

Fire Storm

Chapter 3 The Cave

I gasped for air and held onto Meagan's arm for support as I stared at the half-sunken boat. Spikes of fear shot up and down my back as waves of paranoia flooded my entire body. I couldn't move. Flashbacks of earlier summers with Meagan and I on that boat with Grandpa suddenly filled my thoughts and my eyes welled up.

I remembered the first time Grandpa took us on the boat. We sat out in the middle of the lake and I was so nervous and terrified that we were going to sink that I kept crying. I remember Grandpa laughing and then speaking with his quiet, gentle voice as he promised us that we were safe. At the time it seemed as if we were so far away, but it was really only about twenty yards from the end of the dock by their home.

He bought us each our own fishing rod and then showed us how to hook these horribly fat worms so that we could fish in the boat beside him. Nana had just painted our fingernails with bright red nail polish and Meagan was upset that the worms would ruin her nails. I didn't care so I watched Grandpa carefully and stuck my hands right in the worm bucket so that I could get my own worm and hook it on. I wanted to be as perfect as Grandpa so that I could catch a big fish just like him.

Grandpa always strapped the safety jackets onto us right after Nana had covered us with greasy layers of sunscreen lotion. She never came on the boat with us and missed out on lots of laughter as we sat for hours just waiting for a hungry fish to come and bite onto our lines.

Meagan and I usually only caught a few things like pop cans and snails, but Grandpa always managed to catch some hefty sized fish and then toss them into a huge metal bucket that

sat in the middle of the boat. When we were finished he'd bring the boat back to the dock and he would hold his fish high in the air so proudly as we walked from the dock to the house.

We'd watch Grandpa gut and clean the fish, and then throw them in a huge cast iron pan and fry them on the barbeque outside. I could never bring myself to eat them, especially after seeing their eyes and knowing that they used to be alive, so Nana would always have a peanut butter sandwich waiting just for me. We'd sit outside and laugh and fill Nana in on the day's events. Every summer was the same and yet each one was an adventure of its own that I waited for.

I stared at the capsized boat through blurry eyes and tried to focus on the voice that was yelling beside me.

“Sarah, come on! We have to follow the guys. Come on!”

I looked at Meagan and I could feel her tugging on my arm as she was yelling at me, but it was as if my thoughts were moving in slow motion while trying to speed ahead to the present moment. But as my eyes rested on the boat once more, I was quickly brought back to the crisis at hand.

Meagan was still pulling on my arm and she had fear written all over face. I realized that I had drifted back in time and I apologized to her for it and then began to move slowly with my rubbery legs.

“That's okay, Sarah. But we have to hurry. The guys are down there already. Come on.”

We made our way through the weeds and dried shrubbery to the water where the guys had stopped to yell for Grandpa and Don. Meagan and I joined in and called for them, as well, but there was no answer.

Seconds later, Brad threw his backpack on the ground and pulled his boots off.

“Come on, Ali. Get the rope ready, I’m going in.”

Brad tied one end of the rope around his waist and then climbed down into the water and swam out to where the boat was lodged. He quickly disappeared just in front of it and Meagan and I watched from the edge as we continued anxiously to call out for Grandpa. Ali held on to the other end of the rope and stood on the edge, ready to pull Brad back when he surfaced.

My heart pounded in anticipation as we waited anxiously and watched the bubbles in the water. About half a minute later, Brad came back and yelled something to Ali. Meagan and I edged down closer to listen.

“Nothing. There’s no one here.”

Brad swam back to the bank and Ali helped him out of the water. He pulled off his t-shirt and wrung it out as he talked.

“There’s a huge hole on the bottom – like, I mean huge - but they’re gone. They must have hit something and bailed before it sank.”

Meagan and I hugged each other with joy when Brad said that because it meant they were still alive. Ali looked around with his hands on his hips while Brad pulled his socks and boots back on.

