

Stranded In The Wild

by [Gary Rodriguez](#)

Chapter One

Saturday, 8:14 p.m.

Good evening, this is Channel 7 Breaking News, and I'm Valerie Parker. Four teenagers are missing tonight from an adventure camp in Northern Idaho. Early reports say the teens and their river guide were in a rafting accident sometime this afternoon. The names of those involved are being withheld pending notification of their parents. According to local authorities, rescue teams are already searching the river area. Up until now, this camp had earned the title "The safest adventure camp in Idaho." Tragically, after today, all that is changed. Stay tuned to Channel 7 for more details as they develop.

Earlier that afternoon . . .

"Alright, listen up! The last set of rapids is about a quarter of a mile ahead. Don't be frightened by the uproar. As we get close, it'll sound like a tornado. So you'll have to listen carefully for my commands over the roar of the river," Doug warned.

As soon as he finished speaking everyone heard the clamor of doom, though it was still a quarter mile away. Just as their river guide had predicted, the noise of the upcoming torrent was daunting. The closer they got, the thunderous pounding intensified. The tornado analogy Doug had used to describe the sound of the Class III rapids could not have been more accurate.

"Here we go! Paddle forward! Keep us straight!" the guide commanded loudly.

The river turned hard to the right, and then they saw the nightmare ahead. The level of turbulence was like nothing they had seen thus far. The water appeared entirely white and rushed forward at a furious pace, breaking over and against large rocks on both sides. The only safe way through was a narrow slot between a set of boulders, which they needed to navigate just right.

“Watch for rocks!” Doug cautioned with a shout. “And hold on!”

The terrified teens and their skilled guide flew into the tight gap between the boulders. Suddenly, the craft was encircled by high white water. They shot through the first surge and then saw the river bend slightly right again to reveal a new set of obstacles.

“Paddle left!” Doug yelled over the roar. “Hard left!” he shouted again.

“Rock!” Savi screamed.

Water drenched them from all directions. And just for a moment, Conner removed his right hand from his paddle to wipe off his glasses.

“Rocks left!” Savi shouted.

Suddenly, the bottom of Conner’s paddle struck a rock and flew into the air. The paddle spun and hit their guide, Doug, in the face with such force that it knocked him unconscious. He fell bleeding on the back of the raft.

“Doug’s down!” Rico shouted. “Doug’s down!”

“Rocks right!” Jade yelled.

“Paddle right! Hard right!” Rico shouted.

The raft careened out of control down the river. With Savi on the left side and being the only paddler, Conner did his best to hang on to Doug.

“Rock left!” Jade screamed.

Now sideways, the raft hurled itself into a rock so hard that Conner lost his grip on Doug, and their guide flew out of the raft and into the raging river.

“Doug’s in the water!” Conner yelled frantically. “Oh my God! Our guide is gone.”

Thursday, two days earlier . . .

It was a warm August afternoon, and Camp Arrowhead buzzed with activity. Since midmorning, new teenage thrill seekers had been streaming into the adventure camp.

Savannah Evans, who had arrived earlier in the day, was on her way to the message board to check out the day’s schedule when she noticed another car pulling into the drop-off zone.

Curious, she stood at a distance and waited to catch a glimpse of the new camper. But before she saw the passenger, a commotion erupted in the vehicle.

An agitated woman, who Savannah assumed was the girl's mother, began yelling inside of the car. "Come on, Jade! Get out—we've got a plane to catch!"

Savannah watched in shock as a tall, slim girl with a pained look on her face scurried out of the back seat. A backpack and two suitcases tumbled out after her, while a purse slowly wound itself around her arm. There were no hugs or attempts at a goodbye, only a slamming door and the vehicle peeling off with a shower of gravel. The girl left standing in the dust cloud fell to the ground next to her luggage, sobbing.

Stunned, Savi waited to see if anyone would come to the girl's rescue—but everyone else stood frozen in place gaping, just like her. Knowing how embarrassed the girl must feel, Savi hurried over to her and bent down on one knee.

"How about I help you with some of this stuff? It looks like a lot for one person to carry."

Startled, the girl tried to shake her off. "What do you want? Just leave me alone—I don't need any help!"

Savi hesitated for a second, then leaned forward and spoke calmly, "I don't want anything. I just thought you could use a hand."

