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CLEARING THE TRAIL: A FAMILY IN THE WILDERNESS

by Betsy Kepes

Chapter One

The tree across the trail is big, as wide as a truck tire. Lee and I stand on either side of the trunk with our hands on a long crosscut saw. We sway as we work, our arms pulling and relaxing, pulling and relaxing. The sharp metal teeth of the saw slice through the wood and draw out long shavings that pile up on the ground like two plates of spaghetti.

“Jay, we need the wedges.” I stand up and stretch my back, flexing my fingers in their leather gloves.

My six-year-old son looks up from a shady spot on the side of the trail. He’s playing with plastic soldiers. “Wedges? Where are they?”

“In the lower side pocket of my pack.”

From up the trail we hear the thunk of an axe biting into a tree. Tom is ahead of us cutting out smaller trees with his double-bit axe. The woods are thick here and a windstorm in the winter knocked down several big trees that fell across the trail. It will take our family hours to cut through them all. We work together as a family trail crew in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in central Idaho.

“Mom, I see rope but no wedges.” Jay bends over one of the four backpacks that lean against trees, their sides bulging with sleeping bags and water bottles.

“Other side.”

“Here they are!” Jay runs over, the plastic wedges clacking together in his hands.

“Thanks Jay.” I put the narrow edge of each wedge into the top of our cut. Lee pounds them in with the side of his axe. He’ll be fourteen at the end of the summer and he’s getting strong from long days of hiking and working.

Without the wedges, the weight of the heavy tree might pinch the cut closed and trap our saw inside. With the wedges in we don’t have to worry as we cut toward the bottom of the tree. At the very end of the cut, we take one handle off the saw and I finish the cut on my own, carefully using the very tip of the blade.

Lee watches. “It’s moving, Mom!”

I pull the saw out of the cut just as the tree settles and one half of the tree whumps down onto the ground. The other side hangs in the air.

“Yes!” Lee does a victory dance, waving his arms and jumping up and down.

Now that the downward pressure is gone it will be easy to finish cutting this tree. In a few minutes Lee and I saw through another cut and a big chunk of log falls into the

trail. We sit down behind it and use our legs, the strongest muscles in our body, to push the log down and out of the trail. It crashes through the brush and bangs against a tree.

Lee and I look at each other and smile.

“Time to take a break!” Tom walks toward us. His arms are splattered with sticky pine pitch and he smells like a Christmas tree. He opens his pack, looking for his bag of snacks.

“Dad, will we make it to Long Lake tonight?” Lee asks as he throws himself down on the ground and rolls over, his t-shirt covered in pine needles.

Long Lake is about three miles away. If we were just hiking, we could get there easily before dark, but we’re clearing the trail. In three miles we might have ten or twenty trees across the path. And some of them could be big.

“We’ll probably camp somewhere on the ridge instead,” I say, trying to sound positive.

Tom and I look at each other. The day’s been hot and we’d all like to go for a swim, or at least wash the dirt off our arms and faces. Even more important to us than the lake water is the cold stream that flows into the lake, water we need for drinking. Our water bottles are almost empty. It’s no fun to have a “dry camp”. We’d have to skip supper and go to sleep with our throats longing for water.

SIDEBAR—What is wilderness?

The word ‘wilderness’ has many meanings. It comes from an old English word *wildċor* meaning “wild beast”. In America today, wilderness land owned by the federal government has no roads or houses, no villages or farms. The 1964

Wilderness Act calls wilderness a place that is “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. Today over one hundred million acres of land are protected as federal wilderness in the United States, a total surface area larger than California plus Vermont. Of all the states, Alaska has the most acres of protected wilderness land.

Chapter Two

It's late afternoon by the time we finish cutting out all the trees in the windfall. The July sun is still strong but it's low now, just above the mountains. Stripes of golden light alternate with long shadows from the trees.

I take a swallow from a water bottle, wanting to take a big long gulp. We put our packs on and tighten our hip belts. Tom leads the way, a shovel in his hand. Jay hurries after Lee and I'm last. I take my time, listening to a Swainson's Thrush sing its beautiful evening song, a cascade of notes pouring down from the trees.

The trail meanders along, dipping down below the ridge then back up to the top. We walk through a lodge pole pine forest where all the trees are the same size. They started as seedlings after a forest fire burned the older trees.

When the trail drops off onto the north side of the ridge I hear Lee shouting.

“Snow!”

By the time I catch up to the rest of my family the air is filled with snowballs.

The snow is below the trail in a dark hollow where the summer sun hasn't completely melted the winter snowdrifts.

A snowball smacks into the edge of my pack and I run up to the snow and reach down to grab a handful. "Hey, was that from you Lee?"

We run and duck and laugh until Tom says. "Time out. I want to take my pack off."

"Are we camping here?" Jay asks as he throws a snowball that splatters against a tree.

"You bet." Tom points to the snow bank. "It's not Long Lake, but it's water."

While Tom and Lee set up the tent Jay and I work on dinner. I scoop the dirty top layer off the snow and fill our cooking pots with the clean, white snow underneath. Jay collects sticks and we make a small fire in the middle of the trail. We rarely see people on this trail and it's very unlikely someone will travel through here in the evening.

"Can we have macaroni and cheese?" Jay would like to have macaroni and cheese every night but sometimes we have rice and beans, spaghetti or ramen noodles.

"Sure." We're carrying enough dried food to last us for five days. Each meal is in a plastic bag, carefully packed to give us enough to eat, but not any extra.

After the snow melts into water and boils I add the macaroni and a handful of dried vegetables. When the noodles are cooked I drain the extra water into our bowls for instant chicken noodle soup.

"Come and get it!" I say.

Lee bounces over as Tom tightens up the last corner of the tent.

We all sit on the ground and face to the west, looking out at rows and rows of mountains. We sip our soup and watch the sky as it changes through yellows and oranges and pinks. The macaroni and cheese is warm and filling. Lee scrapes the edge of the pan to get all the salty sauce he can. Another pot of snow is melting on the fire. We'll have cups of tea and cocoa until we're not thirsty anymore and we'll melt more snow to have water for breakfast.

It's getting dark so we cover up our packs with big plastic bags, brush our teeth, and hang our food bags away from animals. Finally we dive into the tent, trying to keep out the mosquitoes that hover by the door. The sleeping bags are soft and warm and Jay falls asleep first, his arms wrapped around Curious George, his stuffed animal monkey. Tom, Lee and I put on our headlamps and use the beams of white light to read and write in our journals. Lee's eyes close and his head falls onto his book. I carefully pull the book out and slip it into a side pocket on the tent.

The last orange light is still in the sky and the stars are brightening when I turn off my headlamp. It will be a cold, clear night. I make sure Jay's sleeping bag covers his shoulders and settle down into mine.

Sidebar—Working in the Wilderness

When trails are blocked by fallen trees it is difficult for hikers and horses to get through, especially if the trails are on steep mountainsides. Every summer the United States Forest Service hires people to clear trails. No motorized equipment is allowed in the wilderness so the wilderness trail crews use axes and crosscut saws to

cut out the trees. The trails are used for recreation by hikers, backpackers and groups who ride horses. Firefighters also use the trails.

SIDE BAR---No Trace Camping.

In the wilderness many campers practice ‘no trace camping’. The goal is to erase any signs of a campsite so that hikers and horse riders passing by see only undisturbed ground.

If campers have a fire they make sure it is completely out and they scatter the ashes and bits of unburned wood. They sprinkle the spot with pine needles and dirt as camouflage. Some wildernesses don’t allow campfires. Visitors use small gas stoves to boil water and cook their food.

Why do people hide their campsites? In the wilderness visitors want to travel lightly and leave the land undisturbed. By hiding where they set up their tents and where they cooked dinner, they keep the land looking wild for other visitors.

