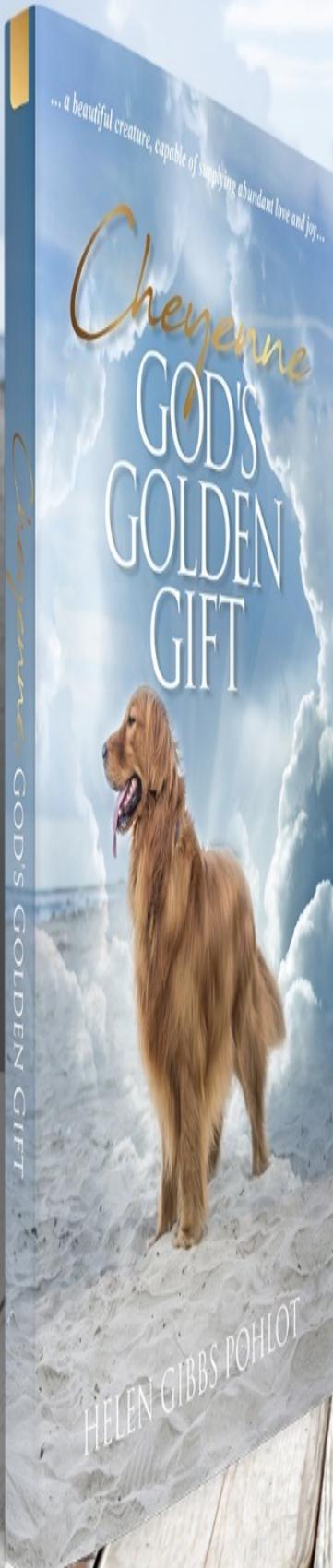


... a beautiful creature, capable of supplying abundant love and joy...



Cheyenne

GOD'S

GOLDEN

GIFT

HELEN GIBBS POHLOT



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**LUCKY’S
WILL**
BY
HELEN GIBBS POHLOT

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This is a work of creative nonfiction. The events are portrayed to the best of the author's memory with some embellishment for literary effect. While the story is true, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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FOR BRUCE

CHAPTER I

Lucky didn't have a Christmas in 1993. On December 22nd, her world shattered amid a frigid and snowy winter that wreaked havoc in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Christmas was Lucky's favorite time of year. The 42-pound mix breed dog awoke on the morning of the 22nd, shortly after eight, looking forward to the weekly trip to town. Will Gilbear, Lucky's beloved owner of almost 20 years, had promised Lucky the night before they would leave first thing in the morning, but Will just wasn't himself. He was still recovering from a stroke he had the year before and felt tired.

Will shrugged off the fatigue that he attributed to a restless night's sleep, then put on his hat and coat. There was no way that he would break a promise to Lucky. For the past three days, he told her about all the things they would buy for the upcoming holiday.

Lucky understood, she always did. Sometimes Will didn't even have to speak. Lucky instinctively knew what he meant.

Lucky was already stationed at the front door, wagging her tail with anticipation. She couldn't wait to go to town. She knew Will would get a turkey, her favorite, and lots of Christmas treats.

“Okay, let's go! Okay, let's go,” Will said, as Lucky bolted towards the car. “Just wait for a second, I have to put the garbage out, then I'll open the car door and window. Remember Lucky; I'm not as young or fast as I used to be.”

An impatient Lucky paced by the side of the car, as Will slowly made his way towards her. It was bitterly cold with the hint of snow lingering in the air. The inclement weather did not dampen the festive spirits of the duo as they got into the car. Will pulled the four-wheel-drive vehicle out of the driveway with Lucky perched to her usual spot: her head poked out of the open window.

The cheerful dog loved riding in the car and going to town. Not only did she get a treat, but the fresh air blowing on her face felt terrific. Will shared Lucky's enthusiasm for the weekly excursion and the approaching holiday. He looked forward to the sumptuous dinner he would cook for the two of them on

Christmas Day. Under the tree, he would place nicely wrapped treats for Lucky and two bags of miniature Milky Way candy bars for himself.

Will, a widower for over 30 years, was grateful for the simple pleasures that life offered. At 79, the former school psychologist chose a reclusive life in a remote area of upstate Pennsylvania which he shared with Lucky, his loyal companion. For over 40 years, Will practiced psychology in the inner-city. He worked to make a difference in the lives of troubled children.

When retirement came, he felt old beyond his years and wanted to live a simple life close to nature. Except for the monthly visits from his brother George and the weekly excursion for supplies, Will and Lucky lived a quiet existence, sharing walks and tasty meals in the beauty of their surroundings.

The trip to town proved uneventful, except for Will's apparent struggle to push the shopping cart. He bought several chew toys for Lucky as a surprise, plus a big pumpkin pie for dessert. He even indulged himself with the purchase of gingerbread cookies, which were his favorite.

Lucky patiently waited outside in the car with her head poked out the window. She looked around at all the fortunate people going into the store to buy their Christmas food. A little girl about six years old ran over to Lucky's car and tried to pet her head. The child could hardly reach up, but Lucky bent her head down and returned the affection.

"You are such a sweet little dog," the child's mother told Lucky. "My daughter Natalie and I wish you a very Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, I hope Santa brings you lots of toys," Natalie said as they went into the store.

Natalie and her mom walked right past Will as he came out of the store. He ambled over to the car and opened the truck. He put all the special treats inside, then made his way toward Lucky with her treat in hand.

"Here girl, I know you are waiting for this," he said with a grin. "You are such a wonderful dog."

Despite the agonizing pain that invaded Will's body, Lucky still brought a smile to his face. He loved her. She had been a devoted friend and provided

solace from the periodic loneliness of his life. Except for his brother George, who lived 300 miles away, Lucky was his best friend. He gently patted her head, grateful for the company. The ten-mile ride was slower than usual. Will, now riddled with pain, drove less than 20 MPH on the highway. Lucky failed to notice, immersed in her delicious beef jerky treat. By the time they reached their driveway, Will could barely hold the steering wheel.

