

## **Day Four**

## 22.

### Not Bad for Wonder Woman

I wake up coughing. Smoke in the air. I leap to my feet and stare at the early morning sky above the swaying treetops. That familiar ash-gray tint means there's a fire burning somewhere nearby, too close for comfort.

"Delphy! Wake up!"

Her face is so puffy and swollen by bug bites I almost don't recognize her. From her reaction, I must look the same, or worse.

"Fire coming! We have to find the logging trail fast!"

Delphy pushes herself upright, props the walking stick under her arm. "Let's go. What direction?"

"East didn't work. Let's try south."

Deciding which way is south takes longer than I expect, with my head still full of sleep and bad dreams, but finally we set off. As usual, I have trouble keeping up with Delphy, who only has one good leg. Girl could circle the world and I'd still be tying my shoes. We don't bother to blaze the trees, there's no time for that. We just have to try our best to move in a straight line.



We keep the wind behind us, and that helps. My heart is racing and my brain is all jumbled, but there's one thing I know for sure: If we don't find the logging trail and the Jeep, we're in big, big trouble. I've seen how fast wind-driven wild-fires can move, eating up the landscape, turning everything into flame.

We can't see the fire, but I know it's there, somewhere behind us. Might still be a few miles away. Maybe we have time to get ahead of it. But not without the Jeep. Fast as we're going, we can't outrun fire. We need wheels, and speed, not to mention luck.

I'm glancing behind us, checking on how straight we're going, when Delphy cries out. "Sam! Over there!"

At first I think she means the fire, and I almost don't dare to look where she's pointing. Not straight ahead, but off to the side. A gap in the trees, brightened by daylight.

We race to the daylight and find ourselves on the old rutted logging trail! "Oh, Delphy, you did it! You found it!" I throw my arms around her. "You did it!"

She shoves me away with a grimace of pain. "You're standing on my foot."

"Sorry."

"Which way, Sam?" she asks. "Two choices!"

The urgency in her voice hits me like a slap of cold water. She's right. Finding the logging trail is great, it's amazing, but we still have to locate the Jeep.

Two choices, right or left.



I nod at her. "You pick."

Immediately she swings her bad foot to the right and starts loping along. I have to jog to keep up. "This looks familiar," I say, panting. "See? That's our tire track. Has to be! Which means we came this way, and the Jeep must be somewhere ahead."

"Hurry!" She picks up the pace.

Is it my imagination or has the smoke thickened? Is the fire getting closer? Is the air harder to breathe, or do my lungs hurt because I'm jogging in this awful, endless heat?

Freaking out doesn't help, I tell myself. Concentrate on the task at hand. *Find the Jeep*. Then you can worry about levering it off the tree, and getting away from the fire, and whatever else happens next.

Taking things one at a time makes sense, and it sounds easy, but my mind is swirling with a thousand thoughts and concerns. Escaping the fire, sure, but worrying about Mom is right up there. At best she knows I'm missing; at worst she thinks I'm dead. Is she sticking with the program, or has worrying about me set her back on the wrong path? How long has it been since the fire started? It feels like a week, but it can't be that long. Night at the logging camp is one. Cottage by the pond is two. Night lost in the woods is three.

Three nights, four days. How long before the fire burns itself out, or gets contained by firefighters? A week? It can't be as long as a month, can it? Because we'll never make it that





long. We'll run out of food and water. We'll run out of gasoline, and out of luck.

Stop thinking about stuff you can't control! Concentrate on the task at hand, which is keeping up with Delphy. Who lopes furiously along, crutch-stick pounding into the dirt, her face a puffy mask of determination.

Ignore the smoky taste in your mouth and the ache in your lungs, and follow that girl.

Ahead of us the logging trail takes a curve to avoid a huge, lichen-covered rock. Which rings a bell in my exhausted brain. I remember seeing that big rock out of the corner of my eye just before the moose appeared. Sure enough, there it is—the Jeep! It's still leaning up against the tree, exactly as we left it when we started chasing after the plane.

Delphy limps up and whacks the vehicle with her walking stick. "Yes!" She turns to me with an expression of triumph. "Not bad for a girl with a limp, eh?"

We slap five. "Are you kidding? Not bad for Wonder Woman!"



# 23.

## Hot Snowflakes

“**W**hat’s that?” Delphy wants to know, looking up at a patch of sky.

We’re searching along the logging trail for a branch that’s strong enough to pry the Jeep off the tree. Making sure we don’t stray out of sight of the trail—one night lost in the woods is more than enough, thank you—when Delphy notices something in the air.

It looks like gray snowflakes.

“Ash.” I hold out my hand to catch a few flakes. “Still warm. Blowing ahead of the fire, I guess.”

“We don’t have much time, do we?”

“I don’t know. Honest. Phat Freddy said it was moving a mile an hour. But that was yesterday. With this wind, who knows?”

Delphy sweeps hurriedly through the underbrush, using her stick to push aside old leaves and pine needles. “This will do,” she announces, lifting one end of a sturdy spruce branch.

I grab the other end and we drag it back to the Jeep.



Delphy studies the vehicle and the tree it's leaning against, and announces that we need to get "high purchase."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Best place to put the lever. Up high, just under where it meets the tree. Come around to this side and help me."

The branch is about six inches around and maybe ten feet long and too heavy for one person to handle. With both of us sweating and grunting like weight lifters, we manage to jam the end in place.

"Hold the weight on your shoulder, like this," she tells me.

Harder for me because I'm shorter, but I manage to do it. And then we're pushing against the branch with all our might. Our backs are to the Jeep, so I can't see what's happening, but our big lever must be working, because I can feel the weight shifting. Then, suddenly, we're falling forward, scrambling to avoid having the big branch fall on us, and there's a whomping sound of steel and springs hitting the ground, hard.

The Jeep has landed upright, in a cloud of dust and pine needles. I walk around it, surveying the damage. The windshield is smashed, the headlights shattered, but all four tires are holding air.

We hurriedly grab the canned goods and jugs of water, and load them into the back of the Jeep, along with Delphy's backpack. The smoke makes my eyes sting.

"You think it will start?" she asks.

"Only one way to find out." I carefully climb into the



driver's seat and test the steering wheel. Feels solid. I push in the clutch, and then press my other foot against the starter pedal.

The engine turns over but doesn't start, and the battery sounds weak. I get out from behind the wheel.

"That's it? You're giving up?"

"I think it needs fuel. Like maybe the gas leaked out of the carburetor when it was tipped on its side."

Delphy helps me get the hood open. I'm trying not to panic with all the sweat and smoke. "Sam! Hurry up!"

I'm no mechanic, but I remember Dad working on his pickup truck, an older model, and adjusting the carburetor. Him explaining how it squirts gas into a mist that's inhaled by the cylinders. Or something like that. All I really know is that an engine needs fuel. "Delphy, pump the gas pedal." I put my ear to the carburetor, and hear the sound of squirting gas.

"Okay," I say, lowering the hood. "Give it a few minutes to make sure it isn't flooded and I'll try it again."

"Sam? We may not have a few minutes. Ouch!"

The falling ash now contains live sparks. I look up, and sure enough, some of the highest spruce branches are starting to wink into flame.

I slip behind the wheel, and give it a go. The starter turns over once, twice—and then the engine roars to life, and the next thing, we're speeding down that old logging trail under a shower of ash and sparks, me and Delphy and the Jeep, which seems to be as alive as we are.



## 24.

### The Last Branch

**T**wo or three miles down the trail and we're out from under the falling sparks, mostly. I say mostly, because much to my surprise, Delphy pours water on my head and then explains that my hair was starting to catch fire.

"You looked like a human candle," she says, very pleased with herself.

"It's not funny."

"It's kind of funny. A teeny little bit," she says, chuckling. "You can smile now, Sam. We made it. We escaped!"

I start to say, "Yeah, for now," but then decide to keep my mouth shut. Maybe she has the right idea—be happy when you get the chance, and never mind what may be coming around the next bend in the trail. But I can't help worrying about that. Look what one moose did to us! We'd probably have found a real road by now, if not for that moose. Add to that the mistake of chasing a plane that couldn't possibly see us through the tree cover, even if it was searching for us, which it obviously wasn't.



So far we've been lucky, keeping ahead of the fire. But sooner or later our luck will run out. We'll make a wrong turn, or make a bad decision, or the dirt bikers will catch up. One way or another we'll find ourselves surrounded by flames, and that will be it.

Sorry, Mom. I tried, I really did.

I'm haunted by the fact that we don't know where we are, other than somewhere to the north and west of where we started. We don't even know exactly where the fire is, or where it's going next. You'd have to be in a helicopter to see the shape of the fire. Visibility at ground level isn't much better than a hundred yards in the deep forest, and in some of the most overgrown areas, much less.

I push in the clutch and shift to neutral. We slow to a stop. Delphy looks anxious. "What's up?" she wants to know.

"Let's try the radio again. Maybe Phat Freddy has some good news."

Delphy nods, removes the little radio from her backpack, pulls out the antenna, and starts cranking. She presses the on button.

Static.

"Where on the dial?" she asks.

"Ninety-eight point six."

She tries fine-tuning, aiming the antenna around, but all we get is static.

"Maybe we're out of range," I say, trying not to sound



disappointed. "Or maybe he got rescued, or the generator ran out of fuel, or broke down."

"Maybe," she says doubtfully.

"I always thought it was funny, the way he talks about broadcasting from the 'lowest official mountain,' but even from the lowest mountain, he can probably see the fire coming from a long way off. He'll have time to get out of there."

"I hope so. The last time we tuned in, he sounded scared."

Thinking about height and visibility gives me an idea. I put the Jeep in first gear and let out the clutch. We trundle along at about ten miles an hour. I ask Delphy to keep an eye out for a tall straight tree with climbable branches.

"Are you crazy?" is her first response, and then she goes, "Oh, I get it. Maybe you can see where the fire is."

"Maybe. And I might even be able to spot a road if I get high enough."

"You have to promise you won't fall."

"I won't fall. I'm a good tree climber," I say. Which is only partly a fib. It's true I once climbed almost to the top of a tree outside our house. But it was a one-way trip—I was too scared to come down. Dad had to rescue me with a rickety extension ladder. Said I was worse than a cat, and if I tried it again, don't forget to bring a parachute.

Later, overhearing what he said to Mom, I realized he was as freaked as me. Dad was fearless about most things, and



even though he never let me know it, he was scared to death I might fall before he got to me.

Finding the right sort of tree turns out to be harder than I thought. Delphy spots some really tall pines—white pines are the official state tree—but most of them don't have branches low enough to grab. It's not like we have climbing gear, or even ropes. So it has to be a tree where I can climb branch to branch, and high enough to get a clear view over the top of the forest.

After fifteen minutes or so of searching, Delphy points into the woods. "Slow down. How about that one?"

"Branches are too high."

"Yeah, but see that tree growing next to it? Leaning on it, actually?"

I stop and turn off the engine. "Might work. Let's check it out."

The closer we get, the better it looks. The big tree rises straight up through the forest, and has lots of sturdy-looking branches starting at about thirty feet off the ground. And leaning up against it, like a boxer that lost a fight, is an old, twisted tree with branches that are barely over my head.

"You sure you want to do this?" Delphy peers up into the mass of branches. "It looks pretty sketchy."

"No problem. If I get stuck, just call the fire department."

"Ha ha. Seriously, though, it looks dangerous."

"I'll be fine." I grab hold of the lowest branch.





Delphy gives me a boost and I swing over on top of the branch and then scoot along on my stomach, arms wrapped around until I get to the main trunk. Then I stand up and start climbing branch to branch. Always holding on with both hands.

