

THE

DOG



RAY

Linda Coggin



# THE DOG, RAY

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## Chapter 1

When my death came it was swift. Swift as a running horse. It wasted no time. Like a magic trick. One moment I was in the car, the next on the road, and then I wasn't anywhere. When I awoke I was slouched in a chair in a room with yellow paint peeling off the walls and a table at the far end. Yes. My death was as fleet as the wind. Meteoric, you might say. Mercurial, like quicksilver. No floating above the body, looking down on the grieving relatives. It was snappy, prompt. It was *fast*.

It's funny, now that I think of it. My dad, who was driving the car, always did have a fear of horses. He was so afraid of them he would never get on one, or pat one on the neck, or let their lovely soft muzzles blow in his face. I know all this because my mom had told me how scared of horses he was.

"It's unreasonable, really," she'd said. "He's never had anything to do with them. It's not like he was kicked by one when he was small."

And that *is* what's funny. Because the reason I ended up on the road was because a horse jumped over a hedge and onto my dad's car as we were driving to the supermarket. So it had been a premonition. His fear of horses.

"You'd better hurry up, dear," said someone at the table at the far end of the room, "or all the best jobs will be taken. We had a multiple-bus crash just before you came in, and most of the qualified jobs are gone."

"Jobs?" I asked. "Why do I need a job? I'm only twelve."

"*Were* only twelve, dear," the voice corrected.

“I’ve got you down as Daisy Fellows. Distinguishing features one blue eye and one green eye. Is that right?”

I nodded. I had always longed to have one of those old-fashioned passports that Mom had told me about. I’d never seen one, but Mom said they used to have a section for distinguishing marks. I thought whoever read it would have to look long into my eyes to make sure it was true, and I would learn to perfect a blank stare so that they wouldn’t be able to see into my soul. But they don’t do that anymore. The passport I got last year just had a little microchip in it that probably said everything there is to know about me, including my bad grade on the math exam.

A woman was sorting out a pile of papers on the desk and she glanced at me every now and then.

“Really, my dear, you must go while you can. A new baby is about to be born in Springfield. It’s the only qualified job left. I think we’ve got about two minutes, so come and sign the form and then you must go.”

“Go? I don’t understand,” I said. “I’ve only

just arrived. And I don't even know where I am. Is this Heaven or something?"

"Heaven? Goodness, my dear. What an old-fashioned concept of death. You are in one of our Job Centers. You are a *soul*, are you not? Everyone who is born needs a soul. It's just a question of whose body you take up. Look at it as rehousing."

She was just about to hand me a form to sign when a telephone rang at her side. She picked it up.

"Oh, dear. Well, thank you for letting me know." The woman looked at me. "The job was taken. We'll have to find you something else."

"Why is no one else here?" I asked. "Six thousand three hundred and ninety people die per hour. I learned that in school. Where are they all?"

"That's an old figure, my dear. Far more people die than that. But that's not the point. The point is we like to treat people as *individuals*. There are lots of rooms in the building, you know, and lines of people waiting to come in here."

"What about my dad? He's here, isn't he?"

"I don't know, dear — what's his name?"

“Dennis Fellows.”

The woman opened a drawer marked *F* and rifled through it. “Fanshawe. Featherstone. Fielding. No Dennis Fellows; there’s a Freddie Fellows—any relation?”

I shook my head.

“He’s not dead, then,” she said.

*Good, I thought. Mom’ll be pleased. And no joint funeral. Thank goodness. I wouldn’t want to be buried to something by the Beatles.* I thought about it for a moment. It would’ve been fun to see who’d come to it—most of the seventh grade, I guess. I hoped Owen Taylor showed up and cried buckets for me. Of course, technically I wouldn’t have had my funeral yet. I was probably still lying on the road, covered in a sheet. I bet there was a crowd of people. They always stop and stare at accidents. I wondered what had happened to the horse. Perhaps it was in the line outside, waiting to come back as a hedgehog.

“So Mom was right about her theory of coming back again as something else when you die?” I said. “She was into Buddhism.”

