

Funny, sad, and irreverent, Hospice Tails shares the stories of pets who traveled to the door of death with their humans. Meet King, an abused pit bull fiercely loyal to his rescuer, Jasper and Jackie, Amazon parrots who sang their person to his final sleep, Washington, a golden retriever who became the only connection to the world for an Alzheimer's patient, and ten other animals who accompanied their beloved people on the hospice journey.

Hospice Tails: The Animal Companions Who Journey With Hospice Patients and Their Families

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Hospice Tails

**THE ANIMAL COMPANIONS
WHO JOURNEY WITH HOSPICE PATIENTS
AND THEIR FAMILIES**



Debra L. Stang

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ISBN 978-1-61434-261-8

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

The characters and events in this book have been altered to protect the identity of hospice patients, their families, and pets.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

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Chapter One

The World's Biggest Lap Dog

The information on the referral form from the home health agency was brief and bleak. I had been a hospice social worker long enough to interpret the hopelessness and frustration behind it. "Sixty-eight year old female. Pancreatic cancer with metastases to bone and liver. Poor pain control. Supportive family. Beware of dog."

I blinked and re-read that last sentence. *Beware of dog?* That was a new one.

Later that day, when I called the patient's daughter, Nancy, to set up an initial visit, I asked her about the allegedly dangerous dog. She burst into tears. "Please don't make Mama get rid of King. It would kill her. It would kill all of us. He's part of the family."

"Of course I won't make you get rid of your dog," I said. "I just have to make sure our staff is safe when we come to the home to make visits. What kind of dog is it?"

"A pit bull."

Great. "About how big would you say?"

"Oh, King's a big boy. Probably close to a hundred pounds."

Double great. Why couldn't they have had a nasty tempered Shih Tzu? "Isn't that pretty big for a pit bull?" I said, hoping she was exaggerating.

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A long pause greeted my optimistic question. “Well, um...the vet thinks King might be part Rottweiler, too. We’re not sure.”

“Listen,” I said to the daughter, “maybe you should just put King in another room while we visit.”

“It wouldn’t work,” she said. “He hates being separated from Mama. He’ll bark and howl and jump at the door until we let him out. I think he could *break* that door.”

This was just getting better and better.

“Well, how about putting him on a leash?” I said. “Just at first, until he gets to know us.” *And gets it through his thick head that nurse, hospice aide, social worker, and chaplain are not food groups.*

“Until he gets to know you!” the daughter said. “That’s exactly the problem.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That home health agency, the one that told us to call you...they sent a physical therapist over to try to help Mama get stronger. He was so rude he didn’t even introduce himself, didn’t even look at me or my brothers. He just walked over to the couch and started moving Mama’s arms and legs. That cancer is in her bones now, and it hurt so bad she couldn’t help screaming, and King, he was just trying to protect her...” her voice trailed off.

I winced in sympathy, and not for the physical therapist. For the first time I dared to hope that King and I might get along after all. “I’m

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so sorry that happened to your mother,” I said. “We’ll do things very differently, I promise.”

A few hours later, I got to meet King in person when the nurse and I went to the patient’s home to admit her to hospice services.

The patient’s name was Lisa. She lived in a small, clean house with her daughter Nancy, a jittery woman in her forties, who bounced from one foot to the other while she shook hands with me and the nurse. I could easily imagine her channeling all that excess energy into cleaning frenzies. No wonder the place was immaculate.

Lisa’s three other adult children, all boys, hovered around the periphery, wanting to help but not sure exactly how to go about it. One of them wiped silent tears from his cheeks every few seconds. Another held King on a thick leash.

And then there was King himself, who greeted us with thunderous barking and growling that made conversation with the patient and the family nearly impossible. King was every bit as big as Nancy had said. He was a uniform tan color with the squat, powerful build typical of the breed and ice-water eyes that never wavered from me and the nurse. I could all but hear him calculating exactly how many bites it would take to finish each of us off, and how deep a hole he would have to dig to hide the bodies.

But all those thoughts flew from my mind the moment I saw Lisa. She was in torment. She had curled herself into a small ball of misery on the couch, and was rocking back and forth with her hands pressed

against her abdomen. “It just hurts so much,” was all she could say when I leaned down to talk to her.

