



CLERMONT COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

SHORT STORY CONTEST

Adult Winners

First Place

Trained to Love by Nancy Zeller

The sounds, smells, and sights in this particular animal shelter are like nothing I've ever seen in my entire four years of life. That may not seem like such a long time, but I've lived in quite a few places and I've seen more than my fair share of things. Sadly, most of the life that I've lived has been riddled with abuse and rejection. I'm not a 'bad' dog, in my opinion, just misunderstood, and I enjoy living the life of a loner and protecting myself from any future heartaches.

My nose twitches in distaste at how terribly inconvenienced I am this morning, as the kennel attendants joyously parade back and forth with promises of hope for all the other dogs and cats. Some are taken away on a leash and others are put into portable kennels, all bound for homes that they'll stay in for the next week. The humans refer to this strange notion as 'Christmas' and it's in hopes that most, if not all, of the animals will find their forever homes. I find that I loathe the sound of jingling bells, the scent of cinnamon, and the sympathetic smile that each human gives me as they breeze past my kennel. But, before long, all the other animals have left the building and I am grateful for the silence and solitude. A yawn escapes me as I curl up on the concrete floor, rest my head upon my paws, and quickly fall into a peaceful sleep.

A few hours later I'm interrupted by Susan, a kind caretaker who often hides pieces of hot dogs in her pockets. I usually don't mind being coaxed awake for the promise of a treat but I know this time that it comes with strings attached. She opens the gate and slips a collar around my neck, "Come on, Boy! It looks like you'll be getting a home for the holidays, too!" The last thing I want is another home, even if it's just for seven days, and I softly growl in protest. Susan tugs

on the leash and leads me out of the kennel area and into one of the adoption meet-and-greet rooms.

A smiling, middle-aged woman, with long hair and kind eyes is sitting campfire-style on the floor. "Hi, Tanner! My name's Vanessa... Do you want to come home with me? I know we'll be best friends!" I instinctively try to slip my collar and back out of the room, but Susan's vice-like grip on my leash holds me in place and she quickly closes the door behind us. Knowing that I'm trapped, I stop struggling and simply stare at the stranger while Susan tries to convince her that I'm special and that I'm worthy of having my life uprooted for a week.

Susan chuckles, "I told you that he's not fond of most people, but I'm sure that you two will be friends in no time at all! Tanner's just been through a lot... He was rescued from a puppy mill when he was about eight months old, and he was severely unsocialized. We worked with him and he did improve and was adopted by a nice family with a little boy. Sadly, the little boy passed away and Tanner was given to a friend of the family. We don't know exactly what happened at that home, but the neighbor placed a call claiming that he was in an abusive environment, and Tanner was surrendered back to us. He returned malnourished, antisocial, fearful of men, and he doesn't like to be touched unless he initiates contact. He's been adopted a handful of times, but sadly, he's always returned. People want a dog that you can hug and kiss and take to the park... I'm not sure that Tanner will ever be that dog, to be completely honest. And, as you know, he's the only animal left that doesn't have a home for the holidays." Susan sighs and shifts her attention from Vanessa to look at me, "Tanner is a purebred yellow lab, estimated to be about four years old, and he doesn't have any known health issues. We've tested him around cats, children, and other dogs, and he's indifferent. He will growl if he's uncomfortable, but to our knowledge, he's never bitten anyone."

Vanessa listens intently to Susan and nods her head sympathetically and frowns as she hears

about my rough past. I'm almost certain that she's going to run from the room and never look back, but she surprises me by saying, "I'll take him. No one should be alone on Christmas." The two women excitedly begin to chat and fill out paperwork, while I tune them out and stare at the floor in disbelief.

An hour later, I'm sitting in the backseat of Vanessa's car, with my nose poking through the three inch gap that she allows me for some air. I can't deny that I've missed the smells of life outside of the pound. We pass several fast food establishments, a park, a school, and many rows of houses; all which pass by in a blur but cast my senses into overdrive. I can't remember the last time I wagged my tail, but as we stop at a red light next to a McDonald's, I feel the familiar swishing sensation and I whine in ecstasy at the smell of a grilled hamburger. Vanessa laughs and turns into the parking lot of the building next to McDonald's, "I'm not going to give you a greasy burger, so you'll have to settle for a puppuccino!"

