


Surviving Alone and Blind on Mount Everest



BLIND DESCENT

“Absolutely gripping . . . impossible
to put down . . . a must-read!”

—DON D. MANN, SEAL TEAM SIX



B R I A N D I C K I N S O N

Blind Descent is an absolutely gripping, factual narrative of Brian Dickinson's extraordinary experience on Everest. The story of his descent just after losing his eyesight while low on oxygen kept me at the edge of my seat. This book is emotionally charged and so compelling that I found it all but impossible to put down. *Blind Descent* is a must-read!

DON D. MANN

SEAL Team Six

Who would have thought Mount Everest would now have two blind climbers? But I got the added pleasure of ascending the mountain blind as well. Brian's story is a harrowing adventure, a testament to his faith, and well worth the read. I only wish I'd known him before his climb so I could have given him some tips on descending by feel.

ERIK WEIHENMAYER

First blind climber to summit Mount Everest

Personal strength, Navy training, and family support got Brian Dickinson to the summit of Mount Everest. Yet when he found himself blind and alone atop the highest point on earth, it was Brian's faith that led the way down during his amazing and treacherous blind descent.

JIM DAVIDSON

Climber and coauthor of *The Ledge: An Inspirational Story of Friendship and Survival*

BLIND
DESCENT

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Some of the names in this book have been changed out of respect for the privacy of the individuals mentioned.

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PROLOGUE

March 30, 2011

Snoqualmie, Washington

THE SKY was a menacing gunmetal gray, with dark storm clouds flowing in and casting an ominous shadow over the snowcapped peaks in the distance. This would have made for horrible climbing conditions, but it was an eerily fitting backdrop for what I was about to do.

The house was blanketed in silence. My wife, JoAnna, was at work, and our kids were both in school. I'd spent the past several weeks cramming in as much family time as possible, playing endless hours of LEGOs with Emily, who had just turned seven, and Jordan, who was four. Now it was finally time. I'd checked everything off my to-do list, and I had the house to myself. It was a moment I'd been thinking about and dreading for months.

In a matter of days, I would set off on my two-month expedition to Mount Everest. It wasn't the climbing that had me anxious—it was the thought of being away from my family for so long. When it came to the climb itself, I wasn't worried. I was in the best shape of my life, and I had planned everything down to the last detail. But I was also aware of

the reality that people *do* die on Everest. No matter how well prepared you are, there are always things that are out of your control—extreme weather, shifting icefalls, avalanches, cerebral edema. Let's face it, there's a reason they call the top of Mount Everest the death zone.

As the winds picked up and rain began pelting my office window, I cast one last glance at the darkened face of Mount Si, which was slowly disappearing into the Washington mist. Then I sat down at my desk and powered up my MacBook. After I'd centered myself in the video frame, I took a deep breath and hit Record. I could already feel the tears burning behind my eyes.

"Hello, JoAnna," I began, a sob catching in my throat. "If you're watching this, something must have gone terribly wrong, and I'm in heaven now, watching you."

CHAPTER 1

EXPEDITION OF A LIFETIME

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

JEREMIAH 29:11

GROWING UP in the small town of Rogue River, Oregon, I never imagined that one day I would be planning a Mount Everest expedition. My family and I lived in the shadow of the Siskiyou Mountains, and I'd heard plenty of news reports about mountaineering disasters—especially the ones that occurred on the highest peak in the world. I was just a kid in the 1980s, when more climbers began ascending above 26,000 feet on Everest. That translated to more fatalities—and more media coverage. Between 1980 and 2002, 91 climbers died during their attempt to summit.

