

stop throwing up, but couldn't. Black patches danced across his vision, then he lost consciousness.

Hours later, Cole awoke feeling weak and confused. His thoughts drifted above him like restless air moving over the bay. The stink of vomit and the salty smell of rotting seaweed hung in the air, and overhead, a leaf drifted down in slow motion as if arriving from outer space.

Cole forced his head to the side and tried to focus. Vomit covered the ground beside his head. He could see chunks of the fish he had eaten. Beyond, he could see the mouth of the bay where the ocean disappeared into the dull, rain-misted sky.

Cole damned the rocks, the rain, and the endless ocean. What a fool he had been to come here instead of going to jail. At least in jail he would have been in the safety and comfort of a cell. He would have had some control. Here he was powerless, nobody to control, nobody to blame. Every action worked against him and hurt him.

A bitter loneliness swept over Cole as tears clouded his vision. He felt so small here, puked up on a remote forgotten shore and left to die. Was this how the world was going to get rid of him?

## CHAPTER 9



**A** CONSTANT RAIN and shrouded gray sky masked the passing of hours, leaving Cole in a cruel time warp with only one possible end. He tried not to think about the end, but he could not ignore the maddening pain from his wounds.

As gusts of wind drove the chill deeper into his body, rain kept falling, penetrating his will, seeping into his consciousness, and flooding his soul. This rain fully intended to kill.

As Cole weakened, he stared up at the giant spruce tree towering above him. Desperate tears welled up inside and squeezed past his eyelids. The wind gusted harder.

What did it matter anymore if he died? Nobody else cared about him, so why should he care about himself? As Cole's gaze drifted among the branches of the tree, a small bird's nest tucked into the fork of two branches caught his attention. The nest rested near the trunk, protected

from both the wind and the rain. As Cole watched, a small gray sparrow landed in the nest, twitched about with a flurry of activity, then flew off. Soon it returned again.

Each time the sparrow returned, it carried a bug or a worm in its beak and busied itself over the nest. The visits brought faint chirping sounds. Cole squinted and made out little heads jutting above the nest. This was a mother bird feeding her young. Up there on a branch, barely spitting distance away, little sparrows rested dry and warm, having food brought to them in the comfort of a nest built by their mother.

The sight of the baby birds irritated Cole. Without his injuries, he could easily have crawled up and knocked the nest down. That's what the stupid birds deserved.

After feeding, the mother flitted to a branch near the nest. She ruffled her wings and chest feathers, keeping an eye on her young. Watching the bird made Cole curse every second of his miserable and haphazard life. If he were the mother bird, he would just leave the babies to fend for themselves. She didn't owe them anything.

That's how Cole felt—he didn't owe anyone anything. Nobody had ever cared for him, so why should he care about anyone else? He wouldn't

even be here on this island, injured, if it weren't for other people and their lame ideas. Nothing had been his fault. Cole's bitterness flickered to life once more. His anger helped to focus his thoughts, but it could not stop the frigid drizzle or the torturing pain that wracked his body. Nor could it ward off the loneliness.

The wind that nugged at Cole's tattered clothing seemed distant. As his attention drifted and his senses dulled, rain numbed his face. Cole stared blankly at the thin sliver of blue sky on the western horizon. Exhaustion finally dragged him into a stuporous sleep.

Unconscious, he dreamed of the colorful at.óow blanket. His left hand twitched and moved back and forth, pretending to pull the at.óow over his freezing body. The imaginary blanket shielded him from the cold as it had protected many generations before him. Under the imaginary blanket, he slept soundly.

A loud rumble woke Cole from his sleep. At first he thought he had gone blind. Then slowly he realized it was nighttime. The wind had let up, but the cold rain still fell relentlessly from some endless reservoir in the sky. Then a blinding flash of lightning lit the horizon. Seconds later, deep rumbling thunder rolled overhead, followed by another flash of lightning.

Before the light collapsed back into darkness, Cole realized the at:óow he had dreamed of was not covering him. And he sensed a presence. He peered wide-eyed into the black night but could see nothing. Then lightning flashed again with a sharp crack, closer this time. In that instant, Cole saw it, ghostlike. Barely fifty feet away, the giant Spirit Bear stood motionless in the rain.

Then the night went black again.

Terrified, Cole waited, his eyes prying at the darkness. Had the bear returned to kill him? As he waited, the storm worsened. The wind picked up, gusting harder. Rain fell in torrents, and thunder rumbled across the sky like empty barrels rolling toward the horizon. When the next bolt of lightning lit the bay, Cole searched frantically.

