

Bingo's Luck
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"My brother says you cheated him last night."

I opened my eyes slowly, squinting up through bright Florida sunlight. My nose wrinkled at the smell of last night's alcohol.

"We want the money back." The man was tall and heavysset and wore a shiny new brown leather jacket. I recognized one of his three companions from our little gambling session of the night before. Derek. He must have been the brother in question. He wore a leather jacket too.

"Could you keep it down?" I said. "Bingo's trying to sleep."

Bingo's fat black head rested on my lap. He was snoring. My hand rested on his tightly muscled shoulder.

"Forget about your dumb dog!" one of the group said. The man wore a scarlet bandana around his head, a sleeveless white T-shirt, and a gold wristwatch. He must have been the token white guy, maybe even the kind who enjoyed slumming with us black people.

"That Bingo is his lucky dog, Malik," Derek warned his brother. "He said the dog was how come the coins always came up his way."

"That mangy mutt?" Malik said.

"Derek's right. Bingo's my lucky dog."

"No such thing!" the white guy said.

"Shut up, Johnny!" Malik loomed over me and stared down at Bingo. He pressed his hand into the palm tree trunk above my head. "That dog don't look so lucky to me."

"But how else could he win so much money?" Derek protested.

"He must have cheated!" Malik crouched down low enough for me to smell the fresh new leather of his jacket. "Where's our money?"

"Take it easy," I said. "You don't want to wake Bingo. Besides, people are starting to stare."

The gang looked around suspiciously. We were in Miami's Bayfront Park, clear blue ocean on one side and busy Biscayne Boulevard on the other. Behind us was a bustling cluster of overpriced tourist shops. In front of us, a bunch of college kids tossed a frisbee around instead of studying the books that filled their scattered backpacks.

"There ain't no one looking at us!" said the fourth man. His head was shaved and he wore a silver ring through his nose. His gold wristwatch partially covered an extravagant tattoo.

Clack-clack-clack. A gaudy little girl with loud wooden sandals marched along the sidewalk, hand in hand with her mother. Across the street, an old man running with a baseball bat in one hand and a cell phone in the other pushed through and around straggling gaggles of people. I had only been in Miami for two days; maybe that kind of behavior was normal here.

"Give me your wallet!" Malik said.

"I already spent the money." I gestured at the fast-food styrofoam that fluttered emptyly at my elbow. "There isn't enough left to matter."

"Let me see!" Malik demanded. "Let me see how much is left!"

"OK. Just don't wake Bingo." I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet, with the sad spirit of submission diligently drilled into me by the bullies of my childhood schoolyards. I was careful not to disturb my snoozing canine companion.

"There's only five dollars in here!" Malik exclaimed.

"Hey," Derek said. "He's not carrying any ID!"

Only because I didn't know how to obtain the fake kind. I was still working out the finer details of the fugitive life style.

"Where's your ID?" Derek asked, obviously offended by my social irresponsibility. "Who are you?"

"I don't have it any more." I had buried the name Ryan Wilson with all my little plastic cards in a cold mountain cave in Montana two weeks ago, the day after Bingo's first birthday.

"Get up!" Malik said, at the same time making it impossible for me to do so, since he was standing right in my face.

"But I don't want to disturb Bingo --"

Malik slammed his dirty Nike into my side with a swift strong kick. The heavysset man had it all over me in weight. I took a spin that sprawled me onto my face. Poor Bingo got knocked flat on his back.

Like most of his kind, Bingo sleeps a lot. But Bingo wakes up especially hard. It was one of the traits that cost him his breeding rights in the Project. Too bad that wasn't all it cost him.

"Mommy, look!" The little girl with the loud shoes pointed at Bingo. "That dog's eyes just changed color!"

The squat lady yanked her daughter away without a glance in our direction. "Don't be silly, dear. Dogs' eyes can't change color."

Parents should give their kids more credit.

Bingo sprang to his feet and shook his head, throwing off deep sleep like icy cold bathwater. His gaze keened from deep dark blue into bright golden alertness.

"But look, Mommy!"

The lady humored her daughter by turning for an instant, then gasped. "Filthy animal!" She pulled on her daughter's hand again and they made off in the direction of the overpriced souvenir shops.

I had darkened Bingo's bright crimson and gold flanks with the local topsoil. How else was I supposed to disguise what he was?

Bingo snarled at Malik and the gentle ocean breeze went from balmy to brisk. The surrounding barometric pressure dipped in response to the sudden heat differential, disturbing the air and kicking up small gusts of wind. Micrometereological phenomena they called that back at Hermes Project headquarters. They could be very messy.

"I warned you not to wake him," I gasped, clutching at the pain in my side.

Malik looked at Bingo and laughed. "What, that little dog? I'm supposed to be afraid of that little thing?"

"Hey, he's not that little," I protested. Malik was just being insulting now. The Hermes Project veterinarians had given Bingo a thorough physical on his birthday. Bingo measured 21 inches at the shoulder.

Bingo shook his head and bounced forward, nostrils flaring. He sniffed the air and flicked his gaze from me, to Malik, to the other gang members. Finally he zeroed in on Malik. He growled and gathered his hind legs under him for a mighty leap forward. He sprang.

He didn't get far. A brightly colored butterfly swirled across his path. His eyes went from yellow to green. He wagged his tail and playfully attempted to sniff the fluttering bug. The air calmed down around him as he romped away from us in pursuit of his new friend.

Ah, Bingo. If only you were a little more... reliable. We wouldn't be in this position. We would still be at Camp Williams, the Hermes Project's top secret breeding center in the Montana mountains, like the loyal soldiers we had turned out not to be.

