

NEWBERY HONOR NOVELIST  
**RODMAN PHILBRICK**

Author of the classic bestseller *FREAK THE MIGHTY*

# WILDFIRE



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**A NOVEL**

**Rodman Philbrick**

**Scholastic Inc.**

Many thanks to my hotshot friends, Eric Metcalf, David Carr,  
and Teddy Bryan, for their fascinating accounts of fighting wildfires  
in the Bitterroot, in Montana.

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## Day One

7 a.m. broadcast from radio station WRPZ, 98.6 FM

“Good morning, campers! This is a wake-up call for my friends at Camp Wabanaski, as requested. Hey, kids, it’s gonna be another day without rain—sixty-five days and counting! The hottest, driest summer ever recorded! Temps in the mid-nineties yet again. Hot enough to burn, baby, burn. That’s according to the Maine Forest Service, so please, no open fires! Only thing we’ll be burning around here is classic vinyl, deep in the groove with your host, Phat Freddy Bell, broadcasting from high atop the lowest official mountain in the great state of Maine.

“Rise and shine, campers! Rise and shine!”



# 1.

## When Trees Explode

**W**e wake up to the smell of smoke. At first it isn't too bad, but then the smoke starts to sting and makes our eyes water, and by the time breakfast is over, the counselors say a decision has been made. The fire is still far away enough that we can't see it yet, but to be on the safe side, Camp Wabanaski will be evacuated as soon as the buses get here.

The smoke is getting worse, a layer of stinky fog that dims the sky. Except along the horizon, which is suddenly flickering orange above the treetops.

Wildfire, moving fast.

"The buses have arrived!" a counselor shouts. "Grab your gear and board! Remain calm but move quickly!"

We're only allowed one bag, so I jam everything into my hiking pack.

I'm on the second step of the bus, tight in a line of super-excited campers, when I remember my phone is still on the charger. I need it to call Mom and let her know I'm okay. I manage to sneak off without catching the attention of the staff, scoot around the buses, and race back to the cabin.



Sprint down the trail, by the tall white pines clustered around the sign for Camp Wabanaski, “A Summer Experience.” Turn left at the intersection for Lake Path, then right on Cabin Path, and there it is, dead ahead, my cabin.

Inside, the smoke is even thicker. My throat is starting to burn, like I gargled something nasty.

Phone, phone, where’s the phone?! Should be on the rickety table next to the wake-up radio, but it isn’t.

Should I run back to the bus and hope for the best?  
Answer: yes!

Then I spot a phone under the table. Blue rubber case, labeled with my name, Sam Castine. Grab it up, slip it into my back pocket, and bolt. Screen door slamming like a gunshot behind me.

Whoa! Serious smoke! The buses are no longer visible through the trees, it’s that thick. But I don’t need to see the buses, I know my way back to the entrance area where they’re parked. I have a really good sense of direction. My dad used to say I was born with a compass in my head. Not that I need a compass. All I have to do is follow the trails, Cabin Path to Lake Path, and I’ll be there.

What stops me is a flash of heat. Feels like an oven door has opened over my head. I look up and see something astonishing. The cluster of tall white pines blooming orange flower blossoms from the top. No, that’s wrong. Not flowers. Flames. Flames pouring from branch to branch like a gleaming



waterfall of fire. Fat flaming drops dripping on the grass below the pines, igniting it instantly.

The pines explode and disintegrate. A wave of flame erupts from the base of the tree trunks, setting up a wall of fire between me and the buses. A wall of fire that wants to kill me.

There's only one thing to do.

Run the opposite way.

Run for my life.



## 2.

### Run, Boy, Run

**R**emember me bragging about having a compass in my head? Ha. Must be that fear turns it off, because I've got no idea where I am in the world. Somewhere inside the smoke, running away from the heat, like a bug trying to find its way off a hot light bulb. Lungs burning, eyes blinded by the hot, itchy smoke, and the only thought in my head is run, run, run.

Smashing through low pine branches that reach out like scratchy hands. Fighting through sap-drenched undergrowth that grabs my feet. Somewhere along the way, I drop the bulky backpack. Too heavy, too awkward. Keep light, keep moving. Faster. Gotta go faster.

*run*

*gasp*

*run*

*gasp*

Don't think, don't try to figure anything out, because it takes too much energy. If you want to live, you gotta run, boy, run.



Not enough air in the smoke. Can't breathe, it hurts too much. Iron bands tightening around my lungs, choking me down.

On my knees. Can't breathe. Can't run.

Dying?

Maybe. Probably.

What saves me is a gust of wind. I'm on my hands and knees in the weeds, desperately trying to find enough air for one last breath, when something changes.

The wind. It had been behind me, driving the flames, when suddenly it shifts. In an instant the smoke lifts, and through tear-blurred eyes I can see again.

I'm in a patch of low, woodsy undergrowth, surrounded by whip-thin birch trees. Beyond the birch trees, the ground dips into a shallow swamp.

Yes.

Get to the swamp while you have the chance, while you can think.

Crawl, boy, crawl.

No, must go faster! I stagger to my feet, take a deep breath of that fresh, lifesaving wind in my face, and aim for the swamp.



### 3.

## Your Son Is Missing

**N**ot sure how long I stay there, lying in the muddy, tea-colored water with my back against a rotting stump. The swamp isn't very deep. Less than a foot. Barely a swamp at all. Probably the drought has dried it out. But the forest is much thinner, and I can see a chunk of sky, gray and glaring. The stench of smoke is harsh, but it no longer hurts to breathe, and the hot wind stays strong. Maybe the shift in wind turned the fire back, or maybe the fire just decided to go somewhere else.

Whatever, it's good to be alive. Gives me time to think and plan. How do I find my way back to Camp Wabanaski? Does it still exist? Last time I saw the camp, before the curtain of smoke came down, it was inside the fire. Trees exploding. Old wooden cabins, they must have gone off like popcorn.

What about the buses, did they get away in time? And if they did, did anybody notice I'm not there? Will they notify my mom? Sorry, Mrs. Castine, your son is missing and presumed burnt to a crisp.

My phone! Went to all that trouble and almost forgot. Mom won't have access to family or friends for the first ten



days of treatment, but I can leave a message with the staff. Then it hits me like a slap to the head. The phone is in my back pocket. And I'm sitting in swampy water.

I roll over, grab the slippery phone, and desperately try to dry it off. Blowing on the screen and muttering, "Come on, come on. Please work, please!"

Drips of swamp water ooze from a crack in the screen. That can't be good.

"One last call," I beg, and hold the button in.

Waiting for the symbol to come up.

Waiting. Waiting.

Nothing.

I lift the phone up to the sky, hoping against hope, but the screen stays dark. That's bad, but it gets even worse. When I try to put the phone back in my pocket, it slips away, vanishing into the tea-colored water. I paw through the muck, splashing swamp goo, going, "No, no, no, no! Please, no!"

But it's too late. Way too late. Even if I managed to retrieve it, the phone is for sure ruined by now, if it hadn't been already.

I want to cry like a baby, I really do, but the heat of the fire has dried the tears right out of me.

Forget the phone. Find your way to a road and get yourself home.

Slogging out of the mucky water, I follow along the edge of the swamp.



## 4.

### Don't Believe in Sorry

**M**y dad had a saying he got from some old TV show. *Let's be careful out there.* He always said it with half a laugh, but he meant it, whether we were going camping or hiking or whatever. If he could see me somehow, that's what he'd say: *Be careful out there, boy.* And maybe he'd add another of his favorites: *Make a plan and stick to it.* Something like that.

Easier said than done, but I'll try.

The swamp I'm following gets narrower and narrower, until finally it becomes nothing more than a dark path, a layer of rotting leaves and pine needles. I keep looking over my shoulder, checking to make sure the fire isn't catching up. So far so good.

Now, if only I can find a road. A road means passing vehicles, maybe even a police car. They'll be evacuating the whole area, right? Somebody is bound to see me. Somebody will have a phone so I can let Mom know I'm okay.

So be careful. And the plan? The plan is simple: Keep walking until you find a road, and hope fire doesn't get in your way.





When the last trace of the swamp disappears, I pick a direction and stick to it as best I can. Trying to follow a straight line through the forest, going from tree to tree. Worst thing you can do, lost in the woods, is start circling.

Hours go by. Or that's how it feels. Without the phone, I have no way of telling time. Not much of the sky is visible under the canopy of the forest, but I'm pretty sure the sun is lower. Which probably means it's afternoon. The clock in my stomach is letting me know I'm hungry and thirsty, that I haven't eaten or had anything to drink since early morning.

The thirsty part is the worst. I keep thinking if only I'd managed to hang on to my backpack, I'd have a couple of water bottles, two energy bars, and dry clothing. My throat is so parched I'm starting to regret not drinking that stinky swamp water when I had the chance. Should I turn around and retrace my steps?

No. Because that would mean heading back in the direction of the fire. Stick to the plan. Be on the lookout for a brook or a stream. Which normally wouldn't be hard to find, but this is the year of the drought. No rain for months. Heat-wave hot for weeks. All but the biggest rivers have shriveled to nothing.

Hot, hot, hot. My throat and mouth feel like dry, gritty dirt. My eyes are so dry they're scratchy. Get to a road, boy. Someone will stop, give you water. Drink first, then borrow a phone.

*Maybe I should take a nap.*



Wow! Where did that come from? Taking a nap in the woods with wildfires raging only a few miles away, that's like the worst idea in the world. Forget about napping. Forget you're tired and thirsty. Keep moving. Find a road, get rescued, and drink a gallon of icy cold water.

*Maybe just lie down for a minute.*

No, no, no. Absolutely not! Keep going!

Thirsty and tired don't matter. Humans survive for days without water. Banish water from your mind. Concentrate on finding a road.

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When I was really little, three or four, I used to sleepwalk. I'd be sound asleep in my bed, and the next thing I knew, my parents would find me in the living room or the kitchen or the hallway, just standing there, still asleep. Weird, huh? Like something in my dreams made me get up and wander.

That's what it feels like, trudging through the forest. Like I'm somewhere between awake and asleep. My legs keep walking, but part of me is floating along, like a balloon on a string.

Something about being in the woods brings up a memory of Dad taking me trout fishing, the year before he went to Afghanistan. Baxter State Park, which is huge. We hiked five miles from a parking lot to this fishing spot Dad knew about from when he was my age. His father took him, so this was like a family tradition. Told me I would always remember



my first trout stream, even if we didn't catch fish. But we did catch fish. We caught eleven brook trout and kept five to eat over a campfire. So that was the year my father taught me how to cast with a fly rod—I sucked, actually—and build a campfire, and whittle with a jackknife, and how to read a trail map, and a lot of cool, outdoorsy stuff. He promised when I was twelve he'd take me duck hunting, but he never came back from Afghanistan, so that was that.

