



A mountain of trouble

A backpacking trip turns disastrous, and a 13-year-old boy must make a heart-breaking decision: should he leave his severely injured father to look for help?

¹ The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness is the largest area of untamed landscape in the United States, covering 2.4 million acres of central Idaho. With its rugged mountains, lakes, and pools, this is a place popular with hikers and climbers.

Near one of those pools, just after dawn on a cloudless summer day, 13-year-old Charlie Finlayson crouches inside his tent, getting ready for a long hike. He stows a water bottle and some snacks in his day pack, along with a sleeping bag, in case he has to bivouac.

Then he turns to David, who lies pale in a bloodstained sleeping bag, his forehead marked with a purple cut, his jaw clenched in pain,

his leg bandaged. 'I'd better get moving,' Charlie tells him.

'Good luck, kiddo,' David says quietly. 'Just take it slow and steady.' Outside the tent, Charlie pauses and mumbles a prayer. 'I'm not coming back without a helicopter,' he calls over his shoulder as he sets off.

³⁰ **A hiking holiday**

At 52, David Finlayson had already explored many of the world's wild spaces, climbing major summits in Alaska, Europe, and South America. David, a defence attorney, had split up with Charlie's mum shortly after Charlie was born. The boy lived with his mother in a town near Boise, Idaho, but spent most

⁴⁰ summers with his father. Although Charlie was as calm and thoughtful as his dad was talkative and restless – David called him 'the Zen master' – both were passionate about nature. When Charlie reached seventh grade, David introduced him to rock climbing.

By the time they went to the Bighorn Crags in August 2016, Charlie was ready to take on complex climbs. They stuffed their packs with enough supplies to last two weeks.

During a hike in the second week, David was carefully making his way across a granite spire 800 feet above the valley floor, searching for a line of cracks that would lead them to the top. Reaching up, David dislodged a small stone, which tumbled off into the void. The next moment he heard a sharp crack from above as something larger broke loose. He barely had time to scream before everything went black.

Charlie saw his father sailing through the air alongside the massive rock that had struck him.

70 'Dad!' he called. 'Are you OK?'
There was no answer.

Setting off

Charlie's destination is the beginning of the trail, 12 miles
75 away, where a couple of volunteers live in a cabin equipped with a two-way radio, which he hopes they'll use to call for help for his dad. The path rises gently at first,
80 but he knows it will grow steeper, reaching 9,400 feet before plunging into a valley and climbing again. It also has poorly marked side trails, which can lead a traveller off track.
85 Grizzlies and mountain lions live in the surrounding woods; as he walks, Charlie blows his emergency whistle to scare them off.

After a mile, the route meets
90 a trail to another lake. Following David's instructions, Charlie takes the detour, yelling to anyone who might be camped there. After a few hundred yards, however, he
95 stops to calculate the odds: it's a weekday, when visitors are sparse. If he continues and encounters no one, he'll have thrown away an hour. He mutters a cuss word and
100 hurries back to the main trail.

Badly injured

David hung 40 feet below his son, each hidden from the other's view. Beneath David's dented helmet,
105 his head was pounding from a concussion. His left arm and foot were broken; the shinbone stuck out through the skin, and blood was dripping onto the rocks below.

110 A vertebra in his upper back was fractured. The pain came from so many places that it nearly knocked him out again.

'I think I've broken some bones,'
115 he shouted. 'Can you lower me about 20 feet? There's a ledge there.' Charlie let the rope play out slowly. When David reached the ledge, he yelled for his son to lower
120 his climbing pack, which held a first aid kit.

He barely had time to scream before everything went black

With his right hand, David smeared a thick layer of antibiotic cream on his leg wound, covered
125 it with gauze compresses, and began wrapping it in athletic tape. Once it was covered up, he called for the boy to join him, shouting instructions all the way. When
130 Charlie arrived, the two of them added more tape and tightened it as best they could. 'Tell me it's going to be OK,' Charlie pleaded, struggling to control his fear. 'It's
135 going to be OK,' David told him, trying to believe it. 'But we need to get off this mountain.'

First encounter

Charlie's hike grows more difficult
140 as the trail climbs toward the pass. As his heart rate rises, so does his anxiety level. He focuses on the

rhythm of his footsteps. Around the three-mile mark, he thinks he
145 hears voices. He gives a blast on the whistle and shouts, 'Hello! Can you help me?' Someone yells back, 'Sure!'

Sprinting up the track, the boy
150 sees two tall men on their way down – Jon Craig and his 19-year-old son, Jonathan. Holding back tears, Charlie describes his father's situation to the pair. He shows them
155 the campsite marker on his GPS.

'There are three groups camping by Airplane Lake in the next valley,' Jon tells Charlie, circling the location on his map.
160 'They can help you get where you need to be.' As the two men disappear down the trail to find David, Charlie takes the side route toward the lake. But none of the
165 groups are there any more.

