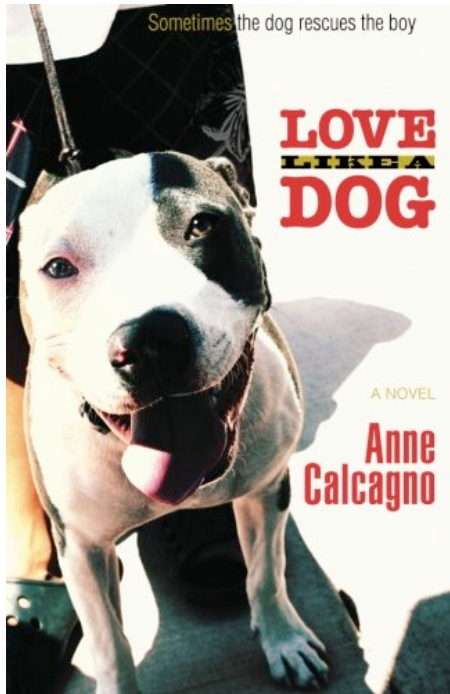


## Love Like a Dog (excerpt)

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2010



I started first grade with the house keys on a shoelace around my neck. When the bell rang, I plodded home in a stream of kids, some with moms, dissolving as we veered onto different streets. Crossing guards in orange vests guided us with gigantic red stop signs through traffic lights and across Ridge Avenue. Six houses east, I climbed the seven stairs up to the porch of our narrow white stucco house. The porch was flanked by a drab stretch of bare yard. A driveway funneled into the unused one-car garage.

The house was so quiet it felt sharp, like it might carve into me and eat me alive. I reheated pizza in the toaster oven. I pulled my homework sheets from my backpack, and sharpened my pencils. When I finished, I set the dinner table. Then I watched cartoons, and waited. Dad's firm order was: "You stay INside, buddy. Streets aren't safe." He'd lifted my chin to make sure we were eye to eye and repeated, "Stay INside."

Dad was the Manager at Happy Mart five blocks away. One late evening, he went out back to toss the day's spoiled produce into the Dumpsters. One lid wasn't closed, as it was supposed to be, to keep out varmints and smell. That angered Dad. He flung in the box of produce and slammed down the lid. The Dumpster started rocking. He thought he'd caught a raccoon. But when he looked in, a half-grown dog stared back. Dad called the produce man, Jim. "Can a dog jump this high?" The Dumpster was as tall as a man's armpits.

Jim said, well, it looked like a pit bull, and he had heard some of them were jumpers, but he'd also heard some people dumped their dogs, even purebreds, when they tired of them. "Poor thing's starving. Ugly, too."

The unfortunate pup was splattered with coffee grounds and wilted greens, but he tilted his head cockily at Dad. "That cracked me up," Dad said, "covered with rot, still trying to look charming. Anyway, it was too late to drop him off at an animal shelter." Dad made a leash out of rope, and hosed him down in the alley. He put him in our garage with an old blanket and a bowl of water, which is where I found him the next morning, before I left for school, after reading Dad's note: Look in the garage. Barely slitting the door open, I peered in. I saw this dog with big paws, his black nose going up and down, trying to smell me. He gave a tiny whine that seemed to want to reach me. I put two fingers in.

He licked them. A new kind of joy thudded in me before I closed the door and ran to school.

The dog was white with black spots, with a particularly big spot centered on his right eye. I named him Bull's Eye. He didn't crap or pee once in that garage. Someone had thought to train him.

Or so we thought, until we brought him inside, where we discovered he had a hankering for chair legs. He'd lie down, all calm-like, under a kitchen chair; we'd almost forget him. Pretty soon his jaw would be wrapped around a leg, quietly, fiercely, chewing. Even after Dad yanked the chair high like he might land it on Bull's Eye, Bull's Eye just backed away bewildered. The next day he started in again on a new tasty leg, concentrated on his pleasure. He was stubborn.

I selected a couple of chair-leg thick old branches on the way back from school, but he just lay down on those, guarding them. He was drawn to chairs.

Dad shook his head, "Sorry, bud, he's got to go. He's eating us out of our damn furniture."

"Please daddy, he doesn't know."

"You buying us new chairs, are you? I worked for those."

Dad brought a big ham hock bone from Happy Mart, and that helped. Except for, when we weren't looking, he buried it between the couch pillows. Dad sat down and just as suddenly jumped up, his fist curled around the moist pink bone, before he threw it on the floor. "Now he's ruining the couch. He's too much damn trouble."

When Dad came home from work, Bull's Eye licked him like he was homemade gravy, showing Dad he was all genuine crazy love. He got to stay a little longer.

