

The first crocuses, New York State

The story about the boy from space was mighty nonsense and Gloria was having none of it.

She ate her oatmeal at the kitchen table, planning her day, and feeling the nagging ache in her hip. Her dog grumbled and slobbered at his food, the poor dear who limped along so slowly nowadays. Jeff sat across from her, magnifying glass in hand, reading the paper with rapt attention. He believed every word about the boy, and sometimes spoke parts of the story aloud with great care.

‘Would you believe it, honey? The President is flying to Hel-sinki, that’s in Finland, to meet the Russians. First on the agenda will be s-sci-ent-ific cooperation following the extraordinary events . . .?’

After all these years, she knew how to tune him out, saying *Well!* and *Ub-bub!* at regular intervals.

Cory, the boy from space, had met the President. Well, the world had gone mad long ago and this was just the latest example. Gloria told herself, at least she had her feet on the ground.

Gloria took the job at the shelter because she liked animals, she preferred them to most people. What she hadn’t realised was how much of the job was panhandling. The county did not want to run a hotel. If the dogs could not be found owners, then, the bosses said with a shrug, too bad for the dogs. Everyone in town knew Gloria, begging for a few dollars, or a line of credit, or hustling for a home for her latest arrival. She even went back to families who had adopted before and said, ‘Would a second dog be so much trouble?’

That’s why, when Gloria took the phone call last night, she’d agreed to open a little early. If they were good people, they would drive away with a dog. Gloria would not take no for an answer. And if her gut told her they were trouble, mean people, then they would not have an animal, and that would be that.

‘Honey, imagine when his people come? A whole inter . . . interstellar civilisation . . .’

Mighty moonshine!

She looked at her man, a few grey curls against his dark skin, a match for hers. She thought of last night, in the marriage bed, and gave him a smile. Not that he noticed.

Gloria drove to the shelter, slow and steady on the slippery roads. It was cold and wet, yet the trees wore their first buds of green. At least the dogs could run around outside. Gloria had a system, knowing which dogs would play nicely together and which had to be exercised alone.

There stood the familiar low brick building, with the wire mesh around the big yard. And in the ground outside the yard, safe from the dogs, were her crocuses, white and yellow and purple. They told her snow was gone, that soon, other flowers would be here. Winter had been bitter, March winds could scourge, but new life still grew.

Gloria limped to the entrance. When she opened the inner door into the big room, a stir went through it. They had a couple of dozen animals right now, more than they should, and several long past their due time. Each dog had its own cage, its own blanket and bone. Some leaped up, barking, glad to see her. A few stayed silent, snouts on paws, and even Gloria could not coax any joy from them. A few dogs were aggressive, vicious, almost deserving their prison, but most were not. On their bodies were written the story of human ignorance, neglect, or cruelty.

‘Quiet, boys and girls, we’ll wake the boss.’ The slacker who outranked her would be sleeping off the drink, in the back room with the cats. Gloria had a system, and being on her own, she had to move quickly - knowing which dogs could be run before feeding, and which could not wait. Some were put outside to run while she fed others. Every dog would get its breakfast and a few words of love and a break outside. All but a few would let her caress their heads and stroke their backs, brown and grey and black, smooth and scruffy. To Gloria the world smelled of dog.

Her boys and girls were real, unlike Them and Their mighty nonsense. ‘They’ were the Presidents and the Generals, with Their endless wars and lying politicians and Their TV reporters who looked like they were made of plastic. Gloria had long ago given up trying to understand why They told all these ridiculous stories and why so many people fell for them. *A spaceship over the White House*. You could sell some people the Brooklyn Bridge.

‘Now, boys and girls, who’s hungry?’

She would need to get a move-on, as this new family would be here soon.

Ten minutes past the appointed time, Gloria peered out of the window by the door. Yes, coming up the track, between the bare trees, was a baby-blue camper. Gloria moved from the window and opened the door to watch them park real close. A lanky man got out and squatted awkwardly. He looked at the side of the vehicle and rubbed his woollen hat.

A woman joined him, moving slowly across the uneven ground.

‘It sounded worse than it was,’ he said.

‘I daren’t look,’ she said, looking. ‘I guess if it didn’t take the side off, we should be grateful.’

‘No need to be like that. It was a real tricky turn.’

‘I said you were going too fast. Now we owe them for fixing it. Oh, company.’

The woman had spotted Gloria and offered her a smile and a raised hand. Gloria came to meet them, looking for the boy they’d mentioned.

‘Molly,’ the woman said, offering her hand. Gloria saw blonde hair; she was maybe thirty. Determination in the eyes and mouth, the sort of attractive that went beyond mere pretty. With Gloria, no one got away with only first names. She would take addresses too, to visit and check her dogs would be well treated.

‘Gene,’ said the husband, also putting out a hand. Handsome enough if you like dark beards, which Gloria did not. Kind eyes.

'I'm doing the dogs' food,' Gloria said, showing them her gloved hands. In fact, she didn't like shaking hands. She knew that was mighty odd, and she kept the gloves on as a device to hide it. Gloria knew right away she recognised the couple, but she had no idea from where.

