

## Chapter 5

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# Calder's Dog

A dog whimpered. Riley groaned and shifted in his armchair by the window. At first he thought it was another dream. Another creature come to him in sleep the way they did, cooing or crying or cackling like jaybirds.

He lifted his head and waited for the sound to come again. It did. A squeaky, far-off sound like a circus clown twisting red balloons. Round and round the sound went making what kind of shape Riley couldn't say.

He roused himself up out of the chair. Calder's dog was at the front door. Riley knew it right away. They were friends, Riley and this dog. Both walkers down a path few trod.

A young dog with fur the color of marshmallows toasted gold.

A pretty dog, but blind. Blind like no dog Riley'd ever known. Like no other being really, man or beast. Calder's

dog had two large glassy eyes, pupil-less like jumbo jaw-breakers sucked down to a pure silver blue.

Cataracts. The dog was born with cataracts.

Well I'll be durned, Riley'd thought the first time he'd seen her as a pup. Would you look at that.

She was always happy, though, this animal. Always wagging her tail.

Riley looked through the gas station's front door. The dog smelled him and stopped whimpering. What are you doing out here by yourself, girl? he thought, Where's Calder?

Riley opened the door and the dog came in. She looked toward him, her eyes beholden, blind though they were. She sniffed her way to Riley's hand and licked it. Her tail wagged as it always did, moving the whole back of her body with it.

Riley really liked this dog. She alone among creatures who came his way, on two legs or on four, understood him. Without words. Or seeing. Just a deep knowing, Riley and that dog had. It was something they'd had since Calder had first held the dog up to Riley as a pup.

"What do you think I should do with her, Riley?" Calder had asked years ago. "Fellers say drown her, but something in me says no. This here's a good dog underneath them ghost eyes she's got. Figure you might know about these

things, Riley. Bet a feller like you's seen a lot of ghosts in your time. What do you say, should I keep her?"

Riley had looked up at Calder, moved by the rich man's question. Calder wasn't much given to asking for advice and surely not from Riley. He'd nodded his head a time or two, Riley had, then given a couple more quick nods to make sure Calder understood him.

"Good choice, friend," Calder'd said and smiled.

Riley remembered being happy at that moment.

Calder squinted. His bottom jaw stuck out. "Think I'll call her Lorraine," he said, and Riley was struck stone. "That was your daughter's name, wasn't it, Riley?" Calder said "The one who died?"

Riley opened his mouth to cry out in pain but nothing came. Nobody'd spoken of his dead baby girl for going on thirty years, not to his face at least, not since Dolores left.

LORRAINE had only been a few weeks old.

"Overlaying," they called it, though Dolores swore nobody'd rolled over on her, their miracle child. "God just took her, that was all," Dolores said, "took her up to heaven he did. Called her back. Wasn't her time, Tom," that's what Dolores said. "World's not good enough for her yet. Too much evil, God figured, for pure goodness like her. She's at peace now, Thomas, swimming in His love. It's a better place, Tom, a better place than here. Someday we'll see

her, husband. Someday we'll know her again. Don't cry, Tom," Dolores said. "Don't cry, honey. Maybe we'll have another baby someday. Maybe God will send us another little girl. Don't cry, sweetheart, don't cry. Everything's going to be all right."

Riley held his hands out to Calder that day and Calder handed him the pup. Riley held her up to his cheek. The dog's soft puppy fur rubbed against his stubble. The animal sniffed around and pushed her wet black nose into Riley's skin, licking the salty wetness she found there, rolling down his cheeks. Riley stood there and let the dog have her way with his face.

"Well, time to go old man," Calder said, taking back the dog and stuffing it into a knapsack he slung over his saddle horn. "Give me a pack of Dentyne for the road, friend, and thanks for the advice."

RILEY LOOKED AROUND in the desert night for signs of Calder. The wind blew a bottle cap off the ledge by the gas pumps and rolled it over toward the door. Lorraine sat up and raised her ears. Riley looked at the crimped piece of metal, bent and rusted like he was, he thought, tossed about alone. He locked the door and led Lorraine back into his room behind the office.

"Are you hungry, girl?" he asked, speaking suddenly out loud.

Lorraine stopped, startled maybe by the sound of his voice. Riley stood dead still, his heart pounding, trying to figure out if he'd really said something aloud outside his hole. Something in him cracked, something hard and cold, and he stopped breathing for a moment.

Lorraine looked toward Riley and wagged her tail.

Riley shook himself and rubbed the dog behind the ears. He pried open his old Frigidaire and took out two hot-dogs and some cooked oatmeal.

“Here you go, little gal,” Riley said softly aloud again, and the words rumbled inside him. “This is for you. This is for Miss Lorraine.”