"Oh, you begged to keep him," Dad told me later. "You had that kid's dream of a dog sleeping at the foot of your bed. Got to me, too, how he'd been thrown out same as garbage." Mom left us when I was three, so I guess Dad felt an obstinate kind of kinship.

Dad lay down the conditions. "Feed him when you get home. Wash the bowls. Tie him up outside to crap, then you throw his business into the big garbage can. Get back inside." He couldn't sleep on my bed. "Dirk, he's lying around all day, wiping up the floor."

A couple of months later, I was shooting hoops alone in the driveway. Which I shouldn't have been, but it was the first really warm sunny day. And I was allowed to step out to pet Bull's Eye who was now usually tied between the laundry line poles outside. He couldn't run loose in our yard because it was still only half fenced. He slid back and forth along his chain, following my bouncing basketball, occasionally barking. I noticed how

he was getting broader, growing nice and big. I was practicing some moves, when a car drove up our cracked driveway. It was spring, the ground was muddy, didn't have much grass. I grabbed my ball and moved over, my sneakers squishing. In Chicago, with all the apartment buildings and congestion, people use the few available driveways to turn around. But this guy stopped and parked. It was quiet, most everyone gone in the early afternoon, and no kids on our block. He struggled to climb out, his butt weighing like ten sacks of potatoes. He smiled, "We're all going to be wearing shorts soon, aren't we?"

I tried to remember if I knew him, but I couldn't think from where. Dad didn't socialize much.

"You want a Coke? I got a six-pack." I shrugged. Leaning against his car, he handed me a can, "I love this stuff," he said. "So are you on a basketball team?"

I shook my head. Bull's Eye lay flat with his head on his paws, staring at us. "You want to go for a drive to the Lake and run around in the sand? You look like you have good strong legs." I stared down at my scrawny knees, startled by what he saw.

"No thanks."

"I can see you're bored. Me, too. Come on, I won't tell on you. We can keep a secret, right?"

"No."

"Really?" He lifted his heavy self straight up and walked over. He put his hand under my chin, lifted it and looked at me funny. Then he glanced around us, where there was nothing happening but the quiet of the street. Suddenly, he yanked me by my free arm and, dragging me, pulled me toward his trunk, which he'd all at once popped open. I tried to yell but his fist pushed into my mouth, and I could taste my blood choking me. He lifted me up, my basketball fell, and must have rolled between his feet because this set him off-balance, and one of his arms flew loose. I started kicking and screaming and biting his fingers. That's when Bull's Eye came, yanking one of the poles out of the ground, leaping for that guy's neck. He ripped the whole laundry line out, and clamped on this guy. It was like Bull's Eye could fly. The guy let go of me and grabbed Bull's Eye, trying to yank him off, but Bull's Eye's body and teeth grabbed him. Like Bull's Eye was half tarantula. I was screaming and throwing my ball at the man, so he'd let go of Bull's Eye. I thought the man might pull out a gun and shoot him. So I grabbed Bull's Eye's back legs and I pulled. I clutched him so hard, still screaming at the man, when Bull's Eye popped loose. That creep ran to his car and screeched away, leaving blood all over our driveway.

I phoned Dad half-out of my mind, and he came home immediately. He walked right to the kitchen counter and filled a bowl for Bull's Eye with a lump of fresh ground sirloin. He ruffled my hair and his eyes actually got wet. He muttered, "I'm sorry, buddy. Somebody should be here looking out for you." He stared out the kitchen window, looking far off. "Damn your mother."

At the police station, based on the license plate color, they suggested the guy came from out of state. They promised to put out a notice to all Chicago hospitals for a man with dog bites on his face. "That's a hell of a loyal dog you got," they complimented Bull's Eye. My gift from the God of Lonely Boys.

Now Bull's Eye could sleep at the foot of my bed on a blue blanket from Goodwill. He'd never go away now, because I needed a bodyguard. Dad started practicing commands: "Sit!" "Stay!" "Gimme paw!" He cut the fat off his steak for Bull's Eye. Bull's Eye began to change us.

When Mom walked out, I was three and a half. Dad was thirty-four. Dad said the police searched grimly with flashlights and dogs. She had vanished without a note. A few days later, Mom had telephoned, "Call off the police, Russ," she said, "I won't be coming back. Let me go." The line went dead.

Dad couldn't speak. He locked himself in the bedroom, didn't relent when I sobbed and banged frantically on his door. Says I fell asleep curled against the door; made him feel like shit. I clung to him any chance I got. He patted my fingers, muttering, "Don't say her name. Just don't."