



eXtreme
BLINDSIDE

Leslea Wahl

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A Jake and Sophie Mystery

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*To my husband for his unconditional support,
my children who inspire me daily, and to God
for leading me on this amazing journey.*

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Chapter 1

Jake

I have a theory. There are certain experiences in life that are so incredible, so unique, so perfect, that they sear into your memory, making them unforgettable. I know this is one of those moments. That's why I'm trying to fully concentrate on what's unfolding around me, to soak in every detail. Last year when I won the Olympic silver medal at sixteen, I was too overwhelmed to fully appreciate the moment. That is not happening today.

The helicopter suddenly dips sharply, swooping closer to one of the snow-covered peaks set against the cloudless, deep blue sky. My stomach lurches, shifting my focus from the surreal experience to the very real risk of injury. As stoked as I am to be here in the Swiss Alps and to have my heliboarding run filmed, I can't stop the nerves that are bouncing around inside of me—anxiety pin ball.

I push the worry away so I can mentally prepare, knowing Mr. McKenzie wants a show for the crew filming this run, but instead I think of my girlfriend. Sophie would love seeing

this. I can picture her with her camera capturing the moment I drop out of a helicopter.

My teammate Tommy nudges my leg. “Welcome to the top of the world, kid!” he shouts over the roar of the helicopter.

The helicopter moves into position, swaying slightly in the wind, but the pilot keeps us steady. This view is staggering. The patches of clouds have mountain peaks piercing through them looking like massive icebergs in the sky. The untouched snow on the mountain beneath us glistens and is calling out to us to be shredded.

Tommy sits on the floor, his feet dangling out of the cop-ter, already strapped to his board. I stare at the mountain peak just beneath us, the sheer beauty of the untouched mountain masking the unforgiving danger. Even though our guide claims that this side of the mountain has less risk of avalanches, and even though we’re wearing emergency beacons, I remind myself of his advice to be alert for the thunderous sounds and be prepared to head to the side of the run.

A brief questioning of my sanity flies through my brain.

Tommy must notice my hesitation. He slaps my leg encouragingly. “The thinking part is over man. Now . . . now it’s time to jump.”

Being a man of his word, he leaps out of the helicopter, lands softly on the mountain peak, and boards down a short distance to join Christophe, our mountain guide. That’s when I feel it. That familiar burning that starts to rise from the pit

of my stomach, slowly replacing the fear. The thought of doing something very few people will ever have the chance to experience rushes through me. This is going to be epic.

I close my eyes, shoot up a prayer for safety, then drop out of the copter. The blowing snow from the whirl of the blades limits the visibility. When I reach solid ground, the helicopter veers away for a better camera angle.

As our ride leaves, a peaceful quiet descends. Not sure if it's the thin air or the unbelievable views that make it hard to breathe. I've been on some pretty amazing mountains, but nothing compares to this. The dizzying height gets my heart pounding. Scanning the range of snow-covered peaks that encircle us, the seemingly endless mountain range is mind blowing. Totally rad.

Christophe turns to us with a questioning thumbs up. Once we return the gesture, he angles down the mountain and disappears from site. Tommy and I grin at each other. He nods for me to go next.

I scooch to the ridge. The knife edge is so steep that I can't see anything until I tilt forward. Suddenly I'm off, plummeting toward the natural chute of the mountain. The wind whips past me as I glide through the pure white powder. The sensation is so different from the structure of the manmade halfpipe, like surfing through clouds. With every turn, not knowing what to expect, my muscles engage, as I push that fine line between recklessness and staying in control.

I follow Christophe's track and soon am surrounded by rocks on either side. The chute is narrow, making turns nearly

impossible. I bullet through the crevice, overloaded with adrenaline. The dark boulders lining the sides are a blur of gray. As the open snowfield nears, I calculate how sharp I must crank my turn when I exit the chute so I can stop and wait for Tommy without losing control. When I see Christophe waiting off to the left, I dig in my toe edge and carve into the snow. My muscles burn under the strain of the deep snow. With my heart racing, I glide up next to him. He nods approvingly. I turn back to watch Tommy barrel through the crevice. His howl echoing through the mountain range.

