

PROLOGUE

Everest Base Camp – 1985

Frank ran into the Frontier Expedition Command tent and found Jack Trammel talking on the radio while the rest of his team crowded around him. When Frank stepped beside him, Jack glanced up from where he sat. The alarm in the expedition leader's deep brown eyes told all as the crackled voice came back over the two-way radio.

"We on way down, but he locking up. Can you radio Camp 4? See if Tar-Chin there? Over," the faint voice said.

"Will do, over," Jack replied. "Keep moving, over."

"Trying. Wind picking up, snow too, over."

Frank's eyes widened when he glanced at the large bulky laptop sitting amongst the strewn weather reports on the table. The data glaring back on the screen wasn't good: FL270, 290/80, MS48, valid at 10:15 GMT. That meant Jack's Sirdar Sherpa and his client were walking right into a goddamned blizzard. He tapped Jack's arm, pointed to the laptop and whispered, "When did these numbers come in?"

Jack nodded, put his hand over the microphone. "Fifteen minutes ago."

"Jesus," Frank muttered. The mountain had once again decided to have its own party while the rest of the world obeyed the weather forecasts. "What's their elevation?"

"8,400 meters," Jack replied, and gave Frank a knowing look. There was no way Pasang and the American with him were going to make it back to Camp 4 before the storm roared in. They were trapped. In fact, for

those who had already made it back, it was going to be a hell of a ride.

Again, the Sherpa's voice came through the static. "Has Tar-chin made Camp 4 yet? Over."

Jack bit his lip and rubbed his grizzled face. Frank knew the expedition leader was in a tight spot. If Jack told Sherpa Tar-chin that Sherpa Pasang was in trouble and asking for him, the man would go without question. But how could he ask Tar-chin knowing there was barely a chance of success, let alone that it would likely cost the Sherpa his life?

Finally, Jack radioed back. "No response yet. How's your O2? Over."

A long silence passed and Frank worried for the worst. Finally, Pasang's voice came crackling back. "One hour on Steve's tank, maybe little more if I crank it back to one. But doubt he could stand it. I have four on mine. I could switch if need be. Over."

"Up to you Pasang, over," Jack said, as the crowd behind them in the Command Tent whispered back and forth.

Frank turned to look at those who'd gotten news of the unfolding drama on the mountain. Word always traveled quickly in the climbing community when lives were at stake. It was the one time when the guarded members of Base Camp came together; working tirelessly to figure out a way to bring men back alive. But the stone-cold fact was that there was little anyone could do when the mountain decided to roar, and that was what it was doing right now.

Jack Trammel's job was keeping Pasang's spirits alive and strong, and he was trying every trick in the book. Whether Pasang knew his expedition leader was lying to him about Tar-chin being at Camp 4 was anyone's guess, but it was a fair bet Pasang knew Jack wasn't being straight with him. Every climber knew it was whatever kept you going that mattered, and if you had to be lied to, then so be it. As long as you kept moving, that was the

only thing that mattered. Freeze up and stop thinking and you die, simple as that.

The minutes turned into an hour and the hour turned into two then three, and as the minutes slid by, Pasang's voice came back less and less over the radio. The end had come for Pasang and the American, or it was looming close and it was crushing Frank's hopes. The last time he'd heard Pasang's reedy voice, it was obvious they weren't going to make it down to Camp 4 where the wind was barreling across the slopes and creating wind-chills of minus sixty-five and lower.

Frank plopped down in the corner of the command tent brooding and checked in with Camp 4 at Jack's request to keep track of their situation. He knew Jack had given him the task to take his mind off the tragedy going on high above. But it wasn't working. All Frank could think about was Pasang lying in the snow and fighting for his last breath. He closed his eyes, saw the short, stout, round face of the Sherpa smiling back at him, and felt his lip quiver.

Someone came around with mugs of warm Mango juice and Masala tea. Frank waved them off when they came to him. He couldn't eat or drink knowing Pasang was dying in a futile attempt to drag a man off the mountain who hadn't listened to reason.

Moreover, Frank was angry Pasang had let the American manipulate him and doubly frustrated that he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

As he sat listening to the wind lash the Command tent's nylon skin beside him, he thought of Pasang's mother, Nuri. It would fall on him to tell her Pasang wasn't coming back. The thought of it was more than he could handle. His throat knotted as he balled his hand into a fist. *If I ever lead an expedition, I'll make sure this never happens again. Any asshole that disobeys my Sirdar's advice is on his own!*



Los Angeles, California – 1985

Sarah popped a bagel in her toaster and turned to the portable TV sitting on the kitchen countertop to listen to the morning news. As she watched the tall, suited man give his report, she thought about her husband over in Nepal. He should have been back at Everest Base Camp from the climb two days ago, but as of yet, she had heard nothing from him. She tried to put the growing ominous concern out of her mind as her son, Gregory, blew raspberries in his high chair. Turning to him, she scooped a mouthful of cereal into his Bugs Bunny spoon and steered it toward his open mouth. At eighteen months old, he already had his father's deep blue eyes.

