

# On The Edge

My Story

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With Mindy Hammond

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Extract

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## Chapter 1

# PREPARING FOR THE NORTH POLE

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Instinct told me that I was watching one of those things that looked very easy to do but that would, in reality, turn out to be very difficult. My instructor glided across the flat, frozen fields in an effortless sweep; her long, thin skis moving in a languid rhythm, until she seemed to ripple over the snow in a single movement. ‘Bend the knees. You see? Bend, push, bend, push. You must get into a rhythm.’ Even her voice, with its lilting, Swedish bounce, floated effortlessly across the open space. Her ski poles touched down gently with each stroke to add to the gentle forward propulsion from her skis, her legs worked slower than her progress across the ground, bringing the next ski up to the front to complete the cycle, and there was not a single break in her progress. The whole sequence looked like a piece of slowed-down film. She was demonstrating the classic cross-country-skiing style of her homeland and it looked as though she had spent her whole life doing it.

I knew that my efforts wouldn’t look so good. And they didn’t; I fell over, of course. I was discovering that cross-country skiing, or langlaufing, isn’t just hard to perfect, it’s almost impossible to get started.

It’s mostly about grip, langlaufing, and I couldn’t find any. And

it's about rhythm – I didn't have any; poise – absolutely none; and grace – not a jot. Annoyingly, my first attempts didn't even amount to a hilarious, high-speed crash. I just slithered about for a few seconds, my skis slipping backwards and forwards on the snow-covered grass as I tried to waddle ahead, failing to gain even an inch towards my goal before gravity won and I flopped on to my side and lay there, feet clumsily crossed in their skis, my bedewed nose inches from the frozen ground. But I wasn't learning this just for fun. In three months I would set off to the Magnetic North Pole on these same skis. Yet I couldn't cross a frozen playing field – and this was my third day of trying. I closed my eyes.

It got frightening inside my mind and panic rose in my chest. I was struggling because of the brain-damage. It must be that. I'd always been good at things when I tried them for the first time. I mean, yes, after lesson one I'd get bored and fall to pieces. But I've always been good at the lesson one stage. A fast learner with a short attention span – pretty much every school report I have ever had said exactly that. I had a sudden, vivid memory of my first attempt at water-skiing behind a boat on Lake Windermere in the Lake District – when they used to allow such things. I had listened half-heartedly while the bloke droned on about the need to keep your knees together, the dangers of drawing your arms in too close to your body, the need to keep the rope tight, and a thousand other things that I had to know. Eventually I got to give it a go. I slipped into the freezing grey waters of Windermere and grabbed the plastic handle at the end of the blue nylon rope. The boat started to pull away and I was left bobbing around on my own in the green-fringed solitude of a quiet corner of the lake. I thought about old Donald Campbell and his *Bluebird* speedboat. Hadn't they gone down in Windermere when he tried to break the record for speed on the water? Actually no, that was Coniston. Or was it? And then there was a gentle but firm tug on the rope as the small

boat reached the limit of the line extending behind it. I gripped hard, there was a lot of water and splashing, I gripped some more and eventually rose up from the foam like a small, straggly Neptune in a borrowed blue wetsuit. I was water-skiing; it was easy. I got cocky and waved at a boat going the other way. Logic told me that I could shift my weight across the skis to change direction and it worked. Crossing the wake, one of my skis was pulled off by the turbulent water. I shifted over to my right leg and carried on.

My wife, Mindy, can still hardly bear to talk about our first horse-riding trips together. She has been riding all her life. Usual sort of thing; spent half her childhood being shouted at by stern-faced women in polyester body-warmers about her leg position and posture in the saddle, and the other half shovelling out what those same horses she dreamed of riding had left in their stable overnight. Horse-riding is, for her, an art; something to be studied, learned and perfected. She approaches it with the same respect, consideration and, yes, fear, that a test pilot might approach each flight. By contrast, I wandered up to the first nag I was going to throw an inappropriately booted leg over, hopped on board, asked how you steered and braked it, and set off. There was no need to shout at me about leading legs or how I held the reins. I still ride horses in the same way as I did that first time; I get on, pull left to go left and right to go right and make sure I don't fall off. It drives Mindy mad. I have always been like this; I love trying anything new and can usually make a decent go of it the first time I try it. And then, if I have to learn how to do it properly, I get bored and want to do something I know I'm already good at.

Lying on the snowy ground, I grew slowly more convinced that my inability to just leap on to the skinny skis and dazzle my instructor by slithering across the surface on my first attempt must be down to the aftermath of the jet-car crash. On the way there, I had harboured a secret suspicion that she might watch my first,

tentative tries at mastering the finer points of the classic Swedish cross-country-skiing style and suggest that I put in just a bit more practice and try a competition or two, just for fun. I might even have the makings of an international cross-country skier – if there are such things. Right now, she was more likely to suggest I took up something else. Like collecting Alpine horns or yodelling.

It might have been funny, but I knew that I was only struggling with this because I had damaged something important in my brain that would never fix. I must have dented my balancing gland or disconnected my coordination centre. Or something. Whatever it was, I wished I hadn't done it. The wet snow started to penetrate the damp fleece I had been issued with by the polar experts who had brought us here for our pre-expedition training. Somewhere, between the playing field I was lying on and Strasbourg airport, the rest of the guys were sharing a car, drinking petrol-station coffee from polystyrene cups and talking about home. They were flying back that morning; they'd no need to learn to ski; they were going to the Pole in a truck. Which meant right now, on this cold and suddenly rather lonely Austrian morning, they could go back home. I thought of Mindy, the kids, the dogs and our house. And I thought of that sodding crash and the pain it had caused.