

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

yesterday; it was practically in front of the long house they had stayed in.

As the skies darkened, he edged cautiously closer, not really knowing what to find.

A hole.

About five feet square going down into the Earth below, like a giant mouth waiting for an unsuspecting animal to stray to close.

Or an unsuspecting person.

His pulse racing, he got down on his hands and knees and peered into the darkness.

Joseph felt a shadow cross over him and he peered up.

“Peter!” he crowed triumphantly, as a familiar face peered down at him, an angel sent from the heavens above.

“How did you get down there?” Peter sounded worried.

“I must have fallen in, can you get me out?” Joseph sounded slightly panicked.

“Are you hurt?”

“My left ankle hurts a bit but apart from that I seem to be ok.”

“I’ll get my rope from my pack, don’t move.”

Joseph wasn’t going anywhere for the time being.

Peter disappeared from view, Joseph slumped back against the wall, forgetting about his ankle, and he cried out in pain.

His ankle felt like it was on fire, throbbing, and he was glad he couldn’t see the damage. He had a weak stomach.

The first drops of rain were like death drops.

It felt like Peter had been gone for hours but it had only been a few minutes. The rain got slightly heavier and he could feel the walls starting to lose their compact texture.

Peter returned but Joseph could hardly make him out against the blackened sky. The rope was a breath of life and he held on tight.

Peter tried to pull him back to the surface but much to Joseph’s dismay he didn’t seem to be moving at all.

“I can’t get a grip.” Peter’s words were a dagger through his heart. It was a downpour now, and a small but menacing pool of water began to form at the base of this pit of death.

He prayed.

Never a religious person, he implored God to let him survive this nightmare.

Tears streamed down his face and he grabbed the sides of the pit in frustration but the dirt had turned to mud as his hopes began to slide away like the crumbling walls around him.

The water had reached his waist.

“Hang on; I've tied one end to a tree nearby.” Peter's words were a godsend, perhaps from above.

With the rain teeming down and the walls collapsing around him Joseph grabbed the rope and started to climb.

He wasn't going anywhere but he didn't stop, kept his legs moving, ignoring the pain.

Inch by agonizing inch he started his ascent, ever so slowly, until Peter grabbed his hands and hauled him to safety with one last mighty effort.

Joseph was saturated and muddy head to toe, like his friends after a game of rugby on a Saturday afternoon.

The adrenalin pumped through bodies, as they lay on the ground, completely exhausted. Neither had the energy to move. Somehow, with a final burst of energy, Peter got to his feet and dragged a muddy, saturated and shaken Joseph with him and they stumbled towards the safety of the long house.

Slumped against the wall with a new set of clothes on and a belly full of hot coffee, Joseph wearily glanced at his watch.

Eight fifteen.

He'd been in the hole for just over an hour but it seemed like a lifetime.

Half asleep from exhaustion and relief he glanced over at Peter who had in fact fallen asleep, slumped against the wall.

His ankle was not as bad as he feared, in fact it seemed to be ok, but Peter insisted on wrapping an ice pack around it.

He closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

He couldn't fight it anymore.

Drifting off, he was back home in Courtenay, 23 Maple Avenue to be precise, and it was mid morning. His mum was cooking a big greasy breakfast, a Saturday morning tradition in the Marston household.

He came downstairs dressed in his favorite combo of baggy jeans and his ultra loud yellow t-shirt, wavy brown hair a chaotic web on his head.

“High honey, did you sleep well?” his mother sang out from the stove where she was cooking some eggs.

“Yeah great thanks” he replied. He was in a good mood today. A quick breakfast and then off to the lake for some fishing with the guys under the Fifth Street bridge on a beautiful day, maybe hit the arcade later on.

“Hey where's Dad?” he queried as he approached the table.

“Oh Joseph,” his mum replied, her eyes moist. “He's been gone for over three months now.”

Chapter Five

They still had another few days of hiking to get to Campbell River where they would fish for salmon.

Joseph knew how quickly the weather could turn, he had received a stark reminder yesterday.

Bright and sunny one minute, freezing cold and pouring with rain the next. They didn't want to be out in the open when a big storm came rumbling along.

As they headed away from the settlement, Joseph shuddered. Looking back, he saw a shadow dart across the ground.

