

PROLOGUE

Run, Ricardo, run as fast as you can!" Ashkan shouted. I struggled to make progress through the deep snow as I ran down the steep slope. Lightning bolts struck the glacier, and the thunderclaps were deafening. The electricity in the air made the hairs on my arms stand up, and I knew we were in serious danger. Terrified at the thought of being hit by 300 million volts, I stumbled down the glacier as quickly as I could.

It was then that I realised I was wearing a rucksack with an ice axe attached to it, pointing straight up. That axe could act as a lightning rod, so I quickly dropped the bag and hurled it down the mountain. A lightning strike hit just 200 metres in front of us, followed by an enormous crash of thunder that forced us to press ourselves flat against the glacier.

Ashkan shouted, "Stay as low as you can and don't move," and I obeyed, petrified.

Thirty seconds after that terrifying moment, we began to move again, slowly crawling forward, still trembling. As I ran, I spotted the shelter in the distance. My heart was pounding, and adrenaline surged through my body, making my pupils dilate and causing sweat to pour down my face. The adrenaline sharpened my vision, hearing, and other senses as my body switched into survival mode.

Suddenly, one of my crampons snapped off near my gaiters, and I began to fall forward. After tumbling a few times, I came to a stop, lying on my stomach—just as another lightning bolt struck the glacier. Paralysed by fear, I pressed my face into the snow, hoping it would all stop.

How did we end up here? Why did we go up this volcano? I asked myself.

We were on an expedition in Iran at the end of the winter season, aiming to reach the summit of Mount Damavand — the highest volcano in Asia at 5,610 metres. The volcano is part of a mountaineering challenge called the Volcanic Seven Summits, which involves climbing the highest volcano on each continent.

The challenge includes Ojos del Salado (South America) – 6,893 metres, Kilimanjaro (Africa) – 5,895 metres, Elbrus (Europe) – 5,642 metres, Pico de Orizaba (North America) – 5,636 metres, Damavand (Asia) – 5,610 metres, Mount Giluwe (Oceania) – 4,368 metres, and Mount Sidley (Antarctica) – 4,285 metres. Only around 47 people have ever completed it, with the first recorded completion in 2011.

Personally, my goal was to become the first person from Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) to ever complete this challenge. The journey would take me to the farthest corners of the world, filled with diverse environments, people, cultures, and experiences that would shape me into a better climber — and a better person.

A faint sound reached my ears, and I strained to listen over the thunder and wind. I caught Ashkan's voice — a few fragmented words: "You... there... move...!!!" In an instant, the meaning clicked, and I knew what I had to do. I needed to get out of this deadly situation.

I pushed myself up with my arms to get into a better position and told myself to run as fast as I could — and not to look back. With a quick leap, I got to my feet and sprinted towards the shelter, Bargah Sevom, our refuge at 4,220 metres altitude. The electrically

charged cloud was descending the slope faster than I had anticipated and had now wrapped the volcano in a firm grip.

In the distance, I saw Ashkan pick up my bag and start running toward the shelter. That gave me a surge of strength — I no longer had to worry about my gear. All I had to do now was focus on reaching the mountain hut. Panic began to set in when a lightning bolt struck just one kilometre away to my right. My legs burnt and my lungs filled with as much fresh air as possible, although breathing at this altitude was a challenge. I was acclimatised, but this level of exertion pushed me beyond what I had prepared for.

The shelter was now just a short distance away, and I started to feel more at ease knowing it was fitted with a lightning rod. The walls were covered in snow that had been whipped up against the door by the stormy wind. Ashkan was trying to clear the entrance of the white powder so we could get inside safely. Once I reached the shelter, I helped Ashkan, and together we managed to open the door within a minute. The door swung open, and six people stared at us. Judging by their expressions, I could tell what they were thinking: who would be mad enough to be out in weather like this?

Most of the people inside hadn't attempted to reach the summit and had instead used their reserve day. We reassured them we were alright — just a bit shaken and full of adrenaline. They brought us a cup of tea and offered us chairs to sit and recover. As we sat by the fire and the intensity of the experience began to fade, I finally started to relax. Ashkan and I had been going non-stop for seven hours, and my body seized the opportunity to begin recovering.

But the recovery after such an intense energy burst took a toll. I had no appetite and crawled into my sleeping bag while the storm raged outside, thunder echoing through the shelter. I fell asleep quickly but was woken multiple times by lightning strikes — until suddenly, the flashes and booms stopped. Darkness enveloped the room, and unease crept in. Usually, I could see some light seeping in through the door — but now, there was nothing.

I asked myself: what's happening? Has the shelter been buried under snow, or am I slipping into some kind of altered state of consciousness? Then it hit me — I couldn't open my eyes. No matter how hard I tried, they simply wouldn't respond. My eyes began to water, and tears streamed down my cheeks. Terrified by the sensation, I tried to reach out to the other team members — but no one was in the room with me, and I seemed to be on a different level of sleep. Yelling didn't help — my voice didn't reach them. Climbing down the stairs wasn't an option either.

This went on for nearly an hour, until I was finally able to open my left eye by just a few millimetres. I peered through the tiny gap and saw the moon. My eye immediately closed again, followed by a stabbing pain, like a knife had been driven into it. The headache was excruciating, and the pain in my eye was unbearable.

I knew exactly what was happening: one of my worst fears had come true —
I was snowblind.

CHAPTER VIII

THE INTERCONTINENTAL ROLLERCOASTER

"Is it possible that coincidence doesn't exist?"

-M. Night Shyamalan (2002) -

8th of April 2022,

"Shall I call a helicopter?" I asked the distressed man, who could only manage a weary nod. I handed him a bottle of water and watched as he took large gulps, desperately trying to rehydrate after being completely dried out. "Stay seated and breathe—I'll make the call," I reassured him. As my fingers tapped the screen, I dialled the number for the medical lead.

"He needs a helicopter—he can't walk anymore. How long will it take?" I asked.

The doctor on the other end replied, "Do you know how to guide the helicopter and what to do?"

I had experience with helicopter approaches from my time on naval ships, where I handled landing and take-off procedures, so I assured him I knew what to do.

Scanning the area quickly, I noticed empty bottles, sweet wrappers, and scattered clothing. I cleared them away, knowing that loose objects could be lifted and struck by the helicopter's rotors. I also removed both our caps to prevent them from becoming dangerous projectiles. Additionally, I made sure the injured person was wearing sunglasses to protect his eyes from the rotor wash, which could kick up dust and small stones.

Below us, I could see the medical team was still about half an hour away, and I could already hear the distinct chopping sound of the approaching aircraft as it flew over the skyscrapers. During my work in this country, I had visited this mountain several times a week, which is how I ended up in this situation.

On my afternoon walk after work, I had started overtaking people carrying parts of a stretcher. Eventually, I came across a group, one of whom had a walkie-talkie and seemed to be the leader. I greeted them, and they immediately commented on my fast pace.

"Are you a regular hiker? Do you know the route?" the medical team leader asked.

I explained that I hiked this trail every four days during my months-long stay in the country, using the mountainous terrain as training for an upcoming expedition.

The medical chief then asked, "Could you please go ahead and locate the person in need?"

With that, my relaxed walk turned into a search-and-rescue mission. They had received a distress call from someone stranded near a treacherous cliff. After the call, they had tried to reach him again, but without success.

Despite this, the team was a skilled rescue unit that climbed the mountain almost weekly during the season to assist climbers in distress. So why did they need my help? Normally, I would have struggled to keep up with these seasoned professionals. The reason for my faster progress wasn't superior endurance but rather the fact that the entire