

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 ~~butt~~ ^{butt}."

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

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

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

Pleasant thought.

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

"The story," Will said.

"What story?"

“That’s the big question,” JR answered. “And part of the fun.”

“And the mystery,” Jack added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It would be great,” JR continued, “if you could write

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

“If you can’t write them down,” Jack suggested, “you can record what you’re doing on the microphone.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s not as comfortable as the climbing camp, but the porters have been kind.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four soldiers had been tracking the bear and caught up

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

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

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

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

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

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

CAMP FOUR

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

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

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

"You try for summit?" he demanded.

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

"Not today," I said.

"How old you?"

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

"How old you?" he repeated aggressively.

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

"Where other boy?"

Uh-oh.

"Who?" I'm a terrible liar.

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

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

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

"Where he go?"

I shrugged.

"You lying to me!"

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

"I kick you off mountain if you lie."

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

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

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

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

"I watching you."

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

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

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

It turned out that he was right.

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

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

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

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

"Uh, no."

He swore.

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

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

"You're going to quit?"

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

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

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

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

"What about that interview?" she asked again.

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

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

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

"When did you get here?"

"A half hour ago."

"You left ahead of us?"

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

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

"I rode on Gulu's yak."

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

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

"You're kidding?"

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

I told him about Captain Shek.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If the weather holds," Zopa said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Everything else okay?" Josh asked.

"Yes. We are all fine."

"I'll check in later."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"People would steal it?" I said.

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

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

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

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

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

I agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I couldn't imagine the three climbing parties trying for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ARREST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He understood.

Zopa gave him a blessing in Nepalese and signed off.

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

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

"What's going on?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

"Call you in New York City?"

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

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

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

"I will."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zopa radioed Josh and told him what was going on.

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

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

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

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

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

"Captain Shek is coming up?"

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

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