For my wife, who pushed me to chase
my dreams, and for my two little boys,
who I hope will always follow theirs.

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WHITEOUT

GABRIEL DYLAN

RED EYE

Chapter One

If it all went wrong, reckoned Charlie, at least it would be over quickly.

He crunched to a halt where the slope fell away into nothingness, and carefully laid his snowboard on top of the deep drifts at his feet. A wave of panic washed over him as he stared down at the tiny streets and buildings that nestled in the valley miles below, just visible through a veil of wispy cloud. He wrenched his eyes away, sank into the snow, and started to slide his feet into the decrepit bindings. The Santa Cruz board was battered and chipped, the edges dull and worn. Where a blue-cloaked skeleton had once grinned manically out from the topsheet, now a myriad of scratches and scuffs made the image almost impossible to make out.

Charlie clicked the last strap into place, tightened the bindings, and reached up to pause the Biffy

Clyro track that blared through his headphones. The sudden silence made his head reel for a moment and he took a frigid, calming breath then leaned back and felt the snow mould around him.

He'd pictured the view countless times over the past six months but, even so, it was far more spectacular than he'd imagined. It had taken him most of the afternoon to hike across from one side of the peak to the other, but the effort had been more than worth it.

Away from the tiny resort they were staying in, there really was nothing but empty wilderness. The south side of the mountain stretched down at his feet, a pristine fun park of untouched, flawless snow and across from him – all around him – lay nothing but distant rocky peaks and vast, deserted forests.

And there was nobody there to enjoy the view but him.

They'd been warned not to go off-piste. The instructors were particularly frantic about that rule and the consequences of breaking it.

Avalanches. Death. Rocks. Death. Freezing. Death.

Take your pick.

But Charlie was pretty sure that he didn't care either way.

Even with the deserted splendour of the Austrian Alps laid out before him, he couldn't help but dwell on the fact that soon he would be slammed back into reality.

Four more days.

And at least three of those were likely to be ruined by the huge winter storm that was currently sweeping in his direction.

Charlie swore and looked down at the drop just a few feet from where his board nestled among the snow. Now that he sat there, actually looking down at the mountain he had planned to ride, he wasn't really sure it was doable. His heart was hammering in his chest as if he'd just run a marathon, and he knew it wasn't just the exertion from the hike that was causing it.

From nowhere, a tiny voice started to chatter away at the back of his head.

Maybe nobody tackled the south side for a reason.

Maybe the instructors had been right.

Maybe he might not walk away from this.

Charlie chewed his bottom lip, his confidence

wavering. But the truth was, there really was nothing waiting for him back home, was there? Nothing but misery, and it wasn't going to get any better any time soon.

He nodded to himself and stood up on his snowboard, hopping from tip to tip to try to warm up, feeling the snow under his feet crunch satisfyingly. He stole another quick glance at the powder field below him, imagined himself flying down the vertiginous slope, catching an edge, hitting a rock, breaking his leg, then lying out until dark and beyond – the barren, starless night slowly sapping the life out of him.

Charlie took another snort of Alpine air. He *could* turn and walk away. He *could* trudge back over the mountaintop and take the reds and blues back down to the village. He knew the risks. The same way he knew that if it didn't work out, nobody was going to miss him anyway.

Screw it.

Before he had time to change his mind, he lined up the nose of the board with the drop below and leaned his weight forwards so that he started to slip down the slope. Just as the board gained momentum

and reached the point of no return, Charlie could have sworn he heard a voice behind him, words calling on the wind. But by then it was too late to do anything but look forwards, bend his knees and let gravity do the rest.

Then he was away.

For what felt like an eternity he freefell down the mountain, the wind in his ears, his heart pounding, the world a vertical blur. An instant before his board could slip out of control he dug in his heels and carved a steep, banking turn through the snow. A quick shift to the right, and he darted the other way, his snowboard chattering underneath his feet. Snow sprayed around him like a cloud of vapour, biting at the exposed skin on his face.

Each time he felt himself getting too much speed, Charlie dug in his heels or his toes and felt the pace die away for an instant. Then he tore off again, only faintly aware that he was shouting – a long, high cry of excitement tearing from his lungs. The speed of his run transformed the frozen wilderness around him into an indistinct kaleidoscope of whites and greys, his mind focused on nothing more than the bite of his snowboard, the winding dance of the

mountain.

It was on his six or seventh turn that he noticed the low rumble, like thunder across the valley. Without slowing, he slipped on to his toe edge, reached out low with his fingertips towards the snow to steady himself and chanced a look back up to where he had come.

A horizon of jumbling chaos loomed above him. Tumbling downwards was a wave of rock and snow, the grey sky gone, a cloud of debris and ice filling the air. Charlie tasted bile at the back of his throat.