'Well, let's see if we can find him the right dog,' Molly said.

'And where is he?' Gloria asked, not moving.

'Oh, he'll probably just stay in the camper,' Molly said. 'It might be easier. He'll take forever to decide, and we need to get back on the road. We've a stiff few days' driving ahead.'

Gloria wouldn't budge. There were evil people who thought it fun to set dogs to fight, big dogs on small ones, or heaven knows what other cruelties. They would claim it was for a son or daughter, and yet have no sign of any youngster. It was tricky, because sometimes adults wanted to surprise a child, which she understood. But Molly had definitely said they wanted the boy to pick the dog.

'He loves animals,' said Gene.

'If it's for him and he's here, then he ought to choose,' Gloria said, to flush out any problems.

Gene and Molly looked at each other, making faces, some sort of silent conversation she did not understand.

'He hasn't been well,' Molly said.

'So maybe you should come back,' Gloria said, 'when he's up to it.' She knew these people from their faces . . . she'd seen their pictures. That was nagging at her, making her mighty cautious.

'We did promise him,' said Gene.

Gloria saw that Molly had made the decision. *One of those marriages*, she thought.

'Please don't tell people we've been here – less fuss for us, and for you.' Molly clutched her thick dark coat around her.

'I mind my own business. A rare thing these days.'

br‘Cory, come out!’ Molly said. And there was a boy standing there – no sound, no puff of smoke, just a boy dressed for the winter where a second before there had been no one. Gloria was getting old, but she had seen nothing, heard nothing, and in a blink, here he was . . .

The boy. Gloria stared. Those large violet eyes were beautiful . . . but around the mouth were two fistfuls of plum-red tentacles. She stared as they fluttered, almost as though he was playing the air. The way the red scarf went over his hat suggested he had much bigger ears than a human. It took her only seconds to decide that this was not a human in a mask, or a puppet. That truth showed in the way those eyes moved, watching her, twitching when a little ice slipped from the roof.

‘I-am Cory Myers and I-am pleased to meet you,’ the boy said, holding out his strange, gloved hand.

Cory Myers, the alien, the photos in the papers.

If Cory Myers existed, maybe *everything* was true.

‘Um,’ Gloria said, touching the hand in confusion. Cory blinked, showing he had white inner eyelids as well as those outer ones, grey-purple like his face.

‘He’s a lot to take in,’ Molly said, with a practised smile. ‘But he’s just a little boy who was promised a dog at Christmas.’

‘And now March,’ said Cory, starting to bob up and down a bit, waving his hands. ‘So-good grown-ups to keep promises, yes-it-is.’

‘Come in.’ Gloria felt like she was floating, just a little. ‘Come see the dogs. My husband must have read every word printed about you.’ Jeff had rescued papers from buses and shops around him; he’d even gone into the library and taken notes. His long obsession with the Meteor – two years come April – had laid the ground for his obsession with Cory and the couple who had hidden him.

‘He can’t have had time to do anything else.’ Molly said. How weary she sounded.

Gene put a hand on her shoulder.

A small part of Gloria thought she was dreaming. They went into the big room and as always, new people created a host of reactions. Some dogs leaped to their feet and barked, some just wagged their tails, hoping for entertainment, hoping to be loved. Some, disillusioned or sick or weary, stayed silent.

‘These are family dogs, except those few at the back. They’re not safe.’ She had to press the point, for the sake of her boys and girls. ‘How is he with animals?’

‘He loves dogs, and mostly, they love him. Cory, the ones at the back are mean, best not to go near them. Any of the others.’

Cory took off his hat and scarf and Gloria saw his long hairless head, the extraordinary ears striped light and dark purple. He looked up and down the room, his hands went to his head and his tentacles writhed.

‘You all right, sweetie-pie?’ Molly said, her hand to his shoulder.

‘Cory can’t help all of them. Can’t-can’t-can’t.’

‘Just one, Cory.’

Gloria knew the problem: how to choose between that bright-eyed spaniel leaping and calling and chasing its tail, *choose me, choose me*, and that adorable collie struggling to its feet, one leg in a cast. Or that old white-muzzled trooper who surely deserved a last year or two by the fire. Gloria always picked older dogs for herself, to give them a little comfort in their last years.

‘So many, Mom-Mom. Such little cages.’

‘They get out to run around, every day we can,’ Gloria said. ‘You know you have to help look after a dog?’

‘Every day. Feed and clean and run around, yes-I-will. So many, so many.’

People expected collecting a dog to be joyful, but some, like this odd-looking little boy, felt the desperation and the magnitude of the choice.

Cory might be ugly and strange, but no boy with that big a heart for dogs could be bad.

‘We have to choose, and then hit the road,’ Gene said. ‘We’re getting out of state, going West: redwoods and the ocean, remember?’ He looked at Gloria. ‘Too much attention here.’

The family had been on the run since the White House. So many stories . . . Cory took Molly’s hand and they walked between the cages. His ears were drooping and Gloria almost felt his upset. *Maybe they’ll take Princess, the collie, or Admiral, the Labrador,* she thought, following a few steps behind. Pandora’s puppies were too young and she kept them out of sight, knowing they would cause trouble. Puppies were easy to find a home.

