

A full-page photograph of Alex Honnold standing on a narrow ledge of a massive, vertical rock wall. He is wearing a red jacket and dark pants. The background shows a vast, mountainous landscape under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

ALONE ON THE WALL
ALEX HONNOLD
WITH DAVID ROBERTS
THE ULTIMATE LIMITS OF ADVENTURE

ALONE ON THE WALL

Alex ‘No Big Deal’ Honnold is a professional rock climber whose audacious free-solo ascents have made him one of the most recognized and followed climbers in the world. Honnold has been profiled by *60 Minutes* and the *New York Times*, featured on the cover of *National Geographic*, and has starred in numerous adventure films, including the Emmy-nominated *Alone on the Wall*. He is also the founder of the Honnold Foundation, an environmental not-for-profit charity that seeks simple, sustainable ways to improve lives around the world.

David Roberts is co-author, with Conrad Anker, of *The Lost Explorer*, about the discovery of George Mallory’s body on Mount Everest. His most recent book is *Alone on the Ice* (Norton, 2013).



ALONE
ON THE
WALL

Alex Honnold
with David Roberts

MACMILLAN

*To my family, for always supporting me
along an unconventional path*

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CHAPTER ONE
MOONLIGHT

I started up the climb shortly after dawn. I wasn't even sure I'd found the right start, since I hadn't been on these lower pitches for two or three years. The beginning of the route is kind of scruffy and ambiguous—ramps, traverses, and hand cracks angling up to the right—but it's not as difficult as the upper two-thirds of the wall.

Still, I was nervous, even a little giddy. It had rained pretty much nonstop the day before, and now the rock was sandy, slabby, and a lot damper than I'd hoped. I probably should have waited another day before heading up the route. But I was overpsyched. I couldn't bear the thought of sitting in my van another whole day, thinking the same thoughts I had recycled for the past forty-eight hours. I had to strike while the iron was hot.

Moonlight Buttress is a 1,200-foot-high, nearly vertical sandstone cliff in Utah's Zion National Park. It may be the finest—the purest and most classic—route among Zion's thousands of lines. It's also one of the most continuously difficult crack climbs in the world.

The first ascent of Moonlight Buttress came in October 1971, when Jeff Lowe and Mike Weis, two legends of American climbing, pioneered the route. It took them a day and a half, with an overnight bivouac on a ledge in the middle of the wall. They used a lot of aid, pulling or hanging on expansion bolts and pitons.

Nearly twenty-one years later, in April 1992, Peter Croft and Johnny Woodward made the first free ascent, as they took all the aid out of the route by finding sequences of moves they could climb without hanging on gear. They solved the route in nine pitches (rope lengths), but rated the climb a really stiff 5.13a (since downgraded to 5.12d). In 1992, that was near the upper limit of free-climbing difficulty anywhere in the world, and Croft and Woodward's feat was a brilliant one.

Peter Croft was already one of my heroes, because in the 1980s and '90s he had pushed free soloing—climbing without a rope or gear at all—to unprecedented extremes. Many of the routes he'd free soloed back then had never been repeated in that style during the decades since.

But as far as I knew, no one had even thought of free soloing Moonlight Buttress. That's what I was hoping to pull off on April 1, 2008.

In the back of my mind was a nagging worry about the feature called the Rocker Blocker. It's an ample ledge, about half the size of a queen-size bed, at the top of the third pitch. Because it's loose, somebody has chained it in place with a two-bolt anchor, but it actually makes for a good stance about 400 feet off the ground.

It wasn't the ledge itself that fueled my angst. From the Rocker Blocker, stretching on tiptoe, you can just reach a key hold above. Essentially you face a 5.12c boulder problem right off the ledge. You don't actually have to jump to make the move, but it's more like an upward lurch to a small edge. As I climbed the easy pitches down low, that move loomed over me. I was pretty sure I could stick the ledge if I fell off, but I'd sure hate to find out.

The day before, sitting in my van in the rain, I had deliberately visualized everything that might

happen on the climb. Including breaking a hold, or just losing it and falling off. I saw myself bouncing off the ledge below and going all the way to the ground, fracturing most of my bones as I rag-dolled down the mountain. I'd probably bleed out at the base.

I hadn't slept very well the previous night. So I got the early start in the morning that I'd planned, hoping to beat the sun to the wall and get cool conditions on the route. To reach the base of Moonlight Buttress, you have to wade the Virgin River, which in early April was freezing-ass cold. I forded the stream barefoot. The rushing water came up above my knees. My feet quickly went numb, and my whole body went into mild shock. Plus I had to pay attention to my balance as I placed my feet carefully in the gaps between polished river cobbles.

At what I thought was the start of Moonlight Buttress, I cached my approach shoes and my daypack. I'd decided to carry nothing—neither food, nor water, nor spare clothes—up the route. I clipped on my chalk bag and laced up my rock shoes. My feet were still cold, but they weren't truly numb—I could feel my toes all right. I was wearing only shorts and a T-shirt. At the last minute, I put on headphones and turned up my iPod. I was shuffling through my own Top 25 playlist of tunes—mostly punk and modern rock.

It may sound lame, but I didn't have a watch, and I was pretty sure I was going to set the speed record for Moonlight Buttress. I could use the iPod to measure the exact number of minutes the climb would take. Music also has a way of helping you focus, although nowadays I prefer to climb without my iPod, because I consider it a bit of a crutch.

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For me, free soloing a big wall is all about preparation. In a real sense, I had performed the hard work on Moonlight Buttress during the days leading up to the climb. Once I was on the route, it was just a matter of executing.

Yes, I'd climbed the whole route only once before, with a philosophy professor named Bill Ramsey. In his midforties, he was still climbing really well, and he'd been working on freeing Moonlight. He recruited me to climb it with him for his free attempt, and we swung leads up the whole route. It was a great day as we both climbed the route clean with no falls.

