CIRCLING THE DRAIN

I COULD TIE A BACHMAN, bowline, butterfly, figure eight, double fisherman, and a half dozen other knots with one hand in the dark, but I couldn't get the tie knotted properly around my neck. The few times I'd worn one, Rolf had done the honors. The guard assigned to escort me to the courtroom finally came to my rescue. Between us, we figured it out, then he led me into the courtroom.

Sitting at a table to the left of the bench were the prosecuting attorneys (a man and a woman) shuffling papers, barely looking up at the person whose life they were about to ruin.

At the table to the right were my attorneys (another man and a woman). They too were shuffling papers, but they stopped when the guard passed me off to them, smiling, shaking my hand, introducing themselves. . . .

I didn't quite catch their names. I was too busy staring at the five people sitting behind them. Rolf, looking dapper and professional with a perfectly knotted tie. Next to him were Patrice and Paula. They were a little teary-eyed, but excited to see me, wearing their favorite dresses. (Matching of course.) They waved and tried to stifle giggles when I mouthed "Pea-Pea" at them. (Don't get me wrong: I wasn't in a joking mood at that moment, but I felt the twins could use a boost. They had been through enough the past few days.)

Next to the twins was my mom, looking worried, but distinctly more relaxed than she had been at JDC the day before. Maybe this was because of the guy sitting next to her. (Although I doubted it.)

His name was Joshua Wood—arguably the greatest mountaineer in the world. He was also my father.

I hadn't seen him in seven years and he looked about as comfortable in his suit as I felt in mine. He had shaved his trademark beard. (Recently, by the looks of it.) The skin beneath was pale compared to the upper part of his handsome face, which was windburned and sunburned. His lips were chapped and his nose was peeling, giving him the overall look of someone who had just been dug out from under an avalanche.

His eyes were the same pale blue as my mother's. He gave me a nod and a smile, which I was too stunned to return.

"All rise," the bailiff said, startling me out of my stupor.

One of the attorneys turned me around and gave me a dazzling smile. I expected her to say, "Love the tie." But what she said instead was, "Don't say one word unless I tell you to. Act remorseful."

She was obviously my lead attorney. I thought her name was Traci.

The judge—a tough-looking guy with a white crew cut—took his seat behind the bench and made us stand for a few seconds more before nodding at the bailiff.

"Be seated," the bailiff said with a slight quiver in his voice.

My mom was right: The judge was going to eat me up and spit me out. He put on a pair of glasses and went over some notes, then started reading the charges aloud. "Criminal trespass, vandalism, reckless endangerment . . ."

It went on and on.

Finally reaching the end of the list, he pushed his glasses to the end of his nose and looked over the top of them directly at me. "How do you plead?"

Traci pulled me to my feet and whispered the answer in my ear. I wasn't sure I had heard her right. She whispered it again with the same smile plastered on her face from before.

I took a deep breath.

"Not guilty," I said.

"To all charges?" the judge asked incredulously.

"That's right, Your Honor," Traci answered, her smile unwavering.

"You've gotta be kidding me. The state has videotape of him climbing the Woolworth Building. There were twenty-three cops on the roof that saw him being pulled over the railing. He signed a statement attesting to the facts."

"Duress," Traci said. "He was exhausted, injured, and half frozen at the time."

"Oh please. This kid has received absolutely every consideration the system can offer, including delaying this arraignment. Now, what's this all about?"

"We want to go to trial," Traci answered.

The arteries in the judge's neck looked like they were about to burst. He glared over at the prosecutors' table. "Do you two know anything about this?"

The prosecutors shook their heads, vigorously.

"Perhaps we should retire to your chambers," one of them suggested.

"Yes," Traci agreed cheerfully.

"The four of you crammed into my office," the judge

said. "Forget it. There's no one here but . . ." He noticed Patrice and Paula sitting between my mom and Rolf.

"Oh," he said, then looked over at the guard who had brought me down in the elevator.

"Do you think you can take these young ladies out and find them some ice cream?"

"What about the prisoner?" the guard asked.

"I think he'll hang around for this." He looked at the twins. "Do you like ice cream?"

"Chocolate," Paula said.

"Vanilla," Patrice said.

"I think that can be arranged."

"Do you want us to bring you back some, Peak?" Paula asked.

