

ARREST

ZOPA, THE WEATHER MONK, was right. Next morning: two feet of new snow.

Sun-jo and I probably didn't get three hours of sleep between us. He must have been feeling better, though, because he groggily offered to start the stove. The process sometimes takes ten or fifteen minutes because there isn't enough oxygen to keep the flame going on the gas lighter long enough to light the stove.

I crawled out with our pan to collect some snow to melt and saw Zopa, the Sherpa brothers, and the film crew were already up. And it was obvious from the steam coming off their pan of water that they had been up for quite a while. Zopa was talking on the radio. That could mean only one thing this early in the morning. Someone was in trouble. I glanced toward the summit through the swirling snow. If it was this bad down here, it was much worse up there.

"Yogi and Yash will stay here at Camp Four," Zopa was saying. "If the weather breaks they will try to get oxygen up to Camp Five."

"I'm not sure we can get them down to Camp Five," a shaky German-accented voice said.

"You must!" Zopa said forcefully. "There is no chance of rescue at Camp Five or Six. In this weather you will have to

come down to Camp Four. You must leave Camp Six as soon as you can. Do you understand?"

This was followed by a long silence, then a discouraged and quiet, "*Ja, verstehe ich.*"

He understood.

Zopa gave him a blessing in Nepalese and signed off.

"Are these the same Germans you did the *puja* ceremony for?" I asked.

Zopa nodded. "The Italians are up there as well."

"What's going on?"

"Two cases of HAPE at Camp Six," JR answered. "Maybe another mild case at Camp Five. Two climbers headed up to the summit a little after midnight and haven't been heard from since."

In this weather that meant they were probably dead, or hypothermic and close to death.

"Maybe we can go up to Camp Five with Yogi and Yash and help," I said.

Zopa shook his head. "You and Sun-jo and Miss Angelo need to get down to ABC. Other Sherpas are coming up to help, but until the climbers get to Camp Five there is nothing anyone can do. As soon as you eat pack your things. We need to leave before the weather worsens."

Because of the snow and ice, getting down the Col was worse than going up—and it wasn't made any easier by thinking about the climbers dying farther up the mountain.

We passed the Sherpas coming up to help. They were loaded with oxygen bottles and Gamow bags. Their plan was to get to Camp Four that afternoon. If the weather didn't hold them back, they would head up the mountain the fol-

lowing morning to help Yogi and Yash get whoever had made it to Camp Five down to Camp Four. If the weather broke, a rescue helicopter might be able to get that high, but even on the best day an airlift was dicey. If the chopper couldn't make it, the Sherpas would have to get the climbers down to ABC as best they could.

We made it down to ABC in pretty good time in spite of the snow. I think what drove us was our eagerness to crawl into our tents and sleep for two days. The camp was nearly empty. Sun-jo was still pretty weak, but confident that he would be better by the time we came up. I was beginning to feel a little less surly toward him. This probably had a lot to do with Zopa's compliment the night before. I was pretty sure they weren't out to sabotage my climb.

The next morning the film crew members were all vomiting. It looked like they had caught the same thing Sun-jo had. Zopa cut their acclimatization short and arranged to have them go down to Base Camp with another climbing party. None of them complained.

"I'm going, too," Holly said.

Zopa shook his head. "You are fine. To complete the acclimatization you will need to stay here at least two days."

She gave him a smile. "It's over for me," she said. "I have no desire to go higher than Camp Four."

"You could make it to the summit," Zopa insisted.

She shook her head, and grinned. "Too slow. It's not in me this year. I appreciate all you've done." She shook his hand, then turned to me. "What about that interview after you get to the summit?"

"I may not make it to the summit," I hedged.

"I think you will." She looked at Sun-jo. "How about you? Will you give me an exclusive interview after you come down?"

"Yes."

I thought he was being overly optimistic, but I didn't say anything.

"It's a deal and your grandfather is our witness," Holly said. "It means you can't talk to any other print journalist until after you talk to me."

"Call you in New York City?"

"Yes." She wrote down several numbers. "Don't lose them."

Before she left she gave me a hug. I didn't mind this time. In fact, I was going to miss her, which surprised me.

"If you ever get back to New York, Peak, you'd better call."

"I will."

As they headed down, JR stopped and shouted back for me to remember to use the camera.

Just before dark five climbers (two Germans, three Italians) and their Sherpas stumbled into ABC looking like they had been buried alive. Most of them had frostbite someplace on their bodies—fingers, toes, ears, noses. One of them had snow blindness and had been led into camp by a rope tied around his waist.

There was no doctor in camp, so Zopa and Gulu (who had stayed behind with his yak so he could sneak Sun-jo back into Base Camp) did their best treating their injuries. When they finished it was clear that three of the climbers were not going to make it down to Base Camp on their own. The other two German climbers who had HAPE were not going to make it down at all. They had died at Camp Six two hours

after Zopa talked to the distraught German climber the previous day. Four dead, assuming the two climbers headed to the summit didn't make it (which was a pretty good assumption at that point).

It's hard to think straight at that altitude, but I had enough feeling in my oxygen-starved brain to feel a little shame over the way I had been thinking about Sun-jo. Climbing Everest is not a competition. It's life and death.

The surviving climbers at Camp Six headed down to Camp Five. Yogi and Yash were helping them haul the climber with mild HAPE to Camp Four. Those who could would have to make their way to ABC the next day.

Zopa radioed Josh and told him what was going on.

"We have a chopper here with a Chinese pilot willing to take a risk," Josh said. "But the weather is going to have to get a lot better up there before he can give it a shot. Do you think it might clear before dark?"

Zopa did not have to look. Visibility was down to about twenty feet. "Negative," he answered.

"Then we'll have to wait until tomorrow. Any idea when the climbers from Camp Four will make it down to ABC?"

"No, but we will go up to meet them. Early afternoon, I hope."

"The chopper's small," Josh said. "It will hold only four people aside from the pilot and Captain Shek. You'll have to choose who gets a ride and who goes down on their own two feet."

"Captain Shek is coming up?"

"That's what I hear. He's still looking for that kid."

"Why? The boy left. He is certainly not up here."

"I told Shek that, but apparently he doesn't believe it. He searched the porter camp yesterday. And today he has soldiers checking everyone coming down to Base Camp."

"I guess he can do what he wants," Zopa said, but I could see he was worried.

So was Sun-jo. I wasn't sure how they were going to get him back down to the porter camp. Gulu's yak had eaten its hay, so there was nothing for Sun-jo to hide under. Captain Shek checking climbers was not good news, nor was his search of the porter camp.

"We have a lot of injured climbers up here," Zopa continued. "We could use the room in that helicopter."

"I know," Josh said. "I'll talk to Captain Shek again. Maybe he'll realize that taking up an empty seat might be the death of a climber, and the death would be his fault."

It was true, but the conversation was entirely for Captain Shek's benefit, who was no doubt eavesdropping.

"I hope so," Zopa said, then changed the subject. "Did Miss Angelo and the film crew get down?"

"They just arrived. Holly's packing her gear. There's a truck leaving tomorrow. To tell you the truth, she made it farther up the mountain than I expected. Doc's taking a look at the film crew right now. They barely made it into camp. Almost everybody has the virus down here. Leah's going crazy treating everyone. The chopper brought in more antibiotics. Five more climbing parties pulled up stakes this morning and left the mountain, sick as dogs. I think I'm getting it, too. If it keeps up no one is going to get to the summit from this side."

I hoped that what I'd gotten over was the same virus everyone else was getting now and that I wouldn't get it again.

I'd have to be careful when I got back down. I wasn't about to have a virus wreck my chances of getting to the summit.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING Zopa sent everyone down to Base Camp except for the climber with snow blindness and the man with frostbitten feet. Sun-jo and Gulu went with them. Sun-jo couldn't very well stay at ABC with Captain Shek coming up. I didn't ask how they were going to get him to the porter camp, but I guessed they would keep him at one of the camps between ABC and Base Camp until Captain Shek gave up.

Zopa asked if I wanted to go, too. I did, but I told him I'd stay and help him with the climbers coming down from Camp Four.

The weather had broken during the night. It was still cold, but the clouds had thinned and the wind had died down some. The climber with mild HAPE had gotten worse during the night and they put him in a bag. This meant they would not be able to bring him down the treacherous ice wall. The chopper would have to rescue him at Camp Four.

Our job was to help Yogi and Yash get the remaining climbers and Sherpas down to ABC as quickly as possible. If some of them needed to be flown to Base Camp they had to be ready to go when the chopper landed at ABC. There would only be one flight.

WE TRAVELED LIGHT and got to the base of the Col just as Yogi was coming down. He said that Yash was staying with the injured climbers at Camp Four.

"How many?" Zopa asked.

"Three. Two with bad frostbite and the one with HAPE."

He looked up. "Some of those coming down could also use a ride to Base Camp."

There were six climbers all together, exhausted but happy to get off the wall. Zopa offered them hits of oxygen, which most of them gratefully took. No point in acclimatization now. After they got to Base Camp they would be going home.

A half hour outside ABC the chopper flew over us on its way up to Camp Four. Zopa hurried everyone along thinking the pilot would not stay long after he landed at ABC.

It turned out the stay was longer than expected.

The chopper landed ten minutes after we arrived. Zopa picked two of the most debilitated climbers for the ride down and one backup in case Captain Shek had listened to reason and stayed at Base Camp.

He hadn't.

He stepped through the miniblizzard caused by the rotors wearing a full uniform including a pistol. The pilot followed behind him and looked as unhappy as all of us did. Helicopters aren't designed to fly at that altitude. If the weather got worse it wouldn't be able to fly.

Captain Shek didn't appear to be in any hurry at all. He casually walked over to the mess tent and looked inside, then smelled the pot of stew simmering on the gas stove like he was some kind of gourmet.

"I will see everybody papers," he said.

He had to be kidding. It was one thing to check everyone coming off the mountain, but to do it at 21,161 feet with injured climbers waiting to be evacuated was outrageous. Several of the climbers let out a howl of protest despite the thin air and their condition.

"Why would we have our bloody papers up here?"

"This is an emergency! We need to get the injured to Base Camp!"

"Are you crazy?"

Captain Shek seemed a little shocked at the response, and changed his tact. "We search camp before we leave," he said, causing another vocal outburst, which he ignored.

He and the pilot went through all the tents (although the pilot was clearly not happy about the duty).

When they finished Captain Shek said, "We looking for boy."

Everyone looked at me.

"Not that boy. Nepal boy. Same age."

"He went back home over a week ago," Zopa said.

Captain Shek shook his head. "I don't think." He pointed at the chopper. "You come with me."

"We have injured climbers," Zopa said mildly. "I'll check in with you when I get to Base Camp tomorrow."

"No," Shek said. "You come with me now. I arrest you."

One of the German climbers took a step toward the captain. He was the team leader who had talked to us from Camp Six. His name was Dietrich. His face was bright red and it wasn't from the cold. He began shouting in German, which I didn't understand.

I don't think Captain Shek understood, either, but he put his hand on his pistol.

Zopa stepped in front of Dietrich and said something to him in German, then turned to the pilot and asked something in Chinese.

The pilot thought about it for a moment, then answered.

"He thinks he can take four climbers," Zopa said.

There were two additional climbers who could have used a ride, but Dietrich relaxed a little and gave a terse nod.

"What about you?" I asked Zopa.

Zopa shrugged. "It's just a misunderstanding."

He and I knew it was more than that. The question was, how much did Captain Shek know?

"I'll radio Josh and tell him what's going on."

"Be careful going down," Zopa said. "You'll have to leave early and go slow. Ask Josh to send some Sherpas up to meet you in case I'm detained longer than I expect."

Ten minutes later they took off. I radioed Josh and told him about Zopa's arrest.

"Shek's a maniac!" he shouted. "The Sherpas and porters down here are going to go nuts when they find out."

I wondered if Captain Shek's men would pass this on to him. I suspected they would. I also suspected that's exactly why Josh said it.

FAMILY HISTORY

THE NEXT DAY I expected to see Sun-jo at one of the intermediate camps, but he wasn't hiding out in either one. This meant they had figured out a way to get him down to the porter camp, or else Captain Shek had gotten his hands on him. Whatever his fate, I didn't have a lot of time to worry about it because our trip down to Base Camp was a nightmare.