The old tree is so close to the big pine that switching over to the taller tree is easier than I thought. They say if you're scared of heights, you should never look down. Not a problem in this case, because the branches are so full that all I can see below me is boughs thick with pine needles. They look almost soft, like if I fell, the boughs would catch me. And maybe they would. Not that I want to find out. No, I'm being as careful as possible, my hands sticky with pinesap from holding on so tight.

Every so often, Delphy shouts from below to ask if I'm okay, and I shout back. Her voice sounds farther and farther away, and still I can't see through the surrounding trees. Pausing to look up, I decide a few more branches in height will put me in the clear, or as clear as it's going to get unless I go all the way to the top, which is impossible. Too skinny up there, too waving-in-the-wind. Just two more branches, that's all I need to see my way clear.

The last branch is the one that almost kills me.



## 25.

### Home, Sweet Home

**I**t happened so fast I can't hardly put it together in my head. I'd gone as high as I was going to go. Then I tried to stand up, and my sweaty hands lost their grip. Next thing I'm on my belly, gripping the branch for dear life and struggling to catch my breath because the wind has been knocked out of me.

Close call. Way too close.

I wrap my arms and legs around the branch and close my eyes and tell myself to be calm. A bad thing almost happened, but it didn't. Slowly the air comes back into my lungs, and my heart slows down to something like normal. Sweat drips from the end of my nose, splashing on the pine needles one branch below.

On the ground, at the base of the tree, Delphy shouts, "Sam! Are you okay? The whole tree shook! Sam! Sam!"

Takes a while to gather enough strength to reply. "I'm okay! Just slipped is all!"

Delphy isn't visible—too many branches in the way—but I can picture her expression as she shouts up, "You better not



fall, Sam! If you fall, I'll kill you, understand? Promise me you won't fall!"

"I promise!"

"Come down! Please?"

Probably I'd be as worried if she was up the tree and I was on the ground. But there's no way I'm coming back down until I've seen whatever there is to see. So I gather my strength, and tell myself it will be okay as long as I'm super careful, and then very slowly I stand up, gripping the pine boughs to keep my balance.

Imagine your head is a periscope rising just above the treetops. One moment you're blind, and then you can see for miles.

And, oh, what a sight!

I can't wait to tell Delphy.

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I won't bore you with the climb down, other than to say it was about twice as hard as going up. Yes, I did slip a time or three, but never quite lost my grip, so that's all that counts.

At the bottom, Delphy drops her stick and wraps both arms around me for a quick hug. "You made it. What if you got stuck? It's not like I can call for a rescue."

"I didn't get stuck. But-I did see the fire."

"Close?"

"Not close at all. At least ten miles away, just barely visible along the horizon. Some of the smoke is blowing this



direction, but the wind is settling down, so it's not spreading fast. Best thing, there's a lake or pond a few miles from here. I saw buildings, Delphy, a bunch of buildings! A big shingled main building and lots of little white cabins. I'm pretty sure it's a summer camp!"

"Are you serious?" Her eyes are as big as Christmas morning.

"Which means there has to be a real road nearby, right? To supply the camp? It's not like parents are going to hike through the woods to see their kids."

"This is so cool." The words catch in her throat. "You said it's not far away?"

"Maybe four or five miles as the crow flies. Too far to risk getting lost again in the woods. We'll have to follow the logging trail and hope it meets up with the real road. We might not make it before the sun goes down, but I'm a thousand percent sure this will be our last night without a roof over our heads."

"A thousand percent?"

"More like a million percent. We're almost there, Delphy, I promise."

"You think the camp will have hot showers? And real food and phones?" she asks, and then adds, "Are there people there? Did you see cars?"

Eager to get going, I head for the Jeep. As usual, Delphy matches me stride for stride, loping along with a big smile on her face and her dark eyes shining. I've never seen her so



happy. It makes her look sort of beautiful, in a dirt-smudged, spent-the-night-leaning-against-a-tree, coated-with-smoke kind of way.

“No, I didn’t see cars or people. They probably evacuated. But if it happened like at Camp Wabanaski, a lot of the food and water and maybe even fuel got left behind. The important thing, there has to be a road to get to the camp. A real road that leads to a bigger road that gets us to the highway. Phone chargers and hamburgers! Civilization!”

“Home, sweet home.” Delphy sits up straight, shoulders back, ready for anything. “I never knew what that meant, not really, but now I do.”

We drive down the logging trail. Our luck has turned and I’m feeling good about it.

What an idiot.



# 26.

## The Tree House

As we lurch slowly along, avoiding potholes and tire-busting rocks in the fading light, Delphy has this fierce look on her face, like she wants to hold back the sunset. Like if she concentrates really hard, the sun will stay up long enough for us to find the summer camp.

I feel rotten about it, but there's no way we're going to get there before the sun goes down. And we can't drive a rutted trail like this in the dark, especially with smashed headlights. No way.

When I suggest that we may have to pull over and wait until morning, she takes offense.

"Are you serious? Sleep in this smelly little Jeep? In case you haven't noticed, I'm a big girl. Tall and big, remember? I barely fit in this seat as it is, and there's no room to stretch out my legs."

"Don't be mad." I slow the Jeep to a crawl.

"Who says I'm mad? Really, that's what you think?" She takes a deep breath. "Okay, maybe a little bit mad. It's just my



ankle hurts wicked bad, and I really, really, really need a hot shower."

"Soon," I promise. "Soon."

"One thing's for sure, I'm not sleeping sitting up. Not again. Not when there's a tree house available."

She must be joking, right? But then she points, and for the first time I notice an enclosed platform built between two trees not far from the trail. Not a tree house. A deer stand.

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The stand is nothing fancy, just a plywood platform, maybe ten feet off the ground, with four canvas walls daubed for camouflage, which makes it hard to see. Hunters use it to spot deer. Part of an old aluminum extension ladder is tied to the platform with a piece of rope. Delphy goes first, and I hand up her backpack and then scramble into the thing. The floor is creaky and covered with old pine needles, but she's right: It's better than sleeping up against a tree, or in the Jeep.

"We should pull the ladder up."

"Why bother?" she says.

"Bears."

She makes a face. "You said not to worry about bears."

"I lied."

We pull up the ladder and tie it sideways to the edge of the platform.

"Bears or no bears, this is sort of fun." She stretches out her long legs. "Like playing fort in the backyard."



"You played fort?"

"Sure. Me and the twins. They'd pretend they'd captured the Big Friendly Giant. The best part was when I escaped and knocked down the fort. Stomped it like Godzilla, which is way more fun than being the BFG. Then we'd put it back together and do the same thing all over again. Kids!"

"Yeah, kids."

I'm relieved her mood has improved. Plus, we have cans of tuna and a full jug of water. May not sound like much, but when you're famished and thirsty, it goes down like Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings. Or that's what we tell ourselves.

"Tur-keee. Mash potatoes and gray-vee . . . mmm, mmm, mmm." I'm doing my best Homer Simpson impersonation.

Delphy laughs. It's full dark, with no stars visible through the dense canopy of trees, so I can't see her face. But I know her mood has changed by the tone of her voice. "You know what's weird? They probably think we're dead. My parents and your mother. My little sisters. All our friends. They're planning our funerals. Feeling sorry for all the mean things they said to us." She pauses. "I don't mean you. I'm talking about my so-called friends."

"Everybody says rotten things sometimes. It doesn't mean they're not friends. But you're right, my mom probably thinks the worst."

She chuckles. "That's so you, Sam. You're the one in bad trouble, but you're more worried about your mother."





I almost tell her, but then decide to hold it back. I don't want her feeling sorry for me, the pathetic kid with the dead father and the drug-addict mom. Because it's not like that. I can't explain why, exactly, but it's not.

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No idea how long it took to fall asleep, but when the first explosion hits, lighting up the forest, I'm curled up in some scratchy old pine needles, and Delphy is screaming my name.



## **Day Five**

# 27.

## Snake Lightning

The heat storm is so close there's no delay between the flashes and the booming thunder. It's like we're inside the lightning. The flashes turn the canvas walls transparent, cracking brighter and brighter, and I expect that any second a sizzling bolt will hit us directly and the deer stand will explode.

I want to tell Delphy not to be afraid, but I'm too scared to talk. She grabs my hand and squeezes so hard I think she's going to break it. The trees are shivering all around us, as if they're as terrified as we are.

There's no wind or rain, just hot, humid air alive with electricity. Mighty bolts crack open the early morning sky, thumping the earth like hammer blows.

A bolt strikes close by, with a cracking boom that could be the world splitting open. So loud my ears hurt. A tree groans and splinters and falls, crashing into more trees on the way down. We see the hot glowing sparks of it burning from the inside.



We've been running away from the fire, putting miles between it and us, but now it has found us.

The deer stand begins to shake and rumble as more falling trees brush by.

Delphy shouts, "We better get out of here!"

I'm about to slide the aluminum ladder to the ground when the hair lifts on my head. My scalp tingles in a strange way, and I drop the ladder just as everything goes sun-blaze white. A bolt snakes down the tree right next to us and explodes into the ground with the sound of a million M-80s going off at exactly the same moment. The tree roots begin to glow and smolder like fiery finger bones.

If I'd been holding the ladder, the lightning might have gone through me on the way to the ground.

Delphy is standing up, shaking her fist at the sky and screaming, "STOP! STOP!"

I try to pull her down, but she's stronger than me, and more angry at the thing that scares her.

"On the floor!" I beg her. "That's the safest place! Keep a low profile."

I'm not sure if it really is the safest place, but raising a fist to a lightning bolt has got to be more dangerous than lying flat on your face with your hands protecting your ears.

*Let it stop, please make it go away.*

And after what feels like an eternity, it does go away, rumbling off into the distance. Heading for the fire line, as if it wants to join in the fun of burning down the forest.



Delphy, face to the floor, says, "Is it safe? Are we alive?"

"Yeah, we made it. But there's one little problem. The ladder fell to the ground. I, um, dropped it."

She slowly shakes her head, as if to say, *What next?*

I lean out the opening, into a whiff of smoke from the smoldering roots. Ground is maybe ten feet below. If I were to jump, there's a chance I'd sprain or break both ankles. Instead, I get down on my belly and carefully lower myself from the platform until I'm hanging on by my clenched hands. So, according to my semi-panicked calculations, the ground is five feet or less beneath my dangling feet.

I let go, landing feetfirst in the layer of pine needles, and then tumble over backward. It hurts, but nothing is broken. I limp over to the ladder and lean it up against the opening. Delphy peers down at me. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"No choice!" I say, feeling good about my decision.

I hold the ladder as she descends. I can tell her ankle hurts as she puts weight on it, but she doesn't complain. She fusses around until she finds her walking stick and looks back up at the tree stand.

"Sam? We need to get out of here. Like right now!"

I look up. The canvas walls of the deer stand have caught fire. Our refuge is going up in flames! The fire is already spreading. Not fast, not yet. But it will grow and feed on itself, tree by root by tree, and within an hour or two it will become a new, full-scale wildfire.



We're hurrying to the Jeep when Delphy says, "What's that smell?"

"Probably me."

"Not a boy smell," she says, puzzled. "More like a zoo." Her dark, shining eyes get big and round. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh, what?" I say, but then I see it, rising up in the back seat.

A black bear, looking at me like he's starving and I'm breakfast.



# 28.

## The Only Way to Stay Alive

**O**n my hikes with Dad, he explained what to do if I ever came across a bear. “The black bear is a complicated creature,” he would say. “In this part of the world, a full-grown bear has no real predators, other than us. So if you meet one on the trail, don’t run. It might chase you, and you can’t outrun a bear. Hold your ground and the bear will likely leave.”

