

A Degree In Fire Starting

By Cathy Eaton

Anthony detested sharing a puny tent with his cousin. Morning was worse. Like a gloating goose, Paul trumpeted reveille through cupped hands and dragged Anthony out of his sleeping bag. Fog still hovered over their campsite.

Splinters of cold air freckled his skin with goose bumps. Wanting nothing more than to crawl back inside his sleeping bag, he grumbled obscenities as a prancing Paul herded him down to the pond tucked below granite ledges. This so called canoe vacation in the Canadian wilderness felt like boot camp.

Instead of calisthenics, his aunt and cousin had decided to greet the dawn with a plunge into the icy pool fed by a mountain stream.

“Climb up, Anthony,” Aunt Karen shouted.

“No way.” Squinting through sleep-crusted eyes, he witnessed his aunt and cousin balanced like mountain goats on a ledge a dozen feet higher than where he hunched against a boulder. Dark clouds scudded overhead and swallowed the sun. He called up to them, “Quit pretending you’re seals. Jumping off that rock wall is crazy.”

“You sound like my husband. Don’t worry,” his aunt responded. “I’ve jumped from much higher ledges.”

It was hard to believe she was his mother’s younger sister. Aunt Karen wore flannel shirts and cargo pants instead of the blousy dresses his mom favored. His aunt had a lean, muscular body from daily workouts at the gym and exuded energy while his mom was always exhausted from extra shifts at the hospital. His aunt was easy to talk to and encouraged his dream to help teens suffering from addictions. Not like his mom who wanted him to study architecture or accounting: jobs that paid well without risk or heartache.

“Watch this,” his aunt yelled. She waved to him before she executed a jackknife, plunged into the frigid water, and then paddled to the other side of the pool where water tumbled down worn rocks. He tried to fathom the decades it had taken the tumbling stream to sandpaper the rock’s coarse surface.

Paul yelled “Geronimo” and cannonballed into the emerald water, yucking it up when he nailed his cousin with a huge splash. Anthony fumed. He wanted to wipe the smirk off his cousin’s face. “Go ahead. Prove you’re an otter. Climb higher next time.”

“Not me,” Paul said. “I’m hungry.”

“What about you?” Anthony dared his aunt.

Never one to back down from a challenge, she said, “Piece of cake.” Both boys watched her worm her way up the steep wall, testing nubs of rock before trusting her weight on them.

“Mom, that moss is slippery,” Paul shouted. “Come down.”

“Go for it, Aunt Karen.” Anthony couldn’t wait for her to make the leap and show up Paul for the chicken shit he was.

She swiveled her head to look down and took her hand off the wall to wave. That’s when she fell.

It happened fast like a stolen pass and winning breakaway. One second clinging to the wall, and the next instant splashing into the water. She bobbed up quickly. Her usual grin gone. “My foot, it’s stuck.”

Her words sent Paul stumbling down into the water. He tugged her foot free. Then he hooked his arm around her waist and supported her while she hobbled to shore.

Anthony followed as they made faltering progress up the hill weaving between massive trunks of firs and spruce. When they reached their campsite, Paul gently lowered his mother against a tree stump next to their orange dome tents.

“Thanks for the lift,” she said. Her clenched jaw belied the joking words. She no longer resembled the gutsy woman who dared to leap into icy water: her Spartan salutation to the dawn. Her sunburned cheeks were pasty white.

“I feel woozy,” she admitted, her voice a sliver of its usual no-nonsense tone.

Despite the warmth of the sun that had emerged to burn off the morning fog, her body was jerking in small shivers. Anthony reached out to touch her shoulder. In an unsteady voice, he said, “Maybe you should put your head between your knees.” For the first time since their trip started, she appeared vulnerable. He wanted to protect her, to do something that would bring back her smile. He unzipped the tent and dragged out his sleeping bag to drape around her shoulders. Then he rummaged through the cooler and grabbed a Coke. He popped the top. “Drink this. It’ll help.”

As her color returned, Paul grabbed the first aid kit, said, “I’ll just dab Neosporin on your scrapes.” She held out her right hand and turned the palm over. It looked like it had been rubbed against a cheese grater.

Anthony winced.

After Paul wrapped it with gauze and tape, he said, “You’ll be fine. We’ll hang out here this morning and you’ll feel better in a few hours.”

In a low voice that his aunt couldn't overhear, Anthony contradicted his cousin. "She's not going to be able to hold a paddle."

"Thanks to you," Paul hissed.

