

PROLOGUE

It was fall in Canada's Jasper Park, a beautiful nature reserve. Animals roamed freely: hunting, grazing, and running through the tall grass, beneath the tall trees, and along the gleaming lakes.

Four young wolves were currently at the top of the hill pushing a log into position.

"Guys, guys, guys!" their leader, Humphrey, shouted, encouraging them on to greater efforts. "It's time to ride the slide and taste the wind!"

His best friend, Salty, wagged his head. "Humphrey, you are totally genius!" Salty was the laid-back, cheerful member of the quartet.

Humphrey grinned at him in return, tongue



lolling from the side of his mouth. “Come on, guys!” he urged. “Let’s go!”

They gave one final push and the log rolled into place. Then Mooch, whose bulk was as much fat as muscle, shoved the front end and the log swiveled around, angling straight back down the hill. It teetered for a second, before slipping downward in the mud. All four wolves leaped onto it. Humphrey was in front, of course, with Mooch in back, and Salty and clever little Shakey in between.

All at once something beneath them scraped and snapped, and suddenly the log tilted forward and plummeted down the hill!

“Air wolf!” Humphrey shouted as they careened downward. The wind whipped at his face and tugged at his fur as they raced down the hill. He couldn’t believe he’d never thought of this before! This was amazing!

Nearby, another young wolf was playing in her own way.

Kate leaped out of the bushes and landed in front



of a smaller wolf. She put her head down, tail up and wagging, front legs bent, back legs stiff. Classic pouncing posture.

“This caribou is mine!” she growled.

“Kate!” her intended prey whined, backing away and almost tripping over her own tail. “I’m not a caribou, I’m your sister!”

Kate ignored Lilly’s pleas. In her mind’s eye she didn’t see her younger sister; she saw a lone caribou, trembling with fear. She tensed, then leaped. The “caribou” bleated in alarm and bolted, but Kate had expected that and her jump carried her right into its path.

“You can’t escape the greatest Alpha ever!” she bragged. And she would be! The Alphas were the leaders, the hunters, and she was destined to be one, just like her father, Winston, who ruled the western pack, and her mother, Eve. She’d make them proud.

She was so busy taunting her prey, however, that she didn’t see the tree right in front of her.

Wham! Kate ran headfirst into its trunk. The impact knocked her back on her haunches.



“Some great Alpha!” Lilly teased as she kept running.

“Oh, yeah?” Kate shook her head again to clear it, then staggered back to her feet. “Just for that, you’re lunch!” She bolted after her sister, focused on catching Lilly and pinning her before she could make it back to the family den.

Meanwhile, the boys were starting to get a bit worried. The ride had been fun at first, even for the more timid Mooch and Shakey, but it had already gone on a bit too long—and it showed no sign of slowing.

“Oh!” Mooch moaned as they narrowly missed a tree. “We’re all gonna die!”

Even Humphrey was starting to get worried. “What was I thinking?” he wondered out loud, but he knew the answer already. He hadn’t been. He was an Omega wolf, supposed to keep the peace, maintain calm, and help smooth over relations with other wolves—yet here he was, goofing off and having fun. And now he and his friends were in danger!

Humphrey spotted several rocks up ahead, and



felt a chill. If they hit those at this speed, the log would get shattered to kindling—and them with it! He had to do something! But what?

Then he had it! “Roll left!” he shouted to his pals. Obediently, they all shuffled their paws to the left—and the log rolled with them! Yes!

They swept safely past the rocks. But Humphrey hadn’t noticed a fallen log forming a ramp in their new path, and they hit that and shot off it and into the air!

Humphrey was thrilled. He hadn’t even considered the possibility of flying! “That was great!” he shouted over his shoulder as the log landed, the impact sending a shudder through him but not dislodging him from his perch. “We are flying today, guys!”

The others didn’t answer—probably enjoying the ride too much to speak, Humphrey decided. He saw a boulder straight ahead of them, its surface also angled upward, and crouched down. The log hit the boulder and went airborne again, but this time Humphrey didn’t manage to stay on. The log

dropped back down but he flew higher, nothing but air riffling his fur all around. “Woo-hoo!”

There! Kate saw something shift in a bush just ahead of her. Lilly was hiding there—she knew it! Without slowing down, Kate pushed down with her hind legs to launch herself into the air. She shot forward, bounding over the bush so she could pounce on Lilly from behind—

— and yelped when she sailed past. The bush had been at the top of a small outcropping, and now she was leaping into thin air! There was nothing else up here, and the ground was awfully far below!