But that was two or three years earlier. In the days before my free solo attempt, I'd focused on the upper 800 feet of the route. It's a mellow hike along a paved trail to the top of Moonlight Buttress, so I hauled up 600 feet of rope, rappelled down it, and practiced the moves on top rope. To self-belay, I used a device called a Mini Traxion, which grips the rope on a downward pull but slides effortlessly up the rope as you climb. If I fell or even rested, the Mini Traxion would hold me tight.

With my top rope, I climbed the upper 600 feet of Moonlight Buttress twice. The crux of the whole route—the hardest single passage, which is the make-or-break stretch of an ascent—is an amazing clean inside corner, 180 feet long. It's the fourth of nine pitches on the route, and it's what gives the climb its 5.12d rating. It's continuous and really strenuous, so your arms get pretty pumped by the time you reach the top of it.

Each top roped rehearsal of those upper 600 feet had taken me only about an hour. I felt super-solid. At no point did I fall off or even feel sketchy. But then I realized that the 600-foot rope didn't reach down to a crucial 5.11c rightward traverse on the third pitch. So the next day I went back up to the top with 800 feet of rope, rappelled down again, and rehearsed the traverse moves until I had them dialed too.

I ran into a few other climbers on my practice runs. I even rescued an aid-climbing chick who didn't quite know what she was doing and had gotten stuck on her lead. I yelled, "Hey, grab this rope!" as I swung the tail of my fixed rope to her, so she could liberate herself from her trap. She wa

pretty grateful. It's not every day that somebody comes rappelling out of the sky on a route like that.

~~Then came two days of rain. I sat in my van in a movie theater parking lot in Springdale, stared out the windshield, and thought.~~

I'd gone to a movie to pass the time, but the rest of the day, into the evening, and through most of the second day I sat in the van, just thinking. It's not like I had work to do. I didn't have anything to do except think. About the climb.

Sitting and thinking, hour after hour. Visualizing every single move, everything that could possibly happen. That's what it takes to wrap your mind around a challenge such as the one I was about to attempt.

That's what I mean by preparation. Now I'd find out if I'd prepared adequately—if I could simply execute what I'd visualized, every handhold and foothold on the long way to the top of the wall.

AT THE END OF MARCH 2008, Alex Honnold was little known beyond the small circle of his friends. Seven years later, at the age of thirty, he is probably the most famous climber in the world. That's not to claim that he's the best climber in the world—in fact, there's no such thing as the “best climber,” because the sport has subdivided into so many genres, from Himalayan mountaineering to bouldering in indoor gyms.

The reason for Honnold's meteoric celebrity is that he's pushed the most extreme and dangerous form of climbing far beyond the limits of what anyone thought was possible. Free soloing means climbing without a rope, a partner, or any “hardware” (pitons, nuts, or cams) to attach oneself to the wall. In its stark simplicity, that pursuit can be understood by the most casual observer. The stakes are ultimate: *If you fall, you die.*

What Alex has done is to free solo routes both longer and of much greater difficulty than anyone before him has thought possible. So far, he's gotten away with it, though some of his closest friends are afraid that he's going to kill himself.

Free soloing is far more than a stunt. It amounts to reducing climbing to its most elemental challenge: a man (or woman), with only rock shoes on his feet and chalk on his fingertips for better purchase, against the cliff. It's climbing at its absolute purest.

This is not the only kind of climbing Alex does, however. His speed “linkups”—enchainments of two or three big wall climbs back-to-back against the stopwatch, with only a minimal reliance on ropes or protection—have rewritten the book in Yosemite. And since 2013, Alex has expanded his horizons to mountaineering, where he's already doing things no one else has managed to pull off.

Alex Honnold, in short, is a climbing visionary, of the sort who comes along maybe once in a generation. He's also smart, funny, a man with surprisingly little ego, and a person who wants to make the world a better place for people less privileged or talented than he is. Nearly everyone who knows or even just watches Alex likes him, because, as Jon Krakauer says, “He's utterly genuine. There's no bullshit there.”

Again and again, whenever he speaks in public, Alex is asked the same two questions by everyone from little kids to graybeards. Indeed, they are the fundamental questions about what he's doing on rock. They are:

Aren't you afraid you're going to die?

Why do you do this?

In a sense, those questions are unanswerable. They lie in the realm of George Leigh Mallory's

throwaway response in 1923 to the umpteenth journalist who asked him why he wanted to climb Everest: “Because it is there.” (Though intended as an irritable jab by a man fed up with the question, Mallory’s quip has become the most famous quotation in mountaineering history.)

Alex has come up with his own quips to answer the inevitable questions. About falling to his death: “It’ll be the worst four seconds of my life.” And: “I’m sure half the people will say, ‘At least he died doing what he loved best.’ And the other half will say, ‘What a fucking douche!’”

Alex is unmistakably a driven, competitive fellow. Yet his modesty, born of an innate shyness, takes the form of radical understatement of his accomplishments, verging (like the quips above) on self-deprecation. His nickname among his closest climbing buddies is Alex “No Big Deal” Honnold.

In the last forty years, only a handful of climbers have pushed free soloing to the razor edge of risk. Half of them are dead. Some of those soloists have survived their decades of dancing above the abyss; they include not only Peter Croft but also Henry Barber, who crisscrossed the globe in the 1970s, blowing the minds of locals at crags from Wales to Australia by flashing their hardest routes.

Others died when a single mistake caught up to them. Among their number was Derek Hersey, a Brit transplanted to the States, who fell to his death in 1993 on the Steck-Salathé route in Yosemite, possibly because a rainstorm slickened the holds. Dan Osman, Charlie Fowler, and Michael Reardon also died in accidents related to their pursuit of extreme exploits on cliffs and mountains. But the demise that most shocked the climbing world was that of John Bachar, with Peter Croft one of the two outstanding soloists of the 1980s and ’90s. After thirty-five years of climbing route after route without a rope, Bachar fell off a short climb he had done many times before, on a route near his home in Mammoth Lakes, California, in July 2009.

