

Bite by Bite

By Rhondi Ann



If not for the dog, Scotti would never have made it to L.A. to say good-bye to her favorite singing star of all time, Riviera Rocklin. The dog and that last of cup of coffee she poured at the Coffee Hop in Albuquerque, New Mexico, she told Officer Lampshire.

Loyal to her employers even though she was shift-supervisor at an ungodly hour, she had all her blenders ready, the espresso machines and steamers set up, and the massive commercial coffee maker all bright and shining. The Coffee Hop operated out of one of the biggest truck stops in the southwest, with gas pumps, repair and

tire store, quickie grocery and snack shop, and the Coffee Hop which had once been the Coffee Shop before the S burned out. Saul Eli and his brother left it that way, hoping it resonated with memories of drive-in eateries and gals on roller skates catering to the customers. The Hop occupied a prime corner inside their Great American Truck Stop and Round-up, right next to the showers. They deemed that a great location because clean men (mostly truckers but a few campers now and then) loved a hot cup of coffee.

Just two days ago she explained to the compassionate police officer, she'd been at her post with co-worker Amanda when a little poof of a thing scratched urgently at their glass door. It then sat, wet, black nose pressed their way, shaking all over. Scotti opened the door and the dog fell in. She scooped it up where it barely filled the palms of her hands and a little tail wagged. Something incredibly warm and maternal welled up inside Scotti as it licked her thumb and leaned into her as if she were the Rock of Gibraltar.

Outside, a big burly man with the looks of a biker stomped past yelling "Where are you, you little shit?"

Scotti dropped the dog into the big pocket of her apron, as the biker passed by again, eyes down, his gaze angrily searching the ground, his cap stitched with something-or-other Trucking on it, and he growled, "Come out here now!"

Her pocket trembled. As did the closed glass doors with his heavy footsteps as he stomped past and she let out a little, disloyal prayer that he wouldn't come in for coffee.

A few more stomps and kicks at the outer structure, and the man left. After long moments, she dipped her hand into her pocket and pulled the dog out as her co-worker came by.

“What on earth is that? You didn't just pick up a rat???”

“No, it's a dog. A toy something or maybe even teacup size, because they're even smaller.” Scotti held it up and they looked at one another, nose to nose, only hers was dry and its was not. “A poo-pom or a multi-poo or maybe just a plain poo.” She thumbed a tiny paw. “Look, it has blue polished toenails. It belongs to someone.” And definitely not the cursing man although a certain percentage of her customers did do polish.

Amana put a hand on her hip. “Blue?”

“I'm telling the natural truth,” Scotti shot back. “Little doggy toenails.” As she rubbed the tiny soft, folded ears, she found a collar buried in its fur. “And a collar.” Carrying the pup over but keeping an eye on opening time, for she'd never opened late for Saul Eli and never intended to, she commanded “What's the tag say?”

Amanda's own nails reflected ebony as she turned the tag about. "Says DimSum, 27 Peacock Ridge, Pacific Palisades. Oh, that must be down by San Diego, with beaches an' stuff."

"No," Scotti told her friend who'd been born and planted forever feet first in Albuquerque. "The whole state has beaches." A longing spread in her heart

Scotti had come from Moline, Illinois and knew a bit about the world. She'd been headed to L.A. when her car died here and she'd found a job to pay the bills. "Pacific Palisades is near L.A. Annnnnd where Riviera Rockling died last week. DimSum is Chinese for Little Bites of Heaven." Or something like that. Heavens knew Amanda wouldn't know the difference. She added, "Peacocks are the symbol of new beginnings of watchfulness."

"You would know!" Amanda told her, and Scotti would. She had the knack of being able to read tea leaves and coffee grounds. Cradling the little dog in the crook of her arm, she reached for and finished off the last of her own cup of coffee. Then she did what she was famous for, at least in Albuquerque, and read the dregs at the bottom. Now, commercial coffee machines did not normally leak leavings and bits of beans, but theirs did, and Eli couldn't afford to replace the stainless steel basket so she'd taken up making the best of an awkward situation. She didn't charge for the fortunes but her tip

jar stayed stuffed. Even the Ladies Book Reading Club and Tea Society came to have their fates foretold.

