

WARREN

A BOWSER AND BIRDIE NOVEL

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TO GABRIELLA

I AWOKE TO THE SMELL OF BACON. COULD THE day have gotten off to a better start? Not to my way of thinking, even though I knew right away that this bacon was of the distant kind, not sizzling in our own kitchen here at 19 Gentilly Lane, but somewhere in the neighborhood. Certain smells—bacon, for example—have the power to pull you toward them. With your tiny nose—compared to mine, that is—this may be news to you. It's not your fault! Don't feel bad!

I sprang off the bed, glanced back at Birdie. She was fast asleep, hair all in a tangle, crust in the corners of her eyes, and a bit of drool leaking from the side of her mouth. No one was more beautiful than Birdie. There are times when I can just gaze at her for what seems like forever. This wasn't one of them.

I trotted out of our bedroom, bacon pulling me along nose-first down the hall. I went by Mama's bedroom, empty until a few days ago. But now Mama was back from some faraway job and I could hear her breathing, slow and deep. Next came the kitchen and the door to the outside

world. Closed, of course. I looked across the breezeway that led to Grammy's part of the house, also closed. Around then was when I became aware of how faint the daylight was, meaning it was still kind of early. I turned to the window that faced the street and stared at the outdoor world, smelling bacon and thinking about nothing at all. With the exception of bacon.

A car came up the street, headlights on until it got close to our place, and then switched off. The car was one of those sporty two-seaters. The first thing I noticed was the cat curled up on the shelf in back, by the rear window. This cat, golden in color and fluffed up to the max, looked very comfortable. That annoyed me. The next thing I knew I was up on my hind legs, both front paws pressing on the glass. The car slowed down and the driver turned and took a long look at our house, scanning it from one end to the other. I had no interest in the driver—the cat had all my attention. But something about the way he was checking out our place, meaning mine and Birdie's, and I suppose Grammy's and Mama's, too, reminded me who was in charge of security at 19 Gentilly Lane. Namely me, ol' Bowser. That meant forcing my gaze away from the cat and laying it smack on the driver.

Some humans think they're pretty hot stuff. This driver was one of them. You could tell by the tilt of his head, like

he was above it all. His thick hair was similar in color to the cat's; he also had a thin mustache that was much darker, and so were his eyes. The whole episode was getting me stirred up. A growl started in our kitchen, amped up a bit when the cat rotated his head in that strange slinky way cats have, and looked me right in the eye.

“What’s with you?”

I twisted my head around, saw that Mama had entered the kitchen. What was with *me*? I didn’t get it.

“What are you growling about?”

Growling? Me? No way! Although there was no denying that something a lot like growling was going on right in this very room. I focused my attention on giving that growling a real close listen and all at once the room went silent. Some things in this life just can’t be explained.

“That’s more like it,” Mama said, coming closer. “What’s so interesting out there? And get your paws off that window, please.”

Paws on the window? Uh-oh. She was right. I got that taken care of in record time.

Mama looked out the window. “I don’t see anything.”

Huh? How was that possible? Possibly rising up again with my front paws on the window, I checked the street. No sign of the sporty car, the golden-haired driver, the cat. All that remained was the smell of the car’s exhaust, almost

lost in the bacon smell. Bacon! Why couldn't I simply have some bacon?

"Paws?" said Mama. "Window?"

Paws? Window. Meaning . . . ? Oops. I got that taken care of in record time.

"Don't tell me you're incorrigible, Mr. Birthday Present," Mama said.

That wasn't going to happen—I had no clue what she was talking about, for one thing, although the birthday present part rang a faint bell, something about how Birdie and I got together, the best day of my life except for all those that came after, right up to now. As for me and Mama, the truth was we didn't know each other very well. I kept an eye on her while she got busy with the coffee machine. Mama was wearing a loose-fitting robe, but anyone could see she was big and strong. She had light brown hair, in a ponytail at the moment, and dark brown eyes. Birdie's were blue. Also Birdie was small. They didn't look much alike. But their smells had a lot in common. I got a good feeling about Mama.

She poured coffee, started to sit at the table, paused. "Hungry, by any chance? That would be my guess."

Wow! Mama turned out to be a real good guesser. I'd have to remember that. Pretty soon I was standing over my bowl and gobbling up my morning kibble. Kibble's not

bacon, but just having the bacon smell all around me somehow made the kibble taste better. That seemed like a really interesting thing to think about. I waited for a thought to come. None did.

Mama sat at the table, sipping her coffee and watching me eat.

“The size of your paws, good grief,” she said. “Are you going to eat us out of house and home?”

