

Dognapping and murder solved by clever dogs with mystical touch.

Dog Star

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Chapter One

The big Chessie leaped from the dock onto the deck of the 50-foot skipjack moored alongside. He halted on his mark, posed a forepaw on the bowsprit of the sailing vessel, and lifted his gaze. The sunrise momentarily gilded his eyes, and coppery highlights glinted from his chestnut coat. After a dramatic pause, he turned to face the camera squarely.

“Cut!” a guy in a plaid flannel shirt called out.

“Good boy, Teke!” called my friend Peg, rising from a crouch in the bow of the *Mary T. Deale*. She wrapped an arm around the Chesapeake Bay Retriever, hugging him, and scratched his chest energetically with her other hand. Teke’s tongue lolled in pleasure. Peg looked up and waved at me where I stood gawking with the rest of the spectators.

Talking and gesturing, plaid-flannel-shirt, trailed by a man with a camera on his shoulder, moved five paces further along the shoreline eyeing the angles back to the *Mary T*. Following directions inaudible at my distance, Peg positioned Teke on the dock and, once again, disappeared from sight aboard the skipjack.

“Roll film,” said plaid-flannel-shirt. “Speed,” replied the camera guy. “Action.”

Teke loped down the dock, bounded aboard the skipjack and struck the pose, precisely as before.

“Cut,” plaid-flannel-shirt called out. “Good head shot. That’s a wrap, everybody. Take a break, Peg. Hey! You guys with the bounce cards, come with me!”

Peg stood in the bow and stepped over to the dock. Teke followed and fell into place at her left heel.

“That was great, Peg,” I said when they reached me. She shrugged slightly, but I could tell by her shining brown eyes glued on the dog, now sitting calmly at her side, that she was proud of Teke’s performance. I leaned over and roughed up the thick, wavy coat over his shoulders. Teke replied by offering me one of his huge paws, which he left resting in my hand.

“So, what happens next?” I asked as I tickled Teke’s webbed toes.

“Well, we’re going out on the river to do some shots of Teke retrieving. But, first, Steve – he’s the director over there - wants to shoot some background scenery around here,” she flipped her hand toward the lighthouse behind her, “while the light is good.” Half a dozen guys with bounce cards—which, Peg explained, are light reflectors—were trailing Steve the director toward the lighthouse.

Like the *Mary T. Deale*, one of the last of a fleet of oyster dredging sailboats on the Bay, the nineteenth century Hooper Strait Lighthouse is a key attraction of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. In its heyday, the hexagonal cottage perched atop iron pilings was screwed into Hooper Strait, and a lens in the cupola atop the cottage shone out over the Bay.

I had arrived at the museum grounds in St. Michaels Maryland at first light to cheer on my best friend, Peg Beauchamp, and her Chessie, Teke. Today was Teke’s first outing as spokesdog for Delmarva tourism.

Tourism fuels the Delmarva economy. Lying between the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay on the east and the Chesapeake Bay on the west, Delmarva is a peninsula. Though carved up among three states—Delaware and the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia—Delmarva is an area where people share a culture and economic interests different than those of the Bay’s urbanized Western Shores. From May through September, millions of East Coast city-dwellers flock to Delmarva’s clean beaches, glitzy slots, quaint rural towns, pristine wildlife refuges, and tax-free outlets.

As his breed’s name indicates, Teke’s kind is native to the Bay country. In 1807, so the story goes, two Newfoundland dogs named Sailor and Canton were shipwrecked in the Bay. Their descendants were intermingled with other breeds and eventually developed into the Chesapeake Bay Retriever, one of only a handful of breeds to originate in North America. With its strong hindquarters and thick oily coat perfectly adapted to retrieving game birds in the cold waters of the Bay, the Chessie is a consummate water dog and Maryland’s State Dog.

A Chessie’s hard-headedness can challenge a trainer. As a puppy, Teke had been no exception. But Peg is a brilliant trainer and Teke’s many titles in obedience, agility and tracking competitions were a tribute to her technique and the highlight of her career—until now.

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When Delmarva's three states banded together to announce a talent search for a spokesdog to star in commercials promoting Delmarva's tourist attractions, Peg decided to audition Teke. Over two hundred canine competitors turned out to vie for the job. Teamed with Peg's professionalism, the local appeal of the handsome 95-pound sporting dog worked to Teke's advantage, and he won over the competition paws down.

