

Chapter One - Iceland

“The rumbling noise started far off in the distance. Birds chirped and sang nearby. The noise got louder and closer. Sweet bird songs became silent as if the birds knew something no one else suspected yet.”

Sarah turned another page in the book while her brother Mattie leaned over her shoulder.

Eager to know more he asked, “What happens next?”

“I don’t know. This is the first time I’ve read this story,” Sarah replied. She gazed out the window, hoping for a glimpse of the boat they waited for. It hadn’t entered the harbor yet so there was no way to tell when Father would arrive home.

Sarah turned back to the story.

“I think there should have been two brothers in the story. It would have made a better adventure,” Mattie said. “Girls don’t know how to do as many things as boys.”

Sarah shook her head at him. They’d had many discussions on whether girls could be as adventurous as boys. She didn’t feel like getting into it today. It usually ended the same. Sarah thought girls knew many things and could be just as adventurous as boys while Mattie thought there was no chance of that. Eleven-year old brothers could be such a pain.

“It would have been fun to live in the old days,” Mattie commented. “All those wild animals who roamed around, they’re so big. I’d like to see a buffalo like in that picture.”

“Those were in North America though, and we’re in Iceland,” Sarah said. “I don’t know how we’d get all the way across the ocean. One day, maybe,” she added as she saw the disappointed look on her brother’s face.

Mattie brightened at her comment. “Perhaps Father could take us there on his boat.”

“Perhaps,” Sarah agreed although she thought there wasn’t much chance of that. Father didn’t travel all the way across the ocean. His fishing boat was equipped with nets for trawling but it wasn’t that big. North America was far away and they would have to go on a larger boat.

“It’s your turn to read a few pages,” Sarah said.

“Too late,” Mattie cried out, “maybe later, Father’s coming. There it is the Northerner. It just rounded the corner.”

Mattie jumped up and ran to the window. Sarah marked the page then joined her brother.

Sarah knew it was useless to continue reading once Mattie spied the boat. Mattie’s teacher insisted Mattie do lots of reading and homework assignments over the summer months to catch up to his classmates. Mattie had trouble concentrating and often mixed up facts he read, so he struggled in school. Sarah read with Mattie every day. She would read a few pages, then it would be his turn to read. Sarah had noticed a great improvement over the last few months and hoped his progress would be enough for Mattie to stay in the same grade as his classmates.

“Let’s go down and watch them unload,” Mattie said. He loved to wander around and get in everyone’s way as they unloaded fish from the boat.

Sarah shook her head at him and smiled. Of course they'd go down to the dock; they usually did. Sarah wished, not for the first time, that Mattie could be half as keen in school as he was about the outdoors. If he showed even a bit of interest in facts his teacher spoke of compared to the hours he spent learning about boats, fishing, rocks, the water and nature, then Sarah was sure he could be a good student.

"Go find Mother and ask her if we can go," Sarah urged Mattie as she peered out the window.

"Yes!" Mattie shouted as he jumped up and ran from the room. He almost knocked over their *Afi* who'd just entered from the kitchen.

"Hey, where's the fire, little man?" *Afi* teased as Mattie raced past him.

"I've got to ask Mother if we can go to the dock," Mattie called over his shoulder. "Do you want to come with us *Afi*?" Mattie yelled to his grandfather as he ran past.

"Sure, sounds like fun," *Afi* replied.

Afi joined Sarah at the window then pulled out his pocket watch. "Stuck again," he announced as he jiggled the watch. He sat down in one of the window chairs to fiddle with it.

Sarah smiled as she watched him. *Afi* liked to play with his watch. It had been handed down to him by his grandfather and didn't work often. When it did tell time proudly displayed it for all to see.

Mattie raced back and shouted, "Mother said we can go, especially if *Afi* is with us. She said take our jackets."

Mattie grabbed his jacket and hat than ran out the door. "Come on *Afi*, let's go. Quickly," he urged.

“Coming,” *Afi* called as he stood up.

