

BILLY BEAVER

An Environmental Allegory

by

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Chapter One

“I hereby pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Billy Beaver. You may now embrace.”

Sage stepped back from the couple, a satisfied expression on his ancient face. He had performed this duty many times during his long career, but he never tired of it. The ceremony always left him feeling he was involved in one of the most profound rhythms of the universe.

Billy and Becky hugged, swaying slowly back and forth the way beavers do when deeply moved.

Everyone from the village was gathered to witness the ceremony and partake of the feast that would follow. There were big beavers and little beavers, fat beavers and skinny beavers, sleek beavers and scruffy beavers, light blond beavers and chocolate brown beavers. They were all there, and every single one cheered as the young couple embraced. Billy and Becky were as handsome a pair as they had ever seen, as perfect for each other as two beavers could possibly be. A feeling of fellowship and warmth came over everyone as they congratulated the newly-weds and chattered back and forth among themselves.

It was warm, and, now that the breeze was gone, the trembling aspens had ceased their trembling for the night. The only sound other than the chattering of beavers was that of

water rushing softly over the dam in the distance and the occasional hooting of an owl in a tall pine just beyond the edge of the meadow. A full moon reflected off the pond, making it almost as light as day. It was no accident the moon was full on this wedding day. The beaver people were a romantic folk, forever thrilling to the many wonders of their natural environment.

The beavers of this village — a village known as Beaver Pond — were more romantic than most, for they had among them Sage, the pride and joy of the beaver world. He had no fear whatever, and was filled with wisdom and kindness.

In his day Sage had felled trees, built dams and sired kittens with the best of them, but now he was content to spend his time in and around his house, known as Beaverlodge. Of simple design, Beaverlodge was the largest and strongest house in Beaver Pond, for when Sage and his late wife were young they always had an exceptionally large family of kittens to care for. Sage had built it with his own two paws of the finest trembling aspens in the valley. It had weathered more storms and withstood the attacks of more bears than any lodge in the land.

Located next to a giant cottonwood known as Max, Beaverlodge was visited by beavers from far and wide. Sage was the wisest beaver alive, and was consulted on matters that included everything from how to deal with a broken tooth and where to find water lilies to fending off marauding wolverines and coping with problems of growing old. He always had time to talk, no matter who you were, and had thoughtful answers for

everything. His lack of fear was a great source of comfort to the beaver people, for they were often filled with fear. He was the most famous shaman in the entire Aspen Valley. He served as magistrate as well, officiating at all weddings in the region and settling disputes when they arose. Until recently he had traveled great distances to perform his duties, but now found such trips too exhausting. Instead, he let beavers come to him.

Sage was loved by everyone. Even the other adult males treasured him. Because of his age, they no longer saw him as a competitor. Rather, he was viewed as a gentle old beaver who was always able to offer useful advice.

“It’s time to eat!” Sage announced to the cheerful crowd, and led the way along the winding path through the forest. Directly behind Sage came Billy and Becky, followed by the best man Chuck and the bridesmaid Cindy. Then came Billy’s and Becky’s parents and their little brothers and sisters, accompanied by the grandparents, as was the custom. Behind the immediate family came aunts, uncles and cousins. Lastly came more distant relatives and unrelated individuals.

They made quite a spectacle as they proceeded from the meadow to the pond, where the food had been laid out earlier in the evening. When they reached the water’s edge, the chattering and laughing gradually diminished until finally all was quiet and still. All eyes were now fixed on Sage. He was about to make one of his famous speeches to the newly-weds, a speech that would set the stage for the feast and for the young couple’s life together in the mountain valley. It was pure joy to watch Old Sage collect his

thoughts, as he was now doing. He cleared his throat and paused, appearing very serious but not at all unpleasant. For a moment he gazed at the faces turned expectantly toward him.

There was magic in the moonbeam that came down through the trees and illuminated his grizzled features. His eyes sparkled with warmth and intelligence from beneath bushy eyebrows. A gnat landed on his rubbery nose, and he gently brushed it off with a paw. The owl hooted faintly in the distance. Not a single aspen leaf trembled. Nary an eye blinked. One beaver swayed slowly back and forth. Every beaver savored each delicious second.

Finally, after what seemed like minutes but in fact was only seconds, Sage glanced at the young couple seated beneath a shining white birch and then turned his eyes back to the crowd.

“My dear fellow beaver people,” he intoned, “we are gathered here to celebrate the happy occasion of Billy’s and Becky’s marriage. My time is almost done, but theirs has only just begun. I have watched them grow from baby kittens to the beavers they are today, from little balls of fur to mature individuals. I have taken much pleasure in their development, and it has gone by all too quickly. It seems only yesterday that they tumbled and played at my feet. Today, with this marriage, they officially join us as adults in the community of beaver people. Their carefree days are hopefully not over; if all goes

according to Nature's plan, they will continue to romp and play for a long time to come.

Though I am old, even I sometimes take pleasure in play."

"But the time has come when they must work as well as play. They must now join us in what Nature designed all adult beavers to do. Billy has already built a fine lodge for himself and Becky. It is small, but sturdy. It will keep them warm in winter and cool in summer, and protect them from the wolves that roam the forest and terrorize us on occasion. Over the past few months I've noticed Billy has become quite proficient with his teeth. He will fell aspens as he needs them. He will help keep the dam from being washed away by spring floods and summer rains. He will repair the lodge as required. He'll do all these things, for such is Nature's design for him."

Looking directly at Billy, Sage paused for a moment and then continued.

"Billy, as of today you are free to fell trees as you see fit. But remember felling trees is a privilege bequeathed by Nature, not a right granted by beavers. Be careful you don't abuse that privilege. Take only as many trees as you need to survive. They are not unlimited in number. There are many, but not so many that they cannot be depleted. Without trees, we would die. Though I haven't seen it myself, I've heard of beavers in a far-away land long ago becoming greedy and felling more trees than they needed for survival. Those beavers are no longer with us; they are extinct. They are gone forever, victims of their own greed. Billy, Nature gave you engineering skills only to enable you to

survive. Don't get carried away with those skills. Always remember you are a beaver first and an engineer second."

Sage scanned the attentive eyes of the crowd fixed upon him. Then he turned to the bride.

"Becky, I'm very proud of you on this, your special day. Everything I said to Billy applies to you as well, for you too must fell trees as needed, keep the lodge in good repair, and help maintain the dam."

"But you have the added responsibility of being a mother. In time, and not a very long time I suspect, you will have some sweet little kittens. Take good care of them, and they will grow up to be healthy and strong, just as you and Billy have done. Billy will of course help, but you'll find being a mother is not nearly as much work or responsibility as you might think. Keep your babies warm, don't let them go hungry, protect them from the otters, give them lots of love, and Nature will do the rest. Let them grow freely, like wild flowers. Don't shape and mold them, and they will grow up to be happy, healthy, robust individuals. It's all in their genes."

Sage paused again, a little longer this time.

"Life is really very simple. All you must do is have faith in Nature. Billy and Becky, I wish you the very best of everything you need for a long and happy life together."

"Oh, perhaps just one more thing," he added quickly. "I offer you one final piece of advice as you embark on your partnership. It is this: learn to recognize that little voice

within you. That voice is your conscience, and it was put there by Nature for a purpose. Learn to trust it. It's the source of your wisdom, just as it's the source of mine. I won't be here to guide you forever, but you have the same wisdom as I do. You just haven't realized it yet. All too often, beavers let their egos — their ambitions, their thoughts of greatness, their desire for status — rule their lives, rather than relying on their conscience. Don't let your ego dominate your life, or it will make things very difficult for you and those around you. Listen to the voice within, and you will live long, healthy, happy lives with each other, with other beavers, and with Nature.”

The beavers had never heard this speech from Sage before. What was all this about Nature? They didn't know he had been feeling poorly of late, and was doing his best to leave them with his most precious wisdom of all before he passed on. They began whispering back and forth when Sage interrupted with “Let's eat!”

All immediately turned their attention to the food arranged neatly in the shallow water along the shore. There were fresh willow twigs with leaves still attached and sections of aspen bark from saplings, the staples of a beaver's diet. But there was also fresh birch harvested from the colony's birch grove, which was eaten only on special occasions. There was another delicacy too, something reserved for wedding feasts: roots from water lilies obtained in a distant lake. In addition to these basics of all beaver weddings, there were water chestnuts and sugar plums for dessert, items procured only with great

difficulty. There was more than enough of everything for everyone; the cold mountain water would keep the leftovers fresh for days.

Being social by nature, beavers relish the company of each other during a feast even more than they enjoy the food. The beaver people gathered there to celebrate Billy's and Becky's marriage exchanged stories and gossip as they munched on bark and leaves and chestnuts and plums. They talked of who was doing what with whom and why, and who wasn't and why not. They speculated about when Becky would have her first kittens. A young matron called Sonia curtly reminded everyone Becky might choose not to have kittens. After all, she did have a choice. Frank, a wizened old male, laughed uproariously and said, "Oh yeah, sure, she might choose instead to spend all her time repairing the dam and fixing the lodge!" It was said in good fun, for beavers are fun-loving creatures. They are party animals.

The moon had worked its way across the entire star-spangled sky before the beavers began to yawn and remark that it was getting late. There was already a tinge of pink in the east when one by one the couples and singles, the adults and youngsters, swam away through the wisps of early morning mist in the direction of their lodges.

Finally the last of them said good night and good luck, and Billy and Becky were alone. They sat on the shore of the pond, arms around each other and webbed feet dangling in the clear water. It had been a wonderful night, but a long one, and the water was soothing to their tired feet.

Happy with each other and their world, they sat there and watched the coming of dawn. The mist had grown thicker and now covered the entire surface of the pond, like a veil. A white-throated sparrow began its serenade from a tall aspen nearby. Then a robin commenced to warble from the top of a spruce across the pond, singing its heart out to the new day. A sleek brown mink slipped silently through the grass on the opposite shore, searching for a mouse. Unaware of the young couple, a deer and her spotted fawn came down to the water for a drink, and then grazed on a carpet of tender shoots in the meadow.

“Let’s go now, Billy,” Becky finally announced. “I’m getting sleepy.”

They eased into the water and swam to the little lodge Billy had completed earlier in the week. Inside it smelled of the forest. The bed was made of shredded aspen wood and decorated with green and yellow cushions of sphagnum moss. A bouquet of freshly-picked wild mint added its spicy fragrance to the already delightful atmosphere. Billy and Becky snuggled together on the bed, their noses nuzzled in each other’s fur, and soon were fast asleep.

As the mist outside retreated before the rising sun, a handsome sign made of aspen wood became visible over the entrance to the lodge.

It read “Billy & Becky.”

Chapter Two

Becky was still sound asleep when Billy stirred and opened his eyes. Light was coming into the lodge through the underwater entrance, but it was weak. Billy knew it was evening, and time he got up. He was an adult now, and couldn't wait to exercise his newly-acquired privileges. He gave Becky a little kiss on the cheek, and quietly dove into the tunnel leading to the pond.

Surfacing behind a dry snag that had blown over during a storm earlier in the summer, he carefully checked for danger. None was to be seen. Nothing moved, not even another beaver. Nor was there any sound. The lodges scattered around the pond were silent and still. Even Beaverlodge showed no sign of life, and Sage was an early riser.

Everyone was sleeping longer than usual. Evidently the long night of the wedding had been an exhausting one, Billy thought. He swam out from behind the fallen tree and headed for shore. The sun was just about to go down behind Blue Rock Mountain to the west, and its rays were painting Copper Mountain to the northeast a splendid hue of crimson. Though shadows were beginning to creep out from the forest on either side of the pond, it was still fairly light. Possibly a bit early for a beaver to be up and about, but Billy was eager to be on his way. He planned to do some exploring. He had never been beyond Fire Creek, and was itching to broaden his horizons.

Grabbing a few bites from the food left over from the wedding feast, he gave the water a mischievous slap with his tail and swam off, heading upstream. Before long the river

was deep in shadow, and Billy began to feel more at ease. Broad daylight always made him feel a little nervous, but night was closing in on Aspen Valley. The Aspen River, in which Beaver Pond was located, was a moderately-sized stream that wound for miles through the valley. Tributaries joined it from side-valleys at intervals, adding to the volume of the flow. Fire Creek was the first of these, but Billy passed it without as much as a glance. He had been there many times before.

