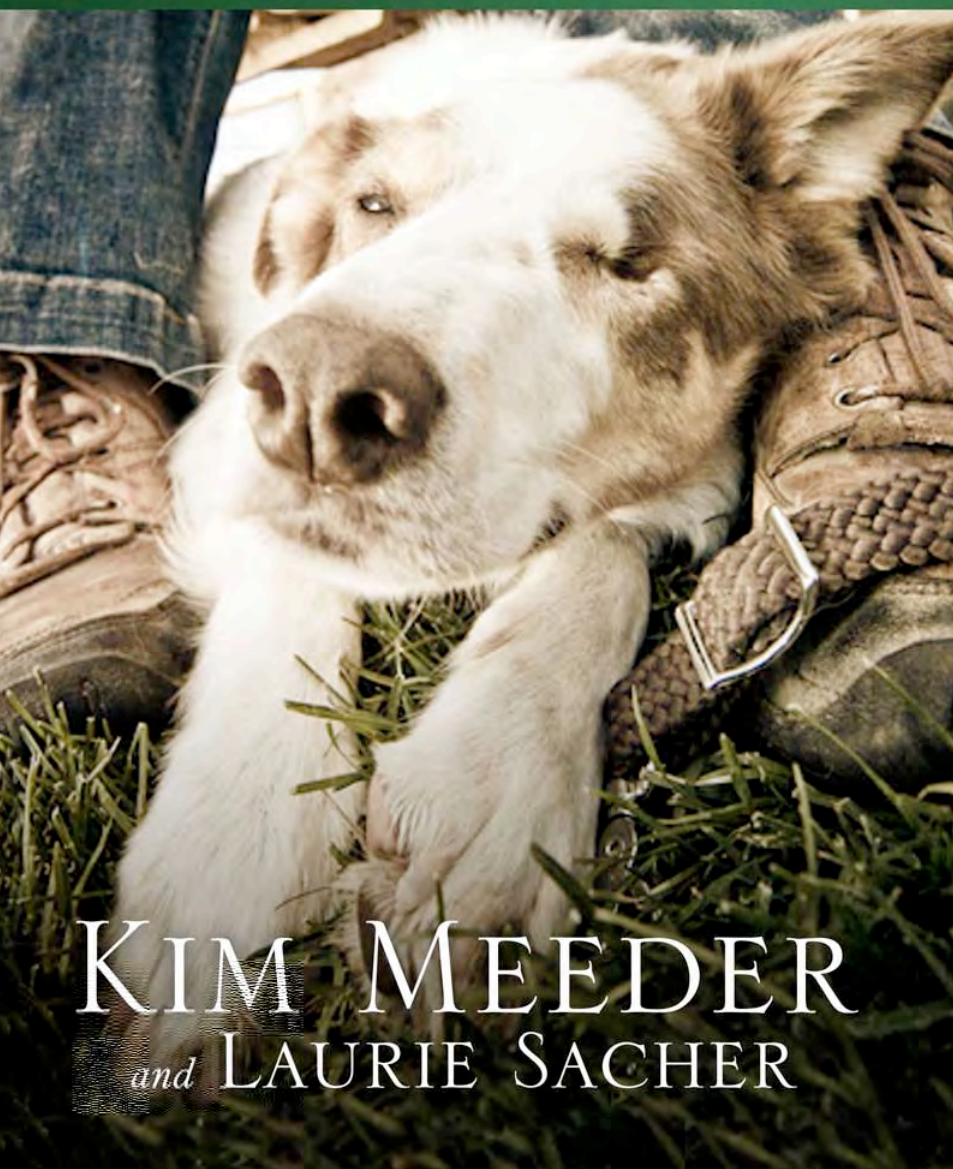


BLIND HOPE

An Unwanted Dog & the Woman She Rescued



KIM MEEDER
and LAURIE SACHER

BLIND HOPE

Other Books by Kim Meeder

Hope Rising

Bridge Called Hope

BLIND HOPE

An Unwanted Dog &
the Woman She Rescued

KIM MEEDER
and LAURIE SACHER



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BLIND HOPE

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For Laurie

Thank you for your courage in choosing to be transparent and honest. In doing so, you knew you would become vulnerable to the judgment of others. Yet you took that risk on the chance that through your story...some would find hope.