Alex points out that none of this group of elite climbers died while pushing their limits at free soloing. Hersey and Bachar fell off routes that would normally have been well within their capacities. (There was speculation that a spinal problem that caused his left arm and shoulder suddenly to weaken, the result of a recent car accident, might have caused Bachar’s fatal fall.) Reardon was swept to his death by a rogue wave after he had soloed *down* to the base of a sea cliff in Ireland. Fowler died in an avalanche as he attempted an unclimbed mountain in western China. Osman met his end while pushing to new extremes a sport he had virtually invented—rope jumping, or deliberately leaping off a cliff to be caught by the rope or ropes he was tied into. Having set a record jump of more than a thousand feet, Osman died when his rope broke on a plunge off Leaning Tower in Yosemite.

Still, all five of those extreme free soloists were out there on the cutting edge of adventure when they perished. Osman in effect discovered the boundaries of rope jumping by paying for the experiment with his life. Though still alive and well at sixty-two, Henry Barber came perilously close to falling to his death in the early 1980s as he was filmed free soloing a British sea-cliff route for an American TV show. Distracted by a nearby cameraman’s sudden movement, Barber lost his balance. As he later described that moment,

It caught me the wrong way. . . . I was doing some stemming moves, pushing with both hands against the sides of the groove. I pushed just a little too hard and my left shoulder bumped the wall, so that I started to fall. Adrenaline shot from my toes right up to my head. . . . I was off and headed down. But the balance and flow of all the movement that had gone on until that point carried me through, keeping me on the rock and still moving.

With his sharp intelligence, Alex inclines toward a hyperrational take on life. He actually insists, “I don’t like risk. I don’t like passing over double yellow. I don’t like rolling the dice.” He distinguishes between consequences and risk. Obviously, the consequences of a fall while free soloing are ultimate ones. But that doesn’t mean, he argues, that he’s taking ultimate risks. As he puts it, “I always call risk the likelihood of actually falling off. The consequence is what will happen if you do. So I try to keep my soloing low-risk—as in, I’m not likely to fall off, even though there’d be really high consequences.”

if I did.”

Just as rational, on the other hand, are some of the arguments made by close friends of Alex who worry about the chances he’s taking. Seven years Alex’s senior, Tommy Caldwell has been his partner on marathon linkups and mountaineering expeditions. One of the best rock climbers in the world, as well as one of the role models Alex most admires, Caldwell said in 2011, “I’ve never tried to free solo anything really grand. I’ve fallen completely unexpectedly lots of times—maybe a dozen—on relatively easy terrain, when a hold broke off or the rubber peeled off the sole of my shoe, or something. If I’d been soloing, I’d have died.

“I really like Alex. I don’t want him to die.”

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By now, the audience Alex commands stretches far beyond the ranks of hardcore climbers. He’s known, for instance, as “that kid Lara Logan interviewed on *60 Minutes*,” or as “the guy in that amazing photo on the cover of *National Geographic*.” But for nonclimbers fully to understand exactly what Alex is doing, a brief primer in techniques, gear, and grade ratings is necessary.

In conventional rock climbing, a pair of climbers is connected with a nylon rope usually about six meters (almost 200 feet) in length. One climber, anchored safely to the wall, belays the leader as he climbs above. To minimize the consequences of a fall, the leader places protection (“pro”) as he goes.

Throughout most of the history of rock climbing, the leader would hammer a piton—any of an assortment of differently shaped metal spikes, first made of iron but now improved with chrome-molybdenum steel alloy—into a natural crack in the rock surface. Once the piton was firmly driven, the leader clipped a carabiner—an oval link with a spring-loaded gate—into the eye of the piton, then fed the rope through the ‘biner. That way, if he fell, say, five feet above the piton, the belayer on the other end of the rope could stop his fall after a plunge of only a little more than ten feet—the additional footage due to the stretchiness of the nylon rope, which also cushions the jolt.

By the 1980s, pitons had become passé except in big-range mountaineering, because the repeated hammering as they were driven home and then pried loose damaged the rock, leaving ugly “pin scars.” Instead, climbers started using nuts—variously shaped blobs of metal that could be slotted into cracks and wrinkles in the rock so they’d hold tight under a downward pull. Nuts, in general, are much less secure than pitons. In the late 1970s, Ray Jardine invented ingenious devices he called “Friends” (now more generically referred to as “cams”). They’re spring-loaded gizmos with opposing semicircular plates. You pull a kind of trigger that retracts the plates, slot the cam into a crack that wouldn’t hold a nut, then release the trigger. The spring allows the plates to grip the edges of the crack, and a well-placed cam can hold weights of thousands of pounds. Needless to say, cams have revolutionized rock climbing.

From the earliest days onward, climbers surmounted otherwise unclimbable stretches of rock by using their pro as artificial holds. This is called “direct aid,” or simply “aid.” Whole pitches of aid can be negotiated with *étriers* or aiders—nylon slings with three or four foot loops to make flexible ladders. The aid climber hangs an aider from a piton or nut or cam, then climbs the nylon rungs rather than the rock itself.

Eventually, expansion bolts enlarged the technical arsenal. In blank rock devoid of cracks, the climber bores a hollow sleeve, either by hammer or mechanical drill. Into that sleeve he then hammers the cylindrical bolt, usually made of stainless steel. A hanger, similar to the eye of a piton, is affixed to the head of the bolt. Then the climber attaches a carabiner to the hanger and clips in his rope. A good bolt is as strong as the best piton.

Free climbing, as opposed to free soloing, means that the leader uses his protection only to

safeguard a fall. He does not slot a nut or cam and then pull on it to move upward. He climbs the rock with only his hands and feet, but if he falls on solid pro, he's not likely to be injured.

In the United States, rock routes climbed free are rated on a scale of difficulty, called the Yosemite Decimal System (YDS), that currently ranges from 5.1 to 5.15. The reason for the awkward numbering is that in the US experts long believed that no climbs harder than 5.9 would ever be accomplished. By the late 1960s, however, that limit had been transcended, and the classifiers felt they had no choice but to invent 5.10. The system is inherently conservative, so the higher grades, such as 5.13, have been subdivided into four classes of their own, ranging from 5.13a through 5.13d. Top-notch climbers recognize that there is as great a gap in difficulty between 5.13b and 5.13c as between 5.8 and 5.9.