Sarah and *Afi* walked out the door. They hurried to catch up to Mattie.

Mattie bounded to and fro, like a little puppy dog just let off his leash.

“I hope Svein is there. Do you think he’ll let me check the nets again like last time? They have to be repaired a lot,” Mattie said.

“I don’t know. Maybe. You’ll have to ask him.”

“Can we walk along the shoreline today *Afi* instead of the road? We can look for buried treasure, shells and skipping stones,” Mattie said as he pranced about.

“Of course *elskan*, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“Great. You’re the coolest *Afi* ever. All the kids at school say so.”

“Why thank you Mattie. How thoughtful of you to say.”

Afi had a big grin on his face.

Sarah thought it made him look handsome. She smiled at Mattie. His good humor often made others feel special. She could forgive Mattie some of his annoying traits when he did something endearing like compliment their grandfather for no reason.

The moment had already passed for Mattie. He pounced on a smooth, flat rock like it was a rare bit of treasure. “A skipping stone. It’s perfect,” he cried as he grabbed it then lined up his body for the ideal throw. “Watch this,” he yelled. “Don’t forget to count. I need to beat my record.”

Mattie’s record was seven skips in a row.

“One, two, three, four, five, aw, too bad,” Sarah and *Afi* chorused as Mattie’s rock skipped over the water.

“That’s OK, I’ll find more,” Mattie yelled as he ran ahead.

“Can people only skip stones on the ocean, *Afi*?” Sarah asked as they walked along the shore. She bent over to examine a shell.

“Oh, any type of water will do Sarah. I heard even small lakes like those across the ocean in North America have skipping stones.”

Sarah gazed out at the water. “Wow, it must be far away.”

“Yes,” *Afi* said by her side, “it must be.”

“We’re just a little speck in this world aren’t we, *Afi*?”

“Well, I guess you could call us that, but we’re an important speck Sarah. Every one of us has the potential to do great things.”

“Like that ancestor of yours, *Afi*? He was the one who went to North America to help start that colony in Gimli. He didn’t know how important he was, did he? I read about him in a history book and he was in an online article.”

“Yes, *elskan* I’m sure *Gummi* never imagined he would be in a history book one day. Back then people didn’t use computers either. He would have been surprised to see his name mentioned with the click of a mouse.”

“Wouldn’t you like to go there one day, *Afi*? To see Gimli, to walk where your grandfather walked and see that little lake they have there? It might even have skipping stones,” she teased.

“Oh, I imagine it does, Sarah. It’s quite a large lake I believe. There must be skipping stones there. To answer your question, yes, one day I would like to go to Gimli. Perhaps you and Mattie would like to come with me.”

“Oh *Afi*, we’d love to,” Sarah said as she clapped her hands. “It would be such an adventure.”

“Quick, quick come here!” Mattie yelled, breaking into their conversation. “I found something neat.”

Sarah and *Afi* exchanged a smile as they hurried to join Mattie. He often found something neat or ‘*the best ever.*’

“It’s a cave, I betcha,” Mattie said as they got closer. “It’s right there, on the side of the cliff. Wow, I’ve never seen a cave there before have you? Can we go check it out *Afi*? Huh, can we, please, please?”

Sarah shook her head at Mattie. He liked to beg for things.

Afi pulled out his pocket watch then began to shake it. “Well, let’s see what time it is. We should have time before anyone expects us at the boat.”

Sarah smiled. Their father didn’t know when they’d arrive. They usually came to meet him but sometimes it was before they began to unload the fish and sometimes after. The watch didn’t tell accurate time so it wasn’t as if it was of any use. *Afi* liked to think it worked.

Her grin grew wider. *Afi* liked to pretend the watch worked just like her and Mattie made up imaginary stories. Maybe adults and older people played make believe just like kids. That was awesome if she could play pretend forever. After all she was only fourteen. She had plenty of time left in her life.

