

# Ripley

## FIRE STATION FIVE

DOGS WITH A PURPOSE

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## FIRE STATION FIVE

W. Bruce Cameron

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
Richard Cowdrey



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed  
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RIPLEY: FIRE STATION FIVE

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*To my daughter Chelsea:  
I love you and I am so very proud of you*



# Ripley

## FIRE STATION FIVE

DOGS WITH A PURPOSE





# One



I lived with several brothers and sisters who all looked like me: white with mottled spots of gray and black. A very tall man with white hair was called Robin, and he took care of us.

His hands often wafted the delicious odor of small treats when he waved them in the air. “Sit,” he would say. Most of my littermates put their rumps down on the floor when he used the word, but I didn’t see the point. Robin would either hand us a treat or he wouldn’t. What did sitting down have to do with it?

When some of my littermates were handed a delicious morsel and I wasn’t, I was very offended.

One day, I understood why Robin kept saying “Ripley” to me. It was because that’s who I am: Ripley.

I chewed on Robin’s fingers and his shoes and was good at it. Then I would chew on my brothers and sisters. I loved chewing them and they would chew me back.

Then I would chase them. Then I would bite at the grass. Then I would run. Then I would flop down on my belly to let one of my brothers or sisters climb on top of me.

It was all marvelous.

I was a male named Ripley. The man was Robin. One of my sisters was Riley. I had a brother named Reggie and another named Repo, and a smaller sister named Rio. This was exciting to understand. We all lived in a wonderful place with a big, snow-filled backyard for running and exploring and rolling and wrestling.

A woman younger than Robin, not nearly as tall, with long, dark hair that looked like it would be fun to tug on, often came to speak to Robin. He called her Mrs. Eckerly.

“So, what do we think of our little Ripley?” Mrs. Eckerly asked Robin during a visit. I glanced up curiously at my name. The snow was gone now, but the ground was wonderfully wet. Water and mud splooshed under my paws in a fascinating way.

Robin often displayed a slow, easy smile. His teeth were as white as his hair. “He’s a bit of a handful,” Robin responded ruefully.

Mrs. Eckerly knelt to see me. I chewed on her shoes until she pushed me away, and then I lunged for my brother Reggie and toppled him over to wrestle.

“I’ve never released a dog so early in the program,” Mrs. Eckerly remarked as she watched us play. “But I don’t think Ripley has it in him to be a guide dog.”



Robin chuckled. “Yah, I guess I’ve got to agree. He just can’t pay attention to anything. It’s best to career-change him now, before he’s too far along in the program. We’ve kept the whole litter a couple of weeks longer than usual just to give Ripley an opportunity to catch up, but they’re past ten weeks now. Time to move on.”

Reggie stopped wrestling with me to squat and pee on the ground, so I ran up to Robin and danced around him. It was time for somebody to chase me!

Mrs. Eckerly smiled down at me and at Robin. “We’ll have to think about where we can find him a good home. Border collies are popular because they’re so smart, but people don’t always realize what they’re getting into when they get one for a pet. They have a lot of energy.”

“That describes Ripley for sure,” Robin agreed. “But . . .”

Robin did not understand about the chasing, but that was okay. Rio obliged. We tore off around the yard together, mud flying under our paws.

Mrs. Eckerly gave Robin a shrewd look. “Why do I think you’re about to suggest something unorthodox to me? You get that look, half excited, half embarrassed.”

Ben laughed. “It *is* unorthodox. It’s only that Ripley comes from a long line of successful guide dogs. We know he’s smart and intuitive—he just needs a lot of training. Maybe there’s a way he could still be of service, not to the blind, but somewhere else.”

“Go on.”

“My friend Ben Gustafson wants a very smart dog for a program he’s starting. He’s a firefighter and thinks that he could train a dog to assist.”

Mrs. Eckerly frowned in puzzlement. “How? What could a dog possibly do in a fire?”

I was much faster than Rio. I made it back to Robin first, and barked a little so that he’d understand that running was much more fun than standing around.