"I had no idea this was going to be such a big deal," Peg whispered as we watched the crew and spectators converge on the lighthouse.

I didn't know how much Peg was making from this job—there are some things even close friends don't ask. However, judging from her excited plans for a new training building, I had assumed the contract was lucrative. Peg had been drooling over one of those spacious metal buildings for the better part of a decade.

"Listen, I want Teke to take a nap. He's been up half the night. Want a cup of coffee?" she said.

"Noticed my teeth chattering, eh?" I replied. Mornings on the water are always chilly. Peg and I both sported rosy cheeks, runny noses, and numbed fingers.

"I left the Tibbies in the car, Peg," I said. "I was afraid they'd bark when they saw Teke. I'll meet you back at the RV." Peg nodded and she set off briskly with Teke at heel.

The "Tibbies" are my Tibetan Spaniels, Senge and Dawa—pronounced SEN-gay and DAH-wah. Most people look at them and say, 'Oh, look at the cute Pokes.' And I reply, no, they are Tibetan Spaniels, the ancestor of the Pekingese, from the land on the roof of the world, Tibet. Then, I coach them to look closer and notice that the monkey-like faces are not flat like a Peke's but have a nice, blunt muzzle, that they are neither as small nor bow-legged as a Peke but medium-sized with a good length of leg, that they don't have coat to the floor but mid-length silky hair. As I walked the dogs to Peg's RV, this familiar scene replayed twice.

Peg's home away from home is an RV with a house unit mounted onto a van frame. The house unit includes a small kitchen, a miniscule bathroom with toilet and overhead shower, and a bedroom tucked into

the back. Another bed occupies the claustrophobic loft over the driving compartment. Peg had removed the table and benches in the “dining area” to make room for dog crates. Like many people active in dog sports, Peg and her dogs take off most weekends in warm weather, driving hundreds of miles to compete in an event.

Senge and Dawa had known Teke since puppyhood. In fact, he had been their canine nanny on many occasions. As we climbed into the rig, they greeted him with typical Tibbie enthusiasm. Eyes bugging, they streaked from one end of the RV to the other, jumping on and off the bed, teasing Teke to catch them.

Peg flattened herself against the kitchen counter and lifted the cups of nuked coffee out of danger. Not that flattening was needed. Peg’s tall body lacked any bulges. Always the natural athlete, she remained lean and muscular no matter how much she ate or how little she exercised. It has always annoyed me.

The Tibbies soon wore themselves out wild-dogging and flopped down to pant. Having stoically endured their antics, Teke crept into his sheepskin-lined crate, circled and settled down for a nap. Peg squatted and scratched his ears for a moment before latching the crate door. Recovered, the ever curious Tibbies took up positions on Peg’s bed to observe the goings-on through the window at the back.

Mugs in hand, Peg and I left the RV and strolled down to the lighthouse to watch the filming. As we made our way through the small crowd of down-vested and sweater-clad spectators milling around, Peg stopped to chat with a few people she knew. A couple of well-wishers from Peg’s dog training classes hugged her and gushed over Teke’s performance. Peg turned when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hey, Dr. Lynch,” Peg said when she turned to a sturdy woman with a square, ruddy face and cropped, sun-bleached hair. “This is a surprise.”

“I read about it in the *Observer*. It’s not everyday one of our patients becomes a movie star,” said the young veterinarian from the practice where Peg and I take our dogs.

“Did you see him work? What did you think?” Peg asked.

“He really looked good. Perfect in fact. You’ve done a good job with him,” Dr. Lynch replied.

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We talked a while longer before Peg and I left her to continue toward the lighthouse.

"I like Dr. Lynch. I think she brings some updated ideas to Doc Twilley's practice," Peg commented. I agreed.

"You know, I didn't know there was anything about today in the paper. I guess Grace Bishop put it in her column."

"Speak of the devil," I said.

