

Chapter One

Ben's dog took off running. He was racing toward two Canada geese, his ears back, head low. Big wet clods of sand flew up behind him.

"Come back!" Ben yelled. "Ranger, *come* back!"

The geese were flapping hard, struggling to get into the air. Nothing was going to stop Ranger. Ben charged after him, wished he'd kept the leash on. One of the geese was slower and got off the ground just as Ranger leaped up. He stretched into the air and snapped at its feet. The geese flapped, feet still dangling, and flew low. Out over the river.

Ranger plunged into the icy river. It was a deep, wide, powerful river.

"Noooo!" Ben clamped his hands to the sides of his head. He loved Ranger with all of his heart. He hollered again. But

it was no use.

The geese landed in the river about a hundred yards out. Something in Ranger's instinctive dog brain kicked in. He was on a mission. He was swimming straight for the geese. Until the current caught him.

"Ranger." This time Ben's voice was a whisper.

Ranger was two years old, young and strong. A seventy-pound golden retriever. His breed made him an excellent swimmer. But it was spring run-off and the enormous power of the river had Ranger drifting toward a log jam. The jam was a tangle of logs and branches snarled three feet high. It was anchored to shore by one massive log, roots pointing skyward.

Ben's thoughts were a scramble. When Ranger hit the log jam maybe he could climb out to him. But Ben had a darker thought. A log jam in the current could be a death trap.

"I'm coming, Ranger," there was a hitch in Ben's quiet voice. Then a shudder. "I'm coming, boy." Ben was running, but he kept his eyes on his dog.

Ranger was swimming hard. All four legs tearing at the water but he wasn't going to escape the log jam.

He hit it. Then he disappeared under water.

Ben pictured his dog under the jam. A horrible feeling slithered into his gut.

Finally, Ranger's head popped up. He got his front paws

on a log. It looked like he might be able to climb up. Then he slipped. He pawed frantically at the water. He was thrashing madly, panicked.

When Ben got to the jam, he splashed into the icy river, to his knees, his thighs. Ranger looked like he was stuck. He was plowing his front paws on the surface but not going anywhere. Ben thought the dog must be caught on something. His heart hammered in his chest.

The river was frigid. Numbing. Ben threw one leg over, up on the massive main log, felt a tear of skin on his inner leg. He clawed his way up onto the log. On all fours, he clambered along. Ranger's front paws were slowing. Ben wondered how long he could last. He had to move carefully, knew what could happen if he slipped into the jam.

Ben crawled over the crisscross of heavy branches. Something snapped under his weight, and suddenly, he was up to his chest. The current sucked at his feet and legs. He kicked his feet and hauled himself back up.

Ranger had gone quite still. His paws had disappeared under water, and all Ben could see was his head. He was nose to the sky, head tipped back. He was running out of gas.

Ben was breathing hard. Crying on the inside. He was very close now. He stretched out on the debris. Branches stabbed him in the ribs, the legs. He inched forward just enough to get

a grip on Ranger's collar.

A branch stub was jammed under the dog's collar. Only three inches long but enough to prevent the poor dog from getting away. With one hand on the collar and a fist full of Ranger's back, Ben heaved with everything he had left. It was just enough. Ranger finally clambered out of the river. For a long moment, they splayed on the jumble of branches, Ben's arms tight around his soaked dog.

With one hand on Ranger's collar, Ben crawled over the debris back toward shore. He realized how incredibly cold he was. He was sopping. His fingers were numb. His jacket, jeans and boots weighed a ton.

On shore, Ben stumbled a couple steps. It was a grey day, the sun just a smudge in the low cloud cover. The wind sliced down the river and cut right through him. Ranger shook himself from head to tail and threw river water in all directions. Something caught Ben's eye. Someone was coming toward him. He recognized her.

"Are you okay?" It was her. Lucy Campbell. She was a girl from his track and field team at school. Not just *any* girl. The girl he had been thinking about twenty-four seven for the past three weeks. Now, she was just a stone's throw away. "Are you okay?" she called out again.

Ben didn't speak, couldn't seem to find his voice. He just

gave her a thumbs up.

“I saw you on the log jam.”

