

Tales from  
the  
RAINBOW BRIDGE

*by*

a. abbie aardmore

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# Note and Dedication

*Tales from the Rainbow Bridge* is a story of heartbreaking loss and joyous reunions as told by Zack, a dog, the greeter at the Rainbow Bridge, as he waits for his own beloved companion to take him the rest of the way home. The endings are all happily ever after—but you must cry to get there.

I acknowledge the gentle unknown soul who conceived the idea of this magical place and wrote the poem that graces many a veterinarian's waiting room and gives comfort to the grieving as they send their dear friends on ahead.

I dedicate this book to everyone who has a best friend waiting at the Bridge.



# Greeting

**M**Y NAME IS ZACK. I'm the gate dog at the Rainbow Bridge.

That makes it sound like I'm some kind of guard dog. It's not like that. I'm the greeter.

There wasn't any such position as greeter before I got here. And I only got the job because I won't leave the gate.

This is not heaven. It's the place for those of us who can't go to heaven yet, because it can't be heaven without our special person – our mom, our dad, master, mistress, owner, best friend – whatever you call the one you love more than life, and who holds your memory in her or his heart.

If you are a beloved dog or the human heart holder of a dog, I'm the first one you see when you come here at life's end.

I'm waiting for Mireille.

The memory of my arrival is still vivid.

I came through the gate backwards, kicking and howling, so frantic I didn't notice it was impossible that I could actually move my legs.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Here's my story just as it happened.



# Chapter One

WE ARE SITTING ON a pile of blankets—me and Mireille. We're on the floor of the vet's office. Mireille is holding me. She's petting me and kissing me. I'm not wearing my collar. I feel naked without it. I guess Mireille knows that I can't get up. I can't get into any trouble, so I don't really need the collar.

I got ice cream before we came here! You need to understand, I never, never get ice cream. And I got a cheeseburger all to myself. I'm not allowed cheeseburgers. Anything I wanted this morning, I got.

I'm getting drowsy now.

I lie in Mireille's arms. I wish she would stop crying.

The vet is doing something. I really don't care what he does. I don't hurt anymore.

I feel a little cold. Mireille is warm. She's trying to sing to me, but her voice keeps breaking. I feel her sobs.

Her tears slip down onto my muzzle.

I feel weird. I'm getting kinda scared.

I'm dizzy. I'm floating.

I look down. There's Mireille sitting on a pile of blankets on the floor of the vet's office. She's holding a lumpy, graying, worn sack of shabby fur that looks a little like me. It's a wreck of an animal. Why is she hugging that thing?

Because that's me!

Whoa! Creepy head weave I'm making down there. I'm lurching side to side. It scares Mireille. She holds me tight. She's bleating. She stops my wild swaying.

Mireille's got me. My tongue is hanging out the side of my mouth. I look stupid. This is just too awful.

Okay. That's it! "Mireille, let's go home now!"

I'm better. I'm better. I am so much better.

I'm feeling light.

I'm floating up and away from Mireille. She's still holding the empty husk down there.

I howl in strong full voice, "Mireille! Mireille!"

Something is pulling me back and up and away towards a brightness.

I roar, "Let me go! She needs me!"

I am getting stronger. Those lumps are gone from my neck. I'm good! I'm all better!

"Mireille! I'm up here! Put that ratty thing down! Stop crying and take me home!"

I see her as through a tunnel – and it's closing. Mireille is down there, hugging that shabby, furry bag.

The vet is listening through his stethoscope to the worn hollow chest of the thing that looks sort of like me. He pronounces the words. "He's gone. I'm so sorry."

"No! I'm here! I'm right here!"

The passageway is getting narrower and narrower. Mireille is farther and farther away. I'm rising backwards as if dragged. Wherever I'm going, it's light and warm.

I can't do light and warm right now! I've got to get back down through that dark passage before it shuts me away from Mireille!

Other voices sound behind me, voices of dogs. They are not what's dragging me away from Mireille. One dog says, "Leave him alone. He'll calm down in a moment."

That just makes me kick and claw harder. I will not calm down!

I'm struggling to keep this passageway open. I'm losing the struggle.

I can barely see myself down there now – the thing that's left of me.

Mireille sets my body down. She kisses the ruined sack of bones and she runs out of the room and out of the building.

That's our truck in the parking lot! Mireille climbs in and curls up in the front cab. She's holding my collar, and crying, "I want my dog! I want my dog!"

I've never seen a human cry like that. And that's not just anyone. That's my Mireille. I need to get to her.

Someone here – wherever here is – is jostling my haunch, asking me if I want to play.

"Huh? I gotta get BACK!"

I bark. I thrash. My paws skitter. I can't get any traction in the passage and it's shrinking. Closing. Closing.

She's down there and I'm up here. I shout louder. "Mireille! Mireille! Mireille!"

I hear a voice behind me, talking to someone else. "We need a therapy dog here. We got us real clinger."

Someone else says, "Shelby. Get Shelby. Get Aggie! And Tiny too. It's a bad one."

Really? Apparently I'm the clinger. I'm the bad one. I can scarcely hear them for my own yelling.



Someone says, "Get him out of the passage."

"No! Let me go!"

The passage is collapsing. I am howling my fine strong lungs out. "Mireille! Mireille! Mireille!" Then to my holders, I yell, "Let me go! You don't understand. She needs me! Now! Now! Now! Now!" I'm barking my head off. She is falling away. She is so desperately hurting. I am scrambling. I feel amazingly strong. And just this morning I couldn't get up the stairs!

Such strange horrible sounds are coming out of Mireille curled down there in our truck, clutching my empty collar. I'm trying to tell her, Let's go home. I'm fine now. Let's go home. And to the ones holding me I roar, "LET ME GO!"

I'm yelling at the closing passageway. It's so tiny now! It's like I'm yelling through a straw. I'm desperate. I howl down the closing tube. "She needs someone! Somebody, help her! Help her! Somebody!"

The tunnel falls away and shuts.

It's gone.

I'm barking at spring grass.

I turn my head and glance back to a glorious meadow. I'm amazed. I don't have time for amazement. I turn back again. I need to get back into that dark corridor. It was just here. I can't find it! I'm frantic. I tear at the grass.

Warm noses and furry sides surround me. Voices assure me, "You're okay. You're okay."

"I know I'm okay! My Mireille needs me!"

"She will be okay, too. In time," a soft-eyed golden retriever tells me. "I'm Shelby."

"Shelby, get me home!"

"This is the way it's meant to happen," a big, placid bullmastiff tells me. "When we go first, we come here to wait for our heart holders."

"Mireille is not here! I need to be where Mireille is!"

"She's coming. In time," says the bullmastiff. "She's alive. You're not. I'm not? "What?"

"Honey, you're dead," says the golden, Shelby. She has a beautiful face, a sweet voice, and the softest brown-eyed gaze. "You wait here. You're okay. She wants you to be okay. She'll be along later. That's what makes this place so wonderful. She will be here."

"No. Oh no. You don't get it! You!" I bark at the bullmastiff. "You! I have to get back! She needs me now. She is not okay!"

And now I'm shouting at the grassy ground where the passage ought to be. I'm stomping on it with my forepaws. I rake the grass away. Doesn't look like I'm getting out of here. I yell at the top of my voice, "She needs someone! Someone, find her! Be with her! She's got to have someone! Find

her! Find her! Find her!"

Several dogs pull me away from the site. The long dark gashes I've made in the turf heal over. There's no trace of my violence.

I fall over sideways in the sweet grass. My sides heave fast, my breaths jet through my nostrils. I'm crazy mad scared and sorrowful.

A sad-eyed bloodhound snuffles me. She says her name is Aggie. She tells me I smell like garlic. Her voice is low, slow, and mellow.

Aggie's coat is glossy red. It doesn't even strike me as strange that I've never seen this rich color before. I snap at her. "Leave me alone!"

Aggie just inhales deeply and sighs, as if I have a wonderful fragrance. "My heart holder smells like garlic." Aggie sounds wistful.

I lift my head. "Look. I'm fine. I'm good. Send me back. Mireille needs me."

"Want to go dig holes in the garden?" Aggie, asks. "We're allowed to dig in any of the gardens."

"Digging is not the point! I need to get to Mireille!"

"There's garlic in the garden," Aggie says dreamily.

Her face is as kindly as it is droopy.

"Okay," I say. I scramble to my feet. "Sure."

Aggie's guard is down. As she turns to lead me to the garden, I whirl and fly at the place where I emerged and I pounce.

But there's no gate. No passageway. There's just hard ground with grass over it. It's green, the grass is. I've never seen this color before, not this vivid shade of green.

I circle and circle. There was a gate and a passageway right here, just now. I was just in it. It's got to be here. I claw at the green grass.

Now, someone's got me by the scruff and is carrying me away. I feel like a puppy in my mama's mouth. I'm not a small dog. The indignity is tough to take. But the scruff-hold takes some of the fight out of me. I go limp. I let myself be carried away from the gate.

The dog—it's Tiny the bullmastiff—sets me down.

And I'm off and running back toward the gate.

Except that I can't find the gate. The gate was just here!

I hear someone say, "Clinger." The voice is Shelby's. It sounds like pity. Another dog nods, mutters. "Clinger."

A low-built, square, black Scottie marches our way. He halts in front of me. He faces me, square on. Everything about this dog is square. His voice is a flat, matter-of-fact bark. "Hey. Idiot. Settle. She wants you to be happy."

Having made his pronouncement, the black Scottie turns about-face and marches away.

I yell at his square hind end, "I know that! I'm FINE! She needs me. You're not hearing me! She is not fine!"

"You will see her again," the bullmastiff, says. "Your job now is to be happy. You are still loved. Your job is to wait and to be happy."

I'm outright howling. "Mireille! Can you hear me? Mireille!"

They let me howl—the bullmastiff, the golden, and the bloodhound do.

They are not properly alarmed.

When I'm spent and panting over the turf that I've torn up, I flop over onto my side and just lie here. I'm a little embarrassed. But not much.

They don't get it.

"Let yourself be happy," says Shelby the golden. "She wants you to be happy."

"I can't be happy."

The bullmastiff gives a growling humph. "Then you'll be useful."

"I—might do that." I'm listening now.

"What's your name?"

"Zack."

"I'm Tiny. I have a job for you, Zack. It's a job that will keep you close to the gate."

I get to my feet. I sniff at the grass. "I'd like that."

"I figured you might."

Tiny doesn't look like a purebred. I think Tiny is actually a cross between a bullmastiff and a Jeep Wrangler. "You can stay here at the gate and tell newcomers where they are. There ought to be someone to do that for everyone who comes here. I've kind of done it, when I'm around. I'm guessing you'll be more dedicated to it."

Two long white strands of drool hang like shoelaces from Tiny's jowls. I'm mesmerized, waiting for them to touch ground. I shake myself back to attention. "If I'm taking your job, what will you do?"

Tiny gives a doggy shrug. "I'm going to take myself for a walk. Sooner or later I'll cross the bridge."

"You're going away soon?"

"Eventually. No one knows when. I don't much notice time passing. I know I've seen a lot of dogs come through here. My turn will come. Thom will come and we'll cross together."

Thom must be Tiny's person.

I'm just now noticing my surroundings. I see rolling meadows of wild flowers, distant cliffs, a waterfall, flocks of birds. There's a whole lot of cattails and reeds over there, so there must be a pond. A couple of echelons of geese come gliding in, their wings bent, feet extended down, their webby toes spread like landing gear. The geese disappear behind the reeds with splashing sounds.

A pair of whippets burst out of the tall grass. They barrel around a majestic old oak tree and charge back the way they came. They looked like

they were having fun.

I don't have time for games. "I don't see a bridge."

"It's not here now," Tiny says. "The bridge only shows when it needs to be there."

"Where?"

"When it comes, it touches down over there in the butterfly meadow."

Tiny's droopy face takes on a softness as he nods where the bridge should be. His knotted brow relaxes as if he's seeing something beautiful. "That's where we go. Where we come from is here, the way you came in."

Tiny walks a circle around in the short grass. "This is the dog gate."

"What is?"

"Here. This spot. Right here. Where you were digging."

There is no trace of my digging now. I can't see a gate. I can't see a hole or a passage. There's nothing here but grass. I haven't left so much as a scratch in it.

I turn circles. I don't see a marker of any kind. I don't know if I'm walking on the gate or not. "Where?"

"Right where you are."

"How do you know?" I look around for guideposts of some kind.

"I've seen enough folk arrive. I know where the gate is. This is where dogs and dogs' special people come up from the world. When a dog dies first, this is where he comes to wait. Heart holders come through this same gate – but later – after they're done living."

"What happens when a dog's person dies first?"

"We never see those dogs. If your heart holder is in heaven, you go straight there. I think we're allowed to go any time we want to. But no one does. Do you want to go on ahead?"

"No!"

"Well, here you are. Everything you see here – the meadows, the pond, the ledges, and the woods – it's all ours."

"Ours?"

"Yours. Mine. All the dogs. The place for cats is way over there on the other side of the forest. You can visit there, but I don't know why anyone would want to."

Tiny gives his massive head a shake. I dodge the flying drool.

"The horses and hoofed animals have a pasture way over there, beyond the ledges. They have their own gate. It's a much wider gate than ours."

"The ferrets have a field over that way." Tiny nods up over his massive shoulder, indicating some place far behind him. "But you can go anywhere that feels closest to heaven to you."

I move cautiously, on guard against another saliva salvo from Tiny's jowls.

"Why can't I see the dog gate?" I'm sniffing the grassy ground where

the gate ought to be.

"The gate is only here when a dog or a heart holder needs to come up from the world."

My head goes up. "Well, I need to get back through it. Now. Right now."

"It's a one-way gate, Zack. When someone from the world needs to come here, there is a gate."

"You mean when someone dies."

"When a dearly beloved dog or a person who dearly loves a dog dies. Yes. They come through here. What's your heart holder's name?"

Heart holder? I guess that describes Mireille pretty well. "Mireille."

I sit down. "I'll stay here and watch for Mireille."

"You shouldn't hope she comes soon," Tiny says. A little bit of a scold, there.

"I don't," I assure him.

I mean it. I don't want her to die. What I'm hoping for is a chance to dash back through the gate next time it appears. I need to get back to Mireille to keep her company. She's so very sad. These mutts don't understand. Mireille needs me. Now.

Tiny shambles away, sniffing the breezes.

The sun is low. The air is soft. Frogs in the pond sounds off cricks and peeps and low croaks.

Barking laughter carries on a gentle breeze.

The sun sinks below the horizon. Now the firefly meadow is merrily winking. I look up at a glory of stars. I want to cry.

Night swifts wing across the face of the moon. An owl hoots. Crickets chirp in the underbrush. I see a shooting star. I make a wish. I wish for Mireille to be happy.

I whisper urgently into the grass over the gate, "Somebody help her! Don't leave her alone! Find her! Find her! Find her!"

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Aggie, the big red bloodhound, has been rolling in a garlic patch. What an extraordinary color Aggie is! In the morning sunlight she looks like she's on fire.

She flumps down beside me with a billow of garlicky scent. She gives a lip-ruffling sigh. Her big ears spread like babies' blankets on the grass. Aggie has more face on her than anyone I've ever seen.

I wish I could be as peaceful as Aggie. I envy her her garlic. Not the garlic exactly, I mean her connection to the smell. Aggie can roll in a patch of garlic and immediately smell her heart holder. That's what I want.

I wish I had something of Mireille's to smell.

No. As long as I'm wishing, I wish I had Mireille.

Aggie snores.

Nothing like a big, slow-breathing dog to calm you down.

A feeling of peace settles into me.

I'm afraid I might become resigned to being stuck here.

And it's getting harder and harder to stay unhappy. I feel a need to be unhappy, because I know Mireille is alone. It's my duty to hurt with her.

Tiny the bullmastiff plods over to check up on me. "Take a break, Zack. Your heart holder wants you to be happy. Do it for her. Take yourself for a walk. Get away from here."

I pretend to obey. But really I'm scouting for something to use as a marker to show the location of the gate.

The passage to the world has closed up solid behind me with no trace that it was ever there, and the grass keeps re-growing over the spot as soon as I clear it away. I need something to mark the place where Mireille will come.

Pee just doesn't last. Yes, I've tried it.

Sticks are the answer. I gather sticks.

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I have two stacks of sticks and branches now. They're supposed to be gateposts. I'm just waiting for a gate to open up between them.

Because I was lately in the world, all the dogs in the meadows come to me for news from home. They've all heard that I'm building gateposts. When they come, they bring me sticks.

They drop a stick onto one of my gateposts and they ask where I'm from and do I know Samuel? Do I know Ashka? Do I know Marty? Dillon? Danny? Laney? Kayla? Ji?

I don't know them.

But now, this big, thick stick marches across the meadow toward me. As it teeters closer, the feet come into view. A sandy-colored pug has the stick clutched between his teeth. I narrow my eyes, trying to get a good look at the small dog behind the giant stick. Do I know him?

The pug's head lifts up and his chin tucks down like someone has just grabbed him by the scruff. It's a gesture of surprise — and recognition. He looks at me. I look at him.

He drops the big stick he meant to bring me.

And here he comes at a double suspension gallop.

I know him! "Jermaine! You old dog!"

Jermaine overshoots my gate. He tumbles through the turn. He shakes his chubby body, and he struts back to me.

Jermaine looks great! He looks happy! His tail wags. His tail is so thick and curly, it looks like he's waving a donut over his butt.

We jump around each other like puppies.

Jermaine's family used to live next door to me and Mireille. Me and Jermaine used to dig holes under the fence, trying to visit each other. I was

always too big to get under the fence. Jermaine could squeeze under, once upon a time, but he grew too wide. We still dug holes.

Mireille and Linnette yelled at us.

Last time I saw Jermaine, he really was an old dog—fat and round as a tick, missing a couple teeth. Here, now, he looks young and and strong. His fur is glossy, not the grizzled color I remember.

I was still a young dog when Jermaine left the world to come here.

Oh, did his mama cry!

So did I. I kept pacing up and down that fence every morning and sniffing at the holes we'd dug. His scent got fainter and fainter. I whined for Jermaine to come out and play. I dug a hole big enough for him to get his pudgy self through, but he didn't show up. Linnette came walking out to the fence, her arms wrapped around herself as if she was cold. Her face was wet. I stuck my head under the fence. Linnette crouched down and petted my nose. She sniffed too, but her sniffs sounded wet. She whimpered.

I got scared. I'd never lost a friend before. I didn't know what this meant.

I guess I still don't. Why do we have to be separated from those we love?

Now, Jermaine pumps me for all the information I have on his mama, Linnette.

I can't tell him much. Linnette and the family moved away from our old neighborhood. I can't tell Jermaine where they went. But I can describe the little shrine Linnette built for him under the willow tree. And I can tell him that Linnette took Jermaine's fired clay pawprint with her when the family left.

Jermaine heaves a wistful, peaceful sigh. Then he goes back to retrieve his big stick from where he dropped it, and he adds it to one of my gateposts.

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I am determined to stand watch at this gate.

It's not hard duty. Days are long and sweet. The smells are lush. The sounds of dogs playing make me happy. Milkweed down floats on the lazy air. Nights are starry and mild.

This morning I let myself get coaxed out to the butterfly meadow. Tiny the bullmastiff, Shelby the golden retriever, and Aggie the big red bloodhound draw me out. Our footsteps leave darker green tracks in the dewy grass.

There are flowers in bloom on the meadow. The flowers are called buttercups. I recognize them by their shape. But buttercups back home aren't this color.

"Shelby? What's this color?"

"That's yellow."

"No, it's not."

Shelby laughs.

I always thought yellow was the color of Labrador retrievers—a subtle beige-y kind of color, like Shelby.

Shelby is still beige-y. But these buttercups are some bright amazing hue that I never saw in mortal life.

"This is yellow? Where have these colors been all my life? Why don't these colors exist in the world?"

"They do," Shelby says. "It's your eyes that are different. Now you're seeing colors as people see them. Back in the world, dog eyes don't pick up as many colors as human eyes do. Didn't you ever wonder why people get so excited about rainbows?"

I do wonder. I don't even know what a rainbow is.

I know there was some mysterious something in the sky that I couldn't see. I never understood it when Mireille ran out into the rain and gazed at the sky as if something marvelous was painted there. I remember our neighbor Linnette stepping outside too. She called over the fence, and pointed. "Look, Mireille! It's a double!"

A double what? I didn't see anything but sunshine through clouds. And it was raining. We were getting wet.

Now, Shelby names all these new vivid colors for me. "The buttercups are yellow. The cardinals and the strawberries are red. Aggie is dark red. The sky is blue. The grass is green. The violets are violet. Pumpkins and monarch butterflies are orange. Those are the colors of the rainbow."

"I've never seen a rainbow."

Tiny gives a low chuckle. "First time's the best."

"I bet the last time will be even better," Shelby says.

Tiny nods, his fat lower lip pushed forward in a wise-looking pout. "You're probably right."

Aggie shambles to where we are. She carries a flying disk in her mouth. She lets it drop at our feet. "What color is garlic?"

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Me, Tiny, Shelby, and Aggie are running and jumping and barking, chasing a flying disk in the sunshine. Aggie knows how to throw the disk. Tiny, not so much. Me, not at all. I just chase and catch and carry the disk back to Aggie and tell her to throw it again.

The disk is a deep vivid blue.

Tiny races me for the flying disk that Aggie has just sent sailing. We bump shoulders, vying for it.

A scent fills my head.

I skid and turn around. "Hey! Aggie! Do you smell garlic? Aggie?"

Aggie isn't with us.



Aggie is running off the meadow and back toward the gate, flat out. The air around us looks strange, incandescent. The sky is singing. You can recognize something you've never seen before. This is the first time I'm seeing it.

Instantly I know what this is. The heart knows. I'm filled with profound joy and wonder. The air shimmers.

I know it's not for me. I shiver anyway. Everyone on the meadows feels it.

All the hounds except Aggie are singing sweetly.

Aggie, the big red bloodhound, is flying. She's pickin' 'em up and plantin' 'em down. She looks like a dolphin bounding over grassy waves, except that her whole face is flapping. Her ears are flying this way, her dewlaps are swinging that way. She's howling like a moose.

I race after her.

A woman stands between my gateposts, an expression of astonished happiness on her face. Aggie flies into the woman's arms and flattens her right out. Aggie stands over the woman and licks her laughing face and inhales her garlic breath.

I'm running over there as fast as I can. I've got to try to escape back to the world. Already, I can see that the gate has closed up. It's grassed over, as if it was never there. The ground is solid.

It smells like garlic.

The woman manages to sit up. She hugs Aggie.

Aggie wags herself. Aggie's soulful eyes are glassy bright. She keeps singing, crazy, wild, happy sounds, in between dragging big sloppy kisses across her mama's face.

And there is a tremor in the sky.

I hunker down and peer up. The shimmer grows brighter and brighter, until it's too bright to bear.

A rainbow appears over the butterfly meadow, with all the colors — red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. The colors grow in intensity. A second rainbow builds over that one. And another.

I'm catching only glimpses of the bridge itself as it touches down. It's veiled inside the whitest cloud, like snow in sunlight. It's impossible to focus on. I can't hold the image. It's someone's perfect dream.

It's not for me, and still I'm crying. It's overwhelming. And this is only the reflection of wonder!

Out of the mist, fleeting glimpses of the shining bridge wink underneath the triple rainbow. I shiver. I'm dizzy. The mist scintillates, unbearably bright. The air sparkles. It's too much. I flatten myself to the ground, trembling. Wow. O bow wow!

All the dogs on the meadows sing.

Aggie, with all her loose skin parts flapping, trots alongside her heart

holder into the light.

The brilliance of the bridge persists for a while afterward.

I can't say it fades. And there's no feeling of loss to its leaving. It just gently withdraws and leaves peace behind it.

And why is my face wet? I sniffle.

I know where I am now. I've heard of this place. Mireille read the poem on the wall of the vet's waiting room just before I came here. No one except the poet knows who wrote it:

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; They each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart. Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together.

It's real. The Rainbow Bridge is real.

It's beautiful.

And I still need to get back to Mireille.

## Chapter Two

NIGHT FALLS ON the dog meadows. There's a glittering of stars. A gauzy cloud sparkles in the moonlight.

I'm missing Aggie a little bit. I'm happy for her.

I'm worried about Mireille.

I lay my chin on the grass where the gate should be. I whisper into the ground. *Please, please, somebody. Mireille can't be alone. Somebody, find her. Find her. Find her.*

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Dogs continue to visit me, asking for word of their people back in the world.

A cocky tough guy terrier swaggers my way. I've already heard of him. He's known for endless energy and a runaway mouth. His name is Jack Flash.

And he has heard of me. "So you're Zack."

His eyes swivel up and down, taking in the stacks of sticks that are my gateposts. "Channeling your inner beaver, Zack?"

"Bite me."

"I don't suppose you know what my Foreman's doing down in the world, do ya?"

"He's in jail."

"Again?"

Oops.

I backtrack fast. "No. Honestly, I made that up. I don't know Foreman. I don't know what he's doing."

Jack Flash barks a laugh. "Good one. I hang out at the phantom roadway. If you're up to some serious action, ask for Jack Flash. Everyone knows me."

Miss Anastasia pays me a visit to introduce herself.

Miss Anastasia is a purebred cavalier King Charles spaniel. Shelby told me about her. Miss Anastasia is a long timer here on the dog meadows. She doesn't look it. She wouldn't. No one ages here. Miss Anastasia is

young and glossy, bright-eyed and healthy like the rest of us. She ought to be crossing the bridge soon. She hasn't been aging, but her heart holder back in the world has.

Miss Anastasia places a little twig on one of the two stacks of sticks that I've piled up to mark the location of the gate.

Bringing me sticks seems to be the done thing, and Miss Anastasia is well bred.

Her doll-like eyes are warm, brown, and meltingly sweet. Her coat is perfectly clean and combed and silky.

She asks if I know her mother, Maud.

I don't.

Miss Anastasia describes Maud for me precisely, so that I will know her when she comes, as if I'm the footman of the Rainbow Bridge.

"Maud, my mother, is always neatly dressed. Her hair is coifed just so. She's a soft-spoken lady. She favors long split skirts and full, long-sleeved blouses and flat-heeled boots. And sun hats. She doesn't go out without a sun hat. She used to love to ride horses. She's quite fragile now. She can't ride anymore."

Miss Anastasia glances about, then she leans in close. Her voice drops to a whisper. "She can't lift me any more." Miss Anastasia confides this like it's an embarrassing secret. "I loved to sit on her lap."

Now, every morning Miss Anastasia daintily tiptoes here to my gate to see if she has a caller. She places a twig on one of my gateposts, then she chats with me. She does the chatting. She tells me a story about her mistress. She repeats herself a lot. Speaking of Maud makes Miss Anastasia feel closer to her heart holder.

I listen.

Miss Anastasia recites her entire lineage for me, all the way back to King Charles' lap dog.

I know my own lineage all the way back to my mom.

Miss Anastasia wishes me good morning and trots away.

From her stories, I don't think she'll have too long to wait for Maud.

A fluffy white mop bounces across the meadow grass, coming nearer to where I'm crouched in between my stacks of sticks. I bet I look like one of those drawings in an Egyptian tomb. I have the ears for it.

"Hi!" The mop's voice comes out muffled, because she's carrying a stick between her teeth. "I'm Luna! You're Zack! Where does this go?"

She glances from one gatepost to the other. I have a sizable collection of lumber now.

"Either stack," I tell her. "Anywhere."

Luna is another one of the long timers Shelby told me about. Luna has been here on the dog meadow for ages.

She asks if I know Hugh. "Hugh is my man back in the world!"  
I would love to make Luna smile, but I can't. "I don't know him."

"Are you sure? Are you really sure?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, Luna. I'm pretty sure I don't know a man named Hugh."

"You'd know him if you saw him! He's very tall. Well, he used to be tall. He's bent over now, so he's not so tall. He has bushy red-brown hair and a bushy red-brown beard. Only his hair is more gray now and there's less of it, and his beard, well, that's gray now too. He's very white. Except that he has a lot of brown spots and patches and mottles on his skin now, and his skin is really kind of more blue-ish where his veins show though. Have you seen him?"

"Sorry. No."

"Please let me know when he comes!"

I promise Luna that I will let her know. But if Hugh's arrival is anything like Aggie's mom's arrival, Luna won't need me to tell her, which is a very good thing, because Luna's descriptions suck bathwater.

There are two kinds of folk I can expect to come up through my gate from the world. There are newly deceased dogs, who come here to wait. I'm one of those. Dogs, I'm told, usually arrive quietly with little notice. The bridge doesn't make an appearance when we dogs come here. And Shelby tells me that most dogs don't kick and scream on their way in like I did.

The other kind of folk who come here are human. Those are heart holders. When a heart holder comes, you can't miss it. Everyone knows. Everyone feels it. The world becomes starry. And you know who the lucky dog is because that's the one coming unglued and speaking in tongues, like Aggie did. And you can't miss the appearance of the bridge. You don't see much of it—it's too bright—but it strikes you with overwhelming happiness.

If I weren't worried about Mireille I would be perfectly content here. But I do worry. I have a reason. I've got to get back to the world.

\*\*\*

There are rabbits here.

I'm convinced that none of the rabbits are real. No one I know has ever caught one. I catch glimpses of them, sure. And off they go. Then off go the greyhounds in short order. But I never see a greyhound coming back with rabbit in his jaws.

Roscoe, one of our greyhounds, is not gray. In fact I don't think there's more than one gray greyhound waiting at the Rainbow Bridge just now.

Roscoe is brown and white. He was a champion racing greyhound

back in the world. He actually caught the lure once. (He says). Says he got it snarled in his racing muzzle and he announced to all the other greyhounds that the rabbit was empty. They didn't believe him. They still chased the lure.

When Roscoe got too slow for racing, he was dumped on a rescue organization. The rescue place found a loving home for him.

Roscoe's rescuer is named Eric.

Back in the world, Roscoe liked to lounge on the couch with Eric and watch TV. Roscoe liked the animal shows.

Why would anyone watch anything else? None of us here has figured that out.

Roscoe and all the greyhounds up here talk about their rescuers and their couches. About racing? Not so much.

They do talk about rabbits.

I don't believe in rabbits.

Still, when I see one, I have this terrible urge to chase. It's like there's no choice. Some ancestral memory wells up and I feel the need to get that rabbit.

