

ADVANCE  
READING  
COPY

# Above All Else



Dana Alison Levy

Text copyright © 2020 Dana Alison Levy  
Cover illustration copyright © 2020 Levente Szabo  
Mount Everest photo copyright © Naeblys/stock.adobe.com

At the time of publication, all URLs printed in this book were accurate and active. Charlesbridge, the author, and the illustrator are not responsible for the content or accessibility of any website.

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Charlesbridge and colophon are registered trademarks of Charlesbridge Publishing, Inc.

Published by Charlesbridge  
85 Main Street  
Watertown, MA 02472  
(617) 926-0329  
[www.charlesbridgeteen.com](http://www.charlesbridgeteen.com)

ISBN 978-1-62354-140-8 (reinforced for library use)

Printed in the United States of America  
(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Display type set in Black Mountage by Sarid Ezra  
Text type set in Arethusa Pro by AviationPartners  
Production supervision by Brian G. Walker  
Designed by Diane M. Earley

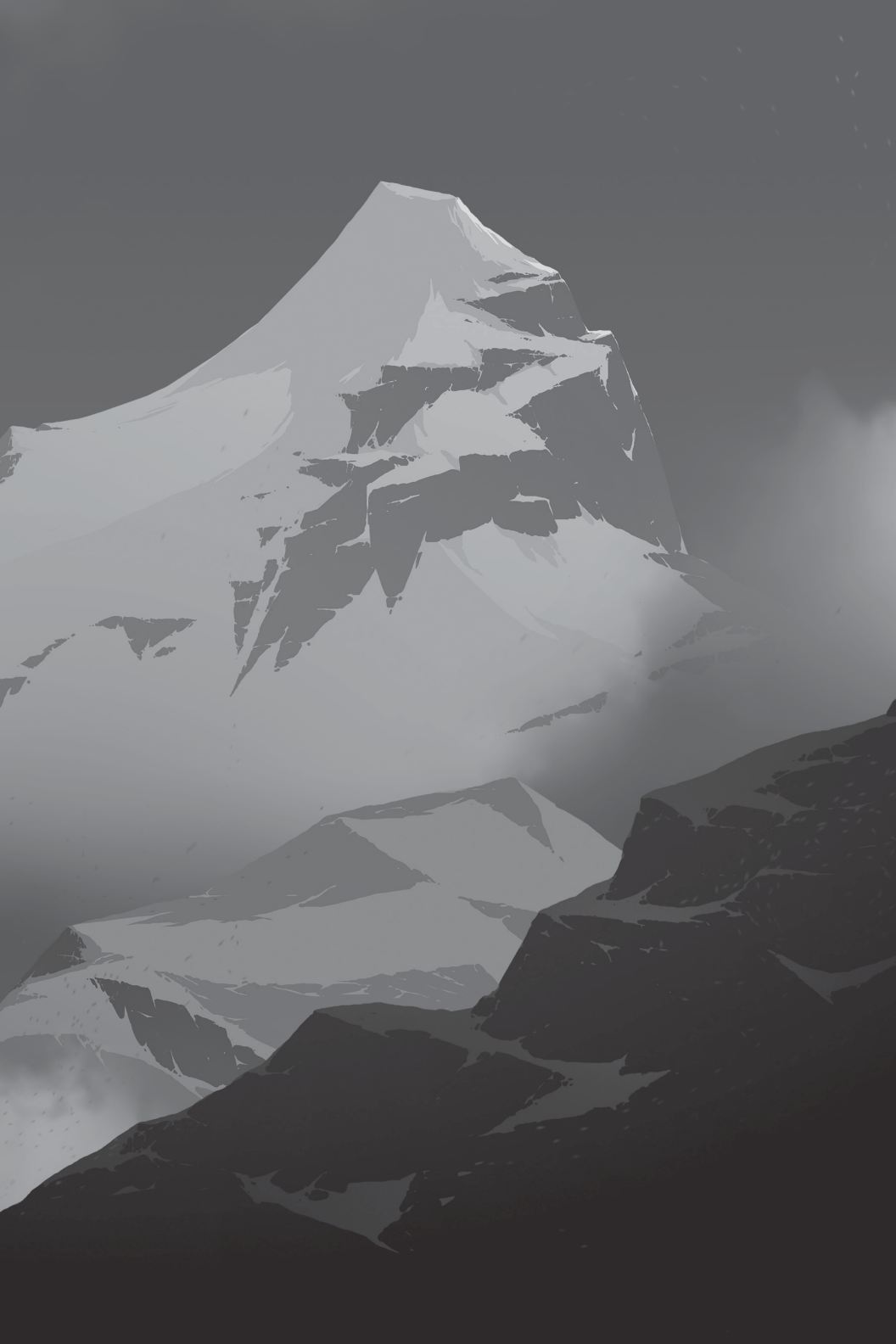
*This one's for Kate, who walked up  
the mountain with me, again and again*

*The mountains are not fair or unfair.  
They are just dangerous.*

—Reinhold Messner







*March 1*

*Dear Jordan Russo, Tate Russo, Rose Keller, and Paul Kirby,*

*We are only one month away from your departure for Nepal!*

*Climbing Mount Everest, or Sagarmatha, as it is called in the Nepali language, is a challenge few will attempt and even fewer will accomplish. We offer top technological equipment, sophisticated weather forecasting, expert guides, and comfortable Base Camp facilities to help you reach your goal.*

*As you know, climbing Mount Everest is a commitment of several months. In order to survive the altitude at 29,035 feet, we require weeks to acclimatize to the lack of oxygen. The best way to do this is to move slowly up the mountain to Everest Base Camp, which sits at 17,600 feet.*

*Base Camp will be our home for the next six to eight weeks, as we commit to a training regimen*

*that involves climbing to progressively higher and higher camps and returning to sleep at lower camps. “Climb high, sleep low” is our guiding principle, allowing the body to adapt to the reduced oxygen over time.*


*An expedition like this is a serious undertaking, and your safety is our priority. This climb is not for thrill seekers or daredevils but for those who hope to challenge themselves beyond what seems possible.*

*Thank you for entrusting us with your dream.*

*Sincerely,*

*Finjo Sherpa,  
Expedition Leader and Founder,  
Mountain Adventure Expedition Company*

*The only Nepali-owned organization to be rated in the top five Mount Everest outfitters by Lonely Planet!*



