

The Gentle Way

Enough Rope collection

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I was at the animal shelter over an hour that morning before I found the lamb. She was right out in plain sight in the middle of the barnyard, but the routine called for me to run through the inside chores before taking care of the outside animals. I arrived at the shelter around seven, so I had two hours to get things in shape before Will Haggerty arrived at nine to open up for business.

First on the list that morning was the oven. Will and I had had to put down a dog the night before, a rangy Doberman with an unbreakable vicious streak. The dog had come to us two months ago, less than a month after I started working there. He'd been a beloved family pet for a year and a half before almost taking an

arm off a seven-year-old neighbor boy. Two hours after that the Dobe was in a cage at the far end of the shelter. "Please try and find a good home for Rex," the owners begged us. "Maybe a farm, someplace where he has room to run."

Will had said all the right things and they left, smiling bravely. When they were gone Will sighed and went back to look at the dog and talk to him. He turned to me. "We could put a fifty-dollar adoption tag on him and move him out of here in a week, Eddie, but I won't do it. A farm—now this is just what your average farmer needs, isn't it? Good old Rex is a killer. He'd rip up cats and chickens. Give him room to run and he'd go after sheep and calves. No Dobe is worth a damn unless he's trained by an expert and the best experts won't get a hundred percent success. Train one right and he's still no family pet. He'll be a good guard dog, a good attack dog, but who wants to live with one of those? I know people who swear by them, but I never yet met a Dobe I could trust."

"So what happens now?"

"We tag the cage *Not For Adoption* and give the poor beast food and water. Maybe I'll turn up a trainer who wants to take a chance on him, but frankly I doubt it. Rex here is just too old and too mean. It's not teaching him new tricks but making him forget the ones he already knows, and that's a whole lot easier said than done."

Rex was the first animal we had to put away since I went to work for Will. There must have been a dozen people who walked past the cage and asked to adopt him. Some of them wanted to give him a try even after they heard why he wasn't available. We wouldn't let him go. Will worked with him a few times and only confirmed what he already knew. The dog was vicious, and his first taste of blood had finished him; but we kept him around for weeks even after we knew what we had to do.

We were standing in front of the Doberman's cage when Will dropped a big hand on my shoulder and shook his head sadly. "No sense putting it off anymore," he said. "That cage is no place for him and there's no other place he can go. Might as well get it over."

"You want me to help?"

"He's a big old boy and it'd be easier with two of us, but I'm not going to tell you to. God knows I got no stomach for it myself."

I said I'd stick around.

He got a pistol and loaded it with tranquilizer darts, then filled a hypodermic syringe with morphine. We walked back to Rex's cage and Will kept the pistol out of sight at his side until Rex was facing the other way. He raised the gun and fired quickly, planting two darts an inch apart in the big dog's shoulder. Rex dropped like a stone.

Will crawled into the cage and hunkered down next to him. He had the needle poised but hesitated. The tranquilizer darts would keep the dog unconscious for fifteen or twenty minutes. The morphine would kill. There were tears flowing down Will Haggerty's weathered face. I tried to look away but couldn't, and I watched him find a vein and fill the comatose dog with a lethal dose of morphine.

We put him in the wheelbarrow and took him inside. The other animals seemed restless, but that may have been my imagination. I had opened the lid of the incinerator while Will was preparing the morphine. The two of us got the dead dog

out of the wheelbarrow and into the big metal box. I closed the lid and Will threw the switch without hesitation. Then we turned away and walked into another room.

We had used the oven before. We would pick up dogs on the street, dogs run down in traffic. Or dogs would die at home and people would bring us their bodies for disposal. Twice in the time I'd been there we'd had auto victims who were alive when we found them but could not possibly be saved. Those had received morphine shots and gone into the incinerator, but that had been very different. Rex was a beautiful animal in splendid health and it went against the grain to kill him.

"I hate it," Will had told me. "There's nothing worse. I'll keep an animal forever if there's any chance of placing him. There are those in this business who burn half the dogs they get and sell the others to research labs. I never yet let one go for research and never will. And I never yet burned one that I had the slightest hope for."

I opened the oven and swept out a little pile of powdery white ash, unable to believe that nothing more remained of the Doberman. I was glad when the job was done and the oven closed. It was a relief to get busy with the routine work of feeding and watering the dogs and cats, cleaning cages, sweeping up.

Then I went out to the barnyard and found the dead lamb.

The shelter is in the middle of the city, a drab, gray, hopeless part of a generally hopeless town. The barnyard covers about a quarter of an acre girdled by eight feet of cyclone fencing. We keep farm animals there; chickens, ducks and geese, ponies and pigs and sheep. Some had been pets that outgrew their welcome. Others were injured animals we had patched up. Some of them came through cruelty cases we prosecuted, on the rare occasions when Will managed to get a court order divesting the owner of his charges. Supermarkets brought us their distressed produce as feed, and a farmer who owed Will a favor had sent over a load of hay a couple of weeks ago. The barnyard was open to the public during normal business hours, and kids from all over the city would come in and play with the animals.

