

Chapter One

Joseph trudged through the dense forest as his stepfather kept up the chatter behind him. This stupid fishing trip was all his mother's idea.

Joseph had reluctantly agreed, if only to please his mother.

“You know Joseph, I came fishing up here in Elk Falls Park with my old man all the time.” Peter couldn't take the hint.

Joseph Marston had loved his father.

Not this impostor, but his real dad.

A couple of years ago it was just him, Dad and Mum. The perfect family living on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. His Dad was a Park Ranger, at Elk Falls.

“Check out that track, Joseph.” Peters' voice interrupted him.

Glancing down he noticed a set of tracks leading off into the wilderness. Possibly a Vancouver Island Wolf, he told himself. His countless camping trips with his dad told him the tracks were a few days old.

“Yep, I bet that bear was here only a few hours ago.”

Joseph didn't correct him.

Here on Vancouver Island, the wildlife was different to that on mainland British Columbia.

Tourists in their thousands visited every year expecting to see towering grizzlies and were always disappointed.

“Yeah, how 'bout that” he muttered.

The last six months, ever since his mum and “Try Hard Peter” got married, saw Joseph subjected to endless hours of torture as his new dad tried to fit in.

His real dad disappeared on a hiking trip about a year ago, or so the papers reported. They had never found his body.

The memories came flooding back and he fought back tears. His dad had been trekking through The Vancouver Island ranges, alone, and was only meant to be gone a few days.

When he didn't return, Joseph's mother had phoned around but no one had seen or heard from him. They searched for weeks, but came up empty handed.

Theories flew around, much to Joseph's disgust.

A wolf had gotten him, was one. Another supposed that he was caught in an avalanche.

The third, and most preposterous, was that he had gotten sick of his life and wanted to live in the wild, full time, away from everything. Maybe he just snapped, people would say.

"How 'bout it sport, let's set up camp right here." Joseph fought back tears and nodded without looking up.

He hadn't slept well since his mum delivered the dreadful news.

He had been working on a school assignment, calm peaceful, content.

What happened next was like a bolt of lightning in the dead of the night.

His mother had knocked on his door and came straight in.

Unusual, he thought, she usually waits for me to answer.

He looked up and her face said it all. Her mascara had run and she hadn't bothered to wipe it away as she fought back tears.

Her voice trembled.

"It's your father". His heart skipped a beat and he dropped his pen, sending it crashing to the floor and he started sweating.

"He's disappeared, somewhere up on the ranges."

His father, his hero, his idol, was gone.

The loud snapping of twigs brought him back to the present.

He began setting up his new tent Peter had bought him especially for this trip. He looked up and noticed Peter was having trouble with his own tent. Smiling slightly for the first time in ages he wandered over and within minutes had the tent ready.

"Thanks Joe" Peter smiled warmly at his stepson.

A week from now it would be exactly a year since the accident.

An office manager back in Courtenay, Peter couldn't stand things being messy or out of place which got on Joseph's nerves. He couldn't relax around him.

Give him a go, the voice inside his head told him.

"You should treat every day like it's your last; you never know what could happen next." Peter sounded like he'd been watching too much Dr Phil.

As he stared into the fire and the night closed around them, he couldn't know how chillingly accurate Peters' advice would turn out to be.

Chapter Two

The sizzling of bacon Peter's cheerful whistle stirred Joseph from his slumber. Eggs, bacon, fried tomato and coffee to start their first full day hiking through the rugged terrain.

After breakfast, they packed up their camp and started out. The crunching of their feet on the ground was the only sound as they headed towards their destination: an old Indian settlement abandoned hundreds of years ago. Only two people knew about it. Him and his dad.

His dad had showed it to him a few months before he died.

Now only one person knew about it.

After dinner last night, Joseph had mentioned the site. Peter readily agreed about the prospect of investigating it the next day.

“Sounds great we'll go check it out tomorrow,” Peter was excited.

They still had about an hour's hiking left and the icy silence was killing him. The monotonous drumming of their feet drilled into his brain like a hammer.

“We should take some photos,” he prompted, hoping his enthusiasm didn't sound too forced.