What would he think of me wandering through the woods with no idea of direction, or where to go, or how to get there? His boy who was supposed to have a compass in his head?

Sorry, Dad.

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

I can almost hear him saying, *Don't give me sorry, boy. I don't believe in sorry*, which was another saying of his, when I notice the ground feels different under my feet. Which kind of snaps me back into paying attention. Looking down, I see a tire track in the dirt. No, wait, two of them, running in parallel. Tracks from a good-sized vehicle, like maybe a big truck.

A road!



# 5.

## Beautiful Music

Okay, let's be clear. What I've stumbled upon is an old logging road, not much wider than a trail. Cut through the forest long ago, to bring out lumber. How do I know that? Because my dad was a trucker, and when he was young, he drove for paper companies in Skowhegan, hauling pulpwood out of the forest and taking it to the mills for processing. Dangerous work, driving heavily loaded trucks on dirt trails. Make a mistake and the truck can flip over, with all those heavy logs crushing the cab.

This particular road is pretty overgrown. Looks like it hasn't been used in years. So it's not like I can stick out my thumb and hitch a ride. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure that logging roads eventually connect with a main road. They'd have to, to bring the wood to the paper mill, right? So it's really important that I choose the right direction. Go the wrong way, the old road will likely take me deeper into the woods.

Which way? I've no idea. How could I?

*Make your decision and stick to it.*



Thanks, Dad, but that doesn't really help.

In the end, I flip a coin in my head and turn left.

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The old trail winds through the forest, under a canopy of green leaves. Mossy, rotting stumps squat alongside the old trail, more proof that loggers worked this road, back in the day. A lot of the paper mills have closed, which is why my father switched over to bulk tanker trucking before I was born. Hauled everything from milk to gasoline. Made a good living, but nothing like the money they paid him to drive gas tankers in Afghanistan, for as long as it lasted. Combat pay, even though he was a civilian. Money intended for my college fund, and to save for a bigger house, so I'm at least partly to blame for why he took the job in the first place.

But I'd rather not think about that. Concentrate on covering ground while I've got the chance. The light is dim, this far into the woods, and getting dimmer. And the thirst is starting to make me feel light-headed. They say being dehydrated can mess with your mind, and thinking straight will help me stay alive. So I need to find water, and fast.

There has to be water in leaves, right? A drop or two. Tearing a few leaves off a bush, I stuff them into my mouth and chew. Not to swallow, just to squeeze a little moisture into my mouth and throat. But the taste is so awful I try to spit it out, and a piece of leaf sticks to the back of my throat



and makes me gag and cough. And cough some more. When it finally comes loose, I'm able to catch my breath.

That coughing fit makes me stop and remember something important we learned in camp. When you're lost in the woods, you have to think and plan, or risk dying of exposure, which can happen if your body temperature gets out of whack, too hot or cold, or if you don't get enough water.

Use your brain or die, that's the rule.

Our camp counselor explained the danger, but most of us already knew. Every year tons of hikers and hunters get lost in the woods of Maine, and we hear about it on TV. Usually they get rescued, but not always. Which makes me remember one of those stories, about a Girl Scout who got separated from her troop on a foggy day, and how she found water by following the mosquitoes. Because mosquitoes are never far from water.

Smart girl.

Never before have I wanted to get bit by mosquitoes. But here I am, trudging along an old logging road in the dying light, so thirsty it hurts. If getting bit by a few mosquitoes is what it takes to find water, so be it.

Come for me, you whiny little monsters. Lead me to water. Lead me to life.

---

I never do get bit. But as I concentrate on listening for the annoying, telltale whine of a mosquito, I hear something



much, much better. A sound more beautiful than music. The gurgle of running water.

It's coming from deep in the brush, just off the logging trail. I approach slow and careful. Thinking about snakes, if you must know. There are no poisonous snakes in Maine, according to our camp counselor, but I don't care to meet one, poisonous or not.

What I find looks at first like the stump of a giant tree surrounded by thick green ferns. But it turns out it's actually an old spring. The low, circular sides are mossy bricks that look like wood in the dim light. The top is a big round cover made of thick, rough-sawn planks. Part of the brick siding has crumbled away, and that's where the water is leaking out, feeding the ferns.

By then I'm on my hands and knees, mouth jammed up against those mossy bricks, slurping down cool, clear water. Beautiful water. Blessed water. Best-tasting water that ever there was.

I drink until my belly is full, tight as a drum, and I'm woozy with the thrill of it. So satisfied that I'm tempted to curl up next to the spring and go to sleep. Might have done it, too, if a thought didn't bob to the surface and fight for attention.

What's a man-made spring doing in the middle of nowhere? The brick sides and thick wooden cover had been built for a purpose, to keep the water clean and contained. Shift that cover, and water could be drawn out by the bucketful. But why here, and for who?



Only one answer makes sense. The spring was built for the same men who had cut this logging road into the woods. Lumbermen from the lumber camps. Which gets me back on my feet and hurrying along the trail with hope in my heart.





## 6.

### Sleep Like the Dead

**T**he old lumber camp is nearly invisible in the fading light. Located not fifty yards from the spring, in a clearing overgrown with bushes, ferns, and skinny saplings that makes everything look blended together. Kind of a natural camouflage. I can barely make out a couple of long, low sheds slowly sinking into the ground. One of them has a caved-in roof. Nearby is a small, one-story cabin, roof intact.

The little cabin is not much bigger than a garden shed, but it can be shelter for the night. A place to hide from bears. Did I mention bears? My dad said steer clear of bears, if possible. Mostly a black bear will leave you alone, he said, but not always. Especially a mama bear with cubs. Very dangerous. So bears have been on my mind ever since the sun started setting. And when you're thinking about bears, every clump of bushes looks like one, ready to charge.

I hurry across the clearing and get to the sagging front porch of the cabin just as darkness falls like a hot, steamy blanket. I can barely make out the front door, and expect to find it locked. Maybe I can skinny through a window? Or



break in if necessary—this is an emergency, what with the wildfire coming to get me if the wind shifts. But when I thumb the latch, the door swings creakily inward.

“Anybody home?” I call into the darkness, not really expecting a reply. The air inside is hot and stale and smells of wood and pinesap. Sweat trickles down my forehead and stings my eyes. Sweat from the heat, but also from being afraid, spooked by the dark, and terrified the fire will catch up.

I feel along the wall beside the front door, hoping for a light switch. No luck. Doubtful the cabin has electricity. I sure didn’t see any power lines nearby. As I search for a light switch, something hard and solid bumps my wrist. It’s all I can do not to scream. Was that a bony hand?

My heart is slamming so hard I can barely breathe.

Don’t be a moron, Sam! Don’t panic. Keep it together. Use your brain. Find what bumped you and deal with it. Slowly I pass my fingers along the wall and touch the thing that nearly scared me to death.

A flashlight hanging from a thin rope, just inside the door.

I press the button, expecting the batteries to be long dead. But to my amazement, a beam of light nearly blinds me.

I’ve never been so grateful for such a small thing. A simple flashlight. “Thank you,” I say, to whoever was thoughtful enough to leave it hanging by the door. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”



The warm beam of the flashlight lights up a small, tidy interior. A potbellied cast-iron woodstove with a tin chimney going up through the roof. A little square table with two spindly chairs. A narrow bunk. A stack of wooden crates piled up against the back wall. And dust, lots of dust.

I check out the top crate. Plastic gallon jugs of supermarket water. The labels haven't faded or peeled, so they can't be that old. The lumber camp looks abandoned, like the logging is long over, but it seems like someone has visited this cabin recently. Which explains the flashlight, the fresh jugs of water.

A supply of water is good—no, it's great, it's amazing—but I'm suddenly so exhausted I can barely keep my eyes open. I head for the narrow bunk. Thin mattress, no sheets, but I'm grateful to have a bed.

Doesn't matter that the cabin is stifling hot, and smells old and musty, but at least it doesn't stink of smoke. A safe place to sleep seems like a treasure I couldn't imagine when the flames were chasing me from tree to tree. As soon as the sun rises, I intend to keep running, putting distance between me and the fire. But tonight I need to get some rest.

---

I lie in the dark, wishing I were home. My mom and I live in Wells, Maine. Not in the beachy, touristy part, but out in the woods by the sandpits. Which is fine. I like it out there.



At night you can hear the coyotes yipping under the power lines. Yipping and howling and singing to each other. Kind of scary if you never heard it before, but once you know, it's like listening to a family conversation. Dad, Mom, and the kids.

I miss it, miss it, miss it.

I fall asleep worrying about my mother. Did the people at the clinic tell her I was missing? Will she stay in the program? Or will she quit and try to find me on her own?

I can hear myself begging her: *Twenty-eight days, Mom, that's all you have to do. Four weeks and then you'll be free. No more pills. Your mind will be clear. I'll go to summer camp, and you'll go to rehab. They'll help you, Mom, I promise. Stay in the program, please?*

No more pills, no more pills, no more pills. Pray for no more pills.

I sleep like the dead.



## **Day Two**

## 7.

### Make a Giant “HELP”

**W***here am I?* That's my first thought as I wake up. I take a deep breath of hot, stuffy air and look around. Oh yeah. The little cabin in the abandoned lumber camp. I sniff the air, but the smell of a distant fire hasn't changed. My second thought is about my mother. I'm worried. Did I mention she's in rehab?

Maybe you think all drug addicts are losers. Not my mother. A loser would give up when her husband dies in some stupid road accident on the other side of the world. A few days after the funeral, she called me into the kitchen and sat me down. "I'm not sure what's next for us, Sammy, but it will be something good, that's a promise. Your dad is gone, and we'll miss him every day, but that doesn't mean we give up. No way, not ever. Not as long as we have each other."

Mom was sad about Dad, desperate sad, but she kept her job as a physical therapist, taking extra shifts to make ends meet. In her free time, which wasn't much, she made sure I was okay, and worked in her garden, which she always said was better than medicine.



Weeding, planting, helping things bloom, helping people heal. That's my mother, or it was until she got rear-ended in a parking lot last year and injured her neck real bad, and started taking prescription meds for the pain. After a while she was taking more and more pills, and pretty soon it seemed like she wasn't really there, like she couldn't concentrate or pay attention. She started missing shifts and let the garden go to weeds.

