



PANDA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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For Pops







CHAPTER 1

Putting on a Show

Pudding beamed from ear to furry ear as she stood in the white glow of the spotlight and took a bow. She let the applause from the audience pour over her like a warm and friendly breeze. This was Pudding's favourite part of the show – it reminded her of her days as Edinburgh Zoo's Star Attraction, where she was surrounded, day after day, by smiling faces and happy children. It filled her with the most delightful feeling – sweet,

just like a spoonful of sugar. She looked to her co-star, Graham, who was smiling beside her.

They rose up and Graham gave her the merest nod. This was her next cue. Graham opened his arms as wide as he could and rushed forward for the biggest hug he could manage. As planned, he bounced off her fluffy tummy and fell on to the stage, on his bottom. The audience roared and Graham chuckled to himself, as he did every performance. Despite an increasingly bruised backside, the joke never got old for him.

Pudding scanned the crowd again, delighted at the sea of



happy faces, but then her eyes caught on a sharp-faced blonde woman near the front. Unlike everyone else, *she* wasn't smiling. Poor lady – Pudding wished she could wrap her in a big panda hug to cheer her up.

They took their final bow and exited stage left, as the clapping continued. Graham grinned at Pudding. 'Another encore, pet?'

'Not this time. First rule of showbiz: always leave them wanting more,' Pudding advised.

Back in the dressing room, Graham



grabbed a bottle of water and collapsed on to the battered old sofa. It was their second performance of the day – the theatre bosses had requested an extra matinee, because the show was so popular.

‘Just gonnae close ma eyes for a moment, I’m knackered,’ he said.

As Graham rested a lavender eye-mask over his face, there was a loud knock at the door.

‘Excuse me, Graham and Pudding – there’s a reporter to see you. From the *Edinburgh Tattle*. Penelope . . . something.’ The stage manager sounded rattled. ‘She’s asking for an interview.’

‘Och, you know we don’t give interviews,’ Graham said, removing the lavender eye-mask and sitting up.

Pudding peered round him into the corridor, where she recognized the sad woman from the audience, typing something on her phone with a frown. Now was her chance to cheer the poor mite

up! She hated to see anyone leave the show unhappy. Pudding poked Graham in the arm.

‘Ow!’

She stuck a clawed thumbs-up in front of his face and nodded furiously.

‘Sorry, this reporter’s very persistent,’ the young man said, pushing his glasses up his nose as he glanced between Pudding and Graham. Like everyone else, he assumed Pudding was an actor in a panda suit. It was for the best – if anyone found out she was a real talking panda, let alone one who had escaped from the zoo a year ago, they’d be in big trouble – but it did mean Pudding had to keep schtum in front of anyone outside the family. ‘Shall I tell her it’s a no?’

Pudding shook her head at Graham sternly and thumbs-upped a second time. He blew a long breath out of his lips. ‘That’s all right,’ he said begrudgingly. ‘We’ll see her for a quick natter. Just . . . give us a

couple of minutes, OK?’

‘What are you playing at, Pud?’ Graham said when the stage manager had left. ‘Ye ken this is risky to say the least!’

‘The journalist – she’s really sad, Graham. I saw



her in the crowd. She wasn't even laughing! This interview should make her smile.' Pudding smiled broadly at Graham and his expression softened. 'I promise I'll keep quiet, OK?'

'All right, pet. You've a kind heart, you know that?'

'Doesn't mean I won't enjoy the interview too!' Pudding swirled a pink feather boa around her shoulders. 'I'm ready for my close-up!'

Graham chuckled. 'Watch it – the fame might go to your head! We'd best be careful, though. It's one thing for you to pretend to be a person in a panda suit on stage, but close up . . . I wonder if we should glue buttons on to your fur – make it look more like a costume.'

But there was a knock on the door, and before Graham could stop her, Pudding sang, 'Come in!' before slapping a paw over her mouth in horror.

The door opened and the sad lady from the audience peered into the dressing room.



Graham cleared his throat. ‘Sorry, hen. Do come in. Had a bit of a frog in my throat there,’ he said gruffly.

The journalist was exactly as Pudding imagined a glamorous journalist should be. She had long smooth blonde hair, perfect make-up, a neat suit and a designer handbag.

Graham shook her hand enthusiastically. ‘Pleasure to meet ye,

Penelope. I'm—'

'It's Penni, actually. Penni P,' the reporter interrupted. She reached a hand out cautiously, towards Pudding. 'And who are you? Really?'

'She's Pudding,' Graham said quickly, shooting Pudding a warning glance.

Penni reached into her handbag for a small leather notebook and offered Pudding a measured stare. Pudding nodded and smiled, holding her tongue. She suddenly felt a little deflated. Penni hadn't even said thank you for the interview – and she didn't appear to have cheered up at all!

