

# THE LAST MOUNTAIN

*A Novel*



Gerry FitzGerald

*Three of the world's most accomplished women mountain climbers race to the top of K2, vying to become the first female to summit all fourteen of the world's 8,000-meter mountains. The Last Mountain is an adventure story of courage, heroism and love.*

## **The Last Mountain**

By Gerry FitzGerald

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## Chapter 1

The snow was starting to fall out of the gray afternoon sky. Slowly now, the big flakes that blew in off Lake Champlain and piled up quickly. In a few minutes the cars in the lot would be covered. In an hour there would be five inches of snow on Route 7 and getting back to Fayston tonight would take Jack Finley over an hour.

He looked back down at the paperwork on his desk and then up at the older couple sitting patiently at the front of him. “Okay, we’re almost done here, uhm ...” he glanced back down at the papers, “Henry, uh Jean. Just need you to initial a few spots here.” He slid a form across the desk and handed a pen to the man. “Saying you’re declining the extended warranty, right there,” he pointed out the spot, “and the rust proofing ... the clearcoat, although you should probably reconsider on that one, with these Vermont winters ...”

“Don’t want it,” the man said gruffly, looking at the paper and initialing where Jack had made the red check marks.

*No, of course you don’t want it. You weren’t born yesterday. Nobody ever wants it.* Jack gazed out of the dealership’s front windows at the progress of the snow. He could make more commission on the sale of a rust proofing and clearcoat application than he would on the sale of the Buick, but he just wasn’t as good at it as the other salesmen. He never would be.

Jack noticed a man sitting in one of the chairs lined up along the inside of the huge plate-glass window. He hadn’t noticed him come in or if he’d yet spoken to one of the other sales associates. It didn’t concern Jack because the man didn’t look like much of a prospect to buy a vehicle late in the day on a snowy afternoon. He had a scruffy look to him with long hair flowing out from under a Montreal Canadiens baseball cap, a well-worn brown winter jacket, heavy-weight work pants and leather boots stained with the white residue of cement work. He sat perfectly still with his back straight to the chair, his hands thrust into slit pockets in the jacket. When

Jack looked at him, the man seemed to nod back almost imperceptibly, as if to say he would wait until Jack was through with his business with the older couple.

“Need to get goin’ here. Drivin’ back to S’ Johnsbury goin’ to be slow goin’ this afternoon.”

Jack’s customer brought his attention back to the paperwork. He smiled at the taciturn couple across the desk. “You bet. We’re all set here. I’ll just turn all this in to the business manager and we’ll have your Buick brought around. Should have the plates on it now.” He gathered up the folder and disappeared around a corner.

The Sales Manager squinted as he went over the paperwork while Jack stood at the front of his desk. “No rust proofing? No clearcoat?” He looked up at Jack with a disapproving look.

“No, they wouldn’t go for it,” said Jack glancing at his watch.

“Show ‘em the DVD?”

“No, they uh, weren’t interested.

“Jesus Jack,” the Sales Manager closed the file shaking his head, “I had big hopes for you.”

“Yeah, well ... next time, right boss?” Jack was looking out the one-way window toward the showroom and saw a young couple come in with an older man. The woman was carrying a baby. Jack started for the door. This was a good “up” and he wanted to get back on the floor. The young couple, he knew, couldn’t afford a new bicycle, but the old man could write a check. He had seen this setup before.

As he came into the showroom, Manny, one of the older salesmen was just reaching the couple with his hand out. They were inspecting a new green GMC Acadia, the older man putting on his reading glasses to read the sticker. “Jesus Ker-iste!” he exclaimed to what had to be his daughter, “you see what they want for this thing!”

Jack had seen the act before and was kicking himself for not being vigilant and seeing the young couple come in. Manny had himself a layup, and a nice commission, once they’d all done their ritual negotiation dance. *Probably sell a rust proofing and clearcoat too... nothing’s too good for that old boy’s daughter.*

Through the big windows, Jack saw the four-year-old Buick he'd sold to the older couple come around the corner of the building and stop in the special "just sold" spot in front. His customers were standing outside in the snow waiting. He needed to go out and shake their hands one more time, hand out more of his business cards, and smile as if he really cared whether they would enjoy their used LeSabre.

Jack took his leather sport jacket off the back of his chair and headed for the door. The man with the Canadiens hat was rising out of his chair. Jack smiled at him. "Is somebody helping you sir?" he asked.

The man was tall, as tall as Jack, six foot three, with broad, strong shoulders like Jack's, but heavier by thirty or forty pounds it appeared from the way he filled out his jacket. "Hello Jack," the man spoke softly with a deep voice and a trace of a French Canadian accent.

Jack stopped in front of the man and smiled, examining him. Then he shrugged. "I'm sorry, do I ..."

"Charest," the man interrupted, "It's me Rene."

The smile left Jack's face and his eyes went wide with disbelief, his mouth hung open. "Oh my God, it really is, it's you Rene," Jack whispered. He moved forward and the two men embraced. Jack wrapped his arms around his old friend and pulled him close and held him tight, oblivious to how it may look to the other people in the showroom. Rene Charest did the same but with only his left arm. His right hand stayed in the pocket of his jacket. They embraced without talking for several seconds, reaffirming a bond forged from experiences no one else in the showroom, indeed no two people in Burlington that day had ever shared or even conceived of.

A loud rapping on the window made Jack open his eyes. The angry Sales Manager was outside with his customers, motioning for Jack to get outside and go over the Buick with them and go through the final departure routine. Jack nodded and held up one finger. He and Rene Charest separated.

"Geeze Rene, I didn't recognize you. I never saw you without a full beard." Jack smiled at his old friend.

"And with so many pounds, aye?" Rene patted his stomach with his left hand.

That was true too. Jack had always known Rene to be thin, with muscles of iron and not an ounce of fat.

“Heard you were here Jack, doing this. Headed back up to Montreal, so, had to come over to say hello.” Rene’s eyes danced around the interior of the showroom. “And see for myself that this is what you do now.”

Jack shrugged. “Not so bad. Got to make a living, you know. Two kids now Rene. Gotta do something.” Jack looked down at Charest’s right arm, his fist still deep in the jacket pocket. “How about you Rene? How bad was it?” he said softly.

His friend shrugged and pulled his arm away from the pocket. “Well, not so good for me, eh?” All his fingers were gone along with half of his thumb. The rounded flesh of the stump was brownish and pulled tight like leather.

Jack winced and took Rene’s hand in his, examining it like a doctor, or like a climbing partner would on the mountain. “Dhaulagiri. That was a hard one, huh. Sorry about your brother.”

Rene sighed and put his hand back into the jacket pocket. “Yeah, Dhaulagiri, on the way down.” He shook his head slowly with the memory. “Same old story, retold too many times, eh my friend?” Rene smiled briefly. “Too late in the day; our last summit try. Eight weeks on the mountain. Horrible weather.” He sighed. “Tired, and no more patience. Almost out of food and fuel.” Rene flashed a quick smile at Jack. “You have been there Jack. We’ve all been there. But this time ...” He shook his head ruefully with the memory. “The luck, it wasn’t with us. Storm comes ... up the mountain, and it takes far too long to summit. Trying to get back to high camp in the dark. We went up light. Not even a bivy sack. No packs, just a short rope, the axes and a water bottle. The wind is so hard, and the snow goes sideways, and it is dark and we’re freezing ... you know how cold Jack. So,” he sighed heavily, “we *had* to get down.”

More rapping on the plate glass window. Jack totally ignored it, peering into his friend’s eyes.

Rene shrugged. “And so ... we fall. In the dark, batteries too weak, three on the rope, we fall. I lose my mitten, torn off trying to arrest. But we

stop finally. Desmarais is okay, but Julien,” he took in a deep breath to stem the emotional tide, “my brother Julien – you knew him, eh Jack?”

“Climbed with him. He was with us, you and me and the Italians, on Annapurna the first time.”

“Oh yes, I forget. I forget.” Rene’s eyes seemed to cloud over as some distant memory occupied him. Then he was back. “Julien, he lands on rocks and his leg is broken in the fall.” Jack winced with the knowledge of what a broken leg meant high on an 8,000 meter mountain.

