

THE SAPPHIRE SAGA | BOOK 1

THE SAPPHIRE SWORD



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CHAPTER ONE

It was all the dog's fault—the altogether unexpected end of the world—but none of them would know this until after breakfast. For the O'Ryans, a respectable family residing in the mountains of New Mexico, it was a day like any other. The sun had risen as glorious as usual, the morning air still tinged with piñon pine. And the mule deer grazed peacefully along the creek beds where the tall grass slumped heavy with dew.

There was no reason whatsoever to imagine what was coming.
No sign of pending doom.
No hint of apocalypse.
Not yet.

“Breakfast is served!” Michael O’Ryan declared, strutting toward the kitchen table, where he plopped down a sheet pan full of cinnamon rolls as big as his fists, soft and steaming and covered with buttery cinnamon glaze.

His children quickly gathered for their favorite breakfast.

“I’ll do the honors,” Scout said, taking up an oversize spatula with typical pageantry. She was the youngest and the only girl and sat proudly at the head of the table as she dished out the goods, hefting the colossal pastries onto everyone’s plates. With much delight and many sticky fingers, the children devoured their giant portions as their father returned to the kitchen to remedy the mess he’d made.

Flint, the middle child with a penchant for comic books, sat hunched over the table, curly blond hair shrouding his eyes. In one hand he

clutched a giant, half-eaten cinnamon roll, his other hand so covered with icing that he had to turn the colorful pages of *Adventures of Superman* #425 with his teeth in between enormous bites of frosted pastry.

His older brother, known to all as Slugger, scowled at Flint's apparent lack of table manners. "You look like a dog," he said.

Flint ignored the comment and continued eating, but this only served to stoke the coals of his brother's annoyance. "Will you eat like a human, please?"

"Slugger!" Dad called from the kitchen, where he wiped down a countertop with a rag. "He can eat however he wants. It's Saturday."

"But Dad!" he protested. "You always say you're trying to raise well-mannered children and not a pack of hyenas." He pointed to Flint. "Look at him!"

Their father finished cleaning, draped the dish towel over a shoulder, and joined them at the table. "It's true I promised your mother I'd raise you like decent human beings. But, like I said, it's Saturday. Everyone knows that rules regarding manners, formality, and proper nutrition don't apply on the weekend. If they did, I would have made you wear a tie to breakfast and fed you tofu omelets and almond milk."

"Gross!" Flint looked up from his comic in wide-eyed disgust.

"Nasty," Scout agreed and licked her fingers of residual cinnamon.

Slugger took a deep breath, narrowed his eyes at his father, then proceeded to stuff half a pound of cinnamon roll into his mouth.

"Saturday, indeed!" Dad smiled, and he dove in as well.



By ten o'clock, the three children had packed their lunches in backpacks and slung canteens over their shoulders, eager to gather the wild cherries that grew on the mountain behind their house. Come rain, snow, or shine, they considered themselves modern-day Lewis and Clarks, commissioned to explore the world. Their adventures

were aided by perfectly sized walking sticks, hand-carved by their dad from ash tree branches the year before.

“Remember,” Dad shouted as they darted out the back door and toward the woods. “Be back before dark!”

Pine trees spiked the mountainside in all directions as the children jogged along a trail they’d trodden countless times before. They knew every curve, every boulder, every fallen log along the way. The chances of getting lost were minuscule at best, as long as they stayed on the path.

“I hope the deer haven’t got to the cherries yet,” Flint said between labored breaths.

“I know. Me too,” Scout said. “Last year I didn’t get a single taste. So sad!”

“Will you two stop worrying?” Slugger yelled back over his shoulder. “There’s a cherry grove we’ve never even tried yet on the far side of the mountain, way down toward the base.”

“You mean by the old quarry?” Flint asked.

“Yep.”

“Dad said not to go that far. He says it’s too dangerous.”

Slugger scoffed. “False. Dad never said not to go there *exactly*.”