“It’s not about *religion*,” the woman said scornfully. “It’s about practicalities. Now you’re getting cold, aren’t you? I can see you shivering. We must hurry. Ah, yes. You needn’t sign any forms for this one—it’s not a qualified job. Off you go, dear—through that door on the right.”

“But what’s my—uh . . . who, uh—*what’s my job? Who will I become?*”

“There’s a litter being born right now in a charming house. I’m sure you’ll like it. They’re nearly all out, but I’ll arrange for one to be stuck in the birth canal. That’ll give you about three minutes to get there. Remember—*the door on the right!*”

I just had the handle in my hand when the door flew open. It definitely seemed like sky out there, and when I looked down, a jagged vent opened up and it felt as if something had grabbed hold of my legs. Too late, I realized—I had gone through the door on the left. Out of the corner of my eye I’d seen a sign—ABSOLUTELY NO EXIT.

I was supposed to go through *the door on the right*. I found myself falling, falling. And it was



as quick as the wind. It was snappy, prompt. It was *fast*.

As I fell I remember shouting out, “What sort of litter? Am I going to be a pig? A cat? A *rat*?” But no one heard me, and it wasn’t until I could open my eyes twelve days later that I could see, perfectly well, that I had come back to Earth as a dog.

## Chapter 2

“So which of these dear little puppies would you like, Cyril?” the woman in the alarmingly pink dress asks.

“Me! Me! Take me!” they all say, their little tails wagging.

Why? Who would want to go with a woman in a pink dress? I could just imagine her home. It would probably have pink furry seat covers on the toilets.

I hide under the table.

Cyril picks up one of my brothers by the tail, and he gives a loud yelp.

“Cyril! Don’t do that. Now, which one do you want?”

“Me! Me! Take me!” they all go again, jumping up and making themselves appear as adorable as possible.

“I want that one hiding under the table,” he says, getting down on his hands and knees and peering at me. I glare at him. He smells like candy and socks.

“Urgh—look, Mom! It’s got funny eyes. They’re different colors. I don’t want it after all.”

“I don’t know, Cyril,” the woman says, looking under the table. “It’s rather sweet. Anyway, it’s the only female. And I did say we’d get a girl. I don’t want some boy dog running after everything that moves.”

Cyril lets out a wail. “Don’t want a girl. Want a boy to play soccer with.”

I growl at him.

“Cyril, it’s just a *dog*. I’m sure you can throw a ball for it, but it won’t be able to play soccer.”

“Actually, I *can* play soccer,” I tell them. “I was on the JV soccer team at my school. I’ve

scored literally *hundreds* of goals.” But they don’t understand me.

“Oh, look, the poor thing is *whimpering*. My mind is made up, Cyril. It’s adorable.”

I never do get to see if they have pink furry covers on the toilets because when they get me back they proudly show me my new home. A doghouse—outside!

“I’m not sleeping in *that*,” I say. “I want a basket, at least. And perhaps one of those nice plaid rugs or, even better, a *beanbag*. Now *that* would be comfy. I imagine I’ll be doing a lot of lying around. I’m sure they wouldn’t have let you take me if they’d known I was going to have to sleep *outside*!”

“I think she likes it,” the woman in the pink dress says. “Come on, Cyril, we must leave her to rest. We’ll come back and see her later.”

“Rest?” I say. “I’m not an invalid!”

“I want to play soccer,” Cyril whines.

“So do I!”

“All in due course, Cyril. Lunchtime first. Spaghetti and meatballs.”

“I love spaghetti and meatballs,” I say, and jump up and down to get some attention. “It’s practically my favorite food—after Thai green curry.”

“I think she’s telling us she needs to go pee-pee,” Cyril’s mother says. “Go on, Cyril, go and put her on the newspaper in the yard and then we must go in and have our lunch.”

Cyril grabs me by the neck and drags me, protesting, to the yard. Cyril’s house looks much like everyone else’s on the road. It has a neat square of grass, a garage with double doors, and a little concrete area on which his mother has placed some pages from a newspaper. Dragging my heels, I reluctantly follow him. My mom always advised me to take any opportunity I could to use a bathroom. “Because you just don’t know when or where you’ll get another chance.”

