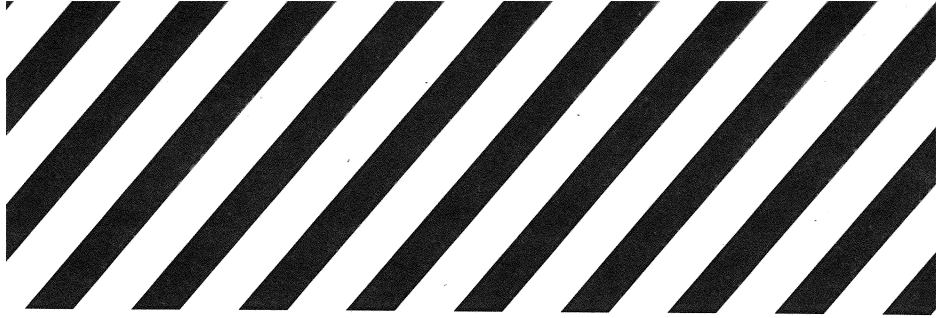


The background of the cover is a dramatic illustration of a river canyon. The canyon walls are steep and colored in shades of red, orange, and brown, suggesting a desert environment. The sky is filled with soft, white and yellow clouds. In the foreground, a river flows rapidly, creating large, white, swirling rapids. Two people are in a black inflatable raft, navigating the rapids. The person in the front is a man with dark hair, wearing a red life vest and a white shirt, holding a red paddle. The person in the back is a woman with dark hair, wearing a yellow life vest and a white shirt, also holding a paddle. In the distance, another smaller raft with two people is visible, also navigating the rapids. The overall mood is adventurous and thrilling.

DOWNRIVER

A NOVEL BY
WILL HOBBS

AUTHOR OF *BEARSTONE*



DOWNRIVER

WILL HOBBS

ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

TO DAVID BROWER,

*who led the fight in the 1960s that saved the
Grand Canyon from dams and reservoirs in
Marble Canyon and Lower Granite Gorge*

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“Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it.
The ages have been at work on it, and man can
only mar it. What you can do is keep it for your
children, your children’s children, and all who
come after you, as one of the great sights which
every American if he can travel at all should see.”

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT,
on his visit to the Grand Canyon, May 6, 1903

1 //

I stumbled on a rock that was barely sticking up, my legs were that tired. Flailing for balance, with the pack working against me, I slipped in the mud and almost went down. I still couldn't believe this was really happening. I couldn't believe my dad had done this to me.

For five days Al had been leading us into the most rugged corners of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado, coaxing and pushing us over the passes and into the peaks, through good weather and bad weather, mostly through bone-freezing rain and sleet. "October in the mountains," Al said with a grin. "You live a whole lot closer to the edge."

The going was always either straight up or straight down—we rarely followed trails. There were eight of us, four guys and four girls including me, all serving nine weeks in this outdoor education school from hell. Al called his program Discovery Unlimited, but we called it Hoods in the Woods, the name we inherited from the previous waves of misfits who'd come through the place.

Al kept us marching all day under heavy packs, grinding us down in preparation for . . . for what? He would never say when you asked him. He'd only reply with a wink or a knowing grin. Hike, freeze, starve, break out the ropes and carabiners and risk your life every day—for what?

"Just a mile till camp, guys," Al said. "Think about a sunny day."

I couldn't. I could see nothing but the frightening dark tunnel that was my future. I saw no images there, no hopes, only blackness. All my happy images lay in the past, all the happy scenes with my dad when it was just the two of us. I tried to dwell on the good times as I walked, but those pictures, those voices, only intensified my feeling of loss and left me staring once again into that black tunnel.

"How's it going?" Suddenly Troy was walking at my side.

"Okay, I guess."

"You don't look so happy."

"I'm ready to be in camp. When Al says a mile, you know it's two or three."

"It's part of his charm."

We jumped a little creek and started up a steep slope. Soon neither of us had enough breath to speak, but thinking about Troy took my mind off me. He seemed much older than the rest of us, just from the way he carried himself. It was like he was sizing up this whole situation from the outside. I'd been wondering if he was going to be friendly, and now it seemed he was.

Camp at last. I found a dry spot under a tree and eased my back against its trunk. Troy sought me out and sat cross-legged, up close. "Does the climbing scare you, Jessie?" He was looking at me with the calmest and clearest blue eyes I'd ever seen.

"Yes," I allowed, looking away.

"I thought so." He said it knowingly, in a way that promised help. When I looked back to his eyes, they kind of locked onto mine and wouldn't let go. Apparently he never needed to blink, and he wasn't going to look away. His eyes seemed to be challenging me to . . . to what?

"I'm doing okay so far. . . ."

His eyes let me go. For now, I thought. I was fascinated by him. Someone was yelling that he was supposed to be one of the cooks. Troy reluctantly unwound his long legs and said, "Catch ya later."

We drew in close to the campfire that night, putting off as always the moment when we'd have to get into our freezing bags and face the shivering hours of the night. We knew Al would make his speech about the next day and of course he did, as he poked the fire. "We've got the climbing skills down now, guys—it's time for a true test. After that we'll head back to base camp for hot showers, real food, and our beds."

I pictured the little log cabin that I shared with Star, and how good it would be to stoke the potbellied stove until the stovepipe turned red. So what was this big test going to be?

"Tomorrow," Al announced, "you're going to climb Storm King Peak, elevation thirteen thousand, seven hundred fifty-two feet. And it's no puppy. You'll know you've accomplished something. We'll draw straws this evening for climbing partners. Troy, you're going to be the navigator—you haven't led yet."

"Nothin' against Troy," Rita said in her nasal, right-at-you New York accent, "but if this Storm King is such a big deal, why not let Freddy lead? We know *he's* good at it."

I glanced over at Freddy. The campfire light flickering on his deep brown skin, black eyes, and shaggy black hair revealed, as usual, nothing in the way of response. True, I thought, he's capable, but he's practically mute. I'd much rather follow Troy. I had reason to believe that Troy cared whether I lived or died.

Al was shaking his head emphatically as he spread the

topographic map out on the ground. "Troy will do just fine. He's your leader for the climb. Star, you're shivering—come into the light and warm yourself up. Folks, everybody needs to develop these skills, every one of you. Sometimes there isn't going to be anybody else around."

"But we travel in a pack," Adam pointed out with his trademark mischievous grin. Our redhead loved nothing better than sidetracking a conversation. "So whoever's going to lead can study the map and the rest of us followers can go to bed."

"Seconded," said Pug, the Big Fella, stretching one giant leg out toward the fire and nudging a piece of wood into its center.

Al scratched behind an ear, amid the wiry gray hair that stuck out beneath his wool cap. He was rocking slightly on his haunches; he preferred to squat rather than pull up a log or a rock. He reminded me in his body language of an aborigine or a tribesman from the Amazon, right out of one of the slide shows my dad used in his anthropology classes. "Sometimes," Al said slowly, "sometimes self-reliance is the key to survival, but other times cooperation is. Let's everybody study this map, and then tomorrow, on the mountain, we'll pool our knowledge. Whenever somebody's wondering if you're doing the right thing, bring it up with Troy."

"What if the right thing, the way we figure it, would be to go into Silverton for burgers?" suggested Adam.

Everyone had a smile or a laugh, including Al. With Adam, there was never anything at stake. He was so easy.

I could sense Heather getting ready to object, and I braced myself for her voice, which I found jarring and oddly mismatched with her broad shoulders. When she thought

something was unfair, which was most of the time, her voice rose even higher than its usual pitch and her speech came out squeaking and gasping, because she couldn't talk and breathe at the same time when she was upset. "What I don't get is, we can all cooperate on the climb, right, except for you, Al. You won't help us at all, right?"

"That's what this is all about, Heather—you guys have the skills now. You make the decisions, you make the choices, you live by the consequences. You'll be on your own. I'll just tag along for the scenery."

Troy, I noticed, was attending to all this. Watching, listening, but withholding comment. Everybody was looking to him, including Al. Troy was a heavy, and everybody knew it. We were all wondering when he'd take Al on, but he was holding back.

When Heather saw that Troy wasn't going to respond, she said in that voice like an abused violin string, "You say we get to make the decisions, but really we're just puppets, and you're manipulating us. I don't like your rules, Al. I can't accept that you get to make them all up. Who gave you that right?"

That's telling him, I thought. That's exactly how I feel. This guy reminds me of my dad.

"Right on, sister!" thundered Pug, who was only half listening, his attention focused as usual on his biceps. Despite the cold, he was wearing a T-shirt cut off at the shoulders, and was admiring the firelight's reflection on his muscles. Without thinking about it, he proceeded to punch Troy playfully in the arm. Maybe it was Pug's way of showing gratitude to his buddy for bestowing his nickname, the Big Fella.

"Why don't you blow your whistle, Heather?" suggested

Adam with his wide ironic grin. "Blow your whistle, loud and clear."

When you blew your whistle it meant you wanted out, it meant you were going home. I'd been wondering all week when somebody was going to do it. I'd sure thought about it, about getting out of this place. But I figured out why I hadn't done it: Aside from not wanting to be first, I would have had to face what I'd be going back to. Was there "home" back there for any of us?

I could only answer for myself. As for the others, their lives were mysteries. We were as far apart as galaxies in the night sky. Star and I shared a cabin back at base camp, yet I had little sense of what kept her going. She seemed so frail, I'd have guessed she'd be the first to blow her whistle. If the last week had been torture for me, what must it have been for her?