"I told you, I've got this. Leave me alone."

Savi held her ground and leaned even closer. "I'm Savannah, but my friends call me Savi."

She waited while the girl collected herself, slowly lifting her tear-stained face to see who was speaking to her so kindly. As Savi looked into the girl's face for the first time, she inhaled sharply.

What a beautiful face.

"What? I look stupid, right?" the girl snapped. "I already know that. Now leave me alone!"

Savi hesitated then shook her head and frowned.

“No, I don’t think you look stupid. I wasn’t thinking that at all.”

In her sixteen years of living in Oxford, Mississippi, she’d never seen a girl as striking as this one. Despite the tear tracks on her cheeks and a pair of puffy eyes, she still looked like a model from the pages of a magazine. Her milky complexion contrasted by her long shiny black hair and dark brown eyes could make any girl envious. She appeared flawless. As close to perfect as a girl her age could look.

Slowly, the girl started to realize that Savi was trying to be friendly and helpful.

“I feel like an idiot.”

“Who wouldn’t feel lousy? Come on, let me help you.”

“Savi, I’m really sorry I snapped at you. My name’s Jade. Do you mind if I call you Savi?”

Savi smiled. “Sure, I’d like that.”

“I’m so mad at my mom for doing that to me.”

“Well—you won’t have to deal with her for a while. Come on. Let’s see what cabin you’re in. Maybe we’re in the same one.”

Jade stood up and with Savi’s help gathered up her belongings and headed for the camp office. Savi looked down at Jade’s Coach purse, Tumi suitcases, and North Face backpack.

All this great stuff but she seems so unhappy.

Savi glanced at Jade and saw tears in her eyes and a look of sadness written across her face. Carrying Jade’s suitcase, Savi reached out and patted her shoulder, as if to say, it’ll be okay. Jade appreciated the gesture and flashed a friendly grin. Savi smiled back and hoped she had found a new friend at camp.

“I notice you’re limping, Savi. Did you hurt your ankle?”

“I injured it a few years ago.”

“Sorry—I didn’t mean to . . .”

“That’s okay. It’s no big deal.”

“I’m way too nosy,” Jade apologized.

“No worries. It’s not like you asked me how much I weigh.”

Savi laughed and nudged Jade with her elbow. Both girls smiled and continued walking toward the camp office.

“How about I tell you about my ankle later?”

Jade nodded in agreement.

Upon reaching the office, they found the cabin assignments posted outside the main door. Jade seemed more relaxed now that she had time to recover from her rough landing at Camp Arrowhead.

“Jade, we’re over here! Those are the boys’ cabins, not the girls’. But I’m sure they’d be thrilled to see you.”

Jade blushed and flipped back her hair. Then she made her way over to where Savi stood in front of the girls’ cabin assignments.

Savi ran her finger down the list of names, “What’s your last name?”

“Chang,” Jade answered.

“Here you are. Oh, that sucks! We’re in different cabins. Let’s go inside and see if they’ll put us together.”

Jade smiled broadly at Savi’s boldness.

“Why not? Let’s give it a try.”

The girls did their best to persuade the camp director to put them in the same cabin. Unfortunately, he wouldn’t budge. But he told them he’d keep in mind their desire to be together when planning future events. After leaving the office, they dropped off Jade’s gear at her cabin and picked up a cold drink. Outside the snack shack, they found a shady spot to sit on a carved log bench.

“Well, I promised I’d tell you about my ankle. Now is as good a time as any.”

“You know you don’t have to,” Jade assured her.

“I know, but I don’t mind.”

“I won’t lie, I’d like to hear.”

“So here goes. I was eight when the U.S. National Gymnastics Team came to Mississippi to put on an exhibition at Ole Miss.”

“Ole Miss?”

“Oh sorry, that’s short for the University of Mississippi. It’s in Oxford. That’s where I live. Anyhow, my dad took me to see the competition, and it changed my life.”

“How?”

“We watched the different gymnastic routines, and they inspired me. I fell in love with the sport right away, especially the balance beam. The girls were so graceful and powerful. Right away I started dreaming of becoming a world-class gymnast. For the next three years, I trained on the beam and competed in a bunch of events. I really believed I was going to make the U.S. National Team.” Savi got quiet and looked at Jade.

