

Chapter 4

The Trail * October

I closed the door between the garage and the house and kicked off my school boots, moving them out of the way so Mom wouldn't trip. I walked down the hall and dropped my coat and backpack on my bed. I found my weekend clothes in the bottom of my closet; longies, ripped jeans, and two long-sleeved shirts. I stopped in the kitchen to make a chunky peanut butter on graham cracker sandwich and downed a glass of milk in short order. I only had about two hours before it got dark in October, and without snow, the trail wouldn't show up as well and slow my travel home.

I headed down the stairs to Papa's part of the basement. A swinging door kept the cold from the rest of the house when we would bring in wood for the woodstove and kept the sound to a minimum when Papa would grind his saw blades back to sharp with the motorized grinding wheel. A large chunk of carpet kept the mess from being tracked through the rest of the house. All of our work boots, winter boots, and insulated rubber boots (Northerners) were lined up or drying on the boot dryer. During hunting season, we all fight for the boot dryer. The losers had to dry their boots by the wood stove. Less effective, but unless you drove the half-frozen swamp or waded too far into the river, everything should be dry by morning.

I found my Northerners and my wool socks draped over the boots. Papa had a footstool next to the boots and I sat and pulled everything on and pulled my jeans over the boots. We hadn't gotten much in the way of precipitation lately, so the trail through the swamp should be manageable.

Hair. Ugh. I found my reflection in the mirror over the big sink and wet my hands. I slicked my thin, static-y, unruly hair into a tight ponytail, then put my work hat over the mess to avoid fly-aways while I worked. Nothing is more distracting than hair tickling your face, neck, or inside the shirt. Those inside-the-shirt ones take forever to find, and heaven forbid anyone see you trying to do so.

I lifted my helmet off the hat hooks left of the swinging door and put it on over my hat, ratcheting it down firmly on my head. I found my chaps hanging by the firewood. I clipped them around my legs and grabbed my gloves from the shelf next to the wood stove and put them on. They were leather with a purple edge around the wrist. Papa had to buy me girly gloves two years ago from Fleet Farm because my brother kept taking mine out of convenience... and then losing them or destroying them, which was inconvenient for both Papa and me. This pair I'd had for quite some time. On one of their first outings I'd been swamping balsam fir trees and they'd been coated in pitch. I thought they had been ruined until I realized they were 5x stronger ...and flexible.

I found my gas and oil jugs by the back door and smiled when I picked them up. Papa had refilled them for me. It was his way of approving of my after-school activities. I made sure the lids were tight, then attached the oil jug to the gas jug with a bungee cord and put the bungee around my neck. I grabbed the little Jonsered 540, put a srench and a file in my back pocket and slammed the door behind me.

It could have been genetics or being as close to the land as I was that made me check the sky each time I stepped foot outside. One good look can tell you a lot about how the day is going to go; one last opportunity to get prepared for what the weather may bring. Dark

clouds mean a shorter day; more potential for things to go wrong IF the clouds materialize. Bright and cold can be the best working conditions. And nothing beats the warm fall days or the first 40-degree spring day when all the snow melts in droves and begins to flood the rivers and creeks. Grandpa even had an old saying for what he'd see in the sky. I remember him telling me once during haying season: "Ring around the sun, rain before the day is done. Ring around the moon, rain before noon." Turned out to be true more than not where we live and even as kids, we knew rain was not good for cut hay.

Right now, it was typical October; 50ish degrees and slowly falling with the sun was getting low, but dark grey clouds were trying to merge to the west and block it out a little early. Clouds this time of day were a double-edged sword. They made the day shorter but held the temperature longer.

I had enough time. I took off at a good clip and flipped the chainsaw so the bar and chain were away from my leg. The road below the house was only used by Papa for his projects. Before he built the detached garage across the driveway from the house, he would park his old truck down there. Near where this road met the driveway was our firewood when it was curing to be burned—bark side up. I walked past it now, but instead of walking to the driveway, I kept straight and veered slightly right. At first glance, it looked like a tall bear trail. It was wide with no branches dipping in where I walked. Looking harder, I could see the old flagging from where someone had marked the trail for access, probably to one of the deer stands back here.

When I was about 8, I'd been exploring around our house and found this trail. I took it until it dipped into the swamp, and not wanting to ruin another pair of shoes, I headed northeast

to higher ground, and away from where I thought anyone had been recently. Near the edge of a clearing, I found a large white pine, one of the few that survived our state's logging history of 100 years ago. I'd found huge nails that had grown almost completely into the tree and, looking up, realized someone had a stand in the tree long enough ago that it had rotted away. I felt special to have found the great giant of a tree, but disappointed again that I hadn't been the first person there. It was always my goal to find a place no one had been or seen in a hundred or so years. It took several hunting seasons to realize that where we lived had no such place. Just when I'd think I found it, I'd find old cans or fishing line.

