

UNTIL  
THE  
ROAD ENDS

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*For my true and generous friend,  
Dr Andrew Beck*

# 1

It would be fair to say that Beau's life began one second before it almost ended.

He hadn't meant to stagger into the road, but he was hungry, starving in fact. The dustbins that lined Balham's alleyways had been mercilessly empty all week, leaving him light-headed and woozy, and his legs feeling like they were detached from the rest of his body.

This was why he tottered from the kerb onto the busy high street: why he found himself staring at the approaching lorry, hypnotised by the eyes of a huge metal monster, which roared and howled as it bore down on him.

He should have moved, he knew that. He'd survived on the streets for years so was adept at darting suddenly from danger, but this time, he didn't. Or couldn't.

The monster's lights held him, trance-like, drawing him deeper into their blinding depths. It blared a warning: a long, tuneless growl, but instead of galvanising Beau, it paralysed him.

He didn't want it to end like this. Of course he didn't. He wasn't old, or bitter. He didn't hate the world or the people who lived in it. But he *was* tired. Dog-tired. And his legs simply didn't understand either the gravity of the situation, or the simplicity of the order being sent by his brain.

So he continued to sit, glowing brighter with every passing moment. Neither cowering nor whimpering. He just watched as the lights enveloped him in an angelic hue, forcing his eyes to narrow and close.

But as he shut out the world one final time, he felt it shift, and then capsize, as two hands gripped his belly, wrenching him sideways, pulling the air clean out of him as the lorry roared one final disdainful roar.

Beau rolled, pulled tight into his saviour, and saw the landscape pirouette as they both dived for the safety of the gutter while the lorry tore by. What had just happened, he wondered, and whose hands were they, gripping him tightly still?

The dog tensed, trying to see who was holding him, but was clutched so closely to their chest that he could see nothing at all. He panicked. He didn't trust humans; he wanted to, but after all that had happened to him, he couldn't take the risk.

His entire body went rigid, but those hands held on. He bucked and writhed, expecting the human to become angry quickly, like they always had in the past. He waited for the hands to strike him, or the voice to shout, but neither came. Instead, his head was pulled into the nape of the human's neck, and a single finger gently scratched at a spot that had been troubling him for days.

If that wasn't enough to allow his tension to subside, there came a voice, not one of a grown human (who were always the worst, in his experience) but of a child.

‘Steady on,’ said the girl. ‘Nuffin’ to be scared of, is there? I got you, Beautiful. Just in time too, by the looks of it.’

Beau’s legs stopped resisting all together, as the single finger became two, three then four, finding every itch and dry spot on his wiry back. Heaven.

The voice continued, singing softly in his ear. ‘It’s all right, Beautiful,’ it repeated, ‘it’s all right.’ And it was such a simple, heartfelt lullaby, that the dog relented, all fear and distrust forgotten. Within seconds, he was sound asleep.

## 2

The dog awoke in a living room. Modest. With a glowing fire, empty vases and an under-stuffed settee. There was an armchair with a thin man perched on it. Everything about the man was angular. His legs ran like drainpipes inside a pair of immaculately pressed trousers, his fingers sat like drumsticks, tapping anxiously on the arms of his seat. But as the dog's eyes opened, the man's face broke into a relieved smile so wide that it made him cough violently, and he was forced to push his thin, wire-rimmed glasses back up his narrow nose.

'Looks like someone is finally awake,' he declared, coughing again.

Instantly, four more pairs of eyes fell on the dog. The first belonged to a woman, as curvy as the man was thin, though the same kindness shone out of her. Her hair fell past her shoulders with a bounce, hiding the top of her flour-coated pinny. Judging by the smell wafting from the next room, she had been cooking some sort of pie and the smell alone rumbled the dog's starving belly.

The second pair of eyes belonged to a boy. He had volcano-red hair, plastered into a severe side parting, though three tufts stuck up at precise regular intervals, as if rusted stiff in an act of disobedience. He was slower to lean forward

than the adults, but that may have been due to what was sitting on his lap: a cat; its build could only be described as hulking. The dog had met many such a tyrant, so wasn't surprised to see it wearing a scowl that declared, *You, Dog, are bad news.*

The starving mutt looked away, prompting the cat to hiss, which made its boy stroke it even more lovingly. The dog thought little of it, concentrating instead on the pleasure *he* was now feeling.

The fingers were on his back again. The same ones that had lulled him to sleep. They felt so good that he allowed himself to roll over, the owner of the fingers coming into view for the first time. All the dog could see at first was a smile. A smile that radiated the same warmth and delight as the thin man's.

'Ah, there you are, Beautiful,' the owner of the smile said.