At the moment, the hardest climbs in the world, of which there are only a handful, are rated 5.15c.

In the last twenty years, expansion bolts have given rise to the phenomenon of “sport” climbing—as distinguished from “trad” (short for “traditional”), in which climbers place and remove nuts and cams for protection. On a sport route, permanent bolts placed as closely as six or eight feet apart, often driven on rappel before the route has been attempted, allow climbers to get up very hard free routes on rock that won't take cams or nuts, with almost bombproof safety. The leader simply clips into one bolt after another as he climbs. For the belayer, catching the leader's fall is routine.

Sport climbing has skyrocketed in popularity in recent years. There are now hotshot teenagers who can climb 5.14 sport routes but who have never led a single pitch of trad, and wouldn't have a clue how to do so.

Because the YDS 5.1 to 5.15 system measures only the pure difficulty of the hardest move, nearly all the top-rated climbs in the world are on short sport routes on easily accessible crags. To put up a 5.15 route, an expert such as Chris Sharma or Adam Ondra will “work” the sequence of moves for weeks or even months on end, falling harmlessly hundreds of times, before he can complete the climb in one try without a single fall. That kind of climbing is so specialized that the Ondras of the world practice almost no other art.

Ironically, then, trad climbing is more “sporting” than sport climbing—and more daring and dangerous.

But free soloing is another whole game. When Alex Honnold performs one of his long free solos, he does away altogether with ropes, with a partner to catch his fall, with pro of any kind (no bolts, piton nuts, or cams) to use for artificial holds or to safeguard a fall. Because the chances of falling on even 5.11 or 5.12 climb are considerable, only a few practitioners have dared to push free soloing beyond the 5.11 level—and then usually on short routes, and only after “rehearsing” the line by climbing it with a rope and a partner many times to memorize every hold and sequence. (For that matter, when you're climbing without a rope, you can fall off and die on a 5.4 route if a handhold or foothold breaks loose.)

Free soloing, then, is the most sporting—the purest—form of rock climbing ever devised. It's the ultimate adventure on rock—with the ultimate stakes if you make the slightest mistake.

People ask me all the time how I got into free soloing. But I don't think they quite believe me when I give an honest answer. The truth is that when I started climbing outdoors, I was too shy to go up to strangers at a crag and ask if they'd like to rope up with me.

I first started climbing at age ten at an indoor gym in my hometown of Sacramento, California, but I did very little outdoors before the age of nineteen. I was so antisocial and tweaky that I was actually afraid to talk to strangers. Though I was already climbing 5.13, I would never have gotten up the

nerve to approach other guys at a crag like Lover's Leap near Lake Tahoe and ask if I could rope up with them.

So I just started soloing. The first route I did was a low-angle 5.5 slab called Knapsack Crack at Lover's Leap. Then I tackled a much steeper three-pitch route called Corrugation Corner, rated 5.7. I overgripped the shit out of it, because I was really scared and climbing badly.

But I quickly got better. I've always been a compulsive tinker. From the very start, I kept a bound notebook in which I recorded every climb I did, each one with a brief note. My "climbing bible," as I called it, was my most precious possession. In 2005 and 2006, I did tons of routes at Joshua Tree, on the granite boulders and pinnacles in the desert east of Los Angeles. I developed a voracious appetite for soloing. I'd do as many as fifty pitches in a day, mostly on short routes up to 5.10. A sample entry from my bible:

10/7/05

18 pitches—kind of a low-day

5.7 to [5].10b

I couldn't start the left Peyote Crack. Weird.

I soon got so that I felt pretty comfortable soloing. I discovered that if I had any particular gift, it was a mental one—the ability to keep it together in what might otherwise have been a stressful situation. By 2007, I had soloed a few pitches up to 5.12a in difficulty. I felt like I was ready for a big next step.

Still, back then I had no thought of becoming a professional climber, or even of attracting any attention for what I did. In September 2007, I went to Yosemite. I had my eye on two legendary routes—the north face of the Rostrum, a beautiful 800-foot granite pillar, rated 5.11c, and Astroman on Washington Column, a touchstone 1,100-foot route, also rated 5.11c.

Way back in 1987, Peter Croft had stunned the climbing world by free soloing both routes in a single day. No one had repeated that feat in twenty years. Of the two climbs, Astroman is significantly harder and more serious—more physically taxing and more insecure. Only one other guy had free soloed Astroman—Dean Potter in 2000. Still climbing hard at age forty-three, Potter has recently specialized in combining hard routes with wingsuit BASE jumping. He was another influential free soloist I looked up to as a role model.

On September 19, I free soloed both Astroman and the Rostrum. I'd climbed both routes before roped up with partners, but I couldn't say that I had either route dialed. I was glad that day to find no one else on either climb. I didn't tell anybody beforehand what I was going to try. I just showed up and did them. They went really well—I felt in control the whole way on both climbs. In my "bible," I noted only

9/19/07

Astroman—5.11c—solo

Rostrum—5.11c—" "

I added a smiley face after Astroman, but no other comments.

That evening I called a friend (it might have been Chris Weidner) and told him about my day. That's how the word got out. I'll admit that the double solo stirred up a certain buzz in the Valley (as climbers call Yosemite), but only among the hardcore locals. In my mind, the fact that I did both routes in one day, just as Peter Croft had, wasn't particularly significant. What was significant was committing to doing them at all. And succeeding gave me the confidence to start imagining even bigger free solos.

