



Edge of Eternity

By Randy Alcorn

Chapter One

The storm crashed down behind me, lightning bolts chasing me like a pack of bloodhounds, thunder screaming at me. As light flooded the darkness I looked up through the pounding rain and saw a wall of jutting rocks looming above the road, their long arms poised like executioners.

The wind was a giant hand at my back, driving me on. I tried digging in my heels but the road was mud, my feet indistinguishable from the swirling brown goo that sucked me downward.

My heart pounded as if I were pursued by a midnight stalker. My body dripped like a deep gash in a dark cloud.

Why did my right arm feel so heavy? My forefinger trembled. My right temple ached from a pressure I couldn't explain. I sensed a cold eye staring at me, a shadowy Cyclops threatening me, pushing itself toward me.

Where was I? What was happening? How did I get on this road alone, bareheaded in this awful tempest?

I remembered driving to my mountain cabin and then...the rest was a blur.

Gusts of wind kept shoving me forward, letting up a little, then pushing even harder. All I saw through dripping, stinging eyes was the ground passing beneath my feet. My jeans were drenched, my hunting jacket a soaked sponge. I shivered.

My knees quaked and my mind started spinning in the gray violence. I could no longer tell ground from sky, earth from heaven.

"Help me! God, help—" Catching myself I groaned. I might as well be talking to the tooth fairy, for all the good it would do me.

I heard a violent noise like a huge canvas tarp whipping in the wind. I looked over my shoulder, then dropped to the ground in frozen terror. The sound was the flapping of giant wings on a reptilian creature with flared claws. It looked like a dragon—no, a flying dinosaur, a pterodactyl with dead eyes and jagged teeth.

It appeared too heavy to fly, but it did, and it was coming for me.

I rose from the mud and ran with the wind, but the beating of those wings grew until it filled my ears. I felt the blast of the creature's hot breath. I smelled a thousand matches lit at once — sulfur. I flailed my arms and fell again into the mud as the monster swooped down.

As I tensed, the beast brushed over me. How could it miss? Was it playing with me, terrorizing me before the kill?

I saw the predator circle, keeping its gaze on me like a sniper on his target. Those eyes, cold and brutal — shark eyes. The beast smirked. Did it take pleasure in my terror? I sensed intelligence far greater than mine, ancient and brooding. The thought of a calculating mind in something so grotesque sent an electric wave of terror through me.

Finally the monster turned and disappeared behind the torrents of rain. I stared into the swirling gray where it had vanished. Had I really seen it? I rose from my knees, willing them to be strong. I ran, my feet battling the mire. I had to find shelter.

Behind me I heard again the whipping tarp, louder and louder.

In a heartbeat the fiery breath fell on me again. I threw my arms over my head, and as I fell into the mud I felt daggers pierce me, claws penetrating the base of my neck, ripping through muscle and tendon. Jerked off the ground, I screamed.

The beast dropped me back into the mud, the echo of my cry disappearing into the merciless storm.

Up. I had to keep moving.

I was kept from surrendering to the ground again only by the dim sight of a stone outcropping on a hillside a hundred feet away. I stumbled onward and up, in pursuit of the shelter, evoking memories of pushing across rice paddies in Nam, searching for the safety of a bunker.

As I fought through the storm, a warmth trickled over my right shoulder. I reached my left hand inside my jacket and felt my flannel shirt, now soaked in blood. My neck throbbed. With aching slowness I turned my head each way.

As I did, I saw the winged beast circling. It plummeted toward me like a rock from a cliff. I curled up, pressing my body against the muddy road.

Just as it grazed my neck I heard a terrifying roar. It came neither from the beast nor me, but from an immense dark shape prowling the ground, a beast I could barely see, a mass of fur blowing wildly in the wind. As the roar filled the air the flying monster's head jerked back violently. It squawked fiercely as it spun away, choking and sputtering, cold horror in its eyes.

I gasped for breath, feeling only a moment of relief. What foe could strike terror into a creature more dreadful than any I'd ever imagined? Would I rather face the flying beast or the prowling one?

