



CHRYS ROMEO

AVALANCHE

2012



AVALANCHE
by Chrys Romeo

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My biggest flaw is that I fall in love. I do. And when I do, I lose my head over it. I do it completely, absolutely blindly to any outcomes, irreversibly and hopelessly. I love too much, when I fall for someone. It might be considered a quality actually, but when you think about it, it's just got me into a lot of trouble, lots of times. Besides, you're not supposed to be in love when you're an aspiring top ski champion training to become a member of the mountain rescue service. You're not supposed to think about her eyes and her smile and an explanation to why she's making your head spin while you're going down the slope in full speed. You're not supposed to see her image reflected in the snow. It's a danger to focus on anything but the direction ahead. The point is, I focus on anything about her, anything but not the direction. I just go with the flow, daydreaming about the impossible. Why impossible? Because I am aware she is less interested in me than the stiff snow itself that covers the mountain. I could hit a tree anytime for it and she couldn't care less. And what makes it worse: she's been in the opposite team. I'm really not supposed to like her. There is no reason for me to think about her. There is no chance whatsoever we'll ever be together. And yet, against such implacable odds, I'm in love with her so much now, that I can't think of anything else and I don't know what to do with my life when she's not around.

That's insane, right? I know. But that's how it is.

Yes. I miss her when she's absent. I keep thinking of her smile, the tone of her voice resounding in my ears, her clear sharp eyes staring me down, the way she lets her hair flow like golden wheat ruffled by the summer heat or the way she gathers it in an athletic ponytail, leaving no question, no doubt... the slender way she moves, the way her steel glance catches me from behind the ski goggles, the way she buckles up her belt, the way she touches her frozen earrings, making sure she didn't lose them in the snow... her determination to be perfect at the game, her subtle winning smile, knowing she's just going to conquer the slope and there isn't going to be anything standing in her way. The slope just lights up when she is there, it becomes a field of gold in a summer sunset and she is almost glowing, making the snow sparkle. I wish I could paint the beauty of those unforgettable moments, the fractions of seconds when I get a glimpse of her in that other realm of sunlight flowing to make me dizzy. I stand and watch her in that morning sunrise frost, which I don't feel anymore, I stand there and let her start down the slope ahead of me, bewildered at my own storm of emotion at the mere sight of her, I stand there amazed and speechless, while the entire mountain seems to sink under my feet and I am surprised I can still find the resources to say good morning when she passes me by. In a word, I love everything about her, even the things that hurt me most: her casual indifference, her cold attitude, her distant independence and detachment from any hint of commitment to anything. I would think

of myself masochistic for having fallen for her, when she's the one that seemed to hate me the most from the opposite team, ever since we first met. I didn't agree with her, I didn't like her, I didn't tolerate her and she seemed equally annoyed by me, or even more so. She couldn't stand the sight of me. My presence irritated her on the slope. She slammed the ski poles in silent protest against me being there one meter away. And I did everything I could to get away from her: I turned my back to her, I avoided being the one next to her at the starting line, I took different tracks on purpose... we were the perfect enemies. Sometimes I would return the passive aggressive language to her and slam down the ski equipment, to show my own anger at her hostility. And yet right now, I could eat from the palm of her hand, or go throw myself off the competition, just to make her happy and help her win. But she doesn't know she has got that power. Who knows what would happen if she finally realized that. I would be lost for good.

So how did I go from complete disapproval to absolute attraction? Well, maybe it's true there's a thin line between love and hate, as well as the magnetic truth that opposites are drawn to each other and need what the other side brings, as soon as they wake up to understand that. How did I cross that invisible line and actually began to let myself be completely charmed by her, when she didn't even attempt it, or actually wanted the opposite? Sometimes I think it would've been much easier to continue disliking her. I wouldn't have suffered so much from feeling attracted to her and having to keep my

distance. Sometimes I think that I'm so addicted to her because she's such a challenge to me. She's like a flow of adrenaline, a rushing heat that goes to my head. She's unpredictable, inaccessible and hard to please. She's tough and drastic. She's also hot and dynamic. She's rapidly deciding, quickly acting, fast ending it. And constantly attentive, watching like a sleepless spy under cover. She could cut you into pieces if you got in her way, in a flash of a second, without even blinking, without remorse either. She's that sharp, though sometimes I ask myself if it's right, for the idea of mountain rescue, for someone to be so harsh just as she slides down the slope, fearlessly, in full speed, spreading a wave of snow from her ski dance, elegantly and ironically fitted in that ski costume that lets you know she's a girl of her own fashion and she knows what she's doing. I just started to notice more, when they placed us in the same team. I started to know her better. I started to like her sense of humor, her sense of justice, her determination and the fact that she always seemed to have an opinion about situations. I started to overlook my disagreement and give in to being interested. I got caught in a series of attractive this and that about her, little things that became important and got my attention. I started to admire her outfits too, though I would never have paid attention to that before. Actually, I started to notice how well it suited her personality and the attraction began to sink in unknowingly. I found myself turning my head to watch her. I found myself listening to what she was saying. I started to realize something had changed in the way I felt about her.