No. No, I tell myself. There is no rabbit.

I will not chase. I will not leave my post.

There's no such thing as rabbits. There's no such thing as rabbits.

Today, I'm dozing in the grass over the gate. I open one eye.

There's a bunny rabbit right *there*, twitching its nose, and chewing on a blade of grass.

I gather all my legs under me in a single motion. Off goes the bunny.

I will not be suckered into this. I will not.

I will, however, sucker the greyhounds into this. I howl, "Get 'im! Get 'im! Get 'im!"

The greyhounds spring.

I stay at my post.

The shadows grow longer. At last, the greyhounds straggle back from the far fields, all telling tales that begin with "I'da had him but..."

\*\*\*

Night has fallen. I'm drifting off.

A sound lifts my ears and opens my eyes.

A black Scottie appears out of the blackness, stumping toward my gate. (It's my gate now, you know. I'm not leaving it again). I've seen this Scottie before. He called me an idiot when I first got here.

Shelby told me his name. It's Sir Walter.

In starlight he looks like a small box with ears stuck on bigger box with feet.

Sir Walter the Scottie tells me, "Make a hole."

I sit up. "What?"

"Move. Someone's coming."

I'm about to tell Sir Walter that he's wrong. There's no shimmer in the night sky to say that the bridge is about to form, and no one's got the shakes the way Aggie had when her turn was up. There's no sign that anyone is coming up to my gate from the world.

All is quiet. Everyone is asleep. The stars shine. Night creatures sing. The gate isn't open. It's all grass.

Sir Walter is wrong.

I open my mouth to tell him so.

I leave my mouth open.

The stars flare brighter. A ripple crosses the heavens. A meteor draws a bright path across the sky. The glow starts. The bridge is materializing from stardust.

Sir Walter looks to me. "You up?"

I search inside myself for a sign that it's my turn. I want to feel that thrill. I want to smell Mireille.

But no. This appearance of the bridge is not for me.

I look to Sir Walter. "Is it you?"

Sir Walter knew the bridge was forming before anyone else did. This must be his turn.

"Na. Na." Sir Walter snorts. "Not mine."

Dogs are waking up. Someone is barking.

I hear a sound from behind me.

Sir Walter tells me one more time to get out of the way.

This time I jump clear.

The ground opens up between my stacks of sticks

Someone - someone human - is climbing up the passageway from the world.

It's not Mireille.

It's a man. At first, all I see is this gray-haired head bowed way over. The man is hiking upwards, getting younger, fuller, straighter, and spryer as he nears the gateway. All grayness fades from his bushy red-brown hair and his bushy, red-brown beard. His thin skin turns from papery and mottled to supple, smooth, and pale.

He reaches the top of the passageway

He stands tall and strapping between my gateposts. He gapes, marveling at our moonlit meadow.

I throw back my head and howl, "Luna!"

Luna already knows.

The man's eyes show me where to look in the dark.

That small white mop comes flying across the meadow, yip yip yipping. Dewdrops on the grasses twinkle as brightness builds where the bridge is

coming into being like sunrise.

Hugh drops down on one knee, his arms spread wide to receive Luna. She flies into his chest. He falls over, his arms around her. They knock over one of my gateposts. My carefully assembled sticks clatter down and roll.

Luna stands on top of her man's chest. She licks his beard. Her tail whips side to side.

The man, Hugh, manages to sit up. He picks a couple of sticks off himself. He holds Luna's squirming body, and cuddles her. Then pulls her back from him and beams at her.

Then something grabs his attention. His eyes focus past Luna, past me, and past Sir Walter, to where rainbows are piling up, one over the other over the other. Yes, it's night but the bright, shining bridge has taken form – half of it has. I can't quite see where it goes. Its near side stands in welcoming brilliance over the butterfly meadow. It shines like the sun.

Hugh gets to his feet, moving slowly, not because he's infirm, but because he's awed. He perches Luna on his hip, cradling her in one arm. Hugh is nervous. He glances around. He seems hesitant to ask a dog, but he's probably figured out that this place is magical, and there's no one else to ask. "Am I allowed to go there?"

I nod, human style. "Yes. That's for you."

He sags a little. Joy can take the breath out of you. Hugh is having trouble believing.

"And Luna? Can I take Luna with me?" He holds her closer.

I look to Sir Walter.

Sir Walter says, "And Luna. Of course, Luna."

Hugh's smile becomes as bright as the bridge itself. He blinks fast. The man is not accustomed to letting himself cry. He seems embarrassed to do it now. Luna licks his face so the tears can't show.

Hugh strides to the bridge with long bouncing steps. From under his arm, Luna's tail wags ecstatically behind them.

When I turn around I find that the gate from the world has already shut and grassed over. Only my stacks of sticks remain to mark the place where the gate briefly was. Okay it's one stack of sticks now and one scattered mess. I can rebuild that.

I turn on Sir Walter.

Sir Walter the Scottie is all black. The night sky is quickly returning to its usual darkness, so I can scarcely see Sir Walter to yell at him. "How did you do that?"

"How did I do what?"

"You knew that man was coming before even Luna did. Before there was a sign in the sky, you already knew!"

Sir Walter gives his head a tilt. "I heard something. Didn't everyone?"



“No!”

So, Sir Walter is like that. He hears night pilgrims coming before the bridge even thinks about sparkling.

I’m not happy that I don’t have Sir Walter’s talent. But I decide this is a good thing anyway. It means I don’t have to be afraid that I’ll miss Mireille’s arrival because I’m asleep. Sir Walter always knows when someone is coming up from the world, even when we’re all sleeping up here.

I restack my gatepost.

Sir Walter has a connection with the night.

Back in the time when Sir Walter still lived down in the world, there was a carbon monoxide buildup in his master’s house. There was no CO detector—other than Sir Walter. He woke up his man. That was tough to do, because the carbon monoxide had the man sunk in a deep sleep. The man had a terrible headache, and really, really did not want to move. But Sir Walter is a stubborn dog. Sir Walter would not be shaken off.

Scotties tend to get their way. Sir Walter got his man out alive.

Now Sir Walter waits here. And he hears souls arriving in the night.

\*\*\*

There are squirrels here. The place is infested with them. They’re not anyone’s pets. Well, one or two of them might be waiting for someone back in the world. The rest of the squirrels are here to give us dogs something to chase, like the rabbits. Except the squirrels are real and they call us names.

And the chipmunks? Those are here to embarrass us. You cannot catch a chipmunk.

Chipmunks turn a corner like a zero-mass particle. You plant your forepaws solid enough, but the rest of you just doesn’t make the turn. You tumble butt-over-air and you end up sprawled in your self-respect.

The only thing you ever catch of the chipmunks is that chuckling sound they make as they beam up to the starship Enterprise. I mean it. They are here. They are gone.

And the ferrets? Ferrets sit on the sidelines laughing at you. I think the ferrets put the chipmunks up to it.

The ferrets are real. They smell good. (Though, if you’re a human you might not want to take a dog’s word for what smells good before you start inhaling deeply.)

There’s also a bunch of mice here. They’re not dog toys. Someone loves them. They’re someone’s fur kids. They’re sweet little guys. They’re waiting for someone.

\*\*\*

I'm lazing in the morning sun, my head on the gate. My whiskers twitch. The ground feels unsteady under my head. My gate is moving.

There's no shimmer in the sky. That means the gate is not opening for a heart holder. The quiet approach means there is a dog leaving the world and coming here.

The passageway opens.

I try to dive into it to get myself back down to the world.

All I manage to do is get my head caught in the gate.

Okay, I'm stuck.

Help?

I'm watching an ending.

Down in the world, a vet has come out to a private home to send off a big silver bitch named Sequoia.

Sequoia is tired. She goes quietly in her mother's arms. Her mom is a tough, wiry, sun-scorched gal. Her face is wet with tears. The woman kisses Sequoia's head and cries into her mane.

Sequoia quietly leaves her body.

In spirit, Sequoia is a big, scary, long-legged, silver gal and she's on her way up here, getting young again, strong, and intimidating. I yank my head free and stumble back out of her way.

Sequoia stands tall in the gateway. She looks around. She is majestic – narrow muzzle, pointed ears, black nose, amber eyes, black scent mark on her tail – you know the type – illegal in eighteen states.

Sequoia doesn't like other girls. She doesn't even look at them.

I'm smitten.

Sequoia moves like a song.

She lopes out to the meadow.

\*\*\*

It's high noon. I'm asleep again on the gate. Yes, I sleep most of the time.

I hear urgent shouting down below in the world.

"Does anyone have an aspirin!"

I think I'm dreaming, but now there are tiny feet pouncing on me. Those are real. I open my eyes to the world's smallest Doberman, dancing on my head. Actually it's a black and tan toy terrier named Hammer. He's shouting in my ear, as if he can shout right through my head and down to the world.

"Don't you come up here yet, Charles! You're too young! I can wait! I can wait, do you hear me? Cough! Take your nitro!"

The shouting continues way down below. They're human voices, angry with fear. "Does anyone have an aspirin!" The shouting is coming

from a cube farm inside an office building.

Someone else down there says quickly, "Jonesy might have nitro. Is Jonesy in today? Anyone seen Jonesy?"

I guess they didn't find Jonesy or get the nitro, because here comes Charles, a tall, bald man in a business suit. He's too young to be having a heart attack, but that's what brings him here.

The toy dog, Hammer, jumps into Charles' arms at the gate—into Charles' hands, really. Hammer is tiny, and the man has enormous hands. Charles cuddles the dog to his cheek. "Missed you, little man," he murmurs. "Missed you bad."

Charles closes his eyes as Hammer licks his face.

Charles opens his eyes. His focus shifts from sky to meadow to me. He's unnerved. "There's been a mistake. This doesn't look like hell."

"It's not." I probably don't need to say that.

Charles runs one hand over his smooth head. He nods agreement. "Hell is middle management."

Charles notices his clothes. When he came here he'd been wearing a business suit. In the blink of my eyes, he's now dressed in jeans and a casual shirt. He reaches for his throat. There's no necktie. He spies the necktie on the ground. It's pink. That must be the power color of the day down in the world.

The tie bursts into flames.

"Dog!" Charles cries at me. He sounds appreciative.

"I didn't do it."

"Is this...? Is this heaven?"

"That way." I pose myself into point.

There's the first rainbow. There's another rainbow forming on top of it. The outlines of the bridge are taking shape in the brightness.

"You have got to be—!"

Charles looks around as if there's been an almighty mistake. "I can't go there. I'm really an asshole."

Charles says that like it's a bad thing. I don't get it. It's what we sniff to say hello. "Nothing wrong with that," I tell him.

"No. You've got to understand. Someone's mistaken me for someone good."

Like I'm supposed to be checking his credentials? I don't think so! I'm a dog.

Charles cuddles Hammer under his chin. Charles is babbling a bit. "Good deeds aren't enough. Good deeds don't get you into, into, into—there. They're going to turn me away, aren't they." It's not even a question.

Humans overcomplicate things. Rather than argue with Charles, I say, "You come talk to me if they turn you away."

Hammer clings to Charles's broad shoulder. Hammer looks down at

me from his high perch. "They're not going to turn us away, are they?"

I press my lips together, close my eyes tight, and shake my head. Not a living chance. I haven't been here long, but this I know.

Charles trembles. He breathes, awed, "Glory. Glory."

My heart soars. I inhale the ecstasy of everyone who is here to share this.

Everyone is awake now.

All the dogs on the meadow sing. We sound off barks and yips and yaps and howls and yowls and whatever you call that wounded tuba noise that Tiny makes.

\*\*\*

A boy arrives through my gate.

There is no glimmer in the sky to announce him, and no dog comes running to claim him. He's just here.

He's young and skinny. His hair is light brown. So are his eyes. His skin is pale. He sees me.

"Hi," the boy says, wide-eyed.

There's still no sign of his dog. The sky is placid blue. The bridge isn't forming.

It can't be, but it doesn't look like the boy has a dog waiting for him.

He lifts one foot, then puts it back down. He lifts the other and laughs. This boy looks ecstatic just to be standing.

Now, you tell me, what kid gets excited about just standing on his own two feet? He jumps from foot to foot and laughs.

And dogs! He's crazy about the dogs playing on the meadow. He crouches down and pets me like it's something he always, always wanted to do and never did. "Hey, you!" he cries.

"I'm Zack."

The boy coughs a laugh. It sounds like astonishment. His eyes open big. Then he points to himself, grinning. "Robbie! My name's Robbie!"

"Who's your dog, Robbie?"

"My dog?"

"You have a dog here."

"Do I?" He sounds thrilled.

"Don't you?"

Robbie rolls his eyes and makes a wry face. "Don't I wish!"

If he had a dog here, it would be obvious. His dog would be flying across the meadow right now. The sky would be brighter. And the boy would know. A heart holder knows.

I don't know what to make of this. "Your dog is back in the world?"

"I never had a dog."

Tiny the bullmastiff marches toward us. He looks perplexed. Good. I don't like to be this confused alone.

When Tiny gets close, Robbie pets him too.

Tiny leans into the ear scratch. "What have we here?" Tiny asks me.

"You tell me!" I yelp.

Robbie rubs his face in the folds of Tiny's neck. "I always always wanted a dog. In the worst way. Always."

Tiny is properly confounded. "You don't have a dog?"

Robbie shakes his head, his mouth tight. "Allergies. Real bad." He pushes his face into Tiny's fur and inhales long. He exhales long and happy.

I'm getting the idea that the boy hadn't been well in life. Not well at all. Now he's here.

That means he's dead.

He never became a man. He never will.

He doesn't have a dog.

"You should be in heaven," Tiny tells Robbie.

"No," Robbie says, suddenly stubborn. "I'm not going without my Mom and Dad."

"It's not their time," Tiny says.

"Good! They're too young. I'm gonna wait for them here until it is their time."

This leaves me airless.

Now, the truth is that boys aren't supposed to die before their parents. That's just not right. I know it happens—more often than it should. But those children go straight to heaven. Maybe they pause here to pick up a beloved dog, but they go on.

Children don't wait here at the Rainbow Bridge.

Robbie's parents are back in the world.

This is so very wrong and desperately sad.

Sadness can't get too firm a hold here. It quickly fades.

I carry some sadness with me. But then I'm a clinger.

"I'm staying," Robbie says.

I look to Tiny. "I guess he's staying."

It's not like we can—or would want to—send him anywhere. It's just that we've never had a boy.

Tiny gives himself a shake that begins with his head and travels down his body and out his tail. Drool flies. He speaks, resigned, "Well, somebody has to throw the balls."

That's true. There's no one here who can throw a ball more than three feet. And with Aggie gone home, no one can throw a flying disk either.

Robbie looks ecstatic, but only for an instant.

"Uh," Robbie mumbles. He stands up. He shifts, uncomfortable, and he worries at the ball that has suddenly materialized in his hand. He's red in the face. I can tell he's embarrassed. He leans down and whispers to me,

a confession, "I can't throw."

"Try it," I whisper back.

Robbie's face forms squiggly lines of doubt and worry and yearning. He looks down at his fully functioning skinny legs. He steels himself, ready to be thoroughly embarrassed.

He winds up for a pitch and—

"I can throw!"

The ball goes rocketing through the air. Tiny dashes after it. Roscoe the greyhound – out of nowhere—is out there running too, vying with Tiny to get under it.

It looks like Tiny is going to flatten Roscoe, but Roscoe leaps high, snags the ball out of the air, touches down and races back with it. He drops the ball into Robbie's hand.

"Do that again!"

Robbie's mouth sticks open. He's amazed at himself.

Suddenly he has a whole pile of balls. Robbie laughs. It's a sound like bright, sparkling water. He's throwing the balls, and all the dogs on the meadow are racing after them.

We have a boy! We get to chase balls! We get tickled! We get our ears scratched. We get belly rubs! The afterlife is good!

## Chapter Three

TINY'S HEART HOLDER is a man named Thom. Work kept Thom away from home a lot. Tiny spent a lot of time alone.

Because Tiny is a hulking bullmastiff, Robbie just assumes that Tiny is a watchdog. "You guarded the place while Thom was away."

Tiny's silence goes on way too long.

I give Tiny a shove with my nose. "Go on, Tiny. Tell us what you did all day while Thom was working."

Tiny's blocky head goes down. His jowls droop. He mumbles.

"I ate the house."

I do the side-to-side head-and-shoulder strut, happily smug. "And here I thought you were the responsible one."

"I was responsible for a lot," Tiny says.

"No more than I was," I confess.

This chat turns into a brag session of couches-I-have-eaten.

"How about down pillows," Tiny says.

The best!

My turn. "Mahogany table."

The best!

"Cherry dining set."

The best!

"Throw rugs."

The best!

"Socks."

The best!

"Shoes."

The best!

"The cat," says Tiny.

"Did you really?"

"In my dreams."

"Freshly washed laundry."

The best!

"Unwashed laundry."

"Ooooh even best-er! Mireille's underwear!"

"Eeyewww!" Robbie squeals and cringes. "Zack! You perv!"

"Robbie? We're dogs."

Robbie just sits in the grass, hugging his knees, rocking and laughing. It's a great sound.

"I always, always, wanted a dog," Robbie says.

We know.

Robbie has all of us, but I know what he wants. He wants to be a heart holder.

"You have a name picked out?" I ask.

Robbie nods. "Yeah. If I ever had a dog, I was gonna name him Casey."

\*\*\*

A dog tumbles through my gate, shoving me into one of my gateposts as he comes.

The sticks clatter down on us. He's yelling. "I got the license plate number! It's RB one seven something! North Dakota! I—oh."

He does a quick glance around. He finds me on the ground next to him amid the fallen sticks. "Uh oh. I didn't make it across the road, did I?"

"Looks like not," I say.

Being dead doesn't slow him down. The dog rolls and springs up to his feet. He looks kind of shepherdish but with short fur and floppy ears. He shakes himself off. "Where'd the sweet thing go?"

Apparently this dog had been on the trail of something female, nice smelling, and hot.

"Sweet thing made it, brother." I pick myself up slowly from under the fallen sticks that used to be a gatepost. "You didn't."

"Oh, bite it." The dog paces an agitated circle. "Can you go down there and tell my Vaughn that I'm okay? He's gonna be real upset."

Fine time to be turning considerate. But we're dogs. When you're male and have all your factory equipment, this can happen.

"I'd love to get a message down there—"

I leave a long pause for the dog to insert his name.

"Randy," says Randy. "My name's Randy."

"Of course it is. I'd love to get a message down there, Randy, but I can't. I've tried."

Randy shakes himself again. He sniffs the air. "So what's there to do around here?"

I bark for a hummingbird. One buzzes in like a speeding leaf. It pulls 10 g's to make that instant stop. Its throat shines brilliant red in the sunlight.

The tiny bird waits, suspended in the air.

"Go tell Jack Flash there's someone here he might want to meet."

The bird zips away.

"Jack Flash?" Randy echoes. "Who's he?"

Jack Flash is a cocky some kind of terrier mix. I met Jack Flash early on.



Not someone I want to spend time with.

I can't say I dislike Jack Flash. That would take too much energy. I just don't pay attention to him except to wish him a speedy trip across the bridge.

Jack Flash is brash and lively and reckless. He has a lot of fans here.

Somewhere beyond the horse pasture there's a road where Jack Flash and his pack chase cars. I don't know who or what drives the cars. Maybe they're what people called "speed demons."

Jack Flash comes dashing across the fields to my gate. He barks at me.

"Heya, Zack! A little bird told me you wanted me. Is Foreman here? Is Foreman here?"

"Not yet, Flash."

"Then why'd you sic a bird on me?"

I tilt my head toward our newcomer. "Jack Flash, tell Randy how you came here."

Jack Flash gives Randy a wide broken-tooth grin. "I caught a car. Bit him right in the Michelines."

"Yeah?" Randy says back. "I tackled one right on the North Dakota."

"Oh yeah?"

Randy and Jack Flash strut away together in the direction of the phantom roadway, telling tall tales and making dares.

Do you know who goes out to the phantom road to watch Jack Flash and Randy chase cars?

Miss Anastasia.

Sweet Miss Anastasia, the purebred cavalier King Charles spaniel, thinks Jack Flash is macho. And Jack Flash has never met anything like pedigreed, pedicured, silky Miss Anastasia. Jack Flash wants to drag down muscle cars and lay them at her dainty feet.

Whenever the sky wobbles, each and every dog murmurs, "Please, please, please, let it be me." But there are quite a few dogs among us who secretly add to that prayer, "If it can't be me, please, please, please, get Jack Flash out of here."

Enough of his eternal bragging, already.

Today, Jack Flash struts to my gateposts. "Heya, Zack. Can I have one of your sticks?" Jack Flash takes a stick from the middle of the stack.

"No."

"Thanks," Jack Flash says, muffled. He prances away with a big stick in his mouth, his tail up like some human's middle finger.

He's half way across the meadow. The stick drops from his mouth. He staggers. He steps on his own foot. He disappears from view in the tall grass.

The sky sparkles.

I yell, "Flash! You're up!"

Jack Flash doesn't need telling. He already feels it. I just yell that for everyone else to hear.

Heads pop above the tall grass and the pond reeds.

Jack Flash is going?

Jack Flash finds his feet, and now he's running back here, toward the gate.

Jack Flash's eyes are huge, his mouth is open. He's shaking like you've never seen Jack.

Everyone is barking. We always sing dogs off. A lot of us are glad to be rid of Jack Flash. Jack knows it. He so doesn't care. He's as sappy, overjoyed, and relieved as any other mutt to know his dear one has come for him.

A big, fleshy, tattooed man swaggers out of the gate. This must be Foreman. Foreman sweeps Jack Flash up and up. He tosses Flash in the air. Jack Flash twists and kicks, tail thrashing. He comes safely down into Foreman's huge hands. Jack Flash licks Foreman's bristly face.

The hulking Foreman carries Jack Flash toward the bridge. I spy the glint of a tear on the man's rough face as he strides past all the dogs on the meadow.

Jack is yapping back at us over Foreman's vast shoulder. Jack pauses to lick the guy's stubbly face. Then he turns back to us, howling an ecstatic, "Yeeaaaaa ha!"

\*\*\*

I'm lying with my ear to the gate, as usual, dreaming. Only I don't know if this is a dream.

I see a little family in the park. Mom, Dad, dog.

The word *metastasized* comes to me. It means something dire. The two people are making the hardest decision. They've decided not to put their dog through the hopeless, painful, sick-making fight.

They've come to the park for a last picnic in the sun. They spread out a blanket on the grass. They've brought raw corn to throw to the ducks in the pond.

The dog is too tired to chase the ducks, but he likes to watch them dive for the corn.

The man and the woman have brought the dog's favorite treats.

They start the coals in the grill. They throw the flying disk to each other. The dog watches it sail over him, but he doesn't get up.

The man and the woman cook hamburgers on the grill. They lay out their food on the blanket in the grass. They don't eat much. It's tough to swallow when you're on the verge of tears. The dog sniffs at his treats.

Dad can't take it. He walks to the edge of the pond, stands there, looking out. He doesn't want to be caught crying.

Mom kinda knows what he's doing. She checks her watch. It's time to go. They have an appointment with the vet.

She rolls up the blankets.

He snuffs the coals.

They load up the car.

They walk slowly back to their dog, where he's lying in the sun, eyes shut, smiling. Mom gently calls his name. "Harley?"

Harley is already here.

Harley trots through my gate, smiling.

I do not want this dog to look back.

Down in the world, his mom is kneeling, rocking and crying hard over his body. Dad is losing his stoic composure.

I howl. "Tiny! A little help!"

"Huh?" says Harley. "What do you need?"

Tiny comes galloping in. I'm trying to wedge myself between Harley and the gate so he can't look back.

Just as Harley makes to turn around, Tiny charges in and alpha bumps Harley on the shoulder, roaring, "You're it!" Tiny dashes away with heavy thudding footfalls. Harley stares, bewildered.

Tiny turns around and bows to the new guy, who is just standing there. "Well?"

Harley stares.

I shove Harley. "Get him!"

Finally Harley gets the idea he's been dropped into the middle of a game. He takes up the chase.

Tiny leads Harley out in the meadow where Robbie is throwing flying disks to a bunch of dogs.

"Hi!" Robbie smiles at the new guy and throws a disk at him.

Harley bobbles the catch. The other dogs cheerfully boo him.

"Mouth of stone!" one of the retrievers yells.

"Bad throw," Robbie says. (It wasn't.) "Try this one."

Robbie lobs a soft spin Harley's way. Harley manages to catch that one.

Down in the world, Harley's mom has unrolled one of the blankets. She's wrapping Harley's body in it. She's sniffing and brushing tears from her face with the backs of her wrists.

I try to leap down into the passage to the world.

The passageway spits me out. I mean it. I was spat.

I shake myself off.

The gate has grassed over solid.

I pee on the gate.

I sit down to watch Robbie and the dogs racing around the butterfly meadow. They're playing a game that's part catch, part dodge ball, and

part tag. Harley isn't that good of a catcher.

I shouldn't talk. I'm really kind of a stone-mouth myself.

At last Harley plods back to me, panting, spent, and happy. "That was fun. I gotta get home. Where's Mom and Dad?"

"Um. Yeah. About that. I have something to tell you, Harley."

"Yeah?"

"Um. You ever hear of the Rainbow Bridge?"

"Yeah. It's where dead—"

Harley freezes. Only his eyes move. Those wide eyes take in the fields, the beautiful sky, the dogs playing games.

Harley unfreezes. He sags a bit.

"Oh poop."

"You'll see them again," I assure him.

"When?"

"Don't be in a hurry."

He opens his mouth. I can tell he's going to say something hurrying. But he suddenly gets it—what it means for his mom and dad to come here.

"Right." He paces. He comes back to me. "Can I go down there and tell them something? I mean, I'll just be a moment."

I move aside. "Show me how to do it."

"What are you saying? You mean it can't be done?"

"I'm saying, if you can find a way to do it, Harley, I'm right behind you."

Harley paces. "I'm just worried about them, you know? They'll be real sad. You know?"

"Yeah."

I know.

\*\*\*

There are a lot of Chihuahuas here. I think Chihuahuas are only part dog. They're also part cat, part ferret, and part gremlin.

The ferrets call them Chee Hoo-ah Hoo-ahs.

The Chihuahuas have formed a pack. They hang out atop the high sheer rock called Whip's Ledge that overlooks the pass to the horse lands. They all line up in a row and heckle anyone passing by on the path below.

There's one Chihuahua called Gordo (actually I think there's a bunch of 'em called Gordo.) This Gordo is waiting for his mama, Luisamaria.

Gordo has split from his pack. He visits me here at the gate.

He brings me a twig with a couple leaves on it.

"That's cute, Gordo."

Gordo adds the twig to one of my piles of tree branches.

Gordo has soft fuzzy brown fur like a human baby's jammies.

He's a long timer. I know his story.

Gordo was a gift to Luisamaria from her new husband, Ramon.

Luisamaria and Ramon had each been married before, and each had been widowed before. They were surprised to find love again. They each have grown children.

Shortly after Ramon and Luisamaria were married, Ramon was diagnosed with something deadly. The little Chihuahua, Gordo, comforted Luisamaria in her darkest time. Little Gordo was Ramon's love for her wrapped in fur.

Gordo came here a long time ago. He worries about Luisamaria, like I worry about Mireille, and Harley worries about his mom and dad.

"I have heard you are trying to get back to the world," Gordo says. "I am here to help you get there. You and I. We will dig!" he says. As if those little paws can move earth.

Still, Gordo has a huge heart.

I'm in.

We madly paw the dirt for a while. When we slow down for even a moment, the dirt fills in and the grass grows back. Now it's filling in faster than we can dig. The gate turfs over yet again. I howl.

Gordo flops down, exhausted. "I am sorry, Zack."

I stand over the gate, my head hanging. "For nothing."

We were doomed from the start. Gordo is right. We had to try.

I would do it again. I probably will.

Gordo tells me how Luisamaria carried him in her purse when she went to places where dogs couldn't go. "No one knew I was even there. Luisamaria take me to work with her. I stay quiet. No one know."

I pout. "I want to ride in a purse."

"I want to race in the Iditarod," Gordo says. Then, for real, "I want to be with Luisamaria."

"Luisamaria isn't alone in the world. You know that, don't you, Gordo? Luisamaria has her children and maybe grandchildren by now. Luisamaria has love all around her. You shouldn't worry."

I don't tell him that my Mireille has no one. Yeah, I know it's not a contest. But Mireille needs me. Mireille is alone. I need to get to Mireille—

Ah. Here it is. The sky shimmers. I close my eyes.

It's not for me. That's not Mireille coming.

Gordo quivers. I give a laugh that comes out more like a sob. I'm happy for him, but my happiness has a stinging edge on it, I gotta admit it.

I move apart from the gate to give Gordo a clear path. This is his moment.

Bitterness drops away as I see Luisamaria jogging up the steps of the passageway. She arrives on our sunlit meadow, her chest heaving, her eyes wide. She's much younger than Gordo ever saw her.

He knows her instantly.

Gordo jumps at her. Luisamaria catches him. She gives a startled cry of joy and cuddles him to her cheek and kisses him. She's laughing and crying. Gordo's tongue isn't even as big as her teardrops.

Luisamaria looks up. Her gaze is distant. I know she sees something in the shining white mist that I can't see.

Gordo follows her gaze and yells, "Papa! It's Papa!"

Marialuisa breathes, "Ramon!"

She sets Gordo down. Gordo races around her. He dances on two legs. He dashes toward the light. He turns around short of the bridge, dashes back, and yaps at Luisamaria to hurry hurry hurry.

She moves at a youthful run. Her cheeks are wet and shining.

What is all this water on my face?

I throw my head back and sing with the dogly choir.

\*\*\*

The formidable silver bitch Sequoia has dislodged the Chihuahuas from Whip's Ledge. The brat pack needs to find another perch.

Sequoia keeps vigil up there on the high rock shelf now. No one challenges you, if you want to walk to the horse lands. Sequoia silently watches you pass.

I climb up the rear slope of Whip's Ledge. I'm carrying a hunk of frozen raw chicken in my mouth. I don't know where I got it. One finds what one needs here. I needed a suitable gift for Sequoia.

I arrive at the top of the ledge.

Sequoia, lying on her rock, growls at me.

I approach. I stop when her hackles lift.

I place the icy chicken brick on the ledge and back away.

Sequoia's tail twitches. She rises suddenly. The motion is swift and startling.