“Hey, neat idea!” Peter embraced the idea immediately.

Suddenly a deep throated roar greeted their ears and they turned in unison towards the sound. A huge Cougar, rare in these parts was mere metres away.

“Run!” Peter hollered.

Joseph didn't have to be told twice. He headed for thicker terrain hoping to evade his would be attacker, but he was surprised he didn't hear the heavy pounding of the carnivorous cat close by.

“Wait, it's not chasing us.” He glanced to his right, then his left and was stunned at the sight that greeted him.

Nothing.

There was just rocks, trees, and shrubs, no Peter. Without thinking, he rushed back to where they had been, but no sign of him.

His heart was pounding faster now.

Boom Boom.

Boom Boom.

Adrenalin surged through his body like a rushing river as he desperately tried to retrace his steps.

They were talking.

The cougar came rushing at them without a moment's hesitation, snarling, drooling at the corner of its huge mouth.

They ran.

Joseph didn't have time to look behind him while he was running; he just assumed Peter was right behind him.

A piece of clothing grabbed his attention nearby. Joseph ran to it and grabbed it. Instantly he recognised it as a shred of Peter's shirt. That was not a good sign, and as usual, the worst-case scenario flashed in his mind. The cougar had gotten his Peter and shook him like a rag doll, breaking every bone in his body, before devouring him with razor sharp teeth.

Peter was gone.

He was all alone.

Tears flowed down his dirty face and he made no attempt to stop them. He angrily threw a rock into the trees and nearly jumped out of his skin when Peter's surprised cry sounded out. Jumping up he rushed towards the sound and embraced his step son who had come hurrying towards him.

"You're OK!" Joseph was surprised by the level of emotion in his voice.

"Hey it takes more than a cougar to stop this guy" he boasted and with a mixture of relief and exhaustion Joseph laughed until more tears rolled down his cheeks, but these were tears of joy.

"But how?" Joseph queried as they sat down for lunch later, their brief encounter still at the forefront of their thoughts.

He had to know. They had continued on, and they were both deathly silent as the situation they had witnessed unfolded in their minds. Each thought the other had been taken by the large cat, of which there would be no escape.

"We simply ran in opposite directions," Peter replied as he poured water over his reddened face. "My shirt must have gotten caught on a bush" he explained pointing to the rag Joseph held in his hands.

The simplicity of it all made them both sigh.

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“Perhaps it saw us run in different directions and became confused,” Joseph thought aloud, looking into the distance.

“It was a good tactic,” Peter offered, and they both chuckled.

“It could have been a whole lot worse though,” Peter added, and Joseph nodded, deep in thought.

He cared for Peter a lot more than he could ever imagine.

Why?

He had only known him a short time, and they had never really connected, never had a warm, fuzzy father son moment like the one you see in the movies. It was all small talk and a nod to each other as they passed each other in the morning, Joseph getting ready for school, and Peter brushing past, on his way to work. They had very little in common; Joseph was the sporty, outdoorsy type, and Peter was more of an at home in front of a DVD kind of guy. The closest he had come to enjoying the outdoors was watching a nature documentary on the discovery channel, but despite this he was prepared to tackle the outdoors, and Joseph had to admire his effort.

Joseph and Peter rose in unison to pack up their lunch before heading off, the sun high in the sky, beating down on their foreheads.

Shortly after their brief stop, Joseph found it. He knew what he was looking for but it had been so long since he and his... well it had been a long time.

Partly covered by grass and bushes was a small cave, about six feet by four feet in diameter.

“Here it is,” he proclaimed like a small child showing off a new toy. He was very proud to show it off and he beamed a wide smile on his face.

Peter parted the grass and gasped in astonishment.

“My God, it's amazing” Peter enthused as they entered cautiously.

The cave was built into a hill. The walls were decorated with intricate designs and sketches. Stick figures with thin pointy spears, large beasts the like which Joseph had never seen before and tee pee shelters adorned each side of the cave, a pictorial diary of a long lost people just waiting to be shared with the world.

The luminous flash of Peter's digital camera startled him and he hit his head on the roof of the low-lying cave.

