Chapter 1

Discovering Whispering Spruce Campground

The more miles Joel and his parents put between them and the city the higher their spirits rose. It had been a busy year, but now they were free at last to take a long-awaited trip with their trailer for a few weeks of sightseeing and relaxation along the Oregon coast. Joel had brought along several books to read and a thousand other items essential to a twelve-year-old on vacation.

Soon they turned off the freeway and took the winding road along the river to the ocean, heading for Whispering Spruce Campground, which is part of the Siuslaw National Forest. Heavily laden logging trucks lumbered up and down the road, scattering wood chips and bark in all directions. Sometimes they passed peaceful farms with sloping sunlit meadows where contented cattle grazed. In other places trees crowded the highway, making it dark and cool.

Wild irises, buttercups, and foxgloves covered the banks, and little streams trickled gently down the rocky surface of the cliffs on one side of the road.

On the other side ran a wide, gray river on which little fishing boats bobbed and maneuvered as their occupants sought the best fishing areas. Along its muddy banks people searched for crabs and crayfish.

Presently they reached a small town bustling with activity and continued on until they reached Whispering Spruce Campground. Dad pulled up to the entrance behind a big, shiny motor home and shut down the engine.

"Looks like we'll have to wait a bit," he said, relaxing back in his seat. "I do hope they aren't full-up."

"I hope so too," Mom said. "It looks like a lovely place, doesn't it?"

"Wonderful!" Dad replied. "Such huge trees and masses of flowers, and the ocean just a short distance away! I'm sure I could stay here forever."

"We have a much more wonderful home for our 'forever,'" Mom said with a smile, "but I know what you mean. How long do you think we should stay here?"

"How about a week at first," Dad said. "If we like it we can extend. What do you think, Joel?"

"Sounds good to me," Joel replied. "I just can't wait to explore it."

The driver of the motor home was complaining to the ranger. "It's expensive," he said. No electricity and you want five dollars a night! We want to watch the Dodger game tomorrow, and we've got to have electricity. He paused and shook his head. "Well, I guess we'll head down the road a bit and check out a few other places. He got back in his motor home, made a U-turn, and sped out of the campground.

Dad got out of the car. "Want to come along, Joel?" he asked. Together they walked over to the ticket booth.

"We'd like a campsite," Dad told the ranger. "For a week at first, then maybe longer. Are there any restrictions on length of stay?"

"The rule is ten days," the ranger said, "but if people cooperate, we can always bend the rules. Here's your envelope. Go ahead and pick your site. "There are lots to choose from. When you've found the one you want, put your money in the envelope and drop it in the box." He pointed to a wooden box beside the ticket booth. "Then put the stub in the window of your vehicle where we can see it when we make our rounds first thing in the morning."

"Do any of the sites come with electricity?" Dad asked.

"Only the host site," the ranger said. "And speaking of the host, we don't have one this year. Too bad, because they relieve us of a lot of routine work around the campground. If you've any questions come and see me."

"I have one," Dad said smiling. "Just what is a host?"

"A host is a volunteer who welcomes people to the campground and helps them find a suitable campsite if necessary. He is here to answer questions such as which berries are edible, what trees are in the campground, where to catch fish - that sort of thing. Sometimes he'll check the paper supply in the restrooms or pick up litter, but generally we leave things up to his particular preferences. Most of all, we want the host to boost the national forest and act as a PR person. It's a terrific job for retired people or for someone who has the entire summer off."

Joel had been listening to the conversation with interest. "What does PR stand for?" he asked.

"Public Relations," the ranger explained. "The host is a visible representative of the Forest Service. "The public likes to know someone is there to whom they can turn in case they have a problem, and the rangers can't always be around. It's a great way to meet all sorts of fascinating people, and the actual work involved is quite small."

"I'm a teacher," Dad said slowly. "I have the entire summer free. I think we'd enjoy hosting in a beautiful park like this. Where would I apply to be a host?"

The ranger grinned. "I believe you'd make a great host," he said quickly. "Tell you what. My partner will be here shortly, and I'll discuss it with him. I'm sure he'll need to ask you a few questions, and you'll probably have some yourself. Find a campsite and get set up; then sometime tomorrow morning we'll come over and discuss it with you. In the meantime, you and your family give the matter a little thought."

