

Chapter 1

Jack's New Job

Jack Montgomery stepped inside the kitchen door and slumped against the frame. His usually untroubled blue eyes were clouded, and his curly brown hair messed up.

“No luck?” Mrs. Montgomery deftly removed an apple pie from the oven. She sprinkled sugar over the top, making it look something like the grey sprinkled through her brown hair. Her blue eyes, so like her son’s, shone sympathetically.

“None.” Jack dropped to a chair and gazed unseeingly out the polished window. Tall fir and pine trees waved gently against a turquoise late May sky, the kind of day Jack loved best. It was a welcome contrast to the exceptionally rainy season that had plagued Snowden in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state that spring.

Jack sighed and looked back at his mother. For the first time he noticed the tiny worry lines around her eyes, the slight tenseness of her mouth. His heart sank. If only he could have brought home better news!

“Maybe something will come up tomorrow,” she said.

“That is like Mom,” Jack thought. “Always looking ahead for a better day.” His face filled with bitterness. “I just don’t understand it,” he said. “God knows how badly I need a summer job! School and clothing expenses just keep going up and up, and after the long winter shutdown when Dad can’t log, we need the money.”

“I know. Rocking-chair unemployment compensation is hard to stretch,” Mrs. Montgomery admitted. For a moment she looked defeated, but her cheerful smile soon crept out again. “At least, we’ve had enough to eat this year, and no one has been sick.”

“Yeah.” But Jack wasn’t all that convinced.

“What did the mill owner say?”

Jack tipped his chair back until it squeaked in protest. “He said I was too young. Not that I wouldn’t be a good worker, but that he just couldn’t use me.” He felt the dull red color creep into his face, but he met his mother’s eyes squarely. “I told him I needed the job to help with school expenses.”

Mom’s eyes gleamed with pride, but she only asked, “What did he say?”

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Jack's mouth twisted. "Oh, he was swell about it. He said, 'Son, I'd like to help out, but I can't. I've got two openings and fifteen men begging for jobs. The lumber business isn't what it could be. And Jack, those fifteen men are heads of families. Most of them have several kids. They need money to put food on their tables.' The mill owner sort of swallowed hard and then added, 'It hurts to see their eyes when I tell them there's no work. Every one of them is a hard worker, same as you are, and I can't do a thing.'"

"He must really like you to open up like that," Mom said quietly.

"I know." Jack spread his hands out. "It's just that it was my last chance. None of the stores need anyone. The wives are competing for what few clerking jobs there are. I wanted to be able to tell Dad that I had a job and could take care of my own expenses this year!"

"Dad appreciates what you're trying to do." Mom wiped her hands on the dishtowel and brushed flour from her apron.

The blue-and-white kitchen was a good setting for her. Their old-fashioned home had high ceilings and enough room for a rocker in the kitchen.

How many childish troubles had Jack brought to her here? He felt 'a stinging in his eyes and shook his head hard. He was too old to cry over something he didn't get.

"Well, I've got to start supper." Mom smiled at him again.

She had been pretty when she was young. All the pictures showed that. But she was pretty now too, Jack thought. Jack hugged her and grabbed the potato peeler. He could at least help with supper. There was no sign of his sister Merry, and Mom looked tired.

While he peeled potatoes, his mind raced, frantically trying to figure out a new angle for getting a job. Mom's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Have you prayed about it?"

"That's always your answer, isn't it?" "Why not? It works."

Jack couldn't help laughing at her quick retort. "I don't see how God's going to make a job out of thin air and mountains!" He pointed out the open door to the sun shining on Avalanche Peak and reflecting off the snowcapped mountains surrounding Snowden.

"Don't give up." She impulsively roughed his hair. "God has a way of waiting until the last minute, then coming through with something better than we could ever hope or dream."

That night Jack sat on the step thinking about what his mother had said. He'd been a Christian since he was a kid. He knew God could do anything. The question was - would He? It didn't look like it as May

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ended. June swept in, hot and unexpectedly dry, and school was over for the year. Jack was cleaning out his locker when his friend Bill Arnold motioned mysteriously and led him to a deserted classroom. Bill's brown eyes snapped with excitement. "Have you got a job yet?"

"No." It was all Jack could get out.

"Why?"

"I got on with the Forest Service for the summer."

