



Breathless

A Novel

Dean Koontz



DEAN KOONTZ

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Dedication

Also by Dean Koontz

Science must not impose any philosophy, any more than the telephone must tell us what to say.

—G. K. CHESTERTON



PART ONE

Life and Death

A moment before the encounter, a strange expectancy overcame Grady Adams, a sense that he and Merlin were not alone.

In good weather and bad, Grady and the dog walked the woods and the meadows for two hours every day. In the wilderness, he was relieved of the need to think about anything other than the smells and sounds and textures of nature, the play of light and shadow, the way ahead, and the way home.

Generations of deer had made this path through the forest, toward a meadow of grass and fragrant clover.

Merlin led the way, seemingly indifferent to the spoor of the deer and the possibility of glimpsing the white flags of their tails ahead of him. He was a three-year-old, 160-pound Irish wolfhound, thirty-six inches tall, measured from his withers to the ground, his head higher on a muscular neck.

The dog's rough coat was a mix of ash-gray and darker charcoal. In the evergreen shadow he sometimes seemed to be a shadow, too, but one not tethered to its source.

As the path approached the edge of the woods, the sunshine beyond the trees suddenly looked peculiar. The light turned coppery, as if the world, bewitched, had revolved toward sunset hours ahead of schedule. With a sequined glimmer, afternoon sun shimmered down upon the meadow.

As Merlin passed between two pines, stepping onto open ground, a vague apprehension—presentiment of pending contact—gripped Grady. He hesitated in the woodland gloom before following the dog.

In the open, the light was neither coppery nor glimmering, as it had appeared from among the trees. The pale-blue arch of sky and emerald arms of forest embraced the meadow.

No breeze stirred the golden grass, and the late-September day was as hushed as any vault deep in the earth.

Merlin stood motionless, head raised, alert, eyes fixed intently on something distant in the meadow. Wolfhounds were thought to have the keenest eyesight of all breeds of dogs.

The back of Grady's neck still prickled. The perception lingered that something uncanny would occur. He wondered if this feeling arose from his own intuition or might be inspired by the dog's tension.

Standing beside the immense hound, seeking what his companion saw, Grady studied the field, which gently descended southward to another vastness of forest. Nothing moved until something did.

A white form, supple and swift. And then another.

The pair of animals appeared to be ascending the meadow less by intention than by the consequence of their play. They chased each other, tumbled, rolled, sprang up, and challenged each other again in a frolicsome spirit that could not be mistaken for fighting.

Where the grass stood tallest, they almost vanished, but often they were fully visible. Because they remained in motion, however, their precise nature was difficult to define.

Their fur was uniformly white. They weighed perhaps fifty or sixty pounds, as large as midsize dogs. But they were not dogs.

They appeared to be as limber and quick as cats. But they were not cats.

Although he'd lived in these mountains until he was seventeen, though he had returned four years previously, at the age of thirty-two, Grady had never before seen creatures like these.

Powerful body tense, Merlin watched the playful pair.

Having raised him from a pup, having spent the past three years with little company other than the dog, Grady knew him well enough to read his emotions and his state of mind. Merlin was intrigued but puzzled, and his puzzlement made him wary.

The unknown animals were large enough to be formidable predators if they had claws and sharp teeth. At this distance, Grady could not determine if they were carnivores, omnivores or herbivores, though the last classification was the least likely.

Merlin seemed to be unafraid. Because of their great size, strength, and history as hunter Irish wolfhounds were all but fearless. Although their disposition was peaceable and their nature affectionate, they had been known to stand off packs of wolves and to kill a attacking pit bull with one bite and a violent shake.

When the white-furred creatures were sixty or seventy feet away, they became aware of being watched. They halted, raised their heads.

The birdless sky, the shadowy woods, and the meadow remained under a spell of eerie silence. Grady had the peculiar notion that if he moved, his boots would press no sound from the ground under him, and that if he shouted, he would have no voice.

To get a better view of man and dog, one of the white creatures rose, sitting on its haunches in the manner of a squirrel.

Grady wished he had brought binoculars. As far as he could tell, the animal had no projecting muzzle; its black nose lay in nearly the same plane as its eyes. Distance foiled further analysis.

