

TWO GOOD DOGS

A NOVEL



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PROLOGUE

Human emotion is a deeply fascinating thing for me. I've studied it at length, observing how people react to certain situations or to other people; to nonhumans, to pain. To joy. Truthfully, I've seen a lot more pain than joy in the people I've studied. Based on my keen observations, I've categorized what I consider the key emotions human beings display: affection, hunger, sadness, anger. Each emotion has a range. Affection, for instance, can go from simple tolerance to pair bonding. Hunger, simply the desire for dinner, or pit-deep starvation leading to bad decisions. Sadness is sometimes just frustration, even boredom. But in its most provocative form, it is grief. Anger, though, is my specialty. I can sense the slightest beginnings of it, even before the subject realizes that a simmering, boiling, festering anger is about to erupt. Variations on these four are kind of like stew, a mix of this and that, sometimes flavorful, sometimes not. Love and anger, hunger and sadness. What's interesting most to me is the layering of emotion human beings experience. Not mood, although that's certainly an ingredient, but a spectrum of emotion. It is my greatest pleasure to suss out the various layers of emotion in a person, to read the underlying, the core, and the surface, layers of the geology of human experience.

In any case, when I met the girl, Cody, I knew right away that she was a unique case. So I did what I always do: I gave her a good examination, taking in the deeply personal details of her. Clues to her state of mind. It didn't take but a moment to recognize that she was

vibrating with emotion. The unschooled, inexperienced among us might interpret her attitude as hostility, or anger. But, as I said, I'm an expert on anger, and this was something far more destructive. This was bone-deep fear.

Not to brag, but I have a knack for making people relax, getting them to share their thoughts and deepest desires with me. Maybe even bare their souls to me. All it takes is my brand of uncritical acceptance, unconditional and neutral, a safe kind of repository for secrets. This girl needed my kind expertise.

So, I wagged my tail.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

The tip of the fingernail file etches a groove into the laminated surface of the school desk in a less than satisfactory way. What she really needs is a knife, something on the order of the kind that her father carried, a folding pigsticker. Something with a more meaningful edge to it. But all she's got right now is this metal nail file she's taken from her mother's cosmetic bag, so she makes do.

Beneath the barrier of a cupped right hand, Cody describes the arc of haunches, a short back, then the angular thrust of a neck, the meaningful scroll of face and muzzle, curls of mane suggesting motion. Tiny forward-pointing ears. By the time she's ready to attach legs to her creation, she's forgotten to protect her work from the prying eyes of her history teacher and she's snapped out of her creative trance by the wrenching of the file out of her hand, the rasp scraping the skin of her forefinger.

"Cody Mitchell, that's defacing public property." Mrs. Lewis holds the offending manicure tool like a tiny sword, pointing it at Cody's artwork.

Cody sits back, shakes her uncombed hair out of her face, shoves her blocky glasses up on her small nose, and folds her arms across her chest in a show of perfect fourteen-year-old defiance. "It's art."

"It's a detention and a trip to the principal."

Just another day at this stupid school. Perfect.

As she slings her backpack over her shoulder, she hears the derisive giggling, the sotto voce gibes of her classmates, not a one of whom is her friend. Her friends are all back in Holyoke, enjoying their first year of high school together, without her. She's stuck in this rural excuse for a high school.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When her mother announced that she'd put a deposit down on an old hotel, fulfilling a longtime ambition to own her own "boutique" hotel, Cody had been as excited as anyone. She envisioned inviting the girls up for the summer, swimming in an outdoor pool, maybe even horseback riding. It would be fun.

But then everything changed.

Now it felt more like she was in hiding. She knows she should be glad to be far away from what happened that day, far enough away that maybe she's even safe, keeping her word, her exacted promise; keeping the Secret, surely safer at this distance. If he can't find them, he can't touch them. Her mother will never know.

It might have been all right, even though the LakeView Hotel did turn out to be a wreck, a giant money pit without even a pool, except that Cody is the butt of other kids' laughter, the stranger who doesn't share in their communal past. Not one friend.

Cody shoves the classroom door open, but her defiant gesture is foiled by the action of the hydraulic door closer. There's no satisfying slam. She storms down the empty hallway, her unzipped backpack thumping against her spine. The heels of her cowboy boots clatter against the scuffed linoleum of the floor, announcing her solitary presence in that hall of shame.

A figure moves out from the shadow of the girls' room. "Where you going?" The voice is curiously deep for a girl. It's a girl Cody knows because she's about the only other outsider in this school. She's a junior, but repeated failures have placed her in Cody's freshman English class. Her real name is Melanie, but she calls herself "Black Molly." To illustrate her point, Black Molly wears only

black, sports a homemade haircut coaxed into something between a Mohawk and a skunk, which is saturated with shoeblack dull dye. She has oversized holes in her ears, plugged with disks. Her nails, her lips, and the tattoo on her left bicep are black. The tattoo riding her thick arm is unidentifiable; it might be a skull and crossbones or a sunflower, and probably the work of some amateur under the influence of crack. Black Molly might be thought of as a Goth, but Cody knows better. There were plenty of Goth girls in her old school, all black lipstick and eyeliner-rimmed eyes, but there's nothing romantically medieval about Black Molly's appearance. If anything, she looks like the love child of a Hell's Angel and a dominatrix. With the disposition of both. Cody's heard the kids making fun of Black Molly behind her back. No one would be stupid enough to say anything to her face. Black Molly is tough. She's the kind of kid that will think nothing of ripping your arm off and beating you with it. The jokes are best made when the girls' room door shuts behind her.

"None of your business." It's a poor riposte, but the best Cody can come up with. Black Molly may be intimidating to everyone else, but Cody holds her ground. She's already mad at the world, so why not get physical? Why not unleash the boiling anger onto this creature of the night?

