

A Good Read

By Irene Davidson

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organisations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

To my readers:

Hello and thanks very much for choosing my book. If you enjoy it, I'd be thrilled if you'd take a moment after you have finished reading to leave me a review at your favourite retailer.

Irene Davidson

Dedication

To Linda, Bart and Lisa: my second family,
...thank you for opening your home and hearts to me.

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And ye, who have met with Adversity's blast,
And been bow'd to the earth by its fury;
To whom the Twelve Months, that have recently pass'd
Were as harsh as a prejudiced jury -
Still, fill to the Future! and join in our chime,
The regrets of remembrance to cozen,
And having obtained a New Trial of Time,
Shout in hopes of a kindlier dozen.
-Thomas Hood

ONE

I was new in town and it was my birthday. Being fresh off the boat -well, plane to be more precise- I knew absolutely no one with whom to celebrate the event. Under the circumstances, I felt that this was a good thing. Given that the one person with whom I would have wanted to celebrate the day was no longer around, I preferred to treat the day like any other. I had learned to be happy enough with my own company -especially as it meant I had no one to remind me what had happened on this day a scant twelve months before.

So, there I was on my twenty-eighth birthday -with little to do other than search for a decent cup of coffee. And just for the record, I had *not* been looking for a library. Yes, if truth be told, I love a good read almost more than anything else, but I was currently deep in the throes of reading a great thriller and was not in the market for a new book on that particular morning. Even my walking into the bookshop -the place I decided later that everything had started from- had been nothing more than chance.

Or so I'd thought.

Now, I'm not so sure any more.

I had simply wandered in off a street bereft of pedestrians whom I might have asked, to enquire where there might be a good local café. I had a mind to sit back, relax and maybe watch the world go by, so bought a glossy magazine by way of thanks to the lady behind the counter. She had pleasantly recommended not just one but several coffee spots nearby and I'd thought I would idly leaf through its pages while I worked my way through one, or possibly more, cups of my favourite brew.

As I paid for the magazine I imagined myself beginning to salivate like some Pavlov's dog at the thought of a piping hot latté. Feeling that I was about to start slobbering all over the counter-top, I made a hasty exit from the shop before I embarrassed myself in front of a complete stranger. Ironic, the intensity of that imagery, I'd later thought, once I'd had the luxury of time to look back over the events that followed.

But seriously, a trip to the library was just about the furthest thing from my mind. Honest Injuns.

Bugger. There I go again. My sincere apologies to any and all of the indigenous tribes of North America because that is not how I usually speak.

But I think I know where it came from.

Politically-correct creature that I am, phrases like that are so *not* something you would normally hear coming out of my mouth. It's weird what that darn book's done to my speech. My command of the language has transmogrified so much that I sound like some anachronistic, tobacco-spittin', '*there's-gold-in-them-thar-hills*' version of myself -and it's not just my speech that's changed. I've noticed a few oddly uncharacteristic behaviours as well, like sudden cravings for beef jerky and a heapin' helpin' of beans served on an old chipped enamel plate. Not foods I've ever favoured, pre-library. I'll have to watch myself or I'll be saying and doing all sorts of inappropriate and potentially offensive things if I'm not more careful.

Frankly, I hope it all wears off soon.

But I digress...

...Getting back to my unexpected visit to the library. Please understand -I have nothing against libraries per se. As I've said, I love reading. Always have. Give me a suitcase full of books (and a change of underwear -the last piece of good advice my final foster-mother ever gave me) and I'm ready to travel to just about anywhere. I'm a book editor for goodness sake, so, I guess you could say that I don't just live to read, I read to make a living.

But this day that should have been special was ruined by a less-than-special memory, and as nourishing to my psyche as a good book might have been under normal circumstances, my mind didn't feel up to anything too taxing. Maybe tomorrow. Today I just wanted to get through the twenty-four hours that was my birthday as best I could.

I did want a drink rather badly though. Not alcohol, in case you are wondering and are too polite to ask. After what I'd been through this last year, I'd been careful not to turn to drink or drugs to dampen the flash-backs and nightmares -and when it seemed that I'd never be free of the demons of my abhorrent memories I'd finally sought help from a PTSD therapist rather than resort to prescription medications or alcohol.

I just wanted that coffee. As I left the bookshop and turned my face towards the direction the lady had recommended, I fancied I could smell the freshly roasted beans in the air. I walked, my mind wandering from subject to subject as its wont to do and I pondered about when some concerned individual would form a coffee drinkers anonymous to go with all those other anonymous groups that one could join for various addictions? Today, I could care less. Until such time as mine was designated an addiction requiring group-support, I'd stick with caffeine.

My helpful guide had said that a number of cafés were to be found in the town square - or, more precisely its Octagon, the town's cultural and social hub and a mere stone's throw away from my present location. I smiled in memory. Her exact words had been "... just take a wee walk down the street and you'll find plenty of nice cafés, all within cooee of one another." I had struggled to keep the amused grin off my face at her quaint usage of the words *wee* and *cooee*. ...Not for the first time since my arrival, I'd noticed that more than a few of the local inhabitants I'd come across still maintained strong links to their not-so-distant Scottish past.

I turned the corner to find that language was not the sole link, apparently. As I rounded the street corner into the Octagon -an eight-sided plaza that was the heart of this town, I noted a large seated bronze of Robbie Burns, the revered Scottish poet, uphill to my left, atop a steep terrace. To my right were a tavern by the name of The Craic and its near-neighbour, the Thistle café. If these were any indication, the town-folk were enthusiastic in celebrating their

Celtic roots. I studied the café's sign. I was no botanist but I knew enough of thistles to recognise that the prickly purple flower depicted on the sign was of the large Scottish variety rather than my more-familiar yellow Californian species.

I was mere steps away from that delightful café, with its comfortable bistro chairs, hot buttered scones and nectar-of-the-Gods coffee, when I spotted a set of imposing, delphinium-blue coloured doors between the café and the tavern -and alongside, a brass plaque on the wall that announced the Athenaeum and Mechanic's Institute Library to be open this morning. The doors were tantalisingly slightly ajar and just asking for me to go through.

What a wonderful name for a library, I thought. Deciding that I might rethink my lazy morning and explore said library after I had downed a cup or two, I checked my watch. I found, to my consternation, that the library would be open for only another fifteen minutes. I re-checked the opening times and dates, finding that the establishment was more often shut than not -it wouldn't be until the same time next month that the doors would allow public access once more. My interest was immediately piqued -I didn't want to wait another month before I could see inside. So I put aside my pressing need for the coffee and made for the entrance.

Fate, you might say? Nah, I wouldn't assume anything so lofty. Just me and my overly well-developed sense of curiosity -of the 'curiosity *killed the cat*' variety. Nosiness, you might as well call it, if we're being blunt. So, with my coffee within *cooee* and my magazine tucked firmly under one arm I decided to take a wee walk inside. I pushed the large blue door further open and walked through.

The sign might have said the Athenaeum and Mechanic's Institute Library was open but, once inside, there was a dearth of information about just where I'd find said library. Plus, it appeared someone was saving on electricity -either that, or they really did not wish to encourage the public to visit after all. A few steps inside and I was reduced to feeling my way along a barely-lit dark-panelled hallway, before proceeding down a steep circular stairwell to a second more-narrow corridor. This was slightly brighter than the first with... Were those gas lamps? The dimly glowing lamps certainly looked convincing enough to be the real deal - but perhaps they were just a modern-day equivalent? With mounting feelings of trepidation, I followed increasingly smaller signs depicting a finger pointing to an open book, feeling as if I was being led down into the bowels of the building. Well, perhaps not the bowels, but the sub-basement at the very least.

I was wondering if I'd somehow taken a wrong turn and should retrace my steps when, at last, I came to a frosted glass door, etched with the words *Athenaeum and Mechanic's Institute Lending Library* -in a gothic typeface. It appeared I'd found my destination. With a small sigh of relief I turned the handle, hoping this would be worth delaying my much-needed coffee for. But what kind of library, I thought, would be tucked away out of sight in the basement of a building and only open one morning a month? Probably one not worth visiting my more cynical inner voice replied. From the looks of the dated signage and old-fashioned doors, it might boast, at best, a few dusty titles, published circa 1900 or before, and nothing I'd want to read. Yes, I'd read my share of classics and toiled my way through one or two weighty tomes, but more for good forms' sake than any sense of enjoyment. Aside from Tolkien, I generally preferred contemporary authors. That was my job, after all. Contemporary fiction.

If only I'd known then what I know now.

I should have turned, beat a hasty retreat and dashed back to the quiet comfort of the Thistle café and three cups of coffee.

Still, I doubt it. After all, curiosity and that cat are powerful influences.

With this thought in mind, I opened the door and walked in.



Wow. Who knew that there was this much space down here in the basement?

As I stood transfixed by the vista before me, the door closed behind me with a quiet snick. Nothing to worry about. Merely a self-closing mechanism, -or so I hoped. I was determined not to turn back and check. Though somewhere in the back of my mind it did occur to me that the sound reminded me an awful lot of a key turning in a lock. I didn't like to embarrass myself by trying the handle so did my best to ignore the thought.

And there was plenty to take my mind off the door. I gazed around with interest. Well, much as I'd surmised, it *was* an old-fashioned library -quite decidedly and delightfully so. Victorian or Edwardian I might have guessed from the architecture, if anyone asked. But then, I'm no architectural expert -one plaster curlicue looks much like any other to me. What I did know, was that for this kind of atmosphere I would have happily put up with searching through a slew of dusty classics for one readable book. But even at first glance, it seemed that would not be necessary. From where I was standing, still just inside the (unlocked -I'm absolutely sure of it) door, I could spot a number of recently published novels displayed on the packed shelves. Though from the haphazard way the books were organised (and I use that term loosely) it appeared that strict adherence to the Dewey decimal system was not of paramount importance in this library. Some were upright, some atop one another on shelves while others leaned like inebriated drunkards looking for support from their neighbours and many more were stacked in leaning-tower-of-Pisa piles on the floor. One or two larger editions had been perched scarily overhanging the upper edges of the shelves and looked like they might fall at any minute. I gingerly moved forward and down a couple of steps, one eye on the books above my head, the other on where I was going.

Aside from the decorative elements, the library was designed along fairly simple lines. There were two levels, (oddly, I'd come in on one upper corner), ...to either side a narrow walkway circumnavigated shelves placed all around the four sides of a large void with a set of stairs spiralling down at each corner to the lower level.

As I moved towards the railing, a magnificent vaulted ceiling caught my eye and I looked upwards -it was painted all over with a literary characters -many of whom I recognised. They were depicted as if they were wandering about, conversing with each other or reading one another's books. I smiled inwardly, admiring both the quality or the artwork and the whimsical nature of the scene.

I was scrutinising an area of the fresco that portrayed several winged books, all fluttering about like butterflies when my study of the ceiling was cut short by the sound of a bell, tinkling from down below. I peeked over the edge of the balustrade to see more shelving arranged in u-shaped bays around the perimeter of the lower level. A large circular desk took up space in the centre with a woman, who appeared to be the library's' only other occupant, stationed behind it. The librarian, I presumed. She was holding a small bell in what I might have called a *lady-of-the-manor* sort of way -delicately held between thumb and index finger and with her pinkie expended. She looked as if she was calling for tea. At first glance, the bell-ringer did not look like the sort of person who would indulge in such imperious behaviour but as I was about to learn, appearances can be deceptive. A small, slightly dumpy, woman of indeterminate age, she was looking up at me with an expression that was hard to read -part welcome, part something ...else. Upon reflection, I later realised it was an air of expectancy, tinged with that certain soupçon of self-satisfaction that emanates from persons who have too much insight and knowledge of the inner workings of the minds and lives of others.

However, I wasn't to know this at the time, neither being forewarned nor forearmed of the events that would follow.

I did have the prescience of mind to wonder, once more, if I shouldn't just leave now and go back the way I'd come. Back to the world above -that of cafes and glossy magazines, but that darned cat-like curiosity would not let me leave. She kept looking up at me and gestured in a come-hither motion with her other hand so, instead of retreating I took the closest set of stairs to the lower level. A threadbare but richly patterned rose-motif carpet muffled my footsteps as I approached the desk.

"Good morning dearie. Welcome to the Athenaeum Library." Shrewd brown eyes surveyed me, peering over the tops of half-specs of the kind my grandmother had once worn. Casting my eyes over her clothing choices, I couldn't help thinking, more Shades of Russet than Shades of Grey here. Not that I meant to be unkind. It was merely an observation -from her mouse-brown hair to her leather brogued feet this lady was sticking to a limited palette of tone-on-tone brown. With the exception of one standout accessory. Her spectacle safety chain of glittering pink diamantes struck me as rather incongruous -at least I presumed at the time, the stones to be fakes and not real pink diamonds, but, like so many things afterwards, I was not so sure.

I glanced to her name badge, pinned to the chest of a russet-brown cable-knit cardigan. It read 'Hello Dearie - my name is Mrs Sera Tosthene', under another badge that proclaimed, 'Head Librarian'.

Hmmm. Interesting way to spell Sara, I thought. And Tosthene was not a surname I was familiar with. It sounded vaguely Greek. But then, what did I know? Perhaps it was a local name. After all, surely not everybody hereabouts was descended from Celts?

