

LOST *ON*
THE
MOUNTAIN



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Lost on the Mountain



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CHAPTER 1

“It’s not fair!”

Sam Brooks shouted out angrily into the evening sky. He threw a fistful of rocks as hard as he could. They spun out into the air and then dropped soundlessly for nearly 1,000 feet. Sam could barely hear a small clattering far below as the rocks struck a mountain ledge. It was eerie. What if he hadn’t noticed the way the grass suddenly disappeared and the air became cooler? He would have walked right off the ledge and fallen into nothingness—and to his death.

His sister, Sara, sat huddled beneath a tall pine tree trying not to cry. Her legs were scratched from walking through bushes and prickly vines, and both knees were bleeding from slipping on sharp rocks. The sky was quickly growing dark, and strange scurrying sounds were coming from the woods.

“What are we going to do, Sam?” Sara kept asking.

Sam just shook his head.

“What if it gets cold? What if there are . . . bears? What if . . .”

“I don’t know!” Sam finally yelled. Then he turned back to Sara and took a deep breath.

“I know this doesn’t look good,” he finally said quietly. “But I’ll figure out something to do. We’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Sam paced toward the cliff and then quickly stepped back. The sharp drop made his stomach feel funny. Off in the distance, dark rainclouds were growing. Every now and then, streaks of chain lightning darted across the sky, followed by low, faraway thunder. It sounded like a threat, a quiet warning. Something bad was coming. Something very bad.

Sam crouched down and put his head in his hands. He had to think. What *was* he going to do? And how had everything gone so terribly wrong? How on earth had they ended up here?

Think back, Sam murmured to himself. Retrace everything, every detail.

Sam had a vague memory of a TV show about a teenage boy who had gotten lost at sea when trying to sail alone across the Pacific

Ocean. The boy explained that by very carefully going through all his memories from the past few weeks, he was able to figure out what had gone wrong. At the time, Sam thought it was ridiculous.

“Yeah, right,” Sam had said with a laugh. “Like some kid could really find his way out of a 12,000-mile-wide ocean by thinking about what he had eaten for lunch a week earlier.”

But now it didn’t seem so funny. Maybe details were important. And anyway, pacing and panicking and yelling surely weren’t going to help the situation. So Sam closed his eyes and thought. Surely, he did not need to think back three weeks—he couldn’t even if he wanted to. Maybe three or four days ago would work.

About three days ago, I was . . .

In spite of his fear and worry, Sam almost smiled. Had he really also shouted that things weren’t fair just this past Sunday evening?

“It’s not fair! If I don’t want to go, I shouldn’t have to go.”

Sam stood with his arms folded, glaring at his mother. His shaggy brown hair kept falling into his eyes, and he pushed it back angrily.

“What is wrong with you, Sam?” his mother asked, sounding more irritated than concerned. “This is exactly the kind of thing you always say you want to do—hiking and adventure and stuff. Plus, it’ll be a good way to meet some of the kids at your new school before the school year begins.”

“I don’t want to meet anyone else here,” Sam grumbled. “They’re all a bunch of hicks. This whole town is a waste of my time.”

“Excuse me?” Sam’s mother said, half angrily and half jokingly. “This is where I grew up, young man. So I’d watch it if I were you.”

Sam just shrugged and turned away quickly from his mother’s stare. He rubbed a painful knot just above his left cheekbone.

“We can talk about it some more during lunch, but you’re going regardless of how you feel about this town,” his mother said. “And change your shirt. You look like you’ve been rolling around in the dirt or something.”

Sam stomped to his room and slammed the door. He flung himself down on his bed and stared at the ceiling for a full ten minutes. Then he picked up the brochure and read it again:

Seven wonderful days in the Blue Ridge Mountains at Camp Crystal! In exchange for

working on the trails, young people (ages 10-15) will enjoy hiking, camping, swimming at Crystal Lake, and nightly cookouts and campfires. This terrific opportunity fills up quickly every year, so sign up now!

Sam looked at the pictures on the brochure. They showed kids around his age clearing trails with shovels and rakes. On the opposite side of the page, kids were splashing in a blue mountain lake. They looked equally thrilled to be doing either activity. The first time Sam had seen the brochure, he thought it looked like it might be a lot of fun. But now those pictures made Sam roll his eyes. He wadded the brochure into a ball and hurled it across the room. It landed on top of a pile of books that Sam needed for his classes when school started in two weeks.