Malik and his band of followers ignored my K9 partner and advanced on me instead. Malik kicked me again.

I tried to point out that it wasn't really cheating if I explained my strategy beforehand and they agreed to play anyway. I had told Derek right up front that Bingo was my lucky dog. If Malik hadn't knocked the wind out of me, I might have been able to reason with him. As it was, however, his distinguished companions decided to join him in the kickfest.

"Yeah, think you can cheat us!" Derek let loose with another good one to my chest.

Bingo must have heard my involuntary cry of anguish. He spun around to face us again. His ears went back flat and he bared his teeth and charged. Stray gusts of wind swirled around him, throwing up dried leaves and old grass clippings. Hackles rose all up and down the coarse dark fur of his neck, shoulders, and back.

This was it, I thought. Bingo's in full attack mode now!

All the Hermes Project dogs were trained in the basics of hand-to-hand combat. Some learned better than others, of course.

The wind picked up speed along with Bingo's anger. He rushed forward in classic attack position, eyes narrowed and tail down, opening his mouth to take a big bite out of Malik's big butt.

"Heads up!" I shouted to the gang. "Here he comes!"

But Bingo stumbled over his own four feet and smashed snout-first into the ground. He looked up and shook his head, a dazed expression settling over his gentle features.

Derek laughed and kicked me again.

My little Bingo. The runt of the litter, but still near and dear to my heart. At least the little guy was trying.

I tasted blood and rolled away, trying to stand up and maybe call for help from the college students. They were still happily throwing their red frisbee in the air. But before I got a chance to shout, the pierced guy grabbed me from behind and tossed me down to the ground again. I tried to grab for a handful of his metal rings, but he just swatted my hand away. Apparently he was ready for that one.

"Them students ain't going to help you!" he laughed.

He was right. The college students didn't even look in my direction. This kind of thing must happen all the time in Miami. All I had ever known was a Mississippi farmhouse and the US military, and neither of those had worked out particularly well for me. Not that life on the run from the Hermes Project's notorious Reclamations Unit was working out all that great either.

It was the token white guy's turn. He kicked me in the face. Bingo raised his head just in time to see it. He pulled his lips back and growled again. The micrometeorological phenomena stirred up some loose dust and leaves and knocked the frisbee out of its smooth trajectory.

The red saucer wobbled in the air and dipped in our direction. For one brief moment, it crossed between Bingo and the sun and threw a fleeting shadow into the H-dog's eyes.

Startled, Bingo jerked his head up and barked at the flying object.

Blam. The frisbee blew apart in mid-air. Tiny bits of hot plastic shot out in all directions. One of them smashed into a nearby streetlight.

The light burst with a loud popping sound. Glass showered onto Biscayne Boulevard and onto the rows of cars parked there.

Car alarms sprang to life as falling glass hit the motionless vehicles, whooping and wailing and whining in a deafening din.

The old man with the baseball bat had reversed course and was slowly walking back. He turned and gaped in the direction of the car alarms. Malik and Derek and associates were directly in his line of sight. He raised his baseball bat and shook it at them.

"You!" he yelled. "You thieves! Shoplifters! You stole those leather jackets and watches from my store!" The man waved his cell phone in the air. "I called the cops on you!"

The old man jumped into the street and ran straight for us. Six lanes of cars honked and skidded all around him. He made it across unhit, a living tribute to the masterful skills of the Miami driver.

Malik and his gang looked up at the sound of the old man's voice. They looked at each other and looked around the park, obviously considering a multitude of pre-planned escape routes.

"Did he say he called the cops?" Derek asked.

"I'm outta here!" Malik said.

They took off running past the college students, who were searching everywhere for their lost frisbee. The old man was right behind them, waving his bat and shouting directions into his phone as the sirens grew louder. I rolled over and put my arm around Bingo. "I told them you were my lucky dog," I gasped.

Bingo wagged his tail and licked my face. A lot. I felt better. Bingo crouched low and bounced back and forth on his forelegs. He wanted to play, but we had no time. I painfully picked myself up off the ground and fumbled in my jeans for Bingo's leash. Law enforcement was on the way and I didn't want to be around when they arrived, even though we hadn't broken any laws that they would know about except maybe the laws of physics.

We played it safe and crossed Biscayne Boulevard at the nearest stoplight. Even so, some idiot honked while we were right in front of him. He drove a silver Porsche convertible and was all prettied up with gold chains and a loose silk shirt. He was probably trying to make an impression on his South Beach model girlfriend. Bingo yipped in surprise, wide-eyed and startled at the sudden sound. Something popped in the guy's engine. There was a hissing noise and steam blew out. I kept walking, pretending not to notice. Bingo didn't make it easy to keep a low profile but that didn't stop me from trying. A few more steps past the curb and the driver's curses quickly faded into the background noise.

I was aiming for a small grocery store I had spotted late last night. It was closed at the time, but should be open now. Bingo needed his morning meal and a cup of coffee wouldn't hurt me either. I didn't want to follow the route we had taken last night, which would have meant three blocks west and three blocks north. It would be smarter to zigzag, taking one block west then one block north and so on. That way I could pick out a tail if there was one. Just like in the movies.

I was pleased with myself. I hadn't been here long, and already I was getting to know my way around downtown. I almost let myself believe I could stay for a while.

When I made my first right turn, Bingo's eyes greened and he pulled back hard on the leash. He dug his feet into the ground and whined.

"Bingo," I said. "Let's get a move on!"

So he sprang up and got a move on, but in the wrong direction. He wanted to retrace our steps of the night before.