"I bet they have strawberry," Patrice said (my favorite), but it sounded like "awe-berry" because she had recently lost her front teeth.

"Nah," I said. "I had a big bowl for breakfast."

"You did not!" they said in unison, giggling, as the guard took them out.

The judge waited for the door to swing completely closed before continuing the proceedings. He nodded at the court reporter. "We're off the record."

She turned off her recorder and stopped typing.

"It's just us now," the judge continued, looking at Traci. "You know as well as I do that we don't want to go to trial with this. It's turned into a media circus. A boy was killed two days ago. I'm sure you and Peak and his parents don't want that to happen again."

"Of course not," Traci said. "But by the same token I

can't let my client be unfairly incarcerated because the media is out of control. This whole thing has not been handled well by the police department or the mayor's office."

The judge looked at her for a moment, then looked over at the prosecutors. "She makes a good point. What do you think?"

The older of the two prosecutors (the woman) stood. "Prior to the arraignment we offered a plea bargain of two years with six months off for good behavior. Eighteen months is a pretty good deal considering the charges."

Not if you're serving it, I thought. But it was better than three years. Traci picked up a sheet of paper from the table.

"In the last five years, fifteen adults have been arrested for climbing skyscrapers in New York City. The longest sentence has been six months, and several of these climbers served no time at all." She looked at the prosecutor. "We can beat this in court. We're going to trial."

The prosecutor gave her a sour look.

I felt the drain being plugged, but it wasn't watertight yet.

"What's your bottom line?" the judge asked.

"A fine with probation," Traci answered. "And no time served."

"Forget it," the judge said gruffly.

"What if we could arrange for Peak to leave New York today?" Traci asked. "Out of sight, out of mind, out of the newspaper. No interviews. The story dies because the story is gone. Poof!"

The judge almost smiled. "A disappearing act, huh? Explain."

"Peak's biological father has offered to take custody of him."

I whipped around so fast I hurt my neck.

My father had gotten to his feet.

"I take it you're the father?"

"Yes, sir. Joshua Wood."

"The climber?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge glanced at Rolf and Mom, then looked back at Joshua. "Mr. Wood, how much time have you spent with your son lately?"

"Not much the past few years," he admitted.

Not any for the last seven years to be exact, I thought.

"When Teri and Rolf got married," he continued, "we decided it would be best for Peak if I kept a low profile."

This was the first time I'd heard of this. In fact, I wasn't sure my father knew that Rolf and my mother had married until he stepped into the courtroom. Maybe she had sent him a postcard or something. He certainly hadn't been invited to the wedding.

"Why do you want to do this?" the judge asked.

"Peak is my son. It's time I stepped forward and took some responsibility."

I looked at my mother and Rolf. They were both staring straight ahead, expressionless.

"What do you think?" the judge asked.

Traci elbowed me in the side and I turned back around.

"Me?"

The judge nodded.

"Uh . . . that would be great . . . uh . . . Your Honor."

The judge turned his attention back to my father. "Do you have the wherewithal to support and raise a fourteen-year-old boy?"

"We've prepared a complete financial statement," Traci said. She grabbed a sheaf of papers from the desk and took it up to the bench.

The judge flipped through the pages.

"As you can see, Mr. Wood is a very successful businessman."

"On paper," the judge said begrudgingly. He looked at my father again. "Where do you live, Mr. Wood?"

"Chiang Mai," my father answered.

"What state's that in?"

"It's in Thailand."

This was followed by a very long silence, and I felt the drain plug loosen.

"What about Peak's schooling?" the judge finally asked.

"There's an International School less than five miles from my house," my father answered. "I've already enrolled him. He'll begin in August."

"Peak is currently attending the Greene Street School," Traci said. "He only has one requirement left to complete this year. It should be easily accomplished in Thailand."

"The Greene Street School?" The judge smiled for the first time. "It just so happens that I went to GSS when I was a kid."

I didn't know they had legal prodigies.

The judge waved the prosecutor up to the bench, where they had a long whispered conversation. When it was over he looked at all of us one by one.

"All right," he said. "This is what we're going to do. Peak, you are on probation until you reach the age of eighteen. If, during that time, you break a law in the state of New York, thus violating your probation, you will immediately serve out

the rest of your time in a juvenile detention facility. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Furthermore, the court fines you one hundred fifty thousand dollars . . ."