But let's start with the beginning. This season began like any other season, we were preparing for the competition and training to become better rescuers. We were on opposite sides, until we learned the news that a bigger ski club bought our two little clubs and the company merged into one, we became affiliated branches. Then we were compelled to meet each other more often: at breakfast, at trainings, at meetings, in the hallway, eventually we got to share the mountain cabin at the foot of the ski slope. I and her and the rest of the joined teams. The thing is, we got used to spending more and more time together and bumped into each other more often, though we both seemed to be slightly annoyed by it and kept avoiding each other's company. We silently agreed that we disagreed. Until the cabin burned down.

It was a peaceful winter day at the cabin in the mountain where we were training for the championship season, at the mountain rescue department. Most of our teammates were up the mountains. There were just three or four of us left in the cabin, according to our training schedule. I was there. And she was there too. We were casually having breakfast in the morning light, I was having coffee at the table and she was getting busy with making some tea, her back turned to me, of course. She liked those tall mugs of tea and took her time preparing it. I was trying not to look at her t-shirt, sipping my coffee and watching instead the glowing snow outside. Then someone burst the door open.

“Quickly, get out! The cabin's on fire!”

We looked at the person in bewilderment. The person ran out, to alert others too, as the fire alarm was ringing in the hall. I was calm, not really believing it. I placed the cup of coffee on the table. Yet she reacted differently. She dropped the bag of tea and started to gather her things in a hurry.

“Shouldn’t we take out the equipment?” I asked her, as she walked around with her ski jacket hanging on her arm.

She slid a quick neutral glance at me.

“The papers”, she said. “We must get the papers”.

We looked at each other with no other choice than to cooperate. And, to my surprise, she was very reasonable, at that moment. She seemed to leave aside whatever she might have had against me, focusing instead on solving the immediate situation.

“Where are the papers?” I asked her.

The club’s contracts and files were of utmost importance, which I hadn’t thought of. But she had. I admired her for it, in that freezing second.

“The papers are upstairs, in the office”, she answered simply.

“I’ll get them”, I said, still remaining calm.

“I’ll go with you”, she informed me, kind of stiff.

“No, you better get out. I’ll find them”.

“You can’t get them alone, they’re too many”, she replied very sure of herself, though I sensed a trace of fear and hurry in her voice. “We’ll get them together”.

I realized she was afraid, and despite that fear, she was determined to do what she considered her duty, stepping over the threat of the smoke that was starting to enter the room. I understood there was no way to make her change her mind, so we went upstairs together, jumping over the things scattered around, as if we were climbing a mountain slope. People had left in a panic, making a mess of whatever got in their way. Yet I saw no panic in her attitude, or she was hiding it well enough. Everything in the cabin was made of wood and likely to catch fire instantly. The flames were spreading fast. I wondered if that thought made her tremble slightly. I opened the door to the office and a whirl of smoke enveloped us.

“It’s too late”, I said.

“No, it’s not. Let’s get the papers”, she said with absolute determination and went inside, to my surprise.

I followed her in and she started taking the files off the shelves in a hurry, piling them up in her arms, as I watched her, stunned and speechless. Another second. Then I hurried to help her. We emptied the desk drawers and the shelves, gathering the documents, as the room was filling with smoke. I seemed to automatically let her take charge of the decisions.

“Let’s go now”, she said.

“Have we taken everything?”

“Yes”.

We went down the stairs, then finally out of the burning building, placing the files safely on the fence in front of the cabin. Then I went

in again, to get the ski equipment too. She didn't try to stop me, nor did she ask what I was doing. After that, I returned next to her and we just stood there, near an advertising board that said "Snow Paradise", watching the flames emerging from the roof, clouds of grey and black smoke rising in the clear winter sky like an atomic umbrella. The fire extended rapidly to the entire roof, going down the walls. Smoke was coming out of the windows, endlessly. In ten minutes, no one would have been left alive inside. Fortunately, there was nobody in, we had been the last persons to get out. When the fire department arrived, sirens, frenzy and tons of water pouring on the cabin, the chief of the club came up to ask us what had happened. I let her explain.

"We got the documents and the equipment safely and we went out. It happened fast."

"It's good that you got the files safely. We'll have to relocate the team now".

And relocated we were.

Yet I think that was the moment when I discovered that I could cooperate with her so smoothly, so naturally and efficiently. And when I started to admire her.

The next thing we knew, we were relocated in a bigger cabin, a bit more distant from the training slope, with shared showers and opposite rooms. It turned out we were neighbors, me and her. In the days that followed, I seemed to just open the door to my room at the exact time when she was going in, or returned when she was coming down the hall from the opposite direction. I was intrigued by these

moments of passing each other by; I didn't know what was going on in my own mind; it went on a stand by zone every time she was around. My thoughts seemed to shut down, which meant I didn't know what to do, what to say or how to react, because I no longer knew what to expect from her or from myself; things were changing visibly between us. I suspected she complained about me to her girl friends, about having to inconveniently stay in the room opposite mine and see me so often or be bothered by my presence in the hall, even more so when one evening, returning from training and forgetting to switch on the lights in the hall, I mistook the left wall for the right and I tried the door to her room. I thought the keys were wrong. While I was fumbling in my pockets, searching for other possibly matching keys, she opened the door and found me standing there, in the dark. I froze instantly, realizing I was in front of her room. She turned on the lights and crossed her arms. I blinked, blinded by her sight and the sudden neon light bulbs in the hall. She was wearing a soft creamy bathrobe and had a towel wrapped around her head. The smell of shampoo and hot water made me forget my words. She was just looking at me with that clear sharp steel glance, halfway accusingly, halfway still waiting for an explanation. I felt an avalanche run me down, engulfing me in breathless snow.

