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A Nature Adventure Chapter Book for Early Readers and How it Can Influence Children's Interest in and Desire to Explore the Natural World

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A NATURE ADVENTURE CHAPTER BOOK FOR EARLY READERS AND
HOW IT CAN INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN AND DESIRE TO EXPLORE THE
NATURAL WORLD

by

Keith Patrick Marshall

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education:
Natural Science and Environmental Education

Hamline University

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To my daughter, nephew and niece who were my inspiration for creating the book; *The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest*. I also dedicate this capstone to all the children who need just a little extra push to get outside and go have an adventure...just do it! You won't regret it.

Read nature; nature is a friend of truth.
-Edward Young

There is no Wi-Fi in the forest but we promise you will find a better connection.
-Author Unknown

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To my wife and daughter who has supported me in more ways than I can ever say or know. To my mother who continues to edit my papers even now. To the rest of my dear and wonderful family and friends for their support, encouragement and love; you know who you are. To the Dummerston School, the principal, JoCarol Ratti and the teachers, Annette Wilson, Heather Graves and Kathleen Evans for the support with this Capstone project and especially the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade classes for their enthusiasm, interest and fun with reading my book. Of course, to my committee members, Deneen Bernier and Lilly DePino (Ms. Lilly) for all of your support, guidance and advice through this process.

The Adventurers...The Journey to the Crooked Forest was written through me more than by me. It was a manifestation of 40 plus years of amazing experiences in the natural world. However, I would be remised not to mention mentors of mine who profoundly influenced me. My earliest memories are of me holding my grandfather's big rough hand and walking in the back fields looking for pheasants and rabbits. Thank you Papa for planting those seeds within me and helping them sprout when I was so young. Thank you for my father for giving me many opportunities to be out in nature as a kid. Jon Young, my coyote mentor, you opened my eyes to how deeply nature goes and took my love and connection with nature to a new level. I would also like to thank all of the kids I have worked with in nature since they are my true teachers. Finally, I thank Mother Nature, the mother of us all.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Motivation

I am a father to an eight-year-old daughter who has loved having books read to her since the earliest of ages. Now, as a second grader, she herself loves to read and still enjoys being read to by adults. As a parent and an educator, I am very cognizant and particular with the content of the books my daughter is exposed to. From my direct experience, the stages of reading start with simple picture books, expanding into picture books with single words. Then, it continues into picture books with short phrases and sentences. The next stage to follow are the picture books with some sort of written story aligned to the pictures. At this stage, the age of the child is around 4-5 years old and he/she begins to follow the words and reading. At 5-6, many children begin reading simpler picture books to themselves. In 1st grade, many children begin to explore early reader chapter books. A chapter book is a book whose story is presented through prose and not pictures. Early reader chapter books have a more involved story that has pictures of the story on almost every page. As the level of difficulty increases, the pictures become fewer and the stories become more detailed and longer. These books are geared towards 6-11 year olds and for many children, these chapter books become a prominent part of the child's recreation. Like my daughter, reading can be a major part of many children's everyday life.

In my informal, yet thorough, search for quality books for my daughter since her birth I have seen a trend with each reading level. The early childhood picture books are

often designed to teach emerging skills to the preschooler. Every moment is a new opportunity to learn for this age and the books reflect this active learning. Many of the picture books out on the market for this age group include topics about the environment, nature, science topics and even healthy social-emotional behaviors. As a science and environmental educator, these are the topics I am most interested in exposing young children to, including my daughter. Popular and successful examples of educational books include: *A Stranger in the Forest* and *First Snow in the Woods* by Carl Sams II and Jean Stoick, *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen and John Schoenherr, *The Story of Jumping Mouse* by John Steptoe, *Stellaluna* by Janell Cannon, *An Egg is Quiet* by Dianna Aston and Sylvia Long, *The Dandelion Seed* by Joseph Anthony and Cris Arbo, *Swan in Love* by Jo Ellen McAllister Stammen and even *The Five Little Monkeys* series by Eileen Christelow to name just a few. There are also the strictly fun and entertaining books that lack any sort of educational intent like the *Olivia* series by Ian Falconer or *The Bubblegum Princess* by Julie Gribble. It is very clear that so many early childhood picture books are geared towards imparting important messages and lessons to children that include nature, science topics and social-emotional themes.

As my daughter grew and her reading interest developed to the next level, chapter books became the next type of books she read. I have spent countless hours reading a myriad of books ranging from fairies to horses to Pippy Longstocking to her. After so many hours of reading these books, I am an informal expert on chapter books for 1st-4th graders (ages 6-10). As I have explored and been exposed to this early reader material, I increasingly recognized a large gap in what is available for these young readers. There seems to be a lack of books that have accurate and positive messages about the natural

world, science topics and social-emotional issues while being entertaining for this age group. Not only have I seen a gap in such topics covered, what science and nature information does exist in chapter books, contains many inaccurate and misleading facts and messages. This is a dramatic shift from the intentionally educational picture books available to early learners.

A very popular book and one of my daughter's favorite series of books are the *Earth Fairy Series*, written by Daisy Meadows (2009). When I first found these books, I was excited since the title implied that they were about the environment. These books did talk about the environment and the main characters did display an environmental ethos, which was encouraging. However, the actual science and environmental information covered in the books were far from accurate. In one of these books, the story has the sun stuck in the sky and never setting until a stolen magical object is returned to Fairyland. In another book the constellations in our night sky change and some even disappear because of a problem in the fairy world. Such occurrences are not realistic or even possible. If the sun did not set but hovered over the western sky, it would mean that the earth had stopped rotating. Such a scenario would create a catastrophic destruction of the planet, as we know it. According to astronomer, Dr. Sten Odenwald, such an event would have earth's atmosphere continue moving at the rate of our rotation (1,100 mph). The atmosphere would essentially scour the surface of the earth removing any and all things from the bedrock (<http://image.gsfc.nasa.gov/poetry/ask/q1168.html>). How would this misinformation influence and impact young readers understanding of our world?

Background

As a science educator by profession, I am discouraged by what such stories teach our children or rather fail to teach them. These kinds of inaccurate messages for children do not lay a foundation of the sciences for later years. Such books are certainly entertaining for our children and have value on those merits. Entertainment is incredibly important to get young children interested in any subject, including reading. In fact, the intention of the early reader chapter book is to primarily get children interested in reading. However, if such chapter books are all that our children can read since there is very little else out there, then we are missing something. There is such an amazing opportunity to not only entertain but more importantly to educate, inspire and engage children with the natural world and science through chapter books.

As an environmental and science educator, I teach elementary age students who are often the target age group for much of the environmental education that takes place in this country. In fact, from my direct experience and training in the field, this is an ideal age group to introduce environmental science and nature education. However, so many environmental education programs for this age group are short lived and few and far between. Many merely contain a special 50-minute program in the school or a once a year field trip visit to a nature center or farm. This does not seem to be enough to fully develop an awareness and an enduring interest in the natural world.

In addition to the limited amount of time that children are exposed to environmental education, today's children spend very little time outside. What I have noticed and heard from fellow teachers, many public schools incorporate very little outside time for recess. Gone are the days when the average child was sent outdoors

until dinnertime. If they are not inside working on homework, then they are in front of screens (Young et. al. 2010). If you are one of the lucky parents, then maybe your child has a chapter book they enjoy reading.

David Sobel (1996) in his book *Beyond Ecophobia*, states “what is important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it...” and yet so many children fail to have this opportunity. In his ground-breaking book, *The Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv (2006) chronicles how children have become more and more isolated and shut off from nature, losing the ability to play, explore and adventure outside. This impact has created a serious disconnect from our humanity in which he calls “nature deficit disorder.” The more one looks into the mounting disconnect of our children from the natural world, lured by electronic technology, climate controlled environments, stranger danger and what Jon Young (8 Shield Institute founder) refers to as the “wall of green” or in other words the fear of nature, the more one can see that a healthy future for all is in danger.

Nature education is the framework from which science is developed. Science, ultimately, is about the study of our world and place within it. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the simple definition for science is as follows: “knowledge about or study of the natural world based on facts learned through experiments and observation” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/science>). Nature education is the first stepping-stone for young children in the journey of developing an interest, a curiosity and eventually a strong knowledge and understanding of science.

Introducing and engaging children with the natural world has to take place in as many areas of children’s lives as possible. Environmental education is important but

limited. Time spent outside during the school day and even at home has become increasingly limited. Chapter books for the elementary age students have very little to do getting readers excited about going outside, let alone generating enthusiasm for science. Yet there are thousands of chapter books that children spend countless hours reading and enjoying. My daughter has been intrigued with imaginary fairies or the extraordinary feats of strength and courage of Pippy Longstocking, but she has not been inspired to get outside and have her own adventures through these books. However, imagine having a chapter book about the natural world that is engaging, exciting, entertaining and educational in the hands of children in the comfort of their own homes. Such a book would provide hours that the child would read and learn about the natural world without a single lesson plan or educator on hand. That could easily help to further develop a young reader's interest in our natural world.

Another challenge I have found with many chapter books is that the adventures or experience of the characters are isolated from what the reader is able to experience on their own. My daughter's current chapter book series that she is reading are the fairy books by Daisy Meadows. What I struggle with in these books is the premise that only two special girls in the entire world know about and are able to help the fairies and our world. This elitism creates a disconnect and separation for what my daughter may feel she is able to do in her world. She is not one of those two special girls. Then, other chapter books have the antics of children as the entertaining storyline where the characters get in trouble or misbehave setting examples of less than ideal behavior (i.e. *Beezus and Ramona* by Beverly Cleary, 1955). As an educator and father, I am looking for engaging stories that teach how to be both a better person as well as form a basis for

wanting to go play outside and learn about the natural world. Chapter books have a tremendous potential as a way of bringing nature, science and healthy social-emotional skills into children's lives. At the very least, having more chapter books in circulation that foster an interest to get outside and explore nature laying the foundation for healthier lives while role-modeling positive social-emotional behaviors would be a benefit.

I graduated with an undergraduate degree in research biology. After a while, my focus shifted to environmental and outdoor education. For several years, I worked in this field with many students ranging in ages from preschool to high school. After a while, nature connection education, an alternative approach designed to connect children and adults to the natural world became a focus of mine. Most recently, I have applied these skills and experiences to teaching science to elementary, middle and high school students. As a biologist/scientist, an environmental/outdoor educator, a nature educator and a science teacher my experiences encompass many educational areas. These past and present experiences helped to shape why I feel writing a chapter book for elementary aged children is so important and valuable. I decided to combine all of my experiences in the education field and my work with this master's degree program to create a nature and science adventure book. It is a way that I can apply all that I know and ideally reach many more children that I ever could possibly reach personally.

Overview

For my capstone, I have written a chapter book geared towards 1st-4th grade students that contains nature, science, environmental education and social-emotional lessons. The book is written using best known developmental cognition practices,

environmental, science and nature education methods and literacy theories. In addition to these mainstream academically accepted theories and methods, I utilized nature mentoring techniques that I have been extensively trained in by Jon Young, founder of the Wilderness Awareness School, Shikari Tracking Guild and the 8 Shields Institute. This nature education technique incorporates nature based mentoring and deep nature connection practices to intentionally re-engage a child's inherent passion, inspiration and desire to know and connect with the earth and natural world.

My objective for writing this chapter book is to instill within the pages of this book the means to create an outcome where children are inspired to spend time outside and explore nature while providing positive examples of social-emotional behaviors. The book is written at an elementary age reading level, which is the prime age bracket for instilling interest and enthusiasm for the natural world (Sobel, 1996).

The chapter book is called *The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest*. The story is that of three children, ages 9, 10 and 11. Two of them are brother and sister and the other girl is the cousin of these two. They are best of friends living in southern Vermont. They enjoy nature and being outside but do not know a lot about it. One fateful evening around a campfire, the three meet an old local man named Jack McGee. He tells them about this mysterious place called the Crooked Forest. However, if they are to journey to this place, they must first learn many things about the natural world and become skilled in the forest. Much of the book has the trio learning from and about nature guided by their mentor. They learn about the trees, the plants, the animals, how to connect deeply with the natural world and even more importantly, they learn about themselves and their gifts.

I read the book to the 1st-3rd grades in the local school. The question being asked and tested was: “Does a nature and science-based chapter book increase both the interest in engaging with and the general knowledge of nature and life science?”

This capstone has two distinct yet connected parts. The first part is the creation of the chapter book. This included research of best practices in writing for early readers, consulting with professionals in the field (teachers, writers and educators) and then the writing itself. The book has undergone more than 6 full edits to get it to the final form for this capstone. In the end, it is 22 chapters and 120 full-length pages.

The second component to this project is to test for any influence this book may have on 3 different classes comprised of 1st-3rd graders after having the book read to them. The data collected will be able to show if the children experience any shifts in their attitudes and interests by their exposure to this book.

I have theoretically created a book that children can enjoy reading while learning about the natural world and ideally get inspired to have their own nature adventures. The nature and science-based book created incorporates best practices for environmental education, fundamental reading theories, developmental cognition and nature mentoring. Field testing my book with classes in the 1st-3rd grades in the local elementary school, I collected test data on how effective (or not) such a book is in fulfilling that intention.

By writing and producing such a chapter book and testing it with children, my Capstone project is worthwhile on multiple levels. First, it is useful in that, as part of the project, a useful science-based book for children was produced. Secondly, it will provide a collection of data on the effectiveness of such a book for shifting attitudes in young children around the natural world.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The Importance of Time in Nature

Spending time out in nature has long been a prescribed antidote to many mental and even physical health issues (Kuo and Taylor, 2009). It is a common belief by many that nature can act as a salve for our human condition. When one is stressed, angry or sad, sitting out in a garden or the woods often brings comfort and calm. Many children in past generations were shut out of the house and had to play outside. Parents intuitively knew that being outside and being active was “good for us.” However, with the advent of modern technology, especially the screens; computers, television with 200 channels, phones streaming videos, YouTube and PlayStation, as well as parental fears that include Lyme Disease, poison ivy and child predators, the act of going outside has become dramatically decreased (Louv, 2006).

In the face of our children spending less and less time out in nature, there has been an increased amount of research and recognition dealing with the importance of nature in children’s lives. This has emerged over the last two decades. In Richard Louv’s pivotal book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder* (2006) a greater awareness has arisen at a public level previously not seen. His book is a comprehensive testament of the value and importance in children spending time out in nature. It describes the current trend of how children are spending less and less time in nature and explores the negative effects of this reality. Children with “nature deficit disorder” are being negatively impacted physically, psychologically, socially and emotionally. “Nature deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from

nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illness” (2006, p. 34).

Researchers are compiling an extensive amount of evidence proving the concept that nature is in fact “good for us.” For children, this body of evidence shows how nature impacts conditions that include: childhood obesity, stress, ADD/ADHD, depression, Autism Spectrum Disorders, cognition, asthma and general well-being to name a few. McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta and Roberts (2010) assert that time outdoors is a necessary element to a healthy child. They also argue that the increased sedentary lifestyle of children is a major contributing factor to the decrease in children’s health. They recommend to all pediatric healthcare professionals the need to have children spend time in nature. Taylor and Kuo (2009) determined in their study that children with ADD/ADHD who spent 20 minutes outside in a park setting were able to increase their attention significantly more than 20 minutes in another setting.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, one in eight children in the United States have some elevated level of stress and/or anxiety disorder (<http://www.adaa.org/search/node?keys=children+anxiety+disorders>). Research done by Wells and Evans (2003) showed that children with readily accessible opportunities of nature nearby had lower stress than children with less nearby nature. Children who spent more time out in nature had less anxiety and stress, allowing for a more relaxed mindset. This mindset then translated into an increased ability to focus and ability to learn more effectively.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents over the past 30 years

(<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>). In fact, in 2012, more than one third of all children and adolescents were considered obese. This level of obesity has immediate and long-term effects on the child ranging from increased risks of cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, cancer, heart disease and stroke. Babey, Hastert, Yu and Brown (2008) analyzed data of 4,010 adolescents from a 2003 California Health Survey. They were able to identify that the children who were more active outdoors were less prone to obesity, proving just one of the reasons why our parents knew that going outside was good for us.

The research studies listed is only a few in the mounting evidence of the mental and physical health benefits that being out in nature provides. The next step is the challenge that exists in actually getting children outside. With the modern distractions, allure and excitement that screens provide, going outside can fall short. How can nature compete with videos, computers, live streaming of first shooter games, browsing YouTube, unlimited movie access, ‘apps’ on smartphones and all the other screen distractions?

When children in the United States are not outdoors engaged in some sort of activity, they are typically using some form of electronic media (Larsen, Green, and Cordell, 2011). Screen time in the form of electronic media has dramatically increased over the last two and a half decades. Pergams and Zardic (2006) report that from 1987 to 2003, the hours of Internet use went from 0 to 174 hours per year for the average American. These figures are before the advent of smart phones and tablets. Now in 2016, those hours are even greater. Jane Wakefield reports for the BBC News (2015) that children spend six and a half hours a day in front of screens, up from three hours a

day in 1995. Screens include television, computer, gaming consoles, tablets or smart phones (<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-32067158>). If this figure is accurate than our children are spending over 45 hours a week in front of screens. That is as much or more than many adults work at their job. Other sources verify this figure. As reported by Science Daily (2008), according to a study presented by the American Heart Association, 60 percent of teens spend on average 20 hours per week, about 30 percent spend 40 hours per week and about 7 percent spend more than 50 hours a week in front of screens.

There is mounting evidence that too much screen time is detrimental to one's mental and physical well-being. Rachael Rettner, Senior Writer for LiveScience writes (2012) how a study links obesity with televisions in children's rooms. Children are twice as likely to be obese if they have a television in their rooms. According to Rettner, about 70 percent of children have a television in their bedrooms with one third of those children being overweight or obese (<http://www.livescience.com/25414-bedroom-tv-children-obesity-risk.html>). Straasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein, (2010) summarize the general health risks for children that have too much screen time (3-7 hours a day). Impacts include difficulty falling asleep at night, elevated risk of attention problems, anxiety and depression and increased risk of obesity.

Victoria Dunckley M.D. reports for Psychology Today (2014) how too much screen time damages the brain. The damages include gray matter atrophy, reduced cortical thickness (as cited in Hong et. al, 2013), and impaired dopamine functioning (as cited in Kim et. al, 2011). Dunckley continues and states that much of the damage is in the brain's frontal lobe. This area of the brain is the area that experiences dramatic changes from puberty until the twenties. It is also the part of the brain that determines

success and well-being in most areas of life as one matures; including academic and career success, relationship skills and the general sense of well-being.

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mental-wealth/201402/gray-matters-too-much-screen-time-damages-the-brain>).

Pergams and Zaradic (2008) illustrate in their paper that the dramatic increase in screen time directly takes time away from time in nature and nature-based recreation. Pergams and Zaradic (2006) linked people's love of electronic media with a downtrend in national park visitation. With children spending anywhere from 20-50 hours a week in front of screens in addition to the 30 or more hours in school, there is little time left for connecting to the natural world. Not only is the mental and physical health of children and teens being negatively impacted from the excessive screen time but also they are not getting the innumerable mental and physical health benefits from time spent out in the natural world. The youth of today are not only having to cope with the addiction and access to excessive screens in their lives but they are also encumbered by fewer opportunities and less motivation for spending time outside. The negative mental and physical health impacts are compounded twofold. The implications of this compounded issue are yet to be seen fully but what it could mean for our children and the future is nonetheless alarming.

Environmental Education

Environmental Education is a mainstream avenue for educating children about the outdoors today. The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental education as: "a process that allows individuals to explore environmental

issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. As a result, individuals develop a deeper understanding of environmental issues and have the skills to make informed and responsible decisions”

(<https://www.epa.gov/education/what-environmental-education>). This field is what dominates the mainstream education of our children about the environment and natural world. It is also seen as one of the few sources of getting children outside.

The history of the Environmental Education field surprisingly spans back centuries. Edward McCrea in his paper, “The Roots of Environmental Education: How the Past Supports the Future” (2006) outlines the timeline of the evolution of this field. According to McCrea, it can be seen as early as 1762 with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s book Emile. In his book, Rousseau asserts that education should include a focus on the environment. During the 19th century, the renowned scientist, Louis Agassiz encouraged his students to learn directly from nature. In 1891, Wilbur Jackman wrote “Nature Study for the Common School.” This book captured the movement of nature study that took hold as a formal subject of education for half a century. The modern field of ecology emerged out of what was known as nature study.

The “Dust Bowl” during the early 1930’s precipitated the conservation education movement where education through doing emerged and developed into a strong root in modern Environmental Education. The foundation for modern Environmental Education was laid in 1969 when the National Environmental Policy Act was passed. With this Act, the national policy was to:

encourage productive and enjoyable harmony between man and his environment;
to promote efforts which will prevent or eliminate damage to the environment and

biosphere and stimulate the health and welfare of man; to enrich the understanding of the ecological systems and natural resources important to the Nation... (National Environmental Policy Act, Sec. 2 [42 USC § 4321], 1969)

The following year, the U.S. Congress passed the National Environmental Education Act of 1970. This act established a domestic grants program for environmental education, created the Office of Environmental Education and formed a National Advisory Council for environmental education. From this point forward, the official field of Environmental Education was established and has only grown to what we know today.

Thousands of children have been touched by environmental education. Field trips, classroom visits, weeklong campouts are all experiences that grace our children's lives. These experiences plant the seeds of stewardship, sustainability and personal interest in the environment. However, the environment and the issues related to our environment are not necessarily inspiring children to learn about nature, let alone motivating them to get outside. In fact, exposing younger children to environmental issues can have the reverse affect. In his book, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*, David Sobel (1996) contends that "if we fill our classrooms with examples of environmental abuse, we may be engendering a subtle form of dissociation" pg. 4. It comes down to what is developmentally appropriate. Sobel recommends that broad and complex global environmental problems beyond the geographical and conceptual scope of children should not be introduced *before* the fourth grade. Children younger than the fourth grade should be exposed to education that is developmentally appropriate. Such education is not the traditionally held idea of environmental education.

In fact, it is better to see this form of education as nature education. In the last decade a variety of alternative approaches to nature education have appeared.

Many studies have identified how environmental attitudes are correlated with the level that people feel connected to the natural world (Dunlap et. al., 2000 and Schultz et. al., 2002). This correlation is an important finding since it can and should influence the means by which education people and especially children for the field of environmental education. Ernst and Theimer (2011) researched the effects of environmental education on student connectedness to nature and found a positive correlation. However, they also acknowledged their findings were limited and further research is needed.

Nature Education

Nature education is not a new field. In fact, it is a very old field of study. As mentioned earlier, the origins of environmental education began with nature study. However, going back even further, humans exist as a species on this planet because we succeeded and thrived in nature. Homo sapiens began as a species of hominids who lived as a part of the natural world just like the bear and the wolf. In fact, our DNA is sequenced and evolved through intimate connection with the natural world. Modern technology has only been around for a very short period of time in our timeline. However, with the advent of an agrarian society and then even more so, an industrial society, our species' connection and immediate dependence with nature was lost. Now, we have entered a new era that currently separates humanity even further from nature. It is the Age of Technology. Technology at this present moment does not bring us closer to

the natural world. Especially with children, it actually takes them out of nature as Louv (2006) so aptly points out in his entire book.

The growing movement of nature education may or may not be a response to this increasing separation with the natural world by our society. However, it does directly address the separation and attempts to counteract our cultural trend of increasing “nature deficit disorder” (Louv, 2006). Across the country, there are many organizations dedicated to connecting people, especially children with nature through approaches that are different from environmental education methods. Kals, Schumacher and Montada (1999) illustrate in their paper how connection to nature motivates children to protect nature. This is the premise and goal behind nature and environmental education.

David Sobel approaches nature education from an academic perspective similar to environmental education. In his book *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators* (2008) he outlines clearly a set of principles to follow when creating educational curricula in order to maximize the effectiveness of nature education. His principles are as follows: 1.) Adventure, 2.) Fantasy and Imagination, 3.) Animal Allies, 4.) Maps and Paths, 5.) Special Places, 6.) Small Worlds and 7.) Hunting and Gathering. In the Procedures and Methods section, I will analyze the book I wrote in relation to these principles. As you can see from these principles, they are based on play, curiosity and fun. All these elements that influence learning are unfortunately often lacking for students in many classrooms.

For seven years, I trained under Jon Young, founder of Wilderness Awareness School, Shikari Tracking Guild and The 8 Shields Institute. He is an internationally renowned leader in the field of nature education and was trained by Tom Brown Jr., also

an internationally known educator of wilderness survival, tracking and awareness. What Jon Young brings to the world is a system of educating people to maximize their connection with the natural world. Young, Haas and McGowen (2008) wrote a book that compiles the philosophy, the methods, activities and practical advice and guidance for how to connect people to the natural world using the system devised by Jon young. The book is called *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature: For Kids of all Ages and their Mentors*.

There are a few key elements to the system of education that Young shares and teaches others to utilize. One of his primary methods of teaching is called Coyote Mentoring. Coyote Mentoring is inquiry-based. It occurs where the learning takes place, often on many levels and is frequently invisible. What is meant by invisible, is that the students often do not realize that they are learning in the moment. It is based upon how native cultures once taught their children about nature. This is currently still practiced in a few places around the world with the last few remaining native cultures. Nature is not taught to native children through a lecture but rather through a community setting of immersion and more often than not, questions are answered with another question. This is where the strong inquiry-based experience comes in with Coyote Mentoring. An example that can be used when teaching about this style of educating is illustrated below.

Imagine a student is out walking with a science teacher and sees a hawk flying overhead. The student turns to the teacher and asks, "What kind of hawk is that?" The teacher responds with the answer, "It's a red-tailed hawk." The student is satisfied and continues to walk with the teacher. A few minutes later, another hawk is seen flying overhead. The student asks again, "What kind of hawk is that one?" The teacher

responds, “It’s a red-tailed hawk.” The student responds, “Oh, cool.” Both student and teacher continue the walk feeling like the teacher taught and the student learned.

Let us now overlay coyote mentoring to this scenario. Again, imagine a student is out walking with a coyote mentor and sees a hawk flying overhead. The student turns to your mentor and asks, “What kind of hawk is that?” The mentor responds, “Well, you tell me what you see? What’s the hawk doing?” The student answers, “Huh, well, it is flying around up high in the sky in broad circles.” The mentor continues questioning, “What do you think it’s doing?” The student answers, “Hmmm. Hunting maybe, right?” The mentor responds, “Could be. Do you notice anything else about the hawk, like the shape of it’s wings or tail?” The student responds, “They are really wide and the tail seems big. Oh yeah, look; when it turns I saw an orange color on the top of the tail. Wow!” The mentor asks the student, “What kind of hawk do *you* think it is now?” Realizing what the hawk must be, the student says, “It’s a red-tailed hawk!” The student continues walking with their mentor and a few minutes later and they see a hawk flying in the sky. The student looks up and watches it closely and realizes that it is the exact same hawk that was observed earlier.

In the two scenarios, it becomes clear when the learning really happened. By just “knowing” the name of a hawk does not mean that the student actually knows a thing about what kind of hawk it is. In the first scenario, the student did not even know that the second hawk was not only a red-tailed hawk but the very same red-tailed hawk. By using intentional questioning, a teacher or coyote mentor can draw the student’s attention deeper into the observation and as a consequence, deepen the learning. This is just a

simple and superficial example of coyote mentoring. However, it is still apparent the value that such inquiry-based techniques can bring to nature education.

One does not have to have a mentor or teacher to create this level of curious inquiry. The student him/herself can bring coyote mentoring into their exploration with nature. An important element to Coyote Mentoring is creating a learning experience that is inspired and curious. Without the inspiration and curiosity, learning can often be a struggle. As an educator, I have seen the difference in a lesson between one where the students are inspired and excited about what they see and one where they are disinterested and bored. The first example they walk away with just a superficial understanding of that lesson. The second example has the students walk away having observed and learned so much.

Another key element to Young's method of connecting people with nature is called Core Routines. Core Routines are just what they sound like; routines that are central to one's journey in connecting to nature. These routines are everyday practices that engage the student in a variety of activities and have been shown to deeply connect people with the natural world. The Core Routines can be broken down into a few areas. The first routine is called the Sit Spot. The sit spot is a place out in nature where the student goes every day, or at least as often as possible to sit, quiet the mind, pay attention to nature around them and to practice the other core routines. It is this Sit Spot that acts as an anchor where the nature connection takes place and is built upon. Another component of the Core Routines is the Sense Meditation. The Sense Meditation is a set of awareness practices that engage all the senses; hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell.

Each of these senses are explored, developed and strengthened. Once these senses are engaged in this way, nature connection can grow deeply.

The combination of these systems; Coyote Mentoring and Core Routines create a powerful foundation for people to reconnect with the natural world. The avenue for developing deep nature connection by using Coyote Mentoring and the Core Routines can happen through several topic areas. Jon Young and many other organizations bring these areas of study to life. Animal Tracking, Wilderness Survival, Bird Language, Scout Awareness, Wildcraft, Herbalism and General Nature Study are all avenues for utilizing this technology of nature connection and working with people. Each of these areas of nature education require the student to slow down, quiet their mind and immerse themselves into the natural world in a multidimensional way. These forms of nature education are the vehicle to deep nature connection.

In his book, *What the Robin Knows* (2012), Jon Young describes and shares how birds reveal to anyone willing to listen (and know what they are hearing) what is happening in the forest. Young describes the many ways that birds communicate through alarm calls, flight patterns and behavior if there is any danger around. In order for a student to hear and understand bird language, they have to employ the Core Routines. Sitting quietly in one spot, using your senses to their fullest are keys to learning bird language. It is the ultimate Coyote Mentor and will effectively bring deep nature connection to the student.

Nature connection organizations that have appeared over the last decade or two across the country and globe are too many to count. White Pine Program in Maine, Three Red Trees in Connecticut, Sticks and Stones Wilderness School in Ontario Canada, The

Tracker School in New Jersey, Wilderness Awareness School in Washington, Mountain Shepard Wilderness Survival School in Virginia, Flying Deer Nature Center in New York, Feet on the Earth in Colorado, Vermont Wilderness School in Vermont, Two Coyotes in Connecticut, Wisdom of Earth in British Columbia Canada, Centennial Parklands in Australia and Shikari Tracking Guild in California are just a few organizations dedicated to educating people with the goal of deepening nature connection and utilizing some form of coyote mentoring and core routines.

Nature education is not limited to Jon Young or David Sobel's techniques. Kriesberg (1999) in his book, *A Sense of Place: Teaching Children about the Environment with Picture Books* provides a myriad of activities and ideas of how to teach children about the environment. Like Sobel and Young, Kriesberg emphasizes the importance of using the five senses and hands-on experiences with nature. If we were to add to the list the organizations that use their own techniques in connecting people to nature, the list would be in the thousands. Across the globe, people have recognized the need to teach about and connect with nature. Whether it is the Audubon Society or the Appalachian Mountain Club or a local nature center, people have a host of options for nature education. Our country also has a multitude of national parks, state parks, natural areas, outdoor recreation areas and green spaces for people to spend time in and enjoy. The opportunities for nature connection exists and many people do take advantage of it. However, for our children, those opportunities are often dependent upon the parents and schools.

An extensive amount of research exists pertaining to the field of early childhood and ways of learning. Although my study group was elementary age, Wilson's (2008)

paper on the innate ways that children know and relate to nature was an effective support while writing the book. I do believe in the natural inclination for children to connect with nature and the job of a nature educator is to unite those inclinations with quality opportunities.

Science Education

It is not a secret that the education system in the United States is sorely lagging with inspiring and educating young children in science. Eva M. Ogens (1991) in her paper “A Review of Science Education: Past Failures and Future Hopes” states that “science education today is unsuccessful in producing a scientifically literate society that will be able to address technological developments and make decisions that will shape our future society and way of life” (p. 199). Pappas (2011) summarizes the most recent Department of Education report. The report states that two-thirds of fourth-graders and four-fifths of high school seniors fail to reach proficiency levels in science. Even more shocking is that only one percent of fourth-graders, two percent of eighth-graders and one percent of 12th-graders actually scored at advance proficiency levels in science. These are alarming numbers and point to a deeply rooted issue in our educational system.

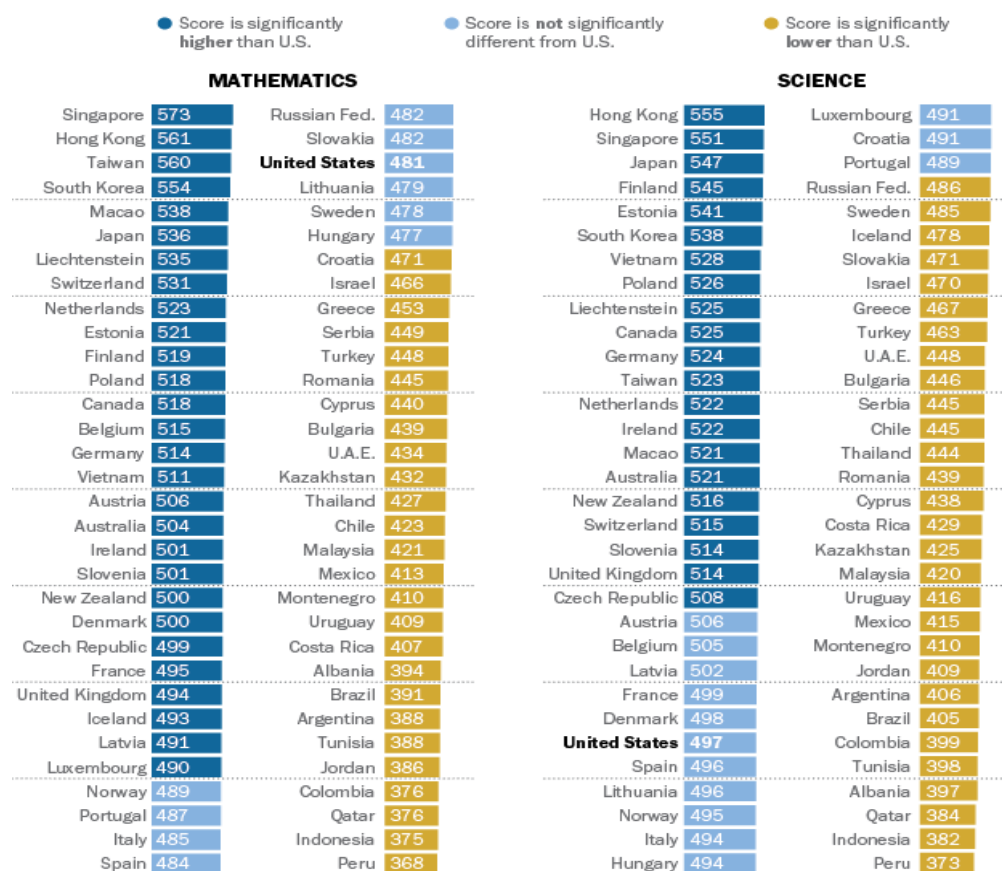
Drew Desilver for the Pew Research Center reports on the current international status of our students. The Program for International Student Assessment is a comparative test of 64 developing and developed countries across the globe. This program tests 15-year-olds and compares them across all countries in math and science. The United States ranked 27th in science worldwide. Poland, Vietnam, Latvia and

Slovenia were just a few of the countries whose 15-year-old students scored significantly better in science than the United States' students (2015). See Figure 1 below for details.

Figure 1. Program for International Student Assessment 2012 report

Internationally, U.S. Stands in Middle of Pack on Science, Math Scores

Average scores of 15-year-olds taking the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment



Note: Scale ranges from 0-1,000. Results for China are not shown because only Shanghai fully participated in PISA 2012. Source: OECD, PISA 2012 via National Center for Education Statistics

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The National Science Education Standards (NSES) and now more recently The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) are national and state initiated educational policies that strive to make science education more effective. STEM which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math is another recently developed educational approach designed to strengthen science education for students in the United States. The

Common Core currently underlies much of the education curricula in this country. There are certainly successes with these initiatives. However, for many teachers, these policies can make science education even more challenging. In an article for US News and World Report, Hiller and Cody ply the case that the Common Core Standards actually harm students and teachers due to excessive testing and rigid curriculum standards (2014). Of course, there are many teachers who appreciate clear and rigorous standards. Fact is, there has been no clear solution to our country's struggle with science education although efforts are being made.

Science education struggles for a multitude of reasons. The subject itself can be challenging. With each science discipline there exists an entirely new set of vocabulary. Classroom presentation of science has historically been didactic and uninteresting. Many students report that science is boring or their least favorite subject further adding to the challenge of teaching science (Hiller and Cody, 2014).

There exists a large array of materials intended to support teachers in negotiating the challenges of teaching science. The Next Generation of Science Standards, although complicated has many support systems. Campbell and Jobling (2012) in their book *Science in Early Childhood* offers a comprehensive tool on how to bring science into the preschool classroom. Books, papers and websites like this help teachers in their quest to quality science education in the classroom.

Regardless of the past and present state of science education in the United States there exist important and consistent elements of science that is taught to young students. These key elements are what many teachers impart to their students over and over independent of what science topic is being taught. First off, inquiry is a strong

foundation for any scientific exploration. Anderson (2002) explores at length what research says about inquiry for teaching science. In his paper, he reports on the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA). According to the NSTA, inquiry based and discovery-focused science education is seen as the best practice today. NSTA defines inquiry in the following way:

Scientific inquiry refers to the diverse ways in which scientists study the natural world and propose explanations based on the evidence derived from their work. Inquiry also refers to the activities of students in which they develop knowledge and understanding of scientific ideas, as well as an understanding of how scientists study the natural world. (p. 23)

Anderson (2002) concludes that inquiry is an important means of teaching science and is needed to reform science education. Davis and Smithey, J. (2009) conducted a 10-year study on elementary science methods. They looked at three main areas of science instruction with beginner science teachers. These areas were inquiry-oriented science teaching, using science curriculum effectively and anticipating and working with students' ideas. They identified these three areas as "crucial areas of focus for elementary science teacher education" (p.765). Again, inquiry-based science education is identified as a key in science education.

The scientific method as currently taught to children by many teachers is based on inquiry. The following are the steps to the scientific method provided by Cox (2012): 1.) Make observations, 2.) Ask questions, 3.) Read books and look for other sources of information to find out what is already known, 4.) Plan an investigation, 5.) Use tools to

gather, organize, analyze, and interpret data and information, 6.) Make predictions and suggest answers and explanations and 7.) Communicate findings and results to others.

These steps are effective tools for teachers to begin to develop and instill a scientific approach in young students. Science, however, is not linear and these steps are just a start to developing a scientific mind in children. Davis and Smithey (2009) highlight the importance of three teaching components for effectively teaching science. These three components include 1.) inquiry-oriented science teaching as a means of promoting student interest and enthusiasm, 2.) to utilize various science curricula sources and be able to analyze, critique and adapt different materials to suit their needs and 3.) to be able to anticipate and work with student's ideas in science. This encompasses the widely accepted approach to effective science education.

Using Literature to Teach Science

According to Sackes, Trundle and Flevaris (2009) there is a growing acceptance by researchers that children's literature can be used to teach science to children. Butzow and Butzow (2000) first printed their book *Science Through Children's Literature: An Integrated Approach* in 1989. The response by teachers was overwhelmingly positive at that time. The teachers felt that science was more approachable using the methods the authors put forth. The use of literature for reading as well as learning the academic curriculum was well received as an alternative to studying science using textbooks. Butzow and Butzow presented an alternative approach to teaching science using children's literature. They saw that this method could be more effective than traditional means. In their book, they provided an integrated approach to science education with

literature while providing oversight and suggestions for potential books to be used that are both appropriate developmentally and in science content. This trend over the decades has continued to grow and expand.

The children's literature used are books published for the general market, otherwise known as trade books. Textbooks are published expressly for the classroom setting. The trade books can be fiction, nonfiction and/or picture books. However, since these books are not published under the academic oversight like textbooks, the information contained within can vary in accuracy and appropriateness. Indeed, such literature that is used by children and even teachers often create misconceptions in science if the source is not appropriate. As stated by Diana C. Rice (2002), these misconceptions can be seen as naïve conceptions or preconceptions that often follow the child into adulthood. These misconceptions are difficult to change to align with current scientific knowledge. A familiar example is the misconception that humans and dinosaurs co-existed. Many films, books and television shows reinforce this erroneous perception. In fact, Dinosaurs existed 60 million years before humans and the only mammal at that time was a small rodent type creature. Research has shown that such preconceived and erroneous science information often does not get overwritten by classroom science education (Duschl, 1990).

A large amount of research has been conducted to sort through the trade books available to teachers to help identify those that are worthwhile and those that are not. Sackes, Trundle and Flevares (2009) acknowledge that trade books can be useful tools and did a content analysis of 75 books to determine their value, accuracy and potential effectiveness in teaching early education science. They were able to identify which

books out of the 75 were viable sources of accurate science information and developmentally appropriate for their age group. Danielle Ford (2006) also recognized the increased use of trade books by teachers as instructional tools. She conducted a similar study analyzing 44 trade books and their “explicit and implicit representations of science” for elementary and middle school grades.

For the last few decades, there has been a distinct shift away from science textbooks as the primary or only tool used for science education for early and elementary education. In fact, as stated earlier, Rice (2002) asserts using trade or library books that include fiction, non-fiction and picture books can be very beneficial to teaching science in elementary classrooms. Trade books are able to engage the interest and enthusiasm of students unlike many science textbooks. Zeece (1999) and Kriesberg (1999) contends that accurate and developmentally appropriate science based literature is able to teach content while at the same time foster curiosity and inquiry in children. Learning takes place for most individuals, especially children, when curiosity and inquiry are awakened. This also aligns with the inquiry-based approach to science teaching. Zynda (2007) examined how appropriate environmental education picture books were for elementary-aged students. She concluded that many of the books being used were inappropriate with children’s cognitive understanding as well as the environmental education content. However, like all the other researchers, she believed that using picture books and literature can be an effective means of educating children in science if the material is appropriate.

As mentioned in the preceding sections, Anderson (2002) analyzed the research around teaching science through inquiry. He was able to identify and acknowledge the

important value of inquiry in learning science and increasing student science literacy. It is clear with the apparent research that children's literature can be an effective means of teaching science by making the material relevant and meaningful to the children (Monhardt and Monhardt 2006; Saul and Dieckman 2005).

Upon my search of relevant papers, much of what I found was related to using literature for early childhood education, specifically; preschool age children. Very few papers looked at elementary age students and the use of literature to teach science for that age group. Rice (2002) was one of the few that I found looking at elementary age students. Also, much of the research done was content analysis of the existing literature and not direct testing of content being learned through literature with elementary students. This is an area of research that needs further development.

Science with Nature as the Foundation

For five years, I managed a nature-based preschool in a very wealthy community. Early Education with a nature theme was my primary focus. I had to be able to justify to affluent parents why having their young children at a nature-based preschool develops skills in their children that will serve them very well in the future. Critical thinking, inquiry, "out of the box" problem solving, healthy social-emotional behaviors and increased physical coordination due to negotiating uneven surfaces were all skills that we observed being developed in the preschoolers. Many of these skills are the precursors to good science skills.

Nature is the foundation of science. Once all the complicated concepts and formulas are broken down, science is about the study of our natural world. The website,

Understanding Science was created by the UC Museum of Paleontology of the University of California at Berkeley in conjunction with funding by the National Science Foundation and in collaboration with various diverse groups of scientists and teachers. The goal of this website is to provide a free and accurate resource for people to teach from and learn about science. The website states that the most important characteristics of science are that 1.) Science focuses exclusively on the natural world and 2.) Science is a way of learning about what is in the natural world, how the natural world works, and how the natural world got to be the way it is (<http://undsci.berkeley.edu/about.php>). It therefore only makes sense when working with young children, the teaching starts with nature to lay the framework for future science education.

From my experience, science education at the early childhood level and even the elementary level historically has been nature-based. Many core elements of science education are woven into nature education. Sobel (1996) in his book *Beyond Ecophobia*, strongly supports this approach as mentioned earlier. Cox (2012) writes by combining inquiry-based and discovery-based science education methods with accurate and appropriate nature-based children's literature you will have the most significant impact on students learning science. This can easily be accomplished through nature education for young children. At this early age, focusing upon nature education not only plants the seeds for scientific inquiry but it also develops the necessary skills as highlighted by Cox (2012). These developing science skills include making observations, asking questions, investigating, making predictions, analyzing discoveries and sharing those discoveries with others. Nature and Science education is closely connected and the more we connect

it, the more effective the teaching and learning will be. The use of literature as a tool has been shown to do this.

Writing a Nature and Science-Based Chapter Book

While writing an effective chapter book for 6-12 year olds that includes nature and science education, I needed to draw upon both my own professional and personal experiences and several sources for support and guidance. To write a such a book, first, one needs to understand what it takes to create and write an age appropriate chapter book. Kathy Temean (2012) has a website that offers support, advice and guidance on how to create and write chapter books (<http://kathytemean.wordpress.com/2010/09/29/writing-chapter-books/>). Character development, plot framing and other aspects of chapter books are included in Temean's website. Temean states that chapter books bridge the gap between picture books and longer novels. These books provide the children who are becoming fluent in reading but are not yet at the level of middle grades opportunities to develop their reading further. In successful chapter books, children read about characters who they can relate to. The storyline also is fast paced and relatable or familiar to the readers. The website provides an exhaustive list of guidelines that proved useful in this process of writing my own chapter book.

In addition to researching helpful tips and guidelines for writing a chapter book, I researched leading educational theories and developmental stages. Mooney (2010) gives an extensive overview of some of the leading educational theorist in this field (Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget and Vygotsky). This paper provides examples of how the theories are applied to actual education. Mooney's work was used as a foundation for my

approach with the story-line and content, ensuring that it was aligned with current cognitive developmental theory.

I also examined research that looked at how children learn through reading. Children learn both through overt and covert means when reading. Some of the learning is not consciously processed yet nonetheless they have been influenced by what they read. This is an important element in my book. Raglan (1993) supports this with his research that children's environmental writing teaches directly and indirectly affecting the child's attitudes towards the environment. The book that I wrote was aspiring to reach children both directly and indirectly with learning about nature and science and shifting attitudes towards the natural world.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Overall Capstone

The overall goal for the capstone was to write an inspiring chapter book for 6-12 year olds that incorporates nature and science education. The book would have a hero-based storyline using ordinary children as characters having extraordinary adventures. The effectiveness of this book to motivate children to go outside and explore the natural world and learn subject content was tested directly with 1st-3rd grade classes in the local elementary school. Pre- and Post-Assessment Questionnaires were given prior to and after the full reading of the book. Parents also were given an assessment at the end of the reading to help determine if the book influenced the students enough for the parents to notice.

Part I: Writing a Chapter Book

The first part of my Capstone was to write a complete chapter book for 6-12 year olds. Prior to my Capstone, I had not written a chapter book for children. The process of producing a book has taken much research and exploration. In order to write a full nature, science and meaningful social-emotionally relevant chapter book, I had to draw upon my personal and professional experiences and knowledge as a science and nature educator, naturalist, mentor and parent. My goal was to create a nature adventure story that would be accessible to every child. By accessible, I mean that the reader could feel that he/she could go out and have similar experiences. This was important since so many

storybooks have the character and/or adventures so fantastic that the reader has not hope, nor interest in reliving them him/herself. I also wanted to integrate and expose the reader to as many natural elements as possible. Animal tracking, plant lore, trees and wilderness skills are some of the main topics incorporated into the story.

Over the course of several months, I worked out the concept of the story to assimilate these elements into the book. I chose to have the story set in southern Vermont, where I work and live. This enabled me to draw upon personal experiences and real life stories to support the realism and accuracy of the book. This increased my ability to create the story effectively. I spent several weeks reading through books and websites on how to write chapter and story books for children.

I also met with several of the local elementary teachers to discuss what makes a successful and developmentally appropriate book for this age group. In addition, I utilized several resources on literacy for developing readers. The reference books include: *Growing Readers* by Kathy Collins, *Word Matters* by Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas, *Reading/Writing Connections in the K-2 Classroom* by Leah Mermelstein and *Literacy for the 21st Century* by Gail E. Tompkins. I also referred to Mooney (2010) and her book on *Theories of Childhood: Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erickson, Piaget and Vygotsky* to ensure that I addressed the different developmental stages of children.

After this period of research which included contemplating and formulating the chapter book concept, I began the writing. The book was written at the developmental and cognitive level of 6-10 year olds (1st-4th grade). Fundamental reading and nature education theories were applied. My two committee members read the chapters as they emerged and provide input and feedback. I also had several other professional educators

provide edits for the book throughout the entire process. It was important for me to have outside perspectives providing feedback and comments throughout the process. This supported me in creating a book that was appropriate, engaging and fun.

Part II: The Elements of the Book

The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest is the adventure book I created for the capstone (see Appendix E for full book). The story follows three children, Nick, Skylar and Alex as they learn about and travel to a mysterious and magical place; the Crooked Forest. But before they are able to go find it, they must learn to deeply connect with nature. Their guide and mentor is an old grizzly local named Jack McGee. He gives them nature training challenges or steps. As they accomplish those challenges, he presents them with others. Eventually in the story, our adventurers have learned to connect with nature in a deep and meaningful way. This prepares them to actually journey and find the Crooked Forest. On the journey to the Crooked Forest, they face many challenges that demand them to use their newfound knowledge of nature and themselves as individuals and as a team in order to succeed.

As I previously stated, the initial impetus was to fill a perceived lack of nature and science-based books in circulation. I also wanted to create a recreational resource for children to inspire them to get outside. As it turned out, this was a fantastic opportunity to combine nature education, science education, literature and social-emotional lessons into one culminating project. My background as a biologist, science teacher, nature educator, early childhood educator, naturalist and parent all supported me in tackling the writing of this book. I wrote this book first and foremost as an educator. I recognize the

importance for children to be inspired and excited about nature and science in order to take any steps toward learning about them. I also understand the value and importance of providing children with accurate and developmentally appropriate information to minimize or even counteract the multitude of misconceptions created by mass media. The book that I wrote combined all of these elements to maximize its value as an engaging educational tool.

The following section provides examples contained within the book that exemplify the scientific method, science education, nature education and even social-emotional lessons that address the child as a whole being. These modalities are woven throughout the entire book creating an integrated and interdisciplinary source of nature and science-based literature.

Scientific Method

The process of inquiry, problem solving, critical thinking and curiosity are all a part of the scientific method and written into the book. A few sections stand out as examples of these scientific skills. However, these examples are by no means exhaustive.

Chapter 3, p. 15: the three characters discover three oval depressions in the snow that are melted out. Using questioning and investigation, they make predictions for what could have made them. In the end, they find clear evidence that deer had made the beds. This is a great example of the inquiry process and making/testing predictions.

Chapter 4, p. 20: the trio find a pile of feathers in the snow. They investigate and look closely at the spot to find clues as to what may have happened. They discover that there are no tracks leading into or out of the area creating a challenging mystery. Through proposing different scenarios and inquiry, the characters form a hypothesis; the

spot is where a bird was killed by a hawk. Then they sit quietly and wait to try to prove their hypothesis.

Chapter 8, p. 34: our characters have to find a solution for a difficult problem. They have a very daunting set of challenges before them and at first, have no idea how to tackle them all. Working together and pooling their knowledge they come up with a solution that works.

Chapter 8, p. 41: one of the characters, Nick, has to figure out how to make a fire using only natural materials. He needs to determine which trees make the best kindling and which materials make a good tinder bundle. In order to do this, he has to experiment with many different kinds of tree sticks and draw conclusions for each. At one point, he states how he felt like a scientist with all of his experimenting.

Chapter 9, p. 44, Chapter 10, p. 48 and Chapter 11, p. 51: the three characters need to share with the others what they had learned and discovered from their nature skill. Sharing results is an important element to the scientific method.

Chapter 12, p. 55: the characters need to investigate and do research on different local plants and their uses. They use field guides and the Internet to learn about the plants and their edible and medicinal uses.

Chapter 15, p. 69: the trio share what they learned with their parents by taking them out into the woods. They were able to show their parents their newfound skills that included tracking, bird language and wilderness survival and to prove that they had learned how to be safe in the woods. Sharing with other people besides themselves is an important concluding step in the scientific method.

Chapter 19, p. 109: is another example of our characters needing to problem solve. They have to figure out how to cross a watery bog by testing different options. In the end, they have to take a leap of faith to discover the best option of crossing. This is a skill that scientists often use.

Science Education

In addition to the scientific method skills written into the book, there are examples in the book where readers are exposed to a variety of science concepts that range from biology to earth science.

Chapter 1, p. 4: has the process of making maple syrup as a part of the storyline. It describes how maple syrup is made from the watery sap. “All this water evaporates leaving behind the thick pure maple syrup.” The explanation of how syrup is made is all based in science.

Chapter 14, p. 67: the young adventurers discuss and are quizzed on the different animals in the forest and what the animal’s primary sense happens to be. The wild turkey with its keen eyesight, the rabbit with its excellent hearing and the fox with its stealthy stalking are all examples found here.

Chapter 15, p. 73 the three children have to figure out when the “season of thunderstorms” comes to southern Vermont. Skylar asks her father and he describes in detail why and how thunderstorms are formed. Cold and warm air flow in the atmosphere is highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter 17, p. 91: the characters discover a stream that has steep sides and is rushing. In the story, the narration explains how the stream bank became eroded with heavy rains and the created the steep V shaped banks.

Chapter 19, p. 101: the three characters find themselves in a dense pine forest. The forest floor has no vegetation. The reason is because of the lack of sunlight. Then, there is a clearing with sun and wild violets cover the forest floor. This is an example of forest ecology and the effect of sunlight on the forest floor and plant life.

Chapter 19, p. 105: the adventurers discover a new and strange habitat. After careful observations of the unique plants, that include Jack-in-the-Pulpit, they figure out that the new place is a bog! They make predictions of the kind of animals that could find in this place, including a moose.

Chapter 20, p. 112: the three characters try to figure out the time of day by where the sun is in the sky. There is an earth science lesson about the rotating earth and how being in the northern hemisphere influences where the sun will be during the summer.

Nature Education

The book is infused with a myriad of nature education elements. Both specific content area skills such as wilderness survival, edible and medicinal plants, tracking, bird language and nature connection practices like sensory meditation, sit spot time and other core routines are all integral parts to the story. In the book, the three main themes for nature education/connection are termed as Nature skills, Animal skills and the Core Routine of the Sit Spot being a foundation for them all. Nature skills are the areas of study that include tracking, bird language, etc. The characters must practice the Animal Skills every day. This teaches them to use their sense in a way that expands their abilities.

In the book, there are three main Nature Skills the trio need to master before they are ready to embark on their journey. Bird language is one of these skills. This is the

skill of listening to the birds and knowing what they are saying. Birds will always alert the forest to predators whether it be a weasel, hawk, snake or human. Animal Tracking is another skill that the trio must learn in order to get to the Crooked Forest. Wilderness survival in the form of making fires and edible and medicinal wild plants also play an important role throughout the story.

Chapter 2, p. 12: the main characters need to go find a “special spot” out in nature to sit quietly every day for at least 20 minutes. This is one of the primary core routines in Jon Young’s nature education training and one that our three characters practiced daily. It is at their Special Spots that they learn to deeply connect with nature.

Chapter 6, p. 26: the children use all of their senses before going into the forest. They smell the air, feel the wind on their skin, look into the woods for any motion and listen closely to the birds much like a cat would before entering the unknown. This is an example of how to deepen nature awareness and connection.

Chapter 7, p. 30: the trio is given an assignment by Jack McGee to practice and master three nature skills. Only if they accomplish these will they be able to get the next step need to become ready to go to the Crooked Forest. Here is the list of the Nature Skill challenges as seen in the book (p. 31).

Crooked Forest Challenges

- 1. Track a deer 100 yards through the forest:**
 - a. Use sticks to mark each track**
 - b. Hardest track to find will teach us the most**
- 2. Chickadee land on shoulder**
 - a. Don’t think**
 - b. Be like a stump**
- 3. Make a fire in a rainstorm**

- a. Find the right tinder
- b. Find the right kindling
- 4. Learn 6 different plants and how they can be used
 - a. Listen to the plants??
 - b. Use field guides too

Chapter 8, p. 36: the character named Skylar embarks on learning the nature skill of tracking deer 100 yards through the forest. The skill demands her to learn first about deer and then learn to look closely at the ground, noticing tiny clues and signs.

Chapter 8, p. 38: the character named Alex begins to learn how to have a chickadee land on her shoulder. This skill requires Alex to learn how to sit quietly both in body and mind.

Chapter 8, p. 40: the character named Nick begins to learn how to make a fire with only one match and wood only found out in nature. With this skill, Nick needs to first learn about the different parts of a fire. Next he needs to learn about various trees and figure out which ones work best for the different parts of a fire.

Chapter 12, p. 55: the characters begin to learn about the plants in their yard and local woods along with their uses.

Chapter 14, p. 67: Jack McGee gives the three children new skills to practice. These are the Animal Skills. Animal Skills are awareness exercises that focus on the senses of each animal. Owl Eyes, Rabbit Ears and Fox Walking are the primary exercises the three need to practice. Throughout the book, the characters depend upon these skills to help them negotiate the journey to the Crooked Forest safely and successfully.

Chapter 15, p. 73: the three children are given homemade sumac tea showing another example of a wild edible plant source.

Chapter 15, p. 74: a hawk creates bird alarms in the forest. This is one of the examples of our characters learning what bird language is and how birds convey when, where and what dangers are around.

Chapter 17, p. 87 and Chapter 20, p. 112 has our characters finding tracks of a bear and trailing a coyote respectively. These are exciting challenges for our trio to further develop their tracking skills.

Chapter 17, p. 93: the children need to use their knowledge of plants and find yarrow to help treat a cut. This is a dramatic part of the book. The characters have to utilize what they know to get through it safely.

Chapter 18, p. 102 and p. 105: the trio find edible violet flowers to forage on. Soon after, they run into a stinging nettle patch and need to find jewelweed to help reduce the burning of the stings. These are more lessons of how to use wild plants both as an edible and a medicinal.

Chapter 21, p. 119 and p. 120: the three characters decide to mark a trail so they will not get lost. This shows the use of wilderness survival skills. They also end up using a compass to identify the four cardinal directions. Map and compass are important in teaching about orienteering and safe travelling in the woods.

Environmental Education

Formal Environmental Education is not written into the story since that is often instructional in technique. However, using David Sobel's 7 guiding principles of

foundational environmental education from his book, *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*, the principles he describes are contained within the story.

From both the science and nature education examples above, you will see a strong overlap with Sobel's principles of environmental education curricular design.

Principle 1: Adventure. The book is called the Adventurers and it is entirely based on a hero's journey to a mysterious place. The main characters have to prepare and train in order to be ready for that journey.

Principle 2: Fantasy and Imagination. The book has a limited amount of illustrations and pictures. The reason for this is to engage the reader's imagination. As a realistic book of fiction, fantasy is not a strong part of it other than inspiring the minds of the readers to go out and embark on their own real life journey.

Principle 3: Animal Allies. Throughout the book, the children have experiences with many animals, often catching rare glimpses because of their newly developing nature skills. Also, the skillset called Animal Skills is intentionally named as such to draw a stronger connection between people and animals. During the actual journey portion of the book, a raven, a moose and a coyote provide signs to the children guiding them along the path. They act as allies to the children.

Principle 4: Maps and Paths. Considering this is a journey into uncharted territory for the characters, there is a vivid depiction and continual referencing to the mental map of the landscape and direction of travel. There are many paths the children must find and follow. A few are small animal trails, some are paths as a rushing stream while others they need to create themselves and forge across uncharted land.

Principle 5: Special Places. The entire book has special places written in it. The Crooked Forest is introduced as a mysterious and magical place that inspires the characters to find it. Also, they must each find their very own “Special Spot” where they sit for extended periods and learn about nature. Along the journey, they find unique and inspiring special places like an ancient old growth pine, an Indian Tree (where the tree was bent many years ago by natives) and a bizarre habitat that they realize is a bog.

Principle 6: Small Worlds. The book does not delve deeply into this principle. However, every time our characters had to track an animal or interpret animal sign, they had to dive into a smaller world of subtle scratches and clues.

Principle 7: Hunting and Gathering. Our characters needed to forage for wild edible and medicinal plants throughout their journey to the Crooked Forest. It was not a matter of choice. The situations at hand demanded they hunt for and gather certain plants due to hunger and injury. Of course, the entire journey focused on them hunting for the Crooked Forest. Incorporating the hunting of animals did not fit the storyline.

By incorporating all of these principles and many others, the book is able to illustrate the excitement and fun that getting outside can provide. It also allows the reader an opportunity to see that there are many amazing nature skills they can learn by just following what our characters did during their adventure.

Social-Emotional Lessons

It was important to not only include all of the nature, environmental and science education into the book but to incorporate social-emotional lessons for the readers as well. I wanted to make the characters as real as possible and that included social-emotional issues that were developmentally appropriate for this age group. The

characters have many social-emotional struggles but ultimately with the help of each other or their parents, they are able to persevere and overcome the struggle. Positive role modeling with overcoming social-emotional struggles for children is important.

Chapter 8, p. 33: the characters are overwhelmed by their next challenge. Here is the excerpt from the book. “This seemed like more than the trio could handle. However, they were not going to give up that easily. One thing they have learned growing up together is that as a team, they are able to accomplish almost anything they put their minds to.” This passage shows grit and determination. These character traits are important skills to develop at this age.

Chapter 9, p. 44: Nick is unsuccessful in mastering his nature skill. He ends up withdrawing and acting angrily with the other two characters. However, with support and understand from the others, he is able to overcome his negative frame of mind and succeed in the end. This is an example of resiliency, another important skill to develop.

Chapter 16, p. 81: all three characters are anxious about the upcoming adventure. One of the children’s parents tells them what bravery really is. “It’s not bravery if you do something that doesn’t scare you. Where is the bravery if you’re not afraid? Courage and bravery is acting in the face of fear. Does that make sense?”

Chapter 17, p. 85: the three main characters feel both scared and excited at the same time as they venture into the unknown. This demonstrates that having these two conflicting feelings is normal.

Chapter 17, p. 93: Nick falls and cuts his leg badly. The girls have to overcome their fear and upset and take action to take care of him.

Chapter 20, p. 114: Skylar is reluctant and nervous about tracking a coyote. She is afraid that she will not be able to do it and will let the team down. She does in fact end up losing the coyote trail. She gets upset and angry as a defensive tool to mask her sadness. Her cousins, the other two main characters are able to see past her angry outburst and recognize that she is sad and afraid. They support her, and let her know that it is alright and together they can find the trail.

Chapter 21, p. 123: each of the three adventurers receives a stone with writing etched on it. The words speak to each of children's "gifts" they offer the world. These gifts are passion, courage and leading others. The emphasis of the story is that the true treasure the adventurers discover are discovering their own personal gifts and who they are in the world. The treasure is not something physically valuable as one might have thought at the beginning of the story.

Part III: Student and Parent Assessments

The third part of my Capstone involved taking the completed book and reading it to three different elementary classes (1st, 2nd and 3rd grades). The 1st-3rd grade classes at Dummerston School in Dummerston, VT were the study test groups. Dummerston is a rural and picturesque region of southern Vermont with farms, forests and rivers throughout. It is located close to Brattleboro, one of largest towns in Vermont with a mix of industry, tourism and farming. There is one 1st grade class of 17 students, one 2nd class of 25 students and one 3rd grade class of 19 students. I have worked in the Dummerston School for the past three years as a science consultant supporting teachers and classes with science and environmental education programming.

A Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment Questionnaire was created to provide to all the students. Perrin and Benassi (2009) and Mayer and Frantz (2004) each looked at different rating scales on measuring the level of connective emotions towards nature with children and communities respectively. I referred to their papers to help shape my assessment questions.

Prior to any reading or testing, a Letter of Consent was sent out to all the parents of the students informing them of the project (see Appendix A). I provided a two-week period with support of the teachers to collect all forms. Once all forms were returned to me I had all students fill in the Pre-Assessment Questionnaire anonymously. The Pre-Assessment Questionnaire had 9 questions that were subjectively based with a rating scale of 0-5 (see Appendix B). In order to minimize any biased influences with the student answers, the assessments were given to the students by their teachers and not by me. All of these students know me as a nature science teacher. Having the teachers do the assessments and having them anonymously filled out helped to eliminate or at least reduce the potential of a student trying to give me the answers they think I want to hear.

The teachers gave each student a paper copy of the assessment questionnaire and proceeded to read aloud each question while the students followed along on their own paper. This was done intentionally to ensure that every student clearly knew what was being asked. I did not want to depend on having the students read on their own. For the 1st grade and some 2nd grade students, reading the questions out loud by the teacher was necessary due to the fact that many of the students were not yet reading at that level.

The assessment questions were set up on a scale of 0-5 with 0 being “Not at all” and 5 being “Very Much”. Underneath each written question there were the numbers 0-

5, the corresponding worded value scale and pictures of acorns representing the scale as well. The multi-dimensional representation of the scale was important to provide a variety of modalities for the students to relate to. At the start of the questionnaire, there were two simple sample questions to help the students become familiar with this method of questioning and how to use the scale. The two sample questions were as follows: “How much do you like broccoli?” and “How much do you like pizza?” These sample questions provided a baseline for me to interpret the answers demonstrating that the students understood how to take this assessment. It also provided them with a fun warm-up before the real questions began. Once all assessments were given to the students, I was able to go into the classrooms and begin reading.

Starting in February of 2016, I scheduled 1-2 visits each week for each class. This required me to go into the school 5 days a week starting at 1pm. The class readings would run for approximately 30 to 45 minutes depending on both the age and attention of the class for that day. At the start of each reading I would ask the class where we had left off and have the students give a review of the story up to date. This helped to both settle the class as well as re-engage their memory of the story. If there were any questions about the story at that time, I would answer them.

The timing for the readings to begin was deliberately set for February. The storyline of the beginning chapters take place during the month of February. It was a nice way of connecting the story to the present world for the students. In addition, I wanted to reach at least Chapter 6 before the school winter break, which began February 15th. The reason for this was by Chapter 6, the characters of the book had learned about what a Special Spot was, had found their own spots and were starting to sit everyday out

in nature during their winter break. I was hopeful that students might be inspired to find their own Special Spots to sit at during their own school break.

Throughout the reading for the classes, I recorded anecdotal observations of how the students responded to different sections of the book as well as took notes regarding the flow of the book. I kept track of their level of interest and enthusiasm during the readings in relation to where we were in the book. I was using each class as a test group to improve the book and strengthen the lessons within.

I concluded reading the book to all three grades the week of April 8th, two months after the start. At this time, the Post-Assessment Questionnaire was provided to the teachers to administer (see Appendix C). Again, each student received their paper copy and followed along filling in the questionnaire as the teacher read the questions to the class. The post-assessment questions we adjusted to test for any perceived change in student's knowledge and understanding directly related to having heard the book. In total, there were 10 questions with the final question of "Did you like the story?" Overall, the questions were aligned with the original 9 questions in the pre-assessment. For instance, the pre-assessment question number 2 was "How much do you know about nature in general?" In the post-assessment question number 2, the question was rephrased to be "How much did you learn about nature in general from the book?"

What was being tested for with the Pre- and then Post-Assessment Questionnaires were 1.) Did the student's attitudes and interest towards the natural world change? 2.) Were children more inclined to go outside and explore after reading the book? and 3.) Did their knowledge of the natural world and science increase? The data collected would provide subjective trends of how the children viewed themselves.

In addition to the student Pre/Post-Assessment Questionnaires, an assessment questionnaire was provided to the parents of all the students at the conclusion (see Appendix D). I wanted to see if the parents were able to recognize any shifts in their child's attitude and/or interest in the natural world over the two months of reading the book. It would be a good indicator of the degree of impact the book may or may not have had depending on the parent's impressions.

Finally, the teachers for the classes provided me with written feedback on the book and their impressions of its impact, value and reception by their students.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The Writing of the Book

The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest

Many sources that I researched and authors I spoke with on writing books shared how the story takes on a life of its own. I discovered this for myself. Indeed, the story took twists and turns as I wrote in many unexpected and exciting ways. At the time of the readings in the three classes, the book had undergone 6 complete edits and was 22 chapters long and 120 full sized pages. The edits were provided by 4 different professionals in addition to self-editing as a result of trial readings with my daughter and her two cousins who fit the age demographic. The edits came in the form of basic grammatical corrections, suggestions for ideas, character development, advice on the nature education lessons, recommendations on how to deepen the story line and other lessons woven within. The process of writing and editing the book took 5 months of consistent daily work. The entire book is provided as the primary part of this capstone. It has been copy written (see Appendix E for full book).

The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest developed into a much longer book than I first conceived. It also was written at a higher reading level than originally thought. My initial idea for the book was to have it be a beginner chapter book geared towards 1st and 2nd graders which is typically 6-8 chapters and only 15-20 full sized pages. Also, the storyline and language used for a beginner chapter book is simple and

easy to follow. A good introductory chapter book for early readers also has many illustrations. However, as my book began to unfold, this initial idea did not align with what was emerging. In order to capture the type of hero-based nature adventure with the amount of science and nature concepts written within it, I needed to write at a higher level and expand on the length and detail of the book.

The Reading of the Book

Reading levels in the age range for my study group can vary widely. An overlap of abilities can even be found with higher level 2nd grade readers with lower level 4th grade readers. However, in general, the final book is written at a 3rd- 5th grade reading level. Because I was reading it to 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders and not having them read it to themselves, the book was still relevant and relatable to all students, engaging their interest and enthusiasm. In fact, the students' level of interest, engagement and enthusiasm for the book were beyond my expectations. Many times students would cheer loudly at certain parts or express concern at tense moments. This aligns with what Temean (2010) stated as signs of a successful chapter book.

As an existing educator for these classes who teaches different lessons throughout the school year, I have a good grasp on the student body and their level of engagement with subject matter. I was concerned as to how the students would respond with the length of the book and amount of time needed to read it entirely. I felt that they might lose interest. However, the opposite happened, with students expressing disappointment over missing a day of reading due to holidays or other school conflicts. The conclusion

of the book was a mix of excitement over the story and disappointment that the story was over.

I was able to record how the students responded to the reading of the story and gauge their level of engagement. The first day of reading, the students were fascinated by the fact that I had written the book in addition to the large size of the book. The children were excited by the title and the element of an adventure and journey. They also kept asking if I was going to publish the book. After the first day of reading and through to the end of my time in the classroom, students would periodically ask when I was going to publish it and that they were “going to buy a copy” when I do. This interest and enthusiasm with the book continued for the duration of the readings.

There are several anecdotal stories as a result of having read the book to the children that are worth sharing here. One of my first experiences seeing the book influence a child was with my daughter. One night before bed I read to her a couple of chapters I had just finished. She was clearly excited and interested in the story and did not want me to stop. Of course, not wanting to stop reading in order to go to bed is nothing new. However, her excitement was more than usual. The next day was a chilly day with frozen snow covering the landscape. When she came home from school she ran in and hollered “Where are my boots Dad?” I told her by the door and she rushed off. In a few minutes she returned suited up for heading outside. Her taking the initiative to go outside had never happened before, especially on a chilly and icy snow day. We proceeded to head outside for “an adventure” as she kept saying. Later that evening, I asked her why she was so interested to go outside today. She answered “because of your book!”

Another example of the influence of the book was when a student was sharing a story about how they were struggling with getting something correct. She ended up saying that “my thoughts were noisy for the birds and I am not using my bird mind.” This is such an unusual set of phrases for a child that it attracted my attention. This idea was one of the lessons learned by the three Adventurers in the book. They needed to quiet their mind so that birds would come and land on them. If they were thinking, the birds could “hear” their noisy thoughts. The thoughts were distractions to both the character and the birds. This child had not only assimilated the concept but expanded it to relate to a completely different scenario in her own life.