Just my imagination, he thought, as if to reassure himself. Still, with the events of the last couple of days, he couldn't help but wonder.

That night they set up camp by a large river, near Elk Falls. The river was running silently by, unconcerned by its new visitors.

Joseph was thinking about the accident and how scared he had been. He had accepted that this was how he was going to die, and waited for the perilous pit to swallow him up.

He didn't know what Peter was thinking about. He usually kept his feelings bottled up inside.

“Folk around these parts say that a Sasquatch roams the woods and has been known to attack horses, dogs and even people.” Peter was keen to start a conversation.

“So I've heard.” Joseph said, only half listening.

He glanced up at the starry sky and listened to the gushing water. It was a very still night and he heard a fish jump out of the water in the river about twenty feet away.

He didn't know why, but that made him smile.

They had tried fishing the river earlier, on small handmade rods but had no success.

A frustrated fisherman his entire life, Joseph had never caught anything, but he still enjoyed the tranquility of fishing.

When he was young, he went fishing with his dad, who usually caught quite a few good-sized salmon to take home with them. Often he would tell Joseph to pick out a fish to show his mother that he'd caught one. They all knew it wasn't true but they played along, and it was a big seafood platter that night for tea.

Smiling at the distant memory, Joseph threw dirt on the fire and went to sleep, dreaming of the one that got away.

Dawn.

The sun shone down on Joseph's face and he awoke almost immediately. He found it hard to sleep in when he was camping whereas back home he could easily sleep in until midday, much to his mother's disapproval.

Looking up he saw that Peter was fishing. Deciding to join him, he was just about to reach for his clothes when he noticed something.

Something that made his blood run cold.

Something that made him quiver in a mixture of fear and excitement.

There, on the ground, was a pair of footprints, unlike any that Joseph had seen.

Human-like but larger than his or Peter's.

Much larger.

And then there was the matter of the claws.

Five small claw marks at the end of each small stubby toe. Peter had joined him to see what all the fuss was about.

"What is it?" he queried.

"I don't know. Some sort of animal footprints."

He had an inkling of what it may be but he dare not utter it aloud.

It couldn't be.

Surely not.

It was the just the stuff of wild stories from people with too much spare time on their hands.

Peter was taking photos, like a seasoned detective at a crime scene, moving around and enthusiastically snapping away at different angles, the shutter clicking in the crisp morning air.

“Something to get the locals excited,” he said, as Joseph watched on.

It certainly did get the locals excited.

Their two-hour journey to the small town Campbell River was uneventful and they headed straight to one of the local watering holes, The Sticky Wicket Hotel.

Upon seeing the photos, the locals excitedly gathered around the two to get a closer look, like a press scrum keen to get some juicy quotes from some big name celebrity.

“Them's Sasquatch tracks” one particularly old guy offered upon seeing the photos. Joseph thought he could smell Rum on his breath.

“I seen the same thing back in '86 and I'll never forget it.”

That's more than twenty years ago, Joseph thought to himself. He wondered how long they lived, or just how many of these creatures were out there.

Or if they even existed.

“I'll give you \$1000 right now,” someone else offered which Peter politely declined.

It was nice to see and hear other people again and they tried to steer the conversation away from mythical creatures. It had been several days since Joseph's mother had dropped them off at the edge of Elk Falls Provincial Park with a big hug and kiss for each of them.

“What is the main income of the town?” Peter inquired.

“Tourism,” the middle- aged man behind the counter replied as he handed them their food.

“We are the Salmon capitol of the world,” he added with a big toothy grin.

Curiosity got the better of Joseph.

“Where do you usually see these Sasquatches?” he asked to no none in particular.

“You're guess is as good as mine,” the old rum smelling guy replied in a gruff tone. “Sometimes they're spotted deep in the mountains, sometimes on the edge of town, scrapping for some food. Sometimes late at night, sometimes early morning. They don't really have a particular pattern, which makes them so hard to track.”

Later on as they sat in their cabin on the northern outskirts of town, Joseph put forward his idea.

“Let's spend a day looking' for one”

“I don't know...” Peter was a man who liked to stick to a plan.

“C'mon it'll be fun” Joseph knew if he pestered long enough he would win.

And sure enough.

“Alright but we're back here by Tuesday.”