Anthony stiffened as Paul's words sank in. If it hadn't been for him, his aunt wouldn't have lost her balance and fallen. Turning to his aunt, he said, "Paul and I can paddle, and you can just sit in the center like a VIP in a limo."

"Does that mean you actually might do some work and break a sweat?" Paul asked. In his navy swim trunks, North Face sweatshirt, and Teva sandals, he looked like a model for an REI catalogue.

Before Paul could say more, Aunt Karen said, "I can't wiggle my toes."

"Let's take a look at your ankle," Anthony said as he knelt by her side. When she stuck her right foot out, he eased off her rafting shoe and ran his fingers over her swollen ankle.

"I think it's just a sprain," she said as if positive thinking could minimize the injury.

He sat back on his heels as he considered his next words. Trying to quell the panic that threatened to spill out of him, he steadied his quavering voice. They were in a remote national park, their cell phones hadn't had reception since they left Newcomb Corner five days earlier, and they hadn't seen any paddlers or hikers for two days. "Look at the swelling. It's already starting to discolor. I'm thinking fracture; maybe torn ligament." Checking for puffy spots and bone that might be displaced, he pressed the top and sides of her foot. When she jerked it away, he apologized. It made him feel sick to cause her more pain.

"You sound like you know what you're doing," she said.

"When you play basketball, you learn a lot about ankle injuries," he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

After he wrapped her ankle with an ace bandage, she said, "Let's have breakfast. What a dim-witted stunt. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I wasn't, but I think Paul's right and that my ankle will be all right in a little bit."

Anthony knew she was wrong. Not now but soon, he'd have to convince her that she wasn't going to be walking anywhere for a while. He rigged up a Ziploc bag with cold water to keep the swelling down, then handed her three Ibuprofen and his canteen.

He rubbed his goatee. He realized his aunt needed time to regroup. He grabbed chunks of wood he had chopped the night before and snapped open his knife to shave off a few curls of bark. The least he could do was start a fire.

As she closed her uninjured hand around the pills, she said, "You'll have to put to use those canoeing

skills you've been practicing." He noticed her lips pressing together, but she didn't complain. So different from her pain-in-the-ass son who was a marathon whiner.

"Not a problem," Anthony said as he raised his left eyebrow and winked. Back home that look had tugged at hearts in high school class. Here, his olive-skinned complexion, jet black wavy hair with bangs flipped up, and chocolate eyes just set him apart from his fair-haired relatives who had invited him on his first camping trip ever.

"I think we should get some breakfast into Mom. Hot food will perk her right up," Paul said as he squatted next to the smoking pile of twigs and shook his shaggy blond hair so that little droplets hissed on the tentative flames. "Get out of the way, Anthony. Once again your fire is about to die. You'd think with all the arsonists in your hood that every kid would have a degree in fire starting."

"You're the one who almost burnt down the forest when you built a bonfire under a dead tree," Anthony said.

His cousin shrugged his bony shoulders. "I had a shovel handy and smothered it. If it weren't for my fire building, we'd be eating cereal and beef jerky all the time. With you in charge, we'd starve."

"Quit bragging and start cooking." Paul had hit a nerve. Everything Anthony touched, he screwed up. He scorched the salmon he'd tried to cook, it took him thirty minutes to put a tent up that Paul could pitch in a few minutes, and he hadn't built one decent fire.

"While I get breakfast, maybe you should wash up," Paul suggested. "You're starting to stink like dirty gym socks. Are you afraid leeches will suck your blood if you dip your toes in the river?"

"I'm hungry," his aunt interrupted, "and my foot is starting to throb."

Paul turned his attention to his mother. "I'll have something ready pronto." He coaxed the faltering flames into a blaze. After frying up slices of potatoes, he poured pancake batter into the cast iron skillet. "Do you think you could make coffee without ruining it?" he asked Anthony.

The older boy bit his lower lip to swallow a retort, grabbed the coffee pot, and bulldozed down the rocky slope to the river. He'd had it with his cousin's insults, but this was no time to lose his temper. He stomped on a feathery fern, then felt guilty for squashing it. His aunt would have been disappointed in him. If she found a spider in her tent, she'd set it outside. With a nod of her head, she could draw his attention to a loon gliding under the canoe or an ant carting away a dead wasp twice its size. He bent to straighten the fern, but it was crushed beyond fixing. He was a hazard.

As he was returning, he overheard Paul say, "Dad was right. We shouldn't have attempted this trip. Not without a guide. So stupid to bring Anthony. He's useless and his paddling stinks. It's up to me to get

help.”