Robin shrugged and talked a little louder. “What was the word you used? *Unorthodox*. Well, that’s Ben, always trying to come up with new and better ways to do things. I’ve got no idea what he’s planning. What I’m thinking, though, is that it would be a shame to waste Ripley’s bloodline by adopting him out just as a house pet. If it’s all right with you, I’ll give Ben a call and tell him we’ve got a border collie named Ripley who might be perfect for him.”

That was the first time I heard the word *Ben*. Later I came to associate it with a man not quite as tall as Robin, with light hair and bushy eyebrows and kind, smoke-smelling fingers. The man brought me a pair of bouncy dog toys and I jumped on the first one, and then the other, chasing them around the yard, running back to the man named Ben, chewing on a stick, and then rolling in the grass.

“For cute!” Ben exclaimed.

“Yah, but like I said, kind of a short attention span,” Robin observed apologetically. “You think that’ll be a problem?”

Ben was smiling down at me, so I went to jump up on him, but I got distracted by the strings hanging off his shoes. Strings are for pulling!

“A fire is nothing *but* chaos, Robin,” the man named Ben said. “Maybe being focused on several things at the same time will be an advantage.”

“Maybe,” Robin agreed doubtfully. I tugged harder.

“Well, it’s supposed to be a dry May, so house-training this little guy will be a pleasure,” Ben remarked. He reached down to pull the strings out of my mouth. I gnawed happily on his fingers instead.

“Seems like just last week I was shoveling snow.”

“Yah, that’s Minneapolis.” Ben scooped a hand under my belly and picked me up.

I was surprised when Ben carried me out of the yard. I caught a glimpse of my brothers and sisters in a pile and wondered why they weren’t coming with us.

Ben opened up something that I would learn later was called a car, and he put me in a crate inside it. I didn’t like it in the crate. There was nothing to chew on. And then it lurched a bit and we seemed to be moving!

I whimpered because the car kept giving me a funny sensation in my tummy. But nothing changed, and after a while I fell sound asleep. It seemed like the best thing to do.

I woke up when I sensed something in Ben, a change in his mood that rippled through the air currents inside the

car. I sat up, peering through a slot in the crate, watching as he reached for something and held it to his mouth.

“That’s just two blocks over,” he said into whatever the object was. “I’ll go.” The car surged forward. “We’ve got a house fire, Ripley!”

I lifted my head because I heard a faint wailing noise, growing louder.

“I’m ten-seven, took a vacation day to meet you,” he told me, “but we’re going to go check it out anyway. You’ll meet some people who’ll become a big part of your life soon.”

My nose wrinkled as a smoky smell filled the interior of the car. I felt an odd sensation that flung me forward a little bit inside the crate, and then Ben was reaching in for me. I felt a familiar *snick* in my collar and was disappointed—Robin had obviously told Ben about leashes. It’s very hard to run and wrestle and roll over on a leash.

Ben set me on the ground and I looked around curiously. We were in the front yard of a house, but not the one I had always lived in. Black smoke curled menacingly up into the air from the open windows of this new house.

A man with hair as white as Robin’s jogged up to us. “I’m with the fire department,” Ben called to him. “Do you know if anyone’s in the home?”

The man pointed. “There’s a girl on the roof!”

Ben made a startled noise and ran to the house and I

kept up with him, happy to be running, even on a leash. “Hey! You! Are you hurt?” he yelled.

I saw movement and realized there was a young girl rigidly clinging to the highest peak of the roof. She didn’t reply.

The wailing sound was getting louder.

Ben turned to the white-haired man. “Hold my dog,” he requested urgently. I saw the leash being passed over and then watched curiously as Ben opened a big garage door and darted inside. I made to follow and was jerked back by the leash.

This is why leashes are such a problem.

Ben came out carrying something long and thin. “We’re in luck! I was hoping there’d be a ladder.”

He set the thing (a ladder?) so that it was leaning against the roof.

“Want me to hold it?” the white-haired man offered.

“No, just please back down the driveway a bit,” Ben replied.

