



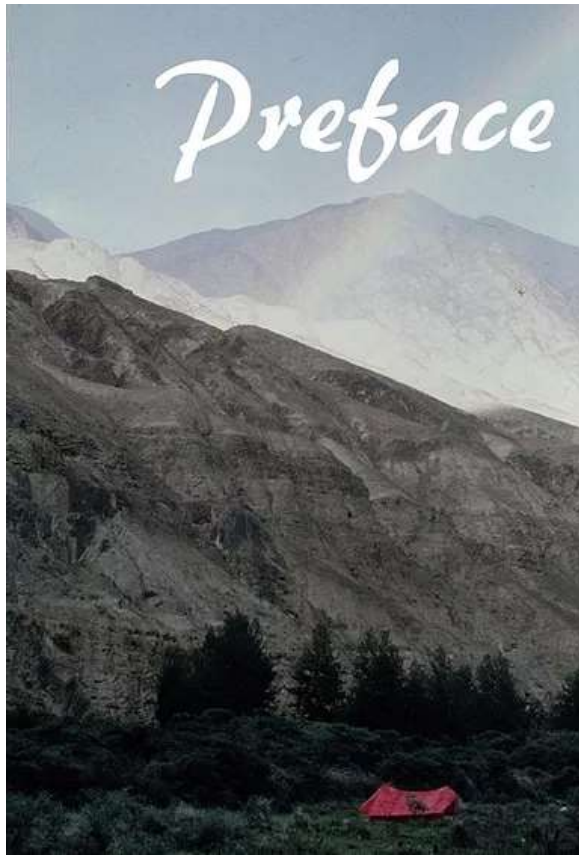
*Springtime
in Kashmir*

*A dangerous
Himalayan idyll
by Talbot Bielefeldt*

Springtime in Kashmir is fiction. Any resemblance of its characters to real people, living or dead, is accidental. With the exception of Delhi, Srinagar, and Kargil, the places depicted in the book do not exist. The venality of the Holz Overseas Trekking Service does not reflect the character of the individuals with whom the author worked in the adventure travel business. The events in the story might have happened, but are not based on any actual occurrences.



Preface	1
Prologue	2
1 Kawapatri	5
2 Delhi	15
3 Hotel Julay	27
4 Flight	28
5 Janavar Gali	43
6 Gulpathar	54
7 Sonjal	70
8 Ladakh	79
9 Darcha	96
10 Kargil	104
11 The Pyramid	117
12 The Gompa	131
13 Srinagar	146
Photo Credits	152
In Gratitude	154
Fonts	155
Author	156



Across the Himalaya in the late twentieth century, groups of people stopped killing one another for a time. India and Pakistan paused their recurrent wars. China observed the Indo-Tibet border. Nepal asserted royal control over Maoist insurgents. Afghanistan opened for tourists. Cycles of life and death went on, of course, but automatic weapons played a smaller part.

Travelers flocked to the Himalaya, drawn by their beauty, the spiritual legacy of their inhabitants, and perhaps a sense that this was an opportunity that would not last. Which it didn't. The peace was like a meadow growing on top of a landfill. Soon martial traditions, God-given rights, and yawning gaps in opportunity leached out to saturate the region in sectarian violence and foreign intervention.

Adventurers visit the Himalaya today knowing they are walking into a region of conflict. That is a good thing; it is culturally aware and has survival value. In contrast, many children of the road during the *pax Himalaya* were innocents. Their wide eyes fed back through narrow optic nerves only what they sought to find: Beauty, or stimulation, or profit, or just themselves in a Kodachrome slide.

Sure, it was unrealistic, but just try to imagine being able to engage the world with such simple faith that airline fares will come down, you can drink the water in the hotel, and beyond that, what could possibly go wrong?



He had been walking down the river bed for hours. The clients were lost. He could tell. There should have been some sign along the trail by now.

He stood on top of a boulder and swept the long valley with the binoculars. At the upper end, the white tips of the main Himalaya poked above intervening rocky hills. The valley floor below was choked with mounds of rubble disgorged from the glaciers that flowed down from the crest. The entire party had camped together close to the ice last night.

Now all were lost in the maze of huge rocks that stretched from the glacier snouts to a bend in the valley below.

His eyes lingered on the intersecting ridge lines at the bend. If only they could make it that far, he thought. Below, there was some organization, some discipline to the wilderness. The goat paths collected into one trail. The braided glacier streams flowed into one river.

"That's the place to find them," he said aloud. "That's the place to pick things up."

His own voice had a pleasing familiarity, an agreeable tone that he had missed the last two weeks. This group had been a contentious lot. On the plane up from Delhi, on the road from Srinagar, on the trail and on the glacier, he had needed to constantly reassert his authority.

"It was that woman," he said. "She put them up to it."

He climbed off his rock and began to head downstream. Among the boulders, the heat was intense. His feet burned inside his heavy mountaineering boots, and the metal ice axe in his hand was hot to the touch. Almost immediately he had to make a detour to ford a branch channel. A half hour later, when he climbed another house-sized rock to get his bearings, he found he was heading upstream once more. He took a compass bearing on a narrow break of shrubbery on a hillside near the bend in the valley.

"Willows," he said. "Some concentration of water there." There was movement in the brush. He got out his binoculars. "Goats. Young ones. You can tell by the coats."

A figure stepped out from behind a hush, hitching up baggy pants under a long smock. He refocused. "It's a man, all right," he said. "Local. You can tell by the cloak."

He followed with the glasses as the man scrambled down the gully. Where the slope ran into the valley floor, there they were—a circle of people in bright T-shirts around a red tarpaulin. Other figures dressed in dark ponchos crouched to one side against a pile of blue duffel bags.

"Right where you'd expect. The porters, too. Every one of them on the wrong side of the valley."

One figure at the far side of the tarp stood up. Even at this distance, he could tell from the shape of the torso that it was a woman. Her close-cut, almost-white blond hair sparkled in the sun. She seemed to be shielding her eyes with both hands. When she waved one arm in the air, he realized she was looking back at him through another pair of binoculars.

He beckoned to her. She beckoned back. The two of them swung their arms at each other. Then the rest of the people around the tarp joined in, laughing, motioning him to come.

“Damn her!” he muttered. “Always disrupting meals.”

It took him almost forty-five minutes to follow his compass bearing across the boulder plain. When he reached the edge of the valley, he found that the main channel of the river ran between him and the hillside.

His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and the sand in his boots was wearing his feet raw. He sat on a rock by the churning stream and plucked at the front of his bush shirt to pump air under the sweat-soaked fabric. He was debating whether to risk drinking the silted water when a voice brought him to his feet.

“Weston!”

He wobbled on the stone and caught his balance. The blond woman was shouting at him from the far side of the stream. Her long legs splayed out of khaki culottes at a firm angle on the uneven ground. Her sunburned face was unnaturally dark under her platinum hair. Beside her was a short brown man in jeans and a sweatshirt. It was the chief porter, the *sirdar*, concern lining his boyish features.

“Wrong side!” the woman yelled over the roar of the water.

“Indeed!” He called back. The woman pointed downstream and began to walk in that direction.

“I mean *you're* on the wrong side!” he shouted, but she did not turn.

“This way, *sahib!*” the porter called.

He banged a rock with his ice axe in frustration. He took a deep breath to quiet himself. “No good to get angry. Bad example.”

He began to follow on his side of the river, picking his way carefully over the waterworn stones. The woman and the porter walked easily along the opposite bank. Every few yards they waited for him to catch up. The stream turned abruptly to the right. As he rounded the corner, he halted in surprise. Rising above the sunbaked rocks, a huge pile of dirty snow filled the channel from bank to bank, the remains of a massive avalanche from the previous winter. The nearest snowfields were now a thousand feet above the valley. The stream carved a tunnel through the center of the pile, leaving a graceful arch above the rushing water.

He kicked his toes into the softened crust, stabbed his ice axe in for balance, and quickly reached the crest of the span. The woman saw him climbing, and shouted, “Go down! Down!”

“No! No, *sahib!* This way!” the *sirdar* yelled, pointing downstream.

He was disappointed in the *sirdar*. Lakpa Tsering had seemed like a level-headed boy. The woman had a bad influence on them all. “The problem trekker. There’s nothing worse,” he said, as the snow bridge broke beneath him. The sheer edge of the fractured arch swept up in front of his nose like a white curtain.

“I could climb it,” he said. “Axe in *piolet* . . .” He tried to remember the term for the appropriate ice axe position. “*Piolet-traction!*” he cried, but the moment had passed. The water caught the fallen section of the snow bridge and carried it downstream with him standing on top.

“Jump!” the woman shouted from the bank as he passed. He shook his head. “The last thing I need to do is start taking orders from *her*,” he muttered. Then she was gone.

The *sirdar* tried to keep up, running along the bank, screaming, “Jump! Jump!”

He came to a decision. This was Lakpa’s last trip with the company.

His feet skidded out from beneath him. A thrill of alarm went through his body, and he scrambled on his knees to the end of the snow raft. He searched the moving bank for a place to get off. At that moment, he floated past the red tarp on the sand. The clients and porters were still at their meal. They gawked at him, tea cups or *bidis* halfway to their lips.

“God, don’t look like a fool.” he muttered, trying to rise. The best he could manage was to lift one hand in salute. Then he had passed them. He could no longer keep his position on his knees. As he began to slide, he realized the block of snow was turning over. As he shifted his grip, the ice axe skidded out from under his hand. It vanished instantly in the opaque water.

“Glacier water. Can tell by the silt.” He followed his ice axe into the stream.

The stunning cold knocked the wind out of him. He tried to climb up the snow block, but his hands and feet could not grip the shifting surface. The block was upstream of him, pushing him ahead of it. The chalky taste of the silt was in his mouth. His skin felt wooden, dry.

The sound of the river grew louder. He twisted his head to look downstream. He was rushing toward another snowbank that blocked the channel. The current rolled up against the dam and then sucked underneath. He flailed at the raft, but only slipped deeper below the surface.

“This is it,” he said. “You can tell.”

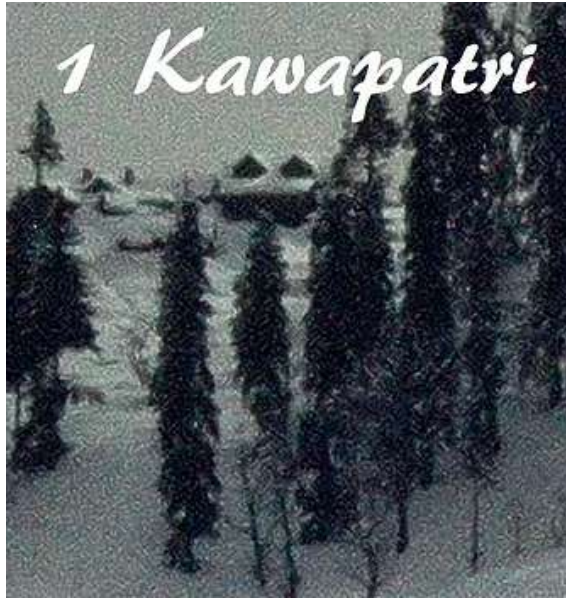
Only *sirdar* Lakpa, staggering to the end of his sprint along the bank, was there to witness the man’s last words. The trekkers found him standing at one end of the snow dam, hands pressed together, head bowed.

The blond woman scrambled onto the snow to watch the water emerge downstream. The river churned up only ice chips and muddy foam. Behind her the others were screaming, “What the fuck was he doing this time?” “Why do we always have to wait for him?”

She could offer no explanation. It had to happen sooner or later, she supposed. Spend all your life in the mountains, it’s only a matter of time.

But truly, in all her years of guiding, never had she had such a client.





The Kawapatri golf course in the Himalayan foothills of Kashmir usually opened in early May. This coincided with the hot season in the plains of India and the migration of tourists to the mountains. The heat came and so did the tourists, but at Kawapatri winter failed to leave. On May 11, a new storm dropped three inches of snow during the night.

In the morning, guests from bungalows surrounding the links retreated to the Kawapatri Golf Hotel, a fortress-like structure that towered above the driving range on the crown of a steep knoll. It was the only heated public building at the resort. Pungent cigarette smoke, the smell of wet wool, and a babble of languages swirled together in the balcony lounge. British businessmen from Hong Kong, Australian tour groups, and Indian families from the tropical south huddled at the central fire pit, competing to thrust damp rumps and elbows an inch closer to the flame.

Of all the refugees, none was wetter than a young man who stood shivering in the cold lobby just outside the lounge. A soldier waited with him, armed with a pistol in a web belt. Newcomers gave the two a curious glance on their way to the fire. The young man was dressed for the storm in a long parka and heavy boots, but water drained from his sleeves and cuffs. When he started to edge toward the warm air of the lounge, the soldier motioned him back against the wall. He stepped back into the puddle that marked his place.

A bead of water found one of the grout lines, zigzagged around several tiles, and ended at a pair of polished boots. The prisoner looked up to face a large, dark-skinned officer with a swagger stick tucked under one arm. The guard had come to attention.

"You are the one who has just climbed the wall of this building," the officer said. Not a question.

"I was just practicing. I was going to the mountains, but, you know, the weather" He gestured at the storm outside, but the officer's stare never left his face.

"Your name, please."

"Ansel Trager."

"You are from . . . ?"

"The US. I'm sorry if the climbing was a problem, I was just"

"We shall find out," the officer interrupted, and pointed him down the hall.

In fact, Trager was as surprised by his ascent as the hotel officials who had called the military police. The wall had loomed out of the clouds as he trudged across the snowy green. The buttress was eighty feet high, rising from near the base of the hotel knoll to support the structure above. The rock was metamorphic, dark, striated with quartz. The holds were small but adequate. Trager had worn his boots on the plane to save space, and for that reason the airline had not lost them with the rest of his equipment. Their stiff soles stuck to the quartz nubbins despite sheets of water coursing down the wall. The angle at the base was not excessive and allowed him to climb in balance for the first fifty feet. It was only on the final headwall that he found his weight coming onto his arms. Still he climbed on, practicing the

familiar moves, until the shock of ice water running into his sleeves made him stop and try to reverse a step. He could not.

The rain had a fresh, almost sweet taste. Its patter on the stone surrounded him with a cushion of soft sound. He had a toe hold for his right foot, and his finger tips were hooked on a painfully fine edge at neck level. There was a quarry drill scar by his waist, but he wasn't sure he could step that high, or if he could, whether his boot sole would hold on the rounded lip.

Trager's concentration became narrow, impassive. He hefted his left boot onto the drill scar. The step was easier than he expected, but as soon as he leaned toward the hold, his right foot swung free. His fingers vibrated with the strain of holding his torso upright. He straightened above his hand holds until he could use them no more. His fingers abandoned the ledge and skipped up the stone like blind spiders, reading a braille of edges and cracks. Trager balanced with his entire weight centered on a millimeter of rock. Through the thick boot, he felt as if he stood on nothing, as if he had won the battle with gravity for all time. He almost regretted finding a deep crack for his hands at the top of the block.

His left foot popped off. As his arms took his weight, he felt the strength ebb from his hands. He scrabbled his feet to new holds, racing fatigue. He climbed quickly, unquestioningly, concentrating on each move, forgetting it as soon as it was accomplished. When Trager finally stood in the slush of the sun deck looking down the wall, he could not remember exactly where he had been on the rock. It was an exhilarating amnesia, the blank space of a moment so completely used that it had been completely used up.

Trager's boots squished as he walked between the guard and officer. They stopped at a door, and the officer made Trager go in first. Behind him the noise from the lounge was suddenly cut off.



He stood in a narrow paneled chamber. A single tall window looked out onto the side of the lounge balcony. Coals glowed in an ornate fireplace, and antique colored etchings of imperial British cavalymen hung at regular intervals above the wainscoting. Papers and beer bottles covered a long table in the center of the room. Two people sat across a corner of the table from each other near the fire. One was a graying, potbellied man in an overstretched rugby jersey.

The other was a suntanned blond woman in a long skirt and shawl. She had a striking face—high cheekbones and bright blue eyes framed by the lightest hair Trager had ever seen.

The officer stood by the door and announced, "There you are, Max, I have rescued your climber. Another favor you owe me."

Trager looked back and was glad to see the guard had been left outside.

"Bullshit!" the potbellied man said. "You still owe for the last fishing trip."

"Yes, but once again I have had to land your catch. Excuse us—Mr. . . . ?"

"Trager. Ansel Trager."

“Yes. Mr. Trager, I am Colonel Battarchaya, Director of the Kawapatri Military Training Center, which shares these facilities with the tourist operation. And here you have Max Holz, a countryman of yours. Also the greatest wildlife conservationist in India.” He gave a small bow toward the potbellied man. “Max maintains our native fishery by graciously casting his flies into streamside shrubbery and the backs of grazing sheep.”

Max snorted, and the woman laughed. “And this,” Battarchaya went on, “is Miss Freya Martens, who knows better than to associate with Max, but who has a charitable heart.”

The woman flashed him a smile. A slight slackness around her cheeks showed her to be older than Trager, but her wide blue eyes were childlike in their size and intensity. It was a handsome, if not exactly pretty face, which Trager found vaguely familiar.

The Colonel nodded pleasantly around the room. “If you will excuse me, I have my duty. I look forward to a full account of Mr. Trager’s ascent. We shall perhaps have to add this exercise to our training program.” Trager let out a long breath as the door closed behind Battarchaya.

Max pushed one of the liter beer bottles in Trager’s direction. “We’re a little short of glasses,” he said. “But you’re not the kind of guy who needs a glass, are you?”

“No, that’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“Shit, no, you don’t even need a door to the goddamned building.”

Trager glanced out the window beside Max. It looked down the height of the wall below the sun deck. He felt the embarrassment of having been caught in a private act.

Freya Martens smiled again. “Give me your parka,” she said. “I’ll hang it by the fire. Sit with us.”

She spoke with a Canadian flatness to her vowels, and her voice was low and clear. She hung the wet jacket on a corner of the fire screen and pulled out a chair between herself and Max.

“Thanks,” Trager said. “Did you just bail me out in there?”

“Did we?” Max asked.

“I thought that guy was going to arrest me.”

“Battarchaya? Maybe he just wanted to introduce us.” Max took a pull on his beer. “You know, one climber to another.”

Trager was skeptical. Nothing about Max’s physique suggested a mountaineer. On the other hand, Freya had an athlete’s build and a mountain suntan. Her wide eyes were accented by white circles where dark glasses had shielded her skin.

“You’re the first climbers I’ve met in India,” he said. “Are you on an expedition?”

“Are you?” Max asked.

Freya leaned closer to him and said, “We have a travel company. We take people trekking and climbing. Right now we’re trying to organize a trek out of Kawapatri. What about yourself?”

“Just looking around,” Trager said. “A few friends and I were talking about putting together an expedition to the Himalaya for next year, so I came over by myself to find something to climb.”

"Really?" Freya asked. "What have you come up with?"

"Nothing. I got held up in San Francisco because of the airline strike, and when I finally got to Delhi I found they had managed to lose the duffel bag with all my gear—ice axe, crampons, tent, sleeping bag, everything. Then it turned out it wouldn't have made any difference, because of this weather."

"The shits," said Max. "So what are you doing here? Come up for a little golf in the Himalaya?"

Max was making fun of Trager's pronunciation. Trager addressed his answer to Freya. "I thought I might at least get a look at the mountains. I've been riding buses all over Kashmir. I got up to Kishtwar, but the bridge above town was washed out, and I couldn't get across the Chenab River. Then I went over to the ski area at Gulmarg, but there weren't any big peaks. I guess that's not really part of the . . . *Himahlia*?"

Freya nodded. Max smirked at his bottle. "I wanted to go up to Ladakh, on the other side of the mountains," Trager went, "but by the time I got to the Zoji pass, the storm had closed the road. A hundred degrees in Delhi, and it's still winter up here."

"Not exactly winter," Freya said. "I was in Ladakh a week ago, and came back over the road without any problem. It's just an unusual spring."

"Springtime in Kashmir," Max muttered, and made a farting noise with his mouth.

Freya frowned at him, and said to Trager, "That's the name of this trek we're trying to run: 'Springtime in Kashmir.' We've got some of the same problems you do, plus some others."

"I'm sure this guy doesn't want to hear about our problems," Max said. "Do you?"

"Sure—I don't care, I mean, I don't mind"

"Shit no," Max went on. "You're here to look at mountains. You got places to go, things to see." Max was talking too loud for the small room. "Let me ask you something. How's your stool?"

"What?"

"Your stool," said Max. "Do you get the runs?"

"No," said Trager. "I'm pretty careful."

"Freya, get this!" Max said. "First trip to India, and he still takes a solid shit!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Max!" Freya said. "Ansel, how long are you planning to stay here?"

"I'm not," Trager said. "I've got more than two months left on my visa, but I'm using my return ticket to Delhi this afternoon, and then I'm going home."

Freya looked quickly at Max.

"Going home?" Max asked. "Where's that?"

"Right now, Oregon," Trager said. "Portland."

"What do you do back there, Ansel?" Freya asked.

“Ski area work. Outward Bound. Equipment sales. Whatever it takes to keep me climbing.”

Max nodded. “Big mountains in Oregon. Must be, what—ten, eleven thousand feet?”

“About that.”

“A little lower than the pass above Kawapatri. About the same as the *valleys* in Ladakh.”

There was an aggressive edge to Max’s voice that Trager did not know how to take. “I guess so,” he said. “I have to go. I have to catch the bus to Srinagar this afternoon.”

“Shit, it costs a lot to fly to India now,” Max said. “Goddamn air fares just went up.”

“That’s what I found out. Thanks for the beer.”

“A hell of a lot, just to run back to those chickenshit mountains in Oregon.”

“Hey, what’s your problem?” Trager said, and reached for his jacket.

Max put his hand on top of it. “Bugging out? You come halfway around the world, and all you do is ride buses for two or three weeks?”

“Eight days,” Trager said. “That was enough. Anyway, it’s nothing you have to worry about.”

“Bullshit,” Max said. “Our business is adventure. That’s what people pay us for. Hey, you’re not my client or anything, but it pisses me off to see someone crap out of a trip.” He stopped and stared hard at Trager. “Eight days? You went all over northwest India in eight days? By fucking bus? Shit, I’ve been here for years, and I’ve never seen Kishtwar at all! At that rate, you could see every fucking mountain from Nepal to Pakistan by the end of the summer. You’ve got the stomach for it—all you need is the balls.”

“Max! Stop!” Freya said. “Ansel needs to go. And we have work to do.” She rose from her chair.

Christ, Trager thought. She was more than six feet tall, with shoulders broader than his own. She walked him to the door. “If you have any trouble getting out, come back and look us up,” she



said. “We’re driving through Srinagar this afternoon and could give you a ride to the airport.”

”Thanks. I know where to catch the bus.”

At the hotel door, porters in long *farin* cloaks hunkered over small clay-lined baskets of coals. As Trager emerged, they jumped to their feet and began calling to him. Each man had a short wooden sled at his side. Trager caught on that he was expected to sit on a sled and be pulled to his bungalow. He couldn’t imagine a more undignified and unnecessary service. He walked away down the side of the knoll and across the golf course.

At the edge of the green he came to a narrow sunken road. He turned onto the lane just ahead of one of the sled porters pulling a woman wrapped in a blanket. She clutched at the edges of her sari to keep it from dragging in the slush. A well-dressed man in a sport coat walked beside, shouting encouragement. The two of them giggled like children every time the sled veered or tipped. Trager regarded the Indian

tourists with a kind of envy. A slippery road was all they needed for their adventure. He, on the other hand, needed an entire mountain range. Walking with his chin in his collar, he did not notice the overtaking footsteps until a moment before a hand touched his shoulder.

“Ansel?”

Freya Martens was at his side. She wore a fleece jacket and carried a small day pack.

“I wanted to apologize for Max,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. He was just getting on my nerves. My problem.”

“I don’t think so,” said Freya. “Can I walk with you?”

“Sure,” said Trager. She fell in beside him. Trager noted the worn toes of hiking shoes poking from under the hem of her long skirt.

“I’m sorry about your trip,” Freya said. “I suppose the rest of them were counting on you.”

“The rest of who?”

“The other climbers. Your friends.”

“Oh, right. They’ll get over it.”

They walked a few more paces, and then Freya said, “Would you like another chance?”

“What do you mean?” Trager asked.

“Another chance at your mountain. Would you like a job?”

Trager stopped walking. “This isn’t going to be one of those offers to change money or sell hash, is it? I always turn those down.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Freya laughed. “We’re a travel company. We need someone to lead a trek next month, that’s all. We were just talking about it with Ravi—Colonel Battarchaya—when you came scrambling past the window. He ran out and grabbed you. Have you ever guided before?”

“Outward Bound, like I said. Ski patrol in the winter. Outdoor program climbs in college.”

“Where was that? What did you study?”

“Portland State. Psychology.”

“Perfect! You’ll certainly get to use that with some of our clients.”

“If they’re rats working for pellets. Look, I’ve never done a trek. What I do know is that things go a lot better leading a group if you know where you’re going and have the equipment you need. I don’t have either.

“But we do! You’d have our best *sirdar* along—that’s like the head porter, or crew chief. And we have all your equipment. Have you done any trips as long as this trek? How long do Outward Bound treks last?”



“We call them courses. Depends on the school, but mine were three weeks in the North Cascades. And I climbed Mt. Foraker in Alaska last year. That was a couple of weeks. And I spent a month bushwhacking in the British Columbia Coast Range the summer before that.”

Freya smiled. “I don't think Springtime in Kashmir would be any problem for you. Just nine days with six clients, and there are only a couple of days of steep snow when you'd have to be on your toes. The baggage will be on ponies, and if horses can make it, you know the trail can't be too bad. And listen—there are enough unclimbed routes to look at along the way to keep you and your friends busy for years. Plus you'd make a few hundred dollars. Are you at all interested?”

Trager was very, very interested. But Max's taunting still grated on him. “Why didn't you ask me before? Why the hustle in the hotel?”

“Because it's Max's company, and that's what he considers an interview. I knew you were going to tell him to go to hell, and I'm the one who really needs the help. I'm supposed to lead Springtime in Kashmir, but I need to go back up to Ladakh with Max as soon as the road opens. We have a new program up there we have to get organized, and I know Max can't do it alone.”

“Frankly, it doesn't look to me like Max has done much of anything in the mountains.”

Freya smiled. “You might be surprised. Max has trekked all over. But it's been a few years.” A crude archway of logs stood by the side of the road. A hand-lettered sign at the apex read, Bungalow Nanga Parbat de Lux. Beyond the arch a low building with a sagging roof lay in the gloom of a dripping pine grove.

“This is home,” Trager.

“Oh, my God! I stayed here years ago, and they haven't done a thing to it. May I come in? I have some things you should look at.”

A gray-haired *chowkidar*, or caretaker, shuffled around the dining room in his *farin* hunting drips with an aluminum teakettle. He eyed Freya suspiciously. Trager led the way down a narrow hall with puddles on the worn carpet. The only light came through a dirty window at the end. When Trager stopped at his door and looked back, it was a tossup which was brighter, the light from outside or its reflection on Freya's hair.

Underwear, socks, jeans, running shoes, toilet kit, notebook, and a small camera were strewn on the low bed and cold wood stove. Trager was embarrassed by his own shabbiness. Freya seemed unconcerned. She quickly unlaced her hiking shoes and hopped up to sit cross-legged on the bed with her feet tucked under her skirt. “Do you mind?” she asked. “I left my climbing boots in Ladakh, and my feet are soaked in these.”

Freya opened her pack and pulled out a large manila envelope. She turned it on end and dumped a pile of papers and pamphlets onto the dingy bedspread. Trager looked at the color brochure she picked out for him.

It's H O T! A New Season of High Adventure with Holz Overseas Trekking Service

The title floated in a blue sky above a ridge silhouette. On the inside fold, Freya Martens beamed at the reader from an alpine rock garden. She was clearly not wearing a bra under her sleeveless t-shirt.

"OK. I've seen this brochure. I thought your face looked familiar."

"Thank you. Most people don't notice the face. The trek is on page three or four."

Springtime in Kashmir was illustrated with a picture of a meadow full of sheep. The text read:

Kashmir's famous Vale is never more beautiful than in early spring. The orchards and fields of the valley floor are green with life. Winter snow still clings to the surrounding mountains, reflected in the water of Srinagar's famous lakes. On the hillside pastures, lambs graze on the new grass. Come ramble through this enchanted land, the vacation retreat of kings. We will trek across the spectacular Janavar Pass and into the remote Sonjal Valley to greet the first wildflowers of spring. An unforgettable experience! Rated C: backpacking experience required.

IATA # ITSTGIHOTZO

Dates: May 14-June 1

Land cost: \$1995



"Grazing lambs? Wildflowers?"

"Keep in mind that most of this trek is on the other side of the Janavar Pass," said Freya. "It's drier over there. Sit down. Let me show you on the map."

Freya got to her knees and swiveled around so that she crouched next to him, nudging him lightly with her hip. The scale of the map she unfolded was huge—one to a quarter million. Tiny black squares indicating villages dotted the sheet like grains of pepper. They gradually disappeared near a central white strip labeled *Great Himalaya Range*.

"This is from the U.S. Army," Freya said, "and it's not very good. But the Indians think any map is a security risk. We don't flash these around in front of police or military."

"I tried to order some of these," Trager said. "They wouldn't let me have them. I just came over with notes from climbing journals."

"Your *sirdar* will know where to go. The trail starts right here, at Kawapatri. It takes three days to cross the first pass, the Janavar Gali, here. You'll have ice axes for the clients. A couple of ropes, too, but I don't think you'll need them. You'll have to make sure the clients know how to use their axes. There are peaks on either side of the pass—you can see them from here when the weather's good—but the rock is pretty broken up for climbing."

"How broken up? Like the Canadian Rockies?"

"You know the Rockies?"

"I spent a month poking around the Columbia Icefields once. Mt. Andromeda . . . "

"Yes!"

"Mt. Athabasca"

"Yes! What did you do? The northwest ridge?"

"The north face. Nice climb."

"I know! Oh, Ansel, that's where I grew up. If we were there, I could take you" She broke off with a laugh. "Sorry. You want to know about the trek."

That was not entirely true, but Freya was back over the map again.

"All right. The Janavar Gali. Northeast, on the other side of the Sonjal River, this glacier area includes probably a half-dozen nineteen-thousand-foot peaks that haven't been climbed. Those are the ones I thought you'd be interested in. You walk for two or three days up to the Sonjal La at the head of the valley—about thirteen thousand feet—and cross back into Kashmir. Jeeps meet you at the end of the road and take you into Srinagar. That's it. It's really not a big deal."

"There must be something to it, or you wouldn't be asking two thousand dollars."

"Plus air fare. That's nothing," she said. "Why do you think people hire us? They need everything—food, equipment, and guiding. Don't forget how much you've already invested in climbing yourself. You can go on a trek with twenty-four hours' notice. The clients can't."

"Wait," Trager said. "Twenty-four hours?"

"This is the twelfth. The clients are already getting on their planes. They arrive in Delhi tomorrow night, come up here the next day, and are on the trail the morning of the fourteenth."

"That doesn't leave much time to get organized."

"It doesn't leave any time. But that's the point—it's already organized. You just have to go down to Delhi tomorrow morning to meet the clients."

Trager felt a cramp in his stomach. Trager was not fond of cities, not even Portland. Delhi—hot, dusty, crowded, raucous Delhi—had been purgatory for him when he arrived in India. The Himalaya had no more formidable defense.

"Why couldn't I meet the people up here?"

"No need," Freya said. "The *sirdar* takes care of all the logistics in Kashmir. But we do need someone to make sure all the baggage gets to the hotel, and that everyone gets on the right flight to Srinagar."

"I didn't even hang onto my own baggage," Trager said. "Are you sure sending a climber to do a travel agent's job is a good idea?"

"This is what the clients expect. A western leader to meet them at the plane. And what the clients expect is what your job is. But I need to know—have you decided to lead the trek?"

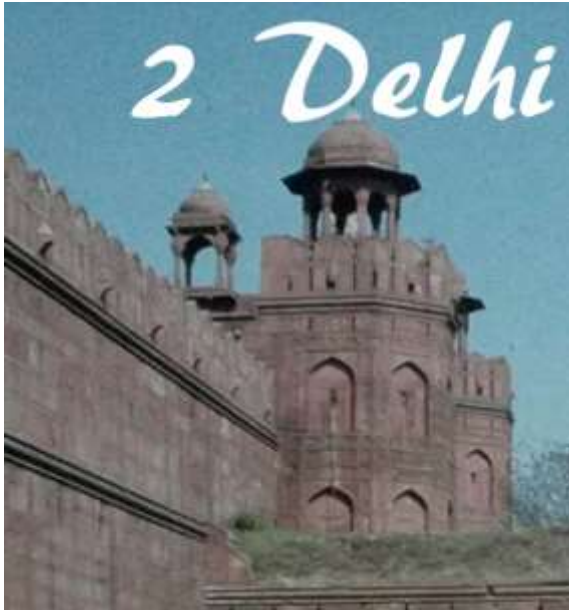
He picked up the map and stared at it, trying to disentangle Freya's description of the Sonjal Valley from his own memory of the crowds and heat of the city. Freya reached out and touched him on the arm. "Ansel, the adventure travel business is still a business, and in any business you have to deal with people. No, guiding is not like a day hike with friends. But that's what makes it special. People need you as a leader. And when have *you* needed to see any mountains as much as the Himalaya?" She pronounced the word as Trager had. *Himalaya*.

"How do you know what I need?" he asked. "You just met me."

"Sure. But don't I know someone who would ride Indian busses for a week just to get a look at the mountains? Who can't keep his hands off the first rock he finds, even if it's a hotel wall? I remember coming to Kashmir the first time myself, watching every cloud from the plane, hoping it would turn out to be a glacier."

Her fingers were still on his arm, and they moved down until she was holding his hand. "I went up to Gulmarg—just like you did, but on a clear day—and stared all afternoon at the Karakoram from the top of the ski lift. I didn't even know they were across the border in Pakistan. I didn't care. I just thought, here I am—this is the place. And I remember how you looked, climbing on that wall, totally absorbed, completely in balance. So yes, Ansel, I think I know you very well."





Freya's room at Kawapatri looked down on the greens, where grass was now emerging in patches from under the melting snow. Several men with clubs were already poking around the tees at the end of the driving range.

Freya had allowed Trager to shower and shave in her guest house rather than washing from a bucket of hot water provided by the *chowkidar* at his bungalow. For his trip to the city he had selected a dry turtleneck and jeans, saving his one collared shirt for meeting the clients. Freya's rucksack sat next to his on the floor. The red nylon was sun-bleached and frayed, decorated on the straps with bouquets of baggage stubs. Her name was scrawled on the top flap in felt marker. The bag had the dingy efficiency of any other climber's pack, something that Trager found reassuring.

On their walk back from the Nanga Parbat, they had shared accounts of routes they had in common. Freya could describe the climbs in sufficient detail that Trager was confident he was working for someone near his own level of skill. At the same time, he was surprised she was not more in the mainstream of the sport. Female climbers had racked up notable ascents in the last few years, and Trager tried dropping the names of women he assumed Freya would recognize. Carla Firey? Sibylle Hechtel? Catherine Freer? Shari Kearney? She did not even know who they were. It was as if climbing for Freya was not so much a sport as an individual personality trait.

At the moment, he was not thinking about Freya's resume. He was considering her crude flirtation in his bungalow. The hip nudging and hand grasping had been totally unnecessary. Trager had already decided that salvaging his trip was reason enough to take Freya's clients; even to go to Delhi. But now that he had agreed, he wondered if the seduction would continue.

Two months ago, Trager had been genuinely surprised to find his duffels and pack lying in the snow outside a Cascade condominium. Usually his relationships lasted an entire ski season. This woman had begun talking in November about moving back to Seattle together in the spring, and Trager should have expected trouble. He was more disappointed than he expected to be afterwards, but once out in the cold, he made no effort to go back.

His attention was already focused on India—that had been the main reason his belongings ended up in the street. He studied for India, worked for India, skied to stay in shape for India. Now that he was in India, travelling by himself, he was as lonely as he had ever been in his life. Not, he noted, particularly horny. He knew from other long celibate trips that libido increased with practice and faded with disuse. But Freya's warm hand had definitely touched a nerve.

He stood up as he heard her key turn in the lock. But instead of Freya Martens, a short, thick-limbed, Mongolian-featured man opened the door. He wore new running shoes, jeans, and a striped ski sweater. Trager thought he must be a Japanese tourist in the wrong room.

"Lakpa Tsering, *sahib*," the small man said. "HOTS *sirdar*. Freya says, come to jeep. Max is ready for going to Srinagar." He noticed the two packs on the floor, hefted one on each arm, and walked out the door.

Trager quickly laced his boots and caught up to Lakpa in the hall.

"I can carry that."

"My job," the *sirdar* said, and tipped his head in the oblique movement that Trager had discovered in India meant something like, that's the way it is. "Good rucksack, *sahib*. Like we have on Everest. Maybe better."

"You were on Everest?" Trager asked. He was still disappointed about not having Freya come to the room, but invoking the name of the mountain helped.

"Yes, *sahib*." Lakpa said. "With Indian Army."

"I read about that," Trager said. "Did you make the top?"

"South Col, *sahib*. Nepali Sherpas take Army men to top."

"Were you disappointed?"

Lakpa tipped his head. "Indian mountains are better. Not so high. Better weather."

Ragged patches of blue appeared overhead as they emerged into the driveway. A sunbeam meandered across the green. Under the edges of the clouds to the northeast, Trager thought he could see the flat white of snow fields or glaciers.

"Lakpa, how do you pronounce the name of the mountains? *Himalaya*, or *Himalaya*?"

"*Himalaya*, *Himalaya*, *Himalaya*, all okay. All people know."

Max and Freya were waiting by a blue Willys jeep with a canvas cover. "Christ, it's about time!" Max said. "If you and Freya hadn't diddled each other so long at the Nanga Parbat, we'd be in Srinagar by now."

"If I hadn't gotten you out of that bar," said Freya, "we'd be leaving you in Kawapatri."

"Bullshit," Max said, and to Trager's horror, got behind the wheel.

"Hop in," said Freya. "Put your pack on the end of the seat. It might keep you from falling out." She and Trager climbed in back, while Lakpa took the seat next to Max.

The road twisted down from Kawapatri through a dense pine forest. Max accelerated on the straightaways, only to brake and skid on the slush in the shaded corners. Cautionary messages had been posted on wooden boards at each turn: *Prudent Drivers Are Survivors; Life Is Short—Do Not Hasten; O Why Do You Drive So Rashly?* Max did not seem to read them.

Trager felt Freya's lips at his ear. "Don't worry. He's crazy, but he's good."

"So how'd you do it, Freya?" Max shouted over his shoulder. "Straight old wham, bam, thank-you-ma'am, or did you have to go with the blow job?"

"Oh, stop it," Freya said. "Watch the road."





“Turn, *sahib*,” Lakpa advised. A Tata sedan was parked on the shoulder with its hood up. Max did not change course, but missed it anyway.

“She promised to take me climbing in Ladakh if I worked this trek for you,” Trager said.

Max snorted. “I would have held out for the blow job—but hey, it’s your show now.”

“Ho, *sahib!*” Lakpa yelled. “Turn!”

A man was walking in the road. He was tall and long-haired, dressed in a shaggy wool jacket and baggy pants, carrying an embroidered bag over one shoulder. He had his back to them, but looked around at the sound of the car. He stepped back toward the drainage ditch to give Max room to steer past him.

But Max did not turn.

“God damn it, Max!” Freya yelled.

Trager had a glimpse of a sad, lined face as it vanished in a wave of slush thrown up by the tires. He was amazed to find the jeep still moving and on the road, with Max laughing at the wheel. Freya leaned over and shouted in Max’s ear, “I told you not to do that any more!”

Lakpa leaned out his door and looked back. “Hippie okay,” he reported.

Max snorted. “Should I go back and try again?”

“What did that guy do to you?” Trager asked.

Freya said, “Oh, God, here we go.”

“Listen, Trager,” Max said, “those freaks are dangerous. Fifteen years ago they swarmed over this country like flies on a turd. Lots of bullshit about experiencing India, but they were in outer space the whole time. Did you see what that guy was wearing back there? A jacket from Nepal, pajama pants from Delhi, and boots from I don’t know where. Treats India like a costume party. The kind of punk from Paris or New York you find begging in villages. They’ll show up in the middle of a food shortage and expect to live off the fat of the land. Gives us all a bad name. The locals can’t always tell the difference between our clients and the bums.”

“Sometimes there isn’t any,” Freya said.

“What’re you trying to do?” Max asked. “Screw this kid up?”

“Ansel’s as likely as any of us to end up with a problem client.”

“What’s a problem client?” Trager asked.

“Anyone who needs . . . extra attention,” Freya said.



They emerged from the forest onto a well-paved highway that curved between terraced fields. Weathered wood buildings sprouted from the gravelly soil, surrounded by poplars just filling out with new leaves. Ponds and canals on the valley floor sparkled in sunbeams that now regularly broke through the clouds. At the Jhelum River, the road contracted to squeeze through a medieval-looking village of overhanging wooden houses. Men, chickens, and sheep scrambled out of the way as the jeep careened through the alleys.

“Shit, this is going to be close,” Max said, checking his watch.

Beyond the hamlet, they turned onto a concrete highway cutting north through level fields toward Srinagar. Garishly painted trucks thundered past in both directions. A horn exploded behind the jeep. Max bounced one wheel onto the rutted shoulder as a Tata sedan passed on the right. The hitchhiker from the Kawapatri road waved out of the passenger’s window.

“Asshole,” Max muttered.

An Indian Airlines Airbus jet was already on the tarmac when Max pulled up at the terminal. The crowd of people waiting to board spilled out of the doors onto the gravel driveway. Trager scrambled from the back of the jeep, and took his rucksack from Freya.

“This too,” she said, and handed him the large manila envelope with the maps and brochures. “When you get to Delhi, go right to our office. The man you need to see is Vasant Bagchee. There’s a note for him in the envelope with the address. He’ll tell you what to do.”

“You better boogie,” Max said. “Looks like they’ve overbooked the son of a bitch again.”

“Good luck,” Freya said, and gave him a hug. Max gunned the engine, but Freya hung on. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Lakpa will take good care of you.”

“Ladakh next month, right?” Trager said.

“That depends,” said Freya. “When you come out, I’ll be there to meet you. Then you tell me.”

Freya waved until they turned the corner around the terminal’s security fence.

He picked up his pack and pressed into the crowd. Around him businessmen pried spaces for themselves with their briefcases. Indian families scooped up their children to keep them from being crushed. Tourists clutched rolled carpets in their arms and kicked their bags along the ground. But there was no forward motion to the mass, only a Brownian quiver.

“Hey, man, what’s happening?” a deep voice said beside Trager.

It was the man from the road. His jacket and pants still bore traces of the Kawapatri road.

“I’m sorry about what happened back there,” Trager said. “The driver is a major jerk.”

“No problem, man. Hey, you’re the one who climbed the hotel at Kawapatri, right? I just wanted to say I went down and looked at that wall. It was far out. I couldn’t get off the ground.”

"You have to have the right shoes," Trager said. He should have been happy to talk climbing, but here he was distracted. "I've got to get on this plane," he muttered. "I could lose my job."

"Oh, yeah? What do you do?"

It took him a moment. "I'm a . . . trek leader. At least I am if I get a seat."

Trager began to move left, where he detected motion at the edge of the crowd. He was relieved when the other man went right. He did not want to be saddled with anyone slower than himself. At the margin of the driveway, a stream of people emerged from a bus and wound python-like around the mob. Trager saw the members of the group carried new rucksacks and wore jackets similar to his own. Trekkers. A grinning, nervous man hurried them on.

"Komm, komm, komm! Steig ab! Steig ab! Acht, neun, zehn, elf . . ."

Trager edged closer to the line, hoping to be sucked along in its wake.

. . . zwanzig, einundzwanzig . . ." The leader paused for only a fraction of a second as he regarded Trager, then called out, *"Zweiundzwanzig! Also, Flugkarten! Flugkarten, bitte!"*

He had not seen this coming. The tour group members were giving their tickets to the leader. Before he could come up with a new plan, the ticket was snatched out of this hand. A man next to him said something to him in German.

"Verzeihung," Trager mumbled. *"Können Sie mir sagen, wo das Kino ist?"* It was all he could remember of a German dialogue he had memorized in high school. Something about the movies, he thought. Behind him, the crowd had sealed the entrance. Trager felt buried in the mob, but at least it would be impossible to remove him easily from the terminal once the mistake was discovered.

A hand fell on his shoulder. "Hello, sir? You will please come this way."

Trager turned to face a mustached official. "I can't," he said. "They've already taken my ticket."

"Yes? You will please come this way."

For the second time that day Trager was marched down a hall by a man in uniform. In a small office separated from the ticket counter by a glass wall, a guard pawed through his rucksack.

"I'm sorry," Trager said. "They took my ticket by mistake." No one was listening.

Beyond the glass, passengers' arms, each with a ticket, waved like limbs of a dancing *kali* before the harried agents at the desk. The guard spindled the manila envelope in his hands, then began a body search. One of the counter agents came around to the door to hand in Trager's ticket to the airline official. He left with Trager's pack.