In 1982 alone, tragedy struck expeditions from four different countries. British climbers Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker disappeared while attempting to be the first to climb the northeast ridge. Then a Canadian expedition lost their

cameraman to an icefall, and just a few days later, three of their Sherpas lost their lives in an avalanche. The American team wasn't exempt from tragedy that year either, as a woman named Marty Hoey, who was expected to become the first woman from the United States to summit Everest, fell to her death. Even a veteran Everest climber from Japan and his climbing partner died near the summit due to extreme weather before the year came to a close.¹

And then, more than a decade later, disaster struck again when eight people were caught in a blizzard and died on Everest. Over the course of the 1996 season, 15 people died trying to reach the summit, making it Everest's deadliest year in history.²

As a child and a young adult, I was gripped by those stories, but it seemed insane to me that mountaineers would climb in such arctic and oxygen-deprived conditions. Why would people want to risk plummeting to their death or losing body parts to frostbite? Like most people, I was a victim of the media. Although only 2 to 3 percent of those who attempted to summit Everest lost their lives, the news seemed to report only the fatalities. Everest seemed like an impossible death trap that only a few elite individuals could conquer. And even then, they'd remain permanently damaged—physically or mentally—as a result of the experience.

But while I may not have had visions of climbing the tallest peak in the world one day, I was a very daring kid. I started participating in extreme sports as soon as I was old enough to venture out without supervision. Now that I'm a parent myself, I realize how much stress I put my parents through—especially my mom. My schedule was packed with organized sports like soccer, baseball, track, golf, and tennis. In between I

rode my single-gear bike everywhere. On any given day in the summer, I would ride 10 miles away to the Rock Point Bridge, where I'd leave my bike in the ditch on the side of the road and jump off the 60-foot bridge into the mighty Rogue River.

My best friend, Joe, and I used to climb to the top of the peaks surrounding Rogue River and play a game we called "no brakes" on the descent, which basically entailed running as fast as we could down the steep hills and jumping over any rocks in our path. I'm not sure how I managed to make it through my childhood without breaking any bones, but I certainly spent a lot of time with scraped-up limbs and skin that was swollen from poison oak.

One day when my parents were gone, I took a dare from my older brother, Rob, to ride my bike off the back of the bed of my dad's old rusty truck. I high centered on the tailgate and fell headfirst into the gravel, ripping up my face. I ended up needing stitches under my nose and in my mouth where the skin had ripped away from my jaw. My face was a massive scab for a few weeks, and I could only drink from a straw.

That didn't stop me from seeking out extreme adventures though. Whenever I saw a hill or even a big dirt pile, I felt some innate desire to conquer it. During my senior year in high school, I went camping with my parents in Mammoth, California. While everyone else was fishing, I decided to head out by myself with some cheap rope to scale the rocky peaks, like I'd seen people do on TV. I successfully climbed one and decided to rappel down, using the belt loops on my pants as my harness. Not such a good idea.

As soon as my body weight tightened the line, all six loops snapped loose, and I was fast roping down 30 feet without gloves—meaning there was nothing holding me to the rope

except my two bare hands. As I strolled back into camp with bloody friction burns on both hands and all my belt loops flapping, my parents just shook their heads. After years of having me return from various adventures with cuts and bruises all over my body, it took a lot to surprise them.



Now, almost two decades later, I still had the same inner drive to push myself to extremes, but I'd matured along the way and gained a healthy respect for mountains. On top of that, I'd learned a lot about climbing techniques, safety protocol, and proper equipment. No more belt-loop adventures for me.

It's hard to trace exactly when my love for climbing began, but it may have been the ascent I made as a teenager to pour my grandma's ashes on the top of the mountain facing her house.

She and my grandpa lived across the creek from my family, so I spent a lot of time at their house when I was growing up. When I was 14 years old, Grandma was diagnosed with cancer and went through a series of aggressive chemo treatments. The treatments didn't help much; they just made her last few months miserable. One of the last times I saw her, she was sitting on the couch with a little head scarf covering her frail head. She waved me over to the couch, and I sat down beside her.

Pointing with her bony finger at the mountains outside the window, she leaned close to me. "Brian," she whispered, "I want you to sprinkle my ashes on top of that hill."

She was sure she was about to die, and even though I knew it was coming, I wasn't ready. My family was going to San Diego to see my brother graduate from Navy boot camp, and I was afraid she wouldn't be there when we returned.

