



 **RUNNING**  



Don Sawyer

PAUL — ELEVEN YEARS OLD

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey,” Paul’s father called to him from behind the Jeep’s steering wheel. “Whatcha thinking?” His eyes twinkled. “You still like this, or are you getting too old to go up into the mountains with your dad?”

Paul grinned broadly and shook his head. The jeep’s top was down and the smells of the fall forest, pine needles, and moss washed over him.

It was Paul’s favourite time of year. Up this high in the mountains the birch leaves had already turned, and they hung on the branches like a million bright yellow suns. The paintbrush and glacier lilies were gone, killed by the frosts a month before, but the mosses were still green on the old fir logs, and the Oregon grape leaves were bright red.

The heavy rains of the last few days seemed to have freshened up the forest. Odours of mould and rotting leaves hung heavy in the light breeze. There was stillness in the air that was more than the chill of an October morning. It was expectancy. A deep breath before the

long winter ahead.

The old Jeep ground slowly up the logging road. Paul glanced over at his father, intent on the potholes and sharp curves ahead. His father's face was set in concentration, but it couldn't hide the smile lines around his lips or the bright blue eyes that seemed to dance to their own, unheard song. Paul turned back to the road. They had been doing this since he was six: their annual fall hunting trip high up into the mountains above Craven Valley, where they lived. They stayed in a tiny cabin built by a trapper many years ago beside a small lake, really just a tarn. The old cedar shakes on the roof were covered in moss and lichen, and the cabin was beginning to return to the woods around it. If you didn't know it was there, you'd drive right by. His father used to tell him it was the house of a forest gnome, a little man who lent it to them for a few days each fall. Paul almost believed him.

Paul's father geared down, and the wheels spun gravel as they churned up a steep stretch of road. No matter where they were, when he was with his father he felt safe. His father seemed to be able to do anything. Make a fire in the rain or skin a deer in a few minutes. He always had the right part when the jeep broke down far into the forest, and if they hit unexpected snow, he had brought down parkas and soft, smooth sleeping bags that kept them warm

through the long night.

At home he had replaced the old steps with a beautiful spiral staircase he'd made from local cedar, the turned hangers perfectly rounded at the bottoms, each made to fit into the space. And then there was the time Paul had told his fourth grade teacher that the big truck he drove was bad for the environment. The teacher had called him insolent. Paul had told the teacher he was irresponsible, a word he had seen but never used before. He thought it seemed to fit perfectly, but the teacher was furious. In the meeting he called with Paul's parents, his father never raised his voice. The half smile that always seemed to play around his lips never slipped. But Paul noticed that his father's eyes grew harder as the teacher demanded an apology, and he felt his dad's hand on his shoulder.

"There's just one problem," Paul's father had said to the teacher quietly. "You *are* being irresponsible. You have no need to drive a vehicle like that. My son sees a larger world than you do, a world where each of our footprints matter. Where irresponsibility hurts not just us but the entire planet." He paused and looked deeply into the man's angry face. "I believe it is you who owes my son an apology."

The next day Paul was transferred to another class. His father never brought up the issue again — except that night at bedtime.

His father sat on the edge of Paul's bed and stared out the dark window at the shred of moon in the sky. "Paul," he said at last. "There are many ignorant people in this world. And there are many wonderful, caring people. Those are the ones you want to seek out. And together you may be able to change the others." His eyes seemed a little sad as he looked at Paul. "I can see plenty of battles ahead for you, son. But Paul," he smiled. "You can't fight them all and stay sane. Some are more important than others." He winked at Paul. "Pick your battles wisely, OK?"

The jeep had topped the steep hill, and his father geared up. With the top down, the wind blew around Paul's ears, whistling softly. His long blond hair streamed behind him. As the jeep sped up, he bounced wildly in his seat, and he wished he had fastened his seat belt like his dad had told him to. He grabbed onto the metal bar on the dashboard.

The road continued upward for a short distance ahead and then swerved to the left and disappeared behind a ten-foot bluff that had been cut into the hillside when the old logging road was made many years before. Rocks and roots stuck out of the dirt like strange decorations, and the mossy forest floor topped the rock face like green icing on a cake.

The jeep roared around the sharp turn. Paul was never quite sure what happened next. As

if in a dream, he remembered the jeep lunging downward, a dull crunch, himself spinning in the air, and then landing hard on the ground below the road. He didn't think he was ever unconscious, but he couldn't be sure. He had no idea how long it had all taken. Seconds, probably, but it seemed like everything occurred in slow motion, and silently.

The sound he heard first was his father screaming. Paul was lying against the trunk of a large fir tree. His ribs hurt terribly. He wanted to vomit. He couldn't make sense of it all. His father's yells came from above him. He grabbed the rough bark of the tree and pulled himself to his feet. He looked toward the screams.

