

Chapter



There's something funny about that white car. It went by me a few minutes ago, going in the opposite direction. Then it turned around in a driveway, and now it's coming back, slow and easy. This is where being able to read would come in handy, because there are big blue letters on the door.

The car stops, and two guys get out—a young one and an older fat one. They're not paying any attention to me, but something tells me I should pay attention to them. They're coming my way, crossing the street but not looking at me. I duck behind a bush and sniff the air. The younger one has that scent that people get when they're gearing up to do something hard or exciting, like going on a journey or running a race. My boy, Noah,

used to smell a little bit like that on his first day of school every year.

I'm ducking down so I can see their feet. Okay, it was a false alarm. They're going right past me. But, wait! I'm getting another scent—a mixture of dogs, cats, urine, and disinfectant—the smell of an animal shelter! I gotta get out of here, fast! I only see one pair of feet now. Just as I'm turning, the fat guy comes up behind me. I scoot between his legs, knocking him off balance, then run around the back of a house.

“Watch out, he's getting away! He ran into the backyard.”

Good, there's no fence—just a bunch of yards connected to each other. I take long strides and move like the wind. Fat Guy chases me behind the first few garages, then drops back. He's panting like an old bulldog. I keep running. I'm too fast and too smart to get caught. That's why my mom named me K-10, because I'm one step above the other dogs.

Woo-hoo!

I'm catching a whiff of something good now. Meat! I'm starving. Haven't eaten in a

couple of days. Ah, I'm on the scent now. Must be just around the corner of this hedge. Yep, there it is—a big hunk of beef. Why would anybody leave that out here on the ground? Can't wait to sink my teeth into—"Hey! Hey hey hey hey hey HEY!" I bark.

A loop of rope drops over my head. Fat Guy from the shelter has it on the end of a long stick. Now he's pulling the cord snug around my neck. I roll and squirm and bite at the stick, but I can't get loose.

"Calm down, buddy," Fat Guy says as he eases me down the driveway.

"Calm down! Calm down? Let's see how calm you'd be with a noose around your neck, Fatso."

Young Guy is standing by their car. No wonder they got here so fast. They drove! That's not fair. They should give a dog a fighting chance. And since when did the shelter guys go around in a car, anyway? Last time I was caught, the guys were in a big truck with a picture of a dog on the side, to give us poor canines a clue. Unfair again!

Young Guy opens the back of the car, and

there's a big open cage inside. Before I know what's happening, they wrestle me into it, shut the door, and we drive off.

My heart is pounding fast. You never know what to expect at a shelter or pound. Sometimes the people are real nice and will keep a dog around until someone wants to adopt him. Other places aren't so nice, and if a dog doesn't find a family right away, they . . . well, I'm not going to think about that.

This is my . . . let's see, my fourth, fifth . . . no, my sixth time going to a shelter. Wow, I never stopped to count that up before. When I get out of here, I'm going to be a lot more careful.

We must be pulling up to the shelter now. Young Guy puts a collar and leash on me, and the two of them take me inside. I've never seen this place before. The lady at the desk yawns. She has that scent that people get when they're bored. "What's the story with this one?"

"No story," Fat Guy says. "No collar, no tags. Just another stray."

"I'm not a stray, I'm a free and independent dog," I bark, but they don't understand me.

The woman writes something on a piece of paper, then takes me into a kennel, where every dog starts barking at once. She closes me in a cage, then comes back with food and water. “Here’s a nice meal for you, boy,” she says. “You look like you haven’t been eating too regular lately.” She scratches me behind my ears before she closes my cage again. Looks like this may be a good place, but you can never tell. Could be just one nice lady in a bad shelter.

Somebody calls, “Hey, new guy. What’s your name?”

I don’t answer. I’m going to keep quiet tonight until I see what’s what. Each one of these joints is a little different. Have to play it slow at first—feel out the situation. There are a few more shout-outs, but the commotion dies down when they all get the picture that I’m not talking.

