

On My Way To You

Chapter 1

John

Pokhara – April 22th

John Patterson woke up in a fog. Putting his hands to his temples, he pushed away shoulder length hair as his stomach churned. He'd managed to crawl in off the porch last night and find his way to the couch. After the banging between his ears eased, he opened his eyes. Yellow sunlight bathed the tiny spartan living room. Take-out containers, empty soda cans, and crumpled-up food wrappers were scattered on the threadbare carpet. An open pizza box sat on a wooden crate that filled in for a coffee table. A lingering odor of cold fried chicken, garlic potatoes and curry permeated the room.

He blinked, pushed himself upright and bent forward. As he did so, his bladder bore down on him. He sighed, went to stand and almost fell. He sat back looking for his prosthetic limb, which he kept nearby when he went to sleep, but it wasn't there. He frowned.

"Shit! God damn it," he muttered. He slid down the couch away from the crate, rocked forward and got up. The journey down the hall to the bathroom would be like hopping through a minefield. The last thing he

needed was to trip and plant his face on the floor. He palmed the wall as he went. Behind him, his cell phone rang out. Whoever it was would have to wait. With a grunt, he shut the bathroom door behind him and navigated to the toilet. He needed something for his headache and the gnawing pain in his leg. Without looking up, he reached beside him and pawed through the collection of razors, tangled hair ties, and wadded tissues on the vanity. After knocking most of them in the sink or on the floor, he found his bottle of *goodies*. He tipped it, expecting to see a little, white, hand-pressed pill drop into his palm, but nothing rolled out. He stared down into the empty blue tube as his brain spun.

Suddenly, the ache in his leg exploded into a rage. He flung the bottle at the wall in front of him and groped for the Tylenol, which, of course, tipped over, spilling its contents on the floor.

“Shit!”

He swept the remaining toiletries away, scattering them around the room.

Get it together.

He reached down beside him and picked up the scattered pills and hair ties within arm’s length. An hour later he had his leg on, bed made and things picked up – maybe not shining clean, but presentable enough for his own tastes. He brushed the mud off the boots that were living in the kitchen sink, put them on and opened the tiny refrigerator. There wasn’t much in it: a few forgotten leftovers, a carton of milk and a crate of eggs. He frowned.

“Okay, eggs it is,” he muttered, and took them out along with the milk. As he scrambled up his breakfast in a cereal bowl, his phone went off again. He dug it out of his pocket and stared at the number flashing on the screen. Putting it on speakerphone, he forced a smile.

“Frank!”

“Hi John.”

“What’s up?” John said, crossing his arms and leaning back against the stove. The last time they’d spoken had been in October right after Andersen had assigned him to run the Annapurna Circuit. Frank had shown up on his doorstep out of the blue, proposing that he run Khum Jung Mountaineering. Told him he could get back in the game. Run things as he saw fit.

It had all sounded good until Frank said it was the least he could do to show his thanks for saving his life, as if he was trying to even the score. As if!

“So, how you doing, John?”

“I’m doing. You?”

Frank paused. “Been better.”

“I bet. I heard what happened up on the Fall. God-awful thing. I assume you were there?” John said, grabbing the carton of milk beside him. He popped it open and caught an unpleasant whiff.

Damn it!

“Unfortunately, yes.” There was a long pause as John dumped the spoiled milk down the drain. Finally, Frank lowered his voice. “John, Da-wa was roping the course at the time.”

John blinked as the words rammed into him. He and Da-wa went back a ways, and although they’d parted on less than friendly terms, he still had high regard for the sherpa. He leaned back against the stove and cleared his throat.

“Damn. That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does,” Frank said and paused before going on. “You probably heard about the meeting of the minds up on the mountain?”

“A little. I guess things got a bit hot up there,” John said. He pulled out a battered frying pan and greased it up.

“To say the least. You know as well as I the Sherpa are getting screwed. A death bennie of a million rupees and a measly comp of forty thousand – are you kidding me? It’s next to nothing.”

“Right,” John said, having a distinct feeling Frank was going to hit him up for something. He turned the knob on the stove, struck a match and put it to the burner. When a flame popped up, he set the pan over it and sucked a lip.

Wait for it.

“Anyway, I’m trying to put together a fundraiser in Kat, so I’m hitting up all the outfits on the mountain. I called Terry, but I was directed to a Brandon Carson. Is Terry still at Andersen?”

“Yeah, he’s there, but he’s not as involved as he used to be,” John said.

“Really?”

“Family issues, or so I’ve heard,” John said.

“I guess that explains the run-around I got. So this Carson guy...he’s running things in Nepal, I take it?”

