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STRAYS
LIKE US



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CHAPTER 1

I heard the barking right away, the noise of it carrying over the wind like a lost kite.

It was an urgent, frantic sound, and even though it was coming from behind a fence that cut through the yard of my new foster home and I was still on the back of Margery's motorcycle with my helmet squished down tight over my ears, I could hear the desperateness behind it. If barks could be turned into words, these might have said something like: "I-know-you're-there-and-you-can-hear-me-so-why-aren't-you-answering-why-won't-anyone-please-just-answer-me?"

Margery slowed the motorcycle to a stop, switched off the engine, and pulled off her helmet. "Don't mind him," she said. "That's the neighbor's dog. He gets a little worked up whenever he hears someone over here." She ran a hand over the top of her head, smoothing down the stray hairs, and swung her leg over the seat. "He'll

settle down eventually. Come on inside. It won't be so loud in the house."

The dog kept barking.

I didn't move.

I had no idea what my short-term plan was just yet, but I was pretty sure it didn't include going inside. At least not yet. Margery Dawson, who some dumb caseworker at the Philadelphia Children and Youth Services center had decided would take care of me for the next few weeks or months or however long it was going to take, and who I'd known for exactly two hours and twenty-six minutes, hadn't *seemed* like someone who would tie me up and throw me down her basement steps, but then she didn't look like someone who drove around on a motorcycle, either.

I thought she was kidding when we left the Children and Youth building and she walked over to the red-and-black Harley-Davidson in the parking lot—until she held out a shiny blue helmet and told me to hop on. I didn't take the helmet. I didn't do anything, really, except just stare at the bike for a minute. It was huge, with orange flames painted on the sides and all sorts of shiny dials on the front. The tires were as thick around as a man's arm, and the silver handlebars gleamed.

"You ever ride a motorcycle before?" Margery asked. It was the first thing she'd said to me besides "Hi, I'm Margery" inside the Children and Youth office.

I shook my head.

“Well, you don’t have a thing to worry about. I’ve been riding Luke Jackson here for twenty years. He doesn’t do anything without my permission.”

“Luke Jackson?” I repeated.

“That’s what I call him.” She reached out and patted the seat. “After one of my favorite movie characters.”

“What movie?”

“*Cool Hand Luke*. You ever hear of it?”

I shook my head.

“It’s an old one. ’Bout a guy who goes to prison and works on a chain gang.” She nudged the helmet at me. “Here. Put this on. And then sit back and enjoy the ride.”

I was glad I was wearing a helmet. I was gladder still that I was sitting behind Margery so that she couldn’t see the look of terror on my face as she gunned Luke Jackson’s engine and sped out of the parking lot. I wasn’t sure if I was more frightened of the motorcycle itself or the fact that she’d named it after some guy in prison, but it took me a good ten minutes to open my eyes, and another half hour to finally start breathing normally again. But by the time we passed the sign for Lancaster, and Margery rounded another bend, I realized she’d been right. She knew exactly what she was doing. And, man, she did it well.

“You coming?” Margery turned around now, her helmet tucked under one arm. Her khaki pants, denim shirt with white buttons down the front, and heavy work boots reminded me of a construction worker. She had a man’s

face, too, with rough, weathered skin and a large nose. Carmella, the caseworker at Children and Youth Services, had told me at least twenty-five things about Margery, including what she did for a living, but the only thing I'd remembered was the part about her never having had a foster kid before. I was her first. I'd blinked when she said that. Wondered if such a thing would turn out to be very, very good. Or very, very bad.

“Winifred?” Margery asked. “You want to come in now?”

I shook my head and stared at a large tree with yellow leaves, behind the fence. The dog's barking got louder. I wondered if he was under the tree, straining against some kind of leash. More likely, he was racing around the trunk, making himself dizzy.

“Okay, then.” Margery spoke a little louder over the noise. “I'm not going to force you. There's not much to do out here, though. And it's going to get cold soon. You want me to bring you a jacket?”

I shook my head again.

“Suit yourself. I'll be inside when you're ready.”

I listened to the sound of her boots crunching against the gravel behind me, and then the heavy thud of them as she made her way up her porch steps. My neck was sweaty, and the tips of my ears felt numb. The helmet was as big as a bowling ball and almost as heavy. I wondered if Darth Vader felt this way inside his: hot, stiff, and slightly claustrophobic. I pulled it off and rubbed my ears for a

moment, trying to piece together all the things that had happened since this morning. But it was impossible. Every thought I had was interrupted by another bark.

Called out of science class by the principal—BARK!

Some lady from Children and Youth Services in there—BARK!

“Have a seat, Fred.”—BARK!

“There’s been an incident.”—BARK!

“Yes, with your mother.”—BARK!

*“You’ll have to come with me now, Fred.”—BARK! BARK! BARK!
BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK! BARK!*

“Shut up!” I screamed, hurling the motorcycle helmet into the grass. “Shut up, shut up, shut *up!*”

A high-pitched whimpering sounded behind the fence, as if the dog had just dodged something heavier than my words. For a moment, everything was still. The only sound was the wind gusting through the yellow leaves. I slid off the bike slowly, taking care not to bump the shiny sides.

Just like that, the barking started again. It was even more desperate than before, almost pleading: “I-know-I’m-annoying-and-that-you’re-already-angry-but-I-also-know-you’re-still-there-please-come-talk-to-me-please.”

“Man.” I walked over and picked up the helmet. “You just don’t give up, do you?” I headed toward the back of

the fence, where the barks were coming from. Maybe the dog would settle down if I said a few words to him or let him lick my hand. I'd do anything to get him to be quiet. My head hurt, and my ears were starting to ring.

The fence was just high enough to prevent me from seeing over the top of it, but some of the slats along the bottom were rotted away. I knelt down next to one of the wider openings and peeked through.

For a split second, I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking at. It was definitely a dog, but I'd never seen a dog that looked so awful. Or so sad. He was smaller than I imagined he'd be, and his fur, which was so dirty that it hung in matted clumps against his body, seemed to be mostly black and white. Parts of his neck were rubbed raw where the metal links of a chain had bitten through, and a large, open sore on his front leg was bleeding around the edges.

"Hey," I said softly, reaching two fingers through the wooden slats and wiggling them in the dog's direction. "Hey, boy. Hey there."

The dog lunged when he saw me, barking so rapidly that saliva flew out of his mouth. The chain around his neck was just short enough that he couldn't reach the fence or my fingers, but he strained so hard against it that I thought he might choke. At least half of his left ear was missing, as if something had bitten it off, and a thick, gooey fluid leaked out of the corners of his eyes. "Oh, buddy," I whispered. "Who did—"

Something heavy slammed against the fence, narrowly missing my fingers. I jumped back so quickly that I fell over.

“Get out of there!” a man’s voice growled. “You go on home and mind your business!”

The dog shrank back along the fence and yipped, a high-pitched, terrifying sound that frightened me even more than the voice did. I scrambled to my feet, looking around frantically, but there was no telling where it had come from.

“I said beat it!” I looked up as the voice snarled from above. Leaning out of the second-floor window of the house next door was an old man dressed in a red-and-blue flannel shirt. His gray beard was shaggy and unkempt, and a shotgun with a long silver barrel on one end rested against his left arm. He glared down at me and nudged the gun with his opposite hand. “*Now!*”

I stumbled as I tried to get back up, and fell down again, cutting my hand on a rock. But the only thing I could feel was the bite of the wind against my face and my heart knocking inside my chest as I raced over to the house and burst through Margery’s front door.