Into Thin Air

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JON KRAKAUER

Jon Krakauer grew up in Massachusetts, and later studied environmental science at Hampshire College. As a young man, he developed a passion for mountain climbing, and throughout the 1970s he traveled to Alaska, Patagonia, and Mount Everest in search of difficult climbs. During these years, Krakauer supported himself almost entirely as a fisherman and a carpenter. Beginning in the early 1980s, however, he began contributing articles about mountaineering and the natural world to the magazine *Outside*, and by the end of the decade, he was supporting himself by writing full time. In 1996, Krakauer was involved in a major mountaineering disaster at Mount Everest, in which four of his teammates died in the middle of a snowstorm. Krakauer would eventually publish his version of these events in the bestselling book *Into Thin Air* (1996). Since the late 90s, Krakauer has published successful books on a number of topics, including the Mormon Church, the death of the marine Pat Tillman, and the life of Christopher McCandless (which formed the basis for the Academy Award-nominated film *Into the Wild*, starring Emily Hirsch). Krakauer continues to write prolifically; his most recent book, on college rape cases, was published in 2015.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book mentions several important milestones in mountaineering history, including the 1982 discovery that Mount Everest was the highest peak in the world, and, in 1953, the successful excursion to the summit of Mount Everest by Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary. As Krakauer argues, Hillary and Norgay's monumental achievement became a rallying point for Great Britain (Hillary was from New Zealand, a part of the British Commonwealth), and Hillary himself became a poster-child for the British Commonwealth.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Krakauer is a fan of the adventure novels of Jack London, a late 19th-century American novelist whose books include *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea Wolf* (1904), and *White Fang* (1906). Like Krakauer's work, London's books often feature vivid descriptions of the snowy wilderness, and include exciting scenes revolving around natural disasters, such as storms and blizzards. Another important text is *The Climb: Tragic Ambitions on Everest* (1997) by Anatoli Boukreev, a mountaineer who appears in *Into Thin Air*. In response to Krakauer's account of the 1996 Everest disaster, Boukreev offers his own version of the events, and argues that his behavior saved many lives, rather than endangering lives, as Krakauer alleges. There is still a vigorous debate in the mountaineering world surrounding Boukreev and Krakauer's competing versions of the Everest disaster.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster
- **When Written:** 1996-early 1997
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts, New York City
- **When Published:** Fall 1997
- **Setting:** Mount Everest
- **Climax:** The afternoon of May 10, 1996, when a snowstorm separates Krakauer from the rest of the group, eventually claiming six lives.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Controversy. Over the course of his long career, Jon Krakauer has seen his fair share of controversy; even so, *Into Thin Air* was by far his most controversial book. Numerous mountaineers, including several of the people who climbed Mount Everest with Krakauer, argued that Krakauer was distorting the facts and omitting key pieces of information. Krakauer rebutted many of these criticisms in a long postscript to his book.

Hollywood gold. Krakauer's books have inspired some well-known movies. By far the most successful and popular movie inspired by his writing is *Into the Wild* (2007), directed by Sean Penn. Although a film called *Everest*, based on the events Krakauer discusses in *Into Thin Air*, was released in 2015, the film is not based on Krakauer's writing. Nevertheless, the actor Michael Kelly (whose face will be familiar to fans of the Netflix show *House of Cards*) played Jon Krakauer in the film.

PLOT SUMMARY

Since 1852, human beings have known that **Mount Everest** is the tallest mountain in the world, and for almost as long, explorers and daredevils have been trying to climb it. In the 1950s, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first human beings to climb to the summit of Everest. The half-century since Hillary and Norgay's achievement has seen a lot of interest in mountaineering. Jon Krakauer, the author of the book, grew up worshipping Hillary, Norgay, and other

mountaineers, and since his late teens, he's been an accomplished mountain climber. Krakauer notes that, in recent decades, Everest has inspired a surprising amount of tourism: expert climbers lead guided expeditions up to the summit, charging their clients huge sums of money. In 1996, Krakauer made an arrangement with *Outside* magazine to write a feature article on the growing commercialization of Everest mountaineering. *Into Thin Air* is about Krakauer's expedition to climb Everest, which resulted in a notorious catastrophe.

In March of 1996, Krakauer flies to Kathmandu, where he meets his guide, Rob Hall. Hall is a famous mountaineer, known for being extremely cautious and orderly with his clients. Krakauer meets some of the other people who'll be climbing Everest with Hall, including Beck Weathers and Peter Hutchinson, both doctors, Yasuko Namba, a Japanese personnel director, and Doug Hansen, a postal worker. Krakauer gets along fairly well with his teammates, but he feels strangely disconnected from them, in part because most of them are exceedingly wealthy, and have had little actual experience climbing mountains. One notable exception is Doug Hansen, who has succeeded in paying the $65,000 permit to climb Everest with the help of a local elementary school. The previous year, Hansen attempted to climb Everest with Hall, but was forced to turn back due to an impending storm. This year, Hansen is determined to reach the summit.

Hall's team also includes many Sherpa mountaineers. The Sherpa are a small ethnic group native to the Himalayas. Because most Sherpas grow up in high altitude, they're natural climbers. Krakauer notes that Everest tourism has ruined some Sherpa communities and replaced them with hotels and lodges. He also points out that Sherpas, in spite of their skill at climbing, are disproportionately likely to die while climbing Everest. This is probably because many Sherpas work for climbing expeditions, and aren't given the same high treatment as paying clients.

There are many other teams climbing Everest around the same time as Hall's team. Scott Fischer, Hall's friendly rival in the mountaineering business, is leading his own team to the summit, including a celebrity client, Sandy Hill Pittman, a well-known socialite. Fischer has a reputation for being more laid-back and easygoing than Hall. There is a Taiwanese team, led by a man named Makalu Gau; the previous year, the Taiwanese team had a serious accident while climbing Mount McKinley, resulting in the death of a team member. There is also a South African team, headed by an unlikeable man named Ian Woodall. Woodall initially assembled an impressive, diverse team of climbers; however, his boorishness and argumentativeness caused most of the climbers to resign, leaving Woodall with second-rate climbers. Finally, there is an IMAX team making a movie about Mount Everest; the team is led by David Breshears, an old friend of Krakauer's. Of these teams, Hall's is by far the most prepared and organized—in other words, the team one would least expect to suffer a serious accident.

Hall's team proceeds with the expedition. They arrive at a Base Camp at the bottom of Everest, and for the next few weeks, they undergo a series of exercises designed to adjust their bodies to the rising elevation of the mountain. Hall slowly leads his team from Base Camp to Camp One, which is higher up, and then to Camps Two and Three. Along the way, Krakauer develops friendships with Doug Hansen, as well as Andy Harris, a likeable young guide. He also begins to respect his teammates more and more: although Beck Weathers and Yasuko Namba are clearly amateurs, they're sincere, motivated people. On the way up the mountain, Krakauer and his peers suffer from frequent bouts of nausea, dizziness, and dehydration, brought about by altitude sickness as well as the physical exertion of climbing. Krakauer has always loved the feeling of independence and freedom that mountaineering affords him, but he finds it difficult to savor the thrill of climbing Everest, because he's part of a big group.

On Scott Fischer's team, one of Fischer's hired guides, Anatoli Boukreev, proves himself to be a highly talented, but strangely neglectful guide. Although it's his job to help the weaker climbers up the mountain, Boukreev climbs ahead of everyone else, claiming that if the clients need his help that badly, they shouldn't be on Everest at all. As a result of Boukreev's negligence, Fischer has to work twice as hard, and, in spite of his vast experience as a climber, begins to suffer from exhaustion and altitude sickness.

By the beginning of May, Fischer and Hall's teams, as well as the Taiwanese team, have reached Camp Four, very close to the summit of Everest. Hall announces that he and Fischer will be climbing to the summit on May 10, but unbeknownst to either of them, the Taiwanese team is planning on climbing up on the 10th as well. In preparation for the final ascent, Hall encourages his clients to breathe condensed oxygen from special canisters; this will strengthen their bodies and protect them from hypothermia and other altitude-related problems. Krakauer notices that Boukreev doesn't use supplemental oxygen, perhaps because of his machismo and self-confidence, neither of which is uncommon among professional mountaineers.

On May 10, the teams set out for the summit. Krakauer makes it to the summit of Everest before 2 pm, the cutoff time Hall has suggested (but not confirmed) for his team; however, he runs low on oxygen, and has to turn back almost immediately. Meanwhile, other members of the team, including Hutchinson, decide to turn back earlier rather than risk being on the summit past 2 pm. Shortly after 2 pm, storm clouds appear on the horizon, and soon, there's a massive snowstorm on the summit of Everest. Krakauer is able to make it back to Camp Four in spite of the storm. On the way back to the tent, he passes someone who he believes to be Andy Harris, and points him in the direction of the tents, not realizing that this person is

suffering from severe oxygen deprivation, and can barely function. When Krakauer reaches the tent, he falls sound asleep.

Krakauer doesn't realize it at the time, but most of the other members of his team and Fischer's team have ben caught in a dangerous snowstorm. In part because Hall didn't confirm a cut-off time, in part because Fischer is easygoing with his clients, and in part because of the overall stress and confusion brought on by oxygen deprivation, the climbers become highly disorganized. Scott Fischer, exhausted and oxygen-deprived, blunders off in the wrong direction, and many of Hall's clients, including Beck Weathers, Yasuko Namba, and Doug Hansen—as well as Rob Hall himself—become lost in the storm.

At this point, it becomes impossible to know for sure what happens to some of Krakauer's peers and teammates. Anatoli Boukreev, who, as before, has climbed ahead of his clients and made it back to Camp Four, bravely goes out into the storm to search for stranded clients, along with Neal Beidleman, a guide for Scott Fischer's team. Beidleman and Boukreev succeed in saving several lives, including Makalu Gau's. Boukreev also finds the dead body of Scott Fischer, which he is forced to leave in the snow.

In the absence of Rob Hall, the *de facto* leader of Hall's team becomes Peter Hutchinson. Hutchinson organizes the remaining members of the team into a search party, and they succeed in finding the bodies of Yasuko Namba and Beck Weathers. However, when they find Namba and Weathers, barely alive, the group makes the agonizing decision to leave them in the snow, since they're almost certainly going to die, and the group needs to conserve its resources.

Back at Camp Four, Hutchinson and the others radio for help. Base Camp sends a team of Sherpas up to Camp Four to help, and the group begins a descent. As the group is about to descend, Beck Weathers appears outside of Camp Four. Despite being left for dead, Weathers miraculously found the strength to get up and walk back to camp. Though Krakauer wants to stay at Camp Four to take care of Weathers, Hutchinson convinces him that he needs to begin the descent or risk dying himself.

The team descends, and, once the storm dies down, helicopters arrive to take Gau and Beck Weathers to the hospital. Many climbers have died in the storm, including Yasuko Namba, Scott Fischer, Doug Hansen, Andy Harris, and Rob Hall. Krakauer is overcome with guilt: if he hadn't gone to sleep when he reached Camp Four, he could have saved the lives of Andy Harris and Yasuko Namba. Krakauer publishes his article on the Everest climb for *Outside* magazine, and immediately becomes the target of much vitriol from the deceased climbers' family members. He continues to struggle with survivor's guilt, and finds it difficult to open up with other people about his feelings. He meets with Neal Beidleman, one of the guides for Scott Fischer's team, and they both admit that they're suffering from guilt for the death of Yasuko Namba.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jon Krakauer – Author and narrator of *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer is an experienced mountaineer and journalist who gets an opportunity to climb **Mount Everest**, thanks to the sponsorship of *Outside* magazine. Krakauer respects his guides, Andy Harris and Rob Hall, but finds that he has little in common with his teammates, most of whom are wealthy and somewhat "out-of-touch" with the realities of high-altitude mountaineering. Throughout the book, Krakauer learns about Himalayan culture—particularly the culture of the Sherpas, a small ethnic group that lives mostly in Nepal and Tibet. He also reconfirms his dislike for large, organized group expeditions, which he finds tedious and fundamentally opposed to the rugged, individualistic nature of mountaineering. The turning point in Krakauer's story comes on May 10, when he climbs to the summit of Mount Everest and makes his way back to his tent, just before a terrible snowstorm hits the mountain. While Krakauer survives the snowstorm, many of his teammates die, leaving Krakauer with a severe case of survivor's guilt. In many ways, Krakauer wrote *Into Thin Air* to get over his guilt and make sense of his contradictory feelings about the expedition. Some journalists and professional mountaineers have attacked Krakauer for obscuring the facts about the May 10, 1996 disaster, and for irrationally blaming Anatoli Boukreev for the disaster—perhaps to mitigate some of his own gnawing sense of guilt.

Rob Hall – Rob Hall is a New Zealand-based mountaineer who acts as the leader of the expedition that takes Jon Krakauer to the summit of **Mount Everest**. He made a name for himself by becoming, along with his friend, the first person to climb the highest mountain in each of the seven continents, and parlayed his fame into a successful mountaineering tourist company. Hall takes expeditions of high-paying clients up and down Mount Everest, exercising extreme caution in doing so. He is known as a publicity-monger, but also a careful, cautious guide—in short, the last mountain climber one would expect to experience a catastrophic accident. Nevertheless, on the afternoon of May 10, 1996, a snowstorm hits Rob Hall's expedition, ultimately killing Hall and several of his clients.

Anatoli Boukreev – A Russian climbing guide working for Scott Fischer. At various points in *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer criticizes Boukreev for what he sees as Boukreev's overly distant relationship with his clients: instead of paying close attention to the clients, he has a bad habit of climbing ahead, leaving them to fend for themselves. Krakauer further implies that Boukreev's refusal to hang close behind led some of the clients to blunder into a snowstorm on the night of May 10. However,

Krakauer also credits Boukreev with incredible bravery for venturing out into the storm later that night. Boukreev's behavior remains the subject of much controversy in the mountaineering community—some agree with Krakauer that he was neglectful, while others insist that, by moving at his own pace and conserving energy, he was instrumental in *saving* clients' lives, not endangering them.

Andy Harris – A young, very likeable guide who works for Rob Hall, and quickly becomes a good friend to Jon Krakauer. Harris has never been to **Mount Everest** before he embarks on the expedition with Krakauer; however, he proves himself to be an excellent guide, and takes good care of his clients. Harris's life comes to a tragic end when, on the afternoon of May 10, he begins to run dangerously low on supplemental oxygen. Delirious, Harris blunders off in the wrong direction, eventually freezing to death. It's not entirely clear who the last person to see Harris alive was, since Krakauer cannot decide whether he ran into Harris, or another mountaineer.

Scott Fischer – A talented, charismatic mountaineer who dies in the May 10 **Everest** disaster. Fischer has a reputation for being the "bad boy" of the mountain climbing world, especially when compared with Rob Hall. Nevertheless, Fischer is highly respected in his field, and runs a successful mountain tourism business. During his expedition to the summit of Everest in spring of 1996, Fischer begins to suffer from serious fatigue, in part because his guide, Anatoli Boukreev, isn't doing his job effectively. On the afternoon of May 10, Fischer's weeks of fatigue catch up with him, and in the thin air he become delirious. Fischer is unable to return to his tent in the midst of the storm, and he eventually freezes to death.

Beck Weathers – Pathologist who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Weathers is one of the most inexperienced people on the expedition, and on the afternoon of May 10, he is unable to ascend to the summit because he's been having serious problems with his eyesight. Weathers is left out in the cold for the night of May 10, during which he nearly dies. However, Weathers makes a miraculous recovery and finds the energy to walk back to his teammates. Weathers is eventually rushed to the hospital, where the doctors amputate five of his fingers. Krakauer feels exceptionally guilty for his role in Weathers' misfortune—he blames himself for "abandoning" Weathers.

Doug Hansen – Postal publisher who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Hansen is one of the only people on the expedition with whom Krakauer feels any rapport; he admires Hansen's honesty and relates to his lower-middle-class background. Unlike most of the climbers on the expedition, Hansen is only able to go to Everest because of the help of other people; a local school puts on fundraiser to supply the funds for Hansen's Everest climb. In 1995, Hansen went on an expedition with Rob Hall, but had to turn back early, in 1996, he's determined not to let the same thing happen. Hansen's enthusiasm eventually backfires when he and Hall climb to the summit too late, and get caught in a deadly snowstorm. Ultimately, he freezes to death.

Stuart Hutchinson – Cardiologist who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Hutchinson is an inexperienced climber, but after the events of May 10, he becomes the *de facto* leader of the group, since, as a cardiologist, he's used to keeping a clear head in a crisis. He continues to lead the remaining members of the group down the mountain and back to safety.

Yasuko Namba – Japanese personnel director who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Namba is one of the most inexperienced people on the expedition, and on the afternoon of May 10, she becomes too exhausted to return to tent, and ultimately freezes to death in a snowstorm. Namba's death is especially tragic for Krakauer, because it appears that she stumbled to within a few hundred feet of Krakauer's tent.

Makalu Gau – The leader of the Taiwanese team, Makalu Gau is an enthusiastic but not tremendously talented mountaineer. In the months leading up to the **Everest** expedition, Gau is involved in a dangerous accident on the slopes of Mount McKinley; thus, when he leads his team to Everest, everyone is expecting his team to experience problems.

Deshun Deysel – Black South African woman recruited by Ian Woodall for the South African **Everest** expedition. Krakauer suggests that Woodall manipulates Deysel into thinking that she might be ascending Everest with Woodall and the rest of the team, even though it's clear that Woodall never intended for her to do so—he never even bothered getting a climbing permit for her.

Sandy Hill Pittman – Wife of Bob Pittman and well-known 1980s socialite, Sandy Hill Pittman is a "celebrity client" on Scott Fischer's expedition. Although she is spoiled, and has to hire Sherpas to carry her extra baggage and food, her teammates see her as a likeable, generous woman. She gets caught in the middle of a dangerous snowstorm on May 10, but Anatoli Boukreev rescues her, probably saving her life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Frank Fischbeck – Hong Kong-based publisher who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Fischbeck is a talented climber, though he suffers from severe fatigue at several points in the expedition. Ultimately, he survives the journey without serious injuries.

Lou Kasischke – Michigan-based lawyer who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Kasischke survives the expedition without any serious injuries, largely because he makes the wise decision to turn around on the afternoon of May 10, rather than continuing to climb to the summit.

Ian Woodall – The British-born leader of a South African **Everest** expedition, Ian Woodall is a tremendously unlikable man who selfishly manipulates his teammates for his own gain. He quickly alienates most of the people on the expedition, and is forced to recruit back-ups after his star mountaineer resigns in fury.

Pete Schoening – A legendary mountaineer who joins Scott Fischer's **Everest** expedition, largely because he doesn't want to wait for his permit to come through. The uncle of Klev Schoening.

John Taske – Doctor who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996. Taske survives the expedition without any serious injuries, largely because he chooses to turn around on the afternoon of May 10, rather than continuing to climb to the summit.

Martin Adams – A client of Scott Fischer.

Ang Babu – A talented climber working for the South African **Everest** expedition.

Ang Dawa – A Sherpa man who, in 1947, climbed 22,000 feet up the side of **Mount Everest**.

Ang Dorje – The head Sherpa climber, or *sirdar*, of Rob Hall's **Everest** expedition.

Jan Arnold – The partner of Rob Hall.

Pete Athans – Highly respected guide working with his own expedition at the time of the May 10 **Everest** disaster.

Gary Ball – Close friend of Rob Hall, who dies in 1993 of cerebral enema (a rare disease caused by high altitudes).

Neal Beidleman – Guide working for Scott Fischer, and, after the expedition, one of the few people with whom Krakauer feels he can talk about his survivor's guilt.

David Breashears – Old friend of Jon Krakauer's, and the leader of the IMAX **Everest** expedition.

Chen Yu-Nan – A Taiwanese climber who dies after falling into a crevasse.

Guy Cotter – Climber who communicates with Rob Hall during the snowstorm of May 10.

Andy de Klerk – Guide for the South African **Everest** expedition.

George Everest – Surveyor General before Sir Andrew Waugh, and the man for whom **Mount Everest** is named.

Edmund February – South African climber, named after Sir Edmund Hillary, who resigns from the South African expedition out of dislike for Ian Woodall.

Alexandrine Gaudin – Ian Woodall's girlfriend.

Mike Groom – One of the three guides working for Rob Hall on Krakauer's expedition and, along with Krakauer, the only person on the team to climb to the summit of **Everest** and survive.

Andy Hackland – Guide for the South African **Everest** expedition.

Bruce Herrod – A deputy leader for the South African **Everest** expedition.

Edmund Hillary – New Zealand mountaineer who, with Tenzing Norgay, became the first human being to climb **Mount Everest**, becoming an international celebrity in the process.

Tenzing Norgay – Sherpa mountaineer who, with Edmund Hillary, became the first human being to climb **Mount Everest**, becoming an international celebrity in the process.

Tom Hornbein – Mountaineer who, in 1963, with Willi Unsoeld, became the first person to climb to the summit of **Mount Everest** via the highly challenging West Ridge.

Willi Unsoeld – Mountaineer who, in 1963, with Tom Hornbein, became the first person to climb to the summit of **Mount Everest** via the highly challenging West Ridge. Unsoeld was a close friend of Jon Krakauer's father, and Krakauer grew up idolizing Unsoeld.

