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UNDER MY HAT
TALES *from the* CAULDRON

Edited by Jonathan Strahan

HOT KEY BOOKS

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STRAY MAGIC

DIANA PETERFREUND

YOU CAN'T HAVE this job unless you love animals, but if you love animals, it's hard to have this job. We're a no-kill shelter, but all that means is that there are some animals who are stuck here for life, wasting away in their little cages. And sometimes we're too full and we have to turn animals away, knowing they'll be taken to the county shelter, where they'll be put down after seventy-two hours.

Three days. That's how long they give them at county. Three days for their owners to find them if they're lost (which, trust me, they usually aren't), or for them to find a new home. Jeremy, my buddy over there, sends me likely candidates for adoption whenever we have space. Good dogs, adorable puppies that all have the potential to be great companions, if only they get the chance to try.

I don't know what he's thinking with this latest one, though. There has to be some sort of mix-up. Jeremy's voice mail described her as a young golden retriever mix, but when I arrive at the shelter, the crate waiting for me outside the back door does not have a golden inside. What it contains is the most bedraggled,

patchy-coated, pathetic creature I've ever seen. The dog's twelve if she's a day. What's left of her fur is a stained and dingy white. Her eyes are bloodshot, her chocolate-and-pink nose is dry and cracked, some kind of mite's been gnawing on her floppy ears, and she's got a big old infected scrape on her belly oozing pus into the remaining mats of her hair.

Adoptable? Not in this state. I wonder what Jeremy was thinking, sending along a hopeless case like her.

I grab a leash and open up the crate door. "So you're the one who they caught out wandering on the highway, huh?"

Highway dogs are the worst. This one was probably dumped by her owner because she was too old, or because she was diagnosed with some terminal illness and they didn't have the heart or the money to watch her get put down. Happens all the time out here. I guess people just delude themselves into thinking their pets are going to live out their days in a nice country farmhouse. People think this is the land of milk and honey for unwanted dogs.

Wrong. It's the land of roadkill and pound euthanasia.

The dog crushes itself against the far corner of the crate. Typical. I see a dozen cases like this a week. Usually they're terrified, and they have a right to be.

"I'm just going to take you inside and get you some nice kibble." I grab her by the scruff of the neck and tug her out into the light.

And darn it if she's not a golden retriever. I'm so shocked, I let go of her, and she shoots off. Or tries to, anyway, as I know that trick well. I snatch up the end of the leash before it disappears, and her flight stops short. She whimpers as I haul her

back, and I blink my eyes to clear them, for she's the old white dog again. Strangest thing ever.

She slumps and stops struggling as I lead her inside. The dogs in the cages start up the second I flick on the lights. I lead the newcomer to crate nineteen. "Welcome to Shelter from the Storm. I'm your host, Malou."

She beelines for the blanket in the darkest corner of the kennel and curls up, resting her head on her paws and looking at me dejectedly. Those big brown eyes are just about the saddest I've ever seen—and I work in a pet shelter, so that's saying something. Must be the eyes that got to Jeremy, though he's a pretty tough sell after eight months volunteering at county.

He fits there, though. He wants to be a vet, and they've already taught him how to spay kittens. I just do this to get my dog fix—we can't have pets at home since Carson's allergic. At least, that's what Cynthia, my stepmother, says, but my baby half brother never sneezes when I come home from the kennel covered in fur. I appealed to my dad, but since he's gone most of the time, he lets Cynthia have the final say in all home matters. So if I want to play with puppies, I have to do it at the shelter.

I guess it's better this way. I know if she'd let me I'd bring them all home. "You're going to be fine here," I say to the new dog in that high, soft voice they all like.

No I'm not. I'm doomed.

She might as well have spoken the words aloud. I swear some days I can read their thoughts—not that most of them have thoughts other than "play with me, pet me, feed me." Dogs aren't simple, but their needs are. They don't ask for much, and even then most people let them down.

"I know what will make you feel better."

Doubt it.

"Some kibble." I wonder what brand Libby, the shelter manager, managed to find on sale at the supermarket this week. The food here's not great, but it's better than nothing—which is what a lot of these dogs are used to getting.

I fill a bowl for the newcomer, then start the routine of changing papers and feeding the others. I let the socialized ones out to run around in the yard for a bit while I process our latest arrival. Libby says they adopt better with a cute name, rather than something like "Old white dog" or "Crate #19." I check on the new dog, who hasn't eaten her kibble yet. Sometimes they come in starving and will wolf down whatever they can get, and sometimes they come in too scared or too depressed to eat, especially if they think you're watching.

"What would be a good name for you?" I tap my fingers on my mouth, considering.

My name is Goneril.

The dog doesn't lift her head, but her eyes are glued to me.

"Pearl?" I ask. Something stately, I think. This is not a goofball dog.

Goneril. The thought's more insistent this time. *Goneril Aurelia Boudicca Yseult, to be exact.*

I write "Gaby" on the chart and hang it from the hook at the top of the crate.

