



# Crossroads Sallie

Skye Blaine

*Crossroads Sallie* is a work of fiction.

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**Dedicated to all the little girls  
who adore their dogs**





## Crossroads Sallie

**A** howl split the chill night air. The sound started deep, rose to a pitch, then fell off a few notes. Jimmy Snickett, who lived on Franklin near Sixth, rolled over and yanked a pillow onto his head.

Down the street, the mournful sound awakened Elizabeth Grange. It must be a large animal, she thought. Prickles erupted at the back of her neck. Saddened by the haunting tone, Elizabeth pulled the covers over her shoulders.

The next day, at quitting time in Walton, townspeople milled around the corner talking and pointing at the giant dog lying in the intersection of First and Main.

Snickett's rough voice rose above the rest. "Ain't that Sallie, lives with Rusty Crawford, the farrier out County Road B? Dog's been here all day now."

"Yes, must be," said Elizabeth. "I believe I heard her howl last night."

"What kind of dog is that, anyway?" The question came from a young boy.

Elizabeth gave her best librarian smile, knowing and a little smug. "Why that's an Irish wolfhound. Tallest breed in the dog kingdom." As an ancient pickup maneuvered around the dog, Elizabeth's blue-veined hands jumped to her face. "It's unsafe out there. Can't we get her to move?"

"I'll try," Snickett said.

The crowd murmured as he, belly protruding over his low-slung pants, plodded to the center of the intersection. Sallie rested with her great head

pressed between her paws. Her rough gray coat lay askew. Tufts of fur poked up between her dark eyes, which followed his every move.

Snickett squatted and put his wide plumber's hand on the rope around Sallie's neck. "Come on, girl."

Sallie pressed her body—as heavy as a full-grown woman—to the ground. She flattened her ears against her head. *Sallie stays here.*

John Grange, the mayor and Elizabeth's husband, strode into the street, yanked the rope from Snickett, and focused his irritation on the dog. "Be forceful! Gitty-up, Sallie!" The dog looked directly in his eyes. *Not moving. Sallie stays!* Then she dropped her head between her paws again.

Grange released the collar in disgust. "Dog won't move."

*Squat-eared man.* Sally crossed her paws.

Elizabeth tilted forward on the curb's edge and said, "Perhaps she's trying to tell us the farrier's ill."

"I'll bring her some water and food," Jacqui, the young cosmetologist in town, called out as she scurried toward the Compton Market.

The dog's sober gaze followed Jacqui across the street. *Good sense.*

Grange postured in his silk suit next to the plumber. Snickett ignored him and spoke to the cluster of people that remained. "Say, Elizabeth has a point. Anyone willing to drive out to Crawford's place with me?" He lumbered back to the sidewalk. "We'd better stick some orange construction cones around that hound. If we don't, she's road kill. Grange, will you do that?"

Jake spoke up. "I'll go with you. Soybean crop's in—I need a change of pace." His brother nodded too. The three piled into Snickett's king-cab truck and headed out of town. Snickett wheeled around the corner of County Road B, and rattled onto Crawford's gravel lane. As they pulled up to the outbuildings, he heard a cow's pitiful low. He heaved himself out of the truck and set out after the athletic farmer brothers. Then he heard snorting and pounding—metal striking a stall door.

Jake glanced first at his brother, then Snickett. "This don't sound good. These animals seem upset."

Snickett pointed to the barn. "You boys look in there." He plodded to the front of the clapboard farmhouse. Horseshoes framed the front door. A man's work shows in his life, Snickett thought. He put his hand on the



doorknob and hesitated. It wasn't locked. Didn't feel right just striding into another man's private space, though. He knocked hard instead.

"Crawford? You in there?" He could hear opera on the radio or TV. *Lord, Crawford hates fancy music; no way he'd choose opera.* Hands sweating, he pounded the door. No response. He tried the knob and pushed it open. "Rusty? It's Jimmy." His voice echoed through the house.

Finally, Snickett trudged into the living room. As he took a tentative step to turn off the TV, he noticed Crawford's Wellies standing upright by the door, caked with straw. Something just didn't feel right. His fear almost pushed him back. He poked his head out the door and hollered toward the barn. "Boys? Get over here."

A moment later, Jake and Frank burst onto the porch, both talking. "Stalls haven't been mucked," Jake said. "Been so long since that cow's been milked, she's near burst her udder."

"We let them horses to pasture, made sure the trough is filled, but somebody's gotta tend that cow," Frank said.

As soon as they tromped into the house, Snickett saw fear spread across their faces too, and he didn't feel so alone.