On one occasion, I went into the 1st grade classroom and the lights were turned off. The students were scattered around the darkened room sitting silently on the floor with a pretzel on their knee. The reading before had Alex, one of the main characters, learning how to sit quietly so that a chickadee would land on her and eat bird seed. For several minutes, I hopped around like a chickadee eating pretzels off their knees. This class can be very boisterous. However, they ended up sitting silently without moving for approximately 10 minutes. This was an accomplishment.

Also, at the end of reading a section on the Animal Skills (Owl Eyes, Rabbit/Deer Ears and Fox Walking) we practiced these skills in the classroom and developed a game. The game consisted of me being a sleeping owl and when I would open my eyes and turn my head, the students would notice that movement and make an alarm call (Bird Language) and have to freeze. If the awakened owl saw any mice moving, then that mouse would be caught. If they were not Fox Walking, stopping would not be quick and easy and the owl would see them moving and catch them. If they were not using their

Owl Eyes, they would not see me wake up and keep moving. If they were not using their Rabbit Ears, they would not hear the quiet bird alarm warning them to stop. For several visits, I would conclude my time with the classes in this way. The students loved the game and saw how learning these skills can be fun.

On several occasions during the readings, I would pause for affect, giving the students an opportunity to think about what might happen next or what it was that the characters had found. For instance, the three characters had discovered oval circles melted in the snow the size of a person in one chapter. They did not know what they were so started to investigate. In each oval depression, some clues were found that gave insight into what had made those ovals. Before the story revealed the answer, all three classes blurted out and said that the depressions in the snow were deer beds. They were correct and very excited about getting it right. This illustrates a high degree of engagement and active listening that was taking place while I read the story. Active listening was a common occurrence throughout the duration of the reading.

Another example of the engaged active listening by the students was when the three main characters were learning their Animal Skills. These skills are geared towards developing one's senses by using animals as role models. The character of Jack McGee was asking the trio what animals in the forest have the best eyesight. Immediately, hands shot up in the class. The students wanted to answer the questions and not listen to them from the story. I did allow them to guess and then continued reading to verify if they were correct or not. Everyday there were examples of this level of active and engaged listening. With such listening, it was easy to recognize that learning was also happening. As reported by Sackes, Trundle and Flevares (2009), children's literature makes learning

more relevant and meaningful for children. Such narratives also engage children more through awakening their curiosity and inquiry. My observations of the children support and illustrate this view as well.

I informally polled the students before the Winter Break and asked if they had a Special Spot at their homes, like what the characters had found. Many of them shared that they did have a Special Spot or two. How many of those children actually went to their Special Spots and practiced nature skills is unknown and untested. But the above stories clearly show that the students were influenced both directly and indirectly in many different ways by the book. The data analysis section below will show if learning occurred for the students beyond these anecdotal reports.

Data Analysis: Student Assessments

After I received all of the Pre-Assessment Questionnaires, I recognized a trend with the subjective data collected. Some of the younger students (primarily in the 1st and 2nd grade) assessed their content knowledge about all subjects as a 5-“Very Much.” This is a developmentally age appropriate reaction. Students at this age do not know what they don’t know. It is what I call the “early elementary expert syndrome.” At this age, many kids think they know everything merely because they have not yet been exposed to the larger world of knowledge (Mooney, 2010). To compensate for this issue, in the Post-Assessment Questionnaire, the questions were asked in relation to what they learned now that they heard the book. A pre-assessment question was “How much do you know about plants?” and the corresponding post-assessment question was “How much did you learn about plants from the book?” The difference in the questions between the pre- and

post-assessments does not allow for direct comparison of the data but it does provide a more thorough perspective of whether or not the students felt that the book impacted their attitudes or improved what they know about different subjects.

The data was collected anonymously so it is not possible to track an individual student's response changes over time from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The reasoning for anonymous assessments was to limit student bias. It does limit some of the possible analysis, however. I am able to look for general trends with each grade as a whole and this can account for individual growth.

I have arranged the graphs of the data by grade. Starting with the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment charts for the first grade class (Figure 2 and 3 respectively).

Having the pre- and post-assessments for each grade together allows for a more direct analysis and comparison.

First Grade Data Analysis (Figures 2 and 3)

The data collected from the first grade was from 17 students although some did not answer all the questions. This accounts for some variability in the total values for each question. Analyzing the pre-assessment data, some trends became clear. All of first grade students were interested in nature with 11 of them scoring a 5 – “Very Much” on the scale of 0-5. For Question 8 and 9, “How interested are you in going outside?” and “How interested are you in going outside to have an adventure?”, 14 out of 17 students responded with a 5 – “Very Much.” This is clearly a very outdoor oriented class. The values for the different content area questions (“How much you know about...”) that include nature in general, animals, birds, plants and trees were all high with a minimum of 9 out of 14 rating themselves with a 4 – “A lot” or higher. This data provides a

general sense of how the students view themselves with their interest in and knowledge about nature.

The post-assessment questions rephrase the pre-assessment questions through the context of how they feel they rate now as a result of having heard the book. Was there an increase in “How much you learned about from the book?” The data shows a change in the trend where the answers were more moderate implying that the students were being honest in rating themselves. For instance, Post-Assessment Question 4 asks “How much did you learn about birds from the book?” Four students marked themselves as having learned 5-“Very Much”, five students learned 4-“A lot”, two students learned 3-“Some”, one student learned 2-“A little”, one student learned 1-“Very Little” and one student learned 0-“Not at all.” This is a greater spread than the corresponding Pre-Assessment Question 4 of “How much do you know about birds?” Here, seven students answered with a 5-“Very Much”, two students knew 4-“A lot”, three students knew 3-“Some”, three knew 2-“A little”, one knew 1-“Very little” and one knew 0-“Not at all.” This indicates that the majority of students had learned about birds to some extent. It also indicates that the students were made aware of the fact that they do not know everything about everything.

Post-Assessment Questions 8 and 9 had encouraging results. Question 8 is “Do you want to go outside more now since you read the book?” All the students from the class were more interested in going outside after having heard the book. Eleven students rated themselves at a 5-“Very Much” and three students at a 4-“A lot” and one student at a 3-“Some.” Question 9 asks “Are you more interested in going outside to have an adventure in nature now?” Ten students rated themselves at a 5-“Very Much”, two

students at a 4-“A lot”, two students were a 3-“Some” and one student at a 0-“Not at all.” The one student who rated him/herself as a 0 is an interesting data point. The only difference between question 8 and 9 is the word “adventure.” Quite possibly the thought of an adventure for this child might have been intimidating. Overwhelmingly, students were more interested in going outside after hearing the book. These are hopeful results indicating that the book had increased student interest in spending more time outside.

Figure 2. First Grade Pre-Assessment Data

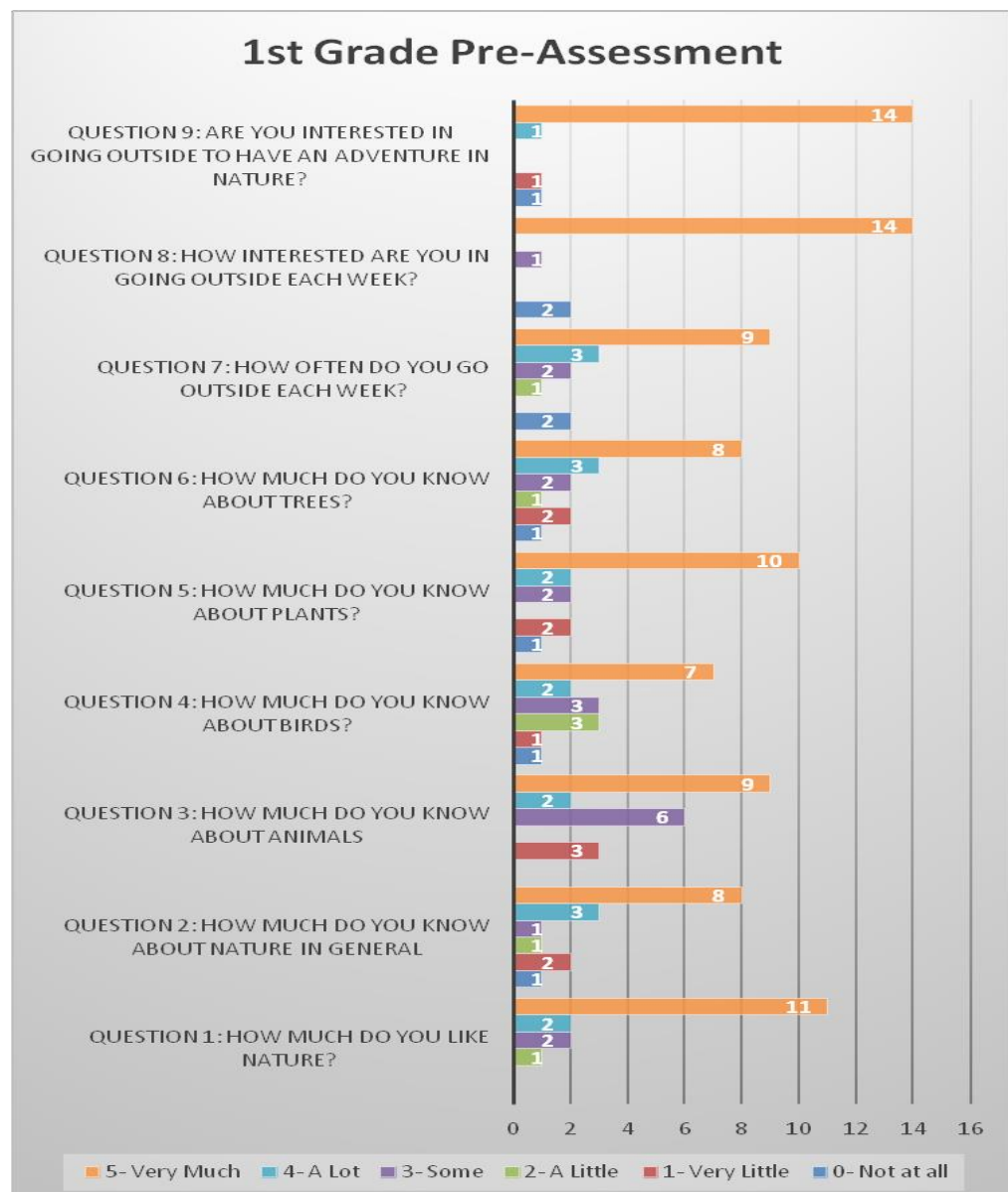
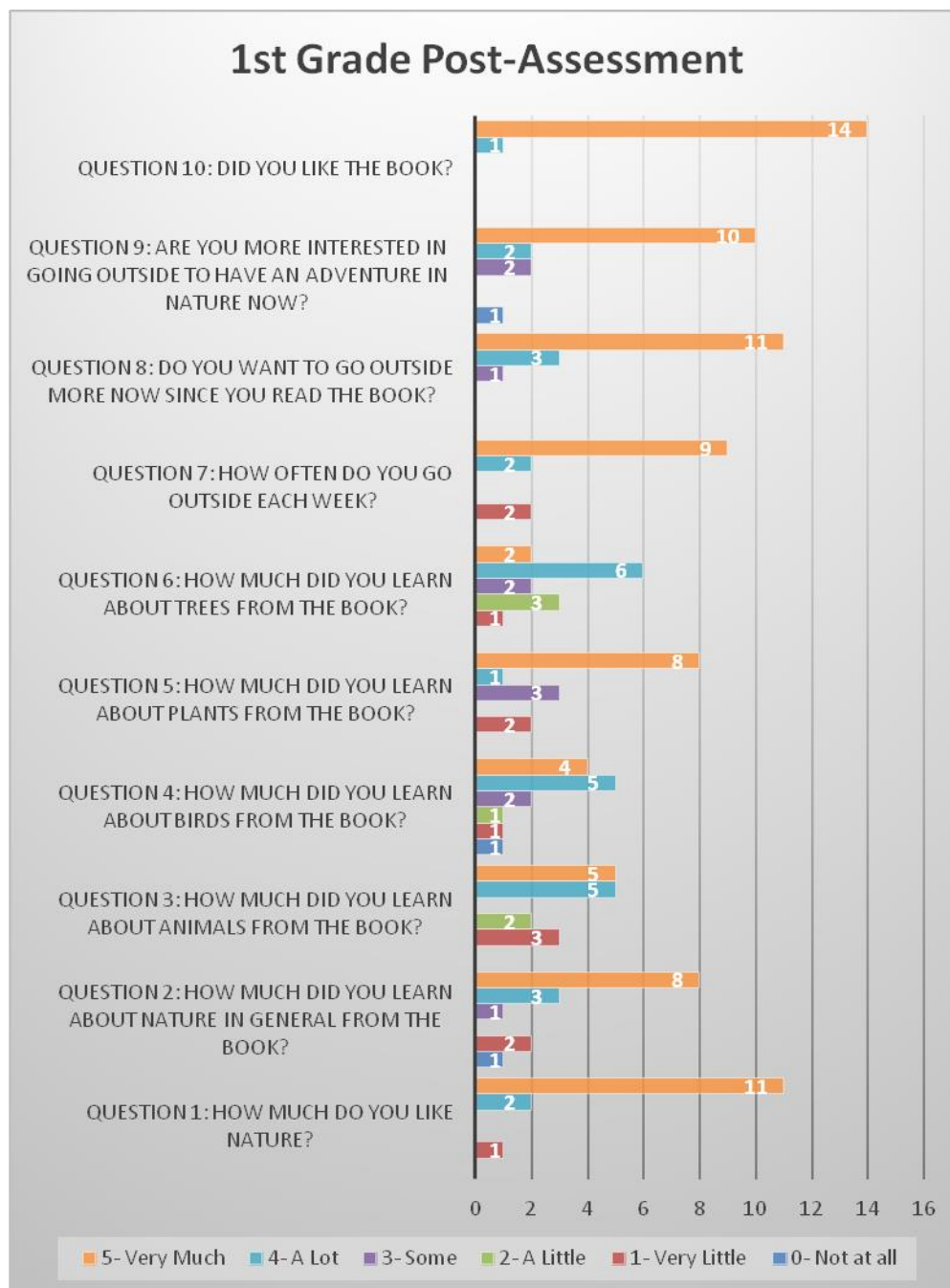


Figure 3. First Grade Post-Assessment Data



Second Grade Data Analysis (Figures 4 and 5)

The data received from the 2nd grade was from 22 students though there is some variability in the numbers for each question due to students not answering a question or

student(s) being absent during the pre- or post-assessments. In the pre-assessments, the 2nd grade class responses were very similar to the 1st grade. The entire 2nd grade class marked themselves as liking nature 4-“A lot” (value of 7) or 5-“Very Much” (value of 15). No students rated themselves lower than a 4-“A lot.” Again, this is a very nature oriented class.

The nature/science content questions 2-6 of “How much do you know...” had much more of a split. Unlike the 1st graders, the 2nd graders were more evenly spread across the scale when it came down to what they felt they knew. Developmentally, 2nd graders are beginning to recognize that there is more out in the world to know than just what they think they know (Mooney, 2010). Their responses seem to suggest a greater ability to be more self-reflective when compared to the 1st grade pre-assessment responses.

The core pre-assessment questions of 8 and 9 pertaining to wanting to spend time out in nature showed very high numbers. Question 8, asking “How interested are you in going outside each week” showed 16 students out of 22 rate themselves as a 5-“Very Much”, five students were at a 3-“Some” and only one student marked down a 0-“Not at all.” Question 9, “Are you interested in going outside to have an adventure in nature?” rated even higher. There were 18 out of 22 students at the 5-“Very Much” level, two at the 4-“A lot”, one at 2-“A little” and one at 0-“Not at all.” As an educator, I find the increase in the scores from Question 8 to Question 9 interesting. The one difference between the two questions is that Question 9 is inviting the students to have an adventure. By using this term, two more students became more interested about going outside. It

points to the possibility that making nature fun (i.e. an adventure) increases the interest in going outside.

The post-assessments for the 2nd grade showed similar results to the 1st grade. The content area questions of “How much did you learn about...from the book” was a general split with the majority of students learning at least 3-“Some” or greater. Both Questions 8 and 9 showed that 15 out of 20 students were 5-“Very Much” interested in going outside and having an adventure since they heard the book.

Figure 4. Second Grade Pre-Assessment Data

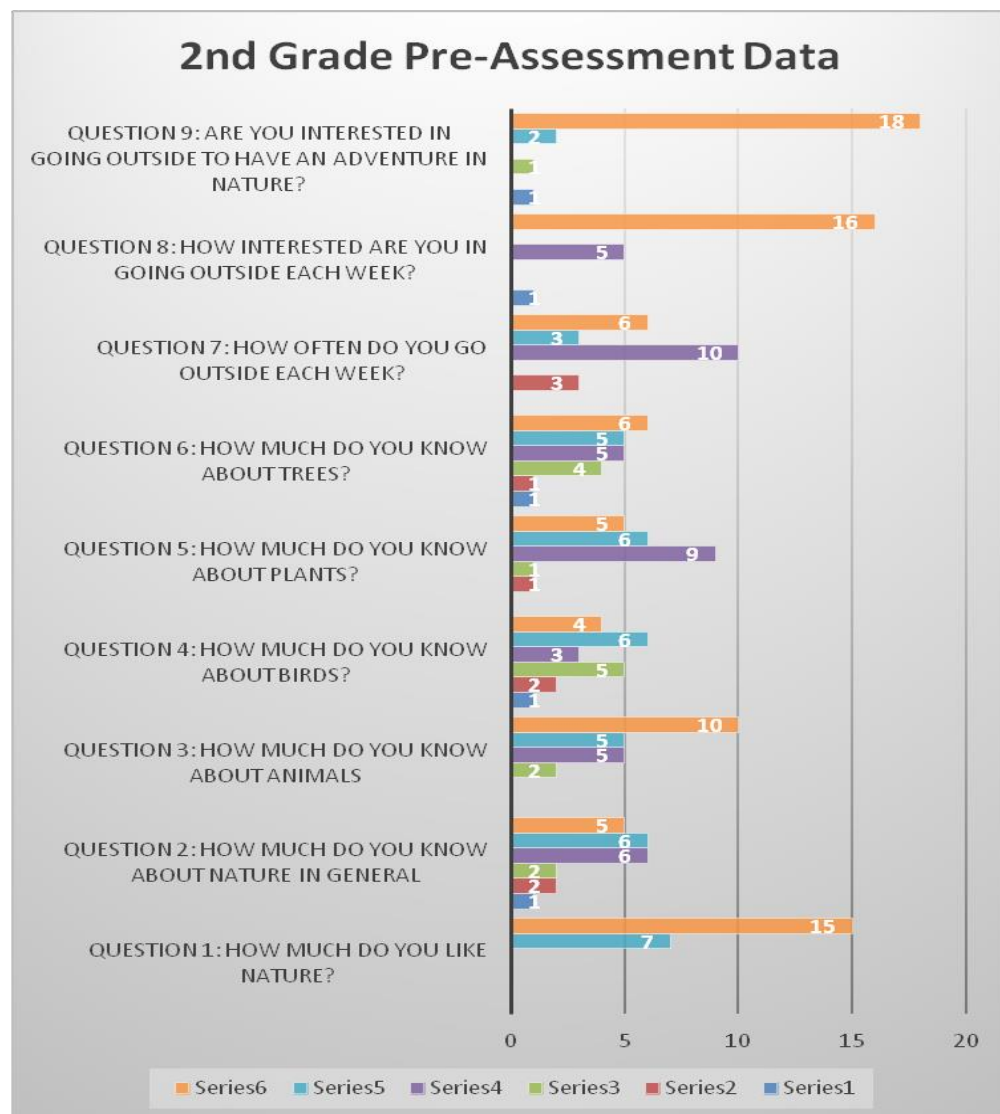
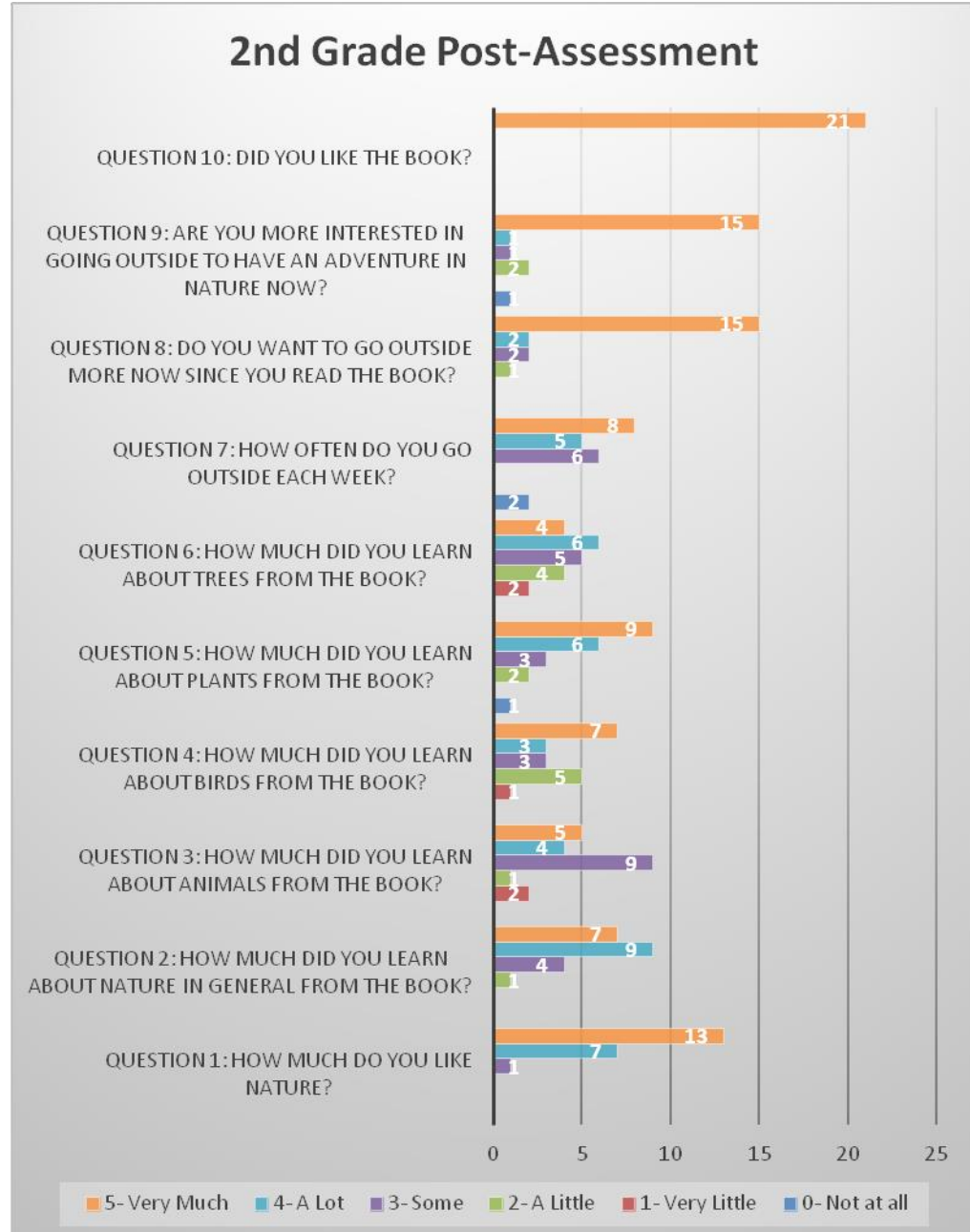


Figure 5. Second Grade Post-Assessment Data



Third grade Data Analysis (Figures 6 and 7)

The data received from the 3rd grade was from 19 students. Some students did not answer all the questions or were absent during the assessments, accounting for the

variance in total numbers for each question. This class rated lower in regards to how much they liked nature than the other two grades. There still existed a core group of 9 students who liked nature 5-“Very Much” and then six students each for the next two lower scale markers. In this class, there was one student who answered this question with a 0-“Not at all.”

The nature/science content questions 2-6 of “How much do you know about ...” had much more of a spread than the other questions. The 3rd graders were more evenly spread across the scale when it came down to what they felt they knew similar to the 2nd and 1st graders. This may indicate the maturation of this age group and their developmental stage (Mooney, 2010). There was a mix of students who felt as if they knew 5-“Very Much”, students who knew 3-“Some” and then students who knew 1-“Very little” about different nature topics. An interesting result for the 3rd grade was how few of them felt that they knew anything about plants. The other two grades rated themselves higher on the scale for plant knowledge. The reason for this is unknown.

Like the 2nd grade values, Questions 8 and 9 showed a correlation between more students wanting to go outside to have an adventure versus just going outside in general. Again, the use of the term “adventure” appears to influence children’s interest in wanting to go outside more.

The post-assessment data was very similar to the other two grades. The data for the content questions 2-6 indicated that almost all students learned something from the book. The post-assessment Questions 8 and 9 showed that there was more interest in going outside since reading the book. An interesting post-assessment result is found in the content area Question 5 asking “How much did you learn about plants from the

book?” There was not a wide spread like the other content questions. Instead, a high number of students (11 in total) rated themselves as having learned “Very Much” and four students rated themselves as having learned “A lot.” Only two students scored “A little” and “Not at all.” This grade’s pre-assessment rating for plants as mentioned earlier indicated that the majority of students had little knowledge about plants. The post-assessment values indicate that the book was effective in teaching about plants.

Figure 6. Third Grade Pre-Assessment Data

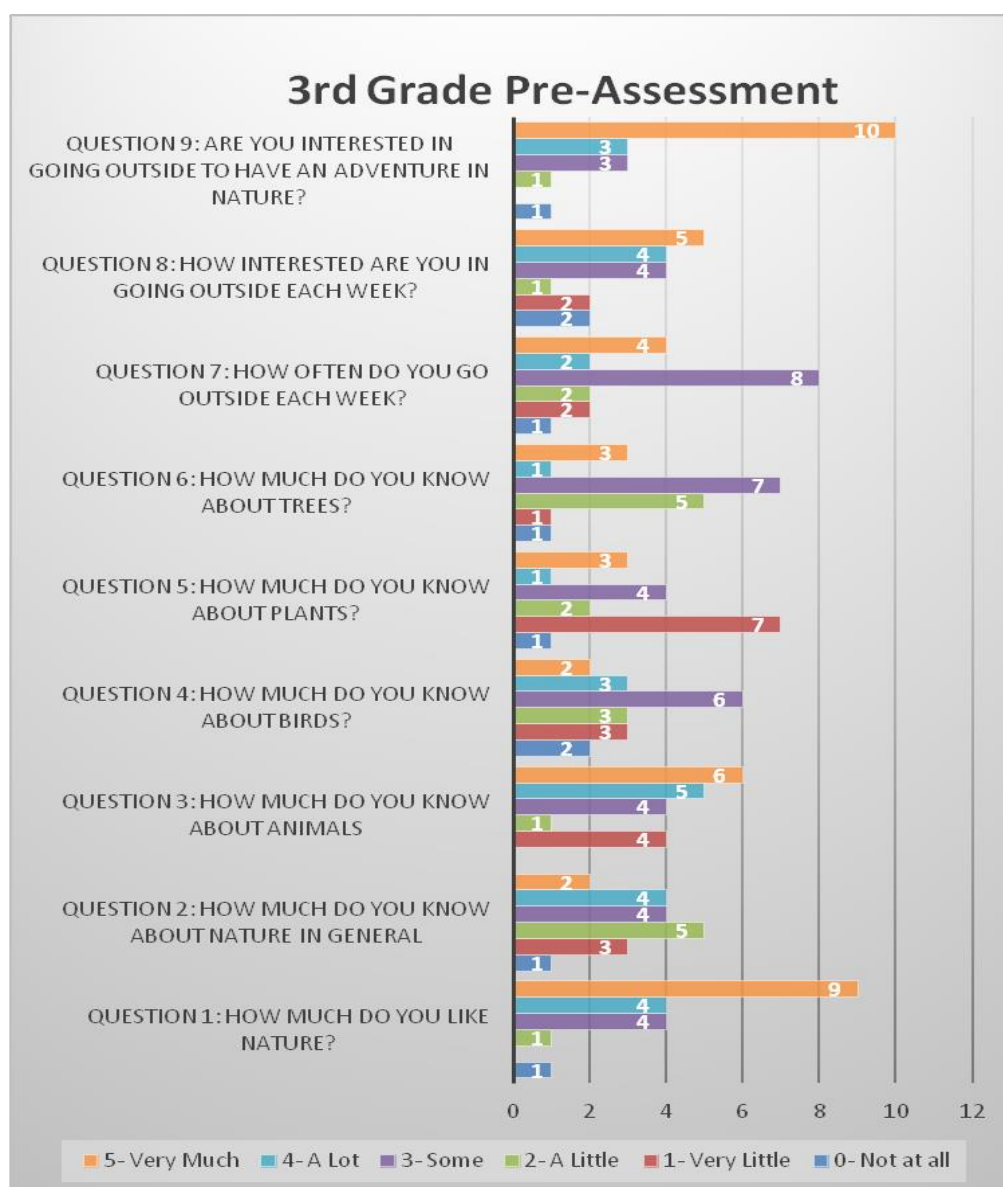
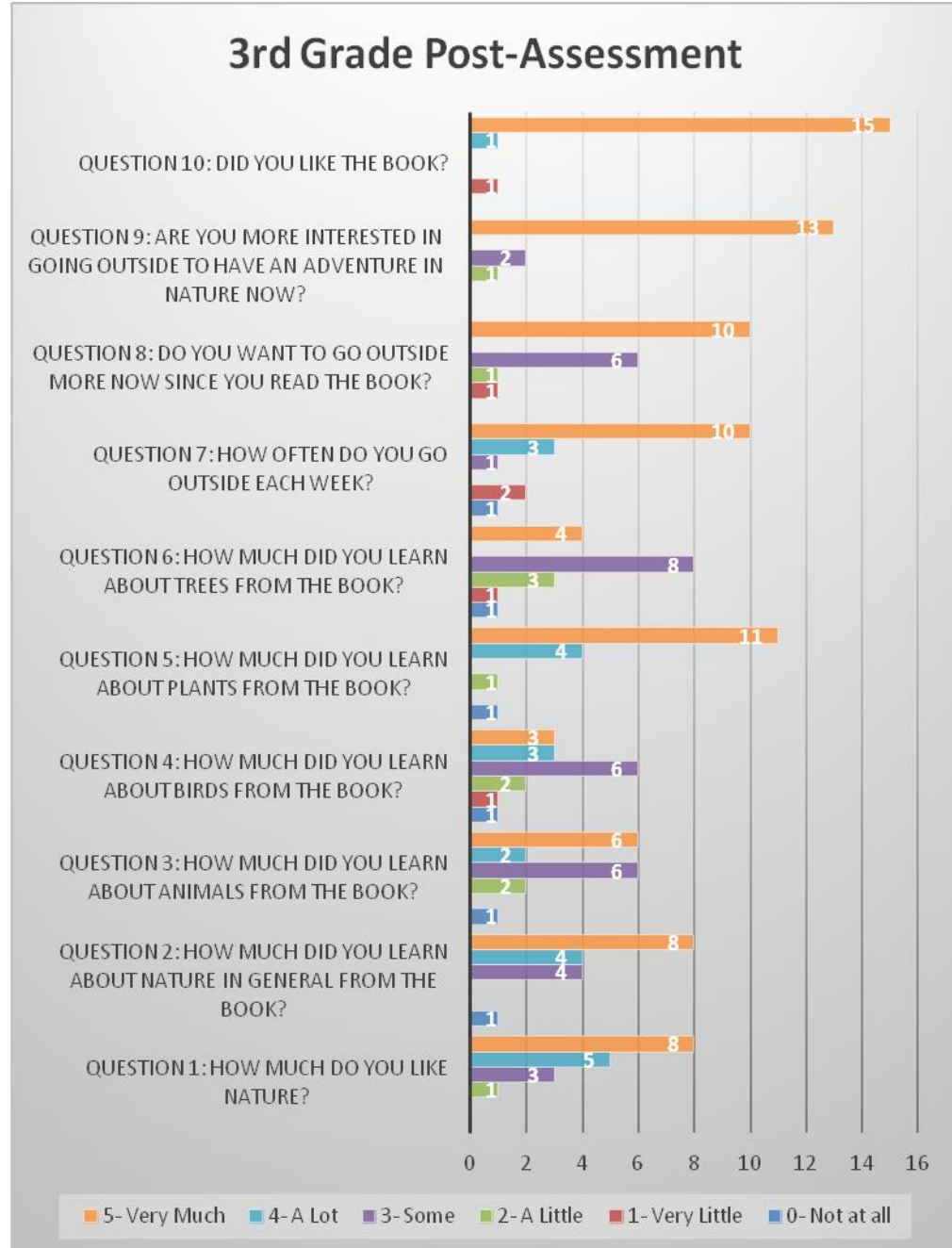


Figure 7. Third Grade Post-Assessment Data



All Grades Combined Data Analysis (Figures 8 and 9)

In addition to analyzing the data separately for each of the grades, the data for all grades were combined to analyze and look for any difference in the trends. The

combined grade data reinforces what was observed with the individual classes for both the Pre- and Post-Assessments for each grade.

In the Pre-Assessment Questionnaire, many more students rated themselves high (4 or 5 on the scale) when it came to being interested in nature and going outside. As Louv (2006) and Sobel (1996) address, interest in nature is inherent in children. The nature content questions 2-6 demonstrated the spread across all of the scale seen with the individual grades. However, one thing that emerged in the data was with the content question regarding animals. The data for this question showed that the students felt they knew the most about animals in comparison to all the other content areas. In my own experience, animals are the most studied and often the most interesting for children. It starts with early childhood picture books. Dog and cat are some of the first words that children begin to say and spell. This result was found with the assessments and reinforced that understanding. Since the data does correspond with what is commonly found, it shows that there is merit to the values gathered in this study.

The post-assessment data for all grades show that more students rate themselves as having learned something about nature and also have an increased interest in going outside. In fact, out of the scale, 5-“Very Much” had the largest group of students for all post-assessment questions excluding the content question regarding trees. For that question, learning still happened but at a lower rating than the other levels. When looking at the book, content lessons around trees were not as ingrained in the story. The most detail about trees came in the form of what trees were needed to make fire. However, students may not have translated that knowledge as learning about trees. The learning with trees was more indirect and therefore harder for students to notice.

One data point that emerged pointing to the issue Louv (2006) points to was when comparing Question 7 with Question 8 and 9. As previously discussed, in all three classes the majority of students were interested in nature. Question 7 asks “How often do you go outside each week?” Only nineteen students out of 53 answered 5-“Very Much”, eight students answered 4-“A lot”, twenty students answered 3-“Some” and the remaining eleven students answered 2-“A little” or less. Now, looking at Question 8 and 9 that asks how much they are interested in going outside and outside for an adventure the numbers are drastically higher on the scale. Thirty-five students answered with a 5-“Very Much” for wanting to go outside and an overwhelming forty-two students answered with a 5-“Very Much” for wanting to have an adventure outside. This illustrates the disparity between how often children are able to go outside and how much they actually want to go outside. As a nature educator, this disconnect is disappointing and unfortunately seems all too common. It shows that the motivation for going outside is not able to overcome whatever is keeping a child inside. Parents concerns and fears, parental motivation, the area in which they live, screen-time distractions, lack of opportunity, too much homework, other obligations can all be possible sources for keeping children from fulfilling their desire to getting outside.

An encouraging post-assessment result that was the same across all grades was 50 students out of 53 students answered Question 10 “Did you like the book” with a 5-“Very Much.” Two of the students liked the book 4-“A lot” and only one student liked the book 1-“Very little.” The results clearly show that the children like the book very much. This demonstrates that the book with all the educational lessons woven within it was still very

entertaining and enjoyable for the students. This is important since it proves a book, that is educational, can still be entertaining and engaging for children.

Figure 8. Pre-Assessment Data for All Grades

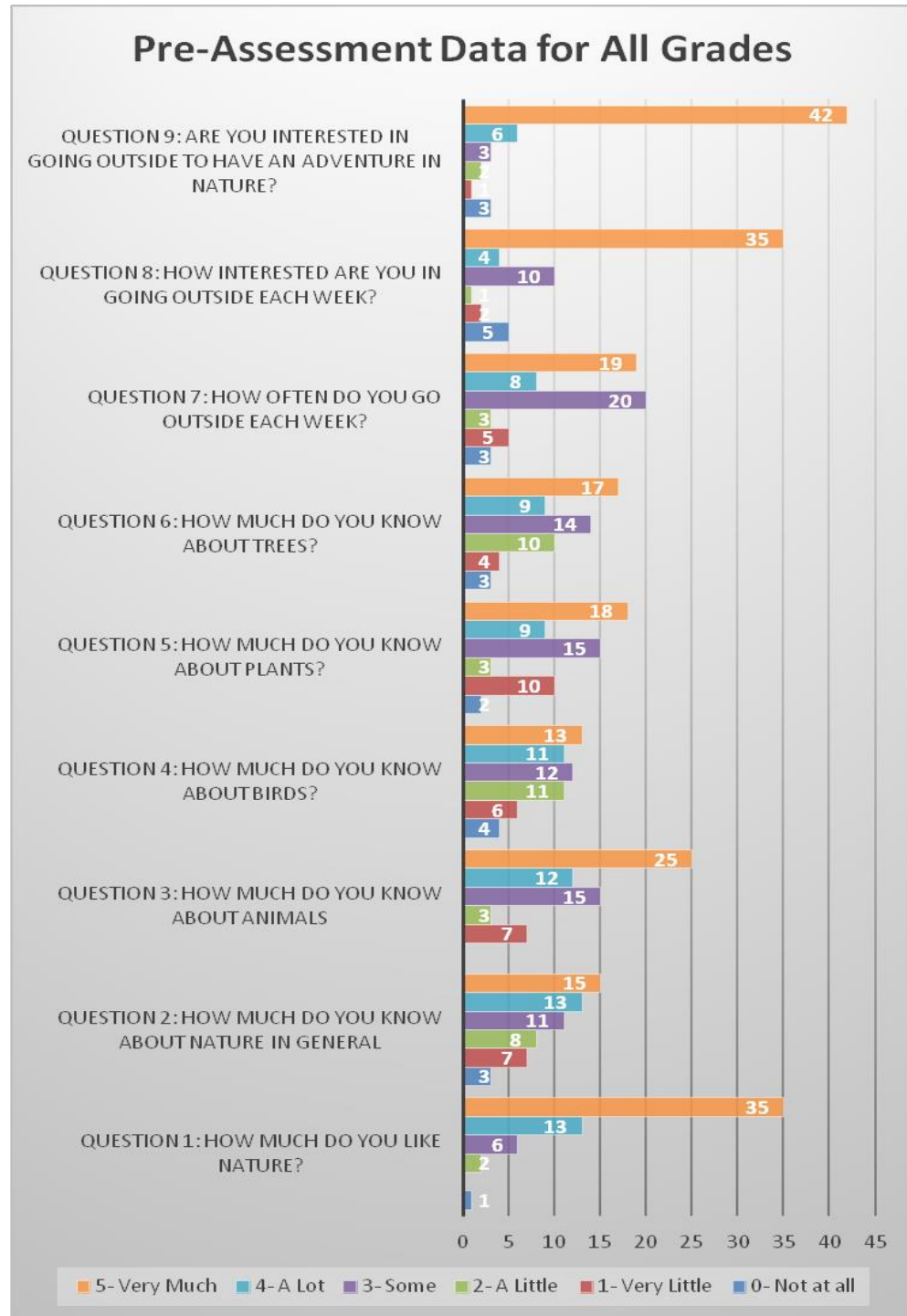
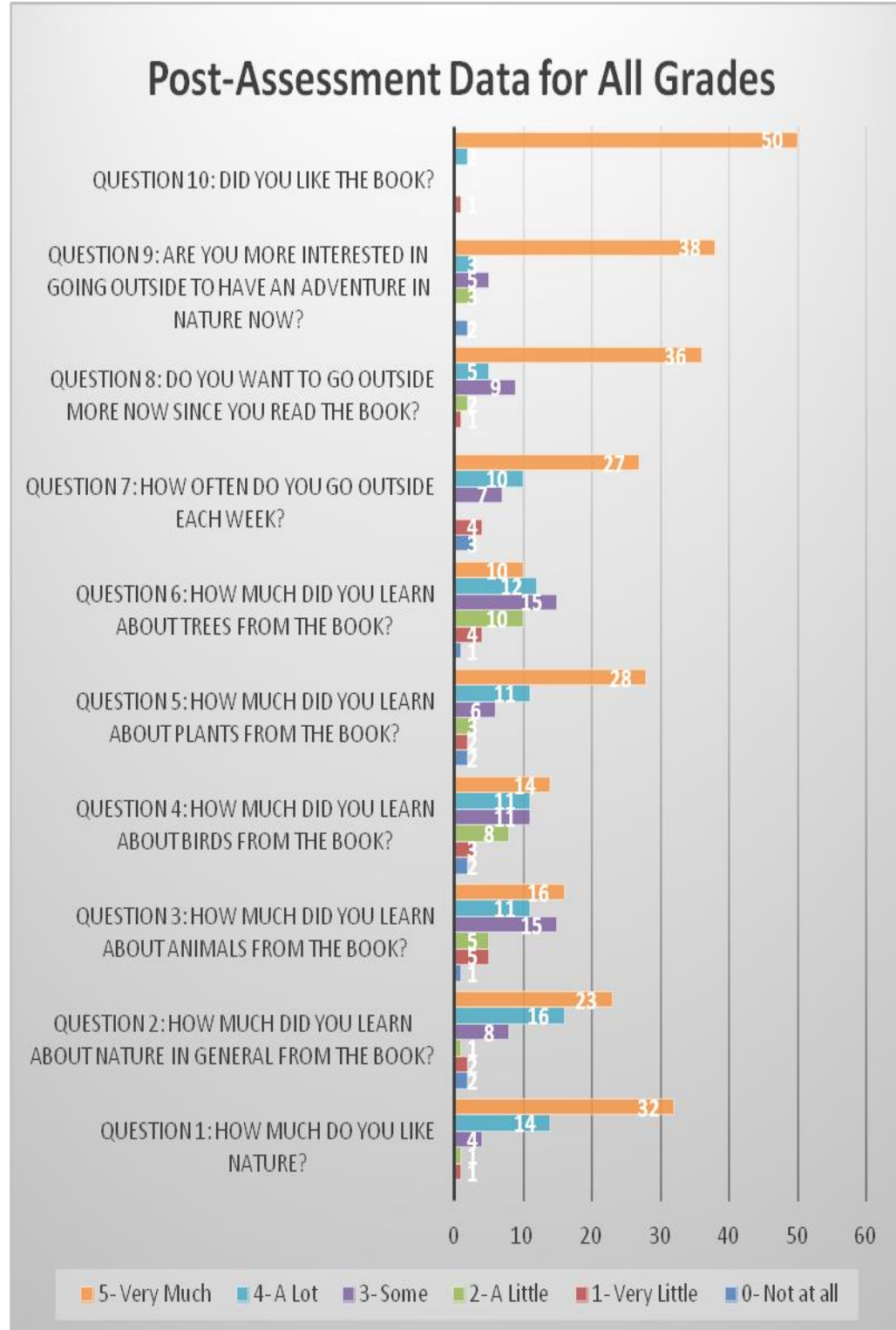


Figure 9. Post-Assessment Data for All Grades



Parent Assessments

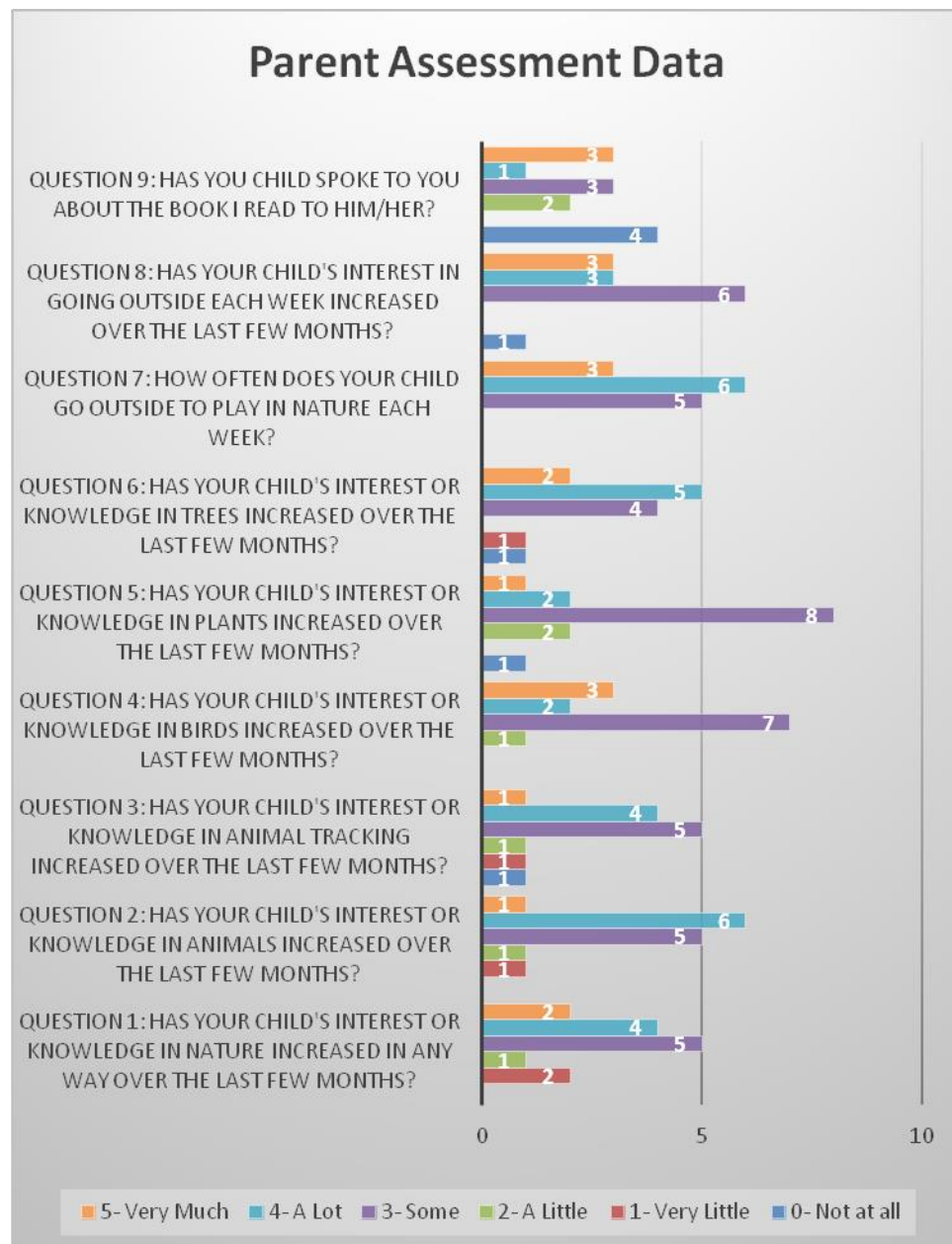
Parents were given an assessment questionnaire at the conclusion of reading the book to the students (see Appendix D). The results are summarized in Figure 10 found following the written analysis.

The total number of parent responses equaled 13. The total number of parents for the three grades is 56, unfortunately the response rate was 23%. However, from the data collected, it is apparent that the majority of parents felt that their child's interest in nature increased. The scale values of 0-“Not At All” and 1-“Very Little” were present with 1-3 parents responding with those values per question. Upon closer inspection of these particular assessments, the parents made comments at the end stating that their child does not enjoy nature or on the opposite side, enjoys nature very much. With both perspectives, it is understandable for a parent to not see any significant change in their child's interest around the natural world either due to a disinterest or an already existing proclivity.

It was surprising to see that the majority of parents noticed some level of increase in their child's interest or knowledge in 1.) nature, 2.) animals, 3.) animal tracking, 4.) birds, 5.) plants and 6.) trees over the few months while I read the book. These were all the main content area categories covered within the book. Question 8 of the assessment asked the parents if their “child's interest in going outside each week increased over the last few months?” This is one of my primary goals for the book so I want to highlight the values received. One parent answered with a 0 – “Not at all.” However this parent answered 0-“Not at All” for the majority of the questions. The parent did report seeing 1-“A little” increase in their child's interest or knowledge in nature and animals and birds.

The parent also provided the comment that her child does not share about school. Six parents answered with a 3-“Some”, three parents answered with a 4-“A lot” and three parents answered with a 5-“Very Much.” The fact that the majority of the parents (12 out of 13) saw at least 3-“Some” increase in their child’s interest in going outside during the two months that I read the book is a very promising result for this study.

Figure 10. Parent Assessment Data



Teacher feedback

The majority of the time, I found that the teachers remained in the room and listened as intently as the students. They would also laugh at the amusing sections and be intent during the dramatic moments during the book. I took their attention and engagement as a positive sign for the effectiveness and viability of the book.

All three teachers provided written feedback in comment form related to the reading of the book. The teacher feedback holds valuable insight into this study. All three teachers shared that they felt their students learned about science and nature. The 1st grade teacher commented that the children “connected to the 4 challenges and could retell them 2 weeks later.” For 1st graders to retain information for several weeks is a positive outcome for teaching. This teacher also shared that her students were able to follow along with the story and she liked all of the lessons imbedded in it.

The 2nd grade teacher felt that the book was very relevant to her students and they “immediately had a connection with the story.” She noted one topic that “really stuck with them was the detail with the plants and their purposes.” This teacher also felt that the length was perfect for the 2nd graders.

The 3rd grade teacher commented that the characters were portrayed realistically and the theme of perseverance and eagerness to learn was refreshing. She felt the medicinal purposes of plants and the different animals and their behaviors were topics that her class learned about most. From the post-assessment data for that grade, plants were an area the students identified as having learned from the book as well.

Much of the constructive feedback related to the reading level being too challenging for the 1st and many of the 2nd grade students to read independently. One

teacher commented that the book might be too long for a parent to read out loud to their child. However, they all acknowledged the age appropriate content and the relevancy to their lessons.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

From the anecdotal observations, assessment data (both student and parent) and teacher comments, it is clear that the book *The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest* was successful on several levels. Firstly, a nature and science-based book was created. For me, this was a major accomplishment as I had never written such a book. It was also clear that the book engaged and entertained students as precursor to learning. The majority of children reported that they learned about the science and nature content woven into the book. This illustrates what other research has shown; appropriate science and nature-based literature is an effective tool for teaching subject content (Zeece, 1999; Rice, 2002; Monhardt and Monhardt, 2006; Saul and Dieckman, 2005). The book that was created for this capstone was appropriate, useful and relevant to teaching science and nature making it a success on that level.

The assessment data that has been collected for primarily functions to give a subjective, self-reflective view of student attitudes, interests and knowledge about nature over time. The data collected was more qualitative than quantitative. However, it did show some very interesting trends. For all three classes, interest in nature was very high as well as the interest in going outside. This may have to do with the geographic area in which the study took place. Nature plays a dominant role in southern Vermont in the community's culture and people's recreation. It would be very interesting and valuable to do a comparative study reading this book to urban and suburban school children.

Seeing how the pre- and post-assessment values of urban/suburban students compared to The Dummerston School would be interesting and potentially enlightening. By expanding the test population, it would also create a more robust study.

With this study, there existed several biases that could not be completely controlled for. Biases include the prior relationship I have with the students both as one of their teachers and a father to a child in one of the classes, the book was read to the students instead of read by the students, having the author read the book and that the setting of the story is where the children live and play.

One of the more significant biases was having me read the story. First off, I have worked with all of these classes doing nature/environmental education for 1-3 years. Therefore, I have brought to the classes nature and environmental lessons that were fun, hands-on and outdoor oriented. I have a unique relationship with the students that is often exciting for them. Such a pre-existing relationship could have influenced the student's engagement with the story in addition to how they answered the assessment questions. Another bias is that the students knew that I wrote the book. That was inspiring for many of them. Many of them excitedly asked if they could get a copy when I publish the book. Knowing the "author" was very exciting and unique for them. However, this could have biased them with how they answered the post-assessment questions. At this point, they knew what the questionnaire was for and whom it was for.

Another bias for this study is related to the fact that I wrote the book. Because of this, I was able to read the book theatrically, adding animation and fun to the story. I did not have to pre-read the story as many teachers have to when reading books to their classes. My situation provided a more dynamic reading than if someone else may have

read the book. This would influence the experience of the listener. Additionally, I did not have children read the book themselves and test for any changes with them having read the book. It would be interesting to see if this difference; to have the book read to you or to read the book yourself would change the outcome in any way.

The setting of the story was very relatable to this group of students. The book was written about the very area the students reside. This easily could have made the content more interesting and applicable to the students increasing their ratings. This bias points to another reason why it would be valuable and important to test the book with other populations of students in other geographic areas.

As mentioned in the results section, after the pre-assessment was returned I immediately recognized an issue with the younger students and the way they answered the questions. For a 1st or even 2nd grader, they often believe that they know “everything.” Developmentally, this is appropriate and normal. Children at this age are at an egocentrism stage (Mooney, 2010). However, for my pre-assessment questions, I suspect that I was unable to retrieve accurate information from some of the younger students. Some of the forms returned had the students frequently evaluate their knowledge as “Very Much.” They knew “very much” about trees, plants, animals, tracking, and most everything on the assessment questionnaire. Since some of the students in the pre-assessments rated themselves at the higher scale, a 5- “Very Much”, it might not have allowed an accurate comparison with the post-assessment. Therefore, the age and developmental differences between the different grades can account for some of the variability in the data and could have skewed the data collected. As I mentioned before, the pre-assessment questions for the 1st graders did not take into account the

developmental stage of the students and how this influenced their answers. A possible reworking of the assessment questions to fit each of the developmental stages found in my study group would perhaps provide more accurate data.

All of the assessment questions used were subjective for the students. Future studies would be better served with both qualitative and quantitative questions. Direct content-based questions with specific answers would add rigor to the data collected. For example, one such question that would provide more definitive and quantitative data would be: "What type of tree has the best kindling for making fires?" This tests for content knowledge gained over the course of the book reading. The answer to this question would not be common knowledge for most children of that age. However, it is clearly written within the story on more than one occasion as being the hemlock tree. Theoretically, after having heard the story, a larger proportion of students would be able to answer this and other specific content questions. Pre/post assessment questionnaires with such specific objective questions that pull out science and nature content would prove to be useful in verifying actual knowledge gained from the book. This data could also be statistically analyzed for significance.

Retrieving subjective and qualitative data from the students was still very valuable. The testing of the students' own perception of learning or changing attitudes/interest holds important information. If a student feels that they learned about nature or have changed their interest level in going outside after hearing/reading the story, then something significant occurred. Additional value to the subjective questions is that they required the students to self-evaluate their own knowledge and learning over time. This is an important skill to develop with this age group.

I was very interested in analyzing the parent assessment data. Seeing that the majority of parents felt their child's interest or knowledge had increased over the time frame of the reading implies a noticeable impact from the book. Parent assessment forms, however, were subject to potential biases as well. With only 23% of the parent body returning their forms, it has the potential to skew and limit the results. For instance, the parents that did not return their form may not have seen any change in their child's interest or knowledge around the natural world so felt inclined not to turn in the form. Also, conversely, the parents who saw some positive shift in their child's interest or knowledge around the natural world may have felt more inclined to turn in their forms. The results from the parents are therefore, at best, preliminary. Future research in this area would need to put into place more structure to ensure a higher return of forms by parents. These forms were taken home by the students. An online survey or forms mailed directly via post could prove more effective.

The teacher feedback was not part of the formal assessments. The teachers on their own initiative provided comments and constructive thoughts. The information was helpful and productive. However, it would be beneficial for a future study to provide a formal questionnaire to the teachers. This would focus upon the benefits and/or failings of the book within the classroom setting. It would also be valuable to see how the book might be aligned with the Common Core State Standards and/or the Next Generation Science Standards. In the teacher assessment form, it could address how successfully the book supported these Standards.

One final factor that could have influenced the results relates to the Coyote Mentoring techniques that were utilized to write this book. Coyote Mentoring is also

recognized as an “Invisible Teaching /Learning” technique. In other words, the student or child is often unaware that teaching and learning is actually taking place. The most powerful teaching frequently happens when the student is unaware. Coyote Mentoring plants the seeds of learning in students only to have them blossom later when the perceived mentoring experience is gone. Many of the students who did not feel they learned about nature or animal tracking or birds in actuality may have learned a great amount. Testing for the effectiveness of Coyote Mentoring can therefore be difficult. The learning often takes place days, months or even years later.

Recognizing all of these biases, influencing factors and opportunities for additional study, I can easily see the research being developed further through a doctoral degree. It would be exciting to test more classes in different socio-economic and geographic regions as well as removing some of the aforementioned biases. Obtaining a more expanded view of students around the country through this study would be incredibly valuable. Such a large scope would require the dedication and focus of a doctorate and I can see pursuing this avenue.

Ultimately, providing children with as many opportunities to learn about, become interested in and be inspired with the natural world increases the likelihood they will develop a connection with nature. That connection has many mental, physical and emotional health benefits (Wells and Evans, 2003). The fifty-minute Environmental Education program in the classroom with an owl on the educator’s arm, the week of summer camp, the 20 minutes of recess, the trip to the nature center, and now, the potential hours of reading a nature adventure book are all a part of educating our children in understanding not only their place in the world but also creating a healthier future

(Larson et. al, 2011; McCurdy et. al., 2010 and Strasburger et. al., 2010). Through this increased exposure to nature, we are able to better combat the emerging nature-deficit-disorder and bring about, in the lives of our children, all of the physical and mental health benefits that nature provides (Louv, 2006).

I am very pleased that I was able to reach more 50 students with my book through this capstone. These 50 children were able to catch a glimpse of the kind of adventure and fun three ordinary children can have out in nature. They also were exposed to a variety of nature and science concepts that otherwise they would not have been. For two months, twice a week, these school children were taken into a world filled with nature adventures that planted many seeds. These seeds have either already begun to grow or will later on. My hope is that children will not only enjoy the story but will also be inspired to step outside and have their very own adventures. With *The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest*, the reader has a roadmap to connecting with nature. However, if all that happens is children stay inside reading the book instead of using screens, then I still feel it is a success. Of course, I do trust in the Coyote of the book and that eventually, what the child reads will take them outside.

I strongly believe in the value and importance of having books like mine in every child's hand. The act of reading this book means that children will spend hours immersed in a world of nature, building strong science foundations, becoming stronger readers and developing a deeper understanding and appreciation with natural world and themselves. Children's books need to not only be entertaining but also teach valuable lessons about nature, science and how to be a better person in the world. Such lessons at this early age will develop a strong foundation for the children to build upon in the

sciences later in their school career. How can we lament how poorly the United States globally rates in science when what our children read and watch on television undermines that education? We start strong in early childhood literature but then a large gap emerges for the early readers. It is time to start filling that gap with entertaining and educating literature about our natural world. This is one part of a whole that we need to fill. With this belief and passion, I will be pursuing the publication of my book and continuing to write more books about The Adventurers.

Definitions for Capstone

Chapter Book – a story book intended for beginner to intermediate readers, generally ages 7-10. Unlike picture books for beginning readers, a chapter book tells the story primarily through prose, rather than pictures but still contain plentiful illustrations. The name refers to the fact that the stories are usually divided into short chapters.

Nature Mentoring- to foster or facilitate the inherent desire to connect with, learn about and deeply appreciate the natural world through covert and overt messages, lessons, stories and invisible teaching.

Literacy - a person's knowledge of a particular subject or field; the quality or state of being literate, especially the ability to read and write

Connection – the state of being connected (united, joined, or linked); having an intimate, emotional and spiritual awareness with something

Foster- To promote the growth and development of

Attitudes- manner, disposition, feeling, position, etc., with regard to a person or thing; tendency or orientation, esp. of the mind

Early Readers – children ages 6-12 who are developing independent reading skills and seeking interesting material that is developmentally appropriate to read

Content Analysis – the analysis of texts of various types including writing, images; includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches used for a variety of purposes including attribution of texts to authors, testing of hypotheses, theory building and evaluation research

Citation for Definitions

Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Retrieved December 06, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/literacy>

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved November 20, 2014, from Wikipedia.org website: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapter_book

Some definitions like Nature Mentoring are of my own words. I also added or modified some of the definitions found to better suit the meaning for this paper (i.e. Connection).

Appendix A: Parental Informed Consent Form

1/20/16

Informed Consent Letter to Parents

Dear Parents of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades,

Many of you know me since I work with your children in school and I am a father of a 2nd grader as well. I have several roles with The Dummerston School that includes the ELF (Environmental Learning for the Future) Coordinator and teacher, Environmental Science Program Consultant (K-8) and during the summers, I run a nature adventure camp for our local children grades 1st-5th. Expanding your child's interest and education in the natural sciences is a personal and professional goal of mine.

I am currently in the process of completing a Master's degree from Hamline University School of Education and working on my thesis research project. This research is public scholarship and the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository and it may be published or used in other ways. The project entails creating a Chapter Book for 1st-4th grade students that is designed to teach them about nature and science in a fun and exciting fashion. Such books do not readily exist for our children and that is why I am using my knowledge and experience in this field to write one. It is also my plan to test this book with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade classes at Dummerston School. I will evaluate to see if my book change student's interest in, appreciation for and/or desire to engage more deeply with science and the natural world. I will go into each of the classrooms (grades 1-3), provide a pre-assessment questionnaire for them, then read the book over the course of several weeks. I will be in the classroom once or twice a week at most for a period of 30-45 minutes each time. A post-assessment questionnaire will be given once finished reading the book. This will take place during the months of February-April. It is my hope to see a shift in the student's attitude, interest and knowledge with natural science related topics.

As a part of this study, I would like to have you, the parents also fill in a pre and post assessment questionnaire to help identify any shifts or changes in your child's attitude towards and interest in nature.

I assure you that this process and the final thesis will be held with confidentiality for and anonymity of participants through one or more of the following: using pseudonyms for students, aggregating data, and covering or deleting all identifiers in any artifacts. You and your child's participation is strictly voluntary and any participant may withdraw from the project at any time without negative consequences. At the conclusion of the research project, anyone interested can receive a summary of the research results.

I have gained the approval from each of the classroom teachers for these grades in addition to Principal Ratti to conduct this project. It is my hope that you will consent to have your child participate in this study with me and the school. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Attached are the consent forms (one is for your records) and the pre-assessment questionnaire. Can you please fill these in and return them to the school addressed to me no later than February 2nd? Thank you very much for this opportunity!

All the best,
Keith Marshall
Kpmarshall333@gmail.com
(206) 718-8686

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Conducted by Keith Marshall

Keep this full page for your records

I have received your letter about the study you plan to conduct in which you will be reading a nature and science based story to my child in his/her class. I understand that part of the study will entail an anonymous pre/post questionnaire that will test for any changes in attitude and in understanding of the natural sciences. I understand there is little to no risk involved for my child, that his/her confidentiality will be protected, and that I may withdraw or my child may withdraw from the project at any time. I have also included the filled in pre-assessment questionnaire.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Student Name and Grade

Participant copy

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Conducted by Keith Marshall

Return this portion to Keith Marshall (can be given to school office)

I have received your letter about the study you plan to conduct in which you will be reading a nature and science based story to my child in his/her class. I understand that part of the study will entail an anonymous pre/post questionnaire that will test for any changes in attitude and in understanding of the natural sciences. I understand there is little to no risk involved for my child, that his/her confidentiality will be protected, and that I may withdraw or my child may withdraw from the project at any time. I have also included the filled in pre-assessment questionnaire.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Student Name and Grade

Researcher copy

Appendix B: Student Pre-Assessment Questionnaire

Pre-Assessment Questions for students (grades 1-3)

Answer the questions to the best of how you feel. There are no right or wrong answers.

GRADE: (Circle one) 1st grade 2nd grade 3rd grade

PRACTICE QUESTIONS:

- How much do you like broccoli?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					


- How much do you like pizza?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

STUDENT PRE-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

Circle or mark your best guess for each question.

1) How much do you like nature?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

2) How much do you know about nature in general?

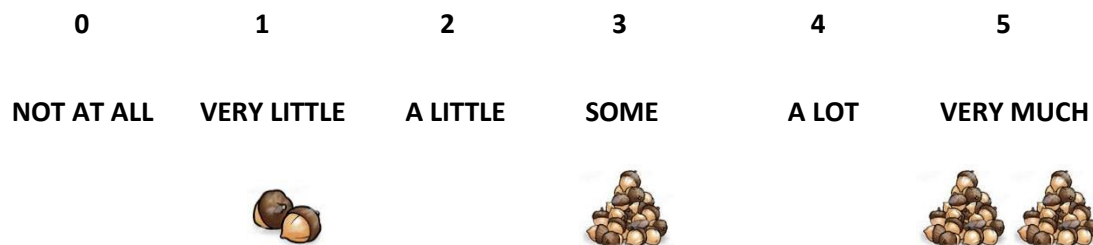
0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

3) How much do you know about animals?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

4) How much do you about birds?**5) How much do you know about plants?****6) How much do you know about trees?**

7) How often do you go outside each week?



8) How interested are you in going outside each week?



9) Are you interested in going outside to have an adventure in nature?



Appendix C: Student Post-Assessment Questionnaire

Post Assessment Questions for students (grades 1-3)

Please return to Keith Marshall via the office – Thanks!

The following questions will be read orally by you, the teacher in your class with emphasis that there are no right or wrong answers and to just mark how they feel right now.

Answers are given on a number scale from 1-5 (very little to very much respectively). Teachers, before you begin, please hand out the sheets with the questions so your students can follow along and fill in the scale. Also, go over the practice questions with the students to ensure that they fully understand the scaling system.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS:

- How much do you like asparagus?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

- How much do you like ice cream?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest

STUDENT POST ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:



Circle or mark your best guess for each question.

GRADE: (Circle one) 1st grade 2nd grade 3rd grade

1) How much do you like nature?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

2) How much did you learn about nature in general from the book?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

3) How much did you learn about animals from the book?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH
					

4) How much did you learn about birds from the book?



5) How much did you learn about plants from the book?



6) How much did you learn about trees from the book?



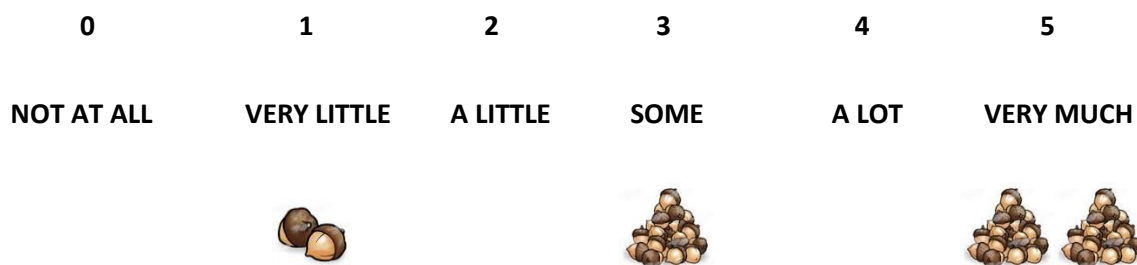
7) How often do you go outside each week?



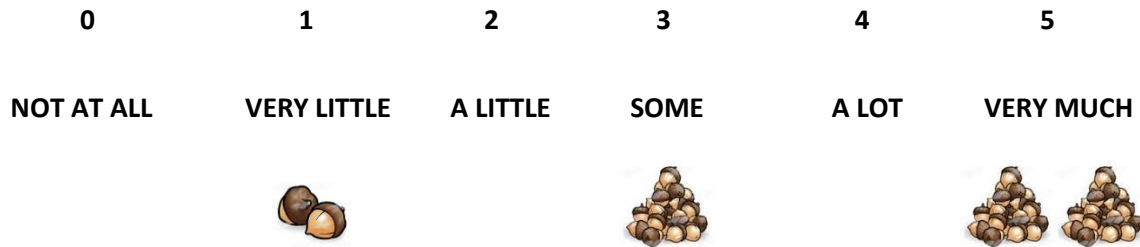
8) How interested are you in going outside each week now that you read the book?



9) Are you more interested in going outside to have an adventure in nature now?



10) Did you like the book: *The Adventurers... Journey to the Crooked Forest?*



*On behalf of The Adventurers... Thank YOU all for a great
adventure with listening to this story!*

Appendix D: Parent Assessment Questionnaire

Dear Dummerston Parents of the 1st-3rd Grade,

As you may recall, for the last two months, I have been reading a nature adventure book to the 1st through 3rd grade classes called **The Adventurers....Journey to the Crooked Forest**.

Getting your feedback will be very helpful with my graduate thesis.

The following questions are your best guesses or impressions regarding your child and their relationship with nature and how it may have shifted (or not) over the last 2 months.

Answers are given on a number scale from 1-5 (very little to very much respectively).

Please return this filled in form to your child's classroom within the next week. Thank you very much in advance.

Keith Marshall

PARENT POST-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

Circle or mark your best guess for each question from your observations and knowledge of your child.

11) Has your child's interest in nature increased in any way over the last few months?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

12) Has your child's interest in animals increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

13) Has your child's interest in animal tracking increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

14) Has your child's interest in birds increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

15) Has your child's interest in plants increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

16) Has your child's interest in trees increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

17) How often does your child go outside to play in nature each week?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

18) How interested is your child in going outside each week?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

19) Has your child's interest in going outside each week increased?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

20) Has your child spoken to you about the book I read to them?

0	1	2	3	4	5
NONE	VERY LITTLE	A LITTLE	SOME	A LOT	VERY MUCH

11) COMMENTS or GENERAL IMPRESSIONS/FEEDBACK about your child's experience with the book and his/her relationship with nature:

Appendix E: *The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest*

The Adventurers...

Journey to the Crooked Forest

Written by Keith Marshall

Illustrations by Kevin Marshall

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Acknowledgements

To my daughter, nephew and niece who were my inspiration for creating The Adventurers...Journey to the Crooked Forest. And to all the children who need just a little extra push to get outside and go have an adventure...just do it! You won't regret it.

I want to thank all the people past and present who influenced me and in turn this book. My family and friends who have helped to edit the book many times over or just listen and offer ideas, I am so appreciative of. Also, I acknowledge and am grateful for the lineage of Coyote Mentoring that was introduced and taught to me by Jon Young. All of the nature connection teachers out there and parents who are in support of getting your kids outside, the world thanks you.

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The Adventurers.....



Introduction

Our Adventurers are three ordinary kids who have extraordinary experiences in the woods, fields, ponds, rivers and even their backyards in southern Vermont. This story is about the first adventure the trio ever had and how it sparks the beginning of many exciting adventures to come.

Alex, Skylar and Nick are 9, 10, and 11 years old. Nick and Alex are brother and sister and Skylar is their cousin. They are also the best of friends. All three have eyes the color of a summer's sky. Nick, the oldest is the tallest with short blond hair. He loves to run, jump, climb and wrestle and is naturally athletic. He also is a very caring brother and cousin, always looking out for the two others. Skylar is the 10-year-old with long blond hair and is the second tallest. Skylar enjoys running, playing and wrestling like the rest but what she enjoys most is to read books and learn about the world. She is curious, smart and very good at solving problems. Alex is the youngest and the smallest of the three with long brown hair. Alex does not let her size stop her in the least. She loves to play rough and tumble with anyone willing to join and often is the first to try something new. She loves to sing and has a very strong voice despite her size. She loves nothing more than spending time with her brother and cousin just like the others.

