

The Scarf

"Are you ready yet?"

Hannah squeezed the neck of her backpack to cinch it shut. "Two more seconds," she promised, forcing her water bottle further into the pack. She knew they weren't getting as early a start as Alex had wanted; he had wanted to get out on a hike right at dawn. Hannah had coaxed him to stay in bed an hour longer, snuggling against him to stay warm in the early morning chill. Now she was slow to get ready, protecting the trail mix they'd bought for the hike in the padding of an extra sweatshirt, buttoning and zipping herself into layers of wool. It was winter, and hiking in the Alps was not going to be a jaunty little trip around a bend. "Okay. I'm set," she said, standing.

"That bag's going to be too heavy."

"No, it's fine," Hannah assured him, hoisting it across her shoulders. It pulled her jacket right off of her back. Alex shook his head. "I can carry it, okay? I need to have enough water and snacks and things. An extra shirt if I get cold."

"You'll be moving. You'll be climbing a hill. You won't need extra shirts."

"Well, I'm bringing them," Hannah insisted, wrenching her coat back around her and propping the bag higher on her back. She sounded harsh to her own ears, and turned to smile at Alex again.

He smiled back. "Okay, then. Let's try to get a move on before it's time for lunch."

Hannah straightened her jacket collar and gave Alex a look of mock exasperation. She felt at her neck, and stopped. "My scarf!" She scanned the room. "Have you seen it?" She dropped her backpack and began turning over pillows on the bed.

Alex sighed and leaned against the doorframe. "Here we go."

It was true that Hannah was always losing her scarf: on the way to classes, running to the underground, in the cushions of the couch at the flat she shared with her friend Sophie in London. Somehow she always found it again, a little worse for the wear, rumpled—once, even run over in the street. It was a running joke with her roommate, how she always lost her scarf.

"It's bright red! How can you miss a thing like that?" Sophie would say. Hannah could only shrug, clean it up again, and welcome it home.

"It's testing my love," Hannah said now, teasing. She opened drawers they hadn't even used.

"It's an inanimate object."

"I know, Alex. It just seems that way. How I'm always losing it, then finding it again, even days later. That one time—"

"Less talking, more looking, please."

Hannah sighed up at him as she lifted the blankets from the corner of the bed. Alex was pacing the narrow length of their hotel room now, the corner of his mouth nervously twitching as he checked his watch. "Just a minute," she said, and dipped her head under the side of the bed.

It was their second day in Chamonix, the second to last day of a weeklong trip to France. This was their first trip together since meeting in their post-grad program in London that fall—a trip that had stretched their student finances.

"It's expensive, but I've never been to France, to the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower," Hannah had told Sophie when she was debating the trip. "And to go with Alex—what could be more romantic than going to France?"

"You should go," Sophie had said. "You can learn a lot about someone from travelling with them." Hannah was beginning to understand exactly what you learned. The strain of the days alone together—in the gray of winter, in a place where the people spoke a language Alex didn't know and Hannah was trying to remember from school days—was pushing an argument through their skins. The crowds at the Louvre made them tense; hailing a taxi had proved challenging on the cold, windy Paris nights. She was hoping Chamonix would be different; that the stifled feeling that had entered their trip would be dwarfed by the towering Alps.

"Maybe that scarf really wants to be free." Hannah joked, standing. "All these times I've lost it, I thought it wanted to be found, but... Here it is!" Hannah grasped the lump of red from behind the nightstand, waving it in the air.

"Thank God. I thought I was going to have to listen to more hypothesizing on the emotions of a scarf."

Hannah wrapped the scarf lovingly around her neck. "I just think it's funny, how often it gets lost. That's all."

Alex picked up his bag. "Let's go," he said, and they headed out the door.

The morning was stark white and covered in fog. "We'll be lucky if there's anything to see up there," Hannah remarked.

Alex shook his head. "It'll burn off."

They walked through town, stomping through slushy puddles that gathered at storefronts. Alex seemed to relax now that they were out in the morning, his breathing deeper, his pace less harried. He put an apologetic, gloved hand in Hannah's. She looked up at the faint and foggy outlines of the peaks, the forbidding crest of Mont Blanc faintly visible behind the rest, overseeing.

"We're not climbing Mont Blanc are we? Say we're not climbing Mont Blanc."

Alex broke into a laugh, his breath rolling out visibly in the chill. "It's not exactly a day hike, is it?" He nudged Hannah's boot with the toe of his own. "And you're not exactly dressed the part." Hannah's boots were more style than function. She didn't own hiking boots.

She shrugged along through the snow. "We could always go skiing instead."

"Not on our budget."

"Snowshoeing?"