*North Col*  
23,000' / 7000m

*Khumbu  
Icefall*

*Base Camp*  
17,600' / 5380m ▲



**Mt. Everest  
Summit**  
29,035' /  
8850m

**South Summit**  
28,500' / 8690m

**Lhotse**  
27,940' / 8516m

**C4-South Col**  
26,300' / 8000m

**C3**  
23,500' /  
7162m

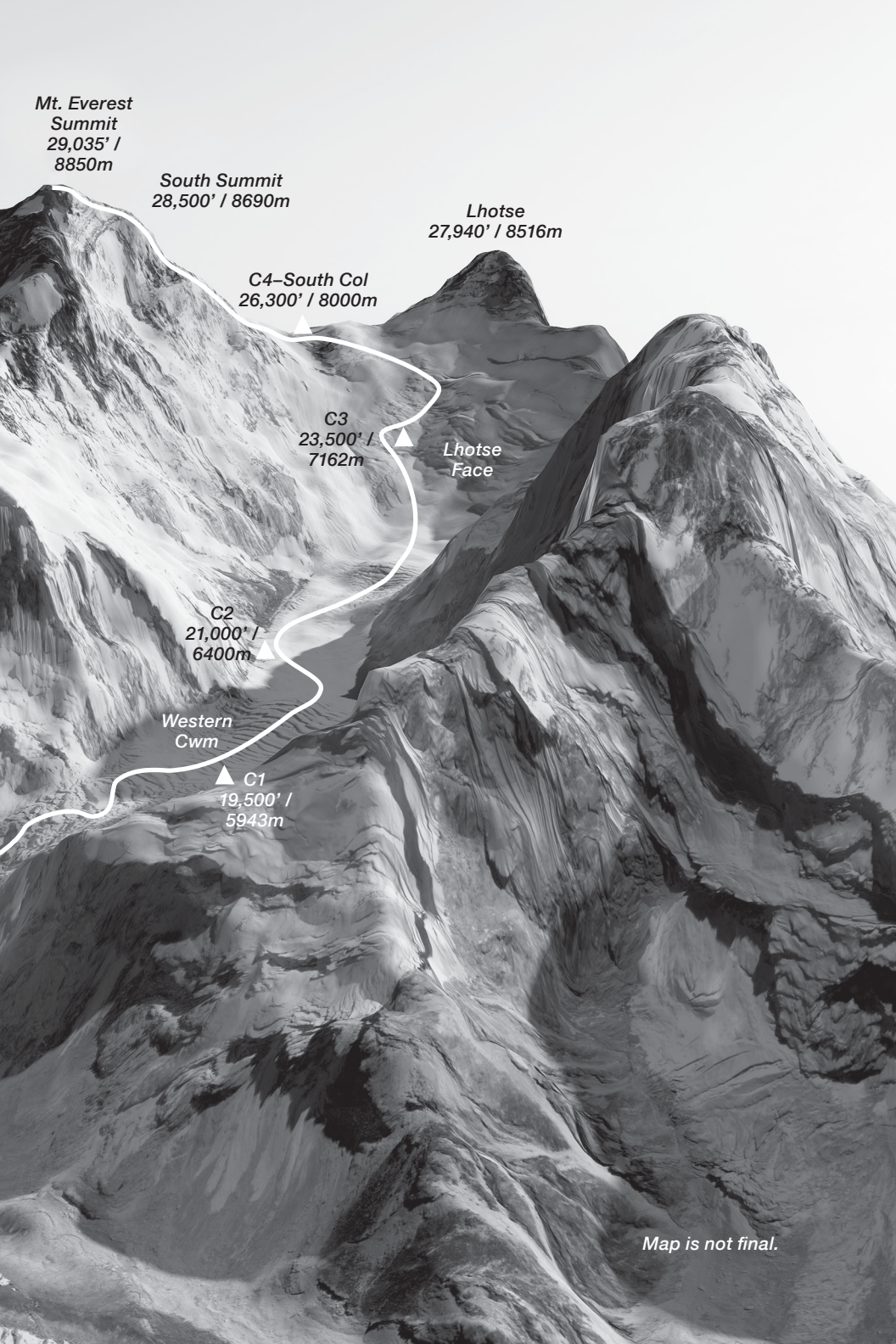
**Lhotse  
Face**

**C2**  
21,000' /  
6400m

**Western  
Cwm**

**C1**  
19,500' /  
5943m

*Map is not final.*





# Chapter One:

## Rose

*April 1*

*San Francisco Airport*

*13 feet above sea level*

The check-in line at the airport is ridiculously long. Even with my lists and special secret passport-and-foreign-currency pouch (which Tate keeps insisting is a fanny pack, but it's *not*), I'm still dithering around convinced I've lost my visa or something. It doesn't help that Mami is behind me, chattering in an upbeat, delighted sort of way about everything from the weather forecast in Kathmandu to the charm of the Buddhist temples we'll have to go see to the ice reports that are starting to be posted on the climbing blogs.

She should be coming with us. She should be photographing the temples and traversing the ice herself. I push this thought away and grab Tate. "Selfie time! Official trip documentation starts now!"



Tate obligingly puts bunny ears over my head and grins, then nudges me. “Yo. We’re finally up.”

I blink and rush toward the counter. We’re already behind schedule, though in theory we still have plenty of time to make our flight. Or flights . . . two flights and thirty-two hours of travel await. San Francisco to Seoul, South Korea; Seoul to Kathmandu, Nepal. We’re off to a tiny, rectangular country wedged in between China and India, home to the highest peaks in the world, including the grand prize, Everest.

I hand over my paperwork to the bored check-in attendant and try to pay attention while she talks about our extra-luggage fees—it takes a metric ton of gear to climb, and that’s before I sorted out which protein bars to bring—but Mami’s still talking. She sounds so happy, like everything is going exactly according to plan, even though, in truth, nothing is. I’m heading off on this climb, this trip of a lifetime, and she’s not.

This whole trip started with her. We have all climbed together for years, since Tate and I were little kids: RoseAndTate, best friends and climbing partners. But Mami was the one who made this trip happen, who pushed Everest from dream to reality, though the dream really started with Tate. He’s always been the most intense of all of us about climbing, and Everest is the ultimate goal. Not that it was hard to convince Jordan, Tate’s father. Jordan’s pretty intense when it comes to bagging peaks. He’s pretty intense in general. Tate is more chill than his dad, except about climbing. Ever-ready, ever-energized, up-for-any-mountain, that’s Tate. Of course he was all about Everest. Especially since it got us out of our last few months of senior year. School’s not exactly Tate’s favorite place. Anyway, now we’re heading off, and it’s RoseAndTate, and Jordan, but no Mami.



Once we're done checking in, we shuffle ourselves out of the way of the crowds to say goodbye. Tate's mom, Sarah, is holding on to him like she might never let go, and Tate shoots me a half-panicked look over her shoulder. I shrug back, not sure how I'm supposed to help with her kraken-like grip.

