

FAMILIAR



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Familiar
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For my daughter,
who says I don't write
enough dog stories,
and for Roscoe,
who inspired this one.

The car accident killed everyone but me, and I was in a coma for a couple months. While the doctors tried to sew my brain back together, they buried my mom, dad, brother and the drunken attorney who smashed his Mercedes into our Taurus. My uncle told me later that he went to the attorney's funeral so he could spit on his grave.

"I would have, too, sweetheart," Uncle Jimmy said, "only the line was so long, and they let all the ones who wanted to piss on it go first."

My uncle never really went anywhere after the accident. He quit his job and spent every day and night with me at the hospital, holding my hand and talking to me. He had them bring food to my room, one of the nurses told me later, and slept in the armchair next to my bed. He did all that for eleven weeks, six days, fourteen hours and nine minutes straight, without a break.

When I asked him why, all he said was, "I wanted my face to be the first thing you saw when you woke up."

Not that I would ever tell my uncle, but the first thing I saw when I woke up was a dove sitting outside the window of my room. I heard a very sweet voice say *I think she's snapping out of it*, Red and Uncle Jimmy leaned over, his tired, whiskery face beaming.

"There's my girl," he said, his voice a rusty saw. "How you doin', Rache?"

I didn't remember much, but I found out I was doing pretty well. The hole in my head had already healed, so a week after I came out of it the doctors let Uncle Jimmy take me home. He had told me about Mom, Dad and Mickey in the hospital, but it really didn't hit me until he carried me into the house. His black and silver German Shepherd, Roscoe, came to meet us at the door, but other than the dog the house was empty.

"What did you do with Roscoe while I was at the hospital?" I asked him.

"My neighbor, Dan, took care of him. But he missed me, didn't you boy?" Uncle Jimmy put me on the sofa, and then gave Roscoe a good scratching all up and down his back. The dog's tail wagged like crazy.

I felt weird. I knew my family was dead, but a part of me still expected to see Mom to come smiling out of the kitchen, and Dad to be snoring in his Lazy Boy. My brother should have been in the back yard kicking a soccer ball into his practice net, or playing Halo on his computer.

"They're really gone," I said to my uncle. I hadn't cried in the hospital – too many lights, too many strangers around – but now I couldn't help the tears. "They're

never coming back.”

My uncle sat down beside me and pulled me into a hug, and I felt Roscoe lick my hand. I heard him say *It'll be all right, doll face* and *We'll take good care of you* a couple of times while I cried.

I didn't know why he kept saying *we* when it was only me and him, but I held on.

♥

Over the next couple of weeks my uncle helped me catch up with my schoolwork so I could finish out my junior year with the rest of my class. He didn't have to go back to work, not with all the insurance money that came in, but he told me he wouldn't touch a penny of it.

“This is for your college and your future,” Uncle Jimmy said when he showed me the check. He explained how my Dad had taken out a big policy years ago to provide for my mom and us in case something happened to him. “I filed a lawsuit against the attorney's estate, too, and we're going to win. When that's settled, you'll be set for life.”

I didn't care about the money. “I can't spend all this, Uncle Jimmy. You should take half of it.”

“And do what? *Retire?*” He made a face. “I'm only thirty-two, kid.”

Uncle Jimmy was younger than my father, and a lot wilder, according to my mom, but he had the same coal black hair and laser blue eyes. In that moment he looked so much like Dad that it made a sob catch in my throat.

“Hey. *Hey.*” He put his hand to my cheek. “We're gonna be okay, Rache. We don't need to worry about the money now. You go back to school, I'll work, and Roscoe can do the laundry.”

It worked out. Uncle Jimmy didn't try to be my mom or my dad; he was just there for me. He worked while I was in school, and came home every night to watch TV, tinker on his pickup truck, or play catch in the backyard with Roscoe, who was still mostly puppy. He mowed and took the trash out and took care of the laundry for Roscoe.

After we got comfortable living together, he invited his girlfriend, Lydia Herman, over to meet me. Lydia was nice. Her father, Pat, owned the garage where my uncle worked, and she got Uncle Jimmy his job back after I came home from the hospital.

“See, this is what you would look like if you were a girl,” Lydia told my uncle as

she gestured at me. "She looks so much like you she could be your daughter."

She was exaggerating a little; my uncle was gorgeous and I was just average. Besides, my eyes were the same color as my mom's: Easter bunny brown, my dad always said. I did wonder what it would be like to be as blonde, tanned and busty as Lydia. She looked like she'd stepped right off the set of *Bay Watch*.