Once again the weather had warmed up, turning some of the glacial rivers into raging torrents. If we'd had boats and paddles instead of crampons and ice axes we could have been down to Base Camp in minutes.

By the time we reached the first intermediate camp about half our party was ready to give up and spend another night high on the mountain.

"We should push on," Dietrich urged them. "We need to get the frostbite taken care of. We can be at Base Camp in three hours."

Unfortunately, no one else seemed to share his opinion (including the other Germans on his team, who I think blamed him for their summit failure). They sat on rocks staring at him dully as if he had lost his mind. But Dietrich was right. We were headed downhill. Even with their injuries it wouldn't take long to get to Base Camp. I knew they were tired and hurting (so was I), but spending another night at a crummy camp this close to Base was stupid. The Sherpas

appeared to be behind Dietrich 100 percent. None of them had even sat down to rest.

"I think Dietrich is right," I said.

One of the Germans laughed. "Ah, now we have a child telling us what to do." Some of the others laughed with him.

Ouch. I should have kept my mouth shut. I wasn't really in a position to tell them what to do, even if I was right.

"What's the matter with all of you?" someone behind us shouted.

I turned around and was shocked to see Josh. And he wasn't alone.

"Bad weather coming in tonight," Zopa added. "You cannot stay here."

Josh was grinning, but I could tell he wasn't feeling well. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked pale and haggard. He patted Dietrich on the back. "Sorry about the trouble up on the mountain."

Dietrich looked like he was about ready to cry. I wasn't sure if it was from grief over the dead climbers or relief that Josh and Zopa had shown up to give him a hand.

Josh walked over to the sitting climbers. "If we leave right now we should be able to get down before dark. We have a team of doctors waiting to treat you. Hot food. Get up. Let's go."

No one was laughing at Joshua Wood. I remembered what my mother said about there being no one better than Josh when you are at the end of your rope. He was obviously sick, but here he was encouraging climbers who weren't even members of his own expedition.

Slowly, one by one, they started getting to their feet. Zopa took the lead with Dietrich. Josh and I followed behind.

"How was Camp Four?" he asked tiredly. "Any problems?"

"It was hard, but not as bad as I thought it would be. My ribs hurt from trying to get enough air."

"No worries. Everybody goes through it. Zopa says you're ready for the summit."

It was one thing for Zopa to give me some words of encouragement after a hard climb. It was another thing for him to tell Josh that I was ready to summit. I didn't know what to say. At that point the summit seemed like too big of a subject to tackle, and maybe even bad luck to talk about. I think Josh knew how I felt, maybe better than I did, because he didn't say any more about it. The squirt of paranoia from a few days before seemed to have evaporated.

"What happened with Zopa and Captain Shek?" I asked.

"A minirevolution. As soon as the porters and Sherpas heard about Zopa's arrest they all gathered around Shek's headquarters to hold a silent vigil. They were there when the chopper landed. Shek tried to disperse them, but they wouldn't budge. He hauled Zopa into the building, hoping to outwait them, but that didn't work. They'd still be there if he hadn't cut Zopa loose. He had no choice but to let him go."

"And Sun-jo?"

"That's the best part. Shek pulled all the soldiers back to headquarters, which made it easy to sneak Sun-jo back into the porter camp. If he hadn't detained Zopa, I'm not sure how we would have gotten Sun-jo off the mountain. He might have had to stay at one of the intermediate camps until he tried for the summit."

"Why is Captain Shek so worried about him?"

"I think he knows more about what we're trying to do than he's saying."

"How'd he find out?"

Josh shrugged. "It's hard to keep a secret up here, even if everybody keeps their mouths shut. Speaking of which..." He slowed down. "Your mom called."

The grin was gone. His easygoing mood had completely changed.

"Why'd you write her?" he asked.

"Because she wrote to me," I said a little more belligerently than I intended. (I guess my mood had changed, too.)

Josh looked confused.

I knew that one day I'd have this conversation with him, but I didn't think it would be at 20,000 feet with him sick and me so tired I could barely lift my feet. But I guess there is no ideal time or place for something like this.

"I thought we had an agreement," he said. "I thought we were going to let me handle your mother."

"There was no agreement," I said, and I didn't think anyone could "handle" my mother.

We glared at each other.

"The least you could have done," he said, "was to tell me that you wrote her so I wasn't blindsided."

"The least you could have done is to write me back!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I sent you letters."

"You mean when you were a kid?"

"Yeah."

"So?"

"You got the letters?" I shouted.

He stopped and pulled his goggles around his neck. "Yeah, I got your letters. What does that have to do with telling your mother about Everest?"

"Everything," I said.

He didn't get it and he didn't seem to care. "Well, she's royally pissed off," he said. "It was all I could do to stop her from flying over here and yanking you off the mountain. At least I think I stopped her. She wants you to call her as soon as you get to Base Camp."

"Fine," I said.

"She insisted that I take you to the top myself, which screws up everything. I'm either going to have to go with you and Sun-jo, or you'll have to join my team. Which means there will be a long delay in your summit attempt because it looks like we'll be the last team to go. I'm in no shape to climb and neither is anyone else on the team."

"Lucky you have a backup in Sun-jo," I said. "Either way you'll get the youngest climber in the world to the summit."

"Is that what this is about?" he asked. "You're mad because it's not about just you anymore?"

"It was never about me," I said. "It's always been about you."

I walked away from him, past the injured climbers, past Dietrich, past Zopa, arriving back at Base Camp a half hour before any of them. I barged into HQ, grabbed the sat phone, and punched in the number as I stomped over to my tent. Mom answered on the first ring.

"Peak."

I got a little choked up when I heard her voice, and it was a second or two before I could respond.

"Hi, Mom."

Silence. That went on so long that I thought I'd lost the connection.

"You should have told me," she finally said.

I was tempted to say that I had told her in the Moleskine, but I knew that wouldn't fly. "Sorry," I said.

"That didn't sound very sincere, but I'll accept it. How'd you do at Camp Four?" she asked quietly.

I was shocked at how calm she was. "It was hard," I answered. "But I'm good."

"Your ribs are okay?"

"A little sore, but yeah, they're fine. You're not mad?"

"Furious."

That was more like it, but she didn't sound furious.

"Josh told me you were sick."

"I'm over it, but a lot of the others have it now." (Including Josh, but I didn't tell her that.)

"I know," she said. "Since I got your journal I've been surfing the Everest websites. Looks like a lot of climbers are leaving the mountain. I also read about the deaths at Camp Six."

"I walked down the mountain today with the German team leader," I told her. "His name is Dietrich."

"And how is he?"

"I don't know . . . devastated, I guess."

"And how are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, four people died less than a mile away from you," she said, sounding a little more like my mother. "Any thoughts on that? Feelings? Reaction?"

I didn't know what to say. "I feel bad" didn't quite cut it. Mom was just getting warmed up.

"Four people died on the mountain. Human beings, Peak, with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, wives, husbands, girlfriends, boyfriends sitting at home worrying

about them. By now they've gotten a phone call or an e-mail with the bad news. 'Sorry, your husband/wife/daughter isn't coming home. No, we can't retrieve a body above Camp Four. It's too dangerous...'"

I reached my tent and climbed inside.

"Let me ask you a question," she said.

"Go ahead."

"Do you think you're a better climber than the four who died?"

"No."

"Do you think you're luckier than they were?"

"I guess," I said. "I'm alive."

"That's not what I'm getting at."

"You're saying that the same thing could happen to me."

"You're not on the wall in back of our cabin or at a climbing camp. You're on Everest. People die up there, Peak. You might die."

"The guys who died weren't acclimatized," I protested. "They should have waited. They saw a break in the weather and got summit fever. They made a mistake."

"You think that means anything to those who were waiting at home for them?"

I looked up at the drawings that the two Peas had sent.

"Well?" Mom persisted.

One of the drawings was a stick figure clinging to a skyscraper with a helicopter hovering overhead. Just above the stick figure was a little blue mountain.

"I'm trying for the summit," I said. "I've gone through too much to give up now."

This was followed by a longer silence than the first.

"I wish you wouldn't do it, Peak, but I'm not surprised by the decision. I know what I would have said to my mother if I were on Everest getting ready for the climb of my life."

She rarely talked about her parents. They still lived in Nebraska and I had met them only twice. It wasn't much fun either time. They didn't approve of Mom, me, Josh, Rolf, or even the two Peas. Mom had left home right after high school and never lived there again.

"I'll be careful," I said.

"No one climbs a mountain thinking they're not coming back down."

"How are the two Peas?" I asked.

"You're changing the subject."

"Yeah."

Mom sighed. "Hang on a minute."

About thirty seconds later the sat phone earpiece was filled with a pair of screaming, giggling six-year-olds.

"Where are you?"

"When are you coming home?"

"I miss you!"

"No, I miss you!"

"Did you get our letters?"

"Mommy was mad at you."

"Are you coming home for our birthday?"

This went on for a while and I just listened with a big stupid grin on my face. Until I heard them, I hadn't realized how much I missed them.

Mom finally took the phone away from them. "Okay, okay," she said. "You have to let Peak answer your questions. I'm going to put him on speakerphone. You two are going to sit there quietly. If you make one sound, the phone call's over."

I heard a click.

"I miss you, too," I said. "I'm on a big mountain called Everest. In a country called Tibet. I have your drawing hanging up in my tent. I'm looking at it right now. I'm not sure if I'm going to be there for our birthday or not. I have to get to the top of the mountain first—"

"Can I ask, Mommy?" Patrice asked.

"Yes, but only one question. Then Paula can ask a question. Then you both need to go back to the kitchen and finish breakfast or you'll be late for school."

"But—"

"No." Mom cut her off. "One question each, then back to breakfast. Do we have a deal?"

The twins reluctantly agreed.

"Did you get our other letter?" Patrice asked. "The heavy one?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'm sure it's on its way. The mail is very slow where I am."

"My turn," Paula said. "Mommy gave your black diary to Mr. Vincent."

"I hope he likes it," I said.

"He's funny," Paula said.

"Okay, that's it," Mom said.

"But I didn't ask a question," Paula complained.

"We had a deal. Both of you go back to the kitchen."

There was some grumbling and whining, but the two Peas obeyed.

"What time is it there?"

"A little after eight in the morning."

I hadn't even thought about what time it was. Mom had probably been waiting all night for my call.

"How's Rolf?"

"He's out of town on a business trip. He'll be back tonight. And he's going to be upset that he missed your call."

Mom sighed. "Peak, I gave it my best shot to try to talk you out of trying for the summit. But now that the decision has been made, you need to focus on the task. You can't think about me, Paula, Patrice, Rolf, or anyone else. To stay alive you are going to have to think only about yourself."

"Do you know why I quit climbing?"

"Yeah," I said. "You fell from the wall in back of—"

"No," she interrupted. "I quit because of you."

"What?"

"With some work I could have gotten my climbing condition back. In fact, the reason I went for that climb the day I fell was because Josh wanted me to get back on the circuit with him. Just before I fell I was thinking about what would happen if a rattlesnake slithered up to my baby strapped in his car seat down below. If I'd been thinking about the climb I would have realized the rock I grabbed was loose before I put weight on it. To climb at Josh's level you have to be completely selfish, Peak. When you were born I couldn't do that anymore."

"I have no doubt you have the physical ability to summit Everest or any other mountain you want. But you may not have the ability to not care. For the next few weeks you have to harden yourself inside. Your guts and heart need to be stone cold."

"I didn't do a lot of high altitude when I was climbing, but I did enough to know that the thin air messes with your brain. You need to forget everything else and concentrate on

the climb. You have enough experience to know when it's over. And when it's over don't take another step higher. If you do, it could be over for good. Turn around. There's no shame in it. Live to climb another day. And when you come back down I hope that good and caring heart of yours thaws. It's the most important muscle you have. I love you, Peak."

And with this she cut the connection. I don't know how long I lay there thinking about what she said, but I can tell you there were plenty of tears. As the blue light through the tent faded to dark I was still lying there when the flap opened.

It was Josh. "You have the sat phone?"

I sat up. "Yeah . . . sorry. I should have brought it back." I gave it to him.

"So, you talked to your mom?"

"Yes."

