

Chapter 2: Stirring Conflict

It took forever for morning to come because I kept waking up, haunted by the whispers of the oak tree. Meagan was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she hit my arm.

“Geez, Sarah, are you still on that? Yeah, it could be a warning of something but it’s probably your imagination. Come on, let’s just get across those campsites to the showers while there’s still hot water.”

We made it to the showers, but the only good part about it was that the smell of campfire was being washed out of my hair. I couldn’t use my usual fragrant shampoo because I didn’t want to attract mosquitoes, and we missed out on the hot water.

By the time we got back to camp, the morning dew was already clinging to my arms and I was worried that the stench of mildew would find its way back into my wet hair. The damp cool morning made it uncomfortable to breathe and almost impossible to feel refreshed.

But the campfire was crackling and Mr. Baker and Mr. Lee had already made a pile of toast with their hand-held wire toasters. I was hungry and burned toast was better than nothing so I joined the others and sat on a log by the fire. To everyone’s surprise, a few minutes later a familiar aroma filled the air. Ms. Ryan got everyone’s attention when she and a couple girls approached carrying trays.

“I couldn’t wait for you guys to make it and it was calling out to me from the restaurant. Coffee anyone?”

It made the start to the morning a little more tolerable, and after breakfast we packed up the camp and prepared to head out in teams. I started snapping pictures of everyone for my scrapbook.

“Hey, how about one of me and Meg?”

Ali put his arm around Meagan’s shoulder and winked at me.

Meagan’s blushing face and high-spirited smile said it all. I took several pictures and then Brad asked for one of himself with me. But at that very second when I glanced over his shoulder, I noticed Rick standing alone, leaning against a tree and fidgeting with his watch. He was smiling at me.

I was sure this was my cue, so I told Brad maybe later and then scurried over to where Rick was, trying not to look too anxious.

“Hi, Rick.”

“Hey, yourself.”

My nerve ran off with all the intelligent words and I ended up muttering meaningless things like how nice his hiking boots were. This is probably one of the reasons why guys avoid me.

“I see Ali Baba’s moving in on your friend.”

“What?”

“Nothing, forget it. It must be annoying having someone like that hanging around you.”

“Someone like that? Like what? He’s a friend and we....”

Before I could say anything more, he cut me off and asked me if I had a boyfriend. My heart skipped a beat and I moved in closer, smiling as I tried to keep my voice from shaking.

“No, not really. Why?”

“Just asking. I’ve never seen you at any parties and you don’t look like the type that likes to have fun, that’s all. But then maybe you don’t even date guys, right? Hey, that’s okay with me. I’m cool. So don’t worry, you don’t need to change for me. You’re not my type anyway.”

What! I didn’t see any of that coming. And then if that wasn’t enough, he kept going.

“Now, here comes my type. Beth knows what I like.”

I covered my mouth so no one would see my quivering bottom lip adding to my humiliation.

“Come on, Beth. Sandy’s gonna take our picture.”

Sandy? I tried to keep smiling even though I felt as if someone had just kicked me in the stomach. I swallowed and spoke quietly.

“My name isn’t Sandy, it’s Sarah.”

“Huh? Yeah, okay. Let me put my arm around you like this and okay, how does this pose look, Sar-ah?”

I took their picture, although I don’t know why because I knew it would never make it into the scrapbook. I didn’t need a reminder of her long blonde hair falling gracefully over the skimpy revealing tank top that almost covered her well-developed body.

I turned and ran back to Meagan who was waving for me to hurry. I shoved my camera back into the pouch just as Mr. Baker began yelling for everyone head out. We followed him onto the trail that bore the red tags on the trees.

“I can’t believe he said that to me, Meg.”

“I can. He’s a jerk. Who cares what he thinks. It doesn’t change who you are, Sarah, and your hair is longer than hers, and it’s natural brown and beautiful and healthy. You’re no less feminine just because you’re not showing everyone your wares. Forget him.”

We hiked along the Snake River and entered into a huge, dark forest where the air felt much cooler on my skin but was a little heavy to breathe. The rapids were splashing freely in the distance, and as the morning went on, the sun moved above us filtering through the trees and lifting the weight of the air.

By noon it was really hot and humid and I was coated in a thin layer of sweat mingled with some tiny annoying bugs. But we were still hiking in a lot of shade so we didn’t really feel the direct affect of the sun. As we edged our way up another slope, Meagan tapped my arm and chuckled.

“Sarah, look at Barbie now. She’s all shiny and sweat is dripping from her bottle blonde hair.”

We were giggling and following behind as Ali looked back with a big grin, shaking his head at Meagan. I felt a bit guilty for laughing at her, especially when she could have heard us.

For a long time after that we were climbing up and running down the shaded trails, crossing shallow ponds and brooks. My chest was tingling as I saw the reflection of the tiny, colored fish splashing freely in the clear waters.

And it was near a clear trickling stream that Ali spotted the first red flag.

“Hey, look over there.”