She pads to my offering. She sniffs it. Sequoia snatches up my frozen chicken offering and trots away with it.

I'm in love.

I have another girlfriend. She's a Sheltie. Her name is Athena.

In life, Athena was a guide dog for a blind woman. Athena was bred, born, and trained to the position. She lived to serve. Athena doesn't know how to have fun. This is my kind of girl.

Athena sits with me at the gate and waits. She says she has to be here when her mistress comes. I understand this girl. She's a professional. She's single minded.

Sometimes she licks my ears.

Athena is reserved. When dogs come visiting me, she's watchful. Her ears keep pivoting back over her right shoulder, as if listening to take a cue

from her mistress, Mandy, who used to always be there.

Athena is very pretty. She looks like a small collie, with the classic sable, black and white colors. Her white ruff is full. I'm a sucker for a thick coat. Athena has a sweet face and she's a little shy.

She got an awful lot of unwanted attention in life. Strangers wanted to pet her. Athena is not a pet. She's not a therapy dog like Shelby is. Athena is a service dog.

Shelby is a friend to everyone. Athena is devoted to one and only one.

Athena and I fall asleep at the gate. We wake up with flowers on our heads.

A preacher's dog has married us while we were sleeping.

Athena looks like she's having a seizure. She kicks. The flowers fall off her head.

"Don't panic," I tell her. "I don't think we're really married. It's a joke, Athena."

That's not the problem.

"What's wrong with me?" she cries.

"Nothing."

I sound mopey, because I'm disappointed. I paw the flowers off my head. I'm happy for her. Sad for me.

Athena trembles. She looks around in quiet panic, "Where's my harness! Zack! Help me find my harness! It's not here!"

"You don't need it."

"I do! How will I guide my Mandy without my harness!"

"She won't need it."

One thing I've noticed about folk coming through here—they don't need any equipment. No one comes here needing braces or insulin or oxygen or wheels or walkers.

The woman climbs up from the dark passage. She's looking about in wonder. She's *looking*. At everything. Everything is astonishing. The sky, the meadow, the ground, her own hands. Her eyes turn to us dogs. Out of all the dogs on the meadow, her gaze immediately finds Athena.

Yes, I told you, you can recognize something you've never seen—although Mandy has seen Athena—just not with her eyes. Mandy knows her. There's not an instant's doubt.

"Athena!"

Athena freezes. She squeaks at me, "Zack! Where's my harness?"

Mandy meets Athena's gaze.

Athena forgets her rigid training. She runs, and leaps into her mistress's arms. She kisses Mandy's face, her plume tail waving. She's quivering.

Mandy's eyes are big and filled with tears. "Look at you!" Her hands touch the familiar face. She knows this face. She's laughing. "Look at you! You are the most beautiful thing!"

Mandy looks everywhere. "Clouds," she says. She's never seen them but she has felt their shadows pass over. She recognizes clouds by their cool moving shadows. The sunlight returns, warm on her face. She always felt the clouds move.

She sees her first rainbow. Rainbows. There are three of them.

"Is that —?" She looks to me. "Is that a rainbow?"

"Yes. It's three of them, really."

Mandy laughs.

Now, she sees the bridge taking shape out of the shining mist. I only see part of it. This is where Mandy sees better than anyone other than Athena. Mandy inhales and forgets to exhale. She trembles. Her eyes are wide. I wish I knew what she sees.

She sets Athena down on the ground. Athena assumes her dutiful position at Mandy's left side. They walk together toward the brightness.

Mandy skips. She laughs and claps her hands. "Let's run!"

The two of them dance together into the brightness.

\*\*\*

When I sleep, I lay my head on the grass over the gate. Sometimes it brings dreams.

This time it brings a nightmare.

I see a highway rest stop. It's a dark evening in heavy rain. I hear car doors thudding shut. The car is pulling out of the service station.

A dog, who had been sniffing the bushes under the shelter of an overhang, lifts his head up. He sights the car leaving, and he runs!

Wait!

The car keeps going.

The dog dashes down the merge ramp. The car is speeding up.

The dog races out into the highway.

Cars swerve around him. Lost, confused, the dog is trying to stop one of them.

He's looking for his family's car. He looks to each vehicle as it flies past. He crosses in front of cars. They veer. The spinning tires splash water over him.

I feel his panic, the hideous fear and the hurt.

Stop. Please stop. Are you mine? Are you?

I hear the last screeching of tires. The skid.

Please let this be a nightmare. Please don't let this be real.

The impact.

It's real.

And here he comes.

This is not a dream. This is a death. I lift myself off the grass and move aside.

The wet dog creeps through the gate, shivering. He's here.



He shakes off the rain.

His eyes move. He takes in the starlit meadow, the full moon, the ghostly clouds, and me. His face is vacant. He looks like he has no idea where he just came from.

He gives me a shaky smile. "Hi."

My voice hitches. "I'm Zack."

"I'm. . . I have no idea. Isn't that funny?"

"Who is your person?"

"I don't know."

This is too weird. This kind of dog never comes here. And heaven knows there are legions of unwanted dogs down in the world.

Abandoned, nameless, rejected, unwanted souls who are left in the rain to be hit by cars don't wait for heaven at the Rainbow Bridge. They don't even pass through here. They go straight on to heaven.

Laughter carries from the meadow. Night shadows romp. Our boy Robbie is throwing glow-in-the-dark flying disks under the huge full moon.

Lonely dog looks amazed and wistful. "Am I allowed to play?"

"Of course," I choke.

Lonely dog is dry and comfortable. He's whole, smiling, and clueless.

A whirr sounds at my ear. It's a hummingbird. I need one, so here it is.

"Go get Sir Walter," I tell it. "And wake up Tiny."

The hummingbird whizzes swiftly away.

Tiny appears in the dark, plodding, his head nodding. The hummingbird has told him everything.

Tiny's jowls sag deeper than usual. He scowls. He growls low in my ear, "This dog not supposed to be here. His kind doesn't come through here!"

"Shhh! He doesn't know he's his kind!"

The blocky silhouette of Sir Walter the Scottie shows blue-black in the moonshine. Sir Walter brings our boy, Robbie, with him.

The abandoned dog looks up at Robbie and gives a tentative tail wag, hopeful. "Am I your dog?"

Robbie crouches down and gives the abandoned dog an ear scratch, and then a belly rub. Then he gives Lonely dog a bunny leg. I don't think this dog ever got treated to a bunny leg in his life. Lonely dog's leg is just a'stompin' the air.

"What's my name?" Lonely dog asks Robbie.

"I don't know. What is it?"

"You mean I'm not your dog?"

I'm trying to give Robbie a wave off, but the boy is already telling the never-loved dog, "This is the place where specially loved dogs come to wait for their masters before they go to heaven."

The discarded dog giving him a blank look. "I am specially loved?" I cough. I can't tell him that no one will be coming for him.

I won't do it.

Robbie tells him, "If you're here, you're waiting for someone."

"That's strange, isn't it?" says Lonely dog. "I don't remember anyone."

"Well someone must have loved you very, very much."

I'm mentally screaming at Robbie not to tell him that. I know there's no one for this dog.

Lonely dog scratches his neck, searching his memory. "Actually I don't remember anything at all. Wanna play?"

"That's what I'm here for," Robbie says. Lonely dog trots away with Robbie. Robbie throws flying disks out ahead of him. Lonely dog chases.

With Lonely dog out of earshot, I ask Tiny, "Where do unloved dogs go?"

"They go straight to heaven. We never see them."

"That's what I thought!"

None of us—me, Tiny, or Sir Walter—can figure out why this dog is here.

Sir Walter mutters, chewing on his own mustache, agitated. "Na. Na. Not good. Not good."

Robbie and Lonely dog are coming back. I hear Robbie telling Lonely dog, "This is where specially loved dogs wait for their people so they can go to heaven together. You're one of those."

I'm crying inside. Stop! Please stop!

Lonely dog says, "I don't remember my people. How can that be?"

"I don't know," Robbie says. "Let's ask Zack. Zack knows everything. Don't ya, Zack?"

Glurk?

I hack, choking for time. *Zack* wants the ground to swallow him up.

Lonely dog trots right up to me and asks, "How come I don't remember anything?"

I open my mouth, but I got nothing to come out of it. I shut my mouth. Some truths don't belong out there.

Tiny looks the unwanted dog straight in the eyes and tells him, "All you need to know is that someone loves you very, very much."

I feel my eyes go big and round as water bowls.

I don't think that's right, telling Lonely dog that. But I'm sure not going to tell him otherwise.

Robbie yawns. "I gotta get to bed. You coming, pup?"

Robbie has a bed up in a tree house. He found it. He thinks it's the best thing ever. Robbie sleeps there with a whole pack of assorted dogs.

Robbie's bed keeps getting bigger and bigger. The lonely dog tags along after him.

I suppose Robbie's bed will be getting bigger.

Sir Walter waits until they're out of earshot. "Do you think that dog might be here for Robbie?"

"Not really," I say. "No."

"Me neither," Tiny confesses.

Robbie never had a dog. And those people in the car sure didn't love this dog.

Why did I have to see that? Why was I given that to see? Now I can't get it out of my head.

Bad feelings can't stick here. The bridge won't allow it. But this one is real, real hard to shake. I can't imagine how this will end.



# Chapter Four

WE HAVE BEEN COLLECTING over the years (I guess they're years. Who knows how time passes here?) huskies. We have lots and lots of huskies. It started long before I came here. Most of the huskies belong to the same guy. His name is Hank. We have two sled teams worth of Hank's huskies by now. Every time a husky comes through the gate, all the huskies at the bridge are suddenly here, right here, clotted around my gateposts, buffeting me in the face with those big fuzzy shelf-clearing tails and demanding, "Where's Hank? Where's Hank?"

These huskies were hard working dogs when they were alive. Now that they're here, they party just as hard.

The huskies play rough. Their idea of fun would make most dogs whimper. Even Jack Flash never played this hard. Jack Flash was all bark. These dogs are all muscle.

They like to threaten each other. They howl at each other in spooky voices at night: "Shackleton! Shackleton! Shackleton!"

Shackleton is the Bogyman of sled dogs. I'm told that Shackleton was an early explorer of the Antarctic. Shackleton's men survived. They ate their dogs.

So now, when a husky gets mad at you up here, he'll tell you to get Shackletoned.

I asked the huskies once, "Did any of you run in the Iditarod?"

They laughed at me. The biggest, baddest husky, Garth, showed teeth. "Iditarod's for sissies."

These aren't sport dogs. They carry mail and food and fuel and equipment. These guys go out when the roads are closed under mountains of snow and towns get cut off from necessities, and people go missing, and arctic truckers don't show up and ice is falling from the sky in sheets and search planes and helicopters can't fly. These are the guys who rescue the rescuers.

There's a place up here at the Rainbow Bridge called the winter lake. It's beyond Whip's Ledge, on the windward side of the horse lands. It's always winter on the lake. The huskies play there along with the malamutes and the Akitas and the Samoyeds.

I don't go up there. It's too far from the gate. I'm told it's great fun to romp and slip on the ice and catch snowflakes and dive into snow drifts. I was never a snow dog. I have a very short coat.

When I used to shed my little black hairs back home, Mireille said it was like sweeping up eyelashes. Not that my coat matters here. I'm never too hot or too cold. I just never got to liking snow. Hank's huskies can have it.

\*\*\*

A dog stumbles through my gate. He barges into one of my gateposts and sends the sticks tumbling. His name is King. I know this because it's the name I hear the girl back in the world crying just before the gate shuts.

King crawls out from the mess of sticks and he regains his footing. He looks around. His tail stops wagging. He realizes where he is. "Oh . . ." he starts, stops. He's searching for a bad enough word to finish his curse. "Bath time! She told me not to eat the raisins! Is it too late to throw up?"

"Yes," I say. And I bite him. Just a little.

"What's that for!" King yelps.

"For being a butt. For eating the raisins. Someone's heart broke over that."

That someone is back in the world, crying for King right now.

"Oooh." King's head hangs. His ears droop. "Chloe hates me, doesn't she?"

"Not you," I say.

The girl Chloe hates herself for leaving the box of raisins in King's reach.

That just makes things worse. King's head hangs lower. I've shamed him. Now I feel like a butt. I should not have said that.

I need to backpedal. I offer, "There's nothing here you're not allowed to chew on."

"I don't want no raisins," King says, sulking. "Ever."

I try again. "Is there anything else you want to chew on that you weren't allowed in the world?"

King's head goes up. "Socks! I'm not allowed socks. I can't help myself. I just can't make myself stay out of the laundry hamper."

"We have socks. If you find 'em, you can shred 'em."

King brightens. "Now? Right now?"

"Go for it."

King gives a happy gasp. Then he stops to think. "Will Chloe get mad?"

"Chloe wants you to have the socks."

King runs off in search of socks.

\*\*\*

A new dog arrives through my gate, astonished. He's a scruffy little

guy, built like a football with feet. He looks like a toy. I don't mean a toy breed. He looks like an actual toy hanging on a rack in a pet supply store. Only he's not new. He's been well used. He has bad hair. He looks like he's been licked by cows.

He creeps through the gate with hesitant, wooden steps. I see him getting real nervous and worried—like he's expecting someone to kick him. He mutters to himself, "I. Oh. No. I'm not supposed to be here. Oh no."

He's turning around like he's got somewhere to go back to.

I get in front of him. "Of course you're supposed to be here. You're here."

The scruffy dog twitches. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll go. Where's the thing?"

The thing. "The Rainbow Bridge?"

"No. No." He's racing in circles. "The thing! The thing!"

Ah. He's looking for the passageway back to the world. It's gone of course.

The scruffy dog sniffs the grass, and gives it a scratch. "Where'd it go?"

I heave a big sigh. "If you find it, you let me know, brother."

The dog fidgets. He's tugging out tufts of his coarse hair. "Ohhh, this is a nice place," he says, wistful, worried. "There's been a mistake. What's everyone doing here?"

"Playing," I say. "Waiting for heaven."

Well! I may as well have told the dog he was standing on a nest of fire ants!

"Oh, no. This isn't right." The dog is pulling fur out of his tail now. He whispers low and horrified, "I'm a Kosher dog. We don't have a heaven."

Really? "Well, then, where do you go?"

The dog lowers his voice confidentially. "Quoth the rabbi: It's best not to think on such things."

"Well then, you'll stay here, I guess."

The dog hushes his voice so low I can scarcely hear him. "I'm not a member of this club. They're gonna throw me out."

"They're not going to throw you out. The only thing they'll do to you is make play with the other dogs. What's your name?"

"Nudnik," says Nudnik.

\*\*\*

A bulldog or something else bully with a big blocky head and a squashed-in face stumps through my gate. His name is Dewey.

Dewey has a big mouth. He arrives yawning. His maw looks like a giant piebald snake mouth. His big jaws shut with an audible chomp. Dewey has a bad underbite and great heavy jowls. There's a chunk missing out of one ear and he has scars all the way around his enormous neck. The poor

guy had been staked with an untipped prong collar. He's not exactly the sort of character I expect to come through here. This is the place where cherished animals come to wait for their beloved companions.

But I shouldn't have been surprised.

I find out why there are so many beat-up mutts here in this place of beloved dogs.

They were rescued. There's an extra special bond in a rescue.

Dewey was a rescue.

I try — as I always do — to squeeze past Dewey in the gateway and get myself back to the world.

I can never get through. But this time I've got my head in the gate, and now I'm peering down the long dark passage. I try to wedge the passage wider. Nope. This is as far as I get.

And I see.

I'm looking back into Dewey's past. The gate lets me know what it thinks I need to know.

I can see Dewey there that night, staked behind a trailer. He is sitting on the cold hard ground, half frozen to it. His eyes are slitted against the gusts of ice rain, his mouth set in a big frown. He's as cold and miserable as a mutt can be, shivering, bewildered, enduring. The eternal night drags on in hopelessness. He might have been crying.

I see red brake lights on the road as a passing car comes to a stop.

White lights now. The car is backing up.

It stops.

The driver's side door opens. The driver is a young guy in uniform. I know his name is Josh.

Josh is big, brawny, clean-shaven, with buzz cut hair, and I know that he has just come home from some country with a stan on the end of it.

He comes out of the car like a poked badger. He's pulling on Kevlar gloves. Good thing he does, because Dewey bites him as Josh unchains him from his stake. Dewey doesn't understand kindness.

The trailer door opens. Dewey's owner stands in menacing silhouette. Josh sees him.

Josh kidnaps the man's dog right in front of his face.

Josh takes off the prong collar and he walks down to his car.

Unchained, Dewey watches him.

Josh opens the car door. He turns and gives his heavily muscled thigh a double pat.

Something penetrates Dewey's hopeless soul. Past cruelty can't entirely erase what Dewey senses way down deep — that life is not supposed to be this way. And Dewey goes to Josh. Or maybe it's just the light inside the dry car that Dewey sees. Dewey jumps into the car. He shakes ice drops all over the interior.



Josh makes Dewey move over into the passenger seat. Then Josh gets in and shuts the door.

Josh has some beef jerky in the glovebox. It was supposed to be his. He offers it to Dewey. Good thing Josh still has the Kevlar gloves on because Dewey is not careful how he chomps. He would've taken fingers. He barely chews. He eats all the jerky. He throws up. He eats it again. He curls up and sleeps on the way home, his face against Josh's heavy thigh.

Dewey is so tired it doesn't wake him up when his new daddy carries him into the small, neat apartment.

Apparently the owner of the trailer called the police to report his dog stolen. The police find Josh by his license plates. They show up at Josh's door.

When the door opens, the policemen look around past Josh and see the state Dewey is in.

They're stunned.

"You have got to be shitting me," one cop says.

"Sorry for the bother," says the other.

The first cop turns away fuming. The other cop hoists a salute to the veteran Josh, and turns to go with his partner.

Dewey doesn't remember that part of his life—like people forget most of their dreams, or their nightmares in this case.

All Dewey remembers is going everywhere with Josh.

Dewey wore a white bow tie at Josh's wedding.

Dewey went to the station house with Josh when Josh got his new job.

Dewey rode on the fire truck in parades on Memorial Day.

Dewey died in Josh's arms, and here he is.

He doesn't get any prettier, and all his scars stay. This is the mug Josh fell in love with.

"Where's Josh?" Dewey demands.

I shut my eyes.

Josh is down there, now, crying, holding Dewey's empty mortal house. Josh kisses Dewey's big blocky head and lays him gently down.

My eyes fly open.

"He'll be here," I tell Dewey. "It'll be a long time, but Josh will be here."

Dewey pushes out his lower lip, as if it can jut forward any farther. He grunts. He nods.

Dewey lumbers out to the meadow to sleep in the sun. I stay here and watch the gate.

Dewey comes moping over to my gate once a day. He leans way over to look around me to see if Josh is coming.

I promise to tell Dewey when Josh comes, but still Dewey checks in every day.

We say the same thing every day.  
"You're still here," Dewey grunts.  
"You're still here," I grunt back.

\*\*\*

Straight out of the gate, a new white puffball of a bichon tells me, brightly, "My mommy gave me a whole bowl of ice cream before I came here!"

I have a hard time talking. "Yeah. Mine did too." I'm afraid I sound a little strangled.

My eyes burn. My last meal in the world was ice cream and a cheeseburger fed from Mireille's hand.

This new gal is a cute little fluffy thing, bred to fit on a lap. Her tail wags over her back. "I never get ice cream. Is there any more?" she asks, eager.

"All you want."

Me? I don't eat the ice cream up here, even though I can. And I'm told it's really yummy. Why don't I eat it? Okay, it's a stupid idea, I know, but I have this notion that if I hadn't accepted the treat—the ice cream—then I would still be down there in the world with Mireille.

Didn't I tell you it was a stupid idea? Well, that's just how clingers think.

I look at ice cream now and my throat closes up.

"Is Mommy here?" the new bichon asks. "Ice cream tastes better when Mommy's holding the bowl."

It sure does. I can barely speak. "She'll be along in time."

"When?"

"Don't worry about it. Your mommy will be coming for you. I'm Zack."

"I'm Bella. My mommy is Irene. Oooh, look at my fur! I looked so bad this morning. This is wonderful! Do you think the ice cream made me look like this?"

She looks like a fluffy snowball.

"Must have done," I tell her. "You look great. Irene will be happy when she comes for you."

Bella gazes around at the fields, the trees, the cattails around the pond, and the grassy pastures where the horses run.

"This is a funny pet resort. Where are the dog runs and the cages? I want a small cage. Covered. It has to be covered. Those big ones feel too open and lonely, don't you think so?"

"Bella, if you really want a cage, I'm sure there's a perfect little cozy one for you here."

Things we wish for have a habit of materializing.

Things do. People don't.

Well, yes, the people always materialize, but not until it's their time.

I dread to think of the time passing. I hate to think of Mireille alone in the world.

I hope someone is down there for my Mireille. I love her.

Did I tell you that?

What we do – we dogs – what we live for is to help, to guard, to share with, to comfort, to guide, to love, to be loved, to warn, to defend, to play with, to make laugh, to retrieve for, to hunt with, to adore, to make life better for those we love.

To never judge. Judging is so not our job.

We try your patience, and you're better for it.

Admit it, you never liked that carpet anyway.

\*\*\*

Every time a human arrives under the shimmering sky, Lonely dog from the highway rest stop is here at the gate with his slow-wagging tail, hopeful.

Always, it is someone else who races past him for a joyous reunion. The rainbows are never for him.

Lonely dog is always sad for a moment. Then it passes, because sadness can't last here. It fades like snowflakes in sunshine.

We all lap up the echoed joy of someone reunited with his heart holder. We get to share their soaring happiness as they walk, run, dance, bumble, and skip together toward the bridge, then cross into the light.

Lonely dog hangs his head. Then he stands up gamely and shakes himself. "Next one," he always says. Next one will be his.

Today, Lonely dog is here at my gate fretting that he can't remember his special someone. "I guess I got hit in the head or something. What do you think, Zack?"

I freeze up like I always do when Lonely dog tries to dig up his past. "Uh. Yeah. That has to be it. Definitely. You were hit in the head."

"Hey, Zack?"

"Yeah?"

Lonely dog is embarrassed. Finally he blurts, "What's my name?"

I'm thinking a million miles a minute. I can't gin up a kindly lie. And I can't tell him we call him Lonely dog behind his back.

"I don't know."

Lonely dog frowns thoughtfully as if trying on the name, I Don't Know. He shakes his head. No, that name doesn't sound right to him.

"How will I recognize my heart holder? How will he call me?"

I can't tell him the truth. *No one is coming for you.*

It burns my mouth to lie to him. Tiny started it. Now, I have to play along. "You'll just know. Everyone just knows."

Lonely dog is never going to know that feeling.

\*\*\*

I fall asleep over the gate, my face in the grass. Dreams come to me there. Only now, I know they're not dreams.

Far, far below, I see a dead man lying in an open casket. Mourners are gathered to pay their last respects. I see from the photos displayed on a board that the departed was once a big formidable man with strong features and thick, jet black hair. What's left behind here is a shrunken empty shell with milkweed wisps for hair.

The man's dog is there—big dog—named Dakota. I can see a wide streak of Native American in the dog. And by native, I mean timberwolf.

The man's daughter holds Dakota on a heavy leash. I know her, the daughter. I've seen her before.

She shows Dakota the casket so that he will understand that his pack leader is dead, not missing, not coming back.

The wolf dog, Dakota, sniffs the casket. He whines.

And to everyone's horror—except the daughter's—Dakota jumps up onto the casket. He sits on the man's shrunken chest, throws his head back, and howls.

Dakota stops eating and drinking.

He's leaving his mortal husk now. Right now.

I expect Dakota to hit me in the chin as he runs up the passageway to here. But he doesn't come straight here!

This is a shock.

Instead of coming up the passageway, where all beloved dog spirits travel, Dakota joins his human companion—the man whose body lay in the casket. The man's spirit is still down there, earthbound.

In spirit, this is a big, robust man, radiating energy and life. His tufted white hair appears thick and black again.

They're stubborn, those two.

The spirits of the big stubborn man and the big stubborn wolf dog go visiting.

I see the man's daughter again. She's not young. She's a lean, hard-muscled, hard-working child of nature. She sits with her legs folded up under her on a loveseat in a small room in her house. I know where I've seen her before.

The man's daughter is the heart holder of the beautiful scary silver bitch, Sequoia, who is already here at the Rainbow Bridge.

The daughter feels a touch, something brushing her arm. Her skin roughens.

She looks aside.

She sees.

"Dad!"

In a silent voice her spectral father tells her, We're going now.

They withdraw — the spirits of her father and the wolf dog, Dakota.

The daughter rushes to the door. The wind is blowing. There might've been tracks in the snow, but those were probably my imagination. Just a trick of the porch light.

But the daughter knows better. She tells the wind, "I love you, Dad."

At last, they come — the big man and the wolf dog, Dakota.

I hear galloping foot falls, fast approaching behind me. This isn't a dream.

It's the silver she-wolf, Sequoia, flying across the meadow to rejoin her pack. I always wondered about her. Now I know for certain.

I leap out of the way.

Sequoia and Dakota howl. It's an ancient song.

The huskies, the malamutes, and even some of the German sheppers up here pick up the call.

I want to join in, but I can't sing.

It's an astonishing sound. The word is "haunting," I think.

Dakota and the big man cross the shining bridge.

The silver wolf, Sequoia, doesn't go with them.

Sequoia stays behind here. She's waiting for the daughter.

It's not the daughter's time, and it's going to be a long wait. The daughter has miles to go.

Sequoia waits.



# Chapter Five

A BIG WHITE EGG is coming up the passage from the world. Actually, what I'm seeing is the head of a stocky bull terrier. Behind him, his deflated, spent, mortal carcass lies on a table in a vet's office, where a young man with a lot of tattoos loses the struggle not to cry.

In between the young man's sobs, I think I make out the name Arnold.

Arnold the bull terrier swaggers through my gate, his tail wagging.

"I'm good now, Roy! Let's go home!"

And Arnold turns around to look for Roy.

My throat tightens up. I remember saying something very like that to Mireille.

And now I can't talk. I'm supposed to explain to this dog that the reason you're good now is that you're dead. You're here to wait.

I don't tell him that.

The bull terrier rushes the gate.

I'm right there with him. We leap toward the real world. And we come down, sliding in the sweet spring grass, no gate, no passageway in sight.

I expected this.

You know I had to try.

Arnold shakes himself off. He meets my gaze. He has tiny black triangles for eyes. He barks, "Where's Roy?"

I sigh. "You're at the Rainbow Bridge."

Arnold doesn't ask what. He knows exactly what the Rainbow Bridge is.

"No. Can't be. That's where dogs go when they die."

I stumble-start. "Uh. Arnold?"

The bull terrier's little triangles shift back and forth.

Arnold sniffs the air. The triangles move up and down. He's getting suspicious. "Um. Am I—?"

"Yes."

Arnold paces a circle. He gets agitated. He paces faster and faster, as if he can open a hole by drawing it. If it works for him, I'll try it. But it doesn't work. Arnold finally slows down. He becomes sad. He puts his wide blunt snout down to the ground and softly whimpers into the grass,

"Roy?"

"Roy will be coming. I promise."

Arnold sits down heavily to wait.

I don't want to explain to him that this could be a real long wait. "Do you want to chase a tennis ball, Arnold?"

Arnold's ears give a half-hearted lift. Then they drop. His whole stocky body slumps, disappointed.

"I'm not allowed tennis balls. I eat them."

"How about a flying disk?"

Arnold's tail gives a half wag, hopeful. "I'm allowed to chase a flying disk."

I yell across the meadow. "Robbie! Get your arm over here!"

Our pet boy trots over to where we are. Robbie smiles at the new guy. He strokes Arnold the bull terrier and ruffles his ears. Arnold doesn't seem to like ear ruffles but he licks the boy's hands and slowly wags his tail.

Arnold and Robbie start out toward the meadow. Arnold turns that giant egg of a head and looks back at me. "You'll tell me if Roy comes for me?"

"You bet."

\*\*\*

First, it was just a few dogs. Now, it has become a ritual for every dog to visit me once a day. They each ask for their beloved.

"Is Roy here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Irene here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Ethan here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Hank here?"

"Is Hank here?"

"Is Hank here?"

"No, Hank is not here yet! Tell the rest of your team!"

Everybody here knows they won't miss their loved one's arrival. When your turn is up, you're the first to know. You just suddenly know.

Still, everyone feels like it's a duty to come here and ask, as if naming the name will make their heart holder appear. It's magical thinking of course.

But this is a magical place, so we try it.

"Is Maurice here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Foreman here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Linnette here?"



"Not yet."

"Is Eric here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Dan here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Vaughn here?"

"Not yet."

"Is Hank here?"

"Go away, all you huskies!"

Lonely dog comes to the gate, every day. This tears my heart right up, because I know no one is coming for him. Lonely dog doesn't even have a name to ask for. I'm terrified that he'll figure out that he doesn't have a heart holder, in spite of what Tiny told him.

"Anyone come looking for me?" Lonely dog asks.

"Not yet."

"You know, Zack," Lonely dog says, like a beginning. He sits down beside me. He gives his ear a scratch. "I've been thinking. I don't know what my name is. Maybe someone came here looking for me and asked for me but no one knows it's my name, so I missed my call. What do you think?"

"Everyone knows. Before they're called, everyone knows when they're up."

"Oh." Lonely dog sits there, thinking. Finally, "But someone is coming for me, right? They have to come. Right?"

"Yes." I get the lie out before I can choke on it.

Tiny started it. I can't tell Lonely dog that he was a throwaway.

Lonely dog sits and waits with me. Crickets sing. Lonely dog gets up and goes to chase fireflies with the other dogs.

Dewey the bulldog – he's the one that Josh the Marine kidnapped from the trailer – Dewey comes marching to my gate on his stocky, stumpy legs when no one else is around. He looks me up and down. He sniffs. "You're still here."

"You're still here," I say back.

Dewey marches off.

Nudnik visits me twice a day. He's here for his second round. "Any sign of Max?"

"Not yet."

"Ah, well. Like I should be surprised. He probably won't come anyway."

I roll my eyes. "He'll come, Nudnik!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because you're here."

"Yeah, I'm here," Nudnik says. "You'll tell me if Max shows up?"

"You'll know."

"If he's even coming."

"Nudnik, stop it!"