Lydia always made dinner when she came over, which spared Uncle Jimmy from having to eat my lousy cooking. I still did my usual chores, and dusted, vacuumed and kept the house tidy. Mostly I spent a lot of time in my room, especially when Lydia was around. I felt like a third wheel, plus Roscoe didn't really like her, so I'd take him in my room with me.

At first I had a lot of nightmares about the accident. I'd wake up screaming for my mother, and Uncle Jimmy would come running, and then I'd cry all over him. I never remembered what happened in the morning. My uncle finally took me to the doctor, who gave me a prescription for sleeping pills and suggested I get some counseling.

"Try the pills first," Uncle Jimmy said. "They don't work, then we'll go see a shrink."

I only took one pill, which made me gag because I hated swallowing them. I threw the bottle away the next day, but luckily I stopped having the nightmares about a week after that.

There were some minor problems, living with Uncle Jimmy. Like this thing he had about making my lunch every day. Lydia got him started on it when she found out I usually bought my lunch at school.

"They count ketchup as a vegetable, Jimmy," she said. She was a vegetarian and into the whole nutrition thing. "Rachel is a growing girl. She needs three healthy meals every day."

They meant well, but I'd outgrown apples, milk and PB&J sandwiches with the crusts cut off in the fifth grade. I usually trashed the lunch Uncle Jimmy made me at school, but sometimes I forgot and had to dump my lunch bag at home. That's what I was doing when it happened.

I came in through the kitchen door, dropped my backpack on the table, and took my lunch bag over to the garbage can.

You've got to eat, kiddo, a voice that was nothing like my uncle's said. *You're starting to look like a stick bug*.

I turned around fast, my lunch bag hitting the floor, but Uncle Jimmy wasn't there.

In fact, no one was in the kitchen but me.

I glanced up at the ceiling. I wasn't religious, but – "God? Are you there?"

God's a little busy right now, doll face. The deep voice laughed, and added, *I wish you could hear me. I'd give you an earful.*

"I can hear you," I said.

"I got off work early today, sweetheart," my uncle said as he came in. "I thought we'd hit the bowling alley." He eyed the bag at my feet. "What's this? You not eating your lunch?"

"I wasn't hungry today," I lied. "Were you just talking to me?"

"No one else here." He spread his hands. "It's just you and me, Rache. You okay?"

"I think so." I bent down to pick up the bag and saw Roscoe sitting under the kitchen table. "Does Roscoe like PB&J?"

Roscoe wedged his snout between his paws at the same time the voice said *You can keep the peanut butter, doll face, but I'd kill for a slice of bacon.*

"That dog only wants one thing," my uncle said as he opened the fridge and took out a zip-lock bag filled with the leftover bacon from breakfast. "Here, boy."

Roscoe got up, trotted over and sat in front of my uncle. I jumped as I heard the voice say *I cannot believe the stuff I have to do to get a decent snack.*

"Sit pretty," Uncle Jimmy said as he took out a piece of bacon and held it over Roscoe's head.

The dog sat up on his hind legs like a kangaroo, his front paws crossed in front of him. My uncle laughed and fed him the bacon.

I couldn't be hearing the dog talk. Dogs didn't talk. And as I thought that, Roscoe looked at me with his big dark eyes.

She can't be hearing my thoughts. First-timers can't hear our thoughts.

"What's a first-timer?" I asked.

Roscoe fell over, let out a screech, scrambled to his feet and ran out of the kitchen.

"A first-timer at what, honey?" my uncle wanted to know.



I found Roscoe hiding under the bed in my parents' room.

"You might as well come out of there," I told him. "I'm not leaving until you talk to me again."

I can't talk, kid. I can only think. You're not supposed to be able to hear me. Go away. Pretend like it never happened.

"I'm seventeen, I'm not a kid." I sat down on the floor and stared at my sneakers. "Uncle Jimmy's never gonna going to believe this."

Hold it right there. You can't tell Jimmy. You can't tell anyone. Roscoe crawled out from under the bed and sat next to me. He looked me right in the eye, the way a person would. *I don't get it. This isn't supposed to be happening. You're a first-timer.*

His lips weren't moving, but I could hear the voice as if he were speaking to me. "What's a first-timer?" I asked again.

You are. This is the first time you've lived. Your first soul, your first life. You're human. That makes you a first-timer.