"One thing we need to get straight," he said. "Getting Sun-jo to the top is not a backup plan. I'm giving him a shot because I owe him and Zopa."

"What do you mean?"

"Two years ago Ki-tar saved my life."

"Sun-jo's father?"

"Up on K2."

"You're the climber who survived."

"We'd been snowed in for three days. No food, no Os, no hope of survival. I watched my climbing party die one by one until I was the only one left. I should have been next, but Ki-tar came up the mountain through the worst blizzard I've ever seen. He came alone. None of the other Sherpas would come with him. He all but carried me back down. When we

got to Base we stumbled into the Aid tent. I took one cot; Kitar took the other. While Leah was treating my frostbite and giving me IV fluids, the man who saved my life died not four feet away from me. His heart gave out. I didn't even get a chance to thank him. I thought you ought to know."

He closed the flap and I heard his footsteps crunching through the snow as he walked away.

UNREST

BEING SELFISH AND FOCUSED turned out not to be a problem.

After Josh dropped the K2 bomb in my tent, he dropped a second bomb on his clients. He told them about his plan to get me to the summit. I wasn't invited to the meeting, but I certainly experienced the aftermath of the explosion the next morning.

I slept late and woke up sore and famished. It had snowed a couple of feet during the night and I had to dig my way out of the tent. When I finally got to my feet and looked around I was surprised how much the camp had emptied out. (I guess I was so upset the day before I hadn't noticed.) Most of the big commercial operations were still in place, but it looked like at least a third of the smaller expeditions had pulled up stakes.

I glanced up at Captain Shek's compound and was tempted to give him a wave, but decided not to. I didn't have time for juvenile antics. I had to stay focused and disciplined if I wanted to get to the summit. Besides, I was starving and the delicious white smoke billowing from the mess tent's chimney was calling to me. Inside was food, warmth, and conversation, but I was a little worried about the conversation part. I didn't want to get too close to anyone and catch the bug that was threatening everyone's climb.

I needn't have worried about the conversation part because as soon as I stepped inside all conversation ceased. The only sound was the hiss of the gas burner and the clatter of the lid on the boiling noodle pot. There were ten people inside the tent and they were all staring at me. None of them were smiling. I would have turned around and left if I wasn't so hungry.

"Speak of the devil," the cowboy from Abilene drawled. He looked like he had lost twenty pounds since the last time I saw him. In fact, all the climbers looked like they had dropped weight. None of them were eating.

"What's going on?" I said as casually as I could with ten pairs of eyes glaring at me. I walked to the shelf and grabbed a plate.

"We're having a meeting," someone said.

"A private meeting," someone else said.

That was obvious. There wasn't a single person from HQ there. No cook. No film crew. No Sherpas.

"I'm just getting something to eat," I said. "It'll only take a minute and I'll get out of your way."

"Well," the cowboy said, "while we got you here maybe you can fill us in on when you found out your daddy was planning to put you on the top of the mountain."

What goes around comes around. Now I knew how Sun-jo must have felt the week before. I scooped a pile of noodles onto my plate, but my appetite was quickly going away.

"Not until I got over here," I hedged, then put a forkful of noodles into my mouth, hoping I wouldn't have to answer any more questions on my way out the door with my plate.

"Course you realize the noodles you're eating, the plate

they're on, and maybe even the parka you're wearing were paid for by the people sitting in this mess tent."

This was an exaggeration, but he had a point, so I set my plate on the table and walked out, hoping that one of them would call me back in and say they were kidding. No one did.

The HQ tent was less hostile, but not much cheerier. Josh, Thaddeus, Leah, and the others seemed to be having a meeting of their own.

"I was just over at the mess tent," I said.

"How was their mood?" Thaddeus asked.

"Ugly."

"They'll get over it," Josh said. "It's been a rough climbing season what with the weather and everyone getting sick. I've seen it all before. As soon as we get a couple people to the top everything will be fine."

No one else in the room seemed to share his optimism, least of all Thaddeus, who said that he thought the climbers would sue Peak Experience and would probably win.

"Did you tell them about Sun-jo?" I asked.

"No," Josh said. "That would have sent them over the edge. That's our little secret, although Shek seems to have figured it out. We're going to shift everything again. Zopa, Sun-jo, Yogi, and Yash are the C team. They're still on our climbing permit, but they're on their own. Peak, you're on the A team with me. We'll divide the film crew between the teams. As soon as JR is better we'll start him filming the A and B teams. We probably won't use any of the footage, but the fact they're being interviewed for the documentary might improve their attitudes." He looked at Leah. "What's your best guess about when this virus will run its course?"

"A week, maybe longer." She looked like she was suffering from it, too. "The bigger problem is the aftereffects. Because we can't exercise and can't keep food down we're losing our conditioning. Even under ideal circumstances it will be difficult for any of us to summit."

"There's nothing we can do about that," Josh said. "We'll either make it or we won't. And that's no different than any other year."

The tent flap opened and the Texan stepped inside.

"Glad you're all here," he said. "We've been talking and we thought you'd like to know that none of us are climbing with the boy. We didn't spend our money, time, and effort to get a kid up to the summit." He looked at me. "It's nothing personal, son. I think you landed right in the middle of this mess just like we did."

"Thanks for telling me," Josh said. "But I decide who goes to the summit and who's on what team."

The Texan gave him a hard smile. "Well, Josh, you're the boss. But if you decide we have to climb with your boy, then we're not climbing at all. We'll head home and y'all will have to deal with our lawyers."

"Well, y'all might as well pack up and leave today," Josh said angrily. "Two or three years from now you might win your case and maybe even get some of your money back, but none of you will have made it to the top of the world."

If the Texan had had a six-shooter strapped around his waist I think he would have drawn it. Instead, he glared at Josh for a moment, then stomped out of the tent.

"He's bluffing," Josh said confidently.

Thaddeus didn't look nearly as confident, nor did anyone else.

In keeping with my mother's suggestion about being selfish I did not step forward and offer to give up my spot. I might have, if I thought Josh would refuse my selfless sacrifice for the team, but I wasn't sure what he would do. The argument we'd had from the day before was far from resolved. And nobody had mentioned it, but the delay from my team change meant that there was a good chance I wouldn't get to the summit before my fifteenth birthday. Both Josh and Thaddeus had to have figured this out. The bottom line was that if Sun-jo made it to the top they didn't need me.

THE NEXT COUPLE DAYS I kept a low profile, which wasn't hard since no one wanted anything to do with me. Josh's clients didn't pack up and leave, but they didn't back off, either. I think they were sticking around to see if Josh would back off. There were no more complaints about my eating "their" food in the mess tent, but the silent treatment and resentful glares continued.

Instead of getting enmeshed in the mountain madness I went climbing. One thing Camp Four had taught me was that I needed to hone my ice-climbing techniques. I think one of the reasons I had had such a difficult time climbing to the Col was my clumsy crampon moves. I hadn't done a lot of ice climbing. Efficiency saves energy, and energy is as elusive as air the higher you go.

I found an ice wall about a half mile outside camp and spent hours every day trying different routes to the top. I slipped, fell, and scraped myself, but I got a little better with each climb.

At night I stayed in my tent writing in my second Mole-skine and tried to visualize my final assault on the summit. I

even went so far as to make a special prayer flag. I took one of the yellow flags and carefully drew a mountain on it with a blue Sharpie. I hung it inside my tent, staring at it for hours. On top of the summit is a pole buried in the ice with a metal wire hanging from it with dozens of prayer flags beaten by the winds. Over and over again I imagined myself struggling up to that pole and tagging Everest.

Captain Shek was still looking for Sun-jo. Every morning when I headed to the wall he had a soldier follow me. I guess he thought my practice climbs were a ruse to meet secretly with the mystery boy. I actually didn't mind being followed. If I had an accident at least there would be someone around to help me, or run back to Base and get help.

Zopa, Yogi, and Yash were staying at Base Camp but keeping a low profile. I saw them once in a while, but we hadn't spoken since we got back. I suspected Captain Shek was watching them, too, and they were keeping their distance.

On the third day we got word that nine climbers had reached the summit from the north side—virtually every climber who tried that day. Now, you would think this news would be received with great joy, and on the surface it was, but just below the surface was a great deal of jealousy and resentment.

"If we hadn't gotten sick..."

"If Josh hadn't abandoned us on the trip to the mountain..."

"If he hadn't brought his son to Everest..."

"That could have been us. We could be headed home in a few days..."

"There may not be another window..."

And other complaints were whispered just loud enough for me to hear in the mess tent that evening during dinner.

The carping was interrupted by the appearance of Josh and Thaddeus along with the film crew. I hadn't seen any of them in the mess tent since I returned from Camp Four. Like the other climbers, JR, Jack, and Will had lost weight and still looked a little weak, but better than they had on the way down.

"If your health continues to improve," Josh began, "and if the weather is good, I hope to start the teams up to the summit in a week to ten days."

"Tomorrow morning we'll start filming interviews with you for the documentary," JR added.

The teams were not impressed by either announcement.

"You still planning to put your son on the top?" the Texan asked.

"Yes," Josh said. "Are you still planning to quit if I do?"

"If he goes we leave. That's the deal."

He didn't look like he was bluffing. Nor did the others. These were not professional climbers. They were all successful businesspeople and very used to getting their way.

"Suit yourselves," Josh said with a sad grin.

I had a bad feeling that Josh was the one bluffing, not them. He was going to blink first. And if he didn't, Thaddeus would blink for him.

BLINK

THE NEXT MORNING I was enduring another uncomfortable breakfast at a separate table from my team members when Josh and Thaddeus came into the tent.

I thought they were going to make an announcement about the filming schedule or something, but instead Josh said, "We've reached a decision."

He took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and slowly unfolded it. "B team, led by Pa-sang, will consist of the following members." He read off the names. "A team, which I'll lead, will be..." Then he read off another list of names with one very important omission.

My name.

Before I could find my voice the Texan spoke up, sounding almost as stunned as I felt. "Are you saying Peak isn't getting a summit shot?"

"Did you hear me read off his name?" Josh asked tersely.

"No," the Texan said quietly.

It's a ploy, I thought desperately. Otherwise Josh would have told me about the decision before this brutal announcement. He was trying to get their sympathy. Trying to get them to say: "Now, just hold on a minute, Josh. We didn't really mean for you to..." It was brilliant! If they decided I should come they couldn't grouse about it later.

I waited for those magic words, but they didn't come.

Instead Josh looked at me. "I'm sorry, Peak, I've been a jackass about this. They're right. This is their climb. They're paying the tab."

I thought he was overplaying it and hoped he knew what he was doing. I looked at the Texan. Now was the time for him to say, "Ah shucks, we were just having fun with you. Of course you can summit Everest with us . . ."

Instead he said, "Well, that's settled, then."

"Wait a second!" I said. "That's not fair. I worked just as hard as anyone here to get up to Camp Four."

"Let it go, Peak," Josh said quietly.

"I won't let it go!" I almost knocked over my chair standing up.

"You don't have a choice," Josh said, raising his voice. "It's all been arranged. Zopa's packing your gear right now. You and he and his Sherpas are heading to Kathmandu. The truck's waiting."

I stared at him in disbelief. It wasn't a ploy. He'd blinked!

"I'm sorry it didn't work out," he continued. "Maybe we can try again next year. You're young. You'll get plenty of chances to get to the summit."

"I don't believe this."

"I'll help you pack."

"Forget it!" I pushed past him and ran outside.

By the time I got to my tent, my gear was already in the truck and ready to go. So, it was all planned. Zopa, Yogi, and Yash were sitting in the bed waiting for me.

I wiped away my frozen tears. "You should have told me!"

Zopa shook his head. "Better to learn the way you did."

"The only thing I've learned is that you and my father are liars!"

"We must leave," Zopa said calmly. "We have a long way to go before dark."

I glared at him expecting more, but it was clear the discussion (if you want to call it that) was over. The driver started the truck.

As we pulled out of camp Josh stepped out of the mess tent and waved at me. I returned the wave with a gesture of my own. He returned the insult by giving me his trademark grin. If Zopa hadn't grabbed my collar I would have jumped out of the back of the truck and killed him with my bare hands.

