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Collect Your Dead

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Collect Your Dead

By

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Chapter 1: The Pilgrims

Tenyon had just told me of the avalanche that killed his father. It was four o'clock in the afternoon at Jeet's Social Club. I was sipping whisky and Tenyon had been working through a glass of desi daru and smoking cigarettes. Our glasses were near empty. This was the first we had really talked of his father. I was trying to be a good friend, and to listen.

“It happened very sudden,” he said. His lips formed a tight frown. Slowly, he rotated the glass on the bartop. “Khumbu took him.”

A billiard ball ricocheted in the back room. A haze of white smoke hung in the air. Jeet's was the only decent watering hole in Sid. It was a bar for wayfinders, Sherpas, roughnecks, pilgrims. An old, eight-fingered sirdar folded and unfolded a sports section.

I killed my whisky and reached over the bar to grab the bottle. I spent a lot of time and almost all my money at Jeet's in those days, and felt comfortable doing a thing like this. I poured a few fingers and looked at Tenyon. There was an uncommon sadness in his face. His father's death was not news. It had happened years before.

“You ever hear of survivor's guilt?” I said.

He took a sip of desi daru. Then he shook his head.

My glass felt cool to the touch in our hot Nepali summer. “Survivor's guilt is where people die and you feel bad for living.”

“Oh,” said Tenyon. He nodded seriously. “Yes, Sherpa have this feeling too.” He finished his cigarette. He stubbed it into a glass tray. Crystal. Black ash.

I didn't want to think of death; it was all I thought about. “I think I'm going to give up my cat,” I said.

Tenyon hesitated. He gripped his glass but did not otherwise move. “Moochi loves you,” he said.

“I don't think so,” I said. I shot my whisky. “And her name isn't Moochi. Besides, it's sick. It's just going to crawl off and die somewhere. I don't want it stinking up my garden.”

“It was a nice garden while she kept it up,” said Tenyon. He checked his watch. It had Donald Duck on the face, a present from his kids. “It's time anyway,” he said. “The client is waiting.” We each left a coin on the bar. Tenyon swaggered out ahead of me into the boiling afternoon.

The town of Siddharthanagar eased in front of us, sulfur yellows and blood browns all crept upon by the lush green of spring. The streets here were wider than they needed to be, as if somewhere down the line the town had given up growing. A cow settled into the dusty yard of Jeet's Social Club. Flies huddled on its face, praying over it.

At a street crossing, we waited for an oxcart to roll past. A child was driving it, a boy no older than twelve or thirteen. “So this client,” I said. “American lady?”

“Swiss,” said Tenyon.

She was staying at the Hotel Arhat. It was a sprawling building, beige walls scrubbed clean every morning by an army of underpaid squeegee kids. Already a patina of grime was creeping up the walls, working toward the hacienda tiles of the roof.

I had resisted the Mountain's pull for two years. Now I could feel myself being drawn in again. I think now I was looking for a way to say goodbye.

Tenyon held the hotel's door for me. Passing inside, I was hit with the wet, chemical odor of industrial-grade sanitizer. The hotel staff lathered the place in it. I never met a Westerner who

liked the stuff, but maybe there was a type. A concierge nodded behind a polished desk. His smile too was wide and sterile. Fluorescent lights reflected in the cold granite of the floor.

“Come on,” I said. “Bar's this way.”

The client was blonde, thin, prettier than I had hoped for. She wore fresh-creased khakis, her hair up in a loose bun. She studied the plastic sword in her empty martini glass. The Arhat's bar was empty beside her.

“Miss Geisert?” I said.

Her eyes flicked up, catching our reflections in the bar mirror. “Missus,” she said. “Sarah.”

“Abbot Boone,” I said. “This is Tenyon.”

As I sat next to her, Sarah Geisert craned her neck and looked around. “Haven't seen the bartender in ages,” she said. “Where's he got to?”

“This place run on Sherpa time,” said Tenyon.

“Is that a real thing?” said Geisert.

“Oh yes,” said Tenyon. “Very much.”

“Your deposit came through just fine,” I told her.

“No backing out now,” she said, tinkling the sword against the rim of the glass.

“I know it's a lot of money.”

“I'm not worried about the money for now,” said Geisert.

Tenyon reached across. He took Geisert's empty glass. “What are you having?” he asked.

“Martini,” she said. “Up.”

Tenyon gave her the big smile he used for courting clients. “Your English is very good,”

he said. He slipped behind the bar. "Sorry, but I have rare disease. I can only pour whisky shots."

He poured three and handed them over.

"To be honest," said Geisert, "I didn't think anyone would take the job. What time is it?"

I shot my whisky, already beginning to swim in my own head. I had started early. "We need the cash," I told Geisert.

"There are other ways to make money," she said.

"Not for us," I said.

We moved to a table in the corner of the empty restaurant. Afternoon had begun to dissolve, the sunset's pink fingers slipping between slatted blinds. The bartender had yet to wander back. "How long you been in the country?" I asked.

Geisert stretched, then rubbed her bare shoulders. "I don't know," she said. One of her fingers lit briefly on a gently-curving collarbone. "What's the date today?"

"Um." I looked at Tenyon.

"Six," he said, clapping another round onto the table. "April."

Geisert zipped open a backpack, pulling out a packet of brochures all rubber-banded together. She tossed them on the table between me and Tenyon. "Here," she said. "My flight was twenty-six hours. I can't even think."

Tenyon unfolded the first brochure, revealing a photo of a mustachioed white man with crossed arms. The Mountain loomed in the background. "Kenning," I said.

"Hm?" said Geisert.

"Henry Kenning, the climber. You hadn't mentioned he was your husband's guide."

"You know him?"

Tenyon laughed into his drink. The sun was dipping behind a farmhouse down the road.

“Yeah,” I said. “We know him.”

“Asshole,” said Tenyon. “Big asshole.”

“We'll need to interview him, Mrs. Geisert. We need his charts if we're going to find the body.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“He'll be able to tell us where your husband got lost.”

“Julien,” she said. “His name is Julien. And he didn't get lost. They left him. It's different.”

“All due respect, ma'am. It's not different.”

Geisert looked at me a long time. There was a hurt in her eyes, a kind of sad, sharp gleam. She said nothing for a while, then drew a tight breath. “He works out of Kathmandu.”

“They all work out of Kathmandu,” said Tenyon, getting up. He returned a moment later with the rest of the bottle, which he passed to Geisert. “All the big fishes.”

“What about you two?” she asked.

“Just a couple of guppies,” I said. My mouth was dry. Friction on my tongue like it was soaked in paint thinner. Geisert was thin, tough-looking. A sharp chin with a little crescent scar. Tenyon caught me staring, and shook his head the tiniest bit.

“We are nice fishes,” said Tenyon. “But small.”

“When can we fly out?” she asked.

A bartender ambled out from the kitchen, and saw the nine empty shot glasses clustered like honeycomb on the table. He flushed a deep red. He said “Have you been helped yet?”

I bet you anything, Mrs. Geisert had never laughed so hard in her life. The bartender brought out another round. Geisert held up her glass for a moment, watching the light refract into rays of soft amber. “To Julien,” she said.

That night, I crashed hard. Tenyon eased me onto the couch and unlaced my boots. “Thanks, Tenyon,” I said.

“It's okay, buddy.” He pulled off my left boot, then my right. “It's okay, just rest.” He was handsome, with a gentle face, a dusting of black bristle on his cheeks. He set a cup of water on the coffee table.

“I like Missus Geisert,” I said.

“I know,” said Tenyon. “I hope we can find her husband.”

“He's in the Death Zone,” I said. “He's a fuckin' popsicle.” My little cat bounded onto the couch, purring.

“Hey Moochi,” said Tenyon. She rubbed her cheek on my knee, then leapt to the floor. For a second, I felt alone. I missed Sana grievously.

“We'll find him,” said Tenyon. “That's what we do for Mrs. Geisert.”

“So professional,” I said. “Always so professional.”

“You're a little drunk, Abbot.”

I snorted. “You're a little drunk, Tenyon.”

He shook his head, sloughing a ragged blanket off the ottoman. “Sherpas don't get drunk. You know this.”

“You staying here?” I asked. “Away from the...” the word escaped me for so long I

thought I might have fallen asleep. "...the responsibilities?"

Tenyon smiled. "Goodnight, pal. See you in the morning."

I loaded the cat into a little plastic carrier and latched the grate. She whined, but shut up when I pushed a square of cold chicken between the bars. At the kennel they asked how long I would be gone. "Four, five weeks if I'm lucky," I said. "If I'm not back by then, find her a good home."

"Yeah," said the kennel-man. "Yeah, no problem."

"I'm serious. Don't you put her down. No matter what."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay."

I handed him a wad of bills. He nodded and took the carrier and put the cat on a shelf in a row of nine other climbers' cats. Moochi gave me a look, then curled up and shut her eyes and fell asleep. I couldn't admit to myself that I was never coming back for her. That even if I came down safe from the Mother, I didn't want her. No more memories. No more half-love.

We flew out in a puddle-jumper Piper at nine. I leaned my forehead against the cool glass and stared at the tundra below. "Rough night?" asked the pilot. He was Nepali, heavysset, with rings of sweat under his arms. He introduced himself as John, which was bullshit. There are no Nepali named John.

"He is hungover," said Tenyon.

"Fuck off," I said. "You're hungover."

"Sherpas do not get hungover," said Tenyon. "You know this."

“It is true,” said Sherpa John. “It is true.”

Geisert sighed in the backseat. She stared out the window. Strands of golden hair tucked behind her ear. She wore aviator shades; the lenses reflected the gray below. She did not speak.

Sherpa John shook our hands as we disembarked the Piper. The four of us stood a moment on the asphalt, where the airstrip butted against a whitewashed terminal. Nepali policemen milled about in khakis and shades, smoking Ghurka cigarettes, kicking pebbles at the monkeys.

Geisert and I followed Tenyon through the terminal into a packed bazaar. Ladies knelt on yak-hair rugs to hock necklaces and shawls and google-eyed dolls. Tenyon led us through the crowd. A hound dodged between us, followed close by a pack of howling boys. Geisert stayed close. She smelled clean.

“You ever been to a place like this?” I called over the crowd.

Geisert did not answer. Tenyon guided us past a cabal of butchers, old men with tangled, white beards. Workmanlike, they hacked into racks of goat and yak, chanting crude jokes over the thousand voices of the marketplace. “Hungry?” said Tenyon, looking over his shoulder. A man wiped a cleaver on the leg of his pants. A fly landed on his eyebrow, then dove and wheeled and disappeared among the dark heads of the market's shoppers.

Everest Adventure Tours. The sign was in English, red-lit neon between a vacant beauty salon and a pen of snuffling yaks. “Here we are,” said Tenyon. He held the front door for Geisert, who took a deep breath and went in.

“Can I help you?” A small, thin woman glanced up from her desktop. The place was cramped; the receptionist's desk jammed against the rightmost wall, and behind it a pair of

cubicles faced away from each other. The whole office was painted a deep, pruny purple, and reeked of Kenning's favorite brand of Cypriot tobacco. A huge fern sat in the middle of the floor, catching a steady drip of brown water from the ceiling.

“Is Mr. Kenning in?” Geisert's voice was sweet, candied.

The receptionist frowned. “I'm sorry, he's having his lunch. Would you like to wait?”

“I'm done, Kima. Send 'em back.” The voice was thick, piny. Good English sifted through his choppy, subcontinental cadence. Kenning's meaty head popped up from one of the cubicles. His blonde mustache. Brown eyes, wide and deep like walnuts crammed in his skull. He saw me.

“Boone!” he called. “Come on in.”

I nodded to Geisert and Tenyon, who went ahead of me. Kenning's huge form was hunched over a paper box of chicken and fried rice. He wiped his chin with a napkin, tossed it in. He reached over the desk for a handshake, upsetting a hula-skirted bobblehead and a framed portrait of him with his old RAF unit. Gray-blue fatigues, cigarettes drooping from their slack faces. Shirtless, the rainforest at their backs, smoke twisting in the distance.

“Hello,” said Tenyon.

“What's happening?” I said. “How are you?”

“Right bloody ready for my crew to get going,” said Kenning. “Katie's already out at BC with our Sherpas, setting the lines. I didn't think you were back, Boone. You boys looking for jobs?” Kenning laughed. He cracked his knuckles. “Kima! Get me a couple applications.”

“Now,” he said, “what can I do for you?”

Geisert put out her hand. “My name is Sarah Geisert. You knew my husband.”

Kenning's face changed. “Julien was a good man. Good climber.”

“You were his guide last year, weren't you?”

The secretary came around the desk and handed Kenning a sheaf of papers. “Here are those applications,” she said.

He glanced at her coldly. “I was fucking kidding with you, Kima. The gentlemen will not be applying for jobs.”

Kima stood there a moment. She looked at Kenning. Maybe thinking of putting her thumb in his eye. Then she turned quickly and returned to the front.

“Well,” said Kenning. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Geisert?”

She kept her spine straight. “Julien died on the mountain,” she said.

“He didn't come down with us,” said Kenning. “That can only mean one thing.”

“We've talked about this before,” she said.

“I know it's different over the phone,” said Kenning.

“You called me from Base Camp.”

“Yes,” he said.

“To tell me my husband was dead.”

He looked at me for only a moment, then flicked back to Geisert. “Yes.”

I leaned in. “We just want a look at your maps from last year's expedition.”

“Why?”

“I want to know where he died,” said Geisert.

Kenning narrowed his eyes. It was strange; I could smell his lunch. It made my stomach turn. “What's this all about?”

“We're going to bring him down,” said Geisert.

Kenning frowned at me. “What have you been telling this poor woman?”

“I asked you about this,” said Gesiert.

“And I told you it's impossible. But you're here, and you've brought Mr. Boone and Mr. Tenyon.” Kenning turned again to me. “You. Did you tell her this could be done?”

“It can be,” I said. “It has been.”

“Not from the Death Zone,” said Kenning. “Not without perfect data. And a perfect window. And about a million dollars worth of gear.”

“We just need the first part,” said Geisert. “Just the coordinates. Just the maps.”

“No,” said Kenning. “I can't tell you, because I don't know where he bloody is.”

Geisert gasped like she'd sucked in a hornet. She clenched her jaw so hard I thought her teeth were going to snap out.

The mountaineer's face softened, only for a moment. “I thought you knew this,” said Kenning. “The rest of the group turned back. We didn't even make a try at the summit. But Julien went on without us. He might have gone off a cliff.” He began counting on his fingers. “Or into a crevasse, or froze in a cave —”

“We get it,” I said.

“Point is, there's just no way of telling you where he might have disappeared to. And you bottom-feeder, you're cashing in on this?” Kenning leveled a finger at me. “Some kind of rescue? Look, he went missing. He froze. It happens.”

“We're going up,” I said. “The map, Henry.”

“You're a bunch of fucking loons.”

“You left him up there to die?” said Geisert.

“Do it again if you asked me,” said Kenning. “I'm a sixty-one year old climber. There aren't many of those. You know why?”

Geisert looked at him. She looked hard. “Why?”

“Because I'd rather be alive than touch the roof of the world. And I make that decision every second I'm on the Mountain. Your husband went the other way.”

We stood there in silence. Geisert sat at the desk. She took a deep breath. “I understand,” she said. “I know why you let him go. But I'm asking for your help.”

Kenning looked at her with blank eyes. Then at me. “Boone,” he said. “You should bloody well know you can't get them back.”

“I have to try,” I told him. “You know why I have to do this.”

A redness climbed Kenning's neck. He was weighing something. “Kima,” he said. “Kima!”

She rounded the corner. “What?”

“Bring me the maps from last year. Make copies for these gentlemen and their client.”

He spread the map over the surface of his grimy desk. The carton of chicken rice held down a near corner, the hula-skirted bobblehead the opposite. A climber's map, the South Col drawn up in red. A traditional route. Sir Edmund Hillary's route. Kenning ran a huge finger along the red vein on the map. “This is how we went,” he said. “BC at seventeen-five. Run of the mill. Nothing fancy. Then up Khumbu—”

“I know the route,” said Geisert.

“Oh?”

“How high did you push?” she asked.

“South Col,” said Kenning. “Last camp before the summit.”

Tenyon shook his head. “Death Zone.”

“And he went on from there?” I asked. “Alone?”

“Last we saw of him.” Kenning's voice was flat, bored, as if recounting a trip to the supermarket. The Mountain kills a man after a while, even if it doesn't end his life.

“What kind of supplies did he have?” I said.

“Tank of oxygen,” said Kenning. “Ax, food.”

“Not enough,” said Geisert.

“You should have taken him down,” I said.

Kenning shook his head. “How old are you, Abbot?”

“Henry—”

“No, I'm serious. I've got what, twenty years on you, at least?”

“I'm thirty-six.”

“I'm in good shape,” said Kenning. “I've gone to the top plenty, and I've wrestled my fair share of bullies, but neither you nor I nor a whole damn cavalcade of Sherpa could carry a flailing Swede down the Mother. It was him or us. I didn't make it that way. He did. I'm sorry he's dead, but I'm not sorry I didn't help him.”

Geisert put out her hand. Her lips pressed tight together. She was red and white and thunderous. “I'll take them now,” she said. “The maps.”

He looked at me the same way he had when I was first met him. There was some kind of indictment in the steady set of his jaw, and it was tinged with pity. “Are you sure these are your

people?” he said. “Are you sure you're ready to come back?”

“The maps,” said Geisert. “Now.”

Lunch was a dirt-floor cafe on the west side of the city. Hens chatted under the tables, pecking up crumbs as they fell. An old woman, toothless and vacant-eyed, brought us bowls of stew. She stared at Tenyon for a second, appraising him, then returned to the kitchen. Geisert went right at her meal, a real world traveler. Didn't even balk at the smell. Good for her. “I need you two to draw up a route,” she said between bites. “We know where he left the group and we know he couldn't have gotten far.”

“Not enough,” said Tenyon. He did not look up.

Geisert put down her spoon. “Excuse me?”

“Not enough. Two days in Death Zone. That is all. Not enough time to look around.” He kept eating. His free hand rested flat on the table, fingertips grazing soft spirals in the wood. “It is not enough.”

“When you took this job—”

“When we took the job,” I said, “we thought you knew where you wanted us to go.”

“I thought I did. Or that Kenning did.”

“Ma'am, there's a lot of nooks up there on the Mountain. Caves, crevasses. It'd take months to search them all. Except we don't have months. Once we're up there get maybe forty-eight hours before we die. Not forty-eight hours before we have to turn back. Actual death.”

Geisert rested her spoon on the edge of her plate. She folded her hands. They looked soft. “Mr. Boone,” she said, “do you believe in heaven?”

“My father was a professor,” I said. “So, no.”

“Mr. Tenyon?”

“Yes,” said Tenyon. “Yes, I think.”

“My husband did,” said Geisert. “His family was well-off, he never wanted for anything. But he always pushed himself, always believed he could achieve more. And he believed in heaven.”

“Look,” I said, “we're sorry for wasting your time. If it's the matter of your deposit—”

“It's just,” said Geisert, and she looked at me like I could really make a difference in her life. “I'm alone now. Do you know what that's like, being alone?”

And that did it for me. That was enough.

“Okay,” I said. “Let's keep thinking.”

The Ministry of Tourism office keeps a detailed record of every climber to attempt an Everest summit. There is a paper trail. Fees, certifications, payments made. The clerk in the office was a young woman, local, with a patient smile. She handed us everything from last year's climbing season. A folder thick as a Bible.

At the hotel, Geisert pored over the documents with Tenyon and me. A bottle of cheap wine sat in the middle of us. “Listen,” I said. “Three other expeditions went up the South Col that week. Each made it to Camp III, two turned right around. One went all the way to the summit. Which means—”

“There's a group that might have seen Julien on the way up.”

“We can call around,” I said. “Let's set up some interviews.”

“I will work my contacts,” said Tenyon. “See what the Sherpas know.”

There were three guides to the group. Eight clients. Ten Sherpas. “I know one of these guys,” I said. “Marcos Ezquerra, the guide. We've worked together. He's a dick.”

“Get in touch,” said Geisert. “Just to see if he might have seen Julien. Any leads at all.”

Ezquerra met me at a pet shop in the outskirts of Kathmandu. He was lanky, handsome, with wild, black hair. Marcos had come to Nepal for a visit after he graduated high school; some vacations, he found, can turn into the rest of your life. “Thanks for meeting me,” I said. Ezquerra smiled, his teeth pearly and straight. They must have had good dentists in Buenos Aires when he was a kid.

“Picking up a rabbit for my niece,” he said. “But this shit-hole store doesn't have any rabbits.” The shopkeep didn't look up from his tabloid, only lit another cigarette and turned the page. Ezquerra poked a snow-white mouse. It hugged his finger, nibbled, then retreated to root among the wood-chips. “She's four,” he said. “What kind of parent lets their four year old get a goddamn rabbit?”

“Listen,” I said. “I gotta ask you something.”

“Look,” said Ezquerra, moving on to the next cage. “Bernice isn't going to fuck you. Give it up.”

“It's about the climb.”

Ezquerra pulled his fingers away from the wire and faced me. “Oh.”

“You went up last year. Made it all the way, right?”

“My second time,” he said. “We got a good group this year, too. Might make it happen

again. Are you back, dude? Thought you were taking some time away.”

“When you were up there in the DZ, did you see anybody?”

“Alive or dead?” he asked.

“Either.”

“We passed through Rainbow Valley, bro.”

“Any bodies you didn't recognize?”

Ezquerria shrugged, kneeling to prod at a forlorn puppy. “Don't think so, man. There was this, you'll get a kick out of this. There was this lady who froze up the year before, just like a hundred yards from C-III. Fell down on her ass and never got up again. Her backpack kept her propped up.”

“Jesus.”

The puppy nipped his hand. Ezquerria recoiled, and snatched the hand to his chest. “Thing is,” he said, “she had long hair. Like, pretty long. Like a model. And it just kept on blowing. Up there a year, and her hair just blowing like she was in a damn convertible.”

“Awful thing,” I said.

“Yeah, Mountain will do that to you.”

“But nobody new up there, nobody really recent?”

Marcos shook his head. “Naw, not that I saw. But you know how it is. Could've been a hundred naked porn stars fifty yards either way, and I wouldn't have seen a titty.”

“Well, thanks for your time.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Hey, what do you think of this dog?”

“Give it up,” I said.

Chapter 2: Sweet Dreams

The house lights went low and purple. Feedback hummed through the speakers in Club Crux. A singer glimmered onstage, swaying at the mic like some kind of snake charmer. Slow and sad, she bloomed into the first lines of Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams." The band followed in with soft snare-taps, a tuned-down guitar just letting her do her thing. The singer stared straight at the ceiling. The bar smelled like old, thin beer and cigarette smoke. Streaks of yellow mold crept up the baseboards. The singer stood at the edge of a ring of purple light.

I was nursing a beer, my second. I was beginning to think of Sana again, and clearly. I missed her. I had always missed her, but now it felt real and sharp under my tongue.

When she and I were first married, I abandoned her for the night in some airport hotel in Phnom Penh. We'd been touring Cambodia, Korea, parts of China, and I can even now remember her practicing her Mandarin in the terminals. It was just me and her that summer.

This stop in Cambodia was the very tail end of our honeymoon. I snuck out sometime after midnight, where I stayed up swapping stories with a surly Bangladeshi bartender. His uncle had been a shipbreaker, the kind of man who smashes apart old boats for scrap. Pennies a day, and thankless work. I listened well, and he kept pouring me drinks. I paid well too. Though money was tight in those early days, Sana and I lived cheaply.

A hotel security guard found me in a corner of the bar, folded up on a burgundy armchair. "Wake up, son. Where's your room?" He was old, and just by looking I could see he'd taken part in the fighting. He was a sad old man. He peered closely at me. I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

The guard took me upstairs. My mouth was swollen by whisky, my cheeks stubbled and scratchy. I had these purple bags under my eyes.

He walked me all the way to our room. He held me by the shoulders as we walked. “The lady you are with, she is very pretty,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

“You should be here with her, together. While you still have time.” The guard unlocked the door and held it open for me. He hugged me. I thought it was the strangest thing. I retreated from the scratch of his beard.

I went into the room and locked the door behind me. I crawled into bed with Sana. “Did you have fun?” she said.

“I met an old man,” I said. “He said the strangest thing.” But Sana hadn't heard me. She was already back asleep. That night I heard her murmuring my name, over and over in a dreamy haze. She had been sleeping in front of the TV. The volume was turned way down. The bright, white lights of a Sesame Street rerun bathed her face in a sickly glow. On screen, Grover laughed and laughed. Sana's fists were clenched.

That night, I dreamt of rats, shrieking, and endless jungles of blood. I remember it. It was a prophecy.

There was skinny man at Club Crux. He sidled up to me. I thought him to be Chinese maybe, with black hair combed off to the right. “I think I know you,” he said. His voice was thin and weak against the music. “You're a climber?”

I nodded to the bartender for another beer. “I'm here, aren't I?”

“Were you up there in '96?” he asked.

“Long time ago,” I said. Most of me wanted to go, to get drunk and wander outside until I passed out somewhere. '96 was a lifetime ago. It was a gorey mess I was better off forgetting. Oh, shit. I recognized this guy. I opened my next beer and went after it. My hands were shaking. “Yeah,” I told the man. “Guess I was.” I'd forgotten what question I'd been answering.

“Awful, wasn't it, that mission.” He didn't speak it as a question. He studied me. I could feel him looking for something.

“That was my first time up,” I said.

“Me too,” said the man. “Name's George Wong.”

“I know who you are,” I said.

Wong's eyes glinted behind round spectacles. “Yeah, I remember you now. You fixed a line for me on Lhotse. We pulled that German out of the snow.”

“He was Austrian,” I said. “One of them.”

“Yeah,” said Wong. “Austrian. Hey, you were a hero out there. Let me buy you a beer.”

I held up my bottle, still half-full. “Still working on this one.”

“What're you up to this year?” he asked. “You with one of the big outfits?”

“Private gig,” I said.

Wong nodded. “Summiting, then?”

I drained the rest of the beer. “Hey, this might be a stupid question. You speak any Japanese?”

Wong frowned. “I'm from Perth.” I didn't reply. We both turned to watch the singer finish her set. She soared into the last refrain of “My Way.” I clapped. Wong clapped. The singer came

down off the stage. All eyes followed her, and as she passed me I caught a poison-sweet smell.

Nightshade, cherry. She headed for the door. A greasy bassist plugged in.

“Well it was nice talking with you, George. Think I'm about finished.”

“Good luck up there,” he said. “Let's catch up at Base Camp if you get the chance.”

I fumbled through my pockets for a few rupees. “Hey,” said the bartender. “You're short.”

I tweezed my wallet open. “Aw, damn,” I said. The bartender raised an eyebrow. He nodded at a tattooed bouncer leaning against a cracked, white wall.

“I got it,” said Wong. He smiled and clapped a bill on the bartop.

I rubbed a finger along the lining of the wallet. An old business card was folded there. I took it out and turned it in my hand. Shit, I'd forgotten about this guy. Something pounced in my stomach when I saw the name. Nikhil Tasman.

“Look,” I said to Wong, “don't pay for these drinks.”

“You gonna pay for 'em?” said the bartender.

“It's no trouble,” said Wong. “What's a few bucks between mates?”

“Whatever,” I said. “I'll get you later.” I turned, leaving Wong behind, and went out into the cold. Even now, the way I left him, it haunts me.

In the neon alleys of the Thamel District, I could not see the moon. A man in a red sweater dusted the steps of a cell phone repair shop. He lifted his head, lit a loose cigarette, and pocketed the lighter. I shuffled past a scribble of graffiti, crimson lines twisting on the steel shutters of a bodega. A teenager eyed me, his old-school Walkman blasting De La Soul. He shoulder-checked me, but kept on walking. He too was smoking. The alleyway was too narrow

for cars, and foot traffic was draining out for the night. A heavysset man zipped by on a motorbike, trailing a heady smell of gas and oil. I glanced at the crumpled business card in my hand. Nikhil Tasman, Rakha Building, Thamel. I had not been here in two years.

A woman came out the front door of a bath-house, and was locking it. "Excuse me," I said. "Didn't this used to be the Rakha Building?"

"We closed," she said. "No bath tonight. Tomorrow."

"I need to see Nikhil Tasman."

The woman had turned to go, but now stopped. "You carry gun?" she said.

"No," I said.

She shrugged and unlocked the door. "Okay, bye-bye," she said, and left me at the step.

My footsteps echoed in the empty bath-house. Cold rubber soles on hot, wet tile. The bath-house was a stereo shop the last time I was here, wall to wall with busted subwoofers. I passed a linen cart piled high with towels. A check-in counter sat unattended, the 90s-era Dell monitor casting a deathly glow on a swivel chair and a packet of Chinese candy. There was a staircase ensconced in the back wall of the staircase. I went to it. The lights were off. I clenched the rail and walked up to the next landing.

The door swung freely, opening to a dim corridor. On the right, just as I remembered it, stood a wooden door with a glass window. On the glass, painted letters. Nikhil Tasman, Detective.

I knocked. I heard the slow shifting of papers, like a snake uncoiling in leaves. "Open," said a voice.

Nikhil Tasman was a short, fat man with a greasy mustache. On the wall behind him hung a framed nagari one-sheet for Three Days of the Condor. I stood at the threshold of the office.

“You carry a gun?” said Tasman.

“No,” I said.

“I do,” he said. He lifted a hand from the desk. He was holding a rusted-out Glock. “No funny shit.”

I held my hands out, empty besides his business card.

“Get in” said Tasman. “Close the door.”

I did, and sat in a stained, brown wingback. Tasman leaned forward, and the shift of his weight made an audible groan from his chair. There was a dim lamp in the corner, and it was by this light he studied my face. “I remember you,” he said. “Handsome boy. You owe me money.”

“That's why I'm here,” I said.

“I had to get a new secretary after you. She fell for your your drunk, stinking ass.”

“The new girl seems nice. Met her outside.”

“What your name, asshole?” said Tasman.

“Boone,” I said.

Tasman nodded. He extracted an old, square ledger from the desk and began to flip through it. “Missing persons case,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Usually, when an asshole skips on debt, he doesn't come back.”

“I want you to pick up the case,” I said.

“That case old as fuck now,” he said. “Two years, it says. Besides, is a lot of money you

owe. I sent legbreaker after you. Nasty Chin fucker. He said you went to Argentina.”

“I went all over,” I said. “You take a personal check?”

I reached for a pocket, but Tasman clucked. He swiveled the gun on me. “Slow, fuck-dick,” he said.

I pulled out a checkbook and held it to the light.

“That's white boy company checkbook,” said Tasman.

“It's my company,” I said. “Just came into a windfall.”

“This case, Mr. Boone. Two years ago you tell me she has six months to live. You think odds get better or worse?”

“I just want you to look again,” I said.

Tasman slotted the gun into a holster. “The check,” he said. “Fill it out.”

I did.

“Fucked up,” he said, folding the check down the middle. “You steal from yourself to pay me.”

“I don't care about all that,” I said.

“You are climbing the Mountain again?”

“A dangerous job,” I said.

“But expensive,” he said. His eyes glittered in the light. “You know I would be dumb fuck-dick to turn this away.”

“I know it,” I said. “You'll take the money?”

He patted the check into a pocket on his chest.

“Find her,” I said. “I don't care what it takes.”

“I find her grave,” said Tasman. “That’s the best offer you get from anybody.”

I went out into the street then. It had emptied. I could hear a barking dog. Elsewhere, sounds of traffic.

It was just so easy to keep drinking. I got back to the hotel, fell over the ottoman, poured something up. Before I knew it the ice was half-melted – an awful, twisted serac at the bottom of my glass. I kept thinking, I’m going to climb it again. Soon. Going to go up and look for that dead man. I dreamed I would find Sana there instead, Sana in a hot spring, alive.

When we first got married, Sana and I honeymooned from Kampot to Bangalore in a pup tent. We ate thin breakfasts of bread and uppuma, sliced tomatoes. American coffee on the camp stove. It was March or April. “The birds,” she said. “Do you hear them singing?”

I listened. A high, piercing cry on the wind. I followed the length of her arm skyward. Her elbow, the thin conch of her right hand, an index finger.

A peregrine circled overhead on the anabasis. Sana squeezed my hand. We watched it hunt. Its feathers were a deep, promising brown against Russia’s pale sky.

Sana went birdwatching while I climbed. When I came down, my hands chalky, my face sunburnt, she would show me her sketches from the day. This was when her hair was long and dark. It fell past her shoulders, caught in the wind, a tracery.

“I think I’m sick,” said Sana.

We had a small, pink house set back against a field of pale dirt. In the garden Sana had planted orchids that bloomed sky-blue, big across as a hand. It was morning.

She had seemed slow that week, and pale. To that point it hadn't struck me that anything was wrong. The Mountain had taken so many of my friends that I'd forgotten the other ways to die.

“We can go to the doctor,” I said. “Do you want to go to the doctor?”

She put her hand in mine. Thin fingers interlaced with mine. Bones like winter twigs.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I think so.”

A black little spider came down the wall and when I went to kill it she said “No, don't. Do it a mercy.” I scooped it into a jelly jar and left it outside, among frosty twigs, frozen berries, the detritus of the hard season. In the morning she was paler, weaker. She could barely walk on her own. Perched on the bed, Sana wrapped a white shawl over her shoulders. It flapped on the breeze from a rattling fan.

The radiologist was a friend of her uncle. He worked at the university hospital in Delhi. It was a long drive and we didn't have a car. I told Tenyon, who got his cousin to lend us a beleagured Geo with a smell like tumeric. We drove that heap fourteen hours to Delhi to see the doctor. He helped us with the cost, as a favor to Sana's uncle. We were doing our best.

“It's going to hurt,” said the doctor.

“I know,” she said.

“You're going to ask me to stop,” he said.

“I'm not going to ask you to stop,” said Sana.

“You must understand,” he said. “Once we begin we cannot stop. It would be a catastrophe.”

She looked at me, squeezed my hand, then looked back at the doctor. “I’m ready.”

They put me outside the room. A flash of yellow-green light, a klaxon blaring. I could hear her low moaning, like a wounded animal shuddering on a footpath. But she did not ask him to stop. I would have heard it.

We had to pull over every mile on the road home. Sana lurched onto the grass, put her hands on her knees, and emptied her guts. The vomit was bright orange, like fire from her throat.

I leaned against the Geo. A warm breeze cut across the highway. A parade of cars, their headlights refracting in the window. Triangles of white spun and passed and fell across her shaking shoulders.

When she finished, I helped her back in the car. I turned the key. Sana touched my palm very softly. She said “Is it always going to be like this?”

It was a long drive. The Geo's cassette player was jammed. Long loops of a Garth Brooks tape dangled like guts from the slot of the tape deck. We stopped off for the night in Kanpur. There, a blind man checked us into a mouldering roadside hotel.

“No hanky panky,” he said.

“Not going to be a problem,” said Sana.

“Listen,” I told him, “we’re married. And besides—” and she took me by the elbow to our room.

“Wish I was up for it,” said Sana. “Just to freak the old bugger out.”

I helped her with her boots.

We'd packed light, just clothes and a book – something I took from her father's study after his funeral that autumn. A book on Bangladeshi shipbreakers. We tried reading it together in the

blind man's hotel room, but there was something in the photos of rotten sea hulks, their black, barnacled innards, that made me deeply queasy. I nearly left it in the hotel room on purpose, but thought Sana might notice it was gone and think about it all the more.

A mile out of Siddharthanagar, we heard the locusts cackling. Their shells popped under the tires like Christmas bulbs. The whole road was paved with them. The asphalt was a dead thing, chitinous, murmuring. Sana held her stomach and pressed an ear against the seat to squelch the sound.