*This little book has become that endeavor; it is your
Blind Hope.*

Contents

The Humble Beginning	xi
Prologue: The Sound of Trust	1
1 The Rescue	9
2 The Facade	19
3 The Choice	33
4 The Calling	39
5 The Lesson of Love	53
6 The Diagnosis	63
7 The Three Things	73

CONTENTS

8	The Light	87
9	The Walk	95
10	The Storm	103
11	The Purpose in Proximity	119
12	The Gift of Joy	129
13	The Bridge of Trust	139
14	The Closet	151
15	The Hope	167
	Epilogue	173
	Acknowledgments	179
	Notes	181



The Humble Beginning

Dear friend,

Before you come along on this journey with a woman, a friend, and a dog, please allow me to take you back to the founding of the ranch, the single seed from which this story was gleaned. Just like I tell our visitors, I would say to you now, “This is how it all began. Come, walk with me...”

“At first, there was nothing...nothing except a hole in the ground.”



Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch arose from extremely humble beginnings. In 1995 my husband, Troy, and I purchased the only piece of property we could afford—a forlorn, abandoned rock quarry that had been mined for cinders. The local department of transportation crushed this abrasive stone to spread across winter roads for traction. The property looked as if a hungry giant had unceremoniously chomped out a three-acre bite from the upper half. The massive wound inflicted by the mining operation had also removed all the trees, grass, and topsoil. What remained was nothing more than a gaping red hole in the ground.

Completely devoid of its former natural beauty, the land looked so hideous that no one else wanted it. One fact others overlooked was the pit's location on the western side of a small mountain. In Central Oregon, that means the acreage possessed a panoramic view of the Cascade Mountain Range, part of the Pacific Ring of Fire. This mountain range divides the entire state of Oregon with a row of formidable volcanoes ranging in elevation from seven thousand to more than eleven thousand feet. From the rim of the cinder pit, this parade of more than a dozen towering peaks creates a majestic skyline.

Looking outward at this geological masterpiece was awe-inspiring. In contrast, looking downward was mortifying. Thankfully, in this life we each get to choose in which direction we will cast our gaze. We each get to decide where our focus will reside.

Troy and I chose to focus on what we could do. We chose to concentrate on the view and to restore a severely wounded piece of property.

Together, we appealed to the owners of the neighboring ranches for their garbage. The following two years, shovelful by shovelful, we hauled anything organic to cover the floor of our pit in order to create a seedbed. To renew the land, we brought in hundreds of tons of used stall shavings, moldy hay, and manure and spread them across the rocky wasteland that had become our residence. Troy, who at that time was a landscape contractor, carted home damaged and unwanted trees. Armed with shovels, picks, and pry bars, we dug large holes in which to plant the homeless trees. We often worked late into the night, with the vast, open darkness illuminated only by the headlights of our truck.

It was during this time that our first rescued horses arrived. I had been volunteering at a local breeding ranch, where I

saw such atrocities that I would often leave vowing under my breath, "Someday this needs to change; someone needs to do something." I believe everyone faces a time when that "someday" is today and that "someone" ...is you.

*Everyone faces a time
when that "someday"
is today and that
"someone" ...
is you.*



I knew those devastated creatures wouldn't survive much longer, so I negotiated their release. Of the two, one was a gray Anglo-Arab, emaciated to the point of missing about three hundred pounds, a third of her normal body weight. Denied the nourishment to grow properly, she had a chest so narrow that I couldn't fit my closed fist between her front legs.

The second mare was a tall red bay with enormous brown eyes. I had witnessed the owner attack this lanky Anglo-Arab in such a savage rage that afterward he had to call a vet to come and suture a six-inch gash on her face.

Unknown to us at that time, those two rescued souls would become the forerunners of a vast stampede of needy horses soon to follow.

Troy and I watched in complete amazement as our ravaged property, filled with broken trees and broken horses, was transformed into the perfect setting to heal the hearts of broken children.

Drawn by word of mouth, kids started coming to the ranch—kids we didn't even know. Typically a friend of a friend had told them about these formerly abused horses that needed help. The children would walk up our driveway armed with little more than the desire to offer their unique brands of love. Remarkably, the kids weren't coming for what they could get but for what they could give.

At that time, our horses weren't trained, nor were they strong enough to carry a rider. So the kids helped in all aspects of their care. Some children only wanted to groom the horses, taking extra time to comb, condition, and braid their manes and tails. Others stood with great patience, holding up large rubber pans of specialized feed to help the horses regain their lost weight. Many kids simply wanted to lead the mares up the grassy hill and just sit and watch them graze.

