

## TIBET

**THE NEXT MORNING** Sun-jo, Zopa, the driver, and two Sherpas were sitting on the tailgate drinking tea. By the look of their disheveled hair and rumpled clothes they must have slept in the truck.

Sun-jo confirmed that they had. "But only for two hours," he said. "We were out getting supplies up until then."

He wasn't kidding. There was so much stuff piled in the bed, I didn't know where we were going to sit.

We squeezed ourselves between the gear along with two Sherpas (brothers, named Yogi and Yash) and left the blue haze of Kathmandu behind us.

**WE TOOK OUR TIME.** stopping at Buddhist temples and monasteries along the way, where Zopa picked up boxes of food and supplies. We already had plenty of food and some of the food he was given wasn't going to last very long up on the mountain. I asked about it but got the standard shrug in reply.

Away from the city, Nepal was everything I had imagined it to be. Beautiful valleys, rustic villages, fields tilled by oxen-pulled plows, all against the backdrop of the massive, sparkling Himalayas. I had been up on Mount McKinley and Mount Rainier, but they would be dwarfed by these snow-covered peaks.

We stopped for the night outside a tiny village. Sun-jo and I started to help set up camp, but Zopa waved us off.

"You two go climb." He pointed to a wall about a quarter mile away. "Don't fall. Come down before dark."

He didn't have to tell us twice. We jogged over to the wall. It wasn't a difficult climb, but about halfway up I had to stop to rest and catch my breath. Sun-jo, who had picked a more difficult route, scrambled up the rock like a lizard, smiling as he climbed past, which taught me a couple of things about him. He had much better lung capacity than me—and he was competitive.

Climbers will tell you that the thing they love about climbing is that it's just them against the rock, blah, blah, blah. . . . That may be true if they are alone on the rock, but put another climber next to them, and the race is on.

I was shocked when he blew by me so effortlessly. I was the kid who was going to climb Everest, and Sun-jo was just along for the ride up to Base Camp. Then I reminded myself that ten days ago I was clinging to a skyscraper a few hundred feet above sea level—not exactly the best training for scaling the highest peak in the world. If I was going to summit I was going to have to do better than watch Sun-jo's butt disappear over the top as I hung below him gasping for breath.

"I think you picked the more difficult way," he said when I finally sat down next to him on the rim. We both knew this wasn't true, but I appreciated his saying it.

We sat on the edge for a while taking in the view. It was too late to climb down before dark, so we decided to rappel to the bottom. Sun-jo offered to let me go first, but I shook my head. First up, first down.

When we got back to camp dinner was ready. Zopa didn't say anything about the climb, but there was a spotting scope set up on a tripod pointed at the wall. He must have watched the whole thing.

The next morning Zopa told us the truck was overloaded and that Sun-jo and I would have to walk with our heavy packs.

"Why did Zopa do that?" Sun-jo complained as we watched the truck drive up the road. "The truck is fine. We haven't picked up more than fifty kilos of supplies."

I shrugged, but I thought I knew the answer. Zopa thought that a hike with a full pack would do me good and didn't want me to walk alone. Sorry, Sun-jo.

The walk was hard, but it was better than bouncing around in the back of a truck, and it gave Sun-jo and me a chance to get to know each other better.

Sun-jo's father didn't want him to become a Sherpa.

"The reason I climb," he had told him, "is so you won't have to."

"Does your mother know you're on your way to Base Camp?"

"No. And she would be very upset if she knew."

Later that day I spilled my guts about climbing the skyscraper, which I immediately regretted. When Sun-jo figured out that I was telling the truth, he stopped in the middle of the road and laughed for at least five minutes. It didn't seem that outrageous to me, but I guess to someone who lives in the shadow of the highest mountain in the world, climbing a skyscraper is pretty lame.

"Does your mother know you are on your way up to Sagarmatha?" he asked.

"I don't think so. And she would murder me and my father if she knew."

We finally caught up to the truck that evening. Zopa suggested we take another climb before we ate, but Sun-jo and I revolted and told him to forget it.

The next day he made us walk again.

**HE GAVE US A BREAK** on the fourth day because he wanted us all to cross into Tibet together.

We reached the Friendship Bridge about noon. I suppose if you're crossing south from Tibet into Nepal the name fits. But if you're going north from Nepal into Tibet there's nothing friendly about it.

The Chinese border soldiers were surly, suspicious, and rude. They examined our papers for nearly an hour and peppered us with questions I didn't understand. Zopa handled the answers calmly, but the rest of us were nervous—especially Sun-jo, who had started to sweat even though it was only thirty-five degrees.

"What's the matter with you?" I whispered.

"Nothing," he whispered back. "Chinese."

The soldiers nearly dismantled the truck looking for contraband. They didn't find any, but they did manage to steal some of our stuff in the process. Food mostly. But no one called them on it.

The day before, as we had walked, Sun-jo had given me a short history lesson about Tibet and China. It wasn't pretty. The People's Republic of China invaded Tibet fifty years ago. Since that time over six thousand Buddhist monasteries and shrines have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have been killed or jailed.



Which brings me to that boulder in the middle of the road the prisoners were cracking into gravel. We passed by it an hour after we got over the Friendship Bridge, which sort of sums up what's happening to the Tibetans.

Or as Zopa put it later that night, "Our brothers in Tibet have been made slaves in their own country."

We stopped at every monastery that hadn't been burned to the ground or dismantled by the Chinese—some of them well out of our way. The monks were grateful for the food, supplies, and gossip Zopa and the Sherpas brought. It was clear that this was one of the half dozen reasons Zopa had for taking me to Base Camp.

Sun-jo and I hiked every day and climbed every evening. By the time we arrived at Base Camp ten days later I was feeling strong. So was Sun-jo.

## PEAK EXPERIENCE

**WE ARRIVED AT BASE CAMP** just in time to see Josh get into a fistfight with someone. At 18,044 feet, though, it wasn't much of a fight.

An older, red-faced man took a swing, which Josh easily ducked and countered by pushing him in the chest. The man landed on his butt in the snow. After this it was pretty much over except for the shouting.

"I want a full refund!" the man shouted. "If you think I'm going to sit around Base Camp while you and the others climb to glory, you have another thing coming!" (He was obviously one of Josh's clients, and not a very happy one.)

It's hard to get up when you are out of breath, swaddled in down clothes, with crampons strapped to your boots. Josh offered his hand to help him up, but the man slapped it away.

"George, you're in no shape to go any farther up the mountain," Josh said. "You heard what Dr. Krieger said. You have a bad heart, which you should have told me about before you signed up."

"My heart's fine! That witch doctor of yours doesn't know what she's talking about."

A pretty woman stepped up next to Josh. "You have a heart murmur, George," she said with a slight German accent. "Blocked arteries would be my guess. You need to get it looked at as soon as you get off the mountain."

"Well, I'm getting off this stupid mountain today," George wheezed, getting to his feet. "And my first appointment is not going to be with my doctor. It's going to be with my attorney! I'll sue you for everything you have, Josh."

"If you want to sue me for saving your life," Josh said, "go ahead." He turned and started to walk away, then noticed us and stopped.

"Looks like you have an extra climbing permit," Zopa said.

"Two, actually. We had a woman leave two days ago, hacking up her larynx. Apparently I'm responsible because she's threatening to sue me, too."

Josh looked at me. The beard he had cut off for my arraignment was growing back in nicely. "So, how was it?" he asked.

"It was good."

He looked back at Zopa. "Can he make it up the mountain?"

Zopa shrugged.

Josh glanced over at the truck where Sun-jo, Yogi, and Yash were standing. "Do you have room to take George back down?"

Zopa nodded. "Those three are staying. That is if you have work."

"We'll see," Josh said without much enthusiasm. "We might need some Base Camp help, but with two less climbers we don't need any more climbing Sherpas."

He looked back at the small truck, then looked back at Zopa. "It'll be a tight fit. You'll have to haul George's wife down, too, and all their gear. She's in her tent sick as a dog. You'll need to get them both to the hospital as soon as you get to Kathmandu."

"There will be enough room," Zopa said. "I'm staying here, too. At least for a few days. I'll talk to the driver. He'll get them to Kathmandu safely."

Zopa started toward the truck but didn't get very far. A Jeep came roaring up and skidded to a stop, blocking his path.

Josh swore, then said under his breath, "Captain Shek. Be cool. Let me do the talking."

A tall Chinese officer in a crisp green uniform got out of the Jeep and walked up to us, frowning. "Papers!"

"Good afternoon," Josh said with a smile.

"No one go until I see papers!"

"Of course," Josh said.

But the captain was too late. Sun-jo, Yogi, and Yash were already gone. (Poof!)

"Show him your visa and passport," Josh said.

I dug them out of my pack and handed them over.

Captain Shek carefully scrutinized them, glancing between me and the photo.

"You climb?"

"He's my son," Josh answered. "He's on my climbing permit."

"Last name no match."

"He has his mother's name. We're divorced."

