

Al and the park rangers and the police couldn't chase us very far along the shore. The gorge soon constricted, and a minor rapid whisked us through jagged cliffs of fractured black rock rising vertically from the water on both sides. A glance back gave no hint of the beach at Phantom, the footbridge, or our would-be captors.

We couldn't see up and out to the canyon above the gorge. It did feel, as Al suggested, as if we were in the bowels of the earth. We'd slipped the noose, but a look around at the menacing black rock provided no context for celebration; rather, it set us brooding on the consequences of our bolt for freedom and filled us with foreboding.

It was late afternoon and the daylight was fading. Each of these October days was shorter than the one before, but this one, with the cloud cover, seemed to be closing by the minute. I was once again in the front of Troy's boat, with the paddle raft floating right alongside us. Adam was holding on to our chicken line, keeping the two boats snugged together. The wind was blowing, our feet were blocks of ice in the cold water in the bottom of the boat, and everybody was pulling on sweaters, then rain slickers, to try to ward off the icy waves. "Holy cow!" Rita wailed. "I've never been this cold in my life!"

Rita let her teeth chatter so hard I thought they'd break.

I was fretting, thinking how complaining might make her feel better, but it sure didn't make the rest of us feel very good. I thought about telling her to cut it out, but I knew she'd yell at me no matter how I put it. I put my nose back in the mile-by-mile guide, that invaluable gift from our twice-former leader. And what a boon it would be, especially knowing the location of camps and rapids.

I read to everybody about what was coming up, namely Horn Creek Rapid, only two miles downstream. "What's it rated?" everybody wanted to know. "How bad is it?"

Everybody wanted to know, I should have said, except Troy. He seemed pained; he had an attitude about that guide.

"Horn Creek's an eight or a nine, except at low water," I explained. "At low water it's a ten. It says, 'not recommended below ten thousand cubic feet per second.' I guess that would make it into a ten-plus."

"So how much water is ten thousand cubic feet per second?" Rita asked nervously, through her chattering teeth. "How much are we on now?"

"Well, there's five feet of bathtub ring on the shore," I said. "The river's not high, that's for sure. The question is, how low is it?"

"I don't know about the rest of you guys," Adam said, "but I'm not fond of that 'not recommended' bit. . . . I mean, you don't want to see me cry like a baby, do you? My feet are so cold as it is, they feel like they might break off. Wouldn't this be a lovely evening for a swim?"

Star started to protest Adam's pessimistic imagery, but he stopped her. "Star, don't even say what I think you're going to

say—it's bad luck to say something is bad luck. What do you guys say we think about camp?"

I looked to the map, and was happy to report that the guide listed a small camp above Horn Creek Rapid on the right. Everybody was relieved.

"We'll take it," Adam said. "Make a reservation. Give them Troy's credit card number."

That brought a smile to Troy's face. "Fine with me," he said.

I watched the right side for that camp, and then both banks, as we picked up the hiss of the River Thunder downstream. The cliffs continued to skyrocket out of the river on both sides, and there wasn't a bit of sandy beach as far down as I could see into the twilight.

On and on we drifted, as the Thunder increased. "Hug the right side," Troy told the others. "We can't afford to miss that camp."

"If there's a place to perch, we'll take it," Rita agreed. "I'm scared. Let's paddle upstream, guys. I changed my mind about calling my mother."

Rita wasn't the only one who was thinking about paddling upstream. I'd already considered it, and realized that paddling upstream here would be about as difficult as time travel. It's a one-way river, I thought. Against this kind of current, we couldn't gain twenty feet even if we threw all the gear out and all seven of us paddled like maniacs. Pulling the boats upstream along the shore was an impossibility as well. Given the cliffs, there was nowhere to walk.

The heartless river gods turned up their Thunder and turned down the daylight. Closer and closer we drifted toward

the murky brink of Horn Creek Rapid, and still no camp, no beach, not even a sliver of sand. The cliffs stood back a bit on the right side, but the bank was steep and lined with boulders. What was wrong? Where was the camp that the guide promised? Could high water have washed it away? Maybe some things change from one year to the next. What did we know? I handed the guide to Troy and let him scour it too. This had to be a Big Drop, it had to be Horn Creek Rapid from the awful sound of it and the nearing horizon line on the water, the jets of white water spurting up from below. Everybody on the other boat was standing up and looking this way and that for the camp that wasn't there. We shouted back and forth, and there was panic in our voices. "Where's camp, Jessie?" Troy asked anxiously, as he tossed the guide back to me and pulled at the oars. "You said there was a camp."

Blame it on me, I thought. That's not going to help anything, Troy.

A few seconds went by, with everybody watching Troy and waiting, as we drifted even closer to the brink. What was he waiting for? Panic ripped through us as it appeared we might lose the chance to get to shore, and drift over the edge without even scouting. "Right side!" Troy yelled at last. "Tie up!"

I stumbled around among the boulders and tied off our bowline. I looked up from another pair of hands on another rope to see Star's face, numb and blue. "So much for Jessie's camp on the right side," Troy was announcing sarcastically. I couldn't believe he was doing that. Everybody kind of looked away. It was embarrassing. It was all I could do to keep from calling him out about it right there—I was thinking, if I let him



get away with it now, it's going to get worse. "Let's think about what we're going to do, Troy," I suggested instead.

"Scout the rapid, I guess. We got sucked into this because of that river guide of yours."

I couldn't take it anymore. "Look, Troy, it's not my fault, okay? Probably there used to be a beach here and they washed it away, jerking the river up and down all the time with their stupid dam."

In silence we picked our way through the slick boulders on the right side, to the brink, to take a look at Horn Creek Rapid. It was simply terrifying. A short big drop with teeth, the top was studded with rocks, which funneled the only passable water into an explosive fall and chaos below—huge waves recoiling on themselves, waves attacking from both sides, and deep, boiling suckholes. "Ten-plus," Rita rasped.

Freddy asked, "What does the guide say about camps downstream?"

I was so scared, teeth chattering too, that I didn't even realize I had the guide in my hand or that he was talking to me. "Jessie, could I see the map?"

He turned a page over and scanned downstream. "What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Camps downstream."

"You don't really think we can run this tonight, do you?"

"If we do, I'd like to know if there's any camps coming up, any beaches where we could recover if we have trouble."

Adam and Pug were looking over Freddy's shoulder. "There's a small camp, theoretically, about a mile down," Adam said. "And another theoretical small camp a mile after that,

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and then comes Granite Rapid, which is either an eight or a nine."

"Would you guys hurry up and decide what you're doing?" Rita said. "It's going to get dark, or haven't you noticed?"

"Lemme see that thing," Troy said, almost shouting over the roar of the rapid. He was standing atop the highest boulder, and Adam handed the river guide up to him.

In one swift motion Troy tossed the guide out into the current streaming toward the lip of the rapid. Disbelieving, helpless, we watched it float over the brink and disappear in the white water.

We were stunned. No one said a word. No one could have thought of such an act. I couldn't begin to calculate what the loss might mean, but I felt sick to my stomach. We were all looking at each other, totally bewildered, and sneaking glances at Troy, whose eyes were locked on the rapid. I looked back to Freddy, but he'd turned inward.

Troy, I thought, I don't really know you at all.

I can't remember ever being more scared than I was at that moment.

Then Troy spun around. His eyes were flickering. "We were doing a lot better without that thing," he said. "We never assumed anything. We used our own resources."

No one wanted to counter him. He was burning up with energy. We were all shivering and shaking. Freddy scrambled to the top of a boulder and studied the rapid. "Hey, whadda we do, Troy?" Rita said, jogging in place and hugging her sides. "Just tell us what to do."

*"Run it."*

"I have a bad feeling about this one . . .," Adam said.

It was spooky, hearing these sentiments from Adam. He'd do anything.

"We're gonna flip," Pug concluded.

"Don't say that," Star objected, practically sobbing.

Rita stuck her face in Star's. "We're only gonna *die*. How's that for imaging?"

"Cut it out, everybody," Troy said. "Freddy, what do you think? If we can run it, it would be stupid to huddle in these rocks all night long."

"It could be raining in a few hours," Freddy said. "Somebody might get sick. I think we can run it, but we better go quick and find camp before it gets dark."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I pointed to that ugly rapid and practically screamed at the two of them. "Look at it, will you! Are you guys out of your minds? What if both boats flip? Who's going to live through the night?"

"Great," Troy said. "Get hysterical, Jessie."

There was no sense appealing to him. "Freddy," I pleaded, "I'm not hysterical, I'm trying to be rational."

"Come up here," he said, and extended his hand. I let him pull me up beside him on the boulder. "It's not as bad as it looks, really. We stay on the inside of the tongue as we enter, and then, look, there's good water moving through all the way down. We stay on that line—no trouble."

I could begin to see the route. "Are you sure . . .?"

"This water level's okay. We aren't going to flip."

"You guarantee it?"

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "No guarantee."

Troy got everybody up on the rocks and pointed out the run that he and Freddy saw, talked strategy, and then we all scrambled, slipping and sliding, through the mossy rocks back to the boats. Shaking with the cold, I tugged at the cinches of my life jacket and tightened them up as much as I could. Star was struggling to do the same, but her fingers wouldn't cooperate. "Here, Star," I said, and helped her out. "Good luck," I whispered.

"Let's go, Jessie," Troy called nervously. "I want you to ride as far forward as you can, and hold that front end down." He was already in his seat and had the oars in his hands.

Despite all my misgivings I was stumbling around in the rocks, untying the bowline, hearing and seeing and feeling everything through a numbing fog. I couldn't have felt any less in focus. *Is this how it happens?*

"Ready, Freddy?" Troy was saying.

"Just a sec."

Freddy was rigging a piece of rope from one side of the paddle raft, underneath, to the other side. "In case we flip," he was saying to the others, "don't get separated from the raft. Hang on to the chicken line, then pull yourself up this rope and get onto the bottom of the boat."

"Should we rig one of those?" I asked Troy.

"Forget it," he said. "We're losing time. We aren't going to flip, Jessie. Now get in the boat, will you?"

I did. I got in the boat, stowed the bowline, and looked back for Star. She gave me a little wave. "Hang on to those paddles, no matter what," Freddy was telling them. "We can't afford to lose one."

Troy was rowing out into the current. I moved forward in the boat, and spread-eagled my weight against the very front. I tried to wedge my legs into the cracks where the tubes met the floor. Only my face projected above the level of the tubes—there was no way I was going to get blown out of the boat by a big wave. The roar of the rapid intensified, the current picked up. Behind us I heard Adam and Pug chanting, “Horn Creek! Horn Creek! Horn Creek!”

“Hang on, babe,” Troy said under his breath, and I felt the boat dropping, dropping, dropping. I couldn’t see a thing with all the water pouring over me. The boat filled, just that fast. As the boat bucked and pitched with the pounding, I wondered if I was going to float out of it. I struggled to plant my legs, but just as quickly as it had all happened, it was over, and Troy was yelling, “Bail! Bail!”

I pitched two buckets of water out as Troy struggled in the turbulence to keep the boat off the dark cliff walls, and then I glanced back to check on the paddle raft. “They made it!” I yelled. “Troy, they made it!”

“O ye of little faith,” Troy chided.

I bailed and bailed. “That was incredible, Troy! You were awesome! They’re all in the boat too—no swimmers!”

“What’d I tell you, Jessie? Now let’s find camp.”

If I’d never been so scared in my life, I’d certainly never been as relieved.

