

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.

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.*

LETTERS FROM HOME

THAT FIRST NIGHT BACK in Base Camp I slept for fifteen hours.

When I finally woke up I felt as good as I had ever felt in my entire life. I could have easily gone out for an 18,044-foot jog, but instead I walked to the mess tent and ate about nine pounds of food.

Dr. Krieger came in and watched me wolf down my last plate, then took me over to the Aid tent to look at my throat. She said that it was better, but I needed to keep taking the antibiotics for the next week to make sure it went away.

My next stop was HQ, where they congratulated me on making it to ABC and gave me a packet of letters from home. There was a card from Rolf, two letters from Mom, and five thick letters from Paula and Patrice. The envelopes were crumpled and smeared with dirt and grease. I looked at the postmarks. The mail had been sent to Josh's office in Chiang Mai, forwarded to Kathmandu, and from there, no doubt, thrown into a truck headed to the mountain.

Thin-air mail.

Getting the letters caused my good mood to tank. I hadn't spent one minute thinking about my family since I'd arrived at Base Camp, and I felt a little guilty. But what really bothered me was that the letters had arrived at Base Camp in the first place. This meant that some of those letters I had sent to my father when I was a kid probably had arrived, too.

He had gone into a tent at some high-altitude camp just like this, and come out with a stack of letters, which included a letter from his son.

I was so mad I wanted to run up to ABC and punch him in the goggles. Instead, I decided to finish *Moleskine #1* (which you are reading) and send it to my mom. Kind of like a long letter. I was not going to ignore my family the same way that Josh had ignored me. And it would fulfill my requirement for Vincent at GSS.

The next morning I went to the mess tent to get something to eat before getting back to the Moleskine. Sun-jo wasn't there.

"Boy very sick," the cook told me

I took a thermos of hot tea over to Sun-jo's tent. He was cocooned in his sleeping bag like a caterpillar larva with only his stocking-capped head sticking out.

"You shouldn't be here," he croaked, but I could tell he was happy to see me.

His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. And maybe it was the dim light coming through the blue nylon tent, but he looked like he had lost ten pounds since I last saw him.

I poured him a cup of tea.

"You shouldn't be here," he repeated.

"Forget it," I said. "You and I have been swapping germs for weeks. I'm immune." I put the cup to his lips, hoping I was right.

"I will be better in a few days."

Looking at him, that was hard to believe, but I said I was sure he was right.

I stopped by the Aid tent. I wasn't sure if Dr. Krieger's duties included treating kitchen help, but if they didn't I was going to talk her into it.

She was tapping away on her laptop, but stopped when I came in.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Fine, but I'm worried about Sun-jo."

She made me open my mouth and shone a light down my throat.

"Inflammation is almost gone," she said, clicking off the light. "But you need to keep taking those antibiotics, especially if you insist on visiting sick people in their tents."

"So you've seen him?" I said.

"Last night and this morning."

"And?"

"And he's sick, but he'll live."

I spent the next two days writing and managed to finish the first Moleskine on the day Josh was to return from ABC and Camp Four. When I got to the end of the notebook I wrote letters to Paula and Patrice thanking them for the artwork they had sent and telling them how I had pinned it up in my tent so it was the first thing I saw in the morning and the last thing I saw at night. I told them that I missed them so bad, I was thinking about rustling a yak and riding it back to New York.

Last, I wrote to Rolf. He had sent me a card with a photo of King Kong clinging to the Empire State Building. Inside were three one-hundred-dollar bills and a handwritten note:

Hang in there, Peak.

I miss you.

I want you home.

Love, Rolf

Not "we." *I miss you. I want you home.* With these two sentences he had done more for me than Josh had ever done, or could ever do.

I went over to HQ and addressed the envelopes. Sparky told me the mail would go out the following morning.

When Josh arrived late that afternoon, I didn't tell him about the Moleskine or the letters. He didn't deserve to know.

MULES

KINE #2

SECRETS

THE MEETING WAS SECRET, held at HQ after the other climbers had all gone to sleep.

By invitation only: Josh, the film crew, Sparky, Dr. Krieger, Thaddeus Bowen, and Zopa, who had brought Sun-jo with him. (Sun-jo looked a little better, but not much.) Josh glared at him, and I thought for a moment he was going to ask him to leave, but he let it go.

“Where’s Holly?”

No one seemed to know.

“We’re not waiting,” Josh said. He turned to Dr. Krieger. “How’s Peak’s health?”

“I think we might have gotten the infection with the antibiotics. As long as it doesn’t migrate to his lungs he should be fine. There were three new cases of pneumonia reported in camp today. I suspect it’s a secondary infection from the virus. William Blade is one of them. Everyone in his team is sick. They left this afternoon and we quarantined everything they left at their campsite.”

The news about William Blade and her former entourage was going to please Holly to no end.

Josh turned to Zopa. “Can Peak make it to the top?”

I was still seriously annoyed with Josh over the letters and this was not helping. I hate it when people talk about me as if I’m not there.

Zopa shrugged. "We will have to see how he does at Camp Four. He was fine at ABC."

I wasn't "fine" at ABC, but I appreciated him saying so.

"Thanks for getting him up to ABC," Josh said. "I suppose you'll be heading back to Kathmandu."

Zopa gave him another shrug.

"What about Holly?" Josh asked.

"She's strong," Zopa said.

Josh looked a little surprised. I was, too. She was fine when she finally got to ABC, and on the way down, but I wouldn't have characterized her climb as strong. What was Zopa up to?

"It won't hurt us to get Holly to the summit," Thaddeus said. "She'll talk and write about it for the rest of her life. Good PR for Peak Experience."

"I suppose you're right," Josh reluctantly agreed. He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and flipped through the pages.

"Okay. We have ten people to get to the top, counting Peak and Holly. Out of those, six or seven have a decent chance if they hit the weather window right." He looked at Sparky. "Do you have some dates for me yet?"

"I'm looking at the week of May twenty-fifth through June fourth." Sparky looked over at Zopa. "But astrology might give us a better idea than meteorology."

"Any ideas, Zopa?" Josh asked.

Zopa shook his head. "I just look up at the sky."

