

# Escape from Windstone Peak

## Chapter 1

Woof woof, Hooowwwl! *Oh, those dogs, they're always up so early; what rinky dinks!* Oakley lay in bed thinking about the day she had ahead of her. *Okay, feed the dogs, get ready for school, make sure homework is done, and then actually go to school.* Wham! The bedroom door flew open, and in came Mom shouting her usual wake-up call. "EVVVVVVVVVVERYBODY UP!"

Oakley jumped out of bed and gave a quick glance at her clock before running into the bathroom. She glanced in the mirror. Her long, brown hair seemed to be sticking out in every direction. She quickly got ready, reviewing in her head what the new dogs had to eat for breakfast. *Sadie: Two cups of food and one egg. Jake: Two and a half cups of food with vitamins and an egg. Dexter: Two cups of food, his medicine, and one egg.* Dexter had accidentally rubbed against something and cut himself. She had to take some medicine to prevent infection. *And Rowan: Two cups of food, one egg, and a belly rub!* Rowan was Oakley's favourite recruit for the DoD K9 division. He is a beautiful brown King Shepherd with jet-black paws and a black stripe going from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail.

"Oakley! Hurry! You're going to be late!" Mom's voice rang through the house.

"I'm coming," Oakley called back. She threw her clothes on and ran downstairs, skipping steps and straight out the door. She quickly walked behind their house, looking around at the giant training camp! *What a lovely spring morning!* As she approached the dog run, she yelled out a command, "Kennels." At her word, the dogs ran from where they had been waiting to their kennels in the back of the run. Oakley then went into the storage room and started measuring out the food. She also added the eggs, vitamins, and Dexter's medicine from a small fridge they kept in the storage room. *Perfect, they're all done. Now to take it out to the pups.* "I hope I got them all right," she muttered as she grabbed five of the bowls to take out to them. She set the bowls in front of the five pups and commanded them to wait. Once she put all the bowls in front of the recruits, she called out the command, "Eat!" and with that command, the dogs were practically inhaling their food!

After cleaning up the dog bowls, Oakley headed back inside for breakfast. Waiting for her on the table was a bagel smothered in cream cheese and delicious fruit. As she sat down to eat, she heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. Jackson came around the corner.

"Morning Oak," he said, yawning while running his hand through his reddish brown hair.

"Morning," Oakley called back.

"Jackson, do you want a bagel?" Mom yelled from the kitchen.

"Sure, thanks," Jackson replied, yawning again as he came and sat down at the table across from Oakley.

"Late night?" Oakley asked him.

"Ehh, kinda; I had to stay up studying for a test," Jackson answered.

Oakley nodded in acknowledgment. Jackson was Oakley's older brother. He was training to be in the military. He wants to be just like their dad Mason, who is deployed overseas. Oakley's father had been away serving for almost eight months now. Madison, Oakley's mother,

runs a Department of Defence (DoD) Military Working Dog Program. The main building for the base is right next to their house. Behind the base and Oakley's house is where the training facilities are set up. Oakley helps out as much as she can outside of school. She's hoping one day that, one of these dogs can be her partner in search and rescue.

Mother came over to give Jackson his food and then sat down. She looked at Jackson and Oakley with a serious look. "Is something wrong?" Oakley asked. *I hope nothing happened to Dad.*

"Well," she started, "I've got good news." Joy spread to her face, "Your father is going to be coming home soon!"

"Really?" Oakley jumped up with excitement. Jackson just looked too surprised to speak.

"Yes, really!" replied Mom excitedly.

"That's great!" Oakley said happily.

"Yeah, that's awesome!" Jackson added.

"Now, I don't know exactly when he'll be back, but it should be sooner rather than later!" Mom put in quickly. *I don't care how soon it is. I'm just glad he's coming back at all!*

"Is everyone done eating?" Mom asked.

"Yep!" they both answered.

"Great! Jackson, would you be able to drop Oakley off at school on your way to class?" asked Mom.

"Yeah, sure!" Jackson replied.

"Mom, do I have to go to school? I mean, couldn't I just stay home today and help train the dogs?" pleaded Oakley.

"I think you already know the answer to that, Oakley," Mother said, giving her a do not argue back look.

"Fine," Oakley mumbled. *I don't know why she doesn't just let me stay and help with the dogs. I already know I want to be in search and rescue. Why can't I just skip high school? It sucks anyways. The only good thing is that I get to see Hudson, Winnie, Carson, and Riley. But other than that, it's so boring, and math is hard.*

"Oakley! Come on, let's go!" Jackson called from outside.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" she called. *Doesn't he have any patience?* Quickly eating the rest of her bagel, she ran out the door, grabbing her backpack and homework on the way. While driving in the car, they listened to some country music, not talking much except for how excited they were that Dad was coming home! The school was almost in eyeshot, Windstone College. It was a nice high school, 250-300 students, not too busy, friendly teachers, and they offered good sports too. They had hockey, football, volleyball, a cheer team, and a swim club.

Oakley started thinking about the news Riley had shared with her, Hudson, Carson, and Winnie a few days ago. She was going to be moving to Oregon in a few weeks. *I wish she didn't have to move. I'm really going to miss her.*

## Chapter 2

Jackson pulled up in front of the school. "Alright, see ya, Oak. Have a good day! Don't cause any trouble!" He said, giving her a mysterious smile.

Oakley opened the door, "Don't worry, Jack, I won't. See ya!"

As Oakley walks up to the door, Carson and Winnie spot her.

"Hey, Oakley," Carson says as they walk up.

"Hey Carson, Winnie! What's up?" Oakley answered.

"Not much; we were just talking about homework. Did you get yours done?" Carson asked her.

"Yeah, I did!" Oakley said cheerfully.

Ding Ding Ding Ding! "Oh, there's the bell. We better get going!" Winnie said quickly.

"Yeah, let's go," Oakley added. *I wonder where Hudson and Riley are; usually, they meet us out front. Hmm.* Oakley, Carson, and Winnie headed to their homeroom, where they met up with Riley and Carson. The morning went by pretty quickly. English, Science, Arts, done. Now it was time for lunch! *I love lunch! I wonder what mom packed me. Let's see. Tomato vegetable soup, a bun, and some fruit, perfect!*

Oakley sat and waited for a bit. She was at their usual table, where they'd meet up for lunch. Once everyone was there, Oakley shared the news that her father, Mr. Tayler, would be coming home soon. Everyone was excited; Mr. Tayler always had the best stories when he returned from overseas deployment.

"I was thinking, and let me know what you think of this idea. But do you remember a few years ago when my dad and Mr. Tayler took us backpacking on one of the trails in the Rocky Mountains?" Everyone nodded. "Well, I was wondering if you guys want to do that again sometime before I leave, maybe next weekend or the weekend after?" Riley asked.

"I think that's a great idea!" Hudson responded immediately!

"Yeah, sounds fun!" Winnie added!

"Do you think we'd be okay to go by ourselves?" Carson asked.

"Yeah, as long as we know where we're going and we give our parents all the details, and where we'll be, I think it should be fine!" Riley answered.

"Okay, sounds good then! What do you think, Oakley?" Carson remarked. *Hmm, I think it would be really fun to hang out together again before Riley moves. We must be careful, though; we're getting close to the forest-fire season. I'm sure it'll be fine; we all have pretty good survival skills.*

"I'm in!" Oakley chirped.

The weekend came, but everyone had too much to do, so they decided to wait till the following weekend. It's Monday now, one week after Oakley's mom said her father would be coming home soon. And when Oakley and her friends decided they were going to go backpacking.

