

Chapter One

Family Getaway

“Hold still, will you?” Mom tugs the strap across my shoulder and snaps the buckle. As she pulls the slack end, I feel the load tighten securely in place.

The backpack is heavier than I thought. If she expects me to carry this for the entire hike in, then she is crazy! Besides, I feel ridiculous. Dogs aren't meant to carry backpacks. That's donkey work, and I'm not a donkey! Can't she see that? If another dog sees me, I'll be the biggest laughingstock this park has ever seen.

“Can someone help me with my pack?” Mom asks, as she wrestles with her over-stuffed sack.

Derek, our stepdad, bends down and braces himself to lift and steady the pack. “Ready, Abby?” he asks Mom, as she eases her arms through the straps.

“*Ooofff!*” she says, as Derek lets go and the full weight releases itself upon her shoulders. Her knees wobble. She totters, but doesn't fall down. Mom reaches out and grasps the car's side mirror, helping to keep her upright.

Long before the sun rose this morning, Mom and Derek urged the sleeping children out of their beds, to get an early start on our summer family vacation. We drove many long hours to reach this Northern Ontario park. It was a long, long ride. I sat strategically between Graham and Evelyn, to keep the siblings from bickering all the way here. After sitting and playing referee for so long, I'm anxious to get moving and hike into the backcountry, where we plan to camp beside a quiet, secluded lake.

Mom has spent the last month getting us excited. “Just think how nice it will be to get away from all this for a while,” she said, waving her arms over her laptop, scattered business reports, and piles of dirty dishes. “We'll get out into the woods, slow down, and enjoy some peace and quiet.”

The sun beats down on us in the parking lot, and my black fur soaks up the heat. I'm restless, waiting for the family to load up their things and start the hike into the woods. Mom fusses over the kids. "Do you have this?" and "Did you remember that?" she asks repeatedly. All the while, Graham pretends not to hear her and focusses rather on taunting his sister.

Still revelling from his recent graduation from elementary school, Graham rubs it in that his younger sister will be all alone at the school with no big brother to protect her. Evelyn rolls her eyes and smirks, probably quite relieved at the thought that she will have a couple of years of freedom without her brother and his friends bugging her in the schoolyard.

Graham's antics are stifled as Mom smothers sunscreen over his fair, freckled face. Graham struggles, but his resistance is futile. Evelyn, also fair, has already taken care to protect her skin and is wearing her floppy-brimmed, hot-pink sun hat. Already ready, she waits patiently for the others.

I'm bored standing around and remember that Mom packed dog biscuits in my pack. I decide that it's a good time to grab a snack before we head deep into the woods. I stretch around to reach the pocket that contains the dog biscuits, but I can't quite reach. I stretch farther and shuffle my feet. Not quite far enough. As I reach more and more, I begin to turn in circles. I swirl faster and faster.

"Look! Toby's trying to catch his tail," Graham squeals, laughing.

In my frenzy, I bump into Mom. That makes her stumble, and the weight of her backpack topples her over. She's like a heavy tree that can't stop once it starts falling. Down to the ground she thumps, landing flat on her back. She looks like a turtle stuck on its shell, her arms and legs flailing helplessly as she tries to right herself.

Graham falls over, laughing hysterically. Evelyn, always keen to help someone in need, rushes to Mom's side.

"I'll help you, Mommy," she says, as she reaches down to grab one of Mom's arms. She tugs with all her might, but her mere seventy pounds is no match for Mom and her pack. Evelyn can't budge her.

Mom grunts and mumbles under her breath. I make out my name, but not much else. I think she's pretty annoyed.

Derek, ever patient and always there when his wife needs him, gently takes Mom's other arm and lifts her easily to her feet. Evelyn and Derek dust off Mom's clothes while she continues to mutter my name.

Graham, still rolling on the ground in hysteria, gasps for air and says, "That was epic!"

"You're a goof!" Evelyn tells him and walks away, shaking her head.

“You okay, Abby?” Derek asks Mom.

“Yes,” she sighs. “I think all my parts are in working order.” Mom pats her body down to double check. “I probably squashed all the food, but it’s mostly granola, so we should be fine.”

Derek brushes the loose strands of long, blond hair off Mom’s face and tucks them behind her ears.

“Shall we, then?” Derek gestures that we should start walking to the trail head and begin our trek.

I rush to Graham and lick his face furiously, to urge him to get up. The rest of the family is leaving without him. Licking Graham only sets him off on another bout of laughter.

I despise it when the family doesn’t stick together or when one of them strays off. I’m what you would call a mixed breed. Not good for presenting in a dog show, but “perfect for a family pet,” as Mom always says. That’s fine with me. Who wants to get all fluffed up for a dog show, anyway? That would mean I would have to bathe often. That’s no fun.

On one side of my family, I come from a long line of working farm dogs that were bred to keep the herds together. So when my family splits up and some stray from the others, like they are doing now, it frustrates me. It’s my job to round them up and bring them all back together.

As the others walk away, I shout at the writhing, deliriously laughing boy, “Let’s go! We’re going to lose them.”

“Okay, Toby. I’m coming. I’m coming,” Graham rolls to his knees, stands, and wipes the laughter tears from his red face.

I take off after the others and hear Graham shout after me, “Wait up! I can’t run. This backpack is too heavy!”

I yell to the others to wait for Graham, but they trudge forward, anyway. I run back and forth between the family and Graham, as he slowly catches up. By the time we reach the far end of the parking lot, the herd is back together.

The trail we follow winds down past the public beach. We’re not the only family that is excited about the start of summer vacation. The beach and water are crowded, as families celebrate the onset of summer and splash joyously in the water.