The whole town was this way. The locusts had buried themselves after the monsoon a decade ago and now had risen to see what new world they would die in. They crawled up the painted shutters of Jeet's Social Club. In the morning he would come out with a shovel to clear his walk. We passed Tenyon's house. Through the cloud of locusts, for they now were taking to the air, I could see the lights on in the kitchen, his wife and daughters peering out. Every building in town was like this, every house but ours.

For ten yards all around the house, no bugs. It was our dirt driveway, our pink bricks, our blue orchids. No pestilence, no locusts. The road quit popping under the Geo's tires. The last few yards of gravel were smooth, ordinary.

I helped Sana up the driveway and left her by the orchids. I went back to the car to get our bags. I came back to find her kneeling among the flowers. She digging among the roots with her hands.

“Sana,” I said.

She dug and dug and came to me with open, dirty hands.

“No bugs,” said Sana. “How can that be?”

I took her by the hand and we came inside together. The house was as we had left it. My backpack leaning by the door, hers hanging from a nail. A cooking magazine laid facedown when she had found the pain too distracting. We went into the kitchen. I ran warm water. I washed her cold hands under the faucet. I promised I would never leave.

The locusts stayed the whole season. They kept us up most nights. Their bizarre mutterings poured in through the windowpanes, the walls. Sometimes Sana would run the shower for hours on end, hoping to drown out the sound. She would come out wet, cold, in a bathrobe we had bought in the foothills of Kilimanjaro.

When I went to shower after her, there was a ring of fluorescent orange around the drain. I bent down and scrubbed it with an old toothbrush. Only when I'd scraped the stain away did I run my own shower. The water was cold. I couldn't get clean.

We drove to Delhi every week in that borrowed Geo. Each time, the doctor told us “We are not seeing the results we'd like to see.” There was a mastectomy, and then another.

She ran the shower. I could hear her retching.

For weeks, I thought she were getting better. The locusts receded for a while, and soon they began to die in the streets, or fall like candied nuts from the gutters. Sana looked a little less pallid. Her hair fell in patches, and when she noticed it we got the shears from under the sink and got to cutting.

“Not too short,” she said, and then she guided the blade down to her scalp. She had me take it all.

“I thought you didn't want it too short,” I said.

Sana rubbed a pale palm on her scalp. “This way is better.”

That night, she only let me approach you from behind. Even then, she wouldn't let me touch her breasts or the bald peak of her head. We stopped after only a minute. It was far too painful. With a bellyful of whisky, I almost told Sana that with no breasts and no hair she looked like a mountain. In bed, with the lights off, I could feel her shape quivering. She was a creature of pure air. I didn't dare reach out for her. I thought I would only make it worse.

I should have tried.

I awoke at some point to hear her vomiting in the bathroom. It was past midnight. By then, the locusts had crept up for one last assault. A lone interloper fluttered on the window, silhouetted by silver moonlight. They had finally come upon us.

I went to the bathroom door and knocked softly. I could see Sana's shape moving under the door.

“Go away, please,” she whispered. I could barely hear it.

“One of the bugs came to the window,” I said. “Right out there.”

“Please,” she said. “Some privacy.”

“Okay,” I said. “Goodnight.”

I went to the kitchen and poured a glass of desi daru. This I took out to the front porch. We didn't have much, just a square meter of cement baked into the back of the house. A pair of wicker chairs, a filmy glass tabletop holding moonlight in a pool of condensation, the table no good but for resting a beer or a broken-spined paperback. Still, it was ours. I swept the locusts off

the cushion of my chair. They buzzed off into the yard. Thousands more chattered in the field beyond the edge of our yard, along brick walls, up the powerlines.

I nursed the drink a while and went back inside. Sana was still in the bathroom. I still saw the light, the shadow. I poured another drink and took it out to my chair. I fell asleep with the glass in my hand. Locusts crawled up my body, from my bare feet to my mouth, my hair. They covered me like a shroud.

When I woke, the locusts were gone.

So was Sana.

I paced the creaking floors of our house. She wasn't in bed. Not asleep on the bathroom floor, where I had found her before. This absence felt larger. It felt permanent.

Some of her things were gone too: her hiking boots, her backpack. I checked the surface of our little electric fridge, its 1971 yellow paint looking dull, sickly in the early sun. No note. I flipped through the awful book about shipbreakers, hoping she had thought to leave something for me there. I wondered if she knew I had almost left it behind, back at the hotel in Delhi. That she knew and her leaving the note would somehow unpack the things we knew but had not been able to speak on.

There was no note. Nothing but void. I threw open the backdoor and looked out on the porch, where I had slept. A crystal tumbler, a dead locust floating in a whisper of whisky. A couple of cigarette butts I didn't remember smoking. A blood-colored crane picking dead locusts from the grass.

I came up the street. My hands were shaking; I could feel my bones. Tenyon was playing

with his daughters. They sat on their porch, smiling like in a commercial. He waved.

“Good morning, buddy. The bugs have died, it looks like.” When he saw my face, he turned to his daughter. “Lamu,” he said, “take the baby to your mother now.”

“But Papa, I was rescuing you.” She cupped her hands over her ears and looked at me. “I’m a pilot,” she said.

“Now, Little Star.” He put her on her feet. She took the little one and went inside.

“Sana’s gone,” I said.

Tenyon reached for me. “She is at peace now, brother.”

I stepped away. “No,” I said. “She left.”

Tenyon frowned. He cocked his head. “Where would she go?”

“I don’t know, man. I don’t know.” I could feel the heat climbing in my throat.

“Okay, buddy. Let’s sit down and think.” He stepped back toward a green bench I’d helped him build the summer before.

“It’s already eight,” I said. “She could have gotten anywhere.”

Tenyon spoke so evenly, like he was guiding me through a rookie boulder problem.

“Listen, listen. Did Sana take the Geo?”

“No,” I said. “No, it’s in the driveway.”

“Okay. So she can’t have gone very far.”

We crisscrossed the town, the Geo’s toy wheels kicking dust. We traveled in a cloud of it to the edge of town, where the square houses opened into a wide expanse of scrubland. We could see for miles.

“Let’s go to Jeet’s,” said Tenyon. “We can call around.”

I called the doctor from the payphone in the bar. He had not heard from Sana, or could not tell me. "I am sorry, sir. Confidentiality prohibits –"

"She's dying," I said. "She needs her treatment."

"Sir," said the doctor. "Sir, I understand. I cannot help."

I spent whole days on the phone with Sana's uncles. "What did you do?" they wanted to know, "Were you unfaithful, was it the drinking?"

"I don't know," I told them. And it was the truth. "She's sick. She just left. Hasn't she called?"

At home, Sana's hairbrush was still by the washbasin, still wrapped in long, black hair. The handle was sandalwood. A dirty mirror offered me a reflection: I was thirty-three, unshaven, white in a country that had little use for me. And I was alone. Sana left her toothbrush in the cup, but took the spare we kept in case of guests. Was this some small offering, I wondered? A gesture for the sake of continuity, so I might at least have this small thing to carry forward with me?

The bathroom still smelled like her perfume. The bottle was shaped like a clamshell. The scent: seawater, rose. She bought it from a vendor in some village at the foot of Aconcagua. He said "Pretty lady, smell like the beach always." Sana smiled and paid what he asked.

"Why didn't you try to haggle?" I asked her later. We walked the foothills that day. I dusted my hands with chalk. I hoped to tackle a boulder in the early afternoon. Sana sat and began to sketch a chirihue, this little goldenrod songbird. It was preening.

"I could have gotten it for half that," she said.

"Well why not?"

"I love you," she said. "But I don't think you'd understand." She smelled like the beach.

When Sana did not come back, I left the country. I spent most of the time wandering, drinking. Tenyon came with me. He left his wife and kids to travel with me. I never questioned why.

In the phone calls with her family, they asked if I'd been to the police. I was in a hotel room in Madrid, watching moonlight twist through the windows. Below, a parade of beautiful people streamed down the street. "Of course I went to the police. Hired a detective, too."

"Well?" said her uncle Naveen.

"She took a toothbrush," I said.

"That doesn't mean anything."

"Yes it does," I said.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"I'm going to bed, uncle."

"Keep looking," he said.

I went to the hotel bar. Outside, the beautiful people kept streaming. The patio at the bar was brightly lit. Gnats wheeled in and out of light. The evening's shot glasses stood in a runic circle. Bright headlamps swooped past like white birds.

"You ever want to die?" I said.

"No," said Tenyon.

"Never?" A brown Datsun pulled up to a crosswalk. I thought of flinging myself under the wheels.

Tenyon's hands traced a wet circle on the tabletop. He set his jaw "Not like this."

“I'm feeling desperate,” I told him.

“Where do you want to go next?” he said. “Somewhere new?”

Inside, a couple was arguing in Czech. They were regular people in a corner booth. The man was holding a bit of steak on the end of his fork, and he wagged it at the woman. A waiter sat at the bar, reading a newspaper.

“Mount Fuji,” I said. “Let's go to Mount Fuji.”

Tenyon looked at me so sadly. He paid our tab and went upstairs.

That night, that drunk, Madrid was a city full of beautiful people. I drank and watched them, and then joined them. I felt beautiful too, and sore. They too smelled like seawater.

Tenyon collected me in Plaza Mayor. I was leaning on a statue of Ponce de Leon. A policeman had come upon me, found me shivering in the street, finally abandoned by the beauties. I don't remember any of this. It was all told to me in pieces.

“Hi buddy,” he said.

“I'm sorry,” I told him. I was sobbing.

“It's okay,” he said. “Can we go back to the hotel?”

“I want to go home,” I said.

He pulled me to my feet, slipped the policeman a few dollars, and put me in a cab.

The next morning, we flew back to Nepal.

The house was almost as I'd left it. A cat had climbed in through the back window. It was one of those strays that lived around back of Jeet's. I don't know why I let it stay.

Some night I would wake up to find it laid across my legs, dozing. It was only then, seeing I couldn't move, knowing I would disturb this thing by twisting around, getting

comfortable, anything. Only then did I need to move. So I moved. The cat opened its eyes, and it meowed, and climbed off me. I slept poorly.

In the last days of summer I sat alone in front of Jeet's with a bottle of desi in my lap and a smoky feeling in my chest. A warm wind passed up the avenue and jiggled the aluminum siding of the bar. The cat would sometimes follow me as far as the street, then sit and watch from the hollow under Sana's bright, blue flowers.

"What's his name?" Tenyon came out of the bar with a short glass of water. "The cat, what's his name?"

I sat there that day and watched the cat as it slept in the shade. I took the water and sipped it. It was cold, drawn from the well out back. "No name," I said. "It just hangs around."

"You should name the cat," said Tenyon. "Names are important."

"I don't want to name it."

"But how will he know when you're calling him home?"

I lifted the bottle of desi. "Almost done with this. Tell Jeet to keep it coming."

"Finish the water," said Tenyon.

The glass was nearly empty. "I'm good," I said.

"Drink it, buddy. You'll get hung over." He put a firm hand on my shoulder.

"You don't know anything about this," I said. I looked up at him. There was a hurt in his eyes.

"We all miss her," said Tenyon.

"Don't do that." I pushed the hand off my shoulder. "Don't be that way."

Tenyon sunk onto the chair next to mine. He took the bottle and took a long drink from it. It filled his cheeks and he drained two big mouthfuls this way.

“What're you doing?” I said.

He coughed, then wiped his mouth with with the back of a hand. His eyes watered. “Not going to let you drink alone.”

I looked at him. We were the same age, but I thought of him as being so much older. He had a whole brood of kids, some of them already big and strong. How could the gulf between two men be so great as that?

“There was a time,” I said. “First weekend Sana and I lived here. We'd just moved into town and were already packing up for the Alps.” I took the last sip of desi. The cat got up, turned, and curled again in the mulch. “We were walking up the road,” I said. “Holding hands. Ten, you were on the porch, picking the mud out of the treads in a boot. You had a knife. One of your boys was laying in the grass. His shirt was off. He was staring up at the sun.”

“I remember,” said Tenyon. “Babu,” he said. “That was Babu.”

I smiled at this. “You're too good for me, pal.”

“Ha,” he said. “You are right about that.”

I held up my glass. He did too.

“To the end of summer,” I said.

I emptied my glass. I reached for the bottle. I closed my eyes.

The sun came at me like a wild beast.

Chapter 3: At the End of Kali-Yuga

“You're late,” said Geisert.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry.” I slumped into a chair in the hotel's lobby cafe. I raised a finger at a passing waiter. “Mimosa,” I told him.

“Are you going to take your shades off?” she said. The table was sanded wood, maybe cherry.

I picked up a menu. My temples throbbed, and there was an empty aching in my gut. “I'm not feeling well,” I said.

“Is the mimosa going to help?”

I laid the menu on the table. “Yes.”

Geisert hesitated a moment. On the table before her, she'd set out the maps we got from Kenning, as well as the research file on the other groups. She waved at the bartender. “I'll have a mimosa, thanks.”

“Where's Tenyon?” I said.

“We ate already,” said Geisert. “Already come and gone.”

“Ran out on you just like that? The cad.”

“Mr. Boone,” she said.

“Did he come up with anything?”

She sighed. “The climbers don't know a thing. I talked to six of them actually, on the telephone. None of them saw anybody matching Julien's description. Another one is here in town. The last is sailing around the globe. No one can reach him.”

“What an asshole,” I scoffed. “Sailing, when there are mountains to climb.”

“So Tenyon is running down his Sherpa contacts,” she said.

“And we?”

“We interview the seventh climber,” said Geisert. “He's on his way. I thought you wouldn't make it in time.”

“I made it,” I said. “Where's that goddamn mimosas?”

From behind me, somebody spoke. “Mr. Boone, good to see you again.” The man rolled in through the cafe and stood by our table.

Already, Geisert was on her feet, shaking his hand. “Mr. Wong,” she said.

Oh.

“Call me George,” he said.

“Where'd that waiter get to?” I looked around, trying to find the drinks without making eye contact with anybody, especially George Wong. There was something about him I didn't want to look at.

“Thanks for meeting us, George.” Geisert pulled out a chair for him. The waiter appeared out of nowhere and took Wong's order. Water with lemon. Geisert cleared her throat. “We were hoping to talk with you about your trip last year.”

“Sure,” said Wong, smiling with his lips closed. “Sure, of course.” He eyed me.

“You're an experienced climber?” asked Geisert.

“Last year was my third summit,” he said. “So addictive.”

“There were other groups that went up the South Col that week, but didn't make a summit push.”

“Yeah,” said Wong. “The weather was touch and go. We got a good window and Mr.

Ezquerro wanted to take it.”

“Well.” Geisert wrung her hands together.

The waiter finally brought the drinks, all three at once, and handed them around.

“Mimosa, mimosa, water with lemon.”

Geisert unwrapped a drinking straw and plunged it into the glass. “Of one of the groups that turned back,” she said, “one member tried going up by himself.”

Wong nodded, tasted his water, and nodded again. “I remember something about that. Poor guy.”

“Were you a part of the rescue effort?” she asked.

“I mean, not really. We kept our eyes peeled.” He took another gulp. “But, uh, no. Sorry. Why?”

“He was my husband,” said Geisert. “Julien.”

Wong bent forward, and planted his hands on the table. “I’m very sorry, ma’am. So sorry.”

The waiter came back. “Would you like another?”

I had been drinking this whole exchange, and was now arriving at the bottom of the glass. “Yeah,” I said. “Fine.”

“More water, sir?”

“I’m alright,” said Wong. I sighed and tried resting my eyes behind the shades. “I assume you’ve interviewed the other people from the group?”

“Nobody saw anything,” I said.

“Did you talk to Mr. Ezquerro?” asked Wong.

“At a pet shop,” I said. “He was looking for a dog.”

“Hm,” said Wong.

“Mimosa,” said the waiter.

The air tightened between Geisert and me.

“Well,” said Wong, “you've got a good one here. Mr. Boone was a darn hero in '96.”

“She's read my fucking resumè,” I said.

Wong frowned. “Of course.” He knotted his hands together, and turned to Geisert. “If there's anything else I can do.”

“Of course,” said Geisert.

“Mr. Boone, always a pleasure.” He reached for my hand. Wincing, I took it. “Don't worry about the drinks,” he said. “You can get me next time.” Then he was gone.

The hotel lobby buzzed, fluorescent and overbright. Geisert scowled across the table.

“Well?”

“Well what?” I said.

“You were rude to Mr. Wong.”

“George? We have history.”

“That man was one of our only leads.” Her mouth was a slate line. “I am here to find my husband's body, Mr. Boone. I worry your history will become a problem.”

“I've been in this business a long time.”

“You were also out of this business a long time.”

I dragged the shades from my eyes. My pupils unclenched. I was sore, but I had to look her in the face. “What are you getting at?”

Geisert touched a passing waiter. “The bill, please.” The man nodded and floated off.

Geisert turned to me. “There aren't a lot of people who do this kind of job. No matter the price. You realize that.”

“Because it's basically impossible,” I said.

“I mean when I was looking to hire a guide,” said Geisert, “I was given a list of people.”

She angled her head down.

“And you settled on me,” I said. “I don't get it.”

“I worked my way from the top of list,” she said, “to the bottom.”

“Oh,” I said. The waiter dropped the bill in front of me.

I picked up the bill and glanced over it. Mimosa, mimosa, mimosa, water. I looked at Geisert. She put her hand out for it. “With or without you,” she said, “I'm getting this done.”

She produced a credit card and folded the bill around it.

“Look,” I said, “I'm sorry. Can we move on? Talk about something else?”

“Is this a tipping country?” said Geisert. “We don't tip in Switzerland.”

“It's included,” I said.

“Besides,” said Geisert, “there's nothing more to talk about. Mr. Tenyon said he'll call once he has talked to the Sherpas. Maybe they saw something.”

“They usually go way ahead of their groups,” I said. “And they keep to themselves.”

Geisert leaned forward.. “Mr. Boone.” She paused. She was working toward asking me something. But she did not speak. Only waited until it was time to go.

I followed her out, into the heat of Kathmandu. I cringed at the blast of voices all around. The mimosas had begun to dull my edges a little. “You haven't asked me about my husband,” said Geisert.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, what did you want me to ask?”

Geisert stopped to let a little boy run in front of her, then moved on without looking back at me. I skittered across the thoroughfare, feeling suddenly very hot under my clothes, and when I caught up she said, “Ask me if I love him.”

“Do you love him?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. Her hair was down that day, hanging just past her shoulders. I thought of Sana, but only in contrast. “Now ask me how much.”

“How much?”

“Enough to climb Mount Everest just to bring him home.”

“Sounds like a lot,” I said, trying not to sound like a dick. “I mean, that's really great.”

“I know it's stupid,” said Geisert. “I know that. It's more for me than him.”

We threaded through an alleyway behind a produce stand. A young couple sold lentils out of little latticed crates. “Where are we going?” I said. Just then we emerged into a thronged street, hundreds of people crammed all into one cracking lane, and up ahead, two hundred yards maybe, there was a shrine. Prayer flags hung on long strings, flapping wild and bright over maybe a hundred clustered bodies.

“Have you taken a puja before?” she asked.

“I've been up the Mountain four times,” I said. “Yes ma'am, I've taken a puja.”

“Stay here if you want,” said Geisert. “I'm going to get blessed.”

She shouldered through the crowd. Not violent, but she knew what she wanted: to get close to the shrine, to see the monks sprinkling water and ringing their bells. Already there was a row of mountaineers and hikers on their knees, offering their axes up for blessing.

The shrine was a golden pyramid, striped black like a honeybee. Prayer flags draped off long ropes strung from the corners, spider-silk squares of red and blue and yellow, billowing in the downdraft.

The lama stood in front of the shrine, facing the crowd. He was an old man, with thick glasses and a tall kind of miter on his head. Long ropes draped over his narrow shoulders, hanging still against the wind. He began to chant, his voice nasal but strong, sustained. Other monks stood on the temple steps. They drew hand-carved horns and blew into them, buzzing like fat mosquitoes in summer. Others clapped tiny cymbals. The lama unfolded a long roll of rice paper, and from this he began to incant.

Geisert made her way to the front of the crowd, where she knelt with the others. She was graceful then, and collected. She had a kind of gravity to her, the same pull I felt from the far-off peaks. Watching her that way, my body began to move on its own. I found myself pushing through the crowd to get to her, past toothless ladies and outfitted white men, and I took my place next to Geisert. She glanced over at me and smiled. The sun was in her eyes. I felt the brief sting of peace.

Somebody snapped a photo. The chanting continued, and the deep vibrating of horns. Some monks came out among us, holding incense and garlands of red blossoms. They unfolded a blanket of white and laid this out among the flowers, and the horns grew louder and louder, and at their crescendo the lama stepped forward.

He passed over each of them. Each man or woman in the front, the lama put his hand out and blessed whatever they offered. This was how they kept us safe from the Mother's wrath: with flowers and strips of cloth and onerous buzzing. The lama came next to Geisert. He held his hand

over her head and spoke a word of blessing. There was a seriousness in her downturned face. When he came to me I too lowered my head. I did not expect to feel any kind of holy surge in my blood or body, and nothing did happen.

Tenyon met us back at the hotel bar. The waiter offered a round of still water. “Fine,” said Geisert, “that’s fine.”

“And a mimosa for the gentleman?”

“Uh, water,” I said.

“How did the meeting go?” Tenyon asked.

“Not useful,” said Geisert.

Tenyon smiled big for Geisert. He put both his elbows on the table and leaned close. “I have good news. The Sherpas, they saw your husband. Or somebody who looks like him.”

Geisert raised her glass to drink, but her hand trembled and she set it back down. “Are they sure?”

“No,” said Tenyon. He shrugged. “Hard to say. I showed them picture and they said it was maybe him.”

“It’s the best we’ve got,” said Geisert. “Is it good enough? They know where he was?”

“He made it almost to the Hillary Step. There is cave there. He was laying down.”

“Shit,” I said. “That’s about as high as high goes.”

“Was he alive?” Geisert nearly choked on the question. She held her hands together now, praying under the table.

“They did not check,” said Tenyon. He didn’t look down in shame. He’d been on the

Mother. He knew how it could happen.

“But is it enough?” she asked.

Tenyon looked at me. “I know the cave,” he said. He was asking my permission.

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.” I looked at Geisert. “It's enough.”

“It's not enough,” I said. I poured a tall whisky from my room's minibar. I laid on an odd-shaped bed, coffinlike, stretched over by rough, pale sheets. Tenyon was seated on an office chair, his legs crossed.

He raised a finger to shush me. “Thin walls,” he said.

“He's at the fucking Step, Tenyon. Three hundred feet from the top?”

“Come on,” he said. “You have climbed it before.”

“Yeah,” I said, “up and down. Not with a fucking corpse on my back.”

“Sled,” said Tenyon. “You know this. A sled.”

“It's a six-man job.”

“So we hire. She has money.”

I looked at the map again, followed the thick red mark from Base Camp, up Khumbu Icefall, up again at the Lhotse Face, all the way to the South Col. Kenning had made a thick dashed line here, cutting horizontal across the mountain. The South Col is the last camp before the summit. The border of the Death Zone. From there it would be a desperate sprint to the Hillary Step, where Julien Geisert got himself killed. Three hundred feet above that, the roof of the world. I glanced up at Tenyon, who watched me expectantly.

“She will never get her husband back,” said Tenyon. “Not if we don't help.”

“She'll never get him back anyway. He's dead.” I knocked back the rest of my drink. It burned.

Tenyon shook his head and reached for the bottle. He took a pull, and set the bottle away from me. “You know about these things,” he said. “You should know.”

I eyed him hard for a minute, but he just sat there watching, and waiting. “Don't fucking talk about it,” I said.

“I know,” said Tenyon. “I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“This is suicide,” I said. “You realize that.”

“You wanted the job,” said Tenyon. “You wanted to come back.”

“The money's good,” I said.

“It is,” said Tenyon.

The wind whipped hard outside. A deep rumbling like cannonfire.

“Tell me about the damn sled,” I said.

“Have you taken puja?” asked Dawa. He was barrel-chested and short, with a clever face. He led me through a tiny house in the outskirts of town. The place was cramped, noisy, a TV blaring around the living room's right corners. A bedroom door stood open and dark. His cousin Lhakpa was dressing, pulling her thick legs through a pair of blue jeans.

“Hey Abbot,” she said. “You pervert now?” She closed the door, winking.

“Yeah,” I said to Dawa, “we've taken the goddamn puja.”

“What's the pay?” he asked. I stepped over a mound of blankets at the foot of a pull-out sofa.

“Commensurate,” I said.

Dawa nodded. “Commensurate is fine.” We came out onto the patio, just a concrete slab laid over the dry earth. A ring of shadow spread under the porch, and I wondered what creatures might live there. I could hear the growling of a feral cat. Lhakpa followed us outside, and came to lean in the shade of the house. The afternoon sun cut sideways through a pale membrane of cirrus.

“But we're not looking to summit,” I said. “We aren't here to snap Polaroids. We're looking for a body.”

“A body,” said Lhakpa.

I went into my pocket and dug out a wallet-sized photo of Julien. He was wearing a green parka, sipping beer. It had been taken at Base Camp. He was happy, and strong. Lhakpa studied the photo and raised it up to the light. “The plan,” I said, “is to climb normally, piggybacking on the ropes set up by Kenning's team. Once we hit the South Col, we'll have one day to find Julien and another to bring him back down to C-Two.”

“Sled?” asked Lhakpa.

“Sled is the only way,” said Dawa. “Who else is in?”

“Me,” I said.

“Obviously.”

“And Tenyon.”

“Sure,” said Dawa.

“That's it?” said Lhakpa. She uncrossed her arms and came out of the shade. Her hair splayed back in a stiff ponytail.

“Plus you guys,” I said.

Dawa shook his head and looked up at Lhakpa. The TV was still on inside the house. A Hindi variety show shot beams of purple and white onto the ragged couch. The walls were stained by years-old cigarette smoke. “Who on your team has experience with moving corpses?”

“That would be you,” I said.

“One time,” said Lhakpa, “and it was on the icefall. You are talking about peak. Hillary Step.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that's still more than we've got.”

Lhakpa pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “This isn't enough people. It just isn't.” There was pity in her face.

“We're still looking for one more,” I said. “Somebody with rescue experience. That's what they're working on right now.”

It was still for a moment. The TV was going. Somebody won a prize. “Guys,” I said. They looked at me. “I think I need this.”

“Abbot,” said Dawa. “This is not good. This client is stupid. It is not done.”

“People keep telling her that.”

“You think they are all wrong?” said Dawa.

“No,” I said, “she's just not listening.”

Dawa looked at Lhakpa, and they both looked inside their house. The furniture was all so close together. “The money is good,” I said.

“Okay,” said Dawa. It was not just the money, I could see that. “Okay, we can work with this.”

I had known Dawa a long time. We met at Base Camp; he had come out as a guide on an environmental climb. One of those missions to collect however much garbage they can between the lower camps. They had these big sleds they loaded up with empty gas tanks, shredded tents blown down from the Southeast Ridge, shit shovels, beer bottles.

It had been reported the year before that a Russian prizefighter had frozen to death in his tent somewhere in the South Col. The leader of this garbage expedition, he hoped to recover the body and give it a proper burial. No one knew quite why this particular corpse rated rescue when there were dozens scattered along the South Col like roadkill. But the prizefighter was to be the crown jewel of this environmental reclamation project, which meant that a crew of Sherpas would be climbing to Camp III, digging this hulking Russkie out of a snowdrift, and lowering him on rope down one of the deadliest climbing routes in the world.

Dawa, whose uncle had been an old-school sirdar, scaled the face with a small team and did the job.

“Pretty difficult,” Dawa had told me over beers. “This Russian, a boxer, you know, arms thick as my cock. Huge man,” he said. “Two-hundred and fifty, pure muscle, frozen to ground. We had to cut him out with shovels, Boone. Shovels.” He looked at me so seriously in that moment. I couldn't tell what he was trying to say. What he meant.

I drank alone in the hotel room. I watched TV. I got on the phone with Tasman. “What's

happening out there?” I said.

“It is late,” he said.

“It's not too late to talk to a client. And I am your client.”

“Your check cleared,” said Tasman.

I turned down the TV. “And?”

“And now I put out feelers. Need new leads.” I could hear him rustling through papers, maybe flipping through that foolish ledger he kept in the desk. Old leads. Probably nothing in the case folder besides porno mag clippings.

“Check with the family,” I said.

“Of course,” said Tasman.

“Maybe she went to stay with one of the uncles.”

“I will check,” he said. “Are you to Base Camp?”

“Not yet. Not that you give a shit.”

“Not that I give a shit,” said Tasman.

“I'll be on video call when I get there. Rest assured, I'm going to stay on your ass about this.”

“I believe it, Mr. Boone. I've known many men with nothing to lose.”

“Get that out of a movie?” I said.

“No,” said Tasman. “This is not a movie. Trust me.”

I hung up. Finished the bottle of whisky. My phone buzzed more, but it was only Tenyon. I let it ring out. He would be coming back to the hotel room anyway.

In the morning, Geisert and Tenyon met me at the airstrip. They had left my sleeping carcass in the hotel to shower off my hangover. Dawa and Lhakpa slung their gear into Sherpa John's cargo hold. He would be flying us out again. "Hey," said Tenyon. He patted my shoulder. "How's my pal?"

"Hey, Tenyon. Mrs. Geisert."

"Mr. Boone," she said. She wore a puffy vest. Rolled sleeves.

"Ready to go?" I asked.

"Just waiting on number six," said Geisert.

"Buddy," said Tenyon, "listen."

"Who's number six?" I squinted through the edges of a hangover. "Did we hire Ezquerra off his pansy-ass tourist hike?"

"We talk about this already," said Tenyon. "Last night. You were zoinked."

"Gentlemen." I turned to see George Wong coming up beside the pilot.

"No way," I whispered to Tenyon. "No damn way."

"Sorry," said Tenyon. "You were not answering your phone either."

"Morning, Mr. Wong," said Geisert. "Everything set?"

Wong passed out handshakes. I got out of it by fumbling with a cigarette.

"I was just talking with John," said Wong. "Think I've convinced him to fly us into Lukla."

"We were flying into Lukla anyway," I said. "Everyone goes through there."

"I was little scared," said John. "Not now. Mr. Wong is really inspiration."

"John, would you mind helping them load the gear?" asked Geisert.

Sherpa John nodded slowly. "I'll go with him," said Tenyon. He looked at me and shrugged. "It is not so bad," he said.

We stood tentatively apart, me and Geisert and George Wong. "You know," said Wong, "some of the Hindus believe we're approaching the end of Kali-Yuga. The age of evil is almost over, and we'll soon return to the Golden Age of ten-thousand years ago."

"What," I said. I dragged the cigarette and toed it on the tarmac.

"It's a relief," said Wong. "Isn't it? To know that good is always around the corner?"

"We're glad to have you with us," said Geisert. "Honestly, we wouldn't be able to do this without you."

"Not you in particular," I said. "I mean, it's a six man job." There were four planes on the runway, all small kits like John's.

"Just happy to help," said Wong. He patted Geisert sweetly. "Really, it's a beautiful love story." I wanted to grab him then, to shake him by his skinny neck, to tell him this was not a love story. There are no love stories on the Mountain. Death or triumph, but not love.

Chapter 4: Prayer Wheel

Sherpa John circled the village of Lukla from way up high. The interior of the Piper was cramped with the six passengers, our gear nearly bursting out the underslung cargo hold. We pattered at last through a net of clouds and into a great blue aperture. The Mountain came into full view: an awful, slumbering titan, the glaciers of her knuckles jutting starkly from the tundra. Tenyon nodded slowly. He lived for that, the sheer majesty of the Mother. Dawa and Lhakpa huddled together, wool hats over their ears, just whispering back and forth. They were already

spending their payment somehow, pacing the floors of their new apartments. “Okay,” said Dawa, “okay, okay.” He squeezed his cousin's arm and together they looked out.

Sarah Geisert did not smile, only stared wide-eyed past me and Tenyon at her husband's tomb. 29,000 feet of awe and fear and ice, and somewhere in it all was poor, bold Julien. Next to me, George Wong reclined in his bucket seat, smirking absently at the ceiling.

Lukla was a little village carved into the face of one of the minor Himalayas. Magazines called it the most dangerous airport in the world. And people joke about it, how tiny and frightening it is. Five hundred narrow meters, stopping dead against a sheer rock face ten stories high. Every couple of years, some idiot would crash his Dornier into the cliff. I had seen the cinders up close. It was not a clean death.

John groaned as he pitched the nose downward. “Here we go,” he said. Geisert gripped the armrest like it was stinging her; her wedding band glinted in the smothered sun. The runway rocketed toward us. The cliff face bore down. I had done this before, but it never got easier. A thought passed through me, that I should make my peace. I felt sorry, I missed you, I didn't want to die.

The wheels bounced on the tarmac. Momentum slammed us forward. Sherpa John yanked back on the braking lever. I smelled burning rubber, and smoke. We skidded to a stop fifteen feet away from fiery death. Dawa and Lhakpa whooped, instantly unchained from city life. Tenyon smiled too, silently. He patted me the shoulder. He was here, where his people began, at the heart of the world.

The village of Lukla sat at the mouth of a mountain pass, a pass that led to the city of Namche, which was itself the gate to the high country. Beyond Namche was the Khumbu icefall,

the first real test for any climbing team. But first we had to unload. Dawa sprung out of the plane, stretched his bowed legs, and extended a hand to Lhakpa. She leapt down past him, wide feet kicking up chunks of gravel. Wong sidled down the steps. “We made it,” he said. “What a thrill.”

“Christ,” I said.

Tenyon clapped me on the shoulder. “The Mother,” he whispered. He said it again, dramatic and wry. “*The Mother.*” I couldn't help but grin. Seeing it, he smiled too. Together we slung gear bags out of the plane's cargo compartment. We made a pile of the bags, yellow and green and blue in a mass entanglement.

“Okay,” said Geisert, “I'm never getting on a plane again.”

“Careful what you wish,” I said.

Sherpa John came over to shake Tenyon's hand and Geisert's. Lhakpa thrust her hips at Sherpa John and he coiled back to the plane, mumbling. He tightened the clasp on the cargo hatch, poked at the underside of the right wing, and finally slid into the cockpit. He waved goodbye.

“He didn't wish us good luck,” said Geisert.

“No luck,” said Tenyon. “No luck here. Either the Mother is hungry or she is not.”

Geisert looked at her boots. The wind nipped us as if in warning.

“Come on,” said Dawa, and together we moved into the village of Lukla.

The cramped streets all clawed uphill. It was quieter than Kathmandu, but more urban than Siddharthanagar. There were nearly as many whites as Nepalese, all thronging along the main avenue and dispersing into humming neon alleyways.

We did not spend the night in Lukla. Instead, Tenyon picked a shuttle, Geisert paid a serious bounty, and we loaded the whole thing with our tents and axes. The shuttle carried us down a long alleyway of busted gutters. It would have reeked if the smells hadn't all frozen in the downdrafts of Lukla's hand-hacked sewage ditches. Of the few pedestrians we passed, none looked in through our windows; they knew where we were going. They knew the shuttle would come back hungry for the next crew of fools. It carried us to the trailhead for the Namche trek. It dropped us at the edge of a thick fog. The trail spun out from here, five or six hours to Namche and the road to Base Camp.

Tenyon walked up front. Geisert floated in the middle of the group, her breath curling up soft and nearly invisible. We walked in silence, silence textured by the sound of creeping caterpillars and the slow, reaching groans of lichen. Once, Dawa cast out a joke, but the wind caught it and flung it away.