The man pulled me toward the street as Ben swarmed up the ladder. In the distance, a dog joined his voice with the wailing noise in a long, mournful howl.

I saw Ben scramble up the pitched roof to the girl. He reached out a hand. “You’re safe,” he told her. “The fire truck’s almost here. What’s your name?”

She mumbled something.

“Okay, Samantha.” Ben braced his legs and then held



the girl in place. “We’re just going to wait here, all right? You’re going to be fine.”

I turned as a big, heavy truck with flashing lights swerved into the street. The wailing noise was blasting from its roof, and then the tremendous sound shut off abruptly. That was a relief.

People poured off the truck. They all wore long coats. I watched curiously as several of them ran to the front door of the new house, kicking it open. Black smoke flooded out. Two of the new people had brought their own ladder, which they secured next to Ben’s.

All the rapid movement excited me. My paws twitched with the urge to run among the humans, barking and nipping until they were all together in one tight group, with nobody left out. It’s just better that way. It’s how things should be.

But the leash stopped me. I pulled against it with a frustrated whine.

Another vehicle, boxy but not nearly as big as the truck, turned in to the driveway. The people who jumped out—one man and one woman—were not wearing the heavy coats. They dashed to the foot of the ladder while two men in coats climbed up to be with Ben. One of the men on the roof was even taller than Robin!

“Okay, we’re going to carry you down, Samantha,” I heard Ben’s gentle voice announce.

The girl shook her head wildly. “I can’t!”



“It’s okay to be afraid. Can you let go of the roof?”

“No!”

Ben looked up at the other men, then back to the girl. “Tell you what. How about if you close your eyes first. Then just let go for one second. That’s all, one second. Then all you need to do is hang on to my back and we’ll all go down the ladder. Willets and Alvis too. That’s Willets, and this is Alvis. Okay?”

Samantha nodded hesitantly.

“I’m Willets. The good-looking one,” the really tall man added.

I watched, wagging, while the girl let go of the roof and clung to Ben’s back. The three men moved carefully to the ladder, and then Ben gently carried the girl to the ground.

I understood from looking at her that she was young. A young human. I hadn’t known before that some humans were small and young—just like I was! I bet she would understand about chasing and wrestling and how to chew your friends gently to show that you like them. I felt the leash snap out of the white-haired man’s grasp as I darted to meet her.

“A puppy!” The girl sank to her knees.

Licking her face, I could taste the fear boiling within her. This girl was *terrified*. That meant, I guessed, that we wouldn’t be playing right now.

“Her name’s Samantha,” Ben announced to the man and the woman who were not wearing long coats.

“Are you hurt, Samantha?” The woman knelt down to look at us.

The girl’s name, I decided, was Samantha. She shook her head, holding me tight. I didn’t struggle in her grasp—I could feel the tension in her easing a bit as she held me. That felt like a good thing. She couldn’t play if she was so scared. If I let her hold me, she’d feel better.

“That’s Ripley,” Ben informed her. I looked up at my name. “Would you like to carry him with you as we go to the ambulance, Samantha?”

Samantha nodded. Her hair was much lighter than Ben’s but not as light as the white-haired man’s, and she trembled as we all headed over to the boxy car. I could smell water, now, water and steam—the odor was as strong as the smoke.

A short, stocky man with clipped hair and light eyes intercepted us.

“Hey, Hutch,” Ben greeted.

The man nodded back a little coolly. “Ben. Thought it was your day off.”

“True. I thought I’d come by and save the day before you guys screwed it up.”

The man snorted. Ben turned and looked where people were walking in and out of the front door of the house. A thin haze of smoke was wafting out into the air and into my nose.

“We know how it started?” Ben asked.

The man shrugged. “In the kitchen, mostly contained

there. If I had to guess, I'd say they left something on the stove too long, caught fire."

"Anybody inside?" Ben wanted to know.

"Just the kid, far as we can tell." The man looked down at Samantha. "Anybody else home, young lady?"

Samantha shyly shook her head.

