

Chapter 1

The Terrible Truck Ride

Would he kill me? I wouldn't put it past Bonehead. He reeked of anger, a stench like burned pepper. He'd smelled like that since after lunch, when Mrs. Bonehead beat him at a card game.

He was also driving his truck funny. It drifted back and forth, instead of barreling straight down the highway. When it veered, he clutched the steering wheel and muttered.

I couldn't catch what he said, but each time he opened his mouth, his breath stank like rotten fruit. When he smelled like that and was mad, anybody nearby better run, especially a dog, like me.

Not that I could. I was trapped on the truck seat between him and his boy, Big Toby. If I moved, one or the other would pound me.

Big Toby burped, breath stinking like he had a sour stomach. Big Toby always had a sour stomach, because he had one mood -- bad.

He also ate nonstop, like some caterpillar gathering energy to spin a cocoon. That's why his cousins called him 'Big Toby,' I guess. Right now, he gulped popcorn from a bag, then slurped cola from a bottle, as Bonehead steered toward town.

I listened to Big Toby chomp-chomping. The noise was gross, because he chewed with his mouth open. Still the sound made me hungry. I hadn't eaten in a long time. My tongue slipped out of my mouth and slid over my chops.

"You're not gettin' any, you stupid mutt," Big Toby said with his mouth full. He thrust the bottle at my head. I flattened myself on the seat. The bottle brushed my ear, but didn't hurt me.

Bonehead swatted my shoulder, then glared with blood shot eyes. "Don't even think of sneaking food under my nose." He grabbed some of Big Toby's popcorn.

Diving to the truck's floor, I scrunched under the seat. Bonehead hated anyone who outsmarted him.

Big Toby stuffed more kernels into his mouth, until his cheeks looked like they would burst. White specks spewed from his lips, clinging to his face. Against his olive skin, the debris looked like the scabs ticks left when they bite.

He swiped at the mess with his forearm. Then, unable to stuff anything more into his mouth, pulled a box from his pocket, and began punching its buttons.

Oh-oh. That box was also a game. If Big Toby didn't play it well, his mood would get worse than it already was. He'd wallop anything within reach. I sighed. Why were he and Bonehead so mean?

The box jingled. Little animals danced on it. He pushed more buttons. The box made a zapping sound. The animals disappeared in a white flash. Big Toby chuckled.

Was he killing them in his play? Probably. His dull green eyes reminded me of weed-choked water, where everything had died. Love and respect did not live in that gaze. I had the feeling he'd kill anything, if he got the chance.

I lay still, wishing animals didn't understand People Language better than jerks like Bonehead and Big Toby thought we could.

After Bonehead lost the card game, he told Big Toby it was a good time to get rid of me. He didn't need me on the farm, so he'd take me into Maryville. Big Toby thought that was a great idea.

But why was Bonehead taking me? Did he plan to dump me out of the truck along the road and hope I'd break my neck?

My teeth chattered, though the day was warm.

Mama said some people were kind, but Bonehead was only nice to dogs with jobs. No wonder she nicknamed him 'Bonehead.' She looked after his stock, so he called her 'Queenie,' fed her good, and let her sleep in the barn.

Me? I was the mutt that tipped over the garbage can to find dinner, and slept under a tree. If Mama gave me her food, he beat her.

I loved Mama, but it wasn't fair. I was a good herder. I know because once when Bonehead was sick, Mama let me bring the cows home. I did it like it was puppy's play.

She said herding was in my blood. She was a Red Heeler, and part fox. I had her fox face. She thought dad was German Shepherd, with maybe a touch of terrier, because of his stubby tail. Farmers would be glad to have a dog like me. When the next full moon rose, I'd be old enough to run away and find a new home, she said. But that was before the stupid card game today.

Big Toby's box buzzed. "Dang!" He stamped his foot. "Missed the blasted target."

"Shut up," growled Bonehead. "I got a headache. Why do you play that noisy game anyway?"

"Nothin' else to do, Dad."

"Then find some friends. Play baseball."

"Everybody beats me up when I try to get in a game."