Each of the three have their own special talents, gifts and skills which when put together makes an unstoppable trio. When they get together, the forests, fields, rivers, lakes and marshes of the area are their playground. Who needs a swing set when there's an ancient grape vine hanging low from an oak tree to swing on or a frozen slide over the rapids of the winter creeks to slide down? What about when every tree in the forest calls to them to climb like monkey bars? It is these nature adventures that test them and where each of their talents and skills are called upon to keep them safe and having fun.

Their first serious adventure starts with a story about a mysterious place in the woods of Vermont not far from where they live. They hear about this place from a grumpy old neighbor known as Ol' Jack McGee around a fire one night in February.

Here is how the story goes and the adventure begins.

Chapter 1: The Beginning

This day starts like a normal Saturday in February in southern Vermont. Nick, Skylar and Alex are helping collect maple tree sap and boiling it down into syrup. This is a tradition at Skylar's house where they have several acres of forest with many Sugar Maple Trees. Each year, when the nights are freezing and days are above freezing, the sap of the maple trees flow clear and strong out of the small holes drilled in the trees. That sap, if you were to take a sip has a faint sweetness to it. Hidden in the watery liquid is the golden syrup. You need to collect the sap and boil it for several hours in a special evaporator pan and fire box to remove the water, leaving the liquid gold. It takes about 40 gallons of sugar maple sap to make only 1 gallon of syrup. A lot of work, time and help is needed to make this happen.

On the weekends, friends, neighbors and family all come together to help collect and boil down the sap. It will take an entire weekend, day and night to boil all the collected sap and make syrup.

"Hey Alex, can you grab the empty pail? These buckets are overflowing with sap!" hollered Nick as he took a slurp of sap out of the sap bucket.

"Mmmmmm, no matter how many times I taste maple sap, I always love it," Nick said looking over to Skylar who was emptying one of the full sap buckets into an empty carry pail.

"I know. It tastes almost like water but with just a smidge of sweet in it," Skylar responded as she finished emptying the bucket and put it back on the spile.

The spile is the little tap that goes into the hole in the tree to funnel the sap down into the sap bucket.

"Boy, these filled buckets are heavy. How many have we emptied so far?" Nick asked feeling like he had already emptied 100 of them.

"I think it's been about 30 of them so far," panted Alex as she came up with another empty pail.

"It doesn't make it easy that there's a foot of snow we have to walk through to get to all the trees," Skylar admitted as she went to another sap bucket to empty.

"I know. Geez, I can't wait to take a break and sit around the fire for a little," Nick said.

"Yeah. Hey Skylar, who's that old dude helping your Dad with the boiling?" Alex asked as she glanced over in the direction of the grown-ups.

"Oh, that's Ol' Jack McGee. He comes every year and helps out. Actually, he's the one that taught my Dad how to make syrup. Ol' McGee's alright. Kinda grumpy though. He's lived around here all his life and tells some great stories," Skylar answered hoping that this evening they might get some good stories around the fire.

The three emptied the last of the full sap buckets and then worked together to haul the filled pails to the storage tanks. The tanks were right next to the evaporator pan and with this last load were totally filled. It was going to be a long night of boiling sap down into syrup.

However, the kids didn't mind the hard work or late nights. There was something special about this time of year and making their own maple syrup. Imagine, collecting clear liquid sap from a maple tree and after boiling it for hours, you have delicious maple syrup! It is like magic really. All this water evaporates leaving behind the thick pure maple syrup. Also, there are always fun adults who come to help out too. Many stories are shared by the flickering light of the fire during this time and the kids love sitting quietly and listening to them all in the cold night air with the warm fire nearby.

"Nice job guys. Looks like we're now ready to just sit around and boil up all this sap," Skylar's Dad, Brian, said to the three tired kids. "Here, take a seat by the fire with Mr. McGee and I'll get you some hot cocoa and snacks."

"Thanks Uncle Brian. Can we get marshmallows in our hot cocoa?" Nick inquired hopefully.

"Sure, no problem. You've earned 'em. I think I tapped more trees this year than last year. It's been hard to keep up. I emptied all the buckets yesterday and they were filled up again by today. Gonna be a good year for syrup."

"You want anything Jack?" asked Brian.

“Got some coffee?” McGee asked in a raspy voice.

“Sure do. Cream or sugar?”

“What’d ya take me for Brian? One of those city slickers? I like my coffee black!” McGee said gruffly.

“Alrighty Jack. Don’t get your britches in a bunch,” Brian responded chuckling. “Three hot chocolates with marshmallows and one coffee black. Coming right up.”

Alex, Nick and Skylar were a little nervous being left with grumpy Ol’ Jack McGee. It didn’t help that McGee was eyeing them also with one eye through a face full of gray whiskers and a well-worn leather hat.

The three stared into the fire and poked the unburnt ends uncomfortably.

“Well, what’d ya three like to do?” McGee suddenly asked.

“Um, well, I guess, I don’t know,” Alex replied nervously.

“You don’t know what’d ya like to do?” McGee stared harder at them.

“Ahem, we play a lot in the woods, sir,” Nick responded trying to sound confident. Truth was, McGee made him real nervous too.

“Play, what’d ya mean ‘play’ in the woods?” McGee continued interrogating.

“Well, we go explorin’ around, looking for animals, climbing trees and stuff like that,” Skylar clarified.

“Hmmmph,” McGee took a deep breath, looked up into the evening sky where the first stars were starting to come out and began...

“Well, these mountains around us were my backyard growing up ya know. And let me tell ya, I had the best backyard anybody could want. The forests, fields, creeks and ponds became my home away from home and the animals and birds became my friends and family. You see, I was never too good with people; wasn’t back then and still ain’t now actually.

When I was your age, I started wandering more and more in these woods. I began explorin’ and learning everything ‘bout this land like some wild Indian boy. Ya see, the more time I spent

in the woods wandering around, being quiet and watching everything I saw, the more I got to know the land like the back of my own hand.

Also, the animals and birds got to know me too. I ended up being accepted by the animals in these woods. They knew that I meant them no harm so they treated me like one of 'em. I could walk right through a herd of deer without them running away or pass by the fox with him only lifting his head to give me an annoyed look. Chickadees would land on my shoulder to say hello. Raccoons actually took to following me since they knew I would eventually be having a snack and they might get some crumbs. You know, there's nothing cooler than having a wild animal either ignoring ya or hangin' out with ya!

One of the things I loved to do too was track animals and figure out what they had been up to while I was gone from the woods. It was like I was a detective, trying to find clues to tell me the story about the animals and forest. By following the animals, you learn more about them than you could ever imagine. An added bonus, is ya also discover new and hidden places that just by walking around on your own you would never find.

I remember this time during a hot spell one summer when I found some weird tracks on a dusty trail that I was walking on. These tracks looked like someone was walking barefoot. I wondered 'who else is crazy enough to be out here barefoot?' I had to find out so I started following them. I was walkin' real slow see, so I wouldn't run into whoever or whatever it was. Up ahead, I saw somethin' through a thick bush moving on the trail so I froze. Whatever it was, it was moving towards me steady like. I waited and tried to see what it was through the thick brush. Well, what it was came around a bend in the trail beyond the thick brush and right there slowly walking towards me with his tongue hanging out of his mouth was the biggest black bear I had ever seen! This bear was so hot and tired that it wasn't even paying attention; it just wanted to get to a nice cool spot to sleep the rest of the day away. This dang bear was walking straight towards me no more than 15 feet away and it still had not realized that here was this young kid standing in the middle of the trail scared witless. I realized that this bear was not going to notice me until he bumped right into me; something that I did not want to happen so I managed to make a cross between a squeak and a croak. Well, that got the bears attention and it stopped and raised his head. His squinty eyes slowly opened wide as he realized that right in

front of him was a human boy. I raised my hand and waved to him and gave a weak smile. I swear to you, that this bear slowly turned around like he was on his tiptoes and stepped off the trail and continued tiptoeing until he was a good 30 yards away. Then he turned back and looked at me again and disappeared down a hill. And that was it. In that moment, I knew that the bear was just as afraid of me as I was of him even though he must have weighed 300 pounds!”

McGee paused as Brian came with the hot chocolate and coffee. He sipped the hot black coffee and closed his eyes.

“I suppose you might like to hear a story ‘bout a mysterious place up here in these hills?” asked McGee.

“That’d be awesome!” Nick said excitedly.

“Yes, sir!” Skylar agreed.

“How mysterious?” Alex asked skeptically.

McGee opened his eyes and looked at Alex and then the other two. “Very mysterious,” McGee said in a soft and deep voice.

With the fire crackling and sending flickering light onto their faces, the stars starting to come out, the night air getting cold and the steam billowing out of the evaporator pan, the stage was set for the story that would change our trio’s lives forever.



"Up in these here hills, there's a mysterious place like is like no other place. It's a forest of crooked trees and very few people have ever stepped foot in it. It's hidden by steep jagged cliffs to the north and east and a thick swamp to the south and west that has brambles with thorns that will tear a person to shreds. It is protected and guarded by nature itself and only those who are worthy are able to make it there. However, this place, if one can make it, has a treasure that is worth more than all the riches in the world.

I first heard about this place by an old local guy. He had noticed how I loved being in the woods and kinda took me under his wing. He ended up teaching me a whole lot 'bout nature. And after a while, he told me 'bout the Crooked Forest. However, when he first told me about it, I wasn't ready yet to go find that place. He told me that there were too many dangerous

challenges for me to go. So, I kept going out into the woods and learning and practicing nature skills that this old fella told me 'bout. Eventually, he saw that I was ready.

Well, (Jack paused long here and looked at each of the kids in their eyes letting them know without saying it that this was serious) well, he set me on the trail that would lead me to the Crooked Forest. It was a very, very old trail that I had never seen nor ever been on before. It lead me to a new part of these wild hills. It was a hidden, secret place where very few people had ever stepped foot. This trail was so old that it had probably been made by the Indians from these here parts long ago.

It was at this very moment that the campfire blazed up high shining eerie firelight on Ol' Jack McGee's wrinkled face and gray beard. Shivers went up and down the spines of the three like a lightning bolt. Mind you, these were not the kind of shivers you get when you are cold. They were not the kind of shivers you get when you are scared. They were the shivers you get when you know you are about to be told a really, really important secret.

Jack McGee cleared his throat and threw another log on the fire. With sparks flying up into the dark sky, he spoke:

When I stepped onto this trail, it felt like it was gonna to lead me to some place really important. Something from my gut pulled me down this trail. It was as if a magical string was attached to me guiding me further along this unknown and faint path. I followed like a dog on a leash. Mind you, on this trail, I met many challenges and tests that I had to overcome before I ever made it all the way to the Crooked Forest. As I got closer, the challenges with every turn in the trail became more difficult and scarier. It was as if the spirit of this place, a guardian of the secret forest was putting these tests in front of me to make sure that I was worthy. If I hadn't trained hard and learned what I learned, I never would've made it. Maybe, I never would've survived it.

Jack McGee coughed, stoked the fire and looked beyond the flames as if he was on that trail again, facing unknown challenges and dangers. Then, he blinked hard a few times and looked back to the three kids staring wide eyed at him.

Aww, we'll be here all night if I tell you about those challenges and tests that the trail put me through. So let me skip right to when I reached the forest...

The three were at the edge of their seats, staring with open mouths at Ol' Jack. Their hearts were pounding because in their minds they too could sense that forest and feel the magic there. Also in their minds were a million questions...like what were the challenges he faced? Were there monsters around those corners? Ghosts? Quicksand? DINOSAURS??? Their thoughts were interrupted by Ol' McGee speaking again. Their minds and breathing went quiet as they listened.

That lonely trail finally opened up and dumped me right into the middle of this "crooked" forest. It felt like I had just traveled a year on foot when I arrived. I was hungry, scratched up, dirty, thirsty and a bit scared but when I looked up and saw this forest, all of that disappeared. I just felt... wonder.

All the trees were growing sideways. Sideways I tell ya! Not straight up and down like trees are supposed to. It was the weirdest and strangest thing I ever did see in the woods. I couldn't help but wonder what happened here? Was it a giant or something else? Besides the trees, there was something very different about this forest. No birds were singing, there were no animal trails weaving through. It was so..." Jack paused here searching for the right word... "so, quiet. The kind of quiet you get when you go into a church or somethin'. And with that quiet, I also had this feelin' of somethin'...somethin'...magical."

You could have heard a pin drop at this moment. Alex, Skylar and Nick were holding their breath, waiting nervously for what would come next. Does a giant or monster charge out of the forest at Jack? Why is it so quiet?

"I kept feeling the pull of this forest leading me into the heart of it. Without trails or other land marks, I could have easily gotten lost but I kept going. I walked towards the center of that forest and there it was, this, this, ancient circle made of hundreds of large and small stones. It looked very old and yet no moss was growing over the rocks. Each rock was placed carefully in a circle with other rocks leading to the center like spokes on a wheel. I could tell that someone, long ago had made this circle and it was very important. It gave me goosebumps standing there. I could also tell that someone, or something was taking care of this circle even now.

I later found out that this kind of place is called a medicine circle. It was a powerful medicine circle. Standing there, looking at it, I felt...felt something more amazing than I have ever felt before and that feeling has been with me ever since."

Chapter 2: The Challenge for the Trio

McGee, stared into the firelight for what seemed like forever. All was quiet except for the crackling fire and the kids' own heartbeats pounding in their chests. Then, as if coming out of a trance, Jack McGee looked at the three and said with a growl:

"You three'll just have to go find it yourselves to know what I'm talking 'bout, won't ya?"

The kids stared at McGee confused.

McGee eyed them seriously. "Aw, but you're not ready yet. But, if you're serious about finding this place then you better get to trainin'. What do ya say? Interested?" McGee questioned with a side glance.

With wide eyes and mouths open with eagerness, Alex, Skylar and Nick quickly nodded their heads up and down shouting together "Totally interested!" They shouted so strongly that Ol' Jack McGee nearly fell off the log he was sitting on.

Ol' McGee righted himself back on his log and with a scowl, he continued.

"Well then, maybe you are and maybe ya ain't. We'll just have to see 'bout that. However, let's presume you are. You'll need to know a few things first." McGee took a long and slow sip of his coffee. The kids could hear him swallow. Then he began again.

"If you're ever gonna to make it to the Crooked Forest, you need to become ONE with nature like I was. I mean, when you move through the forest, you need to not only understand the birds, see the tracks of the animals, know the plants as if they were your own family but you need to *feel* the forest. You need to be able to hear the quietest sounds both in the forest and in yourselves! I'm talking about how people used to be with nature. How the Indians of this area used to be!"

Jack McGee's words and raspy voice echoed in their heads. McGee continued as he eyed them carefully.

“For this to happen, for you to truly become one with nature, you’ll need learn to do several things first,” McGee paused.

“What, what! Tell us and we’ll do it!” yelled Alex, again almost knocking Ol’ McGee over again.

“Hrummph” exclaimed Ol’ McGee with a glare at Alex.

A bit embarrassed, Alex looked quickly down realizing that this was not the best time for her gift of a strong voice and enthusiasm for trying new things to be shown off.

“We’re sorry Mr. McGee but we’re just so excited and want to learn all we can so that we can find the Crooked Forest too” said Skylar, hoping to explain to Ol’ McGee why they’re being so loud.

“Alright, alright then” McGee said with a sidelong glance and a deep sigh. “Here’s what you three are gonna have to learn before you’re able to even place one toe on the Crook Forest trail.” With a deep breath and sitting up straighter, Ol’ McGee started.

“First, each of you need to find a spot outside that calls to you – a special spot.”

Looking out of the corner of his eyes he saw Alex getting ready to ask a question and McGee cut her off saying “No, not really callin’ your names but rather callin’ to your hearts. Remember, you need to learn to listen to your hearts in order to make it to the Crooked Forest! Do ya understand this?”

“Yes!” all three responded.

McGee’s eyes narrowed as he looked at each of the kids making sure that they understood what “calling to your hearts” really meant. After an uncomfortable amount of quiet and staring, McGee continued satisfied enough that each of the kids did indeed understand.

“This is a spot that you can get to easily from your home. I don’t care if it’s in some wild place or just in your backyard. It just needs to be outside and have some nature around it. Don’t be fooled by thinkin’ that your spot has to be deep in some wild woods. One of my most favorite spots is right in the heart of the busiest part of town. You wouldn’t believe what happens there. Once I saw the largest beaver in all my days, lazily swimming by in the river under the bridge and right under all the townsfolk’s noses. The important thing is to go every day and

stay there for at least 30 minutes. Well, 30 minutes to begin with. Once you become more advanced, I'll ask for more out of y'all. Do ya think ya can handle that?" McGee barked.

All three nodded their heads eagerly but making sure they didn't say a word. Clearly, Ol' Jack McGee doesn't take too kindly to interruptions, especially loud ones.

"Start with this, and if you can go to your Special Spots for the next three weeks, every day, in this cold snowy weather, come find me. Maybe you've got a chance after all. I'll then get you started on the next stage of your training.

With eyes glittering, all three nodded their heads. Nick politely and excitedly spoke up saying "We certainly will Mr. McGee. All three of us have some great places. This is Skylar's backyard so she's set and our backyard has lots of bushes and a birdfeeder where birds and even squirrels come. I once think I saw a hawk fly by and scare all the birds away. There's a cat that prowls around though and....."

"Alright then! Son, I don't need to know all the details," Ol' McGee interrupted and growled.

"Can I continue now?"

All three accidentally shouted "Yes!"

McGee impatiently continued... "This may sound simple but it ain't. People are soft nowadays. Kids are even softer. They feel a little cold or wet and wanna run inside and get warm and dry. They feel a little hungry and they cry and say they're starvin'. I once went for two weeks without any real food. If you wanna know hunger, that's the way to do it. Also, kids haven't learned how to stick to somethin'. Their attention is divided; always lookin' at the dang phones or playing those blasted video games or watching T.V! All this makes the mind and the body go soft not to mention nobody's learnin' the old ways or what's really important." McGee shook his head strongly, clearly upset over the state of kids nowadays.

With that last sentence, the fire crackled and sent up a shower of sparks. It was as if the ancestors were agreeing with Ol' McGee.

Alex, Nick and Skylar could tell that they were not alone on this chilly February night and that something big and important was happening. They shook in their warm coats with that kind of shiver again; not like being cold, but of touching something that has great power and mystery.

“Argh.” McGee sounded and stretched his arms and his back. “You kids have got me all worked up now. Geez, I think you’ve got your story though. I’m a tired old man who needs his rest so I’m headin’ off to bed. But remember, you’ve got three weeks to show me that you’re serious about this. If you fail, then this quest ends before it even begins. Enjoy your dreams.”

With that, he gruffly chuckled, abruptly got up, tossed his coffee into the fire with a hiss and walked straight into the dark forest without making a sound. He disappeared in seconds.

Alex, Nick and Skylar just sat there, blinking and dazed. Did that really happen? Are they about to begin training to go and find the Crooked Forest? Did Ol’ Jack McGee really think that they each could become one with nature? Are they really going to go and find this place themselves? If so, what was the journey going to be like to find the Crooked Forest?

They each knew in their hearts that they were going to do this. They first had to train and learn how to become one with the forest and then they would go in search of the Crooked Forest. They would find the Crooked Forest and unlock the mysteries of that place and find the treasures it held. However, they also knew that tomorrow, they must each find their special spot and begin their training or else Ol’ Jack McGee would give up on them right on the spot.

With that, our three went to bed knowing that morning would bring the start of an amazing journey.

Chapter 3: Skylar's Special Spot

With a night filled with dreams about adventures, Alex, Skylar and Nick began their nature training. The end goal of finding the Crooked Forest and the mysterious medicine circle lured them like moths to a lamp. Questions swirled in their heads about what kind of mysteries and magic lay waiting in that place and what kind of challenges were they going to face in order to find it. However, they knew what they had to do first. They had to find their Special Spots.

Early morning came and the three were awake and getting ready to head outside and find their Spots. It was a good thing that they still had a week of break before school started. This would give them time to find their spots and start sitting at them. Since it was break, Nick and Alex were sleeping over at Skylar's. This morning they were going to help Skylar find her spot. Tomorrow, Skylar would sleep over at her cousins' house and help them find theirs.

Now, February in Vermont can be bitterly cold and this morning was no exception. There was 2 feet of snow on the ground and the temperature was 10 degrees outside. Fortunately, all three of the kids knew how to dress for this snowy cold weather.

The three gobbled down some breakfast and started to get dressed for the first step towards their epic adventure of finding the Crooked Forest. They each put on layers starting with long underwear, then a fleece top and flannel lined pants with warm socks. They then put on a vest to help keep their chest warm. They knew that if their chest wasn't warm then their fingers and toes would end up freezing. They put snow gear on over all of their warm clothes. Their snow gear included snow boots, snow pants, a thick winter coat and warm hat and mittens. Alex, Nick and Skylar all agreed that mittens were much better than gloves at keeping their hands warm since the fingers are kept together and not spread apart.

Even though the trio had spent a bunch of time outside for this break, making snow forts, sledding, and collecting sap on the warmer days, this morning was different. They were not going to be roughhousing around but quietly and *slowly* walking through the forest, finding a Special Spot and then sitting still for at least a solid 30 minutes. With the bitter cold this morning, they had to have the right clothes on or else they would freeze and not just their fingers and toes!

“Are we all ready?” Nick asked Alex and Skylar.

“I think so. But Alex, you need your warmer jacket!” Skylar said seeing the jacket Alex had on.

“But I don’t like that one as much. Plus, I like this color better.” Alex replied.

“ALEX!” both Nick and Skylar shouted.

“Do you think it’s going to matter what color your jacket is when you’re frozen like an ice cube?” Skylar questioned.

“Or when your fingers and toes freeze off?” added Nick.

“Alright, alright. I’ll put my warmer jacket on but I’m not gonna to be happy about it,” responded Alex.

Both Skylar and Nick rolled their eyes amused. Alex is the one who is often more interested in fashion. Sometimes, it can be a bother. One time, they went for a hike and Alex decided to wear her boots that had wedge heels. Not a great choice when walking in the woods. However, Alex makes up for this by always having a backpack with extra cloths. This has come in handy on more than one occasion. Once Nick fell in the creek and another time Skylar didn’t have enough clothes while biking on a chilly fall day. Of course, it’s also greatly appreciated with school clothes shopping. Alex is always very helpful with picking out the best clothes...for school that is.

“Now are we ready?” asked Nick with a tinge of impatience.

“Ready!” the girls replied.

With that, they headed outside. The minute they got outside, the cold stole their breath away. The inside of their noses hurt as they breathed in the freezing air. Like icy fingers, the cold tried to find any gaps in their clothing where it could steal away their body warmth. Alex, Skylar and Nick had done such a great job though, the icy cold couldn't get in and they were toast warm. They were so excited and happy to be outside looking for Skylar's Special Spot.

"There is something really neat about being out here in the cold and snow this early," Skylar said with awe as she looked around at the winter wonderland. "It's like we have the whole forest to ourselves. Nobody is outside right now except a few birds and forest animals. It's almost like we're animals moving through the forest."

"I know. It's so cool. I mean cold," laughed Alex in response.

"It's like the forest is expecting us," said Nick. "And it's so quiet and peaceful. I never thought it would be so amazing. Tell you the truth, I was kind of worried about this morning and not too excited about it. But now, I'm psyched!"

"I know, me too," Skylar agreed. "I felt like that too but am so excited to be out here now."

"Me three," Alex joined in.

"Well, let's find a place to bed down like the deer," Nick said.

"Sounds fun!" Alex responded.

So the three headed up the snowy slope into the forest. Even though they were having a great time pretending to be deer moving through the forest looking for a place to bed down and nibbling on buds, they remembered that had to find Skylar's Special Spot.

They wandered through the woods along the edge exploring some deep tracks in the snow. However, none of them knew what they were.

"Maybe a dog," guessed Alex.

"Yeah, a neighbor's dog comes to our house sometimes. But this is really deep snow for it. I wonder..." Skylar said trying to figure out the mystery.

“Oh my gosh! Look at that,” cried Nick.

All three rushed over to the spot that Nick pointed out. Right there, under low lying hemlock branches and melted in the snow were three perfect oval shapes the size of a large suitcase. The snow had been melted down to a layer of ice at the bottom of each oval. The three inspected the impressions closer.



“Whoa, look at this.” Nick pulled out of the bottom a small handful of whitish brown hairs. Some of them were bent or rather crimped like what happens to a straw when you bend it.

“Guys, check this out!” called Skylar. Alex and Nick hurried over to Skylar. A pile of frozen brown pellets lay on the edge of one of the ovals in the bottom. “Looks like poop! Or scat actually.” Skylar had learned from her Dad that scat is the scientific word for poop. She felt like it was important to be scientific about their discovery so the use of the word seemed right.

“Scat?” Nick asked confused.

“Yeah, scat is the scientific word for animal poop,” Skylar answered.

“Oh, that’s cool. Hmmmm, scat. I like it,” Nick said pleased with his growing vocabulary.

Now it was Alex’s turn. “Over here guys.”

Nick and Skylar went over to the oval Alex was looking into. There in the bottom, frozen in the ice were a number of tracks. The tracks were that of an animal with two toes that came to a point and looked like a hoof.



With this final clue, the three of them knew exactly what they’d found. But how could it be? These ovals were only 30 yards away from Skylar’s house up on the hill. In fact, from this spot they could see right inside the house through the back window.

Nick, Skylar and Alex stared at each other, then towards the house and then back to the ovals. Without having to walk more than 40 steps from the house, they found where three deer had bedded down and slept for the cold night nestled in the snow. It was a spot that if any of them would have looked out the window at dawn, they may have seen the deer quietly leaving their night beds.

As they stood there, Skylar let out a little noise that was a cross between a giggle and a grunt. “Heehuh.”

Alex and Nick looked at her alarmed by the noise. “What is it?” they asked.

“This is it guys,” said Skylar.

“What is it?” Alex questioned.

“**THIS. This** is my Special Spot!” exclaimed Skylar.

Indeed, it was the perfect spot. It was not too far from the house. Skylar’s parents could even peek out the window and see her. This is always something that parents like to be able to do to feel better about their kids playing outside.

“It’s perfect. Easy to get to. I can even see it from the window. If three deer think it’s a good spot and feel safe, then so do I.” **Skylar’s eyes glittered while both Alex and Nick smiled with approval.**

“I LOVE it. It’s up on this slope and I can see down through the forest too. These hemlock trees will keep the snow and rain off just like it did for the deer,” beamed Skylar.

“How do you know these are hem-lock trees?” asked Nick.

“These are the same trees that my Dad taught me to collect the dead branches from. We use them as kindling for making a fire,” Skylar replied.

“Oh, the little branches stay dry even if it rains, huh?” said Nick.

“Yeah, that’s the hemlock. The thick needed branches keeps under the tree dry. Perfect for finding dry wood or for finding a Special Spot!” smiled Skylar.

The three sat down under the hemlocks and quietly enjoyed the forest for the next hour. They couldn’t help but think about those three deer who were laying in the same spots not more than a few hours ago.

For that hour, bundled up as they were, protected from the wind under the hemlock trees and buzzing with the excitement of their experience, they didn’t even notice the cold. Alex, Nick and Skylar felt that even though the adventure of finding the Crooked Forest had only begun, it was already pretty amazing. And this was only day one!

Chapter 4: Alex and Nick's Special Spots

All three were tucked in their sleeping bags on the floor of the family room at Alex and Nick's house. Skylar was sleeping over this night so that tomorrow morning, she could help her cousins find their Special Spots. Of course, there also may be some amazing adventure to have as well. Already they had all their winter layers set out for the next morning so the minute they woke up they would head outside.

"Since we have to find two Special Spots, we've got to get out even earlier," declared Skylar.

"Yep, you're right. But if it's anything like finding your Special Spot, then it's gonna be epic!" Nick returned with an excited look.

"And this time, I'll put on my warmer jacket first," joked Alex.

"You better," laughed Skylar.

Nick and Alex's Dad came in and checked on the three.

"You three all set for the night?" he asked.

"Yep. We're good Dad," answered Nick.

"You sure about sleeping on the floor and heading out into the yard tomorrow morning so early? It's going to be really cold." asked Nick's father.

"Daddy, of course we are. This is serious and we've got to find our two Special Spots," Alex responded.

"OK then. If you need anything tonight give a holler. But in the morning, don't holler for me. I want to sleep in!" Uncle Craig winked at Skylar.

With that, lights were turned off and the three were soon dreaming about what they were going to find tomorrow morning.

Morning came quickly. It was light when Skylar, Alex and Nick woke up and started putting their warm layers on.

“Aw man, we slept late. It’s light already,” complained Nick. He was hoping to get out at first light since at Skylar’s spot, they missed seeing the deer. That is one thing about Nick, he loves seeing wildlife. Every time they drive, his eyes are peeled for deer, turkeys, fox, and hawks – any kind of animal. He’s really good at spotting animals too.

They quickly wolfed down cold bowls of cereal for breakfast.

“Wready?” asked Nick still chewing his last mouthful eager to get outside.

“Wready,” mumbled both Skylar and Alex with their mouths full too.

Alex and Nick’s mom was up and a little nervous about them going outside in such cold. “Are you guys sure about this? I mean it’s so cold out there, you might freeze,” she nervously said.

“Mom, we’ll be fine. We know what we’re doing,” replied Alex with a hint of annoyance.

“Alright then but if you get cold, come right in. O.K?” she pleaded.

“Yes Mom,” the two siblings answered fully knowing that they wouldn’t be coming in for at least the next hour.

Snow pants, warm coats, mittens and boots all went over warm under layers. Then they stepped outside into the freezing air catching their breath. The snow crunched under their boots as they went out the back door onto the back porch.

The yard had a swing set along with a shed and a tall fence that went around it. Tall bushes lined the back and sides of the yard. The bushes made the yard private and cozy even in the cold and snow. A large tree was in the middle of the yard. Perfect for tree climbing. At the far northeast corner was the bird feeder that was always stocked with seeds and suet during the winter season. The suet which is hardened fat mixed with seeds, was great for many of the birds giving them extra energy in the cold. Squirrels enjoyed the black sunflower seeds especially raiding the feeders and scaring the other birds off.

They each stood on the steps, just looking out at the yard wondering where they might find their two Special Spots. Alex and Nick's yard was very different from the huge woods that Skylar calls her backyard.

"It is a lot smaller than your backyard Skylar," Nick said with a hint of sadness knowing that finding three deer beds was not going to happen for him.

"Yeah, but you guys have the bird feeder. Plus, with those bushes, you don't get the cold wind blowing," Skylar shared. Skylar knows how much Nick loves seeing deer.

"Nick? Our backyard is still in nature. We see birds and squirrels all the time," Alex said.

"I know, I know. Well, let's walk around even though it won't take that long," answered Nick glumly.

So, the three bundled adventurers stepped down. There had been a light snow that fell overnight. It was like a fresh blanket of powder was put over the whole yard. The trio headed to the large tree in the middle.

"This is a red maple tree," Alex explained. "Do you remember how red the leaves were this fall? It was amazing."

"I remember. It was so bright. This is the coolest tree," Skylar said.

"Yeah, I guess so," mumbled Nick.

Alex and Skylar shared a glance at each other. It was obvious that Nick was not very excited right now.

Nick started to wander over to the northeast corner when suddenly he froze in his tracks.

"Guys, look at this," he loudly whispered.

Alex and Skylar went over to him and looked where Nick was staring. In the fresh snow there was a mystery written that spoke of life and death. In an area about the size of a Frisbee, the fresh snow was matted down by marks. Feathers were all around this area with most of them in the center. Some feathers were clumped in groups of 2 or 3 and a few drops of blood dotted the bright white snow.

“Holy cow, a bird died here this morning,” Nick said in surprise.

“How do you know?” asked Skylar.

“Look at all those feathers and around them the snow is all messed up,” replied Nick. “And look, there’s even some blood!”

All of a sudden, it didn’t matter that the yard was small because clearly, nature was happening all around.

“Whoa, you’re right. What kind of bird feathers are those?” Alex asked as she moved in to pick one up.

“Wait!” called Nick. “We don’t want to mess up the snow around it yet. This is a crime scene after all. We don’t want to spoil any clues that might tell us what happened.”

“You’re right Nick. Are there other tracks around besides in this one spot?” chimed in Skylar.

The three started to look carefully around the site of the feathers. They were on their bellies looking for other tracks but couldn’t find any.

“This is turning out to be a real mystery,” said Nick excitedly. “There are no tracks going into or coming out of the place where all the feathers are. What happened here?” Nick said thoughtfully.

Alex and Skylar glanced at each other again with knowing smiles. Nick was excited now and so were they!

“Let’s look closer at the place where all the feathers are. Maybe there are some clues that will help us figure out what happened.”

Nick leaned in closer, picking up a feather gently and studied it. The two girls did the same. The feathers were dull gray, small and delicate looking. There were a mix of long and short ones. A few of the longer and shorter ones were all white.

“Look at those light marks in the snow around the feathers,” exclaimed Alex.

“Wow, I didn’t see them,” said Skylar as she leaned in for a closer look.

"It's like fingers lightly whooshed the snow. There're two sets of these marks on either side of the bunch of feathers. It is almost like....." Nick trailed off, thinking hard.

All three just knelt there staring for a while. Letting all the clues bounce around in their heads. What happened here? The three started to share ideas.

"What if the feathers fell from a bird flying above?" questioned Alex.

"Right, a bird just dropped all these feathers as it flew by," Nick said. "Plus, how do you explain the blood?"

"Fine. What's your idea?" challenged Alex. Skylar rolled her eyes. Sometimes Nick and Alex argue with each other. Must be the brother/sister thing.

"What if the bird hit your house window and flew back to here? Then it got better and flew off?" Skylar shared, hoping to distract Nick and Alex from bickering.

"But what are those light finger type marks from?" asked Alex. "Too big to have been made by the bird with these feathers."

"Hmmm, good point. I don't know," replied Skylar.

The three thought hard for a little bit.

"I got it! I got it!" shouted Nick startling Alex and Skylar. "The bird *was* killed here on this spot and then taken away." Nick paused, looking at the two girls wanting the moment to last. "The bird was killed by another bird – a hawk!"

"No way! You think so?" Skylar and Alex thought about this option. "Yeah, that does makes sense. Those finger marks could be from the wings of the hawk when it landed on the bird, right?" asked Skylar.

"Exactly!" beamed Nick.

"That's crazy. You mean this morning a hawk flew right in our backyard and killed and ate a bird that was at our feeder?" asked Alex.

"Yep. It has to be right!" Nick said.

"That's so cool Nick! We've got a hawk that comes to our backyard!" said Alex.

“Now that’s cool, guys. I can’t believe it. Right in your backyard. I wonder if it’ll come back today. Hey, let’s find your Special Spots so maybe we’ll be able to see it.” Skylar said excitedly.

Looking around, they didn’t want to be too close to the bird feeder. But they did want to be able to see it. The tall bushes in the back were huge old arborvitae that stay green year round. It makes it a great place to crawl under the low hanging limbs and sit. Alex chose that spot. It helped her feel hidden while also being cozy and able to see the feeder really well. Nick wanted to see the whole back yard so he decided to be in the southwest corner; opposite the birdfeeder sitting on the rock wall between two smaller bushes. Skylar, since she was just visiting chose to sit by the big tree in the middle and all three sat perfectly still and absolutely silent, hoping to see the hawk return.

Well, the hawk didn’t return that day but they did see three different kinds of birds visiting the feeder. One kind were blue jays. They are large and bright blue, black and white birds that are noisy, always squawking. They also are big pigs, hogging the feeder and spilling seed all over the ground. However, they are the lookouts for any hawks or cats prowling around and will screech out a call if they see any. The second kind were black capped chickadees. These guys really like the suet feeder. Their call is a sweet “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” and yes, they look like they have black caps on their heads. The third bird was a type the three didn’t know. It came in a group of the same kind and hung out on the ground picking up the mess that the blue jays left. It had a darkish head, dull gray back and chest and a white underbelly. When it flew, Alex, being the closest, could see that the outer tail feathers were white! Maybe this was the type of bird that was killed by the hawk? It was going to take more time watching them and some research to know for sure.

After a good long while, Alex and Nick’s Dad hollered outside announcing that he had hot pancakes *and* hot chocolate for breakfast.

“Hot chocolate for breakfast?! Yeehah!” hollered Nick.

“Yeah baby!” shouted Alex.

“Now that is what I’m talkin’ about!” called Skylar.

The three adventurers decided they sat long enough and dashed inside. It was over an hour since they went outside in the frigid winter morning and yet, each of them had again, forgotten about the cold. As they took off their layers, they excitedly shared with Alex and Nick's parents all they had seen and the bird kill area they found. Over breakfast, the three couldn't stop chattering like the jays about the adventure they had right out in the backyard.

After breakfast, Skylar pulled out one of her field guides that she brought with her. It was a bird field guide that had every kind of bird one could find in the eastern United States.

Sipping hot chocolate, they went through the book page by page. As they did, they identified different birds they had seen before but didn't know the names of. Then, they turned the page and there was the small ground bird they saw that morning at the feeder. It was a Junco and from the looks of the feathers, it was also the kind of bird that became the breakfast for the hawk.

Now, Alex and Nick had their Special Spots and so did Skylar. The trio were well on their way with training for the journey to the Crooked Forest. They found their Special Spots and had to stick with going every day for at least thirty minutes. But after the adventures they had on their first two days, it wasn't going to be a problem for them. The fire had been lit inside each of them for what nature could offer, if one just bundles up and heads out.

Chapter 5: The Three Special Spots

Over the next three quick weeks, our young adventurers experienced and learned so much from their time at their Special Spots. That is what happens if you take the time to be in nature. Nature is the mother of all teachers; mother nature that is.

Each of them, Alex, Nick and Skylar committed to going to their Spot every day. It did not matter if it was snowy or rainy, freezing or mild, they went out and sat, listened, watched and connected to their natural surroundings. After the second week, they began to notice it became much easier to sit quietly even if they were uncomfortable with the weather. What they at first thought would be hard, became easy. A day did not feel complete without some time at their Special Spots. Nature had become to be a part of their everyday lives.

Their parents watched and were amazed at their dedication. Their parents also started to notice changes in Alex, Nick and Skylar. At first it was subtle and hard to notice but by the end of the three weeks, it was very noticeable. Each of the three had more confidence, were calmer and seemed happier. The things that normally upset them during a day no longer bothered them as much. Also, they had terrific stories to share each night at dinner about what they saw or experienced while sitting at their Special Spots.

The three began to know their backyards like they would a good friend. The animals and birds started to be less afraid or nervous with them out there sitting. More and more amazing nature experiences happened each day.

One time in the morning, Skylar was sitting in her hemlock grove Special Spot listening to a flock of chickadees when she heard some leaves rustling nearby. She turned and right behind her browsing on the low bushes was a young deer. She could hear the deer's breath, see the soft brown eyes and even smell the sweet smell of a wild deer. Seeing this deer so close made Skylar feel amazing for the rest of the day and the week. Wild turkeys would often visit

Skylar also. When she didn't see these animals, she was able to find sign that they had been by her Special Spot. Tracks, nibbled branches, turned up leaves and scat were all signs left by the animals of Skylar's forest for her to begin to read. Skylar loved finding new tracks and clues to who had been visiting her Spot. Each day was a new mystery to solve.

Nick and Alex did get their chance to see the hawk hunting the birds at their feeder. One time, the hawk flew so close to Alex that she felt the air from the hawk's wings. As a result, a junco dove into the bush right by her to escape the hawk. They looked up in a bird field guide what kind of hawk it was and their best guess was a sharp-shinned hawk. These hawks are known for their speed and agility in catching birds in midair. Alex, using the field guide, was able to learn every bird that visited her yard. Being so close to the feeder, she started to see a pattern in how the birds behaved when the hawk was nearby. She also observed how the local cat affected the birds. The kind of sound each bird would make when the hawk or the neighbor's cat would come hunting was different. She started to understand bird language.

Nick loved to play around at his Special Spot, trying out different skills for outdoor survival. Using some stringy bark Nick found in his Dad's wood pile, he started to practice making cordage or natural rope. One day, a big snow fell; two and a half feet. He made a snow cave at his Spot that kept him much warmer on the really cold and windy days. Alex was often envious when she would glance over at Nick sitting snugly in his snow cave. Since Nick was older, he also had a few added privileges. With permission from his Dad, he even started having small fires just outside of the snow cave. That would warm his snow cave even more. One time, on a particularly frigid day, Alex broke down and went over to Nick's Spot and cuddled in the snow shelter with him. The two were cozy and warm even when the temperature outside was below zero degrees.

As you can see, each of our trio were not only learning about nature through their Special Spots, but they were also becoming skilled in areas that interested them. Skylar was picking up tracking. Alex was learning about birds and what they say. Nick was experimenting with nature survival skills. All of these skills would serve the team very well later.

Chapter 6: The Next Step

“I can’t believe how cool my Spot is,” declared Skylar one day while she and her cousins were together over at her house.

“Ours too. I’m learning so much about birds. I never knew how different they all were from each other,” Alex responded. “I can tell when the hawk or the neighbor’s cat is around just by the way the birds act. I never knew the birds did this,” added Alex.

“Man, my Spot’s the best. I’ve been doing all this cool survival stuff that I learned about. I made this awesome snow cave and some rope out of bark. I even had a fire at my Spot. You should’ve seen it Skylar,” Nick joined in with.

“Yeah, I went and cuddled in the snow cave with him and it was so warm. It was like zero degrees out and I had to unzip my jacket in his cave!” shared Alex.

“That’s so cool,” said Skylar. “Hey, let’s go for a wander through my back woods today and see what we can find?” Skylar suggested. “I can check with my folks to see if it would be alright.”

“Sounds great Sky. Maybe we can pack a snack and have a picnic out in your woods,” Nick said.

“Yeah, that’d be fun,” Alex said.

“If we can go, let’s pack some stuff up and head out soon,” Skylar said as she grabbed a backpack, ready for another adventure in the woods with her cousins. “You know, we’ve been going to our Special Spots for three weeks now. Do ya think we should try to find McGee and tell him?” Skylar asked.

“Why don’t we first go exploring out in your woods and then try to find him after.” Nick was too excited about getting out into the woods to skip that. But he also knew it was time to go tell Jack that they succeeded going to their Special Spots for three whole weeks.

“Sounds good,” replied Skylar and Alex together.

This was the first time in quite a while that the three have been together in the woods just wandering and playing. Amazing things always seemed to happen when they were together in the woods.

Skylar checked in with her parents and let them know where they were going and for about how long; always important when you go outside for an adventure. Then the three got some yummy lunch and snacks as well as outdoor gear that they may need like rain gear, water, some snacks, to name a few and then they were off.

It was late winter approaching early spring when the three headed out together. It was warm compared to what they had been used to at their Special Spots a few weeks earlier. It was 40 degrees, sunny and much of the snow had melted in the open areas. A perfect day to explore the forest. There was still enough good snow to track animals but also some dry leafy areas to sit and have a picnic.

They were very different kids after having three full weeks of Special Spot time under their belts. Going every day for three weeks to a place in nature while sitting quietly for at least a half an hour changes you. Indeed, it changed these three.

They did not just rush outside shouting excitedly. They did not even speak to each other when they first stepped outside. They also did not even make a plan for what they were going to do. They knew that nature would show them where to go and what to do. Have you ever seen a cat step outside for the first time in a day? Well, if you ever have, you'd know that first, they stand still getting a sense of what is around. After a few minutes of using all of their senses, they take a few steps and stop again. Once they have a good idea of their surroundings, they move smoothly to a place on the edge of a thicket and stop again sensing the woods and fields. This was very much how our three went outside on this day.

Without a word to each other, they stepped out and stopped. Using all of their senses, they felt the natural world around them. They checked in with how the air smelled and could tell that it was not going to rain or snow just by the odor of the air. They listened to the birds around them and knew there were no predators like hawks or cats around. They looked deeply into the woods and saw no movements like the flick of a deer ear or a turkey's step.

They felt on their skin which direction the wind was blowing and knew that it was blowing into their faces. This was perfect because when you walk into the wind, animals can't smell you since the wind is taking your scent or smell away from their sensitive noses.

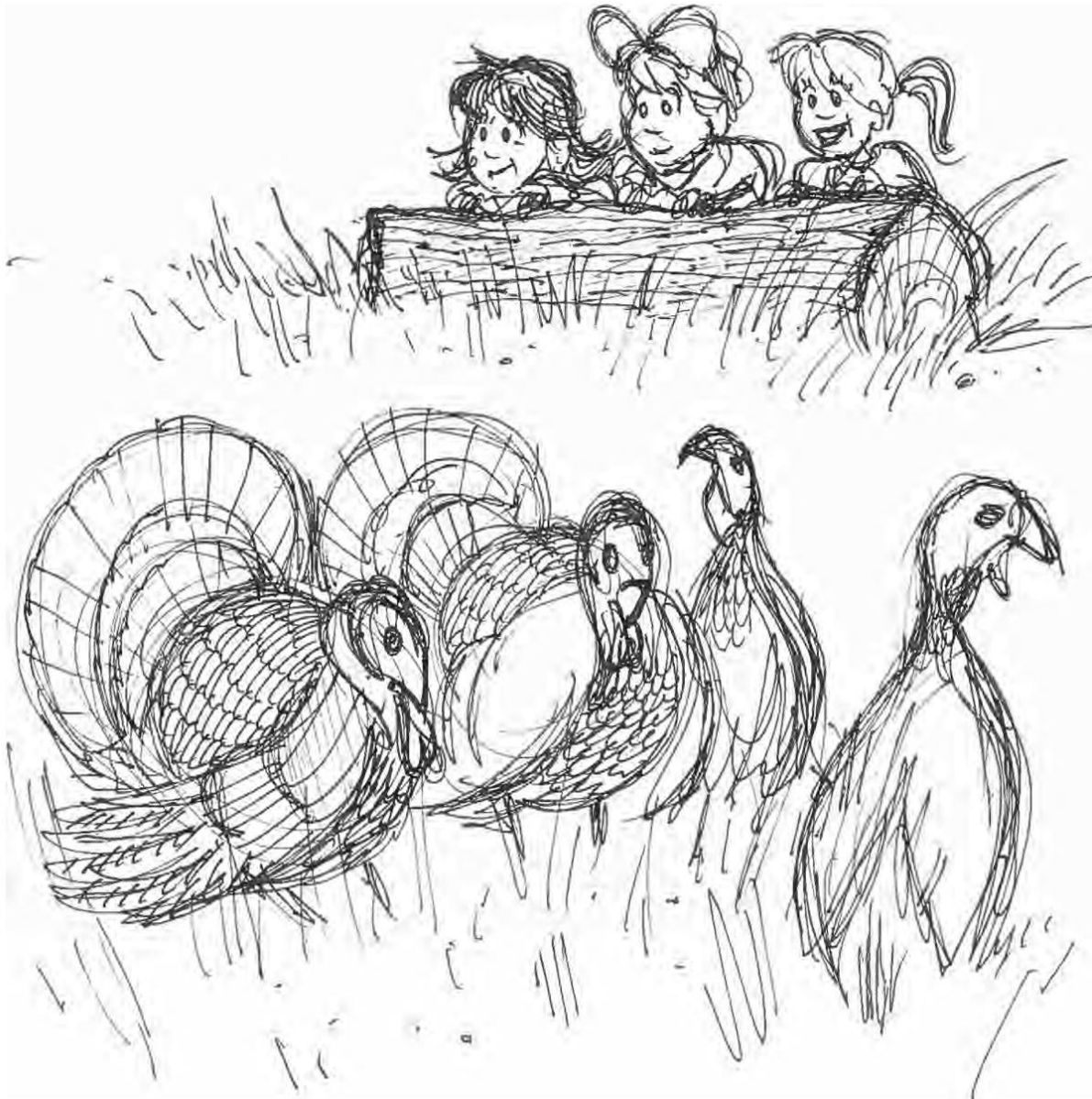
With knowing looks, they smiled at each other and moved smoothly up into the woods. Once into the trees, they paused and looked, listened, smelled and felt all over again seeing if their movement had disturbed the forest in any way. Sensing nothing new, they continued moving forward, slowly, easefully and full of joy and excitement. Of course, they had to keep their excitement and joy inside so not to disturb the woods.

It was difficult to move completely quiet since there still was crunchy snow in the shaded parts of the woods and dry leaves in the open areas. The three did not have a particular place in mind where they were going. They just began moving, feeling their way through the woods.

Skylar was in the lead first, guiding the other two towards the hidden pond deeper in the forest when she froze listening to the quiet. Alex and Nick followed suit and also froze. Sure enough, they could hear the faint rustling of leaves around the back side of the hill just in front of them to the north. Their hearts began to pound. Not out of fear but rather excitement. What could be making that noise?

Skylar made a motion for all of them to lie down behind a rotting log. This was a perfect spot to be able to see up ahead but not be easily seen. All three gently laid down making sure they didn't crack any sticks to alert whatever it was up ahead of them. As they lay there, the sounds of rustling leaves kept moving closer and closer. The three remained motionless, waiting breathlessly.

Closer and closer the rustling came. Then, they saw what was making all the commotion. First one bare knobby reddish head poked up into view and then another and another. Beautiful metallic shimmering feathered bodies and large scaly reddish feet scratched at the forest floor. It was a large flock of wild turkeys tearing up the leaves with their feet for insects, seeds and nuts. There were over 30 of them in the flock.



Now, wild turkeys are cool but when you are laying down and a flock of 30 are heading right at you, it's a test of courage. They can be quite scary since they are big and strong. The three lay motionless as the turkeys kept approaching. The trio could hear the female turkeys called hens making high chirping noises as they kept scratching up the leaf litter. The lead turkey was not more than 2 feet away when it gently turned and headed right along the rotting log that Nick, Skylar and Alex were hiding behind. It slowly moved away not realizing that right on the other side of the log were three excited kids. The rest of the flock followed

the same path as the lead turkey, quietly clucked as they walked by, turning up leaves looking for food as they went.

When the last turkey disappeared in the distance, all three of them finally took a deep breath and with huge smiles hugged each other as they lay there behind the log. The turkeys had been so close, they could have reached out and touched them! They felt like they were a part of the woods, blending in and invisible to everything.

“Well, I see that you three have been doing what I told ya,” called a raspy voice directly behind them.

All three jumped up with a yelp. Ol’ Jack McGee stood not more than 8 feet away with a smile showing behind his scraggly gray beard. He had somehow been able to get right up behind them without them hearing. But what was even more amazing was that he did this *while* the turkeys moved past. How did the turkeys not even see him? The trio were shocked and amazed. Also, how did McGee even know they were there? Their heads spun with questions. It was clear though, they had a lot more to learn.

Chapter 7: The Training - Nature Skills

“Don’t get too impressed with yourselves you three. You’re on the right path but now the real trainin’ is ‘bout to begin,” said McGee with a cross between a grimace and a smile. He stared hard at each of them as if he was reading their minds.

“We did all three weeks sir, every day to our Special Spots,” interrupted Nick.

“Usually we stayed much more than just 30 minutes too,” chimed in Alex.

“We’ve learned so much about tracking, birds and even survival skills,” shared Skylar.

“I know that,” growled McGee.

This was a little weird to the trio. How did he know that? It is like he had been spying on them but how?

“Um, how do you know that, sir?” asked Nick nervously.

“I can tell just by the way you three walk and move in the woods. Not to mention the animals have been telling me what you’ve been up to,” said Ol’ McGee with a side glance their way.

“But that’s not important right now. What’s important is to give you your next training challenge. This one is gonna make the last one of finding and sitting at your Special Spots seem easy. You think you’re ready?”

All three of the kids shouted “Yes!” Ol’ Jack McGee shook his head disapprovingly and continued. It seems like he was reluctantly getting used to our trio’s enthusiasm.

“Alright then. Listen closely. I’ll know you’re ready to find the Crooked Forest **only** when you can do the following four things.”

“The first is to be able to track a deer across the forest floor for a hundred yards,” McGee paused looking up briefly. Then he continued.

“The second is to learn to be so still and quiet that a chickadee willingly lands on one of your shoulders,” McGee sniffed hard glancing again at the three.

“The third challenge is to be able to make a fire in the middle of a rainstorm using only wood you find outside and with one match,” McGee snorted with this one.

“And the fourth challenge, you need to learn 6 different plants around here and how they can help you when in the woods.” McGee stopped and again, looked at the three with piercing blue eyes.

“But, but how are we going to be able to track a deer across the forest for a hundred yards?” asked Skylar clearly upset over what seemed impossible.

“And why would a chickadee ever land on one of our shoulders?” Alex questioned.

“There’s no way you can get a fire during a rainstorm with wood you find outside **and with only one match?**” challenged Nick.

“Hummph. You three think so huh? Not possible? Well, maybe I made a mistake thinking that you had what it takes to venture to the Crooked Forest.” With that, Ol’ McGee turned around and started to walk away.

Alex, Nick and Skylar looked at each other with wide eyes. Ol’ Jack McGee was leaving and their adventure to the Crooked Forest was over before it even began. They quickly ran to catch up to Jack McGee with panic in their eyes and hearts.

“Wait, wait, wait,” they yelled running up to McGee.

“We can do it sir. We just need maybe some pointers or tips,” reasoned Nick.

“Yeah, some tips would be good,” Alex breathed out.

“We don’t even know how to start learning how to do these things Mr. McGee,” pleaded Skylar.

Jack McGee stopped walking and stood still for a bit thinking it over. The trio held their breath and with crossed fingers, hoped that he would agree. A chickadee chirped up above them. A squirrel chrrred in the distance far to the east. A jay called to the west. And then finally Jack McGee spoke.

“Alright then....some tips I guess, couldn’t hurt ya,” McGee scratched his beard.

“I must be getting soft in my older age. You three have all that you need to learn these things without any tips from me but fine, I’ll give ya some.”

All three of the kids sighed a breath of relief and waited anxiously.

“HmMMMM, tips for tracking a deer across the forest floor... Well, for one thing, this is a great time of year with the wet ground, patches of snow and drier parts of the woods. What you need to do is pick up the trail of a deer in the mud or snow and find **each and every** track. To do this, place sticks at the base of each track to help ya follow them. Those tracks will eventually leave the mud or snow and get into drier forest. It will get harder then. Keep putting markers by the tracks as best as you can. Remember this, the track you cannot find is the one that will teach you the most.”

“Uh, O.K. Got it!” Skylar chimed in cheerfully. It made some sense to her.

“Alrighty then...To get a chickadee to land on your shoulder, you’re gonna have to quiet your mind beyond anything you’ve done before. When sitting, think of yourself like an old stump. Do stumps think? No! Do they scratch themselves? No! Do they fuss if uncomfortable? No! So, stop your thinking! For birds, your thoughts are noisy interruptions. In addition to sitting quiet and still, it’s a matter of trust in the end. You’ve gotta trust the chickadee and the chickadee gotta trust you. Got that?” McGee asked impatiently.

“I think so,” Alex answered but not too confidently.

“Right. HmMMMM. Next tip. Listen, if I can start a fire in the middle of a downpour then you three will be able to also. First, you’ll need to figure out what trees and plants make the best tinder. And what trees have the best kindling. Also have to figure out what trees have the best wood – even in the rain. You three know what I mean by tinder and kindling?”

“Ahhh, I think so,” replied Nick.

“Well, what then?” grumbled McGee.

“Um, tinder I think... is the light stuff that catches the flame first. Kindling is the small wood that catches the flame from the tinder. And then the kindling catches the rest of the wood on fire,” Nick smiled nervously.

“Right you are son. Right you are,” replied McGee with only a small growl in his voice.

Nick beamed with pride and Alex and Skylar were happy too. Ol’ McGee seemed pleased with that answer. At least he wasn’t growling at them as much.

“With the plants, well, that one I’m going to let you figure them out on your own. You have any field guides on plants? They will help you a lot. Use them! I would also recommend that you listen to the plants. They can tell you what they can do for you. ” McGee asked.

“I do sir. My Dad’s got a bunch of them. We can use those,” Skylar shared.

“Good then. There now, you have some tips to send you on your way. The last tip for you three is that all of this learnin’ you’ve got to do is gonna happen at your Special Spots. Listen now, it’s March. If you don’t learn these things by the end of June, then just forgit about the Crooked Forest,” McGee growled that last line. Then he turned and walked deeper into the woods.

Alex and Nick and Skylar looked at each other, trying to think of something else to ask him. The tips he gave were not exactly road maps to learning how to do these four things. When they turned back, McGee was gone....vanished into the woods again. The trio blinked in disbelief. Disbelief over him disappearing in a blink of an eye and disbelief in what they had to do over the next three months.

This was big. Really big for the trio. They knew that Ol’ Jack McGee was not going to give them a single hint how to find the Crooked Forest until they had learned to track the deer across the leafy forest floor, have a chickadee land on them, make a fire in a rainstorm and figure out 6 different plants and what they can be used for.

They talked over each challenge and the tips that McGee had given for the rest of the day. Skylar pulled out her notebook and she wrote them down with notes for each one.

Crooked Forest Challenges

1. Track a deer 100 yards through the forest:
 - c. Use sticks to mark each track
 - d. Hardest track to find will teach us the most
2. Chickadee land on shoulder
 - a. Don't think
 - b. Be like a stump
3. Make a fire in a rainstorm
 - a. Find the right tinder
 - b. Find the right kindling
4. Learn 6 different plants and how they can be used
 - a. Listen to the plants??
 - b. Use field guides too

What could it mean, "Listen to the plants" or what about "Don't think"? He said "remember, the track you cannot find has the most to teach." How can a track you can't find teach you anything? How were they going to be able to figure out what trees and plants give dry tinder, kindling and wood in a rainstorm? They had more questions with the so called tips than they did with the challenges.

This seemed like more than the trio could handle. However, they were not going to give up that easily. One thing they have learned growing up together is that as a team, they are able to accomplish almost anything they put their minds to. So with that, our trio put their minds to the task at hand; to learn to track a deer for a hundred yards, to be so quiet and still that a chickadee lands on their shoulder, to be able to light a fire in a rainstorm with only one match and to know six plants and how each can help them.

With only three months before Jack McGee expects them to be able to do all these things, they knew that they needed to get crackin'! They also knew that Ol' Jack McGee was testing them with these challenges to see if they had what it takes to journey to the Crooked Forest. If they couldn't do the things now, how would they ever be able to get to that mysterious forest?

Chapter 8: The Plan for Training

“My Mom always asks me, ‘How do you eat an elephant?’” Skylar said with a knowing smile.

“Wha?” exhaled Nick completely confused.

“What are you talking about Skylar?” asked Alex slightly annoyed. They had so much to do that a silly question was not helping them figure out where to start.

“*How do you eat an elephant?*” asked Skylar with her hands on her hips.

“Fine, um, I don’t know. With a fork and knife?” Nick replied.

“Noooooo,” Skylar answered coyly.

“What about with ketchup?” Alex added who has always loved ketchup.

“Nope,” Skylar said with a smirk knowing that her cousins were hooked.

“O.K., how about on a really big plate?” Nick shared starting to be amused himself.

“Na-uh,” Skylar responded.

“What about with a chainsaw?” giggled Alex with a devilish grin.

“Ewww, that’s just gross Alex,” laughed Nick.

“Come on, just tell us.... ‘How *do you* eat an elephant?’” pleaded Alex.

“Alright then, you give up?” Skylar paused looking at them making sure they were really listening.

“Totally,” replied the other two.

“You eat.... an elephant.... ***one bite at a time!***”

“Arghhh!” exclaimed both Nick and Alex. “What does that have to do with us trying to figure out how do learn all this stuff McGee told us to do?” questioned Nick.

“Well, all those things are like an elephant to us, right? So big that we don’t know where to start.” Skylar paused looking at her cousins closely. “So the way we’re gonna learn all this stuff is to do it ‘one bite at a time.’ Do you get it?”

“Yeeeeeah, I think so,” said Nick unconvincingly as he tossed that idea around in his head.

“I get it,” shouted Alex. “So all we have to do is start doing little stuff and then the big stuff will get smaller. We do it little by little. Like an elephant, if you were trying to eat it that is.” Alex beamed understanding the idea now.

“Exactly Alex. Nice. So all we have to do first is, continue going to our Special Spots. Then we need to start with each of these challenges.” Skylar was starting to feel much better and even excited now that they had a place to start.

“I got it,” Nick joined in with a smile showing that he really did get it. “O.K. so we have 4 challenges right?”

“Right,” both Alex and Skylar answered.

“One is needing to be able to track a deer. The next is having a chickadee land on us. Another is being able to start a fire in the rain. The final one is learning 6 plants that can help us when out in the woods. Hmmmm, that’s a lot though. Where do we start?” Nick asked with doubt creeping back in him.

“We divide and conquer!” shouted Alex triumphantly. So loudly that the others jumped back.

When Skylar landed, she had a big smile on her face. “Yeah! Look, Nick, you already have been learning to start fires so you keep doing that and become a master at it. Alex, you and the birds have a thing going on since you’re right near your bird feeder. You start figuring out how to have a chickadee land on you. And since I’ve got the deer around my Special Spot, I’ll start learning how to track ‘em.”

“Oh, so when we each become really good at our own area, then we can teach the others what we learned,” Nick shared becoming excited again too.

“Exactly!” blurted Skylar.

“But wait a second guys. What about the 6 plants? Who will do those?” asked Alex concerned.

“That’s easy. We divide them up. Two for Nick, two for you Alex and two for me. That way we each have the same amount of work and it’s fair,” Skylar explained. “However, let’s not worry about the plants yet. We can tackle those later in the spring when there are a lot of plants growing.

“Sounds good to me,” said Alex.

“Me too,” added Nick.

“Now all we have to do is get to our Special Spots and do it,” Skylar beamed. “We should try to master our skill as much as we can over the next....um, what? Four weeks? Yeah, that should give us enough time to teach each other before June. For the plants, let’s wait until May to learn them.”

“Wait a second. I have a *really* important question,” added Alex.

“Uh-oh. What is it?” Skylar asked nervously.

“What *does* an elephant taste like?” laughed Alex.

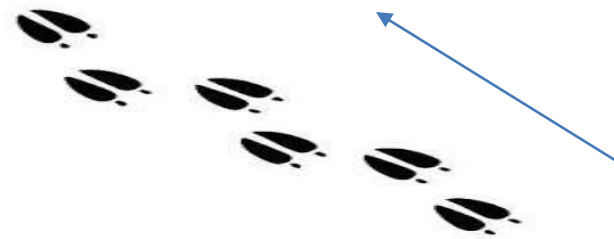
“Like chicken!” shouted both Nick and Skylar. All three cracked up laughing.

With that, our trio began the hard but exciting work of learning the nature skills that Ol’ Jack McGee challenged them with. Each day, the three cousins went to their Special Spots and practiced their specific skill. Hopefully, in 4 weeks’ time, each of them would be able to master their particular skill so they can then teach the other two.

SKYLAR’S Training

Skylar was having difficulty following so many deer tracks. She would find a few but then lose them as she went along the trail especially when other deer trails crossed hers. She needed a solution. Some way of marking the tracks once she found them. Skylar had been collecting popsicle sticks for an art project over the last 2 years. She had a large bag of them stashed away in her art supplies. She decided they would be a perfect stick to mark deer

tracks. The light wood is easy to carry and see on the forest floor. Every day, before she sits at her Spot she looks for deer tracks. Whenever she finds one in the soft ground, she marks it with a popsicle stick and then tries to find the next one and then the next and next. Deer tracks are shaped in a way that they point to the next track in front of them like an arrowhead.



When tracking the deer in the snow, it wasn't as tricking. However, finding the next track in the leaves and following the trail was really tough. Skylar almost gave up at the beginning feeling as if she couldn't do it or that she was doing it wrong. However, with some encouragement from her parents and her cousins, she kept at it. By the end of the first week of doing this, Skylar started to notice some improvement. In the evenings, after her homework, Skylar read about tracking in a few tracking books she got from her Dad.

She learned that the front tracks for most animals, including the deer are larger than the back tracks. This is because the front track needs to be bigger to carry the weight of the head. She also learned what the stride of an animal is. It is the step of the animal and it changes depending on what it is doing. Not only that, but the pattern of the front and back tracks on the ground changes depending on whether the animal is running or walking. This goes for all animals including deer.



Running tracks



Walking tracks

versus

She finally understood what Jack McGee meant by “the track you can’t find is the one that will teach you the most.” The obvious tracks were easy to find. In fact, she started to be able to see deer tracks from 5 steps away in the soft forest floor. But on the harder and drier ground, she had to get down on all fours and look real close. Many times, especially in the beginning she failed finding the next track. That was not for lack of trying but she just didn’t know what to look for. She would often get frustrated thinking that she was never going to master her skill. However, the more she stared at the tracks, the more her eyes started to pick up the little details on the forest floor. A bent leaf, a bit of moss kicked up, a dent in the ground were all the small signs that there was a track there. Skylar’s eyes became trained to pick up these details more and more. Indeed, the hard to find tracks were the ones that forced her to find those details and figure out what the deer was doing.

Now deer are challenging animals to track. They are browsers, often eating throughout the day leaving a winding trail through the forest as they feed. A few steps over to this bush to munch and then a few steps over to that place to nibble on some young ferns and then to the oak tree to try to find some acorns. All this moving around makes it a hard trail to follow for even as an expert tracker. Also, with their long legs, they can take long steps or chose to take small steps. Tracking a deer for a hundred yards means that you will end up tracking a

deer that is feeding and their steps will be all over. Skylar was forced to learn to track a deer in these conditions.

By the second week, Skylar was able to track a deer for 20 yards over wet ground. By the third week, she was able to track a deer for 50 yards without losing a single track. Every night, Skylar closed her eyes and saw deer tracks dancing in her head. On the school playground, she would see tracks of animals between the footprints of kids.

By the fourth week, Skylar had succeeded. She was able to track deer almost like a Native American through the forest for 100 yards and more. She had done it! She was so glad that she didn't give up all those times when it got challenging. Now, she felt so proud of what she was able to do and was looking forward to showing and then teaching her cousins.

ALEX'S Training

Having a bird land on your shoulder is a true test of patience and stillness. As Jack McGee said, you have to allow the birds to learn to trust you. Most of the time, animals and birds see people as a danger. It is understandable since most of the time, animals and birds are not safe around humans. But for someone who spends time sitting in one spot every day for weeks, the animals and birds begin to see you not as a danger but rather as part of the land. Alex's Special Spot is located only 15 feet from the bird feeder in her backyard. The birds would often fly past her going to and from the feeder. However, they would always avoid coming too close to her. Alex had to figure out how to get the birds closer to begin with and then to have them land on her. She decided the best way to start is to have bird seed around her so she becomes part of the feeder.

Each day, she went to her Special Spot and spread bird seed around her and waited, desperately wanting a bird to land on her. One week went by with no luck at all. The next week went by and still the birds would only go to the feeder while she was sitting in her Spot. A few would pause and eye her suspiciously but none would come very close. With each day, Alex was getting more and more anxious. "What if I can't do this? What am I doing wrong? I'm horrible at this" were all thoughts that flew through her head while she sat at her spot.

During the evenings, she studied the field guides and learned more about the birds in her backyard. She also learned as much as she could about the chickadee. The chickadee as it happens, is an amazing little bird. Even though it is one of the smallest birds, it's also one of the toughest birds in the forest. In the middle of the worst snow storms, one can find flocks of chickadees merrily flitting around the forest singing and looking for food. They are also very curious birds and will be the first to investigate new things in the forest. In a way, they are like explorers of the forest constantly flying around looking into and under every leaf and crack of the trees and shrubs. Alex began to admire the chickadees for their toughness and adventurous spirit even though they were so small. They reminded her of herself actually. Yet knowing and admiring the chickadee was not helping her get any closer to having them land on her.



It wasn't until the start of the third week that she remembered what Ol' Jack McGee said. He said to "stop your thinkin'" and Alex at last realized what he meant. The last two weeks she had been "thinking" every time a bird flew by, calling to it, wanting it to come and land on her. When the bird did not, she thought all of these negative thoughts about why the bird had not landed on her. However, she was not "being a stump" as McGee had said. He also said that "stumps don't think."

Of course. Alex had to stop her thinking and become an old stump. The next day at her Special Spot, she sat and let her thoughts drop away. "I am a stump. I am a stump. I am a stump" she repeated silently to herself. In fact, she stopped paying attention to the birds all together. She relaxed and became extremely peaceful inside and out.

Miraculously, when she stopped her thinking and her "wanting" the birds to come, that is exactly what they did! Juncos, the ground birds, started to edge in closer eyeing the seed by her feet. Chickadees started flitting in the branches above her. Nuthatches landed on the trunks of the bushes near her and began working their way down head first. It was working! And in Alex's head she thought rather loudly; "IT IS WORKING!" With that, all the birds scattered and flew back to the feeder.

"Whoa! Did the birds hear my thoughts?" Alex asked herself. "Huh. Even my thoughts can be loud to the birds, I guess."

She tried again, clearing her mind and not thinking about birds or anything. She just concentrated on being a quiet old stump. Sure enough, after a bit of time, the juncos, nuthatches and chickadees returned. This went on for several days with the birds edging closer and closer. Alex kept working at being quiet and still, like an old stump. Then finally, at the start of the fourth week, the birds started to eat the seed around her. Alex decided to put seed on her legs, head and yes, shoulders. By the end of the week, it happened! Chickadees were the first of the birds to land on her and eat the seed. The adventurous chickadee led the way for the rest of the birds to follow. Birds were hopping on her and landing on her as if she was truly an old stump with bird seed on it.

It was the most amazing feeling having those little feet scratching at her clothes and skin and eating right off of her body. The feel of their nails and feet on her skin and clothes will always be something she remembers for the rest of her life.

NICK'S Training

It is one thing to be able to start a fire on a dry and hot summer day. It is one thing to be able to start a fire using paper and a box of matches. It's a whole other thing being able to start a fire when it is 40 degrees outside and raining using only one match and fire making materials only from the woods. Of course, on a rainy 40 degree day is actually when one needs a fire most and it is the most difficult time to make it.

Prior to Jack McGee's challenge, Nick had been using a special fire starter wood and a bunch of newspaper that his Dad uses to get his woodstove going. It is called Fatwood and it's small kindling soaked in pine pitch and very easy to light. Once lit, it burns for a long time catching other wood, even large logs on fire. However, finding Fatwood in the woods is not common so Nick had to relearn how to make a primitive fire using only easy to find natural materials.

Fire can be seen like a living thing. It needs all the right ingredients for it to grow up to be healthy and strong just like you. In order for fire to live, one needs food which is the wood, air which is the breath and a spark which is like our spirit. With these three things in just the right combination, a fire comes alive and burns brightly. However, for Nick to figure out that right combination, he needed to experiment with a lot of trial and error. One has to be a scientist who tests things out and learns from what worked and what didn't work. One also has to be an artist and feel the fire with their heart and sense what the fire needs to burn strong and bright.

First a fire must be born. This is often the most difficult step to tending a fire. A newly started fire is like a newborn baby. It needs care and tenderness to help it grow to become a toddler fire. Then one must continue to care for it to help it grow into a young fire. Once a fire is a teenager fire, one can relax a little and not worry so much and so on as the fire ages.