Will drove the car down the long driveway, stopped in front of the house and turned off the ignition. Lucky was ready for her customary leap from the window when suddenly Will slumped over on to the steering wheel. He didn't move. He did not make a sound. Something was wrong. Desperately, Lucky tried to awaken her master. She barked, licked his face and pushed him with her nose, but to no avail.

Wake up, Will. Don't leave me now. I just got you back.

It had only been five months since they both returned to the house. During Will's six months convalescence at the nursing home, Lucky stayed at a kennel where she patiently waited for him to come get her. Sure, it was lonely, but she knew the day would come when she would once again hear his voice, and he would take her home. After all, they loved each other.

True to her belief, Will happily retrieved his pet after clearance from his doctor. Their homecoming was triumphant, as they once again resumed their peaceful life.

Please wake up Will, please, please! Lucky barked, pleading for him to hear her.

Please, please, you must get up. I can't do it all again, please, Will, please.

Why do these things always have to happen, especially now before Christmas, just when everything was back to normal? We cut down a tree, decorated it, and brought everything for a great dinner. This was supposed to be the best Christmas ever. Come on, Will; please wake up, we can go into the house. I'll take care of you, she begged. But the stillness of Will's body sent shivers of alarm through Lucky's small frame. Instinctively, the severity of the situation hit her. She had to go for help.

It was up to Lucky now. She had to find someone to help Will. But where? Lucky decided to go back to town. *The lady at the bank knew them and*

might help, Lucky thought. Before Lucky leaped out the window, she glanced over at Will. He looked like he was sleeping.

I'll be back. I'll try to find somebody to help us. Don't worry. I just have to leave you for a little while, but I'll be back.

Frantic and upset, Lucky jumped through the open passenger side window. With no neighbors for miles around, she began her journey towards the town, following the same route they had taken for the last 20 years. A determined Lucky headed directly to the bank. It had always been the first stop on their weekly trip. The woman at the drive-thru window knew Will and never forgot to say hello to Lucky. She greeted them each time with a friendly smile, pleasant conversation and a dog biscuit for Lucky.

Lucky ran as fast as she could down the deserted three-mile road which led to the highway. A mix of sleet and snow fell on the recently plowed road. Within minutes, a thick layer of ice blanketed the road, causing Lucky to stumble repeatedly.

She kept falling, which slowed her down considerably. She instantly realized the need to make better time and frantically searched for a faster route. Lucky raced towards the woods which ran parallel to the highway. She opted to follow this alternative course, so she could maintain her footing without losing too much time.

Dodging the trees was difficult, but the strong-willed dog forged ahead until she came to a small clearing with a cabin nestled in the middle. Lucky picked up speed and got within 50 yards of the modest structure. *Somebody might live here*, she said to herself, her heart beating with excitement.

Suddenly, a large German Shepherd lunged from around the right side of the house. Its furious bark paralyzed Lucky with fear. She froze, unable to move until the large dog charged towards her.

I can't let this stop me; Lucky thought as she mustered all her strength and courage, then pounced on the seemingly vicious animal. The shepherd took a brutal swipe at Lucky's tail, snatching the hair from deep within the skin. In split-second timing, Lucky darted past the dog and raced directly towards the front door of the cabin, mindful of the piercing pain in her tail.

Lucky's incessant barking for help drowned out the snarls of the larger

animal who now had her cornered. With all her might, she banged on the cabin door with her nose and paws, leaving deep scratch marks. When it became apparent that no one was home, Lucky made a swift exit before the dog resumed its attack.

When Lucky turned around, she faced the bared, sharp teeth of the large animal circling her as if she were its prey. She had no other choice but to outrun and trick the dog. Lucky sprinted around the left side of the house. Even at almost 20 years of age, she was still fast. Will always told her she was the fastest and smartest dog he had ever known.

But the snapping Shepherd was right on her tail. Just as the two dogs were about to collide, Lucky bolted to the right, sending the large dog reeling into a snowbank.

With only seconds to make her getaway, Lucky ran with lightning speed. No vicious dog protecting its property would get in her way today. Lucky had a mission. Save Will!

Finally, Lucky was free of the snarling dog. She ran aimlessly through the dense woods. When she stopped to catch your breath, exhaustion set in and worst of all; she was lost.

The dog attack threw Lucky off course, leaving her desperately lost. Despite fatigue and piercing pain in her tail, Lucky resumed a vigorous pace, hoping to spot something familiar. After about 45 minutes, a fence line came into view that extended horizontally for as far as the eye could see.

Lucky's ears picked up as she heard the faint sound of engines. *It must be the highway*, Lucky thought, ignoring her tired body. When she reached the fence, initially constructed to prevent animals from going onto the road, Lucky ran in both directions hoping to find an opening through which she could crawl.

She found a spot where a branch penetrated the fence and created a small hole. Her paws ached and grew tired as she diligently dug through the snow and ice underneath the hole in the fence. Within 10 minutes, she could squeeze through the enlarged hole. She quickly made her way down the slope to the gully, next to the highway where she stopped and rested.

I only need a few minutes to catch my breath before I make my way through the briars and onto the road, Lucky said to herself.

After a brief respite, Lucky plowed through the thick brush and finally reached the massive road. She stopped and barked continuously, hoping someone would hear her pleas for help.

Off in the distance, the sound of a truck engine roared. Lucky impulsively ran out into the middle of the road and jumped up and down in a frenzied state.

The driver must notice me. He'll stop, and I can lead them to Will. Then we can take Will to the hospital where the doctors will make him well again. Just like before, she told herself.

Lucky continued her valiant effort for attention as the truck got closer. She jumped up and down, then ran back and forth on the southbound lane. Her bark reached a peak and screeched into the night air. The loud honking of the truck horn silenced Lucky's plea for help. She realized immediately that the driver would not stop.

"Can't you see I need help, please stop, please stop, please stop." Lucky barked as loud as she could.