I was right. After the funeral, my best friend, Joe, and I headed up the mountain with the box of her ashes. When I reached the top of the mountain, I made a cross out of some tree limbs, poured her ashes on the ground, and said a silent prayer. Then Joe and I ran down the mountain in our normal “no brakes” fashion, most likely in an attempt to make things as normal as possible and to avoid the awkward emotions that were rising up inside me.

I took my climbing to the next level when I ascended Mount Rainier for the first time in May 2008. A friend and I signed up with a climbing group, and I was both excited and nervous to explore at a higher elevation than I’d ever been to before. I was also eager to learn some technical knowledge about glacier travel. Leading up to the expedition, I trained on Mount Si, a smaller peak near my house, and when the time came for our adventure, I felt ready.

During the three-day expedition, our group learned various mountaineering skills, including rest steps, pressure breathing, rope travel, and self-arrest. I was surprised how strong the wind could be as we made our way to higher elevations, but it wasn’t enough to stop us. It did slow us down, though, and it felt like for each step forward, I took one step back. I felt the rise of nausea in my throat, and my muscles were screaming, but I was confident I could do it. I put my chin down, placing one foot in front of the other, and suddenly we were there. We’d made it to the top! By the time I made it back to sea level, it was official. I was hooked.

After climbing Rainier several times, I summited other mountains in the Cascade Range, including Mount Shasta in California and Mount Baker in Washington. Mountain

climbing tested my physical abilities and mental sharpness like nothing I'd ever attempted before. And even though I'd grown up surrounded by mountains, being on top of them gave me a newfound appreciation for their grandeur. There's just something about standing at the top of a mountain that's like no other feeling in the world. It's hard to describe, but a sense of complete calm comes over me as I try to take in the beauty and vastness of God's creation.

In the past decade of climbing, I've gotten one recurring question from people who don't climb: "Why do you do it?" The reasons for climbing are unique to each individual, and if you were to ask 20 different climbers the same question, you'd likely get 20 different answers. For me, it mostly comes down to the way God has wired me. I have a deep drive to set big goals for myself and then strive to achieve them. If I don't, I feel like I'm not living life to the fullest and becoming the person God created me to be.

I've also found that climbing provides a spiritual solitude that I haven't experienced anywhere else. There's something about being up there on the mountain heights that shows me the vastness of God in a way that's hard to comprehend when my feet are on level ground. While I respect the mountains, I truly respect and am humbled by the Creator of those mountains. As I've studied Scripture over the years, I've discovered that mountains are mentioned about 50 times in the Psalms, so I must not be the only one who thinks they give us a glimpse of God's majesty.

You are glorious and more majestic
than the everlasting mountains.

PSALM 76:4, NLT

Now that I'm a husband and a father, I get even more questions about why I climb. But honestly, I think that having a family makes me a better climber because it gives me an even greater sense of responsibility. That's not to say anything against climbers who don't have families, but I think that there's a unique kind of accountability that only mountaineers who are parents can understand. My faith and family always come first, so when I'm determining which peaks to summit and what climbing situations to put myself in, I always factor in my values. I pray about it and discuss it with JoAnna. Then, if I feel like God is leading me to go on a certain climb, I break my goal into achievable chunks to figure out what it would take to make it happen.

If I determine that the goal is selfish and would have a negative impact on my family, I scrap it. There are plenty of peaks around the world I'd love to climb, but I've abandoned them before I even got started. I knew that although they might have provided some sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, they would have taken away from family relationships and ultimately just fueled a compulsive drive to climb another mountain.

Here is my golden rule in climbing: I will never abandon my family. I had no idea how much that rule would be tested on the top of Everest on May 15, 2011.



Part of the reason I found myself on Everest that unforgettable day can be traced back to a simple conversation I'd had with a friend several years before. During a perfect summer night in 2007, my family and I were at the home of my close friend, Adam Henry. My kids, who were about the same ages

as the Henry kids, were playing in the playroom upstairs, and our wives were at the table talking to each other.

Adam and I knew each other from work, and we'd already gone on some adventures together, such as rappelling, snowboarding, and mountain biking. But we'd never done any mountaineering before, so it felt completely out of the blue when Adam said to me, "We should do the seven summits!"

