

## RETURNING HOME

In the early morning light, with dew still sparkling on the grass, a *small* dog lay, his feet twitching in his dream. His tail shot between his gently moving legs (a sign of fear or pain) and his legs jolted into motion. Now instead of moving gently, his legs moved fast, afraid. He was having a nightmare, a nightmare he had been having for weeks about THE STORM, the storm that separated him from his family, the storm that tore his family apart, the big black mass of clouds and wind - **A TORNADO!!!!**

He remembered being blown across the ground in spiraling circles, he remembered the oldest yelling to him, "NOOOOOO, ECHO!" He tried to run back but the wind picked him up, and blew him away.

He was lonely, cold, and thin but he kept going. Nothing could stop him now.

He was curled up on the ground when he heard a soft voice.

"What is this? A raccoon?" said the voice.

He lifted his head and saw a woman with a floppy hat.

"No it's a dog!? Probably from the storm," said her companion, a tall man with a baseball cap.

She was looking down at him with kind eyes while the man was looking at him like he was a dirty thing.

The woman said, "We should take him to the vet. He doesn't look so good."

The man said, "Sarah, he could have rabies or something!"

Sarah said, "Well, Stuart, we can't just leave him here."

Stuart said, "Let's go home and get a basket or something. Rabies is dangerous."

"Ok," said Sarah. "I'll stay here. You go."

Seven minutes later, Stuart came back with a basket. Gently, Sarah scooped him up under his belly and placed him in the basket. He was so tired that he couldn't lift his head to look out. Eventually with the rocking motion of the basket, he fell asleep.

He next awoke when he felt the basket stop moving. He could just see through the cracks in the basket and he saw a white room. The vet walked through the door with a nametag that said HILARY.

"The woman at the front desk told me that this dog was unidentified," she said.

"Yes," said Sarah. "We were out walking this morning and saw him."

Hilary said, "Where exactly did you find him?"

Sarah answered. "We found him on the corner of Maple Road. I think he was probably caught up in the storm."

"Well," said Hilary. "Let's see if he has a microchip. He looks pretty thin. We'll see if we can get him some food. I'll take him back and see what we can do for him. Maybe you could foster him until we find his owners or a new home for him?"

Sarah looked at Stuart. Her eyes were pleading. "Come on, he's just a cute little puppy."

"Oh I guess so," said Stuart. "It can't hurt."

Sarah smiled.

Sarah answered when the vet called two hours later. "Hello? Oh, hi, Hilary. Is he OK?"

"Yes," said Hilary. "Just deprived of food. You can come pick him up. Hopefully we'll find his owners or maybe you'll take him full time? It turns out he did have a microchip but the number on it wasn't a number that we have in our records."

"Sure," Sarah replied. "At least for a little while."

At the Veterinarian's office, Echo was lying on a table. The Vet had checked him all over. It seemed like they thought he was OK. While they had been checking him out he'd been listening to his stomach. It had been growling, telling him FOOD FOOD FOOD. Vaguely, he thought he heard a woman say "kibble." He looked up.

"Look," said the nurse. "He heard you."

"Come on. Up you go," said Hilary gently and she took him to another room in which delicious smells wafted through the air. Hilary disappeared through a doorway and came back a few moments later with a bowl filled with some warm rice and chicken.

*Is that for me?* Echo wondered.

"Do you want it?" asked Hilary.

He lifted his head. His eyes said clearly, *yes please*.

Hilary put the bowl down in front of him. It was a small portion at first. But when he gobbled that up she gave him more. Echo licked his chops and thought *that was better than kibble*. Then he heard a different voice calling, "Hilary! Sarah and Stuart are here."

"Ok," Hilary called back. "Can you get his harness, collar, and leash?"

Hilary carried him out to the lobby. Echo recognized Sarah from her big hat and soft eyes, the smell of ink and paper that hung around her. On the ride home Echo lay on Sarah's lap. When they got home he had to smell everything, from the bathroom to the couch to the kitchen. After Sarah gave him another portion of food, he found a soft square and Sarah said, "That's your bed." Echo thought, *ok*, and settled down. So far he liked Sarah. He still wasn't sure about Stuart.

The next few days passed in a happy blur. He had a bath, chased a few squirrels, and slept on his new bed! He was finally happy! But then one day when a knock sounded at the door, Echo ran to the door to check it out, but stopped when he caught the bad smell coming from outside. Not "stinky" bad, but "mean" bad. He backed away from the door, surprising Sarah, who went to open it. When the door opened a man in his 50s stood there. He had long blackish hair dyed half blue, swept back into a long ponytail. He had a dragon earring in one ear.

“Hello Ma’am,” he said graciously. “I hear you are fostering a dog.”

Ten minutes later, Sarah was sitting on the coach with Echo curled up in her lap.

“So, remind me of your name again?” said Sarah.

“I am Robert Thompson. I have been living outside New York City for the past year or so. I used to live in New Hampshire until my wife died, then I moved.

“So why do you want to foster him? I’ve been calling him Spot.” said Sarah.

