

## CHAPTER ONE

“Get it, Fred! Get the ball!”

Taylor threw the tennis ball across the kitchen and I went galloping after it, my paws slipping and skittering on the slick linoleum. It bounced off the pantry door and so did I. I stabbed at the ball with a paw but it squirted across the floor, rattled around under the table and finally dribbled into the corner next to the refrigerator, where I trapped it between my paws and my snout. But just as I was about to pick it up, Taylor snatched it away and threw it across the room again.

“Go get it, Freddie!”

With a good-natured grin on my face, I galumphed after it. I think it’s part of a dog’s job to keep everyone in the house entertained. I dropped the ball at Taylor’s feet.

“Good dog. Freddie want a treat?”

I led her to the cabinet and wagged my tail eagerly. As usual, she made me Sit, Stay, Speak, Roll Over, Dance, Jump, Beg, Chase In A Circle, Kiss, and Don’t Touch It before she finally gave me the stupid biscuit. --Kids.

At least I had the rest of the day to myself. The Bukowski family went off on one of their usual weekend adventures, leaving old Fred to guard the place.

I found a sunny spot in the yard to take a snooze.

I was just enjoying a dream of chasing a giant rabbit when the sound of growls and whines woke me up. It was Bitzy, my little poodle pal from next door. She pushed her curly head through the pickets.

She wriggled with pleasure at the sight of me, as usual. I had to smile at the way she looked: bristly all over, with a dirty mop of curls that half-hid her eyes. She wasn’t one of those nervous little cutesy-poodles with the fancy haircut, which I personally can’t stand.

She squeezed the rest of the way through the fence and we touched noses. “How ya doin’, poochie?” I growled.

“Me?” She hesitated. “I’m good, I guess.” She scratched herself distractedly. “How about you? How’d it go last night? Anything exciting happen?”

“Nothing too much,” I said. Which was the truth. But the plain truth wasn’t good enough for me. I liked to embellish things a bit for my pal Bitz. “The first hour or so, Bukowski and I drove around in the patrol car with Smitty. Then we got a call about a robbery in progress.”

“Really?” she panted. “What happened?”

“Smitty drove us close, and then the three of us moved in. It was a grocery store. Two tough guys were grabbing all the food in the place.”

“Did they have guns?” asked Bitzy eagerly. “Come on, make with the details!”

“Sure,” I grunted. “Big fancy ones. Each guy had a pair of them.”

“Wow!” Her eyes almost bugged out of her head. Then she said, “But how could they hold the guns while they were grabbing the food?”

“Huh?” I blinked a couple of times. “They uh, they had some lady fill a basket for them.”

“So she was like a --a hostage?”

“Uh, yeah, something like that.”

“Were there other hostages, too?” she wanted to know.

“Hm? --Oh yeah. At least a dozen.”

“Holy St. Bernard!” she yapped. “So what happened? Did Bukowski call for backup?”

“Nah. It was only two of them, like I said. Smitty went around the back, then me and Bukowski busted in and disarmed them. --Man, I hate the taste of gun metal.”

“Boy oh boy!” said Bitzy. “You sure lead an exciting life, working with cops and all.”

I shrugged. “I suppose.” I had to smile at poor Bitzy. She didn’t have a lot going for her, other than the tales I told her. She lived for them. And to tell the truth, I enjoyed spinning them, too.

She gazed up at me, her eyes glowing with admiration. Then the glow faded and she looked away.

“What’s the matter?” I growled.

With a nervous little twitch she said, “Whaddya mean? Why should something be the matter?”

“You look kind of worried, that’s all.”

She scratched and scratched at her side. “Worried? Me? I’m fine, just fine.”

I looked more closely at her.

She refused to meet my eye.

“You may as well tell me,” I said.

She sighed. “Fritz ran off.”

I almost laughed out loud. “Is that all? What’s the big deal? Cats are always running off. Now you get the whole house to yourself again.”