The dog drank in the adulation. To a creature like him it felt alien, but wonderful. He looked beyond the smile to everything else around it: a befreckled nose and cheeks, dark brown eyes and matching hair pulled into loose, tired-looking pigtails. There appeared to be a dot of food stuck to her bottom lip, which the dog sought to tidy up with his tongue, making her giggle.

'You really shouldn't be calling it Beautiful, you know,' the boy said.

The dog's ear seemed to sag. Why? What had he done to the boy since waking up?

The girl, frowning, asked the boy the same thing.

‘Well,’ he replied, ‘the dog’s not yours, for starters, so it’s not your place to be giving it a name like *Beautiful*. Plus, it’s a boy . . .’

‘How do you know?’

‘Er . . .’ the boy pointed between the dog’s back legs. ‘It’s obvious, isn’t it?’

It appeared that he was right.

‘So,’ he continued, ‘Beautiful is a completely silly name. Especially when you see how ugly he is!’

That did not land well with the girl, who gasped and pulled the bedraggled dog into her arms again, as if shielding his ears from the insult.

‘He is *not* ugly, Wilf,’ she spat back. ‘He’s just clearly had a hard life. With a bath and a few good dinners, he’ll be a champion. The best in show.’

The boy and perhaps the cat both chuckled at that.

‘Unlikely,’ the boy replied. ‘But anyway, he’s still not yours. And he’ll always fall a long way short of being beautiful.’

The girl stroked the dog even more tenderly, fussing its ears in a way that left it totally disarmed.

‘*You* might think so, but that’s what I’m calling him, whether he’s mine or not.’ She stopped, and thought deeply before looking pleadingly at her parents with wide eyes. ‘*Beau*. I’ll call him Beau. BECAUSE he is *literally* a long way short of *beautiful*. I think it suits him. Don’t you, boy?’

Beau woofed twice. Once in agreement, and secondly at

the boy and his cat. The cat hissed back. The boy looked like he might do the same.

‘Peggy,’ her father said, his smile now tinged with concern. ‘I’m not sure making the family any bigger at the moment is a good idea, are you?’ He lifted the rolled-up newspaper from the seat beside him and Peggy knew exactly what he was referring to. The words *Hitler* and *Nazis* were written large everywhere.

‘But Wilf has Mabel. What about *me*?’

It was a fair enough question. Anyone could see that Mabel was Wilf’s cat.

Her mother and father shared a glance, and Peggy was unable to read its meaning; yet like most children in that situation, she knew that if she wanted her way, she would need to work harder for it.

‘I mean, it really doesn’t look like he has an owner, does it? He’s got no collar, and *look* at him. If he does belong to someone, then they don’t deserve to have him back. Not when they’ve treated him like this.’

Beau licked the girl’s hand in appreciation. ‘But if you want,’ Peggy went on, ‘I’ll put up some posters. Tell people I’ve found him. That way, if they *are* sad about losing him, then they can do something about it.’ She said it confidently, because to her mind there was no way anyone was coming for the dog. He’d clearly been living on the streets for too long for that to be a possibility.

The adults looked at each other again, then at the dog lying

on their daughter and the obvious, instant adoration flowing between them. Her mother sighed in defeat.

‘Sounds fair,’ her father said. ‘But if anyone *does* come forward, then Beau has to go. Agreed?’

‘And if he doesn’t remain the angel he is now, he goes then too,’ her mother added.

‘Of course!’ Peggy said, her heart pounding with joy.

‘Then we’ll take it from there. First thing tomorrow, posters. Do you hear?’

Peggy nodded.

‘Right. Supper. Leave Beau by the fire. Come on, Wilf.’

The family moved as one, Peggy closing the door after a final stroke of the dog’s head.

Beau stretched out on the rug, closer to the fire. It didn’t feel normal to him to be on the receiving end of such love, but it definitely felt good. Were these finally humans he could trust?

His eyes sagged, the flames warming him, inside and out. Sleep pulled at his edges and he began to surrender, until . . .

‘Don’t be making yourself too comfortable,’ said a voice. ‘And don’t be getting any ideas, either. There’s only one top dog around here. And that’s me.’

### 3

Beau lifted his head, startled. His senses felt rather scrambled, pulled as he was from the verge of a safe, peaceful sleep.

His eyes moved quickly around the room, looking for the hound who had made the claim. He was most confused. There had been a lot to take in in the short time since arriving here, but he'd been certain there was no other dog lurking. At the same time, he knew what he'd heard, and so he clambered to his feet, nose pressed to the rug. If he couldn't see the intruder, he would definitely be able to sniff them out.