I could not believe how quickly it had all come to an end. I mean, I knew I might not make it to the top of Everest, but I thought it would be due to weather, injury, or endurance . . . not some stupid business decision.

Josh hadn't bothered to mention what I was supposed to do once I got back to Kathmandu. Wait for him, I suppose. Or maybe I was being sent down to Chiang Mai. It didn't matter. As soon as I got to wherever I was going I would call Mom and find out if things had cooled off enough for me to go back to New York. The only thing I knew for sure was that I was not going to have anything to do with Joshua Wood ever again.

We bumped along the rough road for a couple of miles until we came to a roadblock manned by Chinese soldiers. They checked our papers, then thoroughly searched the truck. This is when I realized that Sun-jo wasn't with us. I was so mad when I got booted out of camp, I hadn't even thought about him. I had to wait to ask Zopa until we were back on the road.

"Where's Sun-jo?"

"He's waiting for us up ahead," Zopa said.

It looked like Sun-jo wasn't getting his shot at the summit, either. I guess Captain Shek had made it too risky. Shamefully, this made me feel a little better.

A couple miles later the truck slowed down. I looked over the top of the cab expecting to see Sun-jo, but it was just a yak and a porter heading up to Base Camp. When we drew up next to them the driver stopped. The porter was Gulu. He gave me a toothless smile, then he and Zopa talked for a while, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. When they finished, Gulu waved, then continued toward Base Camp.

We drove down the road for another mile or so, then came to another stop. At this rate it would take us a year to get to Kathmandu. Yogi and Yash hopped out of the truck and started unloading gear.

"What's going on?"

"Team C," Zopa answered.

"What are you talking about?"

Instead of answering Zopa pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to me.

Sorry about the dramatics, but we had to make it look good so Captain Shek would think you and Sun-jo were gone and stop looking for him. I also had to appease my bonehead clients. It was the only way I could get you to the summit before your birthday. Zopa's idea. (I told you he was cagey.) He'll take you up to ABC along a different route. He's under strict orders to keep you alive. If he doesn't, your mom will kill me. I hope you make it to the top, but if you don't, no worries.

Josh

I read the note over twice, then looked up at Zopa. He was smiling.

"We will take a shortcut to ABC," he said. "But we will have to move quickly before Captain Shek discovers our deceit."

I wasn't sure if I was angry or happy with him and Josh. It had been a cruel trick. I understood why they had done it, but they should have trusted me to play a role. I could have pulled it off, and I was about to tell Zopa this when Sun-jo came over the top of a small hill and waved.

Aside from the rumpled porter clothes and the grass in his hair from Gulu's yak, he looked ready to climb.

SHORTCUT

GULU HAD HAULED a lot more than Sun-jo out of the porter camp. On the other side of the hill was a small mountain of climbing gear. Coils of rope, oxygen bottles, masks, tents, food . . . I wondered how we were going to get it to the upper camps.

On our backs, as it turned out, because Zopa went right to work dividing the gear into five separate piles. As he sorted through the stuff I asked Sun-jo what was going on. He didn't know much more than I did. He said that Gulu had woken him in the middle of the night and told him that they had to leave the porter camp right away.

"At first I thought Captain Shek had discovered I was there," he said. "But when we were safely out of camp, Gulu told me that Zopa was leading you and me to the summit in a separate expedition from your father's, but still on his permit."

I didn't tell him about how I found out because I was still mad about it, and a little embarrassed.

Yogi and Yash's loads were bigger than ours, but Sun-jo and I still had plenty to carry. We had most of the food divided between us. Zopa laughed as we grunted under the extra weight. "It will become lighter as you eat your way through the contents," he said.

THERE IS A REASON WHY Base Camp and all the other camps above it are situated where they are. The traditional route may not be the shortest way up the mountain, but it is the safest and easiest. (Not that anything is safe or easy on Everest.) Zopa's "shortcut" might have been shorter, but it was ten times more difficult than the regular route. Our first obstacle was a vast field of jagged ice sticking out of the ground like great white shark teeth. Sun-jo and I used our walking poles so we didn't slip and impale ourselves. The Sherpa brothers didn't bother with the poles, forging ahead like they were ice-skating until they were two tiny dots on the horizon. I think Zopa could have easily kept up with them, but he slowed his pace, staying about a hundred yards ahead of us so he could glance back once in a while and make sure we hadn't stumbled and were bleeding out on the frozen fangs.

By the time we caught up to them late that afternoon, Yogi and Yash had the camp set up, food on the stove, and were amusing themselves by throwing their ice axes at a wall of ice that appeared to brush the sky.

My legs were shaking uncontrollably from fatigue. My neck and shoulders felt like they had been worked over by a sledgehammer. My only consolation was that Sun-jo looked more done-in than me. He didn't even have the strength to get the pack off his back. It took us two hot mugs of tea before we could talk.

By the third mug of tea I was able to focus enough to take a good look at the wall. It seemed to run for miles in both directions. I figured the next morning we would follow it until we came to a pass then make our way to the top.

When I mentioned this to Zopa he laughed and pointed directly above us. "This is the pass," he said.

"You're kidding."

He shook his head.

There wasn't a single handhold or foothold for as far as I could see. It made the ice wall I'd been practicing on look like an indoor rock climbing wall.

After dinner Zopa turned on the radio and we listened to the mountain chatter. Three more people had made it to the summit that morning. Eight had turned back within a few hundred feet of the top. A climber had broken her leg up at ABC. The virus seemed to have run its course, and everyone who had stuck it out at Base Camp was rapidly getting better.

I was about ready to call it a day and crawl into my tent when Josh came on the radio making small talk with one of the other expedition leaders up at Camp Four. This was very unusual. Josh was a firm believer that the radio should only be used to transmit important information. He hated it when people used it like a cell phone.

They talked about the weather, the woman with the broken leg, and scheduling summit attempts.

"Heard you had a falling-out with your son," the leader said.

There were no secrets on the mountain.

"Yeah, he left," Josh said. "But we'll patch it up when I get down. He's a good kid. I think Captain Shek was going to try to yank his climbing permit, anyway. Not that I would have let him."

"Is Shek still hunting for that other kid?"

"Yep. Still on the warpath. He detained a porter this afternoon named Gulu. He let him go after a pretty tough grilling, but Gulu didn't know anything. That kid left here weeks ago. Not sure what he's trying to prove. I heard he was

having some more soldiers trucked in. Some of them are climbers. He's going to send them up the mountain to check the higher camps. It's insane. I sent an e-mail to the Chinese government and I have my lawyers checking into other official actions. The Chinese make a lot of money on these permits. Be a shame if one overzealous soldier dried up that revenue source, but what are you going to do? Anyway, good luck at Camp Five. I'll check in with you tomorrow. Out."

Zopa switched off the radio. The entire conversation had been set up for us—at least on Josh's end. We couldn't participate, but we could learn a great deal by listening. None of us liked the idea of the Chinese climbers coming in.

"They won't be able to get past ABC," I said. "They haven't had time to acclimate."

"Perhaps," Zopa said.

"How do we get by them on the way back down?" Sun-jo asked.

Zopa shrugged. But this time I think he really meant it. He didn't know.

BY THE TIME ZOPA kicked Sun-jo and me out of our sleeping bags, Yogi and Yash were already fifty feet up the wall setting ice screws so we'd have something to hook on to. The sun was barely up. They had to have started when it was still dark. We ate quickly, packed, then strapped on our crampons and harnesses. Zopa said he was staying below to tie the packs and would climb last.

A bitter wind blasted the wall head-on, which was good because it pushed us into it. If the wind had been coming from an angle it would have blown us right off the wall.

Ice ax in each hand. . . Dig crampon in. Bury ax. Ice splinters in your face. Pull. Dig other crampon in. Bury ax. . . About sixty-five feet up I clipped onto an ice anchor and took a breather. Yogi and Yash had already reached the top, dropped ropes, and hauled up all the gear.

Zopa had just started up the wall. Sun-jo was clawing his way up twenty feet below me. He seemed to be struggling, which wasn't too surprising considering he had been sick and for the last few days, cooped up in a porter's tent. I waited until he looked up and gave him a wave. He returned it with a grim nod.

I started again, and had gotten up about three steps when I heard the yell. It took me a second to get myself anchored so I could look down. What I saw wasn't pretty. Sun-jo had slipped down about ten feet and was hanging on the edge of a protrusion by one ax. I'd seen the protrusion on the way up and knew it was too far from the wall for him to get his crampons planted in the ice.

"I'm coming!" Zopa shouted up at him, but it would take him at least forty-five minutes to reach him.

Sun-jo wouldn't be able to hold on for more than a few minutes. I was a lot closer, but the only thing harder and slower than climbing up an ice wall is climbing down an ice wall. I looked up, hoping to see Yogi or Yash, but there was no sign of them. They must have already forged ahead to set up the next camp.

I didn't even have time to think about what I was going to do next, which was just as well. I started scrambling sideways across the wall toward the gear rope, thirty feet away. Zopa continued to shout encouragement to Sun-jo. He was

climbing the wall as fast as he could, but he had to know that no matter how fast he went, it wouldn't be fast enough to save his grandson.

When I finally reached the rope I gave it a tug. It seemed solid enough, but I didn't know if it would hold my weight. The brothers might not have anchored it properly because they were just hauling gear with it.

"I'm slipping," Sun-jo said desperately.

"I'll be there in a minute!" I shouted.

"Hang on, Sun-jo!" Zopa shouted, catching on to what I was trying to do. "Don't give up!"

I wanted to test the rope more but there wasn't time. I hooked on to it and gave it all my weight. It stretched a little, but held. I swallowed my heart and crabbed my way back toward Sun-jo. When I got directly above him I quickly hooked the rope to an ice screw I knew was secure and rappelled to him, getting the rope hooked on his harness just as his ax slipped from the ice.

"Got him!" I shouted down to Zopa, then looked at Sun-jo. "You okay?"

He nodded.

He was crying.

So was I. Apparently I had forgiven him.

IT TOOK US another hour to get to the top. Zopa got there about ten minutes after us, looking concerned and relieved.

"Nothing broken?" he asked.

Sun-jo shook his head.

"What happened?"

"My ax broke."

Zopa nodded, then looked at me. "Thank you."

"You can thank Yogi and Yash for securing that rope," I said. The first thing I did when we got to the top was check it. The rope was tied to a carabiner attached to a three-inch ice bolt that wasn't going anywhere. Sun-jo and I could have played Tarzan on that rope all day long.

"But you didn't know that," Zopa said.

"Yeah . . . well," I said, a little embarrassed, "Yogi and Yash know what they're doing."

"Not always," Zopa said. "One of the axes Sun-jo was using today was the same one they were throwing at the wall yesterday afternoon."

Uh-oh. I suspected they were going to hear about that when we caught up to them—and I was right. When we got to camp, Zopa took Yogi and Yash to the side and spoke to them for a good ten minutes. He never raised his voice, but when they came back they looked like he had whipped them.

"TWO TRUCKLOADS of Chinese soldiers got here today . . ." Josh was talking to a different expedition leader who had just arrived at ABC. ". . . along with six military climbers. The place looks like an army encampment."

"Glad I'm up here," the leader said.

"Well, you're not off the hook. From what I hear they're heading up the mountain tomorrow morning to check everybody's papers. If you don't have your passport, visa, and permit they're going to boot you off the mountain."

"We have them. What's his problem?"

"When the truck that Zopa and my son left on yesterday got to the second checkpoint, Zopa and my son weren't on it. The driver claimed they got on a second truck and went another way."

"I hope your son's okay."

"No worries. Zopa wouldn't let anything happen to him. I'm sure they're well on their way to Nepal by now. I thought I'd just give you a heads-up about what's going on down here."

"Thanks," the other leader said. "What about the Chinese climbers? Are they any good?"

"They're gung ho and well equipped. They pulled them off a high-altitude climb, but I'm not sure where they were. I wouldn't be surprised if they tried for the summit while they're up there. I know I would."

"I hear you. It's going to get crowded at the top."

Zopa and the brothers spread a map out and started talking in Nepalese.

"What's going on?"

"Zopa says we can't stay in any of the camps until we reach Camp Five," Sun-jo explained. "They're picking alternative sites."

I looked at the map. We were just about parallel to Camp Two, but seven or eight miles to the north. It would take us at least another day to pull up even with ABC.

