

The First

By William Benson

Chapter 15 Coming Down the Mountain

Schaeffer forbid the excursion at first but once he realized they would go on with or without University resources he relented, providing all the equipment they needed for the overnight excursion. That equipment included a United States Airforce Combat Rescue helicopter, complete with a special forces paramedic (PJ). Finding a clear weather window, the chopper took them deep into the white forest. ninety minutes later, it deposited them as high up the mountain's face as possible, finding a level LZ a few hundred yards from the peak. Rick convinced an old friend in the Air Force that the incursion could be done safely. He was only lying to a point, having never mentioned a safe retrieval. It wasn't exactly a landing zone, more of a drop zone. Upon arrival the chopper hovered, not touching down, forcing them to jump a few feet onto the snow covered mountain side. The snow was deep, enough so that the snowshoes they wore barely kept their knees above the fluff. Although the sun shined down from a clear blue sky, the wind whipped steadily bringing the temperature into the single digits.

"Jesus H. Christ, it's cold up here," Michael spoke into the headset he wore. They were bungled up in mountain gear, with goggles and hands-free communication radios.

"What'd you expect at over 12000 feet in March, Doc?" their guide announced.

"I'm from Chicago. I guess I thought I knew what cold was."

"But it's a dry cold. Jackson Hole was actually colder when I skied there last year," Lisa cracked, completely accustomed to the environment herself.

"Okay, enough chatter. Let's get moving. We need to find this cave before sunset. I do not want to have to spend the night out here," Chohopa ordered. Being a climbing and winter wilderness expert, Rick knew the threat they faced and was the only chance they had of getting out of there alive. The backcountry mountain might have looked like a ski resort peak, but its spring snowpack on such steep face would have ski patrol ropes all over it.

They began the trek upward, believing they would mostly hike without any serious climbing. But the ultimate peak was unknown, due to their limited imaging intel. They just had to risk it. As they hiked the sun's rays, brighter and harsher so high up, reflected off the snow causing a serious case of snow-blindness. Only their tinted goggles allowed them to see at all. The clear weather did provide a majestic view however, as countless white peaks greeted them in every direction. They truly felt on top of the world, but was brought back to the ground often. The occasional footstep would put each hiker onto a thicker crust of windblown snow below, which would sometimes give way. This then caused the unlucky explorer to break his way back through the crust and back to softer snow. At other times, the snow was too soft for the shoes to keep them on top of the waist deep fluff. It made their little walk far slower than they hoped. Each step was a struggle and spending half an hour to go a hundred yards was far from fun; it was in fact exhausting. Even though he considered himself in good shape and acclimated to working at higher elevations, each step sapped Michael's strength more than he ever imagined. He just wasn't getting enough of the emaciated air into his blood stream, and the 30-pound pack on his back only made matters worse. He had to take breaks every 20 or 30 yards in order to catch his breath. Lisa and Rick fared better, but not so much that they didn't need the breaks themselves. Rick cursed that the flatlander was slowing them down, but knew O'Neill was the reason they were there to begin with.

By mid-afternoon they were half way to the hard granite of the peak's face. The summit was a sheer cliff that was too steep for most snow to cling to. The three hikers returned its menacing glare and wondered what the hell they'd gotten themselves into. They stopped to rest under an hanging stone precipice.

"Well what do you think?" Lisa looked at Rick.

"I was hoping to make better time than this, but we're not that bad off."

O'Neill took the hint. "Sorry guys. I . . . just can't push it up here. Every step I take feels like it's my last. It's like I'm a pack-a-day smoker. I thought the mountain biking and work in the cave would prepare me for this. Guess I was wrong."

"Don't sweat it Doc. I'll get us there, but I'm afraid we'll need to take a big detour up ahead."

"Why?"

"You see that ridge of snow up ahead?" They both nodded. "Well, we can't go that way. It's a crevasse. I saw it from the copter."

"A what?" Michael didn't care if his mountaineering ignorance showed at that point.