“Sorry” Peter murmured awkwardly as Joseph rubbed his head.

Joseph nodded his head to signal that it was OK. He knew from experience it was too dark to take photos without a flash.

The last time he was here, he had taken about twenty photos but when he viewed them on his laptop found that most of them were dark and you couldn't make out much of the cave.

They spent about an hour in the dank cave and were glad to get back out into the fresh air despite the astonishing scenes that had greeted them.

A brief shower prevented any further progress towards the old Indian settlement and Joseph cursed his rotten luck. He had been desperately hoping to get there as soon as possible, but with the steep slope ahead his instincts told him it was too risky.

They sought shelter in the cave and decided to build a small fire to keep warm.

Unfortunately the wood outside was wet so it took quite a while to get a good fire going, but they were both glad they had made the effort. They both relished the warmth and protection the flames provided and it put them at ease. Sitting in silence, each was engrossed in his own thoughts.

Joseph drifted off to a time long ago. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of years before.

A time of chieftains and elders and tribal dances, he envisioned the tribes sitting in this very spot telling stories to their children or painting on the walls, even doing as they were, sitting around a fire listening to the orchestra that mother nature provided, free of charge.

The rain had stopped so Peter was putting out the fire as Joseph got up and stretched his legs.

He felt oddly at peace with himself as they exited the eerie cave, out into the bright sunshine. It was as if some ancient spell had healed him and released him of all his insecurities and worries.

“Watch your step” Peter warned as they dodged rocks and trees. Joseph nodded in agreement, the going was slow and steep, and the surface was still damp.

“This next bit will amaze you,” Joseph enthused a while later as the ground flattened out. “Dad and I found it a couple of years ago and no one else knows about it.”

“I can't wait” Peter replied as they brushed through some small trees into a large open area that was overrun with trees and grass.

Peter looked at what lay before him and dropped to his knees in utter bewilderment.

Chapter Three

It was breathtaking.

Peter stared about him in utter amazement. It was an old Indian settlement, maybe thousands of years old.

Tee- pees and long houses scattered the area amid the tangle of weed, grass and large western red cedars.

Joseph had rushed forward to examine the nearest tee- pee and Peter hurried after him.

Upon closer inspection it appeared to be made from some animal hide, but Joseph couldn't believe that not only was it still intact but it was in remarkable condition.

The intricate patterns on the hide brought him back to the cave they had found earlier.

Peter ran his fingers over the rough surface, like a child with a new toy who is not sure how it works, excited, yet cautious.

Joseph cautiously entered from the small opening and gazed about him. There were a number of thick branches leaning on one very sturdy central branch, all stripped of their bark and smooth.

The exterior animal hide had been cut into layers and draped over the whole structure. Gingerly he nudged one of the branches but it didn't budge.

“Amazing” he murmured as Peter joined him and together they took in their surrounds.

The air had the same scent as the cave they had visited earlier.

They returned to the bright sunshine and it was then that Peter noticed something peculiar poking out from the rough soil at his feet. Bending down, he clumsily tugged at it but it didn't budge. He started scraping away at the soil and was able to get some leverage underneath the curious object.

He finally managed to dislodge it, and he went sprawling backwards in surprise.

An arrowhead.

An Indian arrowhead, buried by a few centimeters of dirt, waiting to be discovered.

Excitedly, he called Peter over.

“Well I'll be” he exclaimed, peering closer, like a scientist who has just had a breakthrough, after years of painstaking research.

“What are the odds of discovering one of these in perfect condition” Joseph enthused, as he turned the object over in his hands.

It was a little heavier than he expected and quite cool, ice cold in fact.

“My father often told me of a lost tribe of people in these parts that existed long ago,” Peter revealed, as he took a closer look.

“Wha....?” Joseph had no idea Peter knew about this sort of thing.

“The legend goes that these tribes lived somewhere on Vancouver Island, completely isolated, hidden from the advancements of modern man. They never saw anyone else and lived a very primitive lifestyle, or so the story goes. I didn't believe the story at first but now having seen all this I can't help but wonder.”