We came after a while to a rope bridge that slumped over a wooded gorge. A long-haired yak trudged toward us from the other side, with shoulders so wide the ropes bulged around it. The yak was laden with crates and canvas sacks, all lashed with leather thongs. A Sherpa boy ambled behind the yak, prodding it with a shoot of bamboo. We waited on the near side for the yak to pass, and when I did I could hear the yak-herd humming a maithili, one of those old, nameless songs. The beast left a cold cloud of musk in the air, and soon that too was swept down to the rocks and trees below.

When the yak and his boy had gone, we moved onto the bridge. A catch of wind swayed it. Geisert grabbed the weathered ropes on either side. "Don't look down," said Dawa. I immediately looked down at the copse of conifers spiraling out under us, and in the distance a

packet of Oreos pinned between two branches. I looked up to see Geisert clenching her teeth and edging forward. “Yeah,” said Dawa, “easy, easy.”

Wong came up from the back, drifting past me to take the lane next to Geisert. He laid a hand on her shoulder, which she shrugged away. Tenyon gave me the look meaning he wanted to laugh but shouldn't.

It went like this through the whole afternoon. There were bridges and yaks and calm-faced Sherpas pacing the low slopes outside Namche. We reached the town limits just as my stomach began to growl.

“I love Namche,” said Wong. “Might be my favorite place in the world below 15k.”

“Namche's bullshit,” I said. “We'll stay the night and get moving early.”

“Sober,” said Geisert.

I turned to look at her. “Excuse me?”

“In the morning,” she said. “We'll all be sober.” She set her jaw and dared me to answer.

Wong smirked. Tenyon looked on, his mouth twisting in embarrassment for me. “Yes,” I said. Geisert drew close to me, and her breath mingled with mine on the cold air. I could have pulled her in and kissed her. I'd have lost my payment probably, or what was left over that I had not yet stolen. And probably gotten a slap for my trouble. And I'd have to hitch all the way back to Siddharthanagar and hold up the bar at Jeet's until Tenyon got back. Maybe I could have hiked it overland and beaten him home. I was thinking it might be worth it, those pale lips. Might be worth the sting. I shook it off.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, we'll all be sober.” Geisert backed off. Wong trailed her up the road, and I lost them among the crooked streets.

“You believe that shit?” It was just me and Tenyon now. We could talk about this, I thought. I could talk with him about this.

“Well,” he said.

“Don't you go taking her side.”

“No sides, buddy.” He forced a smile and dragged me onto the main road. I remembered instantly that Namche was actually bullshit – I wasn't just being a misanthrope. The whites nearly outnumbered the natives there, at least out on the streets during climbing season. I swear, we're like zebra mussels. You'll find us everywhere, chewing up all the food and looking however-many different kinds of foolish.

“So we're not drinking,” I said.

“Yes,” said Tenyon. “It is best.”

“What then? This town is just bars and internet cafes.”

Tenyon just grinned.

“Oh, no.”

Within minutes we were at the door of a locals-only bowling alley, where Tenyon tried to bribe the bald-headed doorman. “He lives in Sid,” said Tenyon, jabbing a thumb toward me.

“He's one of us.”

“Uh-uh,” said the doorman. He crossed his arms. A drunk woman stumbled out, and when the door swung open I could hear the alley's sound system blaring a Nepalese cover of

“Take on Me.” It somehow made the song better.

“It's okay,” I said. “We can go.”

“I am sorry,” said Tenyon.

The drunk woman vomited in the garbage can, but in between retches she groaned the lyrics. “Taaaake me ooon.”

“It's fine,” I said, and then we wound back the way we came. With nightfall, most of the climbers had retreated to their hostels; the only ones left were the Sherpas. They sat at card tables and on front porches, sipping bottles of brown beer. An electric light hummed across the street, brilliant white against the evening, orbited by a swarm of gnats. A man and a woman sat on the concrete under the streetlamp with an overturned milk crate between them. The man clinked a ceramic disk on the Bagh-chal board and the woman tutted, capturing his piece.

Geisert had put us up in the expertly-named Namche Hotel. Tenyon and I picked up dinner from the corner mart – the boy behind the counter there was maybe fourteen, with a feathery mustache on his lip. We sat now in the hotel room I was to share with Tenyon. The blinds were open, moonlight pouring in.

“So,” I said, “it really doesn't bother you.”

Inside, the lights were off, all but a dim bulb ensconced in the far wall. Outside, the town of Namche slumped toward midnight. A chill breeze crept in around the window's edges. “What doesn't bother me?” said Tenyon.

“The way she bosses us around.”

Tenyon took a bite of a bun. It dripped with a sweet, brown sauce. “She is the boss.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I know. She doesn't have to be so goddamned superior about it.”

“She lost someone,” said Tenyon. “This is important to her.”

“I know, I know.” I unwrapped my own sandwich. Cold chicken between pieces of

pounded bread. “You know what my least favorite feeling is? In the whole world?”

Tenyon shrugged.

“Vomiting,” I said. “That lady outside the bar, hurling in the garbage. It made me fucking depressed.” A streetlamp flickered outside, and I caught the backward reflection of a NO VACANCY sign burning pink in the glass. “I mean, you eat something once,” I said.

“Or drink,” said Tenyon.

“Yeah, or drink. And,” it came harder than I expected. I thought of Sana, that last night, her retching behind a locked door. “So you eat something only one time. Something you cooked, maybe, something your wife cooked. Something with flavor. Something that tastes like home.”

“Yeah,” said Tenyon.

“It feels wrong to give that up. It comes out so wrong when it comes back up.”

Tenyon chewed thoughtfully. He put the sandwich down and pushed stringy bangs out of his face.

“I mean,” I continued, “the Mother has eaten us already. Let her at least keep us down.”

“And Julien Geisert?” said Tenyon.

“Well, I guess it isn't for me to say.”

“You don't like the job.”

“The money's right,” I told him.

“It's money,” said Tenyon. “We need money.”

“I need money,” I said. I thought now of Nikhil Tasman, the detective. I hadn't heard about the legbreaker he'd sent around the first time. I should have asked about that. I'd paid him my share and then some, a good chunk of Geisert's deposit. But it would be fine, I figured. There

was always a little wiggle room. I was good with wiggle room.

“How much is she paying Wong?” I said.

“Commensurate,” said Tenyon.

“It pains me a great deal to say this, but he's not a shitty climber.”

“I think I will go to bed,” said Tenyon.

“Yeah,” I said. “Bright and early, pal.”

“Soft sheets,” said Tenyon. “And soon,” he took a long, dramatic pause, “The Mother.”

“Go to sleep, Ten.”

“Okay, buddy.”

He flopped onto the bed and flipped a light switch. I sat alone for a moment, thinking of the bar downstairs. I could hear light footfalls down the hallway and the clicking of a distant lock.

Geisert was in room six. I stood outside her door a moment, shifting my weight, making sure my fly was zipped. A blade of light shone under the door. It gave me enough courage to knock.

“Who is it?” Her voice was quiet in the carpeted hall.

“Abbot Boone,” I said.

She cracked the door, and peered out. The room smelled of soap. The skin of her face was raw, and fresh. “Can I help you?”

“I wanted to talk,” I said.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“It's cold out here,” I said.

“And quiet, before you came up.”

“I wanted to show you something.”

“How much?” she said. “To drink.”

“Nothing,” I said. “Can I come in?”

She opened the door. She wore a bulky Oxford sweatshirt.

Geisert's bags were all piled in the corner. The map we got from Kenning lay on her unmade twin bed. The bedside lamp was on, projecting a hot iridescence on the rough sheets. I could see the red vein there, the route to the South Col, the Death Zone, the place of disappearing. Geisert shut the door behind me. “What did you want to talk about?” She went to a washbasin, put her hands in, and wet her face.

“Your hair looks good,” I said.

“I'm going back to bed.”

I moved all the way into the room. “I want to show you something,” I said. “Put on your coat.”

“Why?”

“Because it's outside,” I said. “Hurry up.”

I was a little surprised when she went into one of her bags and rifled through it for a bright blue parka. She slipped into it, somehow lithe in that thing, and together went out into the night. Outside it felt colder, more bitter. The streetlight continued buzzing, though the gnats had vanished. They had gone away to torpor and die.

I took her across the street, ghostlike. Nobody else was out. We came off the main road

and into a stand of firs. Geisert trailed behind me suspiciously. We walked a few minutes in silence until the road was just a beaten path in the dirt and the only eyes besides our own belonged to birds and monkeys. The shrine rose up ahead of us, not much taller than me, something like a bus stop. Ancient śāl, cut from thousand-year-old trees, now inscribed with words for the gods.

“What's this?” asked Geisert. She ran a finger across the cylinder of carved wood, the high-relief letters.

“It's a prayer wheel.” We were alone – only me and her and the long shape of the moon obscured by clouds. “This word,” I told her, “it's part of a prayer.”

She rotated the wheel slowly, then moved to the next. “What's it a prayer for?”

“Vengeance,” I said.

“That's morbid.”

“No,” I said, “it's sacred.”

Geisert looked up at me then, and the prayer wheel spun another eighth of a turn. I went off to sit on a hewn boulder. She saw me sit and we both waited silently amid the grievous eyes of the highlands. Eventually, Geisert returned to the prayer wheel and began to spin it, tenderly, reading the prayer in its alphabet of swooping verticals and triangular eruptions. This is the word for mother, this the word for death.

“We're not going to sleep together,” said Geisert. She said it tenderly, and with pity. “This isn't like that.”

“I know,” I said. “I know.”

“How do I pray for revenge?” she said.

She stood there a while yet, searching the prayer. Her fingertips pressed into the cracks in the wood. I wanted to tell her this was a shrine to Simhamukha, the Lion-Faced Dakini, that she was a wrathful protector, a terrible, destructive mother. I wanted to tell her I had prayed here before, wept here before, fallen to pieces in the dirt where she now stood. I wanted to tell her that I came here once with an ax and a jug of whisky.

“You spin it counterclockwise,” I said. “Like this.” I came off my boulder and stood next to her. Together we spun the prayer wheel and I incanted the words. We could never get our dead back, but we could take revenge on the Sky Goddess that took them from us. We prayed.

Far off, I could feel a part of the Mountain shaking, unspooling to reveal the heartless core of the Mother, the barren womb, the blasted innards.

Chapter 5: A World of Animals

We lit out from Namche with a few other groups. The grass along the path was sudden in its spareness, and as we went up the trail I felt a slow weighing down, my body just beginning to give in to the altitude. Tenyon was quiet that day. I could hear him murmuring. “Babu, Tashi, Lamu, Chiri, Yeshe, Baby Diki.” He would not stop thinking of his children until his crampons were sunk deep in the permafrost. For now he would run through the litany of their names. “Babu, Tashi, Lamu, Chiri, Yeshe, Baby Diki.” I stayed behind him.

All of Tenyon's children smelled the same. He had never gotten used to it. The smell disconcerted him. Tenyon told me this once, matter-of-factly, and then asked me quietly to forget it. I did not tell Tenyon that his children smelled the same as his wife, that she scrubbed them with a perfumed soap she kept hidden from him. I found the soap once at Tenyon's house in a

cabinet beneath the sink. I had been looking for booze. It was a grim day. All I found was a sticky, lavender nub stolen from a bathroom at the Hotel Arhat.

“Base Camp,” said Tenyon, nodding northward. “You excited, buddy?”

“Guess I am.”

“All right,” he said, and he lowered his shoulder and went on.

From the head of the formation, Geisert looked back. She turned clumsily under the weight of her gear, nearly losing her balance. “Mr. Boone,” said Geisert, “how long should we plan to stay at Base Camp?”

“That’s a good question,” said Wong. “It usually takes a while. We’ll have to—”

“Two weeks,” I said. “We’ll have a couple of acclimatization hikes to get you used to the air.”

“Sounds very traditional,” she said.

“But we’re piggybacking Kenning’s rope crew where we can. There won’t be a platoon of Sherpas to carry you like a princess to the top.”

“Good,” she said, turning back.

Up ahead, we crossed through a cope of shrunken, hideous trees, and when we emerged on the other side we saw it: the Mother spiking into the sky like a jagged fang. She was wrapped in a smoking white plum, snow whipping off her and snapping against the sky. The other mountains hunched up around the Mother, her gray children. There was Lhotse, there was Khumbu, there were the ten dismal glaciers, boiling through stone and leaving behind cold valleys, sediment-rich, empty.

Nearer, a half-mile out, was the sprawling tent city of Everest Base Camp. It stretched

almost to the foot of Khumbu Icefall, hundreds of Dayglo tents, their guylines creeping like spider-legs in the snow. The only buildings were windblasted aluminum toss-ups, furnished with little more than benches, picnic tables, propane space heaters. The climbers would live here until it was their turn to go up. Here was where they would meet a creeping fear. They would encounter it first as a crumb of gray, a doubt buried in hypnagogic haze. Later they would come to know it all the way through. This is what they do not tell would-be summiters about the Mother: they will come to know the dark in them, and will accept it for what it is, and in the end they will not be sure whether to be happy they came at all.

“This is it,” I said to Geisert. “As soon as we acclimatize, we’re going up.”

“Okay,” she said.

“You get your own tent. Lhakpa and Dawa share, Tenyon and I share.”

“And how about Mr. Wong?” she asked.

I glanced at Wong. He mingled with another group coming behind us on the trail. He smiled toothlessly at them, shaking hands. “He’s got his own too,” I said.

“That’s a waste,” said Geisert.

“We’re leaving one of the tents here. We’ll all share as we go up. Probably change it around so we don’t get too sick of each other.”

“I’m sure that will happen either way,” said Geisert.

I laughed, but it sounded like a wheeze. “Well, don’t worry about me.”

“Almost there,” said Tenyon, and soon we were drowned in the wild colors of the tents and the loud thrumming sound of the lost and desperate.

Snow crunched like cicada shells under my boots. A barren sun dangled overhead. It was cold as hell. I was in overlapping thermals, a coverall, and a red parka I took everywhere. Bulky, black pants. Insulated gloves, insulated hat. Still, even a breath of wind was a parachute ripcord tearing across bare skin.

At night I drank with Dawa and with Marco Ezquerra, whose group arrived at camp just the day before. Ezquerra had brought a woman with him, a client. Their group was prepared to spend a number of weeks here while they waited their turn to go up. Ezquerra and the woman would sleep together soon, or they had already, and she took her eyes off him only to look at me. She was measuring me. We drank tall glasses of beer and punctuated each round with a shot of desi daru, and the woman – Haley, she reminded me, her name was Haley – she said “oof” and exhaled as she felt the burn of the bathtub liquor inflaming the insides of her cheeks and the soft tissue under her tongue. Haley was American, like me. She was delighted I'd seen Animal House. It was her favorite movie. She told me this and poured another shot.

“It'll put hair on you,” said Dawa. He stuck his tongue out and yanked the neck of his shirt down to expose his broad, hirsute chest. Dawa grabbed my glass and shot it too, grinning.

“Alright,” I said, and patted Dawa on the shoulder. He belched.

“Haley,” I said, “this your first time?”

“I always wanted to do it,” she said. Her cheeks were turning red. “Since I was a kid.”

“Haley's been to Angkor Wat,” said Ezquerra. He draped a protective arm over her shoulder. She shrugged out of it.

“I'm gonna get more drinks,” she said, and stood up. This was in McCray's Bar, the highest altitude pub in the world. It was little more than a giant tent like out of a wedding

reception, white swathes of poorly-insulated nylon swooping downward, pinned in the snow with wrist-thick spikes. It was the only place to get booze this high up, and the owner made a killing. It didn't take much to get a good buzz going, either. Not with the air as thin as it was. I watched Haley slide toward the bar. She was cute.

“Yeah,” I said, “I need another round.” I got up and followed Haley to the bar. She looked at me.

“How's it going?” she said.

“It's okay to be scared,” I said. “I get it.”

She got a drink in each hand. A beer, a martini. A smile sliced her face. “Oh yeah,” she said. “I bet that line works all the time.”

“You know,” I said, “more often than not.”

“That's absolutely crazy.”

“Only crazy people come here,” I said. I looked back over my shoulder. Ezquerra was watching us. When I looked, he turned away as if trying to read something on the back wall.

“Anyway,” I said.

“I better get back,” said Haley. She held up the beer. “Or whatever.” She went past, and joined the others at our table.

“What'll you have?” Rod McCray was behind the bar. A Kiwi, indeterminate age, his hair clipped and styled like you might find on the back cover of a magazine. From back in '96 and a few excursions since then, I knew Rod to be a decent climber – but he was a Base Camp hustler, not a mountain guide. He would probably remain in BC another six or seven weeks, catering parties for the journalists, the tycoons, the people who came here to show off. Look at them,

they've climbed Everest, now their children will respect them.

“Whisky,” I said.

Rod poured one for himself, one for me. “Hell and back,” he said, and in his words there was a kind of longing, a regretting of his station, like a caged ape. This was not his place. He belonged out there on the rocks, not here pouring Grey Goose and Red Bull.

“Hell and back, Rod.” We drank.

The whisky torched my throat, and I winced. “Looks like you're doing good business,” I said.

“Everybody wants a nip after a hard day of staring death in the face,” said McCray. “I don't mind selling it to 'em. Keeps the lights on.” With a glass halfway to his lips, McCray turned his attention to a pretty Canadian. “Evening, love.” He leaned over the bar to chat with her, and left me with my drink.

I folded a dollar bill and tucked it into a coffee can. Written in Sharpie on the side: “Fuck Food, Buy Rope.”

I threaded back toward the table. Dawa was wobbling to his feet. He caught sight of a Pakistani friend of his and lurched toward the man. “Hey! Hey!” Dawa patted me as he passed. His face was flushing and bright.

Haley and Ezquerria were the only two left at the table. Still standing, I leaned to whisper to Haley. “Hey,” I said, “do you want to get some air?” She looked up at me. Her glass was near empty. She looked at Ezquerria.

“Babe,” he said.

She patted his forearm. “It's okay, babe. We're just going for a walk.”

I took Haley by the arm and the two of us went out to the camp. On the way out, I shot Ezquerra a wink. There were other tents, other bottles, other drunken Sherpas, guides, and clients. A Union Jack flapped in the snowy haze. That would be the Everest Adventure Tours tent, Henry Kenning's tent.

“That's a badass tent,” said Haley. Our boots bit deep into the snow. “You know those people?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Kenning. His partner Katie. She's alright.”

“Marcos mentioned them. Said they were assholes.” We walked on by.

There were many tongues being spoken in camp. Just in the walking I heard Afrikaners and English and German and Farsi and Cantonese. Haley leaned on me for support as we stepped unsteadily over the guylines of her tent.

“This is me,” she said. We came to a stop. “Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I do.”

I came inside. The tent was small, maybe eight by eight, with a pair of hunter-green cots. Each was draped in a mummy bag. Haley unzipped her coat and eased out of it. She dusted it, and a breath of snow swept to the tent floor. I stepped toward her, and my footsteps cracked with frost. She looked up at me. Her breath curled in the air and mixed with mine. Her eyes were green.

Soon we were undressed in a slow, pulsing blur. There were parts of her in my mouth. She was shaved down there, which seemed so strange. I liked it though. I felt like I was reading braille. For a minute, my whole life seemed encased by warmth. To be completely honest, I did not once think of Sana until it was over.

When we finished, Haley curled up in her bag.

“That,” I said. My lungs felt creased, empty. “You were great.”

“Kill for a cigarette,” said Haley.

I pulled on the first layer of my thermal. A smell rose up, a human smell of exhaust and salt. “You can't smoke up here,” I said. “It'll fuck up your lungs.”

“Being up here fucks up your lungs,” said Haley. She reached blindly under the cot for a sports bra. “Anyway, we should keep this between us.”

I was getting back into my boots. They felt large. Heavy. “Sure,” I said. “Whatever you've got going on with Ezquerro. I get it.”

“Good,” she said. “Anyway.”

I got up then. I didn't kiss her goodbye. It would have felt like shouting in a different language. By now it was midnight or later, and the loud sounds of camp had given way to the subtle stirrings of the Mountain. A faint rumbling, like stones falling in a grave.

“Yes,” said Haley. She zipped the bag up over her shoulders.

I stopped at the threshold of the tent. “What?”

“You said earlier it's okay to be scared. Like you were asking.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. I could barely hear her. She was whispering. “Of course I'm scared. I'm not a fucking idiot.”

Tenyon was in our tent when I stumbled in. I sat on my cot and began unlacing my boots. Tenyon had flipped over a plastic crate and on it were maps of our route, that thick red scrawl

snaking up the icefall, up the Lhotse face, up, up. He had hung a little gas lantern from the aluminum spine of the tent. “Burning the midnight oil?” I said.

He traced the route with his finger.

“Well,” I said, “I met this American girl. Made me god damn homesick is what it did.”

“Going to sleep?” said Tenyon.

“Yeah, well, I guess.” And then I flopped into my bag and let the tent spin around me. Outside I could hear the murmuring of many languages swirling into a chanting, a kind of ur-language, primordial. There were women here, and men, and snow and death enough for all of us. When I dreamt, I dreamt of simple things: coffee and hot food.

Morning cracked open. When I went out to find a bathroom, Ezquerria was waiting for me in his boots and long-johns. He was carrying a bowl of steaming oatmeal, and wearing a hat with long, droopy ears. “Hey,” I said.

With one hand holding the oatmeal away, as if afraid he would spill it and waste some, Ezquerria grabbed me by the jacket and said “Did you do something to Haley last night?”

“It's too early,” I said, but then, annoyed that he interrupted me on my way to piss, I said “Yeah, I did.”

He shoveled a spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth, chewed it furiously, then grabbed me again. “She's with me, man.”

“Did you ever end up getting that dog?” I said. “Or a rabbit or whatever?”

“She's with me,” he said. “Okay? Me. How would you like it if I—” here he stopped to work something out of his teeth – “if I fucked your client?”

I slapped the bowl out of his hand, slopping hot oatmeal onto the snow. It hissed, steaming. “Enjoy your fucking breakfast,” I said.

“Leave her alone,” said Ezquerra, and then he turned to go. I found the bathroom and returned to the tent. On the way I passed Haley, who didn't look my way.

I thought then, that if I could not find Sana, perhaps I would try to lose her all they way.

That night in camp I found Haley by the sound of her talking, her voice full and alive and cutting through the snow. She was talking with another woman in their tent. The other woman was a Berliner, also from Ezquerra's climbing group. They were talking about the Great Barrier Reef.

“I don't think it is overrated,” said the Berliner. She was homely; she had fat cheeks that made me assume she was a librarian's assistant. “But then again,” she said, “I have never been.”

“You'll see,” warned Haley. She drank from a steaming mug. “It's just anemones. You want to see some real shit, try New Caledonia.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey back,” said Haley. “This is Bettina.”

“Hello,” said Bettina.

“Can we talk?” I said.

“Sure,” said Haley. “Oh, are you going to the party tonight?”

“Alone,” I said.

“Bye, Bettina.” Haley smiled and the Berliner, before she knew it, was on her feet and out of the tent. I followed her with my gaze and she went outside to the common area, a pavilion

with a bunch of propane heaters buzzing amid the chatter. Marcos Ezquerra was there, watching me, scowling. “What's up?” asked Haley.

I shot a thumbs up at Ezquerra across the way, then zipped the tent closed.

This time I felt more of it, remembered more of it. The air circulated, cold and slowly warming around us. The hair on my back prickled. I felt my way through her soft geometries. Haley bucked harder against me and soon we were both wasted and steaming in the murky heat between us.

“Are you okay?” said Haley. “I mean, this is fun and all.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “Just working something out.”

“Is that George Wong guy in your group?”

Whatever was left of my erection sputtered out. Everything went cold. “Why would you bring him up?”

“He's nice,” said Haley. “He says you guys are old friends.”

“He's not nice,” I said. “We're not friends.”

“We don't have to talk about it,” said Haley. “He just seems interested in you, is all.”

I put my clothes on. They were cold from the air, from being unworn. It took a moment for my heat to fill them again. “He's not,” I said. “He's confused by the fact that I don't like him.”

“He said you saved a German guy in '96,” said Haley.

“He's Austrian. It's not your business either way.”

“Okay,” said Haley. She looked through me. Her nakedness seemed cold then, and vacuous. “Guess I'll see you around then.”

I went back out. I could hear her thinking of calling after me, and the short silence that

followed. I walked past the mess hall where Ezquerra and the Berliner glared at me. She muttered something about a smell, something in German.

When I reached my tent, Geisert was inside waiting. "I looked for you," she said. "Mr. Ezquerra said you were fucking yourself."

"If only," I said.

"You realize how important this is," she said. "How much this needs to happen."

She was sitting on my cot. She held a pile of maps in one hand. They were all marked up, charted.

"You've done your homework," I said.

"Mr. Boone," she said.

"I know," I said. "Look, the prep-work takes time. It's endless."

"Let's talk about the route." We unfolded the maps on Tenyon's milk crate. Geisert – with Tenyon's help, I guessed, had annotated them with the locations of ladders, difficult rope setups, the chasm waiting on an early shelf of the Khumbu Icefall.

"There's a party tonight at McCray's," I said. "Do you want to go?"

She tapped the map. "Let's figure this out."

"You know the route," I said. Outside, someone put on dance music, something that wouldn't be out of place in a Barcelona nightclub.

"Of course I know the route. It killed my husband."

I had to hold back from telling her I still didn't know much about cancer.

"Even Tenyon is going to the party," I said.

"I'm not asking Tenyon," said Geisert. "I'm asking you. So shut up about the party,

please.”

I imagined Ezquerra approaching Haley that very second, swallowing his pride, placing his hands on her hips. I did not think she would go for it, but maybe. It seemed possible. Very possible. Actually, yes. I needed to get to this party. Maybe I didn't have to close the door on her yet. “Okay,” I said. I picked up a piton and used it to trace the red line on the map. “In a couple days we hit the Khumbu Icefall for our first acclimatization hike. It's mean and slippery and it'll kill you. We'll set up Camp One at the top of the icefall. From there we'll double back, rest a couple days, then hike to Lhotse Face and set up Camp Two. Lhotse is the fourth-highest peak in the world, and we'll be climbing straight up the side. Then we'll come back and rest some more, and hopefully we'll have acclimatized enough.”

All this while, Geisert listened impassively. Somebody turned up the music. I could hear Haley's voice: a whoop, a cheer.

“Then what?” asked Geisert. A propane heater grumbled and hissed.

“Then we hike to the South Col. We'll make our last camp there. We'll have forty-eight hours to cross the Rainbow Valley, up and over some of the most dangerous terrain on the planet.”

“I've heard you say that before. The Rainbow Valley.”

“Do you know why it's called that?” I said.

“No,” she said.

“Because most of the corpses wear brightly-colored jackets.”

Geisert drew a long breath. The exhale was all steam. “Is Julien among them?”

“Not if the intel was right. We'll find him at Hillary's Step. All the way up, almost.”

“And then back down,” she said.

“Same way we came. But more dangerous. Most people leave things behind as they go up.”

“Not us,” said Geisert. She looked almost proud.

“No,” I said. “Not us.”

Then a peculiar silence fell across us. Geisert's eyebrows knit together, her mouth shut tightly. She looked at me across the table and said “Do you know what it feels like to be cursed?”

I looked at her a long time. “I do,” I said. “I really do.”

The sky was cauled in threads of deep gray. A wide moon. Music poured from the doorless aluminum box of McCray's Bar. A man and woman leaned against the outside, holding one another, whispering over the music.

Maybe half a hundred people crammed into the joint. Most of them were drunk already, clashing into one another like yammering children, their voices eaten by the remixed dance jams of DJ Euro Whoever. Across the room, Haley grinded her ass on Marcos Ezquerria. Rope-lights had been strung along the ceiling, and the iridescence caught in her hair the way sunrise catches wheat. She put her hand over her shoulder to grab the back of his neck and pull him closer. A slow fire burned in my chest. She was not mine, I knew she was not mine, but the fire spread.

I passed a fiver to McCray. “Whisky,” I said. “One for you, one for me.”

“Don't mind if I do,” said McCray. He poured a couple ounces of the good stuff. Actual bourbon from actual Kentucky. I'd passed through once as a kid. Bluegrass, bullfrogs. The whisky smelled like caramel, oak. Barely – all the smells freeze up there. Hardly enough

atmosphere to carry oxygen, much less a flavor profile. It could have been Beam for all I knew, but for the bottle. We drank.

McCray wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Ezquerria says he's going to put an axe in your chest, mate.” He poured another shot and gestured broadly at the dance floor. Marcos turned Haley away from us.

“Ezquerria can eat shit.”

“That's the spirit,” said McCray. We drank. He poured again.

“I'm gonna kick his ass,” I said.

“Not in here you're not,” he said.

When I pulled away from the bar, I walked right into Tenyon. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt. “Hey buddy,” said Tenyon. “I was looking for you.”

“Your shirt,” I said.

“It is my party shirt,” said Tenyon, bobbing his head to the thumping synth. “Face it. I look cool.”

“The coolest,” I said. The shirt had palm leaves in the design. Pink and yellow and green.

“Marcos is not happy with you, buddy.”

“Think he means it?” we peeled toward a corner, snatching a couple of Budweisers from the bar.

“He is not dangerous,” said Tenyon. “Only mad you are poinking his fiancee.”

I opened the beer. I couldn't even make out Ezquerria and Haley amid all the others. “I didn't hear they were getting married. Is that for real?”

Tenyon shrugged. He took a sip of his beer, and admired the label.

The dance floor was alive. Someone had strung a strobe from the ceiling, and it pulsed ocean blue, violent green. My vision was blurring. The climbers were nothing more than a mosaic. Nightmare shapes twisting in on each other. Some were missing noses, others their eyes.

I began to feel the sheer stupidity of my being there. Like finding Julien's corpse would patch me back together somehow. Like fucking my way across Base Camp would be some kind of salve. It felt endlessly dumb. As always, I turned to Tenyon.

He had such an easy smile. Like nothing in the world could bother him. No aches, no worries. I know that's not how it was, but that was how he made it look.

“Marcos isn't really marrying her,” I said. “Right?”

Tenyon looked over my shoulder, then shrugged. “Ask him.”

Somebody shoved me from behind. I flew into Tenyon, who held me up and turned me around. There was Ezquerria, his eyes glassy, his fists clenched. “You son of a bitch,” he said.

Tenyon moved between us. “Not in here,” he said. “You know this.”

Ezquerria grabbed me by the collar and dragged me out into the howling cold. Night had fallen hard. He flung me facefirst into a snowbank. “Get up, motherfucker,” he said.

“So this is really happening,” I said.

I stood. Dug my boots into the snow. I'd been in worse scrapes. I grew up in Bangalore, goddammit. “You're not really getting married,” I said.

His fist crunched under my eye, then again on my jaw. My body reeled backwards. I launched at him, put my knee in his stomach, then a fist in his throat. He went down. I got on top of him and jabbed the ridge of his cheek. He turned. There was blood in the snow.

Tenyon dropped his beer and ran to pull me off, but I was already staggering to my feet.

Ezquerria groaned. He sat up, elbows on his knees, both hands on his face. “Fuck,” he said, “ah, fuck.”

“Where's McCray?” I barked. Tenyon leaned me against a wall. “Where's McCray? I need a fucking beer.”

“I think you hurt Marcos, buddy.” Tenyon packed a handful of snow, then pressed it against my cheek where it was already beginning to swell.

“Course I hurt him. He ruined the party.”

“Okay, buddy. Let's get to bed. Big day tomorrow.”

By now others had come out. Haley draped Ezquerria's arm over her shoulder. Without even a look in my direction, she took him away. I imagined her lying him on a cot, tacking out a couple ibuprofen, studying the contours of his face.

A trickle of blood slipped from my hairline. It poured into the snow in my hand, the snow against my face. Tenyon squeezed my shoulder, turned, and went away.

The Mother rose in the distance. A plume of snow in high wind. Suspended in the sky, the snow looked like a bandage.

Chapter 6: Icefall

I shambled alone toward the comms center. An evergreen tent posed at the edge of camp. Beyond it were the shit-pits which by the end of the season would overflow with frozen waste. The smell hammered my stomach, and I doubled over to puke. Beer-smelling vomit hissed on my boots. I wiped a dribble of wet slime from my cheek with the back of a glove. I straightened myself.

The comms center was just a bank of ancient desktops parked on a long, rickety bench. The cables all snaked toward a gas-powered generator. I booted the computer. My stomach was turning. I was a little drunk still, and felt it as my fingers searched for the right keys.

“What the fuck happen to your face?” This was the detective, Nikhil Tasman. His backlit, round silhouette like a Rorschach blot on the monitor.

“Have you found her?” I said.

“You get in fight?” said Tasman. “You face-fuck sledgehammer?”

“Sana,” I said. “What's the news about Sana?”

“Your check went through.”

I put my hands in my hair. I had not bathed since the hotel in Namche and the night of the prayer wheel. My hand came away sticky with blood and flakes of melting snow. “The check,” I said. “Yeah, I know it went through.”

“Is a lot of money,” said said Tasman.

“I'm risking a fucking lot,” I said.

“I risk too, Mr. Boone. I have reputation.”

I chuckled. Spit dribbled out of my mouth. “Reputation,” I said. “Okay.”

“You drunk, Mr. Boone?”

“Leads,” I said. “Tell me about the fucking leads.”

Tasman leaned in, his round face shining in the glare of his desk lamp. He seemed to be surveying my face, studying it. “I have one lead,” he said. “Bhutan.”

“Bhutan?” I said. “How in the fuck could she have gotten to Bhutan?”

Outside, somebody was moving. Footsteps crunching in snow. I expected at first for the

steps to pass by, toward the toilets. But they stopped just at the door of the tent.

“Are you there, Mr. Boone?” said Tasman. “You hear me?”

“Follow the lead,” I said. “Whatever it takes.”

“Is expensive, Bhutan.”

I was turned to look at the pinned flap of the tent. Outside was only the bright white of evening. “Yeah,” I said. “I already gave you the money. Just take care of it.”

Tasman was laughing at something. But I saw a boot at the edge of the shadows outside. I logged off and went out of the comm center. The air braced me. I felt immediately sober.

“Wong?”

“People are looking for you,” said Wong. His arms were crossed in front of his narrow chest. A fist of breath dissolved in front of his mouth. “They're supposed to take a statement when there's a fight.”

“Did you hear that conversation?” I said.

“I don't know,” said Wong. “I was just about to call my wife.” He unfolded his arms in front of himself. “Do you have a family? What were you talking about? Is everything okay?”

“I gotta go,” I said.

Wong waited for me to go by him. He followed me up the trail, ten steps behind. I felt his eyes the whole way.

I woke with a feeling that something was fucked up. That bender when I left Sana at Phnom Penh, and the security guy shook me awake at closing time, it was the same puncture in my chest. I felt I had somehow betrayed her. It eluded me while I poured coffee in my Bailey's. It

eluded while I ate scorched bacon from my camp stove. But when I heard the steady cant of George Wong's Gore-Tex in snow, I remembered the comms tent. Had he heard my call to Tasman? The money? I gnawed at the food. It tasted like ash. Tenyon was pulling on his trousers, a cigarette pinched between his lips.

I rolled my shoulders. The muscles had tightened in my sleep. My arms felt weak, whisky-wet. "You going to the party tonight?"

"I don't think," said Tenyon. "Maybe if we are alive after Khumbu."

"You seen Wong around?"

"No," said Tenyon. "Not yet."

A helicopter was rotoring up from the south. One of those Cold War choppers left behind by the Soviets as they shrank back in the eighties, now used mostly for ferrying high-end tourist groups over difficult terrain. This would be one of the late arrival teams from Lukla. I came out to watch. The noise thumped in my head.