"More or less a big hole in the snow. It's a crack in the snowpack, usually pretty deep and wide," Olsen announced to let her guide know she wasn't a grom when it came to the world of winter danger.

"Right. We'll need to go around to the right. The problem is that the snowpack there doesn't look too stable. It's deep, heavy and on a steep face."

"Wonderful," Lisa announced with a big frown. "Any other way we can go?"

"Not that I can see. I guess we'll have to take our chances."

O'Neill didn't ask, because he didn't want to know. His imagination provided enough anxiety.

They walked slow, careful and one at a time. Rick went first, using a long probe in his hand to test the consistency of the snow beneath his footing. He zigzagged his way up the hill a hundred yards or so around the crevasse, constantly backtracking to avoid weak areas. Lisa went next, carefully checking her footing and listening to Rick guide each step with the radio. Finally, Michael made his way. Stepping lightly was not easy for him. He heard Rick guide him away from the next trouble area.

"Okay Doc, you see Lisa's prints? Follow them up, but don't step exactly in them. This is the touchiest area so go real careful like."

"Uh huh." A full verbal response took too much thought and energy.

He started okay, but he was just too tired to hold his footing. The next step was almost his last. His foot went too far in and he tripped, falling forward. The abrupt impact on the snow was greeted with a growl. A small slab of snow beneath him gave way and began to slide.

(Oh shit) His mind echoed a comment from the radio. The slab was a ten-foot square and foot deep section from the surface snow that broke off from the surrounding snowpack and slid away, with O'Neill on top. Michael knew what was happening, but had no idea what to do about it. The indecision saved his life. Having been merely nudged from its sleep, the slide stopped a few feet down the hill. Mike was on his hands and knees, head down reciting the Hail Mary as quickly as he could. When the slide stopped, he slowly lifted his head and looked up at Lisa and Rick. Even from 30 yards, through the tint of the goggles, they could see the wide-open white of his eyes.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispered to them.

"I think you know what that was Doc. The key now is not to wake its big brother. I want you to stand up as slowly and as smoothly as humanly possible. No sudden movements Doc. None, goddammit. This is no joke."

He did so, acting as if in complete slow motion. It had the effect of a street corner mime.

"Now what?"

"Okay, good. Now re-e-e-al slow like, side step to your left." He did so and was rewarded with more stable footing, breathing for what felt like the first time in hours. "Great Mike. Now start walking up, but act like you are on glass. I want your steps to be like a bird's. Okay?"

"Right, bird steps. Should I tweet a little song too?" No one laughed. Ten minutes later he collapsed in front of his companions.

"You okay?" Lisa asked.

He didn't even lift his face out of the snow to look at her when he muffled his reply, "I swear to God I will never step foot on the snow again after this nonsense is over."

* * *

They stopped at the foot of the cliff face to plan an attack. Michael took out his tablet, comparing the radar image to what he saw before him. If his estimates were correct the cave would be exactly thirty yards in front of them. The problem was that *in front* meant a ninety degree-angle straight up for thirty feet or so. Snow was unable to adhere to the rock, ice however was not a problem. What was rock a few months before transformed into a solid wall of ice several inches thick. He'd heard of people climbing frozen waterfalls for fun. O'Neill realized then how completely insane such people were.

"How the hell are we supposed to do this?"

"That's what the shiny metal stuff in your pack is for Doc."

O'Neill looked down at the equipment Rick spread out on the tarp below him. Ropes, ice axes, carabineers and crampons.

"Umm Rick, this stuff is all well and good I'm sure, but how on earth are we going to get far enough up the cliff to screw in these little bolts for the ropes?"

"Not we Doc, me."