"Where are your parents?" the man demanded tersely. "Why were you alone?"

"We'll take care of her, Lieutenant," the woman next to me interrupted.

There was an odd silence. "Well, hey, Hutch, this is Ripley," Ben remarked cheerfully. "He's a blue merle border collie. Ripley's going to be the newest member of the rescue squad at Station Five."

The man regarded me critically and then looked at Ben. "Over my dead body," he stated coldly. "Fire station's no place for a dog."

"We'll just have to see," Ben replied.

"I mean it, Ben."

Ben's smile didn't falter. "We'll just have to see," he repeated.

## Two



Samantha carried me as she followed Ben and the nice woman to the big, boxy car that had arrived after the truck. They opened the rear doors and we all climbed in. There was so much to see and smell! Things to chew were everywhere. Smoke still painted the air.

But the girl holding me was in real distress, wiping her eyes and taking shuddering breaths as she sat down on a bench. I decided to hold off exploring until she felt better.

The woman sat next to Ben, on an opposite bench. She leaned forward to look into Samantha's eyes. Her nose was within reach, but I decided to leave it alone for now. "You did the right thing, Samantha. Climbing out on the roof was really smart," she told the girl.

"I couldn't go down the stairs. There was too much smoke," the girl explained weakly.

"My name's Roxanne Sabin," the woman went on. Her

voice was calm and the girl seemed to relax a bit just from hearing her talk. “There’s a town in Minnesota called Sabin, but I’ve never been there. And this is Ben. We work together on the rescue squad when he’s not off adopting dogs. He’s harmless.”

Ben smiled. “Ripley really seems to like you.”

Samantha’s arms were rigid as they clutched me. I did not understand what was happening at all; I only knew that this girl was very agitated and unhappy. “How old is he?”

“Ripley’s a little more than ten weeks,” Ben answered.

“Why don’t you tell us what happened, Samantha?” the woman prodded. Her light brown hair was very curly and bobbed around on her head as she spoke. Normally I would lunge over to try to grab a mouthful of those curls, but normally I’m not being clutched by a panicked Samantha.

“I’m scared of heights,” Samantha blurted in response. “When I crawled out the window, I thought I was going to die.”

“Nobody’s dying today,” Ben replied softly. “Right, Roxie?”

“Nobody’s going to die,” she agreed levelly. The woman with the curly hair was probably Roxie, I thought.

“Do people call you Sammie or Samantha?” Ben inquired.

The girl shrugged. “Some people call me Sammie. Some people call me Samantha.”

“All right,” Ben agreed. “You’re safe now, Sammie.”

“Samantha!” I heard a woman wail. We all turned to look out the open rear doors, and there was a woman sprinting through the grass. She had light hair just like Samantha and was thin and shorter than Ben. She ran straight to me, as any person would, and enveloped Samantha and me in a fierce hug, tears streaming down her face. “I couldn’t get here. They have the street blocked off. I’m so sorry, Samantha.”

The new woman cried and Samantha cried and Roxie and Ben glanced at each other. I wriggled a little, pressed between the crying people.

“Are you okay?” the new woman kept asking Samantha.

“I’m okay,” Samantha replied woodenly each time. She was petting me rapidly now, stroking my head with shaking fingers.

Ben was intently watching the new woman. “Seems like your daughter and Ripley have bonded,” he observed with an easy smile.

The new woman grinned back gratefully. “Yes, thank you. Whose puppy is it?”

Ben chuckled. “Until a little more than an hour ago, he was supposed to be a guide dog for the blind, but he flunked out before they even started—I guess they call it career-changed. So now he works for the fire department.”

I noticed Roxie’s eyes widen a little, staring at Ben, but



he was still talking. "I'm just not in uniform today. I took the day off to go pick up this little guy."

Roxie's expression was skeptical. "Does Lieutenant Hutchins know about the dog?"

"It's okay. I cleared it with the captain."

Roxie shook her head. "That's not what I asked. Does *Hutch* know?"

Ben smiled at her. "Yah, well, I just told him."

