

On Parsons Creek

By Richard Sutton

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Chapter One Excerpt...

“You believe in Bigfoot, Papa?”

Brendan had been watching some reality TV and now, I guess he expected me to weigh in. He’s a kid with lots of questions about the natural world and I’ve always encouraged him to get out into nature and see it for himself, rather than get lost in books alone. His question stopped me cold though. It wasn’t about whether I believed the stories or not, it was a question of what, exactly I was going to tell my thirteen year old grandson. His question took me back to 1967, slipping all the way across the country to the forests of the Oregon Cascade Mountains, and a series of events that have been with me ever since... sharp and clear in my memory.

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I was sixteen the first time we crossed the culvert over Parsons Creek. It was just my luck. My tenth grade school year had just ended when Dad told me that we were moving to a cabin out in the cedars. The news didn’t bring a smile. After moving almost every year since I’d been in school, being “the new kid” was

getting old. We'd actually lived in one place during all three years of Junior High and my sophomore year in High School, so I'd started to feel comfortable. Me: Jack Taylor -- settled. Like I finally belonged somewhere. Somewhere I didn't have to try and fit in. I should have known it was much too comfortable a feeling to last for long. So, here we were: uprooted again, according to some unexplained schedule. As we slowed to look u the creek, I'd already started trying to figure out a new angle.

We were staying in the same state this time. Not too far from my school friends. We'd also been out that stretch of highway many times on McKenzie River fishing trips chasing the wily Oregon Steelhead Trout. At least the scenery would be familiar. I wondered how it would feel going from a school with 700 in my graduating class to one that graduated only ninety-six the year before. I'd done my research on the new digs, which helped lower my expectations as my first day at a new school approached.

I was used to feeling all nervous whenever we were about to finish a move, anyway. Running down my mental notes of "how-to-be" and "who-to-be" possibilities always occupied my brain until it was exhausted. I wasn't a typical, well-adjusted kid. Each time I approached a new school in a new town, I tried to get it right. I tried to toss those behaviors that had

been troublesome before and find new ways to fit in. It felt like hitting the ground running. Sometimes this led me to all kinds of interesting information and gossip, which I would consider carefully for anything of value before finally falling asleep each night during the school week. I had developed a "new kid checklist" in my head. It was very important to determine who the major assholes were as soon as I could, and what especially annoyed them. That meant planning how each day's between-class activity would take place. I felt it all hanging over me like a gigantic pile of garbage I had to pick my way through. Since I was supposedly used to it, I also felt a little guilty that it still bothered me after all this time. It's not easy watching your life unfold from an arm's length away.

As usual, that morning we were late to our own arrival. We'd overshot the driveway, so Dad backed the car back over the culvert and uphill to where the driveway opened at an angle, to the brush along the roadside. He pulled in and our first view of the house was suddenly blocked by three deer, running straight at us. One of them lost its footing, skidded in the gravel and had to jump straight onto the hood of the truck. Dad stomped the brakes with a shout and we all cringed back, thinking it was going to come through the windshield. Instead, it jumped off and joined the others, shooting off into the brush on the other side.

“What in the name of...” Mom nudged him, so he tuned it down, adding, “Sheesh! Never saw *that* during daylight hours. Ev’rybody okay?”

I replied, “they must have been spooked by something. Scary. Maybe we should keep our eyes open pulling up. Who knows what’s up there. Maybe a bear?”

No bear. Still, despite the jarring welcome, the fragrant tang of the tall, Red Cedar grove where the A-Frame cabin nestled, felt like a good sign as I climbed out of the back seat of Dad’s panel truck. The movers, parked between trees up past the house, were already unloading boxes and lining them up on the long, decked porch. As I climbed out of the back seat, there was a sudden, shuddering crash as the roll-down back door of the moving van hit the deck. I figured that must have been what had spooked the deer.

The house itself, sat in almost full shade as Mom and I carried the dishes and other breakables from the car. Dad stood there, rubbing his chin with one hand while his finger traced the deep crease where the deer’s hoof had struck the hood. Out through the trees, I could see where the hilltop fell away and clear, sunny light filled in between the crowded trunks. Douglas firs and a few dark hemlocks mixed in from the creek side and wrapped completely around the small cedar grove at our doorstep. It was like an island in the forest.

Dad took a short break, sitting on the porch steps, and I joined him while Mom and my kid brother unpacked the kitchen stuff. He was tapping his nose, which usually meant he was puzzled. Finally, he said, "Those deer... acting like that in broad daylight. Weird, you know?" He turned and looked at me with a strange look in those watery blue eyes of his.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied, adding, "Must have been the movers, huh?"