Lucky raced head on towards the thundering truck that instantly swerved and sped past with a violent gust that tossed the pleading dog into midair. She landed 10 feet from the roadside, dazed and hurt, engulfed in the overgrown thorny brush. Her head and right leg throbbed with excruciating pain, which momentarily overwhelmed her in anguish.

The agony prevailed as Lucky wondered how she could be stupid enough to think truck would stop. Now, she did not even know if she could get up. She knew that town was out of the question, but Will still needed help. What was she going to do? Forlorn and extremely sad, Lucky considered her options.

Despite brave attempts to seek help, Lucky was on the verge of despair. It was getting late and would soon be dark. There was no time to go to town now. Lucky only hoped she could make it back to Will before dark.

Agonizing pain ripped through Lucky's body as she repeatedly tried to get up. Finally, she stood up amid the thorny bushes that clung to her fur. With each step pain shot through her slight frame, which was now also littered with pointed sharp briar needles.

Lucky refused to give up, determined to reach Will even if she had to crawl. Careful of the oncoming traffic, Lucky slowly made her way across the highway. Instinctively she headed south along a gully, next to the highway. After a few miles, Lucky found the side road that would lead her home.

It was now pitch dark, with the snow falling in sheets that obscured her vision. The dark frame of her house came into view. It looked dark and cold, not at all the way it appeared most winter nights with lights in the windows and a roaring fire in the hearth.

Weary and fearing the worst, Lucky limped over to the car. Unable to leap through the window, she hoisted herself up on her uninjured leg and looked in the window. Will had not moved.

No, no, no, she cried, her worst fear had come true. Will was dead. A desperate piercing howl emanated from deep within Lucky that shrilled through the frigid night air. It was over. The beautiful life they shared, gone forever. It was over. Lucky was alone.

CHAPTER II

Each day Lucky grew weaker. After five days Lucky realized that the freezing temperatures and lack of food would eventually prevent her from doing the one job she felt destined to do, protect Will. She licked the snow that had formed a fort around her body, wedged under the driver's side of the car for shelter. The snow tasted good, but the need for food welled up in her stomach. Her head pounded as she tried to stand up. Weak from injuries and lack of nourishment, Lucky collapsed. She kept trying to get up, but each time she fell back, dazed and in terrible pain.

On the sixth day, after eating the fresh snow, she could get up. She limped to the trash cans along the side of the house. Will put the trash out the day before they left for town. Lucky thought there may be some food in the cans if only she could knock them over.

The cans were deeply indented in the snow and would not move despite Lucky's many attempts at pushing them with her nose. Desperately she tried, and each time met with failure. Suddenly, the wind encircled the cans, blowing a mountain of snow to one side.

Seizing the opportunity, Lucky resumed her attack on the cans and was able to tilt one over, spilling the frozen contents on the ground.

Three plastic bags lay partially opened on the snow. Lucky went to work ripping the bags with her paws and teeth, uncovering the remnants of half-eaten food. Although frozen, the food cured the rumble which previously throbbed in Lucky's stomach. For the first time in a week, she rested without constant agony.

Over the next three days she picked from the garbage and quenched her thirst with the snow, but the tasteless food did not last, and she once again felt the pangs of hunger.

Lucky's leg hurt, and her head ached, plus there was a persistent ringing in her ear. However, she had to survive for Will's sake. She knew it, at least until someone came for him. She wasn't about to let Will down now and decided that she must venture out and find something to eat or she too would surely die.

With only her skills and instinct on which to rely, she began her quest for food. Lucky remembered the disposal site where Will always took the trash cans. It was not too far away, maybe three or four miles, not nearly as far as the town. Lucky decided to go there. She was confident that she knew the way.

The site was close to the highway but in the opposite direction of the town. With over 10 inches of newly fallen snow on the road, the journey would be difficult. However, Lucky concluded it was the only option.

Just after dawn the next day Lucky set-out. Unable to run, Lucky walked slowly and paced herself. She stopped many times to catch her breath and rest her aching bones. The three-mile walk to the highway in the heavy snow took over 4 hours.

Pain swept through her body with every step. When it overwhelmed her, she crawled with determination? As she approached the highway, Lucky spotted a gully about 20 feet from the road that she followed north for less than a mile until the small path leading to her destination came into view.

She walked down the narrow trail and noticed a man putting bags in a pile. Lucky collected all her strength and went over to him. Before she could summon his help, the large man's mouth twisted in a vicious snarl. He appeared to be yelling at her, but she could barely make out what he was saying.

“Get out of here you, mangy scavenger. You stupid mutt, get out of here,” the man shouted and tossed a large stick at Lucky.

The stick barreled in the air and struck Lucky on the right side, causing her to fall and slide down the snow-covered bank. At the bottom Lucky laid still, afraid to move, worried that the angry man would come after her.

After about an hour, she cautiously attempted to make it up the hill. Inch-by-inch she clawed her way upward on the slippery slope. When she reached the top, no one was in sight. The opportunity was at hand. She went over to the bags and ripped them open with her teeth. Lucky ate the decaying food until her stomach was full.

Lucky accomplished her goal and resumed the weary journey home. Walking along the gully, Lucky felt protected from the large trucks that sped by on the highway. This time she saw them before she could hear them.

Over the next several days, Lucky made two more trips to the disposal

site, following her carefully planned route. The journey for the injured dog was long and hard, but presented the only possibility for survival. Lucky was a lonely, domestic dog forced by willpower to brave the hazardous elements and return to her post. At all costs, she must stand guard over her beloved Will. Her resolution to watching over Will, her best friend, was firm.

When she reached home each time from her visit to the disposal site, it was pitch dark, bitterly cold and utterly lonely. Ice formed around her eyes and nose while her paws numbed by the frozen snow, making it difficult to move.

After her last trip, an exhausted Lucky curled into a ball. Her warm breath provided some heat against the severe cold. When her eyes finally closed, she fell into a deep sleep nestled between the snow and the car.

CHAPTER III

Lucky woke up in glistening sunlight. She tried to focus her eyes, then immediately noticed the pickup truck parked in the driveway. *George, George, it's George, Will's brother*, a relieved Lucky said to herself.