I moved the saw from my right hand to my left and carefully crossed two downed fences, barbed wire still strung taut above the ground although the posts had rotted and collapsed years ago. On a return visit to the trail a little after I'd discovered the big white pine, I'd cut a pair of boots when I failed to see the second strand of fencing barely above the ground.

I hopped the log that had rotted into the trail like a speed bump and followed it down to the edge of the swamp. Here things got tricky. It took my first five or so trips to memorize a dance step that would take me from grass clump to grass clump across the shallow, treed swamp without needing the boot dryer when I was done. *Left, right, switch feet, right, big stretch left, grab the tree and duck the branch, right, left and stick the landing. Ta-da!*

On the far side by the hemlock, the trail followed the top of a series of small hills that were no more than 15 feet above the swamp and 30 feet across. The grass swamp morphed into an alder brush swamp that ran both sides of these hills. The hills had trees instead of brush, which- I'm sure- is why it was chosen for the trail. Alder swamps can be particularly vengeful of intruders. They'll swat at your eyeballs, snatch the hat off your head, pull things

from your pockets, trip you up, and provide no support or help when you're sinking in the mud they sprout from.

I looked to the southwest-- my left-- at the top of the tallest of the hills. I could barely make out the shimmer of the last of the sun on the river through the alder thicket. Better hurry.



Duck this paper birch branch, left of this maple, down to a small creek. Flat rock with the left foot, big step to the smaller round but stable rock, switch feet and safely across with the third step. Then up to the high ground and my base of operations. I set down the saw and hung up the gas and oil on a branch and surveyed my previous progress.

Almost behind me was an old skid road that went through the entirety of the Cedar Swamp. Papa made the road when he logged the fallen timber after a storm wiped the whole stand. I skied the old skid road sometimes in the winter. Sometimes by the light of the moon.

The skid road ran almost north-south. Where the trail met the skid road was the southernmost piece of high ground. Ringed in smaller white pines, fir, cedar, and hemlock, the high ground opened to a clearing, probably a landing from Papa's logging efforts 20ish years before. This clearing had been infested with brush and small trees. I decided I would clear it. I had a feeling it was something Papa would have done if he had more time, and it was something I could do by myself. Papa trusted me. For my 13th birthday, he bought me a bright orange chainsaw helmet.



I didn't like foam ear plugs, and this helmet came with over-the-ear hearing protection and a flip-down screen to protect your face from sawdust. I loved it I wore it when I worked with the guys and drove loud equipment. But he

wasn't done there. My 13th Christmas he gave me Kevlar chaps. *Now* I knew where he was going with this. My 14th birthday a month later, much to my mother's chagrin, I received a Jonsered 2040 chainsaw.

Papa then sponsored chainsaw safety classes for "the guys." ("The guys" consisted of my cousins, uncles, and anyone who helped Papa with his projects, and the hunting buddies.

Some of "the guys" were all 3; family, helper, and hunting buddy.) I (the only female in the room) listened intently at the class. It was instructional *and* highly entertaining. The guys, who'd been slinging chainsaws since they saved up enough to buy them in their young adulthood, were finally learning *proper* felling techniques. Watching them was like impromptu night in our basement; these guys, mostly 40+ years old each, who had seen-it-all, been-there-done-that, in a classroom setting-- obviously interested, learning something, and thinking back to how they'd found every wrong way to get a job done and still live--was indeed a sight to behold. They questioned and told stories and finally absorbed the physics behind bar-and-chain pinching scenarios, hang-ups, widow-makers, barber-chairs, and the proper use of wedges and the chain brake.

Three years later, Papa let me go out on my own as long as I wore all the protection he'd given me. I preferred the 540, a smaller saw compared to my 2040, and it proved to be more reliable and less quirky over the past 3 years.

I knelt next to the saw and rolled it on its side. Using the scrench, I pried open the gas and oil and filled each, careful to fill the oil slowly so the air could escape as I filled to avoid a bubble that would get oil all over the saw. Tightening the reservoir lids, I surveyed the area and chose where I wanted to start. I flipped the on switch and the choke and braced the saw between my legs. Papa and the guys did the old "throw-start" method (greatly discouraged by the chainsaw safety instructors), but whenever I tried that the saw just jerked back and narrowly missed my shoulder with the bar and chain. I'd developed a leg-lock that kept the saw stable. I pulled three times before it fired and died. Choke off, one pull, and she fired and idled as I used my wrist to pop on the chain lock. Saw in my left hand

I took several steps to the edge of the brush and pulled the brake off. I knelt when I could to save my back as I kept the saw as close to the ground as I dared, trying not to dull the chain on rocks buried beneath a blanket of leaves.