The chopper touched down at Base Camp's makeshift helipad – steel rods hammered into the snow, red flags tied at each corner. Each morning an Afrikaner guide came out to spray an X in Dayglo paint. It was always snowed over by lunch.

A squad of milk-faced civilian climbers piled out of the helicopter. Six of them stood around gawping while a cadre of Sherpas hefted their gear out of the chopper's cargo compartment. One pressed his eyeball to a digital camera and started snapping away at the campsite. The last man out of the helicopter was big, bullish, his eyes hidden behind expensive shades. Henry Kenning, Everest Adventure Tours.

Kenning moved about his group, helping the Sherpas shoulder overstuffed packs. "That

there is our common area,” he said to the shutterbug. “There's warm food in there, and tea. Anything you need, just ask Katie.” He waved in the direction of the pale-green tent with a Union Jack flying over it. Shit, I'd forgot she was already at camp. The group moved on; Kenning stayed at the helicopter, talking to someone inside.

The photographer shuffled past me, his face still up against the viewfinder. “Boy,” he said. “Boy oh boy.”

I came out toward the helicopter. The rotors spooled out to a slow swing, like a thresher I had seen grinding across a cornfield once. When was the last time I'd seen corn? Hell.

“You're late, old man.” The words flopped out of my mouth before I knew I was talking. Kenning turned. He clapped my hand between two dense gloves.

Kenning let go of my hand to clamp the hat to his head. “You know what it's like, mobilizing a crew of civvies. Half of them think Denali is a bloody curry dish. Come on, boy. You been to see Katie yet?”

I leaned over to glance into the cockpit of the chopper. It looked to be a Sitka, though not the same one we'd used back in my days with Kenning. It was fancier, with decent upholstery. This one looked as if rats hadn't gotten to the seats yet. The pilot was a burly fellow, white. He flicked through a series of switches on the ceiling. Something buzzed, then stopped. The sleeve of his jacket peeled back at the wrist. Something peeked out – the serifs of a blocky script tattooed on his forearm. Ad Astra. To the stars.

“This the rescue chopper? He one of your old RAF boys?” I said.

“That's Errol,” said Kenning. “Say hi, Errol.”

Errol looked down from the switchboard. I raised an eyebrow. “You got any crisps,

then?" said Errol.

"Uh," I said. "No, sorry."

"Bugger off then."

"Errol's been a grumpy bastard since we left Kathmandu. Won't eat anything hasn't been broiled at the Bayswater Arms, will you Errol? Eh, come on."

Kenning gestured broadly at Base Camp. Morning activities were in full swing: a couple of men tested the straps on each other's harnesses. A woman came across the way, arms laden with oxygen tanks for the day's climb. Marcos Ezquerra leaned back in a camp chair, his eye swollen, a mug of coffee shooting smoke signals into the air.

"It's good to be back," said Kenning.

We went toward the tent with the Union Jack. The photographer and Kenning's other clients milled about, picking their bags out of the snow where the Sherpas had tossed them. "By the way," I said. "Thanks for letting us use your lines. It's going to save me a huge headache."

"It's not a favor, Boone. Geisert's paying just like everybody else. My rope team has got it right figured this year. Anyway, stiffen up for Katie."

Kenning fished through his pocket for a small pouch, and from it he produced a pinch of tobacco. He smoked this brand of horrific Cypriot shit. Hand-rolled cigarettes, like the Allan Quatermain. The tentflaps were pinned open; the weather had been mild that day, and the sun was only now cresting a rampart of clouds to the east. Inside, Katie Noland-Wallace worked the knobs on a radio.

"By the way, boy." Kenning blew a tight ring of smoke. It smelled like a goat. "Heard you roughed up old Marcos. Gave him a right pounding."

“How in the hell you hear about that?”

Kenning nodded toward the tent. “Old girl's still looking out for you.”

“Is that Abbot Boone out there?” Katie poked her head out. Outside the Union Jack tent, she joined us with two steamy mugs of darjeeling. “Thought I heard that sorrowful groaning,” she said. She handed one mug to me, the other to Kenning.

He looked at her softly. “Aren't you having any, love?”

“We have a guest,” she said. “I'll serve meself.”

“Thank you, Katie.” I took a sip. “It's good. What're you up to?”

“Just minding the radio. Some of our rope crew are late getting back.” Katie put her fists on her hips. While the rest of us were slumping into middle age, Katie still seemed to float right through it. “I heard you and Marcos had a tiff,” she said.

Kenning puffed his cigarette. “Knocked his lights out, he did.” He cracked his knuckles for emphasis.

“You boys,” she said. “I'd hate for it to be either of you.”

“Listen, Boone.” Kenning leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He held the cigarette out to his side, let it dangle. Smoke swirled up in a slow spiral. “Something I want to talk to you about.”

“This should be good,” I said.

“You shouldn't be here,” said Kenning.

“What you talking about?” I said.

“Henry,” said Katie, “don't.” She looked at me. There was sympathy in her face, and pity.

“Let us talk, bee,” said Kenning.

“What are you saying?” I said. Then, “It's alright, Katie. We're just talking.”

Katie shook her head. The corners of her mouth pulled down. She turned and went back into the tent.

“This woman,” said Kenning. “Geisert.”

“Don't condescend,” I said. “What's the problem?”

“The problem is you don't get a body from that high up,” said Kenning. “Ever.”

“There's a chance,” I said. “She just wants a chance.”

Kenning held his mug in one hand and the cigarette in the other. Smoke and steam intertwined. His hair was going gray after all these years. “I don't care what she wants,” he said. “I don't want you to die.”

“It's too late. We're hiking Khumbu in an hour.”

“It's suicide,” he said. “I don't give a bloody fuck about Geisert or her idiot husband. But you're not in the right headspace for something like this. You're grasping.”

“I know what I'm doing,” I snapped.

“Mate, I know why you want to get this chap. I really do.” He dropped the cigarette and kneaded the mug with his strong hands. “Doing this, it's not going to bring Sana home.”

I clenched my fists. The sound of knuckles popping in my gloves, like acorns underfoot. “I don't want to talk about her,” I said.

“That Geisert woman is using you,” said Kenning. “You and her both need to let go.”

A cold wind sliced my face. I felt a sob lodge in my throat. I swallowed. “I'm trying, man. I'm really trying.”

Kenning stopped. He leaned in slightly, as if he might wrap me in a bear hug. “Okay,” he

said. “Just think on it.” He walked off. Across the way, the photographer was rifling through a satchel. Kenning went over and talked with him. They shot a look back at me. The photographer raised his camera and shot a photo of me. A frown ratcheted into my cheeks.

“He's just looking after you, you know.” Katie leaned at the entrance to the tent. She was ten or twelve years older than me.

“Funny way of showing it,” I said.

“I ever tell you how me and Henry met?” said Katie.

I shook my head. Kenning and the photographer strode off toward the Sitka, where Errol was tinkering on a fuel line. I turned back to Katie.

“Before any of this daft Everest stuff, I was just a regular woman going through a messy divorce. I went a little mad. Went scrambling to Asia to get my head right. You know, like a person does. Eat, Pray, Love, all that.”

“I didn't know all that,” I said.

“It's true,” said Katie. “I was very ordinary before all that. Then I find myself holed up in the monastery out at Tengboche. I was about *this* close to taking my vows and becoming a monk.”

“They let women become monks?”

“I don't know, but I was about convinced either way. Silence and chastity for me. Then I met Henry.”

“That was it for the chastity, huh?”

Katie smiled. A wrinkle appeared at the corner of her mouth. A dimple that had not been there before. “The chastity thing went away later. He was on his way to Base Camp and stopped

over for his puja. And he convinced me somehow that it was better to go out into the world than to dry up in the monastery and live on moldy bread for the rest of my days.”

“I’ve been to Tengboche,” I said. “Their bread is fine.”

“But you get my point,” said Katie. “It’s better to be in the world than to not.”

“It’s good to see you,” I said.

I checked my watch. I was the first of our group to the crossroads. Six stupas slumped in a circle. Mounds of scalloped stone and ice, draped in flags of red, green, yellow. These were cairns for the dead, assembled in murmuring prayer by highland Sherpas at the end of last summer. Six climbers died last season. Some of the stupas were inscribed with their names. Thomas, Ana, Julien. Those for the Sherpas, who have no written language, left them nameless.

“Are we the first ones?” Wong appeared from the path toward Base Camp. He was kitted out in parka and climbing poles, reflective goggles dangling under his chin.

That surge of anxiety from when I woke – I’d given Tasman a lot of the money. A whole lot. Sweat collected under my arms, swamplike. Despite the subzero winds, I felt a red heat rising in my chest. A stifling pressure of dread. “I was waiting,” I said.

“Are you okay?” said Wong. He’d grown a layer of patchy scruff on the smooth flesh of his face. “You look a little tired, mate.”

“I’m good,” I said. “I’m good.”

The others came soon. Tenyon with Geisert, Lhakpa with Dawa.

“How’s that face, buddy?” said Tenyon.

I pressed a gloved finger on the thumping welt above my cheek. “Sore,” I said.

“No more fighting, eh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

“Should we get going?” said Wong. He pulled a black balaclava over his mouth. “Sun is up. It’ll be melting the ice. Things will be getting slippery up there.”

“One thing,” said Geisert. She stood now before the stupa that bore her husband's name. “It's like a grave,” she said. She knew, we all knew, there was no body there. Geisert knelt and dug into her backpack. She took out a kata, a white flag of prayer. It flapped like a broken wing. Gently, she rocked the top stone backward. She placed the flag under it.

Soon after, we moved on.

From afar, all six stupas appeared the same. Six stone ghosts. The monuments would stand a while, until an avalanche tore them apart or an earthquake punted the bottom out from under them. The dead would be left behind, one way or another.

We came at last to the seeping blue of the Khumbu Icefall, which coiled before us like a great, raging snake. Blue and white thorns of ice jutted from the permafrost. Morning light caught in the heart of each and coiled there. Looking at Khumbu felt like staring up at Angkor Wat – jagged protrusions carving a blue sheet of sky, a shimmering palace of sheer enormity. Khumbu was two thousand feet high, easily. The icefall formed the south face of a colossal glacier, its surface constantly morphing as the ice melted and refroze from day to night. It was never the same twice. We had left behind much of our gear at Base Camp: the big tents, most of the food and drink. George Wong came up behind me, breathing steadily into his balaclava.

“I was thinking last night,” he said, “about when we first met, back in '96.”

“Long time ago,” I said. My head was throbbing. Bruises, altitude sickness, a hellbeast of

a hangover. I didn't want to look at Wong.

It seemed like the '96 disaster was the only thing people wanted to remember. After Krakauer's book and the new movie that comes out every few years, it's like they won't let us forget. Somehow it made the whole thing even more popular. And that's just what a dangerous climb needs, is an extra couple hundred people crowding the slopes and fucking up the timeline.

“This is right where the chopper came in,” he said. “Remember?”

“Save your breath,” I said. “It's an acclimatization hike. Don't want you blacking out cause you couldn't shut your mouth.”

“Mr Boone.” Geisert wore her hair in braids. She looked like a Swiss Miss box. “What's the plan here?”

“Okay,” I said. I took in the faces of my team. Tenyon, Geisert, Dawa, Lhakpa, Wong. “Most of you have made this climb before. You know how dangerous it can be. We'll scale the glacier and set up our first campsite for next week's push.”

“When you're climbing,” said Wong, “watch your spacing.”

“Just focus. One pitch at a time.”

We began a move up the icefall, tacking along the ropes set by Kenning's Sherpa team. Wong filed behind me on the guiderope, stepping directly in my bootprints along the way. We hit an early crevasse, maybe two meters across – a jagged mouth in the ice. The rope crew had bridged it with a wobbly extension ladder, and flagged it with orange tape.

“Careful,” I said.

“Yes,” said Tenyon. “Always.” he locked his crampons into the rungs. The aluminum frame shuddered with each step. He raised his arms out to his side for balance, and on he went.

Once Tenyon reached the other side, he knelt in the snow and gripped the ladder with both hands to steady it.

“Do you remember what it felt like for that chopper to find us here?” Wong again, sweeping an arm over the brutal scape of ice. “The way that storm came out of nowhere.”

“It's a little fuzzy,” I said.

But it wasn't. The whole Mountain was ravaged that day. Dozens of climbers stranded along the South Face, most of them without enough oxygen to last the night. Young and wild and for the first time feeling like I could do something really good, something to be proud of, I joined the rescue efforts. Henry Kenning paired me with another young guy. George Wong.

“We found the Austrian,” said Wong.

Lhakpa and Dawa moved across the chasm. They had been here before. They knew the feel of a ladder under their boots.

“Mrs. Geisert, you're up,” I said.

She looked at me and Wong. For a moment I didn't want her to leave me alone with him. It felt like that riddle – the fox, the rabbit, and the cabbage. I wondered which was me.

“What do I do if I fall?” she said. Her eyes were shielded in reflective glass. The sun glinted and cast a sickle of light around her.

“Don't fall,” I told her.

She stepped onto the ladder. One foot, then the other. She reached for Tenyon's outstretched hands. I felt a twinge of envy, and shoved it down deep. Can't be thinking like that.

“You're up,” I told Wong.

“Come along,” said Tenyon. “We are almost there.” We'd been climbing a couple of hours. My lungs felt thin, and papery.

I kept thinking about what Wong has said. “We found the Austrian, we found the Austrian.” Like he forgot about the rest of them. And I couldn't shake the feeling we should be steering clear of *this*: a serac, justting like a ten ton railspike from the glacier. A serac is a pillar of ice, usually large, always unstable. This one loomed downhill at a forty-five degree angle, and Kenning's route led us on top and over the damn thing.

The sun had been up a while now, and all the icy surfaces had begun to slick. There was nothing to stop this serac from dropping on my head the second I clipped into it. I weighed the odds.

“George Wong,” I said, “you're first.”

Wong clipped into the nylon safety braid. He braced his crampons against the ice.

“On belay?” he called.

Dawa took the end of the rope and passed it through a loop in his harness. A formality, really. The serac wasn't all that high, but it was heavy enough to pulverize anything it fell on.

“Belay on,” said Dawa. Wong climbed.

And the man could climb. His pick hit the same marks I'd have gone for. He used his legs to push, his back to pull. He was silent too, like a movie without a soundtrack. Just a choreography of body. He got over the pillar like it was nothing.

I clipped Geisert into the braid. “You ever done something like this?” I asked.

“I've climbed Kilimanjaro,” she said.

“There a lot of glaciers on Kili?” I yanked the strap. She gasped sharply.

“Yes,” said Geisert. “Technically.” I fed her the rope. She climbed slowly. Her feet worked along the slippery surface of the serac.

“Steady, but keep pace,” I said. She didn't answer, only reared back with her ax and planted it deep in the cornice. “Tenyon, how we doing on time?”

Tenyon checked his Donald Duck wristwatch. “Ten oh five,” he said.

“Sun's up,” I said. “Things are about to get real impermanent.”

“Life is impermanent!” shouted Wong. He was coming over a ledge with a rack of oxygen tanks.

Near the top of the glacier, Tenyon and I traced a safety line along the ridge. There was only one short face to get over. I anchored myself to the ground and set my feet. “How's the face?” said Tenyon.

“Not great, Ten.”

Tenyon nodded and handed me a piton. “The rope sags here.”

I hammered the metal point into ice. “You want to share what's on your mind?” I asked. “Or just have me fix your rope?”

“Just being safe,” said Tenyon. “Just looking after my buddy.”

“I've got it under control,” I said.

“Yes,” said Tenyon. We moved along the line. The rest of the group spaced behind us. “On belay,” said Tenyon. “We are almost there.” He clipped into an anchor for a near-vertical pitch.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I got you.”

Wong edged up behind me. “Seem familiar?” We were looking out from a shelf of ice. In the far-off distance, six stupas and the motley sprawl of Base Camp. Tenyon reached the top of the glacier and waved down.

“George, are you going up?”

“Lhakpa,” he said, “go ahead.” And to me, “I can't believe you don't remember. The Austrian. We lowered him down this same face in a sleeping back. His hands were falling off from frostbite!”

“I remember it,” I said. Lhakpa climbed past us. Then the others. “I remember we found the tent, right up there.” I nodded toward the top of the glacier – the others were dusting themselves, and waiting for us. “I remember the way it was shredded. Like a bear had gotten to it. The way you said we had to keep moving.” Something flared inside me. “Wong, get moving. Now.”

Wong hesitated, then clipped into the line. He looked at me like I was a wild dog. He didn't know whether to run or shoot me. I took up his slack. “On belay,” he said.

“Go.”

For the time being, Camp I was an acre of moraine in the brutal shadow of the Lhotse, itself the fourth-highest peak on the planet. The ground here was a mess of sediment and chipped ice. There was space for our three small tents. As I hammered aluminum stakes into the permafrost, I wondered who my tentmate would be. Geisert and Lhakpa unfurled a tarp. Tenyon tested the valve of an oxygen valve. It hissed invisibly into the empty air. He nodded to Wong, who began to stack the canisters in a day-glo pyramid at the center of the camp.

When the work was done, we sat on the ground to catch breath. The climb down would be even deadlier in the afternoon, when the sun had begun to melt things.

“Not too bad today,” said Tenyon.

“She behaved,” said Dawa.

“The icefall is a boy,” said Lhakpa. “Moody, like Boone. You know this.” She socked me on the shoulder. I chuckled, and grimaced.

Dawa went into the pocket of his down jacket and produced a flask. He screwed it open and took a pull. He passed it to Lhakpa. “More of that shit?” she said. “Well, if I have to look at your ugly faces another two weeks.” She drank and passed it to Wong.

Wong looked at Geisert. She raised an eyebrow. Perhaps a dare? Wong looked down into the black hole of the flask. “I’m not much of a drinker,” he said. He passed the flask to Geisert.

She sniffed. She took a pull, frowned, and took another.

“Yeah boss,” said Dawa. “Alright.”

“Fuck,” said Geisert. “Oh my.” Her laugh was lively and young. I felt like I had barely looked at her that day, just enough to keep an eye on her technique. Just enough to keep her from slipping off the edge of the planet. But in the moment, she felt something like a person. I wanted to know what her life was like. Her lips were chapped. I thought of what her house might look like. What was she fighting for?

She passed the flask to Tenyon. He raised it to Geisert, smiling. He took a drink. By now Tenyon had forgotten the names of his children. The only names on his mind were ancient ones: Khumbu, Lhotse. The ancient name for Everest, Sagarmatha – Mountain of the Sky Mother.

Tenyon passed me the flask. There was a good swallow left. I looked at Geisert. She

shrugged. I put my lips to it.

“Okay,” said Wong, “I’ll have some.”

I killed the drink. The desi daru was molten steel under my tongue and in the hollows of my cheeks. One hack of cough. I looked at Wong, then turned the flask upside down. A single drop fell from the mouth to stain the snow. “Sorry dude,” I said. “Gone-zo.”

I screwed the cap and tossed it back to Dawa. The camp was set. Three tents, some oxygen to bring along when we faced the next leg in a few days: Lhotse. “We’ll be back,” said Dawa. “Two days?”

“Two days,” said Tenyon.

Dawa planted a kiss on the pyramid of oxygen tanks. “Love these,” he said. “Thank the gods for them.”

I looked over at Wong. He had a cell phone out, taking pictures. I just kept thinking who is this fucking guy? Just enjoying the view from way up high, and all I wanted to do was find a way to fix this. To find Julien Geisert and fix the way I felt inside. The way I would never find out what happened to Sana, the way I wondered whether I ever knew her at all. I had to unspool at least this small mystery of what happened to Julien. I thought it could save me. The stakes were planted so high yet sunk so deep, it felt like the only thing that mattered. And Wong was here, and I still couldn't shake '96, the way it shook out. The way Wong never seemed to feel more than one way about anything at all. Good or bad, fine or not fine. Dead or alive. He caught me glaring. I had been moving my mouth, mumbling curses.

“Some problem?” he said.

“Just thinking,” I said. “About '96.”

“You seem upset,” said Geisert.

“You know what happened?” I said. “You know what happened that year?”

“I know people died.”

“Eight.”

“Okay,” said Geisert. “Eight.”

“I don't know what you're so wound up about,” said Wong.

“Of course you don't,” I said. “You think you were some big hero.”

“We both were,” said Wong. “We saved the Austrian.”

“His name was Schmidt.”

“I know his name,” said Wong. “We still e-mail.”

“What about Gonzales?”

“Who's that?”

I worked my lips together. The rest of the group had choked into silence.

“Buddy,” said Tenyon. “We are up high. Save it for later.”

We were losing time. We would have to get back down before the ice melted worse. The longer I made this a thing, the more dangerous the descent for all of us; I didn't care.

“Gonzales died a hundred yards away from Schmidt. We walked right past his tent. Didn't even look inside. Because you knew where we were going.”

“I did know where I was going,” said Wong. “Schmidt was the one on his radio.”

“And Perkins. Edema. Would have survived if someone had gotten to her with medicine. But they didn't. We didn't.”

“We had our mission,” said Wong. He began to look around the group. No one met his

eye.

“You don't even know their names,” I said. “Gonzales. Perkins. Cornell. Should I go on?”

Wong focused on me. The sun was high now. Each gust of wind felt like lightning on my face. “I never knew he was in the tent,” said Wong. “I never knew that.”

“That's worse,” I said.

“Let him be,” said Geisert. “Mr. Wong has been nothing short of helpful to us.”

“To you,” I said. “You're the one writing checks for glory.”

“At least I'm not just here for the money,” said Wong. “Do they know what you're up to?”

He leveled a stare that could have flayed me like a goat. I snapped to my feet, and in a second I was on him. My hands slipped around his neck.

“Money?” I bellowed. “Fucking money?” I bashed his head against the ice. I did not feel in control of myself. It was an animal directive. My elbow yanked back doe a punch that never showed up. For a tenth of a second I felt like I was facing down Marcos Ezquerra again over some bullshit – not this, not at 30,000 feet. Not with a teammate.

Tenyon and Dawa dove on me and pulled me off of Wong. I'd felt this before, the steel beam of Tenyon's arm across my chest. I had felt it in Argentina, I'd felt it in McCray's. Wong scattered away from me on his hands and ass. His eyes were torched with fear.

“You're crazy,” he was saying. “You're crazy, you're crazy.”

I realized then I couldn't breathe. Air caught in my throat like a bunch of splinters. My legs quaked. Geisert was in front of me somehow, her face seared with anger. “Mr. Boone! Sit. Now.”

Tenyon and Dawa planted me on the ground and went to confer with Geisert. She had her

arms crossed. They whispered together close on a minute. I kept staring at Wong, who sat shivering in the snow. The sun was high, the wind bright and cold. Wong worked a lip between his teeth. He put a mitten to the back of his head, but did not come away with blood.

“Mr. Boone,” called Geisert. “Come here.” The group, all but Wong, stood around me.

Tenyon didn't look at me with pity. I was grateful for that. His face was pleasant, regular. “Buddy,” he said, “we are going back to Base Camp now. We talk after.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, that's fine.”

“And give Wong some space, okay? You shook him like a baby.”

We kept silent on the way down. I tried to push everything out of my head. Sana, the detective, the money. The expeditionary fund would be running low. Wong. Wong knew all about the money. Or was it just posturing? It didn't matter now. I figured Geisert would cut me loose the minute we got back to BC. So I focused on getting down. The giant railspike serac sulked at us again near the base of the glacier, threatening to collapse with one of us under it. We clipped in and belayed, one by one, to the tenuous ground below.

At one moment as we moved toward the last pitch, the silence became loud and agitated. It felt as if Wong and I carried a stripe of razor wire taut between us. Every time I moved my tongue to speak, I felt ashamed for being what I was. A drunk, a loser. Without thinking at all, I reached down to help Geisert with her harness. “Good climbing today,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said. Both hands came to her mouth and she let out a hacking cough. I unclipped her from the safety line. She passed, momentarily, under the looming pillar of ice. The thing groaned, agonized. Its skin had begun to turn to water. It would freeze again at nightfall in a new shape. This happened every day.

Geisert had moved away from the ice, and was heading toward Base Camp with the others. I eased backward, feeling my way down the surface.

We arrived again at the extendable ladder. I felt the crampons lock and unlock. I sniffed, coughed, swallowed. The others watched to make sure I came all the way across.

Tenyon followed, and when he reached me he said “You're bleeding. Your nose.” He packed a snowball and handed it over. “Hold this. No more fights, buddy.”

“Like old times,” I said. We laughed. It was a good laugh, without bad feeling. I spat a long, gooey stripe of blood on the snow.

Chapter 7: Strange Coffin

Base Camp was a sea of voices. Everyone there was always talking. Always got something to say, like if they died on the Mountain they didn't want to die with things left unsaid. I could hear the chatter from a long way off as we came down from the glacier. Our group kept silent until we passed under the hand-carved entryway. A wooden arch, lashed lengths of bamboo carted in from the Chinese side, tottering in the wind. Prayer flags strung from it, slapping wildly. Returning to Base Camp felt like passing through a portal into another world. Narnia, but where everyone was awful.

As soon as we were through, Geisert turned to me. “My tent, five minutes.”

Dawa peeled away from the group as quick as he could. He had a shovel over his shoulder and a roll of toilet paper tucked under his arm. I didn't know where he'd gotten them.

“Dawa,” I said. He stopped.

“Hey.”

“Let me ask you something.”

“Ask what you want,” said Dawa.

“Do you think I'm okay?” It was unfair to ask him something like that. He felt it too, I could see. No friend should have to answer such a thing. Maybe that was why I hadn't asked Tenyon.

“I don't know,” said Dawa. He shifted from one foot to the other. “I have to shit. Sorry, boss.”

I dropped in on McCray's Bar to gas up for the meeting. If I was going to get fired, I wasn't going to do it without at least a little buzz. McCray looked up from studying a bottle of Svedka. “Boone,” he said. The bar was empty besides us. The dance floor stretched, glacial, under the aluminum ribs of the building. “We haven't really got the party going yet, mate.”

I dug into my pockets and came up with a crumpled bill. “Beer.”

Rod popped the cap off an American lager. He handed it over the counter and went to pour a whisky. “Just come down off Khumbu?”

“Yeah.” I felt a pinch in my gut about the money. Sooner or later, someone was going to notice it was gone. Wong had plenty of reason to be curious, now that I'd come damn close to strangling him. “Yeah,” I said again. “First time with this group.”

“Listen, man.” Rod put both hands on the bar. I had never, to that very moment, noticed he was missing two knuckles on his right index finger. Bad frostbite will do that. “I don't want any more trouble with Marcos Ezquerra in here.”

I drained the beer. “Tell him that.”

Rod took the bottle and dropped it into a garbage can. "I did tell him that," said Rod. "Now I'm telling you. Any more bullshit, I'm cutting you off for the rest of the season. I'm not cleaning up your blood again."

I pushed off against the bar. "We fought outside, dick. No blood on your floor."

He hollered after me. "You coming by tonight?"

"One way or the other," I said. "Got to keep you in business, bud."

Geisert sat on an overturned milk crate. Tenyon stood beside her, arms crossed. When he saw me come in, he looked away. I felt as if I was in the headmaster's office. Mr. Singh, he used to bash my knuckles with his cane.

"Right on time," said Geisert.

"Where's Wong?" I asked. "Should he be here?"

"Sit," said Geisert.

There was nowhere to sit. I eased to the ground and crossed my legs. "Let's get it over with. Figure I can book a flight back in the morning. Maybe I can ride back with that crazy fucker, Errol."

"Buddy," said Tenyon.

"Your behavior," said Geisert. "It's a problem."

"My behavior," I said.

"Drinking, fighting."

"I got in one fight."

"Two," said Geisert. "You could have killed Mr. Wong today."

I stood, but was too tall for the tent. “That was not a fight.” Tenyon frowned.

“Listen to how you sound,” said Geisert. “Like a child.”

“Sure,” I said. I was turning so red. I kept looking at Tenyon like he might jump in and pull me out of the fire. “I’m a child. Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

“We can’t have you making trouble with the others,” said Geisert. “We just can’t have it.”

“He’s living in a goddamn fantasy world,” I said. “He thinks what we’re doing is this amazing thing. He called it a love story, Sarah. But he was up there on the Mountain when Julien died.” I looked her in the eye. I wanted her to feel what I felt. That Wong was in the wrong, that he didn’t get it, that he never would. That it wasn’t about me. Or Sana.

“He didn’t even know Julien’s name.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” said Geisert.

“Like I said, I’ll be gone in the morning.”

“You shouldn’t interrupt me, Mr. Boone. That’s probably the last thing you want to do.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I’ve talked it over with Mr. Tenyon,” said Geisert. Tenyon finally looked at me. Almost invisibly, the corners of his mouth turned down. I remembered drinks in a Madrid hotel, when I asked Tenyon if he ever wanted to die. That secret frown was the same. I could see it then: Tenyon knew about the money.

“If this were any other mission,” said Geisert, “I would sent you back where you came from and outsource your contract to Mr. Ezquerra. But Mr. Tenyon tells me we’re out of money, or very nearly.” It was only then that I noticed the manilla folder on the cot beside Geisert. It was thick with paper – invoices, I assumed, financial docs for the climb.

“Darn setup fees,” said Tenyon. He looked at me gravely. “Kenning make assholes of us.”

“Which means,” said Geisert, “at this late stage, I can't afford your replacement.”

It took me a minute to catch up. I flicked from Tenyon to Geisert and back. “So I'm not fired.”

“Like you said,” said Geisert, “it's a six man job. No replacement, no team, no Julien.”

I should have felt relieved. I got to keep my gig at least, and wouldn't have to cope with the shame of getting punted off the Mountain like some freshman dirtbag. But all I could feel was trapped. I was locked in now. Locked in with Wong, locked in with the Mountain, locked in with Tenyon's disappointment, which now that he knew about the money, I was sure would carry on endlessly.

“Call it probation,” said Geisert. “You're at the bottom of the totem pole now. Mr. Tenyon is your boss. You don't sneeze unless he writes you a permission slip. Say yes ma'am.” All this time, she sat perfectly straight. Her flesh was pale, her hands steady, but a steady red flushed her cheeks and forehead.

“Yes ma'am,” I said.

“You and I,” she continued, “we are still on a day to day basis. It doesn't matter how good a guide you are, or that you and Mr. Tenyon put this team together, and it doesn't matter which prayer wheels you drag me to.” At this my head nearly snapped off my neck. I looked at her, and just as I screwed up my mouth to challenge her, to tell her to take a fucking hike, George Wong glided into the tent.

“Hey everyone, how's it going?”

Geisert froze. Her fists balled up, her glare leveled at me like both barrels of a shotgun.

Wong stood like a goon, his arms a bundle of rope hanging slack. “Is there a meeting or something?”

“No, buddy,” said Tenyon. “Abbot and I,” he said, “we go to load the gear.”

Tenyon stomped downhill toward the edge of camp. I followed. The snow came past my ankles and I had to yank my knees up to walk. Without looking back, Tenyon said “Don't.”

“Why'd you lie?”

“I said don't.” He was heading for our tent.

I jogged toward him, gasping. I was out of breath. Each step shrank my lungs. “Ten,” I said. I grabbed his shoulder. “Stop. Listen.” He threw my hand off and spun to face me.

“I do not want to know,” he said. “Do not tell me. Only answer: should I worry?”

I caught my breath. Knees on hands, mouth open, steam curling from behind my teeth. A band of light snow drifted on a bright wind. In the distance, the Mother wore her plume of white. It too was drifting. “It's under control.”

With the back of his glove, Tenyon wiped an accumulation of snow from his mustache. “I don't believe you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Let's just get through this.”

“I think Wong knows.”

“Leave him,” said Tenyon. “No more fights.”

“It's about Sana,” I said. “The money, it's about Sana.”

“I know,” said Tenyon. A softness came into his face. “I know, buddy.”

“I'm just...” I swayed my head left to right, trying to find the words. “I'm just feeling fucked up inside.”

“I know,” said Tenyon. “I see it.”

“Thank you,” I said. “For covering for me. I really do want this.”

Tenyon planted both mittened hands on my shoulders. “Don't talk to me about it again. I hate to lie.”

Despite myself, I smiled. “So what do we do now?”

“We? We work hard. We get Mister Geisert for Missus Geisert. You? You stay out of trouble.”

There was of course going to be another party that night. I went in with the aim to have maybe two beers, then to skulk back to camp and get some rest. I would talk to no women, I would throw no punches. A solemn vow that, even as I thought it, felt entirely up in the air.

Music carried on the wind. The song, a remix of some eighties hit. Wicked Game, maybe.

Behind the bar, Rod McCray bobbed his head to the cocaine-wonderland EDM. Rope lights blinked in long dashes of red around the ceiling's perimeter. Haley was at the party. She was writhing by herself. I didn't see Ezquerra anywhere.

“Beer,” I said.

“We going to take it easy tonight, mate?” McCray gripped a bottle, holding it back. The nub of his missing finger cut a trail through the condensation.

“Way easy,” I said.

“Way fucking easy,” he said back.

I folded a few bucks together and handed them across the bar. McCray caught a glance of something over my shoulder and turned around. He picked up a rag and began to polish attentively.

“Are you supposed to be here?” said Haley. She came up beside me and planted her elbows on the bar. The flashing lights played across her athletic body. Thin, but corded with muscle. Between the pulse of the bass, the lights, it was overwhelming to even look at her. Something like jealousy surfaced, then dove.

All I could think to say was, “You're not really getting married, are you?”

“He had to get stitches.”

I brought the beer bottle to my mouth and took a sip. “He started it.”

“Are you serious? Listen to me.” She reached out; I pulled away.

She paused.

“How many stitches?” I asked.

“Four.”

“Can he climb?”

“He can climb,” she said.

“Are you really getting married?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. I didn't know what I'd hoped for. Not this, though. Not to be a homewrecker, or a sleaze. Haley looked in my face. “You should go to him,” I said.

“I will.”

“Okay,” I said. I finished the beer. It tasted sour, like my tongue had begun to rot. I traced

Haley's path across the bar. She threaded between a couple of GQ Manhattan bankers who were already close to wasted. A disco ball sparked across a crowded dance floor. People were finding themselves out there, finding each other. The bankers gravitated toward a couple of Oregonian women, adventure bloggers. Down the bar, George Wong gripped a beer with both hands. He was sitting by himself at a high seat, staring at a ring of condensation around the base of his bottle.

A big part of me wanted to swoop over and finish the job. Bust his glasses, leave him slumped on the bar, and empty his pockets into McCray's tip jar. What a joke. Might as well get piss-drunk, make another pass at Haley, and burn down Base Camp.

“Look like you're entertaining a stupid idea, mate.” Rod slapped a shot onto the bar.

“All my ideas are stupid.” I nodded at the shot. “What, is this some kinda test?”

Rod shrugged, and drifted toward one of the Oregonian bloggers. She ordered a round of four tequila shots.

“Fuck it,” I said. I pushed off from the bar and slid a few seats toward Wong.

“I don't want any trouble,” he said. He didn't look up.

“I have a hard time believing that,” I said. “What with your little accusation.”

“I didn't accuse you of anything,” said Wong.

“I don't think you even know what you're talking about.”

Wong looked up. The barlights reflected in his glasses. “I might just be an orthodontist, but I'm not a dunce. Those spreadsheets aren't hard to read.”

“Why do you even give a shit?”

He shrugged. “Life is short. It's worth doing things the right way.”

“You're fucking unbelievable,” I said.

Then the unbelievable bastard did something else I couldn't believe. Wong smiled at me. He smiled like I'd asked him the craziest joke. “I don't want anything from you,” he said. “It's just fun to have something on you.”