Five months later, in February 2008, I drove to Indian Creek in southern Utah. The Creek is a mecca of short, beautiful cracks on solid Wingate sandstone. I was in terrific form there, climbing roped up with various partners. I onsighted the hardest routes, getting up them on my first try without falling. Routes up to 5.13b or c. But I'd been climbing so much, I'd developed a bad case of tendinitis in my left elbow. At first I didn't even know what was wrong—I thought I'd hurt my biceps from sheer overuse. But at the Creek, after only two or three pitches, the pain was so intense I'd have to shut it down. One day on, then two days off. I'd go mountain biking with my friend Cedar Wright, just trying to mix it up. But it drove me crazy not to be able to climb more.

Weirdly enough, by contributing to my general angst, the tendinitis was good for Moonlight Buttress. It takes a certain hunger to be motivated to go do something big. At the Creek, I was so fit and climbing so well, but I was also hungry to do more, because I had to limit my days on rock to a lot fewer than I wanted.

And Moonlight Buttress was a project I'd been dreaming of for years, ever since Bill Ramsey and I had climbed it a few years before. Which is why I found myself in Zion, sitting in my van all day in the rain on March 30 and 31, 2008, visualizing everything that could possibly happen on that amazing route the next day.

All the soloing I had done during the previous several years had taught me the value of preparation. But I'd never prepared for a free solo as diligently as I did for Moonlight. Rehearsing the moves on top rope for two days until I had every sequence lodged in my memory was crucial, but so were those days of just sitting and thinking. Imagining every placement of each hand and foot all the way up the huge route. Visualizing everything that could happen. . . . In a real sense, I performed the hard work that free solo during the days leading up to it. Once I was on the climb, it was just a matter of executing.

The dampness and sandiness of the lower part of the wall had addled me somewhat. And at first, I was confused as to whether I was actually on-route. I wasn't truly scared—just hesitant and uncertain. In retrospect, I think I projected my anxiety about the whole project, as I'd sat in my van visualizing for two days, onto the start of the climb. Now I was driven upward by pure excitement, which always has an edge of anxiety about it.

The second pitch is a clean splitter crack, and once I got onto that, I knew I was on-route. There's really only one line to the summit. And after that second pitch, the rock dried out and the sandiness pretty much disappeared. As I climbed higher, I steadily gained confidence. The 5.11c rightward traverse on the third pitch went like clockwork. By the time I got to the Rocker Blocker ledge, it was "Game on!" I was making the moves with what felt like perfect execution.

As I started off the Rocker Blocker toward the tricky boulder problem, the scenario of coming off and trying to stick the ledge was in the back of my mind. But I was moving efficiently, and as soon as I made the little upward lurch and seized the crucial handhold, I knew I wouldn't come off. My confidence surged even higher.

Above the Rocker Blocker, I started up the 180-foot 5.12d inside corner that's the crux of the whole route. That stern rating doesn't derive from any single particularly hard move, but from the strenuous continuity of the whole thing. And here's where my preparation paid off. I started up the corner stemming—placing the edges of my feet carefully on tiny wrinkles of sandstone on either side of the central crack, then moving smoothly upward from one hold to the next. The wall here is dead vertical so you have to gauge those holds precisely. But I remembered every one from my top rope rehearsal. Also, as I had expected, the wall here, which is protected from the rain by a small roof far above, was totally dry.

I was able to rest here and there on small holds as I stemmed up the first eighty feet of the corner. But then I had to shift from stemming to liebacking. Now I grabbed the edge of the crack with both hands, leaned back to the left, and walked my feet up the opposite wall till the soles of my shoes were only two feet below my lower hand. Liebacking feels somewhat unnatural. The whole key to moving upward is the stability provided by the pull with your hands counterbalancing the push with your feet. The position you're in is almost like sitting in a rowing shell and pulling hard on the oars. You methodically alternate feet and hand movements as you inch up the crack. Yes, it's strenuous, but a clean lieback feels solid and secure. If the edges of the crack aren't sharp or are flared outward, though, or the wall you place your feet on is too slick, liebacking is pretty scary. You feel like you could pop loose and plunge toward the void in an involuntary backflip. But if you don't get your feet high enough, they can slip off and your hands holding the crack become worthless. Either way, you're headed down.

The trick of that last hundred feet in the corner is not to let the overall pump get to you. You can't lieback forever, because the strain on your arms keeps mounting. That's what "pump" is all about. If you get too pumped, you simply can't hold on any longer. If I'd been climbing with a rope, or even with a harness and some gear, I could always have clipped in to something, hung for a while, and regained the strength in my arms. Bad style, of course, but better than coming off. But free soloing, I had no choice. I needed to get to the top of the corner before the pump took over.

By now I was in full game-on mode, so I scurried up the corner as well as I had on toprope rehearsal. Didn't even come close to losing it. My only concession to the airiness of being up there without a rope or gear was that I cranked my feet a little higher than I had on my two toprope rehearsals. That meant more arm-pump, but it felt a bit more secure.

The three pitches above the crux are rated 5.12a, 5.12a, and 5.12b—pretty darned hard, but well within my abilities. In fact, those pitches follow a perfect finger crack. It was here that the true glory of free soloing came home to me. Sticking my first digits into the crack, I turned them slightly into perfect fingerlocks, and I felt bomber. At any given moment, I had only a tiny amount of skin inside the crack—like half of two fingers—and my toes weren't on holds, but just pasted to the wall. So little of my body was actually touching the rock. There was air all around me. I felt like I was stepping into the void, and yet it was an amazing sensation. I was one hundred percent certain I wouldn't fall off, and that certainty was what kept me from falling off.

And here, though I didn't pause to look around and take in the view, the beauty of Zion came home. The whole world of the canyon is all red and green—red for the rocks, green for the forest. There's the Virgin River winding so far below. No traffic sounds, that far up. Just peace and quiet.

A final 5.10d pitch leads to the summit, tough enough in its own right. But I climbed it as smoothly as the pitches just before. All the feelings of vague doubt I had on starting up the route had vanished.

Almost before I knew it, I stood on top of the cliff. I checked my time against the iPod. One hour and twenty-three minutes. It was the speed record, as well as the first free solo ascent.