I patiently wait while Vanessa orders herself a coffee and explains to the Starbucks barista that she has a dog in the car and that he will enjoy a treat, too. My tail doesn't stop beating against the seat the whole time, even though I have no idea what sort of treat is in store for me.

Vanessa hands over some bills and pulls into a parking space and turns around to face me.

There's a cup in her hand with some sugary white substance in it and she looks at me expectantly as she extends her arm outwards.

The puppy inside my heart shouts at me to go for it, but the nagging voice inside my brain warns that this could be some kind of trick. Will she strike me? Call me names? What if that delicious smelling snack is really poison and it makes me sick? The swishing of my tail slows and I find myself hesitating, because I find it nearly impossible to trust strangers. I'm confused and a little sad when I look into Vanessa's eyes, but all I see looking back at me is genuine kindness and hope. I cautiously lean forward and sniff the whipped cream before my tongue flicks out

and I taste the most delectable people food that I've ever been allowed. My tail resumes wagging and I wholeheartedly lick the small cup clean, so absorbed in enjoying myself that I don't even notice that Vanessa's fingers are lightly trailing over the top of my head. The cup's clean of any remaining cream and I try to pull back from Vanessa's touch, but it's then that she scratches behind my left ear and I realize that I've lost the battle. I sigh and lean into her caress, going as far as placing a single lick onto her forearm. I usually don't like to be touched and avoid it at all costs, but she hits the right spot and for the next few moments I'm putty in her hands.

We make our way to our next destination and I take a good look at my new home for the week. It's a large two-story house with a sprawling front yard and a fenced in backyard. Vanessa's car is the only one in the driveway, so I assume that she lives alone in this huge house, which is probably why she chose to take me. I remember the words she said to Susan earlier and realize that she doesn't want to spend Christmas alone, either. We exit the car and go into the house and the second that I'm unleashed, I begin to excitedly explore. It's been a long time since I've seen any new surroundings, and so I savor each sight and scent and freely enter every room. Vanessa lets me explore on my own while she prepares dinner, and I find that my senses draw me to a room at the far end of the hall on the second floor.

This room smells of freshness that someone would possess after taking a bath, with a hint of baby powder in the air. The slight earthy undertone reminds me of playing in the leaves with Timmy, the boy from my first home, and I bark in excitement while I follow that scent to the small bed. Just beneath it is a football and I squirm and claw until I'm able to grasp it in my mouth. It tastes like dirt and sugar and long afternoons spent outdoors with a little human. I wonder where the boy is and I drop the football and continue exploring in the room, pausing before a photograph sitting on the bedside table. Vanessa, a man, and a small child are wrapped in a group hug, with big smiles on their faces. They're all wearing shirts with the words

'Fight Childhood Cancer' on them and a gold ribbon blares back at me. I don't know how to read, but I know that Timmy wore a similar ribbon and that he left for the hospital one day and never came back. This makes me sad and I whine softly as I retrieve the football and head back downstairs. I miss my boy and I wonder if Vanessa misses her boy, too.

The rest of the night passes by quickly as Vanessa sits by the fireplace and reads a book and I lay on the couch and gnaw on a bone. I'm grateful that she allows me to sit on the furniture. It's been a few hours and she hasn't once yelled at me, forced me into a hug, or threatened to return me to the shelter. She even mixed some pieces of chicken into my kibble! I think that I could get used to this life, but I don't want to get my hopes up. She's so invested in the novel that I don't want to disturb her, but I have to go potty. Jumping off the couch, I look around and quickly set my sights on the big tree that's erected in the corner of the room. It's covered in colorful balls and lights, which perplexes me. I've never been in a home with a tree indoors, let alone one that's decorated! I sniff at the base of it before I lift my leg and empty my bladder, and I'm a little startled when I hear Vanessa's surprised gasp.