They moved towards the cave while Mattie leaned his head inside. “It looks like we’ll have to crawl in one at a time,” he announced, “it’s sort of narrow.”

“All right Mattie, do you want to go first or shall I?” *Afi* asked.

Sarah liked that about *Afi*. He always knew when to ask and not to boss.

“Hmm, maybe I better go first, then you second and Sarah last.”

Mattie motioned for *Afi* to bend over. “She’s a girl so she might get scared. Watch her,” he stage-whispered.

“I heard that,” Sarah said. She wanted to smile but pretended to be annoyed.

Mattie was such a pain.

Mattie laughed and went down on all fours. He began to wiggle his way into the cave.

Afi followed, then Sarah.

They squirmed and jiggled their way inside the tiny space. It curved up then down before it got even with the ground again. At least it seemed that way. Sarah had the sensation of pitching up and down but after a while it stopped. She was glad *Afi* was with them. Otherwise she would have been scared even though she wouldn’t have admitted it to Mattie.

After a few minutes the cave widened a considerable amount. The tunnel they wiggled through got big enough for them to stand in.

“We’re here,” Mattie announced as Sarah stood to join the others.

It was dark so they couldn’t see anything. Sarah reached her hand out to touch one of them. She felt more secure with her skin against another person. She felt fortunate when she found *Afi*. He didn’t squawk like Mattie would have.

“*Afi*, do you have any matches or a lighter? A flashlight would be great,” Mattie said. He had an eager note in his voice.

“Hmm, let me check in my pockets.”

Sarah could feel him beside her, rummaging around. *Afi* was famous for keeping strange things in his pockets. Sarah knew Mattie was related to him since they both liked to collect things.

“Wait, it looks like I have a lighter in here. I wonder why?” he mused as he began to flick the lighter. *Afi*’s lighters were just like his watch. They didn’t always work.

The next instant, they had light.

Sarah, Mattie and *Afi* turned to gaze around the cave. It was small, not much of a cave. On the positive side there were no animals in it to attack them. Sarah hoped to see some sort of treasure or something. Over in the corner there was a pile of grass but that was it.

Mattie was equally disappointed. “That’s it! Wow, what a rip-off.”

“Hmm, yes, well. Sarah, can you hold this for a moment while I shine my lighter into the corners?” *Afi* asked as he handed her his prized pocket watch.

Sarah took the beloved watch then glanced down at it as *Afi* moved to the corners to check out the cave. Her eyes widened as she watched the hands of the clock move backward fast.

“*Afi*,” she began just as Mattie exclaimed about something he thought he spied in the corner. It turned out to be nothing though.

“Guess we may as well leave,” Mattie griped.

“Wait, look at the watch,” Sarah said as she held the pocket watch out for the others to see. “The hands are moving backwards really fast.”

“Hmm, I’ve never seen it do that before.”

“Let me see,” Mattie said as he grabbed the watch out of Sarah’s hand.

“Wait, be careful,” Sarah urged as the watch flew out of her hand then into the air. They watched it spin, end over end.

Mattie moved to grab it at the same time as *Afi* and Sarah. They let out an “Ooof,” as they collided.

“Don’t worry, I have it,” *Afi* cried as the lighter went out. Darkness descended around them.

“Do you have it *Afi*?” Mattie and Sarah cried at the same time.

“Yes, don’t worry, it’s all right. Now where is that lighter?” *Afi* said. His voice sounded far away.

Sarah began to spin. It was so sudden. Faster, faster she went around the cave like a spinning top out of control. She held her arms out so she wouldn’t bump into anything.

“What’s happening?” she cried.

“I don’t know,” she heard *Afi* say.

Sarah’s ears filled with sounds. It made her eardrums hurt. She wondered if they might burst from the sudden pressure. Loud crashing noises sounded like waves during a storm. Little bumps and groans bounced around the walls as if ping pong balls had been tossed on the ground.