(I guess it was too complicated to explain that they were never married.)

The captain handed back my passport. Next he checked Zopa's papers, then the driver's. After he finished he locked his dark eyes on each of us and said, "We watching all you." He climbed back into the Jeep and drove away.

"He's not kidding about that," Josh said. "Captain Shek

and his men are always watching." He pointed to a small rise with a ramshackle building on top of it. "They have a spotting scope set up there, and the rumor is that he has night vision equipment as well. They monitor the radio transmissions, looking for violations. Shek's already booted two climbing parties this year. Try to stay clear of him."

"And he doesn't always show up dressed in uniform," Dr. Krieger warned. "He sometimes dresses like a climber and wanders around camp catching people unaware. I'll be in the Aid tent." She walked away.

"What do you think of Base Camp so far?" Josh asked.

Because of the argument and Captain Shek I hadn't paid much attention to the camp, but I saw now that it was gigantic. Red, blue, green, and yellow tents were scattered around for what seemed like a mile.

"How many people are here?"

"Three hundred fifty or so," Josh answered. "Maybe another fifty acclimatizing farther up the mountain."

Most of them must have been in their tents trying to stay warm because there weren't too many people wandering around. I looked at the temperature on my watch: fourteen degrees. According to the wind gauge (the watch Josh gave me did everything), the wind was blowing ten miles an hour, which brought the temperature down to three degrees above zero.

Josh looked me over. "You breathing okay? Any problems on the way up?"

Both were good questions considering this was only the second time I'd been this high on a mountain. The summer before I had almost made it to the top of Mount McKinley in Alaska. We were at 18,000 feet (2,000 feet short of the summit) when our guide turned us back because of weather.

"I've had a headache the past two days," I said. "But it's going away."

Josh pointed at George, who had returned to his tent and was angrily packing his gear. "My headache's going away, too," he said. "At least one of them."

He looked over at the truck. Sun-jo and the brothers had reappeared and were helping Zopa unload it. "Who's the kid?"

"His name's Sun-jo."

"Is he with Zopa?"

"Yeah."

"Interesting," he said. "Did Zopa tell you he was going to stay at Base Camp for a few days?"

I shook my head. "Like you said, Zopa doesn't talk much."

"Yeah . . . Well, he's up to something."

"Like what?"

Josh smiled. "He'll let us know when he's ready. Let's head over to Peak Experience headquarters. I'll introduce you to the Base Camp crew."

"Peak Experience?"

"I didn't name it after you exactly," Josh admitted. "But I probably should have."

"What are you talking about?"

"Peak Experience is my adventure travel company. We started it last year. Almost wish I hadn't now."

I followed him to a giant orange tent with PEAK EXPERIENCE tagged on the sides. The *A* in *Peak* looked like a mountain. He pulled back the flap and waved me through.

Inside were several people and more electronic equipment than I had ever seen in a tent at 18,000 feet (or any tent, for that matter): laptops, satellite phones, two-way radios, fax machines, television monitors, and other gizmos.

The crew was so busy talking on phones, listening to radios, tapping on keyboards, they didn't seem to notice us. None of them looked like climbers.

"What is all this?" I asked.

"This is what happens when you get old and start worrying about your future." He pointed to a pudgy guy talking on a satellite phone. "That guy over there is my business partner, Thaddeus Bowen. The rest of the people are support staff. There is another bunch of them back in the office in Chiang Mai, and some up on K2 and Annapurna."

"You're running three expeditions at the same time?"

He smiled. "Get this: Most of our clients are rank amateurs—some haven't been higher than twelve thousand feet. Stupid, huh? But I'm not alone. There are at least ten commercial operations like this at Base Camp. Some of them are running four separate expeditions. Things have changed since your mom and I were living out of the back of that rusty old van at El Cap."

When he said that he had clients I assumed he meant experienced climbers, nothing like this.

"People!" Josh said. "This is my son, Peak."

I felt a flush of pride. Some of them nodded, some smiled, though none of them fully stopped what they were doing. Thaddeus walked over, covering the mouthpiece of his satellite phone.

"How'd George take the news?"

"He took a punch at me," Josh said. "Says he's going to sue."

Thaddeus rolled his eyes. "Great. I'll call our attorney and tell him to get ready." He walked away resuming his phone conversation.

A woman came over and handed Josh a sheet of paper. "The film crew should be here later this afternoon. And I finally tracked down the whereabouts of Holly Angelo."

The name sounded familiar to me, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard it.

"Where is she?" Josh asked.

"She's with the film crew," the woman answered. "Apparently she came in on the same flight. The film crew is threatening to murder her. She brought along her own personal chef and massage therapist, and so much gear they had to rent a second truck."

"I told her she couldn't bring anybody," Josh said. "And to travel light."

"She didn't listen," the woman said. "She's also found out that you have an opening on your climbing permit. She wants to go to the top."

Josh swore. "How'd she find out about that?"

"Word travels fast at high altitudes."

"She's here to cover Peak, not herself."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'll tell you about it later," Josh said distractedly. "Can you reach her on the sat phone?"

"If she's not in the middle of a massage," the woman answered, then started punching in numbers.

Josh turned to me. "I need to take care of this. There's a spot for your tent next to mine. The blue one out back. Why don't you go out and get set up."

Sun-jo helped me haul my gear and set up the tent. When we finished we took a little tour.

Now, you might be thinking that Base Camp on Everest would be one of the most pristine places on earth. The truth



is that you have to watch where you step. And here's a tip: Avoid digging up yellow snow to melt for your drinking water. At ten degrees below zero no one strays far from his tent to take care of business. Everest Base Camp is a frozen outhouse/garbage dump with decades of crap, discarded food containers, and busted gear. I had read that some of the climbers and Sherpas were trying to clean it up, but by the looks of the camp they hadn't made much of a dent. Sardine cans, chip bags, cartons, toilet paper, and other trash blew around the tents like tumbleweed.

Climbers from all over the world were here. Japan, Bolivia, Mexico, Italy, Canada, Luxembourg . . . There were women's teams, military teams; there was even a team made up exclusively of people over fifty. (They had a placard outside their camp that read: THE GERIATRIC TEAM. BEWARE OF GRUMPY OLD CLIMBERS!)

You could pick out the commercial climbing operations by the size of their tents and their camp spots, which were usually the best on the slope. I counted eleven of them, and that's when it began to dawn on me that Josh might be just as cagey as old Zopa.

There was a lot of competition sitting on the mountain under those large tents. Getting a dozen clients to the summit could bring in as much as a million dollars, and if you were simultaneously mounting other expeditions on other 8,000-meter peaks, several million dollars.

If an Everest wannabe was going to plop down a hundred grand (or several thousand to get to one of the lower camps) who were they going to give their money to? The company with the best success rate? The company with the best safety

record? Or maybe, the company who put the youngest person in the world on the world's tallest mountain, who also just happened to have the same first name as the company that put him on the top. And did you hear about him climbing those skyscrapers in New York?

*Don't worry about the money. I'll get my portion back.*

*The film crew should be here later this afternoon.*

*She's here to cover Peak, not herself.*

I suddenly remembered where I had seen the name Holly Angelo. It was a byline under an article about me climbing the skyscraper. She was the reporter who broke the news about who my real father was. Did she dig up this information on her own? Or did Josh give her a call and spill his guts?

The youngest person so far to reach the top of Everest was a fifteen-year-old Nepalese girl named Ming Kipa Sherpa.

If I were one year older I might still be in . . . I stopped in midstep.

"What's the matter?" Sun-jo asked.

"Nothing," I said.

Would Josh have bailed me out if I had already turned fifteen? I didn't think so. Was he using me? Probably. Did I mind? I wasn't sure at that point. He was paying more attention to me than he had my whole life.

"I'm going to head back," I said.

"I should go, too," Sun-jo said. "Zopa wants me to talk to the cook about helping in the mess tent."

"A job?" I asked.

"For room and board." Sun-jo smiled. "Or tent and food, I should say. Perhaps it will lead to something else."

Tent and food was not going to get the tuition paid. "I could talk to my father," I offered. "If I asked him, I think he'd hire you for more than tent and food."

Sun-jo shook his head. "We had better leave that up to Zopa. He brought me to the mountain. It is for him to decide."

## ROCK WEASELS

**RATHER THAN CONFRONT JOSH.** I crawled into my tent, wrapped myself in my sleeping bag, and fell asleep.

I know what you're thinking: CHICKEN! Maybe you're right. But what was I going to say? "I will not be used, Father!" Or how about this: "Send me back to New York so I can do my time. Take that, Dad!"

Besides, I needed some sleep before I talked to him. Walking around at 18,000 feet wears you down. And it turned out that I didn't have to find him because he found me.

"You awake?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, although I hadn't been until he stuck his head into my tent.

He crawled in and zipped the flap closed. "Did you get a chance to look around the camp?"

"A little. There's a lot of competition for your company up here."

