

Short Wagging Tales

WATCH DOGS



Edited By
Kaneez Zehra Razavi

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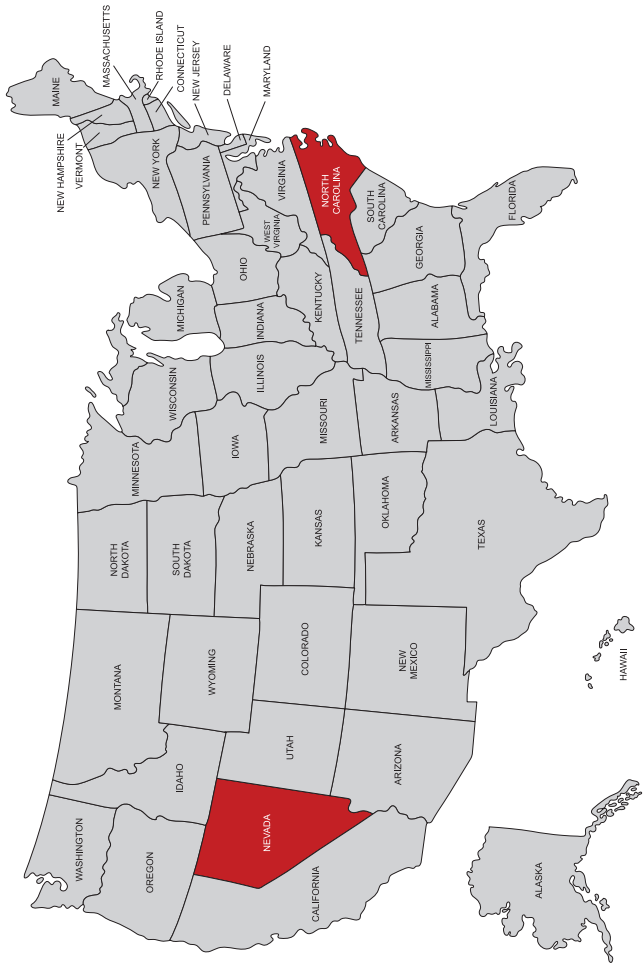


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A SHOT IN THE DARK

MATTHEW S. DENTICE

Charlotte, North Carolina - United States

Kenneth Dillon is a writer of fantasy and science fiction hailing from Edinburg, Ohio.



“So, you hear there was a break-in at the Stevensons’ down the street?” Tim Morris said as his wife Sarah came into the kitchen. “When I got the mail, there were police cars all over the place. I asked Fred about it and he told me what happened.”

“Hmm,” Sarah said, walking over to the refrigerator and beginning to rummage around for the lunch she had prepared for herself last night. “Didn’t Jim and Margot just get burgled the day before last? I hope it’s not the start of a crime wave.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing,” Tim said as he got up from the kitchen table, ready to kiss his wife goodbye. “These things happen. I’m sure it’s just coincidence.”



“Still, I’d feel a lot better about these ‘coincidences’ if we had gotten a security system installed like I wanted,” Sarah said. “We’re definitely having that conversation again when I get home.”

“What do we need a costly alarm system for when we’ve got Jake here?” Tim asked.

He gestured underneath the table, where a Swiss shepherd dog, all white with wavy fur and wearing a red bandana around his neck, was sprawled out on the floor, eyes shut tight.

Sarah stopped in the entryway and cast a glance down on the canine. With a smirk, she said, “Oh, I feel so much safer. You know if anybody breaks in, Jake will be the first one to crawl under the bed and hide.”



She left the room and, a few seconds later, the sound of the front door closing was heard. Jake opened his eyes. Above him, Tim stood up.

“Well, I guess it’s about time for us to head out too. How ’bout it, boy, you want to go to the dog park?”

*

The dog-park was a grassy enclosure, square in shape and not particularly spacious, surrounded by a fence. It was bordered by a larger park designed for human use on two sides, a parking lot on one side, and the street on the final side. There were dogs of all sorts inside, running, playing, and doing



all kinds of canine activities. At one end of the dog park, the various owners were gathered. Tim Morris sat there on a folding chair, lost in conversation with several other people as they debated the finer points of last night's game. At the other end, on the side directly adjacent to the street, was Jake, sitting up against the fence.