“We tried to make a splint with Julien’s ax. We tie it tight to his leg and wrap a rope many times around it. But ... you know Jack ... it is only pretend. No one can be carried down from up there. He tries, but he can’t climb. He can’t walk. Soon he can’t move at all.”

Jack looked away from Rene’s tear-filled eyes. Outside, the older couple was driving away, ignoring the waves of the sales manager and two other sales associates recruited for the ceremony.

“So we carry him to a spot between some rocks and carve out a place to sit in the snow, out of the wind. I stay there, kneeling with him, for...too long, and Desmarais and I, we are freezing. Then ... I kiss my brother and we say goodbye. Julien gives me a note he always carries in the mountains, to his wife and to his children. And he gives me his mittens but it is too late for me. It is thirty below zero with the wind. My hand is dead, black, frozen like meat by then.” Rene Charest shrugged with resignation. “Then, we leave him there, on Dhaulagiri – forever – and Desmarais and me, we somehow find the fixed ropes and make it down to the high camp, a miracle for sure, and we save ourselves.”

The driving snow outside and the darkening sky, along with Rene’s story produced a vivid sense of déjà vu in Jack. Anyone else listening to the story would have thought it a horrible, unique tragedy of a lifetime, but to Jack and Rene, it was just part of their history, an all too often experience shared by the small coterie of high-altitude climbers who live for the challenge of the 8,000 meter peaks. The death of friends and loved ones came with the territory, and it came often.

Rene shrugged and flashed a brief smile. “So Jack, what do you do here?”



Jack nodded Rene over to his half-walled cubicle. "I sell cars, Rene. That's what I do..."

"No, no, Jack. I mean *what are you doing here*, selling cars?"

Jack sat in his desk chair while Rene dropped into the metal folding chair next to the desk. Jack glanced out the windows at the snow. "It's not forever. But for now, I need the income until Peggy can go back to teaching. Next September she'll go back and..."

"C'mon Jack," said Rene shaking his head. He leaned onto the desk toward Jack. "This is not right. It's *not right*," he pleaded. "You are the finest high-altitude climber in America. One of the top ten in the whole world. You have climbed all fourteen. In Europe you would be... like a film star, like a rock star. In Korea, they would *give* you a car dealership." He leaned back in his chair and looked about the showroom. "Not selling Buicks and pickup trucks." He turned back to Jack.

Jack sat still, facing his friend, tapping his fingertips on the desk while he pondered his answer. He owed Rene, his friend, an answer. Rene, with whom he had shared a tent in many high camps, indeed, had shared a sleeping bag with for three days in the horrible storm at 7,500 meters on Annapurna. Yes, Rene – his *brother of the rope* as Charles Houston would call him – deserved an answer. But Jack was tired of the question he'd been answering for the last two years, since he'd come home from the Himalaya after summiting Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world ... the last of the fourteen 8,000 meter mountains Jack had climbed – the grand slam of high-altitude mountaineering, the automatic ticket into the climbing hall of fame.

"Times are different Rene. And America's not Europe. Mountaineering's not of much interest here. The media doesn't care unless there's a tragedy with lots of bodies and beautiful people laying in the snow, with video for the news shows and people to blame." Jack shrugged. "Economy sucks. Bad as it ever was. Sponsors disappeared." Jack smiled at his old friend. "You know me. I'm not a writer. Not a talker. I'm not Viesturs."

Charest chuckled, "Aye, *no one* is Viesturs eh?"

“I can’t write books and give slide shows and motivational talks for the big companies.” He chuckled. “Shit, I went to the two biggest party schools in the country – UVM and Colorado State, and flunked out of both of them.” Jack sighed and turned to watch the snow through the big windows. “All I did for the last twenty-three years is climb. That’s all I ever wanted to do.” Jack looked back at Rene who leaned forward in his chair, squinting at Jack with rapt attention. “And then ... all of a sudden, you’re forty years old ... and all you know how to do is climb mountains.”

“And that is a wonderful thing Jack.” Rene implored. “Only a handful of people in the whole world can do what we did, climbing the big mountains. How do you stop? How? When you are still able?” He shook his head in question. “The new routes, the traverses we talked about... so many beautiful smaller mountains...”

“No Rene,” Jack interrupted. “It takes money to climb now. It’s too expensive to get on permits and to travel, and I need to work.” Jack reached across his desk and turned a picture toward Rene. “This is what I do now Rene.” The picture was a summer shot of Jack and his wife Peggy holding a baby, sitting on a green lawn with a little boy sprawled in front of them. “Peggy is holding Beth – she’s one now, and Ralph is four.”

Rene stared at the photograph and smiled. “Ralph,” he said softly. “So who calls a child *Ralph* today?”

Jack laughed. “Peggy’s father’s name. I was getting ready to leave for Makalu. Couldn’t argue too much with her.” He looked at his watch. “C’mon, let’s go have a beer.” It was late in the afternoon and with the snow he knew the dealership would be closing up soon.

They drove up Route 7 a short distance to *Jake’s* and found a secluded booth. Rene picked the side of the booth where his right arm would be against the wall and then wrestled his jacket off with his left hand. A very attractive waitress, in her early thirties, appeared at the edge of the table. “Hey Jack,” she said softly. “Haven’t seen you around much lately.”

Jack flashed a smile up at the girl. “Yeah, been working a lot.” He shrugged. “You know.” The waitress stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded and took out her pen.

Jack ordered a pitcher of *Long Trail Ale*. Rene added two shots of *Jack Daniel's* to the order.

Rene picked up where he'd left off. "You know you could be climbing if you would take guiding jobs Jack. You would climb all you want and make some money too. More than selling cars."

The beer and the shots came and Jack took a long pull on his mug of ale. He put it down softly. "No," he shook his head, "I don't guide anymore," he said firmly. "Not going to climb that way." He glanced vaguely around the restaurant. "I get four, five offers a year to guide on the 8,000ers." Jack shrugged. "All expenses, travel, permits, food, all paid, but no, I won't do that anymore."

"Ah, my friend," said Rene, hoisting his mug. "It's how we all climb now," he said, forgetting his tense. "Well, most climbers anyway. It's the way climbing is going. Without the commercial expeditions you have almost no way to get on a permit any more. Who can afford it, eh?"

"Yeah," said Jack, "and it's what's wrong with climbing now... the commercial expeditions, dragging clients up mountains they don't belong on for a big price. It's not what mountaineering should be. And guiding on the big mountains is just a ruse. It's window dressing for the brochures to impress the clients." Jack paused to calm himself.

"Guiding is fine in the Alps, the Tetons, in the Cascades, on Denali, where you can teach, and you can actually help someone." Jack stared into his beer, his mind wandering. "Help someone get down if they're in trouble," he said softly. He looked up at Rene. "But not on an 8,000er. It doesn't work. It's just a bad trick on the clients who think they're okay, think they're safe because a professional climber is standing next to them." He took a drink and then spoke more softly. "And then, at 27,000 feet, when they can't climb up and they can't walk down and they can't breathe or feel their feet anymore, and the snow and the darkness are all around them and cold like they've never in their lives felt before ... and they look into your eyes expecting *you* to get them off the mountain safely and send them home to their families..." Jack shrugged and sipped his beer. "And all you can do is hope to save yourself ... and maybe try to leave your client

near the ropes, so someone later will find him and be able to push his body into a crevasse.”

Rene leaned across the table and spoke softly. “That was not your fault Jack. There was no way you...”

A figure suddenly cast a shadow onto the table. “Hey, Jack Finley, king of the mountains. What’s happening?”

Jack looked up and recognized a sports writer for the Burlington Free Press with whom he had had a few run-ins with and disliked for years.

“John Teller,” the man said, introducing himself to Rene Charest, who extended his left hand to him.

“Say Jack,” said Teller, pulling a chair from a nearby table up to the end of the booth and settling in. “How about a quote or two about Logan Healy. This is going to be her summer in the spotlight, huh? Vermont girl makes history, huh Jack?”