The moment Tommy shoots through, we speed down the wide snowfield. Plumes of powder shoot up behind our boards. A feeling of total exhilaration fills every cell of my body as we careen down this untouched blanket of snow. I quickly glance up at the towering, angular range of peaks in front of me. The mountains appear to continue forever.

As we near the end of the smooth snowfield, Christophe points us in the direction of the rocky cliffs that will serve as our jumps. I notice the rise in the snow and a few dark rocks peeking through the powder. I launch off the boulder, look over my leading shoulder to start my body and board spinning. I come out of the trick and glance down to spot the landing, but this cliff is steeper than I realized and I find myself in a free fall. The wind rushes past me as I plunge toward the earth. My board lands on a sharp decline in the massive depth of powder, which explodes from the impact, creating a cloud of white around me. Whoa. Hanging on to the landing takes all my strength.

The pitch of the terrain remains steep, and when I make my turn, my head actually brushes the snow. This is the most extreme thing I've ever done—no wonder Tommy loves heliboarding so much.

Out of my peripheral vision I notice Christophe and Tommy again. Soon the turns are more manageable, as the incline diminishes. I blaze down the mountain chasing Tommy, adrenaline coursing through me. The ankle-deep snow suddenly becomes thigh deep, but it's so light and fluffy, I glide right through.

Christophe pulls in front to show us another rocky cliff to use as a jump. He flies over it, then drops out of view. Tommy and I follow suit with blind faith. This time I throw in a flip, remembering to showcase some airborne maneuvers. As soon as we land, in another explosion of temporarily blinding snow, we hit another jump. I pull a ginormous backscratcher using all my power to hang onto the uneven landing.

Speed, jumps, powder, wind—it's all over way too soon. I follow Christophe to a flat area where the helicopter will land, unable to wipe the smile off my face.



“How's your steak?”

I glance at Mr. McKenzie's face. The food's amazing, but my mind keeps drifting back to the heliboarding. Paying attention to our dinner conversation is proving more difficult than maneuvering through those deep snowfields. But I owe it to the man who made the excursion possible to stay focused.

“I’m sorry. I just keep reliving this incredible day. Thanks again for arranging that.”

Mr. McKenzie reaches for his glass of wine. The crisp white crease of his shirt sleeve reminds me of the steep mountain ridges from this morning. He raises his glass to make a toast. “Here’s to our new partnership. May it be lucrative for us both. Make sure to thank your parents for me for agreeing to all this.”

I clink my soda glass against his crystal goblet. After a swig, I watch the man close his eyes as he savors his drink.

Does he always appreciate his wine this much, or is he as uncomfortable at this dinner as I am? When Mr. McKenzie said he wanted a quick word with me over dinner, I pictured grabbing a burger or something, not a four-course meal at a fancy restaurant. I was thrilled when my folks let me go on this European trip with just my team and no parental tag-alongs. I think they still feel guilty for their unfounded concerns regarding the drug-use rumors a few months back and wanted to show that they trust me. But now I wish they were here. They’d know how to keep the conversation free of the awkward silences.

While Mr. McKenzie’s focus remains on his merlot, I watch the flickering shadows from the candlelight dance across his balding head. I haven’t known the man long, and I’m still trying to figure him out. He’s an old friend of my agent, Bill. I could practically see the memories flashing through Bill’s mind as he explained that he and Mr. McKenzie played college football together. The old teammates are now

both successful businessmen. Bill once told me that he viewed business dealings like a strategic game of football. Wonder if Mr. McKenzie has a similar philosophy. Wouldn't be surprised since he obviously still loves sports. He runs one of the most exclusive winter extreme sports competitions—the Mountain Madness Games, which I'll be competing at next month.