“Something like that. Terry brought him on to evaluate our expeditions.” *And screw with my life.* “Another bean counter who only looks at the bottom line.”

“Hence the lukewarm response I got,” Frank said. He paused then went on, “I know we haven’t always gotten along, but could you get me connected with Terry?”

John rolled his eyes. “I’m not exactly on his speed-dial list, Frank. I’ve only seen him a few times over the last three years.”

“Whatever you can do, I would really appreciate,” Frank said and paused again. “I’ve missed you on the mountain the last two years. Things aren’t the same without you stalking around up there.”

“I bet,” John said, grabbing a spatula and folding the eggs in the skillet. “I’ll be back there soon enough.”

“I’m sure you will. So, they’re keeping ya busy?”

“Yep. They got me straightening things out on the Circuit now.”

“That’s a two-hundred K hike.”

“From what I hear,” John said, understanding the gist of Frank’s comment. But his leg could handle it. He turned off the stove and snatched a bowl out of the dish drainer. After he set it on the counter, he dumped his breakfast into it. “Hey, look, gotta get at the paperwork here. You know how it is – everyone wants to get paid. Anyway, I’ll do my best with Terry.”

“Okay, and thanks. In any case, whether Andersen ponies up or not, I’ll save you a table at the event.”

“You do that,” John said. “Later.”



John pulled his beaten, gray 2002 Santo sedan into the torrent of weaving motorbikes, cars, buses, and trucks heading east along the crumbling macadam road. As he drove past the shores of Phewa Tal, he was mindful of the surging crowds gathered around the end of the lake that reflected the white-capped mountains to the north. He rolled his window down and turned his radio on as he negotiated the madness of weaving traffic that obeyed only one law: keep moving and don’t stop. Fifteen minutes later, he parked outside a rundown, whitewashed stucco building with a ragged blue canvas canopy over the front entry. Overlooking the Seti Gandaki River, Sanjay’s Internet café was a regular haunt for local guides, offering up decent Nepalese food and wireless internet connections, all at reasonable prices. When he opened the front door, he was met with a ubiquitous balsamic fragrance. He waved to one of the regulars and walked past a bank of desktop computers to the back of the room. There, he took a table near the sit-down dining bar.

Unlike the touristy restaurants of Pokhara that were flush with hanging swag lamps, mandala tapestries and Brahma and Vishnu golden statuettes, Sanjay’s was understated - a few pictures of the mountains and Phewa Tal on the walls, solid hard wood tables and chairs, hardwood floors and a few large planters bearing leafy jade and philodendron in the corners.

This was his office, so to speak. He spread out a map of the Annapurna region and opened his laptop while he waited for his sherpa assistant guides, Orson and Kembe, to arrive. As he went over the Circuit Trail map, Nabin came rushing up to take his order. The rail-thin, coffee-skinned kid really didn't need to ask what he wanted. John had been coming there almost daily for the better part of a year. But that was how the Nepalese were: never leaving anything to chance.

Nabin pulled out his pad and pencil. "Namaste, Mr. Patterson! Same as always?"

John nodded. "Same as always. Is the man around?"

"Ho, he in kitchen. You want me to get him for you?"

"Yes, please." John dug two one-thousand-rupee notes out of his wallet and tucked them into Nabin's shirt pocket. "For your piggy bank," he said, knowing the boy was saving every penny he could to attend the Nepalese Mountain Guide School.

Nabin's dark eyes lit and a broad smile flashed across his face.

"Thank you, Mr. Patterson, thank you, thank you!"

John put his hand up. "Nabin, how many times I got to tell you? There's no need to thank me. And for God's sake, you need to stop with the 'Mr. Patterson' bullshit. John works just fine, okay?"

The boy nodded. "Okay, whatever you say, Mr. Patterson."

Whatever.

John rolled his eyes and turned back to his computer, scrolling through his email. As usual, his mother had sent him her weekly note about the goings-on at home in Oak Creek, Colorado, land of the snow bunnies. He made a mental note to email her before he went to bed then sorted through the rest of the unsolicited spam. As he deleted the last of it, Sanjay showed up with his order.

Besides owning the café, Sanjay had a side business in pharmaceuticals – homemade pharmaceuticals – some of which were herbals he sold openly and others that were sold more discretely. The

latter consisted of opiates, which was John's primary interest at that moment. He eyed the short, dark man who had a warm, friendly smile. Over the last year, the two of them had struck up more than a passing business relationship. They were friends, and John never saw Sanjay as anything less than an herbalist trying to provide for his family as well as for the locals who couldn't afford the government-approved drugs.