The morning went by pretty quickly, it's now lunch, and Oakley's sitting at their usual table with everyone. Spread across the table was a map of where they wanted to hike.

"I think we should start at Wind-Pine trail, follow it up to Pine Shadow Lake, then walk around the lake and take Windstone Peak trail to the lookout at the top of the mountain," Carson announced. Everybody looked at the map and mapped out in their heads the route Carson had suggested.

"I think that would be good," Winnie agreed.

"Yeah," Hudson added. *Hmm, yeah, I think that'll be good. It won't take too long, but it won't be short, either. We'll be at the lake by Friday afternoon if we leave Thursday morning. We should be at the peak of the mountain by Saturday night. Then back home by mid-day Tuesday; good thing it's a long weekend!*

"That's perfect!" Riley said, looking at Oakley, "You think that's good?"

"Yeah, I think that'll be great. Not too long, not too short, we should be back by mid-day Tuesday."

The rest of Monday went by pretty quickly. Winnie went over to Oakley's house after school. They did homework together and talked about the backpacking trip!

It was Tuesday now, and they needed to start getting things together for the trip! So, everyone went to Oakley's house on Tuesday afternoon to make a game plan.

"Okay, so what do we need? Food and water, of course. We should also bring stuff to filter water from a natural source. We need our tents too, but what else?" Hudson asked.

"We don't need to bring too much food and water. There's a cache spot at the lake, and they always have lots of stuff." Riley added.

"True, and we only need two tents. Has anyone looked at the weather? It's been pretty hot this week. I think we're in a heat wave. Do you guys know if it's supposed to get hotter?" Carson asked.

"Yeah, I've been watching the weather. We are in a heat wave, and it's supposed to be even hotter over the next few days. So, trust me; you won't need to pack warm stuff. Just lots of water," Oakley answered back.

"Okay, so it's all coming together. We need to gather enough food and water for a day and a half. Then we can restock at the cache point before we head up to the peak! Winnie said excitedly!

"Yeah, I'll pack a first aid kit, so don't worry about that!" Oakley put in after talking over a few more details about the route, where they would camp out, and food. They all went home and started to prepare.

## Chapter 3

School on Wednesday went by as normal. They all met at their usual table for lunch, and math and science were hard as ever. Jackson picked Oakley and Winnie up; they dropped Winnie off at her house before continuing home. When they got home, Mom was out back running training activities with some of the pups. Oakley walked over to the arena where her mom, Liam, Miles and Echo were working with Sadie, Dexter, Marble, and Rowan. They were running an obstacle course designed to be like running through the forest.

"Hey, Oak," Mom called as Oakley walked up.

"Hey, Mom," she answered back. She nodded greetings to Liam, Miles, and Echo as well. They were new officers, each training a pup to be their search and rescue partner. *Wow, the pups are looking good. Sadie picked it up: I didn't know if she would make it through the program for a bit. Dexter and Marble are doing good too. Dexter's getting so big! Oakley watched Rowan run through the course; he almost seemed to soar through it. That's my boy. He's going to be the best search and rescue pup we've ever had at this camp. He moves so swiftly, with such agility, and he's by far the strongest. He's like a bullet, he'll be unstoppable, and his nose is one of the sharpest I've seen in this batch of recruits.*

Oakley turned to her mom, "I'm going to head back up to the house. I need to do some homework and finish packing for my trip."

"Okay, I'll see you later. Oh! There's pizza on the counter if you want some." Mom said while still focused on the dogs.

"Okay, thanks!" Oakley walked back up to the house. She went into the kitchen and grabbed some pineapple pizza before heading up to her room to work on her homework. She worked for a few hours till about 6:30.

*I'm hungry again; I wonder if there's more pizza.* Oakley headed downstairs, only glancing into Jackson's room to see him studying at his desk. As she rounded the corner into the dining room, she saw her mom sitting at the table typing on her computer. The house was quite quiet besides the click of the keys on her laptop. She walked into the kitchen, grabbed some more pizza, and turned to go back up the stairs.

"Oakley." Mom's voice broke the silence.

"Yeah," Oakley answered.

"Are you ready to go tomorrow?" she asked, looking up from her computer.

"Yeah, getting there. I just need to pack a few more things, including the first aid kit." Oakley Responded.

"Okay, also make sure you pack a flare and bear spray just in case of an emergency. I'm sure you guys will be fine, but just in case." She added.

"Yes, ma'am," Oakley answered before jumping up the stairs and back to her room. *Okay, let me see. I have food, water, and clothes; Riley said she'd bring the tent. I have my torch, waterproof matches, water filter straw, skinning knife, sunscreen, multi-tool knife, map, sleeping bag, toothbrush, toothpaste and bear spray. So, all I still need is the first aid kit and flares.*

"Mom! Where are the flares?" Oakley called down the stairs.

"They're in the closet by the bathroom," she called back.

"Okay, thanks." Oakley ran over to the closet and grabbed three flares. She then checked the first aid kit to ensure it had all it needed and packed it all up.

After she'd finished packing everything, she looked over the map, tracing the route out in marker. Once she was done, she relaxed briefly before getting ready and going to bed. They decided to meet at the trailhead at 7:00 AM tomorrow. So she wanted to make sure to get a good night's sleep.

## Chapter 4

Ding! Ding! Ding! *I'm up, I'm up! Ughhh, why is 5 AM so early?* Oakley sat up in her bed and stretched while yawning. *Alright, I got an hour until we leave to pick up Winnie and Husdon.* Oakley's mom was going to drive her, Winnie, and Huson. While Mrs. Fazer, Riley's mom, is going to drive Riley and Carson.

Oakley dragged herself out of bed and into the bathroom. She got ready and headed down the stairs for some breakfast. First, she walked down the hall to make sure Mom was awake and getting ready to go.

She quickly made a bagel with egg, cheese, tomato, and lettuce. While eating it, she ran back upstairs to check over all she'd packed. She then threw the bag over her shoulder and ran downstairs and out to the car. Mom was already in the car, a cup of coffee in hand. Once Oakley put her bag in the trunk, they were off. Next stop, Hudsons, then Winnie's. They only lived about a block apart, so it won't take too long. Then after that, they'd go to the trailhead of Wind-Pine trail.

As they pulled up to Hudson's house, Oakley jumped out of the car and ran up to knock on the door. Mrs. Cooper answered the door. "Good Morning Oakley."

"Good Morning Mrs. Cooper. Is Hudson ready to go?" Oakley asked.

"I think so." Mrs. Cooper answered, "Hudson! Oakleys here! Come on. Are you ready to go?" Mrs. Cooper yelled through the house.

"Coming!" Hudson called back. Oakley waited patiently, chatting with Mrs. Cooper. After a few minutes, Hudson came zooming down the stairs, almost tripping over his own feet. His reddish-brown curly hair was all poofed as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Hudson and his mom exchanged words of goodbye. Before he followed Oakley to the car. Hudson hopped in the back while Oakley threw his bag in the trunk.

"Good Morning Mrs. Tayler. Thanks so much for driving me," Hudson said as he got buckled.

"Of course, I'm glad it all worked out. I'm sure you guys will have lots of fun hiking together!" She said cheerfully! They drove only for about 5 minutes till they pulled up to Winnie's. As they pulled up, Oakley went to get out of the car, but Winnie was already running down the driveway to them. She threw her bag in the trunk and hopped in the back with Hudson. They started driving to the trailhead. It would be about 45 minutes or so till they arrived. As they drove, they talked about what they'd packed and listened to some music.

Hudson fell asleep for a few minutes before the sound of Winnie's laughter awoke him. They were talking about the last time they went hiking and how Hudson had slipped and fallen down a small hill, landing in a muddy puddle.