Ingrid Hunt – Medic for Scott Fischer's **Everest** expedition.

Andrew Irvine – A British explorer who, in 1924, tried and failed to climb **Mount Everest**, dying in the attempt.

Linda Krakauer – Jon Krakauer's wife. Linda was once an enthusiastic mountain climber, but a bad back injury prevented her from climbing ever again.

Göran Kropp – Swedish climber who shows remarkable caution by refusing to climb **Everest** on the morning of May 6.

Kami Rita – A Sherpa herder who falls to his death a few months before Krakauer begins his expedition.

Dale Kruse – A client of Scott Fischer, who suffers from HACE (a high-altitude disease).

Jim Litch – Himalayas-based doctor who helps with Ngawang's treatment.

Lopsang Jangbu – Talented Sherpa climber who works for Scott Fischer, and idolizes him. Lopsang later confesses to Krakauer that he blames himself for Fischer's tragic death.

Fiona McPherson – Wife of Andy Harris, a doctor who works in a Himalayan medical clinic.

Doctor Caroline Mackenzie – The medic for the team headed by Rob Hall.

George Leigh Mallory – A British explorer who, in 1924, tried and failed to climb **Mount Everest**, dying in the attempt.

Reinhold Messner – Mountaineer who succeeded in climbing to the summit of **Mount Everest** without using compressed oxygen, inspiring a generation of "purists" who believed that real mountaineers shouldn't use extra oxygen for their climbs.

Ngawang Sya Kya – A Sherpa guide from Scott Fischer's team,

and the father of Lopsang Jangbu.

Ngawang Topchke – Sherpa guide who suffers from severe mountain sickness but, partly out of a sense of machismo, and partly for concern about his job, refuses to get treatment until it's too late.

Edward Felix Norton – A British explorer who, in 1924, tried and failed to climb **Mount Everest**.

Bob Pittman – Co-founder of MTV and husband of Sandy Hill Pittman.

Radhanath Sikhdar – Bengali mathematician who in 1852 discovered that **Mount Everest** was the world's highest peak.

Klev Schoening – A former Olympic skier who joins Scott Fischer's **Everest** expedition, the nephew of Pete Schoening.

Tenzing – A Sherpa herder who works for Rob Hall occasionally.

Tenzing Nuri – A Sherpa guide from the Taiwanese **Everest** expedition.

Tashi Tshering – A Sherpa guide from Scott Fischer's team.

Ed Viesturs – An American climber who is starring in an IMAX film about **Mount Everest**, which is being filmed at the same time as Rob Hall's expedition.

Sir Andrew Waugh – Surveyor General of India in the 1850s, when it was officially shown that **Mount Everest** is the world's highest peak.

Helen Wilton – A mother of four who, along with Jon Krakauer, joins Rob Hall's expedition to **Mount Everest** in 1996.

Philip Woodall – The brother of Ian Woodall, and a member of the South African **Everest** expedition.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DANGER AND MORTALITY

A simple question hangs over *Into Thin Air*: why would people travel to the other side of the world and pay lavish sums of money to risk their own lives on the slopes of **Mount Everest**? In general, why would anyone climb mountains for fun, when the mortality rate for mountaineers is alarmingly high? As Jon Krakauer shows, mountaineers enjoy climbing Everest not in spite of the danger, but because of it. The challenge of surviving a two-month climb to one of the deadliest points on the Earth provides a "thrill" that, for some daredevils, is well worth the time and money.

However, Krakauer—who was involved in the 1996 Everest disaster, one of the most lethal mountaineering accidents in recent history—also shows that many mountaineers underestimate the danger and trauma of mountain climbing. For all the lip-service Krakauer's teammates—and, perhaps, most mountaineers— pay to thrills and danger, they're poorly equipped to deal with actual death and actual danger.

For the first two-thirds of his book, Krakauer studies how the culture of mountain climbing, both then and now, has glamorized danger and death. Historically, Mount Everest attracted mountain climbers to the exact extent that it was a difficult, deadly mountain. For more than a hundred years, climbers tried and failed to reach the top of Everest, sometimes dying in the attempt. But instead of discouraging future climbers, the Everest mortality rate encouraged more climbing: the danger of falling or freezing to death gave serious mountaineers an opportunity to prove their talents. In the 1970s and 80s, when climbers succeeded in mapping out a reliable, relatively safe route to the peak of Everest, some mountaineers began to say that Everest wasn't worth the trouble—the thrill of danger had gone down. Some more recent climbers have tried to reintroduce danger to Everest by making the ascent without supplemental, compressed oxygen.

At the same time, it's important to recognize that most mountaineers are very careful in their climbing. They ascend slowly to ensure that their bodies adjust to the higher altitude, and they take good care of their gear to avoid accidents in the middle of a climb. Nevertheless, the fact remains that mountaineering is an inherently risky sport, no matter how much care the mountaineer takes. In an average year, Krakauer writes, it's not uncommon to see ten or more fatalities on Everest. Even the amateur mountaineers on Jon Krakauer's team (some of whom have little to no experience with mountain climbing) claim to be interested in the thrills and dangers of Mount Everest. They're confident that they'll survive their trip, but they're eager to flirt with danger during their time in the Himalayas.

On Krakauer's expedition, a sudden snowstorm separates the team, forcing some climbers to spend the entire night out in the storm. Over the course of the next few days, the team tries to stay together and rescue the separated climbers. In the end, six people die on Krakauer's Everest climb. In the aftermath of the accident, Krakauer, as well as many of the other climbers, goes through depression, survivor's guilt, and trauma. The aftermath of the 1996 Everest disaster suggests that despite the thrill of risk-taking that most mountaineers enjoy, the experience of actual danger, and death, is almost unbearable. In general, Krakauer suggests that many mountain climbers want to experience a "taste" of danger, but not too much.

THE NATURAL WORLD

Another important theme of *Into Thin Air* is the natural world. Climbers choose to ascend mountains, not just because of the inherent danger of doing so (see above), but also because of the mountains' sublime beauty and majesty—qualities that civilization cannot rival. The characters in the book believe that they can use their training, technology, and intelligence to "conquer" Everest. However, the 1996 Everest disaster provides them an unforgettable reminder of nature's awesome power—power that human beings can never entirely understand or control.

As strange as it may sound, the natural world (and **Mount Everest** in particular) is a character in the book, with recognizable personality traits, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies. From the beginning, Krakauer stresses the beauty of the natural world: he offers long, vivid descriptions of Mount Everest's vistas, and the sobering feeling of staring up at Everest's awesome height. Mount Everest represents a unique kind of beauty: still, calm, and more than a little intimidating. But there's a lot more to the natural world, and to Everest, than beauty. Everest is a volatile, unpredictable character, capable of moving from calm to stormy in just a few hours. Furthermore, Mount Everest is a fundamentally dangerous character, and has killed hundreds of human beings over the years. In a more academic sense, Mount Everest is a "static" character, meaning that it doesn't change over time (or the course of the book). Although human beings have become more adept at mountain climbing in the last 150 years, Everest itself is no less dangerous, beautiful, or volatile now than it ever was.

For the most part, the human characters in the book respond to Everest, and the natural world in general, by focusing too exclusively on its beauty, while ignoring its unpredictability and fetishizing its danger. In a sense, Krakauer and the other members of his expedition are "punished" for treating the natural world as a mere thing of beauty, rather than an intimidating, lethal force that's worthy of their respect. Rob Hall, the leader of the expedition, accidentally leads his clients into danger because he underestimates the threat of an impending storm. Because he's been lucky with the weather for most of his years as a climber, he seriously doubts that he'll have any trouble climbing back to camp. In the end, however, the storm on Everest claims the lives of many of Hall's clients. At one point, Krakauer writes about the Sherpas (an ethnic group whose members live mostly in the Himalayas, and who often assist with Everest climbs) who believe that tourist climbers have "angered" the goddess of Mount Everest. While Krakauer doesn't subscribe to this idea in any literal sense, he seems to agree with the core concept: human beings disrespect the natural world by treating it as a mere tourist destination, or an opportunity for some easy thrills. In the end, then, *Into Thin Air* reminds us that the natural world is too big and complex to be treated flippantly.

COMMERCIALIZATION

As Krakauer sees it, there are two ways to climb a mountain: 1) by oneself, with no one else's help; or 2) in a tour group, as part of a large commercial business (which charges its clients many tens of thousands of dollars). While both forms of mountaineering can be found on **Mount Everest**, Krakauer argues that it's getting increasingly difficult to practice the first. The Nepalese government now requires all independent Everest climbers to pay a 65,000-dollar permit and join a long waiting list before climbing. It's significantly easier for potential climbers to work through an established business than it is for them to negotiate directly with the Nepalese government. And for Krakauer, the increasing role that large businesses play in mountain climbing—in other words, the increasing commercialization of the activity—is destroying many of the most pleasurable aspects of the Everest experience.

First, and most literally, commercialization has destroyed some of the Sherpas' homeland. To accommodate high-paying customers, most of them Americans, businesses have cut down trees and cleared fields to build lodges and hotels. With decreasing space and natural resources, many Sherpas have no choice but to work at the hotels owned by tourism companies, or work as climbers for the same companies. This brings up a second major way that commercialization has hurt Sherpa culture: it establishes an unequal relationship between wealthy, predominately Western business clients and less financially secure, predominately Sherpa employees. During his time on Everest, Krakauer is struck by the dismissive way that climbers and tourists treat their Sherpa helpers. Though the Sherpas are critical to the success of guided expeditions to the summit of Everest, most clients treat them as anonymous servants. In general, many of the guides and expedition leaders give preferential treatment to clients, since they've paid large sums of money to be there. However, Krakauer also stresses that it would be naïve to argue that things were entirely better for Sherpas in "the good old days," before the onset of commercialization. Tourism businesses have lowered the unemployment rate and increased the average wealth of Sherpa households by providing consistent, well-paying jobs. Furthermore, as Krakauer points out, it would be rather condescending, even paternalistic, to claim that Sherpa culture was superior before it was "corrupted" by big business. The crass Americanization of Sherpa culture is a legitimate tragedy, and represents one of Krakauer's major points of contention with commercialization; nevertheless, it hasn't been tragic across the board.

The other form of commercialization that Krakauer discusses at length is the monetization of mountain climbing itself—the system whereby only a select few have the funds to pay for an Everest climb. One reason this form of commercialization is so harmful is that it creates the impression that money alone

(rather than training, experience, or real dedication) can "buy" an Everest climb. Right away, Krakauer notes that most of his teammates on Everest have had very little recent experience climbing mountains—they're naively confident that they'll have no trouble making it to the summit, since they've paid for the best guides and the best equipment. The false confidence and relative inexperience of the team is partly the cause of the disaster of May 10, 1996, when six of Krakauer's peers die, several of them because they're relatively inexperienced climbers. A similar problem with the monetization of mountaineering is that it pushes the clients to "get their money's worth"—after paying so much money to visit Everest, the clients refuse to turn back early, even when conditions are too dangerous to proceed. On the afternoon of May 10, many of Krakauer's peers proceed all the way to the summit of Everest, even though they've been told to turn back at or before 2 pm; as Krakauer says, they refuse to drop 65,000 dollars on a trip that takes them to 500 feet *below* the summit of Everest. Ignoring bad weather for the glory of the summit is already a serious problem for Everest climbers, but Krakauer shows how money makes this problem even worse. In general, he strongly condemns the commercialization of Everest tourism, showing how, on the afternoon of May 10, it created a serious disaster.

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE GROUP

In the forty-odd years since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first human beings to climb to the summit of **Mount Everest**, the sport of mountaineering has experienced some major changes. Climbing Mount Everest has largely become a group activity, where before it was usually a challenge for a single, determined climber, or, at most, two climbers with a close bond of friendship and talent. While Krakauer spends many pages dissecting why this change occurred (see Commercialization theme), he also writes about the effects of the change. In *Into Thin Air*, he shows why large mountaineering groups are, perhaps surprisingly, often more dangerous and accident-prone than the solo expeditions of fifty years ago.

In 1996, Krakauer joins a large group of clients on an Everest summit climb. In *Into Thin Air*, this group of clients serves as a kind of case study for the problems with group climbs in general. Right away, Krakauer makes it clear that he feels no particular connection with the other people in his group. Most of the clients are wealthy doctors and businessmen (i.e., the kinds of people who can afford to take a two-month, 65,000-dollar vacation to the Himalayas), while Krakauer is a middle-class journalist who can only afford to climb Everest because *Outside* magazine is sending him there. Krakauer makes a few friends, but the majority of the group remains alien to him—he has no idea what to talk about with a millionaire doctor. The lack of a close connection between climbers is an inevitable problem with large climbing groups. A solo expedition to the summit of Everest, or even a two-person expedition, doesn't have this problem. The lack of unity and psychological connection between the members of a large climbing team creates many problems. First, on a practical level, it's potentially problematic for different clients to go at different paces. Some climbers (such as Krakauer) hurry ahead, while others climb Everest more slowly. This can be dangerous because the faster climbers waste a lot of energy waiting in the snow for the slower climbers to join them. Another major problem with large groups is that, in a moment of crisis, the team doesn't work well together. Some clients run off on their own rather than help their peers, and some clients mistake each other for different people. In general, the 1996 Everest disaster proves how weak and fragmented large climbing groups can be. When a sudden snowstorm separated some members of the group from others, the clients didn't work well together. Some climbed back to their tents, while others waited around for others to show up. Krakauer himself mistook a climber for a different person—something that would never have happened if he'd been climbing with only one partner. Finally, the climbers were exhausted, and didn't have the energy to help each other, partly because they'd expended extra energy waiting for their peers.

In part, Krakauer enjoys climbing mountains solo because of the machismo and "rugged individualism" associated with doing so. Nevertheless, as he shows in *Into Thin Air*, there are some real, concrete benefits to climbing alone, and some major problems with climbing in a large group. Krakauer's criticism of group climbing proved so influential that mountain guides after 1996 began taking additional precautions to ensure that the climbers knew each other well and worked well as a team, mitigating some of the dangers of group climbing. Nevertheless, large groups continue to pose a serious threat to climbers' lives, for the same reasons Krakauer explored in *Into Thin Air*.

GUILT

In the final chapters of *Into Thin Air*, it becomes clear that guilt is one of the key themes of the book. On the afternoon of May 10, 1996, Jon Krakauer makes it back to his tent, having climbed to the summit of **Mount Everest**; exhausted, he falls into a deep sleep. Unbeknownst to Krakauer at the time, however, many of his teammates get caught in the middle of a deadly snowstorm. One of these teammates, a Japanese woman named Yasuko Namba, stumbles within 500 feet of Krakauer's tent, but later freezes to death. The idea that he could have emerged from his tent and saved some of his peers' lives proves almost unbearable for Krakauer. In many ways, *Into Thin Air* represents Krakauer's attempt to come to terms with his own grief and guilt concerning the May 10 disaster.

After the events of May 10, 1996, Krakauer seems to suffer from a psychological affliction known as survivor's guilt. Sometimes, when people survive a massive tragedy, they feel an irrational sense of shame and responsibility to the deceased. In his book, Krakauer admits that he partly blames himself for the deaths of Yasuko Namba and other teammates. Sometimes, he hates himself for returning to his tent and falling asleep, rather than waiting for other people to arrive. As Krakauer himself acknowledges, this sense of guilt is largely irrational: there is no particular reason why Krakauer *should* have searched for Namba—he had no idea that she was missing or that there was a dangerous storm. Neal Beidleman, a mountain guide who saved five lives on Krakauer's expedition, feels a similar sense of survivor's guilt—he also blames himself for not saving the life of Yasuko Namba. Beidleman's guilt demonstrates the basic irrationality of survivor's guilt: by any sane measure, Beidleman should be proud of saving five lives, not guilty for failing to save a sixth. Yet Beidleman, as well as Krakauer, continues to suffer from survivor's guilt—the mind's irrational but uncontrollable response to trauma.

It's been suggested that *Into Thin Air*—the book itself—represents Krakauer's attempt to cope with survivor's guilt. While Krakauer mostly refrains from blaming anyone for the May 10 disaster, he criticizes a guide named Anatoli Boukreev on more than one occasion. Boukreev was a highly experienced mountaineer, but instead of climbing slowly and helping his clients, he climbed ahead of everyone else. As a result, Boukreev was asleep in his tent on the evening of May 10, when he arguably should have been helping his clients find their way back. Krakauer implies that Boukreev's behavior may have partly caused the deaths of several clients. Krakauer's accusations have been hotly disputed, in and out of the world of professional mountaineering. Some experts have argued that Krakauer is right to criticize Boukreev, while others insist that Boukreev's decision to climb back to his tent gave him the energy to go back into the snow later that night and save the lives of several other clients. (Since writing *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer has praised Boukreev for his heroism on the night of May 10.) Some have suggested that Krakauer irrationally blames Boukreev in order to mitigate his own sense of guilt. In a lot of ways, Boukreev is the character who most resembles Krakauer: quiet, talented, and individualistic, he climbs back to the tents early on May 10, rather than staying behind. Thus, Krakauer's criticism could be a psychological defense mechanism, transferring his guilt and self-hatred to another person. However, since the events of 1996, Krakauer has tried to "work through" his guilt by talking to therapists, communicating with other climbers, and generally learning from his and Boukreev's mistakes.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MOUNT EVEREST

The central symbol of *Into Thin Air* is, of course, Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. Everest is stunningly beautiful, yet also very dangerous—and Rob Hall's clients mistakenly think that they'll be able to enjoy Everest's beauty while avoiding the danger. In the end, Everest symbolizes the beauty, the unpredictability, the danger, and the awesome majesty of the natural world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Into Thin Air* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my *compadres* dallied to memorialize their arrival at the apex of the planet, unfurling flags and snapping photos, using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. Nobody suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Krakauer sets the scene for an impending disaster. He and his teammates have climbed to the summit of Mount Everest, the highest point on the surface of the planet. And yet, most of them are too exhausted to savor the moment—they've used up all their oxygen and energy ascending, and now they have to descend to their camp, located several hundred feet below.

There are several important things to notice about this passage. First, consider that Krakauer's teammates are wasting a lot of time at the summit—and even though they're entitled to savor the view of Tibet and Nepal, every second they take makes it more difficult for them to make it

back safely. Second, notice that Krakauer is building suspense in an overt way: at the end of this chapter, he makes it clear that a major disaster hits his expedition. In Chapter Two, Krakauer flashes back to explain how he came to be on Everest in the first place; then, much later in the book, he picks up where he left off. Even though *Into Thin Air* is a work of nonfiction, it's designed to be as suspenseful as a thriller.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Getting to the top of any given mountain was considered much less important than how one got there: prestige was earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable. Nobody was admired more than so-called free soloists: visionaries who ascended alone, without rope or hardware.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, Krakauer studies the history of mountaineering, beginning with the discovery, in 1852, that Mount Everest was the world's highest known peak. For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, mountaineering was seen as a solitary, ruggedly individualistic activity, meant for solo climbers or, at most, a duo of close friends. In short, the entire appeal of mountaineering, at least as Krakauer sees it, lies in the freedom and individualism that it affords the climber.

Krakauer contrasts old-school mountaineering with the large, cumbersome teams that pay huge sums of money to climb to the summit of Mount Everest. In the late 20th century, it's becoming increasingly difficult to climb solo, particularly on Everest; it's easier, though less enjoyable, for Krakauer to climb in a big group. For the rest of the book, Krakauer will study some of the major logistical challenges of group climbing.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ By this time Hall was a full-time professional climber. Like most of his peers, he sought funding from corporate sponsors to pay for his expensive Himalayan expeditions. And he was savvy enough to understand that the more attention he got from the news media, the easier it would be to coax corporations to open their checkbooks.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Rob Hall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Rob Hall is one of the key characters in the book, and one of the most contradictory. Although he's widely regarded as a serious, disciplined climber, his greatest talent may be for self-promotion: he knows how to get journalists to pay attention to him. Hall knows that publicity is of the utmost importance in his profession: with good publicity, he can attract high-paying clients, who'll be willing to pay him huge sums of money to guide them to the summit of Everest.

In a way, Hall symbolizes the "new mountaineering," as opposed to the old-fashioned, individualistic style. Hall rarely, if ever, climbs alone anymore; instead, he leads large expeditions up and down the world's most challenging mountains. In order to succeed at this business, Hall must not only be a great climber; he must also be a great publicist.

❝ I wasn't sure what to make of my fellow clients. In outlook and experience they were nothing like the hard-core climbers with whom I usually went into the mountains. But they seemed like nice, decent folks, and there wasn't a certifiable asshole in the entire group—at least not one who was showing his true colors at this early stage of the proceedings. Nevertheless, I didn't have much in common with any of my teammates except Doug.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Doug Hansen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Krakauer meets his teammates, he senses that he has little in common with them. Krakauer is only able to afford to climb Mount Everest because a national magazine, *Outside*, sponsors his permit. Krakauer hails from a lower-

middle-class background, and generally doesn't have very much in common with the other people on his expedition (who are, with a few exceptions, the kinds of people who can afford to take a two-month, 65,000-dollar vacation to the Himalayas). Doug Hansen, the one teammate with whom Krakauer feels a close bond, is the exception that proves the rule: Hansen, like Krakauer, is only able to afford an Everest trip because of the help of other people (in Hansen's case, the sponsorship of a local elementary school).