Chapter Three

In the morning, the sun is covered by clouds. After we’ve walked a mile raindrops dot the trail and we stop to get out our raingear. In this part of Idaho most days in July and August are warm and sunny. We carry lightweight rain jackets and rain pants and for weeks we never take them out of the bottom of our packs. Today, though, we’re glad to have them.

With our nylon raingear on we start up again. The rain pants keep our cotton pants from getting drenched in the wet vegetation we walk through. The rain is steady now and we put our rain jacket hoods up to keep the rain from running down our necks. It's difficult to hear much with our hoods up so we walk along without talking, watching the rain slant down. The trees seem extra green in the rain, their needles bright with drops of water sliding off down into the trail.

When we spot a tree across the trail I take the crosscut saw off my pack. The handles are wet and our gloves get slippery. The work of sawing heats us up so we have to unzip our rain jackets. I notice Jay sitting by the side of the trail shivering as he waits for us to finish cutting the tree. He needs to warm himself up.

“Hey Jay,” I call over, “Would you help us move these branches out of the trail?”

“I'm cold,” he says.

“I know. Put on your gloves and give a hand here.”

It doesn't take long for Jay to get warm. The tree we're cutting out of the trail is a big green Douglas Fir with corky tan and brown bark. The branches make scraping marks on the trail as we drag them. It looks like a giant bird flapped its wing feathers against the ground before lifting into the air.

As we're finishing this job the rain stops and a ray of sunlight shines down exactly where we've been working.

“Spotlight on the trail crew,” says Lee, posing in the sun with a branch in his arms. Steam rises off his wet rain jacket.

His silly pose makes us laugh and we're all feeling content as we put our packs on again. We're even jollier when the clouds disappear and the sun comes out. We stop, take

off our packs and raingear, and drape the wet clothes on rocks to dry while we eat our morning snack. The bottoms of my pants are wet and my socks feel a little damp, but not completely soaked. It's good to have a short rainstorm. The ones that last all day mean soaking wet feet and no dry place to stop for lunch. When our clothes get damp our spirits do, too.

After our snack break it's not far to walk to the next trail junction. A tree there has two large wooden trail signs nailed to it. One arrow points to the right and reads Boulder Creek. The other sign points to the left and says Long Lake and Gold Meadows. I peer down toward the lake, wondering how many trees have fallen across the trail. If there aren't many, we may have a short day and get to the lake by early afternoon. We'd have time to go swimming or explore the far side of the lake.

We turn left and walk along a trail that angles in a zigzag down the steep slope. As far as I can see there are no trees across the trail.

SIDEBAR – A map of our journey in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. An inset map will show the whole United States and all the wilderness areas will be colored in.

SIDEBAR – The history of wilderness in America

The first European settlers to North America found a land with no towns, cities or roads. To them it was a terrible, dark wilderness filled with wild beasts and wild men. They believed they must civilize the wilderness by cutting down trees and making fields and farms. When a Frenchman named Alexis Tocqueville visited the

United States in 1831 he wrote, “in Europe people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet.”

Chapter Four

“I’ve got the next three.” Lee says. He’s ahead of me on the trail down to Long Lake. When I pass him he’s taking off his pack.

Years ago a trail crew worked here, digging trenches and putting logs or rocks at an angle across the trail. In the spring when the snow melts, or after a rainstorm, these water bars guide the running water off the trail. If the water stayed on the trail, it would erode away the soft soil and make a deep ditch. It’s our job to use our shovels to clean out the sediment from the end of the water bars and keep the drain areas clear.

Tom has the next water bars and then it’s my turn. We leapfrog down the trail and share the work.

We come to a place where five trees fell as a group across the trail. They crisscross each other and their many branches make a bristly barrier. It will take us at least until lunchtime to clear out this obstacle. It doesn’t look like we’ll get to the lake early today.

Jay’s feeling warmer so he gets out his sketch pad and colored pencils. He likes to draw Ninja warriors with swords and armor. The rest of us take turns sawing and chopping. Lee’s learning how to use an axe and this pile of trees is a good place for him to practice. The wood is soft and green and the top parts of the trees aren’t that large.

Tom makes sure Lee is safely swinging his axe. The blade must go parallel to his legs, not toward them. The sharp axe bites deep into the wood as Lee swings to cut on the right and then the left, making a deep “V” notch in the tree. At the very bottom of the cut he flips his double bit axe over to the other blade. This side is called the root blade and isn’t as sharp. It won’t dull the blade much if it hits a bit of dirt or a rock when the axe goes all the way through the tree.

Tom and I clap when Lee finishes his cut. Lee’s a bit embarrassed, but he’s also proud. One hundred years ago most rural people in America knew how to use an axe, even kids younger than Lee. They needed to cut firewood and keep their farm roads clear of trees. Now most people use chainsaws to cut their wood and they haven’t ever practiced using an axe.

The sun is high overhead and we’re sweating from the hard work. It’s hard to believe that a couple of hours ago we were cold and wet from the rain.

One of the trees across the trail will be difficult to cut. It’s a big tree low on the ground. Before we start to work on it we decide to take a lunch break.

“RyKrisp or graham crackers?” Lee pulls two boxes of crackers out of his pack.

“Graham crackers!” Jay likes the sweet crackers for lunch. They taste good with peanut butter on them, or cheese.

“And should we have dried pineapple or dried bananas?” Tom holds up two plastic bags.

“Bananas.” Lee gets his choice in first.

We sit on the ground in the shade of a spruce tree. The air smells sweet from the sap we exposed when we cut the trees and branches. A few flies buzz around but no mosquitoes. It's a perfect place for a picnic.

After lunch we tackle the last tree. When the other trees fell on it, they pushed it deep into the ground. We have to dig underneath the tree so we have room to pull the crosscut saw. The teeth of our saw are carefully sharpened and we don't want to make them dull by scraping them through sand or banging them against a rock.

It takes us over an hour to cut out the last tree. Finally we push the last log out of the trail and put everything back into our packs. The axes fit into thick leather sheaths. The crosscut saw is covered in a piece of fireman's hose with Velcro straps to keep it on. I bend the saw over the top of my pack and hook the handles through loops of rope. When I'm walking I look like I have a giant horseshoe on top of my pack.

The trail descends gradually into a valley. We can look out to the mountains on either side of the trail, cliffy ridges where mountain goats and Bighorn sheep sometimes hang out. As we get further down into the valley the vegetation gets thicker and the trees are bigger. In one place a tree is hanging above the trail and we have to scramble up on rocks to get close enough to saw it.

The last light is on the lake by the time we get to the campsite. Tom and Lee decide to go for a swim and walk along the lake to a place where the water is deeper and less muddy than it is at the campsite. Jay and I touch the water and decide it's a bit cold for swimming. I use a bandana to wash our faces and arms. The lake is beautiful to look at, tucked into this valley with cliffs on one side and woods on the other. We watch an

osprey dive down from a tree and come up with a fish clutched in its talons. It has to beat its wings hard to carry the wiggly meal up to its nest high in the top of a tree.

No one has been camping in this spot this spring and there is grass coming up in a fire ring made of a circle of stones. We'll use the ring to cook our dinner and then scatter the rocks and ashes, picking out any glass or aluminum garbage to carry out.

Jay helps me collect wood, just enough for a small cooking fire. By the time Tom and Lee get back from their swim we have a pot of rice cooking and a small pan of water heating up. We'll mix our dried refried bean mix with boiling water to make a tasty topping for the rice. It's even better with a big sprinkle of Parmesan cheese. Sometimes we mix a pouch of tuna into the rice, or a fresh fish if we're lucky.

Lee kneels next to the fire and holds his hands up to warm them. When he shakes water out of his hair I suggest that he put on his wool hat. Even though it's summer we carry warm hats for cold evenings and mornings. A hat doesn't weigh very much, but it can make a cold body very happy.