Alex shook his head, but smiled. "Do you know how much they want to rent snowshoes around here?"

Hannah wanted to argue that if they had saved more money for the end of their trip, they could even ski. But their splurges early in the vacation had seemed so worthwhile at the time: a romantic trip to the top of the Eiffel Tower, dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Paris. They had even bought tickets for the bullet train down to the connection to Chamonix. Hannah had expressed concern over the price of the bullet train, but Alex had leaned over, kissed her nose and said, "When will we get a chance to travel that fast again? We'll be in Chamonix by noon." And they were.

"So, not Mount Blanc," she agreed now. "Where will we hike, then?"

"There are mountains every way you turn," Alex said, linking his arm through hers. "You pick one, and we'll walk right up to it."

Hannah picked one off to the side of the town, not too far. They aimed for it, and hiked right up to the start of snow-covered trail, the ruts of skis visible in places. "It doesn't seem like a lot of people have been hiking here."

"Well, it's January, Hannah. Not exactly hiking season."

Hannah flashed an exasperated look. "That's what I'm saying. *Snowshoes.*" Her scarf slipped from her neck but she caught it before it hit the ground.

They made their way up the side of the mountain, through the trees. The fog was still sitting on the town, and there wasn't any view to speak of. It hadn't been that way the day before, when they arrived. The train had shot through the noontime sun into the

valley, a bright blue sky overhead, the peaks wrapped like a paper chain around them. The air had been crisp and fresh with no fog in sight as they stepped out of the depot. Alex had wanted to hike right then, the whole town gleaming with sunshine. But it was too late to get a good start, and Hannah had wanted to sit and eat crepes and hot chocolate across from the ice rink. "I hope the sun comes out," she said now.

"I'm telling you, it'll burn off. I promise."

"Okay." Hannah said. She was starting to warm up, and unzipped her jacket. Alex was already ahead of her, his stride long and confident. Hannah smiled at the wisps of honey-colored hair poking out from under his hat, at the determined swing of his arms. She followed up behind him.

They walked on through ankle-deep snow, the few tracks around them from the sliding ribbons of skis and sharp indentations of poles. "I can't imagine skiing uphill like this, can you? You'd have to be really athletic."

"I'll bet it's great exercise," Alex agreed, pulling his water bottle from his backpack. "You want a sip?"

"I've got mine in here somewhere." Hannah swung her bag round in front of her, digging through it.

"I told you that you were bringing too much."

"Better to be prepared," Hannah insisted, but she accepted a sip of Alex's water and put her bag back on her back.

It was her preparedness that had led to their meeting in class that fall. She and Alex were in the same statistics course; it was in one of the larger lecture halls, students

dotting the stands in a random array. Hannah always sat toward the back, where she could get a full view of everything, and took copious notes on her laptop.

One day, Alex had approached her at the start of class, a worried look in his eyes.

"I'm hoping you can help me," he said. His eyes moved to the floor. "My computer crashed, and I lost last week's notes."

"Oh," Hannah had responded. She had seen him a few rows in front of her a few times—funny how people chose the same seats, week after week, even when they could choose to sit anywhere—but she didn't even know his name. She wasn't sure why, of all of the students there, he was asking her.

Alex had seen the confusion in her eyes and looked away. "You're always typing back there," he explained, and his cheeks had gotten red. "I figured you take good notes."

"I guess I type pretty loudly," Hannah said, and now she was the one blushing. "That's why I sit near the back—trying not to disturb anyone."

"Of course." Alex was smiling then. "Maybe, it's a good thing I could hear you."

Hannah's notes had been very detailed—she did like to be prepared—and Alex had been impressed. He asked her out for coffee to "talk through them," but they had really talked about films, their families, London. They'd been together ever since.

It hadn't occurred to her until just now that he might have made the whole thing up—the computer, the missing notes. Surely not; hadn't he been embarrassed to ask her for help? Or was he self-conscious about approaching her with such an excuse? Hannah

looked to where Alex was walking up ahead of her, just his back visible as he pushed on through the trees.

“Alex,” she started. He turned back to her, out of breath, expectant. Hannah suddenly felt silly asking. “Nothing,” she said. She smiled back at him and kept walking.

The trees stayed thick around them for the next hour. Hannah heard her own panting breath echoed in Alex’s, like a ball batted back and forth. She was getting the hang of pushing her slippery shoes through the snow, angled, using the weight on her back to lurch forward and upward. Birds flew by, all grey and brown, and each time, Hannah thought a tree limb was splitting and falling until it flew away. Red berries glittered against the snow and otherwise bare branches.

“A lookout! Want to stop and take a break?”