Great advice if you happen to sight a bear in the woods or on a trail, or even in your own backyard. But not in the vehicle you desperately need to escape from a smoldering fire that’s going to burst into full-blown flames any second.

Trying not to make any sudden or threatening moves, I whisper, “Delphy? Back up, slowly.”

We stop about twenty yards away. The air is thickening with smoke.

“It doesn’t want to leave.” Delphy shifts her stick. “It’s scared, I think.”

The bear is upright in the back seat now, nodding its head back and forth, back and forth. Not full-grown but not a cub,



either. Probably scared, like Delphy says. Scared of the storm, scared of the fire. No cave or den for shelter, so it picked the Jeep.

And scared is when a bear is most dangerous. Like Dad said, usually a bear will run away rather than confront a human. But if it doesn't, things can get ugly quick.

"I don't know what to do! Should we leave the Jeep and run?"

Then Delphy does something I never would have expected, or I'd have tried to stop her. She marches up to the Jeep and uses her stick to press on the horn. She stands her ground, making the horn blare. And the bear bolts out of the back seat and scampers off into the woods, away from the fire.

"Nice meeting you, bear!" she calls out, then climbs into the passenger seat, waiting for me.

I get in. "That was really dangerous."

She smiles, as pleased with herself as I was for jumping from the deer stand. "Everything we do is dangerous. It's the only way to stay alive."

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We drive down the logging trail, away from the smoke. The forest gets a little thinner and more of the sky is visible over our heads. The sunshine makes it even hotter, which hardly seems possible. The trail becomes straighter, and we seem to be on a ridge, with the ground falling away on either





side. Not exactly climbing a mountain, but on higher ground for sure.

Everything is going really good until the engine sputters and dies.

Out of gas. It finally happened.

Delphy doesn't say anything. We just sit there for a while, baking in the airless heat. We should be really upset, but for some reason we're not. Maybe the storm and the fire and the bear was all the upset we could handle.

"Shall we take a little walk?" Delphy suggests.

She slings her backpack over her shoulder, gets a good grip on her walking stick, and off we go, following the logging trail. No way am I going back in the woods, even if it isn't quite so dense.

The trail curves gently to the right. For a while, it keeps level and then starts to head down.

We both see it at the same time, glittering through the trees.

A long blue lake.



# 29.

## The Bell

**W**e work our way down the wooded slope to the curving shoreline. Delphy drops her walking stick and backpack. She keeps going, right into the water, and doesn't stop until she's waist-high. "You have to do it, Sam," she says, waving me to join her. "It's amazing."

I cast a wary eye for water snakes, but they like muddy bottoms and weeds and this is clear and sandy. Too inviting to resist. I don't go in as deep as Delphy, not being as tall, but after days on the run, in the constant heat, the cool clean water is like heaven. I bend my knees and sink down, holding my breath as my head goes under. Amazing is right.

I come up spouting.

Delphy smooths the wet hair out of her eyes. "Where's the camp?" she asks. "Which way?"

I close my eyes and picture what I saw from the top of the tree. "That way." I point. "Somewhere along this shore."

"Is it far?"

"I don't know. A few miles? Maybe less."

We slog out of the water. I start to shake myself dry and



Delphy goes, "Hey, wait! My beach towel!" She pulls it out of the backpack and tosses it to me. "You first."

I rub down fast and hand it back.

"Not what I had in mind when I thought I was going for a midnight swim." Delphy, drying her hair, sounds almost cheerful. "Jason Dean, you don't know what you missed."

Should I tell her Jason Dean doesn't exist? No, I don't want to hurt her feelings. She's smart. She'll figure it out.

I take off my shoes, dry them on the grass, and put them back on. Soggy, but tolerable. The only bad thing is the mosquitoes, but Delphy is in such a good mood, getting bit doesn't seem to bother her. "Take a sip, everybody!" She holds her arms out to the bugs. "Come one, come all!"

"You're crazy."

"Crazy happy. There's a difference."

We prepare ourselves for a long hike, but the camp is much closer than I thought. Around the next bend, we come upon a curving notch of shoreline with a white sandy beach and volleyball courts. Back from the lake is a big, white-shingled building with two huge stone chimneys, one on each end. Along the edge of the lake are a dozen or so smaller buildings, similar to the cabins at Camp Wabanaski.

"Hello!" I shout. "Anybody home?"

Silence. As to be expected, the place was evacuated. We work our way around the main building, still shouting in case somebody stayed behind, and locate the entrance, which has a big banner strung along the porch roof:



## MARVEL LAKE SURVIVAL SKILLS CAMP

### *BUILDING STRENGTH, CHARACTER & ENDURANCE*

Delphy shakes her head, laughing. "Just my luck, a survival camp. They probably eat nuts and berries."

"There's a dining hall inside." I'm peering through the windows. "Check it out. Maybe you can find a phone. I'll look for a road."

"You want me to do the breaking and entering, is that it?" She sounds amused.

I try the latch. "No breaking required." I swing open the unlocked door for her and turn to go. As I head out to look for a road, she cautions me. "Be careful."

"Always. I won't be long."

A neatly landscaped gravel drive runs off into the woods, heading uphill. Could be several miles to a paved road, but I want to get some idea of what we're up against. It's really great we found the camp, which means shelter and water and probably food, even if it *is* nuts and berries, but there's a tinge of smoke in the air, and we can't be that many miles from the spreading lightning fire, or for that matter from the main fire line behind it. So the camp is temporary shelter, at best.

I start out jogging along the gravel road, hoping I can find some gasoline in the camp and a way to get the Jeep down from the logging trail. The lawns are mowed, so they must



have power mowers, right? Unless survival camp means push mowers. Which is possible. No, don't think that way. Be positive. One thing at a time. See where the gravel road goes, then worry about the Jeep.

I jog uphill for a mile or so in the crushing heat, sweat pouring into my eyes, until I get this pain in my side that feels like a knife shoved into my ribs. I rest for a bit, bent over and panting, and the pain eases. Okay, so I'm not exactly a track star. And I'm thinking maybe I don't want to get too far along the gravel roadway, not just yet. What if I get cut off by the fire? Delphy on one side of the flames, me on the other?

It's when I turn to go back that I notice the sign. Must have missed it with my eyes full of sweat. A little arrow-shaped sign nailed to a tree. Hand-painted but easy to read.

## *SR 12B—7.2 MILES*

State Road 12B. No clue as to where it might lead, but chances are it will be a real paved road. It has to go somewhere that's populated, or the state wouldn't bother building a road, right? Somewhere with people, that's all that matters.

I'm walking briskly when a bell begins to ring. Like the shimmering bong of a church bell, but that can't be it. Maybe it's an emergency signal. Maybe Delphy's in trouble.

I start running.



# 30.

## In Case of Fire

**T**urns out to be a dinner bell, not an emergency signal. Delphy noticed the rope hanging in a corner of the dining room and rang the bell to let me know there's enough food in the pantry to last a year, at least.

"Ten kinds of cereal, five kinds of cookies. Canned goods galore, in big restaurant cans. Vegetables, meats, soups, sauces. At least five dozen eggs. Flour and cornmeal and baking powder and tons of ingredients to make stuff. No electricity—I don't think this place has any—but the stoves and refrigerators run on propane, and they have a huge tank of propane out back, so we're good there. Fridges packed with gallon jugs of milk, at least ten pounds of butter, trays of Jell-O, blocks of processed cheese."

"All that, but no phone?"

She shakes her head and sighs. "We're out in the middle of nowhere. No landlines, and like I said, no electricity. The lamps use oil, I think. They're not kidding about being into survival."



We're in the dining hall, which looks like it could seat fifty or so, easy, with a soaring cathedral roof made out of hand-carved wood beams, and very cool stone fireplaces on opposite walls, and a view of the long, narrow lake that shoots out from the beach like a blue arrow aimed at the horizon. It's a grand room, way better than the dining area at Camp Wabanaski, and a bit cooler than outside. My guess, the camp caters to out-of-state families with kids who need a little toughening up, or who want an adventure. Cold-water showers—Delphy already checked—and lots of activities like hiking, climbing, and learning to live off the land. So Delphy had it right when she said nuts and berries.

Not that anybody is going hungry, not when they're eating in this dining hall, that's for sure. But the no-electricity setup makes me wonder, because summer camps have to be able to alert the authorities or call for an ambulance—at this location, probably by air—if one of the kids gets seriously ill or injured. Right? When I mention this to Delphy she goes, "Cell phones?"

"Maybe," I say. "But way out here? Where are the cell towers?"

"Smoke signals?"

That makes me grin. "Ha ha. I'm thinking maybe some kind of two-way emergency radio. The kind you can talk on. Maybe a police radio kind of deal. They knew enough to evacuate, right?"

"That makes sense."



“Okay, if it was you in charge, where would you keep the emergency radio?”

She thinks about it. “The office? I saw a room that could be the office, out by the main entrance.”

She leads me to it and I agree, this has to be the camp office. A wooden desk and a big swivel chair, several filing cabinets, and knotty pine walls plastered with photographs of kids on survival trips. White-water rafting, canoe portaging, rock climbing with helmets and harnesses and complicated-looking ropes. The kids look happy to be working so hard—most are pumping fists in the air. There’s a good-sized map pinned to a corkboard. Marvel Lake Survival Skills Camp is marked on the map with a red star, and it shows the access road connecting to the state road, just like the sign said. It also shows we’re about as far to the north and west as you can get and still be in Maine.

I point to the star and say, “That’s why the only station we can pick up is WRPZ. We’re pretty much in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains.”

“Mountains that are burning,” Delphy reminds me.

Tinder-dry forests. Wildfires. I’d rather not think about it, but there’s no getting away from the fact that a clock is ticking. We have to find a way to get rescued, or rescue ourselves, before the fire finds us.

We search everywhere. The shelves are packed with books about birds and wildlife, but there’s no sign of a two-way police radio.





Delphy opens all the desk drawers. No electronics. But she does find an instruction manual for a satellite phone.

I slump into the swivel chair, exasperated. "That's how they make contact. A satellite phone. Probably took it with them when they evacuated."

"Definitely." Delphy looks as disappointed as I feel.

"It's okay." I'm trying to sound upbeat. "Back to plan A. We're only seven miles from a paved road. If I can find some gas, and a way to get the Jeep over to the gravel road, we can be back to civilization in an hour."

She brightens. "Seriously? If you can't find any gas, I can walk seven miles if I have to. I don't care how much it hurts, if it will get us home."

"Let's find some gas. Hiking seven miles on a sprained ankle is a bad idea. What if the fire catches up and crosses the gravel road before we get there? No way to outrace a fire on foot. If it comes to that, we might be better off staying right where we are: In case of fire, jump in the lake and hope the smoke doesn't kill us."

"Where do we start?" she asks.

"With fuel of our own. Did you say there are five kinds of cookies?"

---

After eating—cookies plus a couple of premade salami sandwiches we find in the big refrigerators (Delphy even



locates some ballpark mustard. I swear it's the best sandwich I've ever had in my life)—it's down to business.

The search for gasoline. Which we absolutely need to make an escape.

When I ask her to take it easy and rest her ankle, Delphy gives me an are-you-crazy? look, props herself on her stick, and swings down the steps onto the lawn.

"You take that side, I'll take this one," she says. "We're looking for sheds and storage areas, right?"

"And lawn mowers and chain saws and weed whackers. Like that. They all need gas."