When George got out of the truck, he walked over and discovered Will's body and an emaciated frozen Lucky lying right next to the car under the driver's side near Will. George drew his hands to his face, sat down in the snow and wept.

“Oh Will, I’m sorry! I should have been with you. Oh my God, why did he have to die here alone?” George sobbed. The site of his dead brother was too much for him to bear.

But Lucky knew better. Will did not die alone; Lucky was with him. The only time she left his side was to get help and find food. Lucky stood guard over her Will. She would never leave him. Lucky hoped George understood that. *Will was never alone.*

George was heartbroken over the death of his brother. For two weeks before Will's death, the phone lines were down because of the weather. Despite that, George sensed something was wrong. He desperately tried to contact Will. When the roads became passable, he immediately drove to Will's house, but now he was too late. He outwardly blamed himself for not insisting that Will stay in the nursing home where they could have cared for him.

George knew deep down precisely what Will wanted. Will was both brilliant and independent and disliked being cooped up. After being in the nursing home recovering from his stroke, he could not wait to get home to his books, peaceful surroundings, and most of all his precious Lucky. George tried to console himself, knowing that Will lived a full life precisely the way he wanted. For this George was grateful, but he would miss his older brother whom he loved and looked up to all his life.

A distraught George went into the house and called the police, who arrived with an ambulance 10 minutes later. Lucky remained by Will's side until they took him away. Her heart broke, and now it seemed like nothing mattered.

Goodbye, my friend, I love you, Lucky said to herself, knowing she would never see Will again. With an aching body covered in briars, Lucky stood at the end of the driveway and watched the ambulance disappear from view, ending their 20 years of companionship.

George glanced over at Lucky. His heart went out to the poor little dog. He was glad Lucky stayed by Will's side. George knew that she never left him and was loyal to the end.

“Come on, Lucky, you poor little thing; you need some food and water. You've been out in the cold way too long,” George tearfully said as he put Lucky in the house for the first time in 18 days.

Lucky made no sound. She laid down on the floor in front of Will's big gray chair. She missed him so much. She knew Will would never again sit in the chair and stroke her back while he read one of his many novels. Nor would he ever call her name in the middle of the night to share a snack or to just keep him company.

Lucky felt a vast emptiness throughout the house, which filled every fiber of her being. It was all over. She had no desire to go on. Her only comfort was her ability to survive the hazardous weather long enough for George to come for Will. Now she could rest. Lucky completed her job, and nothing else mattered. She closed her tired eyes, oblivious to the vacant world around her.

“What do I do with Lucky?” George asked himself. He knew what Will wanted, but he couldn't bring himself to face it. Will told George on more than one occasion that if anything happened to him, he must put Lucky to sleep.

Will told George that no one would want a 20-year-old dog. Will did not know anyone who would take her and did not wish to see Lucky abused or mistreated. Therefore, euthanasia seemed the only option. Will also told George that no one would love Lucky the way he did and Lucky deserved that because she was good, loyal and the best friend anyone could ever have.

Despite George's opposition to Will's request, he felt obligated to comply with his brother's wishes. If it were possible, he would take Lucky, but he lived in a retirement community which banned pets, plus his wife was allergic to dogs. He was not aware of anyone else who could care for lucky.

After they took Wills body to the funeral home, the police returned to the

house and offered to take Lucky to the veterinarian 30 miles away for a final visit. The police made an appointment for the following day. When the officers arrived, Lucky was still in the locked house. George held up in traffic on route back from the funeral home missed their call. The police couldn't wait and left a note indicating they would be back the next day. George returned their call, telling them he didn't want to inconvenience them again and would take Lucky himself.

Just as he took Lucky's leash off the wall, the doorbell rang. George's daughters Adele and Victoria, along with Victoria's eight-year-old son Bruce, were at the door. They heard the news about Uncle Will and wanted to comfort their father.

Alone at the foot of her master's chair, Lucky immersed in a silent world watched the strangers come into her house. She wondered who they were and what they were doing in her home? Why don't they all just go away and leave her alone?

Lucky had not uttered a sound since the night of Will's death and ate only enough to survive. Nothing much mattered now as she awaited her fate. Even the filth and briars that matted her once luxurious fur didn't seem to concern her. She resembled a junkyard dog with no wish to interact with people. Lucky wished Will had taken her with him. Lucky could not understand why she survived the harsh weather, and no food or shelter. It would have killed a dog half her age. Lucky also had a menacing look and panted constantly. The apprehensive dog opened her eyes and watched Victoria's son Bruce approach her. She was wary of strangers now after the days she spent on her own, but this was a child with a friendly smile who seemed concerned about her.

Bruce held out his hand in friendship, hoping Lucky would sniff it and they could get acquainted. Lucky lifted her eyes and looked at him but did not move.

“Hey girl, it's okay, everything will be fine,” Bruce said trying to console the pitiful dog.

Bruce felt sorry for Lucky. He knew exactly how she felt. He felt the same way. It was less than seven months since his golden retriever Cheyenne had died. She was his constant companion and best friend. They played together every day of his life. He told no one, but he thought of Cheyenne all the time. He

missed her more than anyone knew. Bruce stroked Lucky's head. She was grateful for the warmth generated from this 8-year-old child.

"She must miss Uncle Will's so much, now she has nobody," Bruce told his mom. "Why do they have to put Lucky to sleep, she's not sick like Cheyenne? It's not fair," he said.

"She survived the blizzard, freezing cold, and she still stayed by Uncle Will. She deserves a heck of a lot better than this," he cried.

"Lucky is a brave little dog, and it's not right to put her to sleep. It's wrong, and I won't let it happen," screamed Bruce.

"Bruce Uncle Will wanted to put Lucky to sleep. She's only used to this house and has never been around many people. Think of her, it would be difficult for her to adjust to another place, she's almost 20 years old," George explained to his grandson.

"Oh, you're saying that just because she's old, she has to die. Well, I'm sorry Grandpa, you're wrong."

"To tell you the truth, I don't want to put Lucky to sleep either, but where will she go? I can't take her," George said. "I wish I could."