Next came Dead Horse Creek, so named because one spring a dead horse was found floating in a pool fed by a small hot spring. Apparently the horse had broken through thin ice during the winter and drowned. Beside the horse the beavers found a dead creature no one could identify. It was very strange in appearance, with no hair on its body except for its head. Sage believed it might be an ape, and speculated further that perhaps it was riding the horse when the latter went through the ice. The other beavers hadn't openly challenged Sage's theory, but secretly most considered it preposterous. Who had ever heard of an ape riding a horse? Hungry grizzlies just out of hibernation soon devoured both horse and creature, and the incident was all but forgotten.

Billy swam a little faster as he passed the mouth of Dead Horse Creek. The thought of a naked ape riding a horse frightened him. It was too weird.

He made slow but steady progress against the swift current. The moon shone brightly, and millions of stars sparkled and twinkled. To the north, hues of green, gold and pink flared in bands and columns across the sky, careened and shimmered wildly, and then

faded. Again and again the northern lights weaved their magic against the glittering sky. Billy recognized what had to be Mount Gibraltar, and then Sun-Gali-She and finally Missing Link. Five times he was forced to portage around rapids.

After several hours he finally came to Snow Lake, near the headwaters of Aspen River. Snow Valley stretched almost half a mile in each direction, with mountain peaks etched against the purple sky on all sides. Billy floated on the glassy surface of the lake for a few minutes, recovering from the long, hard trip.

It was now well past midnight, and he was famished. Time for some water lilies, he thought. Snow Lake was fed by a hot spring and had a marshy bottom, creating an environment suitable for lilies. Diving near the center, Billy worked in the murky depths for a few seconds and then surfaced with a choice root. Swimming to shore, he perched himself on a boulder that projected slightly through the thin soil and began munching on his prize.

The eastern sky was already showing a faint glow, and Billy knew dawn was not far off. He also knew everyone at Beaver Pond would be worried about him, for he had told no one of his plans. Never mind, he thought to himself, I'm a big beaver now. I'll do as I please. Besides, they'd better get used to this sort of thing. I'm not your average beaver, he thought happily, and I don't do average things. If they considered swimming alone for a few miles something remarkable, they didn't know Billy Beaver! This was nothing.

He continued munching on his root, smacking his lips in the silky silence. Finally, his hunger satisfied, he tossed what was left of the root aside and sat there on the rock, reflecting on his future. He hadn't been so foolish as to boast of his ambitions to the other beavers, but he had big plans. Someday he hoped to be Chief Beaver of Aspen Valley. But first he planned to become Chief Engineer.

The glow in the east became brighter, and Billy knew it was getting late. But he wasn't worried, for it was downstream all the way back to Beaver Pond. Swimming with the swift current and shooting the rapids, he would get home in an hour or so. He wanted to see the sun come up over Snow Valley. He'd never been this high in the mountains before, and had heard it was very beautiful at sunrise and sunset. He leaned back, furry elbows on the lichen-covered boulder, and waited for the dawn to come.

Soon there was a hint of mauve on the summit of Snow Mountain, which quickly turned to a soft pink. Then the entire mountain range to the west was painted a series of rose-colored pastels, followed by a touch of gold. Finally the peaks gleamed like gold-tinted ivory against the morning sky.

As the sun broke over the rim of the valley, alpine meadows and pockets of evergreens emerged from the shadows. A small herd of elk grazed to the south, and a grizzly with two cubs dug for rodents on the opposite slope. A white swan swam on the lake, dipping its head into the water now and then to pluck a choice tidbit from below the surface. Two loons floated on the smooth surface as if suspended in mid-air.

It's incredibly pretty, but I wouldn't want to live here, Billy thought as he marveled at the scene. There are lots of water lilies, but not many aspens. You can't build a dam with flowers.

He looked over his shoulder and surveyed the entire valley, managing to locate only a few clumps of aspen. They were stunted and unthrifty-looking. Even the spruce trees grew mostly in sheltered nooks. It was too cold for trees to prosper at this altitude. Then he spotted some aspens that were turning yellow. Fall is here, he suddenly thought, feeling a surge of adrenalin shoot through his veins. I'm going to start gathering food for winter! With this happy thought he dove into the water and began his journey back to Beaver Pond.

Refreshed by his rest, Billy made good progress. He passed Missing Link and then Sun-Gali-She and finally Gibraltar. He shot straight down all 5 rapids, once narrowly escaping disaster by avoiding a boulder at the last second. Only a desperate shove with his powerful tail saved him from being smashed against the huge rock at the bottom of the final cascade. Undaunted, he continued — past Dead Horse Creek, past Fire Creek. Finally, just as he felt his energy waning, he arrived at Beaver Pond.

The sun was now well above the mountains, and the pond was flooded in sunshine. No one was to be seen as Billy swam past the lodges. He noticed that the food left from the wedding was gone — eaten probably. Not a trace remained. Heading for his own lodge, he observed the sign gleaming above the entrance, cheerfully announcing to the

world the names of its occupants: “Billy & Becky.” Billy entered the lodge, finding Becky sound asleep. Quietly shaking the water off his fur, he snuggled up to her hot little body and soon he too was sleeping.

Becky was more than a little miffed when she awoke next day. In fact, at first she was furious. As Billy slept, she went about her toilette with a determined set to her jaw. She brushed her sleek hair until it shone in the dim light of the lodge’s interior. Awakened by the sound of her movements, Billy stretched and yawned.

“What happened to you yesterday, Billy?” Becky asked, sounding hurt. “I thought maybe you left me or something. Sage thought perhaps a grizzly got you. We were all worried, you know.”

“I took a trip up to Snow Lake,” Billy replied a bit sheepishly.

But his confidence quickly returned.

“I felt the need to do a little exploring,” he explained. “And guess what!”

“What!” Becky asked, more cheerfully now, responding to his enthusiasm.

“I saw some yellow aspens in Snow Valley. Fall is here! I’m starting the winter food cache today!”

“Are you sure, Billy?” Becky asked, looking at him doubtfully. “It seems awfully early. It’s still summer, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s almost the middle of August, and I think we’re having an early fall. Besides, it’s going to be my very first food cache, and I want to finish it before anyone else finishes theirs.”

“It’s going to be *our* very first food cache, Billy. Let’s not forget there are two of us now. May I remind you this is a partnership we have here?” Becky admonished gently.

“Well, all right, *our* very first food cache,” Billy said, putting his arms around Becky’s shoulders and giving her a little hug. “But anyway, I’m starting it today.”

Becky cuddled up to Billy, warming to his affection. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and returned his hug.

“Let’s go back to bed for a while,” she whispered in his ear. “It’s still early.”

“No Beck,” Billy said firmly, stepping back from her a bit. “There are trees to be felled! I must get at it.”

Saying this, he disentangled himself from her little arms and moved toward the door. But he paused and looked back.

“We’ll go to bed early today,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

He dove into the exit tunnel and surfaced in the pond. A few beavers were already out. Several were partaking of willow shoots someone had gathered from Willow Flats. Billy noticed Chuck among them, and Sage was there too. As Billy approached, Chuck looked up with a smirk on his lips, but continued chewing his twigs. No one said a thing as Billy took a sprig from the water and commenced to devour it. He was ravenous, and for a few

minutes concentrated on his meal. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sage looking at him while feeding on a long, slender piece of willow.

“May I ask what happened to you yesterday, Billy?” Sage finally said in a gentle but less than approving tone of voice.

“I went up to Snow Lake,” Billy replied nonchalantly.

Sage raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. He continued munching on his willow shoot.

“Yourself?” he asked after a few minutes.

“Yes,” Billy answered without hesitation.

“What if you had run into a grizzly? Or been hurt in the rapids? What if you had gotten lost?”

“Well, I didn’t, did I,” Billy countered, a hint of cockiness in his voice. “And guess what? I saw some yellow aspens. Fall is here!”

Sage stopped chewing and looked at Billy, a surprised expression on his face.

“Billy, Snow Lake is in the high country. It’s cold up there. Frosts come early at those altitudes. There won’t be a frost down here for a month or more. It’s summer, not fall.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think we’re having an early fall,” Billy said, studying Sage’s face to ascertain his reaction. A little voice within him said ‘Shut up, Billy! What are you saying! Show some respect!’

There wasn't even a hint of fall in the area of Beaver Pond. The huckleberries were barely ripe, and the ducklings couldn't fly yet. The wood lilies were still in bloom, and white-throats sang every morning. Cattails had not yet turned brown. Aspen leaves were still green. Fall didn't start until the leaves turned yellow and elk began to bugle.

It was clearly summer.

"I've watched fall come and go for more years than I can remember," Sage said, a pained expression on his kindly face, "And take my word for it, son, it's still summer."

With this pronouncement, Sage swam off toward Beaverlodge.

"What are you trying to prove, Billy?" Chuck asked in consternation after Sage had gone into his lodge.

"I'm not trying to prove anything, Chuck," Billy replied. "It's autumn, and I'm going to start preparing my food cache today, that's all."

"You're kidding!" Chuck exclaimed, laughing derisively. "Are you out of your mind? There's still a month before it's time to start gathering food!"

"He who laughs last laughs loudest, Chuck," Billy said scornfully. He swam toward a clump of ripe-looking aspens, climbed onto shore in front of them, and began gnawing one that suited his fancy. Before long, it came crashing to the ground. He methodically cut it into manageable lengths. Taking one of the pieces in his teeth, he swam over to his lodge with it.

Billy had helped his father build the winter food cache before a grizzly got the middle-aged patriarch, and knew what he was doing. Placing the piece of aspen in the water directly in front of the lodge, he went back for another. One by one he moved all the pieces, and then felled another sapling. He worked all night, and by dawn there was a neat arrangement of aspen stems in the water before his lodge.

Not waiting for Becky, who was visiting her mother, Billy went to sleep early, bone-weary but pleased with himself. By the time Becky came home and snuggled up to him, he was sound asleep. She sighed, turned over, and was soon fast asleep too.

Next day Billy continued storing food in preparation for the distant winter. Many in the village laughed at him, but he paid them no mind. In due course he had a sizeable collection of stems and branches below the surface of the water next to his lodge. By the time the first frost came, when the other beavers began putting together their own food caches, Billy had finished his. And a very large one it was too. In fact, it contained far more food than Becky and he could possibly eat in one winter.

Billy was proud. Not only had he finished his cache before anyone else had completed theirs — he knew it was much larger than the others would be too. Then, to top it all off, a snow storm swept down from Copper Mountain a few days after the other beavers had begun their caches. Billy was very smug as he swam about in the falling snow and watched the other beavers feverishly gathering food for winter.

Sage observed Billy's behavior from Beaverlodge, and didn't like what he saw.

A September snow storm wasn't that unusual in this part of the country; it was hardly a sign winter was on its way. Sage hadn't even begun his food cache yet. He knew there would be at least a month of Indian summer after the little storm blew over. He had learned through hard experience that storing food early in the fall was a mistake. The water was still warm, and the bark unripe. If one made the cache too early, nutrients would leach out of the bark into the warm water, and one might suffer from malnutrition that winter.

But Billy was very smug indeed. As he passed Chuck, who was helping his father, he yelled out, "Who's laughing now!" Chuck ignored him, and continued gnawing on his tree.

That morning Sage noticed a new sign above the entrance to Billy's lodge.

It read "Bill and Becky."

Chapter Three

The snow stopped, the sky cleared, and the following night a heavy frost took Aspen Valley into its cold embrace. Next morning there was a thin layer of ice on the pond.

But the cold snap didn't last. A warm chinook wind blew in from the southwest, and both the skim of ice and skiff of snow disappeared within a couple of hours. A warm wind raked the valley all day as Billy and Becky slept in their snug lodge. When they emerged that evening, the wind was gone and a fragrant tranquility had taken its place.

The aspens turned brilliant yellow and deep crimson. The call of sandhill cranes and Canada geese could be heard overhead as those gentle giants flew south to escape winter's fury. The sound of bugling elk and clashing antlers echoed through the valley as stags challenged each other and dueled over the dainty females waiting in the forest nearby. For days the stags competed to see who would have the pleasure of mating with those females. The opportunity came but once a year, and long, hard battles were fought for that earthy delight. Every year one of the stags emerged victorious and sired most of the calves that would be born the following spring.