“Well, they’re both old so how far can two old men go after sinking their boat and swimming to safety? They called for help shortly after they set out so my guess is that they called from the boat, grabbed their stuff and swam to shore. So they can’t be that far away. Maybe up there towards that clearing?”

As Meagan and I looked in the direction that Ali was pointing, I saw the red sunset spread majestically across the sky and my heart thumped inside my chest.

“It’s going to be dark soon. That sunset will only last another half hour or so and it’ll start getting dark. We have to hurry.”

We all began shouting for Grandpa and Don as loudly as we could. I knew that they had to be somewhere ahead of us and we quickly edged our way along the path on the bank towards the clearing. But when we got to where we thought they might be, there was no one.

Ali took off his sunglasses and wiped his face with his hand.

“Okay, let’s think like an old man. You can’t run up these paths so you walk slowly, which means we should be able to catch up to them. Would they be carrying anything or would they leave their things behind?”

Meagan and I looked at each other and she raised her eyebrows as she shrugged.

“Grandpa wouldn’t leave anything behind. He’s probably lugging his catch, his tackle case and his duffle bag.”

Brad was focusing on a little area to the west of us but turned to Ali when Meagan finished talking.

“Well actually, there was something that looked like a duffle bag caught under the boat but I didn’t see any tackle gear or anything. It likely sank.”

Brad turned away again and Ali moved in closer to see what he was looking at.

“Gees, Ali, it’s so hot out here and I can’t picture two old men moving that fast in this heat, even though they were probably cooled down a bit from the water initially.”

“Yeah, I know. And the heat has dried up any wet marks so we can’t even see where they came up out of the water. And I assume they came out because his message said something about a hole in the boat and that’s likely why his message was short and choppy – they were in a hurry to get out of it.”

“For sure – they’d be scrambling to get the heck out of there.”

Ali motioned for us to follow as he and Brad led the way with Meagan and I right behind them. The trail was unusually quiet and then suddenly, a rupture of birds came screeching above us as they flew over and away from the forest. There were hundreds of them forming a massive dark cloud above us that made Meagan and I both jump.

“Wow, that happened this morning, too. Remember, Meg? We were seeing Grandpa off when the birds did the same thing.”

Meagan looked up as she yelled over her shoulder.

“And there were so many animals, too, like deer and ground critters. It was like they were running for safety or something.”

We continued along the narrow path and talked about the outburst from the wildlife as we ran. When we caught up to the guys Meagan moved in close to Ali while Brad grabbed my hand and we edged closely along the riverbank.

“I’ve seen that before, Sarah. Usually means there’s something wrong like a hunter in the forest or something. The sound of gunfire scares them enough to stampede out like that, although I didn’t hear a gun shot.”

As we climbed the weedy slope, Ali signalled for us to be quiet.

“Listen! Do you hear that?”

We all froze in our tracks as our eyes scouted the area in every direction. I held my breath and waited and then I heard it.

“Yeah, I hear it. It’s whimpering and it’s coming from over there.”

We edged our way back down towards the riverbank and my insides jumped

when I saw Don laying facedown with his feet dangling in the water. The guys ran ahead of us and squatted to speak to him without moving him.

“Don. I’m Ali. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Don began moaning loudly and then he lifted his head off the ground slightly to look at Ali.

“I’m okay, just sore. Really sore.”

“Don, can we move you? We need to move you away from the water.”

“Yeah, don’t touch my hands. They’re sore.”

Ali and Brad gently pulled Don forward and then rolled him onto his back. A few seconds later they helped him to sit up and Don held his hands in front of him. His face was etched with agony and I felt sorry for him as he stared at his cut and bloodied hands. I leaned in to him and tapped his shoulder.

“Don, where’s Grandpa?”

Don didn’t answer me. He just kept turning his hands and complaining that they hurt. I moved in closer to him and sat beside him.

“Don, where’s my grandfather?”

“They hurt, that’s what happened.”