"You noticed, huh? Next year there won't be so many commercial operations. There's only a finite number of people who have the money, time, and desire to get up this mountain. This will be the last year for a lot of the operations."

"Including Peak Experience?" I asked.

He grinned. "Your mom told me that you're smart," he said. "I guess you got that from her."

Flattery has never worked on me. "So, how much trouble are you in?"

"Like the judge said, I look good on paper. But the truth is, I'm in debt up to my crevasse."

Humor, on the other hand, always worked on me. I laughed.

"If we have a good season this year," he continued, "we might be able to recoup some of our losses next year. It's all riding on how many people we get to the summit in the next few weeks and how much publicity we get."

"Which is why I'm here," I said.

He gave me a sheepish look. "Not entirely," he said. "But yeah, that's one of the reasons."

*That's the main reason*, I thought. Might as well get it over with. "If I had been fifteen would you have come to New York?"

He hesitated, then said, "Probably not. I was right in the middle of leading a group of amateur climbers to Everest."

I would have liked it a lot better if he had come to New York to save me because *I* was in trouble, not because *he* was in trouble.

"The youngest Americans to top Everest are a couple of twenty-year-olds," he explained. "So, your being fifteen might have worked, but truthfully, getting a fourteen-year-old up there has a lot more sex appeal, especially after your climb in New York."

"There are a lot of celebrities climbing this year: a couple of rockers, an actor, a football player. There are seven documentary and TV crews on this side of the mountain alone, and just as many, if not more, on the south side. So, when we

tried to get the media interested in our climb there were no takers. Without publicity we're circling the drain.

"Your skyscraper stunt was beamed all over the world. I knew about it before your mom called and asked if I could help out. Someone in our Chiang Mai office saw it on TV, figured out the connection, and called up here suggesting we try to put you on top. At first I told them no way, but then your mom called. I thought I could take care of your problem and mine at the same time."

"Did you talk to Mom about what we're doing?"

"Yeah, before I left Kathmandu."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I was going to take you on a climb, but I didn't tell her where."

"She's not going to like it when she finds out."

"Don't be so sure. She may not climb anymore, but she understands what it's all about. That's why she let you go to those climbing camps. She knows that I might risk my own life to summit, but I would never risk anyone else's, especially my own son's, to get to the top of a mountain."

"What's going to make her mad is your not telling her beforehand," I said.

"You're probably right, but the reason I didn't tell her is that we can't let this out until you're back down."

"What about the film crew?"

"They're not going to say anything. We're paying them. They work for us."

"What about Holly Angelo?"

He gave a deep, foggy sigh. (It was cold in the tent.)

"Blackmail," he said. "Or what amounts to it, anyway."

Somehow she figured it all out. I think she might have a line to Dr. Woo.

"And by the way, if you had flunked the physical I wouldn't have brought you up here. Period. I would have sent you on to Chiang Mai. And I did enroll you in the International School there.

"Anyway, Holly called me here last week and said that she was going to print a story about your Everest attempt unless I gave her an exclusive."

"And now she wants to climb the mountain herself," I said.

"Yeah, and it looks like I'm going to have to give her a shot. Otherwise, she's going to start filing reports as soon as she gets up here."

"Why do we have to keep it quiet?"

"Because of the Chinese," he said. "There's no age limit on this side of the mountain, but if they find out we're trying to put a fourteen-year-old on the top, they might pull our climbing permit. They've been trying to get a teenager to the summit for years. They wouldn't be too happy if an American teenager topped it before one of their own."

He let out a harsh laugh. "Politics, publicity, advertising, sponsorships, endorsements: Climbing has really gone downhill. I can't tell you how much I miss our rock rat days when we showed up at the base of a wall with a bag of trail mix, a bottle of water, and an old rope. We're rock weasels now, and it will never be the same."

"Josh!" A high-pitched scream pierced the cold mountain air.

"That would be Holly," Josh said.

"You know her voice?"

"I haven't heard it in fifteen years, but I'd recognize it anywhere. Kind of like fingernails scraping on a chalkboard."

"Josh!"

We both winced.

"Holly was on the circuit writing freelance articles when your mom and I were climbing. She actually wrote a couple of good pieces about us. She climbed, too—kind of." He shook his head. "It was a scary thing to watch."

"Josh!"

"So, I'll take you to the top," Josh said. "But only if I can do it without killing you. If you make it you'll be famous . . . and you'll help your old man live in comfort for the rest of his life. My plan is to sell the business in a few years and retire on the proceeds. Are we square?"

I wasn't sure about the famous part, and I wasn't happy about his reason for bringing me to Everest, but I did want to get to the top.

"We're square," I said. "But no more caginess. I want to know what's going on."

"It's a deal." He stuck out his gloved hand and we shook.

"Josh!"

He unzipped the flap and peeked out. "We'd better go and say hello before she causes an avalanche."



## GASP

**HOLLY ANGELO LOOKED** like a redheaded scarecrow dressed in pink goose down.

She was over six feet tall with limbs like a daddy longlegs. As soon as she saw Josh she wrapped her arms around him with a shriek so loud every head for a quarter mile popped out of its tent like turtles coming out of their shells.

Standing next to her were several curious Sherpas, three camera guys, a personal chef, and a massage therapist. The chef and the massage therapist were shivering and would be dead before morning unless somebody found them warmer gear.

Josh wriggled out of her tentacles and held her at arm's length so she couldn't snag him again. "You haven't changed a bit," he said with his trademark grin. (Meaning, I think: "Holly, you are still a pain in the crevasse.")

Her hawklike brown eyes darted around for her next victim, which happened to be me. "Peeeeeak!"

Luckily the drawn-out version of my name doubled her over with a coughing fit and she wasn't able to get to me. You would think that her chef or massage therapist would have come to her aid, but they just stood there shivering, watching their employer bent over clutching her knees.

"Bad cough," Josh said, when she was finally able to right herself.

"No big . . . *gasp* . . . deal. You know . . . *gasp* . . . the altitude and . . . *gasp* . . . dry air . . . *gasp* . . ."

"We'll have Doc Krieger take a look at you." He was still smiling but the grin looked a little more genuine. He did not want to take Holly Angelo up the mountain any farther than he had to. In her current condition it didn't look like she was going to get very far.

I followed him over to meet the film crew: JR, Will, and Jack. They all looked fit. He thanked them for coming up.

"Happy to be here," JR said, then whispered, "Do us a favor, Josh. Put us as far away from Holly as possible."

"No problem." Josh looked over at the gasping reporter.

Holly was already telling the Sherpas where to pitch her pink tent, which was only slightly smaller than the HQ tent.

Josh frowned when he saw she was erecting the monstrosity right next to his and my tent, but he didn't say anything to her. He looked back at JR and pointed to a spot about seventy-five feet away.

"Best I can do."

"Fine," JR said. He and the others headed over to the spot with their gear.

Josh rubbed his temples. "I probably don't need to tell you this, but you need to be very careful about what you say to Holly. She's a reporter and anything you tell her is fair game. Just remember that she is more interested in herself and her career than she is in you."

"What about the film crew?" I asked.

"No worries there. We own the footage. When we edit it down we'll make you look good no matter how you screw up." He grinned. "Just kidding. Let's go over to the mess tent and I'll introduce you to the other climbers. Just keep in

mind, they know you're my son, but we haven't told them that we're trying to get you to the top."

"Why?"

"Because they've paid upward to a hundred grand to summit. In a way, we're using their money to get you up there. They might get upset."

"So, what am I supposed to tell them?"

"That you're here with me and don't expect to make it past Camp Four or Five." He looked back over in Holly's direction. "I guess I better fill her in, too, so she keeps her big mouth shut. I'll meet you over at the mess tent." He sighed, put on his charming grin again, and headed toward Holly, who was shrieking orders at the Sherpas. The Sherpas, for the most part, were ignoring her every command.

**THE MESS TENT** was nearly as big as the HQ tent, but a lot more crowded. It was also smoky from the kerosene lamps and stoves, and cigarettes. None of the clients were smoking, but almost every Sherpa had a cigarette dangling out of his mouth as he stood to the side holding a plate of food.

Sun-jo was manning the noodles. I went over to say hello.

"How's it going?"

"What was that terrible sound outside?" he asked.

"A reporter."

"Injured?"

"Not yet."

I looked around and noticed Zopa wasn't there.  
"Where's Zopa?"

Sun-jo shrugged.

A climber walked over and held out his plate. Sun-jo

scooped some noodles onto it with a big smile. The man sniffed the pile, grunted, then walked away.

"What do you think of your fellow climbers?" Sun-jo asked.

"I didn't like that guy," I said, then looked around the tent and did a head count. Seven women, sixteen men (including the rude grunter). Ten of them had signed up for a summit attempt. I tried to pick out which ones they were, but it was hard to figure out. Fitness helped, but getting through the death zone was more about your blood oxygenation, and luck: things even the fittest climber had absolutely no control over. Most of the climbers appeared to be in their thirties or early forties, and of these, only five or six looked in good enough shape to get to the top. I could see why Josh was worried about the climbing season.