The passage conveys one of the major problems with group expeditions as compared with solo climbs—there's no guarantee that the people on the group will get along with one another. As we see later in the book, this disorganization and lack of a close connection between climbers sometimes leads to major problems.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The transformation of the Khumbu culture is certainly not all for the best, but I didn't hear many Sherpas bemoaning the changes. Hard currency from trekkers and climbers, as well as grants from international relief organizations supported by trekkers and climbers, have funded schools and medical clinics, reduced infant mortality, built footbridges, and brought hydroelectric power to Namche and other villages. It seems more than a little patronizing for Westerners to lament the loss of the good old days when life in the Khumbu was so much simpler and more picturesque.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Four, Krakauer studies some of the changes affecting Sherpas, the ethnic group that lives predominately in the Himalayas. The Sherpas are a fairly small ethnic group, and in recent decades they've increasingly become involved in the international mountaineering business, since, by virtue of the time they spend in high altitudes, many are natural climbers. As Krakauer notes here, many Sherpas (and Westerners observing from the outside) resent the growing commercialization of Mount Everest, and they think that Everest has become too crass and Westernized. However, Krakauer adds, it would also be naïve to claim that things were wholly better for Sherpas back in the "good old days." While it's certainly true that mountain tourism has harmed many aspects of Sherpa culture, it's also true that tourism has brought new opportunities to the Sherpas: it's given them jobs and brought wealth to their community, improving health and literacy in the process. So even if Krakauer dislikes the commercialization of Everest as much as any Sherpa, he'd be remiss if he didn't bring up some of the benefits, too.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ This was Doug's second shot at Everest with Hall. The year before, Rob had forced him and three other clients to turn back just 330 feet below the top because the hour was late and the summit ridge was buried beneath a mound of deep, unstable snow. "The summit looked sooooo close," Doug recalled with a painful laugh. "Believe me, there hasn't been a day since that I haven't thought about it." He'd been talked into returning this year by Hall, who felt sorry that Hansen had been denied the summit and had significantly discounted Hansen's fee to entice him to give it another try.

Related Characters: Doug Hansen, Jon Krakauer (speaker), Rob Hall

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, we learn more about Doug Hansen's backstory. Hansen is a postal worker who hails from a lower-middle-class background. He was only able to afford to travel to Mount Everest because of the help of a local elementary school. However, the first time Hansen tried to climb Everest, he was forced to turn back before he reached the summit. Rob Hall, Hansen's group leader, was so sorry for Hansen that he offered to bring Hansen back the next year, at a greatly discounted rate—an offer that Hansen eagerly accepted.

In many ways, Doug Hansen is a tragic character. Unlike most of his other teammates in 1996, he has some genuine drive—he's determined to make it to the summit, rather than failing as he did in 1995. However, Hansen's drive and determination ultimately prove to be fatal flaws: as we come to see, his desire to reach the summit leads him to stay out long after Krakauer, and as a result, he gets caught in a storm and freezes to death.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"If you get killed," she argued with a mix of despair and anger, "it's not just you who'll pay the price. I'll have to pay, too, you know, for the rest of my life. Doesn't that matter to you?" "I'm not going to get killed," I answered. "Don't be melodramatic."

Related Characters: Linda Krakauer, Jon Krakauer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jon Krakauer calls his wife, Linda Krakauer, who's still back in the United States. Linda was once a gifted mountaineer, like Krakauer, but an unfortunate back injury has left her incapable of joining her husband at Everest. Here, she tells Krakauer that she's worried about him—she knows that Everest is a dangerous place, and that there's a slim but very real chance that Krakauer will die during his time on the mountain. Krakauer calmly tells Linda that she's being melodramatic—a good example of dramatic irony, since, by this point in the book, we know that Krakauer's life *will*, in fact, be put in danger by the events of May 10. (Furthermore, one could argue that the passage itself is highly melodramatic, since it builds suspense and cleverly plays on readers' fears.)

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Woodall had no interest in the birth of a new South Africa. He took the dreams of the entire nation and utilized them for his own selfish purposes. Deciding to leave the expedition was the hardest decision of my life."

Related Characters: Edmund February (speaker), Ian Woodall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Seven, we're introduced to Ian Woodall, one of the most unlikeable characters in the book. Woodall is the leader of a South African expedition to the summit of Mount Everest, and he's almost universally seen as a horrible person. Woodall is supposed to lead a triumphant ascent to Everest, one that's meant to symbolize the ascendance of South Africa itself after decades of apartheid (even though Woodall himself is British, not South African). But instead of honoring the country, Woodall uses the expedition as a vehicle to launch his own career: he hogs the attention surrounding the expedition, talks abut himself *ad nauseum*, and manipulates his teammates into obeying him. Woodall is so intolerable that his star climber, Edmund February (a South African man named after Sir Edmund Hillary), resigns from the team in disgust.

The passage is an interesting reminder of the link between mountain climbing and nationalist causes. Just as Edmund Hillary's successful ascent of Mount Everest in the 1950s became a rallying point for the entire British Commonwealth, so was Woodall's expedition meant to be a rallying point for the new South Africa.

Chapter 8 Quotes

When Fischer questioned Ngawang, he admitted that he'd been feeling weak, groggy, and short of breath for more than two days, so Fischer directed him to descend to Base Camp immediately. But there is an element of machismo in the Sherpa culture that makes many men extremely reluctant to acknowledge physical infirmities. Sherpas aren't supposed to get altitude illness, especially those from Rolwaling, a region famous for its powerful climbers. Those who do become sick and openly acknowledge it, moreover, will often be blacklisted from future employment on expeditions.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Ngawang Topchke, Scott Fischer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112-113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn that a Sherpa guide named Ngawang Topchke has been suffering from serious altitude sickness. Ngawang has been feeling sick for a while, but he refuses to shirk his duties, even after his boss, Scott Fischer, orders him point-blank to go back down the mountain (the only cure for severe altitude sickness). Ngawang has been spending too much time at a high altitude, meaning that his body isn't getting enough oxygen. Nevertheless, he continues with his work.

Why doesn't Ngawang just go back down the mountain? Krakauer offers two distinct reasons. First, the Sherpas have a culture with an "element of machismo"—to get

altitude sickness is to be weak, effeminate, and altogether unfit for climbing. Second, Ngawang Topchke may have good reason to think that, if he caves in and gets medical attention now, he'll be "blacklisted" for the rest of his career; no one will hire him again because they'll assume that he's weak and unreliable.

They should have flown him out yesterday morning when they had a chance. If it had been one of Scott's clients who was this sick, instead of a Sherpa, I don't think he would have been treated so haphazardly.

Related Characters: Rob Hall (speaker), Scott Fischer, Ngawang Topchke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

After Ngawang Topchke begins to suffer from altitude sickness, Scott Fischer orders him to descend, so that his body can get more oxygen. However, Ngawang refuses, and continues to work at a high altitude, with the result that his condition deteriorates. Ngawang is rushed to the emergency room at Base Camp, but the doctors are unsure how best to treat him, and the head doctor at Base Camp is suffering from altitude sickness herself. As a result, Ngawang dies. In the aftermath of Ngawang's tragic, completely preventable death, Rob Hall suggests that Ngswang died, in part, because he's Sherpa. If a paying client had suffered from the same symptoms, it's probable that the client would have been given better, quicker medical treatment.

It's important to take Hall's observations with a grain of salt. In part, Ngawang dies because he voluntarily chooses to remain at a high altitude instead of getting medical care. And it's possible that Hall criticizes Ngawang's treatment in order to attack Scott Fischer, Ngawang's boss and Hall's business rival. However, it's also possible that Hall has a point. Ngawang isn't a paying client in Fischer's expedition—therefore, his life is, quite literally, less valuable to the mountaineering businesses on Everest. Perhaps, if Ngawang had been a paying client, he would have gotten faster care, and he'd still be alive.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Ian Woodall, however, declared that the South Africans would go to the top whenever they damn well pleased, probably on May 10, and anyone who didn't like it could bugger off.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Ian Woodall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Krakauer shows some of the problems that arise when too many large groups ascend Everest around the same time. Scott Fischer and Rob Hall are trying to decide how best to organize an ascent to Mount Everest; they agree to ascend on the same day, but ask most of the other teams to refrain from doing that same, so that there won't be too much of a "traffic jam." However, the South African team refuses to comply with Hall and Fischer; spitefully, Ian Woodall claims that he'll ascend whenever he's ready, but refuses to tell anyone when this will be.

When too many large groups ascend to Everest at the same time, they run the danger of climbing to the summit simultaneously. This is a major problem, as Krakauer shows us, because it slows down the descent process at the time when clients need to be moving most quickly (due to the low oxygen in the air). There's also no guarantee that the different groups will get along—as Woodall's example shows, one group might refuse to cooperate with the others, jeopardizing the safety of all other groups.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"To turn around that close to the summit," Hall mused with a shake of his head on May 6 as Kropp plodded past Camp Two on his way down the mountain. "That showed incredibly good judgment on young Göran's part. I'm impressed—considerably more impressed, actually, than if he'd continued climbing and made the top."

Related Characters: Rob Hall (speaker), Göran Kropp

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter, Krakauer writes about a

young Swedish mountaineer named Göran Kropp. Kropp travels a long way to climb Mount Everest, but on the morning of May 6, Kropp climbs to within a few hundred feet of the summit of Everest, decides that he doesn't have quite enough energy to proceed safely, and turns back around. Kropp's behavior shows incredible discipline and self-control—most mountaineers (who are, by nature, driven, motivated people) would press on ahead, ignoring the limitations of their own bodies. Kropp, however, is wise enough to understand that he'd be jeopardizing his life, and other people's lives, if he continued to climb to the summit without sufficient energy.

The passage is important because it contrasts markedly with the behavior of some of the people on Hall and Fischer's expeditions. Hall and Fischer's clients lack the discipline of Kropp: they want to get their money's worth, even if they risk their own safety in the process. As we'll see over the course of the next few chapters, Hall and Fischer's clients try to ascend to the summit of Everest long past the point when they should turn back, and some of them pay with their lives.

❝ "If client cannot climb Everest without big help from guide," Boukreev told me, "this client should not be on Everest. Otherwise there can be big problems up high."

Related Characters: Anatoli Boukreev (speaker), Jon Krakauer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

The speaker here is Anatoli Boukreev, a talented Russian climber with an unconventional philosophy of guiding other climbers. Boukreev works as a guide for Scott Fischer; however, he doesn't hang back, like most of the other guides, and help the slower, less experienced clients. Instead, he climbs ahead of everyone else, ensuring that he's the first one back to camp every day. Boukreev's behavior might seem callous and neglectful, but Boukreev insists that he shouldn't *have* to hang back to take care of the weaker climbers—if they really need his help that badly, they shouldn't be on Everest in the first place.

Krakauer later shows that Boukreev's philosophy of climbing may have contributed to a serious accident on the night of May 10, 1996—by refusing to hang back and take care of his paying clients, Boukreev may have allowed them to blunder into danger and lose their lives. However, it's important to recognize that Boukreev has a point—a point that Krakauer seems to agree with. After reading *Into Thin Air*, it seems almost undeniable that too many inexperienced people try to climb Mount Everest every year—and just as Boukreev says, if they need a guide's help that badly, they should never have come to Everest. As stubbornly unhelpful as Boukreev seems to be here, he's also absolutely right.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I sincerely hoped Doug got to the top, for instance, yet I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on if he turned around.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Doug Hansen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

As Hall's expedition begins its climb to the summit of Mount Everest, Krakauer takes a moment to think about his relationship (or lack thereof) with his peers. Krakauer has never felt a very strong connection with the other mountaineers, and he's worried that they're too unfocused and unmotivated (with the notable exception of Doug Hansen). Thus, as Krakauer prepares to ascend, he feels no particular loyalty or connection to people climbing with him—in other words, if one of his teammates experiences setbacks of any kind, Krakauer will continue to the summit, rather than risking his own chances by hanging behind.

Krakauer's comments underscore one of the flaws with large excursions to the summit of Mount Everest—the "every man for himself" philosophy works much better on a solo expedition than on a group expedition. Because everyone on Hall's trip is dead-set on reaching the summit, the overall structure of the group is disorganized and chaotic.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Now, as Beidleman clung precariously to the rock 100 feet above the clients, the overly eager Yasuko clamped her *jumar* to the dangling rope before the guide had anchored his end of it. As she was about to put her full body weight on the rope—which would have pulled Beidleman off—Mike Groom intervened in the nick of time and gently scolded her for being so impatient.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Neal Beidleman, Mike Groom, Yasuko Namba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Krakauer notes that Yasuko Namba, one of the more inexperienced people on his team, is beginning to show additional signs of her lack of mountaineering experience. As she's about to begin her climb up a steep peak, Namba almost pulls down on a rope, the other end of which is still attached to her guide, Neal Beidleman. Had Namba pulled down on the rope, Beidleman could have fallen to his death.

The passage is important because it reminds us that some of the people on Hall's expedition are much more experienced than others. Indeed, the differences in experience between the Krakauer's teammates will prove to be a major problem after a dangerous snowstorm arrives on the evening of May 10. Mount Everest is an intrinsically dangerous place, where humans couldn't ordinarily survive. Krakauer seems to believe that all but the most talented climbers should be prevented from climbing Everest, for their own safety as much as other people's. (This passage was singled out by critics of *Into Thin Air*, who believed that it was unnecessarily harsh to Namba, and scapegoated her for the May 10 disaster. However, Krakauer doesn't seem overly critical of Namba at all; he's just stating an unpleasant fact—she was obviously underprepared for her Everest climb.)

Chapter 14 Quotes

Beck was nearly persuaded to descend with me when I made the mistake of mentioning that Mike Groom was on his way down with Yasuko, a few minutes behind me. In a day of many mistakes, this would turn out to be one of the larger ones.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Yasuko Namba, Mike Groom, Beck Weathers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Jon Krakauer is descending from the summit of Mount Everest and returning to his tent. On the way back, he runs into Beck Weathers, one of his teammates. To Krakauer's amazement, Weather is standing in the snow, waiting for Rob Hall to return to him. Weathers calmly explains that Rob Hall has told him to wait in the snow, since Hall is worried that Weathers, with his poor vision, will be unable to walk back to camp by himself. Krakauer tries to persuade Weathers to come back to the camp with him, but he's unable to do so—Weathers insists that he promised Hall that he'd wait, and here he decides to at least wait for Groom and Namba, who Krakauer says are close behind him. In the end, Weathers's decision to wait for them proves nearly fatal—he gets caught in a storm, and eventually the doctors have to amputate five of his fingers.

The passage could be considered a good example of how Rob Hall's leadership methods sometimes create danger instead of protecting the clients against danger. Hall prides himself on running a "tight ship" and convincing his clients to obey him at all times. In this passage, Weathers obeys Hall, and suffers serious consequences for doing so. Perhaps it's fair to say that, when descending Mount Everest, there's no way for a team excursion to be perfectly safe—whether the team leader favors a tight, controlled operation (as Rob Hall does), or a more loose, free-wheeling one (as Scott Fischer does), it's impossible to keep everyone completely safe at all times.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Fischer hid the fact from everyone, as well, that he may have been clinically ill during the summit attempt. In 1984, during an expedition to Nepal's *Annapuma massif*, he'd picked up a gastrointestinal parasite, *Entamoeba histolytica*, which he was unable to entirely purge from his body over the years that followed. The bug emerged from dormancy on an irregular basis, producing bouts of acute physical distress and leaving a cyst on his liver. Insisting it was nothing to worry about, Fischer mentioned the ailment to few people at Base Camp.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Scott Fischer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn that Scott Fischer, the charismatic leader of an expedition to the summit of Mount Everest on May 10, 1996, has long suffered from a gastrointestinal parasite. As a result, Fischer goes through intermittent bouts of pain and physical distress. But because of his own pride and machismo, as well as his desire to attract the most

clients, Fischer doesn't tell anyone about his condition: he's determined to project the image of a calm, reliable, perfectly controlled mountaineer.

The passage is a good example of how the culture and overall commercialization of mountaineering, can be lethal to climbers. Fischer is a talented climber, but because he refuses to disclose his medical condition to other people, he becomes severely exhausted on the afternoon of May 10, and eventually wanders off into a deadly snowstorm and dies.

❝ Boukreev's susceptibility to the cold was doubtless greatly exacerbated by the fact that he wasn't using supplemental oxygen; in the absence of gas he simply couldn't stop to wait for slow clients on the summit ridge without courting frostbite and hypothermia.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Anatoli Boukreev

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Krakauer notes that, on the afternoon of May 10, 1996, Anatoli Boukreev was mostly unavailable to help his clients make their way back to camp. Despite the fact that many clients were stuck out in the cold, freezing to death, Boukreev climbed ahead of them, returned to his tent, and fell asleep. Boukreev later claimed that his decision to return to his tent was a good one, because it gave him the energy to go out later that night and search for clients who were still stranded in the snow. But, as Krakauer points out here, Boukreev only needed to return to his tent in the first place because, unlike his fellow guides, he hadn't been breathing any supplemental oxygen, and therefore was getting very tired. Had Boukreev breathed extra oxygen, it's likely that he would have had the energy to assist with his clients and ensure that they found their ways back to safety.

While Krakauer has a lot of respect for Boukreev, he makes it clear that he disagrees with Boukreev's behavior. Many factors, most uncontrollable, caused the climbers' deaths on the day of the disaster, but Boukreev's behavior early in the day certainly didn't help.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Was I really so debilitated that I had stared into the face of a near stranger and mistaken him for a friend with whom I'd spent the previous six weeks? And if Andy had never arrived at Camp Four after reaching the summit, what in the name of God had happened to him?

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Martin Adams, Andy Harris

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Krakauer is forced to rethink his memories of May 10, 1996. Prior to talking to Martin Adams, a fellow climber, Krakauer was convinced that he'd run into Andy Harris just outside of camp on the afternoon of May 10. After talking to Adams, however, Krakauer realizes that he may have been speaking to Adams, not Harris. Krakauer told "Harris" to walk in the direction of the tents, and warned him not to slip on the ice. Now, Krakauer is beginning to believe that he actually had such a conversation with Adams.

As Krakauer says here, it seems almost impossible that he could have mistaken Adams for Harris, or vice versa. And yet, under the circumstances, it's perfectly understandable that Krakauer could have made such a mistake: he was deliriously tired, running low on oxygen, and eager to return to his tent. Furthermore, both men were wearing heavy mountaineering gear that obscured their features. Krakauer's mistake might seem bizarre to the lay-reader, but it's not uncommon at the summit of Mount Everest, where the low oxygen causes even intelligent people to make unintelligent mistakes.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ Two full bottles were waiting for them at the South Summit; if Hall had known this he could have retrieved the gas fairly quickly and then climbed back up to give Hansen a fresh tank, But Andy Harris, still at the oxygen cache, in the throes of his hypoxic dementia, overheard these radio calls and broke in to tell Hall—incorrectly, just as he'd told Mike Groom and me—that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty,

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Rob Hall, Andy Harris

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Krakauer discusses Rob Hall and Doug Hansen's experience on the afternoon of May 10. After taking too long to climb the summit, Hansen and Hall begin their descent, with Hansen running dangerously low on oxygen. Hall, knowing that he needs to get his client fresh, compressed oxygen as soon as possible, radios his guide, Andy Harris, asking if there's any fresh oxygen waiting for them—but Harris, suffering from oxygen deprivation, mistakenly radios back that there isn't. Had Harris given the correct answer, Hall could have run ahead, obtained some oxygen, and rushed it back to Hansen—then, both he and Hansen could have moved at a faster rate. It's possible, then, that if Harris hadn't given Hall the incorrect answer, Hall and Hansen would both be alive today.

The passage is a disturbing example of how one small mistake can cause a "domino effect" and endanger many people. Harris's oxygen deprivation-caused misjudgment seriously slowed Hall and Hansen in their descent, putting them in added danger. Harris can hardly be blamed for sending Hall the wrong information, since he was running dangerously low on oxygen himself—nevertheless, his mistake reinforces the inherent danger of sending a large, disorganized group to the summit of Mount Everest.

"I'm looking forward to making you completely better when you come home," said Arnold. "I just know you're going to be rescued. Don't feel that you're alone. I'm sending all my positive energy your way!"
Before signing off, Hall told his wife, "I love you. Sleep well, my sweetheart. Please don't worry too much."

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Rob Hall, Jan Arnold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In this heartbreaking passage, Rob Hall, knowing that he's probably going to die, communicates via radio with his partner, Jan Arnold. Rob Hall has risked his own life to take care of his client, Doug Hansen, and now he's stranded in the middle of a snowstorm, late at night. Bravely, Hall tries to sound calm and happy for Arnold, even though he's slowly freezing to death. For her part, Arnold, not sure if she'll ever see Rob again, tries to inspire Rob by telling him, "Don't feel that you're alone."