On the other side of the fence, also sitting with her back against it, was another dog. She was a mixed-breed dog, about the same size as Jake, with a slender but powerful frame, erect ears, and a long muzzle. She was mostly tan in color, except for her legs, tail, and the long fur along her neck and beneath her ears, which were mahogany. Her eyes were the color of lapis lazuli.



“There’s been a bunch of break-ins lately on my street,” Jake said. “First it was Fred Stevenson.”

“The tech entrepreneur?” the other dog said. “The one who’s negotiating to sell that website of his for a few million? What did he call it again?”

“You Are Not Alone Dot Com,” Jake said. “It’s the first dating site for people who have been abducted by aliens.”

“Oh, right. I think I remember their slogan, ‘When even E.T. doesn’t want you anymore, we’ll find someone who does.’”

“Roxanne, it’s not funny. It’s an underserved market. Besides, their actual slogan is, ‘Make a connection that’s out of this world.’”



“Of course it is,” Roxanne said. “Mine was better though.”

“And it wasn’t just Fred. Jim Sherman and Margot Baker on the other end of the street got robbed too.”

“They’re the ones who run the start-up creating environmentally-friendly plastic products, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I never understood how they made plastic environmentally-friendly. Does it degrade faster than normal plastic does?”

“No, it takes as long to break down as other kinds of plastic, but each item has a large sticker that you can’t get off which shames you for buying it and harming the planet.”



“Silly me for thinking that an ‘environmentally-friendly’ product would be friendly toward the environment. I wonder where I ever got that crazy idea.”

“But you want to know what the worst part of this whole robbery thing is? My house is next!”

“Right, because that’s far worse than ruining the planet while pretending to save it,” Roxanne said. “Notch up another victory for the narcissistic impulse in all of us.”

“Now, Jake, you know that catastrophizing is so unhealthy,” said a calm, soothing voice up above them. “It weakens your vitality, wraps your mind in the chains of anxiety, and knocks your chakras all out of alignment.”



Up above them was another dog. She was only slightly smaller than either Jake or Roxanne but was currently perched atop the fence with perfect balance, looking more like a bird than a dog. She was very slender and all white in color, save for a few bluish spots on her paws and forehead. Her graceful, wavy fur was particularly abundant around her ears and tail. Her muzzle was long and her eyes were somewhere between blue and green.

“But Clarity, I’m not ‘catastrophe-izing’ or whatever,” Jake said. “The Stevensons are the last house on one end of our street and Margot and Jim are the last house on the other. We’re the house directly in the middle of the street, so it just makes sense that it would be us next.”



“Perfectly logical, Roxanne said, “assuming the whole gang of robbers have OCD.”

“Now, now, Roxanne,” Clarity said from above, “you shouldn’t be so critical of Jake when he’s making an attempt at rational thought. You know how rarely he does and I for one think that he should be applauded for trying something new.”

“I mean, he’s not doing it *very well*, but sure.”

“The effort is what counts. Van Gogh didn’t paint *Starry Night* the very first time he picked up a brush, you know.”

“So, what you’re saying is that if Jake keeps at it, he’ll eventually go mad and cut off his own ear? Hear that, Jake? Your girlfriend has a thing for the one-eared type.”



Jake was not really listening to them. He was lost in his own thoughts. “Oh, why does this have to happen to us?”

“A junior partner at an overpriced law firm married to a social parasite who lives so well on his wife’s earnings that he doesn’t bother getting a job of his own?” Roxanne said. “Why would anyone ever want to steal from them? The world may never know.”

When Roxanne turned back around, she was surprised to see that Clarity’s face was now level with her own, except that Clarity’s was upside down. She had climbed a little down the fence and was hanging above Roxanne.



“I’m picking up some bad vibes here,” Clarity said. “Are we to get the implication that you don’t like rich people very much?”

“Was I implying it?” Roxanne said, feigning innocence. “I’m so sorry! I meant to state it explicitly.”

Clarity did not acknowledge the remark. “Having great wealth can be just as much of a burden as going without it. Everyone suffers in their own way, even those who, on the face of it, seem the most fortunate.”

Roxanne’s eyes narrowed. She stared at Clarity for a moment. “You don’t subscribe to that whole ‘Eat the Rich’ thing, do you?”

“Of course not,” Clarity responded. “I’m a vegetarian.”



Roxanne glared at Clarity. “How’d you even get up there in the first place?” she asked.

