

The Dogs

Tracy and her father followed the man from downtown onto Foothills Road, then onto a tracery of back roads, some paved, some not. Sam had one hundred fifty acres that he mostly used for hunting. He lived nearer to Lewiston, and told them they could have flown into there, although the tickets are more expensive. There were two cabins on the property; one he used, and the one he had rented to Aaron. He'd met Aaron about eight months ago, in a local bar, and he'd seemed like a nice guy. Sam had been looking for a caretaker, as he'd had some vandalism, and had been worried about squatters. Aaron paid rent up front (cash), agreed to clean up some brush, walk the woods, and keep an eye out for trespassers. Sam thought Aaron was maybe one of those hippie types, those live-off-the-grid fantasy guys, but they didn't have any problems until the dogs. And even that ended up being all right in the end.

After they turned onto the dirt driveway of Sam's land, he'd parked, suggested they leave the rental car and join him in his truck. Her father looked uncomfortable, but agreed. Tracy sat in the middle, her father against the door. He pressed his body away from hers, avoiding the discomfort of another person's shoulder and elbow jostling against his in the cab as it bucked over ruts.

Sam told them the story of the dogs. He'd come out in March, when the snow began to melt, pulled up to Aaron's cabin, and the pits had run out, all teeth. Aaron had run out right after.

"Lucky, I already had the safety off my gun."

Tracy bristled. Even though she'd grown up in the land of deer hunting, and now conceal-carry, she'd never felt comfortable with this easy talk of guns.

“The silver one must have just had a litter. Her ti-well, you could tell she’d just had ‘em. And the red one, those always look kind of spooky,” Sam continued, a low chuckle.

“Pits?” Her father perked up. “Pit bulls? Aren’t those dogs vicious?”

“Pit bulls have a bad reputation Dad, but they aren’t all bad,” Tracy answered, although she was starting to feel unsure herself. She had read this somewhere about pit bulls, but she’d never really spent any time with those types of dogs – with any dogs really.

“Tracy, we will not,” he enunciated each syllable, “be bringing any pit bulls home.”

“Well, sir,” Sam responded and she appreciated the “sir.” He must have heard the consonants. “They’re really sweet dogs. But I must admit, I’m partial to Stella.”

After about five more minutes of driving, they pulled up to the cabin. Her father said he’d wait in the car, so Tracy slid out the driver’s side after Sam. The minute they opened the door the pits were all over them. One was silver-grey and one was red, with freckles. They wagged their tails so hard it was as if they had no spines, their bodies curving into *c’s*, then curving back again, as they jumped and licked and pranced, their nails clicking on the wide plank floors. After a few seconds of greeting, Sam yelled “Out!” and the dogs scampered out the door, racing around the yard.

In the far corner of the room, Tracy could see a third dog. It raised itself from a bed on the floor, heavy-boned and muscled, the head square and red, surrounded by jowls. Two strings of drool seemed to be attached to the floor, and as it slowly stood, the strings stretched like elastic until they snapped. The dog locked its front legs, lowered its head, and stared at Tracy.

“Stella warms up a little more slowly,” Sam said. “What you’re going to want to do is sit in that chair there.” He motioned to a green chair right beside the door. “She’s going to come and sniff you and you’re going to pretend there’s no dog in the room. Don’t pet her or talk to her or make eye contact.” Tracy sat.

Stella moved slowly. She walked forward, almost a saunter, and buried her large head between Sam’s legs. She made rhythmic grunting noises, a dog purr. He massaged the rolls of skin around her neck, lowering his face to her back. “Oh Stella.” He said “Stella,” doing some impression of Brando as Stanley Kowalski. After a few seconds, Stella backed up, slowly still, and

then moved toward the door, stopping alongside Tracy. The dog sniffed her backside where she was hunched forward, away from the back of the chair.

“You OK?” Sam asked.

“Am I?”

“Sure. Stella just has to get to know people a little. She’s a discerning girl.” He smiled. “Just keep talking to me.”

“How long did it take her to get to know you?”

“By my second visit, I was all right. But she can be pretty intimidating at first. I thought you might remind her of Aaron.” Tracy’s eyes welled up; just then Stella snorted and Tracy jumped.