Mom kept apologizing, and blamed it on being tired, but it kept getting worse. Until one day I came home from school and found her passed out on the floor, barely breathing. I tried to wake her, and when that didn't work, I dialed 911 and they took her to the hospital and pumped her stomach and tested her blood for opioids.

Opioids. I hate that word. Sounds like some horrible kind of mind spider that takes over your brain. Anyhow, at the hospital, they assigned me a social worker, Mrs. Labrie, who talked to me about going into foster care while my mother went to rehab. When I freaked out, she came up with a plan for me to go to summer camp instead. Which was the perfect solution, until the fire wrecked everything.

I swing my legs over the steel-frame bunk. Sitting there all sweaty with the stifling heat as I try to clear my head. Think smart, like my dad used to say. Stop worrying about things I can't change. Nothing I can do about Mom, not today. Today I need to keep clear of the fire and find my way back home. Concentrate on making that happen.



I have no idea what time it is, but it must be early, not long after sunrise. I'm dizzy, or maybe light-headed is more like it. The constant heat is partly to blame, but mostly it's because my belly is growling, *Feed me, feed me*. I head for the stack of crates, figuring to fill up on bottled water. But what I find in the second crate is way better than that. The crate is loaded with canned goods. B&M beans, Dinty Moore beef stew, canned franks and beans, canned brown bread, Spam, pears, tuna fish. Tons of stuff, enough to live for weeks or maybe months, and there's even a can opener and a jackknife!

Cold beef stew for breakfast, right out of the can? If you haven't eaten for twenty-four hours, it tastes great, let me tell you. And better yet, the food goes right to my brain, and out pops an idea. Okay, maybe it's not an original idea, but it just might work. Remember that movie where a guy gets stranded on an island and spells out "HELP" in the sand? What if I do the same thing in the clearing, except spell it out with trees? Not big trees, of course, but white birch saplings small enough for me to drag into place?

I mean, they'll be searching for me, right? Sending out helicopters and planes and search parties, whatever they do when a kid goes missing in the woods. Unless they think I burned up in the fire. Which is discouraging for about ten seconds, and then I decide to make a giant "HELP" and hope for the best. That somebody will see it and rescue me before the fire gets here. Before the old camp explodes in flames, and me with it.





So my plan is to find an ax or a handsaw and get started. Doesn't take long to search the little cabin and discover there's nothing bigger than the jackknife I found. I decide to put it in my pocket and hope the owner won't mind. Then I remember those falling-down sheds. It makes sense there might be old hand tools in a lumber camp, and if there are, they'd likely be stored in a shed.

Feeling like the smartest twelve-year-old in the universe, I stride out of the hot cabin and into the overgrown clearing. I check out the skyline, looking for signs of fire. The horizon is dark with smoke, but it still looks a long way off. Shoving my way through low bushes and ferns, I head for the closest shed. The one where the roof is more or less intact.

The big shed doors are heavy, but swing smoothly on recently oiled hinges. A blast of super-hot air hits me from inside, and a faint odor of something familiar. Gasoline and motor oil. In my mind, that means a chain saw, which would make my job a whole lot easier. If I can figure out how to start a chain saw. Can't be that hard, right?

As the doors swing all the way open, daylight spreads into the dim interior of the shed. And what I see there just about blows my mind.



## 8.

### The Promise He Made Me

**T**he thing is covered by a dust sheet, but I can sort of make out the shape. A vehicle. Could be an off-road four-wheeler, but I don't think so. Too wide. Only one way to find out.

I take a corner of the dust sheet and pull it away.

"Whoa," I say, amazed. "No way!"

The thing under the sheet is a Jeep. An old Jeep, like from the wars in the last century. Dull green in color and as stocky as a bulldog, with thick tires and old leather seats and no doors, and a flat, tilt-down windshield. There's a shovel and ax attached to the passenger side, and a couple of five-gallon fuel cans strapped to the back bumper. No ignition or key that I can see, just a simple lever marked *Off/On*, and a small compass mounted on the dash.

You may be wondering, what's the big deal about finding an old Jeep, instead of, say, a nice new four-wheeler? Because of my dad, that's why. His favorite vehicle of all time was an Army Jeep! His grandfather drove one in World War II. In one story, the old man had gotten stuck behind enemy lines



in the Battle of the Bulge, but he escaped because of his Jeep—rescuing four wounded soldiers along the way.

I watched a lot of WWII movies with Dad, who wanted to pass along our family history. Plus, it was fun watching movies with him because he knew so much about it all.

Once I asked him if he'd get me a Jeep when I turned sixteen. That made him laugh. "You're only eight years old," he said.

"That makes me halfway there."

He laughed even harder.

"Promise? Swear-on-your-heart promise?"

"Tell you what, Scamp," he said. "I promise that someday we'll buy an old Jeep and fix it up, you and me."

"When?"

"When we can afford it, and that's the end of this conversation."

But it wasn't the end, not by a long shot. Whenever I saw an old Army-style Jeep on the road or in a yard, we'd talk about how someday we'd get one of our own. *I wish you could see this, Dad! You'd already have the hood up.*

What I find in the old Jeep's little glove compartment makes it even better. There's a neatly folded map that looks well used. A small gray plastic folder contains a vehicle registration in the name of Aldrich Brown, and a faded black-and-white photo of a tall, lean man in an Army uniform standing next to a Jeep. Maybe he owns the lumber camp property, or has permission to store a vehicle here. Maybe he's the one who



keeps the cabin stocked with provisions. Whatever, he has a big grin on his face. I turn the photo over and there, in neat handwriting, are the words *U.S. Army, 40th Infantry, Korea 1952*.

Cool! I'm so focused on the Jeep, and on memories of my dad, that at first I don't notice the smell. The terrible smell. The awful, terrifying smell. Then it hits me, and I run out of the shed and look to the sky, which is suddenly boiling dark clouds and flashing orange along the tree line.

The fire is suddenly close and getting closer. The wind has shifted, and it carries the heat and stink of fire.

My heart sinks. The wildfire is back with a vengeance, driving the hot sparky wind, and there's no time to make a plan. I thought the worst was over, but obviously not. All I can do is get moving as quickly as possible, and try and keep ahead of the flames behind the boiling smoke. Smoke that's already burning my throat.

Water. I'm going to need water. Best I can do is grab a few jugs for the road. Go. Make it fast. Don't mess it up like you did going back for the stupid phone.

I'm sprinting for the little cabin, when animals suddenly explode from the surrounding forest. Birds are first, hundreds of them, streaking across the clearing. Big black crows, tiny bright songbirds, and eerie-looking owls, silent but for the swoop of their wings. I raise my arms to cover my head, afraid they'll peck my eyes out, but the birds avoid me and rush up into the smoke-darkening sky.



Next come squirrels, tails flattened as they skitter through the underbrush, chittering with fear. Then ground-hogs waddling along, and raccoon families screeching, and other close-to-the-ground creatures running so fast they're blurred. Weasels, maybe.

Last is a young deer with a rack of mossy antlers. He enters the clearing in one mighty leap, freezing for a split second, as if posing for an amazing nature picture, and then vanishes into a stand of pines on the opposite side of the camp.

The message couldn't be clearer. *Run*. If you want to live, *run*.

I kick open the cabin door and grab crates of cans and jugs of water. I race back to the shed, fear choking my throat. Because I can hear the fire now, roaring close behind the thick wall of smoke. The crackle of burning branches. The whoosh of leaves igniting into flames. It can only mean one thing: Fire is eating the forest. Fire is coming so fast I can't possibly outrun it. Not without help. Not without the Jeep.

Doesn't matter that I don't know how to drive, it's my only chance.



## 9.

### Between the Fire and Me

I toss the crates into the back of the Jeep and slip behind the wheel, hands shaking. Trying to remember what little I know about driving a standard transmission. I know the clutch is important. That's how you shift gears. But which one is the clutch pedal and which is the brake?

*Take a guess.* I press down on the left pedal. It goes all the way to the floor. Okay, that must be the clutch. I turn the lever on the dash to *On*.

Nothing. Total silence. I jiggle the lever. Still nothing.

*Forget the Jeep. Run for your life.*

No, wait. *Starter pedal?* Yes! Remember? Dad said really old Jeeps had a starter pedal. Something you had to press down with your foot. To make the engine turn over.

Find it, boy. Find it or die.

I look down and spot a small, knobby rubber pedal. I press on it with my foot. The most amazing thing happens: The engine turns over and catches!

Nothing ever sounded so good as that engine purring.



Like it woke up happy from a deep sleep and is ready to get to work.

That running engine gives me hope, but the smoke is getting thicker, filling the shed. My eyes sting.

What do I do next? How do I make it go?

My brain screams, "JUST DO SOMETHING, YOU IDIOT! Put this beast in gear and get moving!"

*Yes! But how?* There are two stick shifts! One big and one small! One for regular and one for four-wheel drive? The bigger stick must be for regular transmission, right? But how do I get it into first gear?

Then I see it. A diagram on the dashboard. First gear is to the left and down.

Quick! Do it or get burned to a crisp!

I grab the stick, pull it left and down. It clicks into place. Okay. Now put your right foot on the gas pedal and lift the clutch pedal with your left. Careful! Don't stall the engine!

My left foot accidentally slips off the clutch pedal and *WHAM!* there's an awful grinding noise as the Jeep lurches into gear. Suddenly we're out of the shed, me and the Jeep. Bouncing through the clearing, knocking down bushes and skinny saplings with fire raging behind us.

I'm fighting to get control. The steering wheel bucks in my sweaty hands like a thing alive. I manage to grab hard enough so it stops slipping through my fingers.



I'm in control, more or less. I'm steering for the path, steering for my life. Because the fire behind me is louder than the engine in front of me.

Drive, boy, drive! Go! Go! Go!

---

I know this sounds crazy, but as me and that old Jeep tear through the clearing, I'm laughing out loud. The vehicle is bucking like a horse, fighting to go wild, and I'm howling in relief. Hanging on to that steering wheel like my life depends on it. Because guess what? It does!

I sneak a look behind just in time to see the lumber camp explode into fire. The sheds are burning, dripping with flames. The birches are going up like skinny white candles, spreading from tree to tree. There are hot threads of red and orange glowing behind the smoke. It would look beautiful if it wasn't so awful.

When I get to the old logging trail, I have to choose which way to go. Right or left? Instinct tells me I need to head into the wind. So I steer to the left. The Jeep finds the ruts, and the steering wheel stops fighting me so much. Like it knows the way.