The scene represents Rob Hall's last appearance in *Into Thin Air*. It's clear that Krakauer has great respect for Hall: he admires Hall's bravery and calm leadership. Even if Krakauer disagrees with some of the decisions that Hall made on the afternoon of May 10, he looks up to Rob, both as a mountaineer and as a person—in the passage, Krakauer's reverence is palpable.

Chapter 19 Quotes

There was only one choice, however difficult: let nature take its inevitable course with Beck and Yasuko, and save the group's resources for those who could actually be helped. It was a classic act of triage. When Hutchinson returned to camp he was on the verge of tears and looked like a ghost.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Yasuko Namba, Beck Weathers, Stuart Hutchinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

In this challenging passage, Stuart Hutchinson has organized the remaining members of Rob Hall's expedition into a search party. Together, he and the other clients venture out into the snow to search for their peers, including Beck Weathers and Yasuko Namba, neither of whom has made it back to the tents. After some searching, Hutchinson and the rescue party find Weathers and Namba in the cold, slowly dying. Here, Hutchinson, recognizing that Namba and Weathers are probably going to die whether they're rushed to the hospital or not, makes the difficult decision to continue searching for other people with a better chance of survival.

Hutchinson's decision might seem callous, or even cruel, but it's probably the right one. Hutchinson, who worked as a doctor for many years, knows how to remain calm and orderly in a crisis. Thus, he doesn't let his emotions cloud his judgment, and instead practices "triage," as Krakauer says here—the act of ranking medical emergencies by degree of urgency or efficacy and dealing with them in that order. However, Hutchinson's decision later proves wrong: Beck Weathers, abandoned in the snow, miraculously finds the

will to walk, and trudges back to the tents. Hutchinson's decision to continue looking may have proved too hasty, but Krakauer seems to respect his decision nonetheless—even if, as he'll discuss in the final chapters of the book, he feels incredibly guilty for leaving Beck Weathers to die.

❝ Upon first finding Beck in the tent, I was so shocked by his hideous condition—and by the unforgivable way that we'd let him down yet again—I nearly broke into tears. "Everything's going to be O.K.," I lied, choking back my sobs as I pulled the sleeping bags over him, zipped the tent doors shut, and tried to re-erect the damaged shelter. "Don't worry, pal. Everything's under control now."

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Beck Weathers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Krakauer breaks down upon looking at Beck Weathers, his teammate. Beck Weathers has been through hell: he's spent the entire night stranded in a snowstorm, and on the morning of May 11, his teammates find him, barely alive, and leave him for dead, since they assume that he's doomed to die no matter what they do. Weathers miraculously recovers, walks back to his tent, and falls asleep. That night, Weathers, still in his tent, screams for help, but nobody responds, since nobody can hear his screams over the roaring of the wind.

Krakauer is horrified that Weathers has endured so much suffering, and he feels intensely guilty, both for leaving Weathers in the snow and for not responding to his cries for help. In this way, the passage foreshadows the survivor's guilt that will haunt Krakauer long after he returns to the United States.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ Before this year, however, Hall had had uncommonly good luck with the weather, and it might have skewed his judgment. "Season after season," confirmed David Breashears, who has been on more than a dozen Himalayan expeditions and has himself climbed Everest three times, "Rob had brilliant weather on summit day. He'd never been caught by a storm high on the mountain." In fact, the gale of May 10, though violent, was nothing extraordinary; it was a fairly typical Everest squall. If it had hit two hours later, it's likely that nobody would have died. Conversely, if it had arrived even one hour earlier, the storm could easily have killed eighteen or twenty climbers—me among them.

Related Characters: David Breashears, Jon Krakauer (speaker), Rob Hall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284-285

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 21, Krakauer writes more generally about the May 10, 1996 disaster. How could Rob Hall, one of the most careful, cautious mountaineers in the business, become embroiled in such a horrible disaster? Where did he go wrong?

Krakauer argues that Hall made a series of poor decisions on the day of the accident: he allowed various clients to go off on their own long after they should have returned to camp, and he encouraged one client to continue to the summit of Everest, even after he could tell that a storm was coming. While Hall bears some of the responsibility for the accident, then, we should also keep in mind that the disaster happened for reasons outside Hall's—or anyone's—control. During his time climbing Everest, Hall usually had the benefit of uncommonly good weather. Thus, when Hall saw an impending storm, he had no experience to fall back on—he didn't know how bad the storm could get.

Krakauer's point seems to be that the May 10 disaster was the product of uncontrollable environmental factors as much as Rob Hall's (or anyone else's) bad decision making. Climbing to the summit of Mount Everest is an inherently risky proposition; at the top of the world, even a great mountaineer like Hall can get into trouble.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ For Neal Beidleman's part, he helped save the lives of five clients by guiding them down the mountain, yet he remains haunted by a death he was unable to prevent, of a client who wasn't on his team and thus wasn't even officially his responsibility.

Related Characters: Jon Krakauer (speaker), Yasuko Namba, Neal Beidleman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

In this Epilogue, Krakauer writes about the intense guilt he feels for failing to help his fellow clients during the Everest disaster. He feels especially responsible for the deaths of Andy Harris and Yasuko Namba: whenever he thinks about them, he thinks about the steps he could have taken, with the benefit of hindsight, to save them.

Survivor's guilt is an unfortunately common response to a traumatic incident—when a person survives a horrible disaster, they often believe that they must have done something *wrong* to survive, and begin to feel personally responsible for the deceased. Krakauer, it's made pretty clear, is being far too harsh on himself: there's no way he could have known that the snowstorm would end up being as deadly as it proved to be. Therefore, there's no logical way to argue that Krakauer "failed" to save Namba and Harris. Nevertheless, Krakauer continues to feel a powerful sense of guilt—even though he knows, rationally, that he shouldn't feel guilty.

How does one cure survivor's guilt? Krakauer implies that the only cure is processing it through communication. Thus, he makes an effort to talk to other people who survived the accident, such as Neal Beidleman. Beidleman and Krakauer both feel the same overpowering sense of guilt for having survived the disaster unharmed. Perhaps, by talking about their pain with each other, they can fight off some of their own psychological suffering.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

It is the afternoon of May 10, 1996, and Jon Krakauer, the author, hasn't slept for 57 hours. He stands at the summit of **Mount Everest**, "one foot in China and the other in Nepal," and finds that he can't summon the energy to enjoy the moment. The air is thin, meaning that barely any oxygen is flowing to his brain, and he's utterly exhausted. Krakauer has arrived at the summit of Mount Everest with Anatoli Boukreev, a Russian climbing guide, and Andy Harris, a guide on the New Zealand team to which Krakauer belongs. He takes some photographs with Harris and Boukreev, and then, after less than five minutes, the trio begins their descent.

The book begins with a strange image: Jon Krakauer is standing in one of the most sublimely beautiful places on the planet, the summit of Mount Everest, and he's too tired to appreciate the beauty. After only five minutes or so, he turns back and begins his descent from the highest point on Earth. As we can tell, Krakauer is a client—he's being guided by expert mountaineers, including Andy Harris and Anatoli Boukreev.

Later on, Krakauer notes, people will wonder why he, Boukreev, and Harris continued to climb down from **Everest** and ignored the signs of bad weather. Krakauer had been part of a team of amateur mountain climbers who'd paid a lot of money to climb the mountain safely. Now, six dead bodies, belonging to some of the mountain climbers, have been found, two other bodies are still missing, and one of Krakauer's teammates is missing a hand. However, Krakauer insists, when he climbed down on the afternoon of May 10, the weather looked clear.

Krakauer builds the suspense by alluding to the bad weather on the horizon—weather which, we can guess, will soon cause a horrific disaster. Into Thin Air *is both a history of mountaineering in general and the story of how Krakauer's expedition to Everest—one of the best-organized expeditions that year—fell into danger.*

Krakauer begins his descent from the summit. He's in pain, and he feels weak because there's barely any oxygen in the air. He inhales from his oxygen tank and sees that it's almost empty. Krakauer approaches the infamous Hillary Step, a large notch in the Southeast Ridge of **Mount Everest**. Although Krakauer needs to descend quickly, he sees that three large teams of people are climbing up the Hillary Step, meaning that he'll have to wait.

The passage conveys a sense of disorganization—Krakauer desperately needs to climb down to access more oxygen, but there are too many other people for him to proceed quickly. Throughout this book, Krakauer criticizes large group expeditions, and here he offers a basic reason why they can be dangerous: everyone goes at a different pace.

Krakauer asks Harris to turn off the valve in his regulator, allowing him to conserve oxygen while waiting for the three teams to climb up. Harris mistakenly turns Krakauer's valve all the way up, and Krakauer is quickly "on the brink of losing consciousness." There is an oxygen tank waiting for him 250 feet below, but in order to get to it he'll need to climb Hillary's Step. Frantically, Krakauer watches as the mountaineers slowly climb across the Step. The last one to climb across is Scott Fischer, a talented mountaineer who Krakauer has known for years.

Andy Harris is a trained, experienced mountaineer—but here, he makes a huge mistake, accidentally cutting off Krakauer's oxygen. That a professional guide like Harris could err so greatly suggests the inherent danger of climbing Everest—in low oxygen, even a great mountaineer can become easily disoriented.

Krakauer climbs across Hillary's Step and reaches the fresh oxygen tank. As he inhales oxygen, he looks around, and realizes that a storm is coming; there are clouds on the horizon, and it's starting to snow. Neither Krakauer nor his teammates realize that "a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh."

The chapter ends just before the beginning of the May 10, 1996 Everest disaster, one of the deadliest mountaineering accidents in recent history. Having established the impending danger, Krakauer now goes back to explain how he came to join the expedition.

CHAPTER 2

In India, in 1852, a clerk rushed into the office of Sir Andrew Waugh, surveyor general of India, and excitedly explained that a Bengali employee named Radhanath Sikhdar had just discovered the highest mountain in the world. Sikhdar used mathematics to estimate the height of a large mountain in Nepal—29,000 feet above sea level. Nine years later, Andrew Waugh named the mountain "Everest," after George Everest, his predecessor at surveyor general. **Mount Everest** quickly became a popular site for explorers. Yet, from the date of Everest's "discovery" in 1852, it took 101 years before anyone succeeded in climbing it.

It's a testament to the power (and arrogance) of the British Empire that a Himalayan mountain, whose height was first measured by a Bengali surveyor, bears the name of a British *colonial authority. Right away, Everest's height attracted daredevils and thrill-seekers, who wanted to prove their talents by climbing to the highest point on Earth.*

Mount Everest is a massive, three-sided pyramid of ice and rock. Most of its early explorers tried to climb it from the northern, Tibetan side. In 1924, a British explorer named Edward Felix Norton got within 900 feet of the summit. The day after Norton's achievement, two of his teammates, George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine, tried to make it all the way. That night, a storm hit, and neither Mallory nor Irvine was ever seen again. Whether Mallory and Irvine made it to the summit has been hotly debated, but recently explorers found Mallory's corpse in a ledge, suggesting that he and Irvine probably didn't succeed.

Everest has always been a fairly dangerous mountain to climb, due to the combination of rocky terrain and high altitude. And yet, the growing list of Everest fatalities—including Irvine and Mallory—didn't discourage other mountaineers from trying their luck. On the contrary, it encouraged them to try harder. As we can see already, many mountaineers savor the challenges of a daunting peak like Everest.

In 1953, a large British team, headed by Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa mountaineer, set out to climb **Everest**. On May 29, 1953, Hillary and Norgay became the first people to climb to the top of Everest, just three days before the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The coincidence of the two events caused an outpouring of patriotism in Great Britain, and Hillary and Norgay were knighted and became international heroes.

Just as the discovery of Everest as the world's highest peak was bound up in British colonialism, so, too, did Hillary and Norgay's achievement coincide with another milestone in British history: the coronation of the Queen. Unfortunately, it's also no coincidence that Edmund Hillary, the white New Zealander, remains a far more famous person internationally than Tenzing Norgay the Sherpa—Hillary was from the British Commonwealth, and therefore a better "mascot" for Great Britain itself.

On May 22, 1963, Krakauer was nine years old. A team headed by Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld climbed to the summit of **Everest** via the West Ridge of the mountain. The West Ridge is a highly difficult climb, much more so than the route taken by Hillary and Norgay in 1953. Unsoeld was a close friend of Krakauer's father, and he quickly became Krakauer's hero. By his early twenties, Krakauer was an experienced mountaineer. He loved the sense of freedom that climbing provided—and the friendly competition of racing to the top. For most of his twenties, Krakauer worked as a fisherman and a carpenter, making just enough money to fund trips to Alaska.

Krakauer's book is both a history of mountaineering on Everest and a first-person account of Krakauer's own relationship with the sport. Krakauer has been obsessed with climbing mountains for most of his life; furthermore, he's always savored the sense of freedom and individualism that accompanies a climb. Krakauer clearly loves mountain climbing with a passion—otherwise, he wouldn't spend all his fishing and carpentry money on climbing expeditions.

By the time he was thirty, Krakauer had mixed feelings about **Everest**—strangely, he thought it wasn't challenging or beautiful enough to be worth climbing. By that time, more than one hundred people had climbed Everest, and mountaineers had established reliable trails. In 1991, the Nepalese government began charging for climbing permits. By the middle of the 1990s, it cost 50,000 dollars to climb Everest, and many mountaineers argued that Everest had become overly commercialized.

In the half century since Hillary and Norgay's climb, Everest has become a much less challenging and more commercialized peak. This new notion of mountain climbing—as a white collar, group activity—clashes with everything Krakauer loves about the sport.

In 1995, one of Krakauer's editors asked him to join an **Everest** expedition and write an article about it for the magazine *Outside*. Krakauer asked for a year to prepare for the physical demands of the climb; he also asked the magazine to pay the 65,000-dollar climbing permit. After some thought, Krakauer's editor agreed. In 1995, Krakauer was 41 years old, and a little "past his prime" for mountaineering. He had to face the fact that more than one hundred people had died trying to climb **Mount Everest**. Nevertheless, in 1996, when his editor told him that there was now a place for him on an upcoming Everest expedition led by Rob Hall, he agreed to go without a second thought.

Krakauer's passion for climbing is so strong that even as a 41-year-old man, he immediately decides to climb Everest, training for an entire year for the opportunity to do so. Like so many other climbers, Krakauer isn't discouraged by the high mortality rate—it's even possible that the "more than one hundred people" who died climbing Everest make the expedition seem more exciting and daring to Krakauer.

CHAPTER 3

It's March 29, 1996, and Krakauer is sitting on a plane, flying into Kathmandu. His plane lands and he meets up with Andy Harris, one of the guides working for Rob Hall, the leader of the expedition. Harris and Krakauer then meet Lou Kasischke, a lawyer from Michigan who will also be climbing **Everest**. Krakauer likes Harris's youthful energy. He learns that Harris has never climbed Everest before.

Krakauer forms an especially close friendship with Harris, which is tragic, since, as we'll learn, Krakauer blames himself for Harris's death later that year.

Krakauer and the other mountaineers on the expedition go to a hotel, where they meet Rob Hall, whom Krakauer likes right away. Hall was born into a working-class New Zealand family, and worked for a manufacturer of climbing equipment. While still a teenager, he climbed several mountains, and in 1990 he finally climbed **Everest**. Hall is known for being a publicity-monger; Hall knows that the more attention he gets from the news, the more clients he'll attract. Hall also used to climb with his friend, Gary Ball. In 1990, they became the first people to climb the highest mountain in each of the seven continents.

Like so many famous climbers, Hall isn't just good at climbing—he has a knack for publicity, and knows which expeditions will attract the most international attention. Hall is, in many ways, the typical professional mountain climber of the 90s—a businessman whose priority is attracting some high-paying clients.

Hall and Ball capitalized on their fame by founding a mountaineering company called Adventure Consultants. In his final years, Edmund Hillary criticized Hall and Ball for contributing to the commercialization of **Everest**. Then, in late 1993, Gary Ball died of a cerebral edema, a condition caused by high altitude. Hall was devastated by his friend's death, but continued to run the company.

The death of Gary Ball could be said to symbolize the "death" of a certain kind of mountaineering, characterized by close friendships and rugged conditions. Hall's business symbolizes the "new mountaineering" and, as Hillary argued, it contributed to the commercialization of the sport.

On March 31, Krakauer and the other mountaineers assemble at the airport and prepare to fly to the base of **Everest**. Krakauer's teammates include Helen Wilton, a mother of four, Yasuko Namba, a personnel director from Tokyo, Beck Weathers, a pathologist, Stuart Hutchinson, a cardiologist, John Taske, an anesthesiologist, Frank Fischbeck, a publisher from Hong Kong, and Doug Hansen, a postal worker. The team's medic will be Caroline Mackenzie, who won't be climbing past the base camp. Krakauer isn't sure what to think of his fellow clients. They seem like decent people, though very different from the usual "hard-core" climbers he's met. Krakauer feels that he doesn't have much in common with any of the clients except for Doug—who's saved for more than a decade to pay for the expedition. Krakauer has also never been in such a large climbing group—in the past, he'd only ever climbed solo, or with a friend or two. Krakauer hopes that Hall has "weeded out" clients who don't have the drive to make it to the summit.

The clients Krakauer meets in this scene are representative of the kinds of people who can afford to climb with Hall—in other words, the kinds of people who can afford to take a two-month, 65,000-dollar vacation to the Himalayas. Krakauer is worried about the clients, however, because he thinks that they're a little too laid-back, and not serious enough about the potential dangers of Everest. Krakauer isn't saying that there's anything inherently wrong with paying lots of money to climb a mountain; however, he suggests that escalating permit fees have weeded out a lot of talented, motivated people, leaving clients who are rich, but not necessarily driven.

CHAPTER 4

Krakauer and the mountaineering team march toward **Everest** along the Dudh Kosi, a large river. As Krakauer walks, he notes that the landscape used to be beautiful wilderness—and while it remains beautiful, it's been converted into farmland. The team arrives at the Khumba Lodge, located at the edge of a small Sherpa town near Everest. (The Sherpas are an ethnic group that predominately live in the Himalayas.) At the lodge, Krakauer meets Mike Groom, the third guide for the expedition. Groom had his toes amputated from frostbite in the late 1980s, but he's continued to climb ever since.

There are two important points to glean from this passage. First, the "wilderness" surrounding Mount Everest has been developed and converted into "workable land," perhaps suggesting the commercialization of the area. Second, notice that Mike Groom—and the other guides, too—seems much more intense and driven than his clients: clearly he loves mountain climbing, or he would have given it up after losing his toes.

The team eats dinner, and Krakauer notices that Hutchinson, Taske, and Weathers, the three doctors in the group, dominate the conversation. Taske and Weathers are both funny, though Weathers irritates Krakauer by talking too much about conservative politics. Krakauer also notices a group of American climbers demanding soda and burgers from the lodge's Sherpa owner. The climbers behave as if the owner doesn't speak fluent English, when she actually does.

Krakauer becomes a little irritated with some of his teammates, whom he feels are a sometimes oblivious and self-centered (even if they're funny). Krakauer also begins to notice the overall "Americanization" of the Himalayas: Everest tourism has become so popular that clueless, disrespectful Westerners have come to dominate the area.

The Sherpas are a small ethnic group, numbering no more than 20,000 people. They're mountain people, Buddhists, and, because they live at high altitudes, are often superb climbers. Many Sherpas work in mountaineering, since it's one of the most lucrative forms of business in Nepal. However, a disproportionate number of Sherpas also die on climbing expeditions. Many have criticized what they see as the destruction of Sherpa culture associated with the rise of mountaineering in Nepal: the trees of Nepalese valleys have been cut down to make way for lodges and hotels, and tourism has flooded Sherpa society with crass American culture. To be fair, tourism has also introduced better schools and hospitals to the Sherpa community, and Krakauer senses that it's a little patronizing for Americans to "lament the loss of the good old days" of Sherpa society.

Krakauer is measured in his analysis of the Sherpa population. On one hand, it's tragic that Everest tourism has Westernized the Himalayan region, because this has greatly changed Sherpa culture. As we saw in the previous passage, tourists often treat Sherpas as second-class people, and even guides and professional climbers seem to mirror this attitude (perhaps explaining why a disproportionate number of Sherpas die on expeditions—they're not paying clients). However, Krakauer admits that tourism has also brought many opportunities to the Sherpas, meaning that Everest tourism hasn't been harmful across the board.

On April 3, the team has adjusted to the altitude, meaning that they're ready to proceed. Before doing so, however, Krakauer visits a Buddhist monastery, where the head monk of Nepal, the *rimpoche*, has just finished a three-month vow of silence. A Sherpa bows to Krakauer and leads him to the main room of the monastery, where he shows Krakauer to "his Holiness" (the *rimpoche*). However, as Krakauer, intimidated, bows to the *rimpoche*, he notices some of the photographs on the wall, showing the *rimpoche* with Richard Gere and Steven Seagal.