I cut for 15 minutes, then straightened up and let my wrist lock the chain. I stretched upright and gauged the sky. The clouds won the battle and the sun wouldn't come out again until tomorrow. I had about 45 minutes of safe light. I set down the saw and gathered the downed brush, taking full armloads by the stems and dragged them over to the brush pile I'd started last week. Stacking the stems the same way left little air between them and, Papa taught me, the pile will burn hotter for better consumption. Walking back to the idling saw, I picked it up to cut for another 15 minutes. Instead, it died. I rolled my eyes and walked the saw back to the jugs and knelt down and filled it back up. I surveyed my work from here. I'd managed to clear about 300 square feet, guessed I had about 900 square feet left. Probably one more evening after tonight and then I could see about adding some shooting lanes to a stand I found that was in good condition in the swamp to the east. I glanced up at it, deciding that if I kept cutting to the east, following the ridge of this little hill, the deer would probably use it. It looked like they already did, judging by the old rubs on a few of the pieces of brush I was cutting.

I tightened the reservoir lids and fired up the saw. I cut one more full tank before I ran out of safe light. I put the saw down after flicking the switch off and stacked and hauled the brush to the now-impressive pile. It took 5 trips before my mess of the evening had been cleaned up. In the remaining light, I paused to take in my work and stretch my back. I lifted the ear protection from each ear and the rush of sound filled my ears. I heard the nothing

the quiet without the saw brings, the air molecules competing to be heard first. Soon the rush died down, the quiet evening sounds settled in, and I was able to hear traffic on the highway on the other side of the river. My hands stopped vibrating in response to being one with the saw for so long.

I looked back toward my work. It would probably be overgrown again in a few years, but at least I'd batted back the forces of nature that wanted to fill every available space with a tree or brush and given the deer some open country to play or forge grass or just get dry their legs from the swamp.

Losing light fast now, I acknowledged the first star with the wish I'd learned as a child: "Star light, star bright; first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might. Have the wish I wish tonight."

I hung the jugs around my neck, grabbed the saw, flipped the bar and chain to away from my leg and started back. *To the south-eastern edge of the clearing and back into the trees. Down the small hill to the creek, reverse steps, and back to solid ground. Up and to the left, hard right at the maple. Up and down- duck- down and back at the hemlock.* I could barely see the grass clumps now, so I missed a few on the dance back through. *Up gradually and- ouch. Step OVER the rotten log. OK slowly, slowly... watch for the fence. Big unbalanced step,* (probably clearing the wires by feet on each side, but not to ruin another pair of boots.) *Two steps, another big unbalanced step. Ok clear shot straight to the road below the house.*

The house's big black form glowed on the north side; Mom was home from work and in the kitchen making dinner. I slammed the basement door to let her know I was home and put everything back for the next time. Chainsaw, fuel and oil on the plywood just in case anything leaked. Chaps unclipped and hung back on the support for the firewood. Gloves off and back on the shelf, purple wrist edging facing OUT. Boots and wool socks off and placed next to the woodstove.

I paused and heard Mom closing cupboards and pans banging against each other. The kitchen is right above Papa's workbench on the north wall. I listened to see what kind of a mood she was in. She was humming along with some classic Reba and I knew it was safe to go up. If the news was blaring from the living room across half the house (lengthwise) to the kitchen, I would sneak upstairs, wait for her back to be to the entryway, then dash across to the hallway and down to my room and start homework so she couldn't be upset with me. About anything. But music (especially with humming) meant I could go up, snitch some of whatever she was making for dinner, talk about our days and plans for the week, and procrastinate on homework until she got sick of me pilfering all of the cherry tomatoes for the salad, ...or the chocolate chips for the cookies, ...or eating the soup directly from the ladle while pretending to stir it for her. She'd pretend to be mad and shoo me away until Papa came home or until the table needed setting for dinner.

I opened the swinging door and reached for the light switch when the edge of the door caught on the right ear protector of my helmet, reminding me to take it off. Dang thing was comfortable to wear. From the get-go, Mom was worried I'd sleep in it, I liked it so much. At some point, I probably tried.

I padded up the stairs and inhaled deeply from the entryway at the top of the stairs. Bacon, dill, sautéed onion, hint of garlic... MMM. Potato soup. I said hi to Mom and pretended to stir the soup on the stove.