"Thanks a lot," Dad said. "It sounds very interesting." Then he stuck out his hand. "My name is Rogers. Kermit Rogers."

"Wayne Anderson," the ranger said, and the two men shook hands.

Dad told Mom about the hosting position as they drove slowly through the campground. "There's no pay, of course, but the host site has full hookups, and they won't charge us any fee. What do you think?"

"It sounds great," she said slowly, "but are you sure you want to stay here the entire summer?"

"I can't think of a more pleasant place, can you?" Dad asked. "We decided before we left not to make any firm plans. All we wanted to do was get away from work for a few weeks. The ranger said there wasn't much work involved - mostly meeting people, answering their questions, and keeping the place tidy. We'd have to check the restrooms periodically to make sure they don't run out of supplies, that sort of thing. And once a day we'd go through the camping area and record the license numbers of the vehicles so the ranger can reconcile the records with the money deposited in the box at the gate. We wouldn't handle the money at all, and of course all the park maintenance is done by the rangers."

"It sounds super," Joel said. "I'd rather stay here the entire summer than drive to different places. And I'd be able to help you too. Please tell him Yes, Dad," he pleaded.

"It does make a lot of sense," Dad said. "If you both agree, I'll tell them we'd like the job."

"I'm really excited about it," Mom said happily, "and now let's find a campsite so I can get lunch on the table."

"How about this one?" Dad said, pulling into a site tucked away at the end of a narrow road, almost hidden by tall spruce trees.

"Perfect," Mom said, taking a deep breath of piney air. "There's plenty of shade and lots of sunshine too. And listen!" She paused. "There's a stream over there to lull us to sleep."

"I'm going to explore," Joel shouted, leaping out of the car as soon as Dad had pulled to a stop. "I bet there are fish in the stream, Dad. Come and have a look."

"Later," his father said. "First we've got to get set up. Then it'll be lunchtime, so don't be gone too long."

Joel scrambled along the bank, following the little stream as far as he could, until a tangle of brambles barred his way. He pulled a long, slender willow branch out of the underbrush and trailed it through the water, surprising a shoal of miniature fish that darted out of reach. He crossed the stream, jumping from one stone to another. A green wart-covered toad leaped from under a boulder and hid in the tall reeds on the opposite bank, while overhead a big black crow chattered angrily.

At last, hearing his mother call, he turned reluctantly from the little stream and ambled back to the trailer, where Mom had spread out a tempting lunch on the picnic table.

"What a lovely place," Joel sighed. He turned to his father. "Dad, may I take the inner tube to the stream later on?"

"Of course," his father said, "but hurry and wash your hands. I'm starving."

"Me too," Joel exclaimed eyeing the potato salad and baked beans. "Hold on, I'll be right back."

When Joel returned, Dad gave thanks for their safe journey and for the beauty of God's creation, and he asked for guidance about the hosting job.

"I picked up a brochure from the ranger," Dad said a little later. "There's lots to see and do around here. There are several trails to take, some difficult and some easy, and there's a little tunnel that runs under Highway 101 to the beach and the tide pools. I think if we plan to stay here any length of time we'll try to do them all. That way if we're asked about them we can answer intelligently."

As they ate, the bright black eyes of an inquisitive blue jay stared down at them from a nearby alder. It chattered a minute or two, then grew bolder, and finally, with a shriek of triumph, fluttered down to the ground beside them.

"What a beautiful bird!" Joel exclaimed. "And it is not afraid of us." He dropped a few crumbs on the ground, and the jay gobbled them Immediately. "Wow, it must be hungry! See how quickly it ate them."

Mom smiled. "I doubt it's hungry," she said. "It's just greedy, that's all. Human food really isn't good for birds, you know. They should be eating berries and insects."

The blue jay turned its head in all directions looking for more crumbs, then flew back to its perch on the alder.

"I know!" Joel said, jumping up from the table. "I'll get some cracked wheat for it. That shouldn't hurt it, should it?" He dashed into the trailer and returned moments later with a handful of cracked wheat that he sprinkled on the ground beside the picnic table. There was a brilliant flash of blue, and seconds later the jay lighted on the ground and gobbled up every grain. Then, with a shake of its black crest, it spread its wings and flew into the forest.