"You will please come this way," the official said, handing Trager his ticket and the manila envelope. He opened a door in the wall opposite the counter, and Trager found himself standing alone on the tarmac, the plane parked before him. From the cabin door, the hitchhiker waved at him to come on.

“So how did you do it?” Trager asked. “How does a guy hitchhike into an airport in India and just walk onto an overbooked jet?”

The tall man nodded in rhythm with the rocking of the plane as it taxied. “I wasn't hitching,” he said. “I was taking a walk, waiting for my driver to get the car running.”

“That was your own car?”

“Company set it up. I sold some shit to the Indian Airlines guys in Srinagar last week. They said it'd be cool if you came on the plane with me.” Trager had been concerned about something being taken from his rucksack. Now he wondered if anything had been slipped into it.

“Thanks,” he said. “Ah . . . what kind of ‘shit’ are you selling?”

“Modems. The airline has an office up at Kawapatri, right? They want to communicate with the computers at the airport.”

“I was afraid you were pushing hash. I didn't think you were a computer salesman.”

The man looked surprised. After a moment he said, “I guess that's what I am now. I never thought of it like that. My name's Sundown. Sundown Busco.”

Trager introduced himself as the engines wailed. Mountains, horse carts, gum trees, jet fighters, and saffron fields streamed past the window. The plane climbed through broken clouds, circling to the south above rice paddies. The Pir Panjal drifted under the wing, timbered ridges frosted with snow. Then the ground fell away into brown, brushy hills. Trager stretched to see out the windows to the northeast. The cloud tops rose in waves that broke on an angular horizon. At last, Trager thought. There they are. The mountains were almost indistinguishable from the clouds, but a climber could tell the difference.

“So how did *you* do it?” Sundown asked. “How did you get a job climbing mountains?”

“You were there,” said Trager. “Those people in the jeep saw me climb the hotel wall. So they hired me to lead a trek for their travel company.”

“Just like that? No training or anything?”

“I've done a lot of climbing,” Trager said. He showed Sundown the catalog. “This is the trip they hired me for. It's not really a climb, just a hike. I don't think I'll have a problem.” He sounded defensive, and knew it. His perceptions of himself and Sundown had reversed. Now Trager felt like the one just hanging out in India.

Sundown flipped to the inside cover of the brochure. “I know a guy who went on one of these trips with your people. And this is your lady in the picture.”

“More like my boss,” Trager said.

Sundown studied the photograph of Freya. “Could be worse,” he said.

“So how did your friend like his trek?” Trager asked.

“Wasn't a friend, just someone we did business with. I never even met the dude. Anyway, he died on the trip. Heard about it last week, just before I left.”

"What? They never told me anything about that. Do you know what happened?"

"Couldn't tell you. He was supposed to be a kind of spacey guy. I only heard about him because he went out leaving the projects he was working on in a mess. Sounds like he could have just walked off the edge of something. What kind of people are going on this trek of yours?"

"I'm about to find out," Trager said. "They gave me some reading to do on the plane. Go ahead and keep that brochure. I've got more."

Trager shuffled through the rest of the manila envelope. It contained his own handwritten resume that Freya had asked him to prepare. There was the map that they had looked at, equipment lists, and various company forms. He stopped at a typed itinerary labeled, "Reconnaissance Report."

Stage 1 – 9 miles –The track from Kawapatri is steep but fit for ponies through forest, marg, and maidan. Camp at Gujar site 2 kos NNE of third nala.

Stage 2 – 11 miles – Cross Janavar Gali (13,262), descending to Sonjal at Lunwali, where provision is not available.

The report went on for a page and a half of fine print. Trager did not understand many of the terms, and those that he did told him little more. He found the client roster with Freya's introduction note to Vasant Bagchee clipped to it. The message was on HOTS letterhead, with a Delhi address penciled underneath a Berkeley box number.

*Vasant:
Ansel Trager is taking my place on the Kashmir trek.
\$400 fee okay w/Max. Give Ansel all necessary information.
Thanks, F.*

The roster included three couples, two younger parties from Washington, D.C., and a middle-aged husband and wife from Los Angeles. Trager tried to memorize their names, along with the list of camps and villages. When he looked up from his studies to take a cup of tea from the flight attendant, the hills had given way to the flat monotony of the Indian plains. Sundown had the catalog on his lap, still open to Springtime in Kashmir. His head was inclined against the window, but he was awake, studying the ground below.

Trager felt someone brush his shoulder, and when he looked up, the German tour leader was standing over him. The man still wore his delighted grin, like a mask that was attached. "So! You have come on. When they are taking your ticket from me, I am thinking, I have helped the wrong man, we are now all in trouble."

"You knew I wasn't with your party? I thought you had just made a mistake."

"No, no, no! I know of course who is my party. No, I do this only as one traveler to another."

"Well, thanks. Maybe I'll get a chance to return the favor."

The German laughed. "I think no. It is for a group easier to take one more than for one man to steal a group."

"Sure. But I work in the same business. For Holz Overseas Trekking."

"Yes, yes, yes." The German's grin stretched tighter. "You are very lucky."

“To work for Holz?”

“To be on this airplane. When I know that you are with Max, I would make sure that you are not coming out of Srinagar.” He laughed, clapped Trager on the shoulder, and walked away without a backward glance.

The heat of Delhi poured in through the cabin doors. The passengers staggered across baking concrete under a pale yellow sky. In the close air of the terminal they rocked from foot to foot, glassy-eyed, waiting for the intermittent conveyor to surrender their luggage. Trager was relieved to find his pack had not been lost.

“I can give you a lift,” Sundown said. “They sent me a driver.” A small, bony man in starched khaki led the way out of the terminal and across the small parking lot to a minivan marked, *Synergism Pvt. Ltd.* When they were seated inside, Trager tried to open the manila envelope to find Vasant Bagchee’s address. The humidity had already sealed the flap. Trager tore the paper open and fished out Freya’s note.

The driver glanced at the address, nodded, and launched. Horn blaring, he swung out of the airport gates and onto a racetrack of taxis and trucks. Trager gasped at the hot air that blasted in through the open windows. Blocks of apartments and low store fronts streamed past, broken by industrial plants and ancient brick ruins. As they entered a commercial district, a sudden swarm of bicycles and scooters forced the car onto the sidewalk within inches of street vendors crouched by their tarpaulin displays.

“Do these guys ever crash?” Trager asked.

“Beats the shit out of me,” said Sundown. “First time I’ve been here.”

The temperature fell a degree as the taxi turned into a landscaped residential colony. Jacaranda trees shaded the road, and bougainvillea nodded over high garden walls. The driver pulled up at an open gate with a small brass plaque that read HOTS/INDIA. Trager stepped out into air that was heavy with the smell of flowers.

“I really appreciate all this,” he told Sundown. He extended his hand. There was an awkward moment as the other man tried to take it in the inverted clasp Trager had seen used by old hippies and Vietnam veterans. After a moment of jockeying arms back and forth, they settled on a conventional handshake.

“No problem,” said Sundown. “Good luck with your trekking gig.”

The car cruised away through the shade, paused at the corner, and vanished into the light and motion of a boulevard.

A servant in a stained shirt left Trager standing in an airless hallway. A minute later a hatchet-faced man in a light blazer appeared through an inner door. He spoke in a high, clipped accent.

“Yes? I am Vasant Bagchee. What is it?” he asked.

“My name’s Ansel Trager. Max Holz hired me to replace Freya Martens on the Springtime in Kashmir trek.”

Bagchee’s eyes flicked up and down. “Did he? And exactly where is Miss Martens at this time?”

“Driving to Ladakh with Max. She gave me this for you.” He produced the note, along with the resume he had crafted in Kawapatri.

Bagchee took the papers, but did not look at them. “Max is here, in India? You are quite certain of this?”

“They dropped me off at the plane in Srinagar.”

Bagchee flapped the papers in his hand. “*Achcha*, and he is going to Ladakh, and Freya is going with him. This is most difficult. She was to come to Delhi.”

“That’s why she sent me,” Trager said. “Freya said you would tell me everything I need to know.”

Bagchee flapped the paper a few more times, and then read Freya’s note. He did not bother with the resume. He looked up carefully, as if really seeing Trager for the first time. “*Achcha*,” he said quietly. “Then you must know, the trek is cancelled.”

Trager thought: Of course. How stupid of me. Nothing works for me over here.

“You-understand, Freya did not know this.”

“I guess not,” said Trager. “But who cancelled the trek?”

“I did,” said Bagchee. “Perhaps you should come in.”

He called instructions to his servant, and led the way through a living room full of wicker furniture. From the domestic look of the place—bookshelves full of English paperbacks and a stack of what looked like folded laundry on a sideboard—Trager gathered that the office was actually Vasant Bagchee’s house. Beyond the living room they entered a small and shockingly cold air-conditioned study dominated by a large steel desk. Framed maps and photographs adorned the walls. Trager noticed a blow-up of the picture of Freya before the mountains. Bagchee indicated a small sofa to Trager, and took his own place behind the desk.

“So, please inform me as to precisely how you have come to meet Max and Freya,” he said.

Trager gave a short account of his rock climbing adventure and subsequent interviews.

“And so they hired you? Just like that?”

“I have experience,” Trager said. “And Max was impressed that I didn’t have diarrhea.”

Vasant looked pained. “That would be Max. But tell me, why were he and Freya at Kawapatri?”

“They were meeting a friend of Max’s who was helping them. A Colonel Batt-, Batta- . . . “

“Battarchaya? Max is dealing with Battarchaya again? *Achcha*, no wonder he would not tell me he is in India. But did he say why he was going to Ladakh?”

“Not exactly. They said there were some problems on the last trek. Freya said she wanted to do some extra planning for the next one.”

Bagchee gave a barking laugh. “Ha! Extra planning! That is quite good. And they said nothing about Mr. Weston Ferndecker?”

“No. Is that someone I should meet?”

“Hardly. He is dead. That would seem to be the least of the ‘necessary information’ you should have. Mr. Ferndecker died some seven days ago in the Murghi Restricted Area of Ladakh on a trek led by Freya Martens.”

“And he worked in computers. And he walked off the edge of something. I sat next to a man who was talking about it on the plane.”

“Yes, it is already a source of gossip. Actually, I believe Mr. Ferndecker became separated from the party and fell into a *nala*, a stream. But that is not important. The fact is that because of his death, the Defence Ministry may revoke Max’s trekking permits. HOTS’ competence is in question, you see. And for the same reason, four of our clients have elected to forfeit their deposits and cancel. In any event, there is left only one couple from Los Angeles, and we cannot operate any trek with two clients only.”

The door bumped open, and the servant shouldered in with a tea tray. Trager was glad of the interruption to pull his thoughts together. “Why didn’t Freya tell me all this?” he asked when the man had left.

“You sound more hurt than offended,” Bagchee said, and he smiled. “Did you perhaps have some special expectations of Miss Martens?”

“I thought she was being honest with me about the job.”

Bagchee looked at him curiously for a moment, then said, “It is nothing to hold against her. I myself have only just been notified of the cancellations. And it would have been awkward to discuss Max’s circumstances with him present—particularly as he does not acknowledge any problems himself. As for the accident, obviously she did not want to frighten you off the job. Freya must have been quite frantic at the idea that Max would go to Ladakh by himself to see the authorities.”

“Doesn’t he know about the accident?”

“Of course he does. I imagine that is why he took it upon himself to actually visit the site of his business for the first time in six months. But you have talked with the man. Suppose you are administrator of the largest district in India, responsible for the security of one *lakh*—a hundred thousand—square kilometers. Not to mention borders disputed by both Pakistan and China. And now comes an American travel agent who tells you, ‘Bullshit! Fuck your Restricted Area!’ My only hope is that Freya will keep him from ruining us all.”

“What about Lakpa?” Trager asked. “He’s buying supplies in Srinagar right now.”

“Lakpa is doing nothing of the kind. He may be ordering all manner of things, but he is expecting me to send money with Freya—or you, now—to actually buy them. But you see, this money does not exist. Max has not forwarded a penny, a *paisa* of the deposits the clients presumably paid him. I have covered his debts from my own pocket in the past. And so has Freya—she has some source of money still in Canada, I think. But Springtime in Kashmir is deficient some twenty-seven thousand rupees. Twenty-seven thousand! Even if you offered your good services *gratis*, fed your clients on *chapattis* and tea and made them carry their own baggage, you still would lack the resources to operate this trip.”

“I know about lack of resources,” Trager said, “I was on my way home when Max and Freya found me, and I suppose I’m on my way home again.”

“Quite,” Bagchee said. “You have all your kit with you? You left nothing in Kashmir?”

“I carried it all on the plane. I don't let it out of my sight now.”

“And your reservation?”

“Just an open ticket to San Francisco.”

“*Achcha*, these planes are always full, but I will see to getting you confirmed out tomorrow evening. As for tonight, we shall give you Freya's room at Hotel Julay. Will that be satisfactory?”

“Sure,” Trager said. “I mean, no, but I don't know what else to do. It's like Kawapatri was some dream I woke up from too soon.”

Bagchee smiled. “I imagine you are not alone in this. *Achcha*, here we are all, lumbered with Max Holz, when along comes a young man of vigor and initiative, a not unattractive man, if I may say so, who is keen on the spur of the moment to throw in his lot with ours. I should not be surprised if Freya Martens is as disappointed as you.”

Bagchee drove his little sedan with precision and apparent enjoyment through the evening traffic. Cars wheeled like flocks of gulls around the crowded circles. Trager tasted ozone in the air, and lightning flashed out of purple clouds over the old part of the city. After they had been driving for several minutes, Bagchee said, “And so, Mr. Trager, how long have you been interested in this travel business?”

“I'm not, or wasn't,” said Trager. “I was just a climber until Battarchaya pulled me in.”

“*Achcha*, yes, that is just what Max said when he first came to India. ‘I am just a scientist.’ You did not know this? He conceals his education well, but he has a bloody doctorate in geology. Seven years ago he came to India on some university trek. And among his students was this lovely Canadian named Freya Martens. I was then the agent who arranged their transfer to Kashmir. And when Max returns to Delhi from looking at rocks, he comes to me and says, ‘We can do this better.’ And so another trekking company is born. They are formed in this manner every month. Whoever reigns in this business suffers pretenders to his throne on every trip.”

“Sounds crowded,” Trager said.

“It would be, but on the whole, creation and dissolution are in balance. Just enough fail that there is room for former clients and associates to take their places. You see, most of these adventurers totally misunderstand the nature of the business. Max is one such. He offers only these athletic mountaineering treks. How many people are truly interested in such ordeals, or even understand what they are getting into? Look at this tragedy in Ladakh. Freya is telling me the man who has died should never have been with the party.”

“A problem client,” Trager said.

“Exactly,” Bagchee said. “But what can one expect when the business itself is so problematic? These expeditions will always be too expensive and difficult to operate without complications. Max's more successful competitors subsidize each of their mountain adventures with a good half-dozen parties of twenty or more to the Taj Mahal and the handicraft merchants of Srinagar. It is those trips that are truly worthwhile.” Bagchee had steered the conversation down an unexpected path, and Trager found himself left at the turn.

“Tell that to Freya,” he said. “She’s a mountaineer.”

“Ha! You think that Freya has not led some tours to the Taj? You believe that buying a carpet from a Kashmiri is not an adventure? If this is not the same business as HOTS, it is because mountaineering is no business at all, taken apart from the truly important part of tourism. A diverse culture and civilization that have existed for millennia—that is what India has to offer that is unique. Not simply a wealth of hazardous terrain.”



Trager was liking Bagchee less and less. “That terrain is what matters to me,” he said.

“I am sure. And to a minute percentage of tourists. *Achcha*, you have seen the sled porters at Kawapatri? The ones who pull you about the golf course for a rupee?”

“Who pull some people. Not me.”

“No, of course not. That is just my point. Those chaps are offering a service that was appreciated in the days of the British *Raj*. The old *nawabs* and Englishmen are gone, and the western tourists who have replaced them find the sleds ridiculous. But the porters carry on, chasing Americans like you through the snow, wondering why it is so bloody hard to make a living. They have not grasped that this is *Kali-yuga*, the age of destruction. All things are in transition; all things must change. This is our karma.”

“You mean something like fate?”

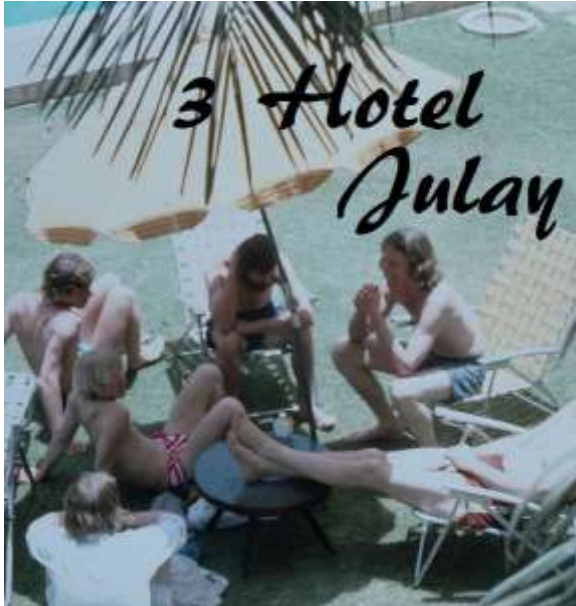
“If you will. But I think of karma more as *duty*. Those who appreciate the nature of change have a duty to be part of it. The alternative is to be a sled porter out of work.”

Bagchee pulled into a circular driveway overhung with droopy pipal trees. He parked across from the entrance to a modern four-story building. Scavenger birds paced in front of the car, pecking listlessly at gutter scraps. They started at a flash of lightning, then settled back to the pavement. Bagchee waited for the roll of thunder to pass before he spoke. “This is Hotel Julay. It has an excellent pool. You may charge all your meals through tomorrow lunch. Do you have taxi fare to the airport? Good. Have a pleasant stay, and a good flight.”

Rain was beginning to hammer on the roof as Trager pulled his rucksack from the back seat. He was about to run for the hotel door when Bagchee waved the manila envelope he had left on the floor of the car.

“Please, keep this,” Bagchee called. “With your permission I shall retain your resume. If I am not mistaken, we may both yet need these things.”

There was another flash and thunderclap, and the rain arrived in earnest, flooding the street, driving the kites and ravens into the trees. The driveway disappeared into an ankle-deep puddle bouncing with raindrops. A doorman called, “This way! Come this way, sir!” But Trager was blinded by the downpour and could not make out the ford. Heaving his pack onto one shoulder, he shielded his face with the softening envelope and waded in.



Ansel Trager did his pullups on the bathroom door frame. Up-down. He had done them every day of the trip, in airports, on roadside trees, in the bungalows of Kashmir, and now at Hotel Julay. He had done them to stay in shape for the mountains. Now he did them as an act of faith. Up-down.

Up, and he could see to the pool, where members a British expedition were lounging and admiring a clutch of Swedish girls across the water. Trager had talked to the Brits long enough to find they were going to the Brahma Peaks, which he gathered were east of Kishtwar, one of the places he had not reached. He wished them luck, they wished him better luck, and he retreated to his room. Down, and he looked up into the white-hot sky, where new thunderheads were forming for the next storm. There were vultures circling the pool. Their shadows flitted across the window when they passed close to the building.

Up. It would already be too hot in Yosemite Valley for serious climbing, and he did not have his camping equipment anymore. Down. Which meant he would be going back to his mother's house in Portland.

Up. Strange, for someone so anchored to her house, that she had married a travelling sales rep. The evening his father left for the last time, just before he came upstairs to his son's room to say good-bye, Trager had heard him say the house in Portland had never really been his home.

Down. Trager had been twelve. His father had been a distant and tentative parent, but even so Trager wondered, if it wasn't his father's home, how could it be his own? Up. When Trager chinned as high as possible on his bedroom closet door, he could just see the white tips of the Cascades over the neighbor's house. That was the farthest horizon a person could see from Portland, Oregon.

The telephone rang, and Trager dropped to the floor. He was expecting the call. It was past check-out. Once he handed in his key, there would be nothing for him to do but start the trip back. The hotel, with its refrigerated air and sealed windows, already had the claustrophobic self-sufficiency of a huge aircraft. He picked up the receiver with cramped fingers.

"Hello? Mr. Trager?" It was a young woman's voice, with a slight Indian accent.

"Give me just a few minutes, I'll be packed up."

"Excuse me? This is Pratima Busco. I'm inquiring after my father. Michael Busco? Sundown?"

"Oh," said Trager, still catching his breath, trying to assimilate the new information. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

"He might have forgotten," the voice said without humor. "Have you seen him?"

"Not since yesterday. He gave me a ride from the airport—but not to here. I don't think he knows where I'm staying."

“Oh, he does. At Synergism they said he had left for The Julay to see Mr. Trager. I'm calling from the lobby.”

“He hasn't shown up yet,” Trager said. “Do you know what he wants to talk to me about?”

“I have no idea. If you do see him, would you tell him Pratima was here?”

“Sure. But why don't you stick around, if you're sure he's coming? In fact, let me get dressed, and I'll come down.”

“That's quite all right. They are expecting me at home. But thank you.”

So Sundown had an Indian daughter, Trager thought as he hung up. It somehow fit his image, although it was hard to reconcile with Sundown's remark that he had never been to India before. What was “home” for the girl, and who were “they” who expected her?

There was a knock at the door. Trager had forgotten about the maids. He was wearing only the running shorts he had used as swim trunks in the hotel pool. His skin and hair still smelled of the heavily chlorinated water. “Give me just five minutes!” he called through the door.

“No hassle, Ans. I just wanted to shoot the shit.”

“Sundown!” Trager opened the door, and Sundown ambled in. He had changed his wooly jacket for a long shirt, and had his hair pulled back in a neat pony tail. He still carried the embroidered bag.

“Hey, what's happening?” he said. “I called HOTS to find where you were staying. I wanted to ask you about your trek.”

“Did you just come through the lobby?” Trager asked.

“Yeah, they sent me out to the pool, but you had already left.”

“Did you see your daughter?”

A wave seemed to pass through Sundown's body. “How'd you know about her?”

“She's here. She just called from the lobby.”

“You sure it was her?”

“I don't know—her name's Fatima, Pratima, something like that, right? Speaks really good English . . .” Trager stopped, realizing how strange that sounded. “I mean, she talks with an accent. She's Indian, right?”

Sundown slouched into a chair. “Maybe so, now. Her mom's from Delhi. Pratima came over after we split up. That was four years ago. Last thing I remember, she wore cutoffs, and talked like any other kid in Santa Cruz.”

“Anyway, you need to run downstairs if you want to catch her.”

“I tried to call her last night,” Sundown said. “I got some guy I couldn't understand. I never thought about her Mom being with a guy who didn't speak English. That'd be weird.”

“Sundown! You're going to miss her if you don't get going.”

"Maybe she's gone already," Sundown said.

"Well you'd better find out. Go on, and I'll meet you down there."

"I'll wait for you," Sundown said. "I want to talk to you about your trek."

Another knock on the door. "I've got to pack," Trager said. "Tell them I'm in the bathroom."

Trager's climbing clothes from Kawapatri were still hanging in the shower where he had put them to dry. He tossed them out onto the floor and turned on the water. "Give me five minutes!" he called. There was no answer. Trager listened for a moment, then pulled his shorts back on, and stepped to the bathroom door. A small, dark girl in a green *sari* stood just inside Trager's room, breathing as if she had just run up the stairs. Her hair was pulled back in a severe bun. Her arms were folded protectively in front of her. She was staring up at Sundown, who towered over her with his hand still on the knob.

"Hey, babe," Sundown said.

The girl just looked up with bright, questioning eyes.

"Never seen you dressed like that," he said. "Looks good." The tail of the *sari* had slipped off the girl's shoulder, but she made no move to replace it.

"Tried to call you," said Sundown.

"And hung up on our cook," she said, and strode into the room.

"Hey, the guy who answered the phone didn't speak English, okay? I thought I had the wrong number."

"When the man was calling for me by name? Did you forget our names, too?" Her voice had the musical, rising intonation of India, combined with a flat American pronunciation.

"Give me a break, Babe," Sundown said, closing the door. "I wrote I was coming."

"Without telling us when. If I hadn't called your office when I did, I wouldn't have even known you were here. And if I hadn't seen you walk through the lobby . . . They say you're leaving tomorrow. Tomorrow!"

She suddenly caught sight of Trager, and gave a start. "Excuse me," she said. "I'm Pratima. Are you Mr. Trager?"

"We talked on the phone," Trager said. He hesitated, feeling naked in his gym shorts. But Pratima crossed confidently to him and offered her hand, light but firm. Then she turned back to her father.

"Sundown, we have to go. I have to call Mother and tell her where I am."

"Wait a sec, babe. Ansel, I wanted to ask you about that trek."

"Oh, right. What is it?"

"Well, like, I thought I might go along."

It struck Trager that Max's first impression of Sundown had been correct after all. Whatever his technological skills, he was still in outer space, too disorganized to meet his own daughter, too naive to think that a mountain trek might call for a minimum of experience and equipment.

"Sorry," Trager said. "It's been cancelled. The whole thing's off. I'm on my way home."

Sundown looked at him for a long moment. His face sagged on his cheekbones. "Bummer," he said. He turned and followed his daughter out of the room, past the great bulk of a muscular cleaning woman waiting in the hall.

KARGIL
13.5.77
09:30

ANSLE TRGAER
HOTEL JULAY
NEW DELHI

WELCOME TO DELHI. WISH I WAS THERE/WEATHER GREAT MOUNTAINS
CLEAR ROAD OPEN/DRIVE OVER ZOJI LA NO PROBLEM/ASSUME
VASANT EXPLAINED PRESENT PROLBEMS/HARD TO TELL ALL AT
KAWAPATRI YOU UNDERSTAND/GOOD LUCK HAVE FUN ON S IN
K/TAKE CARE MY CLIENTS/GLAD YOU ARE WITH US/FREYA ///

The desk clerk gave him the message when he turned in his key. He read it a dozen times, although he knew it changed nothing. Freya did not know what had happened to Springtime in Kashmir. The telegram was just an ironic footnote to a trip that was already over. He walked among the potted palms of the Julay lobby, watching the taxis come and go in the circular drive outside. Another thunderstorm was approaching. The pipal trees thrashed about. Lightning flashed. The rain fell suddenly like a grey shroud across the drive and the street beyond. All this in silence; even the thunder was only a faint murmur over the sound of the air conditioning, and the small cries of computers at the main desk.

Trager found Sundown sitting on a couch near the windows. He eased himself into the upholstery of an adjoining chair. Sundown greeted him with a slight nod. "So you're heading out," he said.

"Pretty soon," said Trager. "Just killing time right now, waiting for a plane. What happened to Pratima?"

"She's trying to call her Mom." They sat watching the rain for a minute, and then Sundown asked, "How come they cancelled the trek?"

"A bunch of clients dropped out at the last minute. The people who hired me in Kashmir didn't know. Still don't know, I guess. It was because of the accident, the one you told me about. Have you thought of calling up another trekking company?"

"Like that asshole on the plane?" Sundown asked. "I don't know, man. I think it's important that this isn't just a job to you, going to the mountains. It's just something you have to do. Something I have to do. I don't really want to be shown around and told what I'm seeing. I've had all kinds of jerks doing that to me the last couple of years. Anyway, I don't know any other trekking companies. At least I know yours was good enough for our old friend Ferndecker."

"Maybe not," Trager said. "Look what happened to him."

At the other end of the room, Pratima emerged from the shop arcade. She scowled around the lobby, saw her father, and strode forward, practically upsetting a palm tree too close to her path.

"I can't believe you just ran away like that," she said. "Mother was right there, on the phone."

"I didn't know you'd get through so fast," Sundown said. "I just ran into Ansel here."

"At the other end of the building? Don't lie to me! You're afraid! You're afraid to talk to her! Or else you hate us. What else am I supposed to think when you show up after four years, and the first thing you do is want to run away to Kashmir with some man you met on the plane?"

Sundown said to Trager, "I told her about the trek."

Pratima acknowledged Trager for the first time. "Excuse me," she said. "I was rude. Our family problems aren't your fault."

"Don't worry about it," Trager said. "My parents are divorced."

"Mine aren't," Pratima said. "That's what makes this all so stupid."

"Mellow out, will you?" said Sundown. "It's not like I wasn't going to be around. I just wanted to take some time to get to know the country."

"Do you think you're doing me a favor just by being on the Indian subcontinent? If you wanted to visit, you could walk up to the house and ring the bell. If you wanted to go to the mountains, you could stay in California and go up to Yosemite."

"You remember those trips?" Sundown asked.

"There were mosquitos," Pratima said. "You never had all the parts to the tent. And we were always going on these stupid walks where we got lost. Mother hated them."

"I know," said Sundown. "That's why I didn't plan to take her with us."

"Didn't plan to! Did you think for a moment that my mother would even consider going on a trek in Kashmir?"

"No, but I thought you might."

Pratima opened her mouth, and then closed it again without speaking.

"Well, sure," said Sundown. "That was the point. I thought it'd be a gas. We could talk."

Pratima sat down violently. "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. You can talk to me right here. You could come home with me right now."

"I don't think so, babe. I'm sorry, but the whole thing with your mom is still really heavy."

"Really heavy!" Pratima said. "'It'd be a gas!' You've been using these same stupid expressions as long as I can remember. Why would I want to walk around in Kashmir listening to that garbage? Anyway, do you have any idea how she would act?"

"She'd let you go, babe, if you asked. She'd go for it."

"I'm not sure I would 'go for it.' This isn't the Sierra Nevada. You can't just throw some things in the car and take off."

"Yeah, but you see, Ansel was going to lead the thing, so it would be all set up."

Sundown took the crumpled catalog out of his shoulder bag, and offered it to Pratima. She read it intently, holding the paper tight with both hands. "Did you see how much this costs? Almost four thousand dollars for two of us! That's more than thirty-five thousand rupees!"

Trager sat up, gripping the arm of the couch.

"It's obscene!" Pratima said. "You could feed an entire family for a year. For years! Is it worth that much to you to avoid her?"

"It's worth that much for me to see you," Sundown said. "Away from her. Somewhere where we don't have to dig up all that old crap."

"So why don't we take a car down to Agra and see the Taj?"

"That's not far enough. It's not long enough. It's been four years, babe. I can't work everything out in a few minutes. I want to spend some time. Anyway, I don't care about the Taj Mahal."

"Wait a minute," Trager said, and stood up.

"So because you can't have it exactly your way you're just going to go home," Pratima said.

Sundown looked out at the rain. "I guess so."

"Wait!" Trager said again.

They looked up at him. So did several other people in the lobby. Trager was himself startled by the assertion in his own voice, but it was something he thought he might get used to.

Bagchee himself opened the door. "Bloody hell! What do you think you are doing?"

"Vasant! We can run the trek!"

"Where is your driver going? Hold him!"

Bagchee skipped off the porch and rushed to the gate. He shouted down the road, and a moment later the cab backed into view again.

"No, listen," Trager said. "I've found some people to go on Springtime in Kashmir. And they can pay in cash. So two more people, more than thirty thousand rupees. You said all we were short was twenty-something. The girl has to get permission from her mom, but we should know by tonight if she can go. I reserved another room for myself at the hotel. Do we have any extra clothing in Srinagar they can borrow?"

Bagchee seemed to try out several answers in his mind, before he finally said, "Of course. But you see, but it is now quite impossible. I have already sent a wire to Lakpa at Kawapatri advising him to cancel all arrangements."

"So wire him again," Trager said. "Tell him we're on the way."

"This is also not possible. Lakpa has certainly set out for Ladakh soonest on knowing the trek is not coming. We have not given the poor chap any furlough in six months, and I know he is keen on going home. As it happens, I myself am about to make a short holiday out of Delhi."

"Maybe Lakpa hasn't left yet. Can't you call?"

"Not on a disconnected telephone."

"Disconnected? But Sundown called you. . . "

Trager realized the house looked different. "You took down the HOTS sign."

"It no longer served a purpose."

"What the hell—did you plan this trip to fail?"

"That question is quite moot, in a company run by Max Holz."

Trager threw up his arms. "But it doesn't have to fail. We've got the clients now!"

"Nevertheless," Bagchee said.

"You mean, nevertheless, you're tired of the trekking business, so you're just closing up shop. I don't care how out of it you think Max is, he'll fire you for this."

Bagchee abruptly lost his civil reserve. His voice rose and broke. "It is not for Max to fire me! Who are you to be lecturing on things you know nothing about? HOTS/India is fully fifty-one per cent mine. So do not tell me about my duty to Max. Because you see I am not his bloody employee. And I am telling you that this trek cannot run."

Trager was mute. It had not occurred to him that Bagchee was more than an agent for Max.

"It is really not too soon for you to proceed to the airport," Bagchee said. "Where are your things?" His voice was calm again, almost sympathetic. He seemed to understand Trager's embarrassment, and was taking advantage of it.

"I left my pack at the Julay," Trager said. "I thought I'd be staying there. Look, if it's partly your company, why don't you just work things out with Max? Why do you have to sabotage the whole operation? Why can't you let me take this one trek? And what about Freya, and Lakpa? What about their jobs?"

"Do you think we haven't tried to talk to Max? But I have no control over his affairs in the States, and to any suggestion, we get only his usual 'fuck' and 'bullshit.' And so then, yes, what about Freya, and Lakpa? They are left waiting in hill stations like Kawapatri for clients who will not arrive. They are left standing by a *nala* in Ladakh, knowing they will be questioned for a death that is not their fault. Mr. Ferndecker's drowning is only extraordinary in that such a thing has not happened before. So I say, enough. It is time for Max to quit India and go back to his university."

"I've got to talk to Sundown," Trager said. "I can't just ditch these people. It's a father and daughter. It's important to them."

“As you wish,” said Bagchee. “Let me only point out I have gone to some trouble to get you onto this flight tonight. I should not be able to do it again if you miss the plane. Max would not worry about this fellow and his daughter.

“I'm not Max.”

“No,” Bagchee said, and smiled. “This brings up last night's discussion. Max Holz is not all there is to this business, and we may well need your services again. I take your strength and skill on Freya's recommendation. Tonight is a test of your discretion.”

“Whose test? Who is ‘we?’ Are you saying Freya is in this thing with you?”

Bagchee held his hands up defensively. “All I am saying is that Freya has her own resources and would be the first to take advantage of an opportunity to make her mark in this business. I believe she would hope that you would do the same.”

A small, desultory jazz band played in the center of the dimly-lit dining room at Hotel Julay. In the shadows at the edge of the room, Sundown circled around toward Trager's seat. “I was beginning to think you weren't coming,” Trager said, as Sundown pulled out a chair. He had been waiting for an hour and a half, dawdling over the one beer he could afford, watching the door. Sundown folded his legs under the table, and slumped on his elbows.

“I saw her,” he said. “Pratima's mom. I wasn't going to. I put Pratima in one cab, and then I thought, this is chickenshit. She shouldn't have to take all the crap by herself. So I got one of these little scooter rickshaws, and followed her. It was ugly, real ugly. I got there just as the shit came down. I had almost forgotten why we couldn't make it in California.”

“Sorry,” Trager said. “But she went for it? She let Pratima go?”

“Oh, yeah. She'll make us pay for it the rest of our lives, but she went for it. I guess we got to talk about equipment and stuff.”

A waiter approached, but Sundown waved him away. Trager watched him go with regret. He had hoped for a few minutes reprieve. “There are some other things we have to go over first,” Trager said. “You know Vasant Bagchee, the man you called at the office? It looks like there's some kind of feud between him and the other owner of the company. He wants to scrap Springtime in Kashmir, just to screw the guy who hired me. He said it doesn't make any difference whether you come up with the money or not, because he cancelled all the arrangements.”

Sundown melted down into his chair. “Oh, fuck, man, don't give me this!”

“At least that was the story he told me.”

“What do you mean? Like he's bullshitting you?”

“Maybe—yes. I do. He said he sent a telegram to Kawapatri telling the *sirdar*—the guy who takes care of all the logistics—to go home to Ladakh. But the *sirdar* isn't in Kawapatri. He rode down to Srinagar with the rest of us in that jeep, and he's staying in town to meet our plane.”

“What about your lady, the one in the jeep? Where's she at in all this?”

"I'd give anything to ask," Trager said. "I got a telegram from her a few hours ago saying, have a nice trek, so I don't think she knows anything about it."

"Well, shit, what do you want to do?"

"I want to go to Kashmir," said Trager. "Just as if everything was all set, which I think it is. If it isn't, I give your thirty thousand rupees back, and then I'd have to borrow enough to get home on." He turned his coffee cup full circle on its saucer. "Or else we could wing it."

"Like how?"

"We could go into the mountains on our own. It wouldn't be guided trip. Just as if you and Pratima and I had bumped into each other in Kashmir and decided to have an adventure."

Sundown gave him an intense stare. Slowly, starting with the eyes, the lines on his face moved, inverted, and a moment later Sundown smiled for the first time Trager could remember.

"Why didn't we think of that before?" he said.

Trager let out the breath he had been holding. "How will it play with Pratima and her mom?"

"Why do they have to know? I mean, if the guy meets the plane, what do they have to know about this jerk in Delhi?"

"Because I don't want to pretend to be something I'm not."

Sundown nodded. "I hear you. You just want to take care of your own thing, and that's okay. That's the way I like it myself. It's the way it ought to be. And I'm afraid it's bullshit, man. You're the guide. You are what people need you to be."

In the main lobby, Trager said, "There's something else. Bagchee wouldn't pay for another night on my room. Can I borrow some money against the trek fee?"

"Not a problem" Sundown said. "You can put up with me. I'm sitting a guy's house while he's in the States. Let's get you checked out of here for good."

There was only one clerk at the main desk, and he was engaged in a dispute with a middle aged couple dressed in matching suits of tailored khaki. Porters were piling their luggage inside the door—duffels, packs, and an aluminum camera case. The bags were tagged by the airline that Trager was to have left on, an hour before.

The woman was doing the talking. She was taller than the clerk and used her height to advantage, leaning over him. Her curly red hair shook above his face. Her breasts rested on the counter, and the young man seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes off of them.

"I don't care what they told you," the woman said in a tight, controlled voice. "We paid for this room six months ago in L.A."

Her husband, a large man with two cameras on his neck, moved to the side to take pictures.

"Stand a little closer to him, would you, Les?" he asked.

"Would you put those damned things away? Listen, I haven't flown halfway around the world to find out you've lost our room."

The clerk wagged his head back and forth. "But the note that is being sent from the agent is clearly saying you are not coming."

"Do we look like we're not coming? If we roll out sleeping bags in your lobby, will you believe we're here? We can't go running all over Delhi looking for a hotel tonight. We've been flying for two days, and we've got to get up in the morning to take another plane to Kashmir. If we're not in a room in half an hour, someone's going to be pretty damned sorry."

"Yes," the clerk said, looking quickly over her shoulder. "Excuse me—Mr. Trager?"

"Take your time," Trager said. "We're in no hurry."

"But you are Mr. Trager? Of Holz Overseas Trekking?" The woman wheeled around.

"Ah—sort of," Trager said.

"Oh, good," said the clerk with relief. "Your clients are here."



“He was going to ditch them,” Trager said. “Bagchee was just going to let them get off the plane in Delhi and figure it out for themselves.”

“Maybe they just didn't get the word,” said Sundown

Trager looked out the grimy back window of the taxi at the following car with Harry and Leslie Macintosh, the last original members of Springtime in Kashmir. Trager wanted to think that their presence proved Vasant Bagchee had

not really cancelled the trek. However, the couple had been travelling in Japan, and it was quite possible that the notice had never reached them.

Last night at Hotel Julay had not been a good time to explain the situation. The Macintoshes were tired and irritable. They had not seemed particularly interested in news of the accident, or even the change in leadership. As soon as Trager had arranged for them to take over his own unneeded room, they had gone up to bed in a flurry of porters and baggage. Trager had the sense that as far as they were concerned, he and Freya were as interchangeable as bellhops.

Pratima was waiting at the airport front apron when the taxis pulled up. With her was a short, slightly plump woman in a *sari* and dark glasses.

“Mother, this is our travel guide, Mr. Trager,” Pratima said. “Mr. Trager, this is my mother “

“Kamala Busco,” the woman said, offering her hand. She had a high, clear voice. Pratima had inherited that and her height from her mother. Sundown had contributed her angular face and thin frame.

Trager took Kamala's hand. “You probably want to know something about the company and the trip.”

“Yes,” said Kamala. “How did your client die in Ladakh?” Trager couldn't tell what the woman's expression was behind her dark glasses, but there was nothing remotely sympathetic in her voice.

“You heard about that,” he said. “I was told got lost and drowned in a stream.”

“You were not there?”

“No,” said Trager. “The leader of that trip was supposed to lead this one, but after the accident, she had to stay in Ladakh to sort things out. It's the first time anything like this has happened. And I promise you I won't let anyone get lost on this trip.”

“I do hope not. It is all my fault, and it would kill me.”

“Excuse me?” said Trager.

“Mother, we have to make the plane,” Pratima said. “Good bye.”

She gave Kamala a quick embrace. As they separated, she glanced at her father.

“Go ahead,” Sundown said. “I'll be there in a minute.”

"I'll introduce you to the others," Trager said.

"What others?" Pratima asked. "I thought they cancelled."

"So did I," said Trager. "But one couple showed up anyway."

"So my father is paying for them, too?"

"No," said Trager. "They paid up months ago. This just means the company can use their money instead of giving it back." That was the way it should work out in the long run, Trager thought. In the short run, Sundown's money would have no cover for everyone. Trager hefted his pack and led the way back to the Macintosh's parked taxi. Harry and Leslie had already acquired two porters of their own. Leslie watched them critically as they piled the bags on a cart, while Harry photographed the operation

"*Namaste*," Harry said when Trager introduced Pratima. "I'm afraid that's all the Indian I know."

"Hindi," said Pratima. "It's more than I knew when I got here."

Leslie looked the girl up and down, taking in her dainty sandals and loose sari. "Is that your trekking outfit?" she asked.

"We're taking care of her gear," Trager said. "Why don't we get in line?"

"What about Sunshine and his Indian princess?" Leslie asked. She nodded at Sundown and Kamala looking at each other in silence across a space of several feet.

"It's Sundown," Trager said. "And that's Pratima's mom."

Harry swung one of his cameras up to his face. "East meets west," he said. "Fantastic."

Pratima walked ahead of them into the terminal. Trager hurried to catch her before the Macintoshes caught up. "They're really tired," he said. "They got in late, and then they had to wake up early for this flight."

"They're still creeps."

"Just remember you're visiting with your dad, not Harry and Leslie."

"I'm mad at him too." She looked ahead. "I think this woman wants to talk to you."

A clerk at the check-in counter peered over the heads of several other passengers. "Hello? You are the SynergIndia party?"

"Right." Trager said, and urged the porters forward with the bags.

"What's all this?" Leslie asked.

"Sundown's company has an in with the airline," Trager said. "Until we're safe in Kashmir, we're all Synergism computer experts."

"I don't think that company has any experts," Harry said. "Our office bought one of their gizmos last year, and we still can't get the damn thing to work."

"That doesn't mean the problem is with the machine," Pratima said.

"Let's just get on the plane," said Trager. "Then you can take it up with the designer,"

The porters began to skillfully stack the packs and duffels on the baggage scale. When the last rucksack was balanced on top of the pile, they turned expectantly to Harry Macintosh.

"Oh, God, just like Nepal," Leslie said. "Always hitting us up for whatever they can get."-

"See him," Harry said, pointing at Trager. "The company takes care of all this, right?"

"Uh, sure," Trager said. "But wait a minute. Sundown's got all the cash."

"Who is that guy?" Leslie asked. "Your banker?"

"Something like that," Trager said.

"Tickets, please," the clerk said.

"Christ, he's got my ticket, too," Trager said. "I'll go get him."

"No," Pratima said. "I will."

Trager stood, useless, watched by the porters, the airline clerk, the Macintoshes, and a crowd of irritated passengers that pressed up to the single other open counter. When the Busco's returned, Pratima nodded at the porters. "Give them one rupee per bag. And we need our tickets."

Sundown handed over the money and tickets obediently. He seemed distracted. Through the baggage check and security screening, he didn't speak. In the departure lounge, he and Pratima stood to one side together. Trager went over to them. "Can I ask—what did Kamala mean when she said it was all her fault?"

"Nothing," said Pratima. "That's just the way she talks." The plane was called, and passengers began crowding toward the door. Trager cut in behind Harry, and followed the creases in his bush jacket. He was reminded of crossing an avalanche slope as a ski patrolman. He had taken all the precautions possible. Now all he could do was set out and hope things didn't collapse.

Another airplane door cracked open, another wave of air rushed into a cabin. But this time the air was cool, with a scent of wood smoke that cut through the smell of hot asphalt and jet fuel.

There was no one waiting in the terminal, no message at the airline counter. Trager's rucksack was one of the first bags unloaded. He grabbed it off the baggage slide and headed for the exit.

The parking lot was pandemonium. Trager was hemmed in by the drivers and houseboat agents who had been waiting to accost the arriving passengers. Hands grabbed at him, nearly tearing the rucksack off his back. An auto horn blared in counterpoint to the shouting.



"Hello! Hello! Hello, *sahib*! You wish taxi? Cheap accommodation? You wish to buy carpet? Woodcarving?"