"Daddy should be on back down from the top of the world right now," Sarah said as he kicked his pudgy legs back and forth. She wiped his chin and forced a smile. "How exciting is that?"

Gregory gummed his cereal, bunched his little round face into a smile and pounded his hands on the highchair tray. Sarah smiled at her happy and animated child. He was the one constant in her life since Steven left for the mountain two months ago, and he got her through each day. But she also discovered, quite unexpectedly, that being on her own gave her a strength she'd never experienced and she liked it. Now, if she could only balance it with Steven's sure-mindedness and quick decision-making.

Today, she had a field trip lined up for her sixth grade students at Lincoln Elementary. Steven had suggested the idea of taking her class to the zoo before he left for Nepal. Said it would be a nice way to say good-bye to the kids she had watched grow into intelligent, curious, and pretentious youngsters. But behind his suggestion was another motive; to give her something to plan and thus distract her from worrying about him.

She looked up at the kitchen clock over the window. It was going on 6:00 AM. Her girlfriend and classroom aide,

Roxanne, would be over to pick Gregory and her up in fifteen minutes. After dropping Gregory off at day care, they'd abandon their usual morning walk and head straight to work. Thirty minutes later, she was tapping her fingers on the kitchen counter while peering out the window. "Where are you, Rox? Of all days to be late, this isn't one of them." She debated if she should pick up the phone and call her. As she went for the receiver, it rang out.

"Hey, where are you?"

"Excuse me," said a man's voice.

Sarah took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling, feeling embarrassed. "Oh,

I'm sorry. I was thinking you were someone else."

"No problem Ma'am. My name is Jack Trammel. Is Sarah Madden there?"

"This is she."

There was a slight pause on the other end and Sarah wondered if he had hung up. "Sarah, I'm the Everest Expedition leader from Frontier Expeditions."

Finally! Sarah thought, feeling relieved. She pushed a lock of her dark brown hair over her ear. "Oh, yes, I've been waiting for your call. Is my husband there? Can I speak to him?"

"Mrs. Madden . . . um, there's been an accident on the mountain. I . . . I wish there was an easier way to say this, but your husband, he's . . . well . . . he didn't make it."

Sarah blinked, trying to comprehend what the man had just told her. Suddenly, the room grew very small around her and she couldn't feel the floor beneath her feet.

"Mrs. Madden? You there?"

Sarah switched hands holding the receiver and cleared her throat. "Um . . . Yes."

There was another pause on the other end. "I'm so very sorry."

"Ummm, can you repeat what you just said, please? I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

Jack's shaky voice came back. "There was a sudden storm no one could predict. Your husband . . . he got

caught in it. I'm so, so sorry. I waited to call you until I was absolutely sure there was no chance he was —. Ummm, is there anything — ”

Sarah dropped the receiver and felt her body slide down the cabinet and onto the floor. This was not happening. Steven told her he was going to be just fine. People climbed the mountain all the time. He was with the best expedition company in the world, with all the safety precautions money could buy. But he was — she couldn't say the word.

A car pulled into her driveway as Gregory started to fuss in his carrier. A horn blew, the TV babbled and the world went dark.

Chapter 1

Present Day — Kathmandu International Airport, Nepal

Sarah glanced at her son, Greg, sitting next to her reading his mountaineering magazine. He hadn't said but a dozen words to her since leaving Hong Kong. At length, she thought about the heated exchange they'd had just before boarding the plane. She had tried to see it his way and had agreed reluctantly to stay in Kathmandu while he was on the mountain, but in the long run, she just couldn't do it. Why couldn't he understand how she felt? She bit her lip as her gaze drifted to the window overlooking the darkened hills passing below.

The airliner banked left and started its descent to Kathmandu International Airport. As it did, she wondered what it was that drew men to risk their lives on such nonsense. Did they have some sort of death wish? Her husband had said it was the challenge of testing himself to find out what he was made of. Well, he found out all right. It had cost him his life. And more than that, it had left her alone to raise a son who deserved a father.

She took a deep breath, unable to endure her son's silence another minute. "I'm sorry. Are you going to be mad at me forever?"

"I'm not mad," he said, but his tone was brittle and sharp.

Sarah felt her body tighten. "Then what? You've been prickly since we left Hong Kong," she said, eyeing him pointedly.

Greg set his magazine down and looked up. "I just can't understand why you called Kincaid. We agreed you'd stay in Kathmandu!" he shot back, raising his voice.

"I know, but I can't do it," Sarah said, glancing at a man staring back at them.

