

Tahoe to Yosemite

Sivia woke up slowly. For a moment she thought that she was back home in her warm bed, her dog licking her cheek as if to remind her that it was a school day and she had to get up. But no. That was the leak in the tent slowly dripping dew onto her face. And even though it was a school day, she wouldn't be able to attend. Not while she was stranded somewhere in the wilderness, miles from the nearest town and people.

Sivia checked her watch. It was 5:30 in the morning. They had been out in the wilderness for about five days now, almost 24 hours longer than they had planned. The rockslide that had buried part of the hiking trail had put them wildly off track. After long hours of trekking through unmarked wilderness they had stumbled upon a trail and followed it blindly until nightfall. Now, with their supplies running out and the nearest civilization untold miles away, things were getting desperate.

Sivia tried to push her dark thoughts away.

Soft morning light shone through the mesh of the tent as she sat up. The crinkling of her sleeping bag woke up the other two in her tent. Cheri yawned, her long brown hair covering her face and draping down past her shoulders as she climbed out of her sleeping bag. Liz woke up more slowly, rolling over, then scrunching down farther into her sleeping bag until only the top of her white-blond head was showing. Finally, she got up too, rubbing her eyes.

“I was hoping this was all a bad dream...,” Liz mumbled, shivering in the cold air.

“I’m sure we’re almost to Yosemite,” Cheri said cheerfully as she pulled on her overshirt- always the optimist. Sivia smiled as she laced on her boots. There was no one she would rather be stuck in the wild with than her friends.

The five girls had begun their backpacking trip on Thursday after school, and since there was no school on Friday or Monday, they had a four-day weekend. Liz’s parents had driven them up to Tahoe where their trail began since the girls didn’t quite have their driving permits yet. The girls- Sivia and her four best friends- were supposed to have been at Yosemite National Park, which was at the end of the trail, by noon on Monday. Today was Tuesday.

They had no cell service. The unmarked trail they had found yesterday seemed to lead in the right direction, but they had no way to know for sure. Ever since they had first left the trail, a newspaper article about a lost hiker had been circling through her head. A young woman had started hiking the Pacific Crest Trail alone. She had disappeared sometime after stopping in Tahoe. Allegedly she had wandered off the trail. No one had heard from her since.

Well, that was all the more reason to start early, Sivia told herself firmly. She unzipped the tent flap and stepped outside. The sun was just peeking over the horizon. Sivia checked her watch again. 5:50am. Willow and Wrenly- her friends that had been sleeping in the second tent- were probably awake by now.

Sivia walked around her tent to check on them and yelped as she almost ran into a bushy-haired girl in glasses coming in the other direction.

“Wrenly!” Sivia said, startled.

“Sorry Siv,” the shorter girl straightened her glasses, “but there’s something you have to see.”

Sivia frowned at Wrenly’s serious tone and followed her toward the bear barrels. The lightweight portable barrels made of thick plastic- nicknamed bear barrels- were meant to keep their food safe from any bears that might smell it. The lid closed firmly with a locking mechanism that could only be opened with human hands. Every backpacker in these areas was required to carry one, and keep it shut when not in use.

But Sivia’s bear barrel was open, and the food inside of it was gone. Willow was kneeling by the empty container, studying something in the dirt.

“Wait- you guys didn’t open it just now for breakfast or something?” Sivia clarified.

“We found it like this,” Wrenly bit her lip. The three girls were silent for a moment.

“There’s footprints here,” Willow looked up at them tensely, “people footprints.”

Sivia frowned and knelt down next to her. The prints were soft, but they were undeniably from the bare feet of a human. Sivia ran a finger over the slight depressions in the soft dirt.

Footsteps crunching in the earth announced that Cheri and Liz were coming up behind them.

“What happened?” Liz asked worriedly.

“Some of our food is missing,” Wrenly said, screwing the lid back on to the barrel.

“The last of our snacks,” Sivia sighed, “now all we have left are the freeze-dried meals.”

“We should get going,” Wrenly said, standing up.

“Will no one just say what we’re all thinking?” Willow said loudly. Everyone looked at her, still kneeling by the footprints. “We’re the only humans out here. One of us obviously got hungry and stole food for themselves.”

Silence. The girls looked at each other, suddenly suspicious.

“Oh, come on!” Cheri cried, “why would any of us do this! It’s got to be a misunderstanding!”

“Really? Because to me the facts are clear, little Miss Sunshine,” Willow snapped, finally standing up. Cheri recoiled.

“They walked with bare feet- now we can’t compare our boot treads, and we all have similar foot sizes so it could have been anyone. Whoever it was took all the food in there- so we can’t judge them on their preference. And no one heard anything!” Willow huffed, glaring at the empty barrel.

“You seem to know a lot about the thief’s methods,” Liz muttered.

Willow opened her mouth to retort, but Sivia cut in.