"Sarah, we'll be fine," Jordan says, rubbing her back. "We are not the kind of mountaineers who are going to make the ultimate sacrifice. There's too much to come home to. We *will* see you in Kathmandu in June, and if we've summited Everest, great. If not, so be it, but either way, we'll be there."

"I know! I know that," Sarah mumbles into Tate's shoulder. "But I can't help thinking—"

Jordan's voice quiets. "It was a fluke, what happened before. I promise, Sare. I'll keep him safe."

I turn and hug Dad. He looks baffled, as always, that this is something I want, but he hugs me hard and tells me he's proud of me. He has grown used to me and Mami heading off to points unknown, but I don't think it's ever easy for him. And this is the longest I'll have been gone: almost three months. Without Mami. But if he worries, he doesn't tell me. Instead he just says again and again how proud he is, how much he loves me.

Next to me, Tate is still wrapped in his mother's arms. "I love you so much, Mama," I hear him whisper.

She squeezes him once, even tighter, then lets go fast.

"Be. Careful," she says, holding his chin and staring into his eyes as if she can burn the message into his brain. The whole family is white, but only Sarah has the kind of pale skin where you can see every freckle stand out. She's flushed

and pink, her eyes a shiny telltale red that means she's trying not to cry.

"Yes!" Jordan says, clearly relieved that the emotional part of the goodbye is over. "Let's break your 'Master of Disaster' track record, shall we? You'll need to really focus."

"I will! Jeez. I'm going to be climbing Mount Everest," Tate says. "I don't think my mind's going to wander."

Sarah interrupts. "I don't just mean climbing! Be careful on the streets in Nepal with those crazy drivers, and on the trek up to Base Camp—my God! Be careful of the yak trains! I read about those giant groups of yaks that come barreling down the paths, loaded up with gear. You have to squeeze yourself against the inside, against the rock, or they can knock you right off the side of the mountain. Rose! Tell him!" She turns to me.

I nod solemnly. "I'm on it, Sarah. Trust me. It's not going to be like in La Paz—"

"I WAS TWELVE!" Tate pretend shouts, and we all laugh.

It's best that we laugh, instead of thinking of what could happen. Like Dad, Sarah has never understood our climbs, but unlike Dad, she's never really been okay with it. Whenever we first get back from a trip, she clutches Tate like he's going to disappear. Now he's eighteen and off on the trip of a lifetime, so she's doing the best she can to suck it up. But I can see the fear in her eyes.

Mami is still smiling big and wide, her dark eyes crinkled up. She looks so happy for us, but what is it like for her, to watch the rest of us head off to live her dream? She swears up and down she can't wait to meet us in Kathmandu when it's all over, that she's fine. And I try so hard to believe it. But my capital-D Dread, so enormous and gut-churning and

constant, isn't easy to dismiss. It waits until I'm relaxing in my room, or half-asleep in my bed. Then it tries to swallow me whole.

I push it away and hold up my phone. "Let's get a group shot, okay? Mami, I promise you, I'm going to send so many photos and videos and texts that you'll practically be there with us!"

"You'll have all the sights, none of the smells, so none of Rosie's high-altitude crop dusters! What could be better?" Tate says, and we laugh. Mami laughs loudest of all.

She grabs me in one last hug. "I am so excited for you," she says, her voice strong. "You, my love, are the most thoughtful, deliberate climber I've ever had the privilege of climbing with." She looks at me with such intensity that I'm surprised flames don't crackle out from her eyes. "Savor every moment, Rosalita. I hope it is magical."

There's no judgment in her voice, no resentment. But I can't help thinking about every time I bitched about training or complained about missing too much school. I wanted this, but never as much as Mami. I can't help thinking that she should be doing this, not me.

I look more like my dad—a seriously tall, skinny white guy with blue eyes—than Mami, who is pretty short for a climber and has darker skin and deep, brown eyes. We're different enough that when I was a baby, people thought she was the nanny. But looking into her face is like looking into my own. Our connection is so strong it's like a rope strung between us. After staring into my eyes, she squeezes me once more, then lets go.

She turns and gives Jordan a quick hug, then swats him. "Jordan! Scram! The last thing I want to hear is a phone call once we get home and back into bed that you've missed the

plane. Remember that time in Chile—”

“Again, I was TWELVE!” Tate says, and Mami laughs and hugs him.

“I know, I know. I’m teasing. You’re an excellent climber, Tate. Just remember to take care of yourself the way you take care of Rose and you’ll be fine.” She pauses. “Take such care. We need you, my friend. Okay?”

Tate nods and hugs her tight, dwarfing her until she disappears in his arms.

We have one more round of hugs, and there’s an attempt to actually head to security, but then we’re delayed by a frantic realization that someone (Tate) forgot his e-reader in his mother’s purse, followed by a round of hugs, and then we’re off.



Twenty hours into our trip, I think Tate and I are the only ones awake. Jordan popped an Ambien the minute our second flight took off, and by the snores coming out of her, so did the woman in front of me. I keep turning around and around in my seat as though there were even the remotest chance of getting comfortable.

“Will you stop!” Tate whacks me on the arm. “It’s like sitting next to a rotisserie chicken!”

I sigh. “Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’m so tired. But I can’t sleep.”

He cracks his neck, then winces at the popping sound. “No, I’m sorry. I’m just edgy. Can’t sleep, can’t read, can’t watch any more TV . . .”

“There are BBC channels. You can watch the baking show,” I point out, my voice muffled. I’ve dropped the tray

table and have face-planted on it, my head resting on a sweatshirt. “Will you draw pictures on my back?”

This is what we do in the tiny tents on climbing expeditions, where we get into our sleeping bags as soon as the cold bites. Depending on the climb and who else from our larger group is with us, I share a tent with either Tate or Mami. He snores way less than Mami, though I swear in high altitude it’s like a contest to see which of our farts are worse. As an only child, I’ve always been fairly private, but sharing tents with Tate gives me some taste of what it might be like to have a brother. Even as we grew up, and the boy-girl thing could have been weird, we somehow managed to keep our friendship normal. Not that our friends at school totally believed it. Anyway, we have a deal: one night I tickle his arm until he falls asleep, the next he draws pictures on my back.

“Course,” he says, and starts to draw. I’m supposed to guess the pictures, but it’s too hard to pay attention when I’m half-asleep and hypnotized by his light touch. The Dread falls asleep too. At least while he’s drawing. This time he doesn’t ask me to guess. He draws shapes that might be mountains, or waves, or rocket ships . . . with Tate, it could be anything.