Nothing! Gone! Again the Spirit Bear had vanished.

Cole grimaced. He hated this bear. What a coward. This creature was waiting until he grew so weak he couldn't fight back. Then it would finish him off. Cole moaned as a violent gust of wind pummeled his body. Would the bear just kill him and leave him to the seagulls, or would it eat him?

Lightning flashed closer, stabbing down with long, probing fingers. The rumbling thunder started crashing and exploding. To protect himself, Cole tried to curl into a ball, but pain stung at his chest,

lungs, and useless hip, and he cried out, "Help me! Somebody help me!" The black night and the wind drowned out his voice. Now the lightning flashed so often that the sky stayed lit for several long seconds at a time and the thunder came in a continuous roar. Trees swayed and bent with the wind. White-capped waves frothed and churned in the bay.

Cole pinched his eyes closed against the piercing rain. Suddenly a prickling sensation, as if ants were swarming over him, covered his whole body. A searing light flashed, and a deafening explosion detonated beside him. He heard a cracking sound as the sky crashed to earth with a violent impact that shook the ground. Splinters of branches rained down. Then came silence and calm, as if the impact had paralyzed the sky. The rain and wind paused, and an acrid smell like burning wire filled the air.

Cole lay frozen by fear. A sobering power had attacked the earth. This power made the bear's attack seem gentle. "No more! No more!" he moaned. "Please, no more!"

But there was more. The storm raged on as Cole lay trembling, his eyes frantic. The explosion had shocked his mind awake. Never in his life had he felt so exposed, so vulnerable, so helpless. He had no control. To this storm, he was as insignificant as

a leaf. Cole blinked in stunned realization. He had always been this weak. How could he have ever thought he truly controlled anything?

The acid electrical smell burned his nose and mixed with the smell of wet vomit on the ground. Cole swallowed hard to keep from throwing up again as the storm kept attacking the sky and earth around him.

Finally the wind lost its fury, and the sky ran out of rain. The thunder subsided, rumbling back and forth across the sky, searching for someplace else to go. Cole swallowed the taste of bile in his throat and listened to the rumbling overhead. Then once more he lost consciousness.

When he awoke next, the rain had stopped. Vaguely, he could make out the big spruce tree lying on the ground only feet away from where he lay. Moment by moment, he sorted out what had happened during the storm. Lightning had struck the tree. The splitting sound, the thunderous impact, the splintering and bits of branches showering him, all had happened when the huge tree crashed to earth.

Cole gazed up at the night sky. A bright full moon drifted ghostlike among the broken clouds. The tortured air had calmed but still shifted back and forth. Cole felt desperately weak. Fighting to survive, he could stay here a short while longer.

Giving up, he could pass quickly over the edge. Which way did he want to go? He clenched his teeth against the pain and despair. Which way did he want to go?

Cole focused his blurred vision on the full moon. It helped him to remain on this side. As he stared, he puzzled at the moon's shape. Something in that hazy shape held meaning. Edwin had said something about a circle. So had Garvey. What had they said? Cole could not remember, but he kept staring up.

Later, Cole flopped his head to the side. He could make out the bay and see moonlight reflecting against one shore. The shoreline faded into darkness in the shadow of the trees. Seeing no sign of the Spirit Bear, Cole returned his attention to the fallen tree beside him.

That was when he remembered the baby sparrows. He tried to make out where they might be now among the fallen and twisted branches. He squinted harder, but all he saw was black. What had happened to the baby birds?

Mustering all his strength, he raised his head, and with a weak and pinched voice he called into the darkened branches, "Are you okay?"

## CHAPTER 10



**A**S COLE LAY thinking about the sparrows, pain surged back and forth through his body. He felt himself slipping into darkness and blinked hard, doggedly clinging to life, willing himself to not let go. For hours he kept blinking, but by dawn, staying conscious seemed less important. Now he hung on the edge of existence, detached from the real world, weightless and moved by the wind. Thoughts of the sparrows disappeared.