To start a fire, one needs tinder. This is a handful of fluffy natural material that burns easily and hot. Once lit, the tinder's important job is to ignite the kindling. The kindling is a mix of small, dry wood, starting with the tiniest twigs and gradually getting up to finger thick wood. One can tell the perfect wood for starting a fire by the sound it makes when broken. If it snaps easily and breaks cleanly in half, then the wood is dry, dead and ready for the fire. If any wood was green or alive, it was very hard to make a fire with them. All these dry and dead ingredients are essential to begin the life of a fire in any kind of weather but especially in rainy weather.

Nick had to learn all of this in order to master fire making so he could start and keep a fire in a rainstorm. He talked with friends and family to learn the basics. But to start a fire and keep it flaming strong using only one match and only natural materials was beyond the knowledge of anyone he spoke with.

So, at first, he had to experiment with dried leaves for the tinder. The leaves just smoked and smoldered. Pine needles were next and they just flamed up quick and were ash before they caught any wood on fire. Then, one day while he was making some cordage out of the inner bark he had collected from the wood pile, a strand of it fell into the fire he was trying to keep alive. It flamed up and burned brightly.

"Hmmm, maybe this inner bark could work as a tinder bundle" he thought to himself.

Sure enough, the inner bark worked great. With one match, he could light a handful of the loose fibers and get a strong flame.

Borrowing a field guide from Skylar - she was the team's librarian, he found out that the log he got the inner bark from was that of a cedar tree. Nick wanted to see if other tree bark could be used to make fire. What if he could not find a cedar tree out in the woods? What other trees would work? For a whole week, he experimented with other inner bark fibers making bundles of the different fibers into nice bird's nests. He even mixed different ones up to make combination of tinder ingredients. He discovered that the cedar, mixed with dry pine needles and some grape vine bark all rubbed together to make a light airy bundle worked the best.

One fire making ingredient mastered! Check.

The next thing he had to figure out was the kindling. He collected all sorts of twigs and sticks from trees around his neighborhood. Oak trees, maple trees, ash trees, beech trees and pine trees were all a part of his fire making experiment. Nick felt like a real scientist testing out which sticks burned best.

He found that oak bark was too thick and did not catch on fire very well. Maples, ash, beech and pine did really well as the middle to large size kindling but didn't burn well as the really small kindling. He was stuck. None of the tree twigs he collected were small enough to make that first layer of kindling next to the tinder. This was needed to get enough flame to light the thicker kindling.

Nick searched all over his neighborhood. He would kick soccer balls up into trees to break down dead branches he couldn't reach. He would raid piles of brush that people put out at the curb. Nothing. Time was getting tight and Nick was getting very nervous that he wasn't going to figure it out.

One day heading to his Special Spot, he approached from the other side of his house. There were some scraggly evergreen type trees along the edge that he never paid any attention to. They were not very attractive actually. However, as he walked past thinking what twigs would work for kindling he noticed that these scraggly trees had lots of dead branches under the green boughs. These branches were super dry and very skinny all the way to the tips. He grabbed hold of one and bent it back. "SNAP!" went the twig. Nick had just found his small kindling. Under the canopy of these trees were a ton of these dead little dry branches. His Dad was super happy that Nick was collecting them since the dead looked so bad anyways. It was perfect. Using the field guide to trees, Nick figured out that the trees were hemlock trees and very common all over Vermont! Jackpot! It was the hemlock that held the key for him and provided him the smallest and most important kindling. Indeed, he remembered that Skylar mentioned hemlock trees before and he had just forgotten.

By experimenting like a scientist for four weeks, Nick had figured out what makes the best fires. It was at the end of the fourth week of his training that a big rainstorm came through

to test his skills. This was his one chance before everyone was to share their mastery. He went outside feeling confident in his fire making skills.

Protecting his tinder and kindling with his jacket, he ventured to his Special Spot where he had been making fires for weeks. A cold hard rain fell. Perfect. He quickly made a Tepee shape with his kindling starting with the light and small kindling and building out with the larger. He had gotten good at setting up his fire quickly. He left a gap for his tinder bundle at the base under all the kindling. But, in this heavy rain, by the time he put the tinder bundle at the bottom of his Tepee, everything was soaking wet. The kindling he had collected and his prized tinder bundle were drenched. There was no chance of starting a fire. He kept trying but it was no use. It was over. He had failed in mastering his skills.

Nick felt horrible about it and tomorrow, the three cousins were getting together to share the skills they mastered. Nick felt like he had mastered nothing. He was going to have to bring the bad news to Alex and Skylar. His failure might even mean that Ol' McGee wouldn't help them find the Crooked Forest and it would be all Nick's fault.

CHAPTER 9: Each one, Teach one – Nick’s Fire

The next day Skylar came over to Nick and Alex’s house. The plan was first see Nick do his fire, then Alex with the birds. They would all head over to Skylar’ house after lunch to finish with deer tracking. The minute Skylar walked into their house, she could tell that something was wrong.

“Good morning guys,” Skylar said cheerfully. She was excited for today. She wanted to show her cousins what she learned with tracking and to see what they had learned. However their response was not what she expected.

“Morning,” mumbled Alex. Nick did not even look up from the T.V.

“What’s going on? Why are you guys upset? Did ya fight?” asked Skylar.

“No. Nick’s just being a jerk!” Alex said shooting a glare over at Nick as he slumped on the couch.

“Whatever,” mumbled Nick.

“Um, OK.” Skylar was thinking about what might get them out of their funk. She was hoping that maybe if they get outside and started showing each other what they had learned things might smooth out. “Let’s get outside and see what you guys learned,” she suggested

“I don’t wanna. This is stupid,” Nick grumbled under his breath.

“See what I mean Skylar? Nick has been like this since last night. He says he doesn’t even care about the Crooked Forest anymore,” groaned Alex. “I keep asking him what’s the matter but he keeps saying nothing. What are we going to do?”

Skylar was surprised. What happened? Just last week Nick was so excited about what he found with the hemlock trees. Clearly, something happened but he didn’t seem to want to talk about it at all. Alright then, this is going to take drastic measures.

Skylar took a deep breath and then sternly said “I don’t care what your problem is Nick but for the last four weeks we’ve all been working really hard to learn our skills and today is the day that we’re going to share them! So get up, get your shoes on and let’s head outside. You can show us what you’ve gotten so far. Come on Nick, move it!”

That last sentence Skylar pretty much shouted. It seemed to be enough to at least get Nick moving. “Fine.” Nick got up and shuffled over to get his shoes.

“What the heck is going on Alex?” whispered Skylar.

“I think maybe it has to do with his fire skill challenge. Yesterday with the rain, he went out to test his skills. When he came in he was dripping wet and went right to his room. Wouldn’t say anything to me all last night even when I asked him how it went.” Alex’s face was full of concern.

“O.K., let’s get him outside and see if maybe he’ll tell us. Shhh. Here he comes.” Skylar buttoned up her coat and headed to the door with Alex and Nick trailing behind.

Once outside, Alex and Skylar looked to Nick. “Why don’t you show us what you’ve got so far. I know you figured out some great stuff, Nick,” Skylar said softly trying to help him open up.

“Fine,” Nick said quietly.

Nick told the girls about the tinder bundle being what you use to start a fire. He showed them the different bark pieces and how you can pull off thin strips from the underside of the bark from the cedar and ash tree. He mixed the different barks together and tucked the bundle safely in his shirt pocket. Then, he told them about his experiments with all of the different sticks from different trees. He shared which ones work best for the fire and how kindling needs to be all different sizes starting with the smallest and going up to thumb size.

As Nick shared, he started to brighten up a little. The girls gave each other hopeful glances.

Then Nick pointed out the hemlock trees at the side of the house and how the dead branches are dry even after all that rain yesterday. He broke off a bunch of the dead branches and gathered the small little twigs as kindling to help start a fire.

“Make a fire Nick,” Skylar said excitedly. “I’m learning a ton. You learned all this just by experimenting?”

“Yeah. It was like being a scientist. I would test the different tinder and kindling. Some worked and some didn’t. But I always found one that worked the best.” Nick’s excitement was building up again.

As Nick was building his Tepee of kindling with a spot at the base for the tinder bundle Alex excitedly said “Nick, you really have mastered fire making!” Nick stopped and hung his head.

“No. No I haven’t. I couldn’t make a fire yesterday in the rain. And now McGee isn’t going to let us find the Crooked Forest and it’s all my fault!” Nick slumped down on the ground feeling defeated.

“Nick, it’s O.K. I know you tried really hard. Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure something out,” comforted Alex.

That wasn’t good enough for Skylar, the problem solver of the group. “Wait, what happened Nick? Why couldn’t you get a fire started?” From what she had seen so far, Nick was a master at fire making.

“Well, I did just what I showed you here but by the time I set up my Tepee, everything was soakin’ wet. There was nothing I could do. I tried to cover it all up with my body but the rain just dripped on all the dry wood. The match wouldn’t even light ‘cause it got wet too,” confessed Nick sadly.

“But Nick, you did master fire making. You learned all that about tinder and kindling. You know which trees make the best of both,” encouraged Alex.

“Yeah but the skill was to be able to make a fire in the rain and I couldn’t do it,” Nick shared with his head hung low.

The girls looked at Nick whose head was down and face was sad. Then Skylar had an idea. “You needed an umbrella!” she shouted with a smile.

“Can’t – McGee said only natural materials,” countered Nick.

“Right...what if you made one?” offered Skylar.

“What do you mean?” asked Nick becoming curious.

“Yeah Nick, we can make one out of....out of....” Alex joined in.

“OUT OF BARK!!!” yelled Nick triumphantly. “I have all these pieces of bark left over from collecting the tinder bundle. I can make a sort of shelter over the fire.”

“Totally. Let’s do it then,” exclaimed Skylar excitedly.

“Huh? Now?” replied Nick.

“Yep. Today is the day to be masters at our skills and I’ve got an idea how to test ya.” Skylar had a look on her face that made Nick and Alex a little nervous. “Come on, we’ve gotta make it really good.”

The three of them gathered all the leftover bark and sticks and made a rustic shelter over the Tepee fire. It didn’t take long with the three of them working together. Nick was excited and hopeful. Maybe he did master fire making.

“Are you all set Nick?” Skylar hollered from the corner of the house.

“What is she up to?” Nick whispered to Alex. “Uh, yeah,” he hollered over to Skylar.

“You sure? ‘Cause here comes the rain.” With that, Skylar turned on the hose full blast and started to spray.

Without losing a step, Nick crouched over protecting his match and tinder bundle. He lit the match to the tinder and it caught on fire right away. Smoothly and quickly, Nick placed the burning bundle in the little gap at the bottom of his kindling Tepee. With the lean-to shelter the three of them built, there were only a few drops of hose water falling on the dry wood of the Tepee. It wasn’t enough to stop the fire from taking off. The flames bit into the hemlock kindling which flamed high and hot. The larger kindling on the outer part of the Tepee started to burn too. Then, the entire fire pit was roaring with flames while the shelter continued to keep the drenching hose water from ruining the fire.

“We did it! We did it” Alex and Nick shouted jumping up and down with the hose soaking them. They were getting totally wet but didn’t care at all.

Grinning from ear to ear, Skylar shouted from the hose, “You did it Nick!” Her cousins looked at her, smiled and then charged!

CHAPTER 10: Each one, Teach one – Alex’s Chickadee

Fortunately, it was a mild warm spring April day. The sun was out and only a light breeze blew from the southeast. Nick and Alex were not prepared for a rainstorm so had gotten pretty wet with Skylar spraying the hose. A quick change into dry clothes and they were ready for Alex to share her skills with the birds.

With the success of Nick’s sharing of his skill, Alex had some big shoes to follow. Alex took charge right away and directed Skylar and Nick to go inside and look out the window.

“Why do we have to go inside? Why can’t we be out here?” whined Nick.

“Because, you might scare away the birds,” replied Alex. “Well, not that exactly. It’s more about the birds not knowing you, so they don’t trust you yet.”

“And they trust you?” questioned Skylar, a bit snippy. She didn’t like being excluded.

“Um, yes, I guess they do. But I’ve been working at getting them to trust me for four weeks now. At first, they wouldn’t even come close to me. Finally, just a little bit ago they started to come around and just a couple of days ago they...well, let me just show you,” pleaded Alex.

“Alright. Fine. We’ll go inside then. Come on Nick,” said Skylar reluctantly as she pulled Nick with her.

“This better be good Alex,” challenged Nick who also did not like being asked to go inside away from the fun.

“It will, it will. And then we can all be outside again and I’ll teach you. I promise,” exclaimed Alex.

The two cousins headed inside leaving Alex outside by her Special Spot. Over the last several weeks, Alex had come up with kind of a ritual or habit before sitting at her Spot. She did it today too, not wanting to change anything. After all, her brother and cousin were staring out the window and not too pleased about it. They were expecting something good to happen and Alex didn’t want to take any chances.

Alex slowly approached her Spot, stopped in front of it and closed her eyes. With her eyes closed, she took several slow and deep breaths. At the same time, she said thank you to the birds, the trees, the plants, the seeds and everything around her.

“What the heck is she doing?” said Nick getting more and more impatient being inside. “This is stupid.”

“I don’t know but let’s give her a chance. We’ve got to trust her. This is her skill that she has been practicing for weeks so she must know what she’s doing,” suggested Skylar trying to be optimistic.

When Alex was finished giving thanks for the nature around her, she gently sat down crossing her legs. Reaching into her pocket, she took out a handful of seeds that she gently spread in front of her. She took another handful of seed out of her other pocket and sprinkled the seeds on both of her shoulders. Then, she slowly put her hands in her lap, closed her eyes and breathed calmly.

From the window, Skylar and Nick were watching closely. Something was different with Alex. More often than not, she was loud, rough and tumble but the girl on the edge of the bushes by the bird feeder was quiet, soft and peaceful. A calmness surrounded her that was noticeable to both Skylar and Nick.

“Wow, I’ve never seen Alex so quiet and calm,” marveled Skylar.

“Totally. I mean if I didn’t know she was there, I probably wouldn’t even see her. She blends in so well with the bushes. Not because she’s camouflaged but because she’s just...just. I don’t know how to explain it,” Nick said struggling to explain with words what he was observing. He was also definitely impressed with his sister.

Not long after Alex sat down, the birds returned to the feeder. Another 3 or 4 minutes passed and the juncos edged over to the seed by Alex’s feet.

“Look, look. The juncos on the ground are right by her feet! Whoa, look, that one actually jumped on and then off her foot!” exclaimed Skylar.

“Holy cow! I can’t believe it,” said Nick in disbelief.

Chickadees flew in to the bush around Alex sending Skylar and Nick crazy with hope! After all, Alex's challenge was to have a chickadee land on her shoulder and there they were, lightly fluttering above her head from branch to branch.

For Alex, she was breathing it all in, like a stump if a stump could breath that is. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell the juncos were by her feet and the chickadees were above her head. The soft sounds of their calls, their wings, feet and feathers surrounded her. However, she knew that if she got excited or worse yet, cocky, then the birds would immediately fly off. After weeks of practicing this, it had become natural for her to sit so peacefully with beautiful birds fluttering around her. To Alex, in that moment, no longer were her cousins in the windows watching her or traffic in the distance or chores at home to be done. She was right there at her Spot in that moment and nothing else existed.

In an instant, she felt the light weight and soft scratching on her shoulder of a chickadee. It was like an old friend coming to say hello. The chickadee pecked at the seeds, picked the plumpest one and flew off. Another chickadee came in, grabbed a seed and flew off. It was five minutes of chickadees feeding off of her shoulders until all the seeds were gone and the birds had their fill. Alex waited another minute or so to let the birds settle and move off without her disturbing them. She slowly stood and walked towards the back door.

She didn't make it to the porch before Skylar and Nick burst out of the back door screaming.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh Alex! That was amazing. How'd you do that? Have they done that before? What did it feel like when they landed?" rattled on Skylar.

Nick was just shaking his head with his eyes popping out, speechless. "Epic," mumbled Nick under his breath. "Just epic."

Alex started to smile and it grew into the biggest and proudest grin ever. All she said was "Wanna learn?"

"YEAH!!" hollered Nick and Skylar.

Alex with a smile handed each of them some seed.

CHAPTER 11: Each one, Teach one – Skylar's Tracking

The next day, the cousins went to Skylar's house. Two challenges had been mastered and shared and now another one to go. It was Skylar's turn to track a deer for over a hundred yards through the forest. On the car ride to Skylar's house, Nick and Alex were talking.

"Do you think Skylar mastered her skill?" asked Alex.

"I don't know. It seems impossible to track a deer through the forest that far. I mean, every track to find and follow? I know I can't do it. I can't even find deer tracks most of the time in the woods," replied Nick.

"I hope she can do it. If she can, then we've mastered 3 out of the 4 challenges McGee gave us. Well, sort of mastered since we each need to learn all the skills. The fourth challenge should be sort of easy. It's learning some plants and what they can do for us right?" Alex asked.

"Yeah maybe. I'm not that excited to learn the plants. I mean, they're just plants. What can they really do for us?" Nick said.

"Yeah. Plus, there are so many plants to choose from. What ones will we choose?" Alex responded.

"Well, for now, let's just focus on learning these three skills!" Nick added.

They arrived at Skylar's excited and hopeful but also a little doubtful that Skylar had mastered her skill. They ate lunch talking about the two skills that Nick and Alex had shared and how they all need to learn them over the next three weeks. They were excited to learn but felt that time was getting tight. Once they ate up their macaroni and cheese, they headed out the door.

Skylar felt that the conditions were pretty good for tracking since it had rained the day before. The ground was soft and wet and some areas in the woods may even have mud. Skylar grabbed a full pack and a long, straight walking stick.

“What’d you have in the pack?” asked Nick.

“Stuff for tracking. The stick I use too,” Skylar replied mysteriously.

“What kind of stuff and how do you use the stick?” questioned Alex.

“You’ll see. Let’s get out there. Just when we get on the edge of the woods, let me go first so I can find a deer trail,” directed Skylar.

By this time, Nick was getting used to waiting to do anything so he let it be. This was tough for him though. He loves deer and he wanted to find the tracks. The three got to the edge of the forest and Skylar stood there looking into the woods. She too had come up with a kind of ritual or habit before tracking deer. She stood, not just looking into the woods but sensing the woods. Using all of her senses; sight, sound, touch (for the wind) and smell, she felt the forest in front of her. As she did this, she also thought about the deer of her woods, gave thanks to them and the whole forest. She also asked the deer to help her find and then follow their tracks.

Nick started to think that maybe he needed to do something before he started a fire, since the girls have something. Not a bad idea.

Skylar started into the forest with the other two following. Her eyes scanned the forest floor as she slowly moved through the woods. Every 10 steps or so, she would stop, kneel down and stare out into the forest. Nick thought that she should actually be staring at the ground since that is where the tracks are going to be. But, he was starting to learn to trust the others, especially when it came to their mastered skills.

The path Skylar took meandered through the trees, into open areas and along existing trails. Skylar knelt down and this time, with her hand, lightly felt the leaves. She gazed in one direction with her fingers feeling the ground at that spot.

“Here,” Skylar stated.

“Huh?” replied Nick, clearly confused.

“We’ll start tracking the deer here,” Skylar said simply.

“What do you mean?” asked Alex. Alex had been quietly following along. Tracking animals was not her thing but she knew it was one of the challenges given by McGee so she was paying attention at least.

“We’ll use this track and follow the deer for the hundred yards,” returned Skylar.

“Funny Skylar. There’s no track there. In fact, there’s nothing here at all. Come on, let’s go to the creek and see if we can find some tracks in the mud,” Nick said eagerly.

“No. Here’s where we’ll start. I *am serious*. There’s a track right here where my fingers are,” defended Skylar.

“Let me see!” pushed in Nick not believing it at all.

“Nick, you can’t see it that well, but you can *feel* it. Give me your hand,” Skylar took Nick’s hand and guided his fingertips over the wet leaves. “Do you feel that sharp edge?”

“Uh....yeah, yeah I do. *That’s a deer track?*” asked Nick incredulously.

“Yep, you got it. Alex, come here. You feel for it,” encouraged Skylar.

Alex came over, knelt down and caressed the area where the track supposedly was. “Oh yeah...I feel it,” said Alex pretty impressed and amazed. “But how do you know it’s a deer?”

“Close your eyes while you feel the track, you can picture the shape of it. Plus, deer are the only animals in these woods that have a hard foot. It leaves a hard edge like that,” responded Skylar helping the others feel the track.

Nick stared at Skylar shaking his head staring at Skylar. Who was this girl in front of him? And the lesson wasn’t over yet. This was just the first track!

“Epic” Lincoln muttered.

Skylar shared, “Deer tracks have a pointed tip so the track is kind of like an arrow. You can see or feel for it and know what direction the deer was going AND guess where the next track will be. Can you feel the point?”

The cousins on their knees both felt for it. “Yeah, there it is. The next track should be over there, right?” Nick pointed in front of him.

“Yep, now before you get up, look in that direction, staring through the woods. Don’t look at anything in particular. In fact, try not to look at anything, just stare in that direction,” Skylar instructed.

“Huh? What do you mean ‘just stare but don’t look at anything?’” asked Alex.

“Just stare,” Skylar reminded her cousins.

“You mean like using your peripheral vision,” added Nick.

“Yeah, I guess so. Do that in the direction of where the tracks are going and tell me what you see,” Skylar said.

Her cousins did that. At first, they didn’t see anything, but after a minute, they started to see something.

“What do you see?” Skylar asked.

“Uh, I see a gap in the bushes and kind of a faint trail weaving through the woods,” Nick answered.

“Me too!” Alex joined in.

“Well, that’s probably the trail of the deer. All we have to do is find each track on this trail. Here,” Skylar tossed them a huge Ziploc bag of popsicle sticks “we’ll put these in each track we find and make the trail really clear.”

Alex and Nick looked up at Skylar and blinked. Was she serious? There must be over 300 popsicle sticks in the bag!

“Come on, we’ve got a hundred yards of this!” And with that, Skylar grabbed a handful of popsicle sticks and started feeling for the next track and then the next. “Oh yeah, we can also use this stick if we can’t find the next track. I have it marked with what a deer step is about. See this mark? That is where the next step is if this is a regular sized deer walking.”

Skylar added, "Just make sure that you don't kneel or step on the tracks. Stay behind and to the side. Also, face the sun, that way you don't shade the tracks and you can see them better. Oh, yeah, know that the larger tracks are the front tracks. Plus, be ready for the tracks to turn off the trail at any time since the deer may be looking for food."

"Oh, yeah, one last thing, remember what Ol' Jack McGee said. The track you can't find is the one that will teach you the most," rattled off Skylar. "So if you get stuck with a track, don't skip it. We can work at it to find it.

Nick and Alex blinked trying to remember all of this. It was obvious that they were going to have to practice this skill a whole lot. Actually, everyone was going to have to practice all of the skills a whole lot. However, with each of them clearly a master of their skill, they had a good chance of succeeding.

CHAPTER 12: The Last Stretch – Learning the Plants

With 3 weeks to go before our trio needed to find Ol' Jack McGee, there was little time for play. Of course, heading outside to practice making a fire or having birds land on you or tracking deer is not necessarily *not* play. However, it is a lot to learn in that amount of time. Alex, Nick and Skylar had to become masters of all the skills that McGee challenged them with. Plus, they had to learn 6 plants and what those plants could be used for.

It was now the April and the outside world was alive with spring everywhere. Different kinds of birds had returned from their winter migrations. Plants covered the forest floor where only leaves once were. Buds on the trees had budded out creating a green leafy canopy to the land. Days were warmer and they were getting longer and longer with the sun higher in the southern sky.

It was a perfect time to learn about plants. Our trio had planned it well. However, it was also a bit overwhelming since in a New England spring there are thousands of sprouting, flowering and blooming plants everywhere.

"Where do we start?" asked Nick. "And don't tell me about the elephant," he said with a crooked smile.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'd rather learn about the plants that are easy to find versus the hard to find plants. We're trying to learn how they can help us right?" Skylar said.

"Yeah, it would be silly to learn about a rare plant that's good medicine but would be super hard to find," Alex joined in with.

"Alright then, let's go outside and find different plants right around the house. We can then figure out if they have any good uses," suggested Nick.

"Awesome. Let's do it," cheered Skylar pumping her fist in the air.

They headed outside to Skylar’s front yard and right away they all started pointing out plants that they already knew.

“There’s dandelion. And clover,” hollered Nick.

“I’ve got some of that flat leaf plant. I think it’s called plantain,” called Skylar.

“Ooooo, here are some violets,” yelled Alex excited to see the cute small purple and white flowers.

“Hey, I think I found some young jewelweed,” Skylar called from over by the wet drainage. “And I think this is stinging nettle. Be careful over here,” she warned.

“What is this one? It’s leaves are like lace and a bunch of white flowers are at the top,” Alex pointed out from over by the apple trees.

“Are these wild strawberry leaves?” questioned Nick.

“O.K. guys, we need a list. Let me grab my notebook and I’ll write down all the ones we’ve got so far. The plants we don’t know we can draw or take a leaf and use the field guides inside to figure them out. How’s that sound?” offered Skylar.

“Great! I think we already have more than 6 plants just from your front yard,” Alex observed.

Skylar ran inside and grabbed one of her many notebooks and a pencil. She returned and began writing the list.

“O.K., shoot. What’d we have?”

Alex and Nick called off the ones they knew, Skylar added hers and their best guesses for the others. Here is what this first list looked like....

Plant List:

Dandelion

Clover

Violet

Jewelweed ?

Wild Strawberry ?

Plantain ?

Stinging Nettle ?

Lacey leaf plant with white flowers?

Armed with a host of field guides back in Skylar's house, the three began looking up the list and samples from the unknown or uncertain plants. The next 2 hours had them leafing through many plant books to identify them. Alex used her Mom and Dad's iPad to do research also. She found a few great websites that helped let her identify what the different plants could be used for. One site was called Learning Herbs and it had a ton of cool information. It was surprising what they discovered about all of those common plants.

"You know, I thought that this was gonna to be boring," shared Alex. "It's actually pretty fun."

"I know. It's so fun. Plus, I'm learning a ton about plants. I had no idea that so many of the plants can help us. I also found a bunch of other plants in the field guides that we didn't find but I'm sure are around, like wild rose. It's really high in vitamin C. One book said that it's better than orange juice!" shared Nick.

"Yeah. That lacey leaf plant I found is called yarrow. It can do a ton. It can stop bleeding and clean a cut and keep it from getting infected. It helps with colds, stuffy noses and coughs. I want to collect a bunch so next time I'm sick I can take yarrow and not the yucky cough medicine," exclaimed Alex excitedly.

"The plant I found by the wet creek is definitely stinging nettle. My Mom uses it as a tea. It has more iron in it than a hamburger she says. A book said that it's really good for reducing

swelling too. So if you sprain an ankle, I bet you can use Nettle. Also, it's good for allergies. So Nick, you can take it if your allergies get bad," offered Skylar. "It's really amazing all the things that these plants can help us with," Skylar said excitedly.

"I know, it's crazy. All of these plants that are so good for us, my Dad calls 'weeds.' And, they're all growing right out your front door Skylar," Nick exclaimed.

"Skylar, why don't you add to the list what each plant can do. Then we can figure out which 6 plants we want to do for McGee," suggested Alex.

"Sure. O.K. I'll read them off and you guys tell me what each one does," directed Skylar.

So the three worked for another hour making a full list of the different plants and what they could be used for. They even named themselves the Nature Adventurers. They did add a few common trees to the list also. Here is what that list looked like:

The Nature Adventurers' Plant List:

Dandelion – super good for you. Eat flower and leaf!

Red clover - good for you. Leaves and flowers for tea. Can eat flower too!

Violet – Can eat flowers and leaves plus good for cough.

Jewelweed – great to wash off poison ivy oils or helps with rash!!!

Wild Strawberry – leaves good for digestion, rashes and yummy.

Plantain – good for stings, cuts, sprains. Young leaves healthy food too!

Stinging Nettle – very nutritious food and good for cuts just watch it!

Yarrow – good for cuts, infection and swelling.

White Pine Tree – needle high in vitamin C and pitch good to cover cuts.

Willow Tree – inner bark used to reduce pain/headaches.

Wild Rose – high in Vitamin C and good for digestion.

Cattail – make flour out of root and eat young stalks.

Wild Raspberry – leaves good for sore throats and diarrhea. 😊

The three had a hard time narrowing down the list to only 6 plants. So, they decided to explore the back woods and see what ones were most common. Having just spent the last hour looking at plant books, they noticed all different kinds of plants around them. They also surprised themselves by identifying new plants just from having looked at the guides earlier.

After 30 minutes of wandering around the woods, the three had made up their minds. It was hard since they liked them all and felt that the uses for them were so good to know.

However, since they knew that the Crooked Forest was in a forest, they stuck with plants they could find easily in the woods. They also wanted to make sure that the medicinal uses would cover as much as possible. Here is the final list they came up with:

The Nature Adventurers' FINAL Plant List:

Violet – Can eat flowers and leaves plus good for cough

Jewelweed – great for poison ivy rash or washing off poison ivy!!!

White Pine Tree – needles high in vitamin C and pitch good for cuts

Stinging Nettle – very nutritious food and good for cuts just watch it!

Yarrow – good for cuts, infection and swelling

Wild Raspberry – leaves for sore throats and diarrhea, berries yummy too!

The trio sat down in the woods to talk about their list.

“Well, here’s the list guys. It looks really good if I do say so myself,” exclaimed Skylar.

“Yeah, I think it’s great. It’s like we have a whole medicine cabinet right here in the forest,” joined in Nick. “I’m glad that we have jewelweed. I can get poison ivy pretty easy. All I have to do is look at poison ivy and I get it.”

“I really like the yarrow. It’s good for cuts and swelling so if any of us fall down and hurt ourselves, the yarrow will help a lot,” Alex shared.

“Stinging nettle’s my favorite,” Skylar added. “It’s good like yarrow for cuts but you can eat it too. All you need to do is crush the leaf on itself. That removes the prickles and then you can eat it. My Dad has done it before. It doesn’t taste too bad either. Kind of green, you know.”

“Wow, we did it guys,” declared Nick. “We did all of the challenges. I’m still not as good at tracking as you Skylar and I only had a bird land on me once but we still have a few more days.”

“I know. I can’t believe it. When McGee told us what he wanted us to do, I almost gave up right then and there. I didn’t think we could do it at all,” Skylar said.

“Me too. I’m glad that you’re my brother, Nick. Because I can’t do a fire that good and I definitely don’t know if I could do it in a rainstorm...or a hose storm,” Alex gave a big laugh remembering Skylar spraying the hose on both her and Nick to test his firemaking.

“But I’m glad we did do it. It’s been so cool learning this stuff. I know stuff and can do things that my Mom and Dad don’t even know. And I’m only 9!” exclaimed Alex.

With that, Alex gave a big smile and a two big thumbs up. Then her eyes opened wide and jaw dropped as she stared past the other two. Nick and Skylar quickly whirled around to see Ol’ Jack McGee leaning against the tree not more than 5 feet away!

Skylar and Nick jumped back, both screaming.

“Argh!!”

No one had seen or heard him come up. It’s like he was a ghost.

“Whoa! How’d you do that?” asked Nick.

“How long have you been here?” Skylar questioned.

“Never you mind. Been here long ‘nough,” spat McGee. “So, you three think you’ve done all the challenges I gave ya?”

“Well, sort of? I mean we do but still could use a few more days to make sure all of us have mastered them,” Nick spoke.

“Why don’t you three tell me what you’ve been up to and what you learned? Then, let me be the judge of whether or not you need a few more days,” McGee said.

With that, he just sat down right there, picked a plant leaf and started chewing it. It was like he was an animal in the forest; so natural and comfortable not to mention silent.

“Well, what are you waitin’ for? Get to talkin’. I want to hear your stories,” grumbled McGee as he laid back chewing on the leaf.

Our three shared the last several weeks and how they each took on a skill to master. Once they mastered that skill, then they told the stories about teaching the other two. McGee would ask them about every little detail. He kept his eyes closed, would grunt occasionally and even nod his head. It was like he could see exactly what had happened. They shared their plant list and how they came up with it. McGee asked about any other plants they learned and between the three of them, they had learned over 12 different plants and trees and their uses. McGee kept on grunting, nodding and asking questions.

He asked Nick directly if he had a “kind of ritual” that he would do before he started fires. Nick confessed that he hadn’t until he saw both Alex and Skylar taking time beforehand to give thanks and get quiet. So now he does too. “Hummph,” grunted McGee.

“What’d ya think about or do before you sit and have the birds come, Alex?” asked McGee.

“Ah, well, I just kind of clear my head and slow down my breathing,” replied Alex.

“That it?” McGee pushed for more.

“Well, no. I, I actually say thank you to the birds and trees and stuff,” Alex confessed.

“I see.” McGee paused here like he was deep in thought. “Yes, yes, very important,” he mumbled.

“Skylar, what made you decide to start trackin’ that deer at that specific track when you were teachin’ the others?” McGee questioned.

“Um, well, I, I don’t know really,” Skylar stammered. She didn’t like questions that she doesn’t easily know the answer to.

McGee shook his head and gave a slight smile. “You know. Think back and tell me what ya were feelin’,” McGee pressed.

“Huh. I, I just sort of knew. Kinda like when I know an answer to a question and I don’t know how I know it. It just felt right I guess,” Skylar said thinking hard.

“Hmmm, yes. Good, good,” replied McGee pleased with that answer.

This went on for over an hour. Birds visited the four to see what the meeting was about. As McGee talked, a chickadee actually landed on his shoulder, tilted its head to the side and eyeballed him and then flew off. The three just stared. No matter how much they learned, whenever they were around McGee, they realized that there was still so much more to learn. They also realized that maybe they weren’t really “masters” of their skills yet. Of course, two months ago they didn’t even think any of what they could do now was possible. Also, with McGee’s questions and retelling their stories, they realized how much they actually did learn.

“Alright you three. It’s clear to me,” McGee declared as he stiffly stood up and stared at Alex, Skylar and Nick with his piercing blue eyes.

The trio stared up at him and held their breath. Another challenge? Did they not succeed in meeting his expectations?

“You...are ready,” McGee said flatly.

“Ready? Ready for....?” queried Skylar

“Ready for the final preparation in finding the Crooked Forest? Next weekend, come to my cabin. Your Dad, Skylar, can tell ya where it is. But don’t take the road. Come through the woods. I’ll have the next set of instructions ready then.” McGee started to walk away and then turned and spoke one last time.

“Keep going to your Special Spots and practicing these skills. You’re gonna need them next weekend.”

With that, he walked a little away and stepped behind a large tree. The three got up and moved so they could see McGee again. They really wanted to figure out how he can disappear and reappear in the woods. But in the few seconds it took the three to move, Ol’ Jack McGee had disappeared again into the woods silently.

CHAPTER 13: A Pleasant Surprise from McGee

For the next week, our trio kept practicing and working on mastering their nature skills that Jack McGee had given them. As they practiced, they kept connecting deeper with nature. Birds would come to them sooner. Tracks would be more obvious. Fires could be made more easily. Our three nature adventurers were becoming “one” with nature. They couldn’t wait until the weekend though. They were so excited to start the next step in getting to the Crooked Forest.

The weekend arrived and our three were eager to go to McGee’s place.

“Have you ever been to McGee’s house, Skylar?” asked Alex.

“No. I haven’t even seen it. I didn’t even know if he lived in a house. I guess it’s down a long dirt driveway. My Dad told me how to get there through the woods. It’s a little bit of a walk so we should bring some water and snacks.”

“Sounds good. We can use my backpack. I brought it along just in case. I also have some survival stuff in it,” offered Nick.

“I’ve got some spare clothes too. Where’s his place from here?” Alex asked.

“We’ve got to head up the hill and hit the rock wall that’s at the end of our property. Then we have to turn to the east or right and follow it until a big pine forest. My Dad said at the start of the pine forest is another rock wall that cuts through it. We should follow that and it goes right to McGee’s place,” Skylar shared.

“What do you think McGee’s gonna have us do or learn today?” asked Alex.

“I don’t know but I’m sure it’ll be good,” said Skylar.

“Totally. I hope he’s gonna teach us how to stalk in the woods like he does. Boy, that’s freaky how he just appears and disappears,” Nick said.

“I know. How does he do it? Remember when we saw the turkeys and he somehow was standing behind us? The turkeys didn’t even know he was there and he was in plain sight,” marveled Skylar. “Are we all set?”

“Ready,” said Nick.

“Ready,” said Alex.

With that, they said goodbye to Skylar’s parents and headed out. When they got to the forest, all three of them paused and sensed the forest. This had become a habit for them and they did it without even thinking. After a minute or so, they looked at each other, smiled and began hiking into the forest.

When they hit the rock wall at the end of Skylar’s property, they had already been out for an hour. When one loves nature, it is hard to walk in a straight line and not explore a little. They found turkey feathers, deer trails, fox trails and even a coyote scat on a log. Many different kinds of birds were all around making the forest alive with sound. At one point, a barred owl flushed out of a tree right above them. It gave the three a bit of a scare.

The forest floor was covered in a million plants. Waist high ferns, mosses and wildflowers were all around. As they walked, they found most of the plants in their plant list and quizzed each other about their uses. It was a glorious time with all the life around them. They could sense the spring energy and were equally happy and excited.

At the rock wall, they turned to right. Nick pulled out a compass that he brought along.

“Yep, we’re heading east now. You can also tell by looking at the sun. Since it’s before noon, the sun is still in the southeastern part of the sky,” Nick explained.

Our nature adventurers continued. At this point, the forest was no longer Skylar’s property and it was new to her and her cousins. This was the farthest they had explored and it was exciting to see new land. The forest was different. The trees had become bigger with different types of trees than Skylar’s part of the woods. There were also grassy clearings that emerged occasionally like little green oases in the woods.

Skylar stopped in her tracks. “Oh my, look at this tree, guys,” Skylar said breathlessly. Right before her was a huge old growth White Pine tree. The trunk was massive and straight with the lowest branches being 50 feet up.

“Whoa. It’s HUGE!” Nick stared up the trunk in awe. “I’ve never seen a tree this big before.”

“Me neither. It must be a grandfather tree,” loudly whispered Alex.

“Huh. It’s the biggest one around for sure. Hey, let’s call it that; the Grandfather Tree,” suggested Skylar.

“Yeah, I like it. The Grandfather Tree,” smiled Alex.

There was something very special about this tree and our trio could sense it. It was The Grandfather Tree was an elder of the forest, watching over everything around.

“Let’s see how fat it is. Grab hands and let’s hug it,” said Nick.



The three held hands around the tree but could not close the circle. In fact, they were only able to hug around half of the tree. The trunk was that wide! They gazed at the Grandfather Tree admiring the size and how old it must be. They hated to leave it but needed to keep going. They continued heading east, following the rock wall. It was only 50 yards before they came upon the Pine Forest. It was a huge expanse of forest with only pine trees in it.

Because the trees grew so thickly and kept their needles year round, not much sunlight ever hit the forest floor. Without the sun, not many ground plants or other trees were able to grow. This created an open forest that had a carpet of pine needles. It felt magical.

“This forest is amazing. It would be so cool to come and camp here. Wouldn’t it?” Nick said.

“Yeaaaaah,” whispered Skylar in awe as she looked up and all around.

“I bet all these pine trees are the babies of our Grandfather Tree,” Alex said as she sniffed the aromatic air.

Our adventurers also noticed that the sounds of this forest were very different. They were hushed and gentle. The wind quietly whooshed through the pine boughs making it almost sound like a river.

After another half an hour of slowly walking and exploring, the forest opened up to a clearing where, in the middle was a neat and tidy looking log cabin with a wraparound porch.

“Is this McGee’s,” asked Nick surprised. He pictured a house that was not so, so, well kept. Before any of the others had a chance to answer a pleasant woman’s voice rang out.

“Hello you three! Please, come on over. Come, come. Don’t be shy. I’m Mrs. McGee.”

“Jack McGee has a wife?” whispered a shocked Nick.

“Come on now. I’ve got some nice iced Sumac Tea for you. Are you hungry? I’ve got some sandwiches and cookies too.”

The three approached the house and there on the porch was a plump older woman with a sweet face. Her hair was pulled back in a gray bun and she wore an apron over her clothes.

“They don’t have time for your Sumac tea and sandwiches woman! They didn’t come here for a picnic. We’ve got work to do,” came a gruff, raspy voice from inside the house. It was McGee.

“Hush ya ol’ grump. There’s always time for a snack, Jack,” Mrs. McGee said. “There’ll be time enough for you with them. Now is my time. I want to get to know these kiddos that you’ve been torturing for the last few months.” Mrs. McGee turned back to our three, warmly winked and pointed to the chairs on the porch.

Alex, Nick and Skylar sat and enjoyed a most delicious snack. The iced tea, made from the Sumac bush was sweet and tart. Mrs. McGee pointed to the Sumac that she got the fuzzy berries from that made the tea. She was the warmest and gentlest woman which surprised the kids since Ol’ McGee is, well, not the warmest and gentlest.

Mrs. McGee saw the surprised looks and whispered, “Awww, Jack really isn’t that scary or mean. He really doesn’t bite. He’s mostly bark.” Then she winked again at them. “Alright, I suppose I’ve kept you long enough. Jack. JACK? JAAAACCCCK!”

“WHAAAAT woman?” replied McGee grumpily from inside the house.

“They’re all yours dear,” Mrs. McGee said as she chuckled amused by her husband.

“About time. Send ‘em in,” Ol’ McGee said.

“Good luck children,” said Mrs. McGee with a smile and a twinkling eye.

Now this was a revelation for our trio. Ol’ Jack McGee was married. And married to the nicest, sweetest woman ever. Maybe there is more to Jack McGee than just a grumpy old woodsman.

They walked into the house and gasped. It was beautiful. The log walls were golden and the wooden rafters had hanging herbs all over. A stone fireplace was in the middle and a zebra hide rug lay on the floor in front of it. What looked like a nature museum was on the mantle of the fireplace. Skulls from animals, wooden carvings, bird wings, an old leather pouch, unusual feathers, survival tools like a bow drill and woven baskets were all neatly displayed. The three naturally moved toward the fireplace in awe and marveled at everything. Everything had a place and they could tell that each item had an amazing story too.

Chapter 14: The Final Instructions – Animal Skills

“Whoa, where’d ya get the zebra hide?” asked Nick with his mouth open.

“What kind of bird is this feather from?” Alex asked pointing to a very long blue-gray feather. It must have been over a foot long.

“What is this Mr. McGee?” asked Skylar pointing to a really old leather pouch on the mantle that had something in it.

“Alright, enough of your lollygagging. Maybe another day I’ll share about some of these things. But we’ve got a lot to do today, so let’s get crackin’,” grumbled McGee.

The three stood at attention. They were ready but couldn’t help and wonder about all the incredible things right there in front of them.

“Good then. Now, you three are just about ready but I’ve a few really important things I need to teach you before you go and try to find the Crooked Forest. These things, if you use them will be **the most** important things you’ll ever learn. They’re the key to becoming one with nature and yourselves. You hear me?” McGee stared at them with a squinted eye.

“Yes,” the three replied seriously.

“To become one with nature, you need to change how you look with your eyes, how you move with your body and how you listen with your ears. I’m gonna teach you today the way to do these things. Now mind you, these are skills that also need to be practiced and eventually to be mastered. I call these Animal Skills and once you master them, you’ll be able to be like an animal in the woods. You’ll be able to stalk other animals, disappear and even know what the forest is saying.

“Are you three prepared for these final lessons?”

“We’re ready sir,” announced Nick on behalf of the others. Alex and Skylar nodded their heads in agreement.

“Good. Once you learn how to use your senses like a wild animal, you’ll then be fully prepared to journey to the Crooked Forest.” Ol’ Jack McGee gave the three adventurers a one eyed stare to show that he meant business.

He then led the three outside to the yard to begin teaching them this final lesson.

“Alright then. Let’s get started. Can any of you tell me what animal in our forest sees the best?” asked McGee.

“Oooo, oooo,” moaned Alex raising her hand.

“This ain’t school for goodness sake. Ya don’t have to raise your hand young lady. What do you think?” said McGee mildly annoyed and mildly amused.

“The wild turkey!” beamed Alex very proud of herself.

“Indeed. Very good. They do have some of the best eyesight in the forest. They can see a hunter’s eye blink from 100 yards away. What else? Anyone have another guess?” asked McGee.

The trio took a longer pause, having to think harder for another animal with really good eyesight.

Skylar raised her hand out of habit then quickly pulled it down. “Yes sir. I do. Owls have great eyesight. They’re able to see a mouse even in the dark.”

“HmMMM. Very good also. I can see that you three have been doing your homework,” chuckled McGee. “Both of these birds have excellent eyesight and we’re going to learn from them.” McGee sat up straighter preparing for giving a lesson.

“Ya know why each of these birds have such good eyesight? HmMMM?” asked McGee. No one knew. “Well, it’s because they’re first looking for motion in the forest.”

The three looked confused so McGee continued with a sigh. "If you look out into the forest and try to find a deer, it's really hard because they blend in, right?"

Nick jumped in here. "Yeah, they're camouflaged."

"Very good. So do you know why some people are really good at seeing deer in the forest?"

"No." Nick answered eager to hear why.

"Because they're not looking for deer but rather looking for a deer moving. A flick of an ear or twitch of a tail. Only once they see a movement, do they focus in and identify what made it. Does this make sense?"

"Yeah, but how do they do that?" Nick asked. Nick loved finding animals in the woods and he was really excited about learning this stuff.

"O.K., you all stand over here." McGee motioned to the open lawn area. "Stand far enough apart that you won't hit each other if you wave your arms."

Our three dutifully did as they were told.

"Now, reach your arms out to your side like you're flying. Do it so you can't see your hands. Good. O.K. then, start wiggling your fingers and slowly move your arms bringing them closer together. But wait, make sure that you are looking straight ahead at some distant tree the whole time. Good. As your arms move closer, you should be able to see your fingers wiggling on both hands while you are still looking straight ahead. Do you see that?" asked McGee.

"Yes, yes. It is using our peripheral vision," Nick excitedly offered.

"Exactly. Now, our eyes are meant to use peripheral vision most of the time but we don't, we use our binocular vision, focusing on one object at a time. Can you imagine how hard it would be to see a deer in the woods using a pair of binoculars? Well, that is what we do. However, looking the way I just showed you changes that. I call this way of using our eyes, Owl Eyes. Go ahead and do it again and pretend you're an owl up on a high branch and your wiggling fingers are mice scurrying around."

"Cool. I can see both of my hands at the same time," hollered Skylar.

“Me too. And look, my hands are still far to the side,” joined in Alex.

“Now you’ve got it. Of course, ya don’t want to be moving through the forest with your arms out and fingers wiggling. Using your hands just gets you practicing. You need to be able to do it all the time. Instead of fingers wiggling, you will see birds flying by, leaves moving with the wind and yes, a deer flicking its tail,” said McGee pleased with how things were progressing.

“Ya three got Owl Eyes, you think?” McGee added.

“Yes. Right Alex, Skylar?” answered Nick. The other two nodded.

“Good. Let’s move to the next Animal Skill. What animal in these forests do you think have really good hearing? Think about it now.” McGee eyed the three as they thought.

“Of course, deer do,” Nick said smiling.

“What about rabbits?” asked Alex.

“You’re both right. Nicely done. Each have the largest ears in the forest. Those large ears help them listen for any animal that wants to eat them; the predators. Ya know that word? Predator?” asked McGee.

“Yes. A predator is an animal that eats other animals,” answered Skylar.

“Right. Very good. Think about it. Just about every predator in the woods wants to catch and eat a rabbit. They’re always listening. This is how you have to be in the forest. Not that every predator wants to eat you but by listening, you’ll understand the forest. I call this one Rabbit Ears. Nick, if you want you can call it Deer Ears,” winked McGee. Nick smiled back. He was planning on it.

“Let me show you one trick for when you want to hear something that is real quiet. Cup your hands and put them around your ears. You are making your ears bigger so more sound is caught in them. You’re making your Rabbit or Deer ears. Go ahead, try it and see what sounds you can hear better,” McGee suggested.

All three cupped their ears and stood facing the woods. All of a sudden, they could hear the twittering of birds in the far distance, the leaves rustling and even a woodpecker knocking on a tree in the very far distance. They were amazed at how well it worked.

“Good. Now, you know Owl Eyes and Rabbit or Deer Ears. The last one is how you need to move in the forest. What animal is the sneakiest animal of all? This animal can move silently over dry leaves and crunchy snow.” McGee eyed them again. “The amazing thing about this animal is that it’s actually not very well camouflaged like most and yet it’s still the sneakiest. Anyone have a guess?”

The hint McGee gave actually made it harder to guess. It was like a riddle. What animal is not camouflaged but is the sneakiest in the forest? Bobcat, coyote, deer, bear, raccoon, weasel and none fit until....

“I got it! A FOX!” shouted Alex.

“You got it. Well done my dear. A fox is able to silently walk and stalk in the forest. They move like ghosts as they hunt for mice and rabbits to eat. In fact, the bottom of their feet, in between their padded toes, they have a bunch of hair that sticks out. This hair muffles any sound and softens their step. One reason why I prefer moccasins over big soled boots personally.” McGee held up a foot that had very well worn moccasins. They looked handmade and very comfortable. Maybe this helped McGee to be able to sneak up on them all the time.

“I call this Animal Skill...”

McGee was cut off by a chorus of three blurting out at the same time, “Fox Walking!”

“Yes, very good,” grumbled McGee. “You want me to show you how to Fox Walk smarties?”

“Yes,” came their eager reply.

“Good. Listen, when most people walk, they step and land first on their heel and then their toe. They also lean forward so they have to take a step or else they would fall on their faces. This is not how the fox moves. When you’re fox walking, and I recommend that you do it most of the time, you land first on the ball of your foot and then your heel.”

Alex started to try it and looked like a chicken strutting. Nick and Skylar laughed at how funny it looked. Alex scowled at them.

“No, no. You should look like you’re walking normally except lean back just a smidge and very subtly have the ball of your foot land first and then your heel. This way, since you’re leaning back, if your foot feels a stick underneath that you may snap, you can easily pick your foot up and place it elsewhere. Alright, you try it.”

At first, it felt very strange and Nick and Skylar also looked like chickens. However, with just a little practice, they started to get the hang of it. They patted each other on the back feeling very proud of their progress.

“Well, yes, very good but guess what?” McGee said.

“What?” all three responded.

“Now the hard part,” McGee exclaimed.

All three turned their scowling faces in his direction.

“Quit your whinin’. What you need to do is use your Owl Eyes, Deer Ears AND Fox Walking all at the same time. And you have to look normal.”

At first, that didn’t happen. It looked like Alex, Nick and Skylar were all robot chickens “Loosen up! Don’t lean back so far. Just a little. Relax and soften your eyes,” hollered McGee.

“Excellent. Much better now.”

“Alright, pay attention now. You need to practice these Animal Skills everyday as often as you can. When you walk down the hall in school or sit at the table for dinner, it doesn’t matter. Use your Animal Skills. Of course, when you go to your Special Spot and practice your Nature Skills, use your Animal Skills.” With that, Ol’ Jack McGee got up and started walking away.

“Wait, what about the Crooked Forest. When do we go?” Nick called out.

“Come back here after the first thunderstorm of the season. You should be ready then, IF you practice all of this every day. At that time, I’ll tell you where to find the start of the trail. Then

it'll be up to you if you make it to the Crooked Forest." And with that, McGee went inside and closed the door behind him.

The three adventurers blinked at each other. When is the season of Thunderstorms? They never noticed when the thunderstorms came.

"I hope it's not too far away," said Alex quietly.

"Yeah, I know. Me too. Hey, let's do our Owl Eyes, Rabbit Ears and Fox Walking all the way back to my home," suggested Skylar.

"Not me, I'm doing Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and *Deer Ears*," said Nick with a grin.

They headed back through the woods using their Animal Skills. Who knows what adventure was in front of them as they looked with eyes of an owl, listened with the ears of a rabbit and walked like the stealthy fox.

Chapter 15: The Season of Thunderstorms

“Dad, when do the thunder storms start up?” Skylar asked casually over dinner one night.

“Hmmm...typically it’s in the summer when the warmer air at ground level rises up and hits the colder air up in the atmosphere. This forced air movement, called convection combined with moisture and unstable air forms the thunderstorms.” replied Skylar’s father who is a bit of a naturalist which is someone who teaches about nature.

At this point, Skylar’s mother adds... “Honey, it’s in midsummer, in July typically. That’s the easier answer.” She gave her husband a sidelong glance at his overly detailed science answer.

“Why? Are you worried about them or something?” she asked concerned.

“No, just curious. Mr. McGee told us to go find him when the first thunderstorms happens. He thinks at that point we’ll be ready to go find the Crooked Forest” Skylar said hoping that her parents would think so too.

“Well, if Ol’ McGee thinks you’re ready then you are. He’s an amazing woodsman,” said Skylar’s father who glanced over at her mother. Skylar’s Mom didn’t look as convinced.

“Honey, Skylar and her cousins will be fine. Don’t worry. They’re in good hands,” assured Skylar’s Dad to his wife.

“Oh alright. If you say so. I’m still a little worried. I am her mother you know!” added Skylar’s Mom smiling.

Skylar smiled too, relieved that going to find the Crooked Forest wasn’t going to be an issue with her parents. Also, July was only a month or so away. Enough time to get really good at her nature and animal skills before they go and find the Crooked Forest.

The next day in school, Skylar met up with Nick and Alex and let them know when the season of thunderstorms arrive. They too were glad that it wasn’t too far off nor too soon. They also wanted more time to practice their skills.

“Have you mentioned it to your parents yet?” asked Skylar a little worried.

“No, not really. Maybe you can have your Dad talk to my Dad about this adventure. Seems like your Dad gets it,” said Nick.

“Yeah, I know our Mom doesn’t like the idea of us trying to find the Crooked Forest at all,” added Alex with a concerned look on her face.

“You’re lucky that your Dad’s a naturalist. Nature doesn’t freak him out like our Mom,” Nick shared.

“Listen, all you have to do is help your Mom and Dad understand that you’ll be safe. They’re just worried and they don’t understand nature like us,” Skylar suggested.

“But how do we do that?” asked Nick.

“Next time you come over with them, let’s take them out in the woods and show them all that we know,” Skylar said.

“That’s a great idea. If they see how good we are in the woods then they’ll feel better and worry less,” beamed Alex.

“That’s the hope anyhow,” Skylar said hopeful but still a little worried.

“Cool. This weekend I think we’re coming over for a BBQ. We can do it then,” Nick said.

“Perfect.” Skylar smiled. “How have your Animal Skills been going?” asked Skylar.

“Great! They’ve even made me better at the Nature Skills I think,” answered Nick.

“Me too! The birds are even more comfortable with me. I sit and use Owl Eyes and Rabbit Ears all the time. I had a bird yesterday land on my shoulder and sit and fix its feathers. I didn’t even have to put seed on my shoulder. It was so amazing,” Alex shared.

“I’ve been doing Fox Walking all the time. Even in school. I’ve been practicing it with the Owl Eyes and Deer Ears so that I can stalk through the woods as quietly as McGee can,” Nick said excitedly. “I want to be able to stalk up on a deer and slap it on the butt!”

“Yeah, and then the deer will kick you in the head,” laughed Skylar and Alex.

“Well, let’s show your parents our skills and hope that they’ll feel fine about us going and finding the Crooked Forest in July.”

That weekend came and with some begging, the kids were able to get Alex and Nick’s parents to go out into the woods for a walk. After some convincing and negotiation they finally agreed to a 30 minute walk. The adventurers therefore only had 30 minutes to show them that they knew what they were doing and convince them that they would be safe.

The trio led the way. As they always do, they stopped at the edge of the woods and used their senses. The two adults scratched their heads wondering why they were standing there. Before one of them could ask, Alex spoke.

“I think there’s an owl up ahead.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” agreed Skylar listening closely to the forest. “Let’s stalk up there and see if we can spot it. Nick, you lead the way.”

“Huh? How do you know that?” asked Nick and Alex’s Dad with a very confused look on his face.

“Um, well, do you hear the birds? Hear those jays calling up ahead?” Alex said.

“Yeeeah,” her father answered looking at his wife with a surprised look on his face.

“Well, they’re pretty much telling the whole forest that there’s a predator over there. And since they’re up high in the trees, it won’t be a cat or a fox,” Alex explained.

“Oh. O.K. Lead on Nick,” his Dad said not fully believing that there really was an owl up ahead.

After only a few steps into the woods Alex whispered, “Mom, Dad, try to walk quieter.”

Indeed, the trio were nearly silent as they stalked while the parents were crashing through the woods like a herd of buffalo. After just a few minutes, they were up by where the jays were calling.

“There, you see it Mom, Dad?” Nick asked as he pointed up high in a hemlock tree.

Sure enough, a large Great Horned Owl was sitting up high in the tree trying to ignore the jays.

“Oh my, honey. You were right,” answered his Mom trying to hide her surprise.

“I can’t believe it. Never seen one before,” said his Dad also surprised.

Both parents stopped and looked at the children, clearly impressed but still a bit doubtful.

“Let’s keep going a bit more,” Skylar encouraged. There was much more to see and do before the end of the 30 minutes.

After a ways, Skylar paused and knelt down. “Nick, check this out.”

Nick knelt down and felt the leaves. “Do you think it’s fresh Skylar?”

“I think so. Let’s follow it for a little,” Skylar said.

“What, what is it?” asked Uncle Craig.

“It’s a deer. Come here, feel the track under the leaves?” Skylar showed him.

“Honey, check this out. You can feel a track here,” he said to his wife. She felt for the track too and her eyes opened wide.

“Come on Mom, Dad, let’s follow it for a bit. Maybe we can see it,” exclaimed Alex. “But you really have to try to walk quietly please.”

“We’re trying honey but we just can’t. In fact, I don’t know how you kids can walk so quietly in the woods,” replied Alex’s Mom.

“Fox Walking Mom,” answered Alex. Her Mom just nodded her head but really had no idea what her daughter meant.

The group moved quietly (well at least the children were quiet) through the woods as they tracked the deer. Every so often, they would stop and cup their ears and listen to the forest in front of them. Then, they did it one more time and looked at each other and giggled silently.

“What, what,” asked Alex and Nick’s father in a hushed tone.

"The deer is just up ahead on the other side of that hill," Nick said.

"Are you kids serious or just joking with us?" he asked quietly beginning to be amazed.

"No Dad, it's true. Come on, we'll show you unless you and Mom scare it away 'cause you're so loud," Nick whispered with a smile. "We have to go around this way or else the wind will give us away."

"What wind?" Nick's Mom questioned.

"The light wind coming from the east," answered Nick matter a factly.

The group crept around the hill on the westerly side and once they came around, there was a doe quietly browsing. Nick and Alex's parents were shocked and thrilled. They had never seen a deer up close in the woods. They were starting to realize that these kids knew more about the woods than they did.

The group quietly walked back around and started heading back to the house trying not to disturb the deer.

"Oh my. I can't believe it. That was amazing. The deer was so beautiful and so close!" their Mom commented, still breathless from the experience.

"I don't know what to say," exclaimed their Dad shaking his head in disbelief.

The three smiled at each other. This plan may actually work. All of that stalking took up a bunch of time so they needed to head back to the house. Our trio was hoping that they had shown enough of their skills. Once they got back, Skylar's Dad was about to start a fire in the fire pit.

"Can I start it?" Nick asked.

"Sure Nick. Do you want me to get you wood from the shed?" his Uncle replied.

"No, we'll do it ourselves with wood from the forest," Nick answered. "Mom, Dad, stay here and watch."

"O.K. buddy" and they sat down at the patio table.

The kids went to work immediately going up into the woods and collecting the tiny dry branches from the hemlock tree. Nick went to under the hemlock and gathered some dry needles. He found a dead ash tree and collected some of the under bark also and put these two ingredients into a tinder bundle. The two girls continued gathering small and large kindling.

After only 5 minutes, they returned to the fire pit with enough wood to start a nice fire. Working together, they made a Tepee shape with the kindling, starting with the smallest on the inside and largest on the outside. An opening at the very bottom was left for the tinder bundle that Nick had in his shirt.

“Here you go,” said Skylar’s Dad as he handed them a matchbox.

“Nick, you light it,” Skylar said.

“No, you can,” he replied.

“Alex, do you want to?” asked Nick.

“Wow, you guys are quite a team aren’t you,” Nick’s Mom said clearly impressed.

They looked over with a smile. The threesome had gotten to be a really good team together.

“Nick, you do it since Fire is your best skill,” Alex said.

“Alright. Stand back,” he said as he took one match out.

Confidently, he lit the match and then the tinder bundle that he placed in the hollow of the Tepee wood pile. Within seconds, the tinder caught fire and began spreading to the dry little kindling of the hemlock. After a minute, the rest of the kindling was burning brightly.

“Nicely done Nick. I couldn’t have made a better fire myself. I’m quite impressed,” Nick’s Uncle said.

“Thanks,” beamed Nick. “But Alex and Skylar did it too. Couldn’t have done this without them.”

“Hold everything!” gently hollered Nick and Alex’s father. “Who the heck are you kids and where did you learn all this? What we’ve seen you do today is amazing. You really know what

you're doing in the woods. I mean, finding an owl by listening to the birds or tracking a deer through the leaves – unbelievable. Now, in 5 minutes using just what you found in the woods, you started a fire with one match. I think it would take me a whole box of matches to start a fire! Really, you're amazing! I knew that you have been learning nature stuff but this, this is crazy."

The trio grinned from ear to ear.

"So can we go find the Crooked Forest in July?" blurted Alex. The other two gasped. They were thinking of a more subtle way of asking.

Her parents eyed each other. "We've been hearing about this Crooked Forest Adventure for a while now but didn't think that you were serious. Obviously we were wrong. Clearly, you are very serious about it. I don't know kids. It sounds like it is dangerous and who knows, you could get lost or hurt or, I don't know. Brian, what do you think?" Nick and Alex's Dad asked Skylar's father, Brian. They figure that if Brian was alright with it, they could be convinced.

"Skylar's Mom asked me the other night too. But I'll tell you, these kids have become very skilled in the woods over the last few months. I also know that Jack McGee knows what he's doing teaching these kids all these different skills. Honestly, I think it's going to be a great adventure for them. Yeah, it is going to challenge them but from the looks of these three, they are ready for the challenge. Plus, they now know how to be safe out there," offered Skylar's Dad.

"Hmmm. Well, if you think so. Honey?" he shot his wife a look and she hesitantly nodded her head. "Alright then, Alex and Nick, you guys can go find this Crooked Forest!" Nick and Alex's Dad announced.

"Hurray! Woohoo! Yesssss!" came a chorus of cheers. In a little over a month, if all went well, our nature adventurers were going to have the experience of a lifetime where all of their skills were going to be tested.

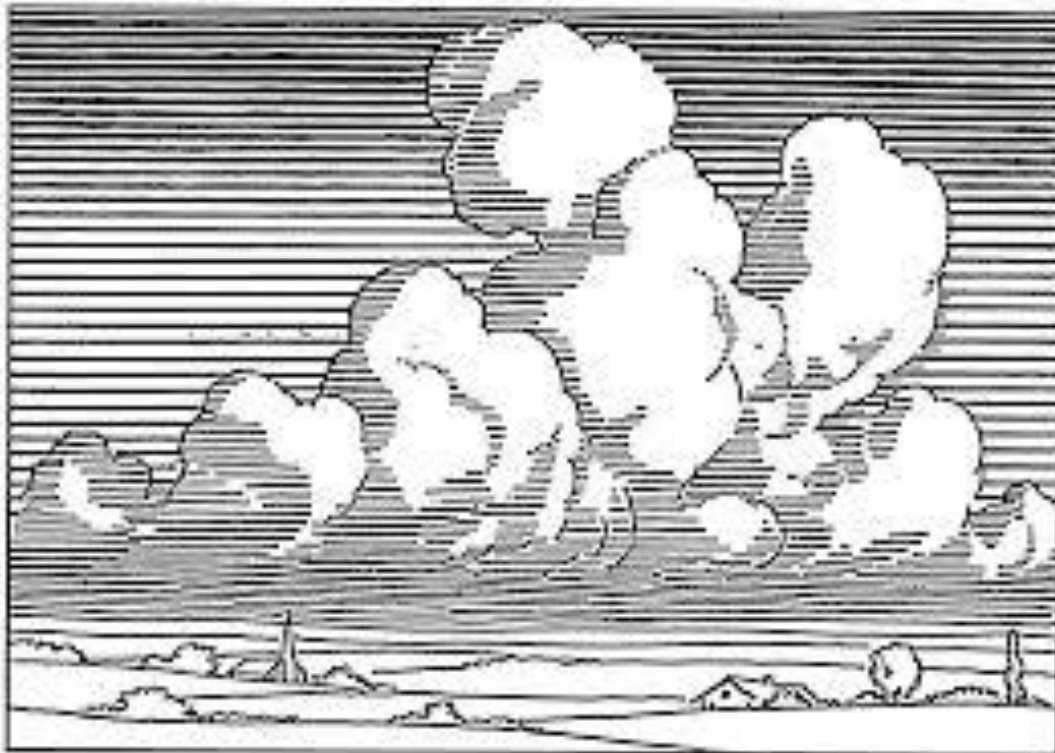
"You better be safe!" called their Mom over the celebration of high fives and whoops.

Chapter 16: The Journey Begins

The next month went by quickly. The children practiced their Animal and Nature Skills while going to their Special Spots every day. Their senses became strong like the animals. Their understanding of the forests became deep like a river. They had become comfortable and confident out in nature during any sort of weather. They had become natives to the land.

School ended for the summer before the Season of Thunderstorms arrived which allowed our trio to spend even more time outside practicing their skills. On a few occasions, they even did some camp outs together in Skylar's yard. They weren't quite ready to be out in the woods camping out alone but soon.

Then, the first thunderstorm clouds began to build in the western sky over the mountains. Those big fluffy clouds that grow higher and higher in the sky became visible. No thunder came the first evening when the clouds were spied but any day now the storms would start.



The adventurers tracked the weather each day while they were out at their Special Spots. They watched the sky and clouds constantly. They used their Animal Senses to feel the weather. They would smell the air like a coyote, testing for the familiar smell of rain on the wind. One evening, while they were inside having dinner together they saw a flash through the window and a few seconds later the crash of thunder. The season had arrived and as the rain started to come down in sheets, they ran outside and stomped in puddles letting the rain drench them from head to toe. They had never been so happy to see a thunderstorm before. Tomorrow, they would seek out Ol' Jack McGee.

“Do you think we’re ready?” asked Alex as she settled down in her sleeping bag. The three were having a sleepover and were planning to find McGee at first light.

“I think so. Of course we can always keep practicing and getting better with the Nature and Animal Skills but I hope we’re ready to face whatever might be on the trail to the Crooked Forest,” Skylar reasoned, also a bit nervous that the moment had actually arrived.

“The only way we’ll know is to try. But maybe we should check with McGee. Just in case. I’m not even sure what we might face on that trail,” Nick said.

“That’s a good idea. The way he described the journey to the Crooked Forest that time around the campfire, I mean, it sounded pretty intense, right?” Nick said.

“I don’t know if I want to do this now,” whispered Alex.

“It’s gonna to be fine. We’ve got to trust what we’ve learned, right? We’ve done everything that McGee told us too and then even more,” Skylar said reassuringly.

“I know, but what if there are bears...or wolves...or real giants?” stuttered Alex.

“Well, then the birds will tell us before we ever come face to face with them!” Skylar said firmly. “Listen, let’s not scare ourselves out of this. We’ve been working on getting ready since February. That’s...5 months. We’re ready,” Skylar affirmed for everyone’s sake, even her own.

That night, none of our adventurers slept that well. Dreams of giants, dragon bear monsters and trails that never end flitted through their heads. Morning came early and the trio did not greet it very enthusiastically.

“Wakey wakey,” shouted Skylar’s Dad. “Come on gang, it’s time to get up, get some breakfast and head on out to find Ol’ McGee.”

“Awwwww,” the three moaned as the shades were pulled up letting in the early sunshine.

“Dad, you know I don’t like waking up like this!” grumbled Skylar.

“Well, it seems you guys have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. Hmmmmm. That’s expected,” he said.

“Why do you say that Uncle Brian?” asked Nick starting to wake up.

“Ah well, whenever you work so hard for something, it’s always when you’re closest to reaching your goal that you want to give up. Human nature I suppose and totally normal” Uncle Brian said gently.

“Really? It’s normal?” Alex chimed in feeling a little better hearing this.

“Sure it is. Heck, I often feel that when I’m going to take on something new or different. Same with your Aunt and your parents. Venturing into the unknown is a bit scary to say the least,” he paused thinking.

“You know, maybe this will help you guys. Do you know what courage is?” he asked.

“Yeah, it is not being afraid of anything,” answered Nick.

“Well, not exactly buddy. It’s actually being afraid but doing it anyways. The bravest people in the world were all afraid before they did whatever it was they needed to do. It’s not bravery if you do something that doesn’t scare you. Where is the bravery if you’re not afraid? Courage and bravery is acting in the face of fear. Does that make sense?” Uncle asked.

“Huh? I never thought of that but yeah, I guess so,” Nick said.

“Well come on lazy bones. Get up. I’ll make a nice breakfast so you ‘ll be ready to meet the day with courage!” With that, Skylar’s father headed downstairs.

He left the adventurers thinking hard about what it means to be brave or have courage.

Maybe today they were going to have to be brave just to go see Ol’ Jack McGee and get the

next step for their adventure. Certainly they will need to be brave and courageous when they go to the Crooked Forest.

With some yummy sourdough pancakes with real homemade maple syrup, blueberries and orange juice, our adventurers felt a little better. They packed up their gear and headed outside, not sure what the day was going to bring.

All three took a deep breath and fox walked into the forest. As they moved through the woods, they started feeling better. Nature has a way of taking away one's bad moods and nervousness. By the time they hit the Grandfather Pine Tree along the back rock wall, they were smiling and enjoying the woods and all it had to offer. They spied the biggest raccoon propped up on a bent branch of a maple tree. The raccoon didn't even raise his head when they passed by. A little later, a cooper's hawk bulletted through the forest right past them as it hunted birds on the wing. Cooper's Hawks are the larger cousin to the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Alex actually heard the hawk coming from the bird alarms before they saw it.

The trio continued on for another half an hour and there was the McGee's snug house in the middle of a clearing in the Pine forest. Sitting outside on a rocking chair on the porch was Ol' Jack McGee.

"I've been expecting you three. Hummmph. Good. Don't just stand around gawkin', come on over and let's get started," called McGee from the porch.

The three hurried over, not sure what he was going to have them do. The nervousness returned but there was no turning back now.

"Alright then. I can tell that you've been doing a real fine job practicing those skills I gave ya. In fact, I didn't know you were coming until you hit that big old Pine tree by the rock wall. Impressive."

Alex, Nick and Skylar blinked hard at each other. That was half an hour ago and quite a distance away. He could tell that they were there then? Now that was really impressive. Again, every time they are with McGee, they realize there is so much more to learn. Of

course, thinking about that today was not helpful considering they were about to embark on an epic adventure to the Crooked Forest.

“Now listen kids, the trail to the Crooked Forest....is....is....hey, where are my manners. If the Mrs. were here she’d let me have it for not offering you three some of her famous Summer Sumac lemonade.” Jack got up and went inside to get the cups and lemonade. The three sat there, breathing slowly, waiting.

McGee returned and passed out the Sumac lemonade and some cookies. It tasted real good. The day was starting to get warm now with the sun higher in the sky.

“Thank you,” the three said together as they slurped down the mildly sweet and tart homemade lemonade and finished up the cookies.

