

THE SPIRIT OF WHITE BEAR ISLAND

a novel by

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## ABSTRACT

When thirteen-year-old Nate finds himself in an unfamiliar wilderness setting and a dangerous situation, he must deal with personal fears, sibling rivalry, and physical challenges in order to help his father and to survive.

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# THE SPIRIT OF WHITE BEAR ISLAND

by Maureen Joy Miller

## Chapter One

Monday morning, when the mid-August sun was halfway up in the sky, thirteen-year-old Nate sat at the stern of the powerboat and wondered if he would be able to do it.

Five days of hiking and camping on White Bear Island – his father's favourite place to go to enjoy the wilderness. Nate listened as his father's friend, Trevor, cut the engine and coasted to the dock at Barnacle Point on the northern tip of the island.

A seal that had been sunning itself on the rocky shore slid into the calm water and disappeared, barely leaving a ripple. Everything was so quiet. Except for Roger.

"Awesome! We're here," said Roger, as soon as the boat came to a stop. He stood up quickly and jumped onto the dock, making the boat lean to one side.

Nate's stomach lurched. He gripped the side of the boat.

Dad stepped onto the dock. "Coming Nate?"

Nate looked at the island in front of him. All he could see was dense bush. He took a deep breath and joined Dad.

"See you back here at four on Friday," said Trevor, handing over the packs.

"Call me on your cell phone if by chance I'm not here right at four if you want to find out my time of arrival."

"Will do," said Dad.

Trevor thrust the boat into reverse. "Have a great time!"

"Thanks, buddy," said Dad. "We will, won't we guys?"

"I'm counting on it," said Roger, giving Nate a quick sideways glance.

Nate swallowed hard. "Thanks for the ride, Trevor."

"Okay," said Dad, putting on his pack. "Here's the plan. It's already ten o'clock. We'll hike until about noon, have some lunch, maybe have a snack in between, and then we'll head for our first campsite. Each day we'll aim to reach our destination by four so there's lots of time to get settled for the night—"

"If we don't get going, we'll never get there," said Roger.

Dad laughed. "We'll try to get to the summit of White Bear Mountain by Tuesday afternoon. That'll get the hard work of climbing over with and we'll be able to spend the last three days leisurely coming back and having fun. Sound okay?"

"Perfect," said Roger.

*Sounds grueling,* thought Nate. He unzipped his waist pouch and took out a pen and a small travel diary that Mom had given him for the trip. Ever since he had learned to write journals in Grade Three, he liked to record new experiences and observations. Like the time Dad took him to the Space Centre and the

aquarium in Stanley Park when the family was on holiday in Vancouver. He drew diagrams of the solar system and made lists of tropical fish.

Now, Nate began his new diary.

*Monday, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 10:03 a.m.*

*Beginning hike on White Bear Island.*

*Clear and warm. Let's hope it stays this way –*

*"You're not going to write in that thing all the time we're here are you?"*

asked Roger.

Nate put the diary and pen back in his pouch.

Dad winked at Nate. "There'll be time. Okay, let's go." Roger followed Dad and Nate brought up the rear. Dad led them to a trail and into the bush. Almost immediately it was darker, as towering conifers filtered out the sun.

Nate pulled out his diary again, stopped walking, and gave a new page a heading:

PLANTS ON WHITE BEAR ISLAND

*Thuja plicata:*

*Western red cedar – stringy bark, flattened leaves.*

*Picea sitchensis:*

*Sitka spruce – scaly bark, bluish green needles.*

*Tsuga heterophylla:*

*Western hemlock (identified from boat) – droopy tips.*



"Coming Nate?" asked Dad. Nate looked up from his diary and saw that he had lagged behind. He put the diary back in his pouch and caught up with Dad and Roger.

Roger rolled his eyes.

"You do know where we're going, don't you?" asked Nate after a few minutes.

"Of course," said Dad. "Besides, I keep a map in my pocket and a compass in my pack in case we get lost."

*That's a relief. But then of course you would. You must have been here a dozen times.* Dad was a naturalist. He had his own company – *Natrek Ltd.* He gave lectures and slide presentations about ecology and guided people in the wilderness. Mom looked after the business part of things. Sometimes Dad showed his slides at home. Nate's favourites were the time-lapsed ones of fern fiddleheads uncurling.

"Does anyone live here?" asked Nate.

"No," said Dad. "The island's uninhabited except for a small fishing lodge at Otter Inlet on the eastern side. It should be quite busy right now, what with the salmon spawning. We won't be going there, though. We'll be staying on this end of the island. So, it will be just us and the bears."

"Grrrr!" said Roger, turning and raising his fingers like claws at his brother.

Nate swallowed hard. Dad had told them both that the island was home to myriad animals, such as wolves, wolverines, foxes, and deer. And he'd also told

them the island was home to black bears and their rare offspring, the white Kermode bear—the white bear that was sometimes affectionately called the Spirit Bear. *Ursus americanus kermodei*. Nate found it fascinating that a mother black bear could give birth to a black bear and a white bear. Fraternal twins. Just like Roger and him.

Once Dad had also told them about a Northwest Coast First Nations' legend he'd heard about the Spirit Bear, how the Raven made the bear white to remind everyone that the land was once covered with glaciers. Really the bear was white because of a double-recessive gene—at least according to one scientific theory. But the legend held more magic. Nate especially liked that some First Nations' people believed the bear had spiritual powers and would help people in distress. But he didn't want to put the belief to the test. A bear was still a bear. Black or white, bears had big claws and very sharp teeth.

"We won't run into any will we?" asked Nate.

"Not likely," said Dad. "Bears by nature like to stay away from humans. And the Spirit Bear is very elusive. In all my visits to the island, I've never yet seen one."

"I wouldn't mind running into a bear," said Roger. He punched the air a few times and growled.

"I think we should just stay out of their way and read about them in books," said Nate.

"Boring," said Roger.

*Books or me? Silly question. I know that he means both.*

It hadn't always been that way. When they were really little, they were inseparable. They spent hours playing in their back yard where Dad had built them a swing set and a fort. But things began to change when they started school. As soon as Nate learned to read, he consumed all kinds of books. His favourite had been *The Swiss Family Robinson* – until he discovered Dad's botany books. He spent so many hours getting snippets of plants and then looking them up in Dad's books that once Dad said, "You're a budding naturalist. Get it?"

Roger read comics. When he first started reading them in Grade One, he went around the house, punching the air, saying, "BLAST! BAM! BOOM!" In Grade Two his hero was Superman. By Grade Three he wanted to be Max Mercury because of his tremendous speed. Roger's friends called him Mercury; sometimes Mom and Dad and Nate did too.

Roger always wanted to run and jump everywhere. Once in their Grade Two gym class, when everyone else, including Nate, was quietly sitting in a circle, Roger kept doing running long jumps. The teacher had to call him again and again to rejoin the class. Roger kept running and jumping. The teacher turned to Nate and said, "It's really amazing. You and Roger are as different as chalk and cheese."

Now, Roger was still jumping – this time over logs and roots. He seemed to take over the forest just by being there.

Nate ignored Roger and instead observed the plant life around him. Many of the plants were ones he recognized around his home at nearby Prince Rupert. Tangles of knee-high, leathery-leaved salal abounded, as did sword ferns and bracken. Moss covered just about everything—logs, rocks, and the dark sides of trees. Much of the trail was like a bright green carpet, cushiony under feet. He made a mental note to add these plants to his list.

He was glad there was a trail. It wasn't wide, and sometimes it wasn't all that easy to see. The forest seemed determined to obscure it, to cover it, to reclaim it from any human activity. But without a trail of any kind, the forest would be difficult to hike through.

He walked carefully. One false move and he knew he'd be flat on his back or eating dirt, either one a perfect position for Roger to have a good laugh. Or a sneer.

Roger. Fast and strong. Nate watched his brother from behind, his muscular legs, the way he practically jogged through the forest as if it were second nature to him. *Who'd ever believe that he is only ten minutes older than I? He's much more like Dad – tall, brown-haired, and athletic.*

Roger was the star centre of his hockey team, the Prince Rupert Wolves, and the best batter and pitcher of the Prince Rupert Slammers. Dad liked to hike and rock-climb. A couple of years ago, Roger started hiking with Dad. Without Nate.

Not that Dad hadn't asked him to join them on previous hikes. It's just that he had always declined, saying that there was something else he had to do. Really he preferred to stay home and read. His mind was full of the things he'd learned about and the places he'd visited via the page—places that Roger had never seen. Loch Ness. The Great Wall of China. Stonehenge. Once when Roger was leaving for a hockey game and Nate was absorbed in a *National Geographic* magazine, reading about the Nile and the Mississippi, Roger said, "You should dump that magazine and do something real." Nate had thought, *What's real?*

Now, after hiking for an hour, Nate's feet ached in his new hiking boots. Wearing them around the house for a few days to break them in just wasn't the same as tramping over rocks and roots. *Is this what Roger meant about real?*

When they came to a clearing, he was glad Dad suggested a short break. Nate sat on a log and wiped his forehead. The air was warm and humid and his entire body was coated in a light sweat. He drank long, hard gulps from his water bottle.

"Anything to eat?" asked Roger. "I've got major growlies."

*What's new?* Roger had the biggest appetite of anyone he knew. Mom said it must have something to do with growth spurts. On his tenth birthday, he had eaten ten hotdogs and ten dill pickles. He didn't even get sick. He dared Nate to do the same. Nate ate four hotdogs and threw up. He passed on the dill pickles.

"Here, let's each have one of Mom's granola bars," Dad said.

"I could eat the whole bag," said Roger.

"I'm sure," laughed Dad. "But we have to make our food supply last."

Nate chewed the buttery oatmeal slowly. What he really wanted was a long rest. He was already tired. And why not? He'd got up at five a.m., an unthinkable hour for a night owl, and it was now almost eleven. And hiking through the forest wasn't exactly like a casual stroll in a park. He took off a boot and rubbed the back of his heel.

"Got a blister?" asked Roger.

Nate quickly put his boot back on.

"If you do, I've got some Band-Aids and moleskin in the first aid kit," said Dad.

"No thanks," said Nate. He stood up and walked around making sure that he didn't limp.

"Right, then let's keep going," said Dad. "The next place we stop will be Bear Creek Ravine."

## Chapter Two

The roar of water told Nate they were there.

Roger charged through a small, sunny clearing over to the edge of the cliff, lay down on his stomach, and hung his head over the edge. "Whoah!" he said.

"Hey, Nate, dare you to take a look at this!"

*Why does Roger always have to dare me?* Five years old. Backyard. "Hey Nate, dare you to climb to the top of the tree." "No thanks." "Chicken." Three quarters of the way up, Nate had missed a branch and fallen. The wind was knocked out of him. Roger said, "That looked SO funny," and laughed. Dad said, "You were lucky. It could have been much more serious." Nate had been cautious about everything physical ever since.

"I think I'll help Dad get lunch ready," Nate said, now noticing that Dad was getting food out of his pack and placing it on a stump in the middle of the clearing.

"Why did you even bother to come?" asked Roger.

*So I wouldn't disappoint Dad. You know that Dad wishes we would do more things together. He was so excited about this trip, saying it would be a special celebration for us going into high school, how could I say no?*

"Why don't you take a look?" asked Dad. "It's pretty spectacular." He poured some powder into a plastic jug.

*I'd rather not.* Nate crawled to the edge and looked down. *Dizzy!* He closed his eyes momentarily and forced himself to look down again.

It was a deep canyon. The sides of the ravine sheered away almost vertically. A few sparsely scattered trees clung to outcrops of rocks and gave way to low, scrubby brush. At the bottom of the ravine, a narrow creek crashed over huge granite boulders.

Roger gave a fist-sized rock a hard downward toss.

Nate watched as it sailed through the air and disappeared into the white water below. *Glad that's not me.* He shimmied away and went back to Dad.

Dad held out some sandwiches. "Here, I made them this morning before we left."

As fast as a wasp, Roger was there. He helped himself to a couple and went back and sat at the top of the cliff.

Nate stayed well away. He found a small spot in the sun and ate his lunch. The sandwiches were his favourite—tuna and celery.

They almost made up for being there. He chewed slowly, twenty times for each bite—something he made a point of doing ever since he'd read in one of Mom's nutrition books that it helped digestion—and brushed a few crumbs off his lap.

A blue and black bird with a black crest on its head glided down from a tree and pecked at the crumbs.



"Ah, a Steller's jay," said Dad. "Hiker's companion. It's a relative of the raven, you know."

Nate made a note in his diary.

"*Cyanocitta stelleri*," said Dad from his place at the stump. "Cy an o c itta steller i. It—"

"Is there anything to drink besides water?" asked Roger.

"Oh, yes," said Dad. "I made up some SPO." Salt & potassium & orange-crystals — Dad's rehydrating drink.

Nate had a cup and lay back under the midday sun. He would have liked to stay there to rest, but Dad had other ideas.

"Let's not get too comfortable," he said. "We've got a ways to go before we can sleep."

Before leaving, they filled their water bottles at a small but fast running stream.

Nate plunged his hands into the water and quickly withdrew them. "Yikes, this is cold!"

"Nice and refreshing," said Dad. "If you think that's cold, on the other side of the mountain there's an alpine lake I'll take you to that feels like ice."

"Can I go swimming in it?" asked Roger.

*Why would you want to?*

"Well, truth be known, I've done a quick dip in it," said Dad, "but it's not recommended."

"I'd still like to try it," said Roger.

*Not me.*

"We'll see," grinned Dad. "Coming Nate?"

Once again, Nate fell into his place at the end of the line. While Roger and Dad chattered about swimming in lakes, he concentrated on where he was going. Vines caught at his feet, making each step rough going.

As he climbed a hill, he became short of breath. The weight and awkwardness of the pack were getting to him. His pack straps dug into his shoulders and the hatchet, which was slung from one of the shoulder straps, thumped against his arm. The leather cover on the blade did little to soften the blows. It hadn't bothered him before, but now he was feeling bruised. *Should I stop and reposition it? No, Roger will just say I'd do anything to stop hiking.*

And there was Roger, easily striding behind Dad.

*How come I had to get the short legs? I practically have to sprint to keep up.*

A little farther along the path, Dad vaulted over a rotting log and then stopped to examine it. "Take a look at this. It's what's called a nurse-log...as it decays, other plants seed themselves."

Nate remembered reading about nurse logs in Dad's *Forest Ecology* book. This log was already host to ferns, a young cedar tree, and a bush with sprays of red berries that Nate didn't recognize.

Roger reached for the berries.

"Don't eat those!" said Dad. "That's devil's club." He looked at Nate.

"*Oplopanax horribus*. Bears like the berries, but they're poisonous to humans."

"Too bad," said Roger, withdrawing his hand. "They look delicious."

While Roger wasn't looking, Nate described the devil's club in his diary – *Oplopanx horribus (check spelling): thorny branches, big, lobed leaves* – and drew a skull and crossbones. *Note to self: Read up on edible plants.*

Soon they came across a different path. This one was tidy, as if it had been groomed.

"Wow! Huge footprints!" said Roger. He put one foot in a footprint. It was twice as big as his shoe.

"Bear trail," said Dad. "Bears use the same trail and step in the same footprints year after year."

Roger made a game of hunching over and stepping in the footprints.

"Should we be walking on a bear trail?" asked Nate, remembering a picture he'd seen in his *Bears and Their Habitats* book that Mom and Dad had given him for his birthday in June.

"I've used this one before," said Dad. "Just up ahead there's something else you might like to see."

*Not if it's large and furry.*

A few minutes later, Dad stopped them again. "Now take a look at this."

He put his hand on the trunk of a Sitka spruce tree. A few feet off the ground, the bark had been rubbed away, creating a rough, concave surface. Tufts of black fur were caught in the remaining patchy scales of bark.

"Is this a scratching tree?" asked Nate, recalling another picture. He touched the fur. It was slightly coarse.

"Yes," said Dad. "No-one really knows why bears use them. Maybe to clean their fur, maybe to leave their scent."

Roger rubbed his back against the tree. "Hmmm. Feels grrreat!"

"Bears have such a keen sense of smell," said Nate. "If they can smell each other, wouldn't they be able to smell us too?"

"No doubt," said Dad. "But they would take that as a warning to stay away." *I hope.*

As they continued along the path, Nate was sure that some of the bushes had been recently nibbled. The ends of the branches were still green, but leafless. He darted his eyes around and purposely made sure he didn't step in any of the footprints. Even more than the trail, the footprints belonged to the bears. He felt as if he were an intruder.

Then one of his feet sank into something squishy.

"Ugh! What's this?" he asked, staring down at his boot that was now covered in brown mush and then guessing what it was.

"Bear scat!" cheered Dad, as if Nate had just discovered gold. "How did I miss that?"

Nate quickly withdrew his foot and shook off the scat.

"Think it will bite?" laughed Roger.

Nate glared at him and then used a large leaf to wipe off his boot.

"But it's not too fresh," said Dad, poking it with a stick. "See, no steam."

"Bummer," said Roger.

Dad laughed.

"You said we wouldn't see any bears," said Nate, his chest tightening.

"We probably won't," said Dad. "This one's long gone. But if you're nervous, every once in a while blow your whistle. Between that and our talking, the bears won't even come close."

"Are you sure?" asked Nate, looking all around.

"Positive," said Dad. "Come on, Nate, try not to worry."

Nate looked around again and then squinted to see as far ahead as possible.

Nothing but trees. He took a deep breath and began walking forward, eager to get away. Roger bounded past him.

"Wait-up!" said Dad. "You don't know the way and it's important that we all stick together."

When the bear trail veered off in a direction Dad didn't want to take, he took another trail. Nate sighed with relief. He didn't even mind when annoying little black flies persistently flew at his face. He just swatted them away, glad that he hadn't had to fend off anything bigger.

Once again, he became absorbed with the forest—the musty smells, the dappling of sunlight, the bright to dark greens.

After another couple of hours of hiking in dense forest, they reached a larger clearing of short and long grasses.

“Good, we’re here,” said Dad.

Nate blinked rapidly to adjust to the brightness of the slanting sun, took off his pack, and rotated his shoulders.

“So, how do you like it?” asked Dad, shedding his pack, too. “It’s almost four o’clock. Seem like a good place to spend the night?”

Nate thought it looked peaceful—like an open-air room.

“Suits me,” said Roger. “Now can we eat?”

Dad grinned. “You and your appetite! How about we each have an apple?”

“Not dinner?” asked Roger.

“Later,” said Dad. “For now, let’s just have a snack and then we’ll set up the tents and do some exploring.”

“Can’t we explore now and put up the tents after?” asked Roger.

“No,” said Dad.

Nate sat down on a patch of short grass, bit into a crunchy red Spartan, and yawned.

Roger devoured his apple and held up his stem in front of Nate’s face. “Beat you.”

*Want a medal to add to your collection?* Roger's bedroom shelf was lined with trophies. 1<sup>st</sup> Place. Hat trick. M.V.P. His room was a mess, but all those trophies were kept perfectly neat. "Can we just set up the tents now?" asked Nate.

"Excellent idea," said Dad. "Spoken like a true camper."

*Not really. I'd just like to lie down and have a sleep.* He untied the tent that he and Roger were going to share from his pack.

Roger leapt up. "Better let me do that. It's tricky." He whisked the tent away from Nate.

*I'm quite capable.*

"Nate, how about you put up mine," said Dad. "Let's put them both here. The ground's a bit mounded, so if it rains, the water will drain away. I'll find some rocks for a rock-ring so that we can make a campfire later. It'll be nice to have a fire. It's warm out now, but the temperature will drop quite a lot by evening."

"Should we light a fire at this time of year? I mean, what about forest fires?" asked Nate.

"Worrywart," said Roger.

