

AVALANCHE

**SIMON
FOX**

*nosy
crow*



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For Poppy,
who makes the world worth saving.
– **S.F.**

1

Two skiers tear down the slopes and, for a moment, my frustration is gone. They fly past as if they're above the ground, bright flashes of colour ripping through the grey day. They burst out of the clouds and whoosh through the heavy air like fire birds – until they disappear into the mist again, as quickly as they appeared.

And I am alone.

Down in the valley, the low afternoon sky does its best to blot out the dull smudge of a town that sprawls to my left. Behind me, the mountain looms like an ancient monster – frozen and concealed under the thick swirling snow that never seems to stop falling. I wait for what seems like ages, thinking that this wasn't how today was supposed to be.

Today, Mum was supposed to be teaching me how to ski. She had promised, but that promise turned out like all her others because she's working as always, so I've got to waste my time in this stupid class. Around me, more skiers surge out of the silence and race down the mountain while I wait uselessly, slapping at the snow with my ski poles. Eventually the others clamber up the slope in small, excited clusters and Nikki, our instructor, calls for the lesson to begin.

I stand at the side while they chatter and laugh and organise themselves into groups.

Nikki calls out, "Is anyone on their own?"

I'm the only one who puts up their hand and everyone turns to stare at me. The tall kid in the ski gear that doesn't quite fit because we got to the store so late. My black curly hair needs a cut and no one can see my blue eyes behind my too-small goggles. I'm a week away from being thirteen in a class of seven-to-twelve-year-olds and I feel completely out of place. Nikki walks towards me, dragging behind her a small girl who looks about as uncomfortable as I feel.

“What is your name?” she asks.

“Thomas Brearly,” I say. “Tom.”

Nikki nods. “Tom, this is Anna. She is on her own too. You will go together.”

My heart sinks.

Anna’s about seven years old, with gaps between her teeth and yellow pigtails sticking out from under her red woolly hat. And she looks like she’s holding back tears.

Anna doesn’t move so Nikki practically shoves her at me, before moving to the front to begin the lesson. Anna and I stand awkwardly, not talking to each other, while Nikki calls out instructions and the other kids laugh and mess about on their skis. Every now and then, Anna glances up at me, then looks away quickly as if I’m some kind of ogre who eats little kids. Then finally I get to do something as it’s my turn to glide off down the slope.

I push off as fast as I can.

And immediately fall flat on my face.

All I had to do was slide about five metres down the

gentlest slope, but as soon as I moved, my skis went from under me and I crashed down into the snow.

Everyone laughs, even Nikki. They point and giggle while I struggle to get up, slipping as I put weight on my skis and fall into the snow again. Anna stares at me like the world is ending and I'm doing my best to make it worse.

I lift up my goggles and stare at her, wondering why she's been dumped here when she clearly doesn't want to be. Another mum with better things to do, I figure. And even though the other is the last person either of us would've chosen as a partner, I wonder if we're not so different.

I lie sprawled in the snow with my face half buried in fresh white mush. Sighing loudly, I blow out hard, watching white flakes fly around my face, then I lean on my left hand and push myself up a few centimetres. I keep my eyes fixed on Anna's.

Then I slip again, letting my face fall back into the snow.

I lift my head once more, opening my eyes and

winking at her, watching as her expression changes from misery to confusion. Then I push myself up again, waiting until I'm almost on my feet before plunging back down to the ground. This time when I look up at her, she smiles. And it's like the sun has come out from behind a cloud.

"You need to help me up!" I say to her.

I hold out my hand even though we both know it's a trick. She grins at me, pulling her arms into her body and shaking her head, but I just lie there like I've been mortally wounded. I wait, and when she realises I'm not going to move, she inches closer, half reaching out to help before pulling her hand away quickly when I move to take it. Then she laughs and holds her hand out again and I don't pull her over like she's expecting. I let her heave me up and I say thanks. And neither of us are on our own any more.

Which is good because it turns out Anna's the best skier in the group by a mile. I don't know if it's because she's closer to the ground than anyone else, but she's not scared of anything. As we get to the end of the

session, she's flying down the slopes and all she wants to do is race – which suits me just fine.

For the last run of the day, Nikki takes us to a chairlift that we haven't used before. Anna hurries to the front of the line, but as soon as I see the lift, I feel the nervousness flood into me. Anna beckons to me but she must see something in my eyes because she lets the people behind us go first.

“Are you OK?” she asks quietly.

I glance out at the two-seater carriages that seem to sail through the sky to the top of the slope. “I don't like heights,” I say. “I don't mind the lifts that drag us along the ground. But these ones...”