"You can't, but I can," Adele spoke up. "Bruce is right. Lucky is healthy. There is no reason on this Earth that she should have to die. She has a family, and she is coming home with me," Adele insisted.

Tremendous relief swept over George. He never dreamed his daughter would want Lucky. He knew how much Lucky meant to Will. She had been a loyal friend to the end; it was against George's grain to put her down. His family stepped up to care for the sad little dog, which made George feel better. Besides, his grandson Bruce seemed to like Lucky, and he could visit her at Adele's anytime he wanted, which would make Will happy. It was the right thing to do, George concluded.

Things were moving quickly. George was on the verge of collapse at the terrible circumstances of his brother's death. While Victoria took care of her 82-year-old father, she looked over at Lucky, and her heart just about broke. She had to prepare the little dog for the long trip to Adele's. Making her comfortable could be difficult. Lucky looked awful with fur matted and covered in dried filth.

Victoria could not imagine how she could even sit down with the tangled fur pulling tight against her skin.

Victoria's first thought was to find a veterinarian to check Lucky for injuries. Although nothing was obvious, she wanted to be sure. The local phone book provided no help. The best Victoria could do was find a groomer about 20 miles away who could at least get rid of the briars and debris embedded in Lucky's fur.

When Victoria called and spoke to the groomer, she asked about a doctor. "I tried to find a veterinarian and can't believe there are none listed for over 30 miles. Do you know of any because my only alternative is to wait until I get Lucky to my sisters and I want her seen right away?"

"I know it is awful," the groomer replied. "My friend John is about the only Vet around these parts. He is stopping by this afternoon. I can have him look at Lucky. Can you bring her right over?"

"Oh My God, yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you! I don't know what happened to Lucky during the days she was on her own, but I want to make sure she is okay. We will be right over."

"Lucky will be so much more comfortable for the trip when they wash and untangle her hair, plus she'll see a doctor," Victoria told Bruce. "This little dog deserves the best treatment and pampering after her ordeal. Let's go. They are waiting for us."

Reluctantly, Lucky got into the back of Victoria's car. Bruce sat right next to Lucky, who panted continuously. They arrived at the groomers where Lucky appeared nervous.

Lucky turned and looked directly at Bruce as she walked in the groomer's office. Her sad look conveyed the feeling of what now? Where are you taking me? But somehow Lucky trusted this kind young boy who whispered, "Lucky, don't be afraid I'll be back in a few hours, and you'll never be alone again."

"When Victoria and Bruce handed Lucky over to the kind groomer, they felt she was in expert hands. Thank you for helping us," Victoria told the compassionate woman.

“Don’t worry; I will call if there is a problem. If not, come and pick Lucky up in about two hours,” the groomer said as she took Lucky by the leash into the back room.

Two hours later, Lucky emerged. Her black, white and tan fluffed fur gleamed in the outdoor sunlight. She no longer looked like a junkyard dog. Lucky was beautiful and according to the Veterinarian in reasonably good health given her advanced age. She had no broken bones, only bruises, which Victoria suspected.

The groomer outwardly displayed affection for the sad little dog, which made Victoria and Bruce happy. Lucky reciprocated by licking the groomer's hand, grateful for the kindness.

After the purchase of a new red leash and collar, which accented Lucky's freshly coiffed look, they got back into Victoria's car for the trip to Adele's home.

Adele assisted George with Will's funeral arrangements but planned on finishing by the time Victoria, Bruce, and Lucky arrived at her house.

CHAPTER IV

Aunt Adele had a beautiful home. Bruce enjoyed going there because he got to see Adele's three dogs, Spike, Mike and Freddie. Freddie was old like Lucky, but Spike and Mike were six-year-old large Irish Setters. Bruce worried about Lucky fitting in with the three male dogs. Victoria thought the same thing.

"Mom, can we take Lucky home? Aunt Adele already has three dogs. There is no room here for Lucky," Bruce said.

"Bruce, it is too soon for us to get another dog. It has only been seven months since Cheyenne died. Honey, I am just not ready," Victoria told Bruce.

Victoria also worried about Lucky. Coming into a house with three male dogs would be hard. In her heart, Victoria knew the right thing to do but could not bring herself to say the words. The grief surrounding Cheyenne's death and the move to Pennsylvania from Boston still overwhelmed her. It was just too soon to get another dog. However, this sad little dog needed a safe place and someone to love her. Thrust into a canine madhouse of dominant males vying for attention was not what Lucky needed. Victoria stood there deep in thought, entirely conflicted by Lucky's plight.

Bruce stayed by Lucky's side as they waited outside for Adele to arrive. Lucky remained silent, standing next to Bruce.

Adele pulled into the driveway and happily greeted Lucky, "You look so beautiful, Lucky," she said while petting Lucky's head.

Everyone entered the kitchen. Bedlam ensued, as the two setters went crazy, vying for Lucky's attention. Adele finally settled them down, but even she worried that this was no place for Lucky.

"Let's give it a few hours and hopefully they will all get used to each other," Adele said.

Lucky stayed by Bruce's side, terrified of the two setters.

Bruce looked at his mother pitifully. Victoria looked at Bruce, then

Lucky. Her heart broke, and she put her feelings aside.

“Bruce put Lucky in the car,” she said.

“YES!!!” Bruce yelled as he grabbed Lucky’s leash and took her outside.

“Adele, we can’t bring Lucky in here. She is invading your dog’s territory; it’s terrifying her. I’ll take her home,” Victoria told her sister.

“Are you sure?” Adele asked.

“Look at how happy Lucky makes Bruce! It is the right thing to do,” Victoria said.

Victoria said goodbye to her sister, who meant well. She knew Lucky was going home with them from the minute she saw the pathetic look Lucky gave to Bruce. She fought it in her mind because the wound from Cheyenne’s death was still too fresh. However, deep in her soul, Victoria knew that Lucky and Bruce would be good for each other.

Bruce talked to Lucky for the entire hour-long ride. He told her about her new house and backyard, plus all the toys he would buy her.