"Hello. Good morning ...Ma'am," I responded to the dual greetings of librarian and badge. Not confident that I'd pronounce her last name correctly, I opted for a more formal honorific.

Choice of honorific aside, I still wasn't sure why I had come down the stairs. It wasn't like I could take out a book on loan or anything. I had no proof of a local address or anything else that I was sure would be required for membership. And until I could sit and pass my driver's licence I'd be carrying my passport around as identification. I was just thinking that I'd have a very quick look around then head back up to the street and the café, when she spoke again.

"You'll be wanting a library card then, dearie." She said the words with a tone of assured certainty, her voice sounding much younger than her outward appearance suggested.

Good thing one of us was so sure.

"Erm, I guess so." I was feeling more than a little uneasy. Almost queasy, you might say. There was something about this place that was setting my teeth on edge, "If I qualify for one that is. I don't have any documents to show that I'm resident. I will be, that is. Resident, I mean." I babbled on, just in case I hadn't made that abundantly clear. Then I said something that was assured to make any librarian worth their salt think twice about issuing a card. "Um, I'm pretty new in town and haven't had a chance to get any post from a utilities company or whatever it is that libraries normally need to prove you're not just passing through and planning on stealing a boatload of books."

Well. There went my chances of getting a card. Open mouth. Insert foot. Could I have said it any worse?

The librarian merely smiled, if a little frostily -eyes narrowing slightly over those half-glasses. "I'm sure you won't do that dearie. I really wouldn't recommend it."

There was a rapier edge to *recommend* and the way she said *dearie*, this time, sent a chilling shiver up my spine.

“Besides, the library’s books have a way of finding their own way home if our borrowers neglect to return them.”

“Well that’s convenient,” I had a bad habit of forgetting to renew books and at times had amassed quite considerable fines for late returns. If what she said was true, I would be more than happy to borrow books that would perambulate themselves back to the library shelves without my intervention. Anything that could save my hard-earned salary was a winner in my book. Oh dear ...*in my book*...that was not intentional. It appeared that I had books on the brain.

“I didn’t say we didn’t *fine* for overdue items dearie, just that the books know their own way home.” Her voice took on a note of steel.

Weird. Unlike my previous faux pas, this time I hadn’t spoken out loud. Well I was pretty sure I hadn’t. Still, it was as if she knew what I had been thinking.

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Well, that was me told off.

“You do that. Now, here’s your card,” with brisk efficiency, she passed over a membership card the size of a standard business card.

I turned the card over. My name and current address were neatly written in beautiful copperplate handwriting on the stiff cardboard. No digital-age, bar-coded plastic-imprints here. The card wasn’t even laminated.

It seemed this library was not one for embracing the modern age.

“How did you kn...?” I hadn’t seen her fill in the card. And she hadn’t asked me for my address, let alone my name.

“...You’ll receive a new card when you find your permanent address,” she said in that assured tone, smiling more warmly. “Mind you, you can’t do better than the neighbourhood you’re in now,” her tone softened to something akin to wistful. She reached across the desk and tapped my card with a fingernail. “It’s wonderful what they’re doing with the old warehouse district. And so good to see the place come alive once more. There was a time, not so long ago, that a girl like yourself wouldn’t have stepped foot there,” her smile changed into something almost feral, “well, not if she had any sense and not after dark, that is. But that’s all changed now. It’s quite gentrified compared to what it was.”

I wondered if she was moonlighting as a real estate agent when she wasn’t behind the library desk. I guess she had to do something with her time all those days the library was shut.

“Yes, but how did you..?” I tried once more to ask how she had known my name and address. I’d barely memorised the latter myself.

“...and by the way, the Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute Library would like to take this opportunity to wish you Many Happy Returns on your birthday. I have the pleasure to advise you that you are our 777,111th visitor,” she continued as if I had not spoken, “and given that it is your *twenty-eighth* birthday, as well, you will have the *special* privilege of taking home not only a book but a lead character from any book you choose. Within reason, that is.”

“A what?”

“A lead character dearie. You know, the individual around whom the plot revolves.” As she spoke she held her forefinger in the air, rotating it in a tiny circle. She peered me as if I was a few slices short of the birthday cake which I was not planning on having this year. “Must I explain further?” From her tone, it was easily evident that this was not something she would do happily.

“Um. No. No need. I know exactly what a lead character is.”

Did I mention that I was book editor? *My* life revolved around lead characters, supporting casts, plots and narrative. I spent large parts of my days deciding which had the potential to sell and which did not. Some were good, some were great...many were average

...and the vast majority were quite abysmal. Whilst it might be true that everyone ‘*had a book in them*’, -as people who met me at events and parties constantly liked to inform me, once they found out what I did for a living- some of those books -and I’d read enough of them by now to be quite sure of this- should have stayed, locked tightly, in whichever part of their authors they’d originated from and never seen the light of day.

“Lovely. I am pleased we’ve got that sorted,” her tone so dry it bordered on desiccated; she made a shooing motion with her hands. “Off you go then dearie. You only have twelve minutes left to choose ...and, like those books up on the ceiling,” she indicated the winged books in the fresco above our heads, “time flies.”

TWO

I was so flummoxed by the Librarian’s instructions that I never did ask how she had known today was my birthday. As I’ve already mentioned, I’d told no one, barely acknowledging the day myself. I was in no mood for a celebration this year and being new in town, had not announced the date to anyone that I could remember.

I stood there, frozen in a grey fog of indecision. Should I just cut my losses and leave? Stay a while and look around? Stand here like a deer in the headlights? Trouble was, now I had the card, I rather wanted to use it. Just being in this library had reawakened a desire to borrow a book or two. Generally, I liked to polish off a few chapters before sleep as a sort of literary nightcap and it wouldn’t be long before I was done with the thriller. I would have another week and a half before I started my new job so whatever I chose, I could read purely for pleasure, not necessity.

“Eleven minutes, dearie. Really, you *do* need to get a move on. Time, tides and titles wait for no one, you know.”

I shook my head to dispel the fog, like a dog shaking itself after a soaking.

“The library closes promptly at midday.” Mrs Tosthene indicated a large pendulum clock on the wall. I watched the heavy brass pendulum arcing side to side, marking the passing seconds with loud *tics* and *tocs*. “Some of us have been waiting for you to arrive all morning and need our lunch.”

The heavy emphasis on ‘all morning’ left me in little doubt that I should have arrived earlier.

And some of us had been heading out for a simple coffee...and maybe brunch. My stomach gave a low growl at the brunch idea, as if in total agreement. This was just ridiculous. Reawakened desire to borrow a book notwithstanding, I turned, determined to make for the stairs.

“Oh, one more thing,” the librarian reached across the desk and with a surprisingly strong grip for such a small lady, grasped my sleeve.

I glanced down at the protruding veins of her mottled hand, holding firmly to the fabric of my white shirt cuff.

“Let. Go. Please. ” Did saying *please* make it a request or an order? I didn’t want to be impolite but I did *not* like people touching me without my permission. I had not liked it particularly much before ...events -well, single event really- of the past year, but now I had a serious aversion to uninvited contact.

“Good. I have your undivided attention?” The hand rested on my sleeve while a second waved in front of my face. “Hello there. Are you listening to me, dearie? I do heartily dislike repeating myself and you’re down to ten minutes and change to make your choice, so I’d advise you not to dilly dally any longer.

Dilly dally?

Really? Who spoke like that these days? And just what was going on here ...some shoot for a reality TV show or suchlike?

Tick-toc. Tick-toc. The pendulum swung and I changed my mind once more, deciding to play along with her game -if only to find out where the hidden cameras were hiding. This was probably all the brain-child of some tin-pot local television station, intent on filming cheap-to-produce reality TV to keep their viewers amused.

“Okay. So, how exactly will I know which book to choose?” I inquired ingenuously.

“Oh, that should be quite obvious dearie.” She smiled at me pleasantly, as if this was not an odd question but one she had answered many times before, “the books are very good at letting you know which one is best for you and your...,” she paused momentarily, as if searching for the right word, “... *circumstances*.” she finished.

I felt like I was being spoken to like some dim-witted twelve year old. And if she called me ‘*dearie*’ one more time I’d scream.

“Now,” she explained with over-exaggerated patience, “I’d forget my head if it wasn’t screwed on. An understandable oversight given the morning I’ve had,” She sighed heavily. “We’ve installed a new security measure to ensure patrons don’t accidentally trigger the books. I omitted to inform you that before you begin your search, you must first tap the barometer with today’s date. We had a problem with the tiger from Jungle Book last year. Nasty business,” she shook her head in a way that said I did not want to know what had happened. “Took days to get the stains out of the carpets,” she grimace then smiled again in what I assumed was intended to be a reassuring look, “...but nothing you need to worry about. All sorted now.” She spoke briskly once more, “Just remember. You must begin over the weather for today and then move anti-clockwise.” She circled her finger in an anti-clockwise direction, the gesture somewhat wasted on me since from my perspective her finger was moving clockwise. She stared at me, her gaze unwavering. “Do. You. Understand? Day. Month. Year. Just the numerals and none of that American twaddle of putting the month before the date.” Obviously unsure that I had retained her instructions, she did a quick demo with a fingernail on the countertop, pantomiming tapping out the date as if she were sending a Morse-coded message. “Got it?” she held up the finger, awaiting my reply.

I looked at her blankly, wondering now if she had been a teacher before she took on the mantle of librarian-cum-estate agent. I was left feeling as if I was about to be told I’d be making a quick trip to the principal’s office if I did not get this right on the first attempt.

“And why should I do that?” I couldn’t help but ask the question.

“Well, we can’t just have *anyone* coming in and taking one of our characters home with them can we? It has to be the right person for the job. We’re *quite* careful whom we choose.” There was a note of pride in her tone.

Sure. Silly me. What was I thinking? Resting one thumb under my chin, I thoughtfully tapped a forefinger on my cheek as I considered.

To give credit where credit was due - she was doing a splendid job of making this all sound very logical and straight-forward. Good enough that I added the additional career of amateur actress to estate agent, schoolmarm and occasional-librarian. If this was the usual calibre of her performance, I’d certainly pay money to see her on stage.

“Barometer? What barometer?” I returned to the script ...if I was going to play along I might as well do the best job I could at acting the part of the fool. Though, instead of “Where is the barometer?” I knew I *should* have been asking, “Where are the hidden cameras?” The least I could do was to give them my best side.

“It’s right over there dearie. Behind you.” she pointed towards the far end of the lower level, “You can’t miss the thing. Enormous banjo-shaped device made of wood and hanging on the end shelf. With a thermometer and a dial that looks a bit like a clock face -only with the weather written in place of roman numerals.”

I might be American and have a tendency to put the month before the date when writing it down but I knew what a barometer's function was and what it looked like, thank you very much. I had been merely enquiring as to said barometer's location in the library.

"Really, dearie, hurry now or you'll run out of time. Such a lot of bother." She dropped her hand from my arm after patting my hand, in a gesture that left me feeling like someone to be pitied, before she turned away, all the while muttering, "Wouldn't be the first to do so, and then they get cross with me as if it's all my fault, ...even though I tell them the rules at the outset."

I stood, unsure whether to continue or call her bluff.

"Still, you are a bit of an urgent case so I'll give you a hint dearie, since you're so short of time." She faced me once more.

There it was again. Time, time, time. I fervently wished that she wouldn't keep repeating the word. I had all the time in the world that I needed. I was more aware than most. After it had very nearly run out for me this time last year, I had learned to live each second as if it counted, not frittering away my time as if it would never run out. And once I made it through this day unscathed, it would be a full year since ...yes, *since* ... and pathetic human being that I was, despite months of counselling, I still could not get myself to say the words.

"Listen carefully, dearie. You must look for the lights. The lights will guide you. And another word of advice ...I'd recommend you stick with the classics. I find time and time again they have what patrons are looking for. You can't go wrong with a good classic novel. That's what I say. The characters are better-rounded and not so inclined to gratuitous sex and violence, as they are in all these new novels. ..Fifty Shades of Grey, indeed. Hrmpf." Crossing her arms over her knit-clad bosom, she stood resolutely, peering at me over her demi- glasses as if to assure herself that I was taking her advice to heart. Seeming unsure that I had, she turned away again, reaching up to open a filing cabinet taller than her and all the while mumbling, "Muddies up a good story, all that fighting and ...whatnot. Temperance and good manners, that's what the world needs more of. Temperance and manners."

I could see that she was not going to be able to reach whatever it was she wanted from the cabinet and took a step in her direction, thinking to offer my help but I was waved off with an impatient flick of her hand. She moved several piles of books to one side until she found what she wanted -grabbed a small step-stool and clambered up to select a file from the topmost drawer.

Making it quite clear that I was dismissed.

As I walked towards the stacks, I thought a little about those 'classics' she found so temperate and well-mannered, adding sourly to myself, ...never mind the misogynistic, incestuous, racist, classist and often narrow-minded viewpoints held by those same classically *genteel* characters -that all too frequently guided their actions...

...Yeah, right, nothing quite like a *good classic novel*.

I sauntered, determined not to appear as if I was hurrying. Found the barometer. As Mrs T. (Tosthene was too much of a mouthful) said, it was hard to miss the thing. Feeling a complete idiot, I did exactly as she had instructed, tapping out today's date, careful to place the nine before the one for the ninth of January, and the year.

