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Fiction Story rough draft  
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### A Life Worth Living

"You never learn, *do you?*" With blow after blow of her father's well-developed right hook, Rowan stumbled backwards and managed to catch herself on the wall. After he felt satisfied with what he'd done to her abdomen, her father redirected his aim so his bulging knuckles met her face.

"We been through this eh, a good many a times, and-and still ya choose to disobey me," he slurred. The combination of his stained teeth and whiskey on his breath nauseated her. Blood streamed down from her nose and her now discolored eyes filled with tears. "Ya know, I think all this black 'n blue jazz really accentuates yer pretty green eyes, sweetie. Them eyes remind me of yer mama, ya know that? But yer mama, yer mama was a bad girl, mmm-much like yerself, 'n so they had to take her away from me. You, uh, ya want that to happen to you too? She jerked her head to the right so she didn't have to look at him.

"Nobody took her, you *killed* her. You and your drunk, foolish self killed her so you could have her wealth. She never loved you." Rowan muttered back only to later wish she hadn't. He took a couple clumsy steps back and looked at her. In an instant, he grabbed one of the empty beer bottles from the coffee table and lunged at her. She darted from the wall and he chased after her. Before she could reach the front door, she felt his hand snatch a section of her long black hair. Her head flung towards the ceiling, and she let out a shriek. Rowan then keeled over, her bony knees falling upon the cold hard floor beneath her. Still holding onto her hair, he stood her up and looked directly at her.

"Maybe you's right. Maybe I did kill yer mama. Unfortunately, the only one who knows'at ain't gonna be able to do nothin' about it," he snickered, "'n that one is you." Rowan screamed. She had often let out screams for previous beatings, but none were like this; this time was different. Her father smashed the bottom of the beer bottle against the wall with his other hand, and Rowan put her hands to her face. Not knowing where the jagged and potentially lethal object would land, she waited for her life to end. She prayed to God that if He wouldn't spare her life, to at least spare her pain. Rowan heard the rustling of her father's jacket. As soon as he drew back his right arm, a howling bark rang through Rowan's ears. She uncovered her eyes just in time to see her Siberian Husky sprinting towards her.

"Kyah!" She gasped in relief. In the midst of her terror, Rowan had forgotten the beloved animal that had been one of her only friends for the past three years, as her father rarely let her leave the house. Since the day she had rescued Kyah from the side of the road three years ago, she had only known Kyah to be a one-person dog. To Rowan, Kyah was harmless, loyal, and loving, but Rowan's father was a different story. Before he could lay a finger on Rowan, Kyah sprang violently upon him. She clenched her teeth deep through the sleeve of his jacket and into the flesh on his arm, causing him to drop the bottle. Her victim let out a panicking holler, but Kyah wasn't finished. She released his arm and then went for his neck. Now free, Rowan sprinted down the hallway and into her room. From beneath her bed, she

pulled out a large, full suitcase. Running back into the living room, she saw blood pooling from her whimpering father and looked down at him.

"You'd think with all that whiskey you wouldn't feel much." For a second, Rowan considered calling the police and explaining exactly what happened, but she didn't know what kind of fate a dog would have for doing this to a man, even if it was only to save her life. Rowan then thought of the innocent face of her mother and that sealed the deal for her: she would leave and act shocked at her father's death when later confronted about it. After washing Kyah's bloodstained fur, she leashed her, grabbed her suitcase and car keys, and walked out the door.

"Who's ready to go on an adventure?" Rowan asked as they climbed into the vehicle. Kyah let out a cheerful howl and spun around a few times on the front seat. Rowan was ready to put the key in the ignition when she remembered something. Turning to Kyah, she told her to stay and got out.

She jogged to the back of the house, admiring the beautiful home her mother had designed for she and her then seven-year-old daughter. Such a large, magnificent house it was, perfectly showcasing her mother's love of modernity. Polished stone floors filled the interior and granite counter tops lined the perimeter of the kitchen. Large windows ran from floor to ceiling in the living room and white leather couches surrounded the fireplace where she and her mother shared the best of times telling stories and opening presents. When she finally reached the backyard, she entered the glass door. She glanced in and noticed that her father's body was only feet from it. "Kyah didn't mean to kill you daddy, she only did it to save me. Unfortunately, the only one who knows that won't be able to do anything about it." She didn't know if he even heard her, but she didn't care. She ran back to the car leaving the glass door wide open. For once she was glad she didn't have neighbors.

