

CHAPTER 7



UNABLE TO FIND much dry wood on the ground, Cole broke lower branches directly off the trees and fed the fire. The fire smoked heavily and stung his eyes whenever it drifted his way, but at least it helped keep away the swarms of bloodthirsty mosquitoes.

As he gathered more wood for the night, Cole glanced over at Garvey's blanket lying on the ground. The at.óow would come in handy tonight if it got cold. Satisfied with the pile of wood he had gathered, Cole settled in beside the smoky, sputtering flames and gazed out toward the mouth of the bay.

Suddenly flashes of black and white sliced the water. Cole spotted the glistening keel-like fins of an orca whale guiding her young calf along the shoreline in search of food. Both surfaced repeatedly for breaths. Chuffs of air from their blow-holes broke the still air.

Cole ignored the orcas and kept tending the

fire. He watched the thick white smoke drift upward like a twisted ribbon dissolving into the sky. His cheek muscles tightened, and a dull anger glazed his eyes. He felt wearier than he had ever felt before. With his hands in tight fists, he closed his eyes and shook his head back and forth, trying to clear the anger and pressure from his mind. He wanted to think straight. He *needed* to think straight.

When Cole opened his eyes once more, his breath caught.

The bear had reappeared.

Beside the water, not a hundred yards away, the Spirit Bear stood watching him with a fearless and passive stare.

"You maggot!" Cole yelled, leaping to his feet. "I'll kill you!"

He searched the ground and found the charred knife blade. He needed more than a knife. Turning his back on the bear, he walked up to the trees to find a thin, straight sapling to make a spear. As he searched, he carefully avoided the thistly Devil's Club.

When he found the perfect sapling, he hacked it off with the knife blade and sharpened the end. Balancing the spear in his hand, he nodded with satisfaction, then returned to the fire and rested the spear against a tree. Again the Spirit

Bear had vanished, but it didn't matter. If it showed its ugly face again now, it was dead!

Cole hung close to the fire the rest of the day and fed the damp wood into the flames, purposely using the smoke to help drive off mosquitoes. By late afternoon, his eyes stung and he scratched irritably at a dozen puffy bites. Hunger knotted his stomach, but he ignored the craving. Instead he hiked to the stream and drank his belly full. He kept the knife and the spear by his side. As darkness settled, the Spirit Bear failed to show itself again. Cole cut boughs off the spruce trees and fashioned a mattress beside the fire. He huddled under the at.óow, curling into a fetal position to keep warm. This day had been easy. Surviving on this island would have been a piece of cake had he wanted to stay, especially with supplies.

Cole rolled onto his back and gazed up at the sky. Stars glistened overhead like frozen fireworks. Curtains of northern lights out over the bay danced wildly under the Big Dipper. Cole turned his head and stared into the black nothingness of the shrouded woods. That was how he felt inside—empty. There was no beauty. For two hours his mind roiled with turbulent thoughts before he fell into a restless, tortured sleep.

Cole awoke during the night to strange

noises deep in the trees. A loud splash sounded in the bay. He sat up and restoked the fire. As he coaxed the flames higher, his thoughts again focused on escape.

This time his escape would end differently. He would leave midday, right after high tide. By the time he cleared the bay, the receding current would help wash him away from the island. Then it would be easy to make it to the next island. Still planning his escape, Cole again drifted off to sleep.

The next time he awoke, he opened his eyes to an eerie stillness. It was as if the sky were holding its breath. The little sounds that normally filled the night air had quieted. Cole sat up and peered toward the blackness of the tree cover. Was the Spirit Bear prowling in the shadows just beyond view?

"You mangy dog!" Cole shouted into the night.

The night remained still.

Cole lay back down and pulled the at.óow tightly around his neck. He adjusted a spruce bough poking him in his back. Still sleep refused to return. As dawn came, the black sky turned gray, then clouded over, and it began to drizzle.

Cole crawled stiffly to his feet, numb from lack of sleep. His breath showed in the crisp

morning air, and a tight knot twisted at his gut—he needed food. The swim today would demand energy. But first he needed to build up the fire that had burned down to hot coals.

Cole gathered kindling as he swung his arms and stomped his feet to warm up. He knelt and blew into the embers. Gradually smoke curled upward. He added more wood and coaxed the smoke into flames, then headed out in search of food.

He found it easier to walk on the spongy grasses above tide line instead of over the slippery rocks nearer the water. In one hand he held the spear, in the other the charred knife blade. When he reached the mouth of the bay, he spotted three seagulls pecking at a half-eaten fish on the rocks.

He rushed toward the gulls, hollering and swinging his arms until the strutting scavengers abandoned their find. Squawking, they took to the air. With the complaining gulls circling overhead, Cole picked up the remains of the fish. The front half had been bitten cleanly off. Cole glanced around for any sign of the Spirit Bear but saw nothing. Still eyeing the trees, he held up his find. The gulls had mangled the fish, but big pink chunks of fresh meat still clung to the skeleton.

It wouldn't be quite like burgers on the grill, but then this wasn't exactly Minneapolis,

Minnesota, either, Cole thought, heading back toward camp. As he walked, he picked dangling guts and dirt from the fish. This was the meal that would give him the energy he needed to escape.

When Cole reached camp, he jabbed the blunt end of his spear into the chest cavity of the fish and rotated it over the smoky flames. As the meat charred, Cole ripped off chunks and ate. He gorged himself until his stomach bulged, then he walked to the stream for another drink. Returning, he picked more meat from the skeleton. It might be a while before he ate again.

The steady drizzle turned to rain. Cole wished the sun would come out again. He tugged the at.óow tightly around his shoulders and circled the fire to keep away from the drifting smoke. As he added branches to keep the faltering flames alive, he watched the rain pelt the icy slate-gray waters of the bay.

If only he could wait a couple of days for better weather. But he couldn't. By then Edwin and Garvey would have returned to check on him. Cole crowded nearer to the fire. Already he had been on this island one full night. He would leave today, and he would leave warm and full of food.

With the heavy overcast, it was hard to judge time. Cole guessed it might be another three or