Krakauer's encounter with the rimpoche *is an apt symbol for the way that Westernization has changed Himalayan culture. The influx of Westerners to the Himalayas has changed many aspects of culture there—even the Buddhist religion. One might think that someone as pure and holy as the* rimpoche *would remain aloof from this—and yet, apparently, he's buddies with Gere and Seagal.*

The first six days of the climb are full of beautiful vistas, and Krakauer feels that he's in a dream. Krakauer enjoys talking to Doug Hansen and Andy Harris. Andy explains that, while he'd never been to **Everest** before, he's climbed other Himalayan peaks. He's married to a beautiful woman named Fiona McPherson, who runs a Himalayan medical clinic. Thanks largely to the clinic's efforts, the mortality rate for Everest climbers has gone down considerably. Rob Hall has spent a lot of time speaking with clinic workers about potential accidents. He believes that the most serious accidents take place on the north side of the mountain (which Hall's team won't be climbing).

At this point in the climb, the terrain is unchallenging, and Krakauer is free to appreciate the beauty of the Himalayas. However, as we'll see, the climb is about to get much more difficult, emphasizing the point that Everest's beauty is inseparable from its danger and capriciousness. In this passage, Krakauer also gives us some important information about Andy Harris's life, and about more of the dangers of climbing—just a few weeks after this scene, Harris will die.

Now 16,000 feet above sea level, the team is adjusting to the high altitude. The trail leads them past yak drivers and small villages to another small lodge in the town of Lobuje. The lodge is filthy, and Krakauer develops a bad cough from inhaling acrid smoke. On April 7, Krakauer learns that Tenzing, a Sherpa herder working for Hall, has fallen and seriously injured himself, meaning that the expedition will be delayed a few days. Krakauer notes that Hall is unusually respectful to Sherpas and sternly orders his team to pay respect to Sherpa guides. Hall is critical of other mountain guides for being too careless with the Sherpa staff—often, team leaders order Sherpa people to climb high without proper training, perhaps explaining why a disproportionate number of Sherpi guides die. Only a few months ago, a Sherpa youth named Kami Rita fell to his death because he hadn't used the usual ropes to climb a difficult peak.

The reason that Krakauer and the other members of the expedition need to proceed slowly is that their bodies need time to adjust to the high altitude of Mount Everest. At high altitude, the air is thinner, meaning that there's less oxygen. Humans can survive at high altitude, but their bodies need time to adapt to the changing environment. Notice, also, that Hall is unique among climbers in paying close attention to his Sherpa guides and giving them a lot of respect. While the commercialization of Everest has created a system in which Sherpas, as non-clients, are too-often treated as second-class people, Hall has genuine respect for his Sherpa employees.

CHAPTER 5

On April 8, Rob Hall learns that Tenzing has been rescued from his fall—he's still alive. Meanwhile, some of the people on the expedition are suffering from nausea and indigestion—Andy Harris has a horrible attack of diarrhea that leaves him very weak. Nevertheless, he proceeds with the climb.

The clients will continue to suffer from nausea, diarrhea, and other problems throughout the book—a consequence of adjusting to the challenging climbs and thinning air of Everest.

The expedition climbs past the Khumbu Glacier, through a cluster of ice pinnacles known as the Phantom Alley. After a long day, the team makes it to the **Everest** Base Camp, located 17,600 feet above sea level. At the base camp, Rob Hall crosses paths with another team leader, Scott Fischer. Hall and Fischer are friendly rivals in the mountaineering tourism business. Fischer has a reputation for being a bold, risk-taking climber, while Hall is known for being more methodical. Fischer has survived several near-death experiences—on more than one occasion, falling down the side of a mountain and miraculously surviving. He smokes a lot of marijuana, and has lots of female admirers. He's also attracted a lot of good press for leading expeditions to clean up trash on the side of the mountain. Fischer has had money problems in the past, but his business seems to be improving.

In this section, we're introduced to Scott Fischer, another professional climber and business owner. Fischer is different from Hall in a lot of ways: he's bold and risky in his approach, and gives his clients much more freedom to do what they want. Given what we know so far about the disaster of May 10, 1996, Krakauer seems to be implying that Scott Fischer, more than Rob Hall, is in danger of experiencing a serious catastrophe. However, as we'll find out, it is actually Hall *whose group experiences a serious problem near the summit of Everest.*

Krakauer notes that, in no small part, Fischer is the reason that Krakauer is climbing **Everest** at all. In 1994, Krakauer met Fischer at a party, and Fischer suggested that Krakauer write an article about Everest. Krakauer met Fischer a few more times, and on each occasion, Fischer brought up Everest. Later on, when Krakauer's editor at *Outside* suggested that he write the article, Fischer lobbied *Outside* to pay the climbing permit and allow him to lead Krakauer. However, in the end, Rob Hall offered *Outside* a significantly better deal. While Krakauer was initially reluctant to switch from Fischer to Hall, he eventually agreed. Fischer was angry, but when Krakauer meets him at the Base Camp, Fischer seems cheerful.

In this passage, Krakauer conveys the importance of publicity and good press in the mountaineering business. Both Fischer and Hall know that, by getting Krakauer to climb with them, they'll attract some (potentially) good publicity: Krakauer will write an article about them for a popular mountaineering magazine, Outside. *Fischer and Hall are talented climbers, but a crucial part of their job is also working to build up an international brand. Thus, it's understandable that Fischer would be upset when Hall "poaches" Krakauer.*

As they spend a few days at Base Camp, the other climbers on Krakauer's team suffer from diarrhea, dehydration, and headaches because of the altitude. During this time, Krakauer bonds with Doug Hansen. Hansen tells him that he's been involved with several women, each of whom left him because he's too committed to mountaineering. In part, Doug was able to climb **Everest** because the students of the elementary school near his home sold T-shirts to help him. A year ago, Doug tried to climb Everest with Rob Hall, but had to turn back only a few hundred feet from the summit, due to an impending storm. Doug is determined to make it to the summit this time around.

Of all the people on his expedition, Krakauer has the most in common with Doug Hansen. Like Krakauer, Hansen doesn't come from a wealthy background—he's not a doctor or a businessman, but a postal worker, and the only reason he's here is because of the generosity of an elementary school. And like Krakauer, Doug is an uncommonly determined, highly motivated climber; he failed to reach the summit once before, and he refuses to fail again this year.

Krakauer worries that his lack of experience with high altitude will prevent him from climbing **Everest**. But Hall assures him that he'll be fine.

Krakauer builds up the foreshadowing here, as we already know that everything won't *be fine.*

CHAPTER 6

The team climbs up **Everest**. Altogether there are twenty-six people, including Sherpa staff. Hall plans to climb Everest slowly, allowing his clients to adjust to the altitude. The team will rise from Base Camp to Camp One for a few days, then back to Base Camp, then on to Camp Two for a longer period, and so on. On April 12, Krakauer's birthday, the team prepares its climbing equipment. Krakauer learns that most of his teammates haven't been able to do much climbing in the last few years—while they're all in excellent shape, they've exercised in gyms, not on mountains. Privately, Krakauer worries that, without recent mountain training, his teammates won't be able to climb Everest.

Hall's careful, gradual climbing regimen is designed to give his clients' ample time to adjust to the thinning atmosphere. But Krakauer is still worried about the other people on his expedition. Some these clients seem to be naively confident—they think that, because they've paid a lot of money, they'll be able to reach the summit—another serious problem with the commercialization of Everest.

The expedition will lead the team past the notorious Khumba Icefall, arguably the most dangerous part of **Mount Everest**. There are huge blocks of ice called seracs in the Icefall, and the challenge of navigating the area is to avoid getting crushed by a collapsing serac. Because the Icefall route is so dangerous, Hall and the other professional mountaineers have agreed that one designated team each year should be responsible for carving out the route for everyone. In 1988, an American team carved out a route through the Icefall, and then demanded that all other climbers pay 2,000 dollars to use it. Hall was furious with the Americans' demands, but eventually came to see the logic of "treating the Icefall as a toll road," and in the early 90s charged his own fee for carving a route.

This passage is an apt example of how commercialization has changed the way mountaineers climb Everest. Initially, Rob Hall is angry that other climbers would dare charge him a toll for navigating through the Khumba Icefall; but eventually, he accepts the toll system, and begins to profit personally from it. One could say the same of the Nepalese permit system: while many professional climbers find it outrageous that the Nepalese government would charge 65,000 dollars to climb Everest, some of them have found a way to benefit personally from the new rules.

On April 13, the team begins to travel across the Icefall. Krakauer has traveled icefalls before, but none as dangerous as the Khumbu. The climbers proceed separately (in less dangerous icefalls, where the climbers know each other better, climbers would be tied together with rope to prevent an accident). Krakauer begins breathing heavily from the effort of climbing, and realizes that his body hasn't fully adjusted to the thin air. Eventually, he and the rest of the team reach Camp One. After a short time, the team returns to Base Camp, so that they'll have time to adjust to the altitude.

In this passage, we can see the importance of altitude adjustment. While it might seem silly to climb up and down the Khumba Icefall more than once (since it's so dangerous), Krakauer and his teammates need plenty of time to adjust to the thinning air. If they were to proceed from Base Camp directly to Camp One and Camp Two, some of the clients would probably collapse from exhaustion and respiratory failure.

Back at Base Camp, Krakauer and the other climbers talk about their strengths and weaknesses. Krakauer has noticed that Frank Fischbeck, the Hong Kong publisher, is a particularly talented climber. Stuart Hutchinson, on the other hand, is too eager to finish first—on the trek through the Khumbu, he started first, but wound up tiring himself out. Beck Weathers and Yasuko Namba seem especially amateurish—they didn't know how to use their crampons (traction devices attached to boots). However, Andy Harris proved to be a good guide, and helped Weathers and Namba proceed safely.

Right away, it becomes clear that the clients on Hall's expedition have varying levels of talent. The problem with having such a range of ability on the same expedition, as Krakauer will demonstrate, is that the faster climbers are often forced to wait around for the slower climbers, wasting energy in the process. In retrospect, it seems clear that less experienced climbers should be discouraged from climbing Everest, no matter how much money they paid.

The next morning, Krakauer receives a phone call from Linda, his wife, to the Base Camp line. Linda tells Krakauer she misses him, and that saying goodbye to him at the airport was the hardest thing she's ever done. Krakauer and his wife have been married for fifteen years, and Linda used to be a talented climber, but suffered a back injury that prevented her from climbing again. Linda tells Krakauer to be careful, and Krakauer tells her, "I'm not going to get killed. Don't be melodramatic."

The final words of this passage foreshadow the May 10 disaster—since, we now know, Linda is being realistic, not melodramatic, when she brings up the possibility of death.

CHAPTER 7

Krakauer notes that **Everest** has always been a haven for "kooks, publicity seekers, hopeless romantics, and others with a shaky hold on reality." In 1947, for instance, a Canadian engineer enlisted the help of two Sherpas, Ang Dawa and Tenzing Norgay, to climb Everest. Norgay, who would ultimately become the first person to climb Everest (along with Edmund Hillary), was only a teenager at the time, but already an experienced mountaineer. Norgay, Dawa, and the engineer climbed 22,000 feet before turning back. Other would-be visionaries tried to climb Everest in the 1930s and 40s, and some died in the attempt. Recently, plenty of "kooks" have climbed Everest, all of whom have had tens of thousands of dollars to spend.

By now, it's pretty clear that you have to be at least a little crazy to climb Mount Everest. The mortality rate for climbers is so high that successful climbers must be willing to take major risks and sometimes endanger their own lives. While Krakauer argues that the monetization of Everest climbing has created some serious problems, he also makes it clear that Everest climbing has always *been dangerous—the challenges of climbing have always been a part of the appeal.*

At Camp One, Krakauer meets some members of Scott Fischer's team, including Klev Schoening, a former Olympic skier, and his uncle, Pete Schoening, the first person to climb Hidden Peak, a famous mountain in Pakistan. Pete joined Fischer's team, not because he needed a guide, but because he didn't want to have to wait years for his permit to come through. Nobody on Hall's team has remotely the same mountaineering abilities as Pete Schoening. Still, the team is fairly competent compared with other teams at Base Camp.

It's a mark of the increased commercialization of Everest that even the great Pete Schoening, one of the most famous modern mountaineers, has to work through a guided expedition instead of climbing Everest solo. Guided expeditions have become considerably more convenient than solo climbing, because there's much less bureaucracy involved for the client.

One of the least competent teams on the mountain is the Taiwanese team. A few months before, the Taiwanese team tried to climb Mount McKinley in preparation for **Everest**. However, half the team had to be rescued by the National Park Service due to a storm, and one of the climbers died. The leader of the Taiwanese team, a man named Makalu Gau, made it to the summit, and when he was climbing down, he cried, "Victory!", seemingly ignoring the death of his teammate. Many of the other teams fear that the Taiwanese will suffer another disaster, which would require the other teams to save their lives.

Echoing the overall theme of the chapter, Krakauer characterizes Makalu Gau as a somewhat intimidating, even mentally unstable mountain climber. He seems so single-minded in his pursuit of success on Mount McKinley that he ignores the tragedy affecting his team. And yet on the current expedition to Everest, it is Hall's team, not Gau's, that suffers a fatal disaster.

There are several other underqualified teams at Base Camp, including a team of South Africans—the first people from their country to be granted permission to climb **Everest**. The leader of the South African team, Ian Woodall, had assembled three lead climbers: Andy de Klerk, Andy Hackland, and Edmund February. Edmund February, a half-African man who was named after Edmund Hillary, was thrilled at the chance to climb Everest. Leading up to the climb, however, several of the other members of the South African team, including February, resigned out of disgust with Woodall, who is, by many accounts, "a complete asshole." Woodall claimed to be an experienced climber, despite the fact that he was involved in only two Himalayan expeditions, and both failed. He also liked to tell stories about his military service, despite the fact that he only served as a pay clerk. February told reporters that Woodall had ruined the South African expedition, using the "dreams of an entire nation" for his own "selfish purposes."

As we've seen in the previous chapter, mountaineering is often tied up in nationalism and patriotism—thus, in the 1950s, Sir Edmund Hillary became a poster-child for the entire British Commonwealth. Similarly, the South African expedition to the summit of Everest is billed as a great moment for the country of South Africa itself. However, Ian Woodall has seemingly poisoned the expedition by manipulating his teammates and using the mission as a self-promotion vehicle. Woodall (not unlike Hall and Fischer) has a flare for self-promotion, but he is far less honest in his publicity maneuvers than the other guides; he lies about his military records and his mountaineering achievements.

After the resignation of Edmund February, Ian Woodall had to reconfigure the team. Previously, he'd recruited a backup climber, a black woman named Deshun Deysel, who had almost no climbing experience. After the first "wave" of resignations, Woodall claimed that he was considering giving Deysel an opportunity to climb all the way to the summit. He claimed that, by the time the team reached Base Camp, he'd make a decision about whether or not Deysel would climb to the summit. However, it was leaked that Woodall hadn't even arranged a climbing permit for Deysel, meaning that Woodall never had any intention of bringing Deysel to the summit. Some journalists suggested that Deysel's only purpose for Woodall was to serve as a "token black woman," even though she wouldn't be allowed to climb to the summit. As his popularity plummeted, Woodall prevented his teammates from listening to reports of his own corruption. He even tried to stop an English journalist from receiving help at a South African base camp, even though the journalist was cold and exhausted.

Woodall cruelly allows Deshun Deysel to believe that she has a chance of ascending to the summit of Mount Everest, when, in fact, Woodall has no intention of bringing her, and never did. However, the fact that Woodall would include a "token" black climber reinforces the nationalistic nature of the South African expedition, and of professional mountain climbing in general. After the end of the apartheid system in South Africa in the mid-1990s, the South African government, led by President Nelson Mandela, wanted to assemble a diverse, multicultural team that attested to the diversity and equality of South African society in general. While Woodall took some measures to make his climbing team racially diverse, he largely abandoned Mandela's vision, and used the expedition to promote himself, not South Africa.

The South Africans and the Taiwanese are frequent topics of discussion for Hall's team. Hall suspects that "something bad" will happen that year, what with the large number of incompetent teams climbing Everest.

This chapter is important because it exposes one of the basic problems with commercialized Everest tours—there are too many different groups trying to ascend at the same time.

CHAPTER 8

On April 16, the team proceeds from Base Camp back through the Icefall to Camp One—this will be their second acclimatization excursion. On his way to Camp One, Krakauer notices that his breathing is more relaxed than it was during his first journey to Camp One. They reach Camp One, where they'll spend two nights, before journeying up to Camp Two, where they'll spend three nights before heading down.

Krakauer's breathing is more relaxed, proving that Hall's methodical, slow-paced altitude training is working.

Krakauer reaches Camp One around 9 am. There he finds Ang Dorje, the climbing sirdar—i.e., the head Sherpa climber. Ang Dorje has a reputation for being a strong climber, and he's worked for Rob Hall for a few years. Krakauer spends time with Ang Dorje until midday, when the last of the team reaches Camp One.

Evidently Krakauer is more experienced and comfortable with climbing than some of the other people on his team. Krakauer's speed isn't a problem for now—indeed, he uses his extra time to bond with the Sherpa climbers.

Two days later, the team prepares to climb to Camp Two. Krakauer feels extremely hot from the exertion of climbing, and tries to prevent himself from getting a migraine by stuffing snow under his cap. He also notices a dead body wrapped in plastic sheeting, which Rob Hall later explains belonged to a Sherpa climber who died three years ago. At Camp Two, the altitude change is so great that Krakauer feels like he has a "red wine hangover."

As the group ascends the mountain, Krakauer has his first encounter with death on Everest. The body of the dead Sherpa has been lying in the snow for three years, a reminder of 1) the lack of attention and medical care that Sherpas are afforded, and 2) the slow-paced hospitalization and rescue procedures characteristic of Everest.

On April 22, the group marches back down to Base Camp. There, Krakauer and Andy Harris go to visit the South African team. Harris and Krakauer meet Ian Woodall's girlfriend, Alexandrine Gaudin, his brother, Philip Woodall, and another team member, Deshun Deysel. Krakauer planned to ask Deysel if she knew that her name wasn't listed for a permit, but when he sees how cheerful Deysel looks, he decides he doesn't have the heart to ask her.

Krakauer walks away from the encounter with Deysel feeling more hatred than ever for Ian Woodall, who's manipulated Deysel into believing that she has a real shot at the summit.

Krakauer returns to his team, where he finds Hall, Dr. Mackenzie, and Scott Fischer's doctor, Ingrid Hunt, communicating via radio with people higher up on the mountain, trying to decide how to take care of a patient named Ngawang Topchke. Ngawang is a Sherpa guide who's suffering from severe altitude sickness. Earlier in the day, Fischer crossed paths with Ngawang, and, noting that Ngawang had some of the symptoms of altitude sickness, ordered him to descend to Base Camp. However, partly because many Sherpas believe that "real men" don't get altitude sickness, Ngawang disobeyed Fischer and continued to walk up to Camp Two, becoming seriously sick in the process.

Ngawangs' altitude sickness represents Krakauer's second encounter with death in this chapter. Ngawang, like many mountaineers, is a strong believer in machismo: even though he's feeling bad, he refuses to climb down and receive medical attention. At the same time, Ngawang may have rational, economic reasons for refusing medical help right away—if he gets help instead of working, he'll gain a reputation as a weak climber, and he might find himself laid off in the future.

Dr. Mackenzie radios the people at Camp Two to give Ngawang Topchke medicines and carry him downhill as quickly as possible. A team of climbers carries Ngawang down the mountain, back to Base Camp. Ngwang's condition continues to deteriorate. While the mountaineers ordinarily would order a helicopter evacuation, a sudden snowstorm makes such an evacuation impossible.

This passage foreshadows the disaster on May 10, when a storm will prevent helicopters from making emergency evacuations. This is also a reminder of why it's important for Hall to guide his clients up the mountain slowly—if they move too fast, they could end up like Ngawang.

Ingrid Hunt, one of the other doctors responsible for taking care of Ngawang Topchke, is young and inexperienced. She'd only lived in Nepal for four months before beginning her work for Scott Fischer. That afternoon, she takes good care of Ngawang, but begins to suffer from stress and altitude sickness herself. She radios for another, more experienced doctor, Jim Litch, to help her—Litch arrives, and is amazed to discover that Ngawang isn't on oxygen. He determines that Ngawang has a bad case of pulmonary edema, a potentially fatal disease. Later, Hall suggests that, had the patient been a client, rather than a Sherpa guide, he wouldn't have been treated so haphazardly. Ngawang is transported to a hospital, where his condition continues to worsen. He begins frothing at the mouth, and goes into cardiac arrest. Ingrid Hunt performs mouth-to-mouth, but she's too late—Ngawang dies, leaving behind a wife and four daughters.

In a crisis, it becomes clear that organization and leadership in the harsh conditions of Everest are tenuous at best. Ingrid Hunt is a good doctor, but she doesn't have very much experience treating altitude sickness, and indeed, she suffers from altitude sickness herself. Furthermore, it's likely that Ngawang would have received better medical care (and might still be alive) if he'd been a paying client—another reminder of how Everest commercialization has marginalized the Sherpas and favored wealthy Western tourists.