"It'll be okay," said Dad. "I checked before we began the trip. There's been enough rain this month, so there's no ban on fires right now. We'll just keep the fire small and douse it well with water when we're through."

Nate unraveled his father's one-person tent and unfolded the nylon poles that were in short segments connected by strings. He was still trying to figure out what to do with them when Roger already had their tent up and was hammering anchor pegs in the ground. He'd finished everything so quickly Nate hadn't noticed how he had done it. And *How to Assemble a Tent* was one book Nate hadn't read.

"Having trouble?" asked Roger.

Nate looked at the poles again and decided that one end of each segment had to be inserted into the next segment. When the poles were together, he looked at the tent for where to put them. As soon as he noticed that there were narrow nylon sleeves running outside the tent, he pushed the poles through. The tent took the shape of a dome. It hadn't been at all difficult to do. All he'd needed was time to think it through. With satisfaction, he spread out his father's plastic ground sheet, placed the tent on it, and used a rock to hammer in his anchor pegs.

Roger was tapping his feet watching Nate finish. "NOW can we go exploring?"

"Ready, Nate?" asked Dad, making a final adjustment of his rock-ring.

"Ready."

"Okay. Remember, we have to get firewood, too," said Dad.

"And green sticks for roasting marshmallows," said Roger, grinning.

"Just don't break off any branches — find something that's already fallen."



"Where should we leave our packs?" asked Nate. "I don't want anything to get them."

"Just put them in the tents for now," said Dad. "We won't be gone long."

*A bear wouldn't need much time.* Nate made sure the tent doors were zipped shut. "What about at night?" He remembered reading tips in his bear book on how to keep food away from bears. "Are we going to string the packs up off the ground?"

"You bet," said Dad. "Does that make you feel better?"

"I guess," said Nate. *Marginally.*

"Good, now before we collect that wood, let me show you a fabulous view of the mountaintop," said Dad. He led them back into the forest.

"Stay clear of the widow maker," said Dad, pointing to a cedar tree directly in front of them.

"What's a widow maker?" asked Nate.

"It's a branch that's broken off a tree and that's caught on another branch and that might fall at any time and hit you on the head and kill you," said Dad.

They walked around the tree, over a shallow stream, and to the treeless top of a low hill.

"Look up there," said Dad, pointing to a flat, bare-rock mountaintop. "That's where we're going."

*That's where YOU'RE going! I'll be lucky if I get there.*

"It doesn't seem very high," said Roger.

"It's just under 3000 feet," said Dad.

*High enough. But at least the top looks like we'll be able to relax on it.* "And you say we're going to get there by tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yup. No problem," said Dad.

"It seems too far away," said Nate.

"Not if we run," said Roger.

Nate shook his head and thought of all the sports day ribbons Roger had won. "You might be fast, Mercury, but even you're only human. At the very least, you should consider that I'm mortal."

"Mortally slow," said Roger.

A lump formed in Nate's throat.

"Hey, hey, now, Roger," said Dad.

Roger glared at Nate.

"Really, though, Nate," said Dad, "it's closer than it looks and once we get farther up where there isn't as much bush the hiking will be easier."

"Can you show us on the map where we're going?" asked Nate.

"Sure." Dad took the map out of his pocket and studied it for about three seconds. "We're here," he said, putting one index finger on the map. "Now if we go directly south, we'll get to the meadow. His finger stopped at a penciled M. "That's the meadow. We'll try to get there by noon tomorrow." Next in line, he came to an S. "That's the summit. One side of it crumbled at one time and created a rough rock face and a now grassed-over slide."

"Is that the lake?" asked Roger, pointing to a kidney shape next to the S.

"Yes," said Dad. "And coming out of it is the Coho River."

"Where's the creek we saw this morning?" asked Nate.

"That's here," said Dad, tracing his finger back a bit.

"Is the Coho River much bigger than that one?" asked Nate, trying to get an idea of size. He couldn't tell their sizes from the map. The squiggly lines on the maps were both the same thickness.

"Enough questions," said Roger, tapping one foot on the ground.

"Oh, about twice as wide," Dad said.

"Does it go to the fishing lodge at Otter Inlet?" asked Nate, thinking that the Coho River and the fishing lodge would naturally go together.

"No, the river flows south. The inlet's actually not that far away and more to the east. It's only a day's hike from the mountain." He put the map back in his pocket. "You'll be able to get a better idea of it all when we stand on the summit."

Nate stared at the summit again. A flash of white caught his eyes. *A white bear?* His heart thumped. *A Spirit Bear?* "Hey Dad, may I borrow your binoculars?"

"You bet," said Dad.

Nate looked through the lenses and focused on the top of the mountain. A huge light-coloured boulder was catching the afternoon glint of the sun. He

relaxed and then his face fell. He didn't really want to see a bear close up, but maybe a white bear so far away, maybe that would be okay.

"See anything?" asked Dad.

"No."

"Well, then, let's get that firewood. We still need to cook dinner and string up the packs. So let's hustle. It'll be dark before we know it."

### Chapter Three

Sparks flew into the air like frenzied fireflies. Nate watched as they rose into the night sky and faded. He gazed at the sky. Even with the half-moon, the stars were distinct and bright. It was just like looking at his book of star maps and drawings showing all of the constellations.

The first constellation he looked for was Gemini, the Twins, with the larger head-star Pollux and the smaller head-star Castor. In the spring, he'd seen the constellation in the northwestern sky. Now he couldn't find it. Nate figured it was either below the horizon or just behind the trees. He couldn't be sure. *No matter. Those twins are holding hands. Like that would happen now with Roger and me.*

But what he did find, there almost in the middle of the sky, was Polaris, the bright, North Star, shining like a beacon of security at the end of the Little Dipper, just like in the star map of the Northern Hemisphere. Above and to the west of the Little Dipper was Draco the Dragon. Nate mentally joined the stars that represented its trapezoid shaped head and followed the stars all the way to its tail.

"Marshmallows anyone?" asked Roger, who was twirling three on a stick above a low flame.

Nate brought his eyes back to earth and stared at the charred blobs. "No thanks, I think I'll have mine plain."

"And I'll pass," said Dad. "I'm still full from all those bagels and beans. Besides, all that sugar would keep me awake."

*I'm so tired nothing could keep me awake.* Nate ate a couple of uncooked marshmallows and bobbed another one in his hot chocolate.

"So, what do you think so far?" asked Dad.

"Our best hike yet," said Roger.

"What about you, Nate?" asked Dad.

"I like that everything's so natural and wild," he said.

"Except we still haven't come face to face with a bear," said Roger.

*Thank goodness.* Nate looked back up at the sky. Directly to the left of the tail of the Dragon, he found the Big Dipper, the saddle of Ursa Major. The Great Bear. At the end of the Big Dipper's handle was the star that shone as the Great Bear's nose. He thought of the Spirit Bear. "Say, Dad, do you think the Spirit Bear really does rescue people in distress?"

"That's just a fantasy. Bears don't rescue humans," said Roger, with his mouth full. "Right Dad?"

"Oh, one never knows," said Dad. "Sometimes it's just fun to believe."

They spent the next hour or so talking about the hike so far and what they could expect tomorrow.

"What time do we have to get up?" asked Nate.

"Crack of dawn," said Dad.

"Ugh," said Nate.

"No problem," said Roger.

"That's because you're used to getting up at five for hockey practice," said Nate.

"If you didn't always read so late, you'd be able to get up early, too," said Roger.

"How about the two of you use the last light of the fire to get ready for the night and then I'll put it out. You can continue your sleep discussion in the tent," said Dad.

"I'm not tired," said Roger.

Nate brushed his teeth, spit into the fire, and changed into his thermal long johns. He shivered. Dad was right. Away from the fire, the night was already cold. He put gloves on his hands and a toque on his head and crawled into his sleeping bag.

Even with his plastic ground sheet and foamie under him, the ground was cold and hard against his bones. He lay on his back, then his side, then his back again, trying to get comfortable.

"Stop squirming," said Roger, pulling his sleeping bag up over his ears, just like when they were little and they'd slept out in their backyard fort. When Roger went to bed, he never liked to talk.

Nate tried to stay still. He listened as water fizzled then sloshed on the fire. He heard his father rustle around in the campsite and zip his own tent shut.

"Good night, guys," said Dad. "Great day. Let's have an even better one tomorrow."

"Good night," said Nate. He expected Roger to at least say "Good night" in return, but then he realized, by his brother's slow snoring, that he was already asleep.

Nate turned on his headlamp and wrote in his diary.

*Monday, August 16<sup>th</sup>, 10:31 p.m.*

*Evening, clear sky, temperature feels like it's practically zero. Sore legs. Stiff neck. So far I've seen almost nothing but trees. We didn't run into any bears on the trail (phew). The only bear I saw was the Great Bear in the sky. Anyway, I survived the first day!!! I wonder what tomorrow will bring?*

He started to put the diary away and stopped. Under his plant heading, he added:

*Gaultheria shallon: salal*

*Polystichum munitum: sword fern*

*Pteridium aquilinum: bracken*

*Lots of moss (don't know the Latin).*

He rubbed his eyes and tucked the diary back under the sweatshirt he was using as a pillow.

As he curled onto his side, an owl screeched and the forest began to speak.

The wind seemed to have the most to say. There had barely been a breeze throughout the day, but now as Nate lay still, the wind picked up, not much, just



enough to whisper through the trees. The sound was soft and rhythmic. It sang like a lullaby. Nate felt himself drifting off to sleep.

But then the wind snarled.

The sides of the tent flapped. There was enough moonlight that through the tent, Nate could see tree branches swaying. It was like watching erratic shadow-dancing. And was it just Nate's imagination? Or was something else out there moving?

What could it be? A wolf? A deer?

No, it seemed larger. A bear?

Nate froze in his sleeping bag. He listened for bear sounds, but now the wind in the trees was too loud to hear anything else. It wailed and whined.

He held his breath.

The shape stopped.

*Must have been my imagination. Go to sleep.*

But he couldn't.

Whatever it was, it was now slowly coming toward his tent.

*Maybe it's just the tree shadows. Maybe because I'm tired, I'm distorting things.*

But the shape kept coming.

*Oh, why did I agree to come on this trip? Someone get me out of here. Whatever you are, please don't notice me.*

Closer, closer.

*Should I wake up Roger? No, he'll just laugh at me.*

A twig snapped.

*That does it!* Nate jabbed Roger in the side. No response. He jabbed him again. Still Roger slept. "Come on, Roger, wake up! There's something outside. I think it's a bear," he said in a voice he hoped Roger would hear but that the something wouldn't.

Now the shadow was directly outside the tent. Nate sat bolt upright so quickly that Roger rolled over in his sleep. Nate called out, his voice shaking.

"Go away!"

The shape stopped.

"Nate, it's just me — Dad," said a whisper.

Nate's heart pounded. "It is?"

"Yes, I just wanted to double check the packs. I was worried with all this wind. They're okay. Hope I didn't scare you. Try to get some shut-eye."

*And be attacked in my sleep? Never!* Nate pulled his sleeping bag tightly around him and kept his eyes wide open. *There is no way now I'm going to sleep.*

But he did.

The next thing he knew, he was awake and the tent was flooded with morning light.

"Look at this mess. It's all Nate's fault. He's barely tied more than a shoelace in all his life," said Roger, shouting.

Nate rubbed his ears, wondering if he were just imagining things again and then realized that Roger was outside. Half dazed, he stumbled from the tent. The early morning sun streaked through the two tallest trees at the edge of the clearing and hit his face like a laser beam. He blinked repeatedly to adjust to the light and focused on the commotion.

Dad was standing at the side of the clearing, hands on his hips, slowly shaking his head from side to side. Garbage was strewn all over the ground.

Garbage?

Still half asleep, Nate stumbled over to the mess.

It was not garbage. It was Roger's pack and its contents. The pack was slashed. Clothing was dirty. Food—or what was left of it—was everywhere. Cracker crumbs. Red and yellow lentils from the soup mix. A chewed up and empty granola bar bag. One half-eaten orange.

"Useless!" said Roger as soon as he saw Nate.

A lump formed in Nate's throat.

"You shouldn't even have come!" said Roger.

The lump got bigger.

"Come on, Roger," said Dad.

"Well it's true," said Roger, kicking one of his T-shirts.

Nate swallowed hard. He knew his brother hadn't wanted him to come on the trip. Roger always thought of camping as something that was just for him and Dad to do together. But up until now he hadn't said it so directly. Just

before they had left for the trip, Roger said, "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay home and read?" Nate didn't answer then. Now, he tried to keep his voice steady.

"What is it that I'm supposed to have done?"

Roger picked up his slashed pack and pointed to the end of the rope that was now on the ground. "Look." He glared as if he were ready to tear Nate apart.

"That's the end that you tied. NOW do you get it?"

Nate's eyes widened.

"How—?"

"It looks as if a bear visited us last night," said Dad. He held up Roger's water bottle. It was empty and there were huge punctures in the plastic. "How could I not have heard a bear of all things?"

Nate took a close look at the punctured bottle. *Teeth marks? Must be. How could I have slept through this?* He shuddered just thinking about it. But then, too, he couldn't quite see why Roger was blaming him for anything.

Roger, however wouldn't let up. He took the water bottle from Dad and shoved it against Nate's shoulder.

Nate clenched his teeth.

"That's enough, Roger!" said Dad. "No-one's to blame. I checked the ropes and the packs in the night and everything was fine. I don't know how the bear did it, but it did."

Roger threw down the water bottle.

Nate wanted to kick it. Instead, he stepped over it and walked over to the end of the rope that was on the ground and took a close look at it. The end was frayed. And a portion of the rope, the portion he had tied, still hugged the trunk in the crook of a branch as he'd left it.

"It's been split, but it doesn't look chewed," he said, handing the rope to his father. "Maybe there was a flaw in the rope and with the wind and the weight of the packs, the rope just broke."

"Likely story," said Roger.

"You're probably right, Nate," said Dad. "And then maybe a bear smelled the oranges and took advantage of an opportunity. It's a miracle that only one pack was slashed. But it is still a problem."

"Yeah, all my stuff is ruined," said Roger, glaring at Nate. "And we have a lot less food."

For a few seconds, they all stood still. Then Dad took charge. "Let's salvage all that we can."

Nate and Roger didn't move.

"NOW!" ordered Dad.

Nate jumped. Dad rarely shouted.

"I—I thought you said bears wouldn't be a problem," said Nate, nervously.

"Just help clean up this mess, Nathan, PLEASE."

Nate did as he was told. Dad only ever called him his full name when he was annoyed. And seeing Dad so annoyed was just adding to his own nervousness.

He kept one eye on his surroundings and picked up bits and pieces: a fork, a squished cup, and a stomped-on windbreaker. "This must have been one hungry bear. Or mad," said Nate. "I knew we shouldn't be here."

"Well, we *are* here and I'm just as mad," said Roger as he found one sock at the edge of the bush. "My best sock! The other one better be around somewhere."

"Now, now," said Dad. "Let's all settle down. Here's your other sock," he said, tossing it in Roger's direction and then repeating the action with a tin plate. It spun through the air like a Frisbee.

Roger effortlessly caught it in mid-flight, just like when he caught fly balls in baseball.

"Good catch," said Dad. His voice was once again calm. "Now, just how much food did we lose?"

"Everything in my pack," said Roger. "We'll starve."

Dad sighed. "No, Roger, we won't starve. I allowed a little extra in the food department. But from now on we'll have to be very careful about how much we eat." He sighed again, took a deep breath, and then rubbed his hands together.

"Look, I'm sorry I yelled. Let's all try to cheer up, guys. What's done is done. The good news is we've still got a whole bag of my special CPR mix. Roger, I'll give you some tape to patch your pack and water bottle. Let's just have breakfast and pack up the camp and get on our way."

While Roger was taping, Nate changed into his shorts and T-shirt and took a moment to write in his diary.

*Tuesday: August 17<sup>th</sup>, 7:53 a.m.*

*So THIS is what camping is all about. Wind, bear visits, and Roger having a fit. Call me boring, but now I really know why I like my books!*

## Chapter Four

An hour later, full of musli and milk made from powder, they started off slowly. It seemed that no one was bounding with energy.

Nate was glad of the slower pace. His legs ached from the day before. And today was only the second day. But after about fifteen minutes of walking, Dad perked up.

"Okay! Let's pick up some speed," he said. "We need to get to the meadow by lunch time and the base of the summit by about three."

Roger increased his stride. "I'm going to be the first one there."

*Go for it.* Nate blocked out Roger's chatter about how he could hardly wait to climb to the peak and became absorbed by the forest again. He thought about all the forests he'd read about. There was the giant redwood forest in California.

*Sequoia sempervirens.* And the Blue Gum forests in Australia. *Eucalyptus globules*—known for its cough drop oil and pungent leaves. And who could forget Sherwood Forest and the old oak trees? Nate smiled as he imagined Robin Hood riding horseback through these woods. But just as he pictured all the merry men on their horses, too, he tripped and got a mouthful of sword ferns.

"Nate, are you all right?" Dad came running to his side and helped him up.

"Yeah, fine." He didn't say he was seeing fern fronds lancing in front of his eyes.

"Nice green face," said Roger.



Nate wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist.

"I'm glad you're okay. Let's all try to be careful," Dad said gently. "We don't want any injuries."

*No, Roger would never let me forget it. He'd just accuse me again of spoiling his trip.*

Nate adjusted his pack so it hung properly again and trudged on under the evergreen canopy.

They crossed a large, dry, pathless area of almost no underbrush—just a continual mat of windfall branches and twigs. Minute after minute it was more of the same. Green, brown, and more green.

"Dad, how do you know where we are?" asked Nate.

"Oh, there are a few markers," Dad replied. "Like that uprooted tree. It must have been a few hundred years old before it fell a couple of summers ago. A little further up, there's a stump several feet in diameter. Oh, and just beyond that, there's a granite boulder that is almost a perfect cube and —"

"Look! Here's part of an orange," said Roger, picking up a piece of skin.

Nate stopped so abruptly that he almost fell forward. A piece of orange skin could only mean one thing. He blew his whistle and blew and blew.

"Nice PURPLE face," said Roger.

Dad touched Nate's shoulder.

"It's all right," said Dad. "Soon we'll be out in the open. Try to relax, okay?"

"Yeah, you'll wear out the whistle!" said Roger. Under his breath, he said, "Wimp."

Nate felt as if Roger had punched him smack bang in the gut. He looked at the ground.

"Come on, Nate, chin up. And Roger, give it a break," said Dad.

"I was just—"

"I know exactly what you were doing. Ready to keep going, Nate?"

Nate held his head up. "Ready."

Dad again took the lead and every once in a while he blew his own whistle. For the first few minutes, Nate kept his eyes riveted to the ground, looking for any more evidence that bears might be close by. When he didn't find any, he began to pay attention to how the forest was changing yet again. The trees were becoming thinner and sparser and the underbrush that had reappeared was giving way to grass. More and more, the light shone through.

And Dad was right. Sort of. It was easier to hike without worrying about tripping on roots. However, the gradual but steady incline more than made up for the ease underfoot.

The farther Nate hiked, the faster his heart beat and the slower he walked. He lagged slightly behind.

"Thought you'd never get here," said Roger as soon as Nate emerged from the trees.

*It was only a few seconds.* Before even noticing where he was, Nate bent over, put his hands on his knees, took in deep, hungry breaths, and then straightened.

The meadow!

The grass was alive with purple-red spiked flowers. And masses and masses of yellow! There were more buttercups than he had ever seen before. He stooped to see how the yellow reflected a glow on his fingers and smiled as he remembered how when he was little Dad had held the buttery petals under his chin.

"Hurry up!" said Roger. "We want to have something to eat."