“Please! Just settle down!” Sivia looked at her friends helplessly, “there’s nothing we can do right now except to start hiking.” Wrenly quickly nodded, and the others started breaking camp in icy silence. Sivia checked her watch again before she went to help Cheri and Liz collapse the tent. It was 6:30am.

The girls ate a quiet breakfast and were on the trail at 7:35am. No one spoke as they hiked, each girl absorbed in her own thoughts. They were all ravenous by the time they stopped for lunch at 12:45pm, and they devoured their freeze-dried beef stew quickly. A few minutes after they had started hiking again, Wrenly- who had taken the lead, stopped by a wooden post and a crossroad in the trail.

“Look!” she said excitedly. The trail perpendicular to the path they were on didn’t seem to have a name, but there on the post- with a double-sided arrow pointing in the direction they had come and towards the path in front of them- were the weathered words *Tahoe to Yosemite*. The girls grinned at each other. They had been going in the right direction. Encouraged by this, they didn’t stop again until the sun was setting, and it was time to set up camp for the night. It was 8:00pm.

Dinner was a solemn affair. The girls had meager portions of Alfredo which left their stomachs unsatisfied, and they had all realized that though they were going in the right direction, they had no idea how close they were to the end of the trail.

After dinner, they all retreated to their tents. Sivia lay on top of her sleeping bag staring up through the flimsy mesh of the tent towards the stars. It was 10:15pm. She couldn’t seem to sleep. Her stomach grumbled, and Sivia thought about the food thief.

Which one of her friends had been so hungry that they had stolen food from everyone else? She didn't even want to think about it, but she forced herself to. Whoever had done it before might try it again tonight. Maybe her sleeplessness could be put to good use. She'd catch the thief red handed.

Time ticked by. As Sivia lay there, her uneasiness grew. She checked her watch again. 11:35pm. She laid back down. Something didn't add up. Why would one of her friends take the food so obviously? Whoever it was had left the lid off, almost like they didn't care. And anyway-

CRACK!

Sivia froze, all senses on alert. The noise had come from outside. A stick breaking under someone's foot. Sivia scanned the tent. Cheri and Liz were still asleep.

Sivia silently got up, unzipped the tent, and stepped out. Was it Willow then, or Wrenly? Willow had been strangely tense recently, so maybe it was her...

Sivia peeked around the corner of her tent. Then her jaw dropped, and she stopped, half hidden from the bright starlight by the shadow of the tent.

A stooped shadow- much too tall to be Willow or Wrenly- carefully unscrewed the lid to Wrenly's bear barrel and lifted out a freeze-dried packet of biscuits and gravy. The figure opened it, scooped out the freeze-dried food, and seemed to eat it with gusto.

Behind her, Sivia heard soft footsteps. She turned. Liz and Cheri stood behind her, wide awake.

“What is that?” Liz hissed.

“Better question- what do we do?” Willow whispered softly. Sivia jumped. Willow and Wrenly stood next to Liz and Cheri. She almost laughed. It seemed that everyone had stayed up to catch the thief. Sivia felt a strange sense of relief. At least it wasn’t any of her friends.

Sivia took a deep breath and felt confidence surge through her. She knew that her friends had her back. Sivia stepped out from behind the tent.

The figure stopped eating, a biscuit halfway to its mouth.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” Sivia asked boldly. Only the knowledge that her friends were behind her kept a waver out of her voice.

The figure stepped forward cautiously, out from under the trees. Starlight shone on thin and haggard features. Ripped clothing- hiking clothing. Bare feet. Sivia gasped in surprise. The lost hiker. They had found her.

Four Years Later

“Happy Eighteenth Siv!” Cheri managed to say around a large bite of freeze-dried ice-cream bar. Wrenly and Liz echoed her statement and Willow thumped Sivia on the back. Sivia grinned, ice-cream and graham cracker flecking her teeth. She was finally an adult, and there was no better way to celebrate than by going backpacking with her best friends. Sitting around the blazing fire as the stars came out reminded Sivia of another backpacking trip so long ago. She smiled at the fond memories.

Four years ago, the day after they had found the missing hiker, the girls had gotten to Yosemite. They had reached the end of the trail at exactly 7:05pm. Their parents had been worried sick about them and had been camping out in the parking lot by the end of the trail to wait for the girls. There were smiles all around as the girls recounted their adventures. They were in the local newspaper for some days after that, reporters gobbling up their story. The lost hiker- Delilah Nova- had been safely reunited with her friends and family and had started a TV show about her experiences alone in the wilderness.

Looking back on it, the whole thing seemed like an exciting adventure.

A shriek of laughter brought Sivia back to the present. Willow stole the rest of Wrenly's ice cream as Wrenly watched Cheri lob marshmallows across the fire at Liz, who caught them in her mouth. Wrenly gasped in outrage a second later as she realized what Willow had done. A chase around the campfire commenced, Liz and Sivia cheering Wrenly on. Cheri crammed the rest of the marshmallows in her mouth surreptitiously. The night wore on, the air filled with the low hum of conversation and laughter.

And Sivia realized something. The adventure had only just begun.