

TWO HUMANS STOOD OUTSIDE MY CAGE, A white-haired woman and a gum-chewing kid. Gum chewing is one of the best sounds out there, and the smell's not bad, either. I liked the kid from the get-go.

They gazed in at me. I gazed out at them. The white-haired woman had blue eyes, washed out and watery. The kid's eyes were a bright, clear blue, like the sky on a cloudless day. I hadn't seen the sky in way too long.

"How about this one, Grammy?" the kid said.

The white-haired woman—that would be Grammy, not too hard to make these human-type connections once you get the hang of it—pinched up her face, and it was kind of pinched up to begin with. "Eat us out of house and home."

The kid cracked her gum. What a sound! I can't tell you what that does to me, shooting this buzzy feeling all the way from my ears to the tip of my tail and back again. "I don't know, Grammy," she said. "Looks thin to me."

"My point exactly. He's just waitin' on some sucker to take him home and fatten him up. Check out the frame on him."

“Frame?” said the kid, not getting it. I wasn’t getting it, either.

“Bone structure, width of his shoulders, size of his paws,” Grammy said.

Something was wrong with my paws? I thought about hiding them out of sight, but how? I was still working on that problem when Adrienne came into view. Adrienne—a big woman with a powerful grip—ran the joint, a joint with cages for me and my kind. “Eats like a bird, believe it or not,” Adrienne said.

Was this a good time for growling? Probably not, which I didn’t realize until it was too late. I should have been doing everything I could to make a good impression. But you’d be growling yourself if the reason you ate like a bird was because you got fed like a bird. And, by the way, the whole thing about birds not eating much needs looking into. Ever seen one of those little red-breasted ones gulp down a long, fat, struggling worm? Enough said.

Grammy backed up a step. “Doesn’t look very friendly, neither,” she said, and started to move away.

Meaning that was that, and not the first time for me in this place. Except for one thing, which was the kid not moving away—in fact, she was leaning in closer. “Yeah, he does, Grammy,” she said. “See his eyes?”

Grammy took a look. “What about ’em?”

“They’re so gentle,” the kid said. The growling sound faded away. The kid turned to Adrienne. “And he’s smart, too, isn’t he?”

“Smart?” said Adrienne. “Uh, sure. For a dog.”

Which I didn’t get, and the kid didn’t seem to, either. We were good at not getting things, me and the kid.

“What’s his name?” she said.

“No idea,” Adrienne said. “Dog officer picked him up a few months ago. Stray, no tags.”

“You mean I can name him?” the kid said.

“Whoa,” said Grammy.

The kid took out her gum, stuck it behind her ear. Maybe the coolest thing I’d ever seen. She went still, the way humans do when they’re going deep inside their heads.

“Bowser,” she said at last.

“Huh?” said Grammy.

“I name him Bowser.”

“What kind of a name is Bowser?” Grammy said.

“What kind of a name is Birdie?” said the kid.

“It’s yours,” said Grammy. “A fine southern name.”

“Fine? Try trashy.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“I’m changing it to Emmanuelle the day I turn twenty-one, meaning exactly ten years minus three days from

now,” said the kid—Birdie, if I was following this right. No guarantees about that. “Bowser’s not a trashy name.” She stuck her fingers through the cage wiring, no room for her whole hand. “It’s dignified.”

I stepped forward, gave her fingers a lick. They tasted of baloney, like maybe Birdie had eaten a baloney sandwich, and not long ago. The kid was off the charts.

“Let’s take him home,” she said.

Totally off the charts.

“This one?” Grammy said. “Really? What is he, anyhow?”

“A mutt, obviously,” Adrienne said. “Those ears are shepherdy—if a little on the big and floppy side—that shaggy tail’s more poodley, and the color scheme’s kind of like a Bernese.”

Whoever she was talking about sounded like a winner to me. The kid must have been thinking the same thing, because she said, “Those are my three favorites!”

Grammy sighed. “Hope you know what you’re doing,” she said. “Happy belated birthday.”

“Not very belated. I love you, Grammy.”

“He’s your responsibility.”

“I know. You’ll never have to worry about a thing.”

“Hrrmf.”



The next thing I remember, we were outside. Not outside in the little walled-in, cement-floored yard back of Adrienne’s that she called the play area, but out front in the parking lot. There the air was fresh, and a dude might actually feel like playing. Freedom!

“Hey, Grammy—check out his tail.”

“Looks even shaggier than a poodle’s to me.”

“I think it’s very nice. And I was talking about how he’s wagging it.”

