



# the hike

*a prequel to* The Changing Season *by*

steven manchester

*The Hike*  
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Billy Baker opened his eyes and lay in bed for a few moments—quietly. The heavy blanket he'd secured over the room's only window made it so dark he couldn't tell whether it was one o'clock in the morning or the afternoon. He rolled slightly to his left and bumped into Jimmy, his lifelong best friend. "I have to pee," he told the family mutt. "Do you?"

The hulking shadow rose from his prone position and yawned, stretching out his hind legs in the process.

Billy swung his feet onto the pile of clothes lying on the floor and carefully started for the door. He heard Jimmy jump off the bed with an elderly grunt and follow him. As Billy opened the door, the blinding sunlight nearly yanked him to his knees. Shielding his eyes with his forearm, he staggered for the stairs. "It's daytime," he told Jimmy.

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Letting Jimmy relieve himself first—the old dog hobbling out the kitchen door to the back yard—Billy filled his friend's water bowl before

transferring two giant scoops of kibble from a fifty pound bag into a blue plastic bowl, the name *Jimmy* nearly faded off.

Within minutes, Jimmy had completed his business and was back in the kitchen, limping over to his breakfast. He looked up at Billy, as if to ask permission.

“Go ahead,” Billy told him, “I can wait to go.” He laughed. “It’s not like you won’t be done in a minute anyway.”

The dog did just as he was told, tearing through his crunchy meal like he hadn’t been fed in weeks. Billy laughed again, watching as the big oaf devoured everything but his own paws.

Jimmy was a black mutt with dirty white socks on his front legs and paws—the same discolored fur running from his forehead to his black, wet nose. He was an old timer now, his once raven coat streaked silver and dusted white around his wise brown eyes and distinguished chin. Due to his advanced years and the aches and pains that went with it, he walked with a limp, favoring his right side. Occasionally, one of his hind legs would even fold up, like a kick stand, allowing him to travel on three legs. His girth didn’t help with his physical struggles; all these years later, Jimmy’s appetite was the one thing that showed no signs of failing him. But whether the sun was shining or it was raining hard—the dark clouds threatening the world with doom and gloom—Jimmy’s thick tail never stopped wagging. He was the ultimate

optimist, his good-tempered disposition serving him well for better than a dozen years.

It was no different today. After finishing off his breakfast with a few loud laps at his water bowl—sloshing the backwash all over the dull linoleum floor—Jimmy’s flailing tail betrayed his happy mood.

“Mom’s going to kill you,” Billy told the dog, but he was too tired to grab a paper towel and clean up after his friend. Instead, he grabbed a Pop Tart from the snack drawer and the half empty bottle of Mountain Dew that sat on the cluttered counter and headed back upstairs.

On their way, Billy spotted his father out in the front yard, doing some yard work. “Shhhh,” he told Jimmy, tiptoeing up the stairs. “If he knows we’re up and about, he’ll make us help him, for sure.”

The pair headed straight for the bathroom, where Billy relieved himself before brushing his straight white teeth.

Leaning in toward the mirror, he stared hard, taking an inventory of the tall, lanky teenager that stood before him. At seventeen years old, he was still a few years away from filling out his wiry frame. He had his father’s brown hair—kept just a bit longer than a buzz cut—with matching eyes that resembled Jimmy’s more than anyone else’s in the family. After years of battling with acne and all the scars that went with it—both internally and externally—he was trying to grow a goatee but wasn’t having much luck. No matter how many times he checked in at the mirror, his baby face

was still proving to be as fertile as a barren desert, with no real signs of vegetation. "Let's go back to bed," he told Jimmy, shaking his disappointed head. "I'm still tired."



It could have been minutes or hours later—Billy couldn't tell in his thick mental haze—when his bedroom door flew open.

Startled, Jimmy sat up quickly, wincing in pain as he did.

Billy's tall father stood in the doorway, taking up most of it. "I'm heading out on the road for another cross-country haul," he said before taking a small step into the room and stopping.

Billy began massaging Jimmy's arthritic hind legs.

With one quick scan, the big man in the doorway shook his disgusted head. "How can you even make it to that bed with all this crap on the floor?" he asked.

"I'm a good climber," Billy said, still rubbing Jimmy's hind quarter.

The man nodded. "Any chance you might be able to put that skill to work for a paycheck?" he asked.

"I know, Dad," Billy said, "I need to find a summer job; I get it."