As I stand over the paper my eye catches sight of the headline.

GIRL AND HORSE KILLED IN FATAL ROAD ACCIDENT. MAN LEFT PARALYZED. And there, smiling back at me, is my picture.



What on earth possessed them to use that picture? It's my school photo. I look demented and about six years old. Why couldn't they have used that one taken on the beach in Turkey? The one with my hair looking particularly good—kind of windswept and interesting.

There is another picture of a mass of flowers and teddy bears that "*friends of Daisy have left at the spot where she was killed.*" I look at the date on the paper and see that it is about three months old. I've already been a dog for a quarter of a year.

After I recover from the thought of my school photo being seen by thousands of readers, I think of my poor dad being paralyzed. I wonder how he and Mom are coping. I look back at the paper again. How could I possibly pee on *that*?

I am lying here. Waiting. Waiting to hear someone call my name. *Misty!* What sort of silly name is *that*? I don't look like a Misty. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of a puddle the other day. I've got sharp features. A long pointy nose

and funny little ears that flop over at the top. But I can make them stand up when I feel like it, which is really cool.

So here I am, *waiting*. Waiting for someone to take me for a walk. I would take myself for a walk, but I'm attached to this doghouse. Not like I'm fond of it. I'm attached with a cord. And Cyril cannot be relied upon to take me for a decent walk. His mother bribes him to take me for a walk twice a day, in the park, because she feels he "needs the exercise." Looking at him, I think she's right.

He goes around the corner all right, but once out of sight he either sits on a bench and plays with his phone or doubles back when he thinks his mother isn't looking. Then he hides me in the garage while he sneaks into the kitchen and takes a snack from the cookie jar. And he never gives *me* a cookie. When I get a biscuit it is in the shape of a bone. Who are they trying to kid? Are they trying to fool me into thinking it's a bone? A bone doesn't look like that—a bone doesn't *smell* like that. And, even worse, when he *does*

give me a biscuit — uh, bone — he expects me to turn into a circus act before he'll let me have it. Now, if it were Thai green curry, for example, I'd sit down, beg, roll over — I'd do a cartwheel if I could — but it isn't. It's a boring bone-biscuit.

In fact, I know I should like Cyril, in a dog way, but I can't help worrying that he's going to do something nasty to me. He doesn't seem to realize that I'm not a toy and that I have feelings, like he does. I remember Mr. Pearce talking about the Second World War and how the Russians trained their dogs to run suicide missions with mines strapped to their backs. I hope Cyril hasn't studied the Second World War yet, because I think it might put ideas into his head.

He doesn't seem to have any friends, never talks to me, and seems almost incapable of laughing. The only time I saw Cyril laugh was when he gave me some bubblegum and my teeth got stuck together. It was humiliating, because I've had a lot of bubblegum in my time and I used to be able to blow the biggest bubbles in the whole school. But the new jaws I've got don't work quite the

same way. I thought it was mean of him to laugh like that. I don't think that strapping a mine onto my back can be too far away.

I'm on a long leash attached to the doghouse. It looks like a clothesline to me. So although I can get out of the doghouse, I can't exactly go anywhere. When the milkman comes I ask him to let me loose.

"Excuse me," I say very politely. "Would you mind undoing me? I don't think they meant to leave me tied up, and they've gone somewhere in the car. I think they'd be very grateful if you did, because it's not very nice leaving me tied to a doghouse. I'm not going to run away, because when you leave you'll be shutting the gate. I'm supposed to be guarding the house. It's difficult to do it properly from here. I need to patrol around it a bit."

"Stop that crazy barking!" the milkman says as he leaves the bottles on the doorstep.

I have to watch the sparrows peck holes in the tops and drink the milk and I can't do anything about it.

What rotten luck to have been the only girl in the litter. I bet the others have really nice homes. I bet none of them sleep in a *doghouse*. Anyway, doghouses are so *old-fashioned* for a dog these days, unless you're a real working dog. I wish I were a working dog. Then at least I'd have something to do.

