

Rochester's Puppyhood

A Golden Retriever Mystery Prequel

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My name is Rochester, and I am not one of those talking dogs who narrate mystery novels. I'm just a golden retriever with a nose for crime, and I have a human who is smart enough to take the clues I provide him with and bring bad people to justice.

You'd be surprised how many bad people we run into in the small town where we live, and the college conference center that Steve runs. I've run out of toes to count them on—nineteen since he and I first hooked up four years ago.

I don't like to complain, but I had a rough puppyhood. Born in a litter of twelve, I had to push my way forward to get my share of mama's milk. For a long time after that, I had a tendency to gobble my food, afraid some other dog might come along and steal it.

Then I had to suffer having a red bandanna tied around my neck as I posed for pictures in the hope that some human would buy me.

Yes, I was originally sold, like a bag of dog chow. The young couple who purchased me were too busy with their own lives, and their newborn baby, to give me proper training and exercise, and after only a few months they got tired of my enthusiasm, my need to get out into the world to pee and sniff, and the golden hair that flew off me at the slightest wiggle of my growing body.

I've always loved going out in the car, so I wasn't suspecting anything the day they asked me to hop in the back of their minivan. I sat up on my hind paws to look out the back window, not realizing that was going to be my last view of the place I'd called home for six months.

Instead of going to the park or the veterinarian's office, we stopped at a big square building that reverberated with the sounds of dogs barking and howling. A nice lady took my leash and led me into the back of the building, and tried to put me in a cage.

Now, I'd been crate-trained, so I was accustomed to the small surroundings. But my crate at home had a cushion, and I could look through the bars to see my human pack. But this cage was all metal and had no cushion, and there were strange dogs on both sides.

I planted my paws on the ground and resisted being pushed into the cage, but the lady was stronger than she looked and she shoved me inside and closed the door.

I sat at the front of my cage peering through the wire, wondering where my humans were. It took me a whole day to realize they weren't coming back. Even so, every time humans came through looking at the dogs in their cages, I kept hoping to recognize a familiar smell. That maybe they'd changed their minds.

But they never came back, and eventually I forgot what they looked like and smelled like. I didn't like the shelter. Too many other dogs competing for attention, and the smells were overwhelming for a sensitive nose like mine. I slept on concrete, inside a wire cage, with only a water bowl for company. Every day, humans paraded past me as if I was an exhibit at a county fair, commenting about my square head, and the pile of fur that was always around me. (I tend to shed when I'm nervous.)

The most frequent comment was about the size of my paws. Some humans thought I might be part Great Pyrenees because they were so big, and others were frightened that I'd grow too large. One man even called me Howard Huge. I rarely growl, but that comment got a snarl from me.

I was pleased when Caroline Kelly took me out of my cage for a brief walk. She was a lovely human, older than my previous humans and hopefully more mature. and I loved the way she smelled, how soft her hands were, and how she came down to my level to pet me. I did my best to make her love me in the half-hour we walked around the outside yard, and I romped around her.

I remember she knelt down beside me and whispered in my ear. "What a handsome boy you are," she said. "Would you like to come home with me?"

Would I ever!

She gave me the name Rochester, after a romantic hero in a book she loved. She confided in me, especially after she'd had a bad date. "I'm going to take myself off the marriage market," she said. "Dogs never come home drunk. They never complain about your cooking and they're happy when your friends come over."

By the time I went home with her, I'd taught myself to do my business outside (my previous owners hadn't bothered with any training). She rewarded me with treats, and loved to take long walks with me. She didn't mind brushing me, often while we snuggled on the floor listening to the happy pop music she liked. A few times we even danced, me on my hind legs, her holding my paws.

At last, I felt like I'd found my true home. But then one day we were out walking on a long strip of land that connected our community, River Bend, to the main street. We had park on both sides of us, so there was a lot to sniff, and I had my head down to the ground when I heard a couple of very loud noises.

Suddenly Caroline fell to the ground and let go of my leash. She wouldn't get up even when I licked her face and barked at her. I took off back toward River Bend to find someone to help her.

I was lucky that the first human I found was her next-door neighbor, Steve Levitan. I'd met Steve a couple of times before and he didn't seem to like me very much, because he thought I was too wild.

He grabbed my leash and let me drag him back to Caroline's body. My poor human was dead, and I had nowhere else to go, so Steve's friend Rick, the police detective investigating her murder, convinced him to let me stay with him for a few days.

That was just enough time to convince him to help me find the people who killed Caroline, and to get him to fall in love with me the way Caroline had. He'd been through a

bad time himself, and I like to think I taught him how to love again and move forward with his life.

With me taking the lead, of course.