

PROLOGUE

Everest Base Camp – 1985

Frank ran into the Frontier Expedition Command tent and found Jack Trammel talking on the radio while the rest of his team crowded around him. When Frank stepped beside him, Jack glanced up from where he sat. The alarm in the expedition leader's deep brown eyes told all as the crackled voice came back over the two-way radio.

"We on way down, but he locking up. Can you radio Camp 4? See if Tar-Chin there? Over," the faint voice said.

"Will do, over," Jack replied. "Keep moving, over."

"Trying. Wind picking up, snow too, over."

Frank's eyes widened when he glanced at the large bulky laptop sitting amongst the strewn weather reports on the table. The data glaring back on the screen wasn't good: FL270, 290/80, MS48, valid at 10:15 GMT. That meant Jack's Sirdar Sherpa and his client were walking right into a goddamned blizzard. He tapped Jack's arm, pointed to the laptop and whispered, "When did these numbers come in?"

Jack nodded, put his hand over the microphone. "Fifteen minutes ago."

"Jesus," Frank muttered. The mountain had once again decided to have its own party while the rest of the world obeyed the weather forecasts. "What's their elevation?"

"8,400 meters," Jack replied, and gave Frank a knowing look. There was no way Pasang and the American with him were going to make it back to Camp 4 before the storm roared in. They were trapped. In fact, for those who had already made it back, it was going to be a hell of a ride.

Again, the Sherpa's voice came through the static. "Has Tar-chin made Camp 4 yet? Over."

Jack bit his lip and rubbed his grizzled face. Frank knew the expedition leader was in a tight spot. If Jack told Sherpa Tar-chin that Sherpa Pasang was in trouble and asking for him, the man would go without question. But how could he ask Tar-chin knowing there was barely a chance of success, let alone that it would likely cost the Sherpa his life?

Finally, Jack radioed back. "No response yet. How's your O2? Over."

A long silence passed and Frank worried for the worst. Finally, Pasang's voice came crackling back. "One hour on Steve's tank, maybe little more if I crank it back to one. But doubt he could stand it. I have four on mine. I could switch if need be. Over."

"Up to you Pasang, over," Jack said, as the crowd behind them in the Command Tent whispered back and forth.

Frank turned to look at those who'd gotten news of the unfolding drama on the mountain. Word always traveled quickly in the climbing community when lives were at stake. It was the one time when the guarded members of Base Camp came together; working tirelessly to figure out a way to bring men back alive. But the stone-cold fact was that there was little anyone could do when the mountain decided to roar, and that was what it was doing right now.

Jack Trammel's job was keeping Pasang's spirits alive and strong, and he was trying every trick in the book. Whether Pasang knew his expedition leader was lying to him about Tar-chin being at Camp 4 was anyone's guess, but it was a fair bet Pasang knew Jack wasn't being straight with him. Every climber knew it was whatever kept you going that mattered, and if you had to be lied to, then so be it. As long as you kept moving, that was the only thing that mattered. Freeze up and stop thinking and you die, simple as that.

The minutes turned into an hour and the hour turned into two then three, and as the minutes slid by, Pasang's voice came back less and less over the radio. The end had come for Pasang and the American, or it was looming close and it was crushing Frank's hopes. The last time he'd heard Pasang's reedy voice, it was obvious they weren't going to make it down to Camp 4 where the wind was barreling across the slopes and creating wind-chills of minus sixty-five and lower.

Frank plopped down in the corner of the command tent brooding and checked in with Camp 4 at Jack's request to keep track of their situation. He knew Jack had given him the task to take his mind off the tragedy going on high above. But it wasn't working. All Frank could think about was Pasang lying in the snow and fighting for his last breath. He closed his eyes, saw the short, stout, round face of the Sherpa smiling back at him, and felt his lip quiver.

Someone came around with mugs of warm Mango juice and Masala tea. Frank waved them off when they came to him. He couldn't eat or drink knowing Pasang was dying in a futile attempt to drag a man off the mountain who hadn't listened to reason.

