

Road Trip

The dog came out of nowhere and lunged in front of his truck, forcing Jameson to jam the brakes and slop coffee onto his pants leg.

Minutes before, on the phone, he had given his name and address to a man claiming to be a Fed Ex driver. After he hung up, Jameson realized a delivery driver wouldn't need to know the name of his employer. He figured he'd just given driving instructions to a process server.

So much for his plan to dodge the debt collector for seventeen more days, the number of days his ex-wife, a lawyer, had told him was left before the statute of limitations ran and the collection agency couldn't sue him.

But, all was not lost. He knew the process server had to hand the documents to him directly, not tack them to the door or slip them through the mail slot. He just needed to stay away from home for awhile.

He stumbled out of the pickup truck and approached the dog. The animal didn't growl or otherwise threaten, just panted, head down and stooped, like he'd been running and needed to catch a breath.

Jameson would have a dog himself, if the landlord allowed it. He sidled up to the animal, avoiding eye contact. When he was next to the dog, nearly touching it with his knee, the dog leaned against him and Jameson reached down and scratched the dog's head with his fingertips. The dog whined and licked Jameson's hand.

He knew better, but he knelt and took the animal's head in his hands and the dog licked his face. Jameson jerked his head back. For all he knew the animal was rabid.

The dog was wearing a choke collar and a leather collar. *Whoever owns this dog should be hung by one of these. Assholes. Nobody uses choke collars anymore.* He pulled the collar off, careful to avoid dragging the spikes over the animal's ears. He flung the collar as far as he could, into the scrubby alders bordering the road.

Jameson could see a name and phone number inked onto the leather collar. He pulled out his cellphone and was punching in the number when he saw a car turn onto the quarter-mile gravel road that dead-ended where his house and three others formed a small enclave in the middle of forty acres of weedy marsh.

Odds on it's the debt collector. This dog is probably from around here, probably knows his way back home. I need to get out of Dodge. You're on your own, doggie.

Too late. The car was less than a hundred yards away. The dog sat down and looked up at Jameson, waiting for his next move.

The car slid to a stop in front of Jameson and the driver heaved himself out. He looked to weigh three-hundred pounds and his face and shirt were damp.

"Are you Melvin Jameson?" the man asked.

Before Jameson could think of a quick denial, the man's car begin to move.

"Dude, your car is rolling," Jameson yelled.

"Shit!" The man lunged for the door handle, but before he could yank the door open the car clanged into the bumper of Jameson's truck, breaking the license plate holder.

"Dude, I'm so sorry," the man said. "I must have forgotten to pull the parking brake."

"You think?" Jameson said.

The man pulled a pen from his pocket and began writing on a pad. He tore off the note and handed it to Jameson.

"Let me get your information," he said, pen poised.

"Forget about it," Jameson said. "It's just a license plate frame. I have to be somewhere in five-minutes. It's your lucky day."

He climbed into his pickup truck and started it, backing up and pulling around the car.

I'm screwed. He knows where I work. It's time for a couple of weeks of personal leave. The boss will just have to suck it up.

He stopped at the end of the road, waiting to turn onto the highway.

The damn dog.

He jerked the steering wheel and jammed the gearshift into

reverse. He backed into a cleared patch beside the road, then drove back toward the debt collector's car.

When he got there, the guy had his back against the car door, hands over his head, trying to pull away from the dog, who had reared up and put his paws on the guy's chest and was licking at his neck.

Jameson grabbed the dog by the collar and pulled him down.

"Sit," he ordered the dog, using the hand signal he'd learned from Janie, before she took their ten-year-old collie with her to Tucson.

"Holy crap," the guy said, "that dog would have killed me."

"He just wanted to talk to you," Jameson said, laughing.

"Really, Mr. Jameson," the guy said. "Well talk to this," he said, pulling a folded sheaf of papers out of his jacket and pushing them against Jameson's chest.

Jameson jerked backward and ran around to the driver's side of his pickup. Before he could jump onto the seat, the dog pushed past him and scrambled onto the passenger's side. Jameson followed him into the cab and pulled the door shut. By this time the man was pounding on the hood, but he fell back as soon as Jameson started the engine.

Jameson sprayed dust and gravel, accelerating all the way out to the highway. A few miles later he pulled into the County park and killed the engine, in a spot hidden by a thick stand of cottonwoods.

He found his cellphone and called the number on the dog's collar. He recognized the voice of his nearest neighbor, Bob Collier.

"Jameson!" Collier said. "I'm sorry you had to deal with Georgie. We just got him. Haven't had time to build a fence. He takes off and I can't get him to come back when I call him. Could you just bring him back here?"

"Sure, Bob," Jameson said. "I was headed for work, but I can be a couple of minutes late. Your dog was pretty distressed, man. I'm glad I found him."

"I'm the distressed one, Jameson," Collier said. "That dog is the devil. I can't even get him to settle down with a choke collar. I'm thinking about one of those collars that shocks them a little. I have to figure something out. He's a damn nuisance. Never should have gotten him, but the kid wanted a dog."

"Be right there, Bob," Jameson said.

The fuck I will.

"Hey, dog. How do you feel about a little road trip?"

The dog just looked straight ahead, his tongue dangling, bracing himself like an old hand when Jameson turned onto the highway.