"I asked you a question." Black Molly eases herself away from the cement-block wall, which is painted a cheery pink to identify the girls' room; the rubber soles of her unlaced boots squeak against the dirty floor. She's a heavy girl, and several inches taller than Cody.

It is that fifteen-minute block in every period where the kids who wander the halls have finally settled in, where the teachers on hall duty have sneaked into the teachers' room to grab a cuppa. Where the principal, head in hands, is studying the budget and the secretaries are gossiping, their backs to the big window that overlooks the main hallway. There is no one to stop this.

"Where'd you come from?" Black Molly suddenly affects a neutral stance.

"Holyoke."

"They got that big mall there, right?"

"I guess so."

"So, why you here?"

Cody shrugs. "Dunno. My mom . . ." She lets the sentence dangle. "It's hard to explain." Cody has enough insight into this poor rural community to know that owning even a run-down hotel might seem like putting on airs.

"They don't like you." Black Molly lifts her chin in the general direction of the classrooms.

"I guess not."

"They don't like me."

Cody, who has not made eye contact, as she wouldn't with any wild animal, finally looks up from under her bangs. "Yeah. I noticed. Sucks."

Black Molly makes a chuffed noise, and it takes Cody a second to recognize it as a laugh. "They all suck. They don't like anybody who ain't like them."

"But you, you grew up here, right?"

"Yeah. But I'm different."

Now it's Cody's turn to chuckle. "You kind of like stating the obvious, don't you?"

"I'm different and I'm proud of it. I don't want to be like them, and if you're smart, neither will you."

"I don't want to be like them. I just want to go—" She cuts herself off. *Home*. There is no home, not anymore.

"Go where?"

"Back where I came from."

"Go. Run away. I've done it. Twice."

"Where'd you run to?"

“Got as far as Greenfield the first time. I got a sister there. She sent me back.”

“And the second time?”

The righteous click-clack of teacher shoes and a quick warning to get where they are supposed to be. Black Molly flourishes a pass and walks back into the girls’ room. Cody unslings her backpack and zips it up, shoulders it once more, and heads to the office.

The bills are fanned out on the reception desk in order of due date. I rearrange them in ascending order of amount owed, then alphabetically. It really doesn’t help. Framed in the plate-glass picture window of the front office of the LakeView Hotel, I can see the Berkshire Hills, which are the chief attraction in this area. The trees, the promised cornerstone of a four-season income, aren’t yet alive with the colors that should attract caravans of tourists this fall; stubbornly languishing more blue than red in the early days of autumn, awaiting some twitch in the calendar to become motivated enough to herald in true fall. The old-timers are puzzled; everyone blames global warming. Summer itself was a disappointing season of too much rain and not enough activity to tempt people northward. As we are a little too far off the beaten path to work as a convenient staging place for cultural forays to Lenox or Stockbridge, and not quite far enough up the Mohawk Trail to get the best views, all I’d had for guests at the LakeView this summer were older hikers and a few tent campers bagging it in favor of a solid—thankfully—roof and a soft bed. Fingers crossed, the rainy summer portends a snowy winter, and skiers will help fulfill my bottom-line expectations. It goes without saying that the LakeView Hotel is just limping along, its glory days in the distant past. My own particular white elephant. Potentially, my second-biggest mistake ever.

My biggest mistake was Randy, my ex-husband. I try to think

better of him now that he's met the end we all feared he would, victim of a drive-by shooting, just another small-time drug dealer who pissed someone off.

So, how does a nice middle-class girl from Agawam meet a renegade bad boy like Randy Mitchell? How else? The mall. The Holyoke Mall at Ingleside, where teens have hung out, met, cruised, and even shopped for longer than I can say. I was a high school senior, feeling flush with the heady power of having my driver's license, and my mother's grudging permission to take our car, the only one we had, since she sold my father's Lincoln after his death. My girlfriends and I were seated outside of the Orange Julius, affecting the ennui of world weariness, casting disdainful looks at the tweens giggling, arms linked, clattering by; the worn-looking matrons dragging toddlers away from the temptations of the toy store. We might have been discussing the college acceptances we were anticipating, or maybe just the latest gossip. What cheerleader was rumored to have had an abortion. Which teacher was caught working part-time at the video store.

Randy Mitchell drifted by with his posse. We feigned not noticing them. They rolled by again, blatantly checking us out. These were the boys your mother would warn you about, the ones who meant trouble, the kind of boys who were after "only one thing." We pretended that we weren't flattered, that their silent, predatory attention wasn't kind of thrilling. They were older. At least twenty. Clearly from the rough part of town. And that was a powerful attraction, being the object of an older boy's interest, a boy outside our social strata. When we didn't move away, they grew bolder and sat on a bench close by. There was a swagger to them, a fearlessness.

Randy was the first to speak, and within moments he'd cut me from the herd and he and I were having our own conversation. And then, as if I were Elizabeth Bennet's younger sister Lydia falling under the spell of the contemptible Wickham, I was smitten.

How I fell for that handsome Welsh charm, his certainty that he was invulnerable. I became Bonnie to his Clyde Barrow, without the bank robbery. Kid stuff, not sociopathic, simply rebelling against my middle-class upbringing. But I can't really blame my mother. For me, Randy was the perfect self-inflicted wound. And, despite everything, he was Cody's father.