The dog lifts her head. *Wait . . . Gaby?*

I swear, sometimes it's like they're really talking to you. "You should have seen some of the names they gave you guys before I came along. Really cheesy stuff. Cuddles. Punkin. You prob-

ably would have ended up a Snowball. I guess it helps to get you adopted, but you're too dignified for a name like that, aren't you? No matter what you're looking like now."

Wait, you can see me? The real me? She stands and bats her paw against the bars.

"Are you thirsty, girl?" I kneel to undo the crate door and grab her water dish. Gaby throws herself against it, but I hold it closed. See? I know all their tricks.

You understand me! She sits and her whiplike tail flops once on the concrete floor. I let go of the door. There's something seriously weird going on with this dog.

And you see the real me, too. Gaby stands now and moves into the thin shaft of sunlight that slices across the back corner of the crate.

I fall back on my butt. This can't be real. There's the old white dog, but then, in flickers like a broken filmstrip, I can see bits of golden retriever, hanging in scraps. I watch in shock as the dog noses her golden flank back into place. As soon as she moves, it slips again.

It's the glamour. It's fading. Every spell my master put on me is breaking.

"The glamour?" I whisper, hardly believing the words coming out of my mouth. I am answering the dog. Because . . . she's talking to me.

Gaby bounds back over to the door. Her tail comes out from between her legs, and her eyes aren't quite as filled with despair.

"What are you, Gaby?" I ask.

Goneril.

"Goneril."

I'm a dog.

A talking dog. A talking dog who sometimes looks like a young, well-groomed golden retriever, and sometimes . . . doesn't. "You're not like most dogs I know."

I'm my master's dog. His . . . special dog.

Poor, deluded pooch. They all think they're special, until they're dumped on the side of the road.

And I've lost him.

"You mean you're lost? You wandered off?"

No! One second I was in the car with him . . . and then I wasn't.

A highway dump. I knew it.

I lost him.

And I might just have lost my mind. "How are you doing this?"

The dog—Goneril—snorts. *I told you. It's a glamour. I have all these pieces of magic I got from my master. But now that we're separated, they're falling to pieces.*

I crawl toward the kennel, too flabbergasted to speak. The dogs nearby are transfixed, too. None of the usual barking, whining, scratching, or even snoozing. Whatever's happening here, they're witnesses, too. At least the dogs prove I'm not hallucinating.

And when they're gone, Goneril continues, *I'll die.*

"Mary Louise," Jeremy singsongs into the phone when I call. "What can I do you for?"

"What kind of game are you playing?" I snap.

Goneril paces at my feet, jabbering away. *My master—he's been using his magic to keep me alive for a good fifteen years.*

"What do you mean?" Jeremy asks. "Didn't you pick up the golden?"

"There's no golden." I watch as another shred of the weird golden-retriever filmstrip disintegrates off Goneril's back. "It's . . . something else. And if this is some kind of practical joke, it's cruel."

Without him I'm done for.

Jeremy sighs. "Not another one of your 'No pit bull' speeches. Because first of all, you sound like a broken record, and second, there's no way that's a pit mix. Golden and collie maybe, or golden and spaniel—"

"It's not a golden at all!" I cry. "And it's not my fault that Libby is prejudiced against pits."

Would you believe I'm thirty?

I press the mute button on my phone and look down at Goneril. "Really? That you're two hundred and ten in dog years—*that's* the part you think it's hard for me to believe?"

Good point.

Jeremy's still on mute, so I feel free to talk to the dog. "You're saying all this stuff—the talking, the golden retriever disguise—it's a result of some kind of spell your owner put on you?"

Goneril starts to pant. Her tail flops twice. *My master, yes. He's a witch.*

"I thought witches kept cats."

She snorts. *Not mine! Cats suck.*

"Whatever breed it is," Jeremy is saying, sounding annoyed. I turn back to the phone. "She has a sweet disposition, responds well to voice commands—seems like an excellent adoption candidate."

The talking 210-year-old dog is still going strong. *I need to*

find my master to mend the spells. The glamour is unimportant—what I really need is to make sure the spell on my heart is still working. This is why you need to let me out.

I shake my head at her. I'm not about to let this dog back on the streets—Jeremy would have my head. "I'm sorry," I say aloud. "There's no way that can happen."

Goneril sighs.

So does Jeremy. "If you don't think you can place her, I'll take her back to the pound. . . ."

Is that manipulative or what? Jeremy knows darn well that I won't give up a dog I can save.

But I have to get back to my master! At the rate this magic's failing I'd guess I only have about three days.

"But you know what that means. She'll only have three days."

"Three days," I say to both of them. "That's a tall order."

That afternoon, I focus on making Goneril look as good as possible, cutting the mats out of her hair, smearing ointment on that scrape on her belly, and cleaning up her paws.

She's unimpressed. *This is a waste of time. I can't be adopted by just anyone. I need my master. My master fixed my leg, he propped up my heart, he stalled this tumor I've got in my neck.* She blinked her eyes at me. *See these peepers? No cataracts, thanks to my master's magic.*

Dogs have the most ridiculously misplaced sense of loyalty. Libby was on a raid with Animal Services last month and she brought back horror stories. A bunch of abused animals, starving, with broken bones and open sores, and they *still* responded to their master's call.