Abruptly the day exhaled. A breeze sighed in the trees behind Grady.

In the meadow, the risen creature dropped back onto all fours, and the pair raced away seeming to glide more than sprint. Their sleek white forms soon vanished into the golden grass.

The dog looked up inquiringly. Grady said, "Let's have a look."

Where the mysterious animals had gamboled, the grass was bent and tramped. No bare earth meant no paw prints.

Merlin led his master along the trail until the meadow ended where the woods resumed.

A cloud shadow passed over them and seemed to be drawn into the forest as a draft drew smoke.

Gazing through the serried trees into the gloom, Grady felt watched. If the white-furred pair could climb, they might be in a high green bower, cloaked in pine boughs and not easily spotted.

Although he was a hunter by breed and blood, with a Sherlockian sense of smell that could follow the thinnest thread of unraveled scent, Merlin showed no interest in further pursuit.

They followed the tree line west, then northwest, along the curve of meadow, circling toward home as the quickening air whispered through the grass. They returned to the north woods.

Around them, the soft chorus of nature arose once more: birds in song, the drone of insect

the arthritic creak of heavy evergreen boughs troubled by their own weight.

Although the unnatural hush had relented, Grady remained disturbed by a sense of the uncanny. Every time he glanced back, no stalker was apparent, yet he felt that he and Merlin were not alone.

On a long rise, they came to a stream that slithered down well-worn shelves of rock. Where the trees parted, the sun revealed silver scales on the water, which was elsewhere dark and smooth.

With other sounds masked by the hiss and gurgle of the stream, Grady wanted more than ever to look back. He resisted the paranoid urge until his companion halted, turned, and stared downhill.

He did not have to crouch in order to rest one hand on the wolfhound's back. Merlin's body was tight with tension.

The big dog scanned the woods. His high-set ears tipped forward slightly. His nostrils flared and quivered.

Merlin held that posture for so long, Grady began to think the dog was not so much searching for anything as he was warning away a pursuer. Yet he did not growl.

When at last the wolfhound set off toward home once more, he moved faster than before, and Grady Adams matched the dog's pace.

Authorities raided the illegal puppy mill late Saturday afternoon. Saturday night, Rocky Mountain Gold, an all-volunteer golden-retriever rescue group, took custody of twenty-four breeder dogs that were filthy, malnourished, infested with ticks, crawling with fleas, and suffering an array of untreated infections.

Dr. Camillia Rivers was awakened by a call on her emergency line at 5:05 Sunday morning. Rebecca Cleary, president of Rocky Mountain Gold, asked how many of the twenty-four Cammy might treat in return for nothing but the wholesale cost of what drugs were used.

After looking at the nightstand photo of her golden, Tessa, who had died only six weeks earlier, Cammy said, "Bring 'em all."

Her business partner and fellow vet, Donna Corbett, was in the middle of a one-week vacation. Their senior vet tech, Cory Hern, had gone to visit relatives in Denver for the weekend. When she called the junior tech, Ben Aikens, he agreed to donate his Sunday to the cause.

At 6:20 A.M., a Rocky Mountain Gold caravan of SUVs arrived at the modest Corbett Veterinary Clinic with twenty-four goldens in as desperate condition as any Cammy had ever seen. Every one was potentially a beautiful dog, but at the moment they looked like the harbingers of Armageddon.

Having endured their entire lives in cramped cages, not merely neglected but also abused, having been forced without vet care to bear litter after litter to the point of exhaustion, they were timid, trembling, vomiting in fear, frightened of everyone they encountered. In their experience, human beings were cruel or at best indifferent to them, and they expected to be struck.

Eight members of the rescue group assisted with bathing, shaving fur away from hot spots, and other sores, clipping knots out of coats, deticking, and other tasks, all of which were complicated by the need continually to calm and reassure the dogs.

Cammy was unaware that the morning had passed until she checked her wristwatch at 2:15 in the afternoon. Having skipped breakfast, she took a fifteen-minute break and retreated to her apartment above the veterinary facility, to have a bite of lunch.