“Sure, that’s right!” she grinned. Then her smile drooped. “It’s not like it was my fault or something.”

“Why, who said it was?”

She didn’t answer.

I stared. “The family thinks you chased him away?”

She dropped her head and nodded.

I could see why they might think that. The skinny, sickly cat had arrived recently at the Johnson house: an intruder, as far as my pal was concerned. So Bitz was always growling and barking at Fritz, and Fritz was always yowling and hissing at Bitz. Well, cats and dogs. Bitz sure didn’t make the cat feel welcome. But at heart,

she wasn't mean. I was sure she hadn't done anything wrong.

I gave the dog version of a shrug, which in my case included a yawn. "They'll get over it."

"Maybe and maybe not," said Bitz. "In fact, if Fritz doesn't turn up pretty quick, they might even get rid of me."

Her words hung in the air like a bad smell. "That sure doesn't seem fair."

"Fair?" she yelped, "What's fair about anything in the Johnson joint? Besides, you know Max and Molly."

I knew all right. The Johnson twins were even worse than cats and dogs. Constantly teasing, mocking or tattling on each other, and arguing over every toy they owned. One thing was clear: if Molly had to give up Fritz, she'd make sure Max had to give up Bitz.

Bitzy shivered. "I could be facing the Dog Pound."

That name gave me the creeps. Her, too, I guess. I'd never seen her so upset.

"You gotta help me, Fred."

"Sure I will," I crooned.

"Willya? Really?"

"Sure, pal. Whatever it takes."

"I knew you would! I mean, after all, you're part bloodhound," she yipped.

"Uhh, r-r-right," I said.

"And you got all that police experience with Bukowski, too!" she added, her little tail spinning.

"Right again," I agreed smugly.

"For a smart dog like you, finding Fritz should be a piece of cake."

"Absolutely," I said. "Uh --Doing what?"

"Finding Fritz. I know you can do it, Fred."

I stared at her in disbelief. She knew I hated cats. I couldn't even stand their awful smell. I spun around to bite at a flea on my rump. But when I turned back, the look on the little pooch's face was enough to melt a pitbull's heart. "Will you help me?" she begged.

What could I say? We go back a long ways, Bitzy and me. And now she really needed me. How could I let her down? I sighed.

"Thank you, Fred, thank you, thank you! I knew you'd do the right thing. You're the greatest," she yipped.

I grinned and panted. "Hey, how hard can it be to find one smelly cat?"

## CHAPTER TWO

“So what’s the plan, huh, Fred? You gonna track down Fritz with your bloodhound nose?” Bitzy panted eagerly, waiting for the master detective to do his stuff.

I looked down at her grumpily. What was I supposed to tell her? That I’m so allergic to cats my bloodhound nose swells shut as soon as I catch their stink? That even when my nose isn’t swollen shut, I’m lucky to sniff out a bone in my own yard? That the only police action I’ve ever been on is a raid on a donut shop? That all I’ve learned from Bukowski is how to fetch the morning paper? I guess not!

But it didn’t really matter. My plan was to fake it until the cat came back on his own. Cats always come home when they get hungry, don’t they? All they think about is their stomachs anyway.

I paced along the fence, doing my best imitation of a police detective on a big case. I thought about the TV cops shows I’d seen. I furrowed my brow at Bitz. “I’ll need some facts. When exactly did Fritz disappear?”

“A few days ago.”

“Before or after the rain?”

“Before.”

“Huh. That could be a problem.” I scratched my ear. “Is anyone home over there?”

“No, why?”

I jumped at the fence and clambered over the top. Bitz pushed between the pickets and joined me in her yard.

The closer I got to the stink of cat, the more my eyes started watering. “Show me where he hung out,” I growled. “I need to get a snootful of his scent.”

Bitz led me over to a large oak tree. In a pocket among the thick tangled roots was a patch of Fritz’s white cat hair. “He used to nap here,” she said.