A familiar shock of white hair bobbed above the crowd ahead. Grace Bishop covered community events for the social column in the local paper. Whether it was a benefit dance, Chamber of Commerce dinner or fireman's carnival, Grace was there. She'd been around forever. More importantly, Grace was a dog lover who wrote dog-related stories for her paper. As always, scribbling on a steno pad, she was undoubtedly taking notes for a story about Peg and Teke for her column. We chatted amiably for a while about how well Teke had performed in the morning's shoot. Grace asked several questions about how Peg trained Teke to repeat the required moves over and over flawlessly.

When another well-wisher drew Peg aside, Grace wedged her talon-like fingers in my bicep and shot me a meaningful look. "Did you see who's here?" she hissed.

"Ow, Grace, that hurts," I protested and yanked my arm away. "Who?"

"Evelyn Hitchens," Grace said, sneering, "I can't believe she had the nerve to show up."

"Well, nerve isn't something she lacks," I said sarcastically, massaging my arm. I scanned the crowd but didn't see Evelyn.

Grace snorted. "Nothing but a puppy mill. That's what she is," she proclaimed.

I shrugged. "Maybe so." I had no proof that Evelyn ran a puppy mill, where dogs are bred indiscriminately and puppies sold for profit, without concern for their health or well-being. But I knew she had proven herself a disagreeable woman at the spokesdog tryouts—loud, pushy, and insulting to the other dogs and their owners.

"The way she showed her ass, pardon my French, at that last audition was..." Grace suddenly stopped talking. She abruptly turned her head

Susan Waller Miccio

toward the parking lot. “What the hell’s going on over there?” she demanded loudly.

Everyone in earshot turned to the direction of her stare to see Peg running flat out across the dead winter grass toward the parking lot. She disappeared behind a Three Guys Productions vans.

Nothing could make Peg move that fast except the final run in a national dog agility championship or a dog in danger. I thrust the coffee cup at Grace and sprinted for the van. I could hear Peg sobbing. My heart choking me, I rounded the van to find her on her knees. Her body shielding and restraining him, Teke lay on the ground next to the van’s rear wheel.

“Get a vet! Get a vet!” she screamed at the gawkers.

Chapter Two

I was still shaken hours later when I turned into the gravel and sand lane to Swann's Nest. No, that's not some realtor's corny name for a suburban development. My name is Abigail Forrest Swann—Abby for short. My people have lived on this land in the little state of Delaware for a couple hundred years, and Swann's Nest is the house my ancestors built here. The house is situated on a slight rise on a V of land between Swann Creek and Cattail Branch, a rivulet that feeds the creek. About a mile downstream, Swann Creek flows into the Murderkill River 15 miles upstream from where the river slides gently into the Delaware Bay.

Every time I drive up the lane as it winds along the course of Cattail Branch, I love to catch that first glimpse of the Nest in the clearing. In 1785, Daniel Swann built the main two-story and attic, three-bay Georgian house on 250 acres he bought during the land turnovers following the Revolution. Constructed of brick laid in the Flemish bond pattern, a decorative design called a belt course encircles the structure between the first and second stories. Beneath the roofline, a richly carved cornice crowns the walls.

My ancestor had attached his elegant house to one end of an earlier, humbler dwelling on the site. The kitchen of the older two-room, frame structure, now modernized, remains my kitchen, while the larger room in the old wing is my all-purpose room that architects like to call the great room. Above the great room is the original bedroom under the eaves, its one dormer window looking toward the creek, accessed by a narrow, steep, closed stair winding around the fireplace,

The Nest sits on a small lawn surrounded by woods. A large carriage house and diverse small outbuildings, also constructed of brick and dating from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, are scattered around the clearing.

Long before the first Daniel bought the land, an enterprising Swedish colonist, whose heirs would eventually build the old frame house, received the land in a grant from the Duke of York. This fellow had promptly dammed up the meandering woodland creek to create a millpond to power a grist mill. By Daniel's time, the 17th century mill

had fallen down, but Daniel rebuilt it to grind corn and wheat for the new republic's farmers. He later added a sawmill to cut the oak and pine in the surrounding forests into building lumber. The mills are long gone, along with the vast tracts of forest that fed them, but serene Swann Pond is still there. A walk of a few hundred yards through the woods up creek from the house, the Pond is visible from the Nest's second story windows on the west side.