I open up the computer, log in to my bank account, and play a round of deal or no deal with the bills at hand, balancing interest rates against relationships with the vendors I have to meet face-to-face, like the exterminator or the guy from the oil company. Bank of America will take another pound of flesh, but Berkshire Oil and Gas needs to be kept happy. I have to be able to meet the eye of the delivery guy when I bump into him in the grocery store. I dole out what I can, fiddle a little with payment dates, and log out of the Web site. It's been just six months, something I have to keep reminding myself when I think back to my original business plan, one that had breezily forecast a better cash flow, complete with college-fund contributions on a regular basis. Just for fun, I open the reservations window on the computer and stare at the empty slots, willing each one to miraculously fill. Each empty line represents an empty room. I extend out to the weekend and see two names listed. Two rooms. Two nights. Enough to pay down another of these bills.

My most current revised business plan skims along the edge of solvency; not quite insolvent—yet—there is just enough cash left over each month to keep us fed and clothed. There is no fat, no juicy bubble of impulsivity. Pizza is budgeted. Health care is at the mercy of Mass Health's sliding scale of contribution. Most important, as I continue to tell myself, I'm providing a good place for Cody, a place where she can breathe in fresh country air, and stay out of malls. Away from the influences of life in a poor city, a place to start anew. Oh, wait, maybe that's just me. Cody has never said it out loud, but it's clear from her descent from a bubbly,

happy-go-lucky kid to a sullen, angry, silent, petulant, et cetera, et cetera, teenager that this move from Holyoke's mean streets to a classic New England village in the Berkshires has ruined her life.

It's a beautiful day and the rooms are done, the laundry is in the washing machine, and Cody is at school. I pull my hair back into a loose knot and go outside to the porch, pull up a rocking chair, and plant my heels on the railing. The view, even at this lower elevation, is spectacular, and it's all mine. Regrets aren't given much headspace. Buying the LakeView might be considered a little impulsive, but I still have, six months in, a deep-seated belief that if something is meant to be, it will be, so I'm not going to let the crushing worries of my middle-of-the-night wakening persuade me it's not. I will make this work no matter how hard it gets. But you know what? It's okay. It's the dream realized. It's the living embodiment of be careful of what you wish for.

"Are you staying after for a club or something?" Skye is eternally hopeful that her daughter will finally adjust to life in this backwater.

"No. I'm in detention." Cody doesn't add, *again*.

"Should I ask why?"

Cody thinks, *Yes, duh*, but says nothing more.

"Do you need a ride home?"

"I'll take the late bus."

"Okay. We'll talk when you get home."

Cody hangs up the office phone without saying good-bye. She looks at the secretary, who is minding her own business, as if Cody is no one important enough to eavesdrop on. A nonentity. Just another skinny jeans and T-shirt-wearing adolescent, braces on her teeth, backpack humped against her spine. There is a countertop that separates kids from office staff, a barricade of last defense against the uprising. On it, a ceramic jar filled with pens and pencils. With an artful swing, Cody manages to knock it off the

counter with her backpack as she leaves the office. The pottery smashes against the ugly tile floor of the office with a satisfying sound of destruction; just as satisfying is the bellow from the secretary: “Cody Mitchell, get back in here!”

At least someone knows her name. The office door eases shut with a gentle thunk. Cody strides toward the exit, in the opposite direction from the detention room, making her heels click as loudly as she can. Black Molly stands beside the water fountain. Cody doesn’t look directly at her, but she gets the sense that Black Molly is smiling.

There was a time when she would have died to have been caught being destructive, mortified not to obey every rule, every directive. But that was the old Cody Mitchell. This one, the new and improved version, delights in anarchy. It feels so good. And in honor of that new power, Cody sticks her thumb out and hitches a ride. She doesn’t even consider herself lucky when her Good Samaritan is a middle-aged woman on her way to North Adams. The price of the ride is a short lecture on the dangers of hitchhiking. The woman buys her story of her mother’s being home with a sick child and her needing to get to her art lesson. Which is sort of true. The art, not the mother with a sick child, unless you consider the Bates Motel as sick. And—technically—she’s not taking lessons, but she is learning a great deal.

North Adams, home of Mass MoCA, has turned modern art into the last hope of a town whose industry has fled. Cody asks to be dropped off at a former factory, now an art studio complex. There are a couple of guys in there who don’t seem to mind her hanging around, although she knows they think of her as more of a pet than an art groupie, but that’s okay. Cody does coffee runs and cleans brushes, keeps quiet and doesn’t ask stupid questions when she does speak. Kieran and Mosley, a pair of hipsters in ironic black glasses and paint-spattered skinnies; the one building installations that defy gravity and the other, Mosley, working in

what he calls mixed media, which looks to Cody like anything he feels like doing. Cody just likes the smell of paint, the pungent scent of an acetylene torch.

“What up, Cody?” Kieran is standing on a three-step stool, wire cutters in one hand. “Hand me that coil of wire, would you?”

Cody finds what Kieran wants. The reel of thin copper wire is surprisingly heavy and it takes both hands to lift it up to him. He measures a length, snips it, and begins weaving it into his sculpture. Even though she has yet to discern the actual subject of this wire and felt and found-object sculpture, Cody has to admire the way Kieran seems to know exactly where he wants to attach the wire, with never a moment’s hesitation, as if he has this blueprint in mind. His stuff reminds her of a bird nest she once found, filled with bits of dog hair and paper. Her own feeble attempts at creativity are more organic. Certainly less interesting.

Mosley saunters in, his blue eyes at half-mast. “Buffalo Bill, how you doin’?” His flannel shirt carries the lingering scent of his afternoon joint. Mosley suffers from some illness that allows him to use medical marijuana. He prefers his dose in the old-fashioned method, forgoing the edible for the combustible. Cody thinks that it’s a little strange that the scent most reminds her of the old guy who owned the fruit stand near their old house in Holyoke. He’d sit outside all day, smoking tiny black Italian cigars that looked more like licorice than a White Owl and stank like sin.