My ears prick up suddenly, all on their own. There is someone at the door of the house! Maybe someone is going to play with me! I run out of the doghouse like I'm fired out of a cannon, only to be choked by my collar when I reach the end of the cord. My legs sort of disappear from under me and I roll over and over. I get up quickly and shake myself. I don't want to look stupid. It wasn't for me, anyway. It was someone collecting for charity. I'm tempted to do it again so that it looks as if I did it on purpose, but there's no one there to see now, so I go back into the doghouse. I feel embarrassed. It looked as if I hadn't figured out the four-legs thing when in fact I was the first in our litter to go from crawling to standing up. Of course the others soon followed. None of my



brothers wanted to be outdone by a *girl*. It was my idea to bring the slipper back too, although they chewed it more than I did. So I moved on to chair legs, which weren't as much fun but a real *challenge*.

I'm so bored now I wouldn't even mind if Cyril's mom came out to do her training session with me. She has taken it upon herself to teach me how to *sit*, *stay*, and *leave it!* Well, it's perfectly obvious to me what *sit* means. She doesn't have to say it slowly, in a loud voice, as if I come from a foreign country. And I hate the way she wags her finger at me. Sometimes, just to be awkward, I pretend I don't know what she's talking about.

"No, Misty! I said *sit*, not lie down."

I also like eating the treat when she is holding it out in her hand asking me to *leave it*. Why would I want to do that? Particularly when it looks as if she's giving it to me.

But the most fun I had was when she first put the leash on me and expected me to walk along at her side. She clearly doesn't understand that us dogs need to sniff at everything as we are walking

along. So I'd lie down and make her drag me along the pavement or, even better, go *backward*. Still, even the most fun things get boring after a while, so now I just trot along at the end of the leash, grateful that I'm out of the doghouse.

This time when I'm out of the doghouse, Cyril and I are at the bench again, he on his phone, me waiting for *someone* to throw a ball. I have my head on my paws and now I'm watching some ants busying themselves on the grass in front of my nose. They are moving a bit of candy, and they are so organized. Part of a team. I miss being part of a team. If Ms. Roberts, our gym teacher at school, could see the way I run *now*, I'd be made captain of the soccer team.

I keep on watching the ants. There's nothing for *me* to organize anymore, and I wish there were. Other than move my bone around the doghouse, there's nothing to do. I used to have a planner called a Personal Organizer and it had all sorts of stuff in it. I kept ticket stubs from movies I'd liked, receipts for hot chocolate in the coffee shop, and the ticket for the bus I was on once with Owen

Taylor. But not now. Now there is nothing for me to file away, though I'm sure if I could get my hands on a few sheep, I could organize *them*.

Yes, there's a whole world down in that grass.

I see a group of boys swaggering toward us. I stand up to make myself look bigger. There's something about them I don't like.

One of them stops.

"What you up to, dude?" he says to Cyril.  
"Should you be out without your mommy?"

Cyril tries to hide his phone and shrinks back into the bench. I can feel the hairs bristle up on the back of my neck. This must be making me look at least twice my size by now. I feel big, anyway. It fills me with confidence. I don't think I'm scared; I just don't like them. I don't have to sniff them—I can already smell them and they smell of meanness and cowardice and boredom.

"Or is that your mommy?" the boy says, pointing at me and laughing.

Now, I can take a joke at the best of times, but this isn't even *funny*. I feel sorry for Cyril. I was bullied at school by Jessica Warner. She and

her gang of friends would poke fun at me and spread stupid rumors that weren't true. I growl at the boys. It's the first time I've tried growling properly, and it makes me want to cough.

It's good not being afraid. If I were Cyril, I probably would be. But I'm here to protect him. After all, that is the deal. I give Cyril and his family devotion and loyalty, and they feed me, walk me, and love me back. Well, that is how it is supposed to work.

