

STAR STABLE
MISTFALL

A S H E S T O A S H E S



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THE FOREST WAS BURNING. All I wanted to do was pull back and let the other rangers deal with this... but I couldn't. I was the Head Ranger. This was my job. The other rangers, the residents of Jorvik, even my own daughter, were all looking to me right now for guidance on how to deal with the worst situation.

But how was I supposed to face, head on, the thing I've feared the most since childhood... fire? Ever since that time... well, I don't like to talk about it. But since that lit-

tle cautionary tale moment, fire has become a whole THING in my life. Not to make a dad joke, but it's like a burning awareness. Friends having a bonfire? I'm the one making sure there's a bucket of water nearby just in case. I walk into a building and I want to know where the fire exits are. Candles? Not in my house. What if someone forgot to put one out? Don't get me started on birthday candles. Frosting is probably flammable. Why risk it?

“SAM! watch out!” I heard another ranger call out to me, breaking me free from my thoughts. I looked up just in time to duck out of the way of a burning branch falling out of the tree line towards me. Why did it have to be FIRE?



When you are a kid, you develop a sense of which kids are okay and which kids are a little... off very quickly.

My parents were a little overprotective and

usually very cautious about what kids they would let me hang out with. They would want to meet the other kids' parents. They'd ask me all kinds of questions about what potential friends were like. "Sammy, when Ryan plays with you in gym, does he play by the rules? Is he rough on the playground? Does he mind the teacher?" One time they even called one of my teachers to see what kind of grades a kid I wanted to be friends with was getting. Who calls a teacher and asks "Hi, I know I'm not Devon's mom, but how's he doing in math?"

So embarrassing.

But you know who my parents were always okay with me playing with unsupervised, no questions asked? My cousins. Maybe they thought they knew lots of things about them already. Maybe they assumed because they knew their own brothers and sisters, they knew what their kids were like. Or maybe it was just that they didn't see each other much anymore and when they did... they wanted to be able to reminisce without worrying about

the kids running around their feet. At any rate, at every family gathering I would end up playing with my older cousin Randy.

And my kid sense knew loud and clear – Randy was not a kid my parents would’ve otherwise let me hang out with. Randy was a little scary. Randy was not “safe.”

So, I found myself at one family thing – I think I was probably seven or eight at the time – playing in my grandparents’ garage with my cousin Randy, who had stolen a book of matches out of my Aunt Lulu’s purse. Matches, as my mother told me again and again, were a “no no” item.

“Check it out, Sammy!” Randy smiled a crooked-toothed grin. “Matches.”

I didn’t know what I was expected to say to this. I couldn’t tell him “hey, that’s a ‘no no’ item” . . . he’d call me a BABY.

“Yeah, those are matches,” I managed. So adult. So suave.

“Let’s burn something,” Randy said, looking around. He found the garbage and pulled

a bit of newspaper out of it and set it on the garage's concrete floor. He lit a match and held it to the paper's edge. It fizzled a little. Turned red. Turned black. I was relieved that was all that happened, but Randy was annoyed.

I was relieved. Well, that was the end of that, and I didn't even have to run and get my mom.

"Too bad... so, let's go back outside? I think there are brownies..." I said, trying to get Randy to drop the whole "no no" item thing.

"That sucked. Not cool at ALL. Hmpf." he said, not really talking to me... I didn't answer. Randy looked around the garage and zeroed in on something on the workbench. He'd found some lighter fluid for grandpa's charcoal grill and poured it messily on and around the paper.

"Um... I don't think that's a good idea..." I started as Randy grabbed for it.

"Don't be a BABY."

Oh no, he pulled out the B word. I shut up.

He lit another match.

Chaos. Utter chaos.

Everything happened in an instant – the paper went up in an orange flash – the fire consumed the rest of the lighter fluid splashed around the floor. I jumped back, knocking over the rest of the trash which instantly caught fire. It spread from there to the wall.

I was frozen with fear... and I think Randy was too.

Another cousin, Janey, came into the garage to see if we wanted to play with her new soccer ball and she had the good sense to scream for help. The adults arrived instantly – somebody (was it Aunt Jean?) quickly appeared with a fire extinguisher and doused the flames.

The wall was scorched, but it could've been so much worse. I hadn't really done anything but stand by and watch Randy do it... but I also hadn't tried to stop him. I was in trouble too. I didn't really care. I was so relieved

we hadn't burned Grandma and Grandpa's house down. I was so relieved nobody got hurt.

I'd heard it my whole childhood, hushed whispers about "the incident." Those whispers eventually faded decades later into Janey and I as adults, her jokingly saying "Remember the time you and Randy almost burned down the house?"

A moment now looked back on by others with bizarre fondness... but every time they mention it across the dinner table I just awkwardly chuckle. Every time someone tries to get me to talk about it at a family gathering, I try to turn it into a lesson for the kids that they shouldn't play with matches... covering up my discomfort by putting on my Ranger hat. No one seems to notice me flinching when someone inevitably lights the grill nearby, joking that they are lighting grandpa's garage on fire. Jerks. They weren't there... I hate thinking about it because that was the day I really

understood that playing with fire was about as dangerous as it gets.



