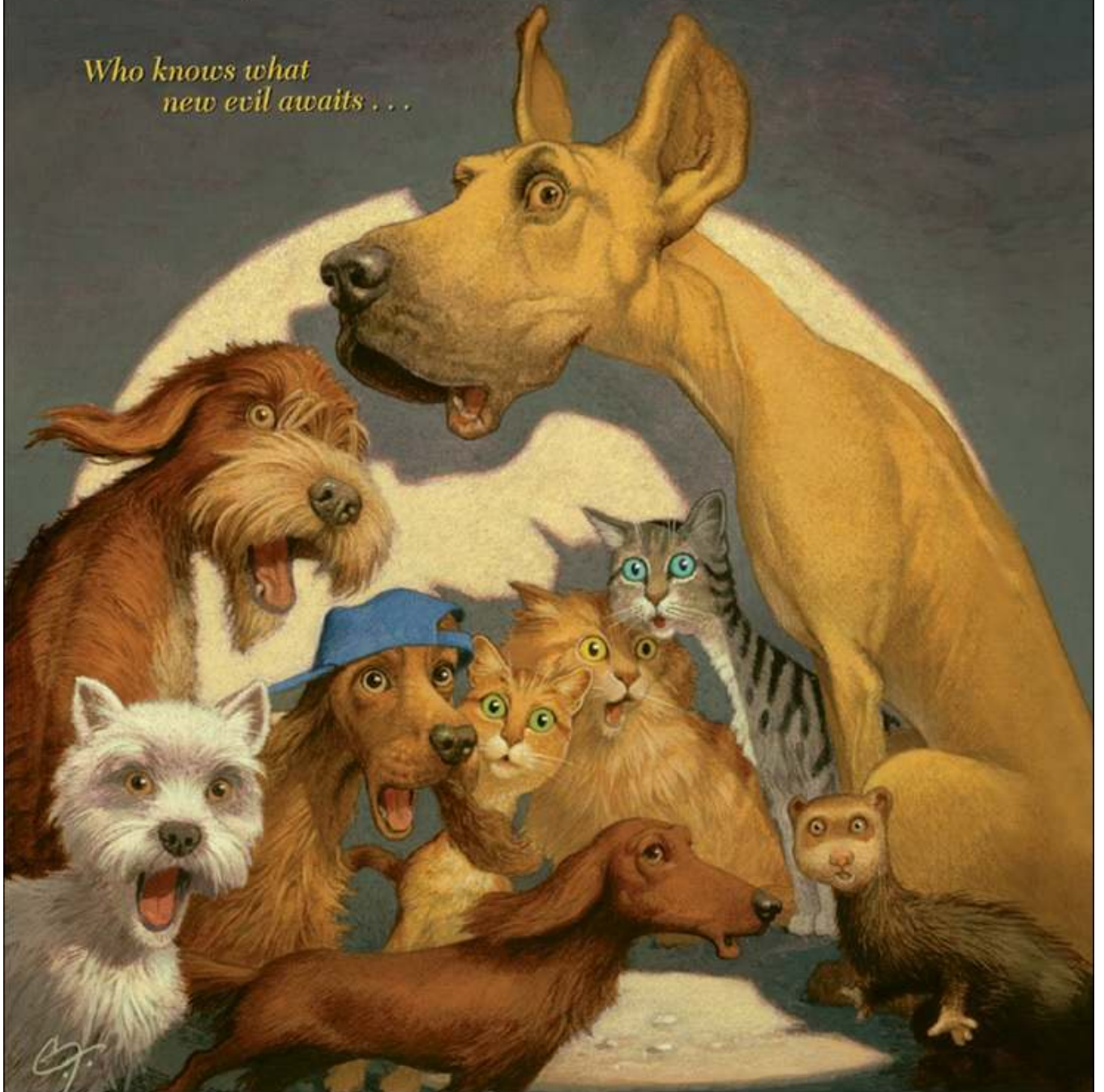


RETURN TO HOWLDAY INN

by JAMES HOWE, author of *Bunnicula*

*Who knows what
new evil awaits . . .*



“As scrumptiously silly as his critters’ earlier adventures.”

