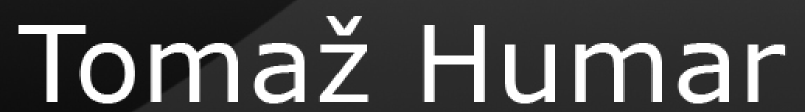

Bernadette McDonald

CONTENTS

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Bernadette McDonald
Title Page
List of Illustrations
Foreword: Reinhold Messner

Chapter One: Rupal Face
Chapter Two: Base Camp
Chapter Three: Kosovo
Chapter Four: Sergeja
Chapter Five: Ganesh V
Chapter Six: Annapurna 1995
Chapter Seven: Ama Dablam
Chapter Eight: Bobaye
Chapter Nine: Nuptse
Chapter Ten: Reticent Wall
Chapter Eleven: Dhaulagiri
Chapter Twelve: The Fall
Chapter Thirteen: After the Fall
Chapter Fourteen: Rescue
Chapter Fifteen: Cinderella Rises

Epilogue: The Show Must Go On
Afterword: Tomaž Humar
Notes
Sources
Acknowledgements
Maps

Index
Picture Section
Copyright

About the Book

In August, 2005, Tomaž Humar was trapped on a narrow ledge at 5900 metres on the formidable Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat. He had been attempting a new route, directly up the middle of the highest mountain face in the world – solo. After six days he was out of food, almost out of fuel and frequently buried by avalanches. Three helicopters were poised for a brief break in the weather to pluck him off the mountain. Because of the audacity of the climb, the fame of the climber, the high risk associated with the rescue, and the hourly reports posted on his base-camp website, the world was watching. Would this be the most spectacular rescue in climbing history? Or a tragic – and very public – death in the mountains?

Years before, as communism was collapsing and the Balkans slid into chaos, Humar was unceremoniously conscripted into a dirty war that he despised, where he observed brutal and inhumane atrocities that disgusted him. Finally he did the unthinkable: he left and finally arrived home in what had become a new country – Slovenia.

He returned to climbing, and within very few years, he was among the best in the world. Reinhold Messner, among others, called him the most remarkable mountain climber of his generation. His routes are seldom repeated; most consider them to be suicidal; yet he often climbs them solo. As this book was being written, he achieved the first-ever solo ascent of the east summit of Annapurna.

Tomaž Humar has cooperated with Bernadette McDonald, the distinguished former director of the Banff Festival and author of several books on mountaineering, to tell his utterly remarkable story.

About the Author

Bernadette McDonald’s biography of Elizabeth Hawley, *I’ll Call You in Kathmandu*, was published in 2005. For many years she was Vice-President, Mountain Culture at The Banff Center and Director of The Banff Mountain Film and Book Festivals. Her biography of the renowned American climber Charlie Houston, *Brotherhood of the Rope*, won the Kekoo Naoroji Award for mountaineering literature. In 2008, Bernadette McDonald won the Kekoo Naoroji Award for an unprecedented second time with *Tomaž Humar*.

Also by Bernadette McDonald

Voices from the Summit
Extreme Landscape
Whose Water Is It?
I’ll Call You in Kathmandu
Brotherhood of the Rope

Tomaž Humar

Bernadette McDonald

arrow books

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Section one

1. Tomaž Humar’s parents on their wedding day
2. Tomaž Humar, 1971
3. Tomaž’s birthday, 1973
4. Climbing Lover Overhang
5. Sergeja and Tomaž on their wedding day, 1991
6. Painting church steeples, 1988
7. Tomaž and Šrauf enjoying hot springs, 1994
8. Šrauf at Camp I on Ganesh V
9. Šrauf on ridge between Camps I & II on Ganesh V
10. Tomaž on the summit of Annapurna, 1995
11. Climbing Ama Dablam’s Northwest Face, 1996
12. Vanja Furlan at a bivouac on the Northwest Face of Ama Dablam
13. Tomaž with newborn son, Tomi
14. The Humar Family, 2001
15. Janez Jeglič and Carlos Carsolio
16. Tomaž on the summit of Nuptse, 1997
17. Sergeja, 1990
18. Tomaž after summiting El Capitan’s Reticent Wall, 1998
19. Triumphant return after soloing the South Face of Dhaulagiri, 1999
20. At the Trento Film Festival, 2000
21. Tomaž in intensive care, 2000
22. Training at Jannu Base Camp, 2004
23. Tomaž abseiling on Jannu East