Fall had arrived.

It was now early September, and the beavers were hard at work. Some cut trees for storage in food caches, while others reinforced lodges against piercing winter winds. Several worked on the dam, placing stones, logs and mud at strategic points to prevent it from being swept away by the spring floods that were certain to follow the deep winter snows.

It was a happy time at Beaver Pond. A beaver is never happier than when working for a worthy cause, and survival is the worthiest cause of which beavers know.

Billy had already finished his food cache, and had also done his share of work at the dam. He stood beside his house and examined its exterior carefully, checking every nook and cranny to determine whether there might be a need for reinforcement. He stepped back from the north wall, where he had been probing what looked like a weak spot, and assessed the entire structure. He was disappointed at what he saw. The lodge seemed so small. It wasn't even one of the bigger lodges in Beaver Pond. An ordinary little house, it was typical of those built by young bachelors just prior to getting married.

Ordinary was not good enough for Billy. He wasn't an ordinary beaver.

According to Sage, there would be at least a month of Indian summer before winter set in. Billy decided to build a bigger house. A two-story house!

No one had ever built a two-story house in Aspen Valley before. In fact, no one had even contemplated such a thing. Everyone had heard of a two-story house a beaver called Nigel had once built in Fire Valley, near the old volcano, but everyone considered the thought of owning such a house more or less a pipe dream. The two-story lodge still stood there in that lonely valley, but it was now empty and forlorn.

The residents of Beaver Pond had been captivated by the thought of a two-story house, for a beaver's home is truly his castle, and what a castle a two-story house would be! Sage gently remarked that it was not a wise idea. For one thing, a two-story house

took a great deal of energy to heat during the winter. For another, it required too many trees to build, trees that were a beaver colony's life blood. He said Nigel was a strange individual, more interested in status than in life itself. Sage cautioned the beaver people about the dangers of becoming obsessed with status. No good ever came of it: in the long run, it always led to trouble. Just as Sage warned them they mustn't become overly concerned with death if they hoped to live, so too he said it would be the end of them if they ever got caught in the status trap.

Still the beavers had chattered excitedly about the dream home in Fire Valley. They all secretly yearned for such a home, as it would give them much status. Every male beaver longed for status, though none would ever, ever admit to that. Indeed, what a male beaver secretly wanted more than anything else in the entire world was status. But no one spoke of it. Status was practically a forbidden word in Beaver Pond.

Inasmuch as Billy craved status, he was no different from the others. However, Billy was different in that some time ago now he had decided to do whatever was necessary to get as much status as possible. In fact, he hoped one day to be regarded as the greatest beaver that ever lived. As he stood there beside his lodge, measuring its meager dimensions in his mind, he decided he might as well start working toward that magnificent goal right now. There was nothing to be gained by putting it off. Hadn't he already taken the first step by getting married?

His mind was made up. Yes! He'd build a two-story house! And it would be a split-level! There was plenty of time before freeze-up, and trees suitable for building material stood nearby. If freeze-up came before he finished the new house, he and Becky could spend the winter in the old one. What did he have to lose? Absolutely nothing. And he had everything to gain. Well, maybe not everything, but specifically status, which was really all he wanted. Besides, with status he could get everything else a beaver could possibly want. He'd order everyone to do whatever he wished, for they would look up to him and obey him like a king. The little voice within began to say something, but he squelched it and immediately went to work on his new venture.

It was still early in the night, and he would have made a pretty good start on his mansion before sunrise. His paws shook with excitement as he savored the thought of the other beavers looking up to him with envy and admiration. What a stroke of luck it was that he had taken that trip up to Snow Valley in August! As a result, he built his food cache a month early, and now had time to build a new house. One that would impress everyone. He trembled like an aspen in a stiff breeze as he anticipated being the owner of the biggest house in Beaver Pond. It would be bigger even than Beaverlodge.

He had selected a good site for the little house last summer, one endorsed by Sage. The bank of the river sloped steeply below the water line at this point, giving Billy the necessary depth for a food cache and an underwater entrance. Moving about 20 yards downstream, he began preparing a new building site. First he dug a tunnel through the soil

from the water up into the bank, and then excavated a cave-like space in the earth at the end of the tunnel just above the water table. He placed some mud and a few small aspen branches on the bank directly above the excavation to mark the spot.

“Billy, what are you doing!” he heard Becky exclaim in a muffled voice as he worked in the excavation.

“I’ll be right out, Beck!” he called through the thin layer of earth. He dove into the tunnel and surfaced in the pond beside the beginnings of the lodge. Climbing onto the bank beside Becky, he shook the beads of water from his fur and looked at her.

“I’m building a new house!” he said happily.

“You’re what?!” Becky remarked with surprise, at first not knowing what he meant.

“But we already have a new house!” she continued after a brief pause, pointing to the neat little structure to one side of them.

“That one’s too small,” Billy replied, looking at the lodge and frowning. “The new lodge will be a two-story. A split-level. I’ve always wanted a two-story house.”

He brushed back the disheveled hair on his head and placed his paws on his hips.

“Don’t you think it’s a marvelous idea?” he asked.

“I think it’s a dreadful idea, Billy! There’s nothing wrong with the house we already have!”

“This one will be much better,” Billy said, looking at the pile of sticks and mud that marked the site of the mansion-to-be. “We’ll have two levels: one for sleeping, another for eating. Pretty fancy, huh?”

“Billy, I don’t want a split-level! I like our little house!” Becky retorted. “It will do just fine until we have a family. Even when we have kittens, it will probably be big enough. If not, we’ll just build an addition. I don’t want to move into a new house!”

Tears were forming in Becky’s big brown eyes, and her lip was quivering slightly.

“But think of the advantages, hon,” Billy argued in the sweetest and most submissive voice he could muster. “We’ll call the little house Little Lodge, and our friends can sleep in it when they come to visit. The new house will be Big Lodge. What else? It’ll be the biggest in Beaver Pond, and the only two-story in Aspen Valley! I’m doing it for you, pet.”

“Nonsense, Billy!” Becky cried, tears trickling down her cheeks. “You just want to impress everyone, that’s all!”

“I want to impress you, angel. I’m building it for you, my sweet.”

“Nonsense!” she repeated emphatically, wiping the tears from her face and composing herself. “You’re building it for yourself! I don’t want a big house! I’m quite happy with what we have! I’d be embarrassed to live in a two-story house! Everyone would think we’re trying to be superior or something! Cindy probably wouldn’t even talk to me any

more! You can build yourself a big house if you want to, Billy Beaver, but don't expect me to live in it!"

Becky turned and dove into the water. She surfaced and swam smartly upstream, in the direction of her mother's lodge.

Billy heaved a sigh.

"Females! They're so unappreciative! But not to worry. She'll come around when she sees how beautiful this house will be."

He worked all night and into the morning. By the time he finally headed to Little Lodge for some much-needed sleep, he was exhausted. Much to his surprise, when he entered the quaint dwelling Becky was nowhere to be seen.

"No matter," he muttered. "She's sleeping at her mother's. Poor thing's feelings are hurt just because she didn't get her way."

He chewed on some stale bark for a while, and then fell into a deep sleep. Later, Becky came home and lay down beside him. But she stayed well over on her side of the bed; she didn't touch him at all.

In spite of Becky's overly polite conversation at breakfast, next day Billy was hard at it again. He finished the excavation and then the foundation, and turned his attention to building the walls of what in his mind he already called Big Lodge. He looked over a nice stand of aspens, selecting the best ones for this grand new dwelling, when it struck him that a grand house ought to be made of grand wood. Aspens are too ordinary. This was

not going to be an ordinary lodge. This would be the most important lodge on the Aspen River.

He walked to the stand of white birches further up the bank, and wondered: dare he? They were the very best trees in the vicinity of Beaver Pond, reserved for special purposes, and were never used as building material. Billy's heart pounded in his chest as he surveyed the stately trees towering above him. He turned his head toward the pond where the other beavers were busily storing food and reinforcing their lodges, and again he wondered: dare he?

Ignoring the little voice within him, he decided to go for it. *Indeed* a grand house ought to be made of grand wood! He selected a particularly handsome birch and sank his teeth into its white bark. He had never bitten into a live birch tree before, and was surprised how sweet and juicy it was in comparison to an aspen. This is the kind of tree my teeth were meant to cut, he thought with satisfaction. He gnawed into the delicious wood until he felt the stately tree begin to quiver in the light breeze. Stepping back, he looked up at the crown. The tree was beginning to sway. Two more bites with those chisel-like teeth, and down it came with a crash.

Well, that's that, Billy thought to himself. There's no turning back now. He cut the tree into short sections, and carried two of the sections to the building site. He got some mud from the shore of the pond and worked it with his paws until it was just right. Taking a length of birch in his teeth and placing it into position, he patted the mud around

it and stood back. Good. He picked up the other section of birch and began doing the same with it.

“Billy!” a voice said quietly but urgently behind him.

Billy started and turned. It was Sage.

“Oh hello Sage,” he said in a tone of voice that wasn’t quite as confident as he had wished.

“What on Earth are you doing?” Sage inquired.

“Building a house,” Billy replied, a little nervously.

“You already *have* a house,” Sage pointed out. “What’s wrong with that one?”

“It’s too small. It has only one story. The new one will have two.”

“But why do you want a two-story house?” Sage asked. “Everyone knows they serve no useful purpose. Could it be that you’re getting ambitious?”

Sage searched Billy’s face in the faint moonlight that filtered down through the canopy of leaves. Billy turned to one side, picked a stem from a bunch of fox-tails growing near his feet, and began chewing on it. He looked back at Sage, but said nothing.

“Well, Billy? Are you?”

“I have finished preparing my food cache, and I’ve put in my share of time at the dam,” Billy said in measured syllables. “There is still plenty of time before freeze-up. I’ve always wanted a two-story house, and now I’m going to build one. What’s wrong with that?”

Shaking his head slowly, Sage turned toward the beginnings of the new house and examined what Billy had been doing. Suddenly he whirled and sputtered, “Birch! And you’re using birch too! You’re breaking all of Beaver Pond’s rules, Billy!”

“Your rules, Sage. I’m breaking *your* rules. They’re not mine. I want a two-story house, and I want it made of birch. So I’m going to build one. I’m an adult, and I can do as I please,” Billy said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

He spat the stem of grass on the ground and picked up the section of birch he had dropped when Sage startled him. Placing the piece on the budding wall of the lodge, he secured it with some mud. Sage watched with stern disapproval, not quite believing what he was seeing. Ignoring him, Billy went to fetch more birch wood from the stand in the distance.

Sage was dumbfounded. This didn’t seem like the Billy he had observed playing as a kitten at his feet, nor was it like the individual he had joined to Becky in holy matrimony just over a month ago. Never before had Sage seen a resident of Beaver Pond break time-honored traditions so arrogantly. Nigel had done that, but Nigel had been from another colony, one that was infamous for ignoring Nature’s simple rules. And look what happened to him. He had wasted away in his mansion in Fire Valley.

Sage suppressed the wrath mounting within him only with great difficulty. But slowly his rage turned to sadness. He walked down to the water’s edge and then swam toward Beaverlodge. He resumed the task of storing food in his cache, which he had dropped

when he was informed of Billy's latest activities, but his heart wasn't in it. He heard another birch fall in the forest behind Billy's lodge, and couldn't stand it any more. He eased into the water and swam slowly to Rufus's house. Rufus was a source of comfort when he was agitated. He was now very agitated, and it was not a time to be alone.

Billy labored all that night, and each night after night for a whole week. Gradually Big Lodge took shape in the forest beside the river. It towered almost twice as high as the other lodges in Beaver Pond. A fine lodge if ever there was one. Billy used all the trees in the stand of birches, but it was worth it. The white wood stood out beautifully against the dark brown earth, rendering the lodge very distinctive.

Even Becky secretly admitted to herself that it was a beautiful lodge. However, though she found it pleasant to look at, she wasn't comfortable with the idea of living in it. In fact she dreaded the thought. There was something not quite right about the whole thing.