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PRAISE FOR THE BUNNICULA SERIES

* “A clever tale abounding with puns, wild chases, and slapstick humor.”

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“A treat for all ages.”

“—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*”

Don't miss any of the adventures of Bunnacula, the vampire rabbit, and his pals Harold, Chester, and Howie!



How did Rosebud check out from Howliday Inn?

The Monroes have gone on vacation, once again leaving Harold, Chester, and Howie at Chateau Bow-Wow, which Chester aptly dubbed “Howliday Inn” during their last stay there. The motley crew of boarders may have changed, but the creepy goings-on at Howliday Inn have not. A ghostly voice, buried bones, and a collar with the name “Rosebud” on it suggest that murder may have been added to the services offered at the kennel.

A pair of yuppie puppies from posh Upper Centerville, two cat burglars (sisters-in-crime) named Felony and Miss Demeanor, a melancholy Great Dane named Hamlet, and a weasel named, well, The Weasel, join the Monroe pets in getting to the bottom of the mysterious happenings. But will they be able to escape the fate that may have befallen Rosebud?

JAMES HOWE wrote the award-winning bestseller *Bunnicula* with his late wife, Deborah Howe, in 1977. The couple went on to write one other children's book, *Teddy Bear's Scrapbook*, before Deborah's untimely death from cancer in 1978.

After *Bunnicula's* publication in 1979, James Howe quit his job as a literary agent to pursue writing full-time. His many other popular books for children include the six sequels to *Bunnicula*; the Tales from the House of Bunnicula series; the Bunnicula and Friends Ready-to-Read series; the Sebastian Barth mysteries; the Pinky and Rex series; and the picture books *Horace and Morris But Mostly Dolores* and *Horace and Morris Join the Chorus (but what about Dolores?)*. He is also the author of several acclaimed novels for older readers, such as *The Misfits*, *Totally Joe*, *Addie on the Inside*, and *The Watcher*, and is the editor of the anthologies *The Color of Absence: 12 Stories About Loss and Hope* and *13: Thirteen Stories That Capture the Agony and Ecstasy of Being Thirteen*. James Howe lives in New York State with his partner Mark Davis.

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RETURN TO Howliday Inn

Bunnicula: A Rabbit-Tale of Mystery (*with Deborah Howe*)

Howliday Inn

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A Night without Stars

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Teddy Bear's Scrapbook (*with Deborah Howe*)

There's a Monster under My Bed

Pinky and Rex

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Pinky and Rex and the Mean Old Witch

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Sebastian Barth Mysteries

What Eric Knew

Stage Fright

Eat Your Poison, Dear

Dew Drop Dead



RETURN TO

Howliday Inn

by JAMES HOWE

ILLUSTRATED BY ALAN DANIEL

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Epilogue

[EDITOR'S NOTE]

IT was summer and I was getting ready for a three-day weekend at the shore. Looking around my office for something to read, I picked up a manuscript that had come in earlier that week from one of my authors: *Pickling for Profit and Pleasure*. It was clear a title change would be in order but that aside it just didn't strike me as beach material. I debated between two other manuscripts—a book by a country veterinarian called *Just a Little Hoarse and What to Do about It* and a seven-hundred-page first novel entitled *Ah, Life!*

Thoroughly discouraged, I told myself I'd pick up a couple of Agatha Christie mysteries at the train station. But then there came a scratching at the door and my weekend reading dilemma was solved.

For there on the other side stood my old friend and valued author, Harold X., an enticing manila envelope gripped between his teeth. Gently, he laid it into my hands and before I could so much as ask if he'd join me for a bowl of cappuccino at the trendy little cafe that had just opened across the street, he was gone.

With eager anticipation, I opened the envelope and read the letter clipped to his manuscript.

My dear editor and friend,

*Enclosed, please find my latest effort. As in the past, it is based on real events from my life and the lives of my family, the Monroes, and my friends, Chester and Howie. Bunnacula was staying with a neighbor at the time these particular episodes occurred. He was fortunate to have been elsewhere, for this was a terrifying adventure indeed. As an old and tired dog, I could well do without such adventures. But as an author, how can I be anything but thankful for them? After all, I doubt your readers would be terribly interested in a mystery called *Why Is My Food Dish Empty?**

And so, here is the story of my fateful return to the place Chester once dubbed "Howliday Inn." As always, I look forward to your response to my work and, I hope, its eventual publication.