The tension was rising inside me and I had to contain myself from getting angry with him.

“How did you hurt them?”

Don lifted his arm to show us a cut that stretched from his wrist to his elbow and then shook his head as brought his knees up to his chest.

“Can’t explain it. The animals went crazy. We finished fishing and Luke drank his usual gallon of water and had to go, you know. Well, he has to do it on land so we brought the boat close to the bank and he climbs out.”

Don’s methodical words were making my insides churn. He seemed to take forever to just tell us what happened and I just wanted him to get to the part where he’d tell us where Grandpa was. Both Meagan and I were restless and hung on his every word but my impatience grew and I cut him off.

“Don, where’s my grandfather?”

Don looked up at me and shook his head.

“You city kids, you’re all alike. You have no respect for anyone except yourself. I’m trying to tell you what happened but you’re rude and don’t even care that I’m hurt. Look at my hands! They’re bleeding. I’m trying to tell you what happened. Why won’t you let me talk?”

For a split second I felt like a child being chastised by an adult for doing something wrong, and I jerked backward out of reflex as I instinctively bit my lower lip. But my insides were aching and I needed to know where Grandpa was. Ali stayed beside me while I tried to get Don to tell us where Grandpa was or even what happened. Meagan and Brad wandered around and called out for Grandpa as they searched the nearby area.

“Look, Don. I’m sorry if I appear rude. I just want to know where Grandpa is.”

“I’m telling you where he is. There were two wolves – well, first I had to wait for him to finish and then when he was walking back to the boat, two wolves chased him right off the bank.”

My heart fell to my feet and my hands became clammy.

“What happened? Did they hurt him?”

“Yup, got his leg. But he was okay, dove into the water and pushed the boat out but it hit one of the sharp rocks and made that hole even bigger. I told him to be careful but he was really scared of those wolves.”

Ali rubbed Don’s shoulder as he looked around.

“And that’s when it sank.”

“Yup, that’s when she started to sink. Luke was in the water and he grabbed the walkie-talkie to call for help but it didn’t work and we had to get out so I dove in after him.”

“Don, where are the wolves now?”

“The wolves? Oh, they took off with the rest of the pack. They were all running, never seen them run like that before. They were scared of something before they saw us and I think Luke just got in their way. But he just had to go, couldn’t wait to get home.”

Just then Brad and Meagan came running back to us and Brad squatted beside Ali.

“There’s a blood trail that leads over there. We gotta grab Don and get going in that direction.”

I saw the anxiousness in Meagan’s face and my chest pounded with the same anxiety, but Don’s words were echoing in my ears.

“What about the wolves? What if they come back? I mean, if Grandpa is bleeding, won’t they smell the blood and come back?”

Ali turned to me and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s not even an issue, Sarah. We have to find your grandfather and we’ll just have to take it one step at a time. Let’s just get to him first.”

Brad and Ali helped Don to his feet and practically carried him up the riverbank to the ridge above us. There were sporadic drops of blood that we followed but when we got to the top,

they disappeared. The guys helped Don to sit on a broken tree stump while we searched the area for more clues.

We spent several minutes searching every possible nook and cranny where Grandpa might have gone, but there weren't even any blood spots to show that he'd been there. Don began to moan as he looked up at the descending sunset.

“It's going to be dark soon and we don't have any way back home. We're going to have to camp out here for the night.”

His words echoed in my ears and as I looked at the sky and realized that dusk really was setting in, I began to ache for Grandpa.

“We have to keep looking for him and then we'll camp out together if we have to, but we have to find him first.”

Just then Brad yelled from a small cave about fifty feet away. Ali told Meagan and me to stay with Don while he checked it out, and I didn't want to wait. I wanted to go and find Grandpa but I knew he was right. We couldn't just leave Don alone, especially when he seemed a bit insecure, and I knew if we left him that he'd just wonder off and get lost.

The next few minutes felt like hours as I watched anxiously in the direction of the cave. Ali came barrelling back towards us and stopped just short of running off the riverbank.