"Huh," Roxie replied. "What did he say?"

Ben's smile faltered a little. "Okay, he didn't exactly endorse the idea."

"Ben. Ripley's not going to be a fire station dog. Hutch will *never let that happen*."

The humans all seemed oddly troubled, which made no sense to me. The day was full of smoke dancing on cool breezes, there were all sorts of things to smell and chew, and I was here to play with everyone. Also, I was getting tired of being held so tight. I wiggled and began to nibble on a strand of Samantha's hair. It tasted smoky and very interesting.

"Yah," Ben finally said to Roxie. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

"How are you doing, Samantha?" the new woman asked. "Do you want to call Mrs. Middleton?"

"I'm okay, Mom," Samantha replied in a low voice. She had called the woman Mom often enough that I figured out it was her name.

The people talked, and gradually Samantha's arms relaxed, her heart stopped beating so loudly, and she even smiled at me. "Can I play with Ripley outside?" she asked timidly.

"You betcha!" Ben agreed easily.

We jumped down out of the car and Samantha put me down in the grass. Finally! I shook myself hard after being held so tightly.

Then I attacked Samantha's shoes, found a stick and carried it around, and showed it to Samantha. She understood how to play Tug, so we did that until the stick broke. Then, to my delight, I located a plastic toy buried in the grass. I dug it up and let Samantha pull it away from me so she could throw it. Then I pounced on it and chewed it to bits, the sharp little pieces sticking to my tongue.

A shadow loomed over me and Ben scooped me up.

"Walk with me to my car," he suggested to the woman named Mom. "Roxie can stay here with Samantha a little longer."

With a puzzled look on her face, Mom nodded, and the three of us left the backyard. Ben carried me but not Mom.

"Seems like this was a tough experience for Samantha," Ben said. "I'm curious as to why she was home."

Mom eyed him shrewdly. "You mean home *alone*? Is that what you're asking?"

Ben reluctantly nodded. Mom sighed. "Well, Saman-

tha's suffered from anxiety since . . . I should tell you that her father died in a car accident a few years ago. She was in the car with him. She's homeschooled because going to school is just . . . too much. Mrs. Middleton, her therapist, is worried that Samantha's getting too dependent on me. For a while it was so bad I couldn't even be in a different room for more than a few minutes."

Since I was being held so tightly in Ben's arms, I decided to lick them. His soft, short hairs tickled my tongue.

"Yah," Ben told Mom. "I think I get it."

Mom nodded. "I've been taking quick trips, gradually increasing the time away. Today the idea was for me to make a fast visit to the store. I was only gone for about forty-five minutes. I'm not sure"—she gestured back behind us, to the smoky house—"what happened in that time."

"Lieutenant Hutchins thinks something was left on the stove and boiled dry and then ignited. That's not uncommon. Especially when I'm the one cooking, don'tcha know." Ben grinned.

Mom didn't smile back. "Oh, my." She briefly closed her eyes. "I set some stew on the stove in a pot and forgot all about it. This is my fault."

"Do you think your daughter is . . ." Ben trailed off.

"Traumatized? This couldn't have been worse." Mom sounded and smelled almost as upset as Samantha. Would she need to hold me too? I was willing, if it was truly important. But honestly, it's hard work being held

and staying still when you want to run, and I'd already done a lot of being held today.

"I'm trying to do what Mrs. Middleton said and gradually introduce her to the notion that she can be left alone safely," Mom went on. "And then there's a *fire*."

"So, you work from home, then?" Ben inquired.

"Yes, which is fortunate, because of Samantha."

"Yah, that probably wouldn't be easy for me."

Mom smiled. "Not too many stay-at-home firefighters," she speculated.

"I'll ask my captain about it. Maybe start a pilot program. So what do you do from home?"

"I'm a ghostwriter."

Ben blinked. "So . . . haunted houses?"

Mom laughed. "No, I write books that are published under other people's names. I just finished one on yoga. Before that it was dog training, and before that a woman pilot who crashed in the mountains and had to find her way back through the wilderness."

