

UNDER THE HORIZON

UNDER THE HORIZON

A Novel by

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Book Five of the Star Valley Saga

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UNDER THE HORIZON

CHAPTER ONE

IF

THE lightning strike was too close for comfort, and the thunder that accompanied it was almost instantaneous. Wind rocked the little single-engine plane as if it were an old-fashioned windmill in a Kansas tornado. If William hadn't been wearing his seatbelt he would have been thrown side-to-side, up and down, and more than likely into the pilot's lap.

Looking at the pilot was the last thing William should have done. He could tell by looking at the Pilot that he was a Native American, yet right now he was whiter in complexion than anyone William had ever seen. He was holding onto the control stick so firmly that William thought it would snap in two. The pilot's fear was contagious and William had caught it. This was not the way his vacation was supposed to go, and

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not the way his life should end.

Three years earlier William had decided to fulfill his dream of traveling into the Northern Canadian Wilds for a hunting and fishing excursion. It had been a dream of his father's—one that was left unrealized until too late. William would not make the same mistake. Now it seemed that his mistake would be a different one—the mistake of actually going and trying to fulfill the dream.

Thoughts were streaming through his head. He was thinking of all the years he had spent saving, eating dollar menu meals, and not going on any expensive vacations. It was now all for nothing—unless, of course, he accepted the most intense fear ever imagined as a reward in itself.

The trip hadn't started off this way. When he had landed at Edmonton International Airport, the sky was sunny and the air warm. After this, he had been flown to a smaller airport some 500 miles farther into the Northern Wilds, and he had liked the pilot on this last flight very much. While speaking with this pilot, he had learned that he was going to fly even farther with a highly experienced Native American pilot. He had also been told of the great fishing he would have, and of the abundance of caribou and grizzlies. The pilot said that the weather was to be favorable—just a small low-pressure area to the west that was expected

to stay stationary. All seemed perfect for a great and rewarding adventure.

William was impressed that this new pilot owned his own little plane and did all of his own maintenance on it. After William had met him and boarded his plane, the Native American pilot also spoke with confidence of the calm weather and the success which William would have in his hunting and fishing trip.

“Yep! You get two big bull, trophy grizz, and big fish you ever see. Might get skeeter big enough to mount.”

William had asked him about the storm to the west. “No worry” was the answer.

“We get word if come this way. Now it stay away!”

But it didn’t. Now, while in the storm, William was thinking of the phrase, “famous last words.”

There was no time to react to the next lightning strike. It set into motion three separate and unexpected consequences. The first and fatal one was the fact that it hit the plane and took out the instruments—all of them—including the dome light, the compass, and the radio. The second was the long and loud verbal outburst of every four-letter word the pilot knew. The third and final consequence was to bring William back to the present and to his helpless predicament.

After many minutes of listening to the pilot’s rants and raves, William finally got a few words in. “What

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are our chances? Where are we?”

“We go down, soon, maybe hour, maybe minute, maybe clear mountains, maybe not. We stay up as long as we can. Burn gas. No explode when land. I think storm blow us NORTH. I think. I not know. You pray!”

William prayed. Perhaps the good Lord heard him, as the plane stayed up for several hours, yet the storm wasn't abating and the instruments stayed off.

As the plane's engine stuttered for lack of fuel, the pilot remarked “We go down! Cover face!”

William held his arms up over his face and braced himself. He kept one little peek-hole between his arms so he could see the approaching ground, or the side of a mountain—hoping it was the smooth, flat ground. It was a funny thing to do, for whenever he had received a flu shot at the doctor's office, he couldn't bear to watch the needle going in, and yet now he was actively watching for his life to end.

It was almost morning. Being this far north in June meant that the nights were short. Luckily, this also meant that the days were long, which would give them a chance to pick out a landing site—that is, if the rain would stop and the clouds got thinner. Neither happened. Before they knew what was happening, the plane hit the top of a small tree, then spun sideways and hit another tree on the pilot's side. A branch

IF

broke through the Pilot's window and protruded into his chest, killing him almost instantly. William's arms were now held out in front of him in a useless effort to brace himself. He had seen the pilot's fate and knew that if he lived he would now be alone. "IF" was the big word—IF meant everything now. Every thought William now had began with that one word. If he did this or that, what would happen? It meant second-guessing himself with every one of his thoughts.