“Easy, girl,” Sam said, but Tracy didn’t know if he was talking to the dog or to her.

Stella continued out the door, joined the other dogs sitting alongside the truck, staring up at the passenger window where Tracy could see the whites of her father’s eyes.

Tracy’s brother Aaron had been living in Idaho, in that small cabin, with those dogs. The man he was renting a cabin from had found him, and his driver’s license (with his parent’s address), and had contacted the local police in Wisconsin. They’d gone to his parent’s house, knowing this wasn’t the kind of news to be delivered over the phone. After a flurry of phone calls between the authorities in some place called Moscow, the local funeral home, Tracy, and the family attorney, arrangements had been made. Aaron was cremated, his cremains flown home. When Aaron’s father talked to the landowner, he’d said he didn’t want anything, to dispose of Aaron’s possessions. Tracy and her mother had been in the kitchen, listening.

“Wait, Dad...” Tracy had said.

“Well, sir,” said the man on the phone, “it’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not comfortable with going through your son’s things, for one,” he said.

“I give you permission.” Tracy was crossing the kitchen to where her father was standing in the living room, looking out the bay window at the lake.

“Dad,” she said, tersely, eyes still red-rimmed. He turned to her.

“And there’s also the dogs to be seen to...”

“The dogs?” Her father asked as Tracy took the phone.

The man continued. “Aaron had three dogs, real sweet, and I don’t want to...” The man on the other end was still talking, his voice tinny.

“This is Tracy, Aaron’s sister,” she interrupted.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Miss.”

“Umm, thank you. Three dogs?”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t real happy when I found out about the dogs at first, but they’re good dogs, and I don’t want to send them to the pound. Two are pits and they’d probably be euthanized, but Miss, when I found your brother, the dogs were sleeping with him, all cuddled up, kind of guarding him. He really loved those dogs.”

“Oh.”

“And Miss, Aaron had a real nice place here, and I think his family might like to have some of his things... I wouldn’t feel right about just throwing things away.”

“Oh,” Tracy said. “Well, I guess we should come out then.”

“I really think you should.”

Tracy’s parents were well off, but in their small town they were down-right rich. Most of the people in their tax bracket only came up in the summer, to their homes on the lake, and lived the rest of the year in Milwaukee or Chicago. For some reason, Tracy and Aaron and their mother lived there all year long. Their small-town school was big by the standards of rural counties, a consolidated school district with class sizes that hovered around a hundred students. Even taking out Tracy and Aaron and a few other wealthier kids, the class distinctions were noticeable. There were the farm kids who often were late for first period, and smelled of manure and milk replacer. There were the poorer town kids, most of whom would scrape through to graduation, but definitely would not be going to college, or even tech school, instead taking jobs right away at the foundry or the processing plant. A few would just disappear. There were the migrant kids who came and went who nobody seemed to get to know. There were the girls, a few each year, beginning in eighth grade, who got pregnant and disappeared forever, so the school started offering an elective in high school called “Parenting” that raised a few eyebrows and caused some dissension at a school board meeting, resulting in a debate about dropping sex education altogether, one argument being that the school’s discussion of sex being a thing was encouraging teenagers to engage in it. Most of the town kids

would go to a technical college, or a state school, either the two-year colleges, earning associate's degrees or eventually transferring to one of the state universities for bachelor's degrees in "something practical." A few students would go out of state, but to their church-sponsored school. Both Aaron and Tracy tried to fit in, doing the things their classmates did – yearbook, forensics, track – but always knowing in some way that they were different as well. Local news about the muffler plant closing down didn't weigh heavily on their mother and father, didn't sit a place at the dinner table, shushing everyone to silence. So when Tracy returned home after college and started dating Greg, a local boy from a local family, her father had called to tell her he was "disappointed."

"Are you marrying this 'Greg'?" her father had asked at the end of one of their already stilted phone calls.

Greg had not gone to college. But he could build anything, from the restored car in his garage to the hay bale house he'd started for the two of them. He was a forager, knew how to locate hen o' the woods mushrooms, morels, and fiddleheads. If she woke to a cold bed in the morning, she knew he'd be back with breakfast – maybe fresh bluegills, or eggs from their chickens. After they'd been dating just a few weeks, he'd asked her to "share his life." Those were his exact words. So when Tracy's father asked, she said "No," and "His name is just Greg, Dad – no need for the extra flourish."