For a long time, Donna Corbett had run the practice with her husband, John, who was also a veterinarian. When John died of a heart attack four years earlier, Donna divided their large apartment into two units and sought a partner who would be as committed to animals as she was and as John had been, who was willing to *live* the work.

The Corbetts viewed veterinary medicine less as a profession than as a calling, which was why Cammy didn't need to consult with her partner when agreeing to treat the puppy-mill dogs pro bono.

After quickly putting together a cheese sandwich, she opened a cold bottle of tea sweetened with peach nectar. She ate lunch while standing at her kitchen sink.

As she'd been working with the folks from Rocky Mountain Gold, two calls had come in, one regarding a sick cow. She referred the caller to Dr. Amos Renfrew, who was the best cowboy doc in the county.

The second inquiry came from Nash Franklin, regarding a horse at High Meadows Farm.

Because the situation wasn't urgent, Cammy would pay Nash a visit later in the afternoon.

She had nearly finished the cheese sandwich when Ben Aikens, her vet tech, rang her from downstairs. "Cammy, you've got to see this."

"What's wrong?"

"These dogs. I've never seen anything like it."

"Be right there." She shoved the last piece of the sandwich into her mouth and chewed on the run.

Puppy-mill breeders were routinely so physically and emotionally traumatized by the abuse that the new experiences of freedom—open spaces; cars; steps, which they never before climbed or descended; strange noises; soap and water; even kind words and gentle touching—could induce a dangerous state of shock. Most often, the cause of shock was chronic dehydration or untreated infections, but there were times when Cammy could attribute it to nothing else but the impact of the new, of change.

If they could be cured of their diseases and conditions, the dogs would need months of socializing, but in time they would find their courage, regain the joyful spirit that defined golden, and learn to trust, to love, to be loved.

Descending the exterior stairs from her apartment, she prayed that all these dogs might survive and thrive, that not one of them would be lost to infection or disease, or shock.

Cammy entered the clinic by the front door. She hurried through the small waiting room along a hallway flanked by four examination cubicles, and through a swinging door into the large, tile-floored open space that included treatment stations and grooming facilities.

Awaiting her was a sight far different from the crisis she had anticipated. Every one of these brutalized dogs appeared to have shed its anxiety, to have suppressed already the memories of torment in favor of embracing a new life. Tails wagging, eyes bright, grinning that fabled golden grin, they submitted happily to belly rubs and ear scratches from the Rocky Mountain Gold volunteers. They nuzzled one another and explored the room, sniffing this and that, curious about things that a short while ago frightened them. None lay in cataplexic collapse or hid its face, or cowered, or trembled.

This unlikely sight had startled Cammy to a stop. Now, as she moved farther into the room, Ben Aikens hurried to her.

Ben, twenty-seven, had a perpetually sunny disposition, but even for him, his current mood seemed unusually buoyant. He was virtually shining with delight. "Isn't it fantastic? You ever seen anything like it? Have you, Cammy?"

"No. Never. What happened here?"

"We don't know. The dogs were like before, anxious, distressed, so pitiful. Then they—Well, they—They went still and quiet, all of them at once. They lifted their ears, all of them listening, and they heard something."

"Heard what?"

"I don't know. We didn't hear it. They raised their heads. They all stood up. They stood still, motionless, they heard something."

"What were they looking at?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know. But look at them now."

Cammy reached the center of the room. The rescued animals were everywhere engaged in the spirited behavior of ordinary dogs.

When she knelt, two goldens came to her, tails wagging, seeking affection. Then another and another, and a fifth. Sores, scars, ear-flap hematomas, fly-bite dermatitis: None of that seemed to matter to the dogs anymore. This one was half blind from an untreated eye infection, that one limped from patellar dislocation, but they seemed happy, and they were uncomplaining. Ragged, tattered, gaunt, freed from a life of cruelty and abuse less than twenty-four hours earlier, they were suddenly and inexplicably socialized, neither afraid any longer nor timid.

Rebecca Cleary, head of the rescue group, knelt beside Cammy. “Pinch me. This has got to be a dream.”

“Ben says they all stood up at once, listening to something.”

“At least a minute. Listening, alert. We weren’t even there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like they weren’t aware of us anymore. Almost ... in a trance.”