My head started to pound. "So what's the big deal with that?"

So the big deal is, first-timers can't hear us.

"Us?" There were more than him?

Roscoe started pacing back and forth in front of me. *You're supposed to live your first life alone in your head, so it can shape your soul. If your first life is cut short, you might come back as a familiar. Then you can hear everyone else.*

"Come back? Familiar with what?"

No, a familiar. Like me.

"I'm going to die and come back as a dog?" I started laughing. "I don't think so."

Only if you die young, with a complete soul, and some other stuff, Roscoe told me. *And only if you want to.*

That's when it hit me, and I grabbed Roscoe's collar. "What about my mom and dad? What about Mickey? Did they come back? Where are they?"

They can't come back yet, Rachel. There are rules. We can't be familiar with anyone from our first lives. Maybe in fifty or sixty years . . . He lowered his head and rested his chin against my hand. *I'm sorry.*

"Just my luck." I let him go and wiped away some tears. "So I live with a talking dog who thinks he was reincarnated. Or I'm turning into Dr. Doolittle. Or I'm going crazy."

Which was worse?

I got up and sat down on my mother's side of my parents' bed. Her pillow felt cool against my hot cheek, and I could smell roses. Mom used a rose-scented lotion on her skin after her bath. I buried my face in her pillow. Mom was gone, and I was losing my mind.

You're not crazy, Rachel, Roscoe said, growling a little. *Your brains are just a little scrambled. Look, I'll talk to some of my friends, see what we can come up with.* He headed for the door, and then stopped and glanced back at me. *Don't go anywhere, and whatever you do, don't tell Jimmy.* He trotted out.

I couldn't lay there forever. I got up, washed my face, and went downstairs. Uncle Jimmy was sitting in my dad's armchair watching Monday Night football.

"I ordered in Chinese," he said as I walked by. "It's on the table if you're hungry."

I wondered what he would say if I told him his dog was talking to me telepathically. And not just me. What had Roscoe said? *I'll talk to some of my friends . . .* "Where's the dog?"

"Roscoe? I let him out to pee."

I walked through the kitchen, past the containers of Chinese and out onto the back steps. Roscoe wasn't peeing; he was sitting on the grass under our oak tree. Around him were Mrs. Blankenship's Siamese, Mr. Varney's Sheltie, a cardinal, and a gray dove.

His friends? I let the door close, and they all looked over at me.

She's definitely human, a cool female voice said, and somehow I knew it was coming from the Siamese. She sounded as snotty as she looked. *You're certain that she could hear your exact thoughts? She wasn't transferring her emotions onto you and simply got lucky?*

Dude, does it matter? That came from the Sheltie, who had a voice like a surfer. *If she can hear us, she's like one of us.*

She's not a familiar, the cardinal said. He sounded like a grumpy old man. *This could be a punishment.*

We watched them revive her at the hospital, the dove said in the same sweet female voice I'd heard when I came out of the coma. *Her soul did leave her body for a few minutes.*

It could have been the head injury, the Siamese pointed out. *That might have rewired some things.*

I'd heard enough, so I walked over. "Do you guys always talk about people in front of them, like we're not even here?"

Why not? The Siamese sniffed at my foot before gazing up at me with her cool blue eyes. *You humans can't hear our thoughts. Or, at least, none of the other first-timers can.*

"Well, for your information, I'm not transferring my emotions," I told her. "Or getting lucky. I can hear you. I can hear every one of you. Every word you say, right inside my head."

I don't like this. The cardinal hopped backward, away from me. *It's bizarre.*

So she's two-legged, dude. So are you. Don't blow a gasket. The Sheltie came over and nudged my hand. *Hey, I'm Brownie. How's it going?*

The cardinal flapped its wings. *We're not supposed to have this sort of contact with humans. It goes against the natural order of things. Make her go back inside, Roscoe.*

No can do, Red. Roscoe eyed me. *I think we're stuck with her.*

♥

Roscoe filled me in on the rest when he took me for a long walk that evening. That was how they saw it, anyway.

You're so slow, Roscoe complained, tugging at the leash. *Come on, girl, get a move on.*

I had to trot to keep up with him. "If you used to be human, how come you don't mind wearing a leash, and eating dog food, and peeing outside?"

I'm a dog now. I don't remember much about being human, except that I loved bacon. Roscoe came to a stop at a corner. Dog food isn't bad. And I peed outside when I was a human. Guys do that, you know.