The mention of Logan Healy made both Jack and Rene Charest smile. They’d both trekked, climbed and shared a tent with her and knew that nowhere on the planet was there a more fun loving, free-spirited, shoot-from-the-hip girl than Logan Healy. Just her name had a positive effect on them. Yes, this would be Logan’s year, when the former ski racer and model- turned- mountain- climber summited her 14<sup>th</sup> 8,000 meter mountain – the *first* woman to accomplish that amazing feat, *if* she could beat her Korean rival, the indomitable Asian climbing machine, Chun Suek Yen, to the top of K2. Right after which, she would come home to wed Rudi Joost, founder and president of Zermatt Sports, and one of the richest men in America. The pop culture magazines, television shows and social media sites were already buzzing about *the year of Logan Healy*.

Jack grinned with an old memory of Logan. “Make sure you write that I was still the only one in the Green Mountain School to ever beat Logan in the downhill at Stratton.” Jack smiled at Charest. “That’ll frost her ass good,” he said with a chuckle. “I was in eighth grade, she was in fourth, and I beat her by a ski pole.”

“So what do you think Jack? Logan going to get up there first?” Teller pulled a notepad and pen from his inside pocket and began writing.

Jack took a long sip of beer and his eyes met Rene's in a knowing moment, the humor gone, sharing - they knew - the same thought. The writer wanted to know who would get up K2 first. Jack and Rene were wondering if *either* of them could summit the world's second highest mountain - the hardest mountain in the world to climb and its most lethal - and live to tell about it. They both knew the statistics - that summiting K2, *doubled* your chances of dying on the mountain. It probably wasn't a coincidence that both Logan Healy and Chun Suek Yen still had K2 left on their scorecards. Both women had attempted K2 twice previously and been defeated by the mountain, as so many others also had; as Jack himself had been turned back twice before making its summit.

Jack looked over at Teller. "Write that I wish great success to both Logan and to Sukey, two tremendously talented climbers who deserve a place in mountaineering history."

"Yeah, okay Jack, thanks," said Teller jotting in his notebook. He looked up. "Come on Jack, who do you think will win?"

Jack just shook his head and sipped his beer. He didn't want to talk to the reporter any more. He'd said enough. *Who did he think would win? He knew who would win. No matter what happened, K2 would win. Even if both women summited and made it down alive, there would be a price to pay, personally or by their expeditions. K2 always got its pound of flesh.*

"So how about the mountain Jack. You climbed K2. You've spent more time up there than just about anyone. Something about the mountain," Teller persisted.

Jack held his beer mug up to Rene and smiled. "To K2, the worst weather on earth." He and Rene chuckled and toasted K2 with their beer mugs.

John Teller folded up his pad and left just as Jack's cell phone buzzed. Jack looked at his watch. "Oh shit, I forgot about dinner." He pushed a button. "Hi honey, yeah I'm at Jake's having a beer with...yeah, okay." It was a short conversation. Jack folded the phone up. "Damn. Gotta get going," he said softly.

Rene Charest smiled briefly and nodded his understanding. He picked up his shot of Jack Daniels. “A toast.” Jack held up his glass to Rene’s. “To our friends Logan and Sukey and their safe return from K2.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “To their safe return,” he replied somberly. The men downed the Jack Daniels and then cooled down their throats with the last of the beer.

The snow had abated when they got back to the dealership. Jack pulled in next to an old pickup truck with Quebec plates. Standing in snow, in the approaching darkness both men disregarded the icy wind chill. They hugged briefly and promised to stay in touch. As Jack turned to get back into his car, anxious to get home as late as he was now for dinner, Rene’s voice turned him around.

“You know Jack, there will be one more on K2 this summer, going for the record also, don’t you? Another woman.”

Jack shrugged quizzically. He knew there was no woman climber with thirteen of the 8,000 meter mountains, other than Logan and Sukey. “Okay, I give up,” said Jack with a shrug. “Who else will be there?”

Rene took a step closer to Jack. “Yes, there is one more.” He smiled at Jack, savoring the moment. “Sophie will be there.”

Jack laughed and then peered more closely at Rene to see if he was making a joke. “C’mon, Sophie has several mountains to go and she hasn’t been active for two, three years. I think she retired.”

“Sophie is on Cho Oyu right now. A winter climb. Then to Gash One in the spring, and K2 in July.”

Jack Finley raised his eyebrows and drew in a long breath of cold air. This was a surprise to him. It was true, he had been away from mountaineering news for a while, but he hadn’t expected or been prepared to hear the name of *Sophie Janot*, the first true love of his life and the source of so many fond memories of their early years of climbing together. Also the source of so much remorse that had been a part of Jack’s life for the last ten years. Her name made his heart skip a beat. He swallowed hard. “Wow, Sophie going for fourteen,” he said softly. “Cho in the winter, huh.” Rene just remained silent. He knew, as did most of the veteran climbing

community, of the storybook affair of Jack Finley and Sophie Janot many years ago.

Jack smiled at his friend. “Well, it’s going to be quite a circus on K2 this summer.” They embraced one final time before Rene climbed into his truck and drove off in the snow, up Route 7 towards Route 89, north to Montreal.

Jack sat in the dark car, the wipers scraping back and forth over the ice-covered windshield, the defroster on high, blowing cold air. He knew there was no sense hurrying. He’d missed dinner and was already in Peggy’s dog house – as he usually was. And now that he’d have to go down Route 100, as the old Pontiac would never make it up and over Route 17 in the snow, it would take him at least an hour and a half to get home tonight.

So he sat in the dark and thought about Sophie, the wind buffeting the car as it had so many tents they’d shared – on Everest, and Nanga Parbat, and the magical Nanda Devi; on Aconcagua their first big adventure together after meeting on Everest – two attractive, young, ambitious, adventurous climbers sharing a tent and then a sleeping bag on the South Col. And then so many tents afterwards. Glorious climbs in the Alps, in Sophie’s backyard in France, and in Italy and Austria with her father and brothers, sleeping together in the warming huts. The summer in Alaska. Every climb was better with Sophie, as was every memory.

Jack pictured her on the vertical rock walls of Colorado and California where he’d taken her to show her his past, watching her hang effortlessly by one arm while she patiently probed blindly above her for a crack, a knob, the slightest weakness in the wall, her shoulders and arms rippling with sinew, the ink-black hair falling around her face, the quick flash of her smile, unconcerned. A gymnast, like a spider on the walls. Skills learned on the *Petite Dru* and *Grandes Jorasses* her father trained her on before she was a teenager. Jack had always thought he was a talented rock climber until he met Sophie.

He thought about Sophie climbing Cho Oyu – the gentlest of the big mountains and the most popular 8,000er after Everest for the commercial tours charging big fees to deliver wealthy amateurs to the summit. But not

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now. Not in winter. Sophie's group would be alone on Cho, and it would be cold and the snow deep.

Jack's cell phone buzzed. He looked at it and saw that it was Peggy. He put it back in his pocket and let it ring. He wondered who would be with Sophie on Cho. He hoped Sophie had some strong companions with great endurance and large boots to break trail in deep snow. And a partner she could trust with her life when they went for the summit.



## Chapter 2

The wind pounded the tent and found minute openings through which to send the powder-like particles of spindrift, coating the small camp stove hanging from the center support. The frosted inside of the tent sagged inward as the snow outside piled up once more.

“Your turn to shovel,” said a deep, tired Slavic voice, muffled by the folds of a brown sleeping bag. “You need to shovel,” the man repeated a little louder along with a nudge of his knee against the sleeping bag next to him.

“Bon, okay, je vais,” the woman replied weakly. She opened her eyes reluctantly and looked down into her sleeping bag at the luminous hands of her watch. Three-thirty, time anyway for them to start getting dressed and melt snow for breakfast if they were climbing today. But, she feared from the sound of the wind and the snow scratching against the thin tent fabric, that no one would be going anywhere today. *Another wasted day, using up more food and fuel that they would soon be out of. And snow threatening to bury their tent.*

The woman turned on the battery lamp and sat up in her sleeping bag, her wool hat hitting the roof of the tent sending a storm of frost powder into the air to mix with the thick fog of her breath. The tent sagged under the weight of the snow. The woman sighed with the thought of pulling her boots on, and having to pee, as she knew she would have to as soon as she got outside in the cold air. It wasn't always like this. Before two children, her bladder was strong and she could go a day if she had to or at least hold it until a sheltered spot came along. But now ... when she stood up. *This was the real reason why women gave up climbing – not the fear of leaving motherless children that was so often given!* She pulled off her hat and gathered her matted black hair behind her ears. *Another day without a brushing.* She was glad there were no mirrors on the mountain. She pulled her wool cap back on tightly and reached down into the sleeping bag for her boots.