I pushed myself the remaining thirty feet to the rocky refuge. Just as I reached it, a burst of wind slammed me into the stone outcropping. Stunned, I fell, throwing out my arms. On the ground my groping hands found a recess, a furrow in the base of the rock. Behind me, just a few feet away, I saw the shadowy image of the ground beast, its great head still roaring up at the sky. Was I the gazelle and this the lion about to claim from the hyena its meal? I reached farther into the recess, pulling my body along, but was still exposed to beasts and elements.

I lay flat on my face, embracing the stony ground. I tried to get a grip, to move myself farther but I couldn't. My body didn't work, but my mind did. *I'm a realist, a skeptic*, I reminded myself. The dinosaur couldn't be real, the prowling brute couldn't be real. But my stinging neck and pounding heart and the roars of wild beasts said otherwise. I willed myself to wake up, but I couldn't. I pressed my eyelids shut and longed for the relief of dreams or consciousness, whichever I wasn't already in.

When I opened my eyes I found myself in damp darkness. I spit out sand and heard an echo. Beyond my feet, the barest light came from a two-foot opening. I must have crawled farther than I thought—into a cave. I couldn't remember.

I was spent, twisted and lying in a heap, too sore to move.

My mind slowly grew more alert, despite a torturing headache. I felt paralyzed in this utterly unfamiliar place. All I'd known was far away. Here, there was nothing else besides me and raging beasts and nature gone mad.

I reached into my jacket pocket, feeling the wet fabric for the box of matches I'd picked up at my cabin. I counted them and swore. Only four. Carefully I struck one against the wet box, three times, then once on the side of the cave. Finally a spark. I blew lightly on the flame and it came to life.

The back wall was only an arm's length away from me, while the cave's height was maybe six feet.

I looked down and saw in the thin ashen dust a boot print larger than my own. Had I blacked out? Did someone pull me in here from the storm and the beasts?

A gust of wind forced its way into the cave, blowing out the match. I lit a second one and looked at the ground. The print had disappeared. I stared at where it had been just a moment before. Nothing.

I must have imagined it, or maybe it was my own. Yes, I had pulled myself into this place. I'd rescued myself, like I'd always managed to do. I was alone—Nick Seagrave, alone again.

I heard footfalls and heavy breathing just outside. I shuddered. The ground beast was stalking me, so close I could feel its wet heat, smell its animal scent. It couldn't fit through the cave's mouth—could it?

I pushed myself to the back of the cave, but even then I was only four feet from the breathing. I heard sniffing now. Whatever it was, it had locked on to my scent. I couldn't stop shaking. Only my headache and the pain in my neck kept me from yielding entirely to terror.

After a long shivering stillness, I took off my jacket and tore the left sleeve off my shirt. With trembling fingers, I wrapped it around my neck to protect the wounds.

The ground beast fell silent. After a long while sitting against the cave wall, my back and legs cramped. I stretched them. Trying to find the least painful position, I curled up like an old soldier digging in for a long night.

When I awoke again I listened carefully to the darkness. I heard no movement, no breathing but my own.

I sat up, blew on my fingers, took off my boots, and briskly rubbed my sore feet in my hands. The cave smelled gamy, like wet sneakers. I had the eerie feeling others had held up here. I wondered where they'd come from and what fate they'd met.

My migraine started to subside. My head felt clearer and my fear had loosed its grip—enough to let me reason. Maybe now I could piece this all together.

It was just too weird. I was Mr. Rational, the last guy to ever be abducted by aliens. Yet here I was, chased into a cave by an otherworldly storm and the monsters it had unleashed from who knew where. Was I living out my own episode of *The Twilight Zone*?

I revisited my last memories: changing out of my suit at the office, then driving into the mountains to the cabin, then...

Why can't I remember?

I lit the third match and examined myself. I fingered the blood-soaked collar of my shirt—my favorite blue flannel, ruined now—and reached down to touch my mud-caked boots which I'd last worn while hiking with Amy and Brian months ago. The hike from hell—I shuddered at the memory of the angry words we'd exchanged.

I ran my hand over the right side of my face and felt it twitch. That stupid embarrassing tic had developed over the last few years, showing my hand when the stress got to me, a telltale spasm that threatened my legendary rep as the Iceman. Even with no one here to see it, it angered me.