What could possibly go wrong he thought to himself as he lay in bed that night, appreciating the soft bed.

Their bad luck couldn't last forever could it?

Chapter Six

They got up early on their quest to find the Sasquatch.

After a quick breakfast, they headed north as instructed by the locals.

After a quick breakfast, they set off with fresh supplies and a renewed enthusiasm.

The sky was clear, the birds were chirping and their spirits were high. They planned to explore for the first few hours and then stop for a break.

The going was tough but both were in reasonable shape and maintained a steady pace.

Their path rose slightly and there were many loose stones underfoot so they weren't rushing. A couple of times Joseph lost his footing, but was able to regain his balance, calling on his many years playing ice hockey back in Courtenay.

Looking cautiously around, he noticed the pine trees were thick in these parts and wondered how rescuers could find people, let alone get to them.

Considering the events of the past few days, that wasn't the best thing to have on one's mind.

Stop it, he scolded himself, you're scaring yourself. Focus on something positive.

Through a gap in the trees, his keen eyes spotted a large bald eagle soaring majestically in the sky above them; a black shape silhouetted against a perfect blue sky. Excitedly he called Peter over but he was out of hearing and, as Joseph realised, had been for some time.

Panic started to set in.

He was all alone in the woods.

His hands began to sweat.

His heart pounded like drums. He raced forward in desperation, eyes darting everywhere.

Still nothing.

The loud snapping of branches alerted him to his immediate left. Half expecting to see a large, hairy monster rumbling towards him he was relieved to see Peter come into his line of sight.

“Sorry, I guess I wanted to start lunch early. Must've skipped ahead.”

“That's OK” Joseph responded, as his heart slowed to a steady pace and his sweating eased.

Together they got a hearty fire going and settled down for a well-earned break.

The early morning hike had exhausted them both, however the view was stunning. They could see for miles on a three hundred and sixty degree radius.

The green landscape of trees seemed to go on forever.

Joseph inhaled.

There was a strong scent of pine in the air and it smelled like his mother's air freshener.

That made him smile.

They headed off soon after and Joseph was enjoying himself so much in the warm air that he had forgotten that they had come this way to search for the mythical creature known as the Sasquatch.

The ground had leveled out into a plateau environment, with long grass and big, sturdy pine trees around them.

They stopped in unison at the edge of a clearing and gasped.

There in the middle of a large field was a large hairy animal of some sort hunched over. They stared in amazement.

Could it possibly be? However, as it stood up they both realised they were mistaken.

The wolf turned without warning and, faced them.

Man and beast eyeballed each other, about 100 metres apart, each studying the other like two old men hunched over a game of chess.

“Don't move” Peter whispered.

Joseph had stiffened when the wolf turned towards them and his muscles began to ache.

To their horror the huge beast began moving, ever so slowly towards them, each step like an eternity, as it got ever closer.

Stalking its prey before the kill.

It gradually increased its speed. It was now just 50 metres away.

Their hands were shaking as they slowly crept backwards into the trees.

Without warning, a large eagle flew into view at an alarming speed and made a beeline for the spot where they had first seen the wolf. Fearing the loss of its meal, it turned on its heels and sprinted after the eagle, lunging at it.

However, the eagle was too agile and feathers flew as the the wolf missed its target.

Both were sweating profusely and not because of the warm day.

Their hearts thudded inside their chests like an out of control drum solo.

Their earlier experience with the cougar had displayed the unpredictability of animals in the wild and they had had no idea what the wolf was going to do next.

But what was it feasting on before being interrupted? They edged closer, unsure of what they would find. They inspected the crumpled heap that lay lifelessly at their feet. It had thick reddish-brown fur with large incisors at the front of its mouth. Large claws at the end of huge gorilla like hands.

It was unlike anything they had ever seen.

Were they standing over the tattered remains of a Sasquatch?

The creature that had divided opinion for hundreds of years.

“I...I don't believe it” Joseph uttered, his voice trembling. He stuck his foot at and nudged it. To his shock, it moved slightly, and they leapt back in surprise.

It got up, with ferocious speed swung an arm out, and caught Peter on the shin, ripping through his pants and drawing blood, before getting up and hobbling clumsily away, trailing blood behind it.