Some stayed up into the night, talking by the firelight—Heather, Rita, Adam, and Pug—and the rest of us either listened without comment or tuned out. Star was in a trancelike state, and I was far away in my mind, reliving an awful day less than two weeks past that was a wound I was sure would never stop bleeding. I was back in my bedroom upstairs in my house, the same bedroom that was mine even before my mother died back when I was five, and there was only an hour to go before Dad said we had to leave for the airport. I was looking at all my kid stuff, clutching my timeworn teddy that I'd named Pistachio for no particular reason when I was little. I was trying to lose myself in the old photographs on the walls. Only one photo of my mom, lots of me, but mostly pictures of me and my dad together, at Disneyland with Goofy, on horseback in the mountains, at the beach, all over.

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I stood by my bed, holding on for dear life to the brass rails and looking out the dormer onto the street. I thought of how many times I'd planned to escape by way of the window out onto the limbs of the elm tree, but instead slipped out the kitchen door because it was so much easier and because Dad wasn't catching on anyway. Now, within an hour, I'd be leaving my home forever, and Dad would pack everything up in boxes, including all my things in this room, and he would move on with his life to the canyon home he'd designed with his girlfriend, and this life I'd known would all be swept away.

As for me, he was sending me away. No matter how much he denied it, that's what he was doing, and I threw it back in his face a hundred times. He just wanted to believe the therapist, who told him this was what I needed—to discover myself, learn my limits, all that psych talk. It just made him feel better about getting rid of me. More time for him and Madeline.

"It's only nine weeks, Jessie," he said. "And it's not like you don't love the mountains. You like hiking, remember?"

"Hiking?" I could hardly believe he was still trying to sell me this propaganda. "This is a program for juvenile delinquents, Dad. It's not summer camp."

"There'll be different kinds of kids there, Jessie. This program is one of the best in the country. Your school counselor, your therapist, we all think it'll help you find yourself, rediscover the wonderful girl you used to be, help you grow up. I know growing up is hard, I remember. . . ."

"This is all Madeline's idea, isn't it, Dad? Admit it. You know she's friends with my counselor at the high school."

We'd had this argument so many times before, I knew which lines came next.

"That's not true. Madeline cares about you too. We're worried about your safety, Jessie; we don't want you to get hurt, or to hurt someone else."

You'd think no one had ever rolled a car before. It was an accident, one that could have happened to anyone. And not just to a kid, either. The police had blown it all out of proportion. We weren't drunk. And we were way out in the country, where there shouldn't have been any other cars.

"You're worried about what people will think of you at the university because your daughter is hanging around with 'bad company.' That's it and you know it. The big professor. Just because my friends look different—you think they're not good enough for me."

"Jessie, there's a lot you don't know about those guys. I see them on campus, and I know more about them than you do. They're too old for you, honey—you're just a sophomore in high school."

"I was a sophomore in high school—I told you I'm not going back. I hate that place."

"Jessie, what can I do? You tell me. You don't come home, you've been in two car accidents, and you're not even old enough to have your driver's license yet. The school calls constantly, you aren't in classes. And this is just the first month of school—last year you did so well. I don't understand, Jessie, and you're scaring me. I'm afraid of what you'll do next."

In a perverse way, I liked that part, about how I was scaring him. I knew I was, and it went straight to my head to know

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what I could do to him. The bitter things I'd said over the past months were nothing compared to what I said in our last week. When I heard myself saying, "I hate you," I swallowed hard, but I never took it back. I wanted him to suffer, and I knew him well enough to know that's exactly what he was doing.

Then the time arrived. I heard my dad call from downstairs, "It's time to go, Jessie," and then I burst into tears, desperate to hold on to everything I was losing. I would never stand in this room again, never sleep in this bed again, never look out these windows again. I had a picture of my dad and me in my hands; I threw it down onto the hardwood floor and the glass broke with a finality that frightened me and seemed to push me over the edge. Every one of those pictures of the two of us, I threw them down onto the floor, and every time it made things worse. I was breaking my own heart over and over again.

Suitcases in hand, I walked down the stairs into the house that was holding its breath. My eyes were all cried out. My cat was at the bottom of the stairs at the front door, eyes darting from me to the door and back, frightened and wanting out. Dad was sitting there on the couch, his heart all broken, and I said into the silence as coldly as I could, "Let's go."

The awful silence captured every moment as the familiar streets and neighborhoods disappeared behind us. For my part, I was fighting in the most hurtful way I could think of, by feeding the silence and making it grow and grow. I knew how badly my dad was hurting. There was nothing he could say. He needed to hear a word of understanding, a word of forgiveness from me, but there was no way I was going to provide it.

As we got out of the car at the airport parking lot, my dad

tried again. "Al—the guy that runs the program—believes that our culture lacks a ritual by which young people can decisively achieve adulthood, and that's why a lot of us never seem to grow up. It makes a lot of—"

"Save it for your graduate students," I said.

Inside we were striding briskly down the concourse. I looked straight ahead, down into that black tunnel that was my future. Again we couldn't speak, until we reached the door that opened out onto the runway where the little "flying culvert" was waiting, when my dad hugged me and cried, and said, "Jessie, I love you." I forced myself to look at him, and said, "Yeah, well, give my regards to Madeline," and I broke away from his grasp and walked out to the commuter plane without looking back.

2 //

The night before Storm King, I got no rest. I was whirling and tumbling inside the car with the world spinning out of control all around. I woke up and took a drink from the water bottle between Star and me. It was pitch dark, still the middle of the night. When I got back to sleep, I was climbing a mountain with Troy and some people who weren't even in our group. I kept saying that we should turn back, we were late for something, but Troy wouldn't. Then I slipped, and was hanging from his grasp for the longest time, but then he let go and I was falling, falling, falling.

Thrashing around in the tent, I woke Star. "Are you okay?" she was asking.

"I'm okay," I said, barely coming to. "Just fell off a mountain, that's all."

"That's not good, Jessie."

"Well, I guess not, seeing as how we're going to be climbing a peak with ropes and all that stuff in a few hours."

"Imaging can make things happen," she whispered. "You have to work on your images."

"It's not like I can control my dreams, Star. I've had falling dreams since I was little."

What I didn't tell her was, they started right after my mother died. I'd told her enough.

Unable to get back to sleep, I lay shivering, and wondering

if my dad had any idea that I still get those dreams. I told myself that the nightmare had nothing at all to do with actually falling, or with mountain climbing. Skiing doesn't scare me, flying doesn't either. Mountain climbing, I told myself, I can do that if I have to. If *Star*, for crying out loud, if *Star* can do it, then I can too.

At breakfast I drew Freddy for my climbing partner. I was relieved. As withdrawn as he was, he wasn't an exciting companion, but he was a capable climber, probably the best among us.

The eight of us, with Al trailing, set out from the trees at dawn, trying to make as much time as we could before the weather turned bad, which it tended to do every day around noon. Troy, our navigator for the day, led the way, along with Heather, his climbing partner.

When we cleared the trees, we couldn't see the peak. A high ridge, serrated and imposing, blocked our view. Troy started up the ridge, making good time. He didn't stop to look at his map and he didn't ask anyone for a second opinion. I wondered if we should be "conferencing," the way Al wanted us to, but like Troy, I was anxious to get on with it before the weather turned bad. Already the clouds were boiling up out of the blue skies.

I walked three steps behind Freddy. I felt awkward with him. Freddy was not exactly an artist when it came to conversation. Anyway he seemed content to ignore me. I had the feeling he was something of a wildman, and I was a little afraid of him, like maybe he had a violent streak and had committed some awful crime. He was the only guy, I noticed, that the Big Fella wouldn't wrestle with and sit on whenever he wanted to play or show dominance or whatever it was. Freddy had some kind of

signal that said "Don't touch," and even Pug, the sensitive soul that he was, could pick up on it.

Freddy slowed a bit, and I thought for a moment that he wasn't sure if we were going the right way, but he said nothing. I stopped and caught my breath. Freddy sniffed the wind, like an animal. He did that often. His jet-black eyes would focus, never on the people, but on the clouds and the peaks, on little gray birds flitting around, on rocks and dirt and trickling water. Someone said Freddy was from New Mexico. When Freddy did speak, it was in a musical Spanish accent. Like Pug, he never flirted with the girls, but unlike Pug, he didn't joke around with the guys either. Freddy was a loner.

As I caught my breath, I watched Troy's bright shock of blond hair bobbing as he chattered with Heather. I wondered what they were talking about.

I was enjoying the walking, happy to have left my enormous backpack in the trees and feeling weightless by comparison, with only my daypack on my back, even if the slope was getting steep and the air thinning by the moment. We were somewhere around thirteen thousand feet, heading for close to fourteen. Al bounded alongside us, appearing out of nowhere with a huge grin plastered across his face and a cheerful "Great day, isn't it!" He wasn't even breathing hard. He's in his midforties, like my dad, and strong and lean as a whip. Even his gray hair is like that, I thought, springing out like steel wool from under his cap and jumping out of his nostrils and ears. There were moments when you almost wondered if you liked him, but those were the rare moments he wasn't killing you, and they passed quickly.

"Say, look at this," Al said, and swooped to pick up a bit of

bone, something I would never have had the energy to notice while climbing at thirteen thousand feet. "Power object!" he proclaimed.

Freddy, looking vaguely interested, slowed up as Al held it out for us to look at. "Bird bone—hollow. What do you think, Jessie? You're a Colorado girl, from Boulder and all."

"I'm too winded to even speak," I managed. "How am I going to think?"

"Freddy?"

My climbing partner shrugged.