At the time, I hadn't even heard the term *seven summits*, and I didn't even recognize the names of most of the mountains he mentioned. I found out that in the climbing world, the seven summits refer to the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. Dick Bass was the first to climb all seven summits in 1985. He came up with the idea together with Frank Wells, who at one time had been the president of Walt Disney Company. But in the 20-some years since, only about 200 people had successfully completed the task, which made the challenge all the more compelling in my eyes. Plus, it combined a few of my favorite things into one dream: travel, audacious outdoor goals, and adventure.

I barely hesitated before responding. "Done!"

Of course, the reality wasn't as simple as my one-word answer that night. It wasn't something I wanted to decide flippantly.

When JoAnna and I talked about it, her initial response was, "Okay . . . but even Everest?" She shook her head, knowing that I was serious and that I'd probably already mapped out the whole trip in my mind. We talked about what it would mean for me and for our family, and we spent a lot of time praying about it and making sure it was the wise choice for us at this point in our lives.

Once JoAnna and I felt confident this was the right move,

Adam and I started making plans. However, Adam's quest was over before it began. One day while I was training on a local climb, he took his motorcycle out on a motocross track in Bremerton, Washington. He crashed after landing a jump, breaking his back in multiple places. He was helicoptered to Seattle's Harborview Medical Center, where several of his vertebrae had to be fused together. The doctors said he had a yearlong recovery ahead of him, so climbing at high altitude with a heavy pack was out of the question.

I continued to push ahead toward our goal alone, but I was grateful to still have his support and encouragement.

The first of the seven summits I attempted was Alaska's Mount McKinley, also known as Denali, or "the High One." I set out to tackle this 20,320-foot peak in 2009, but I had to turn back just shy of the summit due to high winds. The following year I climbed both Africa's highest peak, Kilimanjaro (19,341 feet), and the highest mountain in Europe, Mount Elbrus. Located at the southern tip of Russia, Elbrus measures at almost the same elevation as Kilimanjaro: 18,510 feet.

Next up would be the tallest of them all: Mount Everest.



Although I was already in good shape from the past few years of intense climbing, there were some extra preparations I'd need to do to make sure I was ready for Everest. Whenever I set a climbing goal, I tried to alter my training to conform to the specific conditions of the mountain I'd be climbing. For a mountain like Kilimanjaro, which has a high elevation but takes little technical skill, the best thing was to work on cardio since you can't really train for the elevation. For mountains like Denali and Everest, which are more than 20,000

feet, I added 60 pounds to my pack and did my best to climb three to four times a week. Sometimes I trained on Mount Rainier, which stands at 14,411 feet and is the most highly glaciated mountain in the lower 48 states. But most often I did my training on the various 4,000- to 5,000-foot peaks in my backyard in Seattle.

To emulate a heavy pack and to build up my climbing strength, I filled my pack with old laundry-detergent dispensers full of water. That way I could get a great muscle and cardio workout on the ascent and then dump the water at the top to save my knees during the descent. I tried to get on the trail by 5 a.m. to ensure that I didn't cut into work time or time with my family. I was usually back by 8 a.m. for my work meetings, with a Starbucks in hand for JoAnna.

On days I didn't climb, I ran six to eight miles on back-country trails near my house or swam across local lakes, such as Lake Sammamish or Rattlesnake Lake. I'm not a fan of stationary training (treadmills, pools, and stationary bikes), so if I have a choice, I'll always train outdoors. Not only does this regimen keep me in physical shape, it also keeps me mentally fit. You can never predict what will happen on top of a mountain, but it will never be as climate controlled as a gym.

Another thing I focused on during my training was making sure I had a solid nutrition plan. I knew I needed to make up for the extra calories burned in my workouts, but even so, that wasn't an excuse to indulge in unhealthy snacks (except my weekly box of Chips Ahoy! cookies). For ordinary training days, my diet looked something like this: I started the day with a bowl of oatmeal and a latte; lunch was a sandwich or a can of ravioli; and dinner was usually steak, pasta, or fish. For Everest training days, I still ate three meals a day, but I

needed to fill in the gaps with constant snacks since I was burning calories almost as fast as I was taking them in.