Just as I was about to try beating some answers out of him, he changed. It was like someone had flipped a switch. A genuine smile, or believably genuine, crossed his face. His eyes were warm. For a second I felt like we were old friends, closing down some pub and talking about the good times. But Wong wasn't looking at me, he was looking over my shoulder.

“What have we got here?” Mrs. Geisert was standing next to me. “Enjoying the party, Mr. Boone?”

I realized I'd been leaning forward, ready to leap out of my seat to tackle Wong. I eased back, and reached out for the glass I'd abandoned. “Just having a drink,” I said.

“I'd prefer you didn't.”

I tapped the hardwood next to the shot. The shot glass was brown, clouded with whisky. “This isn't my brand anyway.” I pushed it away.

“And Mr. Wong, are you having a nice evening?” She took the seat between us. McCray came by, and Geisert ordered a martini off him.

“Fine, thanks. Abbot was just apologizing for his behavior earlier.” He smirked in my direction. I wanted to strangle the little weasel.

“Yeah,” I said. I gripped the bar so hard I thought I might tear off a chunk and break it over his head. I couldn't fake it like Wong could. “Yeah, I was way over the line.” I looked from him to her. Geisert didn't respond. She probably heard the hollowness and didn't want to dignify

my bullshit with a reply.

“Anyway, I'm gonna go.” I swaggered to my feet. The music changed. A techno remix, the rising chorus of “There Are Worse Things I Could Do” following me out the door. Frozen wind climbed up my coat sleeves and traced my veins. I didn't know where I was headed, which meant I was heading to place another call to that rat-bastard Tasman. It was ten yards out from McCray's before I realized Geisert had left with me, and was walking just behind.

The sky was a deep purple, the color of the radishes Sana picked up from the market back in Siddharthanagar. “Need something?” I said.

When we reached a clearing, Geisert grabbed me by the elbow. “Are you okay?” She had a kind voice. She really did.

I cast a look over at the Union Jack tent. Kenning had gone inside the tent and zipped it behind him. Katie stood outside with a mug of steaming tea between her gloves. She stared dumbly at the snow. I knew her face. She had been crying.

“I just.” The words didn't come.

Geisert squeezed my arm. I could feel her fingers. “Are you okay, Mr. Boone?”

“I don't feel very well,” I said. “In general.”

“Do you want to go back to the party?” she said. “It would be okay with me, if you want to.”

“Maybe I'll just walk around,” I said. “Fresh air.”

“I'll keep you company,” she said. We walked.

In the moonlight I saw she was made of hands and hair and pale skin. It seemed she was trying to be kind. “Why are you being nice to me?” I said. “You're not nice to me.”

“Back at my home,” she said, “outside of Bern, we had so many children living nearby. This way –”

We struck toward the perimeter of the camp. The moon was full, suspended like a bright face over Pumori, to the west. There was no one outside. Everyone else was at the party or turned in for the night. There were stars in the sky. Thousands of them.

“The children would play in the street, foxes and eggs is what we called the game growing up. Or football, when there weren't many cars. Julien and I loved to watch them play. While we were drinking our coffee or reading, we would look out and see the children. And we could hear them all the time.”

“Must have been noisy,” I said.

“Oh very,” said Geisert, “but we liked it. We never had children, but it was nice to have them around sometimes. But then Julien died out here, and all I could think about was how alone he must have felt. And whether he missed me, and a thousand other things. But all I could hear were these children playing outside. Laughing, laughing all the time.”

“That's difficult,” I said. “I'm sorry.”

“There was a week where I fantasized about running out with a butcher's knife and scaring them away. I thought about it. I really did.”

“Jesus,” I said.

Geisert smiled. Her teeth were white in the moonlight. “It is funny, isn't it? The strange things we do.”

“I suppose so.”

“When I was a kid,” I said, “I used to play this game in the streets of Bangalore.”

“You grew up in Bangalore?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Mostly. And this game, it's so simple. You hit a gilli with a stick, try to knock the gilli into the air.”

“What's a gilli?”

“It's another stick.”

“Oh.”

“The thing that made somebody good at this game, it was timing. You had to be able to know just when to swing, just how far you should let the gilli fall before you hit it. I was terrible. I always let the gilli drop too low.”

“Bad timing an overall theme in your life?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I don't normally think about my life.”

“What I mean to say,” said Geisert, “about the children, is that I'm trying to be understanding. I think of how I wanted to carve up the children I adored, who never harmed me, because I was not myself. I hope you'll forgive the breach of your privacy, but Mr. Tenyon confided in me that you have not been yourself for some time.”

“He tell you why?”

“No,” she said. “I didn't ask. Besides, I don't think he would have told me the truth. That man would do anything for you.”

“I know,” I said. “He's a good friend.”

We reached the edge of camp. A scene of jagged mountains backlit by a sinking moon. There were few trees this high up, sparse stands of conifer spiraling into primeval valleys that snaked the range. Someone had set a bench here. A scenic overlook. I swept the seat with my

hands. We sat. At the feel of metal on my clothes, I remembered how cold I was supposed to feel. I shivered, and tucked my arms around my torso to warm up. We were quiet for a while, our breath rising up on avenues of light from a henge of glaring halogen lamps. A light snow had begun to fall. A flake caught on Geisert's shoulder, and stuck. I could hear the silence before she spoke.

“Mr. Wong said you were on this trip for another reason.”

“I do have my reasons,” I said.

“Is that what you were talking about at the bar? Your reasons?”

“I'm not feeling very well,” I said. “Overall.”

“Everybody can see that,” she said. “It's no secret.”

“It's been a while since I climbed the Mother.” I prepared a half-confession. I knew what I would say. I had almost had this conversation many times. It felt strange to unload one secret and hold back another. “I haven't climbed since my wife passed. Two years ago. The whole death thing,” I paused. This part I had not yet come to terms with. For the first time, I dug it out of my own heart and put it to words. “I just never really closed the door on her.”

Geisert nodded slowly. She looked at me with a kind of understanding. We were both animals, our mates poached, sharing a strange mourning.

“What was her name?” she asked.

“Sana,” I said. “Her name was Sana.”

She paused, as if the name meant something to her. I thought maybe she was thinking of her own husband the same way I groaned inwardly for Sana. The strange coffin of memory.

“You're still on probation,” she said.

“That's fine.”

“I'd like you to get some rest.”

“Okay,” I said.

My bed was cold and lonely. I couldn't think of Sana's face. I tried to, but I couldn't.

Chapter 8: Edema Blues

A voice pulled me out of sleep. It was dark still, purple and dark. The voice had come from outside my tent, where other voices were gathering in murmuration.

“We need tanks,” said the voice. “Tanks of O. Get them up there.” This was Katie's voice, Katie Noland-Wallace of Everest Adventure Tours. She was trying to get oxygen tanks up the Mountain. That could only mean one thing.

“Buddy, you awake?” Tenyon whispered. He stood silhouetted in the doorway.

“What's going on?”

“There was avalanche,” he said. “People hurt.”

I dressed in the urgent air and came outside. People had gathered around the Union Jack tent. Everyone was there: Kenning, looking pale. Haley and her Berliner friend, their hair pulled up in matching buns. Marcos Ezquerra limping slowly up the footpath, one hand on his ribs.

“People,” said Katie. “People, listen up.”

Dawa, Lhakpa, Wong, and Geisert gathered in as well. Tenyon huddled with them.

“There was an avalanche tonight on the Lhotse face. Two of our Sherpas were up there fixing lines.”

A shiver shook through the crowd. Avalanche? Next best thing to a death sentence. Katie

raised her hands. "What I need," she said, "is two teams. One to ferry o-tanks and gear to the top of the icefall, which you'll deposit for the second team. Group two, Henry and I will brief you on the route. You'll be our rescue team."

"Group two!" called Kenning. "I want four of you!"

"Abbot," said Geisert. She touched my arm, just below the elbow. "Are you going?"

"We always have to try," I said. The rest of the team nodded. Lhakpa, Dawa, Tenyon, and Wong.

"I don't think I should go," said Geisert. "I want to. I really do."

"I understand," I said.

"I think I'd be a liability."

"You're not expected to do something like this," I said. "Stay here. Help Katie."

By now the others had formed around Kenning. "Tenyon," said Kenning, "good, you're in." He tapped George Wong as well, and two Afrikaner guides from Ezquerra's crew.

"Henry," I said.

He looked at me with dead eyes. "Not you, Boone. You head up the first group with Ezquerra."

I looked at Marcos. He was badly battered, a sickle of red around the eye where I bashed him. He could barely stand.

"You're kidding me," I said.

Ezquerra spat. He began loading o-tanks into a satchel.

Katie put her hands on my shoulders. "We don't have time for your feelings, love. This is bigger than that. Pull it together for us?"

I looked at Ezquerra, dialing in to a radio frequency. Then at Wong, working a hunk of ice from his mask's intake valve. Whatever. “Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I can run support.”

The rescue group went into the Union Jack tent to look over maps. Tenyon, Wong, Kenning, the Afrikaners. The support group, that would be me and Ezquerra. would go separately. Geisert would remain at camp to coordinate the rescue with Katie. At least she would be out of the way.

“Marcos, you good?”

The sun would not begin to rise for another hour. Ezquerra planted his pick in the permafrost of the Khumbu icefall. The ice was blue. Mystic. A deep silence hung over us, silence except for the crunch of boots on ice. Marcos soldiered along the guiderope. He was not speaking, only climbing. Without much light to go by, Marcos's outline shimmered. The heavy pick on his shoulders resembled a great, black tumor.

“Marcos,” I said.

Without looking back, he reached over his shoulder and patted the oxygen tank on his back. This one had a plastic tube tunneling to his mouth. My own mask was translucent, already whiskered with frost.

At this elevation, oxygen wasn't always necessary. Well-acclimated hikers with as much experience as us, we could usually manage the icefall unassisted. But the stakes were high, and we needed to be at the top of our physical game.

The vast majority of Everest expeditions take place in late May. This is what we call “the window,” when the weather is warm enough to endure, but not so warm that we feel like we're

inviting an avalanche every time we go outside. In summertime, the sun melts snow faster. Snow shifts, avalanches happen. The Mother does what she will. Us orphan sons, we just had to go see if we could shovel them up. Or at least to deposit enough oxygen for the *real* rescuers.

At night, the icefall was a twisted landscape of monstrous arms punching up through the moraine. They bent like nightmares, all purple and deep blue in the starlight. It felt like trudging across an ancient battlefield. Here, a titan cut down by a dragon's scything tail. There, another, fallen on his back, one arm clutching in agony at the sky. All was frozen and dusted with snow. A mountain of corpses. A world of them.

“You just not talking anymore? We make a bet I forget about?”

Marcos ignited the flashlight on his hood. The ultrawhite beam swept the translucent pillars of ice, the sleeping snow. Up above towered the Lhotse face. A wedge of severe stone plunging more than eight-thousand meters above sea level. There was a fresh swab of snow on Lhotse's south face where the avalanche blasted from the Mountain's shoulder.

I clicked my radio on. “Katie,” I said. “We're coming up on Camp Two.”

“How're things holding together?” She sounded worried. In the static, in the noise of many voices. The camp tent would be busting with maps pinned to corkboard.

“We're fine,” I said. “Rescue team moving in?”

“Henry's briefed them. They're heading your way.”

“Copy that,” I said. “Marcos, you copy?”

Marcos raised a thumb high above his head. The silent treatment was not amusing.

“Marcos copies,” I said.

“Okay,” said Katie. “Drop the gear at Camp Two and hustle back. Weather's not looking

super.”

Camp II was little more than a clearing at the foot of Lhotse. A cluster of tents flapping loosely. A tattered tarp hung by one corner. Oxygen tanks and the skeletons of backpacks scattered across maybe twenty square meters worth of land. This camp was a year old, and had been abandoned when a storm threatened to bring a thousand tons of ice and rock crashing off Lhotse.

“I get why you're pissed,” I said. “I shouldn't have gone after your girl. I just feel bad.”

“That an apology?” said Ezquerro. He was speaking into his radio. The short-wave channel, choked with static. The winds were rising.

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” I said.

We kept walking. The silence crowded me. All I could hear was wind and static and my own ragged breathing. The whole world was white and blue and purple. The Mountain was a huge fang against the sky. I had to talk. I had to talk to him.

“Can we just have it out?” I said. “Just get it out of the way?”

“We've already had it out,” he said. “I had to get stitches.”

“I heard.”

“So you heard we split up.”

“She told me you were getting married,” I said. “Like six hours ago.”

“I don't know, man. Shit is inscrutable.”

There was a mound of snow with a jacketed arm pointing out. It had been here a while – not one of ours. “Marcos,” I said. I swept the beam of my flashlight on the mound. Maybe the

avalanche had brought this body down from the peak. Maybe it had been there the whole year. There was no glove on the hand. The fingers were curled into a black knob of fist. That suggested longer than the one night. “Dude.”

I dropped my pack and came to look. Marcos got on the radio. “Ezquerria to Base Camp,” he said.

“This is Katie. We read you, Marcos.”

“We've dropped off the oxygen. Boone found a body.”

“One of ours?” asked Katie.

“No,” he said.

We dug out the body with picks. The ice came away in shards, which I flung over my shoulder. It was not the body we hoped it was. This man, his face mummified by wind, shrunk to a pun of a face, a face like leather. The deep canyons of his eyes crushed shut by a cold, hypoxic death. I drew a knife and sawed at the strap of his backpack. It had frozen to his chest and shoulders. When I pulled away the strap, it came off with hunks of ice and frozen nylon.

“Bury him,” I said.

Ezquerria bent down to unfasten the tarp from one of the tents. He laid an edge of it under the body. Together, he and I rolled it up. We did not look at each other, only at the body.

I unzipped the dead man's pack. There wasn't much left. An oxygen canister, the dial on empty. A mask dangling from a carabiner, the receiver caked with frost. Rock-solid protein bars. A radio tuned to an emergency frequency, the batteries long dead. At the bottom of the bag, there was a bundle of postcards. “Dear Lily,” they began. On the front, photographs of Everest,

shrouded in winter blue, the perennial plume of snow like a priestess's shawl. Another card pictured a stupa, white stone against a brilliant sky. Another, Japanese bowing deer. All addressed to Lily.

“His name was Tom Silva,” I said.

Ezquerria was tying a bowline around the waist of the bundled corpse.

“He was from Oregon.”

“I remember him from last year,” said Ezquerria. “Had this great joke about Mexican midgets.”

“Jesus,” I said.

Together we dragged Silva to the edge of a crevasse. Beneath us there was a long, black tunnel of shadow. As we eased the rope out, the shadows reached up to take the body in until we could not see Tom Silva anymore.

This was what stood for burial on Everest. A simple lowering of the dead into the Mother's mouth. Where there was no crevasse, a cairn of ice and snow would do. As long as the body was out of sight and there was time to dispose of it. But right of way was always given to the living. Otherwise, it wasn't even worth it to think of them. Unspoken rules.

Ezquerria took my knife and cut the body loose. The rope, like the tail of a descending serpent, fluttered out of view.

My fingers flexed dumbly around the rectangle of my radio. “Support team to Base Camp.”

“This is Katie,” came the voice. In the background, quiet. Only the keen edge of wind.

“Not our body.” A skirt of snow blew down the icefall.

“ID?”

“Tom Silva. American. Buried at sea.”

A short silence on the radio. “Got it,” said Katie. “Any problem with the O2 cans?”

“All set.”

“Roger,” said Katie. “Rescue team is en route. You come down safely.”

We didn't see the others on the way down. The dawn had just begun to crest, the orange light filtered through a haze of snow. I meant to say sorry, but didn't. We both were silent.

Below us, below the feet of the icefall, were the hunter greens and sportsman yellows of tents. Base Camp. Geisert greeted us at the edge of the encampment. She had her hood up, a few strands of bright hair dancing on the wind. I felt a swell of relief just at seeing her again, and a sudden burst of guilt.

“Hey,” I said.

“How do you feel?” asked Geisert.

“We buried him.”

“Not the man you were looking for, I heard.”

“No,” I said. “Someone else.”

“There's coffee,” she said. She took my elbow and maneuvered me to the radio tent. Katie Noland-Wallace had her arms on the table, one finger tracing the pad of the headset as it rested on her ear. Her eyes were glazed, her mouth slightly open.

This was Everest Adventures HQ. It was well-stocked with protein bars, dry fruit, a case of jerky vacuum-sealed in plastic. A corkboard hung from a screw in one of the aluminum support beams. Here were topographic maps of the southeastern approach: Khumbu, a tidepool

of blue, trickling toward Lhotse, which rose above the other Himalayan peaks, in turn subsumed by a monstrous vortex of red lines: Everest, and below it the name given her by the Nepali: Sagarmatha, Head of the Sky Goddess.

The floor of the tent was laid over with rugs, giving me the feeling of a cottage in the wilds. Intricate designs, North-African, in striations of red and white and gold. Katie and I had chosen one of these together at a shop in Istanbul, when we both worked for Kenning. We'd been laid over on the way to hike Ararat.

The shop was smoky, sweet-smelling. A one-armed man sat behind a formica countertop. A small electric fan blew straight at his face. He puffed a hand-rolled cigarette, and the fan blew the smoke right back to him. All this, he did one-handed and unflinching. He was watching TV – a Turkish soap, a woman scorned, a man clueless. What had the man done wrong? The woman was upset, she could not explain it. My Turkish was sloppy and imprecise then, and it hasn't gotten better with time. The man watched his show stoically, moving only to grip the cigarette between two fingers, drag it deeply, and exhale.

When the man did not look up to acknowledge us, Katie and I turned to walk the aisles. “This one's nice,” she said. “Or something like it.”

“How do you think he rolls these things?” I asked.

“Stop,” she said, but she smiled. It was a nice moment.

“We'll take this one,” I called.

The man glanced over to us, took one grudging pull of his cigarette, and came from behind the counter. Wordlessly, he scooped the rug onto his shoulder. As if there was a corpse rolled in it, he lugged it purposefully back to the counter.

“We'll need to have it shipped,” I said.

On the television, the woman slapped the man. They were both very beautiful. It's funny what we remember.

“We've been listening to the radio,” said Geisert.

“Rescue group almost up?” I asked.

“Nearly,” said Katie. “Though I fear I've coasted just long enough on adrenaline. Can hardly keep my eyes open.” A breath rattled in her chest.

“We can stand by,” I said. “You could use the rest.”

“Nonsense,” said Katie. She unscrewed the cap of a water bottle. “You've just come down the icefall. You're probably more tired than I am.”

“Well, just go take a rest,” said Geisert. “Honestly, I don't mind.”

Katie stood up haltingly, as if we might kick her over and empty her pockets. “Wake me if they find anything,” she said.

“Of course,” I said.

“Or if they turn back.”

There was a cot in a back corner of the tent. Katie tottered over it, drained her water, then slipped into a mummy bag. She faced away from the light. I had seen her sleep before, in pup tents across the world. I knew the way her hair fell across a pillow. This time, so many years removed, it was like looking at a stranger.

I slipped the headset on, and slid into the scene. Tenyon, Kenning, Wong chattering quietly, seriously. They launched their facts and updates like rocks from a sling.

“Approaching seven thousand meters,” said Kenning.

“See up there, the cornice.” This was Tenyon, his voice tight and low.

“I see it,” said Wong. “Any signal?”

“Nothing,” said Kenning. “Might've lost their beacon.” What Kenning did not suggest – the likelihood that if neither of the missing Sherpa had activated their beacons, they were likely dead or separated from their gear. Either way, a death sentence.

Lightly, Geisert touched my shoulder. “I'm sorry about what happened up there,” she said. “That poor man. It must have been awful.”

“Yeah,” I said. On the radio, Wong drew a deep breath. He called for a check on his lines. Tenyon doubled back.

“I'm not feeling great,” said Wong.

“Ready to move?” asked Kenning.

“Yeah,” said Wong. “Ready.”

“Line secure,” said Tenyon. “All good back here.”

“At least his family will know,” said Geisert. “That will be a comfort.”

There must have been something in her voice, something in the way she made time for grief while two men were freezing to death only a couple miles away. I knew where it came from, the impulse to put others in her shoes. That the other families of the dead would want to know, that it would somehow be of use to them. Still, I was one of them. Maybe she was right. Still. There were two men still out there, and they were dying. All these thoughts slammed through. My blood quickened.

“He's still dead,” I snapped. “He's been dead for a year.”

Geisert looked at me. She seemed surprised. “They'll want to know, though.” She was staying calm, but there was a splinter of frustration in her voice. “They'll want to know where, and how.”

“They already had a funeral,” I said. I didn't know this for sure, but it was a good guess. Anyone who goes missing is presumed dead after a couple of days. She should have known this. She should have remembered it.

“I can't believe you,” she said. “Like none of this matters.”

“It doesn't matter. Not right now.”

“It always matters,” she said. “Why else are we here?”

“The shit these people went through. You know, you went through it. The waiting, the hoping.” I felt myself coming up out of my seat, and reddening. “You know how much it hurts to keep that hope going. I don't want anyone to go through that, Sarah.”

“They *are* going through it. Right now. And now it will be over.”

“What if it's not?” I said. “What if you don't get to just decide when it's over? I know you want it to be. I know that's why you're here.”

“Not just me,” she said. She narrowed her eyes. “What do you think is going to happen when we find Julien? That your pain will just go away?”

The words rushed out before I could think of them. It was pure truth. Finally. “What if we get there and find him and it doesn't help at all? And the pain goes on and on?”

“Then we'll keep living some other way,” said Geisert.

“Not me,” I said. I looked Sarah Geisert right in the face. “This is it for me. Last try.”

She looked like I had hit her. Her mouth hardened into a thin, pink line. Her lips were

cracking. "You're a fucking vampire," she said. "You realize that?"

I thought of Sana's life draining away. The hospitals, the orchids, the fever nights that stretched forever. I'd never, not until that very minute, realized she left because of me. I was looking at Geisert through a veil of tears. "Yes," I said.

"You're this hollow thing," said Geisert. "And I know what you've lost. I do. But it doesn't give you the right to be this way. Just because you're empty doesn't mean you can do this."

"I know," I said. My voice caught and splintered. "I know. I'm trying."

She left the tent. I was alone. The tears blinked away as quickly as they'd come. Part of me wanted to cry, to feel something beside the ache that had been hammering me for two years. I wanted to just let go and wail like in the movies. A real ugly cry, a real feeling. Not this.

But the release never came.

"Kenning to Base Camp." His voice was that of a man calling to his lover. Laden with expectation, opening a dialogue that would (and must) lead somewhere better. I watched the topographic map, tracing their route. The avalanche site was circled in red. Outside, I could hear a sob. It might have been Geisert, might have been anyone.

I gathered a deep breath. Licked my lips. They had been dry, and now tasted like skin that wasn't my own. "Base Camp. This is Boone."

"Hey, buddy," said Tenyon. "Close to the snowpack. No signal."

Kenning held a brief silence on the line.

"Boone," he said. "Is Katie there?"

"Katie?" I said, turning. "Henry's on the line for you."

I stood and moved over to Katie's cot. Only then, in the quiet of the awakening, could I hear it. Her breathing had grown ragged, strained, the breathing of someone who was not acclimating. It was bad.

"Katie," I said. I rolled her onto her back. Shit. I jammed my head out the doorway. "Help!" I called. "Medic!" Just then a great howling wind swept through the camp, toward the Mountain. Someone leapt up from a camp chair and came my way. It was Lhakpa, one of our Sherpa guides. "We're going to need to medicate her," I said.

I returned to the tent. Katie's body swelled and contracted with each breath, each a kind of jagged scraping.

"Katie's not feeling great," I said into the radio. "What's your status?"

"We're at the avalanche site," said Kenning. "No beacon."

"I'll raise the helicopter," I said. "Probably can't muster until morning."

"So dark out here," said Wong. "Lights?"

"We're going to have to turn back," said Kenning. "The weather is turning."

"Roger," I said.

"Damn it," said Kenning. He held the button. In the background, a spike of wind so loud I could almost feel it on my cheek.

"What's this?" said Tenyon. "Over here."

"A boot," said Wong. "It's a boot."

"Helicopter," said Kenning. "Got my coordinates?"

"Yes. I'm on it."

"Get digging, boys. Let's go, Boone. Get me a fucking chopper."

This whole time, Katie's ragged breathing was building an awful tension in me. I didn't know what to do. I got her up and rolled her onto her back. I checked her airway. It was fine, but her skin was blanching to a pale shade of blue. Her eyes fluttered open, but in the confusion of the moment she only looked at me with blank, dry eyes like crumpled paper.

“Kate, stay calm,” I said. “I'm getting help.”

The radio crackled. “Let's get an update, Boone. You raise our chopper?”

Katie put her hands on her chest. “Can't breathe.” She tried to speak the words but pushed them out unvoiced.

“They're on the way,” I said. I pulled Katie upright. She sat rigidly, looking at me the way she'd look at a rolling stormcloud, or a snake.

“Boone,” said Kenning. “Copy?”

I pulled Katie close, threw my arms all the way around her stiffening body. “You're okay,” I said. “You're okay. I'm not going to lose you.”

Lhakpa burst into the tent. “What is it?” she said.

“Pulmonary,” I said. “Getting bad fast. Lhakpa, give her the dex. We need to get her off the Mountain.”

Lhakpa went into her pocket and came out with a capped syringe.

“Give it to her,” I said. I punched a button on the radio. “Errol,” I said, “Errol. Do you copy?” No answer.

Lhakpa peeled down the waistband of Katie's pants. I looked away. A tide of radio static washed through the tent.

“Boone,” said Kenning. A hard edge of anger in his voice. “We're not fucking around

here.” Then, in the background, Tenyon. “He is breathing, he is breathing.”

I came to the radio. “Kenning,” I said.

“Jesus, boy. Is my chopper on the way? Man's dying out here.”

“Henry, Katie's edemic. We need to get her down, now.”

“So get her down,” he said.

“We need the chopper. I can't raise Errol.”

“Keep bloody trying,” said Kenning.

A voice on the radio. Groggy. English. “Who the bloody fuck is this?”

“Errol, this is Base Camp. Spin up the chopper, man.”

“Right, right.” The groaning sound of a man moving on a cot. “Where we going?”

Katie gasped like the pressure coming out of a tin can. I'd heard that sound before: a dry, urgent sucking.

“We got two jobs stacked on top of each other, Errol.”

“I only got the one chopper, mate.”

“Hello?” said Wong. He was on the radio with Kenning and Tenyon. “Hello?” he said.

“The wind.” Static shredded his sentences. “Hello? – Landing – tough.”

I pictured Wong, dead. Dead and frozen to a hunk of coal on the Mountain. Dead and quiet, without any ideas on blackmail or avarice or punishing me for my grief.

“Errol,” I said. “I need you at Base Camp first. Katie's edemic. Priority one.”

“Right,” he said. His radio clicked out.

Lhakpa was stroking Katie's hair with one thick hand. “Is okay, is okay.”

“Henry,” I said.

“Boone, where the fuck – status –”

“Errol's on his way,” I said. “He's on his way right now.”

I thought of Tenyon, dead. My only friend. His body: two arms, two legs. Beard frozen to his face. He was tougher than Wong. Tougher than all of us. He could make it. Jesus Christ.

“Errol,” I said, “you copy?” Again, no answer.

Then the exertion of the day came upon me all at once. The hike, the support climb up the icefall. The compounded hangovers and nightmares. Broken glass poured through my veins. All wrong. It was all wrong. Still, even now, I don't know what I could have done different. I couldn't handle it. I went out into the night.

A hungry moon dangled like a marble over Pumori. I stampeded toward the bar. It was empty, closed up. Everyone was helping the rescue effort, or asleep. I crept behind the bar. The sun was beginning to rise. A sliver of orange cut through a row of plastic windows. Vodka, an endless gulp.

The cannonshot sound of a helicopter's rotor blasted me awake. The sun was all the way up. Eight o'clock, or nine. I'd slept what, three hours? My head felt crushed in. An empty bottle of vodka tucked under my head. I was going to be fired. I was going to have to move in with my dad, wherever he was living. Back in the States, I guessed. I'd have to get a job at a sporting goods store, marry a waitress. This was it for me. I fucked it all up.

Chapter 9: The Call

By the time the chopper set down in the snow, everyone at Base Camp had gathered to

watch. A sharp morning wind cut down from the peaks. Kenning was first out of the Sitka, and as he came there was a look of hollow disappointment in his face. His mustache was salted with fresh snow, the hood of his yellow parka casting a shadow over his eyes. In the set of his jaw I could see he was brutally hurt. He stomped his way to the Union Jack tent. The others came out after. Tenyon swept a tuft of black hair from his face. His mouth was a pressed line. Wong followed him. Tenyon blinked slowly at me, and then he and Wong went the other way. The two Afrikaners from the rescue team, they tottered out last, dazed, pupils dilated from their night in the low-oxygen environment.

I grabbed the shoulder of a man with a camera, one of Kenning's clients. "Where's the guy?" I said. "The guy they rescued."

"He died," said the shutterbug. "The chopper went to pick up Katie first. The Sherpas didn't make it."

"Goddammit," I said. "And where's Katie?"

"Where you been all morning? They took her down to Lukla. She's going back to Kathmandu. Edema, I heard. Shame. She was a real sweetheart."

I left the shutterbug and went into the Union Jack tent, where I'd left Katie and Lhakpa just a few hours before.

Inside, Kenning stood with his back to the door. His broad shoulders seemed to fill the tent. His hood was down, a half-circle of snow on the floor drifted off the dusted trim. "The man died," said Kenning. "We had to leave him up there."

"I heard," I said. "I'm sorry."

He wouldn't face me.

“Is Katie alright?” I said.

“My clients can't go up without me,” said Kenning. “I may have to cancel.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“I know you loved her,” he said. He studied the map in front of him, the language of elevations, steep drop-offs, bottomless pits. A language he understood, an alphabet whose letters he knew well.

“She was a good friend,” I said. I caught it only after I said it. We were talking about her in past tense.

“A good woman,” he said.

“Your guy said they're flying her to Kathmandu.”

“They have a hospital there. And the elevation.”

“Yes,” I said. “That makes sense.”

“I should be with her,” said Kenning.

“You could cancel your push,” I said.

“My clients would want their money back. That's all they bloody care about.”

“They signed a contract,” I said.

“Even so,” he said, “even so.”

“Ezquerria would probably take them.”

“Make some coffee,” said Kenning. “I'm fucking knackered.”

Katie kept the coffee in a vacuum sealed bag. I unzipped it, sprinkled some into the pot. Water, fire, bring it to a boil.

“You've got a contract,” I said. “You should be with her.”

He turned. He made a fist and rubbed his eye with it. Then he sat on the floor, slowly. He watched the light of the camp stove. "I don't want to talk about it either," he said. A long silence passed, where all we could hear was the slow whistle of gas and the unspooling rotors of the Sitka.

"What about the man?" I said.

"You don't want to know about the man."

"He died," I said. "The photographer told me."

"Yes," said Kenning. "He died."

"Was he alive when you found him?"

"Johanssen thought so. I don't know."

The coffee was ready. I poured it. We waited a while, watching the steam rise.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It feels like a disaster."

"It's always a disaster. Every year."

"I guess so." The smell almost froze on the air. "Are you going to be okay?"

Kenning looked at me. "If you had the chance to be there for Sana, would you take it?"

In his face I saw a man who had led others through battle. He'd summited the highest peaks on Earth and come back in one piece. He hadn't done it for the money, but out of sheer love.

"You ask me if I were you, would I go?"

He blinked. "Yeah."

"Yeah," I said. "In a heartbeat."

"I'm going to cancel the summit," said Kenning. "I'm done here."

“You should be with her,” I said. “Just in case.”

“I hope you find Julien,” said Kenning. “I do.” Then he got up with his cup in his hand and he stood before the map of the Mother, the beast to whom he had finally surrendered.

I came back to my tent to wash my face and change into fresh clothes, but when I entered, Tenyon was waiting for me. His eyes were ringed in red, his hair wild.

“I just came in to change,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Is your tent too.”

I hesitated. “Yeah,” I said. I sat on my cot and looked at Tenyon. He hadn't changed out of his climbing gear. The man was dead tired.

“You make difficult choice yesterday.”

I shifted my weight on the cot. “Tenyon,” I said. He had seen me at the bars in Buenos Aires. Passed out on a pool table in Alaska. All my worst moments, and now this. I'd almost gotten him killed. “I didn't know what else to do.”

“Was it right choice?”

“I don't know,” I said.

The answer seemed to satisfy him. I expected a chewing out. By that point I was ready for more flagellation, and when it didn't come the letdown somehow burned anyway. “I am moving timetable. Meet in one hour.”

I used the time to take my first shower in what felt like a year. The water was boiled on a camp stove in jugs, then squeezed out of a sponge. Even lukewarm water felt scalding. The ice, the cold, it had crept in until even the slightest warmth was bizarre and unbearable.

“The window is closing,” said Tenyon. We all were gathered in a large mess tent that belonged to no one in particular. A huge coffee urn hissed in the corner. Me, Geisert, Wong, Dawa and Lhakpa sat at foldable picnic tables. I envisioned a hairy yak hauling these on its back. I thought with jealousy of these dumb pack animals. The simple trodding of their lives. Somebody, maybe Katie, had thrown white and red-checked tablecloths over these ugly, utilitarian slabs of aluminum. She probably had a laugh about that, how Everest was “no picnic.”

“We begin in two days,” said Tenyon. He reviewed the route. A hike to our temporary camp at the top of Khumbu Icefall, rest a night, and in the morning summit Lhotse. Beyond that, we would enter the Death Zone and begin the search for Julien.

I spent the rest of the day checking my equipment. The valve on my respirator was screwed tight, the filter in place. The screws of my ice ax were tight as well. I'd kept everything in good condition. I tested the tensile strength of the rope. My crampons' straps resisted a good yank. I didn't want to lose my footing on Lhotse face. A fall like that, I didn't even want to think about it.

I stuffed my pack with rations, an extra oxygen tank. Inside me was a growing dread. I turned to Tenyon, who was rolling up a pair of thick, wool socks. He had been by my side every minute since the meeting. “Ten,” I said.

“Yes, buddy.”

“What if we find him?”

“Find who?” he asked, without looking up.

“Julien. What if we actually find the body?”

“That is the job,” he said.

“Yeah, I know.” A voice passed outside, then faded. Someone speaking German. “But,” I said, “what happens then?”

“If we find Mr. Geisert.”

“Yeah.”

Tenyon's eyes flicked up to meet mine. Neither of us, when we took this job, really believed we'd find him. “Well,” he said. “We do the job. We have sled.”

“A sled? A controlled slide from Hillary Step? It's impossible.”

“You should have tell her it was impossible when she try to hire us.”

“It's too late for that,” I said.

“Besides,” said Tenyon, “is not impossible. He tucked the socks into his pack, and zipped it tight.

We were silent but for the sounds of packing. Folded cloth against the coiled leather handle of an ax. “Why am I not fired?” I said.

“Two reason,” said Tenyon. “No more money.”

“What's the other reason?”

He shrugged. “Don't know. There is more to Mrs. Geisert. You know this.”

The next morning was cold, heartless. A hot meal on the stove, among the last we would have for a week.

At noon, a woman came to my tent. Haley. The future Missus Ezquerra, or whoever she was supposed to be. She poked her head in. I was sitting alone, listening to the voices of people

as they went by. There was a book in my hands, a book on shipbreakers, that I'd been failing to read.

“I just wanted to say, I hope you find your friend.”

“He wasn't my friend,” I said. I turned deliberately to the book and began to flip through it.

“Okay,” said Haley. She left.