“You know, the very worst part is, we’re totally undefended!” Jake said, staring at his paws. “We don’t even have a security system. Sarah wanted to get one, but Tim said it was too expensive.”

“Since his wife makes all the money, it only makes sense that he should get to decide how they spend it,” Roxanne said. “I can see no flaws in that logic.”

“They said it’s up to me to guard the house for them!” Jake said.

Roxanne let out a laugh. “Why not just put a sign out front saying, ‘All crooks welcome!’”



“I know, right,” Jake said. “I’m a complete coward! I don’t know what Tim was even thinking . . . saying that.”

He realized at that moment that Clarity was now sitting beside him on his side of the fence.

“Jake, we’ve talked about this,” she said. “Don’t say ‘coward.’ Say ‘bravery-challenged’—it’s kinder to yourself.”

“I need to figure out what to do,” Jake said, starting to panic. “Somebody tell me what to do!”

“You could always try reasoning with them,” Clarity said. “They’re probably just wayward youths in need of a guiding paw and a good talking-to.”



“Hey, genius, did you forget that we’re dogs and can’t talk to humans?” Roxanne said.

“You know, I was thinking,” Jake said. “If it’s not too much trouble, could you guys come over tonight and help me fight off the robbers? If Tim and Sarah are putting this much faith in me, I can’t let them down. I just can’t!”

Roxanne shrugged. “I had a hot date with an Irish setter tonight but . . . sure. To think, I get to hang out in a swanky McMansion and all it takes is me risking my life for some rich people I don’t even like!”

“When am I ever not there for you, Jake?” Clarity said.



“If we’re counting emotionally, I can think of a few times,” Roxanne said. “Maybe more than a few.”

“Great!” Jake said. “I feel better already! Tim and Sarah are usually in bed by nine, so come over then. You can use the doggy door; they never lock it. Now, we just need to come up with a plan. Something bold. Something ingenious. Something that won’t require me to put myself in mortal peril!”

Jake fell deep into thought. Clarity and Roxanne watched him silently. Just then another voice said, “Hey, guys, did you see the new movie at the drive-in?”

All three practically jumped out of their skin and tumbled to the ground. When they looked up, they saw that a fourth dog,



a greyhound, was now sitting at Roxanne's side.

“Dang it, Gianni, why do you always do that?” Roxanne said as she picked herself back up. Jake and Clarity also rose to their paws.

Gianni went on speaking as though he had not heard the question. “I just got back from seeing it. *Soho Before Sunrise*. What a movie! You'd love it, trust me. But I probably shouldn't say anymore. You know me, I'm serious about spoilers. So, if you're planning to see it, just say the word and you won't get another word out of me.”

“I'll probably try to see it if I can sneak in somewhere,” Roxanne said.



“Tim and Sarah are taking me in the SUV this weekend,” Jake said.

“Popular entertainment like movies and television weaken the mind and sap the spirit,” Clarity said. “I avoid them on principle. Except I did see *Lost Horizon* one time.”

“That tracks,” Roxanne said.

“So, the thing is,” Gianni said, “this flick’s about a vampire, right? Except, the big twist is, he’s not really a vampire. He just pretends to be a vampire to frighten the movie’s real bad guy. Can you believe that? It’s crazy!”

“No, Gianni, I didn’t want to actually be surprised by the big reveal.” Roxanne said. “Why do you ask?”

Having barked those words, she made a show of standing up and indignantly



walking off. Meanwhile, Jake caught sight of Tim in the distance, standing up and beginning to fold his chair.

“Okay, I gotta get going too,” Jake said. “See you tonight, Clary.”

He then bounded off toward his human.

Gianni, clearly confused, turned his head back and forth in the directions that Jake and Roxanne had gone. “Was it something I said?”

Clarity shrugged.

✱

“Come on, where is it?” Jake said. “I know it’s gotta be in here somewhere.”



He was busily rummaging through an open closet in the upstairs guest bedroom. “There you are!” He said at last.

“What are you doing?”

Jake yelped and spun around, letting an old black top hat and scarf fall from his mouth to the floor. Roxanne was standing behind him.

“Roxanne! I didn’t hear you come in!” he said.

“I got in a minute or two ago,” Roxanne said. “I can be quiet when I want to be.”

“All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding,” came another voice above them. Clarity was lying on the bed, looking down at them.