My shock must have shown, because the judge put up his hand for me to calm down.

"The money will be held in escrow by the state and returned if you fulfill the terms of your probation." He looked over at my three parents. "I assume you can scrape the money together."

"No problem, Your Honor," my father said. Mom and Rolf concurred.

"If I'm going to cut Peak loose, we have to make this look good," the judge continued. "I'm putting a gag order on all of you. You are not to discuss any aspect of this case with the media or anyone else. Especially the refundable fine. We want to discourage people from copying Peak's idiotic stunt. In other words, we want this to go away."

He looked at Traci and me.

"Poof!" he said.

THE TWINS

THE JUDGE TOLD US there was a swarm of reporters waiting in front of JDC and we would have to leave the back way.

My father was the first to go. He said he had some errands to run and he would meet me at the airport. It occurred to me that I should thank him, but by then, he was halfway down the hallway, tearing the tie off his neck like it was an anaconda. I guessed I would have plenty of time to thank him later, since we were going to be spending the next three years together.

Mom gave me my passport and a small backpack stuffed with clothes. Rolf had gone off to find the twins.

"Are you coming to the airport?" I asked, still feeling a little numb.

"Of course," she said. "But we may not have time to wait for your flight to leave. Rolf has a trial."

I flipped through the pages of the passport. "So, you knew I was leaving?"

"Not really," she answered. "Josh got in late yesterday, and we spent the whole night trying to put this together."

"Are you okay with this?"

"I don't know," she said. "It would have been nice to plan it out a bit more, but Josh has to get back. It's probably just as well. I think the thing that tipped it for the judge was the fact that you would be gone today."

"Poof," I said.

She smiled. "And we can get you back as fast as you disappeared." She pulled out a credit card and an international calling card from her purse and gave them to me. "If things go sour, or you just want to come home, use these."

I slipped the cards into the pocket of one of the Moleskines in my backpack.

"Once you get there, we'll ship whatever clothes you want."

"How long?" I asked.

"That's up to you, I guess. If you make it to the end of summer, we'll reevaluate. But if you want to come back sooner all you have to do is call. The judge didn't put any restrictions on when you could come back."

"What about Dad?" I asked. "I mean—"

"I know exactly what you mean," she said. "Josh seems to have mellowed since the last time we saw him. He traveled a long way to help. I can't tell you how shocked I was when he stepped into Traci's office. At that point we were absolutely desperate. The best Traci thought she could do was get a reduced sentence. Josh listened to the situation, then proceeded to outline exactly what happened today in the courtroom. When you're at the end of your rope there's no one better than Joshua Wood. Unfortunately, he doesn't pay much attention until you're dangling." She laughed. "Rolf and Traci said he should have become an attorney instead of a mountain climber."

"I'd better go talk to the twins," I said.

AS SOON AS ROLF and Mom left us alone, Patrice and Paula burst into tears.

"Who's going to walk us to school?"

"Who's going to walk us home?"

"Who's going to play with us at the park?"

"What about our birthday?"

"Why did you have to climb that stupid building, anyway?"

It was easy to become confused around the two Peas. They had a mysterious way of looking at things. They also tended to finish each other's sentences as if they shared the same brain.

I guess I should explain our relationship. They were born on my eighth birthday, which at first did not go over very well with me. You don't want to spend your eighth birthday in a loft with a babysitter while your mother and nervous stepfather are at the hospital having twins. From then on *your* special day is going to be the twins' special day, too. It took me a good two years, but the twins finally won me over. They were brilliant, hilarious little Peas and worshipped the ground I walked on (which really helped). They had a full-time nanny for the first few years, but I started spending so much time with them, Mom and Rolf let her go. Paula and Patrice were probably the best birthday presents I could have ever gotten.

And for the first time since I'd gotten busted, I really regretted climbing that stupid skyscraper. What was I going to do without the two Peas?

"We read that your daddy is not the same as our daddy." Patrice sniffled.

I cringed. Another terrible result from the moron climbing the skyscraper.

We had never told them that I was their half brother. Rolf

and Mom thought it would just confuse them. (They always underestimated the twins.) But I hadn't wanted them to learn about it from the newspaper. It hadn't taken the reporters long to figure out Spider Boy was Joshua Wood's son.

"We're half sisters," Patrice said.