Hers, right then and there, read, “You will taking a life changing trip.”

She added the life-changing part later, but the omen spoke as clear as any ever did. Just as her mamaw had taught her.

Putting her cup down, she hugged the little dog closer and it licked her jaw. “Amanda, I quit. I’m going to L.A. to say good-bye to Riviera, return this little dog and find my destiny.”

Amanda blinked, her Goth make-up paling even more. “You’re leaving? Right now?”

“I have an interrupted journey to finish. It’s destiny.”

“But—what are you doing to do when you get there?”

“I, Scotti Minear, am going to be a Barista to the Stars and tell them their fortunes while I make mine”

“You can’t just quit.”

“I haven’t any choice. I’m twenty-two, almost too old for L.A. as it is! My chance to be discovered is flashing by.”

With that, she took leave of her job, her apartment and roommates, packed up her old Plymouth Fury with her savings, one can of duck and rice dog food that the pet store told her small dogs of indeterminate age would thrive on, a box of piddle pads because she

had no idea of how car-broken or house-broken DimSum might be, the boxes that held her life up to that point, and she drove out of New Mexico.

She wound down talking to Officer Lampshire about the same time she ran out of breath.

After a gulp, Scotti added, “I had no idea this was the same address, and that’s the natural truth,” and waited for him to respond, yellow crime tape bannered in the ocean breeze behind him.

“This is a crime scene, miss.” She thought he had a wonderful world weary expression and a smoky voice. He looked at her through brown eyes that crinkled at the corners. He obviously needed a good cup of coffee. “You can’t stay.”

She could read upside down but he hadn’t made much in the way of notes. But, on the good side, he hadn’t written Nut Case. “Oh, I’m not a fan like that. I don’t want to see the family or the body. I know you have it in autopsy or something and I can’t tramp around the crime scene I just want to give DimSum back. I know with the tragedy and all, things must be confused. Just look at her. She’s adorable.” She lifted the dog to her neck, her fuzzy little head scrunched under her chin. Officer Lampshire looked adorable, too, in a tired way, and with no wedding ring. Of course, this was L.A. Collars

on dogs and people seemed optional. To his further credit, he seemed unfazed that it had taken her so long to run out of breath.

“Nobody is here, and you can’t stay.”

Scotti looked at the front of the immense house, probably a mansion actually, with six various luxury and sports cars gleaming along its circular driveway, and raised an eyebrow at Officer Lampshire. His neck flushed slightly.

“That’s family. If you can call them that. He didn’t, but there you are. It’s the lawyers and some ex-wives and a cousin or two, looking for the will.” He stopped abruptly. “You didn’t hear me say that. And you can’t go up there and take pictures.”

“Never. Of course not.” DimSum wriggled. “You don’t think anyone will claim her?”

“Not a one of them mentioned anything about a dog. Not even a poofy little thing like that.”

“Do you mind.” Scotti hesitated. “Green lawn and all that, and she’s been in my car all day. Can I put her down for a piddle?”

He looked around and shrugged. “Why not.”

Beaming, Scotti put the dog down and watched her begin to scrupulously sniff each blade of grass. “I can’t believe,” she commented, “That I’ll never get to hear Riviera Rocklin sing Bite After

Bite live. I was always hoping he'd come to the big casino in Albuquerque."

"He's in a big casino somewhere. That the song he wrote for that vampire movie?"

She hummed the chorus: *Love always devours, bite after bite.*

"Sure. That's what's so beautiful about it. Even the dead and soulless can fall in love. And it isn't just any movie. It's a classic. Really." And she crossed her heart over her tee-shirt. DimSum waddled around a bit of weed that dared to poke its head out of the immaculate lawn. "I thought you guys had a drought."

"Oh, we do. Some of these guys water anyway." Officer Lampshire cleared his throat. "Look, you really need to pick up and go."

"But it's so sad. No one knows what happened."

