

PRELUDE

On a Sunday in December

SNOWSHOEING UP THE steep trail through heavy snow was back-breaking, but he felt none of that, only a curious numbness. Now and then, he heard himself muttering between heavy breaths, but paid so little attention that it might have been another voice. He hardly cared, or even knew, what the words meant. *It'd be such a relief to be done*, he thought.

Done with what? He didn't know or care. All morning, he'd felt an urge to stand on the granite edge of the summit and peer down the long fall. Below the last switchback, he rested, gasping – the weight he'd gained over the last two years was too much cargo – and stared out and down at the gray granite face of the glacial cirque, an enormous amphitheater of sheer rock. What would it be like to fall? Had finding out been the allure of the cliff?

He'd worry about that some other time. If there were another time.

A raven lifted on air, soared across the face of the horseshoe-shaped cliff, a black line across the void. He felt no consolation, none of the uplift he usually got from this hike, only a far-away sense that he was climbing to the end of something. He'd climbed the Coliseum – the name the valley people gave this glacier-gouged mountain – many times. Always, climbing had buoyed him. Not today.

A half mile back, he had surprised a cow elk and her calf traversing a snow-clogged field. When he'd startled them, the calf had wallowed in a drift, eyes wide and frightened. But the mother had bolted, leaving the little one behind. Absently, he'd thought it odd that the cow hadn't charged. What mother wouldn't protect her calf? He should have helped the calf, but he'd kept climbing, staring ahead. Now, resting, looking out over the cirque, he wondered why he hadn't felt more.

A snow cornice at the other end of the long summit ridge broke off with a gunshot crack, white sheets of snow falling and feathering out against the dark stone. He watched the veils of snow as if he had a kinship with them.

He climbed. At the summit, he walked out to the lip of snow above the cliff and gazed a quarter-mile down the sheer ice-gouged granite. The tiny pool below, Saint Mary's Lake, made a white oval, a pale target. Beyond, the long valley stretched north, fields shining in the winter sun. What would falling be like? Would his bones wash down the Monastery River, to be found by someone fishing? *No need for drama*, he thought – or did he say it aloud? The *black dog* had got him, finally. It had pursued him for twenty-seven years, since his troubles in Minnesota, and at last it had caught him.

He moved closer to the edge, his right snowshoe protruding into the empty air. He stared down through it, into the void. This – his snowshoe out in the air – satisfied him. *No more listening to patients' troubles*, he thought. No more forcing compassion through a haze of sorrow. An end to being the valley's listener. The space beneath his snowshoe soothed him, an opening in his pain.

Just one more step: out into the air.

The chime of a monastery bell wafted up from below, a pure tone rising on the white air. Again, he stared through his snowshoe, waiting for another bell, but there came only silence, as if a child held her breath behind a locked door. Yet, the bell had wakened something in him. There were monks down there, real people, and people lived down in town, in Jefferson, a darker patch thirty miles up-valley, trees surrounded by the winter-white fields. People. *His* people. The people he took care of.

His attention lapsed. He simply stood, his snowshoe out over air.

Just one more step: out . . .

My people. He no longer wanted that, was weary of people needing his help, draining him, depending on him. Was there no end to being dependable? That's what brought him up here, onto this shelf of snow hanging over the void.

A whisper, down the meadow to the right. He turned his head. A larger elk, the bull, stood quietly under the verge of trees. The father of the desperate calf? The bull gazed at him, black eyes calm, his breath billowing clouds of steam. Ed thought, *Protect your calf.* Did his people, his patients, look to him for the steadiness he envied in the bull? He grunted. *I don't want it.*

Just then, the snow beneath his shoe shifted, sank an inch. He snapped alert, heart racing. Was he on an overhang? If it broke off, if he fell swiftly with it, wrapped in falling feathering ice down the cliff face, he and snow would drop too fast. He felt sick, knowing how his body would try to jerk back but would find no footing, would stretch for rock but grasp only air, his fingers dragged through rootless snow as he plunged. In the moment before the snow fell, he came instantly alive.