I had to force myself to get close. “Why do cats have to smell so bad?” I moaned.

“I dunno, they just do, I guess.”

I sniffed the area until I had Fritz’s odor memorized. My nose tickled from the smell and I sneezed. Bitzy whined sympathetically. I sneezed again. And again. And again. By now my eyes were watering so badly I couldn’t see straight.

“Now what? Do we find her trail?” yipped Bitz.

“Subthigg lyge dad,” I replied. I put my poor nose to the ground and made straight for the fence. As far as I could tell, no trails led anywhere. Either my nose stunk as a detecting device, or the rain had mixed up all the scents. But I sniffed at a bush and announced, “He wend daddaway.”

“So whatcha gonna do? You gonna follow him? Track him down?” Bitzy

yipped, all excited.

“Ob gorse I ab,” I assured her. “I’ll ged ryde odd idd.” I eyed her uneasily. “I could use adudder dose,” I added. “Just idd gase I lose the drail.”

“You mean-- you--you--you want me to help?”

“Sure, why dot?”

So off we went, side by side. There was only one problem: I didn’t even know if we were headed in the right direction.

In the middle of the block, I made a sudden turn between two parked cars. “Dis way,” I yapped, pretending I was on the track of the cat. Bitzy bought it.

“Wow, I can’t smell his trail at all,” she yapped.

I went on like that for block after block, zigging and zagging “dis way” and “dat,” piling up points with Bitzy, convincing her I knew where Fritz was going and that I knew what I was doing. Unfortunately, she was wrong on both counts.

The sun was dipping its toe into the ocean by the time we turned back. We were both tired and thirsty. Bitz looked pretty discouraged, too. But I gave her a long-tongued, panting grin. “We’re getting close. He’s definitely moving towards the waterfront. Now it’s just a matter of time.”

“You think so?” asked Bitzy with a worried set of wrinkles on her cute fuzzy face.

“Sure, kid, sure.”

I was positive we’d get home and find Fritz eating Bitzy’s dogfood and stinking up the joint.

It was dark when we slipped into our yards. I sniffed the air. There was no sign of the cat.

Well, he’d be back tomorrow, I was sure. At least my nose was finally unblocked. I said goodnight to Bitzy, went in through my dog-flap and lapped down my entire bowl of water. Playing detective was thirsty work.

“Fred, heel!” Taylor tugged at my leash. As the big sister, she acted bossy to both Josh and me. “Heel!” she repeated. “Heel!” That was one command I just didn’t get. I paused to sniff at a bush. It had rained half the night, and the air was clean and fresh.

“Hey, Taylor, wait up!”

We turned. It was Molly Johnson from next door.

We walked together down the street. Every now and then, Molly pulled a piece of paper out of her backpack and stuck it to a tree. I wondered what she was doing.

She and Taylor were talking. Sometimes I heard the word “Fritz,” so I knew they were talking about the cat. Then Molly started crying. I felt bad for her. I stood

on my hind legs, put my paws on her shoulders and licked at her tears. She hugged me around the neck, and then she really started to wail. I whined in sympathy. She really missed the cat. I hoped he'd get back home soon, for her sake and for Bitzy's.

We reached the corner and Molly stopped to put up another piece of paper. It was covered with dark blobs. Then Molly did something I didn't understand. She leaned into the paper and kissed it. What was that about? I tipped my head sideways. It was almost like--almost like she was kissing her missing cat. Suddenly the fur along my back stood up as a chill ran down my spine. I looked at the paper again. Was it possible? Could those dark blobs have something to do with Fritz? I stared. *And slowly, they revealed the face of a cat.* Not just any cat, but Fritz himself! Those pointy little ears, that cruel mouth, those cold little eyes--it was him! Then it hit me: those papers were asking everyone to help find her cat. Boy, people are smart!

I sniffed along the weeds, checking for places other dogs had been. But the rain had washed away their markers. Disappointed, I let Taylor lead me home.