Not sure what that meant, but I’d heard it before, many times in fact, from Grammy. For some reason hearing it now from Mama made me attack my kibble at warp speed, practically inhaling it. In fact, I did inhale some! A mistake, but easily remedied by a quick puke, mostly right back in the bowl. And then, just in case Mama was one of those tidy types, I scarfed up all the pukey bits and licked the bowl totally clean, like the tidiest dog you’d ever want to meet. After that I sat on the floor, tail swishing back and forth, job well done. Mama and I were still getting to know each other, so my timing couldn’t have been better. I was making a killer impression.

Mama’s eyes narrowed, not the usual human response when it came to killer impressions, but there’s a lot of variety out there in the human world. Some—Birdie, for example—sing in the shower, and others—like Grammy—do not. Birdie has a beautiful singing voice, by the way, no

surprise there. What about Mama? Was she about to sing? That was my take.

Mama opened her mouth, but no singing started up. Instead, she said, “Birdie adores you. That’s what counts.”

Hey! Mama turned out to be pretty smart. At that moment I had an amazing thought of my own: We were one smart family! I promised myself to make an extra-special effort to hold on to that one.

Mama rubbed her eyes. The white parts were kind of reddish and the skin beneath her eyes was baggy and purple. “When are they going to solve the jet-lag problem?” she said.

The jet-lag problem? First I’d heard of it. I had problems of my own, starting with bacon and how to get it. Meanwhile, Mama was checking something on her phone. All of a sudden she sat up straight. “Is this real?” she said, her face going pale. “Wellhead price dropped three dollars a barrel overnight?”

One thing I was learning about Mama: She could be hard to follow. What did she do again? Something on the oil rigs? Off the coast of Angola, wherever that might be? All I knew was her fingernails weren’t quite clean, even though I’d seen her using the kitchen sink brush on them just yesterday.

Mama took a deep breath and let it out slowly, always a

sign of a human taking charge of something inside. “What can I do?” she said. “It’s good to be home, period.”

Which was when Birdie came wandering into the kitchen. Just like Mama, she was rubbing her eyes, eyes the color of the big blue sky on the very nicest day.

“Hey, Mama,” she said. “Were you saying something?”

Mama smiled at Birdie. “Just telling Bowser here that it’s good to be home.”

“He’s fun to talk to, huh?” Birdie said.

“He is?”

“Bowser understands everything.”

Mama laughed. She had a very nice laugh, although not quite in the class of Birdie’s, meaning the best laugh you’ll ever hear. Mama reached out and folded Birdie into her arms. They had a nice hug. Did I understand everything? Couldn’t tell you, but after what seemed like forever I understood one thing perfectly: This hug had gone on long enough. With a hug that’s gone on long enough there’s only one thing to do, namely squeeze in between the huggers and break them up, which was what I did. A basic move that even puppies know.

“Jealous?” said Mama. “What other bad habits have you got?”

No time to puzzle over that, because the door to the breezeway opened and Grammy came in. Is this a good

time to describe our setup here at 19 Gentilly Lane? Probably not, but when else am I going to do it?

First off, we live in St. Roch, the nicest little swampland town I know, with a bayou running right through the middle. Is that a good start? Maybe not. Maybe I should have started with Gaux Family Fish and Bait, our family business and the best family business in all of Cajun country, Cajun country being where St. Roch is, unless I've misunderstood things, always a possibility. Grammy runs Gaux Family Fish and Bait, especially the swamp tour part, and me and Birdie help out. Mama—and this gets a little tricky—is not Grammy's daughter, but the wife of Grammy's son, a cop who got killed long ago, leaving behind a medal Birdie and I look at from time to time. Kind of complicated. Should have left that part out, no doubt about it, should have left it all out and just described the house—actually two sort of small houses joined by a breezeway—which was all I'd meant to do in the first place! And now I've run out of time.

“Other bad habits?” Grammy was saying. “You name 'em.”

This was interesting. Someone had bad habits? I waited to find out who, but instead Grammy went off in another direction—even better. “Breakfast, anybody? I could whip up some eggs.”

Grammy: Where to even begin? She was pretty old, for one thing, smelled a bit like the stacks of yellowed newspapers I'd seen at the town library. Also, not very big, and kind of bony, but here's a surprise: Grammy was strong, especially her hands, which had a habit of gripping my collar very firmly at all the wrong times. Hey! Was Grammy the one with the bad habits? And she was about to spill the beans on herself?

"What's with him?" she said, suddenly turning those fierce eyes of hers on me.

"Wow!" said Mama. "His tail's practically a blur."

"It just means he's happy," said Birdie.

"Hrmff," Grammy said. "He's got plenty to be happy about. In this life we got the makers and the takers."

"Grammy!" said Birdie. "You know Bowser's not a taker!"

"Hrmff."

Mama looked from one of them to the other and blinked a couple of times, the way humans do when they're confused. Me and my kind just sort of stand there, which was what I was doing—except for my tail, which seemed to be in a real good mood about something or other.