Aunt Karen said, “This is his first camping trip. He’s a quick study. Look at that stack of wood he split last night while we were fishing.”

“Why are you always defending him? He’s a loser, and you know it.”

Paul stopped his tirade as Anthony clumped into the clearing and slapped the coffee pot down on a hot rock, sloshing liquid over the sides. Instead of dumping the water over Paul’s head, Anthony grabbed an ax and splintered a log with a dozen good whacks. His temper under control, he said, “We shouldn’t split up.” He spooned instant coffee into a tin mug, added powdered milk and gave it to his aunt. When he handed a second cup to Paul, he said, “If you do your Davy Crocket thing, how will you handle a bear that jumps in the canoe with you?”

“No bear’s gonna surprise me. I pay attention. I suppose you think you could simply knock a bear out with a quick jab to the jaw.”

“Enough!” Aunt Karen said as she threw the last dregs of her coffee on the fire, its sizzle matching her angry tone. The boys stopped their bickering and looked at her. “If the two of you could stop acting like a couple of bull moose ready to rip the stuffing out of each other, we might be able to figure this out. Paul, I hate to say it, but I’m not going to be better in a few hours. I won’t be able to paddle, and I won’t be able to walk even the hour it’ll take to portage the canoe around the rapids and waterfall.”

Paul’s squinty eyes and puckered mouth reminded Anthony of his six-year-old nephew who was prince of pouting. “Anthony can keep you company. It only makes sense that I go for help. I can handle a canoe solo.”

“You’ll go together.” Her tone defied argument. “Two can paddle much faster than one,” she continued. “I’ll be fine on my own. I’ve been camping since before the two of you were born. My foot’s probably broken. You’ll need to bring back someone who can get me to a hospital.”

“I could carry you piggyback, then come back for the canoe and help Paul carry it.”

“I know you mean well, Anthony, but it’s better that I wait here until you bring back a trained medic who can stabilize my ankle and figure out a way to move me safely.”

Both boys nodded.

Then Paul deepened his voice and said, “I’ll map out the route.” Anthony watched his cousin puff out his puny chest. He snapped open a topographic map and weighted down the corners with rocks. A brisk breeze kept the mosquitoes and black flies in hiding. As Paul traced his finger along the twists and curves of the river, he said, “We can handle the early rapids.” He pointed to an island. “At this section, we hit a

bunch of class 3 and class 4 rapids, so we'll take the canoe out. After we portage around Moose River Falls, it's a straight shot down Mercy River. I figure three hours of paddling, an hour portage, and then another five hours of paddling to the town of Spry Harbour." He made it sound easy. "Let's roll. The sooner we leave, the sooner we'll bring back help for Mom."

Anthony jumped up to stack the woodpile closer to the fire. The least he could do was make sure that his aunt would have easy access to firewood while they were gone. She made sandwiches while Paul packed their tent and clothes in the largest backpack. They left the cooler, two jugs of water and plenty of chlorine pills while they kept the canteens for themselves.

Leaning on a staff Anthony had cut, his aunt limped down the rocky incline to the riverbank to bid them farewell. Paul had secured the backpack with a crisscross of bungee cords in the center of the three-man Voyageur. He buckled bright orange life jackets around the thwart of the aluminum canoe.

"Wear those jackets as soon as you hit the rapids!"

"Yessssssss, Mom."

"Take care of Paul," Aunt Karen said to Anthony as she handed him the longer paddle.

"You can count on me. Don't worry about a thing," Anthony assured her. "Remember to keep your foot elevated." She saluted him with two fingers.

When Paul hugged his mother goodbye, she cautioned, "Take it one mile at a time. You need to work as a team. Watch your temper."

"Mom, have faith. I've got it under control. We'll be fine. We'll bring help by tomorrow late afternoon. Maybe you can work on that sweater you've been threatening to knit ever since the trip began."

Anthony knew that the silly chatter covered up the anxiety all of them were feeling.

"It's a scarf for your father."

"Well, make it a long one, and maybe he'll trust us to take another trip."

His mother grimaced. "Your dad will kill me if anything happens to either of you."

"We'll be fine," the boys chorused as they pushed off the sandy bottom and began paddling down the river, gliding past trees uprooted by a storm that had blasted through. When Anthony looked back, his aunt appeared small and defenseless.

The trip started well. They did work as a team. Anthony counted on Paul to steer; Paul relied on Anthony in bow to use his muscles to keep them gliding past marshes and miles of thick forest.