Joseph cried out as Peter lay on the ground in serious pain. There was a large gash on his leg that needed immediate attention. Rummaging through his pack, Joseph found the first aid kit and cleaned the wound before applying bandages, which seemed to stop the bleeding.

“We'd better rest here a while,” Joseph instructed, taking charge with surprising authority. He unrolled a mattress and Peter lay down and went to sleep almost immediately. Joseph checked his pulse. Slightly quicker than normal but not too concerning.

His own pulse was a lot quicker.

His hands were covered in Peter's blood, and he cleaned them, keeping an eye on Peter out of the corner of his eye.

With Peter in no condition to move, Joseph decided to set up camp even though his watch told him it was only 2:30 in the afternoon.

Sleep took him and he was soon in a deep coma-like state.

The wolf stood, poised as it eyed the two humans that had interrupted his feeding. The taste of flesh was fresh in his mouth as he crept to the edge of the clearing.

Should he strike now?

No, he would wait, and see what they had planned. He wasn't used to being interrupted during mealtimes.

The time would come, soon, when he would strike and this time there would be no interruptions.

Chapter Seven.

The icy winds shook them both awake on the exposed plateau and they shivered as the chilly late afternoon air blew right through them.

Peter immediately lifted his pants to check the wound on his leg. The bleeding had completely stopped and it had cleaned up nicely. He glanced over at Joseph who was untangling himself from his thermal sleeping bag.

"I owe you one," he said smiling affectionately.

"No big deal" Joseph's reply was quick. "You would have done the same for me."

Joseph joined him outside in the cold early morning air. He too had wondered what that "thing" was. Yesterday he had been sure it was a Sasquatch. But now, much later, he began to doubt himself.

A Bear cub? No, there were no bears in these parts.

Another wolf? Unlikely.

What then?

The reddish-brown fur. The teeth. The claws.

A wolf, he decided, when something dawned on him.

Something horrible.

Something that made him gasp.

When the "wolf" had fled the scene, it had hobbled on its hind legs. Wolves were a quadrupedal species, they certainly did not walk around on their hind legs.

"That wasn't a wolf." Peter's words seemed to cut through the silence that had developed around them.

"I've been thinking about it too," Peter continued, without waiting for a reply. "Wolves don't walk like that did. And then there's the eyes. Dark and mysterious. Unlike any I've seen before. They seemed, different somehow."

"So what do we do know?" Joseph asked, already knowing the answer.

"I say we head back to town and hitch a ride back to Courtenay. Apparently, the locals are always going there."

"Yeah" Joseph said thoughtfully.

"We'll ring your mother from town," Peter announced. "Tell her the weather was turning so we cut the trip short, no need to make her worry."

They had no chance.

Their backs were facing the trees. The wolf picked his moment and ran like the wind, straight for the nearest one. It didn't growl.

Like a deadly assassin it sprinted forwards and leapt at the closest one, claws extended.

Peter.

Landing on his back as he crouched over the fire, the wolf ripped him apart with the strength and ferocity of a thousand men. Peter cried out in agony as the beast tore through him with razor sharp teeth, but it was in vain.

Joseph stood in frozen fear then his instincts told him to run.

Don't look back, just run.

Keep going, he told himself as he pounded through the trees, not sure which direction he was going but not caring either. Fear gave him energy, desperation gave him hope.

Someone had to survive this.

Someone had to tell the story.

Tripping on a tree root, he was thrown through the air and tumbled down a slope before slamming against a large, flat rock face.

Then darkness.

Silence.

In the distance, the wolf howled triumphantly, as it stood over its kill, blood dripping from its huge jaws. Today he would feast, victory was his. He wagged his tail in satisfaction and sat down to enjoy the spoils of victory.

Joseph's head hurt. No, more than that, it ached.
Slowly he opened his eyes like a patient after a long operation still drowsy on anesthetic.

Only this was no operation.

This was life.

And the diagnosis was not good.

A small creek gurgled nearby. He followed the sound and the icy cold liquid was like heaven. It soothed him and he drank heartily, then he lay back and slept.

Something was touching him. It crept up his arm. He awoke and jumped up in a panic, swatting the air in desperation.

Leaves.

Just some stray leaves blown about by the wind. He glanced at his watch that had survived the ordeal. You really do get what you pay for, he thought.