She wore big rubber boots and carried an armload of sticks. Why the sticks? A bunch of skinny sticks the size of broom handles. Maybe if his brain was working properly, he’d figure it out.

“You’re soaked. You sure you’re okay?” She touched a gentle hand to his arm.

Ranger seemed to be back to his old self, recovered, giving Lucy his dog smile. Then, he let loose a full-body shake of wet dog spray. She barely flinched.

Her long ginger hair caught the breeze like a wave of silk. There were blonde highlights that looked like sunshine. She was nearly as tall as Ben, and it was her long powerful legs that made her the star of the track team. She was his age and held the district record for sixteen-year-olds four-hundred-metre hurdles. She also held the record for girl-always-on-Ben’s mind.

“What the heck happened? You must be freezing.”

Ben *was* freezing. He felt like he was going numb. He started to explain. It came out in stops and starts. It was like he couldn’t talk properly.

She cut him off. “Oh my gawd, Ben. You could have hypothermia.”

He’d heard of hypothermia. Tried to remember. It was

when you got so cold your core body temperature dropped. Your organs could stop working.

“Where do you live?” She took him by the shoulders. Looked in his eyes. “How far?”

“Page Road.” It was about a kilometre back to his place. He realized his teeth were chattering. He tried to stop. Couldn’t.

Lucy glanced back over her shoulder, back where she’d come from. She touched a fingertip to her lips. He started thinking about her full lips. At least part of his brain was working.

“You should come to my place.” She pointed down the river. “Yeah, it’s the best idea.” She started nodding. It was like she was trying to convince herself. “You have to come to my place.” She took a long breath, took his arm, and turned him in that direction.

Ben couldn’t think of a subdivision or of any houses in the direction they were going. But he knew his brain was taking weird turns. Weird or not, one thing he knew for sure ... he loved being this close to Lucy Campbell.

Something had made his heart skip the first time he saw her at track practice. She had a winning smile and beautiful freckles. Freckles danced all over her cheeks, her arms, her legs.

He’d paid too much for a trendy haircut, tight at the sides, long on top, hoping she’d notice. He was a well-built

kid. Trained for shot put, javelin, and discus. As soon as he met Lucy, he started thinking of ways to talk to her. Even considered doing hurdles himself. But that was a joke.

The trail through the young aspens, pine, and red willow was tight. They could barely walk side by side. She kept a tight grip up around his bicep. Ranger followed at their heels. When they came to an opening in the trees, she spoke in a strong voice. Her tone had an edge he'd never heard. Like she was challenging. "Here we are."

Ben was cold to the core, knew his thoughts were scrambled. But he knew where they were.

A homeless camp.

Chapter Two

The camp was made up of an assortment of tents and tarps, maybe ten or so. All shapes, sizes, and colours. A few bicycles stood waiting, but there was no mess, no garbage, like Ben had seen on the news. A dirt path ran through the tents. The camp was surrounded by tall weedy grasses and young aspen trees wearing bright spring leaves.

Ben stumbled a step, and a woman took his arm. She was his height and had a strong grip. Lucy hurried ahead still carrying the armload of sticks and disappeared into a large canvas tent.

A man took Ben's other elbow and introduced himself. "I'm Chuck. Chuck Bob." He had warm brown eyes and a long braid down his back. His ball cap said Native Pride. He and the woman wore matching blue jackets.

“I’m Sheri Chan.” The woman pointed to the crest on her jacket. “Chuck and I do outreach work.” Ben knew outreach workers helped street people, the vulnerable. But he’d never thought of Lucy like that.

“You picked quite a day for a swim.” Chuck’s eyes smiled. “Me, I’m a bit of a chicken. A real fair-weather swimmer.”

Ben stumbled again, but Sheri and Chuck had a good grip. Ranger followed and snuffled the grass.

Ben had never met a homeless person. He’d skirted around them and was always wary, on guard. Was Lucy homeless? She had said, *my place*.

“In here.” Up ahead Lucy waved from the door of the canvas tent. “The fire’s going.” Maybe it was Ben’s imagination, but Lucy seemed to have a defiant look about her. Her jaw was clenched, and there was something stormy in her eyes. Like she was saying, I dare you to say something about this.

