

The Expedition

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Chapter One

About one hundred students were scattered throughout the lecture theater, an unusually small turnout for one of Professor Roberts' classes. Open laptops and notebooks were spread throughout the room and the remaining students were busily scratching down notes as fast as the professor could speak. Near the back three young men sat in a pod, sprawled in their wooden chairs, pens poised, notebooks opened.

The professor was probably in his late thirties, of middle height and weight, a man who carried himself with a dignified air of self-assurance. As was his habit, he paused dramatically for several seconds in front of the lecture theater, the eyes of one hundred students fixed on him, hanging on to his every word.

“You can tell much about a civilization by the treasures they leave behind. Many of these artifacts can tell us things that even written records can't – or don't. Often they speak to us of some of the untold stories of war, love, humanity, even seemingly unbelievable depictions of the unknown. Allow me to explain further.” He paused again, seeming to be deep in thought.

“Last summer I had the opportunity to travel to China to investigate reports of an unusual discovery. This discovery was found in of all places, a coal mine. What the miners had found was a small decorative ornament made of brass buried deep within a vein of coal.” He hesitated, his eyes searching the puzzled faces before him. Finally he cleared his throat and continued. “The only reason I was called to this site to begin with was due to the fact that the individual who was responsible for this amazing discovery had recently read an article I had published in a scientific

journal. In this article I discussed the geological evidence found around the world that points to a cataclysmic worldwide flood, much like the story we read about in the Bible.”

A student near the front of the class rose from his seat. “What does the discovery of an ornament found in a coal mine have to do with a worldwide flood?”

The professor's eyebrows raised slightly as he glanced down at the questioner. “In my article I touched briefly on similar items found in coal deposits in different parts of the world. Many people, myself included, believe that coal deposits resulted from the mass burial of vegetation during a worldwide flood, and it is highly likely that man-made items such as these would be buried in these massive vegetative deposits. Otherwise, how else could it get there?”

“Aren't you then simply basing your theory on a religious myth?”

A confident smile crept across the professor's face. "Don't kid yourself," he said. “Every archaeologist bases the evidence from new discoveries on his or her own particular worldview. If you believe in a creation by a higher power, then you will base the evidence that you find on this particular worldview, and if you believe in Darwin's theory of evolution you will base the evidence you find on that worldview. Keep in mind that we all have the same evidence to work with, however it's often our own worldviews that shape the conclusions we come to.”

The professor stood there for several long seconds looking out over his silent audience.

“They both can't be right,” the same student said defensively.

“That's right,” the professor agreed. “So each of you must decide which particular worldview you will adopt in your own work. And trust me, I'm being a lot more open and honest with you than most of the members of the scientific community.”

Professor Roberts glanced up at the clock and sighed. "I'm afraid that's all the time we have left for this class. We'll have to continue this discussion next week."

"It's reading break!" A voice from the back shouted.

"Oh, that's right," Professor Roberts said with a smile. "I guess this discussion will have to wait. Don't forget, your final assignment can still be found on the university website."

The professor's last words were drowned out by the scraping of a hundred chairs across the floor of the lecture theater. "See you in two weeks!" He shouted.

Levi pushed himself back from the desk and got to his feet. Glancing over at his two friends with a grimace. "How is it that I'm just scraping by in this course and you're acing it, Shaun, despite the fact that you only show up for class half the time."

"I don't miss that much," Shaun said with a laugh. "And I do my homework. I don't know about you guys, but I came here to study archaeology and not waste time down at the pub."

"Touché," Levi said with a grin.

"I just came here to meet girls and wear a fedora," Nate said, grinning broadly.

Just then a voice interrupted them. "Levi. Can I speak with you for a moment?"

They turned to see Professor Roberts standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Sure," Levi said, turning back toward his friends. "Why don't I meet you guys down at the coffee house in a few minutes?"

"Alright, see you there," Nate said.

Levi turned and walked down the stairs to where Professor Roberts was waiting. "What can I do for you, Sir?" He asked.

"I just wanted to thank you personally for making such a memorable appearance at our dinner party last evening," the professor said. "You were very entertaining."

A puzzled expression creased Levi's face. "Your dinner party? I don't remember attending a dinner party yesterday, you must have me confused with someone else."

"Oh, I don't mean you personally," the professor continued. "I'm talking about your essay on the Roman Empire. My guests and I had a good laugh when I read it."

"Ouch," Levi said, forcing a smile. "Was it really that bad?"

"Let's just say it wasn't a typical example of your work." Professor Roberts said, pausing for a moment. "What's going on with you, Levi? I know from past courses that you can do much better work than what you've been handing in lately."

Levi turned from the professor's gaze. "I guess I have been letting my social life interfere with my studies a bit too much."

"Why are you letting your work suffer like this?" The Professor asked. "Are you interested in finishing the program or not? After all, you're the one paying to be in this class." He reached for a file folder that was in his brief case and flipped it open.

"I remember when you were in my first year introductory course. You were such an enthusiastic student." He pulled a sheet of paper from the file and handed it to Levi. It was his final grade from the first year anthropology course.

Levi glanced at the mark on the page and gave his professor an embarrassed smile. "Perhaps I have been losing sight of what brought me here in the first place."

"You just need to apply yourself," the professor said encouragingly. "Don't think you're

missing out on life by not partying day and night with your friends. The time you spend investing in your studies at school will pay dividends for the rest of your life.”

"I'll try to remember that, Sir," Levi said, forcing a smile.

Professor Roberts grinned. "Great. Just remember to spend some time during reading week to work on your final assignment – an in-depth analysis of a legitimate archaeological site. Keep in mind that this is worth a big percentage of your final grade."

Levi nodded nervously. "Right. I'll spend some time on it this week."

"Good," the professor said, turning to leave. "Enjoy your break."

Levi watched his professor as he walked toward the exit. "You didn't really read my paper out loud at your dinner party did you?" He called out.

Professor Roberts laughed. "No, but don't think I wasn't tempted."

Levi exited the lecture theater and made his way down the hallway to the doors leading out into the building court yard. A number of students were lounging about on the lawn, enjoying the warmth of the spring sunshine. Levi nodded absently to a few friends as he crossed the yard and pushed his way through the doors of the small coffee shop. Nate and Shaun were sitting on a couch in the back corner. As Levi entered the crowded room he called out to the young girl behind the counter. "Can I get a large coffee, Sarah?"

"Sure thing, Levi. It'll just be a minute."

He set a bill down on the counter then continued over to where his friends were seated. "You guys sure look cozy," he said, dropping onto the large couch.

Shaun laughed, moving down to the opposite end of the sofa. "Nate was just showing me

something on his computer," he explained.

"So what did Roberts want?" Nate asked.

Levi let out a long sigh and shook his head.

"Was it the '*drink less beer and do more homework*' speech? " Shaun asked.

"Something like that," Levi agreed. He looked over at Nate. "What are you looking at on your laptop?" he asked, anxious to change the subject.

Nate straightened up in his seat, his face growing serious. He leaned forward and turned the screen of the computer so that it faced Levi.

"What do we have here?" Levi asked, leaning in for a closer look.

"It's a map," Nate said sarcastically.

Levi leaned back, staring blankly at his friend. "I know it's a map, wise guy," he said.

"Why are you looking at a map?"

Nate laughed. "It's a large section of the forest called the Kettle Valley. It's only a day's drive north of here, and I was thinking about making a trip up there during reading break."

"Doing some fishing?" Levi asked.

Nate shook his head. "Not exactly," he replied. "I have an uncle who used to prospect in that area. He told me about an old archaeological site that he discovered a number of years ago. My uncle believes it could be at least a few hundred years old."

Levi studied the computer screen for a long moment. "No native civilization has ever been know to live anywhere near that region," he objected.

"Maybe that's why it's significant," Shaun replied. "If the story's true."

Levi turned to Nate. "How reliable is your uncle?" he asked.

Nate shrugged. "He did show me an artifact that supposedly came from the site. It was an old flint scraper that was used for cleaning animal hides."

"Is that right?" Levi asked curiously.

Levi and Shaun looked over at Nate, neither saying anything for a moment.

"You're not serious about going up there are you?" Shaun asked.

"I was just thinking that an expedition to a site like this would be the perfect answer for the assignment Roberts gave us," Nate explained.

"Would we have time to make the trip before classes start up again?" Levi asked.

"Plenty," Nate said. "It would only take a day's drive to reach the general area, then another half-a-days journey by kayak. That would still give us two or three more days for exploring. Who knows what we could end up finding."

Levi stared absently at his friend. "I have to admit, this could make for a great project."

"Are you in then?" Nate asked.

Again Levi hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "I suppose I could use a bit of excitement before I start work this summer, not to mention the possibility of having a first rate presentation for Roberts." He turned to Shaun. "Are you coming?"

Shaun shook his head. "Sorry gents, my project's already done."

Levi grunted. "You would have it done ahead of time, wouldn't you?"

A voice from behind the counter interrupted their conversation. "Levi, your coffee's up." The young woman said with a smile.

“Thanks, Sarah.” Levi said, climbing to his feet. "Looks like we're going to have to start packing, Nate. Why don't we head out first thing tomorrow morning?"

Chapter Two

The early morning sun filtered in through the partially closed curtain, playing on the far wall in a cacophony of colors and designs. Levi crossed the floor of his small bachelor's apartment, pulled a couple of shirts down from their hangers and stuffed them into his backpack. He then walked over to the room's lone armchair, where he sat down and began to do a quick inventory of all the items he had already packed.

A sudden knock on his door caught him by surprise. He glanced down at his watch, then made his way over to the door.

"Hello, Honey." An attractive, young-looking woman wearing a colorful silk blouse and matching skirt breezed into the room. A light tan jacket was draped across her arm and in her other hand she was holding a small shopping bag.

"Mom! What are you doing here?" Levi asked.

"Well, dear, when you called last night to tell me that you were going camping for a week, I thought I should drop by and bring you a few items for your trip."

"That was thoughtful, Mom," Levi said, taking the bag. "What did you bring?"

"Just a little snack to eat on the road," she replied.

He rummaged around inside the backpack and pulled out a plastic bag filled with peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies. "You drove for over three hours at the break of dawn just to bring me some cookies?" he asked with a puzzled expression.

"That," she said, hesitating for a moment. "And one other thing." She pulled a small black

book from her jacket pocket and handed it to Levi.

"Oh, so you have an ulterior motive," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Come on, Levi," she said. "You've never even given it a chance."

"Look, Mom, I'm really happy that you found God and everything, but it's just not for me. Not right now, anyway. I'm too busy to think about religion at this point in my life."

"Please, Levi. Just promise me that you'll take it with you on your trip."

Levi hesitated for a moment then reluctantly reached out and took the book from his mother. "Alright, but I can't promise I'll even have time to crack the cover."

"At least try to make the effort, Levi. I'll even put it in your bag for you." She leaned forward and took the book from his hand and then stuffed it in the side pocket of his backpack.

"Where exactly are you going, anyway?" She asked.

"Up north," he said evasively.

"Come on, Levi. You have to give me a better idea about where you're going in case something bad happens to you."

"Don't worry, Mom. Nate has all the details worked out." Levi replied. "All I know is we're going up to the Kettle Valley. I'm sure he'll leave all the particulars with his folks."

"I wish you wouldn't take risks like this, Levi," his mother said frowning. "You never know what kind of dangers are lurking out there."

"Just think of it as an extended camping trip, Mom. Besides, Nate's bringing along a few hand grenades for protection."

His mother managed a crooked smile. "I wouldn't put it past you two. I remember having

to put extra insurance on our house when you and Nate were kids.”

Levi laughed. "We'll be fine. Don't worry."

At that moment his apartment's intercom buzzed loudly.

"That must be Nate," Levi said, taking the receiver off the wall. "Hello?"

"It's me." Nate replied.

"I'll be right down," Levi said.

He turned to his mother. "I better get going."

“Alright.” His mother said. She glanced around the cluttered apartment. "Do you mind if I stick around here for awhile and clean this place up?"

Levi grinned. “Knock yourself out.”

“I think the smell in here will do that for me,” she said waving her hand in front of her face. “Honestly, Levi, I don't know how you live like this.”

Levi smiled as he picked up his backpack. “It's not easy.” He leaned over to give his mother a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Mom. I'll see you in a week."

"Be careful, Levi." His mother said anxiously.

Levi hurried down the narrow stairwell, taking the steps two-at-a-time, and when he arrived in the lobby Nate was still standing by the intercom, waiting impatiently. Levi could see through the glass doorway that a light rain was falling outside.

"You ready, brother?" Nate asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Levi said, pushing past his friend and walking out into the still-awakening street.

"Did you bring the GPS?" Levi asked over his shoulder.

"Of course," Nate said. "We wouldn't be getting very far without it."

When they arrived at the Jeep, Nate hurried past his friend and opened the back door for Levi's backpack. The two brightly colored kayaks were already strapped securely to the top of the vehicle, and the back of the Jeep was crammed with supplies.

Levi tossed in his bag and slammed the door shut. "Let's get going!" he said, hurrying around to the passenger's side door and climbing in.

Nate settled into the driver's seat and wheeled the Jeep cautiously out into the street.

"I can't believe it's still raining," Levi complained.

"Yah, although the weather report said it's likely to clear up later today."

"Did you check the long-range forecast for the Kettle Valley?" Levi asked.

"It looks like it's going to be clear for most of the week," Nate replied. "Although rain is predicted for the area just north of the valley."

Levi peered through the rain-spattered windshield as they turned on to the highway leading out of town.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Nate said. "I haven't had a proper vacation for months and this is how I choose to spend it?"

Levi laughed. "I hope you remembered the toilet paper," he said turning in his friend's direction. "I have sensitive skin and I don't think leaves are going to cut it."

"Afraid not," Nate said with a grin. "But I did bring a few sheets of sandpaper."

Levi grinned. "We're certainly off to a good start. Maybe there's still time to redeem it

with some good music." He pulled out a disc from his jacket pocket and popped it into the stereo.

"And we all know that every road trip needs its own soundtrack."

The strains of the CCR classic, "Green River", swept through the vehicle.

Nate turned to his friend with a grin. "Inspired choice."

Levi leaned back in the plush seat and folded his hands behind his head. "I hope you brought something for us to drink while we're camping."

"What do you have in mind?" Nate asked.

"Beer, of course!" Levi replied. "A camping trip is never a camping trip without a case or two to ease the pain from all the work we'll be doing."

"I never thought of that," Nate replied. "Good idea. We'd better stop somewhere before we get too far out of town. I doubt there are many beer stores up in the Valley."

Levi glanced out the window, carefully examining the buildings they were passing. "I think there's a convenience store that sells beer coming up on the right."

"I know the one you mean," Nate replied.

A moment later they wheeled off the highway and into the large parking lot. Nate and Levi scrambled out of the vehicle and ran through the rain towards the front doors.

The proprietor of the small shop stood behind the cash register engrossed in a magazine. He was a large, heavy-set man with a short, tobacco-stained beard and a long pony-tail growing out from behind his bald head. He scowled wordlessly as Levi and Nate approached the counter.

"Do you sell beer?" Nate asked.

"Gee, let me think," the man replied gruffly, returning to his magazine. "Perhaps there's

some in that cooler over there marked *Beer*." He pointed in the general direction.

Levi looked at Nate with a puzzled expression.

"Alright, how about a washroom?" Levi asked.

"Yah, we have one of those too." The clerk replied robotically.

Levi paused for a moment waiting for the other man to continue. "Do you mind telling us where it might be?" He finally asked.

This time the man looked up, staring blankly at Nate and Levi. "It's next to the beer cooler. The washroom sign is kind of hard to miss."

Levi scowled. "What's the matter, are we tearing you away from a particularly fascinating article in *Cosmopolitan*?"

Nate grabbed Levi by the arm and dragged him away from the counter. "Come on, Levi. I think we can manage to find it on our own."

The store clerk was now standing with both meaty hands placed firmly on the counter before him, glaring at his two customers. "That washroom is for paying customers only, so you two had better be buying something!"

"Can you believe what a jerk that guy is?" Levi said.

"Let's just get the beer so we can get back on the road," Nate suggested, almost dragging his friend over to the cooler. "I think we'd better take a couple of six packs instead of a full case, that way they'll fit better in our kayaks."

"Good idea. Why don't you pay for the beer while I make a trip to the washroom," Levi said, handing his friend a bill. "Just make sure you get my brand."

Levi made his way into the empty washroom and closed the door behind him. A few minutes later when he returned through the shop, he browsed nonchalantly among the magazines, deliberately avoiding eye-contact with the man at the counter.

When he finally arrived back at the Jeep, Nate was stashing the two cases of beer in the back. "How did you make out?" he asked, turning to his friend.

Levi pulled a couple of rolls of toilet paper from his jacket and tossed them on the seat next to his bag. "Let's just say that the next time our little friend in there uses the washroom, he had better take that magazine along with him."

"Tsk tsk, Levi," Nate said. "Remember what the Good Book says, *thou shalt not steal*,"

Levi laughed. "You're starting to sound like my mother."

"As he opened Levi's backpack a bag of cookies fell out on to the floor. "What do we have here?" He held the bag up before his friend.

"Oh those," Levi said. "My mom stopped by my apartment just before we left."

Nate smiled. "You mean to tell me your mom was at your apartment this morning and you didn't even tell me?"

Levi gave his friend a dirty look. "Don't start with the mom jokes."

"Come on," Nate said. "I would have thought you were used to comments like that. After all, your mom looks like she's the same age as my sister."

"Yah, that's right, Nate," Levi said. "My mom had me when she was six."

"Well, I'm sure I can't be that far off," Nate said, stuffing the cans of beer into Levi's backpack. "I'll bet your mom's closer to our age than my mom's age."

"Come on, Nate, don't start on this again," Levi said. "I'd be the first one to admit that my mom's made her share of mistakes, but she's really managed to turn her life around the last few years. And she did it all without the support of a husband. That takes a lot of courage."

Nate shrugged. "I know, Levi. I was just giving you a hard time."

There was a brief awkward pause. "Well," Levi said. "We'd better get going. We still have a long way to go before we make camp for the night."

"Alright," Nate agreed.

Levi grinned, eyeing Nate cautiously. "Keep in mind that if I hear another mother joke coming from you, I won't hesitate to give you a savage beating."

"I'll take note of that." Nate said, laughing loudly.

Chapter Three

Nate negotiated the Jeep down the narrow dirt road, weaving in and out of the overhanging branches as best he could. Every now and then he would cringe as the vehicle bottomed-out in one of the deeper pot-holes covering the road. Ever since they had left the highway Nate was forced to keep the Jeep in its lowest gear – always seeming to wind higher and higher into the immense wilderness.

Levi was bent over the GPS, studying it carefully.

"Any luck?" Nate asked, glancing over at his friend.

"Not really." Levi replied. "The GPS hasn't shown any other roads or landmarks since we left the highway." Levi made a quick adjustment to the instrument. "When I zoom out, it shows a large river northwest of here. I think that's the one we need."

"How far do you think the river is from here?"

"It's hard to say," Levi answered, sitting back and turning his gaze out the mud-spattered windshield. "Be careful, Nate," Levi said abruptly. "Look what's up ahead."

Nate leaned forward for a better look, slowly bringing the Jeep to a stop.

Both Levi and Nate climbed out of the vehicle and stood for a moment staring intently at a weathered, single-lane wooden bridge stretching precariously across a deep ravine. Levi led the way up to the rickety structure, eyeing it cautiously.

"I remember my uncle telling me that the logging companies built a number of temporary bridges in this area," Nate said. "I guess this must be one of them."

Levi peered down over the edge of the steep embankment, down a hundred feet or more to where a narrow creek meandered off into the distance.

"Do you think it's safe to cross?" Nate asked, walking carefully out into the middle of the ancient structure. "It looks kind of sketchy."

Levi followed him, noting that many of the boards no longer appeared to be attached to the large timbers which made up the frame. "I think the only thing holding this bridge together are the cobwebs," he said. "But there doesn't seem to be another way around it unless you feel like walking. I guess there's only one way to find out for sure if this thing's road-worthy." He glanced reluctantly in Nate's direction.

Nate ran a hand across his sweaty forehead, the trace of a smile inching at the corner of his mouth. "You sure know how to inspire confidence," he said sarcastically, leading the way back to the vehicle. "It's a good thing the Jeep's insured."

Nate popped the Jeep back into gear, then slowly rolled forward, accelerating gently as the front wheels touched the edge of the bridge. "Here goes nothing."

After a few tense moments, Levi and Nate had rumbled their way across the old bridge and were once again rolling peacefully through the forest.

"See. That wasn't so bad," Levi said, settling back into his seat. He stretched and placed his hands behind his head, watching as the colorful wilderness rolled by. They were making their way around another sharp bend when Levi suddenly straightened in his seat, his face almost pressed up against the windshield.

"You've got to be kidding me!" he said in dismay.

Nate laughed as he pulled the vehicle to a stop at the foot of another bridge. "At least this bridge looks like someone put some thought into it."

Levi hopped out of the Jeep and made his way up to the edge of the massive structure. "This one's a lot bigger," he said leaning over the embankment and looking down. "Check it out. Look at how far down the river is from here."

Nate joined him, whistling softly. "That's quite a drop." he agreed, his hands planted firmly on his hips. "Do you think this is a branch of the Kettle River?"

"I don't think so," Levi said. "According to the GPS this river's too far south."

"You could be right," Nate agreed. "Although I do remember my uncle mentioning how many of these little streams eventually wind their way into the main river."

"Well," Levi said eyeing the ancient bridge warily. "What are we waiting for?"

Nate laughed. "I hope you brought along a change of underwear."

They hurried back to the Jeep where Nate settled in behind the wheel once again. "Better say a quick prayer," he said, shifting the Jeep into gear. The powerful vehicle jumped forward, then crawled slowly up onto the wooden planks. "Keep an eye out for any hazards," Nate said.

Levi rolled his window part way down and almost immediately they could hear the creaking of the old bridge as it bore the weight of the heavy vehicle. He glanced over at Nate, who was now perched over the steering wheel, the knuckles of both hands white. He then turned and looked down into the deep ravine they were crossing. "If this bridge gives out we'd have enough time to eat our lunches on the way down," he said.

"Now that's the kind of comment you should keep to yourself," Nate replied.

Levi grinned at his friend. "You're doing just fine. We're almost there." He turned his gaze back out the front windshield for a better look. "Watch out for that pothole at the end of the bridge," he suggested. "It looks pretty deep."

Nate immediately slowed the Jeep down as they approached the pothole. As the front tires reached the edge of the bridge he inched the vehicle down into the hole, flinching as the undercarriage scraped loudly against the metal frame of the bridge.

"Yikes!" Levi said. "You know it's a deep hole when you bottom out in a Jeep!"

Nate groaned. "I know. Remind me to fill that hole on our way back."

The gap in the trees at the end of the bridge was a little narrower than they had experienced up to that point. Large branches from the surrounding forest hung down almost within touching distance of the old road, causing the sun to blink in and out.

"I don't think this part of the road has been used for quite a while." Levi said.

Once again Nate leaned forward to get a better view of the twisting, turning road which wound its way through the dense old-growth forest. It seemed now that almost every fifty meters or so, they were splashing through great puddles of water and maneuvering around large rocks that jutted out precariously from the surface of the road.

"Where did all of these rocks come from?" Nate asked, skirting another jagged boulder. "The logging companies sure haven't done much of a job maintaining the road have they?"

At that moment the Jeep crested a small rise and Nate brought them to a sudden stop. Below them was a great valley, stretching for miles into the distance.

"Look at that," Levi said, pointing off to their right. "That whole area has been clear-cut,

except for a few lone birch trees."

"Wow, you're right!" Nate said, turning to survey the area. "What a shame."

"Why do you think they left the birch trees?" Levi asked.

"I once heard that it's quite common for logging companies to leave them behind," Nate replied. "Although, you would think they would have some use for them. After all, birch trees rarely survive when they're left out in the open like that."

Levi nodded. "That would explain why they're all mostly dead."

Nate edged the Jeep forward, his foot gently riding the brake as he eased the vehicle down the steep incline.

"It's hard to believe that they brought logging trucks all the way out here," Levi said as they weaved in and out of the road's many potholes.

"How old do you think this road is, anyway?" Nate asked.