In the dimly lighted tent, she wrestled on her down jacket and gloves and searched for her goggles in the mess of rucksacks, food bags and trash that littered the small tent. “L'enfer avec eux!” she said under her breath, crawling over the large mound between her and the door of the tent.

“What do you mean?” said the voice from the sleeping bag. “What did you say Sophie?”

The woman giggled. “No Victor, it is nothing. Go back to sleep” she said sliding over the large Russian. “Wrap up Victor, I’m opening the flap.”

The cold hit her like a slap in the face, and then a gust of wind for good measure – like the mountain was telling them it had had enough of the intruders. *Mon Dieu, minus twenty degrees at least, and so much snow!* The new snow was two feet deep and drifting higher over one end of the tent. She waded through the snow toward the handles of the ski poles that were still just barely protruding from a drift, searching with her gloved hands deep into the snow for the rope that was anchored there. She knew it was probably a needless precaution, clipping onto the rope just to squat in the snow to pee, but the wind was blustery and where they’d been able to dig out a level spot for the tent, the edge of the ridge was only ten feet away. *A fitting end that would be! She could see the headline in Le Monde – Noted French mountaineer, Sophie Janot, lost on Cho Oyu, blown off ridge while... –* Sophie giggled, wondering how they would phrase it.

Sophie found the rope and relieved herself quickly and went to work with the plastic shovel, taking care not to rip a hole in the tent. The work made her breathe deeply in the thin air. They weren’t yet high enough for the lack of oxygen to be debilitating, but she *was* worried about how she would perform beyond Camp 3. Though now well acclimatized – from two previous climbs up to Camp 3, two weeks in bad weather at the high camp, and then down again to basecamp to recuperate – it had been over three years since she was above 8,000 meters. *Maybe it was a mistake, she thought, climbing Cho Oyu without oxygen, but then it was probably a bigger mistake to climb Cho in winter. And here they were, stuck at 6,500 meters where the thin air was beginning the slow destruction of their bodies and their brains and the storm doing its best to bring an end to the*

*expedition, an end to this foolish idea of climbing her last three 8,000 meter mountains in just six months.*

A low, guttural cough from the tent a few yards away drew Sophie's attention. Ang Phu and Temba would both be up soon to get on with the preparation of liquids and breakfast in anticipation of the climb to Camp 3. They knew, probably better than she did, that it would have to be today, or there would be no summit attempt tomorrow and that would be it for the expedition, and the end of Sophie's quest to be the first woman to scale all fourteen of the world's tallest mountains. The Sherpas would do their part, she was certain. They would be ready to leave at 6:00AM, to go up – or go down one last time.

She shoveled out the small path between the tents, and then the drift of snow leaning against the windward side of the Sherpa's tent. Again she heard the low, suppressed coughing from within the tent. It was Temba. He had been coughing for two days and now sounding worse.

Before crawling back into the tent, Sophie waded uphill through the snow a few meters and held her face up to the mountain before her. Even on an overcast night with no moon and no stars visible, mountain snow always seemed to emit a faint light through the darkness. She could just make out the form of the ridgeline above the camp, the ridgeline they would follow all the way up to Camp 3 on the shoulder – six hours of climbing in the summer over rock and neve snow, but probably nine hours at least in the knee-deep new powder. *Nine hours of high-risk avalanche climbing. Was it fair to ask Victor and Ang Phu and Temba to take such a risk just to help her “bag another peak” in her race? They didn't need Cho – all three had climbed the mountain before, Victor accomplishing it in one thirty-hour solo sprint to the top and down again, several years ago in summer. She would see what Clement said during the radio call. She would leave it to him.* Just before ducking down into the tent, Sophie thought she could feel the snow and wind start to weaken.

Victor had the stove going and a pan full of snow almost melted when Sophie crawled into the tent. She had to push tightly against his broad back to get past him. Settling back onto her sleeping bag, she pulled off her boots. When she had gone outside she hadn't bothered to fully buckle her

boots and snow got in over the tops. Now she needed to change her socks and dry the inside of the boots. The winter temperature on any mountain in the Himalaya made frost-bitten toes a very serious concern. She'd already lost the tips of both of her long toes – on Nanga Parbat twelve years ago – and knew then that she had been very lucky there was a doctor at base camp with the proper drugs. She also knew that frostbite was a cumulative malady – exposure to it led to heightened susceptibility. Even in the Alps, Sophie was vigilant over the condition of her toes.

“Good morning Sophie,” said Victor, handing her a plastic mug of steaming tea.

“Bonjour Victor. Merci.” She held the mug close to her face, breathing in the warm vapor. The stove had warmed up the inside of the tent a little but it was still very cold. Victor unwrapped an energy bar and handed it to her before unwrapping his own. They sat in silence for a while eating slowly and sipping their tea. The small flame from the stove flickered, working hard to melt another pan of snow, casting a dim glow around the inside of the orange tent.

Victor's eyes went up toward the top of the tent, as if he was looking through it into the sky outside. He turned his head to listen. The sound of the snow scratching against the tent fabric seemed to have stopped, and the wind also. “So,” he said before taking another bite of his breakfast bar, “will we climb today you think?”

Sophie chewed slowly and took another sip of tea, thinking about the question for a few moments. Everything moved slowly in the mountains, even conversation. She shrugged. “I don't know. We'll see. We'll wait to see what it looks like when the first light comes. I'll call Clement to get the weather and see what he says.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes savoring their breakfast before Victor spoke again. “You know,” he said with a slight nod toward the entrance to the tent, “they don't climb today.”

“Who?” asked Sophie. “Ang and Temba?”

“The Sherpa, they don't climb today.”

Sophie smiled with curiosity. “Why Victor? Why do you say that?”

The Russian raised his shoulders and sighed. “They don’t climb because it is late in the expedition – only two days more, probably. And the avalanche danger now is very high, and the Sherpa get their money if we go up one more day, or we go down one more day.” He nodded affirmatively. “So they go down. I know these Sherpa.”

“But we’ve got two more days to the summit. That’s what they came to do.”

Victor shook his head. “These Sherpa don’t need the summit. They have both been on the top, several times. They are here only to get paid. So today they go down.”

Sophie looked over the edge of her cup at her climbing partner to watch for his reaction. “They have been to the top, just like you Victor. You don’t need to summit either.” She suddenly had a chilling thought that the expedition may be over before she put her boots back on.

Victor looked up at Sophie and smiled. “We will look at the mountain and will see what Clement says, okay? And maybe Ang Phu surprises me, eh.”

Sophie hoped that Victor was wrong and that his comments stemmed more from his long-standing dislike and distrust of the Sherpa than from his insight into how men behaved on mountains. It would be a long, hard climb to camp 3 without the Sherpas to help break trail. She thought about Ang Phu and Temba. Unlike the general public, experienced Himalayan mountaineers had long ago stopped deifying the Sherpa as ultra-virtuous, heroic, climbing machines. Some were great climbing partners and wonderful people; some were not. And some didn’t belong on the big mountains. In character, the Sherpa were like everyone else. It was a mistake to generalize about them. They were all different. *These two Sherpa were okay though, and she had climbed with Ang Phu many times before.* She hoped Victor had misread them.