Nothing whatsoever happened.

No camera crew came bursting out from behind the shelves with microphones at the ready to record my mortified reaction at being punk'd.

Well. Ho hum. It looked like I'd have to follow through to the end of this debacle before I was allowed to see the big reveal.

Okay. What now? Ah, yes...Find a book. But which book? There were so many to choose from...

What was it she had said, ‘*the lights will guide you?*’ and something else ...ah yes, best to stick to the classics. Great. Generally-speaking, my least favourite reading category. As far as I was concerned, half the time the classics were nothing more than the OAP’s of contemporary commercially-popularised best-sellers, many of them well past their sell-by date, which did not necessarily mean they were any good to start with.

I glanced towards the shelves nearest and spotted a copy of *Gone with the Wind* -well, there was a twentieth century classic if ever there was. Hours of good reading -or a hefty paper weight at the very least if you weren’t so fond of good ole southern belle sagas. I put my hand on the spine, thinking to have a look through. “Ouch!” I yelped, snatching my fingers away in something of a hurry. A jolt of electricity had raced up my arm -arc-ing in a tiny white lightening-strike almost before my fingers had even contacted the book. Talk about spine-tingling read! That book gave the phrase a whole new meaning.

I was about to return to the desk to voice a loud complaint -along the lines that a prank was one thing, but electric shock treatment quite another. I should leave now before I was made a complete fool of by those practical jokers with their hidden lenses. They wouldn’t even need a team, I’d surmised, -just a craftily placed camera to catch all the action. I didn’t mind a good laugh but if there was one thing I would not tolerate, it was being hurt for the amusement of others.

I was stalking in the direction of the desk when I noticed a faint light emanating from amongst the titles further along the shelves.

Mreow. That cat was instantly back and pushed the irritation at being electrocuted off the agenda. Curiosity swiftly overcame annoyance and I altered course once more -walking deeper into the bay to survey the shelf in question. The soft glow was coming from what looked like an early edition of Ian Fleming’s *Goldfinger*. I pulled the book off the shelf and opened it to the fly and front pages. Goodness me, that appeared to be the writer’s signature on the fly leaf and according to the publisher’s information this wasn’t just an early but a far rarer first edition. I replaced the novel gingerly on the shelf, careful not to damage the pristine dust cover. I might not be a Bond fan -he was far too sexist for my liking and the whole smoking and drinking thing wasn’t my cup of tea at all- but I had a lot of respect for collectibles. Though even if it hadn’t been valuable I would never have considered it as one to take. By the librarian’s strict standards, James -call me *Bond*- definitely qualified as being more than a little inclined to gratuitous sex and violence. Plus, his female co-leads frequently ended up dead. Even if you survived his company, who knew what nasty communicable diseases of a sexual nature you might catch in the process? I thought it ironic that if he’d been female, Bond would have been considered a slut rather than a stud in the era his books were produced.

No. Definitely not a contender. Best left on the shelf.

The Librarian’s voice drifted over to me, “A word of caution dearie. If it’s not glowing, then I would not recommend touching it -the lack of light is a sure indication that the Library does not feel it’s the novel for you. Though I believe you may have already discovered that for yourself.” Was that the tiniest hint of ill-disguised malice I heard in her voice?

I looked up and around, checking for those convex -...or was it concave? - mirrors that allowed people to see around corners. Mmmm, there were none in sight. So how had she seen me pick up the book all the way from her desk? Must be the hidden cameras, though I hadn’t noticed a video console at the desk. There had been little around the desk aside from an ancient pounds, shillings and pence cash register,-of the type that looked a bit like a pre-digital typewriter. In fact, the desk area had been remarkably free of anything I might have expected to see in a public library. No copier, no scanner for check-outs and not a lot else.

“And, for *my* sake, dearie, please don’t handle a title, even if it *is* glowing, if you’re not seriously considering borrowing the book,” she spoke in a dry, resigned tone, “Otherwise I’ll

be here the rest of the day tidying up and getting them back between their covers again. It's a time consuming and tedious task to round them up once they escape the confines of the pages."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Not until I spotted, on the periphery of my vision, an incandescently ghostly female figure dressed up in a green velvet concoction that put me in mind of Scarlett O'Hara's famous curtain-inspired ball gown. She was fanning herself with a graphic novel she'd picked off the shelf ...followed almost immediately by the strident scream of a near-naked woman, gilded to resemble some female Oscar-winning trophy, who scurried around the end of the bays and out of sight. Added to this, I could smell the heavy scent of magnolias in the air -which, although odd, was a vast improvement on the dry, dusty mustiness I'd smelt as I'd entered the space.

Someone was going to a lot of trouble to make this charade seem real for me with holographs and special effects. Electrical tomfoolery notwithstanding, I was suitably impressed.

...Curious to see how far they might take it, I purposely reached out and ran my hand along the spines of all the Jane Austen titles on the shelf nearest me -they all had a faint glow but none were shining particularly brightly. All of a sudden, bebies of simpering ladies in pretty Regency-style day-dresses and bonnets or formal evening attire were popping up all over the place. Several looked as if they had a fit of the vapours and might swoon. You had to give it to them -these guys were good.

"Oh, very droll, missy. That'll be me busy for the rest of the day sorting them all out." I looked around the corner of the shelves to see the librarian standing in front of her desk, glaring at me with hands fisted on her hips.

"Do you see them?" I asked, turning a circle in wonder at the spectacle.

"Of course I see them. Every last one," she spoke shortly. What did you think I was talking about when I said, quite plainly, I thought; don't touch if you are not taking it home? Now go on, get on with it, do. And take more care in the future." She turned away, picked up a broom that had been leaning against the desk and made a beeline for Scarlett.

So that's what it took to get her to drop the dearie? Hoorah. I did not feel repentant at my actions, but I may have made a little more effort to keep my hands in my pockets afterwards.

With all the extras milling around, it was getting somewhat crowded downstairs. I decided to try the upstairs shelves. I took the steps of the closest stairs two at a time, keen to put some space between myself and the posturing misses. A little of them went a long way.

It looked as if I'd have to play this thing out to the end. Perhaps there'd be a prize? A beach holiday would be nice, I decided. I'd just bought a new bikini and could do with a spot of sun.

So many books. Which to choose? The long shelves stretched endlessly before me. I checked - No shortage of classics up here either.

I walked quickly along the shelves, scanning for those titles with the requisite glow, not wanting to chance another unsolicited ECT treatment.

An edition, probably first, -but I resisted touching to check- of *Wuthering Heights* had a distinct shine to it. That was Heathcliff in the starring role, wasn't it? Bit of a hunk by all accounts. Hmm? I pictured the character. Too grumpy, too dismal, too brooding for my likings. I wasn't more than mildly tempted to pick the book up.

Something glinting on top of a teetering pile. Sherlock Holmes? He of Baker Street fame. I considered. Hmmm, Mr Holmes was overly analytical for my tastes, always trying to eliminate the impossible to find his way to the improbable truth, which inevitably everyone else was too stupid to discover until he came along. And I seriously doubted he'd come out of the pages looking anything like Benedict Cumberbatch, Robert Downy Junior or his tattooed

American-TV series counterpart, Jonny Lee Miller. Anything less than one of that trio would be a severe disappointment.

Shame, that. A beach holiday with any of them would have been rather nice.

“Five minutes.” A voice drifted upwards. I peeked over the edge in time to see that Mrs Tosthene had dropped the broom and was resorting to other measures of capture. I’d caught her in the act of lassoing golden girl like some rodeo circuit pro pursuing a prize heifer. From the mezzanine I had an unimpeded ringside view of the show from on high and was tempted to give a whoop, a holler and a yee-haw of approval. Scarlett was nowhere to be seen but the gaggle of Edwardian girls were cowering in one corner, protected for now, it seemed by some top-hatted male outfitted in an elegant dress-coat and brandishing a cane. I had no idea which of Austen’s male leads he might be but I’d put my money on Mrs T. to best him in any encounter they might have. Any day.

“Four minutes and change.” She boomed, not even bothering to look upwards. I felt a little sorry for the writhing girl, now bound by the lasso and being dragged back to where the Bond book was lying open on the shelf. With little more than a G-string for protection, that rope must be chafing something awful. To give her her due, the diminutive Mrs T. was not giving an inch in the struggle for ground.

What people would do for authenticity? I was briefly mesmerised.

Then I remembered what I supposed to be doing. If they could take it so seriously, I guessed that I could too.

Though I was not doing as well upstairs as I’d hoped.

I was tempted to head back down to the Jane Austens. But which one? Sense and Sensibility? Northanger Abbey? Pride and Prejudice? If I chose P and P, would I end up with Elizabeth Bennett or Mr Darcy? Not that it mattered really; each in their own way was as opinionated, pompous and pig-headed as the other. It made the decision doubly difficult when all I could picture of Mr Darcy was which of the male leads who had acted him on film I liked best. I mulled over the possibilities. There was Matthew MacFadyen, Colin Firth or perhaps that Hugh Bonneville who had played him in that rather yummy wet-tee shirt equivalent of a pond scene from *Lost in Austin*? That train of thought set me thinking of the TV series and how the plot had gone so pear-shaped for a contemporary woman suddenly dumped into a period drama. Sobering thought that, perhaps I should just leave now before I made a bad choice. After all, I knew that, historically, my choice in men had been less than stellar.

“Wimp,” said my inner cat, halting its taunting of a wind-up mouse long enough to give me the benefit of its opinion. The mouse took the opportunity to run up the pendulum of my inner-clock.

Good thing I’d completed my treatment and those psych-evaluations prior to my departure from the States, I thought ...if my therapist had caught a whiff of the thoughts running around in my head right now, I’d have found myself heavily sedated in a small padded cell.

Oh well, Might as well play along to the conclusion. It shouldn’t be long now anyway. I turned back to the shelves and numerous piles of books.

How about something by Jules Verne then? *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*? Again, I felt too influenced by movie adaptations of the books...now I was imagining Brendon Fraser outrunning a roaring, slavering dinosaur. Was there any novel here that hadn’t had a TV or movie adaptation? All those film and TV versions of the originals were not helping my choices one little bit.

“Two minutes and counting,” I heard another feminine screech from downstairs but resisted checking it out.

I'd been watching the Australian MasterChef series these past couple of days on TV and I felt as if I was one of those harried contestants, clock counting down, who ought to be rushing to plate up for the judges. I could feel my heartrate increasing accordingly and could hear George in my head yelling 'It's time to hustle, hustle! Let's go people!!' in an encouraging bellow.

I should stop watching so much television.

To do what then? Read more? Ha. Good idea.

Almost out of time... I couldn't decide. I didn't particularly like the idea of a female lead and I most certainly did not want a male...so what did that leave?

Ah. I'd spied one that was a possibility. Sort of male, but sort of ...not. I wondered if bats that could morph into human form counted.

The book barely glimmered but I picked the novel up anyway and opened it, not sure quite what to expect.

"Whilst it's always nice to have new blood in town, I'd be *very* wary of that choice dearie," Mrs Tosthene's voice drifted languidly upwards to where I had been examining the book in question. "After all, you want to wake up much the same as when you went to sleep, I expect?" I looked down at the book in my hands ...Bram Stoker's Dracula. I re-shelved the title post haste, looking upwards and half expecting to see a cloaked figure hanging upside down from the ceiling, mouthing 'I *vant* your blood'. Thankfully not, but I did catch a brief glimpse of a small black bat flitting across from one side to the other of the upper stacks. How did one corral a bat? I doubted that the lasso would work this time. I was sure Mrs T would have something under her desk that would do the job admirably - perhaps an extensible butterfly net for character-retrieval of small flying species? It made me wish that I could find a book with a pterodactyl just to see how she'd handle *that* outcome.

"Thirty seconds. Hurry, hurry, hurry." She sounded out of breath. Perhaps those chaste-looking misses were proving more difficult than they'd appeared to run down? I moved faster, glad I was wearing track shoes and didn't have to dash about in silly Edwardian pumps like those girls downstairs.

Not a male lead. Not a female lead. Okay, I finally made up my mind. The bat had helped -sort of. I'd take anything with an animal. Well, perhaps barring spiders, snakes, large carnivores or human-impersonating bats, that was. And after what Mrs T had said about the tiger-incident I would be leaving the Jungle Book on the shelf, were I to see it.

Oh goodness. As if it mattered.

This was beyond silly.

I searched desperately for a title involving a suitable animal in those last seconds. A horse would be nice, I thought, but Black Beauty was nowhere to be seen and my mind had gone blank for other possibilities. All I could think of other than the big black horse were Lassie the perfectly-groomed sheepdog or Babe the talking pig. Then I remembered, -they were both movie and television characters, so of no use to me.

Then a thought popped into my head. I'd like a dog. Dogs were uncomplicated and affectionate. Plus, I was sure that I wouldn't fall in love with a dog so there would be no issues with romantic liaisons and I would be happy to give him back when the time came. This was ridiculous anyway, so it really would not matter what I chose. How was I going to find a novel with a dog in the leading character role? Old Yeller, maybe? I knew that title was a book before it was a film adaptation.

"Ten, nine, eight..."