The heartbeat that he took his sight off the slope was all it took for him to lose his concentration. His board caught an edge, and he slipped backwards and slammed his head on the snow. His goggles were torn away from his eyes, his legs above his head, all sense of direction gone.

Charlie didn't have time to be scared.

As he flew down the slope on his back, a deep, booming rumble shuddered around him, through him, growing closer all the time. He managed to slam his legs down into the snow, felt the edge of his board bite. The blur around him slowed, and as he had time to process what was happening he

registered the snow that had found its way under his shirt, down his pants, into his mouth. He dragged to a halt then scrabbled to his knees, fighting to suck a whisper of air into his lungs.

The roaring was everywhere now, in his head, his chest, running through his body like a current. He turned to his right, saw the vast wave of snow that was a heartbeat from sweeping him away … and then everything went black.

Chapter Two

Nico heard the sound just as he arrived back in the village, still absorbing the fact that, against all the odds, he'd survived another day with no broken bones. A rumble, deep and powerful, like the anger of a distant earthquake, cracked across the range.

Nico felt a shiver of panic running down his back, then he caught Stefan's eye and noticed the lack of concern there.

"Was that thunder?" asked one of the students, a good-looking girl that Nico was fairly sure was called Leandra. He didn't know much about her, other than that they shared an art class and he'd seen her paintings displayed in their school reception. He'd never actually been brave enough to speak to her, but he'd seen her a few times in the library, and had peered up from the safety of his computer screen to listen in on her conversations.

Leandra's thick black hair was stuffed under a clunky orange helmet, and her large, dark eyes shone out anxiously from under its chipped rim.

Stefan shook his head. "No. That's an avalanche. But it's over there, up on the other side of the mountain, off-piste. No one skis up there. So I don't think we need to worry."

As the eyes of several of the students in his group widened, Nico wondered if his relief at the day's survival had been somewhat premature, but Stefan smiled playfully.

"We get lots of avalanches in the winter. Sometimes we set them off ourselves with dynamite, just to make it safer on the lower pistes. With the dump of snow that they're expecting to fall over the next few days, I think we might be hearing that sound a little more."

One of the boys, Ryan, turned in Stefan's direction. He was tall, well over six foot, and built like a bull – the kind of kid that Nico wished he could be reincarnated as. Back at home, Ryan was captain of the rugby team, king of the common room and a minor celebrity among a sea of sixth formers. But while he could have easily acted like a

dick, he didn't – even towards nerds like Nico. Since they'd arrived in Austria, he'd been polite, respectful and eager to listen to all Stefan's instructions.

Plus he was a natural athlete. Much to Nico's jealousy, he'd picked up skiing in just a few days and was already far ahead of the rest of the group.

"You think we'll be able to ski tomorrow? You think this storm will be as bad as they're saying?"

Stefan shrugged in response. "They always exaggerate it over in this part of the Alps, but it does look pretty bad. If the reports turn out to be right, I doubt we'll be able to set foot out of the front door tomorrow. If there's as much snow as they say, we wont even be able to open it."

As if in acknowledgement of the instructor's words, Nico noticed that a slow trickle of flakes had started to fall from the sky. He looked upwards and saw that the thin grey clouds had given way to a much more menacing, bruised gloom.

Ryan flicked at the flakes that settled in his fringe and pulled his beanie down an inch lower. "Here it comes, then. You sure we can't have one more run before we go in, Stefan?"

"No. That's it for today, I'm afraid. We'll get

some food in us, get the fires going. It'll be – what do you English say? – Cosy? Is that the word?" The ski instructor nodded to himself, then started to lead the party of students back through Kaldgellan towards its lone hotel.

It was growing darker by the minute, a combination of falling dusk and an ominous sky. Every other day this week, there had been streetlights and lanterns glowing all the way back from the lift station to the hotel, Christmas lights twinkling in the windows of the handful of shops.

But tonight the track back from the slopes was unusually dark; wooden shutters closed and candles unlit.

As they reached the village centre, Nico picked up on an air of bustle among the few people on the street. He recognised a couple of the locals he'd seen earlier that week packing up their sleds to hike over to the main lift station, presumably getting down the mountain before the storm came in. Nico had spent the day shivering so much he could barely concentrate, but even so he'd heard about the impending snowfall and its ramifications for the rest of the trip.

Nico jumped at a loud rattle as the shutter slid down on the village's lone café. Stefan spotted the owner – a chubby, friendly local man in his fifties – hovering just outside the darkened building. He was squinting down at his watch, and the instructor held up his hand to pause Nico's group.

"Ho, Marlon, what's with all the closing? Where's everyone going to?"