"They would have heard them coming, and hunkered down. I can't imagine what would've spooked them like that, maybe a bear or a cat... chasing 'em. I'll check into it. Let's get back to work"

A few hours, after the moving van disappeared down the drive and six hundred boxes later, I wandered out to the forest edge to take a look out at my new world. A few layers of Laurel and some Bear Berry bushes led from under the last of the trees, down the rocky slope to a soft bank of dry needles and sparse grass. Below, a narrow stream wound a meandering course between huge, yellow-ochre boulders and expanses of flat rock ledges. It disappeared upstream, around a bend draped with dark, overhanging hemlocks and tall firs.

Downstream, the creek poured into a concrete culvert under the road that looked like a huge round mouth taking a long drink. I was a little over six feet

tall and if I stood inside the mouth and reached over my head I could just touch the ceiling inside. Looking at the little twisting streambed, I couldn't imagine the kind of flood that would need a pipe that big, but it was cheaper than a bridge, I guessed.

As I stood there, finally having a quiet moment, my younger brother, Billy came running up behind me and with a blast of energy, he launched himself downslope, actually flying a few yards above the ground. He had a knack for finding a way to burst through any peace I'd managed to find. He waved up at me from below, where he'd finally run out of steam between a bush and a boulder. You just gotta smile at the little kids, don't you? Faintly, from a distance somewhere off behind me, I could hear what sounded like a big diesel engine start up and begin to rumble. It filled the air with little snatches of background noise. Whatever was left of my private moment had gone, so I ran down to meet my brother at the creek side. Soon, the ripping buzz of a distant chainsaw added to the background rumble.

This had been logging country. Still was. Old abandoned donkey engines and wood or iron A-frame hoists weren't uncommon throughout logged woods all over the Cascades. Dad said all you had to do was follow a logging road or an old skidder path and you'd uncover old axe heads, broken handles, peavey heads, even old bent saw blades or broken saw chains. Here

we were, in a side valley jammed right up against the foothills of those mountains. I knew I'd get used to the added noise, just like I always got used to everything new. I took a little pride in how I could always find ways to slide into any new spot once we found ourselves stuck there. But I never really got to know how well, as we weren't stuck anywhere very long.

A shadow slid by my feet. I looked overhead in time to see a big hawk, silhouetted in the afternoon sun, fly off into the dark bend where the creek disappeared. It was the first time I'd ever seen one in the wild. They were rare, back then. Soon, my attention was distracted by the sound of my little brother splashing in the sunshine, where the creek ran across a bed of water worn, smooth stones.

Maybe this place wasn't going to be so bad, after all. I decided to just take it as it came and not try to plan everything for the best "angle". It would be an effort not to try and figure it all out first, but I figured it couldn't be any worse than my silly, self-charades.

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The first day of school, we dashed out with Dad after a quick breakfast and Mom's extended goodbye hugs. She held me at arm's length and added, "You always have such an easy time making friends. Have a fun day!"

I smiled and nodded. Inside, I was screaming, *no, it isn't easy. No matter how many times I have to do it, it's always really hard.*

Dad dropped us at the bus stop, which was three miles down the road to where the highway junction was. One bus served our side of the school district, all grades. It was noisy and a very long ride. I hadn't really had much of a chance to get to know anyone, but Jim.

He was a sandy-haired, lanky kid with really sharp elbows and a ready grin. He wore a Western-style chambray shirt with pearl snap buttons, jeans and Converse All-Stars. With the obvious exception of the flannel plaid shirt that seemed to be the issued uniform here, he looked like he belonged. His folks had a small horse ranch up at the end of the road, about a mile above the creek culvert. We sat in the row across from him on the bus and my brother found a kid his age to talk to in the seat immediately ahead of us. I tried to talk to Jim about horses and the girl four rows ahead of us who had big ones, above the din of the little kids, but only a few words made it across.

The old bus rattled and clanked us down the road, bouncing over potholes and tossing us all around like ping-pong balls. Seemed like every few hundred feet, it would screech to a stop and somebody would get on. A couple of bigger guys seemed to take pleasure in knocking against anyone's shoulders left hanging into

the aisle, so I made sure to pull mine in. Each one of them gave me the stink eye as they walked past to sit in the back.

I tried to make eye contact with Jim and he just smiled, nodding. Okay. Two more on the assholes list. Check. Jim seemed like a good guy. I appreciated his help with this stuff.