Yours sincerely,

Harold X.

I tucked Harold's manuscript between the sun block and bug spray in my tote bag. I was ready for my weekend—or so I thought.

If only I'd packed a night-light.

The Omen

IT was the third straight day of rain. The third day of listening to Mr. Monroe whistle the score of *The Phantom of the Opera* through his teeth while indexing his collection of meatless soup recipes. The third day of Mrs. Monroe's saying, increasingly less cheerfully, "Channel Six says it's going to clear by morning." The third day of Pete whining about what a rotten summer *it* had been and Toby asking When was *it* going to stop because how could he try his new skateboard and Were they going to go on vacation even if it kept raining? and Why couldn't they ever rent the movies *he* wanted at the video store?

Not that the Monroes were the only ones getting, shall we say, edgy. No, even we pets—who ordinarily exemplify a calm acceptance of fate to which humans can merely aspire—even we were losing it. My first inkling of this came when I found Howie racing around the basement on his little dachshund legs going, "Vroom, vroom."

"Uh, Howie, what are you doing?" I asked.

"It's the challenge of my career, Uncle Harold," Howie panted excitedly. "I'm chasing hubcaps at the Indianapolis Five Hundred."

I would have had a little reality chat with Howie then and there if I hadn't caught myself that very morning gazing into the mirror on Mrs. Monroe's closet door and wondering if the time hadn't come for me to try something different with my hair.

Even Bunnacula, usually the calmest of us all, had taken to hopping around his cage as if the floor were covered with hot tar and twitching his nose so rapidly you would have thought he'd suffer from whisker burnout.

Surprisingly, only Chester seemed unaffected by the elements. Or perhaps I should say that if he was affected, it was not in the way one would have anticipated. As the rest of us grew more irritable, Chester mellowed.

"How do you do it?" I moaned on the third night, as the rain continued to pelt the window and I tried in vain to find an acceptable spot for settling down to sleep. At this point, every square inch of carpet looked the same and I was desperate for a change. Chester, meanwhile, was curled up happily shedding on his favorite brown velvet armchair, an open book in front of him and a contented-on-its-way-to-becoming-smug smile on his face.

"Why aren't you going crazy like everybody else?" I demanded. "What's your secret?"

His smile grew more knowing. "Books," he said, with a nod to the one in front of him, "are not only windows to the world, dear Harold, they are pathways to inner peace."

I shook my head. "I've tried books," I said. "Fifteen minutes and all I ended up with was cardboard breath."

"Try reading them instead of chewing them," Chester advised.

"Oh." This hadn't occurred to me.

Chester is a big reader. The problem is that his reading often gets us into trouble—especially

considering the *kinds* of books he likes to read.

~~“So what are you reading about now?” I asked. “The supernatural?”~~

“The paranormal,” he said.

“Well, that’s a relief. Pair of normal what?”

“No, Harold, not a ‘pair of normal,’ the *paranormal*. How shall I explain this? The paranormal are experiences that are . . . beyond explanation. Like Bunnicula, for example.”

Chester believes our little bunny is a vampire.

“Or Howie.”

“Howie?”

“I’m still convinced he’s part werewolf. That’s no ordinary howl on that dog.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“Or,” Chester went on, if I may use the expression with regard to a cat, doggedly, “haven’t you ever felt that something was about to happen, you just knew it in your bones, and then, bam! . . . happened?”

A chill ran down my spine. “Chester!” I cried. “I had a paranormal experience just the other night.”

Chester’s eyes lit up. “Really? Tell me about it, Harold.”

“Well, it was after dinner and I was lying over there by the sofa, where Howie’s sleeping now and . . . I was yawning and I felt my eyes growing heavy ...”

“Yes? Go on.”

“And I had this overpowering feeling that I was about to . . .”

“What, Harold? Oh, this is really exciting. Go ahead.”

“That I was about to fall asleep. And I did.”

Chester looked at me for a long time without speaking. “And do you have the feeling that you’re about to experience pain?” he asked at last.

“You mean right now? Well, no.”