He looked right and left for an escape, but the men took this as an expression of interest. They literally fell over themselves reaching for him. The car horn honked incessantly. Trager took a deep breath. He probably would need a houseboat, and a driver, and possibly even some woodcarving or carpets. He would need to do something with his clients. He looked squarely at the nearest eager, unshaven face and asked, "How much?"

Before the man could answer, Trager was pulled sharply to the side, out of the way of two honking jeeps that nosed through the crowd, a grinning Lakpa Tsering riding on the lead fender. "Ho, *sahib*, this way!" he called, and jumped down to take Trager's pack. As suddenly as they had attacked him, the crowd of men were gone, swarming around the next passengers emerging wide-eyed into the mob.

"You're here!" Trager felt such relief his knees almost buckled.

"Yes, *sahib*. My job."

"I know, but . . . never mind. We've got to get the clients."

They all came out together. The group of four attracted special attention from the vendors in the parking lot. Harry and Sundown shared some comment as the men approached, smiles fading as the mob encircled them. Leslie snarled. Pratima argued in Hindi. It made no difference. Only when Trager's shout caught Sundown's attention and the Kashmiris saw the party was taken did the crowd move on.

"Only four?" Lakpa asked.

"Four people cancelled, but I got two more. The tall guy is the man Max almost hit with his jeep the other day. The girl is his daughter."

"Indian daughter," Lakpa nodded. "Pretty."

Leslie was upon them. "Where the hell did you go in there? You just left us."

"Had to get the jeeps," Trager said. "Let's load up."

"You should have told us. How were we supposed to know where to go?"

"There wasn't time," Trager said. "I knew with your travel experience you'd find the way out."

"That's not what we're paying for!"

"I'll make sure you get your money's worth."

Lakpa acknowledged each client with a grin and quick tip of his head as Trager introduced him. Then they loaded the duffels and packs into the jeeps. The two drivers helped, as did a neatly dressed young man Trager had not noticed before.

"Who's that?" Trager asked Lakpa.

"Food seller's man," Lakpa said. "We pay him now. You are bring some money from Delhi?"

“Oh, yeah. Sundown!”

“Maybe you just better take this, man,” Sundown said. He reached into his shoulder hag and pulled out a canvas envelope stenciled with the name of Barclays bank. Trager peered in at thick multicolored packets of bills tied together with string.

“Thanks,” Trager said. He turned to Lakpa. “How much do you need?” Lakpa seemed hesitant to talk money in front of the clients. He backed off a few yards, and Trager followed, with the grocer’s man keeping a discrete distance.

“Five thousand, six hundred, thirty-seven rupees,” he said. “This is food and also jeep taxis.”

Trager fingered the unfamiliar bills for a moment, then handed the sack to Lakpa. “Here, take it out.” Lakpa looked into the bag, and glanced up in surprise.

“I hope we have enough,” Trager said. “It’s the trek fees from Sundown and Pratima, less my airfare. About twenty-seven thousand rupees.”

Lakpa laughed out loud. “Bagchee is give you this?”-

“No. I’ve got to tell you some things. Bagchee wanted to cancel the trek.”

“Again?” Lakpa asked.

“He’s done this before?”

“Oh, yes, *sahib*. Bagchee is always say, cancel treks, Max is spend too much money.”

“Well, this time he really did it. How come no one told me about the accident in Ladakh?”

Lakpa did not look surprised, only curious at Trager’s response. “Not your job,” he said. “Only Freya’s.”

“Maybe so, but because of Mr. Ferndecker, four of the clients quit. Bagchee wouldn’t give me any money to run the trek, and he said he was going to tell you to go back to Ladakh.”

“He is not telling me this.”

“I guess not, since you showed up. But all the money we’ve got is Sundown and Pratima’s trek fee. Do you think we can make it on that until we meet up with Max?”

Lakpa laughed again. “Max is not having this much money for us.”

He detached a blue and a pink bill from their bundles. The grocer’s man was effusive in his thanks, and Trager assumed Lakpa had tipped well. On the way back to the jeeps, Lakpa said, “This is good work, *sahib*. Next time, get change.”

Trager rode with the Macintoshes up to Kawapatri. On the highway. He said to Harry, “I saw you talking with Sundown. Did you ask him about your computer problem?”

“Sure did. He was real decent about it. Said he’d check it out when we get back. He’s got a problem, though, with that company of his. From what I hear at the office, old Synergism is on its way down the tubes. Too bad. Seems like a hell of a nice guy. How’d he get that Indian girl of his?”

"It's called reproduction," Leslie said. "I'll explain it to you one of these days." Trager started to laugh, but stopped when he saw that neither of Macintoshes were smiling.

The jeeps climbed from the valley floor, up through the villages, past the terraced fields, into the switchback curves through the forest. All of this was reassuringly familiar to Trager. But when they emerged from the forest near the edge of the golf course, he gave an involuntary shout. There were no clouds. The hotel knoll, once the dominant feature of the socked-in landscape, was now barely noticeable beneath a backdrop of snow peaks.



As the party checked into the Kawapatri Golf Hotel, one of the clerks spoke to Lakpa and handed him a telegram across the desk.

"From Freya?" Trager asked.

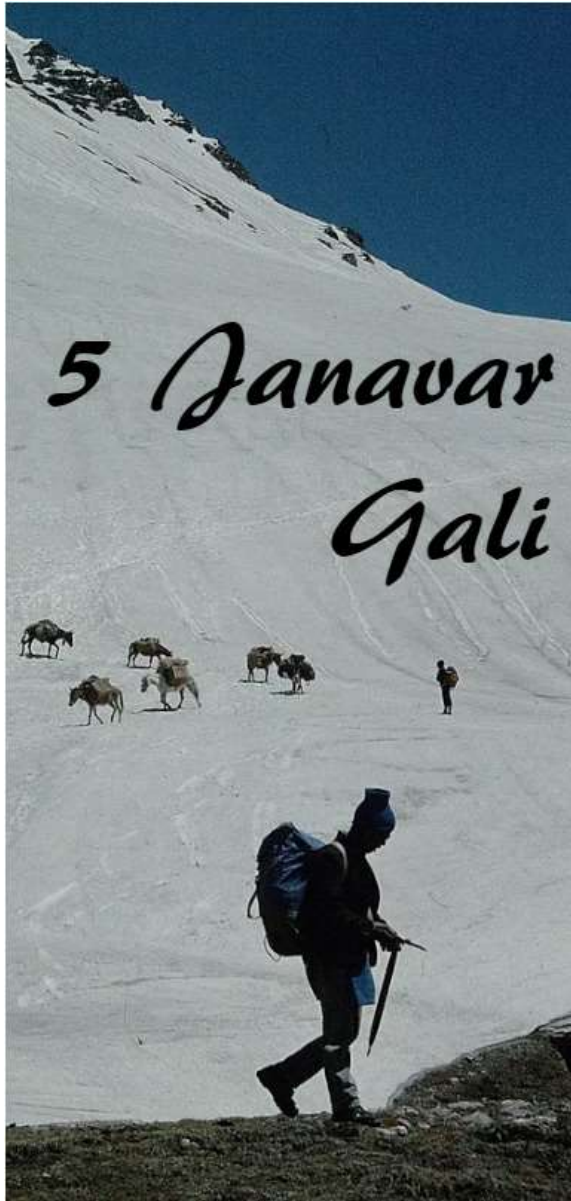
Lakpa looked at the paper and grinned. "Bagchee. 'Kashmir trek cancelled. Go Ladakh.'"

"What's he likely to do now?"

"Vas-ant!" Lakpa said, pronouncing the name as if it were an epithet. "He say, 'I have no money,' 'Max is cheat me.' 'Trek leaders spend too much.' But Trager-*sahib* is go Delhi, bring back thirty thousand rupees, two trekkers. So let Max talk to Bagchee. We go trekking."

While the others were finding their rooms, Trager walked out of the building alone. The sled porters by the entrance now lounged on small wooden wagons. They gave Trager only a glance when they saw he had no luggage. He walked around the front of the structure and dropped down the steep side of the knoll. The ground was still sodden, and his running shoes skidded on the slick grass. When he reached the bottom of the stone retaining wall, he found a freshly painted sign bolted to a wooden post:

CLIMBING THE WALL EXPRESSLY FORBIDDEN
by order of
Col. R. Battarchaya, Commandant, KMTC



The six ponies came single file out of the last stand of trees. The jingle of harness bells carried across the high meadow, bouncing off the rock ridges on either side. Behind the ponies a man in a long cloak whistled and called to keep the animals moving on the well-worn path through lupine and scrubby grass. Ansel Trager, Lakpa Tsering, and the trek cook followed at a distance.

"This is last grass for ponies, this side," Lakpa said. "Lunch is soon, and then ponies are go Janavar Gali, one stage to Lunwali, no stops."

Trager stopped and looked at the country ahead. Patches of wet snow lay across the path, becoming wider and wider until the upper valley was one great snowfield. Above, the cirque culminated in the peaks Trager had seen from Kawapatri. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost noon.

"We're not making very good time, are we?"

Lakpa squinted back at the forest. "Slow," he agreed. "Hippie-*sahib* I think is argue with daughter."

"I know," said Trager. "And then there's Harry."

The cook spoke a few words to Lakpa and set off after the ponies. He was taller and thinner than the *sirdar*. Whereas Lakpa was neatly dressed in climbing knickers and ski sweater, the cook wore patched wool pants and carried an enormous old rucksack festooned with dangling stoves, pots, and fuel bottles. From the back he looked like a pack with legs.

"Sonam Gyaltso say, he is finding lunch place now," Lakpa told Trager.

"Sonam was still washing dishes when we left camp. He starts after we do but always gets in first."

"He is cook," Lakpa said, as if that explained everything.

Leslie Macintosh walked into the meadow. She did not pause to take in the view, but strode quickly toward Trager and Lakpa. In her European stretch knickers, the sun sparkling in her red curls, her face accented by mirrored sunglasses, she looked young and fresh, almost attractive.

"I just go help Sonam," Lakpa said.

"You're sure you don't want to hear what Leslie has to say?"

"You are leader," the *sirdar* smiled, and followed in the ponies' tracks.

"Harry's fooling with his cameras again," Leslie announced when she reached Trager. "I couldn't stand waiting around, so I came up to walk with you," Trager noted she was not even breathing heavily, even though the elevation was already over ten thousand feet.

"I think I'll wait for everyone to catch up," he said. "We're stopping for lunch ahead a ways, and after that we'll want to keep the party together going over the pass."

Leslie seemed to regard the mountains ahead for the first time. "Let me ask you this right now," she said. "Do you think Harry's going to make it?"

"Let's see how the pass goes," Trager said. "I don't think we have any really tough days after that until we cross back into Kashmir. As late as next week, you guys could always turn back."

"I'm not talking about 'us guys.' I'm talking about Harry."

"Okay. But it's still a little early."

"Whatever," Leslie said. "See you at lunch."

Pratima came next, wearing baggy pants and canvas boots that Lakpa had rented from a Kashmir Tourism Department youth program. She fluttered in the breeze that blew down from the pass.

"I'd like to hear your policy on drugs," she said.

"Do I need to have one?"

"At least for my father. He's smoking a *chilom* full of hashish right now. I think he bought it when he was here last week."

"Well, he's an adult," Trager said. "I can't really stop him."

"What about if he falls off the mountain up there? Will you be able to stop him then?"

"I'll give it a try. Did you discuss it with him?"

"No. we're not talking very well today."

"Hold it!" a voice called in the distance. "Hold it! Hold it!"

Harry Macintosh emerged from the trees, trying to walk and hold a camera to his face at the same time. Sundown wandered behind him, staying out of the picture. Pratima's father wore the same clothes he had on at Kawapatri, with the addition of some cleated canvas shoes like Pratima's. Harry was dressed in the same climbing clothes as Leslie, but in his case the trim knickers accented his flabby physique. He carried two cameras and various accessories in padded cases around his waist.

"I wanted to get you kids together," Harry said as he came up. "These wildflowers are fantastic. This is it—India. Right here."

Trager looked at Harry Macintosh carefully. Both the Macintoshes were a mystery to him. He could not imagine why they had come on this trek together. Leslie looked like the outdoorsy one, but Harry seemed to enjoy the trek more than she did. Trager supposed his photography

had the secondary function of allowing him to stop frequently. But he never really rested. He fiddled endlessly with his equipment, his face beaming. Trager wanted him to make it.

"I'd like to get some of those pictures from you after this is over," Trager said.

"No problem," said Harry. "No-oo problem," Trager waited for Sundown to come up. Pratima caught his eye for a moment, and then followed Harry.

"Listen, Sundown," Trager said. "Pratima's a little concerned about your turning on right here. She's probably right. We've got some climbing ahead of us. I'm not going to police everyone, but you ought to save the dope for camp."

"Hey, don't worry, Ans. I do my best work on the weed."

"Sundown, your work is different from this trip."

"Oh, yeah," he nodded. "A different trip. Totally." He kept his eyes on the approaching ridgeline, letting his feet find the trail, one gangly step at a time.

Immediately below the headwall was a small tarn. The ponies, still burdened with their blue duffel bags, grazed on an exposed patch of grass by the north shore. Sonam served tea and biscuits on a red tarpaulin spread on the damp ground. Above the lake the snowfields swept up from the water's edge past bands of rock toward the pass. A zigzag line of dirty snow showed the route of earlier pack trains.

"How long is this going to take?" Harry said as he scanned the slope with a telephoto lens.

"This is a hell of a time to worry about how you're going to do, Harry," Leslie said. "You should have thought about that back in L.A."

Trager turned to the *sirdar*, "What do you think?"

"I think, too much camera, too much woman," Lakpa muttered.

"A few hours," Trager told Harry.

He got up from the tarp and walked behind a rock to change out of hiking shorts into his wool climbing pants. Despite his efforts to dry them, they smelled moldy. The mountain sun will do us both good, Trager thought. When he came back, he helped Lakpa chase down a baggage pony with a burlap bundle lashed atop its load. They dumped out seven ice axes, and Trager went to stuff the burlap sack under the lashing ropes. The pony driver, who had crouched, watching, from the edge at the grass, suddenly sprang to his feet, grabbed the bag from Trager, and tucked it in himself.

"I guess the airlines don't let you unload own baggage either," Trager said as he and Sonam walked back to the tarp.

"*Sahib?*"

"Nothing," Trager said. "Do we have an extra ice axe for the horse packer?"

"No need," Lakpa said. "Ponies go easy way, zigzag. You climb straight, much faster—go ahead of ponies to Lunwali. Sonam and I stay with pony-*wallah*," He paused. "This Kashmiri, he is sometime strike, sometime ask more money. But when money is go first, Kashmiri is following."

Trager and Lakpa carried the axes over to the tarpaulin.

"I think what we'll do is take off ahead of the ponies as soon as we're done with lunch. That'll give us time for a quick ice axe lesson before we start up the hill."

"Harry and I already did that," Leslie said, as Trager handed her one of the tools. "They showed us how in Austria."

"Good," Trager said. "Then you can help the others."

Leaving Lakpa and Sonam to pack up the lunch, Trager led the trekkers toward the base of the headwall. Leslie lecturing behind him as he walked.

"You have to keep your weight over your feet. Don't lean into the slope. And you hold the ice axe like this, with the pick sticking out. Harry! Don't you remember? The other way."

As long as she gets it right, Trager thought. He felt the balance and weight of the axe he had selected. The tools were all the same length: Pratima's axe came to her waist like a cane, while Sundown's swung like a hatchet from his hand.



Trager found the shaft longer than he liked, and he noted that the picks were an obsolete design unsuited to steep ice climbing. But they came from a good manufacturer, and someone had taken pains to keep the points honed and the webbing wrist tethers in good repair. He thought of his own finely balanced axe, sitting wasted in some unknown baggage locker.

Trager had the clients wait at the base of the first steep snow. He kicked steps fifty feet up the slope, anchored the shaft of his axe, and turned to look down. The four clients were watching him intently. Beyond them he could see the green boulders that lined the bottom of the glass-clear tarn. Lakpa and Sonam were folding the red tarp while the pony driver chased one of his animals across the grass. During the two-day walk up through the Kawapatri forest, the Ladakhis had picked the trail, the lunch spots, the campsites. They set up the tents and cooked the meals. They washed the dishes while the clients went to bed, awakened the trekkers in the morning with coffee. It was luxurious, but Trager had begun to feel as if he were just another mouth to feed. He had been looking forward to the moment when he could finally serve as the climber Freya had asked him to be.

"OK, watch," he said. He jerked his ice axe free, and threw himself down the slope.

He gathered speed, sliding head first on his back, curled in a fetal position with his knees tucked so that his heels cleared the snow. He gripped the ice axe across his chest. Halfway down, Trager stabbed the pick of the ice axe into the snow at his waist and kicked his legs out to the side. A roostertail of crystals spurted into the air as the metal cut into the slushy surface. Trager's upper body, slowed by the axe, twisted uphill as his legs swung below him. He rolled his hips so that he was sliding on his chest, now feet-first, his toes gouging deep furrows, his shoulder levering the pick deeper into the snow. He stopped in a wave of slush that splattered the legs of the five clients.

"That," Trager said as he hopped to his feet, "is all you need to know."

"That was stupid," said Pratima. "You could have been hurt."

"Right," said Trager, "But I wasn't. That's the important part."

“Harry and I already did this,” Leslie said.

Trager was irritated at whatever Teuton had drilled such confidence into Leslie. “Great,” he said. “All you have to do is show me that you remember. The rest of you are about to get the world's fastest mountain climbing lesson. I’m just going to show you one thing, how to arrest a fall with your ice axe. But if you can do this, you can travel safely on almost any snow slope.”

He had them sit in the snow to practice. “If you find yourself falling, roll onto the head of the axe. Toward the *head!* Toward the pick! And bridge with your body. Dig your toes in! Try it again. Roll! Bridge! Dig your toes in!”

They drilled for twenty minutes. Sundown handled his ice axe the same way he walked, as if the signals from his brain paused a moment at each joint before moving along. Trager watched him closely, wondering how much the hashish was affecting him. He was relaxed and always rolled to the correct side, but Trager was not sure he would respond quickly enough in an actual fall.

Pratima climbed up Trager’s demonstration track. Instead of sitting in the snow, she flopped backwards as Trager had done. She rolled smoothly over, but to the wrong side. The spike of the axe jammed in the snow and jerked the shaft out of her hands.

Trager scrambled to intercept her, but the girl hung onto the head of the axe, grabbed the shaft again, and slid to a stop at Trager’s feet.

“I just wanted to see what would happen if I rolled the other way,” she said as she got up.

“You could have asked.”

Harry froze up on the first slide, and Trager and Sundown had to spot him to a safe landing. He tried it again successfully, and then sat down on a rock to rest.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Leslie said. She climbed up a few feet and did a perfect arrest.

“Good,” said Trager. “But you were hardly moving. Try it again with some more speed. It’ll be steeper on the other side of the pass.”

“How much steeper?” Harry asked.

Trager hesitated. Freya had not mentioned anything in particular about the northeast face of the Janavar Gali, so Trager assumed it was nothing to worry about. At the same time, he wanted to make sure that his lesson was taken seriously.

“Steep enough that you have be able to stop a fall. Let’s see it one more time.”

The party climbed on, straight up the fall line to a gully that cut through the cliff bands. Avalanches had scoured out the middle of the chute, and Trager hugged one wall to minimize the danger. They had to stop after only a few hundred feet to strip off clothing. The walls of the gully formed a reflector, and the heat was intense. Below, Trager could see the ponies traversing out of sight around a ridge, taking advantage of a natural bench. The pony-*wallah* walked behind, bracing himself on a makeshift staff he had picked up in the forest.

Trager led upward again, trying to set an even rhythm: Plant the ice axe, kick, step; plant the axe, kick, step. The snow was turning slushy in the heat, and it took more than an hour to pass the last at the cliffs. Trager estimated they had climbed a thousand feet. His pulse hammered in his head, and he had to breathe twice for every step. His eyes, even shielded in glacier glasses, ached from the glare, and he could feel that his sunscreen had failed to keep his cheeks and nose from burning. Trager suspected the clients were in worse condition than he was.



He called a halt on top of a rock outcrop. They settled without speaking on the sun-warmed shale. Trager picked a spot at the edge of the bluff, and let his feet dangle as he looked at the view. The valley they had come up had a geometric u-shape, and Trager recognized it as an old glacial trough. West, beyond the end of the meadows, beyond the timbered ridges dropping into Kashmir, the Pir Panjal range rose like a white island in a hazy sea.

Trager felt a warm body brush against him, and he turned to find Leslie crouched behind him. “I don’t think Harry can make it,” she whispered. “He should wait for the ponies and go back. He’ll be happy as a clam in Srinagar. He can shoot enough pictures of houseboats and rug merchants to keep Kodak in business for a year,” There was something cruel about discussing her husband’s condition behind his back. At the same time, he could tell by Harry’s breathing that the man was in distress.

He got up and faced the group. “How’s everyone doing?” he asked. “We’re probably less than a thousand feet from the top. Maybe another hour, hour and a half. Is altitude getting to anyone? Any headaches or stomach trouble?”

Sundown and Pratima shook their heads.

“I got stomach trouble,” Harry said. “It’s too damn big.”

“It’ll be smaller by the time you finish this trek,” Trager said. “Just pace yourself,” Leslie got up, and Trager could she was about to whisper something else. “We’ll see,” he said, cutting her off.

Pratima suddenly stood up. “Are we still trying to keep ahead of the ponies?” she asked.

“I’d like to,” said Trager. “Why?”

“They’ve passed us.”

She was right. The pack train was traversing the slope above them. The driver was walking with the lead animal, struggling to keep the pack saddle balanced. Lakpa and Sonam were bringing up the rear. Lakpa saw the trekkers on the rock. When Trager waved, the *sirdar* held up both hands and motioned, down, down.

“Be quiet,” Trager said. “I think Lakpa wants our pony driver to think we’re still in the lead,”- Trager said. “He’s afraid the guy will try to strike for more money if he knows I’m available to pay him off.”

“That’s the pits,” said Sundown. “What’re we paying him?”

“Fifteen rupees a day for each pony, plus fifteen for the driver.”

"Yeah, I'd strike too," said Sundown. "That's about twelve bucks a day."

"This isn't California," Pratima said. "That's probably the standard rate for this work in Kashmir."

"That's right," said Leslie. "And it's probably too high. We had the same problem in Nepal. We would pay the porters, and then they would strike. You just can't trust these people over here."

"Which of us over here are you referring to?" Pratima asked.

"The ponies are going over the crest," said Trager. "Let's roll," In fact, the pack string was still in sight, but Trager guessed that an argument with his packer would not be any worse than one between his clients.

Sundown stood up slowly. "You know how to keep things under control up here, don't you," he said under his breath. "I mean, this is where you know all the answers."

"No," said Trager. "I just like being in the mountains."

"Same thing."

The upper part of the slope flattened, and in another hour the climbers reached a wide, almost level col. The edges of this plateau hid the view in front and behind so that the snowy field seemed to float in the sky, tethered only to the peaks on either side. The only marker in the otherwise featureless snow was a six-foot cairn of neatly piled rock festooned with carved stones, animal horns, and, on some ledges, tiny wooden and plastic effigies. Long willow wands with bleached muslin pennants sprouted from every crevice. Winds careened around the gap in all directions, making the streamers flutter and twirl as if alive. Trager stopped in their flickering shadows to put on his parka.



"What a picture!" Harry said. "Great! Fantastic! This is it—India! This is worth the trip."

"What is all this crap?" Leslie asked.

"What did you call this?" Pratima cried. "This is a religious shrine. The flags and carving are Buddhist, the images are Hindu. The Muslims don't believe in images, but they will stop here to say a prayer."

"Maybe Ansel should have issued us each a plastic Jesus," Leslie said. "Which of all those things do you believe in?" she asked Pratima.

"It doesn't matter," the girl snapped. "I believe in the people who left them."

The wind veered and snapped the prayers over the heads of the women. Sundown looked closely at one of the carved stones. Harry buried his face in a viewfinder. Trager shrugged his pack back on and started to walk away around the right side of the cairn.

"For good luck you have to keep the stones on your right," Pratima called. Trager changed course. He felt a need for luck.

As they approached the northeast edge of the col, the ground began to drop, gently at first, then more steeply. The tops of snowy mountains appeared, then walls and buttresses hung with glaciers. The massif rose directly from the deep canyon below the pass. A brown river, green

terraced fields, dark forests, grassy alps, moraines, glaciers, rock ridges—the entire relief of the range was represented in one sweeping ascent too great to take in at a single glance.

“Oh, man, where are we?” Sundown asked.

“That's the main range of the Himalaya,” Trager said. “On the other side is Ladakh, where Lakpa and Sonam come from. Beyond that is Tibet,” He recited the description Freya had given him, not for the others so much as for himself. He snapped a picture with his little camera, self-conscious as Harry deployed his own arsenal of equipment.

“This is it—India,” Harry said, clicking away. Trager watched him at work with satisfaction. He had been right to believe that Harry could make the climb. At the same time, he noted the angle of snow below them, the depth of the valley, and the cold shadows that were climbing out of the gorge as the sun lowered. This also is India, Trager thought, and he hoped that by the end of the day Harry Macintosh still thought it was fantastic, great, and worth the trip.

“He'll never make it,” a familiar whisper murmured behind Trager.

“It's all downhill from here. Leslie,” Trager: said.

“And then?”

“And then, since he seems okay so far, he'll probably be with us for the rest of the trek. What are you worried about?”

“You,” she said. “I'm just trying to make your job easier. But you can handle it any way you want. It looks like we have to catch the animals anyway, so let's get out of here,” She started down in the tracks of the ponies.

As the slope steepened below the pass, the trail turned to the southeast to traverse on a gentler angle. Trager stopped at the turn. It would be useful to be on the trail if darkness caught them before camp; on the other hand, climbers could descend a much steeper angle than horses. Trager knew from the reconnaissance report that camp was northwest of them, up the valley. They could not miss recrossing the pony tracks if they just walked straight downhill.

“Okay, stop for a minute,” Trager called. “Watch.”

He turned off the pony track and held his ice axe out of the snow. “All you have to do is walk down on your heels. He strode thirty yards down the slope, plunging his heels into the snow on every step. He skidded to a stop, and called back. “Don't worry if a step breaks out—just take another. Keep your feet flat and dig your heels in. Hold your ice axe like I showed you, and you can always go into arrest if you start to slip.”

The women came first. After a couple of false starts, they took their ice axes out of the snow and walked down to Trager. Harry had trouble. Every time he moved his axe, he leaned into the hill, sat down, and started to slide. He pushed in his axe to stop, got to his feet, and did it again. It took him several minutes to descend thirty yards.

“Stand up, dammit!” Leslie shouted. “He told you to just walk down!”

“Jeez, lady, give him a break,” said Sundown.

“I don't need your help,” Leslie said.

“Okay!” Trager snapped. “This is no big deal. Harry, take your time. Sundown, you can just come down in your own track if you want.”

Sundown nodded, but stayed behind Harry, stepping slowly and methodically. Trager plunge-stepped down another hundred yards. He saw with satisfaction that the fields below were visibly closer. He could see the dry ground below him already. The snow ended abruptly at the edge of a pasture sprinkled with white stones.

The stones moved.

“Wait” Trager shouted. “Wait! Wait!”

Pratima ran into him from behind. “Why didn't you tell me you were going to stop?” she stepped around him to see what he was looking at.

What he had thought were white stones at the base of the snowfield were animals—sheep or goats. And they were not at the edge of the snow, but several hundred feet below it. The snow ended in a cliff. There was a climbing rope in one of the pony loads, and Trager swore at himself for not taking it out. At the same time, he knew it was unlikely he could engineer a safe rappel over an unknown drop with a single rope, no anchoring equipment, and a group of inexperienced climbers. They would have to climb back to the trail.

Trager looked up to tell the others. As he did so, he sensed movement behind him. He turned around in time to see Pratima slide away from him on her seat, pushing herself along with her ice axe.

“Arrest!” Trager yelled.

“I can do it,” the girl called over her shoulder.

“No!” Trager yelled. “Roll! Arrest!”

Pratima was still sliding, gathering speed. She dropped her heels into the snow, but they had no effect. Trager bounded after the girl. He took three giant steps. On the last, he kicked both feet in the air and came down on his back in the track Pratima left in the snow.

By sliding in the girl's track, Trager quickly gained on her. His legs went on either side of her torso, and he let go of his ice axe shaft to grab for her rucksack. He had never tried a one-armed arrest. He could not even imagine how it could work, but his brain had stamped out his imagination for the moment. He missed the rucksack, but the hood of the baggy parka had unfurled, and Trager grabbed it. Pratima's head slammed back on the snow as Trager stabbed the pick of the ice axe into the snow and twisted his legs, turning Pratima onto her side.

“Arrest,” Trager yelled. “Roll!” Pratima rolled, but onto the shaft of her axe, plunging it to the hilt so suddenly that it was torn from her hands. Trager passed over the head of the axe, and the long pick hooked in the crotch of his pants. For a sickening moment Trager thought he was disemboweled, but it was only the pressure of his climbing knickers stretching drum-tight before ripping away.

His rent trousers ballooned like a parachute around his waist, the snow packing his hips and crotch. His legs, especially his right leg, plunged deeper, until he felt that his boots were doing more to slow him down than his ice axe. In fact it was his right leg that brought him to a stop, pain shooting through his ankle. He looked down to find Pratima in perfect bridge position, levering his right boot into the snow as if it were the head of her abandoned ice axe. Ten feet

below them, the slope vanished into an aerial view of a small village set in a patchwork of terraces above a whitewater rapid. Ravens rode the currents of the intervening air.

"Way to dig those toes in," Trager said.

It took twenty minutes for Trager and Pratima to retrieve her ice axe and climb back to the others. The girl did not say a word during the ascent. The mountainside had fallen into the shade by the time they arrived. The trekkers had managed to kick platforms for themselves in the snow, and had put on jackets. Even so, Trager could tell from their stiff, hunched postures that they were cold.

"God, that was stupid," Leslie said, as the girl reached the track. Trager stepped up between the girl and the woman. But the assault on Pratima came from the other side. Sundown's long arm reached out and plucked his daughter off her feet. His hoarse voice sawed through the clear air.

"Don't ever do that again! Ever! Ever!" Trager waited for the girl to shout back. But she just hung from her father's hands, staring into his eyes with steady defiance.

The men of Lunwali made up a song about Ansel Trager on the night he crossed the Janavar Gali. He arrived in the village an hour after dark behind the pony that carried Harry Macintosh. Lakpa and the pony-*wallah* had met them with the animal at last light in a grove of poplars where they had stopped to rest. Above the branches they could see the faint outline of the escarpment below the pass. If we had walked over it, Trager thought, we would have still come to rest in these trees.

They followed the *sirdar* down the black path through the grove, guided by a ribbon of stars above. The Sonjal Nala gurgled somewhere to the right, and the wind made a white noise in the branches. Suddenly they were in open land, walking through the manure smell of turned fields.

Sonam had built a fire in the middle of the four tents. Trager helped Harry dismount, and then put his own pack in his tent. Lakpa or Sonam had already rolled out his pad and unstuffed his sleeping bag. He was tempted to crawl in, but forced himself to get out and check on the others. They had disappeared. Sonam was walking from tent to tent, carrying plates of food. Around the fire strange men were singing and drumming on small skin drums. Lakpa appeared at his side.

"You want *chang*?" the *sirdar* asked.

"I don't know," said Trager. "Do I?"

"Very good *chang* in this village," Lakpa advised. "Like beer."

Trager followed him to the fire. As they approached, the singing fell silent. The men eyed Trager with nervous smiles. "They make a song," Lakpa said. "They say, the *bara sahib* is always ready. Walk over Janavar, pants already open, but no Lunwali girls come out. Too had."

Trager looked down at his turn trousers, and the men began to laugh.

"Only joke, *sahib*," Lakpa said. "And they are having too much *chang*."

"In that case, I think they owe me a drink."

“*Achcha, sahib, good.*” Lakpa called for the brass kettle that sat near the edge of the circle. The men began to drum harder than before. Lunwali *chang* turned out to be less than a metaphor for beer: a mealy, sour liquid floating with grains of mash. But Trager accepted a great mug. Lakpa seated him at a place of honor out of the smoke from the fire and Sonam brought him his food. The Ladakhis settled on either side, and one of the Lunwali men refilled all their cups.

Lakpa leaned over to Trager, the light shining on his smooth liquor-flushed face. “This is good work, *sahib*. Vasant is never find us now.”

And for the first time since clinging in the rain to the wall of the Kawapatri Hotel, Ansel Trager thought himself happy. This *is* good work, he thought.



Lunwali consisted of a dozen box-like wood houses with stone shingle roofs clustered in no particular pattern among potato terraces above the Sonjal Nala. Smoke from early morning cook fires drifted over the campsite downstream from the houses. A young woman carrying an umbrella and a bag on her back paused to stare at the yellow tents. Ansel Trager, lying in the door of his tent, stared back. She did not look like any of the women he had seen in Kashmir, Instead of the long drab woolen cloaks, she wore trousers, a burgundy jacket, and a bright blue vest. With her broad Mongolian face, she could have been Lakpa's sister. The woman's eyes locked on Trager's, and she called, "*Julaiy, sahib! Ab kahan jate hain?*"

"Harry, there's some beggar woman in the camp," Leslie's voice came from the next tent. "Do you have a pen or something to give her?"

Boots appeared by Trager's face. Sonam knelt with a tray of coffee mugs, and Lakpa took one off for Trager. The *sirdar* said, "Woman is ask, 'Where going?' You say, 'Doda.'"

"Doda," Trager called, wincing as pain laced his forehead. A headache that had been lurking behind his eyes began to throb.

"Doda! Achcha, *sahib!*" the woman grinned.

"She says, 'Good!'" Lakpa told him. "Now you say, '*Kahan jate hain?*'"

"Can jahnty?" Trager said, in his best approximation.

"Kawapatri, *sahib,*" she answered. She gave a casual salute, and headed down the path, walking with short but rapid steps.

"Forget it, Harry," Leslie said. "Ansel got rid of her."

"Why are you getting us up?" Trager asked. "Isn't this supposed to be a rest day?"

"We go Doda, *sahib.* We stay Lunwali, pony-*wallah* is maybe strike, go Kawapatri."

Trager tried to imagine the party shuffling along carrying the company's duffel bags. He leaned out on the frosted grass. The young woman was moving steadily, leaving a dark track behind her where her plastic shoes scuffed the frost.

"How can she be going to Kawapatri?" he asked. "All she's got is that little bag on her back."

Lakpa stood up from delivering the Macintoshes' coffee. He called to the woman, and they exchanged a few shouts across the intervening terraces.



"No need camp," Lakpa said. "She is Ladakhi. Tonight she is already in Kawapatri."

Trager watched the woman growing smaller in the distance until Lakpa came back and ripped the fly guy lines out of the frozen earth. Trager swore as he sat up to find his boots.

He had been at altitude in Alaska, but somehow he had managed to forget the headache and nausea that always came on the second or third day above ten thousand feet. There had been no *chang* in Alaska to aggravate his distress, and it had been easier with a group of friends who were all sick together. Here Trager felt a certain guilt for not feeling well, as if the leader should be healthier than the clients.

In fact, the healthiest person in Lunwali seemed to be Harry Macintosh.

"God, what a view!" he said, as he crawled out of his tent. "Jee-sus Christ!" He dove back in for his cameras.

Trager stood up slowly, dragging his pack with him so that it would not be rolled up in the tent that Lakpa already had half collapsed. He had put on a pair of light wind pants, leaving his breeches repair for later. The thin fabric was easy on his abraded leg, but not at all warm. The valley was grey and cold. The great range to the northeast was still in deep shadow, backlit by white sky where the sun approached the crest. Across the river, the snowfields and peaks leading up to the Sonjal La were just being colored with ruddy light. A cluster of higher peaks at the head of the valley shone like beacons in full day. Trager felt better, but he took no chances, standing as still as possible to watch the sun come over the mountains.

Harry paced around the camp, shooting pictures. The rest of the clients were coming out of the tents that the Ladakhis were dismantling around them. Pratima and Sundown were slow and withdrawn; Leslie seemed jumpy and mad. All three stood with faces buried in the collars of their jackets as Sonam served porridge. Trager took a bottle of aspirin out of his pack and placed it on the red tarp like a condiment along with the sugar and instant milk.

"Short day, fifteen kilometers," Lakpa said. "Lunch today at Doda camp."

"In that case, I guess everyone can walk at their own pace," Trager announced. "Just make sure the ponies are ahead of you at noon. Where are the ponies, anyway?"

"Other side Lunwali, *sahib*. Pony-*wallah* is sleep in village," Lakpa said. "Long time. I think maybe you go now, take money to Doda. Then he is coming."

Trager did as he was told. He was not a climber any more, just a paymaster. The track did not go around Lunwali, but instead dissolved into several narrow paths between the huts. Trager found himself wandering across porches and stoops. Lunwalis carrying water and firewood paused in their chores only to say *namaskar*, as if it were normal to have traffic through their homes early in the morning. In one narrow alley, Trager met the Kashmiri drover leading his ponies back to the camp. Trager pressed into a door way to get out of the animals' path.

In the fields on the far side of the village, Trager picked up the woman's footprints in the frost. A few minutes later, he heard heavy breathing behind him. It was Harry Macintosh, walking fast, his cameras bouncing in their padded cases.

"I got . . . to talk to you," Harry said between breaths. "Like to do it . . . before the others get here." He paused to catch his breath. "I want . . . to make this trip. But if you think I can't do it, I'll go back."

Trager appraised Harry for a moment, gauging the older man's respiration rate against his own. "I know you've had a harder time than the others, and if I thought you or anyone couldn't make it, they'd go back. I'm thinking, if you're fit enough to go over the pass and get altitude sick with everyone else, there's no reason why you can't enjoy the rest of the fun. I won't send you off this trek unless you ask to leave."

"Thanks," Harry said. "Now if you'd go on ahead. I want to get a shot of you and these tracks."

Trager walked carefully a few feet to the side of the trail. At the head of the valley, the right and left ridges seemed to merge into a solid wall. Trager knew it was probably an optical illusion caused by distance and the dim light. The valley simply turned there, and the buttresses on either side overlapped. Still, it looked forbidding, and Trager wondered how the woman had negotiated the high country with just plastic shoes and an umbrella. She was not just going from Lunwali to Kawapatri in a day. She had started from above the village, possibly even from Doda. He began to walk again, faster, wondering just how far she had come. Long before he found the start of her trail, the evidence disappeared. As the sun hit the floor of the valley, Trager watched the crystals on the path sparkle, then thin and fade until the footprints evaporated before his eyes. She had left no mark on the packed trail beneath the frost.

Trager sat on the edge of a rock terrace to rest. The big walls across the valley were only a silhouette against the rising sun. Most of the peaks have never been climbed, he recalled Freya saying. He would take care of that. Trager began to walk again. His headache was gone, his cold boot linings had softened to his feet, and his stiff leg had loosened up with exercise. The temperature in the valley was rising quickly, the air trembling as the sun heated the open fields. Sweat began to burn the abrasions on his thigh.

I need to get cleaned up, he thought. A half mile ahead of him, the terraces ended in a forested ridge that extended from snowline clear down to the river. He made for the trees, not stopping until he was walking in their shade. The wood was cool, and the pitchy air seemed clean and clear after the animal odors of the farmland. Above the trail near the crest of the ridge was a large boulder the size of a small cottage. It sat propped between tree trunks as if it had just fallen from the sky. Trager scrambled to its uphill side. Ignoring his leg, he made a couple of acrobatic climbing moves that brought him to the top, overlooking the trail.

He took off his pack, parka, and pants and inspected the livid scrapes on his leg. Trager carried with him the entire group first aid kit. Lakpa had first shown him the medical supplies at the hotel in Kawapatri. They came in a large metal artillery box and included intravenous fluids, an oxygen tank, scalpels, syringes, and a variety of catheters, sutures, and injectable drugs. Trager was unnerved at the thought of the spectacular injuries and diseases he might be expected to treat. Finally he decided to take only what he knew how to use from his ski patrol training—compresses, adhesive tape, aspirin, and various topical ointments. He also added an antibiotic and some codeine, although the expiration dates on the bottles suggested they might be little more than placebos. As soon as the excess equipment was returned to hotel storage, he forgot all about it. Lakpa, who saved the price of one baggage pony, approved.

As Trager finished bandaging his wound, he heard voices. Sonam and Lakpa came walking together, talking and laughing. Close behind were the ponies. The driver whistled and called to his animals, and birds in the branches of the pine trees seemed to answer his calls. A few minutes later, Sundown walked slowly up the trail, followed by his daughter. They were five minutes apart, out of sight of one another, but they seemed to Trager to walk in the same bubble of silence. Both had their thumbs hooked under their pack straps in exactly the same position. Both kept eyes on their boot toes as they hiked.

Trager exchanged his torn climbing pants for shorts, his boots for running shoes. With his rucksack repacked, he edged carefully to the lip of the boulder, found his handholds, and

swung over the edge. He found himself dangling by his arms just above Leslie Macintosh. Her shirt was off, and she was just about to release the hooks of her brassiere. Trager could see his reflection stretched across the mirrored lenses of her sunglasses as she looked up at him.

“Ah, sorry,” he said. “I didn't hear you coming.” He dropped to the ground.

Leslie watched him get to his feet. “Well, you're a grown-up,” she said, and shrugged the bra off her shoulders. Trager felt he ought to say something. Or nothing. He looked away at the forest, then decided it would be better to watch, and pretend it was nothing unusual. Leslie had now stepped out of her hiking pants, and was standing in only her underwear, opening her pack. From her fitness, Trager had expected Leslie's body to be firmer than it was. Her breasts were large and low, her stomach rolled where she folded over, and the flesh of her legs bulged around the edges of her panties.

“Help me with this, would you?” she asked, looking up.

Leslie was holding a cotton halter against her chest with both hands. Trager hesitated, then took the ties in his hands. He managed a bow behind her back, but to get the neck strings, he had to reach around in front of her. His hands met hers, and she shifted her grip, so that for a moment his fingers brushed across her soft breasts. He thought he touched the firmer button of a hardened nipple, and felt an involuntary tightening in his groin. “You'd better hurry,” Leslie said; or maybe it was, “We'd better hurry.” Trager was not sure what he had heard, and it made no difference, because just then Harry Macintosh yelled, “Hold it right there.”

He was standing on the path, taking their picture through the trees. “Hold it—help her with her pack again,” Harry called. “Wait a minute, I want to change lenses. That rock is fantastic!”

“Oh, for Christ's sake,” Leslie muttered, reaching up to take the halter strings out of Trager's hands. She tied them herself, and quickly stepped into a pair of walking shorts. Harry had moved closer on the path, and spread his equipment on the ground. He stood up with a long lens on his camera.

“Do what he wants,” Leslie said nodding toward her pack. Trager held it for her while she put her arms through the straps.

“Great!” said Harry. “Cover of *Backpacker*.”

When Trager climbed down from the path, Harry said, “You didn't have to wait for me, you know.”

“I wasn't,” said Trager. “I wasn't waiting for anyone. I mean, we were just changing . . . I was just changing clothes. My leg was killing me in the heat.”

He pointed at the bandage on the inside of his thigh. Leslie stepped onto the path and looked critically at his crotch. “That little Indian girl did quite a job on you. Sure she didn't damage anything else playing down there?”

Trager forced a laugh. “I hope not,” he said.

“Well, you ready to go at it again?” Leslie said.

“I think I'll walk with Harry,” Trager said. “Give my leg a rest.”

“Fine,” Leslie said. “If that's what you need.” She walked off down the path, her breasts jiggling out the sides of her halter.

Trager waited for Harry to pack his gear and then they walked together down through the woods and out into hot terraced fields. He expected Harry to say something about the scene at the rock, but the man walked in silence, sweat dripping onto the toes of his hiking shoes. Up the slope from the trail, men were plowing with oxen, calling rhythmically to their animals as they worked. Two young boys sitting on a terrace wall called out, “*Ap kahan jate hain, sahib?*”

“Doda,” Trager replied.

“One pen,” one of the children said.

“What?”

“One pen. One pen. Please give me one pen.” the boys chanted.

Trager recognized what must have been a slug of dialogue from a language class. “*Können Sie mir sagen, wo das Kino ist?*” he said.

The children looked at him in puzzlement. Harry opened one of his breast pockets and gave disposable ball point pens to each of the boys. The pocket was full of pens. “Same thing in Nepal,” Harry said. “I wonder why it's always pens.” Trager walked ahead while Harry took pictures of the children. He needed to talk to Harry, to tell him that nothing had happened by the rock. But nothing had happened, and Harry didn't seem to think it had. It was Leslie he really needed to talk to, to confirm that it was just an embarrassing mistake. He finally decided he did not really know what had happened at the rock in the woods, and would ignore the event, leaving it behind as he had the catheter set and oxygen bottle.

The sun shone now from the southeast, hitting the mountains at an angle that emphasized every ledge, chimney and crevasse. Trager stopped walking and inspected the range from end to end. There were four major summits in the massif across the valley. From the map, Trager knew that most of the ridge was over nineteen thousand feet. That made each of the peaks around twenty thousand feet—higher than any mountain he had ever seen outside of Alaska. Trager tried to piece various routes together, but every line either crossed an avalanche path or ran out in blank rock. Seen head on like this, every feature seemed vertical. “Can I look through your telephoto a minute?” Trager asked.