“You want me to tell Nikki?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“I'll be fine,” I say, although I'm not sure I mean it. But it's too late now anyway. It's our turn to get on the lift and I know Anna really wants to do the last run.

I take a breath and shuffle forward on to the hard-packed surface, turning to watch the chair as it

swings around the concrete pillar behind us. My heart is pounding and I know it's ridiculous but I've got this bad feeling that when the seat swings around, it's going to knock me over and my gear will get tangled in it somehow, so I'll be dragged along as it gets higher until I'm tipped out and crash down to the ground.

I blink the thoughts away and try to focus on what I should be doing, but I can't. I adjust my skis, but I'm standing at the wrong angle and I can't grip my poles properly. I'm going to—

Then suddenly the seat bangs hard into the back of my legs and I am forced into the chair, which sways horribly, then settles. Anna reaches up and pulls down the barrier to lock it in place.

And we rise up, high into the air.

Within moments we are about ten metres up. Anna twists and turns to look around at the skiers on the slopes below, but I just hold on tight and stare ahead at the steel wire we are suspended on, wondering how it can be strong enough to hold the weight of all the carriages. "Look," she says, shaking my arm

and rocking the whole thing so violently I feel sick.
“Imagine living there!”

She points at a single building halfway up the slope of one of the mountain faces to our left. It’s a super-luxury ski chalet, six storeys high, with the afternoon light reflecting off the few patches of the glass roof that are not covered in snow. Another chairlift runs up to it, but none of the carriages are occupied. I watch one of them swinging for a moment as it crosses what looks like a deep black scar running all along the mountain slope.

“That’s where I’m staying,” I say grimly.

“That’s so cool!” Anna says. “What’s that black gap in the ground?”

She twists to get a better look, shaking the chair again, and my hands clamp down automatically on the cold metal rail. “It’s a ravine,” I say. “And there’s no bridge. The only way to the chalet is on the chairlift or by helicopter,” I add, pointing at the helipad in front of the chalet. “I’ve done the lift twice. Once last night and once this morning.” I don’t say I was almost

ill both times.

“What’s in the ravine?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Monsters who eat girls like you.”

She laughs and nudges me. “Do you think anyone’s ever fallen in?” she asks.

Just hearing the words, it’s like I can feel my body hurtling down into the emptiness. Strange thoughts of standing on the edge fill my mind, so real I can feel myself shaking. I stare straight at the carriage in front of us, trying to focus on anywhere except down.

Anna must sense something because she stops smiling and looks at me anxiously. “Are you OK?” she asks.

I lie and say I’m fine. Mum always says you can’t be brave unless you’re scared first, so I concentrate on the feel of the safety barrier grasped tightly in my fingers and force myself to be calm. Then I look down again and point to the two red lines that run parallel to the ravine.

“You can’t get close to the edge,” I say. “That fence runs all the way along both sides. The guy my mum

works for owns that whole side of the mountain and he likes his privacy. But he had a car accident, which meant she had to come and stay here for a while.” I sigh. “She said if I came out we could have a holiday together.”

“Does she look after him?”

I look at her, wondering how to explain it to a seven-year-old or even if I’m allowed to. *She’s head of security at his biotech firm*, I want to say. *She doesn’t think the accident was an accident, even though the police do. She thinks someone wanted him to smash his car into a building, wrecking his back and breaking the leg of his daughter, who was in the car with him.* That’s what I want to say, but it all sounds so unbelievable that I don’t.

But Mum believes it. She’s so convinced someone wanted to kill Eric that she won’t let him out of her sight, even if it means not coming home for months because she doesn’t trust anyone else. Even if it means breaking every promise she’s made me.

I look at Anna, but I can’t tell her all that, can I? I just

shrug. "Something like that," I say.

"So it's safe then."

I'm about to tell her that Mum doesn't think so until I realise Anna's pointing at the fence around the ravine. I pull a silly face. "Not if you fall in from up here," I say, and she laughs again.

After another minute, the chalet is out of sight and our carriage is almost at the chairlift. Anna wraps her ski-pole straps around her wrists, then puts her goggles back on. We lift the barrier up and she slides right out of the chair, pushing off and skiing away while I hesitate until the man running the lift grabs my arm and hauls me to the side.

As I try to get my balance, Nikki gets off the next carriage and draws alongside me, putting her gloves on effortlessly as she skis.

"Your skiing is getting better but you're less good at the lifts," she says, but I don't have a chance to reply because she's giving the group our last instructions of the day.

"OK, everyone. Stay in your pairs. We ski down run

number eight, then turn on to number four and go all the way down to the bottom, where you will meet your parents. Let's go."

