

a novel

ROLAND SMITH

★ "A thrilling, multifaceted adventure story . . . A winner at every level."

—*Booklist* (starred)

KINE #1

THE ASSIGNMENT

MY NAME IS PEAK. Yeah, I know: weird name. But you don't get to pick your name or your parents. (Or a lot of other things in life for that matter.) It could have been worse. My parents could have named me Glacier, or Abyss, or Crampon. I'm not kidding. According to my mom all those names were on the list.

Vincent, my literary mentor (at your school this would be your English teacher), asked me to write this for my year-end assignment (no grades at our school).

When Vincent reads the sentence you just read he'll say: *Peak, that is a run-on sentence and chaotically parenthetical.* (That's how he talks.) Meaning it's a little confusing and choppy. And I'll tell him that my life is (parenthetical) and the chaos is due to the fact that I'm starting this assignment in the back of a Toyota pickup in Tibet (aka China) with an automatic pencil that doesn't have an eraser and it's not likely that I'm going to find an eraser around here.

Vincent has also said that a good writer should draw the reader in by starting in the middle of the story with a *hook*, then go back and fill in what happened before the *hook*.

Once you have the reader hooked you can write whatever you want as you slowly reel them in.

I guess Vincent thinks readers are fish. If that's the case, most of Vincent's fish have gotten away. He's written

something like twenty literary novels, all of which are out of print. If he knew what he was talking about why do I have to search the dark, moldering aisles of used-book stores to find his books?

(Now I've done it. But remember this, Vincent: *Writers should tell the brutal truth in their own voice and not let individuals, society, or consequences dictate their words!* And you thought no one was listening to you in class. You also know that I really like your books, or I wouldn't waste my time trying to find them. Nor would I be trying to get this story down in the back of a truck in Tibet.)

Speaking of which . . .

This morning we slowed down to get around a boulder the size of a school bus that had fallen in the middle of the road. In the U.S.A. we would use dynamite or heavy equipment to move it. In Tibet they use picks, sledgehammers, and prisoners in tattered, quilted coats to chip the boulder down to nothing. The prisoners smiled at us as we tried not to run over their shackled feet on the narrow road. Their cheerful faces were covered in nicks and cuts from rock shrapnel. Those not chipping used crude wooden wheelbarrows to move the man-made gravel over to potholes, where very old Tibetan prisoners used battered shovels and rakes to fill in the holes. Chinese soldiers in green uniforms and with rifles slung over their shoulders stood around fifty-gallon burn barrels smoking cigarettes. The prisoners looked happier than the soldiers did.

I wondered if the boulder would be gone by the time I came back through. I wondered if I'd ever come back through.

THE HOOK

I WAS ONLY TWO-THIRDS up the wall when the sleet started to freeze onto the black terra-cotta.

My fingers were numb. My nose was running. I didn't have a free hand to wipe my nose, or enough rope to rappel about five hundred feet to the ground. I had planned everything out so carefully, except for the weather, and now it was uh-oh time.

A gust of wind tried to peel me off the wall. I dug my fingers into the seam and hugged the terra-cotta until it passed.

I should have waited until June to make the ascent, but no, moron has to go up in March. Why? Because everything was ready and I have a problem with waiting. I had studied the wall, built all my custom protection, and picked the date. I was ready. And if the date passed I might not try it at all. It doesn't take much to talk yourself out of a stunt like this. That's why there are over six billion people sitting safely inside homes and one . . .

"Moron!" I shouted.

Option #1: Finish the climb. Two hundred sixty-four feet up, or about a hundred precarious fingerholds (providing my fingers didn't break off like icicles).

Option #2: Climb down. A little over five hundred feet, two hundred fifty fingerholds.

When fourteen-year-old Peak Marcello's long-lost father presents the opportunity for them to summit Everest together, Peak doesn't even consider saying no—even though he suspects there are a few strings attached. And if he makes it to the top before his birthday, he'll be the youngest person ever to stand above 29,000 feet. It's not a bad turn of events for a guy who's been stuck in New York City with only skyscrapers to (illegally) scale.

Here, in Peak's own words, is the exhilarating, gut-wrenching story of what happened on that climb to the top of the world—a climb that changed everything. *Welcome to Mount Everest.*

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"Everything a great adventure story should be and a whole lot more—with powerful, unforgettable characters and a driving, can't-put-it-down plot."

—Terry Trueman, author of *Stuck in Neutral*

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