I remember seeing some storage units next to one of the cabins. Before heading to check it out, I study the horizon to the east, beyond the far end of the lake. I don't want Delphy to worry about it too much, but for the last hour or so, gray clouds have been edging up over the horizon.

Are they storm clouds or distant smoke? Rain or fire? Can't be sure, one way or the other. Whatever they are, they seem to be slowly creeping closer.



# 31.

## Another Greek Thing

**D**elphy is so into it, I'm almost sorry it's me who finds the gasoline. Twenty gallons, neatly lined up in red five-gallon plastic containers, with spouts and funnels. Fuel for a big, professional mowing machine housed in the shed.

She hobbles in, sees me beaming, and goes, "Is that enough?"

"Enough for two hundred miles. We can drive all the way home on this amount."

"I thought you said it was only seven miles?"

"Seven to a paved road. Not sure how far that is from getting rescued. But this will get us there, I promise."

She folds her arms across her chest. "Today?"

"Yes, today, if I can find a way to connect the Jeep up to the gravel road."

She shakes her head, amused. "If there's one thing I've learned in the last few days, it's that you always find a way. You go, I'll pack up whatever supplies I can scrounge, and when you get back here—zoom, we're gone!"



What she said about me always finding a way makes me feel really good, and gives me the energy to start lugging a five-gallon can up the slope to the logging trail. Panting and sweating and keeping an eye out on the way for a path big enough for the Jeep. The slope is okay for walking, but there are parts too steep for any vehicle, even a sturdy Jeep. I'm being super careful, because the Jeep is our only hope of escape. The fire may not be moving very fast today, with the wind so calm, but it's getting closer. I can feel it. I can smell it. I know it in my bones.

I finally haul the heavy container up to the logging trail, and there's the Jeep, waiting patiently. Okay, I'm aware it's only a hunk of steel, and it doesn't have a mind of its own, and it can't be "waiting patiently." But I feel like we're connected somehow, me and that machine. From the very first, when we sped away from the flames at the logging camp and I barely knew how to steer, it's like the machine was taking care of me. Like it had been waiting for a chance to save my life.

Delphy isn't there to hear me being weird, so as I pour gas into the tank, me and the Jeep have a one-sided conversation. "Once we get rescued, you'll have to go back to your real owner. I know that. But maybe he'll let me visit. And when I'm old enough to get a driver's license, maybe I'll have saved up enough to buy you. Would that be okay?"

In my head, the Jeep says yes. Which is just me saying yes, but still it makes me feel better. Without this brave



little machine, made for a soldier in a long-ago war, me and Delphy would be dead for sure. So forgive me if I get all mushy about it.

On second thought, I don't care what anybody thinks. The Jeep is my friend, get used to it.

With five gallons in the tank, the Jeep is good to go. It starts right up, and I slowly steer along the rutted logging trail, searching for a place where we can cross down the slope to Camp Survival.

Sounds like it should be easy, but it isn't. Everywhere I look, it seems to be either too steep and rocky, or too thick with trees. I can't risk getting stuck halfway down. Can't risk making a mistake. This is our chance, this hunk of steel and tires, and every instinct tells me I have to treat it like it's made of glass. It may be tough and reliable, but things can go wrong in an instant.

The old logging trail slowly curves down toward the lake. There are fewer trees blocking the way to the camp. The main building is clearly visible through the thinning trees, and beside it the gravel road, maybe a quarter mile away.

So close.

I get out and explore on foot. No problem navigating around the trees or avoiding the boulders strewn through this part of the forest. The problem is right at the end, where the woodlands meet the camp lawn. There's about a four-foot drop over a steep, rocky ledge. No way to get past that without ripping out the bottom of the Jeep and breaking an axle.



Delphy sees me exploring along the edge and lopes over, swinging on her stick. She's excited to see the Jeep so near, just a little ways uphill through the trees.

"I've put together a bunch of supplies. Food and water and stuff. And if you must know, more TP. Just in case the road is long."

"Great," I say, without much enthusiasm.

"What's wrong?"

"This is as close as the logging trail gets to the camp," I explain, discouraged. "Beyond this, it starts to curve away, up into the hills. So the Jeep has to cross over in this area. Somehow. Except I don't know how."

Delphy swings along on her walking stick, examining the rocky ledge. "I see what you mean. The only way down is to build a ramp."

"Great," I say. "I'll fire up the bulldozer. Oh, wait, we don't have a bulldozer."

Delphy sees the look on my face and laughs. "We don't need a bulldozer, silly. We just need an inclined plane."

"Is that another ancient Greek thing?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. By way of Egypt."



## 32.

### What Scares You Most

Over the next few hours, we pry a couple of long, sturdy planks from the walkway to the dock, drag them across the lawn, and prop them on the ledge. Then we roll a bunch of rocks into place under the middle of the planks, for support. On paper, an inclined plane is just a few pencil lines. In the real world, building one takes time and tons of sweat, especially when it's so miserably hot.

Delphy explains how some of the pyramids were constructed. "They hauled giant limestone blocks up very long, inclined planes. Took them twenty years and thousands of laborers."

"And this comes from your grandfather?"

She laughs. "I saw it on the History Channel."

I collapse on the lawn, exhausted. The sun is about to dip below the tree line, and we both understand that inching the Jeep down the slope and onto the planks will have to wait until morning. It's not a thing that can be done in the dark, or when we're too tired to think straight.

"First thing, right?"



"First thing. Before I quit, I'm going to bring up the rest of the gas and fill the tank. Just in case."

"In case of what?" Delphy asks, uneasy.

"Just in case."

When that last task is done, and the Jeep has a full tank with an extra can to spare, I unplug the distributor wire like before. Because you never know, and no spark means no steal.

---

I'm so tired it feels like there are ten-pound weights around my ankles as I trudge back to the dining hall. We use wooden matches to light a couple of the oil lanterns and munch on some more cookies and drain glasses of cold milk. "Not exactly a balanced meal." Delphy smiles, her eyes bright. "At Calusa, we had to earn desserts by exercising."

"You just exercised enough to build a small pyramid."

"I guess I did, didn't I? Who knew? I totally hate gym, but when I really have to, I can move a two-ton Jeep."

"Mostly with your brain. You figure things out."

She mock punches me in the arm. "We're a pretty good team."

"Yup."

"A toast to us, little brother." She clinks her glass of milk to mine. "To getting home tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."





Delphy fishes through her backpack and takes out the little hand-crank radio. "Maybe there's news about the fire. News about the world."

She works the crank, charging the battery, and when she pushes the on button, what do you know, WRPZ comes through loud and clear! Almost sounds like the DJ is in the dining hall with us, sharing milk and cookies while he tells us about his day.

"... no idea who might be in range of my voice because, like I said, the broadcast radius of this little station is much reduced. The main power lines are down and we're running on the backup generator. I say 'we,' but it's only me, your host, Phat Freddy Bell. And to be honest, I wouldn't be trapped here if I didn't drain all the gas from my car to power the generator. Which is just about to run out of fuel anyhow. Bonehead move. I'm surrounded, folks. Fire on every side. And nobody trying to stop it. Not that I'm complaining. Our brave firefighters are concentrating on the populated areas to the south, where the flames have consumed part of Belfast, Belmont, and Waldo, resulting in fatalities for civilians and firefighters alike. So it looks like I'm stuck here at six hundred and one feet above groove level until the fire burns out. And if I don't make it, I just want everybody to know—my listeners, my friends, my late wife in heaven, everybody—that it's been a blast sharing my favorite tunes, connecting with



listeners. I loved every minute of it. I'm the luckiest man in the world, and who knows, maybe my luck will hold.

**"This is Phat Freddy Bell, high atop the lowest official mountain in the great state of Maine, signing off."**

We're left with only our own silence to fill the room.

Delphy wipes her eyes with the side of her hand. "Poor guy, he sounded scared."

"Somebody is bound to hear him and go to the rescue."

"I hope so."

Something the DJ said really shakes me. All this time I'd been worried about me and Delphy getting burned up, but it turns out the fire is eating towns and cities, not just forest. Belfast, Belmont, Waldo. Phat Freddy didn't mention Portland, where my mother is in rehab, but I can't help worrying that maybe she's in danger, too.

For the last few days, it's seemed like the fire was concentrating on us, but it sounds like there's a lot more going on that we don't know about.

Like the whole state is up in flames.

Delphy has this expression on her face, like she knows what I'm thinking, and shares my concern. "Can I ask you a question, Sam?"

"Sure." I dread what she might ask.

"What scares you most?"



# 33.

## Stuff to Worry About

**T**hat's not fair, so I'll go first." Delphy takes a deep breath, and then she blurts out, "I'm scared I'll never stop growing."

"Seriously?"

"Silly, I know. Most girls stop growing by the time they're fifteen. And I'm almost fifteen, and I haven't grown recently. So I'm worried about nothing. Probably."

"What's the big deal if you get a little taller?"

She sighs. "A little would be okay, I guess. But I had this nightmare that I was so tall my head was bumping the ceiling. I was like eight feet tall. Everybody was staring at me and whispering behind my back. It was awful. When I woke up, I was afraid to get out of bed, in case my head bumped."

I'm not sure how to answer, so I go, "Wow," and then shut up.

For some reason, that makes her laugh. "Don't worry, Sam. You don't have to tell me your greatest fear just because I told you mine. That was unfair, putting you on the spot."



Her eyes are so sad and kind that something breaks inside me, and I find myself gushing the truth. "I'm afraid my mother is going to die of an overdose."

Delphy's jaw drops. "Oh, Sam. No. That's terrible!"

The only other person who has any idea of what I really worry about is Mrs. Labrie, from Child Services, so it's kind of a relief, saying it out loud.

"When I wake up in the morning, I'm scared of finding her dead in her bed, or in the bathroom. When I'm in school, I'm afraid of what I'll find when I get home."

"That really sucks. I'm so sorry."

"That's why I was at Camp Wabanaski. So Mom could get treatment. She wants to quit, she really does. But it's really, really hard. Like the hardest thing in the world. That's what Mom said. She's sick and in pain and her whole body aches for the medicine. She says the medicine is like a giant magnet and she's an iron filing. And she says most addicts don't make it the first time they quit."

Delphy reaches across the table and covers my hands with hers. "I'll bet you anything she does. You're a strong, smart kid, and at least half of that comes from your mother, right?"

"Right."

"You know what's really dumb?" Delphy says brightly. "Here we are in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a deadly forest fire, and what do we worry about? Stuff we can't



control. When really the only thing we should worry about right now is how to stay alive! How do we get home?"

Big questions. I wish I knew the answers.

---

I wait on the front porch while Delphy goes to take a cold shower. Figure I'll take one tomorrow morning before we get to work on moving the Jeep. Besides, it gives me a chance to be alone for a few minutes when I can maybe organize my thoughts, get my head straight. Also keep an eye on the far end of the lake, making sure nothing flares or sparks.

So far so good. The usual scent of distant smoke, but nothing lighting up the darkness. Not yet.

Delphy returns from her shower sounding disappointed. "I thought cool water would cool me down, right? But as soon as I dried off, I was sweating again. Can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm looking forward to winter."

"Totally. Give me ice and snow."

The neat thing about being the only two people in a camp made for at least fifty, plus staff, is that we each get a cabin to ourselves. Real beds, with sheets and mattresses and pillows.

We choose cabins closest to the lake. Great view. Not that we can see very much of it on a moonless, starless night. All we can really make out, carrying our oil lanterns, is the path that goes from the main building to the cabins.



Delphy's cabin is called "Fortitude." Mine is called "Endurance."

"Real cozy," Delphy says sarcastically as she holds her lantern up to the sign.

