

FIND YOUR PURPOSE

M. C. ROSS

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CHAPTER ONE

Lars

“Ruff!”

Lars considered himself a good dog. A great dog, even, if he was being honest. Which he usually was. On account of being so good.

But some things just had to be said. Things that justified being forceful with your tone. Possibly even a bit . . . rough.

“Ruff! Wroof, wroof—RUFF!”

“Coming through! Sorry, excuse me! Excuse us! Coming through!”

Right, Lars thought. *That’s what I just said.*

But he’d take all the help he could get. This was an all-paws-on-deck situation. Ogunquit, Maine, was a great town for many things: Beautiful ocean views, delicious seafood, and kind tourists who were willing to slip certain dogs seafood, even when certain human adults said, “*Please* don’t give him more seafood—you can’t *imagine* the smell.”



But Ogunquit, with its narrow and wandering streets, was *not* a great place to find wide sidewalks. Which was a problem, as Lars was currently barreling down one of those sidewalks at remarkable speed, with his adopted human, Natalie Prater, hot on his heels.

Every corner brought new obstacles. Pedestrians emerged from shops and leaped aside in shock. A seagull investigating a dropped lobster roll squawked at Lars's approach, then exploded into flight. And almost overnight, the town had become covered in a layer of fall's final leaves, scattered across the ground like colorful slip risks, which Lars thoughtfully cleared away for Natalie as they ran.

That was how it worked: Lars was the advance guard and Natalie was public relations. This was good, because there was a record number of tourists on the streets for this late in the season, the reason for which had nothing to do with all those beautiful leaves and everything to do with Natalie and Lars.

"Out of the way, please! Sorry! Thank you!"

"Wroof!"

They made a good team, and as a result, they made good time. And that was crucial, because today was their first day at their new job.

That job was on a boat.

And that boat could *not* be allowed to leave the harbor without them on it.

This was why they ran. This was also why Natalie was dressed like, well, someone who was about to go work on a boat in Maine in late October. Her usual running shoes had been swapped out for deck boots, insulated with bright-orange woolly socks. The socks matched a wool sweater and hat, accompanied by a puffy reflective shell jacket, and all this was layered over a shining black wet suit. It was far from an ideal running outfit, but here Natalie was, keeping up with Lars at full speed, and still managing to get enough air in her lungs to apologize loudly to people as they passed. Lars's heart swelled with love and pride, as it tended to happen when he was around Natalie. One of Lars's favorite things about his adopted human was how determined she could be when she set her mind on something. This was a girl who could not be slowed down by heavy clothes or unusually crowded sidewalks. Perhaps the only thing that could have slowed her down was the law itself. And even the law wouldn't dare to—

“Natalie Prater, slow down!” called the mayor of Ogunquit.

Well, never mind.

Even as the wind rushed through Lars's ears, causing them to flop and bounce, his keen canine hearing could still detect the slight hitch of Natalie's breath behind him. Clearly she didn't love the thought of upsetting Mayor Maher, who had just come out of the Coveside Café a few dozen yards ahead of them, somehow managing to blow on his coffee and frown at the same time. Ogunquit was the kind of small, tight-knit community where everyone knew your name—even the mayor. Most of the time this was great, except when you were trying to get away with something. Then it felt more like living in a town full of hall monitors, some of whom had the power to send you to prison. Not that Mayor Maher *would*. But, you know. He *could*.

For a moment, Lars worried that Natalie might actually stop running. Then:

“Natalie Prater, speed up!” yelled Nancy Jane, one of the friendliest people in Ogunquit—and Natalie's and Lars's next-door neighbor. She had strolled out of the café right after the mayor, and now she gave them both a big friendly wave. “You're almost there! You too, Lars!”

And sure enough, Natalie's hitched breath became a

joyful laugh, and her footfalls got even faster. Lars barked with joy himself and picked up his pace to match. Within seconds, they were racing past Nancy Jane, who grinned mischievously at them both as she reached out her hand and wrapped it around Mayor Maher's. For his part, the mayor said nothing; he just blushed furiously, which was typical. Everyone in town knew that even though the two adults had known each other for forty years, Nancy Jane had the everlasting ability to fluster the mayor with just about anything she said.

