

## Title: Saying Goodbye to Pepper

The day we had to say goodbye to Pepper was the saddest day of my life. Pepper wasn't just a dog: he was my best friend, my shadow, and the fluffiest, happiest husky in the world. His fur was the colour of toasted marshmallows, and his tail wagged like a windshield wiper whenever he saw me.

It all happened so fast. One day, Pepper was chasing his favourite squeaky ball in the backyard, and the next, he was lying still at the vet's office, his breathing slow and heavy. Mom's eyes were red from crying when she knelt beside me and said, "Pepper is very sick, sweetheart. The doctors can't make him better this time." My heart felt like it had been stuffed into a blender.

I sat beside Pepper on his soft blanket, running my fingers through his fur one last time. He lifted his head weakly and licked my hand, his tongue rough like sandpaper. "I love you, Pep," I whispered, my voice cracking. "You're the best dog ever." His brown eyes looked into mine, and even though he couldn't talk, I knew he understood and was saying he loved me to.

After he was gone, the house felt empty, like all the colour had drained out of it. I cried until my throat hurt, and Mom held me tight, saying, "It's okay to be sad. Pepper loved you so much." To help me remember him, we made a scrapbook filled with pictures: Pepper playing in the mud, Pepper stealing my sandwich, Pepper sleeping with his tongue sticking out.

Sometimes, when the wind rustles the trees just right, I imagine it's Pepper's tail wagging from heaven. Even though I miss him every day, I know he's still with me, just in a different way.

## The Great Mango Heist

One hot afternoon after school, my stomach growled like a hungry lion. I stared at Mr. Crabapple's mango tree, its golden fruits dangling like juicy treasure. Everyone knew he was the grumpiest man on our street, with a frown that could scare off crows. Yet those mangoes... they whispered my name in the wind.

I glanced around to see no sign of him. Heart pounding like a drum, I scrambled up the tree, the bark rough against my palms. Thank goodness it wasn't a very tall tree. The sweet, tangy smell of ripe mangoes filled my nose as I plucked one, then two, then three, before I heard..... VROOM!

Mr. Crabapple's rusty blue car rolled into the driveway. My blood turned to ice. I froze, clutching the mangoes like they were stolen diamonds. The car door creaked open, and out he stepped, tall, with bushy eyebrows that looked like angry caterpillars. His eyes, sharp as knives, scanned the tree. Then... they locked onto me.

"YOU!" he bellowed, his voice like thunder. "Get down here before I call your parents!" I gulped. My legs wobbled as I climbed down, the mangoes feeling heavier with every step. Mr. Crabapple loomed over me, his face red as a chili pepper. "Why were you stealing my mangoes, boy?" he growled. I stared at my shoes. "I—I'm sorry, sir. They just looked so good, and..."

His scowl deepened, but then—something unexpected happened. His stern face softened just a tiny bit. He sighed, rubbing his temples. "You know, when I was your age, I stole mangoes too. From Old Man Jenkins." A tiny smirk tugged at his lips. "But I got caught—just like you." My eyes widened. "Really?" He nodded. "But stealing's wrong. If you'd asked, I might've given you some."

Hope flickered in my chest. "Can I... have one? Please?" Mr. Crabapple huffed, then plucked the biggest, ripest mango from the tree and handed it to me. "Here. But next time—ask first." I grinned. "Yes, sir! Thank you!"

As I ran home, the mango sweet on my tongue, I realized something. Maybe Mr. Crabapple wasn't so crabby after all.

## The Worst Party Ever

I had been counting down the days for the neighbourhood block party. Every time I walked past the bright posters taped to lampposts, my heart raced with excitement. Games! Music! Prizes! the flyers promised. I imagined bouncing on inflatable castles, stuffing my face with cotton candy, and laughing with friends under twinkling lights.

Finally, the big day arrived. I skipped down the sidewalk, my neon-green party hat bouncing on my head. But as I turned the corner, my smile melted like an ice cream cone in the sun. The “party” was just a bunch of folding chairs in Mrs. Thompson’s driveway. A sad-looking speaker crackled with static-y oldies music, and the only food was a tray of celery sticks and a bowl of “mystery dip” that smelled like wet socks.

“Uh... is this it?” I whispered to Jake, my next-door neighbour. He shrugged. “Yeah. Last year, there was a magician. This year, we get... vegetables.” Things got worse. The “games” were a sack race with grocery bags (mine ripped immediately) and a “guess how many pennies are in the jar” contest. The prize? A single sticker.

Then Mr. Harris fired up the grill—way too close to where we were sitting. Smoke billowed around us, stinging my eyes and making me cough like a sick cat. “Who wants a charcoal burger?” he boomed, holding up a patty blacker than my sneakers. I gagged and whispered to Jake, “I’d rather eat my homework.”

By the time the “dance contest” started (just Mrs. Thompson doing the cha-cha by herself), I’d had enough. I grabbed my goody bag, which held a rubber band and a mint from 2008 and bolted. As I trudged home, I kicked a pebble, grumbling. All that waiting... for this? Next time, I’d just stay in my room and watch paint dry. At least that wouldn’t smell like burnt burgers.