"Must be like a message to inspire the campers. 'This is what you need to survive.'"

"What I need is a good night's sleep." She yawns. "First thing tomorrow, we get the Jeep down the incline, load it up, and head back to civilization. Part of me is almost sorry, you know?"

"Not me. I'm ready."

"You know what I've been thinking about, when I'm not being scared to death? A cheeseburger with a vanilla shake. First stop. Okay?"

"Deal."

We say our good nights and go to our cabins. Inside, I have my choice of bunks, and pick the one that's the most neatly made. I lie facedown, expecting to fall asleep in an instant, but my head is swirling with a million thoughts. It's like I'm too tired to sleep, which doesn't make any sense.

I turn the oil lantern off and sit on the edge of the bunk in the dark. Thinking about my mom and my dad, and now Delphy, who seems like part of the family somehow. How everything keeps whirling out of reach and I keep grabbing at it, but I can't hold on. It's so hard not to worry about things you can't possibly control.



Mrs. Labrie says that's what life is all about, learning how to deal with stuff you can't control. She's probably right, but that doesn't make it any easier. Not when I feel like I ran a marathon, swam the English Channel, and built the pyramids all in one day, and still I can't sleep.

I get up in the dark and walk to the window and there it is. A faint glow on the night horizon, maybe ten miles away.

Fire, on the other side of the mountains.

I finally fall asleep praying that the wind will change and blow the fire out like a candle on a birthday cake.



## **Day Six**



# 34.

## Burn, Baby, Burn

**I**n my dream, Mom and I are at the beach, sitting in folding chairs with our feet in the water. We're watching Dad paddle around on a red rubber raft, acting goofy for our amusement. When Dad comes back to shore, the three of us will walk down to the hot dog stand and order extra-large onion rings with our dogs. It's the best day ever, and can't be spoiled, not even by the sound of crazy chain saws. I mean, who brings chain saws to the beach?

I wake up with someone's hand over my mouth. It's Delphy, hushing me. "Quiet," she whispers. "They're right outside."

The dream was just a dream, but the crazy chain-saw noise is real. Not chain saws, but dirt bikes roaring through the camp, and somebody shouting, "IF YOU'RE FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY! FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY!"

I sit up on the bunk, heart pounding. We crawl to a window and peep out at the main building. In the soft light of dawn, we can make out a biker doing a wheelie the full length



of the porch, screaming his head off. No longer words, just a scream of rage.

On the front lawn, the other biker cheers him on, chanting, "FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY! FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY!"

Beside me, Delphy whispers, "It's them, isn't it? From Piney Pond? What's that supposed to mean, 'from away, stay away'?"

"Not sure, but I think it means they hate out-of-staters. People from away. People with money who come here and buy up the best land and build expensive places like this."

"And they think it's okay to burn them out, because they weren't born here?"

I shake my head. "I don't think they care about 'okay.' I mean, look at them."

These dudes were scary when they were on the other side of Piney Pond, torching a summer house, but up close they are terrifying. There's a madness about them, a violent fury at the people they're attacking. No helmets, and blond hair, both of them, shaved close on the sides and long on top. The light is still pretty dim, so I can't make out their faces, except for the beards, but from the way they act and move alike, I'm pretty sure they're brothers.

"Do they know we're here?" I whisper.

"Don't think so. I snuck around the back to get to this cabin. They didn't see me."

There's a crash of breaking glass, and suddenly they



invade the main building, on their bikes. We can't see what they're doing inside, exactly, but we can hear them zooming round and round, revving their engines. Every so often the bikes will pause, going to idle, and we hear the noise of something breaking, and their chant: "FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY! FROM AWAY, STAY AWAY!"

"This is probably crazy," Delphy says, "but what if we waded out into the lake? It's still kind of dark, chances are they won't notice us out there. And then even if the fire comes this way, we'd be safe."

"It's not crazy and it might work. But what if they stay until after sunrise, and spot us? And what about the smoke? Narrow lake like this, with hills on either side, the fire will spread from side to side. We'll be stuck, and we might not be able to breathe. Even if we can, how long will we last in deep water?"

"I hadn't thought about that," Delphy whispers. "What's your idea?"

"We should get out of here, hide in the woods until they leave."

"What if they see us?"

"We run. They won't be able to follow in the woods. If we make it to the Jeep, we can get away."

"I'm worried they'll spot me. Big and tall with a crutch, how can they miss that?"

Before I can think of an answer, something changes inside the main building. The biker brothers have turned on the lights. Which is impossible, with no electricity. And then



I realize they've discovered the lanterns and are scattering oil and lighting the place on fire, like they did to the house on Piney Pond. In less than a minute, the interior is so bright it hurts to look. The flames spread quickly, racing up the great beams of the cathedral ceiling and dripping down the beautiful wooden walls.

The brothers remain inside, admiring their work. Racing their dirt bikes around the dining hall, shouting, "From away, stay away! Burn, baby, burn!"

Any second, they'll have to exit the hall, or be trapped by the fire they started.

"Now's our chance," I whisper. "Their eyes are on the flames, they won't see us."

We creep out the back door, keeping the cabin between us and the main building. I look around the corner—they're still inside with the spreading flames, dangerous as it is—and we dash to the next cabin, and then to the next. Keeping to the shadows as we work our way around to the side of the camp where we'd propped up the planks and made an inclined plane.

Part of me wants to carry out our original plan. Get the Jeep across the inclined planks and over to the gravel road, and go from there. But the biker bros will see us for sure, and be on us in an instant. They probably came in on the gravel road and know this country way better than we do. So the only sensible thing to do is escape without being seen. Get to



the Jeep, put some logging trail miles between us and the bikers.

I'm about to dash to the next cabin, when Delphy hisses, "Sam! Look!"

She's pointing at the lake. I've been so focused on the main house I haven't bothered to check out the lake. Small, tight waves are crashing along the shore, driven by the wind, which seems to be increasing with each beat of my heart. But Delphy's concern isn't the wind, at least not directly.

What's attracted her attention is the fire. Not the fire set by the bikers, but the main fire, the big fire, the one that's been chasing us for days. Last night, it was a faint glow on the horizon, miles away. This morning, the fire has speeded up. Now it's coming around both sides of the lake, trees burning from the top down. It can't be more than half a mile away, and moving fast.

All the more reason to get to the Jeep. If the biker bro torch the rest of the camp, we'll be surrounded by a circle of flame, with no way out. Do they know that? Do they even care?

At that moment, both bikes fly out of the building, onto the lawn. Behind them, windows explode with the heat, detonating like glass grenades. Black smoke billows out. They turn to admire their handiwork. Inside, beams begin to fall, and with each crash the building shudders and groans.



Now is our chance. We have to cover about a hundred yards of open lawn. If they glance back at the cabins, they'll see us for sure. Dangerous, but we can't stay where we are. Any place we could hide will soon be engulfed in flames.

Delphy straightens up, tucks her stick under her arm, and gives me a nod. "Whatever happens, don't look back," she says, and takes off at a lope, a brave girl, strong and tall.



## 35.

### The Rabbit and the Wolf

**W**e almost made it. The main building was burning so bright it must have blinded them to the sight of us crossing the lawn. Delphy on her stick, making speed, and me keeping up. I feel totally exposed, like if they had guns they could shoot us, no problem. But we finally make it to the ledge, clamber over it, and begin to climb the slope up into the woods.

The smoke is starting to thicken, but we can still see the Jeep waiting on the trail above us. We're about halfway up the slope—Delphy has more trouble on slanty ground—when the shouting starts.

At first I can't make out what they're shouting about, but then it becomes obvious. They've seen us. The biker bros come roaring across the lawn, the camp ablaze behind them, and zip along the ledge, looking for a way to get to us.

"You go ahead!" Delphy urges. "Get the Jeep started. I'll catch up."

"We're almost there."



I help her along. No way am I leaving her behind. I may be scared, but I'm not *that* scared. When Delphy falls flat on her face, I get her back on her feet. We keep going, yard by yard, struggling up the slope. Slipping, falling, doing it all over again. Focused on making it to the Jeep. Trying not to think about the craziness lurking behind us.

Delphy manages to throw her stick ahead. I've got her hand, and finally we're there.

She crawls into the Jeep, holding her stick in both hands, like a sword. I plug the distributor wire back in, slip behind the wheel, and press the starter pedal.

The engine catches first try.

As I slip the shifter into first gear, I take a look down the slope and see something that just about stops my heart.

The biker bros have found the planks we propped on the ledge, and they zoom across, side by side. Working their way up the slope as fast as they can, skidding around trees and flying high over rocks and protruding roots. Intent on reaching us, the sooner the better.

I feel like a rabbit with a pack of wolves bearing down.

"Sam!" Delphy screams, snapping me out of it.

I let out the clutch and press the accelerator pedal to the floor, running up through the gears. We're hitting forty miles an hour, flat out, and it's all I can do to keep us from flying off the trail. Dirt bikes can go eighty miles an hour, so there's no way to outrun them. I figure they'll be on us in thirty seconds or less.





Hunkered down in the passenger seat, Delphy starts to cough. A moment later, I'm coughing, too, and my eyes are stinging.

I risk a glance behind. A cloud of dense black smoke roils behind us like a breaking wave. The wind is strong at our backs, and the smoke from the fire is catching up even faster than the bikers. That's a good thing, but not if it means we can't breathe.

Seems like there's no way to get away from the smoke, other than to try and outrun it. I concentrate on maintaining maximum speed. We're flying over ruts, bouncing hard enough to make the steering wheel shudder like a living thing. Springs shriek with every bump. The Jeep was designed for terrain like this, but not at full speed.

We don't have a choice. Slowing down means dying from smoke inhalation, or at the hands of maniacs. Not a risk I want to take. So I concentrate on the trail ahead, on steering us safely through the turns. Nothing I can do about what's happening behind us; whatever lies down the road, that's my business.

We enter a long curve on the logging trail. The change in direction gives us a whiff of fresh air, and we gratefully fill our lungs. The forest is dense on both sides of the trail, and for a little while the scent of pine overpowers the stink of smoke.

The trees look like they'll be there forever, reaching to the sky. But soon the fire will change everything, reducing the



landscape to ash. Do they know it, these mighty trees? Do they have any sense of what's coming?

Weird what you think about when you're trying to outrun a fire. When your brain is locked into what it means to be alive. When every moment is so intense that the colors are more vivid, and every bounce and rattle, every whiff of pine-sap, says you must find a way to survive. Even if you're the rabbit and the wolves are close behind.

"Sam!" Delphy shouts. "Do you hear that?"

Then I hear it, too. The banshee scream of dirt bikes at maximum velocity.

A moment later, they burst through the smoke and are instantly upon us.



# 36.

## Road to Nowhere

**I**n every car-chase movie I've ever seen, something impossible happens. Cars fly crazy distances through the air and land safely. They weave through wrong-way traffic like they're threading a needle. They go down flights of stairs, flip over, land right side up, and keep going. Like that. But in all those movies, I've never seen anything like my friend Delphy in action.

With an expression of fierce determination, she climbs into the back seat, clutching her walking stick. Crouches down like she's terrified and wants to keep a low profile. But when the first biker catches up and starts screaming, "You're dead! Stop the Jeep or die!" she suddenly leaps up, swings her stick, and *wham!* slams him so hard he flies off his bike and rolls along the trail like a rag doll.

Last thing I see before he's swallowed in the smoke, he's on his hands and knees, coughing up dirt. His bike is wrapped around a tree and totaled for sure.

