

My Name Was Don

A Short Novel by Don

Ghostwritten by Gary Marks

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PART I

Chapter 1

My job was like figuratively killing me. I was working about sixty hours a week.

Then, I don't know if I ever told you, but I have a three-year-old daughter named Elsa, and I had visitation rights. But all that changed when my ex wanted to go to college to get a degree in real estate -- which seems like overkill. Maybe she'll try to get a PhD in real estate after that, and become a doctor of real estate. I guess that's as good a goal as any. Who am I to judge?

Anyway, my ex said it would really help if I took full custody of Elsa until she got the degree, so we sat Elsa down and asked her who she wanted to live with. And she said, "I guess daddy." I told her it was a good guess.

But now I'm never calm anymore, because Elsa loves to throw food at me when I'm eating. And I don't want to yell because she's only three. Whoosh, our dog, eats all the food she throws, so there's not a lot of clean-up, really.

But the dog is expensive. Everything costs money. And it's amazing because I think air is going to cost money eventually. Could you imagine paying some air guy a penny every time you take a breath? That's what it's getting like.

My ex is funny when she's not mean. She tried to sell me a house the other day because she's apprenticing, and she wanted to show the company she could sell something besides lottery tickets. She knows I'm basically broke. But she told me I could get a "no look" loan. I said, "Didn't that become illegal or something in 2008?"

And she said, "They still do it, they just call it something different. But they still don't look."

But I wouldn't want to buy a house here, ever. It's amazing because I didn't even have to graduate high school to get a job in this shitty little town. It's what they call a paradox, because since no one wants to live here or work here, jobs are readily available. Houses are as cheap as dirt. And even dirt here is cheaper than the dirt in other places, because it's *here*.

Anyway, my ex asked my two real estate agent sisters for help on the big test she had to take. And they were like, well we live in different states, and every state has different rules so we can't help, but even if we could, you just left our brother for some guy that works at a gym. So....

Chapter 2

I write part-time. They say I have talent, and eventually when I finish this story somebody will probably publish it because I'm from a small town and people will want to know how those people write.

So I need to tell you the names of the characters that I think will stick around – which ironically will include my ex, because she's gonna be Elsa's mom unless Elsa decides not to see her anymore, which she might someday but not when she's three.

In order of importance there's me, my dog Whoosh, my ex is named Windi with an "i" for all the vowels, as in "I, I, I." Then there's Z. He works at the gym. And the mayor, who you'll see is not exactly my favorite character in the book. Then there's Katie, who doesn't exist, but she's very important. My brother, who I talk to like once a year. And Elsa, but she only says one thing in the whole book. So even though I love her, as far as the book is concerned she's like an afterthought.

Oh, I'm Gordon, but everyone calls me Don because Gordon is too long, and no one would ever call me Gor or else I'd take them out of the book right away. No one's going to call me Gor.

Anyway, here's the story. I bet you've never heard anything like it.

Whoosh and I were walking downtown, with occasional paper blowing past us in the wind, which I think was mostly paper they rap around To-Go burgers. I guess it keeps the heat in and stops all the goopy stuff from falling in your lap after a few bites. But no one decides to use the paper because they don't want to eat it accidentally while they take a huge bite, which many people do, so they throw it in the street because nobody cares. I mean this isn't Beverly Hills.

So Whoosh starts chasing the flying paper whirling around in the air like a brown-stained helicopter propeller, and Whoosh starts to try to bite it 'cause of the smell of the meat I guess, because the next thing you know he's chewing away at it in the middle of the sidewalk. But then someone's ankle goes by and he bites a hole in the ankle's sock, and there's a little blood -- I mean not enough to scare me if it was my sock -- but the guy's screaming like he just got shot -- so then the police come and take Whoosh away. I had to go to dog court to get him the hell out of there and sign stuff and bring him home.

Elsa was so happy to see him. We love Whoosh. We named him Whoosh because he's the fastest dog in town. Almost as fast as the cars here.

My ex, Windi, told me Z, the gym guy, kind of likes Whoosh, so I'm not saying I *don't* HATE Z, but I'm just saying a little part of me respects that he's got good taste in dogs.

Z is a weightlifter, and with me being a writer when I'm not working sixty hours a week, that doesn't leave us with a whole lot in common. I usually just leave Z and Windi alone. Maybe they'll get married someday, but she'll have to divorce me first, which she says she's not sure she's going to do yet. I'm sure it has something to do with Elsa.

But my strong assumption is that right now Z and Windi also want to have their fun without Elsa throwing food at them. All I know is Whoosh and Elsa and me make a good team. Elsa will be fine living with me. As long as my mom takes care of her while I'm at work all day.

There was this girl that Whoosh found me in the park. She was my age and worked as a modem repair operator. It's great, even though she was just an operator, she knew a lot about computers. In fact, she told me her company offered her high-speed internet for free. Her name was Sally. She ran in the park

once every few days, and one day Whoosh went after her ankle and made her stop, and while I was apologizing she started petting him and then we all became friends and then we started dating.

One thing about Sally, she was really smart. Believe it or not smarter than I'll ever be. She knew a lot about dogs too, not just computers. She was a natural. She could have opened up a dog store if she'd even been fired from her job as a modem repair operator. And I liked her sometimes, more than I ever liked Windi. Looks-wise she kind of looked a little like Katie. Katie has hair the color of a sunbeam. Sally had red hair. So that was different. But Sally is also a red herring, because we broke up after a few months, so I really could have left her out of the book.

Katie -- I may as well tell you now -- is the star of a recurring dream. I meet her at the ocean. She borrows my T-shirt and we go sailing together. We love the water and we meet there a lot. More about Katie later.

Anyway, I got my paycheck, so I decided to eat at the diner. I hate this diner though. First, there's no dogs allowed, which Whoosh doesn't appreciate. He has to stay outside. Second, they list the prices of food like a gas station does. Fruit salad is \$1.99, and their burger is \$2.99. They think I'm dumb enough to think it's not the same thing as a penny more? The sad part is, even if I *was* fooled, when the check comes, of course, they've added tax.