Cammy held a retriever’s head in her cupped hands, rubbing its flews with her thumbs. The dog, so recently fearful and shy, accepted the face massage with pleasure, met her eyes, and did not look away.

“At first,” Rebecca said, “it was eerie ...”

The animal’s eyes were as golden as its coat.

“... then they became aware of us again, and it was wonderful.”

The dog’s eyes were as bright as gems. Topaz. They seemed to have an inner light. Eyes of great beauty—clear, direct, and deep.

The unpaved turnoff was where he expected to find it, two hundred yards past Milepost 7 on the state highway. He coasted almost to a stop, afraid that his hopes would not be fulfilled, but then he wheeled the Land Rover right, onto the one-lane road.

Henry Rouvroy had not seen his twin brother, James, for fifteen years. He was nervous but inexpressibly happy about the prospect of their reunion.

Their lives had followed different paths. So much time passed so quickly.

At first, when the idea to reconnect with Jim came to Henry, he dismissed it. He worried that he wouldn't be met with hospitality.

They had never experienced the fabled psychic connection of identicals. On the other hand, they had never been at odds with each other, either. There was no bad blood between them, no bitterness.

They had simply been different from each other, interested in different things. Even in childhood, Henry was the social twin, always in a group of friends. Jimmy preferred solitude. Henry thrived on sports, games, action, challenges. Jimmy was content with books.

When their parents divorced, they were twelve. Instead of sharing custody of both boys, their father took Henry to New York to live with him, and their mother settled in a small town in Colorado with Jimmy, which seemed right and natural to everyone.

Since they were twelve, they had seen each other only once, when they were twenty-two, at the reading of their father's will. Their mother died of cancer a year before the old man passed away.

They agreed to stay in touch. Henry wrote five letters to his brother over the following year, and Jim answered two of them. Thereafter, Henry wrote less often, and Jim never again replied.

Although they were brothers, Henry accepted that they were also virtually strangers. As much as he might want to be part of a closely knit family, it was not to be.

But by nature, the human heart yearns most for what it cannot have. Time and circumstances brought Henry here to rural Colorado, with the hope that their relationship might change.

Pines crowded close to the road, and branches swagged within inches of the roof. Even in daytime, headlights were needed.

Years earlier, the University of Colorado had owned this land. Jim's remote house had been occupied by a series of researchers who studied conifer ecology and tested theories of forest management.

The hard-packed earth gave way to shale in places, and nine-tenths of a mile from the paved highway, at the end of the lane, Henry arrived at his brother's property.

The one-story clapboard house had a deep porch with a swing and rocking chairs. Although modest, it looked well-maintained and cozy.

Willows and aspens shaded the residence.

Henry knew that the clearing encompassed six acres of sloping fields, because "Six Acres" was the title of one of his brother's poems. Jim's writing had appeared in many prestigious journals, and four slender volumes of his verse had been published.

No one made money from poetry anymore. Jim and his wife, Nora, worked their six acres as a truck farm during the growing season, selling vegetables from a booth at the county farmer's market.

Attached to the barn were a large coop and fenced chicken yard. A formidable flock shared the yard in good weather, kept to the well-insulated coop in winter, producing eggs that Jim and Nora also sold.

She was a quilter of such talent that her designs were regarded as art. Her quilts sold in galleries, and Henry supposed she produced the larger part of their income, though they were by no means rich.

Henry knew all of that from reading his brother's poems. Hard work and farm life provided the subjects of the verses. Jim was the latest in a long tradition of American literary rustics.

Following the dirt track between the house and the barn, Henry saw his brother splitting cordwood with an axe. A wheelbarrow full of split wood stood nearby. He parked and got out of the Land Rover.

Jim sunk the axe blade in the stump that he used as a chopping block, and left it wedged there. Stripping off his worn leather work gloves, he said, "My God—Henry?"

His look of incredulity was less than the delight for which Henry had hoped. But then he broke into a smile as he approached.

Reaching out to shake hands, Henry was surprised and pleased when Jim hugged him instead.

Although Henry worked out with weights and on a treadmill, Jim was better muscled and solid. His face was more weathered than Henry's, too, and still tanned from summer.