As they rounded a bend, Paul pointed out three otters snuggling against each other. As the boys

watched, they slithered over rocks and skidded down a muddy bank only to waddle back up and take another ride. Their antics reminded Anthony of Six Flags. He told Paul about riding Superman five times in one day. "The first drop is a killer," he said.

Paul said, "I could spend all day in the water park."

"I like the roller coasters best." What Anthony didn't say was that swimming had freaked him out ever since a powerful undertow had whipped him under the surf at Daytona Beach.

Paul bragged about rocketing down Geronimo. Hearing about its six-story freefall into a pool of water triggered memories for Anthony of this morning's accident. He knew his cousin blamed him for his aunt's injury. For ruining the trip.

As the boys canoed past blueberry shrubs and a graveyard of charred skeleton trunks that had burned in a forest fire, Paul launched into stories about driving a bunch of friends to midnight bonfires on the beach where they chugged beers and tried to get laid. Even though he went to boarding school at Brewster Academy where students weren't allowed to have cars, his parents had bought him a Buick LeSabre for his sixteenth birthday.

Anthony couldn't resist saying, "In Brookline, only little old ladies drive LeSabres." Naturally he didn't admit that he'd kill for a car. Anthony's father, a vice principal at Roxbury High, didn't believe in handouts. Anthony had been mortified that he had to bum a ride to the junior prom.

The canoe bumped to a halt and brought him out of his reverie. "Sorry about that," he said as he used his paddle to shove off a sandbar. "That shallow water snuck up on us."

"Keep your eyes open. That's your job," Paul said as if Anthony's negligence had put them in grave danger. His nitpicking felt like a mosquito wining and dining on Anthony's eardrum. He wanted to swat his cousin dead and flick him into the water for a trout to swallow.

When Anthony began describing the basketball championship when he'd been the only sophomore on varsity, Paul interrupted. "You've got to paddle more. I'm doing all the work. We'll never get Mom help if you don't stop jabbering and put some muscle into it."

Anthony threw his shoulder behind his next strokes. As he swooped his paddle through the water, the canoe surged forward.

"That's more like it," his cousin said. "When we hit the rapids, you'll need to pay attention to everything I say. Let's practice."

Nothing Anthony did satisfied Paul. He paddled too late, did a sweep instead of a draw, and paddled forward when he was supposed to back paddle.

After twenty minutes of drilling, Anthony had enough. "Time for lunch," he said. "My hand feels like a peeled onion."

"We don't have time to stop." Before Anthony could argue, Paul added, "Mom's counting on us."

That shut up Anthony, who took off his bandana and wrapped it around his hand. "I'll be glad to get home and shoot some pool with Luigi and Carlo."

"What do they do? Get rich selling pot to junior high kids like your brother did? He was lucky he only got six months in juvie. Your dad must have pulled strings."

"How dare you?" Anthony bellowed. He stood up, twisted around and blasted water at Paul with his paddle.

The canoe tilted. Anthony lost his balance and tumbled in the river. Water swamped his lungs. When his head broke the surface, he lunged for the canoe. It capsized. Choking and sputtering, Anthony dogpaddled to shallow water and crumpled on the mossy bank.

Paul, who was swimming the canoe to shore, screeched, "Get the paddles."

Anthony didn't budge. His heart was collapsing in on him like a building being demolished. Beneath his eyelids, he saw himself swirling inside a whirlpool.

When he caught his breath, he sat up and watched Paul. The show-off sprinted along the shore, snagged one paddle with a branch, and then leaped into the water and swam downstream before he snatched the other paddle out of the current. He jogged back.

In edgy silence, they dumped water out of the canoe. Anthony leaned against the birch trunk while his cousin tightened the bungee cords around their stuff.

"I need to dry out," Anthony said. What he meant was he needed to stop feeling the water sucking him under and filling his lungs.

"Get into the canoe!"

"Quit ordering me around."

"Fine! Stay here. Then you won't have to listen to me," Paul blasted back. "Your paddling sucks. I'll make better time without you."

"Let's eat."

"Go for it," Paul said as he threw a soggy bag of sandwiches on the pebbly beach. "Here's your lunch. Take all the time you want. I don't need you. You can't do anything right." Paul picked up both paddles, shoved the canoe down the bank, and jumped in.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?" Anthony yelled, but Paul had already paddled past him, his arms

dipping and stroking through the water. As Anthony bellowed, “Don’t play macho man,” Paul flipped him the bird. Ramrod straight, he didn’t look back.