This got a laugh from everyone, but I don't think Zopa meant it to be funny.

"If your weather prediction is right," Josh said to Sparky, "that doesn't give us much time." He walked to the calendar on the wall. "Peak's birthday is six weeks from today. That

gives us about five weeks to get him into position for a summit attempt. And I'd like to get him up there earlier than that."

"I agree," Thaddeus said. "If something happens and Peak can't get to the summit, we might have a chance for a second try."

"Thaddeus, there won't be a second chance," Josh said. "Peak either makes it on the first try or he doesn't."

Josh was right. Second tries were virtually unheard of on Everest. If you fail you have to return to Base Camp. There's not enough oxygen at the other camps to get your strength back and recover. It takes three days to get back to Base Camp with a night at Camp Six and a night at ABC. Five days at Base Camp (longer if you're really hammered), then back up, which can take eight or nine days—all together nearly three weeks. It would be mid-June before I could make another attempt, long after my fifteenth birthday. Climbers have been stopped one hundred yards from the summit (by weather, exhaustion, or time) and have never made another attempt as long as they lived.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Josh continued. "There's a couple signed up to go to Camp Four, but they're strong enough to go a lot higher. In fact, they have a better chance of getting to the summit than most of the others on the team. If we put them on the two scratched permits it would increase our summit percentage by at least twenty percent."

"Did you talk to them?" Thaddeus asked.

"Yeah, but no promises. I wanted to discuss our options first."

"I think you should send Sun-jo to the summit," Holly said, startling all of us. Uncharacteristically, she had slipped into the tent quietly.

"Who?" Josh asked, annoyed.

"Zopa's grandson," Holly answered.

This sure got everyone's attention. We stared at Sun-jo and Zopa with our mouths hanging open. I think my mouth was open a little more than the others. Josh looked like he had been slapped in the face. Why hadn't Sun-jo told me that Zopa was his grandfather?

Sun-jo sat with his chin cupped in his hands, seemingly oblivious to our shock.

"What's your father's name?" Josh asked him.

"His name was Ki-tar Sherpa," Sun-jo answered.

"I knew him," Josh said quietly. "I didn't know he had a son." He looked over at Zopa and gave him his trademark grin. "What are you up to?"

Zopa answered with a shrug. None of us believed him. There was a lot more to this than Josh, Sun-jo, and Zopa were letting on.

Josh looked back at Sun-jo. "How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen years old," he answered.

I think we had just gotten to the main reason Zopa had agreed to leave the Indrayani temple and take me to Base Camp.

Josh was no longer grinning, nor was anyone else, especially me. I considered Sun-jo a friend. He must have known about a summit attempt back in Kathmandu. He certainly knew that Zopa was his grandfather. I should have guessed something was up when Zopa outfitted him in my climbing gear. Holly clearly had been let in on the secret, which might explain why Zopa had all but carried her up to ABC.

"When is your birthday?" Josh asked.

Sun-jo looked at Zopa, who gave him a nod.

"May thirty-first."

Six days before my birthday.

Josh was visibly relieved, but only for a second.

"How do we know that?" Thaddeus asked.

Sun-jo reached into the pocket of his (my) parka and produced a tattered piece of paper sealed in a Ziploc plastic bag. He pulled out the paper and handed it to Thaddeus.

"This is in Nepalese," Thaddeus said.

Josh took it from him and read it over. "No, it's Tibetan," he corrected, then looked back at Sun-jo. "You were born in Tibet?"

"Yes, sir," Sun-jo answered. "I was five when my father managed to get my mother and me across the border into Nepal. I am a free Tibetan."

"There is no such thing," Josh said. "How did you get back into Tibet? You certainly didn't use *this*." He handed the piece of paper back.

"Forged documents," Zopa said.

Josh swore. "Well, your grandson isn't going to be a *free* Tibetan for long if Captain Shek finds out about the bogus papers," Josh said. "They'll arrest him. You'll probably be hauled away, too."

This explained Sun-jo's disappearing act whenever the soldiers were around.

"A summit attempt is worth the risk," Zopa commented.

Josh looked at Sun-jo for a moment, then back at Zopa. "I owe you, Zopa, but I haven't decided if Sun-jo's getting a shot at the top. And besides, we don't have enough climbing Sherpas to get three teams to the top. And that's what we're talking about. Three separate teams."

"Yogi and Yash," Zopa said.

Josh laughed and shook his head. "You had this all figured out before you left Kathmandu, didn't you?"

Zopa didn't answer, but it was clear he had.

"Maybe you and I should go someplace a little more private to talk about this," Josh suggested.

"That is up to you," Zopa said. "But I don't mind speaking about it here."

"Suit yourself." Josh looked at everyone in turn but lingered when he got to Holly. "This is totally off the record. Nothing we say here is to leave this tent—and I mean ever. If the Chinese get wind of this they could shut down our expedition—but worse, they might grab Sun-jo and put him in prison."

I thought of the shackled road gang we had passed after we crossed the Friendship Bridge and gave an involuntary shudder. I was mad at Sun-jo, but I didn't wish that on anyone. Being arrested in the U.S. was nothing like being arrested in Tibet. I looked at him. He seemed worried, almost as if it had just dawned on him what would happen if Captain Shek caught him with false papers.

Everyone nodded in agreement, although I think the film crew would have loved to have their camera rolling. (Not that Josh would let them use any of the footage in the final documentary.)

"Sun-jo's mother was born in a small village on this side of the mountain," Zopa explained. "My son met her on an expedition. It took him years to get her and Sun-jo out of Tibet into Nepal. Sun-jo is both Tibetan and Nepalese."

"The Chinese won't see it that way if Sun-jo gets caught up here," Josh said.

"If we put him on the summit they'll never give us a climbing permit for the north side again!" Thaddeus shouted. "That could take away half our business. The Tibet route is harder than the Nepal route. It has more prestige. By bringing Sun-jo here you've jeopardized our entire season. And for what? If Peak and Sun-jo make it to the top, Sun-jo still won't be the youngest to reach the summit."

"But he would be the youngest free Tibetan to summit," Zopa pointed out. "It's a matter of national pride."