In theory, the barnyard exists to generate goodwill for the shelter operation. The stray-dog contract with the city is a virtual guarantee of Will's operating expenses. I hadn't worked for him a week, however, before I knew that was just an excuse. He loved to walk among his animals, loved to slip a sugar cube to a pony, scratch a pig's back with a long stick, or just stand chewing a dead cigar and watching the ducks and geese.

The lamb had been born at the shelter shortly after I started working there. Ewes often need assistance at lambing time, and Will had delivered her while I stood around feeling nervous. We named the lamb Fluff, which was accurate if unimaginative, and she was predictably the hit of the barnyard. Everybody loved her—except for the person who killed her.

He had used a knife, and he had used it over and over again. The ground was littered with bloody patches of wool. I took one look and was violently ill, something that hadn't happened since the days of college beer parties. I stood there for what must have been a long time. Then I went inside and called Will.

"You'd better come down here," I said. "Somebody killed Fluff."

When he got here we put her in the oven and he threw the switch. We made coffee and sat in the office letting it get cold on the desk in front of us. It was past nine and time to open the front doors, but neither of us was in a hurry.

After a while he said, "Well, we haven't had one of these for six months. I suppose we were overdue."

"This has happened before?"

He looked at me. "I keep forgetting how young you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It may have sounded nastier than I meant it. I guess I'm feeling nasty, that's all. Yes, it's happened before, and it will happen again. Kids. They come over the fence and kill something."

"Why?"

"Because they want to. Because they'd like to kill a person but they're not ready for that yet, so they practice on an animal that never knew there was evil on earth. One time, two years ago, a batch of them killed fifteen chickens, the whole flock. Chopped their heads off. Left everything else alone, just killed the chickens. The police asked them why and they said it was fun watching them run around headless. *It was fun.*"

I didn't say anything.

"It's always kids, Eddie. Rotten kids from rotten homes. The police pick them up, but they're children, so they run them through juvenile court and it shakes up the kids and terrifies the parents. The kids are released in their parents' custody and maybe the parents pay a fine and the kids learn a lesson. They learn not to break into this particular barnyard and not to kill these particular animals." He took the cellophane from a cigar and rolled it between his palms. "Some of the time I don't call the police. There's a gentler way to go about it and it works better in the long run. I'd rather do it that way this time, but I'd need your help."

"How do you mean?"

"Catch him ourselves." He took his time lighting the cigar. "They always try it again. We can stake out the place as easily as the cops can, and when we take him we can operate more flexibly than they can. There's a method I've worked out. It lets them understand our operation, gives them a better perspective."

"I think I understand."

"But it means staying up all night for the next night or two, so it's a question of whether you want to give up the time."

"Sure."

"Won't be more than two nights, I would say. He'll be back."

"How do you know there's just one of them?"

"Because there was only one dead animal, son. If you got two there's going to be a minimum of two dead animals. Everybody has to have a turn. It always seems to work that way, anyhow."

We staked out the place that night and the night after. We took turns sleeping during daylight hours, and we were both planted behind cover in the barnyard all through the dark hours. The killer stayed away two nights running. We decided to give it three more tries, but one was all we needed.

Around one in the morning of the third night we heard someone at the fence. I could just make out a shape in the darkness. He would climb halfway up the

fence, then hesitate and drop back to the ground. He seemed to be trying to get up the courage to climb all the way over.

I had a tranquilizer dart pistol and I was dying to try dropping him then and there while he was outlined against the fence. I was afraid he would sense our presence and be warned off, but I forced myself to wait. Finally he climbed all the way up, poised there on the balls of his tennis shoes, and jumped toward us.

We had our flashlights on him before he hit the ground, big five-cell jobs that threw a blinding beam.

"Hold it right there," Will boomed out, striding toward him. He had a dart pistol in his right hand and was holding it out in front of the flashlight so that the boy could see it. All it could shoot were the trunk darts, but you couldn't tell that by looking at it.

Either the kid panicked or he figured nobody would shoot him for climbing a barnyard fence. He was quick as a snake. He got three-quarters of the way up the fence when Will put a dart into his shoulder, and he hit the ground the way Rex had hit the floor of his cage.

Will hoisted him easily onto his shoulder and toted him into the office. We turned on a desk lamp and propped the kid in a chair. He was about thirteen or fourteen, skinny, with a mop of lifeless black hair. In the pockets of his jeans we found three clasp knives and a switchblade, and on his belt he had a hunting knife in a sheath. There were stains in the hunting knife's blood groove, and in one of the clasp knives we found bits of bloody wool.

"Just follow my play, Eddie," Will told me. "There's a technique I worked out and you'll see how it goes."