Maybe it does. No, that's crazy, it's just a machine. Nuts and bolts and steel. It feels alive because the trail is so bumpy, and because my heart is beating hard enough for two. I'm super frightened and super excited at the same time. The fire





scares me half to death, but driving the Jeep is the most fun I've ever had. The farther we get down the trail, the less smoke in the air. I'm feeling more confident.

I'd like to turn around and check what's happening behind me. Is the fire catching up? But I don't dare take my eyes off the old logging trail. What would Dad say? Keep the wheels in the ruts! Don't stop, because what if you can't get it into gear again? That would be fatal. Got to keep moving.

*Yes, Dad, yes.* Put as much distance as possible between the fire and me.

I'm pedal to the metal in first gear. I could try for second gear and get more speed, but what if it stalls? And I'm bouncing so hard I'm not sure I can handle going faster. Every now and then we hit a root or rock that makes the steering wheel shudder, and the Jeep groans, like it feels pain.

I decide not to change anything, just stick with it for now. Try not to worry about what's happening behind me. My mission is to keep it on the path. Dad was always saying, *Learn as you go*, right? So now's my chance. Stay focused, pay attention, and let the vehicle eat up the yards.

Not sure how long it lasts, that first part of the journey. Half an hour? Maybe seven miles down the trail? I'm drenched in sweat, but we're doing great, the Jeep and me. And we might have got clear of the fire for good, if it wasn't for what happened next.



# 10.

## The Girl with the Raccoon Eyes

**T**he first screech sounds like a wounded bird. It calls again, closer and louder. Not a bird. It's human. Definitely human.

I put the Jeep in neutral and roll to a stop, listening.

"Hey!" comes a faint voice. "Hey, you! Wait, please wait!"

A girl. At first I can't see her. Then she pushes her way through the tree branches, maybe fifty yards from the logging road. Limping along as fast as she can, leaning on a stick, with a small backpack slung over her shoulder. Face covered with soot, except for her eyes. Makes her look like a reverse raccoon.

I leave the engine running and get out to help. She stumbles through the ferns, hurrying like she's afraid I'll leave her behind. I give her a shoulder to lean on. Not sure it helps, because she's a head taller than me.

Boy, does she stink of smoke and sweat.

"It almost got me," she says, panting. "The fire last night. I ran and I ran. No idea where I was going. Just trying to get away."



"You're okay."

I guide her to the Jeep.

She collapses into the passenger seat and starts to cry. Great, heaving sobs of relief. She wipes tears and soot from her face with the back of her hand. "Sorry. Sorry. I don't cry. Well, hardly ever. But I thought I was dead. And then I heard that beautiful motor sound. I was so afraid it would pass by before I could find it. Ran as hard as I could, until I tripped and hurt my ankle."

"But you kept on running."

"I guess." She focuses on me, as if seeing me for the first time. "Excuse me, but are you old enough to drive?"

"I'm doing okay."

"You're what, twelve?"

"Almost thirteen. Do you want a ride or not?"

That makes her laugh. "Ha! Sorry for asking. It's not like there's any cops around to give you a ticket."

"Fire's coming this way. We best keep moving." I get behind the wheel, put the Jeep in gear. "Um, there's a jug of water in the back seat. Help yourself."

---

Up until three minutes ago, I was on my own, the only human in the woods, or that's how it felt. I kind of liked it that way. Then this girl appears out of nowhere. Delphy Pappas. She's from Camp Calusa, down the lake from Camp



Wabanaski. Two years older than me, broad-shouldered and way taller, with a long dark ponytail. She's big. Strong and solid. The kind of girl you'd want on your sports team. As we bounce along the ruts, keeping a steady pace, she raises her voice above the noise of the engine and thanks me for stopping.

"No problem."

"Is this your Jeep?" she asks. "What are you doing out here?"

I tell her about going back for my phone and missing the bus and stumbling into the lumber camp. "That's where I found the Jeep. It saved my life. And I guess I saved it, too, because the lumber camp went up in flames. What about you?"

She looks away. "I was, ah, out in the woods the night before the fire."

"Yeah?"

"I was, um, texting someone. Then it was really late and I got totally lost in the dark. Had to drink water from this disgusting mucky pool. Next morning—yesterday, right?—I could see the camp through the trees when the sun came up. Almost made it."

"The fire. It came wicked fast."

She nods quickly. "All I could do was run. Never been so scared in my life."

"Calusa, that's a survival camp, right?"



"Fitness. Mostly sports. For me, it was track and volleyball. Which I guess probably saved my life. The running part. So where are we heading?"

"I don't know, exactly. I'm hoping this trail connects with a main road, and we get there before the fire does."

"Okay," says the girl with the raccoon eyes. "Hope is good."



# 11.

## Dead as a Doornail

**W**e rumble along for at least an hour, making good progress—the smoke has thinned from the sky and the smell is fainter by the minute. I’m getting more relaxed and confident behind the wheel. I’ve got this thing beat. I can do it. Hands at ten and two, like Dad showed me, and keep your eyes on the road. In this case the rutted trail. On the lookout for any fallen trees or rocks, because if we break an axle, the Jeep is all done.

When the trail straightens out, I ask Delphy where she’s from.

“Westbrook. We have a Greek restaurant. It’s on 302. Delphy’s. And no, the restaurant isn’t named after me. It’s named for my grandmother, Adelpia, who started it.”

“Cool.”

“It is, mostly. The whole family works there—my mom and dad, aunts and uncles, cousins.”

“Sounds like a big place.”

She nods. “Started small, but now we seat a hundred and



fifty on Saturday nights. And that's the night I have to scrub pots. Ug!"

I wonder what it must be like, being part of a big family. She makes it sound like fun, even if it does mean scrubbing pots.

We settle in, putting miles between us and the fire.

My passenger gets so relaxed she almost falls asleep, even though the ride is bumpy. With her head lolling and her eyelids drooping, and her faced cleaned of soot, Delphy looks younger. A little girl in a big, tall body. Must be exhausted from her night in the woods. She hasn't really explained what she was doing out there, but she did say she ran her battery down texting someone.

I wonder about that. Why go out in the woods to text? Didn't her camp counselors tell her it's dangerous to be wandering the forests of Maine at night? Didn't they warn about bears and coyotes and bobcats? Or how easy it is to get lost?

After a while, she startles herself awake and goes, "Sorry, sorry. Where are we, Sam?"

"See that little glove compartment? There's a map that might help. Are you good with maps?"

She looks uncertain. "I've got a GPS app. Like that?"

"Never mind. I'll check it out when we stop. Right now, all I know, we're heading mostly west."

"How do you know that?"

I point to the compass on the dash.



“Oh. I was wondering, maybe we can charge my phone from the car battery?”

“I don’t think so. It’s not like you can just plug in.”

She exhales and leans back into her seat, disappointed. “I really, really need my phone. I need to let my parents know what happened. They’ll be worried sick. How far before we get to a real road?”

“Don’t know. Could be around the next corner. Could be miles.”

At exactly that moment, the engine sputters and dies.

The Jeep slows to a stop, dead as a doornail.





# 12.

## Not on This Map

**A**fter about a hundred years of totally insane panic—okay, maybe ten seconds—I realize what’s wrong and start chuckling. Delphy has this look—like *What have I gotten myself into?*—until I explain that we’ve run out of gas.

“And why is that funny?”

“Because I can fix it.”

I go around to the back, where the two five-gallon fuel cans are strapped to the bumper.

Delphy offers to help. “My ankle hurts but there’s nothing wrong with my arms.” She grins and makes a muscle.

Turns out she’s way stronger than me. Good thing, because the cans are really heavy, and the last thing I want to do is waste gas by spilling it. I unscrew the cap, and we both hold the can as we slowly tip it up, carefully pouring every drop of gas into the empty tank. And then we do it all again with the second can.

“Ten gallons. That should be good for a hundred miles at least.”

Delphy’s face falls. “You think it’s that far, a real road?”



"Hope not. Let's look at the map, see if we can figure it out."

I take the old map out of the glove box and unfold it on the hood. The air is hot and heavy, and although there's no strong smell of smoke, the air is still bad, so breathing is a chore. Sweat is running into my eyes, and I have to blink it away before I can see the map clearly. I'm disappointed it isn't like the trail maps Dad taught me how to read at Baxter State Park. At first it just looks like a bunch of squiggly green lines. The faded printing identifies it as a topographical survey, but I'm not sure what that means, exactly.

Delphy leans over the map, squinting her thoughtful brown eyes, and announces that the lines are marked for elevation.

"Elevation?" I ask.

"How high above sea level, see?"

As soon as she says that, the map suddenly makes sense, like one of those trick puzzles that snap into place once you know the secret. The squiggly green lines trace the shape of land and lakes and mountains. The lines are close together where the mountains are steep, and far apart where the ground is flat, or where there's water.

I lean over the map. "Wabanaski Lake. My camp and your camp are on the same lake, right? If we can find it on the map, at least we'll know where we started."

The printing is tiny, and faded, but we eventually identify the long, skinny shape of the lake. There are no markings for



the summer camps located along the shoreline. But the map is old and maybe the camps are more recent, or maybe they just didn't bother marking them down.

Delphy must have really sharp eyes, because she's the one who spots the faint pencil lines. "Could this be the logging road?" she asks.

The pencil markings run east and west across the map, following the lower elevations. The flat land. At one end there's a smudged X, and the other end continues to the far edge of the map.

"Yeah, I think you're right. It makes sense if X is the lumber camp. So we'd be somewhere in here." I place my finger on the smudged pencil line.

"So where does this connect to a main road?"

"It doesn't. Not on this map."

Delphy sighs, her round face concerned. "We're really in trouble, aren't we?"

"Yes. But if we stay ahead of the fire, we'll be okay. That's the main thing: Keep ahead of the fire. It's summer, so we're not going to die of exposure, as long as we have water. And we have food for at least five or six days, if we don't pig out."

Delphy's eyes get even bigger. "For real? You have food?"

I show her the crates in the back seat. Beans, beef stew, franks and beans, Spam, tuna fish. She picks up a can, makes a quirky face. "Are you serious? Bread in a can?"

I nod. "Brown bread. Almost like cake. It's really good, especially with butter. Not that we have any butter."



“Huh.” She looks over the collection. “Lots of beans.”

“Beans are nutritious. Besides, this is Maine. We practically invented baked beans.”

For some reason, that makes Delphy laugh. Then she gets serious. “Could you, um, like open a can? I’m starving.”