Too bad. It was time to grab anything glowing that was within easy reach. Shame I hadn't seen the children's section. I could have had my pick of Paddington Bear, Wind in the Willows or Winnie the Pooh. In my current frame of mind any of those would have been acceptable.

Wow, suddenly there was a glow so bright it hurt my eyes to look. So incandescent that I couldn't make out the title. Well, Mrs T had said, 'look for the light' and this thing was lit up like an international landing strip, so, covering my eyes from the glare I snatched the thin novel up without so much as a moment's hesitation, not even bothering to attempt reading the spine or cover before I bounded back down the stairs, reaching the desk just as the librarian was coiling the lasso neatly into a drawer. I wondered if Wonder Woman wondered where hers had got to. That was a lot of 'wondering', I thought randomly as I plunked the book down on the desk.

"Five, four, three..."

"It's there, right in front of you." Surely she could stop the countdown now?

"Just *one* title dearie." Mrs T chided, not looking up from studying her watch. "You'll have to put one of them back. The library frowns upon greed."

I hastily discarded the second book that had somehow found its way into my other hand, keeping a firm hand on top of the glow-in-the-dark title. I looked down at the rejected book, now lying on the Librarian's desk, to see that I'd somehow grabbed the Sherlock Homes in passing. Must have been my subconscious, keen to find out if Benedict, Robert or Jonny really *would* step from the pages? Well, that might have been worth the risk but if I was allowed only one, I'd have to go with the brighter light of the book that appeared to have chosen me.

The librarian held out her hand, waiting for me to pass over my preferred book. No self-checkout here it seemed. I handed the lightweight novel over, trying to read the title as I did, but the glow was still too bright to discern anything.

"Goodness me, dearie"

We were back to that again, were we?

"Interesting choice, though perhaps not what I would have picked were I you. So many lovely men just waiting to meet you in here and you chose that. Oh well, not to judge. A companion is a companion, I do suppose. Each to their own." Judgement duly passed, she tucked the novel into a brown paper bag, folded over the open edges and stapled the bag shut, but not before she had written something on a slip of paper and paper-clipped it to the fold-over with a pink sparkly paper clip. "Due back in four weeks," she said briskly as she handed me the bag and its contents. "And remember, Miss M. Thomas, Apartment 5A, 1192 Bond Street, if you are tempted to keep this book. We. Know. Exactly. Where. You. Live." Using what I liked to call 'barracuda-eyes' she speared me with a look that made me feel like a fish on a dinner plate. Like there was nowhere to wriggle that she would not see.

Impressive memory for an older lady, I thought. But then I should hardly have been surprised. I'd seen her brandishing that lasso with all the bravado of a hoot an' hollerin' rodeo-circuit cowboy.

I swallowed nervously. "Scouts promise. I'll do my very best to bring it back on time."

"Yes, well. That's what they all say," she looked at me as if she did not believe a word that had come from my mouth, "the Library expects better than your best, young lady."

"Hmmm, and whilst I think of it -kindly do not open the bag and begin reading until you are safely home. We wouldn't like anything untoward to occur before its time, while you are still out on the streets, would we?" the look she bestowed upon me as she spoke was harder to read than a Man Booker prize-winner. I'd never got beyond the second chapter with any of those. Too meat and potatoes for my tastes. Generally, I was more of a dessert kind of reader.

"Uh, no, I guess not." I replied. I had no idea what she was on about.

'Untoward happenings'? 'Before its time'? The choice of words sounded rather ominous.

Personally, I didn't want anything untoward to happen, before or after its time. I'd been *there*, done *that* already. Bad timing had contributed to considerable *untowardness* in my life and was, in no small way, a factor in my relocation to fresh climes.

“Now, if you’re done, and you’ll excuse me, I must go and catch that bat before I close up.” Her tone was resigned. “Otherwise there’ll be nasty droppings all over the stacks.”

I stood there, uncertain, waiting... head to one side as I tried to make sense of what had just transpired.

No one had appeared and yelled ‘*cut*’, ‘*gotcha*’, ‘*that’s a wrap*’ or ‘*you’re punk’d*’. Nothing. Just near-silence, occasionally broken by the squeak of the bat circling overhead.

Where were the cameras? The big reveal?

I looked down at the brown paper bag in my hand. The glow had diminished significantly -perhaps whatever batteries had powered its light were running out? I could have read the title now, Mrs T’s instructions notwithstanding, but I didn’t feel at all tempted to check inside to see what I’d chosen.

I made my way back upstairs and I left the way I’d come, brown paper bag in hand and feeling somewhat deflated.



It wasn’t until I was comfortably seated in the sunshine outside the Thistle café with my second half-drunk coffee on the table before me that I slid the small scrap of notepaper out from under its restraining clip. Odd. I don’t know what it was I’d expected to find written but the note was nothing more than the name and address of a pet shop -written in that same perfectly formed copperplate as my library card. I recognised the street address as being just around the corner from my new apartment. Given that I didn’t have so much as a goldfish to care for, I couldn’t see that I’d have much use for it but I liked pet shops so maybe I’d pop in for a look-see on my way home?

After I had that third coffee...

...and another of those delicious piping-hot scones.

I drained my cup and signalled a passing waitress for a refill, forgetting all about the pet shop.

THREE

I should have heeded The Librarian’s subtle hint and stopped to check out that shop or, better-yet, gone back to buy supplies before I retired for the night, but I hadn’t bothered. In my defence, I wasn’t entirely over the jet lag from travelling and still a felt trifle out of my depth in this new town, so once I’d retreated indoors for the evening I had wanted nothing more than to stay within the walls of my new rental.

However, with the 20-20 vision of hindsight, if I had known what I was getting myself into by opening that book, I would have returned poste-haste to the shop and stocked up on suitable supplies, including the purchase of multiple packets of wet wipes. But how was I to know what I was buying *for*? As instructed, I had not opened the bag until I was safely home, by which time going out again was the furthest thing from my mind.

After coffee, scones and an enjoyable interlude of browsing my magazine, I’d wandered aimlessly, window-shopping and just generally taking in the sights of the downtown precinct for a couple of hours. My one and only purchase had been to buy a bunch of roses from a florist, after which I headed home. Thankful to be back on familiar territory, I ducked under the arched entryway to my building, a delightfully pink stucco affair that was so Spanish Mission-style its four floors could have just as comfortably been set somewhere south of the Mexican border as here on the periphery of the Warehouse district. I shut the outer door behind me and wandered down a short hallway with a bathroom and laundry either side and

through the open-plan kitchen-living area to the bedroom. Not feeling particularly like reading, I dropped the book in its brown paper bag onto my bedside table before returning to grab a snack and the television remote.

As luck would have it, there was a re-run of *Gone with the Wind* just starting. Thinking of the odd hallucinations I'd experienced in the Athenaeum Library -and by now I had convinced myself that the whole episode had been a figment of my imagination, brought on by the recent stress of travelling or the odd atmosphere of the old library- I plunked myself down on the comfy sofa, settling among a multitude of cushions to spend the next four hours immersed in the epic goings-on of a certain petulant southern belle. Though, when I say immersed, it might be closer to the truth to say I dozed off intermittently while the Yankees invaded the South, Atlanta burned and an alternately simpering and tart-tongued Scarlett O'Hara made some catastrophically poor life choices. As the end credits rolled, I wondered briefly what Miss Scarlett would think of the modern world if she were to step into it now? Perhaps she'd have a ball? -both literally and figuratively-speaking. Her entrepreneurial spirit and materialistic streak would certainly not go amiss in this current era.

I turned the TV off and went to bed, thinking to read a little of my new book to help me relax back into sleep.



Well, that lack of preparedness came back to bite me and proved I wouldn't be getting back into the Girl Guides anytime soon. This was made all the more evident the next morning, as, in the cold light of the early dawn; I surveyed the wreck that was my apartment. Nothing broken -fortunately- though I didn't fancy a rental inspection anytime soon. Still, I could see that we would need some rules if we were to cohabit happily.

...And wet wipes. Mountains of wet wipes.

He might not want my blood ...but this big guy could certainly drool and slobber something awful.



I'd only managed to read the first chapter of my book before I'd dropped off to sleep. I had opened the bag to find that I had indeed acquired an animal-centric novel, as I'd requested, and a classic (I hope Mrs T. was happy) -though not perhaps the title I might have hoped for and not one I'd ever read before. I began to read but it wasn't long before the words began to swim before my tired eyes.

I admit, as I plopped the book onto my bedside table and switched off the light that I was a smidgeon disappointed to find -just as I'd fully expected- that nothing sprang from the pages -not even an itty bitty bat. So much for getting a lead character as a take-home gift.

I would have quite liked that bat. Well, I liked the concept of it anyway. A critter that stayed awake at night would have been good company when I woke in the witching hours and couldn't drop back to sleep -something that was still happening to me with tiresome regularity. Although feeding the little fellow could become something of a problem if he had a proclivity for the kind of food Vampires were wont to prefer. As I beat my pillow into submission and cuddled into the soft downy covers, I wondered if I could turn a vampire bat into a vegetarian. What might it prefer? Beetroot? Tomatoes? Red currants?

I dropped off to sleep, alternatively musing about the chapter I had just finished and writing a mental shopping list of red-coloured fruits and vegetables that a vegetarian vampire bat might enjoy. It was a little like counting sheep and had much the same effect...

...I drifted off to sleep...

...Only to be woken a bit after two in the morning from a vivid nightmare of having a tree topple on me -accompanied by the terrifying sensation of being pinned to the bed by a weighty branch. I could barely breathe. Even *bad* dreams shouldn't be this real.

... Aargh! Make that -a heavy panting branch.

I screamed in terror. Impressively loud. Decibel-wise, up there with that Hitchcock shower-scene, a la Bates Motel.

The branch barked back at me.

I screamed again. Louder than before -if that was at all possible. Loud enough, as they say, to wake the dead -which did nothing whatsoever to help the situation.

The branch joined in with equally loud barking and an ear-splitting howl.

Frantic, I blindly groped with my one free hand for the switch to the bedside lamp. There was little else I could do. My other arm was jammed under the covers and my lower body immobilised, so, other than wiggle my rapidly-numbing toes, it was pretty much all I could manage at the time.

Unaccustomed to the light, the sudden glare of the lamp burned my eyes. I took a moment to focus. When I could see more than a silhouette all I could think was 'Oh my goodness!' Considering what was before my eyes, I would say that this was something of a magnificent understatement.

From where I was lying, staring upwards and pinioned by the weight, I had a worm's eye view of what appeared to be the biggest dog on earth. Sitting, sphinx-like, on top of my down cover and across my abdomen and thighs. I was tempted to scream a third time but sanity overrode fear -I did not want to frighten the beast further -so I lay there petrified, eyeing the enormous hairy animal that was watching me closely from huge dark eyes. Those '*my what big eyes you have!*' eyeballs were accompanied, I was fairly sure, with correspondingly huge teeth. Though possibly not dark, -but what did it matter, if it chose to bite, whether they were Steradent-white or not?

Sure enough, as if on cue, the beast opened its mouth to yawn and show off absolutely huge fangs -entirely for my benefit, I was sure- before it stuck his tongue out once more and lay there, panting as madly as if it had just run a marathon.

I lay still a moment longer, frozen in fearful indecision before my brain began to spin in all directions.

Questions formed.

Why was there a dog in my room? How had it got in? Had someone let it in? Who would pull a prank like that on a stranger? Was that someone still in the apartment? Oh, God, not that again?

I *had* to get out of bed and check the doors and windows -cursing myself that I hadn't thought to recheck the locks before retiring for the night as per my usual pre-bed routine.

But I couldn't move an inch. The behemoth was taking care of that.

I took a closer look at my captor -the hairy tree-trunk.

Okay, it was very big, but it didn't appear overtly dangerous. Otherwise I'd already be fending off those sharp incisors and canines.

And there'd been no growls to accompany the barking. Nary a one. Which, considering my blood-curdling screams, was something of a good omen. I hoped.

I summoned up my courage.

I knew what to do -I'd watched multiple episodes of the Dog Whisperer. "Please, Cesar, if you're out there help me now," I prayed. As if it would make a difference.

"Off!" I ordered firmly in my deepest and most authoritarian voice.

The dog looked at me with that aggrieved air of an animal that had gone to considerable trouble to get comfortable and was loath to move, before rising rather majestically to its full height and leaping off the bed.

Bad move.

As it landed on the fluffy sheepskin next to the bed, its forward momentum caught the rug like a tobogganist's sled ...on ice, -sending dog and rug skating towards the tall bedroom bureau as if the animal was imitating Babe Ruth sliding into home base. Mayhem ensued. A vase toppled, water splashed, the pretty red roses I'd placed atop the bureau earlier flew everywhere. The shaggy dog yelped in pain as its front paws and nose struck the heavy furniture.

It stood whining and holding a forepaw in the air.

Looked like my Babe Ruth had a boo-boo.

"Uh-oh." Nothing got my attention faster than an injured animal. Fear forgotten, I threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, intent on helping.

"Hang on boy. There, there, you're okay. Mars'll fix it," I cooed encouraging words as I gently ran a hand over the lower leg joint. No broken bones that I could see or feel. No obvious harm done. I massaged the leg a little and after a moment the dog gingerly put the paw back on the floor and tested his weight on it.

Perhaps he was just a big sook?