“So, you okay? Saying goodbye to your mom and all?” he says finally.

I shrug and he adds an accidental zigzag to whatever he’s drawing. “It sucked. But . . . I mean, she’s counting on me to go and totally live the experience, and I will. I’m not kidding that I’ll send so many photos and stuff that she’ll have a, I don’t know, virtual reality version of the trip. So that makes it easier.” I sigh. “I can’t believe we’re actually on our way. Do you realize we’re done with high school? Hello, ‘inde-

pendent study!’ But it’s over. All our friends, and all that work . . . Honors Calculus, History . . . *done*.” I sigh into my sweatshirt. “It feels weird, don’t you think? We’re going to miss all the fun senior spring stuff. ”

He laughs softly. “Yeah, I’m not real nostalgic for high school. Maybe in twenty years. I’ll take a trip to Nepal over sitting in those crappy chairs for six hours a day, anytime.” He sighs. “You have no idea how pumped I am to be out of that place.”

I snort. “It’s not exactly a vacation. You know we’ll be trying to stay alive in the death zone on Everest, right?”

His hands stop moving for a second, then start up again. “Yeah. I remember.”

I sigh. “But I guess it’s easy for you. You’re the toughest of all of us. Who barely gets jet lag? Who’s the least sick from altitude? Who’s the only one who made it up Engelhorn without puking? Also, was that a boat?” I ask, trying to stay awake.

“Shhh, no. It was an owl. Go to sleep; I’ll keep drawing.” Tate’s fingers brush the skin of my neck for a minute, then they’re gone.

I’m so tired. “Are you sure? I can stay up.” My voice isn’t very convincing.

“Go to sleep. I got this,” Tate says, and I do.



## Chapter Two:

*Tate*

*(Five Months Earlier) December 19  
Boorman Creek High School, California  
7 feet above sea level*

*I*t's entirely possible that the thing that will finally kill me won't be trying to ollie a stupid-wide gap on my skateboard or cracking my skull falling at El Capitan, but will be . . . Advanced Seminar Literature. I wasn't going to take the class—I'm not an advanced kind of student, except for electives like Real-World Design Challenge—but my favorite teacher, Mr. Abrams, did that thing where he looked me in the eye and told me he reallyreallyreally thinks I can do it if I put my mind to it. He meant well, I'm sure, but now it's halfway through first term of senior year and all I hear while he's talking about persuasive arguments and fallacy of reason is the adult voices in the Charlie Brown specials: *Wah-wah WAAH-wah, wah-wah*. I have a feeling both Mr. Abrams and I are going to regret this by the time final grades are due.

I slide my sketchbook out from under my notebook and start to doodle. My brain's in that place where a million thoughts collide and crash into each other: Are we finally heading back to Mount Rainier in a few weeks even though the temps are going to be ball-shrinkingly freezing? Is Rose wearing yet another new necklace, and if so, how many necklaces does one human need? Is there a material light-weight and strong enough to build retractable wings on a small airplane, since realistically I think that's the only way we're going to get flying cars in my lifetime? The only thing that shuts off my brain is letting my fingers fly over my sketchbook.

Rose, who sits beside me, slides her foot under my desk and stomps on my toes. "*He's telling us what will be on the midterm,*" she whispers. "*TAKE. NOTES.*"

I sigh. Flip her the finger discreetly behind my sketchbook. Slide it back under my notebook and dutifully try to take notes.

The thing is, school's easy for Rose. No. That's not true. She works incredibly hard, unlike our friend Ronan, who does dick-all and still mostly gets As. No, *working hard* is really easy for Rose. And not just in school. In every part of her life. She has color-coded calendars and bullet journals and list-making apps and whatever else it takes to juggle a million things and make it look effortless.

With climbing, like everything else, Rosie's a natural. That's what Dad said the first time he took us to the rock gym when we were ten, and he repeats it—feels like every single time we're out together. It's true: she clings to the rock like she grew there, like she has magnets in her hands that move automatically to the strongest hold on the mountain. And unlike at school, I am too. The two of us were

phenoms at gym when we were little, and now I've got six feet three inches of reach that make it almost easy to monkey up stuff other people can barely touch. And the gnarlier it is, the better . . . It sends my mind into hyperfocus so that there's nothing to do or worry about except the next reach in front of me.

Somehow climbing went from one thing we do for fun—along with surfing (me), skateboarding (me), sketching (me), eating frightening amounts of fish tacos (me and Rose), buying necklaces (Rose), planning world domination via architecture (Rose)—to . . . *everything*. Every weekend filled with overnight, extreme-condition climbs in the Sierras or the Rockies. Every summer paycheck put into an account for climbing expenses. Every vacation's air miles cashed in for tickets to climbing playgrounds in South America, Canada, Europe. Every conversation leading to speculation about how long it will be until the big one: Nepal. Mount Everest. I love it.

Closing my eyes for a second, I imagine me and Rose and Dad and Maya, Rose's mom, on our way to Everest. Immediately my brain's overloaded with a million different images, facts, thoughts—like a beehive exploded in there. It's too much. Jimmy, the shrink I've seen since I was seven, would probably tell me to get a hold of my toolbox and figure out which tool was going to help me chill out. I've been trying to pull things out of that toolbox for ten years now. Sometimes it works, others not. But I get it now: I'm wired to be hyper.

We've been planning this trip for so long—longer than I have ever worked for anything in my life, by far. We were in fourth grade when I asked Rose and Maya and Dad if we could climb Mount Everest someday. I was hanging on an advanced route at Rockface, the gym where we started climbing, literally hanging in midair, because I could. Maya

was belaying me, and Rose was on a route nearby, with Dad below. We both loved being roped in. When you're belaying, you're suspended by your climbing harness: even if you fall, you don't go anywhere, at least as long as you trust the person holding the rope. It's awesome knowing you can't fuck up if you try.

I asked her the question only because hanging there I could see this huge poster-sized photo of the gym owner on Everest, and it looked incredible. And Rosie said sure, like I was asking if she wanted to go to Mount Tam again this weekend. But Maya looked up at us, then at Dad, and shrugged and said, "Really? Would you?"

And we both said yes, and I don't know about Rose, but my heart was beating so fast, like someone was really asking me if I wanted to see dragons or travel to the moon. It seemed impossible, something that only climbing rock stars could ever even consider, but that night over In-N-Out burgers, Maya pulled up some facts about Mount Everest, and the kind of climbers who did it, and said if we were serious, we could talk about planning for it.