“You choose. I recommend the beef stew.”

We don’t have spoons, so she sips beef stew right from the can as we drive along the logging trail, keeping a safe distance between us and the fire.

At least for now.



# 13.

## Okay for a Boy

**T**urns out my passenger is pretty funny when she wants to be. We're bumping along, going maybe ten miles an hour, and suddenly she shades her eyes with her hand and goes, "Slow down! I see the Golden Arches! Big Macs dead ahead!"

For one tiny millisecond I almost fall for it.

"Gotcha!" She grins at me.

"No way."

"Way. You totally believed me."

"You're good," I admit. "Good enough for ice cream. I've been saving the last pint of chocolate chip. In that cooler in the back."

Her eyes dart to the back and I burst out laughing.

She slumps in her seat. "Great. I got away from fatness camp, but I can't get away from imaginary food."

"Fatness camp?"

"They call it fitness because it sounds better. But at least half the girls are there to lose weight."

"Can I ask you a question? Why were you out in the woods at night?"



“No comment.” And she won’t say any more on the subject.

But here’s the thing. After making each other laugh, we’re no longer strangers. We’re not a team yet, me and Delphy Pappas, but we’re getting there.

---

Late in the day, with light fading through the green leaves, and the smell of smoke ever more distant, we come upon a faded hand-painted sign, nailed to a tree:

## PINEY POND COTTAGE

### *WALK FROM HERE*

Delphy says, “If somebody’s home, maybe they’ve got a phone. I really, really want to talk to my mom.”

“It’s a footpath,” I point out. “Too narrow for a vehicle.”

But Delphy leverages herself out of the seat, grabs the stick she’s using for a crutch, and hobbles past the sign. I’m nervous about leaving the Jeep alone. It saved my life, and my guts tell me to stick with it until we’re clear of the forest, clear of the fire. I can’t outrun a fire, and for sure Delphy can’t. But I need a phone as much as she does, to make sure my mom is okay, and to get us rescued. So I carefully park the Jeep in a cleared space near the sign—this must be where the owners leave their car or truck—and follow her down the footpath.



The path looks like it hasn't been used lately. The undergrowth is so thick with ferns that it's like a wall of soft green waves on either side. Delphy is limping along so fast I can hardly keep up, and I worry she'll trip and make her ankle worse.

"Wait up! Take it easy!" But she's real determined, crashing through the ferns and slashing her stick to clear the path, and then suddenly we're in the clear.

A meadow slopes down to a white cottage on the edge of a small pond. There's a small rickety dock but no boat, and the shutters on the cottage windows are closed.

Nobody home is my guess. But Delphy is determined to find out for sure. A screened-in porch wraps around two sides of the cottage, and she's up the steps and into the porch before I get there. Darting around the old wicker furniture and peering through the glass on the front door, into the dim interior.

She rattles the doorknob. Locked.

"I don't think there's anyone here," I say. "There'd be a car or truck in that spot, right?"

Sounding irritated, she turns to me. "Okay, Sherlock, I get that. Nobody's home! Duh. But what if there's a phone charger in there, or a landline?"

I take a step back. She's taller than me, and holding a big stick. She notices my reaction and her face falls. "Oh, hey. Hey, I'm sorry. I'm just, like, hot and miserable and obsessed about calling my parents, okay?"

"Delphy, I'm pretty sure there aren't any chargers in there."



"How do you know that?"

"Look around. There are no power lines attached to the house. No telephone lines. No lines of any kind."

She hobbles down the steps, looks up at the roofline of the porch and cottage. Her shoulders slump. "This is so messed up."

"There are a lot of places like this in the backwoods. Hunting cabins and getaway cottages that are too remote for power."

"That's stupid."

I shrug, not so sure about that. "It's sort of like camping out, except with a real roof over your head. Summer only, I'm guessing. Unless they come in by snowmobile. That lumber camp? It didn't have power, either."

"I hate this!" Delphy says, frustrated. "Hate it, hate it, hate it!"

"No, no, this is good!" I insist. "This is a great find, even without a phone. We're far enough ahead of the fire that we can hardly smell it. And besides, we don't dare drive a logging trail after dark—too easy to go off the road. So we need a place to stay for the night. The porch is good. The bugs won't be able to chomp on us. Plus, we have chairs and couches and cushions. See? It's way better than sleeping in the Jeep. I'll go back for some food and we'll have a nice supper right here on the porch. How about that?"

Delphy wipes her glistening face with the back of her hand. "You're okay for a boy, you know that?"





# 14.

## Land of a Thousand Dances

**O**n my walk back to the Jeep, I remember something Dad once did with a snowmobile, to make sure it didn't get stolen. He pulled the main spark plug wire and took it with him. "*No spark, no steal,*" he said with a smile.

Doubtful there's anyone around to steal the Jeep, but I can't risk it, not with our lives at stake.

I lift the hood and follow his example.

*Thanks, Dad.*

When I return with canned goods for supper, Delphy is perched on an old porch rocker, looking very pleased with herself. The door to the cottage is open. "You broke in?"

"Nope." She holds up a key. "Found it under the mat."

The sun is already low in the sky, and the shuttered windows make the inside of the cottage dim. "What's in there?"

Delphy shrugs. "I was waiting for you."

I ease down into a chair. "We're probably breaking the law just being here. Trespassing, right?"

"Said the boy who stole a Jeep."

"Borrowed," I respond quickly.



"Whatever. This is what they call a special circumstance. We're two kids lost in the woods, running from a forest fire, okay? I don't think they'll send us to prison for seeing if there's anything inside that can help us survive."

That makes sense, but it still feels wrong. The pond, the empty dock, the comfortable old porch furniture, it all looks private. Like we're intruding on a family. But Delphy is right—what if there's a phone in there? Or food and water like at the logging camp? "Okay. Let's take a look."

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the deep shadows inside the cabin. Our footsteps echo in a way that makes me think the place is hollow somehow. Then I realize: not hollow, but empty. It even smells empty. There's nothing inside but hot, stale air and an old broom, leaning against a bare wall. No furniture, no pictures on the walls, no wood for the stone fireplace. The cupboard doors are open, and the shelves are bare. No food, water, or supplies. No candles, lanterns, or flashlights. Nothing.

"Whoever they were, the owners, they're gone."

Delphy sighs. "Gone for a long time. Years probably. Look at the dust."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault." She's being polite, but sounds heartbroken. Delphy pulls open a kitchen drawer, looking for silverware. At first glance, it seems to be as empty as the cupboards, until she reaches to the very back. Then her eyes get bigger.



"I've got something!" she exclaims. "A phone! It's a phone!"

But her excitement doesn't last long. The object from the drawer is about the same size and shape as an old flip phone, but it's not. It's a small, self-powered emergency radio, with a crank on the side. Turn the crank fast for a couple of minutes and the radio will play for a little while.

I take it from her and check it out. "This is really cool, Delphy. My dad had one of these. He used it for the weather reports, when we were hiking. So we'd get warnings of thunderstorms or flash floods. Like that. With the hand crank, you don't have to worry about batteries. Maybe we can find out where the fire is headed!"

Delphy isn't listening. She hobbles out to the porch, keeping her back turned. I know better than to say anything. Plenty of times I've wanted to cry myself, from frustration and fear and not knowing what happens next. Out here in the blazing heat, running from a fire, all you have to do is take a wrong turn, make a bad decision, and you turn into a crispy critter. No second chances once the flames catch up. I can't imagine a worse way to die, but I can't help thinking about it, even though I'm pretty sure we're way ahead of the fire. Anyhow, if Delphy wants to shed a few tears, I'm not going to say a word about it, no way.

I go to the opposite end of the porch and fiddle with the radio, turning the hand crank as fast as I can. After thirty cranks, I switch it on. Static. I rotate the dial. More static.

Behind me, Delphy goes, "Try pulling out the antenna."



Extending the antenna seems to help, but mostly the static is just louder. I give the thing a few more cranks, then fiddle with the dial again, and this time a faint but familiar voice weaves through the static. I turn slowly, aiming the antenna until the voice sharpens. The voice that did our wake-up call, followed by golden oldies. Phat Freddy Bell. Usually he's joking around, but not this time. This time he's dead serious.

**“... reporting that more than fifteen thousand acres of dry timberland have been engulfed by wind-driven flames in the last forty-eight hours. In some areas, a wall of flame has spread a mile in less than an hour, leaving nothing but smoldering ash behind. Firefighters are working hard, but they haven't been able to stop it. What started this fire is as yet undetermined. Could be a careless camper, or what they call 'dry lightning.' But whatever started it, officials fear this may be worse than the great fire of 1947 that burned from the mountains to the sea, destroying town after town. Unless we get some rain. Boy, do we need rain. So we're praying for rain! We're dancing for rain! That's right, your host Phat Freddy Bell is dancin' right now in the 'RPZ studio, making a fool of himself. Come on, come on! Let's all get up and dance! Old and young! Everybody! Dance until it rains!”**

The voice blends into music, wild rocking music about the land of a thousand dances, but it quickly fades to static.

Delphy tucks the radio into her backpack, then looks at me with worried eyes. “We're in bad trouble.”



# 15.

## The Fart Heard Round the World

**W**e're sitting on the screen porch in the dark, both of us groaning because our stomachs are so full. Cold beans and franks may not sound appetizing, but it is if you're starving. And the beans weren't really cold, not in this heat. Must be ninety degrees with the sun down. To top it off, we each ate a can of brown bread, and even without butter it was delicious.

Delphy, contented, says, "This is the fullest I've been since before Camp Fatness, and all those so-called healthy meals. It feels good not to be hungry."

"I don't know about the other campers, but you're not, you know, fat or anything. You're tall for a girl, that's all. Tall and big and strong. But definitely not, um, overweight."

"Ha. Tall and big and strong. Just what every girl wants to hear."

"I'm serious."

"Let's talk about something else." She leans back in her porch rocker and massages her sore ankle.



It's so dark the world outside the porch might as well be a pool of black ink. No stars, and the smell of smoke remains faint and distant, which means we don't have to worry about the fire. Not right this minute, anyhow.

Delphy clears her throat. "Know what I want more than anything? A hot shower to wash my hair. I smell like a dirt-ball and everything feels gross, like I've been dipped in grease, then rolled around in the dirt. Ugh!"

"No plumbing in this cabin, but tomorrow morning, first light, we can wash up in the pond."

"That would be cool. So what do *you* want more than anything?"

No need to think about it. "Call my mom."