Jay finds a perfect place to set up his plastic soldiers, a big dead log lying on the ground. It has small crevices along it where the soldiers can stand and aim down at the enemy. It's such a good place to play that he's not sure he wants to eat supper.

"C'mon Jay," Tom says. "I'll play with you after we eat."

I can see that Lee is relieved. Jay has been asking and asking if Lee will play with him but Lee brought an exciting book and he wants to read.

We lean against the big tree where the soldiers are perched and look out at the lake as we eat our rice and beans. We see small rings in the water when trout jump up to eat the insects dancing along the surface. The last time we were here Tom had his fly

fishing rod. The fish jumped up all around where he cast his line but none of them were interested in the artificial flies he tied onto his line. Today the osprey had better luck with its sharp talons and strong wings.

SIDEBAR—Why is wilderness important?

When Europeans first came to North America they saw the wild forests and plains as obstacles to civilization. They cut trees and plowed the earth and tried to tame the wilderness. But by the nineteenth century, a few voices objected to the new roads and constant logging and the destruction caused by human activities. John Muir travelled all over the United States, writing about the wild places he found and wanted to protect. He wrote, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.”

Chapter Six

I'm the first one awake this morning. The lake has a layer of mist rising above it and fingers of fog snake through our campsite. Everything is quiet except for a crackling of a branch. I inch closer to the screen door of the tent, peer out and then stop moving, holding my breath.

A herd of elk graze in the little meadow, cow elk and their calves. They're focused on eating, their big heads down. It always surprises me how muscular they are and so much bigger than the mule deer we see. The herd moves slowly as a group, getting closer to the lake. I know if I moved or made a noise they would hear me immediately

and run off. The tent is my hiding place and as much as I want the rest of my family to see this beautiful sight, any movement would send the herd away.

Male elk, called bulls, have wide antlers, sought after as trophies by hunters. Bull elk make a musical sound called a bugle. The long series of notes starts low and rises higher and higher, making an eerie sound. In the fall, hunters come into the wilderness on horses. They set up camps and ride along the ridges, looking with binoculars for elk and calling in the bulls by pretending to bugle. They hope this fake sound will attract a real bull. If a hunter does shoot an elk, the animal is gutted and quartered. The big, heavy pieces of meat are carried out on horses or mules.

“What are you looking at, Mom?” It’s Jay, crouching next to me in the doorway.
“Oh, look at all the elk! ”

The elk in the lead picks up her head and looks toward our tent, her nostrils quivering.

“Mom, look at the baby ones,” Jay says as the elk turn away from our tent and run toward the woods.

The cracking sound of sticks wakes up Tom and Lee but they see only the blurry shapes of animals disappearing into the trees. Lee unzips the tent screen and runs outside to get a better view, but it’s too late. The elk have disappeared.

“How many were there?” Tom asks, and I can tell he’s sorry he didn’t get a better view of them.

“At least ten, cows with their calves, and some young bulls, I think.”

“I saw them too,” Jay says. “They were really big.”

Lee comes diving back into the tent. “It’s cold out there,” he says as he burrows back into his sleeping bag.

“Sure, if you don’t have any pants on.” Tom is putting on his workpants and his fleece jacket. The tent seems very crowded when we all start moving around.

By the time we’ve put away our sleeping bags and taken down the tent the mist is gone off the lake and the morning sunlight sparkles on the water. The sky is completely blue so I don’t think we’ll need our raingear today. I bury mine deep in my pack, hoping I won’t need it again. We have enough food left to be out in the wilderness for three more days.

We eat granola and dry milk, mixing it this morning with raisins and Grape Nuts for a little variety. Sometimes we dream of pancakes or scrambled eggs for breakfast, but we don’t want to carry the extra weight of a frying pan or fresh eggs. When we’re out of the woods on our days off we like to go to a diner to have a big breakfast of all the foods we don’t have when we’re camping.

Today we may not get very far. This part of the Long Lake Trail often has many big trees fallen across it. The valley here must funnel the winds, or perhaps the big trees are shallow rooted and getting old, ready to fall.

In the first mile we have a few small trees down, ones we can drag off the trail or cut in pieces with an axe. We’re beginning to hope we won’t have any big trees but we turn a bend in the trail and find a huge tree lying across the trail like a beached whale. It’s a dead tree, called a snag. The bark is gone and its wood is bleached silver. It’s so big we can barely climb over it.

“OK team.” I try to sound cheerful. “Looks like we’ll be here awhile.”

Jay doesn't mind—he's got his plastic soldiers and sketchpad – and Lee's got a good book. Tom and I take off our packs and talk about the best way to get a big chunk of this tree out of the trail. We'd like to be able to make just two cuts and have the log roll out of the trail. Unfortunately we don't know exactly how much of the tree is rotten and if the tree will sink down more as we cut it, pinching our saw into the cut.

“Well, here we go.” Tom and I begin the first cut. Our saw is sharp and at first we make rapid progress. The wood shavings fly out of the cut and I feel like I'm being showered with confetti. As we get toward the widest part of the log we can only take short strokes with the four-and-a-half-foot saw and we have to stop often and rest our tired arms. We pound our wedges in with the axe and keep going.

It's warm in the sun and sweat is pouring into my eyes. I focus on sawing and silently cheer as we get deeper and deeper into the tree. It can be slow and tedious work to cut through a very large dead tree. I never wish for a chainsaw, though. Our quiet, human-powered saw is what this wilderness job needs.

Finally, we cut into the widest part of the log. Now the sawing becomes easier as the diameter of the log decreases and we aren't cutting through as much wood.

When we've almost cut through the tree we take off a handle. Single-bucking, using only one person on the saw, is even slower than two people sawing.

“Here it goes!” I warn Tom.

The biggest side of the tree settles down a couple of inches as Tom pulls the saw out of the cut.

“Yes!” The tree behaved as we had hoped it would. Now the second cut will be easier. Lee and Tom each take an end of the saw and begin the delicate swing of the saw

that lets the sharp teeth start biting into the wood. They saw and saw, take a break and saw more. Finally the wide piece of log falls heavily into the trail.

“Calling all hands!” Tom says. All four of us sit in a line behind the log and push with our legs. At first it doesn’t move. “C’mon, one—two—three—Push!” This time the log turns and we give it another nudge with our feet until it is rolling off the trail, crashing through the brush and thudding into a big hole.

We all stand up, brush the dirt off our pants and admire our work. Lee counts the rings on the tree. “One hundred and seventy years old,” he says.

I look at the many rings on the log and think of all the fires, snowstorms and winds this tree lived through. Fire is a natural part of this place and this tree may have been lucky that the fires in this valley were light. They may have singed the outer bark of the tree, but not killed the living wood beneath that. Finally after many years, insects or disease may have killed this old tree.

“Onward!” Tom raises his shovel.

“Into the jungle!” Lee says.

“Why did you say that?” asks Jay.

“You don’t remember? You’ll find out.” Lee isn’t smiling.

SIDEBAR --- Fire in the wilderness

In the summer in the Rocky Mountains lightning from afternoon thunderstorms may start forest fires. Usually the fires are small, but as the land dries out, the fires find more fuel. This land has burned and grown back many, many times. The trees and plants are adapted to this cycle of fire. For example,

lodgepole pine trees sometimes have tightly closed cones that only open up to disperse their seeds when they are burned by fire. To keep the landscape healthy, many lightning-caused fires in the wilderness are not put out by firefighters. They burn until it rains or until the edges of the fire meet water or rocks.

Chapter Seven

The trail descends into the valley below Long Lake. Unfortunately for us, the dark north slope retains moisture in the soil and bushy vegetation thrives here. We have to push through shrubs and young trees that crowd into the trail. The branches catch against our backpacks as if someone is grabbing at us, trying to make us stop.