“WHO DOES THAT GIRL THINK SHE IS?!”

I thumped my head down on my desk. Nova was back to complaining about Skye. My daughter was on a bit of a rampage lately.

Earlier that day, I’d sat in the stables listening to my daughter, Nova, complaining about Skye. Skye this, Skye that... I’d known it stemmed from Skye’s growing friendship with Alonso. Nova had always had a thing for the young man, and I could see him and Skye becoming closer was wearing on her. My advice to “calm down, be kind, and be yourself” was met with a huff and a slammed door. That new parenting book I ordered about how to raise a teenager cannot come soon enough. I need to read it immediately... and probably make a LOT of notes in the margins.

From Nova's complaints, I'd started to take notice of Skye more. Parental concern of who my daughter considered a "rival" warring with the fact that Skye was a good kid.

I tipped my chair back to look out through the door. Skye was brushing one of the horses in the distance. She was still skittish around the horses, but she was really putting in the effort to get more comfortable with them.

I called out to her, "Good work, city girl!"

Nova glared at me as Skye awkwardly waved back.

I leveled my own problem child with a glare, "See how easy it is to be friendly? Give her a shot. You know, Rania thinks the WORLD of that girl and in my book, that counts for a LOT."

Oooh, just got an eye roll out of her. That means she's listening.

"Skye was plopped down on this island after living in New York City. She's trying to get used to it here and she doesn't need your attitude AND bad cell reception. Can you TRY to

get along with her? You never know, you may end up best friends!”

Well, I didn't know you could make an eye roll look even more dramatic.

“Dad, you just don't understand.”

I was about to offer what I assure you was an eloquent and educated rebuttal of “Nuh-uh,” but Nova flounced out the door before I could show her my excellent parenting skills.

What I haven't told Nova was that I had a couple misgivings about the Skye girl as well... mine just weren't centered solely on boys and possible dating scenarios.

See I was getting that same feeling in my gut that I'd felt about my cousin Randy... about Skye. Something about her was a little off sometimes. I tried to tell myself I was wrong but, well, instincts are instincts after all.

Something I can't explain about Skye is the scar. She has a scar on the back of her hand...

an unusual scar that, frankly, doesn't look entirely natural. And maybe... maybe I'm just seeing something there that isn't...

No... I'm not imagining things. It's exactly like a symbol I've seen before on this island. A symbol that has to do with flames. I've lived on Jorvik long enough to know that when you spot something like that, it's never a coincidence.

Strange things happen here.



Not long after Nova had left my office in a huff, she ran back in.

“DAD!” Nova interrupted as she ran into the stables, frantic and waving her arms. “There you are!”

“What's wrong?” I asked, pulling her into a hug, trying to calm her.

“Fire!” she shouted. “There's another forest fire.”

“Where?”

“Over by Loshad Pond. About a quarter mile from where the last one started,” she answered.

As I was about to sprint to the door, Alonso burst in from the other end of the stable.

“Sam!” he yelled.

“I know,” I said. “Nova just told me about the forest fire.”

“That’s not all,” Alonso said, stepping up beside me. “Someone just crashed into the south fence. Nobody got hurt, but... I got most of them inside, but one of the horses got loose. Ran off.”

“Which way did it go?” I asked.

“Southwest,” he answered.

“Right toward the fire,” I said, grabbing my saddle and quickly tacking up one of the horses. “I’m going after it.”

“I’m coming with you,” Alonso and Nova said at the same time.

“No. All of you stay here.” I said as I mounted up. “If the fire keeps spreading this way, I need you here to evacuate the rest of the

horses. Plus, I don't want any of you in harm's way."

"But—" Nova started.

"I need you HERE, No arguments." There. Dad AND boss foot DOWN. That'll show 'em. I pressed my heels into the horse, and we galloped out of the stable.

It didn't take long at all to see the bright orange blaze in the distance. I could already hear alarm bells echoing around me. This was the stuff of my nightmares... walls of flames. Burning. Smoke. I hesitated, my earlier gusto leaving me in a whoosh, but the chaos of the voices around me brought me back to the urgency of the situation. I moved my horse forward, hoping the firefighters would be fast so I wouldn't need to get too close to the "action." I was being awful, this is my JOB and here I am... hoping someone else shows up to take over part of it. As I rode closer, thick ash began to fall through the sky, a gray parody of a snowfall. I hated this.

It was getting harder to see. I stopped the horse and wondered if it made any sense to keep going. That's when I heard the horse nearby – crying out in pain and terror. My eyes stinging from the smoke, I rode farther in. The memories of the garage wall beginning to scorch and peel into embers flashing as I looked to the trees ahead.