Section two

24. Stipe Božić filming below Jannu East
25. Anda Perdan praying at Jannu Base Camp
26. Tomaž belaying Aleš on Aconcagua
27. Tomaž belaying Aleš on Cholatse, 2005
28. Aleš on the summit of Cholatse
29. Aleš and Tomaž bivouacking on Nanga Parbat’s Rupal Face, 2005
30. Maja and Tomaž
31. Tomaž greeting Steve House at the Rupal Face Base Camp
32. Tomaž kisses the ground after being rescued
33. Tomaž at Base Camp in obvious pain and distress
34. Tomaž embracing his Sirdar, Javed
35. Portrait of Tomaž taken below Lhotse’s South Face, 2006
36. Elizabeth Hawley with Tomaž
37. Rock island on the South Face of Annapurna
38. View from Annapurna’s East Ridge

All photographs are reproduced courtesy of Tomaž Humar.

Maps

1. Himalayas
2. Ama Dablam
3. Nuptse
4. Bobaye
5. Dhaulagiri
6. Annapurna

FOREWORD

REINHOLD MESSNER

I have had the great fortune to climb all over the world. I have also met many climbers who have accomplished much more difficult things than I. Tomaž Humar is one of these climbers.

Modern mountaineering is a British and central European invention. Further developments were made in the USA, in Japan and, above all, in the countries on the other side of the former Iron Curtain. Finally, it was Slovenian climbers who took alpinism one step further. The extent to which Slovenian mountaineers have dominated big-wall mountaineering over the last decade is illustrated by their impressive routes on the South-West Face of Shishapangma (2,150 metres, 1989), the South-East Face of Api (2,600 metres), the North-West Face of Bobaye (2,500 metres), the South Face of Nampa (1,950 metres, all 1996) and the North Face of Gyachung Khang (1999). The new routes that have been climbed in the last decade would have been unthinkable in the 1980s. Only the very best dare to attempt the ‘big problems’, and drama, failure and tragedy are, unfortunately, an integral part of the game.

It was the Slovenians Vanja Furlan and Tomaž Humar who made the first ascent of the 1,650-metre-high, extremely difficult West Face of Ama Dablam from 30 April to 4 May, 1996, in alpine style. They dedicated their route to the passionate big-wall climber, Slovenian Stane Belak,

who made the first ascents of the South Face of Makalu and the right-hand side of the South Face of Dhaulagiri, and then lost his life in December 1995 in the Julian Alps.

Then, Tomaž Humar and Janez Jeglič made an alpine-style ascent of the extremely difficult 2,500-metre West Face of the North-West Summit of Nuptse. Jeglič had gone on ahead a short way below the top, reached the summit at 1.00 p.m. and waved. A short while later, Humar reached the highest point, but failed to meet up with his partner. He could see his footsteps on the south side of the ridge, caught a very brief glimpse of Jeglič and shouted to him. The wind was blowing in gusts as Humar reached the last of his partner’s tracks. He saw only the radio: Jeglič was gone.

Then it was Dhaulagiri. For a long time, Dhaulagiri (8,167 metres), a peak that rises high above the subtropical jungle of Nepal, was considered to be the highest mountain in the world. Now, this elegant summit – visible in clear weather from Pokhara – takes its rightful place as the sixth highest of the fourteen eight-thousanders. Even its normal route, the North-East Ridge – first climbed in 1960 by an international expedition led by the Swiss climber Max Eiselin – is difficult. Its south flank, described by Professor G.O. Dyhrenfurth as ‘one of the most terrifying walls in the Himalayas’, was the highest unclimbed mountain face in the world.

Incredibly steep, this giant face was the objective of a small expedition that I organised and led in the pre-monsoon season in 1977. I joined forces with Peter Habeler, my tried and trusted partner on Hidden Peak in 1975, and for the extremely difficult and hard enterprise, we invited two additional top climbers of international repute: Michael Covington, one of the top American rock climbers, and Otto Wiedemann, one of the best young German mountaineers.

But the South Face of Dhaulagiri is more than just a Big Wall. It is secretive – and it kept its secrets. Like an oracle

of an old Gurkha soldier from Bega: ‘Dhaulagiri is like five fingers on a hand. The first and last fingers are deadly; the two others too are dangerous. Only the forefinger points the way to the summit.’

There is no single, correct objective in mountaineering; there are only possibilities. One of them leads beyond the impossible. The more I concerned myself with Dhaula’s Face, the closer the relationship became. How hesitantly I began planning for it; yet later I could no longer stop looking at it. When I knew everything; when the Face had me completely under its spell; I discovered the answer and did the only correct thing; I organised the retreat.