It had been a birthday present from Peter a couple of months ago.

Peter.

Was he alive? Instantly he knew he couldn't be. The wolf had been relentless. It just didn't stop; it was like a killing machine, cold and heartless.

He had to know.

Which way to go?

With no confidence, he headed towards the dimming sun.

His first piece of luck in days.

He emerged from the wilderness a little over half an hour later.

The smell of death polluted the air.

It was nauseating.

He could see their tent about 50 metres away. He knew what was awaiting him and it was overwhelming.

He vomited onto the ground.

Feeling slightly dizzy, he stumbled forward and braced himself.

Nothing.

Not a thing.

There was no trace of Peter, the wolf had consumed everything, but that didn't make things easier and he broke down and cried.

The tears flowed and he made no attempt to stop them.

After what seemed like a lifetime, he sat up and took stock of the situation.

He was alone.

He had an idea which way civilization, maybe a couple of days hike away, but he was unsure which direction he should take.

He had to get supplies.

Who knew how long he would be out here for. He had Peter's mobile phone but out here there would be no reception.

He had to be sure.

No luck.

He packed food, clothes and water into Peter's pack. Matches. A torch and the spare battery. He packed up the tent and looked around. Apart from a few sparse items the place was pretty much deserted.

The fire where Peter's last moments were.

Some tatters of his clothes.

He quickly looked away. He looked to his right. Trees trees as far as he could see. Same story to his left.

Mountains in the far distance, reaching up into the sky. He glanced ahead. That would just take me further out of the way.

Glancing one last time at their campsite, the last spot where Peter was alive, he turned around and headed back to to the edge of the clearing, the way he had came.

Away from the scene of the dreadful attack.

Towards the unknown.

Chapter Eight

Joseph stopped dead in his tracks.

That tree.

The one that had grown over the rock, swallowing it like a giant clam.

Had he seen it before?

Yes, he had.

When?

Not more than twenty minutes ago.

Where was he?

He had been wandering around aimlessly for hours.

He was hungry.

He was thirsty.

His body ached.

He was covered in scratches.

He had lost a father.

Again.

He wandered down an embankment and was surprised to spot the small creek he had found yesterday.

After the accident.

The one that he would never forget.

The... He shook his head to clear the memory. Approaching the river, he threw a stick in and watched as it drifted past him downstream.

That's it!

He would follow the Campbell River, maybe it could take him back to civilization. And freedom.

Glorious freedom.

He sat on the ground and retrieved the map. He traced the river as it snaked southward through the trees heading towards the town they had stayed at.

He hoisted the pack on to his shoulders. His shoulders ached, and he would have to stop for a rest soon. But not now. He had to make some progress before it got dark.

He pushed his way through the dense forest, trying to keep his feet amid the protruding

tree roots and sharp jagged rocks, threatening to grab his feet from underneath him. He was surprised that he could follow the river without too much difficulty. He stopped for a rest.

He only afforded himself a few mixed nuts and berries from his pack.

He had to keep moving.

The ground was pebbly and it stretched as far as he could see in either direction. It was the same on the other side. Casually he threw a flat stone and it skimmed across the river, falling just short of the bank on the other side.

He shivered and continued on.

It was 7:28. He was set up on the banks of the Campbell River and was safe.

For now.

Something crashed through the trees behind him.

What was it?

A Sasquatch?

Had the wolf tracked him, using his excellent sense of smell, stalking him, waiting till he was asleep?

He climbed into the tent and hid in his sleeping bag shivering uncontrollably, and it wasn't just the cold.

It was the unknown.

What was around him?

Where was he?

Would he survive?

Thoughts raced around his head, confusing him.

He shut his eyes to escape his mental anguish and drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

He dreamt of indians, out in the wild, hunting, feasting around a large bonfire, singing, and dancing the night away. The indian settlement they had stumbled upon seemed like years ago. Was it really only a couple of days?

He had seemed so happy, so full of life then.

He awoke early and was amazed at the hour; 10:30. He had slept in, in this wild and untamed land. He checked his supplies.

A day of food, if that.

Beyond that was uncertainty.

The battery in his torch was low and he needed to conserve it.

He changed clothes and immediately felt refreshed. A quick breakfast of an egg, a small amount of bacon and one slice of toast had him in high spirits.

