

Chapter 1

Mud and Guts

“There’s a deer in the parking lot,” I state to the clerk with a sense of accusation, almost hostility.

A deer in a parking lot is not particularly noteworthy in Powell River, but this deer is made out of plastic, about four-feet high.

I hit the brakes as I approached the store, just in time to make the turn into the parking lot. I knew that something was wrong, and I needed an answer. The molded black bear is gone, and there could be no good news in this regard. I’m sorry, but a foo-foo deer just isn’t an adequate replacement for the black bear that has watched over this parking lot for years.

The teenage clerk refuses to look me in the eye. She probably has faced this situation many times already today. I can’t tell whether her sad face and near-tears are real.

“It was a hit-and-run,” says the girl. “Bruno is in three pieces in the back room.”

“A hit-’n-run?!” The clerk probably wonders whether I’m really upset. I can put on a pretty good act, but this time it’s real.

“Poor Bruno,” I relent. “Is he really dead, or can Sam put him back together?” It’s probably a common question.

“We’re not sure yet. But it’s pretty bad.”

I’m tempted to ask if I can see the damage, but it wouldn’t be pleasant to see Bruno in pieces. I thank the clerk (sincerely) for the report. It’s probably not fair to complain about the deer. But a deer could never replace a bear. When we’re quadding, we’ll stop and watch deer. They’re a calming sight, and I always manage a smile when I see them. But a bear – now there’s an animal to watch. All quads grind to a halt, and we intently follow the bear until it is com-

pletely out of sight. We might crank up and leave while a deer is still lingering in the field.

I've only been in town for three days. I've passed this parking lot several times already, and I've observed Bruno chained to his spot. (The chain I accept – I can see why a lot of pranksters would want this bear.) He stands (used to stand) right next to the Fish-O-Meter, indicating the status of the local salmon catch. Of course, I've never noticed the Fish-O-Meter's needle in the "Low" range. It's always at least in the bottom of the "Moderate" zone, although there have been some pretty bad salmon dry spells in the area. A low fishing meter doesn't sell anything, so that little white lie is acceptable. But a hit-and-run – it makes you think twice about this town.

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John has already heard about Bruno. He doesn't miss a thing.

Right now, I am trying to act enthused about his new purchase. I knew it was coming, because he has been talking about it for over a year. He has craved a camcorder, and now he has purchased one. I figure it is the end of life, as we know it. Our trips into the forests are unspoiled. What can a camcorder do to improve things? It'll all go downhill from here. Already I am dreading this weekend's trip into Theodosia.

I've watched friends adopt camcorders, and their lives change. They get carried away with filming and lose sight of the event. It changes things. What's wrong with keeping vivid memories in your mind? John is a perfectionist, and a camcorder in the hands of a perfectionist is even worse. It will be endless editing and reediting. He'll have us stop as we prepare to climb up a trail with our quads. John will need to position himself in the perfect spot, and then we'll climb the trail as if no one is filming. Sure.

I saw it coming, and I tried to stop it. But when John makes up his mind about something, it's gonna happen. I remember the day in Dan's shop before John bought his quad. He showed me a framed photo mounted on the wall. The Powell River ATV Club posed for a picture overlooking a deep valley. It could have been an

advertisement for Yamaha, with all the quads lined up. The photo was so clear that you could read the bear model names on the bikes: Grizzly, Kodiak, Bruin.

“Look at those guys,” says John. “Ain’t that some photo?”

“Yes, it is,” I reply, trying to act interested in a recreational activity that doesn’t tweak my interest in the least.

“Now look close at that photo,” says John. “Do you notice one little detail that’s missing?”

I scan the photo carefully. John is big on details, and I am trying to see what is missing.

“No, I don’t see it,” I admit.

“Me. That’s what’s missing – me,”

John is right. He isn’t in that photo. But there is no stopping him. He has to have a quad. But not me – that’s something I’m sure I will never want.

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I meet John to load the quads on Saturday morning. His brothers will converge on Theodosia from several different locations. Rick is coming off a night shift in the taxicab, but that doesn’t bother him. He drives almost on autopilot and is one of the best riders in coastal BC. Dave is doubling on his quad with his wife, Jayne, and quads are new to him. Doubling is not easy in tough terrain, so I’m expecting that I won’t be the laggard today. I’ve been into Theodosia three times previously, and I’ve already challenged my riding skills on today’s route on a smaller quad without four-wheel drive (*Up the Lake*, Chapter 12). Today’s ride on an almost-new Kodiak 450 should be child’s play by comparison. I’ve come a long way in a year.