Feeding carrots to the horses ranked as a favorite fun activity. Brilliant orange foam lined each horse's mouth as it chewed surplus loads of carrots. The horses savored the moment with heads down and eyes half closed, drooling pools of pure enjoyment. The sight and sound of that event always generated giggles from the children.

We watched in awe as these young ones—in their efforts to make the horses better—became better themselves.

Of all the kids who came to the ranch, there was one teenage girl who captured my heart. She was so broken inside that she had retreated into a world of silence. Although she could speak, she chose not to. Over time, I saw her reason for coming to the ranch: to feel safe and loved. Despite my efforts to release this young woman from her wordless prison, I was firmly locked out.

One day I was summoned away from her to take a long-distance phone call. When my call ended, I looked out the

window and down the hill to check on her. She had taken the starving horse out and tied her to the hitching rail, and I could see their heads, lowered and close together. Curious, I kept watching. Finally the girl's head bobbed up, along with the horse's. And then I could clearly see what was happening. She was talking to the horse! From a starving girl to a starving horse, years of words poured out that no one had ever heard. From their parallel lives of pain, each understood the other better

*Simple encouragement
from the little ranch in
a cinder pit is reaching
around the
world.*



than most could understand either one of them. That was the moment when I knew I needed to build a place for this miracle of healing to thrive.

Inspired by that singular occurrence of wondrous free-

dom, we decided to take action, and Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch was born. I determined to build a ranch where this type of release could happen without hindrance. A place that would come to be known as “The Ranch of Rescued Dreams.”

Since those early days, we've seen the ranch grow into an international phenomenon. Our twice-yearly Information Clinics have helped bring more than one hundred similar ranches into existence across the United States, Canada, and abroad. Simple encouragement from the little ranch in a cinder pit is

reaching around the world. Since 1995, we've been involved in the rescue of more than three hundred horses and have welcomed approximately five thousand visitors during our annual season from March to Thanksgiving. To date, an estimated fifty thousand have been served by this tiny ranch—all free of charge.

The ranch continues to exist because of the generosity of others. With thirty resident horses and a paid staff, Crystal Peaks maintains its ability to reach out to horses, children, and families in need because of those who believe in our program and do what they can to support it.

One method of provision for Crystal Peaks is our long-term volunteer program, ranging from two to eight months. Working with our volunteers for an extended time gives us the opportunity to know their hearts. How they respond to others during times of physical and emotional stress is of particular significance. When the need arises to hire someone new, we look first to this group of volunteers.

Laurie Sacher came to our ranch through the volunteer program and is now a member of our staff. Her desire to give, to make a difference here in this place, compelled her to travel north from her home in the foothills of Northern California. Equipped with a minimal knowledge of horses and a wish to work with kids, Laurie came to Crystal Peaks with a heart eager to serve.

This book tells the story of Laurie and a dog, with some unlikely rescues along the way. I hope you enjoy the journey, my friend.

God Bless,

K

Kim Meeder

Prologue



The Sound of Trust

It was seventeen degrees. Earth, snow, and sky converged into a milky emissary, whispering a timeless message of hushed peace. It was January in Central Oregon, and a glorious ice fog had coated every blade and branch with a one-inch layer of spiny rime. The frozen filigree embellished everything with its delicate crystal creations. Muted light shrouded all living things, now held captive in the icy embrace. The silent landscape murmured the promise of deep, abiding rest.

For me that rest would have to wait. I turned my truck off the dirt road that stretches north of Tumalo Reservoir and parked in the snow. From this access point, a wide wilderness invites adventurers to explore its latticed tangle of forgotten logging roads. I stowed my keys in a zippered pocket in my black

running jacket and pulled on a pair of stretchy gloves. Soon my friend would meet me here for a long Sunday afternoon jog. Laurie and I were training for a marathon, her first and my tenth.

From the cab of my truck, I reveled in the peaceful setting. Weary from a heavy week of work, my heart welcomed the refuge of quiet. The small hiatus of silence soon was invaded, however, by the growing excitement of my dog, a Queensland Blue Heeler. She whined in anticipation, willing me to open the truck door to one of her favorite activities: a run in the snow with her mom.

Like all true ranchers, I never go anywhere without my faithful dog. Seven, or Sevi for short, is my third hand and foot and the thinking half of my brain. I'm sure she would finish my sentences if she could talk—and do a much better job of it! Dogs that live with us—really live with us—often know their human friends better than we know ourselves.