Home.

It seemed like a world away.

He packed up and headed off. Birds whistled and for a while, he forgot about his present situation as the sun worked its magic and warmed him up inside his battered and bruised body.

He stopped for lunch and got out his camera to take photos.

The river.

The trees.

The birds.

It all seemed so peaceful and innocent. He ducked his head to remove the camera from around his neck, but lost grip and the camera soared through the air and into the water about six feet out.

Instinctively he waded out.

The camera was waterproof and could take some damage so he knew it wasn't ruined but it had been a birthday present from Peter. A few feet out from the shore and he began to struggle against the current which was surprisingly strong, so close to the bank.

He knew the camera had to be nearby.

So near, and yet so far.

So elusive. It seemed to leer at him. Beckoning him to come closer. He was about waist deep but the current seemed to be getting stronger and he was struggling in the icy water.

He hit a deep hole and went under. With no resistance, he was carried swiftly downstream, and he came up spluttering, his mouth full of water. He managed to swim towards the shore and grab hold of a sturdy branch.

His savior.

As he hoisted himself towards safety, he heard the splitting of wood. Fully clothed and sopping wet, he was much heavier than usual. He dared not move in case the branch dumped him back in to the depths.

Suspended in the water, his fate literally hung in the balance. Around him the water flowed by, ignoring him.

He made a last ditch dash for freedom, trying to hoist himself onto the thicker part of the branch. The splitting branch howled in protest.

Sink or swim.

The branch snapped.

Chapter Nine

Crash! Into a sharp jagged rock.

Crunch!

Again.

Smash!

It was relentless.

Joseph seemed to be a target for pain. The river's torrent swept him downstream towards what seemed like certain death. Too exhausted to fight the current, he let it take him away to a watery grave.

He shut his eyes tightly and waited for death.

Prayed for it.

Anything to end this misery.

The water lapped around his now shoe-less feet. The shore was all pebbles and his body ached from head to toe.

He didn't move.

He couldn't, even if he wanted to.

The light rain spat onto his ashen face and he opened his eyes. This time he managed to sit up and look around. Several metres away, the river roared past.

It seemed to mock him.

His saturated clothes clung to him and he was painfully aware of the bruises that spotted his body like dark tattoos, a constant reminder that he should be dead.

He almost wished he was.

Staggering to his feet, he got out of his wet clothes and hung them on some nearby bushes. It was still raining but hopefully it was only a passing shower.

Gathering some small bits of driftwood, he made a small pile amongst the stones. He

stopped short.

Matches.

There had been a box in his pocket.

Now they were... He rushed over to the bush and patted the pockets. Yes they were still there. Inspired by his luck, he fished them out and was surprised to find they were not very wet at all. He slid the box open afraid of how few he may find.

Seven.

He smiled. Lucky for some, he grimaced. Returning to his fire, he crouched down and took a match out. His hands shook as he struck it and it ignited.

So far so good. Placing the match at the base of the pile, he prayed it would light.

Success.

The small flames grew and embraced the kindling. He got his clothes, set them down near the flames, and warmed his hands.

Up above the rain eased, before stopping altogether.

He was incredibly hungry. When was his last meal?

The other pocket had contained a small pocketknife and a few meager items; a piece of string, a paper clip and a quarter.

I wonder if there is a phone booth nearby, he mused.

He was surprised he had maintained his sense of humour. It prevented him from going insane. He picked up a small branch and studied it closely. It would make an ideal spear he thought to himself. He had topped his class in woodwork last semester.

Was it really only a month ago that he was at school with his friends, playing basketball, hitting the arcade after school, ogling the girls as they walked past in their mini shorts and figure hugging tops?

It seemed like years, so much had happened since then, so many memories, so much pain.

A loud squawk invaded his thoughts. He glanced up. A ruby throated humming bird, common throughout in these parts, had wandered close by. So carefree and innocent, it walked towards him.

Joseph got up to advance on it but it quickly flew off.

He began to whittle the end of the stick down to a point for a makeshift spear.

Deer, he thought to himself.

His dad had taken him deer spotting when he was younger. They had seen several but they were both strong supporters of leaving animals be. Kill only if you have to, his father had advised him.

That time had come.

He was weak with hunger.