He shook his head. "Probably an accidental drug overdose. We'll know in a few weeks what he took."

"But Riviera was clean! Has been since he was seventeen."

He wrinkled his nose, just like DimSum. Scotti thought it endearing. "Miss, they all say that."

"But I've got his dog, all the way from Albuquerque. How did she get there? That has to be suspicious. Don't you want to take notes?"

“It’s not like you’re a witness.”

Scotti pointed at the diminutive bundle who had picked that moment to squat. “She might be.”

He caught his breath a moment as if to say something and did not. Instead, he took a grip on his notebook. “Where will you be if I need to reach you?”

Scotti swiveled on one heel. Her massive Plymouth Fury sat at the curb and she pointed at it. “That’s where I’ll be sleeping until I find work. At the nearest Wal-Mart.”

“That’s not an RV.”

“Don’t go breaking her heart that she’s not quite as big as one, because I told her she was.”

Shaking his head, he wrote it all down before he closed his notebook sharply, pointing at DimSum. “Time to go.” He turned about as a black and white pulled up and two more officers disembarked. As Scotti went after the pup, she heard them exchange greetings.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?”

“We’re here for the computers. ADA sent us over.” The group went into a huddle for a team moment. Another car drove into the long driveway and a short woman got out.

Now Scotti, who’d found herself described more than once as a “tall drink of water” knew that women in L.A., the movie and TV part

of it, were petite. The screen made them all appear larger than life, but they weren't, and this one seemed no different. Professionally dressed, If Tinkerbelle would be caught wearing an attorney's pencil skirt and silk blouse, the woman minced to the front door.

DimSum stood on three paws, holding a tiny front one up, with a bit of puzzlement in her little button eyes, let out a small bark, wheeled about and took off like a shot.

Without hesitated, Scotti jumped the yellow police tape and bolted after her. She, the tiny woman, and the tinier dog, all met at the front door, Scotti scooping DimSum up

“What a cute little thing. Rocky always said he was going to get a dog. Too bad he never did.”

“S-sorry!” As Scotti looked into the woman's face, she got one of the biggest shocks of her life. Painted like a porcelain doll, make-up masking what had to have been at least five decades of hard living, the woman smiled at her. She stammered “Sorry” again as the woman with the fake face pushed her aside gently to open the door.

“We all are, dear. What a tragedy. I think the policemen are waiting for you.”

The door opened to a chorus of voices in urgent greeting.
“Thank god you're here. If we don't get our hands on that will, we're all as dead as he is.”

“Dears, dears,” the fake woman answered, “It’s a minor set back not having found the will first.” Blocking Scotti from seeing anyone and reaching behind her firm skirted butt, she closed the door sharply behind her.

Quick but not quick enough to shut off a muffled comment. “The police are here to pick up the computers. We have thirty million each so far and the estate is ballooning. No one sells like a dead celebrity.”

Then nothing as the mansion door sealed firmly.

Embracing DimSum closely, Scotti sidled off the front porch, and whispered into the pup’s fuzzy ears. “They killed him.”

She felt a little sick thinking of it.

Officer Lampshire grabbed her by the elbow. “How about I escort you to that, mmm, Wal-Mart parking lot?”

She nodded numbly and then, repeated for his ears, “They killed him!”

“What?”

“They must have killed him! They wanted his money!”

“Miss, this is L.A. Everyone wants money.” He sighed.

With DimSum sitting alertly in the front seat, and the black and white following her, she contemplated her destiny all the way to the immense parking lot at the bottom of the foothills. A quaint coffee

shop stood nearby, all alone, its neon sign proclaiming Hot Mess. Officer Lampshire waved and drove off as she tucked her pup into her handbag

“You’re mine now,” she proclaimed. “And we’re not going to let those people get away with what they did to Rock or you!”

She shouldered her bag and entered the coffee shop because the first thing she needed, after caffeine, was a job.

People crowded the building and she could only spot two baristas behind the counter, with customers jostling one another. Indubitably, the store appeared indeed to be a Hot Mess. She stepped up to the drawbridge in the counter.

“Honey, there’s a line.” The blue-haired fellow working the blender pointed.

