

CHAPTER ONE

Darian opened one eye, then the other. He stretched. The early Haitian sun poured into his bedroom, chasing away the remnants of his dream. He spotted the calendar at the foot of his bed. A large orange asterisk marked Tuesday, August twentieth. Today!

He popped out of his bed and sent his sheets flying. Usually he would throw on his bathrobe and saunter to the kitchen for breakfast. Today he pulled the T-shirt from Grandma over his head. Plain white, with bold red letters spelling C-A-N-A-D-A splashed across the back, it would tell everyone where he was going. He dragged brand new blue jeans over his bare feet, checking the label “Made in Canada.” Perfect! Purely Canadian! The rough denim irritated his legs, which were usually clad in cotton shorts. He decided that if jeans were what his new friends in Canada would wear, he could handle it.

Darian ran his fingers over his short dark brown hair. No need to fuss there. That was why he always had it cut as short as possible, although his mom objected. She said he would look more handsome with a “regular” haircut, as she called it. Now that he was thirteen, she let him choose. He poured clean, tepid water from the jug that the maid, Marta, had filled last night, and splashed it over his deep black eyes.

Darian glanced across the room to see if his brother was awake. Although Jacob’s eyes were closed, the gentle rippling of his sheet gave him away.

“Last one to the kitchen is a rotten, stinky, smelly egg!” Darian shouted. He jumped over his single bed and raced for the door beyond Jacob’s cot while keeping an eye on his brother. Expecting Jacob to scream and then sulk, Darian was shocked to see

him jump up, fully dressed in an outfit identical to his own. Jacob beat him to the door and flung it wide open.

“Mom!” Darian shrieked.

The two boys dashed down the hall, Darian passing Jacob just before they reached the curtain that sectioned off the kitchen. Determined to beat Darian, Jacob reached out and grabbed it.

“Mom!” Darian shrieked again, louder this time. Mrs. Stalwart turned just in time to see the two heads of her sons bang together before the curtain fell in folds over them, the rod crashing down on their sprawling legs.

“I don’t want to hear about it.” She was used to the brothers’ rivalry. Since Jacob was only one year younger than Darian they were always competing.

“Are Cass and Erika up?” Jacob held the rod while Darian hung the curtain back up.

“I haven’t seen them yet, but I’m sure they’ll be here any minute after all the noise you guys made. I was hoping they’d sleep in for a while and be well-rested for the plane flight. Erika does so much better if she isn’t tired.” Mrs. Stalwart placed fresh mangoes and steaming bowls of oatmeal on the table in front of the boys as she spoke.

“Sorry, Mom.” Darian, too, wanted Erika to be at her best for the long flight to Canada today. She would have enough challenges to overcome as she adjusted to a new home, especially one in another country.

The back door banged shut, followed by the squeak of the swing as Erika entered the kitchen. She slipped her crutches under the bench and sat down on a chair across the

table from her older brothers. Although she was small for her eight years, her physiotherapy program for Cerebral Palsy had made her strong and coordinated.

“What’s Cass doing out there? It’s not like her to go outdoors before breakfast,” Mrs. Stalwart wondered as she kissed the top of Erika’s head and gave her a little squeeze.

“She says she’s not going,” Erika whimpered. “I don’t want to go without her.”

Erika depended a lot on her older sister, who was ten. She admired her spunky ways, although Mrs. Stalwart frequently called Cassidy’s behavior strong-willed and stubborn.

“Don’t worry. I’ll go talk to her. Go ahead and eat. I might be awhile and I don’t want your cereal to get cold,” her mom’s voice reached Erika from behind the curtain and she heard the back door slam.

Outside, Mrs. Stalwart stood still and watched Cassidy sitting quietly on the swing. Itty and Bitty, the tawny kittens, perched on Cassidy’s shoulders and licked her ears. Cassidy’s arms were wrapped around the black Lab, Caesar, who was busy licking her nose. Mrs. Stalwart sighed. She wished the children’s father were home. She believed her children would face their new adventure more bravely if he were there to encourage them with his jolly ways. He was always joking and laughing with them, and his presence gave them strength. But he had to leave earlier than planned. Dr. Beckwith, chair of the hospital board at Kabul, had said it was important Dr. Stalwart arrived in Afghanistan by the weekend. The last doctor had left and a new one was urgently needed. So Dr. Stalwart had made all the arrangements for moving his wife to Afghanistan to be with him and for

the children to move to Canada to stay with their grandparents. Then he had said his good-byes and left.