Each dog sniffed at Cory’s hand through the cage and he bent his face to the cage as if to smell them back. The animals clearly weren’t worried by his odd looks.

Gloria hadn’t believed in the Meteor either, until Jeff had driven her to Amber Grove, only an hour away. He had shown her the miles of forest to the north that burned when it fell from the sky, and the fierce fence where the Army kept people away. In Amber Grove, she had to take his picture in front of the mighty fragment of space iron near to City Hall – a rock bigger than the whole dog shelter. The town was full of tourists, high on Gloria’s list of undesirables.

The new dog, Grey, was going berserk with joy, trying to prance around the cage, her tail thrashing like a swordfight.

Honesty rose. ‘Ah, ma’am, not that one . . .’

Molly looked at her.

‘She’s not quite right.’ Gloria mouthed the word FITS and tapped her head. How sad, how cold and bedraggled the dog had been, doubtless dumped when her owners found she was too much effort. The dog was as crazy as ten frogs in a satchel, but sweet despite it.

Cory was squatting by the grey dog, a mess of curls with ears that did not match. He did not quite move like a human, she noticed, but tut the boy and the animal were staring raptly at each other.

‘Cory take this one and only-two others. Only-three dogs, easy to clean and feed and run with.’

‘Three – in the camper? Cory, be reasonable,’ Gene said. ‘One dog, until we’re settled. Oregon will be perfect, woods, and peace and beaches . . .’

‘Cory wants his guinea-pigs. Very small.’

‘We left them at the White House, sweetie-pie, remember?’

‘What happens if no one takes dogs?’ Cory said.

Molly shot a look at Gloria, who had fielded this question many times before. She might blackmail adults with the grim reality, but not children.

‘Well, we keep them as long as we can, and kind people usually take them.’

But who would want poor Grey, who barked at nothing and fell over and relieved her bowels sometimes without warning? And Gloria knew that if she lied, then they would bring the dog back, and her boss would blame her.

Cory howled, a noise both inhuman and utterly understandable. ‘Earth people so-so cruel to poor dogs. This one. Then Cory find a million dollars and buy old farm and come back for all of them.’

‘Must we take the weird one?’ Gene said.

And Molly sighed, and touched the boy’s odd ear, and said, ‘We’ll take the grey. Has she had her shots, and, uh, has she been . . . uh, seen to?’

Gloria nodded.

Molly said, ‘If I could . . . don’t tell people we came. If they hear, you’ll have three days of press calls, TV film crews outside for days. And the FBI will be asking about a thousand questions.’

‘The FBI?’ Gloria wished she had listened to Jeff’s endless flow of news.

‘We’re not criminals. It’s just . . . the government want us to live somewhere safe – like on an army base, or an island or something. But we can look after ourselves.’

‘So, Oregon,’ Gloria said, and the adults nodded.

‘Dog wants to run,’ Cory said.

Gloria could have spent all day staring, but a day's hard work called her. 'Well, you can take her in the yard, if that's okay with your folks, and we'll talk about the donation and some stuff we can sell you.'

She'd ask them to give what they could afford. It was the only safe thing to do.

A little later, the three adults stood in the yard, watching Cory chase the dog, and the dog chase Cory. Cory could imitate a bark and the dog could barely contain its excitement, tripping over her own feet, and once running into the mesh fence.

Gene was looking at his watch.

'Runs so fast Cory call her Meteor,' Cory announced, breathless.

'Yes, crashes into things and causes chaos,' Gene said.

'We've got to go,' Molly said, and the family were opening the camper doors. Gloria usually took a photo.

'I'll get my camera . . .'

'No,' Molly said. 'Sorry, no – I hope you understand. Thank you.'

Well, I can't make them, can I? They were going. The most extraordinary morning of her life was coming to an end.

'I'll drive,' Molly said.

Her husband frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm pregnant, not made of glass.'

Time after time, Gloria's man had said, Cory's people flew among the stars. Cory's people were coming. Surely . . . ?

'What happens when his people come?' Gloria asked. 'Won't they want him back?'

It was the wrong question. For a moment Molly's face twisted . . . in grief? Hostility? Then it was once again a serene mask.

'Won't that be a day?' she said. Gene just scowled and got into the camper. Cory waved to Gloria, the dog up at the window barked, and the camper van was turning to leave.

Gloria's certainty grew. Oregon? If they were running away, why say where they were going? Molly Myers was no fool. No one buys a rescue dog – let alone a dog that isn't housetrained – at the *start* of a week-long road trip. You find a dog when you're settled.

Gloria guessed that the Myers were going home – Amber Grove, where the Myers had hidden Cory. A neat practical lie to put whoever was chasing them off the trail.

They came of course, two hours later, in Their long black cars. Gloria was expecting Them and she played her dumbest, most obedient self. They had killed her son in a pointless war and so They got nothing from her.

Ends

Author's note. This story takes place between the end of Chapter 45 and the Coda in *Our Child of the Stars*. Meteor appears regularly in *Our Child of Two Worlds* and Gloria and the animal shelter make an appearance in the final version.

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