"We're in business," Thaddeus said. "Not politics."

"What is the difference?" Zopa said.

"Enough," Josh said. He looked over at JR. "How's the filming going?"

"Okay," JR answered. "We have some decent climbing sequences, a couple of good interviews."

I cringed a little hearing this. He couldn't be talking about the interviews with me.

"Any footage of Sun-jo?"

"A lot. He and Peak have been climbing together. What are you thinking?"

"Yeah," Thaddeus added a little belligerently, "what *are* you thinking?"

"I'm not sure yet," Josh said. He looked over at me. "How do you feel about sharing the glory?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," Thaddeus said.

Josh ignored him. "What do you think, Peak?"

I wasn't doing this for the glory. Or was I? I looked over at Sun-jo and Zopa. They were both stone-faced. I was furious with both of them—Sun-jo more than Zopa because Zopa never told anybody anything.

I wanted to tell Josh to send Sun-jo packing back to Nepal, but instead, without much enthusiasm, I said, "It's okay with me."

"Can I talk to you, Josh?" Thaddeus asked. "Alone."

"Sure."

After they left everyone sat there for a few moments without saying anything. JR finally broke the silence.

"Poker?" He pulled a deck of cards out of his parka.

"Might as well," Sparky said. "Josh and Thaddeus could be a while."

"I'm in," Holly said.

I walked over to where Sun-jo and Zopa were sitting.

"Thank you for supporting me," Sun-jo said.

"You should have told me."

"I did," Sun-jo said, glancing at Zopa guiltily. "At least indirectly."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our first night at ABC," he answered. "I talked about how if *we* got up to Camp Four *we* had a good chance at the summit."

He was right about it being indirect. I barely remembered the one-sided conversation. "That's pretty lame," I said.

Zopa came to his defense. "Sun-jo did not know in Kathmandu," he said. "He thought I was taking him here to become a Sherpa. It wasn't until we were on our way to ABC that I told him about the summit."

So Josh and I weren't the only ones Zopa played cagey with. I glanced over at the poker game, which was in full swing, with a pile of money in the center of the table. They were lucky Zopa wasn't playing.

"I'm going over to the mess tent for some tea," Zopa said.

I waited until he was out of the tent, then asked Sun-jo why he hadn't told me that Zopa was his grandfather.

"Zopa thought it best if we kept that to ourselves," he answered.

If Zopa asked me to keep something to myself I probably would have, too, but it still bothered me that Sun-jo didn't tell me.

Zopa returned with a thermos of tea and several mugs. I took my mug over and watched them play poker. I wasn't really interested in the game, but I didn't want to hang with Zopa and Sun-jo. Holly won every hand, much to everyone's annoyance.

About twenty minutes later Josh and Thaddeus came back into HQ. At first I thought Thaddeus had gotten his way because he was all smiles. Sun-jo noticed his expression, too, and looked disappointed.

"All right," Thaddeus said, smiling at Sun-jo and Zopa. "You've got your shot at the summit."

"You're all heading back up to ABC the day after tomorrow," Josh added.

The film crew groaned.

BEAR AND BULL

THREE TEAMS: A, B, AND (SHH!) C.

We were the C team: Sun-jo, me, the film crew, and Holly—led by Zopa, Yogi, and Yash. (I guess the brothers had not hitched a ride to find a job on the mountain. They already had a job. Zopa had hired them to help him get Sun-jo to the summit.) And I think the C stood for “covert,” not third, because we were getting the first summit shot, not the last, and somehow we were supposed to keep all of this quiet.

The night before, Josh and Thaddeus hadn’t told us to outright *lie* to the other climbers, but they came pretty close to it.

“We’ll have to keep this to ourselves,” Thaddeus had said, lowering his voice despite the fact that it was ten degrees below zero outside and the wind was howling down the mountain at about twenty-five miles an hour. It wasn’t likely someone was standing outside the flap eavesdropping.

“Thaddeus is right,” Josh agreed. “Some of the other climbers are real head cases. There’ll be a fight over who goes first. It’s ridiculous, but it’s the same every year. They can’t get it into their oxygen-starved brains that reaching the summit has nothing to do with the order you climb. It depends on the weather.”

Josh was fudging this a little. Sitting at Base Camp, or up at ABC waiting your turn, increases your chances of catching

a virus or twisting an ankle, to say nothing of the sheer boredom and psychological damage of lying in your cramped tent day after day wondering if you are going to make it to the top.

We were getting the first shot because of my birthday. Period. It could take every one of those thirty-plus days to get me to the top before I turned fifteen.

"In case anyone asks," Thaddeus said, "this is what we're doing." He looked at the film crew. "You're making a documentary about Sherpas." He looked at Holly. "You're writing a story about Sherpas." He looked at me. "You're just tagging along to help with the filming. As far as anyone knows, a summit attempt is not part of the documentary."

"Sun-jo's going to have to move to the porter camp tonight," Josh said. "It's the only way we can keep him under wraps. Can you arrange that, Zopa?"

Zopa nodded.

Josh looked at Sun-jo. "Captain Shek and the soldiers rarely go to the porter camp, but just to be safe, you need to dress and act like a porter. No fancy western climbing clothes. The porters are hauling supplies up the mountain the day after tomorrow. You'll all go with them. When you get to Intermediate Camp, out of sight of the Chinese, you can change into your climbing gear. When you come back down you'll need to change your clothes and stick with the porters. If Shek catches you, you're toast."

"Toast?" Sun-jo asked.

"You'll be chipping boulders into gravel," I explained.

"Oh." A look of dread crossed Sun-jo's usually calm and cheerful face.

"So," Josh continued, "Zopa will lead the C team. I'll lead the A team. And Pa-sang will lead the B team."

I was disappointed that I wouldn't be trying for the summit with my father, but I wasn't surprised. ("Change of plans" had been the theme of our relationship my whole life.) I was also worried about Zopa and Sun-jo.

"Paranoia feeds on thin air . . ." That's a direct quote from one of Josh's climbing books, and the feeling was beginning to gnaw at my guts.