We found our small camp on the left, a little beach shining in the gloom like a beacon, right where it was supposed to be. Thank goodness it was there: A couple of more minutes on the river and we would have had to run by flashlights.

It was quickly agreed there'd be no dinner this night. Breaking out our warm clothes and putting up tents would about do it for the day. Who cared if we were hungry and freezing—we were alive.

After a while we were all sitting around the gas lantern in a tight circle, warming our hands over the exhaust fumes and rehashing our near-death experience. Everybody had a different slant on it, but Adam, bounding quickly back into form, provided the tour de force of the evening. "Great moments in history!" he shouted, and leaped to his feet. Dancing among the rocks, his face coming in and out of the light cast by the lantern, he would announce a name and then strike a pose, as if he were a statue in a wax museum. "David slaying Goliath with a little rock! . . . Ulysses on the john, thinking up the Trojan horse trick! . . . Caesar assassinated in the senate! . . . King Arthur pulling the sword from the stone! . . . Leonardo opening his first box of crayons! . . . Napoleon attempting to free his hand from his vest! . . . Washington standing up in a boat! . . . And, ladies and gentlemen, *and*, the newly minted Greatest Historical Moment of All Time . . . Troy throws the mile-by-mile guide into the Colorado River!"

Adam mimicked Troy's body language at that fateful moment with uncanny perfection: He took the invisible guide in his hand, and with that Troy-like look of disdain, reenacted the infamous toss and froze halfway through the follow-through, to the howling cheers of his delighted audience.

Troy was laughing along with the rest of us. Adam, I thought, you've made the tension go away, you've defused the anger. I can see what you're doing, what you're telling everybody: Lighten

up—what's done is done. It's time to come back together; our survival depends on it.

Rita wasn't exactly on my wavelength. Brash as ever, she up and said, "Hey, Troy, what is it with maps? You have a map phobia or something? I never heard of that one."

"What do you mean?" Troy said defensively.

"Seriously. Remember back on Storm King? You wouldn't look at the map."

True, I thought. Why is that?

As the moon rose, a ghostly half-moon obscured by the clouds, Troy and I sat by the river, holding hands and talking quietly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I was stressed out."

"So was I," I said. "We have to remember not to turn on each other—when the going gets tough, remember we care about each other, yes?" I squeezed his hand.

"And you'll stick with me, okay? That's all I ask."

I said I would, but as I said good night and headed for my tent I was more than vaguely uncomfortable. I would try, but the events of this day would not be so easily forgotten, nor the feeling I experienced as he took the river guide out of my hands. I'd felt I was looking into the face of a stranger. Would I ever fully trust him again?

I joined Star in the tent. She was putting away her Tarot cards. In the light of the candle her face looked ashen, and though she looked away, there was no disguising her distress. "What is it, Star?" I whispered. "Did you just see a ghost, or what?"

"Sort of . . .," she whispered. "I can't tell you."

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"But Star, what's the matter? I really feel the worst is behind us, don't you?"

She wasn't going to tell me what it was, but I begged and pleaded with her. It was spooky. Her eyes were going glassy on me.

"Star," I whispered, "if you care about me at all . . ."

She struggled, and then she said, "I do, Jessie. If you promise to listen to what I say and not take it wrong, I'll tell you. I wouldn't tell anyone else in the whole world, but I'll tell you."

She bit her lip, and then she turned one of the cards faceup. I gasped. It was the Grim Reaper astride a white horse.

"Listen, Jessie, don't say anything, you promised to listen. Death is not to be feared, death is only a transition to another realm of existence, and all of us will die one day. You know that."

"Yes, I can accept that, as long as it's at a ripe old age for both of us."

An ethereal smile played at her lips, and her eyes—they seemed to be looking through and past me. She was floating away; she'd never seemed as loosely tied down.

I took her slender forearm by the wrist. "Star," I whispered, "what question did you ask?"

"I asked if I was going to live through this trip."

"Star, that's not a fair question!"

"Oh? Why not?"

"It's self-fulfilling. It's like a death wish. You're the one who always says, if you think negatively, you'll produce a negative result, right?"

"I didn't ask if I was going to *die* on this trip, I asked if I was going to be alive at the end. That's positive."



"That's voodoo, Star. I'm sorry, but that's all it is. There's so much pudding in your head, you can't think straight."

Star bowed her head. She wasn't going to defend herself.

"So now you have this curse on your head, this death sentence! What are you going to do, not even try to hang on, and get washed out of the boat? Accidentally walk over the edge of a cliff? What?"

She looked up brightly. "Jessie, you still don't understand. I can do my best. I can be cheerful. I can try to be a better person than I ever have before. I just have to be ready for a transition, that's all."

I took her by both wrists and looked her in the eye. "Star, I tell you what: I'm keeping an eye on you. You aren't going anywhere without me."

"I want you to remember me, Jessie, whenever you hear the song of the canyon wren. That's going to be me singing, singing just for you."

"No way," I said. "A canyon wren is a canyon wren. That's what I believe. I want you to be you. I think you're really great, Star."

She smiled painfully. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. I really appreciate it."

"Star, you're . . . you're like a sister to me, the sister I never had. . . ."

"Same here, Jessie," she said dreamily. "I know. These days . . . despite everything . . . they're the best of my life."

My eyes filled with tears.

"It's okay, Jessie, don't feel sorry for me. Let's get some sleep."

Star snuggled down into her sleeping bag and fell silent.

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In the morning it was cloudier yet: A thicker layer had come in under the high clouds as we slept. I ate my breakfast ration, my one packet of hot cereal, in the general silence. It was going to be a chilly day, and we were in for three Big Drops, as I remembered them from the river guide. Granite Falls, Hermit, and Crystal. Maybe it wasn't a coincidence that the worst rapids were found in the most sinister-looking stretches of the canyon. I looked up and down the river at the black walls, and I remembered for a moment the friendly reds and whites of the cliffs in the upper canyon. I remembered the amber hue of Freddy's miracle fountain, the *sipapuni* by the River of Blue. Gone are the days, I thought. So long gone that our frolic in the sun seemed a distant memory. As I looked up and down the gorge at the tortured black rock, Star's premonition came to mind, and a chill ran through me.

"A penny for your thoughts," Troy said. "Join you for breakfast, such as it is?"

"Sure," I said. I was pleased to have the company. And his blue eyes were warm again, steady. His beard growing in, blond peppered with red, accentuated the old charm that had returned to his smile.

"Well?" he said.

"Just wondering what the day will bring."

"I love river-running, Jessie, I really love it. I love moving water. I love running this big water more than anything I can remember."

"More than surfing?"

He smiled broadly. "I can't knock surfing, but these waves, they're something else."

"You haven't flipped yet—haven't had any trouble at all."

"Where's some wood?" he asked with a laugh, and lunged for a piece of driftwood, almost spilling his oatmeal. "I'm knockin' on it, I'm knockin'."

I was laughing too, and then I was hearing something strange, not having any idea at first what it might be. Pug and Adam were yelling and pointing. It was the unmistakable *chop-chop-chop* of a helicopter. I looked up to see two of them buzzing down the gorge.

We all stood silent for a moment as they flew past, only a couple hundred feet above the water, right down the middle of the gorge. The sound ricocheting off the walls was unbelievably loud. We could see the helmeted men inside looking at us.

"They're after us!" Adam shouted. "The plot thickens!"

"Where's my rocket launcher?" Pug thundered. "Oh, for a couple of Stinger missiles!"

"My, my," Troy said softly, standing next to me. "No place for them to land, is there? That's too bad."

They buzzed us three times, and then they left.

"Heli-*cop*-ters," Rita called them.

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It was amazing how high our energy level shot up with the arrival of those helicopters. Our quiet, brooding camp came alive like a nest of fire ants stirred with a stick. Rita and Pug were still shaking their fists at the skies after the helicopters had disappeared downstream. Without anyone calling us together, we all congregated around Troy, and almost everybody was talking at once. "What now?" Rita insisted.

"Hold everything, and I'll show you what," Adam said. He darted away toward his tent, rifled through his dry bag for something, and dived inside the tent with it. A minute later he emerged a whirling ninja, triumphantly garbed in black, hooded and masked, and fought his way to us through imaginary assailants. I saw him wince in pain as he sprang from a boulder; he must have taken a hit from one of his many enemies. He even had a samurai sword slung around his back.

He circled us, jabbing and kicking, as we cracked up. Only the darting eyes of the ninja showed. Gone was the reassuring head of curly hair and the omnipresent grin that proclaimed Adam's motto: "It's all a game."

Everybody was laughing, even Star, who was under a death sentence.

When Adam finally slowed to as near a standstill as he ever gets, Pug said, "Lemme see that thing," and he pulled Adam's

sword from its scabbard. "Wait a minute," he said, hugely disappointed. "It's not real."

Sure enough, it was a rubber sword.

The ninja said, "That's in case I have to fall on it one day."

"So, Adam," I said, "you carried this outfit all the way down the river and waited until now to pull it out. That must have taken quite a bit of restraint."

"Hey, *they* brought out the choppers. No more Mr. Nice Guy."

"I love this," Rita said. "If my friends in New York could see me now."

We held a brief council of war. "If we don't camp at a spot where they can land a helicopter," Troy said, "how are they going to catch us?"

Back in our tent Star and I got dressed all over again after thinking how cold we'd been the day before. This time we started with our long johns. It's always much colder out in the boats, over the water, than it is on shore. As we'd discovered the day before, when the sun isn't shining it makes all the difference in the world. We struck the tent and packed our dry bags, leaving our yellow rain slickers out where we could get to them. I'd been thinking hard, and while I still had the chance I took hold of Star and looked her in the eye. "Star," I said, "I've been remembering another one of your Tarot readings: a beautiful girl pouring water, in front of a ring of stars. I asked you what it meant, and you said 'hope and inspiration.' You promise me you'll image that reading today, with all your heart?"

She seemed like she was going to cry. "I will, Jessie, I promise. Thanks."

"Star, maybe I don't take it as far as you do, but I really do

believe in positive thinking. I could sure use a lot more of it myself."

We looked up to see Adam, still in ninja regalia, limping over to us. "Jessie," he said, "I have a little problem." He leaned back and lifted the sole of his right foot, revealing a nasty puncture wound.

Star and I winced. He had a puncture under the arch, half the diameter of a dime.

"How'd you do it?" Star asked.

"Stepped on a little stick barely under the sand, is all I can figure."

"While you were playing ninja. You came down pretty hard on that stick, I bet."

"Sorry, *Mama-san*. I was a bad boy, eh?"

"You were a bad little ninja. Star, would you get the first aid kit? We better clean it up and try to bandage it, but it's a shame we can't keep it dry. It'll be just about impossible for it to heal, being wet all the time."

Our wounded ninja sighed. "Just another experience in life . . ."

"Well, if you don't take care of it, we might have to amputate with that sword of yours."

"I'll be looking forward to that. I'll have the foot bronzed as a memento of the trip."

A half hour later we were on the river again. "Troy, no getting us wet today," I joked.

"Yeah, right," he answered absently. I knew he had a lot to think about. He hadn't fully recovered from the day before, nor had I for that matter. I wished I had the guide, so I could read

up some more on Granite Falls, Hermit, and Crystal. They were all highly rated Big Drops, and they were all coming up in short order just a few miles down. Granite and Hermit weren't rated higher than 9, but Crystal, if I remembered right, was rated a 10 at all levels but one, and I couldn't remember if that was at low or high water. Crystal, the guide said, was no more than a riffle until 1966. Then, in one event, the rapid was created overnight when the side canyon there flash flooded and created the most feared rapid on the river, along with the notorious Lava Falls.