"He looked like a toddler playing in a muddy puddle," Winnie recalled laughing even more. Hudson didn't think it was all that funny, though; it got brought up quite a bit. It was one thing he would never be allowed to live down.

As they pulled up to the parking lot where the trail started, they saw Mrs. Fazer's black truck. Winnie and Hudson hopped out and ran over to meet Riley and Carson. Oakley stayed in the car for a moment running over one more time with her mom the route they were going to take. So, she'd hopefully know where they were in case of an emergency. Also, over the gear she'd packed. Oakley then hopped out of the car and walked over to the rest of the group.

"I'm so excited! I packed stuff to make smores," Riley said as Oakley walked up.

"Good morning Oakley," Carson said happily.

"Good morning," she answered back. "Are you guys ready to start hiking? We should. probably leave soon if we want to get anywhere today." Oakley asked.

"Yeah, we should get going," Riley agreed.

"Alright, Uhm, Hudson, Winnie, I'm gonna grab our bags from the back," Oakley said, running to her car. Everyone got their bags together and said goodbye to Mrs. Fazer and Mrs. Tayler.

The trail started as a lush, deciduous forest. It was made up of Maple, Oak, Elm, Birch and Basswood trees. While the forest floor was covered in ferns, moss, and other small plants. Birds were flying through the trees, chirping happily as they flew. Squirrels and chipmunks running along the forest floor were squeaking as they dived into their burrows. And evidence of deer. They walked for a little while, just talking with each other.

"Do you guys remember that time we went and played hockey on Buck Lake? And then we all decided to race, Carson, you remember, right? Winnie said deviously.

"No, no, no, not that story!" Carson whined.

"Yes, that story. This happened the year before you moved here, Oakley. It was so funny! We were all out on Buck Lake playing hockey when Carson had the brilliant idea to race. And I don't know if you know this, but Carson used to be the fastest."

"I still am!" He added in quickly.

"Right, anyways. We put our hockey sticks in two different areas about 100 metres away from each other. Then we started the race. Carson was in the lead, and I was a few metres behind him. So, here's the best part, as Carson goes to stop at the sticks marking the end of the race. He doesn't stop! He tried to, but he hit a rough patch, and it sent him flying! And when I say he flew, he flew! He was probably 3 feet in the air, and even once he hit the ground, he slid across the ice for another solid 6 feet. It was the funniest thing ever! So, since that happened, we tease him about being a flying Duck from the Mighty Ducks movie! "Winnie held back her laughter as she told the story. Hudson and Riley were dying of laughter at the memory and the unimpressed look on Carson's face that they had brought it up.

"That's hilarious," Oakley said while also laughing! Carson folded his arms.

"Well, I don't think it was very funny," he said while holding back his own laughter.

They walked on for a few more hours till they stopped for lunch. Riley found some wild berries; they were small and blue, with red dots, which they ate with their lunch. The outer layer tasted a bit sour, but the inside was sweet.

They continued to hike all afternoon before starting to set up camp at around 6:30. Oakley wanted to make sure they had lots of time to set up and get a fire going. They stopped in an area that almost looked like it was made for some kind of secret ceremony. There were eight large, dark stones slightly covered in moss placed in nearly a perfect circle.

"Okay, we gotta get set up for tonight. Riley, and Carson, I'll help you guys set up the tents. Winnie, Hudson, can you guys start building a fire?" Oakley asked.

"Right away, Commander Tayler," Hudson said jokingly.

"Yeah, we'll get right on that," Winnie answered. Hudson and Winnie went off to find wood to use for the fire. Oakley turned to see Riley and Carson already pulling out the first tent. They set it up, then set up the second one. *Finally, done. I'll never understand why they make tents so difficult to set up.* Oakley turned to see Hudson and Winnie building a log cabin-style fire. *And they're working on the fire, good! We got a pretty good setup for tonight.*

"AHHHH!" Oakley's thoughts were interrupted by a scream. Oakley whipped around to see Riley standing on one of the big rocks. Oakley ran over.

"What's wrong!?" Oakley asked.

"There's a firkin, spider! It's a, a, whatever you call it." Riley answered back in a panicked voice. Oakley then looked at the ground to see a Black Widow camouflaged into the forest floor. Black Widows are not often deadly to healthy people; you would need medical assistance as soon as possible, though. Before Oakley had time to process and react, Carson grabbed a big rock and slammed it into the spider. It was definitely squashed and dead, but no one dared lift the rock to check. The rest of the evening went by normally. They ate some soup they'd cooked over the fire, along with a few more of the berries Riley found leftover from lunch. The sun started to go down, casting beautiful red, orange, and pink colours across the sky. Once the sun had set, they talked for a little bit before heading into their tents. They decided they were going to wake up at about 7:00 to make breakfast. Oakley lay in her sleeping bag. *Today went pretty*

*smoothly, besides that Black Widow making a surprise visit. I hope there are no more of those around here. She shuttered. It sounds like the boys are asleep; I don't hear them talking. I guess I should sleep too!*

## Chapter 5

Tweet Tweet Tweet, Oakley was awoken by the sound of chickadees and an eagle's screech. *Oh, what annoying birds. I guess I should get up anyway, though. I wonder what time it is. It must just be the very crack of dawn. It's still pretty dark outside.* Oakley glanced at her watch. It was Friday, May 26, 6:35 AM. *Well, I guess there's no harm in getting up early.* Oakley got up and got dressed before quietly slipping out of the tent. *I think I'm the only one awake so far. Oh, maybe not. I think I hear something moving in the boy's tent. I guess Carson or Hudson are awake. Well, I guess I'll get a fire going then.* The fire still had a few small smouldering embers in the bottom. Oakley walked through the forest and tried to find some dry wood, but there was still lots of dew soaking almost everything. When she got back to camp, she saw Carson sitting on one of the rocks.

"Good morning Carson. Is anyone else awake yet?" Oakley whispered as she walked up.

"Morning, Oak! No, I don't think so. Is that wood to make a fire?" He asked.

"Yeah, it is." She answered.

"Perfect, I was just gonna go find some wood, but I guess I don't have to," Carson said, relieved. Oakley and Carson started building a teepee-style fire. Once it was a blaze, they sat around it, talking a bit, but they were both tired and kept zoning in and out.

"Nice job with the fire," Carson commented.

"Thank you, you helped too, though!" Oakley argued softly.

"Yeah, true, but you did most of it. You're really good at all this survival stuff. You have strong instincts. If there were anyone I would want to be stranded in the forest with, it would be you!" Carson said, smiling at her.

Oakley laughed softly, "Thanks Carson, that means a lot!" Zzzzzpp Oakley looked over to see Hudson coming out of the tent. He walked over to them dazedly and sat down on a rock around the fire. A little while later, Winnie and Riley came out and sat down too. The sun was up now. It was about 7:15. *We need to eat, so we can get going soon if we want to be at the lake by late afternoon.*

"We should probably start eating, so we can leave and hopefully be at the lake by later this afternoon," Oakley said.

"Yeah, true," Riley agreed. They ate breakfast, packed up and were back on the trail by 8:00. As the day went on, it got quite hot, almost 35 degrees celsius. They stopped periodically to rest. Then at about 12:30, they stopped to eat lunch. They all packed similar stuff: dried meats and fruits, nut bars, trail mix, and pita.

"Make sure you guys are drinking a lot of water; I don't want anyone getting heat stroke. Oh! And sunscreen," Oakley stated.

"Yeah, I can't wait to get to the lake; I'm definitely going swimming! It is way too hot." Hudson said excitedly.

"You know it's gonna be freezing, right?" Winnie questioned.