Anyway, just as I was starting to take my first bite of burger Whoosh started barking at another dog that came by. They either wanted to fight or have sex or both, but it really started to get loud, so I had to leave my food and tell Whoosh to knock it off. When I got back inside the waitress had cleared my plate. With one bite gone!

And that's pretty much what my whole town is like. On a good day.

Chapter 3

My dad grew up educated. It was a 2-year deal at a community college where he majored in auto mechanics. He wanted to teach me everything he learned for free, but I didn't want to look up under the bellies of cars all day and get gray stuff under my nails that eventually never comes out. I wanted a job in tech, so I applied at a cable company and now I get discounted monthly cable, plus a salary.

Still, writing is my main interest. One bad thing is they say I'm slightly dyslexic. It's really tough having a disease that you can't even spell. It's even tougher if you want to be a writer.

But I'm stubborn as all crap. I told my dad that I can self-publish my book and work at the cable job all at the same time, so that means I'm definitely gonna be published. I just need to finish.

So here's the rest of the story, which I still think is going to be exciting.

Chapter 4

My city is mostly gray and black and brown, like the people there, and the cars. I don't have a car, because I can't afford it, so me and Whoosh walk everywhere.

One really bad thing Whoosh used to do was chase after cars. He wouldn't just chase them from behind, he would chase them until he caught up, then run with his paws right near the back tire, barking, and sometimes *woofing* really loudly, until the driver would look in his rear-view mirror to see what the noise was. But Whoosh was too small to see. Though he's not an extremely small dog.

This one street we used to walk down was the street where the mayor's house was. We walked down that street because it had trees. They were mostly brown because they were mostly dead because our town has water restrictions. But some weren't.

Whoosh was on a leash that day but sometimes he'd get so excited from a car going by that he'd break my hold and get away and start chasing, with the leash chain rattling up and down behind him like a long clanky tail, almost ready to throw sparks.

This car was fancy. In fact, it was the mayor's car, which was driving way too fast, but she would never get arrested as the mayor. So Whoosh could hardly keep up. But then... he could.

The mayor was married with a baby. I remember when Elsa was a baby, I think she was a year old at the time, Windi was holding her and I said I wanted to hold her, and Windi said no, and that made no sense, because she was mine too. So I took her anyway and we went for a walk, and when we came back that's when Windi wanted a divorce. I mean, it wasn't just that. She had already met Z. But that's what she said.

Anyway, the mayor's baby was in her crib in the garage because it was a very clean and fancy garage with painted floors,

and it was summer. Her husband was working in the front yard wearing these long light green rubber gloves that made his hands look radioactive. The mayor's husband, who wasn't famous so I don't remember his name, was also drinking a bottle of beer at the time.

And the mayor was driving too fast. That's the main point. They say she was mad because of something that happened that day at city hall -- madder than usual, because according to the papers she was being pushed not to run for re-election. So she came flying into the driveway with Whoosh struggling to keep up, and he did, but the car turned too sharply and he couldn't get out of the way, so the car ran him over.

It was a mess. I remember when Windi was in the hospital over the holidays after falling off a ladder hanging Christmas stuff, and there was blood everywhere, but this was worse and I thought, he's dead for sure. He stopped breathing but maybe it was because the mayor was screaming so loud over him that she started scaring him to death. She was saying like, oh my God, if the press finds out I'm screwed. And her husband says, calm down Mary, it's just a dumb kid and a dog, and you only ran over the dog.

Chapter 5

So I have long curly blond hair, which a lot of people say is great, except I have brown eyes and that pretty much ruins everything.

Anyway, I ran up to the mayor and I said my dog needs a ride to the hospital. But she didn't want to get her blue BMW with white leather seats all bloody, so she called a vet who told her she had to drive Whoosh over. Then she did. She put a raincoat and an old blanket under him which was pretty callus of her, I thought. He deserved a nicer blanket.

While Whoosh was with the vet, I was sitting in the waiting room and some guy from the local paper showed up and asked me if I owned the dog, and I said yes. And then it was like, is the dog going to die, and was it the mayor's car, and was it her fault for being a mad at the city council and driving over the speed limit? And I said, "No, and yes, and I don't know."

But before I could say a whole lot more the mayor comes in, sees the reporter and says, "Oh my God, not only is the dog a hero, but he saved my baby."

She said, "I didn't know my baby was in the crib in the garage, and it was starting to rain (I don't remember the rain part, but it was cloudy) and she said, "I pulled in at a normal *legal* speed, but I didn't see my baby in the garage because it was shaded in there, but suddenly the dog came from out of nowhere and jumped in front of my car to save my baby's life. This dog is a hero!"

Suddenly all the local reporters wanted to know what kind of dog was it, and who owned the dog, and what was the name and age and date of birth of the dog, and did we know the baby personally before Whoosh saved it? I mean, were they friends?

So I said. "A mutt, me, Whoosh, 5 -- that's 35 in dog years, and January something, and no we didn't know the baby personally, we weren't friends, but that's not anything the baby said did, or anything like that, we just never saw the baby in our lives, in fact I don't even remember a baby being there that day."

"So it was your dog, Whoosh, who first saw the baby?" they called out, and before I could say I'm not sure he saw any baby, they wrote down that Whoosh saw the baby before I did. Then they asked if I had a photo of Whoosh. I had a ton on my phone, so I air dropped them some, and Whoosh made the local news headlines the next morning.

They all chose the same photo of him staring straight into the camera, looking like a hero. They used Photoshop and a green screen or something, because he was standing in front of a fancy car, and I never took a photo of him in front of a car that fancy, or any car, in fact:

Dog Turns Hero That Saves the Mayor's Baby.

This was a local paper, mind you. So they didn't even have to be all that literate.

Chapter 6

Except one of the mayor's enemies on the city council changed the headline in an editorial he wrote the following day, to:

Dog Saves the Mayor

He said he found out from "reliable sources" that the mayor ran over the dog for no reason, on purpose, because she was mad that the city council wouldn't let her ruin the town, and that the baby had nothing to do with it.