"Namaste, John. What can I do for you?" Sanjay said as he put a basket of roti with a bowl of lassi on the table.

"Hey, Sanjay," John said. Nabin hustled over with his Masala tea. The boy set it on the table and dashed away. John waited until Nabin was out of earshot then leaned forward. "My leg is killing me."

Sanjay wiped his hands on his apron. "John, you must be careful..."

John put his hand up. "I know, I know, and I am. It's just bothering me more than usual. Help me out, okay?"

"I sorry, I have none to give just now. You come back later, maybe?"

John gritted his teeth. "Yeah, sure," he said, feeling his body coil up. He sat back, tore off a piece of roti and dunked it in the yogurt and apricot-blended parfait.



When John looked up from his notes a couple hours later, Mick Hanson stood in front of him with a thick Penda-flex folder stuffed with paperwork pinned under his arm. John grinned at the man who worked for High Trails Adventures and motioned to Orson and Kembe, who had joined him an hour ago to hold off on filling him in on the logistics of the Circuit. He'd known Mick since he'd come to Nepal, and counted him as the closest thing he had to a friend.

Mick pulled a chair back, set his laptop and penda-flex on the table. "Hey Nabin," Mick called out sitting down, "a thermos of butter tea and a plate of Kaju Katli."

John shook his head. How Mick could stomach the combination of the gagging bitter brew and coma-inducing sweet-cakes was beyond him. Then again, not too many things were out of the burly man's diet.

"I see you're doing your homework on the Circuit," Mick said, nodding toward the maps.

"Yeah. My punishment for being a Good Samaritan," John said, and called Nabin over for a refill on his tea. "What happened to you last night?"

"What do you mean?" Mick said.

"You wimped out on me."

"Had a fire to put out," Mick said as Nabin brought his order over. "You want a piece?" He pointed to one of the small diamond shaped cakes on the plate.

"Umm...no," John said, clearing away a stack of papers in front of him. "This here is Sherpa Orson and Sherpa Kembe."

Mick put his hand out to the two men. "Hey."

They shook his hand but said nothing.

"So what'cha think?" Mick said, nodding toward the Circuit map.

"I think I'm being screwed up the a-hole, is what I think," John said.

"Don't worry, you'll get back to Everest," Mick said. "Just have to give it time."

"My leg works just fine," John said.

"They just want to make sure you're ready."

John scowled. "They? You mean Carson. He's just looking for a way to shove me out the door. Sending me on this yellow brick road is his way of letting me know about it, too." He paused. "No matter. So, High Trails is still planning on running all their treks?"

Mick drilled a finger into his ear. "Yep...all except Everest." He eyed the two sherpas critically then went on, "It's all a tizzy up there."

Orson nodded and finally said, “Government act like nothing happen. ‘Go climbing’ they say at EBC. No one care about sherpa side of story.”

“I know,” Mick said, nodding in agreement, “and to my way of thinking you have a right to be raising a stink.”

“We tired of Ministry dictating how things go,” Kembe put in. “All we want is what’s ours. No offense, but we fed up from being used by big companies and government.”

Mick nodded. “Well, I can’t speak for anyone else, but High Trails treats our sherpas fair. The sad thing is, there’s a lot of folks up there who can’t see their hands in front of their faces which puts everyone at risk.”

“Yeah, I know. I heard the ministry offered to raise the death benny to fifteen K,” John said, remembering what Frank had told him. He sipped his tea, and waited to hear what Mick would say.

“Yeah, big joke,” Orson said.

“I agree, Orson,” Mick said. “Personally, some of these outfits shouldn’t be on the mountain. They have no interest in safety or who should climb or not; only the green that comes flowing in.” He took a drink of his butter tea. “And get this—I heard some idiot has contracted choppers to haul their sorry asses up over the Ice Fall to Camp 2 so they can continue a summit attempt. What the hell?”

“You wouldn’t be talking about Andersen, now would you, good buddy?” John said.

Mick cranked his brow up and eyed him with one of his did-you-really-just-say-that looks. He helped himself to another piece of cake. “Sure you don’t want a piece?”

John shook his head. “I’ll pass.”

Mick washed his cake down with a sip of tea and sat back with a speculative gaze. “You know, you could look elsewhere.”

“What do you mean?”

“What about Eckert? They’re a good outfit?”

“They are, ‘cept they’re all filled out at the moment,” John said.

Mick nodded. “Well, there’s always Frank’s offer.”

“Out of the question, and let’s not go there again, okay?” John said, narrowing his gaze on the man. At length, he paused, sucked a sip of tea. “So, High Trails gonna go for an Annapurna summit?”