“I thought this was my door”, I said shrugging and I turned around quickly, finding my keys in the last second, before she replied severely:

“Obviously, it's not”.

I was so sure she would get deeply mad at me for it. The next morning, as we took the ski lift to the top of the mountain, I got a glimpse of her steel eyes, pinning me down in the morning frost, just for a second, and I had the confirmation that she was angry at me. I tried to hide away from her and mingled with teammates, choosing the distant corner, next to the window, where I just stood, watching in oblivion, through the frozen window, the tip of the fir trees, the pines and the cliffs under the moving rope lift. I could still hear her talk, on the other side of the crammed, crowded lift, and I couldn't help listening, though I was sure she hated me with the same determination she wanted to win.

“You wouldn't believe it, people don't know their way anymore!” I heard her say and I knew it was an allusion to me, I expected she could have had said worse about me.

I tried to ignore her comments. We were on the same team at the moment, we were no longer official competitors, rivalry should have dissolved, yet she seemed to find it hard to forget we had been in opposite teams. She seemed eager to tear me to pieces, to beat me down the slope, to show me the extent of her perfect abilities to win against me and get some revenge for having been annoyed by me time and time again. To just be done with it.

As we got to the starting line, I was aware we would meet on the slope, but I was determined to stay out of her way. We were told to go in groups of five. I looked at her again. I could see nothing through her ski goggles, just light reflected from the sunrise. She stood there at

the starting line, ready and eager to get going. She had an early start; instead, I waited for half a second, then followed her down. At first, I was just following her smoothly, making slight turns in the valley, as the mountain view changed and shifted by. I was keeping an eye on her silhouette that went on shining ahead, like a silver comet on the immaculate bright snow. I began to increasingly catch up with her, until we were almost shoulder to shoulder; but then, I hadn't noticed the other skier that came from the side, flying off in a shortcut, over a crest and directly into my elbow. I was knocked down in a fraction of a second, lost balance, rolled over and hit my head on cold ice. I blacked out, as the mountain zoomed around, upside down and when I opened my eyes, waking up, the first thing I saw was her face, against the sky, leaning above me. I was still on the slope, the snow was resting cold under my back, the sun was above, lighting her figure like a halo as she glanced at me in a frown. I wasn't expecting anything from her, but I was surprised she had stopped her race to see what happened to me. Actually, she had done a lot more: she had phoned the team on top and the medical crew at the finishing line. For the first seconds, I just stared at her, unable to move. She was frowning above me, but when she saw me coming around, her eyes took a neutral shade. I soon realized it was not me she was upset about.

I tried to get up.

“Be careful”, she said. “You could have a broken bone”.

She retreated to let me adjust my knees and check if I could move. As she stood up, I looked at her, feeling still slightly dizzy and having

a headache, but something more intense than the sunlight was stinging my eyes.

“I think I’m O.K.”, I said, looking up at her.

Then I noticed we were alone on the slope. I didn’t dare ask her why she had stopped next to me.

“It’s not fair”, she said in a sudden revolted tone, looking away, at the crests of the mountains in the distance. “It’s not right to send a skier off track like that. You didn’t even get a warning. It’s just not fair!”

I was so surprised at her unexpected concern for me and the injustice of the situation. Then, we heard the sound of the helicopter coming from behind the cliffs.

“I don’t think that’s necessary”, I said and she took out her phone.

“I’ll call and tell them you’re fine. Are you sure you can make it down the slope?”

“Sure. I’ll make it.”

We went down together, slowly, and as they greeted us at the finish line and the medical crew took me for tests, I was already longing for her presence to last more than those few hours. It was the beginning of my addiction to her. Yet I seemed unaware that I had already crossed the line from disagreement to love. And maybe she had too.

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“So, you’ve got the hots for the Snow Queen”.

My buddies were already teasing me. They had noticed I had become more and more attentive to her, even though we still didn’t talk or interact too much.

“Snow. Not Snow Queen. Just Snow.”

I forgot to mention her name: Snow. Which was very appropriate for her personality.

“Yeah, we know... Tough one. Haven’t you picked wrong this time...”

They were amused by it and just as aware as I felt, that it seemed an impossible story. She was that inaccessible. She was freezing cold. However, in the last weeks I had begun to see her differently.