So then, all hell broke loose in my shitty little town because the elections were coming up. And now Whoosh was right in the middle of it.

Meanwhile, Whoosh was in bandages, limping slowly around the apartment like an old WWII vet, and the newspapers made sure to get lot of pictures of that. Whoosh was a hero mostly because he was selling lots of papers. Circulation for The Town Cryer increased for the first time since 1969, when it came out supporting the Vietnam War, with pictures of naked hippies on the front page to prove their point.

You know when papers get thrown on driveways and are left there to rot in the rain for weeks at a time because no one wants to even bend to pick them up to throw them in the garbage? Well, people were actually picking The Cryer up to read about Whoosh before throwing it back down onto their driveway. It was amazing. The power of dogs.

But when the camera lights were turned off, and it was just me and Whoosh again, like the old days, Whoosh went back to being just an injured pet. I had to give him special food with medicine and vitamins poked into the center of it. But he knew the medicine was in there when he chewed because it was like

this weird look he would give me. He'd turn his head sideways. He knew there was something different about it. But he couldn't tell if he liked it more or less until the taste got onto the back of his tongue, and then he knew he hated it and would try to spit it out, but it was already too far down his throat so he'd swallow and then start to limp away.

But then you could tell he was getting old because he'd forget what happened and turn back and take another huge bite, and the whole scene would happen all over again.

Chapter 7

What I think about sometimes while walking with Whoosh is Katie, my recurring dream.

She takes my hand and we go down to the end of a beach where the rocks and seaweed are, where hardly no one ever goes. She kisses me. We feel rain fall on our cheeks and clothes. She doesn't stop, and then, the best thing in my life happens.

Meanwhile, the mayor gave Whoosh a *Key to City Hall* in front of a bunch of her supporters, reporters, sons and daughters of the reporters, and two local businessmen. The businessmen were standing right beside the Mayor, because they had the mayor in their hip pocket, and I guess their pockets weren't big enough to stand any further away.

The rest of the city council showed up but stood way in the back. One news reporter called their presence there "a perfunctory obligation." In the end, despite their differences, they all needed to be there, because that way when one council member blamed another council member in front of the press for the bad roads, collapsing buildings, debt through the roof, scandals, bribes, and all that, the opposing council member could blame the first council member for the same thing -- I mean, it was all here, happening in miniature, just like in a real city. That's what I was about to find out.

I was shoved off to the side while poor bandaged limpy Whoosh and the mayor, wearing a diamond necklace and a blue thing that looked like a baggy man's suit, were photographed. It was quite disgusting really. They had to put Whoosh up on a table they improvisationally dragged out of the city hall's basement to get the mayor's face and Whoosh's face on the same level. But Whoosh kept looking around for me, and trying to find a way to get down, and it looked for all the world like he was

snubbing the mayor. "Maybe he's looking for my baby," she laughed nervously, as Whoosh tried to jump off the table onto a soft patch of grass.

Finally, some aide smartened up and dragged me up there to calm Whoosh down. They tried yanking me out of the picture but the minute they moved me to the side Whoosh tried to jump off the table again to be closer to me. Eventually they snapped the pictures with me in it. I wasn't smiling. I was pretty pissed at what they were doing to Whoosh. Even though his tail looked pretty happy. I guess he thought this was a new game to play. And, in fact, I began to think the same thing.

Chapter 8

So Katie and I got married in one dream. I don't know which dream preceded it. The one where I lent her my t-shirt and we went sailing, or the better one where she takes me to the edge of the beach and kisses me in the rain. But in this dream we are so happy.

First of all, she loves dogs. So we have more. With each child we add a dog. And of course, Elsa is there too. And she doesn't throw food anymore.

I know you'll say this dream isn't *that* good. Well, fine, but it's better than what happened next.

PART II

Chapter 9

My picture got in the local papers along with the mayor and Whoosh, who in every photo was shown licking my face.

Everything was going fairly well for the mayor, she seemed to have steered her way out of a big jam. Until a ton of editorials started pouring in (at least three) asking if dogs could run for mayor. And if not the dog, how about *the kid*?

Who? What kid?

The kid who the dog is licking.

Now I had never thought about running for mayor before, but I had seen a lot of movies. One movie was about blackmail. It was kind of amazing how far you can get with blackmail. So when I asked to see the mayor and was surprisingly invited to her office, I was pretty nervous. First of all, I had to take time off from my job because this mayor, our mayor, didn't work on weekends. I mean a bomb would have to go off for her to work on a weekend.

After we shook hands and she offered me some ice water (they probably only offered alcohol in bigger mayor's offices) she asked me what she could do for me. And I said, I don't know. But what I did know was that I was an eyewitness to what happened, and she was speeding, and Whoosh didn't jump in front of the car to save her baby. She ran him over for no reason. (I was kind of glad to get that off my chest.)

She looked at me quizzically, coldly. "And?"

"And so if I tell the truth to the papers and they investigate the accident more carefully they'll see I'm right. I mean, the police already took photos at the scene. I saw them. If someone with half

a brain looks at the photos they'll see that the dog-blood was *nowhere* near the front of the driveway, where you say the baby was. And honestly, I didn't even see a baby. I just saw some guy with radioactive gloves."

"Are you trying to *blackmail me*?"

"I think so. I mean, maybe."

She was a bit stunned by my lack of subtlety, even though I thought adding "maybe" softened things a bit. This lack of subtlety was a mistake on my part. If this was a movie, or a real novel, the character would have said something like, "What do you think?" Or, "Call it what you want. But whatever it is, Mayor, you have a problem. And I'm it."

But I was nervous. So I just said, "I think so. I mean, maybe." I only thought of the movie line afterwards.

And she said, "You *think* so?" Obviously adding "maybe" didn't have much of an impact.

So I said, having a moment to gain my composure, "Call it what you want. But whatever it is, Mayor, you have a problem. And I'm it."