Sarah knew how a leaf must feel caught up in a windstorm. Her feet lifted off the ground as she tilted forward, sideways, backwards. She couldn’t figure out which way was up. When she bounced against Mattie she clung to him. Mattie flung his arms around her in a bear hug. They hung on tight.

Sarah found it hard to breath. She pushed Mattie away when she realized the noise in her ears was gone. It was quiet now, like everything on earth had stopped.

“*Afi*,” Sarah called out.

“I’m here. Are you both all right?”

“I’m good,” Mattie said at the same time as Sarah.

“What...what happened *Afi*?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know. Wait. Let me find my lighter. I think I dropped it right around here.”

Sarah imagined him bent over on the ground, feeling with his hands for the lighter. It was their gateway to illumination. She held her breath. Beside her, Mattie gripped her hand. It was rare for Mattie to do anything like that so Sarah squeezed his hand for reassurance.

“I found it,” *Afi* finally announced.

Sarah and Mattie released their breath together then gave a nervous little laugh. It felt odd to do something at the same time. They were opposite in most ways. When they realized they still held hands they dropped them quick, eager not to be caught holding hands. Sarah didn’t want to look like a worried little kid when *Afi* flicked on his lighter.

The light was heaven sent....

“What a relief. That was so weird,” Sarah said at the same time as Mattie said, “Weirdness, I’m glad that’s over with. Wow, let’s get out of here.”

Mattie bounded over to the cave’s entrance then began to head back out the way they’d come.

Afi smiled at Sarah then said, “After you, my dear.”

Sarah was grateful. She didn’t want to be last this time.

Chapter Two – A Strange Place

Sarah heard Mattie griping when he got out of the cave. She couldn't make out the words but he sounded confused or mad or something. She scrambled the last few feet then brushed off her jeans as she stood.

“This isn't it. It's changed. I don't understand. How could we get lost? We went in the cave then straight out. There shouldn't be another entrance,” Mattie grumbled.

“This isn't where we came in.”

Mattie was bent over poking the cave entrance with a stick.

“What are you talking about?” Sarah began. But as she scanned the area she knew what Mattie meant.

Everything had changed. It wasn't just the landscape. It was the colours. The trees were a type Sarah hadn't seen before and they were very high. The water was dark and it wasn't the blue she was used to seeing. It looked shallow from here. If they ran in Sarah was sure it wouldn't go past their ankles at the shoreline.

There was a different smell in the air as well. It was typical to get a whiff of salt and fish this close to the ocean. The breeze was usually cooler than this. Here, a gentle breeze stirred the trees. The air smelled fresh and clean, not sharp or tangy. There were seagulls nearby and Sarah heard birdsong in the distance. It didn't sound like the same birds she'd heard just minutes earlier.

The strangest part though, were the colours.....

The water was dark, subdued and washed out like a painter had run out of brilliant hues then substituted darker ones. The colours had been laced with great quantities of liquid to tone them down. In stark contrast were the trees. There were scads of them and

they were so many different shades of green. Iceland was replanting trees but they were small and didn't line the water like these ones did. These were old, established trees, not newly planted ones.

One thing was certain.....this was not Iceland.

Where were they?

Sarah had read how other countries had different colours. Iceland had vivid, striking shades whereas some places had landscapes that looked boring in coloured books. This place looked like that, except for the trees.

Just as Sarah had these thoughts the colours shifted. Brilliant sunshine made her shade her eyes from the sun. She wished she'd brought her sunglasses or a hat. As Sarah gazed up she saw the sun had just appeared from behind a cloud. Now everything was bright and the colours were stunning. She wouldn't call the landscape boring now.

"*Afi*, where are we?" Mattie asked as his grandfather emerged from the cave.

Eager to know as well, Sarah turned to her grandfather. She wanted to echo Mattie's words yet restrained herself.

With a puzzled frown, *Afi* looked around then shrugged his shoulders. Sarah watched his eyes scan the same landscape she had moments before. When he turned back to the cave for a second, Sarah thought he was about to dive back in. Instead, *Afi* walked over to a large rock that lay nearby, picked it up then put it right in front of the cave like a marker. He pulled out his favorite handkerchief, folded it smaller then placed it beneath the rock.

