

GORDON KORMAN

EVEREST

**BOOK TWO
THE CLIMB**

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*For Mark Wise, M.D.,
expert on what ails you
at twenty-nine thousand feet*

PROLOGUE

Dominic Alexis was waiting his turn to use the airplane bathroom when he got his first glimpse of Mount Everest.

Standing there in the narrow aisle of the 747, he froze, gawking out the porthole in the emergency door. To the north rose the jagged, icy spires of the Himalayas, the highest mountain range on the face of the earth. And right in the heart of it, the giant among giants — barely lower than the cruising altitude of the plane — Everest.

There should be trumpets, he thought reverently. A fanfare. Fireworks.

Norman “Tilt” Crowley came up behind Dominic and hip-checked him out of the way. “Man, this airline stinks! What do you have to do to get a bag of peanuts?”

Wordlessly, Dominic pointed out the window at the unmistakable silhouette.

Tilt peered through the porthole. “Big deal — Mount Everest. What, you thought they were going to move it before we got here?”

But for all his attitude, Tilt stayed riveted to the

spot, fascinated by the sight of the big mountain that the Nepalese called *Jongmalungma* — “Goddess, Mother of the World.”

An announcement came from the cockpit. “On our left, we see Mount Everest.” It was repeated in several other languages.

There was a rush for the left side of the plane. For most of the passengers, this was the closest they would come to the top of the world. But Dominic and Tilt were part of SummitQuest, the youngest expedition ever to attempt the planet’s highest peak. For them, the massive profile of Everest was the shape of things to come.

Sammi Moon shut off her Walkman and rushed over to join them at the porthole. “How is it? Extreme, right?” She spotted the mountain. “It’s beautiful!”

“You paint it; I’ll climb it,” put in Tilt. “That lump of rock is going to make me famous.”

“We have to wake Perry,” said Dominic. “He should see this.”

The fourth member of their team, Perry Noonan, was in his seat, fast asleep.

“Are you kidding?” snorted Tilt. “He’s so scared of Everest that he can’t even face the picture in the in-flight magazine. He’d take one look out the window and wet his pants!”

Dominic's eyes never left the mountain. "You're crazy if you're not a little bit scared."

"I'm just amped," said Sammi. "I can't believe we're really on our way!"

They squinted through the clouds, trying to discern the summit — the object of years of climbing and months of preparation.

What Dominic, Tilt, Sammi, and Perry could not know was that the mist-obscured peak was more than a goal. For one of the four team members, it would be a final resting place.

CHAPTER ONE

Kathmandu Airport, Nepal. Passports, permits, and paperwork.

The arrivals line stretched from gate 1 to gate B76.

Cap Cicero, legendary mountaineer and expedition leader, marched his team straight through in five minutes.

No one questioned this. Their sponsor was Summit Athletic, one of the richest corporations in the world. Big money opened a lot of doors and smoothed a lot of paths.

"So long, suckers," Tilt tossed over his shoulder at the milling, exasperated crowd they'd left behind in the passport queue. He awarded Perry a slap on the back of the head. "Tell your uncle I said thanks."

Perry's uncle Joe Sullivan was the president and founder of Summit Athletic. Although Cicero would never admit it publicly, that was the only reason Perry was on the team. No one believed this more strongly than Perry himself.

The red-haired boy sighed, wishing he was al-

most anywhere else in the world than Nepal. "Yeah, when Summit does something, they do it right."

"You think they'll have limos for us?" Tilt asked hopefully.

But when the group passed through the gate, their welcome consisted of a hand-lettered sign scribbled in Magic Marker on the flap of a corrugated box:

SUMIT

Dominic regarded the short, squat man holding up the cardboard. "Is that a Sherpa?" he whispered to Cicero. Sherpas are the inhabitants of the Khumbu region around Everest.

Cicero roared like a bull moose and rushed forward to throw his arms around the man with the sign.

"This isn't a Sherpa!" he cried. "It's *the* Sherpa! I want you to meet Babu Pemba, the greatest climbing Sherpa the mountain has ever seen!"

"*Climbing* Sherpa?" Tilt stared at the chubby Babu, who was taking bites out of a large sandwich clenched in his free hand. "Isn't he a little, you know, out of shape?"

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Babu surprised him by replying in perfect English with only a slight accent, "Oh, no. I'm just short for my weight."

Sammi giggled until she had the hiccups. Even Perry cracked a smile.

"I've heard of you," Dominic said with respect. "You saved Cap's life on Annapurna." He indicated the sandwich. "Is that a traditional Sherpa delicacy?"

"Philly cheese steak," mumbled Babu, his mouth full. He looked meaningfully from Dominic to Cicero. The message was clear. Tilt, while only fourteen years old, was built like a lumberjack and radiated power and physical ability. Perry and Sammi, at fifteen, were both solidly put together. But Dominic Alexis looked like a fifth grader. He'd just turned thirteen and was small for his age. Who in his right mind would bring him on an Everest ascent?

Cicero answered the unspoken question. "He climbs bigger than he looks."

It was a measure of their respect for each other that the Sherpa accepted this completely and without comment.

Babu Pemba drove them to their hotel in a rented Volkswagen bus so ancient that pieces were flak-

ing off as they rattled over the cobblestones and rutted pavement. The chaos on the streets was total. There were cars and trucks that made the VW look like a brand-new Ferrari. Motorcycles and mopeds whizzed everywhere. Further down the food chain, bicycles and rickshaws did their best to compete against the motorized vehicles. Yaks and other beasts of burden meandered along like they owned the place. Flocks of geese were driven in all directions. There seemed to be no traffic regulations. The rule was every yak for itself.

To four teenagers who had never left the United States, Kathmandu was an eye-opener. Dilapidated hovels stood next to modern hotels and Buddhist temples. The air reeked of car exhaust, incense, and manure. The food smells were positively bizarre. The general din was a mixture of unmuffled motors, religious chants, animal lowing, and rock music. Orange-clad monks walked the streets side by side with businessmen, panhandlers, and Western tourists.

At the hotel, the SummitQuest group met up with Andrea Oberman, the expedition doctor, and Lenny "Sneezy" Tkakzuk, the cameraman who would be recording the ascent for the Summit Athletic Web site. Both were top-notch climbing guides.

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That completed the team — four adults and four teens. If one of the young climbers succeeded in reaching the summit, he or she would break the record currently held by the Z-man, Ethan Zaph, and become the youngest human ever to conquer Everest.