She slammed her hand on her desk, which kind of shocked me. "I have about five people a day come in here and try to blackmail me. It's part of the job. You think I'm going to cave in to you, you little..?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And why is that?"

"Because if it's proven that you ran over my dog and lied about what happened you'll lose the election for sure, *and* have a perjury charge on your record, which means you won't be able to run for anything anymore, except maybe president."

"Oh, I'm so fucking scared now!" She started laughing with this really mean laugh.

So I took out the piece of paper I brought along with me and read it to her: "Lying to an officer in an official statement, such as

a police report, can incur a fine or jail sentence. For example, in Massachusetts, a falsified report is punishable by a fine of up to \$500, a one-year jail sentence, or both, according to the General Court of Massachusetts."

"*This isn't Massachusetts!*" she screamed.

"Yes I know. Our state is a lot crappier than Massachusetts, even though it's easier to spell. But the fine and jail time are the same. I looked it up."

She was silent for a long moment. "What exactly do you want?" Her voice sounded one-tenth defeated. It was just like the movie predicted. I had gotten to her.

"I don't know."

"*You... don't know?* How can you blackmail me and not even know what you want? That's... *that's just stupid!*"

"Well, now that you mentioned it..."

"Okay, I knew it. *Say it!*"

"I want to be Mayor."

"*What?* Get the fuck out of here, you little shit."

"*Really?*"

"Of course, really! Mayor is an elected office. I can't just anoint you like a King. Nor would I if I could."

"Maybe you could be my campaign manager."

She rolled her eyes. "You are beyond crazy. I'm not going to ... *Jim!*" she called out.

In came Jim, a weak looking guy in a white dress shirt and rolled up sleeves, as if he was going to have to stick his hands in a toilet. He looked weaker and scrawnier than me. If he'd been trying to walk Whoosh on a leash Whoosh would have yanked his arm *right off*.

"Get him out of here."

He looked at me with a face that tried to look menacing. I can read faces pretty well.

He took me by the arm. I looked at the Mayor and said. "It's over."

What I meant was, "I give up. This was a stupid idea. You win."

But she took it as a threat, and said, "Jim, wait. Let him stay."

Jim disappeared as quickly as he appeared. His rolled-up sleeves left with him.

"Look," said the mayor, even though I was already looking right at her. I don't get why people say *look* unless you have your back turned, or a car is coming around the corner.

"Let's work something out. What is it you're looking for? Money? Power?"

I played lots of video games, so it's not like I had never been asked this question before, even though it was by a computer.

"Both."

She shook her head. "Fuck."

I didn't know what to say so I just sat there. She had a nice clock in the corner of her office. It was a grandfather clock, and that name made sense, because it looked really old. The glass face was fogged up and dusty. The hands didn't work. She set it to 5 o'clock, which is when her workday ended.

"How about if I create a position for you?"

"What kind of position?"

"Well, if you campaign for me and help me win the election it could be something like, The Head of the Animal Protection."

"I don't really like animals. Just dogs."

"Well, it's not like we have a lot of Rhinos running around town, Gordon. Mostly just dogs."

"Yeah, no, I mean I hate cats too. And raccoons, of course. And skunks. And moles. And pretty much everything except dogs."

"Okay, *fine*. You can be The Head of the Dog Protection Agency."

"I don't like really small dogs either."

"Okay, The Head of the Medium to Large Dog Protection Agency. How's that?"

"Wow. That's great!"

"And how about a salary of \$50,000 a year?"

I almost started dancing around the office when I heard the dollar amount, but I remembered what happens in movies when the blackmailer starts dancing around. He usually gets shot.

"I can't ride my bike from my apartment to work. I live too far. I'd have to take a bus, or Uber. And what about traveling from dog to dog? Wouldn't that be part of my job? I'd need a car, or a dog truck."

"Yes, yes, a dog truck."

"Plus gas."

"Fine."

"And what about fliers? I might need to print out and hang fliers all over town if dogs get lost."

"We'll pay for that."

"\$55,000."

"\$50,000 is as much as the budget will allow before the council members begin to smell a rat and redline it out. They have people on their staff that don't do anything either, so they'll 'understand.' But the unwritten rule is, nothing above \$50,000."

"I don't want to have to work nights either. So no calls about a dog in the middle of the night." I was trying to think of everything I would want written in the official contract. For some reason I didn't trust her.

"And no sick dogs. I don't want to have to start picking up sick dogs. My neighbor almost died of rabies."

"Whatever, Gordon! We'll put a fever thermometer in the truck. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

As I was about to leave, she said, "We can't guarantee you anything until after I win the election. If I lose, you'll lose with

me. So what I need you to do now is go out there and talk to the press and local radio stations about how you and I have become friends. And Whooten is my friend too."

"Who?"

"Your dog."

"Whoosh!"

"Right. Tell them that we've all become friends and you're going to vote for me, and you want everyone to know that."

"And that if you win, you're going to let me be The Head of the Medium to Large Dog...."

"No, no, *no!* Gordon, Jesus. Don't mention that or they'll know there's a quid pro quo."

I always wanted to use that word in a sentence.

"Do you understand? Just do what I say, and only what I say, and everything will work out fine."

"I thought I was the one blackmailing *you*. It feels like you're blackmailing me now!"

"Well that's what mayors do. They try to find compromises so that in the end everyone feels like they've been blackmailed."

Chapter 10

Now this was the kind of dream that made sense. \$50,000 a year? Needless to say, I was very happy with my blackmail strategy.

Next thing I know this guy Jim, the mayor's weak assistant, is calling me on the phone telling me he's setting up meetings and interviews for me to tell everyone how great the mayor is. And how much she loves babies and animals. I said, "except rats. I'm sure she would work hard to cure the plague." He said, okay fine. (I didn't want to leave anything for the opponent to try to counter-attack with. The plague would have been one of those things.)

I even went on a local TV show with Whoosh and explained how nice the mayor was and, you know, got carried away with like, "Yeah she comes over our house all the time just to pet Whoosh. She gets right down on the floor and plays with him. Because, I mean, if a dog saves your baby's life, wouldn't you come over to play with that dog?"