At the time of the expedition, there are several climbers who send periodic dispatches to websites. One such climber is the famous socialite Sandy Hill Pittman, who is traveling with Scott Fischer. Pittman raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from corporate sponsors to hire alpinists to guide her up to the top of **Mount Everest**. Krakauer had never met Pittman before this Everest trip, but he'd heard a lot about her. When he runs into her at Base Camp, he finds her to be energetic and outgoing. Sandy Hill married Bob Pittman, the cofounder of MTV, and in the 1980s, she was a well-known socialite who spent time with various celebrities. In the early 90s, Pittman began her campaign to become the first American woman to climb the highest mountain in each of the seven continents. However, she lost the race in 1994, when another woman succeeded in doing the same. When Sandy climbed mountains, she took a huge bag of gourmet food with her, along with a television and a video player. Many have accused her of being spoiled and entitled. Nevertheless, most of the members of Scott Fischer's team report that Sandy is generous and fun to be around. For her part, Sandy seems "heedless of the resentment and scorn she inspired in others."

In some ways, Krakauer portrays Pittman as an unfocused, spoiled, wealthy brat—in other words, exactly the kind of person that commercialized Everest expeditions attract. However, Krakauer also suggests that Pittman isn't as unlikeable in person as she might be on paper. Even if she's spoiled, and has overworked her Sherpa guides by making them carry her heavy boxes of food and clothes, Pittman also seems to be a charismatic, generous, and overall pleasant person. In the aftermath of the May 10 disaster, many journalists unfairly blame Pittman for the disaster—and Krakauer wants to make it clear that he's not one of those journalists.

CHAPTER 9

On April 26, Krakauer wakes up at 4 am and prepares for the day's final acclimatization climb: from Camp Two to Camp Three. He's exceptionally cold, and, as the climb proceeds, he begins to lose feeling in his feet and fingers. Suddenly, Hall gives the order that everyone needs to turn back to Camp Two—there's a dangerous storm.

The passage conveys the escalating danger of Everest—it's getting colder, and the weather is getting nastier. Nevertheless, Hall still exercises extreme caution with his clients.

Back at Camp Two, Krakauer examines his toes and fingers—they're stiff, but not seriously frostbitten. Doug Hansen, on the other hand, has some serious damage to his toes; furthermore, his larynx is inflamed from coughing and wheezing. Hansen is worried that he'll be unable to continue with the expedition, and Krakauer is saddened—he and Hansen have become close friends over the course of the journey so far.

The weather is beginning to take a toll on the clients: Doug Hansen may be unable to proceed with the expedition. While this would be incredibly disappointing for Doug, it would be even more dangerous for a sick man to proceed with the summit climb, and Hall, being cautious, seems unlikely to accept such a possibility.

Back at Camp Two, there continues to be a lot of ill will between Rob Hall and the South African team. There are also rumors among the Sherpas that Ngawang Topchke died because two of the climbers have been having sex, angering Sagarmatha, the goddess of the sky. To compensate, the Sherpas build small stone altars, and say prayers before teams enter the Icefall. Krakauer also notes that, while the Sherpas pay lip-service to Sagarmatha's prohibition on extramarital sex, many of them have extramarital sex in secret.

While Krakauer seems not to believe in the Sherpas' religion on any literal level (he even implies that the Sherpas themselves don't entirely), he entertains the basic premise that humans will be punished for disrespecting the natural world. Indeed, it's possible to interpret all of Into Thin Air *as a cautionary tale about the power of nature.*

There are a large number of accomplished mountaineers on the Nepalese side of Everest in 1998, including Fischer, Hall, and Pete Schoening. However, there are four especially gifted climbers: Ed Viesturs (an American who's starring in an IMAX film about Everest), Anatoli Boukreev (a guide working for Fischer), Ang Babu, who's working for the South African team, and Lopsang Jangbu, the uncle of Ngawang Topchke. Lopsang has been climbing since he was twenty, when he demonstrated his vast strength by reaching the peak of Everest without supplemental oxygen. Lopsang is a great admirer of Scott Fischer, and tells Krakauer, "I think Scott has many big plans for me."

On the surface of things, it seems highly unlikely that the expeditions will suffer any casualties, because there are four excellent mountaineers available to keep the less experienced clients safe. Later on, Lopsang's intense loyalty o Scott Fischer will cause him tremendous grief and guilt.

CHAPTER 10

A day after the first attempt to reach Camp Three, the team tries again (however, Doug Hansen stays behind to let his throat heal). The team climbs up the mountain slowly. Most people, Krakauer observes, believe that mountaineering is a sport for reckless thrill-seekers. But while mountaineering can be thrilling, it's also one of the most cautious, slow-paced sports. More than anything else, the key to mountaineering is the endurance of pain—fatigue, tedium, aches, sores, etc.

Mountaineering is an interesting combination of daring and caution. The basic premise of mountaineering is exceedingly dangerous—climbing to high, cold places. However, most serious mountaineers also take great precautions to keep themselves safe. But as Krakauer shows, even these precautions aren't always enough to prevent a disaster.

Krakauer revises his opinions of some of his teammates at they climb the mountain together. Initially, he disliked Beck Weathers for his conservative politics; however, while climbing up to Camp Three, Krakauer begins to respect Weathers for his toughness and determination. Krakauer also grows to admire Lou Kasischke, Yasuko Namba, and John Taske—they seem to be serious, determined people.

Although Krakauer initially wrote off some of his teammates for being weak and incompetent climbers, he now begins to respect them for their endurance and drive.

Krakauer becomes increasingly uncomfortable in his role as a journalist, as he senses that his peers are uncomfortable around him. One day, Beck Weathers confesses that Krakauer's presence puts him on edge; however, he adds that he doubts Krakauer's presence puts any extra pressure on Rob Hall.

After the accident, Krakauer will feel extremely guilty about his role in the disaster. One possibility that occurs to him is that his presence as a journalist made the other climbers less certain and more likely to get into trouble. Here, Krakauer establishes—perhaps to reassure himself more than anything else—that his presence pressured Beck Weathers, but not Rob Hall.

Krakauer arrives at Camp Three, and immediately begins to help two Sherpas chop ice. Although he's supposed to be adjusting to the altitude, he still feels lightheaded. Some mountaineers suffer from a disease called High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE)—in which blood stops flowing through the brain, sometimes causing permanent brain damage. Recently, one of Scott Fischer's clients came down with a case of HACE. While Krakauer doesn't have HACE, he's lost a lot of weight, and he's torn some cartilage in his chest, which makes breathing painful.

As the clients ascend to the summit, they endure more and more injuries and medical problems. Even Krakauer, who's lucky not to suffer from HACE or other altitude-related respiratory problems, tears cartilage in his chest.

Rob Hall leads his team back to Base Camp; he plans to climb from Base Camp and reach the summit on May 10, the same day as Scott Fischer's team. The American and Taiwanese guided teams promise to rest on May 10 to make room for Hall and Fischer; however, the South African team makes it known that they'll be traveling to the summit whenever they want, probably May 10, "and anyone who didn't like it could bugger off."

While some of the teams organize in order to ensure that they're not all climbing at the same time, the South African team refuses to cooperate. When there are too many teams at the summit at the same time, we'll see, serious problems arise.

CHAPTER 11

On the morning of May 6, Krakauer and the team leave Base Camp for the summit. Krakauer perspires heavily from the exertion of the climb, and his tongue swells until he can't breathe through his mouth.

Again Krakauer shows that mountaineering isn't all about thrills and excitement—it's often about enduring suffering and discomfort.

On the same day, Göran Kropp, a Swedish solo climber who'd traveled from Stockholm to Nepal by bicycle, climbs down to Base Camp. He had planned to climb **Mount Everest** without either Sherpa support or bottled oxygen, and he was a highly experienced climber. He left for the summit on May 1, but decided to climb down on May 6 for fear that he didn't have enough energy to finish the climb safely. Kropp's caution impressed Hall—most climbers would have pushed ahead rather than accepting their limitations.

One of the most difficult challenges for mountain climbers is to accept their own limitations. Kropp is an interesting case because, even though he was very close to the summit, he exercised caution and decided to try again another day. Because climbers are by often ambitious, daring people, it can be very difficult for them to imitate Kropp. Nevertheless, not knowing one's physical limitations can be deadly for a mountaineer.

On May 7, the team reaches Camp Two, and Hall declares a day of rest. Krakauer notices Fischer at Camp Two, looking irritable. Because he gave his clients a higher degree of autonomy than Hall, Fischer was forced to make a number of emergency trips back to Base Camp, mostly due to his clients' unexpected problems. Now, Fischer was being forced to rush from Camp Two to Base Camp to help a client, Dale Kruse, who has HACE. Fischer had already to return to Base Camp because one of his guides, Anatoli Boukreev, slept late and ignored the clients, instead of paying close attention to them as Fischer had ordered. Kruse tells Krakauer that he witnessed Fischer yelling at Boukreev for shirking his duties. Kruse also notes that Boukreev, in spite of his vast mountaineering skills, isn't good at helping others. Fischer has been working twice as hard to make up for Boukreev, and as a result he is sleeping badly and losing weight. Later on, Boukreev claims, "If client cannot climb **Everest** without big help from guide, this client should not be on Everest."

In this important chapter, we begin to get a sense for the personality of Anatoli Boukreev, one of the most talented climbers on Everest in 1996. Boukreev is unique among guides because he doesn't hang back to help the weaker, less experienced climbers—he thinks that it's their responsibility to climb on their own. As a result, though, Fischer has to work twice as hard to make up for Boukreev. Boukreev's guiding philosophy might seem callous and mean, but even so, it exposes one of the basic problems with organized expeditions to the summit of Everest—as Boukreev says, if a client needs that much help to climb the mountain, they really shouldn't be climbing Everest in the first place.

On May 8, both Hall and Fischer's teams leave Camp Two. During the climb, a boulder falls and hits Andy Harris in the chest. Luckily, Harris doesn't suffer anything more serious than a bruise—but had the boulder been a little larger, it could have crushed him.

Other random disasters hurt the expedition members, reminding us that Everest is an inherently dangerous, unpredictable place.

Both Hall and Fischer's team arrive at Camp Three. Krakauer is the first to arrive, and while the other team members trickle in, he chops ice—a duty that the Sherpas usually perform. Chopping ice makes Krakauer realize how important the Sherpas' contribution is. Late in the day, Lou Kasischke and Frank Fischbeck appear, both extremely tired. The sight of Frank looking so exhausted is shocking to Krakauer—Frank seemed like the most competent climber on the team.

Krakauer gains new respect for the Sherpas after he sees them chopping ice—and after he tries to chop ice himself. Krakauer gives the impression that most of the people on the expedition never get much of an appreciation for the Sherpas' contribution, reinforcing the point that commercialized expeditions marginalize the Sherpas.

Hall's team gathers together to breathe compressed oxygen—a practice that has long been a staple of mountaineering. Breathing pure oxygen can protect the body from HACE and hypothermia. However, there are some "purists" who've argued that using oxygen is "cheating," and that real mountaineers shouldn't use oxygen to climb **Everest**. In the 1970s, a man named Reinhold Messner climbed Everest without oxygen tanks, though some suggested that he'd breathed in oxygen from a hidden tank. Hall's team uses oxygen masks to ensure that nobody loses consciousness during a climb. As the team approaches the summit of Everest, Hall encourages his clients to sleep with their masks on.

As the group approaches the summit of Mount Everest, it becomes increasingly important for them to breathe supplemental oxygen—without it, they'd be more susceptible to hypothermia and other dangerous diseases. Supplemental oxygen will play an important part in the events of May 10, 1996; furthermore, the fact that the clients need to breathe compressed oxygen at all reminds us that Everest isn't made for human beings—in other words, it's inherently unsafe for people to be there.

Early the next morning, a man from the Taiwanese team, Chen Yu-Nan, goes out to use the bathroom and falls down the side of the mountain. He plunges into a crevasse, but, amazingly, survives; luckily, another Taiwanese team member wakes up and helps lift him back to the camp with a rope. The next morning Chen's condition begins to deteriorate—within a few hours, he's dead. Makalu Gau learns of Chen's death, but doesn't show any emotion; instead, he orders his team to proceed with their climb. Perhaps Gau thought that continuing the climb would be the best way to honor Chen's memory. Despite the large number of accidents on the climb to **Everest** so far, Krakauer and the rest of his team try to remain focused on their mission. "There would be plenty of time for reflection," Krakauer thinks, "after we all had summited and got back down."

Again, Makalu Gau shows himself to be strangely indifferent to the death and suffering of other people, even his teammates. Perhaps Gau really does feel sympathy and sadness for Chen, but chooses to conceal these emotions in order to keep everyone focused on the prize—reaching the summit. If Gau were to mourn Chen now, the team might give up and refuse to keep climbing to the top of Everest. Indeed, Krakauer and his teammates seem to mirror Gau's strategy—instead of dwelling on Chen's death, they proceed with their journey; they're going to climb first and ask questions later.

CHAPTER 12

On the morning of May 9, Krakauer and his teammates wake up early for the day's climb. During the climb, Krakauer steadily advances to Camp Four, located on the plateau known as the South Col, the "launching pad for the summit assault."

For the next few chapters, the climbers (after summiting, or nearing the summit) will try to return to the flat, relatively safe South Col—tragically, not everyone will succeed.

Over the course of the afternoon the weather deteriorates. In the evening, Krakauer sits in his tent. He hears a voice saying, "Let him in quickly or he's going to die out here!" Krakauer discovers Bruce Herrod, a deputy leader from the South Africa team, "and the sole remaining member of that expedition with real mountaineering credentials." Bruce has gotten lost, and is suffering from severe hypothermia. Doug Hansen is also doing poorly—he hasn't slept in days, and feels horribly nauseous. While Krakauer is sympathetic for Doug, he feels a profound disconnect from the other members of the expedition: "each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much."

The climbers can easily become unable to make even the most basic decisions on their own, due to the thin air and the way this lack of oxygen disorients the brain. This passage sums up the problems with guided expeditions to the summit of Everest: they're disorganized, without any strong bond or connection between the climbers; furthermore, the guides are sometimes as clueless as the clients.

Just after midnight, Hall's team proceeds with the next stage of the climb. Fischer's team is also climbing to the summit at this time. Furthermore, unbeknownst to Hall, the Taiwanese team is climbing up to the summit as well. An hour into the climb, two members of Hall's team, Frank and Doug, turn back. However, Hall runs into Doug, says something to him (as Krakauer puts it, "we'll never know what was said"), and as a result, Doug turns back and continues climbing.

One of the major problems on May 10 was that there were too many teams climbing at the same time—as we've already seen, the overabundance of climbers delayed Krakauer's descent, seriously weakening him. The passage is also tragic because Doug Hansen ends up dying—had Hall not broken with procedure (it seems reasonable to assume that he said something encouraging Hansen to continue), Hansen might still be alive.

At the beginning of the expedition, Rob Hall gave his team a speech about the importance of obeying his directions on summit day. If Hall decided that conditions were too dangerous, he insisted, the team would have to turn around right away. On the morning of May 10, Hall and his team are approaching the summit of **Mount Everest** very slowly—since Hall ordered everyone to stay close together. As the team gets closer to the summit, Krakauer notices members of Fischer's team and the Taiwanese team getting closer together.

Hall continues to emphasize the importance of procedure and orderliness, even as his own methods become increasingly disorganized. As we'll see, Hall stresses the importance of a "turn back time," but never officially announces what this time is. While Krakauer has a lot of admiration for Hall, it's clear that Hall made a series of bad decisions that may have contributed to the May 10 disaster.

Krakauer reaches the Southeast Ridge of **Everest** at 5:30 am, with the understanding that he needs to wait for the rest of the team before proceeding. He's frustrated that he can't just continue with Fischer or the Taiwanese, but he understands why Hall wants him to wait. The most rewarding part of mountaineering, Krakauer has always felt, is self-reliance—the freedom to make decisions for oneself. As a member of a group, however, Krakauer does not have this luxury—he must obey Hall.

This passage illustrates one of the major problems with group expeditions—the strong climbers have to wait around for the weak climbers, getting weak and tired in the cold and thin air. A duo or solo expedition would never have such a problem.

At 7:10 am, Krakauer sees Hall arriving at the Southeast Ridge, and Hall gives him the go-ahead to climb. Krakauer begins climbing, and quickly passes Lopsang. Ordinarily, Lopsang would be at the front of any expedition to **Everest**; however, he's tired and extremely nauseous. In part, Lopsang is sick because he's had to carry Sandy Hill Pittman's heavy satellite phone all morning. Furthermore, Lopsang chose to tow Pittman on a short-rope (i.e., he pulled her by a rope). As a result, Lopsang isn't leading the group, as usual.

There were many factors that contributed to the May 10 disaster. Krakauer implies that one small factor may have been the presence of Sandy Pittman on the expedition. Pittman had a lot of heavy equipment, and Lopsang was forced to carry most of it, tiring him out. In general, the most talented mountaineers in the expedition were unusually exhausted, meaning that they couldn't do their jobs to the best of their abilities.

It's not clear why Lopsang chose to pull Pittman; she made it very clear that she didn't want to be pulled. Later, Lopsang claimed that he did so because he confused her with a different, weaker client. But he also claimed that he knew Pittman was Pittman, and towed her because he thought she'd be the weakest member. There's another mystery: it's not clear why Pittman didn't just untie herself from Lopsang. She claims she chose to remain tied to him because she didn't want to disrespect him. It's possible that Lopsang short-roped Pittman because he thought that doing so was the only way to get her to the summit, and therefore, the only way to bring good publicity to Scott Fischer, his idol.

Krakauer doesn't explore Sandy Pittman's relationship with Lopsang in very much detail; however, he gives the strong impression that there's much more to this story than he's able to report. Lopsang's behavior toward Pittman seems highly resentful and disrespectful—perhaps it was a kind of "pay-back" for Lopsang being forced to carry Pittman's heavy phone and other possessions. Also notice that Lopsang continues to be fiercely loyal to Scott Fischer—he wants to ensure that Pittman arrives safely and Fischer gets good press.

CHAPTER 13

On May 10, each person in Hall's team carries a 6.6-pound oxygen bottle, and is supposed to pick up a spare after arriving at the South Summit, a check-in point near the summit of **Everest**, just below the Hillary Step. The bottles can't last much longer than 4 or 5 pm, meaning that climbing Everest that day is a race against the clock.

Krakauer establishes the urgency of timing on the day of May 10—everyone needs to be back at Camp Four before it's too late in the day, and they need to travel efficiently, to ensure that they don't run dangerously low on oxygen.

Hall expected that there would be Sherpas accompanying the team to the summit. However, it's likely that the violent gale on the night of May 9 prevented Sherpas from climbing alongside the team. In any case, the absence of Sherpas on the morning of May 10 means that new ropes haven't been placed on the mountain slope for the climbers to use. Lopsang has since claimed that, the night before, Hall and Fischer decided not to fix ropes because they received the "erroneous information" that another team had already fixed the ropes the day before.

Another factor contributing to the accident on May 10 was the absence of fresh ropes for climbing. It's not clear how Hall and Fischer would have received false information about the ropes (and it's impossible to know now, since both Hall and Fischer are dead). In all, it's probable that we'll never know exactly why the ropes weren't prepared the night before.

Krakauer and Ang Dorje arrive at the Balcony—the steep mountain slope leading up to the summit—around 5:30 am. Krakauer and Ang Dorje could install ropes, but Hall has ordered them to stay with the group; installing ropes would involve running ahead. Furthermore, Ang Dorje is in an irritable mood, and has been complaining that he's doing too much of Lopsang's work. As a result, neither Ang Dorje nor Krakauer installs ropes on the Balcony.

In this passage, we can almost feel Krakauer's guilt and shame. Krakauer's decision not to set up ropes may have contributed to the disaster later that afternoon, slowing down the entire group (including Krakauer himself). Perhaps this is why Krakauer devotes so much time to describing why he didn't install the ropes.

When other team members arrive at the Balcony, the guides begin to install ropes: they climb up to the top of the balcony with ropes tied to their bodies and then hold the ropes as their clients climb up. At this point, the inexperience of Yasuko Namba "nearly caused a disaster." Yasuko is a brave woman, but she has no experience with high-altitude mountaineering. She is so singularly focused on making it to the top of the mountain that morning that she almost puts her full body weight on a rope before her partner has anchored his position. Had she done so, her partner could have fallen to his death.

So far, Krakauer hasn't spent much time talking about Yasuko Namba; one gets the impression that he barely spoke to her. However, in this passage, he notes that she was somewhat inexperienced, and made a series of poor decisions even before the snowstorm. When Into Thin Air *was published, some readers faulted Krakauer for being overly critical of Namba; some thought it was disrespectful, or even arrogant, to do so. Nevertheless, Krakauer isn't wrong: had Namba pulled down on the rope, she* would *have killed someone.*

As the morning goes on, there is a "traffic jam" at the Balcony. Too many clients are trying to climb up at the same time, and they all move very slowly. Another problem: Hall hasn't officially announced a turn-around time—he'd suggested either 1 pm or 2 pm, but hasn't committed to either one. Hutchinson, Kasischke, and Taske assume that the turnaround time is 1 pm—as a result, they decide to go back to Camp Four when it becomes clear that they'd never make it to the summit by 1. This is an incredibly difficult decision, since they've spent close to 100,000 dollars to climb to the top of **Mount Everest**. And yet, in the end, these three climbers "were among the few who made the right choice that day."