"Yeah. I wish I'd thought to ask sooner." Jack's spirits dropped. If he just hadn't waited so long. If only he'd gone in when Bill first mentioned it.

"It may not be too late. Scuttlebutt has it that they may need another guy for tree planting and stuff." Bill couldn't keep back his excitement. "Get yourself down there before any of the other guys hear about it."

A thrill shot through Jack. "I will. Thanks!" He gripped Bill's arm.

"Forget it!" Bill grinned. "You're all right, even if you are religious." He ducked Jack's mock swing and headed into the hall.

Jack sprinted the mile to Forest Service headquarters, his heart pounding in time with his feet. It was the last minute, all right. Had God really made a job out of "thin air and mountains," as he had joked?

An hour later Jack was running a mower over the lawn in front of the Forest Service building, wanting to yell with every blade of grass he cut. He had a job, at least for the month of June. Regular work would start the next day, but he'd asked if there was anything he could do to help that afternoon and was given the mowing job. By quitting time he had finished all except one area. He eyed it, disliking the idea of leaving it. Tomorrow he'd go out tree planting. There would be no time to finish the lawn.

Twenty minutes later Jack had only a few swaths left. He turned a corner, and saw the district ranger marching toward him. Jack didn't know the new ranger, but he looked stern. Oh, oh! Had he blown the job already? He shut off the mower as the ranger stopped a few feet away.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Jack's heart dropped to his Nikes. "Uh - cutting the grass." He could have kicked himself for giving such a dumb answer.

"Didn't you hear the whistle? It's past quitting time. We don't pay overtime unless we authorize it ahead of time." The ranger scowled.

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"I didn't expect overtime," Jack stammered, wiping his hot forehead. "I was so close to being done. I couldn't see leaving it - especially when I won't be here tomorrow to finish."

"Why not?" It cracked like a whip. "Going swimming or something?"

"No. Tree planting."

"And you wanted to finish the job, even on your own time?"
"Yes."

To Jack's amazement the grim face broke into a smile. A hard hand shot out, and the ranger said, "Put her there! First day with us?"

"Yes. But not the last." It popped out before Jack could stop it. He shook hands with the craggy-faced man.

"Welcome aboard - what's your name, anyway?"

"Jack Montgomery."

"Well, Jack Montgomery, you keep up your attitude and you won't have any trouble." The big ranger walked away with Jack staring at him.

That night at supper Jack told what happened. He finished, "I thought I'd had it when he yelled at me."

His sister Merry, a miniature Mrs. Montgomery, looked solemn. "I'd have been scared."

Dad laughed. "The ranger's all right. He carries a tremendous responsibility, not just for a smooth-running outfit, but for the safety of every crew member and even for Snowden." A frown marred his deep blue eyes, and he impatiently brushed back his brown-and-grey hair that curled like Jack's. "Forecasters are predicting the driest summer ever for this area. Fire danger will be extreme come July and August."

"The town won't catch fire, will it?" Merry shivered.

"Not as long as the Forest Service has good men to protect us." Dad's twinkling eyes didn't hide how proud he was Jack had a job.

Jack yawned. "I think I'll hit the sack early. Big day tomorrow."

Jack was right. It was a big day, and an exhausting one. Along with Bill and a dozen others, he rode the Forest Service crew bus to a logged-off area. The hillside that had held giant trees now lay empty in the sunlight. The fall before, the logging crews had done their required cleanup - burning downed limbs and debris. Now the Forest Service crew would plant hundreds of seedling trees, and in time, there would be new timber for homes and industry.

Jack and Bill quickly demonstrated their skill to their "straw boss" (supervisor) who set them planting while he patiently showed the out-

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of-town boys how to hit the soil, make a gash in the earth, and push in a seedling. A careful patting in, and the little tree was ready to grow.

“Glad we already know how to use a Pulaski.” Bill hefted a tool that looked like a single-bit ax with an arched hoe extending from the back.

“Me, too,” Jack said. “All that experience on tree planting day when we were sophomores is paying off.” Jack expertly drove his Pulaski into the ground again. “How many trees are we going to plant today?”

“A whole lot!” Bill pointed to the stacks of seedlings. “Remember when we were sophomores, how some of the kids got tired and dropped bunches of seedlings in one hole? I bet some of these guys will too.”

By the end of the week Jack saw some of the workers doing just that, but he refused to have a part in such negligence. He was being paid to do a good job. He’d give it all he had.