“Well, I’ve been very lonely--” A shrill whistle interrupted Robert.

“Oh that’s the tea,” and Sarah went to get it.

When she came back with two tea cups, Robert asked, “Is he a fighter?”

Sarah looked at him. There was a trace of suspicion in her eyes. “No. He is not.” Sarah spoke firmly. “Why do you ask?”

Robert seemed to be doing some fast thinking, “Well there are a lot of dogs in my neighborhood and if he fights with them it could be sort of bad,” Robert said lamely.

“I see,” replied Sarah. “Well, it’s almost time for dinner. How about we talk about this tomorrow”

She walked behind him and ushered him out the door, closing the door and locking it behind him.

Then she went into the kitchen, to start dinner.

Later at dinner, Stuart asked, “So how was your meeting with Robert?”

“It was interesting,” said Sarah. And she told him about the way he had asked if Spot was a fighter.

“That is suspicious,” Stuart said. “But, you’ve only known him for day. Maybe you need to meet with him tomorrow just to see?”

Sarah said, “I would still feel weird giving him Spot. I’ll meet with him tomorrow to see but I think we should find someone else.” After Sarah said that, she secretly dropped a tiny piece of the steak they were having for dinner on the floor. She heard a snuffling sound which told her that the meat had done its job.

At lunch the next day, at a table at Dan’s Delicious Diner, Sarah met Robert again. Stuart hadn’t been able to make the meeting.

Sarah asked, “Have you had a dog before?”

“No, well, um, yes, I have,” said Robert.

“What kind of dog? Was it a boy or girl?”

“It was a um labradoodle –yes. Named Max and he was a boy.” Robert looked at his watch and said, “Well, I better be going.”

Sarah glanced down at her watch too. “Yes, me too.”

That night at dinner. Sarah said to Stuart, “I still don’t believe him. We should find someone else. I’m not giving Spot to that man.”

Stuart said, “Well if you’re so sure, I guess we should find someone else.”

Meanwhile, a state away, a family was sitting in a tent.

“I miss Echo,” said the smallest child, Lilly who was only 5.

“I do too. We’ll find him, I promise,” said another girl, age 9, who was tucking Lilly into bed. Her name was Lauren.

“Yes, we will find our Echo,” said the oldest girl in the tent, who was 17.

The rest of the people in the tent were the mom, the dad, and a little baby boy called John.

“We’ll find him,” said the oldest girl, Elizabeth, again. “But first we have to get some sleep. Then to herself she whispered, “We’ll find our dog.”

Late in the morning the next day, the doorbell rang. There was no one there but there was mail sticking out of the mailbox. Sarah reached inside to get the mail. Coupons, coupons, coupons. And, a bill. *What’s this?* At the very bottom of the stack there was a white envelope. She looked at the return address on the back and saw PO box 168 and looked at the name below it. Max Jameson. *Oh, my nephew.* She went inside and put down the mail. She took out Max’s letter, ripped it open. Her face turned from excitement at seeing the letter to confusion, sadness, and worry. This is what she read: Hi, Auntie Sarah. I hope that you are doing OK. Our house was hit by the big storm. We have been living in a tent in the yard outside the ruins of our house. Would it be OK if Jane, the kids, and I come to stay with you for a little bit?

Yes, of course you can come stay with us, Sarah wrote back to Max.

A few days later, Sarah was driving Max, Jane, Elizabeth, Lauren, Lilly, and baby John from the bus stop.

“An’ the wors’ par’ is our puppy’s missing,” Lilly said.

“Your puppy’s missing?” Sarah said.

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “When the storm hit he disappeared.”

“I’m so sorry about that!” Sarah said. “That’s TERRIBLE, I hope you find him again. Oh, here we are.”

Everybody hopped out. When they went inside they heard excited barks. *Ruff, ruff!*

“What’s that?” asked Lauren.

“Oh,” said Sarah. “I forgot to mention that we’re fostering a dog.”

“Eeee! Can we say hi?” said Lilly.

“Sure!”

A few minutes later they were all clustering around Spot. Belly rub central!

*This is the best,* thought Echo. *We should do this every day wait*

*Wait ... Lilly!?! Elizabeth? Lauren?!*

“He’s not usually so excited to greet people like this,” Sarah said. “I think he likes you.”

“He reminds me of our dog,” Lauren said.

“Except our dog’s fur was longer,” Elizabeth said.

“We gave him a haircut when he got him,” Stuart said. “His fur was pretty long.”

“Echo!” Lilly cried out.

“Yes, Lily that was the name of our dog,” Elizabeth said.

“Echo!”

Spot jumped to his feet.

“Wait,” Sarah said, as she jumped up and ran into the other room.

When she came back, she was holding a scrap of paper. Wordlessly, she handed it over to Max.

“How did you get this? That’s our home phone number.”

“That was the number on Spot’s microchip, but it was disabled.”

“Echo?” said Lauren, in disbelief.

Echo jumped up and yipped one happy yip.

*A few months later ...*

Echo bounded up the path to Sarah and Stuart’s house. Lauren and her family right behind him. All was well.