Nora came out of the house, onto the porch, to see what was happening. "Good Lord, Jim," she said, "you've cloned yourself."

She looked good, with corn-silk hair and eyes a darker blue than the sky, her smile lovely, her voice musical.

Five years younger than Jim, she had married him only twelve years ago, according to the author's bio on the poetry books. Henry had never met her or seen a photograph of her.

She called him Claude, but he quickly corrected her. He never used his first name, but instead answered to his middle.

When she kissed his cheek, her breath smelled cinnamony. She said she'd been nibbling sweetroll when she heard the Land Rover.

Inside, on the kitchen table, beside the sweetroll plate were what Henry assumed to be five utility knives, useful for farm tasks.

As Nora poured coffee, she said nothing about the knives. Neither did Jim as he moved them—and two slotted sharpening stones—from the table to a nearby counter.

Nora insisted that Henry stay with them, though she warned him that a sofa bed was all they had by way of accommodations, in the claustrophobic room that Jim called an office.

"Haven't had a houseguest in nine years," Jim said, and it seemed to Henry that a knowing look passed between husband and wife.

The three of them fell into easy conversation around the kitchen table, over homemade cinnamon rolls and coffee.

Nora proved charming, and her laugh was infectious. Her hands were strong and rough from work, yet feminine and beautifully shaped.

She had nothing in common with the sharky women who cruised in Henry's circle in the city. He was happy for his brother.

Even as he marveled at how warmly they welcomed him, at how they made him feel home and among *family*, as he had never felt with Jim before, Henry was not entirely at ease.

His vague disquiet arose in part from his perception that Jim and Nora were in a private conversation, one conducted without words, with furtive looks, nuanced gestures, and subtle body language.

Jim expressed surprise that someone had drawn Henry's attention to his poetry. "What would they think we were related?"

They didn't share the name Rouvroy. Following their parents' divorce, Jim had legally taken his mother's maiden name, Carlyle.

"Well," Henry said drily, "maybe it was your photo on the book."

Jim laughed at his thickheadedness, and although he seemed to be embarrassed by his brother's praise, they talked about his poems. Henry's favorite, "The Barn," described the humble interior of that structure with such rich images and feeling that it sounded no less beautiful than a cathedral.

"The greatest beauty always *is* in everyday things," Jim said. "Would you like to see the barn?"

"Yes, I would." Henry admired his brother's poetry more than he had yet been able to say. Jim's verses had an ineffable quality so haunting it was not easy to discuss. "I'd like to see the barn."

Clearly in love with this piece of the world that he and Nora had made their own, Jim grinned, nodded, and rose from the table.

Nora said, "I'll put linens on the sofa bed and start thinking about what's for dinner."

Following Jim from the kitchen, Henry glanced at the knives on the counter. On second consideration, they looked less like ordinary task knives than like thrust-and-cut weapons. The four- and five-inch blades had nonreflective finishes. Two seemed to feature assisted opening mechanisms for quick blade release.

Then again, Henry knew nothing about farming. These knives might be standard stock at any farm-supply store.

Outside, the afternoon air remained mild. From the split cords of pine came the scent of raw wood.

Overhead, two magnificent birds with four-foot wingspans glided in intersecting gyres. The ventral feathers of the first were white with black wing tips. The second was boldly barred white and brown.

"Northern harriers," Jim said. "The white one with the black tips is the male. Harriers are raptors. When they're hunting, they fly low over the fields and kill with a sudden pounce."

He worked the axe loose from the tree-stump chopping block.

"Better put this away in the barn," he said, "before I forget and leave it overnight."

"Harriers," Henry said. "They're so beautiful, you don't think of them as killing anything."

"They eat mostly mice," Jim said. "But also smaller birds."

Henry grimaced. "Cannibalism?"

"They don't eat other harriers. Their feeding on smaller birds is no more cannibalism than us feeding on other mammals—pigs, cows."

“Living in the city, I guess we idealize nature,” Henry said.

“Well, when you accept the way of things, there’s a stark kind of beauty in the dance of predators and prey.”

Heading to the barn, Jim carried the axe in both hands, as if to raise and swing it should he see something that needed to be chopped.