After each and every dog — except for the beautiful Sequoia — has come asking for the other half of their soul, I whisper at the place in the ground where the gate ought to be. "Mireille?"

And I listen for her voice. I hear only barking and gentle laughter from the meadow and the trill of the twilight swifts.

\*\*\*

I'm sleeping. I do that a lot. It just happens to be night now. I'm supposed to be sleeping.

A clear sweet note sounds in the dark. That's the cardinal's first call. He's just getting warmed up for his morning announcement: birdie birdie birdie BIRDIE BIRDIE!

It's still pitch black, but I can forget about going back to sleep. The cardinal is awake. That means everybody's gotta be awake.

I see a black shape in the blackness. It's a very square black shape.

"Sir Walter?"

Sir Walter the Scottie makes a sound like a huff. "Aye."

He comes into view. Sort of. It's tough to see a black dog in the dark. "Zack, move your butt."

I guess this means some soul is about to come up from the world.

I stand up and shake myself. "I don't suppose it's Mireille."

"It's a man," says Sir Walter. "He's holding on hard. This could be a while."

I can see more of Sir Walter in the first gray light of dawn.

The cardinal is singing its tiny brain out. The meadow smells fresh. Everything feels new.

Most dogs are waking up. Some of the night prowlers are just now going to sleep.

I've been holding it, but I can't anymore. "I gotta go mark some bushes. Will you watch the gate for me, Sir Walter?"

Sir Walter grunts.

I dash out to the poplar stand. I leave my autograph on a bunch of trees.

I pick up a distinct scent on one poplar. I catch sight of the marker.

The mutt sees me. He cringes. His tail goes down. His ears go down. "I'm sorry. Is this your place, Zack?"

"Nudnik! It's everyone's place. Stop worrying so much. Go on. Finish your pee."

"I'm done —"

Nudnik's head suddenly goes up. He's shaking. Now Nudnik is babbling. "I feel weird. I feel—I—Oh—What's happening to me?"

I catch in my breath.

I'm so jealous. "You're up, Nudnik."

We are standing a few hundred yards away from the gate. I've been trying for a while now to get Nudnik to go exploring, but he's afraid to touch anything. He's finally gone wandering someplace new and now he's convinced he's done something wrong because he's got the tremors.

He mutters, "Oh no! They've come to evict me. They've come—" His eyes go suddenly huge. The passage from the world has opened. A man is climbing up through the gate with heavy steps. I've never seen him before but I know who it is before Nudnik wails.

"MAX!"

Nudnik goes running—flying actually—like a Joe Namath pass.

Thin, bent-over Max is straightening up, becoming younger. His cloudy eyes are clearing. He takes off his glasses. He sees Nudnik coming at him.

Max catches Nudnik mid-flight, and hugs him. Crushed by joy, Max shuts his eyes. He silently sobs. Tears leak out the corners of his eyes. He pets Nudnik, and holds him to his cheek. It's tough for him to hold Nudnik's squirming, wagging body.

I trot back to the gate.

The sky intensifies its glow. The first rainbow is forming. Max's head goes up. "Oy!"

Max is round-eyed. He hugs Nudnik tight. Then he's fearful. He mutters to Nudnik in his arms, "That's not for us. That can't be for us."

"It's yours," Sir Walter says, gruff, and he marches off.

Sir Walter doesn't like anyone to catch him getting weepy. I know he hides in the reeds and bawls like a puppy whenever someone goes over the bridge.

Another rainbow arches over the first rainbow. It's rainbow over rainbow over rainbow.

Now, I can't see it, but I know it's forming—the bridge will be inside that glistening cloud of mist.

"Oh no!" Max murmurs, overwhelmed. "What's that? What's that for? Where's that go?"

I paw Max's trouser leg. He looks down at me.

"Sir? Max? You're going somewhere and I don't think it's New Jersey."

Max's mouth drops open. It stays open. Nudnik shivers.

Max whispers, as if afraid to be seen talking to a dog. "How can that be?"

"I don't make the rules," I tell Max. "I'm just the greeter."

"There has to be a mistake," Max tells Nudnik. "That's not ours. No."

"Let me down, Max," Nudnik says. "I'll go peek."

"I'll wait here," Max says, frightened. He sets Nudnik down in the sweet grass. "Don't be long."

Nudnik runs ahead on his scouting mission. No one has ever peeked and come back. I'm not sure how this is going to work.

Nudnik disappears into the glistening white mist. I can't see him.

I look to Max. He can't see Nudnik either.

Max clutches and wrings his hands. He's rocking now, sorrowful. Alone again. He gives a wail. "My Nudnik. My Nudnik. I shouldn't have let him go. Why did I let him go?"

Nudnik reappears. Like a bullet.

"You see?" Max, tells me in a resigned voice, as Nudnik comes streaking back. Max raises his voice to Nudnik as he comes near: "What'd I tell ya? They threw you out."

But Nudnik's eyes are big and round as wall clocks. Nudnik is running so fast he overshoots and makes a tumbling turn around Max's heels. Nudnik is shaking. Now he's pulling on Max's trouser leg with his teeth, growling. "Max! Come ON!"

"What?" says Max. "It's nice here. We don't need to go anywhere."

"Max. COME ON!" Nudnik is vibrating, dazzled.

I wish I could see what Nudnik has just seen.

Max shifts his weight, foot to foot, nervous. "What is it? What's over there?"

"IT'S NOT NEW JERSEY!"

Max gathers up Nudnik in his arms. Max takes slow, halting steps. He approaches the bridge with his eyes down. Nudnik is huddled against Max's shoulder, vibrating.

Max sets one foot on the bridge.

Max straightens right up. Nudnik's head lifts. Nudnik shoots a look back at me from over Max's shoulder. Nudnik is wearing the biggest doggy grin you ever saw in this life or the next one.

Now Max, with Nudnik in his arms, jogs cheerfully into the light.

I'm pretty sure I have a sappy look on my face. I'm just swimming in the afterglow.

I think I hear gruff sobbing over there in the reeds.

After a while, Dewey the bulldog marches up to me, his jaw thrust forward. His jaw is always thrust forward. He grunts at me: "You're still here."

"You're still here," I grunt back.

\*\*\*

Josh—Dewey's Josh, the young war veteran—Josh is here a whole lot sooner than I'd've ever expected. Josh is a strong, young guy.

Well, I might've expected it, if I'd thought about it. Josh is one of that breed that's always in harm's way for other people. First, he was a soldier. And now — well right up until this moment — he was a firefighter.

The sky shimmers.

My gate opens. I see Josh coming a long way off. He's in awful shape, but his skin heals as he rises. It's not skin of course. I don't think any of us is real flesh and blood here. We see and feel ourselves as we knew ourselves at our best.

Dewey's Josh is whole and strong and jogging up the passageway. Behind him, down in the world, a fiery building belches black, roiling smoke.

And across the meadow grass, here comes Dewey, lumbering. He's moving those stubby legs faster than ever did in life. He blunders, end over end, and he's up again, chugging and huffing, and snorting through that smashed-in nose of his.

Josh charges up and out of the gate. He sizes up the situation in one lightning glance. He crosses the ground in great bounds and scoops Dewey up. Dewey isn't light, but his weight is nothing when love and joy lifts him up. Josh tosses Dewey up in the air and catches him. Josh kisses him and snuggles him. Dewey makes a show of being embarrassed, snorting and snarling, but he loves it. He's this close to heaven.

The air sparkles. The sun shines brighter. A structure is forming in the butterfly meadow.

The bridge.

It's there and yet not there. It's beautiful — what I can see of it. Unless you're crossing it, you only ever see glimpses of the bridge. Beyond its leading edge, it's too bright to see anything.

Robbie, our boy, comes running to see the reunion. He watches, open-mouthed as Josh and Dewey cross over. Robbie's mouth hangs open for a while.

The bridge lingers warm and glowing and sweet and singing and welcoming. Robbie's face shines, wonderstruck. I sit next to him and lean into his leg. Everything is better shared with a person.

Tiny the bullmastiff stands at Robbie's other side. Tiny looks up at Robbie's face. Robbie's expression is wistful.

"You're allowed to go, you know," Tiny tells him.

Robbie nods at the bridge. It seems to be holding itself in place for him.

"Are my mom and dad there?"

"No," Tiny says. "They need to finish living back in the world."

"Can I go back to the world?"

"No one goes back," Tiny says. He adds, forcefully, "Zack."

"I want my mom and dad," Robbie says.

"You can't go back."

"Then I'll wait for them here."

"You sure?" Tiny asks.

Robbie pets both our heads. "Yeah."

The bridge becomes diffuse, glittering. Gone.

Robbie gives Tiny a nudge with his knee. "Anyway, someone has to throw the balls, don't they?"

\*\*\*

I return to the gate. The gate to the world has opened again. It immediately closes.

Left here on the grass is a black lab, sleeping. Just a moment ago he was sleeping on a woven rag rug in front of a big stone hearth. His exhausted body is still down there in the world. His spirit wakes up here.

He's a gun dog.

He lifts his head with a start. First thing he sees are the reeds. Reeds mean there's water over there. He gives a throaty woof!

Even at this distance, the ducks rise into the air with an alarmed clatter of wings. The black lab scrambles to his feet and goes in to a rigid point. He stands, mesmerized. Quivering, he says, "Look at all the ducks! Doc, look! Doc, look, look, look! Doc? I'm good for it, Doc! Look at me! I'm standing. Hey, I'm running!"

And so he is.

The black lab bounds across the meadow. He disappears in the reeds. I can hear him splashing into the pond.

When he reappears, he's all wet and looking back toward the gate. He has noticed that Doc isn't behind him.

The black lab comes trotting back here. "Where's Doc?"

"Um, Doc'll be a while yet, friend. What's your name? I'm Zack."

"Bo. Name's Bo. Do you spring ducks, Zack?"

"Uh. No."

Bo tries to get me to spring ducks with him. I know nothing about springing ducks. I'm a cross between a Doberman and a sofa spud.

"I'll teach you how," says Bo.

"Waste of breath, brother," Tiny tells Bo. "Zack's got gatelock. He's afraid he'll miss his flight."

I never flew in an airplane to know exactly what gatelock is. And I'm not afraid of missing Mireille. Well, that's a lie. I am afraid of missing Mireille. But it's more than that. I want to get back to Mireille. I need to get back down there in the world. She needs me.

"Go learn how to spring ducks, Zack," Tiny says. "It'll be good for you."

"Nothin' like it!" says Bo. "C'mon, I'll show you how it's done." Bo lowers his head and hollers into the grass where the gate ought to be. "Doc! You gotta see these ducks!"

"Teach Tiny to spring ducks," I tell Bo. "Tiny needs to learn new tricks."  
"Woof!" says Tiny.

My gate is open again!

Before I can lunge at it, a little dog springs up and out of the passageway from the world. The gate snaps shut.

I'm left with an energetic little terrier mutt, running maniacal circles around the gateposts. "Woo hoo! Joe Don! Look at me!" The little dog jumps a somersault and walks on his hind legs. "Check this out!" He hikes a hind leg at one of my gateposts, and he pees, as if it's an amazing feat. I'm not sure if he's impressed with his leg hiking or his peeing or both.

"And look at this!" He kicks the grass behind him at the gatepost where he peed, like it is a marvelous thing. He stands up, yelling, "Throw me a tennis ball! Joe Don! Throw it! Throw it! Joe Don—oh crud." The terrier drops down onto all fours. "WTF," he says, sagging. Only the dog doesn't say WTF exactly. This dog's got a mouth on him.

He's staring at the grass between the gateposts, as if he can see through the closed gate to the world below.

I can still see his man down there. Apparently, this dog can, too.

"Aw. Joe Don. Don't." The little dog paws at the grass. He says very softly, "Don't."

There's a mountain of a man down there. His face is pulled into an awful expression of loss.

In his massive hands he's holding the gear for the wheels that kept this little dog's hind end off the ground in his last months of life. The man is wrestling his face not to cry. But his eyes are way too shiny. He holds his chin way down. His big lips are pursed to keep from trembling. Lines of grief make his face look like a giant unhappy prune. A big tear tracks down one crease in his jowl. There he sits, a massive hunk of helpless sadness.

The man, Joe Don, is homely and formidable. There's a very soft part of his heart and it's breaking. The terrier mutt yells, "I'm here! I'm here! Here! Here! Here!"

The view through the gate is closing. It shuts.

"You!" the little terrier barks at me. "Open that back up!"

I give a sad laugh. "Brother, you figure out how, I'll help you."

"Not your brother," the terrier mutt warns with a snarl.

"Fine. What are you called?"

The dog shuts his mouth.

"Tell me or I'll make something up. And you won't like it, Sweet Pea."

"Moose!" Moose blurts.

And Moose dives into the grassy patch, clawing where the gate was.

I think it's useless, but who am I to pass up a wild chance? I join Moose

in digging, as if we can uncover the passage and get back to where our heart holders are.

As the clods fly, other dogs come and join in. There's Goofball, who is part backhoe, and Gallagher the Irish wolfhound, Bo the retriever, Hunter and Tracker the setters, and Norbert the—don't ask what Norbert is.

We also have a bunch of Chihuahuas in here, Rodrigo, Zorro, El Lobo, Chalupa, Tortilla, Jefe, Ocampo, Gringo, Hidalgo, and a Gordo or two. The Chihuahuas are trying to help dig, but they're kind of in the way. I may have scooped a couple of them out with the dirt, but they come right back—the Chihuahuas do.

So does the dirt.

The black Scottie, Sir Walter of the night watch, struts to our excavation site. He stands back, observing.

"Nice hole," Sir Walter tells me.

"Like it?"

More dogs come. Sweet Lips and Cantor, the foxhounds, join in. Kermit, the old man of the meadow, is in here.

We have a digging circle. And now we have a crater.

Tiny the bullmastiff marches over. "What—?" Tiny starts loud. He has to pause to figure out the rest of what he wanted to say. He finishes with an eye-rolling, jowl-flapping astonished bellow, "—are you doing?"

"Nuthin'" says Goofball, as if he's just been caught digging holes in the backyard.

"Digging," says Moose, the new terrier.

"Group therapy," says I. Digging.

This little project is an expression of our undying devotion. Never mind that it's doomed to grass over the moment we stop. This is what we must do now.

Tiny glowers at the lot of us, but no one is slowing down.

"Tiny?" I tilt my head at the hole. It's an invitation.

Tiny growls. He jumps into the hole.

And now, Sir Walter jumps into the hole. Sir Walter digs like a mad dog! Who knew? I get a second wind. The dirt is flying.

We dig.

It's a failure, of course, our excavation. But it felt good.

Everyone wanders off.

I'm left to re-stack my gateposts. It looks like a tornado took them. There are branches and sticks scattered halfway to the duck pond.

Moose loves to fetch, and Bo is a retriever, so that's a help anyway.

I stack the new gateposts, spacing them farther apart this time.



## Chapter Six

THERE'S A SHE DOG here named Cookie. Nice gal. Lively. Sweet. She's been here a while, so she has lots of friends. Trouble is, whenever anyone calls "Cookie!" every dog on the meadows comes running—from the horse pasture clear to the winter lake. It's a mob scene.

It's past midnight now. I'm awake, watching shooting stars. They blaze across the twinkling sky. There are a lot of them. This has to mean something.

I feel something momentous is about to happen.

I listen hard for Sir Walter of the night watch to call it.

And here it is. Sir Walter's gruff bark makes no more noise than a sneeze, but it sounds very loud in the night. "Cookie!"

Heads lift up over the tall grasses. "Cookie?"

"Who's got cookies?"

"Cookie?"

"Cookie?"

"Cookie?"

Everyone is awake now.

A white fireball lights up the sky, trailing a starry spray behind it.

The ground between my gateposts is moving.

Cookie, the she dog, is bounding over the tall meadow grasses. She looks like an antelope I once saw on a nature channel with Mireille.

Starlight reflects off Cookie's white fur. Cookie is springing and flying. Her crazed smile lights the night.

Cookie's heart holder is a tall gangly woman. She has a long face. Her long hair is held back in a single long braid.

She drops to her knees, and holds her long arms wide. "Cookie! Cookie! Cookie!"

Cookie jumps into the woman's arms. And Tiny yells a warning bark: "Stampede!"

The woman laughs. It's a horsey laugh. There are tears on her cheeks.

All the dogs on the meadow are barking, singing, warbling, yapping, woofing, "Cookie! Cookie!"

You know how I said that things we need or want have a habit of appearing here?

Guess what's falling from the sky, now?

\*\*\*

Shelby sits with me after the night rainbows fade from the sky. Cookie has crossed over with her heart holder.

We're eating cookies.

Shelby licks the frosting off a shortbread cookie. "I'm worried about Robbie."

"Robbie?" I bark, startled. I spray crumbs. "What's to worry about? He's fine! He's great. He's a super kid."

I nose about in the grass for my stray crumbs. Those butter things were really good.

"Robbie doesn't cry," Shelby says.

Shelby's experience is with seriously ill children. Her heart holder is named Dr. Ralph. Shelby gave Dr. Ralph's patients comfort and hope and someone confidential to talk to. Shelby could gaze at a person with those melting eyes and suddenly that person was the most treasured being in the universe. Shelby listened to the darkest secrets, and immediately forgot the secrets.

"Well, Robbie wouldn't cry, would he?" I say. "He's not holding back anything dark. We're not in the world anymore. The bridge protects us. You're out of a job, kid. There's no one here to comfort."

"I have you," Shelby says sweetly.

Well, yes, I am a bit of a project.

A moon shadow bounces over us. Someone is trotting this way. We squint into the darkness.

I make out the shaggy trotting figure. "That's King."

"Which one is King?" Shelby asks.

"Poison case. Waiting for a little girl named Chloe."

King trots across the meadow carrying a bag between his jaws. He drops the bag at my gate. "Zack! Shelby! What kind of cookies do y'all have? I have a lot of oatmeal. I'll trade you for something else. Only I don't want no cookies with no raisins in them."

Just so you know, this is dogspeak. We don't know nothing about no double negatives. To a dog, no is no is no. The more no's, the more something isn't. One no doesn't cancel another no out. They stack up.

King does not want the raisins.

"I have sugar cookies and peanut butter cookies," Shelby offers.

"I have some beef cookies," I say.

Shelby's and King's ears go up. "Beef cookies?"

King sounds jealous. "We never had beef cookies in the house."

I crunch one. I'm a messy eater. "Mireille never ate them. She bought

them special for me. I got to eat all of the beef cookies. I don't think people eat 'em. I have no idea why not. Have a cookie."

Now that Cookie has gone home, no one will be yelling her name across the meadows. That means we shouldn't have any more stampedes.

And why do I even form that thought? I should know better.

My gate is opening. Shelby and I get up.

A dog skips up the passageway, gaining health and strength. He has a long-haired coat. It's a deep reddish brown. His coat shines in the moonlight.

He skips through the gateway, and stops. He looks dazed. He gives himself a shake.

"Hey!" he says to me, Shelby, and King, friendly-like. He looks around and sniffs the air. "This is the Rainbow Bridge, isn't it?"

The gate has already shut behind him. The new dog doesn't notice. He wouldn't.

"I just read about this place. That was some kind of clue—me reading that poem. 'Cause I can't read!"

This makes my job easy. "Then I guess you know the drill."

"Otis will be coming for me?" the newcomer says, just making certain.

"Yes. Otis will come for you."

This new dog leans aside and lowers his head. He sniffs. "Hey! You've got cookies. Are there cookies?"

"Yeah." I move aside. "Help yourself."

The new dog cracks a big smile.

"Outstanding!" He wolfs down a beef cookie. "I like this place!"

"Welcome...." I pause for him to give me his name.

"Bacon. I'm Bacon."

Oh boy.

\*\*\*

I've become accustomed to seeing people change as they climb up the passageway from the world. All their braces and casts and tubing and oxygen masks fall away. Most of the people look and move younger.

Some of them don't change at all. I guess people settle back into the age they felt most like themselves.

Their dogs know them any way they come.

Dogs also change coming up the tunnel. They're always restored to their best health. Though sometimes some of them keep their scars, maybe because that's how they looked when their rescuers first fell in love with them and took them to their forever home, but other than that, all dogs are whole and strong by the time they pass through my gate.

It's night. Sir Walter and Tiny are watching my gate while I'm out watering a poplar. When I come back to my post, we have a new dog. Sir

Walter tells me his name is Fang.

Fang is asleep and snoring loudly. He's a color something like black. His skin is three sizes too big for him. It sags and bunches around his ankles like badly fitting pajamas. And his face? Here I thought Aggie had a lot of face.

I whisper a cry at Tiny. "What is that!"

"A dog," says Tiny.

"No. I mean what is that luggage hanging off this mutt's mug?"

"He's a Neapolitan Mastiff," Tiny says. "And those are jowls."

"You call those jowls? No. Tiny. You have jowls. Those? Really? Those are giant bags for carrying around drool."

He's asleep on my gate. He's looking very comfortable. I don't know how to move him.

Fang is of a size to eat Winnebagos. If he overheard anything I just said, none of it bothers him. I wonder if he even speaks dog-ese.

Some of us decide we have to see how much stuff we can fit inside Fang's jowls. Some of us would be Goofball; then there's my old next door neighbor, Jermaine; Roscoe the greyhound; a whippet named Zoomie; FurFace the ferret; and Randy, who isn't really one of our merry band. Randy is just hoping to make a move on pretty Miss Anastasia, who has come to watch.

We start with apples, pinecones, and walnuts – those big walnuts with their green hulls still on.

Miss Anastasia's gentle brown eyes look concerned. "What if he chokes?"

"So what if he does? You don't think we'd really try this if he was actually alive!" That would be stupid. This is the good thing about being already dead. Nothing hurts. We can't choke or poison Fang.

So we load up Fang's jowls with tennis balls, socks, and chew toys. Randy fits Jack Flash's shoe in there. Jack Flash has already gone over the bridge with his man, Foreman, so he doesn't need Foreman's shoe anymore.

Goofball tries to get a ferret in there, but for once, the ferrets don't want to play. Neither do the Chihuahuas. That's okay. We've run out of room in Fang's jowls.

Fully stuffed, Fang looks like a nuclear hamster.

Fang wakes up. He sits up, yawns, and gives his head a mighty shake.

A soldier dog yells, "Incoming!" and leaps for the hedgerow.

Fang empties his luggage. Everything goes flying. Chew toys lob like grenades. A sloppy tennis ball caroms off my head.

Randy throws himself in front of Miss Anastasia and takes a walnut on the chin for her. Moose the terrier gets a face full of the one thing that actually belongs inside Fang's jowls, so now Moose looks like a glazed

donut.

The ferrets are laughing.

Fang gives a messy sneeze and asks what there is to eat.

\*\*\*

I feel a wobble in my throat.

The sky shimmers.

Someone is coming. Gotta be a heart holder.

A stern, distinguished man appears in my gateway. He's impeccably dressed in a handsome business suit. Even I can tell those clothes cost a lot of money.

His hair is expertly sculpted. It's neat and dark except for the wide swathes of silver gray at his temples.

The man looks to his watch. He touches his chest.

He seems to understand that he has just dropped dead in the boardroom.

"Nuts," he says.

He looks around. His eyes take a cold survey. Slowly, his expression melts into a look of wonder. Something catches his notice far across the meadow.

I follow his gaze way out there to a black and white mutt named Bandit. Bandit is a long timer here.

Bandit is sitting. It's an antsy kind of sit. He's quivering. His tail gives a hesitant wag. Then another wag. He's waiting in agony for the call to come.

Bandit twitches. Bandit has been here since anyone can remember. Only Kermit has been here longer.

Bandit looks hopeful but confused.

Well, he should be confused! His man is shrinking. He's thinning and losing height. The sharp, polished business suit hangs huge on the frame of a boy. That heavy watch with all its dials slides from his skinny wrist and slips off his hand to the ground.

Bandit's tail is lashing. Bandit breaks from his disciplined sit and launches into a run. He streaks across firefly meadow. He cuts the corner at the pond and comes splashing through the tall reeds. He's not slowing down. The crazy happy gleam in his wide eyes gets brighter and closer.

He's here.

Bandit launches himself into the air and hits the boy like a wet, muddy cannonball.

No one ever gets hurt during these collisions.

Bandit and the boy roll on the ground. The boy laughs and giggles, trying to fend off the barrage of face licks. The boy is tangled up in his oversized clothes. He wiggles out of everything but the shirt. Then, apparently realizing that he has no use for the shirt, he pulls that off, too. He's more naked than the jaybirds in the trees.

“Look! Look! Look! Look!” Bandit bounds in circles. He stops and assumes the position of a pointer. “Look!”

Bandit really doesn’t need to point out the bridge. The three rainbows frame it. From the look on the boy’s face, I know the bridge is impossibly beautiful.

The boy sits in his pile of Armani. His dark bangs hang in his eyes. The boy pushes back his hair to clear his view.

“Who’ve thought I’d ever end up here! What’d I do right?”

Bandit just dances and play bows.

The boy stands up. He pats his chest. Bandit teleports up into the boy’s arms. Bandit is a big load for a skinny boy. The boy doesn’t seem to mind the weight. He doesn’t want to put Bandit down. The boy breaks into a lumbering run, hugging his furry load. They disappear into the brilliance.

The bridge, within that shining cloud, hovers for a moment, then gently fades, soft as a kiss goodnight.

\*\*\*

There’s a white dog here named Buddy. He was first named Snowball, because he was very white and fuzzy as a puppy. He’s still white. But he’s not called Snowball anymore.

Snowball was a Christmas puppy.

Snowball was adorable for a few weeks, even if he did poop and pee where he wasn’t supposed to, and he chewed up the other Christmas presents.

The kids had wanted him. They had begged and pleaded all December long. Snowball wasn’t there to hear that, of course, but he knows all about this terrible begging and pleading because Mom threw it back at the kids every day, several times a day, that they wanted the dog. Now they had to take care of the dog.

Mom’s name was Nessa.

Nessa was angry because she had told the kids no, they were not getting a dog for Christmas.

But Santa – which is to say Dad – came through.

Nessa was not happy at all. Nessa wasn’t happy most of the time, as long as Snowball could remember.

Dad’s name was Ethan. The kids and Ethan weren’t home during the day, while Nessa had to deal with the dog. After school, Nessa had to nag the kids to take care of the dog. Nessa thanked Ethan for making her the bad guy. The thanks didn’t sound all that sincere, if you asked Snowball.

When spring came, Nessa threw Ethan out.

Snowball isn’t sure if he was the cause of Ethan getting driven out of their home or not. He only remembers all of Ethan’s stuff getting jammed into Ethan’s car. Snowball remembers being thrown into the car too, and Nessa slamming the door, shutting him inside with Ethan.

Snowball remembers Ethan unloading his stuff at a much smaller living place that didn't have a yard or much room or even walls that didn't have other people on either other side of them.

Snowball could hear the other people's TVs through the walls. He could hear people walking upstairs. He heard a stereo thumping through the floor.

I'm like Snowball. Before I got here, I thought everyone lived in houses with lawns and fences and sidewalks and driveways.

They don't.

After all Ethan's stuff was unpacked from the car, Snowball remembers Ethan driving him to the police station. There they parked. Ethan turned off the engine.

They sat in the car.

Snowball could hear dogs inside the pound, yelling to get out.

Ethan sat there at the wheel for a long time.

The windows fogged. Snowball was confused.

Snowball rested his head on Ethan's thigh. Ethan placed his hand on Snowball's back.

Finally Ethan's leg moved. Snowball lifted his head from it. Ethan started the engine again and put the car in gear. He told Snowball, "It's you and me, Buddy."

After that, Snowball was called Buddy. He answers to that name here.

But before Buddy got here, he learned how to walk on a leash. Buddy then discovered that women on the sidewalk will stop and talk to a man walking a cute dog. Ethan could've been an ax murderer for all they knew, but they stopped to tell Ethan what a cute dog Buddy was.

Buddy, who really was very cute, got lots of snuggles. Ethan got to go out with a lot of women.

After a while it was the same woman over and over. Her name was Jennifer. Buddy the dog liked Jennifer. Ethan the man liked Jennifer a whole lot.

Buddy got to see his first mom, Nessa, several more times on visits to the old house. Buddy always stood up on his hind legs, thrilled to see Nessa. She was his old family! You never forget family! Buddy pawed Nessa, and panted excitedly. Dogs don't fall out of love.

Nessa always pushed him down and exchanged curt words with Ethan.

Each time Ethan went over to the old home, the kids were bigger than Buddy remembered, but Buddy recognized them at once and yelled to be let out of the car. Buddy leaped and romped around the kids. They were happy to see him. They petted him. But at the literal end of the day, Ethan took Buddy back to their new little home without Nessa and the kids.

Jennifer was there to welcome Ethan and Buddy with hugs and kisses.

Buddy slept at the foot of their bed.

Jenn had a baby. Then later she had another baby. She had just one at a time, not a litter of people puppies.

The two babies learned to walk, first one, then the other. Took them long enough! Buddy put up with tail-pulling and the smearing of peanut butter and jelly on his white fur. Buddy loved his people puppies.

The babies grew bigger than Buddy was—lots bigger—big like Ethan and Jennifer.

By then Buddy was failing. Sometimes Buddy didn't make it out of the apartment in time to do his business. Ethan and Jenn didn't yell at him for it. They just looked sad and cleaned it up.

Ethan knelt on the floor and stroked Buddy's patchy fur. "You gotta talk to me, Buddy. I don't know what to do here."

Buddy laid his head against Ethan's thigh.

Ethan took to sleeping on the floor with Buddy next to the bed. Jenn would reach down and touch each of them before they fell asleep.

Then, one morning, Buddy didn't wake up.

Buddy has been here ever since. We have no idea how long it's been. Okay, we have a little idea.

Buddy has been getting restless. Lately, he's been visiting me twice a day. And here he is again. Third time today.

"I can't stand still," Buddy says, pacing. "Is that a sign?"

"It could be."

"Do you think so, Zack? I mean, do you really think so?"

"Uh. Yeah, Buddy. I really think so." I obviously haven't been through it to really know, but I'll bet you anything that the next heart holder through that gate is Ethan.

"I mean, do you mind if I park here?"

I make room for Buddy between my gateposts.

Buddy is a squirmy companion. He's like a kid on Christmas Eve, hoping Santa doesn't get lost.

I doze off in the midday heat. A vision comes to me.

Someone is coming.

I wake with a start. My legs convulse. I kick Buddy.

