



JUST KEEP WALKING

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DAY ONE
Castle Danger to Gooseberry Falls State Park

CHAPTER ONE
JUST KEEP WALKING

The toe of my shoe catches a gnarled tree root, my foot twists, and I quickly jab the tip of a hiking pole into the soft dirt at the edge of the path to stop myself from falling. I take another timid step, testing my ankle on the rugged earth.

Sore, not sprained.

Hurt, not broken.

Just keep walking, I tell myself.

I limp on, keeping my eyes on the trail, trying to hold back the tears that are already brimming. I promised myself I wouldn't cry. Especially not on the first day of our hike. And certainly not after what Mom told me a few days ago, when we were pulling the tags and packaging off the last of our new gear. "I need to warn you," she'd said, her smile just a weird, wiggly line that made her look like a *Peanuts* character. "I *will* cry when we're out on the trail. Possibly every day."

"Nope, I'm not okay with that," I'd said, shaking my head. "I shouldn't have to deal with a parent crying in front of me. That's not normal."

Mom had laughed, thinking I was being cute. But funny tone or not, I hope she realized I was totally serious. It's awkward to see a parent cry. Wrong. More importantly, if Mom's planning to cry on our hike, that means I can't.

"I don't expect you to *do* anything about it, Jo," Mom had added. "Maybe you can just rub my back or give me a hug, sometimes. And try to remember that I do *want* to be out there with you. I'm the one who offered to do this hike, so that you'd still get to have your big adventure. I just know I'm going to get overwhelmed. This whole thing is a lot." She'd looked at me seriously. "But even if I start crying, it doesn't mean I want to quit. I need you to remember that, since I can't promise that I will."

I try to remember that now, but it doesn't seem fair. *Someone* in our party of two needs to keep it together. But with each step, my ankle feels like someone is jabbing it with a hot poker. Maybe I should have gotten hiking *boots*, instead of quick-drying trail *shoes*, but it's a little late for any *shoulda-woulda-couldas*. I pause, shift my body weight to my hiking poles, roll my foot around in the air, and remind myself to step more carefully from now on. There are going to be a gajillion bumps and roots and rocks ahead, and I'm going to have to figure out how to avoid them.

Just keep walking.

The trail slopes up suddenly, a sharp climb to what the Superior Hiking Trail guidebook promises will be a "rewarding view." My pack pinches my shoulders. The skin on my neck

stings. There are thirty pounds of food, gear, and my entire life-for-two-weeks crammed into the turtle shell house I'm carrying on my back. Inside the pack, there is a sleeping bag and a thin blow-up sleep pad, the poles for our two-person tent (Mom took the tent and rain fly in her own pack, arguing that because she's bigger, she should lug the extra weight), five dehydrated packaged dinners Mom has promised will be both delicious and nutritious, a tiny folding camp chair, one change of clothes, rain gear, my brother's Swiss Army knife, three water bottles, and a single paperback book that needs to last until we pick up our first food and gear resupply box five days and nearly fifty miles up the trail.

I chose *The Hobbit*.

Because just like Bilbo, I'm setting out on a quest. But unlike Bilbo, mine's not an *unexpected* journey. In fact, I helped plan this adventure. Our trek wasn't sprung on me by a wizard and a pack of dwarves; I *chose* to be here. But as I look ahead at the endless trail of rocks and roots that keeps climbing upward, like a never-ending mountain that's been plopped smack dab in the middle of mostly flat Minnesota, I can't help but wonder: *Why?*

"You holding up okay?" Mom asks, her breath ragged from the climb. "Do you want to lead for a while?"

"No, you can," I tell her. "If I go in front, we're not going to get anywhere fast."

"It's not a race," Mom says. "Want me to walk slower? We have all day."

“This is fine.” In time, I’m sure we’ll figure out the right speed, who’s a better leader and who likes to lag behind, which of us needs a break halfway up each hill and who only stops to rest once they reach the top. My older brother, Jake, told me that’s what happened when he and Dad took this same trip together eight years ago. *You have almost two weeks to sort out the kinks*, Jake said with a shrug when I asked him for advice. Just under two weeks, just over one hundred miles. Just a *little* farther up the trail than Dad and Jake made it . . . in part, to annoy Dad. In part, to prove we can.