Nate sighed and then strode over to where Dad was sitting on the grass. Roger was perched on a boulder as if he were king of the hill—like in his photo of being held up by his hockey team after scoring the winning goal in a cup final game.

"Hey, Dad, what are those purple flowers?" asked Nate.

Roger groaned and jumped down from his perch.

"Fireweed. *Epilobium angustifolium* —"

Roger cleared his throat. "Lunch?"

"Oh, yes," said Dad. He passed around apples and Melba toast.

"Arggh! I hate this foil!" said Roger, trying to unwrap his little wedges of cheese.

"Just takes patience," said Dad.

"Roger and patience? Isn't that like an oxymoron?" asked Nate, arranging some cheese between two pieces of Melba toast. He had liked the word ever since he'd heard his Grade Seven teacher use it.

"What kind of moron?" asked Roger. He creased his forehead as if confused.

"Never mind," laughed Nate. He ate his lunch, this time chewing only ten times for each bite, and looked across the meadow. A black tailed deer was grazing near the fringe of the forest. Once he'd seen one near his house. "Look!" he said, quietly. "Over there!"

Roger leapt up and the deer ran into the forest.

Nate sighed heavily. "You scared it off! Did you have to do that?"

"Didn't mean to," said Roger. "Besides, it must be time to go. It would have run off when we got going anyway."

"Can't we stay and enjoy this meadow for a while?" asked Nate. He rubbed sunscreen onto his arms and face, as he could feel they were beginning to burn under the wide-open, one-o'clock sun. It wasn't fun having such fair skin.

"We could," said Dad. "But that might throw us off schedule. We can have another break just before we climb to the summit."

Reluctantly, Nate stood up and stretched. He followed Dad and Roger to the top of the meadow and looked at what lay ahead.

The bare summit was now in clear view. Between it and him, the land rose gradually over the distance. It was a combination of grass and low bushes and occasional stands of hemlocks. Nearer the summit, the ground rose more abruptly, like an upside down bowl on a table. As much as he didn't want to leave the meadow so soon, the hike in front of him, to the base of the summit at least, didn't look too bad.

He soon found out it was steeper than it looked. He began to wonder about making it to the peak. He knew it wasn't a huge mountain. Not when he compared it to others he'd read about in Dad's book *Great Hikes of the World*. *There is Mount Everest between Nepal and Tibet. I'd need an ice pick and crampons and oxygen to climb that. And then there's Mauna Kea in Hawaii with its dormant volcano. More than half of its height is underneath the sea. And how about Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa? If I were to climb that, I might even get lucky and see an elephant en route.*

*Any one of those mountains rises thousands and thousands of feet into the sky. So why does this one feel so high? We haven't even started the final climb to the summit. At this rate, if my heart keeps beating this fast, it, not Roger, will reach the summit first!* He inwardly laughed at the thought and then just concentrated on keeping up with Roger and Dad.

By mid-afternoon, tired and with the sun heading west, the only thing that he could be thankful for was that there was now a slow breeze. It cooled the sweat that had been soaking his T-shirt since leaving the meadow.

The higher they hiked, the cooler the breeze became. And thin wisps of cloud blew over, providing more relief from the sun's rays. By the time they got to the base of the summit, the wind was stronger and the air was cold. Nate put on his windbreaker.

Dad rubbed his bare arms and gazed up at the sky. "Exhilarating isn't it? I just hope it's not a storm blowing in."

*So do I.* Living on the northwest coast, Nate was used to storms. He knew they could blow in quickly and leave just as fast as they came or stay like a bad cold for days and days. Right now, more clouds were definitely forming.

"Most of the sky's still blue," said Roger.

"That's true. And it is always nippy up here," said Dad. "But this is one strong wind." He paused. "I'm not so sure about climbing to the summit with the wind blowing like this. Let's have some CPR and decide what to do."

Nate took a handful of Dad's trail mix. He ate the peanuts first, then the raisins, and saved the chocolate until last.

Roger popped his handful into his mouth and reached for another.

"Later," said Dad, closing the bag.

"Hmmpf," said Roger. He stood up. "The wind's not as strong right now. Can we climb to the summit now?"

Dad put the CPR back in his pack. "No, we'll wait just a while longer to see what it does."

Roger dug into his pack. "Want to throw a ball around?" he asked, tossing a baseball to Dad.

Dad caught it in one hand. "How about you, Nate?"

"Yeah, Fumble Fingers, wanna play ball?" asked Roger.

*Fumble Fingers, Fumble Fingers.* Grade Four. A spring baseball game in P.E. The teacher had put them both on the same team. Nate was back-catcher. Final inning. Roger threw the ball to him to run a player out. Nate dropped the ball,

his one and only drop, and the other team won. Roger kicked the third base and called him Fumble Fingers and all the class laughed. Nate hadn't wanted to play baseball or do anything else with Roger ever since. Now he said, "No thanks, I'm tired."

He turned his back to the game, pulled out his diary, and under his plants heading he wrote *Ep\_\_\_\_\_?: Fireweed*. Then he flipped to his Tuesday heading, wrote *Approx. 1:00 p.m. – saw a black tailed deer*, put the diary back in his pouch, lay back, closed his eyes, and listened to the zing thwack zing of the ball.

Soon he was dreaming of hitting a grand slam. He was just about to run across home plate and save the team when—

"Nate, wake up," said Dad.

"Huh?"

"Nate, wake up, we're ready to go," said Dad again.

Nate moved his tongue around in his dry mouth, licked his lips, and rubbed his eyes. "H—how long was I asleep?"

"Only half an hour or so. The wind has stopped. We can climb to the summit now."

Nate stood up and stretched. He put on his pack and looked at the rocky slope. Next to it, so close to it, he felt miniscule. But he could see it was climbable. It was just steep, that was all. And even though the ground was uneven, it didn't look any worse than irregular stairs. *But if I were to slip when climbing it – no, don't even think it!* He rubbed his hands together and took a deep

breath. *Okay. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.* He sucked in his stomach and told himself that once he was at the top, coming down would be easy.

It wasn't long before he felt he could do with a handrail. Every step was so uneven his ankles twisted and turned. *I hope I don't break one.* The straps of his pack dug into his shoulders, seemingly more than before. *Did Roger load my pack with rocks?* Once Roger had done that to Nate's backpack for school. When Nate had entered their classroom, not realizing he'd been carrying rocks, he took off his pack and it landed on Roger's foot. Roger was not amused.

Now Nate just hoped that Roger hadn't been playing his tricks again.

Half way up the wind started up again, not too much, just a breeze.

"Dad, should we go back down?" asked Nate.

"Trying to get out of climbing?" asked Roger.

"No."

"It's all right, Nate," said Dad. "The wind's not too bad. We'll keep going."

Nate kept climbing. *I hope it doesn't get stronger.*

By now, his knees and hands were scraped and he wished he were wearing gloves and jeans. He wished he had done a lot of things—like stay at home!

He stopped and sat down for a minute and took in several deep breaths.

"Are you all right?" asked Dad.

"Yes, fine," said Nate.

"Perseverance," said Dad.

Dad and Roger were almost at the top.



"Hey down there! I could come down and get you and carry you up," said Roger.

*I should have put rocks in YOUR pack.* Nate took another deep breath and kept going. He still had about thirty feet to go. *Will I ever get there?*

A few seconds later, Roger and Dad reached the summit together.

"Yahoo!" said Roger, giving Dad a high five. Then he pointed his index finger into the air.

Nate shook his head at Roger's *Number One* gesture. *Just concentrate on climbing. Think positively. Put your foot here. Grab onto that rock.*

He stopped and took some more deep breaths.

"Perseverance," said Roger.

Nate threw him a dagger-look. When Nate dug his fingers into the dirt, he pretended he was digging them into Roger.

A few minutes later, Nate dug his fingers into a small crevice and pulled himself up the last few feet. He flopped when he got to the top.

"Great! We all made it!" said Dad, helping Nate to stand.

Nate took several more deep breaths and looked around. Except for one large boulder, the boulder that he had thought was a white bear, the summit was virtually flat—a combination of rock slabs, dirt, and tufts of parched grass.

It was a welcome sight!

Nate felt tall. Really tall. Below him, everything, the trees, the approach to the summit, looked small. Boulders looked like pebbles. Bushes looked like

bedding plants. It was like seeing the landscape in miniature. He moved away from the edge and held his arms straight out to the side. The now steady breeze billowed out his jacket and practically lifted him off the ground. He twirled around and around.

*If I were a kite, I'd be soaring by now!*

"Hey, Nate," said Dad. "Come over here."

Nate went over to where Dad and Roger were standing on the other side of the summit.

Dad pointed down. "That's Emerald Lake."

## Chapter Five

The lake was beautiful. It really did shine like an emerald in the sun.

"So what do you think, Nate?" asked Dad. "Isn't it incredible?"

"Yes." And it wasn't just the lake. The panorama of valleys and coves and the sea beyond was as spectacular as any he'd seen in his magazines. More spectacular. Here the lake and the trees and the other islands and the sea felt as if they were within his reach.

"And how about you, Roger? Still feel like dipping your toes in the lake?" asked Dad.

Roger put his hands together in front of him and pretended to do a dive.

"No shortcuts," laughed Dad.

"Can we go to it today?" asked Roger.

"Well, I had planned on us camping at the base of the summit and going there tomorrow, but yes, I guess we could camp at the lake tonight." Dad looked at his watch. "It's just past four. It won't take long to get down. Let's just stay a few more minutes and take in the view. Now, if you look over to your left, that's Otter Inlet."

"The small dent on the coastline?" asked Nate.

"Yes," said Dad. "And almost directly in front of us is the beginning of the Coho River. Can you see it?"

"No," said Nate. With all the trees around that part of the shoreline, it wasn't immediately visible. But sure enough, as he studied the lakeshore more carefully, he saw a smattering of white water at the edge of the lake. There were also small whitecaps on the lake, as the breeze clipped the water. A few shadows passed over the water. High clouds had formed.

"Now can we go down?" asked Roger.

"Shortly," said Dad.

Nate was glad to have some more time at the top. After all the effort it took to get up there, he wanted to enjoy it for a while. Roger sat down and hung his legs over the edge of the summit where the mountain had crumbled away and chattered to Dad about rock climbing. Nate leaned against the bear-boulder in the centre of the summit and wrote in his diary.

*Tuesday, Summit, 4:16 p.m.*

*It's a forever view, and I can't believe I'm writing this, but I'm glad I'm here.*

He turned his face to the sun. It wasn't that warm. The breeze buffered its heat. And now even more clouds were forming. They were low and puffy. Nate began to see shapes in them. A rabbit with a cotton-ball tail. A mound of mashed potatoes.

"I think we should go down now," said Dad. "Just in case the weather turns for the worse."

"Finally!" said Roger.

"This doesn't look quite so easy," said Nate once he saw exactly where they were going to go down. It was a series of narrow ledges linked by jagged rock faces. It really did look like the side of the mountain had just crumbled away. It was in sharp contrast to the steep, grassy slope that started at the bottom of the rock face and went all the way to the lake.

"It just takes careful stepping, that's all," said Dad. "You'll find there are lots of places to put your feet and plenty of rocks to grab onto. You can grab onto the bushes, too. Their roots make them pretty secure. Just don't count on them in a pinch unless you know they're secure for sure. And one more thing: take your time."

Roger jumped down onto the first ledge as if he had the hooves of a mountain goat. Then he pretended to teeter and laughed out an *aggghh*.

Dad cautioned him. "Let me go first. I'd rather show you the best places to put your feet."

Roger huffed.

Nate watched Dad. *Show me all the places you want.*

It felt weird to be going down something so vertical. Each time Nate took a step down, his knees buckled and his pack did a delayed landing on his back. He had to use his hands to steady himself, and within just a few minutes, his palms were scratched and his fingertips stung. He wiped one free hand on his thigh, leaving a bright red streak.

He wished they had gone down the way they came up. That would have been much easier. While Roger chattered with Dad more about rock climbing, Nate just hoped that he would get down in one piece.

Whenever he passed a bush growing out of the rocks, he tested it. *They really do grip the rocks. Maybe it's because the roots have to reach far into the crevices to find water. I guess that's how the bushes hang on even in strong winds. I'll read up on it when I get back to see if it's true.*

About a quarter of the way down, the breeze turned into a wind. Every once in a while, the wind zipped past him, pressing him against the side of the mountain. Every step required even more concentration.

A grey shadow passed over him.

The wind became colder. His fingertips became numb. His bare legs became so stiff he felt as if they were made of wood, which made it even more difficult to descend.

But the change in the weather wasn't slowing Dad and Roger down. They kept their pace. *So it's just me that's feeling it.* Once again, Nate lagged behind.

By now his hands were really stinging, as if they had been scratched raw by rough sandpaper. He stopped to give them a rest. Dad turned around from a couple of ledges down. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, fine," said Nate, dabbing some more blood off his hands.

They all kept descending, down part of the cliff, along a ledge, down farther, onto another ledge. The wind picked up even more and the clouds became

thicker and lower. Nate looked at the lake. The surface was now dark and very choppy.

When he was on a narrow ledge, about three quarters down, a strong gust whipped past him. He grabbed a bush to steady himself, but the branch broke. He lost his footing and stumbled. *Oh, no.* His heart pounded and his hands prickled as fear raced through him. He put out his hands and hit something hard.

It was the rock face. He let out a quick, heavy breath and leaned his back against the rock face to steady himself. Then he held one hand to his chest and closed his eyes tightly. *Phew! That was close!*

Dad turned around again. "Nate? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes," said Nate, shaking. "I'm—I'm just going to wait here for a moment. Is that okay?"

"I think that's a good idea," said Dad. "This wind is surprising me. It's making it difficult to stay balanced. But Roger and I can't stay in this spot. It's too narrow. We'll go to the next ledge and wait, okay?"

Nate gave a shaky thumbs-up. He found a small alcove in the rock face, huddled in it, and hoped the wind would quickly blow itself out. But the clouds got lower still until they surrounded him. He left the alcove briefly and tried to see Roger and Dad. Through the cloud, they looked like apparitions. He went back into his alcove and shivered again.

Dad's voice rose through the clouds. "Nate? Are you safe where you are?"

"Yes." His heart thumped.

"Then just sit tight," called Dad. "Roger and I are on the ledge now. It's the last one before the slide. We've still got good visibility down here. If the clouds don't blow away soon, I'll come up and get you."

"All right," said Nate, his teeth chattering. He wrapped his arms around himself.

He waited and waited for the wind to stop. Not being able to see Dad, he felt cut off. *Just wait it out. Be patient. Wait it out.* Then came an extra strong gust of wind.

"Holy!" said Nate, as it whirled past him. The cloud whipped across his face like a sheet of ice pellets.

And then came another strong gust. And another.

The next thing he heard was a long, drawn out scream.



## Chapter Six

"DAD! ROGER!" he called. No response. The scream echoed in his head.

*Aaaaggggh.*

"DAD! ROGER!" Still no response.

*But Dad was just talking to me a few minutes ago. Now why isn't anyone answering me? Is it because the wind is so strong that they can't hear me? Or was that scream just Roger playing games again?*

"DAD! ROGER! WILL SOMEONE PLEASE ANSWER ME?" he called again.

"DAD! DAD!" This time it was Roger's voice. Except it didn't sound like Roger. It sounded desperate. It gave Nate a chill. *But why is Roger calling Dad? They were together. And if I can hear Roger, why is he still not answering me?*

Nate tried to catch any sight of Roger, but it was impossible to see very far down.

"DAD! ROGER!" Nate called again.

"DAD! DAD!" called Roger.

*What's going on? Nate trembled.*

*Whatever it is, something's not right. Should I go down? Dad said they were on the next ledge, the last ledge before the slide. No, I'm sure Dad would want me to stay here. But what if they need me? I'll just go down until I reach the ledge, even though right now I can't see very far ahead. I'll just have to be really careful.*

His heart thumped as he left his safe alcove and lowered himself down, one unsure step at a time.

"DAD! ROGER!"

Still no answer.

Nate descended farther, grabbing onto anything he could, bracing himself against the wind.

It seemed like an eternity before he at last caught a glimpse of Roger. He was surrounded by cloud, lying on his stomach, craning his neck over the ledge.

Nate crawled along the ledge, his bare knees stinging, to his brother's side.

"Roger! Why didn't you answer me?" Roger's face was ashen.

"Quiet! I'm — I'm trying to listen!"

"For what? Where's Dad?"

No answer.

"ROGER, WHERE'S DAD?"

"I—I don't know. One minute he was next to me, and then the next minute he was gone."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, GONE?"

"A gust of wind got him...I tried to catch him, but he just disappeared."

"Stop joking, Roger."

"I'm not!" Roger was clenching the edge of the cliff so hard, his hands were blotchy red and his knuckles were white.

"But Dad's so experienced! Why would he stand so close to the edge?"

"I was just...it's your fault. We were waiting for you. Then the cloud swirled down. If you hadn't been so slow—" He pounded the ground with his fist.

"My fault? I wasn't that far behind! I didn't make the wind blow. Dad said to stay where I was—"

"He knows you're a chicken. What else was he supposed to say?"

A huge lump formed in Nate's throat. *It's true. I am slow and I know I don't like risky things. If Dad hadn't had to wait for me, this probably wouldn't have happened. So it IS my fault. Roger is right. I shouldn't have come on this trip.* He choked back the huge lump and stared over the edge, too.

It was like staring into a white abyss.

"DAD! Dad!" Nate cried, holding his hands in front of his mouth like a megaphone. "CAN YOU HEAR ME? WHERE ARE YOU?"

"I can't even see him," Nate said weakly. "Can you?"

"NO!" said Roger.

"What exactly is down there?" asked Nate.

"Clumps of trees, boulders, smaller rocks, grass sloping down to the lake," said Roger, sharply.

"How high from the ground are we?"

"Probably only ten or fifteen feet."

"Then maybe he's okay. People can fall that far and make it, can't they? Maybe he landed on the grass and maybe now he's huddled somewhere where he just can't hear us," said Nate, his voice trembling.

"Maybe maybe maybe! You'd better be right!" Roger said angrily. He pulled himself up to his hands and knees and crawled along the edge.

"What are you doing?" asked Nate, crawling behind Roger.

"Looking for somewhere to go down."

"We can't see anything. Only Dad knows the route." *When I left the alcove, at least I knew the approximate way.*

"So what? We have to find him," said Roger.

"But what if we fall and hurt ourselves? What good would that do?"

"Don't you care about him?"

*Not care about Dad? Not care about Dad?* Nate thought about all the times he and his father had shared reading and talking about the books they had read.

"How can you even ask that?"

"Then this is no time to be a sissy," said Roger. He stopped crawling and began to climb down a shallow gully.

Nate swallowed another lump that had formed. *Sissy? I was trying to be sensible. Oh please, Dad, please be okay.*

Gingerly, he put one foot into the gully. It was like a straight-line trench—no doubt a dry winter creek bed. But he had no idea where he was going. Almost immediately, his foot slipped and he had to grab onto a scrubby bush to steady himself.

Loose rocks tumbled down.

"Aggh!" said Roger. "Watch it!"

"I'm sorry," said Nate. He tried to not send any more rocks flying, but it was like walking on marbles. Another loose rock flew down anyway.

"I said be careful!" said Roger.

*I am, I am.* In between footsteps, all Nate could think about was Dad lying in a crumpled heap. His thoughts circled inside him until he became so knotted with fear it was difficult to think at all.

He kept going down, down, his toes jamming against the ends of his boots. More rocks flew. *Where is this going to end? The cliff has to be well behind us by now. Could Dad have fallen this far, too?*

As he kept going down, he was able to see a little farther ahead. He wasn't sure if the clouds had lifted or if they just hadn't got down that far. But now he could see that Roger was far ahead of him – which was probably why he hadn't said anything more about the flying rocks. He was almost at the lake.