You'd think the second biker would go back to help his fallen brother, but he doesn't. He's more intent than ever on



trying to force us to crash. He comes up one side of us, standing on his pegs, and then veers away and comes up the other side, gunning his throttle. Darting at us, trying to rattle me. Daring me to try and hit him, and maybe lose control. All the time keeping just out of range of the walking stick.

The dude is a fantastic rider. Too bad he didn't concentrate on racing instead of setting fires.

Delphy keeps swinging, but he's clever, and either ducks or backs off at the last second, and she never connects.

After one last swing that misses, the stick slips from her hands and goes down between the seats. She paws around, trying to find it, and the rider veers closer, taking advantage. What if he leaps in and grabs the wheel? What then? If we let him have the Jeep, will he leave us alone?

But this is about more than taking the Jeep or crashing his brother. We've seen what they did, in two locations, and I'll bet there are more. I don't know if the brothers started the original fire, but for sure they've been helping it along.

The remaining rider edges in, gets a gloved hand on the side of the Jeep. And that's when Delphy grabs a gallon jug of water, and in one smooth motion, slams it upside his head. Like maybe dropping her stick was to fool him into coming so close. He goes over backward, landing hard in the dirt, and his bike goes straight up in the air and very nearly lands on him. Forks and wheels bent, frame twisted. The bike is finished, done.



I'm thinking, as he fades into the smoke, that if you come after my friend Delphy, you've got a long walk home.

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After we're sure we're clear, and that they haven't miraculously revived the chase, like would happen in the movies, I slow it down, into second gear. Delphy scrambles back into the front seat and gives me a soft little punch in the shoulder. "We did it, Sam."

I baby the Jeep—and us—for a few miles. The smoke is far behind us. We've outrun the fire for the time being. The wind is still blowing hard at our backs, no doubt driving the flames, so we don't dare stop for a rest. Not for miles yet. But for the moment, we made it.

In the seat beside me, Delphy curls up, trembling. Like the experience finally caught up to her.

"You did good!" I tell her. "They were going to get us for sure!"

"I was so scared. Way more than I'm scared of the fire. Did you see their eyes? They were empty, like Halloween pumpkins with the candles blown out."

"Phat Freddy said people have died in the fire. It could be their fault."

Delphy nods. "Do you think they got away? Their bikes were wrecked for sure."

"I bet they're fine. They know this area like the back of their hand."



Delphy pauses, lost in thought for a little while. "Where are we? Any idea?"

"Far to the west is all I know. I'm sorry, but this seems to be the logging trail to nowhere."

She sits up and looks around. "It can't be a road to nowhere, Sam. I mean, what would be the point?"

We drive on, gaining ground for the next few miles as we head deeper into the wilderness. The logging trail gradually rises until we're going over thinly wooded hilltops. We glimpse low mountains in the smoky distance. I'm so into keeping on the trail, and being careful how I steer, that I forget to check the compass on the dash.

When I finally do check the compass, the surprise hits me like a punch to the gut. We'd been heading more or less west. Now we're heading east. It must have happened real gradual, but it freaks me out that I didn't notice.

"Do you smell that?" Delphy sits up straight.

"The logging trail has turned back on itself. So the wind is in our faces. That's why the stink of smoke is worse."

"What does that mean? Turned back on itself?"

"It means we're going the wrong direction." I'm sick to admit it. "We're heading back toward the fire."



# 37.

## The End of the Trail

**H**ow is that even possible?" Delphy wants to know. As if she's been napping and now she's wide-awake, demanding answers.

I shake my head. "It's not like we're on a major highway, heading in a certain direction. The logging trail wanders all over the place."

"Looking for logs." Delphy's face is scrunched up in concentration.

"For lumber. This trail goes where the trees are. It doesn't care about compass headings, or outrunning forest fires."

"Okay, I get it." She sighs. "Let me think. Turning around would be a bad idea because the other end of the trail has already been overrun by the fire, right?"

"Right."

"So no matter which way we drive, we're heading for the fire. Which means we're doomed."

"Maybe not." I try to sound upbeat. "Maybe the logging trail swings round to the west again. Some of this may be switchbacks."



“Switchbacks?”

“Think of a heavy truck loaded with tons of logs. It can’t go straight up a hill. It can’t do steep. So it weaves back and forth, gaining a little altitude with each turn. That’s switchbacks. On a real, paved road they’re very precise. But carving a logging trail through the woods? Not so much. All I know is, we gained altitude over the last hour or so. We’re on top of the hills, not going around them like before.”

“Is that good?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. But we’re more out in the open than we were in the deep woods. If a plane or helicopter goes over, they might see us.”

Delphy snorts, her eyes angry. “As if. You know our problem? Nobody knows where we are, and nobody is looking. Nobody cares!”

“That’s not true.”

She sighs. “I know, I know. I’m just frustrated.”

I figure we’ve got no choice but to see where the logging trail leads. I put the Jeep in gear, and sure enough, after fifteen minutes or so of winding along the hillside, we’re headed west again. Switchbacks, no doubt about it. I try to imagine a fully loaded lumber truck trundling along in these ruts, and it reminds me how dangerous it can be, driving a big rig. One little mistake and you slip off the road and maybe flip over, trapped in your cab.

That reminds me of what happened to Dad in Afghanistan, so I try to banish those thoughts from my mind and





concentrate on the trail ahead. *Keep to the ruts. Do not deviate. Concentrate on the task at hand, and the road will take care of itself.* What my father called his “three mantras,” things he kept in mind that helped him drive safely, back when he was hauling pulpwood.

Every now and then, I glance over to check on Delphy. She has her arms crossed and looks miserable. Probably wishing she’d never gotten into the Jeep in the first place. If she’d stayed where she was in the woods, not far from the fire, maybe rescuers would have found her. Maybe it’s my fault she isn’t already home.

Following the logging trail seemed like a good idea, but what if it was a big mistake? What if instead of saving our lives, everything I’ve done has only made it worse?

“Sam? What’s happening?”

Delphy’s worried tone jerks me out of feeling sorry for myself. I start to pay attention to the landscape beyond the trail, and she’s right, something has changed.

It’s as if we’re rising above tree level, away from the darkness of the forest. But that’s not it. We’re still in the low hills, nowhere high enough to be above tree level. The trail has widened into a large open area populated with skinny birch saplings. Thin enough so we can see for miles, way beyond the rolling hills to the fire itself. A great black scar that runs from horizon to horizon, fed by an orange line of fire driven by wind and fuel. Like an army of flames marching through a crack in the world.



"This hilltop? It was clear-cut a few years ago," I tell her. "See all those old stumps, with the birches growing up between them? That's what happens when you cut down all the trees. New ones grow back, and the first generation is usually something like birch, which is fast-growing."

Delphy looks at me impatiently, not the least bit interested in all the cool woodsy stuff I learned at camp. She wants to know what it means for us, right now.

"I'm sorry, but it looks like this is why the logging trail was built. All those miles. They wanted to bring rigs up here to harvest the really big trees."

"What are you saying?" Delphy grabs my arm as if she wants to shake the truth out of me.

A truth I don't want to speak, because it means I've been wrong all along.

"This is the end of the trail," I tell her softly. "This is as far as it goes."



# 38.

## Because, Because, Because

**T**he Jeep runs on gasoline. Step on the starter pedal and it'll keep going until it runs out of fuel. Me and Delphy, we've been running on hope, but now that tank is empty, and it's like the black clouds of the fire have entered our brains. We sit in the field of skinny birches and old stumps without speaking for a long time. Trying not to think, because there's nothing good to think about.

We can't go back the way we came, because the fire has overrun the logging trail. We can't stay where we are, because strong winds are blowing the fire in our direction. Soon enough it will climb this hill, sweep over the top, and burn its way back down into the thick forest that surrounds these hills in all directions.

If we stay where we are, we die. But where do we go? Running off into the forest doesn't make any sense, because if the fire isn't already there, it will be.

Delphy clears her throat. "Don't be too hard on yourself, Sam. What else could we do but follow the trail? It kept us alive for, what, three days?"



"Five days."

"Five days, see? You did good."

She reaches over to pat my hand. I snatch it away.

"Don't pretend!" I'm almost shouting. "I messed up. I was wrong all along. I was so sure the logging road had to meet up with a real road. Why was I so sure? Because I *wanted* it to. Like wishing would make it happen," I add, laughing bitterly.

"You did what you thought was best."

I get out of the Jeep and scuff through the underbrush. I want to be alone and Delphy knows it. She parks herself on one of the big stumps while I wander around, kicking at stuff.

I'm not mad at her. No way. I'm mad at myself. We nearly made it! All we had to do was bring the Jeep down the incline, across the survival camp lawn, and onto the gravel road. A state road was only seven miles away! We could have been on the road, a real road, last night. Armed ourselves with flashlights or something, to find the way.

Instead, we played it safe and decided to wait until dawn. Then the bikers showed up and ruined everything. Even without them, it might have been too late, the way the main fire was sweeping around the lake.

That was my mistake, not leaving while we had the chance. Because I was scared of driving at night without headlights. Because I didn't want to wreck the Jeep again. Because I was exhausted and wanted to sleep in a real bed.



Because, because, because. *Because* is going to get us killed. Unless we manage to find another path to an actual road. Something passable by the Jeep. But what are the odds, really, in an area so remote there's not a cabin or cottage visible from the hilltop?

Face it, we're doomed. Which is so scary I can hardly hold it in my head. That I might really die. That I'll be gone, leaving my mom alone in the world. What will she do with nobody to look out for her?

I'm wandering around the edge of the clear-cut area, half-heartedly trying to spot something that indicates a road might be nearby, when I happen to look through the birch saplings to the next few hills, which are about the same size and height as this one. Except they're fully wooded.

At first what I see doesn't make sense. A red-and-white needle, barely visible in the distance. Like a skinny arrow stuck into the top of the hill. It takes me a while to figure out what it is.

Could it be? Is it possible?

I hurry back through the clear-cut area, and find Delphy on the stump, sipping from a jug of water. She looks up with a tight little smile. "You done kicking rocks?" She studies my face. "Sam? You found something, I can see it in your eyes."

"This way. I'll show you."

She follows me to the edge of the clear-cut area and pushes a birch sapling out of the way so she's got a clear view of the hilltops.



I point. "What does that look like to you?"

She squints. "A radio antenna? But what good does it do?"

"It didn't just appear out of nowhere," I say. "Somebody had to build it. Had to bring in the pieces and put them together and raise the tower and stuff like that. So they needed a *road*."

Delphy breathes a sigh of relief. "Of course they did."

Then she gives me a hug that just about crushes my ribs.



# 39.

## No Going Back

**T**he hilltop with the radio antenna is less than a mile away, but with no clear path or trail to follow, it might as well be a thousand. Probably we could make it on foot, but without the Jeep and a real road out once we get there, there's no way to escape. Not with the huge, horizon-wide fire racing at us, driven by hot gusts of wind almost strong enough to knock us down.

I don't know how long we've got, exactly, but at this rate, the fire will sweep over these hilltops in less than an hour, at most. We haven't got time to clear a path, even if we had a way to cut down trees, which we don't. So we'll just have to give it a shot, and hope the old vehicle can find its way through the scraggly trees and bushes that cover the hillside.

"Hang on." I put the Jeep in gear. "We'll be going slow, but it'll be bumpy. If you feel us tipping over, try to throw yourself clear."

Delphy nods vigorously, but doesn't say a word. I don't have to tell her how dangerous this is, plunging down a steep



hillside without a path or trail to follow. There's no going back once we head over the edge.

I pat the dashboard for luck. "Take care of us, dear lovely old Jeep, and we'll take care of you. That's a promise."

