CHAPTER 1

Avalanche!

May 4, 1975

We were a month and a half on Mount Everest, no more than a week from the summit, with our route fixed as high as Camp 5 at the South Col. ln an unusual combination of logistics, several of us had descended to Camp 2 for the night. There, our group of expedition tents was pitched along the broad knoll that marked the camp on the Western Cwm Glacier, positioned away from the threat of falling cornices off nearby Nuptse. We considered ourselves to be in a safe spot - a welcomed event on Everest, and enough to let me sleep. I surrendered to the silence. Then, at half-past midnight, vibration, a deafening noise and - WHAM - impact.

With no warning and in the frigid hours of darkness, several tons of snow and ice had suddenly released from the flank of Nuptse and exploded downwards a thousand metres. Non-stop, the thunderous mass of snow pushed up and over the knoll where we slept and barrelled directly across the glacier of our camp. Earlier, there was a mix-up in ferrying loads, and we arrived at Camp 2 short one sleeping bag. Watanabe and I shared a bag with our legs stuffed in together for warmth, our upper bodies wrapped in down coats. When the avalanche hit, I was forced upright, yanking at Watanabe by way of our proximity as the immense blow shook me to my core. Within seconds I could hardly breathe as an enormous pressure bore down on me. Confusion set in as I was tossed and turncd upside down, the tent whipping around in somersaults amongst the churning ice. I thought for a moment I was dead.

An instant later, the avalanche stopped. The entire camp was frozen in place, crushed between unyielding chunks of ice blocks, myself included.

I was unable to move an inch. Any attempt to flex a muscle or shift my position was met with defeat. All effort was in vain while our tent, with my teammates inside, was buried in a mound of avalanche debris.

“Everybody OK?” I yelled at the top of my voice, startled by its loudness. There was no response. I realized then that someone was on top of me. It was Mihara, her hair smothering my face. Our noses touched. Neither of us could properly breathe.

Instinct told me I needed a knife. I reached for the cord around my neck and yanked at the hidden tool with my right hand but I was unable to free it, my arm rendered useless. With urgency, I bit at the knife with my teeth and pulled the blade from its sheath. “Mihara-*san*, cut the tent open!” My breath was short.

“I can’t do it,” she said. The cord of her sleeping bag was wrapped around her neck, her hands and feet unable to move. “Tabei-*san*, I’m suffering.” I could feel her pain exhaled on my face as she spoke.

As if in fast-forward, I realized there were too many of us at Camp 2. Usually a dozen or so climbers based themselves there, but we were a party more than twice that size. My mind filled with newspaper headlines: “Worst accident ever in the climbing history of Mount Everest - seven climbers, three journalists, 18 Sherpas - a total of 28 killed in an avalanche.” I was convinced that everyone had been buried. My thoughts rushed to family and friends at home and how

they would feel when they read such a thing.
I was shocked back to reality as my breathing continued to fail. Coloured lights of red, yellow and purple started to flash in front of my eyes. Mihara was gasping, too. My mind flitted to Noriko, my three-year-old daughter; she would be devastated if I died. 1 was determined to hang on, to stay alive. As soon as I processed that thought, I slipped into unconsciousness.