Then came the election. I drove some old ladies to vote and would say, yes, I'm Whoosh's proud owner, and "Don't forget how great the mayor is with babies and dogs," I'd call this out to them as they got out of my car and hobbled over to the election booth. They almost all had bad hips.

Late on election night I got the great news that the mayor had won. The vote was close. I figured maybe I put her over the top. And now, I was going to have the job of a lifetime.

Next morning, I called my cable boss and quit my crappy job. He said it was fine because I wasn't showing up enough lately anyway, and he could fill my position in like, three minutes.

I took Whoosh for a nice long walk in the cool autumn air. I called Sally to say hi for the first time in a long time. I asked a lot of questions about how her dog was doing because I figured it might be part of my job to ask about other people's dogs.

Then I saw the mayor drive by, so I waved. I know she saw me, but she didn't wave back. She kind of looked away. That got me concerned. So I decided to go right away to city hall to ask her if I could start that day.

Chapter 11

Jim was in the outer office on the phone when I came in. When he saw me, he jumped up and told the person on the line that he'd call right back. That made me feel important. Maybe my job was more important than I thought.

"What's up Don?" he smiled.

"I want to talk to the mayor about starting my job right away."

"You already have a job."

" Yes, I *know*. And I want to start."

He looked at me quizzically.

Just then the mayor came out to ask Jim something. When she saw me she turned away.

"I'm ready to start my job!" I called out.

"Come back tomorrow."

"But I need to start getting paid today. I quit my old job and I need to make sure I have a smooth transition."

"Gordon, I haven't even had time to talk to the council about this. They are going to have to approve your job in the new budget. That's going to take some time."

"How much time?"

"A few months. I just got re-elected, these things..."

"*A few months?*"

"That's the way the process works."

"Well, I, you know... the way *my* process works is if I don't get paid starting today I'm going to tell the press the truth."

"Well then the job offer is off the table. Go tell them the truth. Tell them you tried to blackmail me, but I ended up having you help me get re-elected instead. And they'll say 'Welcome to politics.' Or tell them that because I refused to be blackmailed, and refused to give you some lame job that does nothing to help

the taxpayers, you're willing to bring me down -- *me* -- your best friend, the one who rolls around on the floor petting your dog -- all because I won't offer you a \$50,000 job! To do what? Sit on your ass all day trying to figure out the difference between a medium-sized dog and a small dog -- you know, the ones you'd refuse to help."

"Ok fine, I'll help small dogs too."

"It's too late. You're '*dog gone*' fired my boy. Now get out!"

"This isn't fair."

"Blackmail isn't fair. Life is tough, Gordon. And the fact is, you suck at it. You're just a scrawny kid who barely graduated from high school whose best friend is a dog that drools and chases cars.... The sooner you realize that, the better."

"I don't think realizing that is better."

"Jim!"

Jim sauntered in with his rolled-up sleeves to signify the meeting was over.

Chapter 12

I had this fantasy one night about a girl who was walking in the forest. She was looking up at the moonlight. She didn't seem to be in distress. I was on a moonlight hike. I thought maybe she was hiking too.

"Hi there," she called out casually.

"Hello. I'm Gordon."

Before she could tell me her name a storm blew in. Her clothes got soaked and she began to shiver.

I felt like I was about to blow away, the wind was so strong, so she reached out. She felt warm. I felt myself melting into her clothes like sun butter, like warm moonlight melting into a mirror.

I was suddenly a part of her with the storm blowing outside our window. It was indescribable.

She began to fade.

She kept saying please, Gordon, stay.

But the fading continued. Suddenly she stopped breathing.

She was almost totally invisible now.

I saw the number 21 as she was disappearing.

She was smiling.

"What's your name?" I cried. "Tell me your name so I can find you again someday...."

She reached her hand out to me, "Quickly, take my hand."

But I couldn't quite reach.

It was like the Michelangelo thing.... *almost*.

I cried out, "Please, I promise I'll find you someday if you just..."

"It's Katie. Reach for my hand."

I reached out, but the storm carried her away.

Chapter 13

Jobless, loveless, and counter-blackmailed, I sank into a dark space. Whoosh was reading my mind. He stayed quietly by me all the time, unless another dog caught his attention. Then he couldn't help himself. He'd bark for like an hour out the window. I couldn't get him to stop. What exactly was he trying to say? That's one of the great dog mysteries.

The mayor was now beloved. Her baby was getting older and in the papers all the time. I offered to babysit for her because they wouldn't give me my old job back downtown, and I figured the mayor still owed me. But she wouldn't return my calls.

Sally called me once in a while to see if I wanted to walk our dogs together in the park and then maybe go back to her place. But something stopped me. I couldn't get the thought out of my mind that Katie was dead. Just at the peak of our relationship, she might never come back.

I tried to purposely dream about her being alive again, maybe at the beach, or in a cafe, or at a dog training class. But it was no use. You can't force dreams to do anything. Dreams do things to you.

Then it hit me. I've been forcing things my whole life. Forcing my way into jobs. Forcing Whoosh to stay on a leash. And my marriage to Windi, I was extra nice before we got married, but once she married me, I just became who I am. I was a scam. Even as a dad, I wasn't being real with Elsa. Or playing enough with Elsa. And when I did play with her before dinner and again before bed, I was forcing her to act her age. Forcing her to grow up. I was just being a dad teaching her to be someone else.

Katie was telling me not to follow old rules anymore. *Reach out, or we'll both die.* But reach out to what? How?

PART III

Chapter 14

Whoosh and I had had it. We took Elsa and moved to a town miles away, with a new mayor, and new companies that didn't know I had quit on my old company. And girls in cafes that didn't know what a screw up I was, or that I'd killed every dream I'd ever had and turned it into this.

The town was called "Freeport." I liked the sentiment -- I wanted to feel free and live in a new port, so to speak. A new place, a new me. No one who knew me would believe this new me was even possible. That's how *new* I would be.