Lucky appeared interested but still panted continuously. Victoria made a mental note to check on Lucky’s breathing to see if it got better with time. The Vet told her that the panting was from nerves and would eventually subside.

Once they arrived home, Bruce took Lucky inside announcing, “You are now home, Lucky. We will take good care of you.”

Victoria realized she did not have any dog food to feed Lucky. Instead, she cooked up hamburgers for dinner with vegetables, which Lucky seemed to enjoy.

Bruce’s dad got home around eight o’clock. He walked into the house and saw Lucky. Lucky got nervous and continued panting as Bruce’s Dad went over to meet her.

“Hello Lucky, welcome to your new home,” he said kindly.

Bruce’s dad, whose name was also Bruce, turned to his wife with a smile, “I knew you were coming home with Lucky. The two of you have the biggest

hearts, especially when it comes to animals.”

“I hope you don’t mind,” Victoria said to her husband. “I just couldn’t leave her at Adele’s with those three other dogs, especially the setters. Mike and Spike are so big, and Lucky is still hurt. She needs peace, plus a gentle atmosphere.”

“I know,” he said to his wife. “You did the right thing. It will work out just fine. No worries.”

Victoria looked around the house, knowing that Lucky still had some bruises. She had to figure out the best place for her to sleep. Then it suddenly hit her. Lucky was not used to stairs. The only stairs she had ever experienced were the five front steps going into her house.

Victoria’s house had two staircases, one that went up to the main bedrooms, made of hardwood, and a back staircase that went from the family room up into Victoria’s office, then the master bedroom. She wondered what would be the easiest for Lucky. The main staircase seemed steeper, which may cause Lucky to slip. Victoria decided that the carpeted back stairs would be more comfortable for Lucky.

The next task for Victoria and Bruce’s was to teach Lucky how to go up and down the back stairs.

“But Mom, I want Lucky to sleep in my room,” Bruce said.

“I know Bruce, but the back stairs are the easiest way for her to get upstairs and if she gets used to going this way, she can just walk over to your room.”

“You are right,” Bruce concluded. “I’ll show her how to go.”

With a full stomach, Lucky laid on the floor in the family room near Bruce, who was watching TV, while his mom and dad were in the kitchen next to the family room.

“Okay Lucky, now it’s time to show you where you will sleep,” Bruce told the contented dog.

Bruce went up the back staircase. Victoria ran in from the kitchen saying, “Come on, Lucky, time to go to bed.”

Lucky got up from her comfortable position and followed Bruce up the stairs. She didn't run up but went cautiously step by step and turned around to look at Victoria standing near the bottom of the stairs.

"Good girl, Lucky. You made it up those stairs very well. Not bad for a 20-year-old girl." Victoria praised Lucky.

Lucky followed Bruce down the long hallway to his room. Bruce gathered several pillows, took his train blanket and placed it on top, making a comfortable bed for Lucky. He sat down on the floor, patted the spot saying, "Come on girl, this is a comfy spot for you to sleep."

Lucky laid down on her newly created bed and fell fast asleep, feeling somewhat content for the first time in many days.

The next morning, Bruce was up at the crack of dawn, eager to show Lucky the backyard and his prized possession the trampoline. The two new friends went down the back staircase into the family room. Bruce quickly attached Lucky's leash to her new red collar. He opened the back door. They went out on the deck, then down into the yard where they walked with Bruce explaining Lucky's new surroundings. After Bruce advised Lucky on the backyard parameters, they went over to his trampoline.

"Here it is, Lucky. Wait until you see how high I can jump,"

Suddenly, Bruce leaped up on the trampoline, performing a somersault in midair. Lucky tried to jump up on the trampoline but could not make it. She rested her paws on the side of the bouncing machine and watched Bruce do another flip, mesmerized at his jumping expertise.

Lucky couldn't believe how high this young boy could jump.. It looked like lots of fun. In her younger day, she would have been right up there jumping with him, but for now, she was just happy to watch.

CHAPTER V

While Bruce went to school, Lucky stayed close to Victoria, who took her for long walks and gave her treats. Every day they walked together to the bus stop to wait for Bruce.

When Bruce got off the bus, Lucky ran to him, greeting him with massive affection. The two became great friends. They filled the void in each of their lives left by Cheyenne and Will. Victoria felt the same way. She often thought her grief lessened each day as she cared for this little half blind and partially deaf dog.

It quite surprised everyone at how quickly Lucky adapted to her new surroundings. Bruce, Victoria and big Bruce all fell in love with the charming older dog who desperately needed them.

Lucky got so comfortable with her new backyard that Victoria no longer needed to put her on a leash.

Early one summer day, Lucky got adventuresome. She went outside with Victoria, who was watering her plants. Lucky started exploring the big shrubs. One of them smelled like honeysuckle, just like the plant she remembered from outside Will's house. She quickly found it and poked her head into it to get a better whiff. Suddenly, bees swarmed, stinging her head, eyes, and ears, then making their way down her body. She shook her head, barely able to see. She tried to escape but got tangled in the bush. Victoria heard her movement and rushed over, swatting the many bees immersed in her fur.

Victoria grasped Lucky's collar and directed her toward the house. She seized a towel from the deck and brushed more bees off Lucky. When she got most of the bees off Lucky's coat, Victoria grabbed her leash, leading Lucky to the car.

She drove to the Veterinarian in record time. Without an appointment, Victoria walked right in the door with Lucky explaining it was an emergency. They took Lucky right away, fearing an allergic reaction to the many bee stings. The doctor pulled several more bees off Lucky. He gave her a shot and told Victoria it was a miracle she survived. The veterinarian told Victoria to monitor

Lucky for a few hours and to bring her back if she appeared lethargic. With partially swollen eyes and a tongue twice its size, Lucky braved the battle of the bees like a champion.