With Sun-jo in the mix it seemed to me that he and Zopa had everything to gain if I didn't make it to the summit. I'm not saying that they would try to stop me, but even the slightest mistake, accidental or intentional, could end my climb. And no one would be the wiser. Bad things happen on mountains. It's part of every climb. And when something goes wrong it's usually blamed on bad equipment, bad weather, bad luck—rarely on the climbers themselves.

"Any questions?" Josh asked.

I had a couple dozen questions, like: If Zopa could get forged papers good enough to get Sun-jo over the Friendship Bridge, why should we trust his tattered birth certificate? He could be six months younger than me for all we knew. Zopa knew exactly when my birthday was. He was there when Mom radioed Josh on Annapurna.

Was Josh hedging his bets by sending Sun-jo up with me? If I didn't make it, Josh's company would still receive the credit for getting the youngest climber to the top of Mount Everest. Sun-jo was on his climbing permit. Did it really matter to Josh which of us made it to the top?

But I didn't ask questions or even make a comment. I was so confused and mad, I didn't trust myself to open my mouth.

"There's no way we'll be able to keep this a secret from the other climbers," JR said. "There's only one final approach

to the summit and we'll all be taking it, single file like ants."

Josh gave him the grin. "No worries. Once the A and B teams get to Camp Four the only thing they'll be thinking about is where their next breath is coming from."

"What about when they get back to Base Camp?" JR asked.

"If they get to the summit they won't care who made it to the top and who didn't," Josh answered. "The important thing is to give them a good chance. Your team will be four or five days ahead of A and B. When you get above Camp Four be careful what you say on the radio. One slip of the tongue and everyone on this side of the mountain will know what we're up to. When you pass us on your way down don't say anything about the summit. We'll sort it out later."

"The other climbers are done with their second trip to ABC," JR persisted. "They're at least a week ahead of us in terms of acclimatization."

He was right. The third trip to ABC was when you usually tried for the summit. We were a trip behind Josh's other climbers.

"If the weather breaks our way we'll try to get them to the top sooner," Josh said. "If not, they'll have to wait it out in Base Camp along with everyone else. We can't all head to the top at the same time. There isn't enough room."

Which meant the other climbers could be sitting at Base Camp for another six weeks before getting their shot at the summit. And I knew that would not *sit* well with them.

I HAD A LOUSY NIGHT lying in my sleeping bag, thinking of all the ways Zopa and Sun-jo could sabotage my summit try if they wanted to. It was a depressingly long list.

Late the next morning when I finally poked my head out of my tent, a light snow was falling. I got dressed and went over to the mess tent, where I found Zopa and the film crew talking quietly about the shift in the documentary.

(Or were they talking about me until they saw me walk up? Josh was sure right about that thin-air paranoia thing.)

"Are you sick again?" Zopa asked.

Don't you wish, I thought, but told him that I had never felt better in my life. He didn't look like he believed me. I dished up a bowl of oatmeal, then took a seat at the table next to them. We had the tent to ourselves except for the cook cleaning up after the breakfast rush.

"As soon as you finish eating," JR said, "I'll show you how to use the camera."

"Why?"

"Because there's a decent chance that Jack, Will, and I won't make it to the summit. Someone has to get it on film."

They were all strong climbers. It hadn't occurred to me that they might not make it to the top.

"We'll try," Jack said, "but you never know."

"This is my third trip to Everest," JR said. "The closest I've gotten was just above Camp Six. The weather turned us back and that was it. I'll give you one of our minicameras." He looked at his watch. "We'll meet you and Zopa outside HQ in fifteen minutes, then head over to the porter camp to shoot some footage."

They got up and left the tent.

I looked at Zopa. "Have you seen Josh?"

"He took some of his team up the mountain to practice climbing techniques."

I must have looked a little annoyed because Zopa studied me for a moment, then said, "How do you feel about your father now that you have spent time with him?"

"I haven't really spent much time with him," I answered, dodging the question.

Zopa sipped his tea, then said, "He can't help himself, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"In climbing he has found something he is very good at, something he has a passion for. Not many men find that."

"But what do you do when you get too old to climb mountains?"

Zopa laughed. "Most climbers do not get old."

"You did."

"I stopped climbing."

"Why?"

"My children were grown. I no longer needed the money."

"You must have climbed for more than money."

"Of course, but if I wasn't paid I would not have climbed at all. You climb for sport; Sherpas climb to support their families."

"So you're here to help Sun-jo become a Sherpa," I said.

"No. I'm here so Sun-jo does not have to become a Sherpa."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you're angry at me for not telling you about my plan for Sun-jo. And you're upset with Sun-jo for not telling you that I am his grandfather."

"What does that have to do with your not wanting Sun-jo to become a Sherpa?"

"To get him this far there were things I had to keep to myself. Things I asked Sun-jo to keep to himself. He really didn't know what I had in mind until I told him at ABC. I could not tell him until I saw how he did on the mountain. If he makes it to the summit, the notoriety it brings him will allow him to go back to school. I'm hoping he never has to climb again."

"Is that birth certificate real?"

"Yes. Sun-jo is a week older than you."

"What if I make it to the summit, too?"

Zopa shrugged.

This was not the answer I was hoping for. "I know what you're thinking," I said. "You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not."

Zopa smiled and got up from the table. "I'll see you over at HQ."

"I'm going to make it to the summit," I told him as he walked out of the mess tent.

In a strange way the conversation helped to center me. It reminded me that climbing, even though there might be other people in your party, is a solo sport. Your legs, your arms, your muscles, your endurance, your will are yours alone. A partner can encourage you, maybe even stop you from falling, but they can't get you to the top. That's entirely up to you.

I finished my breakfast feeling a little better and walked over to HQ to meet the film crew. Zopa was there, but Holly wasn't.

"She's already over at the porter camp," JR explained. "Dr. Krieger had some meds for Sun-jo, but didn't want to take them to the camp herself. Captain Shek would find that

suspicious. Doctors do not treat porters. Holly took them over for her.”

I guess I wasn’t the only one being transformed by the mountain. Holly had undergone a remarkable change since we got up to ABC. And it was clear by JR’s attitude that I wasn’t the only one to notice. Her voice was still a little shrill and she still wore her garish clothes, but she had taken care of me at ABC and now she was looking after Sun-jo. I don’t think she would have done that the first day she got to Base Camp.