As we approached a minor rapid, Troy hollered back, "Read 'n' run!" and we started down the tongue as I prayed in vain for a dry ride. The first healthy wave put enough water in the boat to start my feet freezing. I bailed the bottom as dry as possible once we passed through the tailwaves, but the damage was done. Behind us the paddle raft made a flashy fashion statement in their yellow slickers. "Four yellow ducks led by a ninja," I remarked to Troy.

Troy and I were also wearing our slickers. For the moment I felt warm, except for my feet. I wondered if Adam was already soaked. Maybe he can tolerate it, I thought—his fires are always burning so brightly, and paddling helps you to stay warm. I wondered if Freddy's feet were cold.

"Troy," I said, "do you think Al was in one of the helicopters?"

"Don't know."

"I was looking, but with their helmets I couldn't tell."

"Who cares about Al?"

"Did you ever think he would trick us like he did? I never thought of it for a second. Why did he even hike in at Hance? Why didn't he hike in at Phantom?"

"He knew we'd scout Hance. He was afraid we'd blow by Phantom. He had to make sure we'd stop there."

"Of course . . . But if he intended to stop us at Phantom, why didn't he just talk with us about it and make a deal or whatever?"

Troy looked at me as if he couldn't believe how naive I was. "Control," he answered coldly. "It would've burned him to negotiate with us—the guy's used to being a dictator. And Jessie, it really aggravates me to have you keep bringing Al up. Especially today. I wish you'd give it a rest."

Troy had an ugly tone in his voice. I was about to suggest he lighten up, but then I realized for a moment what it must feel like to have Granite, Hermit, and Crystal in front of him. No wonder he was uptight.

Maybe the way Troy can row these huge rapids so well is subconscious, I thought. It must take total self-confidence, especially being so new at it. If you ever lost your nerve going into one of those Big Drops, you couldn't function at all. Give him some support, I told myself. He'll need it shortly.

I stood up to do some stretches. "We're going to have a great day of river-running," I said. "We're still out here on our own, running the Grand Canyon and doing fine."

A trace of a smile crossed his face, but the tension lingered.

A minute later he reached forward, clasped my shoulder, and gave me a strained smile. "Just go with the flow, okay, Jessie?"

We began to hear the hiss of a Big Drop downstream, and the current began to die out. Once again we found ourselves on one of those ominous stretches of slow water. "What's with this lake?" Adam called, tongue in cheek.



“Granite Falls,” Rita announced, loudly naming the coming attraction. “Holy cow! I wonder why it’s called a falls?”

After a while, our boats rounded a bend together, and the Thunder turned up exponentially. Ahead of us, maybe two hundred yards down, was the brink. As we all started looking around for where to scout, Freddy said, “Helicopters.”

We heard nothing, but pretty quickly we saw what he was talking about: On the left side, where we would have to scout, the two helicopters were parked, and four men stood on a high point above the beach looking at us. I quickly reconfirmed that there was no chance for us to scout Granite Falls on the right side. It was all cliff over there. They’ve got us, I thought, almost relieved. They know we’ll have to scout Granite. Game’s over.

We moved toward river left, to keep the gathering current on the right from sweeping us toward the edge. Safely on still water between the current and the eddy moving back upstream, we could hover and consider our position. At first people were talking loudly, especially Pug and Rita, but Troy told us to keep our voices down—the men on the shore might be able to hear. “One of ‘em’s Al,” Pug said in a stage whisper. “I’m sure of it.”

Troy said, “Let’s not think about them, let’s think about us. They don’t have us, you know. Only if we paddle in to that beach and give ourselves up. Is that where we want to be, five minutes from now? With *them*? Think about what fun that’s going to be, and think fast.”

“We’ll probably never see each other again,” Rita said. “And we were having such a good time. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m not ready to quit, no way. I don’t scare that easy.”

I started thinking about consequences. I'd thought about them before, but this was so immediate. What were they going to do with us if we gave ourselves up now? What were they going to do if we didn't? "Maybe we should paddle in closer," I said. "We could talk to them?"

I was thinking, maybe we could still cut a deal, but I didn't say it.

Troy wasn't too happy with me. "What about? Are we going to believe what they tell us? Remember how Al tricked us before? They'll do whatever they're going to do. And they'll try to scare us about this rapid. They'll say we can't run it."

"Live free or die," Adam chanted. "Old Japanese saying."

Pug declared, "I'm havin' the best time of my life."

"Can we run it?" I asked.

"Let's ask Star," Rita teased. "She can see the future. Star, what do you think? Do you see us flying out in the helicopters or floating out in the boats?"

"I don't want to fly out in a helicopter," Star said. I was amazed she knew her mind so well, but then, she was prepared to die. "I love the river, and I want to stay with the rest of you for as long as I can. But don't do anything just because I say so."

Troy was pleased. "Freddy, how 'bout you?"

Freddy said, "I don't mind livin' on rice. There's a lot of canyon I haven't seen yet."

I remembered back to the van, when Troy had asked if we were up for the Grand Canyon. It had all hinged on Freddy. Once again, that seemed to be the case. I sensed how misleading it was to be asking Freddy—he was so different from the rest of us. Freddy was the only one, I knew now, the only one

who had much of an idea in the first place what we might be getting into, and how bad it could get. He was raised out in the elements on the continental divide. I surveyed the lowering clouds. What about the rest of us? The clouds were darker than they'd been a half hour before. Freddy, I realized, was only speaking for himself; he'd never pretended otherwise. He was assuming that we all were looking out for ourselves. It was a scary thought.

"Let's run it," Freddy said. "It's not a ten, anyway."

*Livin' on rice*, I thought, that's us—*livin' on rice and adrenaline*.

We circled back upstream on the eddy, and then made for the current that was flowing into the right side of the rapid. The men on the shore were waving their arms, beckoning for us to come in, but we were committed now to Granite Falls. I felt like a wildwoman. "Wil-der-ness ther-a-py!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. My heart was going berserk. Troy was standing up on his seat and scouting. The men were running for a vantage point close to the rapid, now that they could see we were going to run it.

Behind us Freddy was standing up on top of the load in the center of the paddle raft, but he wasn't as close to the edge yet as we were.

"Good water down the right," Troy hollered back. "Rocks center and left. Watch where I enter—stay off the cliff! Looks nasty!"

A second later I could see down the rapid as well. Nasty is right. We were heading for the gut of the rapid, a long dropping succession of enormous waves on a thin line between the rocks in the center and the side waves exploding off the cliff on

the right. Over my shoulder I saw Troy in his glory, rowing the big water in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, and rowing like he was born to it. "*Downriver!*" I yelled. I braced as torrents of white water poured over and into the boat, and I was instantly soaked to my skin. To the left, I saw Al's face—all eyes—for the briefest of moments, a stone's throw away.

My awareness turned to the cliffs on our right, too close I thought, rushing by so fast and so close I thought certain we'd be dashed against them. Whenever a wave recoiling off the cliff threatened to turn us over, I could feel the boat cock to face it, and we stayed upright. It was over fast. At the bottom we squeezed barely to the right of a hole that would have flipped us, and rode up and down the tall tailwaves.

I rejoiced to see that Freddy's boat had come through as well, with no swimmers. Troy was standing and pointing back upstream, laughing. I spotted the four men, tiny figures now, atop boulders along the shore at the head of the rapid.

After several miles of flat water we neared Hermit, and the helicopters hovered above us. As it turned out, Hermit was easy to scout from the river. Troy stood up and yelled, "Read 'n' run!" and that's what we did, with a perfect run down a roller coaster of huge waves. Hermit wasn't scary at all, just good clean fun, and we were sure enjoying having the audience. "Those guys are probably up there writing songs about us," Adam said, as our boats floated side by side toward Crystal. "The legendary River Pirates—"They never will scout and they never show fear."

We ran another rapid that we knew couldn't be Crystal—Crystal was a 10. Then we floated again in tandem, holding the boats together. We began to hear thunder, rolling thunder,

booming its way up the canyon from the blackening clouds downstream. As soon as the first lightning bolt struck, the helicopters turned and fled upriver. Pug launched imaginary rockets at the fleeing enemy, while Rita and Adam did a victory dance in the front of the paddle raft. Troy was laughing. "Looks like our friends can't take a little weather."

Looking downstream, I could see a wide band of quartz angling from the river and running skyward through the black rock of the gorge. The next moment I couldn't see the bright band at all, or even the gorge. A dark wall of rain was marching up the canyon.

We couldn't see Crystal when we got there, but we could sure hear it down around the bend, waiting in its lair and growling like all the monsters of mythology combined into one. We got out of the boats and stumbled around in the rain, a steady, heartless, bone-freezing rain. Our minds nearly numb, we made our way down a trail and across a little creek just beginning to turn from clear to muddy red, then picked our way through a field of slippery boulders to the shore of the river. Between us and the cliff wall opposite, the entire flow of the river was pinched into a narrow slot and dropping into a hole so large it seemed out of scale with all the others on the river. The speed and the ferocity of the water stunned me. This was a revelation.

"You could drop a school bus into that hole," Adam said. "And look at the one right below it—nearly as bad!"

From the tops of boulders, we looked and pointed at the awful waves breaking upstream and back into the holes. Troy was talking about how to run it. I tried to picture the route he was describing, and couldn't in my wildest dreams imagine the

paddle raft being able to make the moves he was describing, not in this kind of water.

We stood there, Star and I, shivering and shaking and waiting. My feet ached from the cold. Star's hand went to the crystal that hung from her neck. I said, "Let me touch it too."

Freddy wasn't looking at the two huge holes right in front of us, he was looking downstream into the rain. Below the second hole the river widened out into two main channels with a mass of teeth in between—the tops of boulders sticking up from a submerged island.

"Look, Jessie!" Star said, and tugged at my arm. I looked back to the top of the rapid, and saw a red river overtaking the green one we had known. It was an uncanny sight. Just that quickly, the river had turned muddy red.

Freddy scrambled over to us, all happy through chattering teeth. "The *Rio Colorado*! '*Colorado*' means red!"

Troy came over, and then everybody. "What do you think, Freddy?" Troy said. His face looked gaunt under that yellow hood, his blue eyes were blazing.

Everybody was watching Freddy. He shrugged. "Looks pretty bad to me."

"But we can run it, right?"

"I'm not so sure."

"Then let me show you the run."

Troy explained his strategy, and Freddy listened. Then Freddy said, "I don't think so. Water's too strong, that hole's too bad. The river's real high right now—lots of power, lots of speed."

Rita was twisting at the hips, hugging herself and blowing her breath into the rain. "So whadda we do, Freddy?"

Again, he shrugged. "There's no reason we can't carry everything around the right side."

"You mean *walk*?" Troy said, unbelieving. "*Portage*? Look how far it is down there."

"It's a lot of work," I said, trying to help out, "but we know we'll get through it safe."

He gave me a look, like he wanted to reach out and hit me. "I can't believe this. Do you guys have any idea how much work that would be? Carrying all our stuff through this boulder field? Look, have we had any trouble so far? How many times have I flipped, tell me that. That's right—*zip, zero, nada*. And I'm going to make it through this one too. Freddy, I can't believe you. You guys have only flipped once, and that was on the first day. I mean, you ran Granite Falls without even looking at it. How do you explain that?"

