

# Chapter I

## *A Serious Ax*



AS GARTH DROVE THROUGH THE LAST OF THE CLEARCUTS, William leaned his head against the window of the car. He felt his skull rattle faintly and saw his own eyes in the outside mirror, moveably framed by fields of stumps all silvered and shattered and shifting by in a roadside dance of death. When he sat up straight he saw a fresh round chin, plopped in the mirror like a scoop-and-a-half of vanilla ice cream. He tensed his jaw and jutted it slightly. The effect was heroic; the effort, however, hard to sustain.

Beyond William's reflection, the road passed into the forest and left the stumps behind. The amber signs that marked each curve began to hide in the reach of red cedar. At every turn the highway vanished, swallowed up in the greenest of worlds, an asphalt snake consumed by the garden. Garth slowed down as if to relish such a thought.

"Have you seen," he said, "how the sword fern come to the road right here?" He held the arc of the steering wheel as if it were a single frond, pendant with morning dew. He held it gently, so the dew would glisten where it was and not drip into his lap.

William turned and grunted. He saw the long white hair, the long white beard, thick like the lichen on the trees passing by. Why, he wondered, had he ever agreed to climb a mountain with Garth?

Climbing mountains was nothing new to William. Far from it. By the count that he kept on the green-glow screen of his home computer, he had conquered sixty-six of them. No one else of his acquaintance yet owned a computer, and few that he knew had anything like his growing alpine resume. In spite of his somewhat flabby physique, he thought of himself as fairly accomplished, decently skilled, a real mountaineer. In short, the standard routes were beneath him

now. What mattered were Serious Climbs. A Serious Climb held objective danger. It required boldness and commitment. It took fury in the heart and courage in a rucksack; it met the mountain on its very own terms. If William completed enough of these routes (or knocked them off, as he put it), he might one day be referred to as a Serious Climber. It would be whispered quietly, behind his back, at the University Alpine Club. In years ahead he would flip through slides of his latest expeditions. The clubroom would be dark with awe. “Baltistani tea is bloody wretched,” he would say. “It’s all we had for a week in the blizzard at Camp IV.” Afterwards, total strangers would ask what kind of mittens he had worn on the summit day.

As of yet, given his job in instructional technology, he had not found time for the far-off ranges of the world on the weekends. So he sought his manhood in the local hills, and found his partners, such as they were, at the Alpine Club meetings on Tuesday nights. But on the last Tuesday night, Garth had found him. The aging professor had marked him from across the room, edged to his side, taken his arm, and politely proposed they attempt the South Queen. For a moment, William was ecstatic. The northeast face was a climb he coveted. But the southwest slope was what Garth had in mind, which confirmed what everyone said of the man—that he only did walk-ups. This made Garth the worst sort of partner for an aspiring Serious Climber. So that should have been the end of it. William tried to edge away, but the old man held him with a glittering eye.

“Will you go?” said Garth.

“I will,” said William. He answered with the surreal and sacred surprise of a bridegroom at a wedding ceremony.

So on this particular Saturday morning, Garth and William were trailhead bound, one watching ferns, the other regretting a weekend lost. William sighed, tuned in static on the radio, tuned it out, pushed up his sleeves, pushed them down, peeled his thumbnails, wished them back, and bent down to untie and retie his boots. That completed, he fished his ice ax from the seat behind him and held it on display. It was the mountaineer’s tool, his rod and his staff, his terrible swift sword. And since this his ax was newly purchased, it was more than worth discussing.

“New ax?” said Garth.

“New ax,” said William. He drew a large breath before telling its secrets. “Seventy-centimeter. It’s got a chrome-moly head, drooped pick, razor-cup

adze, *plus*, a laminated aluminum graphite and fiberglass shaft—so it won't vibrate. *And*, the angle on the pick is adjustable." This he demonstrated, ratcheting the head of the ax in all directions. "The coating on the shaft is electrostatically applied—won't chip off like regular paint. Got it 35 percent off, too—at that warehouse place on Apple Street."