"We don't know if there's foul play. Let's take it slow." He made his way across the living room and into the hallway. He cast a furtive look into the bedroom on the left. Nothing. Then he glanced at the end of the hall. Crawford's stocking feet stuck out of the master bedroom doorway. Snickett forced himself to go look. He stared down at the white-haired, gray-faced man that had shot rubber bands at him in second grade. "Poor guy."

He called over his shoulder. "Frank? Rusty's in here, and he's very, very dead." His overalls also had pieces of straw stuck to them. He must of come in from the barn just before he collapsed. "Looks like natural causes," he yelled. Then he realized Frank was standing directly behind him. "My God, you snuck up quiet."

Frank shuffled his feet as he spoke. "Scared, I guess. Never saw a dead guy. Only cows, sheep, and a couple dogs."

"Sallie, she must've gotten hungry and come to town. Dogs know death." Snickett looked at Frank and Jake. "Let's lift him onto the bed. Give the man his dignity. I'll phone the undertaker. Frank, stop next door and ask the farmer to come milk the cow."

That evening, parents in Walton told the story of Sallie the wolfhound.

“I wanna see her!” Jacqui’s four-year-old daughter said.

“I think we can arrange that.” Jacqui ran her hand through her frosted hair, taking care not to disturb her newly decorated acrylic nails. She leaned over to tuck Bridgette in. She rubbed her daughter’s back for a moment, and then feeling a cluster of bumps, lifted her nightgown. Surprise ruffled down her spine. *Well, it had to happen sometime.* “Darlin’, petting Sallie will have to wait. You’ve got the chicken pox!”

Her daughter’s mouth turned down. “Like cousin Bobby? I have to stay home?”

“Yes, but this means Grandma will come to visit.”

“Funny-hat Grandma?” Bridgette held her breath.

“The very one.”

One week later, Tuesday at noon, a discussion of Sallie’s future headed the docket for the monthly meeting. The townsfolk met outside at the crossroads where she lay on her L. L. Bean dog bed, an anonymous contribution.

John Grange climbed the library’s oak stepstool and tapped the meeting to order with his gavel. “First order of business: according to law, that dog should go to the Falktown Humane Society. She’s a public health nuisance.” He swiveled his head and looked around the room. “Any ideas how to get her there?”

Jake broke the silence that followed. “Don’t the shelter pick up animals?”

“Not outside of their own town limits,” Elizabeth replied. “They will handle a Walton animal, but we must deliver. And John, if no one adopts her after five days, they’ll put her down.”

“Not our problem,” the mayor said. “We can’t exactly force a dog that big to do anything. She’d fit in a front loader. Snickett, you’ve got one of those.”

No one stepped forward to adopt Sallie. The plumber brooded as the town folk muttered around him, but *he* couldn’t afford to feed the huge beast. *Poor critter.* After the meeting, he went to get his tractor.

Sallie pinned her ears back and hunkered down when they dropped the loader in front of her. Snickett, Jake, and Frank rolled her into the bucket. She looked at them with reproachful eyes. Snickett hauled himself into the operator’s seat and positioned the loader near the bed of the pickup. Afraid, Sallie gripped so hard with her massive toenails they had trouble hauling her from the bucket into Snickett’s truck.



As he crawled his pickup forward, Sallie arced out of the truck and took up residence—again—in the crossroads of First and Main. A mixture of curses and cheers ran through the crowd.

Snickett rumbled under his breath, hauled himself out of his vehicle, and dug around in his tool boxes. Under a pile of PVC he found a nylon web to cover the truck bed and prevent Sallie from escaping. He attached it to a hook on one side. “Okay! Let’s try this again. Boys?” Snickett motored the loader into place. When the three men tried to roll Sallie into the bucket, she wriggled her lips and snarled. The men jumped back in unison.

“We should shoot her and be done with it,” the mayor muttered.

Elizabeth overheard her husband’s remark. Horrified, she stepped forward. “Let’s give the poor dog a rest, and try again tomorrow. Yes?” The people crowding around nodded among themselves.

The next day, Snickett and a few other men managed to load the dog into the pickup. Before she could repeat her antics, Snickett tossed the nylon webbing over Sallie to Jake, who snubbed it securely. The wolfhound pressed against the nylon and howled, but the net held, and they carted her off to the Falktown Pound. Four men, one muzzle, and a huge crate later, Sallie slunk down in the barren kennel, miserable and afraid.

The first two days, Sallie glanced at each family that came to the shelter, looking for any sign that they could communicate. By the third day, without the kind voices of the townsfolk who had visited her at the crossroads, she turned her nose away from the bowl of kibble plunked unceremoniously in her cage.