“O.K., where was I? Right. To be honest you three, I wasn’t sure if ya’ll had what it takes to get as far as you have. You should feel really good about what you’ve learned.” He eyed the three and could tell that they were nervous. It was good since the trail to the Crooked Forest demanded caution and humility.

“You probably know as much if not more than what I knew back when I first journeyed to the Crooked Forest,” McGee shared.

“Really sir?” Alex asked surprised.

“Sure thing. Maybe it’s because I learned it all alone. I didn’t have friends like you have in each other. You end up learning three times as much and three times as fast, maybe more. You kids are lucky to have each other,” McGee added.

This made some sense for our young adventurers. They started to remember how being together as a team helped them do things that normally they never could have done alone. That includes the last five months of their training.

“You’re gonna need to depend, trust and help each other on the trail to the Crooked Forest if you are ever to make it there. However, between what you’ve learned and working together, I know you’ll make it,” reaffirmed McGee.

The three breathed a sigh of relief.

“That doesn’t mean it’s gonna to be easy!” snapped McGee back. He had been uncommonly kind for much of the conversation so far but evidently, with McGee, that only lasts so long.

“Enough of all this touchy feely stuff. Do you three want the clue to get you to the head of the trail or not?” asked McGee all grouchy again.

Feeling a bit more confident they all said, “Yes! We’re ready.”

“Good. Now listen closely. The journey is a full day’s trip so you need to go prepared. You understand?” asked McGee warily.

“Yep. I’ve got a backpack and we’ll take water, food, spare clothes, a first aid kit and even a blanket just in case,” Skylar replied. Being prepared was something she learned as a little kid from her Dad. He always took emergency supplies even on a short hike.

“Good. You kids know that big old growth pine tree you pass when comin’ here?” asked McGee.

“Yeah. It’s so cool. We actually call it the Grandfather Tree,” shared Nick.

“HmMMM.” McGee paused for a moment and closed his eyes deep in concentration. “That’s good. He likes that. Yes, he likes that very much,” McGee slowly spoke. It was like he was talking to the Grandfather Tree right then and there. When it comes to McGee, the three cousins watch him very closely. They always get a glimpse into what could be possible.

“Well, from the Grandfather Tree, there’s a game trail that cuts across the rock wall. You need to follow that trail until you come upon a brook. **Don’t** lose the trail no matter what. If you do, it will be *very, very* hard to find your way back if not impossible. You three listening closely?” blurted McGee.

“Yes sir!” the children answered back.

“When you come upon that brook, you want to follow it upstream. What did I just say, upstream or downstream?” McGee gruffly said.

“Upstream,” answered the three hanging on every word.

“Right. Follow that brook for ‘bout one or two miles. You need to look for an old Indian Trail Tree. When you find it...” Nick interrupted McGee here.

“Excuse me. What’s an Indian Trail Tree?” Nick cautiously asked.

“Hummph. Fine. An Indian Trail Tree is a tree that Indians in this area long long ago bent down when it was young. The small bent tree kept growing into a big bent tree. The trunk therefore sticks out far, like an arm reaching for something for a little ways and then shoots back up to the sky. It kinda makes a big L out of the tree. They did this to mark very important trail junctions or to point a traveler in the direction of important water holes. This particular Indian Trail Tree is a two hundred year old white oak tree. Amazing sight it is.” McGee paused, took a sip of his lemonade and looked hard at the trio.

“Know this, just getting to this point you will have had to face many challenges. They’re the typical challenges you find in the woods. Be prepared and aware at all times. However, when you step upon the faint trail at the base of this Indian Tree, all things will change. It will be like you enter into another world,” McGee said and looked intensely off into the distance.

Those shivers returned to the three. But this time, it was not because of excitement. It was because of fear.

“From here, I can’t help you no more. You’ll need to listen to and let your inner voices guide you from this point forward. There’ll be signs along this trail and beyond. Not road signs but signs from nature that will tell you where to go next. They’ll be like clues. These signs or clues will lead you to the Crooked Forest *only* if you’re ready and listening closely to nature. You need to use your training, you need to trust each other, you need to trust yourselves and you need to trust your inner voices. If you don’t all will be lost.” McGee looked at each of them in a way that felt like he was reading their minds. He probably was.

McGee paused and smelled the air deeply. “Yes, yes. Next Saturday will be clear and warm. All things are set for that day. It’s the day you three will journey to the Crooked Forest.”

Chapter 17: The Journey Part I

Ever have that feeling when you're both excited and scared at the same time? Butterflies flutter in your stomach and you feel a little sick even? That's how it was for our three adventurers. That week went by slow and fast at the same time. Before they knew it, Friday evening had arrived. Alex and Nick had come to stay overnight with Skylar at her house. It allowed for the trio to get packed up for the journey and to start out at first light. It also allowed them to support each other since they all were feeling pretty nervous. Never had they taken on such a journey before for so long. That night, they were not very talkative with each other. When nervous, talking does not come easily.

"It's gonna be awesome tomorrow," Skylar said quietly before lights went out.

"Epic," Nick replied flatly.

"Yeah," mumbled Alex.

Skylar's mother had noticed the quiet mood and offered a little advice.

"Remember what Jack McGee told you guys about trust?" she asked.

"Yeah, to trust what we've learned so far," Skylar answered first without enthusiasm.

"And to trust each other," Nick came next.

"And to trust ourselves," Alex added blankly.

"Exactly. If you trust in all of these things tomorrow then nothing bad will happen. Plus, I trust you three. I have seen over the last several months how each of you have grown and all that you've learned. You're ready for tomorrow," she said positively.

"Hope so," mumbled Skylar.

"I know so sweetie," replied her Mom with a kiss. "Goodnight my nature adventurers."

All three were awake before the sun rose. They got dressed and packed up silently. Downstairs, they made cereal for breakfast and worked together to pack their lunches and snacks for the day. When there was nothing left to do, they each took a deep breath and headed outside. There was only a sliver of light on the eastern horizon and yet the birds had begun their morning chorus. It was like they were singing a welcome to a new day. This dawn chorus helped to get our adventurers out of their heads and into their hearts.

“It’s so beautiful. So peaceful,” Skylar said as she breathed the fresh early morning summer air.

“Wow. I’ve never gone out this early before. Listen to all the birds singing. It’s amazing,” Alex exclaimed as she listened to the chorus.

“It’s a good day,” Nick declared with a broad smile to the girls. “Let’s do this!”

The two girls looked at each other and smiled too. Somehow, all that worry and fear had melted away with this new day and the birds singing their “good morning” to our adventurers. What could be so terrible or scary out there after all? What could there be?

The top branches of the Grandfather Tree were on fire with the golden morning sun. Even the Grandfather Tree seemed to be wishing them a “good morning”. Nothing challenging had happened so far but plenty of magical things had occurred.

They walked through a group of deer in a tall fern patch. The deer just kept chewing as the children passed by calmly like ghosts. They watched a weasel hunting along one of the many rock walls. It bobbed in and out of the rocks searching for a mouse or chipmunk. With a squeak and a tussle, the weasel caught a chipmunk and dragged it to a hole right in clear view of the kids.

On a low ridge, they saw a lone coyote standing and staring at them. After a little while, it turned and loped off in the direction they were heading. The trio felt like the coyote was a friend for some reason they could not explain. For the three, their walk so far this early morning felt magical and left them speechless.

At the Grandfather tree, they took a small break and ate the bread, honey and butter they had packed. It was at this point that Ol' McGee said to pick up a small game trail and head across the rock wall making sure not to lose the trail, or else. They had never ventured further than the rock wall before. They wondered what was beyond it. McGee said they had to follow this trail until it met a rushing brook. Then, going upstream for about a mile or two there would be a tree that was once bent down by Indians, growing straight up again. At that point, they would enter a new world. What that meant our trio had no idea. However, one thing they did know was that worrying about something in the future only spoils the present. So, they packed back up and crossed the rock wall following the game trail.

When they crossed the rock wall, it felt like they were truly on the journey to the Crooked Forest. This was new country they had never before explored and they were excited. The trail from the Grandfather Tree was pretty clear initially but soon after the rock wall, it became faint. Following it was very difficult for them. Many times, they had to get down on their hands and knees to make sure that they were still on the game trail.

"Remember, McGee said we *can't* lose this trail," Skylar said nervously to the others.

It was getting very difficult to find at times and none of them wanted to lose their way. It felt like a lifeline back to the forest they knew. Without it, they'd be lost.

"Just keep going slow, O.K.? We better not lose it. Skylar, slow down," called Nick nervously.

"I'm not going that fast. I can still see it," answered Skylar a bit annoyed. "Here, why don't you lead then?"

"No, no, sorry. I'm just nervous. I don't want to get lost," Nick explained. "This is it, right? I mean, it's so faint I can barely see it. Plus, at times we have to crawl through thick brambles to stay on it," observed Nick.

"It's gotta be. Have you seen any other trails coming off of this?" asked Skylar still agitated at being questioned.

The trail indeed wove through a huge and dense thicket of brambles with long thorns that would catch their clothes at times. In the dense brambles, only a small dark tunnel of a trail

cut through it. Fortunately, the ground was smooth and didn't have thorns on it. Nick had to take his backpack off and push it in front of him just to fit through. This was not easy traveling for the three and it was starting to wear on them.

"What kind of game trail is this? I mean, what kind of animals would make this kind of trail? We can barely fit through," asked Alex not expecting an answer.

"I don't know, maybe a raccoon. Or could be a fox I guess," Nick answered when all of a sudden he bumped into Skylar's behind. And then Alex bumped into Nick's behind. There was a traffic jam in this tube trail and Skylar was at the front.

"Ummmph. Hey, what are you doing Skylar?" Nick called annoyed.

Skylar did not answer. She was frozen in place.

"Come on Skylar," hollered Alex from the back "keep *moving*."

Still, Skylar did not move.

"SKYLAR! What IS YOUR PROBLEM?" yelled a frustrated Nick.

"Look," breathed Skylar as she moved slightly to the side. Her voice was trembling.

"What? I can't see..." and then Nick froze.

"What is going on up there? What is it?" shouted Alex who could not see a thing at the end of the line.

"Alex? You asked what kind of animal makes this type of trail, right? Well, Skylar just found the track of the animal that made this trail," Nick spoke softly and slowly.

"And?" returned Alex growing annoyed being left out at the back of the line.

"It's a...a...bear," Nick said ominously.

Skylar's hand was an inch away from a bear track that was more than twice the size of her hand. It looked fresh with crisp edges imprinted in the soft soil. Sharp nails showed up in front of each clear toe.



The tube through the brambles they were crawling in was the trail of a bear. In fact, the “game” trail that McGee told them to follow had been a bear trail. That is why it was so hard to follow. Bears have large soft feet and leave very little trail behind.

To find a clear bear track is quite rare. Any other time, the trio would have celebrated such a find. However, not in this situation. The reality of their situation started to become clear to all of them. What if the bear was came back down the trail from the other direction? Skylar would end up nose to nose with it. Not a comforting thought to say the least. In fact, it was a terrifying thought!

No one mentioned the situation but they began to hurry through the tunnel in the brambles. They did not want to come nose to nose with any bear in that large bramble thicket. The trail seemed to keep going on forever. They kept scurrying along the tube like hamsters.

“Hurry, hurry Skylar,” Nick pleaded.

“I’m trying to but can’t go any faster without getting caught by the thorns,” Skylar answered.

“Guys...do you hear anything up ahead?” Alex asked nervously.

“No, do you?” Nick trembled.

“No, I was just wondering,” Alex responded.

“Alex, that doesn’t help...just keep going,” Skylar said anxiously.

With one final scramble, all three tumbled out of the bramble thicket. They emerged out of the thicket and immediately looked around for a bear. When they didn’t see any, they all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Oh my gosh! That was crazy! What if the bear came in from this end and met us halfway?” Nick loudly whispered with a shiver.

“I know, I know,” mumbled Skylar, still a bit dazed by that possibility.

“I only saw a part of the track by the time I crawled past. Was it big?” Alex asked. “It looked big.”

“Yeaaaah. I could fit both my hands in the track. It was huge,” Nick said breathlessly.

“Whoa. Skylar, you would have been the first one to bump into it,” said Alex.

“I know, I know,” mumbled Skylar.

They sat there for a little while in silence. Then Skylar began to grunt quietly. Her cousins looked over at her concerned. The grunting turned into a weird quiet giggle. Then, Skylar’s giggled grew a little louder. Alex and Nick shot each other nervous looks. Was Skylar having a nervous breakdown? Skylar’s giggles then turned into a full crazy laugh.

“Um, are you O.K. Skylar?” Alex asked cautiously.

Between fits of hysterical laughter Skylar responded, “I....I....am.....I am....I’m fine.....” More laughter. “I nearly pooped my pants! And Nick’s face was right there!”

The other two looked at each other and began to crack up too. All three of them rolled on the mossy forest floor laughing so hard that tears came down their faces. You could only hear occasional words, “pooped” ... “face” ... “Nick” ... “huge bear” ... “bumped” ... “pooped...” This went on for a good number of minutes. Eventually the laughter started to die back, then turn to giggles and then turned to just heavy breathing.



“Ahhhhhh. That was crazy,” Skylar ended with a sigh and a tired smile.

“We thought that you lost it Skylar,” Nick told her.

“Naw. I’m fine, really. Now that we’re out of there, it was pretty cool; that bear track.”

“Yeah, totally cool,” added Nick.

“Guys, you know, we need to really be serious and start using our Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and Rabbit Ears,” Alex shared importantly. “Remember that McGee said we would still have challenges along the trail. Let’s hope it’s not a bear chasing us.”

“Deer,” Nick countered with a smile.

“What? Where?” Alex whirled around looking.

“No silly, Deer Ears,” Nick giggled.

“Whatever. Fine, Deer Ears. Listen, we’re in a new forest and really don’t know what’s around. We need to be super aware,” Alex countered mildly annoyed and slightly amused.

“You’re right. You’re right Alex,” said Nick.

“Yep. Are we ready to keep going?” Skylar asked as she got up and brushed herself off. She looked at Alex and Nick and was so thankful to be on this adventure with her two cousins. Nothing could be better. “Let’s head out!”

In a short time, they hit the brook. “Brook” was an understatement. Over the last week, there had been many heavy thunderstorms so the babbling brook was much more of a rushing torrent. Water shot downstream crashing over and onto rocks, forming rapids and deep swirling pools. After years of rushing water in this brook, it had eroded to a deep V making wading up it virtually impossible. Also, in this part of the forest, the trees had not been logged for many many years so they were huge. Along the brook, many trees had fallen down making any sort of walk along the brook edge very difficult. Because of the dense forest, old trees and raging brook, it felt like the three were in a very old part of the forest.

The nature adventurers looked at each other with wide eyes. This was going to be a very long walk to the Indian Tree. McGee said it was about one or two miles. “About?” What did that mean? That’s a big difference, one or two miles. The three were starting to get annoyed with McGee’s instructions. First off, the game trail turned out to be a bear trail and now, the hardest trail ahead of them could either be one or two miles long. They are going to need to speak with him when they get back.

Taking a deep breath, shifting their weight back a little to be in Fox Walking, the trio began moving upstream along the edge. They would often have to help each other up and over huge fallen trees. Nick would pass the backpack full of supplies up to Alex or Skylar, then clamber up only to pass the pack back down to them. They would sometimes be lucky and be able to crawl under a massive tree trunk or even walk like a fox over the top for the whole length of a tree.

This was slow going for them. After a while, Nick started to get impatient and began climbing up and over on his own just to save time. After all, they only had one day to get to the Crooked Forest as well as to get back home before dark. For all they knew, this was only the very first part of a very long journey.

“Nick, be careful and let us help you,” Alex pleaded.

“I’m fine. I can do this. We just have to keep moving or else we may run out of time,” Nick said as he passed her.

“Yeah well if you hurt yourself, that’s going to slow us down a whole lot more,” Alex responded getting agitated.

“I won’t. I can do it fine,” Nick called back.

Alex and Skylar shot each other looks. Nick was the most athletic of the three but still, this was a crazy trail they were taking. They kept going on. The big dark forest was weighing them down also. The roar of the water dulled their senses. And even though it was a sunny day, it seemed so dark and gloomy after an hour of hiking along the rushing brook. The three of them were up on a log when they saw up ahead across the stream a clearing. Bright glorious sun was shining on a world of green plants. By this time, it was close to lunch and they were all pretty hungry.

“What’d you guys say we head over there for lunch,” Nick offered.

“Sounds great but how will we get there?” Alex asked looking down at the steep sides, deep stream and rushing water below.

“Over there, look. There’s a tree that fell across the brook. We can use it to cross over to the other side,” Skylar pointed up ahead to a medium sized tree that spanned across the brook.

“Awesome!” Nick said as he headed over there like a mountain goat.

Once at the log, it looked a little less than awesome. The tree had fallen a long time ago and it was dead with no bark on it. There was a waterfall right below it and mist sprayed up wetting the smooth wood of the tree. The brook was a good 15 feet down with steep rocky sides. Once they got up to the log, it looked much narrower than before.

“What do you guys think?” Skylar asked nervously.

“I don’t know. That tree looks much skinnier than the ones we’ve been climbing on and it looks slippery,” Alex said examining the log closer.

“Aw, I think it’ll be fine. I’ll go first and show you,” Nick said cheerfully.

“Wait Nick, wait. Let’s think if there’s a better way,” Alex suggested.

“No, really, this’ll be easy,” Nick said wanting to keep moving and get some lunch.

“At least let’s hold the backpack for you. It’ll make it easier,” Skylar offered.

“Naw, don’t worry. Watch,” he said as he slung the backpack over one shoulder and stepped onto the fallen tree.

With that, Nick started to tight rope walk across the log. He did make it look easy. He was just at the end when he turned his head and hollered “See, I told ya...whaaaaa, waaaahhh.”

Nick wobbled and started to lose his balance. The girls gasped as they watched him. Then, with his arms flailing he wobbled back and forth and slipped right off the log, falling straight down.

“NICK!” shouted the girls.

As Nick fell, it was like slow motion. The girls all felt fear, horror and helpless as he dropped like a rock.

It was lucky that he had mostly crossed the brook so he only fell 5 feet, landing hard on the steep rocky edge of the brook. As he fell, his leg hit a jagged rock. To catch himself from

tumbling another 10 feet into the rushing water below, he reached and grabbed a root. As he did that, the backpack slipped from his shoulder and slid down to the brook. The current caught hold of the pack and took it downstream and out of sight.

“No, no” cried Nick. That pack had all of their supplies – clothes, food, first aid, matches, compass, knife, a premade tinder bundle – everything. He watched helplessly.

“Nick, Nick?” Alex screamed panicked.

“Nick? Nick, are you alright?” Skylar called.

“I, I think so. But the backpack...” Nick hollered over the noise of the water.

“Can you crawl up?” Skylar yelled.

“Uummpfh. Awwwww, owwww,” Nick moaned. “I, I cut my leg bad guys. I’m, I’m... bleeding a lot.”

Skylar and Alex could hear the panic in his voice.

“O.K., just stay there. We’ll come to you,” Skylar shouted.

Alex looked at Skylar questioning, “But Skylar, how?” Alex had lost her nerve seeing her brother fall like that.

“We’ve got to cross the log Alex,” Skylar sternly said.

“There’s no way we can. Even Nick fell. No way. Let’s find another place to cross,” Alex pleaded.

“Alex, we’ve got to get over to Nick to help him. We don’t know how long it’ll take to find another place. Plus, we can’t leave him hanging there,” Skylar explained.

“Skylar, I’m scared,” Alex said with tears forming in her eyes.

“I know Alex. So am I, but we have to. Remember what my Dad said about bravery? Being brave is doing something even though you’re scared,” reasoned Skylar more gently.

“O.K., O.K. But let’s do it together,” Alex whispered.

“Deal. Nick! We’re coming over now. Hang on!” Skylar called.

She and Alex went to the log and looked down. The brook looked angry as the water gushed and splashed against rocks below. The log seemed only 6 inches wide and the brook below seemed 25 feet down. But they had to do it to save Nick.

They both crouched down and sat on the damp log straddling it with their legs. Taking a deep breath, they started to slide along the log, inch by inch. If they slipped, they could wrap their arms around the log to stop them from falling.

“I’m starting to feel dizzy,” Nick called weakly.

The two girls kept sliding and encouraging each other. “Good job Alex. Keep it up.”

“Thanks Skylar. You O.K.?”

“Yeah. We’re almost there.” “Don’t look down. Just keep looking straight ahead.”

“O.K. I will. How much farther Skylar?”

“Almost there Alex. Be brave.”

It seemed like several minutes passed when they finally reached the other side. They ran over to the edge and looked down at Nick. His face was pale and he weakly smiled. He was down the edge several feet. How could they get him up? Skylar had an idea.

“Alex, grab hold of my ankles and I will lean down and grab hold of Nick. Once I have him, you pull as hard as you can.”

With Alex hanging onto Skylar’s feet and Skylar leaning far over the edge, they reached for Nick. Nick stretched his arm up carefully making sure that he didn’t slip further down.

“A little more Alex. Almost have him,” Skylar grunted. “Got him! Now PULLLLLLL!”

With Alex pulling with all her might, they began pulling Nick up and out. Panting, all three collapsed on the damp forest floor.

“Owwww. Ah man, my leg,” Nick groaned.

“Let’s see it,” Skylar ordered.

Alex looked over and immediately turned away feeling dizzy herself.

It was a deep cut on his calf and was still bleeding. Skylar looked around and assessed the situation. Thinking hard, she tried to figure out the next step. Right, we've got to stop the blood. Stop the blood; but how? The backpack was gone with the first aid kit. Wait, the plant list. What plant was it that stops bleeding?

Alex looked on nervously. It was hard seeing her older brother hurt like this and so far away from any kind of help.

"Alex... Alex... ALEX!" Skylar shouted to get Alex's attention.

"Yeah, yes. Sorry," Alex responded in a daze.

"Do you remember what plant stops bleeding?"

"Huh?" Alex grunted.

"What plant that we studied stops bleeding?" Skylar asked forcefully.

"Oh, right. Um, um. Yarrow? Yes, yarrow does! But we don't have any," Alex said waking up some.

"Where'd you find the yarrow at my house?" Skylar asked, relieved to have Alex back.

"In the uncut field," Alex shared.

"Great, go and look in the field over there for yarrow. Hurry though," Skylar called to a running Alex.

Skylar took her bandana and went upstream a bit to the top of the waterfalls where the brook wasn't so far down the ravine. With a stick she dipped it in the clean water and went back to Nick. She wrung it out cleaning some of the blood from around the cut. She did this a few times.

"How bad is it?" Nick asked weakly.

He knew that he may have ruined their entire adventure because he was rushing and not letting the others help. Now he was hurt *and* he lost their backpack. He was starting to feel pretty bad about himself.

“It doesn’t look too bad now. It cleaned up pretty good. Wait ‘till we get the yarrow, then we’ll see if you can stand,” Skylar said seriously. She was all business at the moment.

Alex arrived back breathing heavy but smiling broadly. “I found a whole bunch. Here.”

She handed a huge handful of the lacey yarrow leaves. Skylar took the handful and picked the best leaves. She glanced over at Alex who had gotten quiet again. It was clear that this was not the best place for Alex at the moment.

“Alex, why don’t you head downstream a little ways and see if you can find the backpack. But be aware! No chances, O.K.?” Skylar suggested.

“O.K. I won’t be long,” Alex said and looked one last time at Nick’s leg, at him lying flat on the ground, then she headed downstream with tears coming down her cheeks.

Skylar went back to work. With a smaller handful of the nicest leaves, she crushed them up and put them right on the cut. Nick winced in pain. Skylar looked apologetic at him but continued.

“Wait here for a second,” Skylar instructed.

She ran to a large pine tree and dug at an old wound on it. She returned and had a handful of the pine sap. She took the sap and smeared it around the cut and over the yarrow. With the cut covered in yarrow and pine sap, she then took her bandana and wrapped the wound firmly. The rest of the yarrow, she put in her pocket. Just in case they needed more later.

“There, that should do it. How’s it feel?” she asked.

“Hmmm. Not bad.” Nick moved his ankle and leg. “Huh. Actually much better. Hey, help me stand up, will ya?” Nick said as his color started to return to his face.

Skylar leaned down and with Nick’s arm around her shoulders, she stood up, pulling Nick with her. They took it slow and once up, Nick tested his leg. He looked slowly at Skylar and then smiled a big smile of relief.

“It feels fine. I mean it hurts a little but I didn’t sprain anything. Yeah, it’s good. Look, I can walk almost normal.” Nick smiled and walked around a bit. “Man, that was a close one,” he said sheepishly.

Before Skylar could respond, they heard Alex hollering as she came around a log. In her hand was their backpack, dripping wet.

“I found it, I found it!” Alex announced. When she saw Nick standing and smiling, she dropped the bag and ran and gave her brother a big bear hug. Skylar joined in and all three were hugging and laughing. Then Alex took a step back and glared at Nick.

“Nick, if you ever, EVER do that again....” Alex stared at Nick with fire coming out of her eyes.

“I won’t. I promise. Really. I’m really really sorry,” Nick apologized sincerely realizing how close they came to this adventure ending.

The adventurers looked at each other with relieved smiles. They were back on track.

“Can we eat now?” asked Nick with a devilish grin. “I’m starving!”

“YES!” the other two answered back as they all turned and headed to the field for some much needed sunshine and food.

Chapter 18: The Journey - Part II

Our trio's lunch did not fair too well. In the morning when they packed their lunches, they put the food in a paper bag. Alex found the backpack caught on a branch sitting under the water. Much of their food had turned into a soggy mess that fell apart in their hands. Also, since the water was from the brook, it could have what is called "Beaver Fever." It is a parasite in the water that can get you pretty sick if you drink it. Wet sandwiches, mashed cookies and soaking banana bread all were lost. They were able to salvage two apples and three granola bars. But this was all the food for not only lunch but the rest of the day. Their bellies were still rumbling after the small lunch. However, sitting in the sun, having braved quite an adventure already, there spirits were still high.

"Well, we'll just have to look for edible plants while we walk," Alex said trying to be cheerful.

"Sure. Let's keep an eye out for wild raspberries. They're ripe in July so if we find some, we can have yummy berries," Skylar joined in.

"I do hope we find them soon though. I'm still pretty hungry. Most of my lunch is a pile of mush on the ground," Nick said a little worried about later in the day.

Being hungry is not a comfortable feeling for him. He can often get pretty "hangry" when he doesn't get enough to eat. Hangry is a cross between angry and hungry.

A loud and deep croaking call came from a nearby tree. It was so close and loud that it startled the three adventurers.

"Hey, look at our friend," Alex called pointing up in one of the oak trees on the edge of their small clearing.

Sitting quietly on a branch was a very large raven, just watching them. It had appeared without the three noticing until it made its call.

“Ravens are some of the smartest birds in the forest, you know,” Alex offered this tidbit of information hoping it would take Nick’s mind off of his belly.

“The Indians also saw them as some kind of spirit bird. Some tribes would carve totems poles with the raven sitting on top,” Skylar shared what she knew. “Kinda cool, him just sitting there watching us.”

“He’s probably just waiting for us to leave so he can eat my mushy lunch,” laughed Nick. “You can have it,” he shouted up to the raven. “All yours.”

The three took that as a sign to get up and keep moving upstream. It had been so difficult and most recently, scary with Nick’s fall that no one was that eager to start climbing on top of, over and under the trees by the rushing brook once again. But time was getting short and they still had no idea how much further it was nor what they may find along the trail to the Crooked Forest.

They got up and left their sunny picnic area and their raven friend. They headed back into the ancient dark forest with the roaring of the brook. As they left, the raven gave its deep call as if saying goodbye.

The three trudged on and kept to this side of the stream. They actually weren’t sure what side of the brook the Indian Tree would be on. It was getting harder. Their feet began to drag. Not just because of how hard the path was, but because they were also starting to worry. Worrying about food, about time and worrying if they were going to make it to the Crooked Forest. Worry has a way of stealing away any kind of happiness one feels, making things harder than they have to be. However, after only a half an hour, they stopped dead in their tracks when they heard the call of the raven again. This time, it was up ahead of them. It’s call gave them a burst of new energy.

The brook took a very sharp bend to the south and as they came around that bend, they froze. There was the raven sitting on a massive white oak tree that was shaped like an L right in front of them!



They had made it to the Indian Trail Tree! The raven eyed them again and watched as the three adventurers celebrated by jumping up and down. It was such a relief to find the tree. They finished celebrating and realized that the next part of their journey was going to take them “into another world.” They needed to find and follow a faint trail that was going to take them to some mysterious place.

“What do you think McGee means by ‘another world’?” Alex asked cautiously.

“I don’t know and it makes me a bit nervous,” Skylar shared.

“We’ve come this far though. We’ve got to go on!” Nick said strongly.

“We know!” Alex shot him a look. Sometimes Nick can be so impatient she thought.

“Well, come on then,” Nick said impatiently.

“Nick, don’t you remember what happened the last time you rushed into something...crossing that log?” Skylar said with a stern look.

“Ah, yeah, your right. Sorry. I already forgot,” Nick said sheepishly. “Um, what’s the plan,” he said smiling again.

“Hmmm. First off, let’s find that faint trail and see where it heads,” Skylar suggested.

The three moved slowly forward not wanting to ruin any sign of a trail. Sure enough, starting right at the base of the Indian Tree was a faint trail that headed straight North into the forest away from the brook. Standing right next to the tree, the three marveled at it. The trunk was almost as wide as the Grandfather Tree. It came up straight from the ground and at 3 feet, it made a 90 degree turn and grew parallel to the ground for about 6 feet or so. Then, the massive trunk turned 90 degrees again and reached back towards the sky. It was truly unique and amazing. It was even more amazing when they realized that a real live Indian, maybe 200 years ago walked where they were and tied the tree down to make it grow like this.

“Wow,” was all they could say.

“O.K., like Alex said before, this is new land for us so we need to really use our Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and Rabbit, ahem, yes Nick, Deer Ears,” Skylar said as Nick had opened his mouth. They smiled.

“Who wants to lead? Alex, you want to?” Nick asked.

“Sure,” said Alex as she started following the thin trail that broke through the forest plants. With one last look by the trio at the Indian Tree, they walked until it was out of sight, deeper into the unknown forest.

All the while, the raven remained sitting and staring at them from up in the tree.

Chapter 19: The Journey into “Another World”

This faint trail was different from the trail at the Grandfather Tree. It had a different feel. Maybe it was because they no longer had the roar of the brook in their ears. Or maybe it was because the trees were smaller but even denser. Or was it because every tree around them was a type of pine tree they were not familiar with? Or maybe it was because something they could not even put into words was different. Nevertheless, this difference had all three using all their senses, all of their Animal Skills and all of their Nature Skills more than the entire journey so far.

The thin trail headed in a straight line with only small changes in direction to avoid a tree here or there. There was no sun shining down on the forest floor. The pine trees were so densely packed and stunted that if one of the three stepped off the trail for 10 steps, they could not be seen. The trio stuck close to each other. Without the roar of the rushing brook, the forest seemed especially quiet. No birds called or twittered anywhere within ear shot. Even Rabbit/Deer Ears could not penetrate beyond the silence. The only sound was the soft muffled footsteps of each adventurer and their breathing.

“At least the trail is easier now,” whispered Alex looking behind at Skylar and Nick.

This silence was starting to freak her out. However, the other two just continued fox walking concentrating on using all of their senses.

The densely crowded woods, intense quiet and lack of sunlight was starting to weigh on them all. It was almost like a blanket was thrown over them, dragging them down and smothering them. The air even felt stale and thick.

“This forest feels...feels dead or something,” Alex said again looking back, hoping that one of the others would respond. She wasn’t sure how much more quiet she could take in this forest.

“Actually, it feels like it’s sucking my life force away,” Nick responded walking heavily and feeling spooked.

“Guys, talking isn’t helping. Just keep going. This forest has got to end sooner or later,” Skylar said stubbornly but the truth was, the forest was wearing on her too.

They continued in silence with the forest surrounding them for what seemed like forever. Bellies rumbled and hearts sank. Nick started to worry again about how much time was left in the day. The forest was so dense that they couldn’t even tell where the sun was which made his worry grow stronger. He kept trying to catch a glimpse of where the sun was in the sky. If it was still high in the sky then they were fine but if it was starting to get lower, then evening was getting close.

Skylar felt like she couldn’t breathe. There was no light summer breeze and the air seemed thick and lifeless. Alex was just getting sick of all the dead brown color around. No green or pretty colors and the darkness was depressing her. Alex was about to scream when a color caught her eye on the brown forest floor. It was purple, her favorite color. She stopped and bent down. Skylar stopped as well wondering why Alex had stopped. Nick was a bit less interested.

“A-l-e-x! Come on,” he moaned wanting to keep moving.

Alex turned to the other two and held up a pretty purple flower that was like a ray of sunshine in this dank forest. She smiled and then popped it in her mouth.

“Mmmmmm, it’s delicious.”

“What was that? Is it really something we can eat? Are there any more?” Nick reacted with interest as his stomach grumbled.

“Yeah, they’re violets and there’s this whole patch of them. Look,” she gestured with her hand to the entire forest floor in front of her.

Sure enough, the forest was carpeted with little green leaves and sweet purple, blue and white flowers. Dappled sunlight sprinkled the colorful carpet. Many of the pine trees in this

part of the forest had died dropping their needles, allowing for more light to hit the ground. That light was just enough for a bed of violets to sprout up all around.

Nick, Skylar and Alex started picking and nibbling on the delicious little flowers. They were conscious not to pick all the flowers in one area though. Instead, they were like deer, browsing on a few here, a handful there and so on. This way, there would be plenty of violets in the future. The cheery color, the little bit of sunlight and honestly, the nutritious snack in their hungry bellies changed their whole outlook.

Nick was able to see the sun high in the southern part of the sky. Phew, plenty of time still. Skylar felt like she could breathe some fresh air again. Alex, well, she was thrilled with the dash of color in the forest.

After several minutes, they sat back and looked around. The forest was still crowded, dark and quiet but instead of feeling heavy, they saw it for what it was; a young pine forest struggling to survive. It had some very interesting qualities.

Nick said, "If it was winter, this actually would be a great place to set up camp. All these trees would break the wind and keep a lot of the snow off the ground. I bet it's actually a pretty cozy place in the winter."

"Yeah, totally. Plenty of firewood with all the dead lower branches too. We should name this forest. What about the Dark Forest" Skylar exclaimed.

"Cool. I like it," Nick agreed.

"Maybe we should come back here in the winter to camp. That would be really cool," Skylar said.

"Let's first complete this adventure Skylar," Alex said with a smile. "Hey, is anyone else being bitten by mosquitos?"

"No, oh, yeah, I have two biting me right now. Ouch!" Skylar slapped her leg.

"Me too," said Nick. "Wait, there're even more now. Ouch."

"Whoa, I can see them flying around your head Alex!" exclaimed Skylar.

“You too!” grunted Alex as she batted at them.

“Let’s get going!” Nick hollered as he rose up and swung his arms. “They’re swarming around us.”

“Ouch, they’re all over us now! Yeah, let’s get outa here!” Skylar said as she swatted at the mosquitoes buzzing all around her.

The three quickly got up, thanked the violet patch and started moving. Alex was still in the lead and setting a fast pace to try to outrun the mosquitos. Skylar and Nick were behind waving their arms like scarecrows in the wind.

“Hurry up Alex,” Skylar pleaded as she slapped her arm and got 4 mosquitos with that one slap. “They’re getting worse.”

Around each of their heads were dark clouds of hundreds of mosquitoes. Any bare skin had ten, twenty and even thirty mosquitoes landing and biting them.

“Ahhhhh, they are covering me. Even getting in my eyes. Hurry Alex!” Nick exclaimed.

Alex quickened her pace. “Hey, there’s a big opening up ahead and it’s really sunny. Maybe they won’t follow us there.”

Running now, they broke into the opening. A second later, all three abruptly stopped and started screaming in pain.

In our adventurer’s haste to get away from the mosquitoes, they ran headlong into a huge patch of stinging nettle. The nettle leaves with their tiny sharp needles brushed all of their bare legs causing an immediate burning pain. All three of them had the front of their legs covered in the stinging nettle rash. Their tanned legs turned red with white raised bumps. The pain and burning was almost unbearable for them.

“OOOwww, oooooowwwww, it burns. What’s happening?” shouted Nick confused and in pain.

“It must be this plant around us....ooowwww, aaaaaaaahhhhhh. Is there anything we can do?” groaned Alex.

“Oooooooo, ooooooo, um, a plant, right. There’s got to be a plant that can....can help, ooooooaaaaaaa,” gasped Nick.

“Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmm, yes...yes...I think.....mmmmmmmm...what was it again?” panted Skylar between grunts. “Anyone remember? Mmmmmmm, oooooooo, oooooooowwwwww.”

“Pine sap? Oooo, aaaaa, eeeeeee, uuuuu, um no. Raspberry leaf maybe?” Nick guessed.

“Nooooo, aaaaa, ooooo, that’s for diarrhea! Wait, wasn’t it.....mmmmmm, yes, it might work if....we....can, oooooooouuuuuu, find it,” Skylar huffed.

“Whaaaaat, oooowww, what, what is it?” Alex pleaded.

“We’ve got to find Jewelweed. It should grow near nettle tooooooo. Mmmmmmm. Let’s gently walk arouuuuund oooooo, this patch of nettle and try to find...it,” exhaled Skylar.

The moaning and groaning trio very carefully backed out of the nettle patch and began walking around it. They did not have to go far since both nettle and jewelweed like the rich moist soil that was here on the edge of the forest and clearing.

“Here it, ooooo, is,” hollered Nick as he grabbed a large handful, smashed it up to make a mushing mess and slathered his legs with the gooey crushed plants.

The other two followed suit. It helped immediately, taking the edge off of the pain. In another five minutes, the pain was bearable and in another few minutes, it was a mild burning sensation. The three lay back relieved. They had heard that nettle stings can last a whole day if you don’t do anything for them.

“Wow, I’ve never been stung by nettle before. It hurts. It really really hurts,” exclaimed Skylar.

“Yeah, that’s the last time I run right into a field without paying attention to the plants!” announced Alex. “I’m really sorry guys.”

“It’s alright Alex. Wasn’t your fault,” assured Skylar.

“Um, guys, this isn’t a field,” Nick said under his breath.

“Wha? Holy moly. What is this place?” Alex asked as she gazed in front of her.

Indeed, the Dark Forest had opened up to a huge open area, the size of four or five football fields, maybe more. But the area wasn’t a meadow or field. It was something totally different. Something our three adventurers had never seen before in all their travels.

“What is this place?” asked Skylar.

“I...don’t...know,” replied Nick.

This open area was part lake, part meadow and part forest. It was like the meadow and the forest were floating on top of a lake. Islands of land with thick moss, low bushes and even a tree or two dotted the area. Water lay in between the islands. Some of the islands were large, the size of a baseball diamond while others were only the size of a basketball. All of this had the backdrop of a bright blue sky with a few light wispy clouds. The three just starred at this bizarre and magical world they stumbled onto.



After a while, the reality of their predicament started to dawn on them. Skylar was the first to say something.

“Where do we go from here? The trail is gone and there’s definitely no trail going through this place,” she said feeling a bit hopeless.

“I don’t know. Could the trail loop around?” Alex asked.

“That would take the rest of the day probably. This place is huge,” Nick exclaimed feeling lost and not knowing what to do.

“Wait a second, what did McGee say about clues or signs?” Alex commented.

“Right. Good one Alex. Yeah, he said that there’ll be clues that’ll take us to the Crooked Forest,” Skylar said with hope growing inside.

“Yes, and that we have to trust each other, ourselves and our inner voices. Remember?” Alex added.

“Yeah but what kind of clues? I mean, it could be anything. Plus, how will we know if something is a sign and if it’ll even lead us to the Crooked Forest?” Nick countered.

“Maybe that’s where the trusting of ourselves and inner voice comes in,” Alex suggested feeling defensive.

“Well, doesn’t help talking about it. Let’s at least look around for what could be a clue. Once we find something, then we can figure it out,” Skylar said wanting to keep the moods up.

The trio began poking around. They kept a close eye out for stinging nettle. They did not want to bump into that plant again. As they searched they noticed how different the plants were. The plants on some of these islands near the edge were totally strange. They had never seen most of them before. Many had cool flowers of all different colors. The mosses were thick and spongy. One plant looked like a vase. It had no noticeable leaves, just a cluster of these green and reddish vase tubes. Down in the bottom of each tube was water and dead insects. What kind of plant was this? It was some bizarre alien plant to our trio.

The trees were different too. They were smaller and had short spikey needles. They were not like the hemlock but definitely an evergreen tree. The needles of these trees were like scales. The bark was reddish and flakey too.



“Hey, I think these trees are cedar trees,” Nick called.

“How do you know?” Skylar called back.

“The bark, looks like the stuff I collected from my Dad’s wood pile. I didn’t realize they would grow in a place like this. I’m gonna collect some since my tinder bundle got drenched when the backpack fell in the water.”

“Good idea Nick,” Skylar replied.

“Whoa, look at all the turtles on that log,” Alex shouted as she pointed to a tree that had fallen into the water and was laying on the top.

Several turtles were out sunbathing on the log. The three gathered together and marveled at the spectacle of these turtles.

“This place is really amazing. You know, I think it’s ...it’s called a bog,” Skylar said hesitantly.

“A bog? Hey yeah, that makes sense. Aren’t bogs places that moose like? Whoa, that would be epic, seeing a moose out here?” Nick exclaimed getting excited about that.

“I could totally picture seeing a moose here,” Alex added.

As they gazed across this large expanse before them Alex shouted, “Look. Look in the middle. On that small tree in the middle of the large island...a raven!”

“I see it, I see it. It’s just sitting on that tree out there,” Skylar responded.

“What’s it doing out there anyways?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know. Do you think it could be the same one that we’ve seen before? The one at the Indian Trail Tree and the one where we had lunch?” Alex questioned.

“Maybe. Do you think it could be a sign?” Skylar asked hesitantly.

“Huh. I was thinking a sign would be, I don’t know, something left for us. Not a...a...raven who can fly around and stuff,” Nick shared.

“I did too but animals often bring messages, right. Those stories about Indians always have some animal as a sign...or clue,” Skylar replied starting to feel more confident.

“I think the raven is a clue,” Alex declared strongly.

The other two turned towards her in surprise. The way she said it – clear, strong, confident was different.

“Why?” Nick asked skeptically.

“It just is and I just do. I can’t explain it. I also think that it’s the same raven and it’s helping us,” Alex proclaimed.

“That’s silly Alex. A raven helping us? No way. We’re just three kids in the woods, not some important Indian on a quest,” Nick said disbelievingly.

“Nick, why not. This sort of is a quest right? We’ve been doing all this training with nature for months now and what we are doing is important. I think Alex could be right,” Skylar defended.

“Ha,” Nick scoffed.

“Nick,” Skylar lowered her head and looked seriously at him, “remember, we’re supposed to trust each other and that means Alex too. Maybe it’s her inner voice telling her this but either way, we’ve got to trust her.”

Nick looked at the two girls. Hesitated and then agreed, “You’re right. Sorry Alex. My only question now is...how do we get over there?”

All three looked around at the watery world with islands as far as their eyes could see with a large island in the middle.

Alex smiled broadly, “We jump!” And with that, she jumped two feet over the water to a floating island. “Come on, it’s fun,” and she jumped to another.

Skylar and Nick looked at each other in disbelief, smiled broadly and then...jumped!

They caught up to Alex and gasped for breath while they laughed. They felt like frogs, jumping from lily pad to lily pad. It was so much fun. The islands really did seem like they were floating. The water would ooze up and get their feet wet on some of them. The larger islands had one or two trees growing on them and were more solid. They wondered why that was. Could it be that the ground was more solid and that allowed the trees to grow or the trees and their roots actually made the islands more solid? Either way, they appreciate the dry ground under their feet.

This was slow going though. The further into the bog they got, the more they had to rely on each other to get from one island to another. They were getting tired and the gaps between the islands were getting larger. They developed a system of crossing that worked pretty well. Nick, who could jump the furthest would leave the backpack and jump to the next island. Then, Skylar would toss the backpack to Nick. Alex would jump next, with Skylar giving her a big shove. Skylar would then be the last to jump. On more than one occasion, she would not

totally make it and get wet feet but with Alex and Nick there, they always pulled her up and out quick.

Finally, they reached “Raven Island.” The raven flew up, circled the island three times and flew in a straight line to the opposite side of the bog. On this larger island, they took a break and nibbled on the last granola bar. While resting, Alex heard something by the opposite edge of the bog where the raven had flown.

“Shhhh, listen,” Alex whispered. “Do you hear it?”

“What?” Nick asked while he strained to his ears.

“The bird alarms at the far side of the bog over there,” answered Alex.

“Oh yeah, I hear some chipping sounds over there,” Skylar said nodding her head. “Those birds are really upset at something.”

“Totally,” Alex replied. “Notice that the birds sound like they are above the ground alarming? Must be some serious predator on the ground.”

“What could it be?” Nick asked, feeling a little nervous wondering what could be making the birds so upset.

“Don’t know. But what I do know is that it must be a sign, right?” Skylar answered.

“HMMMMM,” was all Nick said. He still wasn’t quite sure about this ‘sign’ thing.

The two girls squinted their eyes at Nick and said, “Come on! We’ve got to go over there.”

“Alright, I guess so,” Nick said reluctantly.

With that, our adventurers continue jumping, leaping and moving across this watery world of islands.

As they came nearer the far edge of the bog, the travel became even more difficult. They had to pick and choose what route to take, guessing how close the islands were to each other. Several times, they had to double back and find a new route that they could cross. It was like a maze but without a definite exit.

Concern and then panic started to rise in the trio as the sun was moving closer towards the western horizon with every minute. For the last hour, they were going in circles. As amazing as this bog was, it is not a place to spend the night. The longer they stood on one island, the more the water would seep up and soak them. Who knows, maybe the islands would even sink if one stayed too long.

After repeated attempts with several different routes they were stuck standing and looking at solid shore only 40 or so yards away. Their bellies rumbled and muscles ached from all the leaping and jumping. They took a break and gazed around. Off to the west they saw something that caught their eyes in the distance. They blinked hard at what they saw. The sun was in their eyes and they shaded them as best they could with their hands.

There, by the far distant edge, something very large and dark brown was in the middle of the water slowly moving. The head was moving like it was dropping and disappearing in the water and then coming back up. They squinted more and could think of only one thing it could be. It had to be a moose feeding in the water.

Alex, Nick and Skylar grabbed hands and stared, trying to see if it really could be. As suddenly as it appeared, it moved and was gone into the thick brush along the edge. They looked at each other scratching their heads. Was it? Could it be?

“Whoa. Do you think it really was a moose?” Nick asked still breathless. “I mean, moose are really rare this far south in Vermont.”

“What else could it be?” Alex answered.

“Whatever it was guys, it was walking the water,” Skylar pointed out.

“Yeah, so you think it was a moose then?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, could be. But whatever it was, it was *in the water walking*,” Skylar replied.

“Ah, yeah, we saw,” Alex said starting to wonder what was Skylar’s deal.

“What is your point Skylar,” asked Nick frustrated with Skylar repeating herself.

“It was in the water....?? Hello? Don’t you get it? It’s a sign, a clue,” Skylar said more strongly. Clearly, her cousins weren’t getting it.

“What? A sign for what?” Nick asked.

“It’s a sign for us; telling us that it’s O.K. for us to get into the water,” Skylar spelled it out for them.

“Totally! You’re right Sky. It *is* a sign for us!” Alex exclaimed.

“A moose gave us a sign to get into the water?” Nick asked skeptically. The two girls shot him very stern looks.

“Yes, Nick, a moose gave us a sign! What are we waiting for, let’s get wet and get to the other side!” Alex directed.

So, with a sign from a moose, the adventurers decided that if a moose could move in the water, so could they! They were going to have to wade and swim to get to that far shore. What lay beyond that shore, they had no idea. What they did know was that they would figure it out when they got there!

Chapter 20: The Final Trail to the Crooked Forest

When they reached the shore, they sat and wrung out their clothes and checked the backpack. They had stuffed all the important things in a Ziploc for the swim to keep dry. They also looked for the next sign or clue. They used their Owl Eyes and Rabbit or Deer Ears to get a better sense of this side of the bog and the new forest. The sun shined warmly and dried them as good as any fire. The swim did them well too. It loosened their muscles and reinvigorated them.

Skylar put fresh yarrow and pine sap on Nick's cut which was looking really good. Alex discovered another patch of nettle and this time see did not run into it. So while they dried themselves some, they ate nettle. If you carefully pluck the young leaves and roll them up onto themselves and crush them, you can eat it raw without getting stung. The crushing breaks up all the needles and makes it safe to eat. A good swim and some very nutritious wild edibles gave them energy for the final leg of their journey – the journey to the Crooked Forest.

They looked at the sun. It was now in the southwestern part of the sky meaning it was the afternoon. As the earth rotates, it makes the sun look like it's traveling across our sky. But really, we on earth are the ones spinning around while the sun stands still. Our earth rotates in a counter-clockwise direction so the eastern horizon has the sun "rising" out of it and the western horizon has the sun "setting" in it.

In the summer, the sun is high in the southern part of the sky. But it is never directly overhead if you live in the Northern Hemisphere. This is because our earth is tilted a little bit on the axis it rotates around. The only place it is overhead is near the equator. So in the Vermont summers, the sun is very high in the sky at noon but always slightly to the south. This is a great way to tell which way is south and what Nick has been watching all day.

However, for our adventurers, in a few more hours it will be evening with the sun nearing the west to set.

It was time to get up and go.

“Let’s get going guys. The sun is getting lower in the sky. From the looks of it, we only have a few more hours of daylight,” Nick shared.

They got up and got going. On the far edge of the bog, what lay in front of them was more forest. However, it was not the dense and dark forest like the other side but rather an open forest with medium sized trees. There were occasional bushes under the trees also and clumps of ferns and moss. The ground was very wet, soft and even muddy in places. It was almost swampy actually.

What was the next sign? The three scanned the sky for their raven messenger but she was nowhere to be seen. They decided to look around for something that might be a clue. With only a few steps, Skylar stooped down and looked closely at the ground.

“What is it Skylar?” asked Nick.

“Tracks....come check ‘em out,” Skylar said holding back her excitement.

“Whoa. Alex, come here. Look at these tracks!” Nick called to his sister.



“Geez, those are so clear and perfect. What is it?” Alex asked.

“The track is pretty big, about two and a half inches long. And see the four toes with nails at each one and then the large heel pad. Definitely not like the bear track though.” Skylar pondered the options. “Looks like a big dog track really. Hey, it’s gotta be a coyote!”

“Awesome!” Nick called out excited to see real coyote tracks. “A coyote right here!”

“This ground is great for tracking,” Alex commented.

“I know. You can follow the tracks with your eye. They head straight into the forest from here. And look, the coyote actually came right to the edge of the bog and stood here looking.” Skylar pointed out the tracks, creating a movie in their heads. “These tracks are really really fresh guys. It must had been here while we were out in the bog jumping around.”

“You think? Oh my, I guess so. We were jumping for over an hour I bet. Look at this track, the water is still oozing into it,” Nick observed.

“Hey, I bet that this coyote is what made those bird alarms when we were at Raven Island,” Alex shared excitedly.

“I bet you’re right! Boy, can you believe it? A coyote was just staring at us while we were out there. The birds actually told us from all the way out here that a coyote was watching us,” Skylar exclaimed.

“Coyote. So cool. Hey, those bird alarms *were* a sign! And now, these tracks have gotta be a sign right?” Alex said enthusiastically.

“It definitely is a sign!” Nick said firmly.

Alex and Skylar whirled around to look at Nick in disbelief. They all smiled and giggled. If Nick thinks it’s a sign then it has got to be!

“Well Skylar, you’re the tracking master so you lead the way,” Nick announced feeling proud of his cousin.

"I don't know guys. I've never tracked a coyote before. I don't know if I can do it," Skylar shared quietly.

"Come on Skylar, we trust you!" declared Alex.

"Yeah Skylar, you can do it," Nick joined in.

"Alright then," Skylar agreed.

Inside, Skylar felt nervous and scared. Having her cousins put their trust in her with trailing a coyote in the forest...what if she lost the trail? Or worse yet, got them all lost? She might totally mess up and then with the sun going down...she didn't even want to think about it. However, they both wanted her to do it and she didn't want to let them down.

Skylar took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a minute and then began tracking. At first, on the edge of the bog, the tracking was pretty easy. The coyote left clear tracks as it moved straight into the forest over the swampy ground. There is something very different between following the tracks of a deer versus that of a coyote. They are very different animals. They each have very different feet.

First off, one is a prey and the other a predator. That means they each move differently. Secondly, the coyote is all about covering ground and waiting to smell something fresh to catch. Thirdly, a deer's foot is a hard hoof while a coyote is softy padded. Therefore, coyote tracks are lighter and softer and their trail weaves through the forest in one general direction. A deer trail meanders here and there as it browses leaving deeper and sharper edged tracks.

Skylar was doing great keeping with the trail. At times, the tracks were in the soft wet ground while other times they were up on the mossy clumps. Either way, if you looked close enough, you could see the impression of its tracks. Skylar took several steps, then would stop and squat down looking closely at the trail. The longer she followed the tracks, the more she began to understand the way of the coyote. By trailing an animal, you end up connecting with that animal in a way. You can sense things that otherwise you never would.

"She's in the zone," Alex whispered to Nick.

"Totally. Like a bloodhound she is," Nick snickered out of admiration.

Skylar continued and began to feel confident that she really could do it. But then it happened...what she was afraid of happening. She lost the trail. The land had been drying out the further away from the bog they got and therefore the tracks were becoming fainter. However, Skylar felt that she was on the trail. Then, she ended up looking more closely at the tracks because something just seemed off.

It turned out that she had been trailing a raccoon and not the coyote any longer. How long had she been tracking a raccoon? When did she lose the coyote trail? Oh my gosh, she could have been trailing the raccoon for the last 20 minutes! They may not make it now to the Crooked Forest and it's going to be her fault, all her fault! Skylar froze feeling heat rise into her face. She just stopped and stood there.

After a few minutes, Alex and Nick looked at each other. This was not Skylar's normal "zone."

"Hey Sky, what's up?" Nick cheerfully asked.

Skylar didn't respond.

"Skylar?" Nick was beginning to be concerned.

Alex went over to her and saw that she was quietly crying. Alex backed away and whispered to Nick, "She's crying. What do you think is wrong?"

"I LOST THE TRAIL AND HAVE PROBABLY RUINED OUR CHANCES OF FINDING THE CROOKED FOREST," yelled Skylar angrily.

Sometimes, when we are sad or scared or both, we can try to hide it with anger. It is like a shield for our feelings. Skylar was trying to cover up her sadness and hurt with anger right now with her cousins. Fortunately, her cousins know her well. Instead of responding angrily back which is what many people would do, they quickly ran to comfort her.

"It's O.K. Skylar. You did so good. I couldn't have done what you did," Alex said as she stroked Skylar's hair.

"Yeah, Sky. You can find it again. Don't worry," Nick comforted.

“NO I CAN’T. We ‘ve been following a raccoon for who knows how long. It’s getting close to evening time. It could take me an HOUR or more to find the coyote tracks again,” Skylar exclaimed with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Well, maybe YOU can’t, be WE can. Come on, all of us together can do it Skylar!” Alex responded optimistically.

“Yeah! If it would take one person an hour, then it’ll take all three of us, um, what, right...20 minutes! We can do that!” Nick encouraged. “Plus Skylar, if I didn’t ruin our chances of getting to the Crooked Forest by falling off a log and losing our backpack then how can you ruin everything by losing a trail for a bit?”

Skylar sniffed and looked up. Nick had a point.

“Right, and what about me. I ran you two right into a stinging nettle patch and that didn’t stop us from finding the Crooked Forest. It did hurt...ooooowwwwww, eeeeeeeeeeee, oooooooooooooooooo,” Alex said while she did the stinging nettle dance.

Skylar laughed. Wiped her tears away and said, “O.K., let’s find this coyote!”

The three adventurers turned back and retraced their steps. They started circling around in larger and larger circles to “catch” the coyote tracks where they had lost them. As it turned out, the coyote and raccoon crossed paths when the coyote took a ninety degree turn heading east only 5 minutes back. Skylar breathed a sigh of relief.

Alex and Nick patted her on the back and said, “Lead on track master.”

Skylar smiled and began trailing again. The ground where the coyote turned remained wet and soft so Skylar followed it without issue for a good while. The forest changed as they started up a hill. The tracks became fainter but kept to the moss so the tracks were still visible to a trained tracker. Right before the top of the hill the tracks stopped. Skylar stopped and stared bewildered.

“They stopped...” Skylar said confused.

“You mean the coyote stopped?” Alex asked trying to understand why Skylar sounded confused.

“No, I mean the tracks end, like there are no more tracks. The tracks disappear,” Skylar said distressed.

“Huh? Tracks just don’t disappear,” Nick said as he came closer.

“These did. Look, you can see this track clearly, then this track and this one and....no more,” Skylar showed him.

“Whoa. They do. They really do disappear! But how is that possible?” Nick asked incredulously. “The coyote just can’t vanish in thin air.”

“Let me see,” Alex edged in and looked. “You’re right Skylar. That’s so weird. They just vanish. Let’s go to the top of the hill. Maybe the tracks pick back up there?” Alex suggested.

So our trio climbed the last few feet of the hill to the top to try to find the missing coyote trail. What they found was not a coyote trail. It was the Crooked Forest!

Chapter 21: The Crooked Forest and the Medicine Circle

At the top of the hill, sat the Crooked Forest. It was a forest that no one could ever imagine. And it was right there in front of our adventurers. Hundreds of pine trees were growing crooked. Each tree came out of the ground and immediately grew several feet parallel to the ground. After a few feet the tree curved upward and grew straight towards the sky. Each tree looked like the letter **J** and there were hundreds of them, as far as their eyes could see.

The trees all faced the same direction. The forest floor was covered only with moss and pine needles. No other ground plants grew. These pines were not the white pine which has five delicate needles to a cluster. You can remember this since the word W.H.I.T.E. has 5 letters for 5 needles. These pines had 3 stout pine needles to a cluster and really rough red bark. The total effect was eerie and alien-like.



Our adventures stood gazing upon the forest. They were speechless. For the last several months, they had been preparing to find this legendary place. Now, they were there after so much and it was more bizarre, strange and magical than they ever thought it would be. To see hundreds of trees, bent and curved all in one direction was shocking. It was the most

unnatural thing to see. What, how, who could have made this forest? Standing in front of it did not help to answer that question. It baffled our trio. It indeed was a mystery.

“We’ve got to explore it. We’ve got to get to the center of it.” Skylar declared.

“But we could easily get lost? I mean, every single tree is exactly alike. There are no landmarks around to help us find our way out though. This place looks exactly the same everywhere,” Alex questioned a bit unnerved by this place.

“The sun. We’ve got to watch the sun. These pines aren’t so thick. We should be able to do it,” Nick answered.

“We can also put sticks down as markers, kinda like Hansel and Gretel. Let’s start right here and make a tall one so we can see it from far away,” Skylar suggested.

With determined looks, our adventurers put several long sticks together like a Tepee and then began to penetrate deeper and deeper into the forest leaving a trail behind. The further they went, the more it all looked the same. No birds sang, no animal sign was visible and few if any plants grew on the ground. There was also a feeling to this forest. A feeling of something...something powerful. The trio never felt afraid or like something bad was out there. They just felt like this place held a power or magic that was far beyond the three of them.

Keeping their eye on the sun and using sticks to mark their path they ventured deeper and deeper. Through the uniformly bent trees, they began to see an area ahead that looked different from all the rest. The lines of the trees in the distance did not match the J shaped lines of the rest of the Crooked Forest.

They headed towards that change. As they came closer, they realized what the difference was. The trees in this area were much larger and growing completely straight versus curved like all the rest. They also grew in a perfect large circle about the size of a classroom. And in the middle of the trees were a bunch of large and small stones placed in an unusual design. Our adventurers had reached the center of the Crooked Forest and before them was the Medicine Circle.

A medicine circle is a place where natives held special ceremonies. They are sacred places that have great meaning and power. This circle where our trio stood on the edge was very old. However, despite how old it seemed no pine needles, moss or dirt was on any of the rocks in the circle. It was like someone or something has been taking care of this medicine circle. But who? When? Why? Alex, Nick and Skylar had never heard of native Indians still living around here still.

The rocks were arranged like a compass or a wheel. Four very large rocks, the size of very large dogs were placed in the four directions. These four rocks were so large that it seemed impossible for anyone to be able to move them. Medium sized rocks made an outer circle. Then, like spokes of a wheel, smaller rocks went in lines from the large outer four rocks into the middle of the circle. At the very center of the circle was another circle with a small fire pit inside of it. A small path led to the center from the outside by the largest of the four directional rocks. Nick, using his compass, noted that this “entrance” rock was placed in the East and the other three rocks were placed exactly in the South, West and North.



Nick started to enter the circle at the East rock and then stopped. What was he doing? He took another few steps past the rock towards the middle then stopped again, doubting himself. The girls looked at each other confused.

“Nick, what are you doing?” Alex whispered.

In this place, it seemed like talking in a normal voice was not appropriate. Very much like the way you feel when in a church.

“I...I don't know. I just feel like I, like we should go to the very center. I feel pulled to it. I also feel like we are meant to....make a fire,” Nick quietly answered.

“Really? Do you think it's your inner voice?” Skylar asked.

“I...think so,” he said and turned to them with a crooked smile. “Yes. Yes it is. We need to make a fire before we leave guys,” he said with conviction. “But first, we need to collect kindling for the fire.”

The girls did as they were told. In this open dry pine forest, finding kindling was easy. With a small armload each, they gently fox walked forward towards the center using their Owl Eyes and Rabbit Ears. Silently they moved on the moss that was between the rock designs. Once at the center, there was enough room for the three of them to kneel down and build a fire in the pit. Carefully and with purpose, every piece of wood was placed into the fire circle. Enough room was left for a tinder bundle which Nick pulled out of his shirt pocket. For some reason, since the bog, he had been drying this bundle he collected from the cedar trees.

What the three were about to do was a very sacred thing; lighting a sacred fire in a medicine circle. Each of them felt that sacredness or importance.

Then, removing a match out of his waterproof carrier, he looked at the girls. They nodded to him. He closed his eyes and gave thanks for the trees, the land, the wood and the fire. He then with one smooth motion lit the match. Putting the match to the tinder bundle, the flame caught and grew.



Soon, there was a bright fire burning in the middle of the Medicine Circle with our three adventurers gazed upon it. No words were spoken. Each was lost in their own thoughts. Their thoughts took them back to that cold February night when Ol' Jack McGee first told them about this place. Then, their thoughts traveled in time to all they had accomplished to this point. How far they have travelled; not only in distance but in knowledge, experience, and understanding. They remembered how hard it was at first to go to their Special Spots

but how they kept at it. They thought about the challenges they had faced with learning the Nature and Animal Skills.

Then, they thought about this day and the mistakes they made and how they overcame them together. They realized how the entire experience had helped them in so many ways and had shaped who they were now. All they felt in their hearts was thanks. Thanks for every challenge, every mistake and every triumph.

The three adventurers looked deeply into each other's eyes and smiled. Without words, they knew why they had come here and why they had to do it together.

The fire danced before them like spirits. The trees around them looked on like proud elders. The medicine circle surrounded them like family and friends. The fire awoke the ancestors of this place and our trio felt the presence of kind and loving spirits around them. They were not alone as they sat watching the fire.

Our adventurers realized what the riches that McGee spoke of at the beginning actually were. It was not a treasure of gold and jewels but much more valuable and rare. It was a treasure that no one could steal away from them for it was inside them and this journey had uncovered it inside each of them.

The fire began to die down for dead pine burns fast and leaves little coals. It felt right to let the fire go. They felt complete. Each stood up and breathed deeply. They nodded their heads and turned back on the small Medicine Circle path.

All three froze staring at the large rock at the circle entrance. On top of the East rock were three leather pouches with straps and a black feather sticking out of each one place in a triangle. Alex, Nick and Skylar's eyes grew wide in disbelief. But how? But who? Those pouches certainly were not there when they arrived. It was like they magically appeared.

They scanned the forest all around searching for who or what had placed them there. Nothing was seen; not a sign or trace of anyone or anything having been there.

They slowly went to the pouches and carefully examined them. Each pouch looked handmade out of an animal skin. The black bird feather was tied to the strap. They could tell that something was inside of each pouch.

Looking at each other, they knew that these were for each of them. They carefully opened them. The inside of the leather still had deer hair on it making a soft and beautiful place for something sacred. Inside each pouch was something else.

In the first one they opened, there was a beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Nick's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a small fire. On the back were etched these words:

May your PASSION BURN brightly and LIGHT yours and others' JOURNEYS

In the second pouch, there was another beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Alex's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a chickadee. On the back were etched these words:

May your SONG ALWAYS HELP you HAVE courage and BRING courage to others AROUND you

In the last pouch, there was another beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Skylar's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a coyote track. On the back were etched these words:

May you ALWAYS FIND your path and Lead others to their OWN path.

Our three nature adventurers looked at each other and blinked. Their mouths hung open. They could not understand how these three carved stones fit each of them perfectly. The fire stone was for Nick. The chickadee stone for Alex and the coyote stone for Skylar. And the black feather...was it a raven feather? The raven had been such a messenger for them this whole journey. They put the stones carefully back into their leather pouches and put the strap of the pouch around their necks. They hung perfectly over each of our adventurer's hearts. All three just stood there, breathing in this adventure of theirs.

They looked at each other, gazed at the medicine circle and took a deep breath. They looked at the sun that hung close to the western horizon. The deep call of a raven overhead echoed around them.

They looked up to catch the glimpse of their raven messenger as it circled them three times and then headed in the direction back towards home.

"Another sign. Epic. Just epic." Nick said with a knowing smile.

Chapter 22: The Return Home

The trip back was much easier. It was like all of the challenges they faced going to the Crooked Forest had disappeared. Following the coyote trail back to the bog went easily. It was like the trail was glowing for Skylar. They munched on some stinging nettle when they came to the edge of the bog. Crossing the bog, they found one place that they could jump and hop all the way across. No one had to get wet. The Dark Forest was indeed getting darker by the minute but they were able to move easily and cheerfully through it thinking about coming back in the winter to camp here. They did slow to nibble on some violets too.

At the bear trail, well, they moved as quickly along that since they definitely did not want to bump headlong into the bear while crawling through brambles. At the end of the tunnel trail, they noticed that the brambles were actually raspberry bushes and there were some delicious berries to add to their bellies. Although they had eaten very little all day, what they had eaten was nutritious and energizing. Their bellies still rumbled but their spirits soared.

They reached the Indian Trail Tree and gazed at it imagining long ago, Indians standing where they were. Alex, Nick and Skylar realized that natives always felt that deep connection to nature, a connection that our trio was feeling more and more often. They could feel nature around them with all of their senses and with all of their hearts.

When they reached the rushing brook, the sun was almost touching the horizon. It would not be that long before it became dark. Trying to crawl over, under and on top of all the logs along the brook in the dark would be dangerous to say the least. Here was another challenge that in the past might have stopped or slowed our adventurers but not anymore.

Alex with the look of mischief said, "What about we go down the creek?"

"You mean *ride* the creek down?" Skylar said as the bright idea became brighter in her mind.

"Exactly!" Alex said triumphantly.

“Sounds crazy and good to me,” Nick agreed.

“Me too,” added Skylar.

“Me three,” giggled Alex.

With that, the three slid down the steep bank, waded into the moving water and sat on their butts. The current began to push them downstream and pretty soon, our trio were laughing as they bounced down the stream on their rear ends. Sometimes they would hit a rock a bit too hard but that would just have them laugh more as they hollered. Occasionally, they had to pull themselves up and out to avoid a steep drop but in the end, what had taken them a several hours only took them 30 minutes of rip-roaring fun.

Laughing and hugging each other they got out of the rushing brook at their trail. They were having so much fun, they almost missed it. They shook the water out of themselves like wet dogs and headed towards the Grandfather Tree. When they caught the first sight of the ancient tree through the forest, they saw its top aglow in golden light as the sun’s last rays were shining on it. Their adventure that morning began with the Grandfather Tree ablaze in the morning sun and it was ending with it ablaze in the evening sun. As they came upon that tree, they heard it say “welcome home.” Or rather, they felt the Grandfather Tree whispered it.

“Don’t you feel like the Grandfather Tree is happy to see us?” Skylar asked.

“I was just thinking that too,” Alex responded.

“Me too. Remember when Ol’ McGee said that the Grandfather Tree likes the name we gave him? Remember how he kind of listened before he said that?”

“Oh, I bet he was hearing the tree like us right now,” Alex’s eyes widened.

“Maybe, maybe,” Nick said deep in thought. Could one really hear trees?

The last light of the day moved off of the very top branches of the Grandfather Tree. Our nature adventurers continued on into familiar woods. They moved silently, like fox through the woods. In the darkening forest, they had to use their Owl Eyes to see in front of them. The quiet of the dusk hour was occasionally interrupted by robins going to roost and juncos

twittering as they settled in for the night. Our trio kept gliding through the forest. They had become so much a part of the woods at this point that they blended in completely and would have been virtually invisible to anyone looking.

However, they were not invisible to the coyote standing on the hill top watching.

The lights of Skylar's house glittered through the trees as the three came closer. Alex, Skylar and Nick slowed their pace not wanting the adventure to end.

They had made it. They did it. It was almost too unreal to imagine. A sadness started to creep in though. Sure, they were thrilled, proud and excited over what they had accomplished on this day as well as over the last several months, however, what now? They did know that any day out in nature using their newly developed skills would make that day an epic adventure. That will have to do they guessed.

They opened the back door of Skylar's house and froze again. This time, it was not a strange watery bog or a bear track or moose standing in the distance or the Crooked Forest that had them freeze. This time, it was their entire family, Mr. *and* Mrs. McGee along with several of their neighbors standing in the room smiling and shouting hurray as they came in.

Our adventurers felt like heroes returning after a long quest. In many ways, that is exactly what they were.

Warm food, warm hugs and many congratulations by family and friends filled them up. Mrs. McGee gave all three of them a big bear hug that nearly suffocated them. Alex and Nick's parents looked so proud and maybe relieved. Skylar's parents looked proud and excited for them.

The three were heralded to the fireplace to share their story while they ate some food. Family and guests asked questions, marveled at the events of that day and celebrated every step of the way with our adventurers. . The retelling of the story was almost as exciting as the journey itself. A few times, Alex and Nick's Mom looked a little queasy but Skylar's Dad put his arm around her laughing. All was well. All was more than well.

Once they finished sharing their adventure and some food, everyone started to mingle. As Nick, Alex and Skylar mingled and enjoyed everyone's company, our trio noticed that Ol' McGee, a few of the neighbors and even Skylar's father, all had leather pouches hanging around their necks very similar to their own. With the celebrating in full swing, Nick, Alex and Skylar slipped into a back room.

"Did you see the leather pouches?" Nick asked straightaway.

"Yeah, McGee had one on. So did Mrs. Walker and Mr. Lewis," Skylar said.

"Skylar, did you notice? Your Dad had one too." Alex paused then asked, "Do you think they are the same pouches as ours? Could they have been to the Crooked Forest too, like us?"

Before anyone could answer, McGee barged in surprising them yet again.

"There you three are. I've been looking for ya," McGee eyed them. However, there was warmth and pride in his look.

"I just wanted to say, well done...well done."

"Thank you sir," the trio responded.

Then McGee looked at them hard again and said, "Hummmph. Now you're ready. Today was just the beginning. I need your help with somethin' big.....really big."

