

AVALANCHE!

At last, the day has come, the day I have been training for, the long-awaited day when I become who I have endeavored to be. I will be focused, fast, and, by the time the clock strikes twelve, I will proudly be an avalanche rescue dog.

I feel my tail begin to wag. My trainer and companion, Molly, must feel it thumping against her leg because she sits up in bed. Cushions fall about her like clumps of snow, the kind that sever from the trees when an ignorant bird steps onto a branch. Molly seems to mirror my enthusiasm. "Are you ready?" she whispers while stroking my head. There's something about her that calms me. Perhaps it's the smile that's always written across her face, or the treats and snuggles she rewards me with when I do a good job at training, or just the steady beating of her heart in her chest, where I lay my head at night. Whatever it is, I know that I'm meant to be with Molly.

I was born wild. I used to have to beg for scraps and crumbs on the street. Until Molly came along. When I first met her, there was a twinkle in her eyes unlike any I had ever seen. When I came to her, my fur matted and tangled, just trying to find something to eat, her face softened with an emotion I had never seen from a human before. Instead of looking at me with disgust and horror, I saw sympathy in the deep blue depths of her eyes. That very day, she took me home to live with her, and I have ever since.

Then, one day in February, after I had been with Molly for about two months, she took me to the ski hill, and I immediately fell in love with the silver-specked blanket that is the snow. That was also the day I started my training. I worked hard, using my expert

nose to find clothes or blankets at first, then I started searching for people. A person would hide with my favorite chew toy, and I would have to find them. Every time I did well, Molly would jump up and down with joy she couldn't contain and give me treats and belly rubs. Today, after two years of strenuous work, I will finally take my test.

After a nutritious breakfast of organic chicken dog food, Molly and I clamber into our white Subaru Outback. I sit in the passenger's seat next to her and she rolls down the window so I can stick my head out. I love to feel the wind blowing against my face and whipping my floppy ears back.

After a ten-minute car ride, we get out at our destination: Silver Hills Ski Resort, my favorite place in the world. Molly hooks me up to my leash and we board one of the swinging benches of the ski lift. Up, up, up we go, ascending the snowy mountain.

At the top, Molly gets out first, then I leap down, right behind her. When my paws hit the powdery flakes, they spray up in just the same way that the snow shoots out of the snowblower Molly uses to clear our driveway. I feel ashamed when the snow covers her, but she only smiles at me and as quickly as it came, the shame evaporates and I'm back to just feeling excited.

"C'mon, let's ace that test," Molly says, beaming.

The top of the hill is quite high. I can see people everywhere in colorful jackets, helmets, and reflective glasses, each and every one of them with a pair of skis. Soon it will be my job to protect these people.

The time for my test has arrived. I wait in the little log cabin for Molly to set it up. A fire crackles cheerfully in the corner. There are only a few people here, most of them

drinking warm cocoa and apple cider, drinks for humans only, not for me. I prefer water from my dish at home. I wander around the cozy cabin, awaiting the time of my test.

After half an hour, Molly comes in with ruddy cheeks and I'm practically quaking with excitement. I will do my very best to please Molly and make her proud.

"Alright Tundra, it's time," Molly says, grinning from ear to ear.

I bark in reply.

She puts me on my leash again and we walk out the door. My first assignment is to find three human articles buried deep in the snow.

Molly takes off my leash and I sit on her command. "And... go!" she says. I take off running, snow spraying out behind me. When I get a whiff of the first article, I bend my neck and sniff the ground. I breathe in (through my nose)... and out (through my mouth). When I think I've found the spot, I bury my claws in the snow and dig down... down... down... A wool scarf, a beige sweater, a crocheted hat! Once I find all three items, I sprint back to Molly who gives me a bacon-flavored treat and a hug.

Next up, I have to find and dig up an unknown number of items in a limited amount of time. If I get them all, I'm one step closer to finishing my test. I have forty-five minutes. I bend low and smell the frozen ground. Then I sprint with my nose down until I pinpoint the spot of the first smell. Some children point at me and giggle but I ignore them. Focus. Focus. I can't afford any distractions. I find hats, mittens, jackets, and shoes. I also find one blanket and a stuffed animal plus a yellow hair tie.

The whistle blows for forty-five minutes and I run back to find – Edward? Edward is one of the other trainers from Silver Hills. He has a gray mustache and a balding head but he usually wears a hat to cover it up. Right now he's wearing a yellowish

green beanie with a pom-pom at the top. I don't understand. His dog is Charlotte, not me. I belong to Molly. Where *is* Molly?