Her girl friends, instead, were hostile towards me. They were annoyed that I was interested in her presence, they were scrutinizing and upset, ready to stand between us, sending me glances of irritated disapproval. As much as I tried to hide my feelings for her, as much as I tried to give her space and not bother her in any way, people around us still noticed something was going on and they resented it. It was unpleasant to realize she might have been complaining about me to them, even though there was no actual reason for it. Or maybe they thought it was their responsibility to keep us apart, for the good of the team – how that could have served the good of the team, it still puzzled me. Maybe she realized people would be against us and she

behaved as indifferently as she could towards me. Or maybe that was exactly what she felt: nothing but annoyance. However, I liked to let myself believe there was more to it.

I knew I was not supposed to be in love when I went up the mountain, but I couldn't prevent it anymore. And the thought of her having a spark of interest for me, of liking me at least half as much as I liked her, seemed irresistible. It made me dreamy and often melancholic.

As distracted as I was by her, I ended up tying knots to the ropes the wrong way.

“If you do that again I'll disqualify you”, the trainer told me and I found myself caught between the dooming possibility of being disqualified and her indifferent attitude that was sending me nowhere fast.

But when I looked up at her, as I was trying to make sense of the tangled ropes, I noticed something more than cold disregard. She was worried. She was afraid, underneath her indifferent expression. She hadn't said a word, she was standing still, not even blinking, but I could feel her tense attention, watching the situation.

“Fix it immediately. Are you going to fix it, or not?” the trainer seemed to become mercilessly impatient.

I looked at her once more: I was so sure now that she was holding her breath, apparently trying to seem uninterested and detached, yet at a deeper level anxiously waiting for a verdict concerning me, waiting for me to get out of that trouble. I just felt her hoping and praying I

would get it right, as I tried to disentangle the ropes. I felt her indirect attention like a wave of heat above me, something she could not prevent, her heart beating at the same pace with mine, deeply worried; she was sinking in fear more than me, at that moment – and she wasn't even in trouble, it was I who was doomed. There was no reason for her sudden concern, unless she cared about me. I felt so happy for a moment, that I didn't care anymore what would happen to me. Fortunately, I fixed the ropes and tied the right knots the next moment. I saw her become obviously glad about it, as if a burden had been lifted off her mind. Her brow seemed to light up. She arranged the folded equipment with ease.

“You have an exam tomorrow”, the coach told us. “You have a huge responsibility. If you make it on the team you will become certified mountain rescuers.”

I looked at her. She was avoiding my glance.

“Do you know what time it starts?” I asked her in a whisper.

She sent me a quick serious look. I could sense nothing behind her shaded eyes.

“I'm not allowed to tell you”, she whispered back.

“Why not?”

“Don't ask me”.

“Come on - what time?”

She averted her eyes and lowered her voice.

“I don't even know for sure, probably eight o'clock. Of course, we have to be ready an hour before”, she said reluctantly.

“O.K. thanks”, I said and she walked away very fast.

I became conscious that I really loved her, that I appreciated her way beyond that thoughtless attraction that I felt toward her. As unhappy and frustrated as she made me feel sometimes, with her permanent cold distant indifference, I had a revelation that I could finally see beyond her shield of harsh cruelty. As joyful and relieved as she seemed to become when she got rid of my presence, I was certain she had mixed feelings about me. And I was getting closer to becoming crazy about her with each new day: an exhausting, imperative need to be a part of her life. It killed me to think I knew almost nothing about her and I could not reach her beyond the training activities. I could not see her anywhere else except on the mountain. She was just as forbidden to me during that time, as she was beyond it. And yet there we were, together by some game of chance, by some divine intervention, on the same team, day after day...

Speaking of which, what happened next became more and more surreal and unexplainable.

The next morning, on the day of the exam, we went there early. I got up and got ready, I was somehow a bit nervous at the thought of the approaching exam and my wish to become a mountain rescuer, for real. I was even more nervous at the thought of meeting her. I was restless, my heart was sinking beneath my feet, I could hardly breathe, anticipating her arrival. I got there early, before most of the others. I waited and watched the sunrise over the mountain, the sun emerging like a big blazing globe, burning and overflowing the snow in

reflected nuances of red, pink and orange, like magical flames dancing on the crust of iced cliffs. The fir trees were whispering mysteriously, as we gathered our equipment and waited in the snow. There were steps crushing snow under heavy boots, then the snowmobile roaring its engine through the forest. Then she came. There she was: stunningly beautiful in the morning light, casually approaching the improvised camp, with a slight smile, appearing from behind the trees, walking calmly and arranging her ski equipment next to the team's. I felt my lungs freeze painfully at once as my heart melted away; I just stood there, completely still, desperately trying to remember how to breathe.

“Good morning” she said passing me by.

“Morning”, I replied and tried not to glance at her, keeping my feet buried in the snow, making sure I would not fall off the surface of the earth in imponderable dizziness, though there was nothing solid to hang onto and save myself from sinking, after I saw her.

It was then that I started to realize there was something more about her. A lot more than the appearance of reality.