“I’m not boring you, am I?”

“No way! I’m into it. Go on.”

“Okay, but tell me if I’m boring you or talking too much.”

“You’re not at all. Tell me what happened.”

“Well, in just three years, I was ranked fourth in the nation in my age group. My family and friends were so excited for me. But only the top three girls qualified for nationals. The final cuts were in Nashville. I ended up tied for second place with this girl named Julie. With only one routine to go, I was freaking out! My only hope of beating her and getting into nationals was to do a perfect routine and stick my landing. I was killing it until my final element, an aerial summersault. It had always been the most difficult part of my routine. I had trained for this one moment for three years, and I knew I could pull it off. The summersault was flawless, but unfortunately as I landed on the beam . . .” Savi paused and looked at her ankle. “My left foot hit the beam wrong, and my ankle snapped like a dry branch.”

“Oh Savi, that’s awful! I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too. Because that ended my career in gymnastics and my dream of going to the Olympics.”

“They couldn’t fix it?”

“No, they tried, but it never healed quite right. I’ve learned to live with it. Now I get around just fine.”

“Wow, what a story!”

“Well, now you know a lot about me, but I know nothing about you. Next time, it’s your turn. Okay?”

“For sure.”

They sat quietly for a few moments and finished their drinks. Then they stood up to go.

“I can’t believe how tall you are. You must be at least five seven.”

“Actually, I’m five eight.”

“I knew you were up there, but five eight! I wish . . . I’ve always been on the short side. I’m only five two. But you know what they say: Good things come in small packages.”

Jade smiled and nodded in agreement.

“I need to go to my cabin and unpack, Savi. It won’t take me long. I’ll be back in a while.”

“I should do that, too.”

Savi glanced back at Jade and hollered over her shoulder, “I’ll look for you later!”

“Okay, later!”

On the way back to her cabin, Savi passed three boys leaning against a big tree and joking around. She caught their attention as she walked toward them. One of the boys noticed her limp and nudged the others.

“Look at her. I didn’t know this camp had special needs kids!” he said with a raised voice hoping she would hear him. “They better not pair me up with gimpy girl in some activity.”

Savi heard the insult but kept walking as if she hadn’t. Then she overheard one of the other kids say, “Good one, Conner!”

By the time Savi got back to her cabin, she was seething and red-faced. She gazed at herself in the mirror hanging on the wall by the bed. Medium length auburn hair framed her lightly freckled face and a turned up nose. But it was her hazel eyes that exposed the hurt and anger she felt.

Still furious over the incident, she turned away from the mirror to consider what to do next. She sat on the edge of her bed and stared out the window at Conner. For the next few minutes, she watched as unsuspecting passersby suffered similar abuse from the taunting trio. Conner and his friends seemed all too satisfied to entertain themselves at the expense of others.

“I’m not letting that coward get away with that!”

Abruptly, she stood and headed outside onto the front porch. The mean boys were still joking around by the same tree. Savi yelled as loudly as she could in their direction, “Hey, Conner! You’re nothing but a bully. Your mom’s on the phone and says you forgot to pack your blankie and your stuffed animals!”

Instantly, a roar of laughter erupted from those within earshot. Conner glared in shock at Savi. Now it was his turn to feel the sting of humiliation. He slinked away to his cabin and wasn’t seen again until after the dinner bell.

Savi felt good about putting Conner in his place. But finding the taste of revenge so sweet made her feel kind of ashamed.

Just then Jade shouted from across the campground, “Savi, come check this out! We’re in the same raft tomorrow!”

Savi quickly joined Jade at the message board for an enthusiastic high five.

“And guess what? We’ve got boys in our raft,” Jade said eagerly. “Two of them.”

“Two?”

“Yeah, one’s named Rico Cruz, and the other is some guy named Conner Swift.”

“What?” Savi shouted. “Conner Swift? I just met that jerk! I’m not getting on a raft with him. No way!”

“Oh, yes you are, young lady!” Camp Director Anderson said behind her. “All raft assignments are final. There will be no changes!” the director repeated as he walked away.

Savi stood furious, staring blankly at the message board.

What could be worse than being on a raft with Conner Swift? Savi was about to find out.