I heard the horse before I saw it. The high-pitched whine it let out was pitiful and I followed the sound. A huge tree branch had fallen on top of it, the smoldering mess of it pinning it to the ground.

“It’s okay. Everything is going to be fine,” I lied to the poor thing as I dismounted. I had no idea if it was going to be okay. I had no problems going near a thrashing, hurt horse. That I could do . . . I was tiptoeing closer to the poor thing because I didn’t even want to go NEAR the sparking branch, the HEAT.

The far end of the branch wasn’t hot. I ran to it and tried to pull. It wouldn’t budge. I

could smell the horrible stench of the horse's hair being singed by the flames.

"I knew you'd need some help."

I turned to see who had said it. It was Nova. I was so distracted by the horse and the fire and my own fear, I hadn't even heard her pull up in the ranger station's pickup, a small horse trailer banging around behind it on the rough terrain. GAH. *Nova, no. I need to focus! I can't be worried about you too!*

"I told you to stay back," I shouted.

"I know. But I was worried about the horse," Nova answered, unhooking the trailer before reaching into the pickup's bed. "And you."

Arguing further would've been a waste of time.

"What are you grabbing?" I asked instead.

"There's some chain back here," she answered. "I'll attach it to the hitch and you..."

"Put the other end around the branch." I finished. "Good idea." Proud dad mode activated. I may not even ground her for disobeying me... maybe.

As Nova did her part, I looped the chain over the branch where it wasn't burning yet. There was a hook at the end that I could put into one of the chain's loops, securing it to itself.

"You ready?" Nova called to me as she hopped into the truck's driver's seat.

"Ready!" I called back. "Take it nice and slow!"

She did it perfectly. Moving the truck forward, the branch followed toward her and off of the horse.

"OK!" I called out.

The poor horse tried to stand, but it was terrified, and in pretty bad shape. Probably some serious smoke inhalation... And a nasty welt was forming along its side where the embers of the branch had made a mess of its coat. It reminded me of the charred walls of the garage again. The damage that fire can cause in an instant.

"Stay there," I cooed to the horse. "Help is coming." The ash in the air and coating

the horse had distracted me before but now I could clearly see it was one of the chestnut mares. Aw, it was Lucky. I've always liked this horse. Poor thing.

"Help is on the way," Nova said as she ran over to me. "I was on the radio. Firefighters have the blaze contained already. A few are on their way here to help us get this horse up in the truck so we can get it to safety."

I had raced off with no plan. Nova had really come through for me. For both of us.

"Great work," I said, hugging her to my side, "for this, you get pizza for dinner. All the pizza. As much as you want. And ice cream."

"Thanks Dad," she said without smiling. She was staring at the injured horse.

Lucky tried to lope towards us, but she stumbled a bit.

"Shh," Nova said soothingly as she pulled an apple out of her pocket.

I watched her lead the horse into the trailer as I began to wind the chain back up to throw into the truck. Again, proud dad moment acti-

vated. Even an apple smartly tucked into a pocket made me sappy these days.

The firefighters weren't far behind Nova and pulled up as Nova and I were reattaching the trailer to the truck. I waved Nova away to get the horse back to the stables while I talked to the rescue group. I'd ride back on my own horse in a bit to calm my nerves. I didn't want Nova to see how badly I was shaking now that I'd been face-to-face with my own demons.



It took another hour before I made it back to the stables. I'd ridden slowly, trying to tie up the fraying emotions trying to claw their way to the surface. The truck and trailer were parked outside, both empty. I knew Nova must have put the horse away. She was likely with the other rangers calling a vet to come look at the poor thing.

I went to walk by the stall I knew Lucky would be in... and was surprised to see Skye

on the straw-strewn floor petting the injured animal. She looked upset. Full lip tremble. Oh no. I had a kid. I knew tears were coming.

“Skye? Where’ve you been? Are you okay?”

“I was... out,” she answered. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t much help.”

“I asked everyone to stay back at the stables, you were just...” I started.

And that’s when she let go, dropped the tough kid act. She put her arms around me and just sobbed, letting go of the anguish of the evening. The scent of smoke wafted up from her hair. Why did she smell so much like smoke? Was it the horse? Did she...

Wait, no, crying teenager comes first. I pat her head and told her things would be okay as she sniffled. But... where has she been this whole time? And why does she smell like smoke?

Skye sniffed, “I’m scared of fire,” she whispered.

My dad hackles immediately rose. Oh no, this poor kid, that was the confession of a kid

that had a past with fire. I knew it well. “Oh Skye,” I patted her back, “I know EXACTLY how you feel. Fire scares me too.”

Skye sniffed again, “Why are you scared of it?”

“Well, I guess I need to start by telling you about a boy named Randy...”

Skye settled against the wall of the stall, gently petting the horse while I told her about my own fire scare as a kid. She didn’t contribute much to the conversation, but I could tell she was listening.

As I spoke, I started to wonder more about the girl. She was a good kid. But why was I getting that gut feeling that something was wrong?

And why did I feel like the worst was yet to come?