Standing there, as I unlaced my shoes, I was superpsyched. Though I still had to hike down barefoot (rock shoes are so tight that it's excruciating to hike in them), then circle back around and wade the river again to get my approach shoes and pack (it's never smooth sailing off into the rainbow), I was totally jazzed. During that hour and twenty-three minutes, I'd climbed as well as I ever had in my life.

ON APRIL 1, 2008, no one witnessed Alex's climb of Moonlight Buttress. As with Astroman and the Rostrum, Alex had told no one what he was planning to do, though he had confided in Chris

Weidner that the free solo was something he'd *like* to do sometime. Now, after the climb, he called Weidner and told him about his glorious day. Weidner told others, and the news spread like wildfire.

Because the climb had taken place on April Fools' Day, a substantial portion of the climbing cognoscenti wondered at first whether the whole thing was a joke, or even a hoax. But within days, the tide had swung in favor of Alex's veracity.

On the website Supertopo.com, climbers who understood the magnitude of the ascent weighed in. "Holy living f#ck!" wrote one. "Unreal," blogged another. "Just the thought gives me chills." There were also commenters who saluted the climb as inspirational: "Amazing accomplishment, Alex. Reading this post motivated me to push way harder today than I would have otherwise." And those who knew about Alex's previous solos of the Rostrum and Astroman tipped their caps: "That is unbelievable. . . . I would have said impossible, but since it has Alex's name on it . . . just insane." And: "Congrats on the send. . . . keep crankin'!"

On April 6, Jeff Lowe, who with Mike Weis had made the first ascent of Moonlight Buttress way back in 1971, posted on Supertopo that he had always known that the route would go free, and he had attempted to free it before Peter Croft and Johnny Woodward beat him to the prize in 1992. "But I never saw far enough into the crystal-ball," Lowe added, "to foresee Alex's inspired leap of faith. . . . Great job, Alex. Always take care, as I know you do."

Along with this encomium from one of America's stellar climbing pioneers, for the first time a larger media world, including the directors at Sender Films, sat up and took notice. A new phenom of the climbing world had emerged on the stage.

At twenty-two, Alex Honnold was just getting started.

CHAPTER TWO

A VERY PRIVATE HELL

Once I told Chris Weidner about Moonlight Buttress, I should have known the word would get out fast. He lives in Boulder, after all, right in the thick of the climbing scene.

I didn't anticipate, though, the explosion of postings on the Internet about the climb. I went online to check them out. My first reaction was surprise. Oh, wow, I'm in print! That's cool. Somebody had even dug up a photo of me climbing. That's my photo! I bragged to myself.

There was also, of course, the undercurrent of posters who wondered whether the free solo of Moonlight Buttress was an April Fools' joke. But one thing I've always appreciated about the climbing community, after so many of my climbs by now have gone undocumented by film or photos or unverified by witnesses, is that people have taken me at my word. In April 2008, no one on the Internet was accusing me of perpetrating a hoax. If the free solo of Moonlight Buttress was bogus, it was some poster who was lying about it—goofing on the credulity of the Supertopo audience, maybe.

I still could not have imagined ever becoming a sponsored professional climber. If I got a little notoriety, I just hoped that maybe some gear company would give me a free pair of rock shoes.

The tendinitis in my left elbow hadn't gotten any better. If anything, all the work I'd done rehearsing the moves on Moonlight Buttress and then free soloing it had probably made the condition worse.

I finally realized I had to knock off climbing for a while to let my elbow heal. That's how I ended up spending the summer in the Sierra Nevada, doing long hikes and loops on big mountains like the Evolution Traverse. It involved a lot of scrambling, but as long as I could do it in tennies, I figured it didn't count as real climbing. Meanwhile, I was getting into great shape.

Recently a journalist asked me if I could stop climbing for stretches at a time. "Sure," I answered. "You mean you could go for, say, a month without climbing?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" I blurted out. "Not a month! I thought you meant three days."

That's just the way it is with me. No matter what else I've turned my attention to over the years, nothing seems as interesting as climbing. I can't do without it, even though by now I've been climbing in one way or another for almost twenty years straight.

That whole summer in the High Sierra, the idea of free soloing the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome floated around inside my head. It's such an iconic formation, one of the most striking thrusts of sheer granite anywhere in North America, and I'd always loved the way it dominates the whole east end of the Valley.

By 2008, Yosemite had become my favorite climbing area in the world. Some climbers are drawn to towers and pinnacles, others to complex ridges. What I love is big, clean faces, and they don't get any better than the ones in Yosemite—especially El Capitan and Half Dome. You stand at the base of El Cap and look up its 2,700-foot precipice, and you just say, "Wow!"

Granite is also my favorite kind of rock. And that's what Yosemite is made of—more clean, sweeping walls of granite than anywhere else in North America.

The Regular Northwest Face route takes a pure line up the left-hand side of the nearly vertical wall. That summer as I got in shape making loops and traverses in the High Sierra, Half Dome became my muse, a random source of motivation that drifted through my thoughts while I strolled along one ridge after another. The notion of trying to free solo the route was intimidating, yet irresistible at the same time. In terms of sheer grandness, it would be a big step up for me—an even greater challenge than Moonlight Buttress.

THE REGULAR NORTHWEST FACE ROUTE was pioneered in 1957 by Royal Robbins, the finest American rock climber of his day, and two partners, Jerry Gallwas and Mike Sherrick. Two previous attempts, including one by Robbins, had gotten no higher than a quarter of the way up the 2,000-foot wall. The face, which inclines at an average pitch of eighty-five degrees, is intimidating in the extreme. As Steve Roper writes in *Camp 4*, the definitive history of early climbing in Yosemite, “The view upward [from the base] is overpowering. It doesn’t seem possible that humans can climb such an enormous cliff with normal techniques”—i.e., ropes, pitons, and bolts.