Chuck, on the other hand, was excited by the new house. It was the most grandiose structure he had seen in his entire life, and he told Billy so. The other young males, too, openly admired the house. And they admired Billy as well.

In one short week Billy had gained a lot of status in Beaver Pond. In seven days, he had changed from an ordinary beaver into something of a celebrity. He became the center of attention, the talk of the colony. All the young males watched as he put the finishing touches to Big Lodge. And they secretly began planning such lodges for themselves.

Finally the lodge was complete. Billy was bursting with pride as he inspected the handsome structure. Little Lodge looked so plain by comparison, its grayish-green aspen wood so drab in contrast to the flashy white birch. And the sign above the entrance left much to be desired too. “Bill and Becky” seemed so ordinary.

That morning, after Billy and Becky had gone into Big Lodge, a new sign made of birch wood gleamed above the entrance.

It read “William and Rebecca.”

Chapter Four

Billy felt unusually good as he drifted toward consciousness next day, as if something exceptionally wonderful had happened. His body was enveloped in the kind of warmth he hadn't experienced since he was a babe at his mother's breast. He lay there, not yet fully awake, and basked in this glow. After a few minutes his eyes opened and he looked at the wall directly before him. Then he remembered. Big Lodge! It all came back in a flood of glory.

It was early, and Becky was still asleep beside him on the bed of shredded birch wood. Billy turned over onto his back, put his paws under his head, and pondered his good luck. But actually it wasn't good luck at all; it was more like good management. The only luck involved was that he had been born a superior beaver. He was grateful for that, but the rest was all good management, he thought happily. It wasn't the end of September yet, and not only had he completed his food cache — he had also built a new lodge! The other beavers weren't even finished their caches yet. But they can't really be blamed for that, Billy thought. They are ordinary beavers.

He admired the fine arch high above him, and marveled at how superior it was to Little Lodge's low aspen ceiling. He took pleasure too in the fact that Big Lodge was a split-level. He and Becky now had a sleeping chamber above the eating area, a unique

innovation in Beaver Pond. This would make life much more pleasant during the winter, when ice on the pond forced them to dine indoors. No one else could boast of such a luxury!

Billy jumped out of bed and dashed down to the kitchen. It was getting much too late for a beaver like him to be lying around savoring past achievements. Dreamers stayed in bed and dreamt; they seldom accomplished anything significant. He was anything but a dreamer. He was a doer. Action was what he was all about. It was time to press on. He dove into the water and surfaced on the pond.

The sun had already disappeared behind Blue Rock. Beavers went about their seemingly endless chore of storing food for the coming winter. Billy swam leisurely among them, surveying what would soon be his kingdom. It was only a matter of time until he reigned supreme. Not by force, of course, but rather by virtue of having clearly demonstrated through actual achievement that he was the most competent individual in the pond. Billy felt a pang of hunger in his stomach, and headed regally toward shore.

Becky stirred and reached for Billy, but her arms found only empty space. She opened her eyes and peered about. For a moment she was confused. Nothing seemed familiar. Where was she? What was happening? Then she remembered. Big Lodge. She lay back on the bed and stared vacantly at the wall of birch wood before her. An empty feeling came over her, one she had never before experienced. Everything was strange. She missed the smell of aspen bark and the coziness of Little Lodge. She missed Billy's hairy chest and

musky odor. She felt like she had awakened in a strange bed within a strange lodge — which indeed she had, she thought unhappily to herself.

Outside, Billy chewed on a short length of birch that had been left over from the construction project. As he munched, he feasted his eyes on the new lodge. My, he thought, it really is something. A finer dwelling had never graced the shores of Aspen River. A dream come true, better even than he had hoped. He actually owned the home everyone else in the pond only dreamt about.

Billy stopped chewing for a moment, and glanced at Little Lodge. How had he ever lived in such a place? He knew he could never do so again. It was practically a hovel. As his eyes came to rest on the food cache in front of the pathetic structure, Billy realized he'd have to move all those stems and limbs. The cache would be much more convenient in front of Big Lodge. Not to worry; that was not a problem for one such as William Beaver.

He tossed aside the piece of birch and swam to the cache. Grabbing an aspen stem that protruded from the water, he gave it a tug. It didn't budge. He tugged harder. Still it didn't move. He grabbed another, with the same result. Obviously it was going to be more work to move the cache than he had anticipated. Oh heck, thought Billy, it might be easier to simply build a new one. And better too, for that matter. A used cache isn't exactly my idea of class, he thought with a frown. Inspecting the cache more closely, he noticed the

stems and branches in it were already looking a bit faded in places. There were unsightly blotches here and there too.

No point in going half way, he thought. I'll simply build me a brand new cache, that's what I'll do! Yes siree! A brand new cache to go with my brand new lodge!

He headed into the woods in search of a good stand of aspen. Billy wanted nothing but the best. He would have used birches, but they were all gone. No problem. Shiny new aspens would do.

However, as he searched among the cottonwoods and alders, he found that even aspens weren't very plentiful any more. The other beavers were more than half finished their caches, and aspens of the right size — those that made good winter food — were becoming scarce. Finally Billy located a small stand that looked about right, and began the task of building a new cache.

When Becky emerged from Big Lodge, she found Billy busily felling an aspen.

“What now!” she exclaimed in surprise.

“I'm building a new cache, dear,” Billy replied through his teeth, glancing at her sideways as he continued gnawing on the trunk of the tree.

“What?!” she said with alarm. “Why!”

Billy stopped gnawing and turned to Becky with a look of exasperation that quickly changed to annoyance. He began to say something, but thought better of it and continued gnawing on the sapling.

“Billy, stop that chewing this instant and tell me precisely what you are up to!”

Again Billy stopped, but this time he managed to control himself. Looking at Becky for a moment, he realized how comely she was as she stood there in the soft evening light, her liquid eyes wide with concern. Walking up to her, he placed one paw on her shoulder, the other under her chin.

“Becky dear, as I already said, I’m building a new cache. I was going to move the old one over to Big Lodge, but changed my mind. It’s not worth it. The old cache is already faded and discolored in places. I want a new one. To match our new house.”

“Get your paws off me!” she snapped, shaking herself free. “Have you gone out of your mind? You want to build a new cache just for the sake of appearance! Billy Beaver, I can’t believe you’re actually doing this!”

“Well, to be quite honest, that isn’t the main reason, Becky,” Billy quickly replied, a little embarrassed by her rebuke. “Fact is, the other cache has been in the water too long to be top eating quality. The warm fall ruined it. We need a fresh cache.”

“You’re just using that as an excuse! The old cache will be just fine! Maybe it won’t be as nutritious as a new one would be, but it will have to do! Stop this nonsense at once, or you’ll make fools of both of us! Everyone is going to think we’re trying to be superior or something. Even worse, they’ll think we’ve gone nuts. I don’t know about you, Billy! You don’t seem to be the same beaver I married last summer! You’ve changed! What’s gotten into you!”

“Be reasonable, Becky ...”

“*You* be reasonable! I think things are going to your head, Billy boy!”

“Beck ...”

“Shut up and listen to me for a minute!” she interrupted furiously. “You need a good talking to! First you took off by yourself for a whole night right after our wedding, without even telling me. Next you built the food cache a month early, making us the laughing stock of Beaver Pond. Then you built a new lodge, and a two-story one at that, just for show, just to impress everyone. Now you’re building a new food cache, again for show. Have you taken leave of your senses? Where is it all going to end!”

She paused, breathing hard.

“Look ...” Billy began again.

“Shut up and listen I said!” she demanded sharply. “I’m not finished yet! It’s not just that you’re making us both look foolish by trying to prove you’re better than everyone else. That’s bad enough, but just think of the trees you’re wasting. If everyone were like you, soon there wouldn’t be any trees left around here. Our supply isn’t unlimited, you know. And you had the nerve to use the birch grove to build your new house! Now there probably isn’t a birch within a mile of here. All because you want to be a big-shot. Don’t think the others don’t resent that, Billy, ‘cause they do. Oh sure they look up to you, but they hate you too, in a way. They all want to be number one. Now that you’ve started

this mess, there's no telling where it's going to end. Soon everyone will be building two-story houses. Wasting trees just to show how superior they are."

Becky glared at Billy, her jaw set firmly and fire in her eyes. He glared back.

"And that stupid sign you put up yesterday! My name is Becky, and yours is Billy. No one ever calls us William and Rebecca. And no one ever will. I've never heard anything more ridiculous in my entire life! Do you really think William is better than Billy? I like the way Billy sounds. It's friendly. William sounds snobbish. Pretentious. And I like my name too. Becky is plenty good enough for me, and I intend to keep it. I don't like to be called Rebecca."

Becky pointed at the sign made of birch wood, with "William and Rebecca" written across it.

"Take that down this instant, Billy Beaver! Right now!"

Billy had heard only half of what Becky said, if that. He had been getting angrier by the second as she spoke.

"Are you finished?" he asked, livid.

"Yes I'm finished!" she said. "Now take that sign down!"

"It's my turn, my dear little Rebecca. Now you listen to me for a minute. You're not half as smart as you think you are. Exactly who do you think you're talking to, anyway? Maybe you aren't fully aware of it, but I'm not just another laborer like Chuck. I'm an engineer. And soon I'm going to be the Chief Engineer. You ought to be proud to have me

for a husband. Most females would give anything to share my bed and benefit from my power. That sign is staying exactly where it is. It has class. Now go back into the house where females belong, dammit, and let me work in peace!”

Billy turned and resumed gnawing the aspen.

Becky uttered a cry of disgust and disappeared into Big Lodge. But a few minutes later she emerged with her personal things clutched in her little arms. Without so much as a glance at Billy, she headed straight for her mother’s lodge. Noticing this out of the corner of his eye, Billy muttered “She’ll be back by dawn. I know females. They’re all the same.”

She wasn’t back by dawn.

Each night Billy worked at building the new cache from fresh aspen saplings, and each dawn he looked for Becky’s return. She was nowhere to be seen. One by one the tortured days drifted by. The other beavers continued repairing lodges and building caches in the usual fashion, and swam to and fro in front of Big Lodge as they attended to their chores. Becky was not among them.

Once Billy thought he caught a glimpse of her among a group of females gathered at the entrance to Beaverlodge, and he hurried over. However, when he called out “Becky!”, it wasn’t Becky who turned, but Cindy. Billy swam back to Big Lodge, dejected and lonely.

September was finally over, and October opened with more warm, sunny weather. As he worked on the new cache, Billy built up a mighty anger toward Becky and indeed

toward all beavers. Within two weeks he had completed the task of building the cache. There was enough food in it for three beavers, even though there was only one solitary individual in his big lodge of shining white birch logs.

Then he heard the news from Chuck.

Becky wanted nothing more to do with him. She had decided he was a big-headed egomaniac, a disgrace to the beaver people, and didn't want to be his wife any more. She was living with her aunt and uncle over on the Red Deer River, one drainage to the north, and didn't plan on coming back.

In fact, rumor had it she was already seeing another beaver.

Billy took the news hard, but tried not to show it. He turned to Chuck, struggling to hide his troubled soul behind a carefree mask, and said, "That's her problem, bro, not mine. By the time I'm through, there'll be females crawling all over me. I'll have more girlfriends than I can handle."

He couldn't be sure, but Chuck thought he detected a quiver in Billy's gravelly voice.

As a blustery dawn broke over Beaver Pond next morning, a new sign slowly became visible above the entrance to Big Lodge.

It read "William Beaver, Chief Engineer."

Chapter Five

A cold wind sighed through the branches of the aspens and cottonwoods.

Angry-looking clouds scudded across the sky. The last of the leaves fluttered to the ground like doomed butterflies. By noon, the wind had become a gale that howled through

the forest like a demon. The crowns of trees rattled against each other, causing elk to peer nervously over their shoulders into the shadows behind them. Inside Big Lodge, Billy mumbled uneasily in his sleep as he turned over on his big, wide bed.

The valley was now a blend of bleak trees, faded grass and dark water. On the slopes above, evergreens gave way to monoliths of rock that disappeared into gray clouds. An occasional snowflake materialized out of the gloom and lodged in the carpet of leaves on the ground.

All day Aspen Valley cringed below the threatening sky.