Levi shrugged. "Judging by the bridge we just crossed, I'd say fifty years or more."

"They must have re-cut the area more recently than that," Nate insisted. "It looks like they haven't had time to even replant any of the trees."

At that moment the Jeep leveled out as they accelerated down a straight stretch of road.

"Wait a minute," Nate said. "It looks like we're coming to a dead end."

"So it seems," Levi agreed as the vehicle rolled to a stop in front of a thick wall of trees.

"What should we do now? Can we just walk the rest of the way?"

"I don't know. How far are we from the river?"

Levi checked the GPS. "It looks like we're only about a kilometer or so from the river. I'm

sure we can portage the rest of the distance – no problem."

Nate glanced down at his watch. "It's seven o'clock. This might be a good spot to set up camp for the night. There may not be a suitable place to pitch a tent down by the river. We can head out first thing tomorrow morning."

Levi scratched his head thoughtfully. "We can probably camp over in that little clearing," He suggested, pointing to a sheltered area among the trees to their left. "Why don't you collect some dry wood for a fire while I set up the tent?"

Exiting the Jeep the pair dragged a few essentials from the back seat before Nate disappeared into the forest to collect the firewood. Levi then began setting up their small canvas tent in a spot under the branches of a large oak tree. By the time he had the camp set up, his friend was just returning with a final armful of wood.

"This should last us the night," Nate said, dropping the load onto the ground.

"I think so," Levi agreed. "There's probably enough scraps around here to get the fire started. Why don't we gather a few large stones so we can build a proper pit?"

"We might as well," Nate replied.

The two friends immediately set to work scouring the small clearing for suitable rocks. Levi had picked up a few from the ground and began placing them next to the wood pile when he looked thoughtfully over at his friend. "Hey Nate, I just wanted to thank you for coming up with the idea for this expedition," he said with a smile. "I realize that you don't really need the grades for this course as much as I do, so I appreciate your offer to help."

Nate grinned. "No problem, it's just nice to get out into the real world once in awhile." He

paused. "Speaking of grades, I've been meaning to ask you, Levi. Why have you been slacking off so much with your classes? I remember you were really keen about archaeology during our first year. You were always so excited about the idea of getting into this kind of work."

"To be honest, I'm not really sure why I've been losing interest in the course," Levi admitted. "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately, about where I might be in ten years, and I'm not entirely convinced that archaeology is the right path for me."

"Come on, Levi," Nate said. "You're full of it. You've been dreaming about excursions like this ever since you were a kid."

Levi forced a smile. "I'm not really sure what I want anymore."

"Well, don't let an opportunity like this go to waste. I know for a fact that your mother has made a lot of sacrifices so you can attend university."

Levi's face clouded. "That's a cheap shot if I ever heard one."

Nate laughed. "Alright," he said good-naturedly. "But you know I'm right."

There was a brief pause. Finally Levi turned to his friend. "Speaking of the future, what are you planning to do after you graduate?"

Nate shrugged. "I don't know. I'm still thinking about doing some traveling. Maybe that will help me figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life."

"Are you still planning to take that trip to the middle-east?" Levi asked.

"I'm not really sure where I want to go." Nate replied. "Lately I've been thinking that I should probably just throw a dart at a map and go wherever it lands."

Levi laughed. "At least you've given it some thought," he said sarcastically.

"Why don't you get this fire going and I'll go get us a couple of beers." He tossed down the rocks he had collected in the general direction of the fire pit and walked back to the Jeep.

Levi returned to the campsite and quickly assembled the fixings for the fire and within a few minutes had a roaring blaze going. He looked up to see his friend standing over him carrying their drinks and a couple of chairs in each hand. "Care for a beer?"

"Absolutely," Levi said. "I'm also glad to see that you remembered the chairs."

"Actually, I didn't even think we'd get to use them." Nate admitted. "They're way too bulky to take with us on the portage, but at least we can make use of them here." He quickly set them up by the fire, dropped down into one of them and opened his drink.

Levi sagged down into his chair with a deep sigh, taking the beer that his friend handed him. He opened it up and held the can skyward. "To the success of our first real expedition as a team," he said dramatically.

"May it be the first of many," Nate said with a smile.

Chapter Four

The chill of early morning drove Nate and Levi from their sleeping bags before the sun had a chance to fully rise above the eastern horizon. By the time the sun had peaked its head above the craggy hills far off in the distance they had already broken camp and returned most of their supplies to their backpacks.

"It looks like rain," Levi said, staring up at the overcast sky.

Nate shook his head. "I checked the weather forecast just before we left, and it said there would be no rain for at least a few days, so we should be okay."

"I hope you're right." Levi began untying one of kayaks from the roof of the Jeep. "It's cold enough up here without having to deal with rain." He looked over at his friend who was now zipping up his jacket. "Would you mind untying the other side?"

Nate walked over to the opposite side of the vehicle, loosened the rope, then hoisted the closest kayak to the ground while Levi handled the other.

"Do you think there's enough room in these for all of our supplies?" Levi asked.

Nate shrugged. "I tested it with one of my packs earlier this week and it seemed to fit just fine. Judging by the size of your pack I think we'll be alright."

"I just hope I don't tip, because none of my gear is waterproof."

"That depends entirely on your skill level," Nate said with a grin as he lifted the backpack onto his shoulders. "Do you think you can handle it?"

Levi laughed, pulling his own backpack into place. "I may be a little rusty, but I'm sure I

can still keep up with the likes of you."

"I'm glad to hear it," Nate said, lifting the kayak over his head.

"Oh, wait a minute." Levi said suddenly. "Did you remember to pinpoint our location on the GPS so we know how to find our way back?"

"It's all taken care of." Nate said, leading the way across the clearing and into the trees on the other side. The forest was made up mostly of tall redwood trees, protected from the logging companies by government regulations. There was little in the way of undergrowth, allowing easy passage despite the cumbersome burdens born by Levi and Nate. They had barely gone a stone's-throw into the forest when the ground seemed to drop out from under them, and they found themselves descending a steep, slippery hill.

"How far did you say that river was?" Nate asked.

"It's only about three or four hundred meters..." Levi replied.

As soon as the words were out of Levi's mouth, he could feel himself lose his footing as he skidded down the bumpy hill several feet, somehow managing to catch his balance while keeping the kayak balanced precariously above his head.

"Are you all right?" Nate asked, pausing next to his friend.

"I think so," Levi said. "I just scratched my leg on a branch back there, but it's nothing serious. I'll inspect the damage when we reach the river."

Nate slowly led the way down the remainder of the hill until they could hear the faint sound of running water.

"We must be getting close," Levi said.

Nate paused, turning his head. "It sounds like the river's moving fast."

"There's been a lot of rain in this region lately."

"Let's just hope the weather stays clear for the next few days," Nate replied, negotiating his kayak between two small pine trees.

Levi followed Nate down an especially steep embankment, skidding the last several meters to the bottom, while managing to keep the kayak firmly in place. When he looked up he could see the river just beyond the veil of trees.

"I think we're almost there," Nate said.

"I sure hope so. My arms are killing me."

Nate laughed as he settled the kayak into a firmer position on his shoulders. "Suck it up, Princess. You'll have a chance to rest soon."

Levi pushed his way through a thick sumac bush and was surprised to find himself standing on the edge of a narrow, fast-flowing river. He turned to see Nate stagger through the bush behind him, the kayak wobbling unsteadily on his shoulders.

"It's not exactly the mammoth waterway I had expected," Levi said, setting his kayak down on the forest floor.

Nate set his own craft down beside his friend's and stood for a long moment looking out over the narrow river. "I think this might be one of the tributary's leading into the Kettle," he said. "The main river is supposed to be much larger than this."

"How far are we from our destination then?" Levi asked.

"I'm not exactly sure." Nate responded.

"What do you mean? I thought you knew where we're going?"

"Hey, I'm just going by the directions my uncle left me." Nate admitted. "According to him, if we travel further south down the main river we will eventually come to a large cliff rising out of the water on the west bank. There's only one rock formation like it. Apparently the archaeological site is located somewhere in that area."

Levi eyed the river uneasily. "That current looks really strong. If we end up traveling too far downstream, it could take us forever to get back up here."

"If the current is too strong to paddle back up the river, my uncle told me about an alternate route using an old trail running west of the site. He said it could be used to walk back to civilization." He paused for a moment. "Of course we'd have to find someone who could drive us back here to get the Jeep, but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

"Let's just hope the current isn't too strong to make it back the same way," Levi said grimly. "The alternative route sounds like too much work."

Nate took a deep breath and then set his backpack down on the ground before him. "Well, I guess we'll never know until we find out for ourselves." He stuffed the backpack down into the kayak, then slid it over to the edge of the river.

Levi reluctantly followed his friend's example, managing to stow his backpack securely down into the front section of the small craft with room to spare for his legs.

"I guess this is as good a place as any to launch," Nate said, glancing around doubtfully. He settled the kayak onto a flat spot of the shoreline close to a stretch of shallow water, extracted the paddle from inside, then climbed cautiously into his seat.

Levi leaned over his friend's kayak, his hands firmly grasping the stern. "Ready?"

Nate nodded. "Here goes nothing."

With that Levi gave Nate's kayak a firm push out into the water. He then dragged his own kayak to the brink of the river's edge, where he settled down into the cockpit and used his paddle to ease himself out into the water.

The rushing waters of the narrow river immediately caught both kayaks in its grip and swept them swiftly downstream. For an instant Levi felt a small sense of panic well within him as he fought hard against the river's current, maneuvering the craft as close to the friendly confines of the shore as was possible. It had been several months since he had last been in a kayak and he felt strangely disoriented.

"You look a bit queasy," Nate shouted. "Feeling a little rusty?"

Levi forced himself to laugh. "Not everyone's mom buys them a kayak when they're twelve years old – or for that matter a Jeep when they turn sixteen."

"Never mind," Nate said with a grin. "I'd change moms with you any day."

Levi scowled. "Don't start with that again!"

The river bent sharply to the left, and as it did Levi immediately noticed the current begin to slow. Patches of thick weeds and cattails now appeared along the opposite shoreline, interspersed with great dead falls which lay sprawled out into the water. Levi and Nate immediately turned their kayaks out towards the center of the river.

"Do you know if this river has any rough stretches?" Levi asked.

"I'm not sure, but I did notice on the GPS that there's quite a drop in elevation over the

course of the river. You had better keep your ears open, anyway. If you hear anything that sounds like a waterfall or rapids – just make your way to the shoreline."

"That's encouraging," Levi said. "Maybe we'd better just stick to the shore."

Nate laughed. "Don't be a wimp. We'll run close to the shore when we're going around any sharp bends, otherwise we'll get a better line of sight in the middle."

After a few minutes Levi seemed to get into the rhythm of paddling. The fact that the kayak rode so high in the water meant that it required very little effort from the double-bladed paddle to propel him through the waves. "We're making really good time," he said with excitement. "But paddling back against this current is another story."

"I think you may be right," Levi agreed. "We may have to leave ourselves an extra couple of days for the return trip."

Levi paddled in silence for the next several minutes, always keeping his ears open for the sound of approaching rapids. For the most part, however, the current maintained its steady pace, helping them to make excellent time. Before an hour had passed it was most evident how much their river had widened, and it was a small comfort to both paddlers to note that at least three tributaries – each one as large as the host river – had joined them in their journey downstream.

"We'd better be careful on the way back," Levi said. "It would be easy for us to take a wrong fork in this river and get ourselves completely lost."

Nate shrugged. "Don't worry about it. We have the GPS, remember?"

"Somehow I don't find that very comforting," Levi responded.

Once again Levi turned his attention to the task at hand, driving the light craft through the

open river while taking time now and then to admire the passing landscape on the shorelines. Once when rounding an especially sharp bend in the river they startled a large blue heron who was feeding in amongst some lilies. Both paddlers paused for a moment as they watched the great bird take flight, then disappear over the trees.

It was probably close to an hour later when a dull noise filtered into Levi's consciousness. He jerked his head up, a startled expression crossed his face as he looked around. Nate, only a few meters ahead him, seemed to be unaware of the strange sound.

"Rapids!" Levi shouted.

Nate immediately turned in his kayak, looking back at Levi. "We'd better head for shore to check it out!" He shouted.

Both kayakers abruptly turned their crafts and started for shore as quickly as possible, but even as they did, the sound of roaring waters grew even louder. Levi could see that Nate was bearing toward a small opening in a glade of trees twenty meters or so downstream. It wasn't until they had almost reached the shoreline that he had noticed the heavy turbulence in the river immediately in front of them.

Levi maneuvered his kayak toward Nate's, managing to keep as close to the shore as possible and out of the swiftly-flowing water. Nate was frowning as he looked out over the river.

"It actually doesn't look all that bad," Nate said. "Maybe we should try running these rapids. We could save ourselves a lot of time. What do you think?"

Levi scrunched up his face as he followed Nate's gaze. "There doesn't appear to be too many rocks. Why don't you go ahead and I'll follow your lead?"

Nate pushed himself away from shore. Almost immediately the kayak was caught up in the current which pulled them out into the middle of the river. Levi found that he didn't even have to touch the water with his paddle, as they were swept swiftly through the turbulent waters.

They had only gone about fifty meters or so when the waters grew more choppy and the current more determined. Even though the kayak moved deftly through the churning wakes, Levi felt that he was always on the verge of losing his balance and toppling carelessly overboard. The spray from the current was now splashing violently over the sides of the kayak, soaking his entire upper body. Finally after what seemed like an eternity, he and Nate shot out of the rapids and glided peacefully into a welcoming stretch of calm water.

"Look at that!" Nate was turned in his kayak and pointing back to the stretch of river from which they had just emerged. Levi could see where the river formed a great fork partway through the rapids, with a much wider watercourse flowing in from the west. "Judging by the size of this river," Nate said. "The one we're on now must be the main tributary – the Kettle."

"Do you think we're getting close to the site?" Levi asked.

Nate turned back to his friend and shrugged.

"I don't know why I bother asking," Levi said.

Nate led the way back out into the middle of the river. The waterway was now much wider than it had been previously - in some places almost twenty meters across. After paddling for another kilometer or two Nate finally broke the silence. "I hate to sound like a broken record, but I honestly can't see us coming back up the river. With the current being as strong as this, it would take us forever to paddle back upstream."

Nate nodded. "I was thinking the same thing myself, but at least we're able to have some fun on the way down. Why not make the most of it?"

It wasn't another five minutes before they heard the distinct sound of another set of rapids. Once again Levi steered his kayak toward the closest shoreline and had almost reached his destination when he turned back to see that his friend was still paddling out into the middle of the river. "What are you doing, Nate?" He shouted.

"It doesn't look that bad," Nate shouted. "I think I'm gonna run these ones too. Keep your fingers crossed."

Levi leaned back in the cockpit, shaking his head in exasperation as he edged his way closer to the rapids, this time sticking as close as he could to the shoreline. As he neared the tumultuous stretch of water, he was relieved to see that the rapids were not nearly as savage as the last set they had passed through.

"Here we go again," he muttered, pushing himself away from the shoreline and into the white-capped water. Immediately the current swept him out into the middle of the wild rapids, moving him along at a frightening speed, the kayak weaving itself among a myriad of eddies and jagged outcroppings. Suddenly, when he had almost exited the last of the turbulence, the front of the kayak brushed up against a large boulder, throwing Levi sideways. As he fought for the next few seconds to maintain his balance he could hear a tearing sound coming from the cockpit.

With a final rush, the rapids once again spewed him out and into a large calm body of water. A stone's-throw to his left he saw Nate raising both of his arms into the air, waving his paddle with excitement. "Alright! Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Levi slowly made his way over to where Nate now drifted in his kayak.

"What a ride!" Nate shouted. "Nothing compares to that kind of rush!"

"So true," Levi said, "But I think I tore my spray-deck back there."

"Don't worry," Nate said. "I've got a patch kit. I'll fix it up the next time we stop."

"I'm more concerned about the inch of water I'm sitting in," Levi said.

Nate turned his head to one side. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

Levi groaned. "Not again."

"Come on, Levi," Nate said. "What happened to your sense of adventure? As a matter of fact, why don't we have a race to the bottom?"

"What's in it for me?" Levi said with a scowl.

"The loser has to cook all of the meals for the rest of week." Nate replied.

Levi thought for a minute, then turned to his friend. "You're on," he finally said.

Nate plunged his paddle into the waters and drove his kayak toward the rapidly approaching bend in the river with Levi close behind. As they neared the corner Levi began back-paddling, slowing his kayak so he could get a better look at the set of rapids before completely committing himself. The sound of the rushing waters now filled the air. He could see the rapids stretching far out into the distance.

"Nate," Levi yelled. "These look a bit rough. Maybe we should just portage."

Nate turned toward him with a grin. "Nice try, buddy. I'll see you at the bottom."

As soon as they had rounded the sharp bend in the river they were immediately swept into the mouth of the rapids, giving Levi no alternative but to search for what appeared to be the least

threatening course, and then try his best to keep the kayak on a straight path through the treacherous rocks and swirling eddies. He glanced over at his friend one last time before plunging headlong into the turbulence. Levi could see that Nate was desperately fighting to stay on course, swinging his paddle frantically from side to side – seeming to fend off the jagged rocks that came far too close for comfort.

Levi managed to twist his precarious way into a less dangerous channel on the right hand side of the river. The current bobbed him up and down like a piece of lint, so that no matter what he did with his paddle, it seemed to serve no purpose. He glanced over at Nate once again. His friend now appeared to be stuck in some kind of whirlpool, rotating violently in the water, but going absolutely nowhere. Even from the distance, Levi could see the look of terror on his face.

Levi continued down the slipstream that his kayak was now locked into, desperately trying to maintain control, but at the same time knowing that such a goal was completely futile. A few moments later, a sudden steep drop-off caught him so completely by surprise that he shot over the ledge and was plunging back down into the water below it before he even realized it was there. The front of the kayak dove head-first into the water, shooting him forward, the water rushing into the kayak past the ripped spray deck. As his craft bobbed violently back to the surface Levi waved his arms to balance himself, somehow managing to stay inside the craft.

He sat there catching his breath with heavy, ragged gasps, as the realization struck him that he had somehow survived the life-threatening ordeal. He glanced around him at the calm water, a huge sense of relief rushing over him. It was then he noticed for the first time that in the excitement of the last few minutes he had somehow cracked his paddle blade. Peering down into

the water surrounding his kayak told him that the river was no more than a meter deep, so he slipped into the clear water, grasped the front of the kayak and pulled himself safely to shore. There he dropped down onto the sand and let out an exhausted sigh, his eyes still searching the currents of the river behind him . . . searching for any sign of Nate.

Chapter Five

After a few minutes Levi got to his feet, scanning the rapids once again for any sign of his friend. He was soaked to the skin and even the effort of standing for a few minutes made him realize how rubbery his arms and legs had become. As his strength gradually returned he walked over to the kayak, pulled out his soaked backpack and tossed it up onto the shore. He turned back to the river just in time to see a bright yellow object suddenly emerge from the foot of the rapids.

"Nate!" The call came instinctively from within him, for he could see at once that the kayak was empty, drifting swiftly through the water about ten meters away from shore. Without hesitation Levi plunged back into the cold waters, reaching desperately for his friend's kayak, but he had taken no more than a dozen steps when the riverbed suddenly dropped out from under him and the water rushed up over his head. He quickly rose to the surface, sputtering and coughing the water from his throat and lungs.

Frantically, he glanced around himself and almost immediately saw that the runaway kayak had already drifted more than twenty meters downstream. He knew then that there was no way his moderate swimming skills would allow him to catch it. Slowly he turned in the water and made his way back to shoreline.

Levi scrambled back up the shore and climbed on top of a large rock so that he was able to see a long way back up the river, but after searching the rapids for several long minutes, he saw no sign Nate. Giving himself a moment to catch his breath, he then rushed over to his own craft and flipped it on its side so that the water would drain out. Scooping up his backpack he

slung it over his shoulder and began walking up the edge of the river, carefully making his way through the jagged, rock-strewn area, his eyes searching the water for any sign of Nate.

He must have made his way to the other side of the river. A knot of thick tag alders suddenly blocked his path, the sharp branches clawing at his face. Levi fought to keep a sense of panic from rising within him as he skirted another large boulder and climbed up onto a flat shelf of rock. His gaze swung over to the opposite shoreline only a stone's throw away.

He stumbled up another steep incline, the sound of the rapids roaring loudly in his ears. Levi could see a number of enormous boulders strewn across the river, making it difficult for him to get his bearings. He then struggled through another tangle of cedar trees growing directly out of the water, and when he emerged he felt his heart suddenly leap into his throat. There, wedged between two large rocks in the middle of the river was Nate. His friend was floating face-down at the edge of the same turbulent stretch of rapids where he had last seen him.

"Nate!" He dropped his backpack onto the ground and splashed into the water, falling several times. "Speak to me, Nate!" By the time he had taken three or four steps the water had already risen up past his chest, tugging frantically at him, trying to drag him beneath its unforgiving surface. Twice his entire body was pulled beneath the violent current, yet somehow he managed to battle his way over to where his friend lay bobbing in the seething waters. Nate was not moving. His face still submerged in the water, a large gash lay open across his forehead. Levi quickly grabbed hold of Nate's jacket and yanked his friend free of the rocks, then pulled him back through the churning waters, fighting for his life every inch of the way.

After what seemed like an eternity, Levi finally reached the rocky shoreline where he

dragged Nate up into a small clearing in the woods. There he lay his friend gently down onto the soft earth, dropping down to his knees beside him. He lowered his head so that his own ear was only an inch or two from Nate's face. There he listened for the sound of breathing, watching his friend's chest to see if there was any sign of movement. There was none.

"Breathe, Nate! Breathe!" Levi shouted.

Nate's face was chalky white, and despite the large gash on his forehead Levi could see no blood flowing from the wound.

He tilted his friend's head back and with a deep sigh began performing emergency resuscitation. Quickly he got into the routine of the life-saving procedure, rotating between breathing air into Nate's lungs and compressing his rib cage.

With each pause in the routine Levi looked down into the still, cold face of his friend, and despite his best efforts, he could feel a sense of panic rising up within him. He knew instinctively that he couldn't give up. It was everything he could do to keep himself from bursting into tears and recoiling from the lifeless body of his friend.

"Come on, Nate!" He screamed. "Come on. Breathe!"

Yet on he went. On and on, until his arms began to ache and he could feel himself becoming more and more dizzy and on the verge of passing out. He glanced down at his watch. He had now been administering C.P.R. for well over thirty minutes. With every breath he would peer down at his friend, looking for any sign of life – of his chest rising, his eyelids fluttering . . . but nothing. Suddenly, everything around him faded into nothingness and he found himself falling backward onto the soft forest floor and lying there. He lay there for only a brief moment

before pushing himself back into a sitting position, and once again looked anxiously down at his friend, but this time his own arms refused to cooperate. They simply hung by his side, dangling lifelessly in the leaves and pine needles beneath him.

It's no use. Nate is dead.

Levi could feel the tears welling up behind his eyes, the overwhelming sense of hopelessness filling him. His friend was dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. Somehow it had almost seemed like he was in some kind of terrible dream. Surely this wasn't really happening. Surely he would wake up and find himself safe at home in his apartment, relieved to know that it had all just been a horrible nightmare.

He toppled over onto the ground and groaned loudly. Levi had no idea what to do next. Even if he were physically able to continue with his attempts to revive Nate, he knew that it was now too late. His jumbled thoughts turned to Nate's family and friends at school. How on earth would he be able to break the news to them? Nate ... the same Nate who had been his closest friend since they were just five years old, starting grade one together... All of the years they had spend together as best friends – lost in one gut-wrenching moment.

Levi lay there for nearly an hour as the feeling gradually returned to his arms, and his heart rate began to settle. Finally he climbed back to his feet, looking down once more at his friend and then at the rushing waters roaring past them.

He knew that he had to get a grip on things in order to keep from panicking. First and foremost he would have to consider what he was going to do with Nate. Could he just leave him here next to the water until he returned with help? He cringed at the thought of leaving his friend

to the mercy of the wild animals. Then again, what other options did he have? Could he somehow bring Nate's body back to civilization? This option doesn't seem likely with only one good kayak and such a turbulent river. He shuddered to think of the only remaining alternative:

Burial.

