

The Forest and the Trees [Lee's Mountain, #1]

by Rick Coleman



Joe from Pixabay

"Come on! Why are you so slow?"

Alex Lee looked back down the old logging road at his friend, Brian Spiller, who was just ambling along.

"I thought we were out here to enjoy nature," Brian grumbled. "Let's take a break."

"A break? We just started hiking!"

"Yeah, well, what's the rush?" Brian lifted the pair of binoculars that hung around his neck and said, "I want to do some birding on the way... and maybe we'll see a bear."

"If we see a bear, we're not stopping to look at it."

"That's what the binoculars are for."

Alex stopped and turned around, tugging on the straps of his daypack. "Come on, I want to make up some time. It's a long way to the summit and I promised my folks I'd be back for dinner."

"Dinner? Am I invited?"

Alex rolled his eyes and laughed. "You know it!"

Brian slowly caught up. The two friends stood in the middle of the dirt road, flanked on either side by tall, straight pines. Alex had a green baseball cap over his long black hair, gray cargo shorts, and an old, tan Forest Service shirt his father had given him. His feet were clad in well-worn black hiking boots. Brian was wearing a Giants tee shirt and his usual jeans, but his hiking boots were tan and brand new. Both boys carried small daypacks.

"Are your feet hurting?" Alex said, looking down. "I told you to break in those boots."

Brian lifted one foot, then the other, admiring his new footwear. "They're okay, I wore them for a couple hours yesterday."

"That's not enough."

Brian wagged his head, shaking his thick, short dreads, and said, "Man, who put you in charge? I've been on this mountain as much as you have."

It was true, the two friends had been hiking together since they were in first grade, when Alex's father began taking them on short walks. They both loved the woods, and often camped out together. They knew practically every part of the mountain.

"Sorry," Alex laughed. "I must get it from my dad. He's always checking my equipment. Anyway, I want to get to the top to take in the view... and see how bad the logging is."

"Yeah," Brian grunted, shaking his head again, "pretty soon the Wilsons will finish the job and cut down every last tree on this poor mountain. It's too bad your family doesn't still own this place, because then you could save it. I mean, it *is* called Lee's Mountain."

Alex shrugged, and the small pack rode up on his shoulders. It was an old story and everyone in town knew it. His great-great-grandpa had come over in the 1860s to work on the railroad just like thousands of other Chinese immigrants. They were told that they would find it easy to make lots of money in America, but nothing was easy... and all they found was hard work. But then his son, Alex's great-grandfather Sam, had started a business making shoes. Sam turned out to be a good businessman and eventually opened a shoe factory, which did well enough to enable him to buy the plot of land that the mountain sat on.

"That was a long time ago," Alex told his friend.

He sighed and looked at the ground by his boots, then began walking again as Brian followed.

"Well, I never understood why he sold the mountain to the Wilson family. You said he loved this place."

"Yeah, he did-my grandpa always said that was why my family wound up staying here. It was our job to protect it."

"Heck, your dad is a forest ranger and so was your grandpa. I mean, it's practically your family business to protect the mountain. So why did your great-grandpa sell?"

"He had to."

Brian waited for his friend to say more, but Alex just kept walking. After a few steps, Brian went on, his voice rising in frustration. "Okay, but now the Wilsons are clear-cutting the whole place. It's getting worse and worse. They're destroying it!" With his brow furrowed, Brian kicked at a small rock on the road. It bounced several times before rolling into the grassy woods off to the side. "I just wish someone could stop them."

"My grandpa used to say they weren't allowed to, that there was something in the original deal to stop

them, but he didn't have any proof. And anyway, they own the land now, so they can do what they want with it, even if it's terrible for the environment."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, they own the mountain and almost the whole town. They can do *anything* they want." Brian scowled. "And they all just/ooooove reminding everyone about how rich they are."

"Ah, they're not all bad," Alex said with a shrug.

Brian laughed. "You just have a thing for Kayla."

"No, I don't."

"Uh, yeah you do."

"No, I just don't think she's stuck up."

"You mean, because she talks to you at school? I've seen you, walking down the hall." Brian's voice rose an octave as he gave his impersonation of Alex talking to Kayla Wilson: "*Oh, Kayla, that was such an interesting thing you said in history. Oh, Alex, did you really think so? Oh, yes, Kayla, that's why I love you, Kayla.*"

"I do not love Kayla!" Alex shouted.

The boys turned a corner where the road narrowed and then came to a dead stop. Just 50 feet ahead of them stood the very same Kayla Wilson, carrying her own daypack, peering through the viewfinder of a shiny black camera. She looked up, startled.

"Oh, hey, Kayla," Brian called, with a broad smirk on his face.

Looking embarrassed, she asked, "Were you calling my name? I thought I heard something, but I was concentrating on this photo."

"Oh, no, Alex was just... *Oww!*" Brian had begun to make a wisecrack, but Alex stepped on his foot.

"What are you guys doing?" Kayla asked. She wore a red Mountain High School tee shirt, and her gray cargo shorts and hiking boots were almost the same as Alex's. Her brown hair was gathered in a ponytail that came out through the back of her baseball cap.

"We're headed for the top," Alex told her as they walked closer.

"Before all the trees are gone," Brian added, then, "*Oww!*" as Alex stepped on him again.

Kayla didn't seem bothered. "I know, I keep telling my dad to stop cutting down the trees, that it's bad for the mountain and the wildlife and for climate change and... yeah, you get it," she trailed off.

"Are you out here by yourself?" Alex asked, shooting Brian a look.

"I'm waiting for my dad. He drove up to the logging site, and I had him drop me off here so I could take some photos, and he's going to pick me up soon on his way to the logging site."

