

The Red Hoodie Gang

Constable Steve strolled slowly down the road, making his way through his little town. He had a deep knowledge of the area, and knew, pretty much, what went on behind almost every door. The casual observer would have said that his route through the town was random, but the casual observer would not have noticed that whatever route the Constable took seemed to cover all parts of the town.

“Morning Mrs Patterson,” Constable Steve said. “How’s Mr Patterson?”

“Fine, thank you, Constable,” Mrs Patterson said. “His leg is getting better day by day. He’ll soon be able to get back to work.”

Constable Steve nodded and carried on. Mr Patterson had been injured at work and his employer had initially been unwilling to keep him on. Constable Steve had a word with the employer and discussed with him his legal obligations in regard to employee safety and mentioned several checks that he, Constable Steve, could carry out, “if he had the time”.

The employer, who wasn’t a bad chap really, could take a hint, and informed Mr Patterson that his job was safe, and even delivered a food parcel to the Pattersons “to help out”. He also, as suggested by Constable Steve, made some changes to prevent such accidents happening in the future. Constable Steve had checked. He was pleased by the outcome.

He hadn’t actually had to do anything, except talk to people, and had achieved a satisfactory result. Of course, if the employer had proved to be difficult, then Constable Steve knew of various laws that could have been used to try to remedy the situation.

But Constable Steve only used the heavy hand of the law if he had no other option. He saw himself more as an advisor or peace maker, and the citizens of the town as his charges. So he smiled happily as he strolled on his way.

Then his smile disappeared, to be replaced by a frown. A small girl, maybe twelve years of age sat cross-legged in front of a shop. She wore a red hoodie and had placed a small basket in front of her and held a piece of cardboard.

“Hullo, Red. No school today?” said Constable Steve.

She started and looked left and right, but there was no escape. Anyway, Constable Steve knew where she lived. She half heartedly tried to hide the piece of cardboard and the basket.

“‘Spare a few coins for food for my Granny’” read Constable Steve. “What about school, Red?”

“I went this morning, Constable Steve. There’s just sports this afternoon.”

“Hmm,” said Constable Steve. “I will check, you know. No sign of your Dad then?”

Red’s Dad had lost his job and had gone to the Capital to look for work. He wasn’t much of a writer, and all that Red and her Granny got was the occasional postcard that read something like “Getting on fine. Hope you are well. Love, Dad.” No address.

Red's mother had died when she was a baby and Red and her Dad had lived with Granny ever since. Granny worked in a local shop, but had fallen ill soon after Red's Dad had gone to the Capital, and had to give up her job. She was a lot better now, but couldn't find another job.

Constable Steve thought of the family as one of his few failures. He'd almost arranged another job for Red's Dad, but the man had gone off to the Capital before Constable Steve could complete the arrangements. Then Granny had fallen ill. Now that she was better, they got a little money by selling eggs from their chickens, but they were grateful for the food parcels that Constable Steve arranged. It looked like they still weren't getting by.

"Another postcard came the other day. He's fine. Didn't say when he'd be home."

"Where's that hairy friend of yours, by the way? You're supposed to have him on a lead in town, you know."

Red looked around. "I don't know. He was here a minute ago. Probably saw you coming, Constable Steve. Eric! Where are you?"

A scruffy dog crept around the corner. It didn't look like much. It was as if the word 'hangdog' had been created especially for it. It was quite large, but scruffy, with a tangled coat. For all its size, it looked frightened. It cowered away from Constable Steve as if he was about to beat it, which of course he would never do. It reluctantly lay down next to Red.

Constable Steve sighed. "It's supposed to have a collar on."

"Whoops." Red whipped around and pulled a dog collar from her backpack and fitted it round the dog's neck. She attached a lead. "Sorry, Constable Steve. I forgot."

"Move on, Red. You know you aren't supposed to beg in the street," said Constable Steve.

He bent down and picked up Red's basket. "Hmm. Anyway, you don't seem to have been doing too well."

He gave the basket back to Red, turned, started to stroll off down the road. In a convenient reflection in a shop front he saw Red and the dog headed for home. He sighed. He'd try to do something about the Red problem, but the question was what?

Red and the dog strolled towards Granny's house which was just beyond the town, a little into the woods. When they were out of the town Red took the lead and the collar off the dog and then stood still. Hands touched her backpack, but she kept looking forwards. Various grunts and mutterings went on behind her.

"I'm done," said a voice, and a small scruffy boy stepped up beside her.