Levi made his way over to where he had dropped his backpack by the edge of the river. Kneeling down beside it he began rifling through the contents, first pulling out his tent and removing the nylon rain cover and then proceeding to retrieve his small folding shovel. He was dismayed to realize that most of what he had packed had been soaked by the water which had gathered in the bottom of his kayak. Dragging the backpack over to the small clearing, he emptied it onto the forest floor so that some of the articles could dry out in the sun. One of the first things to catch his eye was the small black Bible that his mother had forced upon him. Levi grimaced. Ironically, the Bible was the only item that was completely dry.

Taking a deep breath he gripped Nate under the arms and dragged him carefully across the small clearing to the edge of the forest. He then returned to where he had left the shovel and began the slow, laborious job of digging a grave for his friend.

Strangely he felt a sense of relief to be doing something, for it kept part of his mind active, instead of being completely consumed with the magnitude of his situation.

The ground turned into a myriad of tree roots and large rocks, and using his shovel was not much better than digging a hole with the plastic paddle of his kayak. For the next several hours he worked away at his task, slowly gaining inch by inch until just before the sun began to set, the hole finally reached up to his waist.

Numbly he climbed out of the hole, picked up the tarp from his tent and set it down on the ground next to where his friend lay. As he stared down at the still face of Nate, a feeling of grief and despair overwhelmed him. Levi knew that this would be the last time he would ever see his friend. He dropped down to his knees and began sobbing uncontrollably.

"I'm so sorry, Nate. It should be me lying there, not you. We both know that you only came up with the idea of this trip because you knew I needed the help. I never would have agreed to come on this expedition if I knew something like this would happen."

Levi wiped at his eyes and slowly climbed back to his feet, reluctantly retrieving the nylon tent cover which lay on the forest floor nearby. Spreading it out on the ground beside Nate, he dragged his friend's body over to the middle of the tarp and carefully wrapped it around him. He then picked the body up from off the ground and gingerly carried it over to the hole, laying him down cautiously by the edge. Climbing down into the grave he gently lifted his friend and placed him down on the bottom.

Levi then stepped out from the shallow hole, picked up the folding shovel and began the painful process of filling the grave. To take his mind off his grizzly task, Levi forced his thoughts back to the street he lived on when he was a boy; back to his grandparents' farm, where they would visit every summer; back to the midway that he and Nate frequented in late August, when the thought of returning to school loomed over them; back to anywhere but where he was at that moment, burying his best friend with a small, metal folding shovel in the middle of nowhere.

When the grave was finally filled, Levi walked back into the forest where he found two dried branches from a spruce tree. He then retrieved a small piece of rope from his supplies,

tying the sticks together in the shape of a cross. Picking up his mother's Bible he returned to the grave where he pushed the makeshift cross down into the soil. He then opened the Bible, flipping reluctantly through the worn pages. "I'm not really sure if I actually believe in this kind of stuff," he said in a quiet voice, "But everyone deserves a proper funeral. Especially Nate."

He continued flipping through the book, looking for something in the text that would catch his eye. Finally he turned to the index at the back, carefully reading the *Subject Headings* as his fingers ran down the list of topics.

"Death," he muttered to himself.

He checked a few of the references listed under the topic, painfully looking up the verses for each one, then discarding each verse that didn't seem to fit the circumstance. Finally he settled on one particular passage that he thought would suffice.

"I never know what to say in situations like this, Nate, so I hope this will say it for me." He straightened himself before continuing.

"For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

He paused. "I'm not exactly sure what all of this means, but perhaps it's trying to say that in some strange way maybe death doesn't have to be as scary as we all make it out to be. One thing I know for sure, Nate, is that you have always been a great friend to me and countless others. You were generous and unselfish, and someone I have always looked up to. I'm really

gonna miss you, brother." His voice broke. Levi stood there in silence, looking down at the pile of loose earth at his feet. He felt numb. Completely and utterly numb.

Finally he glanced up at the darkening sky. A great bank of black clouds had rolled in from the east, clouds that held a threatening promise of rain. Reluctantly Levi placed the Bible back in his pack, picked up the shovel and made his way to where he had left his supplies. He knew he had to set up camp before it was completely dark.

Chapter Six

Levi rolled over in his sleeping bag and looked up through the mesh window of the tent at the early morning sky. Over toward the eastern horizon he could see the sun just beginning to emerge from beyond the hills. He pushed his sleeping bag aside and crawled out into the chilly morning air, grateful for the jacket he had worn to bed. Levi knew that it was pointless to continue lying there when he had barely slept all night. Sleeping without a tarp over his tent had made the night excruciatingly long, yet he was thankful for the mesh lining, at least it kept the majority of the mosquitoes and other insects at bay.

The night represented the longest and most terrifying eight hours he had ever spent outdoors. Curled-up in his sleeping bag, trying to keep warm, while listening to the myriad of sounds that emanated from the wilderness surrounding him. Every noise that he heard in the darkness seemed to play tricks with his mind, as his imagination leapt among an assortment of frightening possibilities as to what lurked just beyond the flickering flames of his dying campfire. He knew that it was all in his imagination, but he had never realized how eerie it was to be alone in the wilderness all by himself. And what made it even more disturbing, was the fact that Nate's body was buried only a few feet away from where he lay.

As he crawled from the tent he was somehow able to close his mind to the numbing chill that seemed to invade every crevice of his clothing. Quickly he set about disassembling his tent, rolling it up and squeezing it back tightly into its canvas bag. He then crammed his sleeping bag into its small stuff-sack and pulled the straps closed.

He jammed the tent and sleeping bag into his backpack and walked over to the large rock where the remainder of his supplies had been laid out to dry. Carefully he noted each item in his sparse inventory as he placed them into his backpack:

- One length of rope
- One folding shovel
- One small first aid kit
- One pocket knife
- One hatchet
- Two extra shirts and a pair of pants
- Two pairs of socks and underwear
- One lighter
- Two fruit bars
- One canteen of water
- One small pot
- Several eating utensils
- One headlamp
- ... and his softcover Bible

As he buckled up the bulging backpack he remembered that Nate's kayak contained the majority of their food and supplies, not too mention the GPS and the keys to the Jeep. Even the lack of clean water had the potential of becoming a real problem once he left the river and struck out for civilization through the dense bush.

This is a disaster.

Levi pulled a fruit bar from his jacket pocket and sat down on the shoreline, his eyes fixed on the fast-flowing river in front of him.

“Now what?” he muttered to himself between bites. “Going back up this river seems to be out of the question.” His eyes followed the current as it swept swiftly by, bouncing across the rocks and logs that filled the water, then swirled out into the innumerable eddies that were scattered about the base of the rapids.

Levi took a deep breath, ate the last of his fruit bar, then pulled the Bible from from his backpack and thumbed through it absently. After a moment he looked up into at the morning sky, beyond the clouds and the beautiful haunting blueness above him. He held the Bible firmly in his hands. “Typical,” he said grimly. “I've taken dozens of camping trips before – some a lot more dangerous than this, and yet nothing this bad has ever happened. Now, for the first time I take along this Bible along and look what happens: my best friend drowns, we lose most of our supplies, and I have no real way of finding my way back home.” Levi carefully studied the Bible in his hands. “Instead of bringing along a *talisman*, I brought an *albatross* instead.”

He looked back up into the sky. “You got me into this mess, God. Now you need to get me out!” He flipped open the Bible and began searching through its pages. “There must be something useful in here for me.” He found the index in the back and looked up the word *wilderness*. “Okay,” he muttered to himself. “Let's see where this takes us.”

He turned back the pages until he came to the book of 2 Corinthians in the New Testament. Levi noticed right away that several of the verses had been highlighted in yellow: “*Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the*

wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.”

“That's certainly fitting,” Levi muttered to himself. “I think I get the idea. People have been in much worse situations than this and have survived.” He closed the Bible and stuffed it back into his pack, then struggled to his feet and made his way down to the shore. The kayak was still where he had left it the previous night. Levi dragged it up onto the water's edge and turned bottom-side up. Quickly he flipped the craft over and stuffed his backpack down into the front compartment. Then slipping his feet down into the kayak. He carefully positioned himself in the seat, before using his paddle to push himself out into the current. Despite the calming waters, he had only traveled a few meters downstream when he suddenly noticed that the bottom of his kayak was rapidly beginning to fill with water. He was scarcely able to believe his eyes. *What's going on? The kayak must have sprung a leak while shooting the last set of rapids.* Levi quickly turned to shore, paddling frantically while he watched the water rise up past the bottom of his seat. Leaning over the edge of his kayak he was relieved to see that the water was no more than a few feet deep, with a bottom that was sandy and strewn with small rocks. He then leaped from the craft and dragged it the remainder of the way, heaving it up onto the a narrow stretch of sand.

“You've got to be kidding me!” Levi reached into the interior of the craft and pulled out his soaked backpack. He knew it would be futile to try and fix such a large crack in his kayak, especially with no tools to work with. With a loud grunt he picked the kayak up over his head and hurled it into a large bush growing only a few feet from the water's edge. Then in one smooth motion he hoisted the wet pack up onto his shoulders and snapped the buckle firmly into

place. He turned and studied the area ahead of him. He now knew that his only recourse would be following the shoreline down to the archaeological site mentioned by Nate's uncle, and then cut across country to reach civilization from there.

As he started out he was surprised by the thickness of the brush which flourished next to the riverbed. It seemed to grow out in every direction, forcing him to be constantly zig-zagging along the edge of the waterway. The terrain was, for the most part, extremely rugged. It was as if an enormous giant had thrown hundreds of massive boulders and craggy rock formations everywhere. Levi, however, was grateful for the challenge, for it kept his mind off Nate.

* * * * *

The remainder of the morning wore by with a bone-aching tediousness. Many of the large boulder formations were almost impassable. Worn by centuries of wind and rain, their surfaces had been ground to a slippery smoothness. Some of the rocks towered high above him, as tall as a two story building. More than once he was forced to detour into the river and bypass some of the more formidable barriers, but the current and depth of the water made other such detours seemingly impossible, and was forced to take to the nearly impenetrable bush. Always within sight of the river, he kept a careful watch out for Nate's kayak.

By early afternoon the sun was beating down with all of its strength. Levi had already removed his jacket and tied it around his waist. Still the sweat drenched him, and he could feel his legs beginning to weaken.

He was about to stop for a rest when a large rock formation appeared before him. Carefully he inched his way up the rock-face, making sure that each hand and foothold was

secure. It would only make things worse if he were to fall and hurt himself out here in the middle of nowhere. It would take weeks before anyone would find him – if they ever did. He paused briefly at the summit, then made his way carefully down the slippery slope to the bottom.

There he placed both hands on his knees, and bent over to catch his breath. When he finally straightened himself he noticed for the first time a large pool of dark water stretching out in front of him. It was almost perfectly round, about the size of a backyard swimming pool. He dropped down to one knee and splashed his hand into the cool water, then getting back to his feet Levi stripped out of his clothes and without hesitation leaped feet-first into the waterhole.

As the first shock of the icy water left him, he felt himself sinking down into the depths of the murky pool, relishing its feel as it swallowed his aching, tired body. After a few seconds he realized that his feet had still not touched the bottom of the massive sink hole. Using his hands as propellers, he pushed himself even deeper, and still his feet did not touch bottom. *How deep is this thing?* Finally he gave up, allowing the buoyancy of his body to pull himself slowly back up to the surface. There he lay gently on his back, looking upward through the trees at the sky looming overhead. It was then that he noticed for the first time a massive formation of grey clouds which blanketed the sky high above him.

After several long minutes Levi paddled over to the edge of the pool and climbed out. *Surely it's not going to rain?* He fished the last fruit bar from his shirt pocket, broke it in half and carefully tucked the remainder away. He took a few small bites, slipped back into the water, then leaned his head and shoulders against a large boulder that was protruding out of the pool. Levi lay there for several more minutes watching the gathering clouds as they swept across the sky. It

all seemed so impossible that such a peaceful, idyllic setting could harbor the nightmares he had recently experienced. Again he tried to force all thoughts of Nate's death from his mind. He knew that he needed to plan what he was going to do during the next few days, how he was going to make it back to civilization . . . but time and time again his thoughts were swept back to the shallow grave by the river . . . He glanced around himself, suddenly aware of how dark the shadows of the forest had become. In the same instant he felt a chill envelop him as he lay floating on the surface of the water, watching with a sense of foreboding as the sun disappeared behind the dark clouds high above him. There was something about this deep pool of water that he found unnerving. Levi forced his eyes down into the murky water, attempting to see beyond the few inches at the surface, but it was too dark – too dark to even see his feet. For a brief moment his whole body seemed to freeze as he imagined what horrifying creatures might be lurking just beneath the surface of the cool water.

“Come on,” he said quietly to himself. “There's nothing to fear out here. What do you think is going to happen? Do you really think a giant man-eating octopus is going to reach its slimy tentacles up around your body and drag you down into the depths below?”

Levi's face suddenly froze as the abrupt cawing of a crow began to echo through his ears. With his heart racing, he turned and grabbed hold of the boulder and heaved himself out of the pool, landing in a heap by its edge, his breath coming in long, ragged gasps.

He lay there for a moment, waiting for his breath to return to normal and his heart to settle. Finally he climbed to his feet, laughing loudly at his sudden display of cowardice. With a shaky hand he smoothed back his hair and gazed into the still, dark waters of the small pool.

That was pathetic. Quickly he stepped back into his pants and shoes, slipped on his shirt and looked up once again at the now quickly darkening sky. “Let's just keep this between you and me, God,” he said with a smile. He then hoisted his pack up onto his shoulders.

Chapter Seven

Levi had walked several more kilometers when suddenly the trees by the river ended and he found himself standing before a great clearing in the forest. He stopped for a moment and gazed in surprise at the view before him. The river could still be seen to his right, winding its way off into the distance. Before him stretched a vast rocky terrain.

Levi felt a sense of relief as he made his way closer to the river and set out along the shore. For the next half an hour his route was clear of obstacles and he was able to make excellent time. It was about then that he noticed how thirsty he had become. He reached for his canteen, but found that there was only a mouthful of water remaining. Levi knew that the water filter was in Nate's kayak, so he would have to replenish his canteen directly from the river. He glanced down at the swirling eddies only a few feet away, and was relieved that he could see right through to its sandy bottom. *It looks clean enough to drink.*

Maneuvering his way down the steep embankment to the river, he carefully dipped his canteen into the clear water. When it was about halfway filled Levi raised it to his mouth and took a long swig, then placed the container back into the river.

He sat down on a nearby stump to catch his breath, and as he did he could feel the first drops of rain splashing against his face. Quickly he glanced down at his watch, but realized that it had stopped, the crystal already fogging-up. *That figures.* When he looked up at the sky to get a better idea of the time he was surprised to see that the sun had already dipped well below the trees on the western horizon. He knew that he would have to find a place to pitch his tent.

Levi climbed to his feet and started back down the rocky shoreline, searching the rim of trees for a grove of large evergreens where he could make camp. He had gone no more than a few hundred meters when the rain started coming down in torrents. Levi quickened his pace, seeming almost frantic for a place to find shelter, but the rainwater now streaming over the rocks posed another problem – the run-off made the surface of the rocks treacherously slippery.

He began to run, picking his steps as carefully as he could, skirting any place that looked especially wet; all the while keeping one eye on the treeline, looking for a likely spot to set up camp. He was rounding a slight bend in the river when he saw a small grove of spruce trees sitting only a few feet back from the shoreline. They were clustered together, yet with enough room on the forest floor to set up his tent.

Levi turned and head out toward the trees. He now had to slow his pace and watch out for the small streams which ran in fast-flowing rivulets across the ground in front of him. The slippery surface was now even more dangerous than before, with dips and jagged boulders everywhere. A deep crevice in the rocks suddenly appeared in front of him causing him to hesitate, and as he did he felt his back foot slip unexpectedly on the wet surface. Without time to even brace himself for the fall, Levi tumbled down into the ditch, throwing both arms out before him. He could feel his knees slam hard into the ground as he pitched forward, barely catching himself before his face met the unforgiving surface. Despite the heavy pack on his shoulders he managed to roll down the shallow edge of the trench, swinging his legs out to absorb the brunt of the fall. An instant later his feet struck the bottom and as they did he could feel his left foot turn almost at a right angle to the rest of his body and he felt a searing pain shoot right through him.

As quickly as he could he lifted himself out of the trench and hobbled over to an enormous bolder. He dropped down onto the large rock and bent over his throbbing ankle. Levi was completely drenched – especially his feet, which had been submerged in the water at the bottom of the trench. His ankle pulsed mercilessly. *Is it broken? It certainly feels like it.* He looked down at his hands. The palms were skinned and bloody. His pants were ripped at the knees and without even bending for a closer look, he could see the bloodstains already collecting there. He looked around, relieved to see that the treeline was now only a stone's throw away. Pushing himself back to his feet, he limped the remaining distance to the partial shelter of the trees. Then, with his ankle throbbing he unpacked his tent and somehow managed to begin setting up in a section of the grove that was mostly sheltered from the downpour. He was especially grateful for the thick overhanging branches of an enormous spruce tree, for his tent only had a mosquito netting over the top and would do little to keep out the rain.

Once the tent was set up he crawled inside and quickly unpacked his small store of supplies, setting the dampest items out to dry on the nylon floor. His knees were starting to throb and burn almost as much as his ankle, but he knew he would still have to go out into the forest and gather as much dry wood as possible if he wanted to start a fire.

Slowly he climbed to his feet, and hovered for a moment in the doorway of his tent. “It's going to be fun sleeping here tonight,” he said sarcastically.

He hobbled his way into the trees and began searching the forest floor and low-hanging branches for pieces of wood that were dry enough to burn. Within a few minutes he had a large armful and started back to his campsite.

Dropping the load beside his tent, Levi soon realized that he was going to need a lot more wood if he was going to keep the fire burning long enough for him to dry out. He made his way back into the forest, scouring the already-familiar surroundings. His ankle and knees were now throbbing so intently that he finally resigned himself to scooping up a few last pieces of wood that were handy but not as dry as he might have liked. *This will have to do.*

When he returned to camp Levi quickly formed a circular fire pit just outside the entrance of his tent with the wettest pieces of wood forming an outer boundary. Then with the smallest and driest pieces, he began the delicate process of stacking the wood into the shape of a tee-pee. When the pieces were piled to his satisfaction, he removed the hunting knife from his supplies and began carving thin wood shavings from one of the drier sticks he had gathered. When he had accumulated a large enough pile of shavings he scooped them up with both hands and inserted them into the center of the fire-pit.

Levi paused for a moment and glanced warily up at the sky. The rain had lessened somewhat, but still fell heavily all around him. He was again grateful for the small dense grove of trees that protected him from the worst of the deluge. Reluctantly he got to his feet and crawled back inside the tent. Before starting his campfire Levi knew that he had to do something about his injured knees and ankle. Rummaging through his backpack he retrieved the first aid kit and sat down to check its inventory.

He removed a small pair of scissors, gauze, tape and disinfectant, laying them on the tent floor. He kicked off his shoes and carefully rolled both pant legs up past his knees. Levi was suddenly conscious of how wet and uncomfortable he was. The dampness and cold seeped into

him, sending a chill through his body. When he first examined his knees, he was relieved to see that they were mainly just badly scraped from his fall on the rocks. The bleeding had stopped and it appeared that there wasn't any dirt in the wounds. He dabbed a small amount of disinfectant on the wound and then carefully taped some gauze into place over both damaged areas.

He then drew his ankle toward himself to get a better look, removing his sock and prodding his ankle delicately with his fingers. A sharp pain seared through him. Levi reached into the first aid kit and removed the tensor bandage that lay rolled up inside. Carefully he wrapped the elastic bandage around his ankle, then secured it tightly with a safety pin. Taking in a deep breath he rolled down his pant leg and scooped up a few scraps of paper, cotton balls and left-over gauze before returning the kit to his backpack. He then made his way back out the door of the tent to where he had left the makings of his fire.

“Here we go,” he said to no one in particular, grimacing as the pain shot up his leg. “This stuff should work well as dry tinder. But I'd better make sure that I have enough to spare.”

Levi pulled out his knife and once again began stripping away most of the damp bark from one of the larger pieces of wood, and then delicately shaved away the thin strips of dry tinder from underneath. He leaned back against the trunk of the tree and carefully arranged the pile of wood in front of him. Getting enough tinder and kindling ready for the fire was a tedious undertaking, and it was almost a half an hour before he was completely satisfied with his creation. As Levi pulled the lighter from his jeans he glanced up at the evening sky. Another chill shook his body. Quickly he held the lighter to the pile of cloth and cotton balls and breathed a sigh of relief as the tinder glowed a bright orange, then suddenly burst into flame. He then

moved the flames into the base of the fire, and watched as it grew.

Levi sat for several minutes, observing as the fire spread from the tinder to kindling, and then to the larger pieces of wood he had positioned so strategically. When the fire was blazing to his satisfaction he dragged over several of the larger, wetter pieces of wood and arranged them close to the flames so they were able to dry out.

He then leaned back against the tree trunk, slipping his backpack in behind him, and carefully positioned himself so that he avoided any rain filtering in through the branches of the spruce tree. He drew his legs up and wrapped his arms around them, his eyes captivated by the dancing flames. Levi was immediately grateful for the warmth of the fire, realizing once again how wet and cold he was. He sat there, lost in his own private thoughts until he could see that the fire had peaked and was now faltering. Quickly he dragged several more pieces of wood into the flames and waited anxiously while they caught. It was then that he realized how dark it had become – not just because of the overcast sky, but because the sun had now long set.

Glancing around the small campsite, he was mesmerized by the eerie shadows cast by the fire which played against the fringe of trees on the edge of the forest. Despite this renewed warmth he felt a strange sense of uneasiness come over him as he stared into the surrounding blackness. The awful reality of his circumstances suddenly seemed to overwhelm him as he sat there in silence. For the first time since he had begun this trip he felt all alone – alone and miles away from any living soul – lost – in the middle of a dangerous wilderness with not much more than the clothes on his back and a few meager supplies. He shuddered, once again picturing the shallow grave next to the river where he had left his friend.

Suddenly from somewhere in the darkness behind him he heard a distinct *cracking* sound – almost like the sound of a branch breaking when someone steps on it. Levi could feel the hair raising up on the back of his neck as he turned slowly and peered out into the woods behind him. The powerful urge to get up and run was overwhelming, but he knew that particular option would be futile. His only shelter was a small nylon tent, with a flimsy mesh covering for a roof – not even enough to keep out the incessant rain.

He reached out his hand and pulled a long branch from the fire. It was as long as a baseball bat with a bumpy end that was engulfed in flames. Levi then climbed carefully to his feet, turned and stepped away from the fire and the shelter of the spruce tree. He took several tentative steps into the forest, holding the flaming branch directly in front of him, straining his eyes for a sign of anything unusual lurking in the darkness.

Again he heard the distinct sound of movement – the sound of rustling leaves just beyond the small circle of light. He stood there frozen in the middle of a small glade in the forest, only his eyes moving among the shadows. Then, just as he was about to continue his tentative investigation, a dark shadow moved from behind a thick bush no more than ten feet away. It slipped out into the open clearing, and with its head turned in his direction walked swiftly along the perimeter of the campground. Levi felt his heart accelerating wildly as he came to grips with the sight before him. *It's a mountain lion!*

Levi took a quick step back as the large cat slipped along the edge of the forest. He knew that any sudden moves could cause the animal to attack, so Levi tried to remain as still as possible. He lowered the flaming piece of wood so that it was now between him and the creature,

but quickly realized that the cougar did not seem to be anxious on making any further contact with him, other than giving him the once-over. Levi could also see that the great beast was soaked right through to the skin; its fur hanging in long sagging folds down its side, its tail seeming to almost drag along the ground behind it. Then – just as suddenly as it had appeared, it slipped silently between two large trees and vanished from sight.

Levi stood for several long minutes in silence staring at the gap in the trees where the cougar had disappeared. It was only when he noticed that the flames on his stick were slowly extinguishing did he turn and make his way back to the fire, where he crouched down beside the flames, grateful once again for its comfort and warmth.

