

My husband Robert was born in Alaska, but I came much later in life. Fresh from Arizona, my family moved into a log cabin outside of North Pole the day after summer solstice, and I felt like I'd stepped into some kind of fairy tale. Eventually, I realized that giddy, magical feeling was just the joy of coming home.

One by one, I got used to Alaska's quirks. I figured out why the cars have plugs. I realized that I would never enjoy another snow day in my life. 'Repellant' and 'snow mobiles' and 'spring' dropped out of my vocabulary, replaced by bug dope, snow machines, and breakup. And I learned about geology. I learned why I am jostled awake by earthquakes every now and then, why there are volcanic eruptions and the occasional tsunami out on the coast. And most importantly, I learned that there are, all over the place in glorious little pockets, hot springs.

Everyone knows about Chena Hot Springs, about Circle and Manley springs. But my husband caught wind of another hot spring. A rogue hot spring. A secret hidden-in-the-wilderness hot spring. *Hutlinana*.

Okay, so maybe not a *huge* secret (a quick Google search will bring up pictures and maps), but we were intrigued. And with the parents coming into town for an April visit, it seemed the stars had aligned. Merrily, we packed up, kissed our boys goodbye, and started off. We traveled along the icy mountain roads to the North Slope, and then turned off toward Minto Flats. Shortly after midday, we found Hutlinana Creek and a trail head.

Or so we thought.

Neither of us had been to Hutlinana before and, although we had gathered rumors and internet hearsay about a rock pool and a semi-permanent (and possibly mythical) tent at the end of the trail, we wanted to be prepared, like good little Boy Scouts. Loaded down with everything we needed to survive until spring, we walked to the trail head and clipped on our skis. Taking the lead, Robert tugged the gear sled into place behind him and blazed down the slope. I adjusted my backpack, took a deep breath, and baby-stepped my ski tips over the abyss, eventually eking over the tipping point.

*Sboof!* I crashed headlong into knee-deep powder. Laughing, I heaved myself back upright and continued. Only to crash again. I was now halfway down the ten foot hill. Then I realized.

This was my fourth time skiing. In my life. Ever. What had I gotten myself into?

An incorrigible rubber-necker, Husband paused to watch, offering helpful insights and encouragement. I eventually made it down to the flat stretch and breathed a sigh of relief. Only to punch a ski pole through the crust and crash again.

Embarrassed, I pointed up at the backpack soaring over my shoulders. "My center of gravity's all off." Any excuse would do, really.

“Maybe you should put your backpack on the sled.”

I frowned. “I’m not going to make you carry *everything*.”

“Just until we get to the creek.”

“I’m okay. I just need to get used to it.” Ha ha ha. So naive.

I climbed back to my feet and started again, but at this point there was an incline to hurdle. I was now a scant stone’s throw from the trail head. I slid nearer, only to slide backward again. I tried to get up some speed, only to slide back even further the second time.

Robert winced sympathetically. “You might have to herringbone it.”

This is a change of altitude roughly equivalent to shifting from sitting on my butt to my knees. Swallowing pride, I herringboned it.

The trail led straight into tangled woods. I tripped again at the first opportunity and attempted to clamber back to my feet before Husband noticed. I failed. He offered again to take the backpack and I again declined, waving him on airily. “Go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

Except that I didn’t. Instead, I tripped over a log, got trapped in a gully, and fell on my face so hard that my ears were ringing. Husband took the backpack and I felt my first taste of frustration. But I looked up through a break in the trees and bright, buttery sunshine lured me on. “Don’t worry,” my husband assured me. “Once we get to the creek, it should be nice and clear.”

And it was. Terrifically, gorgeously clear, with smooth, unbroken snow save for two little tracks leading out onto the creek. And then immediately across it. And then into the woods again. I paused, looking at the trail. Ever cheerful, Robert led the way across. I peered dubiously at the bank, a sharp slope and some seriously chewed-up trail.