"No!" I said. "Not that way!" I pulled back on the leash.

True, I was violating the rules of canine communication by using so many words. The trainers at Camp Williams taught us to keep the communication down to one or two syllables at a time. It helped the dogs to focus, they said. I didn't care. Bingo didn't focus half the time anyway.

But he sure focused now. He focused on not going anywhere. He sat down hard on the pavement and faced away from me and whined, his tail nervously beating against the sidewalk.

The last thing I wanted was to stay in one place for long. The Reclamations Unit was coming for us and I didn't want to make it easy for them.

"Come on, Bingo," I said. "Let's go this way instead. Explore new places, meet new people."

My fellow street people stared at me like I was crazy. This from a bunch of guys who slept under bridges and argued with the aluminum recyclables in their shopping carts.

"OK Bingo, you win." After all, we were a team. Why should I get to make all the decisions? Besides, we were attracting attention and that was not good. I relaxed my grip on the leash. "Lead on, my friend."

Bingo jumped up and rushed forward, his tail wagging in delight.

"Hey!" I said. "Heel!" Even Hermes Project rejects like Bingo knew better than to pull their handler along on their leash.

Bingo gave me some slack but his tongue hung out of his mouth and his tail waved in eager anticipation. We headed west along SE 1st Street, past the imported clothing and luggage stores, the way we had come the night before.

A lady with a shiny mobile food cart was doing a brisk business selling hot dogs, tacos, and things I didn't recognize to a line of pedestrians. Bingo's eyes turned an eager green and his tail wagged as he sniffed the air but he kept on going. Now that surprised me. He purposefully ignored fresh meat. Where could he be leading us?

I knew the answer as soon as I asked myself the question. It had to be to the same place he led us last night. I was still tired and hungry after two weeks of hopping trains and hiding in the back of pickup trucks to get down here from Camp Williams, and after the game with Derek I was eager to spend my winnings on an evening meal for us both. The grocery store was closed, but Bingo led us to a spot around the corner and stopped. I tried to urge him on, but he refused to budge until he was distracted by a stray cat. Only then was I able to get to the fast food place and order takeout. I hadn't paid much attention at the time.

Now we were back at the same place, and Bingo planted himself on the sidewalk again.

"Bingo! What is it about this place?"

He got up and wagged his tail, eyes green with eager anticipation.

I was willing to humor him, so I stood there for a few minutes by his side. Behind us, salsa music blared from a music store while in front of us reggae music blared from an electronics store. Bunches of birds perched on overhead utility lines. Cars were parked all along the street, except in front of the fire hydrant. In accordance with my new status as a wanted criminal, I checked the license plates for anything that looked government-issue. Everything looked civilian to me. Not that the Reclamations Unit would be so obvious anyway.

"Bingo," I said. "I just don't get it."

A teenage bicycle rider chimed her bike bell at a driver who opened his car door right in front of her and deftly swerved around him. Bingo looked up at the sound of the tinkle and glanced the girl's way in curiosity. Then he looked at me and bounced on his forepaws. He had forgotten why he stopped here. It was time to move on.

It didn't take us long to reach the grocery store. I slipped Bingo's leash around the thin tree outside and tied it securely. He cocked his head sideways, tongue lolling out of his mouth. I would have to leave him alone for a few minutes.

I tried to explain why. "It's not like it was in... well, you know where." I didn't want to say the name Camp Williams out loud. I might be a dognapper and a deserter, but I wasn't a traitor. "Back there, we handlers could bring dogs into the mess hall and the little store too. Out here in the real world, that kind of stuff is illegal." I put my hands on my hips and cocked my head to the side just like his. "Illegal! Can you believe it?"

Bingo barked in enthusiasm and for once nothing blew up. He cheerfully thumped his tail against the sidewalk as I pulled a smelly twenty dollar bill out of my left sock. Years of being bullied as a kid had taught me the value of a decoy wallet.

Once inside the store, I only took a few minutes to find what I needed. I was clutching a pound of ground beef and gulping down a hot cup of coffee as I walked back out into the heat.

"Bingo?"

He was gone. Even his leash was no longer tied to the tree.

I threw down the coffee but not the beef.

"Bingo?" I cried. "Bingo!"

No response, apart from a few curious stares from passing humans.

I tucked the bag of cold ground beef under my armpit and cupped my hands to my mouth. "BINGO!!!"

Nothing. No howl to let me know he was near. No tap-tap-tap of running feet on the sidewalk as my canine companion rushed to my side.

All this shouting was getting me nothing but unwelcome attention. Time to reconsider strategy. I took a deep breath and tried to think.

Suppose Reclamations had come for Bingo. Would he really have let himself be taken without a fuss? Hard to say. But no point riding that train of thought, because if Reclamations had taken Bingo then he was probably dead by now.

Maybe Bingo remembered what he was looking for at his spot three blocks down and around the corner.

I burst into a run, startling a couple with a baby carriage. The baby cried. The woman cursed. The man flinched. I was sorry, but it couldn't be helped.

As I approached the corner, flocks of terrified birds darted across my path, squawking in terror and fleeing from something down the street where Bingo had stopped. Rats and mice scurried frantically from the same direction, squealing and screaming in panicked hysteria. A cat scrambled out of a garbage dumpster, hissing and clawing to get away, hair all puffed up in an instinctive fear response.

I stopped. Mundane animals always bolt in blind terror from true hermesdogs. Reclamations had found us.

I edged around the corner entrance of an electronics store and stared in horror. There was Bingo, back at the spot he had identified first last night and again this morning. But he was not alone.

