

GORDON KORMAN

EVEREST

**BOOK ONE
THE CONTEST**

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

For Brandon VanOver

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PROLOGUE

It was a funeral in every way but one: The body was missing.

Not *missing*, exactly. Its location was common knowledge — that was the most horrifying part of all this. The body was nine thousand miles away in a country called Nepal, twenty-seven thousand feet up Mount Everest, the highest point on planet Earth.

On Everest, everything above twenty-five thousand feet is known as the Death Zone. There, overpowering wind gusts approaching two hundred miles per hour can wrench a strong person clear off the mountain, and bone-chilling nighttime cold of one hundred degrees below zero causes frostbite and hypothermia. Wherever the body was, it was surely frozen solid.

Twenty-seven thousand feet is above the range of any helicopter. At that altitude, the air is simply too thin to provide the rotor blades with any lift. A stranded climber would have a better chance of being picked up off the surface of the moon than in the Death Zone. Atop Everest, you

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are your only rescue squad — you and the others who take on the mountain with you.

It was easy to spot those teammates among the mourners, and not just because of their young age. Their physical bodies fidgeted in the chapel, constricted by grief and tight collars. But their minds were still on the other side of the globe, five miles straight up, in the Death Zone.

They had that much in common with their unfortunate friend. It was a place they might never truly leave.

CHAPTER ONE

Dominic Alexis arranged the caps and wrappers on his bedroom carpet and examined them for at least the hundredth time:

E E R E S T

He rummaged through the shoebox, searching for the V he knew was not there. R's. T's. Dozens of E's. He had counted once — more than fifty, and that was weeks ago. Even a few extra S's. Not a single V.

That was how these contests worked. Millions of the other letters were stuck under the caps of Summit Athletic Fuel and on the inside wrappers of Summit Energy Bars, distributed to stores all around the country. Then they printed up a grand total of three V's and shipped them to nonexistent addresses in Antarctica, fourth class.

He was exaggerating, of course. There were V's out there, even if just a handful. Over the past weeks, the TV news had shown clips of ecstatic young climbers who had spelled out EVEREST to qualify for the five wild-card spots at boot camp.

Four of those places had been filled. Only one chance remained.

At boot camp, the five lucky winners would join the American Junior Alpine Association's fifteen top young mountaineers for four weeks of intensive training and competition. It promised to be a brutal month of six-hour workouts, night climbs, and marathon hikes carrying heavy packs. But the end result was worth it. The top four climbers would earn places on SummitQuest — Summit Athletic's Everest expedition, the youngest team ever to attempt the world's tallest peak.

A shout from downstairs interrupted his reverie. "*Where's my sand?!*"

It was Christian, Dominic's older brother. Chris didn't have to scramble around garbage cans and recycling bins, scrounging for caps and wrappers. His place at boot camp was already secure. He was the number-two-rated under-seventeen climber in the country — second only to the Z-man himself, Ethan Zaph.

Chris was talking about his good-luck piece — a small glass vial of sand from the Dead Sea. It had been a gift from their grandmother, brought back from a trip to Israel when Chris was a baby and Dominic hadn't even been born. Chris loved the idea that the sand was from the

lowest point on the globe. When he started climbing, he strung the vial on a leather cord so he could wear it around his neck. "I'm taking this sucker *vertical!*" he would say before an ascent. And at the top of the rock, or cliff, or mountain, he would talk to it: "Far from home, baby! You're far from home!"

It was natural that, as Chris became more accomplished as a climber, it would one day cross his mind to take his good-luck piece from the bottom of the world to the top of the world at the summit of Everest. Now, finally, he was getting his chance.

Pounding on the stairs. "Come on, Dom! I'm packing up my stuff for boot camp!"

There was no question that, right then, Dominic needed luck more than Chris did. The vial of sand clutched in his fist, he opened the sash of the window and expertly eased himself outside.