The decision to give up was not too hard to make. We congratulated ourselves on having made the only logical choice, given the situation. I now saw the expanses of ice and the loose rocks with fresh eyes, like a relief model of the face rather than a possible route to the summit, as it had been just a few hours previously. Everything seemed to have changed now in some mysterious way; even I had changed. I began to feel that I was immersed in some great lake, not in order to sink to the bottom, but to climb out again. The sun, shining through the mist, soothed my overwrought mind and body and a liberating tiredness washed over me.

How easy it was to live with this final defeat. Perhaps it was only because I had considered this as a possibility from the very start, and had come to terms with it. Not only had I not discounted the possibility of failure, I had also made friends with the idea during our preparations for the climb. From the beginning, as often as I thought about the summit, I was also occupied with the possibility of retreat.

I felt that this retreat was absolutely final, unalterable, like a law. There wasn’t the slightest chance of another attempt in the future. We had failed, and yet to fail after all we had been through, had still been worth it. It was worth it just to have been up there, cut off from the rest of the

world. It was a powerful feeling just to have survived on this 4,000-metre wall of rock and ice, in the drumfire of stone fall and the thundering rage of avalanches. To carry on climbing would have been suicidal. Right up to the point at which we turned back, we had been totally committed to the climb.

What would have become of this Dhaulagiri expedition if we had listened to the pundits? There were those who spoke of suicide and others who talked about self-sacrifice. One body of opinion considered our enterprise to be one of the craziest ideas of the 20th century, while another group reckoned that it was some last act of heroism.

For humankind it is totally meaningless whether the South Face of Dhaulagiri has been climbed or not. It is also immaterial whether a person has ever stood on the summit of Everest. What counts are merely the experiences one gains along the way.

But my experience was in 1977. Twenty-two years later, another history was written on Dhaulagiri's South Face. Was it by luck, coincidence or instinct that the Slovenian climber Tomaž Humar reached the summit ridge of Dhaulagiri directly above this 'forefinger' in the ancient oracle, the forefinger that pointed the way for him to achieve his objective?

With new routes on Ama Dablam, Bobaye and Nuptse to his credit, Humar had already achieved an entire series of 'crazy things'. On 2 November 1999, he completed his new route on the 4,000-metre-high South Face of Dhaulagiri I – solo and in Alpine style – a climb with difficulties up to Grade VII, ice to 90 degrees, M7+. It marked a new watershed in contemporary extreme mountaineering.

Although, after his fifth bivouac, Humar was no longer able to follow his ideal line, there was no way back, either. Nor did the terrain allow him to camp safely. So he traversed diagonally right for 1,000 metres across a couloir and mixed ground to find himself on the Japanese Ridge

where he bivouacked at an altitude of about 7,300 metres – his seventh night on the face. The following day was to be his summit day. Leaving his tent and a large portion of his gear behind, he traversed back into the centre of the face. Unfortunately, things did not go as he had expected, with extremely hard sections of climbing – water ice and dry-tooling – slowing his progress considerably. Imagine it, if you will: M5/M6 climbing in the Death Zone! Humar was forced to bivouac again, at 7,800 metres, without a tent, just a sleeping bag. On day nine he was able to finish his climb, and descended via the normal route without summitting.

Tomaž Humar is credited with finding the best solution so far to the South Face of Dhaulagiri I: he is an absolute star amongst today's Big Wall mountaineers. As he himself has said: 'All of my future climbs will be directed towards the greatest possible challenges: summits that can only be reached by climbing devilishly dangerous big walls.'

What is it that makes up an alpinist such as Humar? Experience shows that, of the most successful mountaineers of any generation, only half die from 'natural causes'. The others fall to their deaths, freeze to death or otherwise perish in the mountains. Alpine history confirms this situation as a brutal reality. Is it pure chance that determines who 'stays up on the mountain' and who 'survives', or is there some connection between survival and a climber's experience and circumspection? Today I am convinced that one of the most decisive factors for enduring a borderline situation is the will to survive. I would even dare to suggest that the climber who is in tune with himself and the world will not normally perish on a mountain. These days I see inner harmony as the prerequisite for any climber who seeks to push the frontiers. Without it, he should give up extreme mountaineering. Humar possesses this inner harmony.

It is thirty years since our first ascent of the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat, years during which I have climbed other mountains and gained many new experiences. It is said that a man is rejuvenated every seven years – that all his cells are replaced. I wonder, does that also apply to his spirit?

