

"Hotel staff," he said.

They obviously knew he was coming and were overjoyed that he was there. We got out and he introduced me. Not speaking Nepalese, I didn't know if he told them I was his son or his little brother. Regardless, by their expressions they were very happy to make my acquaintance.

They unloaded the gear and we followed them into the lobby, where we encountered more pandemonium—this time from the guests. Women, men, trekkers, mountain climbers, old and young, gathered around Josh like he was a rock star (no pun intended). He signed autographs and answered questions until the concierge, politely but firmly, dispersed the crowd.

"Please, please . . . Mr. Wood needs to rest after his long journey."

Mr. Wood had no intention of resting. When we got to the room he started sorting through the gear and stuffing what he wanted into his backpack.

"You're leaving now?" I asked, trying not to sound too whiny.

"Have to." The last thing he jammed into his pack was a box of energy bars.

I didn't say, "What about me?" because there is no way to say this without sounding pitiful, so I just stared at him.

"Zopa will be taking you up to Base Camp," he said. "Aside from myself, he's the only one I trust to do it. He knows all about you."

"Who's Zopa? And how does he know about me?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Zopa used to be *sirdar*. You know what that is?"

"Head Sherpa," I said.

Sherpas are mountain people who live on the slopes of the Himalayas. Without them and their climbing skills, no one would get to the summit of Everest.

"Right," Josh said. "Zopa got me to the summit of Annapurna the day you were born. He was there when Teri called and gave me the news. Since then, he's asked me about you every time I've seen him. Bugging me, really . . . saying that it's not good for a father to neglect his son."

Obviously, Josh had not listened to him.

"Zopa stopped climbing years ago," he continued. "He's a Buddhist monk now. Lives at the Indrayani temple. The Lama there has given him permission to forgo his vows for a few weeks to take you up to Base Camp."

"Forgo his vows?"

"It's not as big a deal as it sounds. I don't know all the details, but leading you to Base Camp was considered to be auspicious, meaning the right thing to do." Josh smiled. "And I'm sure the donation I made to the temple didn't hurt. They're a little strapped for money."

"So, Zopa is okay with this?"

"Absolutely. He's curious about you. And he didn't say this, but I think he's getting kind of bored with being a monk."

"What's he like?"

"Cagey," Josh said with a smile. "If he agrees to do something, he'll do it, but he may not be doing it for the reason you think he's doing it. And he'll never let you in on why he's doing it."

"Huh?" Josh was beginning to sound like Paula and Patrice.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "You never know what

Zopa's real motivation is. I asked him to take you up to Base Camp. He said he would, but he's not taking you up there just to do me a favor or because I gave money to the temple. There's another reason—more likely half dozen reasons—he agreed to do it. And you and I will probably never know what all of them are.

"It was a sad day when he retired, I can tell you that. He's been on the summit of Everest more than any other human being. At least that's the rumor. Zopa says he can't remember how many times he's reached the top, but I think he knows exactly how many times it's been. He speaks perfect English, and although he doesn't talk very much, when he does you need to listen very carefully to what he's saying. The Sherpas do. A lot of them drop by the temple before they climb to have him do a reading. If he tells them not to go, they won't go up, no matter how much money we offer them."

"How do I get in touch with him?"

"He'll come by in a day or two. In the meantime, you need to sort through this gear. Most of it's yours and you'll need all of it to get up the mountain. I wasn't sure on the sizes, but if something doesn't fit right tell Zopa and he'll swap it out at one of the shops downtown." He looked at his watch. "I'd better get going."

He started toward the door and stopped. "Charge whatever you eat at the restaurant to the room. Do you have any cash?"

I shook my head.

He pulled out a thick wad of money and peeled off several bills.

"It's not as much as it looks like. Seven thousand rupees is about a hundred and fifty bucks U.S."

I took the bills and set them on the dresser.

"I'll see you in a couple of weeks," Josh said. "Maybe less if Zopa thinks you're ready. Oh . . . Before I leave town I'll call your mom and tell her you're okay."

I interpreted this to mean that he would call and lie to her about where we were and what we were doing. Better him than me.

"Enjoy the trip," he said, and with this he was gone.

I stood there for a few seconds, staring at the door. My head was kind of spinning, but it wasn't from altitude. I think it was Josh's energy that was making me dizzy.

There was a light tapping on the door, so faint I barely heard it. I opened it.

It was the concierge. He gave me a slight bow.

"I will turn down your bed."

He wove his way through the junk as if it weren't there, pulled the comforter back, and fluffed the pillows. When he finished he looked at the window. The curtains were drawn.

"This will not do!" he said. "You are missing the setting of the sun."

He pulled the curtains back with a flourish.

Behind them were the Himalayas washed in orange and pink light. They were much bigger than I had ever imagined.



## GEAR OF THE DEAD

**THE NEXT MORNING**, after a huge breakfast in the dining room, I came back upstairs and started sorting through the gear.

All the stuff didn't make up for all the birthdays and Christmases Josh had neglected, but it came pretty darn close. It was all state-of-the-art equipment, most of which I'd only seen advertised in climbing magazines. Camp stove, coils of rope, cams, titanium ice ax, crampons, thermal gloves, digital camera, O<sub>2</sub> regulator and face mask, tent, sub-zero sleeping bag, sleeping pad, altimeter watch, carabiners, batteries, ascenders, pitons, harnesses, climbing helmet, headlamp . . . Everything I needed to get through the death zone.

Most of the clothes were too small, especially the boots. I suppose Josh couldn't have asked my mother for my sizes without tipping her off. And he couldn't have asked me, because until I passed the physical he wasn't sure I was going, which got me to wondering what he would have done if I had failed the physical.

But only for a moment.

The gear called to me, and nothing matters when you are up to your knees in brand-new, expensive climbing equipment.

It took me two hours to figure out how the altimeter watch worked. An hour to set up the tent. I faced it with the opening toward the window so I could see the Himalayas. I snapped a couple photos of my view with the digital camera, then I got hungry and decided rather than going down to the dining room I'd just cook up some food on my brand-new camp stove. (I know this sounds goofy, but I get a little out of control when it comes to gear. I opened the window so I didn't get carbon monoxide poisoning.)

As the freeze-dried beef Stroganoff was simmering away there was a knock on my door. I thought it was housekeeping again. They had come by earlier asking to clean the room, but I told them that I had everything I needed and to come back tomorrow. I slithered out of the tent, carefully stepped over the stove (so I didn't tip it over and burn down the hotel), and cracked open the door, hoping they wouldn't smell the gas burning or the food cooking.

It wasn't the housekeeper. It was a Nepalese boy, about my age but two inches shorter. He was smiling up at my head, which is all I had revealed through the crack. Below my head I had nothing on but my boxers because I had been trying on gear all day and it was getting hot in the room from the stove and the sun coming through the window.

"Peak Wood?" he asked.

"Actually, it's Peak Marcello, but yeah, that's me."

"My name is Sun-jo. Zopa sent me over to bring you to him."

"Oh sure . . . uh . . ." I glanced at the mess behind me. I didn't want to leave him standing in the hallway while I got ready, which was going to take a while.

Appearing like a total idiot won over being rude. I let him in.

Sun-jo looked a bit shocked at the setup, but he didn't burst out laughing, which I might have done if I had stumbled onto something equally as stupid-looking as my indoor camp spot.

"My dad . . . uh, I mean Josh, got me some new gear and I was . . . uh . . . testing it out, so I would know . . ." *Ah, forget it,* I thought. "I'm just making some lunch. Are you hungry?"

Sun-jo said he was.

As I got dressed, I watched him checking out the equipment, and I knew he was a climber. No one else would fondle gear as lovingly. He picked up various items like they were more valuable than gold, which they *were* when they were the only thing keeping you from falling off a rock face or into a dark bottomless crevasse.

I cleared a spot for us on the bed and served him a bowl of Stroganoff and an energy bar for dessert. It turned out that Sun-jo's father had been a Sherpa. Unfortunately, he had died up on K2 the previous year trying to rescue a group of climbers. Only one of the climbers survived.

K2 was discovered in 1856 by a surveyor named T. G. Montgomery. The *K* stands for Karakoram. The *2* means it was the second peak Montgomery listed on his survey. At 28,250 feet it's a bit shorter than Everest, but most climbers agree it's a lot harder to reach the summit.

I told Sun-jo how sorry I was to hear about his father, but he shrugged it off, saying he hardly knew his dad. He and his two younger sisters had spent most of their lives at a private boarding school in northern India.

"My sisters and I only came back to Kathmandu on holi-

day," he said. "My father was usually up on the mountain during those times."

Hearing about his sisters caused a little ache in my belly for Paula and Patrice, but it went away as I watched Sun-jo casually tie a length of Spectra cord to a hex slung with a triple fisherman's knot.

"Where did you learn to climb?" I asked.

"My grandfather instructed me," he answered.

His English was better than mine. He had kind of a British/Indian accent. Mine was kind of a Bronx/Cody, Wyoming, accent—which did not sound nearly as cool or refined as his.

"So, you're on holiday?"

"No," Sun-jo answered. "When my father died we did not have the funds to keep all three of us in school. The tuition is very expensive. My sisters are still in school and I am here to find work so they can stay there. Without a formal education there is no future for girls in Kathmandu. I would like to go back to school myself, but it is unlikely I will be able to. It is more important that my sisters attend school than it is for me."

Sun-jo wasn't much older than I was, and I wondered what kind of job he could get that would pay the tuition.

He looked at my altimeter watch, which he had been playing with throughout lunch. "We should leave soon. Zopa is waiting for us at the Indrayani temple."

I turned off the stove and put the dishes in the bathroom sink.

"Did you know there is a dining room here in the hotel?" Sun-jo asked. "I have not dined there myself, but I hear it is quite excellent."



"Yeah, I ate there this morning. It's great. The reason I cooked . . . well, you know . . . the new gear . . ."

Sun-jo smiled. He knew exactly what I was talking about.

OUR TRANSPORTATION to the temple was the saddest motorcycle I had ever seen. There was more silver duct tape on it than chrome.

It took him six vicious kicks to get it started, and when it finally caught, the motorcycle belched out a column of gray smoke so thick I thought the bike had burst into flames along with my new friend. But the smoke cleared, revealing a coughing Sun-jo with tears running down his face and a mostly intact motorcycle—except for the bolt lying in a pool of oil under the engine.

"It is much better when we are moving forward." He gasped. "In this way the smoke cannot catch us."

I thought about running up to the room and grabbing my climbing helmet, but I was afraid Sun-jo might die of asphyxiation before I got back out, so I climbed on behind him and we lurched into traffic.

Sun-jo yelled something that sounded like, "Only two root beers, last go!" But I think he meant that the motorcycle only had two foot gears, fast and slow. He was right about our exhaust being behind us; the problem was that we were now speeding through everyone else's exhaust. For the next twenty minutes I squeezed shut my burning eyes and buried my face in his back, thereby missing most of Kathmandu.

"We have arrived," Sun-jo announced.

I unclutched my sweaty hands and opened my eyes.

"You must remove your shoes before entering the temple."

I took them off and put them next to about fifty other pairs of shoes and sandals.

"If you don't mind my asking," Sun-jo said, "what happened to your face?"

"It got frozen to a building."

Sun-jo laughed. "No, really . . ."

"Climbing accident," I said.

"That's what I thought."

I followed him into the Indrayani temple, which was like walking into another world. One where people whispered rather than shouted. There were no wandering cows (we had narrowly missed three of them on the way over), no horns honking, no screeching tires. The smell of flowers and incense saturated the air. Worshippers were kneeling in front of shrines, spinning prayer wheels, lighting butter lamps. Mystery, possibilities—this was the Kathmandu I had expected.

Sun-jo led me to a teak bench in the shade of a banyan tree. We sat for a while watching the orange-robed monks talking quietly to visitors and offering them blessings.

"Which one is Zopa?" I whispered.

"None of these."

"Shouldn't we let him know we're here?"

Sun-jo shook his head. "He'll be along when he's ready."

Waiting again, but I didn't mind. I spent the time trying to figure out how to gracefully bow out of a return trip to the hotel on the death motorcycle.

"Here he comes," Sun-jo said.

I expected Zopa to be a frail old holy man. And the monk striding toward us was old, but he was anything but frail. His arm and calf muscles (what I could see of them beneath the hem of his orange robe) were well defined and powerful.

You'd expect a Buddhist monk to have a spiritual presence, but whatever spirituality Zopa had was overwhelmed by his physical presence. When he reached us he put his palms together and bowed. I followed Sun-jo's lead by getting to my feet and returning the bow.

Zopa looked me over, frowning at the scabs on my face and ear.

"Climbing accident," Sun-jo explained.

Zopa pointed at my bandaged fingers.

"Split nails," I explained nervously. "They're almost healed."

"You look like your father," Zopa said.

Actually, I looked more like my mother, but I wasn't about to disagree with him.

"How did you get here?"

"Motorcycle," Sun-jo said.

Zopa shook his head in disgust. "When you go back take a taxi." He reached into a fold in his robe and came out with a roll of rupees as big as his fist.

I didn't think Buddhist monks were even supposed to look at money.

He peeled off half an inch of bills and handed them to Sun-jo.

"What about my motorcycle?" Sun-jo asked.

"If you are lucky," Zopa said, "someone will steal it. Wait for me at the hotel."

The monk turned and walked away. I was relieved about the taxi, but that didn't explain why we had come all the way down to the Indrayani temple. When I asked Sun-jo about it he just shrugged and said that Zopa had his own way of doing things.

Mysterious ways, as it turned out, because when we got back to the hotel, Zopa was already waiting for us in the lobby. I didn't recognize him at first because the orange robe had been replaced by regular street clothes and an expensive-looking pair of sunglasses. The sunglasses made him look like some kind of celebrity, which I suppose he was to the trekkers and climbers gathered around him. It had taken us ten minutes tops to catch a taxi outside of the temple. We drove straight to the hotel, and traffic wasn't any worse than it had been on the motorcycle on the way to the temple. And yet, there was Zopa chatting with the hotel staff and guests as if he had been there all afternoon.

I looked at Sun-jo, expecting him to be as shocked as I was. He wasn't.

"Zopa does things like that," he said.

"How?"

Another shrug, which I learned later was everyone's answer to questions about Zopa.

"You'll get used to it," Sun-jo added, then went over and greeted the vacationing monk.

Now, you're probably wondering why I didn't ask Zopa myself. Believe me I was tempted, but I didn't think he would tell me. Or worse, he might give me some reasonable explanation. It's sort of like asking a magician to tell you how he does a trick. Or asking a tagger how he got those seventeen freight cars painted in a single night. It's all about the mystery. Sometimes it's better not to ask.

Up in the room, Zopa sorted through the gear, putting it in different piles while Sun-jo and I watched. Once in a while he would stop and have me try something on saying, "Fits," or "Doesn't fit." When he was finished there were three piles.



He pointed to one of the piles. "We will take this and trade for things that fit."

My boots, blue snowsuit, and several other items of clothing were in a separate pile with some other stuff. I pointed out that none of the things in that pile fit, either.

"I have another use for it," Zopa said.

I didn't know what that could be, but I didn't pursue it. Instead I pointed to the trade pile, which had several hundred dollars' worth of pitons, cams, ropes, and other expensive equipment.

"This gear is brand-new," I said.

"You won't need it to get up Sagarmatha."

This is what the Nepalese call Everest.

"My dad bought it," I argued. "He might need it."

"Your father told me to make sure that you have everything you need to climb the mountain. How much money do you have?"

I told him, but I didn't mention the credit card Mom had given me. I didn't think she'd be happy about a huge bill for Everest gear.

"It's not enough to get the things you will need," Zopa said. "Hopefully, we will be able to trade all this." He started to gather up the gear from the trade pile.

"Best not to argue," Sun-jo whispered, and he and I helped haul the gear downstairs, where a Toyota truck and driver were waiting for us.

IT TOOK HOURS to get the replacement gear. In the process I got quite a tour of Kathmandu. It seemed that most of the places Zopa liked to shop were located down dark scary alleys. He was warmly greeted wherever we went, until the

bartering started, when he and the proprietor would end up in a shouting match until a bargain was struck.

The most difficult things to find were my boots. I'd try on a pair I liked, tell Zopa they fit great, then he would make me walk, and shake his head.

"Not right," he'd say.

"What do you mean?" I'd insist. "They fit great."

"Too small," he'd say. "But when your toes fall off inside from the swelling and pinching they will fit perfectly."

We finally agreed on a pair that did fit great, but they were pretty battered up on the outside. In fact, all the stuff we bought was banged up.

"I hope this gear wasn't taken from dead climbers," I said offhandedly.

Zopa looked horrified. "Bad luck to use gear of the dead. No, this is from people who come to Kathmandu to climb and decide it is better to stay in bar and drink."

I must have looked horrified myself.

"Don't think ill of them," he said. "They lived."

Zopa also bought a few things for himself and Sun-jo, who I guessed was coming with us to Base Camp by the gear he was getting. Unlike me, he listened carefully to Zopa's opinions and bowed every time the monk gave him something.

It was late when we got back to the hotel. We went up to the room, packed everything, then loaded it into the truck.

"We leave for Tibet tomorrow morning at six," Zopa said.

He and Sun-jo got into the truck and drove away.

## TIBET

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The next day he made us walk again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## PEAK EXPERIENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"It was good."

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

Zopa shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good afternoon," Josh said with a smile.

"No one go until I see papers!"

"Of course," Josh said.

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

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

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

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

"You climb?"

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

"Last name no match."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How many people are here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"His name's Sun-jo."

"Is he with Zopa?"

"Yeah."

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

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

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

"Like what?"

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

"Peak Experience?"

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

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

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



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

"What is all this?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How'd George take the news?"

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

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

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

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

"Where is she?" Josh asked.

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

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

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

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

"Word travels fast at high altitudes."

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

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing," I said.

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

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

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

"A job?" I asked.

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



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

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

## ROCK WEASELS

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

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

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

"You awake?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

"Including Peak Experience?" I asked.

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