Buddy doesn't notice the kick. He trembles. His eyes are glassy. His voice comes out strange. "Is this it?"

Oh yeah.

Me and Buddy skitter out of the way. The passageway opens. There's a man coming up—backwards, like I did, fighting the ascent. He's yelling desperately down to the world, "I love you, Jenn! I love you!"

The passage is narrowing after him.

The man turns his head to see where he's going.

We know before he turns that the man is Ethan.



That blissful fog that comes over most folks upon leaving their bodies soothes him. He's not fighting the force that draws him upward anymore.

He arrives through the gate.

His eyes go wide. His jaw drops. Yeah, I've seen that look a few times.

Buddy jumps onto Ethan's chest. Ethan has no choice but to catch him. Ethan is shaking, staring, astounded. "Holy crap, Buddy!"

Ethan keeps trying to talk but he keeps losing all his words. He can't seem to get them into order. So he just gives a weak shrug. "Holy crap." He shuts his eyes and presses his face to Buddy's side. A few tears escape.

He opens his eyes.

He looks to my stacked gateposts. He looks to me.

I'm just sitting here.

"Um," Ethan starts. Stops. Must think he's lost his mind to try talking to a dog.

He tries anyway. I know he wants to get back to Jennifer.

"Can I—?" He nods at the space between the gateposts.

I'm already shaking my head. No. No one goes back.

Buddy, looking over Ethan's shoulder, lets out a startled yip. Ethan spins around to look where Buddy is gazing. Buddy's tail is flapping.

"Ho!" Ethan yells. He bends over double, then straightens right up, holding Buddy fast. He falls to his knees. "Holy crap."

The rainbows gleam. The clouds around the bridge billow and glitter icy bright.

Ethan looks like he might be sick. His mouth opens and shuts. He claps his hand over his mouth. He speaks into his palm, "I'm not that good."

"Everyone says that."

\*\*\*

A dog arrives, sleeping. He looks young and healthy. I know he has just been put down, because I saw it.

I didn't know those dogs ever came here. We're all innocent.

The vet looked regretful. He placed a hand on the dog with a sad look, almost like asking forgiveness.

No one except the vet is with the dog as he leaves the world.

The dog wakes up here. He sits up. He sees me. His tail immediately wags.

"Hi! I'm Turnip!"

"I'm Zack." I stammer. Then I blurt, "Why are you here?"

"Where's here? I don't know where I am. I bit my mama on the boob. Daddy got mad. I mean real mad. I thought he was gonna kill me. He said he was going to. He rushed me out of there. We drove somewhere. I had a muzzle on my mouth, I remember that." Turnip paws his face where the muzzle had just been. He looks relieved to find it gone. "I can't remember anything else. How is my mama?"

I'm stunned. I can't answer that.

"I don't know." I'm so confused.

Turnip has that haze that comes over most dogs arriving through the gate, a warm fuzziness that allows no harsh memory.

I'm resistant to the haze.

Turnip concentrates. His brow wrinkles up in tight ridges. Something harsh occurs to him. He looks to me.

"Did my daddy kill me?"

I have left my gate. I am flying across the meadow, bugling like a terrified horse. I'm just a greeter. I am out of my depth. I'm yelling.

"Shelby! Tiny! Shelby! Tiny!"

It's a while before I dare go back to my gate. Tiny and Shelby walk me there. I kind of sneak up on it.

No one is there.

I can't face Turnip. I can't deal with that kind of thing. I am not going to answer his question.

Turnip is somewhere else now. Sir Walter has him. Sir Walter is showing Turnip around the meadows.

There he is. Robbie is throwing tennis balls to him and some other dogs on the firefly meadow. This is good.

I creep back in between the gateposts. I sit gingerly, as if something else awful might pop out of the ground.

At least the man hadn't shot Turnip or sent him to the pound to be gassed as a vicious dog. The man had gone through the trouble to take Turnip to a vet. That's expensive. That has the scent of care and regret.

Biting dogs don't come here. I don't get it.

There has to be a reason that I can't see.

I need comforting. Shelby stays with me awhile.

There are few things that a warm golden retriever can't make better.

This might be one of those.

"There's something we don't know," Shelby says.

That's for sure.

\*\*\*

There's a bitch who has been here a very long time. She's a snow dog – some kind of husky, Akita, Samoyed, spitz, malamute mutt. She has a thick, long, double coat. Sasha spends all her time at the winter lake.

She has two different colored eyes – one blue, one brown.

Today she comes to the gate to introduce herself. "I'm Sasha."

"I'm Zack."

"I know."

Now Sasha sits with me between my two stacks of sticks. She settles

in to wait.

"Should I have brought a stick?"

"No. That's not really necessary."

I have two impressive edifices flanking my gate now. I don't need another stick.

"You'll know when your person comes," I tell Sasha.

Yes, Sasha knows. She's seen it happen enough times when others hear the call.

There's a long silence. I wait her out. I'm in no hurry for her to be gone. She's gorgeous.

"I'm afraid Laney won't remember me," Sasha finally confesses.

Laney must be Sasha's heart holder.

"Of course Laney will remember you. You wouldn't be here if she didn't."

"It's different," Sasha says. "Laney was very, very young when I had to leave. I was old and sick. Laney was still just a people puppy when I had to come here. She wasn't even house broken yet. I don't know how much she could remember about me."

Sasha gnaws on a dewclaw. If she were human that would be her thumbnail.

She inhales long and exhales a huff.

I think she's ready to tell me her story.

"It was Laney's second winter. Laney got outside the house and wandered off into the snowy woods. I didn't know it until I heard her whimpering. I came out of my doghouse and went after her. I found a single set of tracks. There was only her scent, so I knew no one was with her. It started to snow again. I found Laney. She was crying. I snuggled with her and kept her warm. I kept the falling snow off her with my tail. I think she was hungry. There was nothing I could feed her.

"The snow filled up all our footprints.

"Later I saw the bobbing lights of the lamps and I heard the people calling. Laney's mama sounded like someone tore her heart open. She screamed for Laney. I howled. A whole pack of people came running. They found us snuggled together.

"After that, I got to stay inside the big house. It was too warm for me, but I didn't want to leave Laney. I got to sleep on Laney's bed. I got to eat anything I wanted. Mom and Dad didn't get too mad when I chewed the furniture. It cost a lot, whatever that means. I didn't do that for very long. I was already old. I had accidents on the rugs. I had to go back to staying off the bed again. But they didn't put me back outside. I slept in Laney's room. Mom and Dad talked about sending me here.

"Honestly? I was ready to go. But Laney wasn't ready. I overheard Mom and Dad arguing in whispers over what was best for Laney. Laney

got her way. I stayed. I got sicker and sicker. Laney was with me at the end. She was snuggled up next to me on the rug on the floor. I fell asleep and woke up here. That was a long time ago. I don't know how much people puppies remember."

Abruptly, Sasha's nose goes straight up. Her nostrils flare. "Ah."

She has caught a scent. She's quivering.

I feel the air sparkling. I don't need to tell her. "Laney remembers."

"Yeah," says Sasha, barely able to make a sound. Her mismatched eyes shine.

There's a tremor in the ground. The gate is forming.

The passageway from the world opens. Sasha and I move aside.

An ancient woman creeps up the passage. She's straightening up, walking now instead of toddling. She's getting stronger, becoming a young woman. Now she's jogging up, a big grin on her face.

And now she's shrinking! She's getting still younger.

And now she's a little girl. She squeals for joy, her little feet pounding as fast as she can get them down. She's running up the passageway.

Sasha the snow dog is bounding in frenzied circles around the gate, her tail thrashing.

Little Laney arrives through the gate. Sasha knocks her down and licks her giggling squealing face.

The two cross the meadow toward the radiant bridge. Little Laney moves at a chubby-legged, clumsy run. She stumbles. Sasha picks her up by the scruff of her little red jacket and sets her on her feet again. The two of them stride and stumble into the light.

Some things you just remember forever.

# Chapter Seven

A NEW DOG ARRIVES. He's a small, wiry, wheat-colored, super-charged terrier. He turns a full circle, twice. His short little tail is a wagging blur. He stares at the meadow. "Oh! How pretty!"

He jumps about-face to where the gate was. The gate has vanished except for my stacked gateposts. The terrier looks to me. "Where's my mother? She'll like this! Oh! Look at the dogs! Can I play?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" the new dog cries.

He dashes out. He comes right back. "Oh! I need to ask my mother permission!"

"Your mother wants you to play with the other dogs."

"Oh! Thanks!" He dashes off. I didn't get his name.

So I call him Oh.

I place my paw on the sealed gate.

There's a quiet woman down below in the world. I know this is Oh's mom. She's very old. Losing her dog is one of the major events of her life. She's in her garden behind a very small, neat house. She's planting flowers around a statue of Saint Francis. She weeps, quietly.

She wears a ring on her right hand. It's a birthstone. There's no ring on her left hand.

I see her again. It's night. She's in her neat little kitchen. She lights a candle next to a photo of her dear little friend.

It's an amazing talent people have, to summon light in the darkness, but they don't seem to be amazed by it. The ability to summon fire and to light a candle is wizardry to me.

We dogs are amazed at everything.

And here, on the Rainbow Bridge, Oh has just discovered a striped lizard. It darts up a tree. Oh is bouncing around the tree, barking. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Oh's name turns out to be Vigo.

Even by dog measure, Vigo is enthusiastic. He's racing around the meadows, saying hello to everyone. Now most of the dogs think his name

is Oh.

Did I tell you his mom is very old?

She's on her way. Her heart gave out. Her name is Val. She's coming here.

Oh —I mean Vigo—Vigo is bouncing off all the trees on his way in from the meadows. Now he's spinning in circles and yelling at the gate. "Oh!"

The old woman, Val, grows younger as she climbs.

Vigo dances, barking his brains out. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Val approaches the gate as a forty-something year old. That must be the age she most liked to be. She's hesitantly smiling.

She sees Vigo. Val's tentative smile brightens to unbound joy.

She runs through the gate. She bends down and gathers Vigo up in her arms. She holds him to her cheek and she closes her eyes. She tries to purse her lips against Vigo's enthusiastic kisses, but you can't purse and smile at the same time. The smile wins.

The first rainbow glimmers into view while Val's eyes are shut.

When she opens her eyes again, Val gasps. She's stunned. "Oh!"

It sounds like a puzzled dove when she says it.

The second rainbow builds over the first.

"Oh!" says Val, swaying, breathless. She kisses Vigo between the ears. She looks around, as if searching for printed signs. She finds me, sitting here. I must look knowing.

"Where do we go from here?"

I tilt my head toward the great big shining obvious.

A bubbling laugh escapes from Val. "Really?"

I nod.

"Oh!"

A bunch of dogs come running out to give Val and Vigo a send-off. We gather around the path that Val walks toward the shining mist. Val carries Vigo in her arms, and we all chant. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Val gushes laughter. Sunlight glints off her tears.

I can only see glimpses of the leading edge of the bridge. Beyond that, the light is too intense to bear.

Val and Vigo disappear into the light.

We dogs keep singing for a while longer, "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!" just because we feel like it. It's kind of like the epic na nas in the people song *Hey Jude*. We just keep going until the ecstatic brilliance settles back to simple happiness.

\*\*\*

Goofball lumps here to my gate. He's wearing a big grin.

Goofball is a cross between a Great Dane and a shag carpet, and he is perpetually clueless. "We're going on a raid to the cat's house," he

announces. "We're going to lick their fur, eat their snacks, and steal their toys. Wanna come?"

"Uh. No," I say. "Sounds pointy. You go have fun."

Somewhat later, here's Goofball coming back. "She bit me!"

His face is all bewildered and wounded.

Goofball is a sweet mutt, but oh so dumb.

"What'd you expect?"

\*\*\*

We're on the meadow. We. That's me, Tiny, Shelby, Miss Anastasia, Gallagher the Irish wolfhound, Roscoe the greyhound, Daisy the Saint Dane, Buster the beagle, Gomer the—I really don't know what Gomer is—and Robbie. We're playing.

This is Robbie's game. He balances a cookie on each of our noses and we need to race to a finish line without dropping the cookie. If we win, we get to eat the cookie. If we lose, we eat the cookie anyway.

Buster doesn't even start. He eats the cookie.

Roscoe and Gomer spring at Robbie's shout, "Go!" And their cookies fall into the meadow grass. They snap up their cookies.

I get off a whole five steps with my cookie.

The sky shimmers.

I inhale and forget to exhale.

It's not for me, and still it thrills. My heart is suddenly full.

Miss Anastasia noses over. She mashes face first into the grass. I quickly turn my head to look. My cookie slides right off my face. I think Miss Anastasia is going to be sick. But no one is ever sick here. Miss Anastasia gets up and staggers. Those big brown eyes, always round, are now huge. It hits dogs like that sometimes. Miss Anastasia gets up, panting, all aflutter. "Do I look all right? Is she there?"

Miss Anastasia's eyes shine in fevered radiance.

"She's there," I assure her.

And Miss Anastasia's dainty reserve dissolves into a babbling pile of hair. This must be like a person speaking in tongues. She gabbles. "Is my coat brushed? Are there crumbs on my nose?"

The air sparkles. And *that* is a rainbow

A human figure rises through the gate and steps out from between my gateposts.

It's a woman. She wears a calf length split-skirt and flat-heeled leather boots. Her hair is brown, not gray, but it's beautifully coifed. (Just so!) She's young and fit and pretty and very strong. She has a tiny waist. I know who this is. This is Maud.

Maud takes off her sunhat and smiles.

Miss Anastasia instantly forgets about the state of her coat and any

crumbs on her nose. She finds her feet and she runs to greet Maud with a tearful yell, "Mama! Mama! Mama!"

Maud gasps. She takes bounding strides out onto the meadow to meet her darling. She crouches down in the grass, arms wide. Miss Anastasia runs to her.

Maud gathers her in. Maud sits back on her heels, rocking her, kissing her beautiful dog. "My sweet darling! My darling!" Miss Anastasia's long silky hair spills over the woman's arms. Miss Anastasia licks Maud's face. Whiney sounds come out of Miss Anastasia's mouth, like she's trying to talk human.

Maud coos, and she rocks Miss Anastasia in her arms. She lays her cheek against Miss Anastasia's silky head.

Maud glances all around. She beams at all of us, an expression of marvel on her face. A lot of dogs have turned out to see her.

"You're all so beautiful," she tells us. "You're beautiful."

She kisses Miss Anastasia over and over.

Maud stands up, lifting Miss Anastasia with her. The bridge is taking form. I only get glimpses of it in the white mist. Even unseen, it tugs at the heart.

Maud walks toward it. She has lost her sun hat. She doesn't care.

She catches sight of our boy, Robbie, standing with a pack of hounds.

Robbie usually runs around naked. Suddenly he needs clothes.

Now he's wearing a pair of shorts.

He's dazzled by Maud, even though he's too young to know why. She's just really, really pretty.

Maud sets Miss Anastasia down. Maud walks to our boy. Robbie stands petrified.

Maud takes Robbie's face in her hands and kisses him on the cheek.

Robbie turns an amazing color. I know I've never seen that shade of scarlet before.

Maud gathers up Miss Anastasia and walks towards the light.

We dogs follow along, frolicking around her riding boots, until she passes the point where we can't go.

Maud steps onto the bridge. She turns around to give the rest of us a warm, regal wave.

Maud and Miss Anastasia disappear into the brilliance.

Our heads go back. All the hounds are sweetly singing. We all bark and howl.

The bridge slowly vanishes, but the sense of wonder persists for a long time after.

As we go our separate ways I overhear others commenting on the look of the bridge—as much of it as any of us is given to see. Apparently the



details are different for each being it shows itself to.

The joy is always the same.

\*\*\*

The gate opens a crack. I can't get so much as my nose through it. I get one eye on it.

I peer down the long dark passageway to a grave.

I see a dog. It's more like a curled-up bunch of bones inside a ragged gray skin—lying on a woman's grave. The dog huddles against the headstone. He's trying to sink into the grave after his heart holder.

I can see he hasn't been eating.

He's wasting away.

I close my eye. Now I see into his past.

When this dog was maybe a year old, a sanitation worker found him in a dumpster.

I know puppies can be difficult. I had Mireille in tears many times when I was a puppy. But actually throwing one in a dumpster?

The sanitation worker pulled the little guy out of the trash and called a rescue organization.

The dog needed everything—shots, deworming, feeding. He's a pit bull. It took awhile to find a place for him, but at last he was adopted.

He was in his forever home.

Then his mom left him.

That's what he thinks. How can he know better? He doesn't know that his mom died. All he knows is that she didn't come back to him. He was alone for days. When people came to the house, he ran away.

Now he lies on the grave, nose to the headstone. I have no clue how he found his way to it. I'm not sure he knows what the grave is, but something holds him there. He doesn't dig. He cries, weakly, "What did I do? I'll be good. Please come back. Why did you leave me?"

I don't know if he can hear me, but I speak into the ground. "Last thing she wanted to do, brother. She didn't leave you. She *died*. Come up here."

His ears twitch as if he hears me, but he's too depressed to move.

He slumps over onto his side. He can't hold his head up. "She doesn't want me. She left me."

That stabs me where it hurts. That's like saying I left Mireille! I didn't leave Mireille by choice!

I'm trying to coax this dog up here now.

There's a glow over our meadow. That means someone's heart holder is coming.

But I don't see anyone climbing up the passageway. The passage is no wider than a drinking straw, and it's not getting any wider. I'm still looking down at this grieving rescue dog lying, forlorn, on his mom's grave. No one is coming up for him. The pit bull is too weak to move.

But there is a definite shimmer in the sky. Someone is going home.

I yell across the meadow, "Who is up?"

No dog here answers the call.

I don't understand what's happening.

The sky is turning brilliant. I catch glimpses of the bridge in the glowing mist. But I don't see the dog and the heart holder who are meant to cross over it together.

I mean, people don't leave heaven to get their dogs.

I no sooner think that, than a figure appears on the bridge—moving the wrong way. She's coming *here*. I have never seen this happen. I didn't know it could happen.

The woman steps down from the bridge and walks among us. Not exactly a walk either. She's trotting.

She picks up her pace, running across our meadow toward the gate. She's a big gal, middle years, kind of flat footed.

We all lower our heads. This is not an angel. This is a heart holder. The woman's eyes are flooding tears. She's shaking like one of us does when our turn comes up, but she's so much more urgent than happy.

She arrives at my gate, which opens! And she runs down the passageway!

She's down in the world!

Well! I turn and follow her down. Here I go. I'm going to find Mireille!

The woman falls on her knees at the bottom of the dark passageway.

I can't get around her.

The woman kneels on her own grave. She picks up the barely living husk of a dog lying at her headstone, and she cradles him in her arms.

Strengthless, he flops. She can hardly collect him.

The dog's eyes open as cracks, looking up in sorrow. He's dying.

The tremor starts. He whimpers. "Mom? Mommy? Mommy!"

He tries to lick her. His tongue is dry.

He slips out of his mortal shell. That part stays behind on the grave.

His deathless self rises, safe in his heart holder's arms. His fur is becoming shiny. His body is fleshing out. His sinew becomes strong. His whole and healthy spirit head lifts. He licks the woman's face. "Mommy! Mommy!"

I guess she's down there because you can't cry like that in heaven. The woman is howling out the sorrow, in between frantic bouts of kissing her dog.

The dog cries. "Don't leave me, Mommy. Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

"Not ever."

She gets to her feet with him in her arms. He's not light, but she's got him.

She turns to climb up the passage.

I'm in the way.

I can't get around her. And you need to know I'm trying! I need to get to Mireille.

But I'm forced to back up. I don't even have space to turn around. So I'm scooting backwards up the passage.

My rear end finds daylight as I back up through the gate. I'm on the meadow again.

I hear Sir Walter's gruff voice. "Zack's butt has seen fit to join us again."

Everyone has clustered in awe. Not at the arrival of my butt.

We all gaze at the woman who left heaven to go back to the world to get her dog.

She's really here. She walks among us with her restored dog.

We all throw our heads back, singing.

She shuffles across the meadow. This isn't a small dog. And with his weight coming back on – he's getting healthier with my every blink – he's not a light load. But she's not putting him down. This dog thought he'd been abandoned, because he'd already been abandoned once.

The dog rests in her arms. I see his fuzzy face resting on her rounded shoulder. He looks storm tossed. Shadows of past horrors fade. His face wears an expression of exhaustion, relief, serenity, and undying love.

The bridge is still holding there, too bright to look at. It's waiting for the woman.

With her beloved companion in her arms, she walks into the light.

We all tell each other what we just saw. This tale will be repeated long after all of us here at the Rainbow Bridge have gone home with our heart holders. She's an instant legend here. The heart holder who went back to the world to get her dog.

I still think I should be allowed to go down there. Mireille must not be left alone.

Now that I know it can be done, I will find a way.

\*\*\*

There are horses over in the far pastures waiting for their heart holders. Some of the horses have dog brothers here at the meadows. Those dogs and horses are waiting for the same person. Sometimes the dogs visit the horse pasture. And sometimes a pony will show up here on our meadows to see his dog brother.

I know what they're really doing. They're checking each other's gate to the world.

When a dog and a horse share the same heart holder, they can't guess which gate their heart holder will come through to the Rainbow Bridge. There's a gate way over there in the horse pasture and there's my gate, the

dog gate, here on the meadows. Neither the dog nor the horse wants to miss the arrival of their loved one, but the Bridge might appear in either place.

And never mind the cats and ferrets. I don't know where those gates are. Mireille never had a cat.

Gallagher the Irish wolfhound invites me to come with him to the horse pasture to visit his horse brother. I know he's really checking up on the horse gate.

I should really call it the hoofed gate, because there are also ponies, a couple of sweet little burros, some gentle floppy-eared Nubian goats, and a couple of pot bellied pigs who are waiting here for human loved ones to take them on home.

Here, I discover that Gallagher's mom likes things big.

As we set foot on the pasture, Gallagher the Irish wolfhound barks. And up in the high pasture, this ginormous thing nods down. This is Gallagher's horse brother, Clifford.

Clifford is a building.

Clifford is the biggest living thing in the pasture. Among all these pretty little hunter jumpers and Chincoteague ponies and Shetlands and cute goats, there is this hulking beer truck of a beast. That's Clifford the Clydesdale.

Clifford is visible from outer space.

Gallagher the Irish wolfhound and Clifford the Clydesdale aren't sure if their mistress will come through the hoofed gate here on the horse pasture or through my dog gate back in the meadows.

Well, guess which gate Gallagher's heart holder suddenly decides to come through now? I mean, like, right now.

I'm standing at the horse gate as this petite horsewoman jogs up from the world, her muscles firming up, her brittle white hair turning a thick autumn blond.

Yeah, this is how I almost get trampled by a Clydesdale. The ground shakes underneath me. Yes, I know I'm already in the after life, but you watch this big double wide thing with hooves big as tractor tires come charging at you and see if your spiritual heart don't just jump straight out of your spiritual skin. I mean, come on. If I was still alive, I'd die right here. Clifford wants his mommy.

I think I scream.

Gallagher the Irish wolfhound is bounding around, wagging himself. Now comes the beloved Clydesdale, steaming in like the ten fifteen out of Chicago.

Did you know I can climb trees? I just found out that I can.

From my tree branch, I watch the massive beast haul himself into an almighty whoa.

Clifford kneels down so his mistress and Gallagher can climb aboard.

Clifford rises to his full height. Up, up, up go the woman and the wolfhound.

Gallagher is now perched way up there on that expansive haunch. He's beaming. He's just king of the universe.

He hooks his forepaws over his mistress's shoulders, so she's kind of wearing him like a big shaggy gray cape.

All across the pasture, horses are rearing and bowing. The goats bleat. So do I.

The rainbows are the same as over the dog meadows. The light is the same. The joy is the same.

Gallagher, Clifford, and their adored mistress cross over, barking, bugling, and laughing.

The sky-high exhilaration settles softly down in the gathering dusk. The sunset sure is pretty.

And I'm stuck up this tree.

Yes, I do get down from the tree. I need to remind myself that I can't get hurt. It's just that I really hate falling from a height.

The path back to the dog meadows takes me under Whip's Ledge. The beautiful, exotic Sequoia looks down from her high outpost. I've never seen her laugh or smile. She almost looks like she's smirking now.

Ooooh, she saw my brave performance at the horse gate.

I skulk on back to my gate.



# Chapter Eight

A NEWCOMER BARGES through my gate. She's a Rottweiler. Her name is Smeegle and she won't shut up. She turns around and faces the space between my stacks of sticks where the gate ought to be, and she barks at the ground like a drill sergeant. She is tireless.

Tiny the bullmastiff marches to my gate and barks at me. "Zack! Why don't you tell her to give it a rest!"

Me? I'm not doing anything. "Because if she gets that gate to open up, I'm going back down with her."

Then Smeegle does it. Sort of. Before I know it, she's through the passageway and making a dash across the real world.

I see a little girl dropping wild violets onto a flat stone in her backyard. The violets are already wilting. The stone is engraved. Well, more like it's shallowly scratched with the crude letters: SMEEGLE.

A puff of wind lifts the hair off the back of the girl's neck as the shade of Smeegle dashes behind her.

Smeegle flies back up through the passageway. She bursts through the gate, tumbling, black over tan.

The gate shuts solid before my stupid face.

"How did you do that!" I cry.

Smeegle looks a little stunned. "No idea."

She gets up, shakes herself off, and looks for something else to bark at.

A big heavy orange PVC traffic cone appears. I guess it's what she wanted. She happily demolishes it, then barks at all the shredded pieces.

A toy dog climbs up through the gate. He stomps past me—as much as a dog that size can stomp. He's a cross between a shih tzu and a sneeze. His jaw is thrust forward so I can see his lower teeth. It makes him look pugnacious and thoughtful. His long hair hangs down his face.

"What happened? I can't see anything. Hello? Anyone? I can hear your breathing. Do you have a ribbon or something?"

"I don't—"

Before I can finish speaking, there's a ribbon at the shih tzu's feet. I throw back my head and bay, "Robbie! Get your opposable thumbs over

here!"

Robbie does his best with the ribbon. Bows aren't really his thing. The new dog's topknot isn't exactly centered, and the bow isn't the prettiest bow you ever saw, but the new dog can see us now. He looks every which way and up and down. He turns full circle.

"Where's Paul?"

I'm getting better at explaining the facts of death to new arrivals. The shih tzu might be pouting as he listens to my intro, but with that face, who can tell?

Robbie offers to carry him on a grand tour of the meadows, but the shih tzu is happy enough to set up camp in a bunch of berry bushes close to the gate.

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I am dozing in the sunshine. My head is resting on the gate.

I hear children down in the world. They're calling. "Indie! Indiana!" Their voices have the sound of searching. That I can hear the children calling means that Indie is on his way up here. The voices are steadily more upset.

It's snowing down there in the world where they are.

A little girl screams in panicked searching. "Indie!" That's the sound of a young heart breaking. "Indie! Indiaaaa-na!"

Indie is up here.

He had stumbled into the frozen woods and fell into a snowdrift.

Here, Indie shakes himself off. He looks like a cross between a small brown terrier and a mohair sweater. He glances around, cheerful. "I feel much better. Where are the kids?"

Indie doesn't know what has happened to him. "Where's Kayla? Kayla's looking for me."

"Um, Indie, that's going to have to wait a bit."

*Like a real a long time, Indie.*

The little girl I saw is a child. One hopes not to see her up here any time soon.

Indie shakes his head vigorously. "No, I need to get back to Kayla. She'll be worried."

I feel for him.

Indie makes a face and belches. He looks to me. "Say, did I eat something funny?"

*You sure did, Indie. "Antifreeze."*

"What's that?"

"It was that sweet stuff dripping from under the car. It was on the ice you licked in the driveway."

Antifreeze is bright yellowy green. I know that, now that I can see



vibrant colors.

"That was tasty," Indie says. "Well, it was at first. Then it was just nasty."

"It's poison."

"You know? It did leave an aftertaste. Yuck."

"It's ethylene glycol."

"But I threw it all up," Indie says. "And *then* some. I feel a whole lot better now. See? I can walk a straight line. For a while, I was seeing two of everything. Say, is there any more?"

"It was poison."

"I'm good! I'm good! Mom goes crazy when I eat things I'm not supposed to. And Kayla cries. There was that time with the philodendron. Hah! I couldn't talk! Kayla was sooo upset. I gotta stop doing this to her."

"Uh. Well. You did that, Indie."

"Did what? What'd I do?"

"You've stopped."

Indie clues in. He drops the happy schmuck routine. "I, uh, have a stupid question."

"Go ahead."

"It's a real stupid question."

"Then I'll laugh at you."

"Right."

Put that way it doesn't seem such a horrible thing to be laughed at by me.

Indie asks, "Am I dead?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Indie pauses. He sobers up. "Kayla's going to be sad."

"I know."

"I want to play with Kayla," Indie says. It comes out a cry.

That hurts.

I'm not going to tell Indie that he has a longer wait for his person than I do. Kayla is just a child. With luck, it will be many, many years before he sees Kayla again. My Mireille is a grown woman. Mireille will come here first.

Indie has a horrible thought. Nervously, he bites at his own forepaws. "What if Kayla forgets me!"

"Kayla will remember you, Indie."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. I know that absolutely."

Indie frets. "How can you know that?"

"Because you're here. If you weren't fiercely loved by someone, you would've gone straight to heaven instead of coming here first. This is heaven's waiting room."

There's a sudden shimmer in the air.

I shiver. My wits scatter. Indie is looking shaken. I choke out some words. "Here. Look up, Indie. This isn't yours, but this is how it'll happen when your turn comes. Ooooh." I stagger, dizzy. I manage to say, "Move away from the gate."

"What gate?" Indie looks around, shaking. His hindquarters are sinking in the grass. Indie scrambles out from between my stacked gateposts.

The grass gives way to the passage from the world.

I throw my head back and howl. I can't help it.

Indie joins in. He probably doesn't know why yet.

An old man is coming up from the world. He's pulling out needles from the back of his hand and throwing aside tubes and yanking off his oxygen mask. His huge arms flail like a great ape.

Now he's lumbering up the steps in the passageway. He grows younger and bigger with every step. A shining reflects in his eyes, which turn from milky white to clear blue.

I've been here a lot longer than I thought. I recognize this man. This is little Moose's man, Joe Don, coming up, roaring for his tiny terrier friend. "Moose!"