For years I have had to defend myself against all the persecution and accusations that this Nanga Parbat traverse brought in its wake. I know now that I will not get very far by constantly going over the whys and wherefores of the accident. I started to listen more to how I felt inside rather than to other people's accusations or to what other people believed they ought to persuade me to do. For the decision to climb down the Diamir Face, I alone bear the responsibility. Whether it was the right decision, or not, nobody can know. Although many have passed judgment, the truth is, we had no other choice.

At the time, bizarre events like these are really desperate affairs, but in a way, they are good for a young person to experience, for it is such experiences that deepen our sensitivity. I had the good fortune to 'die' young; it created the prerequisites for me to occupy myself with the fundamental questions of existence … to prepare for the next disappointment – it is part of the drama of life. Tomaž Humar, too, had this opportunity on Nanga Parbat – a desperate situation with a difficult decision about – ultimately – his survival. Despite those who screamed for self-sacrifice, without question, this experience gave him added wisdom and strength for the next drama of his life – his solo climb of the South Face of Annapurna in October 2007. This was a visionary achievement.

How many of us suffer in one form or another from the fact that our skills and energies are insufficiently challenged? … I only know that when physical and emotional reserves remain unchallenged, this feeds the spiritual cancer of a life unfulfilled. There are many antidotes, many possibilities for self-imposed challenge. A

failed attempt on a 'virgin' face of an eight-thousander gives me much more than the successful ascent of a known route. These high standards, which ultimately provide greater possibility for failure than success, are what I so admire in Tomaž Humar.

Many people only measure things in terms of success and failure and do not know how close together these values lie. On all my mountaineering excursions, the most important thing was never the summits, nor the successes or the fame. Ultimately, the most important thing was the discoveries I made about myself, discoveries that are always new and that have taught me again and again to view the relationship between myself and my surroundings, my world, in new ways.

'The dragon must not die,' I wrote as a twenty-year-old, in the recognition that it was only 'the impossible' that kept climbing so fascinating. Today I would phrase it differently: 'Only the secrets can be conquered' – most of all, the secrets that lie within ourselves.

This book reveals many fascinating secrets: about what motivates climbers who perform at the very highest levels; about the positioning and competition within the climbing communities; about the fascinating world of Slovenian climbers – the best in the world; and most of all, the complex personality of one of the most intriguing and enigmatic high-altitude performers of today – Tomaž Humar.

CHAPTER ONE

RUPAL FACE

6 August 2005, 15.00, Nanga Parbat, Rupal Face

Elevation: between 6,100 and 6,300 metres
Position: small hole on a near-vertical ice slope, rock cliffs and snow mushrooms above, ice runnels on either side
Weather conditions: thick fog, heavy snow, -5º Celsius
Visibility: zero
Climbing conditions: impossible, due to avalanches

BASE CAMP: Tomaž, we are trying to do everything to get a helicopter rescue team. Tell me, how are you and what are the conditions like?
HUMAR: I have been trapped for four days now. There is so much snow; it is avalanching all the time. I can go nowhere. I can't even move!
BASE CAMP: We know; we are trying to get a team willing to risk the rescue, you know it is hard. Is there any chance for you to come down lower?
HUMAR: At the moment I can go nowhere, avalanches on both sides, and if I move even one metre I will be swept down.
BASE CAMP: I understand. We will try to get a helicopter to you at the latest by tomorrow. But you know that if the weather gets worse, nobody will fly.

HUMAR: I know the weather forecast – heavy snow from tomorrow until Wednesday – so I requested a rescue last night. I am in a trap.
BASE CAMP: We activated everything at home and around the world … I suggest you keep yourself in good shape, and if it looks like you can descend a bit in the afternoon, try to go down; it would be easier for the helicopter.
HUMAR: I know I am quite high. The only positive side of this is that I am on top of the mushroom sticking out of the wall, so there is a possibility of throwing me a rope. I know it is complicated, that they have not done that yet. But if I go down I will be on the side of a tower where an avalanche could hit the helicopter … It is not only about the descent, I am in a labyrinth, I can go nowhere …

SOME CALLED IT the boldest rescue in recent memory, others called it a soap opera. For ten days in August 2005, millions around the world watched online as Slovenian climber Tomaž Humar fought for his life, entombed in a coffin of ice over 6,000 metres high on the massive, 4,700-metre Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat, traditionally referred to as the ‘killer mountain’.

