

PROLOGUE

The storm caught us in the open, halfway down the southeast ridge of Denali, the highest and coldest mountain in North America. The wind gusted furiously, sandblasting my face with ice pellets and knocking me to my knees. I hunched against the slope and watched our 9 mm red Perlon rope levitate off the snow as if it were obeying a conjurer's trick. Then the gust subsided, and the rope returned to the ground.

I stood up and stumbled forward, following Wyn as he staggered down the curving, heavily corniced ramp of crusty, wind-scoured snow with patches of blue, bulletproof ice. The descent presented no great technical difficulties other than dizzying exposure, but it took an enormous act of will to keep walking. Last night's bivouac at 19,000 feet had completely fried my brain.

Placing my feet carefully, I reminded myself that most mountaineering accidents happen on the descent. One slip, one screwup, and that

would be it. I thought of my wife and son back in Seattle. I remembered them standing in the doorway of our home, Jill's eyes dark and angry, Andy clutching his stuffed frog. I tried to fix this image in my mind, but their faces blurred, expanded and contracted like the figures in a fun-house mirror.

The rope tugged against my harness.

"Sorry!" I yelled and kept moving. It was about a mile to the end of the southeast ridge, but the snow was maddeningly unpredictable, sometimes offering a stable platform, other times collapsing beneath my plastic boots.

Wyn broke trail 150 feet ahead. Like a bird dog on a leash, he tugged constantly at the rope, urging me forward. Despite his impatience, it was a relief to have him leading. As on so many other climbs, I depended on his strength to pull us through. Nothing seemed to stop him.

As I watched his yellow parka bobbing hypnotically down the ridge, my right crampon caught on a chunk of ice. I tripped and tried to jam my ice axe into the slope, but my frostbitten hands couldn't apply any pressure. Picking up speed, I rocketed headfirst down the slope.

The rope jerked tight against my waist. I flipped over, hit a patch of soft snow, and came to rest on my side. I lay there for a full minute, panting. Slowly I got to my knees, looked around, and brushed the snow off my face. Other than ripping the elbow out of my parka, I was okay. I sucked the thin, bitter air through my compressed lips and tried to regain my composure. Blood pounded in my temples. My heart hammered wildly. I waved up at Wyn. He was still in self-arrest position, his legs spread-eagled against the slope, the pick of his axe buried into the ice.

We exchanged a long look; neither one of us had to say anything. I owed him. Step by exhausting step, I regained the top of the ridge, expending energy I would desperately need later. Then I fell in behind him, riveting my attention on the snow in front of me.

Every step brought us closer to base camp. We crouched against the slope when the wind threatened to knock us over. Stood up when it

died down. I tried not to think about the danger, nor the condition of our partners behind us. I simply put one foot in front of the other, over and over again. After what seemed an eternity, we reached the end of the ridge. Clouds soared up the south face, obscuring our descent route. The storm was building.

Scraps of mist sailed by, lowering the visibility to several hundred feet. I got compass bearings on the jagged, white pyramids of Mount Hunter and Mount Huntington to the south. Clouds gathered behind them like an enormous anvil.

Clutching the map with my frostbitten hands, I used the edge of the compass to sight a line from each summit to the southeast ridge. The intersection of the lines was our present position, if my calculations were correct. By the time I glanced up to double-check the bearings, clouds had already covered their summits. I'd always prided myself on my route-finding ability. Now it would be put to the test.

I looked back up the slope to where Al and Lane descended behind us. Their progress was agonizingly slow. Al went first, walking pigeon-toed, taking a few steps and then stopping. Lane followed behind, keeping Al on a short leash.

"C'mon!" Wyn shouted up at them. I looked at my altimeter watch: 8:35 a.m. Precious minutes were ticking by. I was frantic to keep moving, but we had to wait for Al and Lane. It was a cardinal rule of climbing: keep the group together. An invisible rope bound us to them.

I tried to unbuckle my pack, but my hands felt like blocks of wood. Using my knuckles, I managed to release the buckles, lowered the pack to the ground, and collapsed on top of it. A toxic cocktail of chemicals churned in my gut. For the last few hours, I'd been fantasizing about eating my last square of chocolate. Now I took it out of my pack, turned it over in my black insulated mittens, and popped it into my mouth. It was as hard and brittle as shale, but it softened on my tongue. I ate it slowly, savoring every bit. It soothed my stomach, but now I had no food left. We *had* to get back to base camp soon.

Wyn sat down next to me. The last few weeks had taken a toll on him. His face was creased and sunburned, his lips scabbed, his breathing fast and shallow. His food was gone; he'd eaten his last lemon drop for breakfast. He took a swig from his water bottle and handed it to me. I drank deeply; we had to keep hydrated. Food was optional. Water was essential.

"Which way?" Wyn asked, pointing ahead.

I carefully unfolded the map, making sure that the wind didn't rip it out of my hands. The blue topographic lines gathered in a knot, indicating the steepness of our descent route. I studied the dark patches of rock and the white patches of ice, looking for a way through it. Right or left or straight? A simple decision, but our lives hung in the balance.

"Straight," I said finally, "keeping to the snow."

He looked at the map. "Are you sure we're here?" He pointed to the spot on the summit ridge where the lines met.

"Yes," I said, nodding. "Got a compass bearing on Hunter and Huntington."

"How could you triangulate?" he asked, looking toward the summits now obscured by clouds as gray and thick as wool.

"I took bearings before the clouds moved in."

He nodded and handed the map back to me. "Look. They're almost here."

Turning around, I watched Al and Lane stagger toward us. When they arrived, Al bent over his ice axe and tried to catch his breath. His lips were blue and trembling, his breathing labored and erratic.

Wyn went over to help him.

"I got him," Lane said, keeping a tight grip on the rope. His blond mustache was caked with ice, his skin red with cold, his large back stooped from the effort of short-roping. As a firefighter and mountain rescue volunteer, he was used to dealing with emergencies, but he was acting increasingly irrational. Perhaps he had altitude sickness, too.

"Which way?" he asked.

"Straight," I yelled.

He shook his head. "Right. We need to go right."

I took out the map. "The map says straight."

He seemed to have trouble focusing on it. "Need to get down fast. South face."

"No way," Wyn shouted. "It's way too steep."

"Rescue operation." Lane's speech was becoming garbled, his judgment questionable.

"That's crazy," I said.

"Have to try," Lane said. "Helicopter. Air-vac."

"There's no helicopter!" I shouted. "No air evacuation. Remember?" We'd radioed at the bivouac. Kim, the base camp manager, had made it very clear. No helicopters would fly in this weather. I beckoned him forward. "This way."

Lane looked at Al and motioned to the right.

"Straight!" I shouted, but the wind snatched the words away.

Lane moved to the right. Al followed behind him. They stumbled off into the mist, heading toward the sheer south face of Denali.