Counting stars

It was nearly dusk when David and Charlie reached the base of the cliff, and the temperature had dropped
170 into the 40s. In his shorts and light Gore-Tex jacket, David was shaking with cold and exhaustion. 'That's enough for today,' he said. 'You'll have to go get our sleeping bags so
175 we don't freeze to death.'

After getting their gear from the tent and helping David into long pants and a down parka, Charlie zipped him into a sleeping bag. He
180 propped the injured leg on a rock to slow the bleeding. He made sure his father ate some dinner. Then he crawled into his own bag.

Worried that David would die
185 if he fell asleep, Charlie kept the conversation going. They talked

about past travels, the stars overhead, the accident. Eventually Charlie allowed himself a few short
190 naps, checking on his father each time he awoke.

David, however, was in too much pain to drift off. He tried to distract himself by counting
195 breaths. But breathing hurt, so he counted stars. There was a chance he'd survive, he thought. There was also a good chance he wouldn't.

More help

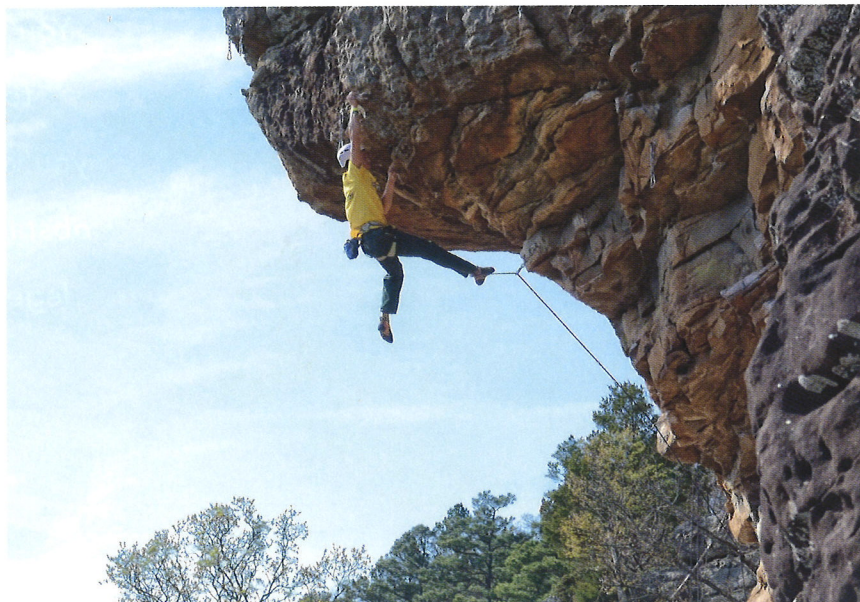
200 On the trail, Charlie hears more voices off in the distance. He blows his whistle and calls out, and the voices answer. Following his ears, Charlie tries to find his way through
205 the pines to a different pond, half a mile away. There, he finds a married couple, their three kids, and a family friend, Mike Burt. Hearing the urgency in Charlie's voice,
210 Mike, a former Marine, offers to run the demanding nine miles to the volunteers' cabin, where he hopes to call in medical aid for David.

Back at the campsite

215 When the sun rose on their camp, Charlie was relieved to see that his father was awake and alert. The pair stayed in their sleeping bags for an hour or two, until the chill lifted.
220 'Let's go, Dad,' Charlie said. 'This could take some time.'

'What if I never see you again?' Charlie cried

After wrapping more tape around the blood-soaked bandage on David's leg, they started down
225 the slope. David dragged himself through the obstacle course inch by inch, leaving a trail of red. When he couldn't find a way between the rocks, he dragged himself over
230 them, crawling up one side and sliding down the other. Sometimes he lost control, landing on one of his shattered limbs and blacking out briefly from the pain.



235 They reached their campsite around 4 p.m. Charlie cooked dinner on the propane stove. He wolfed down his portions of pepper steak and chicken teriyaki, but his
240 father was too sick to eat more than a few bites.

'Charlie,' David said, 'you're going to have to go look for help in the morning.' Picturing himself
245 separated from his father by a huge wilderness area, Charlie burst into tears. 'What if I never see you again?' he cried. 'I'm sorry, kiddo,' David said. 'We don't have a choice.'

Rescued

250 Sometime that evening, David Finlayson awakes. He is at Saint Alphonsus Hospital in Boise, where doctors treat his arm and leg and
255 stabilise his spine with a brace.

Over the coming months, he will undergo several major surgeries and will eventually be able to climb again. But on this night, through
260 the morphine glow, he tries to remember his rescue.

He recalls the Craigs arriving at his campsite. When they told him they'd just spoken with Charlie,
265 he forgot his pain; he wanted to get up and dance. A young ranger named Rachel showed up soon afterward. She kept David company until he was strapped into a harness
270 and lifted by a cable into a hovering helicopter.

The next day, Charlie arrives at David's bedside. Through the tangle of ropes that are IV drips,
275 father and son hug. The Zen master had kept his promise. He brought back a helicopter. <<