The End



Until next time...

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The Adventurers...

Journey to the Crooked Forest

Written by Keith Marshall

Illustrations by Kevin Marshall

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Read nature; nature is a friend of truth.

-Edward Young

There is no Wi-Fi in the forest but we promise you will find a better connection.

-Author Unknown



The Adventurers.....

Introduction

Our Adventurers are three ordinary kids who have extraordinary experiences in the woods, fields, ponds, rivers and even their backyards in southern Vermont. This story is about the first adventure the trio ever had and how it sparks the beginning of many exciting adventures to come.

Alex, Skylar and Nick are 9, 10, and 11 years old. Nick and Alex are brother and sister and Skylar is their cousin. They are also the best of friends. All three have eyes the color of a summer's sky. Nick, the oldest is the tallest with short blond hair. He loves to run, jump, climb and wrestle and is naturally athletic. He also is a very caring brother and cousin, always looking out for the two others. Skylar is the 10-year-old with long blond hair and is the second tallest. Skylar enjoys running, playing and wrestling like the rest but what she enjoys most is to read books and learn about the world. She is curious, smart and very good at solving problems. Alex is the youngest and the smallest of the three with long brown hair. Alex does not let her size stop her in the least. She loves to play rough and tumble with anyone willing to join and often is the first to try something new. She loves to sing and has a very strong voice despite her size. She loves nothing more than spending time with her brother and cousin just like the others.

Each of the three have their own special talents, gifts and skills which when put together makes an unstoppable trio. When they get together, the forests, fields, rivers, lakes and marshes of the area are their playground. Who needs a swing set when there's an ancient grape vine hanging low from an oak tree to swing on or a frozen slide over the rapids of the winter creeks to slide down? What about when every tree in the forest calls to them to climb like monkey bars? It is these nature adventures that test them and where each of their talents and skills are called upon to keep them safe and having fun.

Their first serious adventure starts with a story about a mysterious place in the woods of Vermont not far from where they live. They hear about this place from a grumpy old neighbor known as Ol' Jack McGee around a fire one night in February.

Here is how the story goes and the adventure begins.

Chapter 1: The Beginning

This day starts like a normal Saturday in February in southern Vermont. Nick, Skylar and Alex are helping collect maple tree sap and boiling it down into syrup. This is a tradition at Skylar's house where they have several acres of forest with many Sugar Maple Trees. Each year, when the nights are freezing and days are above freezing, the sap of the maple trees flow clear and strong out of the small holes drilled in the trees. That sap, if you were to take a sip has a faint sweetness to it. Hidden in the watery liquid is the golden syrup. You need to collect the sap and boil it for several hours in a special evaporator pan and fire box to remove the water, leaving the liquid gold. It takes about 40 gallons of sugar maple sap to make only 1 gallon of syrup. A lot of work, time and help is needed to make this happen.

On the weekends, friends, neighbors and family all come together to help collect and boil down the sap. It will take an entire weekend, day and night to boil all the collected sap and make syrup.

"Hey Alex, can you grab the empty pail? These buckets are overflowing with sap!" hollered Nick as he took a slurp of sap out of the sap bucket.

"Mmmmmm, no matter how many times I taste maple sap, I always love it," Nick said looking over to Skylar who was emptying one of the full sap buckets into an empty carry pail.

"I know. It tastes almost like water but with just a smidge of sweet in it," Skylar responded as she finished emptying the bucket and put it back on the spile.

The spile is the little tap that goes into the hole in the tree to funnel the sap down into the sap bucket.

"Boy, these filled buckets are heavy. How many have we emptied so far?" Nick asked feeling like he had already emptied 100 of them.

"I think it's been about 30 of them so far," panted Alex as she came up with another empty pail.

"It doesn't make it easy that there's a foot of snow we have to walk through to get to all the trees," Skylar admitted as she went to another sap bucket to empty.

"I know. Geez, I can't wait to take a break and sit around the fire for a little," Nick said.

"Yeah. Hey Skylar, who's that old dude helping your Dad with the boiling?" Alex asked as she glanced over in the direction of the grown-ups.

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“Oh, that’s Ol’ Jack McGee. He comes every year and helps out. Actually, he’s the one that taught my Dad how to make syrup. Ol’ McGee’s alright. Kinda grumpy though. He’s lived around here all his life and tells some great stories,” Skylar answered hoping that this evening they might get some good stories around the fire.

The three emptied the last of the full sap buckets and then worked together to haul the filled pails to the storage tanks. The tanks were right next to the evaporator pan and with this last load were totally filled. It was going to be a long night of boiling sap down into syrup. However, the kids didn’t mind the hard work or late nights. There was something special about this time of year and making their own maple syrup. Imagine, collecting clear liquid sap from a maple tree and after boiling it for hours, you have delicious maple syrup! It is like magic really. All this water evaporates leaving behind the thick pure maple syrup. Also, there are always fun adults who come to help out too. Many stories are shared by the flickering light of the fire during this time and the kids love sitting quietly and listening to them all in the cold night air with the warm fire nearby.

“Nice job guys. Looks like we’re now ready to just sit around and boil up all this sap,” Skylar’s Dad, Brian, said to the three tired kids. “Here, take a seat by the fire with Mr. McGee and I’ll get you some hot cocoa and snacks.”

“Thanks Uncle Brian. Can we get marshmallows in our hot cocoa?” Nick inquired hopefully.

“Sure, no problem. You’ve earned ‘em. I think I tapped more trees this year than last year. It’s been hard to keep up. I emptied all the buckets yesterday and they were filled up again by today. Gonna be a good year for syrup.”

“You want anything Jack?” asked Brian.

“Got some coffee?” McGee asked in a raspy voice.

“Sure do. Cream or sugar?”

“What’d ya take me for Brian? One of those city slickers? I like my coffee black!” McGee said gruffly.

“Alrighty Jack. Don’t get your britches in a bunch,” Brian responded chuckling. “Three hot chocolates with marshmallows and one coffee black. Coming right up.”

Alex, Nick and Skylar were a little nervous being left with grumpy Ol’ Jack McGee. It didn’t help that McGee was eyeing them also with one eye through a face full of gray whiskers and a well-worn leather hat.

The three stared into the fire and poked the unburnt ends uncomfortably.

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“Well, what’d ya three like to do?” McGee suddenly asked.

“Um, well, I guess, I don’t know,” Alex replied nervously.

“You don’t know what’d ya like to do?” McGee stared harder at them.

“Ahem, we play a lot in the woods, sir,” Nick responded trying to sound confident. Truth was, McGee made him real nervous too.

“Play, what’d ya mean ‘play’ in the woods?” McGee continued interrogating.

“Well, we go explorin’ around, looking for animals, climbing trees and stuff like that,” Skylar clarified.

“Hmmmph,” McGee took a deep breath, looked up into the evening sky where the first stars were starting to come out and began...

“Well, these mountains around us were my backyard growing up ya know. And let me tell ya, I had the best backyard anybody could want. The forests, fields, creeks and ponds became my home away from home and the animals and birds became my friends and family. You see, I was never too good with people; wasn’t back then and still ain’t now actually.

When I was your age, I started wandering more and more in these woods. I began explorin’ and learning everything ‘bout this land like some wild Indian boy. Ya see, the more time I spent in the woods wandering around, being quiet and watching everything I saw, the more I got to know the land like the back of my own hand.

Also, the animals and birds got to know me too. I ended up being accepted by the animals in these woods. They knew that I meant them no harm so they treated me like one of ‘em. I could walk right through a herd of deer without them running away or pass by the fox with him only lifting his head to give me an annoyed look. Chickadees would land on my shoulder to say hello. Raccoons actually took to following me since they knew I would eventually be having a snack and they might get some crumbs. You know, there’s nothing cooler than having a wild animal either ignoring ya or hangin’ out with ya!

One of the things I loved to do too was track animals and figure out what they had been up to while I was gone from the woods. It was like I was a detective, trying to find clues to tell me the story about the animals and forest. By following the animals, you learn more about them than you could ever imagine. An added bonus, is ya also discover new and hidden places that just by walking around on your own you would never find.

I remember this time during a hot spell one summer when I found some weird tracks on a dusty trail that I was walking on. These tracks looked like someone was walking barefoot. I wondered ‘who else is crazy enough to be out here barefoot?’ I had to find out so I started

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following them. I was walkin' real slow see, so I wouldn't run into whoever or whatever it was. Up ahead, I saw somethin' through a thick bush moving on the trail so I froze. Whatever it was, it was moving towards me steady like. I waited and tried to see what it was through the thick brush. Well, what it was came around a bend in the trail beyond the thick brush and right there slowly walking towards me with his tongue hanging out of his mouth was the biggest black bear I had ever seen! This bear was so hot and tired that it wasn't even paying attention; it just wanted to get to a nice cool spot to sleep the rest of the day away. This dang bear was walking straight towards me no more than 15 feet away and it still had not realized that here was this young kid standing in the middle of the trail scared witless. I realized that this bear was not going to notice me until he bumped right into me; something that I did not want to happen so I managed to make a cross between a squeak and a croak. Well, that got the bears attention and it stopped and raised his head. His squinty eyes slowly opened wide as he realized that right in front of him was a human boy. I raised my hand and waved to him and gave a weak smile. I swear to you, that this bear slowly turned around like he was on his tiptoes and stepped off the trail and continued tiptoeing until he was a good 30 yards away. Then he turned back and looked at me again and disappeared down a hill. And that was it. In that moment, I knew that the bear was just as afraid of me as I was of him even though he must have weighed 300 pounds!"

McGee paused as Brian came with the hot chocolate and coffee. He sipped the hot black coffee and closed his eyes.

"I suppose you might like to hear a story 'bout a mysterious place up here in these hills?" asked McGee.

"That'd be awesome!" Nick said excitedly.

"Yes, sir!" Skylar agreed.

"How mysterious?" Alex asked skeptically.

McGee opened his eyes and looked at Alex and then the other two. "Very mysterious," McGee said in a soft and deep voice.

With the fire crackling and sending flickering light onto their faces, the stars starting to come out, the night air getting cold and the steam billowing out of the evaporator pan, the stage was set for the story that would change our trio's lives forever.



"Up in these here hills, there's a mysterious place like is like no other place. It's a forest of crooked trees and very few people have ever stepped foot in it. It's hidden by steep jagged cliffs to the north and east and a thick swamp to the south and west that has brambles with thorns that will tear a person to shreds. It is protected and guarded by nature itself and only those who are worthy are able to make it there. However, this place, if one can make it, has a treasure that is worth more than all the riches in the world.

I first heard about this place by an old local guy. He had noticed how I loved being in the woods and kinda took me under his wing. He ended up teaching me a whole lot 'bout nature. And after a while, he told me 'bout the Crooked Forest. However, when he first told me about it, I wasn't ready yet to go find that place. He told me that there were too many dangerous challenges for me to go. So, I kept going out into the woods and learning and practicing nature skills that this old fella told me 'bout. Eventually, he saw that I was ready.

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Well, (Jack paused long here and looked at each of the kids in their eyes letting them know without saying it that this was serious) well, he set me on the trail that would lead me to the Crooked Forest. It was a very, very old trail that I had never seen nor ever been on before. It lead me to a new part of these wild hills. It was a hidden, secret place where very few people had ever stepped foot. This trail was so old that it had probably been made by the Indians from these here parts long ago.

It was at this very moment that the campfire blazed up high shining eerie firelight on Ol' Jack McGee's wrinkled face and gray beard. Shivers went up and down the spines of the three like a lightning bolt. Mind you, these were not the kind of shivers you get when you are cold. They were not the kind of shivers you get when you are scared. They were the shivers you get when you know you are about to be told a really, really important secret.

Jack McGee cleared his throat and threw another log on the fire. With sparks flying up into the dark sky, he spoke:

When I stepped onto this trail, it felt like it was gonna to lead me to some place really important. Something from my gut pulled me down this trail. It was as if a magical string was attached to me guiding me further along this unknown and faint path. I followed like a dog on a leash. Mind you, on this trail, I met many challenges and tests that I had to overcome before I ever made it all the way to the Crooked Forest. As I got closer, the challenges with every turn in the trail became more difficult and scarier. It was as if the spirit of this place, a guardian of the secret forest was putting these tests in front of me to make sure that I was worthy. If I hadn't trained hard and learned what I learned, I never would've made it. Maybe, I never would've survived it.

Jack McGee coughed, stoked the fire and looked beyond the flames as if he was on that trail again, facing unknown challenges and dangers. Then, he blinked hard a few times and looked back to the three kids staring wide eyed at him.

Aww, we'll be here all night if I tell you about those challenges and tests that the trail put me through. So let me skip right to when I reached the forest...

The three were at the edge of their seats, staring with open mouths at Ol' Jack. Their hearts were pounding because in their minds they too could sense that forest and feel the magic there. Also in their minds were a million questions...like what were the challenges he faced? Were there monsters around those corners? Ghosts? Quicksand? DINOSAURS??? Their thoughts were interrupted by Ol' McGee speaking again. Their minds and breathing went quiet as they listened.

That lonely trail finally opened up and dumped me right into the middle of this "crooked" forest. It felt like I had just traveled a year on foot when I arrived. I was hungry, scratched up, dirty, thirsty and a bit scared but when I looked up and saw this forest, all of that disappeared. I just felt... wonder.

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All the trees where growing sideways. Sideways I tell ya! Not straight up and down like trees are supposed to. It was the weirdest and strangest thing I ever did see in the woods. I couldn't help but wonder what happened here? Was it a giant or something else? Besides the trees, there was something very different about this forest. No birds were singing, there were no animal trails weaving through. It was so..." Jack paused here searching for the right word... "so, quiet. The kind of quiet you get when you go into a church or somethin'. And with that quiet, I also had this feelin' of somethin'...somethin'...magical."

You could have heard a pin drop at this moment. Alex, Skylar and Nick were holding their breath, waiting nervously for what would come next. Does a giant or monster charge out of the forest at Jack? Why is it so quiet?

"I kept feeling the pull of this forest leading me into the heart of it. Without trails or other land marks, I could have easily gotten lost but I kept going. I walked towards the center of that forest and there it was, this, this, ancient circle made of hundreds of large and small stones. It looked very old and yet no moss was growing over the rocks. Each rock was placed carefully in a circle with other rocks leading to the center like spokes on a wheel. I could tell that someone, long ago had made this circle and it was very important. It gave me goosebumps standing there. I could also tell that someone, or something was taking care of this circle even now.

I later found out that this kind of place is called a medicine circle. It was a powerful medicine circle. Standing there, looking at it, I felt...felt something more amazing than I have ever felt before and that feeling has been with me ever since."

Chapter 2: The Challenge for the Trio

McGee, stared into the firelight for what seemed like forever. All was quiet except for the crackling fire and the kids' own heartbeats pounding in their chests. Then, as if coming out of a trance, Jack McGee looked at the three and said with a growl:

“You three'll just have to go find it yourselves to know what I'm talking 'bout, won't ya?”

The kids stared at McGee confused.

McGee eyed them seriously. “Aw, but you're not ready yet. But, if you're serious about finding this place then you better get to trainin'. What do ya say? Interested?” McGee questioned with a side glance.

With wide eyes and mouths open with eagerness, Alex, Skylar and Nick quickly nodded their heads up and down shouting together “Totally interested!” They shouted so strongly that Ol' Jack McGee nearly fell off the log he was sitting on.

Ol' McGee righted himself back on his log and with a scowl, he continued.

“Well then, maybe you are and maybe ya ain't. We'll just have to see 'bout that. However, let's presume you are. You'll need to know a few things first.” McGee took a long and slow sip of his coffee. The kids could hear him swallow. Then he began again.

“If you're ever gonna to make it to the Crooked Forest, you need to become ONE with nature like I was. I mean, when you move through the forest, you need to not only understand the birds, see the tracks of the animals, know the plants as if they were your own family but you need to *feel* the forest. You need to be able to hear the quietest sounds both in the forest and in yourselves! I'm talking about how people used to be with nature. How the Indians of this area used to be!”

Jack McGee's words and raspy voice echoed in their heads. McGee continued as he eyed them carefully.

“For this to happen, for you to truly become one with nature, you'll need learn to do several things first,” McGee paused.

“What, what! Tell us and we'll do it!” yelled Alex, again almost knocking Ol' McGee over again.

“Hrummph” exclaimed Ol' McGee with a glare at Alex.

A bit embarrassed, Alex looked quickly down realizing that this was not the best time for her gift of a strong voice and enthusiasm for trying new things to be shown off.

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“We’re sorry Mr. McGee but we’re just so excited and want to learn all we can so that we can find the Crooked Forest too” said Skylar, hoping to explain to Ol’ McGee why they’re being so loud.

“Alright, alright then” McGee said with a sidelong glance and a deep sigh. “Here’s what you three are gonna have to learn before you’re able to even place one toe on the Crook Forest trail.” With a deep breath and sitting up straighter, Ol’ McGee started.

“First, each of you need to find a spot outside that calls to you – a special spot.”

Looking out of the corner of his eyes he saw Alex getting ready to ask a question and McGee cut her off saying “No, not really callin’ your names but rather callin’ to your hearts. Remember, you need to learn to listen to your hearts in order to make it to the Crooked Forest! Do ya understand this?”

“Yes!” all three responded.

McGee’s eyes narrowed as he looked at each of the kids making sure that they understood what “calling to your hearts” really meant. After an uncomfortable amount of quiet and staring, McGee continued satisfied enough that each of the kids did indeed understand.

“This is a spot that you can get to easily from your home. I don’t care if it’s in some wild place or just in your backyard. It just needs to be outside and have some nature around it. Don’t be fooled by thinkin’ that your spot has to be deep in some wild woods. One of my most favorite spots is right in the heart of the busiest part of town. You wouldn’t believe what happens there. Once I saw the largest beaver in all my days, lazily swimming by in the river under the bridge and right under all the townsfolk’s noses. The important thing is to go every day and stay there for at least 30 minutes. Well, 30 minutes to begin with. Once you become more advanced, I’ll ask for more out of y’all. Do ya think ya can handle that?” McGee barked.

All three nodded their heads eagerly but making sure they didn’t say a word. Clearly, Ol’ Jack McGee doesn’t take too kindly to interruptions, especially loud ones.

“Start with this, and if you can go to your Special Spots for the next three weeks, every day, in this cold snowy weather, come find me. Maybe you’ve got a chance after all. I’ll then get you started on the next stage of your training.

With eyes glittering, all three nodded their heads. Nick politely and excitedly spoke up saying “We certainly will Mr. McGee. All three of us have some great places. This is Skylar’s backyard so she’s set and our backyard has lots of bushes and a birdfeeder where birds and even squirrels come. I once think I saw a hawk fly by and scare all the birds away. There’s a cat that prowls around though and.....”

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“Alright then! Son, I don’t need to know all the details,” Ol’ McGee interrupted and growled. “Can I continue now?”

All three accidentally shouted “Yes!”

McGee impatiently continued... “This may sound simple but it ain’t. People are soft nowadays. Kids are even softer. They feel a little cold or wet and wanna run inside and get warm and dry. They feel a little hungry and they cry and say they’re starvin’. I once went for two weeks without any real food. If you wanna know hunger, that’s the way to do it. Also, kids haven’t learned how to stick to somethin’. Their attention is divided; always lookin’ at the dang phones or playing those blasted video games or watching T.V! All this makes the mind and the body go soft not to mention nobody’s learnin’ the old ways or what’s really important.” McGee shook his head strongly, clearly upset over the state of kids nowadays.

With that last sentence, the fire crackled and sent up a shower of sparks. It was as if the ancestors were agreeing with Ol’ McGee.

Alex, Nick and Skylar could tell that they were not alone on this chilly February night and that something big and important was happening. They shook in their warm coats with that kind of shiver again; not like being cold, but of touching something that has great power and mystery.

“Argh.” McGee sounded and stretched his arms and his back. “You kids have got me all worked up now. Geez, I think you’ve got your story though. I’m a tired old man who needs his rest so I’m headin’ off to bed. But remember, you’ve got three weeks to show me that you’re serious about this. If you fail, then this quest ends before it even begins. Enjoy your dreams.”

With that, he gruffly chuckled, abruptly got up, tossed his coffee into the fire with a hiss and walked straight into the dark forest without making a sound. He disappeared in seconds.

Alex, Nick and Skylar just sat there, blinking and dazed. Did that really happen? Are they about to begin training to go and find the Crooked Forest? Did Ol’ Jack McGee really think that they each could become one with nature? Are they really going to go and find this place themselves? If so, what was the journey going to be like to find the Crooked Forest?

They each knew in their hearts that they were going to do this. They first had to train and learn how to become one with the forest and then they would go in search of the Crooked Forest. They would find the Crooked Forest and unlock the mysteries of that place and find the treasures it held. However, they also knew that tomorrow, they must each find their special spot and begin their training or else Ol’ Jack McGee would give up on them right on the spot.

With that, our three went to bed knowing that morning would bring the start of an amazing journey.

Chapter 3: Skylar's Special Spot

With a night filled with dreams about adventures, Alex, Skylar and Nick began their nature training. The end goal of finding the Crooked Forest and the mysterious medicine circle lured them like moths to a lamp. Questions swirled in their heads about what kind of mysteries and magic lay waiting in that place and what kind of challenges were they going to face in order to find it. However, they knew what they had to do first. They had to find their Special Spots.

Early morning came and the three were awake and getting ready to head outside and find their Spots. It was a good thing that they still had a week of break before school started. This would give them time to find their spots and start sitting at them. Since it was break, Nick and Alex were sleeping over at Skylar's. This morning they were going to help Skylar find her spot. Tomorrow, Skylar would sleep over at her cousins' house and help them find theirs.

Now, February in Vermont can be bitterly cold and this morning was no exception. There was 2 feet of snow on the ground and the temperature was 10 degrees outside. Fortunately, all three of the kids knew how to dress for this snowy cold weather.

The three gobbled down some breakfast and started to get dressed for the first step towards their epic adventure of finding the Crooked Forest. They each put on layers starting with long underwear, then a fleece top and flannel lined pants with warm socks. They then put on a vest to help keep their chest warm. They knew that if their chest wasn't warm then their fingers and toes would end up freezing. They put snow gear on over all of their warm clothes. Their snow gear included snow boots, snow pants, a thick winter coat and warm hat and mittens. Alex, Nick and Skylar all agreed that mittens were much better than gloves at keeping their hands warm since the fingers are kept together and not spread apart.

Even though the trio had spent a bunch of time outside for this break, making snow forts, sledding, and collecting sap on the warmer days, this morning was different. They were not going to be roughhousing around but quietly and *slowly* walking through the forest, finding a Special Spot and then sitting still for at least a solid 30 minutes. With the bitter cold this morning, they had to have the right clothes on or else they would freeze and not just their fingers and toes!

"Are we all ready?" Nick asked Alex and Skylar.

"I think so. But Alex, you need your warmer jacket!" Skylar said seeing the jacket Alex had on.

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"But I don't like that one as much. Plus, I like this color better." Alex replied.

"ALEX!" both Nick and Skylar shouted.

"Do you think it's going to matter what color your jacket is when you're frozen like an ice cube?" Skylar questioned.

"Or when your fingers and toes freeze off?" added Nick.

"Alright, alright. I'll put my warmer jacket on but I'm not gonna to be happy about it," responded Alex.

Both Skylar and Nick rolled their eyes amused. Alex is the one who is often more interested in fashion. Sometimes, it can be a bother. One time, they went for a hike and Alex decided to wear her boots that had wedge heels. Not a great choice when walking in the woods. However, Alex makes up for this by always having a backpack with extra cloths. This has come in handy on more than one occasion. Once Nick fell in the creek and another time Skylar didn't have enough clothes while biking on a chilly fall day. Of course, it's also greatly appreciated with school clothes shopping. Alex is always very helpful with picking out the best clothes...for school that is.

"Now are we ready?" asked Nick with a tinge of impatience.

"Ready!" the girls replied.

With that, they headed outside. The minute they got outside, the cold stole their breath away. The inside of their noses hurt as they breathed in the freezing air. Like icy fingers, the cold tried to find any gaps in their clothing where it could steal away their body warmth. Alex, Skylar and Nick had done such a great job though, the icy cold couldn't get in and they were toast warm. They were so excited and happy to be outside looking for Skylar's Special Spot.

"There is something really neat about being out here in the cold and snow this early," Skylar said with awe as she looked around at the winter wonderland. "It's like we have the whole forest to ourselves. Nobody is outside right now except a few birds and forest animals. It's almost like we're animals moving through the forest."

"I know. It's so cool. I mean cold," laughed Alex in response.

"It's like the forest is expecting us," said Nick. "And it's so quiet and peaceful. I never thought it would be so amazing. Tell you the truth, I was kind of worried about this morning and not too excited about it. But now, I'm psyched!"

"I know, me too," Skylar agreed. "I felt like that too but am so excited to be out here now."

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"Me three," Alex joined in.

"Well, let's find a place to bed down like the deer," Nick said.

"Sounds fun!" Alex responded.

So the three headed up the snowy slope into the forest. Even though they were having a great time pretending to be deer moving through the forest looking for a place to bed down and nibbling on buds, they remembered that had to find Skylar's Special Spot.

They wandered through the woods along the edge exploring some deep tracks in the snow. However, none of them knew what they were.

"Maybe a dog," guessed Alex.

"Yeah, a neighbor's dog comes to our house sometimes. But this is really deep snow for it. I wonder..." Skylar said trying to figure out the mystery.

"Oh my gosh! Look at that," cried Nick.

All three rushed over to the spot that Nick pointed out. Right there, under low lying hemlock branches and melted in the snow were three perfect oval shapes the size of a large suitcase. The snow had been melted down to a layer of ice at the bottom of each oval. The three inspected the impressions closer.



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“Whoa, look at this.” Nick pulled out of the bottom a small handful of whitish brown hairs. Some of them were bent or rather crimped like what happens to a straw when you bend it.

“Guys, check this out!” called Skylar. Alex and Nick hurried over to Skylar. A pile of frozen brown pellets lay on the edge of one of the ovals in the bottom. “Looks like poop! Or scat actually.” Skylar had learned from her Dad that scat is the scientific word for poop. She felt like it was important to be scientific about their discovery so the use of the word seemed right.

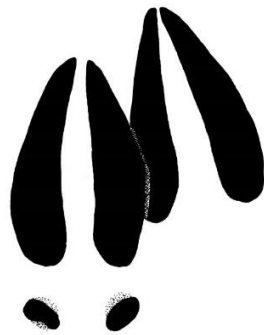
“Scat?” Nick asked confused.

“Yeah, scat is the scientific word for animal poop,” Skylar answered.

“Oh, that’s cool. Hmmm, scat. I like it,” Nick said pleased with his growing vocabulary.

Now it was Alex’s turn. “Over here guys.”

Nick and Skylar went over to the oval Alex was looking into. There in the bottom, frozen in the ice were a number of tracks. The tracks were that of an animal with two toes that came to a point and looked like a hoof.



With this final clue, the three of them knew exactly what they’d found. But how could it be? These ovals were only 30 yards away from Skylar’s house up on the hill. In fact, from this spot they could see right inside the house through the back window.

Nick, Skylar and Alex stared at each other, then towards the house and then back to the ovals. Without having to walk more than 40 steps from the house, they found where three deer had bedded down and slept for the cold night nestled in the snow. It was a spot that if any of them would have looked out the window at dawn, they may have seen the deer quietly leaving their night beds.

As they stood there, Skylar let out a little noise that was a cross between a giggle and a grunt. “Heehuh.”

Alex and Nick looked at her alarmed by the noise. “What is it?” they asked.

“This is it guys,” said Skylar.

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“What is it?” Alex questioned.

“**THIS. This** is my Special Spot!” exclaimed Skylar.

Indeed, it was the perfect spot. It was not too far from the house. Skylar’s parents could even peek out the window and see her. This is always something that parents like to be able to do to feel better about their kids playing outside.

“It’s perfect. Easy to get to. I can even see it from the window. If three deer think it’s a good spot and feel safe, then so do I.” **Skylar’s eyes glittered while both Alex and Nick smiled with approval.**

“I LOVE it. It’s up on this slope and I can see down through the forest too. These hemlock trees will keep the snow and rain off just like it did for the deer,” beamed Skylar.

“How do you know these are hem-lock trees?” asked Nick.

“These are the same trees that my Dad taught me to collect the dead branches from. We use them as kindling for making a fire,” Skylar replied.

“Oh, the little branches stay dry even if it rains, huh?” said Nick.

“Yeah, that’s the hemlock. The thick needles keep the branches under the tree dry. Perfect for finding dry wood or for finding a Special Spot!” smiled Skylar.

The three sat down under the hemlocks and quietly enjoyed the forest for the next hour. They couldn’t help but think about those three deer who were laying in the same spots not more than a few hours ago.

For that hour, bundled up as they were, protected from the wind under the hemlock trees and buzzing with the excitement of their experience, they didn’t even notice the cold. Alex, Nick and Skylar felt that even though the adventure of finding the Crooked Forest had only begun, it was already pretty amazing. And this was only day one!

Chapter 4: Alex and Nick's Special Spots

All three were tucked in their sleeping bags on the floor of the family room at Alex and Nick's house. Skylar was sleeping over this night so that tomorrow morning, she could help her cousins find their Special Spots. Of course, there also may be some amazing adventure to have as well. Already they had all their winter layers set out for the next morning so the minute they woke up they would head outside.

"Since we have to find two Special Spots, we've got to get out even earlier," declared Skylar.

"Yep, you're right. But if it's anything like finding your Special Spot, then it's gonna be epic!" Nick returned with an excited look.

"And this time, I'll put on my warmer jacket first," joked Alex.

"You better," laughed Skylar.

Nick and Alex's Dad came in and checked on the three.

"You three all set for the night?" he asked.

"Yep. We're good Dad," answered Nick.

"You sure about sleeping on the floor and heading out into the yard tomorrow morning so early? It's going to be really cold." asked Nick's father.

"Daddy, of course we are. This is serious and we've got to find our two Special Spots," Alex responded.

"OK then. If you need anything tonight give a holler. But in the morning, don't holler for me. I want to sleep in!" Uncle Craig winked at Skylar.

With that, lights were turned off and the three were soon dreaming about what they were going to find tomorrow morning.

Morning came quickly. It was light when Skylar, Alex and Nick woke up and started putting their warm layers on.

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“Aw man, we slept late. It’s light already,” complained Nick. He was hoping to get out at first light since at Skylar’s spot, they missed seeing the deer. That is one thing about Nick, he loves seeing wildlife. Every time they drive, his eyes are peeled for deer, turkeys, fox, and hawks – any kind of animal. He’s really good at spotting animals too.

They quickly wolfed down cold bowls of cereal for breakfast.

“Wready?” asked Nick still chewing his last mouthful eager to get outside.

“Wready,” mumbled both Skylar and Alex with their mouths full too.

Alex and Nick’s mom was up and a little nervous about them going outside in such cold. “Are you guys sure about this? I mean it’s so cold out there, you might freeze,” she nervously said.

“Mom, we’ll be fine. We know what we’re doing,” replied Alex with a hint of annoyance.

“Alright then but if you get cold, come right in. O.K?” she pleaded.

“Yes Mom,” the two siblings answered fully knowing that they wouldn’t be coming in for at least the next hour.

Snow pants, warm coats, mittens and boots all went over warm under layers. Then they stepped outside into the freezing air catching their breath. The snow crunched under their boots as they went out the back door onto the back porch.

The yard had a swing set along with a shed and a tall fence that went around it. Tall bushes lined the back and sides of the yard. The bushes made the yard private and cozy even in the cold and snow. A large tree was in the middle of the yard. Perfect for tree climbing. At the far northeast corner was the bird feeder that was always stocked with seeds and suet during the winter season. The suet which is hardened fat mixed with seeds, was great for many of the birds giving them extra energy in the cold. Squirrels enjoyed the black sunflower seeds especially raiding the feeders and scaring the other birds off.

They each stood on the steps, just looking out at the yard wondering where they might find their two Special Spots. Alex and Nick’s yard was very different from the huge woods that Skylar calls her backyard.

“It is a lot smaller than your backyard Skylar,” Nick said with a hint of sadness knowing that finding three deer beds was not going to happen for him.

“Yeah, but you guys have the bird feeder. Plus, with those bushes, you don’t get the cold wind blowing,” Skylar shared. Skylar knows how much Nick loves seeing deer.

“Nick? Our backyard is still in nature. We see birds and squirrels all the time,” Alex said.

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"I know, I know. Well, let's walk around even though it won't take that long," answered Nick glumly.

So, the three bundled adventurers stepped down. There had been a light snow that fell overnight. It was like a fresh blanket of powder was put over the whole yard. The trio headed to the large tree in the middle.

"This is a red maple tree," Alex explained. "Do you remember how red the leaves were this fall? It was amazing."

"I remember. It was so bright. This is the coolest tree," Skylar said.

"Yeah, I guess so," mumbled Nick.

Alex and Skylar shared a glance at each other. It was obvious that Nick was not very excited right now.

Nick started to wander over to the northeast corner when suddenly he froze in his tracks.

"Guys, look at this," he loudly whispered.

Alex and Skylar went over to him and looked where Nick was staring. In the fresh snow there was a mystery written that spoke of life and death. In an area about the size of a Frisbee, the fresh snow was matted down by marks. Feathers were all around this area with most of them in the center. Some feathers were clumped in groups of 2 or 3 and a few drops of blood dotted the bright white snow.



"Holy cow, a bird died here this morning," Nick said in surprise.

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“How do you know?” asked Skylar.

“Look at all those feathers and around them the snow is all messed up,” replied Nick. “And look, there’s even some blood!”

All of a sudden, it didn’t matter that the yard was small because clearly, nature was happening all around.

“Whoa, you’re right. What kind of bird feathers are those?” Alex asked as she moved in to pick one up.

“Wait!” called Nick. “We don’t want to mess up the snow around it yet. This is a crime scene after all. We don’t want to spoil any clues that might tell us what happened.”

“You’re right Nick. Are there other tracks around besides in this one spot?” chimed in Skylar.

The three started to look carefully around the site of the feathers. They were on their bellies looking for other tracks but couldn’t find any.

“This is turning out to be a real mystery,” said Nick excitedly. “There are no tracks going into or coming out of the place where all the feathers are. What happened here?” Nick said thoughtfully.

Alex and Skylar glanced at each other again with knowing smiles. Nick was excited now and so were they!

“Let’s look closer at the place where all the feathers are. Maybe there are some clues that will help us figure out what happened.”

Nick leaned in closer, picking up a feather gently and studied it. The two girls did the same. The feathers were dull gray, small and delicate looking. There were a mix of long and short ones. A few of the longer and shorter ones were all white.

“Look at those light marks in the snow around the feathers,” exclaimed Alex.

“Wow, I didn’t see them,” said Skylar as she leaned in for a closer look.

“It’s like fingers lightly whooshed the snow. There’re two sets of these marks on either side of the bunch of feathers. It is almost like.....” Nick trailed off, thinking hard.

All three just knelt there staring for a while. Letting all the clues bounce around in their heads. What happened here? The three started to share ideas.

“What if the feathers fell from a bird flying above?” questioned Alex.

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“Right, a bird just dropped all these feathers as it flew by,” Nick said. “Plus, how do you explain the blood?”

“Fine. What’s your idea?” challenged Alex. Skylar rolled her eyes. Sometimes Nick and Alex argue with each other. Must be the brother/sister thing.

“What if the bird hit your house window and flew back to here? Then it got better and flew off?” Skylar shared, hoping to distract Nick and Alex from bickering.

“But what are those light finger type marks from?” asked Alex. “Too big to have been made by the bird with these feathers.”

“Hmmm, good point. I don’t know,” replied Skylar.

The three thought hard for a little bit.

“I got it! I got it!” shouted Nick startling Alex and Skylar. “The bird *was* killed here on this spot and then taken away.” Nick paused, looking at the two girls wanting the moment to last. “The bird was killed by another bird – a hawk!”

“No way! You think so?” Skylar and Alex thought about this option. “Yeah, that does makes sense. Those finger marks could be from the wings of the hawk when it landed on the bird, right?” asked Skylar.

“Exactly!” beamed Nick.

“That’s crazy. You mean this morning a hawk flew right in our backyard and killed and ate a bird that was at our feeder?” asked Alex.

“Yep. It has to be right!” Nick said.

“That’s so cool Nick! We’ve got a hawk that comes to our backyard!” said Alex.

“Now that’s cool, guys. I can’t believe it. Right in your backyard. I wonder if it’ll come back today. Hey, let’s find your Special Spots so maybe we’ll be able to see it.” Skylar said excitedly.

Looking around, they didn’t want to be too close to the bird feeder. But they did want to be able to see it. The tall bushes in the back were huge old arborvitae that stay green year round. It makes it a great place to crawl under the low hanging limbs and sit. Alex chose that spot. It helped her feel hidden while also being cozy and able to see the feeder really well. Nick wanted to see the whole back yard so he decided to be in the southwest corner; opposite the birdfeeder sitting on the rock wall between two smaller bushes. Skylar, since she was just visiting chose to sit by the big tree in the middle and all three sat perfectly still and absolutely silent, hoping to see the hawk return.

Well, the hawk didn't return that day but they did see three different kinds of birds visiting the feeder. One kind were blue jays. They are large and bright blue, black and white birds that are noisy, always squawking. They also are big pigs, hogging the feeder and spilling seed all over the ground. However, they are the lookouts for any hawks or cats prowling around and will screech out a call if they see any. The second kind were black capped chickadees. These guys really like the suet feeder. Their call is a sweet "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" and yes, they look like they have black caps on their heads. The third bird was a type the three didn't know. It came in a group of the same kind and hung out on the ground picking up the mess that the blue jays left. It had a darkish head, dull gray back and chest and a white underbelly. When it flew, Alex, being the closest, could see that the outer tail feathers were white! Maybe this was the type of bird that was killed by the hawk? It was going to take more time watching them and some research to know for sure.

After a good long while, Alex and Nick's Dad hollered outside announcing that he had hot pancakes *and* hot chocolate for breakfast.

"Hot chocolate for breakfast?! Yeehah!" hollered Nick.

"Yeah baby!" shouted Alex.

"Now that is what I'm talkin' about!" called Skylar.

The three adventurers decided they sat long enough and dashed inside. It was over an hour since they went outside in the frigid winter morning and yet, each of them had again, forgotten about the cold. As they took off their layers, they excitedly shared with Alex and Nick's parents all they had seen and the bird kill area they found. Over breakfast, the three couldn't stop chattering like the jays about the adventure they had right out in the backyard.

After breakfast, Skylar pulled out one of her field guides that she brought with her. It was a bird field guide that had every kind of bird one could find in the eastern United States. Sipping hot chocolate, they went through the book page by page. As they did, they identified different birds they had seen before but didn't know the names of. Then, they turned the page and there was the small ground bird they saw that morning at the feeder. It was a Junco and from the looks of the feathers, it was also the kind of bird that became the breakfast for the hawk.

Now, Alex and Nick had their Special Spots and so did Skylar. The trio were well on their way with training for the journey to the Crooked Forest. They found their Special Spots and had to stick with going every day for at least thirty minutes. But after the adventures they had on their first two days, it wasn't going to be a problem for them. The fire had been lit inside each of them for what nature could offer, if one just bundles up and heads out.

Chapter 5: The Three Special Spots

Over the next three quick weeks, our young adventurers experienced and learned so much from their time at their Special Spots. That is what happens if you take the time to be in nature. Nature is the mother of all teachers; mother nature that is.

Each of them, Alex, Nick and Skylar committed to going to their Spot every day. It did not matter if it was snowy or rainy, freezing or mild, they went out and sat, listened, watched and connected to their natural surroundings. After the second week, they began to notice it became much easier to sit quietly even if they were uncomfortable with the weather. What they at first thought would be hard, became easy. A day did not feel complete without some time at their Special Spots. Nature had become to be a part of their everyday lives.

Their parents watched and were amazed at their dedication. Their parents also started to notice changes in Alex, Nick and Skylar. At first it was subtle and hard to notice but by the end of the three weeks, it was very noticeable. Each of the three had more confidence, were calmer and seemed happier. The things that normally upset them during a day no longer bothered them as much. Also, they had terrific stories to share each night at dinner about what they saw or experienced while sitting at their Special Spots.

The three began to know their backyards like they would a good friend. The animals and birds started to be less afraid or nervous with them out there sitting. More and more amazing nature experiences happened each day.

One time in the morning, Skylar was sitting in her hemlock grove Special Spot listening to a flock of chickadees when she heard some leaves rustling nearby. She turned and right behind her browsing on the low bushes was a young deer. She could hear the deer's breath, see the soft brown eyes and even smell the sweet smell of a wild deer. Seeing this deer so close made Skylar feel amazing for the rest of the day and the week. Wild turkeys would often visit Skylar also. When she didn't see these animals, she was able to find sign that they had been by her Special Spot. Tracks, nibbled branches, turned up leaves and scat were all signs left by the animals of Skylar's forest for her to begin to read. Skylar loved finding new tracks and clues to who had been visiting her Spot. Each day was a new mystery to solve.

Nick and Alex did get their chance to see the hawk hunting the birds at their feeder. One time, the hawk flew so close to Alex that she felt the air from the hawk's wings. As a result, a junco dove into the bush right by her to escape the hawk. They looked up in a bird field

guide what kind of hawk it was and their best guess was a sharp-shinned hawk. These hawks are known for their speed and agility in catching birds in midair. Alex, using the field guide, was able to learn every bird that visited her yard. Being so close to the feeder, she started to see a pattern in how the birds behaved when the hawk was nearby. She also observed how the local cat affected the birds. The kind of sound each bird would make when the hawk or the neighbor's cat would come hunting was different. She started to understand bird language.

Nick loved to play around at his Special Spot, trying out different skills for outdoor survival. Using some stringy bark Nick found in his Dad's wood pile, he started to practice making cordage or natural rope. One day, a big snow fell; two and a half feet. He made a snow cave at his Spot that kept him much warmer on the really cold and windy days. Alex was often envious when she would glance over at Nick sitting snugly in his snow cave. Since Nick was older, he also had a few added privileges. With permission from his Dad, he even started having small fires just outside of the snow cave. That would warm his snow cave even more. One time, on a particularly frigid day, Alex broke down and went over to Nick's Spot and cuddled in the snow shelter with him. The two were cozy and warm even when the temperature outside was below zero degrees.

As you can see, each of our trio were not only learning about nature through their Special Spots, but they were also becoming skilled in areas that interested them. Skylar was picking up tracking. Alex was learning about birds and what they say. Nick was experimenting with nature survival skills. All of these skills would serve the team very well later.

Chapter 6: The Next Step

"I can't believe how cool my Spot is," declared Skylar one day while she and her cousins were together over at her house.

"Ours too. I'm learning so much about birds. I never knew how different they all were from each other," Alex responded. "I can tell when the hawk or the neighbor's cat is around just by the way the birds act. I never knew the birds did this," added Alex.

"Man, my Spot's the best. I've been doing all this cool survival stuff that I learned about. I made this awesome snow cave and some rope out of bark. I even had a fire at my Spot. You should've seen it Skylar," Nick joined in with.

"Yeah, I went and cuddled in the snow cave with him and it was so warm. It was like zero degrees out and I had to unzip my jacket in his cave!" shared Alex.

"That's so cool," said Skylar. "Hey, let's go for a wander through my back woods today and see what we can find?" Skylar suggested. "I can check with my folks to see if it would be alright."

"Sounds great Sky. Maybe we can pack a snack and have a picnic out in your woods," Nick said.

"Yeah, that'd be fun," Alex said.

"If we can go, let's pack some stuff up and head out soon," Skylar said as she grabbed a backpack, ready for another adventure in the woods with her cousins. "You know, we've been going to our Special Spots for three weeks now. Do ya think we should try to find McGee and tell him?" Skylar asked.

"Why don't we first go exploring out in your woods and then try to find him after." Nick was too excited about getting out into the woods to skip that. But he also knew it was time to go tell Jack that they succeeded going to their Special Spots for three whole weeks.

"Sounds good," replied Skylar and Alex together.

This was the first time in quite a while that the three have been together in the woods just wandering and playing. Amazing things always seemed to happen when they were together in the woods.

Skylar checked in with her parents and let them know where they were going and for about how long; always important when you go outside for an adventure. Then the three got some

yummy lunch and snacks as well as outdoor gear that they may need like rain gear, water, some snacks, to name a few and then they were off.

It was late winter approaching early spring when the three headed out together. It was warm compared to what they had been used to at their Special Spots a few weeks earlier. It was 40 degrees, sunny and much of the snow had melted in the open areas. A perfect day to explore the forest. There was still enough good snow to track animals but also some dry leafy areas to sit and have a picnic.

They were very different kids after having three full weeks of Special Spot time under their belts. Going every day for three weeks to a place in nature while sitting quietly for at least a half an hour changes you. Indeed, it changed these three.

They did not just rush outside shouting excitedly. They did not even speak to each other when they first stepped outside. They also did not even make a plan for what they were going to do. They knew that nature would show them where to go and what to do. Have you ever seen a cat step outside for the first time in a day? Well, if you ever have, you'd know that first, they stand still getting a sense of what is around. After a few minutes of using all of their senses, they take a few steps and stop again. Once they have a good idea of their surroundings, they move smoothly to a place on the edge of a thicket and stop again sensing the woods and fields. This was very much how our three went outside on this day.

Without a word to each other, they stepped out and stopped. Using all of their senses, they felt the natural world around them. They checked in with how the air smelled and could tell that it was not going to rain or snow just by the odor of the air. They listened to the birds around them and knew there were no predators like hawks or cats around. They looked deeply into the woods and saw no movements like the flick of a deer ear or a turkey's step. They felt on their skin which direction the wind was blowing and knew that it was blowing into their faces. This was perfect because when you walk into the wind, animals can't smell you since the wind is taking your scent or smell away from their sensitive noses.

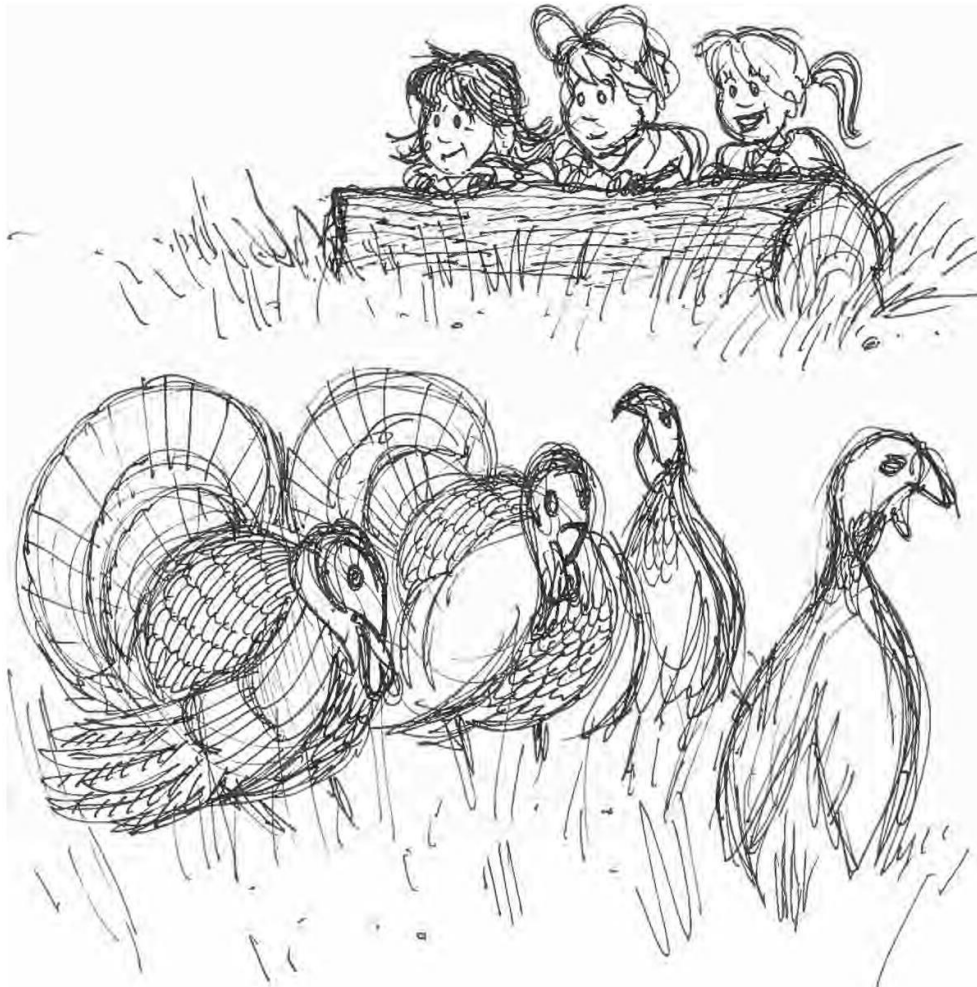
With knowing looks, they smiled at each other and moved smoothly up into the woods. Once into the trees, they paused and looked, listened, smelled and felt all over again seeing if their movement had disturbed the forest in any way. Sensing nothing new, they continued moving forward, slowly, easefully and full of joy and excitement. Of course, they had to keep their excitement and joy inside so not to disturb the woods.

It was difficult to move completely quiet since there still was crunchy snow in the shaded parts of the woods and dry leaves in the open areas. The three did not have a particular place in mind where they were going. They just began moving, feeling their way through the woods.

Skylar was in the lead first, guiding the other two towards the hidden pond deeper in the forest when she froze listening to the quiet. Alex and Nick followed suit and also froze. Sure enough, they could hear the faint rustling of leaves around the back side of the hill just in front of them to the north. Their hearts began to pound. Not out of fear but rather excitement. What could be making that noise?

Skylar made a motion for all of them to lie down behind a rotting log. This was a perfect spot to be able to see up ahead but not be easily seen. All three gently laid down making sure they didn't crack any sticks to alert whatever it was up ahead of them. As they lay there, the sounds of rustling leaves kept moving closer and closer. The three remained motionless, waiting breathlessly.

Closer and closer the rustling came. Then, they saw what was making all the commotion. First one bare knobby reddish head poked up into view and then another and another. Beautiful metallic shimmering feathered bodies and large scaly reddish feet scratched at the forest floor. It was a large flock of wild turkeys tearing up the leaves with their feet for insects, seeds and nuts. There were over 30 of them in the flock.



Now, wild turkeys are cool but when you are laying down and a flock of 30 are heading right at you, it's a test of courage. They can be quite scary since they are big and strong. The three lay motionless as the turkeys kept approaching. The trio could hear the female turkeys called hens making high chirping noises as they kept scratching up the leaf litter. The lead turkey was not more than 2 feet away when it gently turned and headed right along the rotting log that Nick, Skylar and Alex were hiding behind. It slowly moved away not realizing that right on the other side of the log were three excited kids. The rest of the flock followed the same path as the lead turkey, quietly clucked as they walked by, turning up leaves looking for food as they went.

When the last turkey disappeared in the distance, all three of them finally took a deep breath and with huge smiles hugged each other as they lay there behind the log. The turkeys had been so close, they could have reached out and touched them! They felt like they were a part of the woods, blending in and invisible to everything.

"Well, I see that you three have been doing what I told ya," called a raspy voice directly behind them.

All three jumped up with a yelp. Ol' Jack McGee stood not more than 8 feet away with a smile showing behind his scraggly gray beard. He had somehow been able to get right up behind them without them hearing. But what was even more amazing was that he did this *while* the turkeys moved past. How did the turkeys not even see him? The trio were shocked and amazed. Also, how did McGee even know they were there? Their heads spun with questions. It was clear though, they had a lot more to learn.

Chapter 7: The Training - Nature Skills

“Don’t get too impressed with yourselves you three. You’re on the right path but now the real trainin’ is ‘bout to begin,” said McGee with a cross between a grimace and a smile. He stared hard at each of them as if he was reading their minds.

“We did all three weeks sir, every day to our Special Spots,” interrupted Nick.

“Usually we stayed much more than just 30 minutes too,” chimed in Alex.

“We’ve learned so much about tracking, birds and even survival skills,” shared Skylar.

“I know that,” growled McGee.

This was a little weird to the trio. How did he know that? It is like he had been spying on them but how?

“Um, how do you know that, sir?” asked Nick nervously.

“I can tell just by the way you three walk and move in the woods. Not to mention the animals have been telling me what you’ve been up to,” said Ol’ McGee with a side glance their way.

“But that’s not important right now. What’s important is to give you your next training challenge. This one is gonna make the last one of finding and sitting at your Special Spots seem easy. You think you’re ready?”

All three of the kids shouted “Yes!” Ol’ Jack McGee shook his head disapprovingly and continued. It seems like he was reluctantly getting used to our trio’s enthusiasm.

“Alright then. Listen closely. I’ll know you’re ready to find the Crooked Forest **only** when you can do the following four things.”

“The first is to be able to track a deer across the forest floor for a hundred yards,” McGee paused looking up briefly. Then he continued.

“The second is to learn to be so still and quiet that a chickadee willingly lands on one of your shoulders,” McGee sniffed hard glancing again at the three.

“The third challenge is to be able to make a fire in the middle of a rainstorm using only wood you find outside and with one match,” McGee snorted with this one.

“And the fourth challenge, you need to learn 6 different plants around here and how they can help you when in the woods.” McGee stopped and again, looked at the three with piercing blue eyes.

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“But, but how are we going to be able to track a deer across the forest for a hundred yards?” asked Skylar clearly upset over what seemed impossible.

“And why would a chickadee ever land on one of our shoulders?” Alex questioned.

“There’s no way you can get a fire during a rainstorm with wood you find outside **and with only one match?**” challenged Nick.

“Hummph. You three think so huh? Not possible? Well, maybe I made a mistake thinking that you had what it takes to venture to the Crooked Forest.” With that, Ol’ McGee turned around and started to walk away.

Alex, Nick and Skylar looked at each other with wide eyes. Ol’ Jack McGee was leaving and their adventure to the Crooked Forest was over before it even began. They quickly ran to catch up to Jack McGee with panic in their eyes and hearts.

“Wait, wait, wait,” they yelled running up to McGee.

“We can do it sir. We just need maybe some pointers or tips,” reasoned Nick.

“Yeah, some tips would be good,” Alex breathed out.

“We don’t even know how to start learning how to do these things Mr. McGee,” pleaded Skylar.

Jack McGee stopped walking and stood still for a bit thinking it over. The trio held their breath and with crossed fingers, hoped that he would agree. A chickadee chirped up above them. A squirrel chrrred in the distance far to the east. A jay called to the west. And then finally Jack McGee spoke.

“Alright then....some tips I guess, couldn’t hurt ya,” McGee scratched his beard.

“I must be getting soft in my older age. You three have all that you need to learn these things without any tips from me but fine, I’ll give ya some.”

All three of the kids sighed a breath of relief and waited anxiously.

“HmMMMM, tips for tracking a deer across the forest floor... Well, for one thing, this is a great time of year with the wet ground, patches of snow and drier parts of the woods. What you need to do is pick up the trail of a deer in the mud or snow and find **each and every** track. To do this, place sticks at the base of each track to help ya follow them. Those tracks will eventually leave the mud or snow and get into drier forest. It will get harder then. Keep putting markers by the tracks as best as you can. Remember this, the track you cannot find is the one that will teach you the most.”

“Uh, O.K. Got it!” Skylar chimed in cheerfully. It made some sense to her.

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“Alrighty then...To get a chickadee to land on your shoulder, you’re gonna have to quiet your mind beyond anything you’ve done before. When sitting, think of yourself like an old stump. Do stumps think? No! Do they scratch themselves? No! Do they fuss if uncomfortable? No! So, stop your thinking! For birds, your thoughts are noisy interruptions. In addition to sitting quiet and still, it’s a matter of trust in the end. You’ve gotta trust the chickadee and the chickadee gotta trust you. Got that?” McGee asked impatiently.

“I think so,” Alex answered but not too confidently.

“Right. Hmmmmm. Next tip. Listen, if I can start a fire in the middle of a downpour then you three will be able to also. First, you’ll need to figure out what trees and plants make the best tinder. And what trees have the best kindling. Also have to figure out what trees have the best wood – even in the rain. You three know what I mean by tinder and kindling?”

“Ahhh, I think so,” replied Nick.

“Well, what then?” grumbled McGee.

“Um, tinder I think... is the light stuff that catches the flame first. Kindling is the small wood that catches the flame from the tinder. And then the kindling catches the rest of the wood on fire,” Nick smiled nervously.

“Right you are son. Right you are,” replied McGee with only a small growl in his voice.

Nick beamed with pride and Alex and Skylar were happy too. Ol’ McGee seemed pleased with that answer. At least he wasn’t growling at them as much.

“With the plants, well, that one I’m going to let you figure them out on your own. You have any field guides on plants? They will help you a lot. Use them! I would also recommend that you listen to the plants. They can tell you what they can do for you. ” McGee asked.

“I do sir. My Dad’s got a bunch of them. We can use those,” Skylar shared.

“Good then. There now, you have some tips to send you on your way. The last tip for you three is that all of this learnin’ you’ve got to do is gonna happen at your Special Spots. Listen now, it’s March. If you don’t learn these things by the end of June, then just forgit about the Crooked Forest,” McGee growled that last line. Then he turned and walked deeper into the woods.

Alex and Nick and Skylar looked at each other, trying to think of something else to ask him. The tips he gave were not exactly road maps to learning how to do these four things. When they turned back, McGee was gone....vanished into the woods again. The trio blinked in disbelief. Disbelief over him disappearing in a blink of an eye and disbelief in what they had to do over the next three months.

This was big. Really big for the trio. They knew that Ol' Jack McGee was not going to give them a single hint how to find the Crooked Forest until they had learned to track the deer across the leafy forest floor, have a chickadee land on them, make a fire in a rainstorm and figure out 6 different plants and what they can be used for.

They talked over each challenge and the tips that McGee had given for the rest of the day. Skylar pulled out her notebook and she wrote them down with notes for each one.

Crooked Forest Challenges

1. Track a deer 100 yards through the forest:
 - a. Use sticks to mark each track
 - b. Hardest track to find will teach us the most
2. Chickadee land on shoulder
 - a. Don't think
 - b. Be like a stump
3. Make a fire in a rainstorm
 - a. Find the right tinder
 - b. Find the right kindling
4. Learn 6 different plants and how they can be used
 - a. Listen to the plants??
 - b. Use field guides too

What could it mean, "Listen to the plants" or what about "Don't think"? He said "remember, the track you cannot find has the most to teach." How can a track you can't find teach you anything? How were they going to be able to figure out what trees and plants give dry tinder, kindling and wood in a rainstorm? They had more questions with the so called tips than they did with the challenges.

This seemed like more than the trio could handle. However, they were not going to give up that easily. One thing they have learned growing up together is that as a team, they are able to accomplish almost anything they put their minds to. So with that, our trio put their minds to the task at hand; to learn to track a deer for a hundred yards, to be so quiet and still that a chickadee lands on their shoulder, to be able to light a fire in a rainstorm with only one match and to know six plants and how each can help them.

With only three months before Jack McGee expects them to be able to do all these things, they knew that they needed to get crackin'! They also knew that Ol' Jack McGee was testing them with these challenges to see if they had what it takes to journey to the Crooked Forest. If they couldn't do the things now, how would they ever be able to get to that mysterious forest?

Chapter 8: The Plan for Training

“My Mom always asks me, ‘How do you eat an elephant?’” Skylar said with a knowing smile.

“Wha?” exhaled Nick completely confused.

“What are you talking about Skylar?” asked Alex slightly annoyed. They had so much to do that a silly question was not helping them figure out where to start.

“*How do you eat an elephant?*” asked Skylar with her hands on her hips.

“Fine, um, I don’t know. With a fork and knife?” Nick replied.

“Nooooooo,” Skylar answered coyly.

“What about with ketchup?” Alex added who has always loved ketchup.

“Nope,” Skylar said with a smirk knowing that her cousins were hooked.

“O.K., how about on a really big plate?” Nick shared starting to be amused himself.

“Na-uh,” Skylar responded.

“What about with a chainsaw?” giggled Alex with a devilish grin.

“Ewww, that’s just gross Alex,” laughed Nick.

“Come on, just tell us.... ‘How *do you* eat an elephant?’” pleaded Alex.

“Alright then, you give up?” Skylar paused looking at them making sure they were really listening.

“Totally,” replied the other two.

“You eat.... an elephant.... ***one bite at a time!***”

“Arghhh!” exclaimed both Nick and Alex. “What does that have to do with us trying to figure out how do learn all this stuff McGee told us to do?” questioned Nick.

“Well, all those things are like an elephant to us, right? So big that we don’t know where to start.” Skylar paused looking at her cousins closely. “So the way we’re gonna learn all this stuff is to do it ‘one bite at a time.’ Do you get it?”

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“Yeeeeeah, I think so,” said Nick unconvincingly as he tossed that idea around in his head.

“I get it,” shouted Alex. “So all we have to do is start doing little stuff and then the big stuff will get smaller. We do it little by little. Like an elephant, if you were trying to eat it that is.” Alex beamed understanding the idea now.

“Exactly Alex. Nice. So all we have to do first is, continue going to our Special Spots. Then we need to start with each of these challenges.” Skylar was starting to feel much better and even excited now that they had a place to start.

“I got it,” Nick joined in with a smile showing that he really did get it. “O.K. so we have 4 challenges right?”

“Right,” both Alex and Skylar answered.

“One is needing to be able to track a deer. The next is having a chickadee land on us. Another is being able to start a fire in the rain. The final one is learning 6 plants that can help us when out in the woods. Hmmmm, that’s a lot though. Where do we start?” Nick asked with doubt creeping back in him.

“We divide and conquer!” shouted Alex triumphantly. So loudly that the others jumped back.

When Skylar landed, she had a big smile on her face. “Yeah! Look, Nick, you already have been learning to start fires so you keep doing that and become a master at it. Alex, you and the birds have a thing going on since you’re right near your bird feeder. You start figuring out how to have a chickadee land on you. And since I’ve got the deer around my Special Spot, I’ll start learning how to track ‘em.”

“Oh, so when we each become really good at our own area, then we can teach the others what we learned,” Nick shared becoming excited again too.

“Exactly!” blurted Skylar.

“But wait a second guys. What about the 6 plants? Who will do those?” asked Alex concerned.

“That’s easy. We divide them up. Two for Nick, two for you Alex and two for me. That way we each have the same amount of work and it’s fair,” Skylar explained. “However, let’s not worry about the plants yet. We can tackle those later in the spring when there are a lot of plants growing.

“Sounds good to me,” said Alex.

“Me too,” added Nick.

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“Now all we have to do is get to our Special Spots and do it,” Skylar beamed. “We should try to master our skill as much as we can over the next....um, what? Four weeks? Yeah, that should give us enough time to teach each other before June. For the plants, let’s wait until May to learn them.”

“Wait a second. I have a **really** important question,” added Alex.

“Uh-oh. What is it?” Skylar asked nervously.

“What **does** an elephant taste like?” laughed Alex.

“Like chicken!” shouted both Nick and Skylar. All three cracked up laughing.

With that, our trio began the hard but exciting work of learning the nature skills that Ol’ Jack McGee challenged them with. Each day, the three cousins went to their Special Spots and practiced their specific skill. Hopefully, in 4 weeks’ time, each of them would be able to master their particular skill so they can then teach the other two.

SKYLAR’S Training

Skylar was having difficulty following so many deer tracks. She would find a few but then lose them as she went along the trail especially when other deer trails crossed hers. She needed a solution. Some way of marking the tracks once she found them. Skylar had been collecting popsicle sticks for an art project over the last 2 years. She had a large bag of them stashed away in her art supplies. She decided they would be a perfect stick to mark deer tracks. The light wood is easy to carry and see on the forest floor. Every day, before she sits at her Spot she looks for deer tracks. Whenever she finds one in the soft ground, she marks it with a popsicle stick and then tries to find the next one and then the next and next. Deer tracks are shaped in a way that they point to the next track in front of them like an arrowhead.



When tracking the deer in the snow, it wasn’t as tricking. However, finding the next track in the leaves and following the trail was really tough. Skylar almost gave up at the beginning

feeling as if she couldn't do it or that she was doing it wrong. However, with some encouragement from her parents and her cousins, she kept at it. By the end of the first week of doing this, Skylar started to notice some improvement. In the evenings, after her homework, Skylar read about tracking in a few tracking books she got from her Dad.

She learned that the front tracks for most animals, including the deer are larger than the back tracks. This is because the front track needs to be bigger to carry the weight of the head. She also learned what the stride of an animal is. It is the step of the animal and it changes depending on what it is doing. Not only that, but the pattern of the front and back tracks on the ground changes depending on whether the animal is running or walking. This goes for all animals including deer.



Running tracks

versus



Walking tracks

She finally understood what Jack McGee meant by “the track you can't find is the one that will teach you the most.” The obvious tracks were easy to find. In fact, she started to be able to see deer tracks from 5 steps away in the soft forest floor. But on the harder and drier ground, she had to get down on all fours and look real close. Many times, especially in the beginning she failed finding the next track. That was not for lack of trying but she just didn't know what to look for. She would often get frustrated thinking that she was never going to master her skill. However, the more she stared at the tracks, the more her eyes started to pick up the little details on the forest floor. A bent leaf, a bit of moss kicked up, a dent in the ground were all the small signs that there was a track there. Skylar's eyes became trained to pick up these details more and more. Indeed, the hard to find tracks were the ones that forced her to find those details and figure out what the deer was doing.

Now deer are challenging animals to track. They are browsers, often eating throughout the day leaving a winding trail through the forest as they feed. A few steps over to this bush to munch and then a few steps over to that place to nibble on some young ferns and then to the oak tree to try to find some acorns. All this moving around makes it a hard trail to follow for even as an expert tracker. Also, with their long legs, they can take long steps or chose to take small steps. Tracking a deer for a hundred yards means that you will end up tracking a deer that is feeding and their steps will be all over. Skylar was forced to learn to track a deer in these conditions.

By the second week, Skylar was able to track a deer for 20 yards over wet ground. By the third week, she was able to track a deer for 50 yards without losing a single track. Every night, Skylar closed her eyes and saw deer tracks dancing in her head. On the school playground, she would see tracks of animals between the footprints of kids.

By the fourth week, Skylar had succeeded. She was able to track deer almost like a Native American through the forest for 100 yards and more. She had done it! She was so glad that she didn't give up all those times when it got challenging. Now, she felt so proud of what she was able to do and was looking forward to showing and then teaching her cousins.

ALEX'S Training

Having a bird land on your shoulder is a true test of patience and stillness. As Jack McGee said, you have to allow the birds to learn to trust you. Most of the time, animals and birds see people as a danger. It is understandable since most of the time, animals and birds are not safe around humans. But for someone who spends time sitting in one spot every day for weeks, the animals and birds begin to see you not as a danger but rather as part of the land. Alex's Special Spot is located only 15 feet from the bird feeder in her backyard. The birds would often fly past her going to and from the feeder. However, they would always avoid coming too close to her. Alex had to figure out how to get the birds closer to begin with and then to have them land on her. She decided the best way to start is to have bird seed around her so she becomes part of the feeder.

Each day, she went to her Special Spot and spread bird seed around her and waited, desperately wanting a bird to land on her. One week went by with no luck at all. The next week went by and still the birds would only go to the feeder while she was sitting in her Spot. A few would pause and eye her suspiciously but none would come very close. With each day, Alex was getting more and more anxious. "What if I can't do this? What am I doing wrong? I'm horrible at this" were all thoughts that flew through her head while she sat at her spot.

During the evenings, she studied the field guides and learned more about the birds in her backyard. She also learned as much as she could about the chickadee. The chickadee as it happens, is an amazing little bird. Even though it is one of the smallest birds, it's also one of the toughest birds in the forest. In the middle of the worst snow storms, one can find flocks of chickadees merrily flitting around the forest singing and looking for food. They are also very curious birds and will be the first to investigate new things in the forest. In a way, they are like explorers of the forest constantly flying around looking into and under every leaf and crack of the trees and shrubs. Alex began to admire the chickadees for their toughness and adventurous spirit even though they were so small. They reminded her of herself actually. Yet knowing and admiring the chickadee was not helping her get any closer to having them land on her.



It wasn't until the start of the third week that she remembered what Ol' Jack McGee said. He said to "stop your thinkin'" and Alex at last realized what he meant. The last two weeks she had been "thinking" every time a bird flew by, calling to it, wanting it to come and land on her. When the bird did not, she thought all of these negative thoughts about why the bird had not landed on her. However, she was not "being a stump" as McGee had said. He also said that "stumps don't think."

Of course. Alex had to stop her thinking and become an old stump. The next day at her Special Spot, she sat and let her thoughts drop away. "I am a stump. I am a stump. I am a stump" she repeated silently to herself. In fact, she stopped paying attention to the birds all together. She relaxed and became extremely peaceful inside and out.

Miraculously, when she stopped her thinking and her “wanting” the birds to come, that is exactly what they did! Juncos, the ground birds, started to edge in closer eyeing the seed by her feet. Chickadees started flitting in the branches above her. Nuthatches landed on the trunks of the bushes near her and began working their way down head first. It was working! And in Alex’s head she thought rather loudly; “IT IS WORKING!” With that, all the birds scattered and flew back to the feeder.

“Whoa! Did the birds hear my thoughts?” Alex asked herself. “Huh. Even my thoughts can be loud to the birds, I guess.”

She tried again, clearing her mind and not thinking about birds or anything. She just concentrated on being a quiet old stump. Sure enough, after a bit of time, the juncos, nuthatches and chickadees returned. This went on for several days with the birds edging closer and closer. Alex kept working at being quiet and still, like an old stump. Then finally, at the start of the fourth week, the birds started to eat the seed around her. Alex decided to put seed on her legs, head and yes, shoulders. By the end of the week, it happened! Chickadees were the first of the birds to land on her and eat the seed. The adventurous chickadee led the way for the rest of the birds to follow. Birds were hopping on her and landing on her as if she was truly an old stump with bird seed on it.

It was the most amazing feeling having those little feet scratching at her clothes and skin and eating right off of her body. The feel of their nails and feet on her skin and clothes will always be something she remembers for the rest of her life.

NICK’S Training

It is one thing to be able to start a fire on a dry and hot summer day. It is one thing to be able to start a fire using paper and a box of matches. It’s a whole other thing being able to start a fire when it is 40 degrees outside and raining using only one match and fire making materials only from the woods. Of course, on a rainy 40 degree day is actually when one needs a fire most and it is the most difficult time to make it.

Prior to Jack McGee’s challenge, Nick had been using a special fire starter wood and a bunch of newspaper that his Dad uses to get his woodstove going. It is called Fatwood and it’s small kindling soaked in pine pitch and very easy to light. Once lit, it burns for a long time catching other wood, even large logs on fire. However, finding Fatwood in the woods is not common so Nick had to relearn how to make a primitive fire using only easy to find natural materials.

Fire can be seen like a living thing. It needs all the right ingredients for it to grow up to be healthy and strong just like you. In order for fire to live, one needs food which is the wood,

air which is the breath and a spark which is like our spirit. With these three things in just the right combination, a fire comes alive and burns brightly. However, for Nick to figure out that right combination, he needed to experiment with a lot of trial and error. One has to be a scientist who tests things out and learns from what worked and what didn't work. One also has to be an artist and feel the fire with their heart and sense what the fire needs to burn strong and bright.

First a fire must be born. This is often the most difficult step to tending a fire. A newly started fire is like a newborn baby. It needs care and tenderness to help it grow to become a toddler fire. Then one must continue to care for it to help it grow into a young fire. Once a fire is a teenager fire, one can relax a little and not worry so much and so on as the fire ages.