"Maybe a bit of Mr. Raven's wing, chewed by Mr. Coyote," Al theorized. He kept looking at Freddy as if Freddy should really know. Then he took the leather pouch that hung from around his neck, opened it, and dropped the bone fragment in among the rest of his "power objects," whatever they might be. I could never tell if Al was as weird as he sounded, but I guessed that he was. He was always grinning. I had my own images of Vietnam vets, maybe from seeing too many movies, but I knew I didn't trust him. I didn't buy his premise that taking kids out in the mountains and making them suffer will fix what ails them. And to live the way he did, year in and year out, he had to be a madman. I sure wasn't going to respect him for it. So I was always off balance with him.

I looked around for Star and Adam, but they were well behind. Adam would have milked some comedy out of the "power object."

It wasn't time for fun, it was time for technical climbing. We'd run out of walkable ground. Al dropped back to take up the rear on our "true test" and leave us to our own devices. As

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Freddy took his coil of rope off his shoulder, Troy waved us around him and Heather. The clouds were turning dark and the wind was suddenly blowing hard. I could see the uncertainty in Heather's body language even though she avoided my eyes. Words rarely failed her, but on this occasion she didn't say anything. Her partner motioned toward the face of the looming peak and said, "You lead, Freddy. Find us a route."

I watched Troy as he said it. It was a tough admission for him. He was such a natural leader and such an able person physically. It was a defeat, having led all the way from camp, to have to follow now. I glanced to Freddy, to see how he would take it. He shrugged.

We broke out our nylon climbing harnesses and rigged them snug. Mine dug into my crotch a little. I hated it. I thought about how my father had never done any technical climbing in his life and yet had blithely shipped me off to Hoods in the Woods, knowing that climbing was a lot of what they did. Carefully I secured the rope to my harness. "Check my knot for me, would you, Freddy?"

He looked me all over. "Okay," he grunted.

Frightened, I adjusted my helmet with the strap under my chin, and looked to Troy for reassurance. My fear had boiled up out of nowhere like the clouds, and I could taste it. Troy's eyes skittered away for once. He bent over and busied himself getting his rain gear and his helmet out of his daypack.

Oh well, I thought, here goes nothing. I can't believe that was my attitude, given my fear and my nightmares, but I'd always liked to push myself. Driving too fast, that goes without saying. Wanting to hang out with older guys. I'd wear all white,

I'd wear all black, I'd wear my hair long, cut it off short, put a purple streak in it just for fun. I wasn't afraid of what people would think. My dad liked to say it was a natural stage that he had gone through too. "Young people tend to see everything in extremes, not only in our society and not just in modern times—they always did." Anthropologists talk like that. He's studied cultures all over the world, but mostly in books. He hasn't done any fieldwork in his beloved Amazon since my mother died.

"You think in extremes, Jessie," he liked to tell me. "Everything's either wonderful or it's 'blown.'"

Freddy led the way, climbing easily if not gracefully, pausing here and there to hammer pitons into the rock. His stocky body seemed to hug the earth naturally. I'm Freddy's height, but I'm hollow-boned like Al's raven and naturally defiant of gravity. I have a long-distance runner's stride, I've always been able to leap and jump, and I've always liked skiing because it set me free, left me attached only marginally to the ground. Now as we started across the face of this peak, the depths were pulling powerfully at me from below, and I felt my strengths turning to weaknesses.

"Don't look down," Freddy cautioned from above me. His warning came too late. That's exactly what I'd just done, glanced at the drop. It had to be a thousand feet. I'd seen the sharp boulders jutting at crazy angles at the bottom of Storm King Peak's north face, and they seemed to be rushing up to meet me.

"Jessie, don't look down."

Too late. My stomach was in free fall already, and I was so

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dizzy I thought I might black out. Suddenly lightning broke from the blue-black sky and thunder exploded almost instantaneously, with all the force of a sonic boom.

I was aware of gasps and swearing from the rest of them. I knew I hadn't been hit by the lightning, but all the same the sheer terror of the moment chased the strength from every fiber in me, and I was paralyzed.

I glanced up. There was Freddy, with his shaggy black hair blowing in the wind, his face all lit up with a feral sort of joy born of the wild moment. Whoever he was, my life was now tied to his, and our eyes were locked together. He said, "You can do it, Jessie. Move your right foot to that little spot over there, and your right hand to that finger hold."

"I can't," I whimpered.

From behind me and below I heard Rita, the self-proclaimed Thief of Brooklyn, holler the loudest stage whisper I'd heard in my life. "Jessie's got that 'sewing machine leg' Al talked about."

It was true. I was so afraid, the nerves in my right leg were buzzing and the leg was twitching up and down.

"Take a few deep breaths," encouraged Al. I glanced down and back toward the ridge, and saw an impression of his face, wide-eyed under his helmet.

"Look at that leg shake!" I heard Pug yell from below. He obviously loved the spectacle of the jumping leg but had no idea it was connected to my feelings.

"Pug," Freddy called down, "keep your mouth shut."

Pug yelled something back at Freddy. I could feel the spasms in my leg—I didn't need to look. What was worse, numbness was spreading through the rest of my body.

"Everyone cool it except Freddy," ruled Al. "He's her climbing partner." I looked back and below, the way I had come, looking for Troy. He was the only one I could trust. I was hugely relieved to see him appear behind Pug and Star. "Troy . . .," I said desperately, "I'm in trouble. Help me!"

"Let me catch my breath," Troy answered.

I looked up at Freddy, saw him grinning. His teeth flashed whiter than white against his dark skin and jet-black hair. Lightning snapped again, and the wind began to blow hard. "Whistle through your teeth and spit," Freddy offered. "That's what my father always used to say."

Great. That really reassured me. I'm about to black out, about to fall off a mountain, and my only hope is this sawed-off criminal wildman who wants to make some kind of a joke.

"I can't whistle," I muttered. I didn't know if I was more terrified or angry. None of this would be happening, I thought, I wouldn't even be here . . . if it weren't for Madeline. For nine years it had been just me and my father, and then *she* marched into his life and ruined everything.

I was standing in what should have been a temporary spot, a little ledge wide enough for one foot, but both of mine had ended up there. I couldn't go forward and I couldn't go back. My center of gravity was out beyond the ledge and above that bottomless drop. Only my fingers held me, and the longer I clung to the rocks, the weaker they'd become. Now they'd gone numb, buzzing and weak and about to let go. I felt as helpless as when my mother died. Daddy, I thought, your Sugar Plum is about to fall.

I looked for Al once more and found his startled face. His

expression confirmed my conviction that I couldn't hold on any longer. "Troy!" I pleaded. There was no response. Why wasn't he doing anything?

"Gotta make your move, Jessie," Freddy urged. The encouragement did a poor job of masking his alarm.

"I can't," I cried. I had no strength. "It's a discovery program," I heard my father saying. "Jessie, you need to find yourself."

As the clouds dropped and boiled around us, I felt the eeriest sensation: My hair stood out from my head and all of my body tingled with electricity. A moment later lightning struck again and thunder shook the mountain. The rain broke, and the storm center hurled violent wind gusts and sheets of hail against the peak.

"Go for it, Jessie!" ordered Al's voice, and finally I did, with no confidence at all. I made a lunge to the right, with my hands and a leg, and tried to grab hold of something, anything. For a moment my fingers scraped and clawed, my feet dug for a hold, and then I was falling.

Suddenly I was caught up and spun end-over-end somehow, with my head down and my legs above me. My helmet banged against the wall and I was looking straight down its dizzying slick face.

"I got you!" Freddy yelled.

The climbing harness around my hips and between my legs dug in painfully. My life was in Freddy's hands; he was belaying me with the rope passed behind the small of his back, mustering whatever strength he could in his arms and shoulders, back, and legs. If he let go, maybe the piton anchoring the rope would hold, maybe it wouldn't.

"Hang on!" yelled Al. "Hang on, Freddy! I'm coming around!"

I heard the others react, the ones waiting behind and below. They were frightened and thrilled at the same time, as if they were witnessing a spectacular auto accident. "Hold her! Hang on, Jessie!" Star called.

"No way," Pug said. "He's not going to make it in time."

"Don't say it," I heard Star plead. "You'll make it happen."

Something was keeping Al. Star told me afterwards that he was having all kinds of trouble climbing above and past me, by another route, to Freddy's position.

My hands reached out and fended my body off the cliff. "Freddy!" I screamed, as I freed my face from the wall. "Freddy!"

"I got you!" he hollered. "I got you!" His voice came out kind of strangled. I knew he was barely managing to hang on to me when I heard that.

All the blood had rushed to my head. I was dangling there forever. It was taking too impossibly long. The way everyone was shouting, I knew Freddy must be losing his grip. Any moment now, he'd have to drop me. I was so bewildered. *Was I going to die?*

Star told me afterwards, Freddy was a sight to see. He's not that big, but he has wide shoulders and narrow hips, and all the muscles in his arms and neck were standing out like whipcord. She said she's never seen that kind of determination in her whole life. It did take forever, she said, but somehow Freddy held on, until finally Al scrambled down next to him. The two of them hauled me up enough so that I could right myself and work my way back across the ledge to Troy's grasp and safety.

An hour later the clouds opened and the sun shone on

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Storm King Peak. We were down below, having bailed out. No one—not even Al—brought up going for the peak after what had happened. So we'd failed what was supposed to have been the big event of the first stage of Discovery Unlimited.

The rest were having a raging fight as they were eating lunch by the sign at the base of the mountain, the one that says,

WARNING:

STORM KING PEAK IS INFAMOUS
FOR ITS EXTREME WEATHER,
EXPOSURE, AND ROTTEN ROCK.

THREE HAVE DIED HERE.

THINK BEFORE YOU ADD

YOUR NAME TO THE LIST.