Greg gritted his teeth and lowered his voice. "You're gonna cost me my shot at this, you know," he replied, holding her with a chilly gaze.

Sarah stared back into her son's piercing blue eyes. "I don't see how my being there is going to cost you your one shot."

"You'll be a distraction I don't need. Why can't you understand that?"

"A distraction? I'm coming to support you," Sarah said, though in truth she rather discourage him and be done with this whole insane odyssey.

"Support me from Kathmandu then," Greg replied. "I'm sure Kincaid will refund your money."

"Money has nothing to do with it and you know it," Sarah said. "I've lost too much to this damned mountain, and I'll be damned if I'm going to sit in some hotel room waiting to —"

"Nothing's going to happen," Greg interjected. "Look, mountaineering has come a long way since Dad's accident."

"You sound just like your father," Sarah volleyed back louder than she intended. Greg stiffened his jaw. "Is that so?"

"Yes." She paused, looking for a verbal weapon to arrest him with. But she knew there was no weapon capable of piercing his Teflon resolve to go forward with the climb. Finally, she sighed and lowered her voice. "This isn't just any mountain. This mountain kills people."

"It does if you don't know what you're doing," Greg said. "It's why I've been training for over a year."

"You can't train for the weather."

"It was a freak storm that killed Dad," Greg countered emphatically. "They have better equipment now. Hell,

they can predict a dusting of snow three days out with ninety-five percent accuracy.”

“Right, but it’s that five percent that scares the hell out of me,” Sarah said, looking away toward the cabin window.

Greg was quiet for a long time. Finally, he said, “You worry too much. Kincaid’s the best. He’s never lost anyone on the mountain. The guy doesn’t take chances.”

“Worry too much?” Sarah fired back. It was a standard comment Steven had used more than once with her. She didn’t like being patronized then, and she didn’t like it now, especially coming from her son. “Excuse me if I care about what happens to you!”

Greg pressed his lips together and softened his furrowed brow. “I’m sorry. I know you care.”

“Then why are you fighting me on this? The least you can do is accept my decision. I haven’t asked for much,” Sarah said pointedly. When Greg looked away, she shook her head. How could she get through to him? Part of it had to do with his fragile male ego. At length, she cleared her throat. “I won’t embarrass you.”

She heard him laugh. “I’m not worried about that. I worry about you getting sick, and like I keep telling you, I don’t need that kind of distraction.” He was quiet a moment, then said, “I know you want to be there, but this is personal to me. I need . . . to do this . . . alone.”

“I understand that,” Sarah answered, turning back to him. “But — ”

“No, you don’t,” Greg said. He tightened his jaw. “If you did, you wouldn’t have booked yourself with the expedition without talking to me first. That was wrong and you know it.”

The reply stung and Sarah felt her throat tighten. Why couldn’t he understand how his quest to conquer the monster was killing her? She bit her lip. “Yes, I know. I’m sorry. That was wrong.”

“Yes, it was,” Greg answered.

Sarah was quiet a long time. Finally, she said, "I did it because I love you."

"If you love me then stay in Kathmandu," Greg muttered.

Sarah studied his imploring expression, loving him so much she could barely breathe. But staying in Kathmandu was not an option. She turned toward the window, unable to bear his forthcoming frown, and said, "I'm sorry, I can't."



Thirty minutes later, they walked out of the old two-story masonry terminal into the warm night air. Across the two-lane service drive, a mob of eager men were waiting to help anyone emerging through the doors for a hefty tip. Sarah took a deep breath, tightened her grip on her luggage, and followed Greg across the broken macadam drive to a tall Nepalese man holding a cardboard sign scribbled with the words, 'Khum Jung Mountaineering'.

Well, so much for professional marketing, Sarah thought as Greg pushed the cart carrying their mountain of gear. When they came to him, the man smiled.

"Namaste! You are Mr. Madden?" he said, offering a toothy smile.

"Yes," Greg said. "Where to?"

The man directed them to a break in the long, roped off line between the emerging travelers and the crowd. Parked a hundred feet ahead was a Ford mini-van with the Khum Jung Mountaineering logo on it. As they strode toward it, several men in the crowd gathered behind them trying to vie for an opportunity to be of assistance.

The hopeful contingent was cut short though when a tall, broad-shouldered man hopped out of the mini-van's side door. "We'll take it from here, gentlemen," the man said, shooing them off.

Sarah casually glanced at the man's shoulder length salt and pepper hair that was tied back into a ponytail. Was he just another cog in the Khum Jung Mountaineering

machine or was he was one of the guides? He appeared to be the latter.

He broke into a broad smile. "Namaste! Frank Kincaid here. Let me get that for you," he said, taking her bag.

"Thank you," Sarah replied, surprised. She never expected the renowned Mr. Kincaid, whom her son bragged about so much, to meet them personally.