The harriers had fled the sky.

When Henry glanced back toward the house, he saw Nora watching them from a window. With her pale hair and white blouse, she looked like a ghost behind the glass. She turned away.

“Life and death,” Jim said as they drew near the barn.

“Excuse me?”

“Predators and prey. The necessity of death, if life is to have meaning and proportion. Death as a part of life. I’m working on a series of poems with those themes.”

Jim opened the man-size entrance beside the pair of larger barn doors. Henry followed his brother into the wedge of sunshine that the door admitted to this windowless and otherwise dark space.

Inside, in the instant before the lights came on, Henry was gripped by the expectation that before him would be some sight for which Jim’s poem had not prepared him, that the poem was a lie, that the truck farming and the quilting and the simple-folks image were all lies, that the reality of this place and these people was more terrible than anything he could imagine.

When Jim threw a switch, a string of bare light bulbs brightened the length of the cavernous space, revealing the barn to be nothing more than a barn. A tractor and a backhoe were garaged on the left. Two horses occupied stalls on the right. The air was fragrant with the scents of hay and feed grain.

Although Henry’s alarming premonition had proved false, and although he knew that fearing his brother was as absurd as fearing the tractor or the horses, or the smell of hay, his sense of a nameless impending horror did not abate.

Behind him, the barn door swung shut of its own weight.

Jim turned to him with the axe, and Henry shrank back, and Jim stepped past him to hang the axe on a rack of tools.

Heart racing, breath suddenly ragged, Henry drew the SIG P245 from the snugly fit shoulder rig under his jacket and shot his twin point-blank, twice in the chest and once in the face.

Henry had come here with the hope that his relationship with his brother would change and his hope had been fulfilled. Claude Henry Rouvroy was in the process of becoming James Carlyle.

The pistol was fitted with a sound suppressor, and the shots were no louder than a horrid cutting wind. Indeed, neither of the horses had been spooked by the gunfire.

Standing over the corpse, Henry strove to quiet his breathing. His tremors forced him to holster the pistol to avoid accidentally squeezing off another round.

He had worried that his brother would grow suspicious of him, and he had feared that he would not be able to pull the trigger when the time came. In the process of assiduously repressing those fears so that he could carry out his plan, he projected his motivations on

Jim, imagining a conspiracy between him and Nora, finding in everyday objects—the knife the axe—proof of sinister intentions. He had misread menace in innocent actions: Not watching them from the window, Jim talking about the harriers, about predators and prey.

After a couple of minutes, when his breathing returned to normal and the tremors abated, Henry was able to laugh at himself. Although his laughter was soft, something about it disturbed the horses. They whinnied nervously and pawed the stall floors with their hooves.

Grady Adams lived in a two-story house with silvered cedar siding and a black slate roof, the last of ten residences on a county road. The two-lane blacktop had no official name, only a number, but locals called it Cracker's Drive, after Cracker Conley, who built—and for forty years occupied—the house in which Grady now lived.

No one remembered what Cracker's first name had been or why he was called Cracker. Evidently he was an eccentric and certainly a recluse, because to the locals, Cracker was more of a legend than he was a real neighbor with whom they had interacted.

In their minds, Conley's addiction to solitude forever affected the character of the house itself. They rarely called it the Conley place or Cracker's place, never the Adams house or even the house at the end of the lane. It was known as the hermit's house, and in respect of the name, they tended to keep their distance.

Most of the time, their reticence suited Grady just fine. He was not a misanthrope. But in recent years, he had enough experience—too much—of people, which was why he returned to these sparsely populated mountains. For at least a while, perhaps a long while, he preferred the solitude that Cracker Conley apparently had cherished.

In the kitchen, after returning from the hike on which the intriguing animals had been encountered, Grady prepared Merlin's four o'clock meal. Preparation took longer than consumption.

"You were well named, the way you make food vanish."

The dog licked his chops and ambled to the door to be let out.

Half of the three-acre property lay behind the house. After his dinner, the wolfhound liked to prowl the grounds, sniffing the grass to learn what creatures of field and forest had recently visited. The yard was Merlin's newspaper.

On the back porch, with an icy bottle of beer, Grady sat in one of two teak rockers with wine-red cushions.

