

Loose Dogs

By Kirsten Mortensen

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For pit bulls and the people who love them.

PART I

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It finally felt like spring, and wouldn't you know it, I got a call about an Eskimo dog.

Hah.

Anyway, I assumed I was looking for an Eskimo dog, based on the description. "Like a fluffy white fox."

Admittedly, that was second-hand information. The call had come from a lady in the high school main office, but it wasn't the lady who'd seen the dog. Some kids had reported it: a dog, loose, running back and forth along the edge of the school grounds.

Scared, maybe.

Or maybe not.

Maybe he was happy to be running around free.

I looped through the neighborhoods bordering the school property. The snow had pretty much melted, finally, and what was left of it was ridged along the streets, sunken, crystallized, filthy. I had to crane my neck to see over the ridges, and I drove slowly, windows rolled down, peering back and forth, looking, and listening too—sometimes you find out where a loose dog is when you hear the squeal of car brakes.

A normal day, in other words—me just doing my job. My town's official Ms. Dogcatcher Lady, trying to return a loose dog to where he belonged.

It isn't easy. Loose dogs don't follow rules. They aren't predictable. They don't keep to the sidewalks or respect property boundaries. They don't come when called.

Loose dogs are elusive things.



I circled back to the school again, parked the truck and went inside to find the person who'd called me. "Angie." In the main office. She caught sight of me right away and came to the visitor window.

"Sorry," I said. "No sign of the dog."

She sighed and made a sad face. "Poor thing."

In my work duds I look kind of like a cop, which is fine by me. It keeps things unambiguous. I wear a badge, and a white shirt, and navy slacks with sharp seams. Cell phone hanging from my belt. Hair tied back. But for all that, it's the dog person Angie saw when she looked at me. So I nodded, feeling my face pull as sad as hers. And then excused myself, saying "most of the time, they find their way back home"—not true, fewer than half of the dogs we pick up get re-claimed. But I didn't take this job to spend time thinking about that.

I went back out to the parking lot and opened the door of my truck.

Then I heard the shriek.

Make that a chorus of shrieks, and the peculiar high-pitched laughter teenage girls can let loose sometimes, and something told me the ruckus was about the dog. I grabbed my catchpole out of the truck and ran around the side of the school and sure enough, there was a gaggle of girls, seniors I suppose straggling back from lunch, and they were bending over and laughing and falling on themselves, and beyond them: the dog, running flat out across the athletic field.

One of the girls saw me and shrieked again, "there! there!" Pointing. I kept my expression neutral and nodded "thanks" and started running after the dog.

I could run, at that point, because he—I didn't know yet if the dog was a he or a she, but I'd started thinking of him as a he—he didn't know yet that I was there, so my running toward him didn't matter. I was also thinking as I ran that he belonged to somebody who lived nearby, or he wouldn't have shown back up at the school. Territory thing. Which meant that if I missed him this time, I might still get another chance. So that was good. Assuming he was smart about dodging cars. Or lucky.

At the edge of the school property the dog froze, then started to double back and saw me. But I'd anticipated that. I'd already stopped. I turned my body sideways to him—showing him I wasn't a threat—watching him out of the corner of my eye.

He sniffed the ground. Good sign.

I approached, but not direct on—approach straight on and he'd likely take off again—my body still turned sideways, avoiding direct eye contact, making a kind of elliptical spiral to camouflage that I was closing in.

He dropped into a down position.

Tired of running.

Ready to trade away his freedom.

I stopped and crouched, still avoiding eye contact while I fumbled for my pouch of liver treats. He was looking away from me, his head turned, and I left the catchpole on the ground as I stood slowly back up, circled a bit closer, and tossed a treat. I was talking to him now, “good boy, sweet boy.” Happy voice, but not loud. Relaxed. Like the way we women coo to our dogs while we’re curled up together on the living room couch.

The strays I catch are almost always pets, of course, although when they’re off their home turf they don’t always act it. Still, tell them “sit” or “down” and half the time they’ll do it. Then you can just walk up and leash them.

But this time, I didn’t even need to go that far. He came to me and then crawled into my lap, taking another treat from my hand.

Sweet boy.

I stroked him to make sure he was relaxed about being handled and clipped the leash to his collar as he took another treat. Then I slipped an arm under him. His belly fur was gray and straggly and dripping with gravelly mud, and he stiffened when I lifted him and turned his head away from me but he didn’t struggle so I knew we were going to be okay.

Collar, but no tags.

Back at the truck, I scanned him with the handheld I keep in the glove box. No microchip, either. But he was a sweetheart, so even if his people didn’t claim him, somebody would want him.

That’s what I was thinking after I dropped him off at the animal hospital—first stop for most of the strays I pick up.

There might be a happy ending. For this dog, at least.



It was late by then so I swung by the office to drop off the truck and then I headed home.

I live in the westerly half of the only double in my neighborhood. The sole rental on a fairy tale street of sturdy old homes and 100-year-old trees.

Got to my place about 5:30, parked my Civic in the driveway and went in through the front door so I could grab my mail. And there it was, sticking up out of the top of the mailbox: a package.

Well, not really a package. It was one of those bubble wrap-lined manila envelopes, but with a lump in the middle, something-other-than-a-letter inside, and then I saw the handwriting.

It was from Gil.

I stared.

And then I knew what was inside.

I just knew.

I tore open the envelope and cripes, the bundle was all duct tape. Freaking duct tape. How like a guy.

So I had to take it inside and get some scissors.

I cut through the duct tape, and inside it was another little bundle of bubble wrap, and through the layer of plastic bubbles I could see the ring.

Impossible.

Yet there it was.

The Ring.

You think you know what you're doing. You're pretty sure you do. But it's always possible you're wrong. It's always possible that someone you expect to do one thing will do something else entirely, and when it comes to love, the gamble, of course, is that you might lose. You might lose him forever.

I'm not afraid to gamble. But the stakes this time were so high . . .

I sat down at my kitchen table and tore a hole in the bubble wrap, and my heart was beating hard, like all the fear I'd stored up—all that fear that I might be wrong about him and lose him—it all punched through the wall now and hit me, all at once.

He actually bought the ring.

When?

It didn't matter.

All that mattered is that he'd bought the ring.

That silly, oversized, not-a-diamond ring.

And now I was holding it in my hand.

Everything from here on in would be easy.