*Dogs that live with us—
really live with us—often
know their human friends
better than we
know ourselves.*



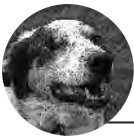
The comfort of my truck's heater subsided, and brittle barbs of frigid air prickled through the glass. I snuggled my hat down over my ears and zipped up my jacket under my chin.

When I stepped out of the truck, cold air engulfed me like an unseen wave. With my first quick breaths, I inhaled what felt like a million needles of ice. The assault on my throat and lungs drove me to hoist my collar even higher to cover my mouth.

While waiting for Laurie, I followed my prerun regimen, gearing up to spend a few hours in significant cold. I alternated jogging in place with pogo jumps to remain loose and warm. Sevi jumped around me in ecstatic leaps. Her chorus of happy yips beckoned me, as if to say, “Hurry up! We have a wonderful world to explore!”

In matters of life, dogs just get it. Sevi has taught me volumes more than I could ever hope to teach her. When it comes to demonstrating qualities like respect, forgiveness, and obedi-

*Few creatures know
how to maximize the
moment better
than a dog.*



ence and expressing emotions like love, joy, and peace, my dog operates on a level I can only hope to attain. Few creatures know how to maximize the moment better than a dog.

Sevi's example constantly reminds me that ten minutes ago is already in the past, so why think about the future when right now is just so much fun? Her exuberance for life shows me how to really enjoy the rich and simple pleasures found within each moment of my days.

Sevi and I persisted in our frigid dance until Laurie arrived. Her white car was almost invisible against the pallid backdrop of the wintry High Desert. After a quick hug, Laurie and I agreed on our time frame and what trail to explore. The breath from our brief conversation froze into thin veils, drifting above us like drowsy angels. Not wishing to stiffen in the deep cold, Laurie retrieved her dog, Mia, and the four of us set off.

Sevi and Mia collided in a jubilant canine hug and then bounded up the trail ahead of Laurie and me. Our once relaxed breath now rose behind us in measured white puffs. Shoulder to shoulder, like twin steam engines, we chugged over a crunchy mantle of frozen snow. Every stride took us deeper into a pristine realm of winter wilderness.

One metered breath at a time, our voices soon merged with the serene environment. Like a smooth stone skipping across a mirrored pond, our dialogue bounced from one subject to another. After several miles, I noticed something else between Laurie's words. Because the rhythm of her voice had maintained a steady flow, I hadn't been aware of it earlier. It wasn't until Mia missed the turnoff onto a narrow, frozen logging road that I heard it—Laurie's voice calling her straying dog back to her side.

All during our run Laurie had been guiding Mia with voice commands that barely punctuated our conversation. Laurie

achieves this weaving of dialogue and instruction with such intrinsic skill I had all but forgotten that she does it for one reason: Mia is almost completely blind.

It wasn't until Mia bolted in the opposite direction that Laurie finally stopped and backtracked, calling out to her wayward friend. Unsure of how to help, I watched as Mia crashed through the frozen brush. She clambered over logs and tripped in a dense tangle of underbrush. Finally, overwhelmed by an icy prison she couldn't see, Mia stopped. A tinge of concern crept into my heart as Mia began to move again, turning in tight circles. She swung her head back and forth in an effort to locate her master. Laurie waded into the wintry snarl and broke through to where Mia was trapped. With gentle hands, Laurie turned her blind dog back in the direction of the correct path, and together they started out again.

I could hear Laurie's low voice guiding her courageous dog. "Easy, easy...step up, that's it. Here...here. Good girl." In unison they crunched up the trail toward me.

Laurie and I often run together, but I still admired their interaction as they trotted up to rejoin Sevi and me. Laurie resumed our run and conversation as if nothing more than a comma had passed between us since our last words.

Mia fell in right behind us, following the sound of our feet drumming over the frozen layer of earth and snow. I doubted

that any onlooker would have been able to detect that Mia is blind. By tucking in at Laurie's heels, Mia relaxed behind a shield of protection she could sense but not see.

As long as Mia stayed close enough to hear Laurie's muted commands—and obeyed them—she was able to navigate an unknown world. Yet the moment Mia stopped listening to her master and chose instead to wander, everything changed. Once Mia was separated from Laurie, her world quickly compressed into a dangerous and lonely place.

Mia was following the sound of her master's footsteps. Her previous experiences had taught her that this was a sound she could trust. A sound that kept her safe.