“Yeah, in the fall. I’ll be running Base Camp,” Mick said and bit into a piece of his Kaju Katli. “In the meantime, they got me training a couple new guys for the Circuit.”

“Better you than me,” John said and chuckled.

Mick flipped him the bird. “Well, at least one of them is experienced. Came from the States. California, I think. The other one’s from Nevada,” he said, and helped himself to the last piece of dessert. He bit into it and said, “The California kid even has an Everest summit under his belt.”

“No shit,” John said, sitting back. A queer feeling ran through him.

“When’d he summit?”

Mick wiped his mouth with a napkin. “2011, I think. Hey, that was the year you-”

“Yeah. Don’t remind me,” John said. The uneasy feeling intensified and for a moment he didn’t know why, only that his breath quickened with dread. And then it hit him.

No f’ing way.

“You know which company he climbed with?”

Mick sat back looking off for some time as John’s heart thumped. Finally, the man rubbed his chin and shook his head. “Geeze, you know I can’t remember.”

John closed his eyes, trying to shoo the bad feeling away. He waved his hand. “No matter. So, want to hit the Golden Monkey tonight for a few?”

“Yeah, why not?” Mick said.

John turned toward Orson and Kembe. “I believe we’re done here.”

The sherpas pushed back in their chairs and stood. Orson said, “So, we meet you next week for first Circuit run?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” John said as the men headed for the front door. When they were alone, Mick glanced toward the door the sherpas left through and said, “Good men there, Shanks. They’ll do you good.”

“Yeah, I think so,” John said. “Well, I got to be heading out. Till tonight then, and don’t be late.”

“Not if you’re buying, I won’t be” Mick said. He grabbed his Pendaflex and got up, then wrinkled his brow. “Hold on, wait a minute. It just came to me.”

John gathered his paperwork and shut his laptop. “What?”

“The guy you just asked me about.” Mick opened his Pendaflex and slid a handful of documents out as John looked on. Rifling through them, he came to a sheet that caught his attention and pulled it out. “Here it is...says here he was with Khum Jung Mountaineering. Name’s Greg Madden.”

John felt hot blood rush into his face.

Son of a bitch!

Chapter 2

Michelle

Cornwall, Canada – May 3^d

Michelle dragged her daypack off the kitchen table and slung it over her shoulder. “Come, Merlin,” she called to her girlfriend’s chocolate Lab who was watching her from the kitchen archway. She opened the door to the attached garage of her one-story ranch and waited for him to scoot through. Outside, Cam was loading the last of their hiking gear into an idling 2015 Highlander. Michelle took one last look around the kitchen, making sure she wasn’t forgetting anything, then grabbed her hiking poles. After locking up, she joined the woman she’d known for over twenty-five years.

“So, grab coffee at Ernie’s?” Cam said as Merlin jumped into the back seat.

Michelle threw her pack in the back of the car and shut the tailgate. Looking up at the cloudless blue sky, she breathed deep and wondered if she’d *break down* once she was out on the trail. Hiking in the wilderness

of Algonquin Provincial Park had been her special time with her husband Adam, but with him gone now, she wondered how she'd react. She shut the tailgate and put on a smile. "Perfect!"

Cam hopped in the driver's seat, and as Michelle got in, put her long blond hair up. Slipping her Expos cap on, she entered their destination into her GPS. "Got your passport, right?"

"Right here," Michelle said, patting the breast pocket of her trail jacket. "Looks like we have a good day for it."

Cam buckled up, put the car in gear, and they were off for the hour and half jaunt over the border to Saranac Lake in the States. There, they'd hike the Ampersand Trail. Training for the real stuff Cam, called it—the real stuff being the Himalayas. When Cam suggested they travel to Nepal to fulfill Adam's bucket list wish, she was all in, even though the idea of traveling halfway around the world scared her.

Michelle could still see the intense gaze coming back from her sister-in-law's bright hazel eyes. *He would've wanted this!*

And Cam was right!

Despite losing her brother and going through her own grief, Cam had never wavered in her support for her. She was the one who forced her out of the house on weekends: took her on field trips, to dinner or just anywhere to hang out and talk. And what was more, Cam never tried to fix her, but instead just listened when she blamed herself for what happened on the day Adam was taken away from her. Cam was the one who kept her from sliding off into the abyss when the world turned into a shit storm.

"So," Cam said, "you'll never believe who messaged me this morning."

Michelle assumed it was a guy and shrugged. Cam had so many of them chasing her, she needed a scorecard. "I haven't a clue, who?"