While I went over hospice with the family, shouting to make myself heard over King’s barking, and got some legal paperwork signed, the nurse immediately got on the phone with Lisa’s doctor to get some stronger pain medication ordered. At first the doctor was hesitant. “I’ve never prescribed narcotics at that dosage,” he said. “Is it even legal?”

The nurse explained that the dosage she was requesting was perfectly legal and that hospice would be visiting Lisa regularly to make sure she didn’t have any ill effects from the medication. Skeptical, but willing to do whatever he could to help his patient, Lisa’s doctor approved the medication.

Now all we could do was wait for the pharmacy to deliver it.

The nurse, who had grown up around pit bulls, stretched out her hand to within a few feet of King’s nose so he could catch her scent. He attempted to lunge at her, but Lisa’s son held the leash tight.

The nurse ignored King and went to Lisa. “I need to check some vital signs,” she said softly. “I’ll do my best not to hurt you. Is that okay?”

Lisa nodded wearily.

The nurse was as gentle as possible, but Lisa whimpered a little when the blood pressure cuff tightened around her arm. King’s ears went up, and his barking took on a whole new intensity.

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The family and I spoke soothing words, and the youngest son slipped him a treat. He continued to give the nurse the evil eye.

“Poor King,” I said. “This must be so hard for you. So hard for all of you.”

The wait for the medication to arrive seemed interminable, but in fact it was only about forty-five minutes. The nurse gave Lisa her first dose of Roxanol, a type of liquid morphine that goes under the tongue or in the pocket of the cheek and is directly absorbed into the membranes of the mouth. It worked quickly, and Lisa’s moaning soon ceased.

King, finally, was quiet as well.

A few minutes later, Lisa stopped hugging her abdomen.

“Oh thank God, thank God,” Nancy whispered. “It’s working.”

A half hour passed and the nurse gave Lisa another dose of Roxanol as well as a dose of long-acting pain medication. Lisa was relaxed and sleepy now. I went to the couch and sat down cross-legged on the floor “Oh, Lisa,” I said, “I’m so glad your pain is better.”

She smiled, nodded, and squeezed my hand.

About that time, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. King was rushing towards me. The son who had been holding the leash had been so caught up in watching his mother that he had let the leash slip through his fingers. There was no time to get out of King’s way, so I just sat there and wondered through the icy panic fogging my brain what it would feel like to be eaten by a pit bull.

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King reached me in two leaps, charged between me and Lisa, turned his broad back to me...and then plopped his butt squarely down on my lap.

The room exploded in laughter. “Oh, King, don’t be so silly,” giggled Lisa. “You’re the world’s biggest lap dog.” I scratched King behind his ears and breathed a sigh of relief. Life was going to be much easier in this household with King as an ally rather than an enemy.

The nurse and I stayed for another half hour to make sure that Lisa’s pain really was controlled and that the family understood how to give her the medicine. They did, and assured us that they would use the medication regularly so Lisa would never have to be in so much pain again.

While Lisa was on service with hospice, I visited her about twice a month to provide emotional support to her and her family. As I sat on the floor by Lisa’s couch—she had refused to allow us to get her a hospital bed—King always perched firmly on my lap, just keeping an eye on things.

Lisa had not had an easy life. Her husband had abandoned her with four small children, and she had had to work two and sometimes three jobs at a time to raise them, but she was proud of her hard work and of how richly it had paid off. She and Nancy loved sharing stories about the things they had done as a family.

King had come along three years ago. Lisa was leaving the diner where she worked as a waitress when she saw a young man with

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dreadlocks and a leather jacket kicking a cringing puppy. It never occurred to Lisa to be afraid. Her years as a single mother had taught her to protect those weaker than herself.

She darted between the young man and the puppy, using every ounce of her 100-pound, 5'1" body to push King's tormentor away from his victim. "You bully! You monster! You..." She called the young man a few more names that he probably hadn't expected to come out of the mouth of a 65-year old woman. Then she scooped the trembling puppy into her arms and stalked away.

"Hey, bitch!" the man called after her. "That dog cost me a hundred bucks."

"You should have thought of that before you beat him," Lisa said. "He's mine, now. Or we can always call the police and let them decide."

Lisa always chuckled at this point in the story. "I guess that fellow remembered somewhere else he needed to be, because as soon as I said the word police, all that was left of him was his ugly backside running in the opposite direction."