“Need help? I’m ready to audition.”

Both guys paused to eye her. She made her way into the work area, washed her hands and looked at the commuter order board which read like a teleprompter. Nice. “I’ll take the Mexican hot chocolate, extra foam, extra pump.” Mmmm. Someone liked their cocoa spicy and sweet. She had it ready in seconds and used her mad skills to trace a nice little pattern in the foam

Blue-hair looked over her shoulder at the cup. “Good to go,” he approved. “You’re hired. At least until the crowd thins down.”

“You know it.” She leaned out the drive-thru window and handed the hot cocoa to no other than Officer Lampshire. They blinked at one another and then he laughed. A nice, generous, laugh. She liked it almost as much as his smoky voice and kind eyes.

When the store emptied, they all took a quick break so she could fill in required papers, discuss wages and work schedules. Chester (blue-hair) and Jon (short-hair with spools in his ear lobes) looked at her Fury in the nearby parking lot. “You’re going to sleep in that?”

“For the time being. You know. Just till I get the area figured out. Being L.A. and all.”

“This,” Jon said archly, “is not really L.A”

“Oh.”

His square, Korean face assessed her. “But then, nowhere is! And everywhere.” He stood up. “Time to clean the machines. If we’re lucky, we’ll have another rush today.”

Chester waved as he threw her a grin. She lounged back in the retro bean bag chair, DimSum panting on her lap. She pointed her sneakered toe at the little room to the back. “Looks like a library or study hall back there.”

“Oh, it is. We have customers who come in, plug in their laptop, do some work, read a book, pay chess...spend all day here. We even

have lockers for some of them.” Jon smiled sadly from behind the counter, pausing. “Riviera Rockling used to be one of our regulars.”

Scotti’s heart skipped a beat. “Really?”

“Yeah. He came here to be alone. Hide out. He said we were his only protection from the parasites. He wrote poetry, some of his material, here. Said he had to work every day or go a little crazy.”

“Miss him?”

“We do. A big loss. He was genuine and a nice guy. He lent us money once, on the quiet side.” Chester hummed a snatch of a song, one she almost knew but he was a little flat, so she couldn’t quite name it. She scratched the flap of Dimmy’s ear and told them part of the story.

“And that’s why I came out. To say good-bye.” To be certain, only a very small part.

Chester hooked his hands around a knee, the legs of his jeans strategically shredded. “Can you really read tea leaves and coffee beans?”

“Yup.” She pulled her phone out. “Check me out on the Albuquerque Yelp.”

That brought Jon back in curiosity, their heads leaning together as they thumbed through the Coffee Hop reviews. Jon looked up in

admiration. “That’s a great *shtick*. The sort of thing a business needs around here.”

“We can’t compete with the big chain, so we do our own thing, but yeah—that would get people in. That and the coffee art you do. Where’d you learn that?”

“YouTube. As for the readings, I could do it here, too, but I’d have to throw dregs into the bottom of the cup.”

They traded looks. “That might be arranged. We could call it...clouds in the coffee. It could trend.”

“Great!” Now Scotti felt really at home. She took Dimmy out for a little run, came back and built a small playpen in the corner of the quiet room before pitching in to the never-ending clean up. She worked her heart out till late at night. The boys owned their shop, so days ran long and hard as the city rarely stopped. She’d have to get used to that, she told Dimmy when they finally settled down in the Fury.

The normally agreeable pup let Scotti know right away that she did not approve being relegated to the front seat floor, alone, while Scotti took the back seat bench. A small but very determined and wavering howl went up. Scotti fetched her.

“Now look. I don’t want to step into a wet piddle pad first thing in the morning.”

Dimmy's answer came by way of a fierce attack on her chin with many fervent licks and a thank goodness you didn't abandon me expression in her caramel eyes. Scotti put her back and settled down, sighing. Another quavering howl went up. Scotti peeled an eye open and looked over the seat back. The pup sat on the floor, watching her, amber glow from the store's tall parking lot lights making her look like a little gold statue. A trembling one.