Harry hurried up the trail towards him. “What have you got? An eagle? I'd love to get a picture of an eagle.”

“No eagles. I just want to look at the mountains.” Harry attached the same lens he had used to photograph Trager and Leslie. “Here, try the three hundred,” he said.

Trager held the camera and heavy lens awkwardly. It took him a moment to aim. Fields and forested hillsides swam in the viewing screen. He tilted the camera up, and suddenly he was there: A green meadow, where bright tents could flutter in the wind . . . a gully in the face above . . . light catching on the ledge where they might bivouac . . . and the corniced ridge where they would emerge, breathless, and look down on this pasture from the top of the world.



"I've got to get a shot of this," Trager said, fumbling for his little camera in the pocket of his pack.

"Just take the picture with mine," said Harry. "Go ahead. I'll send you the slides when I get back. Or prints, if you'd like. Let's put it on the tripod, and I'll set the exposure for you." With Trager's ignorance of sophisticated cameras, it would have taken him five minutes to shoot two or three photographs. With Harry's expertise, the job required half an hour. He insisted on bracketing exposures and retaking the pictures with three different lenses and two different filters, in color and black and white.

A man coming down the trail stopped to watch them at work. He wore a peaked cap, a suit jacket over pajamas, and carried a canvas military haversack. As Harry finally began to put his cameras away, Trager turned to the man, trying to recall his rudimentary language lesson of the morning "Can jahnty?" he tried.

To his amazement, the man responded, "Lunwali."

"*Achcha*," Trager said. He pointed at the mountains. "Men climb? Climb? Up? You know?"

The man squinted at the peaks for a moment. "I think not," he said. "A couple of French chaps had a go at the one on the right last year, but the weather was just pissing and the poor Frogs had to bugger right off."

"Hey, what do you know?" Harry said. "Where'd you learn to speak English so good?"

"The same place I presume you did—my mother's proverbial knee. You don't think the British could rule India for three centuries without leaving us the King's bloody English?"

"Sorry," said Trager. "We just get used to not being understood."

"Quite all right," said the man. "A universal condition. I myself came damn close to failing my own examinations in Hindi. That is one reason why I am now a forest officer afoot in Upper Sonjal instead of a bureaucrat being chauffeured about the parks of Delhi or Bombay."

"Doesn't look like such a bad place to work," said Trager.

"I tell you, it is no place for a man from the city. Not even for a forest botanist. Where is my bloody forest, I ask you? The only trees are up there among the cliffs a thousand meters above the valley. It is otherwise these stinking potato fields. I have had a devil of a time getting these locals to refrain from cutting off that little stand behind you for fodder and firewood."

"In America, you'd have the Sierra Club in here in no time," said Harry. "Where are all your conservationists?"

"At tea, probably. One needs a full stomach to be a conservationist. It is most difficult, because the local people need the fuel and fodder today, and every day. I personally believe the answer is not in forestry, but in money. Your money. Tourist money. That is the profitable way to treat these valleys that have been logged off for a century. Instead of closing them up to foreigners as we are doing in Ladakh just now, we should be opening them up to people such as yourselves in order to irrigate them with your money. I assume you are members of the party above."

"Right," said Trager. "I'm the leader."

“Oh, really? In that case, you might just have a word with that large woman of yours, the one with no clothes. The local people working in the fields are already quite scandalized by her nakedness. She would cause something of a riot if she were to enter a village in such dress.”

“Just like Nepal,” Harry said. “Go ahead, give it your best shot. She sure won't put on her shirt for my sake.”

Trager left before Harry had finished packing up. He did not relish the idea of confronting Leslie, but he saw a chance to make clear that her halter top and her method of putting it on were nothing but a nuisance to him.

The trail began to climb through the terraces. Above the fields, the slope was thick with brush just beginning to green. Trager saw that he was about to begin a series of switchbacks that climbed to a bench near the lowest snowfields. The corners of buildings jutted over the edge of the bench a thousand feet above the river. The ponies were already out of sight, probably in the village. High on the slope, a small figure that might have been Pratima Busco was climbing steadily upward.

As Trager gained elevation, he turned to look across at the mountains he had photographed with Harry. The perspective had changed, but that only made them more familiar. Trager climbed the gulley and the cornice with his eyes several more times. The bivouac ledge was not visible to the naked eye, but he was sure there would be room for them both. The descent would require a large number of rappels. Trager wondered how much technical climbing Freya had done. And for the first time he realized that in his mind he had been climbing the mountain only with her.

The trail skirted a large slab. It was decent climbing rock, some kind of granitic gneiss, glacier-worn, but with enough nubbins and cracks to provide holds. The village was hidden by the contours of the mountain, but he knew he was close from the trail litter: a worn-out rope sandal, a pot shard, a paper airplane. Trager stopped, surprised. He picked up the airplane, and saw that although the paper was faded and cracked at the edges, it was crisply folded, obviously just made. As he contemplated the toy, a cool breeze blew down from the snowy ridges and across the village, bringing with it the smell of wood smoke, and the sound of people shouting.

“Oh, shit,” Trager swore. “Leslie!” He jogged up the last stretch of trail onto the bench, his pulse hammering. Doda was much more of a settlement than Trager expected. It was as large as Lunwali, with enough level ground for two uneven rows of mud and timber houses. The packed



dirt space between the buildings was almost wide enough to qualify as a main street. In the middle of this lane Sundown Busco stood in a crowd of screaming children, holding a paper airplane above his head. He launched the glider in Trager's direction, and Trager had to jump aside to avoid the stampede of children chasing the toy.

Pratima appeared at his side. “Would you stop him? Would you try? He won't listen to me.”

“What's wrong with paper airplanes?” Trager asked.

“Do you have any idea how valuable paper is in a place like this? The kids are taking pages from the shopkeepers' ledgers. They're taking their teacher's writing paper.”

The children were back around Sundown, some of them thrusting scraps of paper in his direction. Trager walked over, with Pratima following.

"Hey, Ans, what's happening?" Sundown said.

"I'm not sure," said Trager, "but hold off making any more of those. How did all this start?"

"I was just sitting in the tea stall here waiting for everyone to show up, and these kids came around, asking 'one pen,' you know. So I decided to show them something. Pratima used to really get off on paper airplanes when she was little."

"There was always computer paper all over the floor when I was little. This is different."

"What do you mean you were waiting for everyone to show up?" Trager asked. "Where's camp?"

"Beats me," Sundown said. "Where did you come from? I thought you were ahead of us."

"This is Doda, isn't it?" Trager asked. He looked at the children. "Doda?"

Pratima repeated the question in Hindi. The children giggled and pointed in several directions. Pratima turned to Trager with fierce eyes. "They say no. There is no Doda."

The village headman was named Chandra Lal. He sat in one corner of the tea stall entrance, punctuating his conversation with noisy drags on a tiny *bidi*. Next to him the shop owner hovered over his primus, ragged shirt sleeves rolled out of reach of the flame. He flapped his arms from time to time to drive back the crowd of men and children that craned to see the foreigners sitting on the bench against the back wall.

"Chandra Lal thinks the others might have gone to a place down by the river," Pratima translated. "There used to be a village there called Doda. He says it went with the snow. I suppose that means an avalanche. This place is called Gulpathar, and it's now the last village in the Sonjal. The country gets steep above. In fact, Chandra Lal thinks it's too early for ponies. Too much snow."

"Ask him how far Doda is from here," Trager said. "Could we make it this afternoon?"

"He thinks so. The villagers do it" The tea stall owner interrupted the translation.

"*Achcha dak bungalow hai, sahibs. You stay.*"

"There's some kind of travelers' bungalow here," Pratima said. "*Kahan?*" she asked. "Where?"

The man grinned and pointed to a loft above the trekkers' heads. The headman and other villagers laughed. "Tell him thanks," Trager said. "But we should find our own camp."

There was more shouting outside. Hopefully, Trager walked to the edge of the flat, where he could look down on the switchbacks. Harry Macintosh was plodding slowly up the steep trail. Below him, the path was empty.

"This is getting worse," Trager said. They met Harry at the top of the trail. The shop owner was along with his pot, and poured Harry a glass of tea right where the trekker collapsed against the first terrace wall.

"I've had it," Harry said between breaths. "I thought this was . . . supposed to be an easy day."

"We took the scenic route by mistake," said Trager. "There's a turnoff somewhere down by the river that we missed."

"Oh, no," Harry said. "How did Lakpa manage that?"

"He didn't. He's not here. Neither are the ponies, or Sonam, or Leslie."

Harry stared at him, then down the long trail below. "Shit," he muttered. "Just let me sit a minute."

"Take your time," Trager said. "We're staying here tonight."

"I can make it down," Harry said. "Don't worry about me."

"It's not you, Harry. I was just thinking, if we go down to Doda, and no one's there, we'll be in real trouble. Pratima, tell the man we're taking him up on his hospitality."

"It's not hospitality," Pratima said. "The people are joking about how much money he's going to make."

"But what's Leslie going to do?" Harry asked.

"Leslie has the food, the tents, and the cook. She's probably going to do a lot better than we are tonight."

"One paper, please give me one paper," a boy called.

Harry reached uncertainly for his pen pocket.

"What they want is your notebook," Sundown said. "Friendly place. You'll see."

Harry gazed for a moment at the deep valley, then turned and walked slowly with Sundown into Gulpathar, a gang of children skipping after them waving paper airplanes. Trager followed with Chandra Lal and Pratima. The headman said something to him.

"Since we're staying," Pratima said, "Chandra Lal wants to know if you can come see his mother. She's sick."

"How sick? I'm not a doctor."

"I told him that. He says he knows. Doctors never come to upper Sonjal. I don't think you have a choice. He's the headman, and it would be an insult to turn him down."

"You'd better come with me."

"Do you think I'd trust you alone?"

Trager left his pack at the tea stall with Sundown, taking only the first aid kit. He and Pratima followed Chandra Lal through the village, watched from doorways by women's faces that vanished as they passed. Trager felt the strangeness of the country pressing in on him.

"I hate pretending to be something I'm not," Trager said.

"It didn't stop you from leading this trek."

"I didn't pretend I knew where we were going," Trager said. "I just made a mistake."

They walked in silence a few moments, and then Pratima said, "I hate this too. I hate this about India. Why couldn't they have some decent medical care? The people they assign up here are probably like that forester on the trail today. Smart-ass guys from the city who can't wait to get out of the hills. I went to school with boys like that."

"You mean in Delhi?"

"Dehra Dun. There are girls' and boys' boarding schools. I haven't seen much more of my mother the last four years than I have Sundown."

"Was that tough on you?"

"Hardly," Pratima said. "It's the only thing that made it bearable."

The headman's house was a two-story structure. Trager and Pratima stepped over a low threshold into a large room with a packed dirt floor. Hand tools, boxes, and burlap sacks were stacked around the sides. In the center, near the light from the door, stood a small loom and spinning wheel. A flight of rough wooden steps led through the ceiling. The room had no furniture except a low wooden table with two gleaming brass primus stoves and an array of aluminum basins and kettles. On a faded carpet in the center of the room sat the oldest person Ansel Trager had ever seen. She was a small woman, but her size was magnified by the large cloak she had draped around her sloping shoulders. The skin in her face was folded and refolded into a wilderness of ridges and valleys. Her corrugated cheeks were further accented by smooth silver hair pulled tight around her ears and dark, shining eyes.

The headman showed them a place to sit on the carpet in front of his mother. Trager put down the first aid bag and settled on the rug. He started to spread one leg in front of him, but Pratima snapped, "Pull your leg back in! It's an insult to show someone the sole of your foot."

Trager grimaced, and hauled his sore leg in with both hands. "What's the matter with her?" he asked. As if she understood Trager's question, the headman's mother held out her arms toward him. Large silver bracelets dangled from her thin wrists, and her bony hands hung like large baubles, drooping, the gnarled fingers flexed into claws. She cried out in a loud voice, and shook her hands, making the bracelets clatter together. The skeletal hands twisted, the finger turning talon by talon in front of Trager's eyes.

"This is making me nervous," said Trager.

"It's her hands," said Pratima. "She says she used to weave rugs, but now has a hand sickness." The woman held out her hands again toward Trager. He took them hesitantly. They were warm and dry.

"Ask if she can move and feel her fingers," Trager said. "Has she had an injury?"

Pratima said, "No, no injuries. And she can feel in all her fingers. The joints just hurt."

"She's probably got arthritis. So does my Mom. There isn't anything I can do about it."

"I didn't think there would be," said Pratima. "But I've got to tell her something. What does your mother do?"

She complains, Trager thought. She's younger than this woman, and her hands are white with Porcelana, and she lives in a house with a Jenn-Air in the kitchen, and she complains. The old woman was watching him expectantly, her eyes shining out of her weathered face. He set her hands down gently in her lap.

"Let's try this," he said. He found his notebook in the top of his pack, and tore out a page. Folding the paper, he poured a handful of aspirins into the crease. "Have her take two of these at meals and bedtime," he said.

Pratima and the woman spoke to each other. "She wants to know, with hot water or cold water?"

"Doesn't matter," Trager said.

"She seems to think so."

"Okay, tell her, hot water."

The woman nodded seriously at the advice, and Trager said, "As soon as she starts the pills, she should try to weave again, and keep weaving as long as she can, even after the pills are gone. Maybe another trek will come along with some more aspirin before her joints give out again."

"What do you think you're doing?" Pratima asked. "Trying to trick her into feeling better?"

"Why not?" Trager asked. "It's all they did for my Mom."

The girl glared at Trager, and then spoke in Hindi. The old woman took the pills from Trager's hand. She pressed the pills and his hands together in hers, and raised them both to her forehead, and made a low bow of gratitude. Trager hesitated, and then bowed in turn. When they straightened up, the woman grinned and began to chatter at Pratima. The girl answered with an unsure smile.

A few minutes later, as Chandra Lal escorted them out onto the path, Trager asked, "What was all that giggling you girls were doing?"

"Nothing," Pratima said. "Let's get back."

As they walked through the village, Trager looked over at the profile of the girl next to him. From this angle the sharp features of her father's face were evident, only softened by some rounder curves. When she relaxed her frown, Pratima also had her father's sadness around the eyes.

"I guess this trip hasn't really worked out for you, has it?" he said. "It doesn't look like you and Sundown are doing much talking."

"Perceptive of you," she said.

"You're being sarcastic," said Trager. "It's none of my business, but that might be part of your problem. You never give anyone a break in a conversation. Even when my parents were getting a divorce, they still could be polite to each other."

"Is that right? And so why did your parents get divorced?"

"I don't know the whole story. I was only ten. But my Mom always wanted to do things her way, and so did Dad. But they didn't argue about it. In fact, things just got quieter and quieter around the house, until Dad finally left. And then I got out, too. In my own way"

"At ten years old?"

"Twelve. My scout troop took up climbing, and my head was pretty much in the mountains after that."

"And you're saying that's the way to run a family? Angry silence, followed by escape?"

"Worked for me," Trager said. "At least I was able to accept it."

"Maybe that's because it wasn't your fault."

"What wasn't? The divorce? No, of course it wasn't. Do you think you caused your parents to break up?"

"They act as if I did. I was in trouble in school, so Mother took me back to India to get me away from California. Of course the way she puts everything, it's her fault for not keeping a closer eye on what was going on. But it still adds up to my having messed things up. And it's all just a stupid excuse."

"For your parents not getting along with each other?"

"Yes! And even Sundown admits it. All I want is for him to tell Mother I'm not the reason we're in India. To tell her there isn't any reason for my being here."

"So you can go back to California with your Dad?"

"Never. Sundown is impossible to live with alone. He's so spaced out on his computers he forgets you're alive. I don't know how my Mother managed before I was born. And my Mother! She worries so much about other people she's really crazy. There's no other way to put it."

"So go back on your own," Trager said. "I got out of the house when I was eighteen."

"I can't," Pratima said. "I don't have the money, and even if I did, I wouldn't go back alone. You probably won't understand it, but my family is different from yours. No one ever escapes."

As they approached the tea stall, Trager realized that the women in the buildings were no longer hiding. They stood in their doorways, smiling. One of them called out some comments that Pratima seemed about to answer. But then she just put her hands together, nodded to the woman and walked away.

"What was that?" Trager asked.

"She thanked us for what we did Chandra Lal's mother." Pratima paused.

"How would they know? It just happened."

"They know. Also . . . these people seem to think you're my husband. She says I trained you well."



They spent the night on the floor wrapped in horse blankets, dressed in every piece of clothing they owned. Trager woke cold and sore, with his sinuses congested with dust. He also had an enormous erection. He had just left a dream. Freya Martens crouched next to him explaining something on a map. As her hip nudged his, Trager became aware that she was naked. He hesitated to look, knowing he would find she had the lumpy body of Leslie Macintosh. But when he turned his head, he found that it was Pratima, sleek and brown, watching him with angry eyes.

It took a minute to orient himself in the tea stall loft. He lay against one cold mud wall, below the single tiny window. Pratima really was next to him, curled in a tight ball with the blanket around her face. She had rolled off the rug she shared with her father and had Trager pinned. Trager could see a gap between the girl and the snoring heap of Harry Macintosh. Sundown was gone.

Trager slipped the corner of his blanket out from under the sleeping girl. His leg had stiffened up again, and he groaned as he stepped over her. Pratima stirred, but only burrowed deeper under her covers. She was so small, so childlike, he wondered how she could have worked her way into his erotic dream. Her angular features were not particularly pretty to Trager, and her assertiveness had a pushy adolescent quality to it. Her preoccupation with her family relations seemed like a kind of nervous hysteria. He did consider if the taut body he had dreamed up for her was like the real thing, but he tried not to dwell on the image. Pratima seemed like someone who longed for care. Outside his narrow responsibilities as a climber, he had never taken care of anyone but himself. Not even those few other women whose bodies he did not have to imagine.

The shop below was empty, but the tea seller had already taken down the boards that closed the front during the night. The sky was streaked with pink snakes twisting out of the west. The air was warmer than at Lunwali, despite the higher elevation. Sundown was not in the lane or at the latrine behind the tea shop. Trager walked out to the terraces above the trail, and looked down at the river.

Two switchbacks down the slope the track disappeared around the slab where Trager had found the paper airplane. It occurred to him that a few climbing moves might actually be good for his stiff leg. He walked carefully down the steep trail.

Sundown was already on the rock, ten feet off the ground. His cheek was pressed close to the slab, his seat stuck out over the trail, and hands groped above him for a hold. It would have been a comical, if Trager had not recognized the stance of a climber about to fall. Sundown looked down at Trager under his arm.

“Hey, man, how am I doing?”

His voice was raspy. His legs trembled.

“There's a lower hold for your right foot,” Trager said. “Then get your hands on the footholds you're using now. That would let you swing low enough to jump to the ground.”

“But, man, I'm trying to go up.” He lunged, straightened for a moment on his feet, slapped at a hold over his head, and slid down the rock. Trager jumped to spot him. Sundown landed on flexed legs and toppled toward the edge of the trail. Trager caught him by the sleeve of his windbreaker.

"I almost had it," Sundown said.

"Do you know what would happen if you even sprained an ankle? How do you think we'd get you out of here?"

"Hey, don't get bent out of shape. That's the second time I've been up there. Anyway, didn't you come down here to climb?"

Trager let go of the Sundown's sleeve. "I did, but let me show you how to do it so you don't get hurt."

Sundown stepped up to the rock again. "OK, help me out," he said.

Trager watched him make the first few moves. "Why'd you break up with Kamala?" he asked.

Sundown took another step. "I was talking about this climb."

"I know," Trager said. "But I was just curious."

"You been talking to Pratima."

"She thinks it's her fault that Pratima left. Or thinks you think it is."

"What is this bullshit?" Sundown said. "She sounds like her mom. 'All my fault, all my fault,' 'til you feel so sorry for her you want to go out and kill yourself."

"She just wants to hear she's not to blame. She figures if you say that, there's no reason you can't all go home together."

Sundown jumped back to the ground. "Sure. As long as she's not to blame, then everything's cool. Well there's a whole shitload of stuff that she doesn't understand, and neither do you."

"I guess not. I just wondered what you'd say."

"How about if we just deal with this rock?" He stared Trager down.

"Okay," Trager said. "You're reaching with your hands first. Place your feet first, and just use your hands for balance. Like this." He stepped up on the nubbins, climbed a few feet, and waited for Sundown to follow. When they reached Sundown's high point, Trager traversed to the side on a thin seam so that Sundown could climb up next to him.

"What do you think?" Sundown asked.

"Looking good," said Trager. "You know, a lot of people say the test of a real climber is knowing when to climb down."

"Like now?"

"Like now. We just reverse the moves. Get your hands low, then step down. I'll go first."

Trager looked down to plan his route. His gaze travelled quickly to the ground and beyond into the depths of the valley. There was the sound of harness bells. Trager straightened on his holds and repositioned his feet. He could make out Lakpa and the pony-*wallah* guiding the lead animal around one of the switchbacks. Behind the ponies, light flashed off the pots and stoves

dangling from Sonam's rucksack. And in front of them all came Leslie Macintosh, pumping hard, bush shirt open, the pink morning sky heightening the flush on her wide bosom.

Trager always felt awkward watching hikers approach on an open trail. There was a long period when the two parties inspected and judged each other but were still too far away for any communication. Trager had never felt more awkward as he watched Leslie Macintosh climb up to Gulpathar. Her eyes were fixed on him where he stood with Sundown at the top of the switchbacks. He wondered what she had dreamed about the night before.

"Hold it! Look up, Les! Look this way!"

Harry Macintosh danced across the edge of the terrace, eye pressed to his camera.

"See that?" Sundown said. "He misses her, man. She gives him a lot of shit, but some people get off on that."

"You guys!" Harry called. "Step back about five feet. I want to get you in the foreground with Les just coming around the corner below. Good! You too, Ans."

Pratima walked out from the village, along with a small crowd of Gulpatharis eager to see the newcomers. She reached her father's side at the same time Leslie arrived at the top of the trail. She strode up the last pitch, ignoring her husband's instructions, and stopped close enough to Trager that he could smell her odd mixture of cologne and sweat.

"You idiot!" she said. "You went to the wrong Village."

"Don't I know. But we had to gain this elevation today anyway. The people here say we can take a high trail from Gulpathar to the next camp."

"So why does our itinerary have us go to that godforsaken Doda? It looks like a bomb hit the place. There isn't even a flat spot for a tent."

"Mellow out," said Sundown. "I was the one who missed the turn."

"And we had to stay," Pratima said. "Ansel had to help sick people in the village."

Leslie took the three of them in at a glance. "This isn't the first trek I've been on. It's not like I don't know the difference between someone who's competent and someone who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the wall. And don't think I won't tell your company which one you are. I'm not paying for a leader to play great white doctor. And I'm sure as hell not paying for him to chase some teenager's ass."

She strode toward the village, Harry hurrying alongside, trying to take her picture.

"Hey, lady!" Sundown cried after her. "You're out of line!" But Leslie did not even turn her head.

The ponies walked through, guided by the scowling pony-*wallah*, urged on from behind by Lakpa and Sonam. The animals spread out quickly on the grassy flat to graze. Lakpa was as dapper as ever, his knee socks absolutely straight on his calves, his pack strapped down smooth and tight. Sonam had added brushwood to his ungainly pack, and had to turn sideways to keep from hitting Trager and the Buscos.

"*Thik hai, sahib?*" the cook asked.

"All okay?" Lakpa translated. "We worry last night."

"I think I'm more worried this morning," Trager said, watching Leslie walk into the village. A gauntlet of children had formed to ask for paper, but Leslie brushed them aside.

Lakpa tipped his head. "Problem client always difficult."

Suddenly it was better. There was a label that explained Leslie, just as it explained Weston Ferndecker to Freya Martens in Ladakh. She was a problem. So in their own ways, were Harry, Sundown, and Pratima. And Trager could deal with them all, if he only watched his step and kept his balance.



The porters set up camp at the edge of Gulpathar. Everyone seemed to take it as an opportunity to withdraw. It occurred to Trager that a trek might have physical exposure, but its social structure was claustrophobic. He wrote in his notebook, outlining an expedition to the Sonjal peaks. Harry took photographs. Sundown seemed to be meditating atop the climbing slab. Leslie slept in, and when she emerged, chose to have her tea with Lakpa at the cook tent. Pratima disappeared into the village. She emerged at lunch with his mended climbing pants. Trager had not known they were gone.

“Chandra Lal’s mother is taking your prescription,” she said. Trager could only imagine what new songs the men of Gulpathar would come up with to rival those of Lunwali.

In the morning Lakpa and Sonam served early and pulled the tents down around the trekkers before they could finish their coffee.

They stopped for lunch in a soggy meadow that murmured with meltwater streams. Goats, loosely supervised by a couple of young boys, mingled with the grazing pack ponies. Trager left the lunch tarp, and climbed up the meadow a short ways to examine the Sonjal peaks from a new angle. Although the sky was only lightly streaked with clouds, the features of the cliffs and glaciers were indistinct through the midday haze. Lakpa Tsering brought Trager’s tea up to him.

“Pony-wallah is strike this night,” the *sirdar* said.

“What makes you think that?” Trager asked.

“Last chance. Tomorrow we are go over big pass, Sonjal La, back to Kashmir. Many ponies in Kashmir, no problem to get more. He is want to strike before at Doda, but you are in Gulpathar with money. I think he is strike here, but too close by Gulpathar. Gulpatharis are come for porter work.”

“So by going to the wrong village, I put off a strike for two days?”

“Yes, *sahib*. But tonight is good for strike. I think we are paying some money.”

“Then let’s settle it right now, if you know what the guy wants.”

Lakpa rocked his head from side to side. “No, no, *sahib*. It is take much talk. We are coming very late to camp. Better to have strike in camp, after dinner.”

How civilized, Trager thought. This was the part of trekking he did not understand, and he let Lakpa have his way. He concentrated instead on the mountaineering problem of the snow-filled gullies that streaked the rocky slope ahead. Ignoring dark looks from the pony-wallah, he and Sonam unpacked the ice axes.

"Remember our practice on the last pass," he said as he handed them out. "No more glissades, Pratima."

Harry said, "You run on ahead, Les. I'm going to take it a little slower and shoot some film." He had tried to keep up with his wife in the morning, talking constantly like a new suitor. But Leslie had remained in a foul mood. Harry had arrived at the lunch site exhausted.

"Anyone else want to walk with me?" Leslie asked.

Trager was surprised to hear Lakpa say, "Yes, mem*sahib*. We go find route together."

Lakpa had headed off an embarrassing silence. Trager could not have risen to the occasion.

The ponies left next, then Harry. "I have to get a head start on you kids," he said. He was smiling, but he staggered a little getting to his feet.

"Do you mind if I go first?" Pratima said. She took off across the slope at a quick pace.

"Take it easy!" Trager called. "We're pushing twelve thousand feet."

"She's trying to ditch us, man," Sundown said. "We're supposed to talk. You're supposed to tell me to go make everything right with Kamala."

"Why would she think I can do what she can't?" Trager asked.

"Must be something you said in the village. Lakpa said the guys back there thought you two were married."

"Maybe so, but not because of anything I did."

Trager took a last look around the lunch site to check for dropped articles, then picked up his own pack. Sundown was still waiting for him.

"Too bad you're not Pratima's guy, you know?" he said. "If she had stayed in California, right now she'd probably be at Berkeley, moved in with someone, and when she came to visit, me and Kamala would get to worry about where they'd sleep. Regular old American family. I could dig it, a lot more than the angry little virgin I've got now."

The trail climbed slowly, snaking around the contours of the hill. On the ridges, Trager would catch a glimpse of one or more members of the party moving through heather. In the snowy gullies he could just see their tracks kicked into the crust. He and Sundown caught up to Harry within the first mile.

"Go ahead and pass him," Trager said. "I'm going to stay at the end today to make sure no one gets left behind."

"No problem," Sundown said. "You might need help." He stopped and let Harry get ahead again. "You know, I should have taken the guys from the head office on this trek. Would have done them as much good as it did me and Pratima."

"Which wasn't much, it looks like."

"Not your fault," Sundown said. "Things just happen to me that way."

"You think so?" Trager asked. "What about your computers? What about Pratima? Did those things just happen to you?"

"Well, yeah," said Sundown. "They did. It's like the draft lottery they had during Vietnam. I always drew the right number. In high school the guys all had hairdos and loafers, and I looked . . . like I do. I was the only member of the computer club. And then by the time I'm in college the dudes with the duck-ass hair are wearing beads and sandals, and we're all trying to get into the same computer classes. And Kamala. She was a girl in my grad seminar. And we just started hanging out, and then we had Pratima, and ended up married. Her family was pissed, but it was okay because I was the right class. Professor and all. Kamala quit school to take care of Pratima, and then I sold the first Synergism program. And then the whole thing went to hell."

"You're talking about Kamala?"

"That, too. But I was talking about computers. I got in on the ground floor, which means the programs I did were the first to be obsolete. I got some guys to put up money, but then they started telling me what to do. The same crap that Leslie's been giving you. 'We paid for it, so this is the way it's going to be.' They're the ones who wanted to get into hardware. Harry bought one of our machines. Ask him how they worked out."

"I heard," Trager said. "But if things are as bad as all that, how come you're flying all over India?"

"The money people are trying to save their asses by sticking it to the Third World. We set up this office in Delhi, and I got sent over to unload whatever I could."

"Modems," Trager said.

"Right. And not much else. The rest of the Third World's already been here, with Korean electronics that are better than ours. Synergism is history, man."

"And you just spent four thousand dollars on a trek?"

"Shit, that's nothing!" Sundown said. "The guys who own me can piss that away in hours with their fuck-ups, and have a lot less to show for it."

He walked a short distance further, and then stopped. "When I came on this trek, I guess I thought I was going to go back in time. I wanted to see what I had before things got strange. I took a little action, and it didn't work out. Like I said, it happens or it doesn't. That's my karma."

"For what it's worth," Trager said. "Our friend Vasant Bagchee gave me a little lecture on karma. He said it means duty, not fate."

"Okay. So?"

"I think he was trying to say, if it's meant to be, you'll make it happen. And if you don't make it happen, no one else will."

"Uh, huh. You sure this is Bagchee talking, and not my kid yesterday?"

"No. All we talked about was how I got along with my parents, and her trouble in school."

"What trouble?"

"She didn't say. Just that it was the reason Kamala took her to India."

“She’s just making that up. Take the blame, so everyone else will have to work to make you feel better. Kamala left because I fucked up, and I bet she knows it.”

Trager waited for Sundown to go on, but as they rounded a corner, they came on the entire trek gathered at the edge of a steep snowfield. Leslie was already across, leaning jauntily on the shaft of her ice axe. Lakpa stood by her, with three of the ponies. Sonam and the pony driver were each leading another animal across the gully. Harry sat on his pack at the near edge of the snow next to Pratima, who was holding the last pony.

“The pony-*wallah* is worried about his horses,” Pratima said.

Trager was beginning to wonder about that himself. He looked up at the Sonjal La. Viewing the rock head on, Trager could see no way up that would not require technical climbing. He wanted to ask Lakpa more about the route before one of the clients raised the question.

He pulled the ice axe from where he had slipped it between his shoulder straps. “I’ll take him across,” he said, and took the halter from Pratima’s hand.

“I didn’t know you worked with horses,” she said.

“Neither did I,” Trager said.



He tugged on the halter and the pony started to walk, pausing only a moment at the edge of the snow. Trager was surprised at how firm the snow was. Even where the crust had been broken by the other ponies, he had to kick his boots in to get firm footing. And when the pony started to slide, he was helpless to stop it. The hind legs went first, and the animal almost tipped over with its load. Trager was spun around on his steps. As his feet shot out from under him, he dropped the lead rope and grabbed his ice axe. He arrested several yards down from the track. For a long moment he lay in the snow, waiting for the pony to crush him. When he looked up, the horse was still on its feet, frozen in its stance, eyes bulging with fear. Lakpa and the pony driver were scrambling across the snow toward it. With one below and one above supporting the load, they guided it back to the track. Lakpa let the pony-*wallah* take the animal.

“Pony is not your job,” he called to Trager. He climbed after the last pony. When he reached the far side of the snow, he said something to Leslie that made her laugh, and then the two of them took the lead again.

Pratima and Sundown traversed by, moving carefully with their ice axes. “Why did you do that?” Pratima asked Trager. “Do you think because you’re the leader you automatically know about horses?”

“No, I automatically thought I should help,” Trager said. “And I know a lot more about horses than I did ten minutes ago.”

He was grateful for a problem that was more familiar. Harry was having trouble. He leaned into the slope too far, causing a foot to skid out from under him every other step. Trager had him wait while he kicked steps all the way across the snow. Sundown waited at the other side, and the three men sat down together.

"That damned porter of yours sets a fast pace," Harry said. "I hope Leslie doesn't burn out trying to keep up with him."

"Or the other way around," Trager said. "Was she this fast in Nepal?"

"Oh, yeah. She never has any problem keeping up. Let's go."

Harry heaved himself to his feet, and started off on the path again in a tired man's swaying, flatfooted walk. He did not bother to see if the other two were following.

After he rounded the first bend, Trager said, "Thanks for waiting."

"No problem," Sundown said. "So, you want to hear it? The reason why Pratima came to India?"

"Sure," Trager said. "We're in no hurry."

"I was teaching at Santa Cruz," Sundown said. "Just one seminar. And there was this strange chick in the class. 'Tima was already thirteen or fourteen, but this kid dressed just like in the sixties. Sandals, big long dress. She stayed after sometimes, and we'd talk. She began to lay this trip on me about how she's born out of time, and how we're kindred spirits."

"I'm getting the picture," Trager said. "You got it on with her."

"It was just like everything else. I was in the right place at the right time. One day in my office she tells me she wants to share her being. Something like that. She stands there and pulls that big dress off over her head, right there in the Faculty Office Building."

"How long did you see this lady before Kamala found out?"

"Two or three minutes."

"She walked in? Just like that?"

"Wasn't any surprise," Sundown said. "She always came to pick me up after seminar. She had Pratima waiting in the car. And when she saw what was going on, she just walked out and went to India."

"Wait a minute," Trager said. "Come on. You're leaving a lot out. Didn't you tell her what the situation was?"

"Tried for a couple of weeks. She didn't believe me."

"But you had to make her believe you! This kind of thing can't be so unusual. And nothing happened! Didn't you tell her that?"

"Sure," Sundown said. "I lied."

"You mean, after Kamala left, you *stayed* there? And *did* it?"

Sundown chopped for a minute at a clod kicked up by the horses. "It's not like I really wanted that girl or anything. And I never saw her again. She dropped out the next week. She came my way, like everything else—work, wife, kid—and I figured it was something else that would work out. Always in the right place at the right time, you know? So when she dropped that dress, I just thought, hey, this must be the place."

The camping ground was a roughly circular ledge about 200 feet in diameter that capped a buttress on the west side of the valley. On either side of the ledge the mountainside was covered in snow, but the protruding ground was melted clear, an oasis of dry rock, heather and short grass.

Trager, Sundown, and Harry arrived together. The tents were up, the ponies were hobbled, and Sonam had tea brewing. Pratima sat on a rock next to the stove, talking with the cook.

She got to her feet as Trager approached. "Gulam Mohammed is quitting," she announced.

"Who?"

"The pony man! You don't even know his name, do you?"

"No, I don't," Trager admitted. "I've never even spoken to him."

"Well you'd better start. Sonam says he's ready to go down tonight. Lakpa's talking to him now."

Trager looked over at the hobbled ponies. The *sirdar* and Gulam faced each other, the Kashmiri waving his hands. Lakpa saw Trager, and motioned him to come. The pony man's burning dark eyes followed him every step of his approach.

"Pony-*wallah* say, this pass is too steep," Lakpa told Trager. "Too much snow. Ponies not go."

"They didn't have any problem on the last pass."

"No, *sahib*, ponies are have some trouble on Janavar Gali. You were not there. Much snow this year. *Sahib*, we must make him go some way higher, then see. I think we pay some money just for this, but he says no."

"All right," Trager said. "Tell him to go down, then."

"*Sahib!* Very difficult, go this pass with no ponies, no porters. Don't pay off this man to go now."

"I didn't say anything about paying him off. If he wants any money at all, he goes on. If he strands us, he goes back without a rupee, and he can plead his case to someone in Kawapatri."

Lakpa looked doubtfully at Trager, and then translated.

Gulam clenched his fists and braced his feet as if he were going to hit Trager. He cried out, and waved his hand toward the sky.

"How did he take that?" Trager asked.

"He say, God is strike us dead on the pass. For stealing from him."

"If he's not going to be with us, he has nothing to say about tomorrow, and neither do I."

The pony-*wallah* did not wait for translation, but ranted on, shaking his fist at Trager.

“On the other hand, if he wants to talk rupees, I could have a lot to say right now.”

At the word ‘rupees,’ the Kashmiri stopped, and looked sharply at him.

“Tell Gulam Mohammed that if his ponies really cannot make it over the pass, I’ll pay him and let him go back. But I’ll only pay for the days he has worked.”

“*Achcha*, yes, *sahib*,” Lakpa said. The *sirdar* looked relieved at the turn of the dialog.

Gulam did not. He looked up to heaven again, and shouted on for several minutes. But he did not leave. They were still trading pronouncements when Sonam announced that soup was ready. Trager and Lakpa went to the red tarp, and the pony man tended his own small fire of scavenged Gulpathar firewood at the opposite corner of the meadow.

“How’re we doing?” Sundown asked.

“We’ll either be lighter tomorrow by several hundred rupees,” said Trager, “or we’ll each be heavier by a couple of duffel bags.”

As Sonam was serving noodles and tinned meat, Lakpa rose from his place near the stoves and walked uphill with a plastic water bottle to the stream that drained the snowfield above the meadow. He chose a path that took him within speaking distance of the pony-*wallah*’s tarp. When he returned, he announced, “Pony-*wallah* say, you pay full whole trek now, he is go up tomorrow.”

Leslie gave a snort. “Tell him to kiss my ass!”

Lakpa looked pained. “What do we do now?” Trager asked.

“We go talk to this man about money. We are talk some time, pay some money, but ponies carry bags tomorrow. This is good work, but . . . *sahib*, I do this talking now.”

It still took a long time. When Trager left the red tarp, the light was going orange on the peaks. By the time he and Lakpa walked back from the pony-*wallah*’s scrub fire, the sky was indigo, full of snapping bright stars.

“So we got away with half-pay tomorrow after the loads are packed. Five hundred twenty-five rupees. Not too bad. And the weather has cleared.”



The *sirdar* shifted on his feet. “Maybe, *sahib*. Maybe some storm tomorrow.” He paused a moment. “Things are maybe difficult on Sonjal La. I think Harry *sahib* is going back.”

“Uh-oh. I know who you’ve been talking to. Listen, we’re this close, there’s no way Harry won’t make it. We’ll carry him over to Kashmir on one of the ponies if we have to. Whatever Leslie says.”

“Yes, *sahib*. But maybe difficult. Good night, *sahib*.”

Trager heard the *sirdar*’s footsteps crunching on frosted grass as he moved away. Lakpa’s diffidence was a little unnerving, and Trager looked back to the clear gleam of the stars for reassurance. They were darkest right over head, fading out into the last faint glow to the west,

and into a new light in the east. The moon. Trager had not noticed the moon since leaving Oregon. It had been hidden behind clouds, or Trager had been too deep in the valleys to watch it rise. From the glow on the peaks above the pass, Trager guessed it was nearly full. He waited in the cold, hoping the moon would clear the ridge. The stream from the snowfield froze still, and Trager felt the tips of his ears go numb. When he began to shiver, he gave up. He started for bed, but quickly realized he had not watched the camp being laid out, and did not know which of the four sleeping tents was his. He scuffed around until he hit the corner of the red tarp, and found his pack where he had left it in the afternoon. His failing flashlight would not stay lit for more than a few seconds, but he caught a glimpse of the tents before it went out.

Trying to walk a straight line toward the nearest tent, Trager groped forward until his hand hit the cold nylon. The door was zipped. He knelt, found the zipper pull, and slowly drew it up. A wave of deodorant and cologne swept over him.

The Macintoshes. He started to close the zipper when the tab was pulled from his hand, and the door flap fell open in his lap.

"It's all right," Leslie whispered. "He's asleep. He took a Valium."

A warm hand closed on Trager's wrist and pulled him in. with only his knees for support, Trager toppled face first into the folds of Leslie's sleeping bag.

"Sh! Not here!" Leslie said. "I'll get my things."

But she held him a moment longer. "God, you're fingers are cold!" she said.

I'm not the one who suggested you put them between your legs, Trager thought. She was trying to stroke him, but Trager realized she had her hand around the barrel of the flashlight in his knickers. Unable to help himself, Trager began to laugh. "Hush!" Leslie said, and at the same instant, white light exploded in his eyes.

"You BITCH!" Harry's voice cracked in Trager's ears as a powerful electric torch illuminated the tent.

Trager pulled his hand from Leslie's crotch, and shuffled backwards on his knees.

"Yes! Crawl out of here you bastard!" Harry screamed. "You piece of crap!" He swung at Trager, cuffing him lightly on the ear.

"Harry, come on! I just came to the wrong tent."

"You bet your sweet ass you came to the wrong tent!"

Harry scrambled out after Trager, pushing him as he got to his feet. They danced around each other in the oblique light of the torch in the tent, Trager in his climbing clothes looking almost as fat as Harry in long underwear.

"Harry, will you just listen?" Trager pleaded.

"You son of a bitch! You give me all this crap about seeing me through the trek. Suck up to me about my photography. But it's the same old thing they all want. My wife's ass!"

"Harry, for God's sake!" Leslie shouted. "You don't understand." She was leaning out the door with her pajama tops pressed to her chest.

"Oh yeah? How do you misunderstand this?" He ripped the pajama tops out of Leslie's hands. "Look at the bitch! Just look at her! Same thing as in Nepal! Bitch, bitch, bitch! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"You bastard!" she yelled, and grabbed the shirt back. Trager had a vivid image of the two of them in their tug of war, Harry's overhanging paunch and Leslie's pendulous breasts swaying in rhythm with their pulls. Four arms suddenly appeared out of the darkness behind Harry, and pulled him away from his wife. Harry sagged, gasping in the thin air, with Sonam's and Lakpa's wide-eyed faces staring on either side of him. Leslie dove back into the tent, as Harry began to cry.

"You can have her, you shit," he sobbed. "Go ahead. Just stay there in the sack with her. She's not sleeping with me."

"Yes, she is," said Trager quietly, stepping up to him. "I don't know what happened in Nepal, but what happened tonight is that I couldn't find my tent. My flashlight doesn't work."

"Sure!" Harry cried. "Here's what I think of your flashlight!" He swung one pudgy leg up kick Trager in the groin. He was not flexible enough to deliver a very powerful blow, and most of the impact was taken by the barrel of the torch. But the assault staggered Trager, and caused the cook and *sirdar* to wrestle Harry to the ground.

Leslie stuck her head out again. "You can't talk to me the way you did! I'm not sleeping with you, either!"

The camp was up. Sundown stood with his sleeping bag wrapped around him, looking like an old medicine man. Pratima, wearing baggy pajamas, stood next to him with long hair cascading over her shoulders. Trager assumed that out in the dark, Gulam Mohammed's dark eyes were watching it all.

Harry muttered from the ground, "I'll sleep in the cook tent before I'll sleep with that bitch."

"That's cool," Sundown said. "Lakpa, get him off the ground and help him move his stuff, okay? Ansel, go to bed."

"I don't understand," said Pratima. "What's going on here?"

"We'll all talk about it in the morning," said Sundown.

Harry broke free from Sonam. "Damn right we will, and for a long time afterward. Trager, I'm going to nail your butt to the wall! And your whole goddamned company. This trip is a joke! But let me tell you, no one's going to be laughing when I'm done."

"Hey, man, will you go to bed?" Sundown said.

Everyone obeyed, even Trager. He felt no urge to command and no power to do so. Anything he might say would seem like an incriminating defense of some crime that he had not committed. He let Sundown give the orders. After all, Pratima's father had been preparing to explain something like this for years.

His bag was limp and thin from being packed, and the nylon shell was clammy with frost. Trager clenched his eyes and fists against the cold, and against the images of the past five minutes. When he opened them, he was surprised that he could see inside the sleeping bag. Pulling up the skirt of his parka, he saw his flashlight, stirred to life by Harry's kick, burning steadily in his pants.



By dawn the stars had been replaced by a low overcast that was changing from purple to grey. Sonam's pots and stoves gleamed faintly on the hexagon of flattened grass where the cook tent had stood. There was just enough light for Trager to read the paper torn from Harry's notebook.

Sorry I didn't wake you. Figured you'd be tired from last night. Actually, not sorry about a damned thing, except that I came on this trip. At least it's the last one. You two should be happy. You deserve each other. Taken 1 tent, 1 stove, 2 pots, 1 ice axe, 1 sleeping bag, 1 pad. Also some food I found lying around. Will leave the gear at Kawapatri. Don't think you'll be able to chase after me and hire your ponies back. Your piss-ass company doesn't have that much money. Will ask the headman at last village to bring you down. Next contact you'll have with me will be through my lawyer. Go to hell.