“Don’t leave me here,” Anthony yelled as he rushed along the bank, dodging stunted shrubs. “You can’t do this alone. Aunt Karen’s counting on us.”

Paul sped away, his paddle digging into water as if he were sprinting to the finish of a race.

Anthony hiked at a furious pace beside the river, expecting at any moment to catch up to Paul. His feet squelched inside his hiking boots. His right heel chafed against the back of his boot. Sweat stung his eyes and dribbled down his back. As he shoved through prickly undergrowth and stepped over gnarled roots, he startled a kingfisher that arrowed to a higher branch.

Each half hour felt like a skirmish he’d won as he battled up rocky slopes. Each clump of pine trees he passed looked identical to the last one. His legs felt like he was pushing through molasses, his hamstrings burned, and his ankle throbbed from tripping over a twisted root. Perched in dead branches, crows sputtered cackles at his ineptness.

He kept picturing his aunt and how brave she’d been, pretending the pain was no big deal. He berated himself for not remembering to pull the food bag up the tree. His aunt was self-sufficient but no match for a bear lumbering into camp. He imagined her walloping the beast with a frying pan while telling it, “Learn to be independent. Catch your own fish. Don’t expect a handout from me.” She was one tough lady.

Nothing like her spoiled, know-it-all son paddling solo all the way to Spry Harbour. He’d find help and save his mom. All he cared about was being the hero and getting all the credit.

Anthony wanted to collapse and sleep away the afternoon, but he wouldn’t rest until he caught up to Paul. His cousin needed him to help portage the canoe. It weighed more than a hundred pounds.

He watched a heron poke its head forward, then stalk ahead on its pencil-thin legs. Alert, it searched for dinner. Anthony began to think about his mom’s cooking. What he wouldn’t give for her eggplant Parmesan and garlic bread.

He waded through a marshy swamp, grabbing branches to pull himself over rotted logs. He dry-heaved as he inhaled the putrid smell of a decomposing muskrat. Chattering squirrels scampered from branch to branch with a dexterity that mocked his cumbersome progress. Swarms of mosquitoes feasted on him. In an effort not to claw at his skin, he dredged up memories of his girlfriend.

He imagined dark-haired Sophia in a pale blue skirt, the tempting soft curve of her breasts, her hips that swayed a little too much as she tried to imitate her older sisters. He imagined himself taking her to the

bedroom he shared with his brother. He could picture her sitting on the windowsill, dangling her bare legs above the floor. He imagined telling her how much he loved her, but she couldn't hear him because the wheels of the ten o'clock train rumbled on the trestle behind their apartment. The blistering sound drowned out his words.

He waited for it to speed by, but the screeching rush of cars didn't end. Anthony's fantasy vanished. Thunderous rushing pummeled his ears. The water beside him raged past, frothing and tumbling over rocks. Anthony dashed forward, ignoring the blisters that burst inside his sweat-soaked socks. When he rounded the corner, spray blasted him. A thirty-foot waterfall, crashing down luminous boulders, mesmerized him.

Gripped by its energy, he picked up a broken branch and arched it high in the air, so he could watch it tumble down, disappear in snarling eddies, shoot out, and finally land in the foaming water at the bottom. As his eyes traced its progress from the tumultuous swirling at the base of the falls to the quieter pools ahead, Anthony's exultation vanished.

A piece of aluminum canoe lay smashed on a pint-sized island below him.

He scrambled down slippery rocks. Unconscious of branches ripping his fleece jacket, he reached the base of the falls. Paul wasn't on the island. It was devoid of life except for one skeletal pine next to the battered canoe hull. Anthony's eyes darted to the bank across from him and to other small islands. He willed himself x-ray vision to see past the thick stand of tree trunks that lined the bank. His cousin could be dead, and it was Anthony's fault. If only he hadn't lost his temper and capsized the canoe.

His heart lurched the instant he saw movement. The antlered stag that glided out of the woods wasn't Paul.

In a tangle of branches on the opposite shore, Anthony spotted a brown shape bobbing in the shallow water. He began to pray, more afraid even than when his grandfather suffered a heart attack. He recognized Paul's brown hooded sweatshirt and dark pants. One arm was flung out and twisted at a sickening angle.

The arm was too skinny to be an arm, and the body too long to be Paul. As he drew closer, he saw that it was nothing more than a log with a scraggly branch. Anthony tried to replay his last memories of Paul. He squinted his eyes, trying to remember if his cousin had worn the life jacket when he paddled past Anthony?