With him was Ranger, another H-dog, but a superior model. Ranger had aced her H-Factor tests and then gone on to specialized training as a long-range tracker. She could track anybody anywhere on the planet.

No one could escape an H-capable tracker. I had been foolish even to try.

Bingo nuzzled the larger dog and sniffed in intimate places. Ranger patiently withstood Bingo's affection. Poor little Bingo. I felt sympathy and admiration for him at the same time. He had known a day in advance that Ranger would show up at this exact spot and had gone out of his way to meet her. While I had been desperately fleeing from Reclamations, innocent little Bingo had been seeking to lead us right to them.

Craig Strickland was now coaxing Bingo into the back seat of a late model Ford sedan parked in the exact spot the dog had predicted. Craig's sandy blond crewcut and light blue eyes looked right at home in the Florida sun. He spotted me and turned to face me, smiling and smirking at the same time.

"I came for my cargo," he said, holding Bingo's leash up like a hard-won trophy. "And I got it."

It was Craig who had untied Bingo from the tree.

"Let him go," I said.

Craig ignored me. "I knew we were close when I overheard some little girl babbling to her mother about how she saw a dog whose eyes changed colors." He smirked again. "From there, all I had to do was follow the sirens. And all those car alarms. Was that you too?"

Bingo wagged his tail happily.

"Let him go."

Craig shook his head. "You know the drill, soldier. Your pup didn't make the cut. It's cargo now, and I always get my cargo."

Through the open door of Craig's car I could see a shiny aluminum item that looked like a small briefcase. But I knew what it really was.

"Bingo is more than just cargo."

"Open your eyes, Ryan. That's all it is. It's the same with any of the dogs that come from... You know."

Of course I knew. The Hermes Project, the secret US Army initiative named after the ancient Greek god of alchemy. The scientists at Camp Williams used the lead-into-gold metaphor for the selective breeding of ordinary military dogs into extraordinary canines. They did this by administering tests designed to measure special abilities and breeding the high scorers. But not everybody gets to make a splash in the gene pool. Bingo's scores were too erratic, too unstable for him to be a useful hermesdog.

"You can't have Bingo," I said, clenching my fists.

Craig laughed. "Ryan, I already have it!"

"You're not going to kill him and put his brain in that thing!"

The shiny briefcase was a cargo container, specially constructed to hermetically seal a canine brain in its interior and preserve it during transport.

Craig shook his head. "The brain is cargo. That's all it is. Something for the guys in the white coats to study in The Lab."

None of us knew where The Lab was, but we all knew you pronounced it with capital letters.

Craig shrugged. "Can we get on with this? It'll be a lot easier if we work together. I'll let the major know you cooperated and maybe after a few months' probation he'll let you stay."

A few months' probation meant scooping poop and cleaning cages back at Camp Williams. I didn't mind the work, but I couldn't bear sacrificing Bingo.

"I'm not going back," I said. "Neither is Bingo."

Craig looked genuinely sad. "I can't let a failed experiment run around unsupervised. It wasn't bred to be a pet, you know."

"Bingo's not a pet! He's my ward."

"Come on, Ryan. A selective breeding program means that some animals won't make it, remember?" He was quoting from the training manual. "Bingo just happened to be one of them. I'm sure they'll assign you another, in time."

And if that one failed too?

"We're not talking about breeding cows for milk, or horses for speed," I said.

"That's exactly what we're talking about. Just the parameters are different."

"But Bingo is more than that!"

"Bingo is US Army property, and you stole it." Craig reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small cylindrical vial.

"Put that away," I said, stepping closer. The little brown pills were designed to produce heart failure with minimal damage to cerebral tissue. They smelled like meat so they would be irresistible to the dogs.

Craig looked around. Pedestrians were going about their business, and no one was paying much attention to us. He lifted the side of his touristy flamingo-decorated shirt just high enough to expose the top of the pistol stuffed into his waistband. "You won't be able to stop me."

Bingo pulled his snout out of Ranger's anatomy at the sight of the pistol. His eyes widened and his gaze shifted from blue to yellow. One ear bent back; the other stood at attention. A quick gust of wind tossed loose litter around the street.

"Please..." I was begging now. "Please, let him go. Just say you never found us. No one has to know you let us escape."

Craig shook his head. "You're not making this any easier for yourself." He popped the top on the vial and tipped it so that one tiny brown tablet fell into his hand.

I quickly unwrapped the pound of ground beef I still carried and stepped forward. A tasty little pill was one thing but a whole pound of fresh ground beef was quite another. "Bingo! Bingo, come here!" I held the beef in my outstretched hand.

"Don't even try it," Craig warned. He kneeled on the sidewalk and pulled hard on the leash, dragging Bingo closer to him. Bingo protested, digging his feet into the ground. He growled at Craig.

Ranger stood over Bingo and lowered her head and bared her teeth. Wind rustled palm fronds and palmetto bushes as Bingo struggled in Craig's grip and Ranger closed her jaws around Bingo's neck.

"She's trained to restrain other canines," Craig commented. "All the Reclamations dogs are." He grabbed Bingo's snout and forced his fingers into his mouth to pry it open. His other hand held the pill.

Still Bingo could not take his eyes off the pistol. All hermesdogs knew that small arms meant danger. They all underwent training in defensive techniques.

Craig pushed the pill into Bingo's mouth.

"No!" I yelled, and threw the ground beef at Craig's hand.

"Ow!" Craig yelled as the meat hit his wrist. The pill went flying. Red-faced with anger, he turned to face me. His change in position put the pistol at his hip directly in front of Bingo's face.

