

**"A RIVETING LITERARY THRILLER OF THE
CAN'T-STOP-TURNING-THE-PAGE-STAY-UP-ALL-NIGHT VARIETY!"**

—ALICE LAPLANTE, author of *A Circle of Wives*

DESCENT

A NOVEL

TIM
JOHNSTON

DESCENT

Also by Tim Johnston

Never So Green

Irish Girl

DESCENT

a novel

TIM JOHNSTON

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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First Edition

I dedicate this book to your daughters, and to mine.

What we chang'd
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
That any did.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught.

—W. B. YEATS

THE LIFE BEFORE

Her name was Caitlin, she was eighteen, and her own heart would sometimes wake her—flying away in that dream-race where finish lines grew farther away not nearer, where knees turned to taffy, or feet to stones. Lurching awake under the sheets, her chest squeezed in phantom arms, she'd lie there gasping, her eyes open to the dark. She'd lift her hands and press the watchface into bloom, blue as an eye in which blinked all the true data of her body, dreaming or awake: *heart rate 86 bpm, body temp 37.8°C, pace (0), alt. 9,015 feet.*

Alt. 9,015 feet?

She looked about the room, at the few dark furnishings shaped by a thin light in the seams of the drapes. To her left in the other bed lay her mother, a wing of blonde hair dark on the white pillow. In the adjoining room on the other side of the wall slept her father and brother. Two rooms, four beds, no discussion: she would not share a room with her fifteen-year-old brother, nor he with her.

The watchface burned again with its cool light and began to beep and she pinched it into silence. She checked her heart: still fast, but it wasn't the dream anymore, it was the air at 9,015 feet.

The Rocky Mountains!

When she'd seen them for the first time, from the car, her heart had begun to pump and the muscles of her legs had tightened and twitched. In a few weeks she would begin college on a track scholarship, and although she had not lost a race her senior year (COURTLAND UNDEFEATED! ran the headline), she knew that the girls at college would be faster and stronger, more