As Cassidy turned in the swing, the kittens jumped to the ground and Caesar bounded to Mrs. Stalwart. Cassidy ran to her, too, and flung her arms around her mom's waist.

"I'm going to miss you and Dad!" Cassidy looked up at her mom, her eyes brimming with tears, though she was determined not to cry.

"I'm going to miss you, too. Dad and I are going to miss all of you very much but we can't change things. Remember, we had a family meeting and everyone agreed we wanted your dad to go help in Afghanistan. I have to be there, too. We're a team. Dad does the surgeries and I give out medicines."

"But I'll still miss you!" Cassidy snuggled in her mother's embrace. Caesar was upset to see the girl so sad. He wriggled under Mrs. Stalwart's arms to lick Cassidy's nose again. His wet tongue made Cassidy giggle. "Piggyback?" she asked her mom, in a sudden change of mood. She jumped on her mom's back and, with Caesar jumping at their feet, mother and daughter giggled all the way back into the house.

After breakfast, Marta cleared the table while everyone scattered to their bedrooms to finish dressing and packing. Even Caesar and the kittens were cooperative and snuggled into their kennels, ready for their journey. The siblings had said farewell to their friends last night and then visited all their favorite nooks and crannies in their yard and house one last time. They were ready to leave their home of five years in Haiti, and start a new life in Canada. Yet, in each one's mind, hung the dread of leaving without their mom and dad.

Jacob stood looking at Henry, his pet garter snake, and his little white mouse, Comet. He had promised his best friend, Harold, that he could have them, since Jacob's dad had informed him the snake and mouse couldn't come to Canada. Marta would take them over to Harold's house that evening. Jacob checked to see if Darian had left the room. Yes, he was alone. Quickly he pulled Henry out of the glass container and held him over his fanny pack opening. Henry slithered in. Jacob zipped the fanny pack shut and then opened Comet's cage. Comet jumped into his hand and ran up his arm.

"Can't play today," Jacob whispered. "Let's just say we're on a secret mission."

Jacob slipped Comet into his pocket and zipped it shut just in time.

"C'mon slowpoke," Darian stuck his head into the doorway. "Are you kissing the menagerie good-bye?"

"What if I am? That's for me to know and you to find out," retorted Jacob, joining his brother on his way to the front entrance.

"Looks like everyone's here and ready to go. Grab some juice boxes and snacks and put them into your backpacks," Mrs. Stalwart instructed as the youngsters piled their luggage on the front steps. The backpacks – Darian's green, Jacob's charcoal gray, Cassidy's hot pink, and Erika's purple - stood in a row. Jacob lowered himself carefully, so he wouldn't disturb Henry and Comet. He filled his backpack and slipped it over his left shoulder. Erika came towards him, loaded down with six juice boxes held close to her chest. Plop, plop, plop! She dropped three juice boxes - one grape, one orange and one raspberry - right at Jacob's feet.

"Steady boys!" Jacob whispered and knelt down to retrieve them for her. Erika stood watching him, smiling, and then slipped him a hug. She jumped back.

“I felt something. Your clothes are moving!” Erika shrieked.

“Shhh,” Jacob whispered, but everyone was already looking at him, Especially his mom.

“Get those critters back into their cages while I load the kennels into the van,” she ordered. Jacob blushed and rushed to his room. He held Henry close to his cheek, and then a thought came to him. He turned and checked to see if anyone had followed him. No one was around. Quickly, he slipped Henry into the large compartment of his backpack, alongside the snacks. Comet fit snugly in the middle compartment with his video games. Content, Jacob rejoined the family.

Mrs. Stalwart was the first to speak. “You didn’t sneak any critters into your socks or shoes or underwear did you?” she asked slyly.

“Mom!”

The siblings helped Mrs. Stalwart pack their luggage into the tan suburban. Even with all that room, it was a tight squeeze. Darian, Cassidy and Erika dumped their backpacks in the back of the vehicle on top of the suitcases, but Jacob kept his on his lap.