JR handed me a small camera about the size of a sandwich. “I know it doesn’t look like much,” he explained. “But it’s reliable at high altitudes and it takes pretty good video—not as good as the one we’ve been using, but hauling the big unit to the summit is a pain in the ass.”

He showed me how to zoom in and out, how to frame a shot, how to use the built-in microphone, and how to change the memory card, which held about an hour of video.

“You have to be pretty close to pick up a voice,” Jack explained. “Especially if the wind’s blowing. Whoever’s talking will probably have to shout.”

“Consider the camera yours until the climb is over,” JR said. “We have another one we’ll take to the top if we make it that far. You need to practice with it. The hardest part is hitting the little buttons with gloves on. So practice with gloves. If you take off your gloves above Camp Five your fingers will fall off and you’ll be pushing buttons with your nose for the rest of your life.”

Pleasant thought.

“What am I supposed to be filming?” I asked.

“The story,” Will said.

“What story?”

"That's the big question," JR answered. "And part of the fun."

"And the mystery," Jack added.

"Josh hired us to film you," JR continued. "Now Sun-jo's been added to the mix, which changes the story. If you and Sun-jo don't make it to the summit the story will shift again. It might be about how you didn't make it—what stopped you. It might be about the friendship between you two..."

(Which was pretty shaky at the moment, but I didn't tell JR that.)

"... or Sun-jo and Zopa, or you and your father. The point is that we won't know what the story is about until we know how the story ends. All we can do now is film details. When we get done we'll piece the documentary together like a jigsaw puzzle."

Which is exactly how Vincent at GSS taught me to put a story together. He wouldn't let me write a word until I'd finished my research. *Hold the story inside until you are ready to burst.*

He made me write my research notes on three-by-five cards. On each card was a scene, a character note, or a detail from my research.

When you do your research write down whatever interests you. Whatever stimulates your imagination. Whatever seems important. A story is built like a stone wall. Not all the stones will fit. Some will have to be discarded. Some broken and reshaped. When you finish the wall it may not look exactly like the wall you envisioned, but it will keep the livestock in and the predators out.

(I wondered if Vincent would accept a documentary in place of a Moleskine, but I doubted it.)

"It would be great," JR continued, "if you could write

down your shots. It's not easy to do, especially at high altitudes, but it would help us when we edit."

"If you can't write them down," Jack suggested, "you can record what you're doing on the microphone."

FROM A DISTANCE the porter camp looked neat and prosperous, but as we got closer it became clear that it was neither. It seemed that everything in it was made out of castoffs—as if the porters hung around after the climbing season and collected the leftovers from our camp and put it in theirs. There were a couple of shacks that had more flattened tin cans nailed to them than wood. The tents were sewn together from bits and pieces of other tents. The yak halters were made from frayed climbing ropes.

The camp had a different smell to it as well: dung, wood-smoke, and the old palm oil that the porters cooked their food in. But the smell and disarray were soon forgotten in the minor stampede of men that came running when they saw Zopa. Sun-jo and Holly came out of a battered tent and joined us. Sun-jo still looked pretty weak, which I wasn't unhappy to see. I wondered how he was going to do tomorrow when we headed back up to ABC.

He pulled me to the side. "I appreciate your standing up for me last night," he said. "I am sorry I didn't tell you about Zopa."

"Forget it," I said, although I hadn't come close to forgetting it myself. "How was it staying here last night?"

"It's not as comfortable as the climbing camp, but the porters have been kind."

The porters had lined up in a long row and Zopa was walking down the line greeting each in turn and giving

blessings. When he finished we sat down in a large circle on blankets and sleeping bags and talked, with Zopa translating.

A good way to understand what the porters do for a living is to think of them as Himalayan truckers. The only difference is that their trucks have legs instead of wheels and are fueled by grass instead of diesel.

The nearest restaurant to our cabin in Wyoming was a truck stop. Mom and I used to go there all the time and we loved it. The truckers were friendly, funny, and full of stories. It was no different with the porters. I got so involved in their stories, I completely forgot about using my camera.

The porters were from all over Tibet and Nepal and spent nine months out of the year away from home. When they weren't hauling gear up Everest and other mountains they were guiding trekkers or moving supplies at lower altitudes. Most of the younger porters wanted to become climbing Sherpas because the money was better. The older porters seemed satisfied driving their yaks in spite of the hardships. They told us stories about falls and getting lost, but the most grim story was related at the end of the day by an old porter named Gulu, who was from the same village where Sun-jo was born.

(Gulu knew Sun-jo's mother well and claimed to have taken Sun-jo on his first yak ride when he was a baby. The porters and Sherpas were spread out over thousands of barren miles, but there always seemed to be connections like this between them.)

On the way back to camp JR said that Gulu's story was compelling but he couldn't use it in the final documentary. No room. Which is why I include it here. (Vincent taught me that what makes a story unique is not necessarily the infor-

mation in the story but what the writer chooses to put in or leave out.)

WHEN GULU was a young man he bought a beautiful yak bull from a distant village. It had taken him three years to save the money for the bull, which he planned to use to increase the size of his small herd.

"It was a long distance to the village where the yak was being sold," Gulu said, shaking his gray head. "The Chinese soldiers were everywhere, and it was dangerous on the road. I traveled at night and hid in the hills during the day so they did not rob or kill me."

It took him so long to get to the village that he was afraid the bull would be gone when he got there—either sold to another buyer or killed by the soldiers for food.

"But the bull was there," he said, "and more magnificent than I remembered. His hair was as dark as a moonless night, his back was as straight as a floor timber and as broad as I am tall." He laughed. "The owner regretted the price we had agreed upon and tried to raise it."

They argued for three days. In the end Gulu gave the owner all the money he had and a promise to bring him the first two calves the bull produced the following year.

"All of this took too long," Gulu explained. "The weather had turned bad. To complicate things I now had a yak with me that had been pastured for over a year with very little exercise. He was weak in the legs from being penned. I had to stop often for him to rest and eat. The other difficulty was that I had no money and I myself had to scavenge for food."