“Okay, we've found your Grandfather. He's in the cave but he's been bitten and he's bleeding bad and we need to get him out of here now.”

Part of me wanted to shout with joy but the other part wanted to break down and cry. Ali lifted Don's good arm and propped him up with his right shoulder and I did the same to his left shoulder. Meagan walked ahead of us looking back constantly. A few minutes later we were at the top and in the cave.

I helped Ali to sit Don as gently as we could onto the ground so he could lean against the cave wall, but my eyes were on the back of Meagan. I scurried over to where she was squatted and as I gazed upon my grandfather, I felt as if I'd been punched in the chest.

He was awake and cognisant but he was in pain as his right leg had a huge bite in it with torn skin and blood was dripping from it. Meagan pulled the first aid box out of the backpack and poured some rubbing alcohol over the wound. Grandpa yelped and cursed at the same time as Brad wrapped his arms around Grandpa's chest to hold him still.

For the next few minutes Meagan and I tried to clean the wound but it was just too open and gory to do it any good. We wound the gauze tightly around it to stop the bleeding and keep the skin in place, and then turned to see what the guys were doing. Ali was digging through his backpack.

"Okay, Brad, did you bring your cell? Seems like mine fell out when I dumped my bag back at the house."

Brad searched his backpack and shook his head.

"Same here. But hey, what about the walkie-talkie?"

Ali asked Don where the walkie-talkie was and Don flung his hand in the air and said he threw it in the water."

"It didn't work so why keep it?"

"Well, that's great. We can't call for help and there's no way we're going to get these guys out of here before it gets dark which is like, in minutes from now. Looks like we'll be spending the night here."

Ali sat on a short boulder beside Meagan and huffed.

“Brad’s right. We need a boat to get across the river and even if we had one, we can’t see a thing in the dark, anyway.”

Just then Don began to whine.

“I don’t want to stay here. I want to go home.”

Grandpa hadn’t said anything and was just watching us while he rubbed his wounded leg. I curled in beside him and he put his arm around me, giving me a bit of security, but I knew that he was in more pain than he was letting on. It was as if he read my mind and then squeezed my arm.

“I’m okay, Sarah. The one guy got me but I gave them our catch and they took them and ran off. I was hurt way worse than this in the war.”

I smiled at Grandpa and then remembered that he’d never met Brad and Ali so I introduced them and I could tell by the gleam in his eyes that he liked them.

“Thanks for coming out here with my girls, fellas. Looks like we’re here for the night so you might as well make yourself as comfortable as you can. Nana will be insane by now with worry, but there’s not much we can do about that right now.”

Poor Nana. I’d forgotten that she must be sick with worry. But again, Grandpa was reading my thoughts.

“She’ll be fine. This isn’t the first time that I got lost out here. We’ve been through this a few times and she’ll be okay.”

We sat inside the small cave and made a campfire on the rocky floor in the middle to keep us warm from the cool damp air that lingered inside the cave. The smoke went straight up and through an opening above us and as the sun went down, so did the temperature. Brad and Ali had gathered a pile of heavy branches and logs to block off the entrance and keep strange

animals out during the night. They found two short branches that looked almost like baseball bats to use as a weapon in case we got unwanted guests.

Brad took the blankets out from his backpack and curled in beside me so that we were all covered, and Ali squeezed in beside Don with Meagan on his other side and spread the other blanket over them.

I held on to Grandpa's arm but I couldn't stop shaking. I'm not sure if it was from the cool night air or from the anxiety of being lost in a forest we didn't know, surrounded by wolves that might be lurking outside the cave, or if it was from knowing that Grandpa was in pain. The only peace I had was in knowing that Brad was there with me.

But the goose bumps crawled slyly up my arms anyway and the shivers kissed the nape of my neck. I knew that there was something waiting for us up ahead and that my nightmare was only just beginning.