"No, Tanner! You go potty outside!" Vanessa's voice is firm but she doesn't punish me or mistreat me like those in my past. She closes her book and gently leads me into the backyard where she makes some funny demonstrations on how I should tinkle on the outside trees but not the one that she brought inside. I think she's giving me mixed signals, but I make a note to only go potty in the backyard.

We go back inside and she busies herself with cleaning up my mess, while I go upstairs and find a safe spot to sleep, with the football tucked beneath my chin. A short time later, I feel the mattress sink slightly from the weight of Vanessa's body, and she props herself against the pillows. She whispers, "Tomorrow's Christmas..." I open my eyes and see silent tears spilling onto her cheeks, and the football is now in her hand. I crawl on my belly upwards, from the foot

of the bed, to her side. I look at her sad face and realize that she needs a friend, and I surprisingly find myself wanting to be her friend. We both are on the precipice of growing to trust each other, so maybe she can train me to love and I can stick around and make her smile. It will mean a lot of work on both of our parts, but as our eyes lock, I know that we are on the same page. I rest my head on her stomach and Vanessa places her hand on my head and soothingly rubs my fur until her sadness passes, "That's a good boy, Tanner. I think you've found your forever home."

Before long, we drift off to a restful night's sleep, and we both find ourselves looking forward to training, loving, trusting, and being lifelong friends.

Second Place

Little Ninja by A.J. Reschka

While continuing to move the feather, Quinn moves from a cross-legged position to balancing on her toes, mimicking Loki's stance. *Head low, paws forward, legs stiffening...*

Bap!

Loki slaps his feline paws on the feather, chewing it in victory. Quinn can't help but marvel at his movements. *If he weren't so food-motivated, he would make an awesome ninja.*

A high-tingling giggle catches her attention. She turns to her baby sister, Skylar, with a coy smile. Robbie says her laugh is like a smoke detector, but Quinn believes it's more like Mommy's yoga instructor's tinga bells. *Wait. Tinga or tingsha? I'll ask her later.*

At first, Quinn thinks she's laughing at her cat pose, but no. It's her favorite toy elephant singing "Do Your Ears Hang Low?" for the umpteenth time. It annoyed Quinn at first, but now, it's just background noise, like Mommy's typing or Daddy's bad singing.

She makes a psst sound and Skylar turns to her. Quinn hides behind her hands for a moment, then opens her hands, revealing crossed eyes and a stuck-out tongue. Skylar laughs and tries to mimic her sister, but it looks more like she's waving 'hi'. Quinn holds back a laugh as Skylar tries to bite the elephant's still-moving ear, looking like a goldfish.

Didn't Daddy make cookies earlier? Ooh, a cookie sounds good right now!

Quinn opens the glass doors connecting the playroom to Mommy's office and finds Mommy close to the computer screen and fingers flying like she's playing piano.

Quinn loudly shuffles closer and waits for Mommy to notice her. A few moments pass by. Nothing. She shuffles her feet louder. Again, nothing. Quinn lightly taps on Mommy's pajama-covered thigh.

"Jesus!" Mommy jumps away from her computer, wide eyes scouring the room. Finding her daughter, she sighs and remarks, "Do I need to put a bell around you?"

Quinn shrugs in apology. She did try to make more noise this time.

Mommy sags into her chair. "Sorry. What do you need, honey?"

A sharp wail cuts in before she can answer.

Mommy and Quinn race into the playroom and find Skylar sobbing, waving her fists in the air.

"Aww, what's a matter, my little Blue Sky? Come here," Mommy gently picks up the distraught infant, bouncing and rocking her. "There's no need for those rain clouds, it's okay."

A flash of movement catches the corner of Quinn's eye, and through Mommy's office glass doors, she finds her brother, Robbie, dashing upstairs. *Odd for him.*

Daddy pokes his head through the living room glass doors. "What happened?"

"I have no idea. She was just fine a minute ago," Mommy turns to Quinn, still bouncing Skylar on her hip. "Is this what you were gonna tell me?"

Quinn shakes her head, lips tightening in worry.

Daddy gives a reassuring smile and says, "It's probably nap time. You want me to put her down?"