Sue and Josh were already waiting in the car when we went up the driveway. Taylor waved to Molly, took off my leash and let me into the yard.

As soon as Bitzy saw me, she started dancing behind her fence, all perky and excited.

"What's up?" I asked. "Did Fritz come back?"

"Naw. I'm just excited to be working with a real dog detective. What did you do last night? Did you catch some more robbers?"

"Huh? --Oh. Robbers. --Let me think." But thinking is hard when you aren't getting any sleep. It takes a lot out of you, making up all these adventures. I was tempted to admit that even though Bukowski kept me up all night on patrol, nothing happened except I got no sleep. But I hated to let the little pooch down. So I spun out another tale.

"Me and Bukowski and Smitty were on the road when a car went speeding by. We chased it down. While Bukowski was writing out a ticket, I sniffed around the back of the car, back by the uh, the um, you know--"

"The trunk?"

"Yeah, the trunk. Anyway, I smelled something in there. Something um, bad."

"What was it?" Bitz yipped. "A bomb?"

I was startled. "A bomb?! Oh. Oh yeahh, r-r-right, it was a bomb. That's what it was all right."

"So what were they, terrorists?"

"Right, terrorists, sure, whatever. They were planning to blow up some buildings or bridges or something. --Did you catch us on TV last night?"

"You know the Johnsons never let me watch TV."

I not only knew it, I counted on it. "Too bad you missed it," I said. "It was all over the news."

“That’s great, Fred. Gee, you’re so famous and all, I’m almost embarrassed to have you look for Fritz. A missing cat is nothing compared to what you’re used to.”

“I guess. But you know me. Anything to help a pal.”

“And don’t think I don’t appreciate it,” said Bitz. “So what are we gonna do today? Head for the waterfront?”

Before I had a chance to figure out an answer to that one, Mrs. Johnson came out to the yard. “Bitzy, come.”

Bitzy turned eagerly and scampered up to her mom. Mrs. Johnson bent over and clicked a chain to her collar. “There. That should keep you from wandering all over town.” Then she turned and went back into the house.

I stared at the poor pooch through the fence. She was stuck. Grounded. A prisoner in her own back yard. Then I yawned. It wasn’t such a bad thing. At least she’d be here to greet Fritz when he returned. Besides, now I wouldn’t have to go running around pretending I was hot on his trail. I wandered over to a shady corner of the yard and flopped down contentedly. I really needed to catch up on my sleep. Being a policeman’s dog isn’t all donuts and walks.

## CHAPTER THREE

I let my eyes slide shut. But I couldn't sleep. I wished I hadn't told Bitz I'd help her. But what could I do? She looked up to me so. I just hoped the stupid cat would get home before Bitzy figured out I was no detective. That was all I really cared about.

I grunted and licked at an itch on my paw. Cats. I could never understand what people saw in them. They had none of the loyal feelings of dogs.

Another thing. Cats are all alike. You can't tell one from another, except for the color of their fur. They all have that screechy cat voice, that nasty cat smell, and that irritating cat personality: lazy, selfish, sneaky and mean. So what if Fritz didn't come back? Let the Johnsons get another cat. What difference would it make?

The next morning, I felt pretty good. I'd gotten a good night's sleep, plus another little snooze after breakfast, and I was all set to put on a show for Bitzy.

I found her lying sadly at the end of her chain. She barely wagged her tail at me. "Hullo, Fred," she moaned.

"Hiya, poochie. Why the sad face?"

"I wanted to check out the waterfront with you."

"Waste of time," I informed her. "I thought I'd talk to some of the local dogs instead. They might have seen or heard something."

The look of respect on Bitzy's face was a pure pleasure to me.

I grinned. Playing detective wasn't so tough. All I had to do was watch Bukowski and do what he did. He talked to people, so I'd talk to dogs. Not that I expected to learn anything from them. But it was better than a wild goose chase to the waterfront or sneezing my head off sniffing after cats.