“Help!” Jay is completely surrounded by the thick green vegetation. I can’t see him at all except for a bit of red on his hat. For a small person this is like trying to walk through an impenetrable jungle.

“Jay, let me put my pack down and come back and help.” Tom’s voice comes from up ahead. I can’t see him either.

Tom comes crashing back to where I’m standing in the trail. With the saw bent across my pack I have to walk sideways through the worst of the brush. It’s a slow process.

“I’ll help Jay,” Tom says, squeezing past me. “And we’ll meet you and Lee at the next stream. I think it’s less brushy there.”

I nod and continue to push through the vegetation. This trail needs to be “brushed”, but that’s not what we’ve been hired to do. It will take a crew of workers days and days to cut back all these branches using handsaws and clippers. Even though it’s

difficult to walk this trail, it would be far worse to get through this valley without a trail. In fact, no one would do it.

We gather again at the stream, take off our packs and shake leaves and twigs out of our hair. We fill our water bottles from the small icy cold stream running down the hillside. Not many people visit this area and we know the water is pure and clean. In areas that are used by more people most backpackers bring a water filter. They pump water through a device that takes out the harmful microscopic organisms that could make people sick.

The trail is less brushy after the stream, though it is steep and eroded. I step around rocks and puddles, looking for ways to get the water off the trail to dry up the mud.

“Mom!” It’s Lee, coming up behind me. He was the last one to leave the spot where we stopped for a drink. “I saw a marten.”

Lee knows he’s had a lucky wildlife sighting. Martens are mammals with thick dark fur, animals the size of a large cat. They are excellent hunters and climbers and stay away from humans. They’re also known to be fierce.

“Did it see you?” I ask.

“Not at first. After you guys left the stream it was quiet. Then this marten climbed down from a tree right next to the trail.”

“What did it do when it saw you?” I ask.

“It ran away, into the brush.” Lee tells me. “But I could see its beautiful fur.”

The whole time we were talking and laughing together at the stream that marten was hiding in a tree a few feet away. I think about how many animals must stand quietly and watch us go by, this family of noisy humans.

We're very tired of pushing through the brush by the time the trail flattens out into a wide meadow with low grass. In an area of big rocks near the trail we hear a familiar high-pitched sound. "Eeeep!" It's the warning signal of a pika, or rock rabbit. Pika are cute little animals, not much bigger than the palm of a hand. They have soft rounded ears and live in rocky areas in the mountains. In the summer they cut down grasses with their sharp teeth and dry the stalks in little hay piles outside their dens in the rocks.

Our trail crosses the creek that flows out of Long Lake. It's not a roaring flood today but the water is wide enough and deep enough that we need to take our boots off to get across. We keep on our wool socks to get better traction on the rocks then we roll up our pant legs and wade out into the water.

Even with our socks on it hurts when our tender feet walk across sharp pebbles and rocks. Tom helps Jay cross because for him the water comes up to the top of his legs. Jay likes crossing streams and if this water was warmer he'd want to stay and splash and play. We all have cold, red feet when we get to the other side. We wring out the wet socks and put on clean, dry socks and our boots.

From here, the trail leaves the valley, going gradually up along a steep mountainside. Our packs always seem extra heavy when we're going uphill and we take our time, moving slowly and stopping to clear rocks and branches out of the trail. As we

get near the top I look out over the valley and the rocky slopes on the other side, hoping to see the white shapes of mountains goats. No luck today.

It's late afternoon by the time we hike up the trail to Gold Meadows. As we're trudging along I think about that name. Did someone find gold there, or wish they could? Over a hundred and fifty years ago miners found gold in the streams near Elk City and Pierce, towns not far from this wilderness.

No one lives at Gold Meadows now, though there is an old trapper's cabin above the meadow. It's built of logs and sits next to a small spring. The cabin was a winter home for someone who had trap lines on the ridges nearby. In the winter, wearing snowshoes, the trapper would walk the route and see if any animals were caught in the traps. The thick fur of the marten was especially valuable, though trappers also caught other mammals. After a few months in the mountains the trapper would bring the furs down to a town and sell them. They'd be made into fur coats and other fur products.

We set up our tent near the cabin and peer in the windows. It's locked and probably smells of mice. It's more pleasant to be in a tent, though on a cold day a cabin and a woodstove would be wonderful, even with mice.

The mosquitoes like this meadow so we don't linger over our dinner. Before dark we're all in the tent. Tom reads aloud and we all listen to the story, our stomachs full and our bodies tired from the long day of working and hiking. We watch the sunset and fall asleep before it's completely dark.

SIDE BAR—Primitive skills in the wilderness

By forbidding motor use in federal wilderness areas, the Wilderness Act guaranteed that the old skills used in the woods would not be forgotten.

Today only a few people in the United States have the tools and knowledge to sharpen long cross cut saws. A properly sharpened crosscut saw with two good sawyers cuts through big trees quickly and easily. A dull saw takes much more energy, time, and frustration.

The US Forest Service offers its employees classes in how to use axes and two-person crosscut saws. This way a new generation of forest workers will know the skills that are still appropriate for the wilderness.

Chapter Seven

The mosquitoes are so bad in the morning we pack up quickly and hike up the trail to the top of the ridge to find a breeze and eat our breakfast. We sit on a log and look east across miles and miles of wilderness. Some slopes are gray where the trees burned in fires. Other areas are thick with green trees. The landscape looks like an elaborate rug of many designs.

Working on a high ridge trail is my favorite part of this trail crew job. In some places there are no trees at all, just low grasses and heather, a shrub with pretty pink blossoms. On warm, south-facing slopes we find huckleberry bushes with ripe berries. We pick the purple berries and let the sweet taste linger as we hike along. We can tell a bear has been here eating berries when we see a pile of fresh bear scat in the trail. It's colored a dark purple. The bear was also looking for insects and ant eggs. It flipped big

rocks over into the trail, hoping to find insects underneath. We “un-flip” the rocks to get them out of the trail.

SIDEBAR --In August, 1910 an enormous fire roared through Idaho. It burned thousands of acres of forest. People in logging and mining communities fled from the flames. The Forest Service was new then and after the 1910 fire more rangers were assigned to the burned area in Idaho. They helped build lookout towers and trained men to fight fire. Whenever possible, all forest fires were put out. It is a recent idea that these forests *need* fire to be healthy.

“Mom, I’m tired.” Jay has been walking slower and slower. It’s mid-morning and breakfast was hours ago.

“Can you walk a little farther and then we’ll stop for a snack?” I say, knowing that the trail leaves the woods soon for a beautiful open part of the ridge. I’m getting hungry too but I want a view to go with my granola bar.

“No, I need to stop now.” Jay plunks down on the side of the trail, his small blue backpack tipping back off his shoulders.

Well, maybe I don’t need a view. “Tom! Lee! We’re stopping for a snack.”

They’re not far ahead of us and they circle back.

The trail here isn’t ugly, it’s just that I wanted more of a view. We’re on a side hill below the rounded shape of the wooded summit of Sponge Mountain. While the others take off their packs and search for their snack bags, I wander up the slope.

I notice the silvery stumps first, lots of them. Years ago someone cut down many trees up here. As I keep walking I see a line of white stones then two lines of white stones. They mark what must have once been a path, though now trees grow in the middle of it.

That's when I look up. In front of me is a tall, dead tree. Metal spikes go up it like a ladder and near the top is a wooden platform, the boards broken and crooked.

"Hey guys!" I run back down to the trail. "There's an old lookout up here."

"What?" Tom stands up quickly. He loves lookouts. When the boys were younger we lived in a glass lookout house on the top of Coolwater Ridge. Our summer job was to look for forest fires.

Now we're all running back up to the top of the ridge.

"Wow! Look at that tree."

"Someone had to climb up there every day?"

"Look at these white rocks!"