The physical preparations for the climb were a lot easier for me than the mental and emotional preparations. Having been on several extended climbing trips in the past few years, I knew that the separation from my wife and kids would take its toll. And the past expeditions had been three weeks or less, which was considerably shorter than the two months required to climb Everest. But when you're heading to Everest, there are no shortcuts. Between the distance, the extensive traveling, the high altitude, and the long process of acclimatization, the trip couldn't be completed in less than two months.

I'm fortunate to have a wife who supports me in these endeavors. JoAnna and I discussed my trip plans often and in great detail so we felt like we were doing this as a team and remained unified in our vision. Many of JoAnna's friends told her they'd never let their husbands climb, and some of them even scared her with stories about climbing fatalities.

Unlike me, she is cautious by nature, but she is open to hearing my side of things. Before I went to Everest, I gave JoAnna an analysis of the various mountains I'd climbed to give her perspective. Mount Rainier has a history of 400 fatalities; Everest has only 200.³ By those numbers, I'd already climbed the riskier mountain multiple times. Of course, she knew that there are lots of variables to consider and that many more climbers attempt the accessible peaks. So on a mountain like Rainier, the number of accidents increases based on volume alone.

But even though JoAnna has her fears, each time I leave on an expedition, she says, "Enjoy your time, but please come home safe!" It helps me to keep those words sealed in

my mind so I can hold on to them when I'm stuck far from home at high altitude, surrounded by swirling winds and whiteout conditions.

Even with a supportive wife, though, there was no real way for me to prepare for being away, knowing that I would face real dangers in the months to come. But I tried my best to hide my sadness from my children. Although they knew that Daddy was climbing the highest peaks on the seven continents, they were too young to know the inherent dangers I would face. At ages seven and four, they still thought Daddy was Superman and could do anything. They were good motivation to make sure I was as prepared for this trip as I could possibly be.

Securing funds for an expedition can feel like an uphill climb in itself, especially for Everest, which is one of the most expensive climbs in the world. The Nepalese government requires climbing permits, which run \$25,000 minimum for an individual climber. Then you have to pay for all the gear, travel to Kathmandu, and take a flight to Lukla, where the trek to base camp begins. And since climbing Everest requires an extensive team, there are also the funds needed to pay Sherpa porters, who help bring gear to base camp; climbing Sherpas, who provide assistance higher on the mountain; porters who carry and stage the equipment at higher camps; cooks for base camp and Camp II; and icefall doctors, who fix the ropes through the Khumbu Icefall. In addition, there are the incidental costs for things like food, oxygen, and tips.

I knew that Western-guided companies charge anywhere from \$60,000 to more than \$100,000, which was well beyond my budget. I chose to work with a Seattle-based company that had local connections in Nepal so it would

be less expensive. I wasn't part of a large team, which meant I had Sherpa support and a climbing Sherpa, but for the most part I would be on my own. JoAnna was agreeable to this approach, but she insisted that I use supplemental oxygen. I agreed with her. In the 1920s, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine had helped remove the stigma that "real" mountaineers don't use oxygen, and now oxygen is used above 23,000 feet by more than 97 percent of climbers. There were some cuts I was willing to make for the sake of saving a few bucks, but oxygen wasn't one of them.

To help with the costs of the climb, I partnered with several sponsors. One was the AIDS Research Alliance, which raises funds with the goal of developing a cure for the epidemic. I'd be wearing gear with their logo on it to build awareness for them during my climb. I also connected with several product sponsors and a couple of financial sponsors. The rest came from out of our pockets—from the money JoAnna and I had been saving for this.

Beyond the physical, mental, and logistical preparations, I spent a lot of time focusing on the expedition itinerary. For me, the planning phase is what fuels my motivation and excitement. And since climbing is typically a team effort, I did my best to include my whole family in the planning process. It helped make things more real for me when I broke down each phase of the trip and shared it with JoAnna and the kids. It also helped to keep me focused. With all the potential distractions that threatened to keep me from accomplishing my goals, the planning kept me loyal to the reasons I was doing this in the first place.