She sighed. "Eric, I never want to see you change again. That once was enough."

"What about me?" said Eric. "I'm not too keen on people seeing me starkers either."

"What happened to you back there when Constable Steve caught me? You were supposed to be keeping a look out." Red asked.

Eric was embarrassed. "Uh, I was just round behind the butchers. To see what there was there. Sometimes there's some choice bits, and I'm not fussy when I'm a wolf."

“Dog, Eric. Why did my best friend turn out to be a were-dog?” Red asked the universe.

“How much did we get?” asked Eric, the were-dog.

“Constable Steve slipped me a five dollar note,” she answered. “He’s so nice. But apart from that, just small change. We have to get a better plan.”

Eric kicked a stone. “But what? Hey, we could rob the bank!”

“And get slung into jail. That wouldn’t work. Banks are too well protected.”

She thought a bit. “Roads aren’t though.”

Constable Steve pondered Red’s case as he went home. He kissed his wife and played with his son before his son’s bath and bedtime, but he must have seemed preoccupied.

“Steve, have you got something on your mind? You’ve been a bit distant.” said his wife, Linda.

“Sorry, dear,” he said and kissed her. He sighed.

“There’s a small girl and her Granny. Her Dad’s off looking for work in the Capital, and there’s very little money. Granny hurt her hip, and while the doctor’s pills and charms worked, and she’s getting better, she had to give up her job. I caught the girl begging in town today.”

“Oh no! Did you arrest her?”

“No, of course not. What good would that do? I just moved her and her dog on.”

He scratched his chin. “There’s something funny about that dog. I don’t know what it is.”

“Is there anything that you can do?”

Constable Steve made a decision. “Yes, there is something that I can try.”

He explained his plan to his wife.

“Yes, that might work,” she said. “Is this girl the one who always wears a red hoodie? Has a rather large scruffy dog?”

“Yes! Do you know her?”

“I always buy eggs from her Granny when I’m over there. She’s a marvellous cook. Used to win awards, apparently.”

“That’s given me another idea. You know that Lucy from down the road wants a wedding cake made? The baker is booked out, and she’s looking for someone else to make a cake for her.”

“You think Granny could make it for her? That’s a good idea,” said his wife. “I’ll go and see Lucy tomorrow. Now, can you put work aside for the rest of the evening?”

Now that he had a plan, Constable Steve was able to relax and just be Steve for the rest of the evening, which pleased his wife. She knew that Steve couldn’t help bringing the job back home some days. It just part of what he was. It was because he cared.

The next day Constable Steve phoned someone in his little town. After a bit of discussion he got a favourable result. Feeling pleased he phoned an old colleague in the Capital. His old pal was happy to help him out and Constable Steve headed out on his rounds whistling tunelessly. His plan was in action!

Linda put her son in his pushchair and headed down the road. Apparently Lucy hadn't yet found someone to make her wedding cake, so the two of them headed to Granny's house.

"Hullo," said Granny. "Come on in. I don't have many visitors. What can I do for you?"

"Lucy needs someone to make a wedding cake. I've tasted your cakes, Granny, and I know that you could do it. Someone said that you used to win awards. Did you really?" said Linda.

"Just a minute," said Granny. She shuffled off to a drawer and brought back a folder and a photograph album.

"Here's my prize certificates," she said. "And here are some photos of my cakes."

The folder was stuffed with certificates. First Prize this, second prize that, for scones, cupcakes, birthday cakes, even wedding cakes, and not just for local events. Some were from regional competitions, and some were from national contests. The photo album showed pictures of Granny's cakes interspersed with pictures of a much younger Granny receiving awards.

"...and this is the cake that I did for the Royal Wedding," said Granny.

"What? You made a cake for the King and Queen?" said Linda.

"Well, they were Prince and Princess then, my dear, but yes, I did. Me and my team."

"Why did you give it up?"

"Well, the usual story. I met my husband, and he was a forester from this town, so I came to live here. I was going to make cakes and sell them locally, but I became pregnant with Red's father. Then my husband died, and I looked after Red's father while he was small, and him and Red after her mother died. I never got back into the cake making."

"Oh, Granny, can you please make me a cake? The baker says he can't!" said Lucy.

"Of course dear. I'd love to. What sort of design do you want?"

Lucy and Granny got down to planning the cake. It took some time, but Granny kept their cups of tea full, and provided scones with jam and cream. Linda's little son sat happily on Granny's lap chewing on a biscuit.