"No. You are NOT sleeping on the seat with me."

The pup sniffled.

They reached a compromise. Scotti put her on the back seat flooring and let one arm droop down, DimSum cuddled up next to her hand.



Officer Lampshire liked his Mexican Hot Chocolate so much that he came by twice a day, in the morning before shift and in the evening, after. At least she hoped it was because he appreciated her barista skill and not because she was a suspect in any way. A POI as they liked to say in the media. Although she had told him right away, with the second cup of chocolate, what she'd overheard at the Rocklin mansion door. In exchange, he told her in the evenings what little gossip he knew about the futile search for a will, which meant that

long-lost relatives, ex-wives, and close friends were going to be putting in for a share.

“Nearly three hundred million, at last accounting. There looks to be seven or eight people who might have a legitimate claim.”

“Have they even buried him yet?”

“Nope. No instructions have been found. Word is his body will be creamated. Or maybe put into one of those pod things you grow a tree from.”

“Really? They have that?”

“This is California. They have everything like that,” Lampshire told her and patted the back of her hand.

“He’d have liked being a tree.”

“Right, you know.”

And they smiled at each other. Scotti thought the world of him because he seemed to have no idea that twenty-two was over the hill for L.A.

His smile faded a little. “Frankly,” he added, licking a bit of foam off the corner of his mouth. “Even if they find a will, I doubt if it’ll ever see the light of day. Notwithstanding what you’ve told me, it would be to their advantage for Rocky to have not left one.”

She shook her head. “He must have! After what happened to Prince and all. Look how organized he was with his rights, and

accounting, and stuff. Somewhere, in that house, is a vault of written material he's never had produced. He was a poet at heart!"

"And poets are rarely accountable. You just never know. Results are still pending but the coroner's office seems fairly certain the death was opiate overdose. Pain pills and sleeping pills. Those kinds of deaths are usually ruled accidental. But you didn't hear it from me," he added sternly.

"I don't want to believe it." Dimmy whined from her corner playpen, agreeing.

"Until we can prove otherwise..." Lampshire surged to his feet, clapping his hands. "Let me take her out for you. Looks like it's getting busy again."

"I'll say. Break's over!" Scotti bounced up. The Hot Mess had two lines now. One, for general service, and the other to have their coffee clouds read when the cup was emptied. Those cups she marked with her special star when her tip jar had been fed. The demand for fortunes added a steadiness to the stream of customers, good for everyone. She was not quite a Barista to the Stars but darned close, so successful that Chester and Jon fussed someone might try to steal her.

Scotti had a hopeful suspicion that Lampshire came by as often to see her as to get his hot chocolate, but she had no way to prove it.

Late at night, after his shift and hers, he insisted on walking DimSum with her, along the little green strip of a boulevard that outlined the coffee shop. He'd ask her if she'd found a place to live yet and she would have to admit that she hadn't and that Southern California seemed to be a very expensive place to live. He'd frown then and she liked knowing he seemed concerned. And that he was tall enough that her lanky frame didn't intimidate him. And he always let her finish a sentence, even when he thought she might be wrong about something.

He tucked her into the Fury, his frown still settled. "We," he said firmly, "are going to have to do something about this."

"Soon."

"See you in the morning."

She grinned as he shut the great back door of the Fury tightly. DimSum pawed at her arm when she settled, and wouldn't give up until she'd gained a spot on the back seat next to her.

Sound asleep, her dreams wrapped around something that dissolved the moment the door of the Fury upon which she'd been resting her head yanked outward, Scotti nearly spilling out of the car. DimSum let out a growl, negating all the fluffiness of her little body and leapt upward in ferocity. Scotti glimpsed a baseball as it swung

past her head. It narrowly missed but collided sharply and painfully with her elbow.

Still upside down and trying to right herself, Scotti tried to roll out of the car door. DimSum clung to the perp's hand, teeth sinking deep, the man cursing as he flung her to the floor. The pup let out a sharp cry as she landed. Scotti managed to somersault out and throw herself at the attacker's ankles with her own dogged determination.