"It has probably gone to get the rest of its family," Dad chucked. "It knows that we'll feed them!"

A yellow-and-white butterfly lighted on a yarrow flower nearby. Everyone sat quietly admiring it.

"Why are they called 'butterflies'?" Joel asked after the butterfly flew away. "They aren't butter, and they aren't flies."

"When I was a little girl, my grandmother told me they were originally called 'flutterbys,'" Mom said, "but the syllables got reversed over the years.

"Chickadee-dee-dee." The cry of a tiny gray bird came from the forest. "Chickadee." Dad answered the call, softly repeating "chickadee." A minute or two later a chickadee flew to one of the lower branches of the alder tree and watched them curiously.

"Sit perfectly still and speak to him softly," Dad said. "Maybe he'll come to us." But the little gray bird wouldn't come any closer, and finally it flew back into the trees.

When lunch was over and the table cleared, Mom suggested that they take one of the marked trails to the ocean tidepools about two miles away. Leaving the camping area they crossed a small wooden bridge. The stream gurgled and splashed over the stones on its way to the sea. They took a little path into the forest. At times they were forced to walk single file in order to avoid the thorns on the blackberry vines and overgrown salal shrubs.

Presently they came to a giant spruce which, despite the fact that it had lost its top when hit by lightning years ago, still stood taller than any other tree in the forest. From here the path took a sharp upward turn. The trail was still spongy from recent rains, and in places much of the soil had washed into the stream, making it difficult to proceed. The

path led across another bridge, wound up for several yards, and finally led to a moss-covered bench at the very top.

"Let's rest here for a while," Dad panted as he slumped on the bench. Joel, impatient to see what lay ahead, wandered on. Presently he came to the concrete remains of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. Before the second world war it had been home to hundreds of young men engaged in forestry projects - the building of bridges, recreational facilities, and Whispering Spruce Campground.

Suddenly Joel stopped and stared at the ground. Then he whirled and ran back toward his parents.

"Dad, come and look," he shouted. "There are bear tracks up here!"

Mom shivered. "A bear!" she said. "Are you sure?" She looked through the trees, half expecting one of them to make its appearance.

"It's quite possible," Dad said, getting up from the bench. "But bears won't harm you unless, of course, you should happen to back one in a corner or come between a mother and her cubs. As a matter of fact, they're more afraid of us than we are of them."

Mom looked skeptical, but she walked on up the trail to see for herself.

"Look at those prints!" Joel said, pointing to the tracks in the mud. "He must be huge!" He placed his hand in one of the tracks. It was twice the size of his hand.

"He probably came down the bank to the stream for a drink," Dad said. "I imagine this stream is a very busy place at night." Joel and his parents examined the bear tracks a few more minutes, then hiked on. After another bend or two down the trail they came to a miniature waterfall that trickled down the rocky cliff and joined the stream below. Joel discovered a dozen or more deer tracks, and nearby the tracks of a much smaller animal.

"These are coon tracks," Dad said. "A raccoon only gets to be about three feet long, and a third of that is tail. They like to come around in the evenings for handouts. We'll probably see some of them at the campground."

"I hope we do see some of them," Joel said. "I'll give them something to eat."

Dad explained that it isn't a good idea to let them eat directly from your hand because even though they have good eyesight, they are very eager and have been known to bite off more than the food!

"Is it true, Dad, that raccoons wash their food?" Joel asked.

"Raccoons are very fastidious about their food," Dad replied. "They wash everything before eating it. Of course, sometimes the water isn't as clean as it should be, but at least the animals have good habits."

They continued their walk, stopping every now and then to listen to the call of a thrush or to examine the wildflowers and ferns along the way.

A quarter of a mile down the trail they met a sunburned young woman swinging a machete who told them she was a school teacher who spent her summers doing volunteer work for the national forest. "They've got me clearing trails," she said. "It's hard work, but I enjoy it." She paused and smiled at Joel. "At first my muscles gave me a bit of trouble, but now that I'm used to it, I feel great. After an hour or two in the forest my frustrations melt away, and I feel renewed in both body and spirit."

