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## CHAPTER 7

### Avalanche!

**W**hat makes an avalanche? Some think that it is the layers of snow coming apart. Snow falls in November and builds up. More snow falls in December and adds a layer. By January there are three or four layers of snow. Between each layer is a sheet of ice.

Then there is a thaw. Or some movement. Or a slight shift in the land.

The layer from December is weak. It shifts. The

layer from January slides and falls. The movement is very slow at first. Nothing starts quickly in this world of white and cold.

But the avalanche has begun.

So what happened that morning? Perhaps a plane flying in the sky made a noise, moved some air. Perhaps it was less than this. It might have been a fish jumping in the China Sea. Perhaps that fish began a tidal flow in the Pacific. Perhaps that flow made a puff of wind in Hawaii. Perhaps that puff made the winds over B.C. blow just a little harder. No one knows. No one would ever know.

But at 7:08 that morning, a dot of snow moved on the side of a mountain. The dot of snow moved just a few buried snowflakes around it. Those snowflakes jiggled and slid. Over them, a heavy layer of snow was waiting for that moment. It began to slide. The sliding was easy once it began. The snow was at a 40 degree angle. It was waiting for the moment when the first dot would move.

Five seconds later it was sliding fast. There was a roar as the snow slid down the mountain. It built up speed — faster and faster. Soon it would be

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going 100 km/hour, as fast as a car. It would weigh 100 tonnes. Anything in its path would be crushed.

On a nearby mountain there were two more winter campers. The day before, they had seen the school kids come in on their snowshoes. They had watched them set up their tents and make a fire. They had watched the boys and girls huddle around the fire. They smiled, thinking back about growing up.

But this morning they were awake early. "Crack of dawn," said Rick Marshall to his wife, Abby. They were up before dawn. By seven, they were dressed and ready to go. Their goal that day was an arctic hut farther down the glacier.

"What's the warning level?" Abby asked.

"Still *yellow*," Rick replied. *Natural avalanches unlikely. Human-triggered avalanches possible*, that's what it meant.

"Well, we should be good to go," replied his wife.

Then they heard the CRACK, but it was closer to

a roar. Across from them, on another mountain, the snow was sliding.

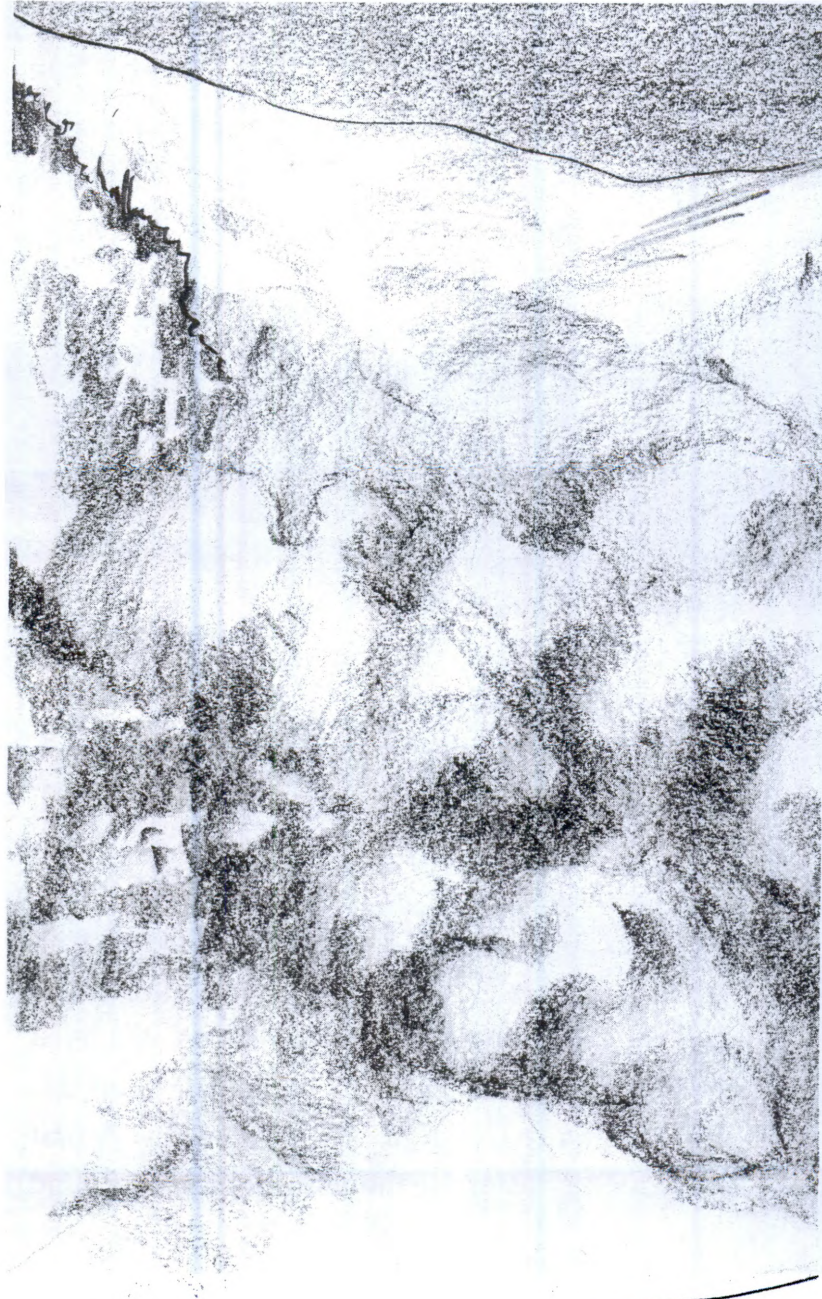
"Ohmygod!" screamed Abby. "The kids!"