The jeep was upside down against another tree 20 feet above him. He glanced upward. The road had been washed out in the rain. When they rounded the turn, the jeep had plunged into a deep hole eight feet across. Paul noticed how sharp the edges were, as if the road had been gouged out with a giant shovel. He guessed he had been thrown free when the jeep tumbled into the gap. His father had been strapped in. His father.

Paul scrambled desperately up the steep slope toward the jeep, holding his right side, which was aflame with pain. He smelled gas and dust. The jeep had pitched off the road and rolled 30 feet down the hillside. It had come to rest at an angle against another giant fir. The passenger

door hanging open, was three or four feet up the trunk. The driver's side seemed buried against the hill in dirt and wet fir needles.

"Paul!" his father called. "Paul, are you OK?" The voice was weak, frantic.

Paul painfully clambered up the last few feet of hillside and reached the passenger side wheel. He pulled himself around the front of the jeep toward the driver's side door. His father was upside down, his back bent at an odd angle and his head against the broken seat. The roll bar had kept the jeep from flattening, but the front end had been crushed and the steering wheel was rammed deep into his father's stomach.

"Dad!" Paul yelled as he scrambled around the upturned jeep. "Dad!"

"Thank God," his father moaned. He closed his eyes, either in pain or relief. "Thank God you're alive."

By this time Paul was next to him. The force of the crash had pinned Paul's father inside the jeep. His body seemed to have folded backward at his waist, and he leaned back against the upturned dirt. His face was twisted in agony.

"Dad," Paul cried again. "Are you OK? Can you get out?"

"I don't know," his father gritted out between clenched teeth. "I can't feel my lower body." He squeezed his eyes shut. "My arms don't seem to work."

Paul began to cry. "Dad, you have to get out!"

You have to. Get out, please, Dad,” he sobbed. Paul grabbed hold of the steering wheel and leaned toward his father. “I’m scared, Dad. I’m really scared.”

His father regained his slight smile. “I know you are,” he said faintly. “I am too, son.” Then he went quiet.

Something new grew inside Paul. It was like a black balloon, filling him up with terror and panic. He turned his head and threw up on the ground. He retched and retched, tears streaming down his cheeks, until there was nothing else to vomit.

“Dad,” he screamed. “Don’t die!”

His father’s eyelids flickered open. His lips smiled slightly. “I’m not dead yet, partner,” he said weakly. Paul grabbed his father’s right arm, which hung limply at his father’s side against the seat. He yanked hard until his father screamed in pain.

“Paul, you can’t pull me out,” his father panted. “You can’t.” He paused. “We only have one chance. You have to go for help.”

“No!” Paul cried. “I won’t leave you! I won’t!”

His father smiled faintly. “I’m really sorry about this, partner. I made a really big mistake.” He closed his eyes again, his breath ragged. “I’m in pretty big trouble here, Paul.” His blue eyes opened and looked directly into Paul’s. “But whatever happens, I was at fault. Do you understand that, Paul?”

A lump the size of a tennis ball filled his throat. He shook his head mutely.

“Do you hear me?” his father asked more fiercely.

Paul nodded. His father closed his eyes again. “Good,” he sighed. Then he was quiet.

Paul frantically grabbed his father’s hand and pressed his fingers against the underside of his father’s wrist. “Oh,” he groaned in relief. There was a faint pulse. “Oh, Dad. Don’t die!” he screamed again.

He knelt by his father, still holding his limp right hand. He looked down the logging road. How far were they from the main road? Fifteen, twenty miles? What had the marker said? He couldn’t remember. Could he run that far? With his side burning in pain? Even if he could, it would take him hours. He couldn’t leave his father here alone. He couldn’t!

His father stirred slightly and his eyelids opened again. “Son,” he said softly. “I’m so sorry.” He took a shallow breath. “You go now. Go get help. There is nothing you can do here.” His half-open eyes stared at the sky. “It will be dark soon. You must go.” He glanced at his son crouched next to him. “For me, OK?” And then he was quiet again.

Paul stood and looked up at the road. His face was twisted in anguish. He looked back at his father. The left side of his face was partly buried in wet pine needles and soft, feathery moss.

“Dad,” Paul whispered. “Wake up. Please wake up.”

His father lay quietly at his feet. Paul slowly edged up the hillside toward the road. “Don’t die, Dad,” he called. “Don’t die,” he called through sobs. “I’m going for help. I’ll be back, I promise.”

He reached the edge of the logging road and looked back at this father below him wedged against the damp ground. He started to go back, then stopped. Tears dripped off his chin. “Goodbye, Dad,” he said.

Then he clambered over the edge of the road and began to run.

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