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JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

ONE WRONG STEP



On Mount Everest,
you're always one
wrong step from
disaster . . .

**ONE WRONG
STEP**

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*To Dad,
For everything I learned the day
you climbed that mountain*

The first question you will ask and which I must try to answer is this, "What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?" and my answer must at once be, "It is no use." There is not the slightest prospect of any gain whatsoever . . .

We shall not bring back a single bit of gold or silver, not a gem, nor any coal or iron. We shall not find a single foot of earth that can be planted with crops to raise food. It's no use. So, if you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go.

What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to live. That is what life means and what life is for.

—George Mallory

CHAPTER ONE

Kings Peak, USA

13,528 feet

July 1936

SUMMIT:

The highest point on a mountain. The twenty highest summits in the world are all in Nepal, Pakistan, and China.

It's been almost three years since my dad and I climbed Kings Peak, but I still think about the summer of 1936 every single day.

My family had traveled from our home in London to America to visit my grandparents. They lived out west, in the state of Utah, where mountains lined the horizon in any direction I looked. The tallest of them all was named Kings Peak.

"You two should climb it," my mum had said to my dad and me. "How I wish I could go with you."

I wished for that too. For my whole life, the three of us had always climbed together. My earliest memory was holding Mum's hand as she let me shuffle up a dirt trail. It never mattered to her if I was slow. She was happy just to be on a climb.

Then last year, she needed to hold my hand while she shuffled up the trail. Mum was sick. That was why we had come to Utah. Her doctors thought the dry heat of the desert might do her good. Maybe it would put the color back in her cheeks.

Finally, Dad was persuaded to bring me to Kings Peak. "What do you think, Atlas? Shall we have a go at it?"

Atlas. I was named after the Titan god who carried the skies on his shoulders. It was the kind of name that came with responsibility, as if I was born to be in the mountains. Dad once told me it was the perfect name for a son he hoped would one day join him in climbing Everest.

I wanted that too. But for now, my first summit attempt would be at Kings Peak.

On the morning we said goodbye to Mum, her eyes filled with tears. I thought of how disappointed she must be, not being able to come with us. She dismissed the tears with a sniff and a weak smile, then pulled out a scarf she had knitted. It was thick and warm and the same shade of blue as our British flag.

"You'll always wear this, I hope," she said, tenderly wrapping it around my neck. "Especially if you ever feel cold or alone, then you'll have it, won't you."

I kissed her cheek as we left, convinced that by the time we returned from our climb, Mum might be well enough to get

out of bed. My twelfth birthday was coming soon. Her recovery was the only gift I wanted.

After a few days in the mountains, Dad announced it was time for us to try for the summit. That morning, as I wrapped the scarf around my neck, I said to Dad, “I wish Mum was here. It almost feels as if she is already with us.”

Dad smiled, but quickly turned away. When he looked back at me again, he pointed to the flag hanging out of my backpack. “What will you do with that?”

“Set it on the summit in King Edward’s honor,” I said. I had a second flag in my rucksack too. I’d made it myself, to honor my mum.

We had left camp at five in the morning with a plan to reach the summit before noon. However, at nearly ten thousand feet, I began complaining of a headache.

“Might be the altitude,” Dad said. “We can turn around.”

I only shook my head. “Not a chance. We’ve come so far already.”

“Then we need to go faster.” Dad glanced up at the skies. “Grandfather warned me about afternoon thunderstorms.”

I increased my pace, but after another thousand feet, the altitude again took its toll on me, as every step felt harder than the one before it. If I kept my head down and focused only on putting one foot in front of the other, walking became easier. But not really. At least we continued to move uphill, even if it was slow.

“Is it much farther?” I hoped the summit wasn’t too far away, because there wasn’t much left in me to keep climbing.

Dad stopped walking, then said, “Where your eyes go, your feet will follow.”

“What does that mean?”

“Look up, Atlas.”

I glanced up and a smile spread across my face. There, only another fifty steps away, was the summit of Kings Peak.

I studied it for a moment before continuing on. The summit was beautiful, certainly, but far from the majestic, snowcapped peak I’d expected.

Nothing much was here, only wide slabs of gray rock stacked in loose piles, tinted with a thin dusting of snow. I couldn’t imagine where the rocks had come from to lie there as they did.

In every direction I looked were the peaks of rugged, brown-topped mountains with small patches of snow that probably never melted. As the mountains sloped downward, they became greener.

I walked to what I believed was the absolute highest point, then opened my rucksack and pulled out the flags. I planted the British flag first, an inch below the flag for my mum. I honored my country, but no one in the world was more important to me than my mum.

I wrapped her scarf around my neck one more time, then backed up to take in the entire scene.

“Mum would’ve loved to be here, don’t you think?” I asked Dad.

His eyes had grown misty, and he nodded. “I like to think she will always be in the mountains.”

My smile back at him only widened as I gazed toward the horizon. The longer I looked, the more the view stole my breath away. I felt as if I was standing on top of the world.

Minutes later, a loud rumble pulled me from my trance. Dark clouds were gathering almost directly above us.

Grandfather had warned us of this very thing. I had wondered then what a thunderstorm on a mountaintop might be like. I'd imagined how amazing the lightning must look at this altitude, when a person felt as if they could touch the sky.

Now that I was here, it wasn't amazing at all. What I saw was terrifying. We were in danger.

"Let's go, Atlas." Dad gritted his teeth. "*Now.*"

I began following my father down the upper ridge, his feet barely touching one slab of rock before the next foot landed a step lower. We hadn't gone far when the next roll of thunder echoed in the skies above us.