“Perhaps they were experimenting with stone tools and decided that this type of implement was not useful to them and just left it,” Joseph supposed, peering over Peter's shoulder.

He had seen a news story not long ago about a tribe that raced out of the bush in South America when a plane flew overhead, perhaps thinking it was a giant bird.

The mystery of the arrowhead had them both pondering its origins.

Later that day, they were checking out one of the long houses when they discovered a small bone protruding from the earthen floor of the one room shelter.

A foot bone.

A foot, bone intact. Joseph picked it up, brushed the dirt off, and studied it.

He was always curious about archaeology, and in fact had often harbored dreams of one day becoming a treasure hunter, scouring the globe for lost gold, artifacts and ancient trinkets.

“I can't believe these old buildings are still standing,” Joseph said, looking around.

The walls seemed to be of cedar but he couldn't be sure. The walls were layers of logs held together by some mysterious material, possibly tree sap judging by their look and texture. The roof was of a similar build although it was in a poorer condition.

A distant howl pierced the night air and reminded Peter of the bizarre incident earlier in the day when the cougar rushed at them but didn't attack and as he stared into the flames, he wondered what made it act that way. It didn't chase them, simply rushed at them and then it seemed to vanish.

Wierd, he thought.

Joseph was fast asleep and Peter threw dirt on the fire, thinking once more of their narrow escape.

Soon after, they had found the cave, and then this place. There was certainly a lot more to this place than meets the eye.

Glancing over at Joseph, he realized there was a lot more to him as well.

He snuggled down into his sleeping bag and dreamed of Indians hunting cougars in a time long ago, where they would celebrate a successful hunt by feasting on their kill, and showcasing their efforts with a pictorial display on the cave walls, and songs and dancing.

He was smiling when he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Four

The sun's rays woke them and they gingerly rose from their slumber.

So it wasn't a dream, Joseph thought to himself as he glanced at the bone next to him. The events of yesterday seemed unimaginable to this unassuming kid.

The cougar.

The cave.

The Indian settlement.

The foot bone.

Was this part of some eerie dream he was having?

But no, Peter's loud yawn told him it was real, all of it.

Joseph stepped outside into the chilly air and glanced at his watch. Seven o'clock. Surprised at the hour, he stumbled forward, intent on relieving himself, but soon his feet found nothing but air.

He tumbled forward, crying out in surprise, before he thudded to a stop, then the blackness shrouded his thoughts, and he was silent.

Peter began preparing breakfast for the two of them and the peacefulness of his surrounds put him at ease. No birds sang, and the wind in the trees was oddly quiet.

As the bacon started to sizzle, he realised he hadn't seen Joseph for some time. Shrugging it off, he figured he was exploring.

It really was an amazing place he thought to himself.

He envisioned the Indians waking early to begin their day.

What did they do first?

Maybe the men went off hunting game, the younger men begging to be taken along on their adventures, and the wiser, elders waving them away with a stern look.

Breakfast was ready.

Joseph's head was spinning.

He tried to stand up but a searing pain in his left ankle prevented him.

Where was he?

He had fallen for what seemed like an eternity and then nothing.

Gingerly he felt forward trying to figure out his new surroundings.

He felt a smooth, damp, surface not far ahead of him, all around him.

He was in a tomb, he thought, deep underground where the Indians buried their chiefs, or their fallen warriors, in times of war.

He shook this image clear and used his hands to get his bearings.

He felt several thick tree roots around him and he wondered how far down he was.

5 feet?

8?

He dared not think any higher.

Time ticked away. His glow in the dark watch told him it was seven thirty.

He'd been down here for half an hour.

What else is down here, he pondered and then he quickly shut out that thought as visions of giant spiders crept into his head, creeping closer to him, fangs dripping with venom.

I mustn't be too far down, he reassured himself, not very convincingly.

The sky looked strangely dark.

Menacing.

He prayed it wouldn't rain.

Peter wandered outside, calling out.

His voice shrill in the early morning, shattering the silence around him.

Then he saw it.

Not far from the entrance to the long house, maybe six feet away at the most.

A pile of sticks that wasn't sitting quite right. He wondered why he hadn't noticed it

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