On that note, he watched Chohopa pick up two ice axes and begin his ascent. He hammered one pick into the ice, bending one knee high to dig his foot into the wall. The crampon attached to his boot and knee had sharp points that clung to the ice, giving him leverage to pull himself up on the pick. There he hammered in the other pick and repeated the procedure. Up and up he went, one handhold and footing at a time. If even one of the holds slipped, he would fall hard and fast. Half way up he ratcheted in two ice screws to hold a long safety rope attached with a carabineer to his safety harness. If he did slip it would prevent a crash to the bottom, in theory.

"You know he's totally nuts, don't you?" Mike said to Lisa as they stared nervously up at their friend.

"*Y-e-a-h*," she replied with more than a hint of affection, not lowering her own eyes.

He reached the top of the face and slipped onto a wide ledge. He ratcheted in more screws deep though the ice and attached the ropes, throwing the thick nylon cord down to his companions below.

"Okay Michael, you go second this time."

"What?"

"I want to be down here to help if you have problems."

"Oh . . . great."

Lisa put the safety harness on him and attached the ropes to it. One rope would be used to pull himself up and the other a safety line if he fell. Even with the rope helping him up, he still had to use the crampons and ice pick to assist the climb. Fear wasn't the problem. Terror was. Just the same, Dr. O'Neill began his climb, with Rick and Lisa guiding him with encouragement from above and below. He climbed slowly making sure every hold was as secure as he could make it, using one hand to pick the axe in and the other to secure his weight upon the rappelling chord. The precariousness of the situation consumed him. Leaning his head against the cold, cold ice Mike could not believe that such little pieces of metal would prevent him from falling to certain injury. The only way to continue was to forego his long held sense of gravitational security and have blind faith that Rick knew what he talking about. Halfway up his foot slipped off the ice and he slammed into the rock. He fell a few feet but yanked the belay rope, forcing it to take hold. Rattled but not defeated he started up again, somehow forcing Newton's law from his brain. A half hour later, he was on the ledge with Rick.

"Not so bad, huh?" The look Chohopa received was reply enough. Lisa arrived 15 minutes later without a mishap.

"Cool!" She announced on her arrival. "I've got to try it without the belay line next time. Looks more fun."

Rick smiled and Mike grimaced. (*These mountain folk are all nuts.*) He thought.

Rick was more supportive. "Only after a little more practice. When we get back maybe we can try it out in that Wasatch Range you love so much."

"Sounds great to me."

O'Neill stared at the two twenty-somethings and grimaced again. "Okay lovebirds, save it for someone who isn't half frozen to death. Let's get down to business and find this damn cave." Lisa blushed at his remark, but Rick smiled even wider.

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They followed the ledge as it wound up the peak. Although a great amount of snow existed, they believed the entrance to the site would be visible. Recent aerial photos clearly showed an entrance, but they were taken a week before and any skier could tell you that a lot can change on a mountain in week. It was obvious there had been heavy snow in those seven days, so the three carefully examined the rock face as they walked. One might expect the snow to be deeper higher up the mountain, but the narrow and protected area facilitated the wind's effort to push the snow to lower elevations. The ledge wrapped around the peak, making it easier to get to the top. As they neared the expected area they were surprised to see the pathway obstructed. Large stones blocked the ledge from easy passage.

"This is strange."

"What makes you say that Rick? Looks like a rock slide to me."

"I don't know Doc. Those stones don't look natural. See how they're fragmented, almost like they were blown out of the wall with explosives, like at a quarry or something."

"Yeah, see all the small rocks. They're jagged not smooth. Nature doesn't act that way Michael." Lisa agreed.

"Hmmm, good catch. I guess the cold has slowed my brain functions. What could have caused this? What man made tools cut rock like this, other than explosives? I'm not ready to say the ancients had TNT stockpiles just yet." There were no replies to his question. "Well, let's get around and explore it some more after we find the entrance."

They did so, carefully climbing over the choked passage. A few yards later Rick stopped cold.

"Does anybody else see that?" he asked, not quite believing his eyes.

"Is that a . . ."

"A bomb," Michael answered Lisa.

"What is a bomb doing way the hell up here?"

