

Chapter 1

Romy was traveling solo. Free solo. Without hook, without rope, and without Thea, her climbing partner. Everything within her was eager to finally start climbing, to dive into that world in which the rules laid down by people no longer held any significance; one in which higher laws applied. The law of gravity, the dictatorship of wind and weather, the challenge to retrieve one's skills and experiences at the right moment: when life depended solely on one's own fingertips. Perhaps in this way she would manage to not think of Thea's disease, at least for a while. Out of overwhelming concern about her best friend, Romy had spent another night without sleep and had set off spontaneously at three o'clock in the morning.

She decided for the lower part of a familiar training track that was clear of snow and ice despite the onset of winter. That meant about ten meters on a near-vertical climbing wall, crossing a ridge to the right and back to the ground via a shale slope. For somebody with more than ten years' climbing experience, it was a calculable risk. Even without partner. She knew each foothold and each handle.

After a few stretching exercises to warm up her muscles, Romy sat on a big stone sticking out from the fresh snow cover and changed her shoes. This stone could split my skull if I fall popped into her head, but Romy dismissed that thought immediately.

She stowed her backpack in a small cave and chalked her hands. An icy wind was biting through her colorful Peruvian wool hat with earflaps. Expectantly Romy turned her face toward the sun, which was pushing like a glowing ball of fire over the craggy summits of the Karwendel Mountains at that exact moment. The pink of the dawn had given way to a fresh blue against which the now partly snow-covered limestone cliffs stood out bright white. She took in the colorful image and was glad about her decision to come here. It was Monday morning, so she would probably have the wall all to herself. And that's just what she needed.

The first two limestone flakes were no bigger than a matchbook. Romy spread her fingers like hooks and shifted her weight on the ledges while tensing her upper body. Then she put the tip of her shoe on a slight bulge in the rock, tensed and pushed herself upward. Next she reached with her other hand above her head and put two fingers in a slack in the wall that was the size of a golf ball, pressed both fingertips in the concavity and climbed higher. This procedure was repeated step by step, grip by grip. Yet no movement was like any other.

When she was about eight meters above the forest floor, a flock of jackdaws began screeching above her, interrupting her flow. The icy wind was tugging at her jacket harder than before. Romy suddenly felt her heartbeat and glanced down.

A feeling that she had not experienced for a long time flooded her body like a wave. An inner voice that she also had not heard for a long time whispered: Something is going to happen! She felt hot and cold at the same time. Her head was pounding. An invisible noose tightened around her neck. Her breathing came only intermittently; rapidly every single muscle in her body tensed. Although her hands lay tightly around two secure handles, she was standing in exposed terrain with the wind hissing in her ears. She loved this toe dance over the abyss.

It was her personal drug, her own special medicine to treat the panic attacks that had agonized her in her youth. It was the perfect balance to her life as a doctor, now functioning interminably in the monotonous routine of the lab.

But suddenly, something changed, and the panic she thought to have long since overcome was returning, despite trying to fight against it. Thoughts pounded her rhythmically like a percussion drill: Now you're going to fall down! Now it will catch you! Now you have gone too far!

Her fingers became stiff; she could hardly hold on any longer. Soon she would have to let go. Relinquish all. She closed her eyes, pressed her face against the cold rock and forced herself to breathe evenly. Usually, she loved to feel the rough rock on her cheek. But now the touch of it pushed the panic even deeper. What had induced her to engage in this venture? Was she tired of life? Was there something in her that no longer wanted to carry on? Was it because Thea had been lying in the hospital for weeks and perhaps would die of cancer? That she couldn't imagine a life without her friend?

Fear clenched her stomach like a ball of lead. Romy was trembling all over, no longer able to control her arms and legs. Like the dark maw of a predator beneath her, the depth was waiting on its victim to devour it. She pressed her belly against the rock to find a grip and tried not to trigger any jolting that would endanger her already unstable balance. But her fingers slid over the rough rock, finding no purchase, and she lost her footing.

Romy heard her own shriek echoing from the cliff walls and flailed her arms about as she plunged into the depth. Her last thought was: Don't fall on the big stone!