



Knifepoint

Alex Van Tol

Reading level: 3.8

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Book Summary

Jill has been having second thoughts about her summer job as a wrangler on a ranch; her pay is a joke, and she is finding herself carrying far more than her share of the load while the “queen bees,” the other female ranch hands, are busy flirting with James, the young heir to the ranch. When a handsome young stranger from an area ranch asks for an “adventure ride,” Jill is caught off-guard, but still willing to oblige his request. Assuming that he is no novice to horseback riding, Jill takes Darren far from the traditional trails as she promises to take him up to the old mill site. But Darren quickly reveals his true intentions, and Jill finds herself alone and isolated with a stranger with a dark side—and a knife that he is more than happy to flash. When Jill refuses to go along with his game, she finds herself in a race for her life through the forest and into the river at Hell’s Gorge. Calling upon every ounce of mental and physical strength at her disposal, Jill lives to see the river swallow her adversary and, ultimately, deliver her—battered, bruised and bloody, but alive—to shore.

Prereading Idea

Most students have learned the phrase “Stranger Danger” as books, films and public-service announcements through the past few decades have been devoted to helping children remember this advice. As a class, first discuss students’ experiences with the concept of “Stranger Danger”: Where have they heard the advice to beware of strangers? Has the advice ever helped them or someone they know personally? Then discuss with students the shortcomings and possibly even dangers of young people believing that danger only comes from “a stranger.”

Connecting to the World—Writing and Research

- Jill refers to hypothermia (a decrease in core body temperature that affects normal metabolism) and the dangers of freezing in the glacier-fed river. Have students work in groups of three to four to research medical conditions, such as hypothermia and hyperthermia, associated with decreased or increased body temperatures respectively. Have half of the groups research conditions associated with decreased body temperatures; the others, increased body temperatures. Have students include in their research: typical situations or causes for the condition, symptoms or signs, preventative measures that can be taken, treatment upon onset of the condition and prognosis. Have each group prepare and share a safety poster that can be displayed in the school and possibly within key locations in their city.
- During her ordeal with Darren, Jill exhibits a variety of strategies, many of which could be classified as “fight or flight,” the biological response of animals to acute stress. Have students research the “fight or flight” response. Working with a partner, have students characterize each of Jill’s efforts to survive her situation as either “fight” or “flight.” Then have students write about a personal experience or an experience of a family member where the person utilized these responses to survive a difficult experience. Have students share and post their experiences on a bulletin board.

Connecting to the Text—Elements of the Novel***Characterization***

In the midst of her ordeal with Darren, Jill relates, “My brain sweeps away all the hysterical chatter, and I calmly size up the situation” (ch. 11). From her attempt to escape on horseback to her leap over the cliff to her plunge in the glacier-fed river, though Jill constantly attempts to focus for her survival, fear slips in and out of her thoughts. Using the events of the story in chronological order, have students work with a partner to write a poem-for-two voices showing the two voices that speak to Jill throughout the story: the voice of fear and the voice of focus. Have students practice and present their poems for the class.

Foreshadowing

The author provides abundant clues throughout the novel that Jill is about to find herself in serious trouble. Even as she gets out of bed, Jill thinks, “If a serial killer poked his head into my room and offered to stab me at this exact moment...” Later, leaving on the trail ride with Darren, Jill realizes that she did not have him sign the waiver, “...the one that says you might die from tripping, falling, drowning...” Have students locate these and other examples of foreshadowing to create a collage. Students should place Jill’s name or a drawing of Jill in the middle and then surround her with quotations that foreshadow the events of the day. Post collages in the classroom.

Conflict

Jill, the protagonist, faces two powerful antagonists in Darren and the river; she is in constant conflict with Darren from the time he reveals his true nature and with constant struggle with the river from the time she plunges into the icy waters. But when Jill pulls Darren into the river, she introduces him to her “treacherous little friend...The Widowmaker” (ch. 14). Though still working against her, the river now is working against Darren as well. Ask students to use elements from the story (ch. 14–15) to create a cartoon strip, pictorially showing the struggle between the river and Darren. Give the river a personality and a voice as it struggles against the villainous Darren.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. How do the events early in the day distract Jill from using good judgment in arranging for the adventure ride with Darren? What missteps does she make that could have cost her life?
2. When Jill successfully maneuvers the sixty horses in the corral alone (ch. 1), she demonstrates some of the same survival skills that come into play when she is out on the trail alone with Darren. What are these skills, and how do they help her in her ordeal with Darren?
3. When Darren first encounters Jill, he asks, “You guys do adventure rides?” (ch. 1). To the reader, the question seems like an unusual request for someone from an area ranch. What does Jill believe to be Darren’s motivation? Why would he actually ask for an adventure ride as opposed to a traditional trail ride? What were hints that Darren might not really be whom he professed to be?
4. Jill remembers the advice of her grade-eight gym teacher, Mrs. Rodney, “You always have a choice...you can choose fear. Or you can choose focus. But you can’t have both. You don’t have room for both” (ch. 7). Throughout her ordeal, how does Jill use her focus to survive?
5. Darren uses the knife to terrorize Jill, though some of the ways are very subtle. Discuss how Darren uses the knife. Why is it so terrorizing to Jill?
6. While Jill is in the river, she uses her previous experience with the river, some official Red Cross training, and her instincts to help her survive the river. What previous experiences and knowledge does she call up to help her in her struggle downriver?
7. Are Darren’s poor swimming skills and lack of experience with the river the real reason for his downfall? What are the reasons he does not survive? How do his emotions and motivations factor into the struggle?
8. When Jill reaches the river in her flight from Darren, she reflects, “In my confused terror, I had just assumed that someone would be standing there, waiting for me with a blanket and a cup of hot coffee” (ch. 12). What is ironic about this statement?

Writer's Craft***Figurative Language***

The author writes a beginning full of description and figurative language that shows Jill waking up to a day that will bring her challenge and fear, and will almost cost her life. The author draws the reader in with simile, metaphor, and hyperbole that foreshadow what is to come: “like I’ve been tied to the bed with a million tiny threads” and “a million tiny daggers shoot through my skull” (ch. 1). Have students write an alternative ending that copies the author’s style in the introduction to put Jill back to sleep at the end of her emotionally wrenching day.

Humor

Though the story of Jill and her harrowing experience is life-threatening serious, the author still manages to insert snippets of humor into the story, as when Jill reflects, “It’s hard to cough up light banter once you’ve found out your companion is a raving sociopath” (ch. 7) or, “You know things are messed up when you’re relieved to see the crazy nutcase who’s out to stab you to death” (ch. 14). Have students work with a partner to find elements of humor in the story. Ask students to use the elements they have found, possibly adding humor of their own, to create a monologue for a late-night television show that would highlight a portion of Jill’s adventures with the “crazy nutcase.” Have students practice and perform their monologues for their classmates.

Author Biography

Alex Van Tol grew up reading a wide range of books, from Enid Blyton to Stephen King. She has worked with children all her life, as a swim instructor, camp counselor, teacher and mother. She traded the chalkboard for a keyboard in 2007. *Knifepoint* is Alex’s first novel with Orca Book Publishers. She lives and writes in Victoria, British Columbia.