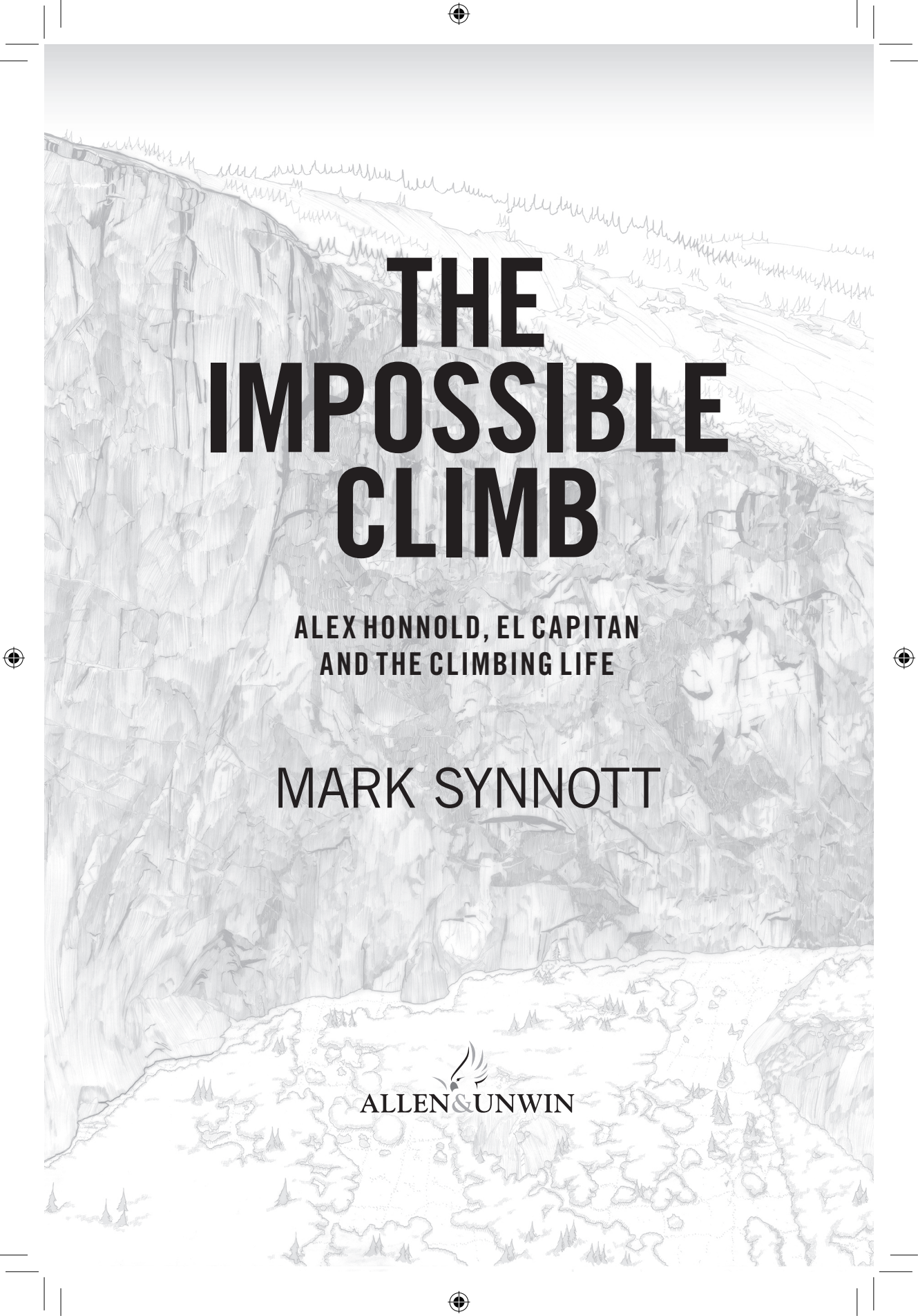


THE IMPOSSIBLE CLIMB





THE IMPOSSIBLE CLIMB

ALEX HONNOLD, EL CAPITAN
AND THE CLIMBING LIFE

MARK SYNNOTT



ALLEN & UNWIN

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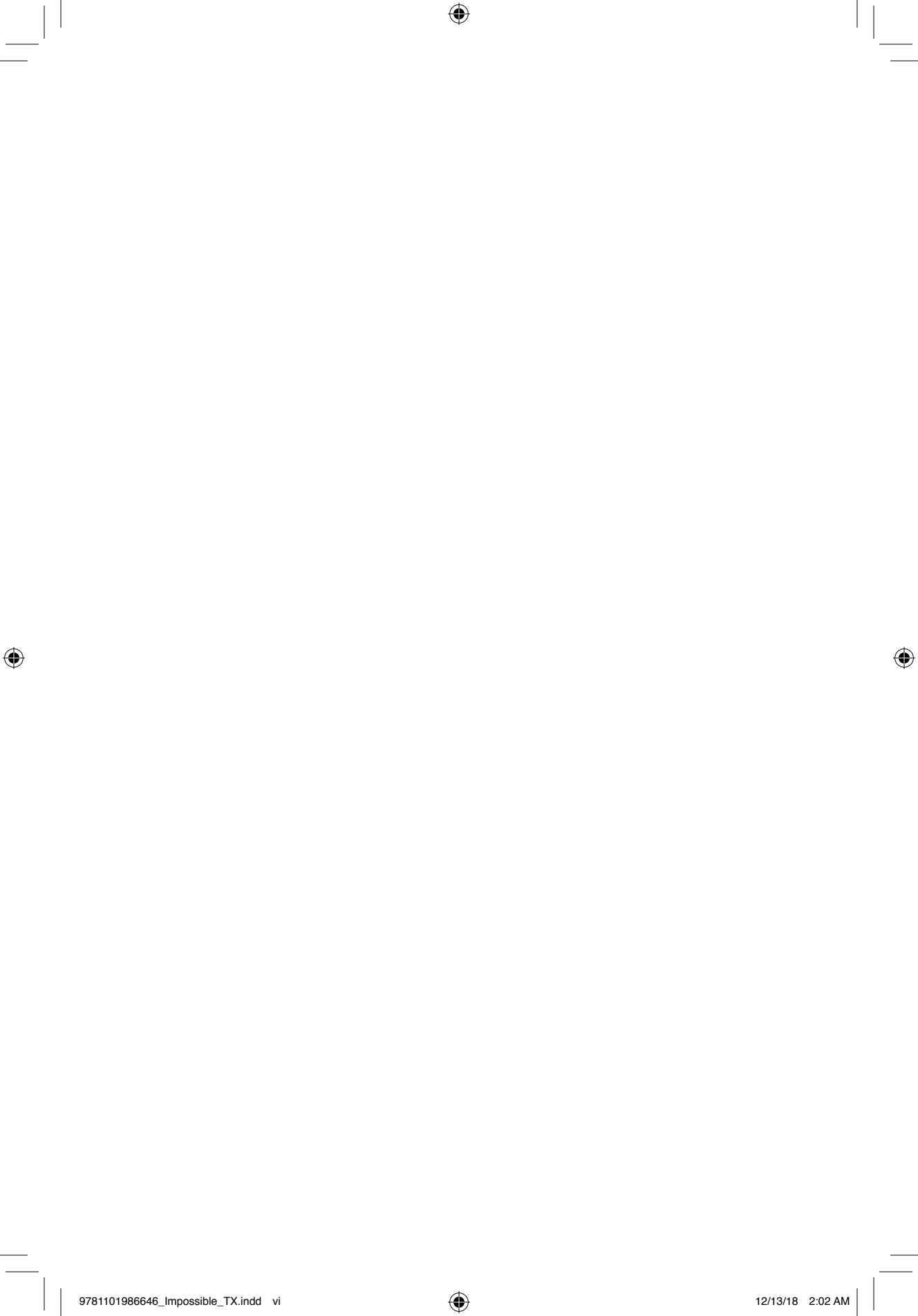
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*For
Tommy,
Lilla,
Matt,
Will, and
Hampton*