Anna adjusts her goggles and looks at me with a half-smile on her face. "Wanna race?" she asks, but she doesn't need to.

Because I've already gone. And for any chance at winning, I'm going to need a head start.

2

We tear over the slope, going so fast it's like the rest of the world is standing still. Anna is quick and I hate losing, so within moments we are ahead of the others.

I can hear Anna just behind me, whooping and yelling that she's coming for me, as she takes a curve at a sharper angle and shoots off into the lead. I bend my knees and point straight down the mountain so that my weight will give me an advantage. We take the next turn together—

Then without warning we are in the middle of a crowd. There's a café with a large outdoor terrace to our left and next to it is the exit point of another ski lift. People are moving in all directions, crossing the slopes or just standing still, oblivious to skiers around them.

A man steps out in front of Anna and she swerves off to her left, ducking close to the ground to stop from falling. I pass the other side of him, then push down hard on my right ski to follow her, banking and swerving towards the café, before turning into a wide patch of snow that is empty of other skiers.

I yell at Anna to slow down but she has lost the grip on one of her poles and is trying to grab it again while still moving. She turns and glances at me, relieved that I'm still following, then leans to the left so she is going against the slope and can finally slow down and sort out the pole. Eventually she stops and waits for me, but as soon as I catch up and stop next to her, she takes off again, grinning and waving and telling me she's going to win by miles.

Except there are three ways down the mountain from this junction. And she's chosen the wrong one.

Within seconds, the slope is much steeper than the ones we're used to.

I shout at her to stop, but she doesn't hear me, and as I try to get close, she thinks we're still racing

and speeds up too. Until it becomes obvious we are way out of our depth.

Anna slips first, trying to take a bend too quickly so her legs slide out from under her. I overtake her and try to stop, but within moments I'm too far past and the only way to slow down seems to be to fall over too. I tip myself over, but it's so steep it still takes another twenty metres for me to stop sliding. Above me, Anna is trying to get to her feet but it's difficult.

"Just slide down towards me," I shout, and she nods, twisting on to her side to let herself skid forward until she's reached me. I sit up and grab my phone out of my pocket, opening the resort map to find where we are. Then I point at a wavy black squiggle that runs over the image of the mountain.

"We went the wrong way at that junction," I say. "We should have gone down the beginners' run but now we're on one of the hardest."

Just as I say it, a couple of skiers appear on the slope above us and flash past so quickly I can feel the rush of wind as they go.

“Hey!” I yell after them, but they have already disappeared into the blur of falling snow and I realise sitting in the middle of the slope is the wrong thing to do.

Anna’s lip is trembling slightly and I think the speed of the two skiers has scared her.

“Let’s walk,” I say. “It comes out at the same place as the run that the others are on. It’ll just take a while.”

She scrunches her face up. “My mum’s waiting,” she says. “I don’t want to be late.”

“I bet your mum will be more happy you didn’t get hurt,” I say.

She nods wisely. “Is your mum waiting for you?” she asks.

I look away. “Mum’s working,” I say. “A girl called Emily’s waiting for me. Her dad’s the man that owns the chalet.”

“Is she good at skiing already?”

I roll my eyes. “She’s good at everything already!” I say. “And I’m not allowed to go back on my own so we’re meant to go back together.”

“On the chairlift? Across the ravine?”

I smile. “Don’t remind me,” I say. “Ready to walk?”

Anna looks back up at the steep slope. She nods and we snap off our skis and carry them to the side of the slope where the snow is thick and undisturbed.

“You carry the poles and I’ll take the skis,” I say, scooping them awkwardly into my arms. “I bet we’re the only pair to do a black run on our first day,” I add, and she smiles.

Then we begin the long trudge down.

What should have taken about a minute to ski takes half an hour to walk. We make it safely but we’re both pretty exhausted. At the bottom of the slope, Nikki is talking to an angry-looking woman wearing designer gear and a policeman dressed in a special ski uniform. When she sees us, the woman shouts out in relief, then rushes up to Anna and starts having a go at her for being late. Then the policeman says something I can’t hear and the woman turns back to him.

“Is your friend here?” Anna asks me.

I nod and point to where a tall girl with long dark hair is sitting on her own on a bank of snow, her face masked by mirrored sunglasses and a scowl. She’s wearing white ski gear, with designer snow boots. As we get closer, she opens the jacket of her white ski suit, lifts her T-shirt to reveal a white disc with a tube running down to a box tucked into her waistband. She checks the box before zipping up her jacket again and looking up, almost guiltily.

“What’s she doing?” Anna whispers. “What is that?”