“Clarity? Where did you come from?”
Jake asked.

“I’ve been here for a while,” Clarity said nonchalantly.

“Then why didn’t you say something? I didn’t even know you were here.”

Clarity shrugged her shoulders. “You looked like you were busy with something,” she said to Jake. “I thought it best not to interrupt.”

“And so I ask again,” Roxanne said to Jake. “Just what the heck *are* you doing?”

“Oh, this?” Jake asked, pointing his nose to the hat and scarf. “It’s all part of my brilliant plan for getting rid of the burglars. You know, Gianni gave me an idea. I’m going to put this stuff on and pretend to be a



vampire. I read in a comic book once that criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot, so it should scare them off!”

“Because the plan where we just do what dogs have done since time immemorial and tear the intruders to shreds with our teeth wasn’t working for you?” Roxanne asked.

“Why must you always resort to the violence of ‘nature, red in tooth and claw’?” Clarity said.

“Maybe because I have both teeth *and* claws?” Roxanne said. “We’re dogs! I’m a dog. Jake’s a dog. You’re . . . well, I don’t know what species you’re considered on your home planet, but my point still stands!”

“But it’s a new age,” Clarity responded. “You should be able to rise above the beast,



tame your savage nature, and turn your mind toward loftier inclinations.”

“I guess you know a lot about rising above beasts, what with that high horse you’re always riding,” Roxanne said.

Clarity sighed. “Look, think about it this way. What if the thieves have a gun? You attack them and they start shooting. What then?”

“Then I’ll make sure to push you in front of me,” Roxanne answered.

“I don’t know why I even try,” Clarity said, shaking her head in frustration. “At least Jake tried to come up with a solution that doesn’t require violence!”

At these words, Jake perked up. “Aww, thanks, Clary!”



“Oh, it’s still a stupid idea, don’t get me wrong,” Clarity said. “But the commitment to principles is worth commending.”

“Well, since you’ve got so many ideas for what we shouldn’t do,” Roxanne said, “what’s *your* plan for dealing with the robbers?”

Clarity smiled a large, somewhat disconcerting smile. She sat up on the bed. “I’m glad you asked. When these obviously misguided young people make their ill-advised attempt to enter the premises, I am going to sit them down and we’re going to have a long talk about the negative effects of a life of crime, the terrible conditions of prisons in this country, and how being convicted of a felony vastly reduces one’s chances of



future employment. Then I will encourage them to explore the root causes of their predicament and uncover the unacknowledged insecurities and perceived inadequacies that are causing them to act out. Finally, to conclude, I will suggest healthy outlets into which they can channel their destructive impulses in a constructive and socially-forward fashion.”

Roxanne and Jake both stared at her.

“So let me get this straight,” Roxanne said. “You’re going to stop the robbers . . . with a TED Talk?”

“Well, I hardly think that we need to apply such a *gauche* term to my carefully considered and evidence-based approach.”



“She’s still sore about the fact that they rejected her proposed talk on ‘Reinforcing Global Interpersonal Synchronicity,’” Jake whispered to Roxanne. “They said it was quote-unquote ‘highly unusual’ for a canine to speak on matters of international spirituality.”

“Small-minded anthropocentric bigots,” Clarity said. “I read the rules backwards and forwards. There’s nothing in them that says a dog can’t initiate a worldwide revolution in collective consciousness.”

Roxanne let out a growl. “That’s just it! You. Are. A. Dog. We can’t give TED Talks. We can’t convince crooks to follow the straight and narrow. We can’t *communicate with humans.*”



“You only say that because you’ve never tried,” Clarity said. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Roxanne howled in anger. “You’re impossible. You’re just as bad as Jake with his dumb vampire idea.”

“At least we’re trying to come up with proactive solutions,” Clarity said. “All you’ve got is ‘see robber, bite robber.’”

“There’s not even going to be any robbers!” Roxanne said. “You know as well as I do that nobody’s breaking in here just because it’s the middle house on the street!”

From the first floor came the distinctive sound of glass shattering.

“You were saying?” Clarity asked.

Roxanne shook her head. “I hate my life.”



The three dogs ran down to the foot of the stairs. A window nearby was broken. Two figures, one tall and the other short, were in the middle of the room. They were both wearing black masks that covered their whole heads.

“Oh my dog, it’s the robbers!” Jake said.

Roxanne shushed him.