Sophie finished her tea and breakfast bar, and began the laborious process of layering up against the cold that she knew, even if the sun was visible most of the day, wouldn’t rise above -15° C. She moved slowly, discouraged by her conversation with Victor. He had verbalized the nagging doubts that had been festering in the back of her mind since the

beginning of the expedition, indeed since the beginning of the trip, since leaving Argentiere. The doubts that grew on the trek in, setting up base camp, and the pushing of camps up the mountain through the weeks of relentlessly horrible weather. The doubts that she knew were well founded and real, along with the realization that this was unlike any other expedition she had ever been on. It was the realization that she was entirely alone on this expedition – the only person on the mountain not getting paid to be there. Everyone else was a hired hand, an employee, getting paid to contribute to the singular goal of getting Sophie Janot to the top of Cho Oyu and back down again so she could be one step closer to being the first woman climber in history to have climbed all fourteen of the 8,000 meter mountains. *One step closer to the fame, celebrity and wealth that accomplishment would bring – that she now, for the first time in her life, so desperately needed.*

Sophie hated the feeling in the pit of her stomach. The expedition reminded her of everything she despised about the new age of mountaineering – *“peak bagging” for fame and notoriety, and commercial expeditions dragging amateurs up mountains, and their grotesque, self-promoting websites and blogs, Twittering and Facebooking their exploits around the globe ... and yet, here she was, right in the middle of all of it! This wasn’t the way she climbed. Sophie Janot, daughter of the great Marcel Janot, an icon of the Alpine school of mountaineering – lightweight climbing with small parties, taking everything you needed up the mountain with you, quickly up and quickly down, leaving the mountain as you found it. The way they climbed in the Alps, and as much as possible in the Himalaya. But she also knew she wasn’t the same person she had been when she’d stopped climbing three years ago – before the divorce. Everything was different now.*

The water was ready and Victor was making a pan of noodles. Sophie watched him through the flickering light, emptying an envelope of noodles into the steaming water. He was so capable at every aspect of climbing, from highly technical vertical rock and ice, to mixing a bowl of noodles for breakfast. One of the world’s strongest climbers, there was nothing Victor Petrov couldn’t do on a mountain. *So why was he here? Just for the money?*

*Like a Sherpa. To haul loads up the mountain and break trail and fix a rope up on the ice cliffs above? And of course, to make sure she got to the top and down again, as he'd had to promise Clement and her father when they'd recruited him and Carlos and Toby. High altitude baby sitters!* The thought angered her ... that *she* needed professional guides to get to the top of Cho Oyu, the easiest, least technical mountain of all the 8,000 meter peaks.

"Here, eat some noodles Sophie," said Victor, handing her a cup and a plastic spoon.

She grabbed the cup without reply. *The idea that she, one of the most celebrated woman climbers in the world – who had climbed more big mountains than anyone else on the expedition, who had climbed the Petite Dru, Grandes Jorasses and Mt. Blanc when she was still a teenager, and the Eiger north face when she was twenty-two – needed professional guides, enraged her. She didn't need guides. She needed friends and amiable companions to climb with and share the adventure. Or else what was the point of it all?* She ate her noodles in silence.

Ang Phu was walking back down toward the tents through tracks from fifty yards up the ridge when Sophie and Victor went outside. In the dim morning light, they could see that Temba was taking down the other tent and that the Sherpas' full rucksacks were standing in the snow. They were going down.

"No more climb," said Ang Phu firmly when he reached them. "Too much avalanche today. Sun come out. Heavy snow. Too dangerous." He pulled his pack up from the snow. "Temba sick," he said gesturing toward the collapsing tent. "He must go down now."

Sophie smiled at the Sherpa and patted him on the arm. "Okay Ang, take care of Temba. Go down safely." She knew there was no sense in trying to dissuade him and this was not the place to argue.

The Sherpa looked surprised. "You go up?"

Sophie looked up the mountain toward the swirling lenticular clouds at the summit and shrugged. "We'll see what the weather holds," she said. "We'll see what doctor Clement says."

Ang Phu looked up the mountain also. He shook his head. “This snow will make very big avalanches. Snow will all come down, and then leave good climbing.” He flashed a quick smile but the lines in his forehead told Sophie how worried he was.

The Sherpas started off down the hill with their heavy packs while Sophie pulled the Motorola radio out of her down suit. Dr. Alain Clement, the expedition leader, would be waiting for her call at basecamp, sipping his morning tea, looking into the screen of his laptop.

“Good morning Sophie,” he said, cheerfully as always. “How are you and all the boys doing up there?”

“Bon jour doctor. We are fine, Victor and I. Temba is sick and on his way down now with Ang Phu. They are on their way to Camp 1.”

“Coming down! They can’t leave you ...”

Sophie interrupted him. “It is okay doctor. Temba is sick. He needs to go down. They are through.

“Doctor,” she said a little louder to change the subject, “what does the weather say for today and tomorrow?”

“Well,” Clement hesitated, unsure if he should be encouraging her now, “the weather is supposed to be clearing for thirty-six hours and warmer slightly, but without the Sherpas, you cannot continue alone, with just Victor. That’s madness in snow this deep.”

Sophie looked up the mountain. Victor was trudging up the slope, testing the snow with his ski poles and huge boots. There was a hint of blue in the morning sky and the wind had completely disappeared. Sophie wondered if it wasn’t a trick the mountain was playing on them just to lure them up higher. She took a deep breath of the thin air. *This was it then...decision time. If they went down now, the climb was over and all the money she had scraped together to finance the trip was gone, wasted. She would go home broke, a single parent with two children and no prospects. There would be no second chance at Cho. Sponsors had no interest in a mountain called Cho Oyu – all they knew about mountains was Everest and K2 – because that’s where people die. Her old sponsors, Evian, and BNP Paribas, and Rolex, they would support an historic climb of K2 in July... if*



*she ever got there. But it wouldn't matter if she couldn't get to the top of Cho tomorrow.*

"Sophie, are you there?"

"We will go up today doctor, and see how it is. Up to Camp 3 for the night and then to the summit tomorrow if conditions will allow. I will call you from Camp 3"

"Sophie, let's talk about ... the avalanche danger will be ..."

"Thank you doctor, I'll call you tonight." Sophie quickly switched off the Motorola to save the weakening battery.

Victor was walking toward her. "So, Clement, he says to do what?"

Sophie smiled. "He says perfect weather for thirty-six hours. Hot and sunny, seventy degrees. Says we should be wearing our short pants today." She chuckled.

"Okay Sophie, okay," said the big Russian, smiling. "We go up." He turned and looked up the mountain. "The snow is deep, but so light still that it may be possible. We'll see."

They stayed close to the ridge line on their left, trudging slowly, mechanically through the knee-deep powder up the long, gradually steepening snow field. The wind had died completely and the morning sky was a rare shade of light purple as the low winter sun rose through the haze. While they wouldn't have to shed any clothing, the day was already the warmest and best day for climbing they'd had on the mountain in six weeks.

Victor broke trail for the first hour. With his size twelve boots and powerful strides, even in the lead, he was able to stay well ahead of Sophie who needed to push hard on her ski poles taking two strides to his one to keep up. This was the kind of climbing Sophie hated – pushing up laboriously through deep snow – and was least suited for. On vertical rock, frozen waterfalls, or steep ice cliffs, she was a match for any climber in the world, male or female. But in the deep snow, she had to make up for her shortcomings with mental and physical endurance. Staring down at the track in front of her she almost bumped into Victor who had stopped for a drink.

Taking water from her own bottle, Sophie looked back down toward the tent and was discouraged at how little ground they had actually covered in an hour of what would be the easiest climbing of the day. If she had her skis on, she calculated, it would take her under twenty seconds to get back down to the tent.

“Okay Victor,” I will lead for a while. Victor smiled down at her without comment, still breathing hard while leaning over his ski poles for a rest.

Sophie started out, up through the unbroken powder kicking through the top six inches, displacing as much snow as possible with her small boots. Victor hung back, resting, knowing that he would catch up to her very quickly at the pace she was limited to. Through his dark goggles, he gazed up the slope to the shoulder and then towards the ice cliff, and beyond it what he could see of the summit snow field. He looked at his watch, and then back up toward the sun rising higher in its low arc to the south, and grimaced. *They needed to be careful.*

Victor let Sophie lead for thirty minutes and then took over again. Sophie reluctantly conceded that they moved far too slowly with her in the lead and took over only for short spells to let Victor rest for a few minutes on his ski poles. Then he would quickly catch up to her and resume the lead.