As he dropped down to the ground before the dying flames, an overwhelming sense of exhaustion swept over him. In the space of only a few short minutes nothing had become more important to Levi than getting some sleep. No longer did he care about the wild animals lurking in the forest, or the haunting memories that plagued him – all he wanted was sleep. Levi carefully placed the remaining pieces of wood onto the fire, then crawled inside his tent. He took one last look up into the swaying branches of the spruce tree above him, and closed his eyes.

Chapter Eight

Sleep was restless and intermittent. When Levi awoke the next morning he immediately heard the sound of raindrops falling on the tent and the branches above his head. He glanced over into the clearing to his right and up into the grey, overcast sky. An old saying came to mind, *If the rain starts before seven, it'll end before eleven*. He looked down at his watch and groaned. "I forgot. It's broken." He peered up once again up into the sky and tried to determine where the sun was sitting. With a long sigh he crawled out from under his sleeping bag, then turned and dragged his backpack out from the corner of the tent. Levi tipped it over and dumped its contents out onto the canvas floor, then rustled through the scattered items, his eye catching the small black Bible that his mother had placed inside. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand, thinking of how worried his mother would be if he didn't show up at the end of the week. He tossed the Bible back down onto the forest floor, and as he did a piece of paper slipped out from the inside of the front cover. Levi knelt down staring at the paper for a brief moment, then leaned over and scooped it up. He carefully unfolded it and held it up before him. It was the song lyrics for *Amazing Grace*. Immediately he recognized his mother's handwriting:

Amazing Grace by John Newton

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound.

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine..”*

Levi knelt there in silence for a moment before sticking the piece of paper into his shirt pocket. He then picked up his hunting knife and hatchet, stuffing everything else back into his

backpack before placing the bag in the far corner of his tent.

Quickly he unzipped the opening to his flimsy shelter, and stepped outside. He could still feel the dull throb of pain emanating from his ankle but was relieved that it felt much better than it had yesterday. As he pulled the collar of his jacket up, he was grateful that he had brought enough warm clothing to fend off the chills of early-morning. He slipped out from under the protection of the thick spruce tree and made his way into the forest. Levi had gone no more than fifty meters when he noticed a large redwood lying on the ground in front of him. It was a massive tree with the circumference of refrigerator. As he approached it he noticed a long branch protruding from the tree. With a sharp blow from his hatchet, he lopped off the branch and held it up for a closer inspection, then with it tucked tightly under his arm Levi returned to his tent, crawled inside and removed the pocket knife from its sheath. Sitting cross-legged facing the entrance, he slowly began skinning the bark from the branch, then shaped the narrow end of the stick into a fine, sharp point. More than an hour had past before he was completely satisfied with his creation. Levi balanced the weapon carefully in his hand, gauging its weight, while he imagined facing the cougar with it, should the big cat make a return appearance.

He brushed the pile of wood chips out the door of his tent, and lay the spear down next to him, his head resting against his backpack. After a moment he turned and once again pulled his mother's Bible from his belongings, then slowly began flipping through it. "I wonder if there are any good topics listed in the index," he muttered. Turning to the back of the book Levi began thumbing absently through the concordance before settling on the "L" section. "What does this book have to say about being lost?" he asked. "Something relevant I hope." He glanced down

casually at the short list of entries under the heading “lost”.

“Here's one. Luke 19:10. This could be promising.” He paused for a moment before turning to the *Table of Contents* in the front of the book, then flipped through the pages to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 19, then ran his finger down the page.

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Levi dropped the book back onto his lap and stared up through the mesh roof of the tent. “Yes, indeed,” he said in his best preacher's voice. “As the old song goes, *I once was lost, but when I'm found, I'll drop to my knees and kiss the ground.*”

He picked the Bible back up and began flipping aimlessly through the pages, pausing briefly at the titles of each section that held his interest. Finally he pulled his last fruit bar from his shirt pocket and took a small bite. He was scanning the pages of the Gospel of John, when the title of a selection of verses caught his eye. *Rivers of Living Water.*

He glanced through the tent door to the turbulent waters of the river flowing by him. “I would certainly love to travel on such a river,” Levi intoned loudly, “But alas, I no longer have a vessel to traverse these mighty living waters.”

After a few more minutes he set the Bible down onto the floor of his tent and closed his eyes. Once again the sound of raindrops could be heard against the ground and limbs of the evergreen trees which surrounded him. As he lay there he tried his best to shake from his mind all of the fears and anxieties which has been building in him over the past few days ... then from somewhere in his subconscious he suddenly became aware that the rain had stopped. He sat up and peered out into the clearing. Only a few drops now fell from the sodden overhanging

branches. Even the sky now showed great swathes of bright blue patches.

Now there's a welcome relief.

Levi crawled out of the tent and made his way to the shore. He stood there gazing up into the clear blue sky, a grin now plastered across his face.

“I appreciate the help,” he said quietly.

Hurrying back to his tent he quickly finished packing away the rest of his gear, eager to get a head-start on the day. He had no sooner finished tearing down his tent when the throbbing in his ankle grew so intense that he had to stop and sit down on a nearby rock.

“This isn't good,” he muttered to himself. “How am I supposed to find my way out of here if I can't even stand up for more than a few minutes at a time?” Levi could feel himself growing more discouraged as he sat there, holding on tightly to his throbbing ankle. It was then that he saw the spear laying on the ground in front of him. He hobbled over to where it lay, picked it up and returned to the rock. He studied the spear for a moment, then pulled the pocket knife from its sheath on his belt, and quickly whittled a dull point on its bottom. Gritting his teeth he then climbed back to his feet and planted the dull end of the spear into the ground to serve as a crude walking stick. He then finished packing the tent into his already-crowded pack, swung the pack up onto his shoulders and set out once again along the shoreline.

Levi was grateful that he could now use the spear to push himself along, and take some of the weight off his injured ankle. He now kept himself as close to the river as he could, for the branches of the trees were still sodden with rainwater and even brushing up against them meant getting wet. The ground, too, was damp and ran with a hundred streams and rivulets, winding

down from the forest in their eager quest to join the current of the rapidly flowing river.

I hope the weather stays like this all week.

Before Levi had gone for more than an hour he could feel the difference the sun was making on his mood and surroundings. A faint mist now rose up from the waters, warmed by the morning sun, and he could feel the dampness of the day begin to melt away as the temperature gradually rose. Levi could feel his spirits rise with the comfort of the sun on his back.

He struggled on for another twenty minutes, and just when he was about to stop to rest his tender ankle he glanced up to see Nate's kayak, wedged in amongst a tangle of brush on the shoreline of the river. He hurried over to the thicket of brush and using the spear as a crude machete, fought his way through the entanglement, grasped the prow of the kayak and hauled it up onto the shore. Immediately he noticed that Nate's backpack was already torn open and its contents were strewn across the floor of the vessel. He dragged the kayak further up onto the shoreline, to a spot where he could sit down on a dry patch of ground and explore the few remaining items left to him. To his dismay, Levi discovered that most of the food items were now long gone - probably eaten by a family of raccoons or other scavengers – and several of the other items seemed to be missing as well – probably lost when Nate fell from the kayak.

He dragged the items from the craft and laid them out on the ground beside him: a carabiner and a length of rope which Nate had planned to use for rock-climbing; a water filter; a small telescopic fishing rod with a few hooks and lures; a tooth brush; several items of clothing – torn badly by the scavengers; a stick of deodorant . . . Levi paused – a GPS! He could feel his heart leap. He quickly turned the device over and switched it on. Nothing happened. He tried

again, shaking the GPS vigorously and holding it up to his ear. Still nothing. He removed the battery, dried it on his sleeve, then returned it to its home. *This thing is useless.* After another quick examination he set the device back down on the ground. *The water probably ruined it.* He looked back into the kayak, running his hand along its bottom to see if there were any holes or cracks. It appeared to be water-tight, but he wouldn't know for sure until he took it back out on the river. The one thing he would need was a paddle, for Nate's was long gone.

He sat by the kayak for a moment, glancing around the area, hoping something would trigger an idea. After a moment he rose to his feet and began scouring the ground between himself and the forest. Near the treeline he came across a number of old sticks of wood lying under an ancient pine tree. He picked one up that was about five feet long and studied it carefully before snapping the branch into three equal pieces. Picking up his backpack and spear Levi returned to the kayak where he sat down on a large flat rock. He then reached into his pack and retrieved a small length of rope. He positioned each stick so that they formed a crude triangle at the end of the spear. He then fastened them securely in place with the length of rope.

He gave a tug on each side of the make-shift paddle to make sure it was secure, then reached into his backpack and pulled out a pair of underwear. He quickly wrapped the underwear around the paddle blade, then secured it in place with another piece of rope. Once he was finished he held the paddle up, carefully admiring his handiwork. "Not bad."

Levi pushed his backpack and spear down into the prow of the kayak, then as he climbed to his feet, felt once again the throbbing pain from his ankle. He turned and looked out over the water, noticing that the current wasn't as strong as it was before. The pain from his ankle made

him especially grateful for finding Nate's kayak when he did. He realized too that if he had been paddling by this spot, he probably would have missed finding Nate's kayak and garnering its modest cache of supplies. Perhaps it was divine intervention that his own kayak had sprung a leak... Regardless, Levi was thankful for the extra provisions. Quickly he gathered up the remaining items from Nate's belongings and pushed them down into the kayak's prow beside his own backpack. He then straightened up, took a deep breath and dragged the kayak over to the water's edge, pushing it out into the current. Climbing gingerly into the craft, Levi picked up his paddle and eased himself out from the shore. He was surprised to see how well the paddle performed as he dipped it into the water and propelled himself downstream.

Cautiously he steered the kayak out into the middle of the river, then began maneuvering his way down its winding course. He noticed now that the banks of the river were even rockier, with the occasional tall cliff interrupting the monotony of the landscape. As he paddled by a shallow bay, two mallards burst out from a bank of reeds, startled by his unexpected appearance.

Levi had traveled for no more than ten minutes when he rounded a sharp bend in the river to find a massive wall of rock lining the shore to his right. It was then that he heard for the first time the sound of rushing waters straight ahead of him.

Quickly he dug his paddle into the water and propelled the light craft toward shore, glancing over his shoulder to where he had first heard the sound. Then as he brought his attention back to the water in front of him, he felt his makeshift paddle snap in his hands, the bottom section breaking off and floating away with the current. Glancing helplessly down at the broken paddle, a panicked feeling rose within him. He drove the broken instrument back down into the

water and pushed hard, but even as he did, the kayak seemed to drift backwards toward the approaching rapids. In an instant Levi was over the side of the kayak and with one hand on its side began kicking himself toward the shore. He could feel his grip loosening on the kayak, his hand slipping on the wet surface. Tightening his grip he kicked with every ounce of strength that remained against the violent undertow. Levi knew he couldn't lose the kayak with its valuable supplies. He kicked even harder, flailing mightily with his one free arm, driving himself forward through the water, a few inches at a time. Suddenly, he could feel his feet brushing up against the bottom of the river. He staggered forward, pulling the kayak along with him, now feeling the current pulling on his chest as he moved through the deep water. His ankle throbbed mercilessly, sending great waves of pain through his body, but ever so gradually . . . he emerged from the deadly current, dragging the small craft through the waters and onto the sandy shoreline situated just below the great cliff that dominated the river. Levi pulled the kayak up among a small cluster of trees, then collapsed in a heap, his heart pounded wildly as he stared upward into the late morning sky, past the huge granite cliff which soared high above him.

Chapter Nine

Levi rolled over onto his back and gazed up at the steep granite cliff that rose from the shoreline and towered fifty feet above him. He lay there staring absently at the massive wall of rock for several minutes, until it hit him. Quickly he sat up and struggled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his ankle as he moved toward the wall of rock. "I can't believe it!" He shouted. "This is it! This is the cliff that Nate's uncle described! The archaeological site must be near here!"

He limped over to the wall, his eyes wide, cautiously approaching the dark rock-face. "So you exist after all," he said softly, placing both hands firmly against the granite surface. "I was beginning to have my doubts." He paused, his eyes sweeping the area. "At least now I'll be able to get my bearings. Maybe I can figure out how to walk out of here."

He stood there for another long moment, then limped across the sandy beach to where he left his kayak. He could see that the cliff emerged from the large bush to his right and stretched for about a hundred feet along the shoreline before disappearing around a bend in the river.

As he studied the steep rock face, he noticed for the first time the faint remnants of a path stretching out from the shoreline, up the face of the cliff, with several obvious hand-holds evident, as well as a few small trees growing out from the narrow ledge.

Carefully he made his way across the small clearing, scanning the ground around him. If this was the archaeological site mentioned by Nate's uncle, there sure didn't appear to be much evidence indicating that an ancient people had once lived here. He continued up to the edge of the forest, then picked his way in amongst the grove of evergreen trees that were clustered at the

bottom of the high cliff. He had gone no more than twenty paces or so when he noticed bunches of small red berries growing from some nearby bushes. He picked a few and examined them curiously, putting one into his mouth and sampling its bitter taste. Levi then spit the berry onto the ground and tossed the others away. "Maybe as a last resort," he said to himself.

He then retraced his steps back out of the trees and once again approached the high wall of rock dominating the shoreline. He stood back for a moment and began planning each step of his climb up the steep surface. Taking in a deep breath, he reached out and took hold of the first niche in the rock and began his ascent.

It felt good to be back on the face of such a steep precipice. It had been awhile since Levi had done any serious rock climbing, and he had missed the experience. His sore ankle, however, made it a little more challenging than he would have liked, but he enjoyed the feeling of exhilaration as he made his way up face of the cliff.

Levi could see that the hand and foot holds had probably been used by climbers in years-gone-by, and as he continued upward he pictured others from generations past making the same ascent, using the same handholds, and the helping presence of the hardy little jack pines that grew almost perpendicularly from the surface of the cliff. Compared to some of the climbs he had experienced in the past, this one wasn't much of a challenge, still he knew he had to be careful, for one slip could mean a fall that would be catastrophic, given his present condition. Within ten minutes he was pulling himself up the last few feet to the top. Levi couldn't keep the big grin from his face as he slid himself up onto the grassy surface at the top. He got to his feet, then turned back and looked out over the spectacular view that greeted him. Levi could now see

in both directions of the river, even to where it wound its way eastward, finally disappearing into the dense forest. He stood there for a long moment absorbing the beauty of his surroundings, and for a few brief seconds he was grateful that it helped to diminish the memory of the last few dreadful days. Finally he turned and surveyed the area at the top of the cliff. This had to be the same area that Nate's uncle mentioned. It would have been the perfect camping spot for the native people traveling through the area. The view would have given them a tremendous advantage in terms of keeping a watchful eye out for any enemies, and the high ground would also have acted as a natural defensive position in the event of an attack.

He checked the area for any obvious signs of past activities. Levi could see where someone had set up a circle of stones for a campfire, with several charred pieces of firewood scattered about. "That looks fairly recent", he muttered to himself. *Perhaps this is the work of Nate's uncle.* He walked over to the fire pit and poked around the ashes with his foot. It was then that he noticed an area just beyond the fire pit that appeared unusual. He could see that someone had been doing some work on the soil. There was a small pile of dirt and debris at one end, and an area of about six by ten feet that had recently been cleared and excavated to a depth of about six inches. Levi stepped down onto the soft mossy earth, knelt and gave the ground before him a cursory examination. *Nate's uncle had definitely given this spot the once over. Probably investigating the site to see if anyone left any artifacts behind.* He ran his hand over the soil, then climbed to his feet. *This is something that I'll have to take a closer look at when I have more time.* He turned and glanced up at the cloudy sky.

"I think the rain should hold off for now", Levi muttered. He returned to the fire pit and

knelt down by the charred remains. There was little other evidence that he could see – no tin cans, bottles or any other signs of civilization. He finally got to his feet and glanced around the area. It was then that he noticed a narrow trail leading into the woods at the far end of the cliff.

“This would make for an ideal place to set up camp,” he said to himself. “Now all I have to do is head back down to get my supplies before it starts raining.” Levi made his way across the open area to the forest, and started down the narrow trail, grateful that he didn't have to take the same route which brought him up there. His ankle was getting much too sore for that kind of activity. Gingerly he followed the winding path which ran parallel to the side of the cliff. About halfway to the bottom the path was abruptly interrupted by a six foot wide gap. He stopped and stepped cautiously out on the edge, peering down into the dark empty space at his feet. As he did, his foot nudged a large stone. The stone rolled off the footpath and quickly disappeared into the darkness, yet even after Levi had lost sight of it, he continued to hear the sound of it bouncing down the incline. He stood there for another long moment, staring curiously down into the crevice. There was something strange about the formation of the rock below him.

Levi scanned his surroundings, spotting a large stick which lay against the side of the cliff. He bent down and picked it up. It was about six feet long and about as thick as a person's fore-arm. This might be just what he needed to help him cross the gap in the trail. Levi hobbled over to the edge of the path and dug the end of the stick into the loose soil at his feet. He then put his full weight on the stick, testing its strength as he studied the width of the gap before him. Under normal circumstances he would easily be able to jump such a short distance, but with his injured ankle, he knew that he would need the advantage of this stick to make it across.

He drew in a deep breath and leaned backwards, making sure that he was able to push off with his one good leg. Pausing for another brief instant he then hurtled himself through the air, using the stick to help catapult himself across. His feet had barely left the ground when he heard a sickened crack beneath him and he suddenly felt himself falling. Quickly he thrust both arms out before him, searching in his panic for something to grab onto. A split second later he felt his chest crash violently on the hard surface on the other side of the gap. Levi managed to wrap his hands around a large protruding rock sticking out of the ground, somehow managing to keep himself from falling into the deep crevice below. He could feel his feet and legs bounce painfully off the side of the ledge and for a moment he thought that he might actually fall to the bottom. To make matters worse, he could feel the rock begin to shift ever so slightly in his hands, as if it were about to give way and drop him down into the depths below. But the rock held firm. Levi dangled there helplessly attempting to gather his strength, then summoning every reserve of energy within him, he pulled himself up and onto the pathway, using his one good foot to help thrust himself upward. He could feel several small stones kick loose from his scrambling feet, and he was dimly conscious of the sound of the stones tumbling downward, bouncing off the face of the cliff for several long seconds before finally coming to a rest at the bottom.

After taking a minute to catch his breath, Levi climbed back to his feet and limped down to the beach where he had left his small stash of supplies. As he made his way back across the shoreline he peered up at the steep cliff. There was no way he would be able to climb back up the face of the rock. His ankle was throbbing like someone had stuck him with a red hot iron-poker. He swung his pack up onto his shoulders and made his way to the shelter of trees lining the

sandy beach. His earlier decision to camp on the high ground was confirmed by the fact that the ground surrounding the beach was still quite swampy from the rain – not exactly an ideal place to make camp for the night. Yet he knew that going back up the trail through the trees meant crossing the gap in the path. He grinned as a sudden thought came to him. *A bridge. I remember there were several small trees lining the pathway at the top – a few of those would serve nicely.*

Levi pushed his way back through the bush to the path leading up the hill, then made his way up the steep embankment, his ankle protesting with each step. A few minutes later he came to the spot in the path which had caused him so much trouble. He slipped the pack from his shoulders and sagged down onto the ground, resting his back on the cliff as he examined the few small trees scattered about him.

A dead medium-sized spruce tree immediately caught his attention. At one time it had grown right out of the side of the cliff, curving and reaching upward toward the distant sun. Levi climbed to his feet and removed the hatchet from his pack. The tree was roughly fifteen feet in length, and most of its branches had long-since died. He grinned. *I don't see why this old tree can't serve a dual purpose. I can make a sturdy makeshift bridge from the base of it's trunk, and collect the rest of the dead branches for firewood.*

Quickly Levi set to work at the trunk of the spruce, and within a minute or two he had felled the tree across the pathway before him. He then trimmed all the protruding branches off the sides, placing them neatly in a pile close by, before turning his attention to cutting the tree in half. Levi could feel the energy slowly draining from his body as he worked away at the tree with his small hatchet. It had been a long couple of days – the longest of his life, and it seemed as

though his lack of strength and energy was finally catching up with him. He shook his head, attempting to focus his attention on the task before him.

It took him nearly ten minutes to finally cut through the center of the tree so that it was now divided into two equal halves. He then sat back on his haunches, feeling with some alarm how hard his heart was pounding within his chest. After a few more minutes he got back to his feet and dragged the one length of tree alongside the other, then pulled the long coil of rope from his backpack. Carefully Levi placed one of the lengths of spruce over the gap in the path, watching the far end drop neatly into place. He then returned to the first log and repeated the process, so that they lay side by side. Dropping to his knees he used the rope to begin tying the closest ends together, to make a bridge wide enough to travel safely across.

As he was tying the two logs together, the loose end of rope slipped off the bridge and hung down into the great chasm. Levi was in the process of pulling the rope back up when he glanced down curiously at the formation below. *I wonder if there's anything down there.* The thought intrigued him. Perhaps he could further explore this area tomorrow morning – but for now Levi was too exhausted to even contemplate such an excursion. He pulled the rope back up the few remaining length, finished tying the trees together, then climbed to his feet.

He would make camp at the top of the cliff, then tomorrow he would do some exploration of the archaeological site that Nate's uncle was so excited about – wherever that site may be. He would need at least a day or two before his ankle was strong enough to carry him out of the area anyway, so he might as well make good use of his time. Perhaps something positive would come out of this trip yet. Levi slung his backpack up onto his shoulders, and took one tentative step out

onto his homemade bridge. It seemed secure enough. Carefully, one small step at a time he eased his way across the gap, making sure to avert his eyes from the rocks which covered the ground below. He felt a strange sense of embarrassment at how terrified he was at that moment. Surely a little thing like this shouldn't be rattling him so much – he had crossed much more perilous ravines than this one and not been half so shook up. Perhaps the grim reality of death was now playing on his mind much more than it ever had on past expeditions.

Finally he stepped off the bridge on the other side, drew in a deep, relieved sigh, then smiled broadly. “I had better get used to this little bridge, because I can see myself crossing over it a few more times before I abandon this site altogether.” Levi trudged the remaining distance to the top of the cliff, dropped his pack onto the ground and began setting up camp for the night.

Chapter Ten

Sleep came quickly for Levi. It seemed like he had barely crawled inside his sleeping bag than he was out like a light. But the remainder of the night was long and cold, and the pain in his ankle continued to wake him throughout the long hours.

Finally, shortly after the sun had skirted the eastern horizon, he crawled from the tent and with his water filter in hand started back down the trail to the river. His ankle throbbed mercilessly with each step, and his stomach rumbled with hunger.

It had been quite some time since he had eaten his last meal, so Levi knew he would have to find something to eat soon if he was to keep up his strength and make it out of there alive.

When he finally made it back down to the shoreline, he knelt down at a small point of land where the river seemed clear. Removing the water filter from its pouch, he then screwed his bottle securely to the filter. Attaching a narrow rubber hose to the side of the pump, he dropped the end of the hose into the water and began pumping the cool clean liquid into his container. He was grateful for at least one item in his inventory that would keep him safe and healthy.

His mind once again returned to what he was going eat. *Surely this river contains a myriad of fish – pickerel, perch, perhaps even some trout. A little fishing could be just what the doctor ordered. Perhaps I should also set up a few traps or snares in the bush. And the berries I saw on the trail earlier – that's certainly another possibility.*

Levi glanced down at his water bottle and noticed that it was almost full. With a few more final pumps he unscrewed the hose from the device, returned the contents to its pouch, then

leaned back and took a few swallows of the deliciously crisp water.

After a few minutes he reluctantly rose to his feet and started back across the beach to the trail leading to his campsite. Even though the water had hit the spot, it did little to relieve the growing hunger he now felt. Levi pushed through a patch of brush and started back up the trail. He noticed how thick the bushes grew along his route, many hanging with clusters of berries. He paused and leaned into one of the bushes and pulled a handful from its branches. Levi studied the small, bright red berries for a minute than popped a few into his mouth. They were tart to the taste, each containing a small hard seed. Something about the familiar sour taste triggered a memory deep within him – perhaps he had eaten these berries on a past camping trip, or when he had visited his grandparents' farm. He waded deeper into the bushes, and for the next several minutes devoured as many of the berries as he could find. Finally he made his way back to the path, and started up the hillside to his camp.