"Pony-wallah is put gunny bags on harness bells," Lakpa said. "Gulam Mohamed is waking us when ponies are going. He say the *sahib* is pay one thousand rupees each day to Kawapatri."

"Bastard," Trager muttered. "He wouldn't even talk to me. What do you think? Should we trust Harry to send porters up from Gulpathar?"

"Gulpatharis already coming. They know this Kashmiri is quit. This is good work for them, but we pay very much. Maybe thirty-five rupees each man-porter."

The cost seemed irrelevant to Trager. Looking up the valley, he saw that the peaks on either side of the Sonjal La had already lost their summits in the clouds. He didn't think Max or Freya would begrudge him an extra ten or fifteen dollars a day to get their remaining clients and equipment back to Srinagar. He walked back to his tent, chilled. The air was laden with dampness. A warm front, Trager thought. The kind of weather that could last for days, or weeks. He ducked in to get his parka.

Trager recoiled from the scent of Leslie's perfume. She was sitting with her legs in his sleeping bag, Trager's parka around her shoulders.

"I came in the back while you were talking to Harry," she said. "He pulled the same trick in Nepal. I could have told you this would happen."

"Then why didn't you?" Trager asked. "Did you pull the same trick in Nepal?"

"I wasn't the one poking around in other people's sleeping bags last night."

"You are now. Do us both a favor and go back to your own tent before the others get up."

"What difference will it make? We're here, Harry's not, and I think this walk could be a lot more fun than it's been up to now." She rearranged herself slightly. The jacket was open at the neck. She had changed from her pajamas into her halter. More support, Trager guessed.

"Take off the jacket," he said.

She did so, smiling, twisting her torso more than was necessary to let the parka fall.

“Now take your legs out of my sleeping bag,” Trager said. “And get out of the tent.”

The smile remained on her face widened into a leer. She leaned back on her arms. “I see,” she said. “I thought this just-the-simple-climber bit was an act. But you're the real thing, aren't you?”

She left by the front, mindless of Lakpa and Sonam, who were waiting at the door to serve tea. Sundown and Pratima were already up, holding their cups at the improvised cook tent.

“Never mind,” Trager said to the Ladakhis. “I'll join them outside.” Sonam laughed and made a remark, but Lakpa cut him off with a curt order. Subdued, he poured and then carried the pot away. Trager followed him back to where the Buscos stood.

“I guess you've got the picture,” he said. “Four tents to pick from, and I chose the worst. I wish I had crawled into yours.”

“We all do,” Sundown said. “What are we going to do?”

“You tell me. When the porters come—if they come—do you want to go on, or go back? The danger is, this storm may catch us on top of the pass.”

“Storm is also on Janavar Gali,” Lakpa said. “We are waiting maybe four-five days Lunwali. Harry-sahib is also there. I think Sonjal La is better way.”

“I hadn't thought of that,” Trager said. “I might even be able to get back and tell my side of things first.”

The porters came with the evening mist, although Trager did not witness the arrival of either. One moment the tents were pitched at the shore of a cloud sea that had completely filled the Sonjal gorge. A minute later Trager looked out to find the camp submerged in fog, and dark bidi-smoking figures crouched before his door. There were four of them—the headman Chandra Lal, one older man, and two youths. They carried wooden staffs, and had blanket rolls and short lengths of rope looped around their shoulders. They wore the usual long cloaks, plus woolen puttees and rope sandals.

Sonam served the Gulpatharis tea, while Trager and Lakpa rigged the red cook tarp over a rock to provide the porters shelter.

“Very difficult,” Lakpa said. “Only four porters. Ponies carry each fifty kilo, man porters only twenty-five. Now trekkers must carry sleeping bag, pads, clothing and things.”

Leslie was standing by her tent in her nylon parka and pants, arms folded across her chest. “We paid to have our loads carried,” she said. “If you don't have enough porters, hire more.”

“No time, *memsahib*,” Lakpa said. “We go with these men just over Sonjal La, then we are having ponies again Kashmir side.”

“Whatever,” Leslie said. “But I'm not breaking my back.”

“No, *memsahib*. Just take own sleeping bag.” Sonam burst out laughing, and Trager looked at him sharply, wondering how much English the cook really understood.

Dinner was a huge meal of tinned fish and noodles, saturated with a heavy sauce.

“Save weight,” Lakpa explained. “Eat now.”

But the day of inactivity, plus the high altitude, had squelched their appetites. Most of the oily meal went into a hole in the gravel. Night came in a condensation of darkness, fog, and smoke.

By nine o'clock the next morning, it seemed to Trager that he had already been climbing in the fog for days. He was at the end of the line with Pratima. Ahead, a line of steps faded away on a ramp of steepening snow below a grey rock wall. The shadowless light was deceptively intense, striking from all directions, forcing them to wear glacier glasses despite the clouds. Trager stopped to take a photo, not for the scenery, but to remind himself why he would not want to come this way again.

Snow began to fall around eleven. At first Trager dismissed the flakes as a flurry of specters. In the whiteout, his eyes had begun to hallucinate small flashes and flitting shadows. But then he felt the soft brush of flakes on his cheeks. Spindrift began to hiss down the rock above. Ahead of him, Pratima had stopped, and he could see the others were pulling ahead. She bent over her ice axe, and seemed to be trying to zip the neck of her parka. One of her mittens came off and began to slide away. Trager snagged it with his own axe.

“I can do it!” Pratima snapped, snatching the mitten away. Then she dropped it again, and it vanished into the clouds.

“Just stay there,” Trager said. I've got some gloves in my pack.” He plunged his axe in as an anchor, and started to take off his pack. But Pratima did not stop climbing. She plodded away in the steps, one bare hand swinging uselessly at her side.

“Oh, shit!” Trager murmured. “Lakpa!”

Trager caught Pratima and held her. She struggled feebly before collapsing into the slope. He managed to pin her to the snow with her own ice axe while he cut large steps for each of them. It was hard work. With the falling temperature, the old wet snow had set up. Ice chips fell out of the clouds to his right, and he knew that above him Lakpa and Sonam were cutting platforms for the porters.

Sundown and Leslie backed down the steps to Pratima.

“She's hypothermic,” Trager said. “We've got to get her out of these wet clothes.”

“Say, this is getting kinky!” said Leslie.

“God damn it, just get your pack off! Do you have an extra sweater or anything?”

“A pile jacket. It won't fit her.”

“Get it out! I've got one too—we'll put her in both.”

Trager wrestled the pack off of Pratima's shoulders and anchored it along with his own to his ice axe. Depending on his feet alone for balance, he started on the parka. The jacket was frozen. The elbows and shoulders cracked as Trager and Sundown pulled it over her head. Underneath was all the wool clothing Lakpa had loaned out from the H.O.T. stores, and all of it was wet.

The *sirdar* climbed down to them while Trager and Sundown were pulling Pratima's parka back on over the dry jackets.

"We're going down," Trager said. "I'll take the clients, if you and Sonam can handle the porters."

"Very slow, going down, *sahib*. Top is very close. Maybe one hour."

Trager glanced back at their steps, already filling in. Downclimbing the traverse would take as long as the ascent, and the important thing was to find a place where they could set up the tents as soon as possible. "Okay," Trager said. "You're the one who's been here."

Pratima began to shiver. A good sign, Trager thought. If she had the energy left to shiver, she might have the energy left to climb. Sundown hugged her against him as best he could on their small stance. Trager pulled their one climbing rope out of his pack and replaced it with Pratima's sleeping bag. He tied one end of the rope around his waist, coiled most of the slack on his shoulder, and tied Pratima into the other end. As he worked the straps, he realized his own fingers were growing numb. Trager climbed up until the rope snugged around Pratima's waist. Then he waited. He couldn't actually pull her up. She would just have to start climbing.

"Go on, babe," Sundown said. "Please." He tried to hold her arm, but there was no way he could get the leverage to lift. Babe," he said. "There's something I have to tell you. Right now. About you coming to India."

Pratima pushed herself away from the snow, tottering on her feet. Trager braced for a fall. "You think I'm going to die!" she cried. "You actually think I'm going to die! So now you're talking! Well I'm not going to die! So go away. Don't talk to me at all."

She flopped her hiking boot into the next hold. Quickly Trager took another step himself to keep the line taut. Pratima stepped again. She was slow and unsteady, but in a few moments she had climbed away from her father, leaving him alone on his step, clinging tightly to the shaft of his axe.

The porters were moving again. The rich smell of their bidis blew down on the wind and warmed Trager. Pratima was climbing more smoothly now, as exercise generated some heat. Trager knew it was only a temporary reprieve.

The wind at the top of the slope almost knocked them from their holds. The snow came in volleys of stinging pellets as the storm funneled through the gap of the Sonjal La. The final snowfield looked much gentler than the ramp, but the wind had scoured the surface down to a hard crust. Lakpa was climbing above, cutting steps in the ice. The chips that flew from his ice axe never came down, but were carried by the wind over Trager's head.

As Trager watched, the air around Lakpa grew brighter. Each individual snowflake sparkled for a second, and then the clouds exploded in light. For a startling moment, the climbers stood at the bottom of a clear tunnel leading up to a circle of cirrus- streaked blue sky. The ice slope led up a short distance to a cluster of eroded rock pinnacles stuck in the nadir of the pass like teeth in a lower jaw. Even as the porters cried out thanks to God, the window in the storm snapped shut with a renewed blast of snow and wind.

"We're close!" Trager shouted down. "How are you doing, Pratima?"

"Better," she said through a hand that shielded her face from the wind. "Where's my father?"

"Coming. Fifty feet behind you. Let's keep moving."

“No. Wait for him.”

“Pratima”

The girl looked up to say something else, but the words caught in her throat. She screamed, and Trager wheeled around. The porters were falling.

It happened in slow motion at first. One of the boys slipped off a step, and grabbed the staff of the boy behind him. The youth rammed the stick into the slope, but the blunt tip would not dig in, and he was pulled down too. Sonam tried to catch them both but the ungainly packs bowled him off his holds. Leslie dodged to the right in time to avoid being hit. Chandra Lal and the other porter cried out and groped in the air, but the boys and cook were already gone in a tangle of cloaks and pack ropes.

Trager slammed the pick of his axe into the crust and leaned on it, as he felt the rope pull tight on his waist. Pratima was hanging on him, screaming at her father. Sundown stared at the oncoming mass of bodies. He started to move left, then right, and then Sonam hit him square in the chest, knocking him from his holds.

One porter slid into rocks near the edge of the ramp, vaulted into the clouds, and vanished. Trager did not even know which boy had died. He had only a glimpse of the HOTS logo on a duffle bag disappearing into the storm. Sonam hit next, and the other porter and Sundown piled into him. Like a bundle of rags, they rolled over the edge.

But not all the way over. A fold of woolen cloak remained pinned to the ice by the pick of the cook's ice axe. The rag bundle seemed to roll back from the lip. Slowly, hands opened on clutched fabric, and the pile resolved itself into four living people. A moment later, Pratima stopped screaming.

“It was just a pack!” Trager yelled to no one but himself. “We lost a pack!”

Sonam left his axe where it was to anchor one of the boys and began to kick a platform for the rest. Sundown sat where he had landed in a pocket of soft snow behind the jutting rocks.

“Untie me!” Pratima said.

“Okay, Trager said. “But you're not going down. I'll bring him up to you on the rope. I'll bring everyone up.”

Chandra Lal was yelling at Lakpa. “Headman is take his people back to village,” Lakpa said. “He is telling these men's families all are coming back safe. This is his duty.”

“Tell him, it's my duty too,” Trager said. “We'll use the rope as a hand line. There won't be any more falls.”

He had Pratima climb up next to him. “Just stand in the steps, and don't move,” he said. “Give me your ice axe.” He pumped the shaft of the axe up and down the snow until it was buried three-quarters of its length.

“Hang onto that,” he said, and pulled at the knot on her waist. When the rope came free, Trager let the full length skitter down the ice to Sonam. Chandra Lal looked at the line on the snow, spat, and tipped his head.

“Okay, *sahib*,” Lakpa said. “Go quickly.”

“You might not be able to hear me up there,” Trager said, “so when I pull on the rope three times, that means people can climb on it. We don’t have any slings or carabiners to clip people in, so you’ll just have to tell the porters to hang on tight.”

“They know,” said Lakpa.



The angle was not steep, only slippery. With his rigid boots, Trager did not need large steps for himself. As the others would have the support of the rope, he only chipped tiny notches with single blows of his axe. In ten minutes, the rock pillars appeared through the snow. The wind was colder than ever, but Trager was overheated from exertion. His sunglasses had fogged, and sweat burned his eyes. His right arm ached from swinging the axe. He had to resist the urge to lunge for the rock, something he knew would only result in his feet slipping out from under him. He chipped two more notches, planted the pick of his axe, and stepped up.

A sharp tug on his waist nearly pulled him off the steps. He had run out of rope. He had guessed the rocks were within a regular 50-meter rope length, but then he had only seen them for a moment. He cut two larger steps and tried to climb up again. The rope stretched—he could almost touch the first tower. He leaned slightly to the left to give himself a more direct line, but there was still not enough slack. He stretched one more time out of sheer frustration, and had to catch himself on the ice axe when his feet slipped. He scrambled back into the steps, and punched his fist against the crust.

“Give me a fucking break!” he screamed into the storm. At the same moment he realized he had just pulled three times on the rope. In a moment, the porters and clients would begin to pull themselves up the line attached to his waist. The rope was wrapped around him several times. The multiple loops were not necessary: they were just his usual method of tying in when he did not have a regular climbing harness. He had been carrying the slack he needed with him all along, if he could only get at it.

The rope jiggled below him, and Trager cried out, “Wait! Wait!” but he knew the words were lost. He let go of the ice axe and balanced on his toes while he worked the knot with both hands. He yanked off his wool gloves, and let the wind carry them away. The knot finally broke apart. Trager unwound the rope from his waist, and dropped all the slack except for the very end. He hoped the sudden loss of tension would make anyone who was about to climb pause long enough for him to reach the rock. He grabbed his ice axe again, and stepped up in his highest toe holds, still holding the rope in one hand.

The rock offered him nothing. There were footholds, but nothing large enough to support a belay. The seven or eight feet he had gained by untying was pathetically insufficient. He needed fifty or sixty feet to circle the rock tower. His eyes danced over the surface of the stone. All he could see was the narrow crevice where gravity and melting had pulled the ice sheet away from the rock. He plunged the shaft of his ice axe into the crack and quickly wrapped the rope three times around.

"Got it! Got it!" he screamed, and started to tie the rope off. Before he could, the line snapped tight, burning around the aluminum shaft, and almost slipping through Trager's fingers. He pulled back, twisting the rope onto his wrist. Then more weight came onto the rope, splintering the ice at the edge of the crevice, mashing Trager's bare hand against the metal. He hung on, his eyes squeezed shut, as the pressure grew. Under Trager's straining lids, the swirling grey of the storm was replaced by a red glow that had something to do with a hot fire.

They took refuge under an overhang at the base of one of the towers. They were not the first to shelter there. The sides of the rock had been extended by carefully stacked stones, much like the cairn at the top of the Sonjal La. Unable to maintain a shrine on the exposed Sonjal La, travelers had deposited their effigies and prayer strips on a little altar at the back of the cleft, where the ceiling was barely three feet off the ground. The brightly painted avatars looked out placidly on the mortals crouched by their door. Lakpa had unfurled the tarp and thrown it over the party like a blanket. Anyone close to an edge grabbed on to hold it down against the wind that swirled around the edges of the rock. One by one they crept out to relieve themselves, then hurried back to under the shelter. The porters huddled against their loads on one side, while the clients crouched on the other.

Sundown had unpacked his own sleeping bag for Pratima, and the girl was lying across his lap. Trager lay sprawled between the clients and porters, snow and wet sand sticking to his parka. He had unzipped the jacket enough to get both hands inside so that he could cradle them in his armpits. The tips of Trager's fingers had frozen before Sonam had arrived to help him tie the rope off to his ice axe. Now the flesh had thawed, and blood was coursing through the damaged tissue, making it burn as if seared in a flame.

"What's the story?" Sundown asked. "Are we stopping here?"

"We'd never get the tents up," Trager said. "All of our stuff is wet. No, we've got to get off the pass. We've still got five or six hours of daylight to find a camp on the Kashmir side."

Lakpa looked at him with wind-reddened eyes. "*Sahib*, we are not going Kashmir," he said. "We are losing many things when this porter load is fall. One tent, stove, rice, stove oil. Porters are losing blankets, food. So we go back Gulpathar."

"But we're only an hour from camp!"

Lakpa shook his head. "Very difficult now. Weather is worse, Kashmir side. I think we are not making camp. We go walk out with Harry-*sahib*."

"Forget it!" Leslie said.

"*Memsahib!*" Lakpa said. "Gulpatharis are not going Kashmir. Chandra Lal says."

"Fuck him!" said Leslie. "He's not running this trek. We paid to go back to Kashmir."

Pratima's voice was so quiet, that Trager was not sure she had spoken.

"I can't," she said. Then she said something in Hindi, and the porters looked anxiously at Lakpa.

"You practically had to carry me here," she said. "It's harder going down. I can walk. I don't think I can stop and wait on those little steps again."

"Oh, no, babe, listen," Sundown said. "No problem. Ans will help you down with the rope. That'll do it, right?"

Trager cleared his throat. "No, not really. Not traversing that ramp. If it were steeper, if I could just lower her . . . but even then we don't have enough rope to do it without stopping to set up new belays. And it would still be pretty cold."

"Hey, wait a minute, man, wait a minute!" Sundown cried. "Don't give me this shit. The kid said she can't make it down the way we came. You're the fucking leader, man. You're the fucking expert! You got to do something, you know?"

Chandra Lal spoke up, and Lakpa turned to Trager. "He says, they carry her. They go now." Trager looked at Pratima, trying to think of her as a man's load.

"No," he said. "Pratima's small, but she still weighs more than a pack. And we would have to move fast, because in a little while the new snow is going to start to slide off the ramp. We just have to make a break for Kashmir."

"*Sahib*, I tell you porters are not go!"

"Then they can go back alone. And we can make a run for Kashmir. Let's look at the map. We can open it in the back where it's dry."

He took the folded sheet from the top pocket of his pack, and crawled with Lakpa out from under the tarp to the very back of the overhang where the little shrine had preserved a floor of dry sand. Lakpa crawled up behind him, giving a cursory bow to the rows of *bodhisattvas*.

"*Sahib*, Max says this map is toilet paper."

"I don't care about the map," Trager said quietly. "I just want to know what the hell is happening. You can't seem to make up your mind where the camp is. You don't tell me where you're going. Ever since Gulpathar you've been treating me like one of the clients. I don't care what you think of me as a leader, but I am responsible for the climbing here, and you and I both know it would take the rest of the day to crawl down that ramp with Pratima. If the porters want to go back into the Sonjal, that's their problem, not ours."

Lakpa rocked his head back and forth. "They know route, *sahib*. I am never coming this road."

Trager could not find words.

"I go with Freya, last year, only to Janavar Gali. We see river, go back Kawapatri. We are not crossing Sonjal La."

"Jesus," Trager said. "Jesus-fucking-Christ! You lied to me! You, and Max and Freya. You didn't know the Janavar Gali had a cliff on the north side. You didn't know Doda didn't exist. Everyone left it to me to find out."

"*Sahib*, this is leader's job."

"But no one told me that!" Trager drove his fists into the sand. He grunted as pain shot through his injured fingers.

"All treks like this first time. We go now. To Gulpathar." He started to back out of the cleft.

"Hold it," said Trager. He was looking at the sand between his knees. He had driven his fists into a foot print made by the last visitor to the shrine. A short person, probably kneeling on one knee. The print was smooth, pointy at the tip, with a deep impression alongside where the pilgrim had used a staff to help her rise. Or an umbrella.

"The woman we saw in Lunwali," Trager said. "She stopped here."

Lakpa looked at the print. "Snow is soft then. No storm. And she is come from Ladakh. Weather is always better in Ladakh."

"Always?" Trager asked. He began to unfold the map.

"*Sahib*, Ladakh is wrong side of mountains."

"Is it snowing there? That's all I want to know."

The white range wrapped diagonally across map like a ceremonial sash. To the left was the green stripe of the Kashmir Valley. The upper right quadrant was a wide khaki area mottled with contour lines. The cartographers had needed to spread the name out to fill the enormous space: L - A - D - A - K - H. Trager's index finger creased the paper at the head of the Sonjal valley. "Say we're somewhere along here. There's this stream without a name going northeast to" He ran his finger down the contours until it hit the first cluster of black dots.

"'Darcha.' Do you know a place called 'Darcha?'"

"Many places called Darcha. In Lahoul, in Murghi"

"That's the one. On the Murghi *Nala*. Do you know it?"

"Yes, *sahib*. We are there last month. Bad road. Kargil bus is not go above Darcha."

"You mean, if we got to Darcha, we could catch a goddamn *bus*?"

"*Sahib*! Darcha is on wrong side of mountains, far away."

"No!" Trager said. "It's not far away." He held his fingers like calipers over the map. "The distance from where we are to Darcha is less than the distance to Gulpathar."

There was a shaking under the tarp. Sundown called out, "What are you guys doing? Don't fuck around, man. We got to get Pratima out of here!"

The Gulpatharis were pushing their loads out the end of the tarp, getting ready to leave. Trager and Lakpa turned together to shout for quiet. Then they thrust their heads back into the stillness of the little shrine. "We might be in Darcha tonight," Trager said. "We could be in Kargil tomorrow. And we have the storm at our backs all the way."

"Yes, always dry in Ladakh," Lakpa said. "But I am never hearing of Sonjal-Darcha track. And mountains are steeper, this side."

"But she made it," Trager said, pointing at the footprint.

"She is Ladakhi."

"So are you. Is this woman stronger than you?"

Lakpa tipped his head. "We find out."



Sonam Gyaltso carried his new responsibility lightly. At the top of the ice slope he wrapped the rope around one leg, saluted Trager with his free hand, and slipped smoothly over the edge. A few minutes later, when he pulled on the rope, the porters followed, one at a time, backing hand over hand down the line toward the fresh steps the cook was cutting in the crust. They carried all the equipment except for a day's food, a stove and pot, and the red tarp. When the last one was gone, Lakpa pulled up the rope and Trager began to coil it. It was difficult: His fingers ached, and he wore a pair of Lakpa's too-small mittens to replace the gloves he had lost. But he did not want to show any weakness to the *sirdar*. He felt as if he had only now become the real leader of Springtime in Kashmir.

Under the shelter, the others had made up new loads from the remaining equipment. Sundown had most of his daughter's belongings stuffed into the embroidered shoulder bag now lashed to the outside of his pack. Pratima's rucksack bulged with a sleeping bag and two ground pads. A food bag dangled from Leslie's pack straps. She regarded it with distaste.

"You'd better hope this damned bus is where you say it is," she said.

Lakpa pulled up a corner of the tarp in an explosion of snow and wind. The others held it while he crumpled the heavy material into the top of his pack. The snow was drifted into waves on the level part of the pass. The knee-high drifts made for hard going, but Trager was counting on the exertion to keep people warm. Trager sent Lakpa first to break trail, and to serve as a target. Trager shielded his own face with one hand, and held his compass up to his eyes with the other.

"Okay, go right!" Trager called. "Right! Straight ahead! Good! Now left! Left, left, left! Hold it!"

He wanted to keep Lakpa on a bearing that would intersect the stream above Darcha. After half an hour Trager realized that he could only see the *sirdar* from the knees up. The slope was dropping ahead of them. The clouds were thinner. Trager could make out the texture of the snow, and in front of them, right on the bearing, he could distinguish a dark feature on the slope. He dropped the compass, and began to stride after Lakpa, his eyes luxuriating at having something to look at besides the thick whiteness of the storm. He recognized the object a little at a time: a graceful arc shading from white to deep blue.

"Oh, no! Stop! Stop!"

The contour lines on the map only marked every five hundred feet of elevation. They had no way of recording features as small as a fifty-foot drop from the lip of a crevasse. But it seemed incredible to Trager that they could have missed marking a glacier altogether. Trager and Lakpa looked in wonder at the tower of ice leaning over the steep slope.

"*Sahib*, I am never see glacier from Darcha," Lakpa said. "This is wrong road."

“Or a short glacier,” said Trager. “Look at the map: The *nala* makes a couple of right-angle bends. Maybe you can't see up this far from the village.” The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, trying to block the wind from the map. Darcha lay on one side of a crease, and the Sonjal La on another. That required Trager to unfold the sheet, and as he did so, a gust blew the pleated paper out like a sail. There was a sudden snap, and he was left with only the east and west margins in his hands.

“Toilet paper,” Lakpa said.

They traversed right to find a snow bridge. Lakpa wanted to keep going in that direction to get off the glacier entirely, but when they approached the eastern edge of the ice, they found a vertical wall of rock. They retraced their steps to where they had first encountered the crevasse, and then kept going until they found a bridge at its left margin. The glacier below flowed down at a gentle angle, and did not seem badly broken up, but with the new snow, it was difficult to tell solid ice from a gossamer snow bridge.

They stayed in single file, following carefully in one another's steps. Lakpa and Trager shared the lead, taking turns probing the snow with their ice axes. When an axe went through without resistance, they would beat at the surface, revealing the fissures underneath. The climbers would then hike along the upper edge of the exposed crevasse until they found a bridge of older, consolidated snow strong enough to bear weight. Trager thought they were making perhaps one mile an hour. As far as he could remember, the map showed the first bend of the Darcha *Nala* to be about two miles from the ridge. And indeed, in about two hours, they walked out of the bottom of the clouds to find themselves at a sharp corner.

It was more than a bend in the valley. It was a place where all the forces of nature seemed to have twisted and broken. Just before the bend, the glacier spilled abruptly over a steeper pitch, fracturing into a web of crevasses running in all directions. To the east, the cliff still rose into a ragged overcast. The western wall was made of more friable rock that had weathered into a jumble of scree and rotten bluffs.

Lakpa pointed up at the bands of shattered stone. “Ladakhi woman is go there, I think,” he said. “We are on wrong way.”

They traversed toward the west, but in a hundred yards Trager could see they were approaching a major fault. The glacier flowed over an escarpment and had sheared to its full depth. The combined drop of ice and rock was over two hundred feet. As they watched, a section of the glacier to their left calved off and crashed to the bottom in a cloud of ice dust.

“Move . . . back,” Trager said evenly. Sundown, walking behind him, took three steps and suddenly dropped to his waist through the snow. “Bummer!” he cried, and flailed with his arms. He sank deeper into the bridge. Trager took a step toward him, and felt the snow give way under one of his own legs. He caught his balance on the other foot and stumbled back from the black hole he had made. Pratima and Leslie were both yelling at Sundown, and Lakpa was trying to crawl out to him on hands and knees.

“Just stay where you are!” Trager cried. “Sundown, roll forward on your chest. Get your axe in!”

Sundown hunched his shoulders, pulled with the ice axe, and tipped his pack over on the downhill side of the crevasse. The weight of the load levered him out of the snow like a cork from a bottle. Lakpa climbed up to him, and chopped at the snow with his ice axe to find the margins of the crevasse. It was small, barely six feet across, but it was long, fencing them in between itself and the ice wall.

"Everyone move up to the lip of the crevasse," Trager said. "If we're right next to the crack, at least we know we're not standing on top of anything else."

Leslie kicked some snow into the hole. "When you screw up, Trager, you do a good job of it."

"Leslie's right, man," Sundown said. "This trip is totally fucked. If anything happens to Pratima, I'll kill you. You understand me?"

The girl was leaning on her ice axe next to him. She straightened up and said, "Stop it! You're the one who fell in."

"I'll kill you," Sundown repeated.

"I believe you. And so you won't get the chance, we'll put the rope on here. We won't be tied in very far apart, so we'll have to move slowly. Hold your ice axes in arrest position. If it looks like anyone is going to fall into something, everyone else just drop on your axes."

"Forget it," said Leslie. "I'm not tying in with a bunch of people who are going to pull me down."

"Fine with me," said Sundown.

"No, it isn't," Trager said. "Leslie knows how to use an ice axe, and we need her."

"He needs me," Leslie said. "Now he needs me."

"Yes!" Trager cried. "For the first time we actually need you. Instead of being just a pain in the ass, you could actually help out. But one way or another you're going to tie into the rope."

He pulled the coils off his shoulder and began to undo the knot that held them together.

"Fuck you!" Leslie said. "When we get back, I'll nail your sorry butt to the wall!"

"Harry's taking care of that. I'm going to put you in the middle, between me and Pratima."

Trager shook out the line in the snow, and began to run it doubled through his hands, ignoring the pain in his tender finger tips.

"*Memsahib!*" Lakpa said. "Very dangerous. Tie onto rope. Just do this. What you want is no matter."

"That isn't what you said at Doda. At Doda what I wanted was everything. I was Leslie, then, not the *memsahib*. And you were so damn eager to please. But now it looks like you were just a servant ready to get his hands on a little white ass."

Trager stopped measuring the rope, and looked up. Lakpa was holding himself very straight, not moving his eyes from the woman. Of course, Trager thought. It made it all so simple. Lakpa's attention to Leslie, his surliness after the incident with Harry. Was Lakpa jealous of him, he wondered. Or was he afraid, as Trager was afraid?

"This is not Doda, *memsahib*," the *sirdar* said.

"I suppose it isn't," said Leslie. "Now I'm just an embarrassment to you."

"You're an embarrassment to everyone," Pratima said.

"Memsahib!" Lakpa said. "Leslie. Please."

He stepped around Sundown and Pratima, picked up a loop of the rope, and held it out to her. Trager thought it looked like crude bouquet, an offering from the small man to the large woman standing over him. Leslie hesitated another moment, and then snatched the rope from Lakpa's hand. Trager climbed up to Lakpa with one of the ends. "This is good work," he murmured to the *sirdar*.



Now they crept down the glacier. Grey ice protruded through the snow like bones through the skin of a carcass. Crevasses were no longer hidden; they were everywhere, with few bridges. Trager would traverse a hundred yards searching for a crossing. On the narrower bridges he and Lakpa belayed each client across one at a time. Trager would sit on one side of a crevasse, anchored as best he could to his axe, and haul in the rope around his hips. Lakpa would protect from the other side with the trailing rope. Then they would cut back, looking for passage across the next gap. After a zigzag of a quarter mile, they might find themselves only ten feet down glacier on the lower lip of a crevasse they had crossed half an hour before.

A cold wind announced that the sun had gone behind a ridge. They would have been in shadow, had there been any shadows. The clouds just turned a darker shade of grey. Close to the left edge of the glacier, a crevasse they had just crossed sliced through to the ice cliff. Through the crack they could see the lower moraine. A chockstone wedged in the cleft only heightened the impression of empty space. Lakpa tried to follow a bridge back to the center of the glacier. He was blocked by a mammoth crevasse.

He climbed slowly down. "We camp," he said.

Trager gauged the angle of the slope. "We could. If we cut in a little, and sit on the packs, and throw the tarp over us. We'd be out of the wind."

"We'd be out of our minds," Leslie said.

He agreed with her. Even if they could survive a night on the ice in damp clothing, it was steep enough that a careless move could cause someone to slide out of the bivouac. The only available anchor he could see was the chockstone at the end of the crevasse they had just crossed, and it was too close to the edge of the ice cliff.

So close, that it overhung the moraine below. "Lakpa, put me on belay," Trager said.

He walked carefully down the edge of the crevasse to where it split the ice cliff. The exposure was dizzying. He could not tell the exact height above the ground. The chockstone, perhaps a yard wide, was jammed a few feet below him. The crevasse walls closed together thirty feet down the face, and below that a bulge in the ice wall blocked a view of the cliff base. In the fading light the fallen chunks of ice at the bottom could have been the size of bricks or boxcars.

It was not easy to get the others to follow to his exposed perch. Leslie called him an asshole. Sundown threatened him again. Pratima came silently, wide-eyed, crawling on hands and knees. But they came, coaxed by Trager and belayed by Lakpa. The *sirdar* walked down last, and knelt at the lip, looking grimly at the descent.

"Belay me from the chockstone," Trager said. "I'll climb down until I can see if the rope reaches the bottom."

"What if the rope doesn't reach?" Sundown asked.

"I'll climb back up and we'll make the best camp we can." Trager hoped his voice did not betray the difficulty he would have climbing up the vertical ice without crampons.

"Leader is stay with clients," Lakpa said. "I go down."

"I'm the climber here," Trager said.

"And I am *sirdar*. Leader stays with clients."

There was no time to argue, and Trager sensed that he was not going to win. "Okay," he said. "You stay tied in. Everyone else unrope."

Trager climbed down to the wedged rock first. It was a short step, but the exposure on both sides made it the most frightening maneuver of the day. He straddled the rock and tied himself to it with heavy nylon gear ties scavenged from his and Lakpa's rucksacks. He cursed Max, Freya, and the universe for not providing even a sling or carabiner to Springtime in Kashmir. Then he took the line to Lakpa around his hips.

"You don't have to prove anything, you know," Trager said under his breath as the Ladakhi stepped down next to him. "Not to Leslie, not to Max or Freya. Sure as hell not to me."

"Yes, *sahib*. Talk later. Belay okay?"

Lakpa rested his back against one wall of ice and let himself slip over the edge of the rock until Trager was holding his weight. Trager strained with his legs to keep himself from pivoting under the load.

"Slack, *sahib*," Lakpa said, and Trager lowered him smoothly down to the bottom of the crevice. When it became too narrow, the *sirdar* swung onto the face, leaning out so that he seemed to be walking down the vertical wall.

"Are you kidding me?" Sundown muttered.

"Does it reach?" Trager asked.

"Yes, *sahib*, I think."

"Think isn't good enough. You'll strangle on the end of the rope if it doesn't reach. Swing back into the crevasse and I'll belay you up."

"No. Slack, *sahib*."

There was no way he could pull the man up by himself. He let the rope run slowly through his hand. Lakpa disappeared below the bulge, and Trager concentrated on the coils piled between

his legs. The wrap of tape marking the midpoint went by all too soon. With only a few feet left, Trager tried to brake. His cramped fingers could no longer control the rope. It continued to slip until it pulled tight on the loop around the rock. Trager relaxed his hand. He could feel Lakpa's weight where the rope cut across his thigh. The *sirdar* had not reached the ground.

"Hey, man, what's he waiting for?" Sundown asked.

Death, Trager thought. A person remained conscious only about ten minutes hanging from a waist loop before his chest collapsed and he could no longer breathe. It took about another ten minutes to die. There was movement on the rope. Lakpa was beginning to writhe. Half-formed rescue plans flashed through Trager's mind, and dissolved. Even with climbing equipment, it could take an hour to haul a man a full rope length. Trager could not bear feeling the death struggle through the rope. He clawed at the rope, trying to roll it off his leg.

Suddenly he was holding a loop of slack. Lakpa was gone. Trager looked in horror at the rope. But then it moved again: one . . . two . . . three. A shout echoed off the rock walls. Trager began to haul the rope in hand over hand, wondering if the others had ever realized that for a moment Lakpa had been dead. The end of the line came up with Lakpa's parka fluttering on the ragged end of a loop that had been cut with a knife.

"What the hell is that?" Leslie asked.

"Lakpa's engineering," Trager said. "We'll find out when we get down. Leslie, you're the closest. Come on."

"No."

"Leslie, let's go! He made it. We're almost out of here."

"I'll rappel on my own. They showed us how in Austria."

"We're not set up for that now. Come on, it's almost dark."

"How convenient. Just time enough for a little accident. That would take care of things, wouldn't it? You're going to have to cover all your fucking around somehow. You and Lakpa both."

"For Christ's sake, Leslie, there wasn't any fucking around. Remember? And the only one who cares about you sleeping with Lakpa is Lakpa, and you can discuss it with him as soon as you get to the bottom. Now tie in."

"I disgust you, don't I?" Leslie said. "I'm too old. You like that fresh, pubescent, virgin cunt. And dark skin, besides."

"Hold her," Trager said.

It took all three of them. Sundown pinned Leslie's torso, while Trager, still tethered to the chockstone, tried to feed the line around her waist. Pratima stared in shock at the struggle, until Leslie began to kick Sundown with her heels. Then she wrapped herself around the woman's legs and held them to the ice.

The hardest part was getting her over the edge after the knot was tied. She clutched at Sundown, and nearly pulled him with her. Trager had to hit Leslie's arm with her own ice axe to break her grip. Leslie kicked at Trager's head, even while he was trying to pull the rope around his waist to keep her from falling. In the end, he simply had to push her off. Leslie toppled from

the chockstone with a shriek. The slack in the rope snapped out, slamming Trager hard against his waist anchor. The rope whipped around his body, and it took both hands to bring the fall under control.



In Leslie's absence there was only the sound of wind across the ice, the hollow clatter of distant rockfall, and the whir of the running rope.

"I hate this job," Trager said.

"Too bad," said Sundown. "You might be pretty good at it."

"We'll see. Sundown, go next. Lakpa may need help with Leslie. Pratima? You okay?"

"Warm now," Pratima said. "Should have done that earlier."

The rope went slack, and after a minute, Trager felt three tugs on the end. The light was so dim that he had to check Sundown's knot by feel. The tall man went down clutching the rope in both hands, muttering, "Oh, shit, oh, shit," until Trager could not hear him any more.

When the rope went slack again, Trager called out for Pratima. "I'm right here," she said. She was lying at the edge, her face a few inches from Trager's. "Not so bad in the dark. Can't see what's coming."

"I'd rather know," Trager said.

"Don't believe you. You wouldn't be here."

"Probably not. But this wasn't what I had in mind. And it's not the nice talk you were supposed to have with your Dad."

"We'll talk. When Leslie said I was a virgin, I thought he might come out and say it." She giggled.

Trager was unnerved by the sound. "What? What was he going to say?"

"That I'm not. That's why I'm here." She giggled again. "If Julio Rodriguez hadn't left rubbers in my room, we wouldn't be here. Junior high boyfriend." The strange giggle again. "Mother couldn't deal with it. Drove right his Sundown's office in the middle of the night. Two weeks later we're in Delhi."

When she giggled again, it dawned on Trager that she was dying. The struggle with Leslie had not warmed her so much as taken the last of her heat. He recovered the end of the rope and leaned Pratima against his shoulders while he threaded the line around her waist.

"Haven't been nice to you," Pratima said. "Stupid. I liked what you did in the village. And you talked to my Dad."

"Not really," Trager said, struggling with knot. "He doesn't even know about the condoms."

"W-W-What?" That awful giggle again.

He pulled her to him with one arm, holding her tightly until she was sitting next to him on the chockstone. As soon as he released her, she sagged onto the belay rope around his hips. She was so light compared to the others that she seemed to float away from him into the dark. This was not the first technical retreat Trager had organized. Normally he was exhilarated at being last on the mountain, alone with his skill and his equipment. But tonight he seemed to have run out of both. He was certainly alone.

He forced himself to be careful and methodical attaching the packs to the rope. He had to stand on the chockstone to drag them up to the lip of the ice, and if one slid over before he was ready, it could easily knock him from his perch. By the time the last one was down, the sky was black. Trager shivered as he wrapped the line under one leg, across his chest, and around his back. He sat on the edge of the chockstone, checked the knot one more time by feel, and then slipped over the side. Braking with his right hand, he slithered down the crevasse, and then stepped out onto the main face. His feet became lighter on the ice as the wall steepened, and in a few steps he swung clear altogether. The rope sawed through his sore fingers and burned under his thigh as he traveled through a bottomless dark. Then a bright pool spread across the blocks of fallen ice below. The rope twisted into the heart of the light, and Trager followed, falling slowly toward a star.

Ladakh came in shades of ochre and yellow, stark hills glowing under a brass-bright sun that rose over higher ranges to the east. In the west, the Himalayan crest was hidden in a maelstrom of cloud that seemed held back only by the force of the sunbeams. The path lay thick in dust. Dust. For the first time in his life, he loved dust. He wanted to tell someone, but there was no one to talk to.

Sundown and Pratima walked together. At some point during their bivouac in the short grass along the Murghi *Nala*, they had begun a private conversation that was still in progress. Lakpa just did his job, setting up the tarp, taking down the tarp, starting the stove, packing the stove, bringing up the rear as they pounded down the rough track toward Darcha. Leslie was close behind Trager, but walking in a world of her own. As Trager saw her aged face looking through reddened eyes, it occurred to him that she was stark, raving mad.

Fuck 'em, as Max would say. Trager had brought them as far as he could, and now he would walk on until he found someone else to talk to, someone who would want to know what he saw, what he thought. Someone who drove a jeep around the next corner, dropping into dips and bouncing over stones, coming to meet them.

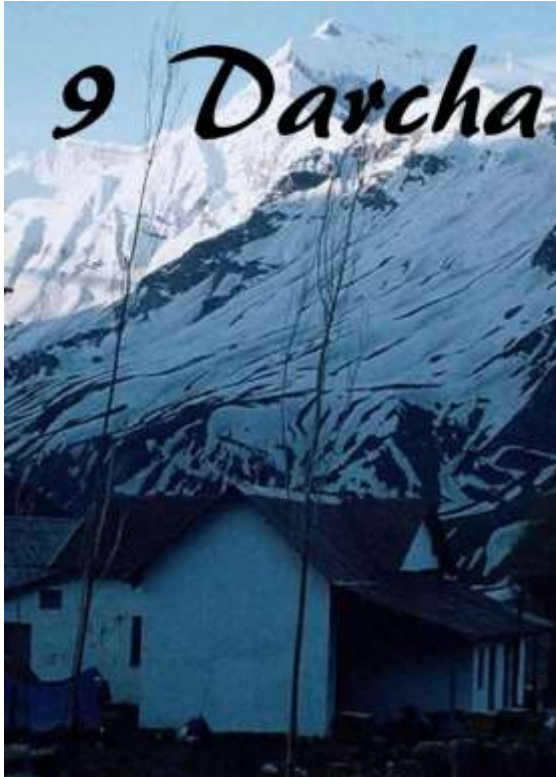
"Freya!" he called, and waved.

The vehicle stopped with a jerk, and its own dust cloud caught up, passed it, and enveloped Trager. When it cleared, it was his own face he saw dimly in the soiled windshield. He did not expect to see such an old man. Nor did he expect to see two soldiers spring from the jeep and level heavy rifles at his chest. It was not Freya Martens who got out from the passenger seat, but a young officer armed only with a swagger stick that flicked in his hand like a fly swatter.

"*Ap kahan ja rahe hain?*" he demanded. "Where are you going?"

"Darcha," Trager said.

"Just as we thought," the officer said, and flicked the riflemen forward.



They kept him in a Public Works Department bungalow in Darcha. The cinder block building stood out like a castle above the mud walls and thick willow roofs of the village itself. Trager was served potato curry twice a day, but what little he ate he regretted. The digestive tract that had so impressed Max Holz succumbed to Indian Army rations. The bungalow lacked indoor plumbing, but the latrine was nearby and clean, and they let Trager go without a guard. In fact, the bungalow was always open. There was no place for him to go. All his equipment had been confiscated along with his camera. He was not so much imprisoned in Ladakh, as buried in it. The mountains across the road from his window could have been a mural painted on the walls of a cave.

Trager would not have felt so cut off if he had been able to talk to the others on the morning after the bivouac. He could at least have given them a message, a plan for getting him out. But the officer had ordered Trager into the jeep, leaving one of his

gun-toting louts to walk the rest of the party down to the village. At some point while Trager was going through his first interrogation, the bus had come to Darcha and gone away with the last remnants of Springtime in Kashmir. At least that was what the officer said.

“How do I know you didn't just shoot them?” Trager asked.

“Why would I have shot them?” the officer asked. “I have not even shot you.” He smiled, and blew a cloud of smoke. He seemed to enjoy playing inquisitor. His name was Nazir, a lieutenant—or, as he pronounced it, leftenant. He had narrow Aryan features, unlike the broad Mongolian faces of the villagers who occasionally peered in through the windows. One bedroom of the bungalow had been converted into an interrogation cell. Nazir had moved in a desk on which he arranged his swagger stick and cigarettes.

“What did you do with the money from my pack?” Trager asked.

“Your *sirdar* claimed those funds for purchasing your party's bus tickets. He is Ladakhi; he is known in Darcha. He assured us the others were merely ignorant tourists. Surely you don't mistrust Lakpa Tsering?”

Trager did. Both he and Lakpa had explanations to make about their trek, and the *sirdar* may have decided to make sure he got his word in first.

“I need to contact Max Holz or Freya Martens. They're my employers.”

“Exactly. And Mr. Holz and his associates are now specifically excluded from the Restricted Area. Was your intrusion his idea?”

“When did Max lose his trekking permits?” Trager asked.

“As of seventeen May.”

“We left Kawapatri on the fifteenth. I was on the trail. How could I know anything about it?”

“Yes, how?”

“This trek was scheduled for months. Ask Colonel Battarchaya at Kawapatri. He knows me.”

“This officer is not at Kawapatri. I am given to understand he has resigned his commission. In any event, Kawapatri has nothing to say about Ladakh.”

“Does the American embassy know where I am?”

“This is for you to tell me.”

“Someone should at least notify my family.”

“So! This is a secret mission. Even your own family does not know where you are. I ask again the nature of your business in the Restricted Area.”

“I was just trying to get my clients out of the mountains.”

“Then what was the purpose of the signals we intercepted?”

“That was a flashlight shining on the snow. We got caught on the glacier after dark.”