Kyah was sitting up, still waiting like she'd been ordered. "That's a good girl", she said, stroking her face as she re-entered the car. Rowan grabbed her cell phone out of her pocket. Clicking on the calendar she read, "May 18th,"-her golden birthday. She turned the key in the ignition, drove down the gravel road, and never looked back.

About a year and a half later, Rowan awoke to the sound of her alarm going off. She lay there for a second, stared at the ceiling, and let out a deep sigh, wondering what today had in store for her. She sat up to see Kyah standing up on her bed and stretching her front legs.

"Kyah, what do you say we walk to the park today?" Rowan asked, exciting her now fully energized canine. "Maybe we'll find some other Huskies for you to run with instead of being cooped up in this small apartment." Kyah ran up and licked her until her face was fully slobbered.

Rowan got out of bed with more ease today than most days. Moving to Alaska did make her life a little easier, but inside of her was still the frail, withdrawn girl that had been abused for nine straight years. Every day was filled with feelings of failure. She constantly questioned her purpose in life and whether she even deserved it. Rowan had told herself that the only thing she has to live for is Kyah, but often she debated if that was even enough. Deciding to put the depressing thoughts

aside for a while, she opened her curtains and the reflection of sunshine off the snow beamed into her room. On her way to the bathroom, Rowan passed by the bulletin board on her wall. She walked by it every day, but it had been quite a while since she'd read the newspaper attached to it. The headline read:

**"MOUNTAIN LION BELIEVED TO KILL AZ MAN"**

She lowered her eyes to the beginning of the article and began reading.

"44-year-old James Dawson of Scottsdale, Arizona died last Thursday in an apparent mountain lion attack. It is said that the animal entered through the back door of the home, which was left wide open when police were called to the scene."

Her eyes skimmed down a little further and she continued to read.

"While investigators aren't certain of the actual animal, mountain lion attacks are quite common around the Scottsdale area. James left behind one daughter who has been released from further questioning and has since relocated."

"Guess it's a good thing we never had you registered, Kyah," she said gratefully, looking down into the crystal eyes staring back at her.

When they finally reached the park, Rowan let Kyah off of her leash and she went wild. She dove in the snow and rolled around until the gray on her coat disappeared. Rowan then threw her the frisbee and each time, Kyah returned it to her. That is, until she came across a young boy walking with his mother. The woman was young and thin, her hair a faded brown, her eyes with bags. The boy was thin as well and wore a red, oversized stocking cap that came halfway down on his forehead. It highlighted his rosy lips, which formed a permanent smile on his small face. Kyah eyed the boy. While Rowan had full trust of her dog, she knew the only child Kyah had ever been around was Rowan herself, so she whistled to her.

"Kyyaaah, come here, Kyah." Ignoring Rowan, she instead began running toward the boy.

"*Kyah!*" Rowan yelled, becoming somewhat frantic. "Kyah, get back here!" She ran after her, her fear continuing to grow. After sprinting a couple yards, Rowan stopped. She watched her dog slow to a walk and come within inches of the boy. Rowan sighed with relief as Kyah's long wet tongue met the boy's hand.

"Mom, look!" The boy pulled on his mother's hand and began petting Kyah, laughing with every lick on his face. Rowan came over to them.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. I didn't think my dog would run away like that."

"Oh, that's quite alright, I haven't heard him laugh like that in a while," the boy's mother replied.

"Is this your dog, miss?" the boy asked Rowan.

"Yes, her name's Kyah. You must be pretty special because she doesn't usually come up to strangers like that." A grin grew on the boy's face as he looked back at the dog.

"Hi, Kyah, my name's Declan and I'm eight years old." The boy held his hand out to the dog out of habit and to his surprise, Kyah placed her paw in it. "Wow, she can shake!"

"I think he's taken a liking to her too," his mother said. So have you lived here long?

"A little over a year now. Kyah and I moved up here from Arizona last May. My name's Rowan." The woman shook Rowan's hand, introducing herself as Tara.