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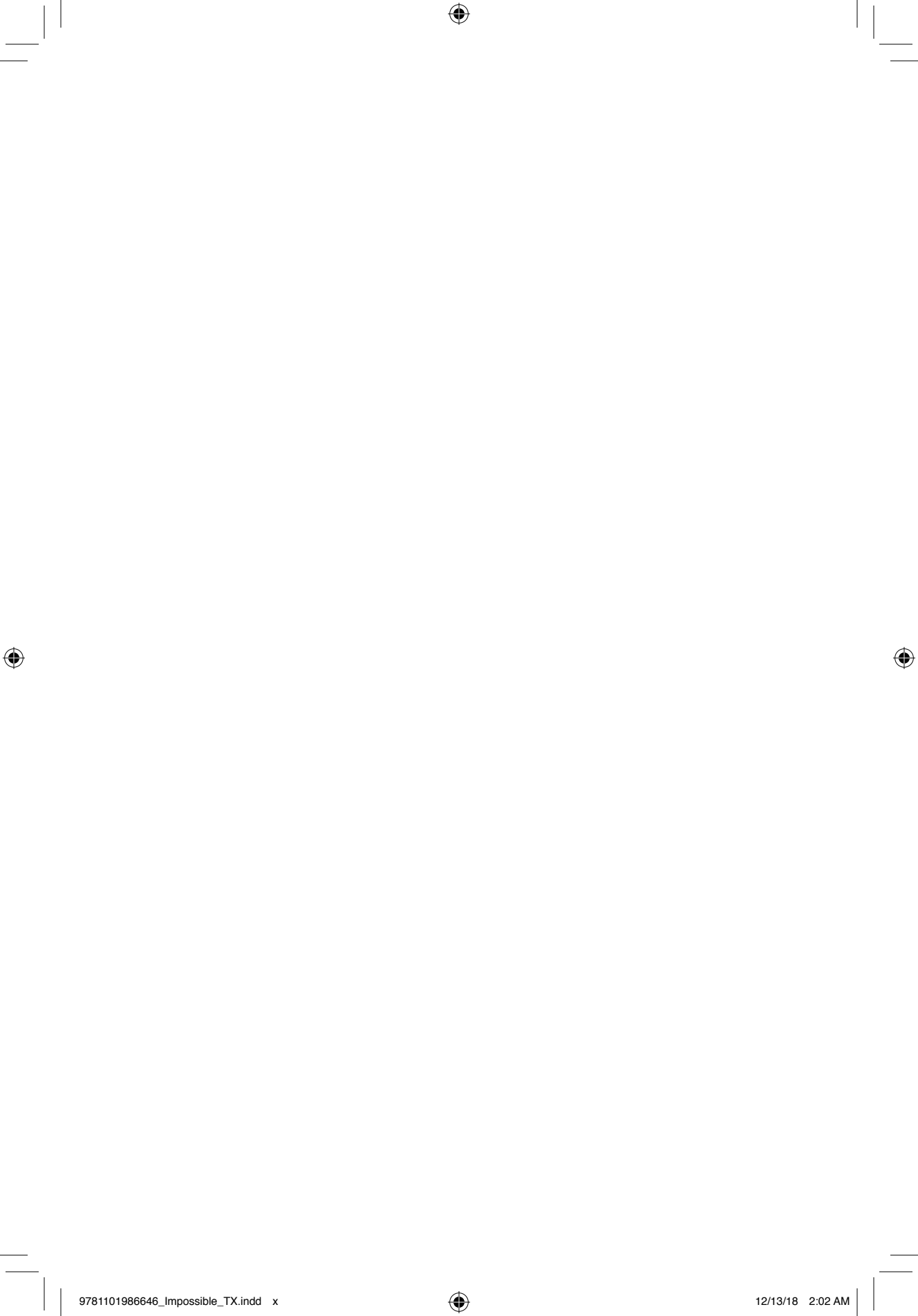
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Prologue

The Ditch, as climbers sometimes call Yosemite Valley, typically remains summer hot well into September, but a rogue cold front had blown in overnight. A wan sun slouched low to the east, barely discernible through a thick, overcast sky. Tiny droplets of water saturated the air. Alex wondered, *Is the rock getting slippery?* The friction still felt okay, probably because a stiff breeze was drying the stone as quickly as the moisture-laden air was wetting it. But the rock had absorbed the raw gray cold, and that was starting to bother his feet. His toes were a little numb, and the size 42 shoes felt sloppy on the glacier-polished granite. He wished he'd worn the 41s.

Years earlier, when he first contemplated free soloing El Capitan, Alex had made a list of all the crux sections on Freerider, the parts that would require careful study and extensive rehearsal. The traverse to Round Table Ledge, the Enduro Corner, the Boulder Problem, the downclimb into the Monster, and the slab section on pitch 6, six hundred feet off the deck, which he now confronted. Of all the various cruxes on the 3,000-foot-high route, this one haunted him most, and for a simple reason: It's a friction climb that is entirely devoid of grips on which to pull or stand. *Like walking up glass*, thought Alex.

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He couldn't help thinking about the fact that it had spit him off before. It's only rated 5.11, which, while still expert-level climbing, is three grades below Alex's maximum of 5.14. But unlike the overhanging limestone routes in Morocco that Alex could bully into submission by cracking his knuckles on the positively shaped holds, the crux here required trusting everything to a type of foothold called a smear. As the name implies, a smear involves pasting the sticky-rubber shoe sole against the rock. Whether the shoe sticks depends on many factors, including, critically, the angle at which it presses the rock. The best angle is found by canting one's body out away from the wall as far as possible without toppling over backward. This weights the foot more perpendicular to the stone, generating the most friction available. The more a climber can relax, the better a smear feels. Conversely, a tense or timid climber instinctively leans in toward the rock, questing for a non-existent purchase with the hands. To rely solely on such a delicate balance between the necessary adhesion and teetering past the tipping point in a high-consequence situation is perhaps the most dreaded move a rock climber can encounter.

Alex had climbed this section of El Cap twenty times and fallen once on this move. A guy who keeps numerical records of every climb he has done since high school, he had noted to himself in recent days that 5 percent of his attempts at this move had gone awry. And those were low-consequence situations; he had worn a rope clipped to a bolt two feet below his waist.

He had obsessed about free soloing El Capitan for nine years, nearly a third of his life. By now he had analyzed every possible angle. "Some things are so cool, they're worth risking it all," he had told me in Morocco. This was the last big free solo on his list, and if he could pull it off, perhaps he might start winding things down, maybe get married, start a family, spend more time working on his foundation. He loved life and had no intention of dying

PROLOGUE

young, going out in a blaze of glory. And so one in twenty wasn't going to cut it. He needed to get this move, along with the other crux sections, as close to 100 percent as possible.

But Alex wasn't thinking any of this. He had trained himself not to let his mind wander when he was on the rock. He was famous, after all, for his ability to put fear in a box and set it on an out-of-the-way shelf in the back of his mind. The life questions, the analyses—he saved that stuff for when he was hanging out in his van, hiking, or riding his bike. At that moment, he was just having fun and not thinking about anything except climbing and climbing well.

