

MY SUMMER CAMP HAS MEGA SLOTHS



Rebecca Wood Barrett

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CHAPTER SAMPLER



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Summary: In this follow-up to *My Best Friend Is Extinct*, Henry and his friends are at
a mountain-bike summer camp that isn't what it seems. At least Henry gets to reunite
with his best friend, Yarp, and discover some new prehistoric creatures: mega sloths!

When a wildfire encroaches, everyone has to band together to escape.

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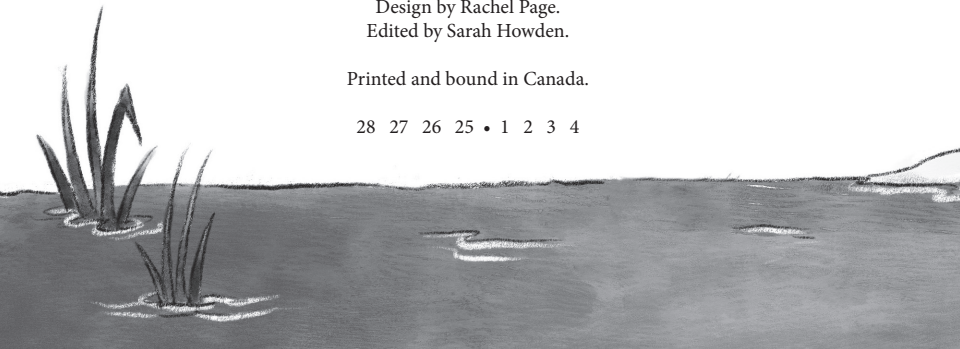
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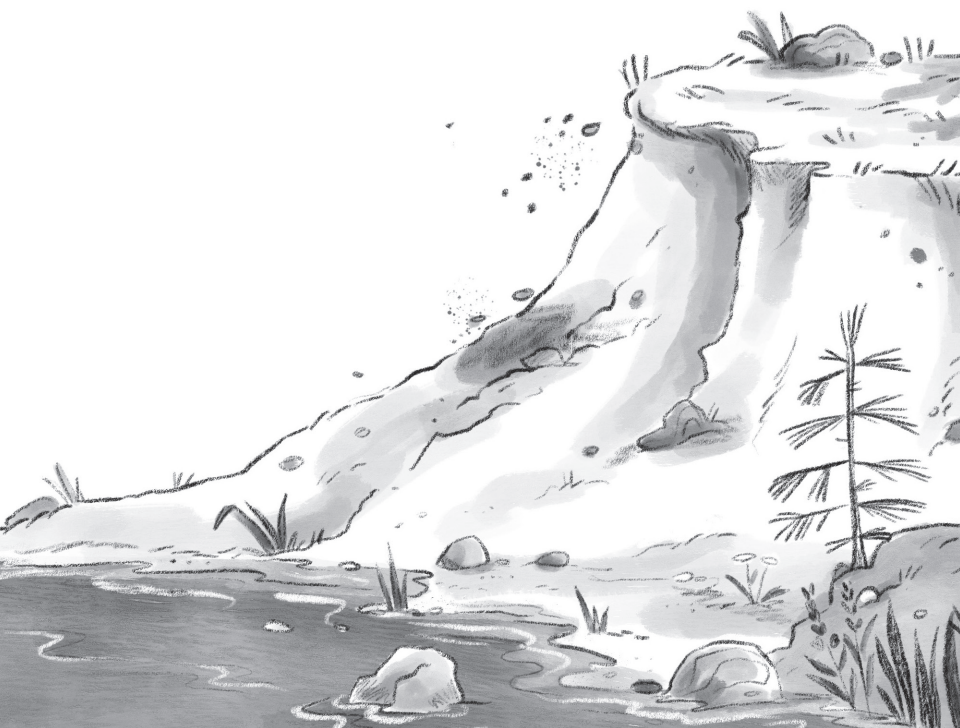
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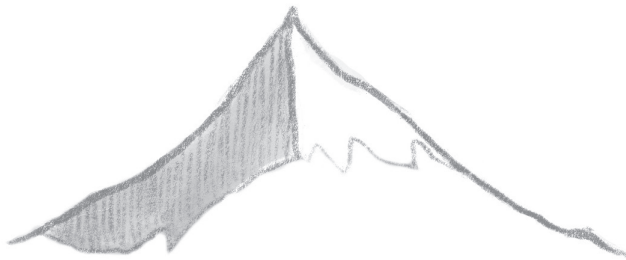


*For Colin and Maggie,
always encouraging me to go on an adventure.*

*To my vicious circle sisters,
Katherine, Libby, Mary, Sara, Stella and Sue.*

*And to Rose and Chelsea,
avid readers and advisors.*





ONE

There's nothing worse than being the worst. I used to love riding my bike. Until I found out I was really bad at it. I used to think I was a legend. Flying over speed bumps. Ripping through puddles. Cruising down the street with a black stripe up my back.