"You two stay back." Chohopa knelt down next to the device and carefully brushed the snow away from its base. It was an armor-piercing bomb, the type dropped from angry warplanes. Though badly rusted, the army green still lingered. Rick peered at the engravings and looked back in shock.

"This is too weird."

"Why, maybe the Air Force used this peak as a practice range?"

"No. They don't drop live weapons in a forested area like this. The tree huggers would all have strokes. And this little nightmare was armed when it was released. It malfunctioned or otherwise we'd be looking at another rockslide like the one we just passed. I think I know what this is, but the coincidence is just too damn strange. I served a couple of tours in the Army after High School. I heard a story about the Air Force losing a plane years before. Seems one of their jocks took his A-10 Thunderbolt AWOL. He just up and disappeared with a fully armed ground attack bird. It had a nickname, the Warthog, cause it was one dog-ugly plane. Ugly as it was it was brutally effective. Basically two wings, a tail and a cockpit wrapped around a very big gun. I was a Ranger and that bird was murder on the enemy's armor let me tell you. Most close air support we called in came via the A-10. Was real handy when we went after the Taliban in Tora Bora."

"Anyway, the flyboys tracked the missing A-10 into this part of the Rockies. It was last detected in the wilderness around here but they couldn't find the damn thing at first. They searched for two years, eventually finding the bird and the pilot on the side of a mountain. Seems he drove that flying gun straight into a granite wall. The USAF decided it was an elaborate suicide, even though the family says his religion forbid suicide. The real problem was they never recovered the bombs. This here is a tank killing, heat seeking smart bomb. That big pile of rocks over there, well that's just about the amount of damage one of these would cause. They found the plane about 30 miles from here, so I guess they didn't search this area hard enough for the missing weapons. Damn! What the hell was that crazy pilot doing dropping his bombs on *this* particular hill?"

“Coincidence?” Lisa asked, confused beyond thoughts by the turn of events.

Michael shook his head. “I think we’re all a tad skeptical of coincidences concerning our project. I don’t know why or what-for, but I’d say the doomed pilot purposely dropped his bombs on this mountain. So, the weirdness continues. Okay, we’ll make sure to tell the Air Force brass we found their missing bombs, but for now, we have another job to do.”

They walked a few more yards and were not surprised to see the entrance. The team did not find additional caverns months before, but the technology used was not powerful to search so high up the mountain. No one believed anything would be at the peak of a 12600-foot mountain anyway. The carved doorway was mostly filled with snow but they could see a break in the rock easily enough. As the sun slowly set behind them, all three removed small avalanche shovels from their packs and began the task of digging their way in. Twenty minutes later they broke through.

Rick again held the large spotlight while Lisa and Mike used their hand held lights. Michael knew what he was looking for, but not what he would find. The vision, that was the only way he knew how to describe what happened to him at the exhibit, was clear enough to force him there but it did not say in what form the answer lay. Rick shined his powerful light in horizontal arrays as they explored, yet nothing but rock and ice appeared. They reached the end of the cave, which was only 33 feet long. Michael worried he was wrong. (*Hell of a risk we just took to be wrong.*) He thought to himself. They backtracked to the center and set up the main light on a portable stand, switching its purpose from search light to lantern, releasing a much wider beam that gave faint illumination to the entire room. That is when he saw them. He missed it before because they blended into the rock walls too perfectly, perhaps a camouflaged defense against intruders.

“Wow.” Lisa noticed them as well.

“Damn. They look just like those pillars at Stonehenge,” Rick announced, not realizing how right he was.

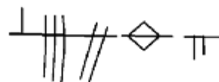
“Pretty damn close Rick. These are ancient Celtic ritual stones, people.”

He approached one of them. It was a large nine-foot stone, cut perfectly square with another square top linking it to a matching block. It was the headstone for a circle of others, with a matching arch at the back of the chamber. The pillars in the middle were not connected with caps nor were they square. They were carved round like perfect cylinders. It was clear it was an ancient ceremonial site of fertility megaliths and Michael knew at once that it was a vital part of the mystery.

