

## 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 tugged 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?"