"Mmm, delicious," said Linda, about the scones. "Have you thought of working with the baker in town? I know he is very busy and would probably be glad of the help."

"Do you think so, dear? I might have a word with him next time I go into town."

It turned out that the baker was very glad to pass over some of the cake making side of the business to Granny. He was flat out making loaves, croissants, buns and rolls and other bread products, and didn't really have much time to spend on the cakes. So every day a boy brought out bags of ingredients and an order, and Granny gave him trays of cakes she had baked the day before, and

Granny and the baker shared the profits. Then Granny included a few pies and suddenly she and the baker were very, very busy.

The baker wasn't interested in making birthday cakes and wedding cakes, so he handed all that over to Granny. Granny soon became famous in the little town for her cakes for special occasions.

Before all that came to pass, though, a couple of other things happened. First of all, Red got involved with the law once more.

One day a farmer dropped in to see Constable Steve.

"Hi, Constable Steve, I want to report a crime." He was smiling broadly.

"What crime is that, Mr Robinson?" asked Constable Steve. He wondered about the smile.

"Well, this morning, when I was going down Forest Road, someone tried to rob me."

"Can you describe this person, please?"

"A small girl in a red hoodie. She had a mask on, and she had a large scruffy dog with her."

"Ah, I see. Is this an official report, or do you want me to handle this off the record?"

Mr Robinson considered. He was trying hard not to laugh. "Oh, definitely off the record. I know that Red and her Granny are having a hard time at the moment."

"What actually happened?" asked Constable Steve.

"Well, she'd rigged up a broom so that the handle stuck out into the road. I could've driven round it, but I stopped to see what was going on. She popped up and said 'Give me all your money or I'll set the dog on you'. The dog made a noise halfway between a growl and a whine. I laughed. 'What are you up to, Red? I'm driving my tractor. I don't have any money on me!'. She said a word little girls shouldn't know, then said 'Sorry to have troubled you, Mr Robinson' and gathered up her broom, and then she and the dog disappeared into the forest."

Constable Steve said "Thank you for the report, Mr Robinson. I'll be happy to deal with it off the record. I'm already working on the problems that Red and her Granny are having. Thank you for reporting it, but please don't talk about it to anyone, at least for a while."

Mr Robinson nodded. "I hope you manage to sort it out. Red and her Granny deserve a break. Thanks, Constable Steve."

Constable Steve considered. Red liked to hang out in the forest, but where? "The Grove"? "The General"? "The Four Brothers"? His mind roamed over the well-known places in the nearest part of the forest. Then he remembered the Gnome's Cave. High up, with a view over a tree filled valley. Fairly close to Granny's house. He didn't know why, but it seemed likely.

He hiked up the trail wondering if he had guessed right. He slowed down as he approached the cave. It wasn't really a cave, but more of a ledge jutting out into the valley with a bit of an overhang which gave some protection from wind and rain. He heard two voices. Strange.

Red's voice said "I should have known that it wouldn't work. You couldn't scare a rabbit."

The other voice said "Do you think he'll report us?"

"Almost certainly," said Red gloomily.

Constable Steve stepped around the corner.

"What on earth were you thinking of, Red?" he said. "And who is this?"

Red was sitting with her back to the rock, and next to her was a scruffy young boy, about her age.

"I'm Eric," said the boy.

"But Eric's a dog," said Constable Steve.

Eric morphed into a dog, and his clothes fell in a heap. He changed back and grabbed his clothes to cover himself.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to do that. Mind if I get dressed?"

Constable Steve and Red regarded the distant view from the rock.

"Care to explain, Red?" asked Constable Steve. He had a fair idea.

"I came up here once, and Eric was already here. He didn't have any clothes and couldn't talk. After I'd been talking with him for a while, he was able to talk and said he came from a place where there were no humans, and he wasn't happy there. The other dogs bullied him, so he'd wished he was somewhere else and suddenly he was. He hadn't meant to do it, he said."

Eric said "It's much better here. Other dogs are trained not to fight, mostly, and humans look after them. Red looks after me. I'm such a coward. The only problem is that I keep switching to human. I have to concentrate to remain dog."

"I think I might know some people who could help you, Eric. Give me a day or so. But Red, you've been committing highway robbery."

"Oh, no. Mr Robinson reported me?"

"Unofficially, yes, which means that I don't have to arrest you. Anyway, he didn't take you seriously, so I can treat this as a prank. You are very lucky."