“Okay, let’s spread out and examine these stone’s individually. We’re looking for any type of writing or inscription.”

It didn’t take long. “Hey Doc, this one has something carved on it, but damn if I can tell what it is.”

O’Neill walked to the nearest stone. On it were hundreds of carved lines and circles. The inscriptions circled the stone in groups, resembling a scratch pad of someone counting things off. One, two, three, four, scratch off five. It was not a primitive abacus. It was Ogham, the ancient writing of the Celts. Michael did not know how to read the inscriptions, so he photographed each with infrared digital film. Three of the other stones had Ogham inscriptions as well. While two more held carvings of typical Celtic fertility symbols. One of the inscriptions stood out to Michael, its familiarity maddening, but no matter how he tried he could not understand why.



O’Neill was frustrated. He knew it *was* an amazing find and the inscriptions might be the answers he searched for, yet he was certain another Tablet or clue to its whereabouts would be found in the cave. The disappointment was hard to hide.

“I know you expected more Michael, but translating the Ogham might give us what we need.”

“Might. I don’t know Lis. I have a feeling we’re missing something. I know we can’t make a full excavation of the sight for a couple months, but it might not take that much effort. Let’s survey the cave again. It has to be here. Has to.”

“But what, what are we looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

They examined every inch of the cave once more, hoping to find what they could not see. O’Neill scoured the walls looking for other inscriptions. There were none. He looked down at the floor. It was covered with ice and snow. That’s when he started digging. Lisa and Rick joined him, without even asking why. Mike knew he didn’t have the equipment needed to remove all the ice, but a voice inside told him something laid below him. He was only partly right. Lisa was at the dead center of the cave, picking away at the ice. A large crack formed below her. She took it as a good sign. It wasn’t.

Before she even understood what was happening the firm footing below gave way. The collapse sent her sprawling down, as the ice below fell into unending darkness. Panic consumed her as she swiped and clawed at the ice around her. She was falling, how and where to she did not know. As the last of her body slipped into the hole, a hand reached out to grab her. She looked to see Michael tentatively grabbing her jacket. Her weight and momentum was pulling him down with her, and for a moment it seemed that the black hole that opened in anger would swallow them both. Just as Mike neared the edge, Rick leaped on top him, the extra weight stopping their momentum. Olsen saw her opportunity and grabbed Chohopa’s coat to pull herself up. The three explorers just looked at each other in shock for a long minute before words could form.

“That was too close,” Rick announced.

“No doubt. Thank you, both of you. I thought for sure I was in for a long fall.” She looked at the hole and saw it was a circular pit surrounded by flat stones.

“What is that thing?” Rick asked.

“It seems to be a sacrificial pit. They are commonly found at Celtic ritual sites. The ice covered it so well that I didn’t even consider the possibility of us becoming its latest sacrifice.”

With that thought, Mike took a large chunk of ice and tossed it in the hole, waiting for an impact. There was none. He closed his eyes and laid flat on the ground, less concerned with his heroics and more with the almos.

“Didn’t the Druids used to practice their pagan rituals on hill and mountain tops?”

There was no answer to Lisa’s question. Something had gotten the archaeologist’s attention.

“The who?”

“The Druids. Remember I told you about them at the ship. All those gold swords and necklace torcs found in the dried mote by the ship.”

“Right,” Rick remembered, nodding.

“And weren’t mountain top sites like this found in Ireland Michael? In fact didn’t they find a similar site in Vermont a while ago?” She waited.

Still lying flat on his back, he kept staring at the ceiling. It was covered with ice as well, but there was light coming through the ice. Just a reflection really, but light just the same. How could that be when it was dark outside?

“I remember that Celtic authorities at the time didn’t take the Vermont site seriously, but after everything we’ve found they’ll have to reconsider that. Won’t they Michael?”

