

## CHAPTER 1



I glanced at the ground and nearly fell. My spot in the tree hadn't looked anywhere near as high a half hour ago when I was still standing on the solid earth. I wrapped my arms around the big branch in front of me and tried to focus on breathing.

The machine on the ground roared, and I jumped. It looked like a gigantic forklift, and it was pointed right at me.

"You ladies need to get out of that tree right this minute!" a voice shouted from the ground.

All I could see was the top of his yellow hat, but I knew it was the guy in charge of the construction crew, and he seemed to be getting angrier by the second. When he'd first discovered the three of us hanging from the branches, he'd simply laughed and said we'd proven our point and could come on down. When we refused, he got grouchier.

Kim was perched in a branch across from mine, trying desperately to hold her knees together in the denim skirt she had unwisely chosen to wear. She looked nervous. "Hayley, are you sure this is a good idea?"

I nodded emphatically, even though I was starting to doubt this

plan myself. "Yes," I said. "I know it is. We have to get their attention, and we have it now."

"Hell, no! We won't go!" shouted Ruby. My eighty-two-year-old powerhouse of a friend was seated on a lower branch, but she had managed to climb up into the tree just the same.

"You tell 'em, Ruby!" I called to her.

"Power to the people!" Ruby yelled. Her high voice sounded nothing short of delighted by our predicament. I couldn't blame her. This had to be far more exciting than anything that happened at the senior home.

I watched a squirrel run up a branch just under mine. It stopped and gave me a quizzical look.

I shrugged my shoulders. "We're doing this for you, too, you know," I told it. It was unimpressed.

"Holy cow, Hayley," said Kim. "The newspaper's here!" She started to point, but she swayed a little and put her hand back on the branch.

I looked in the other direction. A news van had pulled into the parking lot of the senior home. It was just a little newspaper from the nearest town big enough to have one, but it would do. We needed some press.

"Do they report online?" I asked Kim. "Like live?"

Kim nodded, always proud to tell how her neck of the woods could keep up technologically with the civilized world. "They do!"

I waved at the two people who tumbled out of the van. "Yoo hoo! Over here!"

A woman in a long coat shielded her eyes to look up toward me. She waved back. The man who was with her was busy fumbling with his sweatshirt.

"We're up here!" I called.

The woman walked straight toward us, ignoring the construction vehicles. The workers had decided to sit down on the rock fence and open a few cans of soda while they waited to see what

was going to happen. The foreman was talking to the guy with the overgrown forklift.

The reporter yelled something to me, but I couldn't hear it over the truck.

"Turn that thing off!" I called.

The machine quieted, and the foreman groaned.

"What's happening?" the reporter yelled up at me.

"We're protesting!" I yelled down. "They want to take out this whole area for city parking. It is not cool!"

"Dirty rats!" screamed Ruby.

"What are your demands?" the reporter asked loudly.

I looked at Kim. I hadn't really thought about demands. Did we have demands? Kim shrugged.

"We demand that they leave this space alone for the seniors to enjoy!" I said.

Applause broke out on the ground, and I noticed that the senior center residents and staff had also gathered outside to see the event for themselves. An old man in a wheelchair raised his fist into the air.

"Hell, yeah!" cried Ruby, her high voice cracking in the wind.

"But the senior center doesn't own this property?" the reporter asked loudly.

I shook my head. "No. But they love it! The city should give it to them!"

"Have they offered to buy it?" she asked.

"Nope!" I said. "They can't afford it."

"So you expect the city to just give this property to the senior center?" she asked skeptically.

"That's right!" I answered, although it was starting to sound a little far-fetched, even to me.

The man with the sweatshirt had gotten himself situated. He stood next to the reporter and held a large camera. He focused on me and started taking pictures.

I shot him my best portrait smile. I was cursing myself for not applying more lip gloss. I hadn't thought that there'd be pictures.

"Over here, camera man!" shouted Ruby. I looked down in time to see her lift her top, exposing breasts that looked like sandbags.

"Miss Ruby!" Kim gasped.

"Hell no, we won't go!" yelled Ruby, wiggling her shoulders so her breasts flopped back and forth.

The photographer turned bright red and quickly moved his camera back to me. The reporter was holding out her phone.

"Are you recording?" I asked.

"We're live!" she called.

"Miss Ruby, put your shirt down!" Kim thundered.

Thankfully, Ruby paid attention and covered herself again.

"These senior citizens worked their whole lives for this community. They put their blood, sweat and tears into making it a wonderful place for all of us. And this is how we repay them? We take away the place where they like to stroll and enjoy nature? We take away their beautiful view and replace it with a parking lot? They deserve better!" I announced loudly.

Some of the construction workers began clapping.

"She's right!" one man shouted. "Grandmas deserve to see the trees!"

An appreciative rumble went up from the rest of the group, and I beamed at them.

The foreman took off his yellow hat and looked up at me. "We're just trying to do our job, lady."

"Not today!" I announced.

The group from the senior center and the construction workers began to cheer.

The foreman sighed and got out his phone.

I looked at Kim, and she shrugged in reply.