"Yeah, but I'm going anyway!" He answered determinedly.



"Okay!" Winnie said, shrugging her shoulders. They continued hiking, and as they did, the forest started to change. Instead of being a lush, deciduous forest, it started turning into a temperate coniferous forest. The forest was filled with Evergreens and Pine. The forest floor was covered in pine needles, and there were moss-covered rocks everywhere. There were still a few small fern bushes but not many.

Baam! \*Silence\* Baam, Bomb Pop! \*Silence\* Everyone stopped. Hudson and Winnie looked at Oakley.

"Was that thunder? I didn't know it was supposed to storm." Hudson said in a panicked voice.

"It's not supposed to," Oakley said, "But I don't think that was a thunderstorm, thunder. I think, since it's so hot, that it was dry thunder, which could mean there's also dry lighting."

Riley gave a nervous glance at Oakley, "Do you think we need to go back?" *Well, this isn't good; if there's dry thunder, that means that there's almost definitely dry lighting. And that's the main source of natural wildfires starting around here. I wonder if we should go back then. Well, maybe it'll be fine. I just have to keep listening for the storm, and if it's a rain storm, we'll be fine, but if it's not, then we'll see.*

"We need to be careful and listen for the storm, but I think,"... Oakley paused; she didn't want to get caught in a forest fire but thought, *maybe I'm just being a worrier.*

"For now, I think it's okay if we keep going. It sounded kind of far away. I think it might be on the other side of the mountain anyways." She gave a reassuring nod at Riley while trying to sound confident.

They continued hiking, telling Oakley stories from before she'd moved to their small town of Windstone. They told her about the fun they had in the summer, swimming at the lake, the time they had a water gun war that lasted for about a week straight before the parents decided it was enough, and about Hudson's old yellow lab, Sandy, that would dive for rocks. Then in winter, about hockey and how one year Winnie fell through the ice on Buck Lake. Also, about the time, they had a whiteout blizzard that lasted two days, and they were able to build a giant snow fort with tunnels all around Carson's property. She listened to the stories, kinda sad she wasn't there for some of them. But she laughed and enjoyed hearing about them anyway!

Oakley also told a few stories from before she moved to Windstone. Most of them took place at a military base she lived at for a while called Cherry Point in North Carolina. She had made friends with another military kid named Carmen. She and Oakley spent most of their summer at Neuse River, a few minutes away from the base. They would swim and fish in the river. As well as try to catch Blue Crabs and Oysters.

The sun raged on as they hiked. Thankfully most of its rays were blocked by the trees. However, they didn't help with the humidity.

"How much longer?" Winnie grumbled, "This hill is killing me. And if it gets any hotter, I might have to go swimming too."

"I don't think it's that much longer; we're almost to the top of this hill, then I think it's only about a mile before we reach the clearing of the lake," Riley answered back, trying to sound cheerful. Even though it was quite obvious, she was hot and tired too.

## Chapter 6

It was about 30 minutes later when they reached the top of the hill. It was only a mile now till they could set up camp. The lake came into eyesight about 45 minutes later.

"Look! It's the lake!" Riley exclaimed excitedly. Oakley looked up, and there it was! The beautiful aqua-blue lake shone brightly in the sun. *Oh, thank goodness. I've never been happier to see a lake in my life. Oh, and there's the cache; good, we need more water and a bit of food.* They walked about halfway around the lake to the cache. They went into the little shed-type building and got water and some food for dinner. They also started to set up camp a few metres away from the little shed. Once the tents were set up, they went down to the lake. There was a small beachy area where they all sat down. Hudson had his swimsuit on, and now it was time to see if he would actually go. Hudson walked over to the end of the shore and stepped into the water. You could see a shiver go through him.

"Cold?" Winnie called out smugly.

"No, it's quite warm, actually," Hudson said through gritted teeth. "I think you need to feel it for yourself," and at that, Hudson splashed the water toward Winnie.

"Hudson! How dare you!" Winnie yelled, jumping up and starting to laugh. She ran over to the water's edge and started splashing Hudson.

"I wanna join in," Carson yelled as he ran over.

"Me too," Riley followed, "Come on, Oakley."

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" She called, getting up. Before they knew it, they were all sitting on the sandy beach drenched in the cold water; it was still quite hot, though, so it felt refreshing.

"Since we already set up the tents," Riley started. "Do you guys want to get the food, and we can have a bonfire here on the beach while we watch the sunset?"

"Sure, that's a great idea," Winnie said as she jumped up, "I'll go get the food."

"I'll help," Hudson offered.

"Okay, great! I'll come too." Riley stood up to follow Winnie and Hudson.

"Oakley, Carson, could you guys make the fire?" Oakley was about to answer when a loud crack of thunder stopped her. It was followed by a few more cracks and a small flash of light far off in the distance. Panic spread across Oakley's face, and when she looked up at everyone, she saw the same panic.

"Am I the only one who saw that flash of light?" Winnie asked nervously.

"No, you're not," Hudson answered her.

"Do we need to go back? I don't want to go back already. We can't hike in the dark; what are we going to do?" Winnie started to panic a bit.

"Oak?" Riley cast her a questioning gaze. *Crap, this isn't good. There's lighting, and there was probably lighting earlier too! Ughhhhh. No! Come on, Oak! Pull yourself together! If you want to be in search and rescue, you have to keep a level head. They need you to lead them. Okay, breathe. There was lighting which means there could be fire; it's not safe to hike in the dark, though. So the safest option would be to spend the night here and start hiking back in the morning.*

"Hey, calm down. It's okay, I think." Oakley started, then paused for a second to formulate her sentence. "I think we should stay here tonight because it's not safe to hike in the dark, we could get lost, and there are wild animals. So, I think we should stay here tonight and

start hiking back first thing in the morning. It's supposed to continue to be hot for the next few days, and it's not safe." Carson nodded to her in agreement.

"I agree with Oakley," he said.

"Yeah, better safe than sorry." Riley agreed. Hudson and Winnie both nodded agreeably, everyone was disappointed, but they had to be safe.

"Okay, well, we still have to eat this evening. "Are you guys still good to grab the food while Carson and I make a fire?" Oakley checked.

"Yep," Riley answered, trying to sound cheerful! As they went to get the food, Oakley headed towards the forest at the end of the beach. Herself and Carson gather some small sticks, pine needles, and larger sticks. On the beach, they started forming a ti-pe style fire.

"Carson, your survival bracelet has flint and steel in it, right?" Oakley questioned.

"Yep!" He replied.

"Can you use it to start the fire?" She asked.

"Yeah, of course," Carson answered, already taking it off. He hit the flint and steel against each other. It took a few hits, but it eventually sparked and started the fire. It smoked for a bit, but once they blew on it a bit, it started blazing. Riley, Winnie, and Hudson came back with the food. Riley was holding a bag of marshmallows in her hand.

"I figured some smores would be pretty good right about now!" She said happily.

"Riley, don't you know smores are always good, anytime, specifically the marshmallows!" Winnie said while staring at the marshmallow bag longingly. They warmed up some soup over the fire, and with it, they had some naan bread. Then, they made delicious smores, which they ate as they watched the sun slowly sink behind the mountains. The sky shone pink, orange, and red. It all blended, creating one of the most beautiful things ever. The colours reflected on the lake bathing the entire forest in an orange-pink glow. With the colours and the fresh mountain air, it created one of the most calming environments. Oakley wondered why anyone would ever want to leave. After they had finished eating and the sun had disappeared into the horizon, they walked back to their tents and crawled into their sleeping bags.