Bingo's eyes clouded over with the dim recollection of recent training. The Camp Williams scientists had developed a small arms defensive technique they called "snuffing".

When the bad guy pulled the trigger, the well-trained H-dog responded by snuffing the spark that made the bullet go boom. Bingo's response, as usual, didn't work out exactly as planned.

He blinked. The pistol went off tore a bloody hole in Craig's pants. The bullet ricocheted off the pavement near the middle of the street and smashed through the wide display window of the appliance store. It blew away one of the TVs in the window.

A fire started inside the store. The fire alarm went off. The sprinkler system turned on.

Half a dozen soaking wet customers pushed each other out the front door, over the sidewalk, and out into the street.

An oncoming cement truck swerved around the customers and plowed into a red Toyota parked on our side of the street.

The red Toyota slammed forward into a white Dodge van, which slammed into the yellow fire hydrant and bent it sideways. Water gushed from the ground beneath the hydrant, a pressurized surge that blasted Ranger off her feet and tossed her against the display window behind us. She slumped to the sidewalk, unconscious.

Craig barely had time to scream about the bloody burn on his thigh. He dropped Bingo's leash and rushed to Ranger's side to save her from drowning under the spraying water.

Sirens again. The valiant employees of the City of Miami were having a busy day.

"Bingo!" I grabbed his leash. "Heel!"

The gunfire might have deafened him. My own ears were still ringing. I gave the leash a little tug. Bingo gave me a dazed look and then stared off in the direction of the ground beef. It was gone, washed away by the watery onslaught.

"Come on, Bingo. We'll get more." H-dogs need frequent feeding as much as they need frequent rest and I knew Bingo must be starving by now.

We set off north along 2nd Avenue, since the sirens seemed to be coming from the opposite direction. We quickly slipped through the crowd of the curious, come to see what all the fuss was about. A few blocks later we came across another sidewalk food vendor. We took a moment to devour hot dogs and hamburgers, enjoying the comfortable seating and fragrant aromas of a busy downtown bus stop.

Then we were off again, wandering the colorful and multilingual streets of Miami while I pondered our fate. Craig and Ranger would be occupied for a little while, but they had come a long way and a little mishap with a fire hydrant was not going to stop them from completing their mission. How could we escape a pursuer who could track us anywhere?

Only by going somewhere they would be unwilling to follow. Some third world hellhole maybe? But hermesdogs were already deployed in the worst of those areas. Some other not-so-friendly country then, one that might take offense at learning that a top secret mess had spilled over into their backyard and had to be cleaned up by another product of the same top secret project. The bureaucrats behind the Hermes Project would hardly risk those repercussions. If I found such a country and kept a low profile, they might leave Bingo and me in peace.

As vague as it was, it was the only plan I had. I still had to figure out where to go and how to get there. I was sad to think of leaving the US and apprehensive about a new life in a new country, but it was our only choice. Still struggling with these thoughts, I took a deep breath and looked up.

Where were all the tall buildings?

I spun around and oriented myself. Miami's pretty skyscrapers were maybe a mile behind us. While I was lost in my dismal depressing thoughts, Bingo had been forging bravely onward into the unknown without the invaluable benefit of my expert guidance.

I gave a little tug on his leash to try to turn him around.

"Hey, Bingo!" I tugged again. "About face! Heel, boy!"

He didn't respond. He just kept slogging ahead.

A bridge sprouted out of the landscape in front of us. How was I supposed to know Miami had a river? I thought Florida was all beaches and orange trees. I also thought it was strange to see pleasure boats and barges sharing the same waterway, passing through such a desolate part of town.

A wide paved sidewalk near the waterside was decorated with terraced yellow brick planters where a mishmash of flowers and bushes and weeds struggled to survive. The sprinkler system was rusted over. The poor plants were mostly dried up and neglected, just like the three people who lay sleeping it off on the sidewalk.

Bingo walked to the other side of one of the terraced rectangular planters and found a spot in the shade. He turned all the way around, almost like he was chasing his tail, and finally settled down. He fell asleep immediately.

This had been a tough day for Bingo. I sat down too and leaned back against the brick planter. The tall pillars that supported the bridge blocked the sun here, and the shadows brought welcome relief from the mid-afternoon heat. I closed my eyes and followed Bingo into slumberland. It was nice there. But it ended too soon.

I gasped in pain at the sharp blow to my ribs. I would know that nasty Nike anywhere. I opened my eyes and peered up at a fat face framed by the park's bright spherical lights.

"Ha-ha!" Malik laughed. "Hey, cheater! Remember us?"

Afternoon had turned into night, and apparently this park was a regular hangout for Malik and his followers. They were still wearing their leather jackets and gold wristwatches.

"What? You thought an old man with a baseball bat could catch us?" said Johnny with the red bandana. "We left him eating our dust!"

Bingo ran circles around the gang, happily wagging his tail. His eyes were green with delight. The friendly little H-dog had led us here on purpose, intentionally reuniting us with his new friends. Sourly I began to wonder if the little runt was worth saving after all.

"What do you want from me? I told you I don't have your money any more!"

"I don't believe you," Malik said. "Get up. Empty your pockets!"

I leaned against the brick planter and pulled myself to my feet. The four of them blocked any possible escape. Bingo pranced up and down with happiness. The dog was useless.

I turned my pockets out. Some small change dropped to the ground.

"You see? I told you there wasn't much left."

"Search everywhere," Derek suggested. "Make him take his shoes off."

"Do it!" Malik said. "And your socks, too!"