What was this? Something about my tail? I turned my head to look. I can turn my head practically straight back if I need to—although I did not in this case, the layout of my eyes being somewhat better than humans, if you don’t mind me saying—and took a glance at my tail. Shaggy? I thought not. How about bushy? That was it. I have a bushy tail, perfectly suited to all sorts of tail-type tasks. Such as wagging, which I seemed to remember had been mentioned fairly recently. No argument there: My tail was wagging, and wagging good. Looked more like a shaggy blur than anything else. High-speed wagging means someone’s real happy about something. I took a crack at thinking what it could be, and just as I was giving up—isn’t this always the way?—it came to me: freedom!

Not that I was completely free—not with this length of rope that Adrienne looped around my neck on the way

out the door, handing the end to Birdie. Although—and this was interesting!—from the loose way Birdie was holding it, there was really nothing to stop me from—

“For heaven’s sake, child, tighten up on that rope.”

Birdie’s hand, surprisingly strong for its size, closed around the rope. I was giving some consideration to testing how strong that hand would be in action of the real sudden kind, when we came to an old pickup truck, all battered and dented and rusty. Grammy swung down the tailgate—it made a horrible metallic screech that hurt my ears like I can’t tell you—and said, “Okay, dog, hop in.”

“Bowser, Grammy. His name’s Bowser.”

“Whatever. Hop in.” Grammy knocked her fist on the edge of the pickup bed, showing where she wanted me to go. I stayed where I was.

Grammy got that pinched look on her face again. “If it’s gonna be like this, we’re marching him right back inside.”

“Oh, no, Grammy. Maybe”—she turned my way—“maybe he can’t jump ’cause of the leash.”

“Bogus,” Grammy said. “Plenty of slack in that line.”

“It’s more psychological.”

“Huh? What’s that ’spose ta mean?”

Birdie knelt in front of me, eye to eye, took my head in her hands. Slow and cautious, but she did it, and no human had ever tried that with me. I wasn’t sure how to take it.

Sometimes, when I'm in that not-sure-how-to-take-it mode, I can get a little growly, or even—I admit it—bitey. I've had some rough times with humans, no fault of my own. But there was something about how Birdie was looking right into me, a look that said, *Be a pal*, clear as day. Plus her hands were so gentle. On top of that was her smell. There's a basic smell that all humans have. Once, in my puppy days at the pet store—not a happy time, as it turned out—I'd had a monkey roommate in the next cage over. A monkey name of Moxie, if I remember right. The basic human smell is a lot like Moxie's, but then you get add-ons and takeaways that end up giving each human a smell all their own. I remember the smell of every single human I've ever sniffed, believe it or not, and Birdie's was the best I'd run into. A wonderful mix of kid and girl and strawberry chewing gum and lemon soap, plus a hint of fresh, salty sweat, not a surprise considering the summer heat. Just like that, growliness was the furthest thing from my mind, except for bitiness, which was even further. Birdie rose and slipped the rope off my neck.

“Whoa!” said Grammy.

Without another thought, I leaped up onto the bed of the pickup, clearing it with plenty to spare.

“Hey! I was right!” Those clear-sky eyes of Birdie's were open wide, a very nice sight. “And did you see that jump?”

“Hrrmf,” Grammy said, slamming the tailgate shut. They walked around to the front, opened the doors, got in.

The bed of this pickup turned out to be a pretty interesting place. We had some fishing rods over on one side, fish scales glittering on the bare metal floor here and there, but no fish, although there was a whole pail of worms wriggling away in one corner. I went over and sniffed them, mostly since worms—and the strange fact that birds like eating them—had recently been on my mind. I was just starting to think of giving it a try myself, when through the back window of the cab I noticed the most interesting thing of all. There was room on the front seat for three! Did I mention that the back window was wide open?

“Hey! What the—” Grammy said.

“Bowser!” said Birdie at about the same moment I was sticking a perfect landing in the middle of the bench seat. I sat up straight and tall, panting just a bit, but not from exertion—leaping through a wide-open window could hardly be called exertion—more from the sheer excitement about whatever was coming next.

A sort of silence fell on us after that, Birdie looking past me at Grammy in a nervous way. “I think he wants to ride in front,” she said at last.

“He better not get used to it,” Grammy said.

“I promise he won’t.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“But how do you know ahead of time?”

“Also don’t be a smart-mouth.” Grammy turned the key, wheeled us out of the parking lot with a rubbery squeal, and sped down the open road. I had no complaints about Grammy. I love speed! *Faster, Grammy, faster!*

“Why’s he drooling?”

“I wouldn’t call it drooling, Grammy.”

“No?”

“He can’t help it when his mouth’s open like that.”

“Then get ’im to close it!”

“C’mon, Bowser, be good.”

What was this? They liked my mouth? How nice! What about my tongue? I unfolded it all the way, flopped the whole thing out so they’d get a better view. I’m all about pitching in when I can. And who was Bowser again? Oh, right. Me. I’d have to remember that.