As afternoon drew to a close, I leaned my hiking pack against the tent's aluminum frame. Everything was ready. It had been checked, double-checked. Tenyon had checked it too and gone out into the camp to look in on the rest of the group. He would spend extra time with Geisert, reviewing rope discipline and checking the screws in her gear.

Before bed I had a heavy dinner of beans and pork. The protein would carry me through morning's difficult ascent of Khumbu. I ate in the large mess tent across from McCray's Bar. I scooped the food into my mouth with a mind tuned to dull efficiency. I just hoped for the night to pass quietly, for the morning to be safe and easy and careful.

“Can I eat with you?” Sarah Geisert was in a blue parka, unzipped just enough to reveal the OX of her Oxford jumper. Her hair was pulled back in a messy bun.

I sopped up some gravy with a hunk of bread. It tasted salty, stale. Bread never made it farther up than Base Camp. Not enough nutrition for the space it took in a pack. I finished the crust, believing it would be the last carbohydrate I would ever get to enjoy. There was a grim pleasure in coming around to the idea of lasts, and endings. “Sure,” I said. “I'm almost finished.”

Geisert slid her tray of fruit and bread and chicken onto the aluminum table.

“I heard Kenning took off,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Geisert. “His clients are regrouping. Some are going with your friend Marcos.” She jabbed a bite into her mouth with a camp fork.

“They'll get their money's worth,” I said.

“I suppose so,” said Geisert.

I finished the last of my beans, stacked the bowl onto my plate. “Well,” I said.

“Do they have coffee in here?” she asked this just as I stood to go.

“Over there,” I said.

Geisert dug in her coat pocket and handed me a tin cup. “No sugar,” she said. I took the cup and went to the coffee bar.

Rod McCray was stirring a sip of Bailey's into his Thermos. “You still sleeping in my bar?” he asked, stowing the bottle in the folds of his parka.

“Let me just put on my contrite face.”

“Yeah,” he said, blowing on the coffee. “Yeah, I get it. Try not to do it again, okay? I like to know about it when somebody decides to pass out on my floor.”

“Won't see me there for a while. We're going up in the morning.”

“Looking for the husband?” he said. “Fuck me, then. To be honest I never thought you'd get around to it.”

I poured Geisert's coffee. “Hey,” I said. “Any news on Katie?”

“Touch and go, I hear. Hospitalized in Kathmandu. You know how tricky those things can be.”

“Yeah,” I said. I imagined Katie lying in a hospital bed, tendrils of plastic tubing coming

from her wrists and elbows. A machine hummed quietly in the background. She looked pale. Kenning sat at her bedside, his huge hands and wide shoulders useless there. I knew this scene. I had been there before. “Well,” I said, “this is the boss's coffee.”

“Don't let it get cold,” said McCray. “Oh, by the way. Satphone call came in yesterday. Someone looking for you.”

I stopped. Had he found something? Was it over?

“Some weird fucker. Neil, or something. Friend of yours?”

“I'll check it out,” I said.

“Said it was important.”

“You're just telling me now?”

McCray smirked. “I was pissed at you, okay? You've been a total prick lately.”

“I wish,” I called over my shoulder. I headed back to Geisert's table.

“Here's your coffee, boss. No sugar.”

There was someone else in the comms center. An insurance salesman talking to his wife and two kids back home in Arkansas. Clean sunshine poured through huge bay windows on the computer screen. The insurance salesman, he smiled into the screen. His boy was talking.

I slipped on my own hard plastic headphones and booted up the computer. The video call went through, and in a moment there was a woman on the other side of the screen. She was my age, thirties, red hair piled on her head, held together with pale blue chopsticks. She was pretty. She gripped a cigarette between electric blue fingernails, and took a drag.

“Hello?” she asked. The accent was Australian, or maybe Kiwi. This was a nice voice. All

the Aussies at Everest talked like movie characters. Big, salty voices attached to guys who shook hands like it was a contest. But this woman, her voice, her nails. Whatever she was, she was the real thing.

“I’m Abbot,” I said. “I don’t know you.”

“My name’s Julie.” There was an edge of nervousness in the way she fiddled with the cigarette. Her voice quavered. “Julie Wong,” she said. “Have you seen my husband?”

“Okay Julie, the connection isn’t great up here—”

“Honey, can you put George on?”

I paused. I hadn’t even known Wong was married, much less to a human woman. He had always struck me as a bachelor. Who could even put up with his bullshit? Julie was seated in a suburban living room. Bookshelves across the back. A decent sofa, and hanging above it a watercolor of horses coursing near a riverbed. It looked like a house people lived in, a house that contained lives. I could nearly see George Wong descending a staircase in the back of the house, a laundry hamper snug on his hip. His wife in an old t-shirt of his, hair like this, folding a newspaper over coffee.

“Hello, strange man?”

“Can I help you?” George Wong had entered the comms tent and now stood behind me.

I leapt up. “George.”

He eyed me. “Think you’re at the wrong desk, mate.”

I looked back at the computer. Julie peered through the screen. “My mistake,” I said. I moved out of the way for Wong to take my seat.

I found another computer on the other side of the insurance salesman. Wong slipped his

headphones on and began speaking with his wife. “Yeah,” he said. His voice was low, almost a whisper. “Yeah, that was him.”

“Bhutan is shitfucking bust,” said Tasman. “Is nothing but bullshit. Sana never go to Bhutan.”

“Fuck,” I said. “You said this shit was urgent.”

The insurance salesman was wrapped up the call with his family, waving goodbye. He signed off. He hung his headphones on a hook and slid his chair out.

“It is urgent,” said Tasman. His corpulence melded in shadow. I couldn't see his face, only a froglike silhouette and the burning red bullet of a cigar's tip. “She no go to Bhutan, she go Sri Lanka.”

“That,” I said, “that doesn't make sense. How the hell would she get to Sri Lanka?”

The great shoulders shrugged. “I will find out. Big time find out where the lady go.”

I glanced over the partition at Wong. He had been watching me, and looked back down. “All it will take,” said Tasman, “bigger retainer.”

“I can't give you a bigger retainer,” I said. “There's no more money.”

“I hear something interesting,” said Tasman. He leaned into the glow of his computer screen. It lit his face like a synthetic moon. He was ugly, his face carbunkled and huge. “I hear she still alive.”

It was then that I knew it. This whole time, he hadn't even left the office. He hadn't looked for Sana at all. She wasn't in Bhutan. She wasn't in Sri Lanka. She wasn't anywhere, not anymore.

I leaned in too. I wondered what he saw. A white man, sweating madly, his voice a low and strained whisper. “You never expected me to come back, did you? You never expected me to get off this fucking rock.”

“No,” said Tasman. “Did you?”

“I do now,” I said. “And I’ll break your fucking neck when I get down. Give me back the money.”

He laughed and laughed, and soon the laugh became a holler, then a howl. He leaned back, his face disappearing back into shadow. His shrieking was so loud and awful I had to yank the headphones off. The speakers buzzed in overdrive, skittering along the desk like a huge and demented insect.

I stood and went out from the tent. Wong watched me go.

Tenyon was already asleep. He was no doubt dreaming of the Mountain, of sinking his pick deep in the ice. I was jealous of the way he could turn off the dread while the next few days would be among the most brutal of our lives. His breathing steadied into long, smooth pulls. It’s been said that of any people on Earth, Sherpas have the greatest natural capacity for acclimatization to altitude. For the most part, it’s true. A lifetime of climbing for a living, or even just generations of mountain life, it adds up to incredible natural aptitude. But they’re still human.

Back in '96, one of the Sherpa guides got hit with a horrific edema, and he refused to come down from Base Camp. This guy, he was bleeding from his mouth, his skin was turning purple. Eventually he passed out and his expedition leader got him into a helicopter. Apparently the guy woke up in the chopper and demanded they set him down on the Mountain. He could

barely breathe, couldn't even sit up, and he was demanding they send him back. He was afraid the others would think he was weak. And they did. I was on the Mountain. I heard the gossip. Some of the other Sherpas were embarrassed for him. Embarrassed, as if he'd gotten drunk and pissed his pants.

The Sherpa died. The gossip stopped, but he was still dead.

I worried about Tenyon. It was easy to envision a world where he would refused treatment like that. Not out of some misbegotten pride, but something deeper. A kind of sorcery that bound him to this place. Maybe that was what the other guy was feeling too. That spell that binds our souls.

I slipped into my mummy bag and stared up at the crisscrossing aluminum ribs of the tent. A black feeling spread in my gut like a pool of oil. Dread, just pure dread. The detective would never find Sana. I'd never know where she was buried. And this, it would only kill us. It was all for nothing.

I don't know when I fell asleep, only that it came with a fever that cooked my dreams. I kept fluttering awake, overheated in my bag, sweat freezing on my temples like condensation on the steel door of an outhouse. The smell of my body came up out of the bag, and for a moment I felt that I was rotting. I knew where I was; I could see the pale blue light cutting through the siding of the tent. Tenyon's soft, steady breathing. His lungs worked like good tides, in and out, steady. Others were outside. I could make out Marcos Ezquerria's voice, and Haley's. They were talking about something. Arguing.

"I'm just tired," she said, and then let out a tight, ratcheting cough.

"I'm tired too," said Marcos. "I'm really tired."

It all felt very small, like bickering between monkeys up in the canopy. But then I only could think of Sarah Geisert, the day she and I took the puja in Kathmandu. A whisper of blonde floating on the breeze. Her face placid. There was the lama, blessing picks and axes with sacramental water.

I came up out of sleep an hour later. The light was still blue. Ezquerra and Haley were no longer out there; maybe they'd moved to her tent to make up. Maybe she was alone, staring at the door, waiting for me to walk in out of the cold. Maybe her Berliner tentmate was faced away on her own cot, scowling while Haley hacked and sickened through the late hours.

Tenyon was sitting up, pulling his legs into a clean set of pants. He must have sensed that my breathing changed. "Good morning," he whispered. "It's time."

The moment of doubt, of wanting to run, it happened every time. It happened in '96, before I set out with Wong to rescue the Austrian. Part of me just wanted to hit the trail back to Namche and get a hotel room. We pulled the Austrian out of the snow. But I could have run.

To tell the total truth, I almost ran before my wedding. I woke up that morning in shock. Couldn't believe we were really going to do it. Like I might just get to the altar and find that Sana was been a story I had told myself, that all my friends had just gone along with it because the lie made me happy. It seemed possible that I would come up the aisle and instead of her, instead of a life together, I'd find a quiet room with a bunch of chairs in a semicircle, and Henry Kenning there to tell me "It's just that we're all worried about you."

But there she was. It was a small wedding. Her many uncles, our friends. We didn't need a lot. Tenyon witnessed. Kenning sat stiffly in pressed trousers and a murky expression. The sky that day was so blue, we could have been birds.

I put on clean pants. Tenyon and I went into the morning. Lhakpa was standing in front of her tent. She sipped Sherpa tea from a steaming cup. When approached, she nodded. Dawa came out, the sled slung over his back. It was a simple, refitted bobsled, little more than a sheet of aluminum with blades on the bottom. The whole thing folded in half for transportation, and buckled together with two nylon straps. Dawa rolled his shoulders, stretched his chest and back. Lhakpa offered him a sip from her cup. He took it.

We touched one another coldly in the silence of the morning. Hand to shoulder, a silent greeting. Wong came out, looking in every way like a man of Everest. He pulled a balaclava over his mouth. We locked eyes. He nodded.

We all went to Geisert's tent. She was strapping into her harness, feeding a thick vinyl strap through a carabiner already latticed with frost. She looked at me with a mixture of caution and disappointment. Together we trudged toward the edge of camp. A strident wind was already beginning to pick up.

At the base of Khumbu, we checked each other's harnesses and oxygen valves. We began to climb.

Tenyon took point. Lhakpa followed behind him, feeding a safety line behind her. Geisert and Wong came behind her. The way Wong was sticking close, I could tell he thought we'd have to short-rope her at some point, and he was just getting ready. I followed behind them, picking up the slack and herding Wong and Geisert along the right-hand path. The toughest guy, the one you want taking that last, desperate swing with the ice ax, that's your anchor. Apparently, Tenyon decided it would be Dawa.

“Wind blowing southwest,” Tenyon said into his radio. “Weather okay.”

“Roger,” I said.

Geisert kept going forward. She bowed her head. The wind cut against her right cheek. She pulled a cloth over her face and kept moving. At one point she stopped, her fist gripping the party rope. Her free hand slid up to the radio on her shoulder. From behind, I watched as she pressed the button. Through the static I could hear her breathing unsteadily. Two breaths, a ragged pause, three breaths. Wong reached a hand toward her, but before he even connected she released the button and took another step up the icefall.

I realized I hardly knew her. I tried to imagine a domestic life, the way she might be. The way Julien might have watched her from the threshold of their kitchen in Bern. The way she might chop carrots with a long knife, left hand pressing on the blade, a pot beginning to simmer. Something simple.

This was all imagination, maybe a projection of how I hoped her life to have been. But I could not see, in the imagining, whether it was Julien with her, or whether it was me. Maybe this was just an old memory of Sana, refurbished. It might have been Sana in the kitchen in the summer of locusts, grinding coriander with her strong, small hands, her delicate wrists.

The more I thought on it, the less sure I could be whether it was a genuine memory at all. Did I build it out of a wish for Geisert, or did the wish grow from some tiny moment I had forgotten?

“Wind shifting,” said Tenyon.

Cold razors blew against us. The leads would be watching their footing, careful of the chasms that can open without warning on Khumbu. We had already hiked it. But subtle shifts in

the snowpack, even the little ice that melts in sunlight, it could easily tip a three ton pillar of ice onto us like it was nothing. The party line to which we all were hitched, this provided a measure of safety. It couldn't protect us from being crushed, but if one of us dropped out of sight he would at least get to arrest.

“I feel like a domino,” said Geisert. “Like I'll slip and topple you all over.”

“I'll catch you,” I said. “But who's going to catch me?”

We came at last to a twisted column of ice. The sun was just beginning to rise, and it refracted in the ice like a yellow eye. Light spread over the moraine. “We're climbing over,” said Tenyon. “Unclip.” There was a crevasse here, and the serac bridged it. The surface was smooth and slick in the rising light. We unclipped and gathered at the foot of the bridge. They looked to me to go first. Besides Tenyon, I had climbed the icefall the most. I set my crampons on the surface and found almost no purchase.

“Careful,” said Wong.

“I got it,” I said.

Tenyon stood a long second. He was looking out at the steep uprising of snow and stone. A deep crevasse slashed around the base like a scar across a belly. Tenyon stood immobile, hands gathered in front of him, resting on the buckle of his harness. This was near where his father had died.

We climbed the serac. Wong followed me, and then the rest, until we were all safely over the other side and clipping into the party line.

George Wong opened his carabiner to receive the rope. “I know it's not the time,” he said. He was not speaking into his radio, only to me. “I just wanted to say sorry.”

I checked his harness, tugged once on the strap around his waist. “Keep those tight,” I said.

“Alright,” said Wong. We climbed.

The first encampment sat at the top of Khumbu icefall, in the shadow of Lhotse. We saw it from some distance off, a collection of blue triangles huddled together like starving animals.

“Thank god,” said Geisert. “That's ours, right?”

“Yes,” said Tenyon.

Tenyon and I piled into our tent. The space was small, cramped, our breath pouring out as mingled clouds of steam. I dumped my backpack, then dug into it for a packet of jerky. As I raised the first bite to my mouth, I saw my hands shaking. I could barely feel them. I wasn't frostbitten, at least. I dug my teeth into the jerky and tore away a bite. This close to frozen, the meat was nearly tasteless. It sat in my stomach like a pile of matchsticks. There is never any joy to be found in food during a summit. Eating is just one of the hundred painful things a climber does to stay alive.

Breathing was another. My lungs felt like they were caked in frost. With each inhalation I felt the bones flex and crack in my chest. By the time we hit the Hillary Step, each lung would be a bag of splinters. Then, with any luck, we would add two hundred pounds of cargo to the group's load and do the whole thing in reverse.

Tenyon prepared his own dinner. He took a knife and pried the lid off a can of cubed meat. The smell of cold gravy made me think of cat food, the wet stuff. Tenyon folded the knife and took up a spoon. He began to scoop the meat into his mouth without a hint of disgust. He ate and ate, and within a minute the stuff was gone. He took a small plastic bag and put the can

inside. He held the bag up to me.

“Still eating,” I said.

Tenyon nodded. “When you're done,” he said, and placed the garbage bag in the vestibule. With that, he stripped out of his parka, trading it for two layers of longjohns. He flopped down in his sleeping bag and closed his eyes.

Chapter 10: The Ratcatcher's Bargain

Night had fallen over my our campsite in the Eastern Ghats. Sana handed me a spade and told me to dig. “Get going, babe. There's tigers out here.” I was twelve. I didn't know whether tigers lived here in this forest, but I did know they lived in India. That was enough.

“Hell of a honeymoon,” I said. “Remind me why I think this shit is fun?”

Wetness seeped through the knees of my blue jeans as I dug. I could feel the eyes of the jungle on us. Yellow spots amid the twisting creepers.

“I dug it,” I said.

“Good,” said Sana. She bent down with a bundle of dry tinder. “I'll get her going. Pass the knife.”

The twigs made a rustling sound. Beyond the bounds of the campsite, there was a hollering of macaques and the shaking of leaves in a high wind. I handed Sana a knife and a bar of magnesium topped with a strip of flint.

The knife was only a cheap multitool carried over from my father, a hand-me-down from a life that seemed distant and vague. Sana shaved magnesium from the bar and sprinkled it from her palm. She angled the blade against the flint and struck. Sparks jumped to life. They burrowed

into the nest of kindling. At first they seemed to die, but then a small flame blossomed and spread, and soon we had a fire.

A man came from the darkness into our camp. He spoke no English. The man had a strange, distant look in his eye. His hands idled on the oiled muzzle of a shotgun he'd bought secondhand. Travelers sometimes brought a gun when they went into the forest, but at that moment the stranger was not searching the woods for a tiger. He only stood and stared at the fire, and as the light reflected in his eyes it illuminated his thoughts; death was on his mind. His grip on the stock of the shotgun was tight, white-knuckled. He was a ratcatcher.

A rabies epidemic had been sweeping the countryside. Huge rodent populations. Rats creeping in the sheets at the foot of a child's bed. A bite in the night, and just like that a resurgence of disease. An upwelling of it. An avalanche. There were too few doctors and too many miles between them, and it was the poor folk of the country who suffered for it. Their children whose skin grew red and inflamed, their boys and girls who sweated and died.

Local governments convened. It was decided that the solution to the outbreak was a bounty on rats. For each tail collected, the ratcatcher would get some pittance. Enterprising ratcatchers became breeders instead, caging rats and letting them multiply. More valuable than a pair of rats was a whole brood of them. Soon the extermination business had quadrupled the rat population to turn a quick profit. The outbreak intensified. Many more died.

In the woods, this ratcatcher came upon us. Slung across his back was a bamboo crate stuffed with rats, their tails shortened to bloody stumps. The man was barefoot, and one of his feet was huge and gnarled by gout. He walked with the help of a sharpened staff, which he leaned on in the clearing. His shotgun pointed at me, then at Sana. The rats chattered in their

cage. The man glanced down at the gun in his hands. He began speaking in a language I did not understand, but which might have been Tamil. That had been a language of the Ancient World, and like all things old, Sana knew something of it. The two of them talked a while. I knew somehow from watching them, Sana was bartering for our lives.

The ratcatcher began to cry. He opened the breach of the shotgun and took out the shells. He'd loaded both barrels with buckshot. The ratcatcher looked at me painfully, then unshouldered his cage of rats and put it at Sana's feet. The ratcatcher handed off his gun and pocketed the shells. He stared down at the writing mass of rats, their neck-stump tails and pink claws flecked with blood.

Sana took me away from our fire pit and we began the hike back to the car. It was a third-hand diesel junker churned out by a cut-rate Indian manufacturer, the floorboards slowly rotting away to reveal a rusting exhaust system. We left the rats behind, still rattling in their cage. "Sweetheart," I said, "is everything okay? Should we get that guy to a hospital?"

"That man was very lost," she told me. "If someone is lost like that, you leave it behind."

We only spoke of that day once after, the next morning. I was watching a Hindi soap on TV our little house in Siddharthanagar. Papers fanned in front of me: charts of the Mountain, a sheaf of budgetary documents, and correspondence with my clients from the past season. In the off-minutes I was reading Milton, and failing at it. Sana came home from the rill where she sometimes went to draw. She had a notebook under her arm. I looked at her. That night in the woods had felt huge, but strange, and I could feel the pull of opposing forces in my life but could not see them or begin to understand where they were pulling to.

"I'm always going to love you," said Sana. "Just know that." And in her face there was

something else, something she wanted to say but could not yet articulate. I watched her and waited, and soon it was clear the rest of it would never come.

“You were talking in your sleep.”

Tenyon was sitting on the floor of our tent. He was stretching, pulling one arm across his chest, then the other. He stood and traded into his parka. “Are you okay?” he asked.

When I didn't answer, he crawled out of the tent and zipped it behind him.

While I slept, a soreness had covered my thighs, my stomach, my arms. The muscle groups necessary for hacking it through snow. Before the sun came up, its red light crashed over a row of high peaks to the east. The alpenglow shone through a layer of stratus and bounced off white snowpack to illuminate the whole range, a jaw set with bloody teeth. I stayed in my bag a long while, watching the early light clawing over Pumori's crags. My lips had split in short, fleshy strips. I rubbed a fingertip along dead skin.

The others were stirring too, and as I came out of my tent I saw Geisert standing to her ankles in fresh powder. She pulled on a white hat, then fixed a pair of goggles on her forehead. “Morning,” she said.

There was a crunching feeling in my lungs when I tried to respond. I was not acclimatizing as well as I should be. “Good morning,” I wheezed. A thin cough sliced out of my mouth. I crammed a fist against my lips to stifle it, but I coughed and coughed and coughed. It sounded like the air being let out of a rubber bag. I doubled over, hacking. The edges of my vision turned black. The snow and my boots and my fist, that was all I could see, and soon that grew crowded and spotty. I felt a hand on my back.

“I'm fine,” I coughed, “I'm fine.”

“You're okay,” said Geisert. It was her hand. “Just sit down here.”

She guided me down. My ass felt cold. Geisert patted my back until I coughed it all out. I hung my head down, arms draped over my knees like a benched tailback.

“Is he okay?” said Geisert. “Should we do something?”

“Hi buddy,” said Tenyon. He squatted in front of me and planted a hand on my shoulder.

“You feeling light headed?”

I looked into his eyes. There was kindness in them, and pity. I nodded.

“It's okay, we're going to rest a bit before Lhotse. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

Tenyon glanced over my shoulder. “Dawa, we going to put him on oxygen. Get tank.”

“I'm good,” I said. I tried to turn, but just slotted my hand into the snow and rolled my head.

“I know you are good,” said Tenyon. “But Missus Geisert is going to worry, so please take it.”

Dawa slipped the mask over my face and turned the knob. A kiss of air flowed into my throat. It tasted like helium, and rubber. I filled my lungs. My vision smoothened, and the black edges receded. Good old oxygen. Always helps.

I nodded. “I'm cool,” I said.

Tenyon shot me a thumbs up. “Hang in there a bit,” he said. “Just two minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

Today would be the day we attempted Lhotse face. Tenyon had made arrangements with

Ezquerria's group – we would use their campsite at the top of the sheer cliff. We would leave it exactly as we found it. Tenyon would not tell me how much Geisert paid for this. It costs at least a couple thousand dollars to put together one of those sites. It's one of the main jobs for Sherpa guides on the Mountain. They roped the whole path, bottom to top, with safety lines and signal flags. Some purists consider this akin to climbing with training wheels. They believe a climber should summit only on his own skill and determination. But the democratization of Everest had been profitable for a lot of us. Still, I wondered if there was something to the idea that some could be worthy while others were not. Maybe I had made my living on heresy, shepherding witless hobbyists to the inner sanctum of a great and secret tomb.

“How's that mask?” said Tenyon. “Not too tight?”

“I'm good,” I said.

“Ready for Lhotse?”

“Once I've had some goddamn breakfast,” I said. The mask muffled my voice.

“That's the spirit,” said Dawa. He shrugged the pack off his wide shoulders. “Jerky?” he asked.

“You offering?”

“Can't hear you over stupid mask,” he said.

I made a jerk-off motion with my hand. “Jerky.”

He chuckled, shook his head, and tossed me the bag.

“Smells like goat,” I said.

“The mask,” said Dawa.

I lifted it off my mouth. “Smells like goat.”

Dawa made a fart sound with his mouth. "Eat up, Jerky Man."

I peeled the mask off. The steady flow of oxygenated air was replaced with frozen breath from a cold bellows. In, out. My lungs ached. My eyeballs were getting sore; my body was failing to pressurize them. I blinked hard and felt around for my sunglasses, the pair of off-brand Oakleys Sana bought me on a trip to Kilimanjaro. I'd left my expensive, genuine article shades on a bus in Nairobi. We joked for years about the African kid who might have found those expensive glasses wedged in his seat. A kid who would impress his friends with them. He would wear them to play soccer. His friends would call him Obama.

Once, when I took her to the doctor in Delhi, Sana sent me out to explore the city.

"I've been here before," I said. "Loads of times."

"It's going to take hours," she told me. She looked thin. "Go explore. Here's five rupees." She went into your purse and took a neat five rupee note. She pressed it into my palm with cold, shaky hands. I eased her onto a chair in the waiting room.

"This is worth, like, a quarter," I said.

"Don't spend it all in one place," said Sana.

I turned it in my hands, smiling. On the back, a farmer on his tractor, a full, orange sun rising over fields of rice. On the front, a smiling green Gandhi. At that time India was printing all new money, and putting the same picture of Gandhi on everything. He had this strange, piercing stare off to the right, like he might turn and glare at you at any moment.

"In America they have all different people on the money," I said.

"They love Gandhi here," said Sana. "Gandhi all the way." She bit her lip. "And I don't

want you to be around when I come out. I don't like the way I feel.”

“I'll find somewhere to spend this fiver.”

“I just look like shit,” she said.

“You don't look like shit.”

“Fees like it.”

“I know, babe.” I offered a hand. She looked at it, then took it in hers.

“The sun hurts my eyes,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

“I think I'm just falling apart.”

I squeezed. “I know.”

“And my soul.”

I waited.

“My soul's falling apart too.” She looked up at me. The first time we met, it was sunset. I remembered it right at that moment. Funny, the things that come back.

“Your soul's great,” I said. “I love you.”

“I don't like crying in public.” Sana smiled and wiped her eyes.

The doctor came in, his beard cropped, his head wrapped in a rich, purple turban. Sana put her hands on the armrests and pushed herself up. The doctor pointed down the hall with his clipboard. Sana didn't look back.

The waiting room was crowded that day. An old man with one hand glowered at the patients across from him, a sweaty woman and her sweaty son.

I left to take in the sights. The clinic had sprung up in a decent section of the city, and it

wasn't a far walk to the market. A mustachioed man in Oxford cloth tried to sell me a laptop computer, and failing that, a set of kitchen knives, American made. A flight of teenage girls in blazing orange saris whirled and danced while a little boy, a younger brother maybe, patrolled the circle that had cleared around them in the crowd. The dancers were bright-eyed, blushing with life. I imagined this was what Sana looked like at that age. Like a thing on fire.

The little brother came to me. A white man in a crowd like that is an easy target. I tossed him the five rupee note. He frowned at me and I went into my wallet and tossed in some more. The dance ended. The crowd dispersed to swarm the market like bees from a kicked nest.

Back at the clinic, I read a magazine from a side-table. A Reader's Digest from 1999. Robin Williams was on the cover. The pages had been folded over many times. When Sana came back to the lobby, she shielded her eyes. The doctor said the treatment would make her more sensitive to light. She put her hand up and leaned against me as we edged past the one-handed man, the sweaty woman, the sweaty boy. Bright light was streaming in. In the shadow of Sana's hand, she looked up at me. "Where's that kid with the sunglasses when you need him? Besides, I didn't want you to see me like this."

I put my glasses on, the off-brand ones. I gnawed the jerky thoughtfully and watched the others mill about. Lhakpa leaned on Geisert's shoulder, one foot hiked up into the air. Lhakpa gripped the strap of her crampon and jerked it tight. We looked an increasingly ragged company, even the color of our jackets fading.

"How long before we head out?" asked Wong.

"Five minute," said Tenyon. He was holding an orange oxygen tank. About the size of a

football, these tanks had a nozzle near the top, and a small gauge attached to the plastic tubing. These things were known to malfunction. The seal between the tube and the tank itself could wear from repeated use, meaning frequent replacement. The problem was, if the malfunction happened on the Mountain, lack of oxygen might hit before you realized the seal was even out. Then it was a quick slide into hypoxia. Losing the flow of oxygen to the brain is a little like becoming drunk. Moments get slippery, judgment stutters, and then the body just gives out. But on the Mountain, where every moment is critical and every decision carries with it the weight of your life, passing out for even a second can be a death sentence. Tenyon checked the tank again, tapped the gauge, and returned it to his pack.

“Buddy,” he said, “how are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’m good.”

“How is the gauge on your tank?” I picked the tank up out of the snow, the air tube like an umbilical between us. “Ninety percent,” I said. “Ninety-five.”

“Okay,” said Tenyon. “Clean the tube. We are going soon.”

I peeled the mask off. On the inside, the moisture in my breath had already frozen into a shell of shining crystals. This part is important. If the plastic tube becomes blocked by ice, oxygen has no way of going into the mouth and nose. It's as bad as not wearing a mask in the first place, and that's before counting the extra weight, and bulk, and obscured vision.

It wasn't even shitty equipment. These tanks were among the best. But even top-notch gear could break down under conditions like this. The wind, the ice, it can break down anything.

“Hello, Mr. Boone.” Geisert stood in front of me.

“Hello.”

“Are you feeling quite well now?” she asked.

“Fine, thanks.”

“What's the plan for today, exactly?”

I pointed up at the gray face of the satellite peak. “Today we take Lhotse. We'll work from our camp here in the Western Cwm up to that sheer face. Then up and around to the Yellow Band. You know why it's called that?”

“Sandstone is yellow,” she said. “Snow doesn't hold on it.”

“Well, the Yellow Band is tough, but it's a cakewalk compared to the spur.”

“I know the Geneva Spur,” said Geisert.

“Worried about it?”

“It has a reputation,” she said. “For being difficult.”

“And after the spur?” said Geisert.

“You know the route.”

“I'm quizzing you,” she said.

“We'll make camp at twenty-six thousand feet.”

“That's high,” said Geisert.

“It's in the South Col, at the edge of the Death Zone.”

“Where my husband is.”

“Yeah.”

“We'll spend the night there?” said Geisert.

“Hopefully just one.”

“If not?”

“We don't have enough supplies for an extra night,” I said. “Not if we have Julien with us.”

We stood there quietly. She followed my gaze up toward the peak. The wind passed through us like we were ghosts. “Are we doing the right thing?” she said.

I couldn't look at her. A chill caught me, traced a cold finger up my back. “If it was me, I'd want to know.”

We remained that way a while, neither wanting to leave the moment and dive back into the cold world of The Climb. The bergshroud of Lhotse spread before us, a dirty tablecloth at an altar of stone. I thought about the monastery at Tengboche where Kenning first met Katie Noland-Wallace, where she was ready to give herself up to the spirits in exchange for a little bit of peace. I wondered where she was now, whether she was still in the hospital, whether she was still alive at all.

Finally, Geisert shifted on her feet and the ambient sounds of bag-rolling and boot-strapping clicked into the foreground. She returned to the group.

“Base Camp,” I radioed.

“Go ahead,” said the voice at the other end. This would be Rod McCray. During the day he sometimes worked a radio tent.

“Can I order a beer?” I said.

McCray chuckled. “Sure, mate. Pint or bottle?”

I blinked twice, then drew a sharp breath. “Rod. Check on something for me.”

“I'll make sure they don't steal anything out your tent,” he said. “Your filthy porno stash is safe.”

“Is there any word on Katie?”

A pause. Tenyon and Geisert were waiting a few yards off, watching me. “They made it to the hospital,” said Rod. “That's all I heard.”

“Keep your finger on the pulse,” I said.

“Will do, mate. Oh, you will be pleased to know: Marcos and his bird split up.”

I almost smiled. “Ol' Haley flew the coop?”

“On her way back to bleedin' Palm Springs, wherever the fuck that is.”

Just then, a third voice broke in over the radio. “Hello,” said the voice. Accented. Nepali. “Hello, this channel is not for social.”

McCray laughed again. “Hear that, you turd? No social.”

“Good day to you both,” I said. “Over and out.” I could envision McCray mocking the poor radio op that night over beers. Pulling the corners of his mouth down and whining “Not for social, not for social.”

We began. The Lhotse face is thousands of feet of sheer ice. I was dizzy just looking up at it. A field of white clouds passed over. In the steady wind, the clouds moved like a field of waving rice. Suddenly, the red sun caught in them and diffused, like blood in water. I thought of the farmer on the back of the five rupee note. The man at sunrise, plowing away. Alone.

“Ready to go?” said Tenyon.

We all hefted our packs and stepped forward. I put a hand flat against the sheer rock. The surface was frozen. Deep ice over ancient stone.

A nylon rope hung down, a path fixed with crescent moon staples.

“Who's up first this pitch?” said Lhakpa. “Not me, I don't want Wong staring at my ass.”

“I would never,” said Wong.

“I will go first,” said Tenyon. “You all get a good look.” He strode up to the rope and clipped in. He leaned back, bracing first one foot against the wall, then the other. Now he passed his wrist through the leather loop at the end of his ax handle. Tenyon pressed the soles of his boots against the ice, crampons digging in like fangs. He swung back with his pick, then forward. It went in deep. He pulled himself up.

I followed him up.

“How you feeling?” called Tenyon.

My lungs still felt wretched. All I could do was muster a wheeze in his direction. I swung my pick, and it purchased deep in the frost with a satisfying *shick*.

Long ago, I got this pick as a gift from a German cartographer. I stayed with him a few months one spring. He'd needed a mountain guide for his excursion, and we had so much fun at his Bavarian estate we kept delaying the trip. Only when we'd pillaged all the wine from his cellars did we go up. His wife, I remember, was grateful when we finally shipped out.

“Thank heavens for these awful boys,” she said.

The man and I trekked into the Alps. While he looked through the rangefinder on his laser level, I picked edelweiss.

“That flower,” he told me, “it's a sign of dedication. You give it to a loved one.” I gathered by the armful to take home for Sana.

The muscles of my back strained. I leaned far out and swung leftwards with my ax. I felt

weak, human. Lactic acid seeped into my muscle tissue. The burn was deep, and by that night would be almost unbearable. I pushed through it, shifting my weight into the ax. Above, Tenyon grunted and bent at the knee. He coiled, then launched up to dig his ax into the rock face.

I was taller than Tenyon, though not as strong. I had to leverage my height instead. My back and shoulders ached from reaching, stretching, pulling. My ax found a chink in the ice and sent a flurry of chips past George Wong as he transferred to the next support screw. He buckled with textbook precision and slid into a troisième ascent. The others filled in below, Geisert nearly short-roped to Wong, with Lhakpa and Dawa behind.

We soon came to the Yellow Band. It stretched like a gunbelt around Lhotse, an expanse of exposed stone between sheets of linen white.

“Axes up,” called Tenyon. He dropped into a dead hang, dangling one-handed from a deeply set cam. He freed his wrist from the cord of his ice ax, then tucked the tool into a sheath on his bag. Tenyon pulled up and began ascending the band by handholds. Ice axes have no purchase on hard stone.