"Can I see?" Alex asked.

"Sure."

She held the camera out and swiped the screen to show him her shots. Alex had to lean closer to get a look.

"Those are really good," he said, asking, "what kind of lens is that?"

She tilted the camera so he could see. "It's a macro." Suddenly she drew the camera back and said, "I bought it myself with my tips from the diner."

"Yeah, I've seen you there," Alex said, then added, "Hey, do you want to come with us? You can get great shots from the top."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, yeah, sure." She looked embarrassed again. "Hey, where's Brian?"

They both looked around but the road was empty as far as they could see in either direction.

"Brian!" Alex yelled.

"Over here!" his voice came back, not too far away.

"Where are you?"

"Follow the trail!"

"What trail?"

Kayla pointed a few yards down the road and said, "There's a trail there."

She took off and Alex followed her. The trail went down a slope and after a few yards they saw Brian standing by a small, very weather-beaten wooden shack.

"Hey, remember this thing? We must have passed this a million times when we were younger, but it's been a while," Brian said. "I think it's time we see what's inside."

"I don't think so, because it looks like it would fall apart if you blew on it," Alex retorted. "My dad always said to leave it alone, remember?"

"Your dad's not here, so stop worrying so much. I'm just going to look," Brian answered, then yanked open the splintery wooden door and disappeared inside.

"He shouldn't..." Kayla began as Alex hustled toward the shack. When he reached the doorway-with Kayla right behind him-Brian was standing in the middle of the floor.

"This place is a total wreck," Brian said, pointing at a scratched-up wooden table that was laying on its side next to a broken chair. "I wonder who built it?"

Alex stepped inside and told Brian urgently, "Come on, get out of here, it's dangerous."

"Don't be such a baby," Brian teased. His eyes lit on an old pickaxe hanging on the far wall. "Hey, look at that!" he said, and took a step toward it as the floor creaked loudly under his weight.

"Stop!" Alex insisted.

Brian waved him away and took another step, saying "I just want to..."

That was all he said. The floor groaned, and as it shattered under his weight, Brian disappeared.

Ed. : The tale continues in Part 2, "A Blast from the Past."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who is Alex hiking Lee's Mountain with at the beginning of the story?

- A. his friend, Brian
- B. his school crush, Kayla
- C. his dad, a forest ranger
- D. his teacher from school

2. How does the author portray Brian and Alex's relationship?

- A. They used to be friends but now aren't close anymore.
- B. They don't have much in common but they like hanging out.
- C. They are close friends who share a love for Lee's Mountain.
- D. They just met each other but are becoming better friends.

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

"It was true, the two friends had been hiking together since they were in first grade, when Alex's father began taking them on short walks. They both loved the woods, and often camped out together. They knew practically every part of the mountain...

[Alex's] great-great-grandpa had come over in the 1860s to work on the railroad just like thousands of other Chinese immigrants. They were told that they would find it easy to make lots of money in America, but nothing was easy... and all they found was hard work. But then his son, Alex's great-grandfather Sam, had started a business making shoes. Sam turned out to be a good businessman and eventually opened a shoe factory, which did well enough to enable him to buy the plot of land that the mountain sat on."

What can you conclude about Alex's relationship with Lee's Mountain based on this information?

- A. Alex feels unsure about how he should behave on the mountain because he isn't familiar with its terrain.
 - B. Alex's relationship with the mountain is complicated because he's not sure what to believe about his family's history.
 - C. Alex feels upset when he sees the mountain because it scares him and reminds him of bad experiences.
 - D. Alex feels very connected to the mountain both because of his experiences and his family's history.
4. What is Kayla's attitude towards her family's business on Lee's Mountain?
- A. She is unhappy about the logging but she accepts that it's necessary.
 - B. She is unhappy about the logging because it's bad for the environment.
 - C. She is ok with the logging because she understands why her family does it.
 - D. She is happy about the logging because she doesn't care about the mountain.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. As Alex Lee and his friend, Brian, hike Lee's Mountain, they talk about Alex's family's connection to the mountain and their concerns around logging on the mountain by the Wilson family.
- B. Alex and Brian grew up together, hiking and camping on Lee's Mountain, but currently they're not talking because of a fight between their families that goes back generations.
- C. Kayla, whose family owns Lee's Mountain, can't decide if she wants to support her family business of logging trees or if she wants to try to come up with a new plan for the business.
- D. Alex Lee's family has never spent much time outdoors because his mom is afraid of bears, but recently Alex has decided he wants to make camping a part of his life.

6. Read the following sentences from the text.

"'You mean, because she talks to you at school? I've seen you, walking down the hall.' Brian's voice rose an octave as he gave his impersonation of Alex talking to Kayla Wilson: 'Oh, Kayla, that was such an interesting thing you said in history. Oh, Alex, did you really think so? Oh, yes, Kayla, that's why I love you, Kayla.'

'I do not love Kayla!' Alex shouted."

How does this conversation help us understand Alex and Brian's relationship?

- A. It shows us that they have a close relationship where they can tease each other.
- B. It shows us that there are some topics that are hard for them to talk about without getting upset.
- C. It shows us that they are jealous of each other because they both like Kayla.
- D. It shows us that they both want to deepen their friendship but are unsure how to do so.

7. Choose the word or words that best complete the sentence.

Brian goes into a wooden shack _____ Alex tells him it's unsafe.

- A. because
- B. however
- C. until
- D. even though

8. Why does Brian say it's "practically [Alex's] family business to protect the mountain?"
9. What is the difference between Brian and Alex's attitudes towards the Wilson family?
10. How does Alex's family history complicate his relationship with Kayla? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.