And then it happened: I witnessed a first miracle. We were supposed to split up in teams of two and go separately, carry the equipment to a point, find our way with a compass and a map, reach some points of reference, then rescue some kids on a camp. The pairs of two had to be decided by drawing numbers. The coach wrote four numbers on pieces of paper, wrote them again for double matching notes, folded them, mixed them up, then gave them to us, to pick our

fate. Each of us picked a folded note, not knowing what had been written there. They were supposed to match, two by two. People started speaking up their draw. One, two, four...

“Three”, she said very sure of herself.

I opened my note, unfolding the paper, not expecting anything, really. Then I saw it, written clearly: the number three, glowing in the morning light. I froze, not daring to raise my eyes to her. Happiness and bewilderment overwhelmed me, I could hardly speak.

“I’ve got three”, I said, trying to seem neutral, unable to begin to realize the impact of that event which meant we would be together for many hours, just the two of us.

It was like a miraculous gift. It was unbelievable; I would never have dreamed I could get so lucky. And yet I felt there was more to it: it was as if it had been arranged by a superior force above. She glanced at me in disbelief; I couldn’t guess what she felt, as she was so good at hiding it behind her indifferent shield, but she was surprised as well. The trainer checked the other teams, then decided the teams were not what he had planned.

“Give the notes back here. We’ll draw again.” he told us.

He mixed the notes back again, then let us each pick one. I was sure the probability to draw again the same as her would be next to zero. I wasn’t hoping for anything when I picked a note again. I looked at it: one. Number one. Everyone started saying their numbers, two, three, four. The only one left who did not speak was her. And I. And the only number that had not been spoken was one. I guessed we

had it the same again. I suspected that she did not want to reveal that. She must have been as puzzled by it as I was. I could not guess how she felt. Before we could say the truth, the trainer was again displeased by something.

“No, it’s not right this time either. Get your notes mixed up again. We’ll decide one last time”.

I placed the note back. Then I watched the little pieces of paper being mixed, shaken and bounced in the woolen winter hat. Then, hands reached out to pick notes. She was among the first to choose. I waited until everyone else picked something. I did not want to seem too eager. Finally, I picked the last note in the hat. I opened it: it was a four. I waited and listened to the others speaking their numbers. When it got to her turn, she said calmly:

“Four”.

I almost couldn’t believe my ears. I couldn’t help feeling elated by it and I smiled.

“Who’s got the other four?” the trainer asked.

“I do”, I replied, not looking in her direction.

“Well, it’s settled then. You make a team. Get your equipment and go.”

I could not begin to understand how it was that we picked three times the same numbers, each time different ones. It was more than fate, it was more than luck. It was more than a gift to me. It was surreal. It was beyond human power of understanding. I didn’t even want to explain it, it was anyway unexplainable, but I was more than

happy about it. She accepted the situation as it was. She went very determined to get her equipment. She seemed ready to cooperate with me, and she took charge at once, as if it was the only way she could deal with it, to show she had nothing against me. It had been decided, it was out of her hands. So she was taking it in her hands, instead, just as it was.

“Let’s go”, she told me in a firm yet somehow friendly way.

We had become accomplices; I was suddenly her temporary partner. It was official, it was beyond us: it was more than I had ever dreamed of. We were actually instructed to spend the day together. We went to sign the agreement. She scribbled her signature on the document.

“Here, sign this”.

I was so happy to listen to her. I signed right under and, for a moment, I looked at our signatures glowing brightly and clearly on the contract agreement. Now we were together on paper too...

“Come on, let’s go” she said serenely.

Enlightened with happiness, I followed her, willing to do whatever she asked. We grabbed our ropes, the shovels and the nails, the blankets too, and placed them in a bigger sack. We adjusted our skis in silence, not discussing the miraculous truth that we had drawn three times our matching numbers. In fact, we hardly said anything to each other. I looked at her as she was staring ahead, towards the distant valley. The sky was getting cloudy over the mountain top, yet

the sun was radiant enough. I didn't have any idea what was on her mind.

“Let's go”, she said to me again, and the sound of those words was so sweet, I could have spent the entire day listening to her say to me “let's go”, “let's go”... like a heartbeat, “let's go”, “let's go”, like the words I wanted so badly to say to her, to scream out loud in the silence of the mountains: “I love you” - “I love you”...

She took one handle of the sack of equipment and extended to me the other, looking directly in my eyes. I took it, feeling grateful for her direct attitude of sharing everything with me without any doubt and we started down slowly, sliding on the skis, advancing with the equipment after us. I didn't even ask her if she knew where she was going. She seemed to be very sure of herself, and I was more than content to just be with her, so I couldn't care less where we were headed. She could have taken me to the abyss, it wouldn't have mattered. I just went along with her, not saying anything. She kept staring ahead, determined and silent.

The descent was smooth and peaceful. We didn't speed up; I was in no hurry to finish whatever we had started. I was absolutely enjoying her presence and the fact that I could stare at her as much as I wanted... I was lost in a sort of blissful state of mind, when everything in life seemed enough and the sunlight flowing around her made me so happy, that I wanted it to last forever... she was checking the compass from time to time, then looking at the sun, then giving me short glances, as if to make sure I was still there, going along with her

plans. I asked her no questions, made no demands. I was at her service, silently helping her with whatever she wanted.