William felt himself being turned upside down. The plane had come to a stop on its top. He could smell gas, but remembering the sputtering, he knew they had almost certainly run out of it. He hoped now that there was not enough left to start a fire, but he was wrong. He could smell the smoke and began fighting with his seat belt, trying to get loose from it—but he was held tight. If only he had a knife! Wait—he did! It was on his belt, and it took a great deal of wiggling and squirming to get into a position where he could slip it out from its sheath. It took even more wiggling to cut the strap which held him tight. Cutting it but not himself was the trick.

Once he had cut through the strap, he fell head first to the ceiling, which was now the bottom or the floor of the plane. In his haste to get out, he barely felt the conk on his head, but in the following days he would notice that his neck was extremely sore and would

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remember the fall.

It took a number of hard pounding thrusts with his shoulder to get the door open. It was bent and locked into place. When it did give, he fell out onto the rain-soaked ground. The rain was still being pushed so hard by the wind that it blinded William and immediately started soaking through his clothes, making him cold and wet. The fire began to spread into the plane's cabin. When William noticed this new threat, he started to back up and tripped on a protruding rock. The fall brought him back to some common sense, and after picking himself up, he ran back to the plane and grabbed his backpack, taking it from the ceiling, which was now the floor. He had found it near the door, and was glad the turbulence had thrown it forward. He knew that this bag might keep him alive long enough to be saved, if he was found in time—another big IF.

The explosion of bullets caught William off guard. He should have remembered the ammo and the rifles, but it was too late now. The heat of the fire was causing the bullets to explode. If one hit him, at least his death would be sooner rather than later.

William backed up far enough to be mostly out of danger, yet close enough to stay warm. It was a calculated risk. How long the rain would last was answered before the fire went out. Suddenly, in answer to his prayer, the rain stopped.

IF

There was enough fire left to dry William out. Once he had opened the backpack he spent the next few hours building a lean-to and seeing what he had in his bag for survival. His ordeal was either just beginning, or perhaps about to end. Only the IFS and time would tell.

He had dumped everything out of the bag, not wanting to overlook anything. Two pair of warm socks, thermal underwear, another knife, a plastic container with a dozen matches, a compass, a plastic raincoat, and most important to William, three candy bars and a small bag of cashews. He figured a rescue should come within a week. He would divide the candy into eight days. If it lasted longer than this, it would take a miracle. He liked to eat when he was hungry, and it would be very hard for him not to eat them all on the same day. He would try to ration them, if he could. He wished he could have saved his bigger backpack, which would have had more food and provisions for survival. This one was really only a small day pack, but it would have to do.

When the night came, it was more like a soft haze than a deep, dark void. He was glad it had been the storm that had made the previous night so dark—this night was much better. He looked around to see if he could build a fire, both for warmth and as a signal to anyone looking for him. Everything he found was

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soaked and wet. The trees were only twelve to fourteen feet tall and not very big around. He had hoped that dry twigs or needles could be found under some of them, but there was no such luck—nothing anywhere was dry. The matches would be useless until he found something to burn—if he ever did.

Slipping the raincoat over his jacket for extra warmth, William snuggled into as tight a ball as he could. The lean-to afforded protection from the wind and kept him slightly warmer. He was having trouble getting to sleep. Thoughts of his next steps, kept popping into his mind. He told himself he would worry about it in the morning. The night did not cooperate with him. It had its own agenda and began to torment the uninvited stranger that had come into its world.

The howl William heard was off in the distance. It had sounded much closer than it had an hour or so earlier. Now, the howl turned into howls, and was much closer and getting even closer. The lean-to and his two little knives would not be enough to protect him from the demons that his mind was imagining were coming for him. They had probably smelled the burning flesh of the pilot. That had been the reason William decided not to sleep in the burned out hull of the plane, but now he was second-guessing his choice of residence. Safety seemed more important than who

or what was beside him, and safety won out as the howls got increasingly closer.

It didn't take long for William to grab his minuscule assortment of belongings and crawl into his side of the plane, shutting the dented door behind him. Now he felt safe, yet he was uncomfortable to his very core. In the morning he would see if he could bury the pilot. William didn't even remember the pilot's name. It was an Indian name that he hadn't tried to pronounce in case he had heard it wrong. Now he wished he had known it, for it would have been nice to mention his name in a prayer.