We explore the ruins of the lookout. About seventy years ago a fire lookout watched the world from the little wooden platform high in the big tree. This spot is covered in forest now but we can see where a lookout put lines of white rocks to mark a path from the lookout tree to a tent. We find a big hole where the lookout may have stored potatoes and salted meat to keep the food cool. And we find coils of telephone wire where someone started to clean up this old lookout site. Before portable radios, lookouts communicated with their ranger stations by telephone, on "land lines". Miles and miles of telephone wire connected the Sponge Mountain lookout to the ranger station on the Lochsa River.

“What’s this?” Lee kicks a corroded cylinder the size of a big can of fruit.

It’s an old battery, I tell him, from the telephone. In the morning and the evening each fire lookout telephoned the ranger station. They’d report any lightning they’d had and any ‘smokes’ they’d seen. They were the eyes of the forest in the days before airplane patrols. They also worked as firefighters, hiking down from their mountaintops to put out small fires with their shovels.

Now most of the lookouts are gone—burned down or, like this one, fallen into disrepair. The wilderness is wilder without these buildings but it would have been fun to visit the man or woman who stayed up on Sponge Mountain in the summer and fall.

Tom’s found a place where there may have been a cabin. The rotted lines of logs form a square and one of the paths lined with white stones leads to this spot.

It’s fun to imagine what it would have been like here when the only tree on this summit was the one with the lookout platform. We imagine the lookout, a young man, leaving his cabin and walking along the curving path lined with white rocks to climb nimbly up the metal rungs, hand over hand, to his lookout post.

“Ahoy!” We would have said as we approached.

“I saw you coming, miles ago.” He would have answered.

We would have brought the lookout a present of fresh fruit or a newspaper. In return, he might have invited us to climb the tree, or perhaps we’d have stayed on the ground, sharing a pan of fried potatoes and swapping stories.

Sidebar—Cleaning Up the Wilderness

In 1964, when this part of the Selway-Bitterroot became wilderness, many of the old lookout towers were no longer used. Airplanes had begun to do the work of fire spotting. The Forest Service instructed its rangers to burn down many of these lookouts. Miles of heavy number 9 telephone wire were rolled up in the woods and pack horses and mules carried it out of the wilderness. Today, a few lookouts remain. In the summer fire season a lookout scans for forest fires and reports to the ranger station by radio or satellite phone.

Chapter Eight

We all feel revived after the excitement of finding the lookout. Our packs feel lighter as we walk along the ridge, the mountains all around us. We clean out a few water bars and cut out one dead tree, but there isn't much work to do. I feel like a backpacker out on a family trip in the wilderness.

For lunch, we stop at a place where we can look down at Eagle Mountain Lake, far below us in a rocky bowl. Jay is the first one to notice ripples in the water where a moose is walking. The bull moose dips his big head deep into the water to find green vegetation to eat. When he lifts his head up we can hear the splashing sound of water cascading off his wide antlers.

After lunch we follow the trail as it winds up and down along the spine of a long ridge. Jay wants me to tell him a story and I do but he keeps interrupting me to add in his own ideas. Lee's listening too but he can't stand all Jay's chatter. He speeds ahead so he can have some silence. Tom is behind us, taking photos of the alpine flowers.

When we see Lee again he's stopped and he has his head down. Jay and I catch up to him and Lee looks at us with a big grin on his face. He's got something in his hand.

"What is it?" Jay runs to get closer.

Lee opens up his hand. In his palm is a small arrowhead made of a reddish rock that is almost as smooth as glass.

"Wow." I'm jealous. Lee seems to sense when one out of hundreds of rocks in the trail is different. He's always been good at finding artifacts.

Jay wants to hold it and he lifts it carefully out of Lee's hand. Hundreds or maybe thousands of years ago people walked this ridge and perhaps this stone point was lashed to an arrow that sailed after a grouse or a rabbit. For some reason the hunter never found that arrow again. This arrowhead is finely made with delicate little chip marks forming the sharp point. Rounded edges bend in at the place the point would have been wrapped onto an arrow.

Lee lets me hold the arrowhead next. When it is in my palm I imagine the people who travelled through these mountains long, long ago. They may have been journeying from the river valleys in the west, crossing these high mountains to hunt buffalo in the plains east of here. Or perhaps they were here to escape the summer heat and to hunt elk and pick huckleberries and gather white bark pinecones, big cones filled with rich, fatty pine nuts. Dried berries and dried meat mixed with pine nuts made a natural "energy bar".

"Dad, look what Lee found!" Jay shouts as Tom walks up behind us.

I pass the little arrowhead to Tom. He touches the sharp point and feels the smooth reddish stone. "It's obsidian --rock glass -- maybe from Yellowstone," Tom says.

He tells us that this kind of stone came from a volcano. The rocks where we are standing are too coarse to make arrowheads. The people who lived here had to trade, perhaps with dried salmon, to get this kind of stone from people who lived far from these mountains.

We each hold the arrowhead again and turn it over in our hands. I imagine another family, from long, long ago, walking on this ridge in the July sunshine. They carry packs too, made of wood and woven fibers or animal skin.

Lee finds a flat rock above the trail. He looks at the arrowhead one more time then places it on the center of the rock. He covers it with a piece of white quartz, a rock like the ones the lookout at Sponge Mountain used to line his paths. Federal law says not to take any artifacts away from federal land. No one would know if we took this little arrowhead as a souvenir, but it belongs here, on this beautiful ridge. It is part of the heritage of the wilderness.

It's time to move on. We'll remember this place if we walk on this trail again.

SIDE BAR—The first people in the wilderness

For thousands of years before Europeans traveled to North America, Native people lived on the continent. They hunted and gathered and traveled the land by foot and in boats they made. Four hundred years ago the Spanish introduced horses into the Americas and soon native people in the western part of the North America used horses to travel through the mountains and across the plains.

In what is now called the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, native people who called themselves the Ni'imipu lived along big rivers in the winter and spring and moved to higher, mountainous locations in the summer. They harvested berries and

pine nuts and killed wild animals and fish to eat. They walked or rode horses through the mountains. To them, the land was free, not owned by anyone. Their descendents, the Nez Perce people, live in the valleys outside of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. They still come to the mountains to collect special plants and to hunt.

Chapter Nine

It's mid-afternoon when we get to Fish Lake Saddle and a trail junction. Our trail, Trail 206, continues along the ridge but another trail comes up from Boulder Creek and goes down the other side to Fish Lake, the biggest lake we've seen yet.

The lake is long and at one end of it the land has been cleared and made into a backcountry airstrip. Small planes can land there for a picnic or to go fishing or to camp for the night. The Fish Lake airstrip was built in 1933, long before the Wilderness Act of 1964. Back then the US Forest Service wanted to make the backcountry easier and quicker to get to.

We stand in the breeze at the top of the pass and look down at the lake. The cleared, flattened land of the airstrip doesn't seem part of the wilderness. Some people would like all the backcountry airstrips to be closed. They say they are not part of a wilderness landscape that is "untrammelled by man." But other people say it is important to keep the airstrips open, that they are useful in emergencies and when fighting fire. These people agree that no new airstrips should be built in the wilderness but that the old ones should remain.

“Dad, I need a cooking pot,” Lee says. He points to a line of snow below the pass. It’s the last remnant of a long snowdrift from the winter.

Lee takes the cooking pot and scrambles down to the snow. When he returns we sit down to eat our “wilderness ice cream.” We put small piles of the grainy snow in our bowls and sprinkle lemonade powder on top. Next we chop it in with our spoons, making delicious lemonade slush.

The icy snack makes us cold so we move to sit in the sun and discuss what we should do with the rest of the day. We could hike down to Fish Lake and say hello to the volunteer staying in the cabin at the end of the airstrip. We haven’t seen any people in three days and it could be a nice visit. If we have time we could walk along the trail to the far end of the lake to a little beach where we could swim.