Her expression softens. "What would you tell her?"

"That I'm okay and not to worry."

Delphy nods. "I wish it was true, that there's nothing to worry about. How far away are we from the fire?"

"Miles. I hope."

"That DJ on the radio said it was spreading a mile an hour. So every time we stop moving, it might be catching up. Right?"

I shake my head, because I know what she's about to ask. "No way. We can't drive at night. Not on that trail. We'd wreck the Jeep and then we'd be toast."

"No, no. Totally. I get it."

"Unless you think *you* can drive at night, on a trail we don't know."



"Hey, Sam? I can't drive at all, okay? No clue. I'm not, like, being critical or anything. I'm just worried." She sighs. "So if the fire does catch up, can't we just jump in the pond?"

I think about it. "Maybe. If that's our only option. It's risky. Our camp counselor told us it's better to find another way out, if possible. Even in a pond, if you're not far enough away from the burning shoreline, the smoke from a big fire might make it too hard to breathe. It depends on if we want to burn to death, or die from smoke inhalation."

"Great choice."

"Don't worry, Delphy. The fire can't catch us, not as long as we have the Jeep."

"Thanks, Sam. What do we do next?"

"Before the lumber camp burned, I had a plan. I was going to chop down some birch saplings and make a big 'HELP' sign that could be seen from the air."

She perks up. "That's a great idea. Except I haven't heard any search planes overhead, have you? Or helicopters?"

"No. But somebody has to be looking for us. Right?"

"Unless they think we're dead."

"There are a bunch of camps on Lake Wabanaski. Your camp and my camp, and the YMCA on the far side of the lake. Plus lots of summer cottages. What I mean is, the fire came up so fast we can't be the only ones missing."

"True. I'll help you make the sign if you think it might work."

"Awesome."



We sit there in the dark for a while, not saying anything. At first it feels awkward, and then I kind of relax into the silence. People don't have to talk every second. They can just be quiet together. Not perfectly quiet, though, because my stomach is rumbling, which is embarrassing. Not that Delphy says anything about it.

To cover up the rumble, I ask if she has any brothers or sisters.

She nods. "Angie and Calista. Five years younger. They're twins. Not identical, but they might as well be. They had their own language until they were like six years old. They still call me the BFG, or Geegee for short."

"BFG?"

"Big Friendly Giant." She laughs. "They love that book so much I guess I should be flattered. What about you?"

"It's just me and Mom." I leave it at that. "Did your parents make you go to camp? Is that why you wanted to run away?"

She jerks back, offended. "Who says I was running away? I got lost in the woods, that's all."

"Okay. Sorry."

Not something she wants to discuss, obviously.

"It was my dad's idea, to try a fitness camp," she continues. "Especially the volleyball program. He wants me to 'use my tall.' Turns out I like track better, but volleyball is okay."

"Use your tall?"





"Like embrace it. Dad is six foot five. He thinks it's cool, having a tall daughter. Says he wants me to have altitude instead of attitude."

"Sounds like a cool guy."

"My dad? He wouldn't know cool if it bit him on the butt."

That makes me chuckle. "You're pretty funny, you know that?"

"So now I'm big and tall and funny. That's just great."

I sigh. "I'm never going to beat you, am I?"

"Never, ever, ever. Accept that, little man."

"Hey!"

"Accept that, average-heighted-boy-for-his-age."

Even in the dark I can tell she's grinning. She likes it, us bouncing stuff off each other, making wisecracks. I never had a big sister, but maybe this is what it's like.

"I've got a plan," she says. "You know what my plan is? My plan is, tomorrow we get rescued."

"Great. That's my plan, too."

And then it happens. Without warning, or any way to stop it, I let one rip. I mean *really* rip. It sounds like an out-of-control whoopee cushion, venting loud and long. Like a not-so-distant artillery barrage. Like—oh, never mind, you know what it sounds like.

When at long last it's over, I gasp and say the first thing that comes to mind. "Beans."



That does it. Delphy goes bonkers, and then I'm laughing, too, and it's like contagious or something. We can't stop, we keep laughing and giggling until we're out of breath. And then Delphy snickers and shouts, "Beans!" and we start laughing all over again. Laughing until my stomach hurts so bad I have to jam my fist in my mouth to stop the giggles.

"Beans, beans, the musical fruit," she chants.

"Stop!" I beg her. "Don't."

"The more you eat, the more you toot!"

I never knew that you can laugh yourself to sleep, but you can, under the right circumstances.



## **Day Three**

# 16.

## The Sound of Engines

**I**n my dream an angry wasp is buzzing around my head, but for some reason my hands don't work, they're too heavy to lift, so I can't stop the wasp. What if it gets in my ear? What if it stings my brain?

That's what wakes me up, fear of a stung brain. I'm lying on the porch with a cushion for a pillow. There's some light in the sky, but not much. A little after dawn, is my guess. The air feels super hot and syrup thick. Gusts of wind rattle the trees.

I sit up, feeling sore from the hard porch floor, and look around. Delphy is slumped in the rocker, still sound asleep. I stand up carefully, not wanting to wake her, and search for the wasp buzzing against the screens. Because I didn't dream that part, there really is an insect noise.

No, wait, not an insect. A distant engine, like a chain saw, or maybe a dirt bike. It fades in and out with the wind, but there is more than one engine. Two at least.

My heart starts slamming. People! They're finally coming to rescue us, cutting a path through the woods.



I shake Delphy. She lurches awake, and not happily. "Hey, what are you doing? Leave me alone."

"Listen! Can you hear that?"

She grabs her stick and gets to her feet, wincing from the pain in her swollen ankle. I help her down from the porch and we make our way through the meadow, down toward the pond. Toward the sound of gunning engines.

As we get closer to the pond, we see flashes on the opposite shore. Not a light, but fast-moving shapes.

Then I notice what we missed last evening in the fading sunset. Part of a roof and chimney, visible through the trees swaying in the wind. There's a good-sized summer house on the opposite shore, and the shapes that are moving fast are a couple of dirt bikes zooming around the property. Above the noise of the revving engines, we can hear the riders whooping it up, shouting, "Away! Away!" or something like it. Hard to tell, exactly.

"We should yell back." Delphy drops her stick and waves her arms.

"Wait. Not yet."

I've got a bad feeling about the wild riders. Why are they circling the house and whooping it up? What are they celebrating? Are they having a party?

Delphy, ignoring my cautions, shouts, "Hey! Hey! Over here! Across the pond! Help! Help! Help!"

The bikes keep zooming around the house, vanishing



into the trees and then reappearing. Maybe they can't hear her above the scream of their engines.

What happens next makes my blood run cold. An orange light comes on inside the house, making a window glint. The light grows quickly, filling the house, getting brighter and brighter, and then it bursts through the roof as orange flames, leaping into the sky, lighting up the tall pine trees.

Fire, exploding from the house and spreading fast, driven by the wind.

"Delphy! We have to get out of here! They saw us for sure!"

She's staring at the fire, as if she can't believe it. Her hope of rescue going up in flames.

Across the pond, one of the dirt-bike riders comes to the edge of the water, looking directly at us. He raises his arm and points wildly. The other rider suddenly roars up beside him. Then they zoom off, vanishing into the woods ahead of the fire.

Do they know about the Jeep? Maybe spotted it from the logging trail as they zoomed around the pond to have their fun? No time to think about it. Concentrate on getting away from the fire.

The fire. The fire.

The fire grows like a thing alive, doubling every few seconds, getting hotter and brighter, until the whole pond glows



orange and red, like there's a fire inside the pond. A wave of intense heat scorches the air. Black smoke spreads across the pond like night fog, but way more deadly. Fog you can breathe, but not hot smoke.

The weird thing is, it's so beautiful you can't stop watching it.

"Delphy!"

She turns to me, blinking her eyes as if she's just woken up from a dream.

"We have to go! They might be trying to find us! They might have seen the Jeep!"

"They're the ones," she says. "They started the whole thing."

"Probably. Come on!"

She grabs hold of my shoulder and uses her stick for balance. We limp-run up the meadow, away from the pond, away from the fire. Delphy insists on retrieving her backpack, and I keep urging her to hurry.

We have to get to the Jeep before the dirt-bike riders find us.

I don't know how I know they're coming for us, but I do.



# 17.

## Burning the World

**B**y the time we get to the Jeep, the searing hot wind has thickened with smoke. Our eyes are watering from a crummy combination of sweat, smoke, and tears. I help Delphy into the passenger seat, toss her backpack into the rear seat, and then leap behind the wheel. Hoping with all my heart that the engine will start when I flip the lever and depress the starting pedal.

It turns over but doesn't catch. My heart sinks. And then I remember the secret to making it start is in my pocket.

"What's wrong?" Delphy asks.

No time to explain. I race to the front, lift the hood, and plug the wire into the distributor cap.

Back behind the wheel, I close my eyes and flip the starter switch.

*Vrrrrooom.* What a beautiful sound!

"Hang on!" I shout, and let out the clutch.

A moment later, we're barreling along the old logging trail with the hot wind at our backs. Which isn't good, because it means the wind is pushing the fire and smoke in our direction.





But going the other way would have taken us back into the fire, so this is our only option.

I'm gripping the wheel with all my might as we bounce along the ruts. Concentrating on keeping the vehicle on the trail and not veering off or colliding with a stump. The thing is, with my eyes watering, I'm not seeing all that good.

"Look behind!" I shout to Delphy. "Is it catching up?"

"I don't know! Maybe! The whole sky is on fire!"

I press down on the accelerator until the pedal hits the floor. We're flying, hitting twenty miles an hour according to the speed gauge. There's only one way to make it go faster, and that's to change gears. Which is something I haven't attempted at full speed, because until now second gear was fast enough.

"Hang on!"

I push in the clutch, push the gear lever down and to the right, and let the clutch out. Third gear!

Much faster. Too fast, the way we're being rattled around, so I let up slightly on the gas pedal. Thirty-five miles an hour. On a highway, that would be slow as a snail. On an uneven, unpaved logging road, it feels like a hundred miles an hour. And it's working. The smoke is thinning, and that means we're outrunning the fire. Which doesn't make my heart pound any less. We need to get far away. Miles and miles. Back at the pond, the fire moved like a sprinter, racing from a cottage roof to a full-blown wildfire in minutes. Everything so dry, just waiting to explode into flame. And those



dirt bikers racing around like gleeful devils, chanting, "Away! Away!" and burning the world.

Did I hear them wrong? Was that really what they were shouting? And why does it sound so familiar?