I told Sun-jo that I was surprised to see the Sherpas smoking.

"Most of them believe they will die on the mountain," he said. "So, why not enjoy themselves while they wait?"

"But doesn't smoking mess up their climbing?"

"Only if they run out of tobacco," Sun-jo answered. "But Zopa brought up several cartons of cigarettes to sell to them."

Monks weren't supposed to use any stimulants. I guess this rule didn't preclude them from selling them.

"Don't look so surprised," Sun-jo said. "Zopa will give the profits to the Tibetan monks. They are very poor. As you saw on the way here, the Chinese are not favorable toward them."

"Cagey monk reason number two," I said.

"What?"

"Never mind," I said. "I guess I'd better mingle with the other climbers."

"Do you want some noodles? They are very good."

"Sure."

They were good.

I'm not much of a mingler, which drove Rolf crazy, since he is perhaps the greatest mingler on the planet. I have seen him go up to a complete stranger and ask for the time (even though Rolf always has a perfectly good watch on his wrist) just to get a conversation started. But I don't think even Rolf could have cracked this crowd.

They had been at Base Camp for a couple of weeks now and had bonded into inseparable groups. This wasn't the first time I'd run into this. GSS always got out late for summer. By the time I arrived at climbing camp the other kids had already picked their climbing partners. This left me with the kids who had virtually no previous climbing experience, or if I was lucky, the climbing instructor.

Vincent told me that good writers are lousy minglers. They are too busy eavesdropping, or as he puts it: *Gathering grist for their literary mills.*

So, because no one was paying an iota of attention to me, I just wandered around gathering grist. . . .

"WE SHOULD HAVE *been up at ABC by now.*"

(ABC stands for Advance Base Camp, which is the next permanent camp up the north side of the mountain.)

"*We would have been if Josh hadn't ditched us for his so-called son.*"

(The so-called son was standing five feet away from the two guys talking.)

*"I didn't even know he had a son."*

*"Neither did I—and I read every article ever written about him before I plopped down my life savings."*

*"I hear the reason we're stuck down here is because he's waiting for a film crew and reporter from New York."*

*"They came in today. No film, no glory, I guess. Josh is a publicity hound."*

**"DR. LEAH KRIEGER** *is the coldest fish I've ever met."*

*"Straight from Nazi Germany, if you ask me. I think she's here to perform experiments on us, not treat us."*

*"Poor George. Do you think he really had a heart condition?"*

*"I don't know, but I heard that George's wife begged Krieger to put in a bad report. She never wanted him to climb the mountain in the first place, and she's the one with all the money. Before they got married, George didn't have two pennies to rub together."*

**"I WANDERED OVER** *to William Blade's camp this morning. I couldn't tell if I saw him or not, but I think I got close because one of his bodyguards rushed over and blocked my way as I tried to walk past his tent."*

*"Think he'll make it to the top?"*

*"He already has, as far as I'm concerned."*

*"You know what I mean: the summit."*

*"If he can't do it on his own two feet, his bodyguards are big enough to carry him up there on their backs."*

(William Blade was a famous actor. I'd seen most of his films and thought he was great.)

*"I heard there are three people up at ABC with HAPE. They're coming down tomorrow."*

*"Well, they're luckier than the guy who died on the south side*

*yesterday. Stepped out of his tent in the middle of the night to pee. Idiot was wearing slippers. He slid two hundred yards down a slope into a crevasse so deep the Sherpas say he's probably still falling."*

*"He should have been wearing crampons."*

*"Or at least carrying his ax so he could self-arrest."*

(SELF-ARREST HAS NOTHING TO DO with law enforcement. It's one of the first things they teach you in mountaineering. If you start sliding down an icy slope with nothing to grab on to, you'd better know how to stop yourself by digging in your crampons, or punching your ax into the ice and hanging on for dear life. All steep slopes end badly, in trees, solid walls, or deep holes. "Screaming in terror doesn't slow you down one bit," one of my instructors told me. "If you want to live you'd better learn to avoid the void." Self-arrest wasn't my best climbing skill. Hearing about a guy dying because he stepped out to go to the bathroom made my skin crawl.)

*"JOSH IS SO CUTE! What do you think he'd do if I snuck into his tent one night?"*

*"I don't think that's included in the permit fee."*

*"If you wait until you're above twenty thousand feet nothing will happen. More than your lungs shut down at—"*

THE MOST INTERESTING PART of my grist gathering got cut off by the entrance of Holly Angelo.

"Hello everyone! . . . *gasp* . . . My name is Holly Angelo. I'm a journalist from New York and I'll be joining you . . . *gasp* . . . on top of the world!"

Holly did not mingle, she mangled. Her gasps were met with other gasps, but not because of the thin air, although a lot of the oxygen was sucked out of the mess tent when she walked in.

All conversation stopped.

A plate of food dropped.

A Sherpa nearly swallowed the cigarette he was smoking, then made a mad dash for the back entrance with five or six other Sherpas. I was going to join them, but I was too slow. Talons with bright red fingernail polish latched onto my parka.

"Where... *gasp*... do you think... *gasp*... you're going?"

Holly whipped me around to face her with surprising strength.

"Uh...," I stammered.

"I need to talk to you."

"Uh... okay."

"Now... *gasp*... I have seen your pitiful... *gasp*... tent and I think you will be a lot... *gasp*... more comfortable... *gasp, gasp*... in my tent."

I thought I would faint.

"I have a lot... *gasp*... of room... *gasp*... an extra cot..."

No one hauled a cot all the way up to Base Camp, but she had a spare.

"... and my food is much better than... *gasp*... this swill. Pierre is creating something right now... *gasp*... and Ralph has his massage table set up if you need a rubdown."

"Uh..."

"Your father said it was up to... *gasp*... you."

Thanks, Dad.

*Coughing fit...*

I thought about sneaking out while she was coughing.



She would straighten up and ole Peak would just be gone. Poof! Then I thought about what Josh had told me: *Be very careful about what you say* . . . and figured that it also applied to what I did. It's rude to disappear when someone is hacking their lungs out.

"We have so much to discuss," she said when the fit was over, which seemed to have helped her gasping. "Your mom and I go way back. We've been friends for years."

If that had been the case I would have recognized her name the first time I saw it in the byline above the article she'd written.

"She would never forgive me if I didn't watch out for you up here."

"I appreciate the offer," I said, trying to give her my version of Josh's charming grin (which probably looked more like a scowl), "but I think I'll stay in my own tent."

This was returned with a genuine scowl. I didn't care. There was no way I was going to become her tent mate.

"But you will have your meals with me," she said, as if this wasn't even open to question.

I was holding the plate of noodles, which had cooled and congealed and wasn't looking its best at that moment.

"Not every meal," I hedged. "But yeah, I'll eat with you once in a while."

Her scowl deepened and I think she was about to say something nasty, but I was saved by Josh coming into the tent.

"Okay, people," he announced. "Tomorrow we head up to ABC."

A cheer went up.

"It'll take us three days and two nights to get up there if

everything goes well. We'll spend two nights at ABC, then come back down. You know the routine."

"Climb high, sleep low," the team chanted in unison.

"Leah will check you tonight to get a baseline on your blood, et cetera, then check you again up at ABC to see how you're doing."

This news was met with much less enthusiasm.

"She's waiting for you in the Aid tent." He pinned a sheet of paper on the tent pole. "She wrote down your exam times. Don't be late."

"Heil Hitler," a climber muttered under his breath.

Josh shot him a look and he turned bright red. Nobody got up to the summit unless the expedition leader said they were going up. It was best to stay on the captain's good side.

"What about the *puya* ceremony?" someone asked.

A *puya* is a Buddhist blessing ritual that most climbing parties went through prior to going up the mountain.

"We'll be going up to ABC two more times in the next few weeks," Josh said. "We'll hold our *puya* before one of those. I want to get an early start tomorrow."

A couple of the Sherpas didn't look too happy about skipping the *puya*.

"Pack just enough food for the trip," Josh continued. "It will be a hard climb and you don't want to be carrying any more weight than necessary."

The speech ended and the climbers gathered around the sheet. Josh walked over to Holly and me.

"You two won't be coming," he said. "I'm holding JR, Jack, and Will back, too. You haven't acclimatized enough to go higher."

"Then why don't you wait a few days?" Holly asked. "We can . . . *gasp* . . . all go up together."

It was a good question. Mostly because I couldn't imagine being stuck in camp alone with Holly for the next several days.

Josh lowered his voice. "I'd like nothing better than to wait, but most of these people have been here for weeks. If I don't get them higher they'll riot. A third of them have only signed up for ABC. When we come back down they're gone, which will make things a lot easier around here. I'll take you up to ABC as soon as I get back down. I can't hold them back because of latecomers."