But the second his words were out, Rick darted out of nowhere and pushed Ali aside, yelling that he found it first. He climbed over to the flag as Beth and Amanda cheered him on, and then in a pretentious heroic fashion he jumped back onto the ground, holding it high in the air and then gave it Mr. Baker. There were cheers and applause as Mr. Baker praised Rick.

“Way to go, first one down.”

Meagan’s blushing face, however, said it all as she mumbled under her breath. Ali and Brad sat down on a boulder next to the stream as Mr. Baker took off his sunglasses and opened his map.

“Okay, the forest trail ends in about a mile so I think we should stop there to eat lunch before we venture into the hot sun and out onto the prairie trail.”

The heat was rising and I was constantly wiping the sweat from my brow. I was glad we would be stopping to rest very soon and as the trail curved sharply to the right, I could hear the splashing of the rapids in the river that ran along side of the trail.

Just hearing the water made me feel cooler and I couldn’t wait to take a break. As we came out of the density of the forest and into a stretch of trail with

a little less humidity, I saw another foreboding forest in the far distance up ahead.

We dropped our bags and most of us fell upon the cool, shaded ground to rest, although Austin and Amanda dove right into the open field to get away from the humidity. I was carrying the lunches, so everyone gathered around to pick out freeze-dried sandwiches and juice boxes. Mr. Baker wandered out into the open trail and stared up at the sky.

“Hmm, almost looks like a storm brewing. I’m going to call the Canyon and see what’s up.”

He got antsy when the voice on the other end said there was nothing but clear skies ahead, and slapped the phone closed before he tossed it in his bag.

“Well, they don’t look too clear to me. I think we should move on soon just in case.”

Amanda jumped forward and grabbed his arm.

“What do you mean, it’s going to storm? I don’t want to be out here if it’s going to storm.”

Mr. Baker smiled at her.

“Well hopefully, if it does start to rain we’ll be at the first campsite and we can take refuge in the water cabin if it gets too much. But if it starts sooner, then according to my map there are caves just a few miles up ahead and we’ll stay in one of those until it passes.”

Austin hadn’t said much up to this point, but asked what a water cabin was, and since Mr. Baker was chomping on a sandwich, I answered him.

“Oh, on hiking trips like this, they have some campsites along the trail where the hikers can stay at the end of each day’s journey. And there are small cabins set up near these campsites that are stocked with first aid and bottled water, stuff like that, so we don’t have to carry our water supply for the whole hike.”

As I was talking, Mr. Baker was staring up at the clouds with his hands on his narrow hips. His mumbling took my breath away.

“I don’t like this. Why doesn’t the Canyon see this?”

His face was so consumed with worry that a cold flickering chill shot up my back and into the nape of my neck. I grabbed my backpack and jumped up.

“We should leave now.”

Rick was agitated and reached for his backpack.

“Not you, too.”

Brad stepped towards me and asked if I was okay.

“No, I’m just – I just think we should leave soon in case it starts to rain.”

I guess I must have shrugged his arm away because he backed up and stood beside Ali again. Meagan looked worried and took my hand.

“Meg, it’s that feeling again. It’s so creepy. There’s something up ahead, something bad, but I don’t know what it is.”

We sat for a minute and Meagan began reassuring me that I was over reacting.

“If there was a storm coming, the Canyon would warn us about it. Come on, you’re worrying over nothing.”

I was still shaking inside but I said okay and joined the others back onto the trail. We continued at a faster pace than before and about two hours later Mr. Baker got a call from the Canyon. The male voice on the other end was loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Hey, I’m sorry for the confusion, but it looks like you’re in for a bit of rain out there. If you can’t make it to the cabin, get to one of the caves that are about six miles up ahead you.”

Beth rolled her eyes and brushed her hair off of her face.

“And just how do they know where we are?”

Ali finished off his juice box and answered her.

“The trees are marked sporadically with colored chips that they use as geographic locators. We give them the number on the chip, and the Canyon knows exactly where we are.”

“Oh, I see. Gee, Ali, you sure know a lot about hiking. Thanks.”

But before she got passed her first giggle, Rick pushed her behind him forcibly with his arm.

“Look, if you don’t mind, just keep your foreign opinions to yourself, okay? And Beth, leave him alone.”

As Ali was straightening his backpack he stared at Rick.

“No, you look. I’m an experienced hiker and I was just ...”

“Yeah, well just don’t do it again. If Beth needs to know something, I’ll be the one that tells her.”

Ali shook his head at Rick and then flung his backpack over his shoulders. My insides began churning with the worry.

“Meg, what’s going on with them?”

“I don’t know, but Rick seems to really have it in for Ali, doesn’t he? I hope this isn’t how the whole trip’s going to be.”

We continued along the narrow trail that wound down into a beaten stone path alongside the riverbank. We were staying close together and I think almost everyone felt the ground shake when an unexpected thundercloud boomed in the far distance.

Mr. Baker was waving to us as he was yelling.

“Come on, let’s move faster.”

We were heading towards the caves that were only a couple miles up ahead, but as we were hurrying along, I noticed Austin lagging behind us and I slipped back to be with him. He was preoccupied with something else, but I finally convinced him to move faster. I clasped his hand in mine and we quickly caught up to the others.