Details, whether they rose to the surface of his mind or not, did factor into the climbing equation he was in the midst of solving: how he wasn't sure how his right foot felt because his big toe was slightly numb, or how the callus on the tip of his left index finger seemed glassy on the cold rock, or that his peripheral vision, key for picking up all the subtle ripples and depressions in the rock, diminished when he had his hood up, as he did now.

Back in the 1960s, when this section of El Cap was pioneered, the first ascensionist drilled a quarter-inch hole in the rock here, hammered in an expansion bolt, clipped an *étrier* to it, and stood up in this stirrup to reach past the blankness. That bolt (since replaced with a much beefier three-eighths-inch stainless steel version) was still right here, next to Alex's ankle.

Balancing on his left foot, Alex lifted his right leg high and squeegeed his toe onto the blank seventy-five-degree-angle rock. Trusting more than feeling the friction, he rocked the full weight of his body onto this smear.

It held. But only for a second.

Oftentimes, a foot slip can be checked by bearing down on the handholds. But Alex's palms were laid flat against the smooth, holdless slab; nothing counteracted the pitiless pull of gravity. Alex

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was weightless and picking up speed when the heel of his right foot hit a bulge in the wall, snapping his ankle over hard. But before he could register any pain, the rope tied to his harness came taut and he skidded to a stop. It could have been a short, routine fall like the other time he'd slipped, but Alex had chosen not to clip to the bolt protecting the crux, because he wanted to feel out, and perhaps ease into, being ropeless on this section of Freerider. He dangled some thirty feet below where he had come off.

"Ow, ow," whimpered Sanni, who was now only ten feet down and to the right of Alex. While he was in the air, Sanni had tried to reel in a handful of rope to shorten the fall. She was pulling with her left arm, her right down by her hip. When Alex's 160 pounds hit the end of the rope, the force of the fall pulled Sanni up violently, snapping her against the tether that connected her to the anchor and slamming her left arm against the cold granite.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked his girlfriend.

"I'm okay, it's just a bruise," she called up, her breaths coming fast and ragged. "Are you?"

"I think I'm okay, but my ankle really hurts." Alex looked down and saw his right ankle swelling. Bright red blood was splotted across the wall around him. He pressed his fingers into his knee. It felt spongy and full of fluid, like something had burst inside of it.

"I'm gonna try to weight it," he said. He put down his foot on a small shelf and tried to step up. Lightning bolts of pain shot up his leg. "Okay, that feels really bad, sickeningly bad."

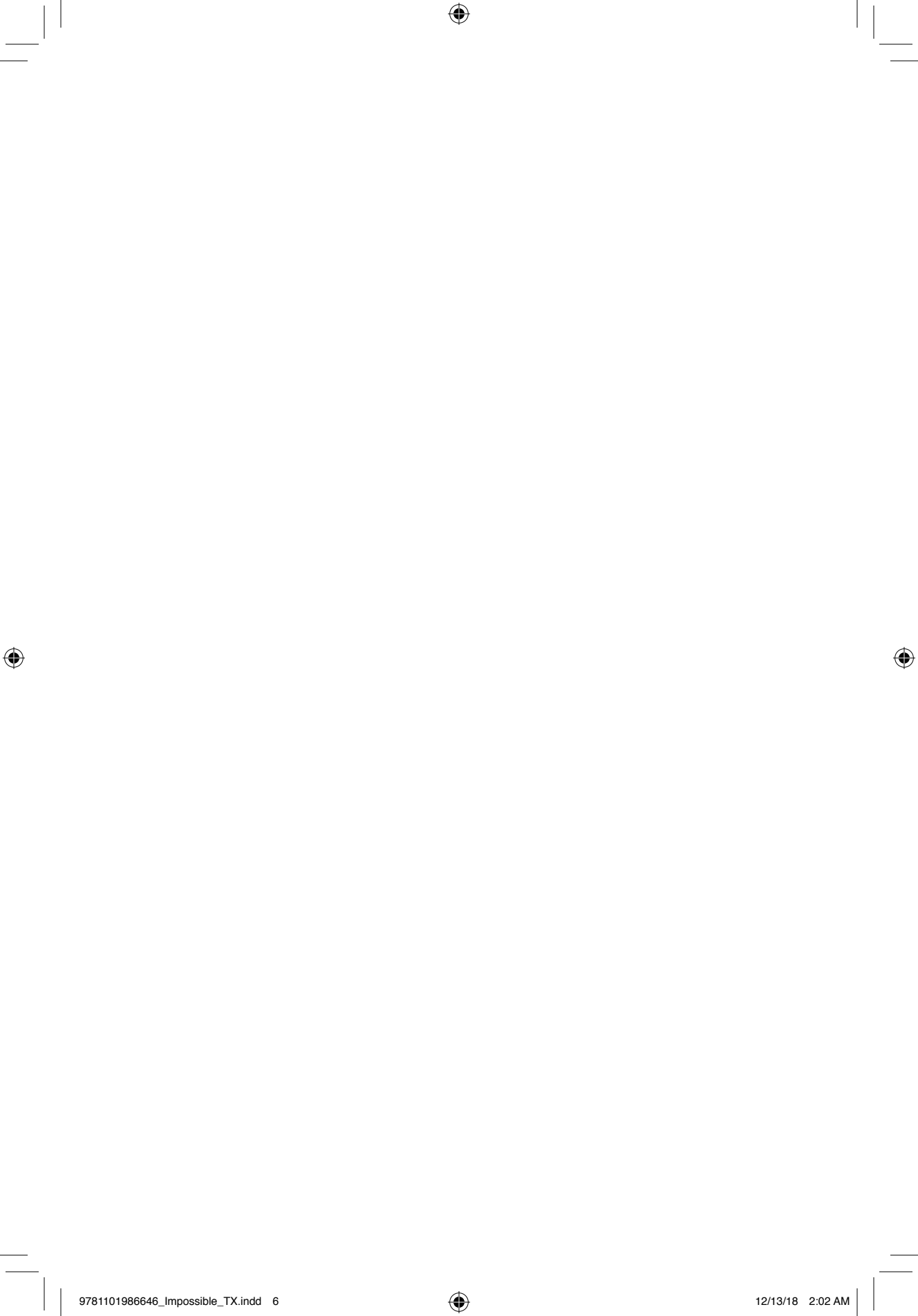
Alex's first foray onto Freerider for the season could have been worse. Had this been his free solo attempt, he'd be dead at the base of the wall.



CATHEDRAL LEDGE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

PART ONE

Y o u t h



CHAPTER ONE

“The Hon Is Going to Solo El Cap”

Jimmy Chin took a deep breath, puffed out his cheeks, and exhaled slowly. “There’s something I need to tell you,” he whispered. “Can you keep a secret?” We stood chest to chest in the Jackson Hole aerial tramway, crammed in with about a hundred other ruddy-faced skiers. It was February 2016, and I was in the Tetons with two of my sons, ages seventeen and fourteen, for their February school vacation. They huddled a few feet away, ignoring me and trying to catch a glimpse of the mountain through a foggy plexiglass window. We had run into Jimmy a few minutes earlier in the line for the tram. I hadn’t seen him in almost a year.

“Of course,” I whispered back. “What’s up?”

Jimmy leaned in until his face was a few inches from mine. His eyes grew wide. “The Hon is going to solo El Cap this fall,” he said.

“What? You’re messing with me, right?”

“I swear.”

I looked around to see if anyone had overheard, but everyone was grooving to AC/DC’s “Back in Black,” which pumped from a speaker overhead. Jimmy stared back at me, his mouth hanging open.

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“He told you?” I asked.

“Yeah. Chai and I are making a film about it. The only people who know about this have all signed NDAs, so please keep it on the down low.” Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi is Jimmy’s wife, and, like him, she’s an award-winning documentary filmmaker.