We could be up on the summit in less than a week.

CAMP 3½

ZOPA PUSHED US HARD the next two days. We were out of camp before dawn climbing with headlamps. Yogi and Yash were always long gone before we started out, and we didn't see them until we stopped at the end of the day.

I had no idea where we were, but according to my altimeter watch, we were gaining altitude. (Not that I needed the watch: Every breath was painful now.) At the end of the day it was all Sun-jo and I could do to eat a little food, drink, and then crawl into our bags.

On the third morning I was surprised to open my eyes and see sunlight coming through the blue tent fabric. I looked over at Sun-jo and saw that he was staring at the light, too.

We had barely talked the past few days. No time, no breath.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Not well," Sun-jo said.

"You've done okay the last couple of days."

He shook his head. "It has been very hard."

That was an understatement. We had done several technical climbs the past forty-eight hours. It had been some of the most difficult climbing I had ever done.

"Any idea where we are?"

Sun-jo sat up with a groan. "Feels like we're on the summit."

I laughed, which turned into a short but painful coughing fit. When I recovered I said, "Maybe Zopa is going to give us a day off."

"Not likely."

We went through the contortions of getting dressed in our small tent, then crawled out. Light snow and freezing fog. We hadn't seen the sky in three days. Yogi and Yash were crouching next to the camp stove.

Yogi said something that made Sun-jo blanch.

"What?" I asked.

"Zopa is sick."

I understood why he was upset. Zopa didn't get sick. Zopa was the iron man. He had seemed fine the night before when we got to camp. We hurried over to his tent. He looked terrible—bloodshot eyes, runny nose, pale—but he managed to sit up in his sleeping bag when he saw us.

"We will go up to Camp Four this afternoon," he said.

He wasn't going anywhere in his condition.

"The virus?" I asked.

"I think so," he answered with a slight smile. "Or maybe it's just age."

"Regardless," Sun-jo said, "we should go back down. We need to get you help."

"We cannot go down," Zopa said. "The Chinese are waiting for us. Our only escape is up."

"We have to come down eventually," I said.

"But not on this side."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nepal is a little more than a mile away from here."

I thought he was delirious or something. It would take us days to reach the Friendship Bridge into Nepal.

He took out the map and pointed to the south side of the summit. "This is Nepal," he said. He pointed to the north side. "This is Tibet." He walked his fingers up the north side of Everest, then down the south side.

"You mean we're not coming back down the north side into Tibet?" I asked.

"When you reach the summit," he said, "you will head south into Nepal."

"But we're not set up for the south side," I protested. "We don't have tents or gear or—"

"Sherpas will help you," Zopa said. "Friends of mine. We have already gotten word to them. They will be waiting on the other side. Yogi and Yash will take you to the summit."

"What about you?" Sun-jo asked.

"As you can see I am in no condition to climb. Camp Four is as far as I will be going."

"Then we'll wait until you get better," Sun-jo insisted.

"That's right," I said. "I don't care if I get up to the summit by my birthday. It's not important—to me, anyway. We'll set up a camp somewhere, or stay right here until you get better."

Zopa shook his head. "We don't have enough food or supplies."

"Yogi and Yash can get more supplies from the other Sherpas."

"That is not the only obstacle," Zopa said. "The weather. In three days it will be good for a summit attempt. You will have to be in position."

I glanced back outside. It was snowing harder and the fog had thickened. "How can you know that?"

Zopa shrugged.

He was impossible! "Okay," I said, "so the weather breaks and we make it to the summit and somehow make it down the south side. How are *you* going to get past the Chinese soldiers on the north side?"

"I'm a Nepalese citizen in Tibet with legal papers. Captain Shek has no grounds to arrest me. You saw what happened the last time he tried. I don't think I will be caught, but if I am, the very worst he can do is deport me, which is what I want, anyway. I'll see both of you on the other side."

"I don't think I can make it to the summit," Sun-jo said. "I had a lot of trouble yesterday."

"I'm afraid I've put you in a terrible situation, Sun-jo," Zopa said. "You will have to make it to the summit now."

I thought about offering to stay with Zopa at Camp Four and help him down the mountain after he got better. But this was clearly not in keeping with my mother's instructions to stay selfish. And I *did* want to get to the summit. The debate was resolved by Zopa.

He gave me a monkish smile. "I don't need your help, Peak. But Sun-jo will."

I just stared at him, relieved I didn't have to make the decision and stunned that he seemed to have read my mind. "How—"

Zopa held up his hand. "Sun-jo will not reach the summit without your help," he said. "I need to rest. And so do both of you. We have a hard climb ahead of us."

SUN-JO TOOK ZOPA'S ADVICE. I tried to sleep but couldn't. I joined Yogi and Yash at the fire. Yogi pulled out an oxygen tank and mask out of his pack. He showed me how to attach

the mask to the regulator, then he held up two fingers, indicating I was to set the dial to two liters per minute. Then, using Yash as a model, he showed me how to put on the mask.

When he finished he took everything apart and had me put it all back together. It wasn't as easy as it looked. I had to pull off my outer mitts, and my fingers went numb in spite of the fact that I was still wearing gloves. This reminded me that I still had JR's little video camera in my pack. I had completely forgotten about it. I needed to start filming our trip. (Which should give you a little idea of how the brain functions, or doesn't function, at high altitudes.)

I managed to get the mask hooked up to the tank, then I put the mask on and tried to adjust the straps for a tight fit over my nose and mouth. The mask was cold, uncomfortable, and a little claustrophobic. Yash had a perfect solution to the discomfort. He turned on the oxygen.

In my entire life I had never felt anything so wonderful. The Os flowed into my body like some kind of magic elixir. For the first time in weeks I felt warm, sharp, and strong. The feeling was short-lived because Yogi turned it off almost immediately. Reluctantly, I took off the mask. The Sherpa brothers were smiling at me. Yogi said something in Nepalese, then held up five fingers.

"Got it," I said. "Not until Camp Five."

Theoretically, you could use Os all the way up the mountain. The problem was you would have to use a half dozen Sherpas to carry enough oxygen tanks to get up the mountain. The tanks didn't last that long.

Yogi and Yash left around noon. A couple of hours later

Zopa came out of his tent looking like a corpse emerging from a tomb. Three mugs of hot tea seemed to revive him . . . a little. I packed his gear, then roused Sun-jo, who looked a lot better after his nap.

We started out for Camp Four. This time Sun-jo and I had to wait for Zopa. About halfway there, he put on an oxygen mask and cranked it up. This certainly put a little more spring in his step. I was envious.

CAMPS FIVE AND SIX

BECAUSE OF OUR LATE START, I thought Camp Four was close, but we didn't get to the dreaded wall leading up to it until well after dark.

"We're climbing the wall at night?" I asked, shocked.

Zopa took off his mask. "It's the only way to get into Camp Four unnoticed. Everyone will be asleep."

They would be in their tents all right—the wind was howling and it hadn't stopped snowing all day. But from our last experience I knew they wouldn't be sleeping. If they were like me when I was up there, they would be lying in their sleeping bags wondering if there was enough air to keep them alive through the night.

The last time we were here it took me over five hours to reach the top and I nearly gave up on the way. The weather was worse now—and it was dark.

Yogi and Yash had thrown a rope over the side for us to use.

"You'll need headlamps," Zopa said.

"Right," I said.

Slide the jumar up the rope, step, breathe, jumar, step, jumar, think, look up, think again, step, rest, rest, rest, hug the wall, pray... The same routine. But in a strange way the climb was easier, or at least less scary, with the headlamp. The light kept me focused on the ice and rock in front of me. I had no idea where

the top or bottom was until a light appeared over the edge about ten feet above me. It was Yogi, although it was hard to tell, bundled up like he was. I managed to get to the top without his having to grab me. As I rested on my knees trying to catch my breath and not puke, I looked at my watch. I had climbed the wall in less than five hours this time.

Fifteen minutes later Sun-jo came over the top, looking like he was about to pass out. I shouted in his ear that he had made it up the wall a half hour faster than he had the last time. This seemed to cheer him up. He managed to get to his feet.

Zopa was last. He was in terrible shape. It took all three of us to pull him over the edge, and when we got him there he didn't move. I checked his oxygen tank. It was empty. Yogi hurried off and came back with a fresh tank and Yash. They got the Os flowing and carried Zopa to their tent. After an hour or so he recovered enough to open his eyes and drink something. A few minutes later he asked the brothers if they had heard anything from Josh.

The Chinese soldier climbers had reached ABC that afternoon and were planning on staying there a day or two before climbing to Camp Four. They had checked everyone's papers and searched all the tents. The climbers at ABC said the soldiers were in great shape and had made terrific time. There was no doubt they were going to try for the summit.

This seemed like the worst possible news, but Zopa didn't seem at all disturbed by it.

"You will be a day ahead of them. Tonight and tomorrow you will rest. The following morning, before light, you'll climb to Camp Five."

"What about you?" Sun-jo asked.

"Do you really think they are going to be worried about a sick old monk when they get up here? If they really are such good climbers, the soldiers will all want to try for the summit. Which of them will stay behind to escort the old man down the mountain?" He gave a wheezy laugh. "By the time they get back here I will be gone."

"Why can't we just go up to Camp Five when it gets light?" I asked. "We'll be just that much farther ahead of the soldiers."

"There will be a storm in a few hours," Zopa answered. "Tomorrow morning is your window."

THE STORM HIT US MIDMORNING. If we had left when I wanted we would have been about halfway to Camp Five. And we would have died, along with the three climbers who *did* leave that morning. None of them made it to Camp Five, and nobody could help them. The weather was too severe.

I tried to write in my Moleskine and found that I couldn't concentrate long enough to string more than two or three words together at a time. After a while I gave up and managed to get a little sleep, and so did Sun-jo, mostly because there was nothing else to do but lie in the tent. Zopa didn't want us wandering around camp (not that we had the energy), and the storm was so bad, everyone there was hunkered down waiting for it to stop.

About eight o'clock that night it did, suddenly. One moment the wind and snow were threatening to blow our tent away; the next moment it was perfectly calm. I stuck my head outside the tent, along with everyone else in camp, and saw a perfectly clear sky overhead scattered with bright stars.

Yash left for Camp Five three hours ahead of us to get the

camp ready. Yogi stuck his head into our tent an hour before we were to leave and told us to pack our gear. We weren't taking much with us. Most of what we needed would be waiting for us at Camp Five. Yogi and Yash had hauled it up the last time we were at Camp Four.

Before we took off we checked in with Zopa. He was sitting up drinking a mug of tea. He was off the Os and some of the color had returned to his face, but he still looked pretty weak.

"Speed is everything now. If you stay in the death zone too long you will die. If you don't reach the summit by one thirty-five P.M. the day you leave Camp Six, I have asked Yogi and Yash to turn you around. It is better to get caught by the Chinese than it is to die on the mountain."

This seemed to contradict his plan to get Sun-jo over the top to safety, but he was right. From Camp Six you have to reach the summit and return in about eighteen hours. Oxygen or not, there was a limit to how long you could survive above Camp Six. If we made the summit we would have to reach the top camp on the other side in eighteen hours.

"Have Yogi and Yash been to the summit?" I asked. It had been a question on my mind since Zopa had announced he wasn't taking us there himself.

"Of course," Zopa said. "Three times."

"Good," I said. "Does Josh know you're not coming with us?"

Zopa shook his head, then gave us a blessing and said, "I'll see you both in Kathmandu. Now go."

It was clear and bitterly cold as we left the dark camp and started up the north ridge to the summit. It was hard to keep

my excitement in check. A night at Camp Five, a night at Camp Six, then the top of the world.

IT WAS MORE OF A FORCED MARCH to Camp Five than a climb. We hooked on to a series of fixed ropes. Yogi set the pace. I tried a regime of twelve steps, a minute of gasping to recover, then another twelve steps. After an hour it was down to about eight steps, and I'm not sure how many minutes to recover. It was hard to believe that some climbers had made it to the summit without any supplemental Os at all. Josh was one of them, although I suspected on this trip he would be sucking down the Os, if for no other reason than to stay sharp so he didn't lose one of his clients.