I've found that focus is especially important in a sport like climbing, where there are so many vocal critics. One day

when I was in the planning phase, I was at Starbucks with my family, and I was approached by someone who had heard I was preparing for an expedition to Everest.

“I heard you’re climbing Everest,” she told me. And then, right in front of my two young children, she said, “What are you thinking? You’re going to die up there.”

I paused and counted to 10, knowing I’d regret any gut-level response. I tried to calmly diffuse the situation and then turned to Emily and Jordan to see what damage had been done. Fortunately, with the white noise of various conversations and skinny vanilla lattes being frothed at high volume, they were oblivious to the verbal bomb that had just been dropped. It was one thing to prepare to scale a mountain that looms at the cruising altitude of a commercial jet. The line at Starbucks was something else altogether.



The final few months leading up to my Everest expedition were intense as I made sure the finances for the trip were covered, arranged to take unpaid time off work, took care of personal finances and bills, planned activities with the company sponsoring my trip, and maximized time with my family.

JoAnna and I wanted to be sensitive to how my trip would affect our children, and we were intentional about setting aside time to talk through everything together. With their different ages and personalities, we knew that Emily and Jordan would face this in unique ways. At four, Jordan had a hard time comprehending how long I would be gone or the vastness and risks of my climb.

One evening after dinner I sat down with Jordan and told

him a simplified version of my upcoming trip. When I was finished, I said, “Hey, buddy, do you want to ask me anything about it?”

“What kind of animals will you see there?”

Not many animals are tough enough to survive in Everest’s harsh climate and high altitude, but I wasn’t about to give my son something else to worry about. I told him about the few animals I knew could exist in the high parts of the Himalayas. “Well, there are a lot of yaks, which are like big, hairy cows,” I said. “Anything else?”

“How tall is the mountain, Daddy?”

We looked out the window together, searching the skyline. “It’s as tall as an airplane flies,” I said.

“Is that as high as heaven?”

I smiled. “Not quite.”

As a first grader, Emily was more aware of the dangers. She’d heard adults talk about the risks involved, and she had classmates who parroted back things their parents had said. And she was old enough to remember the last trip I’d gone on.

Emily was five when I’d gone on my first long expedition to Denali for three weeks. Three weeks seemed like an eternity then, but it was only a fraction of the time I’d be gone for the Everest trip. Denali stands at 20,320 feet, while Everest’s elevation is 29,035 feet. Now, that difference may not sound like much, but in terms of altitude, those extra 9,000 feet are significant. The added elevation affects every aspect of the climb, from acclimatization to the duration of the trip to the gear that’s required.

Emily has a strong will, and while I was gone, she had just continued on with her normal life. JoAnna told me Emily hadn’t shown a ton of external emotion, which we knew

meant she was internalizing her feelings. I understood her perhaps better than anyone else, because I tend to process emotions the same way. Knowing how hard the Denali trip had been for her, JoAnna and I wanted to be intentional about giving Emily space to talk through her feelings with us.

When we discussed things as a family, Emily tended to be quieter than Jordan, but when she and I had alone time, I made sure to ease her concerns. One day when she got home from school, I could tell something was bugging her.

“What’s wrong, honey?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. But she was talking in her little-girl voice, which meant there was something troubling her.

I kept probing, and finally the story tumbled out.

“Kayla’s dad said you were going to die climbing,” she said. She wouldn’t look at me, but I could hear the quaver in her voice.

I wanted to give that dad a piece of my mind, but I knew that wouldn’t change the way Emily felt.

“Nothing is going to happen to me, sweetie,” I said. “I will be home with you before you know it.”

When I tucked both kids into bed that night, I gave them the same reminder: “It’s always harder before I actually leave,” I said. “Someday you’ll look back, and the trip will just seem like a blur.” I said it to reassure the kids, but I was also reminding myself.