Or we could follow this ridge trail over to End Butte, a rocky peak with the remains of a lookout on top. End Butte has a spectacular view of miles and miles of wilderness.

After looking at a map we decide to head over to End Butte. This has become our day to check out old lookouts. And besides, if we went to Fish Lake we’d have a long downhill hike and then miles of uphill on the way back to the pass. We’ve been working hard and End Butte is the easier option.

The trail winds along near the top of the ridge through low-growing mountain heather. The small flowers are a pretty deep pink. We’ve become ordinary hikers now after leaving our tools and backpacks at Fish Lake Pass. We feel light and strong and we chase each other along the trail, playing a game of tag.

To get to the top of End Butte we leave the main trail and follow the old lookout trail. It's been many years since pack horses took this route to the top with supplies and mail. The lookout here lived in a small glass house built on top of a high platform. At the top we find thick wooden beams collapsed against each other. The only other evidence of the cabin is a pile of melted glass and bits of metal and rusty nails.

We scramble up onto the rocks and take in the wide view. In every direction we see rows of mountains, steep valleys and long ridges. Seeing so much of the land almost makes me dizzy. Sitting on top of End Butte is like being in an airplane and looking down at the world.

"What's the name of that mountain Dad?" Jay points to a wide cliffy mountain in the Craggs, high jagged peaks to the south. One mountain seems steeper and bigger than the other mountains.

"That's Chimney Peak. Remember when we worked on the trail on the other side of it?"

Jay shrugs. He doesn't worry much about where we're going and where we've been. As long as he has time to play during the day and we're back at our van before we run out of food he's happy.

"It's above Old Man Lake." Tom says. "The place where you found the chainsaw."

Now Jay remembers. We'd camped for the night and Jay was walking along a wide log behind our campsite when he found a chainsaw hidden behind it. It looked like it had been there all winter. In the morning we called in to the ranger station on our

handheld radio and reported it. Chainsaws are definitely NOT allowed in the wilderness. If the wilderness ranger found who had been using the saw, they would receive a big fine.

“Is that Fenn Mountain?” Lee’s looking over into the Craggs, too. Fenn Mountain is the highest peak in the Craggs, though it doesn’t look like it from this angle. Tom and Lee and a friend hiked for a day to get to the pass near it, camped out and hiked all day the next day to get to the summit. Fenn Mountain doesn’t have a trail and they had to find the best way to get up its steep slopes and piles of loose rock. Even though our job is to make sure the trails in the wilderness are cleared, we enjoy the challenge of getting to mountains and lakes that don’t have trails to them. We think a wilderness needs to have good trails and wild, trail-less places that are more difficult to get to.

Tom and Lee use the binoculars to pick out mountain peaks while Jay and I look at the many ladybugs clustered on the rocks. We’ve noticed this before on the tops of rocky peaks. Do they communicate to each other saying, “meet you at the highest place around?”

The late afternoon shadows are long as we walk back to Fish Lake Pass and the air is getting cool. We look for pieces of firewood as we get closer to the place we left our backpacks. We’ll make a little campfire, big enough to boil water for our soup, pasta and hot chocolate, but no bigger. Even though very few people camp up here we don’t want to use up all the dead wood. The trees are small on this ridge, and there aren’t many. When the trees die their remains will decay, or they’ll be turned to ash if a forest fire comes through. That ash will help nourish new plants and trees.

Tom and Jay put up the tent while Lee and I get the fire going for dinner. We arrange the wood into layers and set our cooking pots on top. If we make sure to keep an

eye on the fire we should be able to cook our food before the wood burns all the way through and the neat pile collapses.

We're still carrying a box of chocolate pudding mix and after we've eaten our spaghetti we decide it's time for that treat. We mix it with powdered milk and water and Tom stirs the mixture over the coals of the fire until it thickens. The package says to let the pudding cool, but we're not going to wait. As the last of the sunlight fades from the sky we sit on the ground licking sweet, warm chocolate pudding off our spoons.

SIDEBAR—Opposition to Wilderness

Some people say we shouldn't "lock up" land as wilderness. They say we might need that land for harvesting trees or looking for oil. Some people say that it's not fair that motorcycles and ATVs and snowmobiles and mountain bikes can't go into the wilderness. It's too difficult to hike in, they say, and some people don't have horses to ride.

We should be allowed to use chainsaws, they say. It takes too long to cut firewood and clear the trail with a crosscut saw.

These people have a different idea of how the wild places in the United States should be used. They do not want any more land to be designated as wilderness.

Chapter Ten

"See you at the spring." Lee is almost running as he heads down the trail, his pack bouncing on his back. It won't take him long to get to the little stream of water that pours

out of the mountainside, the closest water to Fish Lake Pass. We'll eat our granola there and fill up our water bottles. Lee's got his book in his hand. He wants to read before the rest of us get to the spring for breakfast. He stayed up late reading and his book must be very exciting.

"I want to go with Lee." Jay is suddenly in a rush to get out of camp, too.

"Put your soldiers in their plastic bag," Tom says. He's stuffing Jay's fluffy sleeping bag into a small nylon bag. It's a job that's hard for Jay to do.

Tom tosses me the stuffed sleeping bag and I tie it on to the bottom of Jay's pack, another job that Jay's not very good at yet. I could practice the task with him this morning, but we're all eager to get on the trail. Today we'll hike many miles down the Boulder Creek Trail. Another crew cleared this trail so we'll be able to move fast. It's the start of our hike back to the edge of the wilderness and the campground where we've left our van.

At the spring we find Lee sitting under a tree, his nose in his book. He takes a short break to gobble down a bowl of granola, then he hefts his pack on his back and bounds down the trail, shovel in one hand, his book in the other.

"Hey Lee, wait!" Jay stands up.

"Let him go, Jay. He's near the end of a good book." I put my hand on Jay's bowl of granola. He almost knocked it over when he stood up and we don't have much extra food. We've got enough food for one more breakfast, two more lunches and one dinner.

It doesn't take long for the three of us to finish our breakfast, rinse out our bowls, fill our water bottles and get on the trail again. The trail here descends in long, gentle

switchbacks. It's easy hiking through open woods of spruce and subalpine fir and lodgepole pine.

I'm the last one in line. I enjoy having the quiet woods around me. I always see more animals when I linger behind. Once, when I was far behind the others, a badger thought all the noisy humans had passed by. It scrambled out of its hole and started walking down the trail. When it saw me, it quickly turned around and sped away, its loose floppy skin and fur swaying as it ran.

As we near the creek we walk through sunny meadows of tall grasses and flowers. Jay and I each pick a bright Indian paintbrush flower and pretend to paint red stripes across the sky.

"Hey, look." Tom's bent down over a muddy spot in the trail. Fresh prints, like a big dog's, press into the mud. "It may have walked this way last night, or early this morning."

Jay puts his hand down near the trail. The paw print is far bigger than his palm. "Is this from a wolf or a coyote?" He asks.

"A wolf." Tom puts his hand down next to the track. "When the track's as big as my hand, it's a wolf."

I wonder if there's a pack of wolves at the top of this valley. We haven't heard any on this trip, though we may have been sleeping soundly and missed their howling. Once, on a moonlit night, I camped at a high alpine lake near here and heard a wolf begin a howl that was taken up by other wolves in its pack. The howling sounded like music with a wild, fierce melody.

As we continue walking I notice that all three of us are looking around, hoping to catch a glimpse of a wolf. The chances are slim. If there are wolves nearby, they've heard us and will not be in plain sight. I've seen wolf tracks many times, but I've never seen a wolf in the wild. Once Tom caught a glimpse of a black wolf running across a meadow. We don't worry about wolves hurting us. They are much more likely to run away.