Beau's sense of smell was one of the main reasons he was still alive. He was quick too, certainly, and whip smart (you had to be to survive on the city's streets), but his nose had been his salvation on innumerable occasions. He could sniff out a meal in a bin from a hundred and fifty paces, and not just rotting slop that gave out an ungodly pong. He was talking about fine dining: a shard of pork crackling, a scrap from a shoulder of lamb, there was nothing his nostrils couldn't detect.

At that moment though, unusually, his mind wasn't on food. He felt confident after what he'd just witnessed that he

would soon be fed, and fed well. Instead, he was in survival mode. If there was danger lurking somewhere behind the sofa, then he would soon sniff it out.

But Beau didn't find a thing. Well, that's not true, he smelled many things. Furniture wax and Brylcreem, daisy pollen and fountain pen ink, but no dog. He was certain of it.

'You really aren't the sharpest tool in the box, are you?' said the voice again, making Beau spin around to put whoever it was straight. But as he faced the armchair by the fire, there was no other dog, just the cat, Mabel, scowling disdainfully.

'Oh for pity's sake,' she said. 'Do pull yourself together. You *must* have known it was me warning you. No dog is *that* dense, surely?'

Beau didn't know how to respond. Not immediately. He knew of course that cats *spoke*. But he also knew that cats didn't speak to *dogs* unless they absolutely had to. To do so would be to lower themselves to the dog's level, and in cats' eyes, that would never, ever do. It was acceptable to tut or sigh when the idiotic mutts begged for a treat or rolled over for a belly rub, but *speak*?

'Sorry . . . was that . . . you?' Beau didn't want to sound like a dunce, but he had to be sure.

'Talking *at* you, yes,' the cat replied, with heavy emphasis on the second word. 'Don't think for one second I was talking *to* you. *That* would be a very different thing. And not something I'd countenance without an awful lot of forethought.'

Beau wasn't sure where this was going, or what it really meant, but didn't have to worry for long as Mabel went on.

'So I'll make this brief.' She spoke matter of factly and without once making eye contact, such was her arrogance. 'This is *my* house and *my* family. They may allow you to stay, of course, more fool them, but if they do, then none of those facts will change. I will put up with you, but will not fraternise with you. If they try to sit us together, by the fire or anywhere else, you will move. Not me. *You*. We are not friends. We aren't even acquaintances, so I'd suggest you accept that quickly. If you don't, then this cushy life that you think you've wormed your way into will be anything but. It will make the dustbin you previously lived in seem like the Ritz.'

Now Beau was used to meeting territorial animals. It was an everyday occurrence when you eked out an existence on the streets. But his experience was of sharp teeth rather than words, so this left him rather disarmed. So instead of heeding the feline words, he walked over to the sofa to try and thrash out some sort of peace, or at least a compromise.

It turned out, though, that Mabel was true to her word as, instead of continuing to lash out verbally, she now used her claws, swiping at Beau's muzzle, knocking him off balance, leaving him too close to the fire.

His blood boiled, not due to the flames, but at the indignity, and he curled his top lip in disgust, yellowed teeth bared for the first time. Mabel replied in turn, back arched, fur along her

spine spiked like a porcupine, but as each of them prepared themselves for battle, the living room door eased open, and the boy, Wilf, strode in.

His cat, his innocent, saintly pet, was hidden by the back of the sofa, so all he could see was the rabid snarl of the dog on the hearth rug, and of course, he took great delight in loudly telling everyone exactly what he'd found.

'Mum! Dad!' he boomed over his shoulder. 'This stray . . . he's threatening Mabel! Come here, quickly.'

There was a clatter of feet, then a rasping cough as the mother and father arrived in the doorway, followed by Peggy, bursting in between them.

But what they found wasn't what Wilf or Mabel intended. Because if the cat thought she could outsmart Beau, then she was sadly mistaken. It didn't take a genius to realise that once the boy shouted, the others would come running. It didn't take a genius to realise either that if they found Beau with hackles raised, he would quickly find himself back on the street.

So by the time the family entered the living room, all they found was a dirty, straggly dog, blissfully asleep on the rug. In fact, if they listened carefully, they could hear the poor thing snoring.

'Wilfred,' his father exclaimed, after another phlegm-drenched cough. 'I don't know what your game is, sunshine, but we ain't falling for it. Any more lies about Beau and it will be *your* place in this house that's at risk, not his. Understand?'

The boy looked shamefaced, his cheeks flushing the same red as his hair. Mabel didn't look pleased either, and sulked against the sofa cushion. And Beau? He allowed himself a wry smile. The battlelines had been drawn, but he'd proved himself the cat's equal. And that deserved a long, warm and peaceful sleep.