This is where I grew up and where I returned after my father, one of many Daniel namesakes in the family, died two years ago last January. When I left Delmarva for college, I stayed away for years. Maybe growing up in an old house surrounded by antiques steered me to study decorative arts. But it was a freshman course in Asian art that launched me toward what I thought would be a scholarly career in some university's Art department or perhaps a curatorship in some museum's Asian department. Then, while I was in graduate school, I met Brian.

A dealer of Japanese objects from Seattle, Brian Forrest was knowledgeable and urbane. He argued persuasively that I could be far more successful as an entrepreneur than a scholar. I was impressed with his business sense and not a little attracted by his tall, blond good looks. When he offered me an opportunity to be his East Coast partner, I was thrilled. Eventually, he offered me his name, too. I took it. Big mistake.

I spent my post-college years in D.C. —Washington that is—busily growing my business, “Abigail Swann, Asian Antiquities” which eventually became “Abigail Forrest-Swann, Asian Antiquities.” Brian may have been a rat, but he was a smart rat. The business was successful. Much as I would have liked to drop the Forrest after the divorce, I was already well-known to the trade by that name. So, I compromised and dropped the hyphen instead.

After I inherited the Nest, I'd commuted back and forth to D.C., spending the weekdays in the city and most weekends at the Nest. But the summertime trip, along with millions of other city-dwellers, became unbearable. I spent hundreds of hours of my life in a line of traffic, inhaling exhaust fumes, as I crept eastbound on U.S. 50 toward the toll booths at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Once over the Bridge, I risked life and limb dodging crazed urbanites in their headlong rush for the beach until, at last, I turned off on the peaceful back roads leading to my Nest.

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It eventually dawned on me why they charge a toll only on the eastbound span of the Bridge; only a fool would go the other way. So, I moved back home for good. That was a year ago. Once settled back at the Nest, the tension of city life gradually let go. I soon felt like I'd never left home and, moreover, I never wanted to leave again.

Though too petite to see out the car window, Dawa and Senge knew they were home. Dawa raised herself to a sit. Beside her, Senge began to squirm and whine. It didn't take canine psychics to figure it out. The familiar crunch of gravel under the tires would tip off even an olfactory-impaired human. Still, the Tibbies could no doubt smell the tulip poplars, hollies, sweet gums, and loblolly pines in the woods, the freshwater branch to the right and, finally, the musty old brick of the Nest—each a signpost to noses a thousand times more sensitive than mine.

Senge was already standing at the kitchen door, woofing impatiently, as Dawa and I crossed from the former carriage house, now part garage and part workshop, to the kitchen wing. I could hear the phone ringing as I turned the key.

"Abby?" asked Peg, as if the Tibbies would answer the phone. Not that they couldn't, it's just that they wouldn't bother.

"How's Teke?" I replied.

"He'll be OK. Bruised up some. Nothing broken, nothing bleeding, nothing internal. I just got home from Doc Twilley's," Peg said in one breath and then paused. "I just can't figure out what happened. He was running across the parking lot when I saw the Three Guys van back up and knock him down. How did he get out of the crate and out of the RV?"

"Well..." I hesitated, wondering whether I should mention the suspicion that had grown in my mind on the drive home. "When I got there, the door to the rig was standing wide open and the crate was unlatched."

"What? I *know* I latched his crate," she said, punching out the word 'know.'

My mind skipped back to the scene earlier that day. When Peg had yelled for a vet, Jackie Lynch had shown up within a few seconds.

While she examined Teke, I had rushed to the RV, where I'd left Senge and Dawa on Peg's bed. I was terrified that they, too, were running loose.

Miraculously, the two Tibbies were standing just inside the RV's open door. Gasping more from terror than from my sprint, I'd knelt and hugged them tightly while they licked my ears. When I leaned back to look lovingly at them, their wrinkly foreheads told me that both were clearly upset. Dawa trembled. Hugging them one more time, I'd noticed the door to Teke's crate was also open. I remember being puzzled, but there had been no time to think about it. I had to get back to Peg and Teke.

Kissing the Tibbies' heads, I stood up to leave but, as I turned to the door, I'd felt the soft but firm touch of a Dawa's petite paw on my calf. But when I looked down, she was staring not at me but at Teke's crate. She stepped toward it, then looked up at me and back to the crate. Then, she stretched forward to sniff something on the floor in front of the crate. Bending over, I picked up and pocketed what Dawa had shown me and, carefully latching the RV door behind me, I ran back to where Dr. Lynch and Peg still knelt over Teke.

