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JOIN FAIRM'S WAY

FARM *to* TABLE
MYSTERIES

Chapter Four



I should have been out on the ice by now,” my father said as we bumped along the interstate on our way Ballden, the small village on the banks of Lake Skegemog, where the ice fishing tournament was about to begin.

My father had fished at the derby every year for the last fifty years, but this was the first time he wouldn't be on the ice as soon as permitted. Fishermen were allowed out as early as three in the morning to set up their fishing shanties and tents. However, lines weren't allowed in the water until six o'clock sharp, which would be about the time Dad and I were set to arrive.

Huckleberry sat in the back of the truck in his puffy orange winter coat and matching boots. He did not like the boots and whimpered when I put them on. All he needed was a pointed orange hat and he could pass for a traffic cone.

As we drove along the road above the lake, we had a bird's eye view of the proceedings below. A hundred yards from Ballden's docks, there was a square mile of plowed ice. That small part of the lake was dotted with shanties and lights. It seemed like there were several hundred on the lake, and each

one represented a fisherman or woman who had claimed a spot to fish the derby that day.

“There’s not going to be any good spots left,” Dad complained.

“That’s not true. Quinn is fishing today and promised to save you a spot near him,” I said as we followed the winding road down into Ballden.

“He had better pick a good one. One year he got all tangled up in boulders on the bottom on the lake. It was embarrassing.”

“I’m sure he remembers that too and is being careful.”

My father grunted and leaned back in his seat. While he grumbled under his breath over his chances of catching any keeper pikes and trout because of this late arrival, I couldn’t get my mind off the party at the brewery the night before. Kristy had been crushed over Kent’s loss, but surprisingly, Kent had actually seemed relieved. This made me think he hadn’t really wanted to leave his teaching position to be a brewmaster. I knew Kristy might be disappointed for a day or two, but maybe everything had worked out just like it should.

The weather was supposed to be frigid but clear, with little wind. It was perfect ice fishing conditions, or so I had been told. I had never participated in the sport myself, even when I was a kid. It was something my father did with his friends, and he wouldn’t take his bookworm child along. I’d always stayed back on the farm with Grandma Bellamy to do chores and read.

Finding a parking spot was a bit trickier than I had expected it to be, but I finally found one close to the dock.

Outside of the truck, as the cold bit into my skin, I wished chores and reading had been my agenda for this Saturday morning too.

Thankfully, I didn't have to stay all day. I was assigned to work the Cherry Glen booth from eight to ten, and Quinn had promised to bring my father home when the first day of the derby ended at three that afternoon.

Huckleberry jumped out of the pickup and landed on his new boots. He shook each leg in turn as if he was trying to flick them off. When the boots didn't budge, he looked up at me with the question in his eyes: "How could you do this to me?"

"It's just for a few hours, Huckleberry," I told him. "You can take the boots off on the way home. You don't want to get frostbite on your paws, do you?"

He snuffled and I took that to mean, "This isn't over."

"Shi!" a high-pitched voice called me as I went to the passenger side of the truck to help my father out.

I turned and spotted Hazel Killian waving frantically. Her long, dark hair was tied in a ponytail and bobbed from the hole in her stocking cap, specifically made for the purpose. She was dressed in teal from the hat to her coat and snow pants to her boots.

I waved back and opened the door for my dad. By the time he was standing on the pavement gripping his walker, Hazel was at our side.

She bounced, her eyes sparkling. "Isn't this so much fun? I've never been to a fishing derby before. I bet I'll catch at least three pike!"

Dad held onto his walker. “I don’t doubt for a second you will, and I’ll make sure of it. I’ll teach you everything I know about ice fishing. Did you know I won the Western Michigan Junior Ice Fishing Derby in 1957?”

“No!” Hazel cried, clearly impressed.

“It’s the truth,” Dad nodded. “You’re speaking to a champion. You couldn’t ask for a better teacher.”