Beside herself with guilt for letting Lucky venture off into the shrubs, Victoria took Lucky home, vowing to spoil her for the rest of the day. She cooked Lucky a roast chicken and never let her out of her sight. Victoria felt terrible thinking the poor little thing went through enough. Being stung by a swarm of bees was just too much. Lucky survived but had welts from over 20 bee stings over much of her body. She endured yet another life-threatening situation that would have been the demise of most dogs. Lucky's will to survive continued to amaze Victoria..

CHAPTER VI

Despite what many previously believed, Lucky adjusted remarkably well to her new home. She loved Bruce, who was now her special person. She looked forward to seeing Victoria and big Bruce each day, grateful for their kindness and love. While she never forgot Will, she made room in her life for others.

People wary of animals found Lucky irresistible. Bruce's grandmother was one of them. All her life, she had a severe allergic reaction to dogs causing her to wheeze chronically, often gasping for breath if she was within two feet of an animal.

"I don't know what it is, but I could never pet a dog," she told Victoria.

Everyone was nervous when Grandma came to Bruce's house for the first time since they got Lucky. Not that she didn't like dogs, her reaction was so severe, she shied away from all animals.

Concern for Grandma having an allergic reaction to Lucky prompted Victoria to give Bruce specific instructions. Bruce kept Lucky in the family room when everyone arrived. Grandma stayed in the living room with Bruce's Uncle Bill and Aunt Annette, two newlyweds just back from their honeymoon. Grandma left briefly to see Victoria, who was making dinner in the kitchen.

Bruce, engrossed in a television show with Grandpa, didn't see Lucky venture into the kitchen. Lucky went over to Grandma and looked up at her. It touched Grandma's heart, seeing this little dog look up at her with gentle eyes. Without thinking, Grandma reached down and petted Lucky's head.

"You are such a pretty little girl," she said. Lucky responded by licking her hand.

Suddenly, it hit Grandma that she touched Lucky. She didn't want to alarm anyone, therefore said nothing and slipped back into the living room. The last thing anyone needed was a trip to the emergency room.

Two hours later, no reaction. Thrilled, Grandma returned to the kitchen to tell Victoria. "I was petting Lucky earlier, and now over two hours later, it didn't

bother me. I'm fine," she said happily.

Grandma went into the family room and sat down in the big red leather chair next to Lucky. Lucky nestled right on her feet. From that moment on, it was Grandma's and Lucky's special spot. Each time Grandma came for a visit, Lucky resumed her position. Lucky was the first dog she ever touched without a terrible reaction. It was a first for Grandma and Lucky.

There were many firsts during Lucky's first year at Bruce's. One day, Victoria was in the house's front yard with Lucky. An older man who slightly resembled Will strolled down the street. Lucky looked up. She uttered a sound much like a bark and took off running toward the man.

Victoria yelled, "Lucky stop." but to no avail. Lucky continued with Victoria sprinting after her. She reached Lucky just before the street. The man walked by and came over to say hello. Lucky instantly realized it was not Will. Victoria explained to the man that Lucky couldn't see that well and maybe thought he was her former owner who passed away. The man gently patted Lucky's head and said, "I'm sorry."

When they returned to the house, Lucky went straight to Bruce's room and curled up on her bed. Yes, she was sad and still missed Will, but her new family took good care of her. She was grateful. After her run, the tired little dog needed a few hours' sleep before they went out again to meet Bruce at the bus stop.

Later that afternoon, it was snowing when Victoria and Lucky waited for Bruce. Bruce got off the bus, energized by the falling snow. He and a well-rested Lucky played joyfully in the snow.

"It's starting to feel like Christmas, and we still have a few weeks to go," Bruce told Lucky.

Bruce started making plans for the holiday. "We need to get a tree, soon. Dad and I are putting up the Christmas wreaths this weekend," Bruce told Lucky. "You can be outside with us, and it will be a lot of fun."

It was Lucky's first Christmas since Will died. Bruce wanted to make her Christmas special.

"Can we take Lucky with us to get our Christmas tree," Bruce asked his

parents at dinner that evening.

“We sure can,” his dad said. “We’ll go the first thing on Saturday morning before we put up the wreaths.”

Saturday morning could not come soon enough for Bruce. He counted the days. Around 9 a.m., Lucky, wearing her new red scarf with the saying “Santa’s Lil Yelper,” along with Bruce and his parents, got in the car and headed to the Christmas tree farm.

Lucky seemed happy. Bruce and Lucky scouted out all the trees ahead of Big Bruce and Victoria, who followed them up and down the many rows of spruce and pine trees. Searching for the perfect tree was always part of Bruce’s family Christmas ritual. When he lived in Bellingham, MA, each year his parents got the biggest tree from Steve’s nursery and garden center up the street from their house. They had a family room with a high cathedral ceiling and huge atrium window. People came from everywhere to see the enormous tree in the beautiful window.

While Bruce’s new house was larger than the home in Massachusetts, it didn’t have a room with an extra high ceiling. He needed a smaller tree, but one equally nice. Lucky and Bruce searched the scotch pine row but eyed the perfect tree a few yards ahead. A tall, middle-aged man was looking at the same tree.

Bruce and Lucky approached. Big Bruce and Victoria followed up behind. Bruce carefully examined the tree. “I think this is it, Mom and Dad. What do you think, Lucky?”

Lucky walked over to the tree as if she completely understood what Bruce said. She ignored the man and inspected the tree standing right next to Bruce.

“Sir, are you getting this tree?” Bruce asked.

“I don’t think so. It is a little too big for my house,” he replied.

“Do you mind if we get it? It is perfect for our new house,” Bruce said.

“Not at all, young man. I must tell you that is one nice little dog you have there. What kind of dog is it?” he asked.

“We don’t know. My grandpop said Lucky is part miniature Sheppard

and part Chow, but we are not sure. Lucky was my great Uncle Will's dog. He died last year, just before Christmas, and Lucky came to live with us. She is over 20 years old," Bruce proudly told the man.

"Well, I have to say that she is the prettiest little mutt that I have ever seen," the man said with admiration for Lucky.

Victoria felt very proud of her son and the little animal who just one year before resembled a junkyard dog, lonely, and bruised on the verge of despair. Bruce helped turn Lucky's sadness into joy and newfound friendship.