The book fell off the chair. It landed on my paw.

“Ow!” I cried.

“Never discount the paranormal,” were Chester’s parting words, and he jumped down and headed toward the kitchen in search of a midnight snack.

I wanted to whimper but no one was around or awake enough to hear. This made me ask myself the question, If a tree falls on a dog in the forest, does the dog make a sound? I was eager to share this provocative conversation starter with Chester when my gaze fell on the open page at my feet. I began to read.

Harriet M. of Niskayuna, New York, reports the fascinating case of the phantom telephonic conversation. “I had been talking with my sister Shirley for seventeen minutes late one afternoon before I noticed that the phone plug was disconnected,” she writes. “The next day I told Shirley what had happened and when. Stunned, she informed me that she had had oral surgery just two hours prior to the phantom conversation and her mouth was wired shut. She would have been incapable of speaking to me even if the phone had been hooked up!”

Incredibly, Harriet herself suffered such extreme tooth pain the following day that she too was forced to undergo emergency oral surgery. While under the effects of anesthesia, she recalled her sister’s words during their nonexistent (??) conversation: “That new dentist is so cute. I’d d

anything to see him, wouldn't you?"

"Amazing stuff, isn't it?"

I looked up at the sound of Chester's voice as he emerged from the kitchen, licking milk from his lips. Now I understood how he'd remained so calm all this time. His brain had turned into two-week-old banana days ago.

THE rain stopped at exactly three o'clock in the morning. I remember the time because I was awakened just before the clock in the hall chimed the hour. It was not the rain that woke me, however, nor the ticking of the clock. It was a voice.

"Harold," it whispered in my ear, "something terrible is going to happen."

Go away, I thought. But the voice persisted.

"Harold," it intoned. "Wake up."

I knew that voice. Who else would wake me in the middle of the night just to tell me something terrible was going to happen?

"What do you want, Chester?" I mumbled without opening my eyes.

"I've seen an omen." He was louder now that he knew he'd succeeded in awakening me. "Don't you want to see it?"

"That's okay," I said, yawning. "I'll wait for it to come out on video."

"Very funny. Come on, Harold, it's not every day you get to see an omen."

I was going to point out that it was night, not day, but I knew that the difference would be irrelevant to Chester.

Howie was awake now too. He raced over to join us. "I want to see an omen, Pop," he said to Chester. Howie, for unknown reasons, calls Chester "Pop". "What's an omen?"

"A sign that something terrible is going to happen," Chester replied.

Howie shook his head. "I've seen signs like that," he muttered, "NO DOGS ALLOWED. Don't you hate that one? And, oh, here's one that really means something terrible is going to happen. DON'T WALK, when the hydrant is on the other side of the street."

Chester pretended to ignore Howie. "Come on, you two," he said. Apparently, he was unimpressed by the fact that I had both my front paws over my face and was loudly snoring.

"Stop faking, Harold," he said, tapping my eyelids. "Open up. Let's go."

Much against my will, I followed Chester and the relentlessly energetic Howie into the front hall. It was then that the clock struck three and the rain suddenly stopped.



“Look!” Chester commanded. “There, by the front door.”

I looked, but I didn't see anything I'd call an omen. I told Chester so.

“Look again,” was his response.

And then I saw it.

There, next to the umbrella stand, was Chester's cat carrier. It was open.

“What's that doing there?” I asked.

“And what does it mean?” said Howie.

I felt myself begin to quiver. “It resembles an open mouth,” I sniveled. “It means . . . it means we're all going to have oral surgery! Well, I'm not going! I don't care how cute the dentist is.”

“Harold!” Chester snapped. “Nobody's having oral surgery.”

“Oh. Well, that's a relief.”

“But it does mean we're going somewhere and I don't think we're going to like it.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“We would have heard about it if it was anything good. You know what the Monroes are like

They tell us everything. But no one has said a word, so it must be a place too . . . *horrible* . . . talk about.”

There was a scuffling sound in the living room. We turned. Bunnacula was hopping about nervously in his cage. His eyes glistened in the dark.

I ran to him. “Don't worry, little furry friend,” I said. “Nothing terrible is going to happen.”

“Mark my words,” Chester said, “we are doomed.”