It would be wonderful if we could get John’s third brother to join us today. All four brothers have never ridden simultaneously, so maybe the camcorder actually would have a purpose. I would like to help film that event. I suggest to John that we invite Rob to join us, but John’s phone calls to Rob go unanswered. He’s probably working his taxicab today.

Jimmy will be joining us too. He’s a quad rider who proves that you never age if you just keep riding. We’ll all converge on Theodosia via the same road, but we all have separate preferences regarding our off-load locations.

My quad is stored at Rob's house (gotta get a garage soon). When we arrive, Rob is dangling out of the kitchen window, waving to us with his portable taxi dispatch radio. I have a present for him (a T-shirt from the States), so I hand it up to him through the open window.

"Come riding with us," I order. "They'll think your radio has gone dead and not even miss you."

Rob laughs, seems to consider it for a moment, and then says: "Maybe not today."

"Thanks for taking care of my stuff," I say. Rob's garage has become a storage area for way-too-many things, but he never seems to mind.

"No worries," he retorts.

John opens the garage door, and we attempt to extract my quad, wedged between a wheelbarrow, Rob's trailered boat, and another quad that belongs to my wife. I ask John to make the first start of the season for my quad and drive it up onto the homemade utility trailer (deftly crafted by John from a trailer that came with my tin boat). I'm not sure I remember where the starter button is located.

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Dave is already off-loaded when we pull up behind his pickup truck just off Highway 101. Jayne is testing out a bandana – it's still early June, but the road dust will already be a problem, even with the recent rains. John waits for me to start my quad and drive it off the trailer, but I defer to him to off-load my bike – I don't want to embarrass myself in front of Dave and Jayne. As I remind Dave, there was a recent incident (he heard about it, of course) where I rammed John's tailgate during my attempt to drive my quad onto the trailer. If you saw John's truck, you'd wonder why there was so much chagrin over such an incident. But John insisted on having a body shop restore the tailgate of his rusting truck to its like-old condition.

When it is finally time to get riding, John is away in a flash. I'm still fumbling with the starter switch, and nothing is happening. Not only is nothing happening, but absolutely nothing is working properly. I can't find neutral, I've lost a glove, and the zipper on my

jacket is jammed. Dave is patiently waiting for me, knowing that I am, from his standpoint, the weak link today.

“It’s dead, Dave,” I announce, after making sure I’ve tried everything.

“Here, move that red electrical cutoff switch to “On,” he says.

“Oh.” Vroom, vroom – she starts smartly on the first crank. I can’t wait for the camcorder action.

The dust-length is about a quarter-mile today, and I am between John and Dave. But it will take awhile to catch up with John (and Bro in his aft-mounted dog throne), so I have an excuse to cruise at 50 clicks on the dirt road. Potholes are difficult to see in advance in the mix of sun and trees, so I take them with a solid thump before I am able to slow or maneuver around them.

I catch up with John, parked and waiting at the widened dirt area near the bridge. This bridge has been closed for nearly a year, with the few residents on the other side getting plenty grumpy. They have to park their vehicles on their side of the bridge, walk across the condemned structure, usually carrying a heavy load, and drive to town in a vehicle stored on the other side. It’s a slow and demanding portage of about 200 feet, including the barricaded approaches to the bridge on each side. Quads and motorcycles – we refer to both as “bikes” – can make it across, between the huge cement blocks, but you can see paint on the cement where they have cut it a little close. (One month later, a new bridge is built here, and it is completed in less than three weeks, an amazingly short period of time, considering the challenge of the terrain.)

At the bridge, Jimmy is off-loading his quad and trying to strap sheets of plywood and a small outboard motor to his bike. The plywood is for the raft awaiting us at the lake – the floorboards need refurbishment. None of us are pleased with Jimmy’s load, since it seems obvious it will hang up on tight trail corners and slow us down. John helps Jimmy load the plywood and strap it onto the rear rack. None of us complain about the 2.5 horse outboard motor that is strapped to the front.

Rick joins us at the bridge, while John and Jimmy wrestle with the plywood, and now Jayne (with Dave riding double behind her) arrives on the Kodiak. John wants this to be the first footage with his

camcorder, but he isn't ready for their arrival, so he asks Jayne and Dave to go back and return for some action shots. Oh, great – this will be interesting – two people arriving at a bridge parking area on a quad (staged shots, no less). I'm convinced the camcorder is the end of our carefree wilderness life.