Bruce and his dad cut down the tree. With Lucky proudly leading the way, the family walked to the station where they wrapped the tree in twine and placed it on top of the car.

It was a happy excursion for the entire family kicking off the holiday season. Lucky had a full day. After the tree farm, Lucky and her family went outside in the snow and hung 17 wreaths on all the windows in the house's front. Everyone looked forward to a wonderful Christmas, even Lucky.

CHAPTER VII

Lucky enjoyed three more idyllic Christmas's with Bruce and his family. In the early spring of her fourth year with her new family, Lucky began to slow down. It took her longer to go up the back stairs to bed each night. She would stop midway and look through the railing to make sure Victoria followed her up. The little dog who frequently overcame the odds gently and quietly displayed evidence of her advanced years.

Victoria knew the signs and dreaded the inevitable. At 23 or possibly 24, Lucky was still a pretty dog. She could barely see, plus her severely impaired hearing did not dampen her spirit. Despite all her infirmaries, Lucky was innately sweet, always wanting to please. She loved Bruce, her special person, and waited for him to come home from school each day. In the summer, she played with Bruce and his friends outside in the backyard.

It was a Saturday afternoon, in mid-June, when Victoria noticed Lucky ambling into the sunroom next to the family room. Something is wrong, Victoria thought. Running in from the kitchen, Victoria saw Lucky trying to lie down on the tiled sunroom floor, which was highly unusual.

Suddenly, Lucky started to shake uncontrollably. Victoria wrapped Lucky in her arms and held her close. "It will be okay, Lucky," she whispered.

At the time Bruce and his Dad were at Long Beach Island, NJ for the day to work on their boat. No one was around. Victoria knew it was up to her to help Lucky. When Lucky's tremors subsided, Victoria grabbed the phone that was thankfully within reach, and called the veterinarian who came to the house. Dr. Jay did not live too far away. He arrived ten minutes later.

Waiting for the doctor, Victoria made Lucky comfortable. She placed large pillows under the suffering dog and opened the back door for the doctor. She then held Lucky while the doctor examined her.

"Lucky had a massive stroke," he told Victoria.

Victoria knew it was bad. Lucky could not move. Without warning, Lucky's body again shook in a violent tremor, rendering her unconscious. Lucky

died three minutes later, held lovingly in Victoria's arms.

Tears welled in the doctor's eyes as he watched Victoria cradle Lucky.

"She was the nicest little dog. I knew I wouldn't have her long, because she was 20 when she came to live with us. Taking her home was one of the best things we ever did, Lucky was a precious gift. I never regretted one minute with her. Our entire family loved her," Victoria told the doctor.

Victoria covered Lucky with the blanket Bruce bought her for Christmas. When Bruce and his dad returned an hour later, Victoria was waiting for them outside by the front door. They both knew something was wrong given the tears flowing from Victoria's eyes.

"Lucky died this afternoon, very peacefully. She had a massive stroke," explained Victoria.

Bruce and his dad paid their respects and buried Lucky in the backyard, wrapped in her special blanket.

"Dear God, please take care of Lucky. Thank you for letting her come into our lives," The family prayed at Lucky's grave site.

Bruce and Victoria took Lucky's death hard. Everyone kept busy, not wanting to think of the void left by her passing.

Three days after Lucky died, Victoria was washing dishes and looked out the kitchen window into the backyard missing Lucky. Suddenly, she saw a man wearing a baseball cap walking toward the house. He looked to be in his late fifties, about 5'8" inches tall and a bit stocky. Victoria got nervous. She yelled to the man from inside, saying. "What are you doing here?" but got no reply. He acted as if he didn't hear her and walked right over to the spot where they buried Lucky.

Gradually he turned around, facing the house with something moving by his side. He started walking back the way he came into the yard. Victoria could not believe her eyes. Was that Lucky walking next to the man? Suddenly, Lucky stopped short and turned, looking directly at Victoria, staring out the window. She held Victoria's gaze for a minute, then quickly walked away beside the man.

Victoria's heart was pumping, every fiber of her being acute. She rushed

out of the house and ran in their direction, but they were nowhere in sight. Frantically, Victoria ran to every corner of the yard until she collapsed on the grass trying to gain control of her emotions. Did she actually see Lucky leaving with that man? Was she losing her mind? Nothing like this ever happened to her before.

Wait a minute, Victoria said to herself. I know that man. Suddenly, it hit her. She gasped and tried to arrive at an explanation, but down deep, she knew. The man walking in her yard was Will. Not Will at 79 when he died, but a much younger and happier Will.

“How can this be?” Victoria screamed into the universe. “Did Will come to get Lucky?”

For the next few days, the image of Lucky walking with Will then turning to look at Victoria persisted. It would not leave her mind. Bruce and his dad listened as Victoria told them the entire story when they got home that evening. Did she really see the two best friends walking off into the distance together? Or was it just Victoria’s imagination, a vision of what could be. Victoria had no definitive answers.

“Maybe I just needed some happiness amid the sorrow of Lucky’s passing and imagined everything?” Victoria told her husband.

“No, it was not your imagination. I think you saw something. I am not sure what, but it was unusual,” the older Bruce said.

“I know exactly what it was, Mom,” Bruce spoke up. “Against all the odds, Lucky survived being stranded alone in the freezing temperatures with hardly any food for 18 days, at 20 years of age. She faithfully stayed by Uncle Will’s side. She never left him. Uncle Will came to get her. They belonged together. It was the least he could do. Mom, we all know there was something extraordinary about Lucky, and that’s why God allowed you to see her reunited with Uncle Will. When she stopped and caught your eye, it was her way of saying thank you and goodbye.”

Victoria wrapped her arms around her beautiful son. She desperately wanted to believe what he said was true.

“I truly hope you are right, Bruce. I will never forget the sight of Uncle Will and Lucky walking away into eternity together.”

Twenty years later, the image of Lucky and Will is still as fresh in Victoria's mind as it was that June afternoon.



LUCKY

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