I smiled at Laurie and pointed a gloved thumb over my shoulder at her dog.

The moment Mia stopped listening to her master and chose instead to wander, everything changed.



My words were measured out between breaths. “What faith... to follow a master...you cannot see.”

1

The Rescue

When Laurie arrived at the ranch, one of my first impressions of her was that she was tall—taller than me. Barefoot, I stand at five feet nine inches; in work boots I'm closer to six feet. Although I admire and respect many of my female peers, it isn't that common for me to literally look up at them. Nonetheless, before me stood a young woman of athletic stature crowned by sandy hair. Her sapphire eyes were framed by long, dusky lashes that neither needed nor were adorned with mascara. I would later come to know what lay beneath her exterior—a heart full of struggle, compassion, and sensitivity.

Laurie's summer season as a volunteer at Crystal Peaks ended with a new beginning. She was hired on as a permanent

part of our family, our staff. Like everyone else, she wrestled with her intrinsic weaknesses, but she also had kindness, tenacity, and a great capacity to try. One year linked arms with another, each drawing our lives together more closely than the last. The tall, lovely girl that had breezed up my hill had also walked into my heart and turned into a friend.

Part of my job, and my joy, is spending one-on-one time with my staff members on the ranch. My intention for these meetings, while varying in its delivery, is to provide individual encouragement, challenge, and mentoring. Even though I'm thought to be the leader, I'm usually the one who emerges from those times of transparency feeling as if I've been mentored.

One of those transparent moments occurred when Laurie and I hiked around "the block." The block is an old dirt road that meanders in a lazy four-mile loop around our ranch. Rather than sitting in an office chair, I much prefer my real place of work, the great outdoors. Often it is while striding around in this fresh setting that lives are changed—including mine.

Laurie and I were heavily bundled, our knit caps pulled down low. Random snowflakes wandered down from the low gray sky. I waited for Laurie to lead the conversation, and she didn't disappoint.

"Well, you already know about the dog I rescued a while

back. For the last few months I've been giving you updates of what Mia and I are learning together. But I've never had the chance to really tell you how it all started and why this little dog means so much to me."

Her last words were wrapped in emotion.

Many voiceless steps trailed out in the velvety snow behind us. Laurie's silence spoke to me of her determination to contain her emotions. Finally, my friend's fragile resolve dissipated like the frozen breath that drifted over her shoulder. I heard a sob and turned to look at her.

Tears had gathered on her lower lashes and shimmered momentarily before sliding down her cheeks. I reached over and placed a gloved hand between Laurie's shoulders to bridge the small distance between us and peered into her glistening eyes. A single bare finger emerged from layers of long sleeves and gently pressed beneath her nose.

She took a deep breath. "When I rescued my dog, she was a discarded, homely mutt. I will never forget my first thought when I saw her: *She's a wretched creature... just like me.*"

Next, my friend poured out the story of how she had become the unlikely owner of a most unlikely dog.

No one could have foreseen then the significance of that day, least of all Laurie.



Her dog's rescue occurred on a blistering afternoon in late August. The day was devoid of the cooling breath that routinely moves across the High Desert. Scorching air hung still and silent, as if creation itself had given up hope and stopped breathing altogether. Even by Central Oregon standards, it was hot, miserably hot. The combination of searing heat and roadside sage produced an aroma so pungent that it could almost be tasted.

The stifling heat didn't deter Laurie. She was on her way, determined to prove to those around her that she was as kind and generous as anyone else who worked at the ranch. On this special day she was going to rescue an unwanted dog.

The week before, Laurie had learned through our ranch office of a rescue facility with a horse and several dogs in need of new homes.

She's a wretched creature...just like me.



This information was familiar to a rescue facility, but somehow this situation seemed different to Laurie in a way she couldn't define. Her residence wasn't conducive to rescuing a horse, but she could welcome a dog in need. Laurie wasn't able to shake off her persistent desire to help, and like her ranch co-workers, she decided to extend herself to a dog trapped in hardship.

One hopeful thought led to another. This could be the very thing that would lift her aching soul and carry her toward the shore of lasting contentment. Perpetually stalked by low self-esteem, Laurie clung with fresh hope to this adoption. She anticipated how this noble deed would help her feel better about herself. All she wanted was a hideaway, a reprieve from the relentless guilt of past poor decisions that continued to splinter her soul. Maybe this new horizon of selflessness would finally bring relief. Laurie's emotions soared with each thought, and she chose to soar with them.