Soon the slope steepened to the angle it would maintain up to the saddle and breaking trail in the deep snow and thinning air became more arduous. The sunlight hitting the slope more directly also thickened the snow noticeably. They continued climbing at a slow, steady pace with Victor leading, spelled for short intervals by Sophie, until noon time. They had been climbing for four hours and now needed to rest and eat.

They dropped their packs into the deep snow and flopped into seats facing south, down the slope. Sophie treated herself to one of her delicacies, a Fig Newton bar, and drank about half her water. Hydration was a constant concern at high altitude especially with Sophie’s propensity to frostbite. After all the work of the morning, her feet felt fine. Keeping on the move was the key; they couldn’t sit around too long.

Sophie stood and took out her small digital camera from an inside zippered pocket to take some pictures of the spectacular panorama to the west, with the rugged Gaurishanker next to them followed by a line of majestic seven thousand meter mountains, Langtang Ri, Langtang Lirung, Ganesh Himal, and many others that, transported to the Alps, would tower over Mt. Blanc by nearly three thousand meters, but in the Himalaya remained virtually unknown.

To the south, she could make out the massive Nuptse – just a hundred or so meters short of the big club – and, hidden beyond it she knew was Ama Dablam, just 6,800 meters, but the hardest climb she'd ever been on. *And one of the most satisfying – she smiled with the recollection – with Jack, in the old days, when climbing was all they lived for, when they did anything they wanted, went anywhere their wanderlust took them, and climbed the beautiful mountains – Aconcagua, Nanda Devi, Denali, Changabang, Chogolisa and so many others and didn't care about accomplishment, celebrity or notoriety. Just the adventures and living on the edge.*

“Sophie,” Victor’s deep voice brought her back from her reverie. “From here we rope up.” The Russian was on his feet uncoiling the sixty-meter rope he’d been carrying across his chest. He tossed Sophie one end of the stretchable climbing rope.

“Okay Victor, you are right,” she said tying the rope onto a carabiner and clipping in to her harness.

Victor tossed the coil of rope into the snow to play out between them, and took up his ski poles once more. He looked up the slope, inspecting the snow with eyes trained by watching the deep snow slopes of the Caucasus, and then turned back to Sophie next to him.

“Now Sophie, listen to me very carefully now. If I turn back to you and yell *go*,” he pointed to the cornice hanging out over the edge of the ridge twenty yards to their left, “you run quickly to the edge and jump over. Don’t hesitate and don’t wait for me, because if you hear me yell, it may already be too late.”

Sophie glanced at the ridge line up the mountain ahead of them and then to her left, at the sheer drop off of at least two thousand feet down the

southwest face. She nodded. “I understand Victor,” she said, pushing her ski poles into the snow, anxious to get started.

Victor led for the next hour and they made good time. The air was very cold but the lack of wind and the very slight warmth of the low sun made it a very pleasant day to climb. Sophie was encouraged. She still felt strong in the thinning air and her fingers and toes were warm. They’d reach Camp 3 around 5:00pm and if the tents hadn’t been destroyed or covered in deep snow, they’d have plenty of time to eat and rehydrate and then sleep for a few hours. At 3:00am, they would leave for the summit – a later hour than usual in order to avoid climbing the ice cliff in the dark – and if the wind and the snow stayed off the mountain, they would be to the top and back down to the high camp by early evening. Sophie was feeling more optimistic about the climb than at any other time since she had been on the mountain. *It was amazing the difference a window of good weather made! At Camp 3, she would call Wanda and Chantal on the Thuraya.* She smiled at the thought of hearing the voices of her little girls and started calculating the time difference in Argentiere.

Again, lost in her thoughts, she almost bumped into Victor. He was bent over his ski poles taking in deep breaths trying to bring enough oxygen into his lungs. He had been working hard all day, breaking trail in the deep snow, doing by himself the job that the two Sherpas should have been doing much of. Now he was exhausted.

“I will lead now Victor,” Sophie said moving past the gasping Russian. “You rest for a few minutes and then catch up.” She reached into the side of his pack and brought out the water bottle for him. Like hers, it was nearly empty.

Sophie looked up the slope to pick out her line, near the edge of the ridge but not so close where she might stray out onto the cornice and break through the fragile overhang. She pushed her ski poles into the deep snow and started up. It took her twenty minutes to gain thirty yards of separation from Victor.

Stopping for a moment to catch her breath, Sophie looked up the slope to where she could just make out the saddle where Camp 3 was situated. She strained to see through her dark goggles to pick out the small dot that

would be the tent in the sea of shimmering white. Then she noticed the cloud on the summit slope high above. *A strange sight on such a clear day*, she thought. And then, a second later, she heard the noise – a deep *ker-ump*, and the mountain seemed to move. *There were no clouds on the summit slopes*, she suddenly realized, *it was the layer of new powder snow being thrown into the air by the avalanche!* Then the snow moved beneath her feet.

“*Sophie!*” Victor’s voice barely carried up to her in the sudden wind. She turned down the slope toward him. “*Sophie!*” He was running up the slope toward her, pointing madly with his left arm toward the edge. “*Go now Sophie. Run!*”

Sophie gripped her ski poles hard, turned and began running and sliding down the trail in the snow she had just come up. She knew why Victor was struggling to get closer to her – to gain more slack in the rope, enough length for him to also make it over the cornice after he planted his ice ax deep in the snow and wound the rope around it. It was their only hope.

The snow was running past her, filling in the trail, as high as her thighs now, pushing her along, faster and deeper. Then the air was filled with snow, and she couldn’t see Victor any more. She couldn’t see anything.

Sophie turned to her right toward the edge and tried to push her way through the deep, moving snow, using the ski poles to stay erect. She moved slower, and slower as the snow became deeper – up to her chest now – and then the avalanche swept over her, leaving her in darkness. She bent her knees and pushed as hard as she could, and tried to swim through the snow but every step came slower and harder, until she was no longer moving at all. Above her, the avalanche continued to thunder down the mountain, the sound growing more muffled as it built up over her head, applying more and more pressure against her body.

She lay still, trying to breathe, and strained to maneuver her hands up to her chest to see if she could get to the satellite phone inside her parka, to say goodbye to her little girls.

## Chapter 3

Tuesdays belonged to Jack. His day off from the dealership, and by unspoken agreement, his day off from Peggy. It wasn't something they ever negotiated. It just came to be, that Tuesday was Jack's day to train and Peggy learned early in their marriage that it wasn't something to meddle with. It was Jack's day to torture his body, to replicate a day in the mountains, if not in height and thin air, at least in exertion, to maintain his stamina. Jack looked forward to the physical pleasures of Tuesdays, but he also had to admit that over the past two years, he had started looking forward just as much to a day without Peggy.

He sat at the kitchen table hurriedly eating a bowl of shredded wheat, a banana and a glass of orange juice. It would be the last real food he'd have until that evening, but he was in a hurry to get started. On the window next to the table he could hear the pinging of the sleeting snow that had started an hour earlier. *A couple of inches of snow was good. At five-thirty in the morning there would be no cars yet and he could ski down the middle of German Flats Road and with enough speed, he could almost make it all the way to the Mt. Ellen access road.*

"Gonna be gone all day again?" Peggy's voice startled Jack out of his thoughts. He looked up to see his wife leaning against the door frame, wrapped in her white bathrobe. She had her arms crossed at her chest for warmth in the cold kitchen.

"I'll be back about six, maybe seven."

"Want me to make dinner?" she asked.

"No, don't wait for me. Eat with the kids."

She frowned and moved to the cupboard and took out a can of cat food. "Wish I had time to go off and exercise all day."

Jack watched her washing out one of the cat bowls at the sink. The puffy bath robe made her look even heavier from behind. She'd put on a lot of weight with their first child, lost some of it, then put on less weight with

Beth and lost none of it afterward. He knew better than to respond to a 'wish I had time to ...' comment. Jack wanted to get going.

Peggy put the cat bowl on the floor next to the radiator, near where Jack had dropped his lightweight pack, and on top of it, a climbing harness with some hardware and two slings clipped on, and a coil of thin, 8mm rope.

"What do you need all that junk for anyway?" Peggy asked derisively, suddenly in one of her moods. "This is just Vermont for cripes sake. You're not a mountain climber anymore." She put her hands in the air. "You're a goddamn car salesman."