He decided the only way he would make it home before he and the yak starved was to take a shortcut through the

mountains. He had heard about the shortcut but had never traveled it.

"At first the route was good. It was far enough from the roads so that I could travel during the day without fear of soldiers. Then the path started to rise. The weather worsened the higher we climbed. The snow was deep. I should have turned back..." He grinned and shrugged. "But I was young and foolish and I continued to climb, driving the bull before me."

They reached the shortcut's summit and started down the other side, Gulu confident now that he and the bull were going to make it home safely. But as he was looking for a place to sleep an avalanche roared down the mountain and buried him alive.

"I was so cold," Gulu said with a shudder. "More cold than I had ever been in my life, before or since. I remember thinking how unfair it was that the avalanche hadn't killed me when it struck. I waited for death in that cold dark place, wondering how long it would be. After a while I felt a tugging on my right arm like a fish nibbling on bait. At first I didn't know what it was, then I remembered the bull. When we reached the summit I had put a rope around his neck to keep him close. It wasn't a long rope, two meters, maybe a little shorter. He was close, and he was alive, but was he above me or below? The snow was so tight around me I didn't know if I was facedown or faceup. I could have been standing on my feet for all I knew, or upside down on my head."

We all laughed, but being buried alive isn't funny.

"I am not sure why," Gulu continued, "but it seemed important to reach the bull. To touch him one last time. To apologize for taking him from the safety of his pasture. I

started to pull myself along the rope. It was slow and painful work. The farther I got up the rope, the harder the yak pulled—sometimes smashing my face into the ice before I could clear it away. Perhaps the bull is free, I thought, standing on the surface, tethered by the man beneath. I finally broke through, gasping for breath. The bull *was* on the surface, but he was not standing.

“As I examined him he kicked me several times, but I was so numb I barely felt it. My beautiful bull had two broken legs. I felt shards of bone sticking through his flesh. There was only one thing to do. I unsheathed my knife and cut his throat.”

The bull took a long time to bleed out. Gulu watched with tears freezing to his cheeks. Three years of hard work and sacrifice lay at his feet bleeding into the snow.

“But there was no time for sorrow,” he told us. “I had to get back to my village. If I didn’t, my family would have to pay the debt of the two calves. But first I had to survive the night.”

He slit the yak open, pulled his guts out onto the snow, then climbed into the body cavity to warm himself.

“Early the next morning my sleep was interrupted by a violent shaking. I thought the yak was slipping down the mountain. I put my head outside the carcass, and I don’t know who was more surprised: I or the bear pulling my precious bull down the mountainside.

“It reared up on its hind feet and let out a heart-stopping bellow that shook every bone in my body. I was certain I would be eaten. But I was saved by the Chinese army.”

Four soldiers had been tracking the bear and caught up

to it just as it bellowed. They fired and missed, but the bullets were enough to frighten the bear away. It lumbered up the slope and disappeared into the trees.

"All I had to do now was contend with the soldiers," Gulu said. "But I didn't think this would be a problem. I had no money. If they wanted the yak for food they were welcome to it.

"As they reached the carcass, I crawled out from my bloody shelter. When they saw me, the soldiers screamed like frightened children and threw down their rifles. Before I could speak they ran away."

After Gulu returned home he heard a rumor about four soldiers coming across a yeti feeding on a yak. A few weeks later there was a story about a cow giving birth to a full-grown man.

"How did you pay for the calves?" JR asked.

Gulu smiled. "I sold the soldiers' rifles. There was enough money to pay for the calves and to buy a new bull. He was not nearly as magnificent as the one that gave birth to me, but he was a good breeder and increased my small herd tenfold."

CAMP FOUR

ZOPA ROUSED HOLLY AND ME out of our tents at sunrise. Another beautiful day: clear, crisp, twenty-two degrees and rising—which meant we'd have to pack our cold weather gear on our backs instead of wearing it. To make things worse, Zopa gave each of us a pile of Sun-jo's gear to haul up to the first camp.

Holly's share was a lot smaller than my share. She finished repacking quickly and left for the mess tent. It took me forty-five minutes to reorganize what I'd packed the night before. I was slowed down by my ill feelings toward Sun-jo and Zopa. I couldn't believe it. Not only had Zopa taken my gear and given it to Sun-jo, but now I had to haul it up the mountain for him. It seemed that he was doing everything in his power to make sure I was too weak to get to the top.

When I finally finished my pack was fifteen pounds heavier than it was for my first time up to ABC. Not good. One pound can make a huge difference at this altitude. I was trying to decide what to leave behind when Captain Shek walked up.

"You try for summit?" he demanded.

He was out of uniform, dressed like a climber, which is probably why I didn't notice him sneaking up on me.

"Not today," I said.

"How old you?"

He must have been watching and had waited to catch me alone like this.

"How old you?" he repeated aggressively.

Trick question. He'd seen my passport. He knew exactly how old I was. He wanted me to lie. I told him the truth.

"Where other boy?"

Uh-oh.

"Who?" I'm a terrible liar.

"Boy you climb mountain with last week. Boy you walk with in camp. You and he good friends."

Captain Shek's English was a little rough, but the sarcasm was crystal clear. He had watched us walking around camp. He had seen us head up the mountain to ABC.

"Oh, him," I said stupidly. "I haven't seen him in a couple days."

"Where he go?"

I shrugged.

"You lying to me!"

(Apparently I couldn't even shrug a lie.)

"I kick you off mountain if you lie."

"Go ahead," I said, zipping my pack closed. Probably not the brightest thing to say, but I'd had about enough of Captain Shek and everything else on Everest.

He looked like he was about to explode. I don't think he was used to having a fourteen-year-old call his bluff. He raised his arm, and for a second I thought he was going to hit me, but then he smiled as if he realized the "This is the People's Republic of China, you have no rights" thing wasn't going to work with me.

"What is other boy's name?" he asked in a much more reasonable tone.

"He didn't say." I picked up my pack.

"I watching you."

I walked away feeling his eyes drilling into the back of my neck, proud of myself for not even thinking about ratting out Sun-jo.