"Wow, that's quite a ways. What made you come all that distance?" Rowan paused.

"I just kind of felt like I needed to get away, I guess." They continued small talk for a few minutes while the boy played with Kyah, who chased him all throughout the snow. Declan and Kyah got a little farther away, but the boy's laugh could still be heard.

"Easy, Declan, don't over do it, sweetie" Tara yelled to her son.

"Over do it?" Rowan asked, questioningly.

"Oh, yes, well, he has Pleuropulmonary Blastoma. It's a rare form of lung cancer."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I never would've guessed," Rowan apologized and took a second look at the large stocking that covered his head.

"Yeah, he's a strong one. I just wish I could be as strong as he is."

"Well, I admire you. I'm sure you've been a wonderful support to him through it all."

"Hardly," she replied shamefully. "I got laid off from my job a couple of weeks ago and with him managing medical bills with him constantly in and out of the hospital is quite a task." Rowan looked again at the boy and then back at his mother.

"You know, I'm taking a break from college right now, and I don't have much going on. Maybe I could watch him for you if you didn't mind."

"Oh, that is so thoughtful, dear, but I couldn't ask you to do that. Not only that, but there's no way I could pay you."

"Well, that wouldn't be necessary. My parents sent me here with quite a bit of money, so I'm doing just fine. Besides, he seems like a wonderful child and I'd be happy to watch him for you." Suddenly emotional, Tara drew her hand to her chest.

"Oh my, you don't know how much that would mean to me." She called Declan over to her and Kyah followed behind him. She asked Declan what he thought about Rowan watching him sometimes.

"Will I get to see Kyah, too?"

"I suppose so," his mother replied happily.

"YES!" He could barely contain his excitement. He parted ways with Kyah and Rowan watched him skip away merrily next to his mother until they were eventually out of sight.

Later that night, Rowan sat quietly at her kitchen table, staring at the food in front of her, while Kyah was asleep by her feet. She moved her eyes from her plate to the pile of unopened mail not far from it. She found the courage to pick it up and began flipping through it until she came across one from the University of Alaska,

Fairbanks. She slid her finger under the paper and pulled out the contents. Opening up the paper, she read,

“Dear Rowan:

“After carefully reviewing your application, I am sorry to inform you that we are unable to offer you a place here at UAF.”

With that, she tore up the letter and threw it in the pile with the other rejection letters she had received. After doing so, she went to check her phone in hopes that someone had tried to reach her that day. A monotone voice came on and told her that she had no new messages. Since Kyah was still asleep, Rowan went into her room and huddled up on her bed. It was times like this where Rowan was always haunted by the thoughts that filled her head. The silence brought tears to her eyes as flashbacks of her father’s beatings filled her head. They were so vivid in her mind that she could still feel the pangs of where he kicked her in the stomach and left bruises on her wrists. Tears streamed down her eyes and she began to cry. Kyah, hearing her from the other room, ran in and jumped on the bed next to her. She watched her for a second, leaning her head to the left and then to the right, confused as to what she was doing. Sensing something was wrong, she laid down next to her. She remained in that position until Rowan fell asleep.

When Tara brought Declan to Rowan’s house for the first time, his eyes lit up as soon as she opened the door.

“Hi, Rowan! Did you miss me?” he smiled at her. Rowan let out a laugh, though she wasn’t sure if it sounded real since she couldn’t remember what it sounded like.

“Of course I missed you, two days is a very long time,” Rowan replied. Tara hugged her son goodbye and left. Declan walked inside and removed his coat and hat revealing his smooth, bare head.

“So, what are we gonna do today?” he asked her.

“I don’t know, what would you like to do?”

“Hm. Do you have any video games?”

“Unfortunately, no.” I think I have a few board games though. How do you feel about battleship?”

“Okay! Where’s Kyah?”

“She’s in the backyard, I’ll let her in for you.” She opened the back door and called to Kyah who came running full speed when she saw Declan. Rowan got the game out and set up the board.

“Actually, I don’t think I wanna play. I think I’d rather just watch TV here with Kyah.”

“Alright, if that’s what you want.” He sat on the sofa and Kyah jumped up next to him.