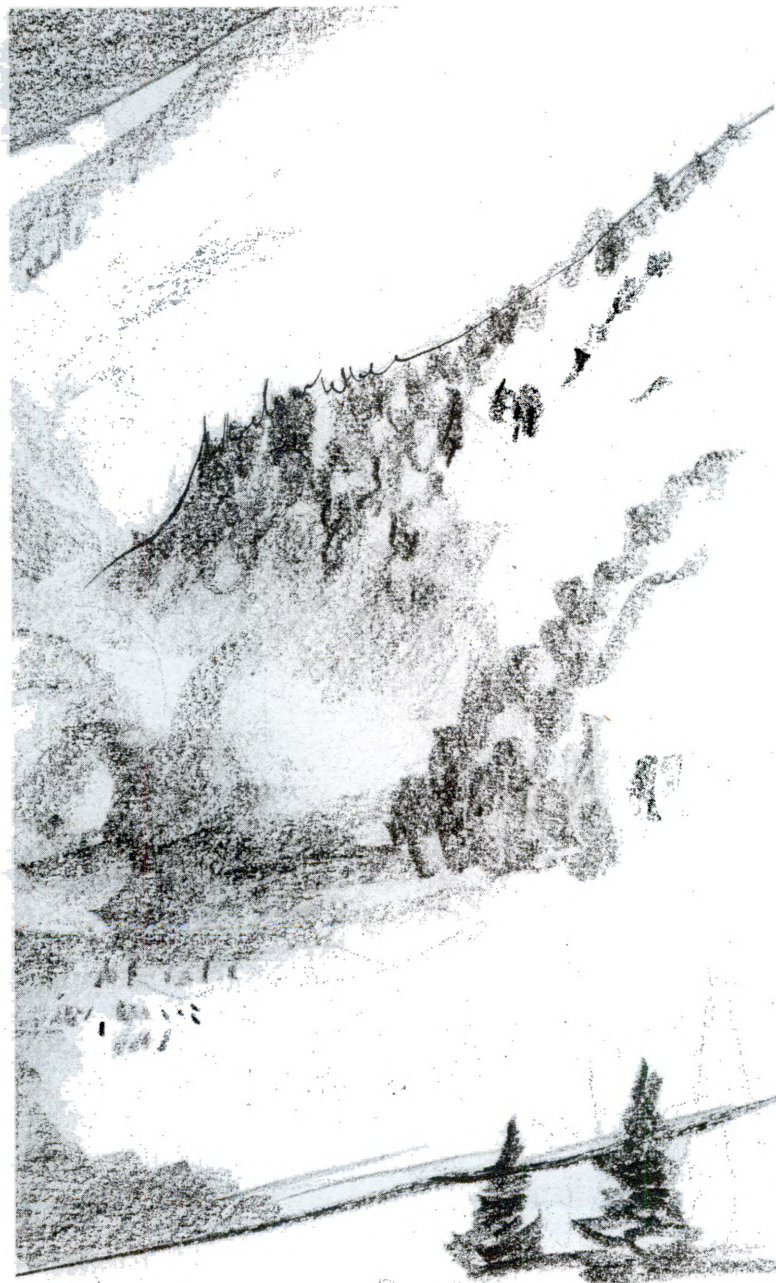
The kids were down below. Most of them were still asleep in their tents. Only three kids were up and outside when the snow let loose.

