



men's Himalayan Expedition

spot, hurricane winds thrown up by them from the ridge to their deaths.) site would work. They designated it require just two more tent sites for a

ng the Avalanche

CUMULATE high on a mountain. On more, the smallest trigger can suddenly shape into a boiling cauldron. When hit er is told to "swim" toward the surface w, ice, and air as it bounds down the cherous as "swimming" a flowing h, the ultimate terror begins when the er caught near the top can often break down are trapped. As the tons of snow is forced upward. Tiny pockets of oxy-

gen might remain in the bowels of the avalanche, but even the largest pockets are exhausted within twenty minutes. And the snow and ice are only part of an avalanche's arsenal of horrors. Avalanches are known to create wind blasts of 200 miles per hour, and as nature's battering ram and giant scythe, they can dislodge a steel bridge or shear off a stand of trees.³

Not surprisingly, then, avalanches are one of the most feared hazards of the Himalayas, and Annapurna is especially notorious. In 1970, Henry Day led a British-Nepalese ascent over the "Sickle" route used by Herzog two decades earlier, and he warned Blum about the exceptional avalanche dangers on the route she was planning: "I do not believe the Sickle is a justifiable route," Day observed, "now that I am the father of two."

The worst danger zone for Blum and her companions was a swath of crumpled glacier between Camp 2 and the bottom of the Dutch Rib. The glacier was a chute for avalanches coming off the vast upper slopes, and it funneled one after another across the route the climbers had to traverse continually as they moved their supplies ever upward. In some mountain areas, avalanches are rarer in the early hours of the day, when temperatures are low, and working around their rhythm can mitigate the risk. Here, avalanches seemed to descend at random. The chute might require thirty minutes or more for the uphill crossing of its half-mile width—half that time in going down—and when one is ferrying a forty-pound supply pack at 18,500 feet, sprinting free of harm's way would be feasible only at the very edge. Given the route she had chosen, Blum had little choice but to pass this way, and she carried responsibility for all those who would cross.

The passage was usually uneventful but almost always terrifying. One day, six of the climbers moved across without incident. Shortly thereafter, a snowslide swept through and obliterated all evidence of their passage. Later, three climbers were nearing the far side of the avalanche run when Annie Whitehouse witnessed a horrifying sight. "I was just beginning to cross the mounds of avalanche debris," she wrote in her diary, "when I saw, but didn't