

# THE LEDGE

AN ADVENTURE STORY  
OF FRIENDSHIP AND SURVIVAL  
ON MOUNT RAINIER



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AND  
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*Dedicated to  
Mike Price*

# PROLOGUE

I peer off the ledge into blackness. Pressing my gloved hand against the ice wall for balance, I tilt my head to the right and stare past my boots, half-buried in loose snow. Squeezing my left eye shut, I look straight down my right hip and leg, as if I'm sighting along a rifle barrel. I am desperate to see the bottom of this dim cavern.

Nothing. Empty space drops below us and vanishes. My stomach clamps tight, and I swallow hard.

Even through my thick climbing gloves, cold seeps out of the ice wall and stings my fingertips. I pull my hand back and exhale a ragged breath.

Fear forces me, for the moment, to block out the ominous space looming around and below, so instead I study the ledge we're on. It's been a few minutes since the collapse happened and we crash-landed here. My eyes have now adjusted to the muted blue light filtering down from far above. Our frozen shelf is about seven feet long and two feet wide. Mike lies on the snow ledge lengthwise, his feet dangling a few inches over the far end. I'm standing next to him, with the toe of my left mountaineering boot touching his climbing harness.

I step back to give him some room, but right away my shoulder bumps against the frozen wall behind me. When I reach forward,

my hand hits the far ice wall before I can straighten my arm. A mild wave of claustrophobic tension ripples through my chest, but I push it away and shuffle about to find more space. But with Mike, his pack and gear all jumbled across our small ledge, there's nowhere else for me to stand. One long strand of yellow climbing rope loops off the ledge just beyond Mike's head, so I bend over to reel it back in before it snags on something.

With my head down low, I feel wetness drip off my nose. I run my forearm across my face and see dark smears on my jacket sleeve. Blood.

Retrieving the rope forces me to confront the dark space beneath our ledge. Fighting to stay calm, I focus on trying to figure out where we are inside the glacier, and how much deeper the crevasse stretches beneath us. The rope droops down at least twenty feet without touching anything; beyond that, I see nothing. Deep below me, the glacial sidewalls are nearly as black as the crevasse itself—I can distinguish them only by the glint of weak light reflecting off the ice. The walls pinch closer until the gap between them is less than a foot across.

I'm not going down there.

To my right, the crevasse stretches laterally away from me as it tunnels more than one hundred feet farther into the mountainside. It's like looking into a dark, narrow alley, just two feet across, squeezed between towering buildings. At the far end our fissure burrows even deeper beneath the glacier and the gloom fades to impenetrable black.

I turn and look in the opposite direction, along the crevasse's long axis as it stretches down the mountain. Peering out over Mike, I figure the crevasse extends about two hundred feet that way. I pull in a sharp breath and hear my hiss echo off the ice wall. This slot is enormous.

Slowly, I face the awful truth: We're stuck on a tiny ledge, trapped alone inside this miles-long glacier. God only knows how far down we are—I haven't dared to look up yet. But there's no question about it: We're deep, deep inside.

It happened so fast. One second we were descending the mountain, nearly finished with the most remarkable alpine climbing experience of our lives, just hours after summiting Mount Rainier. Then a step, a single treacherous step, in the wrong spot.

A snow bridge collapsed, and in a second, I was falling, falling—dragging Mike in behind me. Falling, falling.

And now, *this*. Trapped in a crevasse.

I drop my head and stare at my green plastic boots. I'm shocked by the massive space below us, on both sides of us, above us. It feels as if the weight of all the air in the huge cavern is squashing me.

By looking down and to the sides, I had hoped that I might find a simple exit. But now it's clear: The only way out is up.

I steel myself to face that reality, to determine how far the distance to the glacier's surface really is. Leaning my forehead against the ice wall, I close my eyes, blow out a long breath, and try to find some calm. I need a minute before I can look.

Rocking from one foot to the other, I hear the snow squeak beneath my boots. When I shift my arm, my Gore-Tex jacket crinkles against itself. Water drips on my sleeve, falling from somewhere high above me.

Stoically I straighten up tall and begin lifting my gaze. Twenty feet above me I see the side walls of ice flare away from each other as the crevasse gap expands to around four feet across. Then maybe six.

My eyes travel up...up...up. Forty feet above me, I see the walls, now separated by about eight feet, leaning back inward in an ever-steepening overhang. In the blue light closer to the surface I can make out lumpy blobs of ice frozen to the side walls.

My neck strains. About sixty feet above me, the left wall juts out, forming an overhanging ice roof that would be impossible to free climb. A sense of dread washes over me.

Resting my right hand on the wall for support, I curl my upper body backward so I can finally stare straight up. Far above, back at the glacier's surface, the entire crevasse is capped by a huge roof of snow. In some places up there, the snow bridge that spans this crevasse is thick enough to block all light, and from beneath, the bulbous ceiling appears black. In other places, the deceptive snow layer is so whisper-thin that soft light glows from its underbelly.

My eyes lock on the most vital feature: Directly over my head rests a small, irregular circle of bright white light. It's sunlight spilling through the jagged hole that opened beneath my feet and swallowed us. The sky above the glacier is presumably still blue, but I can't see it—the intense light pouring in blinds me. That sunlit hole is the only way out of here, the only way back to life.

And that hole is roughly eighty feet away, straight up.

I hear a quivering voice.

“Oh, we're in trouble,” I say to Mike. “We're in big, big trouble.”