We zipped along two-lane blacktop, a strip-mall-and-trailer-park kind of town on one side, a narrow bayou on the other, with lots of bugs hovering over the water, like clouds of tiny sparks in the sunshine. This was bayou country, pretty much new to me, being a city dude myself. How had I gotten here and ended up at Adrienne’s? I tried to make my mind go backward and pick up the pieces, but I have

the kind of mind that doesn't like going backward. So the only piece I picked up was the dogcatcher trapping me in an alley, no place to go and a look on his face I didn't much care for.

"Bowser does a lot of thinking," Birdie said.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I can feel him thinking."

Grammy glanced sideways at Birdie. "Too much imagination, that's your problem."

"He's thinking that exact same thing!"

"You giving me lip, child?"

"No, Grammy." There was a little pause. The bayou widened out and boats appeared, tied to a dock that ran along the near side of the water. "Where does it come from?" Birdie said.

"Where does what come from?"

"My too much imagination. Mama or my . . . my daddy?"

Another pause, this one heavier than the last and a bit uncomfortable, hard to explain how. Then Grammy said, "Let's just stick to our knitting."

I knew knitting from my puppy days, had a clear memory of a cat unraveling a whole big ball of wool and then making tracks, leaving me to take the fall. Was that the beginning of the end of my city life? I got the feeling of being close to some sort of understanding. It went away, so

that was that. Meanwhile, there was no sign of wool or knitting in the pickup. So either Grammy wasn't making sense or . . . I couldn't come up with any other possibility.

Birdie gave me a pat on the back of my neck. It felt good. I pressed against her hand. She pressed back. I pressed harder.

"Don't let him push you around like that," Grammy said.

"He's not."

"You're practically out the door."

"Bowser. Be good."

I gave her a lick on the side of the face. I can't be much better than that. Birdie laughed—what a lovely sound!—and was still laughing when we turned off the road and parked in front of a very interesting building. It was low and yellow with a long porch crowded with fishnets and buoys and barrels and coils of rope, and had a big sign on the roof in the shape of a fish.

"Here we are, Bowser," Birdie said. "'Gaux Family Fish and Bait. Guided Swamp Tours, Live Bait, Crawfish by the Sack, Box Lunches to Go.' Only that 'Go' is spelled G-A-U-X, get it? Like a pun."

"Dogs don't spell," Grammy said. "Plus they sure as heck don't get puns." She leaned forward, her washed-out eyes narrowing. "And why's the door open? Place'll be full of flies. If I told him once I told him . . ."

By that time, Grammy was out of the pickup and striding toward the yellow building—bait shop or some other fishing thing, if I was in the picture—and calling, “Snoozy! Snoozy!”

Birdie and I followed, me somehow hopping out first, kind of a preference of mine. “Snoozy’s in trouble,” Birdie said.

We went inside. What a place, filled with smells and sights, way too many to describe now. Except for the cigar smoke scent, which happened to be a personal favorite. Grammy went right to the cash register at the back, where a skinny, long-haired dude sat slumped forward, head resting comfortably on the counter, eyes shut tight. Hey! Was he a drooler, too? I had a new friend already! What a day I was having, after so many with no friends at all!

Grammy smacked the counter right by his ear, good and hard. “Snoozy! Wake up!”

Snoozy sat up with a start. “Wha?” he said. “Wha?” Which was when he must have felt the drool on his face—a face that needed a shave, like maybe days ago—and started wiping it on the back of his arm. His arm was covered in tattoos right up to the armpit, Snoozy’s armpit easily seen on account of the sleeveless T-shirt he wore.

“Am I paying you to sleep?” Grammy said.

“Musta—musta dozed off,” Snoozy said. “Couldn’ta been more’n thirty seconds.”

“And you left the door open. How many—”

“Grammy?” Birdie said. “Where’s Black Jack?”

She pointed to the wall above Snoozy’s head. A yellow wall, but a big section of it was lighter and cleaner than the rest. Everybody looked in that direction. All at once, Grammy seemed to get a bit wobbly. She grasped the edge of the counter to steady herself.

“Grammy?” Birdie said, reaching out toward Grammy but not quite touching her. “Are you all right?”

Something stiffened in Grammy; you could see it. “I,” she said, “am fine.”

“Who’s Black Jack?” Snoozy said.

Grammy turned to him, slow and deliberate. She gritted her teeth, old teeth and yellow as the paint job in this place, but unchipped and very even. “Black Jack,” she said. “The championship black marlin caught offa Grand Isle by my daddy when he came back from the war and mounted right there on that wall ever since.”

Snoozy opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. His teeth were whiter than Grammy’s but way fewer in number. Imagine having a mouth that was mostly gaps! I felt bad for my new pal Snoozy.

“Couldn’ta been more’n thirty seconds,” he said.