To start a fire, one needs tinder. This is a handful of fluffy natural material that burns easily and hot. Once lit, the tinder's important job is to ignite the kindling. The kindling is a mix of small, dry wood, starting with the tiniest twigs and gradually getting up to finger thick wood. One can tell the perfect wood for starting a fire by the sound it makes when broken. If it snaps easily and breaks cleanly in half, then the wood is dry, dead and ready for the fire. If any wood was green or alive, it was very hard to make a fire with them. All these dry and dead ingredients are essential to begin the life of a fire in any kind of weather but especially in rainy weather.

Nick had to learn all of this in order to master fire making so he could start and keep a fire in a rainstorm. He talked with friends and family to learn the basics. But to start a fire and keep it flaming strong using only one match and only natural materials was beyond the knowledge of anyone he spoke with.

So, at first, he had to experiment with dried leaves for the tinder. The leaves just smoked and smoldered. Pine needles were next and they just flamed up quick and were ash before they caught any wood on fire. Then, one day while he was making some cordage out of the inner bark he had collected from the wood pile, a strand of it fell into the fire he was trying to keep alive. It flamed up and burned brightly.

"Hmmm, maybe this inner bark could work as a tinder bundle" he thought to himself.

Sure enough, the inner bark worked great. With one match, he could light a handful of the loose fibers and get a strong flame.

Borrowing a field guide from Skylar - she was the team's librarian, he found out that the log he got the inner bark from was that of a cedar tree. Nick wanted to see if other tree bark could be used to make fire. What if he could not find a cedar tree out in the woods? What other trees would work? For a whole week, he experimented with other inner bark fibers making bundles of the different fibers into nice bird's nests. He even mixed different ones up

to make combination of tinder ingredients. He discovered that the cedar, mixed with dry pine needles and some grape vine bark all rubbed together to make a light airy bundle worked the best.

One fire making ingredient mastered! Check.

The next thing he had to figure out was the kindling. He collected all sorts of twigs and sticks from trees around his neighborhood. Oak trees, maple trees, ash trees, beech trees and pine trees were all a part of his fire making experiment. Nick felt like a real scientist testing out which sticks burned best.

He found that oak bark was too thick and did not catch on fire very well. Maples, ash, beech and pine did really well as the middle to large size kindling but didn't burn well as the really small kindling. He was stuck. None of the tree twigs he collected were small enough to make that first layer of kindling next to the tinder. This was needed to get enough flame to light the thicker kindling.

Nick searched all over his neighborhood. He would kick soccer balls up into trees to break down dead branches he couldn't reach. He would raid piles of brush that people put out at the curb. Nothing. Time was getting tight and Nick was getting very nervous that he wasn't going to figure it out.

One day heading to his Special Spot, he approached from the other side of his house. There were some scraggly evergreen type trees along the edge that he never paid any attention to. They were not very attractive actually. However, as he walked past thinking what twigs would work for kindling he noticed that these scraggly trees had lots of dead branches under the green boughs. These branches were super dry and very skinny all the way to the tips. He grabbed hold of one and bent it back. "SNAP!" went the twig. Nick had just found his small kindling. Under the canopy of these trees were a ton of these dead little dry branches. His Dad was super happy that Nick was collecting them since the dead looked so bad anyways. It was perfect. Using the field guide to trees, Nick figured out that the trees were hemlock trees and very common all over Vermont! Jackpot! It was the hemlock that held the key for him and provided him the smallest and most important kindling. Indeed, he remembered that Skylar mentioned hemlock trees before and he had just forgotten.

By experimenting like a scientist for four weeks, Nick had figured out what makes the best fires. It was at the end of the fourth week of his training that a big rainstorm came through to test his skills. This was his one chance before everyone was to share their mastery. He went outside feeling confident in his fire making skills.

Protecting his tinder and kindling with his jacket, he ventured to his Special Spot where he had been making fires for weeks. A cold hard rain fell. Perfect. He quickly made a Teepee

shape with his kindling starting with the light and small kindling and building out with the larger. He had gotten good at setting up his fire quickly. He left a gap for his tinder bundle at the base under all the kindling. But, in this heavy rain, by the time he put the tinder bundle at the bottom of his Tepee, everything was soaking wet. The kindling he had collected and his prized tinder bundle were drenched. There was no chance of starting a fire. He kept trying but it was no use. It was over. He had failed in mastering his skills.

Nick felt horrible about it and tomorrow, the three cousins were getting together to share the skills they mastered. Nick felt like he had mastered nothing. He was going to have to bring the bad news to Alex and Skylar. His failure might even mean that Ol' McGee wouldn't help them find the Crooked Forest and it would be all Nick's fault.

CHAPTER 9: Each one, Teach one – Nick’s Fire

The next day Skylar came over to Nick and Alex’s house. The plan was first see Nick do his fire, then Alex with the birds. They would all head over to Skylar’ house after lunch to finish with deer tracking. The minute Skylar walked into their house, she could tell that something was wrong.

“Good morning guys,” Skylar said cheerfully. She was excited for today. She wanted to show her cousins what she learned with tracking and to see what they had learned. However their response was not what she expected.

“Morning,” mumbled Alex. Nick did not even look up from the T.V.

“What’s going on? Why are you guys upset? Did ya fight?” asked Skylar.

“No. Nick’s just being a jerk!” Alex said shooting a glare over at Nick as he slumped on the couch.

“Whatever,” mumbled Nick.

“Um, OK.” Skylar was thinking about what might get them out of their funk. She was hoping that maybe if they get outside and started showing each other what they had learned things might smooth out. “Let’s get outside and see what you guys learned,” she suggested

“I don’t wanna. This is stupid,” Nick grumbled under his breath.

“See what I mean Skylar? Nick has been like this since last night. He says he doesn’t even care about the Crooked Forest anymore,” groaned Alex. “I keep asking him what’s the matter but he keeps saying nothing. What are we going to do?”

Skylar was surprised. What happened? Just last week Nick was so excited about what he found with the hemlock trees. Clearly, something happened but he didn’t seem to want to talk about it at all. Alright then, this is going to take drastic measures.

Skylar took a deep breath and then sternly said “I don’t care what your problem is Nick but for the last four weeks we’ve all been working really hard to learn our skills and today is the day that we’re going to share them! So get up, get your shoes on and let’s head outside. You can show us what you’ve gotten so far. Come on Nick, move it!”

That last sentence Skylar pretty much shouted. It seemed to be enough to at least get Nick moving. "Fine." Nick got up and shuffled over to get his shoes.

"What the heck is going on Alex?" whispered Skylar.

"I think maybe it has to do with his fire skill challenge. Yesterday with the rain, he went out to test his skills. When he came in he was dripping wet and went right to his room. Wouldn't say anything to me all last night even when I asked him how it went." Alex's face was full of concern.

"O.K., let's get him outside and see if maybe he'll tell us. Shhh. Here he comes." Skylar buttoned up her coat and headed to the door with Alex and Nick trailing behind.

Once outside, Alex and Skylar looked to Nick. "Why don't you show us what you've got so far. I know you figured out some great stuff, Nick," Skylar said softly trying to help him open up.

"Fine," Nick said quietly.

Nick told the girls about the tinder bundle being what you use to start a fire. He showed them the different bark pieces and how you can pull off thin strips from the underside of the bark from the cedar and ash tree. He mixed the different barks together and tucked the bundle safely in his shirt pocket. Then, he told them about his experiments with all of the different sticks from different trees. He shared which ones work best for the fire and how kindling needs to be all different sizes starting with the smallest and going up to thumb size.

As Nick shared, he started to brighten up a little. The girls gave each other hopeful glances.

Then Nick pointed out the hemlock trees at the side of the house and how the dead branches are dry even after all that rain yesterday. He broke off a bunch of the dead branches and gathered the small little twigs as kindling to help start a fire.

"Make a fire Nick," Skylar said excitedly. "I'm learning a ton. You learned all this just by experimenting?"

"Yeah. It was like being a scientist. I would test the different tinder and kindling. Some worked and some didn't. But I always found one that worked the best." Nick's excitement was building up again.

As Nick was building his Tepee of kindling with a spot at the base for the tinder bundle Alex excitedly said "Nick, you really have mastered fire making!" Nick stopped and hung his head.

"No. No I haven't. I couldn't make a fire yesterday in the rain. And now McGee isn't going to let us find the Crooked Forest and it's all my fault!" Nick slumped down on the ground feeling defeated.

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“Nick, it’s O.K. I know you tried really hard. Don’t worry about it. We’ll figure something out,” comforted Alex.

That wasn’t good enough for Skylar, the problem solver of the group. “Wait, what happened Nick? Why couldn’t you get a fire started?” From what she had seen so far, Nick was a master at fire making.

“Well, I did just what I showed you here but by the time I set up my Tepee, everything was soakin’ wet. There was nothing I could do. I tried to cover it all up with my body but the rain just dripped on all the dry wood. The match wouldn’t even light ‘cause it got wet too,” confessed Nick sadly.

“But Nick, you did master fire making. You learned all that about tinder and kindling. You know which trees make the best of both,” encouraged Alex.

“Yeah but the skill was to be able to make a fire in the rain and I couldn’t do it,” Nick shared with his head hung low.

The girls looked at Nick whose head was down and face was sad. Then Skylar had an idea. “You needed an umbrella!” she shouted with a smile.

“Can’t – McGee said only natural materials,” countered Nick.

“Right...what if you made one?” offered Skylar.

“What do you mean?” asked Nick becoming curious.

“Yeah Nick, we can make one out of....out of....” Alex joined in.

“OUT OF BARK!!!” yelled Nick triumphantly. “I have all these pieces of bark left over from collecting the tinder bundle. I can make a sort of shelter over the fire.”

“Totally. Let’s do it then,” exclaimed Skylar excitedly.

“Huh? Now?” replied Nick.

“Yep. Today is the day to be masters at our skills and I’ve got an idea how to test ya.” Skylar had a look on her face that made Nick and Alex a little nervous. “Come on, we’ve gotta make it really good.”

The three of them gathered all the leftover bark and sticks and made a rustic shelter over the Tepee fire. It didn’t take long with the three of them working together. Nick was excited and hopeful. Maybe he did master fire making.

“Are you all set Nick?” Skylar hollered from the corner of the house.

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“What is she up to?” Nick whispered to Alex. “Uh, yeah,” he hollered over to Skylar.

“You sure? ‘Cause here comes the rain.” With that, Skylar turned on the hose full blast and started to spray.

Without losing a step, Nick crouched over protecting his match and tinder bundle. He lit the match to the tinder and it caught on fire right away. Smoothly and quickly, Nick placed the burning bundle in the little gap at the bottom of his kindling Tepee. With the lean-to shelter the three of them built, there were only a few drops of hose water falling on the dry wood of the Tepee. It wasn't enough to stop the fire from taking off. The flames bit into the hemlock kindling which flamed high and hot. The larger kindling on the outer part of the Tepee started to burn too. Then, the entire fire pit was roaring with flames while the shelter continued to keep the drenching hose water from ruining the fire.

“We did it! We did it!” Alex and Nick shouted jumping up and down with the hose soaking them. They were getting totally wet but didn't care at all.

Grinning from ear to ear, Skylar shouted from the hose, “You did it Nick!” Her cousins looked at her, smiled and then charged!

CHAPTER 10: Each one, Teach one – Alex’s Chickadee

Fortunately, it was a mild warm spring April day. The sun was out and only a light breeze blew from the southeast. Nick and Alex were not prepared for a rainstorm so had gotten pretty wet with Skylar spraying the hose. A quick change into dry clothes and they were ready for Alex to share her skills with the birds.

With the success of Nick’s sharing of his skill, Alex had some big shoes to follow. Alex took charge right away and directed Skylar and Nick to go inside and look out the window.

“Why do we have to go inside? Why can’t we be out here?” whined Nick.

“Because, you might scare away the birds,” replied Alex. “Well, not that exactly. It’s more about the birds not knowing you, so they don’t trust you yet.”

“And they trust you?” questioned Skylar, a bit snippy. She didn’t like being excluded.

“Um, yes, I guess they do. But I’ve been working at getting them to trust me for four weeks now. At first, they wouldn’t even come close to me. Finally, just a little bit ago they started to come around and just a couple of days ago they...well, let me just show you,” pleaded Alex.

“Alright. Fine. We’ll go inside then. Come on Nick,” said Skylar reluctantly as she pulled Nick with her.

“This better be good Alex,” challenged Nick who also did not like being asked to go inside away from the fun.

“It will, it will. And then we can all be outside again and I’ll teach you. I promise,” exclaimed Alex.

The two cousins headed inside leaving Alex outside by her Special Spot. Over the last several weeks, Alex had come up with kind of a ritual or habit before sitting at her Spot. She did it today too, not wanting to change anything. After all, her brother and cousin were staring out the window and not too pleased about it. They were expecting something good to happen and Alex didn’t want to take any chances.

Alex slowly approached her Spot, stopped in front of it and closed her eyes. With her eyes closed, she took several slow and deep breaths. At the same time, she said thank you to the birds, the trees, the plants, the seeds and everything around her.

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“What the heck is she doing?” said Nick getting more and more impatient being inside. “This is stupid.”

“I don’t know but let’s give her a chance. We’ve got to trust her. This is her skill that she has been practicing for weeks so she must know what she’s doing,” suggested Skylar trying to be optimistic.

When Alex was finished giving thanks for the nature around her, she gently sat down crossing her legs. Reaching into her pocket, she took out a handful of seeds that she gently spread in front of her. She took another handful of seed out of her other pocket and sprinkled the seeds on both of her shoulders. Then, she slowly put her hands in her lap, closed her eyes and breathed calmly.

From the window, Skylar and Nick were watching closely. Something was different with Alex. More often than not, she was loud, rough and tumble but the girl on the edge of the bushes by the bird feeder was quiet, soft and peaceful. A calmness surrounded her that was noticeable to both Skylar and Nick.

“Wow, I’ve never seen Alex so quiet and calm,” marveled Skylar.

“Totally. I mean if I didn’t know she was there, I probably wouldn’t even see her. She blends in so well with the bushes. Not because she’s camouflaged but because she’s just...just. I don’t know how to explain it,” Nick said struggling to explain with words what he was observing. He was also definitely impressed with his sister.

Not long after Alex sat down, the birds returned to the feeder. Another 3 or 4 minutes passed and the juncos edged over to the seed by Alex’s feet.

“Look, look. The juncos on the ground are right by her feet! Whoa, look, that one actually jumped on and then off her foot!” exclaimed Skylar.

“Holy cow! I can’t believe it,” said Nick in disbelief.

Chickadees flew in to the bush around Alex sending Skylar and Nick crazy with hope! After all, Alex’s challenge was to have a chickadee land on her shoulder and there they were, lightly fluttering above her head from branch to branch.

For Alex, she was breathing it all in, like a stump if a stump could breath that is. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell the juncos were by her feet and the chickadees were above her head. The soft sounds of their calls, their wings, feet and feathers surrounded her. However, she knew that if she got excited or worse yet, cocky, then the birds would immediately fly off. After weeks of practicing this, it had become natural for her to sit so peacefully with beautiful birds fluttering around her. To Alex, in that moment, no longer were her cousins in the

windows watching her or traffic in the distance or chores at home to be done. She was right there at her Spot in that moment and nothing else existed.

In an instant, she felt the light weight and soft scratching on her shoulder of a chickadee. It was like an old friend coming to say hello. The chickadee pecked at the seeds, picked the plumpest one and flew off. Another chickadee came in, grabbed a seed and flew off. It was five minutes of chickadees feeding off of her shoulders until all the seeds were gone and the birds had their fill. Alex waited another minute or so to let the birds settle and move off without her disturbing them. She slowly stood and walked towards the back door.

She didn't make it to the porch before Skylar and Nick burst out of the back door screaming.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh Alex! That was amazing. How'd you do that? Have they done that before? What did it feel like when they landed?" rattled on Skylar.

Nick was just shaking his head with his eyes popping out, speechless. "Epic," mumbled Nick under his breath. "Just epic."

Alex started to smile and it grew into the biggest and proudest grin ever. All she said was "Wanna learn?"

"YEAH!!" hollered Nick and Skylar.

Alex with a smile handed each of them some seed.

CHAPTER 11: Each one, Teach one – Skylar’s Tracking

The next day, the cousins went to Skylar’s house. Two challenges had been mastered and shared and now another one to go. It was Skylar’s turn to track a deer for over a hundred yards through the forest. On the car ride to Skylar’s house, Nick and Alex were talking.

“Do you think Skylar mastered her skill?” asked Alex.

“I don’t know. It seems impossible to track a deer through the forest that far. I mean, every track to find and follow? I know I can’t do it. I can’t even find deer tracks most of the time in the woods,” replied Nick.

“I hope she can do it. If she can, then we’ve mastered 3 out of the 4 challenges McGee gave us. Well, sort of mastered since we each need to learn all the skills. The fourth challenge should be sort of easy. It’s learning some plants and what they can do for us right?” Alex asked.

“Yeah maybe. I’m not that excited to learn the plants. I mean, they’re just plants. What can they really do for us?” Nick said.

“Yeah. Plus, there are so many plants to choose from. What ones will we choose?” Alex responded.

“Well, for now, let’s just focus on learning these three skills!” Nick added.

They arrived at Skylar’s excited and hopeful but also a little doubtful that Skylar had mastered her skill. They ate lunch talking about the two skills that Nick and Alex had shared and how they all need to learn them over the next three weeks. They were excited to learn but felt that time was getting tight. Once they ate up their macaroni and cheese, they headed out the door.

Skylar felt that the conditions were pretty good for tracking since it had rained the day before. The ground was soft and wet and some areas in the woods may even have mud. Skylar grabbed a full pack and a long, straight walking stick.

“What’d you have in the pack?” asked Nick.

“Stuff for tracking. The stick I use too,” Skylar replied mysteriously.

“What kind of stuff and how do you use the stick?” questioned Alex.

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“You’ll see. Let’s get out there. Just when we get on the edge of the woods, let me go first so I can find a deer trail,” directed Skylar.

By this time, Nick was getting used to waiting to do anything so he let it be. This was tough for him though. He loves deer and he wanted to find the tracks. The three got to the edge of the forest and Skylar stood there looking into the woods. She too had come up with a kind of ritual or habit before tracking deer. She stood, not just looking into the woods but sensing the woods. Using all of her senses; sight, sound, touch (for the wind) and smell, she felt the forest in front of her. As she did this, she also thought about the deer of her woods, gave thanks to them and the whole forest. She also asked the deer to help her find and then follow their tracks.

Nick started to think that maybe he needed to do something before he started a fire, since the girls have something. Not a bad idea.

Skylar started into the forest with the other two following. Her eyes scanned the forest floor as she slowly moved through the woods. Every 10 steps or so, she would stop, kneel down and stare out into the forest. Nick thought that she should actually be staring at the ground since that is where the tracks are going to be. But, he was starting to learn to trust the others, especially when it came to their mastered skills.

The path Skylar took meandered through the trees, into open areas and along existing trails. Skylar knelt down and this time, with her hand, lightly felt the leaves. She gazed in one direction with her fingers feeling the ground at that spot.

“Here,” Skylar stated.

“Huh?” replied Nick, clearly confused.

“We’ll start tracking the deer here,” Skylar said simply.

“What do you mean?” asked Alex. Alex had been quietly following along. Tracking animals was not her thing but she knew it was one of the challenges given by McGee so she was paying attention at least.

“We’ll use this track and follow the deer for the hundred yards,” returned Skylar.

“Funny Skylar. There’s no track there. In fact, there’s nothing here at all. Come on, let’s go to the creek and see if we can find some tracks in the mud,” Nick said eagerly.

“No. Here’s where we’ll start. *I am serious*. There’s a track right here where my fingers are,” defended Skylar.

“Let me see!” pushed in Nick not believing it at all.

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“Nick, you can’t see it that well, but you can *feel* it. Give me your hand,” Skylar took Nick’s hand and guided his fingertips over the wet leaves. “Do you feel that sharp edge?”

“Uh...yeah, yeah I do. *That’s a deer track?*” asked Nick incredulously.

“Yep, you got it. Alex, come here. You feel for it,” encouraged Skylar.

Alex came over, knelt down and caressed the area where the track supposedly was. “Oh yeah...I feel it,” said Alex pretty impressed and amazed. “But how do you know it’s a deer?”

“Close your eyes while you feel the track, you can picture the shape of it. Plus, deer are the only animals in these woods that have a hard foot. It leaves a hard edge like that,” responded Skylar helping the others feel the track.

Nick stared at Skylar shaking his head staring at Skylar. Who was this girl in front of him? And the lesson wasn’t over yet. This was just the first track!

“Epic” Lincoln muttered.

Skylar shared, “Deer tracks have a pointed tip so the track is kind of like an arrow. You can see or feel for it and know what direction the deer was going AND guess where the next track will be. Can you feel the point?”

The cousins on their knees both felt for it. “Yeah, there it is. The next track should be over there, right?” Nick pointed in front of him.

“Yep, now before you get up, look in that direction, staring through the woods. Don’t look at anything in particular. In fact, try not to look at anything, just stare in that direction,” Skylar instructed.

“Huh? What do you mean ‘just stare but don’t look at anything?’” asked Alex.

“Just stare,” Skylar reminded her cousins.

“You mean like using your peripheral vision,” added Nick.

“Yeah, I guess so. Do that in the direction of where the tracks are going and tell me what you see,” Skylar said.

Her cousins did that. At first, they didn’t see anything, but after a minute, they started to see something.

“What do you see?” Skylar asked.

“Uh, I see a gap in the bushes and kind of a faint trail weaving through the woods,” Nick answered.

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“Me too!” Alex joined in.

“Well, that’s probably the trail of the deer. All we have to do is find each track on this trail. Here,” Skylar tossed them a huge Ziploc bag of popsicle sticks “we’ll put these in each track we find and make the trail really clear.”

Alex and Nick looked up at Skylar and blinked. Was she serious? There must be over 300 popsicle sticks in the bag!

“Come on, we’ve got a hundred yards of this!” And with that, Skylar grabbed a handful of popsicle sticks and started feeling for the next track and then the next. “Oh yeah, we can also use this stick if we can’t find the next track. I have it marked with what a deer step is about. See this mark? That is where the next step is if this is a regular sized deer walking.”

Skylar added, “Just make sure that you don’t kneel or step on the tracks. Stay behind and to the side. Also, face the sun, that way you don’t shade the tracks and you can see them better. Oh, yeah, know that the larger tracks are the front tracks. Plus, be ready for the tracks to turn off the trail at any time since the deer may be looking for food.”

“Oh, yeah, one last thing, remember what Ol’ Jack McGee said. The track you can’t find is the one that will teach you the most,” rattled off Skylar. “So if you get stuck with a track, don’t skip it. We can work at it to find it.

Nick and Alex blinked trying to remember all of this. It was obvious that they were going to have to practice this skill a whole lot. Actually, everyone was going to have to practice all of the skills a whole lot. However, with each of them clearly a master of their skill, they had a good chance of succeeding.

CHAPTER 12: The Last Stretch – Learning the Plants

With 3 weeks to go before our trio needed to find Ol' Jack McGee, there was little time for play. Of course, heading outside to practice making a fire or having birds land on you or tracking deer is not necessarily *not* play. However, it is a lot to learn in that amount of time. Alex, Nick and Skylar had to become masters of all the skills that McGee challenged them with. Plus, they had to learn 6 plants and what those plants could be used for.

It was now the April and the outside world was alive with spring everywhere. Different kinds of birds had returned from their winter migrations. Plants covered the forest floor where only leaves once were. Buds on the trees had budded out creating a green leafy canopy to the land. Days were warmer and they were getting longer and longer with the sun higher in the southern sky.

It was a perfect time to learn about plants. Our trio had planned it well. However, it was also a bit overwhelming since in a New England spring there are thousands of sprouting, flowering and blooming plants everywhere.

“Where do we start?” asked Nick. “And don’t tell me about the elephant,” he said with a crooked smile.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’d rather learn about the plants that are easy to find versus the hard to find plants. We’re trying to learn how they can help us right?” Skylar said.

“Yeah, it would be silly to learn about a rare plant that’s good medicine but would be super hard to find,” Alex joined in with.

“Alright then, let’s go outside and find different plants right around the house. We can then figure out if they have any good uses,” suggested Nick.

“Awesome. Let’s do it,” cheered Skylar pumping her fist in the air.

They headed outside to Skylar’s front yard and right away they all started pointing out plants that they already knew.

“There’s dandelion. And clover,” hollered Nick.

“I’ve got some of that flat leaf plant. I think it’s called plantain,” called Skylar.

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“Ooooo, here are some violets,” yelled Alex excited to see the cute small purple and white flowers.

“Hey, I think I found some young jewelweed,” Skylar called from over by the wet drainage. “And I think this is stinging nettle. Be careful over here,” she warned.

“What is this one? It’s leaves are like lace and a bunch of white flowers are at the top,” Alex pointed out from over by the apple trees.

“Are these wild strawberry leaves?” questioned Nick.

“O.K. guys, we need a list. Let me grab my notebook and I’ll write down all the ones we’ve got so far. The plants we don’t know we can draw or take a leaf and use the field guides inside to figure them out. How’s that sound?” offered Skylar.

“Great! I think we already have more than 6 plants just from your front yard,” Alex observed.

Skylar ran inside and grabbed one of her many notebooks and a pencil. She returned and began writing the list.

“O.K., shoot. What’d we have?”

Alex and Nick called off the ones they knew, Skylar added hers and their best guesses for the others. Here is what this first list looked like....

Plant List:

Dandelion

Clover

Violet

Jewelweed ?

Wild Strawberry ?

Plantain ?

Stinging Nettle ?

Lacey leaf plant with white flowers?

Armed with a host of field guides back in Skylar’s house, the three began looking up the list and samples from the unknown or uncertain plants. The next 2 hours had them leafing

through many plant books to identify them. Alex used her Mom and Dad's iPad to do research also. She found a few great websites that helped let her identify what the different plants could be used for. One site was called Learning Herbs and it had a ton of cool information. It was surprising what they discovered about all of those common plants.

"You know, I thought that this was gonna to be boring," shared Alex. "It's actually pretty fun."

"I know. It's so fun. Plus, I'm learning a ton about plants. I had no idea that so many of the plants can help us. I also found a bunch of other plants in the field guides that we didn't find but I'm sure are around, like wild rose. It's really high in vitamin C. One book said that it's better than orange juice!" shared Nick.

"Yeah. That lacey leaf plant I found is called yarrow. It can do a ton. It can stop bleeding and clean a cut and keep it from getting infected. It helps with colds, stuffy noses and coughs. I want to collect a bunch so next time I'm sick I can take yarrow and not the yucky cough medicine," exclaimed Alex excitedly.

"The plant I found by the wet creek is definitely stinging nettle. My Mom uses it as a tea. It has more iron in it than a hamburger she says. A book said that it's really good for reducing swelling too. So if you sprain an ankle, I bet you can use Nettle. Also, it's good for allergies. So Nick, you can take it if your allergies get bad," offered Skylar. "It's really amazing all the things that these plants can help us with," Skylar said excitedly.

"I know, it's crazy. All of these plants that are so good for us, my Dad calls 'weeds.' And, they're all growing right out your front door Skylar," Nick exclaimed.

"Skylar, why don't you add to the list what each plant can do. Then we can figure out which 6 plants we want to do for McGee," suggested Alex.

"Sure. O.K. I'll read them off and you guys tell me what each one does," directed Skylar.

So the three worked for another hour making a full list of the different plants and what they could be used for. They even named themselves the Nature Adventurers. They did add a few common trees to the list also. Here is what that list looked like:

The Nature Adventurers' Plant List:

Dandelion – super good for you. Eat flower and leaf!

Red clover - good for you. Leaves and flowers for tea. Can eat flower too!

Violet – Can eat flowers and leaves plus good for cough.

Jewelweed – great to wash off poison ivy oils or helps with rash!!!

Wild Strawberry – leaves good for digestion, rashes and yummy.

Plantain – good for stings, cuts, sprains. Young leaves healthy food too!

Stinging Nettle – very nutritious food and good for cuts just watch it!

Yarrow – good for cuts, infection and swelling.

White Pine Tree – needle high in vitamin C and pitch good to cover cuts.

Willow Tree – inner bark used to reduce pain/headaches.

Wild Rose – high in Vitamin C and good for digestion.

Cattail – make flour out of root and eat young stalks.

Wild Raspberry – leaves good for sore throats and diarrhea. 😊

The three had a hard time narrowing down the list to only 6 plants. So, they decided to explore the back woods and see what ones were most common. Having just spent the last hour looking at plant books, they noticed all different kinds of plants around them. They also surprised themselves by identifying new plants just from having looked at the guides earlier.

After 30 minutes of wandering around the woods, the three had made up their minds. It was hard since they liked them all and felt that the uses for them were so good to know.

However, since they knew that the Crooked Forest was in a forest, they stuck with plants they could find easily in the woods. They also wanted to make sure that the medicinal uses would cover as much as possible. Here is the final list they came up with:

The Nature Adventurers' FINAL Plant List:

Violet – Can eat flowers and leaves plus good for cough

Jewelweed – great for poison ivy rash or washing off poison ivy!!!

White Pine Tree – needles high in vitamin C and pitch good for cuts

Stinging Nettle – very nutritious food and good for cuts just watch it!

Yarrow – good for cuts, infection and swelling

Wild Raspberry – leaves for sore throats and diarrhea, berries yummy too!

The trio sat down in the woods to talk about their list.

“Well, here’s the list guys. It looks really good if I do say so myself,” exclaimed Skylar.

“Yeah, I think it’s great. It’s like we have a whole medicine cabinet right here in the forest,” joined in Nick. “I’m glad that we have jewelweed. I can get poison ivy pretty easy. All I have to do is look at poison ivy and I get it.”

“I really like the yarrow. It’s good for cuts and swelling so if any of us fall down and hurt ourselves, the yarrow will help a lot,” Alex shared.

“Stinging nettle’s my favorite,” Skylar added. “It’s good like yarrow for cuts but you can eat it too. All you need to do is crush the leaf on itself. That removes the prickles and then you can eat it. My Dad has done it before. It doesn’t taste too bad either. Kind of green, you know.”

“Wow, we did it guys,” declared Nick. “We did all of the challenges. I’m still not as good at tracking as you Skylar and I only had a bird land on me once but we still have a few more days.”

“I know. I can’t believe it. When McGee told us what he wanted us to do, I almost gave up right then and there. I didn’t think we could do it at all,” Skylar said.

“Me too. I’m glad that you’re my brother, Nick. Because I can’t do a fire that good and I definitely don’t know if I could do it in a rainstorm...or a hose storm,” Alex gave a big laugh remembering Skylar spraying the hose on both her and Nick to test his firemaking.

“But I’m glad we did do it. It’s been so cool learning this stuff. I know stuff and can do things that my Mom and Dad don’t even know. And I’m only 9!” exclaimed Alex.

With that, Alex gave a big smile and a two big thumbs up. Then her eyes opened wide and jaw dropped as she stared past the other two. Nick and Skylar quickly whirled around to see Ol’ Jack McGee leaning against the tree not more than 5 feet away!

Skylar and Nick jumped back, both screaming.

“Argh!!”

No one had seen or heard him come up. It’s like he was a ghost.

“Whoa! How’d you do that?” asked Nick.

“How long have you been here?” Skylar questioned.

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“Never you mind. Been here long ‘nough,” spat McGee. “So, you three think you’ve done all the challenges I gave ya?”

“Well, sort of? I mean we do but still could use a few more days to make sure all of us have mastered them,” Nick spoke.

“Why don’t you three tell me what you’ve been up to and what you learned? Then, let me be the judge of whether or not you need a few more days,” McGee said.

With that, he just sat down right there, picked a plant leaf and started chewing it. It was like he was an animal in the forest; so natural and comfortable not to mention silent.

“Well, what are you waitin’ for? Get to talkin’. I want to hear your stories,” grumbled McGee as he laid back chewing on the leaf.

Our three shared the last several weeks and how they each took on a skill to master. Once they mastered that skill, then they told the stories about teaching the other two. McGee would ask them about every little detail. He kept his eyes closed, would grunt occasionally and even nod his head. It was like he could see exactly what had happened. They shared their plant list and how they came up with it. McGee asked about any other plants they learned and between the three of them, they had learned over 12 different plants and trees and their uses. McGee kept on grunting, nodding and asking questions.

He asked Nick directly if he had a “kind of ritual” that he would do before he started fires. Nick confessed that he hadn’t until he saw both Alex and Skylar taking time beforehand to give thanks and get quiet. So now he does too. “Hummph,” grunted McGee.

“What’d ya think about or do before you sit and have the birds come, Alex?” asked McGee.

“Ah, well, I just kind of clear my head and slow down my breathing,” replied Alex.

“That it?” McGee pushed for more.

“Well, no. I, I actually say thank you to the birds and trees and stuff,” Alex confessed.

“I see.” McGee paused here like he was deep in thought. “Yes, yes, very important,” he mumbled.

“Skylar, what made you decide to start trackin’ that deer at that specific track when you were teachin’ the others?” McGee questioned.

“Um, well, I, I don’t know really,” Skylar stammered. She didn’t like questions that she doesn’t easily know the answer to.

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McGee shook his head and gave a slight smile. "You know. Think back and tell me what ya were feelin'," McGee pressed.

"Huh. I, I just sort of knew. Kinda like when I know an answer to a question and I don't know how I know it. It just felt right I guess," Skylar said thinking hard.

"Hmmm, yes. Good, good," replied McGee pleased with that answer.

This went on for over an hour. Birds visited the four to see what the meeting was about. As McGee talked, a chickadee actually landed on his shoulder, tilted its head to the side and eyeballed him and then flew off. The three just stared. No matter how much they learned, whenever they were around McGee, they realized that there was still so much more to learn. They also realized that maybe they weren't really "masters" of their skills yet. Of course, two months ago they didn't even think any of what they could do now was possible. Also, with McGee's questions and retelling their stories, they realized how much they actually did learn.

"Alright you three. It's clear to me," McGee declared as he stiffly stood up and stared at Alex, Skylar and Nick with his piercing blue eyes.

The trio stared up at him and held their breath. Another challenge? Did they not succeed in meeting his expectations?

"You...are ready," McGee said flatly.

"Ready? Ready for....?" queried Skylar

"Ready for the final preparation in finding the Crooked Forest? Next weekend, come to my cabin. Your Dad, Skylar, can tell ya where it is. But don't take the road. Come through the woods. I'll have the next set of instructions ready then." McGee started to walk away and then turned and spoke one last time.

"Keep going to your Special Spots and practicing these skills. You're gonna need them next weekend."

With that, he walked a little away and stepped behind a large tree. The three got up and moved so they could see McGee again. They really wanted to figure out how he can disappear and reappear in the woods. But in the few seconds it took the three to move, Ol' Jack McGee had disappeared again into the woods silently.

CHAPTER 13: A Pleasant Surprise from McGee

For the next week, our trio kept practicing and working on mastering their nature skills that Jack McGee had given them. As they practiced, they kept connecting deeper with nature. Birds would come to them sooner. Tracks would be more obvious. Fires could be made more easily. Our three nature adventurers were becoming “one” with nature. They couldn’t wait until the weekend though. They were so excited to start the next step in getting to the Crooked Forest.

The weekend arrived and our three were eager to go to McGee’s place.

“Have you ever been to McGee’s house, Skylar?” asked Alex.

“No. I haven’t even seen it. I didn’t even know if he lived in a house. I guess it’s down a long dirt driveway. My Dad told me how to get there through the woods. It’s a little bit of a walk so we should bring some water and snacks.”

“Sounds good. We can use my backpack. I brought it along just in case. I also have some survival stuff in it,” offered Nick.

“I’ve got some spare clothes too. Where’s his place from here?” Alex asked.

“We’ve got to head up the hill and hit the rock wall that’s at the end of our property. Then we have to turn to the east or right and follow it until a big pine forest. My Dad said at the start of the pine forest is another rock wall that cuts through it. We should follow that and it goes right to McGee’s place,” Skylar shared.

“What do you think McGee’s gonna have us do or learn today?” asked Alex.

“I don’t know but I’m sure it’ll be good,” said Skylar.

“Totally. I hope he’s gonna teach us how to stalk in the woods like he does. Boy, that’s freaky how he just appears and disappears,” Nick said.

“I know. How does he do it? Remember when we saw the turkeys and he somehow was standing behind us? The turkeys didn’t even know he was there and he was in plain sight,” marveled Skylar. “Are we all set?”

“Ready,” said Nick.

“Ready,” said Alex.

With that, they said goodbye to Skylar's parents and headed out. When they got to the forest, all three of them paused and sensed the forest. This had become a habit for them and they did it without even thinking. After a minute or so, they looked at each other, smiled and began hiking into the forest.

When they hit the rock wall at the end of Skylar's property, they had already been out for an hour. When one loves nature, it is hard to walk in a straight line and not explore a little. They found turkey feathers, deer trails, fox trails and even a coyote scat on a log. Many different kinds of birds were all around making the forest alive with sound. At one point, a barred owl flushed out of a tree right above them. It gave the three a bit of a scare.

The forest floor was covered in a million plants. Waist high ferns, mosses and wildflowers were all around. As they walked, they found most of the plants in their plant list and quizzed each other about their uses. It was a glorious time with all the life around them. They could sense the spring energy and were equally happy and excited.

At the rock wall, they turned to right. Nick pulled out a compass that he brought along.

"Yep, we're heading east now. You can also tell by looking at the sun. Since it's before noon, the sun is still in the southeastern part of the sky," Nick explained.

Our nature adventurers continued. At this point, the forest was no longer Skylar's property and it was new to her and her cousins. This was the farthest they had explored and it was exciting to see new land. The forest was different. The trees had become bigger with different types of trees than Skylar's part of the woods. There were also grassy clearings that emerged occasionally like little green oases in the woods.

Skylar stopped in her tracks. "Oh my, look at this tree, guys," Skylar said breathlessly. Right before her was a huge old growth White Pine tree. The trunk was massive and straight with the lowest branches being 50 feet up.

"Whoa. It's HUGE!" Nick stared up the trunk in awe. "I've never seen a tree this big before."

"Me neither. It must be a grandfather tree," loudly whispered Alex.

"Huh. It's the biggest one around for sure. Hey, let's call it that; the Grandfather Tree," suggested Skylar.

"Yeah, I like it. The Grandfather Tree," smiled Alex.

There was something very special about this tree and our trio could sense it. It was The Grandfather Tree was an elder of the forest, watching over everything around.

"Let's see how fat it is. Grab hands and let's hug it," said Nick.



The three held hands around the tree but could not close the circle. In fact, they were only able to hug around half of the tree. The trunk was that wide! They gazed at the Grandfather Tree admiring the size and how old it must be. They hated to leave it but needed to keep going. They continued heading east, following the rock wall. It was only 50 yards before they came upon the Pine Forest. It was a huge expanse of forest with only pine trees in it. Because the trees grew so thickly and kept their needles year round, not much sunlight ever hit the forest floor. Without the sun, not many ground plants or other trees were able to grow. This created an open forest that had a carpet of pine needles. It felt magical.

“This forest is amazing. It would be so cool to come and camp here. Wouldn’t it?” Nick said.

“Yeaaaaah,” whispered Skylar in awe as she looked up and all around.

“I bet all these pine trees are the babies of our Grandfather Tree,” Alex said as she sniffed the aromatic air.

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Our adventurers also noticed that the sounds of this forest were very different. They were hushed and gentle. The wind quietly whooshed through the pine boughs making it almost sound like a river.

After another half an hour of slowly walking and exploring, the forest opened up to a clearing where, in the middle was a neat and tidy looking log cabin with a wraparound porch.

“Is this McGee’s,” asked Nick surprised. He pictured a house that was not so, so, well kept. Before any of the others had a chance to answer a pleasant woman’s voice rang out.

“Hello you three! Please, come on over. Come, come. Don’t be shy. I’m Mrs. McGee.”

“Jack McGee has a wife?” whispered a shocked Nick.

“Come on now. I’ve got some nice iced Sumac Tea for you. Are you hungry? I’ve got some sandwiches and cookies too.”

The three approached the house and there on the porch was a plump older woman with a sweet face. Her hair was pulled back in a gray bun and she wore an apron over her clothes.

“They don’t have time for your Sumac tea and sandwiches woman! They didn’t come here for a picnic. We’ve got work to do,” came a gruff, raspy voice from inside the house. It was Ol’ Jack McGee.

“Hush ya ol’ grump. There’s always time for a snack, Jack,” Mrs. McGee said. “There’ll be time enough for you with them. Now is my time. I want to get to know these kiddos that you’ve been torturing for the last few months.” Mrs. McGee turned back to our three, warmly winked and pointed to the chairs on the porch.

Alex, Nick and Skylar sat and enjoyed a most delicious snack. The iced tea, made from the Sumac bush was sweet and tart. Mrs. McGee pointed to the Sumac that she got the fuzzy berries from that made the tea. She was the warmest and gentlest woman which surprised the kids since Ol’ McGee is, well, not the warmest and gentlest.

Mrs. McGee saw the surprised looks and whispered, “Awww, Jack really isn’t that scary or mean. He really doesn’t bite. He’s mostly bark.” Then she winked again at them. “Alright, I suppose I’ve kept you long enough. Jack. JACK? JAAAACCCCK!”

“WHAAAAT woman?” replied McGee grumpily from inside the house.

“They’re all yours dear,” Mrs. McGee said as she chuckled amused by her husband.

“About time. Send ‘em in,” Ol’ McGee said.

“Good luck children,” said Mrs. McGee with a smile and a twinkling eye.

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Now this was a revelation for our trio. Ol' Jack McGee was married. And married to the nicest, sweetest woman ever. Maybe there is more to Jack McGee than just a grumpy old woodsman.

They walked into the house and gasped. It was beautiful. The log walls were golden and the wooden rafters had hanging herbs all over. A stone fireplace was in the middle and a zebra hide rug lay on the floor in front of it. What looked like a nature museum was on the mantle of the fireplace. Skulls from animals, wooden carvings, bird wings, an old leather pouch, unusual feathers, survival tools like a bow drill and woven baskets were all neatly displayed. The three naturally moved toward the fireplace in awe and marveled at everything. Everything had a place and they could tell that each item had an amazing story too.

Chapter 14: The Final Instructions – Animal Skills

“Whoa, where’d ya get the zebra hide?” asked Nick with his mouth open.

“What kind of bird is this feather from?” Alex asked pointing to a very long blue-gray feather. It must have been over a foot long.

“What is this Mr. McGee?” asked Skylar pointing to a really old leather pouch on the mantle that had something in it.

“Alright, enough of your lollygagging. Maybe another day I’ll share about some of these things. But we’ve got a lot to do today, so let’s get crackin’,” grumbled McGee.

The three stood at attention. They were ready but couldn’t help and wonder about all the incredible things right there in front of them.

“Good then. Now, you three are just about ready but I’ve a few really important things I need to teach you before you go and try to find the Crooked Forest. These things, if you use them will be **the most** important things you’ll ever learn. They’re the key to becoming one with nature and yourselves. You hear me?” McGee stared at them with a squinted eye.

“Yes,” the three replied seriously.

“To become one with nature, you need to change how you look with your eyes, how you move with your body and how you listen with your ears. I’m gonna teach you today the way to do these things. Now mind you, these are skills that also need to be practiced and eventually to be mastered. I call these Animal Skills and once you master them, you’ll be able to be like an animal in the woods. You’ll be able to stalk other animals, disappear and even know what the forest is saying.

“Are you three prepared for these final lessons?”

“We’re ready sir,” announced Nick on behalf of the others. Alex and Skylar nodded their heads in agreement.

“Good. Once you learn how to use your senses like a wild animal, you’ll then be fully prepared to journey to the Crooked Forest.” Ol’ Jack McGee gave the three adventurers a one eyed stare to show that he meant business.

He then led the three outside to the yard to begin teaching them this final lesson.

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“Alright then. Let’s get started. Can any of you tell me what animal in our forest sees the best?” asked McGee.

“Oooo, oooo,” moaned Alex raising her hand.

“This ain’t school for goodness sake. Ya don’t have to raise your hand young lady. What do you think?” said McGee mildly annoyed and mildly amused.

“The wild turkey!” beamed Alex very proud of herself.

“Indeed. Very good. They do have some of the best eyesight in the forest. They can see a hunter’s eye blink from 100 yards away. What else? Anyone have another guess?” asked McGee.

The trio took a longer pause, having to think harder for another animal with really good eyesight.

Skylar raised her hand out of habit then quickly pulled it down. “Yes sir. I do. Owls have great eyesight. They’re able to see a mouse even in the dark.”

“Hmmmmm. Very good also. I can see that you three have been doing your homework,” chuckled McGee. “Both of these birds have excellent eyesight and we’re going to learn from them.” McGee sat up straighter preparing for giving a lesson.

“Ya know why each of these birds have such good eyesight? Hmmmmm?” asked McGee. No one knew. “Well, it’s because they’re first looking for motion in the forest.”

The three looked confused so McGee continued with a sigh. “If you look out into the forest and try to find a deer, it’s really hard because they blend in, right?”

Nick jumped in here. “Yeah, they’re camouflaged.”

“Very good. So do you know why some people are really good at seeing deer in the forest?”

“No.” Nick answered eager to hear why.

“Because they’re not looking for deer but rather looking for a deer moving. A flick of an ear or twitch of a tail. Only once they see a movement, do they focus in and identify what made it. Does this make sense?”

“Yeah, but how do they do that?” Nick asked. Nick loved finding animals in the woods and he was really excited about learning this stuff.

“O.K., you all stand over here.” McGee motioned to the open lawn area. “Stand far enough apart that you won’t hit each other if you wave your arms.”

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Our three dutifully did as they were told.

“Now, reach your arms out to your side like you’re flying. Do it so you can’t see your hands. Good. O.K. then, start wiggling your fingers and slowly move your arms bringing them closer together. But wait, make sure that you are looking straight ahead at some distant tree the whole time. Good. As your arms move closer, you should be able to see your fingers wiggling on both hands while you are still looking straight ahead. Do you see that?” asked McGee.

“Yes, yes. It is using our peripheral vision,” Nick excitedly offered.

“Exactly. Now, our eyes are meant to use peripheral vision most of the time but we don’t, we use our binocular vision, focusing on one object at a time. Can you imagine how hard it would be to see a deer in the woods using a pair of binoculars? Well, that is what we do. However, looking the way I just showed you changes that. I call this way of using our eyes, Owl Eyes. Go ahead and do it again and pretend you’re an owl up on a high branch and your wiggling fingers are mice scurrying around.”

“Cool. I can see both of my hands at the same time,” hollered Skylar.

“Me too. And look, my hands are still far to the side,” joined in Alex.

“Now you’ve got it. Of course, ya don’t want to be moving through the forest with your arms out and fingers wiggling. Using your hands just gets you practicing. You need to be able to do it all the time. Instead of fingers wiggling, you will see birds flying by, leaves moving with the wind and yes, a deer flicking its tail,” said McGee pleased with how things were progressing.

“Ya three got Owl Eyes, you think?” McGee added.

“Yes. Right Alex, Skylar?” answered Nick. The other two nodded.

“Good. Let’s move to the next Animal Skill. What animal in these forests do you think have really good hearing? Think about it now.” McGee eyed the three as they thought.

“Of course, deer do,” Nick said smiling.

“What about rabbits?” asked Alex.

“You’re both right. Nicely done. Each have the largest ears in the forest. Those large ears help them listen for any animal that wants to eat them; the predators. Ya know that word? Predator?” asked McGee.

“Yes. A predator is an animal that eats other animals,” answered Skylar.

“Right. Very good. Think about it. Just about every predator in the woods wants to catch and eat a rabbit. They’re always listening. This is how you have to be in the forest. Not that every

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predator wants to eat you but by listening, you'll understand the forest. I call this one Rabbit Ears. Nick, if you want you can call it Deer Ears," winked McGee. Nick smiled back. He was planning on it.

"Let me show you one trick for when you want to hear something that is real quiet. Cup your hands and put them around your ears. You are making your ears bigger so more sound is caught in them. You're making your Rabbit or Deer ears. Go ahead, try it and see what sounds you can hear better," McGee suggested.

All three cupped their ears and stood facing the woods. All of a sudden, they could hear the twittering of birds in the far distance, the leaves rustling and even a woodpecker knocking on a tree in the very far distance. They were amazed at how well it worked.

"Good. Now, you know Owl Eyes and Rabbit or Deer Ears. The last one is how you need to move in the forest. What animal is the sneakiest animal of all? This animal can move silently over dry leaves and crunchy snow." McGee eyed them again. "The amazing thing about this animal is that it's actually not very well camouflaged like most and yet it's still the sneakiest. Anyone have a guess?"

The hint McGee gave actually made it harder to guess. It was like a riddle. What animal is not camouflaged but is the sneakiest in the forest? Bobcat, coyote, deer, bear, raccoon, weasel and none fit until....

"I got it! A FOX!" shouted Alex.

"You got it. Well done my dear. A fox is able to silently walk and stalk in the forest. They move like ghosts as they hunt for mice and rabbits to eat. In fact, the bottom of their feet, in between their padded toes, they have a bunch of hair that sticks out. This hair muffles any sound and softens their step. One reason why I prefer moccasins over big soled boots personally." McGee held up a foot that had very well worn moccasins. They looked handmade and very comfortable. Maybe this helped McGee to be able to sneak up on them all the time.

"I call this Animal Skill..."

McGee was cut off by a chorus of three blurting out at the same time, "Fox Walking!"

"Yes, very good," grumbled McGee. "You want me to show you how to Fox Walk smarties?"

"Yes," came their eager reply.

"Good. Listen, when most people walk, they step and land first on their heel and then their toe. They also lean forward so they have to take a step or else they would fall on their faces. This is not how the fox moves. When you're fox walking, and I recommend that you do it most of the time, you land first on the ball of your foot and then your heel."

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Alex started to try it and looked like a chicken strutting. Nick and Skylar laughed at how funny it looked. Alex scowled at them.

“No, no. You should look like you’re walking normally except lean back just a smidge and very subtly have the ball of your foot land first and then your heel. This way, since you’re leaning back, if your foot feels a stick underneath that you may snap, you can easily pick your foot up and place it elsewhere. Alright, you try it.”

At first, it felt very strange and Nick and Skylar also looked like chickens. However, with just a little practice, they started to get the hang of it. They patted each other on the back feeling very proud of their progress.

“Well, yes, very good but guess what?” McGee said.

“What?” all three responded.

“Now the hard part,” McGee exclaimed.

All three turned their scowling faces in his direction.

“Quit your whinin’. What you need to do is use your Owl Eyes, Deer Ears AND Fox Walking all at the same time. And you have to look normal.”

At first, that didn’t happen. It looked like Alex, Nick and Skylar were all robot chickens “Loosen up! Don’t lean back so far. Just a little. Relax and soften your eyes,” hollered McGee.

“Excellent. Much better now.”

“Alright, pay attention now. You need to practice these Animal Skills everyday as often as you can. When you walk down the hall in school or sit at the table for dinner, it doesn’t matter. Use your Animal Skills. Of course, when you go to your Special Spot and practice your Nature Skills, use your Animal Skills.” With that, Ol’ Jack McGee got up and started walking towards his house.

“Wait, what about the Crooked Forest. When do we go?” Nick called out.

“Come back here after the first thunderstorm of the season. You should be ready then, IF you practice all of this every day. At that time, I’ll tell you where to find the start of the trail. Then it’ll be up to you if you make it to the Crooked Forest.” And with that, McGee went inside and closed the door behind him.

The three adventurers blinked at each other. When is the season of Thunderstorms? They never noticed when the thunderstorms came.

“I hope it’s not too far away,” said Alex quietly.

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“Yeah, I know. Me too. Hey, let’s do our Owl Eyes, Rabbit Ears and Fox Walking all the way back to my home,” suggested Skylar.

“Not me, I’m doing Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and *Deer Ears*,” said Nick with a grin.

They headed back through the woods using their Animal Skills. Who knows what adventure was in front of them as they looked with eyes of an owl, listened with the ears of a rabbit and walked like the stealthy fox.

Chapter 15: The Season of Thunderstorms

“Dad, when do the thunder storms start up?” Skylar asked casually over dinner one night.

“Hmmm...typically it’s in the summer when the warmer air at ground level rises up and hits the colder air up in the atmosphere. This forced air movement, called convection combined with moisture and unstable air forms the thunderstorms.” replied Skylar’s father who is a bit of a naturalist which is someone who teaches about nature.

At this point, Skylar’s mother adds... “Honey, it’s in midsummer, in July typically. That’s the easier answer.” She gave her husband a sidelong glance at his overly detailed science answer. “Why? Are you worried about them or something?” she asked concerned.

“No, just curious. Mr. McGee told us to go find him when the first thunderstorms happens. He thinks at that point we’ll be ready to go find the Crooked Forest” Skylar said hoping that her parents would think so too.

“Well, if Ol’ McGee thinks you’re ready then you are. He’s an amazing woodsman,” said Skylar’s father who glanced over at her mother. Skylar’s Mom didn’t look as convinced.

“Honey, Skylar and her cousins will be fine. Don’t worry. They’re in good hands,” assured Skylar’s Dad to his wife.

“Oh alright. If you say so. I’m still a little worried. I am her mother you know!” added Skylar’s Mom smiling.

Skylar smiled too, relieved that going to find the Crooked Forest wasn’t going to be an issue with her parents. Also, July was only a month or so away. Enough time to get really good at her nature and animal skills before they go and find the Crooked Forest.

The next day in school, Skylar met up with Nick and Alex and let them know when the season of thunderstorms arrive. They too were glad that it wasn’t too far off nor too soon. They also wanted more time to practice their skills.

“Have you mentioned it to your parents yet?” asked Skylar a little worried.

“No, not really. Maybe you can have your Dad talk to my Dad about this adventure. Seems like your Dad gets it,” said Nick.

“Yeah, I know our Mom doesn’t like the idea of us trying to find the Crooked Forest at all,” added Alex with a concerned look on her face.

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"You're lucky that your Dad's a naturalist. Nature doesn't freak him out like our Mom," Nick shared.

"Listen, all you have to do is help your Mom and Dad understand that you'll be safe. They're just worried and they don't understand nature like us," Skylar suggested.

"But how do we do that?" asked Nick.

"Next time you come over with them, let's take them out in the woods and show them all that we know," Skylar said.

"That's a great idea. If they see how good we are in the woods then they'll feel better and worry less," beamed Alex.

"That's the hope anyhow," Skylar said hopeful but still a little worried.

"Cool. This weekend I think we're coming over for a BBQ. We can do it then," Nick said.

"Perfect." Skylar smiled. "How have your Animal Skills been going?" asked Skylar.

"Great! They've even made me better at the Nature Skills I think," answered Nick.

"Me too! The birds are even more comfortable with me. I sit and use Owl Eyes and Rabbit Ears all the time. I had a bird yesterday land on my shoulder and sit and fix its feathers. I didn't even have to put seed on my shoulder. It was so amazing," Alex shared.

"I've been doing Fox Walking all the time. Even in school. I've been practicing it with the Owl Eyes and Deer Ears so that I can stalk through the woods as quietly as McGee can," Nick said excitedly. "I want to be able to stalk up on a deer and slap it on the butt!"

"Yeah, and then the deer will kick you in the head," laughed Skylar and Alex.

"Well, let's show your parents our skills and hope that they'll feel fine about us going and finding the Crooked Forest in July."

That weekend came and with some begging, the kids were able to get Alex and Nick's parents to go out into the woods for a walk. After some convincing and negotiation they finally agreed to a 30 minute walk. The adventurers therefore only had 30 minutes to show them that they knew what they were doing and convince them that they would be safe.

The trio led the way. As they always do, they stopped at the edge of the woods and used their senses. The two adults scratched their heads wondering why they were standing there. Before one of them could ask, Alex spoke.

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"I think there's an owl up ahead."

"Yeah, I think you're right," agreed Skylar listening closely to the forest. "Let's stalk up there and see if we can spot it. Nick, you lead the way."

"Huh? How do you know that?" asked Nick and Alex's Dad with a very confused look on his face.

"Um, well, do you hear the birds? Hear those jays calling up ahead?" Alex said.

"Yeeeah," her father answered looking at his wife with a surprised look on his face.

"Well, they're pretty much telling the whole forest that there's a predator over there. And since they're up high in the trees, it won't be a cat or a fox," Alex explained.

"Oh. O.K. Lead on Nick," his Dad said not fully believing that there really was an owl up ahead.

After only a few steps into the woods Alex whispered, "Mom, Dad, try to walk quieter."

Indeed, the trio were nearly silent as they stalked while the parents were crashing through the woods like a herd of buffalo. After just a few minutes, they were up by where the jays were calling.

"There, you see it Mom, Dad?" Nick asked as he pointed up high in a hemlock tree.

Sure enough, a large Great Horned Owl was sitting up high in the tree trying to ignore the jays.

"Oh my, honey. You were right," answered his Mom trying to hide her surprise.

"I can't believe it. Never seen one before," said his Dad also surprised.

Both parents stopped and looked at the children, clearly impressed but still a bit doubtful.

"Let's keep going a bit more," Skylar encouraged. There was much more to see and do before the end of the 30 minutes.

After a ways, Skylar paused and knelt down. "Nick, check this out."

Nick knelt down and felt the leaves. "Do you think it's fresh Skylar?"

"I think so. Let's follow it for a little," Skylar said.

"What, what is it?" asked Uncle Craig.

"It's a deer. Come here, feel the track under the leaves?" Skylar showed him.

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“Honey, check this out. You can feel a track here,” he said to his wife. She felt for the track too and her eyes opened wide.

“Come on Mom, Dad, let’s follow it for a bit. Maybe we can see it,” exclaimed Alex. “But you really have to try to walk quietly please.”

“We’re trying honey but we just can’t. In fact, I don’t know how you kids can walk so quietly in the woods,” replied Alex’s Mom.

“Fox Walking Mom,” answered Alex. Her Mom just nodded her head but really had no idea what her daughter meant.

The group moved quietly (well at least the children were quiet) through the woods as they tracked the deer. Every so often, they would stop and cup their ears and listen to the forest in front of them. Then, they did it one more time and looked at each other and giggled silently.

“What, what,” asked Alex and Nick’s father in a hushed tone.

“The deer is just up ahead on the other side of that hill,” Nick said.

“Are you kids serious or just joking with us?” he asked quietly beginning to be amazed.

“No Dad, it’s true. Come on, we’ll show you unless you and Mom scare it away ‘cause you’re so loud,” Nick whispered with a smile. “We have to go around this way or else the wind will give us away.”

“What wind?” Nick’s Mom questioned.

“The light wind coming from the east,” answered Nick matter a factly.

The group crept around the hill on the westerly side and once they came around, there was a doe quietly browsing. Nick and Alex’s parents were shocked and thrilled. They had never seen a deer up close in the woods. They were starting to realize that these kids knew more about the woods than they did.

The group quietly walked back around and started heading back to the house trying not to disturb the deer.

“Oh my. I can’t believe it. That was amazing. The deer was so beautiful and so close!” their Mom commented, still breathless from the experience.

“I don’t know what to say,” exclaimed their Dad shaking his head in disbelief.

The three smiled at each other. This plan may actually work. All of that stalking took up a bunch of time so they needed to head back to the house. Our trio was hoping that they had shown enough of their skills. Once they got back, Skylar's Dad was about to start a fire in the fire pit.

"Can I start it?" Nick asked.

"Sure Nick. Do you want me to get you wood from the shed?" his Uncle replied.

"No, we'll do it ourselves with wood from the forest," Nick answered. "Mom, Dad, stay here and watch."

"O.K. buddy" and they sat down at the patio table.

The kids went to work immediately going up into the woods and collecting the tiny dry branches from the hemlock tree. Nick went to under the hemlock and gathered some dry needles. He found a dead ash tree and collected some of the under bark also and put these two ingredients into a tinder bundle. The two girls continued gathering small and large kindling.

After only 5 minutes, they returned to the fire pit with enough wood to start a nice fire. Working together, they made a Tepee shape with the kindling, starting with the smallest on the inside and largest on the outside. An opening at the very bottom was left for the tinder bundle that Nick had in his shirt.

"Here you go," said Skylar's Dad as he handed them a matchbox.

"Nick, you light it," Skylar said.

"No, you can," he replied.

"Alex, do you want to?" asked Nick.

"Wow, you guys are quite a team aren't you," Nick's Mom said clearly impressed.

They looked over with a smile. The threesome had gotten to be a really good team together.

"Nick, you do it since Fire is your best skill," Alex said.

"Alright. Stand back," he said as he took one match out.

Confidently, he lit the match and then the tinder bundle that he placed in the hollow of the Tepee wood pile. Within seconds, the tinder caught fire and began spreading to the dry little kindling of the hemlock. After a minute, the rest of the kindling was burning brightly.

“Nicely done Nick. I couldn’t have made a better fire myself. I’m quite impressed,” Nick’s Uncle said.

“Thanks,” beamed Nick. “But Alex and Skylar did it too. Couldn’t have done this without them.”

“Hold everything!” gently hollered Nick and Alex’s father. “Who the heck are you kids and where did you learn all this? What we’ve seen you do today is amazing. You really know what you’re doing in the woods. I mean, finding an owl by listening to the birds or tracking a deer through the leaves – unbelievable. Now, in 5 minutes using just what you found in the woods, you started a fire with one match. I think it would take me a whole box of matches to start a fire! Really, you’re amazing! I knew that you have been learning nature stuff but this, this is crazy.”

The trio grinned from ear to ear.

“So can we go find the Crooked Forest in July?” blurted Alex. The other two gasped. They were thinking of a more subtle way of asking.

Her parents eyed each other. “We’ve been hearing about this Crooked Forest Adventure for a while now but didn’t think that you were serious. Obviously we were wrong. Clearly, you are very serious about it. I don’t know kids. It sounds like it is dangerous and who knows, you could get lost or hurt or, I don’t know. Brian, what do you think?” Nick and Alex’s Dad asked Skylar’s father, Brian. They figure that if Brian was alright with it, they could be convinced.

“Skylar’s Mom asked me the other night too. But I’ll tell you, these kids have become very skilled in the woods over the last few months. I also know that Jack McGee knows what he’s doing teaching these kids all these different skills. Honestly, I think it’s going to be a great adventure for them. Yeah, it is going to challenge them but from the looks of these three, they are ready for the challenge. Plus, they now know how to be safe out there,” offered Skylar’s Dad.

“Hmmm. Well, if you think so. Honey?” he shot his wife a look and she hesitantly nodded her head. “Alright then, Alex and Nick, you guys can go find this Crooked Forest!” Nick and Alex’s Dad announced.

“Hurray! Woohoo! Yesssss!” came a chorus of cheers. In a little over a month, if all went well, our nature adventurers were going to have the experience of a lifetime where all of their skills were going to be tested.

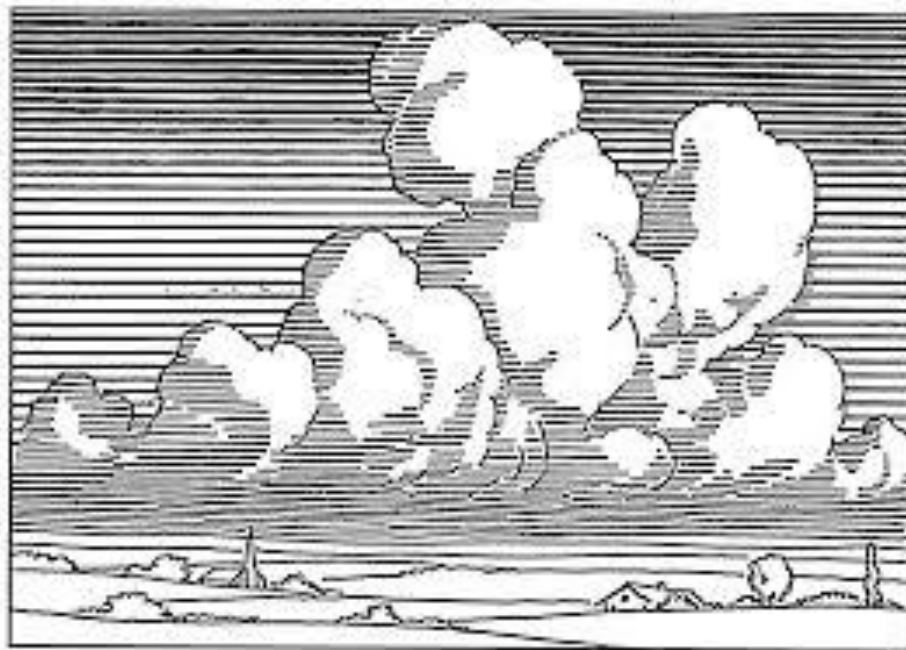
“You better be safe!” called their Mom over the celebration of high fives and woops.

Chapter 16: The Journey Begins

The next month went by quickly. The children practiced their Animal and Nature Skills while going to their Special Spots every day. Their senses became strong like the animals. Their understanding of the forests became deep like a river. They had become comfortable and confident out in nature during any sort of weather. They had become natives to the land.

School ended for the summer before the Season of Thunderstorms arrived which allowed our trio to spend even more time outside practicing their skills. On a few occasions, they even did some camp outs together in Skylar's yard. They weren't quite ready to be out in the woods camping out alone but soon.

Then, the first thunderstorm clouds began to build in the western sky over the mountains. Those big fluffy clouds that grow higher and higher in the sky became visible. No thunder came the first evening when the clouds were spied but any day now the storms would start.



The adventurers tracked the weather each day while they were out at their Special Spots. They watched the sky and clouds constantly. They used their Animal Senses to feel the weather. They would smell the air like a coyote, testing for the familiar smell of rain on the wind. One evening, while they were inside having dinner together they saw a flash through the window and a few seconds later the crash of thunder. The season had arrived and as the rain started to come down in sheets, they ran outside and stomped in puddles letting the rain

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drench them from head to toe. They had never been so happy to see a thunderstorm before. Tomorrow, they would seek out Ol' Jack McGee.

"Do you think we're ready?" asked Alex as she settled down in her sleeping bag. The three were having a sleepover and were planning to find McGee at first light.

"I think so. Of course we can always keep practicing and getting better with the Nature and Animal Skills but I hope we're ready to face whatever might be on the trail to the Crooked Forest," Skylar reasoned, also a bit nervous that the moment had actually arrived.

"The only way we'll know is to try. But maybe we should check with McGee. Just in case. I'm not even sure what we might face on that trail," Nick said.

"That's a good idea. The way he described the journey to the Crooked Forest that time around the campfire, I mean, it sounded pretty intense, right?" Nick said.

"I don't know if I want to do this now," whispered Alex.

"It's gonna be fine. We've got to trust what we've learned, right? We've done everything that McGee told us too and then even more," Skylar said reassuringly.

"I know, but what if there are bears...or wolves...or real giants?" stuttered Alex.

"Well, then the birds will tell us before we ever come face to face with them!" Skylar said firmly. "Listen, let's not scare ourselves out of this. We've been working on getting ready since February. That's...5 months. We're ready," Skylar affirmed for everyone's sake, even her own.

That night, none of our adventurers slept that well. Dreams of giants, dragon bear monsters and trails that never end flitted through their heads. Morning came early and the trio did not greet it very enthusiastically.

"Wakey wakey," shouted Skylar's Dad. "Come on gang, it's time to get up, get some breakfast and head on out to find Ol' McGee."

"Awwwww," the three moaned as the shades were pulled up letting in the early sunshine.

"Dad, you know I don't like waking up like this!" grumbled Skylar.

"Well, it seems you guys have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. HmMMMM. That's expected," he said.

"Why do you say that Uncle Brian?" asked Nick starting to wake up.

"Ah well, whenever you work so hard for something, it's always when you're closest to reaching your goal that you want to give up. Human nature I suppose and totally normal" Uncle Brian said gently.

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“Really? It’s normal?” Alex chimed in feeling a little better hearing this.

“Sure it is. Heck, I often feel that when I’m going to take on something new or different. Same with your Aunt and your parents. Venturing into the unknown is a bit scary to say the least,” he paused thinking.

“You know, maybe this will help you guys. Do you know what courage is?” he asked.

“Yeah, it is not being afraid of anything,” answered Nick.

“Well, not exactly buddy. It’s actually being afraid but doing it anyways. The bravest people in the world were all afraid before they did whatever it was they needed to do. It’s not bravery if you do something that doesn’t scare you. Where is the bravery if you’re not afraid? Courage and bravery is acting in the face of fear. Does that make sense?” Uncle asked.

“Huh? I never thought of that but yeah, I guess so,” Nick said.

“Well come on lazy bones. Get up. I’ll make a nice breakfast so you ‘ll be ready to meet the day with courage!” With that, Skylar’s father headed downstairs.

He left the adventurers thinking hard about what it means to be brave or have courage. Maybe today they were going to have to be brave just to go see Ol’ Jack McGee and get the next step for their adventure. Certainly they will need to be brave and courageous when they go to the Crooked Forest.

With some yummy sourdough pancakes with real homemade maple syrup, blueberries and orange juice, our adventurers felt a little better. They packed up their gear and headed outside, not sure what the day was going to bring.

All three took a deep breath and fox walked into the forest. As they moved through the woods, they started feeling better. Nature has a way of taking away one’s bad moods and nervousness. By the time they hit the Grandfather Pine Tree along the back rock wall, they were smiling and enjoying the woods and all it had to offer. They spied the biggest raccoon propped up on a bent branch of a maple tree. The raccoon didn’t even raise his head when they passed by. A little later, a cooper’s hawk bulleted through the forest right past them as it hunted birds on the wing. Cooper’s Hawks are the larger cousin to the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Alex actually heard the hawk coming from the bird alarms before they saw it.

The trio continued on for another half an hour and there was the McGee’s snug house in the middle of a clearing in the Pine forest. Sitting outside on a rocking chair on the porch was Ol’ Jack McGee.

“I’ve been expecting you three. Hummmph. Good. Don’t just stand around gawkin’, come on over and let’s get started,” called McGee from the porch.

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The three hurried over, not sure what he was going to have them do. The nervousness returned but there was no turning back now.

“Alright then. I can tell that you’ve been doing a real fine job practicing those skills I gave ya. In fact, I didn’t know you were coming until you hit that big old Pine tree by the rock wall. Impressive.”

Alex, Nick and Skylar blinked hard at each other. That was half an hour ago and quite a distance away. He could tell that they were there then? Now that was really impressive. Again, every time they are with McGee, they realize there is so much more to learn. Of course, thinking about that today was not helpful considering they were about to embark on an epic adventure to the Crooked Forest.

“Now listen kids, the trail to the Crooked Forest....is....is....hey, where are my manners. If the Mrs. were here she’d let me have it for not offering you three some of her famous Summer Sumac lemonade.” Jack got up and went inside to get the cups and lemonade. The three sat there, breathing slowly, waiting.

McGee returned and passed out the Sumac lemonade and some cookies. It tasted real good. The day was starting to get warm now with the sun higher in the sky.

“Thank you,” the three said together as they slurped down the mildly sweet and tart homemade lemonade and finished up the cookies.

“O.K., where was I? Right. To be honest you three, I wasn’t sure if ya’ll had what it takes to get as far as you have. You should feel really good about what you’ve learned.” He eyed the three and could tell that they were nervous. It was good since the trail to the Crooked Forest demanded caution and humility.

“You probably know as much if not more than what I knew back when I first journeyed to the Crooked Forest,” McGee shared.