Moreover, Frank was angry Pasang had let the American manipulate him and doubly frustrated that he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

As he sat listening to the wind lash the Command tent's nylon skin beside him, he thought of Pasang's mother, Nuri. It would fall on him to tell her Pasang wasn't coming back. The thought of it was more than he could handle. His throat knotted as he balled his hand into a fist. *If I ever lead an expedition, I'll make sure this never happens again. Any asshole that disobeys my Sirdar's advice is on his own!*



Los Angeles, California – 1985

Sarah popped a bagel in her toaster and turned to the portable TV sitting on the kitchen countertop to listen to the morning news. As she watched the tall, suited man give his report, she thought about her husband over in Nepal. He should have been back at Everest Base Camp from the climb two days ago, but as of yet, she had heard nothing from him. She tried to put the growing ominous concern out of her mind as her son, Gregory, blew raspberries in his high chair. Turning to him, she scooped a mouthful of cereal into his Bugs Bunny spoon and steered it toward his open mouth. At eighteen months old, he already had his father's deep blue eyes.

"Daddy should be on back down from the top of the world right now," Sarah said as he kicked his pudgy legs back and forth. She wiped his chin and forced a smile. "How exciting is that?"

Gregory gummed his cereal, bunched his little round face into a smile and pounded his hands on the highchair tray. Sarah smiled at her happy and animated child. He was the one constant in her life since Steven left for the mountain two months ago, and he got her through each day. But she also discovered, quite unexpectedly, that being on her own gave her a strength she'd never experienced and she liked it. Now, if she could only balance it with Steven's sure-mindedness and quick decision-making.

Today, she had a field trip lined up for her sixth grade students at Lincoln Elementary. Steven had suggested the idea of taking her class to the zoo before he left for Nepal. Said it would be a nice way to say good-bye to the kids she had watched grow into intelligent, curious, and pretentious youngsters. But behind his suggestion was another motive; to give her something to plan and thus distract her from worrying about him.

She looked up at the kitchen clock over the window. It was going on 6:00 AM. Her girlfriend and classroom aide, Roxanne, would be over to pick Gregory and her up in fifteen minutes. After dropping Gregory off at day care, they'd abandon their usual morning walk and head straight to work. Thirty minutes later, she was tapping her fingers on the kitchen counter while peering out the window. "Where are you, Rox? Of all days to be late, this isn't one of them." She debated if she should pick up the phone and call her. As she went for the receiver, it rang out.

“Hey, where are you?”

“Excuse me,” said a man’s voice.

Sarah took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling, feeling embarrassed. “Oh, I’m sorry. I was thinking you were someone else.”

“No problem Ma’am. My name is Jack Trammel. Is Sarah Madden there?”

“This is she.”

There was a slight pause on the other end and Sarah wondered if he had hung up. “Sarah, I’m the Everest Expedition leader from Frontier Expeditions.”

Finally! Sarah thought, feeling relieved. She pushed a lock of her dark brown hair over her ear. “Oh, yes, I’ve been waiting for your call. Is my husband there? Can I speak to him?”

“Mrs. Madden . . . um, there’s been an accident on the mountain. I . . . I wish there was an easier way to say this, but your husband, he’s . . . well . . . he didn’t make it.”

Sarah blinked, trying to comprehend what the man had just told her. Suddenly, the room grew very small around her and she couldn’t feel the floor beneath her feet.

“Mrs. Madden? You there?”

Sarah switched hands holding the receiver and cleared her throat. “Um . . . Yes.”

There was another pause on the other end. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Ummm, can you repeat what you just said, please? I’m afraid I didn’t hear you.”

Jack’s shaky voice came back. “There was a sudden storm no one could predict. Your husband . . . he got caught in it. I’m so, so sorry. I waited to call you until I was absolutely sure there was no chance he was —. Ummm, is there anything — ”

Sarah dropped the receiver and felt her body slide down the cabinet and onto the floor. This was not happening. Steven told her he was going to be just fine. People climbed the mountain all the time. He was with the best expedition company in the world, with all the safety precautions money could buy. But he was — she couldn’t say the word.

A car pulled into her driveway as Gregory started to fuss in his carrier. A horn blew, the TV babbled and the world went dark.