I bit the inside of my lip as I watched Hazel and Dad joking together. It was the kind of relationship that I had wanted with my father growing up, but Dad had been in a different place then. My mother died suddenly, and he was left alone with a young girl he didn’t know how to raise. He threw himself into the farm and learning all he could about Michigan history and left the child rearing to his mother, my Grandma Bellamy. I loved my grandmother dearly. She had been more like a mother to me than a grandmother, but I’d wanted a dad too.

“Do I hear Sully bragging about his angling prowess again?” Quinn asked as he walked up to us.

“It’s not bragging if it’s the truth,” Dad retorted. “Now, I want to get onto the ice and see my spot.”

“I got us a good one,” Quinn said.

“You had better. If my line gets caught up on some boulders, you’ll have to answer to me.”

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?” Quinn asked with a grin.

Hazel grabbed my hand and swung my arm back and forth. “Shi, are you coming out to see our shanty? It’s really cool!”

“Cool” being the operative word there.

I lifted our joined hands and peered at my watch. “I promised Kristy I’d be at the booth by seven, so I have a little time to ride out with you all to see your setup.”

Hazel beamed up at me. “You’ll love it, Shi!”

After unloading Dad’s gear and putting it on a sled to be pulled behind Quinn’s ATV, Quinn helped Dad into the passenger seat of the recreational vehicle, while Hazel, Huckleberry, and I piled in the sled. We tucked Dad’s walker in front of our knees. It was a little tight, but we made it work.

Slowly Quinn drove the ATV and sled out onto the ice. My breath caught as I thought of all the weight we carried and the cold water below. As the sun came up and shone on the ice, I took comfort in the deep blue surface. We were going to be just fine. The clearer and bluer the ice, the thicker and safer it was to be out on.

Quinn and Dad waved and called out to other fishermen as we drove by. The fishing shanties ran the gambit. There were ones that looked like outhouses and others like playhouses, but the majority of them were tents. Thankfully, there was no wind forecast because the tents wouldn’t have stood a chance against the gusts that traveled across the interior lakes in this area.

Quinn and Hazel’s shanty was something in between. It was a sturdy wooden frame, and while one wall was Plexiglas, the rest was tent canvas. Fishing poles and a hand auger for drilling the fishing holes in the ice sat outside of the shanty.

“Be careful on the ice,” Quinn warned as he helped Dad out of the ATV.

I held the walker until my father had a steady grip on it.

"This is a nice setup. Where's my hole?" he asked.

"You can either have the one inside of the shanty, or I have another about ten feet away outside."

"I'll take the outside hole to start. I believe fish can sense the shadow of the shanty and it keeps them away."

"I thought you might say that." Quinn smiled at me over my dad's head and helped him to the outside hole.

There was a lawn chair already set up in front of the hole, and Quinn settled my father into it.

I unhooked the sled from the ATV and pulled it over to my father. "Do you have everything you need, Dad?"

My father squinted into the sunlight. "I do."

"I put an extra an extra winter coat and your favorite cookies in your pack."

"Good, good." He waved my away. "Stop mothering me, Shiloh."

I winced and stepped back.

"The fish will be biting today. I can feel it in my bones," Dad said, completely unaware of how his comment affected me.

"I know you're right," Hazel agreed and then turned to her father. "Can I start the day out here with Sully? He promised to teach me everything he knows. He's the 1957 champion."

"I can't argue with that," Quinn said. "I will leave it to Sully to teach you, Hazel. He's a lot better at this than I am."

Dad looked up at Quinn. "That is the truth." He turned to Hazel. "Now, the first lesson we have to talk about is ice safety. What happens if you fall into the ice?"

She pointed at the twelve-inch hole in the ice. "There is no way that I could fall into that."

"You'd be surprised," my father said. "Conditions on the ice can change quickly, and you need to know what to do."

She nodded solemnly and listened.

"First of all. The bluer the ice, the thicker it is. White ice is fragile."

My heart constricted as I listened to Dad speak to Hazel about the ice. It was something that he said to me when I was about her age. It was one of the few things that he bothered to teach me.

"White ice is fragile," she repeated. "Got it."