People were yelling about how it all happened and what we should have done. Rita was born with a set of lungs, and she was exercising them in spades. A couple of octaves higher, Heather played her screeching violin for all it was worth, as if she could shred Al with her voice alone, while Pug thundered curses and bristled back and forth like a grizzly bear uncertain whether it was bluffing or charging. But most of all there was Troy. I'd never heard his voice raised before, and was he angry. "What do you *mean* having us climb that lousy mountain? Man, look at the sign! Three people died on Storm King! You coulda got Jessie killed, idiot!"

"You picked the route, Troy. And it wasn't the one we planned last night."

I was confused. So were the rest—they fell silent.

"Whaddaya mean?" Pug demanded.

"The map, Troy. I guess you chose not to use it. That was a harder route than the one we discussed."

Such a volley of curses I've never heard in my life.

"How come you didn't say something?" Pug asked.

"Troy was the navigator today. You all know the rules."

"I can't believe it!" Rita shouted, beside herself. I looked over there and saw her right in Troy's face. "I can't believe him and I can't believe you! You took us up the wrong way! We coulda all been killed. Why didn't you look at your map, Troy?"

Troy walked off. I couldn't blame Troy. Nobody else had helped him out. It was Al I was angry with, for risking my life just because of his stupid rules, angry at my dad for letting him do it, and hating Madeline. I went over what I was going to tell my dad as soon as I got to a telephone. "Get me out of here," I rehearsed through clenched teeth. "Get me out of here!"

With a start I looked up and saw that Freddy had sought me out. I was jumpy. What did he want?

He didn't say anything at first. He sat down on a rock and looked out across the meadow, turned red and gold with the hard frosts of early October. He was watching a pika, a little animal like a ball of fur, scurry from rock to rock with a bunch of grass in its mouth. "We call 'em rock rabbits," he said finally.

I didn't say anything. I wished he would leave me alone. Obviously he thought he was entitled to hit on me because he'd saved my life.

"You know what he's doing with that grass?" Freddy asked in his musical accent.

"No, I don't know what he's doing with that grass," I said flatly.

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He looked at me like maybe he would leave, but he explained, "They don't hibernate—they run around all winter under the snow. They have to have something to eat, so they cut grass and dry it all summer, and take it underground. They're hay farmers."

"I never heard that before," I said sarcastically. "Now if I say 'thank you,' will you leave me alone?"

He was really embarrassed. He stood up quickly. "I just wanted to—oh, forget it."

He left. And I felt like a complete heel.

Troy and I walked together on the long hike from Storm King back to base camp. We lagged behind the others so we could talk. I was feeling defeated, pretty sorry for myself. "I don't know what to do," I told Troy. "I want to call up my father and scream at him, but if he lets me go home, you can bet it'll be on his terms."

"Forget about your dad for a while," he suggested. "The mountain-climbing part is over, anyway, and we're heading for the desert. I'm really looking forward to the river-running, myself. I love water."

Being with him was so soothing. I asked, "What kind of water stuff do you like?" I wanted to learn all about him.

"Are you ready for this?" he said with the most engaging smile. He was handsome, sure enough, with his blue eyes, sun-bleached blond hair, and slim build. Usually he seemed so much older and more serious, but at the moment he was positively boyish, and I found it irresistible.

"What is it? It can't be that weird. I'll bet you don't sell aquariums door-to-door."

"Surfing."

"Why didn't I think of it?" I laughed. "You're blond, you're tan. . . ."

"And I practically grew up on the beach, in San Diego. I love moving water, Jessie. I've always thought I'd like white-water

rafting. . . . There was a guy I knew at the beach, an older guy, best surfer I ever met—he always talked about rivers being the ultimate. He used to talk about the rapids in the Grand Canyon all the time.”

“So does Al,” I said, “but we aren’t going to the Grand Canyon. We’re just going to the San Juan River, and it’s supposed to be pretty flat.”

“Gotta start somewhere, and it’ll be warm out there, Jessie. It’s in the desert.”

“That’s what Al keeps saying.”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“Yes?”

He reached out and touched my cheek. “Don’t blow that whistle. I don’t want you to leave.”

I laughed. “I would hate to be the first one.”

“Don’t be afraid, Jessie. There’s nothing like new experiences in life. What are you, sixteen?”

“Almost.”

He shrugged. “In a lot of countries you’re grown up when you’re thirteen. Your father’s trying to psych you out so he can stay in control. He wants to put you through something, tame you down, so you’ll play by his rules.”

“Well, it’s all down the tubes now.”

Troy let it drop. Troy was the most sensitive guy I’d ever met. He watched and he listened much more than he talked. His eyes did the talking. *Trust me* was what they said.

I scrambled to bring the conversation back to life. “You seem awfully independent. Were you raised that way?”

“I guess you could say that. My parents are pretty much on

their own trip—they live in Europe, do a lot of traveling. I have a couple of sisters, but they're a lot older than I am. I hardly know them, really. I guess I was kind of an afterthought—or an accident, more likely. I lived with my grandparents when I was a kid, and then got sent to different boarding schools in the East."

"Sounds like it must have been pretty hard on you. . . ."

He shrugged. "There was good and bad, I guess, but I came out my own person."

He had such an easy way of talking, like his way of moving. Natural grace. A laid-back, unconceited self-confidence. "I admire your independence," I told him.

"Like the song says, 'the past is just a good-bye.'"

"I feel so humiliated about what happened back on the mountain. I was absolutely terrified. That's never happened to me before in my life."

"Forget it," he said easily. "Just another experience. You move on."

"Because of me, nobody got to the top."

"I thought I was the one who got to feel guilty about that, remember? Picked the wrong route?"

"No, it was my fault. I just panicked. Everybody has been good about not saying so, but we all know it would've felt great to be standing on the very top of that mountain."

Troy was pained. "That's exactly what Al would like you to think. I can't believe the guy's judgment. He should never have put you or the rest of us in that situation. We don't have the experience."

"But that's what outdoor schools do."

"You know what I think? It's all a power trip. They create this situation where they can turn you into putty. They scare you to death and then they save you. I don't know about you, but I'm sick of people playing God with my life."

"You can say that again."

We walked up on the others, who were standing around uncomfortably, trying to take the weight off their shoulders without removing their packs. Al would rarely allow a pack break. From the looks on their faces, it was obvious even from a distance that they'd been waiting for us to catch up. "What's up?" Rita said. "You two having your own private experience?"

Pug snickered. I didn't say anything. Rita would love to have Troy's attention; so would the others, especially Pug. People looked up to him and wanted to get closer to him. He granted his favors sparingly, which meant they were all the more in demand.

Somebody, I noticed, was missing. "Where's Freddy?" I asked.

Al called Freddy's name a few times, but no answer came. Freddy was like that, a loner who could vanish on cat's feet. During basic training, before the Storm King expedition, Freddy would disappear from camp whenever we had free time. We had a day off before the big hike, and he was long gone. I was relaxing on the cabin porch in the hammock that afternoon, when I noticed a solitary figure climbing above timberline toward a gap in the peaks towering above the camp. I'm sure it was Freddy.

"What if he splits?" Pug asked Al. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not worried," Al said. "Freddy'll be back." He wasn't about to launch into a "what if" discussion with Pug.

Pug laughed. "And if he doesn't show up, it's between him and his probation officer, right?"

I wondered if Freddy took off because of me.

My mind shot back to my predicament on the cliff face, and I saw Freddy once again on the other end of the rope. "I got you! I got you!"

I felt bad, I felt confused. I had every reason to like Freddy. He'd always had a good word for me in his bashful way, and I'd been so cruel. I thought about Troy's reaction on the mountain, when I was pleading for him to help me. Why hadn't he even tried? He'd fallen silent, seeming as paralyzed as I was. I put it out of my mind. There probably wasn't anything he could do.

Underway again, Troy and I kept up for a while, then lagged behind once more. The weather was building again, and the sun was gone. Visiting with Troy, I didn't even care that it was cooling off and threatening to rain. "Adam's a kick," I was saying. "He doesn't take himself seriously."

"Adam doesn't take *anything* seriously."

"You're right. He can turn anything into fun."

"Here's one you'd appreciate. . . . Back in his hometown in Kansas he would actually dress up like a ninja, robe and sword and all, and sneak around at night, climbing trees and prowling rooftops, and he'd come in through girls' windows and leave roses on their pillows."

"He could've been shot!"

"I guess," Troy said.

"Did he ever get caught?"

"Sure, that's how he wound up here, but you know Adam . . . he didn't take that seriously, either. He's a bit of a space case, but in a different way than Star. She's in *deep* space, wouldn't you say?"

I had to think for a minute about how to describe Star.

"At first I thought I wouldn't even be able to relate to her, but now I'm getting to like her."

"The crystals and the jewelry, the peasant blouse, the whole gypsy bit—don't you think it's a sign of bad brain fuzz?"

I laughed. "'Brain fuzz.' . . . Yeah, I guess you could say she's got some of that, but she means well, and that's what counts."

"Interesting. Where's she from?"

"Well, I know she grew up in foster homes and group homes, and she's even lived on the street."

"You mean, like homeless?"

"That's the impression I get—I still don't know her very well. She's a mystery, really intriguing. She seems like one of those people you hear about who never bonded with anyone when they were young, and then they spend their lives drifting. You know, the people in this group . . . they're more interesting than I thought they'd be. They're not what I expected."

"You're much more relaxed than when you first got here. I remember watching you—"

"Back in base camp?"

"Sure. You didn't know what to expect. You thought you were going to be attacked at any moment."

"I thought I didn't let on."

He smiled and winked. "I can tell these things. But you adapted fast. You have a lot of personal strength. But you're still afraid of Pug, aren't you?"

"I've never liked guys that are always flexing their muscles."

"Well, let me tell you the worst—he stabbed somebody."