I've never wanted anything so much in my life. School sucked, and fighting with my parents about school sucked worse, but when I was training to climb Mount Everest, I wasn't a school fuckup, I was a climber, someone working toward one of the most elite and extreme adventures on the planet. The more people we told, the more it felt like we were nailing down a promise. It felt impossible, but also inevitable, like I *had* to do it.

With Maya's help there were bake sales every Thursday, with two hundred individually wrapped chocolate chip cookies and a cute handwritten sign saying *Cookies for Climbing: Help Us Reach the Top of the World*. And in fifth grade, a

car wash every Saturday. And selling bags of popcorn every Friday lunch period in sixth. Maya was doing all the research, booking the guides, following each year's climbing season the way some people follow their favorite football teams. But I was the one who couldn't stop talking about it. And of course Dad was all in. He was climbing long before I came along. It was his idea to get me to Rockface in the first place. He said if I was going to climb the walls at home, I might as well learn how to do it right. But he was stoked that I love it so much and brags to all his friends about my climbing. It's cool to have *one* thing in common.

The bell rings, and I stare down at my language arts notebook, where I have the word *Everest* written in blocky, jagged letters that get larger in the middle, then taper down again. If the mountain needed a logo, this would be cool. But I'm pretty sure it has all the name recognition it needs. Crumpling the paper with a satisfying noise, I rip it out of the notebook and arc it toward the recycle bin.

Rose raises an eyebrow. "Were those your notes?"

I shake my head. "It was nothing," I say, not wanting to get into my poor note-taking skills. "Hey, we climbing today?" I try to keep my voice chill, because Rose gets pissy when she thinks I'm nagging her. But the truth is that the trip of a lifetime is coming up in a few months, and I'm sorry, but her school yearbook / environmental club / unpaid internship / part-time job / AP course load all need to take a back seat. You can't half-ass training for Mount Everest.

"No, I can't." Rose peers down into her bag as we walk out of the room, and I put a hand on her back to steer her away from the wall. Sometimes she takes multitasking to dangerous new levels. "My mom has a doctor's appointment and needs a ride home after."

We're in the hallway now, pushing through the mob of people, and so many of them seem like babies. Was that really us, four years ago? I glance at Rose: climbing partner and best friend since the first-grade school bus. Four years ago she was five inches taller than me and had braces, but the summer after that year, all my guy friends started asking if they could climb with us sometime, and it wasn't because they all suddenly developed an interest in alpine ascents. She had turned into what Ronan called a "totally naturally occurring homegrown babe," which is, sure, maybe true but totally beside the point. We've both changed since first grade, but thank the god of whatever's up there, our friendship's stayed the same.

"Another one? Bummer," I say, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

"Seriously. I don't know what the doctors are even looking for. I keep telling her—she's just getting old."

I laugh. "Yeah. Right. Your mom's like Wonder Woman . . . Thank God she's almost fifty, or we'd get our asses kicked every time we climb." It's true. Maya's literally a foot shorter than me, and thirty years older, but she's a total badass. Still, she's been achy and dizzy with some weird virus for ages, hence the endless doctor's appointments.

"I'll tell her you said so," Rose says. "But tomorrow, though, yeah? We'll go to Rockface?" She waves at a friend down the hall. "I'll bring the Twizzlers."

"Deal." I wave her off, then head toward the door, wondering if anyone's around to climb with me, not wanting to waste the day.

## Chapter Three:

# Rose

*April 4*

*Kathmandu, Nepal*

*4,600 feet above sea level*

“*W*atch out for the cow!”

This is not the first time Tate has said this since we got in the van outside the airport. The airport was total chaos, between the baffling language gap at customs and trying to find Paul, our climbing partner, who left a few weeks before us to visit India—and whose flight was an hour late. We finally cleared security after several people shouted at us in Nepali for being in the wrong line. When our guide met us outside, holding a sign with our names, I was ready to jump into his arms.

Finjo is young, probably barely thirty, a fact that’s a little alarming, given that he’s the one leading the Everest expedition. But his company, Mountain Adventure, is one of the only full-service Mount Everest climbing expeditions that is



owned by Nepalis, not Westerners. They have a great safety record and cost less than the better-known American and Australian groups that promise everything from Ping-Pong tables to fresh seafood at Base Camp. For the next few months, he and his staff of guides, porters, cooks, medics, weather forecasters, and support workers are going to be dedicated to helping us get up the tallest mountain in the world.

Finjo is all bright eyes and sly smiles and bossiness. Bossy is fine with me right now. Anyone who can navigate this place is my favorite person in the world. He took one look at our luggage and started talking fast in Nepali to the driver, who quickly abandoned his attempt to cram it in the van and instead started lifting it on top. There was nothing up there but a shallow cage, and as we bump over every pothole and crack, I imagine our bags bouncing off the roof and being lost forever.

“Are you seeing this?” Tate asks. “That one was in the middle of the road. We nearly hit it.”

Paul grins. “*A whole new Woooooorld!*” he starts to sing. “*Don’t you dare close your eyes!*’ *A new fantastic point of view!*”

We all groan. Paul’s fondness for Disney movies is just one of those things, like the weird clicking Jordan does with his jaw, that we’ve learned to live with on our climbs. He insists that watching Disney movies at the hospital offers endless opportunities for psychological insights with his young patients, but I think he’s just a mega fan.

Cows are sacred in the Hindu religion. I knew this. But somehow I never really extrapolated that fact to the reality of dozens and dozens of skinny cows wandering through the snarled and smoggy traffic of downtown Kathmandu, ignored by everyone from the traffic cops to the speeding

motorcycles. Also ignored: families, children, old people, beggars, and monks who dart through the traffic, somehow knowing when to avoid being hit.

My eyes burn and sting from sheer exhaustion, and maybe from the fact that everyone in the airport appeared to be chain-smoking fistfuls of cigarettes all at once. I'm not even sure what day it is. The sun is so bright, and the horns . . . Drivers honk like mad here. It is a concerto of beeps—loud, lively, and constant. It's almost musical. I slouch against the van door, despite my fears that it will open up and dump me on the road.

“God, this is like some kind of amusement park ride in hell,” I mumble to Tate, trying not to crash my head on the ceiling when we hit a pothole. “Remind me why we wanted to leave California?” Through the blaze of noise, of pollution, of exhaustion, I remember. Mami. With a groan I pull out my phone. “Hang on. I'm going to get some video.” I turn it around so that it's filming me and the passing scenery. “Heyyyy, Mami and Dad! As you can see, we are here and happily ensconced in the local scene! Don't even worry about this van . . . While we don't seem to have seat belts, I'm sure it's totally roadworthy!” I turn it off, let the smile fall off my face, and wrap my arm through Tate's. “Don't let me fall out of this thing if the doors fall off,” I mutter, and drop my head on his shoulder.