“Is he doing Freerider?”

“Yep.”

“When?”

“Probably in early November.”

As the reality of what I had just been told sank in, the core of my body quivered. *El Capitan. Without a rope. Whoa.*

I had climbed Freerider. Or, I should say, I had attempted it. I got to the top after several days of brutal effort, but not before the climb spit me off numerous times along the way, ropes and protective equipment arresting each fall. On a few of the hardest parts, the cruxes, I simply couldn’t hang on to the fingertip jams and the flaring cracks where my hands wouldn’t stick. So I had been forced to use “aid,” meaning I hung on mechanical devices I slotted into cracks in the rock. I cheated. Freerider is so named because it’s a “free” climb, which means it can be ascended with nothing more than your hands and feet, the rope acting only as a safety net, in case you slip off. The very best climbers can scale Freerider without aid, but I couldn’t think of a single person who hadn’t fallen at least once on the way up.

So what in the world was Alex Honnold thinking? El Capitan is 3,000 feet of sheer, gleaming, glacier-polished wall. And he planned to attempt it alone. Untethered. With no equipment. No fail-safe. Hoping for precision in each grab, in each step. One slip, a toe placed a centimeter too high, a shoe canted off a few degrees, a hold grabbed with the wrong hand—and Alex would plummet through the air, possibly screaming, as the ground rushed upward at 120 miles per hour. If he fell off the Boulder

Problem, which is the crux of the route, 2,100 feet up the side of the wall, he could be in the air for as long as fourteen seconds—about the time it would take me to run the length of a football field.

I knew it was Alex's dream to be the first to free solo El Capitan—I just never thought it would actually happen. When I took him on his first international expedition to Borneo in 2009, he confided to me that he was thinking about it. In the ensuing years, Alex joined me on more climbing expeditions, to Chad, Newfoundland, and Oman. Along the way, I experienced many classic "Alexisms," like him explaining at the base of the wall in Borneo why he didn't climb with a helmet, even on dangerously loose rock (he didn't own one); or the time in Chad's Ennedi Desert that he sat yawning and examining his cuticles while Jimmy Chin and I faced down four knife-wielding bandits (he thought they were little kids). Perhaps the most classic Alexism of all occurred below a 2,500-foot sea cliff in Oman, when he strapped our rope to his back and told me that he'd stop when he thought it was "appropriate to rope up" (the appropriate place never appeared). But Alex and I also spent countless hours talking about philosophy, religion, science, literature, the environment, and his dream to free solo a certain cliff.

I often played his foil, especially when it came to the subject of risk. It's not that I'm against the idea of free soloing—I do it myself on occasion. I just wanted Alex to think about how close he was treading to the edge. Like most climbers, I had an unwritten list of the people who seemed to be pushing it too hard—and Alex Honnold was at the top. By the time I met him, most of the other folks on my list had already met an early demise (and the rest weren't far behind). I liked Alex, and it didn't seem like there were many people willing to call him out, so I felt okay playing the role of father figure. And Alex didn't seem to mind. In fact, it seemed

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as though he enjoyed engaging me on the topic of risk, and he climbed over my arguments with the same skill and flair with which he dispatched finger cracks and overhangs. What it all came down to was that for Alex Honnold, a life lived less than fully is a fate worse than dying young.

I looked over at my two sons, still peering through the tram window, eager to ski. Alex was only twenty-nine years old. If he allowed himself to make it to my age, he might have more things outside of himself to live for; presumably his desire for risk would diminish in kind—as it had for me.

But most of all, I wondered, now that Jimmy had burdened me with the knowledge that this was happening, what I should do about it. Should I try to talk Alex out of it? Could I? Or should I support this mad enterprise and help him achieve his dream?

“COME WITH US,” I said to Jimmy, when we off-loaded from the tram. “We’re heading into Rock Springs. There’s a ton of good snow back there.”

“I want to,” he replied, “but I can’t. I have a lot on my plate right now. I just came up to clean out the pipes. I have to get back to work.”

He fist-bumped Will and Matt, then leaned in to get me.

“I think I want to write about this,” I said, as our gloved fists connected. I had quickly decided that it wasn’t my place to try to stop Alex. And if it had been one of my sons or my daughter committing to a challenge like this, I’d try to have the same respect for their decision. It would be hard, but I’d try.

“Yeah, I figured. I’ll call you,” said Jimmy, jabbing his poles into the snow and pushing off. A few seconds later, he disappeared into the gloom.

JIMMY AND I SPOKE FREQUENTLY over the next few months. It had been a year since he and Chai had debuted *Meru*, the first film they co-directed. *Meru* tells the story of a last great problem of Himalayan climbing, called the Shark's Fin, which Jimmy, Conrad Anker, and Renan Ozturk finally solved in 2011. Well-made mountaineering films usually have their moment within the climbing community; then they fade into obscurity. But Jimmy, with Chai's help, had turned *Meru* into a smash hit. It won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, was shortlisted for an Oscar, and finished out as the highest-grossing documentary in 2015.

Hollywood had discovered Jimmy and Chai. Companies like Sony, Universal, and 21st Century Fox wanted to know what they were doing next. Jimmy told me that one day he was cold-called by a guy named Evan Hayes, the president of a production company called Parkes+MacDonald. Walter Parkes and Laurie MacDonald are legendary Hollywood producers. In 1994, they helped start DreamWorks SKG motion picture studio, where they went on to produce three Oscar-winning films in a row—*American Beauty*, *Gladiator*, and *A Beautiful Mind*. Hayes had just finished producing the film *Everest*, a drama inspired by the 1996 Everest tragedy that formed the basis of Jon Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air*. Hayes loved the climbing genre and wanted to make another film in the same space. And he had been in the audience at Sundance when *Meru* got a five-minute standing ovation.

Hayes tossed out some ideas he had for mountaineering-related films, but none of them captured Jimmy's imagination. They were about to hang up when Jimmy decided to share a half-formed notion that had been floating in his mind for the past few months.

"Well, there is this one idea I've been playing with," he said.

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And then he told Hayes about Alex Honnold, the world's greatest free soloist. He didn't mention El Capitan, because at that moment he had no idea Alex was thinking about the free solo. In all the years he had known Alex, he had never once asked him about it. And Alex hadn't yet told a soul that he was seriously considering it.

"That's it," said Hayes. "That's the film."

Jimmy backtracked. "Well, um, yeah, but I'm not really sure I actually want to make that film. I need to think about it."

Later, he talked it over with Chai, and they decided she should call Alex to size him up, ascertain if he had enough depth to hold together a feature-length documentary. It was during the call with Chai that Alex mentioned, ever so casually, that he might want to free solo El Capitan. Chai isn't a climber, so the significance of what Alex had just dropped didn't immediately register.

"When Chai told me about El Cap, I backed right off," Jimmy told me. "That's when I knew that I really didn't want to make the film. When you live in this world and you see the aftermath . . . dying isn't that glorious." For the next two months, Jimmy avoided Hayes. And he hardly slept.

Jimmy needed advice and direction, but he hadn't bounced the idea off any of his mentors because he worried they would judge him harshly for even considering it. Then he found himself in Manhattan at the same time as his old friend Jon Krakauer. As they strolled down an avenue on the Upper East Side, Jimmy told Krakauer about his idea for the documentary. He said it was a story about "following your dreams" and the choices that one makes when faced with life-or-death decisions. Then he mentioned that Alex had said he was thinking he might free solo El Cap as part of the project.

According to Jimmy, Krakauer replied, "Oh, so that's really what it's about."

"THE HON IS GOING TO SOLO EL CAP"

"Yeah, I guess so," replied Jimmy.