“Spongebob okay?” Rowan asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, stroking the top of Kyah’s head.

"So your mom tells me you've been kind of sick lately," Rowan said, trying to make conversation.

"Yeah, I have some bad lung cancer", he said to her, emotionless, "I don't think my mom thinks I am gonna get better, but I'm gonna, just watch. Hey, did you know my birthday is coming up soon?"

"I didn't, when is it?"

"It's May 18<sup>th</sup>." Rowan gave him a funny look.

"Really? That's crazy, my birthday is May 18<sup>th</sup> too."

"No way! What do you want?" he implored. For a second, she contemplated what she really wanted for her birthday, and she could only think of one thing: she wanted something to live for-for everything to be better and to have a normal life, but because of the intangibility of this wish, she told him that she wasn't sure.

"All I want for my birthday is to be cancer free." With this, Rowan broke down inside a little bit. Seeing as his main interest was always on Kyah, she changed the direction of the conversation in hopes to lighten the mood.

"Well, I can tell you're a pretty tough kid. Kyah can tell too. I think that's part of why she's so fond of you."

"Really?" he demanded enthusiastically.

"Yep. You're kind of like a hero to her."

"A hero? Like *Batman*? Or like a firefighter? Because I think I'd rather be like Batman..."

"Oh definitely Batman," she smiled at him and then watched him form a fist and jerk his elbow down in front of his face.

"Yesss!" he said. Rowan couldn't help but laugh.

The rest of the day consisted of much of the same thing and when Tara came to pick up Declan, no part of him wanted to go.

Months passed and April swept through Alaska like a cool breeze. Rowan had been watching Declan for the past two weeks and despite their age difference, they'd become the best of friends. They watched *Spongebob*, played battleship, and spent many hours laughing over the funny things Kyah did. Whenever Rowan was around Declan, her mood changed. Seeing him immediately brightened whatever kind of day she had been having. She couldn't help but admire his positivity and will to live. He seemed to have such a love for life and so much to live for-things that were so foreign to Rowan. In him she found a sense of hope; a sense of purpose, and at just eight years old, he was her hero.

At 2:43 AM one Saturday in May, Rowan received a phone call. The voice on the other end was shaky and appeared to be crying.

"Tara?" Rowan asked, "Tara, what's wrong? Is everything okay?"

"It's-it's Declan. I'm so sorry to bother you this late at night, but I just had to let you know."

"Let me know what? Is he okay?" her heart seemed to fall into her stomach.

"Oh, he's gotten worse, Rowan. He woke up complaining about shortness of breath and his temperature was 103, so I took him to the Emergency Room. He has a lung infection and the doctor said he's..." she choked up, "he's going to need an

emergency lung transplant as soon as possible or he won't make it." Rowan was in shock. Her breathing became heavy and she felt as though *she* couldn't breathe.

"Like I said, I'm so sorry to wake you, I just thought you should know. They'll need to remove both of his lungs, but after a few tests, I should be able to donate one of my lungs to him. Anyways, you're more than welcome to come visit him if you'd like. His room number is 229.

"I'll be up as soon as I can, Tara. Thank you for letting me know. Rowan hung up the phone and gathered her things into her purse. She got into the car and headed to Fairbanks General Hospital.

Rowan checked in with the secretary and told him she was here to see Declan.

"Yes, Declan Williams, his mother said he was in room 229." The nurse looked down to her sheet and then back to Rowan.

"Um miss, I'm sorry, but he's no longer in that room. They've moved him to the third floor."

"The third floor?"

"Yes, in the Intensive Care Unit." Rowan didn't even let her finish. Trying to maintain composure, she darted down the hall to the elevator. On the third floor she met Tara in the hallway and Rowan had never seen someone look so broken in all her life. Tears poured out of her blood-shot eyes and Rowan could barely make out what she was saying.

"My lung, they can't use it! They said my blood type is different and-and that the donor must be B negative for his body to accept it. I don't know what to do, Rowan!" The panic immediately left Rowan's face. She didn't think twice about what was going to come out of her mouth next.

"I'll give him mine." A doctor came out of Declan's room and she ran up to him.

"Declan needs a transplant. My lung, give him my lung. I can be his donor." The doctor was clearly caught off guard.