"I can see this one," Freddy said softly. "I can see how bad it is. And I knew Granite wasn't a ten. This one's a ten, and I can see why."

Troy's face was all red. "Horn Creek was a ten in that stupid book."

"Maybe not at the water level we did it at," I pointed out for the sake of accuracy, and even more because I didn't want to be silenced. I sure didn't want to run Crystal. I'd gladly help Freddy haul the stuff around.

Troy turned on me, on everybody. "Look, we're going to run it, okay."

"Troy," I pleaded, "let's live to run another day."

"Hey, Jessie," Pug said. "If Troy says we're running it, we're running it. What a bunch of wimps. Professor's daughter."

## DOWNRIVER

I knew that would come up sometime. I snapped back the last thing I would've guessed, and I'm not even sure why. "I'm proud of my father, Pug. And you get out of my face."

I noticed Adam looking away. This wasn't his idea of a good time.

"So let's get started," Troy said.

"Sorry," Freddy said. "I'm walkin'. If we lose the boats in there, then what happens to us?"

Only Freddy, I realized, only Freddy would have the courage to stand up to Troy. The rest of us were sheep, and had been, all the way down the river.

I looked to Star—she was plenty relieved too.

"We can carry around and be all ready when you run," Freddy said helpfully, "in case anything happens."

"You're so sure we're going to flip," Troy sneered. "You'd love to rescue us, wouldn't you, Freddy?"

"Wait a minute, Troy," I said. "I want to get something clear. When you say 'us,' I hope you don't mean me. I'm walking."

Troy acted like I'd stabbed him in the heart or something. "Well, thanks a lot, Jessie, thanks for the vote of confidence. It's good to know who your friends are."

His eyes moved quickly to Pug, then to Adam. "Adam, will you run it with me?"

Adam looked so confused, all out of jokes and looking his age for once, standing there shivering in his suddenly ridiculous ninja suit. Troy's eyes locked on him; Troy didn't say another word. Adam's face ran the gamut of emotions, and then he ended up with a silly little smile. He drew his sword, brandished it menacingly at the rapid, then bowed.



The rain slackened, and we carried the dry bags through the long boulder field down to the surf-lapped beach near the end of the rapid. Trudging back through the boulders, I remembered how the guide said that Crystal never even used to be a rapid. I mentioned it to Freddy as we walked. "Nineteen sixty-six," I said. "All these boulders were washed into the canyon in one shot."

Freddy really liked thinking about it. "Those rocks out in the river making those holes," he said. "Think how big they are—the river can't budge them, but they washed down this side canyon. Pretty neat."

Now all we had to do was carry the paddle raft down. Over in the gear boat, Troy and Adam were making sure everything was secured, and were cinching their life jackets one last time. We didn't talk to them. Obviously they were nervous as could be. Pug stood watching them wistfully, wishing he'd been honored with the invitation that had gone to Adam.

We simply said, "Good luck," shouldered the paddle raft, and started our portage. As we crossed the creek and started into the boulder field, we heard a shout above the roar of the rapid and we looked upstream to see a brave, remarkable, idiotic sight: Troy at the oars, his boat picking up speed and approaching the rapid on the glassy incline that fed into the tongue. His ninja, jumping up and down in the front of the boat, was holding the bowline with one hand, hollering, and waving his free hand like a bronc rider.

We dropped the boat and scrambled for a better view. Evidently they didn't think they needed a rescue boat. More glory without us.

## DOWNRIVER

Troy was rowing hard, trying to break off the tongue, trying to pull against that current and break over the big wave on the right side of the tongue. He was working . . . working . . . working . . . but he wasn't making it. At the last second, when he was about to be swept sideways into the jaws of the hole, he spun the boat and took it head on. Amidst the fury of exploding red water, only flashes of them showed. I saw the black ninja suit hurtling the length of the boat, and I saw Troy's legs directly above the boat, in the air.

A surge lifted the boat up and over the towering wave below the hole. Adam was awash in the river—his hood and mask had been stripped away—and Troy was still in the boat, fighting to regain the oars. The boat dropped sideways into the second hole, and then it flipped.

"Quick!" Freddy yelled, and we jerked the paddle raft over our heads and started stumbling through the boulders. I was breathing hard, falling down, banging my legs. They're going to die, I thought. What in the world are we doing down here?

Halfway down the carry we spotted the gear boat, overturned and pinned against one of the rocks out in the river. It was stuck out there. No sign of Troy or Adam. "Holy mother," Rita said. "Holy mother."

It must have taken fifteen minutes for us to get our boat back in the water. Then we took off, paddling as hard as we could.

We found Troy on the left bank, where he'd crawled out of the water. He was lying facedown on the rocks, breathing hard. Pug said, "Buddy, you don't look too good."

"Let's hurry," I said. "We still have to find Adam."

Pug tried to lift Troy. Troy shook him off. "I'm okay, I can get up on my own." He slowly made his way to the paddle raft and got in.

We could have floated right past Adam. Star saw his head barely above the water on the right shore. He had one arm curled around a rock, his body hugging its downstream side. We were all shouting for joy; but when he saw us, he lacked the strength even to smile.

As Pug tied up the boat, we went to pull Adam up on the shore. "My arm," he said. Freddy got in the water with him and came stumbling up the bank with Adam on his back, crying out in pain. As we took him from Freddy and eased him down on a ledge, we could see his right arm dangling useless at his side.

"Dislocated," Adam groaned. "Dislocated my shoulder."

"You're alive," I said. "That's what matters."

"I couldn't get out of the current," Adam was telling Troy. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get to shore—couldn't use my arm."

Troy wasn't saying anything. I wondered if he was even hearing Adam.

I tried to look them over for other injuries. Cuts and bruises, lots of those, but I couldn't see anything worse, only Adam's dislocated shoulder. My mind was racing, trying to think if there was anything we could do about his shoulder. I wished I knew more. We scrambled for the dry clothes from the paddle raft. At least we had dry clothes, sleeping bags, and tents with us. I don't think we could've kept those guys alive otherwise. Most of the rest of our stuff was lost under the flipped boat. I knew about hypothermia, knew we had to get them warmed

up, and fast. Freddy and Star set up a tent in record time, and we got them into dry clothes and sleeping bags inside the tent.

Before too long the sun came out and the temperature shot up about twenty degrees. Troy and Adam were able to come out of the tent and warm up in the sun.

"I could use one of those helicopters about now," Adam said. I could tell he was in a world of pain. "Where are they when you need them?"

Freddy was thinking about it. He looked doubtful.

"If they don't come soon," Rita said, "we're sunk without that other boat. All our stuff's on it. What are we going to do now?"

"Well, Rita," Adam said, "so much for kicking the Grand Canyon's butt."

Troy still had nothing to say. He was lying on his back in the sun with his eyes closed.

Freddy said suddenly, "Is the water going down or coming up?"

"It was really low early this morning," I said.

"High water might free our other boat from that rock it's stuck on. We better be ready to catch it if it comes by."

We went to work pushing the paddle raft upstream, two hundred yards at least. We had to make sure we weren't going to get swept downstream and separated from the two guys if we got out in the current chasing the other boat.

And then we waited, as the shadows started to grow across the river.

I thought I saw something moving. A rock maybe, but where there wasn't one before. "Rocks don't move!" I yelled. "Here it comes!"

We paddled out and snagged it, then went back to Adam and Troy.

The good news was that we had our boat back; the bad news was that it was upside down. We could all remember what a struggle it had been to right the much lighter paddle raft when it had flipped. Plus, we were short one man. Adam sure couldn't pull on anything right now. Getting this dead weight turned over seemed like an impossible task to me, but Freddy went to work rigging a pulley system, zigzagging a long rope through climbing carabiners. Nobody had the slightest idea what he was doing, but he seemed to have a plan, so everybody was happy to just do what he said. And it worked. By degrees we pulled on the free end of the rope and watched the beast of a boat lift little by little out of the water until it stood vertical and flopped down upright. A major victory.

We were losing the day. People were talking about getting some rice cooked. Freddy was looking around a lot, and then he said, "I don't think we should camp here."

"You gotta be kidding," Rita said.

Freddy pointed. "We're at the mouth of a wash. It's clouding up again. The weather might come back—it could flash flood here. We should go downstream and find someplace else."

Troy glared at him. He'd had more than enough of Freddy for one day. "Give it a rest," Troy said wearily. "I'm stayin' right here. That wash doesn't go anywhere. It's not like the mouth of a creek or anything."

I didn't know what to do. But like everybody else, I was too tired even to think. Probably nothing was going to happen

to us. It wasn't worth the effort under these conditions. We let the night come.

Adam was trying his best to be brave, but anyone could see his shoulder was terribly painful. "I could try to fix it for you," Freddy said.

"You're kidding."

"I might make it worse, but probably I can pull it back in."

"You've done this before?"

"Watched my dad do it."

"To who?"

"A guy that got thrown off a horse."

"Give it a try, Freddy."

"You're sure?"

"I have a feeling that help is not on the way."

By the gas lantern, Freddy had Adam lie on his back in the sand. Freddy took off his left shoe and lay down on his own back alongside Adam, nesting his left foot in Adam's armpit. Freddy sat up a bit, took Adam's forearm with both hands, and said, "Ready?"

"Is this the part about stretching ourselves?" Adam quipped.

Freddy leaned back and pulled, smoothly and decisively.

And that was it. We heard it go back in. The bone went back into its socket, and Adam could feel it as quickly as it had happened.

"How does it feel?" we were all asking.

"A lot better—like a bad ache instead of bloody murder."

"This guy's somethin' else," Rita said. "Freddy, what can't you do? Want to come back to New York with me? We could use a guy like you."

Well after dark, Star and I were finally in our bags and about to succumb to exhaustion when we heard someone moving around, coming and going from the kitchen. I wondered if the ever-ravenous Pug was wiping out the remains of our food.

The beam of my light fell on Freddy. He had one of the gas bottles in his hand. "What're you doing?" I asked him.

"Moving this stuff out of the wash." He pointed at the sky, to clouds speeding under the moon. "Look how fast the clouds are moving."

Star and I struggled out to help him. We stumbled around like sleepwalkers, but we did manage to move the most essential gear to higher ground. I'm sure everyone could hear us, but nobody else appeared. Back in our tent again, we collapsed on top of our bags, unable to muster the strength even to get inside them. "This is one pooped pup," I murmured.

"Me too. Thank God for Freddy."

"I don't even want to think of where we'd be without him."

# 15 //

Thunder was rumbling, moving our way. My dad and I were in a lot of trouble and we knew it. We were way above the tree line, trying to get over a pass, as the clouds were turning black and the wind began to blow. "Can't we turn back?" I pleaded, but he answered almost desperately, "It's too late now," and kept climbing with giant strides. I struggled to keep up, but I couldn't. Lightning started snapping and the thunder shook the mountains. Suddenly the swirling clouds dropped, and my dad was disappearing into the mists. "Dad!" I called. "Wait up! Wait for me!" Then he was gone, and I was running this way and that, stumbling, lost in the fog, calling his name. I caught sight of him again, nearing a lake at the bottom of the slope. The surface of the lake was all jumping with hail. As he went striding into the water, I yelled, "What are you doing?" and he said, "It's not any wetter in the lake." I saw his face for a minute but then he suddenly disappeared as the lightning struck, and I ran up and down the shore, trying in vain to catch another glimpse of him. "Dad!" I cried. "Dad!"