Over the edge we go. For the first hundred yards or so, the steep slope is relatively wide open, with only a few trees and stumps to avoid. I hardly have to touch the gas pedal as we roll over the rough ground, rocking side to side. Then, suddenly, we're tearing through low bushes that block our view. I try riding the brake, but it barely slows us down. Besides, if we slow down too much, we'll get stuck for sure.

Don't touch the gas or the brake, I decide. Concentrate on steering, on seeing what's beyond the next row of bushes.

"You're doing good!" Delphy shouts. "To the left, see that tree? Then you're clear!"

That's how we do it, all the way down the slope, me steering like a maniac with my hands welded to the wheel, Delphy shouting out which way to turn. Bushes and saplings smacking the sides of the vehicle as we go by, as if urging us along.

Suddenly we break through the underbrush, lurching onto a rock-strewn ledge. The Jeep starts to skid sideways. I steer into the turn and we straighten. Finally the tires get purchase on the slippery rock.

Back in control, I steer around the bigger boulders. Then there's grass under the wheels, and the ledge is behind us.





We're picking up speed, and Delphy is shouting out which way to go.

A grove of thin little saplings ahead, too many to avoid. We roll right through, mowing them down. Branches whip at us, trying to snatch us out of our seats. But we hang on. We keep going, bumping over hard ground and soft dirt, rolling through bushes, skidding around bigger trees and the occasional boulder that comes out of nowhere.

I'm so focused on steering that I don't really get it that we made it to the bottom of the slope until the Jeep slows down and starts to roll backward. I look over at Delphy. She's clinging to her seat with both hands. If her eyes were any bigger, they'd fall out of her face.

"That was interesting." She takes a deep breath.

Working our way slowly up the next hill is way less exciting, but it takes just as much effort. A couple of times we have to backtrack when the trees get too dense, but we manage. Finding our own switchback pathways when it gets too steep, and barging straight ahead whenever possible.

We finally get to the top of the hill. There isn't any part of me that doesn't hurt. My hands are so cramped I have to pry my fingers off the wheel. My legs ache and my butt feels bruised, but it's all worth it, because we can see the radio tower looming over us. Close up, it looks old and rusty. The cables that anchor it in place moan with the gusts of wind.



The air is thickening with the eye-watering stink of fire. Even if we couldn't see it—the line of black clouds closing in, the orange flames racing over the treetops—we'd know the fire wasn't far away.

We need to find a road, and fast.

The Jeep bumps over the rough meadow around the radio tower. Delphy's trying to stand up in her seat, searching for an opening that might indicate a road. Neither of us is saying much because we're running out of time. I don't know what's going through Delphy's head, but my brain is thinking crazy thoughts. Like if we don't find a road, maybe we can climb to the top of the tower to get away from the fire. Might survive if the flames sweep through fast, but it's just as likely we'd end up like chunks of barbecue.

I know, disgusting, but I can't help imagining the worst.

We roll through the meadow, dead grass crunching under the tires, and steer around a small stand of scrawny spruce trees. Eyes watering as the smoke gets worse. Desperate for a road. At this point, any kind of road will do, even another road to nowhere, just so we can stay alive for a while longer.

"Hey!" Delphy shouts, pointing. "Over there!"

What she spotted isn't a road, it's a building. A square, flat-roofed building made of cinder block, sitting in the middle of a clearing. White paint peeling and blistered on the sides, but the bold lettering over the door is still clearly visible.



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"It's him." I'm astonished. "Phat Freddy."

Delphy shakes her head. "He must have got rescued somehow. He said it was his final broadcast, and that was last night. He's gone."

"Maybe not." I lean on the horn.



# 40.

## Ride of the Falconries

**T**he man who stumbles out of the cinder-block building is a lot older than I expected from the sound of his voice. He's got a short white beard and a long white ponytail that goes almost to his waist. The ponytail reminds me of Willie Nelson, but Phat Freddy has a potbelly, and that spoils the resemblance.

Wheezing from the smoke, he barely makes his way across the unpaved parking lot. "Oh my Lord!" he exclaims, his red-rimmed eyes taking us in. "You sent me two angels in a Jeep!"

"Is there a road?"

"Access road! Hasn't been paved in years!"

"Hop in! Show us the way!" I have to shout, because the roar of the approaching fire has gotten so loud. It's not a normal sound. More like the trees are screaming. Must be my imagination, because trees don't scream, do they?

Freddy scrambles into the back.

We tear around the building and sure enough, there's an old, pothole-riddled road just wide enough for the Jeep. My heart soars—we've got a chance!



From the back seat, Freddy leans forward, pitching his radio voice to be heard above the roar of the approaching fire.

"Thanks for the ride, kids! Figured I was a fried chicken for sure!"

"Everybody hang on!" I yell. "I'll be going as fast as I can, and the road looks bad!"

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We're just starting down the bumpy access road when the fire sweeps up over the hillside, igniting the meadow and the underbrush and the stand of scrawny pines all at once. More an explosion than a fire. Like the world was doused in gasoline, and God was holding the match.

But the only thing in my head is trying to stay alive. Too late to get ahead of the fire, so we have no choice but to find a way through it. The access road is steep, and the potholes are deep. Steer hard, yanking the wheel to avoid breaking an axle. All around us, trees ignite from the top down, jumping from crown to crown. As if the wildfire has been lifted into the air, into the treetops.

A wave of scalding heat makes it hard to breathe.

"Give me your under shirt!" Delphy shouts at Freddy. "Quick!"

I can't quite see what she's doing, but a moment later, she ties a water-soaked rag over my mouth and nose. Then does the same for herself and Freddy.



We probably look like scruffy bandits, but it really helps. Breathing through a damp cloth is the best we can do under the circumstances.

Maybe you think it's brave, what we did. But courage had nothing to do with it. We were terrified and we kept going because we had no choice. Down that winding access road, avoiding potholes. Keeping as close to the middle as possible because fire is racing down both sides, exploding from tree after tree.

I may have been screaming, not that anyone noticed or cared. Screaming as much in anger as fear. Because I couldn't help thinking about what happened to my dad when the Hummer hit his truck in Afghanistan. How the gasoline tanker he was driving rolled off the shoulder of the road, turning the rig upside down. How he was trapped in the cab as the gas poured out and then exploded.

They say he was probably unconscious when it happened, but nobody knows for sure. Mom didn't want me to hear the details, or read the report from his company, but I had to know. I had to, because my imagination made it even worse than the report, which concluded he perished in less than thirty seconds.

Thirty seconds can be an eternity if you're inside a fire. Believe me, I know. That's probably how long it takes to get all the way down the access road, which is only a few hundred yards.

It finally levels out at the intersection with a paved road.



I scream, “Which way?” and Freddy points to the left. We barrel down the middle of the road—a real road, not a trail—hitting fifty miles an hour on the speedometer. Pedal all the way to the floor, with me hunched over the wheel, urging it to go even faster. That old machine purring like it’s young and brand-new. Maybe it thinks we’re on a battlefield in Korea, but wait, machines can’t think, can they?

This one can, in my imagination, because it was like the Jeep took over. I was holding the wheel, but the Jeep was steering because I was so distracted by the exploding trees that I couldn’t think straight.

I could hear Delphy and Freddy chanting, “Go! Go! Go!” but it was like something in a dream. Like they were part of a soundtrack my dad used to play, a thrilling passage that for years I thought was called “Flight of the Falconries.” I used to imagine flocks of falcons diving into battle, claws outstretched, but it was never falcons at all. It was something from old Norse folktales called Valkyries. Female angels of death who ride into the battlefield, deciding who will live, and who will die, and who will go to heaven.

I wasn’t ready for heaven. None of us were. We wanted to live, and it was the Jeep that helped us, never hesitating as that seventy-year-old engine hit RPMs that under normal circumstances would make it seize up. That day it ran cool and smooth, and somehow it kept accelerating—okay, that was me, standing on the pedal as we headed downhill—and we flew down that road something beautiful, catching up with



the flames and passing them, blowing through clouds of hot black smoke and emerging unscathed.

Well, not quite. Burning cinders lit my hair on fire again, and Delphy jumped to put out the flames with her bare hands, shouting that we're going to make it, just keep going, you're doing great, you crazy little brother! Go! Go! Go! And I'm driving through the pain and the fear and coming out the other side.

Even now I have no idea if it was me or the Jeep that found our escape route. All I remember is that the road ended and the fire was catching up, surrounding us. We came off the paved road at sixty miles an hour, practically airborne, and then we were bouncing over a hard, grassy surface. I remember a couple of cottages flashing by and knew we were close to a lake, but I couldn't see it through the seething clouds of hot black smoke.

If we'd stopped on the shore, we'd have been toast, like all those cottages and cabins. But we didn't. The Jeep never slowed down, and when the wind blew the smoke away, just for a second, there it was, right in front of us.

A long dock heading straight out into that beautiful lake.

A long dock that was as good as a road, wide enough for the Jeep, and we tore down that dock at full speed, racing like no tomorrow as the fire swept around the lake, turning everything to flame, incinerating an entire evacuated village.

Maybe you heard how we flew off that dock and out into the lake and landed in the one and only spot where we had a





chance to survive. Shallow enough so we couldn't drown, and situated in exactly the right place. The Loon Lake Miracle Spot, they called it. The one place in the entire lake where the air was far enough from the fire so it was possible to breathe without searing our lungs.

The water was only about three feet deep, but that was just enough to protect us, and to keep us cool as the rest of the world went up in flames. Two kids and an old man, sitting in a sunk Jeep with the water up to our armpits, laughing our heads off, glad to be alive.

How cool is that?



# 41.

## This Is the End, My Friends

**D**elphy told me later that I was yelling, “Nobody dies! Nobody dies!” all the way down the mountain. Honestly, I don’t remember that part. All I remember is the tops of the trees exploding like artillery shells, and the flash of super-hot air that wanted to melt us, and Freddy clinging to the Jeep like his life depended on it. Which of course it did. They say at the core of a crown fire the temperature can exceed 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit. One breath of air that hot and you’re dead.

Later I learned that the Great North Woods Fire was the largest ever in the history of the state, and that at times it spread almost as fast as the dry windstorms that pushed it. All we knew that day was that the fire kept chasing us, and no matter how fast we raced to get away, it was faster catching up.

They tried to make out like I was a hero. Ha! Some hero. I was scared the whole time, from the very first day. There were lots of real heroes in the Great North Woods Fire. The long-haul trucker who drove his rig through ten miles of blazing highway to rescue his wife and children. That team of volunteer firefighters from Belfast who died trying to evacuate



those people who had taken refuge in the church cellar. Dozens of real heroes. Hundreds, probably, and most of their stories were never heard.

Personally, if a thing can be a hero, that old Jeep deserves a medal. By the way, the grandson of the man who owned the Jeep towed it out of the lake and had it completely rebuilt and presented to his grandfather, Captain Aldrich Brown, U.S. Army (Retired), on his ninetieth birthday. I know because I was invited to the birthday party. The old man looked so much like the young man in the photograph it was eerie. I guess running a logging operation for forty years keeps you in shape, because his old uniform still fit! The coolest thing was that after Captain Brown climbed into the Jeep to try it out, he saluted me.

And then he handed me the ownership papers.

That's right. The Jeep is in our garage, under a dust sheet, waiting for me to turn sixteen. As for Delphy, we talk all the time, and we see each other whenever. Yesterday she told me she was in love with some guy she met on line—in the grocery store, ha ha, is how she put it.

However it happened, good for her.

We were both relieved to hear that the dirt bikers survived and were arrested for arson. Charles and James Binney, who destroyed dozens of homes and helped the wildfire spread, and whose hatred of outsiders landed them in jail.