She picked up a long section of blackberry bush and threw it over the bank. "My friends think I'm crazy," she giggled, "but I love what I'm doing. Some of them are in Europe, and they'll probably come back more tired than when they went. The crowded airports and stifling cities aren't for me. I love the forest with its towering trees and little damp trails. And, of course, there's the beach. That's fantastic!"

Mom asked if she was camped in the forest, and she said she had a tent in Whispering Spruce Campground. "Stop by some evening for a visit," she said. "There's just me and my old dog, Higgins. He loves it here too."

Joel and his parents said Goodbye and continued on down the trail. They topped a gentle rise, and suddenly the Pacific Ocean lay before them, gray and shining. Countless little fishing vessels sailed near its shore, while on the horizon a freighter carried its cargo to a port farther up the coast.

"Let's go to the beach," Joel said as he ran down the path and through a tunnel under the highway where the trail ended. They scrambled up the bank on the other side of the road and were finally on the beach.

The wind blew fresh and strong, and they trudged across the sand until they reached a group of rocks, across which lay hundreds of logs that had been bleached by the sea and the sun. They picked their way around and over the logs and past huge tangles of seaweed and rolls of beach grass that the waves had rolled into solid lumps. They stopped occasionally to explore the little tidal pools that teemed with life: hermit

crabs camouflaged with scraps of seaweed, starfish searching for clams and mussels, barnacles, and sea anemones.

Finally they sat down on the sand and watched the seagulls as they screamed and quarreled, wheeled and dived in an endless search for food.

"Just look at them!" Mom said. "Watch how they glide and catch the air currents. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a gull for just an hour?"

Dad chuckled. "Gulls are called the freebooters of the world, you know. They'll steal anything, even taking the eggs and babies out of the nests of the cormorant and other sea birds. Once I saw a gull snatch a fish from a pelican's pouch. And they'll eat all kinds of garbage, like the refuse thrown overboard from ships and anything they can scavenge along the beaches. That's where the word gullible comes from. They'll swallow anything."

They watched a passing gull drop a clam on the rocks below in an effort to break the shell. It kept retrieving the shell and dropping it till it was finally broken into pieces, but before the gull was able to enjoy its hard-earned meal a swifter gull seized the meat and flew off with it, leaving the first gull screaming and zooming off in hot pursuit.

"I've heard that the seagull is so much at home in the air it can actually scratch its head while flying," Dad said. "Gulls have been clocked as fast as fifty miles an hour. They can also soar for hours on rising air currents."

"Well," Mom said at last, "I suppose it's time to be heading home." They scrambled to their feet, shook the sand off their clothes, and found the little trail again. They walked back through the damp forest, faster this time, over the little bridges, past the pile of brambles the young woman had chopped, until they reached the campground.

While Mom fixed supper, Joel and his father gathered twigs and pieces of dead wood. Soon a bright fire was sending tiny sparks flying into the darkening sky. A breeze cooled the air, and somewhere in the forest an owl hooted.

"It's lovely here, Dad," Joel said later that evening as he skewered a marshmallow onto a coat hanger. "I hope you can be a host for a couple of months."

"Even if it means working for part of your summer vacation?" Dad asked, and Joel said he wouldn't mind a bit. He thought it would be fun.

The darkness deepened. The forest grew black and still, and the fire burned down until there was nothing left but ashes. The sky was full of stars. When Joel yawned Mom suggested that it was considerably past his bedtime. "And ours too," she added. "It has been a long day."

"Have you made up your mind about the hosting job?" Joel asked at breakfast the next morning. "What are you going to tell the rangers when they come around?"

"What would you like me to tell them?" Dad asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"That you'll be the host here this summer. I can't think of anything I'd rather do than stay here. Please, Dad, say we can."

"Then it's decided," Dad said. "I'll tell them we're all agreed. It'll be a terrific educational experience for all of us, but of course, if we're to answer questions about the area and the names of the birds and flowers, we must learn all we can. We'll go into the library this afternoon and look for some books. I'm sure the ranger has some we can borrow too."

