



Prologue

The dog waited in the backyard for her until it was dark. He was anxious and hungry. She was never this late—where was she? He could smell other people's dinners, the delicious food smells wafting out from the surrounding houses. Chicken next door. Salmon across the street. Steak barbequing a few houses down. A thin icicle of drool escaped his mouth, and he sighed and put his chin on his paws.

He spent the whole night outside, something he'd never done before. It was scary sometimes with the shadows shifting and the bushes rustling. He'd been brave and stopped himself from howling, because that's the kind of dog he was. In the morning, he heard the neighbours leaving for work, one front door and car door slamming after another. Soon the street was quiet with morning stillness. And she hadn't returned yet.

He nosed at the back door, hoping it would open. He peeked into the house through a low window, but nothing had changed since yesterday morning. He barked, once, but nobody came.

The dog was very worried now. He had to find her. He trotted through the yard and slipped through the loose fence boards into the woods. He wandered all day, though he didn't find her. But he wouldn't give up.

Chapter 1



SAM

AS SOON AS SAM HUDSON walked through the door to her house, she knew her favourite meal was cooking for dinner. Of course. It was Tuesday—stew day. Sam loved chicken stew, but she clenched her fists. If only something exciting would happen. Something different. Something she couldn't predict by the day of the week. Something that would make her life—*her*—less boring.

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It drove Sam crazy, the way her mom organized every corner of her life. Sam was only allowed to choose the clothes she wanted to wear and which books she would read. And *nothing* she said to her mom made her listen. "Don't worry about making decisions. You're only eleven. Leave that to me—it's my job." It made Sam feel like there was an iron band clamped around her throat.

While Sam stood there inhaling the damp smells of salty chicken, carrots and celery, Mom materialized from upstairs. Sam's small delight in the stew smells trickled away. Even when Piglet, her West Highland terrier, launched himself at Sam and quivered with happiness that she was home, Sam felt her throat close.

"Hi, sweetie! What did you learn today?" asked Mom, as she did every afternoon.

Sam dreaded this moment. If her answer wasn't thoughtful enough, Mom's forehead creased and her lips tightened, creating a snaky knot that twisted in Sam's stomach.

Sam liked learning stuff at school, but she didn't like *talking* about it. Talking about it made her feel all itchy, like ants were running up and down her legs. But Mom wouldn't leave her alone until Sam came up with a good answer. She smoothed her hands along Piglet's silky back, thinking.

"Well...we took a nature walk in the woods and learned about how the plants and animals and bugs all work together."

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"Excellent!" Mom clapped her hands. "The interconnectedness of an ecosystem relevant to our own bioclimatic zone!"

Sam sighed. Mom was always like this. It was just a nature walk. Sam didn't say that she had really been looking around the woods for spiderwebs covered with dewdrops.

"Come on, Sam, snack time for you. We've got to feed your brain!" said Mom.

Sam sat at the kitchen table, munching her way through crunchy apple slices spread with almond butter. She wished they were cookies and Kool-Aid, but that would never happen because Mom only believed in healthy food. As usual, Piglet waited for the bits Sam didn't want. His little paws bounced up lightly onto her legs. He made her smile, and then her smile widened.

One hour. She had one hour to do whatever she wanted. It was Tuesday, which meant that after school she'd gone to her hour-long computer tutoring session at Mr. Fremont's house. Soccer practice was later that night. Mondays were piano lessons, Wednesdays and Fridays were Tae Kwon Do and Thursdays were Girl Guides. On Saturday mornings Sam had swimming lessons and on Sundays there were soccer games, which she hated. Plus, after dinner there was forty minutes of homework per night, and twenty minutes of either piano or Tae Kwon Do practice. Mom wanted Sam to be well-rounded, whatever that was supposed to mean.

But here was a sliver of time stolen from her schedule. Sam could almost feel the soft deep couch in the living room, Piglet tucked up against her. Soon would come the sweet slipping feeling of disappearing into a book's world. Right now she was reading *Anne of Avonlea*. She melted right inside Anne's adventures—adventures that could *never* happen in her own world, especially not with her mom watching and hovering and organizing everything.

But Mom had other plans.

"Sam, you need to clean your room," she said firmly. When Mom used that tone of voice it was useless to argue with her. Actually, thought Sam, it was *always* useless to argue with her. She tried anyway.

"But Mom! I'm so tired. I just want to hang out on the couch for a while."

"No, Sam. Your room is a mess. Up you go. I'll check it before dinner."

Sam filled up with crackling energy. Bolts of lightning should shoot out of her eyes, she thought. Then she could set her mom's shoes on fire so her mom would have to dance away, like a witch in a fairy tale.

When she got to her room, Sam slammed the door and leaned against it. Her room wasn't *that* messy. What would happen if she didn't tidy it? She scanned the clothes on the floor and the toys in the corner. Her book was here! She could read after all.

Sam opened the book. She waited for the world to melt away. Usually the creaking of the house, the faint distant hissing of traffic on the street outside, the

rustling of the trees, all disappeared in seconds. Today, nothing. Sam sighed. She was too restless. Piglet nuzzled, looking for pats. But still the iron band squeezed Sam's throat.

Then a movement in the window caught the corner of her eye. Sam threw down the book, startling Piglet into a yap, and walked over to the window.

Something big and black was standing in her backyard, looking up at her. It was standing in the middle of the grass, in the wild backyard, all alone. Wagging its tail. Where had it come from? Forest tumbled down into the yard, with thick bunches of ferns, salal and blackberry bushes that bears sometimes snacked on. Was it a bear? Sam felt her heart beat faster with excitement.



Chapter 2



SAM

SAM STARED AT THE BLACK CREATURE. This wasn't a bear. It was a huge dog.

The dog stared up at Sam steadily and insistently. She tried smiling at it. The dog wagged its tail in response. But that was crazy—there was no way it could see her up here.

Sam made a decision in one heartbeat and deposited Piglet on her bed. He couldn't shimmy down the rope ladder with her, and anyway, he would be a menace with a new big dog in the yard. He'd just yap his silly head off. Sam needed to be stealthy.