WHEN I awoke for a second time that morning, I noticed that the sun was shining. I also noticed that Bunnacula was gone.

This wasn't the first time his cage had disappeared without warning and as there had always been a logical explanation in the past, I didn't panic immediately. No, I waited until I heard Mr. Monroe say, “Good morning, Harold, we have a little surprise for you today.”

A fleeting fantasy about chocolate chips in my Mighty Dog aside, I couldn't help thinking that the surprise had something to do with Chester's omen.

Toby bounded into the living room just then, but stopped short when he saw me. His face immediately got what I call its “poor Harold” look. That's when I knew I was in *real* trouble.

He ran over and threw his arms around my neck.

“Don't feel bad, boy,” he said. “It's only for a week.”

A week? Why did this sound familiar? I looked up at the spot where Bunnacula's cage had been and began to whimper.

“Bunnacula's okay, pal,” said Toby. “He's staying with Pete's friend Kyle while we go on vacation. Kyle's dad picked him up real early this morning. I said he should go with you and Chester and Howie, but Kyle really, really wanted him to stay with him, so—”

I was out of there and into the kitchen before Toby could finish his sentence.

“Chester!” I cried. “Bunnacula is gone!” Chester barely looked up from his food dish.

“I told you we were doomed,” he said in the tone of voice he uses whenever he tells me we're doomed, which is on the average of twice a week.

Howie shook his head. “I can't get any more out of him, Uncle Harold,” he said. “He just keeps saying, ‘We're doomed, we're doomed.’ Oh, and something about ‘that place on the hill.’”

“That's it!” I said. “The Monroes are going on vacation and we're going back . . . back to Chateau Bow-Wow.”

Howie's eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. "The place of my birth," he sniffed, "my heritage, my roots. Gosh. Uncle Harold, can we take a camera?"

"That would be nice. What do you think, Chester?"

Chester apparently wasn't in the mood to discuss photographic equipment. "I think," he said, "that you both underestimate the seriousness of our predicament. We escaped that dreadful place once, Harold. Will we be so fortunate again?"

I was about to reply when out of the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Monroe coming toward me with my collar in his outstretched hands. "Here you go, Harold, ol' buddy," he said, with a throaty chuckle.

Just as I felt the leather strap tighten around my neck, I heard Chester mutter, "Who knows what new evil awaits us when we return to . . . *Howliday Inn?*"

Gruel and Unusual Punishment

“**H**OWLIDAY Inn” was what Chester called Chateau Bow-Wow, the boarding kennel where we’d once spent an eventful week—the very week, in fact, of Howie’s birth.

“Aside from your being born there,” Chester told Howie as the three of us lurched about in the back of the Monroe’s station wagon on the way to our—what had Chester called it again? Oh yes, our *doom*—“the place is nothing but bad vibes. In the space of one week, Howie, *one week* there was poisoning, kidnapping, attempted murder, howling in the night—”

“That’s not so bad, Pop,” Howie said. “Most movies have all that stuff in less than two hours. *And* you have to pay for it!”

“That may be,” Chester said, slipping from sight as he lowered himself to the bottom of his carrier, “but this is not a movie, Howie. It’s reality.”

I wanted to remind Howie that Chester’s definition of reality was not necessarily a match for Webster’s, but I was feeling a little too carsick at the moment to do anything more than groan.

I groaned the rest of the way to Chateau Bow-Wow.

At first glance, the place looked as I remembered it: a large, creepy house high on a hill with a compound of cages behind it. The compound was surrounded by a tall wooden fence. There was a gate in the fence and a sign on the gate welcoming us. I noticed the sign had been changed. It used to read A SPECIAL BOARDING HOUSE FOR SPECIAL CATS AND DOGS. Now CATS AND DOGS had been replaced by PETS. I wondered at the change. Noticing that change brought other changes to my attention. The house and the cages had been repainted. There were some new shrubs here and there in the compound and the rickety wooden fence had been reinforced by a metal one.

Something more than paint and shrubs was different though. I couldn’t put my paw on it, but there was something missing.

Shortly after the Monroes left, Chester, Howie, and I found ourselves standing in the center of the compound in the midday sun. The air was as still as a puppy who’s just chewed a hole in the carpet and hears her master’s key in the door.