Nate scrambled as fast as he could to Roger's side. It was now possible to see the entire slide and all the way up the mountain, too. It was no longer windy and he could see that the clouds were actually lifting.

As he looked at the mountain, he saw where they had most likely been. All the way up alongside the gully, there was a steep grassy slope. It was at least as wide as the length of a soccer field. Directly above the upper end of the slope, the rock-face went straight up to a ledge. No doubt it was the last ledge where Roger and Dad had been.

Nate trembled as he thought of Dad landing in a heap. His first instinct was to check the bottom of the cliff for Dad. He began to run back up the slope.

Roger had other ideas.

"I'll check out the top and you check the shore," Roger ordered.

Nate stopped. He just wanted to find Dad. While Roger was running back up the slide, Nate started to search around the bushes that bordered the bottom of the slide. He pressed back branches. No Dad. *Maybe he's nearer the water.* He hurried around the bushes. Then a flash of orange bobbing on the shore caught his eyes. Orange. The same colour as Dad's jacket!

His stomach lurched. *Dad! Oh, no! You're in the lake!*

He ran towards the bob of orange. Except it wasn't Dad at all. It was just his tent and sleeping bag and foamie, all bundled together, being lapped by the water. *Of course! Dad's tent and his jacket are the same colour!*

Relief ran through Nate's body – until he realized that if the tent had made it to the water, then it really was possible that Dad had too!

Nate looked back up the slope. Roger was coming down. He obviously hadn't found Dad either. *But why is it so difficult to find him? His orange jacket should be easy to see.* He stared blankly at the shore, trying to figure out where Dad might be. The now calm water was rippling right to left. Right to left. Right to left. It was such a soothing motion he was lulled into a trance.

Then something clicked. *If the water is rippling from right to left, then maybe the tent drifted! If the tent drifted, then maybe it entered the water from the other side of the*

*slide.* And then he remembered one important thing. His father hadn't been wearing his jacket. He was wearing brown leather hiking boots, black shorts, and a light green T-shirt.

Nate charged across the shore, his feet slipping and twisting on football-sized rocks. When he was almost at the other side, he spotted his father.

He was sprawled cheek down on some silt, just inches away from the cold, cold lake.

## Chapter Seven

"Dad! Dad! Are you okay?" asked Nate, crouching down beside him.

No answer.

"Dad! Can you hear me? ROGER! I'VE FOUND HIM! Dad can you hear me?"

Dad's bare arms were splayed to the sides and he had scratches all over them. Nate looked at his father's back to see if he were breathing. No movement. He touched his hand. Cold. Fear gripped Nate so tightly it was as if his own life were being squeezed out of him.

*Please Dad, please be alive!*

He leaned down and put his ear next to his father's lips. *Was that a breath? Yes, yes. Faint, but yes. But his lips are slightly blue. And his skin is pale and clammy, as if there is little or no blood circulation.*

"ROGER! DOWN HERE!"

*Oh, now what should I do? Think! Think! What did I learn at that first aid session at school? What did the book say? Mouth to mouth? No, I already know he's breathing. Check the pulse? Yes, that would tell me how well his blood is circulating.*

His hand shook as he pressed his middle and index fingers over his father's neck. *No pulse! But if he's breathing, he has to have a pulse. Except if it's so faint that I can't feel it, he might not be breathing for much longer. Don't even think that! Maybe*



*I don't have the right place. Move my fingers over. Press again. Something? Maybe.*

*Yes! Yes! It's a faint, rapid beat beat beat.*

"Dad! Dad! Can you hear me?" he pleaded again.

Silence.

"Are you badly hurt?" *Of course, you must be. "Can you tell me?"*

Still no answer.

He looked closely at him. *So why are you out of it? Is it your head? Do you have a head injury? Oh please don't let it be that. Please.*

Nate's own head throbbed. He rubbed his forehead while he tried to think about what to do next.

Apart from the scratches, Dad's arms looked all right. His face had some scratches, too, but nothing deep. Nate looked at his father's legs. They seemed all right, too. Or were they?

As Nate took a closer look, he saw that just above Dad's left boot the leg was distorted.

*Oh, no, is it broken?*

Nausea welled up inside Nate. It traveled up his throat and into his mouth. He coughed so he wouldn't throw up.

"ROGER! COME HERE!"

Nate crouched down farther so that he could see underneath the leg. Just above the tongue of the boot, there was a small amount of dried blood and a bump. Nate quickly saw the jagged tip of a bone protruding.

*Oh, Dad, this is serious! No wonder you're not awake! How are we going to be able to help you?*

"ROGER!"

Nate's stomach churned some more. The back of his throat tasted sour. He coughed again and then splashed some lake water into his mouth.

He leaned over his father again. Roger bounded toward them.

"You found him!"

"Yes."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"What a relief," said Roger.

"I tried talking to him, but he didn't say anything," said Nate. "I think he must be in shock." He remembered from the first aid book that shock often accompanies injuries.

Roger leaned over his father. "Dad, it's Roger. Talk to me!"

But his father just lay there.

Nate scrambled to the other side of Dad.

"His left leg is broken."

"Where?"

Nate showed him. Roger turned pale. "We should phone for help," said Nate. "Where's his cell phone?"

"In his pack," said Roger.

"Yes, but where's his pack?"

"I don't know."

"How could it have come off?" asked Nate. He could understand the tent bundle breaking loose, but not the pack.

"He took it off."

"Why?"

Roger's face tightened.

"Never mind," said Nate. "We'll have to get it later. Right now we need to do something about this leg."

"He's so close to the water, we're going to have to get him away from here first," said Roger.

"I don't think we should be so quick to move him."

"Why not?"

"It could make his leg worse."

"We can't leave him here."

"I know, but what if his back is hurt, too? If we move him we could paralyze him."

"And if the wind whips up again, the lake could drown him!"

"But there's no wind right now, we could —"

"Stop it! I say we're going to move him!" said Roger.

"That first aid book —"

"What book?"

"The one the St. John Ambulance guy gave us after that first aid presentation at school—didn't you read it?"

Roger's face turned bright red—just like whenever his teachers found out he hadn't done his homework—which was often. "What about it?"

Nate closed his eyes briefly. He could actually picture some of the words on the page.

"I'm sure it said if it's safe to do so, it's better to splint a break before moving the person." He was surprised at how calm his voice was. But then he didn't think of it as his own voice. It seemed more the voice of the book. "We could use tree branches for splints and keep an eye on the wind while we're doing it."

"Splint?" Roger turned pale again. "Then...if the book said to do it, let's do it. Is it all right if I get some sticks, Doctor?"

*You don't have to be sarcastic, I'm just trying to help.* Out loud Nate said, "One for each side...and long enough to splint the whole leg." He felt as if he should apologize for having the information; Roger hated him knowing so many things. Once in a science class, when Nate had volunteered the answer to the question that Roger didn't know about the life cycle of a tree, Roger later said, "Keep all that stuff to yourself. And don't EVER make me look stupid in front of everyone again." At least this time Roger was listening to him.

Roger took the hatchet.

Nate heard him thwacking a tree hard, as if he were trying to cut down a tree ten times the size.

When Roger returned with two straight, cleaned off sticks, Nate had a towel ready for padding the leg and two pairs of tube socks for tying the splint together. Nate took Roger's sticks and laid them next to his father's uninjured leg. "Make them this long," he said, scraping a mark on each stick with a sharp rock. He looked up at Roger, expecting him to say something.

Roger didn't argue. He chopped the branches to fit. "Now what?"

"We need to roll him over gently and then pull his leg to make it straight."

"We can't do that!" said Roger, his face cringing.

"We'll have to."

"How?"

"Very gently," said Nate, in his book voice.

"It will hurt him," said Roger. "I don't want him to be hurt." His voice cracked. He cleared his throat.

*Me neither.* "It will probably hurt him more if we don't," said Nate.

Very carefully, they turned Dad face up and slid him a couple of feet away from the water. Now they could see the break more clearly, too. It definitely would need straightening.

Nate closed his eyes again and tried to remember what the book said about straightening a limb: *To apply traction, make sure the person's body is straight and just pull gently until both legs are the same length at the heels.*

"Okay, now, Roger, hold the top of Dad's leg so he won't slip when I pull, and Dad, if you can hear me, this is going to hurt."

Dad didn't respond.

His heart racing, Nate pulled Dad's leg. The tip of the bone puckered the skin, but the leg didn't straighten.

"We should stop," said Roger after only about five seconds. "It's not working."

"I'm sure it needs to take longer," said Nate. But he could also feel that the leg seemed to be stuck. *Patience.* "I'll give it another try," he said. He gently pulled again.

Then Dad groaned.

Nate almost let go of the leg.

"He's awake!" said Roger. "Dad! Tell us how you're feeling."

No response.

Nate wanted to try to get his father to talk, too, but knew that he had to concentrate on what he was doing. "Roger, just keep holding the leg still."

Roger held the leg, but looked away, his face even more pale.

Gradually the leg straightened and the protruding bone went back under the skin. Nate looked up at Roger. His eyes were shut tight, his cheeks were puffed out, and his mouth was clamped shut, as if he were trying not to throw up.

"There," Nate said softly as Dad groaned again. "Now, Roger, just wrap the towel underneath and up the sides of his leg, while I keep holding it."

Roger hesitated and then fumbled with the towel.

"Let me," said Nate. "You hold his ankle. I'll let go when you have a good grip."

As soon as the towel was in place, Nate tied everything together with the socks. He looked at Roger, expecting him to say something about the knots.

"Let's get him to safer ground," said Roger.

"We'll need a stretcher," said Nate. "In the first aid book there was a picture of one made like a ladder."

"Enough of that book," said Roger. "I'll get two poles and some sticks." He grabbed the hatchet and, holding his stomach, strode to a clump of trees.

"I'll get Dad's sleeping bag and foamie so he'll be comfortable on the stretcher," called Nate, as he headed toward the other side of the slide.

When Roger didn't answer, Nate turned to see where his brother was. Roger was vomiting in the trees.

When he returned with the wood, his face was still pale. He tied the rungs to the ladder without saying anything. Nate trimmed the foamie to fit the stretcher. After almost an hour, Dad was resting on the stretcher on a flat, grassy area well away from the water.

Nate felt Dad's pulse again. It was a little stronger and not quite so rapid. But his face was still cold. Nate put his toque on Dad's head. "Okay. Time to call for help."

## Chapter Eight

"I still don't understand why he wasn't wearing his pack," said Nate.

"He took it off when we were on the ledge."

"But why?"

"To—to put on his jacket," said Roger. "He got cold—waiting for you."

Nate winced. *Do you have to keep rubbing it in?* "But he's not wearing it now."

"He didn't get a chance to get it out. Why the Third Degree?" Roger asked through his teeth.

"Hey, I was just asking," said Nate. *Why is he being so defensive?* "So the pack's probably still up on the ledge."

"He was holding it when he fell. Do you want to find the pack or not?"

Nate raised his eyebrows. "Of course I want to find it. I didn't see it when I was looking for Dad. Maybe it's back up the slide."

"I didn't see it," said Roger.

"If you didn't see it, and I didn't see it, then where is it?" He stared at the lake. "Oh, no, I hope it didn't go in the water like the tent bundle did."

They both stared at the lake.

It was no longer beautiful.

Now, with the clouds overhead, it looked dark and dangerous. Nate shivered as he remembered Dad saying that he'd once taken a dip in it. Dad had grinned at the memory. *What could Dad be thinking now?* He pictured Dad swimming in



the lake, probably wearing his orange swimming shorts, his wet skin shimmering under the sun.

"Well? Can you see it?" asked Roger.

With Roger's question, Nate realized that all his thoughts about the sun were because he was staring at Dad's orange pack. It was in the middle of the lake, snagged on a dead tree. His heart sunk. *How could it have got that far out when the tent didn't? Was it just some freak of the wind? Maybe the tent also went that far out and blew back to shore. The wind WAS blowing in all directions.*

"It's out there," Nate said, pointing, his hand trembling.

"How will we be able to get it?" asked Roger.

"You could swim to it."

"I'm not swimming in that lake," said Roger. "The water's freezing."

*I didn't think you would.* And then came the realization of what the stranded pack meant.

"Roger, that pack not only had Dad's cell phone and first aid kit and compass, it had all his clothes and the camp stove and gas and matches and most of what was left of our food." He realized that he hadn't thought much about it earlier. He'd been distracted helping Dad and he'd just counted on using the cell phone. "Now what are we going to do?"

Roger rubbed his temples with his fingers. "We're going to have to carry him out of here. It's too late tonight. We'll go first thing tomorrow morning," he said, turning away from the lake and going back to Dad.

"Carry him out of here? How do you mean?" asked Nate, close on Roger's heels.

"Hiking, of course. What did you think I meant?"

"I—uh—don't you think we should just stay here and signal for help? Isn't that the first rule of being stranded?"

"Who's going to find us here? No one will be looking for us. It's only Tuesday. Trevor's not expecting us until Friday."

"That's why we'd send out a signal, like a smoke-fire. Or we could spell out H E L P with tree branches at the top of the mountain."

Roger sneered. "You've *got* to be kidding! With the clouds overhead, the smoke wouldn't be noticed—"

"The clouds are high enough. I think it would—"

"How many planes or helicopters have you seen or heard go over us since we started this hike?"

"None. But that doesn't mean that there won't be any—and even if nobody were to notice us by Friday, then if we didn't show up, Trevor would get worried and start searching for us."

"We can't take the chance with Dad, waiting until then. Waiting is what got us into trouble. Dad said Otter Inlet is only a day's hike from here. And the map's probably still in Dad's pocket where he always keeps it. We can follow that. It can be done."

*Superman.*

"I don't see how. It's bound to be difficult to carry Dad for long. It was hard enough just carrying him away from the lake."

"You mean you don't think you can," said Roger.

"I just think that it might take longer than you think. And I don't think it would be a good idea to put Dad under that kind of a strain," said Nate.

"This whole thing is a strain," said Roger, getting the map out of Dad's pocket.

*Maybe you want to say that I'm the strain. "We don't know the way."*

"Weren't *you* listening? The map will show us," said Roger.

"But that map doesn't show everything—"

"It shows enough!" said Roger. "I'm the oldest—"

*By ten minutes!*

"And I say we're leaving." Roger waved the map. A packet of matches flew out of the folds and whizzed past Nate's face.

It was nearly seven thirty by the time they got the camp set up. Getting Dad settled was difficult. The only way to get him into the tent was to cut the tent floor out and secure the tent with tent pegs over him. But at least now he would be sheltered overnight.

When Nate finally had a chance to sit down, his stomach rumbled. Roger was already munching on marshmallows.

"I think we should take inventory of our food," said Nate.

Roger popped another marshmallow into his mouth while they laid out their remaining food.

Nate pulled out his diary and made a list:

*6 individual pouches of hot chocolate mix*

*3 cans of beans*

*2 cans of sardines*

*1 package of dried banana pieces*

*¾ bag of marshmallows*

Roger sat stunned. "It's not much. All the more reason for us to get to Otter Inlet tomorrow."

They divided one can of cold beans and each had a cup of cold hot chocolate. Neither of them felt like making a fire to heat their meal. Nate's fork felt heavy as he used it to spear the beans into his mouth. *One bean, two beans, three beans, four.* Even though he was hungry, he wasn't sure if his stomach really wanted them. Cold, they tasted like tomato covered cardboard. However, after a few deliberate five chews per bite, he began to feel ravenous. He wolfed down the rest and actually felt like having more. He imagined sitting in his kitchen, eating a plate of Mom's spaghetti bolognese and finishing it off with a strawberry milkshake and a coconut macaroon.

"I'm still hungry," said Roger. "How will we manage even for just another day?"

"Bugs, I guess," said Nate. He remembered reading how some people around the world eat ants and grubs. He stifled an overwhelming urge to barf up all his beans.

After they ate, Roger spread the map out on the ground, just like Dad had done, and studied it, moving his finger around on it. "We're on the west side of the river now and the inlet is east of the river, but that's not a problem. The map shows there's a bridge. So we'll follow the river to the bridge, cross over it, and then meet up with a logging road that goes to the inlet. Easy. The key is to get to that bridge."

Nate stared at Roger. *I just hope Dad's properly awake in the morning so he can talk some sense into you.*

He kept that thought all evening. Before he crawled into his sleeping bag, he wrote in his diary:

*Tuesday, August 17<sup>th</sup>, 9:43 p.m.*

*Overcast skies. No stars. I hope the weather tomorrow is better. And I hope that in the morning Dad will help us, tell us what to do. SO DON'T WORRY! (That's what Dad would say now). Things still might be okay.*

When Nate was trying to get to sleep, he shivered and instinctively gravitated toward Roger for extra warmth. But his thoughts kept racing. He began counting backwards from one thousand by sevens to keep his mind off his worries. He reached nine hundred and nine and finally fell asleep.

## Chapter Nine

"I don't understand it," said Roger. "We should have found the river by now. Dad said it was twice the size as that creek we saw on the first day. And we know it's here somewhere. We heard it earlier; now we can hardly hear it at all."

"Maybe we've lost our way," said Nate, sighing. It would seem an impossible thing, to get lost with such a large lake to follow, but after initially walking on the shore, they'd had to venture in a ways from the lake-edge when the water butted straight up to the forest. Now, even though there was enough almost bare ground to walk on, trees and tall bushes obscured their view.

"Well, I don't believe we can be lost," said Roger. "We're just going to have to keep going until we find it."

Nate sighed again. He had hoped that Dad would have been able to persuade Roger not to leave the lake, but when Dad woke up in the morning, he just kept saying, "L—leg h—hurts get doc—tor l—eg h—hurts." Roger took it as extra proof that they needed to leave right away. Now it was almost 9:30. They'd been carrying Dad for an hour with very few breaks. Nate's back ached.

*This is impossible. I'm exhausted already. And every step is a jolt. It's not easy to walk in sync. How are we going to be able to get all the way down to the inlet like this? Roger has a different stride than I. His legs are longer. And because he's taller, Dad's on a slope. Anytime now, my feet are going to go out from under me, I just know it. That's*

*if my hands and wrists don't give out first.*

"I'm going to need another break," said Nate.

"We're not stopping again until we find that blasted river," said Roger.

Nate trudged along. His hands stung. *If I don't have a break soon, I'm going to drop Dad.* "Roger, this isn't going to work."

"So what do you suggest? That we set Dad down and twiddle our thumbs and hope that someone will come by and give us a ride home?"

"You don't have to be sarcastic," said Nate. He was surprised he'd said it out loud.

"And you don't have to whine," said Roger.

"I was just meaning that it's not too late to change your mind."

"You on about those smoke signals again?"

"I'm just trying to be practical."

"And I'm not?" asked Roger.

Nate didn't answer.

It was another fifteen minutes before Roger spoke again. "Yes! There it is!"

Nate looked ahead and saw a glimmer of water. His heart skipped as if they'd just found a treasure. He squinted through the trees. Then his heart thumped. It wasn't the river. It was the lake! *How is this possible? Have we been walking in circles?* He stopped abruptly, yanking Roger back.

Roger teetered slightly. "Hey, you could have warned me that you were going to stop."

"It's not the river," said Nate.

"Now what are you talking about?" asked Roger, as they put the stretcher down.

"We've found the lake again," said Nate, his voice as low as the ground.

Roger just stood there, his face expressionless. He kicked a stone. "How could this happen?"

"You were leading."

"You could have said something."

"I didn't notice."

"All this time and energy wasted," said Roger.

"It could have happened to anyone," said Nate. *But it wouldn't have happened if we'd stayed at the mountain.*

"I need something to eat," said Roger.