As I struggled myself awake, I saw the vague form of Star's face, still asleep, and I remembered where I was. My dad can't help me here, I thought. Thunder rumbled ominously, not very far away. And then again, closer. This was real thunder, not dream thunder. Star's face was suddenly illuminated as if by a flashbulb, as lightning cracked close by, and then the



thunder rattled the gorge with an overwhelming concussion, like a bomb blast. Star woke, I heard curses. Suddenly the wind hit, a cyclone of a wind, and collapsed our tent around us. Before we could even react, the rain came, a raw, primal, take-no-prisoners deluge. If you're going to venture into the bowels of the earth, it seemed to say, take this! I was wide awake now.

Where to start? What could we possibly do?

Star was flailing around, elbows flying. Water was already coursing under the tent. "Stuff your sleeping bag before it gets wet," I told her, and so that's what she did. Next thing, we reached out and grabbed our sandy slickers. We pulled them on, half inside and half outside the wreck of our tent, and found ourselves standing in the downpour amidst the flashing lightning. In the earliest light of predawn, punctuated by brilliant strobes of lightning, the innumerable jagged facets of the gorge were glistening like slick knives. Immediately behind our camp, sudden waterfalls were spilling off the black rock and streams were running everywhere through camp.

I saw a form running, and recognized Freddy. He grabbed a rocket box that was being swept down the creek that was suddenly running through the middle of our camp. I could see odds and ends out in the river, lost and gone forever, stuff we hadn't had the energy to move the night before. Troy and Pug were standing on the far side of the wash, which was running almost hip-deep. They seemed paralyzed. Freddy yelled to them to get on this side of the creek, and fast.

Freddy sprinted up the hillside to the landing where we'd stashed the group gear. Back to the beach in a few bounds

with a propane bottle in each hand, he yelled, "Get what you can, get it into the boats!"

Everybody got the message. But for a moment I paused to look. In the first light of dawn, lit brighter every few seconds with flashes of lightning, monumental red waterfalls were pouring off the cliffs and into the river. Star and I scrambled our way up toward the gear, then hurtled down the disintegrating slope with it to the boats. I saw Rita's face, I saw Adam's. Everybody was working now in an amazing display of what can be done in almost no time by people who are scared out of their minds. Troy and Pug were in the boats catching gear, and the rest of us were making as many trips as we could. What little beach there had been was washing away before our eyes. Rocks were starting to tumble down among us, some as big as basketballs.

"Let's get out of here!" Rita yelled.

Then I heard a sound I'll never forget and likely never hear again: the low grinding of boulders tumbling down the wash.

Suddenly the boats were out in the middle of the river, and nobody had untied them. I saw Troy leap for the oars and Pug reached for a paddle. "Swim!" Freddy yelled, and jumped into the river. Glancing back and seeing all hell breaking loose, I realized I had only a moment, and jumped in after him.

I had no life jacket—we'd thrown them into the boats. I was swimming for my life. I looked over and saw Adam alongside me, struggling. I was able to reach the side of the paddle raft, grab Adam, and hold on to the precious chicken line. Troy was hauling Rita into the gear boat. Freddy and Pug helped Adam and me into the paddle raft. I looked back to shore. The side-stream was huge by now, flushing at high speed out of the steep

draw and occupying all of what had been camp. Even above the rain I could hear the grinding of the boulders.

*Star*, I realized. "Oh my God, where's *Star*?"

It didn't matter how many times we double-checked. She wasn't in either of the boats, she was just gone. And I had promised I wouldn't let her out of my sight.

"We've done it now," I cried.

"Anybody see her get off the shore?" Troy asked.

No one had.

Numb, we floated on in the murky light, as the awareness of our loss grew and grew. No one could speak. All was black.

Rita couldn't resist. From right there in the front of Troy's boat, she turned around to Troy and said, "Freddy told you not to camp there."

"Shut up, Rita," he said wearily.

"Yeah, well, now *Star*'s probably dead."

He took an oar off its pin, swung it, and swatted her off the front of his boat and into the river. Pug stood with his mouth agape, and the rest of us started paddling over toward Rita.

"You wouldn't listen to Freddy," I yelled at Troy, "because you always have to be in control. It's exactly what you accused Al of—only it's true of you, not him."

He stared at me like he wanted to kill me, as we pulled Rita onto the paddle raft.

"That's what it is with the maps too," I kept on. "You want everybody looking at you, not some map. You don't care about anybody but yourself. Look what you've done!"

"Jessie, you're hysterical." Troy turned his back on the paddle raft, on all of us.

I was trying to block it from my mind, but I couldn't—the Death card, the Grim Reaper astride the white horse—I had to get past the thought of it and find Star. She's all right, I told myself. We'll find her.

The rain quit as suddenly as it had begun. Shivering, we made for a rocky shore and tied up, then mechanically began stowing things away on the boats. It had to be done. Nobody did any talking. Troy and Pug were sitting off by themselves and watching us work.

In a few minutes we were back on the river, floating somberly, shivering and brooding. Pug rode with Troy.

That's when it happened—the miracle. That's when we got let off the hook that we were sure to hang from for the rest of our lives. We heard a voice calling, then again, and there stood Star, knee-deep in water at the edge of a little beach, waving her arms. "Over here! Over here!"

We were so relieved we swarmed all over her, everyone all trying to hug her at once, except for Troy who was off to the side doing his best to look vindicated.

"Hope and inspiration, Jessie," she whispered weakly. "I kept thinking I could choose to live, and I did." I put my arms around her and walked her over to a spot where we could sit down. Rita brought over a sleeping bag to use like a blanket. Star was in a daze. Adam came over and sat by her. They had both been through it.

All of us were freezing. We broke out a stove and a propane bottle and fixed some hot coffee. We couldn't get enough of it, especially Star. "Hey, Adam," Rita hollered. "Got any jokes? Give us some shtick!"

"Actually, Rita, I'm wondering about something. . . ."

Adam reached into his soggy day pack and pulled out his blue soap dish. It was dripping water as he held it out. Adam unfastened the lid, and then carefully opened it from both sides. The scorpion was sloshing around in a quarter-inch of water, which Adam poured off. Back on dry plastic, the scorpion raised its tail and squared off. "Hardy little bugger," Adam said.

Pug was looking over his shoulder. "Is he still alive? Let me see him."

Adam snapped the lid shut and put the case back in his day pack. He was awfully subdued, and had been since the day before. I'm sure his shoulder was still plenty sore, and having to swim again this morning couldn't have helped.

After changing into whatever dry clothes we could find, we got back on the river. We were almost as quiet as we'd been before finding Star. We broke out of the gorge as the clouds began to lift, and shafts of light illuminated the full width of the Grand Canyon, falling on temples, buttes, spires, and mesas floating like islands among dissolving and regathering clouds. In places we could see all the way from the river to the forest on the north rim, its tall trees cloaked with fresh snow.

Here was the Grand Canyon I'd always pictured, only glowing with more color than I could have imagined. Two rainbows appeared, seeming to draw their hues from the multicolored formations of stone, the gold clouds, purple clouds, and the blue sky. I was at the back of the boat, close to Freddy. I said, "It couldn't be more different from this morning."

He smiled and said, "Same old friends, the wind and the rain."

Another world, I thought, Freddy really does live in another world.

We ran rapids all day, including three or four that we needed to scout. Early on, Troy and Pug blasted through one of these without scouting, and after that Troy was so far ahead we couldn't even see him. We were on our own in the paddle raft, and we knew there'd be no one to rescue us if we had any trouble. I for one didn't care that Troy had left us behind—I knew he wouldn't be much help in an emergency anyway.

I caught myself starting to catalog all his faults, small and large. That I had been so impressed with him, I realized, probably says more about me than it does about him. It was so easy to just let him think for both of us. I guess I let those blue eyes get to me. Big mistake.

We put on the miles. The river was running a rich red with the flooding, and it was running high. We were back in the sunshine and feeling warmth in our bones again for the first time since we started into the gorge with Al, which seemed like another lifetime. A helicopter appeared, remaining fairly high up. As quickly as it had come, it disappeared. "They seem to be just keeping tabs," I said. "Maybe counting heads after Crystal and the weather."

Late in the day we found Troy and Pug at the mouth of a canyon where four boats were tied up at a small camp, with no people around. The canyon was discharging clear water into the red of the Colorado. The stream was the largest we'd seen since the River of Blue, and it ran pure and fast like a Rocky Mountain trout stream. Troy was acting pretty smug about it,

as if he had personally discovered the good drinking water. I refrained from making any more remarks; I could see his giant ego wobbling on matchstick legs. We were thirsty, having avoided the sand-laden river water, and here was a stream the storm hadn't muddied. We filled our water jugs.

"So what was keeping you guys?" Pug said.

"Yeah, right," Rita shot back. "Thanks for watching out for us. What if we'd flipped?"

Troy said, "Put a sock in it, Rita. They can hear you back in New York."

Rita went after him that quick, and I believe she would have done some damage if we hadn't pulled her away.

"Lemme go!" she was yelling. "Think you can knock me in the river, do you? Watch it, Troy, just watch it."

"Who do you think these boats belong to?" I asked, hoping to distract them from all the hassling.

It felt strange standing around these other boats and all this equipment that was attached to other people.

"Probably some people on a hike up the canyon," Troy said.

Troy and Pug were anxious to put back on the river, but the rest of us, happy to be off the boats, were easing our backs and stretching our legs. Freddy and Star and I were talking about going for a little walk up the stream. Rita said she was too tired to walk, and Adam couldn't; he was limping worse than before.

"Hey, we have a long way to go," Troy said.

"We won't be gone long," I said. "No more than a half an hour."

"A short hike," Troy said sarcastically. "Seems like I've heard that one before."

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Star and Freddy and I walked along the stream until we came to a shelf of rock by a crystal pool, underneath a short waterfall. We took off our sneakers and rinsed our feet in the icy water, then lay back on the warm rock and basked in the sunshine. It felt so good. It was such a reprieve to be away from Pug and Troy, to try to forget for a few minutes that we weren't okay anymore. I heard the song of the canyon wren, and tried to clear my mind of the anxiety, to focus only on the wren and the cascading stream, but I couldn't.

Star and Freddy sat up. Maybe they couldn't rest either. "Look at you," Freddy said to Star. "Look at those muscles." He playfully felt her bicep. "You've been getting stronger and stronger."

Star was getting into it. "Maybe I have," she said, as she flexed one arm, then the other. "I never thought I could do all this."

"See, Star," I said. "I was right. You are going to live to be an old lady—and probably a tough old one at that."

We all got a kick out of picturing Star as this eccentric old lady, covered with beads and bandanas, friendship bracelets up and down her legs.

As we were laughing, we heard voices. Hikers soon appeared on their way back to their boats.

A dozen or so men and women in their thirties and forties, they stopped to chat. They were so friendly and so normal, just like people from Boulder. What I couldn't get over was, they looked so clean. And the amazing part was that they were on their twentieth day of a thirty-day trip. They'd been side-hiking every canyon they could, all the way down the river, and had



already spent a night here. They told us that the hike they'd just made was the most wonderful of all. Four miles up the trail, they said, a river bursts out of the redwall limestone cliffs. "It's the largest spring in the world," a woman said. She was the one I'd been watching. A radiant person, sturdy, someone obviously at peace with herself and filled with the joy of it all.