“What time is it?” she asked me after forty minutes. “Have you got a watch?”

“Yes.”

“How long has it been since we started the trip?”

“About forty minutes. Almost an hour.”

I was gladly answering her questions, happy to be of some use to her and to share whatever we were doing like established partners. We finally arrived at the edge of a steep plateau. She stopped and I stopped with her. She checked the compass again, then took off her skis, prompted the poles to secure the equipment, then went to the edge and lied down on the snow, looking beneath the abyss.

“There they are”, she said softly; then she turned to look at me. “Come here. We found them.”

I approached the edge and leaned over, kneeling in the snow, to look down at the bottom of the precipice. I saw the tent and the group of kids, sitting next to one another like lost sparrows, waiting.

“Hey!” I shouted, wanting to make them attentive, but I felt her hand cover my mouth, stifling the words before I could speak.

“No, don’t!”

As I was watching her a bit confused, she retreated her hand and signaled me to look up behind us, at the top of the mountain. Heavy packs of snow, hanging like a swelling boiling pot of milk, were

waiting and shining in the sun, menacingly ready to start down in a huge sweeping force.

“We must be careful not to start it. The avalanche. I’ll call the base and the chopper will meet us on the other side of the ridge.”

“What about the kids?” I asked her.

She seemed to have it planned out. And I realized she didn’t trust me enough to let me decide anything.

“We’ll take them with us. Help me throw down a rope.”

“Listen. Snow.”

She turned around, staring at me inquiringly. I could not figure out what her expression meant. Speaking her name felt like a sacred vow.

“Yes, what?”

“What if the helicopter makes too much noise and triggers the avalanche? It has such strong propellers, right? It could happen. Shouldn’t we take these kids to the base ourselves? It will be like a walk in the park.”

She looked at me with the same expression. Then, she looked at the sun again.

“Do you see that light?” she said, staring up.” Spring is near. Those patches of snow are ready to come down any minute; we don’t have enough time to walk these kids to town. The temperatures will not last on the cool side much longer. The snow will start melting before noon and you’ll have your avalanche for sure.”

I thought about her words. She could have been right. I stood there, looking down at the tent and the kids waiting at the bottom of the cliff.

“Come on”, I heard her speak again and I saw she had unpacked the equipment in less than a minute. “Help me throw down a rope”.

I tied a rope around myself and gave her the other end of it.

“You go. I’ll keep it safe.”

She accepted and went down. One by one, we brought the kids up, a group of seven. I helped her return to the plateau and she started talking to them.

“O.K. children, now I want you to be really quiet. You will follow us to the other side of the crest and we’ll get you on a helicopter. The most important thing is to stay with us and watch out where you step in the snow, because it’s fluffy and slippery underneath. Got it?”

I found myself admiring her again, the way she made it clear to the children what they had to do. After we got to the other side of the crest, the helicopter came and we embarked the children safely on it, just to watch them fly off .

“I’ll come back for you two”, said the pilot.

We were left there in the snow, watching the propellers spin away, over the cliffs and disappearing in the winter frost.

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I noticed she was very silent and serious. She was deeply thinking about something. And I was thinking too. I was rather fascinated by her presence in front of me and my only thoughts were about her. I imagined I could have taken one step closer. I wondered what she thought of me. I wondered how I could try to tell her how much I was in love with her. I was looking at her and speaking with her in my mind, wondering if I could make her read my thoughts. “I love you, do you know that? Can you see it in my eyes?”... I was asking her silently. I was just enjoying the fact that I could look at her, revel in her eyes, sink in the delightful happiness of having her stay in front of me as I would say those words in my mind. In that deep silence, it was as if she could have heard them so well: “I love you...” Once. Twice. A thousand times. “I love you. Look at me now. I love you so much and you don’t even know it...” And the words kept going. “You are so beautiful... Why are you so beautiful?” She was watching me attentively, not saying a word. I just sat there, having a dialogue with her in my mind and feeling as if she could actually hear it. “I wish this moment could last forever... How about making it forever? What if this was our life, beyond this moment? Would you even consider spending time with me? Would you like to?” We just stood there, on each side of the plateau, at a distance, looking at each other, neither of us attempting to speak. And yet I wanted so much to tell her how I felt. I wanted to reach out and hold her. I wanted to spoil and cherish her,

make her feel blissfully free, protect her and surround her with attention. I wanted to make her happy. Yet I didn't move. I was depending on her choice and her wishes. I was looking in her eyes, as the sunlight kept flowing between us, filling the silence of the mountains in a surreal timeless glow, and I felt so much love for her, that I wanted to let her know about it. "I love you, Snow..." It seemed like such a fortunate chance to be able to stay there in front of her and speak that truth to her, in my mind. It was like an endless silent incantation... like an invisible interaction... she was mine and I was hers... it was like meeting at a different level... as if our souls were mingling in the light, in that absolute silence... melting... shining... The minutes went by, in that golden light over the mountains and the snow, as we stood there alone, speechless: just the two of us and the immensity of space around, an eternity watching over. She sat there serenely, surrounded by accepting stillness, looking at me, just as I was contemplating her, and I wondered what was on her mind, what she felt, what she was thinking... what would have made her happy, could I have been the one to make her happy? I didn't speak, I couldn't tell her anything, yet my eyes were speaking for me. "I love you..." And at one time, one fraction of a second, I seemed to notice a trace of a smile in the corner of her lips. Her clear sharp eyes were enlightened with a soft steam, as she was looking at me. What was she thinking? What?