We're ready to go now, maneuvering our quads across the condemned bridge in sequence. It's the order we will ride most of the day. John leads, followed by Jimmy, then Rick, then me, and finally Dave with Jayne doubling on the back. Grizz, Grizz, Kodiak, Kodiak.

We approach the stop sign at a remote dirt road intersection. Did someone put that sign here for special effect? We roar through the intersection after slowing a bit, with a quick look both ways. The road turns into a trail, and the trail becomes a wide wet path. It is a mix of rocks and mud but only a moderate challenge that hardly slows us down. And the dust is gone.



Our climb into Theodosia is just as scenic as I always remember it, but it is much less challenging than that first time. In fact, it is a breeze, and I realize I have come a long way with my riding skills – once I figure out how to get 'er started. But John has stopped to get some shots of us climbing the hill, and it's all messed up. None of us know that John is preparing to film the climb, so we just blast through while he is getting the camera out of his quad box.

Now we are on top of the ridge on the wide logging road that leads into Theodosia. Everything has changed.

You'd think that trails would change little in an area like this, but logging is an ever-changing operation, with new areas being cut every day. We reach the previously blocked entrance to the descent into Theodosia, and there is a gap in the boulder pile wide enough for a quad. John and his friends decided to unpile the boulders one more time to see if the loggers would retaliate. They didn't.

We descend on the rugged trail into the valley, roll out onto the wide logging road, and are cruising smoothly towards our destination – a raft and a June day that should be full of trout. There is one brief stop as we encounter a logging crew removing what remains of a large logging truck from the ditch beside the road. The truck has completely overturned. A giant logging crane makes quick work of the cleanup, the road is clear, and we're on our way again.

The approach to the trail to the lake is completely different than I remember from my previous trip. A giant logging slash is our point of entry, finally joining with the previous year's narrow trail. I'm pleased that we don't have to traverse the difficult path across the inlet that harbors tightly-crowded alders constantly overgrowing the trail. Soon we are through the scenic part and into the mud.

Although my first trip to this lake was difficult on the smaller two-wheel-drive quad, this trip is even more challenging on the mightier Kodiak. The mud and ruts make the difference. The lower reaches of the trail are flooded, and the ruts are deep. Everyone gets stuck, even John. I've never seen John have to back up at an obstacle, but he does it twice today. We all wallow in the mud, get stranded on rocks and logs, and bottom-out at various spots on the route. All of us, that is, except Rick. His expertise at traversing the most difficult of terrain is legendary. He flies over the obstacles rather than drives over them.

I am amazed at how well Dave makes it through. He has less quad-hours than me, but his background in off-road motorcycles shows that ATV skills are universal, no matter how you cut it. With Jayne on the back, it is even more challenging, but Dave makes it through tough spots in fine shape, with one major bout in a se-

vere rut that takes him four reverse-then-forward tries to extract his quad.

As for me, I do pretty well. One corner finds me stranded on top of a log, my bulletproof oil pan lodged firmly on the crest of the obstacle. Everyone is yelling instructions at me, and I treat the onlookers to a terrible grinding noise as I pop out of low gear while trying to abide by John's orders to "Give 'er shit!" It is all captured by John's videocam, of course.

One benefit of the video recording is the need for John to occasionally stop to get set up for the rest of us to come through the trail. John doesn't normally like to stop on the trail, and I'm never displeased to have a break from riding. So there are some advantages today. Every instance of particularly severe trail conditions is met with an order from John to "Wait up," while he gets in position for movie action. I take advantage of these Hollywood moments to catch my breath.

Jimmy encounters a lot of frustration with his plywood cargo on the narrow trail. The sheets of plywood catch on trees during corners, ripping the bungee cords from his rear rack. That requires repeated stops to secure his load. We begin the trek with all but Jimmy annoyed about the plywood. Now he too is swearing at it.

The final descent into the small lake valley is easy in comparison to the muddy ruts. Pulling into the lake turnaround area, I am exhausted. It goes immediately to my stomach, and I gulp down a roast beef sandwich and a half tub of supermarket potato salad.

Jayne starts a fire, and Dave roasts hotdogs. John is videotaping the non-action in the camping area. This is a campsite that John and his friends have personally constructed. The nearby raft has been built from scratch and is stored, tied to a log, a few hundred feet from the campground.

John and I (Bro included, of course) head for the raft, install the outboard motor on the transom, and relocate this fine vessel to the campsite. Jimmy and John go to work right away refurbishing the raft's logs with the plywood. Without this renovation, the raft would not be able to hold today's group. In fact, launch of the raft should not have been attempted with today's heavy load, even with the overhauled floor.