“He did too!” Scout protested.

“Actually,” Flint interjected, “you’re both right. Dad said the quarry was too dangerous. But he never actually forbade a visit.”

“Right!” Slugger proclaimed.

“I say we just go and be extra careful,” Flint continued. “If there are cherries to be had...”

“Yeah,” Slugger said, punching Flint on the shoulder and almost knocking him off his feet. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

Flint winced in pain but kept running.

“Well,” Scout said, “if we end up getting in trouble, I’m claiming innocence!”

As the trail wound up and up the mountain, growing steeper by the moment, their exhaustion muzzled any remaining arguments. Once

they reached the summit, marked by a cluster of granite boulders and a huge pine tree with charred bark (the lone survivor of a past forest fire), they paused just long enough to catch their breath and marvel at the crystal blue sky above and the glorious green wilderness below.

“Onward we go?” Slugger said, then took off without waiting for an answer.

Still winded from the hike, the younger two siblings moaned with displeasure but followed nonetheless. At least the rest of the journey was downhill. Following the trail as it meandered along bluffs and gullies, they finally reached the foot of the mountain, marked by unusually gargantuan pines and spruces, none of them victimized by the merciless logging practices of previous generations. The forest canopy was so dense, it created a perpetual twilight for the adventurers below. The air was still, and a thick layer of brown, dead needles covered the ground. As trees towered above them like marble columns and birdsong rang like handbells from some distant hall, the O’Ryan trio felt as though they walked through an ancient cathedral, and their voices hushed with reverence.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Scout whispered.

Slugger pressed on ahead. “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

Flint called out from behind his brother. “I doubt we’ll find any cherries down this way. The deer surely would have eaten them by now.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Slugger said.

“Look! I see a clearing up ahead!” Scout shouted.

They quickened their pace once more until the ancient pines gave way to shorter scrub brush and cedar and a scattering of oak trees. The path turned right, then left, then headed straight on at a sharp angle until it opened into a grassy field dotted with wildflowers. They waded out into the swaying weeds and stopped.

Slugger looked around a moment, narrowing his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “If I remember right...the quarry should be about three hundred yards that way.” He pointed to the west. “And the cherry trees grow right up to the edge of it.”

"The *edge* of it?" Flint asked. "Are you serious?"

"Totally and completely."

"Dad wouldn't like this," Scout said softly, guilt already weakening her resolve.

"My gosh, you two sound like a couple of old ladies. I'm taking you to the edge of the quarry...not *into* the quarry. Besides, when your bellies are full of cherries, you'll thank me for taking the risk."

The two younger siblings just stared back, feeling a mixture of both hesitation and hunger. They wanted those cherries. But they didn't want to risk the trouble.

Sluggo rolled his eyes and finally carried on, jogging across the field and into the far line of shorter trees that quickly dropped off at an unsettling slope. Before they knew it, they were smack-dab in the middle of the biggest stand of cherry trees any of them had ever seen, fruit so thick and ripe on every limb that the branches sagged toward the ground.

Scout laughed out loud, reached up, and plucked four in one hand. Then she popped them all into her mouth. When she turned to face her brothers, bright red cherry juice was running down her chin. She spit out four pits like a machine gun. "Yummy!" she squealed.

"See!" Sluggo grinned wide. "I told you!"

"Sorry for doubting you," Flint said, attacking the nearest branch with gusto.

Sluggo plucked a single cherry and tossed it in the air, then caught the glistening red orb in his mouth as deftly as a circus performer. As he chewed, he made his way closer toward what he could tell was the unmistakable edge of the quarry in the distance.

"I'll be right back," he said to the others.

"Oh, no you don't!" Scout said through a mouthful of cherry mush. "You're trying to go to the quarry."

"Yep."

"Well..." She wiped her mouth, swallowed. "I'll go with you to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

“That’s very kind of you.”