## Chapter 7

"Breaking News, the West side of Mount Windstone has come to a blaze overnight believed to have been caused by a strike of dry lighting yesterday afternoon. The fire was first noticed and reported this morning just before sunrise at around 5:30 AM. Firefighters were then on the scene by 6:00 AM. Local fire services have joined forces with Washington's Department of Natural Resources firefighting force. A ground team of about 40 firefighters has been sent out, along with six helicopters. The fire is currently being held at about 20 acres and is aggressively trying to be put out. The fire is spreading along the base of the mountain, with winds blowing south/east. It is proving to be very difficult to put out. Chief Robert Poulhouse said in a conference a little while ago that there is no need to panic; there are currently no houses in danger. The most important thing is getting all hikers off the mountain. If you know anyone that is currently hiking up Mount Windstone, please alert your local fire department."

Oakley's mom, Madison, stared at the Tv in horror. Oakley and her friends were climbing the East side of the mountain, but since the winds were blowing that way, it could reach them sooner rather than later.

Jackson came down the stairs, "Did you make coffee yet this morning?" He asked, yawning.

"Mount Winstone is on fire," she said panicky. Jackson walked over to the couch where she was sitting and sat down. The TV played clips of the fire and the firefighters trying to put it out. The tv then played the message again,

"If you know anyone that is currently hiking up Mount Windstone, please alert your local fire department." Madison jumped up and ran over to the table to grab her phone; she then called the fire department.

"Hello, this is the Windstone fire department; how may I help you?" a man's voice came over the phone.

"Hi, this is Madison Taylor. My daughter and four of her friends are hiking Mount Windstone. They left two days ago and should be around Pine Shadow Lake. I need someone to make sure they're okay and that they get home safely. Please!"

"Okay, ma'am, could you please tell me your daughter and her friend's first and last name, along with their ages?"

"Yes, my daughter's name is Oakley Tayler, and her friends' names are Hudson Cooper, Winnie Axle, Carson Matthews, and Riley Fazer. Carson and Winnie are 15. Riley, Oakley, and Hudson are 14."

"Okay, thank you, ma'am. I will pass this information on, and I will call you back as soon as I have more information on the location of these children. Can I reach you at this number?"

"Yes, thank you very much."

"You're very welcome. Have a good day, ma'am; goodbye."

"Goodbye," Madison set her phone on the table. Then stood there thinking for a moment.

"I wonder," Madison mumbled.

"Wonder what?" Jackson asked from across the room. Madison picked up her phone again and made a call. She talked for a few minutes explaining about the fire on the mountain and how Oakley and her friends were on the mountain somewhere.

"Yes, I understand. Thank you, sir." Madison hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" Jackson asked.

"That was Morgan Hall, my superintendent," Madison answered.

"And why were you calling him?" Jackson questioned.

"Because I wanted to ask him if I could take one of our dogs and start climbing up the mountain to try and find Oakley. The fire hasn't spread to where she is yet, but I have to find them and make sure they're safe. So, Morgan said I could take one of the dogs and go ahead as long as the fire chief says it was okay.

Jackson stared at her for a moment. "Well. If you're going, I'm coming with you."

Madison smiled, "Thanks, Jack!"

They gathered together important things like food, water, and some other stuff.

"I think we should take Rowan," Madison said. "He's the best recruit we have. And he has one of the best noses, which will be good with all the smoke."

"Yeah, I agree. I'll go grab him. Meet you in the car in ten." Jackson called, bolting out the back door, Rowan's leash and harness in hand. Madison grabbed the last of the supplies and met Jackson in the car; they then started the 45-minute drive to the mountain.

## Chapter 8

As they drove closer to the mountain, the sky grew orange, and the air became darkened with smoke. Once they arrived, they jumped out of the car; Madison grabbed Rowan while Jackson grabbed the two backpacks of supplies. They headed towards the trailhead. As they were about to get on the trail, an officer approached them.

"Excuse me, ma'am? You can't go on the trail right now. You know there's a fire, right?" The officer asked, stopping in front of them.

"Yes, I know. That's why I'm here. I'm Sargent Madison Taylor. I run the local DoD dog training program. This is my son Jackson and one of our recruits, Rowan. I'm here because my daughter, along with four of her friends, are on that mountain. And I'm going to find them." She said determinedly

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I have orders from Chief Robert. I can't let you do that."

"Please, you have to let me; I have to make sure they're safe."

"I'm sorry. I can call the fire department. But I don't think they'll let you go."

"Okay, thank you," Madison said as she turned to walk away. Rowan didn't budge, though; he sat there firm as a tree stump, staring intently into the forest. Rowan looked back at Madison, his dark eyes almost staring into her soul.

"What is it, Rowan?" Madison muttered to him. Then without warning, he snapped his gaze back to the forest and bolted. Pulling the leash right out of Madison's hand.

"ROWAN! STOP! Get back here! Where are you going?" Madison yelled for him. But he was gone; he sprinted to the trailhead and disappeared into the forest.

"Oh great," Madison muttered, and she turned back to walk to the car.

"Aren't we going to go after him?" Jackson asked, following behind her.

"No, there's no point; he's long gone." She said, opening the car door.

"Oh, so what are we going to do?" Jackson said, also opening his door.

"Well, he has his vest on, so if someone finds him, they'll know where he belongs, or who knows, maybe he'll find Oakley." She said, turning the car on.

## Chapter 9

"Oakley! Oakley, wake up! Winnie, Riley, you too! Hurry!" Oakley awoke quickly at the sound of Carson's panicked voice.

"What, what is it!?" Oakley yelled through the tent wall.

"Get out here asap," he yelled back.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she called. *What on earth is he screaming about? Wait... what's that smell. Smoke!* Fear pierced through Oakley like a sword. She threw on her clothes as fast as she could and ran out of the tent. As soon as she got out, she looked west. The sky was dark orange all around the mountain, and grey clouds of smoke filled the sky. Her worst fear had come true.

"There's fire," she managed to utter the words.

"Yeah, I know," Carson said.

"What are we going to do?" Hudson was standing a few feet away, staring at the fire with a look of fear spread on his face. Riley and Winnie had come out of the tent behind Oakley and were also staring at the fire.

"We got to go. Like, right now. Everyone hurry and start packing up!" Oakley turned and started taking the tent down. The boys listened and started taking their tent down too. Once the tents were down, they started walking along the trail. Oakley paused and dipped her hand in the lake, then held it up.

"Ugh, no," she wailed quietly. The wind was blowing southeast.

"What's wrong? Carson asked.

"The winds blowing southeast," she answered, "It's coming straight for us."

"It's okay, Oakley, we're all gonna be okay; we're gonna make it out of here." Winnie chimed in.

"I hope you're right," Oakley mumbled. "Let's go; we need to hike down as fast as possible."

They hiked for a while, but no one said much. Everyone was nervous that the fire would catch up to them. As they walked, they saw and heard helicopters flying overhead carrying bambi buckets holding hundreds of gallons of water to drop on the fire.

"Oakley, we've been walking for a long time and almost twice as fast as when we were hiking up the mountain. We need to stop for a few minutes to eat." Winnie called up to Oakley, who was walking in front.

"Yeah, okay. We can stop here for a bit then." Oakley called back to her. They stopped to rest and eat. Once they were done, they hiked for many hours till the sunset, though you couldn't fully tell when the sun fully set. The fire made the sky glow red, and the air was getting smokier as time went on.

"We're gonna have to stop here for the night," Oakley said once it was almost too dark to see. "There's still about a day's hike back, but we need to stop and rest."

"Do we need to set up the tents?" Hudson asked her.