Cam shot her a sideways glance. "Matt. Remember him?" she said. Michelle cocked her brow, remembering Cam telling her about the date from Hell whose idea of an outing was a jaw-jarring ride on the back of

his all-terrain four-wheeler through the forest. “You mean Lumberjack Boy?”

“One and the same. The caveman wanted to know what I was up to.”

“Did you answer him?”

“Nooo,” Cam said. She was quiet a moment, then in a brittle tone, added, “I think I need to give up dating for a while. There’s just nothing out there worth it.”

Now it was Michelle’s turn to be quiet. Cam was venting, but she knew she wasn’t serious. Not that Cam dated anything that walked upright, but her best friend liked sex... a lot!

Cam tightened her jaw. “You think I’m kidding.”

“No,” Michelle said and smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Michelle said.

Cam eyed her and sighed. “You’re probably right.”

“About what?”

“What you’re thinking. That I like *it* a little too much.”

Michelle shrugged. “You could be a little more selective. I mean, mind-blowing sex alone does not make for a meaningful relationship.”

“I know...I know. And hey, I’m picky!” Cam protested.”

“Right.”

They were quiet a moment. Finally, Cam said, “There’s Ernie’s.” Cam pulled in and they ordered a couple of coffees along with a sausage biscuit for Merlin from the drive-thru. Once they were off again, Cam said, “So, I’m all set.”

Michelle tossed the biscuit wrapper in a trash bag. “All set with what?”

Cam shook her head. “Duh, the paperwork for the trip. Insurance, paying off Andersen?”

“Oh, yeah. All set,” Michelle said. She sipped her coffee as a recurring vision of them searching for their Andersen connection at a strange airport where no one spoke a lick of English flashed before her. She’d never traveled abroad and the thought of being swept away in a sea of humanity to God knows where unsettled her. It was a dark thought she’d been keeping to herself for some time, but as the date of the trip loomed ahead, it began to assert itself more and more.

She took a deep breath, trying to squash her anxiety. “So, do we know how many guys are in our tour group yet?”

Cam fidgeted in her seat as they fell in line with traffic that was slowing down at the border crossing. “I think all of them are guys except us, but I can’t be sure. Grab my passport from my purse, would you? It’s right on top.”

Michelle sighed as she dug Cam’s passport out and added her own with it.

“What?”

“Oh...nothing. Just thinking.”

“About what?” Cam said, taking a sip of her coffee.

Michelle looked off at the other cars crowding around the border patrol booths, wondering if she should say anything. They’d had similar conversations about her concerns in the past, and always Cam had made light of her worries. But the reality was, since Adam had died, she hadn’t laced her hiking boots up once. Finally, she said, “I’m nervous about slowing everyone down.”

“Oh, please. No one’s in a race to get around the Circuit, ‘Chelle.”

“Maybe, but I’m sure I’ll bog everyone down,” she said.

Cam huffed. “You need to let go of that before you drive both of us crazy. You’ll be just fine,” she said as the car at the border patrol booth was waved through. Putting the car in drive, she pulled ahead.

The interrogation with the tall Border Control officer, whose dark brown eyes glanced up and down Cam’s body, was brief. Even so,

Michelle was fairly sure Cam was aware of his looking her over by the way her voice softened in answering him. After they were waved through and on their way to Saranac, Michelle said, “You sure know how to manage the border boys. I get the full deal coming through customs and they just wave you on through.”

Cam shrugged. “Most of them just want their egos stroked.” She broke into a wicked smile and added, “Among other things.”

“Oh my God, did you just say that?”

“I think I did,” Cam said and smirked.

“You are so bad,” Michelle said, then burst out laughing. But deep inside, she envisioned Cam surrounded by the guys while she brought up the rear alone.



They drove into the depths of the Adirondack Park on a winding road that snaked through the towering spruce and pine. As they drove, veering east through the isolated villages of Gabriels and Harrietstown, Michelle tried to ease her anxious mind. She knew she was catastrophizing (Cam’s word for it) and that all of her worst fears had never come to pass.

Five miles later, they were driving through the dense wood, and by the time they came to the village of Saranac Lake, the sun was high in a cloudless blue sky. Cam pulled off the main road that bordered the sparkling blue lake and parked next to a country store/gas station. While Cam went inside, Michelle waited with Merlin, watching people going in and out of the quaint roadside shops bellying up to the lake.

When Cam came back out and joined her, they looked over the water where jet skis were darting back and forth. Michelle tilted her head back and took a breath of the pine-scented air.