"Tell you what," Mama said, "how about we go out for breakfast?"

"Out for breakfast?" said Birdie.

“Never heard of such a thing,” said Grammy.

“On me,” Mama said. “My overtime check’s burning a hole in my pocket. Let’s try that new food truck everyone’s talking about.”

“First I’ve heard of it,” said Grammy.

Whoa! So much information! All I knew was that nothing anywhere nearby was on fire, and certainly not in Mama’s pocket. I don’t miss things like that.

“He’s not on a leash?” Mama said.

“He really doesn’t need it,” Birdie said. “See how he stays right beside me?”

“Hrrmf,” said Grammy.

So nice to be outside! Even nicer with every step—down Gentilly Lane, out of our neighborhood and into another one called the Dip, with the occasional washer or dryer rusting out front and a car or two up on blocks, plus clouds of bugs hovering over dampish patches in the backyards. The bacon smell grew stronger. Soon, we came to the bayou where the Lucinda Street Bridge led across to the fancy part of town. Parked by the road stood a truck painted all sorts of colors, with one side panel open and a chimney pipe poking out the top. And out of that chimney poured the smell of bacon like I’d never smelled it before!

A sweaty man with an apron around his middle and a do-rag on his head looked over the countertop from inside.

“Hey, there, Miz Gaux,” he said. “And Miz Gaux the younger. And Birdie. What can I do you for?”

“Wally Tebbets?” Grammy said.

“At your service, ma’am.”

“Now you’ve got a food truck?”

“Best food truck in Acadiana,” Wally Tebbets said. He had bacon on his breath! What a cool dude! “Possibly the whole state of Louisiana.”

“What happened to your lube job joint?” Grammy said.

“I kind of . . . evolved,” said Wally.

“Uh-huh,” Grammy said. “Where’d you learn how to cook?”

“In the blood, ma’am. Us Tebbets been cookin’ since the world began.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” said Grammy. “What’s the best thing on your menu?”

“Blue crab and pepper po’boy, hands down.”

Grammy nodded. “I’ll chance it.”

“Make that two,” Mama said.

“Three,” said Birdie.

Wally Tebbets got to work. A kid popped up beside him, a real skinny kid with a dark tan, a Mohawk haircut, and an earring in one ear.

“Hey, Birdie,” he said.

“Hey, Junior.”

“School’s in two weeks.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Maybe a hurricane will come,” Junior said.

Wally Tebbets gave him a smack, not hard. “Watch your mouth.”

Junior ducked from sight, then popped out a door at the back of the truck. He motioned for Birdie. She took maybe a half step in his direction. So did I. Junior was an unknown quantity. I was security.

Junior lowered his voice. “Birdie?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you sing?”

“Sing?”

“Like, you know.” Then from out of Junior’s mouth came a strange kind of yowl. “Down by the river, I shot my baby.”

“You call that singing?”

“I’m not a singer. I’m a drummer.” With his open hands, Junior did some fast pounding on the side of the food truck.

“Knock it off,” yelled Wally from inside.

“But I need a singer,” Junior said. “I’m starting a band—Junior Tidbit and His All-Stars.”

“Junior Tidbit?”

“Cool, huh?”

“No.”

“We can always change it,” Junior said. “But I gotta have a singer. Sing.”

“Like what?”

“Try that one I just did—*Down by the River*.”

“This is stupid, Junior.”

Junior got down on one knee. I considered bowling him over, held back for the moment.

“For heaven’s sake,” Birdie said. Then she took a breath and started to sing. “Down by the river, I shot my baby.”

Silence fell all around us. Had I ever heard anything so beautiful? Yes, every time Birdie sang in the shower. But it seemed to be new to everyone else: They were all staring at Birdie, their eyebrows raised way up.

“You got the job,” Junior said.

“No, thanks,” said Birdie.

Not long after that, Wally Tebbets handed out the po’boys and all of us Gaux, excepting me, were happily chowing down. Wally glanced my way. “What about the pooch?”

“What about him?” said Grammy.

“Think he’s hungry?”

“He’s just been fed,” Mama said.

Wally shrugged. “Happen to have some leftover bacon that got burned.”

And I don’t remember anything after that until we were almost back home. Burned bacon turned out to be the very best bacon out there. That was my takeaway. I was still going over the wonder of it when 19 Gentilly Lane came into view.

“Whoa!” Grammy said. “Did somebody leave the door open?”

“Not me,” Mama said.

“Or me,” said Birdie.

And not me, either. But the breezeway door to our side of the house—meaning mine, Birdie’s, and Mama’s—was open for sure, and not just open but hanging at a funny angle. A moment after that, we were all running, even Grammy.