As he crossed the makeshift bridge, he couldn't help drawing his attention to the strange rock formation lurking below. Now in the light of day Levi could see what appeared to be an entrance-way at the base of the cliff. He stood for a moment, his mind turning over several possible explanations for the unusual formation. Finally he moved back up the pathway, determined to return and investigate as soon as possible – to find out exactly what made up the strange array of light and shadows beneath his bridge.

By the time he got back to the top of the cliff his ankle was throbbing painfully, yet the pain didn't seem quite as sharp as the day before. He hobbled over to his tent and rummaged through his pack, setting a number of items on the grass beside him. Finally he replaced

everything in his bag, except for the small folding shovel and headlamp. Levi sat there for another moment or two, then climbed to his feet and started back down the trail.

When he arrived at the small bridge he proceeded to drop down onto one knee and unwound the rope which had served to tie the two logs together. A thirty foot length now remained at the side of the trail, its opposite end tied securely to the bridge. Levi brought the rope over to the edge of the trail and sat down, his feet dangling casually over the side. As he studied the surface of the rock beneath him he could now plainly see a large chasm in the side of the cliff, a gaping hole which disappeared into the darkness below.

Levi strapped the lamp to his forehead and switched the light on. He then carefully checked the end of the rope that was tied to the bridge, making sure the knot was secure before winding it around one of his hands several times and pulling it taut. Carefully he eased himself off the side of the path, both feet pressed hard against the rock wall in front of him, one hand holding on tight to the bridge. Ever so carefully he eased himself away from the bridge and down the side of the cliff. Almost immediately he wished the rope was thicker, for it didn't offer him much of a grip and seemed to be cutting into his hands. As he lowered himself further into the narrowing crevice he realized how difficult it would be to get himself out with his injured ankle.

Inch by inch he eased himself down into the growing darkness. With one hand he reached up and adjusted his headlamp slightly so he could get a better idea of his surroundings. Already he could feel the damp and coolness enveloping him. As he lowered himself down further he was suddenly aware of a strange light shining in from the cave and realized that he was now almost touching the floor. A moment later as his feet struck solid ground he released his grip on the rope.

He swung the headlamp cautiously about his new surroundings and noticed that to his immediate right was a fairly large crack in the wall from which the fissure of light emanated. Carefully Levi moved toward the inviting crevice and quickly discovered that it was much larger than he first thought. He squeezed himself through the crack and wiggled between the two flat shelves of rock which formed a narrow passageway.

When he finally maneuvered his way through the few remaining feet of the corridor, he was shocked to find himself standing in a large cavern with a high ceiling. A long beam of light was streaming in through an opening in the far wall, giving the room an eerie feeling. Levi moved the headlamp slowly around the room in front of him. The area was about as large as his apartment's living room, with the ceiling only a few feet above his head.

He stepped cautiously into the room, trying to take in the sights before him. The first thing he noticed was what appeared to be an old fire pit sitting in the middle of the floor. For some reason he found himself almost creeping up to the small pile of ash and wood and then kneeling down to take a closer look. It was quite evident in the glow of his headlamp that the fire pit appeared quite ancient. Levi ran his hand through the remnants, picking up what appeared to be a small twig. As he drew it in closer to his face he was surprised to see that it was actually a bone. He gave the fire pit one more careful going-over then reluctantly got back to his feet and studied his surroundings. There was something eerily forbidding about the place. Levi could almost feel the hair standing up on the back of his neck as the dim light from his headlamp shone slowly around the darkened cave. *This place gives me the willies.*

Levi had almost completed a circuit of the room when he noticed something unusual on

the back wall. Pausing, he stepped carefully across the room toward the flat surface of the cave. There he strained his eyes in the darkness, slowly moving his light across the dull, chalky surface so he could determine exactly what lay before him. At first it seemed to be a simple, random collection of lines and scrawls, and then all at once it struck him. What in fact he was looking at was a series of crude paintings. Levi stepped back in surprise. “This is amazing!”

Recovering from his initial shock, Levi inched closer to the wall. He moved so close that his face was only a foot or so from the drawings, the headlamp brightly lighting up the rock surface before him. He could clearly make out a number of the animals: a bear, a wolf, a large cat-like creature, a deer . . . He turned his head, a growing sense of exhilaration swept through him as he examined the drawings more carefully. *Clearly this was painted by the aboriginals.* It was then that the headlamp picked up an even fainter image only a few feet away from the other drawings. He moved in closer and played the light on that section of the wall. The remaining images gave Levi the distinct impression that they were much older than the previous ones, yet it was the subject of the paintings that he found most unusual. The second mural seemed even more elaborate than the first one. He noted the appearance of several men, armed with spears gathered around a large winged creature with a long tooth-filled beak and an elongated bony protrusion sticking out of the top of its head. “That's a painting of a pterodactyl!” Levi shouted in disbelief. “How could the early native inhabitants have known what a pterodactyl looked like? These drawings couldn't be more than a few hundred years old. And these hunters . . .”

After studying the artwork for another moment or two he swung his light further down the wall, and once again the glow illuminated yet another astonishing work of art. This time he

was looking at what was unmistakably an image of a sauropod dinosaur. Levi edged himself even closer to the face of rock, casting the light on the reddish-colored drawing. He quickly recognized the dinosaur as a moderate sized Apatosaurus, and what was even more astounding was the fact that the painting also featured the distinct figures of several fully grown men standing next to the huge beast, their spears pointing upward in a threatening gesture.

Levi shook his head in astonishment. “This is unbelievable,” he said to himself. He stood for a long moment, taking in the strange sight before him, trying to figure out what these paintings were all about. Finally he searched the pockets of his jacket for something to write on – to record exactly what he was seeing. He grimaced. The only writing materials he found was a ball point pen and the lyrics of Amazing Grace that he had stuffed into his shirt pocket.

Levi quickly unfolded the piece of paper, and moved in closer to the first painting. He was about to begin his sketch when he found, to his frustration, that the pen did not want to cooperate. He shook the pen in exasperation, scribbling it furiously on the blank piece of paper. “Isn't that just typical of how these things go,” he said, suppressing a wry smile. “Whenever anybody spots a rare creature like a Sasquatch, or the Loch Ness Monster, they never seem to have a camera on hand. Or in this case, a working pen.” Finally the ink began to flow.

“Thank God.” he said with a sigh of relief.

With great care he began to sketch the drawings, including a brief description below each image. As each drawing was completed, his excitement grew.

“Ah, Nate,” he said to himself. “I just wish you were here to see this. Your uncle may have been an odd, secretive soul, but I think he was really on to something here.”

He returned to the first drawing and began checking his work, making sure that each detail was as exact as he could make it, and also making sure as well that no detail had been missed. When Levi finally completed a review of the paintings he folded up the piece of paper and drew in a deep breath. “Now all I have to do is make sure that I get out of here alive, otherwise I won't be able to share this story with the rest of the world.”

He stepped back from the paintings and glanced out through the narrow crack in the wall on the opposite side of the cave from where he had entered, grateful for the thin stream of light that the opening allowed. For the first time he heard the sound of rainfall. “Oh, great,” Levi muttered to himself. “It looks like I'm in for another wet night.” But as he stood there, a sudden thought came to him. “Hold on a second,” he said, his eyes brightening. “I'm in a cave – dry as a bone and a perfect place to spend the night, regardless of how creepy it might be.” He glanced around the room. “First, I'd better get my stuff out of the rain.”

The crack in the wall was only about a few feet wide, and reached from the floor to the ceiling. Levi edged himself into the crevice and worked his way down the narrow passageway. Although it took a couple of sharp right-angled turns, the passage itself was only about ten feet in length and bore upward at a thirty degree angle. In only a few short minutes Levi found himself out in the middle of a large dense bush. The rain was now little more than a thin mist, giving him an uncomfortable, damp feeling. He quickly got his bearings, then turned and made his way along this new route back up the hillside to where he had left his supplies.

This certainly was a much easier route than going up the backside of the hill, and crossing over that makeshift bridge. He was just on the fringes of the clearing at the top of the hill when a

shiny object under a dead cedar tree caught his eye. Making a detour he bent down and picked up an old weathered pop can. Levi smiled. “Perhaps the remnants of a snack from Nate's uncle.” He studied the can carefully, the object triggering a distant memory from his Boy Scout days. *I think I can make use of this.* He stuffed the can into his jacket pocket and hurried across the clearing to his pack, scooped it up and then walked back down the trail to his new headquarters.

Chapter Eleven

Several hours had passed since Levi had returned to the cave. The light shining in through the opening in the wall had gradually faded until the interior was shrouded in darkness. By then, he was lying within the warm confines of his sleeping bag, trying his best to find a comfortable spot to sleep on the hard rocky surface of the floor.

Levi lay there for what seemed like hours, staring up at the darkened ceiling. As he slowly drifted off to sleep the strange sounds of the night seemed to fade into the recesses of his subconscious. From there, these peculiar sounds took on a life of their own, unfamiliar cries that seemed to call out to him in the night, cries that were strangely similar to the wails of a young child, or the plaintive calls of the lost.

A sudden *thud* at the entrance of the cave caused Levi to sit up abruptly in his sleeping bag. He sat there in the still darkness staring across the cavern at the narrow opening – to the shadows and mysterious shapes that wavered in the light of the dimly-lit fire. Reluctantly he lay back down, his eyes wide open. Then, a faint groaning sound drifted in from the blackness outside, sending a chill coursing through his body. Levi reached frantically for his headlamp and crawled out from his sleeping bag. He got slowly to his feet and with the headlamp lighting the way was able to locate his makeshift spear which lay on the floor near his bed.

Carefully Levi edged his way toward the crevice, his light shining on the darkness of the entrance way. He knew that he was probably overreacting to some innocent night sound, but he could still feel his heart pounding wildly within his chest. When Levi was almost within arm's-

reach, he heard the distinct sound of shuffling feet coming from opening directly ahead of him. He hesitated, leaning forward to see if his light might give him an idea of what was lurking just outside the darkened area before him.

“Hello,” he said in a low voice. “Who's there?”

Immediately the shuffling stopped.

He paused for another moment, listening intently as the strange rustling sound started up once again, this time with such an intensity that it caused Levi to take a few steps backwards. “Get out of here!” he shouted, waving his spear in front of him. For an instant there was a complete and eerie silence in the cave. Even his headlamp seemed to flicker in the stillness of the night, casting grotesque shadows on the walls around him.

Then a sudden warm gust of wind blew through the crevice and into the cave, stirring up the dirt and ash lying on the floor nearby. He staggered, rubbing frantically at the tiny particles in his eyes, and as he did he noticed for the first time a small stream of water trickling slowly by his feet and into the cave. When the dust finally settled he blinked the last of the dirt from his eyes and looked back towards the entrance. There, standing still in the shadows, was Nate.

Levi stood frozen in the faint glow of the rapidly-dying fire, feeling his very breath leave his body as the terror of the moment filled him. Nate stood silhouetted in the darkness, wearing the same drenched clothing that Levi had buried him in . . . but his skin was now a sickly pale blue, and dirt clung to his hair and his face. For an instant their eyes locked. Levi could feel himself grip the spear tighter, and as he did, his hands began to tremble violently. He staggered backwards, his gaze never leaving the blank, ashen face of his friend.

The lamp on his forehead suddenly began to wobble, casting Nate into a myriad of shapes and shadows that were even more terrifying than before. “What do you want from me?” Levi asked, his voice a mere whisper. “Leave me alone!”

Nate stood wordlessly in the shadows staring ominously into the face of his friend. Then, ever-so-silently, a soft moan crept from Nate's motionless lips. The shock of seeing his friend in such a disturbing state caused Levi's body to begin trembling uncontrollably.

Levi took another step backwards, his foot catching on one of the rocks in the middle of the cave. He fell backwards, landing heavily on the cave's hard floor, then scrambled desperately away from the terrifying apparition before him. As he did, Levi could feel his right hand brush up against the hot coals of the fire sending a searing pain up his arm. Instantly Levi was awake, his heart pounding savagely in his chest. He sat upright in his sleeping bag and looked around the darkened cavern. “It was just a dream,” he said. The relief flooded his body so abruptly that for a moment he almost felt faint. He then noticed for the first time a stinging sensation on his right hand. Even in the dim light of the fire he could see a black smudge and realized that he had actually burned his hand in the fire. Levi could tell that it wasn't very serious but he knew he would have to apply some of the ointment from his first aid kit.

Levi slipped out of his sleeping bag and looked toward the entrance of the cave where the dim light of a new day filtered in through the darkness, and he could hear the unmistakable sound of birds chirping in the distance. He slowly pushed the sleeping bag away from himself and was now faintly aware that his body was still damp with sweat. He ran his fingers through his hair trying desperately to push the terrifying image of the nightmare from his mind.

* * * * *

Levi picked up his pack and made his way over to the crevice of the rock. There he slipped through the narrow opening of the cave and stepped out into the fresh morning air. He found himself standing on top of an enormous boulder by the river. The sun was already peeking above the horizon and he was grateful to see that there wasn't a single cloud in the sky above him. It looked like it was going to be a perfect spring day, weather-wise.

He allowed the trace of a brief smile to flutter across his face. "Thank you, God, whoever you are," he whispered, inhaling a lungful of the fresh morning air. As he climbed to the summit of the great rock outcropping he could feel his stomach begin to rumble with hunger. He knew that his first priority would have to be finding something to eat.

When he reached the top of the hill Levi was thankful that his injured ankle didn't feel all that sore after the climb. *One more day of rest and his ankle should be strong enough to begin his cross-country trek back to civilization.* He glanced around the small clearing, then made his way into the woods on the other side, searching the ground before him. After a few minutes he found a large flat rock lying under a small tree. He knelt down by the rock and lifted up the closest end, grinning broadly. *This should work nicely.*

Climbing to his feet he then snapped off a dried branch from the tree and quickly broke it into several pieces, each stick about four inches long and as thick as one of his fingers. Levi then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the last remaining piece of his fruit bar and smeared it against the end of one of the sticks. Dropping down next to the rock he then lifted the end and propped it up with his foot. Ever so carefully he arranged the sticks lengthwise, so they stood one

end on the other. Once he was sure that the sticks were holding up the rock, he slipped his foot out and rose to his feet. As he stumbled to his feet he accidentally nudged the bottom-most stick holding up the rock, and his makeshift trap crashed down to the forest floor.

He groaned and shook his head in frustration. “At least I know it works,” he said with a grin. “Let’s try this again.” He dropped back down beside the rock. A few minutes later the trap had been set and he once again moved away from the contraption.

“Alright,” he said. “Let’s just hope I can catch something.”

He picked up his backpack and slipped it onto his shoulders. *There’s no sense in standing around here all day. I might as well do some fishing while I’m waiting.* Already he could feel the warmth of the sun on his skin as he made his way down to the river. He stopped once again by the berry bushes and spent several minutes filling his pockets with the tangy red fruit. Only when the bush was completely bare did he continue on his journey.

When Levi reached the shoreline he was disappointed to see that the current was much too strong to attempt any fishing. Shrugging his backpack into place he began following the river downstream. It was hard-going. For the first several hundred yards, much of his journey was rocky and treacherous, the surface worn smooth and slippery from many years of wear.

After continuing on for about twenty minutes he rounded an especially sharp bend and was surprised to see that much of the shoreline had disappeared and he was faced with much denser underbrush. His route now appeared even more difficult. Instead of a well-worn path with smooth-rounded rock, Levi was faced with jagged boulders, and fallen trees littering the ground. The climb was most precarious, winding up through a myriad of obstacles to the top of the

distant embankment on his right, each step having to be carefully planned. Two or three times Levi held on to a tree root or boulder to maintain his footing and keep from falling onto the rocks below. Finally he made his way to the summit and swung himself up onto the mossy ledge.

From there he was able to get a bird's-eye view of the river and was able to see if there were any potential spots for fishing, but the current appeared to be strong in every direction. Carefully he picked his way among the scattered rocks and fallen trees, relieved to find that his ankle was now standing up to the rigors of the difficult journey.

Over an hour had past since he had left the campsite and Levi was beginning to wonder if he was ever going to find a spot on the river peaceful enough to do some fishing. It was then that he climbed up over a steep rock face and noted a small shallow bay situated at the bottom of the embankment. The bay was roughly the size of a large swimming pool, the dark waters lying flat and tranquil in the still morning air.

Levi grinned, a strange feeling of euphoria coursing through him. Carefully he made his way through a thick tangle of dead brush to the shoreline, found an old rotting log to sit on, then swung his backpack down onto the ground at his feet. He sat there for several long minutes, taking in the beauty of the peaceful scene before him, then slowly unzipped his backpack, pulled out his canteen of water and took a couple of long sips.

The collapsible fishing rod and reel were easily assembled. Levi selected a colorful lure and carefully tied it to the end of his line. His first cast sent the lure sailing at least twenty feet to where it quickly disappeared beneath the surface of the water. “Here, *fishie fishie fishie*,” Levi said with a grin. “I promise I'll find you a nice warm home, so be a good sport and take the bait.”

Slowly he reeled the lure back in, watching the line trail through the still waters of the bay.

Levi spent the remainder of the morning and a good part of the afternoon in the same spot, casting out the line and reeling it back in. Several times he stopped to change lures, even going to the trouble of digging out a few worms from underneath a nearby rock and attaching it to the hook. By the time the afternoon was over, his arms and legs were beginning to ache and worst of all – he had absolutely nothing to show for all of his troubles – except for a couple of shiners he caught which he just ended up using for bait.

He glanced up at the sun, which was already sinking down toward the western horizon. Reluctantly he packed up his fishing gear and started the long journey back to the campsite, retracing his steps along the rugged fringes of the winding river. Levi had been listening to his stomach rumble for most of the day, but once he started the walk back to camp, it really became noticeable. The handful of berries he had eaten several hours earlier had done little to ease the sharp hunger pangs that now gnawed at him. All the way back to camp he kept a lookout for anything edible along the way – berries, mushrooms, or anything that appeared consumable. He was now very anxious to see if his dead-fall trap had been more successful than its inventor.

He was still several feet away from the trap when he suddenly realized that it had been sprung. The large flat rock was no longer propped up by the sticks, but lay flat on the ground. He slowly raised his homemade spear above his head and cautiously approached the trap. Levi could feel his face break into a mischievous smile.

“Alright!” he whispered to himself. “Finally, something to eat.”

Stooping down he carefully lifted the large rock and peered beneath it. *Nothing*. He

groaned, letting the rock drop to the forest floor. He sagged down on to the mossy ground, shaking his head in frustration. *That figures.*

Levi knew he would have to get something to eat soon, or he'd begin to lose his strength. He glanced back over at the rock, deciding whether or not it was worth resetting the trap. It was then that he noticed for the first time a small tuft of fur sticking to the edge of the rock on the side closest to him. He crawled over and had a better look at the unusual object – then pulled it free. Next to the fur was a smear of blood about the size of a dime.

“Wait a minute,” he muttered. “It looks like whatever sprung this trap must have been injured.” He glanced around the small glade in the forest. “If that's the case, the little critter might still be around here somewhere. Maybe it's too badly injured to have crawled very far.” He climbed stiffly to his feet, scooping up the spear as he did.

Carefully he began a thorough search of the nearby forest floor. Levi knew that with the rapidly setting sun, his window of opportunity for actually spotting an injured animal in the darkening forest would be slim at best.

With each step he cast his eyes in all directions, hoping that something – any kind of movement would catch his attention. He had only been searching for a few minutes when he heard a soft shuffling noise, so indistinct that it was only his subconscious which happened to pick it up. He turned and edged forward to where he believed the sound came from, creeping slowly towards a large, fallen tree about ten feet away. Ever so cautiously he eased his way around the tree, keeping the spear poised over his head. Then he saw it. A squirrel suddenly appeared from a small bush, moving quickly in the opposite direction, the instinct for survival

pushing it beyond the pain of its injuries. Levi noticed right away that the squirrel was dragging one of its hind-legs behind him, so he immediately sprang after the small rodent, gripping the spear tightly and waving it now in small circles over his head. The squirrel was surprisingly agile for having to run on only three legs. It managed to weave in and out of more than a dozen trees, and over and under a half dozen fallen logs before Levi finally cornered it at the edge of a small pool of water. The squirrel stopped abruptly and was turning to its left when Levi brought the end of his spear down on the creature. When he lifted the stick he found the squirrel was now on its back. It gave a few feeble kicks, then lay completely still.

Levi let out a long sigh, kneeling down beside the dead animal. “Sorry, little buddy,” he said with a frown. “It's getting to the point where little critters like you might mean the difference between me making it out of this place alive or not.”

Chapter Twelve

Levi awoke with the first light of dawn. He lay there for a long moment listening to the sound of birds singing in the trees around him. The previous evening had been warm, and the sky clear, so he had made the decision to abandon the cave and sleep out in the open air. He was thankful that he wasn't as hungry as he had been, thanks in part to the squirrel he had eaten for supper. Still, the night had been a long one, due to a rather tender stomach – probably a result of snacking on too many berries the day before.

He crawled out from the comfort of his sleeping bag, rubbing his aching limbs, and patting himself for warmth in the cool of the morning. He had been up stoking the fire throughout most of the night, so all he had to do was throw a few more dried branches onto the coals in order to get a blaze going. He quickly rolled up his sleeping bag, stashed it into his pack then sat down before the fire, grateful for the warmth and companionship that it offered.

Levi took in a deep breath as he considered the possibilities of the day ahead. Now that his ankle had recovered he wanted to set out for civilization as soon as possible. All he could remember from Nate's plan was traveling east or west from this site rather than fighting the river's current all the way back to where they had embarked. The only question was which direction he should travel. He looked up at the sun, rising above the trees across the river, trying to remember how long Nate said it would take to reach civilization. Surely it wouldn't take more than a few days. After all, they had planned on being back in class the following week.

After a moment he reached into his backpack, and once again pulled out his mother's

Bible, turning it over in his hands. For some reason the very presence of the small black book gave him an odd sense of comfort. A smile glinted across his face. “Well, God, you led Moses out of the wilderness, so how about showing me the way?” He turned to the beginning of the book and began leafing slowly through the pages, looking for something that might grab his attention, even though he had no idea what that might be. Levi flipped aimlessly from verse to verse for several minutes before he finally gave up and slipped the Bible back into his pack.

Levi sat there for another minute, mulling over his two basic options – traveling east or west. He vaguely remembered Nate saying that following the river any further was hopeless, because it just wound its way endlessly through the wilderness. *East or west are my only two options*. If he went east he would have to cross the river before starting the trek. He looked out at the swollen current in front of him and shuddered. He couldn't even imagine crossing it in the kayak. And anyway, he wanted nothing more to do with kayaking or going anywhere near that river. He turned and glanced over his shoulder in a westerly direction. *Go west young man*. He was pretty sure that saying wasn't from the Bible, yet for some reason it did offer some solace.

For the next hour or so Levi packed up his belongings and waited patiently for the sun to rise above the horizon. For the majority of Levi's life he had always had a poor sense of direction, and he knew it would be a constant battle to keep himself heading due west. Following the sun's path might give him a better chance of staying on track.

He got to his feet and was about to make his departure from the campsite when he realized that he hadn't yet refilled his canteen. Slipping it from his backpack he made his way down to the riverbed, and knelt down one last time by the swift current and began the process of

refilling the container with clean filtered water. He glanced out at the choppy surface of the river as a cool easterly wind playing softly against his face and he felt a sudden tremor pass through him causing him to shiver involuntarily.

“I guess this is it,” he muttered, climbing back to his feet. “It's time to go.”

Levi walked back to the campsite and then through the small clearing on the other side, making sure to keep the rising sun to his back. As he entered the forest, the tall trees which blanketed the area seemed to blot out much of the light, reminding him of how cool the mornings were up in the mountains. It wasn't long before his mind began to wander.

How am I ever going to tell Nate's parents what happened? What could I possibly say to them? A growing sense of anxiety began to consume him as he tried in vain to come up with an explanation which might help them in some way to accept their son's tragic fate. How do you tell someone that their son is dead? Then again, how do I even know that I'm going to make it out of here alive? And if that's the case, how will anyone know what happened to either of us?

Suddenly Levi was conscious of how dense the forest had become. For the past several minutes his mind had wandered from his immediate surroundings, and he now felt a strange feeling of claustrophobia begin to grip him. He paused and removed the hatchet from his backpack, enjoying the feel of it in his hand as he searched for a gap in the trees ahead of him. Surrounding him was a thick stand of reed-like plants, rising up past his chest. Their leaves were almost the size of dinner plates, effectively blocking out any view of the rugged forest floor. Levi struggled forward, now using his hatchet in an attempt to clear a proper pathway, but soon found the vegetation to be so dense that he couldn't even take a proper swing.