But early in the evening the arctic front paused, hesitated for a moment, and then retreated northward as quickly as it had arrived. By the time Billy surfaced on Beaver Pond, the sky was almost entirely clear and the wind was gone. However, the front had left quite a chill in the air, and crystals of ice brushed against Billy's nose as he cruised through the water.

The crystals melted as a light breeze began to blow from the southwest, bringing mild Pacific air with it. The beavers once again busily towed aspen branches through the water and plastered their lodges with mud in preparation for the frigid winter blast that would soon descend upon the valley in earnest.

Following the brief visitation by the arctic front, another spell of Indian summer ensued as a high pressure system developed and then hovered over the valley. This time it

lasted until the end of November, giving Beaver Pond the warmest and longest fall in living memory.

By the end of the second week of October, however, the work was done. All was ready for winter. The dam was sturdy and secure. The lodges were fortified against even the strongest winds and cruelest frosts. The food caches were swollen with delectable pieces of aspen and willow.

At last the beaver people could rest.

While everyone else had put the finishing touches to their caches and lodges, at first Billy had moped, groveling in self-pity. He harbored genuine affection for Becky, and his sense of lost love weighed heavily upon his soul. But his ego suffered even more. It was inconceivable that Becky should have left him, the most accomplished beaver in the pond. His lodge was the biggest, his food cache the largest. As his attention turned to his achievements, Billy forgot about Becky and began to entertain thoughts of even greater accomplishments. He had only just begun. The world was his oyster. All he had to do was reach out and take it. Simple as that. Billy was amused by how easy it really was.

Sage was not at all amused. On the contrary, he was deeply troubled by what was happening before his very eyes. True, every young male had a need to prove himself, especially right after getting married and being officially recognized as an adult. True, many young males dreamed of building the biggest cache in the pond and the largest house in the valley. True, they all secretly yearned for status, and in fact needed a certain

amount in order to be happy. But Billy was going too far. Never had Sage seen such an ambitious individual. He had watched dozens of young beavers come into adulthood, but none had thrown caution to the wind in their quest for status the way Billy had. To build a two-story house just for status was unthinkable. To cut down a birch grove to create a fancy decor was unforgivable. To allow trees to go to waste as Billy had in building a food cache when he already had one was un-natural.

This did not bode well for young Billy, Sage thought as he mulled these matters over in his lodge. Already Billy had lost his wife, and after only two months of marriage. Already he had failed in one of life's fundamental rhythms.

But Billy was only one part of what troubled Sage.

The others would not be content to sit by and watch as Billy gained status through his achievements. They would want to do the same. In fact, they would want to out-do Billy, and would build houses and caches that were bigger than his. Sage knew this could only mean trouble for the beaver people in the long run. Before they realized what was happening, the trees would be gone, and what then? Without trees, they would perish.

Billy had started something that could spell disaster for the entire colony, and eventually for beaver people everywhere. Sage's life was almost over; he had nothing to lose. And there were probably enough trees to last the lifetime of the present generation of adults. But what of the kittens? How would they feel when they grew up only to find most of the trees gone? To find there was almost nothing left to eat? That their lives were

doomed because the previous generation had been greedy? That the environment had been destroyed by beavers desperate for status and glory? By beavers obsessed with acquiring power and amassing personal wealth? How would the little ones react when they found they couldn't have kittens of their own because there was nothing left to feed them? What would it be like to know that a craving for greatness in the previous generation had deprived them of having even a normal life, let alone one filled with glory?

While Sage lay on his mat with these disturbing thoughts, outside Billy was surrounded by a group of young admirers as he gnawed on the trunk of a large aspen.

Billy had been itching for another challenge, one that would further demonstrate his extraordinary competence, and had decided to fell the largest trembling aspen in the immediate vicinity of Beaver Pond. It was an ancient tree, set well back from the water against the foot of Copper Mountain. The tree had already been large when the beaver people first colonized Beaver Pond. Its bark was coarse, rendering it useless as food. The trunk was much too large to be of value for building purposes. As a result, the aspen had remained untouched by the beavers. It was now almost two feet across at the base, and over 80 feet tall. Just the tree for a beaver such as Billy. A real test for a real engineer.

It was not an easy task. The largest tree Billy had previously felled was much less than a foot across. However, his desire to prove his superiority knew no bounds, and as a result he gnawed with unusual fervor and skill. Round and round the tree he went, slowly but steadily working toward the center. Before the night was through, the tree began to

teeter slightly in the light breeze. Everyone but Billy scrambled for safety toward the pond, well out of the tree's reach. Billy sensed that the tree leaned toward the mountain, and felt safe as he stood on the side facing the pond. He continued to gnaw.

As dawn approached, the breeze died and the tree ceased to teeter, even though there wasn't much left of the trunk at the point of the cut. Still Billy gnawed.

Finally the job was done, and the tree came crashing to the ground. A loud cheer rose from the young beavers watching at a distance. Billy waved and took a deep bow, smiling happily. As the dust settled, the beavers came rushing over to where Billy stood beside the vanquished tree. Each in turn shook his paw and congratulated him on his achievement. They examined the tree with great interest, remarking on its enormous size and inspecting its rough bark. Never before had they seen such a tree felled.

Billy basked in the glory.

The tree had caused the ground to shake as it crashed to earth, awakening the entire village. Soon beavers who had already been asleep began to appear from the direction of the pond, rubbing their eyes and asking what had happened. They too congratulated the young victor when they realized what had taken place.

"What a tree!" some remarked.

"What a beaver!" others exclaimed.

"What an engineer!" still others extolled.

There was much chatter as the crowd stood around Billy, admiring both him and his trophy.

“Sage is coming!” Chuck suddenly whispered, his voice thick with concern.

The crowd instantly fell silent. Everyone looked in the direction of the pond, where Sage walked slowly through the forest toward them. Billy stood next to his trophy, one paw on the trunk and the other on his hip. The crowd parted, making way for Sage as he approached, and stood back in silent anticipation. Sage saw in a flash what was happening.

“What have we here, Billy?” he inquired softly.

“A tree,” Billy replied, his chin jutting out sharply. “It’s a tree, Sage. A trembling aspen, only it isn’t trembling any more. It’s dead now. I killed it.”

“Yes, yes, so I see,” Sage remarked, still softly. “Indeed it isn’t trembling any more, my son. But why did you kill it?”

“Because it was there, Sage,” Billy answered, grinning and glancing quickly at the crowd. “Simply because it was there!”

“Ah yes, because it was there,” Sage commented, a little sardonically now. “Seems to me I’ve heard that one before. Isn’t that what a famous beaver once said when asked why he wanted to climb a certain mountain? Because it was there?”

“Beavers have no business climbing mountains,” Billy snapped, gaining confidence by the second. “Beavers are designed to cut down trees, not climb mountains. We’re engineers, not goats.”

“Are beavers designed to cut down trees they can’t use?” Sage asked. “The mountain is still there, Billy, but the tree is lost forever.”

Billy glanced at the others, and saw not all were with him any more.

“That tree was no good to anyone, Sage. It’s bark is too rough to eat, and it is too big for building purposes,” Billy argued, but a little less confidently than before.

“No good to anyone?” Sage countered, raising his eyebrows. “How about that eagle’s nest over there that’s now smashed against the ground? The tree was apparently good to the eagle. It also seems to me a flicker had been nesting in its trunk for years. And it was a favorite place for the white-throats to sing. If you examine the bark on the upper branches carefully, you’ll see where sapsuckers had been feeding on it every spring. And look at those claw marks over there, where black bears had climbed the tree to escape from grizzlies. It seems to me the tree was good to someone, Billy. Very good indeed, I would say.”

Billy turned to the crowd for support, but found very little there. He began to feel the prestige he had gained by felling the tree slipping away. Anger welled up within him. Who was Sage to tell him, the Chief Engineer, what was right and what was wrong?

Raising his chin even higher, Billy ignored what Sage had just said.

“What business is it of yours anyway, Sage? Exactly who do you think you are? You’re nothing but an old fogey! Go back to bed, where old fogeys like you belong!”

The slight smile that had been playing on Sage’s lips disappeared, and he became deadly serious.

“Billy, this is not good. First you cut down a tree just to show off. I’ve never known a beaver to do that before. Then you...”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Sage!” Billy interrupted. “Just watch me! You’ll see me do lots of things you’ve never known a beaver to do before!”

Again Billy turned to the crowd. The older beavers were clearly against him now. In fact, some were muttering under their breaths as they glowered at him. Seeing the disapproval in their faces, Billy turned back to Sage.

“You’re nothing but an old fool, Sage!”

With that, Billy strode away and plunged into the pond with a mighty splash of defiance.

“Nothing good will come of this,” Sage pronounced sadly to no one in particular as he turned and headed for Beaverlodge.

Slowly the crowd began to chatter again, shocked by Billy’s brazen words. However, one middle-aged male remarked that even though Billy was clearly in the wrong when he insulted Sage, you had to give him credit for his skill and courage. Another nodded his head, and said it wasn’t every beaver who could fell such a tree and then stand up to Sage,

all in one night. But a third said he wasn't so sure. Maybe felling a tree just to prove you could do it wasn't such a good thing. A fourth agreed. Besides, he added, no matter what else had happened, Sage was their leader. And a great one at that. It wasn't right for a young beaver to insult him, especially in front of the whole colony.

There was more chatter as the beaver people resumed examining the tree that only hours before had stood so proudly above the valley and now lay so ignominiously upon the cold ground. It was becoming light by this time, and slowly they began moving back to their lodges in little groups of twos and threes. Finally all were back in bed, fast asleep.

All except Billy, that is. Billy sat atop Big Lodge and fumed.

That Sage is such a jerk, he thought to himself. Some of the beavers had obviously been swayed by the old patriarch's disapproval of what he had done. Chuck was still behind him, as were most of the other young beavers, but the older folk clearly were not.

Billy sat there in the early morning sun and scowled at the world. No way would he give in. Sage was from another era. Those days were gone. Things are different now. Mere survival isn't good enough any more. This was the age of the engineer. And Billy was Chief Engineer. It was only a matter of time until the beaver people realized he was the greatest beaver alive. That he, not Sage, was to be obeyed.

Billy looked at the sign above the entrance to Big Lodge, its white wood gleaming in the sun. "William Beaver, Chief Engineer," it boldly proclaimed. The sign lifted his spirits considerably. He had come a long way since early August, when it had read "Billy &

Becky.” Billy’s face clouded over again as he thought of Becky and wondered what she might be doing at this moment. Sleeping I suppose, like everyone else, he thought.

But who was she snuggled up to as she slept?

Billy turned his attention back to the immediate environs — to his kingdom — and continued to fume. Sage had embarrassed him in front of the others, and someday he’d get even. One day he would get his revenge. Billy’s eyes drifted over to Beaverlodge, where Sage slept, and then fell on Max.

Max! The biggest tree in the land! And Sage adored it!

Say, thought Billy, this has possibilities.

He got up from his perch and viewed Max in earnest. Towering above the pond, it was the largest tree in sight. The elders and kittens called it the Forever Tree — the elders because some thought it had been there forever, the kittens because their mothers told them it would be there forever. Everyone else simply called it Max, though why they did so wasn’t clear to anyone. Some thought Sage had named it that after his grandfather, Maximilian. Others said it had apparently been called Max long before Sage came along. One elder suggested perhaps Max was short for Maximus.

A cottonwood, Max towered more than 100 feet, and was over 3 feet in diameter. When asked why he had built his lodge at its base, Sage always smiled and said “That’s my little secret.” One story had it that he had done so because he regarded Max as the Tree of Wisdom. Another stated that when Sage had first settled in the pond, he chose to

build his lodge next to Max because the tree would serve as a beacon to beavers throughout the land in a time of need. And in fact Max did act as a beacon that could be seen from miles away. Everyone knew that if they came to the spot, they would find the wisest beaver alive, a beaver who had a warm smile and a kind word for everyone. So Max was a great source of comfort to the beaver people, just as was Sage.