Nancy Jane was also right: Lars and Natalie *were* almost there. The Coveside Café was not called that for nothing; passing it meant that they had reached the end of Shore Road, Ogunquit's unofficial main street, and entered the mouth of Perkins Cove, the small inlet harboring Ogunquit's fleet of boats, from fishing and lobster boats to dories, dinghies, and even docked pleasure yachts.

Lars was no stranger to the cove, and this was his favorite part of the approach. Here, buildings and beech trees gave way to reveal the gleam of the ocean. And while there was nowhere you could go in Ogunquit that did not smell of salt air, it was at this precise turn that the deep cool rush of the Atlantic

crashed over Lars's nose. The brine, the boat wax, the slight tang of seaweed—it was all sensory heaven for a dog like Lars.

It was also probably why he didn't notice the stroller.

“Look out!” Natalie yelled. Presumably she was not trying to warn Lars, but rather Mrs. Reardon, the Secretary and Treasurer of the Ogunquit Lobstermen's Union and, currently, innocent mother pushing her infant daughter directly into Lars's path. But Lars, always eager to please, took the warning, anyway. In a move he hadn't had to perform for years, Lars flung himself forward and down, his front and back legs stretched out until he was nearly one long horizontal stripe of dog. He slid under the slim space between the stroller and the pavement, popping back up on the other side with a snort, a wag, and no discernible reduction in speed.

Mrs. Reardon cried out in astonishment, while Cassie Reardon clapped and giggled from her stroller throne. Natalie just waved apologetically as they ran past the Reardons.

“See you at the dock!” she said.

And Lars couldn't hide a doggy grin, his tongue flopping out the side of his mouth as they continued to run.

He'd lived on his own for years before he found Natalie and her family, and even though he'd grown used to a life with fewer daring evasive maneuvers, an old stray dog could still bust out a few good tricks.

Right now, though, the only trick Lars needed to execute was a sharp right turn. At last, after pounding past the antique store, the souvenir shop, and Barnacle Barry's Seafood and Restaurant, they had reached the heart of Perkins Cove, and with it, the dock. Natalie's deck boots thudded on the wooden boards as they descended toward the water, when a cry rang out:

"Hey!"

Okay. *That* was one voice they would never dare ignore. With varying levels of success, perhaps due to varying levels of legs, Natalie and Lars both attempted to halt their own wild momentum, leading to a brief moment of skidding on the wet planks of the dock before ultimately ending up in front of one very bemused, very tanned man.

"Hi, Dad," Natalie said, as Lars fell into what he hoped was a respectful sitting position beside her.

Jim Prater was a good fisherman and, in Lars's opinion, an even better dad. But if there was one big flaw in his parenting armor (other than his absurdly strict

opinions on the recommended daily amount of bacon-wrapped scallops for dogs), it was this: He often looked stern without really trying to. Then, when a time came that he really *did* want to look stern, he just couldn't quite manage it. Like now, as he unsuccessfully tried to hide his laughter while gazing down at the sheepish, panting pair in front of him.

“That’s some unsafe dock behavior you were just modeling for the tourists, huh?” Mr. Prater said. “I don’t remember hearing about that as one of your new job duties.”

“Job?” said the man standing just behind Mr. Prater, whose conversation Natalie and Lars had clearly interrupted. “What job?”

“Sorry, Dad. We didn’t want to be late. Hi, Mr. Rosenberg,” Natalie said, nodding to Barry Rosenberg—Barnacle Barry himself, owner of Barnacle Barry’s Seafood and Restaurant, and frequent employer of Mr. Prater, whose fishing boat, *The Marina*, provided said seafood to said restaurant.

Mr. Prater was sliding back the sleeve of his own shell jacket to look at a beaten-up waterproof watch. “You guys have plenty of time,” he pointed out.

“We do *now*,” Natalie conceded. It was hard to tell if

she was blushing or just flushed from running in the October air. “But we woke up late.”

“We” feels like a strong word choice, Lars thought. After all, he was the one who had sat barking outside Natalie’s bedroom door this morning until she had stumbled out, rubbing at her eyes with stretched-out pajama sleeves, her dirty-blonde hair stuck out at angles Lars had previously only seen in certain clumps of kelp. And he was pretty sure he’d heard her walk directly into the door before opening it.