Jack continued eating without reply.

"And not selling too many cars either," she said, dropping into the chair opposite Jack. She had something on her mind.

"Jack," her voice softened, "tonight, can we talk when you get back, please?"

"About what?" Jack looked at his watch.

"About dad. About the agency. He keeps asking me why you won't go to work for him. He says you could make four times what..."

"I don't want to sell insurance. Don't want to be an insurance man." *Like your asshole father*, he wanted to add. *Your pompous, obnoxious, look-at-how-successful-I-am, born-with-a-silver-spoon-up-his-ass father.*

"Come on Jack," she pleaded. "Daddy just wants us, and the kids to have a nice life, that's all. We could move to Charlotte. Dad said he'd help us get a nice house, near them..."

"Not moving to Charlotte. You know that Peg. We've been over that."

Peggy arose abruptly and trudged angrily out of the kitchen. Jack knew she'd be waiting for him that evening to take up the assault once again, or at least make it clear to him what a dismal day she'd had.

He looked down at his rucksack on the floor and the "junk" Peggy had referred to, and picked up the old leather climbing harness, thick and heavy, with brass rivets, nothing like the modern, nylon versions he had hanging in the shed. Jack turned the inside of the belt up to the light and examined the inscription, nearly worn away from years of use long before Jack took possession of it. *Marcel Janot*, it said, *Argentiere 1979*. Jack smiled. *The*

*blacksmith of Argentiere*. He recalled the story Sophie's father had told him when he'd given him the old harness. He'd told Jack that he'd made it, a special order, for his friend Reinhold Messner, the legendary Italian climber, who had dropped it off for repair some years later, and never bothered to pick it up. Jack had seen the photograph of Janot and Messner together, on the dining room wall in the farmhouse in Argentiere, and he knew that Sophie's father wasn't the kind of man to tell tall tales. Jack would never trust the old harness in the Himalaya, but once in a while, in Vermont, it felt good to wear a belt once worn by the greatest mountain climber who had ever lived... the first man to summit all 14 of the 8,000 meter mountains, and the first to climb Everest without supplemental oxygen.

Holding the harness in his lap, Jack thought about Sophie's father – “Poppi” to his daughter; simply *Janot* to everyone else, including his wife – a living encyclopedia of the Alps, life-long climbing instructor and guide, mountain rescue legend, and craftsman of climbing hardware once prized by mountaineers the world over.

The memories flooded back, of the glorious summer he and Sophie spent at the farm in Argentiere, where she had grown up, climbing throughout the Mont Blanc Massif, with “Poppi” Janot and Sophie's brothers, cousins and family friends. All expert climbers, exuberant partiers and lovers of life. Jack and Sophie climbed, biked or rode horses during the day, explored the cafes of Chamonix late into the night and slept together in the apartment over the barn – Jack quickly came to appreciate the permissiveness of French parents.

They summited Mont Blanc and Grand Casse and several smaller peaks, and then through the tunnel to Courmayeur and an excursion into the Dolomites. They climbed by common routes, Janot always in the lead, always teaching, always preaching the *Alpine* way of climbing – quickly, efficiently up and down, lightweight climbing with minimal aids, leaving behind as little iron as possible. The old master never missed an opportunity to instruct Jack in proper rope technique, sophisticated belaying systems, or the art of tying life-saving knots with one hand. On the



north face of the *Aiguilles d'Arves* Janot gave Jack and Sophie a master class in locating safe rappelling anchors.

Sophie enjoyed watching her father and her lover become friends and trusted climbing companions. And Jack basked in the incredible glow of the knowledge Janot was imparting to him, and in the fast friendship they were developing. It was the summer Jack began deluding himself that one day, Janot would welcome him into the family. Several years later Jack came face to face with the reality that Marcel Janot would never allow his precious, beautiful daughter, a graduate of the Sorbonne, Olympic gymnast at sixteen, and world-class mountaineer, to marry an uneducated, itinerant American rock climbing, ski bum like Jack Finley.

Jack tossed the harness into his pack and tried to ward off the dull pang of heartache he always felt when he reminded himself of Sophie, their breakup, and her subsequent marriage to the Austrian ski racer Tony Linser. The dashing, film-star handsome Olympic champion, from a wealthy family, owned five-star restaurants in Innsbruck, Val-d'Isère, and Cortina, a vineyard in Tuscany, and a villa in Saint-Tropez. It was a marriage made for Hollywood. The paparazzi had a field day.

Passing the wood pile on his way out, Jack tossed two fat logs into his pack bringing the weight up to about fifty pounds he estimated. In the shed off the garage, Jack picked out an old pair of short, telemark skis, and poles. He skied down the driveway to German Flats Road and headed north towards Mt. Ellen, the two inches of icy snow on the road making it possible to get up enough speed in the downhill sections to nearly make it all the way up the next hill. This early in the morning, he skied down the center of the road, enjoying the speed and the cold air of what would be the easiest part of the day.

Starting on the beginner slope to lengthen out his route, Jack skied up Mt. Ellen, pushing easily up the short lower trails, working hard on the steeper intermediates, and then punishing his heart, legs and arms to the breaking point on a couple of black diamonds. The few early ski patrollers and snowmakers he encountered just waved and *knew that it was Tuesday – Jack Finley was skiing up the mountain*. There were no recreational skiers on the mountain until late in the morning when he had reached the base of

*Upper FIS.* The sleet had turned to real snow that high up, and the wind was whipping across the egg-crate surface of the steepest slope on the mountain. Jack had to claw and scratch and side-step his way up through the icy moguls and was drenched with sweat when he finally reached the top. He checked his time, and pushed off up the goat path trail toward the summit.

At a sharp turn in the narrow trail, just below the platform where the chair lift emptied its passengers, Jack stopped and took off his skis. Wading into deep snow beside the trail, he pushed his way into a large fir tree and planted his skis and poles out of sight until he would need them later in the day. At a six-foot, wooden plank fence marking the boundary of the ski resort, face-to-face with an ominously printed sign warning “Skiers Forbidden Beyond This Point”, Jack reached up and pulled himself over the fence, landing in deep snow, his head even with the tips of the evergreens growing below on the steep western slope of the ski area.

Through the thick trees along the top of the slope, Jack hiked for two hundred yards along a trail he was sure, no one else in the world was aware of. When the forest ended at a sheer cliff dropping several hundred feet to boulders and snow covered ridges below, Jack continued up the trail to his left, climbing higher, carefully over ice-covered rocks and fallen tree trunks. Ahead and below to his right, he caught glimpses of the sheer granite face he would soon be rappelling down.

At a landmark boulder, Jack stopped and searched the low rocks for his anchor, an old, rusted piton he’d put in a few years earlier. He tested it with a firm kick, as always, but then also wrapped the rope around a nearby submerged rock for insurance. Whenever he tied onto a piton for a rappel, Jack was always reminded of the incredible story of the legendary French climber, J.C. Lafaille, alone on Annapurna with no hardware, rappelling down a treacherous wall using a scavenged piece of rope and a plastic bottle, frozen in the snow as an anchor!

Jack clamped his descender onto the rope, and yanked hard on the piton one last time, before putting all his weight on the rope. This was a moment of anxiety that didn’t change whether it was on an insignificant wall in Vermont, or a legendary face in the Himalaya. A two hundred foot free-fall

to the boulders below would kill you just as thoroughly as a three thousand foot tumble down the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat.

He knew the wall so well, it took Jack less than a minute to reach the bottom. He unbuckled the harness and stowed it in his pack along with the slings and hardware. Leaving the rope in place, Jack made his way carefully down the rocky slope at the base of the wall, found a rock bridge to cross a small stream, and then welcomed the firm feeling underfoot of the old dirt road that would take him out to Route 16.

After a half-mile hike through thick woods, and then past a sleepy, snow covered farm, Jack's legs felt sufficiently recovered from the ski hike up the mountain to begin his run. At the intersection of Route 16, just north of Bristol, he stopped and ate an energy bar, drank half of his bottle of water, pulled the straps tight on his pack so the logs wouldn't bounce around, looked at his watch, and started out on his ten-mile run.