Hall's failure to give a clear turnaround time proved to be a serious lapse in judgment: he unintentionally confused his clients, with the result that some of them turned back at 1 pm, while others waited too long. As it turns out, Hutchinson, Kasischke, and Taske's decision to turn back at 1 pm proved life-saving—had the three clients stayed out for longer, they could have gotten caught in the snowstorm and died.

Around 11 am, Krakauer is with three guides, Andy Harris, Neal Beidleman (working for Scott Fischer), and Anatoli Boukreev (also working for Fischer), approaching the Hillary Step, the last major obstacle before the summit of **Everest**. Krakauer notices that Boukreev uses no supplemental oxygen—something that doesn't seem to be in the best interest of his clients. He also notices that Boukreev doesn't have a backpack—which, ordinarily, would be full of first-aid supplies and clothes. Boukreev carried both oxygen and a backpack from Camp Four; however, he passed them to Beidleman before reaching the Balcony—he didn't think he needed either.

Boukreev's refusal to use supplemental oxygen arguably contributed to the May 10 disaster by making Boukreev weaker, colder, and more exhausted. Some critics and professional mountaineers have argued that Krakauer was being too harsh with Boukreev: even if refusing to breathe supplement oxygen turned out to be a bad move, Boukreev had his own, highly individualistic philosophy of climbing, which required him to rely on his own lungs, not an oxygen canister.

Krakauer and the guides proceed toward the summit, stopping to inhale condensed oxygen every three or four paces. After about half an hour, they reach the Hillary Step. Boukreev, the senior guide, goes first, extending a rope behind him as he walks. Although Boukreev does a good job, Krakauer worries that he'll run out of oxygen before 2 pm. He tells Beidleman his concern, and Beidleman allows him to hurry on, rather than lagging behind to string up his rope. Krakauer moves toward the summit, feeling very lightheaded. Time seems to slow down. When he finally reaches the summit, "any impulse … toward self-congratulation was extinguished by overwhelming apprehension about the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead."

Although Krakauer makes some criticisms of Boukreev, he also acknowledges Boukreev's talent as a mountaineer, and here he writes that Boukreev did an excellent job bringing everyone across the Hillary Step. At the end of this chapter, the narrative has finally come full circle: we're back where we left Krakauer and his peers at the end of Chapter One. For the remainder of the book, Krakauer will describe the events and the aftermath of the May 10, 1996 Everest disaster.

CHAPTER 14

Once he's made it to the top of **Everest**, Krakauer doesn't linger long; he hurries back to Camp Four, lest he run out of oxygen. He notices clouds in the distance, but doesn't recognize them as storm clouds. Fifteen minutes later, Krakauer is back at the Hillary Step, waiting for the three teams to make their ways to the summit. Krakauer vaguely remembers seeing Lopsang and Sandy Pittman. He also sees Rob Hall, who seems disappointed that five of his eight clients haven't made it to the summit.

Krakauer claims not to have known that the clouds in the distance were storm clouds; however, there has been controversy over this point, and there is some reason to believe that Hall and the other guides did *recognize that there would be a serious storm that evening.*

At this point, Krakauer is on the verge of blacking out. He shouts for Andy Harris to run ahead and bring him a fresh bottle of oxygen from the South Summit; Harris replies that there are no fresh bottles left. This makes Krakauer panic; luckily, another climber, who made the journey without oxygen before, offers Krakauer his bottle. When Krakauer returns to the South Summit, he sees that there are at least six full bottles. Oddly, Andy continues to claim that they were empty, probably because he hasn't been getting enough oxygen himself. But Krakauer is so delirious that this possibility doesn't occur to him.

Krakauer's guilt is palpable in this section: he blames himself for not realizing that Andy Harris was suffering from serious oxygen deprivation, and needed medical attention. However, Krakauer's obliviousness seems forgivable, considering that Krakauer himself was suffering from oxygen deprivation, too.

Around 3:30 pm, Krakauer leaves the South Summit, without either Harris or Boukreev (who are helping other clients). He asks Mike Groom, one of Hall's guides, for permission to continue back to Camp Four on his own; Groom gives him permission. Krakauer reaches the Balcony, where he is amazed to find Beck Weathers, standing alone. Weathers explains that low temperatures impair his vision; thus, early in the morning, he fell behind. Rob Hall told Beck that he'd have to go back to Camp Four. However, Beck asked Hall if he could wait half an hour before turning back, in the event that his vision improved; Hall agreed, on the condition that, if Beck's vision didn't improve, he would continue to wait exactly where he was now standing. Krakauer begs Beck Weathers to come back with him—it's getting dark, and it's beginning to snow heavily. Beck says, "thanks anyway" and then insists that he'll wait for Mike. In a day full of mistakes, Krakauer notes, it was a huge mistake not to convince Beck to climb down immediately.

In this chapter and the ones that follow, it can be difficult to follow what's happening; this reflects the chaotic mood of the disaster. Krakauer's encounter with Beck Weathers is bizarre—in retrospect, it seems like a huge mistake for Hall to tell Weathers to wait in the cold for so long. However, situations like Weathers' may be inevitable in large group expeditions, where all the clients have different climbing abilities. Again, we can sense Krakauer's guilt—he knows that he should have guided Weathers back to Camp Four instead of allowing him to wait by himself. Weather's stubborn insistence that he'll wait might suggest a flaw in Hall's style of leadership: he forces his clients to obey his orders at all times—in this case, Weathers's obedience to Hall nearly caused him to lose his life.

Krakauer proceeds to climb down the Balcony. The climb is difficult, since by this time there is a powerful storm. Halfway down, Krakauer realizes that he's again out of oxygen. He feels a strange, warm feeling, and begins losing consciousness. Nevertheless, he managed to climb the rest of the way down, relying on "instinct and inertia."

The passage emphasizes the importance of training and experience in mountaineering—Krakauer manages to climb down the Balcony because of instinct, which he's built up over decades of climbing mountains.

A short time after Krakauer reaches the bottom of the Balcony, "Andy Harris suddenly appeared out of the gloom beside me." His face is red and his eyes are bloodshot. Harris frantically asks Krakauer which way the tents are, and Krakauer points in the right direction. However, Krakauer warns Harris not to move too quickly, lest he slip in the ice. Harris ignores Krakauer, and slips almost immediately, seeming to break his leg. Amazingly, he stands back up and begins "lurching toward" Camp Four, before fading into the snow.

In this strange passage, Krakauer seems to cross paths with Andy Harris—however, as we later learn, it's possible that this person wasn't Harris at all, but a different climber. Krakauer is so exhausted and disoriented that he doesn't make "Harris" wait up for him—instead, he allows Harris to stumble off into the cold.

Krakauer proceeds toward Camp Four at a slow pace, confused about why Harris didn't wait for him. He eventually reaches Camp Four. As he draws closer, he realizes that he's more exhausted than he's ever felt in his life. Though he doesn't realize it at the time, nineteen men and women are stranded up in the mountain, caught in the middle of a storm.

Because he was one of the first to make it back to the tents safely on May 10, Krakauer will suffer a serious case of survivor's guilt—he blames himself for not hanging back to take care of the other climbers.

CHAPTER 15

Neal Beidleman reaches the summit around 1:25 pm with his client, Martin Adams. There, they find Andy Harris and Anatoli Boukreev (Krakauer departed eight minutes previously). Beidleman is an aerospace engineer, as well as one of the strongest climbers in the group; however, he's conscious of being "third in the pecking order," after Fischer and Boukreev.

Beidleman hasn't been an important character in the book up to this point, but he becomes one of the key heroes of the May 10, 1996 disaster, saving multiple lives.

The three guides—Fischer, Boukreev, and Beidleman—know that they need to tell their clients to come down before they reached the top of the mountain; it's getting later in the day, and it isn't safe to continue climbing. Even though Fischer has said that he'll tell his clients to climb down, he never does; nor, it would seem, does Hall. Instead, the clients continue ascending. Sandy Pittman arrives at the top of **Everest** at 2:10, followed by many of the other clients. Doug Hansen doesn't make it to the summit until 4 pm.

The passage conveys the disorganization inherent to many large group expeditions; the three guides aren't sure how to urge their clients to descend from the mountain quickly, and as a result, the descending process is slow and arduous, and during this time, a dangerous storm arrives.

Krakauer flashes back to the previous day, May 9. That afternoon, Fischer began to feel ill, but didn't tell anyone. He was exhausted from the non-stop climbing, but, because he was a strong, proud person, he didn't tell anyone how he was feeling. Fischer also declined to tell his clients that he had a cyst in his liver, which gave him bouts of acute physical distress.

The culture of machismo is a serious obstacle to successful mountaineering, as we've already seen with Ngawang. Much like Ngawang, Fischer refuses to admit that he's suffering from pain and exhaustion, and proceeds with his climb, endangering his life.

The morning of May 10, Fischer gets up early and begins climbing toward the summit. Around 1 pm, on the way up, he crosses paths with Martin Adams and Anatoli Boukreev, as well as Krakauer and Andy Harris. Although Fischer is visibly exhausted and sickly-looking, nobody thinks that he's in trouble.

Another major problem with large expeditions: the group members don't feel confortable enough to inquire about each other's health. Thus, nobody asks Fischer how he's feeling, and Fischer proceeds with his climb.

By 3:10 pm on May 10, Fischer still hasn't made it to the summit. Beidleman, who is waiting for Fischer to join him, is getting worried. Around the same time, Pittman begins to suffer from severe altitude sickness; she nearly passes out. Beidleman orders a client to give Pittman her oxygen tank; with the extra oxygen, Pittman finds the strength to resume the descent.

Even before the storm hits, the expeditions are becoming increasingly disorganized: the differing ability levels of the different clients, combined with the exhaustion of the guides, makes the entire group extremely at-risk.

Around 5 pm on May 10, Mike Groom and Yasuko Namba arrive at the Balcony; by this time, there is a heavy storm. Groom notices Martin Adams climbing down in the wrong direction (toward Tibet). Groom realizes that Adams is suffering from oxygen deprivation, and points Adams in the direction of the tents. Then, Groom notices Beck, still standing by the Balcony, waiting for Mike. Groom guides Beck toward the tents, accompanied by some of Fischer's other clients. As Groom guides the clients back to the tents, Namba's oxygen runs out; she falls to the ground, and refuses to keep moving. As Groom tries to convince Namba to keep moving, Neal Beidleman shows up and begins "dragging Namba down toward Camp Four." By this time it is 6:45 pm, and nearly dark. In the heavy storm, visibility is less than twenty feet. Ordinarily, Beidleman and Groom would be less than fifteen minutes from Camp Four; however, in the storm, it's almost impossible for them to reach their destination. For two hours, Beidleman, Groom, and the seven clients "staggered blindly around in the storm." The group is terrified—they've run out of oxygen, and it's getting colder.

Many of the other clients suffer from oxygen deprivation, as evidence by Martin Adams' decision to descend in the wrong direction. Namba's collapse marks the beginning of a serious crisis for the group—Groom and Beidleman refuse to continue without Namba, and as a result, the other clients and guides have to slow down to take care of Namba, setting off a chain reaction that endangers many other lives. The point isn't that Yasuko Namba is to blame for the May 10 disaster (as some critics believed Krakauer was implying). Rather, Krakauer's point is that group expeditions to Everest are inherently going to run into problems like those he describes in this chapter. Hall and Fischer's misfortune was to get caught in an especially dangerous snowstorm at a time when their groups were especially disorganized.

Back at Camp Four, Krakauer is sitting in his tent, very cold. Stuart Hutchinson, who's been back since 2 pm, tells Krakauer to come outside and bang pots and pans to make enough noise for the rest of the group to find its way back; however, Krakauer is too deliriously tired to respond. Hutchinson goes outside to bang the pots and pans; however, he's smart enough not to wander beyond the camp.

Stuart Hutchinson wisely makes noise in the hopes that he'll be able to signal the position of Camp Four to the other climbers. In reality, though, Hutchinson's actions accomplish very little—the howling winds of the storm drown out all other sound.

While Hutchinson beats pots and pans, Beidleman tries to remain vigilant. Around midnight, the storm clears up, and Klev Schoening, one of the clients, convinces Beidleman that he knows where the tents are. Beidleman assembles those who can walk (not including Namba or Weathers), and staggers off toward Camp Four, knowing that if he were to wait for everyone to walk with him, they'd all freeze. Beidleman leads the clients back to Camp Four, where he finds Anatoli Boukreev.

At this point in the emergency, the guides are forced to be pragmatic. While it would be ideal to bring everyone back to Camp Four together, Beidleman senses that it'll be impossible to do so. Instead, Beidleman tries to take a few people back and leave the others behind. Beidleman's decision is exceptionally tough, since it involves leaving two people alone in a storm—but it probably saves lives in the end.

That afternoon, Anatoli Boukreev had behaved extremely unusually for a professional guide; he climbed far ahead of his clients instead of helping them. He was back at Camp Four by 2 pm, drinking tea. One client claims that Boukreev "cut and ran" instead of staying to help. Boukreev told Scott Fischer that he'd be going down with Martin Adams, but in fact didn't descend the summit with anyone. Boukreev later claims that he thought he'd be more useful if he went back to Camp Four and rested, rather than waiting out in the snow. However, Boukreev's susceptibility to the cold was greatly increased by his decision not to use supplemental oxygen.

Krakauer reiterates some of the criticisms of Boukreev he made in earlier chapters. A rugged individualist working for a guided expedition, Boukreev refuses to hang back to take care of the other climbers, and he refuses to use supplemental oxygen, either. Boukreev's claim that he returned to the camp to rest up, in order to better rescue the clients later, has been the subject of much controversy. Some climbers insist that Boukreev was right all along—he rested, and found the energy to save some clients later. Others argue that Boukreev wasn't really looking out for his clients at all at this point.

On the evening of May 10, Anatoli Boukreev sets out by himself to try to find the clients that Beidleman had left (including Yasuko Namba and Beck Weathers). Boukreev tries to organize a team, but finds that the other clients are extremely disoriented. Bravely, Boukreev decides to go out into the storm alone. However, he is unable to find anyone. He returns to camp, gets better information from Beidleman about the location of the climbers, and then goes out into the storm *again*. This time, he finds some of the lost clients, including Weathers and Sandy Pittman. Boukreev can only bring the clients back one-by-one; while Boukreev is bringing one client back, heavy winds push Beck into the darkness, away from the other clients, and Boukreev is unable to find him again.

Although Boukreev was arguably negligent earlier in the day on May 10, he acts with remarkable bravery in the evening (something that even Krakauer admits). Boukreev risks his life by venturing out into the snowstorm, finding some of the clients, and bringing them back to safety. Viewed in slightly different ways, Boukreev could be considered the hero or the villain of the May 10 disaster—one could argue that he saved lives, or that he was forced to save the very lives he had endangered already.

Boukreev continues to evacuate clients one-by-one. He succeeds in bringing Sandy Pittman back to Camp Four, but not Yasuko Namba. When Boukreev realizes that Namba is still out there, he cries for nearly an hour.

In spite of his criticisms, Krakauer respects Boukreev immensely; he recognizes that Boukreev is a sincerely motivated climber who wants to help his clients, and who blames himself for failing to rescue Namba. In a way, Krakauer has more in common with Boukreev than he does with the other climbers—they're both quiet, ruggedly individualistic, fast-paced, and prone to guilt.

CHAPTER 16

At 6 am on May 11, Stuart Hutchinson wakes Krakauer from a deep sleep. Hutchinson explains that Andy Harris isn't in his tent, and probably never made it back. Krakauer begins to weep. He remembers pointing Harris toward the tents—now, it seems so obvious that he should have been more careful to help Harris. Krakauer feels especially guilty because he'd told Hutchinson that he'd seen Harris arrive safely at the camps (he assumed that Harris would be able to make it all the way back).

As soon as Krakauer wakes up, he begins to feel a sense of guilt: he knows that he should have been more careful to take care of Andy Harris, instead of allowing Harris to stagger off in the general direction of the camp. However, Krakauer's behavior seems more forgivable when one considers that he too was suffering from severe oxygen deprivation and exhaustion.

Hutchinson tells Krakauer that Beck and Yasuko Namba must be dead, and that Scott Fischer has gone missing. Around the same time, David Breashears, an old friend of Krakauer and the leader of the team of climbers making an IMAX film about **Everest**, radios Woodall, who's stationed at Camp Four, and asks Woodall to give the South African radio to Krakauer, so that Breshears can talk to Hall. Woodall refuses.

Woodall's refusal to lend a radio to Krakauer further endangers Hall's life—another reminder of the disorganization of the guided expedition system (too many cooks in the kitchen) and Woodall's selfishness.

After the expedition, Krakauer notes, he spoke with many people involved in the disaster. One was Martin Adams, who remembered seeing Krakauer ahead of him, climbing down the Balcony. During his own descent, Adams slipped and fell into a crevasse. Amazingly, he managed to climb out. By this time, it was dark outside, and he couldn't see the tents of Camp Four any longer. Shortly afterwards, Adams arrived at the edge of Camp Four, where he encountered another climber, whom he was unable to identify, due to the storm. The climber pointed Adams toward the tents, and warned him not to slip on the ice; ignoring the advice, Adams walked toward the tents and slipped almost immediately. As he interviews Adams, Krakauer realizes something: previously, he thought he'd run into Andy Harris outside of Camp Four, and watched Harris slip on the ice. It occurs to Krakauer that the climber he encountered may have been Adams, not Harris.

In this chapter, Krakauer moves around a lot, jumping back and forth between the events of May 10 and the aftermath of the disaster. This passage is important because it establishes that Krakauer may have been wrong to think that he ran into Andy Harris the previous afternoon. In his oxygen-deprived state, it's entirely possible that Krakauer mistook Martin Adams for Andy Harris (after all, it's easy enough to mistake one man for another when both are wearing heavy climbing gear). In a small or solo expedition, it would be impossible for mistaken identities to create such major confusion, underscoring the point that going alone may often be safer than group climbs.

CHAPTER 17

Around 3:40 pm on the afternoon of May 10, Scott Fischer climbs to the summit of **Everest**, along with Rob Hall, Makalu Gau, and two Sherpas from the Taiwanese team. Fischer is exhausted, and complains about his poor health. After beginning his descent, Fischer takes off his oxygen mask, for some reason.

Krakauer jumps back to tell the story from the perspective of Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. Both Hall and Fischer suffer from serious oxygen deprivation—a harsh reminder that Everest can be deadly even for trained mountaineers.

Hall follows Fischer down the summit. While climbing down, Hall notices Doug Hansen climbing up—even though it's more than two hours past Hall's 2 pm cutoff time. Hansen tried to reach the summit last year, and had to turn back—a disappointment that Hansen is determined not to relive. Instead of ordering Hansen to turn back, Hall helps Hansen climb to the summit, and then they begin their descent. Soon afterwards, however, Hansen begins to run low on oxygen. Hall radios Andy Harris to ask if there's fresh oxygen below. Harris wrongly tells Hall that there are no tanks. As a result, Hall and Hansen climb down slowly, in order to conserve their energy.

In this critical scene, Hall seems to compromises on his values, and decides to allow Hansen to continue with his ascent—a decision that will contribute to both of their deaths. However, Hall and Hansen still might have survived had it not been for Andy Harris, who mistakenly informed them that there was no oxygen waiting for them—had Hall known the truth, he might have gone ahead, picked up some oxygen, and climbed back to Hansen, speeding up the descent in the long run.

Around the same time, Scott Fischer is climbing down, feeling sick. Lopsang notices Fischer's erratic behavior and tries to help him descend safely. Lopsang and Fischer encounter Makalu Gau, who is suffering from altitude sickness. Fischer tells Lopsang to keep descending, but Lopsang refuses; he insists that he'll stay with Fischer and Makalu until they're ready to climb down. However, after an hour or so, Lopsang relents and decides to climb down and get help. He makes it back to Camp Four around midnight, and immediately informs Anatoli Boukreev of Fischer and Makalu's condition. Then, he goes into his tent and falls asleep "like a dead person."

Oxygen deprivation renders most of the Everest climbers incapable of executing their duties. Gau, the leader of the Taiwanese expedition, is so weak that he can barely stand, much less climb. Notice that Lopsang is so fiercely devoted to Scott Fischer that he refuses to leave Fischer's side until hours go by. And yet even Lopsang cannot resist the urge to go to sleep—like most of the other climbers, he's so exhausted that he crashes as soon as he's in his tent.

On the afternoon of May 10, a climber named Guy Cotter, a lifelong friend of Hall and Harris, is stationed at the Base Camp. Over the radio, he hears Hall desperately calling out for a bottle of oxygen for Doug Hansen. Alarmed, Cotter radioes Hall to descend from the mountain immediately; Hall refuses to descend without his client. Hours later, at two in the morning, Cotter receives another transmission from Hall, probably unintentional. In this transmission, Hall's voice can be heard shouting, "Keep moving," probably to Doug Hansen. So it's possible that on the night after May 10, Hansen and Hall descended **Everest** in the middle of a storm. Later, around five in the morning, Hall radios that he's gotten two oxygen canisters. So it's possible that Hall managed to climb down the Hillary Step and access the oxygen canisters. However, it's unclear if Hall had abandoned Hansen by this point, or if Hansen had died.