I was working for Cisco Systems, one of the largest technology solutions providers in the world. I liked it because of the people I worked with and the challenging work I got to do. Another perk was that my position allowed me to have a

flexible schedule. I was able to work from home a few days a week, and they let me take chunks of time off for my climbs. In many ways it was a win-win, because I would also be testing and showcasing Cisco technologies during my trip. I had routers, wireless access points, 3G connectivity, tablets, and laptops spread all over my home office so I could get them ready to be used in a developing country, in areas where this type of technology had never been seen before.

My flexible schedule meant I was around more than most parents and could be present for my kids' school events and other activities. JoAnna and I made it a point to meet with Emily's and Jordan's teachers to talk about how my leaving might affect them in school.

Another way I got involved was through a program called WATCH D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students), which sprung up in schools across the country in response to the 1999 Columbine school shootings. This program encouraged dads (after they'd gone through background checks) to attend class with their children as an added layer of protection for the school. I got to hang out in Emily's class, help the teacher, eat lunch in the cafeteria, and play on the playground. I also had the opportunity to visit other classrooms to talk about my climbs.

One day just a few weeks before I was to leave for Everest, I was surprised when Emily's teacher, Mrs. Heinz, called me up to the front of the room.

"We have a small gift for you," she said.

Then she presented me with a handmade book. As soon as I opened the cover, my eyes started to fill with tears. Each student in Emily's first grade class had contributed a page with pictures and comments.

And that wasn't all. Looking a bit sheepish, Mrs. Heinz

pulled out something else. “It’s a Snoqualmie Elementary School Cougar medal for you,” she said. “For your trip.”

I could barely choke out my thanks. These gifts and the students’ support meant more to me than I could adequately thank them for.

As much as we were focused on how the kids would handle everything, I knew it wasn’t going to be easy for JoAnna either. She had recently started a Christian counseling ministry at our church, Church on the Ridge. She was glad to have something to keep her busy throughout my trip, but it was going to be difficult for her to juggle everything on her own—the finances, the kids, her ministry responsibilities, and all the household tasks. But while she may not be a risk taker, she is tough, and she was up for the challenge. And she had known from the beginning what kind of person she was marrying.

We’d met 16 years earlier, when I was into extreme sports like snowboarding, rappelling, and surfing, and jumping out of helicopters in the Navy. I served in the US Navy for six years, and during that time I learned a lot of lessons that paved the way for my mountain climbing. I spent 18 months in training, including Air Rescue Swimmer (AIRR) school, which is widely considered to be one of the most grueling schools in the US military; Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE), which provides training for land survival, interrogation, and prisoner of war (POW) tactics; and Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron training school. But the most significant lessons I learned revolved around staying calm and maintaining confidence in dangerous situations. That was certainly something that would come in handy in my upcoming expedition.

JoAnna and I couldn't have been more opposite, as she's deathly afraid of heights, but we understand each other and have come to respect the way each of us is wired.

And despite her fear of heights, JoAnna has made an effort to enter my world. She's gone on smaller local climbs with me, and she even joined me at base camp on Russia's Mount Elbrus. She loves the beauty of the mountains and appreciates why I do what I do. I imagine there are times she'd be happy if I were an average guy who worked from nine to five and sat on the couch on the weekends, but ultimately she knows I'd be miserable with a lifestyle like that and I'd be squelching the person I was made to be.

She fell in love with a guy who lived a significant portion of life with both feet off level ground, and she has a pretty good idea I'm not going to change anytime soon. It also gives her peace of mind to know that safety is my biggest concern, having seen me in action on trail hikes and climbs we've done together. She also knows that I'd give my life to save another, if the situation arose.

The one thing that kept both of us grounded as we prepared for this adventure was our faith. We prayed continually about my trip—for protection and safety for me, for the kids' adjustment, for JoAnna as she would be a single parent for a while, and for God to be honored through the trip.

During the church service the Sunday before I left, our pastor, Charlie, brought JoAnna and me onstage. All the church staff members laid their hands on us and prayed for a safe climb and a safe return. I hoped Charlie wouldn't ask me to say anything, because I didn't think I'd be able to open my mouth without falling apart.