## LATECOMERS

**JOSH'S ABSENCE WASN'T AS BAD** as I thought, although Zopa worked Sun-jo and me like dogs.

The morning Josh headed up the mountain he had us build a six-foot-tall cairn out of rocks around a central flagpole for the *puja* blessing ceremony. We then placed smaller poles in the ground around the main pole and strung up dozens of prayer flags between them on strings. The flags come in five colors—red, green, yellow, blue, and white—representing the earth's five elements: fire, wood, earth, water, and iron. As the flags flutter in the wind they release the prayers written on them and pacify the gods.

When we finished Josh had Sun-jo and me gather gear from our team's tents and lean it against the cairn to be blessed.

Zopa held the ceremony that evening for a German and Italian climbing party going up the next morning, and for our group in absentia, which he said wasn't ideal, but it sometimes worked. He recited several Buddhist prayers, then asked the mountain for permission for us to climb it—in German, English, and Italian, which was impressive.

The ceremony took about three hours, and just as it was ending, a black bird landed on the main flagpole, which Zopa said was very auspicious.

"What kind of bird was that?" I asked as we headed back to camp. It looked kind of like a crow or a raven.

Sun-jo shrugged.

**IT TURNED OUT** that even though Holly Angelo was right next door to me, she was relatively easy to avoid.

She never left her tent before ten. I was out of mine by seven every morning. Because there were so many people in the camp, it was easy to get lost among the tents, unless you were Holly, who wore the most garish-colored snowsuits on the slope. I could pick her out a mile away and hide.

She did manage to snag me for dinner the fourth night Josh was gone. I made the mistake of heading back to my tent to drop off my ice ax before dinner (Zopa had been giving Sun-jo and me self-arrest lessons), and Holly was waiting for me like a guard dog.

The food was better than what they offered in the mess tent, but the atmosphere was grim. Ralph sat on his massage table with a permanent pout on his face, as if he were waiting for customers he knew would never come.

Chef Pierre watched every bite of food I took and muttered about the barbaric cooking conditions at 18,000 feet.

And Holly . . . Well, my headache came back, but it wasn't from the altitude. Inside a tent her voice was shrill enough to sour yak butter. She was no longer gasping, which I missed because the pauses gave my ears a chance to rest.

I thought she was going to interview me, but it turned out that I was there to listen to her interview herself. During the two-hour nonstop monologue she filled me in on her life, year by boring year. I didn't really start tuning in until she turned eighteen, but even then it wasn't very interesting.

She'd been married three times and her current husband lived in Rome and she rarely saw him. She came from a wealthy family and didn't have to work for a living. She became a "journalist" (as she called it) against her father's wishes because she felt it was her "moral responsibility to tell the truth." (I didn't mention that in the article she'd written about us there were several things that were blatantly untrue.) I also think she exaggerated her climbing conquests, because when I asked her what mountains she had climbed, she said, "You know, all the big ones," and quickly changed the subject to dreams, asking if I ever have them.

"Yes."

"Well, let me tell you about one I had just last night," she said.

I hate hearing about people's dreams, but I was spared by the arrival of William Blade and three bodyguards the size of yetis.

In his films William Blade had been shot, stabbed, starved, beaten, and tortured, but he had never looked worse than when he hobbled into Holly's tent.

"His back went out," one of the bodyguards explained. "We were wondering if your massage therapist can put him right."

"Of course!" Holly said, pushing things out of the way (including me) to make room.

Ralph smiled for the first time since he had arrived on the mountain and gleefully began laying out liniments and lotions and flexing his muscles (which weren't very impressive).

I stayed long enough to watch them get Blade out of his clothes and onto the table, where he started yelling and

swearing at everyone in the tent as if we were personally responsible for his bad back.

I didn't see what happened the next day (Zopa had Sun-jo and me climbing a treacherous icefall outside camp) but we heard all about it when we got back that afternoon.

After Ralph worked his magic on the film hero's back, Blade offered to pay him twice as much as Holly was paying to move over to his camp. Apparently, Ralph couldn't get his gear together fast enough. When Pierre saw this he begged Blade to take him, too, which he did, leaving Holly absolutely alone in her giant pink tent screaming in rage.

The bet was she was going to quit the mountain. The only person who put cash down on her staying was Zopa. He met everyone's wager with the money he had gotten from his cigarette sales.

It was hours after the incident before Holly emerged from her tent. It turned out that she wasn't about to head home to her Upper East Side penthouse apartment.

We were in the mess tent waiting to hear from Josh and the team up at ABC. They were supposed to leave that morning for Base Camp, but got pinned down by a snowstorm. We had heard that some of the people up there had HAPE, but the storm had knocked out further radio communication, so we didn't know who was sick or how bad it was. If the team wasn't able to start down the next day, the situation would turn critical. They had brought only enough food for two days at ABC.

A couple of the Sherpas were talking about hauling up some food for them.

"Not tonight," Zopa said. "The storm is moving down the mountain."

The Sherpas and a small group of other climbers were arguing with Zopa about his weather prediction when Holly sauntered into the mess tent.

"I'm going to the top," she announced calmly, then walked over and got a plate of food.

The only person smiling was Zopa. And why not? He had just won a pot of money—literally. The mess cook had been keeping the bets in a ten-gallon rice cooker, which was now overflowing with rupees.

Sun-jo had told me that if Zopa won the bet he would give the money to the Tibetan monks.

They would have to wait to get their cash. I didn't know this yet, but just like Holly, Zopa had no plans to go home anytime soon.

"The snow is here," one of the Sherpas said.

"That's impossible," I said. I hadn't been in the tent more than twenty minutes. When I'd walked over from HQ there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The cook pulled the flap back and we stared outside in disbelief. The snow was so thick I wasn't sure how I was going to find my tent.



## GAMOW BAG

I MADE IT AS FAR as the HQ tent, but no farther that night. The storm dumped about four feet of snow on Base Camp. It was much worse up at ABC.

Josh managed to get through on the radio only once during the night. It was scratchy and broken-up, but we think he said there were sustained winds of seventy-three miles an hour and gusts of over a hundred. The team members were hunkered down in their tents, but there was no way for Josh to check on them because of the weather.

At first light he dug out and reported in again. "Base, we're all accounted for, but we have two cases of HAPE. Francis and Bill. One severe, one mild. How's the weather down there?"

"Clear," the radio operator, Sparky, answered. "I just checked the meteorological maps and there's nothing new coming in until tonight."

"When?"

"Storm's ETA is nineteen hundred, give or take several hours."

Josh gave a harsh laugh, followed by a coughing fit. When he finally recovered he said, "I hear you on that weather window. I'll start everyone down as soon as we get them re-hydrated. We're giving Bill extra Os and he's responding well. I think he'll be able to make it down on his own. Leah and I

will follow behind him with Francis and a couple Sherpas. We'll give Bill a hand if he needs it. We're trying to get Francis into a Gamow Bag."

Francis was the guy who grunted at the noodles. A Gamow bag (pronounced "GAM-off") was invented by Igor Gamow in the late 1980s and has saved a lot of climbers from dying of HAPE. It's like an airtight body bag. At high altitudes the air pressure is extremely low. You zip the victim inside a Gamow bag, pump it full of air until it's about the same pressure as it would be at sea level, and bingo, the climber can breathe again... hopefully.

"We'll start looking for the first climbers in about eight hours, then," Sparky said. "Be careful coming down. Avalanche risk is high."

"Keep us posted on the weather."

"Roger."

**I DUG MY TENT OUT** of the snow, then Zopa asked Sun-jo and me to dig out Holly's tent, which took us hours. She didn't help us, but she did keep us supplied with hot tea and cookies.

Late that afternoon the first of our team members started to straggle in, looking like zombies from *Night of the Living Dead*. It took them each three mugs of steaming sweet tea in the mess tent before they were finally able to put a coherent sentence together.

"It was a nightmare.... The snow started a thousand feet below ABC. It was so thick we had to fix a rope and tie ourselves together so we didn't lose anyone."

"Couldn't see a bloody thing past your eyelashes. Then it *really* started snowing."

"Twenty-two below at ABC without the windchill. We nearly froze to death trying to get our tents up."

The guy talking gingerly pulled the glove off his right hand. Three fingers were discolored and blistered. "Krieger says I'll keep the digits, but the little toe on my left foot is going to slough off in about a week. Never liked that toe, anyway." He laughed, but it wasn't a merry sound. "I'd show it to you, but it would just make you sick."

"The blizzard wasn't the worst of it," another climber said. "Not by a far sight." He was a cowboy from Abilene, Texas. "An avalanche hit us at about two in the morning. Sounded like the biggest dang stampede you ever heard. Wiped out seven tents. Didn't lose a soul, thank the Lord, but we had to double and triple up in the remaining tents like sardines."

"Then the food ran out," the man with the frostbitten fingers said. "Josh only had us bring enough for the trip up and back. This morning there wasn't a raisin to eat between us. We're lucky it cleared up. A couple more days and we would have starved to death."