Strangely, Max had never been struck by lightning, even though lightning strikes were common in the vicinity. The elders believed Max was protected by the Great Spirit because Sage lived next to it. The Great Spirit would never let anything hurt Sage, for the beaver people needed him. The younger beavers pooh-pooed this as supernatural gobbledygook, and reasoned it was the jagged rock jutting out from the mountain just above Max that prevented lightning from striking the tree. The rock contained traces of copper, and had been struck many times. The elders countered that it was the Great Spirit who placed the copper in the rock in the first place in order to deflect lightning from Max unto the rock. They knew they were right, but sometimes they humored the young folk, who prided themselves in their rational view of the world.

Max was a focal point in Beaver Pond both physically and spiritually, much like Sage. To many beavers Max had become a symbol of Sage — a symbol of love, truth and beauty.

Billy swam slowly toward Max, surveying its broad base in the bright sunshine. The tree was almost twice as wide as the aspen he'd felled. That was quite a challenge. Dare

he? Yes! He'd show Sage! And the others too for that matter. He'd show them all. He'd show them who was boss around here. The sun had only just risen over Fire Mountain, and with luck he would have the tree down before the others were even aware of what was happening.

Yes, he'd show them! And when he had, no one would dispute his authority. Not even Sage would question his status as Chief Beaver if he could convince the others of his superiority.

Billy was sleepy, but sleep could wait. He began at once to gnaw at Max. By noon he had made a pretty significant cut into the tree's huge trunk. As the day wore on and Billy continued gnawing, he saw he had taken on quite a challenge. He was almost halfway through by the time the sun began its descent toward Blue Rock, but he now realized he couldn't possibly complete the task before sundown, when the other beavers were sure to appear on the pond.

On the other hand, maybe he could: after all, he was no ordinary beaver. He renewed his efforts, but try as he might there was still almost a foot of trunk left at the core when the first brown head broke the surface of the water. Fortunately, that beaver didn't notice Billy and swam off in the opposite direction. However, soon there were beavers everywhere, and it wasn't long before Sage was among them.

Then a youngster yelled, "Hey, look what Billy's doing!"

Everyone turned and looked. There was a great gasp as they caught their breath in unison. However, no one said a word. It was beyond words. Sage rushed over, but when he saw it was too late to save the tree, he resigned himself to the tragedy. Now that Billy had gnawed almost entirely through Max, the job must be finished or one day the tree might come down in a wind and kill someone. Max seemed to lean toward the water, so everyone took a place well up on shore, where they would be safe. They all sat down and watched in silence.

A great sadness hung over the pond as darkness fell and the moon rose in the autumn sky. Frost began to gather on dry grass and dead leaves, and some of the beavers shivered uncontrollably now and then. But still they kept their vigil. Never before had there been such a tree. Next to Sage, it was their best friend, and they would stay with Max to the end.

At last, a groan could be heard as Billy cut through the final few inches of healthy fiber. No one had heard Max groan before, not even in the strongest gales. Some of the elders blinked rapidly, again and again, and others wiped actual tears from around their eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, the top of the tree began to tilt. Suddenly Sage called out, “It’s beginning to twist! Run for the water as fast as you can!”

Billy had mis-judged. He had not cut evenly, and the trunk of the tree twisted around as it began to come down. Instead of falling toward the water, it was now leaning toward shore, where everyone was seated. They began to run every which way through the

forest, scrambling for safety. Sage directed some to the right, some to the left, all the while yelling, “Run for your lives!”

Now the tree was coming down with incredible speed, straight for shore, and Sage knew he too must head for the water. Then there was a great crash as the giant hit the earth, a sound that echoed up and down the valley.

The ground shook violently for a few seconds, as if an earthquake were happening, and then all was still. Where Max had stood there was now only an empty column of air.

The Forever Tree was down forever.

After the shock subsided, the beavers came to their senses and swam about excitedly. It had been a very close thing, but everyone was accounted for. They were all in the safety of the water ... except Sage. No one could find Sage.

“Did anyone see Sage get into the water?” one elder inquired hesitantly.

No one answered.

Everyone began moving toward shore, where Max’s grey hulk lay like a beached whale. Slowly the beaver people got out of the water ... except Billy, who swam toward Big Lodge. Gradually everyone walked toward Max. No one wanted to go there, but they knew they must. Slowly they proceeded along Max’s stretched-out trunk toward his crown. Then the elder leading the way let out a cry.

“Here he is,” he said with enormous difficulty.

Sage lay crushed beneath Max's trunk. The beaver people quickly gathered round, but they saw immediately there was nothing anyone could do for Sage. They huddled together in their sorrow, every one of them swaying back and forth. One elderly matron chanted, sharing her grief with the stars and the trees.

By this time Billy was at Big Lodge, fashioning another sign. While everyone else sat in a semi-circle around Sage's body, Billy gnawed on a piece of wood. When dawn began to break a few hours later, there was a new sign over the entrance to Big Lodge.

It read "William von Beaver."

Chapter Six

The elders were deeply shaken by Sage's death. Their beloved spiritual leader had been taken from them, and quite un-necessarily. They placed the blame squarely on Billy without the slightest doubt in their minds.

The younger beavers were not all affected in the same way. A few felt like the elders. Others viewed Sage as a very old individual whose time had been near at hand anyway, and considered his death simply accidental. They did not blame Billy. On the contrary, they admired him for his achievement in felling Max. No one had ever heard of a beaver felling a tree of that size before.

The majority of the younger males, and some older ones too, began to call Billy the Chief Engineer. A beaver's purpose in life is to fell trees, they reasoned, and Billy had felled the biggest tree in the land. He deserved the title. Most young males aspired to be like him — to have big houses and fell big trees. And the young females found him

irresistible. They saw Billy as a highly desirable mate, and flirted with him at every opportunity.

In the eyes of the younger crowd, Billy was a hero. He had the highest status in Beaver Pond, and some already saw him possessing the highest status in the world. What a status — the greatest beaver in the world!

Billy himself was ambivalent about Sage's fate. In spite of the grudge he had held against the old patriarch, he had not wished him dead. And he knew that though Sage had been a mere philosopher, and he himself was an engineer, it didn't *necessarily* follow that he — Billy — was superior. There was room for doubt. While he hadn't shown it lately, it had always been a source of comfort to know Sage was there to turn to in times of grief. Even though Sage had not been useful to him in his career as an engineer, Billy knew he would miss the old shaman.

"Don't take it so hard, Billy," Chuck said a few days following Sage's death. "After all, it couldn't be helped. It was an accident."

"Thanks, Chuck," Billy answered, turning to his friend appreciatively. "I needed to hear someone say that. It's been bothering me, you know. Even though it wasn't my fault, somehow I haven't been able to get it off my mind."

Chuck and Billy were sitting near Max, admiring the fallen colossus. The older beavers had cut Max in two in order to remove Sage's body, reducing the tree's grandeur somewhat, but nonetheless it was still quite a sight to behold.

Just then voices could be heard approaching, and soon three elders appeared through the trees. They were coming by to consider how they might go about cleaning up the site. When Max had come down, he had taken many lesser trees with him. And his branches had splintered upon impact. All this had created a terrible mess that detracted from the otherwise tidy grounds at Beaver Pond.

The trio started sharply when they noticed Chuck and Billy sitting there, next to Max. They stopped in their tracks and glowered at the young pair.

“You have a lot of nerve coming back to the scene of the crime,” one growled at Billy.

“Crime, baloney!” Billy sneered, glancing quickly at Chuck for support. “It was an accident! It’s not the first time a beaver has been killed by a falling tree, and it won’t be the last. And besides, Sage was old. Regardless how he died, it *was* going to happen soon, you know.”

Billy paused, and then added in a much softer tone of voice, “That’s life, guys. You’ll just have to accept it. Remember Sage was very old, and it only would have been been a matter of time.”

“He may have been very old, but we’ll miss him just the same,” the elder replied gruffly.

The others nodded their heads in agreement, scowling at Billy all the while.

Suddenly Billy had had enough. He didn’t have to answer to anyone any more — he could do whatever he darned well pleased.

“Look, I’m getting fed up with this!” he snapped at the little group. “I’m not to blame for the accident any more than a mountain is to blame for an avalanche. I’m an engineer, and engineers cut down trees. A tree accidentally falls the wrong way, and a beaver dies. Big deal. It couldn’t be helped. If you don’t like it in Beaver Pond, why don’t you just leave! I’m Chief Beaver here now!”

The elders stepped back in shock, as if hit with a bucket of ice-cold water.

“We’ll see about that,” their spokesman muttered grimly.

Turning to his companions, he said “Come, my friends, let us leave this criminal.”

The trio shuffled off into the gathering dusk.

Billy turned to Chuck triumphantly and said, “I sure showed them who’s boss around here now, huh Chuck!”

“You sure did, Bill!”

“You know something, Chuckie ol’ boy, I think I just got me a brilliant idea!”

“What!” Chuck replied enthusiastically.

“Methinks I’m going to vacate these premises. Yes siree! That’s just what I’m going to do! I’ve out-grown this burg. I’m going to start my own colony. They can keep this dump. Beaver Pond is running out of trees anyway. A beaver like me needs more than this place can possibly offer. I’ll start a colony of my own somewhere, someplace where I can begin from scratch. I don’t want somebody else’s leftovers,” Billy said, gesturing at the trees around him with his stubby arms.

“What a concept!” Chuck exclaimed.

Encouraged by Chuck’s support, Billy continued.

“I’ve actually been thinking about this for quite a while now, Chuck, and here’s how I see it. There’s lots of country out there, and it’s all going to waste. The trees are growing old and falling over in the wind. Many are destroyed in forest fires every year too. All those rivers can be dammed and put to good use. It really is a terrible waste of trees and water.”

Undisguised ambition was written all over Billy’s youthful face.

“Let’s start a new colony, Chuck! Right now! Just imagine — we can have our very own empire. Eventually we’ll rule the entire world. I’ll be in charge, and you can be second in command. What do you say to that, Chuck baby!”

Chuck wasn’t so sure about this. To begin with, things weren’t all that bad at Beaver Pond. But more importantly, Chuck didn’t want to play second fiddle to anyone. He wanted to be Chief Engineer, and eventually Chief Beaver. And why not? He could do anything Billy could, and probably better too, if he just set his mind to it.

“I don’t know, Bill ...” Chuck began hesitantly.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? What’s there to know? It’s obvious, isn’t it? Let’s go for it!”

“It seems awfully late in the year to be starting a colony. It’s the middle of October, and freeze-up is just around the corner,” Chuck countered.

“Nonsense, Chuck! Don’t be such a coward! With me running the show, you won’t have a thing to worry about. We’ll go up Fire Creek, where Nigel used to live, and stay in his abandoned house for the first winter. It’s a two-story you know, and I’ve heard it’s in fairly good shape. We can each have a floor to ourselves, and next spring we’ll build ourselves new houses. Come on, Chuck, let’s do it!”

But in his mind Chuck was already planning his own colony. In a little drainage south of Beaver Pond. A nice stream called Wandering River.

“I don’t know, Bill. Maybe you’d better leave me out of it for now,” Chuck said, pretending to be doubtful. “You go ahead. I’ll think about it, and maybe join you later. In a week or so.”

“All right, Chuck,” Billy replied. “But don’t think too long. I need an assistant, and the job is yours if you want it. If you don’t show up, I’ll have to get someone else. You know roughly where that old lodge on Fire Creek is. I’ll fix it up a bit, and start building a cache right away. Come as soon as you can. I’ll expect you within a week.”

“Okay. I’ll be there,” Chuck said half-heartedly, and headed toward his parents’ lodge.

Without further ado — with nary a glance at Chuck or Big Lodge, and taking no notice of the elders who glared at him from the opposite shore of the pond — Billy plunged into the water and headed upstream.

The mouth of Fire Creek was only a mile above Beaver Pond, and the lodge left vacant when Nigel died was only two miles up the creek. Fire Creek was on the whole rather

shallow and rocky, and its current swift. Aspens were scarce on its banks, and instead the valley was clothed mostly in fir and spruce, with occasional stands of birch. The sides of the valley rose steeply to the peaks on either side — Fire Mountain to the southeast and Copper Mountain to the northwest.

Swimming steadily against the strong current, Billy kept a constant lookout for the lodge. He had never seen it before, but knew he couldn't miss it. Nigel had built it in a grove of birch trees, which would be unmistakable with their white trunks shining in the moonlight against the dark firs in the background. As he came around a bend in the stream, there it was — looking magnificent, just as he had imagined, but also looking a little lonely. As he swam toward it, the splendor of the setting quickly dispelled the shadow of doubt that briefly darkened his mind.

