

Chapter IV - The Choice

Chapter IV - The Choice opens at the height of Link Ferris's transformation, where once-barren land now blooms with prosperity and promise. This growth wasn't achieved through shortcuts or easy breaks—it came from tireless work, relentless faith, and the constant companionship of his dog, Chum. Together, man and animal endured long seasons of struggle, pushing against loneliness and uncertainty, forming a bond deeper than most friendships. Now, with new fences, thriving crops, and money in the bank, Link finally has time to consider something he'd nearly forgotten—love. Dorcas Chatham enters his life like spring after a bitter winter. Her gentle wit and refined manner stir feelings Link thought were buried for good, and soon the quiet comfort of their time together fills a different void. Yet, shadows linger—ones shaped not by economics, but by memory and fear.

Dorcas, graceful and kind in most matters, carries a deep aversion that cuts to the heart of Link's new life. A childhood attack by a stray left her with a lasting fear of dogs, one that surfaces each time Chum bounds toward her with innocent affection. Where Link sees loyalty, Dorcas sees threat. Her growing discomfort with Chum shifts the tone of their romance, introducing conditions that slowly chip away at their harmony. Dorcas doesn't give ultimatums with cruelty, but with a sadness that makes the request feel heavier: choose me, or him. Link finds himself silenced by this impossible question. How does one weigh devotion born in hardship against the hope of love that promises a new beginning? His heart becomes a battleground, and neither side feels like victory.

In Chum's eyes, nothing has changed. The collie remains vigilant, affectionate, and eager to please. But Link's silence is noticed, and the warmth in their bond is chilled by indecision. Each time Link hesitates when Dorcas visits, each awkward apology or hastily tied leash adds tension where trust once lived. It is not cruelty but confusion

that unsettles Chum. He waits loyally by the porch, unaware that his very presence threatens the only other bond Link has allowed himself to form in years. Dorcas, too, wrestles with guilt. She does not want to destroy something pure. Still, her fear builds a wall between them—a wall no affection can scale while the dog remains.

It is Olive, Dorcas's younger sister, who changes everything. In a moment that echoes the fragility of life and the clarity born of crisis, she runs into the road chasing her ball. Link, paralyzed by the suddenness, is too far away. But Chum moves without hesitation, lunging into harm's path to shove the child to safety. The screech of tires silences the air. The silence that follows is louder than any cry, filled with dread. Dorcas rushes forward, panic stripping away her fear. In Chum's still body, she sees more than a dog. She sees loyalty, sacrifice, and the painful truth that love is not something we shape to fit our fears—it's something that meets us where we are, and sometimes saves us in the process.

Chum survives, though barely. The vet says he has spirit, and that might be what saves him. Dorcas visits with tears in her eyes, not just for her sister's safety, but for the shame of nearly asking Link to turn away from someone who loved him unconditionally. In the quiet hours beside Chum's resting body, she realizes love isn't about control. It's about making room—sometimes for people, sometimes for dogs, always for truth. She reaches for Link's hand, her voice soft but sure. "I was wrong," she whispers. "He's family."

Their future now holds more than two people trying to build a life. It includes Chum, not as a compromise, but as a cornerstone. The home they imagine together is shaped not by fear, but by grace—one that embraces past hardship, present courage, and the humility to learn from both. Link no longer has to choose. That burden lifts, replaced by something far richer: acceptance. And in that quiet realization, love takes root—not the kind that demands, but the kind that understands.