Mike Conroy was up early that day. His muscles hurt from snowshoeing the day before. His tent buddy, Sid Grafton, snored. Wind made the tent rattle. Mike woke up in a bad mood just as the sun was rising.

He lay in his sleeping bag, in the cold. He thought about the trip, how it was half finished. They had done all they had planned. Now it was time for the group to turn around and head back.

It was supposed to "build character," this trip. *Whatever that means*, Mike thought to himself. He thought about Sid Grafton, snoring, and wondered if he should punch him to make him stop. He thought about Tom and how he was always first pick for every team. He thought about the girls and





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stuck-up Brooke Ashton. He'd asked her out once and she'd turned him down cold. Now she was hooking up with Noah. *Noah!* Of all the guys in the school, he was the least likely. *What did that stuck-up girl see in Noah?* he thought. *Why was she so stupid that she didn't like me?*

Outside, Mike heard some whispers. It took him a minute to figure out who might be up this early, but then he got it. *Noah and Brooke.* In a flash, Mike decided to see what they were up to. He might see enough to embarrass them both, forever.

Mike pulled on his jacket. He looked down at still-sleeping Sid and the avalanche beacon beside him. Mike shook his head. "You wuss," he said, mostly to himself.

Then he crawled through the tent flap and got outside. It was cold, very cold. He pulled himself up and walked to one side. He kept looking for Noah and Brooke, ready to wake up the whole camp if they were really going at it.

Then he heard the crack ... that became a roar.

Mike stood there, frozen, as the sheet of snow came down. He kept thinking it would stop farther



up the hill. He kept thinking the snow could not reach him.

But in twenty seconds, it was there. The wall of snow hit Mike like a freight train, crushing his ribs. And then it buried him.

Noah could not sleep that night. He tossed and turned in his sleeping bag, too excited to sleep. He'd had a kiss that night, a real kiss. Brooke had told him to get up early so they could meet. *What if I sleep in?* he asked himself. *I'll blow my chance.*

Noah solved this problem. He stayed awake. He looked at his watch each hour. He counted the hours till dawn, the hours till he could get up. He listened to Tom snore and twisted from side to side.

When he wasn't counting, he was thinking about Brooke. Had she really liked him all along? Why hadn't he seen this back at school? And how could it happen? Noah was not cool; he wasn't an athlete. What did Brooke see in him that he couldn't see in himself?

At six o'clock, Noah was dressed and ready. He



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was waiting for the first bit of sun. Then he stuck his head out the tent flap to see if the sun up. Then he stared at his watch. Time seemed frozen — moving slowly minute by minute.

At 6:30, the sun peeked over a mountain. Noah was up in a flash. He grabbed his coat, his beacon and his shovel — ready to start the day. In fact, the most important part of the day was right now.

Outside it was cold — just at the freezing mark. The sliver of sun gave an orange light to the snow. To Noah, it seemed that the whole world was golden. There was no movement from any of the other tents. Most of the winter hikers were asleep, or staying in their sleeping bags to stay warm. But Noah was too excited to feel alone. He stamped his feet and tried to warm up. Where was she?

Then Noah saw a movement in one of the tents. A flap pushed open and out came Brooke in her parka. She threw off the hood and smiled at Noah.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he replied, suddenly shy. They had spent a whole day together, but now he felt awkward. He didn’t feel worthy of this girl.

"Cold," she said.

"Yeah," he agreed. And then he just blurted out, "You're beautiful. I mean, in this light, you are so beautiful."

"Oh, my hair . . ." she complained, but then stopped and looked in Noah's eyes.

They talked in whispers that morning. The words weren't important. What they cared about was being together. They wanted a few moments of being just two, two people in a whole world of snow.

Just after seven o'clock, they saw Mike crawl out of his tent. He didn't see them, at first, and they were glad about that.

But at 7:08, Noah and Brooke heard the crack. They quickly looked up at the mountain to the north. Some snow had broken off and started to slide. The movement was slow at first, like a slow-motion film. Then the slide picked up speed. A roar of sound filled the valley.

Noah saw that the avalanche wasn't stopping. He had no words — there were no words. Instead, he stepped between Brooke and the sliding snow.

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He wanted his body to be a shield, to protect her — somehow, somehow.

It was Brooke who saw the wall of snow just before it hit them.

“Hold me,” she whispered. She did not scream, nor cry, nor protest this awful moment. She said two words: “Hold me.”