I followed Tenyon into a hang. The whole weight of my body hung on the tensile strength of my ligaments. Learning to hang slack like this, muscles smooth and calm, it takes practice. Every novice climber tires himself out by hanging with the strength of his arms. That's one of the first things we have to learn: letting go.

Sana and I once went bouldering on a rocky outcrop outside Kampot. “I'm tired,” she said. Another mote of memory from our honeymoon. “I've got no arms.”

“The arms just hold you steady,” I said. I stood under her. It was a small boulder, not more than ten feet high. “Use your legs. Pretend you're a frog.”

Sana laughed, then got quiet. She pulled a knee to her chest, and there she found a foothold.

“Good,” I said. “Very froglike.”

“Vrak vrak,” she called back.

“What's that mean?” I followed on the ground as she pushed to the next handhold.

“It's how a frog sounds in Turkish,” she said. “Vrak vrak.”

“In English it's ribbit,” I said. “You're doing great.”

“I'm tired,” she said.

“Okay, do a hang now. Rest your arms.”

“But I'm hanging by my arms.”

“Dig your fingers in, but let your muscles slack. Your skeleton will do the work.”

“My bones?” she said.

“Yep, give it a try.”

I could almost feel her fingertips probing the rock, finding the right angle. Slowly, she let her body slacken. She hung by your hands. “You're doing it,” I said. “You're not doing any work at all.”

“Vrak vrak,” said Sana.

“Good job, froggie. Hang in there. Rest your arms.” She stayed, like moss on stone.

The steel of my crampons chomped against the hard stone of the mountainside. I slid my fingertips into a crack, steadied myself against the rock face, and pressed up a few more inches. The others had begun to file below me. Geisert and Wong tandem roping, his harness bearing the

weight of her movement. She stuck her ice ax into the loop of her backpack, then grasped at a handhold. She slipped off it, and the pressure glanced out of her hands and feet as she slid off the rock. The rope slacked like something wet, and yanked tight between her and Wong. He held on tight, the doubled-over weave of his harness cancelling most of the shock. Geisert dangled like a pendulum in a clock, left, right, then shot out an arm and pulled herself up against the rock. Wong tugged on his harness, checking the loop holding him to the guide rope. “You okay?” he called down.

“Fuck,” said Geisert. “God.”

We cleared the Yellow Band. The sun hung high over us, its rays catching in the clouds and piercing them like golden spears. It was only a few hours to the Geneva Spur – the last, deadliest crossing before Camp IV, at the edge of the Death Zone.

We navigated the Lhotse face as noon came and went, and as we inched around Lhotse there was a gradual revealing of the Mother. At our elevation of 24,000 feet, she still jutted up above us, terrible and gorgeous. From here we could see her white plume, a billowing cloak of snow rising on a great arc of wind.

“You ready?” called Tenyon. “Fast and hard.”

“Ready,” I said. Wong nodded, Lhakpa nodded. Dawa worked his knuckles.

“I think I have frostbite,” shouted Geisert. She clipped into a cam and dangled a moment, moving gloved hands to her face. She moved her fingers across her cheeks slowly, as if cleaning steam from a mirror.

“Come ahead of me,” I called. “I’m coming down.”

Wong was looking at Geisert helplessly. Being short-roped to an inexperienced climber is one of the most dangerous situations a person can find himself in. Bound up like that, one climber's mistakes belong to the other. Wong's shoulders stiffened.

"I can't do this," said Wong. "Come on, we're so close."

"Come ahead, George." My voice barely audible above a high, full wind. "Come ahead, I got it."

I came down the guide rope, careful not to look at the dizzying fall below me. I positioned myself on the rock between Wong and Geisert and clipped into a silvery screw that stuck out from the ice. I tested my weight on it, then switched from the guide rope to Geisert's tether. Wong shrugged, clipped into the main line, and began going up again.

Some men only come to Everest to touch the top. They might say they're doing it to raise money for charity, or raise awareness for cancer research, or to catalog lichen samples. But most of them come because it's dangerous. They don't want to climb it, they want to *have* climbed it.

"I can't feel my nose," said Geisert.

"We have to move," I said. "We're five minutes from shelter."

"It's hard," she said.

"Hold still," I told her, and I opened the valve on her oxygen tank. The air began to hiss, and soon Geisert was calm.

From the top of Lhotse it would be a rushed traverse across the South Col, a high shoulder of rock that connected these two mountains. One hard sprint, one agonizing minute, and we could flop into our readymade tents at the edge of the Death Zone. My shoulders were aching, seared by lactic acid leaking across my chest and back. My breath came thin and papery,

fogging my mask. I tried to summon a deep breath, and my lungs filled only halfway. I took what I could. Geisert met my gaze. Where the skin was exposed on her face, it was turning gray. The beginnings of frostbite corroding soft, pale flesh. I had seen a man lose his nose to this. The '96 disaster, when hospitals were overwhelmed. The Austrian, when Wong and I pulled him out of the snow, his whole face was blackened from nose to chin. He'd lost his oxygen tank, begun hallucinating. He pulled his balaclava around his neck, took off his hat and scarf and gloves. They call this paradoxical undressing. When the body is so cold it makes believe it is burning. The Austrian passed out before he could wriggle out of his coat. He lost the nose, and both his arms to the elbow.

Geisert's frostbite was not half so bad, yet. "Get ready," I told her. "We're going to get Julien."

I pulled my elbows up over the lip of the spur, then launched up with my lower body. "I'm up," I called. Dawa and Wong were already there on the ledge. They grabbed me and yanked me to my feet. Geisert was a half-step behind me, nearly piggybacked. The wind there was high and deafening. Ice whipped through the air, smacking relentlessly against my shoulders and face. Geisert bent down, hands on her knees. "Okay," she said. "Okay, okay."

Tenyon and Lhakpa were bringing up the back. Lhakpa dusted snow off her legs, and it rose in a pale white fog around her. I gripped Tenyon's hand as he crested the overhand, and our bodies leveraged together. I pulled him up.

We gathered ourselves. I dug my feet into the snow. Behind us, powder blew off the cliff and into the cold, thin air. My friends were with me. We looked at one another, then at the route ahead. The Geneva Spur jutted at a 45 degree angle. We would need to build up decent speed to

get over without stopping and sliding back. One bad slip, and we might slide right off the edge of the world.

“Don't look back,” said Tenyon.

“If you fall,” I said, “swing your ax. Dig your toes.”

“Okay,” said Geisert.

“Almost there,” said Wong. “Almost there.”

We ran. The incline was steep. Air crushed in and out of my lungs. My body was a thresher, jagged and cold and built for one thing. One rope bound us all together and it swung wildly. A fist of wind hamered my throat. I lost my footing, swung my weight forward, and dug in with my ax. Without missing a beat, Tenyon grabbed me by the arm and wrenched me forward again. Something in my shoulder popped. An explosion of pain sizzled through it. But the pain was distant from me, subsumed by adrenaline. If I hesitated I would slip and die, and so I did not hesitate.

Tenyon leapt over the edge of the spur. I was two steps behind him, and for two steps I could not see my best friend, but in the vibrations of the rope between us I could feel him land perfectly. I too came to the edge and leapt without looking, and I was airborne, looking out at the white vista of the South Col, the Mother, her white shawl flapping in the wind, then the sudden ground of her shoulder, flecks of green, Tenyon kneeling.

I landed roughly. The shoulder hurt now, the pain more immediate. My heart was throbbing, my face raked with wind. The others landed behind me. I watched them launch over and land like stones in ash.

Chapter 11: Little Rabbit

There were three green tents like graves grown over with moss. The South Col was a desolate valley perched on the shoulder between Everest and Lhotse. We were at the edge of the Death Zone. Oxygen values were about a third of what they'd be at sea level. At that elevation, the human body cannot physically adapt. Being in the Death Zone, it put us on a forty-eight hour clock. Two days to traverse the Col, brave the awful meat fridge of the Northeast ridge, find Julien, and bring him back to Camp III at the foot of Lhotse. The best excursions could summit and return in a day, with a favorable window. Here, every gust of wind was amplified by orders of magnitude. Oxygen supplies were already running low from the Lhotse climb, and now, here, where every breath was splintered, those supplies might be the difference between life and a slow, hypoxic death.

I dropped my pack at the first tent, unfurled my mummy bag, and climbed in. My lungs still felt thin and weak. As I sat up, a powerful ache shook through my shoulder. I tried to rotate the joint, only to find a grinding pain. The ligaments were swollen like rat tails. I rubbed through the puffy skein of my parka. I couldn't get ahold of the shoulder.

The tent zipped open. Geisert crawled in, zipped the fly behind her. "The others are full."

I grunted. I was feeling light-headed and weak. "Can you get me that?" I said, nodding to my pack.

She pulled up her goggles and tossed them in the corner. She slid the pack to me. "You okay?" She nodded at the arm.

"Can't even get it out of the fucking jacket." I tugged helplessly at my parka, then frowned.

“Come here,” she said. I slid across the vinyl flooring of the tent until I was next to her. She smelled like the sea. “Arms up.”

I raised my arms gingerly. She wheedled the parka off me. I sat shivering in my longjohns. She put two fingers in the collar of my shirt and peeled it off to the side, revealing a plum-colored bruise spreading across my shoulder. “Fuck,” I said.

“Is it going to kill you?” she asked.

I smiled, feeling around my pack for the nozzle of my oxygen mask. I held it to my mouth with my good hand. “Just a sprain,” I wheezed. “Though I'm going to whine a lot with that fucking sled on my back.”

Geisert chuckled, unzipping her parka. “I'll buy you a new one when we get back to Earth.” She pulled an Oxford jumper over her thermals. She saw me looking at her. She pulled on her own oxygen mask. We sat there breathing a while, orange tanks laid across our laps like sleeping children. Our breathing synchronized. I lingered on the marks stretching across her cheeks, dead flesh like the long strokes of a tar brush.

“Does it look that bad?”

“Still pretty,” I said. It felt like a large moment, the long hook of it catching us both. It felt like a betrayal.

Geisert frowned. “I don't know how to take that.”

Besides our silent, mechanical aspirations, the tent was silent.

“When we were young, Julien had a nickname for me.” She smiled vaguely. “Häsli,” she said. “It means Little Rabbit.”

I smiled too. It made me think of Sana. It really did.

“I like that,” I said.

“When we were children,” said Sarah, “our fathers were partners in business.”

“The boy next door,” I said.

“Something like that,” she said. “He was a few years older than me. And handsome. Even now, I think of him that way.”

“Handsome?”

“Young,” she said. “Beautiful and small. He called me Häsli.” She looked at me, and the smile broke away. I had seen this moment before. A good memory pulled down. We were in the Death Zone. We were going to collect a corpse. Everything was rotting.

I crossed my legs. The knees ached from my leap over the spur. Sarah held the mask to her face. Her chest rose and dipped. Wind howled over the Col. To the north, the Mother cast a wide shadow. To the south, Lhotse raged and shook.

Night was falling. The sun behind us cut through the membrane of the tent. Shadows fell on Geisert like some immaterial cloak.

I don't remember falling asleep. Nightmares howled through my brain: flashes of a sun setting behind a glacier, bathing the whole icescape in red. A human face, flesh dessicated by an airless wind. In fast-forward, night fell over the corpse, and the shadows splayed out like long fingers reaching out.

Sana was dead. I kept thinking it over and over, my wife was dead. I pictured her in one of those hospice beds, some unknown hand dabbing her forehead with a cool rag. In the jungle, in the Eastern Ghats the ratcatcher might have killed us with his shotgun. And here I was thrashing in my sleep, dread-ridden with the thought of Sana's passing. A winged shadow passed

over the Mountain. There was a deep rumbling as the air swept down on me.

Sarah Geisert was changing her clothes. The hairs on her arm raised. The skin pale and creamy, flecked with golden hair. From the back, I witnessed the crisscrossed strap of a sports bra, the material thin, perfunctory. Her breathing was shallow. A cloud of breath rose from her mouth, then another. She pulled on a thermal shirt.

“It's midnight,” she said. She pulled her hair into an unwashed ponytail.

I ran a hand through my own matted hair. I hadn't had a shower since Base Camp. Three days? Time had slipped away. “I don't hear any wind,” I said. “That's a good sign.”

Geisert worked her way into her parka. I changed into a fresh shirt. The shoulder was not so bad, but I could feel the grinding of cartilage. The swelling was down, though, and the pain was for the moment manageable.

We left the camp as we found it. Three tents huddled together like old men over a garbage fire. A heavy snowfall had come in the night and buried much of our gear. We unburied it with axes.

“Today is the day,” said Tenyon. He stood at the edge of camp, hands on his hips.

“Sun will be up in an hour,” I said.

“Ready to go?” said Tenyon.

“I feel like shit,” I said.

Tenyon looked me up and down. “You look like shit,” he said. His lips were cracked from dehydration. His gums were a bright pink, almost bloody. But he was in there, his eyes glittering.

“The Mother,” he whispered. “The Mother.”

Lhakpa and Dawa came with their packs. Lhakpa went behind her tent and pulled her pants down. “Fuck, it's cold,” she hissed. “Don't look, I'm pissing.”

Dawa shook his hand. His mustache had already caught a dusting of snow. His powerful arms and chest bulged under the cover of his orange parka.

“Where is Wong?” he said.

Tenyon glanced over at the tent he'd shared with Wong. There was something of annoyance in his face, a twinge in the jaw. “Get the sled ready,” said Tenyon.

Dawa looked at him for a minute, then went to the sled.

“You carrying it today?” said Dawa.

I smiled, and in the smile felt the cracked skin of my own lips. “That's all you, man.”

“Thought so,” he said. “Here, help me fold this.”

Breathing the air up there was like inhaling bone powder. So dry and mealy it coated my nose, my mouth. I held the oxygen mask close to my face, hoping to seal in a little more air. I could no longer feel the difference between the air being on or off. My head was fuzzy, out of focus. All around me, the figures of my team wriggled like standing snakes. Tenyon came up beside me and passed my arm over his shoulder. He carried me this way over the first small pile of rocks, a cairn pointing in the direction of the summit.

He sat me down by the rocks. “You get any sleep last night?” he asked.

I shook my head, then wheezed. “I don't know.”

“The altitude,” he said. “It is tough.” Tenyon dug through his pack and produced a silver torpedo. He passed it to me. My hands were numb, and fumbled it into the snow. I picked the

thing up between my two mittened palms. “Drink,” said Lhakpa.

I twisted off the cap. The hot smell of tea froze on the air. Steam poured out. I put the metal lip to my mouth and sipped. It tasted like watery garbage.

“Thanks,” I said, and I drank again.

I vomited. My puke sizzled in the snow, and this I could smell. Tenyon didn't even flinch.

Soon my vision went back to normal. We had left the spur behind at some point. The sun was creeping up in the east, a tiger peeping into this immortal place.

“I ask you something?” said Tenyon. “I am not supposed to ask.”

I looked up at him. He was looking at me.

“What's up?” I said.

“How long it been since you had a drink?”

I played dumb. I lifted the thermos. “This is pretty good.”

Tenyon looked around to see if Geisert or Wong were coming up behind him. “A *drink* drink.”

“Base Camp,” I said. “Why? Dawa bring that flask?”

“You are shaking,” said Tenyon.

My hands had been going wild. And my arms. “It's cold,” I said. “I'm shivering. I screwed the cap on the thermos and held it up. Tenyon did not take it.

“You look like shit,” he said.

“No one looks good at twenty-nine thousand feet. You're not exactly Miss Universe there.”

Tenyon stared at me for a second. He snatched the thermos out of my hand and stuffed it

into his bag. “Buddy,” he said. “Please don't.”

“Fuck, man,” I told him. “I just want to get this over with.”

“Watch the rope,” said Tenyon. “We will get through.” He was clipping in, and moving away.

In another thirty minutes, the sun had risen. A long, golden scene unfolded before us. Soon the sun passed over us and I began to feel warmth coming back into my skin, and with the coming of morning also the arrival of hunger. Meals in the Death Zone were a luxury. We were barely keeping schedule as it was. I thought of scrambled eggs, pepper, hot coffee. A Bloody Mary.

Wong had remained silent much of the morning. He paced his footsteps directly in front of each other – the best way to avoid triggering an avalanche. He kept to concave terrain where he could, veering out from the group to take the best, safest path. I think I understood this. After all, we had seen what happened in '96, seen how snow and sediment packed tight can pulverize a man, leave him boneless, like a jellyfish on rocks.

Loose, round stones had been swept here by great northern glaciers. My boots crunched on them. “We are coming up on the valley,” said Tenyon. “We can check some of them. There is time.”

I could see it coming up, a long expanse of white and gray, the incline spackled with daubs of bright color. Orange. Green, like jungle vines before rain. They rose from the snow in little mounds. There were perhaps a dozen. Our guide rope led us among them, up and up, toward the Balcony.

The first body was pink. Pink as an orchid. A small form, like a blister in the snow.

Tenyon knelt. "I recognize this one," he said. "She was here last year."

"A woman?" said Geisert.

Tenyon dusted the snow away. She was blonde. Her hair was frozen to the ground, spread like a golden fan against the white. Her body was laid in an L-shape, as if she'd been sitting. Her gloves were off, hands gnarled by wind and cold. They had turned a leathery brown. Her face was featureless, lips and eyelids purple and dessicated.

"Ezquerria told me about her," I said.

"Take a picture," said Geisert. She was looking at the woman. Seeing, perhaps, her own reflection. They would be about the same age, the same athletic body type. The same hair. I wondered for a long time what Geisert saw in that body. A dark twin who could remain there with Julien.

She took a camera out of her pack and handed it to me. I had not to this point seen the camera. The screen blinked to life. The lens snipped in and out of focus on the dead woman, like it didn't recognize the face as belonging to a person. All I could feel was dread. The air was sharp with it. I snapped the photo and shoved the camera into my bag.

"Did you get it?" said Geisert.

"I got it," I said.

George Wong was standing by my side. "I met her before," he said. "I can't tell for sure, but I think I met her." I turned. He standing with his hands on his hips. He was holding his oxygen mask away from his mouth. "What was her name?" he said. He looked a while longer. The sun was coming high.

We went on. We collected the faces of the dead. It would be a hard day.

We soon came along the Balcony, a harsh ridge of ice and stone along the southeast approach. A thick blanket of fog hung around us. Through it I watched the vast landscape unfolding below. "We're in the clouds," said Geisert. "Jesus Christ."

"The cave is near," said Tenyon. He pointed a black glove up through the fog. Geisert put her hands on her knees. She had been climbing resolutely, but the air was thin, and minute by minute our bodies were dying. Our blood was thin as water, and freezing in our very veins.

As if with a trumpet blast, the fog rolled away. I could see India from there, and Nepal. The sound of wind was a long, keening moan. It vibrated in my bones. I began to feel that we ourselves were unwelcome spirits, frail interlopers in this temple of the dead.

These thoughts haunted me the whole way up the Balcony. The ridge was almost as steep as the Geneva Spur, and so much higher that each blast of wind threatened to shred my lungs. At one point I had to crawl. My shoulder ached. I bent low and inched forward on ax and knee.

We stood then at the point Tenyon had circled on the map. The cave we were told to investigate. It was a lightning bolt slash in a wall of ice. It went back five yards, maybe more, then cut sharply to the right. Five or six inches of snowfall had fallen and begun to fill in a crack. "I can't see anything back there," said Wong.

"He's supposed to be here," said Geisert. She looked to Tenyon. The wind was howling. "Right, this is it?"

Tenyon crouched in the snow, studying the contours of the opening, guessing perhaps whether there might be a human body back there, underneath the frost. "Someone has to go in,"

he said. "I can do it."

Geisert had begun to pace back and forth from the edge of the Balcony. Beyond her stretched the whole Himalayan range, an infinite unspooling of white cones like nails in the floor of a booby-trapped catacomb. She was beginning to realize her husband might not be there. All of her lost sleep, her pain and labor, was going to come to nothing. She was preparing for it. I had felt the same, that restless dread. No matter what we found, there would be no release.

Tenyon's ribs buckled slightly as he moved into the narrow crevice. I could almost feel the pressure on my own body.

"It's tight," said Tenyon. He stood in profile, edging sideways.

I fed the rope in after him. Our breathing, the breathing of our group, was asynchronous and ragged. Our shoulders rose, shuddered, and fell. I pressed my mask to my face and drew another short breath. A veneer of ice was forming over the intake valve. I tried to scratch it away with my thumb. It wouldn't go.

The radio line crackled as Tenyon slipped toward the back of the crevice. "Turning the corner," he said. "It is tight." He disappeared into the formation, a knife turned blade-wise. The button remained pressed on his radio. Tenyon's breathing came rattling over the speakers. In, out, the noise muffled by the soft matter of his jacket scraping stone and ice.

"All right," said Tenyon. "There is something back here." I put my hands over my ears. Now I was there in the crevice with Tenyon, feeling his gloves dusting snow from an object half-covered. I saw through his eyes, through the lenses of his goggles. "It is a bottle," he said. His breath steadied. "A water bottle."

Sarah Geisert moaned – guttural, wounded. It was this moan that I felt within myself,

swelling grotesquely in the shape of my own dead.

The witness said he would be here. A man from Ezquerria's group had identified him. It was all we had to go on. He should have been right here, just below the peak.

"The wind?" said Wong. "The wind maybe pushed him, or?" He was stomping around, as if looking for a lost set of keys.

Tenyon was coming back. He wriggled out of the crevice, a dented aluminum thermos sticking out ahead of him. He held the bottle out to Geisert, who had her hands over her mouth and was muffling loud, wet sobs. "Is this his bottle?" said Tenyon. "Is this his bottle?"

Geisert shook her head. "No," she said. She was sobbing louder now, and pulling away her oxygen mask. "I don't, I don't think so." She slumped to the ground. She made an awful gasping noise, as if something had sucked the air from her lungs. Tenyon bent over and put the mask over her mouth. She fought him, but he held it there.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, we have time to look. It is fine."

We had been in the Death Zone most of a day by then, and were running out of time. Tenyon was giving her what he could. A few hours at most, then back across the South Col to our camp. That would at least press pause on our death clocks. We could rest a few hours. Not sleep, there was no sleep in the Death Zone that didn't end in edema. But rest for the limbs, if not the mind. A few hours to come to terms with our failure.

"The body," I said. "We have to look."

Tenyon looked at me. "Okay," he said. "Pairs. Here in one hour. Radio contact." He bent over Geisert and touched her shoulder. "Okay, buddy. You are okay, I promise."

Dawa and Lhakpa turned south. Wong and I edged together up the path. He pulled ahead

of me quickly, and I could see his gaze was locked not on the crevices and icy cairns where one might find a body. He was staring at the peak. It rose up like a huge thorn. We were close enough to see that her white shawl was actually a wild, flapping plume of snow.

I began to wonder at Wong's indestructibility. Until this minute, he had hardly showed sign of wear. Wong was shouting over the wind, but his words were carried off. I tapped my radio and shouted into it. "You gotta do it like this!" I said. Wong nodded dumbly. He was studying the peak still. I pulled in front of him, and he lowered his head. There was an icy film forming over my goggles and my breath was freezing in the folds of balaclava. The moving of my jaw cracked the icy layer, but Wong spoke before I could.

"There's something up there," he said.

"We gotta find this guy," I said. "You coming, or what?"

"I don't feel so good," he said. "What is that thing?"

"Fuck," I said. Wong was moving slow now. All the life had been drained out of him, and now he stood slackjawed.

I moved past him and gave the rope a tug. "Hey," I said. "Hey, we gotta go."

We moved toward the icy scimitar of the Hillary Step. This was the last obstacle before the peak. To climb over it would put us right there, right at the top of the world. The air here was nothing. I couldn't even fill my mouth. But it wasn't our time to summit at all. Wong came to the guide rope. It had been clipped in by a team of Sherpas only a few days before. It might have even been the same men who died in the avalanche. I couldn't say. Wong set one foot against the ice of the Hillary Step.

“Hey, what're you doing?” I said. “We're not going up.”

“I just want to see what's up there,” said Wong. He was slurring.

“Come here,” I said. “I need to check your oxygen.”

He stood in front of me. He was not a big man. Straight, black hair came out from under a green cap. The tank seemed fine, though I was feeling icy and my hands were shaking madly. I chalked it up to cold but knew at least partially I was just very thirsty, and could do for a drink.

“George, buddy. Your tank. You're not getting air.”

“Okay,” he said. “Can you fix it?”

I tried to steady my hand against the pressure gauge. A voice crackled on the radio. It was Tenyon. “The wind is picking up,” he said. “I am sorry.” There was a sense of contrition in his voice. I thought then he was apologizing to Geisert, but came to believe in the nights after that he may have been talking to me.

I came to think of Julien. A man who pushed himself to his own end. Desperate to climb, to reach the peak. To bind all the struggles of a life into one physical contest. All the pain and misery carried to the top of the world.

It could have been me. *He* could have been me.

And then I realized where Julien might have gone. “He didn't die there,” I said. “He got back up. Wong. Come with me.”

Together we inched to the very edge of the Hillary Step, where there was a steep drop-off onto a rocky outcrop some distance below. On the outcrop, there was a hand. A speck of green coat peeking from under a blanket of snow.

Wong looked at me. He turned slowly, unsteadily. His lip had split, and a trickle of blood

was running down his chin. “We found him,” said Wong. “We really did it.”

I clicked my radio. “We found something,” I said.

“What?” said Geisert. Her voice was thin and bright. “Really?”

“Gather at the Step,” I said. “Might have a match.”

The body belonged to a man. It didn't seem to matter. We needed it to be. He was six feet tall, in a green parka matching the one from the photograph. Green as fresh grass. He had fallen off the mountainside not far from where Dawa had found the water bottle, at the final crux before the summit. Between two halves of a splitting glacier, the body looked like an ax head. The color of the jacket was fading in parts.

Tenyon began feeding a belay line through a screw in the rock. “If this not Mr. Geisert, we head back down.” He glanced at Geisert.

“Yes,” she said. “Just a look to see.” She was breathing again.

The process of getting him out would involve one of us clambering out onto that split chunk of ice, then chipping away the frost that held the body in place. The surface of the ice glittered in the sunlight. It was a pale blue, and the light caught in the surface and scattered along it.

“I'll go,” I said. My mouth spoke it before I even made the decision.

I took my ax in hand. It was going to be tenuous. I would take things slow. Wong would follow me down, even though he was tired. Dawa would lower the sled, and together Wong and I would strap the body in.

“This is where we earn the big bucks,” I said. Dawa unlocked the sled. He had been

carrying it some weeks now, and we would finally put it to use. This was it. No matter what, this was it.

Tenyon drove a piton into the ice. He looped the rope through it and fed the rope through his own harness. I was on the other end. This was my lifeline. I crawled to the edge on hands and knees. My face was only inches away from the icy surface. My breath blasted over it in bursts of fog.

They say not to look down, but here I could not help it. My periphery was nothing but a long fall to the jagged ice below. One slip, that's all it would have taken. Tenyon might arrest my fall, might not be able to. He shot me a thumbs up. "Looking good, buddy." Geisert stood next to him, her hands clutched together.

I came slowly upon the crack. I was next to the body now. I swept off the top layer of snow with my hand. This was my first good look at the body. A green jacket, black hat pulled back to reveal what had once been a face. The flesh had been savaged by frostbite. The nose was gone, replaced with a wretched stump. The ears too had withered down, and black marks crept across the cheeks, meeting on dessicated lips like a kabuki mask painted in dark, dark ink. Whoever he was, I couldn't see Julien in him. The features had withered too much, any personality scorched clear off as if by flame.

I looked up. Geisert stood transfixed. Tenyon was steady, minding the work. His knees were bent, ready to absorb the shock of a sudden fall. I worried for a moment, that that was why he was always ready to catch me: maybe he just knew it would happen sooner or later. I gave him a thumbs up. He returned it.

I took my ax and began working the borders of the corpse. I dug away, revealing, inch by

inch, green shoulders, green arms, green wrists. I worked like a sculptor, freeing the shape of a man. I freed his right hand. The wind gusted over me. I was low against the rock, leaned back only enough to work the ice ax. There was a man in here. But was he who we needed him to be?

In the last photo of him, Julien was smiling in the cold sun, a green parka buttoned up to the neck. The colors were close, but who could say? Light and photographs can change things like that, and so can wind, and besides, there was ice on the parka, whitening it like mold. The hands had frozen shut in fists. I worked around his legs. They had been bent back in the fall. The right leg especially. It bent awkwardly at the knee, back and to the side, like a snapped branch. Then I worked the boots. The laces were caked in ice, crampons frozen to the soles. The wind howled. The clouds around us began to whip past. The weather wouldn't hold.

“How we doing, buddy?” Tenyon was calling into the radio.

“Fine,” I said. “Send Wong down, I'm ready for the sled.”

Wong looked at Tenyon and nodded, then he too got on his hands and knees and rappelled out onto the rock with me. He came out wobbly. He looked at the man in the ice, who was emerging like the prow of a shipwreck bobbing.

Dawa lowered the sled. He fed the rope through a series of cams and was working it like a pulley. The sled was a little less than a gurney like we'd find in a hospital.

I had gone back and forth on it, on whether it was selfishness or mercy that compelled Sana to leave. The way she slipped out, nonetheless, while I slept on that porch. Selfishness or mercy. Can they live together in the same feeling? Digging that man out of the ice, loading him onto that aluminum gurney, I hoped it was acting with mercy. That when she left she were only trying to spare me from something worse.

Together, Wong and I hoisted the man up. He was still trapped in the ice, a lattice of frost under his arms like wings. I held him in place while Wong strapped his chest and shoulders. Vinyl straps passed through aluminum buckles.

“You okay?” I said to Wong.

“Fine,” he said. “Let's get this done.” I cinched the strap tight, and the frozen arms crunched into place. They yawned out at strange angles from the elbow, as if he was trying to warm his hands on a long-extinguished fire.

I looked up at Dawa and spun a finger through the air. “Pull it up,” I said.

Huge flakes of snow began to whip my face. A cloud of snow passed over the ice, and for a moment I could not see the body or Wong or the dizzying world below. I clung tight to the surface of the Mountain. The weather was shifting, and getting worse.

Up above, Tenyon waved his hands. “We are going to have to beat it,” he called. His voice cut in and out on the radio, fragile. Winds like this could blow in out of nowhere, and at altitudes like this they were exponentially more dangerous. These windows could open and shut lightning-quick.

A shape was moving through the thick flurries of snow. The body was going up on the sled. The snow let up only enough for me to see Dawa smashing his ax into the ice. His back was to me, and he moved silently through the static. I followed him up. The wind rocked me back and forth. Below was a huge, white emptiness. If I fell, it would be ungraceful. I would not come back from it.

I sunk my own ax into the ice and heaved over the ridge, where the rest hunched around the sled. Geisert was kneeling there. I moved up close to her. The others stared without

expression, just waiting to see. Geisert was touching the face, the shoulders, the ice-encased hands.

“Is it him?” said Wong. It was the right question, but the way he said it was packed with dread.

“Is it him? It has to be.” Wong's voice echoed in the radio, a short wave feedback loop, and the second time I heard it seemed to be the first time Geisert had. She looked up at me, then back at the body. She'd pulled her goggles up and was staring at the corpse, touching it through the thick fabric of her gloves. It was a searching touch, as if she were blind and feeling her way through the rearranged living room of a childhood home.

Tenyon touched her shoulder. “The storm,” he said. “It is coming. We have to go.”

“Is it him?” said Wong.

I pushed through and knelt with Geisert. “Listen,” I said. “Listen. Is this Julien?”

She looked at me, and in her face I could see that she was somehow failing, and that she was losing hope. She had spend tens of thousands of dollars on this operation, and dragged five other people through hell. We all set out to find Julien, and we harrowed, and we struggled, and the whole way up I was failing too, over and over the same failure. Here, at the end of it, she couldn't be sure it was really him. This was no abstraction, no broad shout at Death. It was a statement, then a question.

This man has no face.

Can she be sure this is Julien?

Geisert didn't know. I could look at her and see that she didn't know.

“It's him,” she said.

Chapter 12: Cathedral of the Sky God

Tenyon pointed us back down. I will admit to you it was easier than I thought to turn away from the Mountain peak. I believed a part of me would want nothing more than to break off from the group, to soldier over the Hillary Step like poor Julien. Another might have done it. My vision was swimming in black spots by then, my withdrawal worsening. Another me, a different man having a different crisis, this is the man who would go on alone. I knew then, if I tried it I would die.

As we crossed the Rainbow Valley, my vision became vague. A sensate glow of death fell over the whole sprawling graveyard. The sun was past its apex, and the winds were only getting worse. I had long since lost track of my hands and feet. The only feeling in my body was a kind of numb plodding. I entertained, moment to moment, ideations of death. Just slumping down, dropping the cable that held me to the sled. I had seen others do this, and even done it myself in the moments precluding the '96 disaster. One man, Micah Belsing, simply stopped, looked at Kenning and me, and said "Okay boys, goodnight." We compelled him to stand, but even in the moment of trying to get him up, I sensed in Kenning the notion that if Belsing did not move in a minute or two, he would be left behind. It was easy for me to believe he had left Julien Geisert to die. I was relieved when Belsing finally stood up and started walking again. I didn't have to worry about the nightmares of letting him die. I was grateful for that.

I opened my eyes. At some point I had let go of the sled and sat down and drifted off.

Wong and Tenyon were ahead of me, and when my rope went slack they doubled back to find me. Tenyon nudged me with his boot. I think now they believed I was already dead, or at least beyond saving. Tenyon bent over me.

“Hey buddy,” he said, “you have to keep going now.”

“Why?” I said. “I’m beat.”

Tenyon patted my face. “I don’t know why,” he said. “Just get up, okay? Think of Sana. Let her pull you along.”

The South Col was a world of ice. Breathless, and so very cold. In my shredded brain, I saw the sky as the roof of a crystalline cathedral, the architecture sylvan, twisted, the product of millions of years of wind and thunder.

When I was a boy I put my hand in the fire to see what it felt like. Even this memory was transitory, liquid, escaping me even as I tried to think it. There was no air to breathe.

Tenyon staggered past me on the guide rope. He looked off the other way as he passed, as if looking for my mirror image in the wind. Perhaps he saw it. Perhaps, for the first time in weeks, he was thinking of his oldest son, who now had a mustache and walked just like his father: perfectly.

“Ten,” I gasped. He did not hear, only pushed forward to catch up with the others. Somewhere ahead, Lhakpa was testing the ground with the handle of her ax. Dawa had short-roped Geisert, who was fading quickly. Wong stayed with me, holding me up as I stumbled. I could not understand him. I will never understand him.

We were snowblind up there, and untethered from the guiderope. Why? I noticed it and felt too dumb to reach out for it. My brain was dying. I could hardly see.

I took a step – the fall was instant. Like in the moments before sleep, that sudden feeling of being jerked straight down. I had been walking, stumbling forward. Then I fell into a pit. I felt a grievous snap in my chest, and when I finally moved to breathe again, each breath was a hacksaw. I'd snapped a rib. At least one. I gulped like a landed fish and for a while the only thing that mattered was breathing. I had never fallen like this. Bad breaks, sure. But nothing like this. This was the kind of fall that could kill.

It was some kind of crevasse, narrow as a torpedo tube. The pit splintered at both ends into a network of fractures. It must have opened just as I walked over it. The whole thing was ice-white, purgatorial, and silent but for the sound of ice cracking somewhere in the sunlight above. The light and wind were both drowned out by the smooth walls rising above us. The straps of my harness dug into my thighs. I was suspended in shadow.