"You're right about that, partner," the Texan agreed. "When I crawled out this morning I was eyeing one of them yaks with murder in my heart. Guess we should have had that dang *puja* ceremony before we started up the hill."

"Where's my—where's Josh?" I asked.

"Him and Krieger are still haulin' Francis down," the Texan drawled. "They didn't leave till late, from what I hear. Turns out Francis is claustrophobic. Should have guessed it. He's always sleeping with half his head outside the tent door. He about went plumb crazy when they zipped him into that bag. The only thing that saved him was that he passed out after a bit."

You might be thinking that the above conversation was a little coldhearted. And you'd be right. It was ten below zero outside, slightly warmer in the mess tent but not by much. When you are exhausted, having a hard time catching your breath, freezing, starving, waiting for your little toe to drop off, you have other things on your mind than the welfare of your fellow climbers.

Zopa waved Sun-jo and me over to him and told us to get our gear. We were going up the mountain to help Josh and Leah.

**JR. WILL. AND JACK** joined us. They had been filming our climbing lessons with Zopa the past few days, and I wasn't sure they were coming with us to help or to get footage of the Gamow bag in action.

I didn't think a thousand feet would make that much of a difference, but at that altitude even a hundred feet made a difference. Having to plow through freshly fallen snow didn't help. About every twenty steps I stopped, sucking in ragged breaths of freezing air. At this stage, my hope of getting to the summit, a mile and a half above where I was currently suffocating, seemed about as likely as me flying a Gamow bag to Jupiter. My only consolation was that Sun-jo and the film crew were having as much trouble as I was.

The one person who wasn't affected was Zopa. He'd wait for us until we were about fifty yards behind him, then continue up the Rongbuk Glacier like a mountain goat breaking trail.

By late afternoon there was still no sign of Josh and the others. If we didn't find them soon, we'd be searching in the dark, but even worse, clouds were starting to come in.

Zopa let us catch up to him just as the sun started slipping behind the mountain.

"Maybe they're spending the night at Camp Two or the intermediate camp," JR suggested between gasps.

There are two camps on the way up to ABC: an intermediate camp, and Camp Two, which lies three-quarters of the way up to ABC. The intermediate camp was nowhere in sight, which meant we weren't nearly as far up the mountain as it felt.

"And if they are not at the intermediate camp or Camp Two?" Zopa asked. (Meaning if Josh and Dr. Krieger had passed the camps, or hadn't reached them yet, they could freeze to death.)

"Good point," JR conceded. "What should we do?"

Zopa looked down the glacier, then squinted up at the darkening sky.

"A storm is coming," he said. "You can get down to Base Camp in an hour and a half, maybe two hours. If you leave now you can beat it."

JR gave him a skeptical look. We had been climbing for over four hours now.

"Downhill," Zopa said by way of explanation. "The trail is broken. Don't wander off it."

"What about you?" I asked.

He pulled his headlamp out of his pack and strapped it around his parka hood, then started to slip his pack back on. "I know your father. He will not watch that man die. He will try to get him off the mountain."

I think all of us wanted to go back down to Base Camp (I know I did), but none of us wanted to go down without Zopa, especially with bad weather moving in.

We put on our headlamps and followed Zopa's light.

Two hours later, in the dark, with the snow beginning to fall, we spotted two headlamps flickering a few hundred yards above us.

Josh and Leah looked completely done in. I don't think they would have made it much farther on their own. And I don't know who was happier to see who. They were happy we were there to help get Francis down, and we were happy to find them because it meant we got to go down.

"Did you bring Os?" Josh asked, kind of slurring his words.

Zopa pulled an oxygen tank and mask out of his pack. Josh cranked up the regulator and handed it to Leah, who took in several deep lungfuls. Josh was next. When he finished he offered it to us, but we all bravely shook our heads. We hadn't been up as long or as high as he and Leah, and the only reason they took hits was because they were exhausted. Climbers usually didn't start sucking Os until they got to Camp Five.

Zopa pointed to the bag. "How is he?"

"Alive . . . at least the last time we looked. But he has HAPE bad."

JR pointed his headlamp at the transparent window on the top of the bag, but it was too fogged up to see inside.

"You still with us, Francis?" Josh shouted.

I thought I heard a muffled reply, but it was hard to tell in the howling wind.

"He's writing a message," Leah said.

We stared as a feeble, backward *se4* appeared in the condensation on the window.

Josh managed to laugh, then looked at Leah. "Should we let him out?"

She shook her head.

"You're the doctor." He squatted and got closer to the bag. "Help has arrived, Francis! We'll have you down to Base Camp soon!"

Soon turned out to be four more hours. The glacier was steep and icy. We had to place ice screws and lower the bag on ropes a few feet at a time so it didn't take off like a toboggan.

We stumbled into Base Camp long after midnight. The camp was usually lit up like a Christmas tree with blue, red, and green tent lights, but this late, most of the climbers were asleep. We hauled the Gamow into the Aid tent and laid it on a cot. Leah pulled off her outer and inner thermal gloves with her teeth, then slowly unzipped the bag.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Francis was the color of a corpse. He blinked his eyes open and managed to give her a weak smile. He whispered, "I'm not claustrophobic anymore."

Leah smiled and put a stethoscope to his chest. "But you still have HAPE."

"I'm not going to the summit?"

"Not this year," Josh said, looking just as disappointed as Francis. He had another opening on his climbing permit.

**WE LEFT FRANCIS AND LEAH** and went into the mess tent. A handful of the team, staff, and Sherpas were still up drinking tea and playing cards. Josh reported on Francis's condition. When he finished he asked how Bill was.

"Not too good," the Texan answered. "He doesn't want to go back up."

Josh swore. Another climber down—and no one had climbed higher than ABC yet.

The mess tent cleared out pretty fast after that, leaving me, Sun-jo, Zopa, and Sparky. It felt good to drink hot tea and to breathe and have air actually fill my lungs. I felt like I was sitting in an oxygen tent, not a mess tent.

"Peak and Miss Angelo need to get up to ABC," Zopa said.

"I know," Josh said. "I was going to take them and the film crew up when I got back, but I'll have to wait a few days now. I'm wiped."

"I'll take them all up tomorrow," Zopa offered.

I couldn't even imagine walking back up the glacier in a few hours, but I couldn't protest in front of Josh or Zopa. I wished that JR, Will, and Jack hadn't headed to their tents after filming Francis being freed from the Gamow bag. If they had been there to hear Zopa's suggestion, I'm sure they would have protested for me.

"I can't ask you to do that," Josh said.

"You didn't ask me," Zopa said. "I offered. They need to go up. The weather will break in a few hours."

"Not according to the satellite maps I just looked at," Sparky said.

Zopa shrugged. "The maps are wrong."

"What about Holly?" Josh asked.

"I had a doctor from another camp look at her earlier today," Zopa answered. "She can go."

Josh grinned. "So, you already had this figured out before you came up to get me."

Zopa ignored the comment. "We will take some of the porters and yaks," he said. "Resupply what was lost in the storm. There are some Sherpas I would like to visit at ABC before I leave the mountain."



“Did you talk to Pa-sang?”

Pa-sang was Josh's sirdar, who I had seen around camp but had never officially met. He was constantly rushing around, yelling at the porters, arguing with Sherpas, or in the HQ tent talking to the Base Camp crew.

“He had the porters pack what was needed this afternoon,” Zopa answered.

Josh looked at me. “Are you ready for twenty-one thousand feet?”

I said I was, but I had some serious doubts. I hoped Zopa was wrong about the weather.

## ABC

**THE NEXT MORNING** I poked my head through the tent flap.

Crystal clear, twenty-eight degrees, no wind—by far the best weather we'd had since getting to Base Camp—and I could not have been more disappointed.

I had a sore throat and it felt like the muscles and joints inside my skin had been replaced with broken glass.

Sun-jo was sitting outside waiting for me, dressed in my former clothes, including my so-called junk boots. And there was an added touch: The Peak Experience logo had been sewn on both the parka and his stocking cap. I thought Zopa had traded all that stuff away. Why was Sun-jo wearing my clothes?

"You do not look well," he said.

"I do not feel well," I croaked back at him. "What's with the clothes?"

"They didn't fit you," he answered. "Zopa gave them to me."

I was too out of it to pursue it any further. I reached back into the tent for my water bottle and found it was frozen solid. I was so tired the night before, I had forgotten to put it in the sleeping bag with me to keep it from freezing. I'd spent hours packing and repacking my gear for the trip up to ABC.

Sun-jo pulled his water bottle out of his backpack. I took

a deep swig and handed it back, wondering why he had a backpack.

"Are you going up to ABC with us?"

"Yes," he answered. "And I would like to leave before the herders. I don't like stepping in yak dung."

"Me either," I said, although I had never seen yak dung. The porters kept yaks corralled at the far end of camp. I hadn't been over there yet, but you could sure smell the shaggy bovines when the wind blew from that direction.