The attacker bent, cursing and clawing, and she clawed back, wrapping one arm about the bat. Both froze as a police siren whooped. Bright lights cut through the night. The attacker threw her off and sprinted away, zigzagging through the haphazardly parked RVs and SUVs at the lot's edge. He disappeared.

Lampshire picked her up and settled her inside the Fury. "Are you all right?"

"He's gone!"

"Let's take care of you first." He looked to the quivering little bundle of DimSum as she whimpered and licked at one small leg.

"And her."

"I'm fine. But I know him!"

"How?"

“He’s the beast she was running and hiding from in Albuquerque.” Scotti gathered Dimmy in, the dog quivering and panting in distress. “She’s hurt!”

“One thing at a time. How do you know him?”

“He was at the Coffee Hop. I spotted the cap. Something Or Other Trucking.”

“Seriously? That’s what it says?”

“Seriously.”

This time he scribbled furiously in his notebook. “I thought I heard a cycle take off.”

“Me, too. He looked like a biker. Maybe there’s prints on his bat.”

“We’ll see. We’ve got to get you and her taken care of. I know an all-night vet close by, and you’re going to the ER. That elbow looks swollen already.”

“I’m glad you were here. I mean, I didn’t know you were patrolling this late.”

“I’m not. Officially.” He cleared his throat. “Keeping an eye on you.” He coughed. “On things, I mean. Things.”

DimSum let out a low, anxious whine, drawing their attention. He ran his hands gently over her but not so gently she didn’t let out a

sharp yelp. “I think her leg is probably broken.” He rubbed her ear flap in apology. “Let’s go.”

Scotti hesitated. He helped her into the patrol car. “It’s on me. I was late to the party or neither of you would have been hurt.”

Inside the clinic, while they waited for the tech to come out with Dimmy and a diagnosis, Lampshire paced. He finally sat down next to her.

“I think,” he stated, “they believe you know something.”

“They?”

“Rocklin’s parasites.”

“You think?” She raised an eyebrow. “How could I? I just got here after finding DimSum.”

“No idea, but they had her until they lost her in New Mexico. Something has them worried even though the judge just appointed a neutral financial advisor and accountant to the estate. What the dog has to do with it, I can’t figure.” He tapped his phone. “Crime scene is at the car and they’ve got the bat and are dusting the Fury. We’ll find him, one way or the other.”

“I’m just a barista...” Scotti stopped to think. She’d just opened her mouth to tell him the results of that when the vet tech came out, DimSum splayed limply across her hands.

“Oh my god!”

Lampshire grapped her arm to steady her.

“It’s just the tranquilizer. She’s a broken leg and we’ve casted it. She’ll be out of it for about an hour and don’t let her eat right away. Don’t let her chew on it or we’ll have to put a cone of shame on her.” Vet tech Estrada smiled softly. “It’ll be nearly as big as her and she won’t like it.”

“Thank goodness. You scared me, and that’s the natural truth.” Scotti sat down again, hurriedly.

“Did you know she’s been micro chipped? There’s a second chip in her too but it’s not an ID chip, so I’ve no idea what it’s for.”

They both stared at the tech as she handed the dog over. “The owner is R. Rocklin, but since he’s gone, I guess she’s yours now.”

Lampshire took the pup since Scotti had an ice bag clamped to her elbow. He looked at her.

“No,” Scotti said finally, “I don’t think I knew any of that but the address.” She stayed quiet until they got back in the patrol car and looked to Lampshire. “Hot Mess opens at seven. I think you need to talk to Jon and Chester.”



First, they fussed at her, got a new ice pack, and then fussed over DimSum who staggered around gamely on her tiny full leg cast.

They assured her they understood about broken legs, Jon having broken his ankle once skateboarding and having to wear a cast up to his knee. Then they fussed over Officer Lampshire for rescuing Scotti.

“Honey,” Chester told, leaning back on his stool. “L.A. is the impossible dream. You can’t stay in that car in a parking lot.” He pointed a thumb at Lampshire. “He can’t patrol 24/7. You need a place, with roommates, if you can even find one.” He brushed a bright blue tress off his forehead.