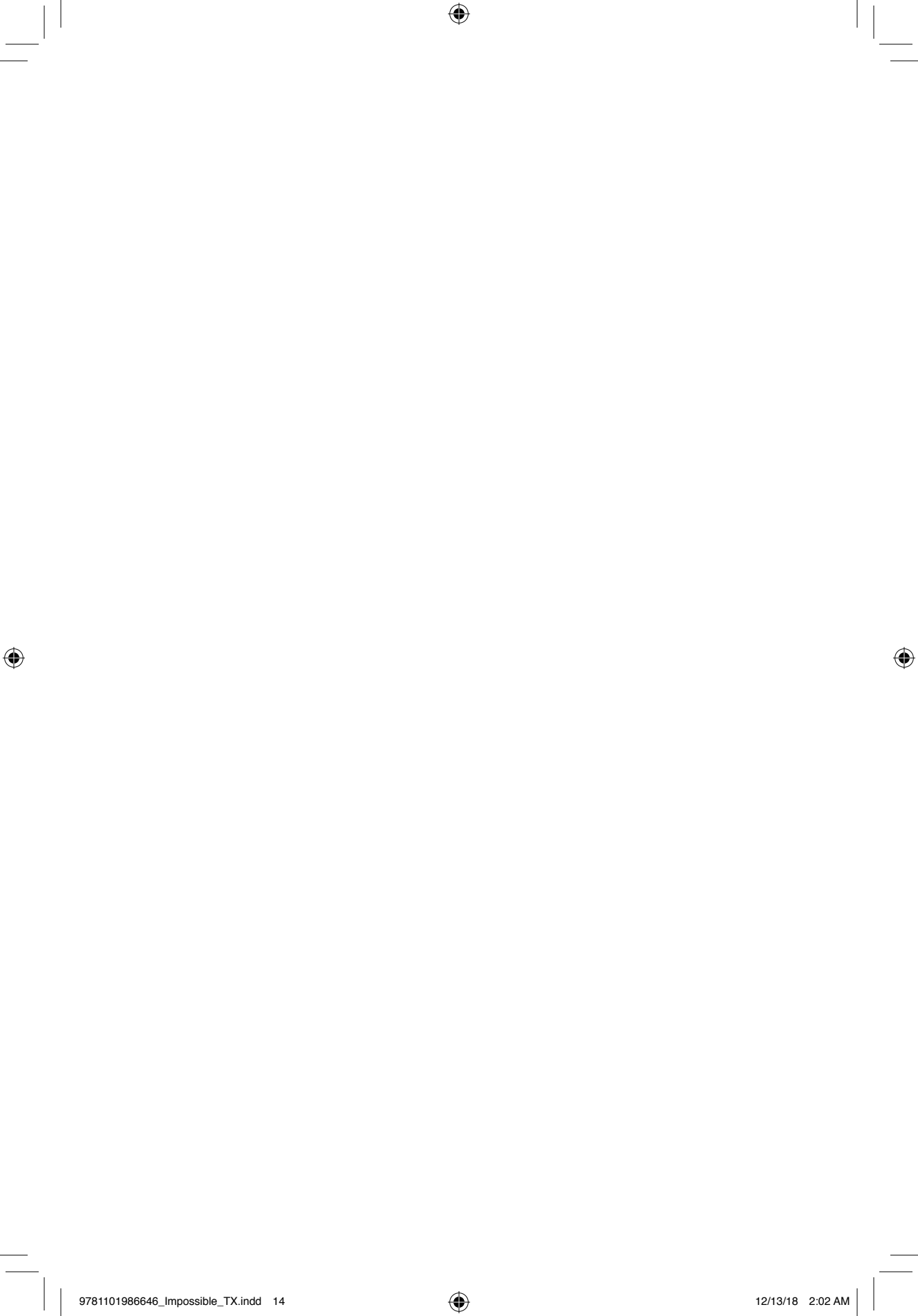
"Well, he's going to do it with or without you, and if he wants it filmed, you're the people to do it."

"So? Should I do it?" asked Jimmy.

"I'll watch it," said Krakauer.

A lot had to happen. A lot had already happened. This story is about what led up to an impossible climb. To understand what Alex would soon attempt, you need to know some things about how he lived and the world in which he became the man he is. It's a climbing world. Not everyone lives in it. But I'm happy, even proud, to say I still do. I guess you could say that I've been lucky that my path in life happened to intersect with Alex Honnold's and Jimmy Chin's, and with those of a whole bunch of other people who helped lay the foundation for what was going to happen.

Alex was going to climb beyond himself, beyond all of us.



CHAPTER TWO

Crazy Kids of America

What happens when you die?" I asked my dad one day, as he sat reading *The New York Times* in the sunroom of our family's brick colonial.

My father lowered his paper and looked me in the eyes. "You're worm food, Mark." Snapping his paper back into place, he went back to his reading, just like that, as I stood there dumbfounded.

That night, while lying in bed, I turned the brief conversation over and over in my ten-year-old mind. If there's nothing on the other side, I reasoned, if heaven and hell are figments of our collective imaginations, then death must be absolute—an eternal void from which there is no return. Worm food. Forever.

From then on, contemplation of my own nonexistence consumed me. How does one become reconciled, I wondered, to the idea that at some unknown future date one will cease to exist? What was I supposed to do with my limited time on earth? I tried to rationalize my way out of this existential conundrum, but the thoughts began to loop endlessly inside my head—and I couldn't find the off switch.

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MY IDOL AT THE TIME was Evel Knievel. My dad bought me a windup Evel on his stunt bike, and I spent hours launching the plastic superhero off elaborate ramps built with discarded shoe boxes and shingles. I loved the spectacular wipeouts when he failed to clear the Matchbox cars and toy soldiers I'd line up underneath him. I turned to the real thing with no hesitation. On a long, unused dirt driveway behind the home of some senior citizens, my friends and I used two-by-fours and plywood to build a ten-foot-high ramp-to-ramp jump. The ramps were about twice our height and prone to collapsing when we hit them at high speed on our bikes. I crashed so many times, and required so many stitches, that authorities at the Newton-Wellesley Hospital questioned my father on suspicion of child abuse.

At night I would wait for my parents to fall asleep, and then I'd sneak out of the house through the window of my third-floor room. I'd slide down the slate shingles, hang off the gutter, and quietly jump down onto the flat copper roof above my dad's study. A quick shimmy down a drainpipe and I was free. Sometimes, I would strip myself naked, save for shoes and socks, and streak through the neighborhood playing ding-dong ditch. I'd ring a house's doorbell, retreating to a nearby bush to hide. When my bleary-eyed neighbors opened their front doors to see who had rung the doorbell in the middle of the night, I'd shoot them with bottle rockets accurately launched from the end of a Wiffle ball bat that I'd sawed in half and glued back together into the shape of a tommy gun.

My discovery of risk taking as an existential salve guided me to long friendships with people who more or less shared this habit, but my young friends often lacked motivation for my style of daredevilry. One day, while I was rooting around in my father's den, I found a box of fancy wooden matches with gold tips that he must

have picked up on one of his business trips. I had a clandestine site in the woods behind my house where I set afire all manner of things, from candles and birch bark to bottle rockets and Black Snakes novelty fireworks, so I pocketed the matches.

On the way to the bus stop the next morning, I decided the matches were too precious to burn. As I held up one of my new treasures between my fingers, the other kids in my neighborhood gazed in awe.

“Is that real gold?” asked one of them.

“It is indeed,” I replied.

“Can I have one?” he asked.

The bus stop was next to a small, shallow, scum-filled pond. It was early winter, and a thin veneer of ice covered the black muddy water. Bobbing in the ice about fifty yards from shore was a foam takeout coffee cup.