“Hi, Mosley. I’m good. Can I help with anything?”

Today, Mosley is good for a couple of make-work tasks, and pretty soon he has Cody set up cleaning brushes and sorting them into proper coffee cans. He’s older than his studio partner, and kind of looks like more of an old-school hipster, like Elvis Costello, than the trendier-looking Kieran. He sometimes slips Cody a buck or two for her help. Sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he barely notices she’s there, and other days he takes a real interest in her—talks about how he stuck to the dream, how he’s going to have the

best collaborative around, how he's just waiting for that right patron to discover him. Cody shakes back her lank hair and jabs a handful of brushes into a can.

"I'm going to need a ride home. That okay?"

Neither Kieran nor Mosley say anything for a moment. The LakeView is hardly on their way anywhere, a better-than-twenty-minute ride into the hinterlands. Cody holds her breath, but she doesn't look at either man, pretends an unconcern she doesn't feel. She really doesn't know what she'll do if they say no, that they can't cart her home today. In the summer, when the light persists into late evening, it's no big deal to walk the hour or so it takes to get back to the hotel, but now, well, it'll be dark in an hour and those blind curves and sidewalkless country roads are scary. Not like the well-illuminated city streets she grew up on. These Berkshire roads are treacherous and still foreign.

Worse-case scenario, call Mom. Suffer the lecture. Get a ration of shit from the old lady. Hope that she gets distracted by something and quits yelling. Even Cody knows that the tone of voice her mother uses couldn't really be called *yelling*. She kind of wishes that she would raise her voice, give Cody a proper tongue-lashing. Skye falls mostly into the world-weary, hands-up-in-surrender tone of someone afraid of really saying what she means. Cody hates it that her mother treats her like a child, like a delicate, ego-sensitive kid, not wanting to inflict bruised feelings on her by speaking her mind.

If only Skye knew just how fragile Cody really was, how vulnerable. She thinks that, six months after the fact, Cody is still upset by the death of her father, that her behavior is from grief. Randy was murdered less than a week before they moved into the LakeView. Cody's let her mother believe that she's mad only because Skye went ahead with her plans to move, as if Randy's death were of no importance. Skye offers half-felt apologies, explanations for why it had to be that way, explaining over and over

that they had to stay the course and the freight train was unstoppable, the handoff from the previous owners needing to take place on the arranged day. The Closing, always spoken of with a capital letter, couldn't be put off. She doesn't say it, but Skye implies that Cody and Randy weren't all that close, that maybe some of this angst is just from being a thirteen-, now fourteen-, year-old with a sense of drama. She *is* grieving, of course. But it's for her life before the Secret took control.

It's not that. No, Cody's whole being is brittle from the Secret. The weight of fear. Of pretending. The Secret is kind of like her shadow. Like Peter Pan, who freaked out when his shadow was stolen, Cody grips her secret close, knowing that if it becomes separated from her, she'll die. It's become an entity. A physical part of her, like her stomach or her eyes. As she can suddenly be aware of her heart beating or her stomach gurgling, or her intestines cramping, she is made aware of the Secret hiding within her.

"Can you? Take me home?" Cody folds her arms across her middle. Throws Mosley a beseeching look.

"Yeah. I'll take you. But you've got to make arrangements for transportation home before you come back here again." Mosley passes her another handful of brushes.

"I will, I promise." It's a lie, but, really, what choice has she? Cody can't imagine not coming here to this studio, soaking in the atmosphere of creative juices, the adult companionship. Her peers are idiots. Pink-loving, Hello Kitty-toting, anime-fixated children. Innocents. Here she listens to the music of grown men who have evolved: Springsteen and Costello, Knopfler and Emmylou Harris. Radiohead. Pearl Jam. Old stuff, ancient history, but still surprisingly enjoyable when set as the backdrop to the work itself. Wire and found objects are defined by a sound track of classic rock and heavy metal. Swashes of color on a rough plank informed by vintage grunge.

“But I can’t take you all the way. I’ll drop you close, but not at the door.”

“Of course.” Cody rubs the sable tip of a fine brush against her cheek, smiles. Mosley’s reluctance to get close to meeting her mother seems so understandable. Why would he want to get caught up in Mitchell family drama? Or be assaulted by the well-meaning but clueless friendliness her mother has been known to thrust on unsuspecting strangers; her professional friendliness.

The late bus has passed by the LakeView without stopping. I’m standing at the window, staring out to where the road curves around the property and up into the hills. No Cody. No surprise. The phone call from the principal, Mrs. Zigler, also came as little surprise. An afternoon driving around, wasting precious gas on searching for a daughter I knew full well would make herself impossible to find, has left me with heartburn. Not actual heartburn, but an all too frequent emotional sensation lodged in my chest that makes me wonder if I really could treat it with Tums. It is the sensation of losing control of a fourteen-year-old. A child who has grown from being a sunshiny charmer into a sullen renegade. It goes beyond—well beyond—ordinary adolescent hormonal acting out. Cody simmers. She’s that old-fashioned pressure cooker sitting on a too-hot burner, the release valve rattling noisily. Except that Cody isn’t noisy. She’s quiet. Very quiet.

It’s closing in on dark now and I have no idea where she is or when she will return. I’ve learned long ago that repeated texts and phone calls go unanswered, like throwing pebbles into the sea. Nothing. Unlike so many of her generation, Cody disdains the cell phone culture, and today it’s clear that she’s left hers home. My one allowable call alerts me to the abandoned phone caught in the tangle of sheets on Cody’s bed, with its singular ringtone identifying me as the caller. I’ve gotten over being miffed at the

Wicked Witch theme, choosing instead to think it funny. Too clever by half. Surrender, Dorothy!