"Are you calling the pigs?" Ruby demanded. "Go ahead! Call them! They can drag me away like they did in '68!"

I made a mental note to ask Ruby what had happened in '68.

A few minutes later, the sheriff's car rolled into the lot. Rick Thomlinson sidled out and looked up at us.

"I smell bacon!" yelled Ruby.

"Kim Reilley, is that you up in that tree?" called the sheriff.

"Hey, Rick!" Kim responded. "Hayley's up here, too!"

"I can see that," he answered. "Listen, you girls gotta come down from there."

"Hell no!" Ruby shouted.

Rick ignored her. "Kimmy, this is city business."

"I pay my taxes," said Kim, brilliantly.

"Yeah!" I put in. I just wanted to add to the conversation.

"If you ladies will come down right now, we can let this slide," said Rick. "If you don't, then we're going to have to arrest you."

"You're going to have to drag us away in handcuffs," I said. "But you have to get us first!"

Rick sighed. He and I both knew that he wasn't going to be plucking us out of the tree.

"Be reasonable," Rick pleaded. "This is wasting the city all kinds of time and money."

"Then send them away," said Kim. "We're not coming down."

The guy in the big machine had climbed down to have a soda with his buddies. The foreman suddenly took his place and turned on the giant forklift.

Rick rushed over to him and began talking excitedly.

I couldn't hear a thing over the rumbling motor.

"What are they talking about?" I asked Kim.

She shook her head in confusion.

Then the machine lurched forward. Rick jumped back and fell to the ground, yelling and cursing.

The huge piece of equipment was coming right at us. Kim started screaming. Rick had pulled himself back up and was chasing the machine.

Kim and I locked eyes again. We were both thinking the same

thing. If he really was going to play chicken, at some point, we might have to jump out of that tree.

Ruby was still gleeful. She was singing an old protest song, and the crowd from the senior center had joined in.

Suddenly, I heard a loud and obnoxious noise. Someone was laying on a car horn. I looked over to see my boyfriend, Joel, standing next to his truck. Having caught everyone's attention, he ran toward the scene. He joined Rick, who had been hanging onto the side of the equipment. Together, they convinced the foreman to stop. He turned off the engine and everything suddenly went quiet.

Joel turned to look at me. His eyes held a mixture of frustration and humor, and I knew that it was a dangerous combination.

"Hayley, what in tarnation are you doing?" he demanded.

"I'm saving these trees!" I said. The construction workers and senior center residents cheered.

My boyfriend put his hands on his hips. "By getting yourself killed?"

"He wasn't going to kill me," I protested, although I wasn't entirely sure it was true.

"What's it going to take to get you down from there?" he asked me.

"Tear gas!" screeched Ruby. She waved to Joel. "Hello, handsome!"

"Hey, Miss Ruby," said Joel dismissively.

"They have to stop the project!" I said.

Joel turned and said something to Rick. Rick went to the foreman and engaged in some heated whispering. Then Rick ambled back to Joel, and Joel looked up at me.

"They've agreed to stop," he said. "For today."

I frowned. "I want them to stop forever!"

"The agreement is that they stop for today, you get to speak your piece to the city, and you and Kim don't get arrested," Joel said. "I think you should take it."

I looked at Kim, and she nodded. It wasn't total victory, but it was enough.

"Make the construction go away," I hollered down to Joel.

Rick gave a signal, and the construction workers dispersed. Some of them got into the heavy equipment and others into their cars. They filed out of the parking lot like a parade.

When the last piece of machinery had left the property, I began to edge myself toward the ground. Ruby was low enough that Joel could simply lift her off her branch. Kim snagged her skirt on a tree branch, and Rick had to climb up to help her get free.

When we were all safely on the ground, Joel took us in. "You three are a whole lot of trouble."

Rick patted him on the back. "I'll leave them to you," he said. He turned to us. "Make better choices, ladies. I do not want to have to arrest any of you."

Ruby's smile was huge. "Are we doing it again tomorrow?"

I gave a short interview to the reporter while Joel and Kim got Ruby settled back in her room. I got the contact information for the newspaper and told them I would let them know when I'd be pleading my case to the city. I wanted as much publicity as possible.

When we were ready to leave, I heaved myself into the truck next to Joel. My muscles were sore from holding onto that tree branch. Kim got in next to me.

I was finding it hard to read Joel's mood. He was angry, for sure, but he also seemed lighthearted. Maybe it was because he'd just saved us from being knocked over right along with the trees.

"You turned left," I commented as we drove away from the scene. "Aren't you taking me home?"

He shook his head slowly. "Oh, no. We're meeting Josh at the office. And we're all going to have a little talk."

I bit my lip. "Are you mad?"

He nodded.

"Is Josh mad?" I asked.

He nodded again.

I turned to Kim, who twisted her mouth into a nervous smile. Her husband, Josh, was very strict. If he was mad, we might be in for some serious trouble.

I looked back at Joel. "How did you know we were there?"

He stopped the truck and turned to look me in the eyes. "I saw Miss Ruby's boobs on Facebook."

I knew enough to keep my mouth shut for the rest of the ride.