"Why did you do that, *Afi*?" Mattie asked.

“I want us to be able to find this spot again,” *Afi* replied. “I don’t know where we are but something happened in this cave. We might have to find it again after we figure out where we are.”

Sarah nodded. That made sense.

“Let’s walk this way,” *Afi* said as he pointed in the direction he thought they should go.

“Father’s boat is that way,” Mattie said as he threw his arm out toward the opposite direction.

Three pairs of eyes looked that way.

There was no boat in sight....

Mattie looked like he was about to cry. “Where’s Father’s boat? Why does everything look so weird? What happened?” he whimpered.

Afi gathered Mattie into his arms. “I don’t know, *elskan*, I don’t know,” he murmured.

Sarah moved closer to their tight circle. *Afi* leaned to include her in his embrace. It felt reassuring to be there. Perhaps when they broke apart everything would be back to normal.

Sarah closed her eyes. Silent, she willed the world to right itself. To switch from topsy-turvy to the common, everyday sights she was accustomed to.

“I’m getting squished,” Mattie yelled, as he broke free of their hug.

With reluctance Sarah opened her eyes.

Nope. Nothing had changed....

Beside her, *Afi* sighed. It was apparent he'd hoped for the same thing she had.

"We should walk," *Afi* said as Mattie ran to the water.

"The water is so dark, how do the fish see anything?"

"I don't know. Yes, it is a murky color," *Afi* agreed as he joined Mattie to peer at the water.

"Can I touch it, see if it's real?"

"Good idea," *Afi* said. "Yes, touch it."

Mattie began to lean over but backed up instead. He sat down in the sand to take off his shoes and socks. He piled them up beside him, jumped up and began to run toward the water.

Sarah expected him to hit an invisible wall, to be hurled back toward them than dumped without ceremony at their feet.

It didn't happen though.

Instead, Mattie slowed from a run to a walk. With caution, he began to navigate the water, yelled, "Ouch, ouch, stones, stones, tons of them," than walked quite a distance out. When his knees were submerged they heard him give a startled yelp before Mattie bee-lined back toward them. As he neared the shoreline again he slowed his pace to carefully walk through the last part.

"I think a fish touched me," he grumbled. "It didn't scare me, just startled me."

Mattie glared at Sarah as if challenging her to disagree with him.

Mattie gathered up his shoes and socks and plunked down to put them on. "There are tons of rocks too. I think they scraped me," he said as he inspected the bottom of his foot. "Nope, fine. It's hot here, too hot for a jacket," he said as he threw his jacket off.

Sarah took her jacket off as well. Mattie was right. It was hot here.

“Is the water cold?” *Afi* asked.

“No, it’s fine. Why wasn’t it cold, *Afi*? I bet I could swim in it if I wanted to.”

“Since it’s shallow here the sun likely warms it. There’s an onshore breeze today so that would make the water warmer as well.”

Mattie stood up, eager for further adventure. “Let’s go,” he announced as he began to walk. “These rocks on the beach are huge.”

Mattie walked from one to another for a few minutes, jumping when they were spread out further. “What kinds of rocks are these, *Afi*?”

“I’d say they’re granite and limestone if I had to guess. You’re right. They are large.”

“How come there are so many of them?”

“I don’t know Mattie. Maybe we can find someone to ask.”

Mattie nodded. “What direction are we walking, *Afi*?”

“The sun is to our right and it seems to be early afternoon so that would be west. So the water is on the east. What direction do you think we’re going?”

“*Afi*, I’m not some stupid little kid. It’s obvious we’re going south.”

Afi smiled, “That’s right Mattie. We’re headed south.”

“As long as we’re not like birds and have to head hundreds of miles to get to our destination,” Mattie grumbled.

Sarah and *Afi* laughed. Sometimes little brothers said the funniest things. Even if they didn’t think they were little.