"I don't think you'll be needing that phone anymore," one of them says, and steps toward us to take it. I growl again, louder. It's a strange, angry, *how dare you?* sort of noise that scrapes the back of my throat.

The boys back off, and I add a snarl and bare my teeth for show. It is very effective.

An old man, who was sitting on another bench a little farther along, gets up and walks toward us.

"You all right, son?" he asks Cyril.

*Son?* I think. This man doesn't look like Cyril's dad, unless Cyril's dad has gone out in disguise. For

a start, he is much older and has shabby clothes on. Cyril's dad would not be seen dead without his suit on and one of his awful novelty ties.

No. This man is definitely not Cyril's dad.

"Get out of here!" he says to the group of boys.

"All right, old man. Keep your hair on!" one of them shouts, and they pull their hoodies over their eyes, dig their hands deep into their pockets, and stroll off, laughing. We all watch them go. I notice Cyril has sweat patches under his arms. I want to feel good about him, lick him to say it's OK, but I can't help thinking that if he'd taken me for a real walk none of this would have happened.

"That's a fine-looking dog," the old man says, ruffling my ears. I like that. Having my ears ruffled. I roll onto my back. I also like having my tummy tickled.

Well, S-O-R-R-Y. But I do. It's a *dog* thing.

"What's her name?"

Cyril remains silent. He's probably still in shock, and I'm pretty sure that his mother has told him not to speak to strangers.



“Well, go on, Cyril, tell him my name!” I say.

“Misty,” Cyril mutters, looking over his shoulder in case his mother can see him.

“Mr. T? That’s a funny name for a female.”

“*Misty*. The dog’s name is Misty.”

“Ah,” replies the old man.

He rests himself on the bench and we all sit in silence for a while. Then Cyril gets up and starts to drag me home. I don’t want to go. I like this man. His face is weather-beaten and wrinkled, and he has the bluest eyes. Besides, I think it’s rude to go when he has just helped us out. Shouldn’t we be inviting him back for a cup of tea?

“Thank you!” I say to him as Cyril yanks me away. “For getting rid of those boys.”

It’s the next day, and we are back in the park. Cyril is looking anxiously around in case the boys are there again. Then he does something he has never done before. He ties me to the park bench and goes away! I sit there waiting for him to return. After all, I am a dog and loyalty is in my bones.

I check out the area. There is something lying on a bench farther down the path. It is like a huge bundle of clothes. It moves a bit, stretches, and sits up. It is the old man we met the day before! He has a few bags, which he collects together, and then he slowly stands up, puts his hand on his back, and rubs it.

When he sees me he walks toward me, and I wag my tail like mad. I like this man. My tail feels as if it is attached to a motor. It goes around and around, and I couldn't stop it if I wanted to.

"Hello, girl," he says, rubbing my head like he did before. "Has that boy left you here?"

He sits down on my bench.

"It's a fine day, isn't it? Why aren't you out on a nice long walk, eh?" He chuckles. "It's a grand world out there; you don't want to be spending your time tied to a bench."

I totally agree with him. I want to tell him about my circumstances, but just a funny little whimper comes out and takes me by surprise.

"I used to know a dog like you. He was a spirit dog. Dogs with two-colored eyes are believed to

be spirit dogs. They guide people. Don't go near a farm, mind you. Farmers hate spirit dogs. You'll freak the animals out. It's your eyes, see. No, you won't be popular if you go to a farm. I bet you're a good companion, though." He goes on. "That boy shouldn't just leave you tied to a bench. It's not right. I'd take you with me if I could, old girl. But I don't want no trouble for stealing a dog. And it would be a hard life for you. I bet you've got a nice warm bed on some sofa somewhere."

"No, I haven't! I live in a *doghouse*! I'd love life on the road. I went on a hiking trip with Mom once and it was great!"

He nods sympathetically.

When he sees Cyril returning, the old man stops stroking my ears. He picks up his bags and shuffles off. He moves slowly, as if his feet cause him pain. I watch him as he goes down the path, his words jumping excitedly in my mind. A *spirit dog*. I like the sound of that.

And this is when I hatch the Plan.


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