His dad shrugged. "You don't need to do anything, Billy. As far as I'm concerned, you can spend the rest of your life wallowing away in this pig sty.

But if you want to go to college and make some kind of life for yourself..."

"I know, Dad," Billy interrupted. "Maybe the telephone company will hire me this summer to climb poles and check loose wires or something?" he suggested, grinning.

"Don't be a smart alec," his dad said.

Billy laughed. "I'm just kidding."

The big man nodded. "Like I said, I'm heading out for a few days, so look after your mom and sister for me, okay?"

"Will do," Billy promised, both of them knowing full well that he couldn't even look after himself, never mind anyone else.

"Love you," his dad said before stepping out of the room.

"Love you too," Billy said, suddenly feeling bad that he hadn't volunteered to help the weary-looking man in the yard. As the door closed, Billy sprung up to begin his search for one of his video game controllers.

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Between games, Billy checked his cell phone: "Still no call from Charlie," he told Jimmy, shaking his head. Charlie had been Billy's second best friend since their first day in elementary school. "He's too busy spending time with Bianca to come around and hang out with us like he used to," Billy told the mutt. "She must be giving him something we

can't," Billy added, smiling wide. "Any idea what it might be, boy?"

Jimmy's tail swung from side-to-side, his breathing becoming quick and excited.

Billy laughed, running his hand across the nape of the dog's thick neck. "So you still remember, huh?" he said, returning to the paused video game.

As he started in on a third round of hunting armed aliens, Billy spotted a few college catalogs sitting alongside the video game console. *College*, he thought, the heavy weight of stress replacing his state of numbness, *I wish I never had to think about it again*. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind and return his full attention to killing the grotesque beings on the screen. It was no use. *But I have to think about college and make some pretty big decisions I'm not ready to make*. He glanced over at Jimmy, "You know I've been kind of worried about what college major I should lock into, right?"

The dog sighed heavily, as if to say, *Here we go again*.

"I was thinking I need to find a career where I can work from home..." Billy said, his eyes still hypnotized on the game, "...in my underwear."

Jimmy yawned, his attentive eyes turning to slits.

"You're right, Jimmy," Billy said, "there probably aren't too many jobs out there where I could sleep half the day away, right?"

Jimmy yawned again, stretching out his front legs.

"It's not like I can become a lazy dog," Billy teased, stealing a sideways glance at the dog.

Jimmy's eyes flew open, like he understood the verbal jab.

Laughing, Billy threw the video game controller down and lay beside the mutt. Closing his own eyes, he scratched Jimmy's belly until hearing the dog snore.

Flipping onto his back, Billy interlocked his fingers behind his head and thought about his upcoming high school graduation. *The clock's ticking way too fast*, he thought. *Maybe Jimmy and I should head out today and go somewhere?*

Jimmy stirred on the bed, getting up and turning a few times until he found a new spot to relax.

"What do you think about getting out of the house for a few hours?" Billy asked the dog. "We could head over to that hiking trail you love. It looks nice enough out to take a little walk through the woods and we could..."

Jimmy was already up on his haunches, his wagging tail signaling that he was ready to go.

"All right then," Billy said, scratching the mutt's neck. "You're the boss." Swinging his feet back on the clothes pile, he began scanning the bedroom floor for something semi-clean to wear.

~

On their way out the door, Billy's cell phone rang. He looked down at the caller ID. "It's Mark," he told Jimmy and answered it.

"I'm surprised you answered," Mark teased. "I didn't think you'd be up this late in the day."

"I'm taking Jimmy for a short hike," Billy said, ignoring the comment. "Do you want to tag along?"

"Not a chance," Mark said, "that sounds too much like exercise to me. I can meet you at Nick's Pizza for a bite after you guys are done, though. There's always a chance your mom will treat us to a free meal."

"True," Billy said. "Wait...wait, hold on a minute." He looked down at Jimmy and smiled, leaving Mark to hang on for a few moments. "Hey, Jimmy says he'd really appreciate it if you would come for that walk with us."

"Still no chance," Mark said, chuckling. "You tell Jimmy that I'll have to take a rain check."

As he ended the call, Billy opened the beat-up Honda's passenger side door for Jimmy and gave him a little boost to get in. "It looks like Mark's even lazier than we are," he said, grunting while helping the elderly canine. "It's just you and me today, buddy." He closed the door. *Which is just fine by me*, he thought.