Jake took no notice. “What do we do? What do we do?” he stammered. “I gotta do this! How am I supposed to do this! I can’t do this! This is too much!”

Turning on his heels, he ran back upstairs and disappeared into the guest bedroom.

“My hero,” Roxanne said. “Guess it’s up to the girls to solve the problem. What else is new?”



“We had better solve it fast,” Clarity said, pointing her nose toward the crooks. “I think they’ve noticed us.”

Indeed, the two ne'er-do-wells had noticed the dogs and were approaching menacingly.

“We’ve got, like, five seconds to do something” Roxanne said. “Any ideas?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle this,” Clarity said. She cleared her throat. “Now, do you think I should start with a brief overview of the historical patterns of crime in this country or skip to the discussion of how our elected leaders have ignored the root causes of criminal recidivism for too long?”

Roxanne saw the taller thief reach into the pocket of his sports jacket.



“Too late for any of that,” she said. “We’re gonna have to go with my plan.”

Roxanne bared her teeth and, with a mighty pounce, she flung herself at the crooks. She landed on the smaller one, knocking him to the ground. Sinking her teeth into his mask, she ripped it from his head, revealing the face of a man well into the depths of middle age.

“So much for your theory about wayward youths that just need to be set straight,” Roxanne said.

The larger of the two men now withdrew his hand from his pocket. A handgun was grasped tightly within it. He aimed at Roxanne.



“Roxanne, look out!” Clarity barked. She leapt off the stair and soon collided with Roxanne. The gun fired. They both lay on the ground.

Above them, Jake was cowering under the bed when he heard the sound of the gunshot. “Clarity!” he cried.

At that moment, as terrified as he was, Jake knew he had to do something. His eyes turned to the old hat and scarf.

On the floor below, Roxanne shook her head. “What happened?”

Clarity motioned her nose toward the wall behind them, which was now marked with a brand-new bullet hole. “I’m not one to say I told you so,” Clarity said, “so let’s just say you owe me one.”



“I think I’d rather be shot,” Roxanne responded. She then saw, out of the corner of her eye, the tall man point his gun at her once again. “I didn’t mean that literally!” Roxanne said in panic.

Clarity stood up and looked the man dead in the eye. “Don’t worry. He won’t shoot. He’s not the kind.”

As if to disprove her sentiment, they heard the sound of the gun cocking.

“You’re a terrible judge of character. You know that, right?” Roxanne said.

Just then, a loud growl was heard from the top of the stairs. Everyone looked up. There was Jake, dressed in the top hat and scarf, snarling menacingly. Or as close to menacingly as he could manage.



The two men jumped back.

“It’s a vampire dog!” shouted the short one. “A fiendish creature of the night who sucks the blood of unfortunate souls like us!”

“What do we do?” asked the tall one frantically. “Do I shoot it?”

“You can’t kill vampires with bullets! Everybody knows that!”

“Then what do we do?”

“Run!”

As Jake bounded down the stairs, the two men made a break for it. They dashed toward the broken window, jumped through it, and vanished back into the night from whence they came. Jake sat down before the window and watched them go. Clarity and Roxanne walked up behind him.



“I can’t believe that actually worked,” Roxanne said.

“I guess criminals really are a suspicious and cowardly lot,” Clarity said. “Who knew?”

Just then, they heard noises from above and Tim calling out, “What’s going on down there.”

Clarity quickly tore the hat and scarf off Jake. Then she pushed the clothes, Roxanne, and herself into a nearby closet.

First came Sarah’s voice, saying, “I tell you I heard a gunshot!”

The lights came on. Tim and Sarah appeared at the foot of the stairs. Their eyes moved from the broken window, to the bullet hole in the wall, and then to Jake.



“Now do you believe me about needing to get a security system?” Sarah said when she had finally recovered enough to speak.

Tim walked over and examined the broken window. “I guess somebody really did break in. I never really thought it was going to happen a third time on this same street. What are the odds of that?”

“First thing in the morning, I’m calling somebody to have an alarm installed,” Sarah said.

Tim’s eyes turned from the window to Jake, who was sitting there looking proud and alert.

“Honey, I think it’s okay,” Tim said. “Looks like Jake scared them away.”

“Jake? Our Jake?” Sarah said.



Tim pointed toward the bullet hole in the wall. “From the looks of it, we’re lucky he’s still our Jake.”