Hall and Hansen try their best to make a safe descent, but to no avail. Agonizingly, Hall is able to talk to his old friend Guy Cotter via the radio, but Cotter is unable to do anything to help Hall, other than listen. It's unclear what happens to Hall and Hansen that night—at some point, however, Hansen dies, and Hall is forced to continue on without him. Hall's seemingly generous decision to allow Hansen to climb to the summit after 2 pm turns out to be a death sentence; both he and Hansen are trapped in the middle of a storm, and end up paying with their lives.

After 5 am, Hall continues to climb down the mountain. He tries to breathe from his oxygen canister, but the breathing "ring" is frozen shut. At 9 am, he finally manages to de-ice his canister, and breathes fresh, concentrated oxygen. On the morning of May 11, Krakauer thinks that he sees Hall climbing down the mountain, and begins to cheer. However, it turns out that Krakauer is just looking at a rock sticking out of the mountain.

The technology that humans have developed for climbing Everest can never account for all of nature's unpredictability and danger.

Around 9:30 am, Ang Dorje, the climbing sirdar, sets out with his assistant to rescue Hall. The rescue mission is extremely dangerous—Dorje is risking his own life by venturing out so late in the day, especially with the strong winds blowing. Around the same time, two Sherpas from Fischer's team, Tashi Tshering and Ngawang Sya Kya, and a third Sherpa from the Taiwanese team, Tenzing Nuri, set out to rescue Fischer and Lopsang. Ngawang Sya Kya is Lopsang's father. After climbing for a few hours, the three Sherpas find the incapacitated climbers that Lopsang was forced to abandon, including Gau and Fischer. Fischer is still alive, but he's barely breathing; thus, the Sherpas make the difficult decision to leave Fischer and take Gau back to Camp Four. Meanwhile, Ang Dorje and his assistant search for Hall on the South Summit, but after the storm worsens, they decide to turn back. Hall radios Cotter, and asks if anyone is coming for him; Cotter delicately tells him that the rescue mission has turned back, and urges him to try to descend alone. Later, Cotter calls Hall's partner, Jan Arnold, and connects her to Hall. Hall tries to sound cheerful, and tells Jan that he'll be fine. He tells Jan, "I love you"—the last words anyone hears him speak. Twelve days later, rescuers find Hall's body, buried in the snow.

While the May 10 disaster shows the disorganization of many Everest expeditions, it's also a testament to the incredible bravery of some of the climbers. Many of the Sherpas risk their lives to help other mountaineers make their way back to Camp Four. But the rescue procedure is also morally challenging, because it forces the rescue team to make some difficult decisions—they choose to leave Fischer in the snow and carry Gau back to Camp Four, for example, a tough, pragmatic decision that saves Gau's life but surely contributes to Fischer's death. Tragically, Hall continues to use his radio to communicate with Cotter, only to be told that no help is on its way. Hall is blessed with the opportunity to say goodbye to his beloved partner, Jan Arnold, at least, and he tries to sound happy so as not to cause Arnold more grief. Hall's death is one of the saddest points in the book—Krakauer clearly has a lot of respect for Hall, and emphasizes the bravery that he displayed up until the very end.

CHAPTER 18

On the morning of May 10, six Indian climbers, part of a recreational expedition organized by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, set out for the top of **Everest**. Three climbers turn back, while three others succeed in reaching the summit. By the time they do so, it is 4 pm, and visibility is low. Afterwards, the three Indian climbers fall to their deaths, though it's not clear how.

In this short chapter, Krakauer emphasizes the intrinsic danger of climbing Everest by recapping another, unrelated disaster that occurred on the same day as the one Krakauer was involved with.

On the morning of May 11, two Japanese climbers set out for the summit; they're shocked to find the body of one of the Indian climbers; however, they choose to continue rather than take care of the body. Shortly afterwards, the Japanese climbers come upon the bodies of the two other Indian climbers, one dead and the other near-dead. Instead of stopping to help the still-living Indian climber, the two Japanese climbers continue, and reach the summit just before noon. They turn back and climb down the mountain, where they again ignore the Indian climbers.

Like many of the other climbers Krakauer describes in this book, the Japanese climbers are so set on reaching the summit of Mount Everest that they choose not to hang back and take care of the dead bodies they find. The climbers' behavior might seem cold and callous, but it's also logical and pragmatic—as tragic as the Indian climbers' deaths may be, there's no practical reason for the Japanese climbers to delay their own expedition.

A week later, other members of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police expedition attempt a summit climb, and discover their teammates' bodies. Again, the climbers do not stop to take care of the bodies—they continue with their expedition, and make it to the summit.

Even the other members of the Indian climbing team don't hesitate on their ascent to the summit of Everest—their priority is climbing, not tending to the dead.

CHAPTER 19

On Saturday morning, May 11, Krakauer and some other clients look for Andy Harris, but can't find him. The events of the last 48 hours make Krakauer feel almost insane; he's spent a sleepless night worrying about his teammates, and now it's becoming clear that many of them are dead. Krakauer's surviving teammates are exhausted, delirious, and psychologically traumatized.

Now that some of the team has gone missing in the snowstorm, Krakauer and his peers have a difficult task—they have to remain calm and organized, and form a rescue party to find the distressed clients (not to mention their guides, Hall and Harris).

Around this time, Stuart Hutchinson becomes the *de facto* leader of the team. Hutchinson is a successful doctor from Montreal, and he has experience with keeping calm in a crisis. He organizes a search group to find Weathers and Namba, and the group finds theim. Amazingly, Namba and Weathers are still alive, even though they spent the night buried in snow. However, Hutchinson realizes that Namba and Weathers will die, no matter what happens next—unpleasant as it is, the best decision is to conserve resources and leave the two bodies in the cold. The search group proceeds back to Camp Four.

Although Krakauer had some misgivings about Hutchinson previously, he also admires him for his calm leadership in a time in crisis—a testament to the many years Hutchinson has spent as a doctor. Hutchinson also has the training to make the tough, callous decision to continue on rather than saving either Weathers or Namba, as both clients are nearly dead. However, Hutchinson's decision proves to be too hasty, since Weathers later makes a miraculously recovery and walks back to camp unaided.

Back at Camp Four, Hutchinson confers with the remaining team members about what to do. Taske is adamant about staying to search for Hall. Meanwhile, Beidleman assembles what's left of Fischer's clients and orders them to descend. Anatoli Boukreev remains behind to wait for Fischer. Beidleman helps the clients down the mountain, with the help of a group of Sherpas who've climbed up to provide assistance. During the descent, wind dislodges some heavy stones from the mountains, and one stone cracks open a Sherpa's head. Beidleman is able to lead the clients and the injured Sherpa to Camp Two.

The group's dilemma in this scene is whether to stay behind and look for their teammates, or continue with the descent in order to preserve their own lives. In a time of crisis, many of the climbers instinctively want to help their teammates; but Beidleman makes the tough decision to bring the clients down Everest. Beidleman's decision isn't selfish; it's just logical—he knows that more lives would be lost than saved if they hung back.

Ironically, Krakauer notes, Rob Hall had been worried that one of the less competent teams would get in trouble, requiring Hall's team to perform a rescue maneuver. As it turns out, however, *Hall's* team is the one in trouble, and the other teams have to rescue them. The members of the IMAX team, including Breashears, generously offer their extra oxygen tanks to Krakauer and his teammates.

This passage illustrates one of the clear advantages *of mountain climbing in a large group—if one person (or one group) gets into trouble, another person or group can provide help. Thus, Breashears generously provides extra oxygen for Krakauer and his peers, allowing them to descend quickly.*

While the IMAX team is delivering the oxygen, a figure appears in the distance—it's Beck Weathers, "risen from the dead." The night before, Weathers was sitting out in the snow, slowly freezing to death. He remained comatose for more than half a day. But on Saturday, miraculously, he regained consciousness, and summoned the strength to walk back to camp. He walked in the direction of the wind, deducing that camp lay ahead. After an hour of walking, he reached Camp Four, where Hutchinson, amazed, bundled Beck in a sleeping bag and, with the help of Pete Athans, an American guide from another expedition, gave him condensed oxygen. Beck was critically ill—it was unclear whether he'd survive or not.

In spite of Hutchinson's decision to leave Weathers to die, Weathers survives his time in the storm, and manages to walk back to Camp Four. Weathers' recovery is perhaps the most incredible part of Krakauer's book—by all rights, Weathers should have died by the time Hutchinson and the rescue party reached him, and his managing to walk back to camp seems almost miraculous. However, Weathers' survival, joyous though it is, makes Krakauer feel intensely guilty about leaving his peer behind.

Around 5 pm on the same day, Anatoli Boukreev goes out on a solo mission to find Fischer. He finds Fischer around 7 pm, with his oxygen tank empty and his gloves off. Realizing that his boss and friend is dead, Boukreev places Fischer's backpack over his face, collects Fischer's pocketknife (which Beidleman later gives to Fischer's son), and turns back into the storm.

Boukreev treats Fischer's body with great dignity, placing a backpack over his face out of respect, and taking Fischer's pocketknife as a memento to give to Fischer's family.

Back at Camp Four, Krakauer breathes some bottled oxygen and begins to feel better. Together, he and Hutchinson try to reinforce the tents, which are in danger of being blown away in the storm. On May 12, Krakauer, Hutchinson, and the remaining clients pack for a descent, knowing that if they stay longer, they'll die of hypothermia. Ang Dorje is reluctant to descend without Rob Hall, his boss. However, Hutchinson persuades Ang to join the descending group: Krakauer, Fischbeck, Kasischke, and Taske. The group is preparing to leave without Beck, whom everyone assumes is dying or dead, when Krakauer discovers that Beck is alive and speaking. He spent the previous night alone in his tent, screaming for help. However, the storm was so loud that nobody heard him. When Krakauer realizes that he and his teammates have let Beck down twice, he almost cries.

Many of the clients are unwilling to descend without Rob Hall. However, Hutchinson, pragmatic as ever, is able to persuade his peers that their own best chance at survival is to descend immediately—if they stay any longer they'd just be endangering themselves. The passage also shows how the group ignored Beck Weathers yet again. Krakauer takes Weathers' suffering particularly hard—he seems to hold himself personally responsible for Weathers' condition.

Krakauer tries to decide what to do about Beck Weathers—does he try to carry Beck down, wait with Beck, or go down with the rest of the group? Krakauer radios Dr. Mackenzie, and Mackenzie tells him that he needs to descend immediately, without Beck; Pete Athans and David Breashears will remain behind to take care of Beck.

Krakauer continues to feel a guilty responsibility for Beck Weathers—he even offers to stay behind with him. however, Dr. Mackenzie assures him that Weathers will be in good hands with Pete Athans.

CHAPTER 20

Krakauer and the remaining clients begin their slow, painful descent on May 12. A few Sherpas catch up with the clients, including Lopsang, who tells Krakauer that he blames himself for Scott Fischer's death.

Krakauer, Lopsang, and some of the other climbers already begin to feel intense survivor's guilt—they blame themselves for the disaster, even when they had nothing to do with their peers' deaths.

Around 1:30 pm, Krakauer and the clients reach Camp Two. There, the wind isn't as strong, and it's slightly warmer. Around 3 pm, a team of Sherpas rushes the body of Makalu Gau—weak, but still alive—to Camp Two. David Breashears gives word that he and a few other guides will be climbing down with Beck Weathers, and should arrive at Camp Two by dark. Later, Krakauer learns that Beck made an amazing recovery after his teammates left him behind.

In the aftermath of the snowstorm, some of the victims, such as Beck Weathers, recover, while others, such as Makalu Gau, remain in critical condition.

Breashears informs Krakauer that a helicopter is on its way to Camp Two. The helicopter can only fly one passenger to the hospital, however. Everyone agrees that this passenger should be Makalu Gau, who's severely frostbitten. Late in the day, another helicopter arrives from Kathmandu; this time, the helicopter takes Beck Weathers to the hospital. The rest of the team prepares for the rest of the descent.

Here, as in the previous chapters, the group is forced to make a tough, pragmatic decision. Even though Beck Weathers is in serious need of help, he's made to wait for a helicopter, so that Gau can receive even more urgent care.

CHAPTER 21

On the morning of May 13, Krakauer is climbing down the Khumbu Icefall. When he makes it through the Icefall, he finds Caroline Mackenzie waiting for him with beer. The feeling of being safe again is so overpowering that he cries. Krakauer feels guilty that he's survived his climb, while others have died.

Krakauer has survived the dangerous snowstorm, but his ordeal is far from over. Now that he's safe, he's left with his own feelings: trauma, guilt, and shame.

On Tuesday afternoon, Neal Beidleman presides over a memorial service for the dead climbers, including Scott Fischer, Doug Hansen, Yasuko Namba, and Lopsang. Shortly after the service, two Japanese journalists approach Krakauer with questions about Yasuko Namba. Krakauer realizes that he faces a "swarm of print and television reporters." A few hours later, a helicopter takes Krakauer to the Tribhuvan Airport, where he has to answer more questions from journalists. Alone in a hotel room that night, he can't stop weeping.

Krakauer continues to suffer from survivor's guilt—even though he has no rational reason to blame himself for his peers' deaths, he continues to do so. Krakauer's trauma worsens after journalists and writers pepper him with questions about the accident, forcing Krakauer to relive some of the most difficult days of his life.

On May 19, Krakauer finally flies back to the U.S., knowing that he has a responsibility to visit Doug Hansen's family and return Doug's possessions. Back in Seattle, Krakauer reunites with Linda. He gains back a lot of the weight he lost, and spends time with his friends and family. Yet **Everest** casts a "long penumbra" over his existence. Several weeks later, Krakauer gets calls from Rob Hall's wife, Jan Arnold, and Andy Harris's partner, Fiona McPherson. Though Krakauer believes it's his duty to comfort Fiona and Jan, they end up comforting him, reassuring him that Hall and Harris's deaths weren't his fault.

Krakauer is safe, but he's not mentally healthy—the disaster that he's witnessed at Mount Everest continues to haunt him for years. He feels he should be a model of comfort and kindness for Harris and Hall's partners, but finds that he's more emotionally fragile than either woman. While many mountaineers climb Mount Everest in order to experience the "thrill" of danger, most mountaineers, Krakauer included, are unable to deal with the trauma of actual *danger.*

Krakauer faces the truth about his time climbing **Everest**. Along with Mike Groom, he was the only person on his expedition who climbed to the summit of Everest and survived. His inaction played a decisive role in the deaths of Andy Harris and Yasuko Namba—a fact that Krakauer will never, ever forget. Krakauer tries to tell Klev Schoening about his guilt, but Klev is unable to empathize; he claims to feel no survivor's guilt.

As one of the few survivors of the expedition, and one of only two to survive after climbing to the summit of Everest, Krakauer has a particularly strong case of survivor's guilt. Unfortunately, he finds that the other climbers don't share his sense of guilt, or at least refuse to talk about it.

Out of all the expeditions climbing **Everest** in May of 1996, it's amazing that Rob Hall's was the one to suffer a catastrophe, since Hall was a notoriously careful guide. But perhaps Hall's good track record was a product of luck as much as skill: year after year, he faced excellent weather—indeed, he'd never faced a storm as dangerous as the one on the night of May 10. It's also possible that Hall's rivalry with Fischer encouraged Hall to break his own rules and take risks, especially since Fischer was guiding Sandy Hill Pittman, a celebrity. And finally, it's important to remember that Hall, Fischer, and the other climbers made some very tough decisions while their brains were running low on oxygen.

Even a calm, organized leader like Rob Hall can make mistakes. On the afternoon of May 10, Hall had already made a series of mistakes that contributed to the disaster. However, the "bigger picture" is that climbing to the summit of Everest is an inherently risky proposition, even for an extremely talented climber like Hall. Even Hall, Fischer, and Harris couldn't think clearly while using oxygen canisters—as a result, their poor decisions may have led them to make other poor decisions, leading everyone into danger.

How can we prevent a disaster like the one Krakauer experienced from ever happening again? One simple way to do so would be to ban the use of bottled oxygen for mountain climbers. This would prevent the vast majority of climbers from ever attempting to climb Everest. At the same time, **Mount Everest** is an intrinsically dangerous business; people die every year attempting to climb it. Indeed, 1996 was actually a *safer*-than-average year for Everest climbers, even when taking the May 10 disaster into account. Consider, Krakauer says, what happened on Mount Everest just one week after the May 10 disaster. By May 17, an Austrian climber had succeeded in making it most of the way up Mount Everest without bottled oxygen. The next day, he began to feel ill, and then he suffered a pulmonary attack and died suddenly.

One of the biggest ironies of this book is that, as bad as the May 10 disaster was, it represents little more than a drop in the bucket compared to the total fatalities from Everest expeditions. So many people die "ordinarily" while attempting to climb Everest that 1996 turned out to be a safer-than-average year. Everest deaths are almost routine, because the conditions at the summit of Mount Everest are so dangerous—human beings simply aren't equipped to survive at low temperatures with little oxygen, and the technology that allows them to do so is far from perfect.

David Breashears and the rest of the IMAX team succeed in making their film, even without their extra oxygen tanks. On May 24, the IMAX team runs into the remainder of the South African team, still led by Ian Woodall, and eager to make another summit attempt. The South African team succeeds in climbing to the summit; however, one of their members, Bruce Herrod, gets lost, blunders off into the dark, and becomes the twelfth Everest casualty of 1996.

It may be further proof of Ian Woodall's incompetence as a leader that Bruce Herrod died during his expedition. However, Herrod's death also reconfirms the fundamental dangerousness and unpredictability of Mount Everest—no expedition, no matter how talented, can climb Everest without experiencing some serious danger.

EPILOGUE

In the months and years following the **Everest** disaster, Krakauer's teammates begin to move on with their lives. Lou Kasischke writes Krakauer a letter explaining that, after months of depression, he's reached the point where he can once again focus on his own life with a "clear perspective."

In the aftermath of the Everest disaster, many of the clients move on with their lives; however, Krakauer is unable to do so—he's still too consumed with guilt.

Beck Weathers survives his hospitalization, though the doctors amputate the five fingers of his left hand, along with his nose. Beck doesn't blame any of his teammates for his suffering. Krakauer notes that Beck and Lou have been able to move on with their lives instead of being "haunted" by their memories of **Everest**. However, Krakauer has been unable to do the same. After reading Krakauer's *Outside* article on Everest, a lawyer from Florida claims that he doesn't know how Krakauer can live with himself, considering that Krakauer's negligence was partly the cause of Yasuko Namba's death. On the night of Namba's death, Krakauer was sleeping in his tent, less than 400 yards from where Namba was slowly dying.

Krakauer writes an article on the disaster for Outside *magazine (the reason he joined the expedition in the first place). The article provokes some strong reactions—and some people agree with Krakauer that he bears some of the blame for the death of Yasuko Namba—since, theoretically, he could have stayed awake, gone outside, and brought Namba back to the camp. This certainly doesn't help his survivor's guilt.*

Krakauer's *Outside* article about **Everest** prompts other angry responses, especially from relatives of the deceased climbers. Scott Fischer's sister writes Krakauer a letter in which she attacks him for arrogantly presuming to know when other climbers made mistakes, and when they made the "right" decisions. A young Sherpa man writes that the 1996 Everest disaster was a punishment for the arrogant Westerners who came to "conquer" Everest. And since the 1996 Everest disaster, Anatoli Boukreev has been involved in a bus accident that gravely damaged one of his eyes.

Krakauer's article (and the full-length book that resulted from it) angered some readers for what they perceived as its judgmental, blameful tone—critics (including the sister of Scott Fischer) accused Krakauer of being too harsh on Namba, Boukreev, and other climbers. However, Krakauer is harshest of all with himself: he blames himself for allowing Yasuko Namba to die. The idea that the expedition was "punished" for daring to climb Everest is irrational, yet in some way, the team was *punished for underestimating the danger of the mountain.*

The 1996 **Everest** disaster hurts or destroys many other people's lives. Sandy Pittman quickly becomes the target of much vitriol, since, it's suggested, her celebrity status prevented her guides from doing their jobs properly.

Krakauer is sympathetic to Sandy Pittman, whom he sees as being a scapegoat for the disaster—journalists unfairly argued that Pittman distracted the guides from doing their jobs. As Krakauer has shown in his book, Pittman played almost no role in the disaster.

Neal Beidleman continues to suffer from depression. Despite the fact that he saved at least five lives, he blames himself for being unable to save sixth: Yasuko Namba. Krakauer visits Neal Beidleman, and together, they talk about their depression and guilt. Beidleman remembers Yasuko Namba, and says, "She was so little. I can still feel her fingers sliding across my biceps, and then letting go. I never even turned to look back."

The book ends somewhat abruptly with Beidleman and Krakauer reminiscing about their expedition, trying to mitigate some of their intense guilt. By all rights, Beidleman should be proud of himself for saving multiple lives—but instead, he hates himself for failing to save Namba. Beidleman's condition reconfirms the basic irrationality of survivor's guilt. The only cure for guilt, Krakauer implies, is communication: by talking to another guilty climber, Krakauer can work through some of his own feelings. Furthermore, Into Thin Air, *the book we've just finished reading, may represent Krakauer's attempt to "cure" his own guilt.*

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