

KALEB
by
ANDRICK SCHALL

Kaleb was born an incredibly happy and lucky dog. A pure-bred chocolate lab, his kind was known for its loyalty and good disposition, and Kaleb was no exception. He was born into a wonderful and kind family, and his love for them showed no bounds. He would do anything for them, he loved them both so very much.

He loved the Graceful dog, a woman with a soft voice with a tint of edge to it, just enough to keep him out of the garbage. She was caring, and always made room for Kaleb at the end of the bed.

He loved the Stern dog, the alpha of the pack, his soul-mate, his best friend. They would do everything together; take long hikes, long rides in the car, and, his most favorite of all, take trips to the lake.

Kaleb loved riding in the car. When the Stern dog rolled down the window, out went Kaleb's head. An onslaught of scents overpowered his olfactory as they drove down the road. This made Kaleb ecstatic beyond belief.

But it was at the lake that Kaleb was at his happiest. Kaleb, like all labs, loved the water, and he would spend countless hours swimming and bobbing about. The Stern dog would throw the tennis ball into the water, and Kaleb, bounding, tearing down the dock, would fly into the water to fetch the floating prize. He would dutifully retrieve the ball, swim to the shore, shake himself off, and bring the ball back to the Stern dog. This game was repeated endlessly.

Kaleb loved the water. He would spend hours dog-paddling about, swimming with people, chasing after ducks, and, most of all, fetching the tennis ball.

You see, it was the game of fetch that Kaleb lived for. He would retrieve the tennis ball for hours on end, days if stamina allowed for it, but, unfortunately, he did have the occasional tendency to chew upon the illustrious prize, rendering the ball a jagged mess of elastic and torn fibers, covered in slobber. No matter, thought Kaleb. The Stern dog will find more tennis balls. He loved the Stern dog.

Countless days were spent at Kaleb's favorite lake. Endless games of fetch were punctuated by spending time with the Graceful dog and the Stern dog by the bonfire, Kaleb in between them. He was the luckiest dog in the world.

So many times, after one of these glorious days, Kaleb found himself asleep in the back of the car on the trip home. He was glad when the Stern dog would wake him up; that meant it was time to go inside and crawl into his comfortable and well-loved bed.

If there was one thing in the world that Kaleb did not like, however, it was the red German Shepherd that lived next door. Kaleb hated this unruly beast. The German Shepherd was unfriendly, aggressive and did not like to play fetch. Kaleb had nothing but contempt for his distant cousin. That is not to say that Kaleb had ever shown the German Shepherd any aggression or violence; by and large, Kaleb was a peaceful, pleasant dog, and the wooden fence kept the two dogs apart. But Kaleb did not like this German Shepherd.

Other than his untoward neighbor, life at home was good for Kaleb. Except when the Graceful dog summoned that most hellish of beasts, that demon spawned from the black pits of hell, the vacuum cleaner. Until his dying day, Kaleb would be at war with the vacuum cleaner. But, other than that creature of evil, Kaleb's life at home was wonderful.

Kaleb remembers the day the Stern dog and the Graceful dog brought home the Small dog. At first, Kaleb was unsure of this new addition to the family. She was as her pack-mates, but small and helpless. She could not feed herself. She could not walk. Kaleb wondered if something was wrong with the puppy.

As time passed, the Small dog began to learn to walk on her own, to speak, and, eventually feed herself. Kaleb came to welcome this Small dog into the pack, despite her penchant to steal his toys. He could not be mad at her for this; she was simply not wise as to the ways of the pack. He knew, however, that with time, she would come to know. And with time, Kaleb would come to love the Small dog, as well.

Time continued its inexorable march forward. As the years went by, Kaleb found the swimming in the lake more and more difficult. His legs hurt. His knees hurt. His back hurt. Of course, this did not stop his abiding spirit. He would play fetch all day, if he could. But time had claimed him, and his body fought harder and harder to keep up.

Kaleb could no longer play in the water. This broke his heart.

Things became tough at home. There came a time a time when Kaleb could no longer navigate the stairs without tumbling. The Stern dog would have to carry him up and down the staircase. Kaleb felt guilty to be such a burden, but, somehow, he knew that the Stern dog's love for him was only deepening.

Kaleb would overhear conversations between the Stern dog and the Graceful dog, whispered in tone, occasionally mentioning his name. This saddened Kaleb. He did not want his infirmities to become a burden for his pack. He knew his time was short.

The times at the lake stopped. The hikes stopped. Kaleb, now covered in gray fur, had great difficulty in walking. I love my pack he thought. He would miss them, but he knew that they would be okay, as his time was coming.

One afternoon, Kaleb was asleep on the back porch when he heard an horrible screaming. He rose to his feet as quickly as he could, scanning the backyard. His olfactory smelled blood.

There, in the corner of the yard, the German Shepherd had broken through the fence, and had the Small dog by her arm. His teeth were sunk into her limb, piercing the flesh. The Small dog screamed in fear and agony as blood poured from her wounds.

Summoning whatever strength he had left in him, Kaleb rose to his feet. He did not know how, but his spirit moved his legs to work again, one last time, one last run, as he tore off towards the German Shepherd. He could see that the German Shepherd had let go of the Small dog's arm, and was moving his muzzle towards her neck.

Kaleb jumped onto the back of the German Shepherd, biting into the back of his neck. The German Shepherd broke off his attack of the Small Creature, and rolled to face Kaleb. He bit into Kaleb's neck, and it was seconds before Kaleb felt the taste of blood in his mouth. Kaleb, determined, bit at the German Shepherd's face, biting it open.

The Graceful dog scooped up the Small dog, while the Stern dog separated the fighting animals.

This was the last thing Kaleb remembered.

Kaleb awoke to a vast, green pasture, next to a beautiful lake. The sun was shining, the day was beautiful. An enormous stack of tennis balls was next to a large bowl of water and a pile of dog treats. An army of dogs greeted him, barking and wagging their tails.

Kaleb felt a deep sense of peace, the most profound peace he had ever known, yet at the same time he was completely overjoyed. A rush of excitement ran through him; a wave of relaxation washed over him. This was the best he had ever felt. Even his legs and hips were fine!

A peaceful looking dog slowly walked up to Kaleb. He told him was a good dog, but it was not yet time for Kaleb to be there, not just yet.

What do you mean, asked Kaleb. Where are my pack-mates?

They will join you soon, someday, said the kindly dog. But first, I need you to go back, for just a moment, and say goodbye.

How will I do that, asked Kaleb.

You will know, said the kindly dog.

Kaleb awoke to find himself on a steel table at the veterinarian's office. He hated the vet, but he knew that there was something special about this particular visit. His entire pack, the Stern dog, the Graceful dog and the Small dog, bandaged on her arm, all surrounded him. They touched him, petted him, and told him he was a good dog. Kaleb knew that this was the last time.

The Graceful dog and the Small dog were crying; the Stern dog, his hand resting on Kaleb's head, was determined not to show emotion. Kaleb understood. That's just how he was.

Kaleb felt a sensation of warmth come over him. He knew what he had to do. He wagged his tail, to say goodbye. He drifted off to peace as his heart stopped.

Kaleb awoke again in the beautiful field, next to the clear blue lake. Endless games of fetch awaited him. He longed for the day when his pack-mates would join him.