And then she spoke.

"Do you know what time it is?"

She almost whispered, as if trying not to disturb too much the peace and stillness of the mountains and the huge packs of snow on top. I glanced at my watch, so glad that she was asking me something and I could answer. As insignificant as it might have seemed, it was a link between us. An interaction, actually happening, undeniably thrilling.

“It’s been almost two hours since we left”, I told her, in the same careful tone of voice, lowering my eyes.

I could feel something building between us. A trust. A silent knowledge, an increasing awareness of our partnership. Like an indestructible, invisible bond. I felt more and more confidence, as minutes went by, as if we were part of each other’s life and we functioned perfectly together. It was just us, the silence, the sunlight, the snow and the mountain... and the love. So much love indeed. I was certain we would never be separated again.

She looked at me and I sensed something like a hidden regret, as if there was a deeper unfortunate truth that she found hard to tell me. I felt as if she was trying to spare me of it, but it was inevitable.

“What?” I asked her, as she seemed to search for words, while contemplating me and I could almost see her making fast plans in her mind, but not revealing anything to me.

“I don’t think the helicopter will be here on time”, she said.

“Yes it will.”

“No, listen. The temperatures are getting hotter by the minute. The avalanche will start going down anytime now. You must be prepared for it.”

“We could go to the other side of the crest”, I suggested.

“It’s no use: the avalanche will get there too. You can’t imagine the force and the amount of snow that’s about to come down on us.”

I was a bit confused. I didn’t want to believe it was that bad. Yet she seemed so certain of the situation we were in.

“It will sweep you off completely. It will cover you up and throw you off the mountain, tons of snow you can’t do anything about.”

Why was she speaking about me? Wasn’t she in it as well? I could not understand that.

“What about you?”

“Draw two circles in the snow”, she told me. ”Right there, on that patch of light, in the middle”.

I did as she asked. I made two circles in the snow, where the sun was sparkling most.

“Can we make snow angels?” I smiled.

“I’m serious”, she said.

She was almost severe now. She could cut off my enthusiasm in a blink of an eye, with that harsh determination that I actually loved about her. So how could I not?... I actually adored her in that blissful moment of timeless sunlight, when we seemed to have already spent an eternity together.

“Look”, she said, explaining to me and pointing to the circles in the snow. “When the sunlight melts the line of the first circle, you must take the gear and cover yourself with the blanket. I’ll help you. When the sunlight melts the second circle, take the ski poles and hang on, because it’s coming.”

“What’s coming?”

She looked at me for a second, as if trying to understand why I was taking it so lightly.

“The avalanche, of course. What else?”

“And you? What will you do?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

And I could not ask her anything more. She was determined to keep it to herself: her plan. The truth. Her thoughts. Whatever it was that I didn’t know. She had decided I was better off not knowing.

“It won’t be long now. Ten minutes at most”, she said.

I still did not believe it would happen the way she had predicted. I was looking at her in disbelief, unable to choose between worrying about the imminent danger and enjoying the happiness of being there with her. I could not decide. I chose happiness. But she wasn’t serene anymore. She was preoccupied. We sat there in silence some more, me watching her, watching the circles, trying to understand what it meant and fearing the moment I would be separated from her. I sensed her getting distant, detached and aloof. Her mind was clouded by something. She wasn’t even looking at me anymore. She was staring at the top of the mountain, frowning. Before the first circle started to

melt, she waved to me to get the blanket. I took the blanket reluctantly and placed it on my head.

“Now what?”

She signaled to me to remain silent. She was listening intently, glancing up at the top of the pack of snow that was hanging heavily over the valley, like a giant ice cream spoon.

“Aren’t you coming under the blanket?” I whispered.

“Shh. One second.”

And then I heard it too. The cracking sound from underneath the tons of snow beginning to give in, to move like an entire continent, from above the valley, falling down on us. She got up at once and walked to where I was sitting, waiting with the blanket on my head. The tumbling, rolling avalanche of snow had started down above us, toward us, roaring and tearing everything in its way, like a sweeping huge white tide, approaching faster than an airplane, spinning and deafening the ears like a thousand helicopter propellers, a thousand airplane engines. It was coming closer and closer. I froze right there, not having time to think. She sat down next to me, crawling immediately under the blanket and I felt her arm around me, warm, comforting and friendly, unexpected as the avalanche itself. I felt her breathing on my neck, as she leaned her head on my shoulder, to reassure me for the next second when I knew the snow would hit us and blow us into pieces. I didn’t have time to realize she really cared about me, she enjoyed being there with me, I didn’t have time to understand we would both disappear in the coming avalanche, and I

didn't even care anymore, in that fraction of a second. I turned to look in her eyes and she smiled at me, peacefully and accepting, like eternity itself, in its clarity and sharpness, in its absolute strength and certainty, and only love was left when the snow engulfed us above, around, everywhere. I was still staring at her, as if in slow motion; I could see her features becoming transparent, while the flakes of snow were sweeping by in full speed; she had begun to dissipate with them, still smiling at me, like in a dream, and I desperately realized she was fading away, vanishing into the snow itself.