Billy turned the ignition and the Honda roared to life. It was a clunker, its fenders rotted from too many winters of road salt eating away at them. It was tough to decide which was dirtier; the interior or the exterior. Snack wrappers and empty Mountain Dew bottles littered the filthy carpeted floor. A faded air freshener—long past its usefulness—hung from the floor shifter. Billy threw the car into drive and stomped on the gas.

Jimmy turned a few times in the cramped confines of the passenger seat before rolling himself into a ball and closing his eyes.

As they started up the road, Billy spotted one of the college brochures wedged between the dusty dashboard and the smudged windshield. His stomach flopped sideways. *There's no escaping it*, he realized. *Wherever I turn, I'm reminded that the party's almost over*. Well aware that he'd lived a safe, easy, and predictable life thus far, he felt the fear of the unknown really starting to tighten its grip on him. "You know, the more I worry about college and the future," he told the mutt, "the more I wish I was you. You've got it made, buddy...not a worry in the world."

Jimmy yawned.

"You've been taken care of your whole life, but not me. After high school graduation, my free ride's coming to an end." He looked sideways at Jimmy. "And if I'm being honest, I'm as scared as hell. I don't have a clue what my future holds and, the more I wrack my brain over it, the less sure I am about anything."

As Billy confided in Jimmy about his fears of the future, the dog tried valiantly to pay attention—but his flickering eyelids struggled to stay open.

They passed a construction crew on the side of the road. "I could always skip college and work construction," Billy suggested.

Jimmy yawned again.

Billy shook his head. "Nah, I don't think manual labor's my thing."

A few miles down the road, they pulled alongside a large brown panel truck. "From what I hear, delivery men make pretty good money...if you're in the union."

Jimmy began snoring.

Billy laughed. "I know, buddy," he said, scratching the scruff of the mutt's neck, "it's my problem, not yours. I get it."

As the Honda sputtered into the hiking trail parking lot, Billy gave Jimmy a gentle shove on the shoulder. "We're here, Jimmy," he said.

The dog opened his eyes and sat up—slowly.

"Are you sure you're up for this, old man?" he asked the dog, concerned.

Jimmy stretched out and shuddered, his body quivering from his head to his tail. With one last yawn, he pawed at the passenger door to be let out.

"Okay," Billy said and walked around the car to free him.

With a new bounce in his step, Jimmy took off for the trail on all four legs.

"As long as you're sure," Billy said, laughing. He hurried after the mutt into the mouth of the dense New England forest. "But let's take it slow, okay?" Billy called out.

As if playing with Billy, Jimmy slowed to a crawl.

"Not that slow," Billy said, catching up to him.

Jimmy took off again, his tongue and tail keeping perfect beat to his brisk gait.



It had been a long winter, the first few snowfalls covering the world in a fresh blanket of white. But it wasn't long before the novelty had worn off, the mountains of snow turning black from one form of pollution or another. As Billy and Jimmy stepped deeper into the forest, the thawed ground reeked of decay. Everything was still wet—the trees, the ground. The air, however, felt fresh in the lungs. The leaves underfoot didn't crunch but squished. Although they couldn't see their breath, the temperature should have felt cold. But Billy's hooded sweatshirt and Jimmy's thick black coat was enough to keep them both comfortable.

The trees were beginning to bud, many of them reclaiming their green outerwear. A squirrel scurried down the trunk of a birch tree, darted out in front of them, and then scampered up a neighboring oak. "It looks like someone's going home for lunch," Billy joked.

Disinterested, Jimmy plodded on ahead.

As they walked, Billy monitored his four-legged friend. *Jimmy's doing really good*, he thought. As the silence of the forest enveloped them, Billy began confiding in Jimmy about how scary it was to be graduating from high school—his childhood—and having to attend college. "I know I have to

go away," he said, "I've accepted that. But it's not knowing what I'm supposed to be going away for that makes me feel completely lost, you know?" He looked down at the panting dog. "I mean, at this point in my life, how am I supposed to know..."

Two chipmunks jumped into the trail, zigzagging in play. Going silent, Billy looked down at Jimmy, expecting his friend to take chase. The mutt never flinched. "Wow, buddy," he teased, "not so long ago, you would have chased after those bite-sized nuggets until you collapsed."

Jimmy forged on, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.

By now, they were deep into the thick woods. They had just reached the crest of a small rise when a conversation reached them on the wind. Billy could tell it was two people talking, but their voices were distant and their words indecipherable. Jimmy looked up at Billy. "We're not alone," Billy told him, not knowing whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Patting the dog's warm head, Billy realized how much he enjoyed spending time by himself with his best friend.