Billy climbed on shore and sat down beside the lodge to rest, for the journey up the swift stream had been exhausting. He immediately saw the lodge wasn't as beautiful as Big Lodge. It was badly weathered in places. Nonetheless it was still serviceable. It had two stories, which was the main thing. Mud plastered over the eroded spots would make it habitable for the winter, and he would build a new lodge in the spring. The site itself was excellent: a flat stretch of creek, where the current was slow and with plenty of mud on the bottom.

Billy cut down a birch sapling and partook of its bark. Imagine eating birch all winter — a diet fit for a king! Nigel had selected a location with a good supply of birch, where no

beaver colony had ever existed before, at least not in living memory. He had been here by himself, without a family, and consumed very few trees before he died. There were several stumps in the grass, but the stand had hardly been touched. Billy noted this with some relief, for his survival during the coming winter would depend on a good food cache.

Satiated, he threw what remained of the small birch into the water and watched it float away, rotating slightly in the uneven current before the lodge. Time to get busy.. As Chuck had pointed out, freeze-up was just around the corner. There was no time to lose.

Billy began with the lodge. Inspecting the interior, he admired the fine workmanship Nigel had displayed in building the split-level structure. He admitted to himself that what Nigel had accomplished here was in some ways superior to Big Lodge. All the better for me, Billy thought to himself. He would benefit from Nigel's design when building a new lodge next spring. Apart from a few dead birch limbs left in the lodge by Nigel, the interior was ship-shape. All it required was new bedding, which Billy created by shredding fresh birch wood on the sleeping platform in the bedroom.

Next he examined the exterior. Except where summer rainstorms had washed away mud, it was in surprisingly good condition. Billy proceeded to apply fresh mud, which he dug from the bottom of the stream. In just over four hours the lodge gleamed in the moonlight like Blue Rock in the sunshine after a fresh fall of snow. Nothing like a new coat of mud to spruce up an old lodge.

By this time Billy's muscles ached. It had been a tough trip from Beaver Pond, against a swift current most of the way, and the lodge work had been exhausting too. Though it was still early, he entered the lodge and let his body fall onto the fresh bed. He lay there with his eyes closed, taking delight in his situation. What a day! What a life!

Before long, he was fast asleep.

He dreamt of big birch trees, fine two-story lodges and huge tiered dams. In his dream, he was awarded a prize for superior engineering. Never before had the world seen such an engineer. Beavers came from far and wide to view his many marvelous works — big dams, big houses and big trees lying flat on the ground.

Just as Billy woke, the beaver people in his dream had been considering the creation of a new title, "Chief Engineer of the Universe," specifically so that they could give it to him. There hadn't seemed to be a title in existence quite good enough to match his caliber.

What a dream!

He knew that if he worked very hard the dream would eventually come true. It was simply a matter of positive thinking and hard work. Anything was possible if you just set your mind to it, he thought as he got off his bed and enjoyed a breakfast of fresh birch bark. The breakfast of champions indeed, he thought cheerfully to himself.

After breakfast Billy set to creating the new food cache. He worked like a beaver possessed, for winter could close in on the valley any day now. His life depended on the cache. Never before had he worked so hard. Fortunately, the labor he engaged in all fall

had conditioned him for just such a challenge. Muscles rippled like bundles of steel cable under his shiny brown fur. His teeth were sharp as razors and strong as chisels. His paws were as powerful as vise-grips yet supple as new willow shoots in June. Before a week was out, he had a good-sized cache of birch stems and limbs in front of the lodge.

He inspected the cache to be certain he had enough food to last the winter. One couldn't be too careful under such circumstances. Billy was no fool. Living alone meant he had to be self-reliant. Somehow he didn't think Chuck would show. Running out of food mid-way through the winter while alone was no joke. It meant certain death.

There was more than enough food in the cache. He could manage quite nicely without Chuck, thank you. October was almost over, and winter was imminent. But let it come. He was ready.

After a day of rest, Billy was completely refreshed. In fact he became rather bored, and decided to explore the creek upstream of his lodge.

Next day he headed upstream early in the evening. Much to his surprise, less than a mile above the lodge the valley became much wider, and the stream was slow and meandering. He had expected if anything that the creek would be faster and shallower, with more rocks. It was in fact slower and deeper, and the bottom was made of good mud. Water lilies grew profusely. He had also expected the birches to disappear, giving way to a forest of solid fir and spruce. Instead the banks were covered with seemingly endless forests of birch.

This was beyond Billy's wildest dreams. Beaver heaven if ever there was one. What a bonanza! He had never seen anything like it in his entire life. And all going to waste. Well, it wouldn't go to waste much longer. With this huge valley, rich forest, and wonderful stream, he would engineer the greatest beaver empire that had ever graced the face of the earth. Not a village. Hardly. More like a city! A city where previously there had been nothing but wildness. And all his doing, too! What luck! Well, in a way it was luck, for no one had known of this paradise before Billy made his sojourn. Except Nigel, of course. He probably had been aware of it. That's obviously why he built his lodge in this valley in the first place.

Billy dove into the water and surfaced with the root of a water lily. He swam to the bank, sat down on a patch of dry grass among the birch trees, and commenced chewing on his find.

As he munched, Billy marveled at his good luck. But of course it wasn't really all good luck, he reminded himself: there was food management too. The harder I work, the luckier I get, but the smarter I work, the richer I get, he chuckled. Hard work and brains was what it all boiled down to. Mostly brains, actually. The only luck involved was being born superior. He would be eternally grateful that he hadn't been born an average beaver, like Chuck. What a bore that would be. The average beaver is so ... so average!

He gazed about in the moonlight as he devoured his root, smacking his lips with self-satisfaction. The northern lights danced joyfully for him, and the stars twinkled

gleefully. What a world, Billy thought. What an incredible world! Finally he had eaten all his stomach could hold. Tossing what was left over his shoulder, he entered the cool water and swam toward the lodge.

It wasn't far, and downstream all the way. He arrived quicker than he'd expected, and there were still a couple of hours left in the night. He selected a birch from the few fine birches remaining in the stand, cut it down, and began carving it. He worked slowly and carefully, for it was important work and he wasn't short of time. Finally he completed the task and went to bed just before sunrise.

When the sun began to break over Fire Mountain, there was a splendid sign above the entrance to the lodge.

It read "William von Beaver III."

Chapter Seven

It was now very near the end of October, and still the fine weather held.

After discovering the valley above the lodge, with its seemingly unlimited potential, Billy wasn't able to rest. He puttered around, adding a few choice morsels to the food cache and touching up the exterior of the lodge.

However, his heart wasn't in the cache or the lodge.

What he really wanted was to build a dam. He would have to build many dams up and down Fire Creek in order to establish the empire he had in mind, and he couldn't wait to begin. Billy toyed with the idea of building one now. Of course he was aware the sensible thing would be to wait for spring, when there would be no shortage of time to complete the project. He knew Sage would have disapproved of him even thinking about beginning the construction of a dam with winter so near at hand.

But Sage was history.

The way the sky stayed clear day after day and the temperature hovered above freezing every night, the creek might not freeze for weeks. I'm going for it, Billy decided. In fact, he reasoned, the low water and cool air at this late point in the fall made for ideal dam-building conditions. The shallow water would make it easier to erect the structure.

And the low temperature would keep him from over-heating as he worked, for he planned on working very hard. He was a hard worker even under normal circumstances, but when it came to something he believed in deeply, he was a virtual workaholic. And he believed in status very, very deeply.

Billy began construction on the 29th of October, 200 yards downstream of the lodge. The creek narrowed and formed a shallow rapid there, creating an ideal location for a dam. Mud was available on the creek bottom immediately upstream, and there was an excellent supply of alders on the banks.

He began by cutting down those alder saplings and placing them across the little rapid, one by one. The first two were swept away by the current, but the third caught in the rocks and held fast. It served as an anchor for the stems that followed, and soon there was a nice collection of saplings in the natural bottleneck. Next Billy gathered cobblestones from the stream bed and placed them on the alders. Then came more alders.

Ever so slowly, the water upstream of the fledgling dam began to rise. After the flow along the bottom had slowed a bit, Billy placed mud in the crevices between the alder stems. There was a good 8 inches of water backed up behind the little dam by the end of the first night's work.

When Billy returned to the dam site next day, he discovered that the current had eroded some of the mud, and the water level had dropped considerably. But he had expected as much. In fact, he was surprised it hadn't dropped even more. This was

normal in the early stages of dam construction. Once again he began by felling alder trees. This time, however, he inserted short sections of alder into the base of the dam, creating a much thicker framework for the mud. Once the mud was added, the flow of water along the bottom would be diverted upward to the surface, where large stems would prevent erosion by the current.

Billy had participated in dam construction at Beaver Pond regularly, and was well versed in the science of dam building. It was an engineering activity dear to his heart. Building dams is second nature to an engineer, possibly even more than felling trees and definitely more than building houses. Building houses can be such a bore, a female's work really, but building dams is pure joy. It's what an engineer does best and loves most. Running water must be stopped if at all possible. Otherwise, it simply goes to waste. And of course this was not just another dam. It was the beginning of an empire.

Billy was a very happy beaver as he worked on his new project.

On this second night of his new venture, he created a solid core at the base of the dam, one made of stems and stones and cemented with mud. Slowly he built on that core, expanding it outward and upward, and as the night's work neared an end there was almost 15 inches of water backed up behind the dam.

He ended the night by placing a thick lattice of alder stems over the entire upper surface of the dam, on the downstream side. This would prevent the water from eroding the mud while he slept, and in fact would do so indefinitely. All beaver dams are overlain

with just such a lattice, and for precisely this purpose. As Billy completed the task and then inspected the fruits of his labor, he was engulfed in a warmth of feeling he had never before experienced.

I have every reason to consider myself a cut above the rest, he thought as he examined his handiwork.

Next day Billy continued working energetically. The dam quickly grew in width, breadth and height. In just over a week he raised the water level by a full 4 feet, even more than he had originally intended. In fact, now the water in front of the lodge was almost too deep, for the water table in the soil beneath the lodge was within 6 inches of the floor.

By the time he had finished, the dam was almost 5 feet high from the stream bed to the surface of the water, and at least 10 feet deep at the base, from its foot in the pond to its tail on the downstream side. It was well over 20 feet long, from one bank to the other.

Thenceforth Billy spent his time reinforcing the structure rather than making it bigger. A dam couldn't be too strong when water came rushing down the mountains from the melting snowpack in spring.

Quite an achievement, Billy thought as he sat on the bank among the alders and watched the water flowing smoothly over the lip of the dam. I can do much better of course, he thought, but still it's really something. Especially since it's the first dam I've built myself. By next summer I'll have Fire Creek plastered with dams like this from one end to the other. Why, eventually I'll flood this entire valley with one big dam stretching

right from Fire Mountain across to Copper. Billy looked up at the slopes above him, and imagined a dam 200 feet high and a mile long. By the time I'm through you won't recognize this place, he thought happily. It'll be practically all under water!

Unbeknownst to Billy, Chuck and the other young males from Beaver Pond were now spread far and wide through the land, doing and thinking pretty much the same as he. Everywhere young beavers sat beside newly-completed dams, admiring their handiwork and dreaming of empires.

The day Billy left Beaver Pond, after his confrontation with the elders, the other young males chose to leave too. They all wanted the kind of status he had attained through his achievements, and decided they could get it most quickly by building their own empires. There was a limit to what one could achieve in Beaver Pond. One had to venture out into the world if one hoped to accomplish anything really significant. In the big wide world out there, the sky was the limit. The only real limit was how many beaver people one could amass in one's empire.

Every young male dreamed of being Chief Engineer. And the way to become Chief Engineer was to build big dams. A beaver is first and foremost an engineer, the young beavers reasoned, and an engineer's job is to build, build, build. Build bigger and bigger. Always bigger. Bigger than before. Bigger than anyone else. The biggest ever, biggest in the whole, wide world. REALLY, REALLY BIG.

Big was what counted.