“I see. But you say this was an easier route down.”

“I was wrong. But I did get my clients out of the mountains alive. That’s what they paid for.”

“You were paid. As we thought. And what was the nature of this work in the Restricted Area?”

The questions went around and around on the same themes, until they too seemed to be part of the walls and mountains holding Trager in. Trager stopped using what freedom he had. As his diarrhea subsided, he stayed in the bungalow. He lay awake at night and slept at odd hours. The moon was full in Darcha. It shone in his window and reflected off the pale dusty ground with a light so intense that there was no difference between midnight and dawn. And Nazir could appear at any time to ask questions.

Trager was asleep at midday when the Lieutenant burst into his room to announce,

“You will please ready yourself for going. They wish to talk to you in Kargil.”

“Who does?” Trager said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

Behind Nazir, a woman’s voice said, “I do.”

She was framed by the door against the glare outside. She was even taller than he remembered, towering over Nazir. Her tan seemed lighter, her hair darker. Her figure was concealed under an oversize khaki blouse and full skirt. Her cheeks were stained with road dust, and her blue eyes looked strained and bleary. For all that, Trager thought Freya Martens looked perfectly beautiful.

“Pick up your things,” she ordered, and walked out with Nazir. Trager stared at the empty doorway, still waking up. A motor growled to life outside, and Trager scrambled to throw his

socks and underwear into his pack. In the road, Freya was at the wheel of the blue jeep. The officer stood by the car door, holding his swagger stick under one arm.

Freya gunned the engine. "We'll talk later," she said. "Get in."

Freya put the jeep in gear, steered deftly around the children, and accelerated out of the village. Trager turned to see Nazir standing in the exhaust, flicking his swagger stick before the empty bungalow.



Freya waited until they had rounded the first corner before she spoke. She did not look at him, but stared at the road, ignoring strands of light hair that the breeze tossed into her eyes. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" she shouted over the engine. "I've just spent two weeks convincing the government that I can be trusted to follow all the rules. And then along comes Ansel Trager, throwing my name around, walking into Ladakh over a pass the Army considers a military secret. Did Vasant put you up to this?"

Trager was taken aback. "Vasant didn't even want to do the trek. Didn't Lakpa tell you that?"

"Yes. He also told me it was your idea to come into the Restricted Area."

"Lakpa was lost. If we hadn't gone into Ladakh, the clients would still be wandering up there."

"They are anyway, from what I understand. You were supposed to pick up six people in Delhi. Then I get a cable from Vasant telling me everyone's cancelled. Then the hotel at Kawapatri checks you in with four. Then some Sonjalis show up at Kawapatri saying you're at someplace called Gulpathar with two men and your Indian wife. Finally Lakpa gets off the bus from Darcha with two women and a middle-aged hippie. No equipment, no cook, no ponies, and one client apparently wandering back down the Sonjal on his own."

Trager blinked his eyes. The road seemed to have fallen into the strange half-light of a dream.

"I have to explain all of this, you know," Freya went on. "The whole point of the Restricted Area is that we don't go in or out of it, and you show up like you own the place. And then send Lakpa to me. I didn't even know you could get to Darcha from the Sonjal La."

"I know you didn't," said Trager.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Trager started slowly, fanning a spark. "You didn't know about the Sonjal La. You didn't know about Gulpathar. You didn't know jack shit about this trek."

Now Freya turned to look at him. The jeep hit a bump, tossing them both an inch off the seat.

"Watch the road," Trager said.

"It was a new trek," said Freya. "People are paying to see places other trekkers don't go."

"Then your clients got their money's worth. They got to see the cliffs you never noticed on the east side of the Janavar Gali. They got to see the ice field you didn't know about on the Sonjal La, where the porters fell off. They had good look into the crevasses of the glacier above Darcha that isn't supposed to exist. The only thing they missed was the village of Doda, but then that disappeared thirty years ago. Did you really hire me because you needed to work with Max, or

because you knew this trek was going to be as screwed up as the last one you did, and you wanted someone else to take the blame for it?"

"You don't have any right to say that. It shouldn't have been that big a job, and I thought you could do it."

"And I pulled it off. I brought my clients out of the mountains alive. And that's more than you can say." That wasn't fair, Trager knew, but then no one had been particularly fair to him. Freya drove ahead, her hands tight on the wheel. She almost failed to make an S-curve when two goats bounded off the bank in front of her. "Slow down!" Trager said.

Freya brought the jeep to a shuddering stop. Trager caught himself on the dashboard. "If you want me to get out here," he said, "how about loaning me bus fare to Delhi?"

The two goats had climbed back to the road and were nibbling at the edges of the canopy before Freya spoke again. "It looks like we'd better start over," she said.

"Fine," Trager said. "I'm in Ladakh because we got caught in a storm and I had to take the fastest route out of the mountains. I told that to the Lieutenant, and I'll explain it again to anyone who needs to know."

"We'll talk about that later. I mean let's start all over. I mean, I'm glad you brought your trek through. I'm glad you're okay. Welcome to Ladakh."

The Kara Koram Lodge in Kargil was actually a cluster of bungalows around a central dining hall in an apricot orchard overlooking the town. The owner had diverted the runoff from a spring for irrigation, and as Freya and Trager walked up and down the rows of greening trees, they were surrounded by the sounds of rustling leaves and trickling water.

"I guess you were the first person to find out about Vasant's plan to close the company down," Freya said. "As far as I knew, all Vasant and I were going to do was ask Max to let us have more control over trekking in Ladakh. Why Vasant decided on that scorched-earth policy of pulling out, I don't know. All I can think is that he changed along with everything else when Weston Ferndecker fell into the Murghi *nala*. Max committed all he had to Ladakh. When the government threatened to pull the permit for the Restricted Area, Vasant must have panicked."

"But he was right," Trager said. "About Max, I mean."

"I know. Max was one of the first outfitters to bring tourists to Ladakh when the area was opened after the last war. He doesn't see that Ladakh now has more foreign travel companies than they know what to do with. He said 'fuck 'em,' right and left, and the District Commissioner threw us out. I told Max it was his own damn fault, and he told me to go to Hell. It's no use trying to change him. Vasant simply figured that out before I did."

"So how come you're still here?" Trager asked.

"Max left for Delhi and California. He thinks he still has some strings to pull. When he was gone, I did the same thing as Vasant. I struck out on my own. I went to the Army and the Tourist Department, and said, 'How about me? Without Max?' Without Max, they said, you've got it. I don't know why I never thought of it before. I was the only applicant who had actually led a trek in the area before it was closed."

"They didn't hold Ferndecker's accident against you?"

"I blamed it on Max." She smiled. "As I think about it now, I see that's what we'll do with your trek too."

"Who is 'we'?" Trager asked.

"We' are myself and a couple of Indian friends who are willing to own fifty-one per cent of me so that I can do business in this country. And you, if you're still interested."

"That's what I want to know. Where do I fit in to all this?"

"I'm trying pick up Max's clients, the ones who have already paid for treks and climbs. We won't make any money, but we have to use the Restricted Area permit to keep it. The first trip is in two weeks. Eight clients on the first ascent of Murgli-II. Max actually sold the first ascent of a six thousand-meter peak—can you believe it? All the permits in the world wouldn't allow Max to actually operate a trip like that. He hasn't even been on the trail in two years, much less lead a rope at nineteen thousand feet. There's only one man in the world who's in position to lead that trip right now. And one woman. And it's probably going to take both of us to do it."

If Trager had thought about it, he would not have hugged Freya. But he did not think about it, and when, a little embarrassed, he started to let go, it was she who held onto him.

"It seems like a long time since someone has been happy to work with me," she said, her head on his shoulder. "I can be a bitch. You know that. But I've spent a lot of time being frightened these past few days, and things aren't going to be easy for a while. I won't even know if we can pay you for the climb until after it's over. The only money I can promise is whatever's left from Springtime in Kashmir."

"If I end up going home as broke as I was two weeks ago, it's still more than I dreamed of."

Freya stepped back. "Dream bigger," she said, "if you want to work with me." She took his arm as they walked back toward the bungalows. "You sold a trip that had been written off, collected the money, did the trek, paid your bills, and finished with cash left over. Ansel, for ten days you may have run the most profitable adventure travel company in the world."



The owner of the Kara Koram was a solidly-built Kashmiri named Roger Kaul. He offered Trager and Freya Scotch in the small library of the main lodge. Roger and Freya did most of the drinking, while Trager scribbled at a report of his trek.

"Look at this fellow write!" Roger said, "Have you retained him as a mountaineer or as your secretary?"

"It would be a lot easier to do it in triplicate if I had a sheet of carbon paper," Trager grumbled.

"Oh, but they want you to sweat over it," said Roger. "When you are done with this Restricted Area business, you shall be able to compose that sort of thing in your sleep."

"Don't put in everything," Freya said. "Just enough so I can show the Army that you see the error of your ways."

"What should I say about Lakpa's error?" Trager asked.

"Are you referring to his route finding or his relationships?"

Roger guffawed. "Has that boy been naughty again? You said you were going to let him go if he dipped into the cherry bowl one more time."

"This was no cherry," said Freya said. "And Lakpa may have saved the day. At least she got some satisfaction from the trek."

"Sorry," Trager said. "It wasn't in the job description."

"Your job was fine. If Max tries to turn her husband on us, we can tell the truth: It wasn't your fault. Also, it might be useful to have something to hold over Lakpa Tsering."

Roger grunted. "Spoiled, is he?"

"It looks that way," Freya said. "Ansel said he was pretty cheeky toward the end."

"But you know he did the best thing at Darcha," said Roger. "That Nazir is a martinet. He could have locked up the whole party. Going over the Lieutenant's head was the quickest way to free your man."

"True, but if I hadn't already gotten the Restricted Area permit, Ansel would still be eating army rations in the PWD bungalow. In any case, we're going to have to remind Lakpa what his job is."

"That's a switch," Trager said. "Most of the time he reminded me."

"Exactly," Freya said. "So leave Lakpa out of the report. You were the leader. Yours is the only apology that counts."

"What about Sundown and Pratima?" Trager asked.

"Them too."

"No, I mean, how did they act when you saw them at the bus? I just want to know."

"Why?" Freya asked.

"They were the ones who made the trek go. They let me in on some of their own problems. And they stuck up for me, even though they had all the close calls."

"Sometimes that's what makes it for a client," said Freya. "Our mistakes provide the biggest thrills of all. For what it's worth, those two were worried about you, especially the girl. And they seemed pretty close. Clingy. People in the bazaar were staring."

"I'd stare too," Trager said. "Do you know what they were like when I first met them?"

"No," Freya said. "And I don't care. And neither should you. Don't wonder about any of your clients after a trek. There are too many of them and only one of you. Now finish that report. Talk a lot about the weather, not very much about the people. Make sure they know you were working for Max, don't say anything bad about Lieutenant Nazir, and leave me out altogether."

"Good Lord, woman," Roger said. "Why not just write it yourself? Do sit down. You are acting like a nervous school girl."

Freya had gotten up to straighten her blazer and blouse in a wall mirror. “These are my negotiating clothes. I’m going to wear them out before the summer is over. It’s a real trick, you know? I have to look businesslike, but not masculine. Otherwise they treat me like a child who doesn’t know her place. But if I’m too feminine, I’m just a woman who doesn’t know her place. What with having had a woman for Prime Minister, I’d expect you people would have come around by now.”

There was the noise of tires on the drive outside. “Oh, God, here they are!” Freya cried. “Ansel, are you done?”

“Just a minute . . . there! I don’t know if they can read that last copy, but I’m sure they’ll find somewhere to stick it.”

“Hah, he is already beginning to talk like Max!” Roger said.

Freya did not laugh. “These things usually run late,” she said. “Don’t worry if I miss dinner.”

Trager watched as a young man let her into the back seat of a small sedan, then got behind the wheel. As the car pulled away, Roger asked, “So, how does it feel to be in Max’s place?”

“I don’t think I’m in Max’s place,” Trager said. “I’m just a climber. I’m not running anything here.”

Roger nodded. “A man who knows his situation.” He reached across the table and filled Trager’s glass to the brim. “I must see to my duties and I am taking my whiskey away with me, but I will not be considered a miser of drink. You need only find me to ask for more.”

“If I finish this,” Trager said, “I’ll be lucky to find the door.”

Trager leaned back in his chair after Roger had left, thinking of how far he had come from his detention in Darcha that morning. On reflection, it was not as far as he would like. The empty room and the time on his hands already reminded him too much of imprisonment. He sipped at his drink, and scanned the full-height bookshelves, looking for anything of interest. Roger’s collection consisted of travel guides, natural history books, hunting and exploration tales, and a number of classic and obscure novels. The Scotch was having an effect on Trager’s ability to focus, and he was about to take his glass back to the bungalow when he picked out a current date on the spine of a journal. Walking up to the shelf, he found that Roger had several decades’ worth of the *Himalayan Journal*, the mountaineers’ record of climbs and expeditions. On an inspiration, he opened the index edition.

There was only one reference to the Murghi valley, which turned out to be a brief note that in 1946 a group of English and American officers had “followed Richardson as far as the gompa.” Trager recalled overhearing references to a gompa, or monastery, during his Darcha incarceration, but no such building was anywhere near the village. Trager also looked up the most recent Indian Army climb of Everest. The account was all martial language, with the peak described as “the target” and the climb as “the mission.” The author did not mention the view or climbing techniques, only the schedule of campsites and an alphabetical list of personnel. Trager found Lakpa’s name under “High Altitude Porters.” He was about to put the journal away when another name caught his eye: Nazir, A., Lieutenant. His nemesis was a mountaineer.

“Hello, *sahib*?”

“Lakpa!”

The *sirdar* stood in the door, smiling as he had on their first meeting in Kawapatri, wearing the same jeans and ski sweater. Trager juggled his drink and book for a moment, then set both down on the floor and shook Lakpa's hand. He knew he was supposed to regard the Ladakhi as "spoiled," but he was going to leave that to Freya. "Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Srinagar, *sahib*, just now, with Sonam."

"Sonam made it! What happened to Harry Macintosh?"

"I am not seeing Harry-*sahib*. Men in Lunwali tell Sonam he is walk out Sonjal, back of Manali, out to Chenab River."

"Manali! I went there on a bus! It's what—a hundred miles from here? What did Leslie say?"

"I am not talking to Leslie, no." Lakpa became visibly reserved.

"Listen," Trager said. "I don't care about you and Leslie. I really don't. And neither does Freya."

"No, *sahib*. But I am not seeing her after Kargil bus. I think she is go to hotel. Others are on houseboat."

"Sundown and Pratima?"

"And the mother." He reached under his sweater and produced a wrinkled envelope from his shirt pocket. "Pratima says, for you."

Trager started to tear open the corner, but at that moment Roger stuck his head into the room. "See here, chaps, your lorry driver is taking out the wall of the building. Be some good fellows and show him the road."

It was dark outside. A truck was backing up the driveway, guided by Sonam with a lantern. The cook flashed a smile of greeting to Trager as the truck's rear wheel ground several flower pots to dust. Lakpa shouted, and the vehicle pulled forward to clear the building. The truck finally just parked where it stood. A Sikh driver got down from the cab and rolled back the tarpaulin that covered the load. The bed was loaded with wooden crates and piles of blue duffle bags.

"Is this Max's equipment?" Trager asked.

"Freya's equipment," said Lakpa. It was an impressive amount of gear. There had been more to salvage from Holz than permits and rosters.

"What do you think of all this?" Trager asked. "You knew Max a long time, didn't you?"

"Yes, *sahib*. He is like little kid. Do this, and this, whatever he wants, always changing. He does some trekking, but he is not knowing these mountains. And he is never have money after a trek. I think, now, more work, better work. And more money. Even after Springtime in Kashmir, there is money left."

Trager helped Sonam and Lakpa move the equipment into the bungalow, while the Sikh sat smoking in his cab. Trager could only guess at the contents of each load he shouldered in the dark: rattling bags of hardware, lumpy duffels, stiff bundles with protruding tent poles, oily stove sacks. Some were the same bags and cartons that he had lived out of for a week—with one difference. Wherever the HOTS logo had been stenciled, there was now only an empty rectangle of fresh black paint.

**Houseboat Golden Victory
Nagin Lake
Srinagar, Kashmir**



Dear Ansel:

I try not to worry about you. The District Commissioner's office said you were a military problem. The military would not see me. J&K Tourism was sympathetic. I don't think they get along with Central Government. But they don't have influence with the Army. Lakpa says Freya Martens will take care of you. I hope that is true. She saw us off on the bus to Srinagar. Such a nervous woman.

Come to us if you can. I want to show you I can be more than the brat I was in the mountains. I made Sundown and Kamala save you the room next to mine. That's right—we're all here together. The worst should be over by the time you arrive.

Love, Pratima

There were only a few parties at breakfast in the Kara Koram, all apparently lowland Indians in safari suits or saris. Trager re-read the letter over coffee. He could just imagine Pratima arguing with clerks in office anterooms. He wondered if she could really have managed to help him if Freya had not turned up. It seemed to Trager that for all Pratima's ironic aggressiveness, she was extremely timid. She told her version of the Busco family crisis long after her father, and then only in a state of delirium. The two of them with Kamala would be a sight to see. The mother was obviously both a link and a barrier between father and daughter. She had discovered of both their lovers and kept both secrets. Trager had only met the woman for a few moments, but he could imagine how it was. His own mother wasn't that different. Sure of her own agency, and for that reason always responsible, she would decide what was proper, then act. Others could flee—as had Trager and his father—or be pulled after, as was Pratima. But whatever happened was her doing. Sundown and Pratima had not escaped Kamala by going on the trek. They had brought her along.

As Trager was contemplating the logistics of a round trip bus ride to Srinagar, Roger Kaul entered the dining room and detoured past Trager's table. "I trust the Kara Koram suits you better than the Darcha Rest House," he said.

"Believe me," said Trager. "Have you seen Freya? She didn't come home last night, and I've got some things to discuss with her."

"Home?" Roger exclaimed. "Freya is at home anywhere in Kargil, where everyone has something to discuss with her. I should not worry."

"Okay, I won't. I take it you're one of her backers."

"Oh, by no means," Roger said quickly, holding up his hands. "No, I believe she has some investment from America."

"I see. I just wondered who I was really working for."

"Do any of us know who we really work for?" Roger asked. "I am fond of thinking I am my own master here, but let there be an airline strike and I am quickly reminded that I am

merely a servant to PanAm or Swissair. My advice is, never worry about the source of your orders. Worry about the source of your customers.”

When Trager returned to the bungalow, Lakpa and Sonam were closing the wide double doors of the living room. “*Sahib*, we go bazaar for some trekking things. I lock this door.”

“I’ll go with you,” Trager said. “I’ve hung out in bungalows long enough.”

Sonam led the way down the steep lane into the bazaar, wearing a necklace of plastic fuel jugs tied together with string. The cook seemed to like his loads loose and noisy. Lakpa carried a nylon gym bag, looking as if he were on his way to a handball workout.

“You climbed with that Lieutenant Nazir on Everest, didn’t you?” Trager asked Lakpa.

“Yes, *sahib*. Very serious man, very strict.”

“But he got along well enough with you to let you take the trekkers to Kargil last week.”

“He is not wanting to feed us all. But he is a good man. On Everest, other Army men tell Ladakhi porters and Sherpas to carry every little thing. Nazir carried loads like porters—thirty kilos.”

They stopped in front of a stall labeled Gupta Stove Work. Sonam left them there, vanishing into the stream of people flowing through the street. A mechanic stepped up to a rough workbench to examine two primus stoves Lakpa took from his pack. The two men discussed some problem in Ladakhi, ignoring Trager. Trager found himself becoming impatient. He had tinkered with similar stoves many times and probably knew a great deal about the issue at hand. Yet he could only watch the *sirdar’s* conversation from afar. Lakpa still had one job; Trager had another. And it seemed to Trager that if he did not take some action immediately, the climb of Murghi-II and every trip in the future would be exactly like Springtime in Kashmir.

“What else do we have to do down here?” Trager asked. “Give me part of your shopping list, and I’ll get to work.”

“We buy some cooking things, some dahl . . . but this man is finish soon.”

“No, I’ve shopped for plenty of trips at home. We always just split the list and do it in half the time. Dahl—lentils—how much do we need?”



"Fifteen kilos. But just wait."

"No, I'll get it. I'll meet you back here." He dodged into the crowds before Lakpa could object again.

The central bazaar was a swirl of noise and dust. Trager's senses, used to the sparse environment of the mountains, were overwhelmed by detail: incense and tobacco; bright piles of spices; women in purdah like walking tents; the chatter of vendors and bleating of goats. Every minute or so, the crowd scattered to the gutters as a truck or bus trundled through, then swept back together. Trager passed the grain merchant's stall three times before he noticed the bins of legumes.

"Dahl. Fifteen kilos," he said to a boy in the stall.

"Achcha, *sahib*. Red dahl? Yellow dahl?"

The boy waved at bins that contained six or eight varieties of peas, beans, and lentils. Trager had no idea what Lakpa wanted, but he pointed at some brownish lentils that looked most familiar to him.

The boy weighed the dahl out on a balance. "Now give me bag, *sahib*," he said. He pointed at the sheets of newspaper he used to wrap his sales. The only way he could wrap thirty pounds of lentils would be in a stack of small packages, and then Trager would still have no way to carry them. "Bag is from tailor-wallah, other side," the boy said.

The tailor, a wizened man sitting with a hand-driven sewing machine held between his knees, spoke little English. A young clerk passing by intervened. "This man does not have any bags. He makes them on the spot. You provide some cloth. Those merchants are at the other end of the bazaar. But please, may I presume you are with Miss Martens? Yes? Congratulations on winning the Restricted Area permit. This was a good piece of work. "

"How did you know about that?" Trager asked.

"Oh, it is all over. Some are saying it should have been let out to an all-Indian company, but for my part, I suspect you chaps are preferable to one or another Bombay travel-*wallah* who would have only bollixed the job."

Trager thought other people were looking and pointing at him as he made his way to the end of the bazaar. He picked out some plain muslin and rolled off what he thought would be needed for a large sack. The fabric cost only a few rupees, but that created a new problem. Trager had only hundred-rupee notes and the vendor could not change them. Trager went back to the middle of the bazaar to the one bank in town. A line of western tourists extended out the door and down the street. He decided he was beaten.

Lakpa was gone when Trager got back to the stove stall, but the mechanic pointed toward the end of the bazaar where a side lane meandered down toward the Indus River. Leaving the main shopping alleys, Trager passed through a warren of sheet-metal shacks ringing with sounds of grinding and hammering. He guessed that this industrial quarter was where Sonam had gone to fill the kerosene jugs. He wandered among forges and car repair stalls without seeing either of the Ladakhis until he found himself at a grove of trees along the river. It was a pleasant place, despite its proximity to the workshops, cool and shady. A small crowd of men and boys had gathered at the edge of the grove, and Trager wandered close enough to see what they were looking at.

The men were watching tourists camping. Bright orange and red tents sprouted among the willow trees. A half dozen young tourists lounged in front of the tents, ignoring the onlookers, sunning themselves in the bright spaces between the leaf shadows. They were almost naked, men and women in sleek swim suits. One girl lay face down with her bikini straps open on either side. She formed the centerpiece for the spectators, who jostled to get a better look.



"Hallo, hallo!" a voice called from inside the camp. "*Ja*, you there! *Komm, komm, komm!*" A round-faced, athletic-looking man in a crisp white sport shirt motioned to him. Trager recognized the tour leader whose group he had crashed at the Srinagar airport. The Ladakhis had already turned to see who the man was waving at. Reluctantly, Trager walked through the crowd and into the grove. There was no fence, but he felt as if he had passed through a barrier that no one else in the road could have crossed.

"So! You are looking for Freya, *ja*?" the man asked with a toothy smile.

"How did you know I was with Freya?"

"Ha!" The man slapped him on the back, too hard. "You are famous. The mysterious young man who appears in Freya's jeep yesterday. So! She sends old Max packing in one direction, drives up to Darcha, comes down with a new one. So! I am Viktor Axt, tour leader for Vogeltur, out of München."

"Ansel Trager," he said. "We met in Srinagar. Where are you trekking?"

"Ha! This is a good question. We are hoping to be in the Murghi this year, but your damn Freya has already the permit. No one will have a chance for another year. Then maybe some bribe, some *baksheesh*, and we will see. But now we just go over to Leh, to see the monasteries. So! But you will enjoy your season at the top. Max did, when he was there. But where is Freya?"

"Couldn't tell you," said Trager. "She was away last night. I guess obtaining trekking permits is late work."

Viktor roared with laughter. He spoke in French to the people on the towels. They laughed, too, and the girl with her top off raised on her elbows to get a better look at Trager. The crowd murmured in the lane.

"So! You are with Freya, but not at night. You have taken over Max's place, but not all of his duties. Poor Max! I am seeing him in Srinagar last week. Absolute drunk! You would say, shit-face. Ha! This is from thinking with the balls, not with the brains. But this is always a problem, *ja*, even on the trek."

He flicked his eyes down at the sunbathers, and grinned. "I have in Nepal one woman, she comes with her husband on the same trek. What could I do? Her man, he goes crying to Vogeltur in München, and next thing they are wanting to give me Afghanistan. Only the *mujahedeen* fighting saves me. We take always the blame, and we hope the shits in the office are not losing the business. Where does Freya have her money from? Do you know? No. This is the big secret. So take care. And take my card, here. Next year, I am my own company. No more shit out of München. When this business with Freya is not working, you call. I will need some man in America."

Trager started to break away, but Viktor said, "Please! We are just having some lunch. These are some of my party, this is Monique, and Rudi, and this . . ." A cook slipped a bottle of beer into Trager's hands. As Viktor steered him farther into the compound, the girl on the blanket rolled over to get a better look.

"Ansel!" Freya's voice cut the sultry air. The men in the lane parted to let her through.

"Ah! Meine liebe, schöne Freya! Wo hast du . . ."

"Genug! Ansel, let's go."

"Freya, your boy was simply lost!"

"And you, you darling, are helping him find his way."

"Ha! As one helps another in the mountains. So! You will join us?"

"Ansel and I have work to do." She slipped her hand around Trager's and towed him away.

"I am certain this is an important time for you," Viktor called after them. "Plans to make. Debts to pay." Freya stepped over the sunbathing girl and headed for the road.

"What happened to you last night?" Trager asked.

"One meeting after another. I haven't been back to the bungalow, I haven't been to sleep yet, and I'm in no mood to discover you at a Vogultur camp in front of half the town. Will you put that beer down?"

Trager set the half-full bottle on the side of the road. "I was looking for Lakpa and Sonam. I was helping them with the shopping."

"I know," Freya said. "The bazaar is talking about it. When you don't know your way around, stay with those who do." She took a deep breath. "Right now, a hundred feet in front of us there's a wave of news saying that Freya Marten's climb leader is in business with Viktor Axt. What did he offer you?"

"Lunch," Trager said. "And he gave me his card. He said he might need a man some day in America."

"Viktor needs a man every day, wherever he is. Look—he was using you, parading you. He needs to have people connected with the only people allowed to run treks in the Restricted Area. You have to be careful. We have the permit, tomorrow they could take it away."

Two men were waiting at the base of the steep road that climbed up to the Kara Koram. One of them, a large balding man regarded them through dark sunglasses.

"I found him," Freya announced. "Ansel, you remember Colonel Battarchaya?"

The Commandant of Kawapatri wore a civilian suit, but Trager still recognized the smooth voice. "Mr. Trager, so good to see you again," the Colonel murmured. "I understand Freya has needed to rescue you once more from the clutches of the military. You really should mind the company you keep."

"Please tell him, Ravi," Freya said. "When I found him just now he was about to have lunch with Viktor Axt."

"Oh, dear God," the Colonel sighed. The young man with him giggled, and the Colonel frowned at him in irritation.

"Ansel, this is Gulam Rasheed," Freya said. "He's the J-and-K State tourism director in Kargil."

Rasheed sprang forward. He was not much older than Trager, with long hair and a stylish sport coat. As he pumped Trager's hand, he said, "Very good to meet you. I was just saying how pleased we are to be able to have you up the Murghi. You know, it was close thing to get the Restricted Area open at all. The army chaps are quite keen to have all of Ladakh restricted again. They would have each of us in our own assigned place. Then they could shoot anything that moved."

The Colonel wheezed, and Trager sensed that Rasheed had made this remark too often. But Rasheed ignored him and went on. "Call on me if there is anything I can do to facilitate your climbing, or . . . any other concerns that will increase the tourism potential of Jammu and Kashmir." He seemed to expect some response.

"Great. That's great," Trager said. "Thanks."

"Very good. Well, I am off." He bounced down the road into the bazaar.

"Bastard," the Colonel muttered. "But he is powerless."

"Do you see, Ansel?" Freya asked. "Rasheed is already working on the angle that you and Viktor are going to come up with a challenge to me. It's only a matter of time until he tries to use that as some kind of lever."

"He'll be out of luck," Trager said. "I don't have anything to do with Viktor."

"Well put," the Colonel said. "Freya, you have the advantage in this matter of loyal companions, both Mr. Trager and your Ladakhis. In fact, Mr. Trager, I should look to your *sirdar* for guidance until you get the hang of things. You should not have left him in the bazaar today. Remember that he also is a guide. Profit from his guidance. Learn from him. He is invaluable, and an honest man."

"I know," Trager said. "He brought back every unspent rupee from Springtime in Kashmir. Had each expense written down in a book, and didn't even pay himself."

"Certainly he has expensed himself somewhat, though," the Colonel said drily.

"In any case," Freya said, "we should pay the boys off tonight."

"Am I one of 'the boys'?" Trager asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Battarchaya said.

"In Kawapatri, our agreement was four hundred dollars. That would be about thirty-two hundred rupees and change."

"Now, see here," Battarchaya began, "the situation is . . ."

"Ravi!" Freya interrupted. "I will take care of this."

Battarchaya looked sharply at her, then at Trager. "Well, see to it," he said. "Best of luck." He shook Trager's hand and walked away toward the bazaar.

"Let's get back," Freya said. "I'll explain on the way." she waited until they were halfway up the hill to the Kara Koram and well away from the bazaar traffic. "The 'situation' Ravi was referring to is this: I don't have a way of paying you in dollars right now. Two weeks ago, you contracted with Holz Overseas Trekking, which doesn't exist. I can give you rupees from the trek—you earned it—but it won't do you much good. When your visa runs out next month and you have to leave India, you can only get dollars for ten percent of what you converted to rupees when you were here. So unless you spent three grand on your bus trip, you'll forfeit all your money from Springtime in Kashmir."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Trust me. No! Don't make that face! Look, you have no expenses as long as you're here. Food, equipment, Roger's scotch--all on the house. When we get back and I can write a check, you'll get everything you earned."

"We? You're coming back with me?"

"Probably. I have to leave every six months to keep my own visa, and there's a trade show in Vancouver. But in any case, I'm asking you to stick with us through this climb and trust us to make it worth your while."

Trager walked in silence for a minute. Then he asked, "Who is the 'us?' Is Battarchaya one of your investors?"

"No. More like a consultant. It was his influence that really got the Army to accept my application."

"Why wouldn't he do the same for Max? I thought they were old friends."

"They still are, as far as I know. But Ravi is a good enough friend to realize that with Max, you can't combine business and friendship."

"You did," Trager said. "You were more than friends, weren't you?"

Freya's eyes flashed. "Was that just a guess?"

"Viktor made some remark about my filling Max's place."

"Viktor," Freya sighed. "But what difference does that make to you?"

"Nothing," Trager said. "Really."

They were both silent for a few paces. Then Freya said, "You know, in this job, all that matters—whether or not our clients climb their mountain or finish their trek—is that all of them feel a little better about themselves after it's over."

Trager waited for her to continue. "OK. And so"

"And so when you ask a woman about her love life, and she tells you, and then asks what difference it makes to you, don't say 'nothing.' Never say 'nothing.'"

Freya slept through the afternoon, and Trager did not see her again until she met him and Lakpa in the bungalow living room in the evening. The floor was packed to the walls with the trekking and climbing equipment, but they cleared a circle under the single-bulb ceiling light. They sat on duffels facing each other with schedules and equipment lists strewn on the worn woolen rug between them.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here last night," Freya said, "but I got a lot done." The main thing is that I got permission to put the base camp by the gompa below the Murghi Glacier."

"The monastery?" Trager asked.

"Yes, *sahib*, Buddhist monastery," Lakpa said. "Many gompa toward Leh. But this side Ladakh is all Muslim. Murghi gompa is only one. But very far from Murghi-II."

"It's not a base for Murghi-II," Freya said. "We'll put a climbing camp on the glacier. The gompa will be more than that. It will be permanent. Some trekkers won't even walk in any further. They'll just come to see the monastery. It will be a place to wait out bad weather, and it means we won't have to move all this gear into the mountains for every trek."

"*Memsahib*, no good camp by gompa," Lakpa said. "Too small."

"It's the place the government will let us have," Freya said impatiently. "We'll make it work."

Lakpa's face assumed an attentive blankness that Trager had seen it before in the Sonjal.

Freya picked up a sheet of paper from the floor and thrust it at Lakpa. "This is what Ansel and I will need for our reconnaissance of Murghi-II. Pull that gear out first. We'll be leaving tomorrow as soon as we're packed. You and Sonam can put the base camp in with ponies while we're up on the glacier."

"*Memsahib*," Lakpa said. "I think, I go with Trager, find the climbing route."

"No, you're putting in the camp," Freya said. Her voice was tense. "You'll be needed there, and I want to see the mountain for myself. It's not the way Max would have done it, but Max is gone, and things are going to be different now. Get started on the equipment in the other room. You can work in here as soon as Ansel and I are finished."

After the *sirdar* had left, Freya said quietly, "This might be harder than I thought."

"Maybe he really wants to find a better camp site."

"Ansel, what Lakpa really wants is your job. Max never let him have a trek of his own, and he thinks now that Max is gone, he automatically has a new position."

"Why shouldn't he?" Trager asked. "He knows what he's doing better than I do."

"Not necessarily. On the trek, sure, of course he does. But you already know that's only part of the business. When clients get nervous over here—about the food, the customs, whatever—they want a westerner in between them and India. Just to take charge. To repeat directions without an accent. To laugh at the same jokes. Another Indian, even one in jeans and Nikes, won't do."

Trager was about to object, but he remembered his own assumptions about Vasant Bagchee. He chose his words carefully. "I don't want to talk myself out of a job, but . . . if the clients want an Indian adventure, why shouldn't they get used to having an Indian guide? I mean, Leslie Macintosh did."

Freya laughed. "OK, Leslie is a different kind of adventurer. Very few of our people are really adventurers at all. They just want the trappings." She waved her hand across the air, as if erasing an invisible slate. "But of course, you're right. Lakpa should get his own treks. Once we get busy, there won't be any choice. But not right now. There are some things that have to be explained to him, and there simply isn't time. We're all going to be on the run from now until the moment the Murghi-II clients arrive."

"Oh," Trager said. "I was going to ask about going out to Srinagar for a day or two."

"Before the climb? Forget it. I need you here."

"I was thinking before the recon. I could take the bus" He did not bother finishing. Freya's face had turned to stone.

"Do you think this is some ski area job where you can pack up and drift away anytime you want?"

"I've never done that," Trager protested.

"Then don't start here!" Freya began to collect her papers. "What's in Srinagar?"

"Pratima—and her family—from the last trek? She sent a letter with Lakpa and invited me to stay with them. It would just be for a day."

"It could be for the rest of your life as far as I'm concerned I'm pretty damned disappointed. I thought you were serious about this, but it turns out what you're really interested in is an adolescent nymph."

"Freya, I just want to see how they're doing."

"You need to make a decision. Me or them. Her—whichever it is."

"Are you—jealous?" Trager asked.

"A little," Freya said. "And I'm mad. I'm mad that I misjudged another man. I'm mad that I have to argue about your girlfriend at a time like this." She stood up. "You go over that pass, you can stay over. With Pratima, with Leslie—with Viktor, for all I care. One way or another, you're packing your bag tonight. You decide whether it's for a bus trip or a climb. I have everything invested in these mountains, and I won't risk that for anyone's sake. Certainly not for yours."

She walked to the door and called for Lakpa and Sonam.

When Trager was a teenager, he had saved to buy one carabiner at a time. Now he had never seen so much climbing gear in one place. Once they had dumped out the duffel bags and crates, there were thousands of feet of rope in coils on the rug, hundreds of aluminum carabiners clipped together in long chains, and ice screws tied in spiny bundles like steel sea urchins.

She's bought me off, Trager thought. He was not going out to Srinagar. He could not imagine why he had brought it up. He was on his way to a Himalayan climb at last, and there was no going back. At the same time, he had the panicky feeling that among all this plenty, with his dream about to be realized, he had already managed to offend Freya to the point where she was ready to wake him up and send him away.

"*Memsahib*, what climbing things you take for recon?" Lakpa asked.

Freya just looked at Trager. "Our climb leader ought to decide that," she said.

After a moment, Trager said, "That depends. "Is it just a glacier walk?"

"Maybe steep glacier," Lakpa said.

"Didn't you climb the Murghi glacier on the last trek?"

"Not very far," Freya said. "We had Ferndecker with us."

"Not see Murghi-II," said Lakpa.

"You're sure the mountain is there?"

"Why?" Freya asked. "Are you looking for a reason not to go?"

"No! I'm looking for a reason not to walk up the wrong glacier. Like you said, we don't have much time. Sorry, but you did a recon on the last trek that went only so far, and it wasn't far enough. If we're going to take people up there, I want to see the whole thing. I don't want to get . . ."

Freya put her hand on Trager's arm. "You don't have to go on. I'll show you everything we've got, since you're going to be with us." She left her hand in place for a moment, then got up. "Start on tents and camp gear until I get back. Then we'll decide on the climbing."

She returned a few minutes later and handed Trager a thick book with a worn cover. "This is from Roger's library. Burlington Richardson's *Routes in the Mountains of Kashmir and Ladakh*. Look at Route 53." Trager opened the heavy volume. The pages were yellowed and printed in an archaic type face. Route 53 was titled, "Indus- Zanskar, via Murghi." There followed a list of villages, with mileages between, starting with Kargil and including Darcha and Murghi Gompa. Beyond the gompa, the list ended with a short narrative.

Proceed, except where impossible, up true left bank, whence crossings may be accomplished on occasional bridges of snow. Three kos from the main track, a narrow gorge is traversed, emerging below the Gompa. Murghi monastery is a poor place, offering little in the way of provisions. Its chief attraction for the monks who reside there is its very wildness, which explains its being overlooked by the Dogra adventurers who overran Ladak in 1834. A range of spectacular snow peaks is visible S from the gompa roof. These appear to be accessible only from the large glacier divulging into the Murghi some six miles upstream. The pass to Zanskar is reputed to lie two or three stages above this confluence.

There was a sketch map showing the layout of the valley. The peaks south of the monastery were indicated by small triangles labeled with roman numerals I-IV.

"This is what you're basing a climbing expedition on?" Trager asked. "It's almost as bad as the recon report for Springtime in Kashmir."

"It's exactly as bad as the recon report for Springtime in Kashmir. Look at Route 14."

Kashmir-Ladak, via Janavar Gali and Sonjal La

Stage 1 - 9 miles — The track from Kawapatri is steep but fit for ponies through forest, marg, and maidan. Camp at Gujar site 2 kos NNE of third nala.

Stage 2 - 9 miles — Ascend to treeline, thence north to a broad marg SE of Janavar Gali, which would be seen to the NW but for intervening ridges.

Stage 3 - 11 miles — Cross Janavar Gali (13,262), descending to Sonjal at Lunwali, where provisions are not available.

"I see," Trager said. He flipped back to the Murghi description. "So, this doesn't tell us much of anything."

"That's not true," Freya said. "It tells us the Murghi peaks are hard to find, and we can guarantee we're giving our clients a first ascent. OK, Max should have waited until we did our own reconnaissance before selling the trip. But Ravi Battarchaya told us the army climbed Murghi-I last year, so we know it's there. He's the one who suggested it."

"But we don't know if it's rock or snow. Whether we need bivouac gear or fixed ropes."

"The rock in the Murghi is terrible, so we have to find a snow route."

"And clients always use fixed rope," Lakpa said.

"Ansel"

"I know," Trager said. "It's an adventure." He surveyed the mounds of equipment again. "Okay, we'll take one rope and a rack of ice climbing equipment on the recon. Inventory everything else and take it all up to base camp. We'll know what we really need when Freya and I see the mountain."

He looked at Freya, and she smiled. She turned to Lakpa. "Do it," she said.

They worked together after that. Trager ran ropes through his hands foot by foot, pulling out ones that had obvious damage to their covers or lumps in the core that indicated broken strands. Trager selected a small collection of ice screws and carabiners, and managed to locate a modern ice axe and ice hammer for his own tools. Freya selected out a compact nylon mountain tent.

"I'm the last person who used it," she said. "I know it's in good shape. Small, but it's light. Your load." She tossed it to Trager.

At midnight, Freya said, "Enough. Let's start again tomorrow. Ansel, would you take Roger's book back for me? He's very jealous of his collection." Trager walked to the lodge under the dark trees of the orchard. The moon was just beginning to wane, and he had no trouble following the path. The library was another matter. No lights worked. Trager suspected Roger turned them off at a breaker to save electricity. Only the white-bound volumes of the *Himalayan Journal* were distinguishable on the wall, and Trager decided to slide the guide on top of them for the night. Then he remembered the one reference to the Murghi he had found, and realized he was holding the 'Richardson' the officers had followed on their way

to Zanskar decades ago. He wondered just how old the guide really was. He carried the book to the window, and turned to the end papers to find the copyright.

The original publication date was even older than he suspected—1875—but that was not what caught his attention. On the inside cover, the previous owner had affixed a bookplate:

Ex Libris
Weston Ferndecker

When Trager returned from his errand, the bungalow was also dark. He almost tripped over Lakpa and Sonam in sleeping bags on the porch. “Watching door,” Lakpa said. “Many loose things now to steal. Good night, *sahib*.” Trager got lost in the living room. Where the door of his bedroom should have been was a pile of duffle bags. He cracked his shins on the corner of a box, and stopped within an inch of impaling himself on an ice axe. A light flickered in another doorway.

“Ansel? In here,” Freya said. She sat cross-legged on the bed, a loose flannel night shirt draped around her. The candle she had lit on the nightstand painted one side of her face in a rich yellow light, heightening the shape of her long nose and high cheekbones, the darker undertones of her light hair, and the curve of her breast. “Thank you,” she said, “for staying with me.”

The room faced south. Although the night was cool outside, the building still held the warmth of the day. Trager took off his windbreaker and carefully, self-consciously, folded it under the flap of his rucksack. “How did my pack get here?” he asked.

“The other room is full of equipment. There are crampons all over the bed. The boys brought your things.”

“Did you ask them to?”

“No.” Freya laughed lightly.

“I must have a reputation,” Trager said. “In Lunwali, they had this song”

“I heard about it,” Freya said. “And in Gulpathar they told stories about you and Pratima,”

“It wasn’t true,” said Trager.

“I know that too.” She shook her head at him. “But that’s not good enough for me.”

She blew out the candle, but the room seemed actually brighter without the flame. The moon shone directly in through this window, as it had at Darcha, replacing the warm glare of the candle with a cool, blue, shadowless light that softened Freya’s features as she arched her back and stripped the long shirt over her head. It was hard to believe this was the same moon, the same sky.

Freya was direct, efficient. She asked him about condoms. Trager was sure he had some in a corner of his toilet kit, but the thought of turning his rucksack out on the floor and rummaging for rubbers seemed ridiculous. He said so, but there was no need. Freya quickly produced her own, laid out close by on the nightstand.

As Trager fumbled with buttons and zippers, he thought every dream he had ever had in his life was coming true, and yet he was thoroughly intimidated. Only when they were actually

together on the bed starting to fit against one another's unfamiliar bodies did Trager discover that Freya was the awkward one. She was not exactly bashful, but had a mechanical way of holding him that seemed overlearned and not responsive to what he did. For the first time in his life, he asked a woman to slow down. He laughed to make it a joke, but she pulled away from him.



Her face was in shadow, her neck and shoulder in white light, her head propped on one arm. "Don't make fun of me," she said. "Do you think this is something that happens every day? You've seen the people we work with. How much experience do you think a person would want to get with them? If I'm falling love with you, it's because you're something different."

"Then relax," Trager said. "You're making me nervous."

"I never relax." But she did, eventually. She let her head drop back to the pillow. As she began to respond to his movements, Trager's own nervousness melted away. He could not say that Freya ever really lost control. But a small cry in her throat and a smooth, sudden bending of her body against his made him think she enjoyed giving him the opportunity to do something for her.



Freya had Trager drive the jeep. “It attracts less attention than having a woman at the wheel,” she said. Yet people noticed them everywhere—in the bazaar, at the Kara Koram, on the road up to Darcha. Noticed, and turned away. “They know we’re together,” Freya said. “People like Viktor know better than to waste their time propositioning either of us.”

They drove through Darcha without a pause. The Public Works Rest House passed in a flash of whitewashed stone. Trager looked for a glimpse of the Sonjal La glacier, but it was hidden behind the bend of the canyon.

“You don’t have to check in with Nazir?” Trager asked.

“I’ve already gone over his head,” Freya said. “If we stopped to chat it would only humiliate him.”