"Mama, you could have been hurt," Nancy reproved her, but with a smile.

King got up and licked Lisa's face. She pretended to push him away. "King, you have doggy breath." Then she relented and gave him a tight hug.

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Unfortunately, Lisa's cancer was very aggressive. She had only been on service with hospice for three months before she entered what we refer to as the active dying process. This means that the body has started the process of shutting itself down, and that death is only a few days or hours away.

I increased my visits to support Lisa's grieving family. That family, of course, included King. As soon as I came through the door, he nudged me gently but firmly onto the floor beside Lisa's couch. Then he sat on my lap. I had to coax, beg, bribe, and finally physically push him off of me when it was time for me to end my visits.

Even at her weakest, Lisa still found the energy to give King a pat on the head when he anxiously pawed at her arm.

The night before Lisa died, she lapsed into a brief coma and stopped responding to everything around her, even King.

By that morning, when I got to the house, her breathing had started to change, speeding up and then slowing down. Soon there were long pauses in between each breath. About an hour later, she took a last deep gasp and her chest stopped moving.

We waited in silence for several moments. Then the hospice nurse said softly, "I'm so sorry. She's gone."

Nancy cried out and fell to her knees. One of her brothers bent down to comfort her. Another slammed his fist into the wall. The third just stood there with tears running down his face. King threw his head back and let loose a howl of sheer anguish and desolation.

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The nurse and I both said and did whatever we could to ease the pain in the room, but some hurt runs far too deep for words to touch. Nancy and I sat together on the floor beside Lisa's couch until the funeral home arrived to remove Lisa's body. King sat on my lap and whimpered uncertainly while I held him and rocked him like the abused puppy he had once been.

We buried Lisa on one of those rare, spring-like days that sometimes pop up out of nowhere in the middle of winter. King attended the graveside service. As soon as he saw me, he let out one of his overpowering barks, charged over to me, and butted his head against my legs until I sat down hard in the wet grass. Then he climbed on my lap. "The world's biggest lap dog," I whispered in his ear.

I've never much believed in life after death, but I knew that Lisa and her family did. And I also knew that if Lisa was watching us from somewhere far away, she was laughing.

Chapter Nine

The Wascally Wabbit

Most of our patients bond with animals because they love them so much. But as I learned one brisk November morning during an animal visit at a nursing home, there are other reasons to connect to furry creatures as well.

My client, Hal, was a feisty man in his eighties. Robbed of most of his speech by a stroke, he still managed to communicate with his clear blue eyes and a look of scorn that crossed his face when someone suggested something he felt was beneath his dignity. The few words he was able to summon indicated that his mind was very much intact.

The first time I met him, the activities director at the facility, a cheery, overly-enthusiastic woman had pushed Hal in his wheelchair to a group activity. They were, she explained in a booming voice, going to make little boats out of Popsicle sticks. I didn't need to know Hal to translate the look on his face to one of absolute horror.

The activities director went around passing out the Popsicle sticks. She stopped in front of Hal and crouched down by his wheelchair. "How would we like to make a boat today?" she asked.

Summoning every ounce of speech still left to him, Hal glared at her and said in a trembling, grating voice, "Now just why the fuck would *we* want to do that?"

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Her face dropped, and I made my move. “Hi, I’m Debra, the hospice social worker. I need to take Hal back to his room to visit with him for a minute. Is that all right?”

It was more than all right with her.

Back in his room, Hal fixed me with a glare. He used one hand to hook the blanket that covered his legs and brought it up over his face so he wouldn’t have to look at me.

I laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to do any crafts.”

The blanket didn’t move an inch.

“I would like to find out what you’re interested in, though,” I said. “You’ll like it much more when I’m here if we can talk about something that really interests you. Are you a sports fan?”

For the next half hour, I tried to find something to engage him. I talked about the weather, politics—both liberal and conservative, the army, the textile industry which had been his life’s work, pets, his children, his grandchildren, and even the food at the facility.

He kept the blanket over his head.

Fearing he might suffocate, I pulled it off. The look he gave me could have frozen boiling water. “It’s okay,” I said, “I’m going now. I just didn’t want you to get too hot.”