Hannah looked up to where Alex was leaning on a tree at the edge of a clearing. “I thought you’d never ask,” she said.

They cleared a log of its snow and put down Hannah’s extra sweatshirt to sit on. Hannah gave a satisfied, I-told-you-so smile as she smoothed the sweatshirt and opened the trail mix. It was sweet and crunchy, and the raisins stuck juicily in her teeth. Alex grabbed a handful and smiled back at her, gazing out at the still unyielding fog. They were climbing above it now, to where they could see the jagged rows of peaks clearly against a bluing sky—but the village below had vanished under clouds.

“Allo.”

Hannah turned to see a skier, head to toe in yellow spandex like a giant banana, with wide, mirrored goggles over his eyes.

"Bon après-midi," Hannah responded, a simple greeting, but Alex nudged her.

"What'd you say?"

"I just said good afternoon... Oui, nous sommes américains. C'est nos premières vacances à France."

"Vous avez un bon accent."

"Merci, merci. J'ai étudié à..."

"Now what? Does he want something?" Alex stood up.

"I am telling your friend that she speaks very well," the skier explained in English.

Alex crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey, is it far to the top from here? Ask him if it's far, Hannah."

"It will take at least three hours," the banana answered in English. He turned his mirrored face to the sky. "It will be dark before you descend, yes?"

"We're moving fast," Alex responded, picking up his bag. "C'mon, Hannah, let's get moving again."

Hannah picked up her bag, wishing the Frenchman goodbye. The skier just smiled and continued down the trail.

"He knew English. You didn't have to speak to him in French like that." Alex handed Hannah her sweatshirt they had been sitting on.

"I know, Alex, it's just polite."

"Well, it was rude to me. I couldn't understand what you were saying."

"Alex—"

"You've been doing that all trip, you know. These people speak English if you'd just ask them."

"It's their country; we shouldn't expect them..." Hannah began, but Alex was already back on the trail.

They hiked in silence as the sun moved across the mountaintop, still aiming for the summit. The straps of Hannah's backpack were digging into her shoulders. She tugged at them annoyed. The snow had gotten thicker around their ankles. "There's not much of a trail anymore, is there?" she said finally. "Don't think we should go back down? It's getting late."

Alex waved dismissively. "It's easy enough from here," he said. "You just head straight up."

What if it's too dark to see our way back down, Hannah wanted to say, but she just hoisted her bag again, and followed. Her shins were getting sore from pulling through the heavy snow, her ankles sore from climbing through in boots with heels. Alex stayed just ahead of her, taking long strides through the snow. He turned every so often to make sure she was still following.

"Do you want me to carry your bag?" he offered.

"I'm fine," Hannah insisted.

Alex pulled the strap up over her shoulder. "It's slipping." He wrapped her scarf doubly around her neck from where it had been dangling behind her.

"I said I'm fine, really."

The fog was not burning off. Hannah resorted to taking pictures of the tips of mountains up above her, the fog like cottony ground in the bottom of the frame. "Alex! Smile!" she called, pointing her phone his way. He turned around, water bottle in hand, and smiled at her. Hannah snapped a photo.

"Let me get one of you," he said, pulling off his gloves to get his phone out. Hannah brushed the snow from a rock and sat down, relieved for a chance to rest. Alex pinched and angled his screen, framing and re-framing the shot. "There! Now, smile!" Hannah held her breath and smiled.

"Got it," Alex said, and he started through the snow again. Hannah kept sitting, dropping her bag into the snow beside her. Alex turned back to her. "Don't stop now, Hannah. We're back on track."

"I need to rest."

"We're almost there."

"I really need to take a break."

Alex crossed his arms over his chest. "We want to get to the top before it starts getting dark."

"We should get back *down* before it gets dark," Hannah pointed out. She turned her ankles in circles. "Alex, I'm really worn out."

"But we're almost to the top."

"Why don't you go ahead, then. If it's not too much further, you can go see the top and come back and we'll hike back down. I'll get my rest, and you'll see the top." She

pulled the front of her coat against her and reached up on her shoulder for her scarf, but it wasn't there

"But the top's the whole point," Alex was saying. "You have to see the summit."

"Do you see my scarf?" Hannah stood up and looked behind her.

Alex shook his head. "Don't tell me you lost your scarf again."

"It looks that way." She opened her bag, digging around for her scarf.

"We'll look for it on our way back down."

"I told you. Go on ahead. I'll look for my scarf and then meet you back here."

"But you have to reach the summit!"

"It's not about the summit for me. I just wanted to go for a nice hike."

"Hannah—"

"Take pictures. You can show me when we get back."