The man turned to her son. "You must be Greg. And you would be Sarah, I assume?" he said, glancing back at her.

"That would be correct," Sarah answered. Though his glance had been fleeting, she felt judgment in it.

"Well then, welcome to Nepal," Frank replied, opening the hatchback and tossing her bag in. "How was your flight?"

"Long," Greg said.

"I bet," Frank replied, closing the van door. "Why don't you both get inside while I get your gear stowed away up top?"



As they drove through a maze of narrow, dark streets, Sarah listened to Greg pepper Frank with questions about the mountain, and the prognosis of the Ice Fall region. Last year, the warm weather in the perilous pass had shut down all of the expeditions from attempting a summit. It had been the first time since the commercial climbing of the mountain began, and it had cost those who'd ponied up enormous amounts of their own money dearly. Others, who were sponsored, suffered losses as well.

Sarah stared off through the window at the passing street level shops. Although her son was sponsored, he still had plenty of 'skin in the game' as he liked to call it; she wouldn't mind a repeat of last year's ditched attempt. Having heard enough talk about the mountain for the night, she spoke up. "So, Mr. Kincaid, how long have you lived in Nepal?"

Frank turned around in the front seat and smiled at her. "Call me Frank . . . please. To answer your question, I

guess around forty years. My Pop moved us here when I was just into my tweens.”

“And prior to that?” Sarah said.

“Luanda.”

“Where’s that?” Greg said

“Angola, Africa,” Frank replied.

Sarah was astonished. She never would have guessed he came from that part of the world. “Why’d you leave?”

“Civil war.”

“Oh. So, what made you choose Nepal?” Sarah asked, a little curious, but mostly to keep the conversation from reverting back to Everest.

The driver hit the horn and swerved to avoid a motorbike barreling past them. Frank diverted his attention to the road in front of them then turned back to her. “My father had friends here.” He fixed her with an enigmatic gaze that put her on guard, as if he already knew her. She smiled, trying to shake the feeling, and said, “So, you live in Kathmandu, I take it?”

“Oh, no. Up in the mountains.” He turned to Greg. “When’s your O2 supposed to arrive?”

Greg pulled a stick of gum out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth. “Wednesday.”

“Got it from POISK, right?”

Greg nodded. “Not cheap either.”

“You don’t want cheap up there, believe me,” Frank said. “How many bottles?”

“Thirty.”

“Good,” Frank said. He pulled a small pad out of the glove compartment along with a pencil. “Got the flight number?”

Greg dug into his knap-sack and pulled a folder out. As he went through it, Sarah said, “Any idea how much longer to the hotel?”

“Actually, we’re here right now,” Frank said as the van came to a halt.

As they started backing down an alleyway, Sarah looked around her. Seeing only broken down brick

buildings around her, she wondered what kind of hotel it was that Mr. Kincaid had set them up with. It wasn't like she hadn't stayed in one star hotels before, but the building they were headed for right now appeared as though it was ready for the wrecking ball. In fact, from what she had seen so far, the whole city looked like it was ready for one. She could only imagine what the light of day would reveal.

Greg handed Frank the flight itinerary for the oxygen delivery as the van stopped. After Frank wrote it down, he handed it back and opened the door, letting Sarah out with Greg following close behind. Trudging into a small closed-in lobby, Sarah felt her stomach knot up. It was shabbily furnished and there was a foul pungent odor in the air she couldn't quite place. There were a lot of things she could tolerate, but a flophouse wasn't one of them.

She turned to Greg. "You've got to be kidding."

Greg shrugged.

Suddenly Frank was behind them. After chatting in Nepalese with the hotel receptionist, he said, "You should be all set."

Sarah stared back at him, wondering if the man had lost his mind. "Mr. Kincaid, this is not a hotel!"

Frank studied her a moment as the receptionist handed him a pair of room keys. For a minute, she thought he was going to read her the riot act, but he nodded toward the front door and said, "Looks are deceiving in this city. Follow me."

He led her around back into a softly lit courtyard dotted with flowering trees and shrubs. Scattered amongst them were wrought iron tables and chairs. Sarah looked up at the enclosing verandas draped with leafy vines and then glanced down to one of the lower windows that peered into an occupied room with drawn back curtains. Inside was a freshly made bed and on it was a colorful quilt. Beyond the bed, she saw freshly painted pastel walls, dotted with a lovely painting of the mountains. Finally, she said, "Well, I guess I stand corrected."

Frank eyed her impassively. “Right. And don’t get too comfy here. It’s the best you’ll see for quite some time.” He turned to Greg. “I put the rest of your gear in storage ‘til our flight to Lukla. Breakfast is at six over there under the veranda by the stairway. Just tell the server you’re with KJM and go help yourself. We’ll meet here in the courtyard afterward; say around eight for introductions and a brief chat on how things are going to go for the next few weeks until we get to Base Camp.”