Riding on dirt trails was a nightmare. Every time I rode over a root or rock, it was like an invisible monster chomped my front tire. I was struggling to keep up with the other campers. I'd see a flash of colors through the trees. My friends Koko, Lucas and Captain Frances pedaling away from me.

I wondered if I would even make it to Camp Bushwhacker. What if I got lost? Would anybody come back to find me?

In the morning our group of eight campers had left the parking lot with our camp counselor. His name was Shifty, and he'd led the way. A truck was hauling all of the campers' clothes and tents up a dirt road to the campsite out in the wilderness, where we'd arrive on our bikes (if I ever got there).

Shifty looked young, and I wondered if he was still a teenager. He was wiry and had tiny freckles all over like he'd done a face-plant in the sand. His hair stuck up like mine, until he smushed it under his bike helmet. I guessed that with a name like Shifty, he was really good at shifting gears on his mountain bike.

I was *not* good at shifting gears. But I was determined to be a better rider. I rammed my front tire up against a big tree root the size of a salami sausage. I would crush it! My tire bounced backward. My bike tipped sideways. My brain yelled, "Put your foot down!" I couldn't move my feet fast enough. *Crash!* I landed hard with my bike on top of me. The outside of my thigh throbbed from hitting a rock.

Now that I knew I was the worst bike rider, all the fun had gone out of it. Which is sad because you can have a lot of fun doing something badly. Until you find out you're the worst. That changes everything.

"Henry! Are you okay?" called Koko, appearing on her bike from around a bend.



“I stopped for a rest,” I called, trying to sound super chill. I hoped she wouldn’t come any closer. I didn’t want her to see I’d just eaten a dirt sandwich.

But in a second the weight of my bike eased off my leg as Koko lifted it up. She set it down on the ground. Even though I was embarrassed, I was glad she’d come back. I sat up. Spat out a curl of dry moss.

Koko leaned over me, her two black braids swinging. “What happened?”

I gave the tree root a dirty look. “That root attacked me.”

She eyed the root, then me. “Did you lift your wheel up as you were riding?”

“No.”

Koko hopped onto my mountain bike and rode smoothly over the root. She kept riding up the trail. Was I supposed to get on *her* bike? I picked it up. She stopped, turned my bike around and coasted back down.

“Your bike has problems,” she announced.

What a relief! Maybe I wasn’t the worst biker after all. I just had a bad bike. Which still made me feel terrible. My mom couldn’t afford a good bike. We didn’t have much money, and Mom had spent her entire savings on this summer camp and my bad bike.

“What do you mean?” I argued. “It’s a *great* bike! It’s the best bike I’ve ever had!”

Koko leapt off and started fiddling with a metal cage thingy on top of my front tire.

“Hang on to it for a second.” She handed me my bad bike. Now I was holding both bikes. My bike looked like an old clunker compared to her shiny, techy mountain bike.

“Your brakes aren’t working.”

I swallowed. Bad bike.

“The brake pads are worn down. You can see there’s a lip coming over the edge of the rim.”

“And that’s...not good?”

“It means you’re riding with your brakes on the whole time. They’re slowing you down. I can fix them with an Allen key.” Koko slipped off her water pack. She reached into it and pulled out a thin piece of metal in the shape of an L. She stuck the weird key into the top of the bolt and turned it. Then she pulled the bottom of the brake upward.

“I’ve raised the brake pad for now.” She turned the key to tighten the bolt. “When we get to Camp Bushwhacker, you can cut the lip off with a knife so the pad is flat on the rim.”

“No problemo,” I said confidently. “I’m very good with knives.”

Koko threw me a strange look and climbed back on her bike. “Can I give you a riding tip?”

“Sure.”

“Before you ride over a root, preload your suspension by pushing *down* on the handlebars and then lifting up.”

“What does preload mean?” It sounded complicated.

“That’s when you push down on the spring inside your suspension. It’ll bounce you back up and over the root if you time it right.”

“Got it.” I rode slowly toward the root. My arms pushed down, I lifted up—and *wham!* The nasty, evil, no-good, killer salami-sausage root ambushed me again! I hit the dirt hard. I was so angry I began to boil. Everything turned red. Scrambling to my feet, I raged at the sausage, kicking it. My big toe screamed at me to stop. I stomped on the root with both feet instead. “Die, sausage, die!”

Koko watched me in silence. Not only did the sausage not die, it appeared untouched. My brain felt like it was exploding with frustration. I ran to my bike, lifted it in the air and threw it into the bush.