Alex crossed his arms over his chest, but Hannah could see that he was done arguing. "Don't get lost looking for your scarf," he told her.

"I won't. I always find it." Hannah sat back on the rock, sifting through her open bag for a hint of bright red. "I'll be right here when you get back." She watched Alex turn and continue hiking up and out of view, pushing through ankle-deep snow.

The scarf wasn't in her bag. Hannah sorted and re-sorted the extra sweaters, the remaining trail mix, and her water bottle. No red scarf. She would have to go back into the woods and search for it. She started to lift her bag, then stopped. No one would come through here, would they? She hadn't seen anyone in hours. And, if they did,

would anyone really take her bag, her heavy bag with no real valuables in it? Hannah decided to leave it on the rock, as a sign for herself of where she was to meet Alex.

She followed their tracks back into the woods. The sun was sinking lower in the sky, creating long shadows of the trees across the snowy forest floor. In the shadows, their footprints looked like deep craters in the snow, no visible end, like tunnels into the earth. Hannah stepped on them, flattening them out to reveal their powdery whiteness once again.

Her feet ached, but she wanted to find that scarf. It was like a game for her now; where was it this time? She looped around the path where she had come up through the trees, picturing her snow-dusted, ice-encrusted scarf at every turn.

She found it at the foot of a tree, one end dipped into a pocket of shadow left by her heel. "There you are!" she said aloud, and the sound startled her, her own voice against the silence that snow pads into the air, her muffled steps. "There," she repeated more softly, and she shook it out, not too snowy at all, and wrapped it securely around her neck. Her game over, she turned back toward the clearing and her rock to rest and wait for Alex.

She hadn't realized how fast she must have been walking to keep up with him on their climb, but at her current pace it seemed much less vertical and more of a stroll. She also wasn't carrying her bag; Alex had been right to tell her not to pack so much, but she had wanted to be prepared. She eased her way back into the clearing, found her bag resting on the rock, and sat with it. Hannah wasn't sure how long Alex had been gone—maybe twenty minutes?—but she figured she had just enough time to really rest her feet

and have a little snack. They hadn't had a proper lunch, and she was starving. She started thinking about having a big dinner at one of the restaurants in town when they got back as she dug into her bag for a handful of trail mix.

She waited. The sun was moving behind the mountains. Hannah wasn't sure how long it would take them to get down, but she knew it would be dark now by the time they reached the bottom. She shivered, and her thighs stung from melted snow that had seeped through her jeans from the rock she sat on. She stuck her hands deep in her pockets, trying to find warmth.

Where was Alex? Surely he had seen how dark it was? Hannah started to worry. What if he had slipped on some ice and fallen down the side of the mountain? She could almost see him, lying in the snow, clutching a broken leg and moaning, freezing to death. What if he was injured, and his only hope was that she would know that he'd been gone too long and come find him, or get help? She leapt to her feet.

"Alex!" she cried out. "Alex!"

Hannah pulled her bag over her shoulders and began following his footsteps in the snow. "Alex!" she cried, then listened for a response. Maybe he would hear her; if he was on his way down, maybe he would call out to reassure her. "Alex!"

Hannah felt herself panicking and took a deep breath. "He must just be admiring the view," she told herself. But she kept calling every few minutes, waiting to hear a response. She decided she would wait just a little longer, until the sun went behind a certain tree. "Alex!" she called again.

"Allo?" Hannah turned to see a skier scaling through the clearing. It was not the same skier she had seen earlier, but he wore a similar spandex suit in red and purple.

"Vous avez crier?"

Hannah tried to remember the word for "lost" in French. "Mon ami. J'ai... oublié mon ami sur la montagne."

"It was you who was calling?" the skier asked in thickly accented English. Hannah nodded. "You are not hurt?"

"No. My friend went to the top, and didn't come back down."

Hannah couldn't tell if the skier was smiling or grimacing. She peered into his bug-eyed, wrap-around sunglasses, but couldn't see his eyes. "I hear you from far down the mountain."

"Sorry if I frightened you." Hannah wasn't sure why she shouldn't have frightened him; Alex was missing; but she felt chastised.

The skier appeared to be thinking. "I will go up," he said finally.

"Oh, thank you!"

"How does your friend look?"

Hannah wanted to point out that there was really no one else on the mountain, but she explained. "He has brown hair. A blue jacket; un anorak bleu. Jeans. Il s'appelle Alex."

"Okay. I will find your friend Alex." The skier started off again then paused, turning back. "You go down the mountain. It is getting dark. I will tell Alex."