Fifteen minutes later, Billy could feel the start of a burn in his leg muscles. *I am so out of shape*, he thought. Looking down at his phone, he checked for a voicemail or text from Charlie. *Still nothing*, he thought, and then realized he had no cell service. "Maybe we are alone," Billy told the mutt, whose breathing now sounded like a locomotive chugging along at full steam.

“We need to take a break,” Billy said.

The dog marched on.

“Jimmy,” Billy called out, “stop!”

The mutt put on the brakes.

Billy pulled a bottle of spring water out of his cargo pocket and took a sip. He then helped Jimmy lap up nearly half the bottle. “Go slow,” Billy told him, controlling the pour, “I only brought two bottles, so we can’t waste any.”

After a short break, Billy decided they should move on. “We don’t want to start cramping up already,” he said.

They walked on, enjoying both the scenery and serenity. Billy rambled on about his concerns for the future, while Jimmy appeared to listen—before jumping out ahead and taking the lead. They were maybe five minutes from their water break when Jimmy suddenly slowed his pace.

“It’s okay if you want to take another break, Jimmy,” Billy called out to him, grabbing for the water bottle on the side of his leg. “To be honest, I could use another little rest myself. My legs are really starting to...”

Jimmy was dragging his hind legs now; they appeared to go stiff on him, causing the mutt to struggle in keeping his coordination. Billy picked up his pace. By now, Jimmy was staggering like a drunk heading home from the bar.

“Stop, boy,” Billy called out to him, hurrying to his side. Billy quickly took a knee and looked

into Jimmy's eyes—to find they were glassed over, dazed, and confused.

"What is it?" Billy asked, as he placed the water bottle to his friend's mouth.

But Jimmy shook off the drink. He began suffering from some kind of physical attack. He took a few long breaths, looked at Billy once, and then collapsed onto the rugged trail.

From his wet knees, a bolt of panic ripped through Billy's body. "What is it, boy?" he asked, sounding like he was a scared seven-year old.

Jimmy wheezed.

"Help!" Billy screamed. "Somebody help us!"

Other than the wind whistling through the trees, there was no reply.

His heart thumping out of his chest now, Billy looked around. *We're alone*, he remembered, feeling another wave of anxiety roll over him, making him gag. He took off his hooded sweatshirt and slid it between Jimmy and the damp earth. *What do I do?* he wondered, rubbing Jimmy's heaving torso. "It's okay, buddy," he told the dog. "I'm going to get you out of here." But these were shallow words, inspired by fear, and he knew it.

Jimmy tried to lift his head but couldn't. Instead, the dog's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he passed out.

*Oh, my God*, Billy thought, completely freaked out. He'd never had to react to a crisis; his mom and dad had always taken care of emergencies. *They've taken care of everything*, he thought, his

extremities now tingling from the adrenaline that coursed through his veins. *And if Mark had come with us...*

“Help!!!” he screamed out again. He listened. There was no reply. *Oh no*, he thought, *please God, what do I do?* He stroked Jimmy’s chest again, discovering that the dog’s heart rate had significantly slowed. Billy didn’t know if this was a good sign or not. Either way, the terror it caused hit him square on the chin with a right cross. *Call someone*, a voice yelled in his head. He fumbled to get his cell phone out of his pocket, his hands trembling worse than the leaves above. *There’s no service*, he thought, recalling that they’d lost all connection to the real world quite a ways back on the trail. *Oh no*, he thought again. *We’re in real trouble here.* He looked down at Jimmy, who was lying still. “I don’t want to leave you here alone, Jimmy,” he told the mutt, the first few tears threatening to break past the dam, “but I don’t think I have a choice. If we stay here and wait for help, you might...” He stopped, trying to collect himself. “I need to run back and call for help. That’s our only option.”

Jimmy was still non-responsive.

Billy gagged again, trying not to vomit. He bent down and kissed the dog’s head. “Just hang in there, buddy. I’ll be right back. I promise.” The last two words sounded like one of Jimmy’s old squeak toys.