The chow isn’t anything special, but I’ve had worse. I polish it off, then settle in on my cot. I can sleep anywhere and eat anything. I’m lucky that way. My mom always told me it doesn’t pay to be fussy, because you never know where you’re going to end up. I bet she

never pictured me in a place like this. Or maybe she did.

The only good thing about being in a cage is that you don't have to keep one eye open in case some other animal is sneaking up on you while you're sleeping. I'll catch up on my rest tonight. I'll probably be adopted tomorrow. Maybe I'll get a good home this time, not that it matters. I've had it with humans.

I only stayed a couple of days with the last guy. He seemed nice enough, but most humans do at first. Even if they start out by playing with you, taking you for long walks, and telling you what a good boy you are, pretty soon they start slacking off. Next thing you know, all you get is food in the dish, a pat on the head, and a quick stop outside, where they keep yelling, "Hurry up, do your business." They don't understand that a dog has to find the exact right spot, and it takes a lot of sniffing and circling to get there. And don't think I haven't noticed how long some people can squat on that pot in the bathroom to do *their* business. I had one owner who used to read the whole newspaper sitting in there—every day!

Anyway, this last owner, who called me Harley—I don't remember his name—he was still in the long-walks-and-playing stage, but I decided not to wait around for things to go bad. I slipped my collar and ran. So I'll play the "please take me home with you" game tomorrow, but it's only my ticket out of here. Nothing more.

I'm beat. At least it'll be good to have a few squares and a warm place to sleep tonight. Somebody's snoring down the hall. I start breathing in his rhythm, and pretty soon I'm heading for dreamland. Works every time.

I wake up the next morning when a guy comes in with food, and the others raise a ruckus all over again. Nobody's shouting for me, though. All anybody cares about is the food.

Before I get a chance to finish eating, the guy comes back. "Bath time, sport. You smell like a sewer."

He lifts me into a big sink and squirts that awful vermin-killing soap all over my fur. Man, that stuff reeks. Makes my eyes water. Never could understand why people love that

fake perfume stuff, but when you smell like a natural dog, they think you stink.

The guy rinses off the soap with cold water from a hose. Sheesh! They never heard of hot water? He takes me into another room, and things start looking up. There's a beautiful girl smiling at me. "Well, aren't you a cute one?" I tilt my head and raise my right ear, just to show her I can be even cuter if I try. She laughs. Humans love that move—especially girls.

The girl puts me up on a table and starts drying me off with a big towel. Then she begins working on me with a brush and a hair dryer. Finally, I'm warming up. Being brushed makes me relax and start to daydream.

"You must have some golden retriever in you," Amy says.

She's right about that. I'm half golden. I was born on a farm and lived there with Mom and my brothers and sisters. Then one day a nice couple adopted me and called me Butterscotch. I don't remember their names. It was a good place to live at first, until they starting leaving me alone all day long. Pretty soon they stopped liking me and took me back to the farm.

I was so happy to see Mom again. I hoped she could tell me what I did wrong. “They said I was getting too big, Mom. How do I stop growing?”

“I’m a golden retriever and your father is part collie,” she said. “You’re going to be a big dog. You can’t help it.”

“I tried to be good, Mom, but they left me alone every day. I got so lonesome. I kept calling for somebody to come play with me. They called me ‘bad dog’ all the time.”

“Humans don’t have much patience with barking dogs, son. When you go to your next home, try to tell yourself stories to keep entertained.” Mom nuzzled me. “You’re not a bad dog at all. You’re wonderful. As a matter of fact, I’m going to name you K-10, because I think you’re one step above all the other canines. You’re the only one of my puppies that I’ve ever named.”

So that’s how I got my real name, and no matter what people call me when they adopt me, I call myself K-10.

The girl tugs at a tangle with the brush and brings me out of my daydream. “There,

look how nice and fluffy your coat is. Fluffy would be a perfect name for you. I think I'll write that on your card."