Like some of the more thorough lunch money bandits of my school days, they had me. I knew better than to put up a fight. All I could do was pull the cash out of my socks, hand it over, and hope for the best.

"Take it," I said to Malik.

"You lied to us!" Malik said. "There must be hundreds of dollars here!"

"I never lied to you! I told you I didn't have your money. I only won twenty bucks off Derek, and I already spent it, like I said."

"So how did you get all this money?" asked the pierced guy.

"I told you!" How many times did I have to repeat it? "Bingo's my lucky dog!" Bingo had talents outside the scope of the Hermes Project's target parameters. I had already taught him to control the outcome of a coin toss. We were working on dice, too. After that, he could graduate to roulette wheels and slot machines. Bingo was eager to please and a willing student. The hard part was keeping him focused.

"Malik," Derek said. "Why don't we take the dog? We could use a lucky dog!"

Bingo was sniffing the pierced guy now. The guy scowled and swung at him open-handed. Bingo dodged just in time.

"He's my dog," I said. "He won't stay with you. He'll just come running back to me."

"He'll stay with us if you tell him to," Malik said.

He might, at least until he forgot what I told him.

"Besides, we've got this." Derek grabbed the leash and yanked hard. Bingo scrambled to keep his footing. He looked back and forth between me and Derek, his head cocked sideways and his tongue hanging half out of his mouth.

I shook my head. "You can't have him. Now let him go."

Malik raised his fist and shoved it in my face. "What are you going to do about it?"

The only thing I could do.

"I'll flip you for him. Heads, Bingo stays with you and I walk away. You keep the money, too. Tails, Bingo stays with me and we walk away together. Either way, you guys keep the money, so you can't really lose."

"I'll flip for that," Malik said eagerly.

"Hey, wait a minute," Derek said. "If he's really your lucky dog, won't the coin come up your way anyway?"

I wasn't so sure. "But we're flipping to see whose lucky dog he is. While the coin is in the air, Bingo isn't anybody's lucky dog. He only becomes someone's lucky dog when the coin lands."

Derek looked skeptical.

"Besides," I reminded Derek, "you're the one holding the leash."

"Let's do it!" Malik said. "Johnny, gimme a quarter!"

"Use one of his," Johnny said, pointing to the coins that had spilled from my pockets to the ground.

"No!" Derek said. "We should use our own money."

"What's your problem, Johnny?" Malik said. "I'll give it right back to you!"

Johnny frowned as he plucked a shiny new quarter out of his pocket. He handed it to Malik. "You better!"

Malik fingered the quarter for a moment, closing his eyes and whispering supplications to whatever generous deity had so richly blessed his life thus far. He tossed the coin into the air.

The quarter twirled up and then back down again. It clinked ominously against the pavement a few times before it came to a complete stop.

We all peered down at George Washington's grim countenance.

I had lost him. I lost Bingo.

"Ha ha!" Malik mocked. "Ha ha! We got ourselves a lucky dog!"

Bingo wagged his tail with happiness, nuzzling his new friends like long-lost lovers reunited. He had traded me in for another set of humans.

"Bingo?" Not since Sandra Lee Norton rejected me in the third grade had I been so hurt.

"You lost, cheater!" Derek said.

Bingo pushed his head under Malik's hand, practically begging to be scratched. My stomach sank down to my knees and took my heart with it. Could I get him back by force? Probably not. There were four of them and one scrawny me. Even so... Even so, Bingo had made his choice and I had to respect that.

"Get out of here, cheater!" said the pierced guy.

"Bingo?" Could I at least say good-bye?

The dog turned away from me and sniffed at Derek's pants.

I rubbed the back of my hand against my mouth so no one would see my lower lip tremble.

"Get lost, cheater!" Derek said. He reached down and found a rock and threw it at me. I winced as it struck my shoulder.

"He likes ground beef," I said quickly. "You don't have to cook it. And make sure he gets his exercise. He needs to run and play every day. And let him sleep when he needs to..."

Malik threw another rock. It hit me in the chest. I dodged another rock from Derek, and then Johnny and the pierced guy joined in. I gave Bingo a last longing look and walked out past the bright illumination of the park lights and into the darkness.

I paused for a moment, hoping that at the last minute Bingo would come bounding back to me, wagging his tail and begging for play and maybe even falling flat on his face.

It didn't happen.

Anxiety gripped me like a mugger grips a baseball bat. Were they treating him all right? I took a position behind a bush and watched them for a while. Malik was flipping Johnny's quarter and laughing victoriously every time it landed. Johnny had pulled a bottle from somewhere and was sitting on a bench drinking from it. He didn't take his eyes off the coin. Derek and the pierced guy slapped each other on the back. Bingo wagged his tail high and bounced up and down on his forepaws.

I couldn't take it any more. I needed to get away, so I broke into a run, as fast as I could, back the way we had come. Back to Bayfront Park, where I could lean against a palm tree and cry the night away along with all the other sad souls miserable enough to spend the night there.

I stumbled onto a main road where four lanes of messy Miami traffic honked at me and at each other. I slowed to a walk, out of breath from the running and the sadness. Tears blurred the broken sidewalk in front of me and it took a moment to spot the stark darkness of my shadow against flashing white lights. A car engine roared up behind me and I spun around to see a late model Ford bump the curb and come right at me, hazard lights flashing and headlights on full beam, an excited H-dog barking in the rear seat.

The car skidded to a stop just before running me over. Craig Strickland leaned across the passenger seat and pushed open the door. He held his pistol below window level so the passing cars couldn't see it but I knew it was aimed right at me. He motioned with his arm. "Get in."