Billy stood, turned, and took off running—sprinting as fast as his legs and lungs would take

him. *Jimmy needs help*, he repeated in his head. *He needs help bad*. It was as though he was trying to inspire his legs to move even faster. Over broken stumps and roots that ran along the trail like snakes waiting in ambush, he ran and ran—stumbling and staggering and tripping, but moving forward all the while. While his heart pumped faster than his feet—a combination of his fears and the extreme exercise his body refused to recognize—he gasped for every breath. Each time he stopped to check for a cell phone signal and found he was still out of range, he sprinted faster—both his legs and lungs burning for more oxygen. As he made it to the top of a rise in the trail, he pulled out his cell phone again. *I have a signal*, he told himself. It was weak, but there was still a chance he could make the call. *Please God*, he thought. *Please...* He dialed 911.

Two rings later, a female voice answered. “911, what is the nature of your emergency?” she asked.

“My...my dog just collapsed on a hiking trail a couple miles into the woods and we need an ambulance. I’m not sure what our exact...”

“Your dog?” the woman asked, cutting him off.

“Yes. He’s a mutt and he’s old and I have no idea what’s wrong with him. We were out walking and he just collapsed without warning. I think he might...”

“Sir, I’m sorry but there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“Excuse me?” Billy asked, unsure whether he’d just heard her correctly.

“We do not dispatch ambulances for animals,” she said, her voice calm and professional. “Your best bet is to carry him out of the woods and get him to an animal hospital as soon as possible.”

“But...but he’s a couple miles in and he weighs almost...” He stopped talking. *No, no, no*, he thought. *This cannot be happening.*

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I wish I...”

*You need to do this*, he told himself, ending the call. *You’re the only one who can save Jimmy.* Thrusting the phone back into his pocket, he sprinted back down the trail—back to Jimmy.

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Jimmy was in the exact same spot—same position—where Billy had left him. Sliding to the ground, Billy placed his ear to the dog’s chest. It took a few moments to calm his own panting enough to detect anything. *Jimmy’s still breathing*, he finally confirmed, *thank God.* He stood and lifted the big oaf into his arms. Arching his back, he adjusted Jimmy until he had a solid grip. “Let’s go.” He grunted and started down the trail again, moving somewhere between a power walk and an incredibly awkward jog.

With each painful step, Billy’s mind raced. He pictured Jimmy as a young pup, the dog’s body sleek and fit. He then looked down at the monster

in his arms and couldn't help but to think, *There's no way I can carry him all the way to the car.* In a different part of his brain, another voice screamed, *You have no choice, so keep moving!* But his legs were already throbbing, while his lungs felt like they'd actually caught on fire. Fear gave way to rage until Billy stumbled on a fallen branch and was forced to take a break. He dropped to one knee, balancing Jimmy's weight on his other knee. *I'm sorry,* he gasped, searching for any sign of consciousness in Jimmy's eyelids. *Nothing.* He craned his neck, staring at the mutt's chest until he could see a subtle rise and fall. Rage then gave way to negotiating with God. "Please just let us make it," he said, looking skyward. "Please..."

Taking a few deep breaths, he steeled himself to get to his aching feet again. "Okay, Jimmy," he said aloud, "we can do this." With another grunt, he was staggering down the trail with Jimmy's lifeless body being thrown back and forth in his quivering arms.

By the time they reached the crest where Billy had made the phone call, Billy had no choice but to rest again. He couldn't help it; every muscle and sinew in his body was trembling, making him question whether he could pull this off. As he struggled to catch his breath, he looked down at his friend in his arms and began to cry. "I'm sorry, buddy," he said, "I'm trying my best but I don't know if I can..." Suddenly, Jimmy's eyelids twitched, like he was trying to show Billy that he was fighting too. Billy stood erect, his overwhelming emotions

cycling back to rage. In that one moment, he discovered that his love for Jimmy was so much more powerful than his own pain. For whatever reason, he let out a scream—some instinctive war cry—before continuing on their awkward jog.

They'd just broken through a cluster of trees when Billy spotted his beautiful rusted Honda sitting off in the distance. New tears began rolling down his cheek; this time, they were a mixture of excitement and relief. From his shoulders to his fingertips, Billy could no longer feel his arms. His legs felt like rubber bands that had been stretched beyond reason. His breathing was rapid and shallow. But the closer he got to the Honda, the wider he smiled. "We're going to make it," he announced, his voice broken from emotion. "We're almost there." He kissed the mutt's head, realizing he'd been able to accomplish what he never imagined he could.

As Billy fumbled to get the limber dog onto the passenger seat, he also realized that they still faced the unknown. Immediately, his recent excitement was replaced by a tidal wave of anxiety. He hurried around to the driver's side and started the car. Throwing the shifter into drive, he placed his hand on Jimmy's torso and begged, "Please hang in there, boy. We're almost there."