Garth checked the rearview mirror. "Old one break?"

"Uh—no," said William. "But this one handles lots better."

"Of course," said Garth.

William twisted around and put the ax away. He saw Garth's wooden ax on the back seat too. It was nearly as long as an antique alpenstock, and battered enough to have been one. No ice tool, that—merely a cane for hobbling up snowfields. He knelt backwards on the seat and ran his hand along the shaft. The wood was dark, smoky, smooth. In places he saw knots and whorls, obvious weak spots. One short fall on a boot-ax belay would snap it like a twig.

"How strong is yours?" he asked.

"As strong as you trust it will be," said Garth. For William it would not be strong.

He tried to guess the wood. Not laminated bamboo, certainly. Maybe ash, or hickory. He asked the old man.

"From the original," said Garth.

"Original what?"

"The original grove," Garth said. "The forest primeval."

William was not familiar with this kind. "But how well does the shaft take the shock on ice? Does it make your hand shiver?"

"Sometimes," said Garth, "it makes my hands tremble."

"I thought so," said William. He was pleased to have guessed the flaw.

He examined the head of the ice ax now, stroking the smooth and tarnished arc. He brushed the edge of the adze, the edge of the pick, both blunt with age. He stopped. Blunt were they? He drew back his fingertips, strangely numb. His own red blood was beading there. How could it? He brought his fingers to his lips and sucked them clean and held the taste within his mouth. The taste made him shudder. He checked beside himself—Garth had not seen. Now his other hand traced the ax head, looking for the manufacturer's imprint. The metal was smooth. It bore no stamp.

"Where'd you buy this?" he asked.

"It was a gift," said Garth.

Maybe the shaft had a logo. William brushed his fingers down the wood once more. They stopped on a pattern of grooves so obvious that he blinked. Minutes ago the wood had been quite plain. He was sure of it. He doubled over the back of his seat to peer more closely. The car rounded a steep curve, and his head swarmed with motion sickness. But on the shaft, unmistakably, were hand-carved letters in an antique script. With a little scrutiny he traced three words: *CAST ME AWAY*. *Good idea*, he thought. He turned the shaft over. On the other side were three words more, carved in the same script: *TAKE ME UP*. That gave him pause. How could a person do both? He gripped the shaft tightly, and trembled.

“Would you like to use it?” said Garth.

William dropped the ax as if it were the known instrument of a bizarre cult murder. He turned back around in the seat, his chin exhibiting new shades of pallor. “No,” he said finally. “Thanks, but no. It’s a little too long for serious ice.” He had not meant to say *serious*—using the word for oneself was not done.

“It may be what you need,” said Garth. “It’s a serious ax.” He left it at that.

So did William.

In a short while, Garth pulled into a shady turnout beneath a small waterfall. He switched off the key, and the motor shuddered three times—a repeated death rattle or, perhaps, the violent exorcising of a stubborn demon. The car gave up its ghost—or stood quietly cleansed—and the two men stiffly got out. The air was cool on the small of their backs, where their shirts had come untucked. Beside them, a neatly cut trail broke into the forest, not quite wide enough for two. A brown wood sign announced the itinerary:

*Lost Creek Meadows 7*

*Obsidian Trail 8*

Garth slipped away to the base of the fall and stood beneath a dogwood tree. Its blossoms were starting to wilt. The fading flowers trembled in a fine cool spray, and the spray fell softly on his beard. He paused to see the white foam splash, the black stones glisten. Then he knelt at the water’s edge, and his knees sank deep in the mossy bank as he reached his lips to the stream. It was very good. He drank for the taste of melting snows and decaying cedars and settling must of fallen needles, for the fading damp and duff and detritus that made the water sweet. It was a taste far to be desired above the inside of an automobile, or

for that matter, above the inside of the finest book. After his drink Garth stayed to consider the toil and spin of the waterfall, and lingered long.