We'd spoken just once before when he passed me on the road, day after we got in, walking his horse down the creek from the bend.

He'd nodded, asking "New kid?"

"Yeah. Guess so." I'd waked over to where he held the horse's bridle up close. I was maybe eight, nine inches taller than he was. I stuck out my hand and said, "Jack".

"Jim. Morab," pointing up with his other hand to indicate the horse. I could tell he wasn't one to waste words. He started to move down towards the culvert, so I followed them down to the edge of the creek where he let the horse drink a bit. "Where you from?" His voice carried a sense of gravity.

This, I'd thought, feels like a business discussion. I'd told him where we'd moved from and hoped for the best.

He'd replied, "I thought you was a city kid. That house always seems to bring city folks up here, but they don't ever last too long. Mostly don't have any kids,

either.” He drew up on the bridle and the horse... Morab, lifted his head and looked back. “You like horses? We got a few of ‘em. C’mon up after school if you wanna see ‘em.” He pulled back, Morab turned and they headed up the bank. “See ya.”

So, I figured I was going to be a stranger in a strange land for a while. I wondered why our new house hadn’t kept its tenants long, but put that thought away. At least Jim wasn’t looking at me side-ways. So far, so good.

The bus ride was the first chance I had to look around at my new classmates, but there were only six of us still riding when the bus finally got to the High School. Low and brown, it looked like a cluster of mismatched, pre-fab buildings with one a tall one in the back, where I figured the gym was. I stayed in my seat, following Jim’s example, until the guys in the back had left the bus. Then, I guessed it was our turn. I always assumed I’d be assigned to the peon rabble in a new school. That was just the way it always worked. I’d decide if I wanted to remain there or if this was going to be a chance to become more popular, after I’d seen what the deal was here.

We stepped down off the bus and I noticed that the last step was riddled with rust. Jim was a class behind me, so we split up as we went through the big steel

double doors. The bell rang and I headed to the administration offices to report in.

It turned out, once the counselor had pulled my transcript from a brand new file folder in her desk drawer, I'd already taken every science course they offered and was also caught up with my math and social studies requirements for the year. She seemed very puzzled over what to do with me, but she assigned me to a homeroom and told me they'd get the rest of my schedule figured out by the end of first period. Okay. I found my locker and my Junior Year began with a yawn.

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A month later, I'd settled into the dull buzz of classrooms, the ongoing, awkward stress of being the new kid and trying to find something in common with at least a few other guys. I'd noticed a few of 'em talking excitedly about what they were gonna do when they got to Saigon. Couldn't wait to fire off automatic rifle rounds. I knew those weren't going to be my kind of friends. I was now just two years out from having to register with the Selective Service and as the days fell off the calendar there was an unpleasant background buzz in my head reminding me I'd better get set up with a deferment of some kind. I had figured academics might get me into a decent school, but the way classes

were stacking up here, it didn't look like I'd be helping my chances much.

Some of the less-aggressive farm kids hung out talking livestock and since I liked animals – sometimes better than people – I decided to make friends here, first.

I had two full periods of study hall – where I was supposed to put together a reading list from the High School Physics and Poly-Sci curriculum. No one in this rural district had taught any of the those courses, so I fell under the eye of the gym coach and Driver's Ed instructor, Mr. Flynn who also ran the study halls. I was really on my own and soon learned how to coast with the least effort, academically. Mr. Flynn, noticing my height, kept making references to the Basketball Season which I politely ignored, being tall but terribly slow and usually seriously uncoordinated. I had almost no skill with any kind of ball. I could draw, and I could take anything apart and put it back together in seconds, but a ball tossed to me might well smack me in the face before I got my hands up to catch it.

Jim was shaping into my only new friend and within a couple of days he'd asked me if I could come up and help him get some hay into the loft in their barn. Then, he said we could go riding. They kept Arabians and mixed saddle horses and I jumped at the chance to get to know horses better than my few summer camp

experiences, walking on horseback around a corral at the end of a lead. Not even exciting for a six year old that liked cowboy movies.

This became a weekly thing, sometimes a couple of afternoons' work. It was a lot better than my last after-school job, mucking out the local Egg Lady's big chicken coop. Her brown eggs tasted great; but on reflection, I figured no eggs *ever* cost that much.

But we lived in the trees now. The nearest chickens I'd seen were down near the highway turnoff. One afternoon, around 4:30, I walked up our driveway. Still trying to get the straw dust off, I almost walked right into the bed of a flatbed truck I didn't recognize. Inside, my mother was sharing a cup of tea with the oldest, most wrinkled man I had ever seen. He looked exactly like one of those puppets they make out of apples: all dried up. He stood up and extended his hand to me as Mom said, "Son, this is our neighbor, Mr. Wright."