I got a job in a hotel. They actually had a hotel in Freeport. It was big, and right near an airport, which was very exciting. I got to meet people from all over the world. I especially enjoyed the ones that spoke English. It made my job a lot easier.

Whoosh seemed happy in his new apartment. Elsa was in school now. My hours at the hotel allowed me to pick her up at 3pm and give her some serious quality time. Whoosh and Elsa and I would go to a park and run around and play.

One day while I was emptying the hotel garbage that the maids bagged and left in the basement for me, Z, Windi's gym rat boyfriend, came up to me from out of nowhere.

"Listen bud, I don't give a crap personally, but Windi wants Elsa living in the same town we're in. You didn't get her permission to move this far away and she's not happy about it."

"Does she even have time to spend with Elsa? I mean, she can have her on the weekends. But during the week she'd definitely be better off with me."

"I don't think she'd be better off if you were in a *wheelchair*, with two broken legs."

"Yes. But my legs are fine."

"I'm serious."

"Okay, well then have Windi call me and we'll try to work something out. But I'm not moving."

"Do I look like her fucking social secretary?"

"*No!* In fact, do you even know how to write or spell?"

"Listen, you little jerk. You were no good when you were with her, and you're even more of a screw-up now. She doesn't want Elsa sitting around your crappy little apartment with a flea-infested dog as her only friend."

"Whoosh has *never* had fleas. Wendi was always a bad judge of dogs. And people apparently."

He pinned me against the wall. "You won't be a 'people' much longer if you keep this up. Just remember what we talked about. *Got it?*"

He let me down gently. As he walked away I called out, "Thanks for letting me down gently."

I appreciated that. I really did.

After that day, when my work day was over, and Whoosh was laying at my feet, and Elsa was fast asleep dreaming about all the time the three of us would spend together tomorrow, and I was done with my work at the hotel, and I was sitting in front of the TV watching re-runs of *The Jetsons*, everything seemed hopeless.

I started to feel like every decision I made, and pretty much every thought, was just a huge massive enormous waste of time. The walls trapped me in, my breathing would quicken, the TV

would go dark, the lights would become too bright, and I'd put my hands over my eyes and try to fall asleep on the couch, telling myself over and over again not to forget to buy Whoosh some flea ointment in the morning. Just in case.

Chapter 15

Freeport was a harbor town. On the eastern edge of town a thousand boats rocked in their jetties. People would work on them day and night because boats never get totally fixed. Not even one of them, ever.

People would bring lunch buckets and dinner picnics. Some guys tried to be romantic about it by letting their girlfriend drink beer and watch them fidget with wires and radios and change the sandpaper in their sanders and tinker with motor parts, and then order parts from a catalogue. Sometimes it would rain and the girl would go below deck and sleep off the beer while the boyfriend stayed up top trying to figure out how the thing that happened that wasn't *supposed* to happen, *happened*, and how not to let it happen again

Which was exactly what I was trying to do except without a boat.

The reason I know so much technical stuff about boats is that my dad had a boat. He thought being an auto mechanic meant he could fix boats too. We would take our boat out on summer weekends and go under the bridge and watch the towns float by in slow motion. Colors were cleaner and brighter when you saw a town from the water. My brother and two sisters would be playing cards in the cabin while my dad would teach me about the stern drive, and the wiring for the emergency radio.

So now on summer days, when work was over, instead of sitting around watching TV, I'd go down to the docks with Elsa and show her all the different kinds of boats. We'd laugh at some of the names written on the stern like, "Sun-Day-Driver," or "Vitamin Sea."

Things were going pretty well at my hotel job. I got a big raise along with a lot more responsibilities. I was overseeing the

entire hotel housekeeping division now. So with the extra money I bought a beat-up sailboat with a huge amount of water damage for almost nothing, and on weekends Elsa and Whoosh and I would go down to the dock and work on the boat. I couldn't afford to buy beer, but it was okay because there was no girl.

Now I was one of the crazies spending every free waking hour trying to keep their boat afloat. *And it felt great!* Things were looking up.

I did call Windi after Z visited, and she said she wanted Elsa to be with her every weekend. So I agreed. But then she never called again. It's almost as if once I said okay, she didn't care anymore.

On Elsa's seventh birthday we launched it.

I considered naming the boat, "Just After Don." But it sounded too foreboding. Even though the word play was about the sunrise, it was also about what would happen after *me*.

So I came up with another name, it came in a dream I had one night.

We christened the boat, "Katie's Dream." We had dock space 21, which was coincidentally the number from the dream. And we all stayed there on warm nights. It was like a second home.

I realized later, it was *my* dream, not Katie's, so the name really didn't make any sense. But I had already paid the guy at the marina a lot of money to paint *Katie's Dream*, in big black scripted letters on the stern.

Besides, maybe I *was* Katie's dream, and not the other way around. I read about something like that happening in a Marvel comic book once. Knowing that I was referencing a famous book and not just making a stupid mistake made me feel a lot better.

Chapter 16

Then, *surprise*, Z and Windi got married. First they had a huge wedding, inviting everyone they'd ever met -- they even invited me, plus my brother and *his* wife, my two sisters, and Whoosh! Whoosh and Elsa and I went together. They gave him a special place near Elsa with a doggy bowl full of his favorite meats, none of which were being served at the wedding. Plus they were all just piled up on top of each other so it wasn't a very nice presentation. But it was thoughtful.

Then, they got into the car with the string of cans hanging from the back. People were throwing rice too, which Whoosh went nuts over. He lapped up small piles of it from the ground because he knew somehow it was food, but then, he knew somehow it wasn't.

Then, right after their honeymoon, which consisted of a trip to the Virgin Islands, which for Windi was kind of ironic because she hadn't been a virgin since she was like fifteen, they bought a house in our old crappy town for maybe forty thousand dollars. You could buy a house on ten acres for only five thousand more than that, because nothing grew there, so the acres were just piles of dirt.