The sun came up and gave us the best view of Everest's pyramidal summit yet. It was enormous. Coming off the top was a disk of ice crystals against the blue sky. The sight inspired my sluggish brain to remember the camera, which I had put in my pocket before we left Camp Four. I shouted ahead at Sun-jo to wait up, which he was more than happy to do. When I got to him I took off my outer mittens, pushed the record button, and tried to imitate JR as best as I could.

"What are you feeling right now?" I asked. "You're less than a mile from the highest point on earth." I had him framed perfectly against the summit.

"Frightened," Sun-jo said. "And hopeful. And worried about my grandfather. I had no idea it would be this hard."

That's about all my unmittened fingers could take.

"I can film you now if you like," Sun-jo offered.

"Nah, that's all right. We have to get moving."

About half an hour later we saw our first corpse. Sun-jo

saw it first. I walked up to him as he was staring down at it. Yogi had breezed by as if he hadn't noticed but I bet he had. It was a woman. About fifty feet away was another corpse but I couldn't tell what it was because it was lying facedown.

I had never seen a dead person, let alone a frozen dead person. She looked more like a wax figure than a former human being, and in a way this was even more disturbing to me. She had been there a while if her shredded clothes were any indication. It looked like she had died sitting up and had fallen over on her side. She was only a few hours from her tent at Camp Four. I'm not sure how long we stood there staring, and we would have stood there a lot longer if Yogi hadn't shouted at us to hurry up. After five more corpses I stopped looking.

At noon we came to a steeper part of the north ridge. It was much colder. The fixed ropes were frozen and Sherpas had chipped shallow steps into the ice to make it easier to climb.

Yogi waited for us to catch up to him. He pointed to the tents down at Camp Four, then up to tents at Camp Five and said something in Nepalese.

"Halfway," Sun-jo translated. "Six hours to go."

To make that six hours worse, the wind picked up. We had to bend over as we climbed so we weren't blown off the ridge. My initial excitement was long gone. I think the only thing that kept me going were the Os waiting for me up ahead. I don't know what kept Sun-jo going. Probably the Chinese climbers behind him and freedom ahead.

We got to Camp Five a little before seven: 25,196 feet. It seemed impossible that we could ever go any farther. It was

the end of the world. And it really wasn't a camp. It was a series of cleared platforms stretching up the north ridge for at least a quarter of a mile, with absolutely no shelter from the howling wind. The big platforms could hold five or six tents, the small platforms one or two. Several of the platforms had tents on them, but it was hard to say how many people were up there. I suspected most of the tents were waiting for climbers coming up from Camp Four, or down from Camp Six after their summit attempt.

Our tiny rubble pile was just big enough for two tents pitched on the garbage of the former occupants. Yash had water boiling for tea, but what I was interested in was the mask strapped to his face pumping Os into his lungs. He was moving twice as fast as we were.

I grabbed a tank from the pile, pulled the mask out of my pack, hooked it up, and stuck my face in it. The feeling I had with the first lungful of oxygen is indescribable. *Bliss* is about as close as I can come, but it was way beyond that.

Yash helped Sun-jo set up his rig, and when he got it on we looked at each other and started laughing.

We were going to live. We might even make it to the summit.

"THE CHINESE ARE HEADING UP to Camp Four tomorrow," one of the climbers from ABC told Josh.

"You're kidding!" Josh said. "What about acclimatization?"

"These guys are acclimated. One of our climbers speaks a little Chinese. They told her they were up on K2 when they were ordered to come here. They haven't said it, but I don't

think they're coming back down until they take a shot at the summit. They're like climbing machines. When are you heading up?"

"The day after tomorrow if the weather's good," Josh answered. "I was going to hold off a little longer, but I took my people out for a climb today and they all did pretty well. The virus seems to have run its course."

"We're heading up to Camp Four in the morning. We'll see you on the way back down."

"Good luck."

"Out."

This was probably the last transmission we would hear. I wondered if Josh would be worried when he didn't pass me on his way up.

I asked Sun-jo how he was doing.

"The oxygen helps, but I'm still concerned. I had a lot of trouble today."

"You're not the only one. It's hard up here."

"I have to make it," he said. "For my sisters and my mother."

Those were great reasons to risk your life, I thought. But why was *I* doing it? For Josh's business? For my ego?

Now that my brain had oxygen I found myself really missing the two Peas, my mom, and even Rolf. This got me to thinking about the corpses we saw on the way up here. Who had they left behind? These were very uncomfortable questions to fall asleep on.

THE OXYGEN WAS WONDERFUL, but the masks were a pain in the butt to sleep in. It was hard to find a position where the straps didn't dig into your face. Also, the exhaust system

stank. Small pools of icy slime collected in the mouthpiece valve. When I moved my head slushy spit ran down my neck. Because of this, Sun-jo and I were up early.

We checked and rechecked our gear. Leaving something behind like a spare headlamp battery or a glove could be a death sentence.

Yogi took the lead this time, leaving Yash to take us up to Camp Six. Our first obstacle was a steep snowfield that we had to four-point with ice axes and crampons. Stupidly, I assumed that now that we were on Os, it would be like climbing at sea level. Nothing could be further from the truth.

By the time we reached the top of the snowfield my lungs were screaming for air. I thought there was something the matter with my mask or the tank had run out of oxygen, but everything was working perfectly. The two liters of oxygen didn't simulate sea level; it simply allowed me to stay alive above 25,000 feet. And there was a huge difference between lying in a tent doing virtually nothing and climbing a steep snowfield on all fours. I took the little camera out and filmed Sun-jo crabbing his way up to me. By the expression on his face I could see he was having the same O revelation I'd just had.

"I don't think I can make it." He gasped. "I'm serious, Peak; this is too much."

"We just pushed it too hard going up the field," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. "We'll just have to pace ourselves."

He nodded, but there was fear in his eyes. I knew exactly how he felt. We had passed another three or four corpses on the way up.

A few hours later I stopped to rest and looked at my altimeter watch. We had just passed 26,000 feet and were

officially in the death zone. Every minute from now on we were dying a little.

We stumbled into Camp Six like three zombies. Yogi had the tents set up, but he didn't look much better than we did. He told Sun-jo to get our stove going to boil snow and drink as much water as we could. The very idea of drinking or eating anything made my stomach lurch.

I turned on the video camera and shot Sun-jo lighting the stove, or trying to light the stove. It must have taken him fifty strokes to get the cigarette lighter going in the thin air. When it finally ignited his thumb was bleeding like he had sliced it open with a knife.

We gagged down as much water and food as we could, then wrapped up in our sleeping bags to wait. Sleep was out of the question.

The inside of the tent was filled with a thin layer of frost from our breath. Every time one of us moved, the freezing crystals fell on our faces.

They say that when you die your life flashes before your eyes. Mine was passing before my eyes in slow motion like a horror movie. I think it was the corpses that did it. I thought of Mom falling off that wall, the boy I'd never met falling off the Flatiron Building, Sun-jo hanging by a thread on that ice wall, and Sun-jo's father saving my father then dying of heart failure. . . .

The only thing that stopped the depressing playback was the tent flap opening and the appearance of Yogi's masked face.

"We go," he said.

Well, not quite. It was more like: "We get ready to go." They made us drink more water, then told us to do our

toilet, which is a lot easier said than done at thirty degrees below zero. Two hours later we were ready.

We left for the summit of Mount Everest.

I looked at my watch. It was 1:35 A.M. We had twelve hours to get there.

TOP OF THE WORLD

OUTSIDE CAMP SIX we picked our way across two snowfields. Yash led the way with Yogi sticking close to us. On the far side of the second field we started to encounter bare rock. I kept my eyes on Yash's headlamp. He was probably 150 yards ahead of us. Breathing was difficult and it was freezing out, but I started to think this might not be as bad as I thought. It was certainly no worse than what we had already been through.

Then to my utter shock, Yash's headlamp started to rise from the ground. I blinked several times, thinking it was some kind of optical illusion. It wasn't. He was climbing a steep wall.

"Yellow Band!" Yogi shouted above the howling wind. "Careful!"

We started up. Large chunks of yellowish sandstone broke off with almost every handhold, and the crampons strapped on our boots were worse than useless. They're made for ice, not rock, but there wasn't time to take them off. At Base Camp it would take three minutes to shuck the crampons. Up here in the thin air, it might take half an hour or longer. We didn't have a half hour to spare. And we would have to put them back on the next time we came across ice or snow, which takes longer than taking them off.

There were ropes, but most of them were rotten, flapping

uselessly in the wind. About an hour into the climb I grabbed one to help me over a difficult pitch and it popped loose from its anchor. I barely caught myself before I keeled over backward. I didn't touch another rope on the way up.

There were three steps leading to the summit and this had to be the first. But if that was the case, why had Yash called it the Yellow Band? *Must be the Sherpa nickname for it*, I thought.

Five hours later I found out I was wrong.

We got to the top just as the sun was coming up and there it was: the ridge. It looked like a gigantic dragon's tail with switchbacks and scales and complex rocky steps. I counted the so-called steps. One . . . two . . . crap . . . three. The Yellow Band was the Yellow Band. The first step was yet to come.

Yash and Sun-jo caught up to me a few minutes later. I taped them resting with their hands on their knees, then swung the camera around to the summit. Yash pointed to his watch and started toward the base of the first step.

Yogi was sitting on a rock waiting for us. He checked our oxygen tanks, made us drink something, then pointed up.

The first step was about sixty-five feet. It was 7:00 A.M. and minus thirty-five degrees out. Zopa was right about the weather again. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but that could change in a matter of minutes.

The first ten feet led up a crack on the left side of the cliff. Next came a traverse across an unstable ledge, made much harder by our weakened legs. (Mine were shaking almost uncontrollably the entire traverse.) The final part of the climb was a wild scramble between two boulders.

We got to the top of the first step at 8:30 A.M.

The second step was twice as steep and twice as high as

the first. Before we attempted it, Yogi changed all of our oxygen tanks. Both Sun-jo and I nearly passed out while we waited for him to reconnect the precious Os.

There were aluminum ladders attached (kind of) to the wall of the first section. They moved and twisted under our weight and made a terrible scraping noise against the rock. Climbing the slippery rungs wasn't made any easier by wearing crampons. It was like trying to climb a ladder with ice skates. I was delighted to get off the ladders, but the final move to the top was much worse. It was a tension traverse where you could only use your arms, then swing up to the top by a bunch of old ropes tied to a sling. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I watched Yogi do it without a hitch. Sun-jo was right behind me. He looked as sick about the move as I did.

I followed Yogi's route move for move, but when I grabbed the rope my crampon slipped and I found myself dangling by the rope like a dead fish with absolutely no momentum to get me to the top of the step. In addition to this I had gotten twisted around with my back to the wall.

I glanced over at Sun-jo and Yash. They stared back at me helplessly. There was nothing they could do. I looked up. Yogi was leaning over the ledge trying to reach the sling so he could pull me up. He wasn't even close. We hadn't brought any rope with us. The extra weight would slow us down and that could kill us.

I knew the longer I hung there the more fatigued my arms would become. If I waited too long for a solution, I wouldn't have the strength to execute it. I had to move. Now!

I flipped back around, smashing my face into the wall, then drove the front spikes of my crampons into the hard

rock. One of them stuck, and putting weight on that leg, I was able to relieve the pressure on my arms. Holding as tight as I could with my left hand, I let my right hand go. I pulled off the outer mitten with my teeth and let it drop, then shook the arm out. (I had another pair of mittens in my pack.) I repeated the procedure with my left arm. I was going to need all the strength I could in my arms for the next move. And I hoped Yogi was paying close attention above because I was going to need his help.

I walked up the wall with my crampons until I was in a < position, then I basically stood up, hoping the crampons held. They did. At the last second I let go of the rope with my left hand, hoping I could stretch it high enough for Yogi to grab. He grabbed it, but he was still going to need help getting me up. He had taken off his outer mitts, too, and had me pretty solidly. I let my right hand go and flailed away blindly for a handhold. I found a crack, just big enough to dig the very tips of my sore fingers into. I pulled up with all the strength I had. If it didn't work, Yogi was going to have to let me drop. When I was as high as I thought I could go I brought my right knee up to my chest and tried to get my foot into the sling. I barely snagged it, but it was enough. All I had to do now was stand up and I would be within inches of the top.