Dr. Lynch had said Teke didn't appear to be badly hurt but she wanted to get x-rays. While she and Peg were loading him in the vet's Jeep for the trip to the clinic, I retrieved the contents of my pocket and examined them in my palm. It was three pieces of dried liver.

"How the hell did the crate get unlatched?"

"Huh? I'm sorry. What'd you say?" I asked, momentarily confused. I didn't wait for her answer. "Peg, did you know Evelyn Hitchens was there today?"

"You're kidding," Peg said with a snort.

"I didn't see her, but Grace told me she was there."

"I can't stand that Hitchens woman," Peg said, "She treats her dogs awful."

"Mmmm," I said noncommittally. Peg had known Evelyn Hitchens for all the years I'd lived in the city. All I knew about her was that her behavior during the spokesdog competition showed her to be a person who cared more about herself than her dogs.

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Dawa delicately touched my calf with her paw. I looked down. She was motionless, her deep brown eyes glittering.

“What is it, little girl?” I asked, puzzled.

“Abby? You there?” Peg said, drawing my attention away from Dawa. “Could you watch Teke tomorrow morning? Dr. Lynch said he’ll probably be stiff and sore for a day or so, so Steve called off filming for the day. But I need to go back over to St. Michaels to pick up the RV. I don’t want to drag Teke over there and I don’t want to leave him home alone either,” she explained, needlessly. By now, she should know that the Tibbies and I love Teke. No explanations required.

“Oh, sure, no problem. Bring him over,” I said. “How’d you get home yesterday, Peg?”

“Dr. Lynch drove us home after she’d finished examining Teke. I offered to call somebody to come get me, but she insisted. She seems real nice. I’m so glad she was there.” She paused. “I just don’t understand how Teke got out of his crate.”

While Peg said good night, I glanced down again. Dawa was still staring at me with magic eyes. Senge whined and scratched at the pantry door.

“OK, you guys, I get the message. Dinner time.”

“I love your new sign, Abby,” Peg said as she motioned Teke through the kitchen door the next morning. Teke sauntered to his bed in the corner, a large plaid pillow stuffed with cedar shavings, while Senge bounced around him and Dawa gently sniffed his injured leg.

My new sign, at the end of the lane, proclaimed that Abigail Forrest Swann—Asian Antiquities—formerly of the Nation’s Capital was now operating from a Delaware backwater. Well, almost operating. Most of my inventory was still boxed up in the carriage house, but soon it would be en route to the space I’d leased in an antiques mall in Rehoboth Beach, a resort community on the ocean.

Enticed by Delaware’s tax-free shopping, tourists and retirees flocked to the shops and malls along the resort coast. I’d decided to tap that market. Hopefully, my loyal and well-heeled clientele from the city would continue to seek me out as well. They could also find me on the internet, where my web site would soon be up. I only hoped to make

enough income to pay the upkeep on the Nest. Two-hundred-year-old houses are like a drain down which to pour your money.

“Breakfast?” I asked as I opened a package of scrapple, deftly removing and flicking the nutrition statement into the trash without looking at the fat content. Why torture myself?

“No thanks. I ate,” said my svelte friend, “Tea would be good though. I’ll get it.”

“So, how’s Teke doing?” I asked while slicing a slab of scrapple.

“A little depressed. But he’s lucky not to have been hurt worse.” She hit the button on the microwave.

“All that muscling protected him,” I remarked and slid the slab into the frying pan. Peg nodded in agreement and took her mug of hot water out of the microwave.

As an urban sophisticate, I would have turned up my nose at the suggestion of eating scrapple. However, while grocery shopping soon after I moved home, a hunk of the gray meat with the unfortunate name called to me from the refrigerator case. I succumbed and took it home. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven when I bit into that scrapple sandwich, the first since childhood. Now I rationed myself one sandwich made of the local delicacy—a term I use facetiously—per week.

“Well, I’ll take him for a walk around the pond later on. He’ll like that and it’ll keep him limber.”