And then one morning I sat up in bed, my heart pounding. The countdown was over. I would be leaving for Nepal in three days.

Everything had been checked off the to-do list—all except one thing.

I'd finished hiding two months' worth of gifts, notes, and surprises throughout the house to keep my family's spirits up and to help them feel connected to me. It was tough trying to find 60 different places to put each thing, so I put together a spreadsheet to track the locations, the gifts, and the clues. I then had my good friend Joe text a clue to JoAnna each day so she and the kids could have a daily scavenger hunt. Two of the gifts were prearranged trips—one to San Diego and one to Las Vegas. Not only would this give them something to take their minds off my absence, but it would also give them a break from the constant spring rain that hits western Washington every year. The kids' other gifts included things I knew they loved—coloring books, toys, and special notes.

There, I thought, when I'd finished hiding the final gift. That should last them until I come home.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard that haunting question that I usually succeeded in silencing: *What if I don't come home?*

I felt confident I'd done everything I could possibly do to prepare. I was in excellent shape, and I'd mapped out everything for the next two months. But I also knew the reality: people do die on Everest. Things could happen that were out of my control—like severe weather, unexpected

mountain conditions, or my body's response to performing at altitude.

I shuddered to think about the events of 1996. I was in the Navy at the time and hadn't started climbing yet, but the news still rocked me, as it did the entire nation. With 15 total deaths, it was Everest's deadliest year on record. During a summit attempt on May 10, eight people were caught in a blizzard and perished. While Everest isn't the most technical mountain to climb, there are many reasons it has earned its reputation for being the most dangerous. First of all, there are the geological hazards. Not long after base camp, you have to climb the Khumbu Icefall—basically a river of ice—multiple times. Along the route, you face the threat of avalanches, massive walls of glacial ice, and huge blocks of ice called seracs, which can be the size of buildings. Seracs are constantly moving, and they may topple with little warning.

Then you have to climb Lhotse Face—no easy task, since it's a straight-up ice climb for a few miles. Once you've made it up Lhotse Face, you enter the death zone (26,000 feet)—the altitude at which your body starts slowly deteriorating. Once you get above the South Col, or high camp, you face a fierce mix of rock, snow, ice, wind, and miles of exposed faces. Between the lack of oxygen and the high altitude, Everest boasts an element of danger that can be found on few other peaks in the world.

Another reason for the increased risk on Everest is that in recent years it has become easier for people who aren't fully qualified to attempt the climb, putting not only themselves but others at risk as well. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal relies on the money brought into the country

from travel and climbing tourism, which constitutes 8 percent of the gross national income. Some suggest that the requirements are too lax, allowing unqualified climbers to attempt major peaks.

But whatever the risk factors—some of which were under my control and others that weren't—I couldn't deny that a number of people had died in the very spot where I would be heading.

With that reality in mind, I did the one final thing I needed to do to prepare. I waited for my family to leave the house and then sat down at my desk.

If something went wrong on the mountain and I needed to say some final words to my family, I would have to plan for that possibility too. And since I probably wouldn't be able to say good-bye from the top of Everest, I'd have to say good-bye with the help of a video.

As soon as I clicked Record, I started bawling my eyes out. I tried to tell JoAnna and Emily and Jordan how much I loved them and my hopes for their future, but I'm pretty sure no coherent words came out the first time.

I tried again, attempting to keep my composure, but something about saying those words out loud and imagining my family hearing them undid me every time.

In the end, I just had to accept the tears.

"I love each of you so much," I choked out. "I'm so proud of you—all of you. Emily, I'm so sorry I won't be there to walk you down the aisle at your wedding. Jordan, I know you will grow up to be a good man, and I am proud that you'll carry on our family name. I think you know this, but I want to say it out loud: JoAnna, Emily, Jordan, you are my world."

I saved the video file and hid it on JoAnna's MacBook. Then I sent the hidden location along with an explanation to Joe, who was already handling the scavenger hunt clues.

I prayed that JoAnna would never see it.