Tracy had begun disappointing her father when she'd majored in business and minored in communication, definitely a "practical choice," like the kids who didn't know they could dream bigger: a pre-major that necessitated graduate school and ensured more years of study, a hefty starting salary and the prestige of certain letters that automatically attach to a person's last name. She'd continued disappointing him when she'd decided not to go to graduate school and returned home. Greg was probably the last straw, but since then Tracy and her father had settled into a kind of truce. Although they lived within a few miles of each other, they kept their contact to a minimum: major holidays and birthdays. She didn't bring Greg around; they didn't talk about anything beyond the perfunctory niceties. She maintained access to her gifted money, checked on Aaron, and reported back what she could without upsetting her mother too much.

Until about a year ago, the news on Aaron was disappointingly the same. His depression was clinical and constant. When he was under a doctor's care,

there would be some hope, some new combination of pharmaceuticals that would improve his affect, and even allow him to take some joy in interacting with his sister from time to time. But often the lifting that came with this relief from the worst symptoms would also lead to new energies that would turn self-destructive. He had been hospitalized for suicide attempts several times since his one semester of college. Since that first terrible phone call, there had been more, almost a routine. Despite Tracy's mother's busyness with all things domestic, she rarely answered the phone anymore – certainly a learned behavior. Aaron's college roommate had been so kind to him that they hadn't known how bad it had been before that first phone call. How he had re-arranged his class schedule to check in on Aaron several times a day, stayed weekends at the dorm arranging movie fests and study sessions, even making an anonymous report to the dean of students.

When Tracy drove with her father to pick Aaron up from the university, and her father was loading the car, the roommate had taken Tracy aside and explained the details. Tracy had recognized her old fears. This young man, only eighteen himself, had become Aaron's keeper. After their first two weeks of college, the old Aaron had returned: the old Aaron who rarely stirred from his bed; whose clothing and pajamas became indistinguishable, sleep-creased, and stiffened; whose only activity seemed to be silent surfing online, an eerie echo of taps on keys and mouse clicks; whose communication became reduced to small grunts, and even that without eye contact. The roommate had tried everything he could think of – taking Aaron out to dinner, to walk State Street, to parties, introducing him to girls who liked quiet, dark types who themselves tried to draw Aaron out. Nothing worked and he felt like a failure, just like Tracy felt like a failure. And Tracy, who was not given to hugs, certainly not to strangers, hugged this stranger and said *thank you*, said *it's not your fault, there's nothing you could do*, said *we appreciate your help*, and meant it. Tracy and her father loaded the car at the dorm and after Aaron was released from the psych ward, took him home. Aaron sat in the backseat, staring out the window the whole way, worrying the hospital bracelet on his arm, the skin of his wrist winter-pallor white and flaking.

Aaron's illness seemed to embarrass his parents, their natural reserve deepening and steeping. And Aaron was irritated by his parents, by their embarrassment or concern, whichever it was. He moved out one weekday

afternoon when his father was at work and his mother was running errands. Tracy then became the conduit of information, checking on Aaron when she could locate him through his ever-changing addresses and phone numbers. His trust fund took care of expenses and his doctors had her number; she was his contact-in-case-of-emergency person. This went on for years: the years that stretched between Tracy's return, the years of Greg; a tumble of years, all sameness with occasional chasms of deep worry or guarded hope. But Aaron made a large cash withdrawal about a year ago and disappeared for good. When she couldn't locate him, she called her father. He seemed to take the news in stride. At the end of the call, he asked, perfunctorily, "How's Greg?"

She hadn't told him about their break up, or the dissolution of their business, both over a year old. Hearing her father say her ex's name, after years of him never bothering to ask, made her start to tingle and itch, like all of her was the sensitive skin on her forearms getting too close to a tomato plant. Somehow she thought he would have heard about it, or at least noticed that the trucks with their business name were no longer seen around town.

"We broke up Dad," she said, swallowing.