As each day passed and Tomaž’s situation became increasingly desperate, the world watched voyeuristically. The expedition’s base camp team posted updated reports on the Humar website, and viewers alone with their computer screens wondered if they were about to witness a man die in the mountains – in real time. Could it end any other way? And then there were private feelings of guilt as the viewer recoiled in a moment of awful comprehension: there were two young children also awaiting the outcome.

The plot thickened. A top-level Pakistani military helicopter pilot, a Croatian filmmaker, a beautiful award-winning journalist and a Slovenian climber joined with presidents and NATO in an international effort to mobilise a rescue. This dangerous, almost suicidal mission, conducted

on a direct order from Pakistan's President Musharraf, would become the most controversial mountain rescue in recent history. Debate raged over the unacceptable danger, the value of one climber's life, competition in the mountains and the death of adventure. The American climber Mark Twight, mentor of the Grivel climbing team, commented, 'Now every ill-prepared sad sack whose ability falls short of his Himalayan ambition can get on the radio, call for help, and expect the cavalry to save the day.'

But the debate had begun years earlier when this young Slovenian alpinist, Tomaž Humar, emerged on the world stage. As journalist Maja Roš wrote in Slovenia's national newspaper, *Delo*, Humar's character was never simple:

> *He is aware of his complicated personality but cannot hide his attraction to it: 'I do not allow anyone to know me completely!' Tomaž Humar, although an invalid with one leg shorter than the other and a partially fused heel bone … moves the boundaries of what is possible. A controversial alpinist, and these days a national hero … he is not fooled by peer pressure but is rather searching for his own path. He puts content above form, a man who wants to drink at the source and always values honour the most … So in spite of the guides and 'whisperers' who have been accompanying him in his life, he makes his own decisions. 'We were born alone, with a tear in the eye, and we will die alone with our tear.'*[1]

Tomaž Humar is a man in a vortex of motion, much of it controversial. His physical appearance is typical of an alpinist: he has a moderately small frame, although powerfully built, and is agile as a cat. The real impact of Tomaž's personality is felt only when he begins to speak, to gesticulate or to explode into action. When he turns his attention towards you the effect is dazzling – like a stage

light, blinding in its intensity. The Swiss helicopter rescue pilot Gerold Biner's impression of Tomaž is precise. 'He is like Luis de Funès [an energetic French comedian]. I called him Mister Ten Thousand Volts. What a muscle and energy pack,' Biner says, adding, 'He is phenomenal and very smart.' Tomaž's explosive character was not initially evident, for he grew up a quiet child, obedient, well behaved and a model student. But as he matured, he developed a personality destined to lead. He doesn't conform to existing standards; he creates them. His very existence evokes strong emotions: admiration, love, disdain and often jealousy. As the Italian alpinist Simone Moro says, 'Tomaž is a charismatic person: the more charismatic you are, the more enemies you will have.'

Tomaž is also unpredictable. He can be open and sociable, but at other times he is sullen and withdrawn – in his 'cave', as he calls it. And while many regard him as a clown figure, a lover of publicity, superficial and shallow, a few know him as a thoughtful and spiritual person. He laughs, saying, 'I am just predictable in my unpredictability.'

Despite the controversy surrounding this man, he is widely acknowledged as a superb climber and one who is comfortable with an exceptionally high level of risk. Although he is Slovenian, and experienced in the mountains of his native country, Tomaž's identity as an elite alpinist was shaped in a place where mountains are sacred and where risk and death are constant companions – in the Himalayas.

A great and complex range, the central Himalayan mountains are situated in Nepal, while the eastern peaks extend to the borders of Bhutan and Sikkim. The Nanga Parbat massif is the western corner pillar of the Himalayas in the Karakorum range, an isolated island of peaks rising up from the plains far below, surrounded by the Indus and Astore rivers. Nanga Parbat, or Nanga Parvata, means

‘naked mountain’. Its original name, Diamir, is perhaps more appropriate: ‘king of the mountains’.

The main summit of Nanga Parbat, at 8,126 metres/26,660 feet in height, is the ninth highest peak in the world and the second highest in Pakistan after K2. The mountain has three vast faces: the Rakhiot (Ra Kot) Face, the rocky Diamir Face, which transforms itself into massive ice fields near the actual peak, and, on the southern side of the mountain, the mighty Rupal Face. Reinhold Messner, the Italian mountaineering legend, who was the first to climb all fourteen of the 8,000-metre peaks, said, ‘Everyone who has ever stood at the foot of this face [4,500 metres] up above the “Tap Alpe”, studied it or flown over it cannot help but be amazed by its sheer size; it has become known as the highest rock and ice wall in the world!’