My feet hurt.

My neck stings.

My legs burn.

I already want to quit. But we’re going to finish. If we don’t, Dad wins. He’s already taken enough from us, and I refuse to let him win by thinking we need him around to lead us through stuff like this. Mom’s better off without him, and so am I.

We can do this on our own.

We’ll survive, just the two of us.

Dad’s a quitter. Not us.

Mom and I walk in silence for a few more minutes, listening to the rustle of birch leaves in the trees overhead. For the past few weeks, I’ve secretly wondered if we would be stuck chatting about nothing all day—neither Mom nor I do well with awkward silence—or if we’d figure out how to settle

into a comfortable quiet. Our house has been a lot quieter lately, especially in those rare times when Mom's gone and I'm home alone. I never used to mind being home by myself; I even sometimes *liked* the space and quiet and responsibility of taking care of myself. But that was before.

Before Jake went back to college, and before Dad side-stepped into his new family.

After, there are way too many uncomfortable silences. Too much time to think about the way things used to be. Too much space to notice the holes in our life. Too many chances to wonder what else might break.

Now alone terrifies me.

Just keep walking.

Something shrill screams from the top of a tree just off the trail. I know that sound—a squirrel yelling at us for barging in on its turf and demanding a peace-food offering. I wave up into the trees, trying to be friendly. The squirrel yells again, warning me to move along or pay up. It's not like a squirrel poses much of a threat to us, but there are plenty of other dangers out here: bears, moose, wolves, ticks, poison ivy, dehydration, heat, cold, injuries. I try not to think about those things. But as we settle into our silence, there's too much room to think about everything that scares me.

We come around a corner, and the wall of trees to our left is split open by an enormous boulder jutting out into open sky. I lean against my poles and peer out at the view. It's a

sea of green: lime, pine, and emerald all mixed into a watercolor canvas of trees that stretches out below us for miles. “That view *is* pretty rewarding,” I grumble.

“Oof, I’m pooped already,” Mom admits, laughing as she grabs her water bottle out of the side pocket of her pack and takes a long swig. “How far do you think we’ve gone?”

We set out from the parking lot about an hour ago, probably. We got a lift to the trailhead from one of Mom’s friends early this morning. Regina dropped us and our packs at the edge of a gravel parking lot, took a couple quick pictures of us standing together next to the Castle Danger trailhead sign, and cheered as we set off on our merry way. “Maybe two miles?” I guess. We have ten miles planned for today. Ten again tomorrow. Same for the next day. I try not to think about the days of more miles after that, since it gets a little overwhelming when you stack them all up in a line.

Mom pulls out her cell phone, which is set to airplane mode to save the battery, and opens the app she’s using to track and map our route for the hike. She glances at the tracker and draws in a breath.

“I don’t like your cringe face right now,” I say, wiping my forehead. It’s only nine in the morning, but it’s so hot that a rivulet of sweat has already run down my temple and pooled in my ear. “What’s the deal? How far have we gone?”

Mom says nothing.

“Is it *less* than two miles?”

She won’t look me in the eye when she says, “Point six.”

“Point six what?” I ask. “What does that mean?”

“Six tenths of a mile,” she says. “Point six. We’ve gone just over half a mile. That’s it.”

“Are you kidding me?” I lift my eyebrows. “This is what half a mile feels like?”

Mom laughs, but it’s more of a choked gurgle.

“If this is what *half* a mile feels like,” I say, “I’m gonna need to start working on my will right now, because I’m definitely going to die out here.” Even though I’m kind of joking, the look on Mom’s face tells me this comment isn’t very helpful. It’s *maybe* not the right attitude to get us through day one. “Come on, we’ve got this,” I say, gently poking her in the butt with the tip of one of my hiking poles. “Let’s just keep walking.”