I turn away from Emily as if I haven’t seen. “It’s because she’s diabetic,” I say quietly. “I don’t know why but she’s a bit embarrassed about it.”

“She doesn’t look very happy.”

Before I can reply, Emily’s spotted me and marched up to us. “Where’ve you been!” she demands. “I’ve been waiting on my own for ages. I sent you about a million messages.”

“We went the wrong way,” I say. “Got stuck on a black run and had to walk.”

She looks at me like I'm a complete idiot. "Didn't you use the map?" she asks. "All the runs are clearly labelled. You could have messaged me!"

I check my phone and see the string of messages and missed calls. "I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't think."

She shakes her head. "You only think about yourself, don't you," she says. "As if I have nothing better to do than wait for you!"

Emily pulls on her gloves and heads towards the private ski lift that goes back to the chalet. Anna looks sad for a moment before her mum snaps at her to hurry up. She turns to me as she walks off. "See you tomorrow," she says hopefully.

"I'm supposed to be spending tomorrow with my mum," I say. "But I was supposed to spend today with her, so who knows."

Anna nods as if she understands and I slide awkwardly down the mountain after Emily, who only waits a second for me, scanning her pass and pushing through the barrier to the private lift. I follow clumsily and stand next to her as the next carriage trundles

towards us, then swings into position.

Emily must have taken this lift hundreds of times and could let the chair scoop her into the sky, but instead she pushes the red button, which stops the lift so I can climb into the seat, before pulling the safety bar down and starting it again. The mechanism clanks jerkily into life and we sail upwards to the chalet.

“Thanks for stopping it,” I say, trying to make peace. “But I would have been all right with it moving.”

She snorts noisily. “I didn’t do it for you. This lift’s not manned so if there’s a problem there’s no one to help us. You’re a complete beginner,” she says. “You’d probably panic and get us both killed.”

Her words sting, but I feel bad about being late and I don’t want to argue so we sit in silence while I concentrate on staring at the top of the mountain in front of us and ignoring the ravine below. The snow falls like it’s never going to end, like it has every day since we got here and apparently every day for a month before that. Once we cross the ravine, the

slopes wind through scattered groups of trees. And it's odd how empty this mountain is after seeing how many people were on the other side.

"If you stop trying to lean back, you'll find it much easier."

I've been lost in my thoughts and Emily's words come out of the blue. I turn to her. "How do you mean?"

"I saw you earlier," she says. "Beginners often lean back when they think they're going too fast, but the best way to slow down is to change your angle on the slope. If you keep your weight even on the skis you won't lose balance so much."

I wonder if she's trying to build bridges too. "Thanks," I say, and I don't want the conversation to end so I ask her why there's no one skiing on this side of the mountain.

She shrugs. "Like who?" she asks. "There's only me and Dad here. And your mum," she adds.

"So who do you ski with?"

"I don't really," she says.

“Is that because of the diabetes?” I ask, and immediately wish I hadn’t.

Her face colours and her frown returns. “No,” she says bluntly. “My leg gets sore where I broke it, OK? Nothing to do with diabetes.”

It’s been months since the accident and her leg seems fine, but I don’t want to say the wrong thing again so I stay quiet until a large red sign indicates we’re nearing the exit point for the chairlift. The carriage descends close to the ground and Emily leans out to slap at the large button on the wall beside her so the lift stops completely.

Then, without waiting, she is out of her seat and walking towards the chalet, taking the footpath, which is separated from the main slope by a thin line of trees. I gather up my skis and am about to shout for her to wait when my phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s a message from Mum.

Come and find me when you’re back

By the time I put my phone back my pocket, Emily has reached the chalet. She climbs up the wide steps

at the front, which run all the way from the ground floor up to a sun terrace on the fourth floor and then into the main sitting room. I ignore the steps and turn off to go to the ski changing area on the ground floor where I can dump my skis and put my trainers on.

Suddenly I feel nervous. It feels like I haven't seen Mum in forever. She talked about us going for dinner in the village so if she's finally finished work maybe we can go early. I hurry out of the changing area, into the central hallway, which separates each floor of the chalet into two sides. There is a lift on my left but I take the stairwell on my right, running up the flights of stairs to the third floor where the guest suites are.

Inside our suite there's a sitting area and doors that lead to two separate bedrooms and another for the shared bathroom. Music is coming from Mum's open door and I drop my hat, gloves and goggles down on a chair before heading towards it. Mum looks up as I appear in the doorway and stop abruptly.

Laid out on the bed in front of her is a small travel

case with several items of clothing packed neatly. Next to them is her washbag as well as her laptop, charger and passport.

And next to the case is a gun.