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Billy sped into the animal hospital parking lot, jumped out of the Honda, and ran around the front

to the passenger side. *He's still breathing*, Billy confirmed before lifting the unconscious dog into his arms, arching his pulsating back to carry him into the building.

"Help!" Billy called out.

A young man in powder blue scrubs hurried over with a rolling gurney and helped Billy place Jimmy onto it. Handing Billy's hooded sweatshirt back to him, the young veterinarian's assistant started for a pair of swinging doors. Billy followed him. "You need to stay in the waiting room for now," the guy said. "Don't worry. Your dog's in good hands."

*I hope so*, Billy thought, walking in a daze over to one of the waiting room chairs.

"We'll need some information," the clerk behind the front counter called out to him.

"Wha...what?" Billy asked, moping over toward her like he was sleepwalking.

She placed a clipboard with several forms onto the counter. "We'll need information on you and the animal, as well as your pet insurance info..."

"I don't have pet insurance," he blurted.

Her face instantly changed. "So you'll be paying cash then?"

Billy gawked at her, still entranced. "I guess so," he said. "How much is it going to cost?"

"It depends on the treatment the animal needs, but the exam and bloodwork will require a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar retainer anyway."

Without a care in the world, she snapped her chewing gum and awaited a reply.

Billy swallowed hard. *Two hundred and fifty dollars?* he thought.

“But it could be much more expensive than that,” she added. “Do you want to call your parents before we begin treatment?” she asked, smirking.

As if it were even possible, Billy’s blood pressure went up, threatening to pop out both of his tear-swollen eyes. “No, I don’t want to call my parents,” he said a little too loudly for the quiet waiting room. He grabbed for his wallet, pulled out his debit card, and slapped it onto the counter. “Just put it on this,” he said.

She snatched the card off of the counter. “Fill out both forms and give them back to me when you’re done.”

*Well, aren’t you nice,* Billy thought sarcastically. *I’m scared to death for Jimmy’s life and all you’re worried about is getting paid.* He took the clipboard over to the closest empty chair and plopped down. The first form looked blurry. He took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes. *Please God,* he prayed, *please just let Jimmy be okay. I know I don’t talk to you as much as I should, but I’m talking to you now. No, I’m begging you now—please let my dog live. He means everything to me—everything! I don’t care what it costs. Please don’t let him...* He stopped and opened his eyes. *Please just let Jimmy survive this,* he concluded. *I’ll do anything you want, I promise.*

After completing the forms, Billy returned to the counter. "Here you go," he said, extending the clipboard for the girl to take it.

But she didn't. She was on the computer, ignoring him at the moment.

*And she's rude too*, he thought. "Is there any word on my dog yet?" he asked. "I'm kind of freak-ing out right now, and I really need to know how he's doing back there." He looked toward the double doors.

Glancing up, she slowly shook her head. "I only deal with the insurance forms and payment," she said. "I wouldn't know."

*So you only deal with all the really important stuff, huh?* he thought sarcastically. "Well, can you at least ask someone how he's doing?"

She half-shrugged. "I'm sure one of the veterinarian's assistants will be out soon to give you an update," she said, lifting his debit card. "Can I authorize payment for up to twelve hundred dollars?" she asked.

"Twelve hundred dollars?" he repeated; it was more than half of what he'd saved in the last six months.

She nodded. "For treatment."

"Sure, whatever," Billy said. "I'll pay whatever it costs. I just want my dog to get the help he needs."

"He's being treated," she muttered, handing back his card and requesting one final signature for

payment authorization. "Why don't you just take a seat for now." She smiled an empty smile.

Billy felt enraged. *There's no reason this heartless girl can't ask for an update for me*, he thought. *She's either too lazy or couldn't care less about anyone but herself*. Either way, he felt repulsed. As he reclaimed his seat, he gave it some thought. *I know I'm a slacker, but I'm not that lazy*. He caught his reflection in the animal hospital's front window. *Am I?*

The girl snapped her gum again, making Billy's jaw tighten.

*Jimmy's been in there for a while now*, he thought, the panic rushing through him again. *If he was okay, they would have been out here by now telling me that*. His eyes swelled with fresh tears. *Oh God, this isn't good*. He looked back at the double doors. *I should be with Jimmy right now*, he decided, overwhelmed with panic. *No matter how bad it is, I should be in there with him*. He took two steps toward the double doors when they swung open.