Chapter Three – Civilization or Wilderness?

Mattie bounded about like an eager puppy dog. “I found tons of skipping stones,” he yelled as he gathered one up. “Don’t forget to count.”

Sarah and *Afi* watched as the first stone skipped. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight,” they chorused.

“I did it, I did it,” Mattie shouted as he jumped up and down. “I beat my record. This place is lucky. I’ve been practicing forever and I couldn’t get past seven. Yes!” he yelled as he punched the air. “More, more, I gotta get more.”

Sarah and *Afi* smiled at one another. Mattie’s forever was about a month. Last year he hadn’t gotten past five skips though. So when he’d hit the magic seven just a few days ago, Sarah had been pleased to share his victory. Eight skips did seem like a good sign. Maybe Mattie was right and wherever they’d landed up was a lucky place. Sarah hoped so.

“*Afi*,” Sarah said, “can I look at your watch again, please?” She had just remembered how the watch had been going backwards in the cave and was interested to see what direction it was going now.

“Of course, *elskan*.”

Afi passed Sarah the watch.

“*Afi*, come watch me throw another stone in the water.”

“Go ahead,” Sarah urged as she took the watch.

“Only six,” Sarah heard as she shielded her eyes to get a better look at what she’d seen...

As Sarah peered at the watch she was surprised to see the hands of the clock still moved backwards. The watch must be broken again. Sarah jiggled it. Out of the blue she heard strange noises behind her.

“Screech, screech, chitter, chitter, chirp, click, chit, cheep.”

Sarah turned around. Her eyes bugged out. She took a step backwards then put her hands up in a protective manner. She held onto the watch tight.

Sarah had never seen anything like it. She wanted to call out to Mattie and *Afi* but her vocal cords were paralyzed. When she opened her mouth to scream nothing came out.

The large creature in front of her was at least three times taller than Sarah. It had huge eyes, high up on its head, spread wide apart. Sarah felt the eyes stare right through her; they were enormous and didn't blink.

Sarah held her breath and stared back at the creature. She thought it might be some sort of rodent since it was covered in fur and had a long, swishy tail. She watched the tail flick as the creature continued to make strange noises.

Her gaze wandered to the gigantic claws thrust towards her. They were sharp and Sarah was sure they could cause extensive damage to her face. She backed up again and covered her face with one hand, peeking out at the beast.

Sarah noticed the creature held something in its claws. She peered closer hoping it wasn't something alive. With some relief, she recognized the object was a nut.

Since the animal or rodent or whatever it was hadn't attacked her Sarah decided flight was in order. She turned and broke into a run.

As she found her voice Sarah screamed at the top of her lungs. “Run!” she commanded.

Mattie and Afi had just rounded a corner. She barreled past them, feet pounding, arms pumping.

“What’s wrong?” *Afi* shouted.

“Don’t ask, just run,” Sarah yelled over her shoulder.

They ran.

When Sarah was out of breath, she screeched to a halt. Bent over, with hands on her knees Sarah struggled to get her breath back. Her heart felt like it wanted to jump out of her chest. She risked a quick look over her shoulder. The creature was nowhere in sight.

As her heart rate returned to normal, Sarah glanced up at Mattie and *Afi*. Their faces showed the concern they hadn’t voiced aloud.

With shaking hands, Sarah passed the watch to *Afi* then rubbed her face with her hands. “Yuck,” she said as she wiped sweat from her face onto her clothes.

Mattie smirked.

Sarah knew it was because he always did that and she scolded him for it. She didn’t care though. What did dirty clothes matter now?

“I just saw,” Sarah shook her head.

“What?” Mattie urged.

“This, I don’t know, this creature or animal. It looked like a gigantic rodent or something with huge eyes and these sharp claws. It made these strange, loud noises. Didn’t you hear it?”

“No. You must be exaggerating,” Mattie scoffed. “We didn’t see or hear anything did we, *Afi*?”