"Ma'am you do know that you have to be eighteen to donate?"

"I know, I'm nineteen," she let out a deep, relieving breath, "I'm B negative." They tested her and Rowan soon found herself in a gown being wheeled to the OR where she would donate one of her lungs to Declan. Before giving her anesthesia, she had just one question for the doctor.

"What is the date today?" she asked earnestly. The doctor looked down at his watch.

"It's the 18<sup>th</sup>. May 18<sup>th</sup>." Clearly Rowan had heard the answer she was hoping for.

"I thought so." A smile stretched across her face and she fell asleep.

When Rowan awoke, she immediately thought of Declan.

"Is he okay?" she asked one of the nurses who came in her room.

"Yes, he's doing just fine. You saved his life, you know that." Rowan still couldn't believe it.

"I know. Can I see him?"

"Both of you should get some rest today, but you should be able to see him within the next few days." As the nurse left the room, Tara came in. She ran toward Rowan and threw her arms around her.

"You don't know how grateful I am to you. You saved my baby's life! I can't thank you enough. How are you feeling?"

"I was more than happy to. I'm feeling good, just a little tired. Declan is okay?"

"Yeah, I'm going to go check on him here in a bit, I just wanted to come by and check on you first. I hope you don't mind, but I went over and took care of Kyah today and she was doing well, so you don't need to worry about her. I returned your key to your purse as well"

"Oh, thank you! That means a lot. Well, be sure you give Declan a hug for me." Tara agreed that she would and left.

Two days later, Rowan was released from the hospital. She hadn't gotten to see Declan yet but was hoping that she would be able to tomorrow, if not today. She entered the door, greeted by her loving canine companion who had surprisingly not destroyed the house during her absence. She set down her things and she and Kyah took a long nap on the couch.

The doorbell rang and by the first knock, Kyah was barking her head off. Rowan abruptly awoke and went to the front door. Through the glass, she saw the familiar smile she'd been missing the past three days. She opened the door and Declan ran to her.

"Thank you so much! My mom told me that I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you."

"You're very welcome," she smiled at him, "I'm just glad you're okay."

After hugging her, Declan ran to Kyah, who was madly wagging her tail at the sight of him.

"Boy, have I missed you," he said to her rubbing the sides of her face. Rowan stood there for a while, just watching them. The dog who has been there for her since she was 15 and saved her life and the boy who has changed her life and given new meaning to it. It was in that moment that she realized there was only one thing left to do.

"Well you guys are welcome to stay for as long as you'd like, but when you leave, I want you to take Kyah home with you," Rowan said, waiting to see Declan's reaction. He stopped and turned around to meet her face. Tara's looked at Rowan, stunned.

"Take her *home* with us? Wait, really?" It was as if the boy couldn't take in what she'd just said to him. For the first time since she'd known him, Rowan watched a tear fall onto his cheek, and she felt better about her decision.

"Yes, really. My life's bound to get pretty busy in the next few years, so I won't be able to be with her as much." Without giving it a second thought, Declan agreed and promised that he would love and take care of Kyah.

"You really don't need to do this," Tara told her, "we could never repay you."



"You already have. Tara, your son has given my life meaning and that's the best thing anybody has ever given me. Besides, Kyah has served her role in my life, and I think Declan could use her now."

"Well, in that case, I guess it'd be a good time to tell you the good news," Tara replied, "I got a job yesterday!"

"Wow, that's great, Tara, I'm so happy for you!"

"Wait there's more, "Declan piped in, "Can I tell her mom?"

"Sure, honey, go ahead." Declan grabbed Rowan's hand and dragged her to the front door.

"If you're going to give me Kyah, then I want you to be the first one to show her her new house." He pulled her out to her driveway and pointed to the house just next door. Rowan felt like her jaw could have fallen to the cement below.

"You guys bought the house next door!" Rowan was flooded with emotions. She was so overjoyed that she picked Declan up and spun him around.

"Now you'll be able to see her any time you want," he told her cheerfully.

"You're right, and you know what's even better than that?" she asked him.

"No, what?"

"I'll get to see you anytime I want, too." She smiled at him and for the first time, she felt that life was worth living.