The veterinarian entered the waiting room. "William Baker?" she called out.

Billy suddenly felt dizzy but, ignoring the horrible sensation, he willed his legs toward the woman. "I'm Billy," he said. "Please tell me Jimmy...my dog's okay?"

Grinning, she placed her hand on Billy's shoulder.

*Oh no*, he thought, feeling his legs wobble.

"Jimmy's weak right now but he's going to be fine, Billy. We've taken blood and I'm running

some tests, but I believe he's suffering from heat exhaustion as well as EIC, or Exercise Induced Collapse."

"EIC? What's that?"

The animal doctor removed her hand from Billy's shoulder. "It's a genetic condition usually found in Labrador retrievers," she explained. "Many of the black males carry a gene called heterozygotes. It's not fatal but it can slow a dog down, that's for sure."

*Exercise induced collapse?* Billy thought, still at a loss.

"Trust me, he'll be fine," she repeated.

"But why didn't this ever happen before?" he asked.

She half-shrugged. "Usually it's caused by extreme heat or when excitement levels increase. Was Jimmy..."

"We went on a hike," Billy explained, cutting her off, "but we took it slow, at his pace." He shook his head. "I still don't get it. We've gone on hundreds of hikes, and he's never experienced this before. I thought he was going to..." He didn't finish the thought.

The veterinarian smiled compassionately. "Jimmy's an old-timer now," she said. "He's not going to be able to do everything he used to do, Billy. You need to remember that, okay?"

Billy nodded, feeling some real sorrow over the truth of it. "Can I see him?" he asked hopefully.

She smiled. "Of course," she said, "he's resting comfortably while we get some fluids into him."

As they walked through the swinging doors between the waiting room and the examination room in the back, Billy asked, "So what kind of treatment is he going to need?"

"In the short term, we'll rehydrate Jimmy and monitor his heart to ensure there was no damage," she said.

Billy nodded. *Heart damage?* he thought, a pang of anxiety making his own heart flutter. "And going forward?" he asked.

"For the long term, the less anxiety or stress Jimmy experiences the better."

Billy couldn't help but grin. "Oh, you don't need to worry about that," he promised. "Jimmy's usually a couch potato." He shook his head. "Our hikes have been very few and far between in the last few years."

As the kind veterinarian stopped at one of the exam rooms and grabbed for the door knob, Billy took a deep breath. He was beyond excited to be reunited with his best friend.

The door swung open and Billy stepped in. Seeing Jimmy lying on his side on the table, Billy stifled a gasp before struggling to keep an onslaught of emotions at bay in front of the doctor. "Here he is," Billy mumbled; his voice was filled with emotion, his eyes filled with tears.

Jimmy's head popped up and he whined, calling out for Billy.

Forgetting there was anyone else in the room, Billy hurried to him, gently placing his hand on the mutt's warm neck. "Shhhh," he whispered, "lay down, buddy. You need to relax so they can make you feel better."

Jimmy looked up, trying to lick Billy's trembling hand.

Billy ran his hand across Jimmy's muzzle, allowing the overweight mutt to slobber all over it. "You really scared me, boy. You know that?" Billy told him, his voice cracking more. "I think our hiking days are over."

~

On the ride home, Billy called Mark's cell phone. "Hey, bro. I won't be able to get over to Nick's today, sorry."

"No problem," Mark said, "is everything okay?"

Billy patted Jimmy, who was resting quietly on the passenger seat. "Let's just say you don't have to worry about honoring that rain check to Jimmy on a future hike."

"What happened?" Mark asked, his deep voice dripping with concern.

"The poor guy collapsed on the trail and I had to carry him out of the woods and rush him to the vet's."

"You carried him out of the woods," Mark clarified. "For how long, twenty feet?"

"Yeah, about that," Billy fibbed.

"Is he okay?" Mark asked.

"He'll be fine now," Billy said, "but believe it or not, the doctor said he needs to cut back on any strenuous exercise."

"Strenuous exercise?" Mark repeated, surprised. "Jimmy?"

"I know," Billy said, laughing. "I tried to tell her that he's the laziest dog she could ever meet but..."

"Which is why he's the perfect companion for you," Mark interrupted.

"Yeah, whatever," Billy said.

"I'm just teasing. I'm just glad to hear that the senior citizen's all right."

"Tell me about it," Billy said, stroking the mutt's mane. "I swear I've never been so scared. I think he may have taken a few years off my life."

"Make sure you take care of him, bro."