"Please. I gotta finish my deadline."

"Gotcha," Daddy holds out his arms, beckoning his baby girl. "Come here, sweetie."

As the parents pass the baby, Quinn notices something missing. A certain blue, big-eared something. Eyes widening, she looks back at the stairs where her brother was.

That. Thieving. Jerk!

Quinn marches to Mommy, ready to tell her what happened but Mommy stops her, saying, "Not now, hon," and closes the office doors.

Quinn turns to Daddy, but he cuts in, "Honey, whatever it is, it can wait. Mommy has a lot of work to do, and we need to be extra quiet so she can finish, okay?"

Frustration twists inside her like Christmas lights as she pulls out her ninja book, flops on the floor and browses through it.

Daddy eventually gets Skylar to fall asleep and he settles her on a padded blanket in the play pen. He strokes her back, softly smiling at her. Quinn goes back to her book, studying the 'caltrop'; they remind her of the jacks pieces.

"Hey Quinny?"

Quinn looks up and sees Daddy smiling at her. "Can you do me a big favor?"

Quinn nods.

"Mommy and I have some work to do, and Skylar needs her sleep, so can you practice your ninja skills by being extra quiet?"

Quinn nods again.

"That's my little ninja." Daddy leaves the room and closes the living room doors.

Quinn goes back to her ninja book. *Fine. I need to go over my ninja kit anyway. Let's see... Katana? Got it. Throwing stars? Got 'em. Grappling hook? Tried to make one out of a wire hanger and jump rope. Didn't work. Mommy got mad. Daddy said we needed new gutters anyway. Tekko-gagi! Tried to ask Mommy and Daddy and Santa for them, but they said they're too dangerous. Yet Robbie got Wolverine claws for his birthday. How is that fair? And now he has Skylar's toy, all because he's too lazy to put on headphones! How is that justifiable?*

The last word gives her pause.

What is justifiable? What is justice? Ninjas are. They help serve the greater good.

And what do they do about thieving enemies?

Quinn observes her sleeping sister, her tear tracks flaking on her red cheeks and her tiny hands stretched out, subconsciously searching for her favorite toy.

They do whatever it takes to get justice.

She looks around the room, and in the darkest corner of the room, she sees them: Robbie's wolverine claws, a hill of LEGOs, and her foam throwing stars. Right next to that toy box is a basket of clean laundry.

Quinn smirks.

Since it's daytime and the walls are beige, she has to improvise: Daddy's ratty T-shirt as a makeshift ninja mask; her tan sweater and sweatpants (pockets stuffed with toys); her parents' beige bedsheet, wrapped like a baby sling; her fox slippers with rubber soles; and Robbie's claws. Quinn smirks in petty glee as she slips the claws on.

Opening one door only a crack, Quinn peeks out, searching for any obstacles. She doesn't see or hear anything. *Let's move to the kitchen. A good ninja always fuels up before an important mission.* And she has a particular treat on her mind.

She tiptoes to her right, but a rustle of paper gives her pause. Peeking around the corner, she finds Daddy sitting at the dining room table, looking at some papers.

Quinn inwardly groans at the obstacle. Even at her quietest, he'll notice; she swears he has super hearing. *Maybe, Quinn theorizes, I can distract him, slip past him, and reach the kitchen. Just think like Loki when he dodged that snake.*

It looks like her thoughts summoned the cat, for he drops a ball at her feet and looks expectantly at her, his tail twitching.

Daddy spreads the documents out, ready to pay some bills, until he hears a soft tap. He perks up, seeing a small ball, and then Loki pounces on it, scattering the papers. Daddy quietly hisses at Loki, pushing him off the table. Right behind him, Quinn dashes into the kitchen, sliding across the kitchen floor.

She waits for a few moments, then looks back. Daddy is reorganizing his papers and giggling. Quinn raises her arms in triumph.

Turning back to the kitchen, it doesn't take her long to find it. A misshapen blue jar, filled with Daddy's chocolate chip cookies. Ready to be eaten at any moment.