On the fourth night of Sallie’s imprisonment, Snickett couldn’t sleep. The wolfhound’s impending death haunted him. Shivering, he pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, grabbed a flashlight, and drove to Crawford’s place. He’d heard the man didn’t have any family, and his belongings remained untouched. Superstitious, Snickett almost turned away, but he gathered his courage and searched every cranny of the farrier’s house. With tired satisfaction he pocketed the papers he found in the rolltop desk, and headed back to town.

The next noon a crowd gathered in the community room of Jesus Our Savior church. Four teenagers picketed outside with “DOG ABUSE!” signs. Elizabeth called the meeting to order and invited Snickett to speak.

“Okay,” he bellowed. “We have to make a quick decision here, for the wolfhound’s sake. This is the final day.” He waved the papers. “Sallie was willed to Crawford by his Aunt Flora Mae, along with Treasury Bonds for her care. It’s quite a bit of money. We could cash them in and save the hound.”

Elizabeth stepped forward. “This town had almost adopted Sally. Jacqui fed her, and most of us pet her from time to time,” she said. “Frank cleaned up after her, bless him for that!” The group cheered. “I’d be happy to have her at the library, but she only seems to thrive at the crossroads.” She surveyed the thirty or so people sitting on folding chairs. “Perhaps we can build her a roundabout, so she’s safe.” She pinned Jimmy Snickett with her gaze. “Why, you almost ran over her Saturday night, coming home inebriated. Orange cones can’t protect her from *that*.” Chuckles and murmurs circled the crowd.

Snickett hitched his pants. When he spoke, his voice sounded gruff. “This money’ll cover it. Me and the guys’ll build it.” Male voices in the crowd grumbled at being volunteered.

“What’s a roundabout?” Jacqui asked.

“They’re used in European intersections,” Elizabeth said, as she drew a diagram on the white pad. “The larger, lower round is for the cars. We could build a taller, inner ring, landscape it, and put a dog house on top.” People nodded to one another.

Elizabeth tapped the gavel on the pillar. “All in favor, raise a hand.” She pointed a slender finger as she counted. “Passed. Mr. Snickett, you’re project manager. Will you pick Sallie up today? We’ll put her bed near the construction so our dog can watch.” She glanced at the clock. “Heavens, I hope we’re in time!” Elizabeth trotted toward the telephone, Jacqui a few feet behind.

“We’re calling about the wolfhound.” Elizabeth worked her hands as she listened, then clutched her chest and glanced with huge eyes at Jacqui before turning back to the phone. “Oh please, run! We found the money to adopt her.” She tapped her foot and, covering the mouthpiece, whispered to Jacqui. “Four men are taking her to be euthanized—two dragging, and two pushing from behind.”

Elizabeth gripped the receiver harder as the minutes ticked by. Finally, the person returned to the phone.

Relieved, Elizabeth said, “Thank heavens! We’ll pick Sallie up this afternoon.” She hung up, took a deep breath and focused on Jacqui. “Just in time.”

The next day, the construction crew brought a cement truck to the crossroads. Snickett glanced at the wolfhound. The dog's ribs showed. Worried, he called Jacqui, who tried to bribe her with large Milk Bone biscuits. The crew gathered around. Sallie wouldn't touch the offering. Perplexed, Jacqui went to confer with the Elizabeth, who frowned and thrummed her delicate fingers on the desk. "I don't know a thing about dog psychology, but I can call Jason Hill, the Falktown veterinarian."

At lunchtime Elizabeth donned her wool coat and walked to the crossroads to find Jacqui eating her lunch next to Sallie. "Dr. Hill said she is probably grieving—we should lace her food with chicken stock and come nighttime, she might decide to eat."

The next morning, on the way to breakfast at the diner, Snickett found Sallie and an empty bowl. He felt so cheered he ordered himself a second helping of grits and a double side of crisp bacon.

Roundabout construction continued.

A week later, at pre-school, Bridgette's friend Mandy chattered about the biggest dog in the world. The class had gone to visit Sallie while Brigitte had chickenpox. Home after her first day back, Bridgette pestered her mom. "The dog sounds just like Paddy in the book Aunt Ginny gave me."

"You think so?" Jacqui tried to keep her voice non-committal. She had read the book to her daughter every night for the last six months. Sallie resembled the storybook character all right.

Bridgette looked up at her mother, her blue eyes large with anticipation. She tugged on her braids, excited. "Can we visit her?"

"Hon, the men are building a new home for Sallie with big machinery. It's too dangerous." She needed an excuse to delay her daughter's visit. "Besides, you still have a few pox spots."