Joe Don is a big, hulking lump of a man with no neck. His bald head is shaped like a bullet. His prune face lights up with joy.

Moose comes flying from the meadow.

Joe Don claps his hammy hands. "Moose! Look at you! Where's your wheels, dog?"

Little Moose merrily kicks and dances and jumps. "I don't need no stinking wheels! Look at me!" Moose does a back flip.

Joe Don's thick-lipped mouth hangs open. His face looks like an astonished happy prune.

Moose leaps into Joe Don's massive arms.

Joe Don laughs like a kid. A huge kid.

The sky grows brighter.

Our newest dog, Indie, goggles at the brightness. This is his first time seeing it.

Indie shrinks a little, awed.

So does the big man, Joe Don. "What's that! Is that —?"

Everyone knows what it is. Heart holders who come here don't need to ask. But they always do ask.

"No, no, no." Joe Don waves it off with a big meaty hand. Joe Don doesn't want to go. "I'm not that good."

Every third person who comes through my gate says that.

"We hear that a lot," I assure Joe Don.

Joe Don stares at me like I'm a talking dog.

I tilt my head toward the light. "Go on."

But no. Joe Don has his buddy, Moose. That's enough for him.

The brilliance, the rainbows, scare him. He doesn't want to go anywhere.

I look up to the little terrier cradled in Joe Don's thick arms. "Moose? Get this guy outta here."

Moose flashes a huge smile. "Sure thing, Zack!"

Hulking Joe Don and little Moose cross the meadow. Joe Don walks like Godzilla. He and Moose arrive at the bridge. Joe Don's mouth drops open. I catch the flash of his astonished smile just before the two disappear into the radiance.

Indiana, Indie, our latest visitor on the meadows, gawks after Moose and Joe Don. Indie is shaking.

Indie lowers his nose and scratches at the ground where the gate was just moments before, the place where Joe Don came through to be reunited with his dog.

The gate is just grass now.

Indie sniffs the ground. "Is Kayla down there?"

"Yes."

"Is she crying?"

Undoubtedly. But I don't say it. I'm not going to beat Indie up for gluttony.

We're dogs.

I gotta confess the green stuff does smell sweet. Mireille caught me sniffing a puddle of antifreeze in a parking lot one winter. She shrieked at me. "LEAVE IT!"

I think all four of my paws left the asphalt. Then I cowered like she was going to bite me. I hunkered down, sniveling. Okay! Okay! Don't hurt me! She would never hurt me.

I didn't understand at the time.

There's a lot I understand now that I didn't while I was in the world.

I listen to Indiana tell stories about Kayla.

Kayla used to dress Indie up in doll clothes. He hated it.

"Give anything to be dressed up again?" I ask.

Indie gives a heavy nod. "You know everything, Zack."

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We're all different here.

We have dogs that ballroom dance. We have bomb sniffing dogs. We have heroes. We have cowards. We have dogs who just hold the floor down. Only thing all of us have in common is that we each formed an undying bond of love with a special person.

And now comes Sophie. She's a small black poodle with natural

ringlets all over her coat.

Sophie's elderly mistress was taken away in an ambulance. Someone has been giving Sophie food and water since then, but Sophie stopped eating days ago. Now Sophie steps through my gate. I try to rush past her into the passageway to get home. We bump.

In that heartbeat before the gate heaves me out, I catch a glimpse of Sophie's mistress – where she is at this very moment.

Sophie, herself, is gazing in wonder at the butterfly meadow and all the dogs playing on it.

I tell Sophie that she ought to just take a seat here with me.

Sophie sits, uncertainly.

Randy struts over to us. Randy volunteers to show Sophie around, probably because Sophie is really cute.

"I think you might want to stay with me, Sophie," I say.

Randy snorts. "Zack is the most boring dog on the meadow. Come on, beautiful. I'll show you what's what."

Sophie stands up. She tells me, "I think you're very nice, Zack. But I would like to look around."

I shrug. Sophie trots away with Randy.

I can't tell her she'll be sorry. She won't be. She'll just be a whole lot farther from the gate than she'll want to be, real soon.

And, don't you know it? Sophie and Randy are way over there on the phantom road when the sky shimmers. I hear the long beeeee of a flatline monitor sounding from down there in the world. I hear an electrical charge winding up.

I hear the human warning bark. "Clear!"

The sky over the Rainbow Bridge gets bright.

Sophie is charging back my way, wild-eyed. I can hear her panting. "Shoulda listened. Shoulda listened."

Sophie is here. She's in her mistress's arms. And that's the end of all the shoulda woulda mighta oughtas.

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Here we go again. The sky goes glassy and glittering. My tail wags. I know it's not my turn. I don't feel the call. But it's always so exciting when someone goes home. All of us look at each other to see who is the lucky one this day.

It's Turnip!

The dog who got left at the vet to be put to sleep, young and alone, after he bit his mama on the breast.

Trembling with excitement, Turnip steps onto the meadow. His ears go up. His loved one is coming to get him. Turnip is galloping and panting and yelling. "Mama! Mama! Mama!"

As the gate opens in the grass, I get a look down the passageway.  
Mama is not who I see coming.

I jump back.

Turnip nears the gate. I turn around. He sees my face.

I must look like I just swallowed a cat.

Turnip makes a terrified, clawing stop. He turns around and runs the other way with his tail tucked between his legs.

I dash after him.

I'm very fast. I catch up with him.

"Turnip! What are you doing!"

"It's him!" Turnip says, panicked, running.

The person now standing in the gate is Turnip's daddy. The man who had Turnip put to sleep.

I try to envision Turnip's past, but the scene is unbearable. I get near it and my mind snaps shut.

No one is chasing us. Turnip finally stops running. He crouches down under a tree and cries, "I want my mama!"

Back at the gate, the man has fallen to his knees. His arms are stretched out, pleading. "You beautiful, beautiful dog."

I bark, "Turnip. Look. Look. Look."

Turnip peers back. He cowers. He's trying to become one with the fallen leaves.

I shiver. I'm mystified. I cough.

I know.

My voice comes out strangled. "Turnip. He's the reason you're here."

Turnip gibbers. "I know that! He killed me!"

"No, I mean he's the one you're waiting for. He loves you. He's your heart holder."

"Aren't you listening, Zack? He killed me!"

"You bit his wife! You bit your mama!"

"That? I had to! There was a big ugly in her. I was trying to get the ugly out."

"It sure looks like your daddy knows that now. You have to forgive him."

"Forgive him?" says Turnip. He stares at me like I have just said the most ridiculous thing ever uttered by a dog.

And that really is a bone-headed thing for me to say. As if we ever judge our people! To forgive daddy would mean daddy did wrong. Daddy is daddy. Daddy can do no wrong. Daddy doesn't need forgiving.

And Turnip isn't trying to hide because he's holding a grudge against his daddy.

He ran because he's just plain scared to pieces.

"Daddy hates me," Turnip howls. "I'm dirt!"

"Hey. Stop. Does that look like hate?"

Turnip peers back.

Turnip's daddy is on his knees. We can hear him even at this distance. The kneeling man croaks to his frightened dog. "You saved your mother's life. I had fifteen years with her I wouldn't have had without you. I can never never never make this up to you."

Oh yeah, you can.

"Are you hearing this, Turnip?" I give Turnip a head butt.

The man keeps talking. "It was cancer. The thing you smelled. They got it. They got all of it."

Turnip cringes. He's trying to disappear into the meadow grass.

I bark at him. "Turnip, you have been waiting for him all this time. Your father loves you more than anything except your mama. He thought you'd turned on your mama. He thought you were dangerous. You were the only one who knew why you bit your mama."

Turnip sniffs. He whimpers. "How is mama?"

*Your mama's just been widowed. I don't think she's doing so good right now, you dillweed!*

I don't say anything.

Turnip's daddy gets up and walks toward us. Turnip cowers, hugging the ground. His brow is pinched into deep furrows. His ears are pasted back.

Turnip's daddy crouches down and strokes Turnip's head. "Your mama's real sad."

"Did you take her to Australia?" Turnip mumbles into the ground.

Daddy sits in the grass. He doesn't seem the least bit surprised to be understanding what his dog is saying to him. It's like in dreams. You just accept the unbelievable.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. We wouldn't have had that without you. She can tell you about all the animals when she comes."

The rainbows have been building all this while. They are glowing vivid now. Everyone on the meadow is barking.

The shining white mist that holds the bridge has become unbearably bright for everyone except the man and dog meant to see it. The man glances up. He breathes an oath. He whispers to me, "What's that?"

"Sir? It's what it looks like."

He gives a crying laugh. How wrong can someone be about so many things?

He gives Turnip's ears a ruffle and he nods up at the miraculous bridge. "Let's go. I'm guessing we can keep a better eye on your mama from up there."

Turnip gets to his feet. He gives himself a shake. He leans his head against his daddy's leg.

The man gathers Turnip in his arms and lifts him up. Turnip is an ungainly bundle. He lays his head on his daddy's shoulder.

I tag along for a few steps. Then I scamper ahead of the man. I turn around to face him. I'm walking backwards as he advances.

I gotta know. "Who named him Turnip?"

Turnip's daddy looks embarrassed. "You've got to understand, this was a truly homely puppy."

The man's eyes lift. He looks past me. He gazes into the light. He can see farther into it than I can. He's beholding something that I can't see, something profound and wonderful. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open. He's too stunned to smile.

I move aside. This is their moment.

The man kisses his dog on the ear, and he walks into the glory.

It turns out there's a whole pack of dogs like Turnip here at the Rainbow Bridge. They're all different breeds. They've bitten, scratched, whined, or worried at their heart holder's bodies. This strikes me as a very weird thing to brag about. But then the only time in my life I've ever heard the word "cancer" was when the vet was talking about me.

These dogs are talking about cancer in their people.

In the heroes' pack there's Shadow, Bentley, Bear, and Molly.

Shadow started nosing his mom's crotch. She thought he was hot for her, but he wasn't humping her leg. He was just sniffing and whining at her crotch. She told a human friend she was going to take the dog to a vet.

The friend looked at her like she'd grown an extra head. "The dog? You're taking the dog in? Honey, if I were you, I'd get your ass to a doctor, yesterday."

Turns out Shadow's mom had ovarian cancer. Early stage.

Shadow has a long wait ahead of him before he sees his mom again. Shadow is happy for the wait. He wants his mom to live.

Bentley the Saint Bernard whined and nosed at his mom's breast. He didn't bite her like Turnip did his mom, but he kept at it until mom got herself checked out. It was breast cancer—so early that her last mammogram missed it. Bentley didn't.

Bear whined at the smell of his mom's breath. The cancer was in her lung.

Molly the spaniel kept nosing her dad where a man doesn't want a dog's nose to be. People are funny that way. But Molly's nosing wasn't the usual "hi, how are ya" kind of sniffing. Molly was all business, pushing and growling. Molly's dad got angry—close to kicking Molly kind of

angry. Dad wanted this deviant dog out of the house. Molly's mom told him she would find a new home for Molly only if Dad first went to the doctor to have his male equipment looked at.

Dad refused.

Molly's mom packed up and went to her sister's house and stayed there – with Molly.

Molly's dad called Mom to tell her she was being ridiculous. He told her to please come home.

Molly and her mom stayed with the sister. Mom cried the whole time.

Then Dad called to tell her that the doctor found early stage prostate cancer. He was going in for surgery.

Mom and Molly came home.

Molly's dad spoiled Molly rotten for the rest of her days.

\*\*\*

Hunter and Tracker are the same breed – they're setters – and they're the same age. But Hunter is built low and dense, with thicker, shorter legs, while Tracker looks like a tall spindly pony. Tracker has long, long legs that extend from here to Ashtabula.

Because Tracker was neutered young, he has those long skinny leg bones.

Hunter was older when he got the snip. Apparently it's your nuts that tell your body how to grow solid bones.

Me, I didn't get the snip until I was a year and half old.

I was in the pet supply store with Mireille. She'd brought me in to get weighed. Someone noticed me and said, very alarmed, "Is that dog *intact*?" Like it was a crime.

Mireille told the guy she was waiting for my bones to finish growing before she did anything.

"Lady, there's nothing wrong with that dog's bones!" the guy said.

Mireille walked me to the scale to weigh me.

I hiked a leg and marked the scale.

Mireille collected some paper towels to wipe up my work.

The store welcomes dogs, and they kind of expect this sort of thing, so the spray bottle and the towels were right there for her to use. Well, while Mireille cleaned up the scale, I marked a display of dog toys.

Mireille turned around and set herself to cleaning that up.

And – you know I had to – I marked another display.

An employee took the spray bottle, and he told Mireille, "Just go."

Mireille took me outside at a run. And there were a lot more other things I wanted to mark back there, too.

Mireille put up with my masculine ways for a few months longer. Finally I got the snip.

I didn't mark anymore.



By the time I left the world, not a whole lot was working in my body, but I had really good bones.

\*\*\*

A street dog comes through my gate. He's intact. (Yep, he's got good bones.) He's dreadfully thin under that thick, double coat of fur. He's got some shepherd in him. He holds his head down. He looks around, fearful. He sees me but he doesn't care. There's no opening for introductions. This dog is not interested in getting to know me. He dashes away in search.

He catches a scent, and he runs for it. He retrieves from the meadow –  
A whole roast chicken.

I guess that's what he most wanted to find, because that's what he found.

First, I'm thinking that a roast chicken may have been what killed him. Cooking makes chicken bones brittle and sharp, and they can be dangerous inside a dog. But this dog doesn't wolf down his roast chicken. He races back to my gate with it.

He finds the gate closed up and vanished.

The street dog looks stunned. He lets his prize chicken drop from his mouth. He looks bewildered. He's shaking in fear and horrible disappointment.

I realize he meant to give the food to someone else. He failed. He's all kinds of upset.

And now he's panicking. He tears down one of my gateposts. Sticks and branches go tumbling everywhere.

He finds nothing but grass and dirt underneath.

He doesn't want to, but he's forced to, talk to me. He growls, "Where'd it go?"

I'm pretty sure he means the passage back to the world.

"You can't go back, brother. I've tried. The one you're waiting for will come for you eventually."

The street dog's eyes get crazy. "No. No. You don't get it. I gotta get there now. Now. He's hungry."

I clear some of the sticks out of my way so I can plant two paws on the gate. Immediately, images come to me.

I see back where this dog has come from. It's a big city. Tall buildings crowd the busy street. People crowd the sidewalks. Trees grow out of holes in the cement. There's no grass.

I see a homeless man and this street dog. That means I'm seeing the past.

The man and the dog met over a garbage can near the homeless man's hot air vent, where he sleeps in winter. The man pulled out a crumpled, fast food bag from a trash bin. The dog sat down and drooled. The man shared the remaining French fries and scraps of bun with the dog.

After that, the man and the dog rummaged in trash together. They shared everything. The dog sat with the man at his beggar's post. When they were cold or afraid, the shaggy dog sat on the man's lap on the pavement.

The man is still down there.

The man never went to a shelter. There were too many rules. And they wouldn't take his dog.

The man is a wreck. He has a dent in his head. And he's not a nice guy at all. He's nasty—except to his dog. He can't hold a job. He drinks when he can get a hold of alcohol. He's dirty. He smells. The dog doesn't give a rip about any of that. The dog is devoted to his friend.

The man needs to eat. Now.

The street dog stands over his roast chicken and snarls at me, his muzzle wrinkled back, showing teeth, crazed. "I gotta get there! I gotta get down there!"

I know that feeling.

And, what the hay? We dig. We send clods of dirt flying.

Soon, we have a good beginning of a hole.

We pause for only a moment, and the depression in the dirt heals over.

The street dog wails.

I rip back into the grass, and we start again, digging faster.

I get this street dog's name out of him. His name is Hey You Dog.

We dig like sons of bitches.

The ground heals.

Hey You Dog is beyond distraught. He's screaming and scratching, desperate to feed his friend.

He collapses. He rolls over on his back, panting. He turns his head and stares forlornly at his chicken. He gets up and tries to shove the chicken into the ground.

I know just how he feels. I'm feeling a little desperate myself. I gotta help this guy and I don't know how. I look around wildly. I don't see Shelby anywhere.

I howl: "Is there a therapy dog on the field! I've got a clinger here!"

I want to help Hey You Dog. There's too much pain here. I start again, digging like a badger on fire.

Hey You Dog is right there with me.

Hey You Dog sways. He looks dizzy.

I give Hey You Dog a nudge, and I back out of our newest hole. "We can stop digging."

I can tell by Hey You Dog's look of stunned wonder that his man has just died.

He will be here any moment.

The man died alone. Not from cold. Not from hunger. I think he died of a broken heart.

Now, the homeless man is coming up the passageway, getting stronger as he rises. He breaks into a run, a twisted expression on his face, something like a smile but he doesn't know how to smile, so he just looks kind of frightening. His face looks as if someone taped his bushy eyebrows up on his forehead so he wears a look of permanent surprise.

The instant that he steps through the gate, Hey You Dog jumps into the man's arms. The man holds his dog, bursts into tears, and sobs into Hey You Dog's shaggy ruff. The man makes loud wracking sounds like a donkey braying.

You wouldn't think he could lift Hey You Dog, but Hey You Dog weighs nothing.

As the bridge materializes, the vent man recoils, hugging Hey You Dog.

Hey You Dog shivers, holding his ears flat back.

The man doesn't put Hey You Dog down. He holds on. He takes creeping, halting steps toward the bridge as if expecting someone on the other side to throw rocks and order them to go away.

I don't know, but I'm getting the idea that any heart that houses love crosses that bridge.

Hey You Dog's tail gives a cautious wag. The man lurches forward step by step.

And whatever is on the far side of the warm, shining bridge takes the two damaged strays in.



# Chapter Nine

PEPPER IS A BOSTON TERRIER.

Back in the world, Pepper had his routine. Up at six o'clock. Out the dog door. Did what he needed to do. Then he fetched the paper. I'm not sure Pepper's mom ever read the paper. From Pepper's viewpoint, newspaper was for wrapping up garbage.

Pepper never strayed from home.

He questioned anyone who entered his yard.

When Pepper's mom had to go out without him, she would give Pepper a treat. Actually she set the treat down for him. He wouldn't take it.

When she came home, the treat was always still there, right where she left it. Only when mom's coat was off and the keys were safely on the table did that treat ever get eaten.

Pepper slept on the bed with mom. He had his own pillow. He snored a little, until tonight.

Pepper has stopped snoring.

He's quite old.

He jumps up, feeling better than he has in a long time. He tries to snuffle in his mom's ear.

But Pepper can't smell her anymore.

Pepper is here at my gate, confused. Dogs are always particularly confused when they die in their sleep.

Pepper sniffs the grass. He trots away, still sniffing. He circles back to me and asks, "Where are the bushes?"

Just so you know, we dogs do pee and crap in the afterlife. I'm not sure people do. Well, our boy Robbie writes his name in the snow at the winter lake, but that's about it.

People just don't appreciate the joy of taking a squat and the importance of sniffing poop and the checking the trees and fire hydrants for pee-mail.

Apparently this new dog, Pepper, needs to have his bushes.

I tell Pepper he can use any bush that smells right to him. He trots away quickly.

He comes back to me, all happy, and announces that he's ready to go home now.

"You can't go home, Pepper. Your mama knows where to find you. If you look around, you'll find most things you're looking for. Except your mama."

Pepper isn't looking at me as I'm talking to him.

Pepper is staring at my feet. "Is that yours?"

I look down. There's a dog treat between my paws. It's the kind that Pepper's mama used to give him.

"I think this is yours." I push the treat toward him.

Pepper picks it up and trots away with it.

I know full well that Pepper is not going to eat that treat until his mama gets here.

\*\*\*

A Yorkie arrives through the gate. She's honking like a goose. There is an awful lot of honking going on in the world. That's because there's a great lot of Yorkies down there. They're popular little guys, and too many of them have fragile windpipes. The condition is common in the breed. Collapsing trachea, it's called.

When Yorkies come up here, I usually see them shrugging out of a tiny harness. They don't wear collars, because they can't safely wear anything around their delicate little necks.

Our latest Yorkie is named Duchess. Duchess stands up for herself. All six bad-ass pounds of her. She wears a red bow on her topknot like it's a tiara.

At sunset, her attitude slips. She's aware that she's small.

So, her first night here, Duchess sleeps on top of me.

At dawn, her little head goes up. She's disoriented. "Mama?"

"Sorry, kid."

Duchess's mama is not here.

Duchess whimpers. She confides to me that she needs a place to pee. She doesn't know where she is, so she can't find her usual spot.

I take her on a tour of the meadows. I show her all the best bushes. She likes several of them. She chooses one of Pepper's bushes as her favorite.

Pepper the Boston terrier comes charging in at a brisk trot, ready to defend his turf. On seeing the trespasser, he stops short.

Well.

Pepper is at her ladyship's command. Pepper's bushes are Duchess's bushes.

\*\*\*

I become aware of a beagle named Buster down in the world.

Once upon a time, Buster used to work airport security at LAX.

Travelers don't mind so much being searched when a comical, floppy-eared, fuzzy dog with soft brown eyes and a button nose sniffs their luggage for drugs and gun oil.

Buster got sacked from his job when he sniffed out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead of dope or firearms.

A Customs officer took Buster home and gave him to his young son, Wyatt.

Wyatt and Buster have been inseparable for the last ten years.

Now, it's that time.

Old Buster has run out of years.

I can hear Wyatt's teenaged voice cracking.

I get up from the gate to make way for Buster the beagle. He arrives as a round, old dog. He's been eating way too well. Before my eyes he transforms into the bright-eyed, peanut butter-sniffing narc of his youth. He walks a circle, confused. He meets my gaze. He barks, "Hi!"

"Zack," I introduce myself.

"Buster," says the beagle. "Is Wyatt here?"

"Not yet."

Buster sniffs the air.

"You know, Zack? I don't recognize a single smell here! This is weird."

"You're not in LA anymore, brother."

"Where on earth are we?"

"Uh, not there."

\*\*\*

I'm sleeping on the gate, dreaming. I see things down in the world when I sleep. Sometimes I see the past. Sometimes I see the present.

Never the future.

In this dream, a young priest opens up the church at sunrise. He regrets the need to lock a house of God. He opens all the doors. A whimpering from the sanctuary brings him forward. He walks up the aisle and finds a half grown dog at the altar. There's a wear mark around the dog's neck. This dog has worn a collar in the past. The dog is naked now.

Someone has dumped this dog in the church.

This is not the hand of God, the priest thinks. An irresponsible person left his burden on the church.

The priest is not here to save dogs. So he does what he thinks the owner should have done. He takes the dog to the pound.

On the sixth day the priest goes back to the pound to see if the dog has been claimed or adopted.

The dog is still there. An attendant tells him that the dog spends its days staring at the wall.

It's actually a very pretty dog. The priest expected someone to have claimed it by now.

The cage opens. The dog hesitates, confused. It walks out quietly. It approaches the priest, its head held low, eyes down. It touches its face to the priest's shin. It seems penitent. It really just wants a home.

How hard can it be to take care of a dog?

Okay, well, that idea goes south in a hand basket.

The priest takes the dog home to his tiny rectory behind the church.

He doesn't really have the money to care for a dog. But how bad could it be?

He takes the dog to the vet. The expense is shocking. The dog has worms. It has von Willebrand disease, which is like dog hemophilia. The dog's wounds don't heal fast.

The dog is not housebroken. And it won't relieve itself in the rain for anything. But it will pee by accident in the house, whether it means to or not. The dog is a bed wetter. It doesn't even know it's leaking. How do you housebreak an incontinent dog?

The dog can't eat meat scraps. The output is ugly and smelly.

The priest wants to take the dog back to the pound.

A dog soul is not in the same league as human souls. The priest has been told that it's not. But the fate of this living, feeling creature has been put upon him—but not by God. By an irresponsible person. He doesn't need to take this burden.

He's going to take the dog to a shelter tomorrow. That is decided.

Evening comes. The priest sits in his small quarters. He's watching a Catholic video made by his bishop.

The dog climbs up onto the sofa with him. The priest commands the dog to get down.

It doesn't. It snuggles up against his side. As the priest watches the video, the dog elbows in, close as a rib, until the priest is kind of wearing it.

The priest looks down.

Brown eyes look up.

The priest is done for.

He names the dog Fido. The Latin word means "faithful."

The priest gets accustomed to standing in the rain holding an umbrella so his delicate Doberman can relieve himself without getting wet.

The priest gets accustomed to keeping a sheet of plastic under the bed sheets, because Fido has wheedled his way into bed privileges.

The priest tries to trim Fido's nails, which have grown dagger long. He nicks the vein, and Fido runs yelping around the little dwelling, tracking blood on the pee-stained carpet.

The priest is supposed to be devoted to saving the souls of men. This creature is an overwhelming burden. And he can't drop it.

He barely stops himself from asking God to take this dog away from



him.

He's afraid God will do it.

Fido develops lymphoma. I recognize that one. Those lumps.

The priest considers having Fido put to sleep.

Church doctrine tells him that the dog doesn't have a human soul, so relieving its suffering wouldn't be murder.

But he can't do it. He's been taught that the dog doesn't have a rational soul. That means that this life is the only life Fido has. The priest has been taught that a dog ceases to exist at death. So he tries to keep Fido comfortable while he tries to appreciate this strange burdensome gift.

The priest thinks he'll be relieved when Fido is gone.

When the day comes, he's relieved that Fido is out of pain.

But he never expected to be in this much pain himself. He hates his neat, orderly, clean-smelling housing unit.

How is it possible to miss something so exasperating?

He'll never see that soft muzzle or those adoring brown eyes again. He can't even say the dog is in a better place. It was a dog. In the priest's belief, the dog is nowhere at all.

It doesn't exist anymore.

That's what he thinks.

Fido is right here. I know Fido. He's healthy and whole. Fido has been here a long time.

That I'm dreaming about Fido's man now can only mean that he's coming. Now.

And here's the shimmer in the sky.

I bark.

Fido the Doberman is already halfway across the meadow, running. He stumbles, buckles. He quivers on the ground for a moment. Then he springs up. He runs. There's a big, wild smile on his face.

Behind me, an old priest ascends the passageway from the world. He gets younger with each step.

I try to squeeze past the priest to get myself down to the world. You know I have to try. But I fail, of course, as always.

The priest steps onto the meadow, and the gate closes up and grasses over behind him.

I have never seen a face wear greater shock than this man wears now.

But why the surprise? Why not expect unconditional love?

The bridge, decked in its sparkling white clouds, can't be an unfamiliar image, but it still overwhelms. The priest falls to his knees.

He can hardly see through his tears.

A black and tan shape flies at him, baying, "Father! Father! Father!" Fido's soft brown eyes are wide. Fido the Doberman leaps on the priest.

Love manifests itself in strange ways. Fido's love is unconditional.  
And now there's nothing more to explain, nothing to understand.  
The man and his dog cross the bridge.  
They disappear in the light.

\*\*\*

Today the sky looks speckled somehow. I hear random plops here and there. I think it's raining.

A soft plop sounds not far from me. I trot over to see what it is.

It's a shoe.

It's a boy's sneaker to be exact. (That's a "trainer" for you British dogs. Learn to speak English. Honestly.)

Someone is yelling. "It's SHOEING!"

Another soft plop comes from behind me. It's a woman's high-heeled shoe.

Dogs are racing around, drawing maniacal paths through the meadow grass. They're howling.

"It's shoeing! It's shoeing!" They yell it like it's raining. And it sort of is. It's raining shoes.

So that's how they get here.

Buster the beagle comes barreling my way. He overshoots, tumbles around the turn, and dashes back to me. He pounces on the boy's sneaker. He stuffs his nose inside the sneaker, and rolls over and over. He rubs his face on the sneaker, ecstatic, babbling. He digs into the shoe as if he can pull his boy, Wyatt, out of there. He pushes his face into the shoe and struts away, wearing it on his nose.

Next, the Boston terrier Pepper dashes past me, clutching a woman's style orthopedic shoe in his teeth.

Smeegle found her shoe. I can't tell what it was. She shredded it.

Indie finds a little girl's shoe. That has to be Kayla's. Indie takes a big sniff. He tells me the smell is way better than antifreeze.

Hunter the setter tracks down a waxed canvas hunting boot that smells of his man.

Tracker the other setter snags a well-worn, full-grain leather, insulated hunting boot. It smells wonderfully of essence of master.

There are enough Lobbens dropping out of the sky for each and every one of Hank's huskies to have one.

But huskies don't really share that well. The lead dog, Garth, snatches up a horde of Lobbens. Other huskies grab more than one. The rest of the huskies are barking and snarling. Wheeler and Swinger are on the verge of an unholy furball right in front of my gate.

Tiny the bullmastiff, marches into their rioting midst.

Tiny doesn't bark. He very quietly demands that all the huskies shut up and drop the Lobbens into a pile, all of them, right here, right now.

Tiny talks softly and is a big dog.

Amazingly, the huskies obey. Even the lead dog, Garth, surrenders his stash.

Now, there's a big pile of boots. The boots are big. Hank apparently has enormous feet and he has owned a lot of huskies over the years.

Tiny turns his back on the boot pile. "When I count these boots, there had better be the same number of boots as there are Hank's huskies."

He waits. There's some muttering and growling in the pack.

A stray Lobben comes flying onto the pile. Tiny hears the plop behind him. He doesn't turn.

"Are we done?" he asks up at the sky.

There's some jostling and more growling.

Another boot flies onto the pile. It plops down.

Tiny turns around. He orders all the huskies to sit.

Incredibly, they do.

Tiny hands out—yeah, okay Tiny doesn't have hands. Tiny rations one Lobben to each husky by turn. They all go away happy, carrying the essence of Hank's feet.

Tiny picks up his own heart holder's shoe. It's a Timberland lace up, men's size ten. Tiny flops over on his back, eyes shut, blissful, with Thom's shoe on his face.

I marvel at the way he handled the rowdy mob of huskies.

"Tiny? Is your man, Thom, a cop?"

Tiny doesn't open his eyes. "No," he answers into Thom's shoe. "Flight attendant."

Tiny opens one eye. The eye narrows at me, disapproving.

I know what's vexing him.

I don't have a shoe.

"Go, Zack," Tiny commands. "Mireille's shoe is out there somewhere. Go get it."

"I can't."

I can't leave the gate. I'm not going to risk missing Mireille's arrival because I'm hunting for her shoe.