As soon as I found Zopa I told him about the conversation. He was a lot calmer about it than I was, saying that Captain Shek was the least of our problems.

"In a few days you will be at Camp Four," he said. "This is all you need to worry about."

It turned out that he was right.

WE JOINED A SMALL GROUP of porters and their yaks heading up the mountain. Sun-jo was not with them. When I asked Zopa about this he said, "He will be along."

The trip up to Intermediate Camp was a lot easier than the first time. I wasn't able to sing and chant with the porters, but I was able to talk as I walked, which was a big improvement. I even managed to use the tiny video camera and discovered that I was a lot more comfortable behind it than I was in front of it.

The landscape had changed dramatically from the previous week. The warm weather had created several new streams of glacial runoff. It was difficult to find places to cross without drenching ourselves. The other problem was the rocks. The thaw was causing them to pop loose from the ice. It was like the glacier was a bowling lane and we were the pins. One of the porters and his yak got hit by a large rock and had to return to Base Camp.

"Did you get the strike on tape?" Jack asked.

"Uh, no."

He swore.

I spent most of the trip with Holly, who wasn't doing that well (I think because she was carrying her own pack). I offered to lug it for a while, but she insisted on carrying it herself (for which I was relieved).

She said she was thinking about heading home after we got down from Camp Four and wanted to know if I would give her an exclusive interview after I got down from the summit.

"You're going to quit?"

"Reaching the summit of Everest was not on my to-do list this year. If it had been, I might have done some practice climbs and visited the gym a little more leading up to this. Or maybe even climbed a skyscraper or two." She grinned and pointed at the peak. The clouds had cleared enough for us to see the very top. "I don't know if you've noticed, but that's one of the most daunting sights on earth."

"You don't strike me as easily daunted."

"Yeah, well..." She took a deep breath. "I've learned a couple things about myself up here. One, I'm getting older. And two..." She took another deep breath. "This mountain is a lot bigger than I am. It's humbling. The truth is I've had time to do some thinking. I can't tell you how long it's been since I've been alone. That's been humbling, too. Pierre and Ralph taking off was probably the best thing that ever happened to me."

Being in a camp with over three hundred people is not exactly being alone. But I knew what she meant. You don't have to be alone to feel alone.

"What about that interview?" she asked again.

I'd been doing some thinking, too. "We'll see," I said.

I could tell that Holly wanted to argue, but she was too out of breath to pursue it.

She and I straggled into camp after everyone else and we were both surprised to see Sun-jo sitting on a rock with a cup of hot tea in his hands, looking a little rumpled in his porter clothes.

"When did you get here?"

"A half hour ago."

"You left ahead of us?"

"No," he said, "I left the same time that you left."

I thought he was pulling my leg. There had been a dozen or so porters and maybe half that number of yaks. I couldn't have missed him.

"I rode on Gulu's yak."

"Yeah, right," I said. "When you were a baby." I had walked with Gulu some on the way up. The only thing I'd seen on his yak's back was a pile of hay.

"No," Sun-jo insisted. "I was concealed beneath the hay."

"You're kidding?"

He shook his head. "It was hot and uncomfortable."

I told him about Captain Shek.

A worried look crossed his face. "That means I'll have to go up the mountain again on the yak. I'm not looking forward to that. Thank you for carrying my things up here."

I wished he wasn't always so polite. It would be easier to be mad at him. "No problem," I said, and realized that the extra weight hadn't been a problem. That was encouraging.

I looked around camp. It had not improved in the past week. The boulder-belching slope looked even more unstable

than the last time we had been here. Zopa was looking at the slope, too, shaking his head.

"We cannot camp here tonight," he said. "We will go farther up."

I didn't recall anywhere to camp farther up, and I was right. He stopped us about a thousand feet above the collapsing wall and had us carve sleeping platforms into the ice. It took hours, and it was exhausting work at that altitude, but I was happy to do it. Anything was better than sleeping under the wall.

The next morning the cold was back, which was good because it lessened the chances of avalanches. On the way to Camp Two we heard over the radio that there were three climbing parties moving up to Camp Five. They were going to make a summit attempt the following day.

Gulu was concerned because they had taken only one load of oxygen tanks to Camp Five. Zopa radioed Josh.

"I heard," Josh said. "Idiots. None of them are fully acclimated. This is only their second time above Camp Four. As far as the tanks go, some of them are going to try to get to the top without supplemental Os. So there should be enough for those who need it."

"If the weather holds," Zopa said.

"I talked to them about that, but their concern is that there won't be another good weather window. Nothing we can do about it. After they get to Camp Five they're on their own."

What he meant by this is that above Camp Five there is little chance for rescue. The air is too thin for a helicopter and at that altitude everyone is too out of it to help anyone but themselves. If you die above Camp Five your corpse stays there forever.

"Oh," Josh said, "one more thing. Captain Shek has been asking around about a Sherpa boy. Says he thinks he came up on the truck with you."

"Sun-jo," Zopa said. "He left a few days ago to go back to school. He just came up for the ride."

"I'll pass that on to the captain."

This part of the conversation was obviously completely planned for Captain Shek's benefit. The only problem now was that if the captain caught sight of Sun-jo again, Zopa was going to be in trouble, too.

"Everything else okay?" Josh asked.

"Yes. We are all fine."

"I'll check in later."

Zopa signed off and JR pointed his video camera at Zopa. "Do you think those climbers will make it to the summit?"

"Perhaps," Zopa said. "But it is too early in the season. If they make it, others will try and some of them will die. There are no shortcuts to the top of Sagarmatha."

By the time we reached ABC the following afternoon we were all exhausted, especially Sun-jo, who was still feeling the effects of his recent illness. In a role reversal from our last time at ABC, I made dinner for us while he lay in his sleeping bag. I'd like to say that I felt sorry for him, but the truth is that I didn't. I was still resentful about his horning in on my climb.

After we ate I went outside and found the porters and Sherpas sorting through the gear they were going to haul up to Camp Five.

Zopa explained that the yaks could not go much past ABC. The Sherpas would carry the gear on their backs to camps Four, Five, and Six and establish camps a few days

before we made our summit attempt. In the meantime a couple of them would stay at ABC to guard our stuff.