Howie looked around in awe. “So this is where I was born,” he said. I followed his gaze as he turned to take it all in. The grassy compound was surrounded on three sides by seemingly empty cages—I made a mental note to tell Howie that at Chateau Bow-Wow “cages” are called “bungalows”—behind which stood the wood-and-metal fence. The fourth wall of the compound was actually the back wall of the house with an extension of fence going out from one corner. There was a door in the wall leading into Dr. Greenbriar’s office and a gate in the fence leading outside.

It was incredibly quiet.

“Must be siesta time,” Chester quipped.

I nodded in agreement.

Howie sniffed the air. "Maybe we're the only ones here."

~~That's when it hit me. The big difference in Chateau Bow-Wow was that our friends weren't there. Max, Louise, Georgette, Taxi, Howard and Heather, even crazy Lyle— they had been who had made Chateau Bow-Wow so, shall we say, unique. I couldn't imagine the place without them.~~

A lump was forming in my throat when all at once I heard a familiar voice call out, "Harold Chester! And oh, my gosh, is that little Howie?"

I turned. There at the door to the office stood Jill, an old friend. She flung her arms open wide and ran toward us, tripping on a tree root. Another girl followed on the first girl's heels.

Jill gave me a big hug around the neck as I licked her face.

"Do you two know each other?" Howie asked, and he added, "Just a hunch."

"This is Jill," I told him. "She works here. Last time, there was another helper, a real clown named Harrison, but I don't think—"

"Oh, it's so good to see you guys," Jill squealed. "I just got to work and Dr. Green-briar said you were here. I'm his assistant now, isn't that neat? Of course, Harrison . . . you remember Harrison."

Chester rolled his eyes.

"Well, Harrison has started his own comic book company, so I've taken his job for the summer. And Daisy helps me." She nodded at the other girl.

Daisy looked like a daisy. She had this big, open face and wild, yellow hair. She was also what we pets call a "gusher"

"Ooooo," she crooned, grabbing Howie and squeezing him so tight his eyes bulged, "you are *sooo* cute. I could just eat you up, little puppy."



Howie licked Daisy, which only made her giggle and gush some more. "You're just as cute as the dickens," she said. "How about if I call you Dickens?"

"How about if she calls *me* a cab?" Chester muttered. "I want outta here."

Glancing at the fence, I thought, Not much chance of anybody getting out of this place.

"Daisy," I heard Jill say then, "I'm afraid you're going to have to put Howie down for now."

"Aw, do I have to?"

“Fraid so. We really need to finish getting the bungalows ready for these guys.”

Daisy nuzzled Howie’s nose. “Goodbye, Dickens,” she said. “Hug ya later, okay?”

She put Howie gently back on the ground and the two girls walked away. Howie couldn’t take his eyes off Daisy. “She’s cute,” he said with a sigh. “Gee, Uncle Harold, is this what they call puppy love?”

Before I could answer, Chester shook his head and started to walk away. “Dogs,” he muttered.

As if on cue, two dogs poked their heads out from behind one of the far bungalows. “Hallo” shouted the smaller one. “I’m Linda!”

“And I’m Bob!” shouted the other. “Care to join us for a little barbecue?”

BARBECUE-FLAVORED dog biscuits sat propped against the back of what we came to realize was Bob’s bungalow. Bob was a cocker spaniel in a Mets cap; his friend Linda was a West Highland white terrier bedecked in a knotted yellow bandanna.

“Don’t you just love barbecue?” Linda asked. “Bob and I say we don’t know how we get through each winter without it.”

“Well, but then there’s sushi,” said Bob.

I nodded politely. I wasn’t aware of any raw fish-flavored dog biscuits on the market, but I kept my ignorance to myself.

“The kids insisted that we be allowed to keep our barbecue biscuits,” Linda went on. “That nasty Dr. Greenbriar didn’t want to let us. He said something silly about a balanced diet, but the kids told him that *they* were paying the bill and *they* would decide what a balanced diet was.”

“Where’re you folks from?” Bob asked.

“Centerville,” I told him.