"You're kidding!"

"He was raised by his stepfather, a really mean guy, I guess. Beat Pug and his little brother up all the time. That's why Pug's always looking for a shoulder to punch or somebody to sit on."

"I don't know how you can stand that, him punching you all the time. I think he's creepy."

"It's just a little ritual. Anyway, a couple of years ago Pug put a knife in his stepfather. Lucky for Pug he didn't kill him—they would have put him away for sure."

"That's scary. Don't you think it's scary?"

Troy shook his head. "He's no danger to us. Guys like Pug don't have any *mental* toughness, and as long as you realize that you can stay way out in front of them."

I was impressed. "You know a lot about people."

"It's kind of a hobby."

"So what do you make of Heather and Rita?"

He smiled. "Heather's your classic nobody. Probably ran away a dozen times, doesn't have any idea what she's doing. Always trying to impress somebody. I'll bet anything her father's an alcoholic—like Adam's."

"You amaze me. You're incredibly perceptive."

"And Rita—I get a huge kick out of her, as long as she's not on my case. She's for real. She grew up with six brothers, no sisters. You know she actually ran a burglary ring in New York City? Had people bring her hot jewelry, TVs, stereos, and she would fence 'em herself."

"Who told you?"

"She did."

"She was bragging."

"Of course. But all the same, she was telling the truth. I can tell."

I hesitated, and then said, "What about Freddy?"

Troy hesitated too. He looked at me and cast around as if to find something, and then he said, "I can't get a fix on him—he doesn't talk to anybody. One thing I've figured out . . . you kind of like him, don't you?"

I was surprised. "Why do you say that?"

"Oh, just a hunch."

"I told him to get lost."

"Maybe you did, but that doesn't mean anything."

Confused, I looked away, then stopped in the trail. We looked each other in the eyes. Troy's deep, deep blue eyes were staring into mine with that same unblinking, soul-seizing look he'd fastened on me before. This time I didn't blink either, and I didn't look away. "I don't care about Freddy," I said.

It started to rain. We looked a little longer into each other's eyes, and then we finally took off our packs and broke out our rain gear. We walked another mile or so, quiet now, because we couldn't hear anything with our hoods up but the rain. We came upon the others huddled under the shaggy limbs of a big spruce, and this time they didn't say anything. They were standing around spouting jets of vapor, like horses.

Several steep miles below us, base camp came into sight and made a homey picture, with its little log cabins alongside the river. We weren't that far away from hot showers, a good hot meal, and rest. Al seized the optimism of the moment to

walk alongside me and see if I was ready for some counseling. "How do you feel now, Jessie? Any better?"

"Not really," I said, even though I did. What was I going to say? Sure, Al, I'm feeling much better. Thank you very much for terrifying me out of my mind and almost killing me.

"I understand," he said. "It was scary. But Jessie, you have to believe in your own unlimited potential. I really believe that. Stretch yourself. Do something great. Dare to be great. Don't accept your limitations; outgrow them."

That did it. "Get lost, Al!" I screamed at him. "Get away from me, and take your condescending psychobabble with you!"

Rita and Pug were howling, and Troy smiled approvingly at Al's confusion. I couldn't believe Al thought he could do that to me and get away with it. I'd heard all this back in Boulder a hundred times before. And they think you should have to take it just because you're a kid and they're the adults.

"Stretch yourself!" Adam repeated, marveling over the phrase like it was a work of art. "*Go stretch yourself.*"

"You know what I'm talking about, Adam," Al said defensively.

"Sure. Stretching is torture and torture is good. Torture is the way to enlightenment—ancient marine wisdom."

Pug's ears perked up. I could tell it was either torture or the marines that had him excited, probably both.

"Naw, let's not call it torture," Al said, the knowing grin returning to his face. "How about, 'wilderness therapy'?"

"Wil-der-ness ther-a-py," Adam chanted. "I like the sound of it. Lots of stretching involved in that 'wilderness therapy,' I bet."

Pug wasn't following closely. "I think we should fight the Vietnam War over again, and win it this time."

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This wasn't the first time he'd pestered Al about Vietnam. He couldn't stand it that Al wasn't gung-ho, especially considering he'd actually been there and fought in combat.

"You'd have to kill most of the civilian population," Al said.

"Fine with me," Pug snorted. "Waste 'em all and let God sort 'em out."

The first thing I did when we got to base camp was race into my cabin and look in the mirror. It was much worse than I'd even guessed. My hair was all plastered down, my face was a total mess. There was a big smudge on my cheek, where I'd touched my face, from the black that comes off the cooking pots. Star came in behind me and smiled as she saw me looking in the mirror. "I can't believe it," I said. "Tell me if I ever look this bad again, okay? I can't wait to get into the shower."

"Me too. Rita and Heather said to tell you that the guys are building the fire in the boiler, and they're planning on getting into the shower first."

"How unchivalrous! I mean, we've been out in the rain for a week and none of us complained about suffering along with the guys, but I really wouldn't mind a little inequality just once, like now, when it comes to the showers."

"That's what Rita and Heather thought. They said we'll sneak in right before them."

"All right! Are you with us?"

"Sure."

Star and I got our kindling fired up in the little potbelly stove, and started stoking it with wood we'd split and kept dry while we were gone, in anticipation of this moment. Pretty soon the cabin was toasty hot. Across from us, Heather had her cabin's chimney puffing, while Rita staked out the showerhouse.

She watched as Pug came and went, restoking his fire in the boiler and testing the temperature of the water. After hollering "Almost!" to Adam, who was out in front of his cabin chopping wood, Pug disappeared into the cabin he shared with Troy. Freddy was nowhere around. At Rita's signal we sneaked around the back of the showerhouse. Each time Adam raised the axe over his head and concentrated on his target, one of us would dart inside, laden with clean clothes and towels and all the soap, shampoo, conditioners, and lotions we could carry.

The water was plenty hot. It was exquisitely hot. I don't think I ever felt so good in my whole life as I did letting it pound on my sore shoulders. We were all shrieking with the pure pleasure of it and the joyous sight of the week's grime heading for the drain. I shampooed again and again, I scrubbed and scrubbed, I let the hot water play all over my back. "Hot stuff!" Rita was hollering. "We're hot stuff! Mountain girls!"

The hot water was running out as we heard voices suddenly snickering in the changing room, and then the outside door banged, and Pug and Adam were whooping it up. We looked at each other, suddenly realizing our predicament, and Heather said, "Uh-oh."

"You guys give us those clothes back," Rita screamed, "or you're gonna be sorrier than sorry."

Pug was laughing his head off. I could picture him well enough, with all our clean stuff balled up in his huge, grimy grasp.

"What'll you give us for 'em?" Adam wanted to know.

By now I could hear Troy's laugh along with theirs. For a second I thought of appealing to him, but I knew I shouldn't.

"Give 'em back right now and we won't rip your faces off," Rita declared.

"You're going to have to do better than that. You girls have committed a heinous crime, and now you're going to have to pay!"

"State your terms," I shouted.

"Ah," Adam replied merrily, "the voice of reason . . . Let's parley, mates."

They had their parley. It was a spirited debate. We could hear only snatches of it, and most of those I wouldn't care to repeat.

"Hurry up!" Heather wailed. "We're completely out of hot water . . . it's cold in here!"

"Too . . . bad. . . ."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Adam intoned, "the terms are as follows: It's Troy's and my turn to cook tonight. We return your stuff if Rita cooks that same lasagna she did before we went out on the hike."

"Deal!" Rita shouted. "Hey, I love to cook." Then she turned to us and whispered, "You watch. Where I come from we don't get mad, we get even."

Back in our cabin, Star and I stoked the fire and sat with our backs to the stove, drying our hair. Mine dried first—it's shoulder length, and not as thick as Star's, either. I brushed Star's out for her, and as we talked, I found myself telling her how I'd been thinking about calling my father, but now I wasn't going to. "I can't believe he's marrying a lawyer," I said. "She seems so different from him. And she's a lot younger than he is—she's only thirty-four. My dad is forty-five."

Star didn't comment. I had the sudden insight that I was telling a homeless girl about my home.

"I was really scared up there, when I fell," I said.

"You were brave."

I laughed. "Sure."

"No, really, you went first, with Freddy. That peak was swirling with negative energy."

"It was, wasn't it? I felt like I got hit by a train. And could you believe Al, the line he was feeding me? After he almost got me killed?"

Star got up, took the crystal from the pendant around her neck, and offered it to me. "If you lie back, put this on your forehead, and think positive, your anger will leave you."

I set the brush aside. "Sure," I said with a little laugh, "why not?"

Star walked lightly as ever over to her bed. Her reddish-brown hair fell halfway to her waist. Freshly washed and brushed, it was beautiful. On her left hand and right ankle she wore those colorful woven "friendship bracelets."

I lay back on my bed with the crystal on my forehead, smiled a little to myself, and rested. Star brought out a small wooden box, the kind you might find in Mexico, from among her things. I'd never seen it before. One of her secrets. "What's in it?" I asked.

"The Royal Road of Tarot."

I sat up. "Tarot cards? I've heard of them, but I've never seen them."

"I thought you might be a person who is open to what the Tarot can offer."

"I need some kind of help. I feel like a wreck."

"Let's sit on the floor. The floor would be best."

"How come?"

"Wood enhances the spirit of the cards and shields them from negative vibrations. That's why I keep them in this wooden box."

We sat side by side on the floor. Star gently lifted the lid of the box and removed a silk-wrapped bundle.

"What pretty silk," I remarked, and touched it. It felt lovely.

"Silver for my soul color. Silver is the color of starlight."

"Did your parents name you 'Star'?"

"No," she said calmly. "I did."