He gave Sarah one last long look then said, “Night now.”

Sarah watched him walk back the way they came in as the bellhop brought their luggage around. As Frank faded into the dark shadows of the passageway, she wasn’t convinced she should trust him with her son’s life. But there was little she could do about it for the time being.

Chapter 2

Frank opened the door to his hotel room and hit the switch. He hadn't known what to expect when he finally met the Widow and her son, other than he had been determined not to like them anymore than was necessary. Yes, the tragedy on Everest involving Steven Madden had happened a long time ago, and yes, Frank had told himself he had gotten over it, but that didn't mean he'd forgotten it either. Added to that was the fact that the Widow and her son were Americans; expecting folks to lay down the red carpet for them. He snorted. They'd soon find out things didn't quite work that way on the mountain. Frank Kincaid was not a cruise director nor did he concern himself with being their personal valet.

He cleared a pile of regulatory expedition documents from his bed and plopped them on the dresser. Why hadn't he told his front office to call the son back and cancel the American's expedition reservation when he found out about it? And letting the mother tag along and live with them at Base Camp? Sure, the extra \$10,000 from her would help in financing the classroom addition he was building with the support of the Hillary Trust in Khum Jung; and yes, he'd occasionally allowed family members to be present during expeditions. But that was generally reserved for repeat clients with enthusiastic loved ones. Greg Madden and his mother were neither of those things.

Was the need to see the son and widow of the man who was responsible for killing his best friend so long ago morbid curiosity or was it that he wanted vengeance? Frank refused to believe it was the latter because it would

mean he was vindictive and self-serving. Yet, with every day leading up to this night, the anger he'd worked so hard to repress over the years had grown exponentially.

He took a long look at himself in the dresser mirror as he unbuttoned his shirt. What were the chances he'd be guiding the son of the man who'd brought so much pain to him and those he cared about? Then again, Frank had learned that karma had a way of reconciling itself. He tossed his shirt over his backpack and sat on the bed, pulling his legs into a lotus position. Lying on his pillow beside him was his satchel. In it, was a tattered book of Buddhist stories he'd put down on paper over the years. He pulled it out, leafed through it, and thought of what Ang Tshe-ring would say. The answer the old Buddhist lama would give him back, he already knew; ' . . . what lesson are you about to learn? And are you ready to hear it?'

Frank peered out the window across the courtyard toward the Widow's room. He knew anger was a ghost, an irrational emotion that could control his life if he let it. He took several deep measured breaths to take back control of the angst that was twisting his stomach into knots. As he did so, he realized he had a mountain of his own to climb. It was a different kind of mountain; yet no less dangerous than the one awaiting the young American client. At length, he looked down at the book in his hands, drank in the words on the page and read; 'If you light a lamp for somebody, it will also brighten your own path'.

He sighed.



The next morning, Frank woke early from a dreamless sleep. He quickly showered and went to work reviewing the expedition climbing permits and the shipping paperwork for the cargo and equipment. On top of the pile were copies of the various alpine clubs attesting to his clients' climbing abilities. He glanced at them one more time, and seeing the American's half way down, pulled it out, and looked it over. Having summited the Matterhorn

by way of the south face, along with Denali, Greg Madden was no tenderfoot. But that didn't mean he wasn't reckless either. When pushing for a summit, people often took ill-advised chances. Frank would have none of that on Everest.

Next, he took one last glance at the insurance policies for his Sherpas along with the required Ice Fall and ground transportation fees. Once he was satisfied that all the 't's were crossed and 'i's were dotted, he picked up his cell phone, and called his local rep, Daku, to give him flight numbers and arrival times for client oxygen. Finally, last but not least, he pulled out his schedule to go over the day's tasks.

First thing would be a short briefing with his clients after breakfast to go over upcoming details and to make introductions. Afterward, he would take them to the Nepalese Trekking Ministry to file essential paperwork and pay the fees, along with having a brief meeting. From there, it would be onto another meeting to provide information for the mountaineering historical records.

The afternoon would then be devoted to confirming flights to Lukla and overnight accommodations in Namche and Tengboche. In between these last minute details was a phone call to the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) over back taxes they were insisting he owed, even though he had receipts to prove otherwise. Someone there had it in for him, and he had a good idea who was behind it. The problem was, his documentation of proving he paid the taxes would be swept under the proverbial rug because in this instance, it wasn't about the money; it was about shutting him down and settling a score. That it was jeopardizing his support of the school in Khum Jung pissed him off even more.

