

FIRESTORM



Maisie Chan

A decorative border at the top of the page featuring various types of leaves and branches in shades of grey and black.

Chapter 2

The taxi drove along a wide highway from the airport. Winnie could feel her eyes closing as the hum of the engine lulled her to sleep. Marcus rested his head on her arm. She woke up with a jolt as the taxi began shuddering, no longer on smooth road. Winnie looked out of the window and saw that they had turned down a dirt track.

“Nearly there!” Mum said.

Winnie already knew from photographs that Auntie Fong lived away from the main roads, not in a busy city like Winnie’s family. There were green bushes with dry-looking leaves and tall trees Winnie didn’t recognise. She could see a white, single-storey house up ahead, and around it a concrete yard.

Auntie Fong’s children had all grown up, so the swing and slide in the yard were falling apart and rusted. An old, white four-by-four car was parked in the driveway.





There were no other houses around as far as Winnie could see – no shops, no signs of people.

The taxi stopped and Winnie undid Marcus’s seat belt, then her own. She jumped out as Mum paid the driver. The house was a little run down, and she couldn’t help being a bit disappointed. It definitely was not a luxury holiday resort or a fancy hotel.

“Do you think we’ll be okay to hike in the Blue Mountains tomorrow?” Mum asked the driver.



“We could just lie on the beach,” Winnie mumbled. “Dad would have chosen the beach.”

“Your dad is not here!” her mum replied, crossing her arms. “We’re going for a hike, and that’s that!” Mum grabbed a bottle of sunscreen and began squeezing it out, furiously, on to Marcus’s arms.

Winnie sighed. She knew when it wasn’t worth trying to argue with her mum, and now was one of those times. “Fine. But can you check the fire app first?”

Mum rubbed the cream off her hands and swiped at her phone. “Yep, it’s showing green, so we’re good to go. We’ll drive to the nature reserve car park then walk from there. It’ll be a great day, you’ll see!”

The sun was beaming down when they arrived at the car park in Auntie Fong’s car, and Winnie was glad her mum had reminded her to bring a hat.



They put on their backpacks and began following the signs to the waterfall that Auntie Fong had recommended. Winnie noticed the sounds of the birds were different here. She stopped and looked around to see if she could spot some birds or animals they didn't have back home.

"Come on, Win, don't dawdle, or it'll take us ages to get there!" her mum said, striding off, Marcus skipping along beside her.

Winnie grunted. *Dad would have wanted to see the animals too*, she thought. But Dad wasn't here. She caught Mum and Marcus up, hoping that the waterfall really would be as great as Auntie Fong made out.

At first, they were surrounded by grassland and bushes, but after an hour it had changed to lush, green forest. Winnie's feet were beginning to ache. She hoped the waterfall wasn't too much further. It felt as if they were just walking and walking. *At least they had Mum's phone if they got lost*, Winnie thought.



She looked left and right instead ... and saw that the rocks on the left side weren't *too* steep. Was that a way out?

She had to try. She couldn't sit and do nothing. And she knew she had to act fast otherwise the helicopter might leave.

Winnie edged closer to the edge of the cave mouth and put out a foot on to the rock. She tried to remember what she'd learned when she'd gone bouldering in school last year. She needed to find a good, deep hole to secure



her toes inside, and then use her leg strength to push herself up. She grabbed on to a tiny ledge above with a hand and, without another thought, pushed upwards. Her breath caught in her throat. She was out. And the helicopter was above her!

She found a grip for her other foot to steady herself, and then leaned her body against the rock so she could use her hand to unwrap the sodden headband Mum had given her. She waved the soaked fabric in the air, like she'd seen people do on TV. This had to work!

