

The First Chapters Writing Contest

Wrath by Kristi Stalder
(Winning Entry from 2018)



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Resentment and anger are dangerous traits and leads to failure, and a strong mindset with an adventurous heart will lead to a bounty of treasures in life.

Chapter One

Entering the shop was forbidden for anyone except Grandpa Rhett. He built it when he and Gram married and moved to Winthrop fifty years ago and spent most of his time inside those four steel walls. It was tucked just up the hill behind the barn, where it stood underneath towering pine trees, covered in green moss and pine needles. I'd never seen the inside of that shop and was shocked when Gram handed me the key after Grandpa Rhett's memorial service, telling me to see if there was anything I liked in there.

I stood outside the shop door and waited. For what? I'm not sure. Gram didn't have the courage to come along and see what her husband had been up to before he disappeared on his last expedition and went back to bed, sick with grief. Originally, I had no intention of going inside the shop that night, but while I tossed hay to the cattle and finished up my chores like any other day it beckoned to me, as if an invisible thread had secured itself to my mind and slowly reeled my thoughts and finally my body over to the locked door.

The shop was set back a little way into the woods, which ran along the backside of the property. In front of the big, metal door was a small concrete pad with a basketball hoop and what was left of the deteriorated net hung by a thread and a prayer. My old Schwinn bike leaned against a tree where I had left it years ago, tires flat and veins of rust marring the sides. Discarded logs and small piles of damp wood dust scattered across the muddy grass next to the chopping block where Grandpa

Rhett had sent me to split wood for his pot belly stove last winter.

No matter how many times I convinced myself I had permission to go in there, I still felt like I was breaking and entering. I half expected Grandpa Rhett to come striding out of the house, hollering and shaking his fist, and threatening to whoop my ass if I didn't get away from that shop. He only had to do it once when I was seven years old. That was the first and last time I ever touched that door handle.

Despite the chill of the evening spring air, I was sweating. I pulled the key out of my pocket and turned it over in my hand, brushing away the bead of sweat that trickled down from under my hat. There was nothing special about it — small, silver, and generic. The edges were smooth from years of use, and the frayed remains of a braided horsetail keychain stuck to my sweaty palm. The same keychain that I remember seeing on my mom's set of keys.

That was thirteen years ago, before my dad shot them both with his Colt .45 pistol. I thought of how much I missed her and what words of wisdom she would have for me at this very moment. She loved quotes about life and love, and would often print one or two that she liked from the computer and put it up on the fridge for my dad and me to read. But it wasn't her quotes that I missed the most. It was her loving arms and the reassuring smile that made my heart ache. Gram and Grandpa Rhett had done a good job raising me after her death, but there was nothing that could compare to my mother's love.

My dad wasn't right in the head, and when he lost his job at the mill, he started drinking heavily. But it wasn't the alcohol that drove him to kill his wife. It was the thought that he had failed his family, and his wife and child were leaving to get away from the shell of the man who began to speak harsher, louder, and use his fists to prove he wasn't weak. He pulled a gun during an argument with my mom, and changed the course of my life when he killed her. If I hadn't been at a friend's house, who knows if I'd still be here today. The neighbors called the police when they heard the gunshots and they found their bodies in the kitchen where she had been making dinner.

It took a long while to move on after their deaths, but Gram and Grandpa Rhett picked up where they left off. The flood of memories that came with the smell of baked chicken and the tears that fell at the thought eventually stopped and I began the healing process. Grandpa Rhett kept me busy on the farm; even as a seven-year-old boy I was helping to bottle feed the calves and muck out the horse's stalls. He wanted to protect and preserve his daughter's memory, and he took great care to

raise me as he did my mother; strong-willed, clever, and with a big heart.

Sometimes I would sneak into Grandpa Rhett's study, pull open the bottom drawer of his desk and take out the Ziploc bag that held the bloodstained shirt she wore the day she was killed. I would gently open the bag, and beneath the odor of copper pennies and gunpowder, I would catch the faint scent of her perfume. If Grandpa Rhett caught me, he would have kicked my ass outside and made me scrub out all the water troughs as punishment for trifling through his treasures. But he never caught me.

By now it had been a long time since I had gone into his study. He was focused on his treasure hunting, and I grew up working on tractors and keeping up the family farm. We rarely talked about the incident, and our weekly gravesite visits turned into monthly visits, which finally turned into annual visits. It's not that we didn't miss her; it's that we struggled to let her go.

My father's remains were given to me by the coroner, and Gram had planned to remove them for us. Grandpa Rhett wanted nothing to do with the man who killed his daughter, and I felt a burning rage toward that tiny metal box holding his essence. Late one night, I woke up and took the urn outside, throwing it into the garbage can near the road. As a child, I reasoned that it was the only place where I thought he belonged, and nobody asked what happened to the missing urn. When I woke up the next morning, Grandpa Rhett stood in my doorway and looked at me, saying nothing. After a while, he spoke, his voice strong and confident, and said,

"Wrath is a sin. Don't let it control you, Wes."

I didn't understand what any of that meant, but I nodded my head as if I did. My father was erased from my memory from that moment on.