It took the 1957 trio five days to complete the ascent, during which they pulled out all the stops: using their newly invented chrome-molybdenum pitons and expansion bolts for direct aid, lowering Robbins fifty feet so he could “pendulum” sideways across the blank granite to reach a chimney system, and enduring four bivouacs as they hung from slings and stirrups. The key pitch, led by Gallwas, involved strenuous aid on pitons and bolts that reached a “disturbingly narrow” ledge stretching across the face only 200 feet below the summit. Thank God Ledge today is one of the most famous features anywhere on American rock.

The YDS scale from 5.1 to 5.15 measures only pure difficulty, with no regard to danger. Another scale within the YDS, however, is grade ratings, which indicate the overall difficulty, danger, and required commitment of a long route on a big wall or a mountain—in short, the “seriousness” of a major ascent. Until very recently, the system ranged only from Grade I to Grade VI. A few landmark ascents in the last decade—nearly all of them in the remote ranges—have been tentatively rated as Grade VII, but by and large the pinnacle of the scale remains Grade VI.

The first Grade VI ever climbed in the United States was Robbins, Gallwas, and Sherrick’s 1957 ascent of the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome. At the time, it was matched only by a few routes in Europe.

In 1976, nineteen years after Robbins’s team climbed the wall, Colorado-based climbers Art Higbee and Jim Erickson made the first free ascent of the Regular Northwest Face route, eliminating all the aid moves—almost. (It was Erickson’s tenth try to free climb the route.) Roped together, belaying every pitch, using pitons, nuts, and bolts for protection, the duo required thirty-four hours of extreme climbing to reach a point only one hundred feet short of the summit. There, to their chagrin, they had to resort to aid to surmount the final obstacle. That glitch rendered the deed a “magnificent failure” in Higbee’s and Erickson’s eyes, but subsequent climbers, impressed by the achievement, have granted them the first free ascent. Higbee and Erickson rated the climb solid 5.12—close to the highest level of technical difficulty accomplished at the time anywhere in the world. The single passage on which they had to resort to aid would also prove to be the dramatic crux of Alex’s 2008 climb.

By 2008, no one had ever attempted to free solo a Grade VI climb, let alone succeeded on one.

That September, my elbow seemed healed, and I was in top shape from all that cruising around the High Sierra. Dwelling on Half Dome for months had put me in a mental state where I felt I had to do it. Maybe I'd just spent so much time thinking about it that now I had to clear it from my mind.

I'd climbed the route five or six times before with different partners, but I'd freed all the moves, roped up and clipping pro in case I fell, only twice—most recently two days before my solo attempt, when I'd gone up there with Brad Barlage. There are three completely blank sections on the route the Robbins's team solved by going on aid as they drilled bolt ladders through the impasses. Almost everybody climbs the bolt ladders today—they're secure, and relatively easy for aid. But free variations have been worked out that bypass those blank sections. That's why it's possible to climb the whole route free, as Higbee and Erickson (almost) did, though they were roped up and using pro.

After Brad and I climbed the route on September 4, I spent the whole next day resting, sitting by myself in my van, thinking about the route. I was still somewhat conflicted about going up there alone. Do I really want to do this? I'd already made plans with different friends to climb a few days later in the Valley, so I felt some pressure to get my soloing done before any of them showed up. Ultimately I decided to go back up to the base of Half Dome the next day. I told myself that I could just hike back down if I wasn't psyched. I've done that a few times, or even started a route and then backed off. In 2006, on Royal Arches Terrace, a long climb in the Valley but technically a pretty easy one, I climbed a pitch and a half up the friction slab at the start of the route, then realized I just wasn't into it. I downclimbed, hiked back to the road, and hitchhiked out of Yosemite. I was done for the season.

This time, though, I knew that once I got up to the base of Half Dome, there was no way I was going to bail.

I didn't want to make a big fuss about my project, so I told only two people about it, Brad and Chris Weidner. Brad said, "What the fuck?" But then, "Okay, be safe. Text me when you're done." He was being a bro.

Chris tried to talk me out of it. "Dude, that's crazy," he said. "You should rehearse the hell out of it on a toprope before you try to solo it."

"Nah," I answered. "I want to keep it sporting."

"Are you crazy?"

When I look back on those exchanges, it sounds as though I was being flippant or arrogant. That's not what was going on. I just didn't want to make too big a deal about the attempt—especially in case I backed off low on the route. It's bad form to brag about a climb before you do it. And I didn't want my good buddies to get too alarmed—then I might start worrying about them worrying about me! I guess I was just trying to reassure them: Hey, guys, I think I can handle this. I'll be safe.

There was something else going on as well. Despite my emphasis on methodical preparation, I'd begun to think that maybe I'd rehearsed the moves on Moonlight Buttress so thoroughly that I actually took some of the challenge out of the climb. Half Dome was so much bigger than Moonlight that it would take forever to get all the moves dialed. I decided to head up the wall with a little less preparation—that's what I meant by "keeping it sporting."

As it would turn out, maybe too sporting. . . .

In September it's still pretty hot in the Valley. That meant there weren't likely to be many other climbers on the face, which is what I was hoping for. But because the wall faces northwest, in September it stays in shade the whole day, which meant I could climb without getting too sweaty or dehydrated. Sweaty hands make smooth climbing pretty dicey, no matter how much you chalk up, and dehydration not only saps your strength but also can interfere with your judgment.

So on September 6, I found myself at the base of the route again. With a much lighter load than I'd carried with Brad two days before, the approach hike had taken far less time, but the whole way I felt the face looming over me. I tried not to think about it too much. It was a bluebird day, a perfect, clear

morning. Resting at the base, I felt completely detached from the rest of the Valley glowing in the morning sun below me. ~~As I had hoped, I had the whole wall entirely to myself. For the next few hours I would be alone in a unique way, locked in a high-stakes game of solitude.~~

It's not much trouble to climb through a roped party when you're soloing—I'd done it before, and I'd do it again. But encountering others on the wall, especially if they express their incredulity that you're climbing without a rope, can make you self-conscious. And that can interfere with the absolute concentration you need to pull off a big free solo. Before such a climb, I have to get really psyched up. And once I'm off the ground, I'm totally fixated. I'm going to do this. It's the most important thing in my life right now. That's not the kind of mental state I can share with random strangers.