"What's it called?" I asked.

They seemed surprised that we didn't know. "Thunder River," she said. "If you guys can possibly manage the time, it really is one of the wonders of the world. Everywhere the mists from the falls touch, it's an oasis—big cottonwood trees, vines, ferns. . . ."

Freddy was wide-eyed, taking it all in.

"We're behind schedule," I said. "But we'll tell the rest of our group about it."

"How far is it to Lava Falls?" Freddy asked them.

They figured out pretty fast that we didn't have a mile-by-mile guide. "We lost it in the river," I explained.

As we walked back to the boats together, Freddy asked them how to run Lava.

"There won't be enough water for the left run," the woman told us. "You'll have to run the right, and it'll be wild. Most boats come through totally out of control, but right side up. Actually we've had a lot more trouble in Upset—most people do. On our last trip we flipped two out of our four boats in the big hole in Upset."

"Upset," I said faintly. "Nobody even told us about Upset."

"You'll get there tomorrow. We'll give you one of our mile-by-mile guides so it doesn't sneak up on you. It's really long,

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and kind of on a turn. The big hole's at the bottom. It definitely deserves a good scout."

Back at the boats we joined the rest of our group. They were just hanging out, and to my surprise Troy and Pug didn't look unhappy about waiting for us. The other group started putting on their life jackets and getting ready to go. The woman I liked so much brought over the river guide and said, "I can't resist making one more suggestion. Don't miss Havasu Creek if you can help it."

The woman quickly flipped through the guide. "We're at mile one thirty-four here—the mouth of Tapeats Creek. Upset's at one fifty. Havasu Creek is at one fifty-seven. Hug the cliffs on the left as you're getting close to Havasu. It's so narrow at the bottom that you can slide right by it. As far as you want to hike up the creek, there's one beautiful blue-green pool after another formed by natural travertine dams, and lots of waterfalls: Beaver, Mooney, Havasu. . . . Well, Havasu Falls is a bit far. It's up near Supai, the Indian village."

"Indian village?" Suddenly Troy was all ears. "Is there a road into there?"

"No, only mules and helicopters come into the village from the rim. And hikers, of course. Anyway if you got up the creek at least to Beaver Falls, it would be well worth it."

We watched their boats round a bend and disappear. I thought Troy would be anxious to get back on the river, but he said he wanted to stay right where we were for a while. That was just fine with everybody else. Maybe he's going to calm down, I thought.

Dinner that night was certainly less than gourmet—melted cheese over rice. As we ate, the tension seemed to lift a bit. Troy and Pug were feeling better, that was easy to see. They didn't go so far as to offer to help with the dishes, but they did say a campfire would be nice, and started gathering driftwood. Pug was excited, like a little kid. "Let's get lots of wood," I heard him telling Troy. "Let's have a real bonfire."

Adam and I were doing the dishes. I was thinking how ironic it was that he was more helpful now that he was disabled than he'd been when he was healthy. He was getting around with a sturdy walking staff of tamarisk that he'd whittled with his pocket knife. "How's the shoulder?" I asked him.

"Still hurts a lot—I can't lift my arm up very high—but nothing like it did when it was dislocated. I mean, that was painful."

"I bet it was." I was thinking, this is the first real conversation we've had all the way down the river. I was thinking about comparing notes with him about Troy—things obviously weren't the same between them, either—but I thought better of it. "Maybe we can take a look at your foot afterwards," I suggested.

"I cleaned it and put that antibiotic stuff on while you were up the creek."

"So how's it look?"

"Fine," he said, less than convincingly.

"You're limping worse than before. Let me take another look at it."

"Really, Jessie, I already cleaned it up."

It's getting infected, I thought. My dad's like that; he doesn't want you to know when he's sick.

"I don't want to have to amputate with that rubber sword."

He smiled. "Lost it in Crystal."

It got dark, and we were all sitting around the campfire. Pug looked like the proverbial cat that ate the canary, and after a while we found out why when he brought out a quart water bottle full of a golden liquid. "Look what that other group donated to us," he said. "Tequila."

"You're kidding," I objected. "You guys ripped them off?"

"Don't get all excited, Jessie," Troy said. "Just think of it as a gift. . . . Sort of like the river guide they gave us."

"Who cares?" Rita said. "Let's have a drink."

Pug took out his big knife, stuck it between his teeth, and mumbled, "Hey, we're River Pirates, remember?"

The bottle went around once, and then Troy remembered that we had a few limes in the bottom of the cooler. He brought them over all quartered on a dish, with a salt shaker in his hand. "Let's do it up right," he said, "like they do in Mexico."

Passing the lime sections around, he said, "I'll give you a demo." He salted the crease between his left thumb and forefinger, then reached for the tequila. Everyone else was watching him. Mr. Personality, I thought. There's nothing that makes him feel better than being the center of attention, calling all the shots. Now he's reduced to calling tequila shots.

Troy licked his fist, took a swallow or two of tequila, and then quickly bit into the lime, grimacing with satisfaction.

"Just like they do in Mexico . . .," Adam repeated, as Troy passed him the bottle. Tilting the bottle toward us as he prepared to indulge, he said, "*Salud, mis amigos—salud, pesetas y amor.*"

I was surprised to hear Star's voice from right beside me. "I didn't know you spoke Spanish, Adam."

"Accent wasn't right," Freddy said, "—sounded a little Japanese." Everyone was certainly enjoying the break in the tension. It was great to be having a bit of fun again. Maybe there was still hope for us.

Adam bowed, and passed the bottle to Rita, who looked around and said, "You know, guys, we're somethin' else. Here we are way down the Grand Canyon. We may not have kicked its butt, but I still say, we're kickin' butt."

"Rhaat onn!" Pug bellowed. "Pass the ammunition!"

"We're doing great," Troy said expansively. "We're going all the way."

"All the way to . . . *where?*" Star asked, wide-eyed. She took the bottle from Freddy and took two or three gulps before she started coughing, yet still managed to bite into the lime, only remembering afterwards about the salt and finishing up all out of order, to everyone's appreciation.

Adam was cracking up.

Out of nowhere, Pug said, "There's a deep pool just up the creek a little ways."

Nobody knew what he was getting at. "So," Rita said. "So what about it?"

"Well," Pug hesitated. "I thought maybe we . . . we could go skinny-dipping."

He looked around with a big, sheepish smile on his face. "C'mon, you guys. The moon's up and everything."

Rita and I were cracking up. "In your dreams, Pug," she told him. "In your dreams."

"Seriously," I heard Troy saying as the bottle came to me again, "it's time to be thinking about what's next."

"Lava Falls," I said. "That's what's next. It's only forty-five miles away. We're at one thirty-four, and Lava Falls is at mile one seventy-nine. What did Al call it . . . 'the steepest navigable rapid in North America'?"

Quickly I licked up the salt, took a big swallow of tequila, and bit into the lime. Steam must have been escaping from my ears. Finally I was as warm as I could want to be, with the bonfire cooking me from the outside and the tequila from the inside.

As everybody was somberly considering those two words, "Lava Falls," Troy waved his hands and said, "That's not what I'm talking about. I mean, where next after the Grand Canyon?"

He's got to be kidding, I thought.

"Paris?" Adam suggested quizzically. "Let's all go to Paris together and speak French. Go to French restaurants, order right off the menu. Wear French clothes, drink French wine, drive French cars, smoke French cigarettes. Or maybe Greece—sail around the islands in a yacht, I'd like that."

"Eating Greek food and speaking Greek," Pug suggested.

Troy was chuckling too, with the official manner of a master of ceremonies. The bottle was making its fourth trip around.

Troy said quickly, while Adam was poking the fire and Pug was finishing the bottle, "I'm talking Mexico. Now listen, everybody, we've had a few disagreements, but we're awesome. All of us—I mean everybody."

Troy, I thought, you are amazing. There you go with the eyes, even trying them on me again.

"Do you realize how close the Mexican border is? Jessie, Star . . . do you have any idea how nice it is down there in the winter? Rita, Freddy, Adam . . . do you have any idea of the rate of exchange—two thousand, three thousand pesos for one dollar! We could live like kings!"

"Living like *kings*," Adam chanted, fairly exploding with the image.

"Here he goes," said Rita appreciatively. "This guy's too much."

"Yes, my friends," Adam whispered wistfully. "We'll be living like kings . . . living in a tile-floored hacienda by the sea, with the trade winds blowing gentle breezes through the palms. Accordions playing, soft guitars strumming, castanets clicking, iguanas patrolling the rooftops. . . . We bathe in the sea, we rest in our hammocks, we sip piña coladas served by sandaled servants who always wear white and have big hats. The stirrers in our drinks are hand-carved from native plastic in the image of Aztec gods. Parrots warble romantic music and the servants add the harmony parts if you ask them to. There's fruit on all sides, all the fruit you can eat—papayas, mangos, and pineapples—and endless supplies of limes and tequila. Salt, naturally, and fresh fish—red snapper, sea bass, mahi-mahi—"

"We got the picture," Troy said impatiently, ignoring the

possibility that Adam was putting him on. Or was it all in my tequila-fired imagination?

Anyway I was laughing, and Troy was saying, "Seriously—you guys don't understand what that rate of exchange means. You don't go to a big international resort—you go to a remote village on the beach, you rent one of those open-air houses, and you live off the local economy."

Great, I thought. Spend the rest of my life as a fugitive from justice, with Troy, in Mexico. "It must cost *something*," I objected, trying to keep a straight face.

Troy's eyes scanned us, and he said, "Hey, I got money, okay? Money's not the problem. Does anybody have a better idea? I'm not joking—I'm going to Mexico and you're all invited."

"Livin' like kings," Pug said.

Troy was looking around for his support. "We can do it."

"I know," Adam said. "I've been down there before. People are nice too. And if you get away from where the gringos are, everything costs next to nothing, it's true. Not to mention we'd be escaping justice, as they say. . . ."

"On to Mexico," Pug sang.

Adam waved the empty bottle. "*Viva Mexico!*"

Now I was all confused. Maybe Adam would do that. . . . It would be just like him.

"Rita," Troy said excitedly, "give me that river map. I got an idea."

Troy started flipping through the pages. "That other group mentioned a hiking trail that goes out Havasu Creek through some Indian village. Remember, Al is expecting us to go all the way through the canyon and take out where everyone else



does, either Diamond Creek or Lake Mead. Here it is—we'll hit Havasu Creek tomorrow."

"Look who's all into the mile-by-mile guide," Star said, and pointed at Troy. She said it loud and clear. Tippy, but loud and clear. She was getting really spunky.

Troy looked up, astonished to realize that Star, of all people, was making fun of him.

"Hey, I know why we're working on a new plan," Rita shouted, tickled with some great insight of her own. "*Troy's afraid of Lava*. Troy's afraid to run Lava Falls after the flip in Crystal! That's why he wants to go out Havasu Creek! Didn't like that spin in the washing machine, eh, Troy?"

Troy lost it. He jumped up and stood in front of Rita, who was rapidly scrambling to her feet. "Maniac," she said, "can't you take a joke?"

Troy pushed her suddenly, and she went sprawling down into the sand, catching herself on her hands.

Rita was scrambling to her feet again, and so was everybody else, trying to back up and get out of the way.

"Party's over," Freddy said, stepping forward. "Let's call it a night."

"Who says it's over?" Troy snarled. "Nothing's over till I say it's over."