Levi paused, searching for some kind of escape route, but found nothing. Slowly he waded further into the thick brush, stumbling into unseen holes and tripping over hidden logs. It took him more than ten minutes to travel half the length of a city block. Again Levi paused, catching his breath and pushing aside a growing sense of panic.

This is impossible. How am I ever going to make it out of here? He gazed down at his bare arms and noted several new scratches. Levi knew that his ankles, too, had been scratched up, and his legs felt weak with fatigue. He stood for a long moment, attempting to regain his composure and some of his energy. *I'm going to have to come up with something quick, or it'll take me forever to get out of here!* He glanced upward at the towering coniferous trees rising high above his head. *Too bad there aren't any vines hanging down for me to swing on. Now I understand why Tarzan swung his way through the jungle rather than walked.* As Levi scanned his surroundings he noticed for the first time a number of dead trees that had fallen and lay scattered about him, often sprawled one on top of the other in crisscross patterns.

Slowly he moved through the dense brush toward the closest tree, one laying in the same direction that he was walking. As he approached the old tree he was surprised to see how large it was. "Aha," Levi muttered to himself. "I think this might actually work." Even though the tree was lying flat on the forest floor, the circumference rose up past his chest. He slipped the hatchet back into his pack, then hoisted himself up onto the tree. Levi knew that he would have to be extra careful, for he could feel the slippery dampness from the recent rainfall under his feet. Holding his arms out at his sides he cautiously made his way down the length of the fallen tree, free at last from the annoying branches that had tormented him for the past half an hour.

Using this new strategy Levi was able to transfer almost seamlessly from tree to tree, nimbly skirting the majority of the underbrush as he made his way in a generally westward direction. A few minutes later he could see that the surrounding brush was growing less dense, and the fallen trees were less plentiful and much smaller. Finally he looked up to see that there was only one fallen tree that remained in close proximity to where he was now standing – but this tree was a good three or four feet away.

“Well, I think this must be the end of the line,” he said to himself as he prepared to jump the short distance. Shifting his backpack slightly he took a few quick steps back and launched himself across the gap between the two trees. For a brief instant he could feel the wind whistling by his ears, then as he touched down on the fallen tree, he felt his feet shoot out from under him. Levi crashed down hard on his side, having little opportunity to shield himself from the fall. The blow knocked the breath out from his body, and he lay there for a long moment, feeling a surge of pain shooting through his side and up his right arm. *I knew I would regret that.*

Finally he got to his feet, drawing in a number of deep breaths and with each one he could feel an intense burning in his side, a pain so strong it almost caused him to black out. He pulled up his shirt and checked his torso. There was a large red welt where he had landed, but as he pressed his fingers against his ribs, he couldn't feel any of the sharp pangs that would normally accompany a broken rib. *At least I can be thankful of that.*

Levi made his way slowly down to the end of the log, and slipped back down onto the forest floor. There, with one hand still pressed firmly against his aching side he pushed his way through the remainder of the thick underbrush until finally stepping out into a small clearing in

the forest under a canopy of enormous oak trees.

He made his way to the middle of the small clearing and sagged down onto the ground, resting his back against a large stump. He just sat there for a few minutes gathering his strength before reaching into his backpack for the canteen. As the water made its way down his parched throat, he could hear a dull rumble from within his stomach and once again realized how little he had eaten during the past few days. Subjecting his poor body to so much physical work without giving it enough fuel was bound to leave him weak and his energy levels depleted. Levi knew that he would have to find something to eat soon, or he wouldn't have the strength to make it home. It wasn't as though he had that much body fat to keep him sustained for very long.

After a few minutes Levi finally climbed back to his feet. The area to his right looked promising, with a number of thin bushes spread out among the trees. Suddenly a bird flew down from an overhanging branch and landed on one of the bushes on the fringe of the clearing. It was quickly joined by a second. Levi bent over and dug out a rock from the dirt at his feet, then crept stealthily toward his distant prey. *I only have one chance.* He was more than half way there when the two birds suddenly darted out from the branches and disappeared into the forest. He groaned, and then tossed the stone awkwardly in their direction.

Levi crossed the remaining distance to where the birds had perched. "I wonder what they were so interested in," he asked himself as he approached the bush. "Aha!" He grinned. "Large, purple, delicious-looking berries." He picked a couple and studied them carefully. "Interesting," he said to himself. "I've never run across these before. Still, the birds obviously thought they were tasty." He stepped back and glanced around. Scattered on the ground at his feet were a

number of round rabbit droppings. “And the rabbits seem to share that sentiment too.”

He bit one of the berries in half and felt the slightly sweet taste on his tongue. “Not bad. I suppose a few of these won't kill me.” He carefully picked several more of the berries and popped them into his mouth, but was only able to find about a half-dozen that were ripe enough to eat. “I guess I should have been here before the rest of the animals,” he said grimly.

Chapter Thirteen

For the next hour or so Levi was able to make good time, always keeping one eye on the sun as it traveled slowly across the sky above him. It was about then that he climbed to the top of another rocky crest and saw for the first time the sweeping landscape before him – a myriad of trees stretching far off into the horizon, swaying gently in the warm afternoon breeze. Levi blinked, suddenly aware that his eyes were burning uncomfortably, and he felt the distinct sensation of a headache coming on. *I think I've been staring up at the sun too much.*

He soaked his handkerchief in some water from his canteen and placed it against his forehead, savoring the coolness of the cloth against his burning skin. Levi carefully returned the canteen to his pack and started back down the rocky crest. He had gone for no more than a dozen steps when the forest seemed to close in around him. He was thankful that the woods were fairly clear of the thick underbrush he had contended with earlier in the day, but now the most trying element he faced was the growing heat of the sun.

Levi continued walking for several more minutes before stopping once again for a drink of water. It was then, in the stillness of a small grove of fir trees, that he heard the faint bubbling sound of a nearby stream. He shook the remaining contents of his now nearly-empty canteen. “Perfect timing,” he muttered. Despite the fact that the majority of the sun was hidden by the clouds, he could still feel the heat radiating from his body. He splashed the remainder of the water onto his face and then made his way through the thick curtain of trees towards a shallow stream meandering its way through the peaceful forest.

Levi dropped down beside the water and set his pack on the ground next to him. He then removed his canteen and filter and started pumping fresh water into the container. He was almost finished when he noticed a dark shadow suddenly move over him. It happened so quickly that he thought a cloud had moved between himself and the sun, but when he glanced up at the sky he could see that the clouds still hid the sun, and there were no birds, nor any rescue planes in sight. In his heart he knew that he hadn't been gone long enough to expect to see any rescuers yet.

He slipped the canteen and water pump back into his pack and hoisted it up onto his shoulders. Taking a deep breath he moved away from the stream and with a quick, painful glance up at the sky started off once again into the curtain of trees.

Levi moved more slowly now. His legs had begun to lose their strength, and his stomach was now giving him serious problems. He felt a small surge of panic as he took in the surroundings. The trees in this part of the forest were so tall and dense that it had become difficult for Levi to get a good idea of where the sun was sitting, or in which direction it was tracking across the sky. For the first time he had a real sense that he could be lost – that he might actually be walking in circles, or at the very least, not walking westward as he should be.

He stopped directly under an enormous white pine and drew in a deep breath, willing the feeling of panic from consuming his mind. Finally he swung the pack down from his shoulders and reached inside. “My map,” Levi said anxiously. “Why didn't I think of that before?” He rummaged around inside the pack, pulling out several items and dropping them onto the ground at his feet. “Where did I put the map?” he muttered.

Suddenly he felt the enormous shadow passing over him once again, this time

accompanied by a sudden breeze. Quickly he glanced up, just in time to see the faint outline of a great bird disappear between two treetops above his head. He stood in stunned silence, his face turned up towards the empty sky. “What was that?” he asked nervously to himself.

After a moment he returned to his pack and continued digging around inside, frantically looking for his elusive map. Levi had just about reached the bottom of his pack when a disturbing thought struck him. *I didn't even pack a map!* Suddenly a loud shriek sounded directly over him. Levi looked up. What he saw took his breath away. The bird was now plainly evident. Its wingspan was at least fifteen feet, with a body larger than a full-grown man. Beneath its two short legs, massive claws hung threateningly below a pointed tail.

“That's impossible.” he whispered.

Levi stood there, frozen in stunned silence for another long moment, then dropped to one knee and began cramming his belongings back into his bag. Quickly he tossed the pack over his shoulders and dashed into a thick grove of towering oak trees.

As he tore through the gap in the trees he felt for the first time a strange sense of lightheadedness. Onward through the woods he careened, the ground feeling soft and mossy beneath his feet, the feel of his heavy pack bumping and banging against his back. He had gone for only about a twenty meters when his foot caught on a tree root, sending him sprawling through the underbrush. Quickly he pushed himself back to his feet and immediately felt a sense of alarm as he looked upward and saw the tops of the trees swaying in the afternoon air high above him. Levi drew in a deep breath searching frantically to see which direction the great bird was heading. Finally he collapsed onto the ground under a large evergreen tree, believing he had

now lost whatever creature had been lurking in the sky above him. He wiped an arm across his damp forehead, attempting to regain his nerve. Just then he heard a sharp cracking sound coming directly behind him, causing him to freeze in his tracks. He spun around, his gaze darting in all directions. Everything was still and silent, yet even so, he felt a growing sense of unease, for the forest was growing darker, even though it was still early afternoon.

He drew in another long, deep breath and climbed stiffly to his feet, when he heard the distinct *crack* of another branch breaking behind him. He turned, his eyes searching among the trees in the direction the sound had come from. He just stood there, transfixed, his eyes captivated by a large shadowy object moving through the forest about fifty meters away. Levi strained his eyes to get a better view of what it was that he was looking at. Suddenly, he heard a loud *crunch* and watched in horror as two distant pine trees were pushed apart and crashed down hard on the forest floor. Although the creature was too far away for Levi to identify, he could clearly see that it was massive in size, and moving swiftly in his direction.

Levi's heart accelerated wildly, and the only thing he could think of was getting out of there – running as hard as he could, away from the terrifying creatures that now surrounded him. He turned and raced through the trees, weaving his way through the countless obstacles that sought to snare his feet and grab at his clothing. He had run for several minutes when he crested a small rise, then staggered down a steep embankment, barely able to keep his feet under him before he splashed through a shallow stream at the bottom. As he did, he could feel the dark shadow of the giant bird fly over him. He glanced up, and saw for an instant the outline of the enormous creature as it sailed over the treetops. For the first time Levi noticed that the sky had

turned a strange blood-red. The sounds of the forest to which he had grown so accustomed, now seemed to shrill and scream their protests from every direction.

He crossed the creek and quickly climbed up the bank on the other side, glancing anxiously over his shoulder as he did. Even in his panic he knew that he could not afford to get himself lost, he somehow needed to stick to his original plan of following the sun on its westward track. He paused behind an enormous boulder while he caught his breath, and tried to calm his heart-rate, searching among the treetops overhead for the elusive sun. Sagging down to one knee he fought to regain his bearings while he kept an eye on the trail behind him, for he could hear the distinct sound of thundering footsteps drawing closer. Finally he pushed himself back to his feet and ducked behind the trunk of a large oak tree only a few feet away. He stood there for a long moment, his back pressed up against the tree just as he heard a terrifying *roar* directly behind him. He turned and looked back in the direction from which he had just traveled – there stood the most massive creature he had ever seen, as large as a fully-grown mammoth, with fiery red eyes and a row of deadly spikes running down its back and tail.

Levi screamed in terror. He pushed himself away from the tree and tore off blindly in the opposite direction of the ferocious animal. It seemed he had gone for no more than a hundred feet when he suddenly burst out into a large open clearing. Directly in front of him was an old broken-down log cabin sitting stark and solitary in the middle of the field. The cabin was ancient and decrepit, its doors and windows were boarded up and its roof badly damaged. Levi paused for only an instant then dashed across the field and up to the door of the cabin, his mind all but consumed with the sound of breaking trees trailing behind him. He tore at the boards which had

been nailed over the entrance, quickly yanking them free and revealing an opening in the doorway the size of a manhole cover. Without hesitation he removed his backpack and tossed it inside, then dove headfirst through the entrance, landing awkwardly on the hard floor inside. He scrambled to his feet, grabbed his backpack and made his way over to the far corner of the dimly-lit shack – to a section of the old cabin which appeared to be the most solid.

He stood there in the darkness of the shelter, attempting to gain control of his breathing so whatever was outside might not know he was hiding inside. To his dismay he could still hear the sound of the great beast approaching. Levi was sure that the floor of the cabin trembled slightly with each thundering footstep. Scarcely daring to move even slightly, he searched the wall of the cabin before him for a crack through which he could get a glimpse of the terrifying creature. A small opening between two of the logs caught his eye and he peered out into the clearing. There was nothing out there, only the same waving bushes and wildflowers through which he had just come. Levi stepped back from the wall and dropped down onto the cabin floor, a sense of relief washing over him. Maybe it had just been his imagination. He drew his backpack toward himself and pulled out his Bible, gripping it tightly with both hands.

Suddenly the sound of a terrific explosion detonated directly behind him. He turned to see the front wall of the cabin completely disintegrate before his eyes – logs and debris were flying in every direction. He scrambled back to his feet just as the huge tail of the monster whipped through the cabin once again, sending the remainder of the wall flying in the opposite direction and leaving him standing there, completely exposed. Levi shoved the Bible back into his pack and dove into the far corner of the shack, the only part of the cabin that remained standing.

In the dim recesses of what was left of his shelter Levi could see one of the boarded-up windows just a few feet away. He scrambled over to it and quickly aimed a few savage kicks at the boards covering it. As the boards tumbled outward he became aware of a loud tearing noise coming from the roof overhead. He glanced up to see several of the boards from the roof falling down around him, now revealing the great bird, its terrifying, fiery eyes boring right into him.

Levi turned back to the window and with all of his strength kicked the remaining boards free. He scooped up his backpack and leapt through the opening, landing directly on his face outside. Immediately he scrambled to his feet and sprinted away from the dwindling remains of the cabin, yet even as he did he could hear the thunderous pursuit closing in behind him. Far off in the distance he could see a thin line of trees, but instinctively knew that he wouldn't make it.

As he ran he could once again see the great shadow darkening the ground around him. He began to zigzag as he ran, attempting to lose his predators, not daring to look back, running as hard as he could, his feet barely seeming to touch the ground. Then, in one terrible instant, Levi felt a vice-like grip grasping him by the shoulders, the claws of the great creature digging painfully into his flesh. He was then yanked from the ground and lifted high up into the air, his body dangling helplessly in the monster's clutches. He screamed loudly as he watched the tops of the trees sail by in his ascent, moving further away from the forest floor below.

Levi could feel the panic overwhelm him as he watched the landscape soaring by at a tremendous speed. What appeared to be a long, narrow lake had now emerged from the forest, stretching far off into the distance. Levi strained his eyes, beyond the great body of water he could see a tall plume of smoke moving steadily through the forest. He drew in a deep breath,

willing a calmness to his thoughts when suddenly the claws of the great bird wrenched savagely into his shoulders causing him to cry out in pain. He looked down and could see trails of blood now running from both of his shoulders. Frantically he reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife. Snapping the blade open he drove the knife deep into the leg of the terrible beast.

With a loud shriek it opened its claws, and Levi slipped from its grip, tumbling through the air and plummeting downward onto the ground below.

Chapter Fourteen

Levi awoke with a start. He quickly realized that he was laying on his back in a small clearing of the forest. The evening sky directly overhead was a bright orange color, spreading outward towards the horizon. Suddenly he remembered the horrifying creatures and scrambled to his feet. He stood for a moment and scanned the sky and surrounding forest, but all was still and peaceful. It was then that he felt his stomach give an abrupt heave, and he dropped back down to his knees and promptly threw up the meager contents of his stomach onto the ground.

He knelt there for several long moments, feeling completely drained, the sweat running down his face. He looked over at the result of his illness and saw the vestiges of his last meal.

The berries. They must have been poisonous. That certainly explains the hallucinations.

Levi crawled back to the base of a large stump and leaned against it. As he sat there he could feel the last of his strength seep from his body, his stomach turning over and over. He ran his tongue over his parched lips while gently rubbing his temples, his head pounding mercilessly. *I'm just thankful that I didn't eat any more of those berries, or they could have killed me.* He sat there for nearly an hour, his strength gradually returning and his stomach beginning to settle, and as it did his thoughts returned to the strange creatures that had terrorized him. Even though he knew it was merely an hallucination, it had all seemed so vividly real.

When his stomach finally stopped turning over, he struggled back to his feet and dragged his backpack over to the stump and began rooting through his meager belongings. He groaned. His water filter was no longer in the pack, but he still had his canteen, a few pieces of clothing,

his hatchet, a length of rope, a telescopic fishing rod and lure, and his Bible. Most of the items from his inventory must have fallen out during his delirious wanderings. Quickly he checked his pockets and pulled out the small slip of paper on which he had made his drawings.

It's still here. Thank God.

He sagged back down against the tree stump and closed his eyes. He realized that his journey home was going to be even harder than he thought, especially after he had wasted an entire day wandering in circles. He sat there for another few minutes feeling the effects of his dehydration. He knew that the loss of his water filter meant that he would have to find a clean water source to replenish his canteen – and soon.

I wonder how far I've wandered from my intended route during the past few hours. I guess I have no way of really knowing. Backtracking to find my lost items would probably be a waste of time. I'd better just stick to my original plan and keep heading west.

Levi looked up at the sun and studied its position in the sky, then drew the canteen up to his mouth, anxious to rid himself of the taste of vomit. Taking a quick swallow he shook the remaining contents of the canteen. *Empty.* He then pushed the canteen back into his pack and climbed slowly to his feet, and as he did, he suddenly remembered the lake. In the midst of his hallucinations he recalled seeing a lake stretching off to the south through the wilderness.

He stopped and shook his head. *What are you thinking? Surely I'm not going to give any credence to some wild hallucination that I experienced after eating some strange poisonous berries? Still, perhaps my subconscious is trying to tell me something.*

He tossed the pack up onto his shoulders. “Well,” he said. “It's probably worth a shot.

After all, what other options do I have? It's already getting dark and if I don't find water in the next few days, I won't stand a chance of making it out of here alive.”

Levi drew in a deep breath and struck off across the open forest and through a gap in the trees in what he hoped was a southwesterly direction. For the longest time it felt like he was walking in a some kind of hazy trance, his mind distant and unresponsive, yet he was grateful at least that his headache and queasy stomach had eased somewhat, and the crispness of the evening air began to revitalize him. *I'm so thirsty!* What he needed more than anything was a long, cool drink. He began checking his surroundings, looking for a small stream or pond where he might replenish his empty canteen. His mouth now felt extremely dehydrated.

Levi was detouring a tall, leafy tree that had suddenly blocked his path when he noticed several small, spiny objects hanging from some of the lower branches. He paused and pulled a few of them free and examined them carefully. It seemed quite possible that they might actually contain something edible, but their cases were rock hard, and prickly to boot. He grinned and tossed them aside. *I don't think it would be worth the effort.*

He was about to continue on his journey when the faintest rustle from the bush to his left drew his attention. He peered through the branches of the trees to see two deer standing stock still in the distance – barely visible in the fading light. He smiled. Somehow the sight of these two magnificent creatures restored within him a sense of hope – that eventually everything would be alright and he would reach civilization once again. As he watched, the two deer moved cautiously away from him and deeper into the forest. For some unknown reason, Levi decided to change course and began following the deer as they slipped silently over the crest of a hill about

a hundred meters away. At first he couldn't understand why he would even bother following two of nature's most elusive animals, then a thought struck him. Perhaps they might lead him to food – something he could forage – or better still – to water.

A moment later Levi climbed up over the hill. His eyes dancing at the sight before him. The countryside stretched far in the distance, but most importantly, there at the bottom of the hill was the shore of a long, narrow lake, deep blue and sparkling in the evening sunset.

“I can't believe it,” he said to himself. “There really is a lake here!” Levi raced down the steep slope to the shoreline, swinging his backpack out before him as he ran, and digging around inside to find his canteen. When he reached the shore, he dropped down to his knees and began lapping up the cool water as fast as he could. He grimaced. The water had a strange metallic taste to it, but Levi was so thirsty that he didn't seem to care.

When his thirst was finally quenched he removed a clean piece of clothing from his pack and placed it over the mouth of his canteen. Using it as a makeshift filter he carefully refilled the small container. Finally he got back to his feet and looked out over the long body of water stretching out into the distance. Levi could see that the lake wasn't all that wide, but it seemed to travel for a number of kilometers in both directions.

Walking around it will take far too long, so it looks like I might have to swim across.

Levi turned back from the shoreline, replacing the canteen in his pack as he walked. The first thing he had to do was to get a proper fire going, for he could already feel the coolness of the evening settling in around him. He dropped his pack on the edge of the forest and began scouring the brush for dry grass and dead twigs. Before long he had collected a fairly large pile

of materials for his fire. Now that he no longer had a lighter, getting a fire started proved quite a challenge. He pulled the hatchet from his pack and set off slowly down the shore, his eyes searching the ground for a likely-looking stone. Several times he picked up a rock and tested it with the back of his hatchet, watching to see if it would give off a spark. Finally he settled on what appeared to be a flat piece of slate. Taking it back to his fire pit he then carefully arranged the grass and twigs, and began sparking the stone with his hatchet.

For nearly an hour Levi worked in vain at creating enough heat to generate a fire. He worked until his wrists and arms ached, and could feel his headache returning. When he stopped for a breather he was relieved to feel a warm gust of wind blowing in from across the lake. For several more minutes he continued to work at his fire, all the while feeling the frustration growing within him. Finally he threw his tools down on the ground and climbed to his feet.

“This isn't working,” he said grimly. “If I can't get a fire going, I'll have to find another way to keep myself warm for the night.”

He dug around in his rapidly depleting pack and took out an extra shirt and pants and his last pair of dry socks. He pulled them tight over his clothes and sagged back down onto the ground, leaning against an old stump and hugging his legs for warmth.

It was still difficult for him to think about all of the trials that he had been through these last few days. *As if things aren't bad enough with Nate's death, I had to go and poison myself on some nasty berries, and then lose the majority of my supplies.*

Levi sat there watching the gentle waves of the lake lapping up against the shoreline as dusk slowly crept in around him. He thought once more of the lake that he saw during his

hallucination – long and narrow and flowing off into the distance. Then he remembered the pillar of smoke rising up from the forest, one that appeared to be traveling along the opposite side of the lake. “Perhaps that means something after all.” He whispered.

So what's the plan for tomorrow? If that hallucination led me to this lake, then I think it's safe to say that my best option would be heading towards that black pillar of smoke. He leaned over and pulled the soft covered Bible from his pack.

“Let's see what the Good Book has to say.” Levi muttered.

He flipped to the concordance in the back of his Bible. “I wonder if there's any mention of a pillar of smoke in here. After finding a verse, he then flipped to the appropriate page.

“And it shall come to pass after-ward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Joel 2:28-32)”

Levi closed the Bible. “I kind of doubt that a wild hallucination would pass as a vision by any stretch of the imagination, but this passage certainly seems fitting for my particular situation. I have to admit, it's amazing to see how many random verses relate to my circumstances.”

For the next hour or so Levi sat quietly by the waters reading from his Bible, until it was too dark for him to continue. He rested his back up against a long piece of driftwood and sat

there as the night closed in around him and the warm south wind played gently on his face. Leaning against an old piece of driftwood meant for a restless sleep. He would drift off for a few minutes and then be awakened by a strange noise in the night, or a cramp. Several more hours passed when Levi suddenly awoke with a start, to a loud splashing sound coming somewhere out on the lake. He sat upright, his heart racing. The reflection of the moonlight gleamed eerily off the surface of the water, and he was suddenly aware of how cool the night had become.