I wasn't sure if I should press her to talk about her past, so I let the moment go, but I felt closer to her. She was right about her "soul color," I thought. Wispy silver, fragile and ethereal, like herself. I felt like it was an honor to have her pull out her cards for me and tell me about her soul color. I wondered why someone so gentle could have been left homeless. I wondered, too, about the horrible things I'd heard that happen to homeless girls on the streets. Could Star have been through things like that?

She unwound the silk wrapping from the cards and handed them to me. "Shuffle them," she said. As I was doing so, she spread a royal blue silk cloth out on the floor.

When I had shuffled them three times, she said that it was enough. She took a small notepad and pencil from the wooden box and handed them to me. "Write out your question," she said.

"Me? What question?"

DOWNRIVER

"Whatever you want to know," Star said softly. "Or if you don't have a specific question, just write, 'Wisdom of the Tarot.'"

I felt a little strange. I wrote, "Wisdom of the Tarot," whatever that means.

"Concentrate on the paper, and the question will absorb the energy of the deck."

Star began to lay out the cards. "This is called the Celtic Cross. This first card, the Nine of Pentacles, helps me to understand your state of mind. This next card, the Magician, can be either good or bad. We'll need to see first how the other cards come up. The Four of Cups tells how your past is affecting you right now. The Five of Swords is your past. The King of Cups could come into your life. The Wheel—"

I was fascinated. "What are 'cups'?" I interrupted. "What are 'pentacles'?"

"Cups are like hearts in a regular deck of cards. But wait—we have to finish laying out all ten before we can interpret. Close your eyes, Jessie, and tune in to your higher self. Let your inner eye see the cards. Now, the seventh card . . . the Wheel of Fortune represents your negative feelings. The Sun represents the feelings of those around you. The King of Cups represents your own positive feelings, and the Eight of Cups is the outcome."

"Can I open my eyes?"

"Sure."

The cards were pretty to look at, exotic human figures and strange symbols. "Well?" I asked expectantly.

Star smiled. "Lots of cups, Jessie."

"So what are 'cups'?"

"Love and happiness. Like hearts, remember?"

"Oh, good. Tell me more."

"Five out of ten cards are cups. That's pretty unusual. Love and happiness, then, is the center of your reading."

"Is that all?"

"Except that the King of Cups here is in the reverse position. That means you are open to a new relationship."

"Sounds good to me," I giggled. "The King of Hearts. Think it could be anybody we know?"

The dinner gong was sounding. That meant we had to get to the dining hall quickly, or Pug would eat all the food. "Quick," I said. "Let's go."

I was pulling on my sweater and was halfway out the door. Star was still sitting cross-legged on the floor, looking perplexed that I'd want to run out in the middle of our reading. "I'm starving," I explained. "Is there something more?"

"Your wish will not come to fulfillment at this time."

"Darn!" I said. "C'mon, Star, let's eat."

We ran over to the dining hall. Rita was serving her lasagna buffet-style. She'd baked it in two casserole dishes, and as she set them out at some distance from each other, she shouted that the smaller one was for the girls and the larger one for the guys.

"How considerate," Adam said, in a mock British accent.

First in line, Pug was delighted, and dished up even more for himself than usual.

We served ourselves and sat down at the big table. Freddy was back. I noticed him glancing at me, just a glance, and when he saw me notice him he looked away. The place was buzzing. A

genuine hot meal, and everyone knew in advance it was going to be world-class.

As Troy sat down next to me, he said, "Feeling good?"

"I sure am," I said. "I feel great."

"Good."

I took a bite of Rita's lasagna. It was delicious. I felt warm and good. I thought about my Tarot reading and smiled to myself. I wondered how Troy fit into my "love and happiness." I might be open to a new relationship—the cards were right about that. The cards must always be right, I thought, like fortune cookies. Really they could apply to anything. But I wouldn't tell Star how skeptical I was. The cards were fun, anyway, and gave you a lot to think about. What *about* Troy? I wondered. Was he the King of Hearts?

All of a sudden, there was pandemonium. Troy was gagging, and so was Adam. Pug was shoveling the lasagna down so fast, he hadn't realized there was a problem, but now he did—he spit out what was in his mouth.

Adam said, "Try a little garlic next time, Rita."

Rita sprang to her feet and raised a fist in triumph. "*Gotcha!*"

"Got me too," Al muttered.

I tried a little bit of Troy's lasagna. It was unbelievable. A half-dozen garlic bulbs—not cloves—must've gone into the guys' casserole. The one for the girls tasted just great.

Al didn't look too happy. He was hungry. But what was he going to do about it?

"Check out Freddy," Pug said.

Freddy was eating away like nothing was wrong. His plateful of lasagna was half gone.

Heather tried a bit of his, and said, "Try a little garlic' is right. How can you eat that?"

He shrugged, and flashed his smile. He had the most beautiful teeth. "Pretty good. Kills worms, too, I bet."

Everybody laughed, and the way it ended up, it turned into a macho contest. The guys cleaned their plates, even Al. Adam was going around to each of the girls with his lips out like a goldfish, saying, "Give us a kiss, give us a kiss."

After dinner we were supposed to be making plans for running the San Juan River. The girls were off to one side, keeping their distance from the garlic victims. Everybody was complaining that there wouldn't be any rapids on the San Juan. "We all want to do a white-water river, Al," I said.

"I've been looking into that," Al said, with a grin.

"And? . . ." asked Troy.

"It's hard to find white water this late in the year," Al explained, "but with the recent rains, the Colorado River is running high in Westwater Canyon, below Grand Junction and just across the Utah line. Ten thousand cubic feet per second—I called and checked. That's a great level for Westwater. Before we do our long trip on the San Juan, we can train on some prime white water on the Colorado. Westwater is a one-day stretch, but we could camp there for three or four days and just keep running it over and over."

"Is it very . . . rough?" Heather asked.

"There's a rapid in there that, at some water levels, is rated a ten on a ten-scale. It's called Skull, and it can be just as nasty as Crystal or Lava Falls."

"I've heard those names," said Troy. "They're in the Grand Canyon."

"So why don't we just run the Grand Canyon?" Rita shouted. "We'll kick its butt."

"Yeah, right," Al said with an appreciative smile. "Well, among other considerations, we can't get a permit for the Grand, but we can pick one up for Westwater on the spot. I promise it'll knock your socks off."

Adam couldn't help himself. In a perfect mother impersonation, he said, "Bring lots of extra socks, everybody."

Al had been right about Westwater. It knocked our socks off. We were still talking about it as we approached the San Juan River. Al was driving slowly because we were pulling the heavy trailer with gear for a ten-day float. We were suffering from white-water withdrawal. "Skull was awesome," Adam was saying. "I'll never forget it. Especially the look on everybody's face when we dropped into the hole."

"I was too busy paddling to notice," Rita shouted. "Maybe if Redhead here was paddling instead of messing around, we wouldn't have gone into the hole. Al missed it by a mile with his raft."

"Your mother . . .," Adam teased.

Rita reached out and grabbed Adam's T-shirt by the neck, and pulled him toward her. "—wears ordinary women's shoes, and if you say anything different . . ."

"Al was rowing, not paddling," Troy said. "You have more control with those oars than with a bunch of paddles."

"The part I liked best," Adam said merrily, "was the Room of Doom. We almost got sucked in there the first day. Around and around you go, *and you can't get out*. That would've been interesting—floating around all day with that dead cow."

Pug was chortling. "The part I liked best was when Heather went flying, like she was shot out of a gun. And the look on her face when she was suddenly out in the river."

Riding shotgun in the van, Heather rolled her head and groaned. It wasn't a pleasant memory, I'm sure. When we dropped into that hole in Skull Rapid, in Westwater Canyon, the boat folded like a sandwich made from one slice of bread. Everybody crashed into each other, and when the boat sprang back to its normal length, it catapulted her out just the way Pug said, as if she'd been shot from a cannon. But that wasn't the worst part. She was caught in the hole, and the white water recirculated her over and over before spitting her out. It must have felt like she was in a cross between a washing machine and a garbage disposal.

Once Heather was rescued, she lost it, got really hysterical. It wasn't pretty to watch. Star and I helped settle her down. After that, the fear never left her eyes. That happened on our first day on Westwater, and then she wouldn't get back on the water for our second and third runs, no matter how much Al counseled her about "getting back on the horse." She stayed by the van and waited for us.

After our last run through Westwater Canyon, we spent a couple of hours loading the boats with all the overnight gear we'd need for three more days of flat floating downstream, all the way to Moab, Utah. Heather got back on board after Al promised it would all be flat. It was. Pretty in stretches, with red cliffs along the river and snow-covered mountains in the background, but it wasn't white water.

The van rumbled from Colorado into Utah, and we passed through the little towns of Monticello and Blanding. We were nearing the San Juan. It had taken days of work and preparation

back in base camp—shopping from Al's shopping lists, packing waterproof metal "rocket boxes" with a ten-day supply of food, stuffing all our personal gear into huge waterproof bags—and we were exhausted. We'd chattered for hours about Westwater and whatever else came up, but the long drive had finally worn us down, and most people had nodded off. Troy's head was on my shoulder, and I wasn't very comfortable, but I was happy. Only Freddy and I were awake. Freddy, as ever, was studying the countryside like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

I looked around at the barren high desert of southeast Utah. I'd never been out this way with my dad. It didn't look very interesting to me until we drove into Bluff, a tiny town with old buildings made out of blocks of red stone. The huge cottonwoods that lined the road wore their fall colors, and it was warm. We stopped at a gas station and convenience store. It would be our last stop. The put-in for the San Juan River was only three miles away.