Only days before, she learned the dog that was soon to be hers was an Australian Shepherd mix about nine years of age. Laurie imagined a beautiful tricolored Aussie with piercing blue eyes. Further indulging her daydream, the new owner pictured this cool dog as her new sidekick, joining her in every hike, jog, and horseback ride. Her knowledge that Aussies are energetic, intelligent, and social only added to the framework upon which Laurie was building her dream.

Laurie's expectations multiplied as she traveled the twisting road to where the dog awaited. She envisioned walking with her silky-coated dog through the trendy downtown streets of Bend, Oregon. Dogs and their owners are so welcome in this hip scene that many merchants provide watering bowls outdoors and dispense dog biscuits indoors. Laurie pictured her-

self with her stylish dog at her side and smiled in advance approval, knowing the two of them would fit right in.

With her hopes as high as the afternoon's temperature, Laurie turned her car into the dilapidated yard that matched the given address. In an instant she knew why the call regarding the animals residing here had come to the ranch. The family lived in an old mobile home that was in the obvious process of returning to the crumbling earth beneath it. Everything appeared to be dead: the trees, the grass, and all the scattered, rusting cars.

A lone horse stood motionless near the sagging barbed wire fence that encircled it. Laurie breathed a heavy sigh and reminded herself that the underweight gelding would be moved later in the day to the new adoptive home found for him by the ranch. Goats and chickens, dogs and children, dotted the ramshackle landscape. Laurie's heart ached for them all.

Laurie made her way up wobbly wooden stairs and knocked lightly on the door, triggering a barrage of barking from within. The door opened a few inches, and a stocky woman peeked out. After brief introductions, the owner ducked back inside and then returned, leading the dog Laurie had promised to adopt. Laurie's earlier excitement fell like a blazing meteor.

This dog doesn't look anything like the dog I had imagined!

The dog was almost completely white with a brown patch

over each eye and a single brown spot on her rump. Her coat was a dull, tangled mess. Despite the intense heat, the Aussie's underbelly, from chin to tail, was shrouded with a three-inch swath of stinking guard hair. The dog was so thin she looked to be half her normal body weight.

Laurie's heart recoiled.

What? You've got to be kidding me! This isn't the dog for me. She's not nice looking at all! There has to be some mistake; this can't be my dog! Why did I say yes to a dog I'd never seen? What was I thinking?

Suddenly Laurie felt too ashamed of her shallow motives to admit out loud that, based solely on how the dog looked, she didn't want to take her. Yet if she declined to take the dog after

*Why did I say yes
to a dog I'd never
seen?*



seeing her, everyone would know that her loving compassion was only a facade; she would be exposed as a fake. Laurie rubbed her hand across her mouth in an attempt to hide her deepening disappointment. She stifled a moan of frustration, all the while hating herself in the awkward moments of silence.

When the dog saw Laurie appraising her, she lowered her head and began to wag the entire back half of her body in a plea to be accepted. Laurie heard a strained “Hi, baby” drift off

her lips as she knelt down to greet the wiggling dog. The canine's breath greeted her first—it was horrible! She fought to keep from reeling backward. The owner stood nearby and watched. While the dog licked her entire face, Laurie struggled to control her gag reflex, and her expression matched that of a woman being slapped repeatedly in the head with a giant putrid slug. Laurie pulled away just in time to see the dog's rotten teeth smiling at her.

This just keeps getting better and better, she thought, jerking her nose away from the stench that puffed from the dog's mouth. Standing back up, Laurie could do little more than stare at this homely dog with the ugly coat, bad breath, and nasty teeth.

Attacked by a dual ambush, Laurie fought to suppress the negative emotions inside her heart and the negative thoughts inside her head.

Get a grip! Even though this isn't the dog I pictured—the dog I wanted—I want even more to do the right thing. This dog cannot stay here; she won't survive. I can take her home and help her stabilize by regaining the weight she has lost. If I must, I can find a suitable home for her then. I simply cannot leave her here—not now, not after seeing her plight. Today—right now—she needs my help. And I'm not leaving without her!

Laurie squared her shoulders and looked over at the owner. "I'll take her."

Her “yes” to the dog was also a “yes” to herself. She purposed to fulfill her promise and become a woman of her word. Within moments, Laurie retreated over the worn road that had led her to the tumble-down homestead. But she wasn’t alone on the return trip—a smelly, scraggly dog was now by her side.