

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How many?" Zopa asked.

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

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

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

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

It turned out the stay was longer than expected.

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

He hadn't.

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

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

"I will see everybody papers," he said.

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

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

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

"Are you crazy?"

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

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

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

Everyone looked at me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about you?" I asked Zopa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILY HISTORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think Dietrich is right," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And Sun-jo?"

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

"Why is Captain Shek so worried about him?"

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

"How'd he find out?"

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

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

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

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

Josh looked confused.

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

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

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

We glared at each other.

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

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

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I sent you letters."

"You mean when you were a kid?"

"Yeah."

"So?"

"You got the letters?" I shouted.

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

"Everything," I said.

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

"Fine," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Peak."

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

"Hi, Mom."

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

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

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

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

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

"Your ribs are okay?"

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

"Furious."

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

"Josh told me you were sick."

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

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

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

"And how is he?"

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

"And how are you?"

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

I reached my tent and climbed inside.

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

"Go ahead."

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

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?" Mom persisted.

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

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

This was followed by a longer silence than the first.

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

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

"I'll be careful," I said.

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

"How are the two Peas?" I asked.

"You're changing the subject."

"Yeah."

Mom sighed. "Hang on a minute."

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

"Where are you?"

"When are you coming home?"

"I miss you!"

"No, I miss you!"

"Did you get our letters?"

"Mommy was mad at you."

"Are you coming home for our birthday?"

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

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

I heard a click.

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

"Can I ask, Mommy?" Patrice asked.

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

"But—"

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

The twins reluctantly agreed.

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

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

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

"I hope he likes it," I said.

"He's funny," Paula said.

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

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

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

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

"What time is it there?"

"A little after eight in the morning."

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

"How's Rolf?"

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

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

"Do you know why I quit climbing?"

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So, you talked to your mom?"

"Yes."

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"Sun-jo's father?"

"Up on K2."

"You're the climber who survived."

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

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

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

UNREST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A private meeting," someone else said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How was their mood?" Thaddeus asked.

"Ugly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tent flap opened and the Texan stepped inside.

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

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

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

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

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

"He's bluffing," Josh said confidently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There may not be another window..."

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

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

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

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

The teams were not impressed by either announcement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

BLINK

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

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

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

My name.

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

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

"No," the Texan said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't believe this."

"I'll help you pack."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's Sun-jo?"

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

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

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

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

"What's going on?"

"Team C," Zopa answered.

"What are you talking about?"

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

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

Josh

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

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

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

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

SHORTCUT

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

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

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

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

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