"Guys are pigs," I informed him. "So you really wanted to come back as a dog?"

No, that's predetermined. Anyone who protects others during their first life comes back as a dog. Brownie was a lifeguard.

"What was Red? And what about pigs? What were they?"

Red was cardinal. You know, the church kind. You're a girl, you don't want to know what pigs were. Hang on. Roscoe paused to lift his leg and pee on a fire hydrant.

"I'm guessing you weren't a fire fighter."

No, I was a Marine. Compared to us, firemen are pussies.

I beg your pardon. Dorothy, the Siamese I'd met in the backyard, strolled up to us. *What was that?*

Oh, evening, Dottie. Roscoe looked a little embarrassed. *No offense.*

"Were you a fireman?" I asked the cat.

God, no. She lifted a paw and delicately licked it. *I was a writer. All creative souls come back as felines.*

"Were you a famous writer?"

Only after I died. A shame I can't collect the royalties. Dorothy went to the curb. *See that rat nosing through the garbage over there?*

I joined her and looked into the alley behind the restaurant. "The big ugly brown one? Sure."

He was a millionaire investment banker. He killed himself when the stock market crashed in '29. She let out a low, scary yowl that sent the rat scurrying into the shadows. *Now that, Roscoe, is a pussy.*

I chuckled. "Did he come back as a rat because he committed suicide?"

No, he's a rat because he was rich and greedy during his first life, a familiar voice said from above. *That sort always get the worst punishment lives.*

Dorothy looked up at the gray dove perched on the elm tree branch above our heads. *Hello, Amelia.* She glanced at me. *Pilots, travelers and daredevils always come back as birds. So do dancers, for some reason. Flighty familiars for flighty creatures, I suppose.*

Like creative souls, who sit around and do nothing all day, Amelia said, *make the perfect cats.*

“What about the guy who killed my family?” I asked, my throat tight. “Does he get to come back?”

Oh, yeah. Roscoe jerked the leash out of my hand, ran into the alley and knocked over one of the garbage cans. Dozens of cockroaches poured out into the alley.

Amelia flew down and perched on my shoulder. *Rachel, meet the local bar association.*



Even with my new ability to hear what animals were thinking, I still felt depressed. The more I moped around the house, the more tired I felt. Roscoe took me for walks every day, but pretty soon I couldn't get up the energy to go more than a block.

You need to go back to the doctor, doll face, Roscoe told me as I hung up the leash. *Something's not right. Your scent has changed. You smell funny. Like Lydia.*

“Maybe some of her perfume rubbed off on me.” Lydia was always hugging me and calling me her *poor girl*.

No, it's not perfume. Roscoe sniffed me. *Whatever it is, it's getting stronger.*

“I'm probably getting the flu.” I sat down on the sofa and rubbed my elbows. “That's supposed to make you feel tired and achy like this.”

I went into the kitchen to get a drink and start dinner, but my head pounded and I kept dropping things. Finally I wrote a note for Uncle Jimmy and went to bed. The minute my head hit the pillow, I was out.

I woke up a couple of hours later and saw Roscoe sleeping on the floor next to my bed. I stepped over him and went out into the hall, stumbling a little in the dark as I headed for the bathroom. I heard Uncle Jimmy's voice coming from my parents' bedroom, and stopped.

"I know, but I gotta be here for her, Lydia," he said, and then paused before adding, "We've been over this. I'm all Rachel has."

I waited, but he didn't say anything else. Then I went to the bathroom and went back to bed. I'd never thought about how Uncle Jimmy had put his whole life on hold to take care of me. I always came first. No wonder Lydia was upset with him.

The next morning I talked to him about it over breakfast. "Uncle Jimmy, I'm going to be eighteen in November. I'm old enough to live by myself."

Says who? Roscoe wanted to know from under the kitchen table.

"Is that right?" My uncle put down his coffee mug. "You kicking me out, then, kid?"

Women. I heard Roscoe sigh. *Can't live with them, can't bite them in the ass.*

"No." I nudged the dog with my shoe. "I really appreciate everything you've done for me, but I am almost an adult now. Maybe it's time I learned how to take care of myself."

He nodded. "So you *are* kicking me out."

Tell him the truth, doll face, Roscoe advised.

"No, it's just . . ." The dog was right; I might as well come clean. "Look, I heard you talking to Lydia last night. I'm causing problems between you and your girlfriend, and I don't want that."