“I’m coming too,” Flint called out, running after them.

When they reached the quarry, none of them were prepared for its mind-numbing proportions. They stood shoulder to shoulder, mere feet from the drop-off, their mouths gaping.

“This pit has gotta be two hundred feet deep,” Flint said.

“And that’s just to the water,” Slugger added. “Probably double that or more to the absolute bottom.”

“It gives me the creeps,” Scout said, clutching the side of Slugger’s T-shirt to keep from falling in.

“What was this quarry for?” Slugger asked no one in particular.

Flint wasted no time to answer. “Dad told me people thought there was marble in these hills. Like a hundred years ago or something. They dug and dug but never found anything. Then they finally abandoned the whole operation right before World War I or something, when all the workers went to fight.”

“And now it’s a big, bottomless lake in the middle of nowhere,” Slugger said. “All the roads heading in or out of this place are long gone...overgrown or washed out. Nobody can get in here.”

They all looked on in silence for a moment, a light breeze rippling their hair.

“Something is strange about this place,” Scout said as she observed their surroundings.

“What is it?” Flint asked.

“Look at the lower branches of the trees.”

“Yeah...so?”

“All the leaves are still there.”

“Okay,” Slugger said. “What are you getting at?”

Scout sighed. “On other spots of the mountain, these lower leaves are all gone. Eaten by deer or elk or whatever. But not here. It’s like the animals are afraid of the quarry.”

“That would explain why the cherries were untouched,” Flint said.

“Exactly! But why?”

Out of nowhere, the distant howl of a dog sliced through the trees, echoing off the quarry walls below. The children froze.

“What...was...that?” Scout whispered.

A second howl arose, this one even louder, tinged with fear and pain.

“Might be a coyote,” Slugger said.

“Or a wolf,” Flint suggested.

“Dad said there aren’t many wolves left around this area. They were hunted out like a million years ago.”

“Not a million,” Flint corrected.

“Geez. I was just being dramatic.”

“Well, whatever made that awful sound is a ways up the mountain,” Slugger said. “I say we investigate.”

“Are you crazy?” Flint said. “For all we know, that thing is rabid and ready to eat us all. I say we just head home.”

“Okay, Kentucky Fried,” Slugger said with a laugh, then took off.

“What does *that* mean?” Flint asked.

“He just called you a chicken,” Scout said and darted up the mountain toward her brother. Flint shook his head and followed, albeit reluctantly.

When they reached the clearing, their nostrils were met with a stench so sudden and pungent it watered their eyes.

“Gross! What is that?” Flint asked.

“I don’t know,” Slugger said, grimacing. “But it wasn’t here before.”

Scout noticed something lying deep in the grass up ahead. She darted forward, spry as a gazelle, before her brothers could stop her.

At first it looked like a clump of fur. But when she crouched low for a closer look, she could see it was a dog. The smell was stronger there, flies buzzing about in a hungry frenzy. Was the animal dead? Why hadn’t they smelled or seen it on the way in? She took a furtive step forward, eyes set on the creature. It wasn’t moving, but she could see the telltale rise and fall of its chest. It was alive, but barely. Something

was curled around its lower legs, black thorny vines pushing out from a crack in the ground. She narrowed her eyes at such a strange sight.

“Boys!” she cried.

In seconds, Slugger and Flint were by her side, panting. Slugger yanked her back by the shirt collar.

“Let go of me!” Scout protested, squirming free. “It’s just a puppy. I think it’s hurt.”

“A puppy? Let me see.” Slugger pushed past her and dropped to his knees. Flint joined him, holding up his walking stick for protection just in case. Indeed, Scout was not lying. But this was too big to be a puppy.

“Looks like a kind of poodle mix.”

“Or a Bernedoodle,” Flint offered. “I read about them one time. It’s a poodle and Bernese mountain dog mix. Supposed to be pretty smart.”

Slugger shrugged. “Well, whatever it is, it’s not doing too hot now.”