"I will," Billy said. "We're swinging by the ice cream parlor on our way home."

"Yeah, that's good for his health," Mark said, chuckling.

"Whatever. After the day we've had, we both deserve a treat."

"So I'll see you tomorrow?" Mark asked.

"Yup. And if you happen to talk to Charlie, see if you can get him to join us."

"I will."

“Cool.”

“Later, Billy.”

“Later, Mark.”

After hanging up the phone, Billy looked at Jimmy and promised the resting dog, “No more hikes, buddy. And this weekend I’m going to buy you a new kiddie pool for the summer.”

With his eyes still closed, Jimmy licked Billy’s hand—which was still trembling from the fear and adrenaline.

“And to think I’ve been so worried about college and the future,” Billy said, snickering. “That seems so meaningless right now.” He stroked the mutt’s fur. “I’ll figure it out,” he said, shrugging. “But for now, the most important thing is to get you better, boy. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost...” He stopped. A rush of overwhelming emotion made his eyes swell with tears again, while his throat constricted. Even the thought of losing Jimmy was too much to consider.

The dog licked Billy’s hand again, letting him know they were still together.

“And after you have that ice cream,” Billy said, “you’re going on a diet.”

Jimmy turned his head and sighed heavily.

## *A Note from the Author*

First and, most importantly, thank you for reading *The Hike*—the prequel my upcoming novel *The Changing Season*. I hope you enjoyed the brief story half as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Both “The Hike” and *The Changing Season* were a labor of love for me. Although I consider myself an animal lover, I absolutely adore dogs. I’m not really sure why, but I’ve always felt a deep connection to the canine species. Granted, there have been a few times when I’ve experienced fear caused by our four-legged friends—most taking place on my paper route. For the most part, though, dogs and I hit it off very well.

From my earliest memories, my family has always had a dog or two we adopted as family (never just pets). Most have been mutts, mixed breeds like most of us, with different temperaments and personalities. And I have loved them all, completely and unconditionally—exactly the way they taught me to love. The average size of these furry family members has ranged between fifty to eighty pounds, hearty creatures that could lick your face off if you let them. And though I never realized it at the time, each one of them was destined to inspire our canine protagonist, Jimmy.

As I wrote the novel, I quickly realized that the trick behind making *The Changing Season* relatable to most folks was to give Jimmy (our lovable mutt) as many human traits as possible—creating a loyal and non-judgmental sounding board for Billy to confide in. As the entire novel takes place during

the summer between high school graduation and college, most of us remember (or will discover, for the younger readers) that there were life-changing decisions made at a point when we were grossly inexperienced to make them. That fact alone sets the stage for a tale of innocent love, adventure, heart-break and the bonds of friendship that can last a lifetime.

Although *The Changing Season* is a true coming-of-age story, I also like to think of it as a love story; a tale of unconditional love between a boy and his dog. In my life, there have been few relationships that have helped to define me more.

*The Changing Season* is now available for pre-order with all of our retail partners. The e-book is even available at a special pre-order price. If you decide to give the novel a read, drop me a line and let me know what you thought about it. There's nothing better than connecting with readers. Thanks again...from me and Jimmy!

Steve Manchester



This was supposed to be a simple summer for Billy; one more lazy expanse of time before college began. He'd fill the hours playing with Jimmy — his canine best buddy — going camping and doing all the things he promised Jimmy they'd do before Billy left.

But that was before the accident that shook the entire town.

It was before the summer job that turned into something so much more than a way to get a paycheck.

And it was before Vicki.

This summer was destined to be many things to Billy, things he didn't truly understand until now. But it was definitely not going to be simple.

An enormously touching, richly textured, deeply moving novel of new adulthood, *The Changing Season* is an experience to savor.

“*The Changing Season* is a story that will bring you back to that awkward period of time between childhood and adult life. I highly recommend this book.”

– Richard Paul Evans, #1 NYT Bestselling Author, *The Christmas Box* and *The Mistletoe Promise*

“Manchester’s *The Changing Season* will be to young adults what *Old Yeller* is to my grandson.”

– Ed Asner, Actor, *Up*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Lou Grant*, *Elf*

“*The Changing Season* is a thought-provoking coming-of-age tale that explores the complicated themes of love, faith, family and, above all, loyalty. Mr. Manchester’s portrayal of a boy at the cusp of manhood is evocative and sympathetic.”

– Susan Wilson, NYT Bestselling Author, *One Good Dog*

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