Ben was surprised how warm it was in the tent. And it was tidy. There were a few rugs on the floor and a curtain divider at the back. Probably beds back there. It was one of those great big wilderness wall tents that Ben had seen advertised for hunters. It had tall canvas walls and a high-angled roof. There was room for a table, chairs, and a little stove was blazing. It was cozy. Ranger sat on a mat by the door.

“Sit here, Ben.” Lucy pulled a lawn chair next to the stove.

Chuck and Sheri stayed outside, but Chuck poked his head in. "Have some of this." Lucy poured steaming tea from Chuck's thermos. Ben sipped the sweet tea, and it gave him a shot of instant warmth. He drank half the mug but really needed to get his wet things off. He thought about it but couldn't ask, *do you have a spare set of clothes?*

Lucy answered his question. "Want to change into these?" She had a pair of coveralls. Without waiting for his answer, she handed him a towel, unzipped the front door, and stepped out.

Ben could hear bits of conversation from outside. There was Chuck's voice, Sheri, Lucy, and a fourth voice that he didn't know. A woman's soft voice. The coveralls were a bit tight but not a bad fit. There was a pair of clean wool socks in the pocket. The coveralls had a Kal Tire patch on one side of the chest and a name patch on the other side. Sandra. Who was Sandra?

Ben drained the last of the tea and held his palms to the fire. The tent was really getting toasty, and he could feel the warmth coming back into his arm and legs. Ranger was lying down. He looked content. Nearly asleep.

"How are you doing?" Lucy called from outside the door.

"I'm good," Ben used both hands to try to fix his hair. "Come on in." What did he look like in the coveralls with a messy mop of hair? So much for the overpriced haircut.

Lucy came in, and a woman followed right behind her. “I’m Sandra Campbell,” the woman had the soft voice he’d heard outside, “Lucy’s mom.”

“I’m Ben,” he stumbled over his words, “Ben Belenski, from track and field. I ended up in the river.” He gave a little tug on the front of the coveralls. “Thanks for these.”

Lucy’s mom was a bit taller than Lucy and broader across her shoulders. She had the same thick red-gold hair, wide smile, and perfect teeth.

“Who is this handsome guy?” Sandra stroked Ranger’s damp head.

“Ranger,” said Ben. “He’s the guy who wanted to go for an early morning dip.”

“He’s gorgeous.” Sandra had the same sapphire-blue eyes as Lucy. Ben had done some research. So yeah, maybe he was a *bit* hooked on Lucy. Less than half a percent of the entire world has red hair and blue eyes. Super-rare.

“Are you hungry?” Sandra asked.

He was suddenly starving and chomped down a couple of Sandra’s granola bars. Ranger watched Ben and inched close trying to mooch a bite. “You need your breakfast, big guy,” Ben scratched Ranger’s ears. “I should probably get going.”

Ben looked at his sock feet and at the waterlogged boots on the mat. “Thanks for everything.”

“Nice to meet you, Ben.” Sandra put out a hand for Ben to shake. Ben’s dad had taught him about shaking hands. Firm grip, eye contact, and never shake a person’s hand sitting down.

“Knock, knock.” It was Chuck. He poked his head in. “You need a lift somewhere, Ben?”

Ben described where he lived.

“It’s on my way,” said Chuck.

Ben caught Lucy’s eye. “Wet boots, coveralls, and mop head?” He threw his hands into his hair, made it even messier. “What do you think?”

“I love it.” She winked at him.

Chuck drove an old-school Chevy Malibu with a cracked windshield. Sheri took the passenger seat, Ben and Ranger sat in the back. “Thanks a lot.” Ben kept Ranger on the floor.

“No worries,” said Sheri, “our schedules are pretty open as long as we’re helping out, it’s all cool.”

Ben guessed she was about his dad’s age. Mid-forties. Chuck a lot older. Like grandfather age.

“It’s a pretty good gig.” Sheri turned to look at Ben and scratched Ranger’s ear. “City Outreach Wellness Society. Or, as we like to say, COWS.”

“I used to work with *real* cows,” said Chuck. “Back in the good old days.”

“Chuck was a real-life Gang Ranch cowboy,” said Sheri.

“Yes, sir, we ran twelve-thousand head of cattle, ten hours a day in the saddle. Still got a set of bow-legs for proof.” Chuck giggled.