What kid doesn't cling to her phone? It was the consolation prize I bestowed upon her when we moved so far from her friends, a way to keep in touch; a way for her to have some freedom of movement without my abnegating parental authority. All I ask: *Just keep me informed.* Her disdainful reply: *Of what? I have no life here.*

Today, as so often, words, like those pebbles, plink beneath the surface and disappear.

CHAPTER 2

If the weather hadn't been so rotten, Adam March would have pressed on, making his destination of North Adams and the Holiday Inn. But the rain was coming down in sheets and the visibility was almost nil. Climbing into the Berkshires and into the teeth of a thunderstorm along a winding and completely unfamiliar road had him gripping the steering wheel of his trusty Jetta and gritting his teeth in a pantomime of Man against Nature. Behind him, oblivious of the conditions, slumbered his constant companion, his pit bull, Chance.

Blurry headlights shone in his mirror, someone impatient with him, no doubt a local who knew where every switchback was on this mountain road, someone who wanted this flatlander out of his way. Ahead in the murk there glowed a white sign with LAKEVIEW HOTEL 2.5 MILES in red lettering, an arrow beneath the name, pointing to the right. He could barely read the bent road sign, identifying this as Meander Road. Another glance in the rearview mirror and those headlights were closer than ever and clearly attached to a very large truck. Impulsively, Adam signaled the turn, gunned the Jetta up the steep incline of Meander Road, and pointed the car toward the LakeView Hotel.

At the sound of the turn signal, Chance lifted his boxy head, pushed himself upright, then yawned.

"Hey, what do you say we stop now? The weather isn't

improving and I'm beat." Hearing no dissension from the back-seat, Adam took that as a yes.

"Sorry. We have a no pets policy." The girl behind the desk pushes her horn-rimmed glasses back up on her small nose, takes a swipe at her bangs. She looks at Chance, then at Adam. There is a scrim of regret in her wry expression.

"Look, I've been driving for hours, the weather is terrible, and I just need to stop." Adam pushes up his own spectacles. "He's a good dog. Very well behaved, in fact; he's a trained therapy dog."

"Where's his vest?"

To Adam, this girl seems a little young to be manning a hotel reception desk. "In the car. I'll get it. Will that help?"

"I'm not in charge."

"Can you please get whoever is in charge?"

The girl shrugs. "She'll be back in a minute."

Adam smiles and pats Chance on the head. "It'll be fine, old man. You bet."

Chance runs his massive spade-shaped tongue over his dew-laps, making a sloppy sucking sound. He flops down on the threadbare rug in front of the reception desk. Adam takes in the shabby collection of mismatched chairs, a small scuffed-up maple table set in front of the massive picture window overlooking the now-invisible view, a fan of tourist brochures on it. Historic Deerfield, Mass MoCA, Mount Greylock, Tanglewood. Shopping!

A tall woman with fair hair tucked up in a hasty bun pushes through the office door with a bundle of wet towels in her arms. She doesn't immediately see Adam standing near the table.

"Mom." Louder, more exasperated: "Mom."

"What is it, Cody?" The woman spots Adam. "Oh, sorry." The harried look is quickly replaced by a professional smile. "Welcome to the LakeView." She dumps the armload of wet towels behind a door. "How can we help you?"

“This guy has a dog? He wants to stay here?” The girl sounds like his daughter, Ariel, at that age, all uptalk; sentences always sounding interrogative, never declarative. Not so much petulant as insecure. His daughter, a sophomore at college, his only family now, the voice on the other end of the phone once or twice a month.

It’s been three months. How is it possible that a quarter of the year has passed so quickly? Ninety days, give or take. Adam feels less like he’s on a trajectory toward the rest of his life and more like he’s still looking backward and wondering why Gina isn’t there.

Adam March sat in the visitor chair, both hands holding the lifeless hand of his wife. He was unshaven, exhausted, too tired really even to weep. Too tired even to think. There was a meditative quality to this silence, to this thoughtlessness. The opposite, he supposed, of *mindfulness*, which was a popular buzzword flying around. To him, mindfulness was an excuse for utter selfishness. He couldn’t focus on himself; his self no longer existed in the way that it had a mere hour ago, when his whole self had been lodged in battle against this robber, this thief in the night who had stolen Gina from him. Now that the battle, her battle really, not his, was over, Adam was unable to gather a single thought. Soon they would come in to ask him to let them take her away. This hospice room, this place, had become a second home to him, a comfort. What would he do without these people? Whom would he turn to now?

A weight bore down on his leg, the boxy head of his dog, Chance. “Oh, Chance, what are we going to do without her?” He wasn’t even embarrassed to ask this out loud.

Chance lifted his head from Adam’s leg to nudge his fingers where they still gripped Gina’s. He made a sound, a soft rumbling noise in the back of his throat. He sat, looked at Adam, then raised his muzzle and howled.

The sound was what Adam would have made himself if he could. The dog's ululation was the perfect accompaniment to Adam's grief. As always, the dog, his constant companion, had said the right thing. Adam extricated his fingers from Gina's, set her hand gently on the side of the bed, straightened the bedclothes for the last time. Five days before, they had taken away all of the mechanical devices, the hiss and bip of the monitors and oxygen apparatus silenced for the first time in a hundred days. She looked nothing like the healthy, strong-willed, opinionated, loving, guiding light he'd married four years ago. This skeletal form was not how Adam wanted to remember her; he wanted to remember her as she had been. How they both had been. How she'd kept him to his better self.