For reasons I cannot remember or understand, I took the lead and herringboned somewhat less skillfully halfway up before sliding down, falling on my rear, and rolling an ankle. Husband coaxed me upright again and I tried it again, with similar results. The *third* attempt, however, got me to the top. Husband followed, dragging the sled up after him and I started into the woods, which became rapidly denser as we progressed. About ten feet into it, I stopped, staring at the point where the trail went literally into a tree. Was I supposed to climb? Circumnavigate? Levitate? “Honey, this is getting impossible.”

He agreed. And then, a flash of brilliance: “How about we just follow the creek?” (For anyone who thinks this is a good idea, please refer to any of the Google maps. Hutlinana Creek has more twists than Game of Thrones.)

I glanced back, wondering wistfully how difficult it would be to get back to the car, drive to a hotel, spend the night in a hot tub, then lie through my teeth to my parents-in-law the next day. Alas. “Sure. Let’s try it.”

We returned to the creek, a feat which included my falling over backward, rolling an ankle, muttering angry things, getting my skis crossed and hooked under a root, and being generally hilarious. Sprawled on my face in a ditch, I *insisted* my husband scout ahead. Much growling, flailing and ski-waving later, I was back on the creek.

Others had been on this creek, too, we soon found. And not just of the bipedal variety. “Uh, honey, is that a wolf track?”

He didn’t even look. “No.”

“That’s a *really* big dog track.” I stared as I skied past and then insisted again, “I think it’s a wolf track.”

“Wouldn’t that be cool if we saw a wolf?”

I frowned. “You do know that being eaten is number one on my Ways Not to Die list, right?”

“Wolves never attack groups of more than two people.”

I considered. “We’re not more than two people.”

“I meant more than one.” Perfect deadpan. Isn’t he wonderful?

I pursed my lips, looking down at my feet again, and began to wonder anew if it would be worse to be eaten or to die in a fire. Being indecisive, I still haven’t really decided, nor have I come up with a plausible scenario in which it would ever be a choice. Also, I hadn’t decided whether or not Robert was making things up again, like the time he convinced me velociraptors couldn’t run downhill. In my marriage, it’s best to assume everything is a lie. I’m not sure why I didn’t apply this thought exercise to our ‘trail’. It probably goes back to the indecisive thing. But at least we decidedly had life insurance, so the kids wouldn’t be totally bereft.

We found yet another set of tracks leading off the creek and followed it into the woods, even popping off our skis for the trek. It petered out into nothing almost immediately—definitely the moment in my life when I’ve most fervently believed in will-o’-wisps—and we turned back again to a snowy creek increasingly choked with trees and crisscrossed with moose tracks. I took the lead again and we eventually stepped out into a larger branch of the creek, once more blessedly clear.

But the snow was getting deeper. Initially at our shins, it soon rose to our knees. Then we were wading through hip-deep powder and I warily declared sighting more wolf tracks.

We followed a moose trail around another bend in the creek and found ourselves staring at an apocalyptic riot of uneven ground, ice, and open water.

We looked at each other and Husband shrugged. “At least we know we’re on the right creek.”

Somewhere at the end of all this was a tent and a rock pool. If not, there was no justice in the world. We pressed on.

We clung to the frozen edges of the creek, still following some crazy moose through the wilderness. Crossing the creek at a frozen bend, we climbed onto a shelf and paused. We could see the next bend twisting sharply and considered the merits of cutting through. Robert sighed, planting his ski poles. “Let’s check the map.”

We dug out the map and gnawed on the last of the granola bars while we guessed at where we were. A long series of switchbacks snaked for miles and it was getting late. We had no idea how close we were. Then Husband had his next epiphany. Turning toward the far ridge, he said, “The trail should be north of us. I think we should just cross country until we come across the trail.”

“Just... take off into the woods?” (This was before I’d seen the play; otherwise this line would probably have been sung, despite our ever increasing odds of dying horribly.)

He folded the map decisively. “Yep. And if we get to the ridge and don’t find it, we can just camp for the night and head out in the morning.”