He clenched his fist and tried to put the issue with taxes behind him for the moment. It was going to be a long day for sure, so he'd best get to it. He threw his paperwork into his satchel, stepped into his sandals, and went out of his room into the warmth of the early morning sunshine that

was pouring down into the courtyard. As he strode down an open-air stairway, he saw Toby and Jakob heading out into the courtyard with their breakfasts.

The Austrian clients had arrived the day before yesterday along with the Aussie. The two Italians, an Irishman, and two Frenchmen came in on Monday. The Widow and her son that he had picked up last night rounded out the climbing permit to nine. Frank preferred small numbers in his expeditions as opposed to one of the larger companies on the mountain. Besides, having smaller numbers allowed him to get to know folks better going up the mountain. That, and it made it manageable for his Sherpa guides. Two or three clients per team were more than enough for one guide to handle.

As he stepped off the last stair tread, he was greeted by his assistant, Sang-gye, a short, young, wiry bronze-skinned man with a bright smile and friendly brown eyes.

Frank put his arm over the man's shoulder and gave him a good squeeze. "Sleep well?"

"I did, and you?" Sang-gye replied as they walked in lockstep toward the dining room.

"I'm still kicking, so I guess so," Frank quipped. He withdrew his arm from Sang-gye's shoulder and dug his cell phone out. As he checked his text messages, he added, "You get ahold of Guna?"

"Yes, he is bringing the van around just now and will park it outside the lobby," Sang-gye answered.

"Good," Frank replied. He slipped his cell phone back into his pocket and eyed the two Austrians, who were just outside of the dining room sitting in the shade of an overhanging veranda. By the look of their breakfast plates, Frank wondered if there was anything left at the buffet.

Tapping Sang-gye on the arm, he said, "You go on in. I'm going to go have a chat with the boys over there." Walking over to them, he donned a smile. "Namaste."

The men looked up as Frank snatched a chair from a nearby table. "Good morning," Jakob replied in a thick Austrian accent.

Frank flipped the chair around so the back of it was against his chest and straddled it. "You're enjoying breakfast, I see."

Toby shoveled a fork full of fried potatoes into his mouth, and nodded. Jakob said, "It's not bad. Could use a little more seasoning."

Frank appraised the large fair-haired men. They were in marvelous shape, but being large and muscular wasn't necessarily a good thing for where they were going. "You might want to ease up on the chow. The mountain will make you pay for it."

Both men eyed him quizzically then glanced down at their plates. Jakob set his fork down and leveled a pointed gaze at Frank. "It has never been a problem before."

"Except neither of you have been higher than 6,500 meters. Normally, calorie intake is a good thing up on the mountain because your body works harder up there. But being large and muscular has its drawbacks. Your bodies demand more oxygen and once you're over 8,800 meters with the air volume being a third of what it is down here, it becomes a lot more difficult if you get my drift," Frank countered. "Trust me, ease up the chow. You'll thank me for it later on."

The men darted glances at their plates and then at each other. Jakob frowned. "I had not thought of that before."

Frank got up and slid his chair back under the table beside him. "You'll be okay. Just need to pay attention to intake is all. All right, I'm off to get a cup of tea." He pointed to the far end of the courtyard. There, a small round pool with a stone sculpture of a Lotus flower was adding its burbling voice to the sounds of the waking city. "When you're done, join me for a briefing over there by the fountain."

The Austrians nodded and a moment later, Frank heard them break into their native tongue as he walked into the

dining room. Grabbing a cup of Masala tea off the end of the buffet table, he went over to the French and Italian clients who were sitting with the Aussie and the Irishman.

“Namaste, gentlemen,” he said, offering them a practiced smile.

“Morning,” replied the Italian named Carlo. He pulled a chair out for Frank. The Frenchman named Vicq said, “So, is everyone here now?”

Frank drank a gulp of tea and considered the short, lean man. Vicq certainly got right to the point. Though he could appreciate the man’s desire to get things moving along, Vicq needed to understand folks in Nepal didn’t necessarily adhere to the schedules of the western world. He patted the man’s shoulder. “All here. Relax guy, enjoy the morning.”

Vicq sat back stiffly and looked out over the wrought iron rail to the courtyard beyond. Frank ignored the muttered French coming from the Frenchman and turned to Carlo and Rene. After exchanging pleasantries with them, he said, “We’ll be heading to the Ministry today for final paperwork. Everyone have their fees worked out?”

“All set,” Carlo replied as the Italian, Lanzo, came over and joined them. “So, when are we leaving for Lukla?”

“If all goes according to plan, Friday,” Frank said. “Depends on the weather. I’ll go over that in our briefing right after breakfast.”

Lanzo took a sip of coffee, and setting his cup down, said, “And where would this briefing be?”

“Right outside. It’s pretty informal.” Frank said. He turned around and called out to Sang-gye. “Hey, Sang-gye, could you have someone gang some tables and chairs up outside by the fountain?” As he turned back to his clients, the Widow and her son entered the room.