"Okay. Thank you." Hannah held the straps of her pack to her shoulders and began to hurry down the way the skier had come up. The terrain was rocky and slick with ice in

spots. She stepped sideways to avoid falling as her ankles wobbled in her heeled boots. The sun was hiding behind the mountains and still-present fog; it was nearly dark. How lucky that the skier had heard her! She imagined the skier up ahead on the summit, finding Alex, lost and frantically trying to make his way down to her. At least the skier could speak English, so Alex wouldn't get frustrated with him. Hannah stopped, realizing. She hadn't remembered the word for "lost"; she had used the word for "forgot": "I forgot my friend on the mountain." She felt silly. How could she have said "I forgot my friend," as if she had just remembered him that moment?

She had been walking for at least half an hour before she heard Alex calling to her. "Hannah! There you are!" She stopped, turning to see him running through the snow.

"Alex! Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay." Alex reached her, out of breath. "You couldn't just wait a little longer?"

"I met a skier... he told me to go straight down... I was worried that you'd hurt yourself!"

"Hannah!" Alex's look was reproachful. "I saw the skier. He came up and told me you were looking for me, and you'd gone back down."

"It was getting dark."

"Yeah, well I was almost to the summit. I didn't even get to make it there, thank you very much."

"You were gone such a long time," Hannah explained. "I was so worried—"

"Well, if you'd come with me you wouldn't have been worried in the first place."

"Alex!" Hannah couldn't believe he was mad at her; the sun had nearly set, and he hadn't even gotten to the top. "Alex, it was too far. You shouldn't have kept going if you couldn't make it before dark. I was just waiting and wondering if you were okay."

"And hollering at the top of your lungs."

Hannah stopped, squinting to see his face in the shadows. "You heard me?"

"Of course I heard you. Some skier halfway down the mountain heard you."

"You heard me calling you, and you kept climbing?" There was no remorse in his face.

"Hannah, I told you. I wanted to reach the top."

Without another word, Hannah turned back to the path and kept walking. Alex sighed heavily and followed her down.

How had things gotten this way? How had she come here with so much hope, to find out she was with someone who would hear her calls and not respond? She had spent what little money she had on a trip with a man who walked on ahead to see the summit without her, leaving her waiting in the cold.

Hannah was tired of carrying the heavy backpack, tired of the way it slid between her shoulder blades. Each bump was like an *I told you so* from Alex, banging against the small of her back. With each step, it nagged her more, making her arms ache, tugging her shoulders back, until she finally cried out and threw it to the ground. And in an instant she was kicking it, tearing at the straps with her arms, attacking it with the full force of her weight and strength until it split on one side, the water bottle cracked and spilling out across the ground. She continued to scream and kick at it, the extra shirts

and socks pushed up against the splitting seams, shards of plastic from the water bottle flying like confetti over the ice, until finally her screams turned into tears and she knelt beside the bag, the sting of the snow on her knees and her breath staccato clouds of sobs before her.

Through all of this Alex stayed silent, watching, and when he finally knelt beside her his expression was unreadable. He did not meet her gaze. Instead, he picked up the battered bag and stuffed the clothes back inside, pushing everything in far from the splitting seams, and put it on his own shoulders. He offered Hannah a hand in getting up. She took it, squeezing her fingers around his. When she was standing, he let go, and kept on walking.

Neither of them spoke the rest of the descent, the light growing dimmer, the bright evergreens turning black in the shadows. They passed through town, the women in fur coats, the skiers in neon returning from a day on the slopes, the restaurants and bars beginning to fill with tourists. Hannah and Alex arrived at their hotel room, and Hannah sat on the bed, loosened her coat. Alex put down the bag, and was the first to speak. "I think we should leave tonight," he said, and Hannah nodded in agreement, still thinking of how she sat on the rock, waiting for him on the mountain.

As they walked to the station, the evening fog still hugged close to the ground. Hannah asked at the ticket window for "deux billets les moins cheres" back to Paris on the next train. Alex forced centimes into the hot cocoa machine, and sat in a corner of the station sipping from the paper cup.

It was not until they were on the train for Paris that Hannah reached around her neck and realized her scarf was gone again. This time, however, she felt sure of its intention. For where better for it to finally go but in the gentle dip of Chamonix between those violent and majestic cliffs, such beauty in the meeting of extremes? She let herself imagine it out there, lying like a stain across the snow. Hannah's fingers touched the sharp edges of her collarbone, the bare skin of her neck exposed, and she turned to see Chamonix behind them, as if she would see her scarf out there, finally free. But the station lights illuminated only fog and shadow.

Hannah turned to Alex, who was staring at the beaten backpack that he held between his feet, his mouth still a sealed line. She spoke to him in English. "It's gone for good this time." He looked up at her, and in his eyes she saw he knew it, too.

End.