I leaned my forehead against the cool metal door. The floodlight near the eaves of the shop buzzed and cast a dull, yellow glow against my skin. I realized that the last person who closed this door would never step through the threshold ever again. Grandpa Rhett was gone. Presumed dead. His body had never been found after he separated from his expedition party, deep in the Llanganatis Mountains of Ecuador. Despite searches by the local authorities, they determined that the seventy-year-old man would have died from exposure and gave their condolences. I thought of how different life will be now that he's was gone. He was an old man, yes, but not old enough to stop doing what he loved. Before he left in early February, he mentioned to Gram and me that he had found a clue that would lead him to history's biggest treasure. The answer to the location of the treasure was written in a book by a

botanist, Richard Spruce. He spent the better half of last winter in his shop, doing what we assumed was research and preparation for his upcoming expedition. He would often talk about a guide, a map, and a journal that had instructions to locate a bounty of treasure, hidden from Spanish conquistadors during the fall of the ancient Incan Empire. None of this mattered to me, of course. All I wanted was for Grandpa Rhett to pull up the driveway in his old, brown pickup, waving and smiling at us.

A wave of anger washed through me at the thought.

Why didn't he come home? How did a man with his level of intelligence and experience succumb to a fate that only a novice archeologist would be exposed to? He knew better than to wander off on his own. It was common knowledge that the jungles were dangerous and seemingly endless, full of poisonous and lethal creatures. Finding treasure was not worth risking his life. It was selfish.

"Damn, Wes, you look like shit," a familiar voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "Have you slept at all?"

My best friend since elementary school walked up in his usual Henley shirt, dirty jeans, and work boots. Beau had been visiting me every day since the news of Grandpa Rhett's death just to make sure I was okay.

"I'm moderately functional."

"I'll take that as a no," he said, and took a crisp bite of his apple. The sweet smell wafted over and my stomach growled. "You haven't eaten, either. Here," he said, and tossed the apple to me. Reluctantly, I took it and leaned against the shop door.

"So you still think he's really out there? I mean, alive?" Beau asked, studying me intently. "It doesn't seem likely, given the time that has passed since anyone heard from him. The expedition party said he's gone. They came back without him." He kicks a pinecone with the toe of his boot and heaves a sigh. "He's a brilliant man, but he's an old man. And old men probably don't have much luck surviving in the Amazon jungle."

I was only half listening to Beau rationalize the probability of Grandpa Rhett's demise. My mind was working through the list of questions that haunted me, ever since Gram had broken the news of the memorial service.

It all made sense, I guess. But why? Why didn't he return with the expedition party?

Don't they have any sort of idea when he went missing? Where were they when they last saw him? How come he didn't have any of this survival gear turned on, like his walkie-talkie or cell phone?

Where is Grandpa Rhett?

I sigh. "Yeah. I do think he's still out there. Call me nuts, but I think that he's waiting for someone to come and rescue him." To my surprise, Beau didn't say anything, so I continued. "I know my grandpa better than anybody, and his skill level is beyond any expert in the anthropology field. He knows where he's going, and at least ten different ways to get there. I think that's why he's been so successful doing what he loves. The man always has a plan for his plan."

"So you think he might have been sabotaged?"

"I'm saying he probably didn't get lost."

He nods, scratching his head. "How many expeditions did you say he went on?"

"Thirty-two. Including the last one."

"Yeah, I'd say he should have some experience under his belt. But maybe he had a stroke and fell down somewhere?"

I had considered that a possibility, too. But something told me that wasn't why he was missing. "Nah. He was healthy and didn't have any problems that I know of. Besides, if he had a medical condition or stroked out, don't you think someone in the expedition party would've noticed?"

We stood in silence for a moment, thinking of the possibilities. I thought of how easy it would be to get lost in the jungle, with thousands of miles of rainforest and mountains. Did he miss something on his map? It seemed impossible. The gray sky, the roaring of the muddy river, the smell of rain and earth should have guided him back to the nearest trail, where he could call for help.

I throw the half-eaten apple into the woods behind the shop and step up to the door. "I want to check out his shop to see if there's anything in there that might tell me where he was headed. I know what he was looking for, I just don't know where," I said. The key slipped into the tumbler, and I turned the knob. The door opens silently. The hair raises on my arms, and a chill creeps further down my spine as the whisper of light from outside lie across the dirty cement floor. The smells of grease and pine stir my memories of Grandpa Rhett's strong hugs, and I swallow hard.

Beau must have sensed my apprehension and moves quickly to turn on the lights. Fluorescent bulbs buzz to life, illuminating the shop in a cold, white glare. I hear him gasp as we look around the shop.

Maps of the world covered the walls. Red string reaching across continents and places were pinned taut and zig-zagged from place to place.

A glint of gold caught my eye, and I move over to the nearest workbench to investigate. A skull inlaid with tiny veins of gold rested on a platter, as if it were

prepared for surgery. Little stickers notating blemishes and imperfections covered the skull, and a notebook lies next to it. Relics of Mayan stucco heads with faces set with teeth bared, ornately embellished with colorful pigments lined the workbench. Strange birds carved out of volcanic stone, and ceramic vessels cracked down the middle rests underneath the workbench, as if unimportant.