We keep milk in a little fridge, mostly for the cats and puppies. Will poured out a glass of it and put it on the desk. The kid opened his eyes after about twelve minutes. His face was deadly pale and his blue eyes burned in the white face.

Will said, "How you feeling? Never run, son, when someone holds a gun on you. There's milk in front of you. You look a little peaked and it'll do you good."

"I don't want any milk."

"Well, it's there if you change your mind. I guess you wanted to have a look at our animals. Just your hard luck you picked tonight." He reached over and ruffled the boy's hair affectionately. "See, there was a gang of troublemakers here a few nights ago. We know who they are, we had trouble with them before. They hang out in Sayreville over to the north. They broke in the other night and killed a poor little lamb."

I was watching the kid's face. His mind wasn't all that quick and it dawned on him rather slowly that we didn't know he was Fluff's killer.

"But it's one thing to know who they are and another thing to prove it," Will went on. "So we thought we'd try catching them in the act. You just happened to drop in at the wrong time. I thought you were too young to be one of them, but when you started to bolt I couldn't take chances. That was a tranquilizer dart, by the way. We use it on animals that are impossible to control."

Like the kid himself, I thought, but Will was talking to him now in the gentle voice he uses on high-strung dogs and spooked ponies, showing him the pistol and the darts and explaining how they work.

"I guess those punks won't be here tonight after all," Will said. "You wouldn't believe what they did to a poor innocent creature. Well, they'll be back sooner or later, and when they do return we'll get them."

"What will happen to them then?" the kid asked.

"A whole lot more than they counted on, son. First off the cops will take them in the back room and pound hell out of them—kill a cop or an animal in this town and the police tend to throw the book away—but those kids won't have a mark on them. Then they'll sit in jail until their case comes up, and then they'll be in a reformatory for a minimum of three years. And I wouldn't want to tell you what happens to them in reform school. Let's just say it won't be a Sunday school picnic and let it go at that."

"Well, I guess they deserve it," the kid said.

"You bet they do."

"Anybody who'd do a thing like that," the kid added.

Will heaved a sigh. "Well, now that you're here, son, maybe we can make it up to you for scaring you like that. How about a guided tour of the place? Give you some kind of an idea of the operation we're running here."

I don't know whether the kid was enthusiastic about the idea or whether he just had the sense to give that impression. Either way, he tagged along as we led him all through the place, inside and out. We showed him around the barnyard, pointed out Fluff's mother, talked about how Fluff had been born. We showed him the dog and cat cages and the small animal section with mice and hamsters and gerbils. He was full of questions and Will gave him detailed answers.

It wasn't hard to see what Will was doing. First, we were making it obvious that we knew a decent kid like him couldn't possibly be an animal killer. We let him know that we suspected somebody else for the act and that he was home free. We reinforced things by telling him his act would have earned him precisely the sort of treatment it *should* have earned him—a good beating and a stiff sentence. Then, while all that soaked in, we made him feel a part of the animal shelter instead of an enemy.

It looked good, but I had my doubts. The kid was having too much fun making the most of the situation. He was going to go home convinced we were a couple of damn fools who couldn't recognize a villain when he almost literally fell into our laps. Still, I didn't see how we could get worse results than the police got by following the book—and Will had done this before, so I wasn't going to give him an argument.

"And this here is the incinerator," Will said finally.

"For garbage?"

"Used to be. But there's an ordinance against burning garbage within city limits, on account of the air pollution. What we use it for is disposal of dead animals." He hung his head. "Poor little Fluff went in here. All that was left of her was enough ashes to fill an envelope—a small one at that."

The kid was impressed. "How long does it take?"

"No time at all. She heats up to something like three thousand degrees Fahrenheit and nothing lasts long at that temperature." Will unhooked the cover, raised it up. "You're just about tall enough to see in there. Enough room for two or three big dogs at a time."

"I'll say."

"You could pretty near fit a pony in there."

"You sure could," the kid said. He thought for a moment, still staring down into the oven. "What would happen if you put an animal in there while it was still alive?"

"Now there's an interesting question," Will allowed. "Of course I would never do that to an animal."

"Of course not."

"Because it would be cruel."

"Sure, but I was just wondering."

"But a dirty little lamb-killing brat like you," he said, talking and moving at the same time, gripping the boy by the scruff of the neck and the seat of the pants and heaving him in one motion into the incinerator, "a brat like you is another story entirely."

The lid was closing before the kid even thought to scream. When it slammed shut and Will hooked the catch, you could barely hear the boy's voice. You could tell that he was yelling in terror, and there were also sounds of him kicking at the walls. Of course the big metal box didn't budge an inch.

"If that isn't brilliant," I said.

"I was wondering if you knew what I was leading up to."

"I didn't. I followed the psychology but didn't think it would really work. But this is just perfect."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Just perfect. Why, after the scare he's getting right now, he'll never want to look at another animal."

"The scare?" Will's face had a look on it I had never seen before. "You think all this is to scare him?"

He reached over and threw the switch.