Aw, *Fluffy*? That's the worst name yet. Sounds like a cat—a *girl* cat.

She spends some extra time fussing with the top of my head. "You've had a hard life, haven't you, Fluffy? I can comb some of the longer fur over to hide that split in your ear. There, that's better. Can't hide the scar on your nose, though."

Split ear? Scarred nose? I guess those fights I was in left their marks. Next time I see my reflection in a puddle, I'll have to check myself over.

The girl gives me a trim here and there, clips my nails, then snaps on a leash and leads me out into the adoption area—a long, narrow room with cages lined up along each side. She closes the door to my cage and fastens a card to the bars. "There you go, Fluffy. You make nice for the people, and you'll be in a new home before you know it. Yes sir, you sure are a cute one."

There, she said it again. I am cute. I knew it.

There's a low woof from the next cage.
"Hey, what about me?"

The girl squats down and reaches inside.
"I know, Tucker. You want a home, too, don't you, boy? I'd take you home with me if they allowed pets in my apartment building."

For a second I think she understands dog talk, but then I realize she's a dog person. People like her don't catch the words, but they're good at figuring out what a dog is thinking. I've known a few dog people—like my boy, Noah.

There's a sheet of metal between each pair of cages, but ours is a little short, so I can peek around it and see Tucker. He's an old mutt—been around the block a few times. The girl pats him on the head, then leaves. She looks sad.

Tucker sees me spying on him. "Are you the guy who came in last night?"

"Yep, that's me. My name's K-10."

"What kind of a name is that?"

I explain why Mom called me that.

Tucker shook his head. "That's a mother for you. They think all their pups are perfect.

Then we end up in a place like this. They'll let the people in soon. If you look friendly, somebody might take you home."

"I've been in shelters before," I say. "I know the drill. Somebody always adopts me on the first day."

Tucker sighs. "Maybe you should be teaching me, then. I've only had one owner. His name was Jake. Then he died, and nobody in his family wanted me."

"You were with one guy your whole life? Wasn't it boring?"

Tucker looks puzzled. "It was wonderful. Jake and I were best friends."

"Listen," I say. "People will always let you down. The only one you can count on is yourself."

I can tell Tucker doesn't get this. "So why did they bring you back?" he asks.

"Who?"

"You said you always get adopted on the first day. Why did your families bring you back to the shelter and leave you?"

"They didn't leave me. I left them. The call of the open road, you know? Freedom!"

The expression on Tucker's face tells me that he still has no clue what I'm talking about, so I change the subject. "So, how long have you been here?" I ask.

Tucker droops his ears. "I'm not sure, but I think I'm near the end of my time, because that girl who just brought you in—Amy—is getting sadder every day. They don't keep you here forever, you know. If nobody adopts you, they . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Listen, you gotta spruce up your act, Tucker."

"My act?"

"Show me what you do when the people come in."

"I don't do anything."

"No wonder you're not getting any action. You gotta look cute."

Tucker's ears drooped. "Jake didn't care if I was cute. He liked me just the way I was."

"Well, that was then, this is now. You want a new owner, you have to make yourself into a new dog. Try this." I give him my best move—the full head tilt, ear perk, with big, sad eyes.

"Is that supposed to be cute?" Tucker asks.

"Forget it. I was only trying to help you.

It's no skin off my snout if nobody takes you." I go to the back of my cage, where he can't see me.

"Wait, K-10. I'm serious. I'm not sure what 'cute' is. Am I doing it right?"

I peek into his cage. "You're tilting your head too far. You look like somebody's trying to strangle you with your collar."

He straightens up a little.

"Okay, that's better. Now perk one ear up."

All of a sudden Tucker is scrunching up his face, but his ears are just hanging there. "Is it perked?"

"I can't even tell which ear you're working on."