I reached for his hand and began to reply, "Glad to..."

"Everett Wright, son. I'm Everett Wright. I own the adjoining parcel, uphill."

"You doin' some clearing Mr. Wright? I've been hearing what sounds like a Cat 'dozer and a saw running."

“Oh? No son, I log my land. Regular, like. Have been for the past forty years or so. I usually cut in the morning, then buck off and skid ‘em out by dark.”

“Wow. You have enough trees?”

My mother cut in and explained that Mr. Wright owned the full section, many square miles of forest. I nodded, absorbing the fact that this ancient apple-head with his skinny neck covered in stubble was a big landowner. We just rented. I was impressed.

He added, “Mostly Doug Fir and Hemlock, but I can usually take a couple of cedars, too. I try to leave ‘em alone, mostly though.” He gestured over his shoulder to the door with his thumb.

I asked him about his family and he replied, “Nope, It’s just me up there. Don’t even have a dog no more, but enough critters come around to keep me comp’ny.” He thanked my mother for the chat and the tea and nodded to me, saying, “I’ll keep my eye out for you boys. Make sure you don’t get into any trouble out there... in the cedars.”

I shook his knobby old hand as he left, wondering what he could have meant about trouble. I asked Dad, “What did he mean about trouble, anyway?”

“Oh, I don't think he had anything specific in mind. Just being friendly...” his voice trailed off as he shifted mental gears and added, “Don't worry. He's just old. Been here... forever I guess.”

Mom had already headed into the kitchen, so I figured I'd grab a shower before dinner and get rid of some of the horse smell and the prickly straw dust. I was still wondering what Mr. Wright meant about *any trouble*, as I toweled myself dry. I decided he thought we were city kids – not used to the ways of the woods. This might be the first time we'd lived in the woods, but we had always spent our leisure time camping, hiking or fishing if we had the chance. I hadn't ever taken to guns, though. The idea of killing a deer was repugnant, but I realized in this new community, I would probably be better off keeping those feelings to myself. Gun racks filled the back windows of every pickup we saw in the little strip of stores, auto-repair garages and the post office that made up the village.

A couple of days later, Dad told us that he'd looked into it. There weren't any bears left around and not even a bobcat had been sighted in many years.

“Mr. Wright just wants you to be careful around the deadfalls and brush. You can break a leg out there pretty easy,” said Dad and we both nodded solemnly. He'd also checked with the local Fish and Game guys about good fishing spots, but mostly they said the lower river and feeder creeks were fished out, except for Chubs and the like.

“So we'll still get up the McKenzie to do some real fishing, right?”

“Whenever we get the chance, son.” His vague answer didn’t give me a lot of hope to look forward to future trips.

The early fall passed through quickly. By late October, there was a definite chill in the air. When doe season came on, there was sporadic gunfire heard from every direction nearby. My dad had suggested that we wear orange stocking caps whenever we walked out into the trees. Seemed to make sense, especially when we read a couple of stories in the local paper, about hunters shot by their hunting buddies. One died out in the woods, so we decided it was better to stay safe, no matter how goofy it looked.

School remained mostly boring. An occasional jarring nudge by a passing upperclassman as I was “tested”, or a snort and laugh at the expense of the “new, city kid” was expected stuff. I told myself it was nothing to worry about. The only class that offered me anything new was English. We were assigned to read *Brave New World* and had scarcely gotten into class discussions when several of the more devout parents wrote in to excuse their children from having to continue it as it was a “...sinful, deceitful book. Not something that young men and women should be forced to read.” I got that from my English teacher after class, who swore me to secrecy. She just told the class that if they could think of another book they’d rather read, to

bring it in so she could check it over first. I stuck with Huxley and the report I handed in the Friday after, was ten pages long.

“Well, you sure had a lot to say about this book, didn’t you?” I tried not to smile. I thought I’d really outdone myself and prepared for the heaping praise surely to follow. She read the first page and wrinkled up her nose at the appropriate point, but she laid it back down on her desk and reminded me that the bell had rung. As I grabbed my stack of books and folders, I felt a little crestfallen. The book had held my attention all the way through and answered some things I’d wondered about. I’d really gotten into the groove while writing, so I figured the report would be a work of near genius, or at least, something useful and entertaining, but I’d have to wait to find out. The rest of that day went likewise. Disappointing, at best.