“Rose. ROSE. We're here.”

For a moment I am lost, hot, nauseated, and unsure where I am or who is calling me. Then I open my eyes to see a palace. An enormous building, wedding cake white and trimmed with frosting-like curls and flowers, is in front of me, surrounded by fountains and lush flowering plants. Off to the right, turquoise pool water is glistening.

“What . . . ?” I ask. “What happened to the—” I wave my hand to encompass everything: the noise, the dirt, the honking “—the cows?”

“This is the Hotel Shakter,” Finjo says, smiling. “You’re home. For now, anyway.”

“This place is seriously swank. And we look like something the cat dragged in,” Tate says, staring around. He turns to me and scrubs at his dark, shaggy hair, making it stand up like crazy. “Well, you look like something the cat dragged in. I look like something the cat dragged in, ate, then puked back up.”

“Nice,” I say, shooting him the finger and trying to smooth down my own hair, which has totally escaped its braids and is a mass of frizz and curl.

“It was a compliment. Kind of,” he says, shooting it right back.

Jordan sighs.

The hotel guy starts talking about our rooms, and Jordan is asking about timing for our first team briefing, while Tate is interrupting to ask if he can go crash, but I tune them all out. Beyond the lush green of the hotel gardens are smoggy sky and decrepit buildings. But beyond that, in the distance, are mountains. Dimmed by smog and barely there, but snowcapped and enormous against the sky. The Himalayas.

It’s all starting. I try to imagine what it’s like up there, two weeks’ walking distance into the mountains, so far from home. Unbidden, my thoughts fly to Mami. She would love this. Love the roads with their chickens and cows and shrines, love the hotel with its wedding cake balconies, love the start of this adventure. My excitement dims, and the Dread shows up, strong enough that I must have made a noise, because Tate glances over.

“You okay?” he asks, and I know he catches a whiff of it on my skin, fear so deep it feels bottomless.

I nod, take a deep breath, and reach for the excitement, fan it, coax it back into flames. I will love it enough for both of us. I will soak it all in and bring it home to her.



Noise and light and color. Kathmandu has a serious overabundance of all of them. And traffic. In addition to the cows. Walking through Thamel, the main tourist district, is like being in a developing country made up of mostly white hippies and climbers. Every storefront promises *Everest View Trekking—Best Price or Mountain Panorama Helicopter Rides—Safety First*, or sells fake North Face down jackets for five dollars. People follow us down the block, holding out trekking poles, water bottles, Mountain Hardwear gloves.

Tate realizes he forgot his water bottle on the plane and asks if we can stop for one, which has Jordan huffing in annoyance about the number of water bottles Tate loses. But Paul makes a joke about Tate and leaving a trail of water bottle bread crumbs to follow home, and we all laugh. I’m reminded again that I’m glad to have him here. We’ve known Paul for years, when some friend-of-a-friend introduced him to Jordan before a climbing trip. He’s younger than our parents and older than us, a peacemaker who always offers a welcome voice when we’re getting on each other’s nerves. But now, without Mami, I’m even more grateful he’s with us. He’s another grown-up for Jordan when Tate and I want to be by ourselves, another non-Russo for me when Tate and Jordan are squaring off. Maybe it’s because he’s a pediatric and adolescent psychiatrist, but he’s able to calm the Russo

men down better than most. Listening to Tate and Jordan fight is not my favorite part of climbing.

Paul slows to wait for me.

“Can you believe this is really happening? Just being in Kathmandu is a dream come true, and we haven’t even gotten close to the mountains yet!” He grins. “If only I could go back and tell my sad, bullied fourth-grade self that I’d be heading off to climb Mount Everest someday. Though maybe I should thank the jerks who made me so miserable. If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t have run into the mountains every chance I got.”

I put an arm around him. “I hate that anyone was mean to you. If you want, I’ll fly back to Salt Lake City and beat them up. Or beat up their kids. Whatever.”

He laughs. “Rose the Avenger. Thanks for the offer, but I think sending the article headlined ‘Acclaimed Psychiatrist Aims for the Summit, Dedicates his Climb to LGBTQ Youth’ to my alumni newsletter will allow enough gloating. Besides, that’s all in the past. I need to—”

“If you sing ‘Let It Go,’ I swear . . .” I side-eye him. “Please. No.”

“It’s a great song!” His smile deepens. “I’m just really, really happy to be here.” He looks around. “Hard to believe we’re only a few minutes from the hotel. This is a different world.”

“The real different world is when you get outside the tourist area,” Finjo says. “But today we’ll stay in Thamel and get our shopping done.”

We nod obediently, because that’s our only option whenever Finjo tells us what to do. The bossiness continues unabated. Still, as he shepherds us forward, barking in Nepali to the map sellers who are encroaching, I can’t help slowing

to stare. The streets are choked with cars and mopeds and the occasional cow, and the sidewalks have even less room, with tables of Buddha statues, prayer bowls, incense burners, and—oddly—old American DVDs for sale. Dust, thick and lung-punishing, hangs over the streets in a cloud, dimming the sun as though smoke from a fire were blowing. Adding to the dust is real smoke from storefronts that aren't stores but, instead, tiny makeshift restaurants with smoky grills that smell of delicious meat. No tourists stop; only crouching Nepali men grabbing a quick lunch. I can't help staring wistfully.

Finjo catches my eye. "No street food, ever. Okay? It will make you sick, and no getting sick before we climb." He looks fierce.

I nod, filming the street scene as I walk and nearly knocking over a rack of mountaineering maps. I'm taller than a lot of the men here, and the women only come up to my chest. I feel like a giantess laying waste to a village as I try not to trash the careful displays.

"Oops! Here, I wanted to get a few maps," Paul says. He has already stopped to buy an ornate Gurkha knife, a hand-hammered brass bowl, and some carved figurines. We've only gone around three blocks from the hotel—I can't imagine how he's going to get this stuff home. Now along with the maps he grabs more post cards, some to mail back to the kids he sees in the hospital, some for Drew, his husband, who will meet us here in Kathmandu when we return, along with Tate's and my families. I think about being back here in close to three months, having stood on the summit of Mount Everest. I try to imagine Mami's arms around me, her face when I display the photo proving that I left a picture of her at the top.

My head throbs a little from the noise and smog, and it's hard to see where I'm going while I film, but I keep at it, narrating the sights for Mami in the brightest voice I can muster. I'll have to edit before I send it to them. They don't need to hear me swearing when I realize I've stepped in a giant pile of cow manure.