"You can if you want to, but I'm not going to sleep in one tonight. I want to stay in the open so that I can keep an eye on the fire." Oakley answered. Everyone agreed with Oakley and stayed out in the open. They ate a bit, and then everyone crawled into their sleeping bags, gazing into the starless sky as they fell asleep.

Oakley couldn't fall asleep, though. As she stared into the haunting dark red sky, she listened to her friend's breathing slow down as they fell asleep. In the distance, she also heard the faint sound of fire crackling and popping in the forest. She eventually drifted into an interrupted sleep. Worrying about herself and her friend's safety during the night.

## Chapter 10

Oakley woke up first the next morning. It was hard to tell if the sun had come up and where it was in the sky. But she had a watch to tell time. Swsh, Swsh, Swsh! Oakley jumped. *Oh, it's just another helicopter.* She watched it closely as the bambi bucket dropped its water. *Wait a sec, that's not West. Where is... Wait! That's the bottom half of the trail. Oh no, no, no, no. The fires reached us. We can't go down anymore. If we do, we'll run right into it. We're almost trapped. God help us. What are we going to do?*

"Guys! Guys, wake up!" Oakley yelled panicky.

"What! What's going on?" Winnie said, yawning.

"The fires in front of us," Oakley said shakily.

"What!" Winnie was wide awake now. "What do you mean it's in front of us?"

"Look down the trail; you can see the smoke, and I just saw a helicopter dump a bambi bucket over it," Oakley said, pointing in the direction she saw the helicopter. Winnie stared blankly down the trail.

"What are we going to do?" Riley said, her voice cracking.

"We only have one choice. We have to go back up and try to find safety. We have to stay ahead of the fire." Oakley answered her.

"Is that even possible?" Won't it catch up?" Hudson questioned.

"I don't know," Oakley confessed, "But we have to try."

"What is that?" Winnie was staring past Oakley.

"What's what?" Oakley turned around to see a wolf-sized creature running toward them. But before Oakley had time to react, the creature was standing among them.

"Rowan!" Oakley yelled, wrapping her arms around him, "How did you get here?" No one said anything, they just stared in shock at Rowan sitting in front of them.

"How is he even here? Did he run through the fire?" Hudson said, bewildered.

"I'm not sure; he must have been ahead of the fire," Oakley said while scratching him and checking for burns.

"Well, It doesn't matter; he's here. And we still need to get out of here." Oakley said, focusing again.

"Yeah, right, we need to go." Riley agreed. They packed up quickly, eating a bit of food while they started the hike back up the mountain.

"If I ever climb another mountain after this, it will be too soon," Hudson muttered under his breath.

"For once, I agree with you, Hudson," Winnie muttered.

Oakley walked over to Carson, "You okay? You didn't say much this morning."

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just tired and worried about what's going on back home." He answered her.

"Yeah, I'm worried too." Oakley admitted, "But we got this; we'll make it out, okay? We'll be home before we know it." Carson smiled and nodded at her.

They continued to hike for many hours. The day seemed to stretch on and on, dread filling everyone. Rowan would walk ahead and sniff like he was scouting the trail for danger. Before coming back to the group and making sure they were all there. They gave him some of the beef jerky they had packed and water. The group stopped to rest and eat before they'd have to go up one of the steepest hills to get to the lake. Oakley looked behind them to check where the fire was before they started the incline up. The fire seemed to follow them but always stayed at least a mile away. They started the dreadful hike up the hill, Rowan handled it with ease, but everyone else was struggling. It had been almost two days with the threat of fire weighing down on them, and everyone was tired, stressed, and sore. But they knew they had to make it out of there, so they pushed hard and made it back to the lake. The sun had gone down by the time they made it back to the cache. The sky still glowed that haunting red as it had the night before.

"What are we going to do? Are we going to sleep here tonight?" Riley asked as they reached the spot they'd camped at two nights ago.

"I don't know." Carson said, "We do need to rest, but do you think it's safe?" He turned to Oakley.

"Yeah. I think it'd be okay to rest here for a couple of hours, but we can't stay all night. " *Think, Oakey, there must be some way to get the firefighters to notice us. But they don't even know where we're up here. We have to get them to notice us somehow... The flares! I might be able to get their attention with them. They're not giant, and they are meant for daytime, but it might be enough!*

"Guys! I have an idea. I don't know if it'll work, but I think it's worth a try." Oakley announced.

"What! What is it?" Hope sparked in Winnie's eyes.

"The flares! I don't know if they'll be strong enough to be seen with all the smoke, fire, and the sky being red. But I think it's worth a try. I have three, so even if it doesn't work, we still have two more."

"Sounds like it's worth a shot. I mean, we don't have anything to lose." Hudson said hopefully.

"Yeah," Riley agreed. Oakley walked out from the cover of the trees to the opening sky around the lake. The red flare in her hand. She undid the flare cap and pulled the tab; red smoke immediately started pouring out. Oakley watched it go up into the sky, blowing with the wind. It blended in almost perfectly with the colour of the sky and the smoke.

"Frickle. I can barely see it." Oakley sighed, "They'll never see it." Everyone had been watching from the edge of the forest. Carson walked up behind her.

"Oak. I don't think they're going to be able to see it." He muttered to her.

"Yeah, you think!" She snapped at him. As she turned, she saw hurt in his eyes.

"Sorry." She said, looking down at the flare in her hand, "I didn't mean to snap. I'm just worried. I feel like protecting you guys is my responsibility, and right now, I'm failing. The fire is chasing us up the mountain. And what if. What if it catches up?" She said, choking back tears.

"Oh, Oakley." Carson started, putting his hand on her shoulder. "You're not failing. You can't control the fire, and without you, who knows, maybe we would have gotten caught in the fire by now. Everyone here looks up to you. You're smart, brave, strong, and a great leader. Especially with a fire threatening to kill us." He said, smiling.

"Thank you, Carson. I couldn't do this without you." Oakley said as she went to hug him, "I mean it. I really couldn't. You're my best friend!"

"And you're mine," he said, squeezing her tighter. Carson and Oakley walked back to the tree line where everyone had been watching.

"Sorry that didn't work, guys," Oakley mumbled to everyone.

"It's okay, we knew it might not, but hey, it was worth a shot," Hudson said, shrugging.

"Yeah," Winnie agreed with Hudson. They slowly walked back to the cache. Winnie walked over to Oakley, who had been walking in the back, still discouraged.

"So," She started with a mischievous smile, "What was that about?"

"What was, what about? Oakley answered with a confused look.

"You know!" She said, raising her eyebrow.

"No, I don't know. What are you talking about." She said, still confused.

"You're really gonna make me say it?" Winnie said, giving her a side-eye.



"Winnie, I don't know what you're talking about. So yes, please, just say it." Oakley said, stopping and looking at her.

"Fine." Winnie rolled her eyes, "What's going on with you and Carson?"

"What do you mean?" Oakley started walking again.

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. I've noticed you two have been hanging out more recently. And that hug? Coincidence? I think not!" Winnie said dramatically.

"Oh, Winnie, Winnie, Winnston! We're just friends; you know that." Oakley answered, sounding matter-of-fact.

"Sure, and pigs flying." Winnie said sarcastically, "And besides, you only call me Winnston when you're trying to hide something."

Oakley sighed, "Whatever. Let's just focus on getting off this mountain. Okay?"

"Okay," Winnie said, giving her a small shove, before running to catch up to everyone else. Once they got back, everyone crawled into their sleeping bags. Oakley set a timer on her watch for three hours before closing her eyes; that's when they'd get up and start hiking again.

## Chapter 11

Beep, Beep Beep, Beep Beep Beep. Oakley's watch started beeping at the end of the three hours. She quickly turned the timer off and crawled out of her sleeping bag. She then walked out to the clearing by the lake to see how far the fire had come. It definitely had gotten closer; it was now only half a mile away, if she had to guess. She hurried back to where everyone was still asleep.