But Nanga Parbat boasts a grim history. It was in 1841 that a rock-slide from the mountain dammed the Indus river, creating a huge lake upstream. The floodwater that was released when the dam broke caused the river to rise 80 feet, sweeping away an entire Sikh army. Europeans first set eyes on Nanga Parbat shortly after this catastrophe, in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Schlagintweit brothers, from Munich, arrived in the Himalayas in 1854 and drew a panoramic view of the mountain, the first known picture of Nanga Parbat. Just three years later, one of the brothers was murdered in Kashgar. The curse of Nanga Parbat had begun.

Still, its allure proved compelling, and the mountain became a coveted climbing objective, especially for the Germans. Soon a relentless series of deaths on the peak led to it being dubbed ‘the killer mountain’. The tragedies began with a British expedition in 1895 led by Alfred F. Mummery. The British team reached almost 7,000 metres on the Diamir (West) Face, but Mummery and two Gurkha companions later died reconnoitring the Rakhiot Face. In 1934, a storm on the mountain swallowed four German

mountaineers and six Sherpas. Three years later an avalanche buried an entire base camp, killing 9 Sherpas and 7 climbers. In total, six German expeditions attempted the mountain in the 1930s, including the 1939 expedition, of which the famous Austrian climber Heinrich Harrer was a member. No expedition was successful in summitting the mountain, though climbers did reach 7,700 metres on the East Ridge via the Rakhiot Face. By the time the Austrian alpinist Hermann Buhl evenually reached the top in 1953, a total of 31 people had died trying. Buhl's final summit push was dramatic: he continued ascending alone after his companions had turned back, and after reaching the top, he was ultimately forced to spend the night standing upright, with no shelter from the elements at this high-altitude bivouac. Yet he managed to survive and safely descend the mountain, making climbing history as the first alpinist to climb an 8,000-metre peak without supplementary oxygen.

Following a second successful ascent by the Germans in 1962, Reinhold Messner and his brother Günther climbed the giant 4,600-metre Rupal Face in 1970. Members of a strong German team, the two Italians ascended a route on the left side of the magnificent wall. However, their great achievement ended badly. When they realised they would be unable to return via their ascent route, they instead headed down the Diamir Face, completing the first ever traverse of the mountain. But Günther was lost on the descent, presumably killed in an avalanche. For decades his body lay undiscovered, and the tragedy took on a life of its own. Reinhold Messner eventually became involved in a very public battle over the details of his brother's demise. It wasn't until 2005 that DNA testing of some small remains proved that Günther had indeed perished on the Diamir side of the mountain.

In 1985, an expedition led by Jerzy Kukuczka, the Polish alpinist who was the second to climb all fourteen of the

8,000-metre peaks, many of them in winter, managed another route on the Rupal Face, this time on the right side of the wall, up the South-East Pillar. It became known as the Polish–Mexican route, because the Mexican alpinist Carlos Carsolio was part of the team. When Tomaž Humar began his attempts, neither the Messner nor the Polish–Mexican route had been repeated. As climbers thronged the slopes of Everest, the Rupal Face retained its solitude, remaining a formidable objective.

Tomaž Humar first came to Pakistan in 2002, trekking in the Nanga Valley and the Hunza area. After a number of spectacular Himalayan climbs, and recently recovered from a crippling accident, he was eager for another challenge. The atmosphere in Pakistan was tense, for it was less than a year since the 2001 bombings in the United States, and the perpetrators, allegedly hiding out in the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, were not far away. Not surprisingly, there were very few foreigners in Pakistan at the time. Tomaž went alone to the base of the Rupal Face and waited there for three weeks. Although the weather awarded him only occasional glimpses of the mountain, what he saw excited him immensely.

The weeks at the base of the mountain were profoundly meaningful for Tomaž, and not only from a climbing perspective. This was an intensely spiritual period in his life, and his time spent alone below the massive face only strengthened his connection with the gods. Coming from a deeply religious family, Tomaž had evolved and modified his Catholic Christian beliefs into a universally inclusive form of spirituality that embraced the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism. He constantly searched for connections with an absolute, transcendent spiritual force, however it was named, striving to raise his consciousness to a level that would subsume all categories of his experiences, including his perception, cognition, intuition, instinct, will and emotion. The mountains were the source of his inspiration,

and there was very little that divided his feelings for the mountains and his sense of spirituality.