Above the village, the road followed the Murghi Nala in a narrowing valley, until constricting walls of red shale forced the track to switchback up a gravelly ridge. At the first corner above the stream, Freya said, “Pull off. Put it in four-wheel drive and follow the *nala* as far as you can.”

They parked after the track had already narrowed from two ruts to a single foot path. The slope so steep that the jeep crept backwards against the hand brake. Freya jumped out and wedged stones beneath the wheels. A faint trail traversed slopes of scree and cactus above the brown foaming stream. The day was hot, and Freya changed her khaki skirt for a pair of hiking shorts. “This is the only kind of place I can wear shorts,” she said. “It’s not considered appropriate dress for women in India.”

“Leslie Macintosh wore them,” Trager said.

“Exactly.”

They shouldered their heavy packs and started along the trail. Behind them, the road climbed barren slopes toward a high pass. In a few hundred yards they stopped to readjust the loads. Trager was surprised to find the road, the jeep, and the lower valley had already disappeared into the folds of the hillside. On the canyon floor the stream carved back and forth across a waste of boulders and glacial till. The trail clung to the slope, worming around the bases of crumbly cliffs.

“This is pretty narrow for ponies,” Trager said. “The loads will bump the rock.”

“We’ll get by this season,” Freya said. “Next year we put a road in.”

“You’re serious.”

“I am. It will just be a bulldozer track along the stream, and it will probably get washed out every year, but we’ll be able to truck in supplies and construction materials.”

“What construction materials do you need for a climbing camp?”

“Do you listen? It’s not a climbing camp. Our clients expect more than that. I expect more than that. Remember we’re going to be living up here. Do you want to spend three or four months a

year without a place to wash or hang your clothes? At the very least, we'll have bunks, a wash house, and maybe solar water heat. We're here for the long haul."

A few miles up the valley, a long waist-high stone wall divided the trail into two lanes below a cliff of friable yellow rock. Freya kept the wall on her right, as Pratima had the cairn on the Janavar Gali. Compared to the cairn, this was a work of art. It was built of neatly placed slabs of stone, all of them completely covered with finely carved characters. Trager ran his hand over the graceful, clean cuts. It was the first time he had seen a *mani* wall, although he knew what it was from a childhood reading about Himalayan expeditions.



Freya traced each syllable. "'*Om-ma-ni-pa-dme-hum.*' It's a mantra. *Mani* is jewel, *padme* is lotus, and *om* is . . . *om*. So something like, 'the jewel is in the lotus'. The lotus is an important symbol for Buddhists. Blossoms on top of muddy water. Beauty growing out of nothing."

The trail dipped into a gulley choked with gravelly snow. On the other side was another wall just like the first. Then another gulley, another ridge, another wall. And so on. After half an hour of passing wall after wall, Trager asked, "Who did all the work?"

"Look up," Freya said. Trager was startled to find that the cliff he was walking beneath formed the lower buttress of what looked like a skyscraper. A tall, rectangular building rose out of the hillside a few hundred yards above the trail. Built of bricks the same color as the rock, it seemed to be a natural formation exposed by erosion. On the corners of the roof, long strips of white cloth fluttered in the warm breeze. "Murghi Gompa," Freya said. "This is the lamas' work."

"From below, you can't even tell it's here," Trager said.

"That what makes it a good place for a gompa. And for a base camp, whatever Lakpa says." The trail dropped onto a sandy shelf dotted with large boulders.

"It looks OK to me as a camp." Trager said to Freya. "Is Lakpa concerned about it violating something to do with the gompa?"

"Or something to do with ghosts," Freya said. "This is where Weston Ferndecker died. Just back where we crossed the snow. That avalanche track ran all the way across the stream last month. Ferndecker was on the wrong side of the stream. He tried to cross over on a snow bridge upstream, and it broke. He floated right past here—we were having lunch—and got sucked under the snow from that avalanche track. The *nala* has cut all the way through now, so we have to assume his body washed away. I looked for his equipment on the way up and didn't see anything. Nazir said nothing had turned up downstream."

"What did his family say?"

"As far as I know, the consulate is still trying to track them down. Wherever Mr. Ferndecker is now, he will keep until we get back."

One hour upstream from camp they caught sight of the first snow peak. Only a white summit protruded above the craggy hills, giving no indication of the climbing problems below. "Murghi-I," said Freya. "Murghi-II is to the right. We can't see it behind the ridge."

Trager looked up and down the valley, studying the proportions of the landscape between the flat below the gompa and the distant peaks. "You know, this is a funny place for base camp," he

said. "It's far from the climbing, but it's also a half-day from the road. It seems like it ought to be either on the road or up at the glacier."

"There are two things our clients want," Freya said. "Exclusiveness and comfort. If we set up too close to Darcha, trekkers will feel cheated. If we make them walk all day to the glacier, they'll feel abused. But for what it's worth, Max and Vasant agreed with you. They laughed when I told them we needed a comfortable base off the road. Cute idea, Freya, now go stick your tits back in that brochure and keep them there. Now I'm the one who got the permit, I'm the one who'll run the place, and I'm the one those bastards will have to come to if they want their clients to stay there."

"I'm not laughing," Trager said. "So relax."

"Sorry," she said, and reached for his hand. "One of the things you get to do is listen to me bitch. I haven't had someone like that around, so I'm kind of making up for lost time. Look—this isn't an original idea. The Japanese have a hotel practically at Everest base camp in Nepal. The Alps have huts all over. My grandfather ran a mountain hotel in Alberta for thirty years. The *Gletscherblick*—Glacier View."

"But that was Canada," Trager said. "People could drive up in cars."

"People drove up in wagons," Freya said. "It was 1890."

"What happened after thirty years?"

"The glacier receded. It's nothing but a sand wash today."

"Like this?" Trager nodded at the valley.

"Open your eyes!" Freya jabbed a finger at the gumpa. "That's a four hundred year-old Tibetan monastery. The only one in western Ladakh. Outfits like Viktor's organize trips just to look at places like that. We've got our very own. Even if a whole summer of expeditions gets stormed out, no one who gets this far will go away disappointed. When China opened up, people paid to look at a few communal factories. When restrictions were taken off Ladakh, tourists stood in line just to ride a jeep down the highway. If the Provincial Government had ever made a Restricted Area out of my moraine, the *Gletscherblick* would stand today."

At early evening they came to the snout of a glacier that spilled into the valley from the direction of the Murghi peaks. Trager and Freya forded the foaming exit stream braced against each other, fighting to keep their balance in the current. On the far side, they rested on a sandy beach.

"I think Ferndecker got lost here on the way out," Freya said. "He hated this crossing going in, and I think he wandered down the wrong side of the *nala* hoping he'd find another ford."

"I noticed that old guide in Roger's library belonged to him. And some Americans used the Richardson book to hike up here in 1947. Was that Ferndecker? Had he been here before?"

"You figured that out. I'm not sure how far he actually got in 1947. And it wouldn't have made any difference. How would you tell someone where to cross the stream?"

“Depends on how much meltwater is coming off the glacier. It would change with the temperature. I'd tell people to follow our route, unless the glacier melt is too great, in which case they'd have to get across below here somehow.”

“In other words, ‘proceed, except where impossible, up true left bank’”

“ . . . whence crossings may be accomplished on occasional bridges of snow.’ OK, I got it.”

“Now you see what reconnaissance reports are really like. A hundred-year-old one is about as good as one from last month. Unless something—or someone—comes along to make a permanent change.”

“Like an avalanche that wipes out a village.”

“Or a company that builds a new one.”

They climbed along the edge of the glacier moraine to a gently sloping bench where a garden of blue gentian had taken root in the gravel near a cascade of ice water spilling off the glacier. Freya dumped her pack into the flowers and stretched her back and arms.

“Camp 1,” she said, “at least for us. Once we have the base in, this will just be a lunch stop on the way to the glacier.”

Trager set his pack next to Freya’s. The ground around them was patterned with large rectangles of pale, flattened plants. “Tent sites from last month,” Freya observed. “Things don’t grow back very quickly up here. If we can start trips next year from the gompa, we’ll never have to set up tents on this spot again.”

“How are the monks going to feel about tents set up right below their monastery?”

“Well, it's not exactly a natural environment to begin with. The only plants around the gompa are the willows and garden terraces the monks put in themselves.”

“The monks themselves is who I was thinking of. Carving all those stones that no one will see.”

“That's just it. People *will* see them now. Murghi gompa is probably the only monastery in Ladakh without its own tourist officials and concession stands. It's also probably the poorest. After four hundred years of chanting and carving, I think they'll welcome the attention.”

Freya sat next to Trager and pulled off her damp clothes. It was the first time Trager had seen her naked in full light. Like Trager, she had the outlines of her clothes stenciled on her body: Dark limbs and neck, pale everywhere else. She did not shave her armpits. Her breasts were not large—the photographer who took the famous catalog picture had used her muscular torso to fill the frame. Her hips were narrow; she was a woman of strength, not curves. She turned to him, and from where he sat, the long crest of her body stretched from horizon to horizon. He put the monks of Murghi gompa out of his mind, and rolled to meet her.

But she was on her feet. “Shower time!” she said, and danced across the flowers to the waterfall. Trager flinched. Ice water. But he knew there was no way he would not follow. “Hurry up!” Freya called. “Get your clothes off before we lose the sun!”

He pulled his shirt over his head without undoing the buttons. The jagged shadow of the western ridge raced toward their garden. It would be close, but Trager knew they would win.

There was frost on the flowers in the morning. Muffled in down jackets, they sat facing each other across the stove. Trager poured coffee. He had taken over Sonam's duties for the recon, and Freya approved.

"You know your way around a kitchen better than I do," she said. "Since I've been working in India, most of my meals have been handed to me by someone."

"What about before?" Trager asked. "Weren't you ever a little girl following your Mom around the house?"

"More like I followed my father around ski areas. But I used to be a cook. I worked summers for a B.C. guide service. I thought the same thing you did—nothing could be better than to make your living in the mountains. But those Austrian guides made it pretty clear a woman's place is in the cook tent, even though I could ski and climb better than a lot of them. One day I found I was a twenty-seven year old glorified housekeeper. So I borrowed some money, went down to Seattle, and ended up in Max's geology class. I thought geology would let me make a living in the mountains. It didn't work out like I expected, but in the end I was right."

They shouldered the packs. Trager had discovered why Sonam always had the stove and fuel bottles dangling off his load: The lids of Indian containers did not seal. His pack already smelled of kerosene from the previous afternoon.

They worked their way up a lateral moraine to avoid the lower crevasses of the glacier. When cliff bands finally cut off their route, they plunge-stepped down loose gravel onto the ice. They put on the rope, their crampons, and an array of crevasse rescue equipment. Each of them wore a webbing seat harness and carried webbing slings, ice screws, extra carabiners, and a pair of ascender clamps for climbing up the rope after a fall. No more Darcha Glacier tours, Trager thought. Never again.

They crunched across the ice on their crampons, hardware dangling around them. The slope steepened where the glacier poured around the cliffs. The upper edges of crevasses became higher, and the bridges across the cracks tipped at acute angles. Trager looked at the seracs with anticipation.



"Can I lead?" he asked. Freya nodded and pushed the rope through a brake attached to her harness. Trager watched her stance carefully. He knew this was a critical point in a climbing relationship—the point at which two people who have never climbed together have to come to terms with one another's technique. Trager wished Freya would tie herself to an ice screw, so that they both wouldn't be pulled off if he fell; but she seemed ready for him to climb. He would give her that, but decided to protect both of them by clipping the rope between them through a screw he placed near the lip of the first crevasse.

"Hoping you'd do that," Freya said.

Using his axe and ice hammer for handholds, Trager crossed the first crevasse with a single high step onto the face of the serac above. He took his time, enjoying the airy feeling of perching on the points of his crampons. He placed another screw in the middle of the face and anchored to a third inside the next crevasse. Then he pulled in the rope to protect Freya. "On belay!" he called.

She had trouble with the step. She missed her crampon placement on the first try, and did not try again. She simply grabbed the rope, yelled, "Hold me!" and pulled herself over the lip of the crevasse.

"That's cheating!" he called down.

"In mountains this big, nothing's 'cheating.' You'd better learn that."

She climbed up to him, unclipped some carabiners and ice screws from a sling on his chest, and immediately set off up a steep bridge across the next crevasse. Trager watched carefully as he paid out the rope. Freya was no gymnast. No matter what the angle or surface of the ice, she kept the same rhythm: Left foot, right foot, plant the axe, left, right, axe. He suspected she was a poor rock climber. When she came to a short ice wall, she shamelessly used a sling on an ice screw as an artificial foothold.

And yet she was fast. She was clearly scoping her route several moves in advance, never needing to backtrack or reconsider. In only a few minutes, she had run the rope out and was calling for Trager to climb. The glacier was less broken above, but they continued to belay each other for several rope lengths until they emerged at the bottom of a wide valley. The glacier above climbed gently for some miles-before turning right around a dramatic triangular rock peak. Beyond the peak towered an ice wall streaming with spindrift.

"Beautiful place!" Trager said. "How are we going to get the clients through the icefall?"

"You're going to have to allow a day for you and Lakpa to fix ropes. Then another day for moving the clients through."

"Maybe three days. How much climbing have the clients done? Will they need training before they go onto the ropes?"

"Shit," said Freya. "They might. If we had done that before, it might have worked out better. Weston Ferndecker turned around at the icefall. Turned us all around."

"So you never even saw this valley. Where is Murghi II, anyway?"

"Still behind the west ridge of Murghi-I. That's the ice face. Murghi-II is miles to the right. This pyramid at the corner doesn't have a name. Ravi Battarchaya showed me an Army map that puts it at a little over five thousand meters."

The triangular peak was almost symmetrical, split on the north ridge by a long ice couloir that ran in a white stripe from glacier to crest. Trager traced the obvious climbing route up the gully and along the skyline to the pointed summit.

"Why can't we climb that instead of Murghi-II?" Trager asked. "It's closer and we can see the whole route from here."

"For one thing it's probably too hard for our clients. And too small. Max promised an unclimbed six-thousand-meter peak. The Army already bagged Murghi-I, and the only other six-thousander in the area is Murghi-II. Plus you have to get a permit for every peak. You can't just switch mountains at the last minute."

"Who's going to know what mountain we climb in here?" Trager asked.

“The clients! The whole point is to give them something to brag about. And you’ll have a liaison officer with you, an army man assigned to make sure you get along with the local people and only go where you have a permit.”

“You keep saying, ‘you’ will do this. Are you going to be on this climb with me?”

“I hope so. It depends on how confident I am that this permit thing won’t go to hell. That’s why we need to wrap this up and get back to Kargil.”

Although the glacier was almost level now, their progress above the icefall was pitifully slow. The ice had a mantle of snow. Most of the crevasses were bridged, but the valley was a reflector oven and the snow was changing too fast to be trustworthy. They trudged through the slush, far apart at the ends of the rope, frustrated at the tedium and at the same time anxious that one of them would suddenly fall into an unseen crevasse. Trager could feel his skin beginning to burn beneath his sun screen. Freya steered for the shadow of the pyramid. Incredibly, just into the shadow of the north face, the air was near freezing, and the snow had a hard crust. They stopped to put on parkas.

Trager took off his dark glasses to admire the couloir, now steel grey in the shadow of the wall.

“Let’s pass the next crevasse on the right,” he said. “I’d like to see the base of that route.”

“Focus, damn it! We’re here to see a different mountain!”

“What if we can’t?” Trager said. “The pyramid here may be the best we can do.”

“I told you! It’s too small, and the liaison officer would never let you set foot on it.”

“I don’t mean for the clients. Look, at our pace, we’ll still be in this valley tonight. Tomorrow—maybe—we get to the west ridge of Murghi I. The next day we see Murghi II, but then we have another day or two to get back here, maybe not even off the glacier. We won’t actually get to Kargil and start packing for the trip until next week.”

“Shit. Shit again.” Freya said. “My itinerary is getting more screwed up the longer I spend with you. I thought you wanted me to relax.”

“I do. Just listen. The pyramid is five thousand meters. We must be well over four thousand right here. Why wouldn’t we be able to see Murghi II from the top? Tomorrow. Then we have you back in your skirt and blazer two days later. Anyway, didn’t you just tell me it’s all about exclusiveness? I’m offering you the ultimate trip. A secret climb of a hidden peak. How can you turn it down?”

Freya looked at the mountain, then up and down the glacier to where they had been and where they needed to go. She cocked her head at Trager. “I knew there might be place for you in this business.”

Trager could not sleep. His bag was cramped with boots, mittens, and water bottles he had taken in to prevent them from freezing. He had a dull headache. The tent was indeed at 4400 meters by Freya’s altimeter—about as high as the summit of Mt. Rainier in Washington, the highest peak he had ever climbed. She must have sensed his restlessness, and reached across from her sleeping bag to hold him.

Just as Trager knew that he would never rest that night, he found himself swimming up from a deep sleep. It was absolutely black, bitterly cold. The stove was sputtering outside the door, and Trager heard Freya splashing water on her face. He pulled on his wool pants, wind pants, pile jacket, parka, boots, and gaiters. Then he carefully buckled on his climbing harness, feeling each attachment carefully to make sure it was correct.

They had laid out the equipment so it could be found in the dark: Packs anchored to ice axes driven into the snow; crampons draped over the packs with straps folded out; rope coiled double with ends and middle already tied for clipping into the climbing harnesses. There was no need for words, and Trager would have welcomed some conversation. But when he stood up from buckling his crampon straps, the rope was already hissing across the ice, trailing after Freya.

The climb up the lower gulley went quickly. The crampons bit firmly in the hard crust, and Trager and Freya could move together without belaying. The waning moon was behind the peak, but its light reflected off the opposite ridge to give the snow a faint blue glow. They had headlamps but did not need them.

When it got so steep that they faced into the slope, climbing on the front points of the crampons, Freya called down, "I'm going to belay. Just don't pull me off until I'm anchored." She brought him up to a ledge she had chopped in the crust. As Trager stepped next to her, she turned on her light. A wall of ice hung over them, and between the ledge and the wall was a bottomless crevasse. It was the *bergschrund*, the final crevasse separating moving glacier ice from the static snowfield above.

"This is your pitch," Freya said. "Yesterday it looked like there might be a bridge to the left."

Trager looked over his shoulder. The eastern sky was just beginning to pale at the edge of the face. The sun couldn't come soon enough for him. The overhanging ice seemed like the roof of a cave. He had to somehow reach the wall across the crevasse, and then climb it. He had never tried such gymnastics at this altitude.

"How are you doing?" Freya asked. Trager knew she sensed his anxiety.

"I'm having an adventure," Trager said. He turned on his light and headed left, walking on a moving island of white. He concentrated on placing his crampons flat on the lip of the crevasse, ignoring the drop below and the wall above. The only snow bridge was five feet below the surface. At the end, the crevasse ended in the smooth rock side of the couloir.

Trager sat on the lip, double checking his equipment to make sure he could grab the screws and carabiners he needed quickly. He was being compulsive to hide his lack of confidence, both from Freya and from himself. This moment was the whole purpose of his journey to India, yet he knew even here he might take any excuse to turn back.

The bridge was composed of rotten snow that started to crumble in sugary lumps when he stepped on it. He could not believe it was still supporting his weight as he touched the far wall. Quickly, he swung the picks of his axe and hammer into the blue ice high over his head. Then the toe points of one crampon, then the other. And then the snow bridge vanished beneath him, crumbling with a sigh into the depths. Trager swung from a few millimeters of steel, the light from the headlamp dazzling back from the ice in front of him. Blood pounded in his head. He straightened his legs and slammed his hand tools in again. Immediately he let himself sag on straight arms to save his muscles, and kicked new holds for his feet.

As he straightened again Freya called, “Looks good,” but her voice, coming from behind, only reminded Trager that he still had most of the wall to go, and he was entering the truly dangerous part of the pitch. Once he climbed above Freya, he faced a long swinging fall into the downhill wall of the crevasse—unless he stopped to place an anchor. But placing an ice screw was hard work in itself, and might even cause a fall.



In two more steps he knew he was not going to make it. Inching up a step on his crampons, he threw his left arm through the sling of his ice axe and hung on it. That freed both hands. He tried to blank out all reflection as he unclipped a fat tubular ice screw and began to twist in into the ice with the hammer pick. His left arm was completely numb in the ice axe sling, while his right, the one with the hammer, burned with exertion. He almost dropped the carabiner as he went to clip his rope through. As soon as the gate snapped shut, he sagged on his feet, and called out, “Falling! Watch out!”

But he didn’t fall. Although Trager was sure he had given up, his arms and legs behaved as if controlled by another, stronger climber. The hammer appeared in his right hand again, the axe was once more in his left, he was lifting his feet—right, left—lunging up with the axe, then the hammer. Trager felt the tug at his waist as Freya pulled in the rope to catch him around the anchor. He could not speak to tell her what he was going to do; he didn’t know himself. Freya must have realized he was climbing on; the rope went slack. Moments later he had his axe and hammer buried in firm snow above the overhang. The headlamp flashed on the bright edge of ice as he heaved himself past the lip, and then its beam was lost among the stars.

Trager climbed another forty feet past the lip, cut a platform, and tied off the rope to two ice screws. On a smaller, lower mountain, Trager would have held the rope as a safety line while Freya climbed the ice. But with a thousand feet to go, they had agreed that they needed to save time by having the second person on each pitch climb up the rope using the ascender clamps. Trager had nothing to do but wait.

His clothes were soaked with sweat that was beginning to chill. His head swelled with pain, and he was hyperventilating long after he had caught his breath. Damn, I’m scared, he thought. The climbing was much harder than he imagined, and he had only done half a rope length. The sheer size of the task seemed to emanate a force that was pushing him down.

“Ansel! Turn your headlamp off! You’re wasting the batteries.”

A white flush had spread across the sky behind the mountains at the east end of the cirque. Opposite, the three-quarter moon, too late to do any good, drifted above the west ridge of the pyramid. The rope ran in a quivering line to Freya as she swung over the edge of the bergschrund. Freya pulled herself up the rope to his stance.

“Nice lead. Am I on belay?”



“What? Wait a minute, where's your end?”

Trager grappled at the ropes now draped around him. Freya climbed up a few feet without waiting for him and was placing an ice screw by the time Trager had the rope through a belay brake. She moved quickly up the forty-five degree slope, climbing straight up the fall line. It took her only a few minutes to complete her pitch and anchor the rope.

Trager's confidence returned as he pulled himself up the fixed line. Another hundred and fifty feet of climbing done, another hundred feet of elevation below them. He led through for the third pitch without saying a word. They climbed on that way, changing leads as the rising sun cast serrated shadows on the glacier below.

Freya drew the eighth lead in the gully. The cornice at the top of the couloir had seemed within reach for the last several rope lengths, and it was Freya's pitch that finally gained the ridge. They had worried about the route around the cornice, but Freya found a convenient series of rock ledges to one side of the snow wall, and vanished over the top. Trager let out a cry of joy. They needed to rest, to eat, simply to sit. They had been standing on crampon points for three hours since passing the bergschrund, and Trager's legs vibrated with fatigue. When he pulled up to the crest of the ridge, he found himself face to face with Freya, separated from her by a knife edge of snow.

“Don't come over the top!” she said. “There's nothing to anchor to, so I just hung onto the rope across the ridge.”

It was a terrible place. The crest was composed of striated, rotten rock that protruded from granular snow melting in the full sun. Freya perched on a platform stamped into the slush.

“I'll tie you off,” Freya said. “We'll both just hang in our harnesses on either side of the crest. We can clip the packs to the rope to keep us off the snow.”

It took careful coordination, but once they were perched on their loads, weight off their backs and feet, they were reasonably comfortable. Over Freya's shoulder Trager's view was a spectacular deep space between their thin ridge and the great west face of Murghi-I.

“So how are you, stranger?” Freya asked, as they rummaged for food. “I haven't talked to you all morning.”

“I was busy,” Trager said. “You knew I was about to lose it at the *bergschrund*, didn't you? That's why you took off on the next lead so fast. I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. I certainly couldn't have done it. Maybe you wouldn't have done it without me, but then that's why we're together.”

Trager looked back down the route. Their tent was a yellow mite caught in a spider web of crevasses. “Did you ever do anything like this with Max?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? Max didn't climb.”

“I'm not sure how to ask this without sounding like a jerk, but what did you see in him?”

“It's a touchy question, but you've got the right to ask. Back to adventure again. Max was an adventure. But another thing—he gave me more responsibility than I had ever had before. If he hadn't also given me such a pain in the ass, I might still be working for him.”

“Did you love him?” Trager was pleased to find he could ask the question without jealousy. There was no one in sight to compete with.

“Did I love Max Holz? I don’t know. It was a very strange relationship. I thought Max’s world was exciting. I loved that, and to that extent, I loved him too.”

“What about me?” Trager asked. “Am I just lovable so long as I’m exciting?”

“And so long as you’re not a pain in the ass,” Freya said. “Are you planning to tell the Indian Minister of Defence to go fuck himself? Are you planning to brag that ‘others have tours, but we’ve got tits?’ I don’t think so. You don’t have anything to worry about right now unless we can’t see a damned thing from the top of this peak.”



The craggy summit ridge still blocked their view. They had not packed for rock climbing. They had no jamb nuts to wedge into cracks for anchors. It was not technical climbing, but the rope was now a hazard. If one of them fell, the other would be plucked off. They discussed whether one of them could jump off the other side of the ridge fast enough to stop a fall. In the end, they unroped and climbed together, a few yards apart, Trager in the lead. When Trager tested his first handhold, a softball-sized block broke out and caught him on the chest.

“Don’t rush it!” Freya called, although it seemed to Trager that he could not possibly move more slowly. At one o’clock in the afternoon they crawled over the last rocks onto a snow ridge that snaked up to a surprisingly flat summit.

And there it was: Murghi II, rising higher on the skyline with every step they took until they could look down on the glacier and see the entire northwest face. The ridge connecting it to Murghi-I rose in a smooth slope to a summit dome.

The wall between glacier and ridge did not seem particularly steep judging from the amount of snow that clung to it. That snow presented its own problem. As Trager and Freya watched, avalanches came down three different parts of the face.

“Look back at Murghi I,” Freya said. “That face isn’t all ice. There’s a lower angle arête the goes up to the main ridge right at the lowest point. Probably about the same elevation we are.”

Trager studied the range, and turned to look back down the Murghi Nala. “OK, let’s take it from the bottom. Base camp below the icefall. We decided a couple days for the icefall. Then we get all the way to the corner the next day. Then, over to the base of your arête. Then we have to camp on the summit ridge. That’s a week . . . “

“Or more. On the higher camps, you’ll have to carry the tents up, come back down to sleep, then occupy the camp the next day. And people will still probably be sick from the altitude.”

“Okay, eight or nine days to the ridge. And then that’s a long way from the top. It might even take another camp before the summit. How’s your itinerary holding up?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Freya said. “That’s the best schedule I can imagine. You won’t make it—you’d need the logistics of an Everest expedition. But the clients will have a glorious defeat.”

“We’re selling people on a climb we know isn’t going to go?”

“We certainly can’t call them up and tell them to forget it at this point. Ansel, you didn’t have a chance of climbing at all when you showed up in India, and look at you now. Who knows? If we throw in some extra food, you might pull it off. Even if you don’t, we still might sell the clients another try next year. Or another mountain.”

“Another mountain! I’ve got it!” He stood and looked west, shielding his eyes from the sun. “There—I think.” He pointed at a cluster of snow peaks on the horizon. “Aren’t those the peaks above the Sonjal La? There’s one I had Harry Macintosh photograph. Doesn’t do us any good now, but the approach isn’t any harder than this one, right up the *nala* above Darcha.”

“And way, way, out of our permit area.”

“Well, fuck,” Trager muttered.

“I know, those were the first high peaks you saw. But there are a lot of mountains in the world you won’t climb—what difference will a few more make? You’d do better to worry about the one you’re on. We’re not getting off of here in the daylight, you know.”

They climbed the last snow ridge in slow motion, leaning heavily on their ice axes, taking breaths for every step. As the sun lowered a few degrees, the sky took on a deeper blue, and the mountain glowed brighter. Below them to the north, Trager could see over the tops of the brown foothills toward Kargil, the Indus valley, and a faint line of snow far away in Pakistan. Down in that warren of ridges and valleys, Nazir brooded over his boundaries, and Viktor Axt fussed with his clients’ lunch. Beyond the horizon, Pratima Busco would have his telegram by now:

AM OK WANT TO SEE YOU ALSO BUT WORK TO DO HERE
LET ME KNOW HOW ALL COMES OUT

He saw her tossing the scrap of paper away, and folding her family around her like a blanket.

A few yards below the top, Freya, walking behind, grabbed a loop on the back of Trager’s pack. She stepped up and slipped her arm through his. “This is as far as we go. We need to be able to honestly swear that we never climbed this mountain.”

Approaching summits, Trager usually experienced one of two emotions: Relief that an ordeal had ended, or else a wave of something like nostalgia, as if he were coming back to an old home. Holding Freya on this unnamed peak, he felt neither. They were too far from safety to feel relief, and the thrill of a new world at his feet was tinged with a sadness for what no longer waited below.

The next morning they needed to sleep in. They had rappelled all night long: Once from crevasse rescue slings lassoing a questionable flake of rock at the top of the gully, five times off of single ice screws. They were only able to accomplish the descent because Trager had included a roll of parachute cord that allowed them to retrieve the climbing rope after each rappel. Otherwise the rope would have been doubled, and they would have run out of equipment halfway down. By the time they dropped over the *bergschrund* and climbed down to the tent it was two o’clock in the morning. So they needed to sleep in.

But didn't. "Skirt and blazer in two days. You promised," Freya said, as they crunched down the lower glacier at dawn. Trager didn't answer, only contemplated the need to watch his words with this woman. The early start did have one advantage: The slush that had bogged down their reconnaissance was frozen, and they walked to the top of the icefall as if on a sidewalk.

The first few rope lengths in the icefall were not bad. Trager belayed Freya from a shallow crevasse. He noted that she was as tired as he was. She made several awkward mistakes, catching a crampon in her own ice axe strap and needing an assist from the rope to recover her balance. Trager could afford no such errors, because the rope was below him as he descended after her. When he reached her stance, he told her what he thought: She needed to go first so he could hold her rope, because he was "more comfortable on this terrain." She did not argue, just started climbing down on belay. He was sure she resented it. On the other hand, he was sure he was right. Something he had sensed on the climb became clearer on the descent. Freya was strong and experienced, but not practiced. She had not spent recent time on vertical ground. She clipped in a carabiner upside down, so the gate might have opened against the ice. She tied a pair of ice screws together too tightly, so the sling put unnecessary load on the anchors. She neglected to tuck in the tail of a knot that might come undone. These were part of the many details that an active technical climber would have integrated into habit or ritual. In the wrong context, a lapse in any of them could be fatal.

Trager did not want to downclimb the pitch where they had first shared the lead, but all their anchoring hardware was in the ice couloir. "We're going to have to cut a bollard," he said.

"Oh, for God's sake! Then you go down first, and I'll downclimb."

"No. You're good, but not that good. And neither am I. And we're both punchy."

"OK, whatever, just do it!"

Trager began to chop at the edge of the crevasse above the steep pitch, putting his frustration with Freya into each blow. As he swung the axe, Freya's absurd offer to downclimb the pitch unprotected echoed in his ears. Suddenly he recognized what had escaped him before. He had seen the Pyramid as a test, but it was Freya who was trying to prove herself to him. And on reflection, she had.

Together, they finished crafting a mushroom of ice at the edge of the crevasse. Using the same retrieval line technique as the night before, they lowered themselves one after the other to the gritty ice by the moraine. By the time they tried to retrieve the rope, the day was growing warm, and the line had melted its way into the bollard and was stuck fast. They walked off the glacier with less equipment than Trager had carried over the Sonjal La.

Freya did not take the lightened packs as any clue to relax. She was gone from the edge of the moraine before Trager could get his crampons off. He caught up to her at the descent to their first campsite, and he did not like what he saw. She was walking carelessly on rocky ground where a misstep could break a leg. She was stumbling and not learning from her stumbles, pushing herself off her ice axe and lurching ahead.

This chick is nuts, he thought. This is one high-maintenance relationship. At that exact moment of naming, Trager realized what his options were. As he stepped into the flowers, he made his choice.

"Freya! Do you want to die?"

She stopped at the edge of the next stony slope and turned around. "What is this shit?"

“You’re exhausted. You need to stop. You’re not going to be wearing your skirt blazer. If you don’t break your neck, you’ll be in a cast. After some porters carry you down in a basket. Won’t that impress your investors? And who’s going to be left to serve your clients? To explain things? Me! Just like the last time. And I’ll do it. You know why? Because you’re worth it. But for your own sake, for our sake, it doesn’t always have to be Springtime in Kashmir!”

She threw her pack down and walked back across the flowers toward him until she was in his face. “God damn it!” she said. Trager could not say how long she stood glaring at him before she reached out and gripped him firmly by the shoulders. “Your right,” she said. “Let’s hit the showers.”

On the last night of their first expedition, things changed. The ice water was as awful for Trager as ever, but Freya betrayed genuine delight both in teasing and warming him. Later, he invited her to be on top, but the tent was too small for her frame. After much squirming and giggling, they settled for her being on his lap, which turned out to be a good thing. Afterwards, they lay their heads on stuff sacks full of dirty clothes and shared pillow talk:

Histories: Freya told of coming of age at resorts where it was easy to have relationships with people you would never want see again. “OK, now let’s hear about your first time.”

Intimacies: “Oh, God, we leaked all over this sleeping bag.”

“Yours or mine?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just make sure we get it cleaned before it ends up with one of the clients.”

Strategies: “I’d like you to be at that show in Vancouver with me. You’ll learn about high-end travel. And we’ll have a great room.”

“Do I have to wear a tie?”

“Yup. And I have to shave my armpits. Want to swap?”

And so it went until the tent passed into shadow. They fell asleep to the sound of falling water and the smells of kerosene, love, and flowers at the campsite where they would never stay again.





They had been walking down the river bed for hours. Muscles strained during the climb and descent had stiffened overnight. Both Trager and Freya walked with unaccustomed clumsiness through the uneven terrain. It was not steep; at the same time, it was not any easier walking down than walking up. The day was hot, and the monastery on the hill seemed to recede from them as they approached, quivering in a heat mirage.

At the flat below the gompa, the campsite had been transformed. Three of the familiar yellow tents had been set in a neat row. Opposite was a large cook tent, buttressed by piles of blue duffle bags. The wind fluttered the nylon fabric in time with the prayer flags on the monastery roof.

"I told you Lakpa would come around," Freya said. She called the *sirdar's* name, but there was no answer. Trager dropped his pack and walked over to the cook tent. As he reached for the flap, it opened by itself. Lieutenant Nazir stepped out.

"Ah, there you are," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Freya asked. "Where is my *sirdar*?"

"I thought it best to guard your belongings in Lakpa Tsering's absence. I have detailed your boys to attend the official review party at their camp by the road. You should know it does not look well to have the holder of a Restricted Area permit absent for an inspection committee."

"What inspection committee? From where?"

"Delhi," said Nazir. "From Defence. And also the Lok Sabah representative's man from Leh. And some lamas from Mulbekh and Thikse."

"Shit," Freya said quietly.

"Excuse me?" said the officer.

"Listen," Freya said, "I don't care what your responsibilities are to those people down there, but you don't have any business sending my staff to go wait on them. Lakpa is my *sirdar*."

"And I am your liaison officer."

"I suppose you volunteered for that," Trager said.

"As a matter of fact, yes. And now we will just go down to the road. Your guests are waiting."

"Can't they wait just a little more?" Trager asked. "We've been climbing for two days straight."

"Mr. Trager, you have obviously not done military service in your own country," Nazir said. "Inspections are always held at the convenience of the inspectors. And where exactly did you go climbing?"

“Ansell!” Freya interrupted. “Stay here and get some sleep. Someone has to watch the camp. I’ll go down and be inspected. Lieutenant, thank you for waiting for us. Let me see if I have some clean clothes, and I’ll be right with you.”

She found a bag among the duffels and dragged it into the cook tent. There was the sound of splashing water. If Nazir had not been there, Trager would have gone in and bathed with her. Even as a prisoner in Darcha, Trager had not hated the officer so much. He sat down on his pack. His legs still twitched in a walking rhythm, like those of a sailor just home from the sea.

Nazir paced nervously back and forth. Trager noticed that in place of military shoes, the officer now wore a pair of well-used mountaineering boots.

He decided to try conciliation, if only for Freya’s sake. “You were on Everest with Lakpa,” he said. “Congratulations.”

Nazir stopped his pacing and regarded Trager for a moment. “It was a privilege,” he said. “It is always a privilege to visit the mountains for sport. Do you not think so?”

Trager hesitated. Nazir was using his interrogator’s voice. “Sure,” he finally said. “What are you driving at?”

“It might interest you to know that I agree with Freya, about the chaps waiting at the road. There is no reason why they should not have walked up here. Except that some of them would die in the attempt. Not the monks. The Delhi types. There is not enough air for them up here. Most of them have never inspected anything that did not appear on paper or a dinner plate. It is not the sort of group one would want to have in the mountains. And that is what I do not understand. That is, I do not understand why you want them up here, or people like them. Last week you were a mountaineer. Now, if I understand correctly, you are to be an innkeeper.”

“Freya’s plan is to provide a base for climbers and trekkers.”

“The gentlemen waiting at the road are surely not mountaineers.”

“They’re not our clients, either. The people we’ll be with on Murghi-II are climbers. Having a base means that we won’t have to trample a lot of campsites. It will mean jobs for the local people.”

“What campsites? What local people? This is a desert. There is nothing at this end of the valley except a half dozen lamas and a riverbed of sand and boulders. And that very barrenness is the total reason for this monastery being here.”

“And some people will come here to see it. I understand it’s the only gompa left in this part of Ladakh.”

“So why are you so keen on destroying it? Your Miss Martens has nothing more or less in mind than the replacement of Murghi Gompa with her bloody hostel. That is what they say in every bazaar in Ladakh.”

“Is that where you gather your intelligence on what Freya plans to do? The bazaar?”

“Yes,” said Nazir. “Where do you gather yours? No—please! That was not meant to offend. I only ask, are you trusting completely the word of this woman, who you yourself told me was sending you last month across the Himalaya with no good itinerary, insufficient equipment”

Freya emerged from the screen in her khaki skirt and blouse. She had replaced her climbing boots with running shoes. She turned her pack out on the ground, keeping only her sleeping bag and a toilet kit. "I may stay the night down there, or I may come back up. In either case, there are some things I'd like you to do while I'm gone." She handed Trager a scrap of paper, and called, "Leftenant!" She started for the downstream trail without waiting to see if the officer was coming.

"The gompa will still be here. Freya told me it is the reason people would come in the first place. Are you a Buddhist?"

"Oh, by no means. I am Muslim. And my family is from Delhi. I am a city man as much as any of these fellows waiting below. But I am also a mountaineer, as you are, and I am Indian. And this gompa is the heritage of India, and the heritage of these mountains. Tourist hotels are not. Not here. You must prevail on her to reconsider. You should not want to be in association with this scheme. My concern is that it could not have been done legally."

"Leftenant?" Freya called. "Are we in a hurry, or aren't we?"

"We are," he said, and started after her, stopping by the cook tent to retrieve his swagger stick.

Trager watched them go around the first corner, and then looked at Freya's scrawled note.

Have to get along with Nazir. Won't have much time alone for a while. Thinking of what we share—hope you are too. If wind picks up, put extra guy lines on cook tent so damn thing doesn't blow away.

Trager wondered what things Freya might not have shared with him, but the wind was gentle, and in the warmth of the sun, he could feel sleep coming toward him like a wave. The gompa would last at least until tomorrow. He heaved himself to his feet, and aimed for a tent door.



Something tugged on Trager's foot, and he woke with a start. A young goat was nibbling on the heel of his socks. He kicked at the animal, but a pair of gnarled hands suddenly appeared to lift the kid out of danger.

An old man in voluminous russet robes stood before the door. The visitor was stooped, as if borne down by the weight of his attire. The deep folds of the fabric seemed to extend into the valleys of the man's weathered face. He held out a piece of paper to Trager. It was a wrinkled and water-stained page torn from a pocket note pad. The message was written carefully in soft pencil:

*My dear:
Come to me now.
F.*

"All the way down to the road?" Trager asked. His watch said it was six o'clock, too late to make a round trip in daylight. The man didn't answer. "Where is she?" Trager asked. "Kahan?"

The man nodded and pointed up the hill. "Gompa," he said.

A meeting with the monks. As Freya had said, they might actually want her hotel. Nazir had not even considered that. She must have turned on the charm along the trail and persuaded him to see for himself.

The old man walked with tiny shuffling steps up the steep path, but he took them steadily, tirelessly. Trager, sore from the last three days, had trouble keeping up. The trail switchbacked between willows sprouting along a tiny stream. An evening wind had risen and the thin branches lashed around. The cook tent would have to hold up without him.

The gompa was smaller than Trager expected. What Trager had taken to be the tapering perspective of great height was an actual inward cant to the walls. The downhill face might have been seventy feet of actual building, plus supporting brickwork. Where the sides merged into the cliff, they were only about forty feet high. A long mani wall led to a gateway of willow trunks. Prayer flags, faded from exposure to the sun, fluttered from the corners. Old foundations lined the approach, as if the gompa at one time had supported a bazaar below its walls.

The double front doors were massive, built of planks from some distant forest. They stood ajar, and Trager ducked after the monk into total darkness. The old man's face appeared at the end of a hall, disembodied, floating above a small lamp. Trager could make out a steep flight of steps built against one wall. The monk held the lamp high and waved Trager ahead, up the stairs. Trager hadn't even considered bringing his headlamp. Now he followed his own shadow up into another hall. This one was brighter, with light falling through a narrow slit window at one end. The air smelled of wood smoke and incense. The sound of deep chanting came from somewhere deeper in the building. Around a corner was another staircase, leading to another story, another hall. And another walk, another climb. And again. Four stories? Five? Trager lost count. In one of the halls, they came suddenly on a monk. He was even older than Trager's guide, and stood motionless as they passed, a statue with flickering eyes. At the top of the next flight of steps, they emerged into the blinding light of a balcony. Blinking, Trager looked down on the river and the bright tents perched along the bank. In the distance, he could see over the tops of the ridges to the crest of Murghi-I. He scarcely believed he had walked out of those mountains this same day.

Another floor remained before the roof, but the monk passed by the flight of steps at the end of the balcony. He led Trager back into a hall, stopping at a low doorway covered with a faded curtain. Trager stepped into a tiny, plain room with a single slit window. A thin-faced man with white hair sat on the floor before a low table, a blanket across his knees.

The man looked up and spoke with an articulate American accent, like a character from an old film. "Yes, hello, what can I do for you?"

Trager stood up too fast after entering and hit his crown on the low ceiling. "I'm Ansel Trager," he said, rubbing his head. "I'm a climber, from the camp."

"A climber! Of course you are. You can tell a mountaineer by the way he walks." Trager hadn't taken a step since entering the room, but he nodded in uncertain agreement. He looked around for another door. This had to be an anteroom to wherever the meeting was being held.

"I'm looking for Freya Martens. She sent me this note." He plunged his hand into the pocket of his breeches and pulled out the paper.

"Did she? Yes, that's her writing. Terrible. Indecipherable. They should require calligraphy in the Canadian schools." As he handed it back, Trager saw that he had given the man Freya's note to him, not the message from the monk.

“Handwriting,” the man said, sketching some figures in the air. “You can always tell. One of the things I hoped to work on with her. She’s coming. I have just sent her a note. Who did you say you are? One of the clients, I think?”

Trager had found the neatly lettered note the monk had brought. “Is this yours?” he asked. The man stared at the paper.

“How did you get that? Who did you say you are?”

“Ansel Trager. I work for Freya. Who are you?”

The man looked offended. “Weston Ferndecker,” he said. “Surely you've heard of me.”

Freya’s fatigue showed as she walked the last few steps into camp. It was dusk, but Trager could see the gleam of her glazed eyes. She gave him a quick hug, and sat down on a pile of duffle bags.

“We're hosting lunch for the Ministries of Tourism and Defence tomorrow. It’s going to be harder than I thought. The people in Delhi don't get along with the people here in Ladakh. They seem to feel the locals have overstepped their authority. Or something. Who the hell knows? Anyway, the whole crowd is coming up here to look around. They want the lamas to come down from the gompa. What a waste of time. They talk and talk about tourist development, and then . . . God, I am tired.”

“Ferndecker is alive,” Trager said.

Freya looked at Trager as if he had spoken in a foreign language. “Ferndecker is alive,” he repeated. “He’s staying at the monastery. I just saw him. He wants you to come up there. I guess there was a space melted out under that snow bridge. He came up and managed to get out of the water on some rocks. He was there for a while, days I guess. Anyway, the top of the bridge fell in, and he managed to crawl out.”

Freya continued to stare. Trager babbled on, wishing she would interrupt.

“He seems to be OK, except that his toes are infected from frostbite or immersion foot. I just got back here a few minutes ago. I was going to take him some penicillin.”

“Oh, my God,” Freya murmured. “Oh, my God.” She heaved herself to her feet and walked a slow circle. When she got back to Trager she spoke quietly, as if not wanting to be overheard, although they were alone. “Lakpa and Sonam are coming with ponies. You meet them, tell them I've gone to . . . Don't tell them about Ferndecker. Yet.”

