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Dog on It

Spencer Quinn

Published by Pocket Books

Extract

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First published in the USA by Atria Books, 2009
First published in Great Britain by Pocket Books, 2009
An imprint of Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia
Sydney

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84739-838-3

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Printed by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, Berkshire RG1 8EX

ONE

I could smell him—or rather the booze on his breath—before he even opened the door, but my sense of smell is pretty good, probably better than yours. The key scratched against the lock, finally found the slot. The door opened and in, with a little stumble, came Bernie Little, founder and part owner (his ex-wife, Leda, walked off with the rest) of the Little Detective Agency. I'd seen him look worse, but not often.

He mustered a weak smile. "Hey, Chet."

I raised my tail and let it thump down on the rug, just so, sending a message.

"I'm a little late, sorry. Need to go out?"

Why would that be? Just because my back teeth were floating? But then I thought, What the hell, the poor guy, and I went over and pressed my head against the side of his leg. He scratched between my ears, really digging his fingers in, the way I like. Bliss. How about a little more, down the back of the neck? I hunched my shoulders a bit, giving him the idea. Ah, nice. Very nice.

We went outside, me and Bernie. There were three trees out front, my favorite being a big shady one just perfect for napping under. I lifted my leg against it. Wow. Hadn't realized I was that close to desperation. The night

filled with splashing sounds and I zoned out a little, listening to them. I managed to stop the flow—not easy—and save some for dampening the rock at the end of the driveway and the wooden fence that separated our property from old man Heydrich's next door, plus a squirt or two between the slats. Only doing my job, but don't get me started on old man Heydrich.

Bernie was gazing up at the sky. A beautiful night—soft breeze, lots of stars, lights twinkling down the canyon, and what was this? A new tennis ball on the lawn. I went over and sniffed it. Not one of mine, not anyone's I knew.

"Wanna play fetch?"

I pawed the thing. How did it get here? Cooped up all day, but I'd kept an ear cocked; except for when I dozed off, of course.

"Bring it here, Chet."

I didn't want to, not with this stranger's smell on it.

"Come on."

But I never said no to Bernie. I gave the ball a lick or two, making it mine, then took it over to Bernie and dropped it at his feet. Bernie reared back and threw the ball up the canyon road.

"Uh-oh—where'd it go?"

Where'd it go? He really couldn't see it? That never failed to surprise me, how poorly he saw after the sun went down. I tore after the ball, bouncing up the middle of the road in

plain sight, got my back feet way forward and sprang, totally airborne, snaring it on the short hop, the way I like, then wheeling around in one skidding motion and racing full speed, head low, ears flattened by the wind I was making, and dropped it at Bernie's feet, putting on the brakes at the last moment. If you know something more fun than this, let me in on the secret.

"Got it on the short hop? Couldn't tell from here."

I wagged my tail, that quick one-two wag meaning yes, not the over-the-top one that wags itself and can mean lots of things, some of which I'm not too clear on myself.

"Nice." He picked up the ball and was rearing back again when a car came slowly down the street and stopped in front of us.

The window slid down and a woman leaned out. "Is this thirteen-three-oh-nine?"

Bernie nodded.

"I'm looking for Bernie Little, the detective."

"You found him."

She opened the door, started to get out, then saw me. "Is the dog all right?"

Bernie stiffened. I felt it; he was standing right beside me. "Depends what you mean."

"You know, is he safe, does he bite? I'm not that comfortable around dogs."

"He won't bite you."

Of course I wouldn't. But the idea was planted in my head, for sure. I could tell by all the saliva suddenly pooling in my mouth.

"Thanks. You never know about dogs."

Bernie said something under his breath, too low for even me to hear; but I knew I liked it, whatever it was.

She got out of the car, a tall woman with long fair hair and a smell of flowers and lemons, plus a trace of another smell that reminded me of what happens only sometimes to the females in my world. What would that be like, having it turned on all the time? Probably drive you crazy. I glanced at Bernie, watching her, patting his hair into place. Oh, Bernie.

"I'm not sure where to begin. Nothing like this has ever happened to me."

"Nothing like what?"

She wrung her hands. Hands are the weirdest things about humans, and the best: you can find out just about everything you need to know by watching them. "I live over on El Presidente." She waved vaguely.

El Presidente: Was that the one where the sewer pipes were still going in? I was bad on street names—except our own, Mesquite Road—but why not? I didn't need them to find my way.

"My name's Cynthia Chambliss. I work with a woman you helped."

"Who?"

"Angela DiPesto."

Mercy. I remembered endless nights parked in

front of motels up and down the state. We hated divorce work, me and Bernie, never even accepted any in the old days. But now we were having cash-flow problems, as Bernie put it. The truth was, I didn't really know what "cash-flow problems" meant, but whatever they were, they woke Bernie in the night, made him get up and pace around, sometimes lighting a cigarette, even though he'd worked so hard to stop.

Bernie didn't commit to anything about Angela DiPesto, just gave one of those little nods of his. Bernie was a great nodder. He had several different nods I could think of off the top of my head, all very readable once you knew what to look for. This particular nod meant: strike one.