The rangers came by soon after breakfast and asked if they'd thought any more about being hosts for June and July at Whispering Spruce Campground. Dad told them they'd discussed it and decided it was something they'd really enjoy, and the rangers gave him an application form to fill out.

"It's just a formality," the ranger explained. "Although if you should have an accident, the insurance company would need proof that you were employed by us."

One of the rangers went back to the truck and returned with a dark green forest jacket for each of them. Each jacket had a badge on the arm. The rangers also handed Dad the keys to the supply room, a clipboard, and a large box of maps and brochures. "You'll want to study up on these," he said. "You'll be asked all kinds of questions about the area."

"And this," he said, handing Joel a long stick with a nail in the bottom, "is your badge of office. Discharge your duties faithfully."

Joel slipped into his forest jacket and went outside with his stick. He felt very important as he snagged pieces of litter and deposited them in the garbage cans. Now he was part of the National Forest Service, helping to keep the campground clean.

"By the way," one of the rangers said just before they left, "we're having a slide show for all our volunteers over at the visitor center this

afternoon - sort of a get-acquainted time. There'll be cookies and punch, too, so you'll enjoy it, I'm sure."

Dad promised they'd be there.

"Then you're on your own," the rangers said. "Good luck."

As soon as they'd gone, Dad towed the trailer over to the host site at the entrance to the campground, where the Stars and Stripes waved, and set it up. Then he pulled out the awnings and placed the deck chairs under the trees.

"Well, what do you think of your home for the next two months?" he asked Joel when he came back. "Not bad, is it?"

"It's great, Dad," Joel said. "And now what are we supposed to do?"

"Nothing much at present," his father said. "Of course, people will be stopping by to ask questions, and we'll help them all we can. For now we might as well walk around the campground and get to know it. We can check the restrooms while we're at it."

"There aren't many people camping here, are there?" Joel said. Dad told him that the rangers had said that in a few days the campground would probably be full. "Enjoy it while you can," Dad chuckled. "Apparently it gets very busy later on."

When they got back to the trailer a Mr. Jenkins from the Department of Agriculture stopped by to see them and left a leaflet for them to read. Then he suspended a little triangular box from a branch of an alder tree nearby. Joel asked what it was for.

"It's a gypsy moth trap," Mr. Jenkins said. "It has been coated with a special scent to attract the male gypsy moth. It's also sticky so that when the moth gets inside it can't get out. I'll be around periodically to check it, and if I find a gypsy moth in the trap we'll have to spray the campground."

"Why?" Joel asked.

"Gypsy moths are very destructive," Mr. Jenkins explained. "They can wipe out entire orchards and forests in a very short time unless they're eradicated. They're terrible pests. Right now they've been found in California and on the East Coast, but none in Oregon so far, and that's the way we want to keep it."

"How did they come to be in this country?" Joel asked.

"It's a strange story," Mr. Jenkins replied. He explained that in 1868 a Harvard astronomer began experimenting with the crossbreeding of silk worms in his spare time, and he brought the gypsy moth to Medford, Massachusetts, by importing eggs from Europe. It was never any

trouble in Europe because its numbers had been controlled by birds and other insects, but it liked the conditions it found in America and set out to take possession of the land. Trees in Massachusetts were completely defoliated. Ravenous caterpillars soon covered the sidewalks and houses. Real estate prices plummeted, and people left the area, unable to cope with the problem. The government appropriated hundreds of thousands of dollars to eradicate the gypsy moth, and by 1900 the victory was almost won. In fact, the government was so sure it had gotten rid of the pests that it cut off the money, and in the next five years the area of infestation grew from 359 square miles to 2,224 square miles!

"Since the female cannot fly," Mr. Jenkins continued, "the spread of the gypsy moth depends on free transportation. It attaches itself to cars and is carried to all parts of the United States, where it drops off and breeds new generations. We're particularly concerned with checking campgrounds because people come in from every state, often bringing the pest with them."

"What do they look like?" Joel asked, fascinated by the story.

"They're quite beautiful, I suppose," Mr. Jenkins said. "They're white with bold bands of black. I hope you never see one here though," he said grimly.

Joel checked the little trap almost daily, but fortunately it was always empty.