I briefly calculated my odds of stumbling into a bear den and getting mauled. “I can’t do skis through there.” It seemed like a good stating-the-obvious situation.

“Yeah. You carry the skis and I’ll pull the sled.”

I nodded. “Alright.”

Another bit of Alaskana I’d previously missed out on: I’d never been bushwhackin’ before, and for a pretty solid reason. It seemed like the sort of thing that got adventure-seeking whipper-snappers lost and/or dead. I wanted to be neither of those things.

But as we were already lost- and since I have incredible confidence in basically anything my man suggests, despite his aforementioned proclivity for outrageous and compulsive lying- why not? I volunteered to break trail and led the way to the opposite bank.

I don’t know if other people do this, but I spent the whole time engrossed in how cool I was, how I should write a scene about this, heck, a whole book! Starring me! I plowed forward, blasting through hip deep snow and uneven terrain, scouting out the best trail for my pack mule, er, I mean, husband, and being generally awesome. The sun was sinking, the temperature dropping, the nocturnal predators waking, but this was downright fun.

Robert's voice cut through my inner monologue. "Is that the trail?"

I froze. "What? Where?"

He pointed. "Over there."

I squinted, slogged forward a few steps, and brightened. "I think so!"

It wasn't the best trail I'd ever seen, rough and narrow, but it was better than the one the moose had left and a heck of a lot better than following a melting creek a hundred miles from civilization. We clipped our skis back on, Husband once more taking the lead. We hurried forward and I was reminded again that I am far less awesome on skis than I am on foot. But golly, that hot spring was going to be flippin' amazing once-

Hubby stopped, staring at his feet in disbelief.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaning around him to see.

"It stops."

"*What?*"

We counseled furtively in the gathering twilight, peering hopelessly through the trees for the trail to pick back up again. Nothing. But we were too desperate to turn back then, even if others had had the sense to give up. We found our guiding ridge again and cut through the woods, but I had lost much of my enthusiasm. Maybe wandering lost and stupid in the woods wouldn't make such a great book after all.

The sun sank deeper behind the hills as we trudged on. And then- a break in the trees! Almost not daring to hope, we burst out onto the *real* trail, unmistakable in its broad, smooth glory.

Relief rushed through me, warm and light. We had been wandering around for four and a half hours. Surely we were close.

Yet we weren't. Despite the fineness of my bushwhackin', the trail went on and on. I skied a few miles, then started unclipping my skis for any uphill. Then for any icy patch. Then for any excuse at all. Finally, my patience for skiing was completely spent, and I kicked them off like an angry toddler flinging strained peas. I was *done* with this.

But as appealing- sort of- as curling up and going to sleep there on the side of the trail was, I hated the thought of ruining the trip for my darling, a man practically born on skis and much more used to adventures than I. So I put on my best Vanna White smile and I hoofed it. I hoofed it like a crazy woman, determined to keep up with him. The only thing I had going for me was that he was still hauling everything except my skis, but I was willing to take any advantage at that point.

Daylight drained off the horizon, the temperature plunging. My legs grew stiffer, and the terrain icier, but I stared at the back of the sled and swore to myself, 'I will pass out or die before I complain.'

Determined to be a happy camper even if it killed me, I helped push the sled up the hills, and then helped push it along the flat stretches, too. I was a helper, darn it! The sun was long gone and we still weren't sure how close we were, or even if we were really on the right path at all. Maybe the will-o'-wisp were still out there, waiting. Them or the wolves.

Three more hours passed before Robert called back suddenly, "I see the tent!"

I craned my neck around him, peering desperately through the evening gloom, and there it was! The canvas tent was waiting for us with open flaps, its wood stove chimney standing tall, a rock pool steaming away at its side. The legends were true! We'd made it!

People always say that it's the journey, not the destination. But they're probably the same people that say 'the customer is always right' and other lame fortune cookie wisdom. As I melted into Hutlinana hot spring, all the frustration and soreness and imminent wolf mauling faded into the background, and I figured that sometimes the destination is what saves the trip.