That begged the question. Was *he* a boy or a girl? It was hard to see under all that hair. I checked the under-carriage, parting a coat that reminded me of some hirsute stage curtain to take a peek at his or her privates ...whoa, unquestionably a male. Quite entire and definitely *not* castrated, I noted.

I kneeled and checked around his thick line-backer's neck. There were no collars or tags to be found under the matt of shag. I dug around more with my fingers just to be sure but couldn't find anything hiding among the hair.

I wondered what his name was.

I glanced at the book, lying face down on my bedside table beside the lamp where I'd left it before dropping off to sleep.

Looked back at the dog. The book. The dog again.

I could feel the lines forming on my brow. I put up a hand to smooth the furrows. I didn't need frown-lines at my age.

I sat on the edge of the bed. Mr Dog was staring out the window, the folds of his loosely-jowled face easily topping the window sill, his body turned away from me.

Saint Bernard-mix, I'd have said if asked. Big, but not quite as elephantine as a pure-bred. A little finer around the face. Longer coat too. In need of a groom, I noted.

As ridiculous as it seemed -I knew just the name I wanted to try out for size on my boy.

Not *Beethoven* -that mishap-prone movie Saint Bernard and not, thank goodness, that scary rabies-infected psychopath, *Cujo*. Besides, they were both purebreds and I'd have staked a fair fortune that this guy was not.

Go on, get on with it, I cajoled. Worth a try. No one else in the room to call me a fool if I got it wrong.

I opened my mouth, about to speak. Closed it, peered furtively around as if I'd see that hidden camera. Saw nothing of the sort. Opened it a second time ..."Buck?" I questioned quietly, tentatively. Half expecting a rebuff at my attempt.

Mr Dog immediately turned his leonine head towards me, as if to say "you clever thing, you. Yep, that's me. Right first time." Everything from his ears to his tail wagged happily as he ambled towards me.

I slumped back on the covers, contemplating the ceiling plasterwork and the small central chandelier for several seconds before a big head blocked my view. I hitched myself up

onto my elbows to see that he had his forepaws up on the edge of the bed. As I did so, I heard a growl. Not the dog. It was coming from my stomach -complaining at the lack of dinner.

“You hungry Buck?” I asked, not really expecting an answer. “I didn’t have dinner last night. Let’s go see if we can find something to eat. I think there might be some left-over chicken from yesterday’s take-away.”

Buck appeared happy at the prospect of food, panting and wagging his long thick tail in enthusiastic approval at my suggestion.

FOUR

Before we’d made it out of the bedroom there was a loud banging on the outer door.

A deep voice -male from the sound of it- shouted, “You okay in there? I heard a scream. Do you need help?”

Oh dear me. It looked as if we’d woken a neighbour.

And whilst it was heartening to think that whoever it was had been public-spirited enough to respond to my screams, in this instance, I might have preferred to be in one of those apartment blocks where people didn’t come running at the smallest spine-chilling shriek or two.

Or maybe that was the TV crew? Here at last and waiting to pounce when I least expected?

I hoped not. Despite how crazy it all seemed, I wanted this to be real. Acknowledged that, at some level, I had wished it might be so right from the first, back at the library. Wanted Buck to stay, at least for the duration of the loan period. He might not have been a bat, but now he was here and despite his rather over-dramatic arrival and the way he filled my tiny apartment with his bulk, I found myself strangely reluctant to part with his genial presence. I knew it had more than a little to do with the fact that, although I’d gone to some lengths not to admit even to myself that I’d been horribly lonely since landing on these strange shores. Had, in essence, been in that state long before my arrival.

The banging started once more.

“Hello again! You don’t have to open the door if you’d rather not. I just want to know you’re okay.” There was genuine concern in the unseen voice. “Say something, please.”

TV crew or not, I’d best go and see who it was, or the rest of the building’s occupants would be wide awake as well.

Buck followed me, padding along behind all the way to the outside door, his doggie nails making a tic-tac-toe staccato accompaniment to my soft footfalls.

I opened the door as far as the safety chain would allow and peered out into the dimly-lit walkway. Happy to see that I’d had the presence of mind to latch the door before seeking my bed. And as I’d walked through the apartment, I’d noted also that I hadn’t been as lax as I’d thought when it came to the windows. All of those that faced street-side and appeared to be locked and shuttered. Aside from the bathroom and laundry windows, which both opened onto the breezeway, and were, I knew, protected by stout iron bars. I could see no way in which someone had secreted a large dog into the apartment without my knowledge.

The Athenaeum Library theory was starting to look more attractive by the minute, but I had little time to think about that right now as there were more pressing matters vying for my attention.

For instance, the sleepy-eyed, tousled and rather good-looking stranger standing on my stoop at two-thirty in the morning.

“Ah, I thought I heard a dog barking.” He was taller than my five foot seven by at least six inches and his deep-set eyes were looking over my shoulder, beyond me, at Buck. “Wow, that’s some dog.”

State the obvious why don’t you?

“I thought I heard barking in among the screams.”

I smiled calmly. Found my voice and spoke.

“Yeah, about that. Sorry about the screaming. He jumped me.”

The stranger suppressed a knowing smile and raised thick, dark eyebrows.

I thought about what I’d just said. My calm smile disappeared.

“Not like that.” I waved my hand in a gesture of rebuttal. Tried again. “I mean he jumped *on* the bed and woke me. I wasn’t expecting it.” Yeah, you could say that again.

Understatement of the year.

“That’s fine then. I’m just through the wall, next door -he pointed to his right- and your Marion Crane impression was pretty intense so I thought I’d better come investigate.”

So he’d immediately thought of the *Psycho* connection as well? Great minds? Small world, more like.

“I’m very sorry we disturbed your sleep. It won’t happen again.”

“No need to apologise. You didn’t wake me because I wasn’t asleep.”

“Oh,” I did not want to know if I’d interrupted some private nocturnal activity. That set me thinking. With whom? Wife? Girlfriend? ...Boyfriend? I hadn’t heard any noises from my side of the wall.

Perhaps my thoughts showed on my face.

“I wasn’t asleep *or* in bed. I was working.”

Working? Hmmm. Good answer. But I’d have to get a better game-face if I didn’t want complete strangers reading my mind. I tried to set my features into a more inscrutable look.

“I had the front door open -the breeze was helping me stay awake-, that’s how I heard the commotion.”

I winced apologetically. Instantly losing the battle with my impassive expression and pursing my lips like I’d sucked on a lemon. “Sorry,” I repeated. So, I’d been downgraded from a *Psycho* moment to a mere commotion? That hadn’t taken long.

“S’okay. Like I said, I was up.”

Why? I thought. Insomniac? Shift worker? Axe-murderer?

He answered my unasked question a second time. I obviously sucked at *expressionless*. He was reading me like a book. “I’m an Architect. I run a small practice with my parents ...that is, my dad. We have a big presentation tomorrow,” he stopped for a second, shrugged, “... later today, to be more accurate,” he corrected, “and I had some last-minute details to finish. More than I thought as it turns out and it took a lot longer than I expected.”

“Always does, doesn’t it?” I commiserated. I’d done that midnight-to-six a.m. emergency shift, in response to immovable deadlines, more than I cared to admit. “Sorry we interrupted your work.” There I was, apologising for a third time. “We’re fine, so I’ll let you get away to bed now.”

“No need, I was done and just clearing up when I heard the din.”

Oh, now I was a *din*, was I? Ouch. I winced inwardly. Outwardly, I was over any further attempts at inscrutability.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to judge. If something that size jumped me,” he pointed a finger over my shoulder, “Well, I guess I might have screamed as well.”

I doubted that. He didn’t have the look of a screamer.

But it was polite of him to pretend that he might be.

Then, I noted the lack of that all-important preposition between *jumped* and *me*. So, he was a Mr Funny-Guy, was he? Well, ha, ha.

Droll. I made sure he saw the eye roll.

“Don’t let me keep you, you must be tired.”

“Nah, not really. Pumped up on too much coffee and coke -the canned variety, not the illicit white powder,” he explained glibly. “I’ll never get to sleep now and I have to be up at five-thirty anyway, to get to the office and set up for a conference call -so bed doesn’t seem like much of an option anymore.”

That was the moment at which I did something so completely out-of-character that I later wondered if perhaps I’d lost my mind or some crazy repressed alter-ego had taken possession over me.

“In that case, and in the light of your clarification that you’re not into substance-abuse, - which I deeply appreciate by the way, - would you like to come in for another coffee? Or maybe something to eat,” I added before I lost my nerve. “You see, Buck and I haven’t acclimatised to the time-change yet so we’re eating at odd hours. We were just about to have breakfast -or, I’m not sure- maybe its catching up on last night’s missed dinner.” My brain was so fried that I wasn’t entirely sure what meal I was at now. Too early for breakfast and not exactly brunch ... I smiled weakly.

“Guess you could call it brinner?” he suggested, once more appearing to have read my mind. “Or dinfast?” he grinned.

Neither sounded as if they might catch on. I responded with another weak smile. Not as weak as my knees were feeling at the prospect of a stranger in my house. Despite him being the kind of stranger whose smile lit up his entire face like a thousand watt bulb.

“You’re welcome to join us.” I couldn’t believe that I was *repeating* the invitation, as if I hadn’t made it clear the first time that I was unhinged enough to invite a perfect stranger into my home in the middle of the night, “if you don’t mind having whatever I can find in the fridge. I haven’t looked in there much in the last day -We could be down to green eggs and ham. ... Which would be fine if your name is Sam?” I was a bit of a Dr Seuss fan and couldn’t resist the couplet.

Perhaps I hoped that my unappetising menu options or my awful rhyming would put him off?

And perhaps when it came to the autopsy, the homicide team would put my demise down to temporary insanity, brought on by a nasty fright and being out of my time zone. Yeah -‘cos that was logical. Right?

Well, I knew how far out of my normal time zone I was, but I could only imagine where Buck might have journeyed from. Had he flown in from California? Or maybe Alaska? Or somewhere much closer at hand? Like a local kennel he’d escaped from just down the road?

At my last comment, Mr Gallant had, unsuccessfully I might add, tried to hide a surprised start. Perhaps he was no better at impassive than I? Or was it my odd menu suggestion that had finally put him off?

Apparently not.

“That’d be ...great.” He paused, before adding, politely, “I can hardly wait.”

His rhyme was every bit as bad as mine; still, I wasn’t sure why he’d reacted so.

Maybe *he* thought *I* was a crazed axe murderer? Or some black-widow, come-into-my-parlour trickster who was planning on feeding then fleecing him?

In either case, why was he politely accepting my invitation? In the scheme of things, he should have had second thoughts by now and beat it back to his own place.

Instead, he stood there expectantly, showing no signs of dashing off. Looking ridiculously calm and unruffled. And to give him credit, unlike me, he hadn’t so much as rolled his eyes at my odd suggestion.

He was even trying to be nice about it.

“Jet lag, aye?” he said understandingly, “it’s a killer, and everyone’s got a solution they feel they have to share, but, in my experience, none of them work.”

“Hmmm,” I gave him another moment to reconsider and retreat, waiting ‘til just the other side of awkward ...before I unlatched the chain and opened the door wide enough for him to pass through.

“Um. Come on in,” It appeared that my insane alter-ego was still in control and feeling hospitable this morning.

All the while I was speaking, the more logical and unsociable part of me wanted to push him backwards with as much force as I could muster and slam the door in his face.

I hoped there were meds for this...’cos it looked as if I’d finally taken that leap over the edge where they made a distinction between the *sane* and those with that extra ‘*in*’ prefix.

...Yep. I’d be making a doctor’s appointment as soon as I could find a practice that would take me.



“Hi, I’m ...Sam,” once over the threshold, my second early-morning visitor for the day held out a hand to shake. “Samuel Worthington.” He was grinning broadly now. “So I guess you could say ...Sam, I am.”

Ha. Now I understood why he’d recoiled at my lame attempt at rhyming.

Great -if he did turn out to be the murdering type, at least he knew his Dr Seuss.

I shook. All over. “Pleased to meet you Sam. I’m Marion.” I touched his hand as briefly as possible, before retracting my visibly trembling fingers to my side, “and that’s Marion Thomas, not Crane, FYI.”

“Seriously?” he laughed bemusedly, “In that case, -oops. Sorry about the *Psycho* reference earlier. I didn’t know you shared a name with the shower screamer.” He put his hands both sides of his face and opened his mouth in a parody of Munch’s famous painting, *The Scream*.

There was that funny guy thing again. And he didn’t *sound* all that sorry to my apprehensive ears.

“I’ll let you away with it this time,” I replied in a way I hoped would make him think twice before he tried anything similar again. “And how *could* you know my name? You’ve never met me before.”

Unless this is all part of the set-up? I thought darkly. I’d thought that I had got beyond that particular paranoia, but his comment brought the oddity of the situation flooding back to me with the ferociousness of a post-earthquake tsunami.

Weird *free gift with no purchase* offer at library.

Large hairy dog appearing out of thin air.

Man arriving at door shortly after.

Invitation to food and beverage.

No ...that final foible was purely my own doing. I couldn’t blame anyone else’s set-up for it.

I needed more therapy sessions. That much was immediately obvious. Perhaps there was another phone call that I ought to make?

...If I survived until break-of-day, that was.