"Second. If you were to fall in, there are three things you can do to save your own life, especially if there is no one around to help you. Number one: don't panic. Try to remain calm. Number two: Swim out of the hole."

"What do you mean when you say that?" Hazel tugged on her ponytail.

"You want to get your upper body up over the edge of the ice and kick like you are swimming."

She nodded.

"And number three: if for any reason your head goes under the water, do not lose sight of the hole in the ice. If you go under the ice slab, you're done."

Hazel's eyes were wide.

"Okay," Quinn said. "I think that lesson is done. It's important advice, but don't worry, Hazel, you will never have to use it. 'The ice here is thicker than the whole length of my arm'—he held out his arm to show her, then flexed it

with a wink—“and it won’t go above freezing today. When the ice is melting, that’s when you should just stay away from it all together.”

“Good advice,” my father agreed.

“Looks like you all are all set,” I said, changing the subject. “I’m sure you’re going to have a great day on the ice. I, however, had better head back to the shore and meet up with Kristy. If you need anything just shoot me a text.”

Dad was already in the process of showing Hazel how to bait the line, so I wasn’t sure he’d even heard me.

Quinn followed Huckleberry and me over to the ATV. “Hey, are you okay?”

I gave him a half smile. “I love seeing Dad with Hazel, but...”

“You wished he was like that with you.” He touched my hand.

I pulled my hand away to brush imaginary snow from my sleeve. “Just never take for granted what you and Hazel have. It’s special. Very special. Not every girl gets that kind of close relationship with her father, no matter how much she may want it or try to have it.”

“I don’t take it for granted,” he said. “I don’t take *anything* for granted.”

I squinted at the sun because I knew he wasn’t talking about his daughter any longer. “Will you look out for Dad today? I have to say I’m worried about him sitting out in the cold for so many hours. He’s stubborn, and he wants to win. He doesn’t always listen to reason. At least he doesn’t listen to *my* reason. He might do better if it’s coming from you.”

"I'll make sure he's well cared for. You don't have to worry about a thing."

I smiled. "I am grateful you're an EMT."

He chuckled. "It helps."

"Before I leave, I'll stop by and see if you all need anything."

"Your dad and Hazel would like that." He paused. "And I would too. I love spending time with you."

I swallowed and couldn't think of anything to say in return.

"Do you want me to drive you back?" Quinn asked after a beat.

I shook my head. "I think a walk on this crisp morning will do both Huckleberry and I some good. Right, Huck?"

The pug looked at me and tried to shake off his right front boot.

"He doesn't like those boots," Quinn observed.

"Not even a little bit," I agreed and started to walk away, but my foot slipped on the ice; Quinn's hand shot out to steady me, holding my arm in a comforting grip. "You need to be careful. I can drive you, really. It's no trouble."

I felt my face turn red. My brain swirled over him saying "I love spending time with you." Why would he say that when he made it clear we were just friends and would always be just friends?

"No, no, you stay here with Dad and Hazel," I said. "I'll be fine. I just need to get my ice legs under me."

He grinned. "Ice legs? I've never heard that term before."

"That's because I just made it up." I said goodbye one

more time and started—much more slowly this time—to cross the ice. The outside chill permeated my coat, but the place where Quinn had touched my arm felt like it was on fire.

Maybe twenty yards from the shore, Huckleberry whimpered and started pulling against the leash. He wanted to go to the left.

I tugged on his leash. “Huck, Kristy and the booth are this way.”

He pulled harder.

Thinking that he needed a potty break, I said, “All right. You lead the way.”

The little pug took an abrupt ninety degree turn and walked to the edge of where the ice had been plowed free of snow. I went along, knowing my dog could be finicky about where he went to the bathroom.

However, when he reached the edge of the snow, instead of going potty like I expected, he pawed at the ice and snow. Then he bent his neck and howled into the sky. It was the most haunting sound I’d ever heard from my little dog.

“Huck, what’s wrong?”

He pawed at the ice again and looked at me.

Shaking my head, I walked over to see what he had seen.

I screamed. There was a dead man under the ice.