Each beaver sat beside his dam and yearned for spring, when he could continue his quest for greatness. This is a good start, each thought to himself, but it's nothing compared to what I will accomplish next summer. It was going to be a long winter, but a beaver could always spend his time planning projects for spring. Nice big projects.

In due course fall was behind them. Winter eventually passed too, and spring finally arrived. The snow melted under the hot sun and warm wind. The young beavers emerged from dim winter abodes into bright sunshine, and declared it was time to get down to serious business. Each began felling trees like he never had before, and building dams with unprecedented vigor.

And so the beaver people became engineers first and beavers second. They ceased to be Nature's children, and instead became Nature's engineers. What fine engineers they became! What dams they built! Never had the world seen such dams. Enormous structures that were concrete proof of the superiority of their creators. Only superior individuals could build such dams.

Where once there had been shady little rivers flowing inconspicuously through the dark forest, now there were huge lakes shimmering in the sun behind gigantic dams.

Soon there were thousands of such dams throughout the land. Some were bigger, some smaller, but all were big. They were everywhere. Every mountain valley was dammed. Every creek and every river was dammed. Not a stream that could be dammed was ignored, for the engineers were very thorough. As an eagle flew through the sky in search

of fish one hot summer's day, the land below fairly glistened with huge lakes behind countless dams. But there weren't many fish for the eagle to discover as it flew over the lakes, for the dams had destroyed most of the fish habitat and spawning grounds. As a result, fish had become scarce.

Eventually the eagle grew weary and looked for a tree on which to perch. But it was out of luck. The land had been cleared of trees. Only huge clearings dotted with ugly stumps and strewn with slash remained of the once endless forests. Not a single tree suitable for an eagle to perch on, let alone nest on, could be seen anywhere. Even the highest hills were barren. Ugly sores began to open up on those hills as heavy rains eroded the exposed soil and washed it down the slopes to be deposited as silt on the bottom of the lakes below. The sores became deep gullies, festering like gashes made in a beaver's back by the claws of a grizzly bear.

The eagle flew for hours, riding thermals when it could, without finding either a fish to eat or an adequate perch on which to rest. Finally out of desperation it landed on a stump and sat there tottering weakly, hunched over like a vulture. Within minutes it was pounced upon by a starving cougar that had been hunting deer for days without success. The deer were few and far between, for the forest in which they once flourished was gone. The scrawny eagle, though hardly a suitable food item for a cougar, was quickly devoured, feathers and all.

Everywhere birds and beasts suffered and starved. Animals of every description — big and small, furred and feathered — died for want of food and shelter. Few birds flew in the sky, and almost no beasts roamed the earth. Hunger and exposure had taken a heavy toll.

The beaver people were hungry too, for their population had grown dramatically, and food had become scarce. In their quest for ever larger empires, the Chief Engineers encouraged large families among their workers. As a direct result, the population exploded beyond anything ever seen before Nature's children became Nature's engineers. The shores of the lakes were covered with huge houses. Castles, really. Two-story houses, three-story houses, and even four-story houses. The more a beaver craved status, the larger was his house. Because building sites along the shore became hard to find, beavers began building on the mountainsides. In some places the houses went on and on as far as the eye could see.

Yes, the beaver people were hungry, exactly like the eagle and cougar. Most of the trees were felled to furnish building material, and the remainder had been cut for food. The bottomlands, where non-woody plants suitable for use as food were once plentiful, had been flooded by dams. Beaver kittens, and many an adolescent as well, could be heard crying for food almost anywhere you cared to stop and listen. Others were already too weak to cry and suffered in silence, large brown eyes staring vacantly into space. Big bellies protruded from frail little bodies, portending death.

Early in the famine, many beavers began to steal to avoid starvation. Others fought openly over food, causing much discord in the land. Then, as the food shortage grew more acute, murder became commonplace. Everywhere beavers killed each other in their desperation to get food. Some resorted to cannibalism. Beaver people are vegetarians by nature, but when faced with death by starvation they are not unknown to consume meat. Beaver flesh is quite nutritious, as attested to by wolves and bears when there still had been wolves and bears in the land.

Where not long ago there had been life and wilderness, now there was death and destruction.

Only the beavers with the highest status — the Chief Engineers — had enough to eat. In fact, they had more than enough. Billy had the highest status of all. He was the Supreme Chief Beaver. He was now acknowledged as the greatest beaver that had ever lived.

He still resided in Fire Valley, but it resembled not at all the lush garden he had seen when he first set eyes on it, for he had created a beaver city of three million souls. A dam had been built across the valley at its lower end, resulting in a lake many miles long, over a mile wide and all of 200 feet deep. It was easily the biggest dam in the world.

Billy lived in a five-story house — a fortress in the minds of most beavers — on the slopes of Fire Mountain. Like the dam, it was the biggest anywhere. The stories were not positioned one directly above the other, but rather tiered at a 45-degree angle against the

side of the mountain, creating quite a charming effect. The flat roof of each level served as a spacious balcony for the next. The mansion was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of smaller dwellings belonging to Billy's subjects. Most of them were minuscule in comparison, little more than hovels by the standards of the day.

Billy had at his disposal everything that existed on the planet. He had but to name it, and his servants would get it for him. As he dreamt of so long ago, females were his for the asking. He had more females than he could handle (every engineer's dream).

Incredibly, in spite of all this, Billy was not happy. He had everything but happiness.

He almost never went out of his mansion any more, for the world was no longer a nice place in which to be. With its tortured hills, sodden valleys and starving millions, it was not a pleasant sight to behold. He'd rather not see it. So he stayed in his mansion and suffered. Instead of enjoying the world and the many natural wonders it once had to offer, Billy tried to derive satisfaction from his status. He was the Supreme Chief, but somehow it was an empty honor.

Fire Mountain was anything but Heaven, and Fire Valley had become pure Hell.

One day he lay alone on a bed of fresh roses and yearned for that long-ago time in Beaver Pond, when he slept with Becky on a bed of shredded aspen wood. How he missed Becky and the little lodge he built for her before their marriage.

What he wouldn't give to go back!

But there was no going back, ever, because Beaver Pond was under 100 feet of water, its cottonwoods and denizens long dead.

Above the entrance to the magnificent five-story lodge, the sign that bore Billy's name was now made of pure gold and inlaid with jewels that sparkled more brightly than any star in the sky.

It read "Sir William von Beaver III."

Chapter Eight

Visions of ever bigger trees, ever bigger dams and ever bigger houses passed through Billy's head like freight trains roaring through a mountain tunnel. Suddenly he was short of air. He felt like he was suffocating.

He woke with a start, breathing hard, and quickly looked around.

He seemed to be in a simple little lodge. And Becky was apparently sleeping beside him on a bed of shredded aspen wood.

Billy felt the cold grip of fear clutch his heart. Was he hallucinating? Had he finally gone mad?

He slowly reached out with a shaking paw and touched Becky on a shoulder. Then he touched the low ceiling of aspen wood directly above him. There was no question about it. They were real. He was in the little lodge he built before the wedding, and Becky was lying there beside him, sleeping.

How had this come about? Could it be that it had all been a bad dream ...?

Billy paused for a moment. Bright light was streaming into the lodge through the underwater entrance. He dove into the water and surfaced outside the lodge.

He was in Beaver Pond.

Yes! It *had* all been a dream!

... or had it?

Still wary, Billy caught himself before he got carried away. This seemed far too good to be true.

He glanced at the sky, where the sun shone brightly to the southwest. It was late afternoon. Billy swam cautiously around the little pond for a moment, prepared for a letdown. He couldn't believe this was happening. Then he swam quickly to the location where the wedding feast was held. There they were, ample leftovers scattered gaily in the shallows, just as he and Becky had left them only hours before, after the others had gone to bed.

The trip to Snow Lake and all the rest — the big dams and big houses — had been nothing but a bad dream! The death and destruction didn't exist! Nothing had changed! Overcome with joy, Billy gave the water a tremendous slap with his tail and dove into the clear depths, startling a large trout as he did so.

Coming back to the surface, he swam excitedly in a circle, not knowing which way to turn. Finally he headed for the dam. It was still the same little structure, not much more than 6 feet high and 50 feet long. A puny little dam! But what a wonderful little dam it was. He hurried back to the main part of the pond. The houses scattered sparsely among the trees were all one-story structures.

Trees! There were trees everywhere he looked. Tall trees, short trees, stout trees, slender trees, old trees, young trees. Trees as thick as the hair on a wolf's tail. Thousands upon thousands of trees. Millions, in fact. Cottonwoods, aspens, birches, spruces, pines. They began at the water's edge and went way up the side of the mountain, in one continuous sweep. One huge, glorious forest! Not a clear-cut in sight.

Then Billy remembered Sage. Dear old Sage! He swam quickly over to Beaverlodge, dove into the entrance tunnel, and surfaced inside. Sage was lying on his mat, flat on his back and snoring loudly. Overcome with gratitude, Billy rushed over and gave him a hug. Sage abruptly stopped snoring, lifted his head, and peered at Billy in the dim light.

“What’s happening? Who is it?” Sage asked groggily.

“It’s me, *Billy!*”

“What’s wrong, Billy?”

“Nothing, Sage!” Billy fairly squealed, delirious with delight. “Absolutely nothing’s wrong! In fact, things couldn’t be more right!”

“Billy, have you been getting into those mushrooms again? I thought you gave them up long ago,” Sage admonished gently.

“No, Sage,” Billy laughed. “It’s nothing like that! I’m just so happy you’re alive!”

Sage looked at the light reflecting into the lodge through the entrance, and then back at Billy.

“I don’t know what’s going on, lad, but it’s still awfully early. Go back to sleep, for God’s sake!”

Sage put his head back down on the mat and turned to the wall. Soon he was snoring again.

Billy giggled, dove into the water, and surfaced in the pond. There stood Max, towering over Beaverlodge. Old, gnarled Max! What a tree! Billy climbed on shore, rushed

up to Max, and embraced him. His short arms didn't come close to encircling the huge cottonwood.

They can call me a tree hugger if they want, he thought happily, 'cause that's exactly what I am! And very proud of it, too.

He loved trees, and would hug them if he so wished. In fact, he planned to be a tree hugger for the rest of his life. Much better than being a tree killer, or even indifferent to trees. Next to beavers, trees were his favorite things. Billy clutched Max, the rough bark rubbing his cheek. Finally he stood back and marveled at the tree for a long moment.

"What a wonderful tree you are, you beautiful thing, you!"

Patting Max affectionately, he turned and surveyed the idyllic setting.

The pond was peaceful and serene.

An osprey sat patiently on a tall perch above the pond, waiting for a trout to come near the surface. A robin had already begun its evening serenade. A flycatcher flitted about in the air above the water, catching mosquitos and butterflies. A woodpecker hammered on a tree somewhere not far away. A white-throated sparrow sang sweetly from a tall aspen. Two wrens chattered back and forth in some hazel bushes up on the bank.

Elk tracks, bear tracks and coyote tracks could be seen plainly in the mud along the shore. The prints were everywhere. A mink rested in the shade of some tall grass and watched as her half-grown litter devoured a duckling she had just killed for them. A deer

and her fawn grazed peacefully in the meadow. Unseen by Billy, a well-fed cougar lounged on a brown carpet of pine needles beneath a green canopy that glittered as rays of sunshine danced and played among the gently-swaying branches.

The sun was now well over toward Blue Rock, and on its way down. Its rays slanted through the trees into the clearing made by the pond and landed squarely on Billy's face. Squinting, he placed a paw above his eyes. What beauty, he thought. What sublimity.

To think he had taken all this for granted.

Finally Billy eased into the water and swam home. As he entered the dwelling, Becky was sitting up in bed, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"Where were you, Billy? I thought maybe you left me or something," she said playfully, smiling at him as she did so.

"I love you, Becky," Billy said in reply, very seriously and with genuine reverence.

"You're such a silly beaver!" Becky teased, laughing quietly.

"Come back to bed for a while, okay?" she said softly after a brief pause.

Suddenly Billy was overcome with embarrassment as he remembered the sign in his dream, with "Sir William von Beaver III" written across it.

"I will in a sec, Becky, but I must check something first. I'll be back in a flash!"

Billy dove into the water and surfaced directly outside the entrance. He whirled and looked at the sign.

It still read "Billy & Becky."