“Retrieve that cup,” I told him, “and this thing is yours.”

Seconds later, he was off, breaking the ice with his fists as he half swam, half waded through the freezing swampy water. He never made it to school that day, but he got the match—and became the first of the “Golden Fellows.”

FOR THE NEXT couple of weeks, the gold-tipped matches kept my friends motivated as we worked our way through an important mission I laid out for the Golden Fellows—to dance on the chimney of every house in the neighborhood. As each of my friends, from the scrawniest to the beefiest, found his route up a typically snowy roof and did his *Solid Gold* moves on or above its ridge, we’d laugh and whoop. The boy would scramble down, a grin splashed across his face, burning with the adventure, awaiting his prize. I’d make a ceremony of the presentation of the Golden Match in the middle of the icy night.

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When I handed out the final gold-tipped match, it was like the Once-ler felling the last Truffula Tree in *The Lorax*—everyone packed up and went home. There were still several houses left on the list, so I persevered alone, scaling drainpipes, friction climbing up slate roofs, and going hand over hand across gutters, but it just wasn't the same dancing my little jigs on top of people's houses without anybody watching and cheering me on.

EVERY FRIDAY AFTERNOON my mom would push us kids into the back of our lemon-colored Chrysler station wagon and pick my dad up in the parking garage below the Bank of Boston. There, my dad would assume the wheel for the three-hour drive up to our vacation house in New Hampshire's White Mountains. My mom sat next to him, her primary job to keep him plied with cans of Coors and to act as a sounding board as my dad vented about the irritations and venal corruptions of the world of banking in which he lived much of his life.

My sister and I slid around the back seat, seat belt-less, bored, annoying each other however we could. I learned that if I developed what my dad called "diarrhea of the mouth"—a common tactic was to chant the slogan for Coca-Cola, which at the time was "Coke is it!," but add an "sh" to "it"—my parents would offer me money to shut up. The pay was only twenty-five cents, but with this I could play a game of Pac-Man at an inn near our house, or I could get a Charleston Chew at the candy store. My parents, I'm sure, had no idea how carefully I followed their conversations during these silent contests or how deeply they resonated. All these years later I can still remember the names of all the people who were trying to undermine my dad, who was a senior vice president. My obsession with the black eternal void of death that was coming down the pike made me vitally aware that how you spent your

CRAZY KIDS OF AMERICA

time alive mattered. Banking, or anything like it, certainly didn't sound like time well spent. Years later, when my dad would ask me what I planned to do with myself after graduating from college with a philosophy degree, I'd tell him in all seriousness, "I've decided not to have a career."

IN NEW HAMPSHIRE, I used the Golden Fellows model to start a new club that I called Crazy Kids of America, which quickly drew in my ski-racing buddies. The club included some noteworthy characters, including Tyler Hamilton, a compact ball of energy who always had a sly sparkle in his eyes, and who'd go on to become Lance Armstrong's right-hand man in the Tour de France, and Rob Frost, who was small for his age but scrappier than a junkyard dog, and who is now a high-angle cameraman and filmmaker. Even Chris Davenport, today a legendary extreme skier, joined us occasionally for Crazy Kid missions, his catlike athletic ability and rambunctious daredevil spirit making him a perfect fit for our crew.

I had learned from the Golden Fellows that the reward for completing a stunt shouldn't be something in finite supply, so for Crazy Kids of America, I created ranks. But instead of captain, sergeant, lieutenant, and so forth, I used the various superheroes—Spider-Man, Batman, Robin, Superman, Aquaman, Wonder Woman—and when I ran out of superheroes, I added on Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Each rank was further divided into junior, middle, and senior. Depending on how dangerous the mission was, you could gain a certain number of ranks.

Our specialty was pole-vaulting across ice-choked rivers with bamboo ski gates that we'd filch from our ski team lodge at Wildcat Mountain. A few of my top lieutenants—including a senior Aquaman and a junior Batman—and I became highly skilled

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vaulters, propelling ourselves across fifteen-foot spans of water. Of course, we had picked the sturdiest gates from the supply, leaving the rest of the kids to choose from the leftover bamboo poles, which were flimsy and prone to snapping in half at the very worst times.

Every mission followed a similar routine. A top-ranking Crazy Kid and I would find a jump across the small river that ran past the Wildcat Base Lodge. We'd pull off the feat by the skin of our teeth; then I'd offer up a few ranks, and my senior superheroes and I would apply intense peer pressure to the lower-ranked kids to follow suit. "You've totally got this, dude," I'd call to a junior Wonder Woman from the far side of the river, rubbing my hands together in anticipation of a spectacular failure.

Many a fledgling Crazy Kid took what we called the Nestea Plunge. A new recruit once showed up wearing his ski boots (rather than the Moon Boots the rest of us wore) and then proceeded to attempt a varsity-level pole vault from an ice-slicked rock over the most turbulent section of the river. We knew it was sheer folly to shoot for Spider-Man rank without some practice first, but who were we to stop him if he wanted to try? He missed badly and completely disappeared underwater. He resurfaced a short distance downstream and, like the good Crazy Kid that he was, scrapped his way back to shore.

Our ski coaches pretended they were unaware of their team's extracurricular activities, but they must have noticed the rapidly dwindling supply of ski gates and our banter about who had risen to which rank. And in a show of tacit approval at the end-of-the-season banquet, they let me give out my own Crazy Kids of America awards. Each Crazy Kid got a cardboard Burger King crown on which I had pasted our logo—a hand-drawn pencil rendering of a kid pole-vaulting over a river. The top-ranked kids got parachute men, which we saved to launch off the top of Cathedral Ledge, a five-hundred-foot cliff in nearby North Conway.

CRAZY KIDS OF AMERICA

Most of the parents appreciated my contribution to New Hampshire youth culture, “Live free or die” and all that, but a few of them thought I was reckless and a bad influence. At least one kid, after taking the Nestea Plunge and going home nearly hypothermic, was forbidden from further engagement in our club’s activities.

FROM WHERE MY DAD was sitting in his station wagon, he could clearly see the vertical wall of granite through an opening in the towering pine trees that lined the base of Cathedral Ledge. In the foreground stood two fifteen-year-old boys. One of them was yours truly, his hyperactive son, who had stayed back in kindergarten because he was a biter—and couldn’t count, do his ABCs, or tie his shoes.

Perhaps it was the tightly laced Converse Chuck Taylors on my feet, or the hardware-store white utility rope neatly coiled over my shoulder, or the fact that my buddy Jeff Chapman, a top Crazy Kids lieutenant and a frequent partner in crime, stood by my side, but for once, my dad—who had an uncanny knack for failing to observe much of anything—realized that something was up.

“Hey,” he called over, his arm hanging out the window of the K-car. “What exactly are you guys planning to do here?”

“Oh, nothing much,” I replied. “Don’t worry about us. Just come back in a few hours to pick us up.”

My dad gave the scene a good hard look, then delivered the wood-paneled door two hard slaps. “Okay,” he said. “You boys have fun.”

EVERYTHING I KNEW about rock climbing had been gleaned from a poster my dad had hung on the wall in my bedroom. It pictured a craggy-jawed man hanging by his fingertips from the lip of an overhang, suspended in thin air with nothing but a skinny rope

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tied around his waist. Why my dad bought me that poster never occurred to me; he was a boring banker who enjoyed outdoor pursuits like skiing and hiking, but he wasn't one to push boundaries. No one had told me that it was a vintage poster from the earliest days of the sport, before the invention of harnesses and kernmantle ropes. And I didn't ask.

With the poster as our sole how-to manual, Jeff and I established our cardinal rule: The leader must not fall. But we decided whoever followed behind should have the security of the rope being held from above. This way, only one person had to risk his life.