"Lydia is a nice girl, and she'd love to move in with me and get married and all that jazz," Uncle Jimmy said. "But honey, I don't want that."

"You don't?"

He shook his head. "I've been a bachelor all my life, and to be honest, I like being single." He grinned. "You could say I've been using you as an excuse."

"Men." I rolled my eyes. "Can't live with them, can't bite them in the ass."

My uncle's jaw dropped. "Rachel!"

Under the table, Roscoe made a rude sound.



I felt a lot happier after talking to Uncle Jimmy, but I still couldn't shake the tiredness. I barely made it through school that day, and when I got home I called and scheduled an appointment with the doctor. Then Roscoe wanted to take me for a walk, but I felt too wiped out to get off the sofa.

You don't look good, the dog told me. And you smell worse. Something's bad here, doll face. Why don't you call Jimmy at work?

"I'll be okay." I licked my dry lips. "I'm dying of thirst, though." I got up and staggered into the kitchen. The floor tilted as I was getting my Diet Coke out of the fridge, and the liter bottle slipped out of my hands, spraying soda all over the floor. "Blast it."

Roscoe went over and sniffed the soda. *Rachel, this stuff smells wrong. Like you.*

"That's because I'm the only one who drinks it," I said, leaning against the fridge. "Uncle Jimmy hates soda, and Lydia only drinks water."

"Water is good for your complexion, dear."

Roscoe growled.

"Cut it out, dog." I looked over to see Lydia step into the kitchen. She was carrying a tote bag and had rubber gloves on, which seemed a little strange. "Hi, Lydia. Uh, what are you doing here?"

"Your uncle told me you weren't feeling very well," she said as she put her bag on the counter. "I thought I'd bring over some of my special gazpacho for you."

I hated vegetables, and especially cold vegetable soup, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings. "Thanks, but I'm really not hungry." Something puzzled me. "I never told Uncle Jimmy that I was sick."

"I'm sure he's noticed how tired you've been, and how much weight you've lost," Lydia said as she shooed Roscoe out into the yard and closed the door. "Come and sit down and I'll make you a nice bowl of soup."

"I can't eat that," I told her. "I don't like it." I didn't like the way she was looking at me, either.

"You're so ungrateful." Lydia thumped down the container of soup and glared at me. "You have Jimmy waiting on you hand and foot, and all the insurance money your parents left you, and this house, but you still don't appreciate any of it."

Why was she talking about the insurance money? "I'm very grateful for what I have."

"When the court settles the lawsuit against that lawyer, you'll probably get millions." She scowled at me. "You think you have it all, don't you?"

Roscoe began barking outside the kitchen door.

"I don't have my family," I said. "Maybe you should go home now, Lydia."

"You should have died in the crash. That way Jimmy would have inherited the insurance money free and clear." Lydia took out a bottle of pills. My sleeping pills, the ones that I'd thrown away the first week I'd gotten home. "Do you know how much trouble my father went to, fixing the brakes on the car?"

I froze. "*What* did you say?"

"Oh, that drunk lawyer was a Godsend," she said as she took a glass out of the cabinet. "No one suspected your parents' car actually caused the accident instead of his. But then you lived, and Jimmy wouldn't leave you alone for a second."

Things started to make sense. "You took my sleeping pills out of the trash."

"They were the perfect answer to my problem. I knew Jimmy didn't like peanut butter, so I ground up a handful and mixed them in the jar I brought. But you wouldn't eat the sandwiches, and you didn't drink enough of the Diet Coke." She filled the glass with water. "Luckily I have enough left to take care of you."

"I'm not taking those pills." I turned around and slammed into a big, broad man's chest. I looked up and saw it was Pat Herman, Lydia's father.

"Course you will, you brat." He pinned me against him with his heavy arms. "You want to be with your family again, don't you?"

"Let go of me." I struggled against his hold, but I was too weak to break it.

Pat gave me an ugly grin. "After you take your medicine." He forced me around to face his daughter.

"They'll know you did this," I said to Lydia.

"No, it'll look like you took an overdose of the pills prescribed for you," Lydia said as she filled the glass with water. "You have been acting very depressed." She walked over to me. "Jimmy will be hurt, but I'll be there to get him through this. We'll have a beautiful summer wedding. Hold her mouth open, Daddy."

Lydia's father squeezed my jaw until I thought it would crack, but I kept my teeth

clenched.