One thing I know for sure, the bikers spotted us from across the pond. Me and Delphy are witnesses to a crime. Does that mean they'll try to run us down? Shut us up?

Maybe the fire scares them more than we do. If it was me, I'd want to have the wind in my face, pushing the flames in the opposite direction. Fastest way to get clear and safe. And besides, we weren't close enough to see their faces, let alone identify them.

That's what I keep telling myself as we slam along the ruts, teeth rattling. If we get far away from the fire, we'll also be far away from the dirt bikers.

With the Jeep going this fast, Delphy has to yell to make herself heard. "I need to use the ladies' room!"

I slow down and put the gearshift in neutral and let us roll to a stop. No way am I going to shut off the engine, not when something might be catching up. Fire or bad guys or both.

Of course, there's no ladies' room, so Delphy takes a small roll of TP from her backpack, limps to a row of bushes, and disappears behind them. There's no smoke showing under the canopy of trees, just plain gray sky. And now that we're stopped, I notice the wind is no longer blowing in our direction. It's barely blowing at all, and seems to have shifted. All good.



I strain to listen for the chain-saw sound of dirt bikes, but can't hear anything.

Delphy comes limping back and heaves herself into the passenger seat. "Sorry."

"It's okay. The radio is in your backpack, right? Maybe we can get an update on the fire."

I crank the little radio as fast as possible. Then turn it on and slowly pan the antenna around until it catches the signal.

**"... Fire Service officials announced that the fight to contain the fire will concentrate resources and personnel on the southeastern edges of the conflagration. That's a big word for 'fire,' but it's fun to say. Con-flah-gray-shun! They explained that the northern areas are thinly populated, whereas in the south, six to a dozen towns and villages are under threat. So, Bigfoot, if you're out there, you better get runnin', because nobody is coming to help! Just kidding, rock 'n' rollers. I'm raising my mug of morning coffee in a toast to our brave firefighters, who are risking their lives to contain this awful blaze. Good luck! Be safe! This is Phat Freddy Bell, high atop the lowest official mountain in the great state of Maine ..."**

When the music comes back on, I switch it off.

"They're concentrating on the south," Delphy says, in a croaky kind of whisper. "We're in the north."

I nod.

"So we're on our own. Totally."



"Looks like it." I try to sound upbeat. "But we have been all along, and we're doing okay. We're still alive, right?"

Delphy sighs. "Any idea where we're going?"

"Mostly west." I point at the compass on the dashboard.

"What about the map?"

"I'm pretty sure we're off the map by now."

"What do we do?"

I shrug. "Keep driving until we bump into a real road. Or a fire crew. Or somebody."

"But not them!" Delphy shudders. "Not those creeps!"

"Not them," I agree.

"I can't believe I waved at those jerks."

"Doesn't matter now. We're making good progress."

I get the Jeep back up to third gear and keep going for what must be a solid hour. Chalking up the miles. Figuring maybe eighty more miles in the tank before we run out of gas.

Not sure how far away from the fire we've gotten, because the old logging road meanders around, looking for a level pathway through the deep woods. Deep and getting deeper. The spruces and pines are much taller here, towering into the gray sky, blocking sunlight. Kind of spooky, really, like if you turned your back, the giant trees might come alive. Of course, they *are* alive, but you know what I mean.

I'm thinking about how I'll describe all this to Mom, how I'll make it a really good story, when we come around a corner and everything changes.



Standing tall in the pathway is a great big moose. A big bull moose with antlers like radar scoops, and he's not about to move.

I jam on the brakes. We start to skid, turning sideways as I fight for control. The wheels hit the ruts the wrong way, and suddenly we're flying through the air.



# 18.

## It's a Girl Thing

**B**y rights we should be dead. In a forest full of sharp branches and big rocks, we're somehow flung into a thick patch of soft ferns. I land on my back, hard enough to knock the breath out of me. I turn over onto my hands and knees, gasping for air. Ten feet away, deep in the ferns, I see Delphy with her big eyes wide open, staring in amazed confusion.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Moose" is all I can manage to say.

"I mean to your Jeep! I thought it was going to land on top of us."

I crawl out of the ferns, onto the logging road, and can't believe my eyes. The Jeep is up on its side, undercarriage exposed, leaning against a tree, one tire still spinning. Delphy's right—if the tree hadn't been there to block it, the vehicle might have killed us both.

The moose is gone, vanished back into the woods.

Delphy limps over, puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I know that Jeep was like your friend or something."



I don't know what to say. If we don't have the Jeep, how are we going to escape the fire? How are we going to find our way back to civilization? It's not like firefighters are on their way to save us.

Delphy cautiously approaches the Jeep. "You think it's totaled?" she asks.

"I don't know." I feel helpless.

Glass from the shattered headlights and the smashed windshield is scattered across the ground. Other than that, the Jeep looks more or less in one piece, except it's leaning up against a tree.

Canned goods and water jugs have been thrown in the underbrush. I gather them up while I try to figure out what happens next.

Meanwhile, Delphy finds herself a new walking stick, and then snags her backpack from the leaning Jeep. She perches on an old stump and starts winding the charger on the radio, then aims the antenna around, honing in on the signal, which is stronger than it was the last time.

**"... your WRPZ host Phat Freddy Bell, high atop the lowest official mountain in the great state of Maine. Wish I had better news, but the fact is it's getting worse. In the early morning hours, wildfire erupted in the vicinity of remotely situated Piney Pond, and quickly engulfed hundreds of acres, cutting off power to this corner of the county. We're on backup generator now, with enough fuel for a few days. Heck, I'll siphon the gas out of my car, if it comes to that.**



I'm planning on sticking it out, and making these reports in the hope it will help. If there's anybody listening! Phone lines are down, too, so I can't be sure of that. But if you are listening, here's something you need to know.

"Satellite images indicate that the Piney Pond fire was probably arson. Hard to believe there's someone out there angry enough, or evil enough, or stupid enough, to deliberately start a fire in a tinder-dry forest. But what do I know? I'll tell you this much: It's getting personal. I can see fire and smoke from the studio window. Miles away but moving in this direction. And you know the weird thing? I never thought of a fire as being alive, but it sure looks like it's living and breathing, except it's breathing flames instead of air. Whew! Forecast says there's a chance of thunderstorms later in the day. Sure hope they're right, because, boy oh boy, do we need rain!"

The sound fades out, turning to static, and Delphy stares at the little radio. "I can't believe it. We were there, Sam! We were right there watching when those two creeps started the fire. Hundreds of acres. Out of control. And nobody knows who did it but us."

"We don't know who did it. Not really. Except they were guys on dirt bikes."

"Young guys with long faces and blond beards. Tattoos on their arms."

"Are you serious? All I saw was the bikes. You must have eyes like an eagle."





"You noticed the bikes, I noticed the boys." She smiles.  
"It's a girl thing."

I make a pile of the canned goods, sorting them for nourishment. There's only so many we can carry if we're on foot, and we'll have to make them count.

"What's the plan?" Delphy wants to know, limping over to inspect the cans.

"We have to keep moving. If those dirt bikers come this way, we're toast. Same for the fire."

"Do what you have to, but I'm not walking." She's defiant. "See this swollen ankle? The more I walk, the worse it gets. There's only one thing to do, one thing that makes sense."

"What's that?"

"Fix the stupid Jeep."

"How?"

Her grin gets bigger. "We do what the Greeks do."



# 19.

## Sort of Lost

“**M**y grandfather was born in Greece and came here as a kid,” Delphy explains. “He loves this country and everything, but he’s also super proud of being Greek. Thousands of years ago, Greeks invented a lot of important stuff that we still use today. Anyway, my *pappou* is a stonemason, and he talks a lot about this ancient Greek named Archimedes, who claimed he could move the world if he had a big enough lever. Because that’s what Pappou does—he moves big stones and rocks with levers and crowbars. He’s a little dude, my grandfather, shorter and smaller than me, but he can shift a two-thousand-pound stone easy peasy. Trust me, tipping this Jeep back on the level would be a piece of cake for him.”

“Too bad he’s not here.” I’m not sure where she’s going with this.

“Oh, he is.” Delphy taps her skull. “Right here. I’ve been helping Pappou since I was little. If I’m strong, that’s why.”

Despite what she said about her sore ankle, it doesn’t slow her down much. Next thing you know, she’s dragging me into the woods to find fallen branches we can use as levers. It blows



my mind that she's so confident that we can do it, rescue the poor Jeep. "The best thing, we've got the tree as the fulcrum. Some call it the pivot point. I can't do the math—Archimedes is the one who came up with the formula—but instinct tells me we need a lever at least ten feet long and strong enough so it won't break. But not so heavy we can't lift it!"

Sweaty and hot, we work our way through the underbrush. Most of the fallen branches we find are rotten and useless. Delphy says hardwoods would be the best, like oak. But this particular stretch of forest is mostly pine and spruce, so we're stuck with that.

As we search, I keep my eye on the logging road. Don't dare stray too far, or we're likely to get lost. And that makes me think about my dad, and how much he loved hiking, and being outdoors. Probably all those twelve-hour days in a truck cab made him crave fresh air. Anyhow, I'm sort of lost in my own thoughts as we kick our way through the underbrush. I'm not really paying attention when Delphy stops and looks up, squinting into the dense coverage overhead.

"Hear that?" She inhales sharply. "Is that what I think it is?"

It's a plane. Unmistakable. A prop plane. And getting closer.

"We need to find a clearing! They'll never see us through these trees!"

And then we're running, or trying to run, because it's hard in the underbrush with so many things underfoot. The miserable heat makes it even harder. Delphy's swinging along



with her walking stick tucked under her arm like a crutch. "Come on, come on! Find us! Please, please, please!"

I've got no choice but to follow, and anyhow she's right: To be seen from the air, we have to find a clearing in the forest. I want to get rescued as bad as she does. So we're running deeper into the woods, following the tantalizing drone of the plane. Hoping to find an opening in the forest canopy. Hoping to be seen. Hoping to be rescued.

Hoping, hoping, hoping.

"Got to see us! Got to see us! Got to see us!" Delphy chants to herself as she limp-runs.

It's all I can do to keep up. I don't know about her, but I'm in full panic mode. Heart revving like a race-car engine, head pounding with excitement, sweat pouring into my eyes. A plane! A chance to be rescued! Hot showers and hot meals! A phone call to Mom! Better yet, I'll just show up, make sure she's okay. What a surprise that will be—she probably thinks I'm dead. By now they'll have told her what happened at camp. The wildfire evacuation and me missing the bus. Maybe she checked herself out of rehab to join the search! Assuming there *is* a search. Can't blame them for thinking I probably got killed in the fire.