Quinn climbs on a stool and kneels on the cushioned seat. Her legs shake with anticipation. She carefully lifts the lid and marvels at them, the chocolate chips shining in the light. She reaches in, her fingers an inch away from the cookie—

Quinn freezes.

What do ninjas not do?

Use their skills for personal gain.

And what are you doing now?

Quinn's shoulders sag. Shaking her head, Quinn puts the lid back on. *It can wait. Skylar is more important.*

She finds the fruit bowl nearby with one banana left. *It does have sugar*, Quinn shrugs to herself as she takes the yellow fruit.

After her mission snack, Quinn sneaks through the kitchen and reaches the bottom staircase. She peers up the stairs. Robbie's door is slightly ajar. *Good*, Quinn thinks, *it'll be easier to get in and out*. But first, the stairs.

The first step creaks, making Quinn cringe and pause. She listens and looks for any disturbances. Finding none, she keeps going, being mindful of her surroundings. The creaks get easier, but her fox slippers' soles tap on the wooden steps; to Quinn, she might as well be tap dancing up the stairs.

When she reaches the top, she quietly sighs in relief. That was more nerve-wracking than she thought.

Quinn peers through the crack, finding Robbie on his bed, reading a thick book. *Look at him*, Quinn sneers, *reading away without a care in the world. Like he hasn't stolen a baby's toy. Does he have any remorse? Where is the toy anyway? Not on the bed, the desk is clean... There it is!*

Sitting on top of the highest shelf is Skylar's blue elephant, waiting to be rescued. But his room is too bare and dark to hide or blend in. And he's not leaving anytime soon.

Quinn goes into her room, leaves her door ajar, and waits for any movement. *This will be the ultimate test. Skylar is counting on you!*

Time passes. No sign of movement. Her wrists and ankles are aching. She keeps blinking, trying to moisten her eyes. *Should've brought a watch. Next mission.*

A creak interrupts her thoughts. Quinn straightens her posture. A shadow is moving towards the door. She opens her door a little more, just enough to jump through. It's go time.

Head low,

Robbie opens his door,

hands forward,

steps out of his room,

legs stiffening,

turns right,

and...

and goes into the bathroom.

Go!

Using all her leg muscles, Quinn springs across the hall in one leap and lands softly in Robbie's bedroom. She only has a few minutes.

She looks up at the elephant, nervous at the deceptively high height. *For Skylar.* She takes a deep breath, then takes her first steps. Her slippers grip well, but her claws keep pushing against the books, weakening her grip. Without missing a beat, she grips the side bookshelf, blades facing outward. Problem solved; she continues to climb.

She sees the foot. Her fingers brush against it. It's coming closer. She can see the body now. A toilet flushes. The elephant is falling. Quinn catches it.

It starts singing.

Quinn scrambles to push the foot again, taking too many tries. She hears footsteps. She drops to the floor and stuffs the elephant in her wrap.

"What the...?"

Quinn looks back and sees Robbie at the doorway, giving her an annoyed look. She slips the wrap over her head and starts to walk away. *Do not engage. Good ninjas stay away from a fight.*

"Where's the elephant?"

But sometimes, ninjas have no choice.

Throwing stars!

Quinn throws her foam stars at his chest and face. Robbie swats at them, flinching at the ones hitting his face. She takes the opening and runs to the door. Robbie grabs her wrap.

"Give it back!"

Tekko-kagi!

Quinn slashes at Robbie, poking him in the eye. He cries out and lets her go, letting Quinn escape.

She hops on the railing and slides down, Robbie's fingers barely grazing her. Using the momentum to her advantage, she flies across the hallway and lands like a gymnast. She dashes

down the hallway, but unfortunately, Robbie has longer legs and is catching up. But fortunately, he's barefoot.

Caltrap!

Quinn throws the LEGOs behind her, smirking at Robbie's scream. It's only drowned out when Skylar starts crying again. Using the cry to motivate her, she sprints forward, quietly closing the door behind her.

The baby's cries alert both parents and bring them to where Robbie is; sitting on the stairs, picking off LEGOs from his feet.

"What are you yelling about? The baby's slee—" She spots the LEGOs on the ground and lets out a guttural sigh. "Robbie, how many times have I told you to not leave your LEGOs out in the hall?"