They had promised to wear vests in rough water, but Paul hated wearing one. Claimed they interfered with his paddling. Anthony knew riding the rapids would have tempted Paul. The canoe would

have leaped forward. Alone, he wouldn't have been able to stop the craft from shooting over the falls.

Anthony could have saved him. If he hadn't bailed, together they could have manhandled the canoe to shore before the falls swallowed his cousin and spat him out.

This was stupid. He had to get a grip. Paul couldn't be dead. Anthony wouldn't give up looking for him until he died of exhaustion. He tried to picture his cousin lazing on a flat boulder. Again he imagined him face down, trapped beneath a pile of branches.

Anthony shouted Paul's name. The falls swallowed his screams. He forced his way through a chaotic jumble of trees whose tops had been sheared off by a violent storm. He dodged slippery piles of decaying leaves. He couldn't risk falling and breaking a leg because Paul needed him. Aunt Karen was relying on him. No one else in the world knew they were in trouble.

He climbed a tree in order to see down the river. Pine pitch clung to his hands, and pricking needles dug into his neck as he pulled himself up the tree.

When he scanned the sluggish water that parted to slip past wooded islands and rock clusters, he spotted the battered shell of the rest of the canoe. It bobbed like a duck decoy in a small inlet. Seconds later, a burst of orange drew his eyes. He jumped to the ground. His sprinting legs ate up the distance between him and the orange glimmer of hope. He dropped to his knees next to the empty vest. A life jacket was useless if you didn't wear it.

"The Canadian Mounties to the rescue," a voice uttered from above. "Are you saying your prayers, or by any chance did you bring food? I'm starved." Anthony looked up and saw Paul clinging to a branch above him.

"What the hell are you doing up a tree?"

"I thought you were a moose crashing through the woods."

Anthony tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't support him. His eyes swallowed Paul, the barrage of bruises on his swollen face, the shredded pants and sweatshirt that revealed gashes on his abdomen and legs.

"I never thought I'd be glad to see you," Paul admitted. Then he tried a joke. "I was worried I'd be supper for a hungry bear."

Anthony watched his cousin bite down on his swollen lip.

Then Paul's bravado faded, and he choked out, "What are we going to do? Mom's stranded. She could die. It's all my fault."

Anthony stood up and inhaled life into his lungs. "First you need to come down." He stood below

Paul and reached his arms up to steady his cousin as he crept down like an old man. He knew they should keep going, but that wasn't possible yet. As if they had all the time in the world, he said, "I'm putting you in charge of finding some edible grub."

"I can do that," Paul said. His lips parted in a crooked grin. Anthony winced as he took in three broken teeth.

Anthony turned his back on his cousin and walked over to where the river had drawn patterns in the sand. He needed to overcome the nausea he felt, so he stripped down to his boxers, stood in the shallow water, and scrubbed himself clean. Here the river meandered, rippling over a sandy bottom. Lacy boughs of cedar shaded the cove. Dragonflies hovered, and a school of minnows flashed past his bare toes.

First he would make a shelter. He dragged branches and piled them between tree trunks. His cousin, sitting against a boulder with his arms hugging his knee, asked, "Got your knife?"

"You planning to make a spear and kill us a bear? I could eat one."

"Actually I saw pieces of flint next to a chunk of slate on the beach. Maybe I can scrape up a few sparks and start a fire."

Anthony said, "About time you put to use that badge in fire starting the Boy Scouts awarded you." He was glad Paul's voice sounded less ragged. "I'll get some wood." When he returned, he saw his cousin hunched against the shelter.

Paul's words skittered out. "I can't do anything right. Everything hurts. I'll never go in the water again. Not ever. It was awful, Anthony." His hands covered his eyes as if he could erase the memories, but they kept pouring out. "The falls sucked me down. I slammed into a boulder. My paddle broke. I inhaled gallons of water. I thought I was dead."

"Yeah, well scary shit is what keeps us sharp, keeps us alive," Anthony said as he stretched out a hand to pull his cousin up. "How about showing me how to make a fire like our ancestors did? We'll sleep tonight. Hike tomorrow."

Paul didn't lift his hand to meet his cousin's extended one. "What about Mom?"

Anthony eased down beside him. He elbowed his cousin in the ribs. Not too hard, just firm enough to let him know that they couldn't sit this one out.

"Your mom's fine. She's a survivor. Just like you. Just like me."