"Don't bruise her," Lydia warned as she clamped my nose between her fingers. "Come on, Rachel, open up, or I'll have Daddy hang you in your closet."

Keep your head down, doll face, 'cause here we come.

Glass shattered, making Lydia cringe and scream as Roscoe hurtled through the broken window and onto Pat's back. Pat let go of me, cursing as he went down with Roscoe on top of him.

Hoo-yah, you moron. I'll teach you to hurt defenseless girls. Roscoe went right for his crotch.

Lydia's father screamed just like a girl.

Amelia, Red, and half a dozen other birds flew into the kitchen and went right for Lydia's face. *Get the fake eyelashes! Claw that nose job! Tear out the earrings, the earrings!*

As Lydia shrieked and tried to run for the door, Dorothy jumped on her back. *This scene isn't over yet, bitch.* She raked her claws, gouging deep into Lydia's neck.

This should be like your throat, dude, Brownie said as he sank his teeth into Lydia's ankle and held on, snarling furiously.

I stumbled over Pat and out of the kitchen, running for the front door. I met Uncle Jimmy halfway there.

"Rachel?" The crashing and screeching sounds coming from the kitchen made him pale. "What in God's name is going on in there?" He hurried to the door and I ran after him.

"Uncle Jimmy, let me explain—" I stopped in the doorway and saw that Lydia and her father were on the floor, both of them moaning and bleeding from a dozen small wounds.

Roscoe and all the other familiars were gone.

♥

After the police came, I told them and my uncle almost everything. I gave them the jar of peanut butter, what was left in the bottle of Diet Coke, and repeated what Lydia had said about her father tampering with the brakes on my parents' car. Uncle Jimmy took me to the ER to have me checked out, and my blood test came back positive for sedatives.

"She's been heavily dosed," the doctor told my uncle. "If she'd been given even one or two more pills, it would have been fatal."

The cops interrogated Lydia, who cracked pretty fast and blamed everything on her father, who turned around and blamed everything on Lydia.

The truth completely wrecked Uncle Jimmy, especially when Lydia's father told the cops that they had intended to kill my uncle, too, as soon as he married Lydia.

"Turns out that Lydia used to work for the insurance company that sold your parents their policy. She knew before we even met that I was the only other beneficiary besides you kids. Somehow she talked her father into going along with the whole scheme, hiring me so she could cozy up to me, then talking your Dad into bringing the Taurus in to be serviced." My uncle shook his head. "Rachel, I'm so sorry."

"You didn't know, Uncle Jimmy." I scratched Roscoe behind the ears. What Lydia and her father had done had been horrible, but for the first time since the accident, I felt at peace. "I'm just glad you came home early to check on me."

"Actually I got a call from one of the neighbors." He gave me a sheepish look. "She said Roscoe was running through her garden and if I didn't come home and catch him, she'd call the pound." He reached over to ruffle a hand through Roscoe's fur, and frowned as he pulled back and looked at the red stain on his palm. "Is this blood?"

Big dark eyes met mine. *You can't tell him, Rache.*

"He probably banged into some thorns when he went running through Mrs. Blake's rose bushes." That much was true.

The dog grinned at me. *Good save, doll face.*

Later that night, I sat by the open window in my bedroom, looking up at the stars. It didn't surprise me when Amelia and Red flew down and landed on the sill, or when Dorothy climbed down a branch and jumped bonelessly into my room. Roscoe came over and rested his chin on my leg. Brownie followed, and curled up at my feet.

"How did you get in here?" I asked Brownie.

He grinned and thumped his tail. *Dude, I never left. Oh, and that puddle in the bedroom next door? My bad.*

"You guys saved my life," I told them. "And Uncle Jimmy's, too. How do I thank you for that?"

Bacon, Roscoe suggested, lolling his tongue. *Lots of bacon.*

"That reminds me," I said. "Who comes back as pigs?"

The criminally vain, Red said. *Movie stars. Socialites. Supermodels.*

"Oh, so it's a punishment life."

Amelia nodded. *You're getting the hang of it, girl.*

Of course she is, Roscoe said. *She's one of us now.*

"I'm still human," I reminded her. "I can't go around acting like Dr. Doolittle or a pet psychic. They'll lock me up."

You could become a totally awesome vet, Brownie suggested. *Then every time my human brings me in for a shot, you could like just, you know, fake giving it to me.*

I laughed. "Well, I'd never have a problem figuring out what was wrong with my patients."

I have a better idea, Dorothy said.

And she did.