Jon tapped his arm. “We could use a third. Three bedrooms, two bath.”

“She’s a female.”

“So are you.”

“True that.” Chester ran his palm over his cobalt scalp. “We’ll think about it.

“It’s all right,” Scotti told them. “I’ll find a place.”

“Nope,” they said together. Jon added, “We’ve thought about it. You’re too close a friend to lose.”

“But what if she brings trouble to the Hot Mess?”

Everyone stared at Lampshire. He shrugged. “It’s a question that has to be asked”

Which reminded Scotti of what she'd been thinking before DimSum's reappearance had distracted her. She put up a finger.

"Someone thinks I know something."

"Undoubtedly."

"But I don't know what I know. I do, however, have Rocky's dog. And even though no one said they were missing a dog, they were. I brought her back, so they came after me. It took them a few weeks to find me, but they saw me and DimSum on their doorstep that first day. When I met you."

Lampshire's phone buzzed and he pulled it out to read his text. "Oh-kay. I have verification that Rocklin's drivers wore caps designating them as Something Or Other Trucking. He thought it was funny."

"See! And one of them kidnapped DimSum!"

"And tried to attack you to get her back."

"Right. So this is about the money. He wasn't giving that much of it away and he was only thirty-five, so nobody could inherit for decades."

"Almost thirty-six," Jon said solemnly. He tugged on an ear spool. "We have the same birthday."

"Okay. He wrote every day but he'd shifted his interests to charity performances and stuff. Any new material he was sitting on."

Jon nodded to Lampshire. “He was genuinely a nice guy.”

“Maybe too nice.”

Lampshire shook his head. “Just because the will hasn’t been presented doesn’t prove motive. We can, and will, nail that guy for going after you, but that doesn’t prove a conspiracy.”

“Unnnnnnless,” Scotti told him, “the will says, whatever you do, don’t give my money to so and so, and so and so.”

Lampshire considered that. “Then we’re back to square one. Where’s the will that might prove that?”

“I have an idea.” She swung around on her stool, hissing a bit as her elbow banged gently against a table top. “Did Rocky have one of those lockers in the back? In the study? I think you told me once.”

Jon’s square jaw dropped while Chester bounced to his feet. “Holy shit.”

“Which is why they thought a barista knew something they shouldn’t have known, in addition to having Rocky’s dog.” Scotti picked up DimSum tenderly. “Lead away.”

They all came to a stop in front of a locker in the farthest corner of the reading room.

“Do we need a warrant?”

Lampshire tilted his head. “I don’t think so. He didn’t rent this with the expectation of security or privacy, did he?”

“Naw, the whole thing was informal and free. Besides, he was in here nearly every day and no one even knew except for us.” Chester reached out. “Oh. There’s a lock on it.” He turned to Jon. “Did you put that on?”

“No way. It’s digital, too.”

Lampshire considered the lock and locker. “Might need a warrant after all. No good to break in.”

DimSum stretched out her white plastered leg on Scotti’s arm. “Maybe,” Scotti said, as if the dog had whispered something to her, and put the pup next to the digital lock. A hum, a click, and the lock popped open. She smiled triumphantly. “The tech said she had a second chip implanted. RF, for the lock. And that’s why she got kidnapped and they were so peeved when they lost her. Someone knew she was the key, but not where the lock was hidden!”

Lampshire opened the locker door.



Later, the four of them would tell their tales to the TV stations (all of them, network and cable, across the country and even a couple of worldwide outlets) of a treasure trove of unknown songs, and a will, and even a contract for a new manager/agent to be put in place,

pointing at a handful of very guilty parties as soon as the overdose toxicology, murder not accidental, came in.

“And that is the natural truth,” Scotti finished on every interview, because Officer Lampshire (soon to be Detective Lampshire) dutifully let his fiancée have the last word, unless DimSum wished to chime in with an adorable little bark. She, however, stayed respectfully quiet when the five of them convened to plant Riviera Rocklin in his pod in the eternity grove, to someday sprout into a great, green-leafed tree.

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