And then, right after their Virgin honeymoon and first mortgage payment they started talking to lawyers about how to take Elsa away from me.

This was something Windi insisted be a part of Z's wedding vows, and a vow is a vow.

Windi took him at his word to be faithful, and to honor and obey the heck out of her for the rest of his muscle-bound brainless life. So they paid lawyers whatever they asked for, usually monthly, to make sure Windi got Elsa back.

Chapter 17

I had spent all my money on the boat, and on Elsa and Whoosh, so by the time the legal papers were served I was pretty much living paycheck to paycheck.

I searched far and wide, as they say, for the cheapest lawyer in town. And I found him. His name was Egbert Hazelton. The son, and grandson, and great grandson of the famous Hazelton family of Freeport. Although I never did find out why they were famous, unless maybe they discovered hazelnuts. And even if they did, who eats hazelnuts these days?

He worked for peanuts (oh no, that was funny by mistake, but I'll leave it) because he was already so rich he worked as a lawyer just for fun. But the problem was he didn't know the law very well because he didn't read much. Nor did he feel like hiring assistants to read for him, or just give him the Cliff notes. So by the time we replied to the demand letter it was basically like David and Goliath, except David loses. Which is a lot more typical when you're talking about the law.

The way they got what they wanted was that they didn't just ask for Elsa. They wanted Whoosh too. They said since Windi and I bought Whoosh together as a young puppy he was joint property. Of course, what they failed to mention was that Windi didn't walk Whoosh ever. And never fed Whoosh unless she was throwing him a piece of pizza crust while we watched a ballgame, or gave him a taste of her beer just to watch him shake his head and shiver. She thought that was a world class joke.

Hazelton was a buffoon. Not that I'm not. I understand that. But I'm just saying it's easy for one buffoon to recognize another. The problem was, being a buffoon as the head of a hotel maid service is not the same thing as being a buffoon as a lawyer. One's a lot more dangerous.

By the time it was over, the trade-off was just as they planned it -- they got Elsa, I saw her one day a week. And I got to keep Whoosh, but they could never *ever* see him, touch him, or pet him, or feed him, even if it was feeding him his four favorite meats, *ever*. I made sure they put that in the agreement.

So I saw Elsa once a week from then on, until the climax of the story.

PART IV

Chapter 18

So in a lot of books there's a big event that happens near the end of the book that changes everything. But I don't have to make one up, because something really happened.

It all started with a phone call from my brother, who I hardly ever heard from. He called me to wish me a happy birthday, and then proceeded to tell me that Z was an asshole.

"You think so too?"

"Uh, yeah, he tried to pick up my wife at a cafe last week. And I don't mean he tried picking her up over his head."

I said, "How did Maggie even know who Z was?"

My brother said, "She was at the wedding, moron, along with half the world. Remember?"

"Oh yeah."

"Well he didn't recognize Maggie, but she recognized him, because his muscles are three times bigger than his brain."

"True."

"But that's not all."

"She slept with him?"

"Nooo, you numbskull. She didn't. Jesus, why the hell would she have told me the story if she'd slept with him? If that were the case, I wouldn't know shit about it, and we'd be talking about what you're going to do on your birthday besides yawn and watch TV all day."

I yawned and pressed the power button off on my remote, feeling a bit embarrassed

"Anyway, remember the girl, Madison from high school?"

"Wow. Didn't she move to Wisconsin or something?"

"Why?"

"I think I remember that for some reason."

"Well, I don't fucking know. But she lives here in town now. Again. Anyway, my wife and Madison became good friends a while back, and she started telling her about this affair she was having with this stud who works at the gym in town."

"Wait, what?"

"Connect the dots, Sherlock."

"So Madison and Z are..."

"Doin' it. Drinking outta the same keg. You get the metaphor? I mean, you're not a big beer drinker, and you can't afford to buy a six pack on your salary anyway."

"Would you just shut up? I get it."

"Well, what are you going to do about it? You going to tell the ol' lady and piss her off?"

"I don't know. I have to think. I mean, there may be a way to have this work out better than just making Windi so mad she bites his face off and then has a nervous breakdown. There might be something better. But I need to think it through."

"Since when did you become so devious, little brother?"

"I tried to blackmail a mayor once, did you know that?"

"Oh yeah? How did that work out for you?"

"Well, that's why I need to think."

"Sounds like whitemail to me. You got ghosted."

"Yeah, well, fuck you."

"Fuck you too."

That's how phone calls with my brother almost always ended.

It was like our secret family handshake way of saying goodbye.

Chapter 19

When I called Windi she was surprised to hear from me.

"Hey, listen, you know how I didn't give you a wedding present?"

"How could I ever forget?"

"Well, I thought of a cool admittedly delayed wedding present for you and Zack."

"And what's that? Dropping us out of a plane without a parachute?"

"No! I'm serious. Bygones. We need to be a family, for Elsa's sake."

"Okay... so?"

"So what if this weekend you and Z -- do you mind if I still call Zack, Z?"

"He hates you for it. But I don't care."

"Well then, how about if you and Zack go sailing on my boat with me this weekend? Just the three of us?"

"Really?"

"Really."

"That might actually be cool. I'd like that."

"How about Saturday?"

"Yeah, I guess. Sure."

"You can leave Elsa with my mom, and I'll leave Whoosh at home, he stays home on workdays anyway. So he'll be fine."

"Well, thank God for that."

I was ready to punch her right through the phone, but, no, I decided to stick to the plan.

Chapter 20

Friday night got me concerned. The weather report said it would be overcast with a chance of heavy rain. There might even be a small boat advisory. But I figured if Windi and Z didn't cancel, I sure wasn't going to.

I was missing Elsa more and more by the day. And Whoosh was getting old. His limp from the car accident had never gone away. And when I came through the door from work, he would struggle to get to his feet before running over to me like he hadn't seen me in ten years.

But if this plan worked, the three of us could be one big happy family again.

Chapter 21

We met at dock 21. They climbed aboard. I greeted them, and while they were settling in I secretly put a note in Wendi's purse.