Levi picked up his hatchet and kept it poised before him as he climbed cautiously to his feet. With his heart still in his throat he took a few steps towards the water. As he reached the edge of the lake he paused, straining his eyes to see what it was that had made the sudden noise. *A moose or beaver perhaps? Some industrious animal that makes its living by night?* In the silence of the pale moon-light he stood there listening intently to the sounds of the forest, but the only noise he could hear was the gentle lapping of the water on the shore, and his almost-indiscernible breathing. Levi was amazed at the beauty of the wilderness in the moonlight.

As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light he began to appreciate anew the variety of shades and textures that were gently illuminated in the darkness. *It's a shame that more artists didn't use nighttime landscapes for their subjects.*

Levi continued to scan the large body of water in front of him, searching for whatever it was that had made the strange noise. He was about to give up when a distinct, yet faint splashing sound startled him into a renewed alertness. His eyes caught an object moving slowly through the water about twenty feet from the shoreline. Levi froze. The creature was unlike any other animal he had ever seen before. It appeared to have a rather large, bulb like head looming out of

the water with a very distinctive jawline and long neck which disappeared just below the surface of the water, before once again reappearing only a few feet behind it.

Levi stood there in stunned silence, strangely aware of his pounding heart and the quickness of his breathing. Suddenly he was desperately afraid of being heard or seen by the creature, and took a couple of quick steps back into the shadows. It was then that he became aware of the Bible which he was still holding firmly in his right hand. He must have fallen asleep with it on his chest and brought it along with him to the shore. Levi knew that whatever he was witnessing at that moment was a once in a lifetime experience, and he also knew that if he ever made it back to civilization no one would ever believe him.

As he watched, the creature slowly passed through the cool still waters of the lake, only a stone's throw away from where he was standing. Levi flipped open his Bible and drew the pen out from his shirt pocket. In the faint light of the moon he carefully sketched the scene in front of him on one of the blank pages found in the back. By the time he had finished, the creature had slipped into the shadows and a moment later disappeared from sight.

Chapter Fifteen

Levi's makeshift bed on the forest floor was hard and uncomfortable, and the unexpected appearance of the creature on the lake kept his mind in constant turmoil.

As the first light of dawn peeked over the hills on the eastern horizon Levi knew that sleep would no longer be possible, so he propped himself up against a large tree by the shore and began mulling over the evening's events. He thought that the strange animal he had witnessed the previous night was the result of the berries he had eaten, but then he remembered the sketch he had drawn. Quickly he retrieved the Bible from his pack and flipped it open to the blank page at the back. His sketch sent shivers down his spine. *What on earth was a creature like this doing out here in the middle of nowhere? Wasn't I taught in school that creatures such as this were a part of mythology and weren't real – first those unusual rock paintings depicting man living with dinosaurs, and now this.* The very idea that he was now one of those strange people who claim to see creatures like the Loch-Ness Monster made him squirm uncomfortably.

Levi thought back to the many lessons he had sat through over the years, and the slick documentaries he watched on television. All of those well-rehearsed tales of dinosaurs living on earth millions of years ago, and man slowly evolving from primates. He remembered the subtle feelings of doubt that had crept into his thoughts whenever these particular views were being presented, and now he began to wonder what the truth really was. It had always seemed so unlikely to him that a world filled with so much beauty and complexity could simply be the result of random chance. *Perhaps there's another answer to these questions.*

Levi stirred as the sun slipped into view on the horizon. Even in the chill of early morning it was impossible not to enjoy the picturesque view of an isolated lake at dawn. Far out on the smooth surface two loons slipped through the still waters, every so often sounding their plaintiff call, and just for the moment the sight made him feel less alone. The far bank wasn't all that distant – perhaps a few hundred meters, but when he thought once again of the animal on the lake making its home somewhere beneath its surface, he wondered how he would manage to swim even a short distance. For a brief moment his mind was filled with terrifying images of being attacked and devoured before he had even made it to the other side of the shore.

Levi finally got to his feet and stretched out the remaining kinks in his legs and back. He then removed his shoes, shirt and pants and tossed them and his few belongings back into his pack. He briefly considered removing his underwear as well, but the thought of swimming naked across the lake made him feel uneasy, even if there was no one around.

He took in a deep breath and then stepped gingerly out into the shallow waters of the shoreline. The lake was freezing. He stopped momentarily, took another long breath, then continued wading out into the water past his knees, feeling the icy cold temperature drive right through him. Levi glanced down at the pack in his hands. He would have to keep it raised above his head so that his belongings would remain dry. He then turned to the opposite shore, and pushed himself out into the lake drifting placidly on his back.

Levi had gone no more than fifty meters when he discovered that the water no longer felt as frigid as it once did. He was also now aware of a slight current, pushing him ever-so-gently. The unexpected current made his heart begin to race. He hadn't counted on any opposition to his

crossing. Levi began kicking harder, almost willing himself across to the opposite shoreline. When he felt his arms beginning to tire from holding the backpack up out of the water, he realized that he was already at the half-way point. He knew, too, that if he stopped to rest, even for a moment, the weight of his pack would cause him to sink.

Steeling his mind to the task at hand, Levi continued kicking his feet as hard as he could, now willing his weakening arms to keep their burden high up above the surface of the water. For a brief moment Levi could feel the touch of something rubbing up against his legs. It was only a faint sensation, but his thoughts immediately turned to the creature he had witnessed swimming in this very spot, and his whole body recoiled with fright.

Almost instantly Levi began to kick with all of his might, now holding the pack even higher out of the water, his mind totally consumed with one thought – getting to the other side as quickly as possible, and the more he thought of the creature, the harder he kicked. His head was now bobbing in and out of the water, and he soon found himself gasping for breath, his panic-level heightened by the fact that he could no longer see where he was going because of the water splashing into his eyes. His arms and legs were just reaching the point where they were beginning to burn when one of his feet suddenly brushed against the bottom of the lake. Levi scrambled to his feet, turned and raced the remaining distance through the water and then up onto the steep shoreline. There he leapt onto a large flat rock and dropped down to his knees.

Levi knelt there for several minutes as his breathing returned to normal, then he turned and looked back out over the lake. He realized that it was probably only a piece of lake grass that had brushed up against his leg, but the memory served as a reminder of how dangerous it was to

be out in the wilderness alone, where one small mistake, one error in judgment could mean his death. Even a serious injury could be fatal when there was no one out here to help.

He pulled his backpack closer to him and rummaged around inside. It appeared as though everything had survived the swim – even his Bible was still dry. Levi breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled the book close to his chest and held it there for a long moment. It was difficult to believe that at the beginning of his journey he didn't even want to bring this book along with him, and now he couldn't bear the thought of losing it. The only thing which now gave him hope and comfort was his new-found faith that God would lead him out alive.

As Levi was pulling his clothes back on he could hear his stomach begin to growl. He knew that if he was going to make it any further he was going to need something to eat; something to give him strength for the next leg of his journey. He peered inside his backpack at the few remaining items, and pulled out his telescopic fishing rod.

“I might as well try my luck at fishing,” he said with a shrug. *Perhaps I'll even get lucky and snag one of Nessie's babies for lunch.*

Levi climbed to his feet and walked the remaining distance up the rocky incline into the dense brush, his eyes fixed on the ground around him. He had turned over several large rocks and rotten pieces of wood before a few earthworms caught his eye.

“Here we go,” Levi said, picking one up.

He returned to the edge of the water and sat carefully baiting his lure.

“I'd better not lose the lure,” he muttered, carefully casting his line out into the water.

For the next few hours Levi sat absently casting his line, then slowly winding it back in.

Fishing in such a peaceful setting was a welcome break from all of the drama he had endured over the past few days. Slowly his thoughts turned to the strange hieroglyphs he had witnessed, and the wild hallucinations he had experienced. It was amazing to think of the possibility that such creatures could have once coexisted with man. Perhaps there was some truth to all those old dragon legends after all. As a student of archaeology, though, where might such unusual possibilities take him? He knew that unconventional theories such as these, were certainly not part and parcel of most of the belief systems of your modern day archaeologist. He wondered, too, why he had never been exposed to alternative perspectives in his archaeology courses – despite the abundance of such sightings found across the world. He vaguely remembered seeing pictures of similar rock paintings in science textbooks and wondered why they didn't get more air time in classrooms across the country. As he cast his line once more into the water he could feel his mind racing with all sorts of different questions and possibilities.

Suddenly Levi felt a sharp tug on his line. With his heart racing, he quickly climbed to his feet and began to reel in his catch. The fish on the other end was a common rock bass, not much larger than his hand. Still, the thought of having something to eat gave him an unexpected thrill.

He glanced up at the sun. “Looks like we have dinner tonight,” he said with a grin. “But first I have to get more serious about starting a fire.”

Levi placed the fishing pole up against his backpack and then began scouring the woods along the shoreline for the makings of a fire. Within a few minutes he had gathered several pieces of wood and some tinder and dry grass and brought them back to the water's edge. He then began his search for a few likely-looking rocks that might generate enough sparks to start a

fire. It took several minutes for him to turn up a few pieces of stone that had potential. These he brought back with him to his campsite and began scraping his hatchet across the rough surface.

An hour later Levi had still not started a fire, yet he could also see that his efforts were growing marginally more successful. A couple of times he had witnessed a curl of smoke rising up from the dried grass, and once he had even got to the point of adding a few small twigs and pieces of tinder to the smoke, only to be disappointed. His wrists were about to give out from exhaustion when he suddenly noticed a thin orange flame leap from the grass. Quickly he bent over the workings of his fire and blew gently on the tiny flame while he carefully fed it several pieces of grass and dry twigs. After a few tense moments a large flame leaped from the ball of tinder. Levi's eyes widened. He added a few more twigs to the pile and got quickly to his feet.

“I can't believe I did it!” He shouted, doing a slow soft-shoe shuffle around his handiwork. “It actually worked!” Levi threw both of his arms over his head. “Thank you God!” he shouted towards the sky. “Now I can finally get something to eat!”

He took the next few minutes to gently nurse the fire, then set about cleaning the fish as neatly as he could with his hatchet. Finding a long, round stick near the shoreline, he fashioned it into an ideal spit on which to cook his meal.

When his fish was cooked to his satisfaction, he removed it from the spit and sat back against his backpack, picking away at the tender white slivers of meat. Although he did his best to draw out the experience for as long as possible, it was only a few short minutes before he had completely devoured his first meal in days.

With a contented smile he tossed the remnants of the fish into the fire, leaned back and

relished the moment, enjoying the sensation of having his stomach at least partially filled. After a few minutes he turned to his pack and pulled out his Bible. Levi had grown accustomed now to reading small portions of Scripture during each day of his journey. Even though he found some of the stories hard to understand, they gave him a deep sense of comfort during this difficult time. Before he knew it Levi had finished reading the entire Gospel of John.

When he finished, Levi carefully placed the Bible on the ground beside him. He settled back into position and stared admiringly up at the evening sky. He hadn't been aware of how quickly the night had crept in on him, but at that moment it didn't seem to matter. He just sat there in silence, gazing up at the stars, seeming to be without a care in the world.

Chapter Sixteen

When Levi awoke the following morning he felt surprisingly refreshed. For the first night since the beginning of his trip he had slept soundly, and was greatly relieved to find that his mind was clear and his thoughts upbeat. He climbed to his feet and stretched as far as he was able, inhaling a deep lungful of the cool morning air. He then looked down at the inviting, still surface of the lake, considering how good it would feel to jump in head first. Then with a deep sigh he sagged back down onto the soft earth and pulled the Bible from his backpack. This morning he wanted to read something different. He decided to start at the beginning. He flipped to the first chapter of Genesis, vaguely aware of the warm morning sun beaming down upon him. Before he knew it more than an hour had passed and he had read through more than half of the book.

He then placed the Bible in his pack and lay down on the soft blanket of pine needles, lacing his fingers behind his head for a pillow. His mind turned to the material he had just read. Never had he realized that so many fascinating topics had been covered in the book of Genesis: the creation of the world, the fall of mankind, the first account of death, and even a worldwide flood. The old familiar stories from Sunday School had suddenly taken on a new, more vibrant life of their own. Not only was it a great comfort to read these old stories again, but for a few fleeting moments it helped him to think of something other than the dreaded possibility that he might not get out of the wilderness alive, and even if he did, he then had to face Nate's parents with some of the worse news imaginable. With the exception of his own father, who had left the family several years ago, he had never lost anyone close to him before. Now he was able to

understand some of the pain that others undoubtedly felt when losing a loved-one.

Levi forced his thoughts to other, more pleasant things that awaited his return to civilization, like enjoying his mother's home-cooked meals, and sleeping in his soft bed. For the next several minutes he turned an assortment of dinner menus over in his mind ... Then, for some reason his thoughts turned to his University classes, to the new career that he would begin soon, and the reaction of his classmates to all of the strange things he had witnessed during the past week. No doubt they would think he was crazy when he told them about all of the strange things he had witnessed during his expedition.

Levi spent the next hour readying himself for the day's journey. After breaking camp he placed all of the items back into his bag, and with a strange sense of foreboding, turned and looked out one last time at the lake. *Why am I so reluctant to leave this spot. What I witnessed last night was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that one usually only reads about in the tabloids. I'm not exactly sure what that thing was, but I'm sure that creature will have a starring role in my nightmares for many days to come.* Finally he turned and headed out into the bush, grateful that the undergrowth was sparse and the ground solid.

The area that he now traversed had an almost-tropical feel to it. The trees were mainly redwood and sequoia pine, and the ground was carpeted with lush vegetation, countless ferns and scattered bushes. Around him Levi could hear the chatter of a number of small birds that flitted in and out of the branches high overhead.

After walking for only a few kilometers Levi noticed that the terrain had now become progressively more rocky. Several large granite boulders lay strewn about the forest, and every-

so-often he encountered enormous flat shelves of rock about the size of football fields. It wasn't long before he found himself on the edge of an enormous sheet of rock, stretching ahead of him for as far as the eye could see. *There's something unusual about this rock.*

Levi was now forced to pick his way much more carefully along the rugged surface. He noted a number of large cracks and crevices running along the ground, and what almost appeared to be massive sink holes scattered throughout the rocky surface – strange holes in the ground that disappeared mysteriously down into the shallow caverns beneath his feet.

Walking deeper into the rocky terrain, Levi was able to skirt the worst of the ragged outcroppings and perilous chasms which seemed to appear out of nowhere. After an hour or so he stopped and sat down on the ground to catch his breath and regain his bearings.

How could such an unusual setting like this have ever come into being? It almost looks like the elements of nature had ground the surface of the rock to a smooth, almost-glossy finish.

There was something else about his surroundings which Levi found fascinating. The environment was unlike anything he had seen before, and his instincts urged him to spend more time there to take a closer look. He got to his feet and began following a shallow ravine which wound its way like a snake across the moon-like surface. Again he noted the sink holes which were scattered about the area. Most of the entrances were no larger than a manhole cover, and he could see that they only extended a few feet beneath the surface of the rock. Some, however, seemed to run further down into the earth, and had openings large enough for him to enter.

For about twenty minutes Levi continued to follow the winding ravine in a westerly direction, appraising each of the sink holes that he encountered, looking for one that would allow

him to do a little spelunking – to determine, at least, how far down into the granite these caves might extend. Several times, too, his subconscious reminded him that his curiosity was starting to get him off-track, but his fascination with these peculiar formations kept his mind fixated on what new treasure might lay around the next corner.

Levi was about to give up on his seemingly pointless wanderings, when he noticed a large rocky dome suddenly appear in front of him. As he made his approach he could see a long crack running down the face of the rock, gradually widening its way toward the bottom. Leaving the base of the ravine Levi climbed up the strange mound, his curiosity getting the better of him. There was something about this particular crevice that demanded his immediate attention. The thought of being able to explore such an unusual landmark was irresistible.

The crack itself was roughly as wide as he could span with both arms and almost as tall as he was. He was relieved to see that the interior was fairly well lit, and appeared to stretch upward into the darkness. As he studied the unique structure of the cave, Levi was again impressed by the unusual shape of the rock. What could have formed such a remarkably-shaped landmark? The fact that there was presently no water in the immediate vicinity led him to believe that whatever happened here must have happened a long time ago, for it seemed most likely that these landmarks were formed by an abundant source of fast-flowing water.

Cautiously Levi stepped into the narrow tunnel, wishing he hadn't lost his headlamp during his berry-induced hallucinations. The entrance-way allowed him barely enough headroom to stand, and he could see that the tunnel wound its way upward, and as it did, it grew smaller and narrower with each step. Using the light from the entrance-way he slowly began making his

way into the cave. As he crept up the slippery incline Levi was reminded of the rock paintings that he seen in the last cave he explored, and kept a watchful eye out for anything that might indicate that people had once lived here. As he climbed higher and deeper into the cave he found that the already scarce light was growing even dimmer, and the only signs of life were the sounds of the occasional bat flying past him as it fled its lonely sanctuary.

Levi managed to climb for another twenty feet or so before his surroundings had grown almost completely black, so dark that he wasn't even able to see his hand waving in front of his face. He was eager to continue exploring, but also realized the danger of attempting to go any farther without a significant source of light, or renewed strength. Reversing within the narrow confines of the cave proved much more difficult than he had anticipated, and to make matters worse, the floor's smooth and slippery incline proved to be quite treacherous.

As Levi slowly inched his way back down the tunnel, he found himself fighting a sudden wave of claustrophobia. Retreating backwards through such a narrow space meant he was not able to see where he was going and where his next foothold might be located. The closeness of the rock walls which surrounded him gave Levi the sensation of being smothered. *Perhaps it wasn't such a great idea to get side-tracked like this.* He could feel his breath restricting, as his worst nightmares about his current predicament played over in his mind.

When the passageway widened sufficiently, he managed to turn his body around so that he was now facing back down toward the entrance, and as the dim light shining in through the mouth of the cave lit up the area before him, he was filled with a sense of relief. Quickly he moved down the sloping cave floor anxious to breathe the fresh air of the outside world once

again. He was only a few short steps from the cave entrance when his left foot slipped unexpectedly on the rock's smooth surface. Frantically Levi reached out in the darkness, searching for something to grab onto and break his fall. Even as he fell, he was somehow able to tuck his head forward and thrust his right arm out for protection. When his arm struck the hard surface he could hear the distinct *crack* of a breaking bone, and a sharp fiery pain shooting up the length of his arm, causing him to gasp in surprise. The pain was so severe that Levi wanted nothing more than to scream at the top of his lungs, but the only sound he was able to emit through his clenched teeth was a muffled cry.

Levi lay there on the floor, grateful at least for the dim beam of light which cascaded into the area where he had fallen. The intense pain in his arm immediately caused his stomach to lurch and cold beads of sweat to break out on his forehead. There was nothing he could do but lay there on the cold hard floor for several long minutes, fighting to come to grips with what had just happened, but it seemed as though his mind had suddenly stopped working. Only when his thoughts gradually began to clear was he able to roll himself into a sitting position and hold his arm up in front of his face to get a better look. The intense pain made him believe that there must be a piece of bone sticking out from his damaged limb, but he was surprised to see that only a large red welt and the beginning of a massive bruise had appeared just below his elbow.

Levi sat on the ground for several minutes, trying to come to terms with the situation. He then tucked the fingers of his injured arm into the front of his shirt, which served to immobilize his damaged limb. He then climbed to his knees and very carefully made his way down the remainder of the slope to the entrance, where he crawled out into the cool afternoon air.

Almost immediately he could feel every ounce of strength draining from his body as another surge of pain coursed through his arm. He scooped up his backpack with his good arm and made his way over to a large rock where he sat down for a rest. Carefully he pulled the backpack onto his lap, knowing now with certainty that his arm was badly broken.

His mind reached back to the little he knew about first aid, and remembered that broken arms should be immobilized as soon as possible in order to prevent important arteries from being severed. He also knew that the best way to accomplish this goal was to put his arm into a sling. Levi rummaged through his pack and removed several items before coming across his Bible. He paused as he placed it with his other belongings. *I guess I had this coming.* Despite himself a small grin crossed his face. *I suppose it could have been much worse. I could have broken my leg. After all, it was my stupid decision to get off track in the first place.*

Levi placed a few more items from his pack on the ground next to him, and then pulled one of his extra shirts out from his bag.

“This should do the trick,” Levi said.

Fashioning a sling with only one arm proved a difficult task. Levi sat there working on the device for close to an hour, his frustrations growing by the minute as the shock began to wear off, and the pain in his arm intensified. To make matters worse, just when he finally put the finishing touches on his sling he felt the first few drops of rain hit his face.

Chapter Seventeen

Levi pulled the collar of his shirt up around his neck, ducked his head into the light drizzle and set out across the rugged terrain toward the line of trees a hundred meters away. He was especially careful to watch where he placed each foot, for the rainfall had made the smooth surface of the rock even more treacherous. With each step he could feel the pain in his arm piercing through him like a thousand sharp needles. What he wouldn't give for even the mildest pain-killer from his medicine cabinet back home, something to dull the agony now shooting up into his brain. Levi wondered briefly what damage was being caused by not having the bone properly set and by putting himself through such a jarring trek through the wilderness. He could already feel his small reserve of energy now draining from his body, his desperate situation compounded by the fact that he hadn't had a solid meal in days. He knew that there was a real possibility that if he didn't make it out of here soon, the damage could be permanent.

Levi had almost reached the fringe of trees bordering the rocky plateau when he noticed a large, clear pool of water flowing directly in his path. Quickly he dropped to his knees and bent over the pool, lapping up the water with his good hand. When he was satisfied, he drew the canteen from his pack and filled it up.

He then reluctantly climbed back to his feet, skirted the pool of water and headed back into the forest through a small gap in the trees. He had ventured for no more than a few hundred feet when he could feel the air begin to cool around him. Levi was grateful to be at least partially sheltered from the rain, but also found it increasingly difficult to avoid contact with the many

water-soaked branches which sought to brush up against him.

He was now very conscious of the dangers that his wet clothing posed, and constantly found himself peering upward through the branches, looking for any possible sign that the rain was letting up. Levi was making his way down a fairly steep hill when he suddenly became aware of a faint buzzing noise. At first he thought that it might be a plane or helicopter and sought frantically for an opening in the trees where he might get a clear view of the sky, but even as he did, Levi realized that the sound was unlike that of an aircraft. Could it be a swarm of insects, like bees or wasps? He had encountered one such swarm a few years back when he visited his grandparent's farm. Again he discounted this possibility as the buzzing gradually grew louder and took on a distinct metallic sound. He then noticed that shining through the trees straight ahead of him was a bright silver-colored object. Levi felt a surge of excitement rush through him as he hurried through the trees in the direction of the mysterious sound. When he finally burst into the small clearing, what he saw caught him completely by surprise. Rising up from the ground in front of him was a massive metal hydro tower, and beyond it in the distance were several more, all connected together by shining steel wires strung high over his head.

Despite the fact that it was strangely exhilarating to stumble across such a large man-made object in the middle of the wilderness, his heart sank as he gazed down the row of towers. Levi knew that he could follow hydro lines like these for many days without reaching civilization, besides, they were heading north-south, rather than in the westerly direction that he was heading. Levi stood there for several long minutes staring upward into the light rain, up at the tantalizing objects glistening dully in the afternoon drizzle. *Perhaps I should follow them*

anyway. Who knows, maybe there's a small town just over the next hill.

Finally, Levi was snapped from his daydream by the realization that he was now standing in something that was decidedly wet. He glanced down at his feet. The ground beneath him was mossy and saturated, giving him the faint sensation that he was walking on a large kitchen sponge. Quickly he moved up onto a pile of rocks that were partially sheltered by a lone, scraggly pine. He bent under one of the thick overhanging branches, grateful for the respite from the rain but also grimly aware of how weak his legs had become.

He moved out from under the pine tree and quickly made his way across the clearing to the woods on the other side, his eyes sweeping the bush around him for any signs of life. He realized he was no longer thinking straight. Too many days without food and clean water, and too many traumas had begun to take their toll, and now he knew that he was in for the fight of his life. Levi found what looked to be a narrow pathway through the bush and followed it, ignoring the pain that shot up his arm and slammed directly into his brain. Onward through the forest he trotted, now holding his broken arm tightly against his body as he continued to search the trees that flashed by, looking for anything that he might catch ... and cook ... and eat.

Suddenly his eye caught a flicker of movement in a thick shrub not far off from the trail ahead of him. Levi slowed to a stop, his eyes never leaving the bush. Quietly he crept down the path until he was only a few feet away from his target. He then glanced at the ground around him, looking for something that he could use as a weapon. A stick about the length of a baseball bat, but not nearly as thick, caught his attention.