Whatever, I need to let Mom know I'm alive. Because I can't imagine what she'll do if she thinks both me and Dad are gone forever. Go back on the pills, or worse. And worse I can't bear thinking about, even though I do think about it all the time, of course I do.



More than anything I want a happy ending.

I mean, life was so tough and miserable that first year after Dad died, and Mom tried so hard to keep us going, just me and her. Us against the world. One for all and all for one. We deserve a happy ending, just this once.

Please, please, please.

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We never do find a clearing. Not that we ever see the plane, the canopy is so thick. But the sound of the prop engines gets fainter and fainter, and then they disappear. Silence, except for Delphy leaning against a tree, sobbing in frustration.

"This is *so* unfair."

"Yeah, it is. It really is."

Delphy rubs her eyes and looks around. "Where's the Jeep?" she wants to know. "What direction?"

"We weren't exactly running in a straight line," I tell her cautiously, not wanting to upset her more than she's already upset.

"What are you saying?"

I take a deep breath. "We're sort of, um, ah . . ."

"Um ah' what?" she demands.

"Lost," I say, with a great sinking feeling. "We're lost in the woods."



# 20.

## Totally Boogered

**T**he most important thing when you're lost is not to panic. Running around like a chicken with your head cut off will only make matters worse. Once you realize you're lost, you have to stop and make a plan.

Making a plan and sticking to it kept me alive that first day when I missed the bus, and it can help now.

First thing, try and determine which way is north. If the sun is low in the sky and you know it's afternoon, then put the sun on your left-hand side and you'll be facing north. If the sky is overcast or dark, or you just can't tell where the sun is, check the moss on the trees. Chances are most of the moss will be concentrated on the north side of the tree trunk.

"How do you know all this?" Delphy sounds amazed. "Are you a Boy Scout?"

"My dad. He loved to hike and camp and stuff."

"That's great, but how does knowing which way is north help if we don't know where we are?"

"It's a place to start. First we establish north, then we walk east or west, blazing a trail."



Delphy looks at me with something like astonishment. "Blazing a trail. Whatever that is."

"It's a way to keep us going. Making sure we don't circle back on ourselves. In the deep woods, you think you're walking a straight line, but chances are you're going around in a circle. Dad explained it to me. Your dominant foot strides slightly longer, okay? Makes you veer to the right or left. One way to be sure you're going straight is to leave marks as you go, like a cut in the tree bark. If you circle back, you'll know. That's what trailblazing is—the blaze is the mark on the tree."

Delphy nods thoughtfully. "I guess that makes sense. Um, speaking of circles, did you notice the plane wasn't circling?"

My heart sinks. "It wasn't, was it? It sort of just kept going."

"If it was a search plane, it would have been circling, right?"

"I guess."

"So it just happened to pass overhead. Heading for the fire, maybe. Not looking for us." Delphy sounds discouraged. "We have to find your Jeep, or we're totally boogered."

"Totally boogered," I echo.

"Do you think they'll find our burned-up bodies, or will we melt into the ash?"

"Hey! We're not going to burn up, that's a promise."

She makes a face. "You don't know that."

"I can't explain it, but I'm a thousand percent sure we're going to be okay."



She snorts. "Based on what?"

"Based on the fact we're not going to give up."

"Who said I was going to give up?" She's indignant. "I'm just mad about getting us lost. I'm not giving up, you got that straight?"

"You didn't get us lost. We both got us lost."

"Whatever. So, you figured out which way is north?"

I nod and point.

She adjusts her walking stick, tucking it firmly under her arm. "Then we better start—what did you call it?—blazing a trail. The sunlight is already fading, and I have no intention—none whatsoever—of spending a night in the woods. I don't care if my ankle swells up to the size of a basketball, we're not stopping till we find the Jeep."

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In the old days, they left the blaze mark on the trees with an ax or a hatchet. We don't have an ax or a hatchet, and trying to carve a mark with the jackknife would take too long. Another way is to mark each tree with a strip of cloth, and that gives me an idea.

"Delphy, what happened to your backpack?"

"Left it by that tree stump near the Jeep. Why?"

Discouraged, I explain about using strips of cloth for markers.

She gets a funny look in her eye. "Maybe I can help with that."





Turns out she's wearing a swimsuit under her clothes, from that first night she spent in the woods. Whoever was supposed to meet her, they had planned on swimming in the moonlight. "I didn't want him to think I'd go skinny-dipping, so I wore a one-piece." She sounds ticked off, so I keep my trap shut. "Stay where you are, Sam. Be right back."

She emerges from behind a thick patch of tall ferns with a lifeguard-red swimsuit over her arm.

I cut it into strips with my jackknife. It takes a while. Delphy looks on with a sour expression. I don't think ruining the swimsuit is what bothers her. More like being reminded that her friend never showed up. Whatever, she takes a handful of the bright red strips and helps me mark the trees as we hike through the dense woods. It's hot, miserable work.

My gut tells me the logging trail is to the east, and I'm pretty sure that's the way we're heading. We tramp maybe a mile through the dimming forest, dry pine needles crunching under our feet, making sure we're never out of sight of the last tree marked. Trying to keep in as straight a line as possible.

Nothing. No logging trail, just more trees. So much for my stupid gut.

"It's going to be dark in a few minutes." Delphy's voice is full of dread.

"Double darn rat puke."

She laughs. "Is that the best you can do?"

"I pledged not to swear."



"You really are a Boy Scout," she says with something like affection. "Good for you, and lucky for me. Okay, so what do we do next?"

It's not like we have a lot of choices. Before the last of the light fails, we pick out a nice big tree and sit with our backs against the trunk. The ground is uncomfortable and the tree is rough against our shoulders. The only good thing, there's no danger of getting a chill. Plus, being with another person somehow makes me less afraid of bears.

Not that I mention the word "bear," because there's no reason to give Delphy something else to worry about.

"I wonder how much blood you lose in each mosquito bite?" she asks. "I must be down a pint by now."

"Mosquitoes suck, they really do."

"Ha ha."

"It could be worse."

"Oh really? How?"

"We could be alone."

"We *are* alone, dummy."

"No. I mean alone alone. Then you'd get bitten twice as much."

She chuckles. "You're funny. Do you think you can sleep, leaning against this tree?"

"No way."

"Me neither."

We sit in silence for a while, leaning against the hard bark of the tree. Me personally, I'm wishing for a nice cool pillow.



That and wondering what Mom is doing at this very instant. Hoping she's not alone. She had friends before the pills got in the way. But true friends would keep her company in an emergency, wouldn't they?

I'm not sure, and that makes me sad and worried.

Delphy breaks the silence. "Can I ask you a question, Sam? It's like really personal."

"Okay."

"What happened to your father? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

I shrug. "He's dead."

"I figured that. But how did he die?"

So I tell her.



# 21.

## Secrets Sad but True

No need to gross Delphy out with the gruesome details, so I give her the general idea. That Dad was a civilian truck driver in Afghanistan, making really good money, and there was an accident and he didn't survive. I don't mention what kind of tanker he was driving, or exactly how he was killed, because I can barely stand to think of it myself, even though it's always there in the back of my head.

It's kind of amazing I can talk about my dead father without freaking out, but after three years, it's my reality. A terrible thing happened, and no matter how much you ache to have him back, it can't be changed. That first year was the worst, with some days worse than others, like his birthday and every holiday and Sunday nights and especially Christmas. Me and Mom went to grief counseling, and that helped a little, but it never goes away. You just have to live with it, and one thing I know for sure, Dad wouldn't want us to be sad forever, not all the time. No way. He loved us way too much.

After I finish, Delphy doesn't say anything for a long time, and then she goes, "Hey, Sam? I got lucky when you



drove by. You saved my life, so thanks. And I'm sorry for thinking you were some little dork showing off with a stolen Jeep. You're an amazing person and your father would be so proud."

"Huh! I don't know about that. My dad thought letting yourself get lost in the woods was really lame."

"That was an accident," she says earnestly. "An accident, okay? We got excited by the plane. It would have happened to anybody."

"We'll find the trail, Delphy, as soon as the sun comes up. How's your ankle?"

"Fine. Sort of. It only hurts when I put weight on it."

We sit quietly together, propped up against the scratchy tree. Not talking about the fire, or how it might catch up, but it's always there in the back of my mind. It's full dark now—I can barely make out my hand in front of my face—and night noises are starting. A brittle creaking from the tall trees as they react to the warm wind. A fluttering of wings—birds taking shelter in the pine and spruce branches, or so I hope. Something light and furtive padding over the pine needles. What lives in these woods?

Best not to think about it. Best to cover the mysterious noises with the sound of our voices. Maybe that will scare the critters away.

I say, "Can I ask *you* a personal question? What were you really doing out in the woods in the first place, if you were going swimming?"



"That was dumb, huh? Can you keep a secret?"

"I swear."

"Okay." She sighs. "I was supposed to meet this guy, Jason Dean? He's a counselor at your camp. We've been texting. Just plain texting, nothing bad. We never met in person, and my two weeks were almost over, so finally he texted for us to meet up on this trail behind my camp, after lights-out, and we'd go to a good spot he knew on the lake."

"And he never showed?"

She laughs, but not a funny laugh. An angry, hurt kind of laugh. "What was I thinking? That a super-cute guy like Jason would actually want to meet me? In his first text, he said he had his eye on me. As if. What a joke. And there I was with a swimsuit and a beach towel. Pathetic."

"I'm sorry."

"The really stupid thing? I waited until after midnight, because he kept texting he'd be there any minute. That went on for hours! I bet they were laughing themselves sick, him and his friends. Pranking this pathetic loser girl."

"You're not a loser."

She says, scornfully, "No? Big and tall might be okay for some girls, but me? You think I don't know what I look like? Big Friendly Giant, ho ho ho!"

"Delphy, stop." There's nothing worse than when someone's hurting and you can't do anything about it.

She takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not crying because of Jason Dean. I'm crying



because mosquitoes are eating me alive and I'm thirsty and hot and hungry and tired and wish I was anywhere but here." She pauses. "No offense."

"None taken."

"Are there bears in these woods? Tell the truth."

"Not in this part of the forest," I lie.

Bears aren't the only lie. Because I know for a fact there's no counselor named Jason Dean at Camp Wabanaski. Whatever rotten person pranked Delphy, he was too cowardly to use his own name.