There. Through the ice light glimmered at almost random locations. But the idea came to him that they weren’t random. Each light marked a position, a location. That knowledge came to him from a source he could not place, but he was positive that what he stared at was a map. A map of the stars. He jumped to his feet, his eyes still peering upward. He finally smiled and looked back at his shocked companions.

“We need to clear the ice off the ceiling.”

“What?”

“Turn the light off for a moment.” They did and saw what he did.

“That’s weird. How could the moonlight shine through this deep. The snow above this cave must cover any holes they dug.”

“Not necessarily Lis. We are just below the peak. It’s not flat above here, and the wind is strong enough to keep any snow from accumulating. I’ll climb up there in the morning to verify,” said Rick.

“I bet you’ll find some interesting engineering once you do. It might have been moonlight when it was built 3000 years ago, but tonight we’re seeing star light. A star for each location I’d bet. Basically, what we’re looking at is a map. A star map that outlines the route our travelers took here.”

“What? How do you . . .” She stopped her argument, for reasons all of them knew.

“Okay, but let’s be more careful chipping the ice away this time, eh. In fact, I’ve got an idea.”

Chohopa lifted the powerful lantern and held it to the ceiling, its beam narrowed for search mode. The heat the lamp gave off was more than enough to begin melting the ice above. It was an inch or more thick, but slowly gave way to rock. After ten minutes, the first light showed them its home. On the rock was a carving around a hole that the light squeezed through, an unmistakable carving of an island whose ancient name paid tribute to the Celtic goddess Erin. All three stood silent. Rick moved down and right onto the next light. There the ice gave way to reveal a vision of the Nile River and Egypt. A little to the right was the ancient land of Babylon. Above and to the left was Greece. Excited, Rick moved several feet across the cave to another light. It showed the North American coast. The light peered through to a spot in the middle of another island, a long narrow island.

“Okay, I think I get all the other points of the map. We found artifacts from all of these places, but Long Island, New York? That’s a heavily populated suburb of the biggest city in the country. A site like this would definitely have been found by now,” Lisa queried.

“Who’s to say it hasn’t been, and then ignored by modern science. I’d say there is a precedent for that.”

They both nodded. Rick continued melting all the ice on the way to the final glimmer. The large space revealed a perfect map of the Americas with a more detailed outline of a river emptying into the Gulf of California. There Michael saw the mystery river he conjured in his mind, laid out on a map just as he thought it would be. He was right.

“Damn, but aint that something.” The Native American announced after taking a break. Above them was a perfect map of the earth, a round world, carved thousands of years before, with the corresponding stars that allowed them to navigate their way.

“You realize what this means don’t you?” Lisa commented.

“We’ve proven how they came and that they were more advanced in their knowledge of the stars than even we are today,” O’Neill answered in confidence. “But more importantly, we know where to search next.”

“New York?” Rick asked.

“Go figyah.”

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After removing all the remaining ice from the ceiling, floor and walls and finding nothing telling, they set up camp for the evening. It was terribly cold in the cave, but their excitement at the find kept them warm. The next morning they took a final set of photos in the semi-daylight of the cave while Rick climbed to the peak. When he returned, he told them that the location of each light source held funnels of cut rock that prevented the snow from clogging the deep tunnels cut to reach the cave. Indeed the engineers of the site wanted the stars to peer into the cave no matter the season. Unknown to the trio, the selected stars perfectly aligned to shine brightest directly above its corresponding funnel on the evening of the spring equinox (one of only two days of the year when the night is as long as the day), and most bright on the Spring equinox of that very year, the night they just spent in that structure, as expected by its builders three millennia before.