I hesitated for a moment, but I had nowhere else to go. I took a seat next to Craig and closed the door.

"Where's the runt?"

"Gone," I said sadly.

"Gone!" His face flushed with anger. I noticed his pants leg was burned and bloody from where the pistol had discharged. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs. "Put your hands behind you!"

I obeyed, greatly persuaded by the proximity of the pistol but also out of general apathy. Without Bingo, there was no more reason to keep up the fugitive routine.

Craig snapped the handcuffs shut and pulled the car forward.

"Where is it? I want my cargo!"

"He's not mine any more."

Craig's jaw dropped. "What have you done, Wilson?"

"I lost him in a coin toss with the locals. I was supposed to win!"

Craig's face went expressionless. He said, quietly, "You released an untrained H-dog into the civilian population? Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?"

"I think so," I said.

"I should shoot you right now!"

"So do it!"

Craig slipped the pistol back into his pants. I knew he was way too law-abiding to shoot me.

"Ranger!" Craig said. "Find!" He held up a vial of scent. Essence of Bingo, distilled by one of the Hermes Project veterinarians for situations just like this.

Ranger clawed the back seat in excitement. Her eyes greened and she crouched low. Her snout stayed above the horizon, which meant Bingo was close. But I already knew that.

Craig turned the car in the direction Ranger indicated. "How many of them are there?"

"Four," I said.

"That's just great."

Ranger barked when Bingo was close enough for visual. Malik was challenging his captive audience of sleeping drunks and addicts to a game of coin toss and Bingo was faithfully following at his side along with the rest of his gang.

Craig parked the car by the side of the road and turned off the lights. He pulled a key out of his shirt pocket and unlocked my handcuffs.

"You're releasing me?"

"Not a chance." He slipped the cuffs through the steering wheel and locked them around my wrists again. The key went back into his shirt pocket. He got out of the car and slammed the door behind him without wasting any more words on me.

The back door opened and Ranger hit the ground running. Craig didn't bother with the leash. Ranger headed unhesitatingly for Bingo, zigzagging around the rectangular brick planters and hopping over the supine sleepers who lay unconscious on the sidewalk. Craig was right behind her.

Malik didn't see them coming, but Bingo did. The little guy ran -- as usual, in the wrong direction. Toward Ranger.

Bingo opened his mouth and bared his teeth. I stared in astonishment. Bingo was defending his newfound friends!

"Hey! Bingo!" I could read that much on Malik's lips even though I was too far away to hear him. Then Malik saw Ranger heading his way, head low and lips pulled back, eyes red with fury. The heavyset man stopped cold.

Bingo matched Ranger's red glare and raised his hackles. He stood his ground. Fresh wind pushed at the plants in the planters.

Ranger stopped short, snarling at Bingo. The two dogs locked eyes, both refusing to give. Cold winds whipped around them, knocking stray papers around and waking dozing drunks. Malik stood frozen. Derek and Johnny were unmoving. The pierced guy had already fled.

Craig walked up then, his shirt fluttering in the winds. He barked a command to Ranger, but I was too far away to hear it. The big H-dog leaped forward in a mad charge for her prey.

The globe-shaped park lights fizzled, startling Malik out of his frozen posture. He broke into a run. I heard a loud scream as the park lights flickered again and Malik smashed into one of the rectangular planters. The wind picked up as the two dogs closed in on each other, and the park lights went out entirely.

The sharp crack of gunfire. If it was Craig's, hopefully the pistol was in his hand this time.

A few streetlights still shone from down the block, but there was not enough illumination to make out the action. The wind pushed against the side of the car, but I heard nothing else above my own slowed breathing and accelerated heartbeat.

I reached over to turn the car's headlights on but the cuffs wouldn't stretch. I squirmed around in the seat and hit the switch with my shoe.

Light splashed forward and caught the park in the periphery. Malik was rolling on the ground in agony. Derek was standing over him. Craig held the pistol in front of him, obviously aimed at Bingo. He had missed, probably for fear of hitting Ranger. The two dogs were now entangled in a vicious fight, biting and tearing and clawing at each other. Micrometeorological phenomena surrounded them, whipping dust and dirt into the air.

With Malik writhing on the ground, Derek ran full-speed at Craig, fists raised as if to pummel him. He yelled something. I couldn't make it out through the car's closed windows, but it was clear to me that Derek thought Craig had shot his brother. Craig raised his pistol at Derek but Derek just kept on coming. I doubted Craig would shoot an unarmed civilian anyway.

I managed to work the handle of the driver's side door with my feet. I kicked the door open.

Blam! A passing car ripped the door off its hinges and tossed into the street in front of me.

Bingo spooked at the sudden loud noise and the passing car's engine burst into flames. The driver jumped out and took off running. He dropped a paper bag and a beer can bounced out of it and clattered to the street behind him, all shiny and colorful in the burst of engine fire.

The park lights stuttered on for a few seconds to highlight the sight of Derek and Johnny pounding on Craig before going dark again. Craig called out for Ranger but when the dog turned toward him Bingo attacked her flank. She spun around again, howling and snarling in frustration. Water gushed into air as the rusty old park sprinklers went off under fast and forceful pressure.

The cold water brought Malik to his feet. He looked around at the chaos created by Bingo and Ranger.

"I'm outta here!" he yelled to Derek and Johnny and burst into a run. He ran right past Craig's car and saw me sitting handcuffed to the wheel. "That's some lucky dog you got, cheater! You can keep him!" and kept on running, his two partners right behind him.

Bingo was mine again!