Evening draws to a close. The sky turns from light blue to deep indigo—one of those colors I never used to see in life. The shoes have stopped falling.

The tiny Yorkie, Duchess, is curled up in her mistress's big shoe. Most of Duchess fits inside it.

A footstool marches across the meadow in the deepening twilight. Okay, it's really Sir Walter the Scottie. He looks like a footstool in the dark. He really does.

Sir Walter takes a seat at my gate under the darkening sky. He drops

his man's tartan slipper between the gateposts and gives me a shove. "Go get your shoe."

With Sir Walter sitting watch, I run.

If someone comes during the night, Sir Walter will know before I do.

The meadows are wide. I don't know where to begin searching.

Where would I fall, if I were Mireille's shoe?

Someplace Mireille would like.

At the forest edge, among the spring beauties and jack-in-the-pulpits, near a chuckling stream, I catch her scent. My guard hairs stand straight up. Why did I wait so long to come searching! The scent makes me giddy. It leads me to Mireille's favorite shoe.

Mireille's shoe has a name. It's Enzo. Oh, did Mireille get mad at me when I tore up one of these! I see the torn insole of this one. There's a word inside. I can read!

"Enzo" is printed on the insole.

I shove my nose into the shoe. I have a narrow nose but not that narrow. Mireille has narrow feet. I inhale Mireille.

I fall over, blissful.

How I have missed her!

In memory I can still hear her scolding me, "Not my Enzos!"

I secure Enzo between my teeth and I run back to the gate. Sir Walter is there, keeping watch, his big, tartan slipper tucked under his paws.

I fall asleep, my head pillowed on Enzo. Mireille's scent fills my head.

You know what?

Ferrets love shoes. This is a bad thing.

Someone is barking, "It's a raid!"

Ferrets think this is a game. Before they can get near me, I snatch up Enzo and snarl at the ferret who is angling to make a grab for it. I give a full voiced barrel growl.

FurFace the ferret says I can't take a joke. She bounces away in search of easier prey.

It's not a joke to me. This shoe smells of Mireille. You do not take Mireille away from me!

A bunch of other ferrets circle me, their beady eyes gleaming. They're looking for a chance to steal Enzo.

I'm not laughing. I'm hunched over my shoe. My hackles are up. My muzzle is wrinkled all the way up my face. I'm snarling.

Honestly? I'm actually scared.

The huskies have my back. I hear the shout. "Zack's in trouble!"

And suddenly all Hank's huskies come running in one huge pack, howling, to my rescue.

"Hang on, Zack! We're coming!"

The huskies snatch up the ferrets and fling them into the pond.

This is when I learn what the weasel war dance is.

I can too take a joke. Funny is a wet ferret. They go flying, all four legs splayed straight out, their tails spinning like helicopter blades, and they sploosh into the pond.

The ferrets drag themselves out of the water, their fur plastered to their bodies, and they spring up from all four paws, their backs arched, and they bounce around like enraged Slinkys, fluffing out. They hiss, "I'm so mad! See me mad! I'm sooo mad!"

"Yeah, you're mad. Touch not my Enzo."

I tell Garth I owe him and his team, big.

Garth won't have it. He says, sincerely, "It was our pleasure, Zack."

Overnight, a wide stream forms between the ferret hollow and the dog meadow and peace returns to the rainbow lands.

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Shelby the golden retriever visits me at the gate. "Have you seen Kermit?"

Kermit the mutt is the old man of the meadows.

"No." I haven't seen Kermit in a long time.

Shelby yawns. She's not tired. Dog yawning is like human fidgeting. She's unsettled.

"I found his man's shoe," Shelby says. "Kermit wasn't with it. The shoe doesn't look like it's been sniffed."

That doesn't seem worry-making to me. "I guess he hasn't found it yet."

"I don't think he even tried to look," Shelby says. "I'm worried about him. He's awfully old."

"What? You're afraid he'll die?"

"Zack." That's a scold.

"I mean it." I'm not unsympathetic, really. It's just that nothing bad can happen to Kermit here.

"I would think he'd want to be with his shoe," Shelby says.

"I guess he doesn't think like you and I do."

Me? I'm guarding my Enzo for all I'm worth. That shoe smells like Mireille. It smells like heaven.

"They say you can see things back in the world, Zack."

"Sometimes," I answer slowly. I don't like where she's going with this.

"Can you see what's happening with Kermit's heart holder?"

"Shelby, I can't choose what I see. I can't see Mireille."

And I can't un-see some of the stuff that I really wish I'd never seen. Like the visions of Lonely dog stranded at the rest stop. I want those visions out of my head but they won't go.

"What if something bad has happened to Kermit?"

"Look where we are, Shelby. I know you saw a lot of awful stuff in your job. Don't imagine any of that followed you here."

Back in the world, Shelby sometimes sat with people who had no one except her. She was with them at the end. She never complained. It's a sacred passage and she feels privileged to have been there with them.

"Bad things do happen," Shelby says.

"But none of that happens here. You know that. Nothing can happen to Kermit."

"Nothing can happen," Shelby says significantly.

I suddenly get it.

*Nothing* is exactly what is happening for Kermit.

Nothing can be very, very bad.

Kermit's heart holder hasn't come for him.

"Kermit thinks his man has forgot him," Shelby says.

"You mean like a kid left at the school bus stop?"

"Not like that. This isn't one bad day. It's an eternity."

"How does a heart holder forget to pick up his dog's heart? Has that ever happened?"

"No. Not unless...."

Not unless it's happened to Kermit. I shudder. I don't believe it can happen.

I won't believe it can happen.

# Chapter Ten

THE LONG TIMERS TELL me we're coming up on time for the Games. These aren't our usual romps on the meadow. These are major league dog games. The Games are held when the Dog Star is high in the sky.

Smeeple the rottie is trying to organize a soccer team. Trouble is there's no one in her league. She dribbles the ball, she passes. She corrals the ball with her right paw and zips it under her body behind her left foreleg. Her footwork is all very fancy and professional looking.

No one else up here can do it.

So Smeeple spends a lot of time by herself, yelling at the ball.

There are some new events for the upcoming Games, because we have a boy among us.

It used to be that the water dogs took turns charging down the dock and launching themselves into the air. Winner was the one who made the farthest leap into the water.

Now we have Robbie.

Robbie throws tennis balls high over the water. Winner is the dog who makes the highest catch mid air.

These aren't my kind of games. I don't swim.

I hate the water.

When I was half grown, Mireille took me for a walk around the development. It was summer. It was ninety degrees. I was jumping into every shrunken puddle and ditch we passed.

Then I saw a perfectly round pool of water near the edge of the road. The round pool was maybe twice as wide as a garbage can and it looked like it had a little depth to it.

A little.

I jumped. And went down. And down. It was deep. And it was cold.

I couldn't see a thing.

And I knew I had just vanished before Mireille's eyes.

I bobbed up into the light. Mireille was there in the bright hot sunshine, her mouth open in shock.

I pawed for the edge of the hole, my eyes bugging wide. I was shivering.

Mireille pulled on my leash to help me haul myself out of the hole.

Next day, on our walk, we found a fireplug installed where the hole full of water used to be.

I have never liked the water since then.

For the water games, I sit on the bank of the duck pond and cheer on the retrievers, the poodles, the newfs, the springers, and the other water dogs. The huskies aren't allowed to compete because they make up their own rules. You can see them splashing around at the other end of the pond, playing calvin ball.

I root for Bo the black lab, because he's the first water dog I welcomed onto the meadows.

I'm told Kermit was nearly unbeatable back in the day. But Kermit stopped competing before I ever came here. Not that he's too old. We're all in splendid health. Kermit just stopped playing.

We also have land games.

Now I'd've thought Tiny was a shoe-in (you spell it your way, I'll spell it mine) for the couch-shredding competition. He was the odds-on favorite. But the new champion couch ripper is Smeegle the Rottweiler. She blew Tiny away, just blew him away, even without counting the extra points for artistic distribution of the stuffing. Honestly, her couch demolition is a marvel of a mess.

There are two divisions in the herding competition—border collies and everyone else.

The other shepherds and cattle dogs think the border collies should be required to herd ferrets. But even a border collie can't herd a ferret. And cats? Cats have their own rules. They don't let us know what those are.

One of the biggest events is the tug of war. It's several tugs, actually, leading up to a championship round.

In the past, this event was held across a big mud pit. The victorious side drags the losers into the mud.

That's not much of a loss if you ask anyone here. It's more like a reward.

This time we turn up at the mud pit, ready to do battle, and we are all struck with the deepest dread.

There, in the pit, where there ought to be mud, is a wide pool of foamy bubbles.

It's a *bath!*

All of us tuggers on all teams try to run for it, but the shepherds and cattle dogs gather us in to do our duty.

Here's the deal. We either win the tug or get a bath for failure. The shepherds aren't letting us out of it.

So we go bravely to our opposite sides of the foaming pit. By bravely, I mean whining, sniveling and howling.



First heat pits Team Hank's Huskies against a mixed team of malamutes, Akitas, and Samoyeds.

Team Hank's Huskies takes the opposing team for a bath. It's horrifying.

In they go, malamutes, Samoyeds and Akitas, all thrashing and sudsing. Soap bubbles are flying. It's too horrible. I can't bear to watch.

The losers drag themselves out of the bath, wide-eyed, shaking, and way too clean.

That's not going to happen to my team.

We're up next. We're facing Team Sporting Group. Team Sporting Group is Bo the retriever, three labs, Tracker and Hunter the setters, and a clumber.

*They are going down.*

On my team are my fine self, Tiny the bullmastiff, Goofball the big something, Fang the Neapolitan drool carrier, Smeegle the rottie, Rocky the boxer, and Harley the whatever Harley is.

We call ourselves the Bad Sporting Group.

I wish Gallagher was still here. We could use an Irish wolfhound. And Kermit. Kermit's supposed to be a real good tugger, but he's not coming out to play.

I don't want a bath.

Tiny is our anchor dog. The rope is tied around Tiny's chest like a harness. He hunkers down low. The rest of us line up by size. We put our smallest dogs in front. I'm in the middle. Goofball and the drool carrier are behind me.

We take the rope between our teeth and wait for Robbie call: "Go!"

Tiny yells: "Heave!"

We give a mighty heave in unison. So does the other team.

The rope goes taut. I, and the rest of my team, take a step backwards. This is fabulous. I see the other team across the foaming nightmare. Their eyes are big. They're one step closer to doom.

Tiny roars: "One, two, three. Heave!"

I pull. There's a leaden jerk from the other side. And yet I take another step toward safety. We're winning!

One step at a time.

Tiny starts another count. We don't care if the opposing team can hear it. Tiny is calling, "One, two, three."

We're grunting along with him.

On "Heave!" We heave for our lives.

A weight shifts. I almost stumble. There's a splash! The clumber has fallen in! We're winning! We scramble to immediately launch another concerted heave! The rope lurches with our united tug. Another splash! We have momentum. It's a continuous tug now. We haul. We're running

up the embankment, the rope clenched between our teeth. We hear a series of splooshes and anguished yelps from the soapy pit of doom. And it's a rout.

We run until their last dog, their anchor, hits the bath.

We won!

We are dancing and woofing and wagging and yelling nyah nyah at full volume.

Those dastardly herding dogs who forced us to compete are giving us evil grins now. They know something we don't. Something ominous.

Of course. It's our next match. Our win means we have to tug again. We're in the semi-finals!

And we've drawn the worst possible opponents.

Team Bad Sporting Group is up against *Team Hank's Huskies*.

I gather my team into an emergency huddle to talk strategy. We put our heads together. We're all panting fast. My speech is short and inspirational: "Run for it!"

My team likes this strategy.

We instantly break and run wide.

And out of nowhere, the cattle dogs and the shepherds are all around us, herding us back in. I howl. I call them blood traitors.

The cattle dogs tell us to stop whinging.

Tiny gets trussed up in the rope harness. The rope is wet. Tiny says he feels like he's wearing a hangman's noose someone has already used.

*Please please please. I don't wanna bath!*

We pick our rope back up. My skin crawls. The rope tastes like soap.

On the first heave, we are united. We tug altogether with all we've got. The rope goes stiff as a tree branch. It doesn't move. We don't gain ground, but we don't give a whisker either.

Neither do they. They're chanting a dummy count to throw off our rhythm.

We listen to our own count. We heave!

The second heave is not good. We budge. I'm yelling at our anchor, Tiny, to hold fast.

Tiny is holding. The ground under him isn't.

The first rounds have left the ground wet and soapy, and now we're sliding, closer and closer to the pit. The bath water looks hungry. The masses of soap bubbles in the pit wobble and pop ominously. The spectators are barking and cheering and heckling.

Hank's Huskies are howling the call of the wild. Their voices are muffled by the rope clenched between their jaws.

I'm yelling a muffled call of the tame: "Mommy!"

We lose our rhythm. We lose our footing.

The wet ground is giving way. It's way too slick. I'm down on my haunch, sliding. The guys in front are screaming. I hear them hit the suds.

I want to bale. Too late. The guys behind me, Goofball and Fang, have let go of the rope. They're sliding into me because they're being swept along by Tiny, who is tethered and *can't* let go. Tiny has become a living plow blade. He sweeps everyone in front of him down the slippery slope.

With a mighty heave, the huskies haul the whole rest of my team into the foaming horror. I'm up to my ears in bath water. Tiny, at the end of our rope, hits the water like a canon ball. Bubbles spew up like lava from a wet volcano. My teammates are splashing and kicking around me. Bubbles fly. It's too horrible.

I dog paddle to the edge. I haul myself out of the pit. I'm shivering. Bubbles cling to my coat. My ears are flattened to my head in shame.

Hank's Huskies are gracious in victory. They yell at us: "Losers!"

Robbie is standing on the edge of the pit, holding his middle and laughing his butt off. I push him into the bath.

I find some dirt to roll in.

The championship round pits Team Hank's Huskies against those dastardly shepherds and cattle dogs, who forced my team to compete in that last tug. We—that is Team Bad Sporting Group—root for Hank's Huskies.

We want those shepherds *eaten*.

The huskies win easily. Like there was any doubt. These guys are professionals. In go the shepherds and the cattle dogs. Great fun.

Who is whinging now, mate?

The cattle dog who caught me when I tried to run away is trying to climb out of the bubbling bath. I step on his face.

Sore loser? Me?

Sir Walter tells me that the Gate Race is *the* big event in the Games.

I really don't want to compete. As soon as I say that, Zoomie the whippet calls me a poop head. He informs me that I have to run.

I still have soap in my ears. I don't want to do it.

But I can't really get out of it, because the racecourse runs straight through my gate.

The starting line is way over there, on the border of the horse lands.

The contenders will line up at the split rail fence, and Robbie will give the ready, set, go.

Each racer needs to imagine that the gate has just opened and that his heart holder is arriving there. That's supposed to make the racers give it their all.

That would work for me, except that I'm not running.

Tin Tin the German shedder gives me an alpha bump on the shoulder. "C'mon, Zack! You're a natural. This is your event!"

Rocky the boxer says, "Zack, you gotta run! I've got you to place!"

Tin Tin looks at Rocky sideways, like Rocky is nuts. Tin Tin says, "Place? Poop! Zack, I've got you to win!"

Place? Win? I gawk at them. "You're betting on me?"

"Well yeah!"

The idea of betting on a race is silly. And against greyhounds and whippets? "Are you kidding? Are you barking mad?"

"Not at all," Tin Tin says.

"Tin Tin! Have you seen the legs on those greyhounds? They're not dogs. They're gazelles. They have haunches like—well, like racing dogs. And never mind the greyhounds anyway. Have you seen a whippet run?"

Tin Tin takes me aside. "Zack. Let me tell you a secret about greyhounds. If they don't see a rabbit or something to chase, they're just not that into it. You can take 'em."

I open my mouth to object. Tin Tin won't have it. "No. No. I know my Zack. Forget the legs. Forget the size. When the time comes, you'll cross that meadow like birdshot. Do it, Zack! Think of it as a dress rehearsal for when your Mireille comes."

Mireille! I picture Mireille arriving at the gate.

Hank's huskies start up a chant: "Run, Zack, run! Run, Zack, run!"

I plop down flat—chin, chest, all four legs, tail—on the ground. I'm hugging the gate.

"I'll stay here and declare the winner."

"Na. Na. That's my job," says Sir Walter the Scottie. "This gate is part of the finish line. If you stay here, you will be trampled."

"Trample me," I dare them.

The other dogs are already carefully moving all the stacked sticks of my gateposts out of the way.

Actually, I'm just saying that. They're not being careful at all. My gateposts shrink around me. I get up, yelling and snarling. I snap at the vandals. "Hey! Stop that! You put that down! Leave it! Leave it!"

All my sticks are leaving.

Sir Walter looks dour. He always looks dour. He frowns at me.

"What?" I cry.

"You run, Zack. You owe it to the other dogs."

"I what?"

"It won't be a real win for them if you're not in the race."

He's rabid. They're all rabid. I know I'm fast, but I'm not that fast.

And I'm not doing it. They can just run me over. I am not getting dragged away from this gate for some silly race.

So what am I doing standing here at the start line at the sunrise edge of the horse pasture?

A bunch of horses behind the fence are giving odds and placing bets. I'm apparently the two-to-one favorite.

Syd, one of the whippets, is suddenly suspicious of my motives. He knows I don't want to be here. He wants to know why I gave in. "What's in your head Zack?"

Syd might think I'm running as a spoiler for someone else. That's not why I'm here.

I'm thinking that if I can just run fast enough, I might punch through the closed gate somehow and get back to the world. Back to Mireille.

The finish line is too far for me to see over the tall grass from here, but I know that a mob of Yorkies and Chihuahuas and toy dogs are gathered there to declare the winner. I can hear their yipping cheers.

Robbie is here at the starting line to give the signal and to spot anyone who jumps the gun. It's not really a gun. It's going to be a shout.

And here's the countdown. Robbie holds one arm high in the air.

"Get ready!"

I'm ready.

"Get set!"

I coil.

Down comes Robbie's arm. "GO!"

I'm off!

I know I got a fast start, because I don't see anyone out of the corners of my eyes.

I would've thought the jet-fueled border collie would be up here in the lead, but he's in the back. I mean it. He's behind the pack, nipping at the heels of the slowest dogs, and barking like a drover, ordering them to stay together and keep up. "Move! Move! Move! Yah! Git along little doggie!"

I stop minding whatever else is happening around me. All the voices are a barking blur. It's me and the gate and the ground between us. My legs are pumping. My paws are hitting the ground and propelling me on. Tall grass whips at my sides.

I run my heart out. I have only a distant awareness of the other runners, of the cheering. The smaller dogs are barking out the names of their favorites from the sidelines. The horses are neighing and bugling. I hear my name a lot.

I fly.

I feel the breath sting my lungs as if I'm alive. Maybe I'm coming back to life!

*I'm coming, Mireille!*

Now, I am aware of someone at my flank. I hear the footfalls, the heavy breaths. I see that narrow head bobbing up and down with every stride. I

feel his heat and motion.

I make myself ignore him. The gate is all. Mireille. I need to get to Mireille. My vision narrows down to a tunnel. I envision the passageway to the world. I will fly through the gate and into the passage. I will go back to the world and find Mireille.

The crowd noise is like I remember the sound of low flying jets.

I feel hot breath on my shoulder.

Greyhound.

Do not miss a step. No one will get between me and Mireille!

*Fly!*

We stampede to the line, I and the greyhound. The noise spikes. We're there!

There's no stopping. Momentum carries me on. I'm just getting my feet under me to keep from plowing into the grass.

Now, I'm coming down a little from my mad charge. I'm moving at a slowing canter.

A garland streams from my neck. I've crossed the line first.

I've won.

I slow down, turn, and look back to the gate. Where is the gate? Where is Mireille?

Of course she's not there. And the gate to the world is still closed.

I lope back to the finish line. Disappointed of course. But I won the race against near impossible odds. I did it. For Mireille.

Tin Tin the German shedder was right. I don't think the greyhounds' hearts were in it.

"Nice run," second place tells me. That's Roscoe, the big brown and white greyhound.

"You too," I say.

The whippets bow down before me.

\*\*\*

Eric arrives through my gate. Roscoe's Eric.

This is when I find out just how fast a greyhound can really run.

Let me put it this way: I should not have won that Gate Race. No how. No way.

There are fighter jets slower than our Roscoe. And here he comes.

Roscoe's heart holder, Eric, is stepping through the gate. He's showing a huge smile full of crooked teeth. Eric's cheeks push his eyes into shining blue crescents.

Roscoe is rocketing across the meadow toward the opening gate like a furry bullet, picking up strength as he races across the green grass. His eyes are rapt, glowing huge. His mouth is open, smiling, his tongue streaming out the side of his muzzle. He's flying, frantic with joy.

I want to be that dog.

I skitter out of the way as Roscoe comes thundering in. Roscoe launches himself off the ground.

The man, Eric, takes the impact on his chest. The sound makes me wince. Eric is thrown two yards back, and lands with a whomp!

Now the man, Eric, is hugging a big brown and white missile. Eric gets a bludgeoning snuggle from wildly ecstatic Roscoe.

I'm not sure how such a harsh cackle can sound so happy. By that I mean Eric's laughter.

Roscoe? Roscoe lets out this piercing, desperate whining that sound like puppies getting their tails stepped on, only it's happy.

All the voices on the meadow give voice. I howl, part joy, part yearning.

The rainbows are stacking up in the sky. I get glimpses of the bridge through the shining white mist.

At last, Roscoe lets Eric get up, and Roscoe runs at the bridge. He turns hard around at the leading edge of the bridge. He's not going any farther. Not without his man. Roscoe rockets back to Eric. He makes a wide tearing turn and shoots forward again. "Come on!"

Eric cackles. He's taking big leisurely strides, soaking in the joy, and tagging Roscoe as Roscoe bullets past him in another big loop.

Eric and Roscoe set foot on the bridge. I lose their silhouettes as the brightness gathers them in.

\*\*\*

Pepper the Boston terrier comes to my gate. He's carrying a dog treat between his teeth. "Zack, can you hide this for me?"

Pepper has been guarding that treat since he got here. Well, he's been *trying* to guard it.

It turns out that the cute little Yorkie, Duchess, ate the treat Pepper was saving for his mother's return. Another treat appeared for Pepper, but Duchess snagged that one too.

Pepper loves Duchess to pieces, but he needs a place to keep this treat from her.

He thought he'd found a safe place to hide it, but there are just too many keen noses on the meadow. Someone ate it. Coulda been anyone.

Another treat materialized for Pepper, and he hid that. Well, that got eaten too.

Treats have a half-life of grilled snowflakes around here.

Now, Pepper has another treat.

Pepper won't eat it until his mama comes home. That's his ritual. "Can you put this under the gatepost or something?"

I'm not sure I can keep a treat safe, but I tell him I'll try.

"Don't eat it," Pepper tells me. Terriers are like that.

"Pepper, if I want something to eat, I'll wish for a raw hotdog, okay?" I flip his treat back at him.

"Sorry. Sorry." Pepper paces back and forth. He surrenders his treat into my care.

I push his treat into the grass that covers the gate.

I feel a tingling under the ground beneath my paws. I hear keys dropping onto a tabletop, the rustle of a coat shrugging off and dropping onto a floor. And now I hear a heavy thump.

Someone is home for good.

I jump up, barking.

"Pepper! Take your treat!"

Pepper's mom is on her way up the passage.

She's not wearing orthopedic shoes. She's running barefoot. Her hair turns from white to the color of autumn oak leaves. She knows exactly where this passage leads. She's yelling all the way up. "Pepper! Pepper!"

She bursts through the gate and immediately pats her hand against her chest.

That's the signal for Pepper to leap into her arms.

Pepper leaps.

His mama rocks him, nuzzles him, and kisses his head. Pepper's tail is going too fast to see. He's licking any part of her that's in front of his face. He's panting quick enough to make himself dizzy. And there's that sappy smile. I want to wear that smile.

Pepper's mama looks up. She gives a little gasp, marveling at our meadow. The rainbows are taking shape. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!" She glances down at me. "Hi, you!" Then she kisses her dearest Pepper on the nose.

I tilt my head toward the shining cloud, but she has already figured out where to go.

She goes, dancing, Pepper in her arms.

I look down. The treat is still here. Pepper forgot to eat it.

After the rainbows fade, I end up giving the treat to Duchess.

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A solid, compact mutt built like a fireplug shows up at my gate. He has just come up from the world. He stamps past me.

I try, as usual, to squeeze past the new dog in the passageway to get back to the world. Again, I fail.

The passage shuts tight with both of us – me and the fireplug – on this side. The gate itself is nothing but a patch of green grass and solid dirt once more.

The new dog shakes off ice and snow.

I feel something moving in the ground, something like an earthquake. It's not coming from the world. It's happening right here, right now, on the meadow.

When I turn around, all the huskies between heaven and earth are



thundering my way. I think I'm about to be eaten. I scream. You really need to see those mouths, those white teeth, and those crazy, blazing blue ice eyes charging at you at full gallop to appreciate my alarm.

The sled dogs converge on the new arrival.

The fireplug of a mutt is named – ever so creatively – Mutt.

The huskies are all over Mutt. Milling and sniffing, they demand, "Where's Hank! Where's Hank!"

While they're all yelling, I step onto the closed gate. Sudden images come to me of Hank and Mutt back in the world. Images of events just past.

I know that Mutt never pulled a sled. Mutt was Hank's pet, his compadre, his co-pilot. Mutt used to ride shotgun in Hank's off-roader when Hank drove a motor vehicle. Mutt rode on the sled when Hank took the team out.

Mutt called the huskies Hank's mule team. Mutt called himself Hank's wingman.

Here is Mutt. But where is Hank?

All the huskies are clamoring. "Where's Hank! Where's Hank!"

I feel a trickle of arctic air. The gate cracks icily open. I jump aside.

Three more huskies blow through with a frigid gust.

Oh boy. Just what we need. More huskies.

The latest one tumbles in, frozen stiff. He's thawing out. First thing he says is, "Where's Hank? Where's Hank? Hank! Hank! Hank!"

That sets all of them off again, yelling, "Hank! Hank! Hank!"

I wedge my muzzle into the gate. I see what is happening down on the world right now.

Actually, I can't see much of anything for the snow. It's a horrendous blizzard. I see shapes in confused motion. I hear dogs down below, barking in a total whiteout, "Help! Help! Help!"

Our huskies, those who have been up here awhile, crowd around the gate and yell at the back of my head. "Hank! Hank! Hank!"

The snow is fierce down there in the world. I make out the figure of a man lying face down on the ice. His parka is stiff.

He is stiff.

The big lead husky named Garth yells right next to my ear, "Hank! Hank!"

For hours, huskies come through the gate, thawing as they come. The rest of the pack, waiting here, demands of each one, "Where's Hank?"

"You mean you don't have him?" the newly arriving huskies bark.

The resident huskies turn the new dogs around and give them a shove. "Go back and get him!"

They can't get back through the gate any more than I can.

I volunteer to go.

Garth takes me up on the offer. He tries to shove me into the passage. He steps on my head and pushes, but he can't get me through either.

Another frozen husky, just arriving, blocks my way. He forces me backward. Ice drips off him.

"Hank's right here," says the latest husky. "He'll be right up."

I have a sudden vision of a crooked figure lifting out of his frozen body. He's straightening up. He's looking upward. His eyebrows and beard are crusted white. He takes a step up toward us. Another. Snow melts from him. His beard is taking on color.

Garth is yelling: "Come! Come! Come!"

All the huskies are yelling.

A gust reaches up here where we are. *Sheets!* It's cold!

The man is growing big and strong.

At last, a hulking, vigorous man with a chest like a beer barrel blows through the gate.

And what a sound goes up! I'm told that a lot of huskies are deaf. Yeah? Well, there could be a reason for that!

Hank and his huskies exchange greetings that would make me cry. I suspect some of these guys are real close to the root of the old canine family tree. They're all big, fierce, tough dogs. They leap around Hank like a litter of enormous puppies. Their eyes are crazy. Their smiles are terrifying.

The sky over the meadow turns pearly gray. Snow falls, but I'm not cold.

There is a shining in the air. A dog sled materializes. And suddenly Hank has himself a red suit and a snowy white beard.

Hank harnesses up nine of his crew. The huskies growl at the jingle bells on their leads. "What the fox is this get-up?" Garth sneers.

"I always, always, always wanted to do this," Hank says.

Hank ties a couple of twigs onto Garth's head. Physics are more like suggestions than they are law up here, so the twigs stay upright, like antlers, instead of flopping over like twigs really want to do.

The twigs make Garth look like a reindeer. Sort of. Not really. They make Garth look stupid.

"Hank. I am not going to heaven with this rig on my head," Garth growls.

Hank grins. He has great horsey teeth. "Yeah, you are."

I see through Garth. His growlage is all talk. Okay, he will wear the reindeer get-up. Except for the red nose. Garth will not wear the red nose. Hank can do without the nose.

The bridge appears under icy glittering rainbows.

Hank gives the reins a jingling shake. He bellows. "Ho! Ho! Ho!"

And I'm thinking there's no way you'd ever catch me trussed up in a

harness and lugging a sleigh like that. But just for half a tail wag there I want to be part of that team.

Ferocious happiness bashes around among them.

The sled leaves the ground and flies over the snowy rainbow, with Hank bellowing laughter, Mutt seated at his side. The rest of the dogs on the ground race the flying sled to the bridge. Hank and his huskies go loud to heaven, raising a joyful noise.



# Chapter Last

HANK AND THE SLED TEAM are gone, and it has stopped snowing on the meadow, but the bridge itself doesn't entirely go away. It stays like a mirage.

For hours afterward, frozen huskies straggle up through my gate.

I can't figure out how you can freeze a husky. These guys must've fallen through the ice.

They thaw out. They ask for Hank.

The setters point the lost huskies toward that great big obvious glowing bridge under the triple rainbow.

Normally we don't see dogs like the stragglers. If you are a dog and your loved one is already in heaven ahead of you, you go straight on there. You by-pass the Rainbow Bridge entirely. That's what Kermit tells me, and Kermit's been here forever.

Maybe because these dogs are a team, they all take the same route, following their leader to heaven by way of the Rainbow Bridge.

Kermit Roosevelt is the old man of the meadow. He's another mutt—Heinz hound, cosmopolitan, mongrel, trucked-in-from-Georgia, mixed breed. When I left the world, the popular term was "All American."