The owner had a harassed shine in his bloodshot eyes, and he shook his head. "Just getting away before this storm comes in, is all. I don't want to be stuck up here for three days with no way of getting down. They're saying that the winds will get so bad they'll shut the cable cars down. I don't want to be trapped up here like a prisoner, no thank you."

Nico felt a nervous twinge in his gut, but Stefan grinned at the owner. "What about the money you could make? There must be nearly thirty students staying at the hotel. Think of the cakes and cappuccino they're going to need!"

Marlon didn't reply or even crack a smile. Nico watched as he turned away and continued to quickly stuff his belongings into the back of his battered wooden sled. Stefan shrugged and turned back to

his group.

"What will we do all day tomorrow if we can't ski?"

Nico looked at the speaker, a tall, skinny girl called Ellie. He'd gone to primary school with her, watched her try to cope with her parents' messy divorce, danced with her at the year seven disco … only to somehow lose touch with her as they crept into adulthood.

Stefan smiled in Ellie's direction. "I'm sure you'll think of something. Worse case scenario you can sneak out and build a snowman. Me, I plan to sleep. I'm back to university next month for my finals and tomorrow might be my last chance for a guilt-free day in bed."

Ellie's blue eyes were locked on to Stefan, a glint of admiration hovering there that gave Nico a twinge of envy. She was pretty, although he wondered if she'd be even more attractive without so much make up. Her thick woollen hood obscured most of her features, but in the half-light Nico could make out skin that had been coated with a more than liberal helping of fake tan, flanked by a pair of hoop earrings that nestled in the curls of her long,

bleached hair.

"I want to get to university and do fashion, down in London. But first I've got to get through my A-levels. My parents say it'll never happen, that people from our part of the city don't belong at uni. And if I don't get at least Cs in my mocks, they say they're going to make me leave and get a job. I just hope I prove them wrong."

Stefan flashed his winning smile. "You'll do it. Just believe in yourself."

Nico turned as a figure surged out of the gloom, and watched Stefan wave a gloved hand in its direction.

"Hey Matthias, you not staying for a drink tonight?"

There were four ski instructors that worked for the hotel in Kaldgellan, but Matthias was the oldest by quite some way. Nico had heard Stefan telling one of the other students that Matthias had lived in the village all his life and had never strayed far from the isolated resort.

Normally Matthias and the other instructors stayed in the hotel bar after dark, swapping stories and ridiculing the awful skiing of some of their

guests, which Nico was sure included him. But now the older man shook his head slowly.

"No, I … I can't stay. It's a … a family thing. I need to get down to the valley, and if I don't go tonight…"

Matthias had his skis over one shoulder and seemed about to say something. Then he shook his head and looked up at the snow that was steadily falling from above. He didn't speak for a moment, and in the half-light it looked to Nico as if he were shaking.

One of Matthias' big, gloved hands swept out and clapped Stefan on the shoulder. "My group are inside, getting warm. You should take this lot in. You're a great guy Stefan. Look after yourself, the next few days. Have a drink for me tonight, eh?"

Matthias was a gruff, bearded Austrian, the kind of man that looked to Nico as if he could wrestle a bear – but there was something odd on his face, something that Nico found unnerving. Stefan seemed to pick up on it too, and he took a step closer to the older man.

"Hey, whatever's wrong, I'm sure it'll work itself out. You want me to stay for a while, talk things

through?"

Matthias shook his head and slid his bulky hand off Stefan's shoulder. While Nico watched the conversation unfold, the rest of his group chatted and milled around, staring up at the descending flakes that grew heavier by the second. They'd been in the Alps for three days and although there had been showers, this was the first real snowfall since they'd arrived.

Matthias leaned closer to Stefan. "No. Just need to get down the mountain. You look after yourself and this lot. Be lucky, if you can. I need to get over to the lift before this wind gets any worse. It's come in a lot earlier than they said it would."

He strode off in the direction of his car, an old jeep with snow chains shining on the tyres. Without a backwards glance he jumped in, slammed the door, revved the engine then skidded away through the snow. Stefan watched him go, a look of confusion on his face.

"You OK, Stefan?"

The instructor nodded vaguely, tracking Matthias' tail lights as they flickered towards the lift station. Stefan's eyes fell on Nico, trying and failing to

hide a glimmer of exasperation. The instructor had warned him about the cold that morning, but even so Nico had come out on to the slopes with nothing but a long-sleeved top with a *Walking Dead* T-shirt over it and, as Stefan had predicted, he'd spent the day shivering.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But you look a little frozen."

Stefan shook his head and gestured towards the Panoramic Hotel, a faded, dumpy, three-storey building a few metres away. "Come on, you guys, nearly there. Let's get inside before this snow *really* starts to fall."