

1 MARINE LIFE SOLIDARITY

April 16, 1989

“On belay,” Dave says.
“Climbing!”

I pull up onto the golden rock off the snow of the Ruth Glacier. The sun stabs like a knife, and I’m in Patagonia polypro long johns on April 16, 1989, at fifty-five hundred feet in the Alaska Range. The mountains shimmer, the snow crystals sparkle. I’m just back from a rock climbing trip to the desert and in the best shape of my life. I trail two ropes, one yellow and one blue. The crack faces out of the corner to the right. My shoulder presses against the wall, and my left hand, thumbs down, fills the crack with four fingers. My right hand, just below, is thumbs up. I pull until my arms are straight and shuffle my hands up the edge of the crack. My purple shoes pad the stone right below my hands. Dave and I are the only climbers in the whole range. The nearest person is fifty miles away. Tom Petty goes around in my head. *You can stand me up at the gates of hell, and I won’t back down. No, I won’t back. I won’t back down.*

Twenty-two days have passed since the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef. Neither Exxon nor the state was prepared for the spill. There is no boom and there are no skimmers. No oil has been recovered, and the weather’s been perfect for a couple of weeks. The oil has spread over a hundred miles. Thousands of birds and otters are dead. Commercial salmon fishing is closed all along the coast. People

rush to Alaska for the easy money the cleanup promises. There is no way to clean up eleven million gallons of oil.

I was going nuts sitting around Homer listening to the news. Everyone was arguing about the spill. As a state, Alaska is bought and sold by the oil companies. The oil pays for everything: government, schools, and a long list of nonprofits. We have no state taxes. Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) and British Petroleum are the biggest employers, and although Exxon holds the most power, they have very little presence up here. Alaskans love the Permanent Fund Dividend and the yearly cheque from the oil royalties. I should be washing birds and otters. I should be cleaning a beach, but I can’t work for Exxon, so I came to the mountains.

The climb follows an almost vertical open-book dihedral with gold rock on both faces. Fifteen feet above Dave, one foot on each wall, three fingers of my left hand in the fissure over my head, I jiggle protection into the crack and clip both ropes to it with a sling and carabiners. Miniscule blue and green flowers grow from the crack.

I spotted this buttress from the plane as it circled before landing on the glacier. When Jim Okonek roared off in the red K2 ski plane, we listened to the quiet for a moment, gaped at the giant granite spires and said a prayer, but we didn’t set up our tents or make camp. We loaded our packs, clicked into our skis, and headed for the buttress.

Dave taught me how to climb. We’ve been climbing together for six years. First he took me ice climbing at Five-Fingers down in Portage and rock climbing along Turnagain Arm. Then we went to Yosemite. Three years ago we came here to the Ruth Glacier. We climbed, skied and camped for twenty-two days. Near the end of the trip on a day like this, we skied over here to the base of the Moose’s Tooth and went rock climbing. The climbing bug bit me that day. I’ve

been training, climbing, and dreaming about coming back here for the past three years.

The rock is perfect. There isn't a loose flake or pebble on the golden stone. The corner is a refractory oven, and the crack running up it varies in size from fingertips to hands. It doesn't look like anyone has ever climbed here before. This is better than my dreams ever were. This would be a great climb even in Yosemite. I gain confidence moving up the stone. I place a variety of rock climbing gear every five to ten feet in case I fall. All the climbing and training I've been doing is paying off today.

My ropes are three hundred feet long. I use them for ice climbing. They are stupidly long for rock climbing, and I meant to cut them to a more manageable length for rock climbing before this trip, but I didn't, and I use the ropes to climb 250 feet to a big sloping ledge so Dave and I don't have to hang squished into the corner together. I place two nuts, and a cam, and yell, "Off belay!" This lets Dave know I am secure at a belay station.

I waste no time grabbing our ropes and pulling up the slack before feeling Dave. I always feel the pressure to move fast. That's how it is. You have to climb fast.

"On belay!"

Dave hollers, "Climbing!" and scales into the corner. I hang long bights of rope over my daisy chain out of the slack I gather while belaying him up. The sun is warm on my neck and the backs of my arms.

I keep the ropes pretty tight. Dave has done a bit of hard climbing, and he can follow this even though he is in no kind of climbing shape. He liebacks, stems, pushes, and pulls while cleaning the gear I placed.

When he is twenty feet away, I unzip my fanny pack and take out my camera. "Nymo, say cheese." He looks up but doesn't smile. I

snap his picture anyway. He turns his head back to the crack. "Good climb, eh?" I ask.

"Yeah, this is as good as climbing gets. Nice lead. Up rope," he says. Dave is five foot ten inches tall—the same height as me, except I weigh about 155 pounds, and he weighs 175. He has black hair, green eyes, and a sharp dimple on his right cheek. He wears a blue helmet.

"Up rope," Dave says.

At the belay, we hang pushed next to each other. Not a breath of wind blows. The sky couldn't be clearer or the sun sharper. We slather on more sunscreen. Dave turns the gear over to me, and I'm off. The focus is on the climbing, protection and moving steadily up the corner. I'm climbing as strong as I ever will, and all of a sudden small yellow-orange butterflies with black markings flutter around me.

"Dave, check out the butterflies."

"Whoa—hundreds of them! They're all over your ropes."

"I think we are being blessed."

I'm less than twenty feet above Dave with butterflies everywhere and a foot on each wall trying not to kill any. I think they might be slippery if smashed underfoot. Dave takes pictures. Even more butterflies. If I lean out left past the edge, I see Denali (The High One). Denali, the Athabascan name for Mount McKinley, is the highest peak in North America.

"Do you hear a bird?" Dave asks.

"Maybe."

"Micro-climate," he says.

At the next belay, we sit on a sloping ledge surrounded by butterflies. Black, yellow, and orange swirl around us. He hands over the gear and says, "On belay."

I'm off, my shadow printed on the white rock. The crack is wider. The sun has moved off the left wall of the corner. I roll down