He knew he should make some phone calls, but he couldn't bring himself to say the words out loud. He knew he should let the hospice workers finish their task. He knew he should take Chance out for a break. They had both been in here, in this tiny, airless room, for what seemed like years, not less than a week. It should have happened sooner; it should have taken longer. He wanted it to be over; he wanted it never to end. He went to the casement window, shoved back the curtain. It was broad daylight, and that surprised him. How could the sun have risen like it did any other day? He looked out over the Boston skyline. A jet etched a perfect descending arc toward Logan, filled, no doubt, with people glad of the journey's end. A safe arrival.

There was a soft tap on the door. Adam realized that it had been more than an hour since Gina was—what was the term they used? *Pronounced*. As if death were a new word that needed practicing. He'd been there, and for that he was grateful. She hadn't slipped away, as he'd feared, while he was out of the room. Every time he took Chance out to pee, Adam had rushed back to this sanctuary of waiting, anxious that she'd have passed while he was

paying attention to inconsequential, like eating a plate of eggs handed to him by one of the staff.

Adam moved away from the window and opened the door. "Come in."

The hospice nurse gave him the kind of smile that he'd been dreading, a gentle, kind smile signifying that, for the first time in his life, he was the object of pity. He, Adam March, who once was the object of disgrace, until Gina and this dog named Chance saved him from himself.

"Sir?"

Adam pulls himself out of his thoughts, walks back to the tall reception desk, puts on his best smile. "Yes, if it's at all possible, I'd really appreciate not having to go back out in that." He thumbs toward the picture window. The rain is coming down so hard now that it cascades off the porch roof, a shimmering curtain in the lights.

Chance gets to his feet, shakes himself, and opens his massive jaws in a canine simulacrum of a smile.

"That's some dog." The woman has that look on her face, the one the uninitiated most often wear at the sight of the chewed-up pit bull. Brindle-colored, one ear half gone, scars lining his muzzle, along with black crescents of scar tissue on his chest and flanks, Chance displays his past on his body.

"He's a sweetheart." Adam has had this conversation over and over.

"I'm sure he is, but we have a policy."

Adam puts one hand on Chance's smooth head, pulling the patience of the dog into himself. It's what he's learned to do when he feels the annoyance or frustration begin to swell. Touch the dog to deflate it. "Well then, can you recommend another place close by?" Adam has a good eye for desperate and he can

see that this place isn't exactly turning away droves of would-be customers.

At that moment, a bolt of lightning sears across the window, followed almost immediately by the concussion of thunder, close enough that the windowpane rattles.

The innkeeper and Adam simultaneously chorus "Jesus! That was close!" and then laugh.

"Please don't make me go out in that." Adam pulls his glasses off and shoves them into his breast pocket. Smiles. Touches the dog again.

"Guess I'd be pretty mean to do something like that. Okay. You and the dog can stay, but I have to put you in the least-nice room."

"Just so long as it's grounded."

"I know, we're up high, but I'm sure you'll appreciate the view in the morning." She hands him a clipboard with a registration form attached, a blue pen. "If you would just fill that out. Sign the bottom."

Adam dips into his jacket pocket for his wallet, extracts his credit card, bends to the task of filling in the registration form while Chance patiently sits at his feet. He hands the clipboard back.

"Oh, and"—she looks at the form—"Mr. March, I'll have to charge you a fifty-dollar cleanup fee for the dog."

Adam doesn't say anything about highway robbery. In his experience, dog-friendly hotels vary from no extra charge to exorbitant fees. "No problem, Ms. . . . ?" He glances at the brass-colored name tag affixed to her white blouse. "Mitchell." Skye Mitchell. Interesting first name.

Plastic Adirondack chairs are scattered along the cement-floored porch, and the innkeeper straightens them into alignment with each numbered door as she leads Adam and Chance to the last room on the first floor. Room number 9.

She asks, "So, are you in the area for business or pleasure?"

"Business." A reluctant reentry into his working life.

The key sticks a little as she unlocks the door.

The scent of old rug and Pine-Sol waft out as the heavy door is pushed open. It's just like so many hotel rooms he's been in, two queen beds opposite the bureau with the television on it, a big flat-screen one. There is a small round table flanked by two vaguely Danish Modern chairs beneath the picture window, which is obscured by heavy drapes drawn across it. A far cry from his days of expense accounts and suites at the Ritz Carlton or the Taj. No minibar, no room service, just a little fridge and an unplugged microwave.

Skye points out the bathroom, "This might be the last room on my to-be-painted list, but the bathroom window doesn't leak. I really wouldn't have put you in here if it did." It's a tiny space, but clean and well stocked with towels and toiletries. She hands him the remote. "Continental breakfast starts at six-thirty."

Another flash of lightning, another crack of thunder, but it's clear that the storm has moved east. Adam feels a little foolish; he could certainly make North Adams easily now that the rain has let up and the visibility is better. Chance is waiting outside, sniffing the air. Adam takes the key from Skye's hand, thanks her again. "I have a bed for him, so he won't be on one of yours."

"Good. But I'll still have to dry-clean those spreads." Then, as if she's a little taken aback by her inhospitableness, she smiles. It's a nice smile, Adam thinks, but one that she has to remember to use.

I really like this place, I'm glad that Adam decided to stop here. First of all, there's the wonderful aroma of critters. Outside, not inside, although I'm pretty sure there was a mouse in the wall of our room. Which could be fun, but Adam always discourages me from indoor hunting. Hunting really isn't my thing, but I'll do it if the opportunity

arises. Outside is the scat of all sorts of woodland creatures, most of which I have no name for. Deer, certainly. Squirrel, absolutely. Skunk. Oh yeah. Fortunately, I'm smart enough to give those buggers a wide berth. The farther away I wandered from the building, there lay odors from other rodents I've never encountered. Best of all, I got to be the first to mark the territory with my kind of scent. Not another canine has been in this area for a long time. The best I could come up with, and immediately covered, was old. Canine, yes, but possibly not dog, the idea of which gave me this excited little thrill. I shook myself.