Wonder why. I squelched the urge to bite Big Toby's ankle.

Bonehead looked at him with a bleary gaze. "Hit 'em back, Toby. Show who's boss."

Big Toby studied his feet. "There's six or seven guys on a team. That many against one isn't fair."

Oh yes it is. The thought almost made me bark with joy. But I kept quiet. No sense in making Bonehead or Big Toby madder.

The truck bounced. Peeking out from my hiding place, I looked up through the cab window. Bonehead was pulling off the road onto a small street. I could see the roofs of the buildings lining it.

A shiver ran from my nose to my tail. Whatever he planned to do with me, it would happen soon. Looking toward the door, I got ready to slither under his legs and run.

Bonehead hit the brakes. The truck jolted to a halt. He opened the door. I peeked out. We'd pulled off the street, and parked near some gas pumps. They'd been built on a raised, concrete strip, like the pumps on his farm. Behind them, a human den stank of oily food and stale coffee.

Big Toby's game squawked again. "Dag nab it," he whispered, giving off his own scorched pepper mad smell.

Reaching under the seat, Bonehead grabbed my scruff, heaved me onto his lap, and shoved me. "Beat it, mutt. Don't come home."

I tumbled out of the truck, smacking my head on pavement. "Yelp."
"Stupid game," Toby mumbled. Aloud he said, "I'll scare her off, Dad."

Scrambling to my feet, I ran. He was fat, but he was fast. Before I could scamper very far, he stood beside me.

"Go beg inside the service station." He pointed to the den. "Maybe they'll give you spoiled chicken, and you'll die."

So, that was the plan! They wanted someone else to kill me. That's why they brought me here. Snarling, I scrambled toward the pumps, looking for someplace to hide. My muzzle smacked a tangle of hoses. They twisted like the thick snakes I chased on the farm. I couldn't squeeze through them.

A wind gust choked me with Big Toby's stench. I retched. His hand swiped at my tail. "Scram."

From the truck, Bonehead yelled. "Come back. Let's go home."

Big Toby ignored him. *Rabid cats!* He wanted to torture me as long as he could. Spotting a car parked at the last pump on the strip, I danced in its direction. The motor wasn't running. Maybe I could hide underneath, until they drove off.

Another wind gust hit me, bringing a nicer odor, like clean sleeping blankets and the roses that grew wild in what had once been the farm garden. The aroma wafted warm, kind and encouraging. Catching my breath, I peered around. What was I smelling? Something in the car?

Yes. My eye caught movement behind its big front window. A girl shifted her weight in the seat next to the spot where the driver should be. I could see her head and shoulders. She looked to be about Big Toby's age, not quite grown, but not a little kid. She had rolled down the window in her door, and was looking his way. Her scent floated out. It smelled flowery. But it was also spicy from clean sweat, as if she'd just been running hard.

I sighed. *Another kid to beat on a dog.* Being near kids was worse than having fleas. Even though this girl smelled okay, I scouted another direction to run.

A fresh kick shot pain up my spine. Big Toby stomped my tail. "Stupid mutt. Don't just sit there. Scram."

"Ki-ya-yai." I flailed my legs on the hot, sticky pavement, trying to run toward the street. Pushing his boot harder into me, he laughed.

The girl stuck her head out the door. "Hey. Cut it out, Toby Johnson, you big pig. Leave that poor little dog alone." Metal stuff glistened on her teeth. The wind fluffed her short, blond hair. "Why'd you guys throw her out of your truck?"

"None-a your bees wax Darcy Simmons." Big Toby kept his boot on my tail. "Shut up, or I'll bust you in half, Scrawny Butt."

"Try it." Darcy swung her door open, and sprang out of the car. Sharp points glittered under her heavy, laced up shoes as she strode up to us. She wore thick, green-and-red things people call pads on her shins, and shorts and jersey to match. She looked strong, with long arms and legs. "Let the dog's tail go."

"Okay. Like it better if I squeeze her neck?" sneered Big Toby. Releasing my tail, he grabbed my scruff.