“I only have one chance,” he muttered under his breath. “I’d better make it count.”

Levi moved a few steps forward, getting a firm grip on the stick with his left hand. He was about to begin skirting the bush to get a clearer view of his prey when a sudden burst of noise beside him almost scared him half to death. As he staggered backward in surprise a brown-winged flurry flew suddenly from the brush. *Quail!*

Without hesitation Levi hurled his weapon at the fleeing bird, the stick flying wildly off its mark and in among the trees to his right, missing the quail by several feet.

Levi's sagged down onto the wet ground in despair. That was the only quail he had seen since beginning of his journey and he had missed his only opportunity to catch it.

That was pathetic.

He knelt there on the wet ground gazing up at the trees where the quail had disappeared. Levi couldn't remember feeling so low in his entire life. Absolutely nothing had gone right since he and Nate had started out on their fateful trip. And now, Levi really had no idea where he was, or even in which direction civilization lay. For all he knew he could have been walking in circles for the last several days . . . and the very thought that he might be getting himself even further off track played havoc with his mind. For the first time Levi realized that it was entirely possible that he might not make it back home at all. He brushed back a few wet strands of hair that were plastered against his forehead. *At least I'll make a great looking corpse.*

He leaned back against a fallen tree, oblivious now to the rain that was falling softly on his upturned face. It was hard for him to imagine his life ending in such a manner. He had never pictured dying like this. He had always thought that he would eventually meet the right girl, get married, have children and enjoy a challenging yet rewarding career for the next forty years or so

. . . beyond that . . . well, he had never really given it any real thought. Levi was grateful at least that this little, ill-fated excursion had opened his eyes to some of the realities of eternity, the hope that his life would indeed go on beyond the next forty years, whether he lived – or died.

Levi tilted his head back and looked up into the light drizzle, gazing beyond the tree tops high overhead. Despite the trauma of Nate's death, there had been a number of experiences he had been through on his adventures that he was anxious to share with his friends back home. One of the most amazing things he had encountered was the comfort that God had given him during his ordeal, perhaps even guiding him in some way and opening his eyes to some remarkable things that under normal circumstances, he never would have welcomed with an open mind.

Levi knew that what he had witnessed on his expedition, the strange cave paintings and the lake creature especially, would definitely put him on the fringe of the archaeological world.

He ran a hand through his tangled hair, ignoring the rain as it gathered on his face and seeped down into his clothing. “Please, God, help me find my way out of here.” Levi said, his voice barely audible. “You know that I can't do this on my own.”

He reached into his pack and pulled out his Bible, shielding it from the rain with his body. Then with his head bowed and the Bible clutched firmly to his chest he said a short prayer.

Levi opened his eyes and wiped the gathering rain from his hair and face with his good arm, then placed the Bible back into his bag. Scooping up the backpack he climbed abruptly to his feet, took in a deep breath and struck off into the trees. Almost immediately he felt a strange sense of relief. It reminded him of the bedtime prayers he said when he was little, and how they always seemed to comfort him. Although this time it was different. He realized for the first time

how much he needed God to help him. When he was younger he had always felt that he was invincible, but the last few days made Levi realize how fragile life really was.

Levi was relieved to find that the terrain was now much less rugged and easier to navigate, especially with one of his arms now immobilized. He found though, that the pain radiating from his broken forearm had intensified to the point where he was beginning to feel nauseous. It was about then that Levi realized that the rain had now almost completely stopped, and it was only the wet branches of the trees through which he passed that remained a nuisance. He noticed, too, that the woods around him had darkened considerably and the air had begun cooling rapidly as dusk settled in.

Levi was soaked to the skin, half-starved and exhausted from his long journey. Several times during the past few hours he had felt on the verge of passing out, but he had been able to push himself, knowing that to surrender, would mean defeat ... and possibly death. He remembered back to when he and Nate used to race kayaks in high school. Several of the races had been several kilometers long, often over very difficult waterways, and it was then that he discovered as the end of the race neared, and most of the participants hit the wall, he was often forced to block all of the pain and exhaustion from his mind and push himself mercilessly to the finish line. It seemed, too, that he and Nate were always the ones who were neck-and-neck near the end of the race, and more often than not it was Nate who managed to muster up one final burst of energy in order to win. It was ironic to think that it was he and not Nate who had made it this far. Levi finally knew what he had to do. There would be no more time to set up camp, no more time for hunting and fishing, just relentlessly pushing himself to the end.

Levi walked on, the brush continuing to thin, the evening getting darker. Finally a great yellow moon rose above the horizon to his right and settled over the trees. It was just about then that he approached a steep hillside, reaching only a few feet taller than his head and running straight through the middle of a narrow clearing. The hill had a particular man-made feel to it, reminding him of an old logging road. Quickly he scaled the slippery slope, stopping at the top of the hill to catch his breath. There stretching into the distance was an old set of railway tracks.

Levi stared at the unusual sight in disbelief. The tracks looked tired and worn, the steel was brown and rusted and grass grew up carelessly among the wooden ties. Immediately his mind went back to his recent hallucination, when the creature had lifted him high into the air and he had seen a plume of smoke rising up into the distance. *Is this my way out?*

Even though it looked like the tracks had not been used for a number of years, they still gave Levi his first real feeling of hope. He knew that the tracks would provide him with a solid dry roadbed on which to walk, and even though its eventual destination didn't offer any more promise than did the hydro lines which he had crossed awhile back, it would still be better than slogging on through the wet bush.

With a renewed sense of purpose Levi struck off down the tracks in a more-or-less northern direction. *You never know*, he thought, *a railway siding or a small town might just lay around the next bend.* But the next bend came and went, as did the next... and the next... and the night got darker and darker until he found that his body had grown increasingly fatigued. It wasn't long before he was fighting just to keep his eyes open and his legs moving as he trudged endlessly down the middle of the tracks, pressing on deeper into the night.

Levi enjoyed the straight stretches the best. Lit up by the full moon, the tracks looked more like a comforting path through the wilderness, making the darkness seem far less foreboding, and the night sounds less frightening. It was on one of these stretches that Levi saw something glistening off toward the side of the track, and as he approached the unusual object he stopped to take a closer look. *What do we have here?*

Set back only a few feet from the tracks was a large flat rail-cart with a pile of long steel spikes strewn across its top. beneath the small flatbed was a chassis with four small train wheels. “I can't believe it,” he said with a grin. “It looks just like the ones I used to see in the cartoons when I was a kid. Some of the rail workers must have left it here.”

He thought for a long moment, studying the strange-looking vehicle. Finally he approached the car and quickly swept the spikes off the top. “I hope this thing still works,” he muttered to himself. The ones he had seen before had motors, or hand pumps – this one had neither. It must have been one that was pulled by a motor car.

Moving the cart closer towards the old set of tracks took every ounce of strength that Levi had remaining, despite the fact that the cart only weighed a few hundred pounds. With only one good arm he nevertheless was somehow able to inch the heavy contraption onto the rails. As he shifted the last set of wheels into place, he could feel his arms on the verge of giving out.

He lay there on top of the cart for several long minutes while some of his strength slowly returned. Finally, he got to his feet and once again examined the strange contraption.

“I think my best option would be getting next to this thing and pushing it,” Levi said to himself. “That way I can get a free ride down any of the steep inclines.”

Positioning himself at the front left-hand corner of the cart he leaned against the steel frame and gave it a steady push, easing it down the tracks several feet. He was immediately surprised at how quickly it moved along the rails. Keeping pace with the cart as he established his footing, Levi was gradually able to increase his momentum. With the accelerated speed he felt his confidence growing. Once rolling along the smooth tracks the cart seemed to require very little effort to keep it moving. He gave it one final push, then hopped aboard.

Levi found it exhilarating. The cart sailed swiftly down the tracks for probably thirty seconds or more before gradually slowing down. At that point Levi would leap off and repeat the process, pushing it for several more seconds, then jumping aboard.

About a half an hour had passed when Levi noticed that the tracks began a distinct downward incline. He brought the cart to a cautious stop at the top of the slope and searched the dimly-lit track ahead of him. He knew that the cart would probably reach a fairly good speed as it descended down the hill but if there was anything wrong with the tracks, he could be in serious trouble. His eyes peered in vain through the inky darkness before him. He groaned softly, the exhaustion now beginning to overwhelm him.

“I suppose I could walk the rest of the way,” Levi muttered to himself. “But it sure would be a lot easier to ride this thing to the bottom of the hill.” He smiled. “Not to mention a lot more fun.” Taking a deep breath he gave the rail-cart another sturdy push and climbed aboard.

Gradually the cart rolled down the incline, seeming to pick up speed with every turn of the wheels. Despite his exhaustion, he felt a tremendous sense of excitement as he glided down the tracks. The wind whistled through his hair and even in the darkness he marveled at the beauty

of the silhouetted trees standing stark against the moonlit sky. After traveling for a minute or two Levi was surprised to see how far he had gone without having to push the rail-cart. He wondered again at the condition of the tracks. From his brief, cursory examination it appeared as though they had not been used for quite some time, and he knew that if he were to hit a broken rail at this speed, the results would be disastrous. Levi expelled a long ragged breath into the cool night air as he wheeled around a long bend. He was more conscious too of how cold the wind had become, especially since his clothes were still somewhat damp from the rain.

The cart rounded another sharp curve and Levi now found himself heading down an even longer straight stretch. He was amazed at how quickly the cart was still moving, and was grateful that the downward grade in the tracks had lasted so long. The moon was now centered almost immediately above the tracks, lighting up the long narrow clearing ahead of him. He strained his eyes in the darkness as he suddenly noticed something unusual about this particular stretch. Then the realization struck him. He could see in the distance a siding branching off the main track no more than a few hundred feet away - and he also noticed something even more disturbing. A large pile of railway ties were stacked across the tracks at the entrance to the siding.

Levi's gaze flew over to the large switching device standing next to the siding. He couldn't tell which way the switch was positioned, but he knew that he was moving far too quickly to do anything about it. He held his breath and gripped the edge of the cart with the fingers of his good hand. With an abrupt lurch the rail-car suddenly veered off from the main track and shot unexpectedly onto the siding, the force of the turn launching Levi out from the cart and onto the hard, rocky ground below. For the next several moments everything had

become a blur. Levi could feel himself tumbling violently down the steep embankment, screaming in agony as his arm thrashed painfully against the forest floor. In the same instant he heard a loud *crash* as the rail-cart collided with the large pile of railway ties high above him.

Chapter Eighteen

For several long moments Levi lay there in the darkness gazing up into the star-filled sky. He had rolled and tumbled down the hillside for what had seemed like an eternity, and now he lay there flat on his back in a low marshy ditch filled with cattails. Surprisingly he could still feel his pack strapped securely to his back. Levi was about to climb to his feet when a sudden shooting pain scorched up from his fractured forearm, causing him to gasp in surprise. He struggled to his feet and pressed his arm against his chest, trying somehow to ease the horrific pain that consumed him. Finally he managed to lift his broken arm, holding it up in the dim moonlight for a better look. He groaned loudly. Barely visible in the dim light was what appeared to be a ragged piece of bone, now protruding from his skin roughly halfway between his wrist and elbow. Surprisingly he could only see a small trickle of blood oozing from the injury, but he instinctively knew that he would have to get the wound wrapped and the blood staunched.

Using his one good arm Levi eased his pack down on the ground and searched through the few remaining items inside. There was really nothing he could find that would serve as an appropriate bandage for his wound. He could probably use the makeshift sling as a bandage, but was afraid that without something to immobilize his injured arm, he could face an even greater problem as he continued on his journey.

Levi forced the panic from his thoughts as the reality of his situation slowly set in. *What about using an article of clothing as a bandage? Perhaps my socks? Not the most sanitary option, but it might make for a good temporary solution.*

Easing himself back down onto the ground he removed both of his shoes and socks. Very carefully he then wrapped one of the socks around his broken arm as tight as he was able to endure. He then drew the other sock up over the hand of his injured arm and down his wrist – almost to his elbow, securing the first sock tightly in place.

Levi bit his lower lip as the searing surge of pain shot up his arm. He desperately prayed that the pain would begin to recede, but instead it seemed to intensify. He took in a deep breath and screamed loudly into the night air – a long, ragged scream that echoed among the treetops high overhead, and rang hauntingly through the surrounding forest.

“Why, God?” he shouted. “Why, is this all happening to me?” He sat back down onto the damp ground and closed his eyes. “Are you ever going to get me out of this place?” he asked.

Levi lay there for several long minutes before slowly becoming aware of the wet ground beneath him. Carefully he climbed back to his feet, still moaning loudly with the pain, and began the long ascent back up towards the rail bed.

When Levi finally reached the top of the incline he made his way over to the rail-car. He could see that it was now flipped onto its back next to the tracks, and it appeared as though the primary axle had been jarred loose as a result of the crash. He was almost relieved to see the extensive damage done to the rail-cart, for he shuddered at the idea of actually getting back on that thing and continuing his journey in this fashion.

Gritting his teeth against the overwhelming pain, Levi skirted the pile of ties and began scouting the immediate area. It seemed now that his only remaining hope was to stay on the main track and follow it until he ran completely out of energy.

Pushing all thoughts from his tired mind he carefully put one foot in front of the other and once again resumed his journey down the tracks. He found that his pace was now governed by the odd spacing of the railway ties – too close together for a normal stride, and too far apart to skip every second one. Perhaps the fact that he had no idea where the railway tracks were leading him increased the growing sense of hopelessness that threatened to overwhelm his mind.

The chill reached right through Levi's thin clothing causing him to begin shivering uncontrollably, his teeth chattering with every step. One thing he was grateful for was the fact that the cold air seemed to have had a numbing effect on his broken arm.

Onward he walked. There were stretches of his journey now when his mind would completely black out, and he would suddenly wake to find himself stumbling robotically along the tracks. Finally, just when he felt he couldn't go another step he happened to glance off toward the horizon and saw for the first time a faint glow peek over the distant hills. He paused for a moment as he took in the unexpected sight. It was then he noticed something just down the tracks ahead of him. Off to his right about a hundred meters in the distance there appeared to be a break in the trees, now faintly lit by the first glimpse of the early morning sun. He moved forward, as fast as his feet could take him, never taking his eyes off the gap in the treeline.

At first glance the opening had the distinct appearance of being man-made. The thought that he might be this close to rescue caused him to summon up his last reserves of strength. When he finally neared the gap he quickly discovered that it was not the dirt road he had anticipated. Rather it appeared to be an old trail running through the bush, likely worn over time by deer and other wild animals crossing through the area.

He stood on the dirt path, staring helplessly into the forest in disbelief, attempting to bring reality more into focus. Finally he dropped down to his knees, his whole body beginning to shake with exhaustion. Levi knew that he had gone as far as he could possibly go, and the thought that he had only made it as far as an obscure trail miles from nowhere filled him with an overwhelming sense of despair. He sagged down onto the ground, collapsed onto his side, took one last deep breath and felt everything around him fade into black.

* * * * *

From somewhere off in the distance Levi felt the heat of the sun beaming down on his face as he felt himself slipping in and out of consciousness. He was also dimly aware that he was slowly falling into a deep dreamless sleep, only to stir briefly at the sound of voices which drifted in and out of his semi-conscious mind, seeming to call out to him. It was impossible for him to discern what was real and what was imagined. Then for a long stretch of time Levi felt as if he were being beaten up inside an enormous cement mixer – turning over and over and getting battered and bruised, until finally all was still and peaceful once again.

It may have been hours later . . . or perhaps even days when he felt the heat of a bright light shining on his face and the sound of a multitude of voices surrounding him. He managed to open his eyes a crack wondering if he was once again in the midst of a dream. Several white-clad men and women were bustling around him, and it appeared as if he was in a large room with stark white walls on every side. Levi was just beginning to assemble his thoughts . . . a glimmer of reality that crouched on the fringes of his mind when once again lost consciousness.

For the next several hours it seemed to Levi that he was drifting in and out of two worlds:

that of darkness and sleep; that of semi-wakefulness and confusion.

When he finally awoke, it was as if someone had turned on a switch. Immediately Levi knew that he was in a hospital bed. Even before he had opened his eyes he could hear the quiet beeping of a monitor next to his bed and could smell the familiar scent of disinfectant. He glanced curiously around the small room, only to discover that his bed was completely shut in by a portable room divider. Somehow he had survived his ordeal, and he was grateful.

Levi pushed himself into a sitting position when he was abruptly reminded of his injured arm. He glanced down, but could see that his arm was now covered with blankets. He hesitated, having the strange sensation that something wasn't quite right. Again he felt the intense pain of his injury, a sharp and painful throbbing that shot up from his broken limb and screamed into his brain. Slowly he reached down and taking a corner of the blanket, pulled it away from his arm. Levi immediately felt his entire body give a savage jolt at the sight before him. His right arm, swathed in bandages came to an abrupt end directly below his elbow. He sat there for several long seconds as his mind attempted to register exactly what he was looking at.

My arm has been amputated.

Levi could feel the blood draining from his face as he sagged back onto his bed. He then buried his face into his pillow and sobbed quietly to himself. He could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks and soaking into his pillow as he came to grips with his new reality.

Just then he heard the door of his room opening and could see the shadow of a nurse pause by a computer screen at the doorway. He quickly wiped the tears from his face.

“Nurse,” he whispered hoarsely.

Immediately he could see the nurse turn in his direction. “Oh, you're awake.”

Levi attempted a smile.

“How are you feeling?” She asked softly, approaching his bedside.

“Not so good,” he said, avoiding the nurse's eyes. “The last time I checked I had both my arms.” He looked down at the empty sleeve of his hospital gown.

“I can't tell you how sorry I am that you lost your arm,” she said sympathetically. “I'm afraid you lost a lot of blood as a result of your injury, and the wound had become badly infected. Unfortunately the doctors felt that your arm was damaged beyond repair, so they were forced to amputate.” She paused. “I'm just glad you're awake.”

Levi took another deep breath and turned to the window beside him.

The nurse smiled. “You're really lucky to be alive,” she said. “The doctors said if you were out there any longer you probably would not have survived.”

Levi glanced back at the nurse. She was a middle aged woman, fairly stout with short, greying hair. “How did I end up in the hospital?” He asked.

The nurse smiled. “Thankfully there were two hikers that found you just in time,” she said. “I don't need to tell you you how fortunate you were to have someone find you in such a remote area. I think someone up there must have really been watching over you.”

Levi managed a smile. “I think you're right about that.”

The nurse returned his smile and pulled back the curtain surrounding his bed. “If you're feeling up to it, there's someone here who's really anxious to see you.”

Levi's heart leaped. “Sure, send them in.”

He was about to ask who it was when the nurse turned suddenly and disappeared from the room. *What if it's Nate's parents? What do I say?*

A faint noise drew his attention back to the doorway. He turned to find his mother standing there. Levi could tell that she had been crying. Her face was red and blotchy, her eyes swollen. Quickly she rushed over to the bed and threw herself across Levi's chest, weeping uncontrollably. "I'm so glad you're okay, sweetheart," she said between sobs.

Levi gave his mother a long hug. "I really missed you, Mom," he said, fighting to keep his emotions in check. "I thought I would never see you again."

She pushed herself back from his bed, then reached out and pressed her hand against Levi's cheek. "What happened to you out there?" she asked. "Where's Nate?"

A sudden knock on the door drew their attention. Standing there were Nate's parents. Immediately Levi could feel a sense of panic begin to overwhelm him.

Levi's mother straightened up, pulling a tissue from her pocket and wiped the tears from her eyes. She quickly waved the two visitors over to the bedside.

Nate's mom picked up Levi's hand and held it tightly in her grasp. "Levi," she said, her voice showing the strain. "We're so glad you're home safe and sound. We just want you to know that the authorities have mounted an intensive search to find Nate. We also thought you might be able to help us by telling the police where you last saw him."

"Anything you can remember would be helpful," Nate's dad interjected. "We just have to have some kind of idea of where he might be."

Levi stared up at the three faces looking down at him. He could almost hear his heart

pounding within his chest. He adjusted himself and carefully withdrew his hand from the older woman's grasp, then cleared his throat. "I . . ." he paused awkwardly, choking back the tears.

Levi's mother took his hand. "What's the matter?"

Levi's eyes dropped back down to the hand which tightly grasped his own. "I'm so sorry," he finally said, his voice faltering. "Nate didn't make it."

For several long seconds the room was completely silent, then Nate's mother collapsed onto the shoulder of her husband, weeping uncontrollably.

"What happened, Levi?" Nate's father asked. "What happened to our son?"

Levi paused for a moment, seeming to collect his thoughts. "The current in the river was too strong," he finally said. "I tried to revive him but it was too late."

The older man wrapped his arms around his wife, attempting to console her.

Levi wiped at his eyes with a tissue before continuing. "I buried Nate under some large trees next to the Kettle river," he finally said.

Levi's mother rose and gave the other woman a long hug. "I'm so sorry, Deborah," she said. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

"Thank you," she said fighting to regain her composure. "You know, it's strange, I had this feeling for the past few days that something terrible happened to Nate, but I just couldn't admit it to myself. I just wish I could have stopped him from going there in the first place."

"It's nobody's fault, dear." Nate's father said as he inched his way closer to the bed. He placed a comforting hand on Levi's shoulder. "The police will want to know where they can find Nate's body," he said with a frown. "Can you tell them where it's buried?"

“I’ll try my best.” Levi replied.

The older man wiped at his eyes. “Thank you Levi, I’m sure you did all you could for Nate. He was really lucky to have a friend like you.” With that he put a hand on his wife’s shoulder and began steering her towards the door. “In the meantime we’d better let the police know about Nate so they can call off the rest of the search.”

Levi and his mother watched in silence as the couple crossed the room and slipped quietly out the door.

“That was even harder than I thought it would be,” Levi said. “I’ve been dreading this moment for the entire week.” He swallowed the huge lump in his throat and again wiped the tears from his eyes. Levi’s mother sat down on the bed next to him.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.” She said. “You seem so strong.”

Levi smiled. “Well, I have you to thank for that.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” she said, averting his eyes. “Just look at me. I’m a mess.”

“No really, Mom. I mean it.” Levi insisted. “You’ve been more of a help than you realize. Can you hand me my backpack?” He pointed to the bag sitting in the far corner of the room.

She looked at him curiously, then got to her feet and retrieved the object, handing it to her son. “What do you want to show me?” She asked.

Levi rummaged inside his backpack and withdrew the tattered Bible, placing it firmly into his mother’s hands.

A smile washed over her face as she thumbed through the worn pages of the book.

“I know I fought you about this sort of thing in the past,” he said. “But that was the only

source of comfort I had throughout my entire ordeal. I know I haven't always been the easiest person to talk to about this sort of thing, but that Bible helped me more than you can imagine.”

His mother patted his hand encouragingly. “I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that, Levi. I'm so proud of you and I think your father would be proud of you too.”

Levi gave his mother's hand a squeeze. “There's one more thing from my trip that I was hoping to share with you and the rest of my classmates,” he said with a smile.

“Let's take this one step at a time,” she replied. “For now, you need your rest.”

* * * * *

Levi peeked his head between the folds of the crimson red curtain lining the front of the stage, and felt his heart leap as he caught a glimpse of the number of students which had filled the massive auditorium. He felt a hand suddenly grip his elbow and turned to see his friend, Shaun, standing in the semi-darkness of the back stage.

“Are you sure you still want to go through with this?” Shaun asked. “After-all, Professor Roberts already gave you a passing grade for your assignment.”

“I'm not doing this for the grades,” Levi said with a smile. “It's about something a lot more important than that. Something I feel the need to share with others.”

Shaun hesitated, smiling awkwardly at his friend. “You're not going to tell them about the lake monster you saw on your trip, are you?”

Levi shook his head. “I haven't made up my mind about that yet.”

Shaun stepped back in surprise. “Alright, Levi. I guess you know what you're doing. I'll be watching your speech from back here. Break a leg.”

“Thanks.” Levi said with a smile.

At that moment the curtains slid open and Professor Roberts beckoned him forward. Levi took in a deep breath and slowly stepped onto the stage towards the podium as the audience rose to its feet and welcomed him back with a thunderous applause.