Good riddance, I say.

Oh yeah, you're probably wondering what happened with



my mom. That's a really long story, but the short version is, at the height of the fire she promised herself that if I survived, she'd complete rehab. Which she did. She's back home now. Managed to keep her job at the physical therapy clinic, too, and has really thrown herself into it, helping other people. Says it takes her mind off feeling sorry for herself, and that's a good thing. When she's not working or looking after me, she's out in her garden, weeding like crazy and bringing it back to life. Today a rosebush she thought was dead started to bloom.

It's been a long time since I've seen her so happy.

The truth is, she's still pretty shaky about what happens next. I keep telling her, Mom, nobody knows what happens next until it happens. All we can do is take it one day at a time.



## Afterword: About Wildfires

I first heard about the devastating effects of wildfires from my mother. She had been a college student in Boston in the fall of 1947. That's the year Maine burned from the mountains to the sea, and the smoke from those fires tinged the skies all over New England. Desperate for help, the state of Maine sent trucks to Boston to round up young men willing to join the battle. Hundreds did, but despite their best efforts, the fires were out of control. They swept through coastal towns like Bar Harbor, to the north, and destroyed most of Shapleigh and Waterboro, to the south. An eight-mile wall of flames threatened to reduce the community of Kennebunkport to ash. Hundreds of homes were lost, and the forests of Maine were changed forever, with effects that still linger into the present century.

Later, friends of mine enlisted in hotshot crews in Montana, and they shared harrowing tales of their fight to contain fires that threatened to engulf the Bitterroot National Forest. They explained that going up against the Montana wildfires required courage, physical strength, strategy, and a certain amount of luck, much of it dependent on weather conditions.

Wildfires do not discriminate. They can erupt anywhere, if the conditions are right. In 2017, wildfires broke out in all



fifty states. What sets them off? The vast majority are caused by humans. Drought and extreme weather conditions make fires much more likely, and one spark can turn a tinder-dry forest or grassland into a full-blown conflagration. Millions of acres of forest, and thousands of homes and structures, are lost to wildfires every year—and people lose their lives, including firefighters and other first responders. The U.S. Forest Service employs as many as ten thousand wildland firefighters during fire season, and they are joined by thousands of state and local firefighters. They all have the same mission: to save the lives of those threatened by fire, to prevent or contain wildfires, and to save structures when possible.

Firefighters use many strategies to stop wildfires. Early detection can help manage the damage. On the ground, firefighters work tirelessly to stop the fire by hand, using chain saws, shovels, and other equipment to remove fuel from the path of the advancing flames. They use water trucks and hoses to wet down grass and trees in the path of the fire, and homes are sprayed to save them. As embers blow, firefighters try to prevent new outbreaks. The challenges can be unpredictable, overwhelming, and extremely dangerous. Fire trucks, bulldozers, and other big machines may be brought in. Large wildfires can also be fought from the air with planes and helicopters that drop fire retardant or scoop water from lakes or other bodies of water. Some “Super Scooper” aircraft can dump as much as 1,600 gallons per flight. When a fire can’t be otherwise reached, “smoke jumpers” sometimes parachute



in. Their supplies are dropped nearby. More than 250 smoke jumpers fought fires in 2017.

Three elements are needed for fire: fuel, oxygen, and a spark to set it off. Under certain conditions, wind and flames combine into a fire tornado. A big wildfire makes its own weather, sometimes creating hurricane-force winds. In a large fire, flame temperatures can exceed 2,100 degrees Fahrenheit. Fires can also spread at incredible speed, and wind can blow them any direction. Multiple reports said the 2018 Camp Fire in California was blown by wind gusts approaching 50 miles per hour, and *60 Minutes* reported that “at one point the fire was spreading at a rate of one football field per second.”

Wildfires are not new. Around the planet, there are many types of fires, and they have burned for hundreds of millions of years. Some wildfires occur naturally and are beneficial to the ecosystem involved; certain plants, for example, depend on fire for reproduction and healthy growth. However, the current pattern of more fires, longer fires, and bigger fires has been extremely destructive. In 2017, the states with the most wildfires were Texas, California, North Carolina, Georgia, Missouri, Florida, Mississippi, Montana, Arizona, and Oregon. The states with the most acres burned were Montana, Nevada, California, Texas, Oregon, Idaho, Alaska, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arizona. Experts have many theories to explain the trend of larger, more frequent fires in much of the U.S., but overall, the cause seems to be a combination of extreme weather cycles, an increase in drought, and stronger winds to fan the fires.



How we manage forests—and fires—is also a factor. But however you explain it, the number of acres burning is steadily going up, up, up.

If your family lives in the path of a possible wildfire, the more you can learn about fires—and the more you can prepare—the better. There are things you can do that may well save your life.

As you can see, wildfires are complex, and surviving them can be very challenging. What would happen if you suddenly found yourself trapped in a wildfire—and, like Sam, you had no phone, and no rescue team searching for you? What would you do?





# **A Few Survival Tips for You and Your Family**

## **MAKE A PLAN**

Determine the best routes for evacuation—ahead of time, if possible. Know where you'll go. Decide what to take with you, and what must be left behind. If fire is coming your way, get out quickly. Don't be like Sam and run back for your phone! In the event of fire in your house or building, have a place outside where you all know to meet.

## **KNOW YOUR ESCAPE VEHICLE**

Try to learn about wildfire conditions. It can be very helpful to get in the habit of parking so that the vehicle is facing the direction of escape. Keep the tank full. If your electricity fails, you may be able to use your car to charge your phones and devices.

## **PACK YOUR VALUABLES**

Gather up essential paperwork—such as passports, insurance company contact numbers, and personal financial information—and keep them in a sealed bag ready to grab at a moment's notice. Cash, credit cards? Food, water? Make a list of things you may need to grab quickly (including keys!). A handy suitcase or bag should contain a change of clothing and an emergency supply of medicine.



## HAVE A PLAN FOR YOUR PETS

Keep carriers and crates handy, as well as a backup supply of pet food and pet medication.

## WILDFIRE ALERTS

Download local alert apps to your cell phone. Most “fire-danger” states have such programs. If possible, pack a wind-up emergency radio and flashlights. In some fires, Wi-Fi is completely knocked out along with all electricity. Keep in touch with your neighbors and help everyone share information. Just knowing the location of the fire—and the direction it’s moving—may save your life.

In addition to observing these very basic survival tips, learn as much as you can about fires, evacuation, and safety. You will discover that even a small amount of investigation will teach you many more things you may need to know. What is the likelihood that a wildfire might happen near you—or near your loved ones? What questions do you have? Most can be answered with a little basic research, using your library and search engines. Knowledge and preparation may well give you the power to survive—and to help others!

## USEFUL SOURCES

Hundreds of articles, interviews, books, and websites were used to research the wildfire information in this book. Wildfires occur all over the world, and a vast amount of information is available. You might find the following sources useful:



US Forest Service: Public Fire Information  
<https://www.fs.fed.us/science-technology/fire/information>

US Forest Service: Wildland Fire  
<https://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/fire>

Statistics: National Interagency Fire Center  
[https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo\\_statistics.html](https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_statistics.html)

Wildfires: National Centers for Environmental Information (NOAA)  
<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/fire>

About Wildfires: Smokey Bear  
<https://smokeybear.com/en/about-wildland-fire>

How to Prepare for a Wildfire: FEMA.gov  
[https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1409003859391-0e8ad1ed42c129f11fbc23d008d1ee85/how\\_to\\_prepare\\_wildfire\\_033014\\_508.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/1409003859391-0e8ad1ed42c129f11fbc23d008d1ee85/how_to_prepare_wildfire_033014_508.pdf)

Wildfires: Ready.gov  
<https://www.ready.gov/wildfires>

What to Do if You Become Trapped Near a Wildfire: Ready for Wildfire  
<http://www.readyforwildfire.org/What-To-Do-If-Trapped/>

Learn Wildfire Safety Tips: *National Geographic*  
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/natural-disasters/wildfire-safety-tips/>

University of California, Forest Research, and Outreach: Wildfire  
<https://ucanr.edu/sites/forestry/Wildfire/>

Fleeing the California Wildfires: What to Take and When to Evacuate  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/us/fire-evacuation-california.html>



## About the Author

Newbery Honor author Rodman Philbrick grew up on the coast of New Hampshire and began writing novels at the age of sixteen. As is often true of aspiring writers, Philbrick wrote for many years before finally publishing his first book. In fact, he wrote eight or nine unpublished novels for adults, and during those years, he also worked as a roofer, carpenter, longshoreman, and boatbuilder.

Eventually he turned to the genre of adult mystery and suspense thrillers and published his first novel at the age of twenty-eight. Over the next dozen years, he published fifteen of them, several under a pseudonym.

*Freak the Mighty*, Philbrick's first book for young readers, was published by the Blue Sky Press/Scholastic in October of 1993. Among its many honors, the book won the California Young Reader Medal and was chosen by the American Library Association as a Best Book for Young Adult Readers. Now considered a classic, it has sold more than four million copies and was made into a 1998 Miramax movie, *The Mighty*. Philbrick wrote a sequel, *Max the Mighty*, because "so many kids wrote to me suggesting ideas for a sequel that I decided I'd better write one myself before someone else did."



Philbrick's rip-roaring historical novel about an inveterate teller of tall tales, *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg*, is set during the Civil War, and was a 2010 Newbery Honor Book. The Kennedy Center commissioned a theatrical production of the book, which premiered in 2012. Another novel that examines American history is Philbrick's *Zane and the Hurricane: A Story of Katrina*, about Zane Dupree and his dog, Bandit, who are trapped in New Orleans just as Hurricane Katrina hits the city. This dramatic survival tale is both heroic and poignant, educating readers about an unforgettable catastrophe. Among its many honors, *Zane* was on the Texas Bluebonnet Award Master List.

Always suspenseful and filled with fascinating details, Philbrick's novels are also celebrated for their depth and heroism. *The Young Man and the Sea* is the powerful tale of a boy trying to save his grieving father by taking a desperate fishing gamble out at sea. *School Library Journal* praised its "heart-pounding suspense" and named it a Best Book of the Year. For young adults, *The Last Book in the Universe* is set in a dangerous future where reading and writing are a thing of the past, but when a young gang member discovers books, he sparks a rebellion. It was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and a YALSA "100 Best of the Best Books for the 21st Century." Philbrick's 2016 *The Big Dark*, about social dysfunction that erupts after a solar flare wipes all electricity off the planet, was a "Recommended Page-Turner" by the *Horn Book*.



From coast to coast, Philbrick engages young readers with stories about ordinary children who are suddenly faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles—and must summon up courage they don't even know they have. For this ability to connect with readers, Philbrick's books have been given awards and nominations by more than thirty-five states—often multiple times.

For a number of years, Philbrick thought the devastating Great Fire of 1947, in which his home state of Maine burned from the mountains to the sea, would make an interesting subject for a survival adventure story. But the increasing number of wildfires nationwide convinced him to set the story in the present. After a period of research into how changing climate has made fires more frequent and more dangerous, he started writing *Wildfire*, in February of 2017.

On November 8, 2018, *Wildfire* was in its final stage of editing. That day, massive wildfires broke out in California. The Camp Fire and Woolsey Fire both raged out of control, much like the wildfire that chases Sam. Many people lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes, and more. About this novel, and the rampant wildfires that are now being called “the new normal,” Philbrick says, “I wish this book was fiction, but it keeps coming true.”

Rodman Philbrick currently divides his time between Maine and the Florida Keys.