“Really sir?” Alex asked surprised.

“Sure thing. Maybe it’s because I learned it all alone. I didn’t have friends like you have in each other. You end up learning three times as much and three times as fast, maybe more. You kids are lucky to have each other,” McGee added.

This made some sense for our young adventurers. They started to remember how being together as a team helped them do things that normally they never could have done alone. That includes the last five months of their training.

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“You’re gonna to need to depend, trust and help each other on the trail to the Crooked Forest if you are ever to make it there. However, between what you’ve learned and working together, I know you’ll make it,” reaffirmed McGee.

The three breathed a sigh of relief.

“That doesn’t mean it’s gonna to be easy!” snapped McGee back. He had been uncommonly kind for much of the conversation so far but evidently, with McGee, that only lasts so long.

“Enough of all this touchy feely stuff. Do you three want the clue to get you to the head of the trail or not?” asked McGee all grouchy again.

Feeling a bit more confident they all said, “Yes! We’re ready.”

“Good. Now listen closely. The journey is a full day’s trip so you need to go prepared. You understand?” asked McGee warily.

“Yep. I’ve got a backpack and we’ll take water, food, spare clothes, a first aid kit and even a blanket just in case,” Skylar replied. Being prepared was something she learned as a little kid from her Dad. He always took emergency supplies even on a short hike.

“Good. You kids know that big old growth pine tree you pass when comin’ here?” asked McGee.

“Yeah. It’s so cool. We actually call it the Grandfather Tree,” shared Nick.

“HMMMMM.” McGee paused for a moment and closed his eyes deep in concentration. “That’s good. He likes that. Yes, he likes that very much,” McGee slowly spoke. It was like he was talking to the Grandfather Tree right then and there. When it comes to McGee, the three cousins watch him very closely. They always get a glimpse into what could be possible.

“Well, from the Grandfather Tree, there’s a game trail that cuts across the rock wall. You need to follow that trail until you come upon a brook. **Don’t** lose the trail no matter what. If you do, it will be *very, very* hard to find your way back if not impossible. You three listening closely?” blurted McGee.

“Yes sir!” the children answered back.

“When you come upon that brook, you want to follow it upstream. What did I just say, upstream or downstream?” McGee gruffly said.

“Upstream,” answered the three hanging on every word.

“Right. Follow that brook for ‘bout one or two miles. You need to look for an old Indian Trail Tree. When you find it...” Nick interrupted McGee here.

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“Excuse me. What’s an Indian Trail Tree?” Nick cautiously asked.

“Hummph. Fine. An Indian Trail Tree is a tree that Indians in this area long long ago bent down when it was young. The small bent tree kept growing into a big bent tree. The trunk therefore sticks out far, like an arm reaching for something for a little ways and then shoots back up to the sky. It kinda makes a big L out of the tree. They did this to mark very important trail junctions or to point a traveler in the direction of important water holes. This particular Indian Trail Tree is a two hundred year old white oak tree. Amazing sight it is.” McGee paused, took a sip of his lemonade and looked hard at the trio.

“Know this, just getting to this point you will have had to face many challenges. They’re the typical challenges you find in the woods. Be prepared and aware at all times. However, when you step upon the faint trail at the base of this Indian Tree, all things will change. It will be like you enter into another world,” McGee said and looked intensely off into the distance.

Those shivers returned to the three. But this time, it was not because of excitement. It was because of fear.

“From here, I can’t help you no more. You’ll need to listen to and let your inner voices guide you from this point forward. There’ll be signs along this trail and beyond. Not road signs but signs from nature that will tell you where to go next. They’ll be like clues. These signs or clues will lead you to the Crooked Forest **only** if you’re ready and listening closely to nature. You need to use your training, you need to trust each other, you need to trust yourselves and you need to trust your inner voices. If you don’t all will be lost.” McGee looked at each of them in a way that felt like he was reading their minds. He probably was.

McGee paused and smelled the air deeply. “Yes, yes. Next Saturday will be clear and warm. All things are set for that day. It’s the day you three will journey to the Crooked Forest.”

Chapter 17: The Journey Part I

Ever have that feeling when you're both excited and scared at the same time? Butterflies flutter in your stomach and you feel a little sick even? That's how it was for our three adventurers. That week went by slow and fast at the same time. Before they knew it, Friday evening had arrived. Alex and Nick had come to stay overnight with Skylar at her house. It allowed for the trio to get packed up for the journey and to start out at first light. It also allowed them to support each other since they all were feeling pretty nervous. Never had they taken on such a journey before for so long. That night, they were not very talkative with each other. When nervous, talking does not come easily.

"It's gonna be awesome tomorrow," Skylar said quietly before lights went out.

"Epic," Nick replied flatly.

"Yeah," mumbled Alex.

Skylar's mother had noticed the quiet mood and offered a little advice.

"Remember what Jack McGee told you guys about trust?" she asked.

"Yeah, to trust what we've learned so far," Skylar answered first without enthusiasm.

"And to trust each other," Nick came next.

"And to trust ourselves," Alex added blankly.

"Exactly. If you trust in all of these things tomorrow then nothing bad will happen. Plus, I trust you three. I have seen over the last several months how each of you have grown and all that you've learned. You're ready for tomorrow," she said positively.

"Hope so," mumbled Skylar.

"I know so sweetie," replied her Mom with a kiss. "Goodnight my nature adventurers."

All three were awake before the sun rose. They got dressed and packed up silently. Downstairs, they made cereal for breakfast and worked together to pack their lunches and snacks for the day. When there was nothing left to do, they each took a deep breath and headed outside. There was only a sliver of light on the eastern horizon and yet the birds had

begun their morning chorus. It was like they were singing a welcome to a new day. This dawn chorus helped to get our adventurers out of their heads and into their hearts.

“It’s so beautiful. So peaceful,” Skylar said as she breathed the fresh early morning summer air.

“Wow. I’ve never gone out this early before. Listen to all the birds singing. It’s amazing,” Alex exclaimed as she listened to the chorus.

“It’s a good day,” Nick declared with a broad smile to the girls. “Let’s do this!”

The two girls looked at each other and smiled too. Somehow, all that worry and fear had melted away with this new day and the birds singing their “good morning” to our adventurers. What could be so terrible or scary out there after all? What could there be?

The top branches of the Grandfather Tree were on fire with the golden morning sun. Even the Grandfather Tree seemed to be wishing them a “good morning”. Nothing challenging had happened so far but plenty of magical things had occurred.

They walked through a group of deer in a tall fern patch. The deer just kept chewing as the children passed by calmly like ghosts. They watched a weasel hunting along one of the many rock walls. It bobbed in and out of the rocks searching for a mouse or chipmunk. With a squeak and a tussle, the weasel caught a chipmunk and dragged it to a hole right in clear view of the kids.

On a low ridge, they saw a lone coyote standing and staring at them. After a little while, it turned and loped off in the direction they were heading. The trio felt like the coyote was a friend for some reason they could not explain. For the three, their walk so far this early morning felt magical and left them speechless.

At the Grandfather tree, they took a small break and ate the bread, honey and butter they had packed. It was at this point that Ol’ McGee said to pick up a small game trail and head across the rock wall making sure not to lose the trail, or else. They had never ventured further than the rock wall before. They wondered what was beyond it. McGee said they had to follow this trail until it met a rushing brook. Then, going upstream for about a mile or two there would be a tree that was once bent down by Indians, growing straight up again. At that point, they would enter a new world. What that meant our trio had no idea. However, one thing they did know was that worrying about something in the future only spoils the present. So, they packed back up and crossed the rock wall following the game trail.

When they crossed the rock wall, it felt like they were truly on the journey to the Crooked Forest. This was new country they had never before explored and they were excited. The

trail from the Grandfather Tree was pretty clear initially but soon after the rock wall, it became faint. Following it was very difficult for them. Many times, they had to get down on their hands and knees to make sure that they were still on the game trail.

“Remember, McGee said we *can’t* lose this trail,” Skylar said nervously to the others.

It was getting very difficult to find at times and none of them wanted to lose their way. It felt like a lifeline back to the forest they knew. Without it, they’d be lost.

“Just keep going slow, O.K.? We better not lose it. Skylar, slow down,” called Nick nervously.

“I’m not going that fast. I can still see it,” answered Skylar a bit annoyed. “Here, why don’t you lead then?”

“No, no, sorry. I’m just nervous. I don’t want to get lost,” Nick explained. “This is it, right? I mean, it’s so faint I can barely see it. Plus, at times we have to crawl through thick brambles to stay on it,” observed Nick.

“It’s gotta be. Have you seen any other trails coming off of this?” asked Skylar still agitated at being questioned.

The trail indeed wove through a huge and dense thicket of brambles with long thorns that would catch their clothes at times. In the dense brambles, only a small dark tunnel of a trail cut through it. Fortunately, the ground was smooth and didn’t have thorns on it. Nick had to take his backpack off and push it in front of him just to fit through. This was not easy traveling for the three and it was starting to wear on them.

“What kind of game trail is this? I mean, what kind of animals would make this kind of trail? We can barely fit through,” asked Alex not expecting an answer.

“I don’t know, maybe a raccoon. Or could be a fox I guess,” Nick answered when all of a sudden he bumped into Skylar’s behind. And then Alex bumped into Nick’s behind. There was a traffic jam in this tube trail and Skylar was at the front.

“Ummmph. Hey, what are you doing Skylar?” Nick called annoyed.

Skylar did not answer. She was frozen in place.

“Come on Skylar,” hollered Alex from the back “keep *moving*.”

Still, Skylar did not move.

“SKYLAR! What IS YOUR PROBLEM?” yelled a frustrated Nick.

“Look,” breathed Skylar as she moved slightly to the side. Her voice was trembling.

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“What? I can’t see...” and then Nick froze.

“What is going on up there? What is it?” shouted Alex who could not see a thing at the end of the line.

“Alex? You asked what kind of animal makes this type of trail, right? Well, Skylar just found the track of the animal that made this trail,” Nick spoke softly and slowly.

“And?” returned Alex growing annoyed being left out at the back of the line.

“It’s a...a...bear,” Nick said ominously.

Skylar’s hand was an inch away from a bear track that was more than twice the size of her hand. It looked fresh with crisp edges imprinted in the soft soil. Sharp nails showed up in front of each clear toe.



The tube through the brambles they were crawling in was the trail of a bear. In fact, the “game” trail that McGee told them to follow had been a bear trail. That is why it was so hard to follow. Bears have large soft feet and leave very little trail behind.

To find a clear bear track is quite rare. Any other time, the trio would have celebrated such a find. However, not in this situation. The reality of their situation started to become clear to all of them. What if the bear was came back down the trail from the other direction? Skylar would end up nose to nose with it. Not a comforting thought to say the least. In fact, it was a terrifying thought!

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No one mentioned the situation but they began to hurry through the tunnel in the brambles. They did not want to come nose to nose with any bear in that large bramble thicket. The trail seemed to keep going on forever. They kept scurrying along the tube like hamsters.

“Hurry, hurry Skylar,” Nick pleaded.

“I’m trying to but can’t go any faster without getting caught by the thorns,” Skylar answered.

“Guys...do you hear anything up ahead?” Alex asked nervously.

“No, do you?” Nick trembled.

“No, I was just wondering,” Alex responded.

“Alex, that doesn’t help...just keep going,” Skylar said anxiously.

With one final scramble, all three tumbled out of the bramble thicket. They emerged out of the thicket and immediately looked around for a bear. When they didn’t see any, they all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Oh my gosh! That was crazy! What if the bear came in from this end and met us halfway?” Nick loudly whispered with a shiver.

“I know, I know,” mumbled Skylar, still a bit dazed by that possibility.

“I only saw a part of the track by the time I crawled past. Was it big?” Alex asked. “It looked big.”

“Yeaaaaah. I could fit both my hands in the track. It was huge,” Nick said breathlessly.

“Whoa. Skylar, you would have been the first one to bump into it,” said Alex.

“I know, I know,” mumbled Skylar.

They sat there for a little while in silence. Then Skylar began to grunt quietly. Her cousins looked over at her concerned. The grunting turned into a weird quiet giggle. Then, Skylar’s giggled grew a little louder. Alex and Nick shot each other nervous looks. Was Skylar having a nervous breakdown? Skylar’s giggles then turned into a full crazy laugh.

“Um, are you O.K. Skylar?” Alex asked cautiously.

Between fits of hysterical laughter Skylar responded, “I....I....am.....I am....I’m fine.....” More laughter. “I nearly pooped my pants! And Nick’s face was right there!”

The other two looked at each other and began to crack up too. All three of them rolled on the mossy forest floor laughing so hard that tears came down their faces. You could only hear

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occasional words, “pooped”... “face”... “Nick”... “huge bear”... “bumped”... “pooped...” This went on for a good number of minutes. Eventually the laughter started to die back, then turn to giggles and then turned to just heavy breathing.



“Ahhhhhh. That was crazy,” Skylar ended with a sigh and a tired smile.

“We thought that you lost it Skylar,” Nick told her.

“Naw. I’m fine, really. Now that we’re out of there, it was pretty cool; that bear track.”

“Yeah, totally cool,” added Nick.

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“Guys, you know, we need to really be serious and start using our Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and Rabbit Ears,” Alex shared importantly. “Remember that McGee said we would still have challenges along the trail. Let’s hope it’s not a bear chasing us.”

“Deer,” Nick countered with a smile.

“What? Where?” Alex whirled around looking.

“No silly, Deer Ears,” Nick giggled.

“Whatever. Fine, Deer Ears. Listen, we’re in a new forest and really don’t know what’s around. We need to be super aware,” Alex countered mildly annoyed and slightly amused.

“You’re right. You’re right Alex,” said Nick.

“Yep. Are we ready to keep going?” Skylar asked as she got up and brushed herself off. She looked at Alex and Nick and was so thankful to be on this adventure with her two cousins. Nothing could be better. “Let’s head out!”

In a short time, they hit the brook. “Brook” was an understatement. Over the last week, there had been many heavy thunderstorms so the babbling brook was much more of a rushing torrent. Water shot downstream crashing over and onto rocks, forming rapids and deep swirling pools. After years of rushing water in this brook, it had eroded to a deep V making wading up it virtually impossible. Also, in this part of the forest, the trees had not been logged for many many years so they were huge. Along the brook, many trees had fallen down making any sort of walk along the brook edge very difficult. Because of the dense forest, old trees and raging brook, it felt like the three were in a very old part of the forest.

The nature adventurers looked at each other with wide eyes. This was going to be a very long walk to the Indian Tree. McGee said it was about one or two miles. “About?” What did that mean? That’s a big difference, one or two miles. The three were starting to get annoyed with McGee’s instructions. First off, the game trail turned out to be a bear trail and now, the hardest trail ahead of them could either be one or two miles long. They are going to need to speak with him when they get back.

Taking a deep breath, shifting their weight back a little to be in Fox Walking, the trio began moving upstream along the edge. They would often have to help each other up and over huge fallen trees. Nick would pass the backpack full of supplies up to Alex or Skylar, then clamber up only to pass the pack back down to them. They would sometimes be lucky and be able to crawl under a massive tree trunk or even walk like a fox over the top for the whole length of a tree.

This was slow going for them. After a while, Nick started to get impatient and began climbing up and over on his own just to save time. After all, they only had one day to get to the Crooked Forest as well as to get back home before dark. For all they knew, this was only the very first part of a very long journey.

“Nick, be careful and let us help you,” Alex pleaded.

“I’m fine. I can do this. We just have to keep moving or else we may run out of time,” Nick said as he passed her.

“Yeah well if you hurt yourself, that’s going to slow us down a whole lot more,” Alex responded getting agitated.

“I won’t. I can do it fine,” Nick called back.

Alex and Skylar shot each other looks. Nick was the most athletic of the three but still, this was a crazy trail they were taking. They kept going on. The big dark forest was weighing them down also. The roar of the water dulled their senses. And even though it was a sunny day, it seemed so dark and gloomy after an hour of hiking along the rushing brook. The three of them were up on a log when they saw up ahead across the stream a clearing. Bright glorious sun was shining on a world of green plants. By this time, it was close to lunch and they were all pretty hungry.

“What’d you guys say we head over there for lunch,” Nick offered.

“Sounds great but how will we get there?” Alex asked looking down at the steep sides, deep stream and rushing water below.

“Over there, look. There’s a tree that fell across the brook. We can use it to cross over to the other side,” Skylar pointed up ahead to a medium sized tree that spanned across the brook.

“Awesome!” Nick said as he headed over there like a mountain goat.

Once at the log, it looked a little less than awesome. The tree had fallen a long time ago and it was dead with no bark on it. There was a waterfall right below it and mist sprayed up wetting the smooth wood of the tree. The brook was a good 15 feet down with steep rocky sides. Once they got up to the log, it looked much narrower than before.

“What do you guys think?” Skylar asked nervously.

“I don’t know. That tree looks much skinnier than the ones we’ve been climbing on and it looks slippery,” Alex said examining the log closer.

“Aw, I think it’ll be fine. I’ll go first and show you,” Nick said cheerfully.

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“Wait Nick, wait. Let’s think if there’s a better way,” Alex suggested.

“No, really, this’ll be easy,” Nick said wanting to keep moving and get some lunch.

“At least let’s hold the backpack for you. It’ll make it easier,” Skylar offered.

“Naw, don’t worry. Watch,” he said as he slung the backpack over one shoulder and stepped onto the fallen tree.

With that, Nick started to tight rope walk across the log. He did make it look easy. He was just at the end when he turned his head and hollered “See, I told ya....whaaaaa, waaaahhhh.”

Nick wobbled and started to lose his balance. The girls gasped as they watched him. Then, with his arms flailing he wobbled back and forth and slipped right off the log, falling straight down.

“NICK!” shouted the girls.

As Nick fell, it was like slow motion. The girls all felt fear, horror and helpless as he dropped like a rock.

It was lucky that he had mostly crossed the brook so he only fell 5 feet, landing hard on the steep rocky edge of the brook. As he fell, his leg hit a jagged rock. To catch himself from tumbling another 10 feet into the rushing water below, he reached and grabbed a root. As he did that, the backpack slipped from his shoulder and slid down to the brook. The current caught hold of the pack and took it downstream and out of sight.

“No, no” cried Nick. That pack had all of their supplies – clothes, food, first aid, matches, compass, knife, a premade tinder bundle – everything. He watched helplessly.

“Nick, Nick?” Alex screamed panicked.

“Nick? Nick, are you alright?” Skylar called.

“I, I think so. But the backpack...” Nick hollered over the noise of the water.

“Can you crawl up?” Skylar yelled.

“Uummpfh. Awwwww, owwww,” Nick moaned. “I, I cut my leg bad guys. I’m, I’m... bleeding a lot.”

Skylar and Alex could hear the panic in his voice.

“O.K., just stay there. We’ll come to you,” Skylar shouted.

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Alex looked at Skylar questioning, "But Skylar, how?" Alex had lost her nerve seeing her brother fall like that.

"We've got to cross the log Alex," Skylar sternly said.

"There's no way we can. Even Nick fell. No way. Let's find another place to cross," Alex pleaded.

"Alex, we've got to get over to Nick to help him. We don't know how long it'll take to find another place. Plus, we can't leave him hanging there," Skylar explained.

"Skylar, I'm scared," Alex said with tears forming in her eyes.

"I know Alex. So am I, but we have to. Remember what my Dad said about bravery? Being brave is doing something even though you're scared," reasoned Skylar more gently.

"O.K., O.K. But let's do it together," Alex whispered.

"Deal. Nick! We're coming over now. Hang on!" Skylar called.

She and Alex went to the log and looked down. The brook looked angry as the water gushed and splashed against rocks below. The log seemed only 6 inches wide and the brook below seemed 25 feet down. But they had to do it to save Nick.

They both crouched down and sat on the damp log straddling it with their legs. Taking a deep breath, they started to slide along the log, inch by inch. If they slipped, they could wrap their arms around the log to stop them from falling.

"I'm starting to feel dizzy," Nick called weakly.

The two girls kept sliding and encouraging each other. "Good job Alex. Keep it up."

"Thanks Skylar. You O.K.?"

"Yeah. We're almost there." "Don't look down. Just keep looking straight ahead."

"O.K. I will. How much farther Skylar?"

"Almost there Alex. Be brave."

It seemed like several minutes passed when they finally reached the other side. They ran over to the edge and looked down at Nick. His face was pale and he weakly smiled. He was down the edge several feet. How could they get him up? Skylar had an idea.

"Alex, grab hold of my ankles and I will lean down and grab hold of Nick. Once I have him, you pull as hard as you can."

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With Alex hanging onto Skylar's feet and Skylar leaning far over the edge, they reached for Nick. Nick stretched his arm up carefully making sure that he didn't slip further down.

"A little more Alex. Almost have him," Skylar grunted. "Got him! Now PULLLLLLL!"

With Alex pulling with all her might, they began pulling Nick up and out. Panting, all three collapsed on the damp forest floor.

"Owwww. Ah man, my leg," Nick groaned.

"Let's see it," Skylar ordered.

Alex looked over and immediately turned away feeling dizzy herself.

It was a deep cut on his calf and was still bleeding. Skylar looked around and assessed the situation. Thinking hard, she tried to figure out the next step. Right, we've got to stop the blood. Stop the blood; but how? The backpack was gone with the first aid kit. Wait, the plant list. What plant was it that stops bleeding?

Alex looked on nervously. It was hard seeing her older brother hurt like this and so far away from any kind of help.

"Alex... Alex... ALEX!" Skylar shouted to get Alex's attention.

"Yeah, yes. Sorry," Alex responded in a daze.

"Do you remember what plant stops bleeding?"

"Huh?" Alex grunted.

"What plant that we studied stops bleeding?" Skylar asked forcefully.

"Oh, right. Um, um. Yarrow? Yes, yarrow does! But we don't have any," Alex said waking up some.

"Where'd you find the yarrow at my house?" Skylar asked, relieved to have Alex back.

"In the uncut field," Alex shared.

"Great, go and look in the field over there for yarrow. Hurry though," Skylar called to a running Alex.

Skylar took her bandana and went upstream a bit to the top of the waterfalls where the brook wasn't so far down the ravine. With a stick she dipped it in the clean water and went back to Nick. She wrung it out cleaning some of the blood from around the cut. She did this a few times.

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"How bad is it?" Nick asked weakly.

He knew that he may have ruined their entire adventure because he was rushing and not letting the others help. Now he was hurt *and* he lost their backpack. He was starting to feel pretty bad about himself.

"It doesn't look too bad now. It cleaned up pretty good. Wait 'till we get the yarrow, then we'll see if you can stand," Skylar said seriously. She was all business at the moment.

Alex arrived back breathing heavy but smiling broadly. "I found a whole bunch. Here."

She handed a huge handful of the lacey yarrow leaves. Skylar took the handful and picked the best leaves. She glanced over at Alex who had gotten quiet again. It was clear that this was not the best place for Alex at the moment.

"Alex, why don't you head downstream a little ways and see if you can find the backpack. But be aware! No chances, O.K.?" Skylar suggested.

"O.K. I won't be long," Alex said and looked one last time at Nick's leg, at him lying flat on the ground, then she headed downstream with tears coming down her cheeks.

Skylar went back to work. With a smaller handful of the nicest leaves, she crushed them up and put them right on the cut. Nick winced in pain. Skylar looked apologetic at him but continued.

"Wait here for a second," Skylar instructed.

She ran to a large pine tree and dug at an old wound on it. She returned and had a handful of the pine sap. She took the sap and smeared it around the cut and over the yarrow. With the cut covered in yarrow and pine sap, she then took her bandana and wrapped the wound firmly. The rest of the yarrow, she put in her pocket. Just in case they needed more later.

"There, that should do it. How's it feel?" she asked.

"Hmmm. Not bad." Nick moved his ankle and leg. "Huh. Actually much better. Hey, help me stand up, will ya?" Nick said as his color started to return to his face.

Skylar leaned down and with Nick's arm around her shoulders, she stood up, pulling Nick with her. They took it slow and once up, Nick tested his leg. He looked slowly at Skylar and then smiled a big smile of relief.

"It feels fine. I mean it hurts a little but I didn't sprain anything. Yeah, it's good. Look, I can walk almost normal." Nick smiled and walked around a bit. "Man, that was a close one," he said sheepishly.

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Before Skylar could respond, they heard Alex hollering as she came around a log. In her hand was their backpack, dripping wet.

“I found it, I found it!” Alex announced. When she saw Nick standing and smiling, she dropped the bag and ran and gave her brother a big bear hug. Skylar joined in and all three were hugging and laughing. Then Alex took a step back and glared at Nick.

“Nick, if you ever, EVER do that again....” Alex stared at Nick with fire coming out of her eyes.

“I won’t. I promise. Really. I’m really really sorry,” Nick apologized sincerely realizing how close they came to this adventure ending.

The adventurers looked at each other with relieved smiles. They were back on track.

“Can we eat now?” asked Nick with a devilish grin. “I’m starving!”

“YES!” the other two answered back as they all turned and headed to the field for some much needed sunshine and food.

Chapter 18: The Journey - Part II

Our trio's lunch did not fair too well. In the morning when they packed their lunches, they put the food in a paper bag. Alex found the backpack caught on a branch sitting under the water. Much of their food had turned into a soggy mess that fell apart in their hands. Also, since the water was from the brook, it could have what is called "Beaver Fever." It is a parasite in the water that can get you pretty sick if you drink it. Wet sandwiches, mashed cookies and soaking banana bread all were lost. They were able to salvage two apples and three granola bars. But this was all the food for not only lunch but the rest of the day. Their bellies were still rumbling after the small lunch. However, sitting in the sun, having braved quite an adventure already, there spirits were still high.

"Well, we'll just have to look for edible plants while we walk," Alex said trying to be cheerful.

"Sure. Let's keep an eye out for wild raspberries. They're ripe in July so if we find some, we can have yummy berries," Skylar joined in.

"I do hope we find them soon though. I'm still pretty hungry. Most of my lunch is a pile of mush on the ground," Nick said a little worried about later in the day.

Being hungry is not a comfortable feeling for him. He can often get pretty "hangry" when he doesn't get enough to eat. Hangry is a cross between angry and hungry.

A loud and deep croaking call came from a nearby tree. It was so close and loud that it startled the three adventurers.

"Hey, look at our friend," Alex called pointing up in one of the oak trees on the edge of their small clearing.

Sitting quietly on a branch was a very large raven, just watching them. It had appeared without the three noticing until it made its call.

"Ravens are some of the smartest birds in the forest, you know," Alex offered this tidbit of information hoping it would take Nick's mind off of his belly.

"The Indians also saw them as some kind of spirit bird. Some tribes would carve totems poles with the raven sitting on top," Skylar shared what she knew. "Kinda cool, him just sitting there watching us."

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“He’s probably just waiting for us to leave so he can eat my mushy lunch,” laughed Nick. “You can have it,” he shouted up to the raven. “All yours.”

The three took that as a sign to get up and keep moving upstream. It had been so difficult and most recently, scary with Nick’s fall that no one was that eager to start climbing on top of, over and under the trees by the rushing brook once again. But time was getting short and they still had no idea how much further it was nor what they may find along the trail to the Crooked Forest.

They got up and left their sunny picnic area and their raven friend. They headed back into the ancient dark forest with the roaring of the brook. As they left, the raven gave its deep call as if saying goodbye.

The three trudged on and kept to this side of the stream. They actually weren’t sure what side of the brook the Indian Tree would be on. It was getting harder. Their feet began to drag. Not just because of how hard the path was, but because they were also starting to worry. Worrying about food, about time and worrying if they were going to make it to the Crooked Forest. Worry has a way of stealing away any kind of happiness one feels, making things harder than they have to be. However, after only a half an hour, they stopped dead in their tracks when they heard the call of the raven again. This time, it was up ahead of them. It’s call gave them a burst of new energy.

The brook took a very sharp bend to the south and as they came around that bend, they froze. There was the raven sitting on a massive white oak tree that was shaped like an L right in front of them!



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They had made it to the Indian Trail Tree! The raven eyed them again and watched as the three adventurers celebrated by jumping up and down. It was such a relief to find the tree. They finished celebrating and realized that the next part of their journey was going to take them “into another world.” They needed to find and follow a faint trail that was going to take them to some mysterious place.

“What do you think McGee means by ‘another world’?” Alex asked cautiously.

“I don’t know and it makes me a bit nervous,” Skylar shared.

“We’ve come this far though. We’ve got to go on!” Nick said strongly.

“We know!” Alex shot him a look. Sometimes Nick can be so impatient she thought.

“Well, come on then,” Nick said impatiently.

“Nick, don’t you remember what happened the last time you rushed into something...crossing that log?” Skylar said with a stern look.

“Ah, yeah, your right. Sorry. I already forgot,” Nick said sheepishly. “Um, what’s the plan,” he said smiling again.

“Hmmm. First off, let’s find that faint trail and see where it heads,” Skylar suggested.

The three moved slowly forward not wanting to ruin any sign of a trail. Sure enough, starting right at the base of the Indian Tree was a faint trail that headed straight North into the forest away from the brook. Standing right next to the tree, the three marveled at it. The trunk was almost as wide as the Grandfather Tree. It came up straight from the ground and at 3 feet, it made a 90 degree turn and grew parallel to the ground for about 6 feet or so. Then, the massive trunk turned 90 degrees again and reached back towards the sky. It was truly unique and amazing. It was even more amazing when they realized that a real live Indian, maybe 200 years ago walked where they were and tied the tree down to make it grow like this.

“Wow,” was all they could say.

“O.K., like Alex said before, this is new land for us so we need to really use our Owl Eyes, Fox Walking and Rabbit, ahem, yes Nick, Deer Ears,” Skylar said as Nick had opened his mouth. They smiled.

“Who wants to lead? Alex, you want to?” Nick asked.

“Sure,” said Alex as she started following the thin trail that broke through the forest plants. With one last look by the trio at the Indian Tree, they walked until it was out of sight, deeper into the unknown forest.

All the while, the raven remained sitting and staring at them from up in the tree.

Chapter 19: The Journey into “Another World”

This faint trail was different from the trail at the Grandfather Tree. It had a different feel. Maybe it was because they no longer had the roar of the brook in their ears. Or maybe it was because the trees were smaller but even denser. Or was it because every tree around them was a type of pine tree they were not familiar with? Or maybe it was because something they could not even put into words was different. Nevertheless, this difference had all three using all their senses, all of their Animal Skills and all of their Nature Skills more than the entire journey so far.

The thin trail headed in a straight line with only small changes in direction to avoid a tree here or there. There was no sun shining down on the forest floor. The pine trees were so densely packed and stunted that if one of the three stepped off the trail for 10 steps, they could not be seen. The trio stuck close to each other. Without the roar of the rushing brook, the forest seemed especially quiet. No birds called or twittered anywhere within ear shot. Even Rabbit/Deer Ears could not penetrate beyond the silence. The only sound was the soft muffled footsteps of each adventurer and their breathing.

“At least the trail is easier now,” whispered Alex looking behind at Skylar and Nick.

This silence was starting to freak her out. However, the other two just continued fox walking concentrating on using all of their senses.

The densely crowded woods, intense quiet and lack of sunlight was starting to weigh on them all. It was almost like a blanket was thrown over them, dragging them down and smothering them. The air even felt stale and thick.

“This forest feels...feels dead or something,” Alex said again looking back, hoping that one of the others would respond. She wasn't sure how much more quiet she could take in this forest.

“Actually, it feels like it's sucking my life force away,” Nick responded walking heavily and feeling spooked.

“Guys, talking isn't helping. Just keep going. This forest has got to end sooner or later,” Skylar said stubbornly but the truth was, the forest was wearing on her too.

They continued in silence with the forest surrounding them for what seemed like forever. Bellies rumbled and hearts sank. Nick started to worry again about how much time was left in the day. The forest was so dense that they couldn't even tell where the sun was which made his worry grow stronger. He kept trying to catch a glimpse of where the sun was in the sky. If it was still high in the sky then they were fine but if it was starting to get lower, then evening was getting close.

Skylar felt like she couldn't breathe. There was no light summer breeze and the air seemed thick and lifeless. Alex was just getting sick of all the dead brown color around. No green or pretty colors and the darkness was depressing her. Alex was about to scream when a color caught her eye on the brown forest floor. It was purple, her favorite color. She stopped and bent down. Skylar stopped as well wondering why Alex had stopped. Nick was a bit less interested.

"A-I-e-x! Come on," he moaned wanting to keep moving.

Alex turned to the other two and held up a pretty purple flower that was like a ray of sunshine in this dank forest. She smiled and then popped it in her mouth.



"Mmmmmm, it's delicious."

"What was that? Is it really something we can eat? Are there any more?" Nick reacted with interest as his stomach grumbled.

"Yeah, they're violets and there's this whole patch of them. Look," she gestured with her hand to the entire forest floor in front of her.

Sure enough, the forest was carpeted with little green leaves and sweet purple, blue and white flowers. Dappled sunlight sprinkled the colorful carpet. Many of the pine trees in this part of the forest had died dropping their needles, allowing for more light to hit the ground. That light was just enough for a bed of violets to sprout up all around.

Nick, Skylar and Alex started picking and nibbling on the delicious little flowers. They were conscious not to pick all the flowers in one area though. Instead, they were like deer, browsing on a few here, a handful there and so on. This way, there would be plenty of violets in the future. The cheery color, the little bit of sunlight and honestly, the nutritious snack in their hungry bellies changed their whole outlook.

Nick was able to see the sun high in the southern part of the sky. Phew, plenty of time still. Skylar felt like she could breathe some fresh air again. Alex, well, she was thrilled with the dash of color in the forest.

After several minutes, they sat back and looked around. The forest was still crowded, dark and quiet but instead of feeling heavy, they saw it for what it was; a young pine forest struggling to survive. It had some very interesting qualities.

Nick said, "If it was winter, this actually would be a great place to set up camp. All these trees would break the wind and keep a lot of the snow off the ground. I bet it's actually a pretty cozy place in the winter."

"Yeah, totally. Plenty of firewood with all the dead lower branches too. We should name this forest. What about the Dark Forest" Skylar exclaimed.

"Cool. I like it," Nick agreed.

"Maybe we should come back here in the winter to camp. That would be really cool," Skylar said.

"Let's first complete this adventure Skylar," Alex said with a smile. "Hey, is anyone else being bitten by mosquitos?"

"No, oh, yeah, I have two biting me right now. Ouch!" Skylar slapped her leg.

"Me too," said Nick. "Wait, there're even more now. Ouch."

"Whoa, I can see them flying around your head Alex!" exclaimed Skylar.

"You too!" grunted Alex as she batted at them.

"Let's get going!" Nick hollered as he rose up and swung his arms. "They're swarming around us."

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“Ouch, they’re all over us now! Yeah, let’s get outa here!” Skylar said as she swatted at the mosquitoes buzzing all around her.

The three quickly got up, thanked the violet patch and started moving. Alex was still in the lead and setting a fast pace to try to outrun the mosquitos. Skylar and Nick were behind waving their arms like scarecrows in the wind.

“Hurry up Alex,” Skylar pleaded as she slapped her arm and got 4 mosquitos with that one slap. “They’re getting worse.”

Around each of their heads were dark clouds of hundreds of mosquitoes. Any bare skin had ten, twenty and even thirty mosquitoes landing and biting them.

“Ahhhhh, they are covering me. Even getting in my eyes. Hurry Alex!” Nick exclaimed.

Alex quickened her pace. “Hey, there’s a big opening up ahead and it’s really sunny. Maybe they won’t follow us there.”

Running now, they broke into the opening. A second later, all three abruptly stopped and started screaming in pain.

In our adventurers haste to get away from the mosquitoes, they ran headlong into a huge patch of stinging nettle. The nettle leaves with their tiny sharp needles brushed all of their bare legs causing an immediate burning pain. All three of them had the front of their legs covered in the stinging nettle rash. Their tanned legs turned red with white raised bumps. The pain and burning was almost unbearable for them.

“OOOOwwww, ooooowwwwww, it burns. What’s happening?” shouted Nick confused and in pain.

“It must be this plant around us...ooowwwww, aaaaaaaahhhhhh. Is there anything we can do?” groaned Alex.

“Oooooooo, ooooooo, um, a plant, right. There’s got to be a plant that can....can help, ooooooaaaaaaa,” gasped Nick.

“Mmmmmmm, mmmmmmm, yes...yes...I think.....mmmmmmmmmm...what was it again?” panted Skylar between grunts. “Anyone remember? Mmmmmmmmm, oooooooo, ooooooooowwwwww.”

“Pine sap? Oooo, aaaaaa, eeeeeeee, uuuuuu, um no. Raspberry leaf maybe?” Nick guessed.

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“Nooooo, aaaaaaa, oooooo, that’s for diarrhea! Wait, wasn’t it.....mmmmmm, yes, it might work if....we....can, ooooooooooooouuuuuuu, find it,” Skylar huffed.

“Whaaaaaat, oooowwww, what, what is it?” Alex pleaded.

“We’ve got to find Jewelweed. It should grow near nettle tooooooooooooo. Mmmmmmm. Let’s gently walk arouuuuuund ooooooo, this patch of nettle and try to find...it,” exhaled Skylar.

The moaning and groaning trio very carefully backed out of the nettle patch and began walking around it. They did not have to go far since both nettle and jewelweed like the rich moist soil that was here on the edge of the forest and clearing.

“Here it, oooooo, is,” hollered Nick as he grabbed a large handful, smashed it up to make a mushing mess and slathered his legs with the gooey crushed plants.

The other two followed suit. It helped immediately, taking the edge off of the pain. In another five minutes, the pain was bearable and in another few minutes, it was a mild burning sensation. The three lay back relieved. They had heard that nettle stings can last a whole day if you don’t do anything for them.

“Wow, I’ve never been stung by nettle before. It hurts. It really really hurts,” exclaimed Skylar.

“Yeah, that’s the last time I run right into a field without paying attention to the plants!” announced Alex. “I’m really sorry guys.”

“It’s alright Alex. Wasn’t your fault,” assured Skylar.

“Um, guys, this isn’t a field,” Nick said under his breath.

“Wha? Holy moly. What is this place?” Alex asked as she gazed in front of her.

Indeed, the Dark Forest had opened up to a huge open area, the size of four or five football fields, maybe more. But the area wasn’t a meadow or field. It was something totally different. Something our three adventurers had never seen before in all their travels.

“What is this place?” asked Skylar.

“I...don’t...know,” replied Nick.

This open area was part lake, part meadow and part forest. It was like the meadow and the forest were floating on top of a lake. Islands of land with thick moss, low bushes and even a tree or two dotted the area. Water lay in between the islands. Some of the islands were large, the size of a baseball diamond while others were only the size of a basketball. All of this had the backdrop of a bright blue sky with a few light wispy clouds. The three just stared at this bizarre and magical world they stumbled onto.



After a while, the reality of their predicament started to dawn on them. Skylar was the first to say something.

“Where do we go from here? The trail is gone and there’s definitely no trail going through this place,” she said feeling a bit hopeless.

“I don’t know. Could the trail loop around?” Alex asked.

“That would take the rest of the day probably. This place is huge,” Nick exclaimed feeling lost and not knowing what to do.

“Wait a second, what did McGee say about clues or signs?” Alex commented.

“Right. Good one Alex. Yeah, he said that there’ll be clues that’ll take us to the Crooked Forest,” Skylar said with hope growing inside.

“Yes, and that we have to trust each other, ourselves and our inner voices. Remember?” Alex added.

“Yeah but what kind of clues? I mean, it could be anything. Plus, how will we know if something is a sign and if it’ll even lead us to the Crooked Forest?” Nick countered.

“Maybe that’s where the trusting of ourselves and inner voice comes in,” Alex suggested feeling defensive.

“Well, doesn’t help talking about it. Let’s at least look around for what could be a clue. Once we find something, then we can figure it out,” Skylar said wanting to keep the moods up.

The trio began poking around. They kept a close eye out for stinging nettle. They did not want to bump into that plant again. As they searched they noticed how different the plants were. The plants on some of these islands near the edge were totally strange. They had

never seen most of them before. Many had cool flowers of all different colors. The mosses were thick and spongy. One plant looked like a vase. It had no noticeable leaves, just a cluster of these green and reddish vase tubes. Down in the bottom of each tube was water and dead insects. What kind of plant was this? It was some bizarre alien plant to our trio.

The trees were different too. They were smaller and had short spikey needles. They were not like the hemlock but definitely an evergreen tree. The needles of these trees were like scales. The bark was reddish and flakey too.



“Hey, I think these trees are cedar trees,” Nick called.

“How do you know?” Skylar called back.

“The bark, looks like the stuff I collected from my Dad’s wood pile. I didn’t realize they would grow in a place like this. I’m gonna collect some since my tinder bundle got drenched when the backpack fell in the water.”

“Good idea Nick,” Skylar replied.

“Whoa, look at all the turtles on that log,” Alex shouted as she pointed to a tree that had fallen into the water and was laying on the top.

Several turtles were out sunbathing on the log. The three gathered together and marveled at the spectacle of these turtles.

“This place is really amazing. You know, I think it’s ...it’s called a bog,” Skylar said hesitantly.

“A bog? Hey yeah, that makes sense. Aren’t bogs places that moose like? Whoa, that would be epic, seeing a moose out here?” Nick exclaimed getting excited about that.

“I could totally picture seeing a moose here,” Alex added.

As they gazed across this large expanse before them Alex shouted, “Look. Look in the middle. On that small tree in the middle of the large island...a raven!”

“I see it, I see it. It’s just sitting on that tree out there,” Skylar responded.

“What’s it doing out there anyways?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know. Do you think it could be the same one that we’ve seen before? The one at the Indian Trail Tree and the one where we had lunch?” Alex questioned.

“Maybe. Do you think it could be a sign?” Skylar asked hesitantly.

“Huh. I was thinking a sign would be, I don’t know, something left for us. Not a...a...raven who can fly around and stuff,” Nick shared.

“I did too but animals often bring messages, right. Those stories about Indians always have some animal as a sign...or clue,” Skylar replied starting to feel more confident.

“I think the raven is a clue,” Alex declared strongly.

The other two turned towards her in surprise. The way she said it – clear, strong, confident was different.

“Why?” Nick asked skeptically.

“It just is and I just do. I can’t explain it. I also think that it’s the same raven and it’s helping us,” Alex proclaimed.

“That’s silly Alex. A raven helping us? No way. We’re just three kids in the woods, not some important Indian on a quest,” Nick said disbelievingly.

“Nick, why not. This sort of is a quest right? We’ve been doing all this training with nature for months now and what we are doing is important. I think Alex could be right,” Skylar defended.

“Ha,” Nick scoffed.

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“Nick,” Skylar lowered her head and looked seriously at him, “remember, we’re supposed to trust each other and that means Alex too. Maybe it’s her inner voice telling her this but either way, we’ve got to trust her.”

Nick looked at the two girls. Hesitated and then agreed, “You’re right. Sorry Alex. My only question now is...how do we get over there?”

All three looked around at the watery world with islands as far as their eyes could see with a large island in the middle.

Alex smiled broadly, “We jump!” And with that, she jumped two feet over the water to a floating island. “Come on, it’s fun,” and she jumped to another.

Skylar and Nick looked at each other in disbelief, smiled broadly and then...jumped!

They caught up to Alex and gasped for breath while they laughed. They felt like frogs, jumping from lily pad to lily pad. It was so much fun. The islands really did seem like they were floating. The water would ooze up and get their feet wet on some of them. The larger islands had one or two trees growing on them and were more solid. They wondered why that was. Could it be that the ground was more solid and that allowed the trees to grow or the trees and their roots actually made the islands more solid? Either way, they appreciate the dry ground under their feet.

This was slow going though. The further into the bog they got, the more they had to rely on each other to get from one island to another. They were getting tired and the gaps between the islands were getting larger. They developed a system of crossing that worked pretty well. Nick, who could jump the furthest would leave the backpack and jump to the next island. Then, Skylar would toss the backpack to Nick. Alex would jump next, with Skylar giving her a big shove. Skylar would then be the last to jump. On more than one occasion, she would not totally make it and get wet feet but with Alex and Nick there, they always pulled her up and out quick.

Finally, they reached “Raven Island.” The raven flew up, circled the island three times and flew in a straight line to the opposite side of the bog. On this larger island, they took a break and nibbled on the last granola bar. While resting, Alex heard something by the opposite edge of the bog where the raven had flown.

“Shhhh, listen,” Alex whispered. “Do you hear it?”

“What?” Nick asked while he strained to his ears.

“The bird alarms at the far side of the bog over there,” answered Alex.

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“Oh yeah, I hear some chipping sounds over there,” Skylar said nodding her head. “Those birds are really upset at something.”

“Totally,” Alex replied. “Notice that the birds sound like they are above the ground alarming? Must be some serious predator on the ground.”

“What could it be?” Nick asked, feeling a little nervous wondering what could be making the birds so upset.

“Don’t know. But what I do know is that it must be a sign, right?” Skylar answered.

“HmMMMM,” was all Nick said. He still wasn’t quite sure about this ‘sign’ thing.

The two girls squinted their eyes at Nick and said, “Come on! We’ve got to go over there.”

“Alright, I guess so,” Nick said reluctantly.

With that, our adventurers continue jumping, leaping and moving across this watery world of islands.

As they came nearer the far edge of the bog, the travel became even more difficult. They had to pick and choose what route to take, guessing how close the islands were to each other. Several times, they had to double back and find a new route that they could cross. It was like a maze but without a definite exit.

Concern and then panic started to rise in the trio as the sun was moving closer towards the western horizon with every minute. For the last hour, they were going in circles. As amazing as this bog was, it is not a place to spend the night. The longer they stood on one island, the more the water would seep up and soak them. Who knows, maybe the islands would even sink if one stayed too long.

After repeated attempts with several different routes they were stuck standing and looking at solid shore only 40 or so yards away. Their bellies rumbled and muscles ached from all the leaping and jumping. They took a break and gazed around. Off to the west they saw something that caught their eyes in the distance. They blinked hard at what they saw. The sun was in their eyes and they shaded them as best they could with their hands.

There, by the far distant edge, something very large and dark brown was in the middle of the water slowly moving. The head was moving like it was dropping and disappearing in the water and then coming back up. They squinted more and could think of only one thing it could be. It had to be a moose feeding in the water.

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Alex, Nick and Skylar grabbed hands and stared, trying to see if it really could be. As suddenly as it appeared, it moved and was gone into the thick brush along the edge. They looked at each other scratching their heads. Was it? Could it be?

“Whoa. Do you think it really was a moose?” Nick asked still breathless. “I mean, moose are really rare this far south in Vermont.”

“What else could it be?” Alex answered.

“Whatever it was guys, it was walking the water,” Skylar pointed out.

“Yeah, so you think it was a moose then?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, could be. But whatever it was, it was *in the water walking*,” Skylar replied.

“Ah, yeah, we saw,” Alex said starting to wonder what was Skylar’s deal.

“What is your point Skylar,” asked Nick frustrated with Skylar repeating herself.

“It was in the water....?? Hello? Don’t you get it? It’s a sign, a clue,” Skylar said more strongly. Clearly, her cousins weren’t getting it.

“What? A sign for what?” Nick asked.

“It’s a sign for us; telling us that it’s O.K. for us to get into the water,” Skylar spelled it out for them.

“Totally! You’re right Sky. It *is* a sign for us!” Alex exclaimed.

“A moose gave us a sign to get into the water?” Nick asked skeptically. The two girls shot him very stern looks.

“Yes, Nick, a moose gave us a sign! What are we waiting for, let’s get wet and get to the other side!” Alex directed.

So, with a sign from a moose, the adventurers decided that if a moose could move in the water, so could they! They were going to have to wade and swim to get to that far shore. What lay beyond that shore, they had no idea. What they did know was that they would figure it out when they got there!

Chapter 20: The Final Trail to the Crooked Forest

When they reached the shore, they sat and wrung out their clothes and checked the backpack. They had stuffed all the important things in a Ziploc for the swim to keep dry. They also looked for the next sign or clue. They used their Owl Eyes and Rabbit or Deer Ears to get a better sense of this side of the bog and the new forest. The sun shined warmly and dried them as good as any fire. The swim did them well too. It loosened their muscles and reinvigorated them.

Skylar put fresh yarrow and pine sap on Nick's cut which was looking really good. Alex discovered another patch of nettle and this time she did not run into it. So while they dried themselves some, they ate nettle. If you carefully pluck the young leaves and roll them up onto themselves and crush them, you can eat it raw without getting stung. The crushing breaks up all the needles and makes it safe to eat. A good swim and some very nutritious wild edibles gave them energy for the final leg of their journey – the journey to the Crooked Forest.

They looked at the sun. It was now in the southwestern part of the sky meaning it was the afternoon. As the earth rotates, it makes the sun look like it's traveling across our sky. But really, we on earth are the ones spinning around while the sun stands still. Our earth rotates in a counter-clockwise direction so the eastern horizon has the sun "rising" out of it and the western horizon has the sun "setting" in it.

In the summer, the sun is high in the southern part of the sky. But it is never directly overhead if you live in the Northern Hemisphere. This is because our earth is tilted a little bit on the axis it rotates around. The only place it is overhead is near the equator. So in the Vermont summers, the sun is very high in the sky at noon but always slightly to the south. This is a great way to tell which way is south and what Nick has been watching all day. However, for our adventurers, in a few more hours it will be evening with the sun nearing the west to set.

It was time to get up and go.

"Let's get going guys. The sun is getting lower in the sky. From the looks of it, we only have a few more hours of daylight," Nick shared.

They got up and got going. On the far edge of the bog, what lay in front of them was more forest. However, it was not the dense and dark forest like the other side but rather an open

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forest with medium sized trees. There were occasional bushes under the trees also and clumps of ferns and moss. The ground was very wet, soft and even muddy in places. It was almost swampy actually.

What was the next sign? The three scanned the sky for their raven messenger but she was nowhere to be seen. They decided to look around for something that might be a clue. With only a few steps, Skylar stooped down and looked closely at the ground.

“What is it Skylar?” asked Nick.

“Tracks....come check ‘em out,” Skylar said holding back her excitement.

“Whoa. Alex, come here. Look at these tracks!” Nick called to his sister.



“Geez, those are so clear and perfect. What is it?” Alex asked.

“The track is pretty big, about two and a half inches long. And see the four toes with nails at each one and then the large heel pad. Definitely not like the bear track though.” Skylar pondered the options. “Looks like a big dog track really. Hey, it’s gotta be a coyote!”

“Awesome!” Nick called out excited to see real coyote tracks. “A coyote right here!”

“This ground is great for tracking,” Alex commented.

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"I know. You can follow the tracks with your eye. They head straight into the forest from here. And look, the coyote actually came right to the edge of the bog and stood here looking." Skylar pointed out the tracks, creating a movie in their heads. "These tracks are really really fresh guys. It must had been here while we were out in the bog jumping around."

"You think? Oh my, I guess so. We were jumping for over an hour I bet. Look at this track, the water is still oozing into it," Nick observed.

"Hey, I bet that this coyote is what made those bird alarms when we were at Raven Island," Alex shared excitedly.

"I bet you're right! Boy, can you believe it? A coyote was just staring at us while we were out there. The birds actually told us from all the way out here that a coyote was watching us," Skylar exclaimed.

"Coyote. So cool. Hey, those bird alarms *were* a sign! And now, these tracks have gotta be a sign right?" Alex said enthusiastically.

"It definitely is a sign!" Nick said firmly.

Alex and Skylar whirled around to look at Nick in disbelief. They all smiled and giggled. If Nick thinks it's a sign then it has got to be!

"Well Skylar, you're the tracking master so you lead the way," Nick announced feeling proud of his cousin.

"I don't know guys. I've never tracked a coyote before. I don't know if I can do it," Skylar shared quietly.

"Come on Skylar, we trust you!" declared Alex.

"Yeah Skylar, you can do it," Nick joined in.

"Alright then," Skylar agreed.

Inside, Skylar felt nervous and scared. Having her cousins put their trust in her with trailing a coyote in the forest...what if she lost the trail? Or worse yet, got them all lost? She might totally mess up and then with the sun going down...she didn't even want to think about it. However, they both wanted her to do it and she didn't want to let them down.

Skylar took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a minute and then began tracking. At first, on the edge of the bog, the tracking was pretty easy. The coyote left clear tracks as it moved straight into the forest over the swampy ground. There is something very different between

following the tracks of a deer versus that of a coyote. They are very different animals. They each have very different feet.

First off, one is a prey and the other a predator. That means they each move differently. Secondly, the coyote is all about covering ground and waiting to smell something fresh to catch. Thirdly, a deer's foot is a hard hoof while a coyote is softly padded. Therefore, coyote tracks are lighter and softer and their trail weaves through the forest in one general direction. A deer trail meanders here and there as it browses leaving deeper and sharper edged tracks.

Skylar was doing great keeping with the trail. At times, the tracks were in the soft wet ground while other times they were up on the mossy clumps. Either way, if you looked close enough, you could see the impression of its tracks. Skylar took several steps, then would stop and squat down looking closely at the trail. The longer she followed the tracks, the more she began to understand the way of the coyote. By trailing an animal, you end up connecting with that animal in a way. You can sense things that otherwise you never would.

"She's in the zone," Alex whispered to Nick.

"Totally. Like a bloodhound she is," Nick snickered out of admiration.

Skylar continued and began to feel confident that she really could do it. But then it happened...what she was afraid of happening. She lost the trail. The land had been drying out the further away from the bog they got and therefore the tracks were becoming fainter. However, Skylar felt that she was on the trail. Then, she ended up looking more closely at the tracks because something just seemed off.

It turned out that she had been trailing a raccoon and not they coyote any longer. How long had she been tracking a raccoon? When did she lose the coyote trail? Oh my gosh, she could had been trailing the raccoon for the last 20 minutes! They may not make it now to the Crooked Forest and it's going to be her fault, all her fault! Skylar froze feeling heat rise into her face. She just stopped and stood there.

After a few minutes, Alex and Nick looked at each other. This was not Skylar's normal "zone."

"Hey Sky, what's up?" Nick cheerfully asked.

Skylar didn't respond.

"Skylar?" Nick was beginning to be concerned.

Alex went over to her and saw that she was quietly crying. Alex backed away and whispered to Nick, "She's crying. What do you think is wrong?"

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"I LOST THE TRAIL AND HAVE PROBABLY RUINED OUR CHANCES OF FINDING THE CROOKED FOREST," yelled Skylar angrily.

Sometimes, when we are sad or scared or both, we can try to hide it with anger. It is like a shield for our feelings. Skylar was trying to cover up her sadness and hurt with anger right now with her cousins. Fortunately, her cousins know her well. Instead of responding angrily back which is what many people would do, they quickly ran to comfort her.

"It's O.K. Skylar. You did so good. I couldn't have done what you did," Alex said as she stroked Skylar's hair.

"Yeah, Sky. You can find it again. Don't worry," Nick comforted.

"NO I CAN'T. We 've been following a raccoon for who knows how long. It's getting close to evening time. It could take me an HOUR or more to find the coyote tracks again," Skylar exclaimed with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Well, maybe YOU can't, be WE can. Come on, all of us together can do it Skylar!" Alex responded optimistically.

"Yeah! If it would take one person an hour, then it'll take all three of us, um, what, right...20 minutes! We can do that!" Nick encouraged. "Plus Skylar, if I didn't ruin our chances of getting to the Crooked Forest by falling off a log and losing our backpack then how can you ruin everything by losing a trail for a bit?"

Skylar sniffed and looked up. Nick had a point.

"Right, and what about me. I ran you two right into a stinging nettle patch and that didn't stop us from finding the Crooked Forest. It did hurt....ooooowwwwww, eeeeeeeeeeee, oooooooooooooooooo," Alex said while she did the stinging nettle dance.

Skylar laughed. Wiped her tears away and said, "O.K., let's find this coyote!"

The three adventurers turned back and retraced their steps. They started circling around in larger and larger circles to "catch" the coyote tracks where they had lost them. As it turned out, the coyote and raccoon crossed paths when the coyote took a ninety degree turn heading east only 5 minutes back. Skylar breathed a sigh of relief.

Alex and Nick patted her on the back and said, "Lead on track master."

Skylar smiled and began trailing again. The ground where the coyote turned remained wet and soft so Skylar followed it without issue for a good while. The forest changed as they started up a hill. The tracks became fainter but kept to the moss so the tracks were still

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visible to a trained tracker. Right before the top of the hill the tracks stopped. Skylar stopped and stared bewildered.

“They stopped...” Skylar said confused.

“You mean the coyote stopped?” Alex asked trying to understand why Skylar sounded confused.

“No, I mean the tracks end, like there are no more tracks. The tracks disappear,” Skylar said distressed.

“Huh? Tracks just don’t disappear,” Nick said as he came closer.

“These did. Look, you can see this track clearly, then this track and this one and....no more,” Skylar showed him.

“Whoa. They do. They really do disappear! But how is that possible?” Nick asked incredulously. “The coyote just can’t vanish in thin air.”

“Let me see,” Alex edged in and looked. “You’re right Skylar. That’s so weird. They just vanish. Let’s go to the top of the hill. Maybe the tracks pick back up there?” Alex suggested.

So our trio climbed the last few feet of the hill to the top to try to find the missing coyote trail. What they found was not a coyote trail. It was the Crooked Forest!

Chapter 21: The Crooked Forest and the Medicine Circle

At the top of the hill, sat the Crooked Forest. It was a forest that no one could ever imagine. And it was right there in front of our adventurers. Hundreds of pine trees were growing crooked. Each tree came out of the ground and immediately grew several feet parallel to the ground. After a few feet the tree curved upward and grew straight towards the sky. Each tree looked like the letter J and there were hundreds of them, as far as their eyes could see.

The trees all faced the same direction. The forest floor was covered only with moss and pine needles. No other ground plants grew. These pines were not the white pine which has five delicate needles to a cluster. You can remember this since the word W.H.I.T.E. has 5 letters for 5 needles. These pines had 3 stout pine needles to a cluster and really rough red bark. The total effect was eerie and alien-like.



Our adventures stood gazing upon the forest. They were speechless. For the last several months, they had been preparing to find this legendary place. Now, they were there after so much and it was more bizarre, strange and magical than they ever thought it would be. To see hundreds of trees, bent and curved all in one direction was shocking. It was the most unnatural thing to see. What, how, who could have made this forest? Standing in front of it did not help to answer that question. It baffled our trio. It indeed was a mystery.

“We’ve got to explore it. We’ve got to get to the center of it.” Skylar declared.

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“But we could easily get lost? I mean, every single tree is exactly alike. There are no landmarks around to help us find our way out though. This place looks exactly the same everywhere,” Alex questioned a bit unnerved by this place.

“The sun. We’ve got to watch the sun. These pines aren’t so thick. We should be able to do it,” Nick answered.

“We can also put sticks down as markers, kinda like Hansel and Gretel. Let’s start right here and make a tall one so we can see it from far away,” Skylar suggested.

With determined looks, our adventurers put several long sticks together like a Teepee and then began to penetrate deeper and deeper into the forest leaving a trail behind. The further they went, the more it all looked the same. No birds sang, no animal sign was visible and few if any plants grew on the ground. There was also a feeling to this forest. A feeling of something...something powerful. The trio never felt afraid or like something bad was out there. They just felt like this place held a power or magic that was far beyond the three of them.

Keeping their eye on the sun and using sticks to mark their path they ventured deeper and deeper. Through the uniformly bent trees, they began to see an area ahead that looked different from all the rest. The lines of the trees in the distance did not match the J shaped lines of the rest of the Crooked Forest.

They headed towards that change. As they came closer, they realized what the difference was. The trees in this area were much larger and growing completely straight versus curved like all the rest. They also grew in a perfect large circle about the size of a classroom. And in the middle of the trees were a bunch of large and small stones placed in an unusual design. Our adventurers had reached the center of the Crooked Forest and before them was the Medicine Circle.

A medicine circle is a place where natives held special ceremonies. They are sacred places that have great meaning and power. This circle where our trio stood on the edge was very old. However, despite how old it seemed no pine needles, moss or dirt was on any of the rocks in the circle. It was like someone or something has been taking care of this medicine circle. But who? When? Why? Alex, Nick and Skylar had never heard of native Indians still living around here still.

The rocks were arranged like a compass or a wheel. Four very large rocks, the size of very large dogs were placed in the four directions. These four rocks were so large that it seemed impossible for anyone to be able to move them. Medium sized rocks made an outer circle. Then, like spokes of a wheel, smaller rocks went in lines from the large outer four rocks into the middle of the circle. At the very center of the circle was another circle with a small fire pit

inside of it. A small path led to the center from the outside by the largest of the four directional rocks. Nick, using his compass, noted that this “entrance” rock was placed in the East and the other three rocks were placed exactly in the South, West and North.



Nick started to enter the circle at the East rock and then stopped. What was he doing? He took another few steps past the rock towards the middle then stopped again, doubting himself. The girls looked at each other confused.

“Nick, what are you doing?” Alex whispered.

In this place, it seemed like talking in a normal voice was not appropriate. Very much like the way you feel when in a church.

“I...I don’t know. I just feel like I, like we should go to the very center. I feel pulled to it. I also feel like we are meant to....make a fire,” Nick quietly answered.

“Really? Do you think it’s your inner voice?” Skylar asked.

“I...think so,” he said and turned to them with a crooked smile. “Yes. Yes it is. We need to make a fire before we leave guys,” he said with conviction. “But first, we need to collect kindling for the fire.”

The girls did as they were told. In this open dry pine forest, finding kindling was easy. With a small armload each, they gently fox walked forward towards the center using their Owl Eyes

and Rabbit Ears. Silently they moved on the moss that was between the rock designs. Once at the center, there was enough room for the three of them to kneel down and build a fire in the pit. Carefully and with purpose, every piece of wood was placed into the fire circle. Enough room was left for a tinder bundle which Nick pulled out of his shirt pocket. For some reason, since the bog, he had been drying this bundle he collected from the cedar trees.

What the three were about to do was a very sacred thing; lighting a sacred fire in a medicine circle. Each of them felt that sacredness or importance.

Then, removing a match out of his waterproof carrier, he looked at the girls. They nodded to him. He closed his eyes and gave thanks for the trees, the land, the wood and the fire. He then with one smooth motion lit the match. Putting the match to the tinder bundle, the flame caught and grew.



Soon, there was a bright fire burning in the middle of the Medicine Circle with our three adventurers gazed upon it. No words were spoken. Each was lost in their own thoughts. Their thoughts took them back to that cold February night when Ol' Jack McGee first told them about this place. Then, their thoughts traveled in time to all they had accomplished to this point. How far they have travelled; not only in distance but in knowledge, experience, and understanding. They remembered how hard it was at first to go to their Special Spots but how they kept at it. They thought about the challenges they had faced with learning the Nature and Animal Skills.

Then, they thought about this day and the mistakes they made and how they overcame them together. They realized how the entire experience had helped them in so many ways and had shaped who they were now. All they felt in their hearts was thanks. Thanks for every challenge, every mistake and every triumph.

The three adventurers looked deeply into each other's eyes and smiled. Without words, they knew why they had come here and why they had to do it together.

The fire danced before them like spirits. The trees around them looked on like proud elders. The medicine circle surrounded them like family and friends. The fire awoke the ancestors of this place and our trio felt the presence of kind and loving spirits around them. They were not alone as they sat watching the fire.

Our adventurers realized what the riches that McGee spoke of at the beginning actually were. It was not a treasure of gold and jewels but much more valuable and rare. It was a treasure that no one could steal away from them for it was inside them and this journey had uncovered it inside each of them.

The fire began to die down for dead pine burns fast and leaves little coals. It felt right to let the fire go. They felt complete. Each stood up and breathed deeply. They nodded their heads and turned back on the small Medicine Circle path.

All three froze staring at the large rock at the circle entrance. On top of the East rock were three leather pouches with straps and a black feather sticking out of each one place in a triangle. Alex, Nick and Skylar's eyes grew wide in disbelief. But how? But who? Those pouches certainly were not there when they arrived. It was like they magically appeared.

They scanned the forest all around searching for who or what had placed them there. Nothing was seen; not a sign or trace of anyone or anything having been there.

They slowly went to the pouches and carefully examined them. Each pouch looked handmade out of an animal skin. The black bird feather was tied to the strap. They could tell that something was inside of each pouch.

Looking at each other, they knew that these were for each of them. They carefully opened them. The inside of the leather still had deer hair on it making a soft and beautiful place for something sacred. Inside each pouch was something else.

In the first one they opened, there was a beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Nick's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a small fire. On the back were etched these words:

May your PASSION BURN BRIGHTLY AND LIGHT YOURS AND OTHERS' JOURNEYS

In the second pouch, there was another beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Alex's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a chickadee. On the back were etched these words:

May your SONG ALWAYS HELP YOU HAVE COURAGE AND BRING COURAGE TO OTHERS AROUND YOU

In the last pouch, there was another beautiful shiny stone. It was large enough to fit perfectly in Skylar's palm. On one side of that stone was carved a coyote track. On the back were etched these words:

May you ALWAYS FIND your PATH AND LEAD OTHERS TO THEIR OWN PATH

Our three nature adventurers looked at each other and blinked. Their mouths hung open. They could not understand how these three carved stones fit each of them perfectly. The fire stone was for Nick. The chickadee stone for Alex and the coyote stone for Skylar. And the black feather...was it a raven feather? The raven had been such a messenger for them this whole journey. They put the stones carefully back into their leather pouches and put the strap of the pouch around their necks. They hung perfectly over each of our adventurer's hearts. All three just stood there, breathing in this adventure of theirs.

They looked at each other, gazed at the medicine circle and took a deep breath. They looked at the sun that hung close to the western horizon. The deep call of a raven overhead echoed around them.

They looked up to catch the glimpse of their raven messenger as it circled them three times and then headed in the direction back towards home.

"Another sign. Epic. Just epic." Nick said with a knowing smile.

Chapter 22: The Return Home

The trip back was much easier. It was like all of the challenges they faced going to the Crooked Forest had disappeared. Following the coyote trail back to the bog went easily. It was like the trail was glowing for Skylar. They munched on some stinging nettle when they came to the edge of the bog. Crossing the bog, they found one place that they could jump and hop all the way across. No one had to get wet. The Dark Forest was indeed getting darker by the minute but they were able to move easily and cheerfully through it thinking about coming back in the winter to camp here. They did slow to nibble on some violets too.

At the bear trail, well, they moved as quickly along that since they definitely did not want to bump headlong into the bear while crawling through brambles. At the end of the tunnel trail, they noticed that the brambles were actually raspberry bushes and there were some delicious berries to add to their bellies. Although they had eaten very little all day, what they had eaten was nutritious and energizing. Their bellies still rumbled but their spirits soared.

They reached the Indian Trail Tree and gazed at it imagining long ago, Indians standing where they were. Alex, Nick and Skylar realized that natives always felt that deep connection to nature, a connection that our trio was feeling more and more often. They could feel nature around them with all of their senses and with all of their hearts.

When they reached the rushing brook, the sun was almost touching the horizon. It would not be that long before it became dark. Trying to crawl over, under and on top of all the logs along the brook in the dark would be dangerous to say the least. Here was another challenge that in the past might have stopped or slowed our adventurers but not anymore.

Alex with the look of mischief said, "What about we go down the creek?"

"You mean *ride* the creek down?" Skylar said as the bright idea became brighter in her mind.

"Exactly!" Alex said triumphantly.

"Sounds crazy and good to me," Nick agreed.

"Me too," added Skylar.

"Me three," giggled Alex.

With that, the three slid down the steep bank, waded into the moving water and sat on their butts. The current began to push them downstream and pretty soon, our trio were laughing as they bounced down the stream on their rear ends. Sometimes they would hit a rock a bit too hard but that would just have them laugh more as they hollered. Occasionally, they had to pull themselves up and out to avoid a steep drop but in the end, what had taken them a several hours only took them 30 minutes of rip-roaring fun.

Laughing and hugging each other they got out of the rushing brook at their trail. They were having so much fun, they almost missed it. They shook the water out of themselves like wet dogs and headed towards the Grandfather Tree. When they caught the first sight of the ancient tree through the forest, they saw its top aglow in golden light as the sun's last rays were shining on it. Their adventure that morning began with the Grandfather Tree ablaze in the morning sun and it was ending with it ablaze in the evening sun. As they came upon that tree, they heard it say "welcome home." Or rather, they felt the Grandfather Tree whispered it.

"Don't you feel like the Grandfather Tree is happy to see us?" Skylar asked.

"I was just thinking that too," Alex responded.

"Me too. Remember when Ol' McGee said that the Grandfather Tree likes the name we gave him? Remember how he kind of listened before he said that?"

"Oh, I bet he was hearing the tree like us right now," Alex's eyes widened.

"Maybe, maybe," Nick said deep in thought. Could one really hear trees?

The last light of the day moved off of the very top branches of the Grandfather Tree. Our nature adventurers continued on into familiar woods. They moved silently, like fox through the woods. In the darkening forest, they had to use their Owl Eyes to see in front of them. The quiet of the dusk hour was occasionally interrupted by robins going to roost and juncos twittering as they settled in for the night. Our trio kept gliding through the forest. They had become so much a part of the woods at this point that they blended in completely and would have been virtually invisible to anyone looking.

However, they were not invisible to the coyote standing on the hill top watching.

The lights of Skylar's house glittered through the trees as the three came closer. Alex, Skylar and Nick slowed their pace not wanting the adventure to end.

They had made it. They did it. It was almost too unreal to imagine. A sadness started to creep in though. Sure, they were thrilled, proud and excited over what they had accomplished on this day as well as over the last several months, however, what now? They

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did know that any day out in nature using their newly developed skills would make that day an epic adventure. That will have to do they guessed.

They opened the back door of Skylar's house and froze again. This time, it was not a strange watery bog or a bear track or moose standing in the distance or the Crooked Forest that had them freeze. This time, it was their entire family, Mr. *and* Mrs. McGee along with several of their neighbors standing in the room smiling and shouting hurray as they came in.

Our adventurers felt like heroes returning after a long quest. In many ways, that is exactly what they were.

Warm food, warm hugs and many congratulations by family and friends filled them up. Mrs. McGee gave all three of them a big bear hug that nearly suffocated them. Alex and Nick's parents looked so proud and maybe relieved. Skylar's parents looked proud and excited for them.

The three were heralded to the fireplace to share their story while they ate some food. Family and guests asked questions, marveled at the events of that day and celebrated every step of the way with our adventurers. . The retelling of the story was almost as exciting as the journey itself. A few times, Alex and Nick's Mom looked a little queasy but Skylar's Dad put his arm around her laughing. All was well. All was more than well.

Once they finished sharing their adventure and some food, everyone started to mingle. As Nick, Alex and Skylar mingled and enjoyed everyone's company, our trio noticed that Ol' McGee, a few of the neighbors and even Skylar's father, all had leather pouches hanging around their necks very similar to their own. With the celebrating in full swing, Nick, Alex and Skylar slipped into a back room.

"Did you see the leather pouches?" Nick asked straightaway.

"Yeah, McGee had one on. So did Mrs. Walker and Mr. Lewis," Skylar said.

"Skylar, did you notice? Your Dad had one too." Alex paused then asked, "Do you think they are the same pouches as ours? Could they have been to the Crooked Forest too, like us?"

Before anyone could answer, McGee barged in surprising them yet again.

"There you three are. I've been looking for ya," McGee eyed them. However, there was warmth and pride in his look.

"I just wanted to say, well done...well done."

"Thank you sir," the trio responded.

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Then McGee looked at them hard again and said, "Hummmph. Now you're ready. Today was just the beginning. I need your help with somethin' big.....really big."

The End