I breathed deeply, trying to make myself relax in the darkness. I managed to doze off and on. Finally I saw a faint light through the cave opening. Cautiously I pulled myself toward the mouth. The clouds had broken and a hazy reddish moon peeked through. No, wait. What was that? Another light, lower in the sky and about half the size. A second moon?

Impossible!

I opened and shut my eyes, squinted, craned my aching neck. Each time I looked there were still two moons. I examined every back corner in the warehouse of my mind, searching for explanations, refusing to let myself believe the obvious. I couldn't be in another world. Could I?

I rubbed my eyelids, then blinked again at the moons. This attack on my sanity seemed more cruel than being pursued by the beasts. Seeing was believing, right? I'd always trusted my senses. But now, how could I? Had I lost my mind?

I pushed back inside and sat in the cold clammy lap of the cave's innermost wall, my back to the opening. Reason was failing me. For the moment, I gave up on it, quit trying to figure it out, hoping it would all make sense if I came back to it later.

Into the mental vacuum fell a tangled, tumbling mass of vivid memories. First came the morning I woke up to discover Marci and the kids gone. It was as unthinkable as waking up now to find myself in a world with two moons.

I relived the shock and anger I felt as I, in my mind, read and reread her note. And the helplessness, which I hated most of all.

Two years later now, I could understand a little more why they left. My long hours, endless trips away, climbing the company ladder. Enduring—often enjoying, I admit—all that went with it. I did it for Marci, I always said, and when Amy and Brian came along I did it for them.

But wouldn't I have done exactly the same if none of them had been there?

And now they aren't.

Maybe it was something about the air in this cave; I sifted through the ruins of my existence like a man whose life was passing in front of him on the long fall to death.

I saw myself sitting in that corner office, on top of the world, so I thought. I was all the swagger you could stuff into a three-piece suit. A legend in my own mind. I could bark out orders to a hundred people under me. But I could do nothing to make my wife and children stay, nothing to make them come back.

I'd reached the pinnacle of my career. Why had it looked so much better from below? My soul felt empty. *Or do we even have souls?* I wondered.

I'd always outrun those questions before. Now they forced themselves on me, like a hound hot on a scent.

I wished I were thirty again, when nothing seemed beyond reach. Now at fifty I was old, my sore knees forcing me to give up marathons for a treadmill. Treadmills instead of marathons—it had become the story of my life.

I'd lost everything that mattered over the last two years. Now it was too late to chase dreams. Impossible to start over, impossible to unscramble all the broken eggs.

“What happened?” I shouted. The hard echo slapped me, mocking me. Was I trying to make the cave hear me better? I swung my right arm against the cave wall, bruising my forearm. I winced more from stupidity than pain.

Closing my eyes did no good; the wild video played relentlessly: empty days, empty nights, and two years of an empty bed—all the more empty whenever some stranger occupied it with me.

I shouted again, “Is this the best you can do?”

I laughed a cold, caustic laugh that bounced back at me from the cave’s low ceiling. I clamped my eyes shut. Then heavy pain shot through me as I saw again the face engraved on the back of my eyelids—Lee Ann, my little Lee Ann, our five-year-old, always five. Her death seven years ago shredded the last of my optimism. From that day, every cradle I saw swung above an empty grave. Every birth was the beginning of death, a cruelty I could no longer bear. In my grief I’d refused even to look at our family’s old videotapes. Seeing her now in wrenching, living color was a twisting knife in my heart.

“Daddy,” I heard her say. I felt her smooth cheek against mine. I smelled her baby-powder softness. Roughly, I swept away the warm streak on my face.

Then came my father’s wretched end in that nursing home six months later, when I could tolerate his empty suffering no longer, when I told the doctors to And finally my mother’s agonizing death from cancer three years ago, one more outrage heaped on me by a senseless universe.

“Nick, you can be whatever you want to be”—Mom’s melodic voice sounded in my mind again, as it had hundreds of times over the years. But was that really what she sounded like? I couldn’t even be sure of that any more. Mom, always trying to get us to Sunday School, but every week we stayed home and watched football or baseball with Dad. I closed my eyes and felt my fingers in her long auburn hair, touching her soft reddish cheeks. I smelled her faint sweet perfume.