"At this rate, our food may have to last for a couple of days," said Nate. But he had to admit he was hungry, too. The half can of beans he'd had for breakfast and the cup of cold hot chocolate didn't exactly make him feel full. Now his mouth watered for some of Dad's CPR. But it was in Dad's pack, still in the lake. They ate some more of the marshmallows instead.

"We'd better not get lost again," said Roger, stuffing the near-empty bag into his pack.

"We won't if we think it through," said Nate.



"And what do you suggest, oh wise one?" asked Roger, kicking another stone—harder this time.

"I'll think about it," said Nate. He tapped his fingers on his chin. *We should be able to just walk, keeping the lake in view. But the trouble is, with these tall bushes, we can't always see it.*

"Well?"

"Still thinking." His eyes lingered on a stump with fungi growing out of it. He recalled how Dad had pointed out markers in the forest. *If only we had markers now...but what if...what if we were to use the same idea and change it a little? What if we were to make our own markers?* He worked out a few details in his mind before speaking.

"Okay then," said Nate. "This time we're going to have to REALLY concentrate on the sound of the river. Then we're going to have to find a point to walk to in the direction of the sound, a marker, something like a particular tree—"

"Is this going to take long?" asked Roger, shuffling his feet.

Nate took a deep breath. "When we get to it, we'll take a fix on the sound again and find another marker. Each time we reach the next marker, the river should sound louder. Do you agree?"

"I guess," said Roger, biting his fingernails, just like he did when he had to work out math problems at school.

Nate flicked a black fly away as it flew to his neck, as if to say *How dare you?* and looked ahead. "Our first marker will be the tree with the widow maker."

"It better not fall on Dad," said Roger.

Nate hadn't made the connection when he'd said it. But now he thought about Mom. *What will she do if Dad doesn't make it out of the forest alive? What will she do if we show up with Dad dead? Dead. Dead.*

Dad squirmed on the stretcher. "G-go a-round," he mumbled.

"That's okay, Dad. We won't stand under it," said Nate.

And they didn't. They stopped to the side of it. Nate turned his head this way, that way, and listened again. The river was definitely a little louder.

"The next marker is that huge stump with the vines growing over it," he said.

As they walked toward it, the river got louder still.

Four markers and half an hour later, Roger said, "Okay, the next marker is that patch of mist."

"Mist! Mist hangs over rivers," said Nate.

In just minutes, they were at the grassy top of a low riverbank. Nate felt like falling to his knees and worshipping it.

"Finally!" said Roger, as they put the stretcher down. He took off his pack, pinched his shoulders back, and then relaxed them. "It doesn't seem as big as Dad said, does it?"

It was about as wide as a four-lane highway. "It looks more than wide enough to me," said Nate. "Good thing there's a bridge farther down."

"Did you know it's almost lunchtime?" asked Roger.

Nate looked at his watch. 10:32. *Maybe not lunchtime, but how did it take us this long? Because we didn't know where we were going. Because carrying Dad means we have to walk more slowly. Because we had to keep stopping and starting. Because because because.*

"What's there to eat?" asked Roger.

"Gourmet beans and sardines a la tin."

"Very funny," said Roger, rolling his eyes.

They ate one can of sardines and the rest of the marshmallows. When they were finished, Roger went down to the river to fill up their water bottles.

Nate was so tired, he sat down and leaned his back against a log and listened to the river. Like the wind in the trees the first night, the river had its own gentle rhythm, as if it were whispering, *Don't worry, follow me.* His chin sunk to his chest.

His mind drifted. He imagined being lost in the forest for days and days and days.

*H – help me. H – help me. H – help me.*

The words played over and over in Nate's mind – *h – help me, h – help me –* until he realized that they weren't coming from him, they were coming from along side of him. From Dad. Nate sprang up.

Dad was moaning like an animal caught in a leg-hold trap.

"Where – where are we?"

"We're at the river."

"N—Nate?"

"Yes, Dad, it's me."

"My l—leg...it h—hurts."

"I know—"

"Rog—er."

For a second, Nate had to think about where Roger was. Then he remembered. "He's getting some water."

"G—good—I'm—th—thirsty," said Dad, his voice as rough as the bark of a Sitka spruce tree.

*I'm not surprised. You haven't had anything to drink since yesterday afternoon.*

As soon as Roger came back, Nate propped Dad up and held a water bottle to his crinkled lips. Dad drank slowly, coughing between mouthfuls, then lay back.

"Th—thank-you," he said, closing his eyes.

Nate touched his father's hand. *Maybe things will get better now. Next time you wake up, maybe you'll feel like eating.*

Roger checked the map. "Okay, it's 10:45," he said in his *I'm-in-control* voice. "Dad's made a couple of notes on the map. First, there's a waterfall about a third of the way between here and the bridge. And about two thirds along, there are some rapids." He bit his fingernails again. "So, if we get going now, we should still be able to make the bridge by late afternoon and the fishing lodge by this evening."

"I don't see how. It's taken us this long just to find the river."

"That's because we got lost. Now we just have to follow it."

*Just.*

By 1:00, they still hadn't reached the waterfall. They ate the bag of banana chips. Nate crossed it off his list. Then 2:30 came and went with several breaks in between. Then 3:27 and 4:14.

When they finally reached the waterfall, it was almost 5:30. They put the stretcher down on a small patch of moss.

"We're only a third of the way to the bridge. I knew it would take longer than you thought," said Nate. "There's no way we'll be able to make it to the fishing lodge by this evening. And anyway, I'm too tired to go any farther." He looked at the waterfall. The water was so white, it made him think of the Spirit Bear.

"We can make it if we hustle," said Roger.

*Max Mercury.*

*No we can't. And I can tell you're tired. You haven't been walking as fast as usual. Why won't you just admit it?* "We have to be realistic," said Nate. "Let's just find somewhere to set up camp."

Roger squeezed his head between his hands. "Fine."

A little farther along they found a small clearing next to the river. They put Dad down, and without saying anything, Roger took the water bottles and went down to the river.

Nate sat down next to Dad and held his hand. Dad was sleeping, but his face was strained. Nate wished that his father were holding his hand and not the other way around.

He watched as Roger threw stones into the river. During the baseball season, Roger threw stones at targets. A pop can on a fence post. A knot on a tree trunk. He said it improved his pitching. Sometimes he liked to throw stones just for fun. One time when they were younger, spending a day at a beach, Roger had spent a whole afternoon skipping stones across the water. Four skips, five skips. Once he skipped a stone eight times. The most Nate skipped was three. Now, Roger was throwing stones hard, down, as if he were lashing out at the river.

*Roger hates it when things don't go well. We're way behind schedule. His schedule. Does Roger blame me for this, too? Is he mad at himself because he took on something that even he couldn't do? Is he just as worried as I am about Dad? Or is it something else? If only the Spirit Bear...oh, I wish it were true that the Spirit Bear helps people in distress, but it looks as if the only things that will get us out of here are hiking and time.*

Nate stared at the mist that had hung over the river all day. It was white and delicate, the way it hung like Mom's window sheers, making everything look soft, filtered.

While Nate sat, the air cooled and the mist became denser. It made Roger's body appear dark and shadowy. Soon it surrounded Roger just like the clouds had enveloped him on the mountain. He became ghostlike. *Unreal.*

Nate shuddered as he remembered losing sight of Dad and Roger on the ledge. It was as if a ghost passed through him as he remembered the scream.

*Everything that has happened shouldn't be happening.*

As Roger became even more ghostlike and the river lost its distinction, Nate began to see shapes in the mist, just like he'd seen shapes in the clouds. A person lying down. A bird with outstretched wings. Upstream a little, a shape like a walking bear formed. But unlike the other shapes, the bear shape moved steadily in one direction. Their direction. It lumbered silently downstream along the opposite shore of the river, its head swaying from side to side.

Nate stared in disbelief. He blinked and blinked, expecting the image to go away, just like the other images had. But when it was directly across from Nate, it stopped and looked at him, as if to say, *Don't worry, I'm here.* Nate's heart thumped. *A real bear? So close? No, it can't be. C – can it?* He closed his eyes tightly, afraid to look straight back at it.

When he finally opened his eyes, just to see if he *had* been dreaming, the bear had disappeared.

## Chapter Ten

"Roger! Did you see it?"

Roger stopped throwing rocks and turned to Nate. "See what?"

"The white bear. The Spirit Bear."

"No."

"You had to! It was just on the other side of the river."

"Must have been your imagination," said Roger, turning back to the river and throwing another rock.

"Was not. It was there, I tell you. It even stopped and looked at me. It stared me right in the eyes and —"

"Now I really think you're losing it."

Another lump formed in Nate's throat. He swallowed hard and stared back into the mist. So much of everything was blurred. *Maybe I was dreaming. After all, Dad said that real white bears are rare. Maybe I was just being hopeful. Maybe bears are bears are bears.*

He sighed and reached out again for his father's hand.

It was warmer than before. And Dad was squirming. Nate noticed that his father's face was bright red. Nate laid his hand across his father's forehead and cheeks. They were hot and dry.

Nate recognized the signs from when he and Roger had the flu a while back. Burning body. Skin ready to pop.



"Roger! I think Dad has a fever."

Roger dropped what he was doing and dashed to his father. "How do you know?"

"Feel his forehead."

Roger did. "Maybe he's just getting too warm in his sleeping bag."

"I don't think so," said Nate. He paused. "Fevers can be really dangerous. Remember how worried Mom was when you had yours?" Roger had the flu much worse than Nate.

Roger had thought he was dying. When his temperature reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit, he became so delirious, he thought he was flying. He kept saying, *Watch me, I'm Superman, I'm Superman.* And then he started shrieking, *Get the Earth out of the way! Superman's crashing! Superman's crashing!* When his temperature returned to normal and Mom told him what had happened, his face turned as bright red as it had when his fever had been at its highest.

"Let's just talk about Dad," said Roger, his face now flushing. "What could be causing it?"

"I don't know," said Nate. "Don't fevers have something to do with infections?"

"Maybe he has the flu, too," said Roger.

"I doubt it. But what could it be? All the scratches on his face look okay."

"Maybe there were some bugs in the water," said Roger.

"Maybe, but we're okay...so it's probably not that. You don't suppose—"

Nate uncovered his father and pulled away the tissue he had put on the punctured skin. There was some resistance as the tissue stuck to the open wound.

Dad squirmed and groaned loudly.

"Sorry, Dad," Nate said softly. "You'll be okay. I'm trying not to hurt you."

But when the wound was completely uncovered, Nate cringed. The flesh around the puncture was flaming red and the wound was oozing yellow pus.

Roger turned his head away.

Nate didn't want to look at it either. But he knew he had to. "We're going to have to do something about this."

"You're the doctor," said Roger, looking all pale and backing away like he had done at the lake. "Just tell me what you'll need and I'll get it."

Nate searched his memory. *What would Dad do? What would Mom do? How did they treat our scrapes and cuts when we were little? They cleaned them with water and some antiseptic. And then they put sterile bandages on them and when we were really small, they kissed them to make the scrapes go away. Except this isn't just a scrape. But wouldn't the treatment be sort of the same? Oh, Dad, I wish you could tell us how to make things better.*

"We're going to have to do something to clean this up," said Nate. "We'll need lots of water."

"I'll go get some more," said Roger, taking their cooking pot. He seemed glad to get away.

"I'll get a face cloth," said Nate.

When Roger returned, Nate poured some water into a bowl and dabbed the sticky wound.

Dad scrunched his face each time Nate touched his skin. "Wh—what are you do—ing?" Dad asked in a barely audible voice.

"Just cleaning a cut," said Nate. *No point in telling him how bad it is. It could make him all upset.*

"Just a few more dabs," said Nate. "Honest." When the wound was completely clean, he covered it with some more tissue.

"What else can we do?" asked Roger when the sleeping bag was back over Dad's leg.

We? "Just keep cleaning it and give him plenty of water to drink. I'm going to wash out this stuff," Nate said, holding the cloth and bowl. "Can you sit with him?"

Roger nodded.

Nate strolled down to the river. After rinsing the cloth and bowl, he stayed for a while and thought. He thought about how short a distance they had come and how they were only a third of the way to the bridge. He thought about how his entire body ached from carrying Dad. He thought about how an infection could make Dad's leg even worse. He shivered and looked at his watch. It was already 6:30. And they still had to set up the camp for the night.

Wearily, he went back to Dad and Roger. After they put up the tents, Roger sat on a log and started whittling a stick. Nate's stomach growled. He was amazed he hadn't heard Roger saying he was famished.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Nate.

Roger didn't even look up from his whittling. "Nah, I've been drinking lots of water."

"Do you mind if I get myself something? Half a can of beans?"

"Go for it," said Roger, still not looking up.

Nate put his hand past the clothes to the bottom of Roger's pack. All he could feel was one flat can. *That's odd.* "Didn't we have another can of beans?"

"Don't think so."

Nate visualized his inventory list. They'd started with three cans, eaten two. "I'm sure we did." For a fleeting moment, he imagined that Roger must have eaten it. *He's my brother. How could I think such a thing?*

"Well if we did, it should be there. Are you sure it's not?" asked Roger.

"I'm sure."

"Maybe it's in your pack."

"I wasn't carrying any tins."

"Maybe it fell out and we didn't notice," said Roger.

"I don't see how."

"Well it must have," said Roger, abruptly slashing his stick. "You don't know everything."

"I know I don't," said Nate. "But I don't see how it could have fallen out from the bottom, especially when the pack was closed."

Roger shrugged. "Lots of things have been happening that don't make sense. Maybe that white bear you saw took it when we weren't watching."

"Bears don't eat cans. Besides, I thought you didn't believe I saw a white bear."

"Just like I don't believe there's a can missing."

Nate looked at his brother. *Something's not adding up. Why isn't he practically tearing apart the packs himself in order to find the beans? Maybe there wasn't one left. Maybe I made a mistake on my list. Maybe everything is just getting to me.*

Just to be sure, he checked Roger's pack again. This time he checked the outside pockets, too.

Something sharp cut his finger. He opened the pocket wider and looked inside. It was a tin lid! And a flattened can.

*That's weird. I'm the one that has been collecting our camp debris. So why would this be here? Unless it's true —*

Disgusted, Nate clenched the flattened can in his hand and he charged over to Roger.

"How could you?" asked Nate, his voice screeching. "How — how could you be so — so — selfish?" He punched the air with the foodless can.

Roger stared back with startled eyes. "I was hungry."

"We needed to share that food. There's almost none left."

"You never eat much. And I move faster. I get hungrier. I'm the one that needs more to eat."

Nate couldn't believe his ears. He narrowed his eyes and marched towards his brother with the intent of yelling some more at him. But then his arms seemed to act on their own. He did something he never did. He pushed the can hard into Roger's stomach. So hard that Roger lost his balance and fell backwards off the log onto the dirt. His knife went flying. His legs stuck straight up into the air.

Nate didn't know whether to laugh or punch his brother some more. *But I can't do either.*

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I didn't mean to push you over!"

"Yeah, right," said Roger, his arms flailing as he tried to get back upright.

Nate quickly extended his hand to help Roger back up, but Roger grabbed his hand and pulled him down, too.

"Now you'll pay," said Roger. He flipped Nate onto his back and tackled him, pinning him down.

"GET OFF ME! GET OFF ME!" said Nate, struggling under Roger's hold and trying to push him away.

Roger gave one more extra hard push.

"Okay, okay, I give up," said Nate.

"Wimp." Roger got up and walked away, picked up his knife, and resumed his whittling.

Nate lay there for a few moments. He felt as if he were seven years old again when Roger had challenged him to wrestle and Nate had said, *No, I don't want to*, but Roger had pinned him down anyway. Nate had begged him to let him go and had finally surrendered. Roger laughed and called him a wimp then, too. Now Nate wanted to tell Roger how much he hated it when Roger called him that name. But the words wouldn't come. He pulled himself up, brushed the dirt off his jeans and, gritting his teeth, went back to Dad.

Dad was mumbling, "Boys—don't—fight—don't—fight."

Shame filled Nate. "I'm sorry, Dad." *I know how much you want Roger and me to get along. But we are just so different. Like the teacher said: Chalk and cheese.*

As the light gradually dimmed, he and Roger didn't speak for the rest of the evening. The air temperature cooled even more. Nate wanted to make a fire, but was too exhausted.

He cleaned his father's wound once again, gave him some more water to drink, and anchored his tent over him. Roger set up their part of the camp. Before it was even dark, he retreated into the tent, saying he was going to sleep.

Nate was so hungry, his stomach cramped. *But how can I eat when there's only one can of sardines left? We'll need something tomorrow morning. And we're making such slow progress, there's no telling how much longer we'll be out here.*

He thought about what Dad would say.

*Perseverance.*

Like one Saturday last year when Roger challenged him to run a mile around the track at school. Nate had said, "No thanks, running is your thing." Roger had retorted, "So I guess that's decided. You can't do it." Dad whispered, "Why don't you try?" Half way around, Nate doubled over when a stitch jabbed under his ribs, just like it always did when he tried to run any long distance. "Ha ha! Knew you couldn't do it," Roger laughed. Dad called out, "Remember, Nate, perseverance." But Nate stopped anyway.

Now he was so tired he crawled into his sleeping bag early, too. He pulled out his diary and held his pen in his blistered hands.

*Wednesday, 8:26 p.m.*

*What good is perseverance when you don't get anywhere?*

As he tried to get to sleep, Nate didn't feel like gravitating toward Roger.

*I'd rather freeze.*



## Chapter Eleven

Nate woke up early Thursday morning with numb toes and a headache. Roger was still snoring. Nate hauled himself out of bed. He thought about what lay ahead. The rapids and the bridge.

The morning air was still cold and the sky was still a solid grey. Nate sighed and rubbed his arms to get warm. *Whee-ah, whee-ah.* A Steller's jay was sitting on a stump, bobbing its head and chattering. Nate couldn't help but grin at it. He remembered how Dad had called it a hiker's companion. *I wonder if Dad's awake and if he can hear it?*

Nate hurried over to his father, expecting to find him as he had left him under his sleeping bag.

But Dad had unzipped part of the sleeping bag and had partially thrown it off.

Nate crawled into the tent. "Dad! Why aren't you under your covers?"

"Almost at the peak—"

"No, Dad, we're at the river. We left the peak." He felt his father's forehead. It was even hotter than the night before. And his father's eyes looked glazed and wild. He was staring past Nate, but his eyes didn't appear to be focusing on anything in particular.

"Top—of—the w—w—world."

"No, Dad, we're no-where near—" said Nate. But he cut himself off mid-sentence as he watched his father run his tongue over his lips and then open and shut his mouth like a fish coming up for food sprinkled into an aquarium.

"Do you want some water?"

"SPO."

"There's no more SPO." *The powder is in the lake.* Nate quickly got his water bottle.

"Roger, wake up! I think Dad's much worse."

Nate removed the tent pegs, lifted away the bottomless tent, and helped his father to drink.

No Roger.

"Th—thank you," said Dad quietly, still not focusing on anything.

"Are you hungry, too?" asked Nate.

His father nodded.

"I'll get you something," said Nate. "ROGER. GET UP!"

*I doubt if Dad will even have the strength to chew.* Nate tried to figure out what best to give him. *How stupid of me. All we have is one more can of sardines. That's if Roger hasn't found a way to secretly eat it, too.*

Nate was relieved to find the can was still there. He made a broth with one sardine. The smell of fish filled the air. *I hope it doesn't attract all the wildlife in the forest.* He grabbed his spoon from his pack and, leaving the nearly full tin behind on a low stump, he hurried back to his father and propped him up.

Still no Roger.

"Okay Dad, open up," said Nate.

Dad opened his mouth and closed it over the spoon.

