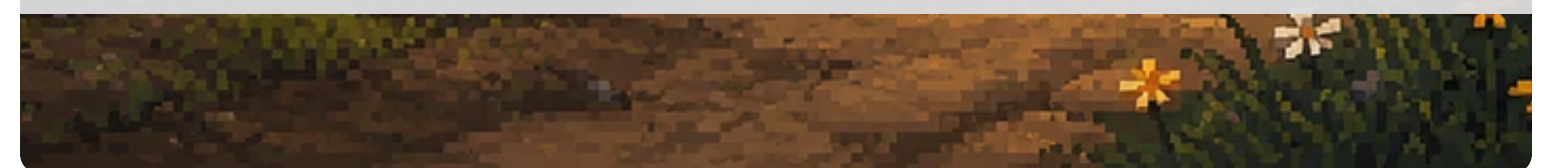




The Dog Who Listened

Bittu





Leo sat alone on a weathered park bench, clutching an old baseball glove that felt far too heavy. The world around him was vibrant and green, but he only saw the gray shadows of the grandfather he missed so dearly.



From the edge of the woods, a scruffy dog with patches of golden fur and a notched ear watched the boy. The stray had no home and no name, but he possessed a heart that could sense the weight of a heavy soul.



The dog padded softly across the grass and sat at Leo's feet, making no sound. He didn't bark or beg for food; he simply rested his chin on Leo's knee, offering the silent comfort of his presence.



Leo looked down, surprised to see the gentle creature waiting there. For the first time in weeks, the boy's eyes met another's, and he saw a reflection of his own quiet loneliness in the dog's amber gaze.



The words began to spill out of Leo like a broken dam, telling the dog about his grandfather's laugh and the empty seat at the kitchen table. The dog tilted his head, listening with such deep focus that Leo felt truly heard for the very first time.



Dark clouds gathered and a soft rain began to fall, turning the park into a watercolor blur. Leo stood up and beckoned the dog to follow him, unwilling to leave his new, silent friend alone in the storm.



At the front porch, Leo's mother watched through the window as her son gently dried the dog with an old towel. She saw a flicker of light in Leo's eyes that had been missing for months, and she knew their lives were about to change.



In the warm glow of the bathroom, Leo gave the dog a soapy bath, scrubbing away the dirt of the streets. As the dog shook himself dry, sending bubbles flying everywhere, Leo let out a small, genuine giggle that echoed through the house.



Under the golden afternoon sun, Leo and the dog, now named Barnaby, raced across the backyard. They played fetch with the old baseball glove, transforming a symbol of loss into a tool for new, joyful memories.



As evening fell, Leo and Barnaby curled up together on a soft rug by the fireplace. The boy felt a sense of peace settling over him, knowing that while some things are lost, a loyal heart can help find the way back to happiness.