For Tomaž, the two were one. He would never contemplate a serious climb before consulting his spiritual advisers. The Rupal Face was no exception. In Islamabad he met a holy man who told him: ‘We wait for you. You will survive. Are you prepared?’ Tomaž believed that 80 per cent of alpinism was mental and spiritual, and that his ‘third eye’ vision and the openness of his mind to the language of the walls were critical. He credited his survival in the mountains to a variety of influences: his belief in simultaneous giving and receiving, positive thoughts, the existence of the soul of non-living matter, and love. ‘There are many paths, but only one essence – love.’ And to Tomaž, the essence was worth dying for.

Tomaž felt prepared for the Rupal Face, but his confidence was tempered with reality. He knew what the giant Himalayan faces had to offer: steep walls composed of a questionable mixture of rotten rock, brittle ice and unstable snow. He knew about Himalayan storms: horrendous assaults that arrived with little or no notice, with a force that could pin a climber down for days. He knew about avalanches: those deadly, ever-present companions on the steep Himalayan walls. He had seen it all before: on Ganesh, Bobaye, Ama Dablam, Nuptse, Dhaulagiri and other Himalayan giants. Yet still he was here, contemplating a new route, solo, on one of the greatest faces of them all. He was not naïve enough to assume success – or even survival. In fact, he knew the chances of dying on this route were rather high. If not, someone would surely already have climbed it.

By 2003, nobody had attempted the difficult and extremely dangerous central part of the wall. It was then that Tomaž returned to give it a serious try. His first step was to contact his good friend Nazir Sabir, the best-known Pakistani alpinist and land agent for foreign climbing

expeditions coming to Pakistan. It was Sabir who would manage the internal logistics. The Rupal Face, with its 4,600 metres of climbing, presented very complicated route-finding problems, extremely dangerous conditions and technically demanding climbing. A successful climb would undoubtedly demand a lot of experience, outstanding physical and mental conditioning, enormous courage and a certain amount of luck. ‘It can be climbed by one of a thousand’ was Messner’s assessment when they met to discuss the route.

But the weather conditions in West Pakistan in 2003 were extremely warm and the entire team was also suffering from illness. After four attempts at acclimatising on the Messner route, and in snow conditions that saw him wallowing up to his waist in deep, unconsolidated slush, Tomaž abandoned the climb, but only for the moment.

Tomaž wasn’t alone in his fascination with the Rupal Face. An American climber, Steve House, initially visited Nanga Parbat in 1990 with a Slovenian expedition to the Schell route. First climbed in 1976, the Schell route follows a spur that forms the left edge of the Rupal Face, and after its first ascent, the route became quite popular for a time. Shortly after leaving high school, House decided to live and study in Slovenia. While living in Maribor, he quickly became a regular fixture at the local climbing club, and soon made a number of deep friendships with Slovenian climbers. Many climbers thought that his apprenticeship with the hard-core Slovenians helped him become an elite mountaineer.

But in 1990 House didn’t feel as though he was a member of any elite. He failed to reach the summit, struck down by altitude sickness at Camp II. The experience humbled him: ‘It seemed like science fiction to me.’ Still, camped under that face for weeks, he began dreaming about something more ambitious than the Schell route, and by the time he left the mountain, he was completely

transfixed: 'Nanga was my first love. And like any first love I was innocent of what she would demand of me in time.'[2] What Nanga demanded was a rigorous training regime of increasingly difficult and committing climbs. This House did, chalking up an impressive list of futuristic, difficult ascents with some of the best alpinists in the world, often at lightning speed. 'I worked to make myself worthy of her. I would travel around the world many times in hopes of gaining her favour. I climbed many mountains for her.'[3] One of his climbing partners during this period was the outspoken and articulate American alpinist Mark Twight, generally regarded as one of the best in the world. While together on an alpine route in Alaska, Twight admitted to House that his career as an extreme alpinist was winding down and that House should be prepared to assume his mantle. Even though he was in fact doing just that, House's personality was not well suited to this kind of responsibility – or notoriety – and he appeared unprepared for the public pressure that would soon be forced upon him. House too became outspoken and blunt, sometimes alienating people with his puritanical criticism of others' climbing styles. Although his performance as an alpinist was undeniably at the highest level, some wondered why he didn't simply allow his actions to speak for themselves.

There probably could have been no greater contrast than that between Steve House and Tomaž Humar, for Tomaž seemed to come alive when in the public eye. He could certainly climb at the highest level, but it sometimes appeared that he could talk about it even better. Some described this as 'creative licence'; others simply called it lying, particularly when it came to claims of difficulty. Climbers and journalists began comparing the two men, blending their 'public' styles with their 'climbing' styles, inadvertently causing confusion by comparing two somewhat unrelated things. Tomaž often emerged the loser, for his public style invariably eroded his reputation as a

serious climber. One thing the two climbers did have in common was their position in the public eye. Both faced constant scrutiny and criticism, along with adulation.