Tucker tries again, squeezing his eyes shut and wrinkling his nose, but there is zero ear action. I'm talking not a twitch. Just then, the outside door opens and people start coming in. "Forget the ear perk, Tucker. Just look friendly. It's showtime."

He sighs. "I'll try but I don't think it'll work. I get all excited when the people start coming in, because I think maybe it was all a

mistake, you know? Maybe Jake didn't really die and he'll come to get me. Sometimes I even see shoes like his, but when I look up, it's never Jake."

"Give it one more shot," I say. "Today's your day. I can feel it."

The people are coming by our cages now. There are a lot of families with kids, so I don't go into my act for them. I still have a soft spot for kids, but I've never found another Noah.

Then I see them coming in the door—a mother and two boys. One is kind of young, the ear-pulling, ride-on-your-back age, but the older one is a dog kid. I can spot one three driveways away. Sure enough, he sees me and comes running over. "Look at this dog, Mom. He's perfect."

He looks almost familiar. I can't believe it. At first I pull a Tucker, getting all excited, thinking it's Noah, but then I sniff his scent and know it isn't. Still, my heart speeds up a little.

Tucker woofs. "Looks like you got one already, K-10."

I can't take my eyes off the kid. "Yeah, maybe," I whisper. I put my front paws up on the bars of my cage, so our eyes are almost level. The mother is dragging the smaller kid farther down the line. "Not that one, Timothy. He's just a mutt."

Uh-oh. Can't let this one get away. The words *forever home* pop into my head. That's what Noah's family said they were. Well, that one didn't work out, but maybe . . . just maybe. I pull back my lips in a smile. This does not come naturally to me, but it's something I learned a few shelters ago from a Samoyed.

"But, Mom, he's smiling! Come see."

"You think they're going to take you?" Tucker woofs.

"I hope so," I say. "He looks just like my boy, Noah."

I'm sorry I said that out loud. Don't want to jinx it. Timothy and I are staring eye to eye, soul to soul, and I know that this kid and I could be best friends. "Tell your mom you want me," I say. "Tell her I'm your dog." I lean in and lick the fingers that are clutching the

bars of my cage. He giggles. I love that sound. And he tastes like potato chips.

“Here’s a poodle, Timothy,” the mother calls out. “Your brother won’t be allergic to poodles, because they have nonshedding hair instead of fur.”

No-o-o-o! Not the poodle–allergy argument! I’m allergic to the poodles I’ve met because of their stuck-up personalities, but does anybody ever stop to think about that? Of course not.

“C’mon, Timothy,” I say. “We’ll have a blast. I’m the best Frisbee catcher in the whole entire world.”

Timothy seems to be understanding me. Like I said, he’s a dog kid.

Then his mother calls again. He turns and runs off without a backward glance. I can’t believe it. He’s giving up on me! No argument. No begging to take me home.

“What happened?” Tucker asks.

“That kid is no Noah. Besides, his mother had some nerve calling me a mutt.”

“You are a mutt,” Tucker says.

“Okay, maybe I am, but she said it like it

was a bad thing. We mutts are special, like snowflakes, you know? No two of us are exactly alike.”

But I don't feel special at all. I feel like a soccer ball that has had all the air kicked out of it. Why did I let myself get my hopes up about that kid? It's amazing how humans can disappoint you without even adopting you.

I peek around to see how Tucker is doing. He's lying in the back corner of his cage with his head on his paws. “Hey!” I yell. “Look lively, will you? Nobody's going to take you if you don't attract attention.”

A family walks by Tucker's cage without stopping.

“Come on, Tucker. You just let some good ones get past you.”

“I know, but I can't pretend to be happy when I'm not.”

“I'll cheer you up,” I say, thinking of the last dog joke I heard. “Why did the beagle like to go to the psychiatrist?”

“I don't know. Why?”

“Because it was the only place he was allowed to lie on the couch.”

Tucker chuckles and seems to brighten up for a second or two, then he lets his head droop. “Jake used to let me lie on the couch,” he mumbles.