"People would steal it?" I said.

"It has happened," Zopa said. "Not all expeditions are as well equipped or funded as your father's. Some climbers come to the mountain with nothing more than what they can carry, and sometimes they borrow equipment they find along the way."

The next morning he had us lighten our packs, carrying only what we needed for a night at Camp Four, which was a good thing because, three hours above ABC, we reached the foot of the Col, which is basically a pass between two peaks.

It was clear why the Col was a dead end for the yaks. The wall leading up to the pass was enormous. And from the base it looked terrifyingly unstable. Half of the wall was smooth, rounded off by strong winds, giving it the look of soft ice cream. The other half was made out of nasty seracs (or ice towers) that looked like giant jagged teeth. If I'd had enough breath the sight would have taken it away. I looked at my altimeter watch: 7,000 meters or 22,965 feet.

Holly slogged up and rested her hands on her knees before looking up at the terrible wall.

"No... *gasp*... way," she said.

I agreed.

Yogi and Yash walked up next, frowning and shaking their heads. Zopa and Sun-jo arrived last. Zopa was carrying Sun-jo's pack. Sun-jo looked really bad. When he saw the wall his face filled with dread. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Imagine what it was like two days ago when it was thawing," Zopa said.

It was a good point. Three teams had made it up to the Col in worse conditions than this.

The first stage was the hardest. It was up a steep pitch of soft ice. Sherpas had cut steps into the ice and there were fixed ropes, but the ice was slick and the ropes were still coated with ice because we were the first up that day.

We fell into an agonizing rhythm. *Slide the jumar up the rope.* (A jumar is a mechanical ascender with a handle that slides up the rope and grabs on so you have something to hold on to as you pull yourself up.) *Step, breathe, jumar, step . . .* Three hours later it was more like: *jumar, think, look up, think again, step, rest, rest, rest, hug the wall, pray . . .* as a chunk of ice the size of a Hummer fell past, crashing below, followed by the sound of our leaders, Yogi and Yash, laughing. Real funny. They were breaking away the loose ice along our route so it wouldn't unexpectedly peel us off the wall or knock our heads out of our butts—helmet and all.

I was next in line followed by the film crew, Holly, Sun-jo, and Zopa. The climb was anything but quiet with the brothers shouting "*Ice!*" and Zopa shouting "*Faster!*"

Four hours after we started up I reached the steepest pitch. Fifty feet. It might as well have been fifty miles. My arms and legs were numb and virtually useless, but the worst part was the air. There wasn't any. Or so it seemed. Each breath seemed to yield only a thimbleful of precious oxygen. Maybe enough to keep a bird alive, but not enough for an exhausted fourteen-year-old climber. Dr. Woo had been wrong. There was something the matter with me.

Yogi and Yash were already on top. One of them was manning the ropes and I hoped the other one was boiling snow at Camp Four. We would all need a steaming cup of tea when we got there. If we got there.

Holly, Sun-jo, and Zopa had dropped farther behind, but I could still hear Zopa shouting at them to move faster.

I was about ready to give up and head back down and go home when JR came up behind me. He looked terrible. His beard and goggles were covered with ice. It was a wonder he could see where he was going.

"Thanks for waiting," he rasped. "I need to film you arriving. Give me a couple of minutes' head start to set the shot."

I didn't have enough breath to tell him that I hadn't been waiting. I looked at my watch, and by the time I figured out what time it was, JR was already several feet above me. Without actually thinking about it I started up behind him.

An hour later, when I finally reached the top, Yogi hauled me over the edge by my backpack, which I was sure was not the shot JR wanted. Yogi's assist reminded me that seven weeks ago to the day a cop had done the same thing to me on the top of the Woolworth Building. I'd come a long way and it felt like it. I spent a good ten minutes on my knees trying to catch my breath until it dawned on me (again) that at this altitude there was no breath to catch. With difficulty I got to my feet and stumbled over to where Yash was trying to boil water.

Camp Four was tiny, and to make it worse, there was a gaping crevasse running beneath the crest, which I'd read was getting wider every year. Some believed that one of these days (hopefully not today) the whole thing would collapse and climbers would have to devise a new route up the north side.

I looked toward the summit, which was shrouded in gray mist, but I could see enough to pick out the route along the north ridge and across the north face to the pyramid. It seemed like a very long way from where Yash and I were squatting.

I couldn't imagine the three climbing parties trying for

the top feeling like I did. My ribs ached from trying to get enough Os into my lungs to survive. I knew that Zopa was carrying at least two tanks in case of emergency and I suspected that Yogi and Yash had a couple stashed as well. Sherpas do not climb without loads. For them that would be a waste of effort. I thought about begging Yash for a hit off the tank, but resisted the urge, knowing it would defeat the purpose of the climb. Instead, I started to put together my tent, which seemed a lot more complicated than it had at ABC the day before.

Jack and Will came over the top next. Will spent a good ten minutes on his hands and knees puking. (JR did not film this.)

Forty-five minutes later I was still working on the tent when Yogi hauled Holly over the edge, followed by Sun-jo and Zopa.

Zopa was shaking his head in disgust muttering, "Too slow, too slow, too slow..." He bent down to the two slow-pokes. "If you climb like that above here you can forget the summit."

Holly and Sun-jo were out of it and didn't appear to have the slightest idea of what he was saying. I thought he was being pretty harsh considering Holly's lack of conditioning and Sun-jo's recent sickness. He came over to where I was struggling with the tent and I thought, here it comes, but instead he patted me on the back.

"You did good," he said. "You have a chance."

That was like a whole tank of Os flowing into my bloodstream. Maybe he wasn't going to try to stop me from getting to the summit.

Suddenly, the tent made complete sense. I had it together

in less than five minutes. I got everything unpacked, the pads and sleeping bags spread out, then I started in on Holly's tent as she and Sun-jo watched through dull, lifeless eyes.

The burst of energy cost me. As soon as I finished, it was all I could do to get to my feet. Zopa brought over three mugs of tea and made us drink them down.

"Get your stoves going," he said. "I know you are not hungry, but you have to eat and drink." He looked up at the sky. "It's going to snow tonight."