Only two weeks! Sam thought miserably. He would be a freshman at Washington High School in the small town of Blueville, North Carolina—if he lived through the stupid trip to the mountains. For nearly three years, Sam had practically been counting the days until he would finally be in high school. But that was back home in Washington, D.C. Now, suddenly, everything had changed. Sam's stepfather, Don, had gotten into some kind of

trouble that Sam's mother wouldn't completely explain.

"There's no reason for you to know about all that," his mother had said. "Too many boring details."

But Sam knew enough to figure out that it probably had something to do with his stepfather's drinking too much and losing his temper. It happened all the time. Usually, Don just yelled and maybe kicked a door or broke something. But other times he would hit Sam. Sam didn't like being punched and slapped by a grown man, but he could stand it if he just shut his eyes and pretended he was somewhere else. What he couldn't stand was watching Don hit his sister or his mother.

Sometimes Sam lay awake at night imagining being big enough to fight back. If he weren't so small, he'd smack Don so hard in the face that he'd never mess with him again—much less with Sara or his mother. But Sam was the smallest 14-year-old boy in his school. It was something that his stepfather never missed an opportunity to point out.

"I could snap your arm like a twig," Don had drunkenly sneered one time as he yanked Sam's arm. "There are 10-year-old *girls* that

could punch you out! Man, you are the littlest and most useless excuse for a boy that I've ever seen."

Several times, Sam's mother had taken him and his sister to a cheap hotel for a few days to get away from Don.

"Why don't we just leave for good?" Sam asked whenever it got that bad. He couldn't understand how his mother could bear being around someone like that. Sam didn't remember his real father, but he knew there was no way he could have been as awful as his stepfather.

But Sam's mother just shook her head and said, "We can't do that."

"Why not?" Sam would demand angrily. "We could just pack up and leave and go somewhere where he'd never find us!"

Then Sam's mother would look very tired and put her arm around Sam and sigh.

"No, Sam. You don't understand," she'd say. "I just can't do that. It's not that simple, and it's not going to happen."

But now, it *had* happened.

In the middle of the night, two months earlier, Sam had awakened to some frantic shouting, a slamming door, and the sound of

breaking glass. Then flashing blue lights lit up his bedroom wall, and voices on the street, three stories below, grew louder. Sam ran to his window and strained to see what was happening, but he caught only a glimpse of a police officer putting someone in handcuffs in the back seat of a squad car. Was it Don? Sam dashed out into the hallway and called for his mother, but there was no answer. The front door to their apartment was wide open.

Sam began sprinting down the stairs in his bare feet. There were broken beer bottles strewn on the stairs, which Sam had to hop over. When he was halfway down, his mother came around the corner. On her cheek was an ugly red scratch that dripped blood down to her jaw. Sam could tell that she had been crying. In her hand was something that looked like an official form. When she saw Sam looking at it, she shoved it in a back pocket. Then she put her hand out and pointed back upstairs.

“Start packing” was all she said.

The next day, Sam, his sister, and their mother were crammed into their old beat-up Honda, headed to North Carolina. Their mother’s brother, Joe, said they were welcome to stay with him as long as they needed.

“Do you think Uncle Joe will get sick of us and kick us out in a few days?” Sara whispered. “And then we’ll have nowhere to go?”

Sara and Sam were sitting close together in the back seat, since the front seat was piled with boxes and clothes and maps.

“What?” Sam said, looking at Sara. Her lip was quivering, and tears brimmed in her eyes. Immediately, Sam reached over and put his arm around his 10-year-old sister. Sara was small like Sam, and she had been born with one leg a little shorter than the other, so she limped and couldn’t run very fast. Sometimes kids made fun of her. Sam knew what that felt like.

“No. Of course not,” Sam said quietly. “Uncle Joe’s not some jerk like Don—you know that. He’s always been great when he’s come to visit us. Remember that time he brought you that 6-foot kite? ”

Sara just snuffled and looked out the window. Sam handed her a piece of a candy bar he was eating. Other boys his age generally ignored their sisters, but Sam was different. Since the first time he had seen his stepfather slap Sara, Sam knew he needed to watch out for his younger sister. Whenever Don hit Sara, Sam sat with her in her bedroom until she fell

asleep, sometimes telling her old stories to calm her down. Maybe he wasn't very big. Maybe things weren't fair. But he could protect Sara.

"Everything's going to turn out okay," Sam said.

Up ahead, towering mountains covered in a bluish mist came into view. Sam had never seen anything like them outside of movies and magazines. They rose up into the sky like dark thunderclouds coming out of the ground. With every mile, the mountains got taller and taller. Their sheer size made Sam feel frightened in a creepy way. And worse than that, they made him feel smaller than he'd ever felt before.