I first met Mr. McKenzie, or Mac, as Bill calls him, when he approached me a few months back about being the celebrity spokesperson for his newest project: a state-of-the-art training facility for world-class athletes. I loved the idea of training with the top competitors, constantly pushing each other to improve. But, as cool as it sounded, I wasn't sure I wanted to link my name to the project. It seemed like too much pressure with everything that was happening at the time. But Bill kept hounding me about it. When he finally suggested to Mr. McKenzie that they include something for Special Olympians and para-athletes, my reluctance melted away, and I was down to participate. Then Mr. McKenzie had the brilliant idea of doing a promotional video to spread the word about the project, which resulted in today's heliboarding experience of a lifetime.

“Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt.” I look up to see a woman, probably in her mid-twenties, standing at our table. “I think I'm a little late.” Strands of long dark hair trail down her fuzzy white sweater.

Mr. McKenzie rises out of his seat to greet the woman. “Not a problem! We are just finishing our meal, and you can join us for dessert.”

The woman settles into a chair and then directs a huge smile toward me. Her red lipstick stands out in sharp contrast to her pale complexion. “Jake, it’s nice to meet you.” When she reaches out her hand, jangly silver bracelets slip out from her sleeve.

I shake her hand and get the feeling I’m supposed to know this mystery woman. Hopefully, whoever she is, she’s a better conversationalist than I am.

Mr. McKenzie settles back in his chair. “Jake, this is Ms. Addestein.” He turns to the woman. “I must apologize, Adele. I haven’t had a chance to tell Jake about you yet.”

These words put me on high alert.

Mr. McKenzie pushes away his plate. “Jake, do you remember when you first agreed to be part of this project and I said we’d come up with a great publicity gimmick?”

This can’t be good. “You mean besides the heliboarding videos?”

He leans forward, his face lighting up with excitement as dread washes through me. “The heliboarding video will be the highlight of a huge gala we’ll be holding during the Mountain Madness Games when we reveal the plans for the new training facility.”

“Umm . . . okay.” Still not sure what this Ms. Addestein has to do with anything.

“We need a way to build momentum to that event. So, I have asked a friend of mine who is the managing editor at a magazine if they would do a huge spread on you.”

I stare at the remainder of my steak, which suddenly looks less than appetizing. That can only mean one thing:

entertainment reporters. The press used to be a minor annoyance. But they turned from an irritation that comes with competing on a world-class level to a life-altering plague. Now I have no respect for them.

Mr. McKenzie is sly. He must know my distrust of reporters and of their power to spread misinformation about me. Smart man to spring this on me after treating me to the most incredible day of my life. A blitz on a defenseless player. Not cool, Mr. McKenzie. Well played, but not cool.

I take a deep breath and try to remind myself all the good the facility will do for the athletes I've vowed to help. This is a good way to use my fame.

"Alright."

Mr. McKenzie slaps the table, rattling the silverware. "Atta boy! Adele here will be shadowing you for a little while. You'll see, all the publicity from her articles will make some buzz around this project."

I briefly look back down at my steak so he doesn't witness my eyes rolling.

Ms. Addelstein leans toward me. "I'm excited to be part of this project. I'm sure the month will fly by."

I physically jolt in my seat. "A month? I thought you said a magazine spread." I must have missed something. There's no way he would suggest that she follow me for a month. He can't be serious.

Her eyes flick toward Mr. McKenzie. They share a brief look, then his gaze settles on my face. "Well, it's more of a series of spreads. The magazine is mostly online these days." He smiles. "Jake, what's a month out of your life to help

others? Your name is huge right now and we should capitalize on that momentum. People love your story, not only your Cinderella Olympic tale, but the adversity you found yourself facing this fall, the incredible way you stood up for justice and brought down the corruption that scandalized your town, and your commitment and generosity with the Special Olympics. The public will love this in-depth report on your life, on what makes you tick. Then, once they fall in love with you, they'll fall in love with what you're promoting. Adele will shadow you from now through the end of the Mountain Madness Games."

He's serious.