“Can I say hi to your dog?” Unaware of my train of thought, Sam manoeuvred past me in the confines of the hall, brushing close by in his haste to greet Mr Dog. Buck, I amended. As he passed, he was so near that I caught the waft of some manly scent. Hmm, fresh, piney ...and not in that pungent chemical bathroom-cleaner kind of way. I noticed he was wearing comfortable loose-fitting track pants and a long-sleeved hoodie over a tee, -giving some credence to his story about being up and working in preference to sleeping.

His choice of words echoed in my head.

Your dog? ...Mine?

Hmmm. I rather liked the sound of that.

“Yeah, I guess you can. Go right ahead,” I replied with more nonchalance than I felt. Well it wouldn’t be my fault if Buck proved unfriendly. Sam would either loose a hand or not. There was little I could do to stop any negative repercussions without giving the game away that I hadn’t had the dog for longer than the past ten minutes.

“Did I hear you call him Buck? As in *Call of the Wild*?” he asked curiously. “Excellent choice of name,” he approved, “fits him like a glove.”

And so it should, I thought, with smug satisfaction. I’ll be sure to tell Jack London of your appreciation of his lead characters’ name, next time I see him. Oh sorry, he died in 1916. Could be a mite difficult to communicate ... these thoughts ran willy-nilly through my head, tumbling one after another down the roller-coaster track that was my mind.

Oblivious to the rambling nature of my musings, Sam squatted until his face was at the same level as Buck’s, holding the pose while he chatted in a quiet, calm voice to the dog.

I was impressed, despite my qualms. Not with the tone of voice. Most anyone could do that. But I doubted that I could maintain that same squat position for more than twenty seconds before my thighs would have been screaming at me for release. It reminded me that I needed to get back to the gym.

“Hey there Buck.” After a minute of soft one-sided conversation Sam stretched out a hand for the dog to sniff. I held my breath, waiting to see what would happen next. Saints help me, I wasn’t even sure what the local emergency number was; should I need to place a call. Not my familiar 9-1-1, I knew. What was it? ...000? 111? 999? Or some arcane combination? I hoped I wouldn’t have to find out in a hurry.

My anxiety was unnecessary. Within seconds of Sam’s touching him, Buck turned into a quaking mass of excited puppy dog, everything wagging from his nose to the furthest tip of his tail. So much so that I worried he would hurt himself as he flailed that appendage back and forth between the walls of the narrow hall. The library would not be impressed if I returned a dog with a broken tail, of that I was sure. Was it a crime akin to returning a book with a torn dust cover or missing pages? Having witnessed Mrs T.’s prowess at capturing wayward characters and heard the veiled threats she had made about knowing where I lived, I did not want to find out what she could do with neglectful borrowers.

“We’re a bit short of space here in the hall. Perhaps we should take this meet and greet into the living room?” I suggested brightly.

I’d have to wait ‘til they moved. There was no way I could squeeze past both man and dog.

Sam rose easily. I knew that if I’d been crouched like he had, I’d have had to crawl my way up the walls to get back to a standing position. “Come on Bucko boy,” The dog obeyed, eagerly following him to the sofa, where Sam sat, leaning forward to fondle Buck’s silky ears with strong, long-fingered, ringless (and, yes, I’d already noted this, ...but only at some subliminal level) hands.

Why was I noticing that absurd detail? So what did I care if he was married or not? I was absolutely not in the market for a man, available or otherwise.

Then I saw how Buck’s eyes were half-closed in doggie ecstasy at the caresses.

Lucky Bucky. I felt a small stab of something akin to jealousy. Multiple stabs. A bit like having needles stuck all over my body by a quack acupuncturist.

Shaking my head to dispel my foolish blethering, I turned and headed for the tiny u-shaped kitchenette, separated from the remainder of the room by a counter and a short section of wall that was hardly more than a supporting column. I opened the fridge and reached for a packet of ham and the egg carton. I'd come back for the chicken leftovers once I'd started our breakfast.

Nothing wrong with Buck's sense of smell. He was at my side in an instant, elbowing me aside in his eager rush to get to the food. From the force of his enthusiasm, it seemed he might have missed out on dinner as well. And lunch and breakfast.

The carton of eggs flew one way, the ham the other. One executed a neat double flip and ended right-side-up on the bench; the other hit first the wall and then the floor. Unfortunately, the latter was the carton of eggs and the results were much as you might expect.

And that's just the beginning of when the wet wipes would have come in handy.

FIVE

"Well, it's a huge relief to see the eggs weren't green," Sam's voice oozed ironic good humour as, shortly after, he and Buck stood watching me wipe up the remains of gooey yolks from the floor and kitchen walls. After scarfing as many broken eggs as he could get before being apprehended, Buck was now showing considerable restraint, ably assisted by Sam's holding my dressing gown cord around his neck as a make-shift leash, in case he forgot his manners. The dog, that was, not the man. Sam seemed quite well mannered, if a little over-inclined to make light of the chaos that had followed my opening of the refrigerator door.

"Ha, ha," I wiped up the last of the eggy muck, using a tea towel I'd found in a kitchen drawer, scooped up a piece of broken shell I'd missed and stood, "I'm thrilled you can see the funny side of it."

"Aw, it wasn't such a disaster. We didn't lose more than six out of the dozen -there's still plenty for omelettes. And we saved the ham, didn't we Bucko?" The packet of sliced ham was now well out of dog-reach, hidden from view behind the toaster at the back of the bench.

And it appeared Buck had acquired an advocate, keen to protect my new canine companion from the consequences of his bad behaviour.

To give credit where credit was due, Sam had assisted by mopping up considerable dog drool and slobbered egg from around the Buck's face. He still had a wad of paper towels in his hand just in case Buck started to leak doggy-goo a second time.

"Since you've done the clean-up on aisle three, how about I cook? I'm a bit of a dab hand at omelettes. You got some cheese to go with the ham?" He reached up and unhooked an omelette pan hanging from a hook above his head. One, I noted, that I could barely reach on my tippy-toes.

"Yeah, there's some grated cheddar in the dairy compartment," I was washing egg off my hands in the kitchen sink so pointed over my left shoulder with my chin.

Sam opened the fridge door. Buck made a dive, "No," Sam spoke firmly, tugging back gently on the improvised collar, "Sit."

Back sat obediently at the command.

"Stay," Buck froze, eyes trained on the contents of the refrigerator as if he could will them to come to him, but not moving a muscle. "Good boy," Sam said approvingly.

"He's well trained," Sam commented. He'd found the cheese -and a fresh green pepper from the vegetable drawer and was now searching the cupboard next to the fridge. Anticipating what he was looking for, I handed over a chopping board and knife.

“Yes, he is, isn’t he,” I mused.

Sam raised his eyebrows questionably, “He’s your dog. Surely you’d know that?” At my bemused expression, “You had him long?”

“No, not really,” I replied. “He’s a fairly new acquisition.” If only he knew. For some reason, unknown to me I felt impelled to add, “He just arrived tonight. I wasn’t expecting him.” Well, that was certainly the truth. Never a truer word and all.

“Odd time of day to deliver a dog?”

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” Best to agree, rather than dissemble.

“International flight, was it? I guess he was caught up coming through quarantine and all that palaver.”

“Hmmm,” I could think of no better reply. In my defence, it was now near-on three in the morning and I was operating on less than my preferred eight hours sleep. Not my best time for sparkling repartee...or responding to a mini-inquisition of sorts.

“Still, better here with you than stuck at some depot all night. Someone must have taken pity on him.” Sam seemed to have it all worked out. Good for him. Less work for me to think of a plausible alternative.

“Yeah. Door to door dog-delivery service and all that.” I wouldn’t elaborate more; aware I’d probably get in over my head in no short order if I tried to fabricate a bigger lie. From past experience I knew that creative story-telling was not my forté. I tended to dig holes that I couldn’t get myself out of when I attempted to stretch the truth.

“Wow, so, did you bring him from home?”

Some people were far too curious for their own good. What to say?

“Um, well, yeah, from the west coast.” My voice was kind of squeaky. As I’ve said, I’m really not a good liar but I figured that was a safe enough guess -encompassing all possibilities from Santa Cruz, California, where Buck had originally hailed from, to that beach way up in Alaska -where he appeared to have been taken after he was dognapped. Chapter One had been quite informative but had ended before Buck was safely ashore. I could see I’d need to venture back into the uncharted literary waters of Chapter Two and beyond if I wanted to know more of his life-story.

“Yeah, I think I got that -the accent’s a bit of a give-away.”

“How do you know that Buck has the same accent as me?” I asked tartly. “I wasn’t aware that there was a North American bark.”

“Fair point,” he replied, smiling in the face of my animosity. “Does he then?”

“Well, he came from Santa Cruz originally, which isn’t all that far from San Francisco, where I’m from, so I suppose if we *spoke* the same language we might sound the same. But since he speaks dog and I speak human it doesn’t really matter, does it?” I knew that my reply was, perhaps, a shade more acerbic than necessary but I was starting to feel that I had got myself into a situation where the likelihood of tripping over my own flapping tongue was increasing exponentially with every sentence I uttered.

Sam opened his mouth to ask another question.

“He’s a rescue dog. I don’t know his whole history.” I offered, playing my trump card in the hope that the sympathy vote might forestall his line of questioning.

“Well done for bringing him with you. That must’ve been an expensive trip. I guess he’d have an interesting story to tell?” Sam’s tone invited me to fill in the blanks.

Oh great -all that had done was engender more questions.

“I guess so. I don’t know all that much about him. As I said, he was a rescue with a pet relocation service. Sort of an international dog-adoption agency.” Now I was clutching at straws. I dearly wanted to end this line of questioning, sure I’d start to lose track of the lies I’d already said and change the story I’d given so far if it continued much longer.

Well, in my defence, what I'd said so far wasn't a complete lie. Buck was sort of rescued...if he had escaped the novel's pages; I'd certainly rescued him from a life of servitude in the frozen realms of the Alaskan wilderness.

Sam shrugged, "Good on you." It appeared he accepted my semi-truths at face value. "You've taken on quite a challenge there. He's a big boy to feed and care for."

I looked at the dog. "You're right," I agreed. And I am mad, I thought, thinking I could play adoptive mamma to an animal this size.

"He's certainly a big chap," Sam appeared to feel this was a detail worth repeating.

Did I mention that I'd woken up with him on top of me? You'd be surprised but I've already noticed this. "Thanks for reminding me," my reply was verging on waspish.

Sam however was unfazed and continued to question. Had he said he was an architect or a prosecution attorney?

"What does he weigh?"

A freakin' lot, I thought. More than me. Anyway. Then I recalled a detail from Chapter One that I'd read just last night. I felt tempted to put my hand up, as if vying for the teacher's attention. "Ow, I know that. Around one hundred and forty pounds," I recited. Then I just had to add, "Not as heavy as his father," I was quite proud of myself for being able to divulge these small facts.

"You sound like you've memorised those details," Sam frowned briefly.

"I was just reading it yesterday. It was written on his adoption papers." Dig, dig, dig. I was enlarging the hole I was falling into wider and deeper with every lie.

It was around then that Buck rescued me.

He whined piteously. Diverting our attention and reminding us that he was still hungry. He had stayed seated and immobile but obviously was very keen to sample more of the fridge's contents.

He raised a paw in mute supplication. Cute. Obviously still desperate for his promised dinner, despite the raw-egg entrée he'd already consumed.

I grasped the straw like a drowning victim snatching at a passing life jacket.

"There are the remains of a roast chicken in that blue-lidded container," I practically sighed with relief. "If you wouldn't mind handing it over here, I'll take some meat off the carcass for him.

Giving the appearance that he had understood every word, Buck gave a happy, excited bark.

Huh. Maybe we spoke the same language more than I'd thought, after all?

"Shhh," Sam and I both said in unison. At this double-censure, Buck lay down, his paws over his eyes, as if to show his mortification. Sam and I laughed at his performance.

"What a ham," I shook my head.

"There's only one kind of ham he's interested in," Sam commented, "and if you would be so kind as to hand it over I'll chop it for our breakfast." I tossed the packet of sliced ham to Sam, noting Buck's eyes drilling into the plastic wrapper as it sailed over his head. He rose to his full height but did not attempt to jump.

"Ha. Missed the interception. No points there buddy," Sam caught the packet neatly. "Maybe feeding him in the laundry might save your furniture and floors?" he suggested, seeing the beginnings of more spittle forming around Buck's jaws. As he spoke he was breaking eggs into a bowl and whisking them in readiness to cook. The pan was already warming on the stove.

"Good idea," I called the dog to me and made for the laundry, placing the bowl of cooked chicken pieces I'd scavenged from the roast hen on the tiled floor. Buck's nose was into it in an instant, nudging aside my hand in his hurry to get to the food.

A cheery whistle was coming from the kitchen. Sounded like *North, to Alaska*. Interesting song choice. My hackles rose once more. Was this, or was this not a set-up? I was still uncertain.

“I’ll get you some dry food in the morning,” I promised, as I watched the big dog wolfing down the chicken morsels. Then, amended, “I mean, later today.”

“My dad has a golden retriever,” Sam’s voice drifted from the kitchen. It appeared he had overheard our conversation. “She’s an old girl, spends a lot of time at the office so we always keep food there for her. It’s only a couple of blocks away if you’d like to walk with me and pick some up for Buck -just to tide you over ‘til the stores open.