"Last chance for junk food," Adam said with a crazed look, as he slapped himself into consciousness. "Let's go in there and clean 'em out."

Pug took him seriously. "Ten days on the river is a long time. . . ."

"It's gonna get grim out there," Adam added. "People are gonna kill for a little bag of chips."

Pug counted out his available funds. Freddy and Star wandered by him, looking around aimlessly. They never had any money. I'd tried loaning Star some, but there wasn't much she wanted from the material world.

Mildly irritated, Al raised his voice. "Keep in mind, we have three meals a day packed in the rocket boxes on the trailer. Nobody's gonna starve."

"Tell you what," Troy said suddenly. "Pick out whatever you want, everybody—I can cover it."

Pug's mouth fell open. "You're kiddin'."

We were all pretty astonished, including Al and the guy at the cash register.

Troy shrugged. "I'm serious. That's what money's for, isn't it? Anything in the store you want." Then he flashed his golden smile, and said, "No big deal."

It was interesting to see how people reacted. As happy as a kid on Christmas morning, Pug had his arms so full he was dropping stuff. The clerk gave him a bag. Adam accompanied Pug around the store for the fun of it, encouraging him to take this and that. At the magazine rack, they picked out *Soldier of Fortune* for Pug, and Adam got a couple of ninja magazines for himself. He struck a few martial arts poses and went around the store grunting in mock Japanese. I had to laugh, remembering about his moonlit escapades on the rooftops, the roses on the pillows.

Rita was on a shopping jag, too. I was just watching. "C'mon, Jessie," Troy encouraged me. "It's our last chance. You know, ten days in the wilderness and all that."

"Are you sure? It's going to be a lot." I nodded toward the big hitters.

"No problem. My treat. Star, Heather, Freddy . . . if we're going to have a good time on the river, we're going to need some supplies."

I picked out a little junk food, but Star refrained. She was so conscious about what she ate, her body was practically translucent. Not that she was anorexic—Star would eat, as long as it was natural food and no red meat. She and I picked out some lotions and lip stuff, and I talked her into a pair of sunglasses with some colorful loops to hold them on.

It was a windfall for the fellow at the counter. Troy never flinched, either. I'd never met anyone that generous before. Heather thanked him, and he said, "For my friends . . ." Freddy was kind of disappearing out the door when Troy said, "Freddy, isn't there anything?"

There was a tone in Troy's voice, like his feelings were about to be hurt. I knew he was intrigued with Freddy—he'd never met anyone like him before. None of us really knew who Freddy was.

Freddy glanced back at Troy, and he smiled his bright, shy smile. "Sure," he said. "Thanks." He picked out a Hershey bar and a Coke, and that was it.

It was dusk. Al drove us to the edge of town, and we stopped at an old stone garage with a half-inflated raft out front and a huge sign that said SCENIC SAN JUAN RIVER TRIPS.

Al turned around and said, "This should only take a few minutes. They're shut down for the season, but they're going to do our shuttle for us—drive the van and trailer to the end of the line while we're on the river."

It wasn't a few minutes. Apparently Al was having trouble with his shuttle arrangements.

We were having a good time in the van, munching on junk food and visiting. The talk turned to the San Juan. What was

it going to be like? Pretty boring, was the consensus, after our wild adventures on the Colorado in Westwater Canyon.

Adam's voice turned lunatic. "Give me white water, I say. Give me *white* water!"

"So we're supposed to do ten days on a flat river," Troy said. "And you know why?"

"Yeah," Rita blurted. "Because Al said that's where he could get a permit."

"That's right. That's the only reason. But that's pretty lame, if you think about it. Why should *Hoods in the Woods* need a permit?"

Adam laughed. "That's about like bank robbers applying for a loan."

"It's Al who needs the permit, not us. We can go anywhere we want!"

"Vegas," Adam said, just that fast.

Rita was shaking her head. "Gotta be L.A."

"Miami," Pug insisted.

"I'm serious," Troy said. "The keys are in the ignition."

Our attention was immediately riveted to those keys and the sudden significance that Troy had given them. The van crackled with energy. With one stroke Troy had turned our imaginations up to white-hot. It was a priceless moment. Rita and Pug were going wild and Adam was slapping Troy on the back. I checked Freddy out; he was amused. Heather was awfully quiet, with a nervous little smile on her face. But if she'd said anything, Rita would have ripped her face off.

Troy looked around the van, to each of us, and settled us down with the power of his eyes.

"We can go anywhere we want," I said softly, trying out the idea.

I thought how my dad would feel. He'd find out it wasn't going to be as tidy as he thought to ship me off to a "program," where he could picture me in a certain box. He'd have to account for my feelings for a change.

"Where to?" Rita said impatiently. "Hey, I could show you guys around New York."

Troy was shaking his head. "That's what they'd expect us to do. And think about how fast they'd pick us up."

"We could steal a different car," Pug offered.

"Okay, everybody, now think about that trailer we're pulling. It's got two boats' worth of gear and a ten-day supply of food. I'm thinking, if we could get off the roads and get onto a river—not this one—we could slip away and have ourselves a good time."

There was plenty of noisy agreement about that.

"Hang in there," Troy said, and we hushed up. "The question is, can we launch before they catch us? They'd never guess we're on a river, let alone which one. And it's October—there won't hardly be anyone on the river but us, just like it was at Westwater."

"Rhaat onnnn!" Pug thundered.

We all knew Troy was about to name the river, but nobody had the slightest idea what it might be. "Hurry," Rita said, "Al could come out any minute!"

"Easy," Troy assured her. "Remember, everybody . . . remember how Al said Skull was a 'Grand Canyon-class rapid'? You remember that?"

"Sure, sure," we answered.

"Well, we did fine in Skull. Heather took a swim, but big deal. And it was a blast. *So why don't we run the Grand Canyon?*"

There followed several moments of total silence, a rare event for the eight of us. It was an awesome thought, outrageous and inspired. There was a beauty to the idea, grand, wild, and majestic, drawing power and mystery from the canyon itself. You'd have to be awfully nervy to think you could up and run the Grand Canyon, as inexperienced as we were. No adults, just us.

The calm broke into a babble of excited voices.

"We could do it!" Adam cheered.

"Ten days of food," Troy added, "and all the rafting gear's packed on the trailer."

"Could we really do it?" I asked Troy. "Would we make it through?"

"Like Adam said, we were awesome in Westwater. It sure would be fun trying."

A thrill of fear went through me. "Do we even know where to start?"

"Sure. Lee's Ferry, Arizona. Remember, Al mentioned that's where all the Grand Canyon trips start."

"We should have Al with us," Heather put in nervously. "Hasn't he been down the Grand Canyon four times?"

Rita put her face in Heather's. "Are you out of your mind? No permit, get it? You can't go legal. You think Al's going to help us sneak it? Forget Al—we'll have a lot more fun without him."

Heather was trying to catch her breath. "But isn't it some kind of crime? What would they do to us?"

Suddenly I could see myself in a cell, and just that fast I felt all queasy. I'd been in trouble before, but never in *jail*.

Everybody was quiet, and looking to Troy.

He shrugged. "Some kind of larceny, wouldn't it be? I can't expect we'd serve life in prison for moving Al's van a couple hundred miles and then taking his gear downstream. It'll be obvious we didn't intend to *steal* any of it."

Adam broke a long moment of tense silence as he shouted, "Hey, wait a minute! This is perfect. Troy's last name is 'Larsen,' right? This will be a case of '*Grand Larsen-y*'!"

Everybody groaned, and Pug pounded Adam on the shoulder, then a few more times for good measure.

"Put him out of his misery," jeered Rita.

Adam was mugging only a bit sheepishly. "Get it, Rita? Are you *sure* you got it?"

"Look," Troy said, eyeing the door of the office next to the garage. "Al's going to come out of there in a minute and then this will have been just another bull session." He looked us over again, with blue eyes blazing, taking our measure, and when he got to Freddy, he stopped and stared at him.

"Freddy," Troy said finally. "What do you think, Freddy? We haven't heard from you."

The way he said it, and especially considering the timing, I got the idea it all hinged on Freddy, somehow. It seemed improbable, but true.

Freddy shrugged. "For me, it would be worth it. The *Grand Canyon*? Sure. You bet."

"Good deal," Troy said.

Freddy, who was in the very back seat, leaned forward. "We

have to make it to the river first. Cops'll be looking for us up ahead, after Al puts out the word. But I know some back roads through the reservation. . . ."

Pug, who'd always seemed to dislike Freddy, roared his approval.

Is this really happening? I thought. We aren't just talking about it?

Troy slid up to the driver's seat and had Freddy trade out for Heather up front. He put his fingers on the keys and said, "It's an adventure. Take us to Lee's Ferry, Freddy."

Rita reached forward and grabbed Troy's shoulder. "So what makes you think they won't catch us there, smart guy?"

Troy turned around and gave us a sly smile. "In the middle of the night?"

We drove out so slowly and quietly, Al never even came to the door of the shop. Within a few minutes we'd crossed the muddy San Juan and passed the sign that said we were entering the Navajo Nation. The mood inside the van was delirious—an intoxicating combination of excitement and fear. Troy had his foot down on the gas pedal, trying to get off the main road as quickly as we could. Up ahead dozens of gigantic red formations were catching the last of the sunset. "Check it out," Rita crowed. "It's like office buildings made of stone."

"Monument Valley," Freddy said. "Here's that side road. Turn at the trading post."

Pug's face was practically propped on Troy's shoulder. "Let's get some booze and cigarettes," he said. "I can pass for twenty-one."

Troy drove right on by the trading post and onto the gravel road. "If we stop, they're going to pick up on us and we'll have cops on our tail real quick."

"He's right," Freddy said. "Besides, they don't even sell liquor on the reservation."