I stare at the two faces eagerly awaiting my reply. I'd never wanted to have my face plastered all over magazines and the Internet, but, hey, shock the nation by winning an Olympic silver medal and suddenly you are the news. It was hard enough to deal with the unwanted attention, building me up to be some super-athlete who could leap over tall buildings in a single bound. I mean, come on, who could ever live up to all the hype? But then, when I struggled to learn a new trick, suddenly everyone was reporting that I was a one-hit wonder, that I didn't really have what it took, and my fifteen minutes of fame were over—nearly annihilating my confidence. But that wasn't the worst. Then came the bogus claim of drug use. Do you think even one so-called reporter searched for the truth? No. They all ran with the story, tore me apart, practically ruining my life just so they could have the most sensational story for everyone to read. My initial distrust proved true. They don't give a rip about the truth.

They're all about selling stories, picking up viewers, and gaining more advertisers. Needless to say, having a reporter assigned to me for the next month ranks pretty high on my things-to-avoid list—right up there with rabid dogs and intensive dental procedures.

I look between the two of them, not sure how to respond. "I'll have to talk this over with my folks." Oh, parents of mine, where are you when I need you?

Mr. McKenzie waves the waiter over. "Of course. I believe Bill discussed the idea with them today. Since Adele was already here covering this European race for the magazine, I wanted to introduce you. The two of you will meet back up after Christmas in the new year."

While he debates dessert choices with the waiter, I stare at the table. Well, this dinner certainly took an unexpected turn.

"Jake," Ms. Addelstein says. "Obviously this came as a shock to you. I promise I'll stay out of your way, as much as possible. Mr. McKenzie is right though. The way you single-handedly brought down a huge drug-smuggling operation was incredible! Everyone wants to know more about you."

A mere ten seconds into this new arrangement and she's already got the story wrong.

"I didn't 'single-handedly' do anything," I snap. "Sophie Metcalf played a huge role in the events as well." I hate when people leave out Sophie's part of the story. Reporters always want to make this all about me. I suppose there might be a few journalists left with scruples—that's the kind of reporter Sophie hopes to be—but how do you know who to trust?

How do you find the decent ones amid the vultures? Better not to trust any of them—with the exception of Sophie. I know reporters come with the territory, but I've found the only way to deal with them is to be polite, answer the questions, and keep them far away from my personal life. Of course, that's going to be hard to do when I have my own personal reporter following me around for a month.

Her eyes widen. "Oh, of course. I didn't mean to diminish Sophie's role." She glances at Mr. McKenzie, but he's too busy asking the server about which after-dinner drink will perfectly pair with the dessert he picked out. She shifts in her chair. "I understand she would like to be a reporter too."

"Yeah, and she's the only reporter I've found I can trust."

She bites her lip. "I hope I'll be able to change that belief."

While we wait for our dessert to arrive, my tablemates chat, leaving me time to ponder the turn of events. Am I being difficult? Maybe having her follow me wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Instantaneous fame had been hard and I certainly didn't handle it well. It was Sophie who helped me realize it wasn't all bad, that I could be a positive role model. Mr. McKenzie's project and being able to include the proper equipment for the Special Olympics really is a perfect way for me to use my fame for something better than advertising sportswear. I guess I should be thankful for the opportunity instead of complaining about it.

I pull out my phone, wishing I could call Sophie or my parents to discuss it. A message Sophie sent earlier pops up on my screen. I grin at the photos of her and her brother making a family of snowmen. Her carefree laugh is frozen on my

screen, those beautiful green eyes crinkled with delight. Furry earmuffs hold back her brown waves, revealing cheeks red from the cold. She included one of our coded messages. The 49ers code helped us out in the fall and is now our secret language.

Someone near the red soil of the river misses you.

Easy. I remember Sophie telling me, during one of her nervous ramblings, how Colorado got its name. Some Spanish explorers gave it the term for “colored red” because of the red sandstone soil found in the rivers of the area.

Someone in Colorado misses me. Sophie.

A pang of homesickness blasts through me. Time to get home.