"The fact is, Angie spoke of you highly—how you stuck it to that creep of a husband." She gave herself a little shake. I can do that way, way better. "So when this happened, and you being practically in the neighborhood and all . . . anyway, here I am." She rocked back and forth slightly, the way humans do when they're very nervous.

"When what happened?"

"This thing with Madison. She's disappeared."

"Madison is your daughter?"

"Didn't I say that? Sorry. I'm just so upset, I don't know what I'm . . ."

Her eyes glistened up. This was always pretty interesting, the crying thing; not the sound—I could relate to that—but the water-

works, as Bernie called them, especially when Leda was on the producing end. They get upset, humans, and then water comes out of their eyes, especially the women. What is that all about? Bernie gazed down at the ground, shuffled his feet; he didn't have a handle on it, either, although I'd once seen water seeping out of his own eyes, namely the day Leda had packed up all Charlie's things. Charlie was their kid—Bernie and Leda's—and now lived with Leda except for visits. We missed him, me and Bernie.

This woman—Cynthia? Chambliss? whatever her name was—the truth is, I have trouble catching names at first, sometimes miss other things, too, unless I have a real good view of the speaker's face—took a tissue from a little bag she carried and dabbed at her eyes. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. How long has Madison been missing?"

The woman started to answer, but at that moment I heard something rustling in the bushes on the far side of the driveway. The next thing I knew, I was in the bushes myself, sniffing around, maybe even digging, but only the littlest bit. Some kind of smell was in the air, frog or toad, or . . . uh-oh: snake. I didn't like snakes, didn't like them at—

"Chet? You're not digging in there, are you?"

I backed out of the bushes, trotted over to Bernie. Oops—my tail was down, tucked back in a guilty manner. I stuck it right up, high and innocent.

“Good boy.” He patted my head. Thump thump. Ah.

The woman was tapping her foot on the ground. “So you’re saying you won’t help me?”

Bernie took a deep breath. His eyes looked tired. The booze was wearing off. He’d be sleepy very soon. I was feeling a bit sleepy myself. Plus a little taste of something might be nice. Were there any of those rawhide chew strips left in the top drawer by the kitchen sink, the ones with that Southwestern flav—

“That’s not exactly what I said. Your daughter didn’t come home from school today. That makes her gone, what, not yet eight hours? The police won’t even open a missing-persons file till a full day’s gone by.”

Eight hours I had trouble with, but a full day I knew very well, from when the sun rose over the hills behind the garage to when it went down behind the hills on the other side.

“But you’re not the police.”

“True, and we don’t always agree, but I agree on this. You say Madison’s a sophomore in high school? So she’s what? Sixteen?”

“Fifteen. She’s in the gifted program.”

“In my experience, fifteen-year olds sometimes forget to call home, especially when they’re doing something impulsive, like going to the movies, or hanging out, or partying from time to time.”

“It’s a school night.”

“Even on school nights.”

“I told you—she’s gifted.”

“So was Billie Holiday.”

“I’m sorry?” The woman looked confused; the confused human face is almost as ugly as the angry one. I didn’t get the Billie Holiday thing, either, but at least I knew who she was—this singer Bernie listened to, especially when he was in one of his brooding moods.

But even if no one got what he was talking about, Bernie seemed pleased with himself, like he’d scored some point. I could tell by the smile that crossed his face, a little one, quickly gone. “Tell you what. If you don’t hear from her by morning, give me a call.” He held out his card.

She gave the card a hostile look, didn’t touch it. “By morning? Seventy-six percent of disappearances are solved in the first twelve hours, or they’re not . . .” Her eyes got wet again, and her voice sounded like something was choking her throat. “. . . solved at all.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“I didn’t *hear* it. I looked it up on the Internet before I drove over. What you don’t seem to understand is that Madison has never done anything like this and never would. Maybe if you won’t help, you can recommend someone who will.”

Recommend another agency? Had this ever happened before? I couldn’t read the look on Bernie’s face at all.

“If it’s money you’re worried about, I’m pre-

pared to pay whatever you charge, plus a big bonus the moment you find her.” She reached into her bag, pulled out a roll, peeled off some bills. “How’s five hundred in advance?”

Bernie’s eyes shifted over to the money and stayed there, his face now readable to anyone from any distance, his mind on cash flow. “I’d like to see her room first.” When Bernie caved, he did it quickly and all at once. I’d seen it with Leda a thousand times.

Cynthia handed over the money. “Follow me.”

Bernie stuffed the bills deep in his pocket. I ran over to our car—an old Porsche convertible, the body sandblasted, waiting a long time now for a new coat of paint—and jumped over the passenger-side door and into my seat.

“Hey. Did you see what your dog just did?”

Bernie nodded, the proud, confident nod, my favorite. “They call him Chet the Jet.” Well, Bernie does, anyway, although not often.

A coyote shrieked in the canyon, not far from the back of the house. I’d have to deal with that later. I no longer felt tired at all. And Bernie, turning the key in the ignition, looked the same: rarin’ to go. We thrived on work, me and Bernie.