Sarah walked over and examined the hole for herself. “Well, I’ll be. He really did it.”

“What did I tell you?” Tim said as he knelt down and began to tussle Jake’s fur. “Our boy’s a hero.”

“How much of a ‘hero’ would they think he was if they knew that his whining started the whole shootout,” Roxanne muttered from the closet.

Clarity shushed her. “Let him have this,” she said.

And so, as Sarah joined her husband in giving him a hearty amount of pets and



affection, Jake basked in the satisfaction of knowing that his home was secure, his loved ones were unharmed, and two more petty criminals would forever afterwards fear the night, when monsters lurk in the shadows and vampire dogs are on the prowl.

CHASING SQUIRRELS

LYNDA WATSON

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When he entered the living room, he walked right by me, the click of his paws on the wood floor much quieter and muffled now. His hind legs shook, and he paused in the middle of the room like an elderly man who'd forgotten where he was. I watched as his hound instinct kicked in and he sniffed the air.

“Ceili, come.”

He didn't respond the way he once had.

I said his name again. He turned to look up at me through his clouded eyes.

“Hey buddy.”

I held his graying snout and stroked his velvet ears. He stepped closer and snuggled his head into my lap. The conflict I'd been struggling with swept through me again.



I'd been stalling. Ignoring the obvious signs of his coming death. A decision had to be made, and I had to make it for him, not for me. That room had always been so peaceful when it was just him with me, but the sound of his labored breathing had invaded it. I gently lifted his unsteady head off my lap and shuffled down onto the carpet in front of the sofa. His body flopped next to me. I sat with him until the sun set and the room darkened. I petted his soft coat and reminisced about the day I brought him home.

The smell of antiseptic filled my nose, as I remembered the cold sterile room where he and I first met. His boundless energy, his curious little brown nose and his wobbly



hind legs. He pounced right into my lap within moments of sniffing my hand. It was love at first sight.

“He’s just a pup, I can’t believe no one’s scooped him up.” I said.

The attendant began flipping through her clipboard.

“Looks like he was adopted a few weeks ago but he was showing signs of aggression, so they brought him back,” she said.

As he wiggled about in my lap, all I felt was pure joy. He and I were bonded already and I was ready for our adventure together—clueless to how hard it might be.

A heavy feeling sank to the bottom of my stomach. I cradled his wobbly head in my hands and whispered in his ear, “I love you,



Ceili.” His eyes fluttered shut and his breathing calmed some, before I spoke again. “It’s ok to let go . . .”

A tear kissed my cheek as I realized how much he had unselfishly given to me over the years. Ceili was never more than an arm’s length away and although tripping over that 40-pound dog was probably the most infuriating feeling, I now felt nothing but shame.

He loved me, even when I didn’t love him back. He refused to leave my side, even when all I wanted was space. I showed him little mercy when he nipped at my toddler after her tiny finger found its way into his rear end. But worst of all, I contemplated giving him away when the kids took precedence, because he was ‘too much work’.



In that precious moment, sitting with him in the living room, I wanted nature to take its course. Wanted him to let go. His stubbornness and faithful determination to be there for me, would never let him leave this world on his own.

It took a few days to make the arrangements. I decided I would have him put down in our home, in the comfort of his own bed. I'd arranged for this to happen on a day when my kids weren't home; I didn't want them to see Ceili go. It was a few weeks before Christmas and the weather that day was dreadful. The wind was howling and the snow fell relentlessly all day. By the time the kids came home from school, all of their after-school activities had been cancelled.



Now they would be home when the veterinarian came. The children didn't express much emotion about putting Ceili down; I don't think they entirely knew how to feel. I found myself quickly trying to process how this all might affect them and whether they'd want to be present while it happened.

After talking to both kids, I realized it wasn't right for me to make this decision for them. They were both teenagers and old enough. Ceili had been part of our family since before they were born.

"If you aren't comfortable being around when Dr. Tolton comes to put Ceili down, that's ok," I said.

Alyssa shrugged, and Riley said, "Would it be ok if we decide once the doctor gets here?"



“Yes.”

It was getting late and I was starting to fear that the doctor wouldn't make it through the storm when the doorbell rang. I looked nervously at my husband as we both walked toward the front door.

“Hi, Dr. Tolton, come on in.” I said, “I really appreciate you and your assistant tackling this awful weather.”