I wondered why Zopa hadn't mentioned Sun-jo going up to ABC with us the night before, but I was too tired, hungry, and worried about the climb to ask Sun-jo about it right then. "Guess we'd better try to wake up Holly."

"She and Zopa have already left," Sun-jo said.

I looked at my watch in a panic, but it was only nine o'clock. "When did they leave?"

"Two hours ago."

"Why didn't Zopa wake me up?" I asked (although I was glad for the extra sleep).

"Miss Holly is a slow climber. We will overtake them."

I grabbed my gear and checked it one last time, then we went over to the mess tent to get something to eat. The only person inside was the cook. I was disappointed Josh wasn't there to see me off, but considering what he had been through the past few days, I couldn't blame him for sleeping in.

Halfway through my breakfast, JR, Will, and Jack dragged in, blurry-eyed and irritable, but after half an hour of coffee and carbs they began to perk up.

"Let's get this over with," Will said, smearing glacial cream on his face to prevent it from burning.

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**AT FIRST IT APPEARED** that Holly was a faster climber than Sun-jo thought, but her speed was explained a few hours later when we finally caught up to her near a stream of glacial meltwater: Zopa had been carrying both his and Holly's heavy backpack as they made their way up the steep glacier.

Even without the backpack she was having a hard time catching her breath. She tried to smile when she saw us but couldn't quite manage it. Zopa looked a little haggard, too, which wasn't too surprising considering he was carrying as much weight as a yak.

Speaking of which, the yak herd had been gaining on us all day long and were now less than a hundred yards behind. Each yak carried over a hundred pounds of supplies *and* their own fodder—there was nothing else for them to eat this high.

With a grim expression Zopa looked at the long line of animals. I guess he didn't want to trudge through their dung anymore than we did.

"Those cows are going to ruin our shots," JR said.

"They're not cows, they're yaks," I said. "And how are they going to ruin your shots?"

"We're filming you, not a bunch of herders and their yaks."

I thought that at 19,000 feet all my hot buttons were out of reach, but JR had just managed to punch one of them dead center. I hated television documentaries where they filmed the intrepid scientist, climber, or explorer in the middle of some dreadfully hostile environment *all alone*. Oh yeah? Then who's operating the camera as they battle the elements *all alone*?

Back at Base Camp I had overheard climbers complaining about the "filthy" porters and herders and their "stinking"

yaks. When something was missing from one of the camps, the porters and herders were always the first suspects.

Sure, I didn't want to step in yak dung, but it was pretty humbling to hear those same herders and porters in their cheap boots, ratty clothes, and heavy packs coming up behind us with the strength and breath to whistle, chant, and sing as they hauled *our* gear up the mountain. None of us were whistling or singing and we were carrying a tenth of what they had on their backs.

"Without those herders, yaks, and porters we wouldn't be here," I said to JR. "Leaving them out of the film is like leaving Everest out of the film. They're more important to a climber getting to the summit than the climber."

I didn't have enough breath for any more, but I think I made my point because Zopa laughed, long and hard (which is hard to do at that altitude). And when the yaks and herders and porters reached us JR filmed the entire procession crossing the stream, including the bloody spots in the snow left by the yaks that had cut their hooves on sharp rocks.

We gladly followed their dung trail all the way up to the intermediate camp. The camp wasn't exactly what I expected.

It was located at the very edge of an unstable cliff above a roaring glacial river. Behind us was a slope that looked like it was going to come tumbling down on top of us. I pointed out these two potential disasters to Zopa, and as an exclamation mark, a boulder popped loose and came tumbling down the slope, sliding to a stop about fifty feet from where we were standing.

"It's level," Zopa said as if a comfortable sleep were all that mattered before we were crushed to death.

I looked around at the others. None of them seemed bothered, but that might have been because they were so exhausted they could barely move. I knew exactly how they felt. The simplest tasks seemed to take forever and we weren't even up at ABC yet. There were three higher camps above that.

After setting up our tent (Sun-jo and I had decided to bunk together so we didn't have to carry up an extra tent) we set up Holly's. She hadn't uttered a single word since we'd caught up to her. She was sitting slumped on a flat rock like a puppet with its strings cut, watching us through dull, lifeless eyes.

Sun-jo went to help Zopa and the other Sherpas get dinner ready, and I walked over and asked Holly how she was doing.

She took several deep breaths, and on the last exhale managed a wheezy "Fine."

At sea level anyone who looked like she did would be in the back of an ambulance on their way to emergency, but at 19,028 feet the emergency threshold was proportionately higher. Even so, I didn't like Holly's chances for getting any farther up the mountain in the condition she was in.

A shot of Os would perk her right up, but it would also defeat the purpose of acclimatization. Her body was actually climbing as she was slumped on that cold rock, which was the whole purpose of climb high, sleep low. . . .

"Red blood cells are multiplying by the millions to protect our bodies from the thin air. These new red cells stick around during the rest periods at lower altitudes, making it easier the next time you go up. So even though—"

"Shut up, Peak," Holly managed to say with a small smile.

"What?"

"I know . . . *gasp* . . . how . . . *gasp* . . . red blood cells . . . *gasp* . . . work."

I stared at her completely dumbfounded until I realized that somewhere in the middle of my thoughts I had started talking out loud without realizing it, which should give you some idea of what kind of shape *I* was in.

"Sorry."

Holly nodded. "Help me to my tent."

When I got her up she swayed, but a couple of shallow breaths steadied her. It took us a good five minutes to walk the fifteen feet to the tent, and by the time we got there we were both gasping. It felt like somebody had cut *my* strings. What was happening to me?

I deposited Holly in her tent, then slowly made my way over to Sun-jo and Zopa, wondering if I was going to make it there without collapsing. Zopa handed me a cup. I took it from him, but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with it.

"Drink," he said.

*Oh yeah*, I thought sluggishly. *A cup. You drink from it.*

That first sip flowed down my esophagus and hit my belly like some kind of magic elixir. "What is this stuff?"

Zopa stared at me. "Tea," he said. "With sugar."

"What kind of tea?"

"Plain old green tea."

He reached into the inside pocket of my Gortex coat, pulled out my water bottle, and shook it. It was nearly full.

"Dehydration," he said. "You are not drinking enough. This will kill you faster than the thin air." He nodded toward Sun-jo, who also had his hands wrapped around a mug of tea. "Sun-jo is guilty, too."

I hadn't felt thirsty all day, but I knew Zopa was right. If

you waited to drink until you were thirsty at this altitude it might be too late.

"Holly!" I said with alarm, thinking she was suffering from dehydration, too.

Zopa shook his head. "Miss Holly has had plenty of fluids," he said. "I made certain."

"She's not doing well," I said.

"I have seen worse," Zopa said. "And some of those made it to the summit. You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not."

## I HAD A MISERABLE NIGHT.

I went a little overboard in my hydration and had to get up three times to pee. Then, it seemed that every time I started to doze off, a boulder from the slope let loose, causing me to sit up in terror as I waited for it to crush us. But the worst problem was my throat. By morning it felt like I had a hard-boiled goose egg lodged in it.

With all my tossing and turning and peeing, I don't imagine that Sun-jo got much sleep, either, but he didn't complain.

On a bright note, the morning was as mild as the previous morning, and Holly was much improved. She managed to walk to the mess tent to have breakfast with us. (The night before, Zopa had served her dinner in her tent.)

The herders and yaks left an hour before we did. They would go straight up to ABC without stopping at Camp Two, which should give you some idea of the kind of shape they were in compared to us.

JR came up as I was packing the tent and said he wanted to do an interview with me before we headed up. Sun-jo and Zopa were packing up Holly's gear.



I had already done several of these interviews down at Base Camp and I dreaded doing any more. I had discovered that a camera in my face and a microphone boom dangling above my head turned me into a babbling idiot.

"Just act natural," JR would say. "Be yourself."

Right.

Then he would give me little prompts like: "What's it feel like to be up on the world's greatest mountain with your dad?" Or: "How does being up on Everest compare to climbing skyscrapers?"

I would try to answer the questions with straightforward honesty and end up spewing forth the most incredibly lame answers imaginable.

I stopped packing and joined the crew, trying not to look too glum. They had positioned the camera in front of the rotting slope, and I was up all night listening to the slope belch boulders. Will made me squat, pulled the hood off my head so they could see my face, and wiped off all my glacial cream, which I had just carefully applied.

"Man, wouldn't it be great if one of those big boulders let loose while we're doing this?" Jack said. (He was the sound guy and was always hoping that something horrible would happen when the film was rolling.)

"Okay," JR said. "We're going to keep it real simple today. I just want you to repeat what you said yesterday about the yaks and porters. That was really poignant. And you were absolutely right. I don't know if they'll use it in the final version but they sure ought to."

I was thrilled. In fact, during my sleepless night I had thought about what I said and wished they'd had the camera rolling.

JR gave the cue. "On three . . . two . . . one . . . tape rolling . . ."

I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

"We're rolling," JR said impatiently. (The camera batteries didn't last very long in cold weather.)