Satisfied that they gathered all the data they could from the area the explorers called their ride and began the trek back down the mountain. They repelled down the ice wall, which Michael found even more terrifying. In contrast, Lisa and Rick really seemed to enjoy themselves. The trek down the rest of the mountain was quicker than the way up, not because they walked faster but rather were less exhausted and

took fewer breaks. They hiked down as carefully as coming up, gently placing each step to avoid damage to the snowpack. The melting sun of the previous day and the cold of the night hardened the top layer of the pack and made it even more treacherous and unstable. They navigated the area that nearly broke loose with O'Neill aboard very slowly and were lucky to get past without any mishaps. Several hours later they neared the landing zone. Rick called in and was told the helicopter's ETA was fifteen minutes.

After a quick lunch of frozen protein bars, the SAR bird came into view. Over the radio the pilot told them that they needed to trudge down another hundred yards to a more stable extraction zone. This they did, as the chopper circled far enough away so not to awaken the mountain. It was the easiest hiking they had done so far, and being in a rush to reach the semi-warmth of their ride they did not take the same care in travelling that they had earlier. Rick warned them to go slow, but even he believed that the 30-degree slope was safe. What Chohopa did not know was that the vibrations of the helicopter had already caused a crack in the very weak pack they crossed three hundred yards above. Just thirty yards from their destination, it broke loose. The Army aviator did not see it slide free, bringing her bird of prey down to the LZ, and the hikers did not hear it coming over the sound of the helicopter. They were just a few yards away from safety when they felt it coming for them.

The ground shook under Michael, his initial thought being an earthquake. The realization of truth was much more horrifying. He turned to see Rick running toward him and above, the mountain attacking. A slab of heavy, wet snow nine feet deep, sixty feet wide and thirty long broke free from the softer layer below and was sliding in their direction. It rumbled toward them at 60 miles an hour gaining momentum and mass as it steamrolled its way down the mountain. The power of the avalanche caused a huge white cloud in its wake that looked to O'Neill like the Kingdom of Heaven coming down to reclaim the earth and all souls within its path. The ground shook hard and its noise overwhelmed even the Sikorsky's blades. Michael could not move. He stared at the maelstrom racing toward him in shock. Rick reached him and smacked him out of his trance, literally. Chohopa hit Mike in the arm, and grabbed his coat, dragging him with him as he went by. Neither of them said a word. Escape was the only possible concept in either of their minds. They ran toward the helicopter as fast as they could, snowshoes earning every penny of their worth that day. Lisa was ahead of them, already being helped on the bird by the crew's parajumper. They were only a few feet away from safety, but the avalanche was nearly upon them. The snow cloud arrived as the air filled with static electricity and flying ice. Chunks of snow rolled past them and they realized only a few seconds remained before the deadly slide would strike.

The helicopter was in serious danger, but the pilot would not lift off until she absolutely had to. Holding the bird just inches from the ground, she was ready to fly high on a moment's notice. The vibrations and airborne debris made it tough to keep the Sikorsky steady, and she knew just one inconveniently flung rock could ruin their day, and life. Lisa and the PJ screamed for them to hurry. An ice boulder rolled past, narrowly missing the runners, as the pilot lifted up about three feet off the ground to avoid being crushed by the attacker. The running men reached the bird just as the charging wall of snow arrived. They both grabbed the landing skids and the chopper lifted off at once. Lisa reached for Rick's hand, but he nodded to Michael. O'Neill held on with just one hand as the PJ struggled to lift him on with the other. Lisa grabbed him as well and the two were able to lift the scientist on board.

The heart of the avalanche was upon them and the pilot had to rise above it or be sucked in by the vacuum it produced. They were thirty feet high, as Rick hung precariously to the skid. Lisa, the PJ and Michael grabbed him, trying to pull him up. Seeing its last chance to claim a victim, the avalanche pounced. A huge chunk of ice launched skyward, reaching up and striking the tail of the helicopter. The bird lurched sideways, sending its passengers sprawling. All three lost their hold on Chohopa and fell backwards. Rick lost his grip with one hand and hung on with just one arm. His grip was slipping. O'Neill recovered first and lunged back toward the door, just in time to see their guide and friend disappear into a cloud of white death.