For our first rock climb we chose a mossy gully in the center of the wall. With its ample supply of trees and vegetation, it appeared an ideal route to the summit. We took turns clawing our way up through the loose rock and vegetation, and when the rope ran out, we would untie, give it a couple of loops around a tree, then use the friction against the bark to provide security for the second climber. The higher we climbed, the steeper the wall became, until we stood on either side of a stout hemlock growing from a matrix of hard-packed dirt, moss, and rusty beer cans. Above us loomed the crux pitch, a vertical wall of loose blocks stacked on top of one another like a life-size game of Jenga.

It was Jeff's lead, but he wasn't sure he was up for it. I certainly wanted nothing to do with the crumbling wall that hung above us, so I offered up a few Crazy Kids ranks. By this point I had become a bit of a master at persuading kids to do dangerous things, and Jeff was not immune to my charms; plus, I very rarely gave anyone the opportunity to achieve junior Tom Sawyer status. A few minutes later, he was several body lengths above me, clinging to a mossy house of cards. When he reached over his head for a grip in a horizontal crack, a television-size flake shifted, raining pebbles and dirt down the wall onto my head. "I think I'm going to fall," he cried out.

“Hold on a second,” I called up, untying from the rope and then using it to lash myself to the hemlock like someone about to be burned at the stake. After several turns around the tree, I locked the end off with a series of half hitches, knots I’d learned how to tie by trial and error. Satisfied there was no way I was going anywhere should he come hurtling down, I called up to Jeff something obnoxious like, “Okay, you can fall now.”

Jeff looked down between his legs and saw me lashed to the tree. Two things were clear: He was going to die (or at least be badly mangled) if he fell—and I wasn’t. Something about this situation seemed to violate our honor code, and the injustice of me not bleeding and broken by his side at the base of the cliff inspired him to pull it together and climb back down.

As we scabbled our way down the gully, still determined to ascend the cliff, I noticed a horizontal break that offered a potential traverse out onto the main face. We followed it, scrambling sideways, clawing our way hand over hand through bushes to reach a small ledge about two hundred feet above the deck, with sweeping walls of clean granite surrounding it in every direction. Still tied together with the clothesline, each with some extra coils over our shoulders, we sat side by side, taking in the bird’s-eye view of the valley far below us. We gave each other a knowing look. We had taken Crazy Kids of America to a whole new level, and it felt so right.

Our reverie was cut short by a jangly metallic sound, and a few seconds later a hand appeared at the lip below our feet, followed by a man who hauled himself onto our ledge. What followed was a moment of mutual disbelief as the two climbing parties took each other in. He was probably in his twenties, bearded, with calloused fingers and taut arms all muscle and sinew. I stared at his collection of space-age-looking gadgets, which hung from snap links on a bandolier over his shoulder. His rope—unlike ours, which was

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comprised of three lumpy braids—had a smooth sheath decorated in an Indian print of yellow and black geometric patterns.

“Wow, that’s some nice-looking gear you’ve got,” I said.

The fit man stared back at us, his face all surprise, and said something like, “How the hell did you two jackasses get up here?”

Jeff and I scooted out of his way and observed with rapt attention as he secured himself to some bolts in the wall with a couple of snap links he unhooked from his harness. “We should get our hands on some of those for next time,” I said to Jeff.

When the climber’s partner arrived and saw us sitting side by side next to his friend, he was equally bewildered. But the climbers wasted no time feeding their ropes through some rings in the wall and setting up what I would learn was a rappel. I keenly observed their every move, secretly hoping that our new friends might have a word of advice for our descent or, better, help us get down. Lowering yourself down on a rope looked like a great option, but as I observed them set up their gear, it was obvious that it would be tricky without harnesses, their snap links, or those fancy figure-eight thingies they were now feeding their ropes into. At the very least I wanted some props from them, a word or two acknowledging that we men were all cut from the same cloth.

But instead, as nonchalant about our fate as my dad had been that morning, they stepped off the edge onto the steep, smooth rock wall below. They slid down their ropes, leaving us kids alone on the ledge to figure out our own way down.

After they hit the ground below, they pulled their ropes out of the anchor by our heads, leaving them empty. So we fed our clothesline through the rings, just like we’d seen them do. Since we didn’t have any gear other than the rope, the only option was a Batman-style bare-handed rappel, which worked for me until I reached the end of the rope and found myself dangling in the middle of a blank wall, still a hundred feet above the ground. Thankfully, using my

feet to push off, I was able to pendulum swing over into the gully. Jeff followed suit. From there it was an easy climb back to terra firma.

I WAS A CLIMBER NOW, which meant it was time to begin a proper apprenticeship. So I was thrilled to discover that the Wellesley Free Library had a climbing and mountaineering section. I'd been rooting around in this library since I was a little kid, and all those years this treasure trove had been sitting right under my nose: *The Vertical World of Yosemite* by Galen Rowell, *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills* by the Mountaineers, *Climbing Ice* by Yvon Chouinard, *The White Spider* by Heinrich Harrer, *Blank on the Map* by Eric Shipton, *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog, and *The Shining Mountain* by Peter Boardman. I signed them out and greedily read them in quick succession. These books and others opened my eyes to a hitherto unknown world of high adventure, to a time frame the authors referred to as "the golden age" of climbing and exploration. The golden age, from what I read, was a time when there were still blanks on the map, when all the great mountains of the world were unclimbed, and any man or woman who had the courage, the resolve, the tenacity, could go stick a flag in a place on planet Earth where no person had ever been.

In the photo insert of *The Shining Mountain* was a picture of a bearded Joe Tasker hanging in a hammock suspended on the side of a frozen vertical wall of white Himalayan granite called Changabang, a glacier thousands of dizzying feet below. I stared at that picture for days until I could just about feel the cold granite against my back, the nylon pinching my shoulders, a cold wind frosting my face. Far more than the summit, I became enthralled with the idea of the bivouac, the part of these epic climbs when you get to relax, when maybe you'd had a decent meal and were warmly ensconced

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in your sleeping bag, comfy and secure in the midst of a thin-aired, cold, cold world of rock and ice.

There was one mountain that stood out like a beacon among all the rest—the Trango Tower. I first gazed upon its otherworldliness while ensconced at a carrel desk in a back room of the library. This ethereal spire rising into the mist knitted perfectly with my vision of what a mountain should be. One day . . .

While my new heroes may not have come right out and said it in so many words, I knew that the golden age of mountaineering was the greatest time in human history. And I had missed it. Here I was, a hyperactive kid, desperate to find something that could give meaning and direction to my life. Then, just as I discovered heroes to lead the way, they quashed my delusions of grandeur. Why couldn't I have been born a generation sooner?

I sulked about it for a week or so, until it struck me: What if the golden age wasn't completely over? What if there still were some obscure blanks on the map that hadn't yet been filled in? What if I could find some random mountain that no one had ever heard of, a mountain that my heroes had overlooked?

And there, in the musty reading room of the local library, a trajectory was firmly set.

CHAPTER THREE

A Vision of the Stonemasters' Lightning

Alex Honnold was screwed.

He had climbed hundreds of feet up the frozen gully, lured in by the initial low angle and the softness of the snow. But as he ascended, kicking steps with the REI snowshoes he had found in his dad's closet the day before, the gully had gradually narrowed and steepened until he found himself clawing the boilerplate ice in front of him with his bare fingers. If he'd had any idea how to climb snow and ice, the snowshoes would have long been stowed away on his pack in favor of crampons with steel toe spikes. But Alex didn't own crampons or an ice ax. It was his first winter hike. And he was alone.