He jerked upright, then froze, realizing that he stood not on granite but on the wind-blown cornice extending out beyond the rock, a drift his weight could break.

Get off the edge! His mind screamed, but he stayed motionless. Throwing himself backwards, moving at all, could crack the cornice. He remembered the sharp gunshot pop, remembered white sheets of snow cascading against the dark cliff. He stilled his breathing. *Slow. Easy.*

Shifting his weight slowly onto his left snowshoe, he edged the right shoe back. Its rear point caught in snow. Holding his breath, he leaned all his weight on the left, gently freeing the caught tip. He dreaded the gunshot sound of the cornice snapping.

At last, his right shoe came free and he carefully lifted it backward, planted, shifted weight, then moved the left. Repeat, repeat, until he stood above granite.

Exhausted, he sank into the drift and began to tremble. He lay on his back, looking up at the incomparable blue of the mountain sky. *I almost died.*

His fear gave way to a surge of self-contempt. *How stupid can I be?* He'd hiked these mountains for twenty-five years, knew the dangers of the winter cliffs.

Disgusted, he sat up and gazed out over the long valley, down where his patients lived, the people he no longer wanted to help. The sensation of plunging down through air with no hold to grab swept through him and he began trembling again. *So close!* If he'd fallen, or stepped off into the air, what would his people do without him? *That's*

nuts, he muttered, almost aloud. He looked up to the deep sky to calm the trembling. The cold air bit his skin.

A long time ago, when a Minneapolis psychologist had committed suicide, his partner Paul Carlen had said, “A psychologist has no right to suicide. Too many people need us.” What did it matter if he resented it? He’d chosen it, hadn’t he? They needed him, didn’t they? He gazed at the trees lined vividly green against the implacable blue. And waited.

In his pocket, he dug around for the ten-dollar gold piece he’d carried since Minnesota, twenty-seven years, the coin little Elizabeth Murphy had used to pay him. For a moment, he fingered it, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger, as he always did, soothing himself. “So I’m burned out,” he said to the trees. It had crept up on him, year after quiet year, until now. Until he almost threw himself off – or fell by stupidity.

He stood and threw Elizabeth’s coin into the void. It curved up, sunlight flashing on the twisting disk, and in a fading arc it fell, a dark speck against the white lake, and then was gone. He watched a long time, then thought, *I don’t want to die. But am I ready to live?*

The bull elk had gone. Ed shivered. The sun was declining, the afternoon air growing chill. Why had he thrown away his coin? He’d carried it, fingering it, every day for all the years since Minnesota. Losing it solved nothing: He bore the same burden, felt the same burned-out despair. The *black dog*.

At least there’d be no death today on the Coliseum.

He turned and followed his tracks down the trail as the afternoon sun fell into the west. When he reached the trailhead, the sun had gone behind the rugged Monastery Mountains. He sat in his pickup waiting for the heater to take the bite out of the air. Across the little lake, St. Brendan’s Monastery was immersed in shadows. He’d drive down the mountain to town and he’d resume his life, care for his patients, find a way to keep his despair at bay. Nothing had changed, except he’d thrown his coin away.

High above, the rim of the Coliseum reddened in the alpenglow. Ed gazed at it sadly. What would come of this? His belly fat, the thirty pounds he’d gained lately, strained against the seatbelt. He was defeated. Alive, but futile.

Something had to change.

“I’ll lose the damn weight,” he said aloud.

He snorted. What he needed was to really talk to someone. Maybe Jim? Ed put his truck in gear and drove slowly out onto the narrow road down the mountain. At the monastery gate, he stopped the truck. For twenty-seven years he’d kept silent about his Minnesota life, quiet as those monks inside. Talk to somebody? After all this time?

Silence had accumulated within him like drifts of snow.