Paula shook her head and rolled her eyes. "I already explained that to you. One half plus one half equals one. That's a whole. Together we are his whole sister."

"That's right," Patrice said. "I forgot."

(I told you they had a mysterious way of looking at things.)

"We always wondered why your last name was different from our last name," Paula said. "I thought it was because we were twins and you weren't. Some kind of name rule."

When Mom and Rolf got married I kept Mom's maiden name, Marcello. Rolf offered to adopt me legally, but I passed. I liked my last name and didn't want to change it. And I didn't like Rolf all that much. (There was nothing the matter with him, really. It's just that he wasn't my real father. More on that later.)

"You're going to Thailand," Patrice said. "Where they make these." She pulled on my necktie.

"Not quite," I said. "Thailand is a country in Southeast Asia, just south of China."

"When will you come back?" Paula asked.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Will you be here for our birthday?"

"Birth*days*," Patrice corrected.

"Will you?"

"I hope so," I said. "But it costs a lot of money to fly from Thailand to New York."

"We have money."

"Sixty-four dollars and thirty-five cents."

Paula shook her head. "Sixty-four dollars and forty-seven cents."

"Is that enough?"

"Maybe," I said. "Look, I'm going to miss you, and I want you to write me a lot of letters."

"We promise," they said in unison.

Mom and Rolf came back into the room.

"We'd better get going," Rolf said.

ROLF PULLED UP to the departure curb at the airport and we all got out. Mom started crying, and when the twins saw her crying, they started crying.

I gave them a group hug. As I held them I glanced at Rolf. He was standing off to the side, awkwardly as usual, and I realized that I was going to miss him, too. I gently untangled myself from the girls and walked over to him.

"I'm sorry about all the trouble," I said.

Rolf put his hand on my shoulder and smiled. "It's going to be pretty boring without you around. Take care of yourself and don't hesitate to use those cards." He looked at Mom and the twins, and for the first time ever I saw tears in his eyes. "We're going to miss you."

ROCK RATS

MY DAD WASN'T at the airline counter when I got to the airport. Our flight wasn't scheduled to take off for another three hours, so I wasn't worried . . . yet.

I went into the restroom and discovered Mom had filled my pack with all the clothes she liked (not necessarily my favorites), but they were better than the suit, which I stuffed into a garbage can. It was too small for me, anyway.

Two hours and fifty-five minutes to go. Waiting at an airport might be the worst . . . well, except for waiting in jail.

I bought an evil-looking hot dog and wolfed it down with a flat soda.

Two hours and fifty-three minutes.

I went through my pack and found the two Moleskines, and I thought about starting my assignment. All I had to do was fill one of them, but at that point I had no idea what I was going to write about.

I found an automatic pencil in an airport store, but when I sat down and pulled the wrapping off, the eraser shot off into space, and I couldn't find it. I wrote: Moleskine #1 on the first page, then put the pencil and the Moleskine away.

Discouraging.

Two hours and thirty-seven minutes.

As I sat there watching everyone coming and going, it finally dawned on me that I was free, and this got me thinking

about what had led up to this—and I don't mean climbing skyscrapers, or getting arrested, or the trial. I mean way back. Back before I was born . . .

I WAS CONCEIVED in a two-man tent under the shadow of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

At least that's when my mom thinks it happened.

My parents were twenty-four years old at the time. The day before the tent, they had reached the summit of El Cap along the Iron Hawk route in the record time of thirty-two hours and forty-three minutes. And this was not the only climbing record they had broken that year: Hallucinogen Wall, Body Wax, the Flingus Cling, and dozens of other records had fallen to the climbing team of Teri Marcello and Joshua Wood.

Climbing magazines and equipment companies had started to pay attention to them . . . and to pay them money. The rusty old van they had lived in for three years was ditched for a brand-new four-wheel-drive truck camper. No more temp jobs to scrape together money for gas and food, no more mooching off the weekend climbers. They bought a piece of property in Wyoming and built a log cabin in front of a ninety-foot vertical wall, perfect for conditioning climbs. The rock rats were on their way up.

I'd seen photos of them back then. My father looked like a bodybuilder, but he was as flexible as a gymnast. My favorite photo of him was the one where he was standing on a high ledge touching his knees with his nose.