A low table with a black-marble top stood beside the chair. Stacked on the table were three reference books from his library.

As intent as a detective at a crime scene, nose to the grass, Merlin vacuumed every clue to the identities of all trespassers.

A large paper birch overhung the north side of the house, and three others graced the yard, their white bark tinted gold in places by the late-afternoon sun. At times, Merlin seemed to be following the intricate patterns the trees cast upon the lawn, as if their shadows were cryptography that he intended to read and decode.

No fence was needed to contain him. He never rebelled against the rule to stay within his master's sight.

Grady's property ended where mown lawn gave way to tall grass. The forest loomed, the land rose under the forest, the foothills broke in green waves against the mountains, and the mountains soared.

From time to time, Merlin marked his territory. For the more substantive half of his toileting, he waded into the tall grass, where there would be no need to pick up after him. Even then, he remained within sight, for the grass didn't rise above his brisket.

When he returned to the yard, he raced in great circles and figure eights, chasing nothing but running for the delight of running. His long legs were made for galloping, his heart for joy.

The dog's beauty was not just that of a well-bred breed, but also the more profound beauty that confirms its source and inspires hope. Two things that most comforted Grady were making Craftsman-style furniture—which was his trade—and watching Merlin.

When the wolfhound returned to the porch, drank from his water bowl, and lay in happy exhaustion beside the rocking chair, Grady picked up the first of the books on the table. Like the other two, this one was a reference guide to the wildlife in these mountains.

He had traded bustle for rustic, power for peace, and glamor for the honesty of this artless landscape. Artless it was, because nature stood above mere art, with none of art's pretensions.

Having made this trade, he wanted to know the names of the things he loved about this land. Taking the trouble to know the names of things was a way of paying them respect.

His library contained dozens of volumes about the flora, the fauna, the geology, and the natural history of these mountains. This trio offered more photographs than the others.

None of the three books contained a picture of any animal remotely like the pair in the meadow.

As the sun descended toward the peaks, Merlin rose and moved to the head of the porch steps. He stood as if serving as a sentinel, gazing across the backyard toward the tall grass and the woods beyond.

The wolfhound made a sound that was half purr and half growl, not as if warning of danger, but as if something puzzled him.

“What is it? Smell something, big guy?”

Merlin did not look at Grady but remained intent upon the deepening shadows among the distant trees.

Walls of shimmering gold and a treasure of gold cascading along the blacktop: The private lane that led to High Meadows Farm was flanked by quaking aspens in their autumn dress, which lent value to the late-afternoon sunshine and paid out rich patterns of light and shadow across the windshield of Cammy's Explorer.

She drove past the grand house, to the equestrian facilities, and parked at the end of a line of horse trailers. Carrying her medical bag, she walked to the exercise yard, which was flanked by two stables painted emerald-green with white trim.

A promising yearling had come down with urticaria—nettle rash, as the older groom called it. This allergic reaction would eventually clear up naturally, but for the comfort of the horse, Cammy could relieve the urticaria with an antihistamine injection.

At the end of the yard, a third building housed the tack room and the office of the trainer, Nash Franklin. Living quarters for the grooms were on the second floor.

Lights glowed in Nash's office. The door stood open, but Cammy could find no one. The enormous tack room also proved to be deserted.

In the first stable, Cammy discovered the stall doors open on both sides of the central aisle. The horses were gone.

Stepping outside once more, she heard voices and followed them to the fenced meadow on the north side of the building.

The Thoroughbreds were in the pasture: the yearlings, the colts and fillies, the broodmares, the studhorses, the current racers, at least forty of them in all. She'd never seen them gathered in one place before, and she couldn't imagine for what purpose they had been brought together.

Many of the horses were accompanied by their pets. High-strung, sensitive creatures, Thoroughbreds tended to be happier and calmer when they had a companion animal that hung with them and even shared their stalls. Goats were successful in this role, and to a lesser extent, dogs. But the meadow also contained a few cats, even a duck.

The fact of this assembly, the herd and its menagerie, was not the most curious thing about the scene. As Cammy passed through the gate and into the pasture, she noted that every one of the animals faced west, toward the mountains. They were extraordinarily still.