"It wasn't me," Robbie complained, "it was Quinn! She took my LEGOs and—"

"The baby isn't crying anymore."

Mommy and Robbie turn to Daddy and realize he's right. The trio run to the playroom and swing open the glass doors.

Quinn is in her plain T-shirt and pants (her ninja gear haphazardly folded back in the laundry basket), making Loki catch the ball in mid-air. Skylar is cooing at the elephant, playfully tugging on its big ears. If Mommy had her phone, she would take a picture of this serene moment.

Daddy smiles, gesturing to the duo. "Well, there you go."

Robbie shakes his head. "No, she's playing you guys. She was dressed as a ninja, broke into my room, and stole my toy!"

"Your LEGOs?"

"No, the eleph—" Robbie stops himself, not wanting to incriminate himself.

Too late.

"The elephant," Mother demands more than asks, "do you mean *Skylar's* elephant?"

Robbie doesn't say a word.

"Robert Kyle Darnell, did you steal your sister's elephant?"

Robbie stomps his foot like a toddler, snarling, "She kept playing that stupid song! I couldn't take it anymore!"

"Then just put on your headphones." Mother points down the hall at the LEGOs, "Now give me your phone, pick up your LEGOs, and stay in your room until we say otherwise."

"But—"

Mommy widens her eyes, giving him 'the look'. Quinn almost feels sorry for Robbie. Almost. Robbie groans as he gives his phone to Mommy and walks away. Mommy turns to Daddy and Quinn, her face softening but still stern.

"You two keep being quiet until I'm done, you hear me?"

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am," Daddy salutes her.

Quinn nods her head, smiling in compliance and secret victory. Mommy goes back into her office and closes the door. Loki gets her attention by leaping on the ball in her lap, making her giggle. *Good job earlier*, Quinn mentally sends the message to Loki, petting him for a job well done.

"Hey. Little ninja."

Quinn looks up. Daddy is still there, his arms crossed and a smirk on his face.

"You forgot something in the kitchen."

Oh crap, he knows. But how? I was so careful! Did I leave a LEGO behind? Did he hear me? Was it Loki? Loki, you little—

Wait. What did I forget? The banana peel? A throwing star?

Daddy uncrosses his arms, revealing two cookies on top of a folded napkin. Quinn's eyes widen like Loki's while watching birds, and she slowly takes one cookie.

Daddy holds up his finger to his lips, winks at her, and leaves the room with his own cookie.

Quinn takes a bite, and she smiles as her mouth tingles at the sweetness. *Justice is served, and it is sweet.* As she takes another bite, the elephant sings again, and Skylar's bell-jingling laugh fills the room. Quinn's smile grows bigger.

Third Place

Cap by Shannon Haynes

“We can talk when you are ready.” Emilia consoled me as she left the room.

She was the nurse that had been with us these past few days. Her words echoed inside my head. The doctor would return to the room soon, and we would all talk. I didn’t have much to say. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. Not yet.

He was really sick this time. His lungs were weak, his kidneys were not working as well as the doctor had hoped, and his heart was no longer able to keep up with the strain. They had mentioned last time he was here that he needed to slow down and rest, but you can’t slow down a farmer.

My husband had been a farmer his entire life and he had no intention of slowing down. He grew up on a farm, earned and bought his own farm, and raised our kids on a farm.

My mind had started drifting these last several hours to our younger days on the farm. I caught glimpses with each blink like a memory frozen. I looked down at Cap’s feet as he lay there in the bed and smiled with a memory of watching him plant our vegetable garden during early spring in the mud only to turn and see our children covered in mud behind him. He had come in late that night because he took a break from planting to make mud pies, mud wrestle, and spray everyone off when they were stiff and cold. He was such an amazing husband and father always working hard to provide for us and also making time for laughs.

It was tough watching him like this. His boots were in the corner of the room tied in a plastic bag. I giggled a little and shook my head remembering that he had asked me this morning to make sure I gave the goats a little more alfalfa since he was sure they would be kidding overnight.