“Kate?” she heard her sister call out from safely under the bush, but Kate was no longer thinking about her, or about the hunt. She was just wondering what would happen when she eventually came down!

Humphrey saw something in the air in front of him, and whipped his head around. Whatever it was, it was brown and approaching fast.



* * *

Something appeared in Kate's field of vision and she squinted. What was that? It was gray and right in front of her — and closing in fast.

The two wolves recognized each other at the same time.

“Kate?” Humphrey called out.

“Humphrey?” she replied.

Then they slammed into each other — face-first! They reached out, latching onto each other's paws, and the force of their impact spun them both around so they circled in midair.

It was a magical moment. They had grown up together, of course, and had always gotten along well, though Kate was an Alpha while Humphrey was an Omega. But now they couldn't help but be aware of each other.

Then their own momentum pulled them apart again.

“What are you doing up here?” Humphrey asked,



finding his voice first though it caught a bit. He was still reeling from their collision. . . .

“I’m practicing hunting for our lunch,” Kate told him proudly.

“Oh, good,” he replied, grinning. “’Cause I’m about to lose mine.”

“You are? *Eww!*” Kate recoiled.

“I’ll try to swallow it,” he assured her, and she realized he’d been kidding. As usual. Humphrey was never serious about anything.

Suddenly the ground interrupted her musing and drove all thought from her head and all breath from her lungs.

Wham!

“*Uhh!*” Humphrey moaned as he crashed down, too. They rolled to a stop right next to each other, and for a second they gazed into each other’s eyes, both a bit stunned.

Kate was back on her feet first, as usual. “You okay?” she asked him, shaking off her own aches and pains.

“Sure, fine, never better,” he claimed, though it took him two tries to regain his paws. “You?”

“No worries.” She started to say more, though she had no idea what, when someone called her name.

“Kate!” A massive wolf just edging past his prime stood near the edge of the woods, his deep voice echoing out through the trees. It was her father, Winston!

“It’s time to go,” he told her. She nodded and shook off the last of the impact.

“I’m coming, Dad!” she assured him, and scampered over to join him, excitement making her fur tingle. She’d forgotten what day it was!

“Where are you going?” Humphrey asked, following her.

Her dad heard his question. “She’s going to Alpha school, Humphrey,” he explained, pride clear in the rumble of his voice. “My little girl is going to learn how to be a strong Alpha wolf!” He nudged Kate with the tip of his nose, and she pranced happily, her tail wagging fiercely.

“I will, I will!” she promised. She’d been looking forward to this since her parents had first realized she was an Alpha—when Lilly had been a newborn and she’d pinned her to the ground.



“Kate will marry another Alpha one day,” Winston was saying, “and they will be the new leaders of the pack.” That was a long way in the future, though, and Kate didn’t think about any of that. All she knew was that she was going to get trained to be a real Alpha! Sure, she’d miss her parents and Lilly and her friends, but it was only for one season! “She’ll be back in the spring,” Winston said, echoing her thoughts.

“Spring?” Humphrey didn’t look any happier. “But that’s a whole winter away!”

“That’ll give you plenty of time to work on your Omega skills before you meet again, Humphrey,” Winston reminded him gently but firmly. “I need the Alphas to hunt and lead, but I need the Omegas to keep the peace and keep the pack nice and—”

He was interrupted as three young wolves suddenly leaped out and tackled Humphrey.

“Wolf pile!” Salty, Mooch, and Shakey shouted as they piled onto their friend. The four of them collapsed into a heap in the mud at Winston and Kate’s feet.

“—calm,” Winston finished, shaking his head. He couldn’t completely hide his smile, however. Though an Alpha himself, he was wise enough to recognize the value of both Alphas and Omegas, and affectionate enough to still be amused by the antics and good natures of these young pack members.

“Come on, Kate, let’s go,” he reminded her gently, brushing his shoulder against hers.

“Right, okay. Bye, Humphrey,” she said, but Humphrey was too busy wrestling to notice.

“Don’t worry, sir,” he called out. “Omega class is already in session!” But when Winston didn’t reply, Humphrey squirmed around to where he could see past his friends. He watched as Winston and Kate walked away. “Good-bye, Kate,” he whispered. Then Mooch bit his ear, and Humphrey turned his attention back to the mock battle. Somewhere beneath his playful growls, however, there was a sad whimper at the thought that his friend had gone, and a grim whisper that the next time he saw her they would both be very different.