House concentrated on climbing, and his dream of the Rupal Face did not fade. He had heard of Tomaž's plans, for his climbing activities were well publicized during this period. House had developed a close climbing and personal friendship with another Slovenian alpinist, Marko Prezelj, and it was Prezelj whom he first invited to join him. Prezelj declined, so instead it was the American climber Bruce Miller who accompanied House to the base of the Rupal Face in 2004.

House waited patiently for good conditions, and by the end of August he and Miller were ready to make an attempt on their chosen line. They climbed well and reached 7,500 metres, but House developed high-altitude sickness and Miller insisted that they descend, which they did via the Messner route. Despite the apparent failure, their attempt was praised worldwide as an exceptional achievement. House later publicly stated that the decision to descend was based more on Miller's fear than his own altitude problems, a statement that many climbers felt unfair and untrue. Miller recalled that House had admitted to him just how serious he was about this objective, saying that he was 'prepared to die' for the route. This was quite possibly true, for after Miller left base camp, and despite obvious signs of altitude illness, House made one last attempt on the face – solo. The dream had become an obsession.

Just as in the anticipation in 1953 to climb Nanga Parbat for the first time, there were now two climbers vying for a new route on the mountain best known for its tendency to kill people.

CHAPTER TWO

BASE CAMP

June 2005, Nanga Parbat, Rupal Face

BY JUNE OF 2005 Tomaž Humar was back. His goal remained the same – to climb, solo, a new route on the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat. With him on the expedition was an eclectic group of people, subject of much intrigue to the public. Aleš Koželj was an exceptionally talented 30-year-old Slovenian climber from Tomaž's home town, Kamnik, and they had climbed and trained together for the previous two years. Extremely reserved and almost painfully shy, Aleš already had an impressive climbing résumé, with expeditions to Janak in 2002, Aconcagua in 2003 and Cholatse in 2005, the last two of which he climbed with Tomaž. Although widely regarded as one of Slovenia's most promising Himalayan climbers, Aleš was not sure if he would climb the entire Rupal Face with Tomaž. But they definitely planned to acclimatize together when they would attempt to adjust their bodies to survive the debilitating effects of extremely high altitude.

Also at base camp was Tomaž's frequent expedition companion and friend, the Croatian climber and cameraman Stipe Božić. Stipe was Croatia's most successful Himalayan alpinist, having climbed the three highest mountains in the world: Everest, K2 and Kangchenjunga. He had been Tomaž's co-leader on several

previous Himalayan climbs. Their personalities contrasted greatly, and yet the partnership flourished. Stipe readily accepted Tomaž's more volatile and explosive disposition, and Tomaž, in turn, appreciated Stipe's generous spirit, for he never appeared jealous of Tomaž's audacious climbs. 'When he sees me climbing he is happy,' Tomaž said. Stipe described their friendship as close, and said he felt responsible for providing Tomaž with essential organisational support: 'I believe in his ideas and I have found someone who can extend my own dreams.' Stipe was experienced, mature, competent and reliable – exactly what Tomaž needed to balance his own mercurial genius.

Another important member of the team was Anda Perdan, a soft-spoken Slovenian doctor from Kranj, a city near Tomaž's home. With her slender figure, short-cropped hair and conservative demeanour, Anda gave the impression of a modest, cerebral and very self-contained woman. In fact, she was an exceptional doctor with an innate understanding of expedition life and its particular challenges, for she had accompanied Tomaž on five previous Himalayan expeditions. Perhaps more importantly, it was Anda who had nursed Tomaž back to life after a near-fatal injury five years before. She knew his body well.

Possibly the most unusual member of the team was Nataša Pergar, a biotherapist whose speciality was auras. Author of *Vidne in nevidne poti* (*Visible and Invisible Ways*), Nataša was particularly interested in the auras of climbers as they attempted difficult climbs, and she had been monitoring and interpreting Tomaž's energies for four years. In fact, she had become a kind of climbing psychic for him, helping him ask himself the right questions – the equivalent of a personal trainer. A wild-looking creature with a head of unruly auburn hair, she added an element of pizzazz to base camp. Her assignment was to observe Nanga Parbat closely, as well as to advise Tomaž on auspicious dates, hours and signs. As he explained, 'Every