

Chapter 1

Camp Wautum Woods

By the shores of Lake Mahala climbed a craggy, snow-draped mountain, barely glowing in the starlight. Across the deep, dark water, waves lapped gently at the shore of Camp Wautum Woods. The youth camp lay silent beneath giant pines and firs, their bouncing branches a symphony of soft sounds, playing a lullaby for the slumbering youngsters.

In Girls' Village Cabin 11, Becka Bailey burrowed deep into her sleeping bag. "They won't talk!" she grumbled in her thoughts. "All ten girls - too shy to do anything but stare at one another!"

Becka tried to pray about the situation, but an annoying sound, like a miniature chain saw, kept cutting her sentences into meaningless phrases.

Supper had proved a disaster, her girls all stiffly proper in their blue jeans and sweat shirts. The awkward, quiet table seemed hopelessly adrift in a sea of noisy voices as the lodge swelled with juniors eager for the week ahead.

Becka cringed at how ridiculous she had felt, babbling away, smiling broadly. (Of course, all staff personnel smiled broadly; it was the rule.) She and the girls' director, Maxine - "Max" for short - had tried several ploys to draw the campers out of their shyness, but to no avail.

Cabin worship time was the same. No one talked. No one wanted to pray. All ten girls just stared, their faces looking eerily frozen in the glow of the heater that hung from the ceiling.

Now Maxine slept peacefully across the aisle, while her assistant, Becka, continued to toss and turn.

For years Becka had looked forward to this counselor job - eight years, in fact - back when she had lugged her overstuffed suitcase through the door of Cabin 15's A-frame for the first time. How tiny and scared she had felt then!

"I suppose that's how these poor girls feel," she told herself, and then she remembered how her counselor had put her at ease.

"A great job I'm do ..." *What is that sound?*

She sat up on the lower bunk and listened more closely. Snoring. *Someone was snoring!*

Becka slipped into her shoes and robe and followed the irritating noise to the top berth of the next bunk. Carrie lay on her back, blowing loud, gurgling sounds from her throat.

Becka eased the girl over onto her side, then settled back on her own bed to take off her shoes.

Sniff! came another sound, this time from across the aisle. Then more sniffing. Now what?

Again, Becka groped through the dark, ending up at Ruzena's bedside.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"I miss m-my mom," the girl stammered, "and I wanna go home."

Becka put her arm around the bulging sleeping bag. "Now, Ruzena, you don't want to go home already."

"Yes, I do!" the pathetic, small voice declared.

Then Becka used her most persuasive whisper. "Think of all the fun you're going to have at camp!"

"I don't want to have fun at camp. I wanna go home."

Becka sighed, then employed the "brainwashing" techniques she had used on her younger brother, Kurt, at times. When those tactics failed, she prayed with the girl and left her with her promise to go to sleep.

Wearily, Becka climbed back into her sleeping bag and reminisced about staff training the week before. She had worked hard alongside other staff members, spreading wood chips, clearing rocks, and cleaning cabins. There were also Indian songs and lines to learn as Hiawatha's sister in a play for campfire. In the midst of their hard labor, however, the young people had enjoyed some special fun every evening.

Becka smiled when she recalled one such event, the spaghetti feed. She had been matched with Geoffrey Blake. His

bright blue eyes gleamed impishly as they were ordered to feed each other the entire meal. Becka clumsily dropped spaghetti in Geoff's juice, and they laughed so much their food grew cold. Becka's auburn-haired friend, Beth Gates, sat nearby with Dan Burnett, likewise spooning vegetables into his grinning mouth. Spaghetti sauce and salad dressing smeared most faces before the evening ended.

"Too bad staff members aren't allowed to fall in love with each other!" Becka sighed. "Another rule," she thought in exasperation, "and an unfair one at that." Geoff, a sophomore in college and a music major, would make a fine catch - "such a positive, sweet guy!"

Becka groaned inwardly at the sound piercing the dark. The miniature chain saw was at it again. She jumped up, turned Carrie over, then made swift tracks across the icy floor and back to bed.

"*Brrr!* It sure is cold for late June," she thought. But Texas, where she would attend college, would be warm nearly year-round. Her heart fluttered at the thought of traveling so far from home.

Because Becka had completed her junior and senior grades in one year, she was much younger than most academy graduates. Barely past her seventeenth birthday, she felt quite inexperienced compared to the rest of the Camp Wautum Woods' staff.

"Please, Lord," she began, "help these girls to talk and to learn about one another - and about You. Help Ruzena to get over her homesickness and ..." Becka fell asleep.

Monday and Tuesday passed quickly as Becka joined in her campers' activities, including photography class, their specialty that week. "Surely, they'll talk now!" Becka thought while hiking a trail with her girls in search of natural objects to photograph. To her dismay, however, the girls dutifully - and silently - followed her and the teacher, clicking their cameras at trees, the mountain, the lake, and anyone who would agree to stand still for them.

"It's as if they're each in some kind of imaginary cubbyhole, hiding from the world," Becka complained to Beth while they curled their hair early Wednesday morning at the shower house. Becka put down her curling iron with a thud. "I feel like a failure already, and this is just my first week as a counselor."

Beth looked sympathetic, but exclaimed, "Count your blessings! I'd gladly trade a few of my live wires. And to be honest, I'm looking forward to five o'clock, when my day off begins."