My ice ax was bent against my own spine. I took it and used it to crutch myself against the frozen wall. The pain spidered across my body as ribs ground against one another. I took a harrowed breath, and another. Below me was a narrow stripe of void. I heard a low moan, so low it might have been a prayer. Down in the pit with me, hanging by the same rope, there was a figure in a green parka, like a cocoon dangling at the opposite end of the crevasse. A chevron of bright red had begun to form on the wall behind the figure like a satellite moon emerging from behind a hill. The rope snaked limply between us, and already had been dusted by snowfall from the narrow aperture above. The body was small and still. It was George Wong.

I gathered a word in my lungs and under the brown meat of my tongue. "George," I said. He did not move. I looked up. My head felt like a deflating soccer ball. All the world above was a strip of bright white. I hoped to see Tenyon's face pop over the edge. To hear him call for me,

tell me he'd be right over with a long rope. But I did not expect him, and he did not come.

We'd been unclipped from the main rope. Those above might not even notice we were gone. Maybe they would have felt the weight shift, or maybe a sudden silence. But sometimes people just disappear.

I pushed my feet against the wall and edged toward the slumped figure of Wong. He had a wound in his forehead, a cracked forehead steaming like the breath of a ghost. I prodded him with one aching hand. "Hey," I said. He flicked his eyes open. His pupils were huge, hungry for light.

I pulled his head gently away from the wall of the crevasse, and a soft trickle of blood licked the side of his face. Wong blinked slowly. "You're okay," I said. "You feel okay?" He only groaned. His hands were feeling around in the empty air.

"Hey," I said. "Listen. They're making a decision up there."

"What?" said Wong.

"How long they can spend looking for us."

Wong scratched his head. His fingers came away with blood. "I hope it's an easy decision," he said. He did not notice the blood. "I want to ask you something."

I coughed. "I think I broke a rib." I cradled my chest. Pain forked through my bones.

"I want to ask you something," he repeated. "Back at the nightclub, in Kathmandu. Did you remember me?"

I coughed. A tooth came out of my face and clattered like a pebble down the shaft. "The nightclub?"

"I remembered you," said Wong, "from '96. I thought you'd be happy to see me too."

The blood began to freeze on Wong's forehead. His air tank sat between jagged rocks. The connector hose was torn out, hissing like a wounded snake. I took the tank and the hose and reconnected them. Air continued to hiss out; the valve had been knocked loose, sitting askance on the mouth of the tank.

Wong's breath was raspy. He closed his eyes. I pushed against him with a shoulder. "Wake up," I said. "Man, you have to wake up."

He moved his hand vaguely. I had seen other injuries like that, injuries to the head. I draped an arm around him and rocked him gently. I took the broken mask from around his neck and put mine on him. "You gotta get up, man." I took him by the shoulder. I saw myself for a moment as Tenyon, felt myself through the looking glass. A memory of Tenyon loading me into that cab in Spain.

"You're okay, buddy." I put a hand on his face. "You're okay, sit up." Wong opened his eyes. He held up his hands and looked at them in amazement. "Hey," I said. I put my face right in front of him.

He looked at me. The blood was frozen on his face.

"The Austrian," he said. "Aren't you proud?"

"You can sit like this," I said. "But keep those eyes open."

Wong nodded slowly. He began working a glove off his fingers. I grabbed the hand, holding the glove on. "Stay dressed, okay?"

"I'm hot," said Wong.

"You're delirious," I said. "It's a paradox. You remember how that works?"

He looked at me sadly. "Okay," he said.

I put a hand on my radio. "Ten, it's me. Do you copy?"

There was nothing. I might have broken the radio in the fall. I looked up. It was a forty foot climb, up sheer ice. I took Wong's ax, which dangled from his wrist. He was dangling quietly, tapping the toe of his boot against the ice, over and over.

Without expecting an answer, I tried the radio again. "Tenyon, Dawa. Hello?"

Wong called from behind me. "You know where we are," he said. His face was stricken, frozen in sorrow. "It's okay to be scared."

I did feel a kind of holiness about the chasm. Soft, smooth curves of ice. Dark reflections alive in the surface. There was a dark me, and a dark Wong, our shapes mixing like daubs of oil. The sky above us was a narrow band of white.

I took Wong by the face. "I'm going to leave you behind," I said. When he looked at me I could not see what he was thinking. "I'll come back," I said. "I'll get help and come back."

I tore the mask off his face and put it back on my own. I stowed the tank in my pack. I packed a snowball and put it in Wong's hand, then guided the hand to his face. "Hold this up here," I said. "It'll stop the bleeding."

"Tell Julie," he said. "I'm sorry about the car."

I dug my pick into the icy wall. It sunk deep. I braced one foot, then the other. I began to climb. Each push racked me with pain. I wanted to cry, but there was no time. The ax handle strained under my weight. I had climbed sheer ice before, even without a rope, but never with a broken rib. Never so exhausted.

I felt a kind of reckoning coming my way. Like maybe I could do this, I could save Wong's life, and in doing so perhaps undo a part of my own suffering. The climb was a martial

challenge, and a spiritual one. A dry wind shrieked overhead.

Over and over, my ax found purchase. I braced carefully at each tiny handhold, sliced the ax out of its slot, and before momentum could carry me off the face, I slammed my body forward and up. A higher purchase, another push. Each hammerblow crunched my ribs. Soon I gave up trying to minimize the pain. The bone was ground to meal. My lung was a pale, dying thing, unprotected now by its bone cage.

I climbed. I climbed. I climbed. I was over the top.

All about me, the South Col stretched like a snowbound battlefield. The frozen bodies of the Rainbow Valley greeted me. The radio now would not even light up. I shook it once, twice. I cracked open the battery compartment. My fingers were numb. There was nothing else I could do.

I took up a gnarled length of rope, and with a few cams I anchored one end to the lip of the crevasse. I left what I could out of my bag: rations, water, the broken radio. I would not have the strength to make another attempt, and the cold would kill me long before dehydration.

I went to the body of the dead woman, the one whose photo I had taken. Her pack was frozen shut. I sliced through the vinyl and took out what was inside. There were more rations, now little better than hunks of stone. There was an extra set of gloves. A headlamp. I laid all of these things in the snow in parallels. There was a set of pitons, climbing spikes for driving into ice. I took these and holstered them.

I fed the line through my harness. For a while I stared down into the void. I could barely make out the unmoving form of George Wong. I wanted to leave, I really did. I wanted say fuck it and begin the hike back to Camp IV, alone, where I might be able to sleep. I could go back to

Kathmandu, to the lounge singer, to all the decent mediocrities of my life. But more than that, I wanted to do something right. To prove, if only to myself, that I could do this one real thing. I took the rope in my hands and began a careful descent.

I stopped every few feet to drive a spike into the wall of ice.

I reached Wong in under two minutes. He had stayed where I put him, hands under his legs. He was staring at the pit below. I knew the look. He was thinking of death.

“Remember when we pulled the Austrian out of the snow?” I said. I took his arm and put it over my shoulder. “This is just like that. You and me.”

Wong nodded. He was weak. Fresh blood bubbled from his head. “Okay,” he mumbled. “You and me.”

I short-roped him to my back and carried him up. The rope strained. As hard as it was to carry myself, it felt damn near impossible to haul myself and George Wong up the side of this crevasse. But the pitons I'd grabbed let me find footing. The whole time, Wong moaned deeply. I climbed. I could not look back at him, but could feel the slow shifting of his weight on my shoulders as he shivered toward death.

My breaths came like those of a panting dog, and I believed urgently that I would die with this man on my shoulders. That I would stall out somewhere on the ice, unable to endure the pain, unable to reach any higher. I was afraid of passing out, each breath like a shotgun blast in my chest. Imagined us dangling from that cold length of rope like a pair of snared and mindless elk. Then, sometime soon, the rope would give out. We would fall, and although we were both already dead, would be doubly so – mutilated. Wong groaned. He could feel it too.

The violent ache in my chest was not offset, not hardly distracted from, by the powerful

tiredness in my arms. They were bordering on useless, propelled as much now by my grim ideations as by any kind of actual endurance.

I do not remember cresting the lip of the crevasse, nor the sense of relief I ought to have felt. There was a voice, a familiar one, charged with antipathy, annoyance, and grace. I was cold. My lungs felt small and shredded. My body was a thing that had run out. Whatever else was left of me, it was dying.

“Fuck,” said the voice. “Look at this.”

There was a pressure on my face, and the sensation of light finding its way to my eyes. “Shit, he's alive.”

I opened my eyes. Someone was kneeling over me. Someone else was kneeling over George Wong.

“This one? What's up with this one?”

“I know this guy.”

There was a feeling of movement. I was being dragged by the ankles. Up above me, upside down like a fang piercing the sky, there was the Mountain peak. I was so close. So very close.

Then I was in a helicopter. The rotors were like gunclaps in the night. I woke. There was another figure, shrouded in a tarp. Marcos Ezquerria was sitting on the bench. He had long hair, a short beard. He was breathing through an oxygen mask. He looked at me and saw that I was awake. I had a mask on too, and reached to pull it off. My fingers were numb. I did not know at the time I had lost two of them to frostbite. The mask sat awkwardly on my nose. The warm, fresh atmosphere of the mask yielded to altitudinous, cold air. Marcos Ezquerria held a railing

and got up and put the mask back on me.

“Stay there, dude,” he said. “Back to sleep for now.”

Chapter 13: Pretty Far Gone

The place buzzed with a digital lifelessness. A TV was on, muted, tuned to some reality series. A middle-aged man singing a Bollywood hit on a neon stage.

A nurse opened the door, looked at me, and turned around. Hospital sounds washed over me: hurried footsteps, the squeaky wheel of a gurney, the steady beep of machinery. Voices murmured in Nepali, Hindi, English. My chest and hands were wrapped in gauze.

The nurse returned with a doctor. She looked over the rims of her glasses at me. She asked questions in accented English.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Kathmandu,” I said. “Some hospital. I was with a man.”

There was one sheet of paper on the clipboard.

A finch perched on the concrete sill outside. Behind it, a storefront draped with prayer flags. They fluttered on the breeze. “Sir,” said the doctor. She checked her notes. Her lips were a scimitar curve, pressed into a frown. “Mr. Ezquerro. He said you were with another man. Is that right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, George Wong.”

“Yes,” she said. “He did not live.”

It felt like she'd clocked me with a hammer. I had carried that son of a bitch on my back. Forty feet of ice. Forty feet of agony. My tongue was swollen, my mouth dry. “He's dead?”

“You'll want to hear it from Mr. Ezquerro yourself,” said the doctor. “I'll let him know you're awake.”

She got up and headed toward the door, then she stopped. “And sir, don't worry about the pain in your hand. It's perfectly normal. It will go away in time.”

My left hand was sore. The bandages were wrapped thick, so thick I couldn't make much of it. Pain stretched like a glove with every heartbeat. With the other hand I began to unwrap the bandage. Slowly I revealed a skein of purple and black. A whole corner of my hand ravaged by frostbite. At last I peeled away the last strip of bandage. Where I once had a ring finger and a pinky, there were now two stumps cut close to the knuckle. These were black and dead. My heart smashed through my chest.

“Fuck,” I said.

I had seen men lose whole arms, whole legs. In '96, a man from Texas almost lost his whole face. Two fingers, though. I could almost feel them. Phantom pain. I tried to make a fist, but the muscles would not contract. I had a black, rictus claw. But I could feel the way I had been, and that made it so much worse.

That night, Ezquerro told me what I already knew. George Wong died in the South Col. I had pulled him out of the dark but failed to bring him home. Ezquerro's climbing group, who had been a day behind us, stumbled on me blindly. He called it “Providencia, dude.”

I shook my head, but didn't speak.

He told me that the rest of my group had made it safely to Camp IV. They searched as long as they could for Wong and me, and then went down safely. They were recovering at Base Camp, and from there they would join us in Kathmandu.

“And the body?” I said. “Julien's body, did they get it?”

“I guess,” said Ezquerra. He put his fingers in the thicket of his short beard. “Yeah, I guess.”

I got it out of him that the jury was still out on whether the body really belonged to Julien. The authorities weren't asking a lot of questions; to them our whole expedition was a kind of morbid garbage retrieval. We were filed in the same class of outfits as the environmental cleanup folks, those ones who treat it like a fun run.

The problem, said Ezquerra, was getting the body out of the country. Repatriation was going slowly. All the while, Julien – or whoever it was – stayed filed away in the dubiously organized morgues of Kathmandu. Sarah Geisert was filing paperwork. She had petitioned a very good lawyer who was trying to make headway. All the while, as Ezquerra told me this he stared at my hands.

“It hurts,” I told him.

“Shit, man.” He jiggled his leg nervously. “I, uh.” He looked up at the muted TV.

“Listen,” I said. Ezquerra looked at me impassively. “I'm sorry we left things badly.”

Ezquerra blinked. “It is what it is,” he said. He turned then to the TV and began watching it intently.

It was a hot night. When Ezquerra left, I pushed out of bed and wheeled my saline drip down the empty hall. At each door, I stopped and checked the medical chart on the jamb. Names from all over the world. Wegner, Cheung, Akbar. Climbers who had fallen or needed treatment. At the end of the hall, on the left, I found the door I was looking for. Noland-Wallace.

I knocked softly. There was no answer. I eased the door open. A woman was in the bed. From the door I could not see her face, only a mess of dark hair. I came and sat by her side. Without looking at me, she said "Everybody's visiting." Her heart monitor beeped steadily. I thought of sonar. Of ships sailing toward ice.

"How you feeling?"

Katie Noland-Wallace rolled over to face me. She looked unhealthy, and thin. "I'm alive," she said. "Henry told me you were here."

"I thought he'd be at your bedside," I said.

"Don't you go talking bad about him."

I shrugged. "I imagine it's been hard on him too."

Katie smiled pitifully. "Not as hard as on you, I hear."

"Well," I said.

"I can understand you feeling a little raw."

"One of my guys died," I said.

"I know," said Katie. "It's okay now." She looked so small then, and for maybe the first time I saw this person laid bare. I was not sure how to feel. Everything seemed contorted. I felt a rising ball in my throat. I was sure I didn't want to cry, and so I said nothing. We sat in silence a long while. I cleared my throat. "Everyone goes," I said.

Katie rose up on her elbows. She screwed her mouth up to the side, like she was biting a lemon. "Guess so."

"They're releasing me in the morning," I said.

"Where are you going to go?"

“Florida, I think.”

“What's in Florida?” said Katie.

“I think my dad lives there,” I said. “I don't know.”

“They're taking me to a proper hospital.”

“Oh,” I said archly. “On the continent?”

“Somewhere with toilets,” she said.

“How posh.” The heart monitor beeped. I raised my bandaged, black hand. “Say you cut me off in traffic,” I said.

“I would never,” said Katie. She smiled crookedly.

“Just say.”

“Are you driving like an asshole?”

“Too slow,” I said. “Dangerous, like.”

“And then I cut you off.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Katie's hand shot up to an imagined steering wheel. “Move over!” she yelled. “Move, wanker!”

“Okay,” I said. “Wanker. I don't get that a lot.” I showed her my hand. “I'm missing two fingers, see?” She nodded. I counted. Thumb, index, middle finger. “So if I need to flip you off, which one do I raise?”

We laughed and laughed.

Sarah Geisert collected me in the morning. She looked thin, weathered. Her lips were dry

and flaky. She had showered and was wearing a clean t-shirt. "We're going to a web cafe," she said. "Right now."

I was standing at the nurse's desk, filling out a check I knew would bounce. Amputations don't come cheap. "I don't want to go to a web cafe," I said. "I want to go to McDonald's."

"I got an email from a man," said Geisert. "He says he met Julien. We're going to call him."

This man, his name was Roger Preston. He was a surgeon, American. He was on the expedition that came up after Julien's. When we'd called before, he was sailing around the world, unreachable. Now here he was, waiting on our call.

The web cafe was small. An ancient cat dozed at the base of an oscillating fan. Preston's face popped up on the monitor. He was vaguely handsome, his hair lined with gray, his tanned face bore the weathering of salt spray and hot wind. He lately had laid over at the Cape of Good Hope, where Geisert's message finally reached him.

"Yeah," said Preston. "I remember him. We were coming up on the Step. I was the last one in my group." Sunlight reflected in Preston's aviators. Wind swept his hair. Behind, a bright sun danced on the Atlantic. His voice was throaty and deep. He sounded like Sam Shepard. "Ezquerria, the others, they were pretty far ahead. I got a little separated, I guess. A little off the wire."

I reached for Geisert's hand, and she met mine with a squeeze. Around us, travelers stopped in to log their own calls. Some spoke German, another Greek, one in English with a Welsh chip. All were speaking of home. "I miss you," they said, "I wish I was home with you."

Preston told us that after he got separated from his group, he went looking for a place to

rest and radio them. He found a narrow cave where the Mountain gave way to a jagged ingress. He sat awhile, and when he looked around he saw, trapped in a crack on the approach, a man.

Geisert was sitting straight up, her spine like a telephone pole. “Well, I pulled him out,” said Preston. The man was dying, babbling incoherently into a frozen respirator. His face was black from frostbite. “Like a mummy,” said Preston. “It was horrible.” But the man was alive, at least for the moment. Preston dragged the man out into the sunlight. “I just wanted him to feel the sun on his face one last time,” he said. “Honestly, that was the whole thing. I tried looking him in the eyes, but his eyeballs, I'm sorry to say this, they were frozen in his head There was no hope.

“I grabbed him under the arms and dragged him out into the light, and even though he was totally somewhere else, when that light hit his skin he started making this face. His lips twisted, like. He was smiling. He tried to look up at me, and I'll be honest, I was crying. I'd never seen somebody like that. My parents died in a car wreck. And your husband, he was trying to look at me, and he was smiling. He didn't say anything, it was just a look of, maybe, gratefulness. I stayed with him as long as I could. His breathing was short, like a rabbit's, and my group was calling down for me on the radio. I didn't think it would do any good, but I left him my bottle of water. Maybe it was just for me, just so I could feel like I'd done something for him. I don't know. But that face, I still see it.

“Right before I left, he made like he wanted to say something, so I got down on my knees in the snow there. I put my face close to his and asked what he wanted to say.”

“Well, what did he want to say?” Geisert's fingers were shaking as she took the microphone and pulled it closer to her mouth. Off in the distance, somewhere on the other end of

Preston's line, a gull was calling.

“I could hear him fine,” said Preston, “but I couldn't place the words. He wasn't speaking English.”

“I see,” said Geisert. Her mouth became a flat line. She looked briefly at me. Maybe she expected me to come through with a question, an answer, a revelation. I didn't know what to feel. Preston scratched his face, then put his hands down. He cleared his throat, then looked off to the side, somewhere out of view of the screen. Somebody whispered something to him. Dutch, maybe. It sounded like Dutch. “No,” he said back.

Preston looked back at Geisert. The light caught in her hair. I believed he could not see her the way I could, not through the screen like that.

“Ma'am,” he said, “if it makes any difference, I don't believe he knew what he was saying. He was pretty far gone.”

Geisert walked me to the bus stop. I had very few possessions left. Clothes, boots, an old book with the page marked by a five rupee note. “What now?” she said.

“I'm going to Florida.”

“There's going to be a funeral,” said Geisert. “For Julien.”

“That's good,” I said.

“Plenty of people will come, I think.”

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“I'm tired,” said Geisert.

“You'll feel better soon.”

“Why are you going to Florida?” she asked.

I felt so distant from her in that moment. “I'm happy you got what you wanted,” I said.

“Are you going to stay there?”

“I don't think so,” I said.

“Well, what happens after?” I could feel the weight of her question.

“I don't know,” I said.

The bus rounded a corner. It was a block away. I could see its blue stripe, the bobbing head of a driver.

“When you're done,” said Geisert, “you can come and visit me.” She paused. “If you want.”

“Okay,” I said. “That's my bus, though.”

She was quiet. The bus pulled to a stop. The door hissed open. I envisioned another world, where another me could have loved another her. Morning coffee, shade climbing the lawn as the sun came over some nameless Swiss village. Even the scene was fake, idyllic, cribbed from the side of a Swiss Miss box from my childhood. Rabbits in the hedge, their breathing wild and sweet. Sarah in a bathrobe, a clavicle emerging from the shadowed folds of terrycloth. Coffee steaming in her hands. Her hair up in a bun, sun-pierced. She was smiling.

“I should go,” I said.

The bus was a rickety can, stuffed with Sherpas and dirtbags on their way out to the countryside. Among them were a number of split lips and bandaged hands. One man sat with a new crutch propped between his legs, and when he got off at Ramgram he hobbled away across a

fresh, stinking blacktop. We idled there awhile. I had a small box on the seat with me, wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. It was unmarked. The bus driver slinked away for lunch, and others followed him to the market to pick up a paper bowl of chiuraa. I leaned my head against the window to watch them go. In the distance, the man with the crutch limped through a wooden gate. He passed among a pack of hens. He pushed open the front door of a little house and went inside. The hens followed him in like dogs, or children.

I went home, back to Siddharthanagar. I sat on the corner of my bed. Outside, locusts were thrumming in the trees. Jeet knocked on the door. It was open. He stood in the doorway, apprehensive, sweat gathering on his lip and temples. It was summer.

“Woman on the phone.”

When I got up, I brought the parcel with me. I hugged it under one arm as I followed Jeet to the bar. The familiar smoke hung in the air as it had on the day I met Sarah Geisert. A pool ball cracked somewhere in the back of the bar. The handset was laid out, a twisted cord climbing up a wood post to the cradle. I laid down the package and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

In the background, a quietude. She was alone. I could feel her loneliness. “Is it him?” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “You know it is.”

“Okay,” she said. “I just wanted to know what you think.” Then she hung up.

When I turned to go, Tenyon was standing at the entrance to the bar. The way he stood with the sun at his back, he was wreathed in light like one of those Byzantine icons. I was

surprised to see him. Until that moment, I had not realized I'd meant to leave without saying goodbye.

“Hey,” I said. I put a hand on the back of my neck.

“You're going,” said Tenyon.

There were others in the bar, men I had learned to call neighbor. I'd felt accepted there, just another barfly in a village of barflies. Somebody racked the pool balls and chalked up a cue. Jett's shadow loomed out of the kitchen as he stacked cases of beer.

“Did you take care of everything?” I said.

“She does not want test,” said Tenyon. “No DNA.”

“And the body?”

“Whoever he is, he is hers.”

“She's going to keep wondering,” I said.

“Yes,” said Tenyon. “I know.”

“Everybody's wondering,” I said. “Everybody's wondering about someone.”

“I passed your house,” said Tenyon. “You have bags in yard.”

“I guess I'm going away,” I said. “Doesn't feel that way.”

Tenyon came inside. He was wearing new boots. Black cowboy boots with intricate tracery in the leather. He sat on the stool next to me. He spun a half-circle left, then right.

“What's it feel like?” he said.

“Like I'm not coming back.”

Tenyon shrugged. “Maybe you visit.” There was a glint of pain in his face. He didn't want to look at me.

“How about a drink?” I said. I was halfway around the bar.

“This is goodbye,” said Tenyon. I was reaching for a bottle of whisky and stopped. “But we drink if you want.”

I slotted the bottle back. “What, then?”

Tenyon nodded at the parcel on the bar. “What is in the box?”

“Just running an errand,” I said.

He nodded. Both his hands were on the table, palms down. “It feels very big,” he said.

“What we did.”

I came back around and sat beside him. “On the Mountain, you mean?”

“Yes,” he said. “A very big thing.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so.”

He looked at me, and as he did, the billiard balls broke with a sharp snapping sound.

“Don't guess,” he said. “You always guess. Listen. It was big.”

In the back of the bar, someone missed a shot. The poolshark muttered “Always, always with this.” I felt myself floating away. All I could picture was Sana, her face, the cut of her chin, the gentleness of her eyes. It was a kind of forgiveness. I had done something decent. Maybe it came trapped with uncertainty. That didn't undo the peace we brought Sarah Geisert. She would be okay. I would be okay too.

I put my arm across Tenyon's back. “I know you're right.”

I offered a hand to Tenyon, and he shook it. “See you buddy,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. “See you later.”

I walked out of the bar by myself. My bags were in the yard, where I had left them. I

slung one over my shoulder and went out across the yard. A yak watched me go, working in its jaw something warm and green.

The bus arrived a half hour late. I climbed on it. I recognized too many of the faces. Sometimes the world is cruel.

Chapter 14: The Path of Good Wishes

Clouds rolled back as morning came to Perth. This town was not one I'd grown up in, but I felt as if I knew each stop before my rented sedan rolled up to it. I passed a church lot. Cars were pulling in, queuing for their spots. Dodge Caravans and hatchbacks, decades old and maintained with Protestant diligence. The sign in the churchyard read "Only God Forgives. Jazz Service 9:00."

The air was heavy and wet. I patted the parcel on the passenger seat. The stoplights seemed to drag for hours.

The sandstone bungalow was set back on a yard of fresh-trimmed carpetgrass. A woman watched me from the shade of a screened porch. She held a cigarette between electric blue fingernails, smoke wisping up and cut by an overhead fan. When I got halfway up the walk, she said "Glad you found the place." Julie Wong was my age, mid thirties, wearing only a tank top and jean shorts. Shoeless, feet kicked up on the handrail. "Come on up."

"Nice to meet you in person," I said. I leaned my pack next to the front door and approached with the parcel between two hands. She dropped her cigarette down the neck of a beer bottle and eased to her feet.

"Likewise," she said. She glanced down at the package in my hands. She regarded it

sadly. “Is that him?”

I nodded. My voice wouldn't go.

“So small,” said Julie. She reached out with both hands. Holding it, she smiled faintly, as if it were warm and pleasant to the touch. She pulled open the screen door. “Come on, I'll take you on back.”

The inner foyer was thick with shadow. A hall light had burned out. Julie went into a dim central corridor, and I followed. Outside, it began to rain. We passed rows of photos, barely illuminated, printed out in some strip mall photo center. A shot with Julie's hands George's shoulders, their heads cinched too far to the left. He was smiling. I'd hardly seen him smile like that on the Mountain or at Base Camp, and this, a grin so big and toothy it had to be real.

“I got most of my crying out by now,” said Julie. “You'll stay for dinner and everything, I hope.” Julie floated at the end of the hall, hair piled like new fire on her head and shoulders. I closed the rest of the distance, passing more photos on the way. The two of them at the beach, holding a rain-soaked tarp over their shoulders. Another, George Wong as a young man. He was wearing a blue parka, leaning against a tree, the sun in his eyes. The last, a wedding photo. Julie was young, her dress off the rack from David Jones. George, clean-shaven, his eyes bloodshot, his smile tentative here, as if locked behind it was the knowledge of what he was, of how this thing would end.

Julie lifted her hand. Behind the door, a muffled sound somehow like boots on ice. She pulled a strand of hair out of her eyes, pinned it back behind her ear. “His dad isn't well,” she said, “and there's tacos.” She left me at the end of the hall. I went in.

An air conditioner buzzed in the ceiling. I lowered myself onto a grimy, colorless

wingback. My hands were thin, see-through, my knuckles a long ridge of bone and rock. I guessed I had lost twenty pounds. My pants climbed up around me like strangler vines. The belt wasn't doing much.

Thunder rolled, and rain coursed down the window. A narrow bookshelf stood in the corner. Collected Goethe, Kipling. Interspersed, at random or by some strange design, The Da Vinci Code, Bridget Jones's Diary.

Julie worked the cork on a bottle of mescal and served it up in a crystal tumbler. This she set next to a platter of steaming corn tortillas, a clay dish of salsa roja, a skillet of spiced beef. “You think it's ever gonna let up out there?” Julie sat across me in a wingback matching the one from my room.

“I forgot how it could be,” I said. “All this.”

“You mean the rain?” She slid the tortillas my way.

“Life.”

“Well, what were you doing in Tibet?”

“Nepal,” I said, scooping salsa.

“Oh, right.”

“I was doing pretty much anything but living.”

She raised the glass. “That's life, honey.” We drank.

“This is good mescal,” I said.

“George picked it out on our honeymoon. It's been sitting in the cabinet god knows how long.”

“It's been forever since I had a good taco.”

Julie nodded at the skillet. “Plenty more here.” I took it.

She touched my wrist haltingly. The house was still. The photographs seemed to be only blank squares on the wall. “Your hand,” she said. “I saw one like that in a movie.”

I folded my fingers and pulled away. My incompleteness felt raw, exposed. I had felt incomplete much of my life, but now there was more of it, and anybody could see.

Julie left the TV on while we washed up. The screen cast a light like white phosphorous on Julie's pale skin and mine. We sat there glimmering, with mescal in our bellies. The door opened onto a back porch, and out beyond stretched the murky night. In the next lot over, a palm tree shook in high wind. A smell of rot crept up from the distant water.

We sat on the porch to watch the storm roll by. Julie took a cigarette from the pocket of her shorts, passed me the pack and the lighter. “So this is it,” I said. “Life.”

“Could be a lot worse,” she said.

“Could be Kathmandu.”

She dragged her cigarette, unembarrassed. “I don't even know what that is.”

“It's the capitol of Nepal,” I said. “Guess I figured you knew that.”

“I always knew he was crazy,” said Julie. “You must be too.”

“You're not wrong,” I said.

“I'm grateful,” she said. “For what you tried to do for Georgie.”

“I got lucky,” I said. I held up the stubs of my fingers. “Mostly lucky.”

Julie poured another round. We clinked glasses. “It's good we're here,” she said.

“Together.”

“What was he like?” I was thinking of how things end, and how they start again so quickly.

“He was really good,” she said. “He was sweet.”

“What's going to happen to you?”

Julie put a finger on her chin. “We saved up some money. Not much, but it's enough. I can go back to work.”

“What did you do before?”

“When I met George?” She laughed cleanly. “I was serving him potato salad at Monahan's Seaside Grill. He said I had a nice smile.”

I stubbed my cigarette on the handrail. “That sounds like him.”

“That was in Adelaide,” she said. “That's where it was.”

“You look happy in the pictures,” I said.

“We were real. Don't mistake it. We fought like crazy sometimes.” She looked beautiful in the half-light, but older too. She jabbed her cigarette back toward the house. “I loved that man in there.”

“I believe you.”

“Yeah,” she said. She knocked back the drink, stared out over the yard. Puddles spread in the grass, thick swabs of cloud, slashes of warm rain. It reminded me of when Sana and I first lived together, before we joined Tenyon in Siddharthanagar, we had that tiny hovel on Chiang Street. When the spring rains came, we would leave our door open and stand there, watching it pour. I'd stand behind her with my elbows on her shoulders. The hot wind pressed against our faces, our bare arms. We'd watch the storm all the way through, beginning to end.

Julie poured another round. She'd put on an old Willie Nelson CD. "The Mexicans have a saying," she said. "For all your bad times, mescal. And for all your good times, too."

"Words to live by," I said.

We shot our drinks. Thunder. Far off, the frogs got going. She smiled at something, poured another. This was the end of the bottle.

"He crashed my car," said Julie. "Right before he left. I was so fucking furious."

"He mentioned something about it," I said. "Right near the end. He said to tell you sorry."

Julie shook off a sob. She came out of it smiling and crying somehow at the same time.

"God, that man. It's still at the mechanic's. I'll probably never get it back."

The guest bed was piled high with old quilts. Ragged quarters of Union Jack, red stitching on white squares like a belay line up ice. I could hear Julie's bare feet on the hardwood. A shadow passed under the door as she walked up. She paused by the door. The hall lights flicked off and she walked away. I don't know if I slept, but I dreamt.

At breakfast, Julie served up chorizo, eggs, ranchero sauce.

"Where'd you learn to cook like this?" I said.

"George taught me. Our first date, he had me over to his apartment. We chopped up onions and hot chili peppers in that little kitchen he had. I guess this was when he'd just come back from a visit to the states."

"Long time ago?"

"Feels like," said Julie. "But now it feels like barely yesterday." We finished breakfast.

“What's next for you?” Julie and I walked the front driveway. Her sandals in the wet grass.

“No idea,” I said. “Maybe go back home. After I say goodbye.”

“Don't worry too much,” she said. “Goodbyes aren't so much for *them*.”

At the curb, Julie opened an aluminum mailbox. She took out a lavender envelope – a condolence card, probably – and a bill from the insurance company. The junk mail, the grocery store mailer, the electronic super-sale, these she left for tomorrow. “You'll stay for the funeral?” she said.

We scattered Wong's ashes three days later at Helena National Park. We were forty miles from the ocean, another five thousand from Nepal. Nine people showed up to the gravesite, Julie and me included. Local friends, guys who fished with George, an anthropology professor from the Edith Cowan with whom George had a casual correspondence. A couple of women, both in their forties, who came and cried but did not speak to anybody but one another. The chaplain read from the Tibetan book of the dead, in accordance with the will. Above us, a billboard offered laser hair removal. Red font on yellow background, mutant prayer flags for a flat, wet world.

There was no wake. The fishermen and the professor went to a lakeside sports bar, and they invited me along as well. Chet, the older of the fishermen, was a hairy insurance exec. “Come on,” he said, “Georgie would like you to come with us.” I could barely imagine George

Wong fishing.

“Just a drink,” said Chet. “He would be happy.”

The walls of the Victoriana Tavern were draped in football pennants, each corner shaved down by a flatscreen TV. Onscreen, a young cricketer lined up a pitch. Chet ordered a round of tall gin and tonics. The waitress, a heavy woman in her forties, called him honey. Her teeth were wild, her grin revealing grimy recesses between them. “Marlene,” said Chet, “this is George Wong's friend, Abbot.”

“Well my god,” said Marlene. “I heard all about you, love.” She touched my shoulder. “Sorry I couldn't make it today, my manager can be jerky about my days off.”

“It's okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Beautiful service,” said Chet. The other fisherman nodded. He was an orthodontist, retired young from his practice in Sydney. He was living small out in this part of the country, and seemed happy to be in a place like this.

“Get the wings,” said the orthodontist. “Great hot wings if you like a kick.”

I looked at the menu. “Okay,” I said. “Maybe a basket of the hot chili kind.”

Marlene slapped a thick hand to her chest. “Oh wow,” she said, “that was Georgie's kind.”

Marlene brought the drinks in tall, translucent cups like you'd find at a lunch buffet. A slice of browned lime floated on the surface like a roach. I drank it and did not order another. The orthodontist's Mercedes was parked outside. I watched a homeless man come up to it, peek inside the driver's side window, and move on. The professor sat with us as well, though he was

quiet. I could tell he did not know these other men, Chet and the orthodontist. He and George knew each other from an overland adventuring club, and wrote back and forth about world cultures, philosophy, religion. He peered at me over the lip of his cup.

“Young man,” he said. “Pardon the presumption. Are you American?” He was more than eighty years old. His beard was white, and clipped short.

“Yes sir,” I said. “More or less.”

He clapped one hand softly against the table. His drink sloshed. “Excellent! Do you know what the Hopi Indians do for funerals?”

I shook my head. Chet and the orthodontist had turned their attention to the cricket match.

The flesh of the professor's hands was marked by a rash of red welts, like he had jammed them in ant piles to the wrist. “They're buried sitting up. Isn't that amazing?”

Outside, it had begun to rain. The orthodontist insisted on covering the bill, and when it was time to go I shook everybody's hand. The air smelled like thunder, and ash. All the things I loved, I couldn't name them.

I returned to the house in the early afternoon. Julie was in my bedroom. She was still wearing her black dress from the funeral. She had been crying. We sat together a long time in mutual loss and silence. It was a sad thing, a thing I knew I could never explain after that. But I carried it with me.

I awoke alone sometime before dawn. I collected my bag, my razor, and went out into the front porch where I watched the dark pull away from the horizon. The air was mild, wet, alive

with the thrumming of crickets. Julie stood behind me, behind the screen door of the porch. I didn't know where I would go, but there was a car coming for me.