“Could we? That’d be great. I wouldn’t ask but I don’t think he’s going to last until the pet shop opens before he wants a real breakfast.” I looked down at the empty bowl Buck was licking clean, “I didn’t get a chance to stock up on any dog supplies before he arrived.”

Would have helped if I’d known what was coming, I thought. Mrs T. could have been a little less subtle in her inclusion of the pet shop’s name and address. Like mentioning that I was about to get landed with a starving colossus of a dog and providing me with a detailed shopping list.

Now *that* might have been helpful.



“Hope you’re hungry.” Sam appeared around the corner, hands clasping two plates heaped with steaming omelettes, sprinkled with a small mountain of grated cheese. “Two orders of green eggs and ham coming right up!”

I was leaning on the door jamb, watching Buck lick the last tiny remnants of chicken from around the bowl.

I did a double-take at the colour -the omelettes were a shade of green that wouldn’t have been out of place in a St Patrick’s Day parade. “How did you...?” I began

“...Trade secret,” he smirked. “Well, not really,” he sat the plates on the table, “a couple of drops of blue food dye I found in your pantry did the trick nicely, along with that chopped green pepper.”

His humour had an infectious quality -I laughed out loud, shaking my head in wonder.

“After what you’d said, I couldn’t resist,” he smiled again. “And I hope you don’t mind that I also took the liberty of putting your coffee machine on,” he added, as he placed knives and forks on my pint-sized dining table. “I can’t afford to come down off my caffeine high just yet or I might not make it through the presentation. I can crash later, once it’s all over but it won’t look good if I fall asleep in the middle of pitching our designs to the clients.” He pulled out a chair for me. There were those nice manners again.

“Coffee sounds good,” I agreed. It appeared that I wasn’t going back to bed anytime soon, so I might as well join him in the extra caffeine. “So what kind of buildings do you design?” I enquired as I sat, salivating at the prospect of food. The omelettes might look odd but they smelt divine. I was keen to grab the fork and check if they tasted as good as they smelled. Buck reappeared from the laundry. From his expression as he stood watching us eat, he would have happily helped out in that department, but he took my quick head shake as a ‘no’ and retreated to lie on the mat in front of the sofa, his large head balanced on his crossed front paws. After a few moments his eyes closed. Tired out, I guessed, from all his travels from ...the far north?

I refused to think about it until after I had eaten.

From the way his omelette was rapidly disappearing, Sam had been hungry as well. He paused between bites to answer my question. “Not so much buildings. Right now, its *building*, singular. We’re working on a proposal for one massive project for a company

headquarters in mainland China,” as he spoke he used his fork as a sort of baton, waving it in the air to accentuate his words. “If they like our design and give the project the go-ahead, it’ll mean several years’ worth of work for us. We’re really excited, but its nerve-wracking at the same time...means we’ve got all our eggs in one basket.”

“Well, I hope you do better with them than I did with mine,” I quipped. I asked him what the project entailed.

He started to explain in more detail, gesticulating as he attempted to describe the overall design, “the roof and walls are all based on natural forms,” then stopped abruptly, “You know, it’d be much easier to show you. We have scale models down at the office if you’d like to see. I have to head on down to set up for the presentation as soon as we’ve eaten, so if you want to come for a walk I’d be happy to show you them.”

So now I was expected to venture outside with this stranger and accompany him to his office before daybreak? Still, couldn’t be any odder than inviting him into my apartment for breakfast on a less than five-minute acquaintance, could it?

Sam was scraping the last of his omelette from his plate. The way he was eyeing mine put me in mind of Buck. I pulled my plate slightly closer to my edge of the table and continued to eat.

I could see he knew what I was thinking. His full lips twisted in a sardonic smile.

He sat back in his chair, tapping a finger against his cheek thoughtfully as he spoke. “I must say, you’re brave having a big boy like this in an apartment. Must have been tricky organising all the paperwork to transport him and get permission from the agent to keep him here.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that hard. A lot of it was done for me...and the estate agent is fine with him being here,” my voice was back to sounding as if it required oiling. I was starting to hate that squeak.

“Not surprising. He’s not the only dog here. There’s a terrier in number three.”

Whew. I felt unaccountably relieved to hear that.

“Have you thought how you’re going to exercise him? Is he good on the leash or do you use a harness?” he asked, adding, “I’d be happy to take him for a bit of a run, if you’d like. I go out for a jog most evenings and I sometimes take the pooch from number three with me.”

I couldn’t answer even one of these questions. I had no idea if Buck would behave himself on a leash or not. I hadn’t even considered the *need* for a leash until a half hour ago. Did he like to run? How should I know? When I’d read Chapter One I hadn’t known there’d be a test! I could see that I’d need to read faster if I wanted to find out what my new canine companion liked and did not like and what he was capable of.

I motioned that my mouth was full, giving myself an excuse to stave off an instant reply, all the while thinking, I’ll get back to you on that once we’ve *been* for a walk. I disliked not telling Sam the whole story - but in this instance, I felt the truth would not set me free. More likely, I’d find myself in a padded cell, or out on the street at the very least, in no time flat. To the contrary of what I’d said in my earlier lie, I was unsure if animals were allowed in my particular apartment or not, -it had been unnecessary to check that minor detail when I’d applied for tenancy. I wondered what the statutory punishment was for keeping a very large dog in a pet-free apartment, not to mention the larger crime of dognapping.

So I said nothing, finishing my eggs in uneasy silence. By which time Sam had moved the conversation to safer ground, before suggesting we go and collect the dog food.

Yes. As it transpired, Buck was great on a lead -even a makeshift one improvised from my trouser-belt as a collar and my dressing-gown cord as the leash- and he walked along nicely - well, better than I might have imagined. And, yes, it appeared that he liked to run ...if the way he and Sam ran circles around me for the five blocks between my apartment and his workplace was any indication. I'm sure we could have been there in half the time but man and dog were having too much fun for me to object. From the joyful way that Buck danced and pranced alongside Sam on the end of his lead, I could see he was happy to be outside and not pent-up in the narrative of his book. Despite Sam's suggestion that the big dog could do with a proper run-around, I drew the line at allowing him off-lead. There was a small semi-enclosed park less than a block from the apartment building but I strongly doubted that Buck had any kind of ID, should we become separated, and I did not want to start trying to explain to some irate dog ranger why my new pet was neither registered nor microchipped.

It was surprising how easily I was coming to accept that Buck had apparated into my life from within the pages of his book. Until otherwise disproven and in the absence of another, more garden-variety explanation, I was (for the time being, anyway) prepared to accept this as truth.

I was musing on this child-like acceptance as we approached Sam's workplace. His architecture studio appeared to be hidden beneath a bank. Not one of those green, grassy sort of banks where hobbits might make their homes. Instead, more a bank that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Mary Poppins* ...you know, a Greco-Roman, fluted-column, imposing-steps-up-to-the-porticoed-front-entrance type of building? There was a church adjacent. In the half-light of the pre-dawn city, all the scene needed was the addition of an old lady singing "...Feed the birds" to complete the picture. As I walked along, I half-imagined Julie Andrews floating down from the pre-dawn sky, holding her carpet bag and black brolly. I shook my head to dispel the image.

It was a tiny bit of let-down to discover that this *former* bank was now a wholefoods outlet and a vegan café. Apparently it and the other trading banks that had once plied their business in the area, Sam explained, had relocated to the opposite end of the town and the buildings had been repurposed, more than once in the years since they'd closed from their original purpose. For example, he said, the church next door, once deconsecrated, had served first as a discotheque then as a racy night club before sinking into little more than a front for a massage-house-cum-brothel, and now, several incarnations on, it housed an IT firm and a bike shop. I was fortunate, he added that I hadn't seen the area ten years ago when it was at its lowest ebb. Seedy and down-at-heel, it had not been the sort of place you'd want to walk around alone after dark, he warned. There were still one or two hot-spots that knowledgeable locals avoided once the sun went down.

His comments put me in mind of something the librarian had mentioned about the area undergoing a renaissance. What was it she had said to me -something about me buying a place here? I wasn't sure if I was in the market for buying property just yet, but I'd liked what I'd seen on the walk over from the apartment. We'd passed by another bank that was now an upmarket boutique hotel and several old warehouses that were obviously undergoing renovations to accommodate commercial businesses at street-level with residential apartments above.

"We often use the side entrance outside of business hours. Watch your step." Sam opened a gate in the iron railings and he and Buck led the way. I descended after man and dog down a dimly-lit, steep flight of worn stone steps, waiting as Sam entered a passcode into the narrow basement door. Single-file, we all trooped inside. As the solidly constructed door slammed behind us it cut out all light. Not that there'd been much in the first instance - but the street lights had at least illuminated enough to see in front of my face. Now we were all standing in cave-like pitch blackness. Buck whined unhappily, uncomfortable at being denied

one of his senses. Just as I was about to suggest turning on a light, I heard the unmistakable flick of a switch and the space lit up like Christmas. Seriously, just like Christmas ...there were fairy lights strung all along either side of a long tiled passageway and icicle lights dangling from the ceiling. The dashed pattern of the tiles running up the centre of the long hall reminding me of lines on a road so I couldn't decide if it was like being in the tunnel leading to Santa's grotto or the Christmas version of an airport runway. I half expected to see an elf standing at the far end with paddles, directing air-traffic.

"Where's the big red guy and the reindeer?" I asked cheekily.

"They've pretty much all left on a post-Christmas holiday but Rudolf and a couple of the gang are still hanging around out back," he replied without batting an eye. "I stopped feeding them after New Year but no matter how hard I try, I can't get them to leave." Sam tossed this back with chirpy good humour, giving as good as he got.

I thought of the date today, this morning, actually. January sixth. Epiphany. "Hey, isn't it bad luck to leave your Christmas decorations up after twelfth night?" I asked.

"I guess so. It doesn't bother me -I'm not the superstitious type, but if you are, I can call the elves back from their hols to pack them away if it bothers you that much. I warn you though, they won't be happy."

"Nah. Don't disturb the little guys on my account," I shook my head, "Besides, I'm sure they need the break after all that work leading up to the holidays," I went along with his jokey tone. "Besides, the lights are pretty and I kind of like it."

"Well, that's a relief. Because, I have to warn you, the hall is only the beginning..."

We had been walking as we talked and now he opened a door at the end of the hall. He flicked light switches that triggered several bare pendants -hanging over a number of computer workstations. The space beyond was still in half-darkness, divided into a series of glass-walled enclosures set between square granite pillars holding up brick-vaulted ceilings. It reminded me more of a church crypt than a bank vault.

"Wow, cool work space," I enthused as I walked past him, right before I noticed the abundance of holly wreaths, ribbons, mistletoe and Christmas trimmings adorning the columns. Long loops of green disappeared off into the dim corners of the underground space. "Hmm, I see what you mean about the hallway lights being only the beginning. Pretty impressive." Although there were an abundance of garlands and other decorations in the space, they somehow did not look out of place or overdone. Instead, they were entirely appropriate to the space's timeless ecclesiastical ambiance.

"Yeah, well, we wouldn't normally have the office space so decorated but my mother passed away only six months ago and my dad's been spending most of his time here working ever since, so we made the decision to put the family decorations up here rather than at their house. Dad wanted them up but said it just made him feel sad to have them in the house. Too much of a reminder that she wasn't there." There was an undercurrent of sadness in his voice that I recognised all too well in the next words. "I wanted to make it easier on him ... You do what you have to - to get through, you know."

"Yeah, I get it." I tried to smile but knew full well that the smile didn't reach my eyes. You do what you have to -up to and including moving jobs, cities and countries- to get through. I knew all that, and far more, from my own personal experience.

Sam was looking at me like he saw a lot more than I wanted to reveal. Creative people, I thought, they were far too intuitive for my liking. I forestalled anything he might have been going to say by reminding him, "You were going to show me those models?"

He brightened, "yeah -I was. Over here," Sam reached around a column to flick the switch of another light. The scene it lit up was nothing short of spectacular. Sitting atop a long boardroom table was a sinuous model, all in white and scaled larger than most architectural models I'd ever encountered. Although recognisably a building of some sort, it

was so unlike anything I'd seen before that it took my breath away. The soaring curves and sweeping lines were obviously nature-inspired but combined in such a way that they were unmistakably original. I walked around the table trying to take it all in - in what appeared to be the spine of the main structure cantilevered leaf-forms were juxtaposed to a souring central floral shape - and these were complemented by various other buildings that although part of the whole, had a character that was uniquely their own -one smaller structure in the corner was very reminiscent of a clamshell and another put me in mind of a nautilus. But it was the way that the forms flirted and danced around one another that made for a breathtakingly beautiful overall impression. I crouched down to peer through the structure. At the scale of the model it was relatively easy to imagine myself wandering through the interlinking buildings.

"You're going to build this?" I exclaimed. "My goodness. It's incredible! I'd love to see it when it's finished."

"Me too," Sam appeared pleased if a little embarrassed at my effusive enthusiasm. "Yeah, well, we'd like to build it -if we can get the client to agree that is. We'll know better after this morning's presentation." He made a face, "No one ever gets to build exactly what they want -there are always compromises to be made for cost-cutting or regulations or some other reason."