My mother was a foot shorter than my father. She was lean, with dreadlocks tickling her powerful shoulders, muscles

in her arms and legs like knotted ropes, and abs like speed bumps. She was bulletproof.

But she was not baby proof.

Two months after El Cap she told my father she was pregnant. I have no idea what his reaction was, but I doubt he jumped up and down for joy when he got the good news.

It was a difficult pregnancy. There were complications. She was told to stay in bed or she would lose me. She did, but my father was on the move, teaching seminars, endorsing equipment, and climbing—shattering records on Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount McKinley, and Annapurna, which is where he was the night I was born.

He called her from Base Camp on a satellite phone after reaching the summit.

"What do you want to name him?" Mom asked.

"Peak."

"Pete?"

"No, Peak. P-E-A-K. Like 'mountain peak.'"

He didn't lay eyes on me until I was three months old, and that's when my mother had her accident in the backyard. I was there, strapped into a car seat at the base of the wall (and at that age, probably staring at the prairie dogs popping out of their holes, only dimly aware that I had parents at all).

They were thirty feet up the wall, free-climbing. For rock rats like them, this was like strolling across a level parking lot. Mom reached up and grabbed a handful of rotten rock. It was still clutched in her hand when my dad got down to her, which was probably five seconds after she hit the ground.

Thirty feet. Shattered hip. Broken back.

My dad canceled all his seminars, climbs, everything,

staying right at her side through the whole orthopedic jigsaw puzzle. It took nearly a year to put her back together. Wheelchair, crutches, and finally, when she was able to hobble around with a cane, Dad left again, showing up a couple times a year for a day or two at a time.

It took Mom two more years of physical therapy to ditch the cane, but she never climbed again.

Dad took me climbing for the first time when I was five years old. (We tried to keep it a secret, but the fly rods and fishing gear didn't fool Mom for one minute.) Only four more climbs with him over the next two years, but in between I made hundreds of solo ascents on the wall in back of the cabin with Mom manning the belay rope, shouting instructions up to me.

Then Rolf showed up on our doorstep. The New York lawyer in shining armor. He and Mom had actually grown up together in Nebraska. Neighbors. Rolf had been smitten with her since they were eight years old. After high school, Mom hit the road to climb rocks. Rolf went to Harvard to study law.

He arrived at the cabin at night in the middle of a blizzard. We were sitting in front of the woodstove reading. (We didn't have a television back then.) There was a knock on the door (actually more like a desperate banging), jolting both of us from our books. Our cabin was sixteen miles from the nearest town. People didn't drop by at ten o'clock at night (except for Dad, who never announced his arrivals and wouldn't think about knocking).

Mom opened the front door and there stood Rolf, although she didn't recognize him at first. He wasn't dressed for a Wyoming winter. He had on a light jacket, khaki pants,

and tennis shoes. He was trying to control it, but his teeth were chattering. There was a quiver in his voice, which could have been from the cold, but I think it was more from fear. It had been over ten years since he had seen my mother.

"Hi, Teri," he said.

"Rolf?"

"Yeah . . . uh . . . my rental car kind of slid off the road a mile back or so. I would have called, but you're not listed."

"We use a cell phone out here. It's just easi— Well, never mind that . . ." She pulled him inside and made him a cup of hot chocolate, then gave him some of my dad's clothes, which were too big for him.

I went to bed, so I don't know what happened that first night, but he became a regular guest at the cabin for the next several months, flying in for long weekends whenever he could. Rolf made my mom laugh and I liked him for that, but aside from that we didn't have much in common. I guess I resented him for horning in on the simple life we had made in the wilderness.

He took us to New York, which was interesting, but noisy and confusing compared to the prairie. At the end of our two-week stay, they sat me down in Rolf's kitchen and told me they were going to get married.

"Okay," I said, not really knowing what that meant at the time.

I later learned that it meant we were selling the cabin in Wyoming and moving to the loft in New York. It meant that my real dad would no longer be popping in for visits. It meant the Greene Street School. It meant that the closest I was going to get to a rock wall for the next few years was the

fifteen-footer at the YMCA down the street, which I could have climbed backward without protection if the guys manning the ropes would have allowed it. None of this helped to sweeten my relationship with Rolf.

The twins saved me. And it also helped that my mom let me subscribe to a half dozen climbing magazines. In the back of one of those magazines I discovered summer climbing camps. It took a lot of sulking to get her to let me go to one of them. What cinched it in the end was that she knew the climbing instructor. A former rock rat gone legit.