Second, I like this place because Adam let me sleep on the bed. The human bed. A total crime in our own place, but for some reason, maybe forgetfulness, maybe being so tired, he didn't object when I took the second bed.

Third, I like this place because it is neutral. By that I mean that Adam doesn't have any association with it. There is no scent of Gina, no possessions lying around that require holding, sniffing. He had only one drink before bed. He's not sitting with his head in his hands, thinking, dwelling on her absence. I miss her, too. She was kindness itself to me way back when I was not the dog I've become.

When the lady who opened the door to the room for us came out, I was waiting for her. It's always been my policy to befriend the people who extend hospitality to us. I sensed that this was a near miss, this hospitality; although the hostility I felt coming from the young one really wasn't directed at us; and the coolness from the woman wasn't really hostility in the proper sense, more a tension that had nothing to do with us, and more with the girl, who I assessed at a breath was her kin. Nonetheless, I did pick up on the more traditional anti-my kind of inhospitable attitude; thus I waited for her on the porch, having shaken off the rain from the tip of my nose to the tip of my tail, which I wagged as she came out.

She froze in place. I countered her fear with a little dance I do,

forepaws tapping, head wobbling gently from side to side, tail whipping in my best pantomime of big galoot. That's what Adam calls me when I do it for him, Big Galoot, usually followed by some kind of treat. This lady didn't have a treat, but she quickly relaxed and timidly extended a hand, which I sniffed politely, then licked. She didn't like that, and quickly withdrew the hand without giving me a pat on the head, which was all I was hoping for. That's okay. Baby steps are fine. I am certain to win her over on the next round.

The door opened and Adam stuck his head out, saw the two of us standing there, and said something to the lady in their tongue language that I interpreted as conciliatory. What he had to apologize for, I can't imagine, but in the next moment he called me in and I did as I was told. I've been well schooled in the past few years—I am a certified service dog now—I hardly ever disobey, as long as I understand what's expected of me.

Ick. In the laundry room, I squirt a dollop of liquid soap into my hand and scrub away the feeling of soft, wet dog tongue. It's not that I don't like dogs; I do. At least I like them well enough. I've just never had one. And I'm not a big fan of dog kisses. Especially out of the mouth of such an unattractive dog. I just hope that he doesn't have fleas, although that seems unlikely, given his owner's well-groomed look. Adam March hardly seems like the kind of guy who would have a flea-bitten dog. He also doesn't look like the type who would have a chewed-up pit bull, but there's no figuring some people out. It's enough that I've scored a walk-in room rate, plus surcharge for the dog, and that will help. I won't really dry-clean that duvet. Everything here is washable in the venerable industrial-size washer and dryer. That extra fifty bucks will cover the overdue installment on Cody's braces. God works in mysterious ways.

My phone jingles with my mother's ringtone, my weekly dose

of skilful interrogation. We dispense with the formalities quickly and get down to the only subject we both care about, Cody. Florence Lenihan should work for the government; before I can throw up my barricades, she's gotten me to confess that my beautiful, intelligent, perfect child is in trouble again. I try to keep these things from my mother, partly because I don't want her to think that any part of my life is payback for the hell I put her through when I rebelled against her comfortably middle-class life and ran off with Peck's Bad Boy, the rebel without a cause, the attractive nuisance that was Randy Mitchell.

"I still need to deal with her cutting detention. She did the detention for defacing school property and another one for not showing up at the original detention, but, Mom, I don't have the feeling that she's learned any lesson at all. She's shrugged off the punishment as the price of doing business, and the question is, What *is* the business?"

"At least she's not selling dope out on the street like her father did at her age."

"He never sold it at that age." Unsaid was that he was at least seventeen before he got into the business.

"Whatever." My mother affects the lingua franca of hipness without irony. "I wish I could say send her to me, but I can't. I can't take on the responsibility."

"I could never do that. Be separated from her. As much as she aggravates me, I can't imagine life without her."

It's been only the two of us for a long time. Cody has no memory of living in a two-parent household, not that what Randy and I had could ever have been called a *household*. Ever since I threw him out before she turned two, it's all been on me. Single motherhood. A choice, a preference. Like my mother before me—in her case widowed, not divorced—I have stayed away from complicating my life with relationships. It's been a privilege, being the only parent. And, for the most part, it's been easy. Until now.

I tuck the phone between my shoulder and ear and bend to pull the sheets out of the dryer. The static snaps and shoots up my arm and I nearly drop the phone. "It's really all I have in my arsenal, so I'll tell Cody that she's grounded and she'll shrug and give me the eye roll, and happily take the grounding as yet another reason not to socialize with the kids her age."

"Still no friends?"

"None that I know of."

"She's a bright kid, a nice kid. Why can't she make friends?"

"Maybe because Cody refuses to engage, or maybe there's something about her that keeps her isolated." If she's treating me with such disdain, how is she treating others?

"So, where does Cody go when she disappears?"

Ah, yes, the very question I taunt myself with. "Nowhere, she says. She just walks." I snap the sheet into submission, fold it, and add it to the pile of clean linen.

"Why is taking a walk a bad thing?"

"It's not the walk; it's the radio silence, the not knowing where she is. It's the taking a walk to nowhere when she should be in detention."

"So how long will you ground her?"

"The punishment must fit the crime, so a week. And I'll assign her to clean room number nine tomorrow. We have a guy staying with us who has a dog with him, so maybe that will add to the punishment."

"A dog? Since when?"