Five of us (six, including Bro) motor and pole our way around the lake for several hours. Rick volunteers to stay ashore, minding the campfire and blazing his typical trail improvements near the campsite. The raft probably could not have held another body anyway. We are barely above the waterline, and sometimes below it. Bro moves around unexpectedly, requiring us to immediately redistribute our weight to prevent sinking. We are usually standing, sometimes sharing the two stump seats.

The fishing is great. Jayne catches the first trout, and Bro goes crazy (“For me, for me?”). Everybody catches at least one trout, and several fish are well over a pound. We also catch a lot of underwater logs. Captain John maneuvers the outboard motor (which barely pushes the overloaded vessel) every-which-way to retrieve our lures. At one location in the shallow water, three of us are simultaneously hung up on different obstacles. We don’t lose a single lure.

As we return to the campsite, we begin laughing about how this would look from shore (if there were people to observe). Five people and a dog are crowded onto this small raft, and we are riding so low that we must look like we are standing on the water.

Rick uses the videocam to capture our return to the campsite. We regroup to gather our gear and begin the slow journey back to

civilization. All goes fairly well, punctuated by numerous hang-ups in the mud and ruts. I am in low gear and four-wheel drive constantly.

At one of our brief stops, I hear John announce that we'll make one more stop at the point near the logging camp. I'm not sure where the point is, but everyone nods. The logging camp is not a big place, so I simply put my helmet back on and begin the final leg.

After we return to the main logging road, I linger about a half-mile behind Rick to keep out of his dust. I know Dave is behind me, so there is no need to worry about getting lost. I blast into the logging camp at about 50 klicks and continue to the end of the road, where the climb out of the valley begins. No one is there.

Could they have started out of the valley without me? The route is so clear at this point that John might have decided to simply press on. But I should wait for Dave to be sure all is okay with him. And so I wait. And wait.

I turn my engine off to conserve fuel and enjoy the quiet. I prop my feet up on the front fenders, and immediately I hear the blast of John's horn. He must have been listening to my engine, waiting for it to quit so that I would hear his horn.

It doesn't sound like he is very far away, but he is definitely back along the way I have come. I hit the starter, shift into gear, and off I go on the logging road. I'm trying to watch the road for ruts and rocks, but I'm also glancing left and right to find John's location. I've traveled about a mile now, and that seems further than the horn's location. Suddenly, there is a roar, as Dave passes me, motioning without gentleness that I should turn around and follow him. I feel like a guilty driver being stopped by a cop.

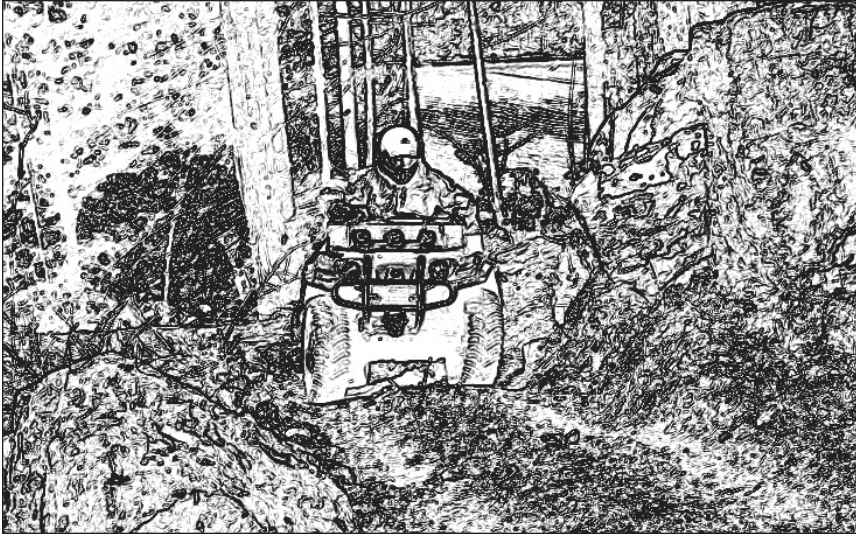
As I turn onto the road to the point, I follow Dave along the short trail that leads to the rest of our group. They are laughing and pointing at me. I immediately turn off my engine.

"Hey, you guys," I yell matter-of-factly. "You were all really lost. You're just lucky I was able to find you."

There are some derogatory comments about Americans, but all is well again.