As daylight seeped through thick curtains of haze, a new pain arrived and gradually worsened until it could not be ignored. Pressure had built in his lower gut. He needed desperately to go to the bathroom but held back, grimacing. He had no way to squirm away from his own waste. Finally the pain became so sharp, Cole let out a deep groan. He couldn't fight his own body any longer. Painful shame gripped Cole as waste slipped from his body and a raw stench filled the air. He

jerked his head and arm to drive away the mosquitoes swarming around him, but they returned instantly. Finally he gave up. An absolute and utter hopelessness overwhelmed him. He felt like a helpless baby, not able to roll away from his own filth. He wanted to hate somebody, to be angry, and to place blame on everything and everyone for this moment. But anger took energy, and Cole no longer had energy.

As the sun climbed over the trees, black horse flies started attacking. Unable to drive them away, Cole felt the huge insects bite him. He gazed desperately away at the fallen tree beside him. A ten-foot trunk remained upright, its ragged top charred where lightning had struck. Whiffs of smoke still curled upward. Beside the trunk lay a tangle of broken timber.

Cole watched the birds flitting among the downed branches, feeding on bugs and worms. For them the storm was over and life continued. The falling of the tree was simply a natural reality, like the passing of another day. Cole eyed the birds as he struggled to concentrate. Something in those branches had been important. His gaze wandered to the tipped-up grass under the splintered branches and crushed boughs. What had been so important in that maze of destruction? He spotted a small, brown, fist-sized clump of

twigs not ten feet away.

The nest.

That was it! That was what he had been searching for. Something about that nest was important. But what?

And then he found them.

First one, then two, then a third and fourth—four lifeless baby sparrows, scattered in the short grass where they had been thrown from their nest. Matted fuzz covered the twisted little bodies. Two had died with their big yellow beaks open as if searching for food. The other two lay facing the nest, their necks reaching out. Even in death, the sparrows had strained toward their nest. They had tried to make it back to the safety of their home.

Cole envied the dead sparrows. He had never really known any home. It sure wasn't the big brick building that his parents landscaped and fixed up to impress the neighbors. Nor was it the empty space he returned to most days after school. Even before his parents' divorce, Cole had always wanted to run away from that place.

As Cole stared at the tiny bodies, sadness flooded through him. The sparrows were so frail, helpless, and innocent. They hadn't deserved to die. Then again, what right did they have to live? This haunted Cole. Did the birds' insignificant little existences have any meaning at all? Or did his?

He watched one solitary gray sparrow hopping among the broken branches near the nest. Was that the mother? Was she looking for her young? Cole licked his cracked and dried lips. At least the babies had a mother to search for them. Nobody, not even a scrawny gray bird, was looking for him.

Cole's eyes grew moist. He couldn't stop thinking about the tiny birds strewn in the grass. Had they suffered before they died? Or did their fragile existence just suddenly stop? And what had happened to their energy when their hearts quit beating? It didn't seem right that now maggots would eat the bodies. Or maybe they would just rot into the ground to help the grass grow. Maybe that was the circle Edwin had spoken of. You live, die, and rot, then something else lives, dies, and rots.

Cole understood this cycle. Beside him a tree had died. Already, ants and bugs crawled among the cracked bark and splintered wood. For them life went on. In a few weeks they would make new homes from the wood. With time, the tree would rot and become dirt. Then a new seed would fall and grow, and another tree would push upward. Years later, that tree would fall back to earth and begin the cycle all over again.

Yes, death was part of living. Cole knew his

own body would eventually die and decay and be reduced to dirt. That was okay. That was how the world worked. But how had the world benefited from his living? Was he no better than a tree or some weed? Was his life just fertilizer for the soil?

Cole grunted angrily—he didn't want to die yet. Yes, someday that would be part of his circle. Someday he would lie in his own waste and be eaten by maggots. But not now! Suddenly, in that moment, Cole made a simple decision.

He wanted to live.

In death there was no control, no anger, no one to blame, no choices, no nothing. To be alive was to have choice. The power to choose was real power, not the fake power of making others afraid. Cole knew he had used that fake power many times. All of his life he had squandered his choices, wallowing in revenge and self-pity, keeping himself down. Now, as he lay near death, those he had hated were safe and warm. Those he had blamed were still alive and well. He had hurt himself most. Life was empty and meaningless unless he found some meaning.

Maybe it was a vision or maybe just a thought. Maybe a hallucination. A simple image entered Cole's mind: a tiny sparrow in a nest, helpless, neck straining upward, mouth gaping open. The sparrow Cole imagined was not angry.

The young bird was helpless. It knew nothing of pride or control. It pleaded only for help, wanting nothing more than a worm brought by its mother. A worm was food, food was energy, and energy was life. The baby begged simply for life.