I stick very close to the family, since the rules in the parks are quite strict about dogs being off-leash. I tuck myself into our pack and try to look as inconspicuous as possible. If my family forgets to put me on a leash, then I can run free once we are safe and out of sight in the forest.

It’s an unusually hot day for early July, and the sun beats down relentlessly. The glimmer of the sun off the lake is stunning. Mom stops to look around at the scenery for a moment. She is funny that way. She will spend hours looking at trees or rocks or water, but she never pees on

them or jumps on them, and she rarely splashes around in them. It seems like an enormous waste of time, if you ask me.

“Oh, kids, I’m so glad to finally be on vacation. I have such a good feeling about this trip. I think we are going to have a wonderful adventure,” Mom says in a day-dreamy voice.

You’re not going to have an adventure by standing around all day, I think. “Let’s go!”

My bark pulls Mom out of her reverie, “Okay, Toby. Let’s get hiking.”

We follow the trail over an old footbridge that crosses a bubbling brook. The water swirls around the rocks as it rushes past. I keep my nose as close to the old wooden boards as possible, to see if I can catch a glimpse of a fish swimming in the gurgling water. I am ready to jump over the side if I see one. What a great first meal in the woods that would be!

The trail is narrow and rugged immediately after the small bridge, with no room to walk side by side. I get stuck walking behind Mom. She walks *so* slowly. The back of her legs bump my nose with each step. I figure that if she feels me right on her heels, she will pick up the pace. No such luck.

The tall grasses and weeds edge the trail, and the rocks jab through and poke up randomly. Every couple of steps, I hear one of the family stub a toe and stumble. People with their two legs make me laugh. They always have such a hard time keeping their balance.

I smell him in the air before I hear him speak. He blends in with the woods, and I know that he is from around here. “Good morning,” he says, as we approach.

Before I poke my head around Mom’s leg to see who has spoken, she whips out the leash with astounding speed and expertly latches my collar. She is like a rodeo cowboy who stealthily strips a bull’s freedom away with a slip of the rope. I had no idea she could move that fast!

I guess the man works for the park, and she does not want to get caught with me off leash. I should have seen it coming.

“Good morning,” Derek replies. “Mighty fine day, isn’t it?”

“Quite so,” the man responds. The tan cargo shorts and the Killarney Park T-shirt confirm my guess. He is one of the park rangers. “May I see your permit, please?”

Derek searches through his front pants pockets, then the back ones, then through the side pockets. He pulls out paper and maps and his wallet and a bunch of odds and ends. He looks perplexed at not finding the permit. Just as he is about to give up and return to the car to look for it, Mom calmly hands a small paper past Derek to the ranger. “Here it is.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replies politely.

The ranger examines the permit carefully. His eyebrows crease and he looks serious. “I see that you are heading in for a five-night stay. That’s a fair hike you have planned, and quite

aggressive for the young ones. You're sure the children are up for a trip like that?"

"You bet your bottom dollar, they are. They are fine athletes and well-oiled machines," Mom chuckles. Grinning, she adds, "It's me you should be worried about."

Shifting his weight nervously from one leg to the other, the ranger advises, "I must let you know that there has been some bear trouble in the interior. We're keeping watch. Nothing too alarming, mind you, but you should keep your eyes open."

"What should we look out for?" Derek inquires.

"Any sign of a bear—scat, footprints, claw marks, a visual, anything. Be alert. The season has not been particularly good to them this year, and they are hungry. They are quick to learn that campers are a fairly easy source of food. So please take precautions."

I'll be darned if I'll share my food with a bear! I'm the only one who has brought anything remotely tasty to eat. All the family brought for themselves is granola and nuts. I'm not sharing my kibble or dog biscuits with anyone!

"Don't worry. We have our bear bells and whistles. We're all set for safety," Mom says confidently.

"Very well, then. Have a wonderful hike."

"Thank you."

"Good day."

We walk past the ranger. Once he is out of ear shot, Evelyn asks, "What is 'scat'?"

"It's animal poo," Mom says.

"Poo! Ahh ha ha—" His laughing fit renewed, Graham can barely walk straight.

Mom and Evelyn look at each other, roll their eyes, and keep walking. Graham staggers along, gasping for air and clutching his gut, as the mention of poo tickles him silly.

I am eager to be out of sight of the ranger and am hopeful that Mom will release me. The lush, humid scent of the forest calls me, and I am raring to run free through the trees.

Evelyn hikes silently, probably replaying the ranger's words through her mind, "Mom, what was that man talking about?" she asks, sounding worried.

"He said that we will probably get eaten by bears. They're really hungry this year, and they love eating little girls," Graham teases. His laughter bubbles out before he gets through his next words. "And don't step in the bear poo!" He sends himself over the edge, with unrestrained laughter cramping him up, and he falls to the ground in a fit of hysterics.

"Graham! Stop that!" Mom scolds, her eyes lancing invisible daggers at him.

Not bothered by Mom's tone of voice, Graham rolls in the tall grass, tears streaming down his freckled, pink face, as he enjoys being the sole audience to his own humorous antics. Mom and Evelyn continue on the trail, shaking their heads and muttering, "Boys . . ."

Derek follows them with a slight grin, privately entertained by the same humour that has taken over Graham.

The family hikes on and leaves Graham behind. I pull back and forth, wanting desperately to have Mom release me so that I can run back for him, but she holds me tight.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," she says to Evelyn. "The ranger was just letting us know that we need to be respectful and careful of the bears in their environment." Mom smooths Evelyn's long blond hair from her face and leans down to kiss her worried, crinkled forehead, "Everything will be just fine. We just need to stick together."