“They like cold rainy nights” he told me through whispered breaths. He was still hopeful he could be home before they dropped kids so he could watch the miracle one last time. I didn’t have the heart to tell him yet that I had already arranged for our oldest son to stay at our home while he recovered.

Our children had always helped with the births on the farm. They were especially helpful this past year while Cap had been in the hospital twice during the spring.

Another glint of memory came as I remembered the first twins we saw born on the farm. Cap was sure they were coming overnight and slept on his chair in-between waking up and checking on the goat. He had pounced on top of me at 4 a.m. while I was asleep in bed and shook me saying, “She had them in a puddle but I moved them and they are doing great! Get the kids and put on some coats; they are so cute!”

He was always so excited, every time. Even after 50 some years, he still came in excited after being on night watch to make sure they delivered safely. I wasn’t so sure he would make it this time. We had 2 days left before the goats were due and that first one was sure to be dropping them in a puddle as the rains had turned our small pasture into a swamp once again.

With his eyes closed, he squeezed my hand.

“I moved them last night on to the hill, they have hay and are protected from the winds.” I whispered and grinned at him unsure if he was awake or still resting. He relaxed and settled in for what seemed like his fifth nap today.

I watched him grin at me, give his signature wink that melted my heart still, and squeeze my hand many times before closing his eyes again after only a small bite of food and a sip of water. He had been drifting in and out on me since yesterday. He was sleeping more but I wanted to be there for every time he was awake.

Time seemed to stand still in the room while all of the commotion continued in the hallway. Emergencies would rush past and then quiet down. Nurse Emilia always checking in on us, making sure to keep the door closed and the lights dim.

“I am going to get coffee,” I whispered and slid my hand out of his hand and covered him with the grey quilt from our couch he loved to use in the spring. Our daughter had made it as one of her 4-H projects when she was twelve. It was thin and the same muted grey as the day she made it. She had given it to him when she finished and told him it was his new spring quilt for sleeping on his chair while he waited for babies. She had brought it in when we first arrived so he would feel more at home.

I walked in to the hallway and noticed nurse Emilia giving me a soft smile as she came my way to inform me the doctor was coming soon and they would be back to talk. I knew what she meant. Cap and I had talked about it all over the years but I guess I was holding on to hope. Hope that he could still come home for another kid to hit the ground and he could have that excitement one more time. He wasn't supposed to die at the hospital, not like this. Nothing made sense. It didn't feel like it was his time yet.

The coffee was lukewarm and tasted terrible. I guess as most hospital coffee does. I walked back in to the room and strained to look out the window. It was a bright day. The sun shone in between spring drenches. The melted snow banks were almost gone now, after a late snow had surprised us with six inches. Our life felt as fragile now as the melting snow. The past few days were like a whirlwind in slow motion.

When I brought him in to the hospital this time, he insisted on walking. He nearly collapsed on the bed in the emergency room from exhaustion.

“78% Cap, I think it’s time we grab that oxygen” Terry said.

Terry was our neighbor and our nurse in the emergency room. His father, Jimmy Mathis, had called ahead to the hospital when we left the house after helping me get Cap in the car.

“He will be there, Andy. I will call him.” Jimmy had said to us as we closed the door.

Jimmy must have seen the fear in my eyes. He never used Andy’s first name. Everyone just called him Cap. He got that nickname in his younger years of farming from Jimmy’s wife who insisted he should run the farm strictly instead of having fun with all of the children. She called him Captain, hoping it would encourage him, but the kids shortened it and it stuck.

Cap had nodded to Jimmy as I pulled the car away to drive the short distance to the hospital. He knew Terry well. Terry had worked on our farm just the day before. He came over more this spring than recent years and said he was needing something to keep him busy. I knew he was helping on his days off to keep Cap out of trouble while he moved the fences. His strength was fading and he was slowing down. Terry made sure to do exactly as Cap asked and I think Cap welcomed the company and extra set of hands.

Terry stayed with us as they moved Cap from the emergency room to the ICU. Somehow, he knew Cap would insist on standing to change beds and he jumped right in, offering a steady hand. Cap wasn’t able to say much, but he shook Terry’s hand. Terry held back tears and pushed the cot back to the elevator. I was so proud of the man he had become. He was an amazing nurse.