After this, as long as I did well in school, she let me sign up for more camps.

Then the time lag between the climbs became a problem. I started eyeing skyscrapers, telling myself that I would just *plan* the route up but not climb it. Right.

To get up a rock wall you study the outside, trying to pick the best footholds and handholds, guessing where you're going to encounter problems so you have the right equipment with you to get around them.

To climb a skyscraper you have to know the inside as well as the outside. (Which is where I screwed up on my last climb.) You don't want to be dangling outside of a window when someone is at a desk working or vacuuming the floor.

You also have to plan your exits. Mine were pretty simple. I used the elevators.

Rooftops have doors. Late on the day of the climb, while the building was still open, I'd go up to the roof and put a piece of duct tape over the latch. After I climbed to the top I'd slip into the stairwell and spend the night. In the morning, when the building started to fill up with workers, I'd walk down a few floors, get on an elevator, punch the lobby

button, and walk out as if I had just finished an early dentist or doctor's appointment, getting home before Mom, Rolf, or the twins knew I was gone.

I guess my plan didn't quite work out in the Woolworth Building.

BANGKOK

ONE HOUR AND FORTY-THREE MINUTES.

And still no sign of my father.

I had made one trip out of the country with Rolf, Mom, and the twins (London, two summers ago) and knew that you had to check in early for international flights.

Where was he? What kind of errands was he running? What if he didn't show? (And all the other boring questions that run through your mind when you're waiting.)

I walked over to the flight information monitor, thinking that maybe our flight was delayed. ON TIME, it read.

Above the monitor was a regular TV. I glanced at it, and was going to turn away until the anchor said: "The state of New York has reached a plea agreement with Peak Marcello, the boy who climbed the Woolworth Building early last week. He was sentenced to three years of probation and fined a whopping one hundred fifty thousand dollars! This is the steepest penalty ever given for criminal trespass in New York's history . . ."

The camera cut to a shot of the mayor getting into the back of a black limo. He turned to the reporter and said: "This should put an end to people climbing skyscrapers in the city of New York. This illegal activity will no longer be tolerated under any circumstances."

"Peak Marcello and his family were unavailable for comment," said the reporter, "and it is believed the boy has left the state of New York for an undisclosed location."

Not yet, I thought, turning away, grateful they hadn't run a photo of me.

"Peak!"

Finally. My father was pushing a huge cart with a mountain of gear piled on it. I trotted over.

"Give me a hand."

I helped him push the cart up to the counter. "What is all this stuff?"

"I don't get to New York very often and thought I should stock up on some supplies. Give me your passport."

He put it down on the counter along with his own battered passport, which looked like it had been through the wash a couple times.

"You're cutting it a little close, Mr. Wood," the attendant said.

"I know," my father said. "Family emergency."

The attendant pointed at the cart. "This exceeds your baggage limit."

My father took a credit card out of his pocket. "Just put it on this."

By the time we had everything checked we had only minutes to catch the flight. We were the last ones down the Jetway.

"I couldn't get us seats together," he said as we stepped onto the airplane. "But at least we're both in business class." He pointed out my seat, then took his own, which was three rows behind me, and that's the last time I talked to him for thirteen hours.

We had a three-hour layover at the Narita airport near Tokyo, but I didn't get a chance to talk to him there, either,

because he spent the entire time on his cell phone speaking in what sounded like Chinese, but it could have been Thai or Nepalese, as far as I knew. He was still jabbering on the phone when we boarded the plane for Bangkok, where I was disappointed again to see that we were in separate rows.

Another six hours passed.

On the way to customs in Bangkok, I finally caught him between calls.

"I'm really sorry about all this, Dad. You having to come all the way to the States, the money, being stuck with me—"

"Whoa," he said, holding up his calloused climbing hand. "First, you don't have to call me Dad. I don't deserve the title. For the time being, let's pretend I'm your big brother. Just call me Josh like all my friends do. Second, don't worry about the money. Rolf and your mom put a big chunk of change in. I'll get my portion back. And finally, I'm not stuck with you. I couldn't be happier to have you with me. I just haven't had much time to show it because I'm trying to put something together."

"What?" I asked.

"A surprise, but in the meantime, no worries."