Kermit has been here longer than anyone.

The last of Hank's huskies has just gone over the bridge. The sky returns to normal. My heart is still soaring from the shared joy.

Kermit shambles to my gate and flumps down in the grass. He lays his head down. Other than my own desperation to get home to Mireille, Kermit's dejection is the closest thing I've ever seen to true grinding misery on these sweet meadows.

His long, sighing breaths move the blades of grass in front of his muzzle. He looks like a doormat.

I don't know how to cheer him up. I try. "Did you find your heart holder's shoe?"

Personally, I know that breathing in the scent of Mireille's shoe always makes me happy.

"I didn't look," Kermit says faintly. He seems—I'm not sure this is the

word—breakable.

Kermit asks me what year it is.

We're no good with numbers. Oh sure, we can count the number of cookies you took out of the treat jar, but things like dates and time? That gets awfully fuzzy. I confess, I'm not even exactly sure what a date is.

Together, me and Kermit figure out that Kermit came here eighty years ago. I don't think that can be right, but Kermit says it is.

"They say you can see the world, Zack."

"Sort of," I admit. "Sometimes things come to me when I fall asleep on the gate. But I can't control them."

"Can you look for me now?"

I don't know. I've never tried to command a specific vision, except to see Mireille, and I never succeed at that.

I lay my head down on the patch of grass where the gate ought to be. I close my eyes.

Kermit's voice sounds above me, hovering. "Can you see him?"

"Uh. Not really."

Actually, I can sort of see Kermit's man. I'm just not seeing him today. I'm seeing him in the past. That's what often comes in my dreams.

Young Kermit's best friend is a boy named Danny. Little Danny picked Kermit out of a box of puppies in a dime store. Or rather, Kermit jumped out of the cardboard box into Little Danny's arms.

While Little Danny was growing up, he and Kermit were inseparable.

I see games of fetch. I see Kermit running alongside Little Danny's bicycle. There's a playing card clipped to the rear wheel of the bike that makes a flappy whirr against the spokes. I see Kermit licking Little Danny's scrapes, and soothing the invisible wounds when there were hard words and broken promises. Kermit was Danny's pillow to cry on. Kermit was there to listen to teenaged Danny rant about how cruel girls were, then rave about how wonderful girls were, then damn those girls anyway.

Danny rehearsed his college interview before Kermit, who tilted his head intently. All us dogs know how to do that head tilt. People like it. It makes us look like we understand.

Danny smuggled Kermit into his dormitory room—tough to do, because Kermit got big. All the other college men kept their secret. It didn't last. In Danny's sophomore year, Kermit got discovered by the wrong people, and he was sent home.

Kermit didn't understand. He paced the family house, waiting and waiting. His friend Danny didn't come home.

Kermit stopped eating. He grew very, very thin.

I see Danny coming home for Christmas. He's smiling at first. The front door of the house opens. Danny braces for the welcoming rush of galloping paws.

Nothing bursts out the front door.

The troubled faces of his mom and dad appear in the doorway.

All expression falls off Danny's face.

No one has told him. His parents hadn't wanted to upset him during exams.

Kermit died, waiting under Danny's bed.

Danny's parents noticed Kermit's food bowl going untouched. They just assumed the dog was wandering outside and begging for food elsewhere. They never ever imagined that Kermit would starve himself to death.

That was whole bunches of years ago.

Kermit is still here on the dog meadow, still waiting for Danny.

Kermit has stopped eating here. He can't starve himself. But he's trying.

Every dog who was here when Kermit came to the Rainbow Bridge has long since gone on.

It's Kermit's turn. It's been his turn.

He missed his turn. He knows it.

Kermit has given up.

Kermit stretches out. He looks boneless. He mumbles, "He's not coming. He's already gone on without me. He forgot me."

"Danny is coming," I tell him, stern. I'm not sure at all. I'm just saying what Kermit needs to hear.

"No, he's not," Kermit sighs.

I try the scolding approach. "How can you say that!"

"I can count, Zack. I really do know what year it is. Danny was ten years old when he picked me out of the box. Ninety years ago."

"That can't be right." That would make Danny —

I pause. I'm trying to count. I keep coming up with the wrong number.

Kermit answers for me, "A hundred years old."

Yeah. That's the number I got.

"Danny used to love me. Before he went away to school. Then he forgot me. He didn't come back. I know how long people live. It's been too long. Danny's not coming. He's already gone on. He forgot me. Probably a long time ago."

"Um. Kermit? Have you forgotten Danny?"

"No. Of course not. I will never ever forget Danny."

"He hasn't forgotten you either."

"I don't think it works that way." Kermit lies there, despondent.

I lay my head back down on the gate and shut my eyes.

I see images of Danny's life after Kermit.

Events flutter by like pictures in an album. I see Danny — they call him Dan now — with a freckled wife and freckled children, a bunch of freckled

dogs, and a bunch of cats (not freckled). I know that Dan quit college and went into a trade.

I see Dan wearing a yellow helmet and standing way up high in a big yellow bucket to run power lines on a new utility pole.

I see Dan mourn the passing of his mom and then of his dad.

I see grown children gathered around Dan, very old. There are layers of blankets around Old Dan's narrowed shoulders. His children and grandchildren and great grandchildren tell him to make a wish.

There's a cake with a ridiculous number of candles on it. The freckled great grandkids need to blow the candles out for him.

Old Dan can't talk. I hear his unspoken wish on the wispy smoke.

*I want my dog.*

And here's the wobble in the sky. The ground is spongy beneath me. The air glows. The clouds sparkle.

Kermit's long legs convulse. He jumps up. He sways on his feet. He staggers. He swoons toward the left, steps to the right.

"Here you go, bonehead," I say, making way. I'm giddy with relief. I'm dancing. My tail is flapping.

And here is Dan—Danny—jogging up the passageway, growing younger and younger, wearing that expectant face of a young man coming home to his best friend.

There's no crushing disappointment in this homecoming. I think Kermit meant to sulk. Well, pee on that idea! Kermit bounds around the gate like a giant puppy, but with all the grace of a happy moose.

Danny steps up from the world. He looks like the college sophomore Kermit remembers, the one Kermit was waiting for while he hid under the bed.

Kermit mugs Danny—takes him right down with a jump. He pins Danny to the ground, and drags a big sloppy tongue over Danny's squinting face.

Frantic, wailing, amazing sounds come out of Kermit. Every other moment he's struck with a renewed jolt of zillion megawatt joy that Danny is really, really here. Kermit's eyes are wide and wild. He yodels.

Danny shakes with laughter. He's grabbing Kermit's ruff and hugging him and wagging Kermit's ears.

The sky is singing.

Danny manages to get up to his knees. He towels off his face.

I didn't see the towel arrive. Things are just here when you need them.

I'm wailing. I can't help it. Everyone joins in. Not all the huskies here belonged to Hank, so we still have a few of those, and they howl.

The German shedders can gin up a good howl too.

Somewhere in that chorus I hear Sequoia's voice. That's what a howl sounds like in the big leagues.



The hounds sing. The rest of us yip and yowl and bark and yelp and woof.

Danny staggers past us. He can't walk a straight line with Kermit glued to his side. And Danny is laughing too hard anyway.

I can't remember ever feeling happier in life or death.

\*\*\*

The nightmare re-runs.

I remember what Lonely dog should not. He cannot be allowed to remember this. Ever.

I'm thrown back to that night. I see the highway. I see the rest stop. I don't want to see it again.

Not again. Not again. Not again. Don't make me see this again.

The scene replays.

A family piles quickly into the car. It's raining.

The dog is outside, sniffing around a planter under an overhang at the service station. He hikes his leg to pee.

There's a sound of car doors shutting. Lonely dog's ears go up. That sounds like his car!

He turns around in time to see the car pull away. He dashes across the parking area. He runs frantically after the car. It's headed for the merge ramp. He's barking his heart out. *Wait. Wait you forgot me!*

The taillights vanish in the gray downpour.

Lonely dog runs out onto the highway. Rain pelts him. The world is dark and cold. Shivering, wet, he runs up and down the median, looking at each of the passing cars. He's looking for his car with his people in it.

*Is it you? Is it you? I'm lost. You forgot me.*

I don't think there's anything more terrifying, more heart breaking.

That tail is clapped between his legs. His ears are down. He's shivering. Running. Scared. With the approach of each car, his desperate hope leaps. He runs alongside one car. It outruns him.

Other cars swerve and whip by. He cringes from the engine roar and the tire splash that slaps him. His hopes are crushed. His hope springs back, but there's panic in it. *Is it you? You've come for me! Stop! Wait!*

I'm right there with Lonely dog, darting back and forth, looking at all the cars dashing past. *Are you mine? Are you mine? I don't get it. There!* A great wheel-spun sheet of dirty water splashes over him. He shakes it off. He watches another car slowing down. His ears perk up. But the car only slows to avoid him, then it speeds up. Lonely dog runs desperately after it, crying. *I'm a good dog! Stop!*

I've seen all this before. I don't want to relive this. My mind screams at my nightmare. *Stop. Stop. Stop.*

But this time I see inside the car that Lonely dog chases next, one of those cars that swerve to avoid him. A voice from the backseat cries,

“Look! A doggy!”

Now I can see the little girl in the back seat. She has unbelted herself. She’s kneeling up on the back seat to see through the rear window. I can hear her shrieking, “Daddy! Daddy, stop!”

The girl is horrified.

I see the girl’s anguished face in the rear window, her hands pressed to the glass. She’s screaming.

Lonely dog’s ears go up. His heart reaches to her and hers to him.

I see her mouth moving. “Stop the car!”

Her hands push at the rainy window. “Doggy!”

Her sweet, stricken face quickly disappears from view in the dark rain.

I hear squealing tires.

I jerk out of the vision. I take a step to catch my balance, as if I’ve just been hit by a car.

I’m here. I’m me. I’m safe on the peaceful meadow.

I’m all right. I breathe in sweet grassy air. I sway on my feet. I’m panting. My heart pounds.

There’s the shimmer in the sky. The Rainbow Bridge is about to appear.

There’s an unsteadiness underneath me. The gate is about to open.

Someone’s heart holder is coming.

I’m looking for the lucky dog who will answer this call. This is good. I need to see something wonderful.

Across the meadow, there’s Lonely dog taking tentative steps, by halts and lurches, toward my gate. He’s shaking. Bright-eyed.

Oh no no no. I don’t want to have to break it to him that this isn’t for him. I can’t be the one to tell him he’s mistaken, that no one will be coming for him.

But Lonely dog looks dazzled.

And he’s not the one who is mistaken.

A woman arrives through the gate. She smiles at all us dogs. She clasps her hands together under her chin. “How wonderful,” she breathes. “It’s real.” Her eyes shine. She meets my gaze. She sounds apologetic. “But I’m confused. I don’t have a dog—”

She cuts herself short. She’s gazing past me. She gasps. Her face goes slack in recognition and perfect disbelief.

I turn to look.

Still frozen there at the meadow’s edge, quivering, one paw up, his eyes gone enormous—it’s Lonely dog.

The little girl is all grown up here, but suddenly I know her.

Hers was the anguished face in the rear window of the car on the rainy night at the rest stop. *Daddy, stop the car!*

The car didn't stop.

This woman stares. Lonely dog hangs back, eyes huge. He's quivering, as if afraid to approach her. Now, he's creeping toward her on his belly, submissive.

The woman gives a wordless cry and falls to her knees, her arms wide, reaching for Lonely dog —

Who leaps to his feet and flies to her. He's bewildered. All he sees are the open arms and that loving face. He throws himself into her embrace. She hugs him and snuggles him and pets him and cries on his fur. Lonely dog's whole body is wagging.

Lonely dog licks her face. She's crying waterfalls, sniffing, and petting him. "It's you! Oh you! Oh you!"

The girl, now woman, is kissing Lonely dog. "I never, never, never, never forgot you. I thought about you all my life. Do you know how happy I am that you're here?"

"You know me?" Lonely dog asks her. "You love me? I don't remember."

She looks to me, catches my gaze. She takes in a sharp breath like a stab.

She looks a bit horrified. She whispers to me, "No one...stopped?"

I say, "He's your dog."

"I never had a dog."

"You've loved him your whole life."

She bursts into a fresh flood of tears, her face contracted into a whole nest of lines. She's nodding. She swallows a sob. "I have!" She kisses Lonely dog. "You're mine. My dog. You're my dog."

Lonely dog says, "Why don't I remember?"

She kisses him over and over, trying to kiss away all that terror, the crushed hope as cars swerved around him. And the one that didn't.

He doesn't remember that. And he never will—not where he and she are going. That memory won't stick there.

She hugs him. She presses her cheek to his side. Her tears roll down his fur. "Don't try. It's okay that you don't remember. That's really okay."

I lick her feet. I'm so glad she's here.

The shining swells over the meadow. The rainbows brighten and build, one on the other. Here it comes. You glimpse the pylons in the gleaming mist. The bridge is forming.

I bow.

Lonely dog cowers. "I don't think I can go there."

The woman smiles at him. Her voice is thick and raspy from crying. "You have to. It can't be heaven without you."

Lonely dog asks, "What's my name?"

"I—" She's at a loss, rather stunned. She doesn't know! She stammers, flustered. And she's apparently one of those namingly challenged people.

There are a lot of them. And who really cares? It's the love when you say the name that means everything. "Doggy," she blurts. "You're my Doggy."

Lonely dog—Doggy—wags his tail and licks her face, wild with joy. He makes her laugh and cry.

The woman and Doggy—lonely no more—cross the bridge together.

I crumble into the grass, relieved. Oh bow wow. Oh woof. I'm spent.

Someone must've thought that if they left that dog at the rest stop, someone would have to pick him up. Well, guess what, jackaster? No one did!

Anger flares inside me.

Just as quickly, the anger melts. It can't stay here. I breathe it out.

I'm happy that someone came for Lonely dog. I'm overwhelmed. I'm quivering with relief. I never guessed that would end happily.

I really should have more faith.

\*\*\*

Shelby, me, and Tiny are a team on a treasure hunt. We're really inept, and Robbie won't help us cheat. We're trying to find something by smell, but ol' bacon breath here is making it difficult. Yes, I'm talking to you, Tiny.

Shelby's large, brown, expressive eyes go distant and glistening—expressing the inexpressible. Her soft mouth hangs open. She quivers.

"Oh no!" I blurt.

This is a disaster!

Shelby smiles at me, the brightest, sweetest smile.

And she breaks into a tearing run toward the gate. Me and Tiny fall in behind. It's like trying to keep up with an arrow. I can hear sounds coming from Shelby as she runs—like laughing, whimpering sobs.

The first rainbow is taking shape above our heads. Shelby lets out an ecstatic yelp.

A figure stands in the gate. He's a tall, slender man. He seems calm, gentle, happy, and weary, as if he's taken the long way home. He wears an open-mouth smile, and he's shaking his head, a look of utter disbelief on his face.

Shelby flies at him. She breaks conditioning and leaps on him.

He catches her, and buries his face in her fur. He's sobbing. Even a good shock can hit you like a semi-trailer.

He loses hold of Shelby. No problem, she jumps back up on him and licks his face.

This is Shelby's Dr. Ralph. She was his right-hand dog, giving comfort and hope to his patients.

He holds her now as he stares at the rainbows. The bridge is sneaking into view. For us, it's sneaking. For Shelby and Dr. Ralph, I'm pretty sure

they're struck with the full miracle.

Dr. Ralph's mouth is open. His mouth stays open. He shakes his head. I can see all the assumptions he brought with him from the world are crumbling.

He used to know better. He was a child once, and children know these things.

A force this powerful does not stop being.

Dr. Ralph looks into the shining where I can't see. An expression of recognition lights up his face. Shelby's tail wags. She pants excitedly. Dr. Ralph's eyes move again and again. It can only be that he's sighting people he knows, children whom he and Shelby comforted, who didn't go into the good night alone and afraid. Dr. Ralph needs to set Shelby down. She's dancing, and bowing, recognizing so many loved ones who are beyond my sight.

Suddenly, Shelby turns around. She flies back to me in a lightning charge! She tumbles around the turn, picks herself up and babbles something at me, her eyes shining. She dashes back to her heart holder, her golden hair flying, to cross the bridge with Dr. Ralph.

I don't know what Shelby said to me. I didn't make out her words, if she was even using words. I only got her meaning.

It was perfect un-muzzled happiness.

\*\*\*

I don't know how long I've been here. Shelby's going makes me think about it. So many dogs have come and gone on with their heart holders since I arrived. It makes me think I've been here a very long time.

But I'm not the old man of the meadows. There are others who have been here longer than I have.

There's Sir Walter. He might have the most time here. But that doesn't give any clue as to when he'll leave. We don't come and go in order. We go when our heart holders get here.

Shelby's last babbling non-words let me know that the waiting will be worth it, however long it takes.

I just hope Mireille has found happiness, or at least comfort, during this eternal wait.

\*\*\*

I'm sleeping on top of the gate in the noonday heat when the ground gives way underneath me. I scuttle back like a crayfish.

Two elderly people are coming up the passageway from the world. There was no warning. The sky isn't shimmering. No overjoyed dog is running this way with shining eyes to greet the couple with wet kisses and wagging tail.

There's no trace of a rainbow.

A voice sounds from the shade of some bushes off to my right. "Zack? Is somebody at the gate?"

I squint into the berry bushes. There's a pile of brown and white hair in there. It's a shih tzu. I know that the sloppy bow on his topknot was tied by a boy, and it sure looks like it.

"Uh. Yeah," I answer. "Two people are coming up. I think they're together. Are they yours?"

"No," says the shih tzu. "I'm waiting for Paul."

I don't think the man is Paul. Neither is the woman.

Neither is their dog.

They're climbing quietly, a man and a woman, bewildered, wearing hesitant smiles.

Sir Walter comes fast-trotting to the gate in a huff. He looks personally offended by these arrivals. No one gets by Sir Walter. He clearly doesn't know what's happening, and that's not all right by Sir Walter's rules. People do not sneak up here unannounced by the sky.

All the dogs on the meadow are quiet. No one hears the call of a heart holder.

And these two people already brought their own dog with them.

So why are they here?

These people must belong to somebody here.

Sir Walter and I exchange clueless glances.

I bark.

Tiny comes running at a leaping gallop. His paws thunder on the ground. But I don't see any excitement, any joy. I don't see fear either. Tiny is just plain bewildered like the rest of us.

We dogs don't deal with big changes well. We get into routines. Upsets on this scale make us pee the carpet.

Luckily there are no carpets here.

Tiny joins me and Sir Walter in confusion.

The man and the woman climbing up the passage have become younger. I'm guessing they're now at the age when they married.

They hold hands. Their dog trots at their heels and sniffs the passageway. He's some kind of beagloid terrier mix. He sees me and says, "Hi."

The young woman picks up the dog and gazes around the starlit meadow with an amazed smile on her lips.

My guess—and I think it's a good one—is that they must have all three died suddenly, together—man, woman, dog. It must've been quick for them. And, if there was ugliness to it, it hasn't followed them here.

The tunnel has shut. The gate is grass.

I have no idea why these people and this dog would come to the Rainbow Bridge instead of going straight to heaven. They look as confused

as I am. It makes absolutely no sense for them to be here.

I hear the woman murmuring. "Casey? Casey, stop squirming. Stay with mommy."

Oooh, never mind. This makes all the sense in the world.

The sky is still quiet.

Now the woman's mouth drops open. She puts down the wiggling, beaglely dog. Her eyes fill with tears. She stares. Her chin and her mouth get wobbly. Her knees are going. She's sinking to the ground. Her hands tremble. Her mouth forms an O. Her shoulders heave in silent sobs.

The man sways, unsteady on his feet. He puts a hand on his wife's shoulder for balance.

The woman's arms stretch forward.

Over the gentle rise in the meadow, where buttercups grow thick, a skinny figure appears. He's taking hesitant, stagger-steps towards us. He shakes like a poplar leaf. His voice breaks. It takes Robbie a couple tries to get out the words.

"Mom? Dad?"

Then it's like a happiness grenade goes off. I don't know how to describe it. Hey, I'm a dog. I just don't have the right words for this.

Joy explodes. Mom and Dad make weird sounds. Robbie closes the distance at a pelting run. He throws himself into their arms.

Robbie is healthy and whole—and he's not allergic to the beaglish dog, whose name is Casey.

Robbie told me once that if he ever had a dog, he would name it Casey.

Casey, the beagle mutt, romps around his family, jumping up to join in, trying to kiss them all. Mom and Dad kiss Robbie and hug him and touch him as if trying to make sure he's real.

This is as real as real gets.

Mom pushes back Robbie's bangs and tells him his hair is too long. She pulls him in tight and strokes his too long hair as she sobs.

Dad looks like he's having a heart attack, except that he's smiling.

Dogs are gathering. Horses and goats are gathering. Ferrets are gathering. Cats are gathering.

They gaze in wonder.

Mom and Dad hold Robbie between them. They kiss each other over the top of Robbie's head. They walk slowly, all together—man, woman, boy, and dog—toward the bridge.

Me and every soul here, down to the snarkiest ferret and the tiny pet mice, turn out to touch them and sing them on their way. I can't sing. Funny squeaky sounds come out of my throat. My nose is stuffed with tears.

Robbie names each of us for his folks.

When he comes to us, Robbie drops down on one knee in front me and

Sir Walter and Tiny. "Oh, you guys." Robbie is gushing tears. He wags his head. He doesn't know what to say. He wipes his nose on his arm. "You be good, you guys. Aw, Zack, don't!"

"I'm not crying!" I say.

I'm crying.

Robbie ruffles the fur between my ears. He drags me into a big fat hug. "I'll see you soon."

Robbie gathers Casey in his arms and stands up. His mom and dad stand on either side of him, each with an arm around him. Mom touches Robbie's cheek and kisses him. Dad snugs him close to his side.

They go.

Something is soaring inside me.

I try to watch them. But it's too bright, and my tears are full of rainbows.

\*\*\*

The stream that divided the dog meadows from the ferrets' playground following the shoe-napping incident has dried up.

I'm guessing the brattiest ferrets have gone on to heaven. There's no longer a need for a barrier to divide us. My Mireille's shoe, Enzo, is safe in my custody.

One of the ferrets here is named FurFace. Before FurFace left her mortal life she had been dreadfully sick for quite a long time—okay, it was a long time for a ferret. She'd had one tumorous teat removed. (Furf said that made her seven-eighths a woman.) She'd gone blind in one eye. She'd broken one of her front fangs. (You know, one of those pointy teeth that people call "canines.") Her silver coat and black stockings had turned white, then most of her fur fell out altogether. She'd lost her sense of balance. She staggered in circles. Her mom had to mush up her food and feed her with an eyedropper. Finally her mom took her beloved one-eyed, seven-breasted, lumpy, snaggle-toothed, bald, stumbling ferret, FurFace, to the vet to send her here.

Well.

FurFace did not want to go.

Most creatures know when it's their time to go. Dogs will sometimes tell you. Not ferrets. Ferrets are never ready to go. Ferrets cling to the very last shred of their lives no matter how agonizing and hopeless.

Now that FurFace is here at the Rainbow Bridge, she's happy every moment. She's looking forward to sticking her tongue in her mommy's ear when she comes.

Me, I'm sort of happy here, most of the time.

Days are sunny. Nights are soft.

This evening, a bunch of us are gamboling on the sweet grass. It's good here. If I could know that Mireille was happy, I would be happy.



I'm playing tag with a lot of ferrets.  
I'll tell you something else about ferrets. Ferrets cheat.  
The twilight air is warm and fragrant. Smells of sundown cling to the meadow grass. Fireflies wink.  
A thin cloud passes across the face of an enormous moon.  
It feels like a Cinderella night—enchanted.  
FurFace bounces an acorn off my head. "Here you go, Zack!"  
I'm dizzy, and I fail to duck.  
The sky shimmers. A masked ferret tags me. "You're it!"  
I quiver. The sky is bright. There's the first rainbow.  
A shape is revealing itself in the clouds.  
I'm always stunned by how stirring and magnificent it is—the glimpses of the bridge to the hereafter clouded in the brilliance.  
FurFace sasses me, "You're it!"  
What's with her? I rasp at her, "Oh you silly ferret, I don't care about a game of tag right now! Someone is going home!"  
Everyone is howling for joy. FurFace is rolling with laughter. My heart feels enormous. The meadow sings. The sky is radiant. I shiver.  
Someone is going home.  
I get to share someone's splendor. I feel as if I could fly.  
When it's done, I know I will feel the bittersweet pang because the joy is not for me, but still, right now, there is joy.  
And now it occurs to me that I'm not feeling that bittersweet pang. My heart is overfull. That bridge is beautiful. I stare, stunned.  
FurFace bites my tail to get my attention. She bites hard. "You're IT!"  
It's not quite getting through my thick head. I'm shaking.  
I hear a human voice. "Zack?"  
My ears lift themselves. My fur stands up. Everything vibrates inside. Is this it? This is it? Can this be?  
I'm it.  
I'm IT.  
Oh.  
FurFace is laughing at me.  
The breath catches in my lungs. I turn, trembling, toward the gate. The gate is there. It's open.  
I catch her scent. She stands between the gateposts. She's brushing back her long blond hair. She smiles at the meadow.  
Mireille.  
She sees me.  
I break into a run. Try to. I stagger. My legs are wobbly. My knees fold. My muzzle mashes into the sweet grass, just like Miss Anastasia did. I'm overwhelmed. Here's the dog who won the gate race. Come the real thing, I stumble like a puppy.

I find my feet. All of them. I think I must have eight or ten of them, all made of rubber.

I get 'em going. I tear across the grass. The meadow is a teary blur. I'm moving my legs faster than possible. I hurtle over the ground, yelling, "Mireille! Mireille! Mireille!"

The space between us shrinks, vanishes. I launch myself into the air and fly at Mireille.

I bowl her over and lick her tears. She's laughing. "Bad dog!" She doesn't mean it. We're rolling in the grass. I wag myself. My tail is flapping. Mireille is kissing me. I'm washing her face. How long since I heard her laughter! It's like bells. She looks just as I left her, only happy. She's happy! I want to know how she's been. But that's a blank. The past years may have been a nightmare. But they're over now. She's here. We're together. We're going to heaven.

Suddenly this big white furball—it's a giant dog—comes blundering through the gate and takes us both down.

"Cochise!" Mireille cries. She is astonished, then appalled. She scolds the white flying carpet, "How did you get here so fast!"

This mutt is way too young to be here. Something went wrong back in the world.

The white dog hangs his head, ears down, shoulders hunched, looking sheepish, and really truly guilty. Cochise mumbles in a small voice, "I bit a paramedic."

"What!" Mireille cries, sitting up. "Cochise! Bad! Dog! That's horrible!"

Cochise licks Mireille's feet. He pleads, apologetic, "They were taking you away, Mommy." He looks aside at me with a sudden bright goofy smile, instantly happy again. He wags a tail that's as big as a ferret. "I know you! I ate one of your pictures. My name's Cochise Bad Dog!"

"I'm Zack."

"I know," Cochise says. "When I was real young, I kept hearing this nagging voice. It kept yelling, 'Find her! Find her!' It wouldn't let up. Funny, that voice sounded a lot like yours."

Oooh, funny thing, that.

I remember that—yelling down the dark passage when I first got here. *She needs someone. Somebody, find her! Find her!*

How many times did I yell that into the ground?

Cochise found her. He got my message. He was there for her.

I can't be jealous. Mireille is the center of my universe. She must be loved. I cannot express how relieved I am that this big happy over protective idiot was there for her.

We're together now. Mireille—she's really here! She's hugging me and rocking me like she did when she said goodbye. She is just about strangling me, crying every bit as hard as that day, but it's a happy hard

this time. I'm wiggling out of my hide, out of my mind with joy. This is the happily ever after.

Mireille gets to her feet.

And here it comes. Out of the mist, the Bridge appears before us. I really see it this time.

The sky sings. I look up at my Mireille and read the wonder in her eyes. We gawk at the misty brightness. Sadness gets washed away, leaving freshness after the storm.

And here's a surprise—to me anyway. All the dogs at the Rainbow Bridge gather to send us off. Okay, me. They're all here to send me off.

I greeted most of them on their way in.

I hear them now, shouting and running in from the forest and the horse pasture. "Zack is going! Zack is going!"

Everyone has to get a look at Mireille. So that's Mireille.

I catch sight of my big beautiful scary crush, Sequoia, skulking behind the pine trees. She meets my gaze then fades back into the shadows.

Tiny is here. He looks woebegone.

Tiny stands right up on his hind legs. He plants his forepaws on Mireille's shoulders, and sweeps that giant tongue up her face.

She laughs and sputters. She hugs Tiny. "What a sweetheart!"

Tiny drops down onto his forepaws. He steps back, blubbering.

My laconic night watchdog, Sir Walter the Scottie, is here, too, waiting in the gauntlet, scowling. But there's a tremor in his whiskers.

I stop in front of him.

"Sir Walter—" I don't know how to say goodbye. He has been my rock, my friend. Friends are important. Friends are everything. Behind me, Tiny is moaning.

Sir Walter jerks his head toward the bridge and snarls at Mireille, "Get this guy outta here."

Too late. I already see that tear in his eye.

"See you," I tell Sir Walter.

Sir Walter growls. He is so full of kitty litter.

Mireille crouches down. She takes Sir Walter's blocky head in her hands, and she kisses him on the muzzle.

We walk toward the light. I say goodbye to each and everyone here.

We reach the point where no one follows. I've been up to this point many times. I've never been beyond it. I could never see into the mist.

Now, me and Mireille set off toward the bridge. Big white Cochise Bad Dog dances around us. It's less of a dance than it is a galumph. He's jumping and tagging Mireille with a heavy paw to make sure she's really here. Me, I'm glued to her side. I am not ever leaving her ever again.

Ever.

I mean ever.

We come to the foot of the bridge itself. Bow wow wow. Here it is. For me this time. For me and this big galoot Cochise, and my beautiful, beloved Mireille. I feel . . . shining, like there's a light inside me. Joy swells, trying to burst out. I'm at Mireille's side. Love sweeps around us, holds us, fills us. We set foot on the bridge together and cross to the other side.

And yes — oh yes — there is a God.

## The End

# About the Author

a.abbie aardmore is the sixth incarnation of a veteran novelist. I've never written anything like this before. A new name for a new breed of story. This one is from the heart.

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I live in New York with my beloved husband and too many dogs.























