“Whoa,” I breathe. “Look at all of this. There must be hundreds, even, thousands of artifacts.” I look to the shelves on the back wall, stacked with boxes and plastic totes, all labeled with Grandpa Rhett’s scribbles.

Beau holds up a silver figurine in the shape of a llama, examining the tiny intricate details. “Rhett was a modern-day Indiana Jones. There’s got to be a fortune in here...There’s no way this is legal. Why would he keep this from you and Gram?”

“I don’t know. Where did he get all of this from? By the looks of things, they’ve got to be Aztec or Mayan. I’ve seen this type of stuff in history books, and it would make sense if Grandpa Rhett found these in the Amazon.”

We spend the better half of two hours looking through boxes of artifacts and reading notes about their origins and the places that Grandpa Rhett had found them. He made several references to a man named Richard Spruce, a botanist back in the late 1800s. It seemed as if Grandpa Rhett had an obsession with the man. What exactly was he looking for? These artifacts were priceless, yet it still seemed as if they weren’t enough.

I gently roll out a faded piece of parchment paper onto the workbench, revealing a map with faded ink, and a red handprint smeared the bottom corner. Dust particles swirled into the air as I wiped the mysterious stain. “This map has a mark across Machu Picchu with a giant question mark. What do you think that means? Is that where —”

“Shhh! Listen,” Beau hushed me. “Do you hear that?”

I bait my breath, but only hear white noise. “No, I —”

He waves a finger, and I strain to listen when a soft buzz, like that of a hundred bees, filtered through the open door. Curious, I follow Beau outside. The sound is coming closer. Now it sounds like a gas-powered weed trimmer tearing down a patch of overgrown cheatgrass.

Movement catches my eye near the back corner of the shop. A white drone, large and blinking with a red light looks around. A camera pointed at the shop hovers just above the roofline. It moves slowly, precisely, and the camera sweeps along the metal siding, toward the door.

“Who the hell does that thing belong to?” Beau shouts above the noise.

Whoever was flying the drone couldn’t see us standing there, and I wanted to throw a rock to send it crashing down. Instead, we waited to see where it was going. It was clear that someone was looking for something at the shop.

“I don’t know, but let’s wait and see if we can grab it. Whoever wants it back will have to come and get it from us.” The drone continues to scan the building, and we step out farther from its line of sight, anticipating it to lower enough to snatch out of the air.

“Shit, Wes, it’s headed for the door!” Beau said, just as the drone rounded the corner, camera pointed into the open door.

I pounce up at the drone, but it was a few inches out of my reach. Beau darts through to the door and slams it shut, glaring up at the camera and waving his middle finger. I jump, again and again, this time my fingers connect with the cold, plastic leg, knocking it to the side.

The drone recovers and with a whir, the camera twists down and hovers above my head. I look into the glass eye for a moment, and a blast of air hits my face as it skyrockets straight up into the dark sky. I hear the buzz faintly, and then the quiet rush of blood pumping in my ears.

“Whoever that was, they already knew about the artifacts in the shop. They were looking for something,” I said. “And now that they have our faces on camera right after seeing what was in the shop, we could be in a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, but what if they were just some kids down the road? Those things travel for miles, and it’s possible that they were just playing around,” Beau said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

I look in the direction that it had disappeared to, and shook my head. “Maybe, but we have to figure out what to do with this stuff. If they realize how many valuables are sitting here, they’ll be back.”

An uneasy feeling washes over me as I think about Grandpa Rhett’s treasures. His legacy is inside that shop, and all this time it has been a secret.

“Let’s keep looking to see if there’s any clue that might tell us exactly where he was headed, and the rest can wait until we talk to Gram.”

Inside the shop, we rifle through a few more boxes, and I glance over my shoulder. The feeling of being watched settles in the forefront of my mind, pushing me to move quickly.

With a huff, I flop into an old office chair and grab the journal next to the skull.

Maybe this old thing will tell me a thing or two, but then again, all I've discovered about Grandpa Rhett was that he liked to keep major secrets from his family. From me.

Irritation and resentment settle in my bones, and I carelessly toss the journal back onto the workbench.

This is stupid.

All of this junk is worthless to me. The real treasure is the man who stepped in to raise me after losing my parents to a selfish death. Anger arrives in my stomach at the memory of Grandpa Rhett kissing Gram goodbye as he left for his expedition. The anger quickly turns into guilt at the thought of him huddled next to a fire, his bony fingers reaching for warmth and a bleak look on his face. I refuse to give up on the man who became the father that he didn't have to be.

He has to be out there. I can feel it in my very soul.

And I'm going to find him.

A piece of paper fluttered to the floor after I had tossed the journal, and I lean over to pick it up. My heart races as I read the rushed and sloppy writing.

With this document and the map before us,
let us trace the attempts that have been made
to reach the gold thrown away by the subjects of
Atahualpa as useless when it could no longer be
applied to the purpose of ransoming him from the
Spaniards.

"Hey, Beau," I call over to my friend. "I found our first clue."