ABC

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

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

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

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

"You do not look well," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you going up to ABC with us?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Two hours ago."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

"Sorry."

Holly nodded. "Help me to my tent."

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

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

"Drink," he said.

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

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

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

"What kind of tea?"

"Plain old green tea."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I HAD A MISERABLE NIGHT.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

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

I tried again, but nothing came out.

"Any time, Peak."

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

"Come on, Peak!"

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

JR swore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beautiful!" JR said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How's your throat?" Holly asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fork to mouth.

Ice cold.

Huh?

Look at watch.

Half an hour?

How?

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

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

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

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

LETTERS FROM HOME

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

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

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

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

Thin-air mail.

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

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

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

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

"Boy very sick," the cook told me

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

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

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

I poured him a cup of tea.

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

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

"I will be better in a few days."

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

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

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

"How are you feeling today?"

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

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

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

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

"Last night and this morning."

"And?"

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

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

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

Hang in there, Peak.
I miss you.
I want you home.
Love, Rolf

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

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

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

MULES

KINE #2

SECRETS

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

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

"Where's Holly?"

No one seemed to know.

"We're not waiting," Josh said. He turned to Dr. Krieger. "How's Peak's health?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zopa gave him another shrug.

"What about Holly?" Josh asked.

"She's strong," Zopa said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Any ideas, Zopa?" Josh asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you talk to them?" Thaddeus asked.

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

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

"Who?" Josh asked, annoyed.

"Zopa's grandson," Holly answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When is your birthday?" Josh asked.

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

"May thirty-first."

Six days before my birthday.

Josh was visibly relieved, but only for a second.

"How do we know that?" Thaddeus asked.

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

"This is in Nepalese," Thaddeus said.

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

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

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

"Forged documents," Zopa said.

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

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

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

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

"Yogi and Yash," Zopa said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is the difference?" Zopa said.

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

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

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

"Any footage of Sun-jo?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure."

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

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

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

"I'm in," Holly said.

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

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

"You should have told me."

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The film crew groaned.

BEAR AND BULL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zopa nodded.

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

"Toast?" Sun-jo asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Any questions?" Josh asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sick again?" Zopa asked.

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

They got up and left the tent.

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

"You did."

"I stopped climbing."

"Why?"

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

"You must have climbed for more than money."

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

"Is that birth certificate real?"

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

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

Zopa shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pleasant thought.

"What am I supposed to be filming?" I asked.

"The story," Will said.

"What story?"

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

"And the mystery," Jack added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four soldiers had been tracking the bear and caught up

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

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

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

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

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

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