We continued down toward customs, where there was another little problem. I didn't have a visa to enter Thailand. ~~My father~~ Josh took my passport and disappeared into a room with a couple customs officers and came back out ten minutes later.

"We're in the clear," he said, hurrying through the airport toward the terminal, bypassing baggage claim.

"What about your gear?"

"We'll get it tomorrow. No worries."

Outside we climbed into the back of a cab.

"We're not going to Chiang Mai?"

"Not yet. We'll get there eventually."

It was well after midnight, but Bangkok was wide awake. The cabbie crazily swerved between bicycles, motorcycles, and cars for twenty minutes, finally coming to a stop in front of a hotel.

Josh paid the driver and we walked into the lobby, where the concierge beamed at us.

"Mr. Wood, I have your rooms all ready."

He handed each of us a key.

"Okay," Josh said as we got into the elevator, "I have some more errands to do tomorrow. In the morning I'll have a driver waiting for you in the lobby. Nine o'clock. He'll take you to the clinic for a physical."

"Physical?"

"Yeah . . . Uh . . . an immigration formality, and I want them to check your face and ear." He took my hands and looked at my damaged fingers. "We'll need to get those fixed, too. Anyway, I'll come by the clinic and pick you up when you're finished, and we'll be on our way. If I'm late, just wait for me there. Try to get some sleep. I don't want you to flunk the physical because you're tired."

WHEN I WOKE UP I didn't even know what day it was. Couldn't remember if you lost a day or gained a day in Thailand. I ate breakfast, went for a walk, and got back to the hotel and waited for my driver.

The clinic turned out to be a huge hospital and it took a while for me and the driver to find Dr. Woo's office. He was

expecting me. In fact, it turned out I was the only patient he had that day.

I'd had physicals before, but nothing like this. Dr. Woo and his nurse didn't speak English, so they had to pantomime me through the battery of tests. I was X-rayed, CAT-scanned, and jabbed with countless needles. They put me on treadmills and stationary bicycles with so many leads attached to my body and tubes jammed in my mouth, I wouldn't have been able to ask them what they were doing even if I spoke Thai. They must have drawn a quart of blood over the course of the day. They checked my eyes, ears, mouth, and other holes I don't even want to think about. They took the stitches out of my ear. Another doctor came in and looked at my feet, knees, shoulders, hips, elbows, wrists, and finally my fingers, which he put some salve on and bandaged, then gave me instructions on how to do it myself, which I barely understood. By the time they finished with me, it was late afternoon, and I was so exhausted I wanted to check myself into the hospital as a patient.

The nurse led me to the waiting room and I promptly fell asleep on an uncomfortable chair. And that's where Josh woke me sometime after dark. Apparently, he had been there for a while talking to Dr. Woo because he had a thick file in his hand, which I assumed were Dr. Woo's findings.

"Am I going to live?" I asked groggily.

"No worries," Josh said. "I'm not surprised you're in such great shape with my and your mother's genes. Let's go; we have an airplane to catch."

I was looking forward to Chiang Mai, where I could finally get some rest.

His gear was waiting for him outside the airport, guarded

by a porter the size of a sumo wrestler. He paid the porter, wheeled the cart to the counter, and said, "We're booked on the flight to Kathmandu."

I wasn't sure I had heard him right.

"Did you say Kathmandu?"

"Right."

"I thought we were going to Chiang Mai."

"We will," he said as he transferred gear to the conveyor belt. "But we have a stop to make first."

He must have bought the gear for someone in Kathmandu.

"Actually, a couple of stops," he added as he threw on the last box.

"Where's the second stop?" I asked.

"Everest," he said.

I stared at him. For a climber, saying that you are stopping by Everest is like saying you're going to stop by and see God.

Josh was grinning at me. "I didn't want to tell you until I had it all worked out. Your physical was the last hurdle, that and the Chinese visa."

"Kathmandu is in Nepal," I pointed out.

"Right," Josh said. "But we're not going up the south side in Nepal. We're going up the north side in Tibet. You have to be sixteen to get a permit to go up the Nepalese side. The Chinese aren't quite so picky. They don't care how old you are as long as you pay the fee. And then there are the twenty-five clients I have waiting at—"

"I'm climbing Everest?" I asked, more stunned than I've ever been in my life.