"No, I don't like it." Reaching into her blouse pocket, she pulled out a thing people call a phone. "I'll call the Animal League, and report you for cruelty."

Ptui! Big Toby spat on the cement. "You don't have their number."

"I'm one of their junior volunteers," Darcy retorted.

I stared. What was the Animal League? Something good or something bad?

"Eat it, Scrawny Butt." Big Toby grabbed her phone, interrupting my thought.

"Now I got your cell an' the dog. Whatcha ya gonna do?" Sticking her phone into his pocket, he shook my neck.

The girl faced the human den, cupped her hands to her mouth, and shouted, "Auntie Ellen, come here, quick. Emergency." Kicking her feet high, and exposing the spikes under her shoes, she danced at Big Toby. "Let her go."

"Hit me with those soccer cleats, and you'll be sorry," he blustered, stepping back, and dragging me with him. My claws slid on the cement.

I heard the truck door open again. Bonehead's peppery, fruity stench reached me. "Come on, Toby," he shouted. "Leave the dog."

Big Toby lifted me off the ground, and swung me in a circle. I screeched. He pulled me against his chest and pressed one arm against my stomach and ribs, until I gasped.

"Auntie Ellen," the girl shouted again. "Auntie Ellen!"

A woman dashed out of the den. "Darcy, what's wrong?" she exclaimed, racing around the pumps toward us.

"He took my phone," Darcy pointed at Big Toby. "He's torturing a dog." She sprang at him again.

Grabbing me more firmly with both arms, Big Toby stuck out his tongue.

The woman walked up to Darcy. "What are you talking about? What dog? Who's got your phone?"

"He does," Darcy pointed at Big Toby. "And he's beating up that little dog he's holding."

"I am not," Big Toby yelled. "I'm tryin' to keep her from goin' under the car here."

Darcy stamped her foot. "Liar."

The woman raised her hands. "Stop shouting, both of you. Tell me what's happened, one at a time. Please."

Her tone caught my attention. It was gentle, yet strong, as if she expected to be obeyed.

Bonehead stumbled out of the truck and ran up. As he reached Big Toby, he tripped, and almost fell.

Dangling me by the scruff, Big Toby grabbed his arm. "Careful, Dad."

Bonehead caught his balance, then snatched me from Big Toby, and flung me aside. "Quit horsin' around. We're going to the drug store. I got a belly ache."

I closed my eyes, bracing to hit the concrete. Instead, I fell into someone's arms. Looking up, I found Darcy holding me. Holy bones.

She grasped me firmly, but more gently than Big Toby did. "Stay, little dog. Stay here."

I cowered in her arms, out of breath.

Bonehead's angry voice echoed. "What's that?"

I looked in his direction. He was pointing to Darcy's phone in Toby's pocket. Big Toby covered the pocket with his shirt. "I took it away from Scrawny Butt Darcy. She was--"

"Is it hers?" Bonehead thundered, glancing at Darcy.

"Yeah--"

"Give it back."

"She was tryin' to get us in trouble, Dad."

"Give it back." Bonehead curled and uncurled a fist.

Big Toby glanced at Bonehead's hand and flung the phone at Darcy. She took one arm off me to catch it, and held me tight again.

Bonehead pushed Big Toby toward the truck. "Let's go. We'll leave the dog here."

"Just a minute." Darcy shouted. "You're not going to dump him."

"Yes, Missy." Bonehead spat the words. "That's just what I'm going to do."

The woman put her hands on her hips. "You're disgusting." She said giving off another hot, peppery smell. "I'll take the dog home. Give it to me."

No way. Angry people hit dogs. It was time to escape from this mess. I had plenty of breath for it now. Bracing my paws against Darcy's chest, I pushed.

The woman grabbed my scruff. Darcy handed me to her.

I growled, trying to kick my hind legs loose.

Seizing them, the woman shoved my nose under her arm. "I've got an extra scarf in the car, Darcy. Get it and make a safety muzzle."

I stopped squirming. They'd tie me down, if I kept trying to get loose, and I'd get tired fighting two of them. Later there might be a better time to escape, when they weren't looking -- if I was alive to run.