I sailed the boat under the bridge, the same bridge my father used to sail me under. It was a two-lane bridge with a bicycle path. It had crisscrossed steel beams that made it look like a cat's cradle.

Windi was not super happy about the weather. The boat was being thrown around pretty good by the time we were headed out to open sea. So she consumed an ungodly amount of beer to relax (I had seen this act far too many times before when I lived with her). Unfortunately, the more beer she drank the windier the weather got.

After she couldn't drink another sip, with her stomach in knots from the boat pitching and yawing, she stumbled down to the cabin, dove headfirst onto the little couch near the mini-fridge, and fell asleep. This played perfectly into my plan.

I decided to leave the helm and have the talk I planned to have with Z. He was at the bow, wave spray ricocheting up into his face. He was licking up all the swirly salty life in front of him. His shirt was off. He was flexing his muscles and laughing every time the boat rolled to one side. We were pitching nose forward. He was holding onto the rail laughing like a madman at the top of a roller coaster.

I reefed the main sail. Then I noticed the main sail maker's name, *Z-Spars*, at the bottom of the sail. I'd never really thought about it before. Z! Spars! I took it as a sign. I went to the front of the bow to join him.

"So," I said loudly as the waves hissed against the hull, "Windi is sleeping off the six pack she just chugged down. I don't think she likes the weather very much."

"I *love* it!" Z screamed into the wind-swirl. "It smells like life and love and sex. It's like *salt*-screams, it tastes like..."

"An affair?"

"What?"

"It's exciting, isn't it? The taste, I mean. Like having an affair, kind of."

He cocked his head to one side and stared at me. One of his eyelids began to close. I couldn't tell if he was staring me down or if sea spray had hit his face before he had a chance to blink.

"Windi would hate it if she ever found out you had an affair," I mentioned as casually as possible. But I had to be casual while also talking loud enough to raise my voice over the waves breaking.

"Not sayin', but I mean, also, I think the courts would re-think Elsa living full-time with a step-dad that's fucking a friend of my brother's wife. If that were to ever happen."

"You're brother's wife?"

"My brother's wife, Madison's best friend, as fate would have it."

"You *little mother*..."

"No, no, don't worry. I'm not saying I'm going to tell Windi. I just want a little something to keep me quiet, to keep things even keeled, so to speak... but not money. Let's say it would be in the form of you helping me get my daughter back."

"Oh, is *that* all you want." It wasn't stated as a question.

"Yes, well I mean, maybe *some* money thrown in for good measure, but..."

Suddenly he picked me up by the shirt, I knew I shouldn't have worn a shirt, and tilted me backwards until I was half overboard."

"You know what this is, don't you? It's *blackmail!* And I don't like being blackmailed, especially not by stupid little shit faces like you."

I was starting to choke.

"And in a storm like this, who would know whether you fell off the boat from an oncoming wave, or if you got murdered trying to *blackmail* someone twice your size?" He started shaking me like a rag doll.

At that moment a big wave actually hit the boat and he almost lost his grip on me.

If it wasn't for him reeling me back in, using all of his strength, like he'd just caught a marlin, I would have fallen in for real.

I tried to catch my breath as the rain began to ping against us like tiny cold pins. I pointed at him, "You know what I just thought of? I'm the only one that knows how to sail! So if I go overboard, you're dead. In this weather, you'll never make it back. You need me alive."

Another wave hit and I began falling over the rail, this time without him pushing me. He caught me with one hand and said, "You almost got me there, mate. Except my team won sailing races when I lived in Australia, so, on second thought, your devious little plot has a slight hole in its sail. *Gor.*"

I hated when anyone called me *Gor*, but at this moment I found it in my heart to forgive and forget.

I saw a glint of sunlight hit the water. It looked like... *someone gliding?*

The wind was pinning our hair back. I was hyperventilating. "I know how to swim for miles and miles," I yelled. The noise all around us was deafening. "I could make it to shore for sure. Windi knows that! She'd never believe you if you told her I fell overboard and drowned.... And, oh yeah, I almost forgot to mention, I wrote her a note about your little escapade and left it

in a place where she'll find it, and you won't. So if we don't make a deal, I'll leave the note where it is. And she'll know."

Just then a wave as hard as a brick slammed into the boat and I tumbled overboard.

My body screamed with cold. Under the sea Z no longer existed. Only bubbles. I saw bubbles all around me.

I tried to find my way up to the light. But then the hull of the boat slammed against the top of my head and I blacked out.

When I became conscious again I tried to orient myself. I had somehow made it to the surface and was gasping for air. My head was aching, bleeding, pulsing to my heartbeat. I looked around in every direction. And then I saw her. She was shimmery like a sunbeam. I watched her vaporize into sea mist.

I started swimming towards the boat. It was listing. I didn't see Z aboard.

After swimming for what felt like an hour I had arrived too late. The boat had keeled over. I tried to see if I could find Windi or Z in the surrounding water, but there was no sign of either of them. I tried to grab onto the hull, but it was too slimy. My hands reached frantically for something to hold onto. I could feel my nails digging like dog paws into algae and brine.

I thought of Whoosh waiting for me at home, hips aching. I thought of Elsa waiting at grandma's. Waiting for me to come for her, wide eyes hypnotized by the blue and yellow TV light grandma always put her in front of.

The water rose from behind me and I went under again. I came up gulping for air but breathed in sea water instead. My chest was burning.

Katie came closer to me. I could see her face. She said, "The boat is gone.... Z is dead."

The deck and hull were fully submerged now. Piercing rain pummeled what was left of the main sail. I saw that the *Z-Spars* label had ripped in half, right between the Z and the "--."

"*Katie!*" I cried.

The sky continued to darken. I couldn't see anything anymore. But I sensed something trying to reach back towards my outstretched arms. I swam towards the feeling.

Then I heard a voice as clear as starlight, "It's me, Don. Quickly, reach out... I'll save you."

Our hands joined together. Our fingers intertwined.

The End

~ Don