“And now you do full-time outreach work?” asked Ben.

“Yep. Now I’m sidekick to the number one outreach worker in all Turtle Island.”

“Oh, yeah?” Sheri gave his shoulder a little shove. “*Who’s* the sidekick?”

“Yep, we know all the who’s who, and they know us.” Chuck slapped his knee. “Who lives in the shelters, the camps, their cars.”

“How many camps,” Ben asked, “here in town?”

“There’s people in tents all over the place, but official camps?” Chuck let the question hang.

“Just two, officially,” said Sheri. “Lucy’s and the much bigger one across town.”

“Half the people in Lucy’s camp are just down on their luck,” said Chuck. “Some still working. Like Sandra, works weekends at Kal Tire.”

For a while, they drove in silence. Chuck had the radio on, and there was a tinny twang of country music. “Sometimes it’s just a pay cheque or two between paying the rent and being out on the street. But when we try to help, people don’t understand. If it’s a shelter being built or a place like COWS, they say no way,

not in my hood, not in my back yard. And when a few tents pop up, they say danger, scary, tear them down.”

“I get that.” And it was true, Ben understood completely. *And* he knew about being homeless. Personally.

It was his deep dark secret.

Chapter Three

When Ben opened the door at home, it was well past lunch time. He got a whiff of something delicious. Some kind of fried food. In the fridge, still in the frying pan, were thick slices of browned ham. Beside the ham was a mushy lump of fried onion. His dad fried onions with just about everything.

There was a note on the counter: *got a call*.

Ben knew exactly what it meant. His dad had a mobile RV repair business. *got a call* meant someone had called him to fix their RV. Ben ate the first chunk of ham cold. Then he fed Ranger. Ranger ate a cup and a half of premium dog food twice a day. No table scraps. And he had monthly tick and worm meds. A couple years back, Ben had begged for a puppy. Dad gave in but said that if they had a dog, they had to take the best possible care of it. It was their duty. Ben had

seen the money that Dad spent on Ranger. It was a lot of ham and onions.

Ben put the frying pan on medium and spread the mound of onions out a bit. Lately, Dad's business was pretty slow. And in the winter, it slowed to a crawl. It was early spring, beginning of the RV season. It should be hopping. But a new mobile RV repair guy had come to town. He had two big cube trucks, twice as flashy and modern as Dad's little Ford Ranger. And the new guy spent big money to advertise. On TV!

Ben buttered some bread. He ate the warm ham and onions with a spread of mustard. Everything straight out of the pan. They were out of milk, no juice. Some Crystal Light flavour drops in a tall glass of water did the job.

Ben and his dad lived in the basement of a 1960s used-to-be farmhouse. Mrs. Angeloni, the landlord, was a retired lady. She lived on the main floor and let them use the old orchard out back of the house to park their RV restoration projects. The four acres they called the old orchard had three old RVs parked on it. Ben's dad was working on two of them. He had plans to sell them for a few bucks once the restorations were done.

Ben's project was a 1990, twenty-six-foot, Fleetwood Prowler travel trailer. It had a few problems, but the price had been right. The owner had told Dad, you tow it out of here, I'll give it to you for five hundred bucks. Dad got it home, but

it was obvious the Prowler was on its last legs. The hot water tank leaked, shower leaked, the fridge wasn't working, and some of the floor needed replacing. Dad fixed the furnace so that was a bonus.

After lunch, Ben went out to work on his trailer. He was down on all fours trying to track down the shower leak when he heard his dad's voice.

"Hey, Benny." His dad was the only person in the world allowed to call him Benny. "You lose something?" Dad joked.

"Still getting a puddle of water," Ben stood up, "every time I run the shower."

"Let me have a look." Ben's dad squeezed into the little bathroom. He always moved slowly, sometimes like he might be in slow motion. "You check the intake pipe? Door seals?"

"You bet."

Dad lowered himself to his knees. He was a big guy. His hockey days were long over. But he still had gimpy knees and a bent-over nose to remind him of his glory days in the CHL.

He had heavy shoulders and a bit of a beer belly, even though he didn't drink beer. That wasn't quite true. Every Saturday, he had a single beer with supper. Just one. Ben knew his dad used to be a big drinker. But now just one beer a week. Like he was trying to prove something. A twenty-four pack lasted all summer.