He watched them wade through the sea of tables to the buffet. The Widow was wearing a crisp, white cotton blouse and tan khakis. As she took up a bowl and perused the offerings under the domed metal lids, he got up and went over to greet her.

“Well, good morning, Mr. Kincaid,” she said without turning around. Frank was surprised. “How’d you know it was me?”

“Your cologne. It’s quite distinctive.”

“I hope that’s a good thing,” Frank said. He grabbed a plate and piled a spoonful of potatoes and onions onto it.

Sarah lifted the lid off the tub of scrambled eggs and spooned out a couple helpings. As she dashed salt and pepper over them, she looked up, and gave him a diffident smile. “It’s nice.”

Frank sensed her ambivalence as he snatched a napkin. “How’d you sleep?” he said, offering her a friendly smile.

“I didn’t,” she replied tightly, and turned toward her son, who was standing at the far end of the buffet waiting for the toaster to pop. “Greg, could you throw a couple slices in for me, too?”

Greg looked up. “Sure . . . Oh, morning, Mr. Kincaid.”

“Namaste,” Frank replied. “Going to try the porridge, huh?”

“Thought I might. Looks good,” Greg said as the toaster popped up.

“It is,” Frank replied. “They call it Halwa here.”

Sarah rolled back a barrel-topped lid and peered down into a steaming tub. “What are these?”

Frank peered over her shoulder. “Roti — it’s fried unleavened bread. It’s good, especially with honey. You should try some. The vegetable curry is good, too.”

“Hmmm . . . interesting,” she muttered. She grabbed the tongs and took one out. Placing it on her plate, she went around him and scooped some mangos and pineapple up along with a banana. Shooting Frank a thin smile, she added, “I’d better get out of the way and let you boys chit-chat.”

“Nonsense, join us,” Frank insisted.

“No, I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Sarah replied, glancing furtively toward her son. “Don’t take it personally. I just feel like being alone right now.”

Frank nodded, and watched her wend her way out into the courtyard. Things were definitely going to be different up in Base Camp this year.



Thirty minutes later, Frank gathered his team of climbers and Sang-gye around two large tables in the courtyard. As they sat by the babbling fountain, sipping tea and mango juice, the sounds of car horns, motorbikes, street people, and shopkeepers hawking their goods beyond the hotel walls trickled in around them. Over a low brick wall beside them, children could be heard playing a lively game of cricket. A rooster crowed in the distance.

Frank leaned forward in his chair and gave his clients the typical opening spiel regarding their responsibilities of looking after their own gear and letting them know what their assigned Sherpa guides would and would not do during the next two and a half months. As he ticked off the list, his glance fell on the Widow and her American son more than once.

When he finished, he sat back. “All right, let’s get to know each other a little better. Why don’t we start with you, Toby? Anything you’d like to share with the rest of us?”

Toby set his bottle of water down, ran a large hand through his light blond hair, and cleared his throat. “Not much to tell really. I work as mechanical engineer for large firm in Vienna for ten years now.” He paused, looked around him then awkwardly went on in his thick Germanic accent. “I enjoy travel, and of course climbing. My brother, Jakob, here beside me, got me into it when I was eighteen and in university, and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Frank nodded as the big man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “So, tell us, Toby, what made you decide on Everest?”

Toby took a moment with the question before he said, “When I was young teen, fifteen years old, I was very, very big. People used to make joke about me. One day, I

get on train with father and brother to go to Graz for soccer game. As I walk down aisle to find seat, people stare at me. That was okay. I was used to it. Then I see little boy turn to his father and say, 'Wow, look da, the circus fat man is here!' I never forget it."

Glancing at Frank, Toby paused and went on. "The following year I lose one hundred fifty pounds. Start working out; get in shape. Now I eat to build muscle, not because I feel bad about myself. Anyway, I push myself now to be the best I can. This is the ultimate way to find out what I can do."

He reached down and took up his water bottle and as he did so, Frank found himself reassessing the thirty-something year-old Austrian. It was a hell of a thing to lose that much weight. Well, it was clear the man had the focus to get up the mountain, but his six foot four, two hundred and sixty-five pound frame was a strike against him. Next, Frank turned to Toby's brother, Jakob.

Jakob was tall like Toby, and perhaps thirty pounds lighter. The two men shared much in appearances: fair skinned, strong Roman noses, sky-blue eyes, and square jaws. But that was where it ended. Where Toby was introspective and quiet, Jakob was gregarious and out-going. Having never faced a weight problem, Jakob had played soccer and was an avid skier growing up. 'Mountaineering was just a natural extension of his love affair with the slopes,' he said, and so it had led him into his present occupation as owner of a small alpine gear and clothing shop just outside of Vienna called, 'Carabiners'.