“Why not? Lakpa should be glad to find out he doesn't have to worry about ghosts.”

“Ansel, we have to very careful now. Actually, I think you'd better come with me. Does he really know I'm here?”

“Sure. He’s probably watching us right now.”

“His binoculars,” Freya said. “Of course. Why the hell didn't the monks report anything? Why didn't he just walk out to the road?”

“Because of his feet,” Trager said. “And he paid the monks to put him up and not report to Nazir. He told them he was just waiting for you to come get him. So he’s been there for what—three weeks? I think he’s a little feverish from the infection. He talks like he was the guide and you were the client last month. He treated me like I was working for him.”

Freya looked up at the gomba. “You are,” she said.

The great door was closed when they arrived below the walls, and they had to wait for someone to answer their knocks. Freya leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

“Freya, you need to tell me about him. I’m getting a Springtime in Kashmir feeling about this.”

“I’m sorry,” Freya said, without opening her eyes. “He was dead. I thought he would stay that way.” She looked at him, and then pushed herself slowly upright. “I met him two years ago. He came to a lecture I gave in Berkeley on trekking in Ladakh. He said he had been there. He sent me some route itineraries. It turned out what he really wanted was to be a leader, a guide. It was an old fantasy of his. There are a lot of people like that, and I thought he’d be a good customer. You know, he’d get a group of clients, and we’d run the trek. Then it turned out he also had money. A lot of money. He wanted to be part of the company. I was going to send him to Max, and then I thought, why not put him to better use? That was when Vasant and I realized we had a chance to get some control of the business.”

“It sounds like you should be pretty happy to get him back,” said Trager.

“He was a problem client before,” Freya said. “I can’t imagine what he’s like now.”

The same old monk who had guided Trager before finally appeared at the door. He offered his lamp again, but Freya had already turned on her headlamp.

Ferndecker sat where Trager had left him. He threw out his arms when Freya stepped through the curtain.

“Freya! Freya, Freya, Freya! My dear, darling Freya!”

“Weston, I thought you were dead.” The old man held her fast.

“No, no, not me. Just waiting for you.” His hands explored the curve of Freya’s back, until he caught sight of Trager.

“Excuse me, thank you, but you can go now.”

Freya pried herself away. “Weston, this is Ansel Trager.”

“Yes. One of the clients, I think.”

“No, Weston,” Freya said patiently. “We don’t have any clients right now. The Murghi-II people are coming next week. Ansel is going to lead the climb.”

“I don’t need any help.”

“Weston! Look at your feet! You need to see a doctor.” She spoke close to his ear, almost nuzzling him. “Weston, while we were looking for you, Ansel took over the Springtime in Kashmir trek. He found the route with no problem.”

"Found the route? / found the route! All he had to do was follow the list I gave you. That was from Richardson, you know. Damned heavy book to carry across the Himalaya. But he was the authority. That was before independence, of course, and people had respect for authority."

"Weston!" Freya interrupted. "Listen—it's all working. Everything is going just as you planned it. But I'll be much too busy with the travel business to do the climb. We need Ansel."

"You can always tell a project has gotten too complicated when you start hiring duplicate help. Everyone should have at least two jobs."

"We all do, Weston."

"That's the problem! Spread too thin. So we don't need this fellow for the climb. Time to think, Freya. I had time to think. You believed I was dead? I was! And when the roof fell in I came alive. Concentrate on the important things. You can tell the important things. That's what lives when all else is dead."

Freya's eyes twitched. She shook her head and looked up. "Okay, Weston. What did you decide is really important?"

Ferndecker pulled her close to him again. "This is no place for comfort, no place for safety and profit. This is a place for danger. A place where a man can die, and be reborn. Why do you think these monks live here, chanting and chipping at their rocks?"

"Because if they didn't, the Moghuls, or Persians, or Punjabis, or Chinese, or any of the others who keep invading Ladakh would have killed them." She broke his hold and stood up. "Weston, we have to get you out of here."

"Survival! Yes! They came here to survive. Just as we do. For recreation. *Re-Creation.*"

"Do you realize we have clients arriving in less than two weeks?"

Ferndecker just smiled. "Did you think you were really going to make a mountain guide out of that old man who drowned? Threw himself in the river. Should have done it years ago. But I'll continue to take care of you. There should be ample left from my advances. If I understand the head lama, he will let us have this room for only ten rupees a month."

Freya actually wrung her hands. "*Concentrate, damn it!* What are we going to do with the clients in a place like this?"

"Are you still thinking of that hotel business?" Ferndecker asked. "We got rid of that idea long ago. Told the head lama already. Gave him my affidavit that we would not tamper with his gompa. Why should tourists accomplish what the Moghul armies could not?"

He nodded at the corners of the cell, as if addressing a board meeting. He frowned when his eyes fell on Trager again. "Are you still here?"

"Get out!" Freya snapped. She herself was backing toward the door.

"You want the penicillin tablets for him?" Trager asked.

"Freya!" Ferndecker said. "You know I can't take tablets. Capsules only. Maybe with some tea"

"I'll get it," Freya said. She shoved Trager ahead of her into the hall.

On the open balcony, Freya leaned on the parapet and put her head in her hands. The *nala* was deep in shadow and the Murghi peaks had turned pink in the alpenglow. The very tips of the prayer flag poles were in sunlight for a moment, but as Trager watched, they went out like snuffed candles.

“Were you really going to tear down the monastery?” he asked.

“No,” said Freya. “Maybe some remodeling. Leave me alone. I have a lot to think about. Do you have any idea what all this means? We’re completely out of it.”

“Ferndecker is, but he’s doing pretty well for someone who was dead.”

“It’s not Ferndecker I’m talking about. It’s his money. I spent it all. And he doesn’t know that. I don’t even know how much was spent and who got paid off. It was all under the table. He wasn’t accounting for it. All he wanted was a chance to be the mountain guide he didn’t become when he was young enough to actually do the job. And now the son of a bitch gets religion on us. A month from now, you and I could be living in a rotting apartment in Kathmandu, pimping one another for the chance to walk a bunch of tourists into Everest Base Camp.”

“So? We’d get by. We’d still be together, and we’d still be working in the mountains. I’m committed to that, Freya, I really am.”

“What the hell do you know about commitment? You’ve never committed to anything in your life! You would have left India if Max hadn’t embarrassed you into staying. You practically walked out on me in Kargil. Commitment doesn’t mean deciding to do this or that. Commitment means putting so much of yourself into something that you have no choice. Anyway, God damn it, I’m too old to just get by!”

There was movement on the trail below the gompa. The sound of harness bells floated up on the breeze. “Get down there,” Freya said. “Don’t mention Ferndecker. Tell them I’m—I don’t know—talking to the lamas. I’ll be along as soon as I can.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What do you think? I’m going to sell a crazy man a trip in the mountains. That’s what we do.”

A new pile of food boxes was stacked by the cook tent. The ponies had dropped their loads and gone, but the camp still smelled of *bidis* and horses. A lantern in the cook tent threw shadows against the walls. The night was growing cold, and Trager put off entering the tent long enough to retrieve his parka from his rucksack. This is my world, Trager thought—a camp in the mountains. And yet the terms on which he knew these mountains had been determined by Freya Martens, playing a game he did not understand. Sonam’s voice came from the cook tent, and Lakpa answered in Ladakhi. These are the men who really belong here, Trager thought, but he was a stranger to them. So, it occurred to him, was Freya. The two Ladakhis looked up from a folding table covered with onion skins and potato peelings.

“Sahib,” Lakpa nodded with a tip of his head. “Where is Freya?”

“Talking to the lama,” Trager said. “Old guy.”

"But he is not so old," Nazir said. The officer had been sitting in the corner by the door, so that Trager had not seen him when he entered. "The head lama at Murghi Gompa is relatively young. The older ones chose him for that reason."

"*Memsahib* is not speak Ladakhi," Lakpa said. "How is she talk to this lama?"

"I don't know," Trager said. "All I know is she got a note asking her to go up there."

"Note? In English?" Nazir asked.

"I don't know," Trager said, rattled. "Anyway a guy came down here from the gompa."

There was a moment of excruciating silence. Trager was both frightened for Freya, and furious at her. Then Nazir said, "The mechanics of all this are not important. What is she talking about with the lamas?"

Saying he did not know again seemed like a bad idea. "The monastery. I asked her about it, like you said. She told me no, the gompa stays."

"Did she?" Nazir said, eyebrows raised. He got up. "Well, this is something. I should like to hear her conversation with the lamas."

"She told me she'll be right down," Trager said.

"Then she truly ignorant of these monks. They will keep her drinking tea for hours."

A gong began to sound from the hillside above them. Nazir looked out the tent door. "Have you heard this before?" Nazir asked Trager.

"No," Trager said. Lakpa was listening intently. He put down his paring knife.

"I go now," he said, "Find Freya *memsahib*."

"We'll join you," said Nazir.

The echoing gong from the gompa took the place of conversation on the path. Trager could not have talked in any case. It was his third hike up the trail that day. Where the trail cut into the willows, Lakpa and Nazir stopped and stared up the hill. The slit windows of the first story were faintly illuminated from within. Suddenly a bright orange hole appeared in the face of the dark building, like an open mouth giving voice to the bell.

"*Achcha*, it's on fire!" Nazir gasped.

Lakpa yelled down to Sonam at the camp.

"Tell him to bring buckets," said Nazir.

Trager thought of Ferndecker's room, high on the south wall. "And a rope," he said. "We need a rope." He started to run up the trail.

The crackle of desiccated wood timbers and willow floors catching fire was deafening at the foot of the tower. The metal fittings of the main door were too hot to touch. Through a slit window, Trager saw glowing shapes of beams and lintels on the second story. Then a section of the first floor collapsed, and the image dissolved into cloud of sparks.

A hand grabbed Trager out of the dark. It was Freya. Her face was sooty and her light hair was spiky and stiff.

"Thank God!" Trager said. "What happened?"

"Fire in the kitchen. I managed to get these two out from the second floor." She pointed toward the shadows, where two monks huddled by the path.

"Where are the others?" Nazir asked.

"What about . . . ?" Trager began.

"I don't know," Freya said quickly. "I just don't know." She waved a hand up at the building. Light appeared behind the third floor windows. The gong fell silent.

"Top, *sahib!*" Lakpa said.

Now Trager could hear cries from the roof. He scrambled up the hillside along the base of the wall. The roof of the gompa ran directly into the cliff behind it. Trager felt his way up the rock a few yards. It was crumbly schist, too rotten and steep to climb in the dark.

"We'll have to throw them a rope," Trager said.

"Then what?" Freya asked. "Call up directions on how to rappel?"

He had not even realized she was following. "We'll figure it out," Trager said. "You've done enough. I'll go up and lower them down.

"And who's going to lower you?"

"I'll rappel. Off of . . . something."

"Did you bring the ascenders? You can't pull yourself up there all the way hand over hand."

"Yes. I can."

Sonam's breathing sounded like an approaching steam engine as he jogged up the slope. Lakpa pulled the rope from his shoulders and shook out the coils on the ground. He kept one end, which he wrapped around a chunk of rubble from the cliff. They all fell back as he began to swing the weight in circles around his head. The first throw ricocheted off the wall, narrowly missing Sonam when it landed. On the second throw everyone covered their heads, waiting for another miss. Instead, there was a shout from above.

"Tie off the line!" Trager called.

"I tell, *sahib*. They have no English."

"But Ferndecker does."

"*Sahib?*"

Trager couldn't answer. Freya had hit him in the stomach, hard. "Tell them, Lakpa,"

Trager sucked in enough air to whisper, "What the fuck difference does it make now?"

Freya ignored him. "Are they holding it? I'm going up."

She's delusional, Trager thought. He already knew she was no gymnast. He pulled the rope out of her hands. She snatched it back. In the light of flames pouring from one of the third floor windows, Freya's face seemed full of lines that had not been there before. Her eyes were brighter than ever. But Lakpa seemed to know the drill from Springtime in Kashmir. Perhaps Sundown or Pratima had told him. He took Freya by one arm, and a moment later, Nazir took the other.

Trager was aware of the screaming and pushing below him, but he focused on the feel of the rope in his fingers, the grip of his boots on the brick. The climbing was easier than he expected. The sloping walls allowed him to get some support from his feet. His main concern was how the rope was anchored. It seemed to give now and then, and each time he wondered if he would find himself in free fall, the limp line floating in his hands.

At the top of the wall he reached over the combing to find himself in a tug of war with a huge seated figure. He swung a leg over the waist-high barrier and tumbled into the laps of the four men who had been holding the end of the rope. He smelled the incense that permeated their robes. On the far side of the roof, smoke was pouring from a square hole where the final staircase emerged.

"Ferndecker?" he asked. He got only strange words and gesticulations in reply.

"Lakpa!" he shouted over the edge. "Tell them I'm going to lower them down."

"Hold rope, *sahib*," the *sirdar* answered. "Coming up." Lakpa took a long time, and Trager began to worry. An arm-over-arm pull up a line had to be done quickly or not at all. Finally he heard the scrape of shoes on the brick. Freya, trembling and gasping, tumbled over the combing.

"What are you trying to do?" Trager asked.

"Shut up. Tie these people in," Freya gasped. "There's enough rope to lower one on each end. Hurry up. Balcony's on fire, roof's going to go."

The jet of smoke shooting up from the staircase was mixed now with sparks. "What about Ferndecker?"

Freya nodded across the roof. "What do you think?"

The first two monks stood passively while the ropes were tied around their waists. Going over the edge was more difficult, but with Lakpa shouting directions from below, the old men managed to sit on the combing and slip over the side. There was some animated debate at the last moment, but a push from their colleagues decided the issue. By the time Trager's man was down and untied, Freya was already belaying a third. Trager turned to tie in the last monk, but he was gone. Trager made out a figure at the opposite corner.

"Get him!" Freya said. "As soon as this one is down, I'll try to find a rappel anchor. Maybe one of the flagpoles on the tall side."

Trager jogged across the warming roof. He was about to touch the monk's robe, when the man cried out and grabbed Trager by the sleeve. From a window two stories below, something flapped out of the smoke, disappeared, and flapped again. A blanket.

"The flag poles will work for an anchor," Freya called over. "It's the long side of the building, but I think the rope will reach."

"Ferndecker's alive," Trager yelled.

Freya leaned over the parapet and looked down the wall. "Shit," she said. "The lama still goes first."

"That room could go up in flames any moment!"

"And melt the rope if it's in there. Then we all burn."

They had to drag back to the short side of the building. He was still trying to argue with them as they pushed him over the side. As soon as the line went slack, Trager began to pull it in. Freya was already carrying the bulk of the coil across the roof to the flagpole above Ferndecker's room. Trager followed with the end, tying himself into the rope as he walked.

"We're not going to make it," Freya said, looking down the wall. "He's already dead." Freya held the rope loosely, twisting it in her hands.

"Freya, he's alive. That monk knows he's alive. *Ferndecker* knows he's alive. Put me on belay.

She continued kneading the rope. "I'm not going to lose everything," she said.

"Freya! The money is gone! This building is gone! What are you trying to save?"

"You! I'm not going to lose *you*. You'll kill yourself trying to save that old man's corpse!"

She stood close to him. Flames shot out of the stairway. The heat of the fire warmed his face, while at the same time he could feel the cold void at his back.

"Put me on belay!"

"No," Freya said. "We'll rappel off the flagpole. Now. Get yourself untied." She had her legs braced apart, immovable. Trager stared at the gargoyle that possessed the woman he loved. It reached out stony arms for him, but where Freya had been Trager saw only a pillar of rock.

"Watch out," he said, and quickly passed the rope from his waist around Freya, catching it on the other side of her. Still holding the rope, he rolled backward over the wall.

Freya screamed as she was slammed to her knees against the waist-high combing at the edge of the roof. Trager lowered himself down a few feet, using Freya's body as a bollard. She cried out in pain as the rope burned across her back.

"You can lower me," Trager said, "or I can lower myself, but I'm going down."

"You're going to kill us!"

"One way or another, I'm going down."

"Let me have it!" Freya gasped. "You'll pull me over." Trager hesitated, but he had no choice. He loosened his grip on the running half of the line, letting Freya take control of his weight. She let the rope slide, slowly at first, then faster. Trager's feet slipped off the wall and he scraped hard against the brick. Freya was dropping him past the window.

The man was very likely dead from the smoke. It would be easy to pass by, to land in the gravel at the base of the wall. Freya would rappel down from one of the flagpoles, and they would walk down to the camp together. They would not speak much at first, and when they did, they would not talk about this night. It would be only a little omission, considering all the other things they would have to share. But it would be permanent, irreversible. He grabbed the window ledge.

The shock wrenched his shoulders, and he couldn't hold on. But other hands had grabbed his wrists. He dragged his torso through the narrow slit, and dropped to the floor, his feet still sticking out of the window.

"One should always remain close to the floor in a fire," Ferndecker said.

"Pull on the rope!" Trager yelled. "Freya's holding it."

"Freya, is it? Bad, bad idea."

"Oh, fuck, just pull There!"

The rope went limp, and Trager tumbled into the room. He started to rise but three feet above the floor the air was thick with smoke.

"As I said, one should always remain"

Trager groped in the dark until he caught hold of a woolly sleeve. "Hang onto me. Freya will lower us down."

"I doubt that," Ferndecker said.

"She can do it," said Trager. "As long as you hang onto me, you'll be okay."

"I'm afraid the converse is not, as long as you hang onto me. Why would she have bothered to burn the place down?"

"What?"

"And, if she intended to rescue you, why cut the rope?"

Trager grabbed at the loose rope from his waist. The severed end fell in the window by his feet. Trager scuttled to the opening and looked out. Freya was gone.

"She never would listen to me, either," Ferndecker said. "I recall when I first met her"

"*Will you shut up?*" Trager ran the remaining scrap of rope through his hands. It was no more than thirty feet. He guessed the drop below them was at least twice that.

"Petroleum fire," Ferndecker said. "Kerosene. You can tell. Quality of the smoke."

The end of the rope was a bush of fibers, with the braided core dangling six inches out of its woven sheath. Trager tore the knot open at his waist and hacked the whipping tape off the end with his pocket knife. He stretched the sheath a few inches off the core and put it in Ferndecker's hands.

"Pull on that while I work the rest of the sheath off. If we tie the sheath and the core together, we might have enough to reach the ground."

The hall outside the room erupted in flame. Trager could feel a wave of intense heat pass over his head, and then a rush of air sucking in the window to feed the fire. Trager could now see Ferndecker for the first time. He had been close to the flame already. The front of his wool coat was singed, and his eyebrows were gone. But his expression was calm and distant. They were in a strange room, one of the monk's quarters. There were elaborate hanging paintings on the walls, and an altar in one corner. A butter lamp smoked in front of a cast image of a *bodhisattva*, its little flame absurdly small.

"Do you know our great weakness, you and I?" Ferndecker mused.

"Pull!" Trager said. "Oh, shit! Just pull!" One of the scroll paintings burst into flames.

"Adventurers," Ferndecker said. "Not really. Just the same as everyone else. Our own little place, our own little duties. That's what we really want. Different duties, oh, yes. Different settings. But that just makes them a little distinctive. Now a real adventurer"

"I got it, I got it," Trager chanted. The two parts of the rope had separated in his hand. He tied the sheath in a quick bowline around his waist. He quickly surveyed the cell. The only object that appeared at all substantial was the cast image on the altar. It was almost too hot to touch, and it was not fixed to its pedestal. Desperate, Trager measured the window with his eyes. It was wider than the statue, but if he turned the figure sideways . . . the *bodhisattva* was just another chockstone.

"With a true adventure, there's no end. There's no safe place. And the adventurer"

Trager tottered across the floor with the statue, eyes closed against the smoke. When he dropped the casting by the window, the mud floor buckled underneath, and more smoke welled up through the cracks. Trager tied the two parts of the rope together and fastened the core end around the statue.

"On belay!" he cried, throwing the rope around his waist. "Out the window! Go! I'll rappel after you."

". . . I say the true adventurer—well, he simply does not worry about those things."

Trager dove on the old man and pulled him to his feet. He was amazingly light. Trager shoved him head first into the window. The sheath of the rope twisted and folded where he held it around his back, slicing into his flesh. His whole back seemed on fire, and in fact it nearly was. The ceiling of the room was beginning to burn. He let the rope run faster, hearing his own groans rise over the crackle of flames. He almost let go when the knot in the middle hit his braking hand, He burned his palms trying to bring it under control, but his level of pain was so great that the added hurt made little difference. Then the rope was tight on the body of the Buddha. The metal figure rose from the floor, seared his hand, and jammed across the window as Trager twisted free from the line. The statue stuck fast, pinned against the inner wall by Ferndecker's weight. The rope didn't reach.

Something landed on Trager's head, and he smelled burning hair. Batting at the ember, he dove out the window. Only when he was hanging face down, did he realize he should have gone out feet first in order to grab the rope. Brands landed on his legs, and he thrashed to kick them off as he tried to turn himself in the narrow slot. He got his hands on the rope as his feet somersaulted out over his head. He began to slide immediately, screaming as the skin left his palms. It was a cry of fear or anger, not of pain. His hands felt strangely wooden as they burned down the rope. He stopped at the knot, but his fingers began to open of their own accord, as if melting off. He slid on down the core, braking with his feet against the

brick, hoping to reach the end before his hands let go completely. Ferndecker stopped him. He landed in his lap, straddling both the rope and Ferndecker's stomach.

"Get off! Not . . . proper . . . thing at all!" Ferndecker groaned.

True, thought Trager. I did it all wrong. I should have found another way. Trager could see the moonlit rocks below where they would hit, and the hillside across from them. It rose under the wall so that to one side the drop increased, and to the other, it disappeared altogether.



"Swing," Trager whispered. "Swing over. Over to the ground."

Ferndecker didn't answer. He had lost consciousness, strangling in the single loop of line that had slipped up around his chest. Trager tried to move the both of them, but all he could do was turn them over on the wall. He kept at it, kicking at the brick with his feet, rolling them back and forth together until the rope burned through. Trager hung on to the old man as they fell—hardly adventurers at the end, just two travelers needing a place to land.



The destruction of the Murghi Gompa was a disaster. Besides the loss of monastery, the fire consumed dozens of *thangka*, religious scroll paintings, including the one Trager saw immolated in Ferndecker's last refuge. The gompa library contained original Tibetan translations of Sanskrit sutras, all now lost. The Murghi Restricted Area was immediately closed to all foreigners, and the military demanded an investigation of the travel company whose associates had figured in the event.

At that point the newspapers, which played up the story, began to have trouble summarizing the situation.

Freya Martens India, the company in question, was unknown prior to the fire. Its majority Indian partner turned out to be a well-respected former military officer, and the inquiries from that side abruptly ceased. At that point the head of the Sonjal *tehsil*, or district, had already dispatched the regional forester (a condescending Delhi man whom he despised) to the upper valley to find out more about the incursion into Ladakh by an American trek leader. Chandra Lal was away with the shop owner assessing Doda as a site for a tourist tea stall. However, his mother was at home. She lectured the forester for half an hour, emphasizing her points with graceful movements of her hands and several suggestions to the *Tehsildar* that the forester chose not to convey. In the end, the papers decided that readership and access to information would be greater if events were presented as a story of sacrifice rather than intrigue.

Meanwhile, the six lamas, offered refuge in eastern Ladakh at the large gompas, refused. Despite being isolated in a largely Muslim district, they asked to stay where they were. With assistance from the Ladakh Buddhist Association, they were housed temporarily at the rest house in Darcha, while others decided their fates.

Which did not take long. Even Vasant Bagchee, waiting in a corridor of the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh hospital in Srinagar, had to admit the cascade of consequences following the fire at Murghi Gompa challenged his conception of karma. He was considering how he might revise the lecture on the topic that he gave to westerners, when the two American officials emerged into the hall and walked past him to stand at the edge of the stairwell. They lit cigarettes, which Bagchee was certain violated hospital rules, but he kept silent.

"Well, that was a waste of time," one of the Americans said. He was dressed in a button-down shirt and tie, quite formal for Srinagar, but admirably crisp given the June heat.

"I don't think he actually knows," said the other, a shorter man in a khaki safari suit that Bagchee recognized as a uniform of U.S. embassy staff. "He's just a kid."

"My son is younger than he is, and he's old enough to know his ass from a hole in the ground," said button-down.

"Your son is an econ major at Stanford," safari suit replied. "This guy's a climbing bum. Like I said. Just a kid. Martens wouldn't have told him squat about where Ferndecker's money came from."

"Even if she's fucking him?"

“Even if. And Martens might not even know herself. Or care. She was just taking the old man for everything she could, no questions asked.”

“And that’s just it, isn’t it? There won’t be any questions asked, at least not of Martens. Not for a long time.”

The two men smoked in silence for a moment, polluting the entire corridor. “Ferndecker doesn’t have any trouble talking,” safari suit said.

“No shit,” said button-down. “Not that it’s any help.”

“Not to him, but maybe to Martens. Hard to claim elder abuse when the victim says he was her boss, and when Martens and her boy toy are heroes for saving his ass.”

Button-down stubbed out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe, and let the butt fall on the floor. “Is it true you can’t get a drink in this town?” he asked.

“I know a place,” said safari suit, and they exited down the stairs, never once taking note of the middle-aged Indian on the bench in the hall.

Incredible, Bagchee thought as their footsteps faded. These people consider themselves the Leaders of the Free World. I could have been a bloody Soviet agent listening to them discuss nuclear missiles. Whatever. All this was useful. And now it was his turn.

As it turned out, the interview did not go as smoothly as he had hoped. The first hint of trouble was the girl who intercepted him at the door to Trager’s room. She was small, dressed in a simple sari, but she had a commanding presence.

“Mr. Trager is not seeing any additional visitors today. He is quite fatigued and needs to prepare for travel.”

“And that is precisely why I must see him. I am Vasant Bagchee, his employer.”

“You are nothing of the kind. You are the one who dismissed him in New Delhi and would have stranded your own clients there last month.”

Bagchee was taken aback. “And who, may I ask, are you?”

“The person who ran Springtime in Kashmir,” Trager’s voice said from inside the room. “Pratima, let him in.”

The young woman glanced behind her. Bagchee sensed that she might be as frustrated with Trager as she was with him. Nevertheless, she stepped back and Bagchee was allowed to advance to Trager’s bedside. All considered, the climber did not look that bad. One leg was suspended in a cast, and his face was bruised and scarred with abrasions. But the young man was instantly recognizable. Good enough for Bagchee’s purposes. He had heard that Freya Martens was returned to Canada looking like a mummy.

“Ah! The hero of Ladakh” Bagchee began.

Trager cut him off. “Excuse me. This is Pratima Busco. Her father was the one who saved Springtime in Kashmir. I told you about her in Delhi.”

“Oh, yes,” Bagchee said. “So pleased to meet you.”

Not even Bagchee could pull it off. The fact was that forceful women from his own country intimidated him. With Freya Martens, he always had the upper hand. He could hold her foreignness against her. She could not possibly understand. She was too blond, too Canadian, too connected to the oppression of the British Empire. But this child knew more than Freya did. She had an Indian mother who had instilled in her truths that predated the Raj. The Vedic scholars had written that women should honor their men as gods. Wishful thinking on their part, Bagchee suspected. He was relieved when Pratima announced, "I am going to find a nurse," and departed.

When she was gone, Bagchee said, "I have listened to your interview on All India Radio. This was very good. You told them exactly enough to please their audience, but not enough to incite further inquiries. And you have established yourself and Freya as the saviors of the Murghi Gomba."

"Even though it's our fault it burned down."

"Not at all. The lamas in Darcha have said that the fire was due to a malfunctioning primus. The fact that it was being used to make tea for Mr. Ferndecker at the request of Freya Martens is sheer coincidence."

"Still, the place is gone."

"But it is not! The Ladakh Buddhist Association intends to rebuild Murghi Gomba. This time with a proper road and accommodations for tourists. And, I imagine, rather more safe cooking facilities. They are collecting funds already. The Dalai Lama has contributed. As have I. As will every travel organization that wants a chance at the Murghi Restricted Area once it is again open. You see, Freya's dream is coming true."

"Without Freya."

"Well, no, of course, not until she recovers."

"Without Freya. Her father tracked me down, and Sundown Busco managed to book a call to Canada. I talked to him."

"I see. Yes, that is unfortunate. But you are still here, and that is what we must talk about now."

"Make it quick. I'm flying back to the States with Pratima's family tomorrow. It's going to take surgery to put this leg together."

"But this is no problem," said Bagchee. "Given your current renown, surely the government will extend your visa. And the doctors here are very good at repairing people. During the last war with Pakistan, they were doing it every day."

"And what am I supposed to do here all this time?"

"Lead treks, of course! Well, obviously not on the ground. But as an adviser, your status as one of the heroes of the Murghi Gomba would make you invaluable as an addition to any trek prospectus. You could have tea with the clients on arrival, perhaps check in with them at base camp by radio."

"Get out."

"No, I am quite serious. One could . . ."

“And I’m serious. Get out. Of the room.”

“Just let me finish,” said Bagchee. “Achcha, you have had a rather extraordinary experience. You have sought to make a job of your holy pursuit of mountaineering, and found that this avocation is subject to economics as much as it is to gravity. This is hard-won learning. Why do you turn your back on it?”

“Just because something happened doesn't mean it should have happened. Are you talking karma again? My mother would be all over you. She'd say, “That was a mess. Don't let it happen again. But what's done is done.”

“Ah, but what is done is what is to be. There will be fresh cohorts of adventurers eager to sign up to see the Himalaya because you reminded them that it is there. There will be work for all.”

“For Lakpa Tsering, at least. He was here yesterday. It sounds like the Murghi II clients are yours and Max's again.”

“Well, yes. They know nothing about our disagreements, only that they sent their fees to Holz Overseas Trekking. So it seemed prudent to resume operations. All we need is a leader. That, and a peak to climb.”

“Lakpa has the mountain. We talked about it. It's in upper Sonjal.”

“I will speak to him about this presently. But there is still the matter of the leader.”

“Talk to Lakpa. He and Sonam are setting up their own business. I'm sure you can negotiate something.”

“These boys are a *sirdar* and a cook! They have no resources for establishing a business.”

“They've been saving. And they have my earnings from springtime in Kashmir. I couldn't take all those rupees out of India, so I gave it to them.”

“You did what? This is profligate! Irresponsible! You have totally ruined these boys! You are no leader at all!”

“Right,” said Trager. “I'm an investor.”

Bagchee went to the Srinagar airport to see Trager off. Lakpa came to push the wheelchair as far as the checkpoint. The Ladakh representative to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, showed up with a retinue of photographers. The three of them posed for pictures around Trager before Pratima, Sundown, and Kamala took him into security.

Once the travelers had passed through the gate, Bagchee took the opportunity to chat up the Lok Sabha representative. They conversed in English. The woman, wearing a traditional long robe and black apron, was gracious and friendly. Yet Bagchee knew that he was at a disadvantage, as would be Battarchaya, Viktor Axt, or anyone else from south of the Himalaya. Lakpa, standing silently to one side, was probably communicating more to his fellow Ladakhi in one glance than Bagchee could articulate in an hour.

Afterwards he strolled along the edge of a saffron field bordering the Srinagar airport. For Muslims it was the time of afternoon prayers, and he had given his Kashmiri driver a few

minutes to prostrate himself toward Mecca on the airport lawn. The field was coming into bloom in hot orange colors, bright against the terraced hills and valley groves. A beautiful place, Kashmir, Vasant thought. The Moguls were right to move the capital here from Delhi every summer, but he would not want to have agented that trek. Modern Kashmir and its visitors were problem enough.

He hadn't counted on Trager entering the game so soon. It usually took longer with his type. In the event that the man actually healed, it would require some effort to bring him back in on Vasant's side. In the mean time, he had to deal with a Ladakhi who knew both the mountains and the Indian travel business. Bagchee would have preferred a leader with a little less insight. He began to walk back to his taxi, hoping the driver was not excessively devout. He picked up his pace as he saw a stranger bearing down on him from the direction of the terminal. Bagchee particularly did not want to deal with this hippie sort: A large man with a pack, outlandishly dressed in baggy pajamas, a Tibetan jacket, and crudely-knit hillman's cap.

"Excuse me? Hello? Mr. Bagchee?"

Bagchee stopped in surprise. "Yes?"



"Found you! Fantastic! The hospital sent me to your houseboat, and the *chowkidar* sent me here. I'm looking for Ansel Trager."

"I am sorry, he has just now taken the plane to Delhi. Are you a friend?"

"I'm Harry Macintosh. I was on your company's trek last month."

Damn Trager. "I am so sorry, but this man has no connection with my company any more. If you have accounts to settle, you must see Trager himself."

"Then you know him. Great guy. Great trek leader, and I've been on a lot of treks. I just wanted to thank him for the last trip. Do you know where he was going?"

"I believe he is travelling to San Francisco with Mr. Busco and his daughter, also of your trek." He paused. "Your wife inquired at my office. She was keen to contact you. I understood there was some, well, unpleasantness on your trip."

"She was along, if that's what you mean. And I walked off with the ponies. I also have a bunch of equipment I need to give back."

"Oh, that," Vasant laughed lightly. "I would be perfectly happy to take charge of the kit. I can give you a receipt."

"Well, maybe. Actually, I really want to see Trager. When I left I was just crazy because I thought he was fooling around with my wife. But you know what? It was the best thing that ever happened to me. By the time I got to Lunwali, I was enjoying myself. So I just kept going. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, most crazy," Bagchee agreed. "If we could just resolve this equipment matter . . ."

"For the first time, I was just doing something at my own pace. And I had this feeling of, I don't know—freedom. Accomplishment. I saw what it must mean to you guys, always on your way, walking over mountains one after another, year after year. To be free like that—God, what a vision!"

Does no one understand his role in this world? Bagchee thought. I have listened to a destitute mountaineer talk about investments, and now I must suffer visions from a middle-aged adolescent. "I am most glad that your trip has come to a happy conclusion," said Bagchee. "I believe I can put you in touch with Mr. Trager at his mother's home."

"That would be great. When I got to Manali, I realized I had to tell Trager what I understood. I thought, if this can change my life, think of what it could do for others. I thought he might be interested in setting up some kind of business to work with people like me. People who really need to get away to straighten out their heads."

One could grow old trying to make sense of these people, Bagchee thought. This man is enslaved now as much by his enlightenment as he was by his silly wife. And that child Max, trapped in an adulthood he only pretended to enjoy. And poor Freya, so desperate to control a situation that would have surrendered to her of its own nature. They were perseverative to the point of valor. There was a certain heroic quality in this search to be other than they were. In any case, it was not his job to change them. Someone must do his duty.

"So," he said, "you have walked from Upper Sonjal to Manali? The mountains must be spectacular."

"Oh, God, it's fantastic. I can show you. I found a lab in Manali that could develop my black and whites. Trager had me shoot a peak he wanted to climb, and I've got his prints. That's my dream now. To come back and climb that peak with him."

"Indeed? You have a photograph of this mountain?"

"Sure, let me show you. It's a beautiful, beautiful peak."

Bagchee pretended to look at the photograph Harry Macintosh took out of his pack. What he really wanted to examine was the man. He noted the slack skin, evidence of fat recently lost. The mountaineering background was unknown. But there was stamina; that was proven.

"You must be quite fatigued," Bagchee said, concern in his voice. "There are people who have trekked the Himalaya for years who would not undertake an expedition such as yours."

"Listen, I'd start again tomorrow if I had the chance."

"Ah," Bagchee smiled. "And your digestion, Mr. Macintosh? What of that?"



Photos

Unless otherwise noted, photographs were taken by the author in India between 1975 and 1979. If you identify a mistake in label or attribution, please contact the author at talbotb@comcast.net

Cover

Mani wall, Markha Nala, Ladakh, 1979

Contents

Bird on prayer flags, pass above Hemis Monastery, Ladakh. 1979

Preface

Page 1: Rainbow above camp in Markha Nala, Ladakh. 1979

Prologue

Page 2: Porters breaking base camp, Mulkila Glacier, Lahoul. 1975

Page 4: Nala, Tehri Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh. 1979

Kawapatri

Page 5: Tourist hotel, Gulmarg, Kashmir. 1978

Page 6: Bar, Gulmarg, Kashmir. 1978

Page 9: Sled porters, Gulmarg, Kashmir. 1978. Photo: Jim Miller

Page 11: Guest house, Gulmarg, Kashmir. 1978

Page 12: Sheep, Black Peak, Tehri Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh. 1979

Page 14: Dawn at Gispa, Lahoul, 1975.

Delhi

Page 15: Red Fort, Delhi, 1975

Page 16: Road sign, Kashmir, 1977

Page 18: Road and orchard, Kashmir Valley, 1977

Page 26: Taj Mahal tour guide, Agra, 1975

Hotel Julay

Page 27: Mulkila 6 Expedition members, Claridges Hotel, Delhi, 1975

Flight

Page 37: Indian Airlines A320. Photo: Yatrik Sheth. Shutterstock.

Page 39: Tourist sign, Srinagar, Kashmir, 1978

Page 42: Peaks above Manali-Leh Road, Lahoul. 1975

Janavar Gali

Page 43: Ponies below Rohtang Pass, Lahoul, 1975

Page 46: Ice axe lesson, Eliot Glacier, Mt. Hood, Oregon, 1973

Page 48: Climbers, Middle Sister, Oregon Cascades, 1968.

Page 49: Prayer flags and cairn, Markha Valley, Ladakh, 1979

Gulpathar

Page 54: Village below Keylang, Lahoul, 1975

Page 54: Porter, Mulkila Glacier, Lahoul, 1975

Page 58: Sickle Moon Peak, Tehri Garhwal, 1979.

Page 60: Making paper airplanes, Keylang, Lahoul, 1975. Photo: Dr. Everett Howard.

Page 66: Teahouse, Manali-Leh Road, Lahoul, 1975

Sonjal

Page 70: Tents, Black Peak, Teri Garhwal, 1979.

Page 73: Fallen pony, Rohtang Pass, Lahoul, 1975.

Page 76: Paying porters, Mulkila Glacier, Lahoul, 1975. Photo: James O'Neill.

Ladakh

Page 79: Climbers approaching high camp, Black Peak, Tehri Garhwal, 1979.

Page 84: Climber on east face Mt. Hood, Oregon, 1969.

Page 88: Cook approaching high camp, Mulkila-6, Lahoul, 1975.

Page 91: Climber, Tahoma Glacier, Mt. Rainier, 1972.

Page 94: Climbers, Mt. Hood Summit, 1973.

Darcha

- Page 96: Rest House, Panikhar, Ladakh, 1978.
- Page 98: Jeep, Srinagar-Leh Road, Ladakh, 1979.
- Page 100: Tourist cottage, Manali, Lahoul, 1975.

Kargil

- Page 104: Expedition equipment, Portland, Oregon, 1975.
- Page 105: Bazaar, Manali, Lahoul, 1975.
- Page 107: Onlookers, mela, Keylang, Lahoul, 1975.
- Page 116: Full moon superimposed over night sky from dark room. Photo: zef art. Shutterstock.

The Pyramid

- Page 117: Peak above Kaintal Glacier, Ladakh, 1978.
- Page 118: Mani stone, Lahoul, 1975.
- Page 121: Climbers, Tahoma Glacier, Mt. Rainier, 1973.
- Page 125: The author, east face of Gandalf. Arjuna Peaks, British Columbia, 1973. Photo: Peter Renz.
- Page 125: Ascender and ice screw, Mulkila 6, Lahoul, 1975
- Page 127: Climbers, east ridge of Mulkila 6, Lahoul, 1975.
- Page 130: Blue gentian, Nepal. Photo: Ursula Perreten. Shutterstock.

The Gompa

- Page 131: Painting, Hemis Gompa, Ladakh, 1979
- Page 133: Phyang Gompa, Ladakh, 1979.
- Page 145: Texture of fire. Photo: nasti23033. Shutterstock.

Srinagar

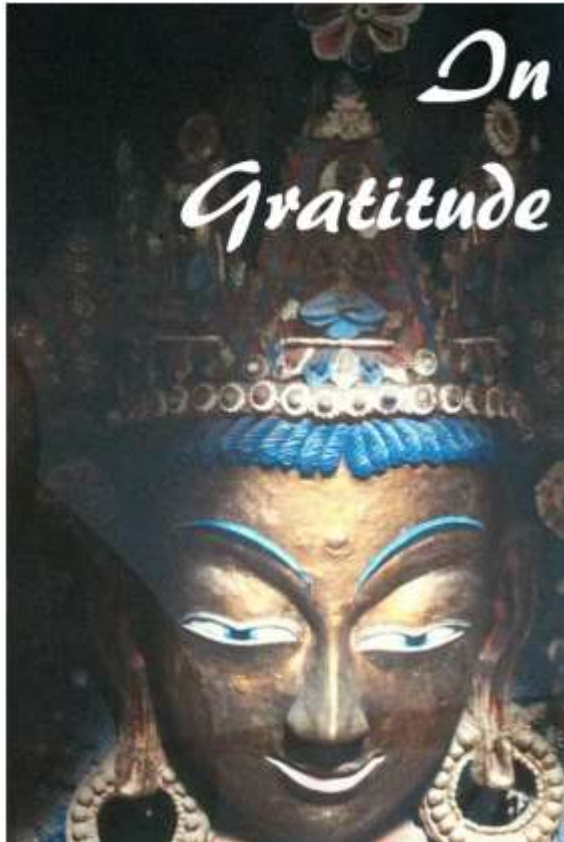
- Page 146: Chinar leaves. Photo: Artography, Shutterstock.
- Page 150: Nagin Lake houseboats, Srinagar, Kashmir, 1977.
- Page 151: Pakoras, Tangmarg, Kashmir, 1978.

In Gratitude

- Page 152: Avalokiteshvara, Hemis Gompa, Ladakh, 1979.

Author

- The author, Barun Valley, Nepal, 1979. Photo: Dr. Etsuro Motoyama.



I want to thank my first wife, Nancy Woolfson, for putting up with the writing of an earlier version of this story, and my second wife, Talleen Holloway, for reading and critiquing *Springtime in Kashmir*.

The experiences behind this work would not have been possible without the misplaced trust of Dr. Lute Jerstad and his colleagues at Mountain Travel India, who repeatedly sent me into exotic environments that stretched the limits of my skill and judgement. I am also grateful to the clients I served, and hope that all will be forgiven in time.

I would not have survived those adventures without timely interventions from my companions. For all our sakes, I hope we never face an occasion for me to repay those debts.

Finally, I want to thank the residents of the greater Himalaya—Kashmir, Ladakh, Lahoul, Teri Garhwal, and Nepal—who welcomed and guided us in their mountains. I wish all of us peace and safety.

Talbot Bielefeldt
Eugene, Oregon
July 2020

Fonts

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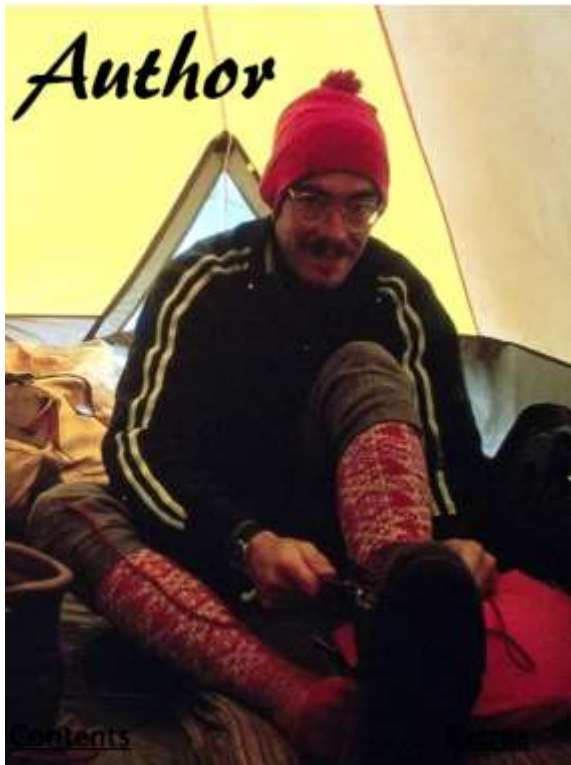
Fonts

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Springtime in Kashmir uses *AR Berkeley* for titles, chosen because its flourishes suggest the Arabic script used to write Hindi/Urdu in Kashmir.

Everything else is Lucida, a very readable font used in Microsoft Office and other software for on-screen display. Designers Chuck Bigelow and Kris Holmes released Lucida in multiple versions, which allowed me to distinguish different types of body text in the book without creating the font salad typical of so many design illiterates.

Text and menus are **Lucida Sans**, printed material is **Lucida Bright**, handwritten material and non-English terms are *Lucida Sans Italic*, and telegrams are **Lucida Sans Typewriter**, all from the same family.



After graduating from Reed College in 1972, Talbot Bielefeldt spent a decade as an outdoor educator and writer. He led mountain treks in India, Nepal, and New Zealand and participated in expeditions to India, Alaska, and British Columbia.

He earned a Masters in Education Policy and Management from the University of Oregon and has worked for more than twenty-five years in educational publishing and research. He has two daughters and lives with his wife in Eugene, Oregon.