He got to his feet and walked through the trees that met the shores of the Campbell River. He was able to move about without too much discomfort and he found it helped his state of mind to be doing something constructive.

He had managed to make a nice spear and the end was certainly sharp enough.

He checked the ground for any signs. Unfortunately, the recent rain would have eliminated most animal tracks. Some faint hoof marks gave him hope, and he eagerly followed them into the dense forest.

It was a good size.

He guessed it could keep him fed for a couple of days.

Creeping up slowly, he positioned himself behind a tree about ten feet from the beast. The damp leaves of the bushes contrasted with the heat of his naked body and he was careful not to make any noise. These animals, swift and agile, scared easily.

This was it.

The moment of truth.

This would determine whether he would eat tonight.

This is it big guy, he thought to himself. The game's on the line, the crowd is cheering.

He raised his arm and aimed at its chest. He had to kill it in one shot. He edged closer.

A twig snapped at his feet and the deer's head shot up immediately. Seizing the moment, he threw with all his might.

Perfect.

He could not have timed his shot any better. The spear pierced the deer at the neck and it slumped to the ground.

Joseph raced forward.

It lay still, not breathing, silent. He retrieved the spear, grimacing at the sucking noise it made and moved to the front of the deer.

He smiled menacingly.

He would eat well tonight.

Chapter Ten

He lay amongst the pebbles, looking up at the night sky.

It had taken him a long time but bit by bit, he had dragged the deer back to the fire. He had skinned and cleaned it as best he could and cooked it on a large flat rock he placed in the fire.

It tasted good.

Oh how it tasted good!

Unfortunately, he had used all his matches to keep the fire going. Tomorrow he would move on, regardless of his physical condition.

His thoughts turned to the future.

What now? He had decided to follow the river back to town. He figured it couldn't be too far.

He hoped it wasn't too far.

With a bit of luck he might meet someone on the way.

And then.... He didn't know what would happen after that. Back to Courtenay, and his mother. She would be devastated, he knew that for sure. But she would also be glad that he was alive.

The dawn sun shone down on his dirty face and he opened his weary eyes. It felt like he had only been asleep for a few minutes. He stretched and arose from his slumber.

Walking down to the water's edge, he felt strangely excited.

It would end today.

Today would be his final day of hell. He washed his hands and started out, on a parallel path to the river, which this morning seemed less menacing. He brushed through the trees at a brisk pace, a determined, steely face amongst the trees.

His clothes were still damp but that was good enough for him and he had eagerly put them on.

His shirt was tattered and his pants filthy but it was better than nothing.

The water was only ankle deep and he was amazed at how calm he was. Only yesterday, he had been swept away in this very river, battered on the rocks and rejected onto the shore. Now he was wandering in its shallows. It was a calm day, eerily silent. He was still bruised and, every step he took ached.

The rocks were like broken glass, and they were everywhere. But, gritting his teeth, he fought back tears and battled on like a soldier on the front line. His feet were bleeding but he ignored it and continued on.

The man sat on the rocks and cast out.

For about twelve months, he had fished this very spot, every morning rain, hail or shine.

He never caught much.

The others would ridicule him, calling him senile and incompetent. But he ignored them and kept up his habit despite their criticism. He enjoyed his time alone in the cool mornings. He had only lived in the area for about a year and he had some emotional scars he was still dealing with.

Mistakes he had made, things that he had done that couldn't be undone.

He was enjoying his new life, his new identity; he just wanted to forget his past.

Somewhere below a fish nibbled his bait and he jerked his rod.

Too late.

Grunting, he pulled in his line to check his bait. Nothing. One day he would catch the big one he thought to himself as he re-baited.

A distant noise made him look to his left, upstream.

A lonely figure walking met his eyes and he squinted trying to make out what was coming towards him. His eyes weren't as good as they once were. Once again, he saw the figure, hobbling along in the shallows of the river.

Gasping, he dropped his rod and hurried upstream.

The stranger was the best thing Joseph had seen in a long time. He fell to his knees, completely overcome with pain and exhaustion. He tried to get up but couldn't.

The man grabbed him and embraced him.

Joseph looked into his saviour's eyes, and a light went on inside him.

“My son,” John Marsten said and hugged him for the first time since he had disappeared.

The End