The next week, the blanket was back. I talked about activities at the facility that I thought might interest him, music, the holidays, his roommate, whether he would like a communication board to make it

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easier for him to express his wants. Nothing. The blanket stayed over his head. I felt like I was talking to a corpse.

By week three, I was getting desperate. I started telling him about myself, my pet cats, my love of Broadway musicals, my freelance writing career. “And of course,” I said, “I love to read.”

The blanket came down exactly three inches, revealing those intense blue eyes. “So do I,” he rasped.

The stroke had robbed him of his ability to read, but he could still listen to stories and understand them. I got him hooked up with books on tape, and always brought along a book to read aloud to him when I came to see him. To my surprise, he favored the classics, especially anything by Jack London or Mark Twain. Before long, we found a volunteer who was willing to go out and read to him once a week, and he enjoyed that as well.

Once I knew what interested him, our relationship progressed rapidly. He even gave in and started using the communication board. We modified it to include phrases like, “Read that again,” and “Skip that chapter, it’s boring.”

His behavior at the facility improved, too. Oh, he still glowered over tasks that he thought were silly, but he avoided the use of the F-bomb which sent the activities director into a frenzy. He could even be persuaded to help people with cognitive disabilities finish their little crafts.

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We were all devastated when Hal had a second, more serious stroke and became paraplegic. The few words he had used in the past were gone, but he still seemed to enjoy our reading sessions, so anyone from hospice who visited him read aloud a few pages of his favorite books.

He seldom went to activities anymore, so I was surprised when I stopped by on one of my routine visits to find he wasn't in his room. I asked the nurse, and she directed me to the dining room where volunteers from a group called Pets for Life had brought in their animals for the residents to interact with. One woman had a fluffy black and white cat with blue eyes that reminded me a little of Hal's. It lay in her arms and purred and didn't seem to mind when some of the residents forgot and pulled at its soft fur. There was also a gentle black Labrador who was being petted by a few women who shared a table.

I spotted Hal immediately, sitting stoically in his wheelchair in the middle of it all. He made no effort to touch any of the animals, and his face had the familiar look of scorn. I was about to rescue him, when he laid eyes on the rabbit.

It was a large, white, lop-eared rabbit cradled in the arms of a volunteer. He grunted and sat up so straight his wheelchair jerked. The nurse and I ran to steady it at the same moment. I beckoned the volunteer over.

“Do you like the rabbit, Hal?” I asked, surprised. I had figured he would go for one of the dogs.

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Hal strained in his seat again and attempted to speak. His eyes were shining.

The volunteer held the rabbit out to him, but he didn't touch it. Again, he blurted a few words I couldn't understand.

The nurse, however, suddenly turned and ran from the room with her hand over her mouth. I made sure the brakes on Hal's chair were locked and followed her. She had retreated into an empty room and was bent over at the waist from laughing so hard.

"Honestly," I said, "what is so funny? I think it's sweet that he likes the rabbit."

That produced another mad gale of laughter.

It was two or three minutes before she calmed down enough to explain. "Didn't you hear what he was saying?"

"No," I confessed, "I haven't been able to understand him since that second stroke."

She giggled again. "He was saying, 'Get me my gun.' He didn't want to *pet* the rabbit. He wanted to *hunt* it!"

I couldn't help it. I started laughing, too.

"Oh, God," the nurse said, "how are we going to tell that poor volunteer?"

"We're not," I said, trying to pull myself together. "Let her think that rabbit was just what he needed to make him feel better. In an odd kind of way, I guess it was. But let's get back out there before he decides to wring its neck or something"

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By the time we reached the dining room, Hal had decided there was no gun forthcoming and lost interest in the rabbit. When I took him back to his room, though, he was still talking excitedly and from the few words I caught, I gathered he was telling me about hunting trips he had taken with his sons.

The next time I visited Hal, I brought some hunting magazines I had borrowed from friends. He stared wistfully at the pictures as I read him the stories, stories that made my stomach churn but that he, obviously, loved.

Hal didn't live long after the rabbit incident. A third stroke robbed him of his sight, and soon after, a fourth put him into a comatose state. He died comfortably a few days later.

At the funeral, his eldest son asked the hospice staff who had cared for him to slip something meaningful into his casket. The staff and I thought about it, and after careful consideration, we buried him with a copy of *Call of the Wild*, his favorite Jack London book...and with a stuffed white rabbit.

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