Penni forced a tight-lipped smile and turned to Graham. 'So, Mr Campbell, how did you think up the idea for *Panda-mime*?'

Pudding and the Campbells had a ready-prepared story for the inspiration behind their sell-out show. Obviously, they couldn't very well tell the world it

was easy to create such a panda-tastic work of genius when half of the act was, in fact, a *real* panda.

‘Well, actually, it was my daughter Tabitha who started it all. She absolutely loves pandas, has them all over her bedroom – panda pyjamas, bedcovers, snow globes . . .’ Graham pulled his phone out of his pocket. ‘Here, I’ve got some great pictures.’

Graham scrolled through photos of his children without noticing that Penni was looking everywhere but at his phone.

‘May I take a look at the costume?’ Penni said abruptly.

‘Well—’

But Penni P had already walked over to Pudding and looked her up and down, then round and round, like everyone always did – searching for the zip or buttons in the costume. Despite her good intentions towards the woman, Pudding felt herself bristle

slightly. How rude!

‘Perhaps if you told me who’s inside the suit,
my paper would print an exclusive story – it might



even end up on the front pages, who knows? Great publicity for you.'

'We'd never reveal that, I'm afraid,' said Graham. 'The mystery guest on stage is absolutely top secret.'

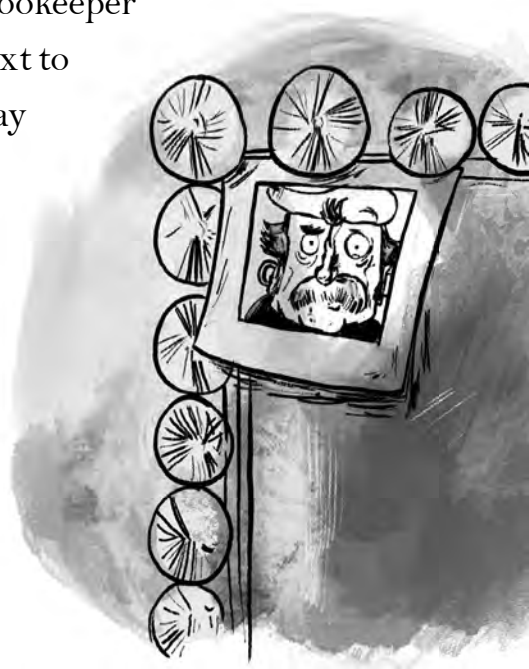
Penni tapped her pen against her lips. 'What about if I guess, and you say "yes" if I'm right? Apparently Jodie Whittaker bought a holiday home in the area recently. Have you got Doctor Who in there?' She stroked Pudding's arm and Pudding felt her fingers sinking into her soft, warm fur. 'So realistic.'

Pudding didn't care for being prodded and poked. She stretched out a paw and gently ruffled Penni P's hair until it stood up on end – see how she liked it! That stopped the reporter in her tracks. She pulled away and turned towards the Hollywood mirror to smooth down her no-longer-perfect hair.

Pudding loved her dressing room – the lights on the mirror made her feel like a real star, as did

the hatstand in the corner, which was draped with colourful scarves, boas and beads. There was *Mary Poppins* memorabilia everywhere, from little dolls, to kites, to a signed photo of Dick Van Dyke and the penguins. The table itself was barely visible under cards and drawings from fans and well-wishers, and tucked in the corner of the mirror was a photo of Gerald, Pudding's former zookeeper friend at Edinburgh Zoo. Next to her fur-brushes and fur-spray was a large glass of water filled with juicy bamboo stalks. Pudding licked her lips.

Graham gave a little cough. 'So, Miss, er, P? What else can we tell you about the show? Or have



you got everything you need?’

Penni seemed distracted, more like she was doing complicated maths in her head, rather than fixing her hair. She stared at the photo of Gerald, and the bamboo and the picture of Mary Poppins with a small cut-out of Pudding’s face in place of Julie Andrews, as if that were more interesting than the giant panda sat beside her.

Pudding began to worry that they weren’t going to get a good review and that perhaps she should start singing or juggling, when suddenly Penni appeared to figure out whatever it was that was bothering her, and her face transformed. She smiled a big, flashy, toothy smile, just like all the children used to at the zoo, whenever a grown-up with a camera phone mentioned ‘cheese’. When she smiled like that, Penni P was radiant and sparkly. Pudding’s heart felt warm; they really *had* cheered her up.

Penni P turned back to face them, crossing her legs and leaning closer to Graham.

Resting her notepad on her knee, pen poised, she said, 'Call me Penni, please. And tell me everything, Graham. And I mean, *everything*.' She paused. 'And then I might have some exciting news for you.'