"Thank you Constable Steve. I won't do anything like this again. I promise."

"OK, but I'll be watching you, Red. Come on. Let's go home."

The three of them made their way down the trail, Eric in dog form, Red carrying his clothes in her backpack.

A couple of days later, Eric, in dog form, was sniffing his way through the forest. He smelt the trace smells of squirrels, but the traces were a few days old. The very old trace of bear. A recent deer smell. Suddenly two humans appeared in front of him. He couldn't help but change to human.

"Hullo Eric. I'm the Boffin and this is the Mage. We've come to see if we can help you."

The Boffin gestured and suddenly he was dressed.

“Oh thank you. Constable Steve said that he would ask someone. It would be great if you could help me. I hate changing backwards and forwards,” said Eric.

“Constable Steve says that you want to be fully dog. Is that right?”

“Yes, please. I’m naturally a dog, and it hurts my brain to think like a human, but I keep changing to one.”

“What do you think, dear? I can change his endocrine system so that he doesn’t change. It’ll make him a bit braver too, as a bonus,” said the Boffin.

“Yes, I can change his aura, so that he is more of a dog, and less of a human. He’s mostly like that anyway. Can you stabilise that?”

“Yes, through his pineal gland. Then you can create a charm to fix it all in place. That should do it.”

“Eric, you won’t remember Red, after this. We will take you somewhere else and give you to someone who will look after you. Is that OK? We’ll leave a note with Constable Steve, so that he can tell Red.”

Eric nodded. “It’s for the best,” he said. “Will it hurt?”

“No, not at all,” said the Boffin. “Just a pin prick.”

She put an instrument on his upper arm and tapped a few buttons.

Eric said “Ow!” and became a dog.

The Mage put a slender rod on the dog’s head and a glow slid down it and, so it seemed, into the dog.

“Mm, using instruments, dear?” queried the Boffin.

“Sometimes it’s the best way,” replied the Mage. “Anyway, you use gestures and spells some of the time. Well, that’s him fixed up. Let’s go and find Constable Steve. Come on boy,” he said to the dog.

The three stepped off down the trail and disappeared between one step and the next, going who knows where.

Constable Steve went to see Red the next day.

“Eric’s gone, Red. Some friends of mine fixed his little problem, and he is fully dog now.”

“Gone? Oh no, I didn’t get to say goodbye!”

“Sorry, Red. He wasn’t happy the way he was, but my friends say that he is OK now. He’s gone to a good home they tell me.”

Red nodded. “Thanks Constable Steve. I glad he is fine. He was a good friend. For a dog.”

A couple of days later Constable Steve dropped by Granny's house. He had with him a tall man with broad shoulders. Red took one look and shrieked!

"Dad! You're back!"

She ran to him, and he bent down and picked her up, as if she were still five years old. "Oh, I've missed you, Red!"

He kissed her and put her down, and they all sat around Granny's table.

"Constable Steve has got me a job with a forestry firm round here. His friend in the Capital contacted me, and I decided to come home," Red's Dad said. "I was doing quite well in the Capital though, mostly trimming hedges and gardening. But I did a few jobs trimming peoples' trees, cutting them down, and planting them, and that paid well. I quite liked the work and I think I'll see if anyone needs that sort of thing done locally. But Constable Steve tells me that you didn't get any of the money I sent back?"

"Where did you send it to?" asked Granny.

Red's Dad produced a grubby slip of paper. "I put it in this account. Is it the right one?"

Granny looked at it. "No, that's not mine. Wait a minute."

She shuffled through a drawer and drew out some papers.

"It's your wife's old account," she said. "I didn't even know it was still open. Oh, son!"

"Oh, Dad!" said Red in the tone that kids use when a parent does something that they consider silly or embarrassing.

Red's Dad looked embarrassed. "Oh dear, sorry about that. I'm not very good with that sort of thing. There should be quite a bit in there by now. I'll go into town and sort it out tomorrow."

Constable Steve said his goodbyes and Red showed him out.

"Thanks for getting my Dad back, Constable Steve. And thanks for helping out with Eric."

"That's OK, Red," said Constable Steve. "I'm glad that it all worked out. See you around, and no robbing anyone else."

Red laughed. "Sure, Constable Steve. I didn't like trying to rob people. I'll apologise to Mr Robinson when I see him next. I give you my word that this is the end of the Red Hoodie Gang."
