

# Chapter 15



**B**ad dogs! You leave our cow alone.” Ann’s eyes squinted to narrow slits. Her chin jutted out, and her cheeks were bright red. White knuckles clutched a small, flimsy stick. She shook it at the two dogs. “Bad, bad dogs!”

Without a thought, I bolted—charged across the flat between the cedars and the rocks at the base of the hill.

Normally, dogs never attack people. But from the smell of them, from the look of them, from watching the way they moved, these weren’t “normal” dogs. They were hungry. Starving. They were so hungry, they would eat anything they could. Anything.

I glanced at Ann.

*Anything!*

The word seemed to echo inside my head. It made my fur quiver from the tip of my tail to the bridge of my snout.

I had to get to my Ann!

The two runners were so busy with Tess, neither of them heard or saw me. I knew I couldn't handle the Rott, but one-on-one was still better than two against one.

I was halfway to Ann when I heard a sound behind me. Nails scratching against rock. Loose gravel clicking, clattering down the slope. I didn't look back. I didn't slow. But my ears turned, trying to home in on the noise. It had to be the yellow dog. He was gaining on me. But not too close yet.

Glancing across the canyon, I found the huge Rott. He was just starting down the edge of the slope on the far side. It would take him a few seconds to reach the bottom, then more time to cross the wide part of the canyon and start up the playhouse side.

Never taking his eyes from Ann, he licked his slobbery lips. He seemed to move faster, the farther he made it down the slope.

The sound behind me was close. I ran harder, leaped from one rock to another, dodged around the bigger boulders. Once more I glanced to see where the big guy was. He was halfway down the slope now. Even from far away, he

looked enormous. The best I could hope for was to keep him busy long enough for Ann to get away. But if that yellow dog caught up with me . . . neither Ann nor I would have a chance.

I sucked in a deep breath. Ran even faster than I thought my legs could carry me. The yellow dog was closer now. If I stopped here, he could circle out of my reach and get—

I had to get to Ann!

The yellow dog was right behind me—no more than four or five strides. I could hear his breathing. About two yards from Ann, I stopped, spun, lowered my head, and charged!

The yellow dog's eyes flashed wide. Running as fast as he was, those long legs didn't give him time to dodge. When I lunged, I caught him square under the chin. The instant I felt the impact on the top of my head, I lunged a second time. Only this time, I lifted upward.

I was heavier than he was, and I was coming up underneath him. The impact flipped him over on his back. Snarling and growling, I leaped on top of him, roaring as fierce and angry as I could. He wriggled loose, but only bounded about three or four jumps. Then he turned to come after me again. Before he had a chance to move, I leaped on him a second time.

Tangled up, we both rolled down the hill. He snapped at me but missed. I snapped back, get-

ting a hold on the scruff of his neck. I guess I also got a tooth or two in an ear. He yapped and squealed. When we stopped tumbling, he leaped to his feet.

This time he didn't turn back. Tail tucked, he raced off, clear to the bottom of the hill.

My tail wagged. Nine times out of ten, if one dog in a pack takes off hurt, the others will follow. As soon as I knew he was gone, I hurried to Ann.

She was still waving the little stick in her hand like a club. I saw two tears trickling down her cheeks.

"You leave Hoss alone!" Her voice quivered when she screamed. "You hurt my Hoss again, I'll paddle your bottom!"

She petted my head and stroked my back when I stopped beside her. I looked down the hill. The yellow dog was still running. The girl dog, with the matted hair, was backing away from Tess. She took off in the direction of the yellow dog, then stopped. Her head twisted back and forth, from one side to the other, as if she was trying to decide whether to run or stay.

If she ran, then that enormous Rott wouldn't stick around, either. Even a starving dog knows that without his runners he can't take on a mad mama cow alone. I looked toward the hill on the other side of the canyon. I couldn't see

him. When I started to go look over the edge, Ann wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I love you, Hoss,” she sniffed. “I don’t want that mean old dog to hurt you. You stay away from those nasty, stinky doggies. If they come back, I’ll hit them with my club.”

But I had to know where the big dog was. Flattening my ears and stretching my neck, I tried to slip out of Ann’s grasp. She only tightened her hold.

If the Rott was running away with the others, he wouldn’t go down the floor of the canyon. That would be too close to Tess. So I should be able to see him on the far hill, backtracking the way he came. But he wasn’t there.

I tried to slip away from Ann once more. Still scared, she squeezed my neck so hard, I could barely breathe.

I didn’t want to hurt her, I didn’t want to knock her down or have her scrape her knee on the rock. But I had to know!

With a sigh, I let out all of my breath and relaxed. When I felt her grip loosen, I yanked backward and slipped out. Before she could hug me again, I scampered to the side of the canyon.

The Rott wasn’t on the far hill. I looked to the floor of the canyon, toward Tess and her calf.

No dog.

Leaning forward, I looked down the side of the cliff where I stood.

Nothing.

Suddenly, a noise. A paw appeared. It was right under my nose—the nails almost touching my nails. Then a second paw. My hair bristled, clear from my ears to the tip of my tail. I heard a grunt, then hind paws scratching on loose rocks. Another grunt.

Suddenly, a humongous head appeared—right below me. On the very rock where I stood. Black eyes glared up at me. Then, startled to see another dog this close, they popped wide.

I did the only thing I could. I barked . . . growled . . . leaned over and nipped his big fat ugly snout.

That startled him even more. He yipped. Lost his hold on the rock.

There was a loud thump when he landed right on his little fat stubbed tail. The instant he hit, he tumbled backward. A whole lot of clunking and crashing and rocks clacking together followed him as he tumbled down the cliff to the flat part of the canyon. By the time he and the rocks stopped bouncing around, my tail was wagging so hard, it kept hitting me in the sides.

Like I said, I could not take this guy in a fight. He was too big, too strong. It was just sheer dumb luck that saved both Ann and me. After taking a fall like that, he had to be pretty well scratched up, pretty sore. There was no way he was gonna

come back for more. He'd take off with those other two dogs and—

The other two!

I looked over my right shoulder. The bigger dog, with the matted hair, was making her way back up the hill. I really don't think she'd spotted Ann yet. But she hadn't run off. She was coming to see what all the commotion was about or to see where her giant friend was. The yellow dog wasn't far behind. I leaned forward and looked down at the Rott.

When he looked back at me, it sent a chill skittering up my back. His eyes were tight. His stare black as death. Even from where I was, I could feel his hate and anger cut right into me. He struggled to his feet. Those angry eyes never left mine as he started once more up the canyon wall toward Ann and me.

The strong paws clawed and ripped rocks from his path as he climbed the steep slope even faster than before.