It was a slow process. He took small spoonfuls and waited several seconds before opening his mouth for another one. Nate concentrated hard, wanting every last morsel to go into his father and not down his chin.

All of a sudden, Roger's voice boomed behind Nate. "Get away! Get away!"

Nate was so startled, he spilled the last spoonful of the broth. In the corner of his eye, he saw a raccoon with black eye-rings like a bandit's mask slinking off with the sardine tin.

*Whee-ah, whee-ah.* The Steller's jay sounded like it was laughing. *Some companion.*

"I thought you were the one all concerned about the food!" said Roger, his voice as cold as the morning.

Dad held his mouth open. Nate looked at the mushy sardines that stained his father's orange fleece jacket. Grey liquid with traces of shiny black skin. A fragment of bone.

Nate wanted to cry. *It's all getting to be too much. Too much to worry about, too much to try to figure out.*

"I'm sorry, Dad," he said. "That's all there is. There isn't any more."

Nate's head throbbed, he was so hungry. He blinked back tears. *Now what should we do?*

"Well that's just great. We might as well get out of here now," said Roger, in his get-out-of-my-way-I'm-hungry voice.

*We're going to need to eat if we're going to continue. But what? I don't know what kinds of plants are edible. And I don't want to make a mistake and eat something that's poisonous. He remembered how Roger had almost eaten devil's club berries. But I do know some edible berries, such as salmonberries and thimbleberries. Some grow by the stream near our home. Maybe I'll be able to find some here.*

He whispered to his father that he'd be back soon and grabbed their only tin pot.

"Where are you going?" asked Roger. It sounded more like an interrogation than a question.

"To find some berries."

"We're going to need more than berries."

"What do you suggest?"

"Protein."

"Then why don't you go fishing?"

"No time for that. We've got to find the rapids and the bridge today." He practically tore down their tent.

"Suit yourself," said Nate. *You always do.*

"Fine. I'll go fishing," said Roger. He paused. "We'll see who comes up with the best meal."

Nate shook his head. *Another competition.* He walked alongside the river. He didn't want to venture too far into the bush for fear of getting lost.

Mist still hung over the water. In the early morning light, moss covered rocks, just below the surface of the water, made the river appear dark, foreboding green. Nate stayed well clear of the banks, so as not to slip in.

It felt strange to be walking in the forest without Dad and Roger. But was he alone?

A tiny brown snake slithered to the left of him. On a tree trunk in front of him, a squirrel ran up the bark. A Steller's jay — the same one? — hopped and chattered from tree to tree. As Nate walked along, he kept his eyes open for anything small and bright and juicy.

He didn't see anything. He kicked a rotting log. Out spilled a gazillion big, plump, black ants. He was almost tempted to scoop them up and swallow them whole. But his stomach churned at the thought. *Forget it! Even if they were deep fried and covered with chocolate, I still wouldn't eat them.*

He kept searching for berries. Then somewhere ahead there was a loud snort. Nate stopped. *What was that? Whatever it was, it sounded like it came from something big. Maybe I should go back to the camp. Maybe I shouldn't be out here by myself. Maybe I should go back and pack up the camp and let Roger get the food.*

Just then a black tailed deer pranced past him. Nate jumped back a step and then relaxed. *So that's what snorted. I guess I will keep going. We do need to eat. And I'd never hear the last of it from Roger if I were to return without any berries.*

He started searching again. Another snort. Also ahead of him. He stopped, expecting another deer to prance by. But when he didn't see one, and he didn't hear another snort, he forged on. Over a rotten log, around a cluster of mushrooms, through a tangle of knee-high salal.

The Steller's jay took off from a branch and cheekily dropped a pinecone right at Nate's feet.

Nate grinned and stopped and picked it up and tossed it into the bush. Something rustled again. Then he heard another snort. Something inside him said it was too loud to come from a deer. His heart pounded in his ears. The rustling continued. Stopped. Then started again.

Silence.

*Maybe now I'm just imagining things. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. Better just concentrate on finding berries.* He climbed over another rotting log and pushed away more salal.

More rustling.

He stopped again and stared into the mist that was seeping into the forest.

He was just about to call out again when he saw a white bear shape. Just like at the river. But this time it was much closer—like from one side of a street to another. Not close enough to touch, but close enough to really see. This time there was no mistaking it. It was a white bear—all creamy white with a dark nose. *Real.*

He hardly breathed. He didn't dare take another step. *What should I do? Blow my whistle? Run?*

He held his whistle in his hand and started to slowly back away. The bear stopped. Nate ducked behind a bush. He could still partially see the bear. Now it was nibbling at berries. He blinked rapidly. *Can this be happening?* He watched as the bear ate and ate. His hand shaking, Nate pressed the branch down so he could see it better. The bear stopped nibbling and turned its head in Nate's direction.

Nate's heart thumped. *Run! Run!* But for some reason his feet seemed stuck in one place.

The bear looked away and sauntered to another bush. It nibbled at more berries. Then it turned and looked straight at Nate.

Nate's chest thumped harder. He crouched down lower. The bear nodded its head up and down and slowly lumbered away. In just seconds, the bear seemed nothing more than a thickening of the mist.

Nate put his hand over his mouth and shook his head, still in disbelief. He stayed crouched for another minute or so until he remembered he was there to find food.

He went to the first bush that the bear had stopped at. There were sprays and sprays of red fruit. He reached out to grab some, felt thorns on his skin, and then quickly withdrew his hand. He looked at the large, lobed leaves.

*Devil's club. Oplo something horribus.*

Nate whacked the bush with his tin pot. *Oh, what's the point?* He was about to give up and go back to the camp when he decided to look just a little further. The bear had nibbled from two places. *Maybe – just maybe – there is something on the next bush that we can eat.*

Yes! Just a few yards away, there were thimbleberries—small, velvety, and dark red, just like the ones that grew wild in his neighbourhood.

He tasted one. Two. Three. They were deliciously juicy and sweet—as sweet as gummy juice berries, his favourite candy. He was so hungry, he stuffed his mouth full once, twice, and again. He didn't count the chews. Then he picked as many berries as he could fit in the pot and stuffed several more into his mouth. These he didn't chew right away. Instead, he pressed them between his tongue and the roof of his mouth and sucked the juice. Then he ate another handful, and, letting the juice linger in his mouth, made his way back to the camp.

Roger was rolling up the ground sheets.

"So did you catch a fish?" asked Nate, holding out his pot of berries.

Roger scowled. "No line or hook. I decided it would be better to pack up the camp since we have to get on the move."

"Hmmm," said Nate, looking at Roger's wet boots. He wondered if he should mention to Roger that he had seen a bear. *No, he won't believe me.*

Nate got his bowl, filled it with berries for his father, and then handed the pot to Roger. Using the back of a spoon, Nate squished the berries in the bowl into a silky puree and then fed it to his father.



While Roger was eating straight out of the pot, Nate whispered to his father.  
“Guess what, Dad. I saw a white bear again. That’s twice now. And do you  
know what? I think it actually showed me where to find the berries!”

The corners of Dad’s mouth turned upwards.

*Was that a smile? Does he believe me? Or does he think I am kidding?*

His father’s eyes closed again.

Whatever Dad had been thinking, it didn’t matter. For a few moments, Nate  
had seen his father’s face free of pain.

All of a sudden, it seemed possible to get to the bridge by late afternoon.

Yes, he could feel it. One quick crossing and they would practically be home  
free.

## Chapter Twelve

For the first couple of hours, the bush was patchy and much of the ground cover was just ankle high. "We're keeping a good pace," said Roger. He was in a lot better mood after eating the berries.

But soon after eleven, they came across a thicket of devil's club so dense it was almost impossible to get through.

There didn't seem to be any way of avoiding it—not if they were going to stay as close to the river as possible to avoid losing their way and not if they didn't want to add any more distance to their journey. Besides, from what they could see through the mist, the shrubby growth farther in the forest was just as thick.

"Blast," said Roger, as the stretcher kept catching on the bushes.

Nearly every step, they had to tug and push the stretcher free. Spiny thorns caught on their clothes and their skin.

"Roger, stop for a minute."

"Why?"

"Just to cover Dad's face a bit. I don't want any of these thorns to hurt him."

"There's nowhere to lower the stretcher."

"We'll just have to do it here."

The stretcher didn't get as far as the ground. It lay cradled, held up by the thickness of the bush.

Nate leaned over and pulled the sleeping bag up and over his father's face. Then Nate tented the sleeping bag slightly, creating airspace for his father to breathe.

"He'd better not suffocate," said Roger.

"Can't you see that I took care of that? You'd think you'd give me credit for trying to protect him."

Roger glared at Nate. As soon as they got going again, he rammed through the devil's club like a bear on a mission.

It was all right for Roger. He was tall enough that his head was above the bushes. But Nate was shorter. Branches bent backwards and then sprung back. Some of the longer ones slapped Nate across the face. Nate thought they were like tiny machetes attacking him. Two, four, six. Slap, slap, slap.

*Enough!*

"Can't you be more considerate?" Nate shouted.

"Now what?"

"The branches!"

"You complaining again?"

Nate bit his lip so hard that he tasted blood. For the next few minutes, he just tried to keep up without letting go of the stretcher. His arms felt as if they were being yanked out of their shoulder sockets. His muscles quivered.

Dad stirred. As he wriggled, the stretcher teetered from side to side.

"Quit jerking," said Roger.

"It's not me," said Nate.

"Who else?"

"Dad."

"Hmmmph."

*I guess he doesn't believe that, either.* "Try to keep still, Dad," Nate said softly.

"What?" asked Roger.

"Nothing," said Nate. He just hoped that his father wouldn't topple the stretcher into the devil's club.

When they finally got through the devil's club, it was almost two. By now, Dad was straining under the straps to sit up.

"Dad, try to stay still," said Nate, as he and Roger lowered the stretcher onto a bed of moss near the riverbank.

"Want to walk," said his father again.

"Dad, you can't," said Nate.

"Hot," said Dad. "Thirsty."

Nate felt his father's cheeks. "He's still burning up. I just knew this would happen. I told you we should have stayed back at the mountain."

"Shut up," said Roger. He was in a terrible mood again.

Nate gritted his teeth. He untied the ropes so his father could relax and went down to the river for more water.

When he got back, Dad was trying to get up and Roger was struggling to keep him down.

*Where is Dad getting the strength?*

"Roger," said Nate. "Maybe he doesn't like being pinned down."

"How else can we get him to stay still?"

"Maybe all he needs is a drink. He said he was thirsty."

Roger kicked a mushroom right off its stem and walked away.

Nate crouched down behind his father and propped him up against his own chest. Dad didn't struggle. As tightly as Nate could from behind, he circled his arms around him. His arms barely reached; his father was that much bigger. But Nate repositioned himself slightly so that the water bottle could reach his father's lips.

"Okay, Dad, have a sip."

Dad squirmed.

Nate held his father more tightly. Dad took a small sip and then took a large gulp and swallowed. When the water bottle was almost empty, he held up his hand and said, "Full."

As Nate settled his father down, Roger returned with red-stained lips.

"You'll never guess what I found."

Nate raised his eyebrows.

"Salmonberries!" said Roger.

Nate jumped up. "Where?"

"I was going to show you."

"Then show me now!"

The bush wasn't very far away. It was loaded with plump red and yellow and orange fruit. Nate tossed one berry up into the air and caught it in his mouth. As he bit into it, it popped and spurted juice. He laughed. Roger tossed a berry up and caught it in his mouth, too.

"Bet you can't catch one I throw to you," said Roger.

Nate didn't have time to respond. A berry came flying toward him. He opened his mouth just in time.

"Beginner's luck," said Roger.

He threw another one. Nate caught that one, too. Next they were tossing salmonberries at each other's mouths, both catching a few and missing a few. Soon they were both laughing so hard, they couldn't catch any.

"Hey," said Roger, "do you remember that time we did this with black grapes? We had so many on the kitchen floor Dad said that we should stomp on them to make wine—"

"And Mom said we'd better think twice about that unless we wanted to scrub the stains off the floor." Nate laughed so hard his face muscles ached. He put his hands up in a T. "Time out. Let's just pick them and eat."

Between them, they stripped the bush of its fruit. Nate saved a few in his hand for his father, just in case he wanted some.

On the way back to Dad, Roger held his stomach. "I think I ate too many."

"Me, too," said Nate. His intestines were gurgling. But at least he wasn't so hungry.

He raised his eyes to the sky. The cloud-cover was breaking slightly and there was a glimmer of sunlight directly overhead. It cast a soft glow on the forest.

The huge cedars looked feathery soft.

When the twins got back to Dad, he was sleeping. Nate gave Dad's handful of salmonberries to Roger, who swallowed them so fast it was as if he'd never had a stomachache.

"Okay, let's get to those rapids," said Roger.

*It's amazing. Berries twice in one day and he's actually cheerful!*

## Chapter Thirteen

It was already 4:30 when they reached the rapids, only two thirds of the way to the bridge. Even Roger had to agree that they wouldn't make it to the inlet by evening. He sat down on a log and hung his head between his knees.

Dad was twitching and groaning in and out of sleep. "I don't know how much longer Dad can go on like this," said Nate, sitting down as well.

"Me neither," said Roger. He sighed heavily, slapped his knees, and then jumped up. "I'm starving. I can't live on berries. Time to catch a fish. It'll have to be a barehanded thing. No hook, no bait." He rolled up his sleeves and marched straight toward the river.

*This I've got to see.*

Roger hopped down a low bank onto a gravel bar, leaned over with his hands on his knees, and stared into the river. As it crashed over the rocks, the water looked like marshmallows in a blender.

"See any?" asked Nate from the bank.

"Nope."

Nate stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep them warm and waited. "Well?"

No answer.

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?"

"Duh."

"Maybe I could catch one."



"When have you ever been fishing?"

"Never." *It's something that you and Dad do.*

"Exactly, so just watch me," said Roger.

They both watched the river a while longer. Every once in a while, they saw a fish jump. But it was always too far away—in the middle of the rapids. Then seemingly out of nowhere, a bald eagle flew down and silently used its talons to grab a dead fish that was floating near the shore.

"Wow!" said Nate. He could almost feel the whoosh of the eagle's great wings as it flew away downstream. He'd never seen anything quite like it.

"Just concentrate," said Roger.

When at last a fish jumped in front of Roger, he plunged his hands into the water. There was a flurry of splashes. Just as quickly, he stood up and thumped his hands against his pants. "Blast! I almost had it."

"Well, tell me when you catch one," said Nate. "I'm getting too cold to stand here forever."

"Make a fire," said Roger. "We'll need to cook what I catch. If you're lucky I might even share it with you."

*How generous!*

Not feeling very lucky, but eager for warmth and cooked food, Nate gathered bits and pieces of dry tinder to start the fire.

He looked under evergreen canopies, inside hollow logs, and in the forked trunks of trees. He found brown spruce needles, insect-eaten wood, and

disintegrating leaves. He stripped papery bark from a cedar, collected hard sap, and dead grasses.

When he had two hands full, he put a few small rocks in a circle, rubbed the tinder between his hands to break it up, and fluffed it into a small mound.

Next he gathered some thin, brittle twigs and some thicker sticks for kindling. He arranged them all into a shin-high teepee. Then, crouching down so his face was almost level with the ground, he struck a match and touched the flame to the tinder.

*Please burn!*

The grasses lit like a fuse. The spruce needles crackled. Bark sap sizzled. Pop! A big flame. It grew and grew.

Yellow.

Orange.

Heat.

Then just as quickly, it faded.

*No! Don't go out!*

Quickly, Nate blew at the last specks of orange. Long, slow blows. The specks glowed.

Another pop and another flame. Over and over, he sucked air in and then blew it out in long, steady breaths. The flame intensified, igniting the kindling sticks.

In less than a minute, the whole teepee was blazing.

Nate grinned and sat cross-legged and held his palms to the fire. Then he held them to his face. He closed his eyes and let the warmth soak into his skin.

"Good, c—cold," said a quiet voice. "K—keep it burning."

Dad!

Nate left the fire and checked his father. He was shivering. Inch-by-inch and puff-by-puff Nate dragged the stretcher close enough to the fire so that his father could share the heat.

"Th—thank you," said Dad, turning his face to the fire.

"Is there anything else you'd like? Something to drink?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, but tell me if you do."

Half expecting his father to change his mind, Nate stayed next to him. But after a few minutes, when Dad didn't say anything, Nate stoked the fire and then left it to gather some more wood from the perimeter of the clearing.

Over his knees, he snapped more brittle sticks into short lengths. He used his hatchet to hack through thick branches.

Soon he had a woodpile big enough to fuel the fire for the whole evening and cook dinner.

Dinner! Roger!

Nate put some large pieces of wood on the fire, made sure Dad was close enough to stay warm and far enough away so sparks wouldn't get him, and went over to the riverbank. Roger was no longer hunched over the water. Instead, he was sitting on a rock, holding a long, straight stick in his hands, sharpening one end into a point.

"Hey, Roger. What are you doing?"

Roger looked up. "Making a spear."

"Couldn't catch a salmon with your hands, eh?" asked Nate, impressed at the same time that Roger was making a tool.

"Bet you couldn't either. They're way too slippery."

"Bet I could," said Nate. *I can't believe I said that.*

"Prove it. I'll use the spear. First one to catch a fish gives it to the other to clean."

"Deal," said Nate, surprised that he took Roger up on his challenge so easily.

While Roger took his place back where he was standing before, Nate glanced around for somewhere else to fish. *I don't want to go too far away. But I do need to find another place where the fish might be. What about leaving Dad? Will he be okay? Yes, I left him in a safe place.*

One thing he knew about fishing was that fish liked to find still water to take a rest from swimming upstream. Sometimes he'd read from Dad's *Angling in the Wild* when Dad and Roger were out with their lines and poles at a stream near their home.

Nate left the sandbar and found a sheltered pool alongside the bank out of Roger's sight. *Perfect. Here I can fish in peace.*

He chose a large, flat rock to sit on and waited.

But not one fish came into the pool.

Maybe this isn't the best place. *Should I look for another? Perseverance.*

He decided to wait a while longer.

A woodpecker drummed a tree and a raven clucked in return. The mist became denser and now almost touched the river. He spent a long time gazing at the pool, occasionally letting his eyes wander. Upstream the water tumbled down a low waterfall. The water was so white as it cascaded over boulders it was mesmerizing.

He began to see shapes again. Dad falling. Dad disappearing.

It made him think of the Spirit Bear, how it had appeared in the mist and had helped him to find berries.

He waited and waited. Still no fish. Should I go back to Dad? No, I'll just wait a few more minutes. He gazed back at the waterfall. The mist was now gathering around it.

As he stared and stared, the mist and the water seemed to become one.

And then a white bear emerged, dripping with water. The bear shook itself and water flew off in a fine spray, leaving its fur separated like the teeth of a comb. Then the bear sauntered over to Nate's side of the river's edge, not far

away from where Nate was sitting, maybe about twenty-five feet, and stood very, very still.

Nate's heart thumped, although not quite as hard as the first and second time he'd seen it. He made himself look as small as possible on his rock.

The bear stood still for a while longer and then waded back into the river. It stood still again, as if studying the water. Then in one swift movement, it bashed its ivory-clawed paw into the water, buried his head after it, and came up with a fish in its mouth.

The fish writhed between the bear's teeth and then became perfectly still. The bear went to the shore and turned and looked at Nate. Nate swallowed hard. He covered his eyes with his hands and peeked through the gaps between his fingers. The bear nodded and sauntered into the forest.

As soon as the bear was out of sight, Nate quickly went to where the bear had been. It was a bigger pool, encircled by rocks, with a narrow entrance from the river. He stood by the side of the pool and waited again. One minute passed. And another. And another. And then came a salmon. It glided through the entrance and rested.