I hurried to get closer to my father. He was obviously concerned about the weather, but Dad was also the kind of person who never missed an opportunity to teach me something.

"Did you know that some scientists claim at any given moment, there are hundreds of thunderstorms happening somewhere on Earth?"

"That's only a guess," I said. "It would be impossible to know that."

"Modern science is a wonder," he said.

I glanced up again. "If that's true, then how many of those thunderstorms are happening over Kings Peak right now?"

He moved faster. "At least one. Do you see any lightning?"

I looked around. “Not yet.”

“Of anyone, Atlas, you should be the first to spot it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just because you named me Atlas doesn’t mean I can spot—”

“That’s not what I meant.” Dad briefly glanced back at me. “You’re good at seeing details others miss. Even if it’s a small flash, I need to know.”

From that moment on, I spent more time watching the skies than my own feet. Normally, I was more cautious than that, because it’s easy to lose one’s footing, especially when headed downhill. But I also understood that we were on a bare ridge where we stood taller than anything else in the area. Lightning has a way of finding tall things.

Something flashed at the corner of my eye. I counted the seconds between the roll of thunder and the lightning itself.

Six seconds. Two miles. That was too close.

“Can we go faster?”

Dad said nothing but picked up his speed, and I stayed right near his back. That is, until the lightning flashed behind me, brighter this time. I paused long enough to turn around. Three seconds. Less than one mile away.

“Keep moving, Atlas!”

I turned, but with my eyes on the sky, my boot slid on a loose rock. My feet came out from beneath me and I fell backward. Anywhere else and that wouldn’t have mattered, but I had fallen on a field of loose rocks on a steep slope, so I went sliding.

There was nothing to grab on to, nothing to dig into to

slow my speed. I put one gloved hand over my face to protect it and held out my other hand, hoping to find a solid hold. But there was nothing. Only loose rocks sliding with me.

“Atlas!”

Dad was shouting my name, and I knew he was heading downhill as fast as he could, but it wouldn’t be fast enough to help me.

Finally, the ground leveled out, and I began slowing, then came to a stop.

“Atlas!” Dad was beside me only a couple of moments later as I was still catching my breath. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I don’t—”

Before I finished answering, we heard a loud crack higher on the mountain, followed immediately by a flash of light so bright it hurt my eyes.

Dad covered me with his body, but the flash was already gone when he did, and so mostly he just pressed me into the sharp angles of the rocks.

“If you’re all right, let’s get off this ridge,” he said.

I’d have crawled off the ridge if necessary, but we scrambled downhill, scraping our hands and knees more than once as we learned which rocks to trust, and which would send us sliding. To our relief, the thunderstorm began moving in the opposite direction.

With the worst of the danger behind us, Dad said, “You know, in a way, sliding down the hill the way you did was quite clever. It might’ve saved our lives.”

“Mum will be furious,” I said.

“Your mum is the best of women,” he said. “Always remember that.”

That was a simple challenge. No one in my life could ever compare to her.

When we continued walking, Dad glanced over at me. “I think after that, you’ll never want to climb another mountain again.”

He couldn’t have been more wrong. “How about Mount Everest?” I smiled over at him. “It’s the tallest mountain in the world, you know.”

“I’ve heard that too.” Dad laughed. “You’re not ready for Everest yet, but until you are, perhaps we can climb other mountains, discover new summits.”

“When can we start?” I’d climb again tomorrow, if he asked. In that moment, I felt like I could conquer any summit on earth.

But that isn’t the way the world works. No one can stay on a summit forever.

By the time we returned to my grandfather’s home, we were greeted with the worst possible news: My mum had died. She was gone.

Dad reached for me, but I turned and ran out the door and kept running until I reached the end of my grandfather’s farmyard. Somewhere I could be alone to cry.

This loss had opened a hole in my life so deep, I couldn’t see the end of it. I should have been with her to say goodbye.

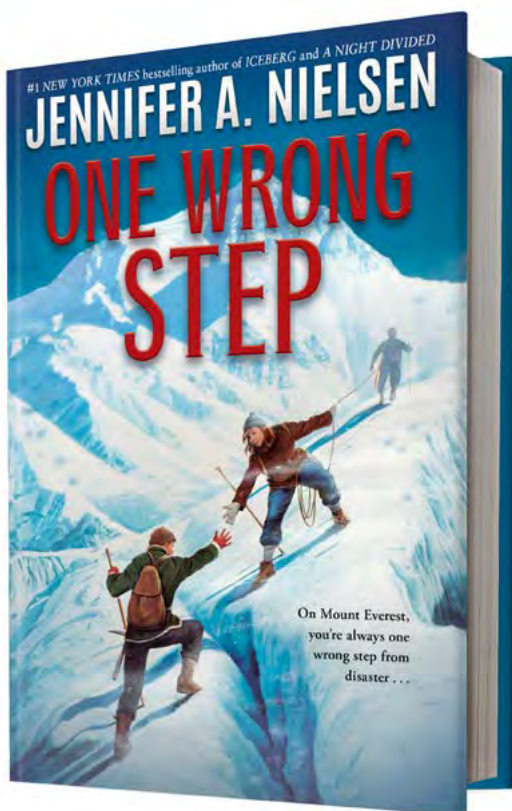
Three years had passed since then. I thought of her every single day. Some days, she was all I thought about.

Since then, it was just me and my dad, so we went everywhere together. I'd been on five major mountains, all over the world, and reached the summits twice.

I'd thought I was ready to climb Mount Everest.

I was wrong.

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