"It was a mercy booking, and no, I'm not turning the Lake-View into one of those pet-friendly places."

The sheets are folded, the pillowcases, too. I can hear the sound of my mother's grandfather clock chime six o'clock.

"Skye, you're doing a fine job. Stick to your guns and don't fall into the trap of trying to make up for what Cody thinks are your deficiencies. They aren't. They're about being a good parent."

Once in a while my mother makes me feel better.

Maybe tomorrow, after school, I'll see if Cody wants to get mani-pedis together, a little girl fun to encourage her to open up a little; take advantage of the unexpected largesse of Mr. March's arrival *avec* dog and even get pizza. I know what I'm doing, what I always do—make up for being a parent. Most of the women I know who have kids Cody's age are older, closer to fifty than I am to forty. A lot closer. The benefit of being a young mom is also a hazard. The desire to be an authority is undermined by the equal and compelling desire to be a friend. Heck, I know women my own age who are still living at home with their own mothers. Women still trying to figure out who they are. I've known forever who I am. Guess that's the price you pay for being married the day after high school graduation. A single mom at twenty-one. You grow up fast. You simply grow up.

Cody Mitchell inserts her earbuds and scrolls through her music until she finds the playlist based on Mosley's recommendations. In her bureau drawer, tucked into a tampon box, is a half-used joint, one that Mosley had put out and carelessly left in the ashtray sitting on his worktable. Cody knew he'd never miss it; in fact, she sometimes thinks that he's leaving these treats for her on purpose. She likes that about him. He's so cool about stuff. More so than Kieran, who always acts all big brotherly around her. Mosley doesn't treat her like a kid, more like a respected grad student. Soon, very soon, she is going to get up the courage to show him some of her work.

Her old art teacher, Mrs. Dumont, really, really liked Cody's work and made noises about her having some real talent. But because of her academic schedule, Cody couldn't get into the art class at her new school. Skye had promised, on her mother's grave—which, if you think about it, is stupid, 'cause Gramma

Florence is still kicking—that Cody would have an even better art program at the new school, and now she can't get into the class and has had to give up her art just because her mother got the hare-brained idea that life in this backwater would be better. That owning a freakin' hotel was an improvement over a regular pay-check as a concierge and access to the Ramada pool year-round. Cody has made the loss of art class something to chew on, a plank in her campaign to keep her mother at arm's length. An injustice that she can dwell on to the point where she actually believes it.

Well, Mosley will be an improvement over a high school art teacher, for sure. And if he liked to hold her close in a bear hug now and then, big whoop. It was him being friendly, that's all. And if the bear hug occasionally went on for an uncomfortable length of time, well, that was the price of being allowed to hang around.

"Cody? You in there?"

Cody tosses her hair back and sighs, tucks the unlit joint under her pillow. Here it comes. "Enter."

Skye is wearing that face, the one she puts on when she's about to get all parental. The one she thinks is intimidating. Her *serious* face. "We have to talk."

"I know. I won't do it again. I've served detention; don't you think it's a little late to start ragging on me?"

"First of all, drop the tone. Second of all, no, I don't. We haven't discussed where you went. You've been lucky; I've been distracted."

Cody bites back the obvious retort about how Skye is always distracted, mostly because it's not true. Because they live "over the shop," as it were, there is hardly a time when Skye isn't aware of Cody and what she is or isn't doing. Up in her grill is how Cody describes it to herself. *What are you doing, honey? Need some help with homework? Do you want to invite someone over for a sleepover?* As if. "So, what's my sentence? Hard labor or the seg?"

“Guess it’s seg. That is, you’re grounded for the rest of the week, and that includes the weekend. And maybe we should be watching a little less *Orange Is the New Black*.”

Cody bursts out laughing. “So how is that different from the rest of my life?” She’s gratified to see the serious-parent expression dissolve.

“Oh, honey, I know it’s been hard for you.” Skye sits on the bed beside Cody. Now she’s in for it, the heart-to-heart. She moves over. “It’s hard for both of us, but you have to make an effort. You can’t wait for them to come to you.”

Cody knows the words to this tune pretty well. “You can’t force it, Mom. And, really, I don’t care. It’s meaningless to me.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Well, I do. And there’s no amount of wishful thinking on your part that will make it different. You brought me here, and I’m suffering the consequences.”

Booyah. Here comes the conciliatory hug. Cody allows herself to lean briefly into her mother’s embrace. Tries not to put her head against her mother’s shoulder. Just when Cody is trying to figure out how to extricate herself from her mother’s embrace, Skye’s cell phone rings and miraculously she’s released.

Skye backs out of the room, talking in her concierge voice, and blows a freakin’ kiss. Cody doesn’t even pretend to catch it. Once the door clicks shut, she retrieves the joint, attaches a roach clip to it, and hunts around for the lighter she keeps squirreled away.

Mosley’s stuff is good, and within a couple of minutes Cody can feel the ever-present weight of the Secret lighten. Six months, almost seven, and nothing has happened. She’s kept her end of the bargain. She’s keeping her end of the bargain. No one knows. Hopefully, *he* knows that she’s keeping her word. The man who killed her father.

Another toke and the lightness darkens; the density of the

Secret thickens. The weight in her chest feels like his hands felt, holding her against the brick wall, pressing her so that her feet didn't touch the ground.

"You will say nothing to no one." She was speechless, in shock from what she'd seen, but he shook the promise out of her; the back of her head hit the wall. "You say one word and you—and your mother—will die."

"I won't."

ALSO BY SUSAN WILSON

The Dog Who Saved Me

A Man of His Own

The Dog Who Danced

One Good Dog

Summer Harbor

The Fortune Teller's Daughter

Cameo Lake

Hawke's Cove

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