*Yes! This is my chance. If the bear can do it, so can I!*

He took off his shoes and socks and put one foot into the pool. Yikes! The icy cold water stung. He resisted the temptation to pull his foot out, took a deep breath, and put in his other foot. He waded through the shin-deep water and inched toward the fish. It didn't even seem to notice. As soon as Nate was

directly over it, he aimed with his hands to snare the fish. But as soon as Nate's hands touched the salmon, it flicked its tail, slid away from Nate's fingers, and escaped through the pool's entrance.

It took just a split second. Nate slapped the water, went back to the side of the river, sat back on a mossy log, and rubbed his legs. *Maybe I should stick to gathering berries. Maybe I should just put on my socks and shoes and go back to the camp. And let Roger win again? No way. If it's the last thing I do today, I'm going to catch a fish!*

He rubbed his feet some more and waited again. While he waited he thought about how fast the salmon had escaped. *How will I be able to catch something with that kind of speed? One touch of my hands and it will be gone like a shot again. Now, if it weren't able to escape so quickly, then maybe I would have a chance.*

*What I need to do is cage it somehow. But how?* He looked around. *What could I use? Rocks? Like a wall? No, it would take too long to get them in place. Sticks? Maybe. Yes. Sticks would work.*

While he waited for another fish to enter the pool, he gathered an armful of sticks. As soon as another salmon came into the pool, he waited until the salmon was completely still. Then carefully he walked over to the rocks at the entrance of the pool and, like a beaver making a dam, blocked up the entrance with the heap of sticks.

Yes! The fish was caged! *Now what should I do?* This time he took more time to think about how to approach the fish. He remembered what he could from the fishing book and combined it with what he'd seen the bear do.

*Move slowly toward the fish. The fish moved away. Get closer. Try not to even ripple the water. Use your hands to follow the wavy movement of the fish.*

Nate's heart thumped faster. His hands were now directly above the salmon. *Now grab the salmon under its gills.* Very quickly, he tried to hook the gills. The salmon darted away. *Too bad I don't have talons like the eagle or claws like the bear!* But even so, the fish didn't get very far.

When the salmon was still again, Nate tried again. This time he caught the salmon in his hands. The salmon wriggled and arced. Nate was amazed at how strong it was. *Like Dad.* How hard it struggled to be free. *Like how I felt when Roger was tackling me, pinning me down after I pushed the empty beans can into him.*

The salmon was so magnificent, so silvery and smooth, that Nate was almost tempted to let it go. But he hadn't eaten since noon. "Forgive me," he said, and he hurled the squirming salmon up into the woods. It landed with a muted thud.

When Nate got to the fish, it was writhing on damp soil. Its once shimmering scales were now dirty and dull. Its eyes shone with terror. Its gills flapped in the open air. Nate's chest tightened. He picked up a rock, held it tightly in his hand, clenched his teeth, and firmly hit the salmon twice on its head. Its body flopped only once more and then its mouth gaped open, motionless.



Nate stared at it for a moment. He started to put on his socks and shoes and then stopped himself. He went back to the river and unclogged the pool entrance. The water rushed away. He put his shoes and socks back on. Then he picked up the salmon and carried it by its gills back to the clearing.

## Chapter Fourteen

Roger was already there.

He was sitting and leaning against a tree, his legs stretched out in front of him, his arms folded. Next to him the spear was planted in the ground. On the other end of the spear, as if it were swimming in air, was a fish about the length of Nate's arm. Roger was grinning as if he had caught a whale.

Nate quickly hid his fish behind his back.

"Ha! Get cleaning," said Roger.

Nate kept his face deadpan. He sauntered up to Roger and then, in one swift movement, he revealed his salmon and dropped it onto Roger's lap.

"You, too."

For a moment, Roger was speechless.

"You clean mine and I clean yours? I don't think so," he finally said. He flipped Nate's salmon off his lap, stood up, and took his own off the spear.

"At least mine's bigger," he said. He grabbed the hatchet and headed back to the river.

*They look the same size to me.*

Nate put some more wood on the fire and went to his brother.

A fish head was already lying severed on the ground. The rest of the body was on the log that Roger had used as a chopping board. Nate arrived just in time to see his brother confidently hack off the tail and throw it into the foaming

river. *It's amazing. He could barely look at Dad's injury, but here with this fish, Roger's not at all squeamish.*

With his Swiss Army Knife, Roger slit the belly. Tiny pink salmon eggs, transparent as bubbles, spilled out of the salmon and splotted the log.

"Wow. Roe," said Nate. "Pink caviar. Some people eat it, you know."

"Gross. Just the salmon for me," said Roger.

On this point, Nate didn't disagree. Not that he wanted to waste food, but there was something unappetizing about the gooey little pink spheres. Although in some ways they did resemble salmonberries, too.

Next, Roger dug his hands into the belly, ripped out the guts, and tossed them in the water, too. He held up his bloody hands.

"So, that's my fish done. What're you waiting for?" he asked, as he went back to the camp.

A fish eye from Roger's severed fish head stared vacantly at Nate.

Nate grimaced and began to clean his fish. He had to just use the hatchet, because Roger had taken his knife with him.

By the time all the guts were removed, Nate felt that his own stomach was turning inside out. He puffed out his cheeks to stop his stomach from spurting into his throat.

There was only one job left to do. Remove the scales. Roger hadn't bothered, but Nate knew that Dad always removed the scales when he cleaned a fish.

Using the hatchet blade, Nate scraped and scraped the salmon skin against the grain, showering scales like flat pearls in all directions. By the time he was finished and his salmon was clean and ready to cook, Nate's hands smelled like they were part fish, too.

He rinsed his hands and his salmon in the river and headed back to the camp.

Roger was already skewering large chunks of his salmon on a sturdy green stick. "Mmmmmm. Barbecued salmon," he said, running his tongue over his lips.

"I think I'll put mine in a pot and make fish soup," said Nate. "Dad would like that." Chowder was one of his father's favourite meals.

"Go for it," said Roger. "But it will take longer to cook." He continued to hold his salmon over the fire. Oils and juices dripped and sizzled, flaring the flames. Soon the air smelled like smoked salmon.

*It does smell good.* Nate got a flat rock, and, using it as a cutting surface, methodically cut half his salmon into bite-sized pieces. He sliced the skin off each piece and used his teeth to pull out the bones. When all the salmon pieces were in the pot, he added enough water to cover the fish.

By the time Nate was ready to cook, bits of Roger's salmon had begun to fall off the skewer and into the fire.

"Done," said Roger, and he began to eat.

Nate tried not to drool.

He set the pot directly in the fire. As the outside of the pot blackened, the water inside the pot boiled. The fire was too hot to get near the pot with a fork, so Nate stirred the mixture with a long stick. Gradually the salmon lost its shine and turned opaque. Nate stirred and stirred and stirred. Soon the salmon flaked into smaller bits and the mixture became smooth and creamy.

"Want some?" he asked Roger, who was whittling again, having eaten one whole side of his fish.

"Nope. Stuffed."

*Now there's a first.* Nate glanced at his father. He was still sleeping.

Nate poured some of the steaming soup into a bowl and slurped a spoonful. Ouch! The hot liquid singed his lips, but wow did it taste good. He blew on each spoonful to cool it down and devoured the entire contents of the bowl. Knowing there was a lot left for his father, he ate some more.

After he had had enough, Nate filled the bowl for his father and put the lid on the pot.

"The rest of the soup can keep until tomorrow. What should we do with all the uncooked salmon?" he asked Roger.

"Save it, of course."

"I think we should barbecue it. It would keep longer."

"Whatever," said Roger.

"Good. We'll be able to snack on it tomorrow."

Roger sat bolt upright.

"Just make sure you keep mine separate," he said, lying back down.

Nate saluted. "Ay ay, sir." *At least he's letting me do it.* He barbecued the rest of the salmon. After he had finished, and the salmon had cooled some, he packed the barbecued salmon in two separate plastic bags and zipped them shut. He poured the remaining soup into another bag. He noticed that Roger opened one eye slightly to see what he was doing.

"Don't worry. Your salmon will be safe with me," said Nate, walking away with the bags.

Roger leapt to his feet. "Hey, where are you going with all that?"

"I thought about hanging it between two trees, but I don't think we'd be able to get it high enough. So I thought I'd put it in the river. The water's as cold as a refrigerator. Submerging the bags will keep the smell away."

"Wait up. I'll store mine," said Roger.

They secured the bags in water at the edge of the river, wedging them between rocks and forming a pyramid over them so that they'd stay in one place.

"I'm going back to check on Dad," said Nate.

"Fine," said Roger.

As Nate started to walk back to the camp, he grinned to himself when he noticed Roger put some extra rocks onto the pyramid.

Dad was now awake. Nate propped him up and fed him.

After he'd slurped it all, his father said, "Good soup. Thank you."

That evening, Roger sat whittling and Nate sat balancing stones on top of each other. It was all quiet in the camp. Then Roger got up and got his baseball out of his pack. He threw it up into the air a few times and then said to Nate. "Want to play catch?"

Nate toppled his rock pile of eleven stones. "Uh—sure!" He caught ball after ball and didn't say a word about his blisters. When he dropped one ball, Roger didn't call him Fumble Fingers.

Later, after Roger went into the tent, Nate stayed by the campfire so he could see the stars. The sky was still a little cloudy, but he found Polaris and, although it was difficult to know for sure without seeing the entire constellation, he thought he found the Big Dipper's handle and the Great Bear's nose.

When he could hardly keep his eyes open any longer, he crawled into his sleeping bag.

"Hey, Nate—" said Roger.

"Yeah?" Nate was surprised Roger was still awake.

"Do you think Dad's leg will be okay?" asked Roger.

"I hope so," said Nate.

Roger didn't say anything else. He pulled the sleeping bag over his head and within a very short time he was snoring.

Before going to sleep, Nate wrote in his journal:

*Thursday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 9:56 p.m.*

*Partially cloudy. Low mist. Temperature cool.*

*What an unusual evening. Roger actually asked me to play catch with him. Go figure. And tonight I saw the stars again, but what's really GREAT is that I saw ANOTHER WHITE BEAR today. That's the third time. Could it be the same one? It doesn't seem at all afraid of me. Maybe it's never seen another human. But even though my heart thumps whenever I see it, somehow it makes me feel that everything will be okay. I know I've thought it before, but now I really do believe we'll get to the bridge.*



## Chapter Fifteen

Friday morning arrived with the sound of birds clucking like crazy. Nate yawned as if he hadn't slept at all.

"Quiet!" said Roger. He rolled over and pulled his sleeping bag over his head.

Nate was tempted to do the same, but he was too curious about what was making the birds go crazy. He dragged himself of his sleeping bag. Once he was outside of the tent, he realized the sound was coming from the river.

*What? Oh no, our fish!*

He ran in his long johns to the bank of the river. About a dozen ravens were fighting over bits of salmon.

"NO!"

Nate frantically waved his arms. The ravens ignored him, so Nate blew his whistle so hard he thought his eardrums would explode. The ravens clapped their wings and filled the air like a black cloud.

They soon disappeared into the trees and Nate jumped down to rescue the salmon.

To his surprise, the pyramid was still intact. The ravens had found some scraps that had missed being thrown in the river after the salmon had been cleaned and that amazingly hadn't been scavenged during the night. He sighed a huge sigh of relief and retrieved the plastic bags. They were all okay!

As he carried all the food back to the camp, he hummed as he went.

*That was a lucky break! Maybe today will be our lucky day.*

"So, let's see what we have on the menu for breakfast," he said as soon as he was in earshot of Roger, who was combing his hair. "Will it be salmon or, let me see, salmon?"

Roger pulled on a sweatshirt and scowled. For a morning person, he wasn't being very chirpy. "Why are you in such a good mood?"

"Just because. How's Dad?"

"Still sleeping."

"Oh. So would you like barbecued salmon or chilled soup?"

Before Roger answered, Dad's voice came from his tent. "Soup."

"Hey, Dad, I didn't know you were awake. How are you feeling?" asked Nate, poking his head inside Dad's tent.

"A—a little better. The—the leg still kills, but I'm not quite so hot."

Nate took down the tent and checked Dad's leg. "It's clean and dry," said his book voice. "Do you want me to feed you your soup?"

"No—I'd like to," said Dad. He ate slowly, but steadily. When he was finished, he said, "Thanks, you're a good cook."

Hearing Dad thank him warmed Nate. *It may have been my fault, Dad getting injured, but Dad doesn't seem to be angry with me.*

"Just you wait," said Nate. "You'll be home in no time and you'll be able to have some of Mom's great cooking."

"Can't wait," said Roger.

By the time Nate and Roger were finished their breakfast, there was enough salmon left for one more meal per person. Roger secured his bag in his pack and checked the map again.

"It says here that there are some alters across from the bridge. Weird."

"That's alders. With a d. Trees," said Dad.

"Oh," said Roger. His face turned red. "So let's go find them."

They were on their way by 8:30.

Just the thought of almost being there made trekking through the forest bearable. Now Nate looked at the forest with new eyes. Every towering Sitka spruce was strong and protective. Everything mossy was soft, inviting. Another Steller's jay was calling whee-ah, whee-ah, as if to say *Carry on. You're almost there. Carry on.*

Along the way, they found another salmonberry bush. Nate and Roger stopped and ate. Every mouthful gave Nate more hope, more energy. Even Dad had a few.

By mid morning, Nate was tired. He had another two blisters on his hands from carrying the stretcher, a bruised shin from where he'd bumped into an obscured rock, and an itchy rash on his hands from when he'd brushed against some nettles.

"*Urtica dioica*," said Dad.

*Urtica hirtica.*

But none of that mattered. First they would reach the bridge, then the abandoned logging road, then the fishing lodge where there'd be people! Everything was looking bright—except the sky. Dark grey clouds were slowly gathering high overhead. Nate hoped there wouldn't be a repeat of the storm on the mountain.

Probably not. There wasn't a cold wind. In fact, the forest was now warm and muggy. That and the hard work of carrying the stretcher made Nate break out in a sweat. In the distance, he heard a clap of thunder. The air felt heavy and damp.

Suddenly a flash of lightning lit the river mist and a closer clap of thunder ricocheted through the air.

Then came a few spots of rain.

Roger and Nate ducked the stretcher under a cedar tree, whose long, sweeping branches acted like an umbrella.

"Great," said Roger. "This is all we need."

"Let's just hope it doesn't rain heavily," said Nate.

It did. Like a torrent. So much so that the cedar umbrella started to leak. The air cooled. Nate got out one of the ground sheets and put it over them for extra cover.

"You okay, Dad?"

"A l—little c—cold."

Nate put another sleeping bag over his father.

"Now how do you feel?" asked Nate a few minutes later.

"Better—th—thank you," he said, shivering.

"This better be short-lived," said Roger, sounding a little testy.

Nate wrapped his arms around his knees. "Maybe it will pass quickly," he said. *Surely this must be the last thing to get in our way.*

For the next half hour, through a half dozen more flashes and claps of thunder, Nate watched as rivulets of water ran down the clear plastic.

They all shivered.

"What a waste of time," said Roger, hitting the overhead plastic. He had become more impatient by the minute.

"C—can't do much about it," said Dad, with bluish lips.

When the rain finally stopped, and the clouds lifted, Nate felt so stiff he jogged on one spot to limber up again.

"Can't you do something more useful? We've got to get going," snapped Roger, who was shaking the ground sheet.

"I was just trying to get warm," said Nate.

"Warm up on the way," Roger ordered.

Nate did. And as the clouds dispersed and the sun appeared the forest warmed up a little, too. The mist thinned and rose slightly. It was as if the thunderstorm had started to clear the air.

As they walked along, the river churned with all the additional groundwater run-off, looking as if it had risen.

Soon they reached a stretch of flat rock. Next to it, another waterfall plunged into a canyon. Nate thought about how long it had been since they'd seen the canyon on the first day. They put Dad down and took a break. This time Roger didn't hang over the canyon to have a closer look.

"Hey, Dad, do you know where we are?" asked Nate.

Dad didn't answer. He was asleep again.

"Let's just check the map again," said Roger.

Nate sat on a rock, which was really one rock on another, the combination of which looked like a square toadstool. "So how far away do you think we are?"

"Don't know," said Roger. "I guess we'll just have to keep going. What do alder trees look like anyway?"

"Tall, thin, grey trunks, deciduous, dull green leaves, kind of weedy," said Nate. "They tend to fill in the forest after the conifers have been logged."

Roger rolled his eyes. "You get that from another one of your books?"

"No, from our science class."

"Oh." Roger's face turned red again. "I'm going to go and see if I can see any."

While he was gone, Nate stayed on the granite toadstool. The river crashed loudly below him. Above him a chickadee—just like the ones that had nested in Dad's birdhouse at home—flitted from tree to tree. A vole skittered past him. He half expected a forest gnome to join him—like the ones in the stories his dad used to read to him when he was little. He thought about all those times, how he

liked to sit with his father, snug on his lap, with books in front of them, opening the world.

This time, when Roger returned, having not seen any alders, it was Nate who said, "Let's continue."

He thought of the alders as a magical lure. As much as he could while he was walking, he kept his eyes on the other side of the river.

As the river straightened slightly so that it was possible to see further in the distance, Nate spotted the alders. They stood out wispy and pale next to the dark hemlocks and cedars and spruce.

His heart raced. "Roger. There they are! The bridge is bound to be near."

They kept as close to the canyon edge as was safe, so they wouldn't lose sight of the alders, only pulling away from it when the bush was too dense to get through. But after walking past the alders, they still hadn't seen any bridge.

"This is nuts," said Roger.

"I don't understand it," said Nate. "We've passed them. We should have come to the bridge by now."

"I think we should wake up Dad," said Nate.

"No, I can figure it out," said Roger.

Dad squirmed on the stretcher. "I'm already awake. Go back. If—if you're past the alders, you've come too far," he said very quietly.

"What did you say?" asked Roger.

Dad spoke a little louder. "You—you've come too far. Go back."

Roger looked at Nate. "How could we? I was paying attention to where we were. Why would there be a bridge here anyway? There's nothing but alders on the other side."

"Maybe we're missing something," said Nate.

"Lookout," said Dad.

"We did look out," said Roger.

"No. There's a lookout," said Dad.

Nate studied the map some more. "Dad, there's no mention of a lookout...oh yes, now I see it, there's a faint L."

"Nice view," said Dad, smiling weakly. "It's why the bridge was built. Find three trees."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Roger.

Dad frowned.

"I'll go take a look," said Nate.

"I will," said Roger.

"You don't even think they're there."

"So what. I'll be quicker."

A few minutes later, Roger returned, shaking his head. "Couldn't find anything."

"Go back," Dad said more firmly. "Find three trees," he said again.

"Dad, are you sure?" asked Nate.

"Yes. Three trees," he said for the third time.



Nate touched his father on his shoulder. "I'll be back in a minute."

He retraced their steps the best he could. To look for three trees in a forest did seem a little silly. As he hopped over sword ferns and dodged more nettles, he scratched his head. *Perhaps Dad really wasn't thinking clearly. But Dad's not completely out of it, and the alders are there. What should I be seeing?*

When he was directly across from the centre of the alders, he scanned his side of the forest as much as he could.

There were more trees than he could count. Then he saw them. Three perfectly straight cedar trunks with barely a breath of air between them were near the canyon edge. They had been sawn off about six feet high. He went over to them. With a clump of devil's club all around them, he couldn't tell if the trunks were all from one tree or if they had come from three seeds.

He almost got lost in his curiosity until he realized it didn't really matter how they got there. What was important was that they must be what Dad wanted them to see.

He looked directly across to the alders. There was still no bridge. He searched along the ledge and along the forest on either side. Still nothing.