Meanwhile William redeemed the time by donning his armor. Soon he towered beside the professor in full array: his feet were shod with white polyurethane, his shins were greaved with blue polypropylene, his loins were girded with beige polyester. His chest was mailed with a thoroughly waterproof, thoroughly breathable, thoroughly crimson parka. And his shoulders were hung with a marvelous burden, likewise crimson, looming behind him like a burning chest of drawers.

A concealed pocket behind his scalp held secret tools of navigation: a carefully folded contour map entitled “South Queen,” laminated with clear contact paper to make it rainproof; the *Climber’s Guide to the Three Queens*, second edition, in which every route he had mastered was duly checked and dated; a liquid-filled compass, magnifying glass attached; and a small altimeter. The altimeter was unreliable, but it did offer a number whenever it was consulted. William prized his digital watch for the same reason, even though it unaccountably stopped at times.

Three accessory pockets festooned each side of the pack. One side held a plastic liter bottle that fizzed to capacity with miracle electrolytes; tropical chocolate bars, guaranteed not to melt; and a compact camera, used only to record, and occasionally to contrive, the serious nature of William’s exploits. The film in the camera had already been exposed six times to the downward plummet of an ice couloir, lost below in a foggy abyss.

In the other set of pockets lay a tube of Western Cwm Cream (“as used by the the conquerors of Mount Everest”); a mint-green stick of protective lip balm (“specially prepared to screen out dangerous high-altitude rays”); a small hand mirror, to ensure proper application of both; a bottle of liquid amber soap (“Absolutely Biodegradable”); a plastic vial of insect repellent (“New! Improved! Stops Bugs Dead!”); a chartreuse toothbrush, part of the handle sawn off to save weight; a can of foot powder (“GETS THE ROT OUT!”); and a small cylinder of toilet paper—in the bathroom of his tiny apartment he carefully set aside each roll before it was completely used up.

This side of his pack was also home to exactly half of the Ten Essentials. Here lay a pair of prescription glacier goggles in a crushproof lavender case; a lithium-cell headlamp—The WonderBright; a waterproof box of waterproof matches; a silver whistle—The Acme Thunderer; and a red pocketknife, itself

an arsenal. Folded into its recesses were tweezers, scissors, leather punch, awl, screwdrivers (flat-blade and Phillips), cutting blades (short and long), toothpick, file, miniature crosscut saw, can opener, bottle opener, corkscrew, and magnifying glass. The magnifying glass troubled William, because he already had one on his compass. He often wondered whether he should vandalize his pocketknife to eliminate this redundancy.

And in the womb of William's pack? At the bottom, tightly curled like a slumbering fetus, a lime-green sleeping bag, quilted with down and laced with synthetic fibers. There, too, a canary-yellow air mattress. And beside it a bundle of fiberglass reeds, tightly wrapped in a purple shroud. Unleashed, they collected themselves like Ezekiel's bones to frame the flesh of a nylon geodesic dome.

Further inhabitants: a sackful of stove in bottles and tubes, a nesting set of aluminum pots, foil packets of freeze-dried delights, booties and gaiters and stockings and mittens, caps and cagoules and bandanas and—suffice it to say that these were a few of his favorite things.

Crushing it all was a 150-foot rattlesnake coil. No rope was needed for the snowfield they planned to climb, but William had packed it in the wan hope that Garth might be persuaded to try something More Interesting. Ice screws and pitons, chocks and carabiners, harness and helmet were stashed here too—just in case. William's versatile ice ax was strapped to attention on the back of his pack, its inverted head pillowed on a pair of black crampons. And that was all.

"Ready?" said William.

Garth left the waterfall and donned his own pack. It hung loosely on his shoulders, a weathered canvas bag of tricks. His coat was faded, a dubious gray. His pants were tattered khaki.