My eyes burned. Koko picked up her bike and, without looking back, started riding away. “Just walk your bike over the root, Henry,” she called over her

shoulder. “We have to get to camp before dark. And we don’t want to run into any cougars and bears.” Her bright-orange helmet bobbed between the fir trees.

I wanted to lie down next to my bike and never move again. If Koko thought she could scare me with her talk about wild animals, she was wrong. I’d met all kinds of strange animals in the forest before. The previous winter, after a massive snowstorm, I had discovered an unusual creature hidden in a snowbank. At first I’d thought it was a bear. I never did figure out what species he was, although my best guess was a short-faced bear from the last ice age. Which was amazing, because short-faced bears are supposed to be extinct.

I’d named the creature Yarp and introduced him to Koko and my other friends. For a time he was my best friend, until he had to return to the wilderness with his yarpie clan. Sometimes I wondered where he lived now. I wondered if he ever missed me like I missed him.

If I lay here long enough, moss would grow over me like a blanket. Mice would nest in my pockets. Slugs would sleep in my ears. Eventually I would disappear into the forest floor.

A mosquito circled around my nose. I waved it away. Over on the bush, my bike lay waiting for me. It didn’t mind that I had called it a bad bike. It didn’t

care that I'd thrown it into the forest, even after Koko had fixed the tires and the front brake. But if I didn't get up and get back on, I wouldn't get to have fun at summer camp. Thinking about missing out made my heart ache.

I rolled over and hopped to my feet. Gripping the handlebars, I lifted up my bike. I walked it toward the root and lifted the front wheel up and over.

I was about to climb back on when I had a feeling that something was watching me. I scanned the forest. A light wind swished through the tree-tops. The ferns and bushes were unmoving down here on the ground. My heart thudded. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Telling me someone was watching me? All because I was embarrassed about walking my bike over the root?

I heard a light crack. And another, like twigs breaking. Someone, or *something*, was creeping after me. I pushed my bike along the trail, glancing nervously over my shoulder. Behind me, the tall bushes were moving like a large animal was stalking through them. My whole body was electrified with fear. I started to jog, rolling my bike along. Looking back, I swear I glimpsed brown fur, but I wasn't sticking around to find out what it was. I leapt back on my bike and pedaled like mad to catch up to Koko.

My lungs were exploding by the time I found her, sitting on a log, waiting for me. “Some...thing... was...following...me,” I panted.

“A bear? A cougar?” Koko stood up with alarm.

“I don’t know.”

“Yikes.” She climbed on her bike. “Let’s keep moving.”

We pedaled along in silence while I caught my breath. I noticed the trees had changed from giants with droopy fir shoulders to dwarfs trying to whop you with their stiff branches. I didn’t know where we were, but I knew we had climbed high into the remote alpine wilderness. Luckily, the predator seemed to have decided we weren’t worth it.

“Thanks for fixing my bike. It sure is a lot easier riding a bike without the brakes on,” I said. “I still have to walk over all the roots though.”

“Just keep trying to ride over them, Henry. I’ve been mountain biking since I was five, and I ride with my dad all the time. It takes practice.”

I didn’t want to tell her that this was only my second time mountain biking. Or maybe she’d already guessed that.



After a while dusk floated down out of the sky, and it was hard to see in the gloom.

“Hey, Koko,” I said, speeding up to ride alongside her. “It’s been hours since we’ve seen anyone. Do you think it’s strange we’re out here by ourselves?”

She frowned. “Yes.” She thought some more, then said, “Why hasn’t anybody come looking for us? I told them I was going back for you.”

I shrugged. “Maybe they forgot about us.”

“And *that’s* why teachers always do head counts on school trips,” she said in a huff. “Besides, why is there only one camp counselor riding with us? There should be at least two.”

My mind revved into the worst-case scenario. How would we survive without any food, water or candy if we got lost in the wilderness?

Koko stopped, and I skidded to a stop next to her, thankful for the rest.

“Do you see that?” she asked.

An orange blaze flickered through the pines like a moth flapping in front of a light. I caught a whiff of the sweetest smell in the whole world. Juicy hot dog. My stomach gave a volcano-sized rumble.

We had made it to Camp Bushwhacker! A jolt of happiness and relief surged through me. We pedaled up to the campsite, where six kids sat on

logs around a campfire. All were roasting hot dogs and marshmallows. Shifty, the camp counselor, was splitting firewood with an axe. *Whack!*

“You’re here!” cried Lucas. I always felt happy when his big, toothy smile beamed at me. We’d gone through a lot of hard stuff together, and there was even a time when he was really mad at me. I was glad we were still friends.