"Don't worry," he says, giving me a reassuring pat on the back. "All you have to do is find her."

Oh, so this is just part of the test.... I see now, I think to myself.

Edward gives me a treat and tells me to sit. Here comes the command. "Ready, and—"

But before he can get his sentence out, someone hollers, "Avalanche!"

I hear screams and shrieks of terror from everywhere, a choir without a conductor and everyone is singing the wrong song. Everyone surges toward the little log cabin and I just run. I bound aimlessly, searching for Molly's familiar blue eyes in a sea of reflective goggles. I feel strong arms lift me into the air. It's Edward. He carries me through the chaotic crowd and I hear the ear-splitting screams increase as the icy cloud swallows up a few unfortunate skiers.

In just a few seconds, the avalanche is gone, and so is the jump in my legs, the wag in my tail, the joy in my heart. I don't know where Molly is and I never finished my training so I can't go out and find her.

Everyone sits in the cabin and Edward goes around, counting those who remain unscathed. First aid is provided to those with injury. As the other dogs are let out to find the missing people, I try to sneak out with them, but Emma, another trainer, stops me. She puts a delicate hand in front of me and says pityingly, "Tundra, dear, I'm so sorry, you can't go out there without being a certified avalanche rescue dog." Then she bends

down to pet me but I pull away. Every now and then, a dog comes in with a man, or woman, or child, and every time I get excited only to be let down again.

After twenty minutes, I can't take it anymore. When the door opens again, I bolt out into the snow. All the world is white and silent. Snow covers every visible surface. I put my nose to the ground and try to ignore all the smells apart from hers.

I race down the wintery hill, following the scent of my favorite person in the world. I hold on to the memory of my owner, envisioning her face. I imagine her hands stroking my silky fur. I remember her voice shouting encouragement at me during training. Whenever I feel tired or hopeless, Molly's voice in my head keeps me going strong. The search continues, on, and on, and on. I am tired and weak, but I have to find Molly.

Finally, the scent strengthens. Despite my languor, I pick up the pace. I stop. I stand for a moment, smelling the air. I bark a shrill-sounding bark, really more like a yelp. And again. And again. And then, I dig. Icy pellets shoot up, hitting my face like miniscule daggers as my paws move faster than they ever have before. My claws are lightning bolts in a niveous sky full of clouds. My soft paw strikes a stone. I yelp in pain and see a gash on my foot. I keep on digging, my paw leaving red stains in the once perfect snow. I bury my claws deep and make a hole about the width of my food dish at home. I can see her now. Molly, with her glasses crooked and broken, her eyes closed in a deep slumber. I open up the hole some more before yipping noisily. *Woof!* I dig some more. *Woof! Woof!* I jump into the hole. *Woof!* I thunder, pawing Molly in the ribs. *Wake up...* I think ...*Please – wake up.* She doesn't wake. I howl miserably and bury my head in my paws. I lay my head on Molly's chest and listen to the *thump, thump,*

thump of her heart. The sound I always fall asleep to. The rhythmic drum inside her chest beats in time to mine. My eyelids begin to droop.

I wake with a start. I feel warm. Someone is stroking my head and humming a soft lullaby. I'm weak and there's a sharp pain in my paw. I force my eyes to open to see a bloodied bandage wrapped around my foot. I whimper, softly.

"I know," a female voice says soothingly. "It hurts, I know.... Shhh.... Quiet, now go back to sleep."

The voice is Molly. I sit up and my weakness seems to vanish. Molly and I are on a couch in the little cabin lit by firelight. Molly doesn't have her glasses, but of course I recognize her all the same. I leap off the couch and limp towards her on my three uninjured feet. I lick her face with my pink tongue. She beams at me, her face expressing my feelings. "You saved me. If it wasn't for you, I probably wouldn't be here right now," she says, grinning at me, "Tundra, you are a very good boy."

The rest of the day is spent in the little cabin, the people drinking hot chocolate, and me drinking water. They eat marshmallows roasted over the fireplace and I get a special treat of bacon and peanut butter, my two favorite foods. Everywhere I look, people congratulate me and caress my nose.

Then, Molly and the other trainers gather around me. Edward takes a step forward and says, "You have served us well, Tundra. You have trained and worked hard and it is certainly time for you to join the others and become an avalanche rescue dog." Everybody claps as Edward places a medallion around my neck.

Molly kneels next to me. "I think we can consider your training complete." And everything feels just as it should be.