To be honest, this kind of thing had been happening more and more recently. While it was true that Natalie was unstoppable once she’d built up a head of steam, in the months since she’d turned thirteen, it had seemingly become harder and harder for her to get... sufficiently steamed. In her defense—and Lars was always ready to come to Natalie’s defense—the girl was busy. On top of getting ready for this new job, the start of eighth grade had brought a slew of new commitments, from homework to Natalie joining the swim team.

It could be hard to balance work, school, family, and friends, especially when you suddenly found yourself with more friends than ever before. *And* more family;

last year, Maria Prater—Natalie’s mother and Mr. Prater’s ex-wife—had remarried and become Maria Dugnutt, officially making Natalie the stepdaughter of one Bob Dugnutt, also known as Diver Bob, the town goofball who gave aquatic animal sightseeing tours for kids and tourists. Over the past year and a half, Lars had watched Natalie make an effort to grow closer to Diver Bob, but there was still some oddness to the relationship—partly just because Diver Bob was, given his whole deal, kind of an odd guy. But partly because all those late-in-the-season tourists were here for one thing, and that thing was . . .

Well . . . it was complicated. Enough to make any girl want to sleep in more. And Lars understood that—really, he did. But at a time when he was already seeing much less of Natalie than he would have liked (he had yet to convince any relevant authority that he should be allowed to attend school with her), Lars couldn’t help but flash back to the loneliness of his stray years and worry: If Natalie had so much trouble this morning making time for the new job she was so excited for . . . what if, someday soon, she had trouble making time for *Lars*?²

Just then, Natalie’s hand found the perfect spot

behind Lars's ears, the spot she loved to pet when she was anxious about something and wanted to be reminded that Lars was by her side. Conveniently, Natalie's favorite way to make herself feel better also made *Lars* feel better. His tail swept across the dock and his head rose to meet her hand, all worries forgotten for the moment.

Mr. Prater apparently knew his daughter well enough to notice her nervousness, too, because he uncrossed his arms and bent down to give Lars a comforting scritch. This was shaping up to be a banner morning for Lars, who considered Mr. Prater's scritches to be especially valuable (his hands always smelled like fish).

"Well, you're here now," Mr. Prater said. "You excited about your first day on the job?"

Natalie nodded enthusiastically.

"I was studying for it all night," she said.

"Okay, again, what is this about a job?" Barnacle Barry asked. "Is she officially on our staff now? Should I be adding her to payroll?" He paused, seemingly experiencing a minor implosion somewhere deep inside: "Is the *dog* on my payroll?"

"Not today, Mr. Rosenberg." Natalie laughed.

“Yeah,” Mr. Prater huffed in fake offense. “She found someone who’ll pay her better than I would.”

For someone standing on a dock in a quiet cove, Mr. Rosenberg was doing a great job of looking completely at sea.

“But you love helping on your dad’s boat,” he said to Natalie. “If *that* isn’t the big new job you’re so excited about, then what could it possibly—”

BEEEEEP!

An absolutely ridiculous noise, loud and squeaky, as if a clown nose had been squeezed into a megaphone, echoed across the harbor.

“All aboard Diver Bob’s Sea Life Tours: *Winter Edition!*” blared a voice from the end of the dock. “Last call for all sailors! *That means you, Natalie and Lars Prater!*”

Lars hopped back up on his feet, and Natalie laughed.

“*That’s* my new job,” Natalie said. “Now if you’ll excuse us—I’d *really* rather not be late to my first day working for my stepdad. Good luck fishing today, Dad!”

Suddenly Natalie was running again, making her way for the farthest end of the dock, where a big colorful boat was waiting for her. She’d taken off so quickly that even Lars was surprised, and as he whirled

away from Mr. Prater to chase her, Lars felt happily foolish for ever having worried about Natalie, who was clearly adjusting just fine to this new chapter of her life, and who didn't seem even slightly tired.

As Lars turned up the gangway and followed Natalie onto Diver Bob's boat, he searched for a way to express that happiness. In the end, there was just one thing that had to be said:

"Ruff!"