Cam tapped Michelle on the arm. “I believe that’s our destination,” she said, pointing to the rising treed landscape overlooking the lake.

Michelle followed the leading edge of the ridge that rose above the lesser peaks and nibbled her lip.

“What?” Cam said as Merlin sat beside them, sniffing the air.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t you worry. You’ll do just fine,” Cam said, turning toward her. She put her hand on Michelle’s shoulder and stared her in the eye. “This is for Adam, never forget that.”

“I know,” Michelle said and steeled herself.

Cam gave Michelle’s shoulder a squeeze. “You’ve worked hard in the gym. You’re in good shape. Come on, let’s go. Daylight’s wasting.”

While Michelle couldn’t argue about her being in better shape lately, she still worried. It had been two years since she had been on a real trail, before.... Her breath caught as the thought passed through her like a knife.

I’m not going to go down this dark well – not now!

Michelle closed her eyes and swallowed the heartbreaking image of her husband, forcing it back to the private place in her heart where she held him safe.



Ampersand’s beaten trail beat a level path under the canopy of the forest for the first kilometer before taking to a moderate uphill slope. As she followed it with Merlin dashing back and forth on the trail, Michelle gazed at the sea of green ferns and trillium that dominated the understory. Here and there, fallen trees and decaying stumps poked up through the sun-dappled verdant blanket. Above, squirrels raced along the clacking branches and birds flitted about from limb to limb. The whine of insects permeated the spring air that was warming up. Cam, who was walking ahead, stopped and waited for her to catch up.

“The trail’s busy this morning,” she said, nodding at the group of teens who’d just tromped past them.

Michelle watched the bare legged girls marching ahead with tank-topped boys leading the way. The majority of them were wearing sneakers

and ankle socks. A couple of them carried backpacks. Michelle shook her head, and waved a couple of black flies away from her face.

“They’re gonna get torn up pretty good.”

“Oh, yeah,” Cam said, bending over and retying her boot. She looked up at Michelle. “Say nothing of ending up with a blister or two. City kids, probably.”

Michelle was quiet a minute. All of a sudden, she was noticing things that were bringing back memories of Adam. Images of Adam in his dress blues, of him stepping off the military transport plane into her arms, of them hiking the seaway trail, camping in the provincial park and canoeing, things they’d still be doing if she hadn’t forgotten to get gas that fateful morning.

They started off, walking at a steady pace as Merlin bounced ahead. Sometimes they passed people who were admiring the forest until at last the ground ramped up to a steep rocky incline. As it did, they met strewn boulders. Poling along, Cam led the way. Her long legs able to bridge the substantial stepped heights of the helter-skelter stone riprap. Michelle tacked her way up behind her and after a solid hour of uphill going, they took a moment to relax and slake their thirst.

Michelle sat on one of many boulders marching up the ragged mount and mopped a river of sweat off her face. Looking up, she hoped to find the top. They’d been climbing for what felt like forever, and she was ready to get off this winding, steep trail cutting into the mountain.

Cam dropped her daypack beside her and leaned against a thick maple. “You okay?” she said, digging a bag of trail mix out of her pack.

“Yeah, I’m good. How much farther, you think?” Michelle said as Merlin bounded back from above where he’d been exploring. The dog nestled beside Cam, his tongue lolling and tail wagging.

Cam looked upward. “Don’t know,” she said. “Can’t be too much farther.”

“I’ll be glad to get into open air.”

“I hear that,” Cam said, stepping up to Michelle. She offered the bag of trail mix to Michelle. “Want some?”

Michelle dug in and grabbed a handful of nuts. She glanced at Adam’s sister from the corner of her eye, put her hand over Cam’s and smiled.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking how good it is to be out here. I’ve missed the woods.”

Cam studied her a moment with a crooked smile. Finally, she said, “Yes it is, and we better get moving before the bugs find us.”



An hour later, Michelle sat on the undulating granite slabs of Ampersand’s summit overlooking the rolling land of spiked pine and spruce. Beside her, Cam sat cross-legged near the edge of the down-sloping rock that dove into the forest.

The last hundred meters up the side of the mountain had tested Michelle, but she was proud of herself, despite being scared a couple of times when the trail turned into a wreck of fallen trees and slick-faced boulders. Her reward was an angry red scrape above her ankle, which she was presently dealing with.

Cam nodded at Michelle’s leg and then at her woolen sock lying beside her. “You’re not wearing liners?”

“Couldn’t find any,” Michelle said, digging a bandage out of her pack. She peeled the tabs off and fixed it over the sore, hoping the field dressing would get her down the mountain. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” She stretched her injured leg out, buttoned her canvas med kit up and put it away.