Yogi dragged me over the edge and he and I lay there on our backs gasping for breath. He reached over and cranked my tank up to four and I did the same for him. Even with the extra oxygen it took us a good five minutes to catch our breath.

I wondered what was going through Sun-jo's mind after he saw that. Apparently, he had learned by my mistake

because a few minutes later he swung up over the edge like a spider monkey. Yash was right behind him.

They let me rest for another fifteen minutes. I needed it. Yogi didn't turn my oxygen down until we were ready to leave. I needed that, too.

The third step was the easiest of the three for me, even though it came higher in the climb. Compared to what I had just been through, it was a breeze.

When we got to the top we saw another corpse. He was lying on his back with one arm splayed out and the other hand buried in the pocket of his down parka. The corpse looked pretty fresh. It might have been one of the German climbers who had died when we were at ABC. There was no sign of the other climber he had been with. I wondered if he had died on the way up to the summit, or the way down. I wondered how many people were waiting for him to come home. *No one climbs a mountain thinking they're not coming back down.* I looked away from the dead climber, trying to shut out Mom's warning.

Beyond the corpse lay the summit pyramid's ice field, then the summit ridge.

Yogi pointed at his watch, then held up two fingers. Two hours left.

We clipped on to ropes and started across the ice field. I don't know about Sun-jo, but this is when I shifted into summit fever. At this point I should have been completely spent, but instead I was totally juiced. Mom's warning disappeared into thin air. Poof! Nothing was going to stop me from getting to the top.

The snowfield became steeper, curving around into what I thought would be the summit, but instead we ran into fresh

avalanche debris. Some of the chunks were as big as school buses. I swore. To come all this way only to be stopped by an avalanche? It would take us hours, if not days, to scramble over the debris.

Yogi pointed at the debris and shook his head.

No kidding, I thought, staring at the debris bitterly. He yanked on my sleeve. I thought he was telling me that we had to go back now. That it was over. I was going to shout that we had to try for Sun-jo's sake, even though I knew it was hopeless.

But Yogi wasn't trying to turn me around. He was pointing at another rock cliff flanking the final buttress. The debris-filled ice field was not the route to the summit.

Once again we had to traverse a narrow ledge along the face, clipping on to a rope that looked like it had been there for three hundred years. About a hundred and fifty feet along the ledge we ran into an outcropping that took a lot of finesse, and time, to get around. At the end of the traverse the route stepped up in a series of small ledges, which took us about twenty minutes to climb. We emerged onto the upper slope of the summit pyramid ice field past all the avalanche debris.

The wind was really blowing now. Yash led us to the shelter of an outcrop, where we rested for a few minutes before our final push. Yogi pointed at his watch again and stood. I took up the rear and recorded him, Sun-jo, and Yash heading for what I thought was the summit. It wasn't. When we reached the top of the ice field the real summit was revealed. The colorful prayer flags on the summit pole were fluttering in the wind 650 feet away.

We stopped again to rest, but I cut mine short.

"I'm pushing ahead!" I shouted above the deafening wind. "I'll film you coming up!" This wasn't exactly the truth. The real reason was that I couldn't wait to get to the top.

600 feet...

Two football fields. At nearly 29,000 feet it felt more like twenty miles.

Three steps... rest... three steps... rest... two steps... rest...

I discovered it was best to avoid looking up at the summit. Every time I peeked it appeared farther away, as if I were walking backward. Sun-jo, Yash, and Yogi were about a hundred feet behind me moving at the same snail's pace. I shot them for a couple minutes, then started out again.

100 feet...

90 feet...

I stopped and checked my Os, thinking the tank must be empty. It was half full, hissing out two liters per minute, which didn't seem nearly enough to keep me alive.

80 feet...

50 feet...

I looked at my watch. 1:09 P.M. Twenty-six minutes to turnaround time. I stopped to rest. I was standing at 29,003 feet, higher than any other mountain on earth: 32 feet to go.

It was cold and windy, but the weather was rarely better at this altitude. I could see for hundreds of miles in every direction. "Beautiful" doesn't describe the view, nor does "majestic." The closest word I could think of was "divine," but even that fell short of what it was like.

Sun-jo had made up some time. He was less than twenty feet away from me. Yogi and Yash were walking on either side of him. I wanted to turn around and finish the climb, but in-

stead I took out the camera and recorded my team coming up. I could see now that Sun-jo was struggling and Yash and Yogi were actually helping him along. It was 1:19 by the time they reached me. Sun-jo fell down on his knees and was having difficulty breathing. I checked his oxygen tank gauge and saw they had already cranked it up to four liters per minute.

I gave him some time to rest, then squatted next to him. "You can do this, Sun-jo. It's only about thirty feet away. Look!" I pointed to the ridge pole.

He gazed up at the colorful prayer flags snapping in the wind and gave a dull nod, but he didn't move.

"After you touch the pole," I said, "it's all downhill."

Sun-jo shook his head. "I don't think I can do it."

"You have to do it! For your sisters. For yourself."

He continued to shake his head. I looked at Yogi and Yash. They were in as bad a shape as Sun-jo. Getting Sun-jo this far had nearly done them in. I looked at my watch. Twelve minutes to turnaround time. Even if we left right that second, I wasn't sure we would make the summit by 1:35.

"You go," Sun-jo said weakly. "I'll start back down."

"You can't go down the north side. The Chinese are waiting for you."

"I will get around them."

He and I both knew this wasn't true. I looked down the mountain. Two other climbing parties had topped the third step and were winding their way up the dragon's tail. They must have gotten a late start or had run into problems along the way. If the weather held they might be okay.

You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not. . . . Sun-jo will not reach the summit without your help. . . .

"Let's go." I pulled Sun-jo to his feet.

We started back up and with each little step, Sun-jo seemed to gain strength.

25 feet...

20...

17 feet...

10 feet...

I stopped and stared up at the summit pole, then turned around and looked below.

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

I looked back up at the summit pole, then pulled my goggles down and looked at Sun-jo. "Do you know the date?"

He shook his head.

"May thirtieth," I said.

"So?"

"I think this is as far as I'm going."

"What are you talking about? The summit is only a few steps away. What does the date have to—"

"Tomorrow's your birthday. You have a reason to be here, Sun-jo. An important reason. Your future and your sisters' future. I don't have a reason for being here. I'm heading back down the north side."

Sun-jo stared at me like I was crazy, and maybe I was at that moment, but the decision I had made during the last few feet felt right. I didn't want to be the youngest person to summit Everest. Sun-jo's father died saving my father. Reaching the top would save Sun-jo and his sisters. With the money from the equipment endorsements he would receive they would all be able to go back to school.

"It is too much," Sun-jo said.

"It's nothing."

"Come with us down the south side into Nepal."

I shook my head. "If I climb down the south side everyone will know that I reached the summit. The only way down for me is the way I came up. But I do have a favor to ask." I took off my pack and found the Moleskine. The yellow prayer flag with the blue mountain was hidden in a pocket in the back of the journal. I took it out and handed it to him. "When you get to the top tie this on the pole."

"Of course, but—"

"You need to go."

Sun-jo put his thick gloves together in the Buddhist way and bowed. "Thank you, Peak. I will not forget this."

"We're running out of time. I'll tape you getting to the top so there's a record of the climb."

Sun-jo quickly explained what I was doing to Yogi and Yash. At first they looked shocked, then they both broke into broad smiles and clapped me on the back.

"Yogi is coming with you," Sun-jo said.

"I'll be all right."

"He insists," Sun-jo said, "and so do I."

"Fine."

We all shook hands and hugged, then I recorded Sun-jo and Yash taking those last ten steps. When they reached the summit of the highest mountain in the world they took off their masks and smiled and waved for the camera.

Sun-jo tied my yellow flag to the pole, then he and Yash crossed into Nepal.

DOWN THE MOUNTAINSIDE

I DON'T REMEMBER MUCH about the trip back to Camp Six. We stumbled into camp well after dark. I vaguely remember Yogi hooking up a fresh oxygen tank to my mask, but after that it's a blank. I didn't have any trouble sleeping. I know that. And I didn't have any regrets about not reaching the summit.

I woke up with spit frozen all over my face and the worst headache of my life. The oxygen tank was empty. I grabbed another one and cranked it up to six for a few minutes. That got rid of most of the headache.

Yogi and I were eager to get down and check on Zopa. We bypassed Camp Five and went directly to Camp Four. As soon as we stepped into camp we were confronted by one of the Chinese soldiers. He was dressed like a climber, except for the pistol strapped around his waist. In pretty good English he asked who we were and what we were doing.

"My name is Peak Marcello and this is Yogi Sherpa," I said. "We took supplies up to Camp Five and we're headed back down to Base Camp."

He called Captain Shek on the radio and they had a long conversation in Chinese.

"The captain wants to talk to you," the soldier said and handed me the radio.

"This is Peak Marcello," I said.

"Joshua Wood's son?"

"Right."

"What you doing on mountain?"

"Like I told your officer, I helped take some supplies to Camp Five. Josh is taking a climbing party up tomorrow."

"But you leave mountain!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, enjoying myself immensely. "I'm up at Camp Four."

"You have big argument with you father."

"Oh that. He told me that he wasn't going to let me try for the summit. It made me mad, but at least he let me get as far as Camp Five."

"What about other boy?"

"What other boy?"

"Sun-jo!"

"Oh him," I said. "He's in Nepal." Which was the absolute truth.

"I don't believe. I have soldier bring you and Sherpa back to Base Camp."

"Whatever," I said and handed the radio back to the soldier.

They had another long conversation in Chinese, but I knew what this one was about. The other soldiers had gathered around the radio and were listening intently. The one with the radio finally signed off and shook his head with resignation.

"You don't have to escort us down," I said.

"We have orders," he said.

"That's fine with me, but we're going to Base Camp. Where else would we go?"

About that time Josh came on the radio asking for me. The soldier handed me his radio again.

"Is everything okay, Peak?"

"I guess. What's the matter with that captain?"

"I don't know. Anyway, we're headed up to ABC tomorrow, so I guess we'll see you on your way to Base Camp. Thanks for helping Yogi get those supplies up to Five."

I could see him and the others gathered at HQ monitoring the call from Captain Shek.

"No problem," I said. "Is there any way you'd reconsider giving me a shot at the summit?"

"We already talked about that, Peak. The answer is no. Maybe next year, or the year after, when you're a little older. You're not ready."

"Out." I handed the radio back, trying to look disappointed.

The soldier looked at me for a moment. "Do I have your word that you are going down to Base Camp?"

I held up my right hand. "You have my word. All I want to do right now is crawl into my tent and go to sleep."

He nodded.

Yogi and I headed over to Zopa's tent not sure what we would find. What we found was a note.

Peak,

I left Camp Four yesterday. All is well. I will see you on the road.

Zopa

I was glad to hear he was okay, but the note freaked me out. It was addressed to me! The plan had been for me to top the mountain with Sun-jo and cross into Nepal. How could Zopa possibly have known what I was planning to do?

I didn't know what I was planning to do until I was ten feet away from the summit!

YOGI AND I WOKE UP early and left Camp Four before anyone was awake. I wanted to give the soldiers an out so they could tell the captain that we had left before they were up.

When we got to ABC we were met by more soldiers. They were in uniform and looked uncomfortably cold. Once again I was given a radio with a very angry Captain Shek on the other end.

"You leave Camp Four!"

"Right."

"Without soldiers!"

"We left before light. We didn't want to wake them. Besides, we know our way down to Base Camp. We don't need an escort."

"Soldiers at ABC escort you!"

"Fine."

The two soldiers picked for the duty were delighted to be leaving ABC.

We ran into Josh and his clients just as they were arriving at Camp Two. They must have left Base Camp early, because they had made good time. Josh took me to the side out of earshot of the Chinese soldiers.

"Did you make the summit?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"What happened?"

"Ran out of steam."

"No worries," he said. "What about Zopa, Sun-jo, and Yash?"

"Zopa got sick and didn't get past Camp Four. I don't know where he is now. I was hoping that you'd seen him."

Josh shook his head. "I'm sure he's fine. He probably slipped into the porter camp at night and is laying low."

"I hope so."

"And Sun-jo and Yash?" he asked.

"As far as I know they're in Nepal."

"What?"

