

Alone Chapter 3

Me and Charley seemed to be locked in a standoff, with neither of us moving an inch. It took an awkward eternity before I realized what I was doing. I was staring down a fricking stuffed animal. Of course the only thing I'd see would be my own reflection bouncing off his beady glass eyes. Why was I waiting for him to make the first move?

I huffed and turned away, once again turning my attention to the mountain I was trapped on. Charley's appearance had done nothing to alleviate my situation, and I growled in annoyance. Why couldn't Cedrick have sent me a magical staircase or something I could use to get off this forsaken ledge? Or better yet, not stuck me up here in the first place?

I was never good with heights. I would freak out over climbing a ladder, let alone dangling on the edge of a massive precipice surrounded on 3 sides by imminent death. So it was safe to assume the shivering was from fear and not the cold even as waves of frigid air blew through my fur. Looking down was a mistake. I let out a yelp and froze solid, all four feet refusing to move either forwards or backwards. My legs were like pillars of ice but my nerves were like molten lava, melting away what little courage I could muster. I was trembling like a scared little cub, and for once I was glad to be 1000 miles from the nearest pair of eyes.

I looked back towards the stuffed animal, eyes pleading for help. It was pathetic, but I'd run out of options. I whimpered like a cub, hoping beyond hope that it could

understand my plight and somehow summon a helicopter out of his fuzzy behind to rescue me. It wouldn't have been the most improbable crap to happen to me today.

Charley cocked his head as we locked eyes, though whether in pity or amusement I couldn't tell. Then to my astonishment he abruptly turned ninety degrees and lept right off the cliff, disappearing from view. This was enough to break my stupor as I yelped and darted over to the spot where Charley's paws had left the ground just moments before. Was it something I said? Was he going back to his master? Why would he leave me now?

To my surprise Charley was not torn to bits on the rocks below but perched on a ledge about twenty feet away, looking perky as ever and very un-dead. Despite the ledge being little more than the width of a ruler, his paws clung to the rock like a magnet. He looked back up at me, as if he wanted to make sure I was paying attention. Then, to my surprise and amazement, he took off down the cliff.

Charley bolted downwards like a lightning bolt, making leaps and bounds that would far surpass the most athletic human gymnast. "*What the hell?*" I thought in sheer incredulation. It was a sheer wall of rock! How could anyone possibly navigate that? But as I squinted closer at Charley's path, I noticed that my initial assumption had been wrong. It was not a smooth sheet of rock as I had thought but one peppered with tiny cracks and ledges, providing the slimmest of footholds only a cat could navigate. The thought sickened me as I watched Charley's descent. *Was I supposed to do that? How*

the heck does he expect me to make those jumps? I watched in both shock and fascination as Charley's plush-filled tail danced and weaved through the air, providing balance and helping the cat make death-defying turns mid-leap. His body was like a ballerina's in concert despite being made up of plush, industrial-grade fabric, and faux-fur. I could barely make him out as he softly landed on the snow below me like a gray spotted ant. Then I could've sworn he looked up at me, although it was too high to tell for certain. It's as if he was waiting for me. Great.

I shuffled further back onto the ledge, all four paws scraping against the snow. My limbs moved like molasses as my brain desperately tried to connect the right neurons to move them properly. Even now I could feel the sensation of my tail swishing across the snow, sending a chill up my spine and to my brain, filling it with signals of wrongness. My heart was beating a thousand times a minute. I ran countless scenarios through my head of what would happen if I jumped off that ledge. All of them resulted in shattered bones and agonizing, imminent death. My brain was shorting out as I began to hyperventilate. I had awoken in this body not two hours ago, and now I was being asked to push it to its limits. And yet, there was no other way down.

I sighed, trying to calm down the tsunami of thoughts flooding my brain. One way or another, I had to get off this ledge if I had any hope of getting back home, let alone survive for more than a couple days. Charley had apparently shown me the way down. All I have to do is follow him exactly and I'll be okay, right? Besides, what's the worst that can happen? If I plummet to my death at least my misery will be over.

Throughout all this there was a soft, subtle voice in the back of my head slowly creeping its way through my subconscious. It had gone unnoticed during my panic, but now that my thoughts had slowed it began to speak louder and louder.

Trust in me. Let me guide you. I will keep you safe.

As the voice bounced off the walls of my mind I could feel a tingling sensation throughout my body, starting with a flutter in my chest and spreading out across my limbs. It was like a jolt of electricity that sparked my muscles to life, filling them with a renewed sense of energy. I instinctively crouched into a pouncing stance, arching my haunches as if getting ready to leap. My legs tensed up as my tail twitched in anticipation, paws digging into the snow to gain proper leverage. I realized what I was doing a bit too late as I looked down to see nothing but air underneath my paws.

“WAAUGHGAHGH” I yowled, flailing my paws about aimlessly as the mountainside grew closer and closer. The gray walls of rock loomed ahead and I was flying into it face first as I screamed and flailed my limbs. *I'm going to die* was the dominant thought in my head as panic wiped away all sense of reason. My first action was to close my eyes out of fear. I quickly realized how stupid that was and forced them back open, just to see the cliff walls right in front of me. Right before I shattered my skull against the cliff face, however, something clicked inside my subconscious. I suddenly flipped around and hit the wall with all four paws, my limbs absorbing the shock of the

impact. Time seemed to slow down as I glanced down the cliff walls scanning for my next target. Information bombarded my brain almost faster than I could process it.

Possible jump onto the ledge 20 feet down, 18 feet east. Another ledge 30 feet out but the wind's against you. Too much risk. Adjust tail tip 15 degrees and shift right. At the halfway point, adjust tail 30 degrees for a mid-leap direction change. Pounce!

I screamed internally as I rebounded off the wall and sailed towards the ledge, my body making minute adjustments as I went. I wasn't in control but submissive to the voice that I now realized was sheer instinct, an innate survival guide built into my body. It was as if millions of snow leopards gone by were guiding me from the back of my subconscious, providing me with the knowledge of millions of years of evolution. Which I was now using to perform the impossible.

I actually started to enjoy myself as I artfully leapt across a gorge and bounced off a boulder back towards the cliff wall. I felt like a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth as I made my way down. That is, until I made a misstep as my right forepaw slipped on a rock causing me to tumble down the mountainside. I could only yowl in fear as I went from ping pong ball to bowling ball in about 3 seconds, knocking over rocks and pebbles as I fell. A surge of pain coursed through my body as I smacked into the soft snow below, sending the white stuff flying everywhere.

I groaned, slowly waiting for the stars to leave my vision. Thankfully, my fur coat protected me from the cold, wet snowbank I had landed in, although that did little to help my aching back. As my vision cleared I could see the mountain towering above me and I could vaguely make out the ledge from which I started from. From here it looked like an impossible descent. But somehow I had done it. I was alive, albeit with a sore back and a couple bruises across my body.

For some reason I laughed. This day seemed so impossible, so ridiculous, that I couldn't hold it in anymore. The strange chuffs and howls that escaped my muzzle were only making me laugh harder. Maybe it was the adrenaline still coursing through my veins or a rush of euphoria from escaping death but I felt good about myself for the first time in years. My life had turned completely upside down and I'd managed to escape with just a couple scratches and bruises. I had survived a day in one of nature's harshest environments. If I could conquer the forbidding slopes of the Himalaya mountains, then me and Charley could take on anything. Right?

If only I could know how wrong I was.