"Yeah," Pug said, swaggering into the clearing. "Who says it's over? Freddy?" He drew his knife from its sheath, and said, "From now on, you're going to do whatever Troy tells you to do. Got it, punk?"

Pug was waving the big knife back and forth for emphasis, swaying a little from the tequila. Just that quick Freddy struck,

and the knife went flying. In a few seconds, as we watched with our mouths open, Pug lay wheezing on the ground. Nobody reached for the knife, certainly not Troy. He'd backed away, and there was more moonlight than firelight on his face.

Hurt and drunk, Pug was having a hard time picking himself up. Freddy picked up the knife, took a few steps, held it by the tip of the blade, and sent it flying end over end into the river. Everyone could hear the splash. Freddy said, "I'm tired of looking at that thing."

Troy grabbed Adam's walking stick away from him. He was watching Freddy and Pug both, trying to gauge how soon his Goliath was going to recover. Rita reached down for a rock, grabbed a second one, and handed it to me.

Pug was back on his feet, but he didn't look much like a warrior. Troy threw the staff down and muttered, "Such a bunch of losers I never saw in my life."

Troy and Pug went down to the beach together and were carrying on quite a discussion, plotting their revenge, no doubt. Some tough guys, I thought. I'm not impressed. I thought we should get away from them a little, where we could talk among ourselves. We started to walk up the creek. "My foot's hurtin' too bad," Adam said. "I'm going back to the fire."

"I'll stay with Adam," Rita said.

We sat on the slickrock by a little pool along the creek, just the three of us again. For a long while, we didn't speak. The nearly full moon lit up the canyon walls and the river and our faces. It was a cold moon, and I was afraid.

"Freddy," Star said finally, "you have to watch out for those guys. There's no telling what they might do."

"I'm not afraid of guys like that."

"It's Troy," she said, all serious. "He really has it in for you."

"If those two hike out Havasu Creek tomorrow," I said, "it's none too soon for me."

"Maybe we should all go out Havasu Creek," Star suggested. "Give them a head start, so we won't have to be with them, and then go up ourselves. Adam's hurt . . . we're just putting off the inevitable."

"You mean, turning ourselves in," I said.

"What else are we going to do?"

I could see that Freddy wasn't so sure about leaving the canyon just yet. But he held back, and kept his thoughts to himself.

Back in camp Star and I were just about asleep when I became aware of someone outside our tent, calling my name. It was Freddy. I struggled to my elbows and unzipped the tent. I parted the door and saw Freddy's face in the moonlight. He was in agony. "I got stung," he said. "Couple of times."

"Stung?"

"In my sleeping bag."

Poor Freddy. The thought of him being hurt had never entered my mind. I'd always thought of him as impervious to pain. He knelt on one knee, with one hand behind his back.

"What was it?" Star asked. "What stung you?"

"I don't know . . .," he said, his voice thick and choking in his throat. "It got me more than once—I think it must have been a scorpion."

"Oh my God," I said. "Freddy, get in here."

With our flashlights we located the stings. There were two of them, tiny bumps along Freddy's spine in the small of his back. "Star," I said, "would you get the first aid kit off the boat, and pull out the book?"

Troy did this, I thought, I know it.

I had Freddy crawl into Star's sleeping bag, while I scrambled out of my own. I pulled on my jeans and a sweater. Freddy's breathing was in short gasps now. "Tell me what it feels like," I asked him.

He was writhing around in the bag. I felt his forehead; he had quite a fever.

"It hurts like crazy where I was stung. . . . My throat is dry. I need a drink of water."

I handed him my water bottle, and he managed to sit up on one elbow and take a few sips. "Where's Star? What's taking her so long?" he asked.

"She'll be right here."

Parting the door, I saw Star with the flashlight in her teeth, stumbling toward us with the heavy first aid rocket box in her arms.

Back inside she was pulling on more clothes, while I was reading what the first aid book had to say about scorpion stings. It wasn't going to be much help about what to actually do, I could see right away. Treat for shock, it said, and get the victim to the hospital.

"What's it say?" Freddy rasped.

"It says babies are in the most trouble, because of their low body weight."

"Jessie, please read me the whole thing. I need to know."

I looked at Star, and then I read. "Of the twenty known species of scorpion in the Southwest, only one, the slender scorpion, is considered lethal. It is found mostly in southern Arizona and in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The sting of other scorpions causes local swelling, while that of the slender scorpion is systemic, with intense pain at the site of the sting which may not abate for up to twelve hours. Small children and infants are at greatest risk due to low body weight. Multiple stings, especially around the neck or spine, can prove lethal for adults as well. Reactions vary considerably from person to person. Respiratory distress, shock, and exhaustion can lead to death. Keep the victim calm. Treat with ice at the site of the sting, treat for shock, hospitalize if possible. Several Arizona hospitals have antivenin."

"That's all?"

"That's it," I said helplessly.

"Freddy," Star said, "you're not going to die. I know it."

Freddy grinned through his pain. "I'm not planning on it. . . . I keep thinking about something my mother told me. The Hopis get bit sometimes when they do the snake dance. I asked her why those rattlesnake bites don't make 'em sick or kill 'em. She said"—Freddy's hand emerged from the bag and pointed to his head—"the answer's up here."

"That's it," I said. "Whistle through your teeth and spit, Freddy. Like your dad always used to say."

We sat beside him into the endless night. No more talking, it was too hard on him. We had no ice to put on the stings. I kept my hand on his forehead, and our eyes met often. His breathing came more and more labored as his pulse raced, and

he tossed and turned with all his muscles contracting. He had retreated deep into himself, and was drawing strength from places only he knew. Sometime after the moon went down, though, it all started to back off, and eventually he was able to fall asleep. Star and I were so thankful. We kept watching him to make sure he was still breathing. I looked to Star. "He's gonna make it, Star," I whispered.

"Jessie, I think we should wake Adam and Rita. We need to tell them what's happened. I think we need to do something. We need to get away from these guys before something worse happens. I've seen people like Troy before. You have to get away from them."

The four of us gathered just outside the tent, whispering. "I already checked," Adam said first thing. "That scorpion in my blue soap dish—it's not there. They could have killed Freddy."

We were all of one mind: We had to leave as quickly as possible, and we had to take both boats so they couldn't follow us. The first light of dawn was already starting to show. We would have to be quick and very quiet. "Take your sleeping bags and clothes," I said. "There's food on the gear boat. Leave everything else behind. We can make it to Havasu Creek by this evening."

We carried Freddy, inside the sleeping bag, and slipped away onto the river.

"Headin' for Havasu," I sang softly. "We are headin' for Havasu Creek, Freddy. Home stretch."

He couldn't hear me. He was asleep, lying in the sleeping bag on top of the cooler in front of me. I was rowing the gear boat and trying to avoid any waves that would splash him. Fortunately we had no big water to run until Upset.

Upset. The name was working on me. It was down there waiting, seven miles short of Havasu. As we floated through the slow and chilly hours of the morning, I thought about what was coming. Counting me, we had only three able-bodied paddlers, and with only three paddles in the water, we wouldn't have a prayer in a major rapid like Upset. We'd all have to run it in the gear boat.

It was going to be up to me to get us through Upset. I was the only one of us who'd handled the oars. We'd deflate the paddle raft, fold it up, and leave it at Upset. Then I'd row them all through. Portaging was out. It was a twenty-three-mile day to Havasu Creek. We had to get there today. It was going to be up to me.

We rounded a bend and came into the sunshine at last. Within moments I was warm. I felt good, I felt strong. I can do it, I told myself. Blue skies ahead; it won't be the kind of day we had at Crystal. I'll scout the rapid and I'll find the way and I'll bring them through to Havasu. Ten miles up the trail to the Supai village.

Freddy was stirring. Maybe it was the warmth that was bringing him around. He was trying to lift his head, and was having trouble clearing his eyes. "Easy, Freddy." I cushioned his head with my daypack. "Take your time."

A few more attempts and he was seeing me, right there, a girl with oars in her hands and the sun on her face and her heart singing like a canyon wren.

He propped himself up on an elbow.

"Welcome back, Freddy. Sure is good to see you."

"Me too," he said feebly. "I mean, it's good to see you too."

He was looking around. I could tell he was better—he wanted to look at the light on the passing canyon walls.

"Blue skies," I said. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been beat with a stick. But the pain is gone. I never guessed there was anything like that. You wouldn't think that much pain could come out of something so little."

I handed him my water bottle and he slowly drank from it. "When you carried me—got us on the river—that was good. I remember you telling me to keep quiet."

"We don't have to worry about them anymore. We left them behind for good."

I was turning the page in the river guide.

"Where are we, Jessie?"

"From here it's only about seventeen miles to Havasu Creek. I've been thinking about Upset a lot. I can run it. We can put everybody in this boat, and I can run it."

He sat up some more, and I could see he was thinking it through for himself. "You're right," he said finally. "You can do it. I know you can, but what's this about Havasu? Hiking out?"



You can run Lava too . . . we could see the rest of the canyon. . . .”

“You would, wouldn’t you? You’d keep right on going.”

“Sure. When are we going to get another chance?”

“You’re unbelievable. You’d go the rest of the way on a piece of driftwood. We could tie you down and let you float right on through Lava Falls all the way to Lake Mead.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I read in the guide about a woman back in the 1940s who ran sixty miles of the river down below Lava in just her life jacket.”

“Toss me overboard,” Freddy said with a chuckle.

“Sorry, you’re stuck with us, and we have this thing about eating. We’re three-quarters starved and we had to leave the stoves and the pots and pans behind.”

“Darn.”

“I hate to get serious, but I’m worried about Adam’s foot—about gangrene. And I’m thinking that maybe you should still get some medicine, the sooner the better.”

He was sitting up straight now, and the other boat had seen him. They shouted and came paddling hard. I pulled into an eddy so they could catch up.

We held the boats together and basked in each other’s company. I expected Rita would be shouting to the canyon rims, but this morning she was more like Star, quietly celebrating Freddy’s return. We shared a feeling at this moment that was inseparable from the water and the light and the canyon. I thought about how, not so long ago, I’d thought of my future as a black tunnel. Now it was all light, with the promise of living in this kind of light.

How close we’d become. We were all looking to each other,

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realizing the same thing. I was taking each of them in and savoring the moment. Adam, so full of life. Freddy, born for the wild places. Rita, the irrepressible. Star, my sister.

It was Adam who put the feeling into words, as the five of us floated down the river with one heart: "I love you guys."

"Me too," Rita said. "I want to take you all back to New York."

"Hold the garlic," Adam said. "Definitely hold the garlic."

I looked across to Star, and our eyes met. She was looking a little lost, and I had an idea she was thinking how it was all coming to an end real soon.

"Hey, you guys," Rita said. "We just figured out it's November already. Can you believe that?"

Using the guide, we counted off every side canyon marking our approach to Upset. When we first heard the River Thunder, and started into the pooled-up water behind the rapid, my heart raced. Then I felt a calm lifting me up, and I knew I wouldn't go brain dead when the test came, the way I did on Storm King. I'd come too far. I had a vision of a piece of safe water, to the side of that big hole in Upset, and I was going to reach it.

I never found out if I could have. There'll be other tests as important for me, maybe not as physical, but I'll recognize them when I see them and apply my Upset strategy.

"Helicopter," Star said, pointing.

Yes, there it was, a metal dragonfly on a ledge on river right. At the landing for the scout, two men stood waiting.

We pulled our boats together and let them drift silently with the slow current, and we cried our tears.