We're stopped again, this time while Paul looks at a patchwork skirt for his niece. I pull Tate forward, trying to get him to stop staring at the wall of a sketchy little pharmacy. He appears to be reading a sign about male enhancement.

"Seriously? You know girls don't care about that stuff nearly as much as you think," I say, dragging him along to where Paul is finishing his transaction. "We always say, 'It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the—'"

"Oh, shut up. I was . . . you know what? Never mind." He moves as though to give me a wet willy, but I duck, keeping my ears far away.

It's a comfortable seventy degrees or so, and I'm too warm in my long pants and boots. But I hadn't thought to pack any sandals, which was dumb. Kathmandu's at the same latitude as Florida—the cold only comes when we get up into the mountains. Still, I fit in here. Pretty much everyone in this part of town is decked out in climbing clothes. Tate snorts at a particularly geared-up blond guy who looks ready to start scaling a peak.

"What the hell? What's he going to do? Boulder up that two-story building?" he asks.

"He's just excited," I say. "Like us." But my voice makes it a question. I want to be excited, but I'm still so tired it's hard to think of anything other than sleep.

Tate doesn't answer.

"Hey," I press. "We are excited, right?" I knock lightly on the side of his head. "Right? You home in there?"

Tate swats my hand away. "Sto-ooop!" he fake whines. "You're messing up my hair!"

I laugh but keep staring at him. "Yeah? All good? You've been super quiet all day. And yesterday."

He nods. "All good. Still a little zonked."

I nod but keep looking at him. Tate notices and shoves me.

"I promise. Things are fine. I'm deliriously excited. Or-gasmically excited. Radioactively—" He starts to spin around, *Sound of Music*-style, and almost knocks over a table of brass singing bowls.

"Fine!" I laugh, relieved. He is back. Endless-energy-constant-optimism Tate. The tiny knot of unease I hadn't really noticed dissolves. Normally Tate's bad moods are epic, more tantrums than moods, and they never last long. This quiet "just tired" attitude since we arrived in Nepal weirded me out a little and made me realize how much I count on him to keep our energy up.

We move slowly up the street.

"Did you see the poster?" he asks, after a minute.

"About male enhancement? Dude, I am *not* the person to talk to about this," I say.

"Dumbass. Next to it, for the missing climber."

I shake my head. "I didn't notice. What did it say?"

He shrugs, shouldering through the crowd. At six feet three inches, Tate looms even higher than I do. I follow easily.

"Tate?" I ask, trying to slow him down.

"Nothing. It was nothing. A Dutch dude last seen two



weeks ago, heading toward Annapurna summit. I don't know why they bother putting up signs. If he hasn't been found by now, he's not going to be," he says, catching up to Jordan and Paul, who are standing outside a restaurant that Finjo has deemed acceptable for lunch.

I don't know what to say. Of course it's dangerous, climbing mountains. We know this.

"Tate . . ." I start, but I trail off.

"It's fine. It's too bad, that's all." He turns to me, his grin bright and real in his stubble-covered cheeks. "Hey, did I tell you? It was on CNN in the lobby this morning: a dog summited Everest!"

I blink at the change of subject, then scowl.

"That's bull. You totally made that up! Who's going to bring a dog twenty-nine thousand feet up a mountain! Humans can barely survive it, and most of them are wearing oxygen masks."

Tate takes his hand, puts it over his heart. "Scout's honor. It was a rescue dog. With its own tiny O2 canister hookup specially designed for him by a group of NASA technicians."

I look at him, skeptical. His brown eyes open wide, looking innocent. He shrugs.

"Okay, I made up the part about NASA, but the rest of it is true. Seriously, I saw it on the news. Ask Finjo." He turns and taps Finjo on the shoulder. "Didn't a dog summit Everest this week?"

Finjo snorts. "No summit. To Base Camp. It was a Sherpa dog."

"That makes more sense," I say, comforted that I haven't been beaten to the summit by a canine.

"But the headline read 'First Dog to Summit Mount Everest!'—How is EBC a summit? It's not even eighteen thou-

sand feet! Middle-aged tourists go there all the time.” Tate snorts. “False advertising.”

“Well, eighteen thousand feet is still something,” I say. “Especially for a dog, I guess. After all, most mountains stop at that height. It’s just that Everest starts there.”

I glance over at Tate. We joke about the climb a lot, but we haven’t talked about what it’s really going to be like. Probably because—even with all the books and documentaries and live, in-real-time blogs—we don’t really know. We don’t know what it will take, only that it will challenge us in ways we’ve never been challenged before. That’s the part of climbing I love best, solving a puzzle that’s unfolding in front of me. The part I like least is the amount of time it takes, time that was increasingly hard to find as high school got harder and harder. Time that Mami had to remind me I owed to climbing, to our grand Everest plan. Time that I often gave all too grudgingly.

But everything is different now. Everest is unlike anything we’ve ever done, and Mami can’t be here, but I can. I itch to start climbing, to push away the Dread and concentrate on the work ahead. I can’t worry about Mami, or about anything, when I’m climbing. And right now that’s exactly what I want.

All around us, Kathmandu roils and bustles, but I barely notice. Instead I’m seeing a route up through snow and ice, Tate beside me, roped in. We’ve climbed so many mountains together; maybe Everest will be just another peak. Maybe. But I can see it so clearly in my mind: me and Tate, arms around each other for the expected photo at the summit, sending it across the world to Mami in real time. Need like fire burns in me, to do this, to *be* this.

Millions of tourists flock to Nepal every year, and most

of them are there to gaze on Mount Everest. Getting to Everest Base Camp takes less than two weeks of walking—not climbing or doing anything technical—and doesn't even have a view of the mountain, since it's so close. It's unimaginable to me, really. The idea of traveling so far and paying so much money to walk up and see the side of a glacier where climbers pitch their tents. The prize isn't there, among the junk left behind by the expeditions. The prize is at the top.





# Author's Note/ Further Reading

For millions of years, in an inaccessible part of a remote area near India, Tibet, and Nepal, stood a looming, massive peak. It was called Chomolungma by the Tibetans who lived in its shadows, which means mother goddess of the universe. Later the Nepali government named it Sagar-matha, or goddess of the sky. Measuring it, climbing it, “conquering it,” as the later explorers hoped to do, was unfathomable. It just existed, enormous and wreathed in clouds, high above where humans lived.