I was wearing only shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I had my Miura rock shoes on my feet, and my chalk bag dangling at my back, but no harness, and not even a single carabiner. In one pocket I put a few Clif Kid Zbars, my favorite multi-pitch snack, and I filled a collapsible flask with about a third of a liter of water. I put that in my other pocket, though it pulled my shorts down a little. But I knew it would take me a few hours to climb the route, and I didn't want to be parched by the time I reached the hard pitches up high. A pack was out of the question, partly because of all the chimneys in the middle of the route (it's almost impossible to chimney wearing a pack), but mainly because the climbing was hard enough that I didn't want any extra weight on my body.

Finally, there was nothing else for me to do but quit procrastinating and climb. I started up the first pitch.

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For years, the great Yosemite pioneers had been heroes of a sort to me. The guys from the "golden age" of the 1960s—Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, and the like—were almost too remote in history for me to appreciate, even though I'd read stories about their memorable antics. It was the self-described Stonemasters of the next generation, in the 1970s and '80s, that I most admired. John Long, Jim Bridwell, Billy Westbay, Tobin Sorenson, and their buddies. . . . But especially John Bachar and Peter Croft, because of their soloing and free climbing at the highest level. And Lynn Hill, the first person, male or female, to climb the Nose route on El Capitan completely free, in 1993. A year later, she freed the route in a single day. Those are still two of the greatest feats ever pulled off in the Valley. I was also fascinated by John "Yabo" Yablonski, to whom so many wild and crazy stories clung—about him falling off a free solo and saving himself by catching a tree branch, about his nude ascent of North Overhang, about his infamous "screamers" when he fell (roped) as far as a hundred feet, only to be caught by miracle belays. Yabo was evidently a tortured soul, for he committed suicide in the early 1990s.

A lot of the Stonemasters, though, were into drugs. Some of them even bragged about doing serious climbs in Yosemite while they were tripping their brains out on LSD. Their style was part of the counterculture movement of the day, but I just couldn't relate to it. I've never done drugs, and though I've tasted alcohol, I've never had a whole drink. I don't even drink coffee. I had a small cup once—it was like drinking battery acid. I had to poop all morning. I once had a sniff of Scotch. I thought, I should be cleaning my sink with this stuff. It's not some moral objection—drugs and booze and caffeine just have no appeal to me.

I grew up in Sacramento, California. Both my parents taught English as a Second Language (ESL) at a series of institutions in the United States and abroad. Eventually they landed more permanent jobs at American River College in Sacramento. My mom, Dierdre Wolownick, taught ESL, Spanish, and French at the college. Today she constitutes the entire French department for the school. She's a gifted linguist, fluent in three foreign languages (French, Spanish, and Italian) and competent in

German, Polish, Japanese, and a bit of American Sign Language.

~~My dad, Charles Honnold, got a full-time job teaching ESL at American River College before my mom did. So I grew up in an intellectual, academic climate—for whatever good that did me.~~

Mom likes to tell people that on the day I was born, August 17, 1985, I could stand up, holding onto her fingers. Like a lot of her stories about me as a kid, I tend to think she made that up—or at least stretched the truth pretty far. She's told journalists that from the time I was two years old, she knew I'd become a climber. She also relates a story about taking me to a climbing gym when I was only five. According to Mom, she was talking to the supervisor, turned around, and found me thirty feet up in only a minute or two. She says she was scared to death I'd kill myself.

My sister, Stasia, was born two years before me. From our infancy on, Mom spoke only French to us. Her idea was to make us bilingual. She still speaks only French to us when we visit. But Stasia and I rebelled from the start—we'd answer her in English. Even so, I'll have to give Mom the credit for making me pretty fluent in French. My grasp of the language has come in handy on many trips to France and three to North Africa.

Mom may be right about me being an uncontrollable, hyper little monster. At age five or six, I broke my arm for the first time. I'd decided it would be fun to run down the slide at Carl's Jr.—my favorite restaurant. I went over the edge. The docs called it a green twig radius fracture, whatever that is.

I broke my arm a second time at age seven or eight. This was a really pitiful accident—in fact, it's hard to describe how I fucked up. There was a big rope that was part of a play structure in our backyard. It was meant to be a rope swing, but I rigged it as a tightrope, then lay down on it as if it were a hammock. Fell off and broke my arm.

Dad took me to the local climbing gym when I was ten. It was just a random stab at another kind of recreation, but it “took” from the first day. For years thereafter, he would drive me to the gym and spend the whole afternoon belaying me—he wasn't interested in climbing himself. Later he even drove me to other gyms around California where I'd enter competitions.

He was a man of very few words. We'd drive for hours with almost no conversation. He wasn't comfortable expressing his emotions, but belaying me tirelessly and driving me all over the state was his own way of showing love.

From childhood on, there was an elephant in the room. It was that my parents weren't happily married. They didn't fight openly—it was more just a kind of chilly silence that filled the house. For Stasia's and my sake, they waited till after I graduated from high school to get a divorce. But we knew they were going to split up, because we occasionally read Mom's e-mails. The real bummer for them was that they were so much happier after they got divorced, and they stayed friends.

I'm sure a shrink would have a field day with the fact that, to this day, I have a hard time remembering the details of my childhood. In 2011, when Alex Lowther interviewed me for a profile for *Alpinist*, he started quizzing me about the early years. I told him that my memories were fuzzy and unreliable. “Ask Ben about this stuff,” I said. Ben Smalley and I had been best friends since first grade.

LOWTHER DID JUST AS Alex suggested, contacting Smalley, who by 2011 had become an air force lieutenant. Smalley's sardonic portrait of Alex as a kid and teenager rounds out the picture of the dorky misfit Alex genuinely considered himself, even after he started to attract the notice of the climbing world. According to Smalley, as told to Lowther,

Alex wore sweatpants to school. Every day. There was a gray pair and a blue pair. He wore T-shirts that were two sizes too

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