"I don't know if you'll make the summit," he said. "But if

we get you up there before your fifteenth birthday you'll be the youngest person in the world ever to stand above twenty-nine thousand feet." He picked up the tickets and started toward the gate.

I followed him numbly. He didn't have to ask if I wanted to go. Every climber in the world wants to summit Everest, or at least give it a try.

On the airplane Josh waved me into the window seat and sat down in the seat next to mine. The plane backed away from the Jetway.

"Does Mom know about this?" I asked.

"Uh . . . no, but I'll give her a call. No worries."

THE SUMMIT HOTEL

WHEN THE MESSAGE about my arrest reached Josh he had been in Tibet on his way to Base Camp on the north side of Everest. With him were twenty-five clients, fifteen Sherpas, and about fifty porters and their yaks.

Twelve of the clients were trying for the summit, the other thirteen had signed up for one of the four lower camps along the northern route. The higher you climbed, the more it cost.

"I caught a truck heading back to Kathmandu and sent the others on to Base Camp," he explained. "That's why I've been rushing around. I don't want to lose my acclimatization, and I need to get back to my clients. They weren't too happy about me abandoning them on the way to the mountain."

"Thanks again for bailing me out," I said.

"Forget it," he said, leaning his seat back and pulling his cap over his eyes. Within a minute he was sound asleep.

Why had he done it? That was the question bouncing around in my jet-lagged brain. He was my father, but that was a technicality more than a fact.

I had written him at least a dozen letters over the years, but I had never gotten a letter (or even a postcard) in return. Mom said that Josh wasn't much for letter writing, and that there was a good chance he never got my letters. There weren't too many post offices in the places he hung out.

So why, after all these years, did he show up? Guilt? Not likely. That emotion didn't seem to fit him. My mother told me once that Josh always slept like a baby because he had no conscience to keep him awake. He was demonstrating that right now, quietly snoring as we winged our way to Kathmandu.

KATHMANDU. For me the name conjured up mystery, adventure, possibilities, but the reality was somewhat different. The city is noisy, grimy, and polluted. My eyes burned and I started choking as soon as we stepped outside the airport.

"Takes some getting used to," Josh said as our taxi sputtered into an unbroken line of traffic. "You'll be staying at the Summit Hotel."

"Me?"

"Just for a couple days," Josh said. "I need to get up to Base Camp before there's a revolt. I don't have time to stay with you while you acclimatize, and you need to acclimatize slowly. You know the routine."

I did know the routine. I'd read at least a dozen books about conquering 8,000-meter peaks (peaks above 26,000 feet), including the three books my father had written. There are fourteen of these peaks in the world.

It can take at least two months to get to the top of Everest, which is actually 8,850 meters tall. The long climbing time is not because of the distance, which is less than five miles, but because it's up.

Most of the climbing time is spent sitting in the six camps along the route, letting your body get used to the thin air. If you go up too fast you might get mountain sickness, or high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE). Here's how HAPE works: Your lungs fill with fluid, you can't breathe, you go into a coma, then you die.

The only way to treat HAPE is to get to a lower altitude where there's more oxygen (or "Os," as climbers call it). It doesn't matter what kind of physical condition you're in. If you climb up faster than your body can adjust, you'll get HAPE and your climb is over—maybe forever. The only chance you have of reaching the top of Everest (or any 8,000-meter peak) is to "climb high, sleep low" until your body is ready to make the push to the summit. In other words, you have to make sure your lungs keep up with your legs—it's a very bad idea to leave your lungs behind.

The other problem with Everest is that there is only a small window when the weather is good enough to get to the top. Two weeks, maybe less. (Some years, the window is only two days.) You have to be positioned in the right place, at the right time, in the right physical condition, or you'll never make it to the summit.

Because Josh has spent most of his life training and climbing at high altitudes he could almost jog up to Base Camp (18,000 feet). Well, not really, but he could certainly get up there in half the time it was going to take me coming from sea level in New York City. Without me he would be at Base Camp in four or five days. If he waited for my lungs to catch up with his it would take him ten days to two weeks to get to Base Camp.

What he hadn't explained was how I was going to get to Tibet on my own, and he didn't get a chance to tell me right then because the taxi had just pulled into the courtyard of the Summit Hotel, where we were immediately surrounded by a swarm of laughing, smiling Nepalese.