“It's not a problem,” he said.

I took the doctor straight to where Ceili was resting on his bed by the back door. I joined my children and husband waiting in the kitchen while the doctor examined him. After a few minutes Dr. Tolton joined us in the kitchen.



“You’re making the right decision,” he said. “He’s in a fair bit of pain and it’s definitely time.”

We gathered around Ceili resting peacefully on his bed.

“I’ll sedate Ceili first to take away any discomfort he’s having and then once he’s resting nicely, I will inject the serum that will stop his heart.”

He crouched down and injected Ceili with the sedative.

“I’ll leave you with him for a few minutes to say your goodbyes.”

My husband and the doctor returned to the kitchen to do some paperwork while the children and I sat on the floor beside Ceili’s bed; the kids kneeling behind him



at a concerned distance, while I sat in front of him. Ceili's breathing was very slow; he'd take a breath through his nose but it took a few seconds before he'd let it out again. I shuffled a bit closer. Lying next to him I rubbed his back and hoped he knew I was there. Riley asked, "Will he feel it? Will he know what's happening?"

I sat up slightly, and took a minute to reassure her. "The medicine that the doctor just gave Ceili will make sure he's comfortable. He will likely be sleeping peacefully by the time the doctor gives him the serum, which will stop his heart. He shouldn't feel anything."

"Will he be dead after that?" she asked.

"Yes."



They both put their hands on Ceili's limp body. Riley looked up through tear filled eyes and said, "I don't know what to say to him, Mom."

"You don't need to say anything. Ceili knows we're here and that's all he needs."

I leaned down to his ear in case that he might still hear me.

"You're such a good boy. I hope heaven has lots of squirrels for you to chase."

Moments later, his breathing became rapid and irregular as the sedation started to kick in and he began gasping for air. Why is this happening, I thought, wasn't the sedation supposed to make him rest? I jumped up and shouted, "Something's wrong!"



Dr. Tolton knelt down beside me. With his stethoscope he leaned in and listened intently. The girls got up and moved away from Ceili. Dr. Tolton looked at me kneeling beside him and said. “He’s quite a fighter . . . he’s trying to resist the sedation. We can’t wait any longer—I need to put him down now.”

Time stopped and then sped up at a rapid speed. It was all happening too fast, he said we’d have some time. The children now holding each other, stood with their father. Dr. Tolton injected Ceili with the serum, and the breathing calmed. He put his stethoscope to Ceili’s chest one last time, gave him a pat on the head, looked at me and said, “He’s gone.”



Dr. Tolton left me sitting on the floor beside Ceili and walked back into the kitchen with my husband. I looked up at the kids.

“Do you want to sit with him for a minute?”

“No, Mom.” said Riley. “Can we go?”

“Yes.”

I leaned down, laying my head close to his, wrapping my arms around his limp body. Flashes of the past 16 years raced through my head; my eyes blurred. I loved him, and in that moment, I wish I'd loved him more.

“Goodbye Ceili—thanks for being my buddy.”

My husband came in behind me and placed his hand on my back. I loosened my



grip on Ceili and left him in his bed while my husband helped me up off the floor. Without a word we walked together into the living room. Dr. Tolton's assistant wrapped Ceili up in a brown fleece blanket. The doctor came to the front door carrying him in his arms like a sleeping child. "I want you to know," he said. "We value your pet, we will treat him like one of our own."

His assistant handed me Ceili's collar.

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

I opened the door and uttered a simple "Thank you."

The weather hadn't let up and the cold air hit my face like a slap. Dr. Tolton adjusted the 40 pounds of cargo in his arms and stepped down the porch leaving deep



footprints behind him in the snow, which his assistant carefully stepped into as she followed him out. The heavy snowfall and night sky so peaceful and quiet. I crossed my arms tight over my chest while I fought the temptation to step back inside. One last glimpse, one last something. Through squinted eyes I watched as the doctor's silhouette blended into the elements as he moved further away from the glow of the porch light, and then, they were gone.

I took a step back into the house and closed the door.

Still facing the door, my husband put his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you ok?”

I turned to him and said, “I don't know.”



I walked to the back door and stood over Ceili's empty bed, squeezing his collar in my hand. My eyes felt warm and heavy, so I closed them for a moment. The image of Ceili chasing that elusive squirrel flashed in my head. A single tear rolled down my cheek and landed on a tender smile.