The sleet had turned to light snow, and the breeze had picked up in the afternoon bringing a wind-chill that Jack figured to be around zero. He pulled up his scarf, covering his mouth to warm the air a bit before he pulled it into his lungs. It was turning into a very difficult day for his workout. The snow was starting to accumulate on the road, the wind was pelting him with stinging fingers of icy snow, and the temperature was dropping.

But inside his lightweight North Face jacket, under the hood pulled down tight around his wool hat, Jack smiled to himself. His fingers and toes were warm and comfortable, and the heat he was generating with the pace of his running made the temperature feel unimportant. This was the kind of weather he reveled in. The kind of weather that built toughness and endurance, and separated the serious climbers from the pretenders. He grimaced when he thought about how cold it would be on Cho Oyu that day.

Jack had been to the Himalaya twice in winter. Once to Chang A Bang, to the dreaded north face, in winter to eliminate the hazardous rock falls of spring and summer. And several years later to the Karakorums to attempt Gasherbrum I and Broad Peak. Both expeditions ended abruptly, the unrelenting conditions sucking the enthusiasm, quickly and completely

from all hands. Jack remembered the cold that didn't stop, that chilled your bones and never went away, from base camp without sun, to the frozen ridges and snow fields always in shadow, always blasted by the wind. Cold that would freeze your body from the inside out. He vowed never to return in winter.

After a ten-mile loop, the last leg ran down Main Street through Bristol, one of Jack's favorite places in the world, waving back to the few people who recognized him. He left Route 16 and continued his run right up to the base of the granite wall. In spite of the cold and the sleet now pelting him sideways, his inside layer of thermal underwear was now drenched with sweat, and his thigh and back muscles screamed for relief from the heavy pack. But it was late in the day and darkness was closing in and Jack would prefer to have at least a glimmer of light to ski down the mountain in. He quickly donned the old climbing harness, clipped two slings to carabiners on his ascenders, and started up the icy rope. This was a feeling he knew well, as all Himalayan climbers did, making his way up a fixed rope, late in the day in diminishing weather, with another heavy load of supplies needed at a high camp. It was the essence of high-altitude mountaineering. As always, Jack was grateful for the heavy, oxygen-rich Vermont air.

It took Jack twenty-five minutes to get up the wall and hike back to his skis hidden in the pine tree. He quickly stepped into the bindings and set off down the summit path. He stopped at the top of *Upper FIS* and peered down over the edge to see if there was enough light to tackle the difficult slope. Far down the mountain he could see the lights of the snowcats starting up the lower slopes. *Too dark for FIS tonight. No need to break a leg just to cut twenty seconds off the trip down.* As he started to push off to head down the easier path, Jack felt his phone vibrating against his rib cage. He hesitated – it would be Peggy, he knew, to remind him that it was past six-thirty – and she'd been holding dinner for him. He glanced at his phone, saw that it was an unknown number and pressed it hard against his ear to hear over the wind. It wasn't necessary. The reception was perfect, and even from halfway around the globe he immediately recognized the exuberant voice of Logan Healy.

“Hey Finn! Guess where the fuck I am!”

Jack almost dropped his phone, laughing at the first words he'd heard from his old pal in over a year. "Hey Logan," was all he could manage.

He could hear Logan Healy talking to someone near her. "Hey, where are we anyway?" she asked. A mumbled voice Jack couldn't make out answered her. Then she was back.

"We're on the Aegean Sea, right next to Greece. It's about seventy degrees. Where are you?"

"I'm at the top of *FIS*. It's pitch dark and about five below."

Logan Healy laughed. "Hey, what's not to love about Vermont, right? Geeze Finn, you ought to see this boat I'm on. It's Rudi's new yacht, about two hundred feet long and it's incredible."

"So, that'll be *your* yacht pretty soon," said Jack. Over the phone He could hear music, like a band starting up.

"Yeah, I guess that's right," Logan had raised her voice to be heard. "Sorry Finn, we're having a party, for my birthday. Thirty-six today."

"Happy birthday Logan. Sounds like some Dropkick Murphy music playing."

"Yeah, the Dropkick Murphys are here, on deck."

"What?" Jack didn't think he heard her right.

"Rudi flew them over, the whole band, to play at my party."

Jack had to laugh. "Wow, must be nice."

"Yeah, it is. They're great. But this crowd sucks. Too many Europeans and business friends of Rudi's. Not enough of our gang. They don't appreciate DKM. They've all got girlfriends that weigh about ninety pounds and look like Victoria's Secret models. For dinner, they all eat a grape. One girl, I keep telling her she looks chubby, and she goes down and throws up her grape."

Jack laughed. "Same old Logan."

"Yeah, I'll never grow up." The noise from the band diminished and it was apparent that Logan had gone inside. "Hey Jack, listen. You're going to get a call from a guy named Masters, Phil Masters, he works for Rudi. He's going to invite you to a meeting in New York in a few weeks, at Zermatt headquarters."

"Why should I go to New York?" asked Jack.

“Because I want you to. I made them invite you.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s about the expedition, Finn. This summer... K2.”

“Not interested Logan. I’ve been there.”

“Finn, don’t be a pig. Just go to New York and listen to Masters, please. Will you do that for me? A favor to me.” Logan used her sweetest voice.

Jack shook his head and laughed. Logan Healey would never change. He was too cold to argue. “Logan, I have to go. I’m freezing my ass off. I’ll think about the meeting in New York, but I’m not going to K2 this summer.”

There was a pause and then Logan spoke again in a serious voice. “I know you’re not Jack. But I want you to go to the meeting in New York, for me. Listen to their pitch and meet the people involved, and let me know what you think. Okay Jack?”

“What’s the matter Logan? You worried about the climb?”

“Not the climb. It’s the expedition I’m worried about. They’re turning it into a circus, Rudi and his guys. It’s going to be one big merchandising event for Zermatt and it’s starting to feel creepy. Christ Jack, The Outdoor Sports Network is going to cover the whole thing and they’re flying a trailer right into base camp. They’re going to have twenty people there! And the Korean media is even worse. The whole thing’s getting out of hand.”

“Sounds like it. Well you always wanted to be in showbiz. Maybe they could get Charlize Theron to play your part if you don’t want to go.”

“Yeah, that’s funny Finn. Just go to New York for me, and let me know what you think. Okay?”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. Happy birthday Logan.”

“Thanks Jack. I’ll call after the...” Logan Healy stopped in mid-sentence, shocked by the vision on her laptop on a desk a few feet away from her. It was logged on to ExplorersWeb, the international web site of mountaineering and other adventure pursuits.

“Logan, you still there?”

She lowered herself into the chair in front of the desk and leaned in closer to the screen. “Oh Jesus Jack! I can’t believe it.”

“What Logan? What’s the matter?”

“It’s on Exweb Jack. *Oh God.*” Logan clicked the image to full-screen and gazed at the unmistakable image of Sophie Janot in her trademark blue down suit accented in red and white, the colors of her beloved French national soccer team, *Les Bleus*. The team emblem with the *Coq Gaulois* symbol, showed proudly on the breast of her suit. It was a file picture from several years earlier, taken at a high camp, the wind pulling Sophie’s hair across her forehead, cheeks and nose red, pale circles around her eyes from the goggles.

Logan scrolled up to again see the simple headline... *Sophie Janot Feared Lost on Cho Oyu*. “Oh Jack, I’m so sorry.” The tears ran down her cheeks onto the phone.

“*What is it Logan?*”

“Jack, it’s Sophie.” Logan took in a deep breath to cut off a sob. “She’s gone. On Cho. A huge avalanche. She and Victor Petrov, the Russian.”

Jack Finley couldn’t speak. His heart was beating madly and his knees started to buckle. He tried to support himself on his poles, then dropped the phone over the edge of Upper FIS. He watched it bounce its way down the icy moguls, occasionally taking a big leap into the air, until it disappeared into the darkness.

# THE LAST MOUNTAIN

*A Novel*



Gerry FitzGerald

*Three of the world's most accomplished women mountain climbers race to the top of K2, vying to become the first female to summit all fourteen of the world's 8,000-meter mountains. The Last Mountain is an adventure story of courage, heroism and love.*

## **The Last Mountain**

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