I tried again, but nothing came out.

"Any time, Peak."

"A boulder's coming loose," Jack said excitedly.

"Come on, Peak!"

I pointed to my mouth and shook my head. My voice was gone.

JR swore.

"That boulder's ready to pop," Jack said. "I think it's going to miss us, but it will definitely be in the frame."

"Zopa!" JR yelled. "Can you come over for a little stand-up?"

Zopa shook his head and pointed at Sun-jo. "Let Sun-jo do it."

"Get out of the frame, Peak!" JR shouted.

I moved and Sun-jo quickly stepped into my place.

"We're still rolling," JR said. "Talk about your feelings toward the mountain, Sun-jo. Maybe something about your father. On three . . . two . . . one . . ."

"My father came to Sagarmatha when he was my age," Sun-Jo said in his cool accent. "He started as a porter and worked his way up to become a Sherpa and an assistant sirdar. He told me that he climbed mountains so I would not have to, but I think there was more to it than this . . ."

The boulder Jack hoped would fall did, along with a ton of other debris. Sun-jo did not flinch, or even glance behind him at the mini-avalanche. He just kept talking, and JR kept filming.

"My father was a stranger to me, but here on the mountain I am getting to know him through the conversations of the Sherpas and climbers and porters. I came here to see the mountain, but what I'm discovering is my father."

"Beautiful!" JR said.

It *was* beautiful. And I hate to admit it, but I was a little jealous of Sun-jo's smooth performance. Unlike me, he was totally comfortable in front of the video camera. JR had never praised me after a taping. Of course I was lousy at it, but still . . .

Jack and Will were patting Sun-jo on the back, telling him what a natural he was. I walked back to our tent and finished packing. I don't think they realized I had left.

**AT MIDMORNING** the weather turned, with gray clouds coming in from the west and a bitterly cold wind blowing down the mountain. We had to stop and put on more layers of clothes. I covered my face with a silk balaclava and wool scarf. My throat was no better, but I trudged on, one step at a time, stopping every half hour, unwinding my shroud to drink, and gagging on every gulp.

Zopa walked behind us, still carrying Holly's load and gently coaxing her up the slope as if he were her personal Sherpa or something. I didn't know if she had hired him, or promised to give money to the Tibetan monks, or if it was something else. But without him, she would have been going downhill instead of up.

It took us eight hours (half a mile an hour) to get to Camp Two. There were so many climbers there we barely had room to pitch our tents. Some of the climbers were coming down from Camp Four above ABC, some were on their way up to ABC, and some were using the site as their Base Camp,

which was hard to imagine because I could barely breathe. The film crew had to set up their tents on the far side of camp from us.

The camp was at the junction of two glaciers: East Rongbuk and Beifeng. You couldn't see the Everest summit from the camp, but there was a spectacular view of three other Himalayan peaks: Changtse, Changzheng, and Lixin.

There wasn't enough room to set up the mess tent, so we were on our own for dinner.

I got the stove going while Sun-jo walked down to a glacial pond to get water. By the time he got back it had started snowing. We put the water on the stove and waited for it to boil, which was taking longer and longer the higher we climbed.

I wasn't hungry, and I don't think Sun-jo was, either, but we both knew we had to eat.

Sun-jo asked me how I was doing. I tried to answer, but all that came out was a hissing croak. It didn't bother me that I couldn't talk. What worried me more was that the sore throat might be the beginning of something worse. There was a nasty virus going through Base Camp that had everyone in an uproar. If you catch something bad enough your climb is over. As a result the teams had circled the wagons by staying in their own camps and suspiciously eyeing the approach of other climbers as if they were plague carriers. Typically, one of the porters was accused of bringing the virus to camp, as if the climbers were incapable of carrying a virus to Everest.

As we waited for the water to boil we watched Zopa set up Holly's tent, which she crawled into as soon as it was up. He then put up his own tent and started making their dinner.

"I was talking to one of the other climbers," Sun-jo said. "He told me that tomorrow will be a big test. He's been up

to ABC and has spent one night up at Camp Four. He said if we make it that far we should be able to make it to the summit..."

I should have been paying more attention to what Sun-jo was saying, but at that moment I was having a minor crisis that had nothing to do with my sore throat. What was causing the meltdown was the fact that it had been a relatively easy day but I was a complete wreck.

*You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not.* Zopa's words had been echoing in my brain all day—and I was betting that Peak Marcello was in the "not" crowd, right beside George with the clogged heart and Francis of the Gamow bag.

Dr. Woo had been wrong about my conditioning or else I had screwed myself up by getting dehydrated. But if that was the case, why wasn't Sun-jo suffering? I looked over at him. He was stirring the pot, chattering away like we were camped on a beach.

**THE NEXT MORNING ZOPA** dragged us out of our tent before dawn. There was about a foot of new snow on the ground, but it had stopped falling.

"Hard climb today," he said. "And we need to get up fast, or there won't be a place to pitch out tents. How's your throat?"

I shook my head. My voice was still gone, but I didn't feel any worse than I had the night before, which I considered a victory.

**OUTSIDE CAMP** we started up the Trough, a depression that sits between two rows of jagged ice pinnacles that looked like

giant canine teeth. The main path was well worn and clearly marked by the yaks. Zopa warned us to stay on the path.

"If you wander off it, even to take a pee, you could be lost forever in the ice maze."

(I promise this is the last time I'm going to talk about high-altitude bodily functions. Answering a call of nature on the mountain is a huge ordeal because at that altitude you can't do anything fast and you have to take off layer after layer of clothing. It can delay your climb by a half hour or more, which can ruin your chances of getting higher because bad weather moves in so quickly. This is why you try to take care of all this before you leave camp.)

About noon we ran into the porters, yaks, and herders heading back down to Base Camp. They were still whistling and singing and I was tempted to get in line with them. I think the only thing that stopped me was that Holly had been in front of me all day long, and I wasn't about to let her get any higher up the mountain than me.

Two hours later we got our first look at ABC. Sun-jo pointed out the tiny colored tents in the distance, but the camp wasn't as close as it looked. It was three more torturous hours away. The only bright spot was that Sun-jo and I managed to pass Holly and Zopa about a hundred yards before they reached the camp.

ABC: 21,161 feet. Higher than Kilimanjaro and Mount McKinley. And I felt it. The crude camp made every other place we had stayed seem like paradise. It was situated on a pile of rubble between a glacier (that looked like it had been formed by frozen sewage) and a rotten rock wall. The ground was littered with ankle-breaking rocks and life-ending crevasses.

JR filmed our triumphant arrival. I barely had the strength even to look at the camera as I trudged by it.

There were only about six tents set up, so there was plenty of room for us to stake out an area for the team. Unlike at Base Camp, people weren't wandering around socializing. They were either too pooped to move or terrified about twisting something this close to the top.

By the time Zopa and Holly arrived, we had our tents set up and a fire going from the wood the porters had left.

"How's your throat?" Holly asked.

Sun-jo and I nearly fell off the rocks we were sitting on. This was the first full sentence she had put together since we left Base Camp, and her voice almost sounded normal. We had passed her, but she seemed in better shape than we were.

"It's . . . still . . . sore," I said with difficulty.

"I think there's a doctor up here," she said. "I'll go find him."

By the time we had her tent up she was back with the doctor in tow. He looked like he needed a doctor himself, but he examined my throat, then called Leah Krieger down at Base Camp. They decided to put me on antibiotics.

Josh came on the radio and asked me how it was going. I couldn't answer, so I turned over the radio to Holly, who gave a glowing report. Josh said they were heading up to ABC, then to Camp Four for a night and would no doubt see us on our way down.

(I should mention something about the radios here. The frequencies were wide open, and people had nothing better to do than sit in their tents and monitor the chatter. This included Captain Shek and the soldiers. As a result, everyone

was careful about what they talked about, especially expedition leaders like Josh.)

The next day was basically spent lying in our tents trying to breathe, hoping that our red blood cells were doing what they were supposed to be doing. When we moved it was in slow motion, like we were on the moon. You'd get a plate of food and stare at it, thinking a couple minutes had passed, and tell yourself you should try to eat before it cooled off. . . .

Fork to mouth.

Ice cold.

Huh?

Look at watch.

Half an hour?

How?

By the morning we left, the antibiotics had kicked in and my throat was better. I even managed to croak out a couple of understandable sentences.

Sun-jo, on the other hand, wasn't feeling good. He had spent a good deal of the night vomiting outside our tent door. Every time he puked, Zopa would come over and make him drink, worried about dehydration. I felt bad for him, but to be honest, his getting sick perked me up a little. (Terrible, I know.) I felt better knowing that I wasn't the only one having a difficult time.

The three-day trip up took us nine hours to complete on the way down. We ran into Josh between the first and second camps. He asked how my throat was, then continued toward ABC, shouting down to us that he would see us in a few days.

Holly not only carried her own backpack on the way down, she beat us to Base Camp by half an hour. *You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not.*