"Oh. Probably for the best," he said. "Let me know if you find anything out about your brother," and he hung up.

In preparation for the flight into Spokane and the rental car journey to Moscow, Tracy packed several books (a couple of novels and a how-to home repair book) to use as armor against her father and conversation. She imagined him doing the same, carefully selecting various work projects – some that required close concentration, some that required cursory glances – to keep him insulated from whatever he didn't want to see, or talk about – tools of useful distraction. In this, as in other ways, Tracy and her father were similar. This trip, to discover and collect the last year of her brother's life, would be the most concentrated time she and her father had ever spent together. So many things to not talk about.

Growing up, she only sometimes found it strange that she and Aaron and her mother were a family of three most of the time. When her father was working full-time, he'd only come up from Milwaukee on the weekends. In the winter, when the weather was unpredictable, he'd stay in the city and it would be just the three of them for weeks. She and her brother

didn't miss him; she never knew if her mother did. When she became a teenager, she'd occasionally go for a weekend in the city, stay in the apartment downtown where she could go to the art museum or see a concert. She could bring friends if she wanted to and her father left her alone as much as she wanted, leaving her a number for the car service, a couple credit cards, and a stack of cash. Her hometown friends thought this was "very cool" but were intimidated by the city, unless they could watch the nighttime streets from behind the tinted windows of the rented car. She and Aaron would have fun when they went together, if he was in the mood to go out – to the Rave to see bands on their Midwestern tours, or visit the ethnic fairs, or Summerfest.

The first two years of high school, Tracy realized, was when she'd lost track of Aaron, distracted by her new freedoms and her new friends. That was when she'd started having the dreams – long before any of them knew consciously that he was in danger. The dreams were always the same: someone was hurting Aaron. She never saw who it was, but the danger was real, and advancing and meant to cause bodily harm to her brother – to torture and kill him. In the most common dream, Aaron is an infant and she has to carry him around. The danger is the kind of killer who enjoys exacting pain before delivering death. The landscape is flat, mostly sand and scrub. She stumbles, carrying infant-Aaron, and tries to outrun the killer. She swaddles and wraps him in bandages, but blood is seeping through from the wounds. The killer has cut and torn and stripped his skin off, but infant-Aaron doesn't scream in pain anymore, he whimpers. She knows she can't outrun the killer forever and she knows she needs to get help. Infant-Aaron is heavy; he's weighing her down. She sets him down and runs for help. She digs a hole in the ground and hides him in it, runs as fast as she can, hoping he'll be quiet and she'll get back in time. She always woke up before she could get back to help him.

She always woke up before she could get back. Night after night she'd have some variation of this dream. She'd have to go for help, his poor body hurt and broken. She couldn't save him herself. And in the morning, she'd be sitting across the breakfast table from him, eating her hot oatmeal or eggs, readying for high school while he readied for middle school across town; their mother in the kitchen, their father in Milwaukee in his apartment.

Now she and her father were on a plane, both of them with something open on their laps, to protect them from each other. They were going to where Aaron had lived and died, not knowing what they are going to find.

Her father refused to come into the cabin until the dogs were locked in the back bedroom. Sam was right about Stella: as long as Tracy ignored her, Stella did the same. She really was an impressive animal – loose flesh collected around her neck and chest and when she ran it swayed with her gait; her eyes were amber, her paws were huge. With the dogs locked up, she and her father inspected the cabin. Well, she did. It was one large room, a connected living room and kitchenette, furnished with a couch, the green greeting chair, and a small desk. There was the small bedroom, and a bathroom with a stand-up shower, and a composting toilet. Her father wrinkled his nose. He gave the space and Aaron's belongings a cursory glance, then walked outside where Sam had gone to give them privacy.

Once Tracy started looking, she couldn't stop. There was a small woodstove and a stack of perfectly split and stacked logs. There were three cast iron skillets, well-seasoned and well-used. There was an orderly root cellar. Trays of started seedlings were on the window sills, mostly vegetables, now parched and drooping. There were the dogs' bowls. There were jars of saffron and turmeric and arctic root. There were shelves with novels and poetry and self-help books; dog books, *The Monks of New Skete*, Patricia McConnell. There was a light table. And there was what was missing: his pharmaceuticals, his videogames, anything wired. He was trying to get better. Aaron had withdrawn here to get better and return to himself, maybe to return to her.