“Oh, it’s so sweet there,” Linda said. “Quaint. Charming. We’re from *Upper* Centerville.” I could have guessed. “We have a pool. Of course, we have to be careful not to fall in, don’t we Bob?” Bob nodded. “Do you have a pool?”

“We did,” Howie said, “until I bit it and the air came out.”

Bob and Linda smiled politely as if Howie were just too quaint for words.

“So,” Chester said. It was his first word since we’d joined the two dogs. Well, not his first word exactly. He *had said*, “Not if my life depended on it,” when they’d asked him if he’d care for a barbecue-flavored dog biscuit. “So,” he repeated, “are we *it*? Is anybody else staying here?”

Bob and Linda looked at each other, their brows furrowed.

“Let me put it this way,” Bob said at last, “we’re the only *normal* ones.”

“Really,” said Linda. “You won’t believe the riffraff. There are these two cats.” She looked at Chester and scrunched up her face as if her dog biscuit had stayed on the barbecue too long. “Trust me,” she said. “You don’t want to know them. And then there’s this character they call ‘The Weasel.’”

“Why’s that?” Chester asked.

“I expect it’s because he’s a weasel,” said Bob. Turning to Linda, he said, “Don’t forget the parrot, hon.”

“Oh, that bird!” Linda said, fluttering her eyelashes. “Squawk, squawk, squawk, all day long. Thank heavens they cover it up at night. And then there’s this strange dog.”

“Size of a horse,” said Bob. “And talk about moody. Sheesh. I told him he should lighten up. Try deep breathing, get a hobby.”

Linda nodded. “Most depressed dog I ever saw,” she said. “Oh, if the kids only knew the kin

of place they were leaving us.”

“~~This is the longest the kids have been away from us~~” Bob explained. “~~They send us post-card~~ but we can’t help but worry.”

“Here, let me show you,” Linda said. She pulled a card out from behind the biscuit bag. On the front was a picture of a long stretch of sandy beach. On the back were these words:

*Dear Bob and Linda, Never saw water so blue! Hope you're having fun at Chateau Bow-Wow
We miss you like crazy but need the space. Love, T&T.*

“Tom and Tracy,” Linda explained. “The kids.”

Chester leaned over and whispered in my ear, “If these two are the normal ones, I can’t wait to meet the others.”

Linda gasped. “Don’t look now,” she said, staring at something behind us. Naturally, we all turned to look. Two—what you might call if you were in a forgiving mood—cats were heading in our direction. One, a skinny, striped gray with matted fur, strutted so smoothly her shoulders must have been on ball bearings. Her piercing eyes were stuck on us like hungry fleas. Her blank faced companion was fat, long-haired, and tabby. As she waddled toward us, I noticed she was chewing something, and I couldn’t help wondering how she kept from getting whatever it was stuck in all the long hairs around her mouth.

“Well, well,” the gray one snarled as she approached, “and whom have we here, hmm?”

The tabby circled Chester, giving him the once-over. “Nice whiskers,” she said in a husky voice when she came full circle. For the first time since I’d known him, Chester appeared to be at a loss for words. The tabby stared him in the eyes and asked, “Did you bring any rations?”

Chester took his time before answering. “Are you talking to me?”

The scrawny gray cat snorted. “Well, she ain’t talkin’ to yer mother,” she cracked, breaking into a snorty sort of laugh. The fat one chortled huskily.



Chester, Howie, and I exchanged nervous glances. Bob and Linda just shook their heads sadly no doubt wondering what “the kids” would think if only they knew.

The gray cat stopped laughing abruptly. “I’m Felony,” she said, spitting out the words. It was less an introduction than a threat. “And this here’s my sister, Miss Demeanor.”

“You’re sisters?” Howie said.

“Sisters in crime,” Felony snapped. “Cat burglars. Wanta make somethin’ of *it*?”

There was a long silence during which no one chose to make somethin’ of it.

“What were you saying about rations?” Chester asked at last.

Felony sneered. “I’ll let you in on a little secret,” she said, glancing around. “The glop the serve here is enough to send yer taste buds out on strike.”

“They say it’s good fer ya,” Miss Demeanor chimed in, “but I say so’s a flea collar, doesn’t mean I want to eat it.”