"It's been nice," Rita said finally. "I'm never going to forget it, that's for sure."

One of the two men was Al. The pilot wore a Park Service uniform.

The boats bumped the shore side by side, our last landing. Al and the park ranger stood back as Star and Rita tied up the boats. Adam hopped ashore and I stuck close to Freddy as he tried out his legs.

The park ranger's face registered only disapproval. I met Al's eyes as I walked up to him. The hurt was still there, but he was happy to see us, even after everything. "Freddy and Adam should go first," I said. "They should get to a hospital. Freddy got stung last night by that slender scorpion."

"Troy and Pug did it," Rita said. "Put it in Freddy's sleeping bag. They coulda killed him, and they better pay for it. They're old enough to be tried as adults, aren't they? Tell him how it all happened, Jessie."

I filled in the details, and Al listened carefully. When I was done, he said, "I hope there's a way to prove it, I really do. What do you think, Freddy?"

He shrugged. "Pretty hard to prove it was the same scorpion."

"They're up at Tapeats Creek," Rita told the pilot.

"We know," he said. "The other helicopter is picking them up. Let's get these two to the hospital."

Quickly I asked, "Are we going to see them again? Be with them somewhere?"

"Not unless you're going to the hospital in Flagstaff. Hurry up and get their personal stuff, and let's go."

My mind was numb as I packed Freddy's things into one dry bag. He sat on the shore with his head down. There was

so much I wanted to say to him, so much that had been unsaid ever since the first. I carried his dry bag up the beach, handed it to the pilot, and then helped Freddy up. Adam was limping toward the helicopter. He turned and looked back at the rest of us, and stopped. For once he had nothing to say.

Freddy was on shaky legs. "Do you need some help?" I asked him.

I found his soft dark eyes. "I got it," he said. "Thanks, Jessie." He squeezed my hand, and he gave me a little hug. "Bye, Star, bye, Rita."

The time for words was over. None of us could speak. We watched them as they hobbled to the helicopter. Adam was getting in, and Freddy was still on his way when I ran to him and said, "Freddy, I didn't say good-bye." I kissed him on the cheek, and he smiled.

"One more thing," I said. "Don't look down."

Freddy was so bashful. He smiled, and said, "You coulda rowed Upset."

We both looked over to the rapid. I could see the safe water beside the big hole from where we were standing. "You coulda rowed it no problem."

We stood back with Al and watched them take off.

"Down to three," Star sighed. "How long can we stay together?"

"Tonight you'll be at a juvenile detention center in Kingman. After that there's no telling. A judge will have to decide that."

Al seemed so sad. I felt as sorry for him as for me. I hugged him, and then I said, "I've learned more down here than I could ever tell you. Thanks."

He shook his head and scratched his gray, three-day beard. "I can see that's true. But don't you go telling anybody that the program still works when I'm not along, okay? I wouldn't want that to get around."

We went to work deflating the boats, rolling them up, and repacking our dry bags. It was good to have something to do. Then the other helicopter arrived, and the pilot said he'd taken Pug to Park Service Headquarters on the rim. But they hadn't been able to get Troy; he'd run off up the Thunder River Trail.

"Sounds like Troy," Al said. "They'll be waiting for him at the rim."

We climbed into the helicopter, and as we lifted up we waved to Al standing below with all his gear. The layers of the canyon opened and spread out as we climbed. I was remembering it all, from the moment we sneaked onto the river, but mostly I remembered a night under the stars, when Star had given me her friendship bracelet, and I remembered rock hopping with Freddy up the River of Blue. Somehow, I promised myself, I won't lose them.

"Take a look at Lava Falls," the pilot said. "There it is, that white band across the river."

"Holy cow," Rita protested. "That doesn't look like anything. I still say we coulda kicked its butt."

# 18 //

It was March, late in the morning after a heavy spring snow, and the sun was blazing. All around us, the pines were shedding their snow and their branches were lifting, suddenly free of the weight they'd been carrying. The canyon stream was running high and brown with snowmelt. Star and Madeline and I had been out on our cross-country skis, enjoying the sunshine, and now we were headed home. We paused as the house came into sight, "the Hacienda" as we all called it, and took it in. There it was, sitting on a little hill among the pines on the sunny side of the canyon, perched above the stream. Our new home. To me the newness was part of what I loved about it. I would always have that feeling of starting fresh here.

I looked to Star and Madeline. We were all smiling, reflecting each other in our sunglasses. I had an idea they were feeling the same way about the Hacienda. How unlikely that we'd come together, how well it had been working, how new it still was for all of us.

We skied down the canyon and up to the house. "I'm starved," Madeline said, stepping out of her skis. "How about you?"

"Let's fix those sandwiches," Star said, heading for the kitchen.

I poured a couple of soft drinks and brought one out for Dad in the sunroom, where he was reading the papers. My bare

feet felt so good on the warm Mexican tiles. "It was wonderful out there, Dad. So warm."

"The snow's going to go fast."

I sat close to him, in one of the leather chairs. "Here's the first installment on lunch. Madeline and Star are fixing some sandwiches."

"Thanks. I've really been enjoying myself just being lazy this morning."

"I really do love this place, Dad. Especially all the light. I was thinking when I was out skiing, I had no idea it would turn out like this when it was in the planning stages."

He could see I was talking about *back then*.

Cautiously he said, "I didn't know it would turn out this well either."

"But you hoped it would. I didn't think there was anything good about it. I didn't even want to look at it."

"I remember that vaguely. . . ."

"You remember that well, Dad. I was a hard case."

"That was back when you were fifteen. Pre-Grand Canyon. What I really like about sixteen is how we can talk—you know, every so often, like now. It's great."

"I just wish I didn't have to wait another whole year to get my driver's license. It'd be so much easier if I could drive."

"We don't mind driving you, really. This year'll fly by before you know it. You won't have this probation hanging over your head; you'll be a free woman. It's going to come too fast for me, Jessie. I want to hang on to you, both of you."

"It was great you got to meet Freddy too, after all the stories we've told about him."

## DOWNRIVER

"I'm glad we took that trip. He's just as you described him, maybe even better. What a break for Freddy that they sent him to southwestern Colorado to get 'rehabilitated.' He sure loves those mountains. You can see it in his eyes when he talks about the country they've been in, learning to fight the fires."

"I guess it's really hard work they do," I said, "but Freddy doesn't mind that. And if he does really well, he'll get to try out for the Forest Service Hot Shots. It's a special team of firefighters that travels all around the West fighting the worst forest fires, jumping out of planes and all that."

"Well, I hope he makes it."

"Oh, he will. And he wants to come up here sometime too, and visit us. We'd like to plan a hike together, off the north rim of the Grand Canyon and down to Thunder River. He's determined to see that place one way or another. Maybe we could all go. What do you think?"

"Sounds great—that's where the underground river comes shooting out of the cliffs, isn't it? And that's the trail where Troy disappeared."

Star and Madeline brought in the sandwiches on a big tray with melon cubes around the outside and chips and guacamole in the center. Dad's eyes lit up. Chips and guacamole are his "natural food."

Star heard the sound of a vehicle stopping at the driveway. "The mail," Star said. "I'll get it."

With a spring in her step, she was out of the house. I've never seen anyone get so excited about getting mail, even junk mail. In a minute she was back, waving a letter in her hand. "Jessie! It's a letter from Adam!"



"Well, read it!"

"Okay, okay," Star said, catching her breath. "Here goes. . . ."

*Dear Star and Jessie,*

*What a flash it was to hear from you—and thanks for sending the pictures of your place. I practically karate-chopped a tree into splinters when I read that you two wound up together. I always thought you seemed like sisters anyway.*

*No, I haven't heard from Rita either, except that she's back in New York. And thanks for all the news about Freddy. I miss you guys, and I wish I could join you for that Thunder River hike, but not this time.*

*Yes, I'd wondered too if we'd ever hear what became of Troy. When I heard they didn't catch him, I could almost see him, down there in Mexico, "living like a king."*

*Well, ladies and gentlemen, wonder no more. Troy has been found. No, he's not passing the time in his beach hammock, sipping piña colonics and sending his servants out for red snapper. He's been in L.A. all this time. No imagination, eh? They caught him last week in Malibu, by following the trail of his credit card receipts, wouldn't you know. His parents are coming back from Europe for the occasion. Al's convinced them it's time to put Troy's feet to the fire.*

*How do I know all this stuff? I just heard it last night. Believe it or not, my folks and I have been in touch with Al. Yes, the very same. Now get this: I'm going to be working for Al this summer at Hoods in the Woods, as a kitchen*

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*slave and all-around gofer! He runs a much bigger program in the summer than when we were there. Imagine, I'm going to be back in Colorado, and getting paid for mountain climbing and rafting, besides the scullery work. Kind of a junior counselor too, the idea being that if this fool can get something out of the program, anybody can.*

*Yes, I said rafting! We are, believe it or not, going to attempt the Mighty Canyons of the San Juan, not once but three times during the summer. Al swears by that river, so I'm looking forward to seeing it. And we'll be doing Westwater too.*

*I hope I'm making both of you sick and that you'll come to visit me at Discovery Unlimited. (I better start using the real name—I'm one of the staff!)*

*Here's my hidden agenda: One day I'm going to be a big-time river guide on—you guessed it—the Grand.*

*Love to you both, and here's to this crazy dream of mine, that one day the five of us will once more run the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.*

*Love, Adam*

*P.S. This time, we'll launch in broad daylight.*

"That was quite a letter," Madeline said. "You two sure wound up with some great friends."

"Friends and family," Star said, with her green eyes shining. She pulled something out of her jeans pocket and held it up for us to admire. It was another of those friendship bracelets she'd

been weaving. I still had the one on my wrist that she'd given me in the Canyon.

"Whatcha got there, Star?" Dad asked.

Star sat down, then tied the new bracelet around her ankle. Silver, speckled with blue. "There," she said, hitching up her jeans a bit to reveal her now-completed collection. "Four of them—each with our soul colors. One for every member of our family."

## // AUTHOR'S NOTE //

Running the Grand Canyon on your own private trip with a small group of friends is every river runner's dream. I've been fortunate enough to row my own raft down the Colorado River through the incomparable Canyon ten times. It's a journey of 225 miles with more than 150 rapids. My wife and I have always made this trip together. Once, at the very top of our game, Jean and I went solo—just the two of us, no other rafts along. All told, we've spent six months of our lives at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, in what we like to think of as "the real world."

Sometimes I meet readers who tell me that my stories have led them to the places I write about. A river trip through the Grand Canyon is deservedly called "the Great American Adventure." I hope you'll experience it for yourself some day, on your own or with an outfitter. Whichever way you go, you must. After a couple of days you'll find yourself living in the moment, enthralled with the moving water and wonders great and small. See you on the river!

Will Hobbs

Durango, Colorado



Author photo by Jean Hobbs

**WILL HOBBS** is the award-winning author of many popular adventure stories for young readers, including *Bearstone* and *Beardance*. His picture book *Beardream*, illustrated by Jill Kastner, is a companion to these novels. Seven of his novels have been chosen by the American Library Association as Best Books for Young Adults. He is a graduate of Stanford University and is a former language arts teacher. He lives with his wife, Jean, in Durango, Colorado. Longtime backpackers and river runners, they have spent many years exploring the mountain and canyon settings of Will's stories. To learn more about the author and his books, visit Will's website at [WillHobbsAuthor.com](http://WillHobbsAuthor.com).