It was a good thing that William moved into the plane when he did. The pack of five wolves showed up a few minutes after William had closed the door. He had grabbed a piece of metal that had been part of the back seat and propped it up against the broken window on the pilot's side. This proved to be a wise decision. The wolves circled for most of the night, and William could make out the glowing eyes in the night's haze. They were growling and snarling as well as continuing to circle. Every now and then, one of the wolves would try to get through a crack—most often by way of the broken window. William thought it was because of the smell, but for whatever reason, the wolves' actions kept William awake all night.

Morning broke clear and sunny. The wolves were

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still there, however, circling the plane. William did not know how long they would stay. A plan started entering his mind. It was good for William to have and work on a plan because it gave him hope, a purpose, and a momentary distraction from his immediate predicament. He looked around the inside of the plane and found two triangular pieces of glass, with sharp points. Using all the strength he could muster, he broke off two long pieces of aluminum conduit from the walls, and using the thin electrical wires within, he wrapped and connected the glass to the end of the conduit. They were very primitive spears, in both looks and function. Making primitive spears out of such advanced materials gave him the first hint of a smile. They were simple, yet he knew they would work better than just a knife. Somehow and for some reason it made him feel better and safer, as he had no doubt that it would help him survive.

For three long days, and seemingly long nights, the wolves remained within sight of the plane. Some would lay watching William's every movement, no matter how slight. Some would continue to circle and look for a way in. Finally, William heard a howl off in the distance. He saw that the wolves heard it as well, for their ears and heads pointed in the direction from which the howl came.

As though a message had been sent to them or a

IF

command had been given, all five wolves sprang up and began running towards the sound. For William, it was a relief to finally see them leave. He wished he knew for how long. Maybe they were after easier prey—he hoped they would stay gone.

It took William most of the day before he had built up enough courage to venture out of the plane's safety. Every step he took for the next few hours would find him looking over his shoulder at the horizon, scanning it for any hint of movement. He was equally aware of any sound, whether it be another howl off in the distance, or the rustling of the tree branches in the wind. So far, all was well. He needed to stretch his legs and work out the kinks in his body. There were not enough little rocks to bury the pilot and it wouldn't be civilized to let the wolves have him, so instead he moved the pilot's body to the back of the plane. Doing so would give William more room in the front. Having to sleep next to the pilot was not pleasant, even though after three nights it had become routine—so had eating only half of a candy bar a day. William was proud of himself for not eating more than he had allowed himself to. Although it was hard in the beginning, now his ability to stick to his plan gave him a sense of pride.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DECISION

DAYS kept going by, one after another—clear, sunny and same-old same-old. Never did William hear a plane, or even see a bright speck in the sky that could have been one. His food was running out. He had been drinking from a small puddle which he had found close to the safety of his burned-out plane. He would need to make a decision soon, as to whether he would stay or go. Either way, it would probably be his last major decision. If the wolves returned and found him outside, he would be easy prey—even with his makeshift spears. He had noticed a little rise in the land off to the east. Maybe if he walked to the top he could see something like smoke, or a village, or even a river which he could follow. It was worth the energy and time it would take him to get to the top of the rise. It was a gamble he could not afford to pass up, for all was nearly lost, anyway.

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William waited until the next morning, hoping his luck would change and that he would be rescued. If not, he was giving himself the whole day to get to his destination. It was hard for him to exit from his plane—what had been his home for the last seven days. He knew the journey would take most of his strength and will to accomplish. No other choice presented itself—it was leave, or die where he was. He left, eating his last half of a candy bar and three cashews for his dessert.

The trip took him longer than he thought it would, as he had to stop often to catch his breath and rest his legs. The rise in the land was, to his surprise, steeper than he thought it would be. It turned out to be a little hill. From the top, it would be easy to see for many, many miles. Now he wished he had climbed it sooner.

When he was at the very top, William squinted his eyes in order to see more clearly, and scanned the vast empty land before him. There was no smoke, no lights, no village, and no sign of civilization anywhere he could see. To top off his disappointment, he spotted a cloud bank coming towards him from the west. It looked the same color as clouds back home looked when they were filled with snow. Snow meant cold and no visibility. So far, the nights had hovered around freezing and the days were 20 to 30 degrees warmer. William could and did survive those

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