My mind drifted back to the present as the doctor and nurse Emilia walked down the hallway towards Cap’s room. Emilia was a kind, gentle nurse who always had a sunflower pin in her hair which was somehow reassuring and gave her a warmth that made me feel at ease.

Inside the room, she sat next to me reminding me she would be there to listen to everything the doctor said. She did this so I could ask her questions later if I had any.

Cap woke slightly when I squeezed his hand and told him the doctor had returned. They gave an update about how Cap's lungs were not responding to the high amount of oxygen he had been given. They rattled off numbers and terms I didn't understand. I knew his kidneys were failing, but the doctor's words confirmed it. Dialysis was the only word I could catch. My mental fog had set back in. I looked over at Cap. He was nodding along as though he knew what it all meant.

The doctor talked about blood pressure and heart rate and rhythms. Numbers being too low and too high and abnormal. I couldn't process it all, but Emilia must have felt me tense and she placed her hand on my back.

I breathed.

"Ok, I will let you know soon", I said as the doctor gave me a sympathetic nod and left for another room.

Emilia stayed.

"I am here if you have any questions. I know that was a lot to take in" she said. Her voice was soft and calm.

Cap smiled as he looked at her. She seemed to understand whatever he was telling her. Before he closed his eyes, he winked at us both.

"It's ok, honey, I think you can listen to her now" Cap said.

He loosened his grip after patting my hand and rolled over to get more comfortable.

But I didn't want to listen to anyone else tell me what I didn't want to hear. I didn't want to hear that Cap was dying. I didn't want to hear that he was going to die in these god-forsaken white walls at this hospital with only parking lots and highways for scenery. I began to feel my

breath get heavy and my palms clammy. I was not going to listen to someone tell me it was time for me to say goodbye to my husband, my best friend. I looked at Emilia and I could feel myself turning red with anger as I tried to think of words to explain to her that I didn't understand what the doctor was saying. I didn't understand any of this. 'Not yet!' I wanted to yell at her, 'I am not going to let him die here!'

"Do you want to take him home?" Emilia asked. "I hear the rain is breaking this evening and we can arrange for Terry to help get him home to the farm."

I looked blankly at her. I glanced at Cap. Tears started to well up in my eyes. Emilia explained to me that we didn't have to continue fighting. She explained that death with dignity was something she had spoken to Cap about while I had gotten lunch yesterday. She described bringing oxygen to our home and Caps chair being moved over to the large windows near the hill so he could watch the goats deliver once more. She spoke slowly and calmly as she detailed every step of the process to move him where he could live out the last chapter of his life, surrounded by family on his farm. Emilia must have been able to see the rage melt from my body as she described me taking Cap home.

I could never bring myself to ask Cap after all these years what he wanted in the end. I knew he never wanted dialysis, he didn't want oxygen, and he surely did not want to be in a hospital while it was spring on his farm. I knew when the doctor mentioned dialysis, while talking to us moments earlier, that Cap's nod meant he was done. He had a whole plan. He knew I couldn't ask him, so he must have told Emilia.

Emilia helped me sit on the bed next to Cap. He rolled back toward me and placed his hand on my leg as I smiled at him, no longer able to hold back all of the emotions.

"Let's go home," he whispered, "all the kids are waiting," and he winked at me.

The children had Caps chair ready by the window as Terry and our son helped us into the house. Cap had refused an ambulance, as expected. Terry brought us home in his truck. He guided Cap while maintaining dignity that only another man would understand. Terry helped Cap slowly walk to the chair while holding his oxygen for him so it wasn't a burden. Our daughter had dinner waiting when we arrived. After only a few bites, Cap covered up with his quilt and nodded off in the chair while I went to bed.

I woke in a panic sometime in the middle of the night when I heard a noise at the end of the bed.

"Twins, in the mud! We moved them and they are doing great!" Cap gleamed while laughing, motioning for me to hurry out, just as excited as he had been the first time all those years ago.