"Carson, Riley, Winnie, Hudson. We gotta start hiking." Oakley gently nudged Riley and Winnie.

"What time is it?" Hudson said sleepily.

"It's about 2 AM," Oakley answered him, "But I went to look at the fire, and it's closer, probably only about half a mile away. We have to go. Quickly!" Everyone got up, moving quickly, even though they were half asleep. Rowan was sitting at the end of the forest watching the fire when they walked past him and started on the trail again.

"Oakley, what are we going to do when we get to the peak?" Riley asked her, "I mean, won't the fire go there too?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping the firefighters get it out by then, or it burns out itself. Once we get to the peak I'll try and set another flare off. Maybe since we'll be higher they'll be able to see it. At least I hope so!" The hike to the top of the peak was one of the hardest parts. It was quite steep, and they had to do a lot of bouldering. Rowan handled it with ease, of course, he seemed to be made for the mountains. Jumping gracefully from rock to rock. Slowly but surely they were getting there. *I will never climb a mountain again if I make it out of this. Why is this part so steep? My legs feel like jello, but I have to keep going, I have to.*

"Ooowww fudge!" Oakley whipped around to see Riley, laying on one of the rocks.

"Riley! Are you okay? What happened?" Oakley and everyone rushed over to her.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. I jumped onto that rock but it moved and I wasn't expecting it." She answered sitting up. Oakley looked at her shin, it had a few scraps and cuts, and so did her hands.

"Does anything hurt?" Oakley asked her.

"My ankle kinda hurts, I think I twisted it a bit when I fell, but other than that, not really." She said as she was squeezing her ankle.

"Okay, can you try to stand up?" Oakley asked, nervous about the answer.

"Yeah, I can try." She said determinedly. Everyone watched nervously as Winnie helped Riley stand up. A sprained ankle was terrible hiking any mountain, much less one of fire. Riley stood up and took a step.

"It's fine, it doesn't hurt too bad," she said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, and rabbits fly," Hudson said sarcastically. Winnie elbowed him as if to say, not the time to joke around Hudson.

"Sit on the rock and we'll wrap it up. Oakley, can I have the first aid kit?" Carson half demanded.

"Yep," Oakley reached into her bag and grabbed the kit. While Carson wrapped her ankle, Oakley cleaned off some of the bigger cuts and put bandanas on them.

"Perfect, all" Oakley was interrupted by Rowan. Woof Woof Gwrrr his deep bark and growl pierced through the air. Oakley looked up at Riley. She was staring past her up the trail with a look of pure terror. Oakley turned around to see a giant, tan colour animal standing in the middle of the trail. Rowan was standing about 15 feet away from it. Growling and barking defensively, his fur lifted down his spine.

"Perfect, just what we needed, a cougar," Carson muttered under his breath. The cougar stood in the middle of the trail crouched low. Its tail slashed back and forth and a low growl rumbled in its throat. Oakley stood panicked for a moment, she was just about to call out what to do but Carson was one step ahead of her.

"Winnie, Hudson come stand in front of Riley. Slowly. And keep direct eye contact with the cougar." They did what he said and slowly came over. Rowan stayed where he was, still barking and growling at the giant cat.

"Oakley, do you have the pepper spray?" Carson asked her.

"Yes, it's in my bag." She answered.

"Okay, slowly reach into your bag and find it. Hudson, Winnie, Riley put your arms above your head and try to look as big as you can." Oakley fumbled trying to find the spray in her bag.

"Found it," she said as she pulled it out and handed it to Carson.

"Okay, I want you guys to start screaming as loud as you can. I'm going to slowly walk towards it." Carson said calmly. Carson started edging toward the cougar, holding the spray in front of him and never breaking eye contact. Thankfully the wind was blowing forward so when or if he needed to spray it, it wouldn't mist back at him. Carson reached Rowan; he was now about 15 feet from the beast. Carson started yelling at it, but it didn't even flinch, he moved forward about five more feet, Rowan sticking to his side.

"Down," Carson commanded Rowan, but he didn't move.

"Rowan down," Carson commanded again, this time he listened and lay down.

"I'm going to spray it," he warned everyone. Carson then pulled the safety pin out of the bottle and sprayed it at the cougar. The cat screeched, clawing at its face before running off into the bush. Carson waited till he couldn't hear or see the giant cat anymore before letting Rowan get up and going to walk back to the group.

"Nice, bro," Hudson high-fived him as he walked up.

"Yeah, that took guts," Oakley said as he passed her the pepper spray to put away. Riley just sat there as if she couldn't believe what had just happened.

"Well, this has turned into quite an adventure." Winnie commented, "I don't think many people can say they've hiked up a burning mountain, and had their friend scare off a 120-pound wild cougar."

"Yeah, probably not," Hudson agreed, laughing a bit.

"Yeah! We still need to get to the top of this mountain though. Riley, do you think you can walk? I have some Tylenol in my bag if you want some. Oakley offered her.

"Yeah, I think I can but some Tylenol would be great, thanks!" Riley answered, trying to be in good cheer.

They continued hiking for a while, stopping more often for Riley to rest. Oakley stuck close to her, in case she needed help. It was now about 9:00 AM. They were almost to the peak only about a mile and a half more. They stopped longer now to eat breakfast. The redness in the sky had been starting to fade, it was still definitely there but not as dark. Oakley looked out and down she could just see the lake. The fire was all around it now but it was running out of fuel. The higher it got the less wood there was to burn, just rock and small shrubs. They had some naan bread, and trail mix, and drank more water. They hiked another mile, now there was only about half a mile left. It would take about an hour and a half still till they'd reached the top.

## Chapter 12

*We have to be almost there. We're gonna make it. I just hope someone finds and rescues us once we get up there.*

"Guys! I see the peak, it's only like 50 more metres!" Hudson announced excitedly. Oakley looked up, he was right, they were almost there! As they reached the top, the land flattened out. They could see for miles. It wasn't fully clear because of the smoke and the sky was still a bit red, but it was still a sight to see.

"Look! There's Windstone, and there's the lake!" Hudson said excitedly pointing to the different places.

"Yeah, It's beautiful. It would be nice if everything wasn't covered in fire, but what can you do? Winnie said while looking out towards Windstone.

"Yeah, It's nice," Riley agreed. Everyone looked at the amazing view while sitting and resting.

"Oakley." Winnie looked towards her, "What time is it?"

"Uhhh, it's 11:03," She answered back.

"Okay. I know we only got here a bit ago, but how are we gonna get rescued? Because this has been fun and all, but I'm ready to go home."

"Yeah, I am too." Riley agreed with Winnie.

"Well, I think I have an idea for that," Carson said abruptly, "I've been watching the helicopters, and one flies by about every half hour. One should fly by in about 20 minutes. And Oakley, you said you had two more flares, so the next time one is supposed to be coming once we hear it. You could try setting off another flare; they should be able to see it this time. Since there's less smoke up here and no fire."

"Yeah, that could work! Oakley said cheerfully. Everyone waited quietly, listening for the helicopter. Swosh swosh swosh, the sound of the helicopter's twisting blades came into earshot.

Oakley reached into her bag and pulled out the flare. She then ran over to the middle of the wide-open peak area. She again pulled the pin, and it immediately started smoking. The red smoke surrounded her and blew up into the sky. The helicopter flew by a bambi bucket hanging below it. Everyone watched it, hopefully, but it didn't show any signs of stopping. It continued flying over to the fire area. They watched as the water from the bucket showed the forest. Down went the water, and up floated dark smoke. Oakley set the flare down on the ground as the last of the red smoke drained out.