In many neighborhoods, it would probably raise eyebrows to have a thirteen-year-old climbing out a second-story window, but it was a fairly ordinary occurrence around the Alexis home. Sometimes it was just the easiest way down. Vertical was a forbidden direction for most people; for Chris and Dominic, it was as simple an option as left or right. Years before, as little kids, Chris had become the town hide-and-seek champion by

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scaling a fifty-foot tree for aerial surveillance every time he was “it.” Even Mr. Alexis, when he needed to go up on the roof to check a flapping shingle, never bothered with a ladder. He had grown up in Switzerland, in the shadow of the high Alps, and was responsible for introducing his two sons to “this climbing foolishness.” (Their mother’s opinion.)

And anyway, a thirty-second climb was better than a face-to-face with Chris over a stolen — ahem — *borrowed* good-luck charm.

As far as degree of difficulty went, the front of the house was pretty pathetic. Dominic started down, jamming the edges of his sneakers into the narrow spaces between the bricks.

As he passed the picture window in the living room, he caught an exasperated look from his mother. He couldn’t actually hear her, but instead read her lips as he dropped to the flower bed:

“We have a *door* . . .”

But Dominic was already sprinting along Mackenzie Avenue. Preparing for an ascent of Everest required workouts in the five- to seven-hour range, and he had been matching Chris step for step, pedal for pedal, and stroke for stroke. Only when climbing did Chris still hold an advantage. He was almost sixteen, bigger, taller, and stronger than Dominic. He could haul

himself up a top rope as naturally as a yo-yo returns to the hand playing with it. Dominic was just a month past his thirteenth birthday, and small for his age.

The Mackenzie Avenue 7-Eleven was his home away from home. Dominic estimated he had drunk more than forty gallons of Summit Athletic Fuel in the process of spelling E EREST. He'd tried his share of the bars, too, but Summit Energy Bars were like quick-drying cement. After a few of them, your insides turned to concrete. Better to stick with the liquid.

One more bottle. One last try.

Out of habit, he checked the recycling bin behind the store first, but it was empty except for a couple of soda cans. Inside, he grabbed a bottle of Fruit Medley. The flavors didn't matter with Summit Athletic Fuel; it all tasted the same — like weak, slightly salted lemonade backwash. He paid, walked out, and flopped down on the wooden bench next to the store.

Before popping the cap, he addressed the good-luck charm the way he'd seen his brother do it. "Find me a V and it's Everest or bust! I'll take you to the top of the world!"

Sheepishly, he looked around to make sure no one had overheard. When Chris talked to his little vial of sand, it always seemed cool. But in the

7-Eleven parking lot, it was just plain embarrassing.

He twisted the cap off and peeked underneath.

Another E.

Until the wave of disappointment washed over him, he hadn't realized how much faith he'd had that his brother's good-luck charm would deliver.

The leather strap slipped from his fingers, and the vial dropped to the pavement and began to bounce down the small strip mall's parking ramp. Horrified, Dominic stumbled after it. Losing a shot at Everest was nothing compared with what he'd have to face if he came home without Chris's Dead Sea sand.

He scrambled like a crab, but the bottle rolled ahead of him, just out of reach. As he ran across the garage entrance, a hulking SUV roared up suddenly. The driver slammed on the brakes, and the big vehicle squealed to a halt just inches from the boy.

"What's the matter with you, kid? Why don't you look where you're going?"

"Sorry." Dominic picked up the vial and scooted out of the way. Mom had continuous nightmares that climbing would kill at least one member of her family. *I'll bet she wasn't expect-*

ing it to happen like this, he reflected, a little shaken.

The SUV accelerated up the ramp, pausing at the top. The driver tossed a candy bar wrapper into the trash barrel and drove off.

It was a Summit Energy Bar. Dominic recognized the logo from where he stood, rooted to the spot. He had climbed towering cliffs, yet walking up this gentle slope to get that piece of paper seemed much, much harder.

He reached into the garbage and fished out the sticky wrapper. In a way, he almost knew what he would see before he turned it over.

A V!

It was a ticket to the top of the world.