COMMIT TO THE SUMMIT

PROJECT: Every success begins with an ambitious and clearly articulated vision.

If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy, and inspires your hopes.

—Andrew Carnegie, founder of Carnegie Steel Company

Mount Everest is located in the Himalayan Range on the border between Nepal and Tibet in Asia. At 29,035 feet, Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth and the most dangerous of the Seven Summits to climb. More than 250 climbers have lost their lives there.

It was May 24, 2001. After sixty-three days of climbing Mount Everest, Sue and John had just one day left to reach the summit. It was late in the climbing season, the weather was looking ominous, and their goal of reaching the top of the world and completing their Seven Summits quest would come down to one last push.

Human bodies aren’t designed to operate efficiently at extreme altitudes. Above 24,600 feet, sleeping becomes difficult, digesting food is almost impossible, and climbers face an increased risk of high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) and high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE). These conditions, caused by low oxygen, can often prove fatal. Contending with headaches, nausea, and persistent fatigue, climbers quickly exhaust their energy stores and begin to rapidly lose weight.
Sue and John were now at 26,000 feet, an altitude known as the Death Zone. At this elevation, virtually every human— unless they receive supplementary oxygen—will begin to experience a rapid deterioration of bodily functions that leads inexorably to loss of consciousness and, eventually, death. On the evening before their final 3,000-foot push to the summit, John and Sue huddled anxiously in their tents against the freezing temperatures and howling wind. The climb awaiting them would be the most difficult of their lives. Would they be able to summon the drive and energy they would need to succeed?

The storm that had arrived the day before was building in strength when they dragged themselves from their tents at 11:00 p.m. to survey the conditions and make final preparations. After forcing themselves to take a few sips of water, they began to climb. It was almost midnight and pitch-black. The jet stream had moved in like a freight train, bringing heavy winds that drove needles of snow into their faces. They could barely see each other as they climbed into the darkness.

Sue struggled as she ascended a series of steps that had clearly been carved into the icy mountain for climbers with legs much longer than her own. It was like climbing a staircase made of chairs. Slowly, painfully, she trudged on, following the pale circle of light cast by her headlamp on the snow.

Her muscles were already sore from months of climbing and years of training. Her pack felt heavier and her headlamp cord froze where it snaked against her neck. The vent in her oxygen mask, which allowed her exhaled breath to escape so she wouldn’t suffocate, kept freezing over, too. Every few steps, she had to stop to break the ice. And no matter how she adjusted the ascender in her safety harness, it kept banging painfully against her knee. Her fingers were stinging and she couldn’t feel her toes. She began flexing them, hoping to prevent frostbite from setting in. To keep herself going, she chanted the three mantras she’d written in her journal: