

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, before I left Kathmandu."

"What did you tell her?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What about the film crew?"

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

"What about Holly Angelo?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why do we have to keep it quiet?"

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

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

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

"That would be Holly," Josh said.

"You know her voice?"

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

"Josh!"

We both winced.

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

"Josh!"

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

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

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

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

"Josh!"

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

GASP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Best I can do."

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

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

"What about the film crew?" I asked.

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

"How's it going?"

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

"A reporter."

"Injured?"

"Not yet."

I looked around and noticed Zopa wasn't there.

"Where's Zopa?"

Sun-jo shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Cagey monk reason number two," I said.

"What?"

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

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

"Sure."

They were good.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He should have been wearing crampons."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All conversation stopped.

A plate of food dropped.

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

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

Holly whipped me around to face her with surprising strength.

"Uh . . .," I stammered.

"I need to talk to you."

"Uh . . . okay."

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

I thought I would faint.

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

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

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

"Uh . . ."

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

Thanks, Dad.

Coughing fit . . .

I thought about sneaking out while she was coughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A cheer went up.

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

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

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

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

This news was met with much less enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LATECOMERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sun-jo shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GAMOW BAG

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

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

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

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

"When?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Keep us posted on the weather."

"Roger."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's my—where's Josh?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about you?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shook her head.

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

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

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

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

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

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

"I'm not going to the summit?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zopa shrugged. "The maps are wrong."

"What about Holly?" Josh asked.

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

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

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

"Did you talk to Pa-sang?"

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

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

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

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

ABC

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

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

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

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

"You do not look well," he said.

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

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

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

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