“Thank goodness you made it,” said Captain Frances. Although she was two years older than us, she was one of our best friends at school. She pushed a curl of brown hair back underneath her light-pink headscarf.

A sweet feeling of relief filled my chest. They hadn’t forgotten about us after all.

No one else said anything. I expected my frenemies, Jackson and Mattie, to at least call me a slowpoke. At school they acted like my friends when we were in front of the teacher but enemies when we weren’t. When I’d heard they were coming to camp, I was bummed, thinking about all the mean things they’d say. But now they just stared at the fire, toasting their marshmallows.

There were two other campers I’d only met that morning. I hadn’t even had a chance to talk to them. Revati had dark skin and short, electric-blue hair.

She was waving at a cloud of mosquitoes in front of her face. Next to her sat Iris. She had a round face, worried green eyes and messy blond hair. She was squishing a marshmallow between her fingers, silently making ghost gum.

Nobody was laughing or singing songs or waving burning marshmallows in the air. All of the campers looked tired. Dribbles of dirt and sweat lined their cheeks. I thought summer camp would be more fun.

“What took you so long?” asked Shifty.

I didn’t want to admit I was the worst mountain biker. I thought about making something up. Until I remembered I was trying to stick to the truth these days.

“I fell off my bike.”

“For two hours?” Shifty scowled. He didn’t believe me. “You don’t look hurt.”

“I’m not.”

“You sure are slow.”

“He also had a mechanical problem,” said Koko. “Which took some time to fix. You would know that if anyone had come back to help.”

Lucas piped up anxiously, “We wanted to come find you, but—”

Shifty threw a log onto the fire and sparks exploded. “I didn’t want anybody getting lost in the dark.”

Lucas's big shoulders slumped. Everyone was quiet. I sat down next to him, and Koko joined me. Even though Lucas was hunched over, he was still taller than the two of us.

"You must be hungry," he whispered, handing me an open packet of hot dogs. Captain Frances gave Koko two roasting sticks.

"Thanks," I said. We stuck the wieners onto the sticks and held them over the fire.

Lucas said under his breath, "This summer camp is weird. No ghost stories...no campfire songs...no fun. And where are the other counselors?"

I glanced around at the sad sight of the campers. I had always imagined how good it would be to have all my friends—and okay, a couple of foes—sitting around a campfire. Except everyone was so unhappy. Someone needed to cheer them up.

I stood up and waved my hot dog in the air like a conductor. "Who wants to join me in a campfire song?" Eight pairs of eyes bored into me. "You probably don't know it, so I'll just sing the first verse and you can sing along with the chorus."

Every great song begins with a catchy beat. Or a guitar solo. Seeing as I didn't have an electric guitar handy, or electricity, I handed my hot-dog stick to Koko. "Hold this." I scooped up two other sticks

leaning against a big log and tapped out the opening beat of “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns N’ Roses.

Whack. Whack. Whacka whacka whack.

Whack. Whack. Whacka whacka whack.

Welcome to the outhouse, it’s the place to go
Make sure you hold your nose, it’s no
place to be slow

Turn around, don’t look down, there’s
nothing there to fear

Flies are buzzing round and round, they’re
really glad you’re here

In the outhouse, welcome to the outhouse.

It’ll make you beg and p-p-p-p-p-p-p
plead, plead!

Ohhh, toilet paper’s what you neeeeeed.



Pretty soon all the campers were tapping along to the beat with their hot-dog sticks. Except for Revati. She played hers like an electric guitar. Iris was giggling, and Koko was grinning madly. By the time I belted out the last chorus, everyone was singing. Even Shifty, who had a voice like a squawking parrot. It was perfect. And I was pretty pleased I’d come up with the lyrics on the spot.

The whole vibe had changed. The campers were dirty, sweaty, tired and happy.

“Now *that’s* what I call summer camp,” said Koko, the firelight dancing in her eyes.

Shifty stood up abruptly, and his intense gaze traveled around the group. “Time to hit the hay, campers.”

No one moved.

“Now!” he barked.

We all startled, then jumped up and stumbled off into the dark. A couple of the campers had flashlights, and the beams of light speared their tents in the black night.

Shifty kicked dirt on the fire. Sparks swirled.

“Where’s our camping stuff?” Koko asked.

“It’s over there.” Shifty pointed into the darkness. I could make out some large mounds, covered in tarps. Then he ambled off to his own tent on the other side of the clearing. It was as far away from the other campers’ tents as possible.

“How are we going to find our stuff?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Koko, “but you should always put the fire out.” Koko stood over the flames and emptied out her water pack. A cloud of steam whooshed up. “The last three days have been very hot and dry. We don’t want to go up in smoke.”