Again, Frank asked the question of why he wanted to tackle Mount Everest, and Jakob answered that it was the challenge of testing himself, and of reaping the reward of knowing he could do anything if he achieved the summit.

Next, Frank turned to Aldan, who was sitting beside Jakob. Aldan was a soft-spoken man with bristly short white hair, but didn't appear to be anywhere near his age of fifty-five years. Intelligent and discerning hazel eyes

looked out from a thin, chiseled wind-burnt face while he told the team about his time guiding people in the outback.

“I came to climb the beast ‘cause I like adventure and this here mountain provides it,” Aldan said with a lilting voice.

Frank nodded, but down inside, a flag went up. While the Aussie might be a skilled guide in the Australian outback, this was Chomolungma, not the bush. Experience told Frank, that folks who were skilled outdoorsmen often didn’t understand things were different on the mountain than what they were used to. The last thing Frank needed was someone who believed he knew more than his guides.

Sullivan, or Sully as he preferred to be called, had the body of a mountaineer: sleek and sinewy and not too tall. Like Jakob, Sully was an experienced climber, having summited the technically challenging Ama Dablam and K2. But there was more to the thirty-one year old Sully than just being an alpinist. He was a Theoretical Physicist who held a prestigious position at the atomic super collider CERN. That, and he had a young wife and baby daughter waiting at home for him; which was where Frank thought the Widow should be right now. When the question of why Sully wanted to climb Everest came up, he simply said he wanted to know what it was like to gaze out over the world.

The Frenchmen, Rene and Vicq, came from affluent families just outside of Nice, and were partners in their family’s vintners operation. Rene said they had taken up climbing several years ago after being introduced to it by a friend, and that they both found it a welcome diversion from running the winery. Since then, it had turned into a passion.

Rene was a tall, sinewy man in his early thirties and had curly black hair and large chocolate brown eyes. A colorful tattoo of a flowering grape vine peeked out from under his shirtsleeve. Vicq was quite the opposite: late thirties, blond-haired, ice blue-eyed, short and angular. With his constant stoic attitude and expression, they made

quite the odd couple, Frank thought. But their zest for climbing was evident as was their reasons for climbing.

The two Italians were watchful throughout the conversation as they sat listening to the Frenchmen tell their stories. Lanzo, who was a ski instructor at Andalo, which was located in the north of Italy, was the younger of the two. Late thirties, Frank guessed he was. At six-three with flowing black hair, doe brown eyes, and a sleek build that was almost cat-like, the soft-spoken man was undoubtedly popular with the young ladies.

Next to him was Carlo, a mid-forties restaurateur. The chunky, dark-haired Italian was staring ahead with a far-away look. At last, he turned his attention onto the group, and as he did so, leaned forward and said, "My family lost everything when my papa died of a heart attack at his ristorante. He was a good man and devoted to my mamma. I was eighteen when it happened, and I can still remember my mamma slouched over him.

"My older brother, Marco, and I struggled to keep the ristorante running, but not knowing how to run a business, we almost ended up losing it. The years that followed my papa's death were hard, many times we were near bankruptcy, but eventually we learned and we made it. Now we are the best ristorante in all of Milan."

He paused, and Frank heard him cough. At last, Carlo cleared his throat and went on. "The one thing I remember most about my papa was his wanting to climb the mountains. I asked him why he wanted to do it one time, and he told me; up there, it's only you, the mountain, and God. He wanted to know what that felt like to be that close to God. So, I climb for him."

There was silence all around the circle of men, and when Frank saw the Widow's stricken face he knew the Italian's story had affected her. He wondered what she was thinking and turned to Greg.

"So, Greg, what about you?" Frank said having a good idea what the young man would say.

Greg shifted in his chair and furtively glanced at his mother. "I've been climbing for the last ten years. Started out facing some of the cliffs in the Grand Canyon before moving onto alpine climbing. My father was into it in a big way before he died. In fact, he was here back in 'eighty-five," he said. "Anyway, I like challenging myself, and I love the feeling I get when I reach the top. There's nothing like it."

"Did your father summit?" Jakob said.

"No, he didn't," Greg answered quietly while fixing his gaze straight ahead. The Widow's face stiffened and looked away. At last, Greg shrugged. "Anyway, hopefully, I can finish what he started."

"A very admirable thing," Toby said.

The Widow pushed her chair back abruptly, scraping metal on the courtyard's brick pavers and got up. "If you'll excuse me, I need to find the lady's room," she said through tight lips, and walked away.

Greg's gaze remained forward and his face darkened as he took his water bottle up and gulped a swig. Frank shot a fleeting glance at the Widow's retreating back, then glanced over at her son. Red flags were waving all over the place. There was definitely more to this young man's simplified reason for climbing than he was letting on.