"How didn't they see us?" Oakley said, confused and somewhat worried.

"I don't know," Riley said, shaking her head, "Well, maybe they did see us. I mean, they probably can't rescue us with the bucket attached, anyway."

"That's true, but they probably would have communicated that with us somehow, wouldn't they?" Oakley thought aloud.

Carson sighed, "Sorry guys, I thought they would work."

"It's okay, Carson, it should have worked," Winnie said determinedly. Everyone sat there quietly, deep in thought. Even Rowan looked like he was trying to come up with a plan.

"Well, what are we going to do now? We can't just stay up here forever. And I think my ankle is starting to swell more." Riley said, breaking the silence. Oakley heard Riley's question but didn't process it; she was thinking. *Oh, frickle, what are we gonna do now? I thought that would work. We still can't go down the mountain, there's still fire, and even once the fires burn out, there'll be hot coals for a while. I guess we'll just have to stay up here for a while. I should see how much food and fresh water we got, just in case we're up here longer than I hope.*

"How much food and fresh water does everyone have? I'm sure we have enough for a while, and our families are probably trying to figure out some way to get us rescued soon. But I just want to know, to keep it in mind." Oakley asked everyone.

Everyone opened their bags to pull out the food and water they had left. Oakley looked at the supplies. There was about a day and a half's worth of water and about two days of food. Worried spread in the pit of Oakley's stomach, but she calmed herself. Just like she said, she was sure their families would find them.

## Chapter 13

Ring ring, ring ring. Madison ran to the phone,

"Hello," she said as she picked up the phone.

"Hello, is this Madison Taylor?" a man's voice came across.

"Yes, it is." She answered him.

"Perfect, I'm Gale Butcher from the fire department. I'm just calling to let you know we have located the children." Madison let out a breath of relief.

"One of our Aircrane helitankers spotted what they thought to be four kids at the peak of the mountain. One of them had a flare going off. Unfortunately, they were not able to rescue them at that moment because they were carrying a bambi bucket, but we will be dispatching a rescue helicopter immediately."

"Oh, thank you so much; this is such a relief."

"Of course, ma'am. The helicopter should be arriving back here in about 1.5 hours."

"Okay, thank you. I'll plan to be there when they get back."

"Alright, have a good rest of your day, ma'am."

"You as well, goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Madison hung up the phone, "thank God they're safe," she mumbled to herself.

"Jackson!" Madison called upstairs.

"Yeah?" Jackson answered as he came trotting down the stairs, "What's up? Any word about Oakley?" He asked.

"Yes, I just got off the phone with the fire department and."

"And what did they say?" Jackson erupted mid-sentence.

"Well, I was about to tell you. Before you interrupted." She said, raising her eyebrow.

"Right, sorry," Jackson said, smiling guiltily.

"Like I was saying, I was just on the phone with the fire department, and they said they located everyone. They were at the peak of the mountain and they dispatched a helicopter to rescue them a few minutes ago. So, we'll head over in about an hour and a half to pick them up. And I'll call everyone's parents, though I'm sure they probably already know."

"Oh, that's amazing; thank God they're safe!" Jackson said excitedly. Madison just smiled and sat back on the couch.

## Chapter 14

Oakley sat with everyone around the fire pit they had made. Rowan snuggled up beside her. Time seemed to go by slowly as they waited to be rescued or to think of a way to rescue themselves. Then, all of a sudden, Rowan jerked his head up. He was staring off into the sky, his ears twitching.

"What is it, Rowan?" Oakley muttered to him. She tried to trace his gaze, but she couldn't see anything. She turned back to everyone.

"Anything there?" Carson asked curiously.

"No, I don't know what he's looking at," Oakley answered, slightly confused. Then without warning, Rowan jumped up and took a few steps forward, still focused on the sky. Oakley stood up when Rowan jumped up; she turned and looked at the sky again. This time though, she could see something moving.

She sighed, "It's nothing, Rowan, just another helicopter."

"Yeah, it is! But look, it's not carrying a bucket; maybe it's coming to rescue us!" Hudson said enthusiastically while standing up.

"You think it could be?" Winnie jumped up beside him. They watched as the helicopter came closer and closer. It was red and yellow, and once it got to where they were, it started hovering. After a few seconds, one of the side doors opened, and someone got lowered to the ground.

"Hi, I'm Micheal, and if you haven't already guessed, we're here to rescue y'all. Now, first thing first, are any of you injured?"

Riley sprained her ankle: we wrapped it, though," Oakley answered, gesturing toward where Riley was sitting.

"Okay. You and you come here," the rescuer pointed to Winnie and Riley. Oakley and Winnie helped Riley over to their rescuer.

"I'm going to put this harness over your head and around your hips. As you rise, it's gonna tighten, so don't panic. And I'm going to do the same for you other three." The lady got

Riley and Winnie all harnessed up. Then she used a walky-talky on her vest to radio up that they were ready to be lifted. Oakley watched as Riley and Winnie were lifted into the helicopter.

"Now, you two," the lady said, pointing to Carson and Hudson.

"Wait, what about Oakley?" Carson asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

"Don't you worry, she'll be up right behind y'all!" They walked over and got harnesses on just like Winnie and Riley. Once the boys were safe in the helicopter she radioed up again, "Dispatch, we need a K9 harness, about 90 pounds."

"Copy that, I'll send one now," someone replied over the radio. Oakley looked up, one more human harness and a dog harness were being lowered down. She got herself set up in the human harness and then helped Micheal put Rowan in his harness. Once they were secure they slowly got lifted into the helicopter. Winnie, Riley, Hudson, and Carson were already buckled in safely, and a look of relief was on all of their faces. Oakley got buckled and helped secure Rowan. As they were flying back to the station a paramedic named Austin inspected Riley's ankle. He said she was lucky and it wasn't too bad, but she needed to ice it once she got home and take it easy. He also checked everyone else for smoke insulation, but thankfully everyone was okay.

## Chapter 15

"We are going in for landing now: please make sure you are seated and buckled in." The pilot called to everyone in the back. The helicopter landed smoothly on the landing pad. Everyone shuffled out of the helicopter and into the fire hall. Inside they were led to a room to wait until their parents could be directed to them. It was only a few minutes before they heard the door open. Oakley looked up, and in walked her mom and Jackson. She ran over and gave them giant hugs. Rowan followed at her side, wagging his tail happily. Behind Oakley's mom, Riley's mom and Carson's dad also walked in.

Riley hobbled over to her mom, "What happened?" Oakley heard the concern in Mrs. Fazer's voice. Carson ran over to his father, Mr. Matthews and hugged him.

"Are you all okay?" Madisons asked everyone.

"Yeah, we're okay. Riley sprained her ankle, though." Oakley answered her.

They continued to talk about the events of the last few days, with the fire, and the cougar. Everyone was tired, though, so they all started heading home. Oakley dropped Winnie and Hudson off at their houses before heading to her own. Once she was home, she went upstairs and plopped into bed.

"Oh, my sweet bed, I could sleep for days," Oakley muttered tiredly to herself. The next morning came as it always did, though, and it was time to go back to school, back to Math, Language, Socials, and everything else. Oakley met up with everyone as usual. Even though it had just happened less than 48 hours before, they talked about the cougar and how they'd survived the Windstone fire. Life then went on as usual, the fire got fully extinguished, and Oakley's dad came home from the military a few days later. She excitedly told him stories from those few days on the burning mountain.

"One day, you'll be an excellent member of a search and rescue team." He said proudly. "And with Rowan by your side, you'll be unstoppable!"