We find Lee leaning against a rock and looking at the clear water of Boulder Creek. His book is closed beside him.

"You finished it?" Tom says.

Lee nods. He seems far away, as if he is still inside the story he just read.

"Was it a good book?" I ask.

"Really good." Lee stands up. "So, let's get going."

"Hey, we just got here." Tom swings off his pack and lowers the heavy weight to the ground. He shrugs his shoulders up and down to get rid of their stiffness.

"You want to play with my army men, Lee?" Jay knows that now Lee doesn't have an excuse. He's finished his book.

"Maybe." Lee walks over to touch the creek water. It's so clear we can see every stone on the bottom. Small trout dart into the shadows. Up here, at the top of the valley, the creek doesn't have much water and it winds through the meadow as if it doesn't know where it's going. We'll be walking alongside this creek for the rest of the day and it will continue to gain volume from many small creeks that join it.

Jay has his plastic troops out of his pack and is placing the red ones in position at the top of a big rock. "You get green, Lee."

We stay in the shade. I listen to Jay and Lee discuss battle strategies and behind them hear the soft gurgle of the creek sliding over rocks. Up on the slope the leaves on a cluster of aspen trees rustle, a pretty sound, like gentle waves pushing against a rocky beach. If I listen very carefully I can hear bees and flies rushing past. For me, part of the pleasure of being in the wilderness is to be far away from the sounds of cars and trucks and lawnmowers and chainsaws.

Tom is lying down in the grass, his hat covering his face. I think he's taking a nap but then he sits up and leaps to his feet. "Horses!" He pulls his pack out of the trail.

In an instant I'm standing too, sweeping up a pile of army men and dragging my pack further from the trail. "Boys, get your packs, now!"

SIDEBAR – The reintroduction of wolves into the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness

A hundred years ago people were paid to kill the wolves and grizzly bears in Idaho. In fact, most of the wolves in the entire Lower 48 were killed.

Fifteen years ago wolves were re-introduced into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The wolves found plenty of food—rodents, deer, elk and other animals—and the population grew quickly. Now visitors to the wilderness may hear the howling of wolves or see a wolf run across a meadow.

Wolves have been on the Endangered Species list for the United States but some people believe that now too many wolves roam in the woods of Idaho. They have requested a hunting season for wolves, the same way deer and elk have a hunting season. Recently a hunting season was approved.

Chapter Eleven

We hear the thudding of hooves first, then the creak of leather. A horse comes around a bend in the trail and the rider is wearing a light green United States Forest Service shirt and a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. His left hand holds the reins of the first pack horse. Three other animals, a horse and two mules, follow.

“Whoa.” The rider speaks softly and his horse stops. We make sure we’re far off the trail, and our packs are too. Skittish horses and mules may jump around if they see bright-colored objects along the trail. The pack animals are all tied together so if one animal falls off the trail it will pull down the others, causing a wreck. If they’re at a steep place on the trail they could tumble a long way down. A broken leg would be the end of a horse out here. It would have to be shot.

“Nice morning.” Tom says.

“Yup.” The packer looks at us and sees our shovels leaning against a tree. “Doing some trail work?”

“We’re on our way out.” Tom says. “We’ve been up on Eagle Mountain and before that Long Lake.”

The packer nods. His horse paws the ground. “I’m taking a load of supplies up to Fish Lake, a new volunteer’s coming in. You’ll see him on the trail today.”

The packer tips his head at us, his hat shading his face. He signals to his horse and they go forward. Behind him the big mules and horses walk along, stepping carefully and snorting when they go past us. On their backs they have pairs of big rectangular boxes wrapped up in canvas and tied up with rope, like a giant’s birthday presents.

“They must have been at Horse Camp last night,” Lee says when the string is out of sight. Horse Camp is a Forest Service outpost on the Boulder Creek trail with a small cabin and a corral for horses.

“And they left there early.” I imagine the packer getting up before dawn to put saddles on his stock and heave the heavy boxes up onto their sides.

“We need to saddle up, too.” Tom’s got his pack up his knee, bracing it before he swings it up onto his back.

The trail is churned up from the heavy hooves of the horses and they’ve knocked some new rocks loose. The trails we maintain are designed for horses—not too steep and wide enough most places for two pack strings to pass each other. In some wilderness areas the trails are very steep and rocky, fit for humans to scramble up, but not horses.

I take a big step over a pile of fresh horse manure and continue walking.

In another couple of miles we meet the volunteer. He’s walking up the trail with a daypack and a hiking stick. We stop to chat and he tells us he’s from Chicago and he loves to go to the wilderness in the summer for his vacation. For two weeks he’ll be checking in with the people who land airplanes at the Fish Lake airstrip. He’ll have time to go hiking and swimming and to read lots of books. When we say goodbye he heads up the trail with a bounce in his step.

Our next landmark is the Forest Service cabin at Horse Camp. The dusty corral is empty and we don’t see any boots on the front porch. Our friend Sarah Walker is a wilderness ranger who often uses this cabin when she is in the area checking out campsites. We won’t run in to her today.

We stop for lunch at a bend in Boulder Creek, not far past Horse Camp, a place we know has a deep pool for swimming. We sit on the small beach, partly rocks and partly sand and take off our shoes and socks.

“Ah...” Tom stretches out his toes. “My feet needed a break.”

Lee is the first one to take off his clothes and dive into the creek. I sometimes think he is part seal. He’s happy to swim in cold water, long after the rest of us have gotten shivery and put our clothes back on.

Jay wants to join his brother but the water is cold and he stands on the edge, jumping up and down. The water isn’t as cold as it is in the spring when the snow is melting, but it never gets very warm.

“Get in, you chicken,” Lee says, splashing water all over Jay.

“Stop it!” Jay runs out of the clear water, away from the cold splashing.

Tom runs in, making a big wave as he dives into the deeper water. Jay can’t stand not being part of the fun and he tries again, making it up to his waist, but holding his arms above his head so they won’t get wet.

Lee and Tom chase after each other, swimming hard when they try to go upstream and floating easily down in the strong current. Jay and I watch the game from the shallows. Jay’s not a strong swimmer and as much as he’d like to play out in the deep water he knows he can’t.

After we’ve all at least dunked under, we dry off in the sun and then find a shady place to eat lunch. Our cheese is getting soft and oily and we’re getting tired of the same crackers every day. We still have a small bag of dried mango and a bag of salted peanuts. They taste new and different and we pass around the bags, eating every bite.

Lee has finished his book, but we still have a read-aloud book. We rest in the shade as Tom reads. We only have a few more miles to hike this afternoon, and no trees to cut, so we're in no hurry. When we put our packs back on after the long lunch break they don't seem as heavy. I wonder if we look as bouncy and happy as the volunteer did when he headed up the trail.

SIDE BAR—On foot in the wilderness

No motors or wheels are allowed in federal wilderness in the United States. All materials that are needed—lumber for cabins, food for workers, instruments for scientists – must be carried in with human or animal power. Packers are men and women who know how to care for horses and pack up the heavy loads that each horse or mule will carry. They tie the animals together in a line called a string and ride or walk at the front of it. The animals can get spooked by a snake in the trail or by people who don't know how to step aside when the string goes by. The packers know how to calm the animals and get them to their destination.

Other animals can be used to carry loads into the wilderness. Some people use llamas. Others have goats. These animals can't carry as much weight, but they also don't need as much food.

Chapter Twelve

The next section of the trail goes through a rockslide, a curving pathway built of small rocks and sand. It took a trail crew many weeks to create this path through the boulder field. Every day they carried rocks and hauled buckets of sand. Now it's an easy

walk on a smooth path surrounded by jagged rocks. I wonder what this trail was like before that trail work. It may have climbed high above the rocks or gone through wet, muddy areas near Boulder Creek.