I wiped my eyes. Why was I pretending they had dust in them? I was alone in a cave—just as I’d been alone in the cabin. Wait. . . it started to come back. I’d been lying facedown on the cot, wrestling, tortured by the same thoughts that suffocated me now. But I’d gotten up, walked out. . . and. . .

Something hovered on the edges of my memory. What was it?

In Nam I thought I’d faced the toughest obstacles life could muster. “Dig deeper,” Sarge said as I studied his craggy old face. “You can always find the will to survive; you can always do what you think you can’t. Just dig deeper.”

The last few years made Nam seem like kindergarten. I dug as deep as I could. Nothing was left.

Dig deeper. I’d started believing I might be better off beneath the cold dark ground than on top.

“No!” I was too angry to let death win the war he always won. Not me. Not now.

A second chance. Is that really too much to ask?

But who could I ask? I’d always heard words about God, spoken by that church full of hypocrites, but what did words matter? If there were a God—and I had no reason to think there was—he was irrelevant. Besides, he owed us all an apology for a world of hurt. And I knew better than to expect an apology—or anything else—from God.

If he expected me to come groveling to him, he’d better not hold his breath.

Did you hear that?” I screamed, jumping to my feet and hitting my head on the cave ceiling.

As I stretched out my hands to keep from falling, my fingers brushed past some indentations on the cave wall behind me. Hesitating, I carefully lit the last match.

Rough letters were scratched on the wall, as if inscribed by a nail. Three lines, one above the other, forming a triangle:

FORWARD

RED ROAD HOME

BE CAREFUL WHO YOU TRUST

They were in plain English—evidence I wasn’t on another planet after all. But who put them there? Some lonely lunatic, some desperate prisoner groping in the dark?

I touched every word with my forefinger. Then I flung the match away just as it burned me, and I sank down into the cold damp darkness.

The throb in my neck yanked me into consciousness. A reddish light from the cave's mouth blinded me. I pulled myself up, amazed I'd managed to sleep on that cold rock bed.

I'd kill for a triple latté.

Once I could keep my eyes open I stared at everything bathed by the warm light pouring into the cave, which now seemed even smaller.

I couldn't stay inside. The light was calling me, inviting me out to something better. Slowly the strength of the morning filled me. I got up on my creaking knees and reached for the wall. I touched the letters again in that cryptic triangle. It wasn't a dream.

But wait—I saw other inscriptions in the wall, a foot above the message. The delicate writing was exquisite, not uniform yet orderly, with a natural beauty that made it appear artwork as much as language. It seemed more like hieroglyphics than anything else human, but exotic and unfamiliar in form, as if it were alien calligraphy. This wasn't any human language. And yet . . . what other languages were there but human ones?

I noticed now there were also inscriptions below the English message. Why hadn't I seen them last night? Scrawled out on crooked and uneven lines, sprawled haphazardly across the wall, this was yet another language. The writing was coarse and crude, devoid of artistry. I reached out and started to touch it, then felt a cold chill down my spine. I backed away. I looked up and down from the elegant language above to this one below, and began to see some similarities. Despite their differences they shared some of the same characters.

I spun around, bracing myself. I had the uneasy feeling that whoever—or whatever—had written the alien inscriptions might not be far away. If they returned, I didn't want to be there.

On the floor at the far wall, at the bottom of an eerie shaft of light, I saw something—a dark-green heap. I moved toward it, cautiously reaching out my hand. Something darted out from under it—a black snake. I drew back, then reached again—it was a backpack, with worn and faded leather straps and a battered frame, bowed and rusted. I emptied it, finding handfuls of dust, a dirty gray blanket, an old black plastic water bottle and a bent rusty nail. Whose pack had this been? Why had he left it here?

I could have used this blanket last night.

I felt repulsed as I recalled the previous night's wallowing in emotion and defeat and regret. Mom was right, and Sarge was right. It was time to do what Nick Seagrave had always done—take charge.

I pushed aside thoughts of the creatures. I would not spend one more night, one more hour, one more minute in this cave. If I had to fight my way out, that's what I'd do.

I pushed out the backpack and crawled forward on my stomach through the mouth of the cave—out into the brilliance . . . cast by a huge red sun.