"Don't go!" I tried to shout while the snow flakes zooming around were covering my voice.

"I can't stay", she whispered. "I belong to the mountain".

"Please stay!... Snow!"

Before I could even say her name, she was gone. She had disappeared. Only snow flakes remained and the force of the avalanche hit me so hard, I closed my eyes and felt covered by it completely, lost in darkness.

When I opened my eyes, I could see nothing. My hair was freezing wet, yet I was still breathing. I was under the blanket. I was alone. I got up and threw the blanket aside. A feeling of desolation and emptiness made everything silent and dark, like a heavy burden. The mountain itself seemed insignificant under the grey sky above. The avalanche was gone too. The winter view was dark, lifeless and dull. Long shadows were spreading on the mountain and light was getting dim. I looked around; I was beginning to freeze. It was close to

sunset. I started to go down the slope. I had to return to the base. I didn't know how to tell them that Snow had disappeared. I didn't even make a plan for it. I was about to reach the forest when I saw the helicopter zooming above. It landed next to me.

"I was looking for you", said the pilot.

I was so upset that I didn't even tell him she was gone. I thought it was obvious, but he asked me nothing.

"Have you seen the avalanche?" I asked him, absently getting on the helicopter and looking at the silent cliffs that witnessed my desolation, as we took off.

"No. What avalanche? Where have you been, anyway? I kept looking everywhere for you, for hours. And they're expecting you at the base. They thought you got lost."

I stared at him, bewildered. What about Snow? Hasn't anyone been expecting her too?...

"I was with Snow", I answered. "We were hit by an avalanche".

"*We?* what do you mean *we*? I took the children to the base and I returned for you, but you were gone. By the way, congratulations. You made it. You're a mountain rescuer now."

I didn't understand. I didn't want to understand. I could not understand. There was no way I had been alone on the mountain and the pilot hadn't seen Snow.

"Haven't you seen Snow?" I asked him, hoping for a flicker of light that could save me from despair and the impossible perspective ahead.

“Yeah, sure.”

He laughed.

“Lots of snow around here”.

I stared at him, speechless. I frowned. No, there was no way to figure it out. The pilot must have been wrong.

“I wasn’t alone. Haven’t you seen the girl I was with?” I tried one more time to reason with him.

“A girl? Up there?” he smiled and looked at me attentively. “Listen, you’ve been out there for too long. You might have developed a fever. You look wet and frozen, probably hypothermic and in shock. Don’t worry, we’ll get to the base in no time.”

I didn’t say anything more.

When I got to the base, I started asking around about Snow. I started asking the teammates.

“Have you seen Snow?”

“There’s plenty of snow on the mountain.”

“No, Snow - the girl.”

“What girl?”

Nobody seemed to know who I was talking about. Nobody seemed to remember. I started to wonder if it had been just a dream. I couldn’t question though the reality of what had happened on the mountain. Me spending time with her. She coming under the blanket. Her arm around me, her head touching mine, her eyes returning that light of love to me. The avalanche eating us out. It had been too real to

deny. Besides, what about the weeks before that? What about her presence on the team?

I went into the office and looked for the agreement. I had to find proof I wasn't crazy. I had to make sure I hadn't dreamed it. I ruffled through the papers and the files. The files we had once taken out from the fire, together. And then I found it: the agreement we had signed on that day we picked the same numbers and went off to find our destiny in the mountain. I looked at it triumphantly: there it was. Her signature glowing on paper, right above mine. Surreal as it seemed, it was still there. She had signed it indeed. It hadn't been just a dream.

From that moment on, I started rolling the film of events in my head, searching for clues. And I remembered what she had said: "I belong to the mountain"... I understood why I could not see her anywhere else. But I understood I had to go back up there, to look for her. I became determined to find her again. I knew she was out there, up there, somewhere. We were supposed to be together. It was our fate. It was what the numbers had shown. I went out and looked to the top of the mountain that was emerging high up in a haze of clouds, covered in snow. I knew what I had to do. I would go there alone, to look for her. I knew for sure I would find her. She was waiting for me. She wouldn't have shown herself to me, had she not been real. Had she not been meant for me. Had she not been my destiny. I was making a plan, for the first time. I would find her and we would be together forever. It was a simple plan.

So now I've written it down because tomorrow I'm going up the mountain to find Snow.

I'm leaving this here, in case I don't return. I needed to write this story down, I just had to get it out of my mind, out of my system and lay it on paper, in case I never come back. I think I would've gone insane if I hadn't written it down. I miss her so much... But now I feel a lot better and I'll be on my way to find her, starting tomorrow.

You can keep the story, if you find it, in case I don't show up here again.

If you like it, keep it.

Wish me luck.

See you around.