A more experienced mountaineer might still have saved himself by retreating down the staircase of tiny toeholds the same way one descends a ladder. Instead, when Alex realized he had no choice but to retreat, he turned around to get an eye on the steep slope below him, like a skier sizing up his run. A second later, he was on his back, careening down the mountain. As he picked up speed, Alex looked down and saw a field of angular granite blocks at the bottom of the slope. His last thought before he slammed into the talus was *I'm going to die*.

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DIERDRE WAS MAKING TEA at the kitchen counter when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mother.”

“Alexandre?” It sounded like Alex, but something wasn’t right. His voice was muffled, like his mouth was stuffed with cotton balls.

“Where am I? Why am I all covered in blood?”

Dierdre rushed into the bedroom in back; woke up her daughter, Stasia, who is two years older than Alex; and handed her the phone. “Keep him talking,” she said. “I’m going to call 911.”

The dispatcher at the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office told Dierdre to ask Alex what he could see. Were there any landmarks they could use to determine where he was? She grabbed the phone back from Stasia.

“What do you see?”

Silence. *Did he pass out?* “Alex, Alex, are you there? Are you awake?”

“Who is this?”

“This is Mom.”

“Well, what are you speaking English for?” replied Alex, sounding annoyed. “I thought you were somebody else.”

Indeed, it was the first time in nineteen years since Alex’s birth that Dierdre, a professor who taught French, Spanish, and English as a second language, had spoken to her son in English. She wanted to raise her children in a bilingual household. Alex mostly replied in English, his way of letting his mom know he thought the whole thing was kind of stupid.

“*Ne bouge pas, les secours arrivent*” (Sit tight, help is on its way), she said, switching to French.

HE'D OWNED THE CELL PHONE for less than twenty-four hours. His mom had given it to him for Christmas. She had almost returned it because Verizon had given her the wrong one, the fancy model with the built-in camera. But it was the camera that had made Alex think to bring it with him that day. Luckily, it survived his tumble down the hill.

He faded in and out of consciousness. In his more lucid moments, he gazed to the north toward Lake Tahoe, which he vaguely recognized. But he still didn't know why he was lying in a pile of rocks at the base of a snowfield. There was a streak of blood on the slope above him. He looked down at his shredded hands. His right thumb had been degloved and felt broken. The side of his head was raw and swollen. There was a hole in his cheek, and his chest hurt like hell whenever he breathed in. His puffy jacket looked as though a tiger had attacked it. Down stuck to the blood all over his body, as if he'd been tarred and feathered. The more he probed his body, the more hurt parts he found.

The first helicopter, an Airbus H135, located Alex but couldn't land due to high winds. The pilot radioed his position back to the sheriff's office, which told Dierdre they would have to send in a team on foot. This was going to take hours, and a powerful storm was developing over the Sierra Nevada. *He's going to freeze to death*, thought Dierdre. Then she got some good news. A smaller chopper operated by the California Highway Patrol had made a gutsy landing at the base of the southeast chute. As they packaged Alex for the evacuation, he lost consciousness again.

Alex's mom took him home from the hospital in Reno late that night. He had stitches in his hand and face, a punctured sinus, chipped teeth, a broken right hand, and a serious concussion. The next day, lying in bed, his eyes nearly swollen shut, Alex recorded

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the ordeal in the diary he had started a month earlier. With his left hand (he was a righty), he neatly scribed the following:

Tallac

Fell, broke hand. . . . airlifted.

Should have stayed more calm and walked off. Pussy

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS, Alex recuperated at home in Carmichael, a suburb of Sacramento. A new video game had just come out called *World of Warcraft*, set in an alien world called Azeroth inhabited by zombies, werewolves, and gryphons. The object of the game is to complete quests that reward the player with points and currency that can be used to buy weapons and superpowers. Alex escaped to Azeroth for hours every day. In the game, he could lose himself in a fantasy world and forget about his own life, which hadn't been going so well lately.

His grandfather, with whom he was close, had died the year before. The route Alex used to ride his bike to the climbing gym went past his grandfather's house, so he would often stop by to play cribbage and chess with the old man. Several months later, after Alex graduated from high school, his parents announced they were divorcing, though Alex and his sister already knew, because they'd been reading their mom's e-mails on the family computer. Charlie Honnold moved out of the family home that summer. Not long afterward, Alex enrolled at UC Berkeley, thinking he might major in civil engineering. He lived off campus in the apartment of a family friend. Alex skulked around in sweatpants and an oversize sweatshirt, usually with the hood up. He had always been socially reserved, but now, without the support of his childhood best friend Ben Smalley or his girlfriend, Elizabeth,

he withdrew into his own private world, a place with which he was already deeply acquainted.

According to Ben, Alex had a lot of social anxiety in high school. He never went to a single party or made the slightest effort to try to fit in and be popular. At lunch, while the cool crowd gathered in their exclusive section of the cafeteria, Alex retreated to the algebra room to “hang out with all the losers.”

“If something made him uncomfortable or he was nervous about it, he would just avoid it,” says Smalley. “He would sometimes make offhanded comments about the shiny, happy people, but it was never like, ‘Oh, I wish I was one of them, I wish they liked me.’ It was more like an acknowledgment that they exist, and he wasn’t one of them. He was so far from being like them that he decided he wasn’t going to bother even trying to get there.”

But although Alex was a confirmed geek, people still respected him, says Ben, because he was so intelligent. He was a top student in the school’s International Baccalaureate program, despite having no real passion for academics. He did the bare minimum to get by. Alex’s mom was a member of Mensa, a society for people with high IQs. Alex also took their test and passed. According to Mensa, his intelligence puts him in at least the top two percent of the general population.

At UC Berkeley, Alex was surrounded by more shiny people than he’d ever seen in his life, but he was so shy and socially timid that he sometimes went months without communicating face-to-face with anyone. He claims that he never made a single friend that entire year. His second semester he started cutting classes to go rock climbing. His favorite spot was Indian Rock in the Berkeley Hills, two miles north of campus. He’d ride up there on his bike and spend hours traversing back and forth on the volcanic outcropping. Between climbs he’d sit on top of the rocks next to the acorn-grinding pits carved by Native Americans, eat plain bread, and stare out past the houses toward campus to the south. To the north, he could see

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San Francisco Bay, which was often blanketed in fog, only the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge rising above the mist.

Climbing was his one salvation, and he hardly ever missed a day. When he wasn't hitting the gym, Indian Rock, or the stone-clad buildings on campus, he sat around in his boxers playing video games and doing pull-ups on the doorframe of his room. His classmates, who had little to no awareness of his existence, had no way of knowing that the quiet genius who was flying under everyone's radar was slowly transforming himself into a climber the likes of which the world had never seen.

THE FIRST HONNOLD blip on the climbing world's radar was in July 2004, after his first year at Berkeley, at the National Climbing Championships. The competition was held at Pipeworks in Sacramento, a gym where Alex had been training since it opened in 2000. Feeding off the energy of the hometown crowd, Alex delivered an inspired performance and took second place in the youth division (ages fourteen to nineteen). This qualified him for the world championships in Scotland, which would take place two months later. Shortly after the nationals, Alex's father, who had served as his one-man support crew over the past eight years, driving him to competitions all over California and holding his rope for countless hours, died from a heart attack while hustling to catch a flight at the Phoenix airport. He was fifty-five years old.

At the world championships in September, Alex couldn't muster any motivation or enthusiasm for the event. He placed thirty-ninth.

The thought of another year at UC Berkeley filled Alex with dread, so he asked his mom if he could drop out. Knowing how miserable he had been—he had described the college experience as "heinous"—she agreed. Then, the day after Christmas 2004, Alex nearly killed himself on Mount Tallac.