Bridgette's lower lip bulged. "All the kids got to pet her. Why can't I?"

Jacqui looked down at her daughter. Tears threatened to overflow. "Darlin', probably by next week your spots will be all gone." She felt a little guilty at this white lie, but caring for and feeding a animal like that would be a huge responsibility. Besides, she was terrified of huge dogs.

"How many days?"

Jacqui walked her daughter to the wall calendar and, in solemn ceremony, made seven red X's. Under her breath, she said a prayer for the construction project. Maybe it would be delayed. Maybe the dog would find a home.

Late Monday afternoon, one week later, the crew completed the finishing touch—they placed Crawford’s extra-large dog house on top of the roundabout. Elizabeth tucked fresh bedding inside and moved Sallie’s bowls nearby. The wolfhound watched with mild interest. The townsfolk went home, hopeful that she would choose to move onto the new roundabout overnight. If she took up residence, a celebration was planned for noon.

The next morning dawned cold and clear. Snickett levered himself into a sitting position on the edge of his bed. Sallie crowded his thoughts. “Gone bonkers over a damn dog,” he muttered.

On the way into town for breakfast he checked on the hound first. His appetite picked right up when he saw Sallie’s eyebrow tufts poking out of her house, where she was safely ensconced on the new roundabout.

All through the morning, small clumps of people gathered on the corner to chat and ogle. At noon the fire station added three short blasts to call the townsfolk to the celebration. Businesses closed. The church preschool and elementary teachers walked their children to the center of town. Elizabeth tied a fat green ribbon around Sallie’s neck—the dog was Irish, after all. Flushed, she stood in the center of the roundabout next to the wolfhound. Sallie perked her ears when she heard school children giggle.

The town bell signaled the beginning of the festivities. Elizabeth welcomed Sallie as a permanent resident. “We have money left over to pay for Sallie’s needs,” she said. Jimmy Snickett presented the deed that proved Sallie owned her roundabout until her death. Twelve children from the Walton Elementary School sang a special song they had written called *Crossroads Sallie*.

With a firm grip on Bridgette’s hand, Jacqui pushed through the crowd. The time had come for her daughter to finally see the dog that looked so much like her beloved storybook character, Paddy.

When they broke through the throng at the front, Bridgette stood still, clasping the lei of paper flowers she had made in preschool. Jacqui peered down. Her daughter’s eyes were full moons. “It’s Paddy come to life, really it is,” Bridgette whispered.

“Sallie’s a girl, not a boy like Paddy. Let’s cross the street and pet her. Then you can put the lei around her neck.”

Bridgette pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Mommy, I can do it myself.”

“I’ll walk you across and stand at the bottom of the roundabout. Okay?”

After they crossed, Jacqui’s hands flew to her heart as she watched her daughter move away from her. That dog was huge. The townsfolk fell silent as the tiny girl scabbled up the first roundabout step. Bridgette set the lei down, climbed the next concrete stair, then retrieved the lei and headed straight for the wolfhound. When she got within four feet of Sallie, she stopped and sang to her. Sallie pricked her ears and tilted her head as though listening to each word. Then Bridgette spoke to the dog. To the people nearby it sounded like a small bird; to the wolfhound, it came as a call home.

Sallie hesitated, then with grave steps left the dog house, walked to the four-year old and sat with quiet dignity in front of her. She towered over the little girl. Jacqui started forward, her hands pressed over her mouth. Around the square, a collective intake of breath could be heard. Bridgette reached up on her toes and carefully placed the lei around Sallie’s neck. The wolfhound offered a gentle paw. The girl threw her arms around the giant dog. *You seem sad. Do you know Paddy?*

*No, little one.*

*Will you come home with me? Forever?*

*I’ve been waiting for you to ask.*

*We’ll have to make Mommy understand.* Bridgette locked her small fingers in Sallie’s fur, and they turned to leave the roundabout.



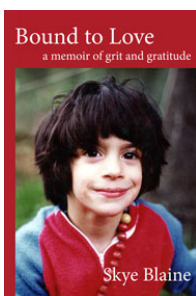




## About the Author

**Skye Blaine** writes short essays, memoir, fiction, and poetry, developing themes of aging, coming of age, disability, and awakening. In 2003, she received an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University.

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Skye has had memoir, fiction, and poetry published in seven anthologies, and personal essays in national magazines: *In Context* (now known as *Yes!* magazine) and *Catalyst*. Other essays have been published in the *Register-Guard* newspaper, and the *Eugene Weekly*. She also presented radio essays on KRML 1410 AM in Carmel, CA.

Skye teaches fiction and memoir in the Older Adults Program at Santa Rosa Junior College.

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