While Mrs. Stalwart drove to the Port au Prince airport, the siblings plied her with questions about their soon-to-be home in Canada. Cassidy had fond memories of her trip to her grandparents’ acreage a few years ago.

“I loved Alder Estates. Grandma cooked all our special foods and let us sleep in. Grandpa took us shopping and even took us boating and fishing. I loved it! Will they be strict with us now that we’ll be living with them?” she asked.

“They will have rules and expect you to follow them, but they’re fair and easygoing,” Mrs. Stalwart replied. She was maneuvering the Suburban through Port au Prince’s heavy traffic.

“Why is it called Alder Estates?” Erika wanted to know.

“Just a minute,” Mrs. Stalwart interrupted. “There’s a tricky turn coming up at this intersection. I have to concentrate.”

The siblings always marveled at how their parents got through the busy intersections without being hit by the many vehicles around them. There were no traffic lights in Port au Prince, so whoever thought they arrived in the intersection first honked loudly and plowed through. Their mother was honking now and smoothly making a left hand turn, just missing a bus loaded with people, animals and produce. The children waved, used to seeing the combination of pigs and chickens squeezed in among people and large baskets of fruit and other goods filling the colorful bus to overflowing. With no windows or doors, it was easy for the passengers to load and unload their wares quickly whenever the driver stopped for them.

Mrs. Stalwart had safely completed the turn and was ready to answer Erika.

“Your grandparents called it Alder Estates because of all the alder trees. They have forty acres of land, and thirty of those are full of trees. A lot of them are alder. Darian, you’re awfully quiet. Are you all right?” Mrs. Stalwart was looking at him in her rearview mirror.

“Yeah, sure!” Darian replied quickly. He was pretending to look out of the window, but he was actually keeping a close watch on Jacob, who kept juggling his

backpack from one knee to the other. Was that a ripple moving across the backpack, or was Darian imagining things?

“Alder Estates is a fun place for kids to grow up. At the back of the acreage is a dirty old swamp, but I used to pretend it was my ‘Lake of Shining Waters’.” Mrs. Stalwart laughed at the memory.

“Do they have crocodiles in the swamp? I’m scared of crocodiles!” Erika cringed, and leaned against Jacob. Her question went unanswered as Jacob’s backpack fell to the floor and rolled onto Darian’s feet. Darian picked it up and fingered the front zipper pull. Jacob pulled at the bag.

“Let go of my backpack!” Jacob shouted and boxed Darian’s arm.

“Scared I’m going to eat your snacks?” Darian teased.

“Huh!” Jacob slid down on the seat scowling and clutching his bag. Mrs. Stalwart turned around, about to scold Jacob, but Darian gave her a knowing look and nodded. She changed the subject and the rest of the drive was peaceful.

As soon as Mrs. Stalwart parked the Suburban in the airport parking lot, a porter appeared to help them with the kennels and baggage. The youngsters carried their own backpacks. Mr. and Mrs. Seawall, missionaries in Haiti, were there to guide them to the right check-in counter. They were returning to Canada because Mrs. Seawall needed surgery. Dr. Stalwart had arranged for them to chaperone the youngsters to the Vancouver airport where their Uncle Elwood, Mrs. Stalwart’s brother, would meet them.

Mrs. Stalwart suggested that the siblings use the washroom before they boarded. She stood guard over the backpacks while they were gone. The flight was leaving ahead

of schedule so the siblings quickly hugged and kissed their mother good-bye and hurried down the corridor to board the plane.

They had just adjusted their seatbelts when the plane began moving down the runway.

The girls sat with Mrs. Seawall and the boys sat across from them with Mr. Seawall.

Erika snuggled up to Mrs. Seawall and gave her a shy smile. Jacob patted his backpack.

Strange! All he felt was the solid shapes of juice boxes, snacks, and his video games.

The plane was taking off, climbing higher and higher. Jacob opened the video game compartment just a little. No little mouse nose peeked out. He slid his hand into the opening of the backpack and felt for something soft and alive. He forced his hand all the way down the full length of the backpack. His face turned white. He opened the large compartment wide, not caring if Henry slithered out and got him into trouble. The juice boxes and snacks spilled on to the seat, but Henry was nowhere to be found.