"Wise guy," Pug said. "Anybody got any cigarettes?"

Troy ran his hand through his hair. "Hey, Big Fella, we're in great shape. We're off the highway, it's going to be dark soon, and both tanks are full of gas. But if we make any stops, we're going to blow it."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm cool if you are. Hey, Freddy, is that really your name?"

"Federico."

I wondered why Pug seemed to dislike Freddy. The way Pug looked at him made me wonder if it was Freddy's dark skin.

"How come you don't go by 'Rico' then?"

Freddy's eyes flashed. I had the feeling he wasn't afraid of anybody, including Pug. "Cause my name's Freddy," he said.

Pug's face returned to Troy's shoulder once again. "Need a break driving, buddy?"

"No thanks, Pug, I can drive all night. Driven cross-country lots of times."

Star was sitting next to me. She whispered, "Can we really run the Grand Canyon, Jessie?"

"That's exactly what I've been wondering," I whispered back. "I sure hope so. I'm pretty scared, to tell you the truth. Are you scared?"

"You shouldn't even talk like that. It's negative thinking. You can make something bad happen, if you image it."

"I don't even know what it'll be like, so how can I image it?"

"We could ask the Tarot."

"How about right now?"

"Oh no," she said softly. "Too many influences on the cards. It wouldn't be right in here."

"So you're going to start down the Grand Canyon without knowing what it would say?"

Her green eyes were calm—maybe too calm to be real, I thought.

"I'm a water sign," Star said. "A Pisces. A fish can always swim."

. . . .

A couple of hours passed as we rumbled down the back roads. Everyone in the back was nodding off, even Rita. I was exhausted, and slept in fits and starts. Once, I woke up, looked around, and saw only Freddy and Troy awake up front. They were talking quietly, actually communicating with each other. I thought that was a good sign. Our lives were going to depend on those two guys.

I noticed Troy checking me out in the rearview mirror. The whites showed all around his eyes. Our driver was totally alert, as advertised. He gave me a thumbs-up.

I felt good all down my spine. I felt alive. This was going to be an adventure, all right. I didn't go back to sleep, I was too excited. I thought about my dad, how this was much more than he'd bargained for. It would be the ultimate way to show him. Al, too. They both deserved it.

We rumbled on into the night, occasionally passing by sleeping Navajo hogans and deserted roadside jewelry stands, and the sense of the isolation into which we were plunging got me to imagining more and more what it might be like to actually be in the Grand Canyon, beyond any help and trying to make it through alive. I could picture only the vaguest of shapes; the place loomed impossibly huge, mythical, ominous. I remembered the thrashing Heather took in Skull rapid. Al said that Skull was an 8 on a 10-scale at the level we ran it. What must a 9 or a 10 look like? What would happen to us down there?

Brooding more with every passing mile, I actually began to hope that we'd have a flat or that the van would break down.

But it kept rumbling along. We passed a gas station in the middle of nowhere, closed down for the night, and I realized I'd seen a phone booth. Panicky, I leaned forward and touched Troy on the shoulder. "Stop," I said.

He looked over his shoulder at me, confused and unwilling.

"Stop!" I yelled. If anybody had been asleep, they were awake now.

Troy brought the van to a stop on the side of the road. "What is it?"

I was practically desperate. I didn't care what anybody thought. "I have to make a phone call," I said.

"You're kidding," Pug said. He looked around. "She thought she'd make a phone call."

I was backing out the side door. Everyone's eyes were on me. I just kept going, got outside, and started running back toward the gas station.

Troy caught up with me as I ran. "What're you doing?"

"Making a phone call."

"Who are you calling?"

"My father."

He looked sick. He didn't say anything. He just kept jogging.

"Don't worry. I won't say where we are or where we're going. I just have to talk to him, okay?"

When I got there, Troy stood only about fifteen feet away from the booth. I went inside, shut the door, and turned my back to him. I was breathing hard as I asked the operator to make the call collect. I was afraid Madeline would answer. I was so panicky, I didn't know what I would do if she answered.

My father answered. "Jessie, is that you? Where are you?"

I felt so confused. Now what was I going to do? Why was I calling him?

"That's not important," I said, still breathing hard, and my heart going wild.

"Jessie, are you all right?"

Troy, I realized, was standing right by the phone booth.

"Sure."

"You don't sound so good. Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. . . ."

"Where are you calling from?"

Somehow he knew I wasn't where I was supposed to be. What was it I wanted to tell him?

"Look, Dad . . . we're going to do something, okay?"

"Jessie, talk to me. You can talk to me. What is it you're going to do?"

I looked up into Troy's face. He was pretty unhappy, and he was signaling with his finger across the throat. I wasn't answering my dad. I was so confused.

"Jessie, I have confidence in you. I know you'll do the right thing. Don't make any choices you won't want to live with, okay?"

"Sure, Dad," I sniffled. I wanted to speak, but I couldn't. I wanted to say "I love you." I felt like it might be the last chance, but I didn't. I don't know if I couldn't, I only know I didn't.

"Jessie . . ."

"I'll be okay, Dad. Bye." Quickly I hung up the phone.

Troy and I didn't talk about it. And I was too disoriented, too guilty, even to think about how pushy Troy had been. When I got back in the van, Rita said, with those beady black eyes, "So, who'd you call?"

"My father, all right?"

"Jessie didn't say anything," Troy explained as he started up the van.

"So I coulda called my mother," Rita wailed. "You guys are really considerate, you know that?"

Adam laughed and said, "Notice who didn't leave the keys in the ignition."

"Well, I feel a lot better," I said.

"How nice for you," Heather snapped.

About one in the morning, Troy pulled out onto a narrow bridge and slowed the van down. "Colorado River!" he sang out, and we all came lurching out of our sleep and looked down. Far below, the black surface of the river was reflecting starlight. *Spooky.*

Past the bridge we came to a filling station and trading post that was all closed down for the night. "No more phone calls," Troy announced decisively. Pug said we should break in for "supplies," but everybody knew he was only talking. We turned down the road marked LEE'S FERRY. After a couple of miles, we passed some parking lots, a campground, and a ranger station. The road dead-ended at a wide concrete boat ramp at the river. There were a couple of cars in the lot there, some bathrooms, and good overhead light.

"Nobody's around," Troy said. "Perfect. Okay, you guys, we know how to rig, just like we did at Westwater. Pump up the boats, rig frames, stow all the rocket boxes and dry bags, tie everything down. Dry bags in between the nets in the middle of the paddle raft, everything else on the oared raft. And *whisper*. Let's see how fast we can get out of here and slide downstream."

Pug hadn't been listening. Pointing over at a sign, he said, "Get a load of this: 'Private boaters must register permit with the river ranger.' What a laugh. Anybody see any river rangers?"

We set to work. We rigged the boats. We were out of our minds with anticipation. Were we really going to do this? We weren't just talking about it?

Troy drove the van and the trailer into a dirt lot, then came back. We were dead tired. The first hint of dawn was starting to show, and still no river rangers, nobody at all.

"We gotta get out of here," Troy said.

We hustled. It was all a blur, but finally the boats were rigged.

"Hey, where's Heather?" Rita said suddenly, and she wasn't whispering.

Everybody looked around, and the realization sunk in. "She split!" Rita said. "Heather split!"

Of course, I thought. It makes perfect sense.

"Run up to the john," Troy ordered. "Check both of 'em."

Adam and Rita came running back. "Gone," they said, breathing hard. "What do we do?"

"Yeah," Pug said, "what if she squeals?"

Troy reached for his life jacket. "Forget it. So she squeals."

We moved toward the boats. One was a paddle raft, with all of our personal stuff in the dry bags, and one was the rowed raft with all the food and group gear. "Who's rowing?" I asked. Al had rowed on the Westwater trip.

"I am," Troy answered. "Let's get going!"

"You got a river map, Troy?" Freddy asked.

Troy waved his arms impatiently. His eyes were jumpy;

DOWNRIVER

I'd never seen him nervous like this before. "I got my Arizona road map," he said. "It's got the river on it."

He didn't say it like a joke, that was the thing. Adam didn't even make hay out of it, and he'd never been handed a better setup. This was the moment. We could've backed out right there. We all looked around at each other, and I bet we were all thinking the same thing. We didn't really know what we were doing, yet we'd dared each other into this. If we backed down now, our self-respect was going to go down the tubes. We'd be totally whipped.

Of all people, I grabbed my paddle and stepped into the paddle raft. Maybe I wanted to make up for the phone call, or for being the one who kept us from the top of Storm King Peak. "We'll make it up as we go," I said. "We can't get lost—you just float downriver!"

Star was right behind me. "I'm with Jessie," she said.

Troy was pleased. "We can scout the rapids as we come to 'em. Remember how good we were in Westwater."

"I want muh mother," Pug sang, and everybody laughed.

And then we were off, paddling for the current in the dawn, the ramp slipping away behind us. We paddled through a riffle, alongside a low cliff on the left, and passed into the rising walls of a canyon. With a look back I saw the water tower at the ranger station disappear. Troy rowed his boat alongside ours. Barely above us, bats were zooming at crazy angles. "Let's put that bridge behind us before we stop," Troy advised. "Well, guys, we're really doing it, we're pirating the Grand Canyon of the Colorado."

"Pirates o' the Colorado!" Pug roared. He pulled out his buck

knife—an item Al never knew about—and put it between his teeth.

“Ninja Pirates!” Adam declared.

Rita bounced up and down on the front of the raft. “Bring on the Grand Canyon—we’ll kick its butt!”

And there was Freddy with a beautiful grin on his quiet face, his eyes drinking in the water, the walls, the bats, and the last reluctant stars.