“Okay. Keep an eye on it, though,” Cam said as Merlin came loping back from another exploration. She looked off toward Mount Marcy and was quiet for some time. Finally, she said, “It’s beautiful up here, don’t you think? I can only imagine what it’ll be like in Nepal.”

Michelle pulled a ham sandwich out, ignoring the dog's hopeful gaze, and took a bite. "The people where I work think I'm nuts going there, except my boss, Don. Which is a good thing because we're gone for a month. Speaking of which, how did the partners take your news?"

Cam smiled. "Like a baby takes a bottle."

"I should have you break the news to my brother and dad," Michelle said, and smiled.

"Well, my family isn't high on me going either. But hey, I'm not a kid anymore. I'm 43," Cam said and grabbed a sandwich from her pack and unwrapped it. "Hey, wait, you haven't told them yet?"

Michelle shrugged. "Umm...nope, not until I'm ready," she said. "Oh my God! Really?"

"Yep. You know CJ. He'll go off like a roman candle, and I'm not interested in dealing with it until I'm ready. Don't worry, we're good," Michelle said, and petted Merlin. Then, sensing the time was right to bring up the phone call, she added, "By the way, he phoned me last night."

"Oh? And?"

"He mentioned there's a house near his neighborhood for sale. Told me he'd buy it and give it to me if I moved up north."

Cam's eyes widened. "Why?"

Michelle looked off. "He wants his family around him, says he's worried about Dad, especially after his heart attack. I know what you're thinking. Don't worry. I'm not going."

"Still, your father would love having you nearby." Cam was quiet a moment, then added, "What's Monica have to say about it?"

"Don't know," Michelle said, trying to hide her reservations toward her brother's wife. "She probably likes the idea of me being there so she can have CJ back to herself."

"Don't sugarcoat it," Cam said. "We both know Monnie wants you to daddysit."

Michelle couldn't argue with that. "You think?"

Cam rolled her eyes. “Daddy’s little princess.”

There was that. Monica was spoiled growing up and had a sense of entitlement. For the life of her, Michelle couldn’t understand what CJ saw in her. Then again, CJ had been driven to make something of his life after putting his family through hell, and marrying into the Mannington family had gone a long way in doing that. Michelle supposed she couldn’t blame him.

That Monica had given CJ two beautiful children, even though they were a tad spoiled (okay, a lot spoiled) sealed the deal. But he was a good father and he grounded his children from a world of glitter that spun around them like so many sugarplums on Christmas morning.

Cam took a bite of her lunch, looked toward the valley below and said, “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing...yet.” Michelle said, and cleared her throat. “Hey, wanna get a room in town and drive back tomorrow?”

Cam turned back with a start. “That sounds great except what do we do with Merlin?” She tilted her head toward the dog.

“Oh...yeah, right,” Michelle said, and pulled Merlin tight to her. “I’m sorry buddy. Your auntie wasn’t thinking, was she?” The dog bent his head back, trying to lick her face.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Cam said.

“What’s that?”

“What about my place? The wine’s free there, too.”

“Hmm...I like that idea,” Michelle said. “And we can stop at Bernie’s on the way back and pick up takeout. I’ll buy.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Cam said.



They ran into torrential rain on the way home and by the time they pulled into Cam’s driveway, the blister on Michelle’s leg was a raging fire. She opened the car door and stepped out into the cool, damp, evening

with Merlin piling out behind her. As she did, she sucked a breath and gritted her teeth.

Cam grabbed the takeout and headed for her side door. Unlocking it, she pushed it open and glanced back, catching Michelle limping after her. “You gonna make it, Hop-Along?”

“Very funny,” Michelle grumbled as she ducked in behind her. “I think I screwed up royally.”

“Ya think. You could have told me you needed liners this morning when we left and I would have stopped at TrailTown, you know.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to hold us up,” Michelle said as she plopped down with a grimace onto one of Cam’s kitchen chairs. Bending over, she untied the laces and tugged her boots off. As she did so, Cam glanced at the bloodstained sock that covered the bandage on the side of her leg.

“Ouch! Sit right there and I’ll go grab my med kit and get you cleaned up,” Cam said setting their takeout on the kitchen table. A minute later, she was back with a small plastic case and a large towel tucked under her arm.

“Merlin, stop sniffing around that table,” she said to the dog as she slid her hands into a pair of latex gloves. The dog darted glances between their takeout and them, then reluctantly retreated to the corner of the room. Cam kneeled before Michelle, placed the towel under her foot and peeled the sock off revealing the bloody bandage. Sitting back, she sighed and looked up guardedly.