"Too bad they still got you locked up," I said to her. "I wanted to show you how a real detective works. See ya later, poochie."

Bitzy's eyes filled with admiration as I shoved the gate open and trotted out.

My first stop was across the street. I wanted to check out Ginger, a sweet little golden retriever and a real flirt. I woofed a greeting and she came bounding noisily out of her yard. We touched noses, then scampered around the bushes for a while. When we got tired of that, we rolled on our backs on the lawn. Finally, we chased a noisy squirrel up a tree.

"Well, big guy," she panted, "That was sure fun."

I gave her ear a lick. She didn't mind at all. For a while there, I got distracted. But then I remembered to ask her about Fritz.

"What do you care about a nasty old cat?" she asked.

I told her my sad dog-tale.

She was no help. I moved on.



A few doors down, I stopped to greet Grogan, a rangy yellow mixed-breed with bent-over ears and a black muzzle.

"How ya doin' Fred?" he growled cheerfully.

"Not bad. You?"

"I can't complain. They treat me well enough here. They love me and all. Feed me well. Give me plenty of exercise. My big problem is steak bones."

"I love steak bones," I said, starting to drool.

"Me, too! --Or I used to, anyways, back when I was a pup. Now the darn things give me gas."

I had to smile. "Nobody forces you to chew them."

"I know, I know. But I can't help it. Animal instincts, right? Am I right?"

"I hear ya, Grogan."

We chewed the fat for a while. Then I gave him a serious look. "Listen, you know Fritz, the Johnson family cat who moved in with Bitz a while back?"

"Bitz I know. Little poodle that yaps all the time."

I was offended. Bitz didn't yap all the time. Only when she was feeling nervous. But I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. "That's her. Anyway, the cat she lives with went and ran away."

"Yeah, so what? I mean, cats! Right? Am I right?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Thing is, I need to find him. He ran off a few days ago and nobody's heard from him since. Bitz is in trouble with the family over it."

Grogan didn't seem very concerned. "Yeah? Hey, all cats go off on their own now and then. He'll come back. They all do. So why worry? Right? Am I right?"

I couldn't argue with him.

For the next several hours, I met with a whole bunch of mutts. None of them had any information about Fritz. By the time I got home I was dog-tired. I wished I had something good to report to Bitz. Especially when I saw how hopeful she looked when I pushed into the yard.

"What did you find out?" she asked eagerly.

"I'm working on a few leads."

"Yeah? Like what? I want details."

I thought for a moment. An idea popped into my head. With a sly wink, I said, "It's not for sure, but there may be a certain female feline involved."

"Yeah? Gee, Fred, you're doing great."

I modestly agreed.

"So what happens next? You going to hunt down the two of them?"

"It's too soon to say," I answered. "Sometimes you just gotta let nature take its course. He'll probably come back on his own pretty soon."

"You think? I sure hope so." She flopped down.

Looking at her sad face, I had to wonder if maybe, in some weird way, she

actually missed that cat. --Nah, impossible. What dog could possibly enjoy the company of cats? They were so obnoxious, so selfish, so mean and self-centered. Worthless creatures.

“Hey, Bitz--cheer up. Things’ll get better, even if Fritz doesn’t come back. They’ll get over it. Kids forget.”

Bitz shook her ears. “I don’t think so. If anything, it’s getting worse. Molly is more and more upset. Today she yelled at me. And Max has been hugging me a lot more than usual.” Bitz looked up at me. “I’m getting scared, Fred.”

“Oh, come on. Scared of what?”

“The Dog Pound. --I never told you before, but that’s where I came from.”

I was stunned. “It is?”

“Oh, Fred--you have no idea what goes on there.”

The way she said that made the fur stand up on my back. “Wha-what does go on there?”

“Any stray that isn’t adopted out in a month--”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah?”

“They’re taken for a walk down the hall and through a black door.”

“Then what happens?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at me, her eyes moist and dark. “They never come back.”