"Maybe you could write my life story! As soon as I have one, anyway," Ben suggested. "So, when you do a whole book about yoga, does that mean you become a yoga expert?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Well, to be an expert in yoga, you have to practice it nearly every day. I do occasionally go online for a class, but that's it. You're reminding me I should get back to doing that. I'm between assignments right now, so I have plenty of free time."

“What about dog training?” Ben asked. He sounded very interested in Mom, even though she didn’t have any treats that I could smell. “Did you have to become an expert for that book?”

“Well, *expert*?” Mom shook her head. “I certainly know all the basics and have a good idea of what’s required, especially when you have some problem behaviors. But there’s a difference between writing about something and actually doing it.”

I squirmed again. If we were going to just stand around, I couldn’t think of any reason why Ben shouldn’t let me chase one of the butterflies I saw flitting from flower to flower in some bushes.

“I wonder if the universe, or at least a pan full of stew on the stove, is trying to tell me something,” Ben mused. “A while ago I lined up a dog trainer to teach the basics to the puppy I was planning to get, plus do some dog sitting. But I guess she met someone in New York on a trip and now she’s moving there, so . . .” He gave Mom a hopeful smile. “My plan was to take the next couple of days to find someone. Do you think you . . . ?”

Ben and Mom were smiling at each other even though they weren’t paying me any attention. Then Mom frowned. “But like I said . . . I’ve never actually trained a dog before.”

“How hard can it be?” Ben replied with an easy grin. “Ripley’s a border collie—very smart, smarter than me.”

“All right,” Mom agreed thoughtfully. “I’m certainly

willing to give it a try, especially because of how much Samantha enjoyed holding Ripley.”

Mom turned and looked back toward where people were still trooping in and out of the open front door. I wanted to go play with them if Mom and Ben were going to go on being so dull. “I guess I’ll look for a new place to rent. One that allows dogs,” she said with a sigh.

Ben smiled. “That’s great. At the fire department, we work twenty-four-hour shifts on and then have forty-eight hours off. On my days off I work for my dad at a car dealership. It’s a pretty loose schedule. I already told my dad I’m going to need time off to train Ripley to be a fire station dog, and he’s all for it.”

“Give me a week or two,” Mom responded, “to find a new place and move in.” She sighed. “I hate moving. But then, yes, it’s a deal.”

We left Mom and got back in Ben’s car. It was so fun to jump back and forth between the seats. “Ripley, do you ever stop moving?” Ben demanded. “It’s a short trip. Are you really going to make me put you back in the crate, for Pete’s sake?”

I wagged because he was talking to me.

The car started moving and I felt like I wanted to sit still for a while because of the funny feeling that created inside me. “Thank goodness,” Ben muttered, glancing over at me as he held on to a big ring that looked like a nice chew toy.

After a little while, we arrived at a place Ben called home. It was wonderful!

There was carpet and I dug at it. Then I squatted on it. Ben shouted “No!” and took me out into the lush grasses of the backyard, which had birds in it, so I chased them, but then they flew up into the trees, so I bit at some bushes. Then ran in a big circle, jumped on Ben, who was sitting there laughing at me, and found a wonderful toy.

“Not the hose,” Ben objected, pulling it out of my mouth.

This set the pattern for the next several days. I ran in circles in the house and the backyard, I dug up dirt and grass and squirmy bugs called worms, and I chewed a lot of things. Ben pulled some of them from my mouth while he talked to me. “Not my hiking shoes, Ripley!” “Stop, that’s my tie.” “Ripley, let the cushion alone.” “Not the remote, Ripley!”

Sometimes my chewing games turned into chasing games, and that was very fun indeed.

I could always tell when Ben wanted me to be serious because he would talk to me in low tones. When he talked like that, he often wore a pouch on his belt, and in that pouch was my food. He would hand a piece of food to me and then click a toy that he held between his fingers. Soon I understood that if he clicked, I would get a treat.

What I did not know is how to get a click. I decided I needed to find out.