Heads raised, eyes fixed, they seemed less to be staring at something than to be listening.

Suddenly she realized that she was witnessing a scene similar to what Ben Aikens had described when, in her absence, the rescued golden retrievers had gotten to their feet to listen to something that none of the people present had been able to hear.

The eastward-slanting light brightened the equine faces. Black shadows flowed backward from their heads, like continuations of their manes, flowed off their rumps and tails, reaching eastward across the grass even as the horses yearned toward the west.

Also in the pasture were half a dozen grooms. And the owners of High Meadows Farm, Helen and Tom Vironi.

Clearly perplexed, the people moved among the herd, gently touching the Thoroughbreds, speaking softly. But the animals appeared to be oblivious of them.

The goats, the dogs, the cats, the single duck were likewise entranced, seeming to hear to something only animals could hear.

Tall enough to look into a horse's eyes even when it stood proud with its head raised, Nash Franklin spotted Cammy. She and the trainer made their way toward each other.

"They've been like this for almost fifteen minutes," Nash said. "It started with a few in the exercise yard, a few in the pasture."

According to her vet tech Ben Aiken, the golden retrievers had stood in their trance for only a minute or so.

Nash said, "Those in the stables began to kick the walls around them so violently, we worried they'd injure themselves."

"They were afraid of something?"

"That isn't how it seemed. More just ... determined to be let out. We didn't know what was happening. We still don't."

"You released them?"

"Felt we had to. They came right to the pasture to be with the others. And they won't be led away. What's happening here, Cammy?"

She approached the nearest horse, Gallahad. A deep mahogany, almost black, the magnificent three-year-old weighed perhaps twelve hundred pounds.

Like the other horses, in his perfect stillness, Gallahad appeared to be tense, stiff. But when Cammy stroked his loin, his flank, and forward to his shoulder, she found that he was at ease.

She pressed her hand against his jugular groove and traced it along his muscular neck. The horse neither moved nor even so much as rolled an eye to consider her.

Cammy stood five feet four, and Gallahad towered, immense. Great Thoroughbreds were usually tractable, and some might be docile with the right trainer, but few were entirely submissive. Yet in this peculiar moment, Gallahad seemed lamblike. Nothing in the intensity of his concentration on the western mountains suggested fierceness or even willfulness.

His nostrils didn't flare, neither did his ears twitch. His forelock fluttered against his poll as a faint breeze disturbed it, and his mane stirred along his crest, but otherwise Gallahad remained motionless. Even when she stroked his cheek, his nearer eye did not favor her.

Following his gaze, she saw nothing unusual in the foreground, only the next wave of foothills and the mountains in the background, and ultimately the sun swollen by the lens of the atmosphere as Earth resolutely turned away from the light.

At her side, Nash Franklin said, "Well?"

Before she could reply, the horses stirred from their trance. They shook their heads, snorted, looked around. A few lowered their muzzles to graze upon the sweet grass, while others cantered in looping patterns as if taking pure pleasure from movement, from the cool air, from the orange light that seemed to *burst* through the pasture. The Thoroughbreds' people became animated as well, the goats and the dogs, the cats, the duck.

All the animals were behaving only as they ordinarily would, no longer spellbound. Yet here in the aftermath of the event, when all was normal, all seemed magical: the whispering grass, the soft incantatory thud of cantering hooves, the canticle of nickering horses and panting dogs, the season's last lingering fireflies suddenly bearing their wishing lamps through the pre-dusk air, the sable shadows and the gilding of all things by the descending sun, the sky electric-purple in the east and becoming a cauldron of fire in the west.

The grooms and the exercise boys, the trainer and his assistant, Helen and Tom Vironi, and Cammy Rivers all turned to one another with the same unasked and unanswerable question. *Why did the animals seem enchanted? What did they hear if they heard anything at all? What happened here? What is still happening? What is this I feel, this wonder without apparent cause, the expectancy of I-know-not-what, this sense that something momentous passed through the door without my seeing it?*

Cammy's vision blurred. She did not know why tears filled her eyes. She blotted them on her shirtsleeve and blinked, blinked for clarity.

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