“Get a grip, will you? Jake isn’t coming back, so snap out of it. You don’t see me getting all mopey about Noah, do you? We gotta take what we can get. Here come some more people. Stand up and move out where they can see you.”

“All right.” He shuffles to the front of the cage.

“That’s it. Wag your tail. Good. Lift that chin up a little. Nice. Turn and give them a side angle. Okay, now you’re getting the idea. Work it. *Work it!*”

A little girl runs over and grabs the bars of Tucker’s cage. “Look at this one. His name is Tucker. Isn’t he sweet?”

“You hooked her,” I tell him. “Now reel her in nice and slow. Add the head tilt—just a little bit.”

“This is the one I want, Daddy. Can we take him home with us?”

The father comes over. “I don’t want to get a dog with medical problems, Clare. This one has something wrong with his eyes.”

His eyes? I look over at him. He has his face all smooshed up again and he’s squinting. “Aw, Tucker. I told you to forget about the ear perk. Now look what you’ve done. You almost had them.”

I coach Tucker for the next hour, but nobody wants him. Meanwhile, I almost hook a family for myself. The kid loves me, but the mother says, “That dog is too noisy. He’s been barking every second since we came in here.”

Now, that’s a home I don’t want to go to. I’m not barking. I’m trying to help a friend get a place to live. A dog person would know the difference, even if she didn’t understand what I was saying.

I’ve pretty much given up on Tucker when this old guy comes over to his cage. I figure nothing is going to happen, because Tucker is back into his blue funk again. Sure enough, the guy walks by, then comes over and looks at me.

I start into my act, but not too lively. A geezer wants a calm dog, not some young pup that's gonna drag him around the block. Now the guy is looking at Tucker again. He's getting down on one knee and reaching a finger through the cage to scratch Tucker behind the ears. "You look just like my old dog, Rusty. Same eyes."

I check Tucker out. He's not even trying anymore. He's just looking up at the guy, sort of sad. Sheesh. All that good advice I gave him, and he doesn't remember a thing.

All of a sudden the geezer says, "You want to come home with me, boy?"

You could knock me over with a whisker. Who knew you could lie there like a lump and somebody would adopt you? Who knew?

Tucker is surprised, too. "He wants me," he says, peeking through to my cage. "You think I should go?"

"What are you, crazy? Of course you should go!"

The guy leaves and comes back with Amy. She's so excited, she's practically skipping. She gives Tucker a big hug. "I knew you'd find a home," she whispers in his ear. "I just wish

you hadn't waited till your last day. You made a nervous wreck out of me." She snaps on a leash and hands it to the old guy.

As Amy is talking to his new owner, Tucker comes over to my cage. "Thanks for your help, K-10. Only trouble is, you spent so much time on me, you never got to find a home for yourself."

"Don't worry about me," I tell him. "I have a whole routine I can go into. I didn't even get warmed up yet."

"Yeah, but you're not getting any younger, you know? Most people want to adopt the young ones."

"What are you talking about?" I say. "I still feel like a pup."

"You may feel like a pup, but those white hairs on your muzzle are a dead giveaway. All I'm saying is, don't get too cocky and use up all your time. Get yourself out of here instead of helping somebody else, you hear? Look how close I came to . . . you know."

I wish Tucker remembered when he came to the shelter, because Amy said today was his last day. How long do they give you here?

A couple of weeks? One week . . . or less? But I don't want Tucker to see that I'm worried.

They start moving toward the door. "I'll be fine," I call out. "You have a nice life, Tucker."

He looks over his shoulder. "You too, K-10. A nice long life, if you catch my drift."

I catch his drift, all right. Here I think I'm the handsomest dog in the place—a sure thing to get adopted—and now I find out I look old and battle-scarred. When did that happen?

"Visiting hours are over for today," Amy says. "Thanks for coming, everybody." That's when I realize all the people are heading for the door.

And for the first time in my life, I'm about to spend a second night in the slammer.