"Well, Dad," he said to the river. "I've tried but I just can't find it." Before he left the ledge, he stood on the edge and looked down into the canyon. His eyes lingered on three logs that lay in the river. *Too bad they're down there and not across the canyon. They could have been used as a bridge.*

He was about to dismiss them until he realized that something about them was unusual.

They were exactly in line together. He looked harder at them. No wonder! They were tied together with heavy rope.

His knees wobbled and he broke into a clammy sweat.

The logs *had* been the bridge. They must have come from the three trees. Someone must have felled them over the river to make the bridge when the now-alder-area had been logged.

Now the bridge lay hopelessly in the river.

Nate stepped back from the edge, fell to his knees, and sobbed.

## Chapter Sixteen

*What kind of a bridge was that anyway? What was I expecting? The London Bridge? The Lion's Gate? Now what will we do? How can I go back to Dad and tell him we won't be able to get him over the river?*

Now the tears raged down his cheeks like a swollen river. He didn't wipe them away. He just let them run down his cheeks and down his chest until the front of his sweatshirt was soaked.

He thought about how far they had come to get nowhere. What for? Nothing? They were all hungry, tired, cut, and bruised. He thought about how much his father had wanted them to have a fun, happy trip, how after reaching the peak things were supposed to be easy. *Maybe the trip would have been okay for Roger and Dad if only I hadn't been here in the first place.*

When he couldn't sob anymore, when his eyes were so dry they felt full of grit, he forced himself up. He went straight to his father and knelt down beside him.

"Well?" asked Roger.

Nate squeezed his father's hand. "Dad," he said sniffing quietly. "There's no other way to say this. The bridge has washed away."

"WHAT?" Roger's voice exploded.

"We can't go over it," said Nate, turning to Roger.

"I don't believe you. How do you know?"

"I saw it. Some storm must have washed it into the river."

"I still don't believe you."

"Trust me."

"Show me!" said Roger.

Nate took Roger back to the site.

"That was our way out," said Roger, his voice breaking.

"I know," said Nate.

"I was counting on that bridge."

"I know."

"We can't follow the river all the way down to the sea. It will take us in the wrong direction."

"I know."

"We're too tired."

"I know."

"Stop saying that."

"Sorry."

For the longest time, they stood in silence. But finally Nate couldn't stand it any longer.

"I'm going to look a bit down the river. See what's there. You go back and stay with Dad. Make sure he's okay."

Roger said nothing. Nate went on ahead. He turned to look back at Roger. He was throwing up again. Nate wanted to rush over to his brother, but he knew it would just embarrass him. Nate's mind went blank except to ask over and over again, *Oh why is all of this happening?*

As if all hope were lost, Nate continued to follow the river. Fresh tears formed, making everything look misty. An image of the Spirit Bear came into his mind.

*Please, Spirit Bear, please help us. I know you helped me find food. And I know you showed me how to catch a fish. Now we are really in distress. Please, please, show us how to get out of here.*

But no Spirit Bear emerged.

Nate blinked back more tears. He wandered some more, only paying half attention to the river. Without knowing why, he left the canyon edge and entered the bush.

It wasn't an easier place to walk. But he kept going, absentmindedly pushing back branches. Unexpectedly, he came across a path. Almost immediately he accidentally stepped in a deep depression in the moss. He bent over and rubbed his ankle. Then he saw there were more depressions. He dried his eyes and looked closely at the depressions. They were as regular as footprints. Big footprints. Bear path footprints. Without knowing why, he strode into each footprint. He smiled as he remembered Roger striding in bear footprints the first

day. As he continued, he came upon bear scat. This time, the scat was steaming. Fresh. Nate's pulse thumped loudly in his ears.

He carried on, still walking in the footprints.

A few feet ahead, he came across a scratching tree. White fur was caught in its bark. He pulled some of the fur away with his fingers and rubbed it and put it in his waist pouch.

He crept along the path. The path went down, down until the canyon was no more and there was just a low bank above the river. The path led him straight to the water.

The river gushed by. Under the filtered sun, the water reflected a contrast of light and shadow. It was as if shapes were dancing in the water. Shapes of bears.

Not shapes of bears.

They WERE bears. Two. Almost the same size, one black and one white. The black bear was slightly bigger. They could easily have been siblings. Twins.

"Oh, wow," he whispered to himself, as his skin prickled. Quickly, he hid behind a boulder and watched the bears.

The black bear nudged the white bear with its nose. The white bear retreated. The black bear chased the other bear in the water and growled.

The white bear retreated some more.

The black bear chased again and caught up with the white bear and snapped at its hindquarters.

The bears wrestled. The air filled with grunts and snorts. Water splashed and flew off the bears. The white bear ran a short distance in the water. The black bear followed. Then the white bear turned and stood on its hind paws and growled.

The black bear retreated slightly and then came back to the white bear.

Within seconds, the two bears were head to head, with their great arms around each other, tugging and pushing, their contrast of black and white shouting across the river. Yet now, the bears, with all their skirmishing, were silent.

It was like watching Roger and him. It was hard to tell if they were friends or foes. Nate crept from behind the boulder so he could get an even better look.

The white bear stopped its skirmishing and looked at Nate. Nate looked straight back at it. The bear nodded its head up and down. Nate sat wide-eyed.

The white bear turned away and together both bears loped through the water to the other side of the river. The white bear stopped once more, looked back at Nate. This time, Nate nodded at the bear. Then the white bear followed the black bear and disappeared into the forest.

Nate sat amazed, wishing he could have watched them forever.

*This time I really have to tell Roger.*

He dashed back along the bear trail and then pushed through the bushes until he got back to Roger and Dad at the clearing. Roger was sitting with his head buried in his hands.

"Roger! You won't believe what I just saw."

"If it's not a bridge, I'm not interested."

"You should be."

"Why?"

"Because this time I saw two bears. A black one and a white one."

"Sure." Roger didn't even look up.

"It's true." Nate recounted what he had seen.

"Now I KNOW you're imagining things," said Roger.

"I'm not." Nate showed him the fur.

Roger's mouth fell open.

"And don't you see?" asked Nate. "If the bears could get across the river, then if we're careful, maybe we could too."

Roger suddenly jumped up. "Take us there!"

All Dad said was, "Watch out, the river's dangerous."

As soon as they all got to the spot where Nate had watched the bears, Roger rolled up his pant legs past his knees.

Nate examined the river. He hadn't really taken a good look at it when he was watching the bears. Now he saw that the centre two thirds of the river flowed over a long bed of flat rock. Over it the water ran glassy-smooth. It didn't appear to be fast—quite the opposite. There didn't seem to be any movement at all. But at the end of the flatbed, the river frothed over haphazardly scattered large rocks. On both sides of the river, there were more



rocks. The river swirled around them and scoured the shore. He approached the rocks nearest the shore and felt them.

Slimy.

And the river was still swollen from the rain.

"I don't know," said Nate, wishing he'd never suggested crossing it. "Now that I see it again, it doesn't look safe."

"Dare you," said Roger.

Yet another lump formed in Nate's throat. He swallowed hard. "It's going to be difficult not to lose our footing. Maybe we should wait awhile to see if the water level goes down."

"Forget it," said Roger, in his take-charge voice. He puffed out his chest. "Either help me get Dad across or I'll carry him over myself."

*Superman.*

"You couldn't."

"Watch me." He bent down and grabbed his end of the stretcher as if he meant business.

Nate bit his tongue. It was clear that Roger was in one of his don't-stop-me-now moods. *Should I try again to convince him? How can I? If I were to grab my end of the stretcher to make a point, Roger would just pull his as in a tug-of-war. What good would that do? Roger is stronger. He would win, I'd be left behind, and Dad would be the loser.*

Nate swallowed hard. Something deep down in his gut said he should stand up to Roger anyway. *Say something! Say something!* But once again, something prevented him from doing it. He gritted his teeth, rolled up his jeans, rubbed the white bear fur, and hoped they would all make it across the river alive.

## Chapter Seventeen

The first step Nate took into the river, he knew they were making a big mistake. With the stretcher blocking his vision, he couldn't see where to place his feet. It had been awkward enough carrying the stretcher on land with roots and underbrush to trip on at any time. But trying to navigate the river was much worse.

He slipped on the first rock he touched. Not enough to fall over or lose his grip on the stretcher, but enough to warn him that there'd be many more slippery steps ahead.

There were. It was like stepping on ice.

*We should go back.*

The river rushed past them. The current pushed and sucked at Nate's legs. Where he was able to stand on the riverbed, the water was over his knees. It was all he could do to stay upright and to keep Dad and the stretcher from falling into the river.

Except for the occasional "Blast," Roger didn't even seem bothered by any of it. He just kept going.

Dad on the other hand, seemed petrified. With his feet at Nate's end of the stretcher, Dad's face was in Nate's plain view. He was scrunching his eyes shut. And he was gripping the sides of the stretcher so hard that his knuckles were white.

*Roger, this is a very bad idea. It's frightening Dad. We should go back.* But the words stuck inside him, piling up like a log jamb.

Roger wouldn't want to hear it. Roger would want to keep going. Roger would call him a wimp again. Nate put another foot forward and tried to find a flat rock to stand on, and *aggggh*—he toppled to one side. Without even realizing what he was doing, he put out one hand to stop his fall. Both he and his end of the stretcher landed on a rock jutting above the water.

"What the—" said Roger.

Nate struggled to keep the stretcher from completely overturning. His hand stung. He took a quick look at it. Blood. He winced.

"USELESS!" said Roger, turning his head and glaring at Nate.

"We should go back," said Nate, finally out loud.

"WIMP."

Nate winced again. Anger welled up inside him. The pressure built. The log jamb burst.

"NO ROGER! I'M NOT USELESS. AND I'M NOT A WIMP. I'M BEING SENSIBLE. I'M NOT GOING TO LET DAD BE IN ANY MORE DANGER. WE'RE GOING BACK TO THE SHORE!"

Roger's face turned as white as the river froth. A couple of times he opened his mouth as if to speak, but said nothing.

Nate turned his back to his brother and picked up the stretcher from behind. "Hold on, Dad...Roger, are you coming or not?"

Roger didn't say anything. He didn't move.

Without saying anything more, Nate waited. The cold water pushed and sucked and roared around him. Stabs of pain shot through his legs. They became numb.

Finally, Nate felt the stretcher push him from behind. He took a deep breath. "Hold on, Dad," he said firmly. "We're going back to the shore."

Nate navigated the rocks. Every one he stepped over without slipping was a victory. Every step was proof he could take the lead.

As soon as they were back on land, Nate turned to his father. Once again, he was surprised by his voice. Only this time it wasn't the book voice. It was his own. "Dad, are you all right?"

"Just a little wet," said Dad, his hands still gripping the sides of the stretcher.

"All right, Roger," said Nate, as he tied a sock around his hand to stop it from bleeding. "Apart from the first aid, we've done just about everything your way and it hasn't worked. Now it's time for a change."

"But—"

"I don't mean it has to be my way or the highway. I just think that right now we need to be more careful. Dad is counting on us."

"How has Dad been able to count on you? It was your fault—"

Dad held up his hand as if to say stop. "No, Roger," he said gently. "It wasn't Nate's fault."

*Not my fault? Not my fault?*

Roger put his head in his hands.

Nate looked at him in bewilderment. *Now what's with him? Now is he upset that he can't blame me for Dad's injury?*

Dad continued. "And Roger, it's not your fault either. It was just an accident. That's all."

Roger kept his head down. "I—I thought it *was* my fault," he said, his voice shaking, just like it had on the ledge. He stared at the ground and picked at his fingernails. "If I hadn't wanted something to eat—"

"Eat? I thought you said Dad was getting his jacket," said Nate.

"Never mind what he said," said Dad. "Roger, you weren't to know that the wind was going to gust like that. And I made the choice to get you a snack. I'll say it again. It was just an accident. That's all."

Nate was astonished. "I don't get it, Roger. Why did you blame me if you thought it was your fault?"

Roger kept looking at the ground. "I—I don't know. I—I just did, that's all. I guess I didn't want to—to take responsibility." He looked up and paused. "I'm really sorry, Nate." He turned to his father. "And I'm really sorry, Dad. Right after we found that you were injured, Nate wanted to light a fire and send out smoke signals. If it weren't for me insisting that we leave the lake, we wouldn't have had to drag you through all of this. If we'd made smoke signals, you might have been rescued long ago—"

"But we never did see or hear any aircraft go by after we left the lake," Nate conceded.

"No, but if we'd made smoke signals, someone on one of the other islands or the mainland might have noticed the smoke and alerted someone," said Roger.

"So why didn't you let me do it in the first place, Roger?" asked Nate quietly.

"Because—because I guess deep down I thought that if Dad were hurt because of me, then it was my job to get him to safety. I—I wanted the rescue plan to be my idea." He cleared his throat. "And you know I don't like waiting."

"You mean it wasn't just to boss me around?" asked Nate, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't know, maybe. Sometimes I feel stupid around you because of your books and things. Sometimes the only thing that makes me feel important is that I'm stronger than you."

Nate chuckled.

"What's so funny about that?" asked Roger.

"Just that I try to be extra smart because around you I really do feel like a weakling."

Dad cleared his throat. "Ah, guys, remember me? Could we try to get across the river now?"

Both Nate and Roger looked at their father with surprise.

"But you said before that it was too dangerous," said Roger.

"It is. But I've done it," said Dad, grinning weakly.

"So why didn't you want us to do it?" asked Roger.

Dad looked at Nate, then Roger.

"Because," said Nate, "because we were fighting too much." He paused. "The current is enough to fight."

Roger looked at Nate. "So, if we, uh, like, get our act together, we should be able to get across."

Dad let out a deep breath. "That's the spirit."

Nate thought of the Spirit Bear and the dark black bear. And then he thought about Roger and him. They were twins. They were connected. And they needed each other.

Maybe Roger was thinking the same thing. "So, Nate, what should we do?"

"Well, when we were trying to cross the river, I was thinking that if we could just float the stretcher—"

"Yeah, make a raft—like in *The Swiss Family Robinson*—"

Nate's mouth fell open. "You read that? When?"

Roger's face went red. "One time when I ran out of comics."

"So what about the raft, guys?" asked Dad.

"Oh, yeah," said Nate, tapping his chin. "We could—we could make it out of wood—but it would have to be quite wide to float—"

"And that would make it too wide to get between or over the high rocks—"

"So maybe—"



"Maybe we could tie all the foamies together and make the stretcher float that way, you know, like the Robinson family used barrels to float the slats of wood."

"Hey, great idea," said Nate. "Is that okay, Dad?"

"Sounds fine. Now get me off this thing so you can make the raft."

Twenty minutes later, the foamies were lashed to the underside of the stretcher.

"We need rope handles, too," said Nate, "so we can take the weight off the stretcher while we're trying to float it."

"I'll get the rope," said Roger.

When Dad was back on the stretcher, he gave Nate and Roger the thumbs up.

"Ships ahoy!"

Roger led the way, but Nate didn't mind. It made sense to have Roger's strength up front. And now, with the stretcher floating, it was easier for them to wade across the river. Without having to hold the stretcher off the water, Nate was able to see where to put his feet. He avoided any rock that looked totally unstable or slippery.

Roger must have been feeling more comfortable, too. He began to move more quickly.

"Hey, Mercury—" said Nate.

"Oh, right," said Roger, slowing down.

Nate smiled. It seemed weird for Roger and him to now be talking to each other like they used to do when they were little. Maybe it wouldn't last all the time. But right now he liked it.

They managed to get to the flat rock bed without any more mishaps.

But then things changed. Without any rocks to break the current, the water felt as if it were actually traveling faster. Nate gulped as the water sucked at his legs and the stretcher strained to float downstream. The stretcher lurched with the current.

"Whoah!" said Roger. He pulled hard on his rope handle. Nate's arm muscles burned as he also tried to keep the stretcher from going downstream. Dad's knuckles were white again.

The water rushed by. As Roger and Nate inched their way across the flatbed, Nate slipped and fell. He held onto the rope handle with all his strength, but he could feel himself being pulled with the stretcher by the current. "Roger! Help!"

"Let go of the stretcher so you can stand up," said Roger.

"Dad will float away!"

"No he won't. I've got him. Besides, you're going to dump him over."

"Are you sure you've got him?"

"I'm sure! I'm sure!" said Roger.

Nate let go of the rope handle and gasped as he saw the stretcher pull away from him. He had visions of Dad tumbling over the rocks a few feet below. But

when he stood up, he saw that Roger, leaning backwards with the veins in his arms bulging, had a tight reign on the stretcher.

"Man, am I glad you lift weights," said Nate, as he grabbed his rope handle again.

"So am I," said Roger. "But I'm glad you're back on your end. I don't think I could have kept Dad in tow much longer."

"Hey, can you guys pat each other on the back later?" asked Dad. "I'm dying to get to the other side."

"Did you have to put it that way?" asked Nate.

"Just kidding," said Dad.

The rest of the crossing seemed easy. Well, sort of easy. Especially after Nate figured out that it was easier to guide the stretcher if he didn't stay directly behind Roger. By walking slightly downstream from Roger, so that the stretcher floated on a diagonal to the shoreline, there was less opposition to the current.

"Sort of like streamlining," said Nate, as he explained what he was doing. "Get it?"

Both Dad and Roger groaned.

By the time they got to the other side of the river, where the rocks gave way to sand, Nate was sure his arms were several inches longer. It was a relief to rest the stretcher on the shore. He took a deep breath and then held his nose. "Eeew. What's that smell?"

"Skunk cabbage," said Dad.

Nate looked around. "Those weedy plants with the huge leaves in that muddy area?"

Dad strained to see across his shoulder. "Yup. *Lysichiton americanum*."

Nate pulled his diary out of his pouch and wrote down the name.

Roger looked over Nate's shoulder. "Hey, and write down that it stinks."

Nate laughed. *Note from Roger: It stinks.*

As Nate looked back across the river, a smile welled up inside him and erupted across his face. He smiled as if he had just crossed the mighty Fraser. And the Nile. And the Mississippi. And he smiled because for the first time he felt completely comfortable in his own skin.

"Let's get you dry, Dad," said Nate.

"I'm okay. You're wetter. You change first," said Dad.

After moving away from the skunk cabbage, they stayed a while on the sandy shore and rested. By now, the sun was almost completely visible. Roger reached into his pack and pulled out his bag full of barbecued salmon. "Hungry anyone? Dad? Nate? Lunch is on me."

Nate was so astonished by Roger's gesture, he just said, "I'm starving!"

"Hey, that's my line," said Roger, laughing.

They all ate the remainder of Roger's salmon. Nate didn't even bother to count his chews. And for the first time in three days, Dad actually chewed his food, too. He wiped his forehead; it was beaded with sweat.

"How's the fever?" asked Nate.

"I think it's finally broken," said Dad. "Must have been all that cold water."

*Like the thunderstorm clearing the air.*

"And how's the leg?" asked Roger.

"Bearable. You two must have done a good job of splinting."

Nate and Roger high-fived each other.

*Pollux and Castor. Star twins.*

They rested for a while longer until they were all completely warm.

"What next?" asked Roger.

Nate looked at his watch. "It's almost three. We should get to the logging road. Is it far from here, Dad?"

"Just back to the alders and then about a block away," said Dad.

"And how far down the logging road is the fishing lodge?" asked Nate.

"About three miles."

"Then if both of you like, after we get to the road, I'll run for help while you wait," said Nate, standing. "I should be able to get there by four to phone Trevor."

Roger didn't object.

Just before they left the shore to embark on the final part of their journey, Nate put the white fur between two pages in his diary. Then he looked back at the river. He thought of the Spirit Bear. In the distance, there were still traces of mist.

Some of it looked thicker than the rest.