Scout squeezed her face between her brother’s shoulders and reached down to touch its coat.

“Don’t!” Slugger grabbed her hand. “It might be diseased. Look at those vines!”

“Will you calm down?” She wrenched her hand free and ran her fingers along its upper back, gingerly at first, then with increasing pressure.

Flint examined the animal from head to foot, taking in every detail he could. “These vines look poisonous to me. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He reached out a trembling hand.

“Don’t touch it!” Slugger barked.

At that moment, the vines twitched. They pushed farther up from the ground and wrapped tighter around the dog’s legs, all the way up to its smooth-skinned belly. A black, tar-like substance dripped from the vine as it moved, hitting the trio harder than ever with a fresh stench.

“Oh my gosh, that’s awful!” Slugger held his nose, backing away. “Let’s leave it alone.”

“No!” Scout protested. “This dog needs our help.”

"It's dead, Scout. Can't you smell that?" Flint said.

"It breathed!" Scout cried, pointing to the animal's ribs. "I saw! Didn't y'all see it?"

"I don't know," Flint said, scratching behind his ear. "Maybe."

"What do you mean, *maybe*? Don't you know what breathing looks like?"

"I know exactly what breathing looks like, you little squirt!"

"Don't call me that!"

"Shut it!" Slugger interrupted. "We've wasted enough time already. Let's just get out of here."

"Absolutely not!" Scout declared. She reached for a fallen branch and began the tedious and noxious process of pulling the vines away from the canine's body.

"Wait a second!" Slugger said. "What do you think you're doing?"

The brothers watched in wide-eyed wonder as their sister managed to clear the vines, despite the many thorns that seemed to cling to the dog with an unsettling tenacity. Minutes later, after Scout's teeth-clenching effort, the vines lay limp on the ground and the dog was free, though still covered in foul slime. Scout reached down and scooped the dog into her arms, though it was more than half her size.

"I'm taking this poor creature back home. It'll die if we don't help it. Mountain lions will get it for sure. I'm gonna nurse it back to health."

"What are you, some kind of vet? Come on!" Slugger tried to reason with her, but she was already a dozen feet up the trail with the dog hanging limp in her arms. The brothers watched her go, traded knowing looks, then with a string of shrugs and sighs, followed their pigtailed sister all the way up the mountain and down toward the house, taking turns carrying the animal along the way.



"Now, what do we have here?" their father asked when he appeared in the back porch doorway.

His children had already wrapped the dog in a blanket. Scout rested her hand on its head and looked up with eyes brimming. "It's hurt, Daddy."

"That I can see," he said. "Not to mention filthy and soiling Mom's favorite patchwork quilt." He crouched on his haunches. "Where'd you find it?"

They told him.

"Can we keep it?" Scout asked. "Please!"

"You can't be serious!" Slugger crossed his arms. "It's practically roadkill. I give it a day before it's crawling with maggots."

Dad reached down and placed his hand on the dog's side. He waited a moment, then looked up. "It's not dead. Not yet, at least."

"What are we gonna do with a half-dead Bernedoodle?"

Dad shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "Nurse it back to health, I suppose."

Slugger shook his head as adamantly as his neck would allow. "You do realize that I've been asking for a Siberian husky for as long as I can remember, which you've refused. Now Squirt here brings home a borderline corpse, and you give in just like that?"

Their dad explained his change of heart. "I'm not promising we'll keep it forever. I'm just saying we should take care of it until it can walk on its own or until it dies, if that's what is going to happen. It's the least we can do."

"Yeah!" Scout shouted victoriously as she lay down beside the dog to look into its sleeping face.

Flint sat down beside his sister. "What should we call it?"

Without hesitation Scout kissed the cold, wet nose of the dog and declared her decision. "Robin Hood," she said, beaming. "Its name is Robin Hood."

None of them had any idea what unstoppable calamity had just been set in motion.