During the climb out of Theodosia, we encounter a large bear, foraging solo near the road in the logging slash. We stop and watch

until the bear exits into the forest above the slash. Bro is howling at the top of his lungs the whole time, and it is a good thing he is too rotund to jump out of his quad box and chase the bear. This is the second bear we have spotted today. (Dave and Jayne saw a third).



As soon as we get started again, we see three more bears crowded around a tree, seemingly trying to escape our inspection. The mother and her two tiny cubs (the smallest I have ever seen) finally dart upward out of the slash into the protection of the forest. Bro is howling, and John's camcorder is rolling.

By sunset, we are home.

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John and I off-load my quad at Rob's house and haul the empty trailer through the take-out entrance at A & W. I'm not sure John will be able to make the tight corner at the end of the "Dub" drive-through, but he negotiates the curve successfully. We get our chicken, fries, and root beer, and cruise on back to John's house. I am totally exhausted, and my fatigue is just starting to sink in.

"Don't forget the video," says John.

I'd like to.

"I shot 52 minutes," he says. That's fifty-two minutes of agony, so we might as well get it over with.

We prop ourselves up in front of the television, with John's parents and Rick filling the remaining seats. John's dad, Ed, is at least as negative about this as I am. He asks whether we really need to interrupt a good movie on Canadian TV for this silliness. Rick sits without comment, going smoothly with the flow, as always. I'm glad I have my chicken from the "Dub" to distract me.

The first minute of video is Dave and Jayne arriving at the entrance to the old bridge. Ed comments sarcastically: "That's pretty exciting." There's only 51 minutes left.

The next 10 minutes involve John trying to hold the camera steady while he navigates down the trail into Theodosia. There is only the ground immediately in front of the quad in the frame, and it bounces around a lot. You can barely hear John's voice describing the route over the roar of the engine.

"What are you saying?" asks Ed. John doesn't answer and refuses to fast-forward through the 10 minutes of bouncing ground. No one is impressed, except John.

Now we are in the mud and ruts, and more mud, and stuck quads, and gunning engines, and horrible crunching noises. And suddenly, I start to get interested. We were there? It looks even tougher on the videotape than in person. Wheels are spinning and mud is flying. I'm stuck on top of a log, and then there's the loud scream of my slipped gearshift. Everybody laughs. John's dad says: "Wow!" And he means it.

John's mother, Helen, comments: "I never realized this is the kind of trails you ride on?" She looks more than a little shocked.

"You're crazy," says Ed. "Look at these people. Why in hell would they put so much effort into trying to get to a little lake?" He loves it now. So do I.

Engines are roaring and everybody is stuck. We're blasting through mud. Our quads are bouncing every-which-way. In one scene, John has handed the camera to Rick, and now we watch John and Bro thrashing through the obstacle course. Bro is shifting his weight from side to side, holding on for dear life. We ride behind John and see this all the time. John has never seen Bro riding in his quad box. John loves it.

In another scene, we are all stopped, engines off. A tree has fallen across the trail, and Rick is tearing through the log with his chainsaw. Sawdust is flying, and the saw screams.

We're all laughing now. This is a totally agonizing journey that even we, as riders, didn't realize was quite this demanding.

Now the engine noise is gone, and we are standing around the campfire at the lake. Rick is kicked back on the side of the hill, looking totally bored but content. There's the raft, ready to go. But the next frame is a time leap, as Rick picks up the camera when we are returning from our fishing trip. The raft is in the distance but slowly growing in size. And on it are five people and a dog, mostly standing, huddled together and shifting their weight. You can barely see the raft. It looks like these five idiots (exclude the dog) are standing on the water with sticks in their hands. John's mother starts laughing, and she can't stop. I am gasping for air, and Ed is roaring too.

Now there's more mud and roaring engines and quads stuck in the ruts.

"Look at those idiots!" laughs Ed. "It looks like a war zone. Mud and guts." He's right – it is a bit like a muddy war.

As we leave Theodosia, there are tiny bear cubs, scampering with their mother to safety. In the background is Bro's ugly, persistent howling, like a fire truck's siren in the forest.

And then there's one final set of frames as my quad goes ripping through the logging camp in a roar of dust (50 clicks worth). The distant engine slows to idle and runs for a few more minutes, as voices in the background say interesting things about Americans. The quad motor silences, and you can hear John's loud horn only a few feet from the camera. The distant motor starts up again. Another cloud of dust in the opposite direction, right past the logging point again. There goes Dave, roaring after the cloud of dust.

Ed is howling, Helen is howling, I'm gagging and laughing, John is beaming from ear to ear, and Rick is smiling.

I guess John's camcorder won't put an end to our wilderness adventures, after all.