We were scurrying along the ragged path, ignoring the unbearable heat, and made it to the caves just as the first few drops began to fall. We crowded inside the small rock cave that was about the size of my bedroom, and sat down along the far walls. Within seconds the rains became torrents and totally blocked the entrance with a sheet of water. Ali was amazed.

“Wow, is that ever coming down. You can’t even see past the entrance.”

Rick mumbled to Beth that he should go back to his own country if he's afraid of a little rain. I'm not sure that Ali didn't hear that, but he didn't react to it. Meagan and I looked at each other and she huffed as she rolled her eyes at Rick.

We began squirming in closer together to keep warm because the sudden rains had cooled everything down and the drops being shot inside the cave were cold. Brad sat down beside me but Amanda wormed her way in between us almost right away. Her flirtatious look convinced me that Brad was her goal for this trip. And I was fine with that because it meant that he wouldn't be bothering me.

"I'm freezing," Beth said as she pulled out her jacket. "Here Rick, here's yours."

We all did the same because it was too cold to sit without one on. Then we rolled out a couple sleeping bags and waited while it rained for the next couple hours. Even with my jacket on, though, I was shaking inside.

The strident thunder was shaking the rocks that we leaned against and the lightning illuminated the entrance of the cave like a horror movie. I knew we were safe but the raging storm kept my insides quivering. Thunder and rain don't bother me, but lightning terrifies me.

Meagan broke the silence.

"Hey, I know what we can do. Let's share our creepy ghost stories and weird camp experiences."

The fluorescent lighting of Mr. Baker's lamp revealed a lot of excitement and laughter from almost everyone as we began telling ghost stories. It was helping all of us to ignore the storm and pass the time; everyone except Austin who wasn't really talking or laughing.

I was sitting close to Meagan and feeling safe inside the cave, even though it was sounding like the whole world was crashing in around us. I was thinking about the oak tree but I didn't sense any kind of chill or fear, and I began thinking that the warning was probably for this storm. So, I began relaxing a bit more.

When the storm was finally over, the sun returned bringing even more unbearable heat and humidity. Mr. Baker rolled up his sleeping bag and stuffed it in the backpack.

"Okay, everyone, let's get to the campsite so we can set up camp and get that fire going. I'm starving."

It was after six by the time we got to the nearest campsite where we could set up our tents. The mosquitoes were eating us alive and the humidity was making it difficult to breathe. We sat around the campfire long enough to roast some canned wieners and unwind a bit. But Meagan and I were exhausted and the mosquitoes were really annoying, so we went inside our tent fairly early to sleep.

When we got up the next morning the heavy, stuffy air was so damp that my clothes stuck to my skin. I pulled out the camera to get a few shots of the campsite before we moved on.

“Geez, Meg. I’m all sweaty and we haven’t even started out yet. Rick seems happy, though. I never thought of bringing pop like he did. Keeps him hydrated, I guess.”

“Yeah, well hopefully it’ll keep his mouth shut from making sick remarks to Ali. Oh, good. You’re taking pictures. Quick, get that one of Mr. Baker.”

I took a few more pictures and then put my camera away so that we could coat each other with insect repellent before we headed out once again to win the race. About an hour into the hike, Mr. Baker stopped in front of this unusual tree formation and we were all gathering around it because it was uniquely shaped like a dolphin on a stick. Then he became fidgety.

“Hey, where’s Austin?”

We began calling out his name and looking around frantically but he wasn’t with us. Brad and Ali darted back and forth about twenty yards in every direction to see if he was there. Mr. Baker dropped his backpack and we talked about when we last saw him. It had been several minutes since anyone had spoken with him.

Mr. Baker shouted for us all to head back on the trail to look for him. But Rick’s face turned red as he pointed his finger towards the trail.

“No, I think we should keep going because there’s a race going on here and we’re not gonna win by going back. You go back and we’ll keep going. You can catch up.”

Mr. Baker glared at Rick.

“I’m in charge here, not you. We stick together and no one gets left behind. Now let’s go back and look for him. Maybe he’s sprained an ankle or something and he needs our help. So, let’s go.”

“Come on, Mr. B. It doesn’t take the whole team to find him. Send those two guys and let the rest of us wait here.”

Mr. Baker took a deep breath and warned Rick not to move from this spot while he went back to look for Austin. I looked at Meagan and she nodded.

“Meg and I will go, Mr. Baker.”

We flung off our backpacks and raced back down the trail. I hoped that he wasn’t hurt, but then I knew he wasn’t his usual self, either, and I was worried that maybe something happened to him.

We ran about a hundred yards back into the clammy forest before we noticed that Brad and Ali were right behind us, and within seconds Mr. Baker caught up to them. We were searching anxiously and calling out Austin’s name many times but there was no response.

Then all of a sudden Meagan squealed and pointed to Austin’s backpack. It was lying on the ground beside a rock near the edge of the riverbank. She moved in closer and gasped.

“Oh no!”