“So we was just wondering if you brought anything widja,” Felony went on. “Somethin’ beside mosquito-flavored crackers.” She snapped a look at Bob and Linda.

“That’s ‘mesquite,” Bob said softly.

“Whatever,” said Felony, turning back to Chester.

“I’m afraid not,” Chester said.

“Pity,” said Felony. “You’re gonna wish you had.”

“The food’s that bad?” I asked.

“Like nothin’ you ever ate,” Felony replied.

“Like nothin’ you deserve,” said Miss Demeanor.

“Gee,” said Howie, “it sounds like gruel and unusual punishment.”

Miss Demeanor nodded her head. “However, once Felony and I have found the—,” she started to say, but the other cat gave her a sharp look that stopped her cold. Her mouth snapped shut and she resumed chewing.

Chester eyed the two cats suspiciously.

Suddenly, the air was filled with a distant high-pitched voice singing what sounded for all the world like a hymn. The only words I could make out were, “While on the path of righteousness slither.” Felony shook her head in disgust.

“That’s The Weasel,” she snarled. “A disgrace to his race.”

“A shame to his name,” said Miss Demeanor.

Howie, who hates being left out, said, “A wart to this sort.” We all turned slowly. He smiled up at us and said weakly, “A blot to his lot? A blister to his sister? A bother to his father?”

“Oh, dear,” I heard Linda whisper to Bob, “perhaps you and I are the only normal ones here after all.”

I wasn’t the only one who heard. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Felony said, turning her eyes into tiny slits.

Linda laughed nervously. “Oh, nothing.”

“Yeah, well, it better mean nothing. Else, watch out fer yer doggie biscuits.”

“Surely,” said Bob, arching a superior eyebrow, “stealing dog biscuits is beneath you.”

Miss Demeanor arched a superior eyebrow of her own. “*Nothing* is beneath us,” she said with pride.

I caught the little smile behind her eyes and began to wonder if Chester might have been right. Perhaps something terrible *was* going to happen.

Things That Go Bark in the Night

CHESTER was thinking the same way I was.

“Didn’t I tell you?” he muttered, as Jill and Daisy escorted us to our bungalows. The two of us trailed behind Jill, while Howie rode first class in Daisy’s arms. “Those two spell trouble.”

“I don’t know if they’re that bright,” I said. Personally, I wasn’t sure they were the biggest of our worries. After all, we hadn’t met the hymn-singing weasel yet.

As it turned out, we didn’t have long to wait. He was staying in the bungalow next to mine.

“Harold,” Jill said, “this is The Weasel. Don’t let his name fool you. He’s a sweetie, isn’t he, Daisy?”

Daisy looked up from where she had her head buried in Howie’s tummy. “I call him Little Darlin’,” she said, as if that proved something other than her own inability to call animals by their rightful name.

After she and Jill returned to the office, The Weasel weaseled out of his bungalow and into mine. I retreated to a corner, not sure how eager I was for the company of this slinky, not exactly aromatic creature with the beady eyes and pointy nose.

“Hello, friend,” he said in a velvety, soothing tone. I suspect he sensed my discomfort. The fact that the floor was covered with the hair I’d shed immediately on his arrival might have been a tip-off.

“I’ve just come to spread a little sunshine,” he went on.

“That’s nice,” I said.

“I just want you to know, since we’re going to be neighbors and all, that you can call on me anytime. If you need anything, anything at all, I’ll be here as quick as a mink.”

“That’s very—”

“Weasels get a bum rap, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, well—”

“Look at me, do I seem mean, sneaky, homicidal?”

“Gee, I—”

“Of course I don’t. Judge not, lest ye be judged, that’s what I always say. Take yourself, for instance.” I wanted to take myself right out of there, but The Weasel was blocking the way.

“You’re not dumb and lazy and covered with fleas.”

“Well, he got one out of three right,” I heard Chester crack from the bungalow to my left. I glowered in his direction.

“Would you like to take a stroll with me?” The Weasel asked. “Get acquainted?”

I noticed that he never stopped smiling. I began thinking what a great game-show host he would make.

“Well?” he asked.

“Oh, sorry.” I wanted to say no, but fearing that he’d think me lazy if I did, I said, without

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