Jay wants to walk with Lee, and Tom stays with them. They're telling a story as they walk and I let myself slow a bit so I can hear the sounds of the woods instead. It's quiet in mid-afternoon with a few chirps of a bird and the chatter of a red squirrel. The loudest sound is Boulder Creek, a big rushing torrent of water now, water that drops off rocks and swirls into eddies.

It startles me to hear voices ahead, voices that don't belong to my family. When I turn the next corner I see animals in the trail. They're smaller than horses, and softer looking. They're... llamas! I know I'm smiling as I walk up to say hello. Llamas are such an unusual sight in this wilderness. They make me think I've been transported to high mountain trails in the Andes of Peru, except that these llamas have brightly-colored nylon packs on their backs

The people with the llamas are happy to learn that the higher trails are cleared. They're on a week-long trip and plan to get to some of the mountain lakes to go fishing. The llamas aren't big enough to carry a person but their packs hold food and gear so the humans don't have to carry as much on their backs.

Jay is hiding behind Tom. He's heard stories about llamas spitting and being mean. These llamas look gentle, but I decide not to try to pet one. We say goodbye and the group moves up the trail as we continue hiking downstream.

We all know what we want to do first when we get to our camping spot near Huckleberry Flats. We lean our packs against a big spruce and head off on the trail to Stanley Hot Springs.

The trail goes into a clearing at a campsite where horses have been tied to trees. Horses can trample rings around trees, damaging the tree's roots. Most horse groups are more responsible and tie their horses along a "high line", a rope stretched between two trees. They let their animals graze in the pasture but they also bring horse pellets—pressed together hay and grain-- so the horses have food and can leave some of the grassy pasture for other grazing animals, like deer and elk.

At Boulder Creek we're glad to see that the huge dead tree across the creek is still there. In the early summer this can be a dangerous place because the high, cold water is deep enough to make it very difficult to get across the creek. With this natural bridge, it's easy to scramble up to the tree's wide trunk and walk across. We look down to watch the cold water of the creek swirl by underneath. The tree crossing takes us to an island and from there we find more logs that hikers have put into place to cross the rest of the creek. We don't even get our boots wet.

The trail to the hot springs winds through a grove of big cedar trees and the ground is shaded and moist. Delicate maidenhair ferns line the trail and pale pink fairy slipper orchids. It feels magical, as if there should be elves and unicorns hiding behind the trees.

The hot springs feel supernatural, too. How strange it is to have hot water pouring out of the earth. Deep in the ground the water here passes over hot rocks and rises up to

the surface. The pool closest to the source of the hot water is too hot to sit in, but the pools farther down are a perfect bathwater temperature.

We don't see any tents at the campsites and the pools are empty. We take off our boots and socks and clothes and slide into the pools. The warm water relaxes our muscles and the hot springs soak is a perfect ending to our long day on the trail.

SIDE BAR—Wilderness Rangers

Wilderness rangers travel by foot or horse and keep an eye on what is happening in the wilderness. In the summer they check campsites to make sure they're not left in a mess. In the fall they visit hunting camps and talk with the hunters about keeping fires small and reducing human impact on the land. Sometimes they pull out invasive weeds, trying to keep the plants from taking over the native vegetation.

SIDE BAR—How much is enough in the wilderness?

Trails in the wilderness need yearly maintenance work to cut out branches and trees that have fallen in the trail. Sometimes spring rains wash away part of the trail or trees fall and the roots pull away part of the tread. Sometimes a trail that gets lots of use may become a muddy trench. How much should be done to fix these trails?

Some people believe a wilderness area should have very few trails. They say when trees fall across trails, leave them there. When a gaping hole makes the trail impossible for horses to get across, fine. It should be difficult for people to travel in

the wilderness. They should have to use a map and a compass to find their way, not a trail.

Other people believe a wilderness area should have good trails. They say trails are an appropriate way to see wild country, by hiking or by using pack animals. Trails need to be kept wide open, they say. And new trails may be needed.

In the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Montana and Idaho, some areas have trails and some areas do not. The Forest Service pays trail crews to clear trails. Some trails have not been cleared in many years and they are now difficult to find. Visitors to areas with no trails use good maps and must travel slowly, following ridges and their compasses or GPS.

Chapter Thirteen

Tom is the first one awake this morning. I hear the sound of the tent zipper and open my eyes. As he crawls out Jay wakes up too. He sits up in his sleeping bag, his dark hair wild around his head.

“Dad. Is this the day we hike back to the van?”

“It is.”

“And can we go to the Wilderness Inn and get hamburgers and French fries?”

Jay is very fond of the little restaurant about twenty miles down the Locha River Road from the campground where we left our van.

“Yes.”

Jay puts on his pants and fleece jacket and jumps on Lee to wake him up. “C’mon Lee. We need to get going.”

Lee wiggles deeper into his sleeping bag.

When I poke my head out of the tent I see Tom with his work gloves on. He's picking up handfuls of cold ashes from our campfire and throwing them into the brush to "no trace" our cooking fire from dinner. With Tom out of the tent I have room to stuff sleeping bags in their sacks and roll up our sleeping pads. I can tell by his deep, even breathing that Lee is asleep again.

I carry the sleeping bags and pads over to our packs and strap them on. Every morning on the trail we follow this same pattern as we break camp. All the gear that's been scattered around the campsite has to be put in bags and small bundles and go back into the packs.

Jay likes to help by pulling out the tent stakes. This morning the job is particularly fun as Lee is still inside. Jay and I rattle the poles and pretend we're taking them down.

"Stop!" Lee's voice is loud. "Let me get out." He comes bursting out the tent door dragging his sleeping bag and pad.

We think about crossing Boulder Creek and hiking back to the hot springs for a morning soak, but we want to hike the six miles of trail out to the campground before the afternoon. Most of that part of the trail faces to the west and gets very hot with the afternoon sun on it.

Our eyes blink and squint when we come out of the cool, dark woods into the sunlight. A grassy, rocky slope leads up away from the river. The plants are turning brown and will soon be bone dry. If lightning strikes here there will be plenty of fuel to create a quick flash of flame up the slope to the trees.

We walk along in the sunshine and in one place a sweet smell comes from the soil. I bend down to look for the wild strawberries, tiny berries no bigger than half a raisin. Each miniscule berry has a huge burst of strawberry flavor.

The trail curves into the shade of leafy drainages then returns us to the sunshine of the open slopes. A wide straight ponderosa pine next to the trail has flaky bark that smells of vanilla and cinnamon.

After a couple of miles we meet a group of hikers going in to the hot springs for the day. Their clothes are white and clean and they smell like flowery soap. It seems a strange scent, not something that belongs in the woods. I look at the four of us in our stained t-shirts and dirty pants. We look like we've been mud wrestling.

We stop to talk to the hikers and they're amazed at how long we've been in the woods, and how far we've walked. One of them says to Jay, "What's it like carrying that big pack? "

Jay looks at me, wondering what he is supposed to say. He's been carrying a pack for years. At first he carried a little daypack with his stuffed animals. Now it's easy for him to carry his sleeping bag and pad, his water bottle, his bag of snacks and his book and sketch pad.

"It's fine," Jay says, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The hiker laughs. "You're a tough little guy." He waves as he heads up the trail with his group.

On the last mile of trail we reach a place where we can look down at Boulder Creek below and across it to the campground road and the parking lot. "I see our van!" Jay points to the blue Volkswagon.

“Yes!” Lee picks up his pace, starting his sprint on the final stretch of trail.

Jay follows his big brother. Now there is no stopping him. He moves his small legs faster and speeds down the trail. Tom and I let the boys go first and we walk together.

“It’s been a good hitch,” I say.

“Yup. Almost no rain and not many difficult trees,” Tom says.

“Where should we go next week?”

We’re leaving the wilderness but we can’t wait to get back.

Notes

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