"As I'll ever be," said Garth. He waved his ax as if to say, *After you.*

For the load that he carried, William took off with amazing strides. And his tongue kept pace with his feet. This was the maiden voyage of a new hip-belt suspension system—an ingenious concoction of snaps and buckles and Velcro straps—and William extolled its features for at least a full mile. As he talked, his palms cut diagrams in air, and he stared at them as if they would vanish if once he looked away. But since his student walked behind him, walled off from the ersatz blackboard, it did not really matter if the drawings were erased.

And Garth was looking elsewhere. His eyes kept track of the wandering stream beside the trail—purling in roots of red cedar, fanning over smooth

logs, stopping in dark pools. In one dark pool—*there!*—flashed the orange belly of a newt.

Where the forest was thick, sword fern overhung the water. Where the forest was thin, the bracken foamed waist-high. Here they walked by faith, by a miraculous parting of pale green seas, and faith crushed the fiddleheads underfoot like so many sunken chariots. Shafts of sunlight, roiling with pollen, shed blessings on the ferny deep. The sunlight pierced an understory of vine maple, first to catch autumn fire. Slide alder grew in shadowy thickets, good reason for a trail. And dogwoods—one here, one there—dropped yellowing blossoms on the path.

Over the maple, the alder, the dogwood, sometimes shutting them off in darkness, great hemlocks and great cedars rose, giants on the earth. The cedar trunks were red and shaggy. Cobwebs hung in fire-scarred hollows, safety nets for cones and dust and dead leaf sprays. The hemlock trunks were gray and even, bearded with pale lichen. The huge trees groaned aloud at times, traveling in a heavy staccato—not any one tree, but all.

Yet the topmost branches held echoes of wind—soft, distant, the muted empyrean roar of a sea shell. From this verge of heaven, nudged by the breeze, hemlock cones leapt down to earth, littering the path, so small an incarnation of so great a tree. The cones fell almost soundlessly, touching the ground like shy-blown kisses. They slipped through William's diagrams as if through airy nothing.

William quit his lecture at last when the path upended itself in switchbacks over a valley step. Here he found comfort in merely breathing. He let his diagrams dissolve, and fell to watching the manly rhythm of his polyurethane boots. Sometimes, in mid-stride, they clicked together like a gumball machine.

And so miles passed, hours passed. The two men watered the path with the sweat of their brows, anointing change in the green world about them. Cedars and hemlocks slipped away. Douglas fir appeared, then vanished. True firs raised their straight-brushed steeples, sticky with cones that squirrels sever. Cones like gently curved bananas hung from statuesque white pine. Then mountain hemlocks, shorter than their lowland cousins, drooped their limp crowns, each one crooked like the hat of a witch. Last of all grew whitebark pine, wind-raked clumps of rubbery twigs, refuge in a storm.

Ferns gave way to mops of bear grass. Mossy earth dried up in dust. Then came a snowpatch, hollow and arched like the shell of a tortoise. The surface

was scalloped, stained with needles. William broke through into meltwater pools, and Garth followed after, wetting his cracked leather boots. It was then that his nose caught the first sweet sting of alpine slopes. Here was manna at their feet, hinting a promised land.

And before very long it was upon them. The forest simply ended, and they stood on the verge of a vast meadow parkland. Except for islands of hemlock and whitebark, all was treeless, open to the bright sky. The land lay green, lavish and undulating, dotted with ponds and ahum with mosquitoes. All of this, paradise enough, was but a velvet footstool to the raised splendor of the South Queen, her train of snowfields sweeping gently on the right; on the left, the austere profile of her face. They lifted their eyes to her fullness, her presence, as if nothing else mattered.

“Ah,” sighed Garth. His burden slipped unbidden from his shoulders.

“*Ab!*” cried William. “*Aiee!*” He slapped a mosquito on his temple and missed another on his forearm. Then he reached one hand behind his shoulder. There, his wrist painfully bent, he unzipped the waiting pocket in his pack and seized upon the vial within. He had what he wanted. It pooled yellow in his palms. The bitter poison stung his eyes and crept between his lips.