With new desperation, I pulled and yanked at the steering wheel but it didn't give. I tried another angle, and caught a glimpse of something glistening in the road out of the corner of my eye.

The key! It must have been knocked out of Craig's shirt pocket during the fight. The water from the sprinklers had pushed it down across the sidewalk, under the car and over to the other side. The tricky part was grabbing it between both shoes to get it off the ground. I stretched and squirmed, but it kept falling back down. Finally I pushed off my left shoe and used my toes

to press the key against my right shoe and drop it onto the car seat. I grabbed it and unlocked the handcuffs.

I rushed over to where Craig lay unconscious on the pavement and handcuffed his wrists in front of him. He would still be able to follow us, but the cuffs would slow him down. I could have placed the cuffs behind him, but he would be helpless and he didn't deserve that. The guy was just doing his job. The flowing water led me to a sewer grate and I tossed the key through the grill.

The bigger dog was starting to get the better of Bingo. He was bleeding from his ears and flanks. In an uncharacteristic act of physical courage I grabbed Ranger from behind and flung her away from Bingo. I don't know what I would have done if she had turned around and attacked me. Instead, she rushed to Craig's side and licked his face and whimpered.

"Bingo!" I grabbed the leash. "Heel!"

We double-timed it out of there to the tune of approaching sirens. I headed up a small slope and around a side street, in the opposite direction from downtown. We found ourselves on the bridge over the river. A few small boats passed below, on smooth water that reflected their running lights and the blue lights from the safety buoys that dotted the riverbanks. I pushed ahead eagerly, anxious to put the bridge between us and the park.

Even so, our pace slowed to a walk as we crossed the broad waterway. I couldn't push Bingo much faster than that. The dog was wounded and by this time he must be hungry again. His head drooped almost to the ground.

Four lanes of cars passed us in both directions, each one adding to the background noise of big city traffic. One of those cars flashed high beams at us from behind and swerved straight for us. I gasped and spun around. It was a late model Ford. Craig Strickland, bruised and beaten, clutched at the wheel with grim determination. A raging H-dog clawed at the seat behind him.

The car bumped the curb and beamed bright light straight into Bingo's eyes. The tired H-dog yelped at the oncoming vehicle and dark fluid spurted all over the sidewalk. Craig stomped the brake with no visible effect and I realized that the dark fluid was brake fluid. Bingo had destroyed the exact part of the car that could have saved us.

The Ford surged forward and Craig pulled hard on the steering wheel to avoid us, smashing into the bridge rail inches from where we stood. His rear end fish-tailed out into the street. Craig picked his bloody head up off the steering wheel. I could see he was still wearing the handcuffs. He glared and opened his mouth to speak.

His words were cut off by the blare of a compressed air horn. An onrushing semi truck clipped his back end and shoved the car right at us. I grabbed Bingo but it was too late to get away so I jumped up on top of the guard rail to keep us from getting crushed. Craig's car crashed through the rail with a loud metallic tearing sound and took us with it. We tumbled out into open air just inches below the falling car. My legs jerked a few times trying to find solid ground but it wasn't there any more. My legs stopped jerking then, because my body locked up in fear.

Bingo dug his claws into me and snapped me out of it. He was scrambling for support, but I didn't have much to offer. I tried to think but it wasn't easy with the wind whistling in my ears. We fell so fast it was even hard to breathe. I managed to spread my arms out and stop the spin and get ready for the mother of all bellyflops. I looked up to see that the car's momentum had spun it off on another trajectory. I looked down to see a wide flat ship between us and the water.

Its cargo was covered in tarpaulin. I had no idea what it was, but it was coming up fast so I hoped it was soft.

Splat! It felt brick-hard but I was still alive so it was soft enough. Oof! Bingo landed right on top of me. I gasped for breath, sandwiched between dog and tarpaulin.

I heard a huge splash but I was too stunned to turn my head. It had to be Craig and Ranger coming in for a landing. Hopefully the car protected them from the worst of the impact. Without a driver side door, they would have an easy exit and even with the handcuffs Craig and Ranger together could make it to shore.

"Hey! Is somebody up there?"

There was no place to hide.

"Over here!" I shoved Bingo off my stomach. He scrambled to his feet and held his nose high, sniffing unseen objects in the wind.

A brown face poked up from the edge of tarpaulin and stared at Bingo.

"The dog is mine," I said. "He doesn't bite or anything." Just blows stuff up when you least expect it.

"Hey mon what are you doing on this boat?" the man said. "Come on down here right now!"

I carried Bingo down the ladder that led to the deck. Three other men were waiting for us there. They were not smiling. One of them pointed a gun at me.

"I'm the captain of this ship," a man with a mustache said. "How did you get aboard? What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said. "It was an accident. We fell..."

"Where I'm from, we throw stowaways overboard!"

"I'm sorry, sir. Um, where are you from exactly?"

"Someplace where US laws won't protect you," said the man holding the gun. He had a nasty grin.

"Please let me explain," I said, having no idea of how I could possibly explain our presence here.

The captain looked at his watch. "This better be good. You're interrupting my poker game."

Suddenly I was feeling lucky again.

"So you're a man who likes a wager. Let's flip for my passage then. Just a coin toss. If I lose, I'll jump overboard right now and take my dog with me. If I win, you take me with you. What do you say?"

"This ain't no passenger ship," the captain said.

"If I stay, I'll work my way. You get another crew member."

"What about the dog?" the captain said as he pulled out a coin.

Bingo wagged his tail and panted with excitement.

I smiled. "He stays if I stay. Bingo is my lucky dog."