I told him about Zopa's plan.

He broke into a broad grin. "That son of a . . . Captain Shek is going to flip when he finds out. Topping the mountain." He shook his head, then turned a little more serious.

"How far did you make it?"

"Above Camp Six."

"Well, you made it a lot farther than most people. I'll take you next year or the year after. We'll go up on the Nepal side. After Shek finds out about Sun-jo I'll never get a permit to climb on this side again. When did Sun-jo summit?"

"One thirty-two P.M. May thirtieth. A day before his fifteenth birthday."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "I wish it could have been you."

"No worries," I said.

"We go!" one of the soldiers said.

"In a minute!" Josh said, then turned back to me. "Shek is going to detain you when you get to Base Camp and ask you some questions. Thaddeus will be there with you. In real life Thaddeus is a lawyer and is fluent in Chinese and Chinese law. You'll be okay."

I was going to be okay, but not for the reason he thought.

And I was not going to join him on another Everest climb. I'd had enough of 8,000-meter peaks littered with corpses.

"I'm going home," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Back to New York."

"We'll talk about that when I get back down."

"I won't be there when you get down," I said.

"What's the hurry?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Okay. I want to be home for the twins' birthday."

By the look on his face I was right. He didn't understand.

"I haven't missed one yet," I said.

Josh stared at me for a moment. "Well, I guess Thaddeus can get you a ride to Kathmandu."

"We go now!" the Chinese soldier shouted.

"We're just about finished," Josh said irritably.

"I guess I'd better go."

"Yeah... well... Sorry it didn't work out." Josh put out his hand.

"Actually, it did work out," I said, shaking his hand. "I'll see you around."

I started following the soldiers and Yogi, then turned back and shouted, "Write when you get a chance."

Josh looked at me and grinned. "I might just do that."

WE GOT TO BASE CAMP about five o'clock. Captain Shek, several soldiers, and Thaddeus Bowen were waiting for me. They weren't interested in Yogi and let him go into camp.

When we got to Shek's headquarters, the first thing he

did was to dump everything in my pack onto a large table. Then (just like my New York detective a century ago) he examined the contents item by item.

He found nothing of interest except for the digital camera Josh had gotten for me, JR's video camera, and my Moleskine. He flipped through the Moleskine, found mostly blank pages, and put it back down. The cameras he pushed to the side of the table.

"Sit," he said.

There was a single straight-back chair.

I sat.

He asked me the same questions he had asked me up at Camp Four, but this time he had a tape recorder going and a soldier taking notes. I answered the questions in the exact same way. When he finished he told me I could repack my things. I began stuffing things back in, but when I got to the cameras the captain stopped me.

"Not those," he said.

"You have no right to take anything," Thaddeus said.

"Cameras will be returned after we look."

"Well, there better not be any damage to them when they are returned," Thaddeus said.

Some lawyer, I thought. Glad he wasn't defending me when I was in front of that NYC judge, I'd be in jail right now.

When we got outside the building he whispered, "Was there anything incriminating in those cameras?"

"It's a little bit late to be asking now," I said. "But the answer is no. I took the memory card out and put a blank one in."

"Where is the memory card?"

"Someplace safe." (It was actually stuffed in my sock.)

I was tired. I started toward my tent, and it wasn't until I got there that I remembered I didn't have a tent there anymore. I crawled into Josh's and I was a little surprised at how tidy everything was. All the clothes were neatly folded, gear stored in boxes. He had a little folding desk with pens, paper, and a laptop computer. Next to the computer were two stacks of mail. The first stack was addressed to him. The second stack was addressed to me. (My stack was a lot smaller than his.) I could have gotten mad again at the whole mail thing, but I didn't have the energy or the interest anymore. Like I said, "You don't get to pick your name or your parents." Joshua Wood is what he is. I couldn't change him or the fact he was my father. All I could do is try not to become him.

I opened the big envelope, addressed to PEAK "PEA-PEA" MARCELLO. Inside was a drawing and a smaller envelope. Written on the outside of the envelope was: AIRPLAN FAR (six-year-old spelling). Inside was sixty-seven dollars and eighty-six cents. Not quite enough to get to New York, but I still had Rolf's three hundred bucks, and the credit card. I pulled out the drawing. It was an invitation to a birthday party. I would have to hurry if I was going to make it in time.

I started toward HQ to find Thaddeus, but on the way I heard a truck start. I ran over to see if I could hitch a ride and found Yogi in the back.

The drivers charged me a hundred bucks but I didn't care. I would have paid twice as much. I was on my way home and the truck was nicer than the one we'd taken to the mountain. The covered bed was empty, with plenty of room to lie down and sleep.

The two drivers took turns at the wheel, and were both in a hurry. They only stopped for fuel. Which was fine with me.

WHEN WE CAME TO THE ROAD above the Friendship Bridge where the prisoners had been chipping the boulder, the truck slowed, then came to a stop.

Yogi and I hopped out of the back to find out what was going on.

The boulder and prisoners were gone. In their place was a Buddhist monk with a shaved head and an orange robe. He was talking to the driver with his back to us.

As we walked up, he turned around and smiled. It was Zopa! He looked fully recovered—as healthy as he had the first day I met him in the Indrayani temple.

“How did you get here?”

He held up his thumb. “I hitchhiked.”

Somehow I doubted that. Why would someone drop him off on this lonely stretch of road? The only thing nearby was the border crossing at the Friendship Bridge. Unless he asked to be let out here. *I will see you on the road*, his note had said. I figured he had messed up the phrase and meant *down* the road. I guess I was wrong. The three of us got into the back of the truck.

I thought we were in for a big hassle at the bridge, but when we got there, the guards looked in our truck, glanced at our papers, then waved us through without a word.

We made one more stop before we got to the airport in Kathmandu. I complained that I needed to get to the airport, but Zopa made a good point: “They will not allow you on an airplane looking and smelling like you do.”

The monks at the monastery washed my clothes as I took a long bath.

ZOPA RODE TO THE AIRPORT with me.

Before going into the terminal I pulled out the note Zopa had left for us at Camp Four.

"How did you know you'd see me on that road?"

Zopa shrugged. The answer didn't surprise me.

I unzipped a side pocket on my pack and pulled out the memory card. "You might need this to prove Sun-jo got to the summit."

Zopa took the card and stashed it in the folds of his orange robe. "Will we see you again on Sagarmatha?"

I wanted to shrug my reply, but I couldn't because I knew the answer. "No," I said. "But I might return to Kathmandu to visit."

"You are welcome anytime." Zopa bowed and gave me a blessing.

When he looked up he said, "Thank you for what you did for my grandson."

I returned the bow. "Thank you for what your son did for my father."

DENOUEMENT

IT TOOK TWENTY-FOUR HOURS to get to New York, but because I crossed the international date line going west, I got there only a few hours after I left Kathmandu.

I grabbed a cab and nervously fidgeted as the driver fought the heavy traffic into the city, hoping that I wouldn't be too late. When he pulled up in front of our building I gave him a fistful of cash without even counting it. I took the elevator to the loft.

I heard the party before I saw it. Rolf knew how to throw a party. (Mom and I were a little weak in that area.) There would be no less than seventy-five people in the loft: parents and their kids, teachers from GSS, neighbors, people from Mom's bookstore, lawyers from Rolf's office. . . . Last year for entertainment, Rolf had hired a group of performing dogs. The year before he had brought a reptile woman (Helen the Herpetologist—the twins' favorite) with bags of snakes, turtles, and lizards.

It turned out that I was the entertainment this year—at least that's what it looked like when I walked through the front door.

"I told you he would be here!"

"I did, too!"

The two Peas dropped their presents and threw their little arms around my thighs. Mom was next, then Rolf. I

told myself that I wasn't going to cry, but that idea went right out the window as soon as I saw them. As we hugged, everyone sang "Happy Birthday."

When everything had settled down a little, Mom pulled me into the kitchen and asked me how I was. I told her I was tired and a little sore.

"You've lost weight."

"I guess."

She looked at me for a moment, then gave me another hug. "I'm glad you're back."

"Me too."

"So, you didn't make it to the summit."

"How'd you know that?"

"Josh called this morning. Said to tell you happy birthday."

That was a first. "Where was he?"

"He didn't say . . . somewhere up the mountain. The connection wasn't very good. It reminded me of the old days."

"I bet," I said. "I know I should have called, but I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It was still a surprise," Mom said. "I didn't think you'd get here in time for the birthday—although the two Peas insisted I was wrong."

"Is everything okay here . . . I mean is it all right that I came back?"

"Your skyscraper stunt is old news, and Rolf and I are trying to keep it that way."

"What do you mean 'trying'?"

"Holly Angelo."

"Uh-oh."

"She's been hanging around a lot."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. I kind of like her, and the twins are wild about her. Rolf? Well, he *tolerates* her. We've talked her into not writing about your Everest trip. It would just bring up the whole skyscraper thing again and we don't want to do that, especially now that you're back in town. It's best if we—"

Rolf opened the kitchen door with an apologetic, worried look on his face.

"Peeeeeak!"

Holly pushed him aside as she assaulted the kitchen wearing a bright pink pantsuit, lime green scarf, and a red purse the size of a suitcase. I let her throw her spidery arms around me and actually hugged her back. It was good to see her.

When she finally set me free she glanced furtively around the kitchen as if she were looking for spies. "I heard you didn't make it to the summit," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

"How did *you* find out?"

"I've talked to Josh several times in the past couple days."

He was being pretty chatty, it seemed.

Holly put her red purse on the counter, looked around again, then pulled out a newspaper. "This is about to hit the streets."

YOUNGEST PERSON SUMMITS EVEREST BY HOLLY ANGELO. It was a full-page spread with several photos taken from video I had shot. The biggest photo was of Sun-jo, Yogi, and Yash sitting next to the summit pole.

"I think there's a book in this," Holly said. "I talked to Sun-jo today. He said to say hello and to wish you a happy birthday. He also told me he's enjoying the birthday present you gave him, and so are his sisters."

I smiled.

"What did you get him?" Holly asked.

"Nothing much," I said. "I'd better go out and mingle."

Rolf gave me a doubtful look.

I said hello to a few people, got a tour of the twins' presents, then noticed Vincent sitting in the corner by himself, gathering grist. I was surprised to see him. We always invited him to the parties, but he rarely showed up.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

"I was just about ready to leave when you walked through the door," Vincent said. "You have had an interesting few weeks."

"You read the Moleskine," I said.

"Yes, and it was well written. Unfortunately, there is only a beginning and a partial middle to the story. Even though you managed to fill the Moleskine I'm afraid the assignment is incomplete. The story lacks a climax, an end, and a denouement. So, I cannot—"

"There's a second Moleskine," I said. "I'm not sure about the climax, but the story does have an end . . . kind of. And I'm right in the middle of the denouement, literally." I pointed at the partygoers.

Vincent smiled. "Of course. I see your point."

"How about if I finish it up tomorrow morning?"

"That will be fine. I will be at GSS until noon. School is out for the summer and the deadline for your assignment has passed, but under the circumstances I think we can make an exception." He stood up. "And again, it's a well-crafted story. You left me hanging. I'm desperate to find out what happened."

I'M SITTING IN MY BEDROOM finishing the Moleskine.

The twins are awake. I hear them giggling and arguing as they eat their midmorning snack. I promised to take them to GSS with me when I drop off the Moleskine.

Here they come, their little feet pattering up the steps.
The door opens.

"What are you doing?"

"You said you'd take us to school."

"I'm working on my assignment."

"What's this?" Patrice points at the newspaper article about Sun-jo pinned on my bulletin board.

"Is that you?" Paula asks, pointing at Sun-jo.

"No."

"What are those flags?"

"Prayer flags."

"What's a prayer flag?"

"There's a prayer written on the flag. When it blows in the wind the prayer goes up to God. If you put the flag really high on a mountain the prayer gets to God faster."

"Looks like that yellow one has a blue mountain on it like the ones you used to draw."

"It could be. Now, sit down on my bed and be quiet so I can finish this."

"We missed you, Peak."

"We love you, Peak."

"I love you, too. I'm almost finished."

I look at the twins, smiling, and write my last sentence . . .

The only thing you'll find on the summit of Mount Everest is a divine view. The things that really matter lie far below.