

Chapter 1- The End

I drove home on North 805. The two rightmost lanes were packed, so I moved into the number two lane to pass them. An ominous feeling overcame me. I glanced to the right and saw another vehicle veering toward me. It seemed his left front tire had failed. I pressed the brake just as it collided with my car. The impact pushed me toward the center concrete median. I closed my eyes and prayed.

I felt nothing as I looked down on my own body, lying limp on the hospital bed. "Is this really me?" I wondered. If so, how can I be looking down on myself? That scenario would seem to be impossible unless what I saw was some kind of reflection in a mirror. I heard the doctor say, "The time of death is . . .," and then nothing. At that moment, I felt warmth on my back. Without moving, I now faced a tunnel of changing colors, like a kaleidoscope. I glanced back to find only darkness. I could not understand why my hospital room was suddenly missing. The sound of a chorus turned my attention back to the tunnel. Without effort, I began to move into the tunnel of light. I hoped this journey would end better than the trip that landed me in the hospital in the first place. I tried to recall the accident, but the details eluded me. I was certain I had lost what remaining faculties I had. I closed my eyes and hoped for the best.

Seconds later, I felt my feet on solid ground. I opened my eyes to see a large valley filled with trees and meadows of wildflowers. I remember my train trip through the South of France long ago. There, the flowers were generally lavender or sunflowers. Here, the flowers were in every color. Several rainbows floated in the sky high over my head. I immediately thought this would be a great location for a vacation home. I glanced down at my feet and found I was standing on a cobblestone path, so I began to walk forward, still yearning to understand what had happened.

After several minutes, the barking of dogs began in front of me. I smiled thinking about the dogs that had graced my life and the tales of the Rainbow Bridge. I started to trot and then to run toward the sounds. After a few moments, I crested a small hill and saw a farmhouse surrounded by a picket fence. On the other side of the fence were all the dogs I had known, loved, and lost, as well as two that I knew were still alive. I was so lost in my emotions that I fell to my knees and cried. My mind could not cope with these feelings of joy and amazement.

I felt a hand on my head and looked up at a familiar face. "Uncle Dick?"

"It's good to see you, Karl," he replied. Then he reached down and pulled me to my feet. "Now isn't the time for tears, Nephew."

I wiped my eyes with my hands and sighed. "Is this Heaven, Uncle Dick?"

He shook his head. "No, not yet. Your Aunt Elaine and I have been waiting for you. Please come inside for a cup of coffee." He put his arm around my shoulders, led me to

the fence, and opened the gate. We headed across the lawn with the seven dogs following closely behind.

When we reached the porch, he told me to spend some time with the dogs. Then, he went inside, leaving the door open. I sat on the porch with the dogs all around me. Again, I was overwhelmed with emotion and lay flat on my back. The dogs crawled all over me and licked my hands, arms, neck, and face. Warmed by my dearest friends, I rolled onto my side and fell asleep.

Sometime later, I woke up in bed. All the dogs were next to me. The door opened, and my Aunt Elaine entered. "I made fresh coffee, Karl. Why don't you come join us?"

She held out her hand, which I took and stood up. "Aunt Elaine, why did you two wait for me?"

She smiled and said, "We're family, but don't think we've been here forever. I could say more, but my job is just to welcome you." I nodded, and we walked into the kitchen and sat at the breakfast table. "Cream and sugar?"

"Yes, thanks for remembering that and for being here." She patted my cheek and went over to the coffee pot. "What is the place, Uncle Dick?"

"I suppose you could say it's a waystation," he replied. "The transition is complicated. This place seems more Earthlike, so people can adjust to their true life at a slower pace."

"True life? What does that mean?"

"It means your uncle needs to keep his mouth shut," Aunt Elaine interjected. "We're not here to teach you the whole truth. We are here to help you understand that life never truly ends. Your physical death is not the end, just a beginning."

"Now you're the one talking too much, Elaine," Dick said. He put his hand on top of Karl's. "Our part in your transition is almost over. We welcomed you and returned your dogs to you to show that death is not the end. If you thought this part was overwhelming, the rest of your transition will be more so."

"But in a good way, right Dick?"

"Yes, Darling," he replied.

"What happens next?" I asked.

Dick said, "You will stay here with us tonight. Your dogs will be with you. When you wake, Elaine and I will be gone. The dogs will take you on the next step."

"Where are you two going?"

Elaine patted my hand. "You'll see us again very soon. All the bad things you have ever dealt with are now gone. Only good things will happen next."