“What?” Michelle said.

Cam turned the leg into the light. The area around the blister was swollen and red. “I’ll do what I can, but tomorrow we’ll need to get you to the clinic and have this looked at,” she said, dousing a Q-tip with peroxide. She pulled the bandage away and exposed the wound. “This is going to sting a bit.”

Michelle looked down as Cam lifted her foot. As she dabbed the Q-tip on the wound, Michelle jerked her foot back and winced. “Easy there, Nurse Ratched!”

“Hold still,” Cam said.

“Sorry, but easy, okay,” Michelle said.

Cam took hold of her leg and went about cleaning out the wound.

“You’re going to need to stay off this for the rest of the night.”

“So, no shower?” Michelle said. She gritted teeth while she watched Cam cut away a shriveled flap of skin.

“Fraid not,” Cam said looking over her work. She reached into her case and pulled out a surgical sponge and tamped the area around the wound lightly, then slathered ointment on it. “We’ll let it drain for a bit then I’ll bandage it up.”

“What about a bath...if I keep my foot out of the water,” Michelle said.

Cam sat back on her heels. “I suppose that’d be okay. Just be careful.” She put her medical stuff away and got up. “You need help getting to the bathroom?”

“No, I think I can make it,” Michelle said and got up.

“Okay, I’m gonna grab a fresh towel for you and get you a robe,” Cam said, and headed down the hallway. Over her shoulder, she added, “Remember what I said, keep that hoof out of the water.”

Michelle shed her clothes and was about to toss them in a white, wicker hamper when Cam knocked on the door. Thinking nothing of it, Michelle told her to come in.

“Here, let me take those from you,” Cam said hanging a dark blue robe on the back of the door and reaching out for Michelle’s pants and shirt. Michelle handed them off and turned to draw a bath. As she did, she heard Cam come in. Flashing her a smile, Cam handed a handful of bath beads to her then left.

Michelle dashed them in the water and watched it bubble up as she tied her hair back. Before long, the bathroom was saturated with lavender scents. She straddled the rim of the oval garden tub, careful not to get her wounded ankle wet, and sank down into bliss. For a minute, she lay there submerged with eyes closed breathing in the floral scented water.

The door opened again and Cam came in with a couple glasses of wine. "Takeout's in the oven keeping warm. Thought I'd bring some wine in and get our party started."

"Oh, this is perfect. Thanks," Michelle said, taking the glass. She took a sip, savoring a hint of peach.

"You want the lights dimmed?" Cam said. "It's a bit bright, don't you think?"

Michelle shrugged. "Sure, why not."

A moment later, the room was in a soft yellow glow. "So, how's the water," she said taking a seat next to the tub.

"Heavenly."

Cam sipped her wine and ran her finger through the water. "It is nice. Think I'll be taking one later myself." She was quiet a moment, as if debating something. Finally, she said, "You making out okay financially?"

"Yeah," Michelle said. "I'm okay." She looked at her best friend who was sipping her wine. Cam had been on her own since forever. "Ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"You ever get lonely?"

Cam shrugged. "On occasion."

They were both silent a moment as Nora Jones' voice floated out from the other room. Finally, Cam said, "It gets easier with time."

But Michelle wasn't so sure it would ever get easier for her. Yet, she couldn't see herself with anyone else but Adam. "I guess."

Cam tilted her head and peered down at her. "It's not easy for you, I know." She looked away a moment. "I miss him, too."

“I know.”

Cam turned back. “You need to get out there again. It’s been two years ‘Chelle. I know how much you loved my brother, but he’s gone.”

“I know, I know.” Michelle sighed. “But I wouldn’t know where to start, and to be honest, I’m not ready.”

Cam pursed her lips. “You keep telling yourself that and you’ll end up alone.” She paused. “You might not believe this, but it’s possible to fall in love again. All you have to do is make yourself available. They can’t find you if you’re hiding in your house all the time.”

Michelle frowned. “I get out.”

“Yeah, when I drag you.”

Michelle looked away. She couldn’t argue with that. But a parade of men running through her life? She didn’t think so. It wasn’t who she was or ever had been. She turned back. “I’m not a bar hopper like you.”

“Who says I’m a bar hopper,” Cam said. “I go out with friends. Have a good time. Sometimes, I meet someone. See where it goes.”

“Sometimes?” Michelle said and smiled.

“Okay, a lot of times. Point is, I put myself out there.”

Michelle thought about putting herself out there. She was no Cam, didn’t have the long legs and curves, attributes that summoned men unwittingly. She forced a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

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