But in the 1800s British explorers were aggressively traveling and mapping the globe, hoping to fill in the gaps on their maps of our world. In 1841 George Everest surveyed a part of the mountain range known as the Himalayas, and in 1856 it was measured with what was at the time cutting-edge technology. It came in at 29,000 feet, and was

designated Peak 15. Nine years later, in 1865, the British renamed Peak 15 Mount Everest, after the western explorer who mapped it. New technology and shifts in the mountain itself have caused the official height of the mountain to be revised several times. In 1999 it was considered to be 29,035 feet, but the Nepali government began a new measurement campaign in 2019 to see what the effect of the 2015 earthquake had on the mountain.

Once named and measured, it did not take long before foreign explorers considered the possibility of reaching the summit. Starting in 1921, massive expeditions flocked to the base of the mountain to launch summit attempts. Again and again climbers headed up into incredibly harsh conditions and bad weather. Some died, many more were turned back by impossible conditions. While it's possible that earlier explorers managed to reach the summit before disappearing on the descent, it was not until 1953 that Nepali Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and New Zealander Edmund Hillary, as part of a British climbing expedition, made the first official ascent.

Since then, a veritable parade of “first ascents” have been attempted. First climbers from different countries, first climber to reach the summit without bottled oxygen, oldest climber, youngest climber, first visually impaired climber, first paraplegic climber, first descent by ski, first descent by paraglider, fastest time to the summit . . . the list goes on and on. In addition to the zeal of holding a record, no matter how esoteric, there are also more climbers who simply want the glory of having tagged the highest mountain in the world, and ever more commercial climbing companies willing to help them get there—for a price. The crowds have led to increased pollution, ecological damage, and, improbably, human traffic jams on the mountain. Many fear that this



commercialization of Mount Everest will lead to its ruin. But the allure of a place that is both gloriously beautiful and utterly deadly continues to draw people in.

As I wrote *Above All Else* I did a lot of research, and I have traveled to Nepal to the Goyko Lakes in the Khumbu, near Everest Base Camp. It is a truly extraordinary part of the world. I can't overstate the beauty of those mountains, the improbably blue of the sky against the white peaks, the sense of distance—both physical and cultural—that it takes to get yourself there. The Khumbu region has been transformed by tourism: English signs offering solar showers, pizza (dubious at best), Coke, and internet access dot the landscape. But it is still an incredibly poor part of the world. Twenty-five percent of people live on U.S. fifty cents a day, and rates of disease, malnutrition, and child mortality are high. The contrast between the climbers who pay upwards of \$60,000 for a three-month expedition and the local communities is stark and sometimes uncomfortable to witness, even as the Sherpas gain some benefit from the tourism dollars and are welcoming to the global visitors who admire their home. There are no easy answers to this tension. And in Nepal, like everywhere, climate change is irreparably shifting the reality on the mountain. More extreme weather patterns will lead to more dangers, putting more climbers and Sherpas at risk. The future of the mountain, and the region, is unknown.

Most of the details about the landscape, lodges, villages, climbing routes, and camps, are as accurate as I could make them. There are indeed dead bodies left along the path to the summit, though the ones I reference in the book are not real. The dangers of altitude sickness and exposure are real, as are the kinds of problems and missteps that befall the

characters in the book. Unfortunately, small errors can turn deadly on the mountain. But the beauty of the place, the glory of the mountains, and the kindness of the villagers who host travelers there is also real. If you get a chance, I strongly recommend you wander that way someday. You won't be sorry.

For more information about Mount Everest and climbing, please check out the books and links below. Most of these are adult titles, but offer vivid and page-turning tales of life on the mountain.

*Into Thin Air* by John Krakauer

*The Climb* by Anatoli Boukreev

*Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest* by Wade Davis

*High Exposure* by David Breashears

*Annapurna: A Women's Place* by Arlene Blum

*Breaking Trail: A Climbing Life* by Arlene Blum

*High Crimes* by Michael Kodas

*Dark Summit* by Nick Heil

[www.alanarnette.com](http://www.alanarnette.com)

[www.melissaarnot.com](http://www.melissaarnot.com)

<http://www.summitpost.org/mountain/rock/150230/everest.html>

<http://sherpafilm.com>

<http://thewildestdream.com>

<http://www.beyondtheedgefilm.com>

<http://www.mounteverest.net/expguide/route.htm>

There are many global foundations and nonprofits supporting Nepal. You can always look on [www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org) to ensure that the organization you are supporting is actually doing good work and using the money well. To directly

support the Khumbu region and the Sherpa families there, consider giving to The Juniper Fund, a small nonprofit started by western climbers that works directly with Sherpa families impacted by accidents on Everest. [www.thejuniperfund.org](http://www.thejuniperfund.org)

*Into Thin Air* meets *The Sun is Also a Star*  
in this tale of two best friends tested in every way  
by their attempt to climb Mount Everest.

*The mountains are not fair or unfair. They are just dangerous.*

—Reinhold Messner

Almost out of high school, climbing prodigies Rose and Tate are eager to begin the biggest adventure of their lives—summitting Mount Everest. Along with Tate’s dad and their expedition team, they arrive in Nepal to set out on the weeks’ long trek. They are missing Rose’s mother who is too sick to realize her life’s dream. Rose vows to make the ascent for Mami.

But as they climb farther up the mountain, their plans go downhill. It’s not only the high elevation, expedition politics, and blistering chill that’s nipping at them; the two teens are weighed down by personal burdens heavier than their gear.

Most unexpected is the simmering, and then sizzling, romance between them. Suddenly at 29,000 feet, in the Death Zone, they must decide who—or what—they value above all else.

*Dana Alison Levy* is the author of several acclaimed books for younger readers. Above All Else is her YA debut. Dana loves Nepal and has stood in the shadow of Mount Everest, but she will never ever climb it. [www.danaalisonlevy.com](http://www.danaalisonlevy.com)

**ON-SALE DATE: OCTOBER 13, 2020**

Fiction, ages 12 and up  
ISBN: 978-1-62354-140-8 HC  
\$18.99 US / \$22.99 CAN, 5½ x 8¼, 320 pages

Marketing

- National advertising campaign
- National media campaign
- Digital galleys available on NetGalley and Edelweiss
- Physical galley distribution at ALA Midwinter, TLA, BEA, and BookCon
- Chapter excerpt on [www.charlesbridge.com](http://www.charlesbridge.com)
- Social media promotions
- Readers group guide

This is an uncorrected proof. There may be corrections, deletions, or other changes before publication. Should you intend to quote from this galley, please contact the publisher or check quotes against the final printed book.

If you’ve read the galley, we’d love to hear what you think. Please contact us at [trademarketing@charlesbridge.com](mailto:trademarketing@charlesbridge.com). For publicity, contact Donna Spurlock at [dspurlock@charlesbridge.com](mailto:dspurlock@charlesbridge.com) or at (617) 926-0329.