“Here we go.” Dad was half in, half out of the shower stall. He pressed on the shower wall where it met the pan below. “See where the wall meets the pan here?” The pan was the bottom of the shower, where the water collected and went down the drain.

Dad pressed on the spot again. “Right here.”

Ben could see the seal had dried out. It would be an easy fix.

“I’d caulk the whole pan, all the way round.” Dad backed out of the shower and, with a groan, eased himself back into a standing position.

“Might as well.” Ben figured that his dad knew just about everything there was to know about RV repairs.

“You wouldn’t believe what happened today.” Ben sat on the bench seat of the trailer’s little kitchen table.

“What?” His dad squeezed in across from him. “What happened?”

Ben told the story about Ranger in the log jam, Lucy’s place, Chuck and Sheri. The whole thing.

“This the same Lucy from the track team?” his dad asked.

Ben had mentioned Lucy, that he liked her, a few times. Dad was super easy to talk to. Ben said, “Never guessed that she lived in a tent. So how does she always look so good?” Ben wondered. “Like, where does she shower?”

“Maybe the Rec Centre?” His dad shrugged. “Or one of

the shelters? Maybe the COWS place you were talking about.”

“How much do you think this trailer will be worth?” Ben asked. “Once I get everything working.”

His dad knew exactly what he was talking about. “You’re thinking family and friend’s rate? For Sandra and Lucy?”

“Maybe. Or what if I rent it?”

His dad’s eyebrows scrunched down. He had a look of concentration. “You’re moving pretty fast here.” He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw like he did when he was thinking. “I thought this Prowler project was going to give you a nest egg. Something for a savings account.”

“But what about renting? I’d get cash every month.” Ben thought there might be a whiny tone in his voice. “Right? I mean, that would be good.”

“Sometimes rent isn’t that easy.” Dad stood up. Maybe it was a sign that the conversation was coming to an end. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy who’d want to nag Sandra Campbell about a late rent payment.”

Ben hadn’t thought of that. But he had to agree.

“Another question.” His dad was halfway out the trailer door. “Sandra and Lucy, where would they put this thing?”

Supper was pierogies, Ukrainian sausage, and of course, fried onions. Ben stood at the stove and watched the pierogies boil. Outside, there was a drizzle of rain. But in the little

basement kitchen, it was cozy and warm. The small window was steamed up, and the fan on the stove was humming.

“Almost time for the news.” For Ben’s dad, the six o’clock news was a daily ritual. At the end of the kitchen counter was a small flat-screen TV.

One part of the news Ben liked to watch was a weekly bit called *Hometown with Harry*. Sometimes, he knew the people in the story. Harry was in his mid-forties and still wore his dyed hair in stand-up gelled spikes. This time, he was interviewing a construction guy who was working on the new twin rink arena. “We’re on target with construction,” the guy told Harry. “Pretty cool. My kids will be skating here by Christmas.”

A moment later, the anchor man came back on. “The homeless problem. It’s getting worse, as the months go by. I have Mark Klassen, president of the Business Improvement Association, here in studio,” he announced.

Mark frowned over heavy-rim glasses and said that homeless camps lead to street disorder. “And with street disorder comes vandalism, theft, and all manners of crime. My home across from the river used to be a view lot. Now, I have a view of the homeless camp. I say no, not in our city. These camps need to be knocked down.”

The camera went back to the anchor man.

“Today’s story is just breaking. City council has voted, and

plans to dismantle the homeless camps will go ahead by the end of the month.”

Ben’s stomach tightened. Did that mean Lucy’s camp?

“We go now to our reporter on location.”

The reporter on location looked completely out of place. He wore a jacket and tie out in the rain. Ben couldn’t believe what he saw in the background. Sweat prickled across his forehead.

The reporter said, “It will be a combined operation, including the RCMP, bylaw officers, with support from local agencies. Shelter space for campers is being arranged ...”

Ben’s thoughts were racing. He didn’t hear everything else the reporter was saying. He got out of his chair and pointed to one of the tents behind the reporter.

“Right there!” He gasped. “That’s Lucy’s place.”