And there would be Sam's stories about Aaron, stories of an Aaron she didn't know: the Aaron who helped him fell trees and clear a space for a new pole building; the Aaron who joined him and his hunting buddies for beers; the Aaron who could tell a great story, entertaining everyone; the Aaron who rescued the silver bitch from the roadside where she'd been dumped, her puppies drowned; the red bait dog and Stella, returned six times to the shelter, scheduled for euthanasia.

In the end, she and her father argued. He took the rental car and flew back. She stayed for a week at the cabin, going through Aaron's things, packing what she wanted, discarding what she didn't. It took Stella about four

days to warm to her, but they co-existed in the small space with no animosity. She fed the dogs, let them out, took them for walks in the woods. The pits, who she took to calling Smoke and Red (Sam didn't think they really had names), loved her immediately, curling up on either side of her on the couch when she read her books, and when she'd finished those, started on Aaron's bookshelves. She found his journals but boxed those up right away, not yet ready to read them.

Sam was staying at his cabin for the week too. He stopped over early afternoon on her second day there to check in on her. He was probably a few years younger than her father, but seemed quite a bit younger, rangy and lean, with a weather-beaten face that was very sexy. She was glad to see him, asked him back for dinner that night.

"Are you sure? I mean, I don't want to intrude."

"Please. You can help convince Stella I'm OK," she smiled. The big dog was leaning against the tall grey-haired man, staring up at him lovelorn. "She probably feels doubly abandoned."

He arrived that night with a six-pack and a pizza, fired up the grill and showed her how to grill frozen pizza when there's no oven, doctoring it with a few of Aaron's leftover provisions – some mushrooms he reconstituted in water, the dried basil leaves that were tied up in the eaves. They sat around the fire ring and he told her how he had found Aaron, how he thought that Aaron had probably arranged it that way, not wanting the dogs to suffer. He'd likely taken the pills the day before. The dogs' food and water bowls were full, but they hadn't touched them. When he knocked and yelled and Aaron didn't answer, but the dogs were whining, he knew something wasn't right, so he'd walked in. The pits were together on the couch, looking shell-shocked. But Stella was curled around Aaron's body, so that his head was cradled on her big belly. She was shaking and lying in a puddle of her own drool.

Tracy was glad dusk had fallen but thought that her wet eyes were probably still visible in the firelight. She let her bangs, which were getting a bit long, fall into her eyes.

"You OK, Tracy? I'm sorry—I shouldn't be telling you this..."

"No, it's OK. I want to know. Keep going."

Maybe Stella had curled around him after he was gone. Maybe he'd lain down with her. Either way, that's how Sam had found him. He said Stella

let out the most plaintive sound he'd ever heard a dog make, worse than the pain he'd heard his own dog cry when it got hit by a car, almost wrenching its leg clear off.

Sam came out a few more times to help her load boxes, light a bonfire, and move the heavy things. He drove her into town to rent a panel van and buy a double mattress for the back, to haul the dogs home with her. When she told him she was taking all three of them, that she was keeping them, he hugged her hard. When he pulled away, his eyes were wet, and he kissed her on the mouth. She'd mostly decided that night, after Sam told her about Stella holding Aaron. She figured they'd get used to each other. But two days later, she woke in the morning, and it hit her all over again that her brother was dead, that there was nothing she could do, that she'd never be able to go back for him, to protect him, to save him from the danger. She started crying, quietly at first, then louder, and pretty soon she was sobbing full-throated into her pillow like a child with no control over anything.

She felt her. The bed sunk down a few inches and she froze. It was Stella. The pits didn't come on the bed, they slept on the couch for naps and all night long. The dog's big paws rocked the mattress, like a kayak steered crosswise in a motorboat's wake. She circled twice then dropped to her belly, her spine lined up perfectly with Tracy's, her head on the pillow facing the other way. They were mirror images of each other. Tracy whimpered. Stella sighed heavily, and Tracy could hear the air escape her meaty jowls, the *phfft* as they flapped softly together.