UNCONDITIONAL

KENNETH DILLON

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The boy trudges through his snowy yard towards a squat little barn sitting about a stone's throw away from a rustic looking ranch house. Right behind follows a shaggy black and brown German Shepherd, his liquid amber eyes never leaving the diminutive figure in front. There's a tinge of gray at his snout signifying his ripe age of ten years, in contrast to the boy's young age of twelve. As they arrive at the barn, the clanging of metal and muttered curses greets their ears. Through one of the bay doors a pair of booted feet could be seen sticking out from under a jacked-up 70s Camaro.

“C'mon Moose let's grab our adventuring gear then head out,” the boy says quietly to his four-legged companion. The dog merely



tilts his head and wags his tail, signifying he understood.

Quickly he scampers into the middle bay, grabbing an old pair of binoculars and a rusty hatchet. Just as fast as he went in—he's out again, headed out from the house towards the leafless winter woods of Ohio. He passes their frozen over pond, where in the summers Moose loved to chase the blue herons and ducks away. Snow laden boughs arch overhead as booted feet and padded paws enter the woods, casting all sorts of shadows to drive a young boy's imagination wild. Deeper and deeper they go, the boy stopping from time to time to chop at imaginary foes or scout ahead with his binoculars. All the while his dog is never far



behind, sometimes even joining in on the fun with a booming bark or heavy leap into a snow drift, the latter of which always got a laugh out of the boy.

Fat snowflakes begin falling before long, starting slowly but steadily growing thicker and thicker. A deep chill begins to set upon the woods as well, suddenly much colder than it was when the boy and dog had entered the trees.

“I think we better head back Moo Moo,” the boy says to his dog, turning back the way they’d come from. The way he thought they had come from at least. Snow was whirling around them now, stinging the boy’s eyes and face. The dog keeps dutifully by his side, walking with him through deeper



and deeper snow. Eventually when the boy stepped his foot forward, instead of hitting solid ground, met thin ice before pushing through into water below. He tripped, falling into the depths of the shallow swamp that neighbored the end of the woods. His head came up, gasping for air and from the freezing cold temperature of the water. Loud barking met his ears, before a splash next to him. The dog had leapt into the water, grabbing the boy's hood in his mouth to drag him out.

He sits up, shivering violently while Moose licks his face. The trees are thinner here, but he couldn't see a way out through them. Even worse, he now could see that there were pockets of water like the one he'd



fallen in all around him. The dog licks him again, bringing a little warmth back to his face.

“Thanks Moo Moo,” he says, grabbing his big shaggy head behind the ears and holding it to his own. He could feel the ice forming in his fur and could feel the dog shivering as well.

“I’m scared Buddy, we’re lost. D’you know how to get home? Can you lead us home?” the boy says through chattering teeth, standing up and holding on to a handful of fur on the dog’s shoulder. Moose looks at him, wags his tail stiffly, then begins leading the way.

On through the blinding snow the dog leads, keeping in front so that when they hit



water again it was him that went into the freezing cold liquid and back out again, not the boy. Each time Moose shivered a little more, got a little stiffer, and began moving a little slower. But he never stopped. Eventually they were back in the woods, the dog still leading the way slowly with the boy in tow behind. Shouting could be heard ahead of them, a man's voice ringing out through the deafening snow.

“KEVIN! MOOSE!” the shouting voice calls.

The dog works up the energy to give out a few loud barks before the boy collapses behind him, the cold finally becoming too much. He lay on his side, snow piling around him. His eyes close, his shivering



beginning to lessen. Frantic barking echoes around him, then he's being lifted into the air. His eyes open, seeing his Dad's scared face looking down at him. He's being carried away, but his head turns back to look over his father's shoulder. Moose lay in the snow behind them, head on his ice-covered paws. Snow is piling up on his back, amber eyes staring at the boy through the snow, their light slowly fading.

He was going to rest now, he'd done his job.

“Well, Dad? What do you think would be a good name for him?” My son says excitedly, holding the little bundle of fur out at arm's length in front of me for my inspection.



I take my eyes away from a dusty old photograph on the mantle, a boy who looked to be about seven standing next to a German Shepherd, hand placed firmly on his furry head.

Tiny amber eyes meet mine, causing memories to flicker in my mind once more.

“Son, I know the perfect name for him.”

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