"No. No compromises." I was adamant. "You should build this, exactly as it is right now. It's too sublime to make petty alterations just to save money."

"Wow, I wish you were the client," he laughed. "But unfortunately, that's not quite the way things happen in the real world."

"Architecture of this standard should never be watered down to suit a budget," I repeated. "You must tell your client to find the budget to build this, as is."

"Perhaps we'll just see if they like it first?" Sam suggested wryly.

"They're not just going to like it. They're going to love it." I knew a winner when I saw one. "What scale is the model?" I asked, rising from my crouched position and continuing to prowl around the model. The way the room lights filtered through the fretwork, I could see that the interplay of sunlight and shadow would be a major factor in the building's success.

"We built it at 1:50 -there's so much detail that we had to work big, especially with all the fretwork." Sam indicated areas of the model that had been cut into intricate shapes.

"I guess I can't ask who it's for."

"You're right, you can't," he agreed. "Sorry, but it's all hush-hush at this stage. I can let you know once we get the contract. If we get the contract, that is."

"Of course you'll get the contract. You're a shoe-in."

"Well thank you. Again."

"Gaudi would be proud of you." I added.

"Ah, so you see his influence?"

"I spent a summer in Spain a few years ago. Couldn't get enough of his buildings," I admitted. "The Sagrada Familia almost made a convert out of me and I spent a lot of time in Parc Guell. I loved the colourful mosaics."

Sam pointed towards the all-white model. "A lot of the finishing will be done in mosaic tilework," he said. "We haven't included it on the model but I have lots of coloured concept drawings I can show you sometime." He was still holding Buck's lead. The big dog chose that moment to whine his impatience at not being allowed off-leash. "Right now, I'd better find you that dog food. The kitchen's this way," he indicated the direction with a hand.

"Yeah, and we should go and let you get back to work," I looked down at my own watch, "cos who doesn't like to start work at five-thirty in the morning."

“Well, technically, I haven’t stopped yesterday’s work yet,” Sam corrected. “And if we get this job - I doubt there’ll be much stopping for the next five years or so. It’s a pretty big project.”

I looked back towards the model sitting in a pool of light in the centre of the room. “Yeah, I can see that.” I agreed.



As Buck and I were heading back up the steps to the street we met a grey-haired gentleman and a dog starting on their way down. He stood back politely to allow Buck and me access to the street, merely smiling at our ingenuous ‘good morning’ as we reached the top of the steps. From the age of the man and the breed of the dog I figured this might be Sam’s dad and Glitter the golden retriever but he didn’t introduce himself and I hesitated to venture into an explanation as to why we were coming out of his workplace so early in the morning - particularly with a tub of his dog’s dry kibble under my arm. If he noticed anything awry, he was too polite to mention it. The dogs spent a few moments huffing and chuffing around one another in a fairly congenial meeting of noses and tails before I tugged on Buck’s makeshift lead to encourage him to move along.

I turned my head briefly to check back as we neared the end of the block but the man and dog had disappeared from view, presumably gone down into the basement to begin work. I hoped their client presentation would be worth all the extra hours.

SEVEN

We hadn’t been home long before Buck let me know that he was still hungry. He made short work of the kibble, which I poured into a breakfast bowl then sniffed around the fridge for a time, as if hoping for something more. Since I knew that that particular cupboard was bare, I did my best to direct his attention elsewhere. Bored, he started to tug and tear at the corner of the lounge rug and I had to put a stop to that as well. I could see we would be fronting up to the pet shop the moment it opened so I checked the store’s website for opening hours and found that, fortunately for me and my Mother Hubbard’s cupboards, the shop’s doors opened at seven-thirty a.m... It appeared that Sam was not the only business in town that preferred early starts, for which I was thankful.

Consequently, we were waiting outside the shop at seven twenty-five, bright eyed and bushy tailed ...well, Buck was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Me, not so much. After a broken night’s sleep and two early-morning visitors, I was starting to flag. On our return journey from Sam’s practice, I’d also discovered that Buck was something of a handful for me to manage on my own. I’d found that he had a tendency to want to take off in directions that were contrary to where I wanted to go and what had appeared quite easy for Sam, was not nearly so straight-forward for lighter-weight me. The big dog had practically dislocated my shoulder when he’d seen a cat and had suddenly darted off to go and make its acquaintance - well, at least I hoped he just want a meet-and-greet and hadn’t been hunting another snack for breakfast. I felt as if I was nothing more than a negligible irritant on the other end of his lead and had been dragged half a block until the cat had disappeared inside an open window. Even with the cat out of sight it had still taken me some time to convince Buck to walk in the opposite direction.

I hid a yawn behind my open hand and stared at that bushy tail. As he waved it back and forth, it reminded me that I’d need to buy some grooming tools for the big guy as well as all those other necessities a large hungry dog might require. I window-shopped as we waited for

the doors to open, checking out all the pet-oriented goodies on the other side of the glass and made a mental list. Reminded of Sam's Christmas grotto of a workspace and his quips about Santa Claus, I still didn't bother to check it twice but I did add a few more items when I saw the display of dog toys through the glass. A chew toy or two might be useful if I wanted to preserve the apartment's furnishings.

I looked at my watch for the tenth time in as many minutes. At last, it was seven-thirty ...and who should appear from the depths of the pet shop to open said doors but the familiar brown-clad form of Mrs T.? She was dressed in an almost-twin outfit to the one she'd worn in the library yesterday, the main point of difference being that the badge pinned under her 'Hello Dearie -I'm Mrs Sera Tosthene' read 'pet retail assistant'. She approached the locked doors with a step stool under one arm -setting it down and clambering up the short flight of stairs to reach the top bolts. I added one more professional role to her increasing repertoire of jobs as I watched her undo the locks. I wondered if the step stool was a permanent accessory or if she kept one at every venue she worked at. Or perhaps she owned the place and dishing out large hungry dogs was her way of drumming up business? Even on such a short acquaintance as ours, I wouldn't have put it past her.

Mrs T. clipped the doors back and stood aside for me to enter. Buck did a little dance of excitement at all the lovely scents emanating from inside the store -food, mainly. I put a hand on his head to calm him -something I could easily do without even needing to bend, since he was so tall. When Mrs T. brushed past me on her way to the L-shaped counter, I felt a momentary spark of electricity that reminded me of the books from yesterday that I'd been told not to touch. Buck yelped and I side-stepped hastily, not wanting to be a conduit to any further shocks.

Mrs T. stationed herself behind a counter with timber edges that were chipped and chiselled as if something had been nibbling at the wood. I wondered what animal might have caused the damage but didn't get time to ask before Mrs T. broke into my musings, "I recollect mentioning you should visit the pet shop on your way home, dearie," she placed both hands flat on the scarred surface and frowned up at me with a look that made it crystal clear I'd done something wrong. "Did you not read my note?" she asked tersely.

"Yes, I did," I answered back a little more sharply than I might have if I'd had a good night's sleep. "But it didn't make any sense until a colossus of a dog landed on my lap at two o'clock this morning."

"Ah well, you got what you asked for," she gave me an acid-drop smirk. "Strange choice, considering all the lovely male characters that you could have taken home for a month," she smiled thinly. "Now, I guess you'll be needing wet and dry food," she looked over the counter at Buck, "a *large* quantity of food ...and feeding bowls, a collar and lead, a bed, chew toys, shampoo and a brush. Oh, and wet wipes, wasn't it? That should get you started. I have them all here waiting." She stepped aside to reveal a pile of all the necessary items on the floor behind the counter. "You will thrilled to know that this shop delivers for free within the local area." I was contemplating just how thrilled I felt when she added, "so that will all come to..." she named an amount that made my eyes water. Wordlessly, I passed over my credit card and stood blinking in doe-eyed shock as she rang up my purchases.

She raised an eyebrow at my make-do collar, "I imagine you'll want to take these with you dearie," she added, passing the new collar and lead across to me. She leaned her elbows on the counter and tapped her thumbs together as she watched me loop the collar around Buck's thick neck and clip the lead to it.

"Oh well," she appeared to be making her mind up about something, "I suppose he is a handsome boy," she paused, significantly I later thought, before continuing, "...and as you are apparently, such an animal-lover, you're going to adore this little guy,..." she bent down to the floor and I had a moment to wonder what she might be doing before she plunked a

small towel-draped cage on the counter top, "...you can consider him a gift with purchase." The towel was pinned to the cage at intervals with clothes pegs. I stretched a hand to pull up a corner of the make-shift drape. She smacked my hand away -none too gently... "Uh uh, dearie. No peeking. He's sleeping. Doesn't like to be disturbed during the day."

"Sleeping?" What kind of pet sleeps during the day, I wondered.

"A nocturnal one, silly girl."

I knew that I hadn't spoken out loud. I narrowed my eyes at Mrs T. wondering how she had guessed my thoughts.

"What's in the cage?" I had the vaguest inkling I should know.

When I ventured, once more, to raise the drape, she stilled my hand with that vice-like grip of hers that I remembered from the day before, "He *really* doesn't like the light, dearie. Won't do him a bit of good and he gets *quite* cross." She patted the cover back into place.

"What is in the cage?" I repeated my earlier query, enunciating each word quite clearly.

As if to deflect my inquiry, Mrs T. placed a second, much larger cage on the counter top and opened the door. Out hopped a pair of blue and gold Macaws. One of them immediately went to work with its sharp beak on the counter top, answering my unspoken question about the damaged edges while the other waddled across and peeked over the counter at Buck. "What ya got there, silly girl?" it squawked. It sounded as if Mrs T. had been coaching the bird.

"Is there a bird in the cage?" I asked.

Refusing to answer my simple question, the former librarian plopped an insulated grocery bag in front of me. I couldn't see what was inside the bag but whatever it was sloshed around making a noise like a tiny waterbed. I poked the bag gently and felt it give ...hmmm, definitely liquid.

"Best keep it refrigerated," Mrs T advised glibly. "And feed him at least every twelve hours. Everything you'll need is in the bag. He'll require regular ...infusions, or he'll get ...cranky."

Infusions? Cranky? That did not sound promising. I was about to voice my regret that I could not accept the cage when Buck chose that moment to attempt a leap on top of the counter.

"No Buck. Down!" I cried as I turned sideways to heave both of his front paws off the counter top -ably assisted by the second Macaw -who pecked enthusiastically at the dog's paws. Buck barked in protest and the bird squawked loudly, flapping its wings in annoyance.

"Nasty dog!" The Macaw appeared to have quite a wide vocabulary.

"Stay." I said. Buck responded, crouching on the floor at my feet, more, I think in fear of the bird than in obedience to my commands. I turned back towards the counter, determined to tell Mrs T. that I could not possibly accept the contents of the cage ...or the bag of 'food'.

But Mrs T. was no longer anywhere to be seen. I leaned across and peered over the counter top, as if I might find her hiding on the other side. No. She was not down there either. Hardly surprising, I thought. I glanced around the store; there hadn't been time for her to go anywhere.

"Where are you?" I muttered crossly.

"Gone away!" croaked the Macaw.

I noticed the draped cage, still sitting on the counter top. A note had been attached to the front cover with a pearl-headed pin. My name and address were there in bold print with ... *Do not forget to take the cage and his food! (Or they will be delivered)* written in what I could only describe as mildly threatening copperplate. And yes, copperplate *can* be threatening. I could almost hear Mrs T.'s terse voice in the written words. Regardless of the note, I was about to turn and make for the open doors when an older grey-haired man

appeared from around the end of one of the shop's aisles. He wore dark trousers and a shirt with the pet shop's logo on his chest and looked a little surprised to see me.

"May I help you?" he inquired pleasantly, moving to position himself where Mrs T. had so recently been standing. Both of the Macaw's flew to perch on his shoulders. He reached up absently to pet the birds.

"Erm, no thanks," I replied, "I'm good. Mrs T. served me and I have some things being delivered," I gestured in the general direction of my purchases. "So I'm just leaving. Bye."

"But we don't have a Mrs T. working here," the man sounded confused.

"Mrs Tosthene," I elaborated. "From the Library."

He smiled in that way that people have when they think you've completed lost the plot. Glancing at the pile of goods by his feet, he smiled reassuringly, "Well, it looks as if everything's in order, so that's all that really matters, isn't it?" It was more of a statement than a question, as if he did not want to prolong the conversation with someone who was so clearly not all there. I looked down at his feet, seeing the heaped dog-related items - a till receipt had been clipped to the top of the bag of dog food, again, my name and address had been added. Whatever I might think of her, I gave Mrs T. full marks for efficiency.

"Yes, I guess," I semi-agreed, once more hoping to make it to the door an outside the shop before he mentioned the items still on the counter.

No such luck.

"Hang on a minute," he said.

"Hang on a minute!" the Macaws repeated in unison. They laughed and I could have sworn I could almost hear Mrs T's voice in the raucous laughter.

I stopped and back-tracked a couple of steps towards the counter.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Miss?" he made a small gesture towards the cage and shopping bag still waiting on the counter top.

I reluctantly returned to the counter. Grimacing, I slung the bag over one shoulder and picked up the draped cage. The cage and its contents were lighter than the bag. Almost as if there was nothing in there.

I could only hope.

Buck and I headed for the doors once more.

"Bye, bye dearie. Come back soon!" Screeched the Macaws.