"That's right! It's my day off too," Becka noted. "Twenty-four hours of nothing but sleep and lying in the sun. No responsibilities!" She finished a last curl and began to brush her dark blond hair. "I'm so tired, Beth. Every night, just as I'm drifting off, Carrie begins her snoring routine."

Her friend grinned mischievously. "And you were just complaining that she never says anything!"

After a good laugh they returned to their respective cabins.

Becka gazed around at her sleeping girls. At least Ruzena was more content - no more homesickness. In fact, she seemed happy in her own quiet way. And all of them did enjoy the lively songs and plays at campfire each evening.

Just then reveille sounded, waking her charges.

"They even stretch and groan shyly," the counselor noted with little amusement.

The day proceeded as before, her juniors obediently taking part in camp activities, but seeming to leave their voices and enthusiasm packed away in suitcases.

Promptly at five o'clock, Nellie Mansfield met Becka at line call. "Go have fun!" she ordered. Nellie, a tall brunette, would substitute for Becka and Maxine the next twenty-four hours.

"Bye, girls!" Becka waved to her campers. "See you tomorrow afternoon!"

"At least Nellie would have no problems with her quiet brood," she thought. She smiled at the new confidence she felt. Technically, she was an assistant to Maxine, because as girls' director, Max was often away from her cabin, taking care of camp business. "I think I could handle a cabinful of girls by

myself,” Becka mused as she packed a small suitcase for her short trek to the girls’ staff cabin, where she and Beth would stay.

At ten o’clock that night, after all campers were bedded down, the staff members wandered to the lodge. Upstairs in the loft a special, carpeted place awaited. Here, every Wednesday, they received a spiritual refresher while sharing testimonies and praying for one another and their campers. Pastor Joe, the camp director, usually had some words of encouragement for them during this “praise meeting.”

Becka and Beth sat side by side in the candlelight, adding their voices to the sacred melodies. After those peace-filled moments, Becka felt reluctant to leave, wanting to drink in any leftover blessings.

“Becka!” Geoff’s deep voice broke into her thoughts. “It’s Don’s and my day off too. Would you and Beth like to go to town for some milkshakes?”

Becka’s heart skipped a beat. “I don’t know.” She hesitated. “It’s pretty late - and is it legal?”

Beth answered her question. “On our days off we can go and come as we please. All we have to do is tell Dan. So, let’s go!” she coaxed. “It’ll be our last chance to indulge in junk food for a whole week.”

“All right!” Becka agreed.

The four piled into Don Hamada’s car and took off for the town about fifty miles away. Moonlight streamed through tall ponderosa pines as they descended the mountains.

Later, when they reached the sleepy outskirts of the city, the foursome found a cafe open and ordered milkshakes.

While waiting for the waitress to return, Becka decided, “I think I’ll phone my mother.”

“Wish her a merry Christmas for me!” Don called after her.

Geoff couldn’t be outdone, so he added, “Tell her, good luck with her scuba-diving lessons!”

Becka giggled. “Hi, Mom! Don says, ‘Merry Christmas!’ and Geoff says -”

“Becka!” Mrs. Bailey’s sleepy voice sounded anxious. “It’s after midnight!”

“We’re in town, the four of us, Mom. We’re recharging our batteries with some junk food.”

“Now, Becka, you watch those sweets!” her mother protested.

“Aw, Mom, camp food is so nutritious that one milkshake a week is hardly going to make me come down with typhoid fever or some other rare disease.”

“Well, just be sure to brush your teeth when you get back to camp.”

Becka stifled a laugh. Here she was, ready to go off to college, and her mother was reminding her to brush her teeth.

“Oh, Becka! It’s so good to hear your voice. I’ve missed you, sweetheart.”

I’ve missed you too, Mom. How are Kurt and Dad?”

Her mother yawned audibly. “They’re fine - working hard, as usual. Kurt’s helping Grandma in her orchards.”

They chatted a few more minutes, then ended with her mom’s pledge to visit the following week.

On the drive back to Camp Wautum Woods, Becka and Geoff talked quietly in the back seat, discovering they shared many common interests - especially a deep love of music. Geoff’s honey-colored hair glistened in the dim light as their car made its way up the mountainous road.

Becka remembered the first time she had seen Geoff. She was a senior in academy when his college group of musicians had performed at her school. During his marimba solo his hands turned to a blur over the keys, causing Becka’s marimba-playing friend, Marty Webster, to drool with envy.

But that wasn’t the only instrument Geoff had mastered. He turned up again at Bible conference, this time his agile fingers stroking the keys of a piano. For two hours he had played any gospel song the teenagers had requested while they encircled him with their voices.

Becka glanced again at the handsome musician beside her as the car neared Lake Mahala. Geoffrey Blake would make a

“fine catch” indeed - if only it weren’t forbidden by the camp manual.

A few moments later she and Beth said goodnight to the fellows and made their way to the girls’ staff cabin. The next morning both girls slept until noon, then spent a few hours down at the dock sunning themselves. Four-thirty arrived too soon, and Becka slipped into deserted Cabin 11 to unpack. “Nellie’s done a good job,” she thought as her eyes swept over the neat room. Each bed was meticulously made.

Suddenly, Becka noticed Ruzena’s empty bunk. Where was the girl’s sleeping bag? She peeked under the bed. Ruzena’s suitcases were missing also.

“Oh, no!” Becka groaned, dreading the explanation she knew awaited her.