Mosquitoes and horseflies swarmed around Cole's face. He grunted and jerked his head. It didn't matter who was at fault for his dismal life. All that mattered was living. Cole wanted to live and once again make choices. But to live he needed food. And soon!

But how? Every ounce of food he had eaten earlier lay in vomited chunks beside his body.

Cole fingered blades of grass under his left hand, then broke off a few and brought them to his lips. His dry, swollen tongue felt stuffed into his mouth. Deliberately, he opened his crusted lips and poked the grass inside. As he worked his jaws to chew, he reached for more grass.

Gradually the stringy green blades formed a wad in his mouth, and he swallowed. Without water, the clump caught in his throat. Again he tried to swallow, but gagged. The clump was stuck and refused to go down or come back up.

Panicking, Cole stifled a cough—he didn't dare cough. Frantically he gagged harder, twisting his head, straining until he felt blood vessels bulge on his face. He couldn't breathe. The clump was

suffocating him. Raising his head, mouth wide open, he convulsed, frantic and desperate to dislodge the grass. His body screamed for air. Then suddenly, explosively, he coughed, ejecting the wad of grass.

Violent pain, like the claws of the Spirit Bear, ripped at his ribs. Cole gasped and clenched his teeth, hugging his side with his left arm while his head swam in a fog. A long grueling minute passed before the pain eased and he dared allow a shallow breath to seep past his lips.

Sweat beaded his forehead. When he opened his eyes again, he glanced around and found the stringy lump of grass on the ground beside his chest. He stared. What other choice did he have if he wanted to live? Reluctantly he picked up the wad and returned it to his mouth. This time he chewed a very long time before swallowing. He exhaled with relief when the grass went down.

As Cole reached for more grass, he spotted a worm near his hand and grabbed it instead. The long worm bunched up and squirmed to get free, so he brought it quickly to his mouth and poked it safely past his cracked lips. It coiled against his tongue as he bit it and started chewing. The worm was easier to chew than grass and went down with the first swallow. Cole searched for

another. As he searched, the rain began again. He opened his mouth and let the drops tickle his tongue. Maybe the rain would bring out more worms.

The second and third worms Cole found were smaller, and he ate them quickly. His teeth crunched on dirt, and there wasn't much flavor, but he chewed as he watched another big worm creep slowly past his hand just inches beyond his reach. Failing to find more worms, he turned his attention to bugs. The ground teemed with insects, and he began putting ants, beetles, spiders, and even a fuzzy caterpillar into his mouth. With each insect, he closed his eyes and imagined a baby sparrow reaching upward with an opened beak.

Finally, exhausted, Cole rested. Sometime later, the rain stopped, and a warm sun brought back the thick clouds of mosquitoes and horseflies. They swarmed over Cole's body as if it were a dead carcass. He tried to shoo them away with an awkward swing of his hand, but they returned before his fingers touched the ground. Dozens blanketed his bloody face, neck, chest, and arms.

The only place Cole felt no bites was on his broken right arm. He raised his head to look. His right arm was shaded black with mosquitoes, as



thick as hair. Cole could only stare, and finally he closed his eyes. In the darkness, he still felt the sharp bites of the horseflies, and he felt the mosquitoes, dozens and dozens of tiny pins pricking him, sucking at him, leaving their itchy venom behind. If only he had the ar.óow blanket for protection. He had no idea where the blanket was. How could he have ever tried to burn it? It would have protected him from the cold, the rain, the wind, and the insects. It might even have protected him from himself.

Cole lost consciousness again.

Hours later, drifting awake, Cole became aware of a tickling sensation on his left arm. He opened his eyes to find a small gray mouse perched on his elbow, working its way toward his wrist. It stopped every step to poke a whiskered nose about. Cole lay motionless as the skittish mouse ventured across his forearm and sniffed at his wrist, then inched onto his upturned palm. Cole held his breath. He would have only one chance. Catching this mouse would be better than a dozen worms or a hundred bugs.

The mosquitoes had not slowed their feasting. Hundreds covered Cole's exposed skin, their tiny torsos swollen with blood. Several landed on his eyelids, and Cole blinked to drive them away—he dared not move his hand to swat at

them. Focusing his gaze on the mouse, he waited for it to take one more step. It moved its whiskered head back and forth with jerky caution, then stepped forward.

Cole clamped his hand closed.