She nodded again and plopped into a chair at the kitchen table, dunking her Earl Grey bag and watching me as I moved a box of carefully packed 19th century Imari dishes to one side of the table. While she contemplated the color of the tea, I lifted a dish with a lovely chrysanthemum pattern from the box.

“What are you thinking, Peg?” I asked as I automatically ran my hands over the dish, in search of tiny, invisible imperfections best detected by touch.

“I’m thinking somebody went in my RV and let him out.”

Dawa touched the back of my calf. I reached down and scratched her head. I’m well-trained.

“I think you may be right about that,” I said, carefully placing the Imari dish on the kitchen Hoosier and taking out another encased in its protective wrapping. “Peg, you don’t use liver on Teke, do you?”

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Understanding that I was referring to the small bits of liver some dog trainers use as an incentive and reward, she shook her head ‘no,’ still staring into her mug. “Teke has never been food-motivated,” she said, “The only reward he wants is his toy *du jour*.”

“I didn’t think so,” I said, removing the bubble wrap from the dish and placing it gently next to its companion on the Hoosier. I reached into my jeans pocket and dropped the three pieces of desiccated liver onto the table. “I found that bait right outside his crate when I ran back to check on the Tibbies.”

She stared at the liver.

“I think somebody’s trying to hurt Teke, Peg.”

She nodded.

Chapter Three

There's a saying among fanciers of the Tibetan Spaniel that Tibbies are like potato chips—you can't have just one. It appears to be a fact. "Only" Tibbies are a rarity. Most people who discover this uncommon breed soon find themselves with a pair, a trio and so on. In fact, one day while surfing the net for information about Tibbies, I discovered that a special collective noun, evocative of their personality, has been coined for Tibbies. Lions live in a pride, whales in a pod, geese in a gaggle, and Tibbies in an attitude.

Everyday, my attitude and I head down to Swann's Pond. It's only a short stroll through the fenced woods surrounding the Nest down to Cattail Branch, over the footbridge, and through the piney grove to the south gate. Then we take the farm lane that skirts an adjacent field out to Swann's Pond Road. Across the road, we're on park land. A short cut through the state-owned woods brings us to a path encircling the pond. Oh well, I guess it does sound complicated but it's really only a twenty-minute stroll.

In the 1950's and 60's, Delaware acquired a number of privately-owned ponds and made them into state-run fishing areas. This suited my parsimonious grandfather, Poppop Benjamin, just fine. He never stopped complaining about the cost of maintaining Swann's Pond. The state's offer was a good deal for my family. Besides stocking the pond with game fish, the state repaired the deteriorating mill dam, replaced the bridge over the Creek, cleared the underbrush, and improved the woodland. Eventually, they also cleared a walking trail around the pond, paved a small parking lot and added a boat ramp and picnic area. In summer, they mow the grass and maintain a portable toilet on site. So, now the Swanns have the use of the pond without the headaches of owning it.

After Peg left for St. Michaels and I polished off my scrapple sandwich, my attitude and I headed for the Pond. I let the dogs run free in the fenced woods between the house and the gate. Though Teke wanted to hang back at first, Tibbies do not take "no" for an answer. With Senge attached to an ear and Dawa tugging at his tail, they soon

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propelled him into a suitably energetic pace and then, leaving him behind, dashed ahead.

A Tibbie rarely travels in a straight line willingly. Instead, they “jink” with rapid fire changes in direction—forward, then reverse, then flank—always twirling, charging and retreating. Today was no exception. Teke did not join in the jinking but trotted along sedately while I brought up the rear.

At the gate, the dogs panted patiently while I attached their leads. As we turned down the farm lane toward the Pond, the ill-mannered Tibbies trotted ahead, as their independent natures demand, while the well-trained Teke walked at my heel. The sun was still low in the eastern sky, pinking the low scudding clouds. March had been windy but mild and dry so far. Today’s calm was a relief.

The farmer who leased the land, Tim West, had taken advantage of the good weather. Lime lay on the field like a dusting of snow. I assumed Tim would plow soon and wondered what he planned to plant in this field this year. I hoped it wouldn’t be boring soybeans. Corn makes a prettier field, and I love to listen to it whisper while it grows.

After a few token barks at the cows and calves in the distant pasture, we crossed Swann’s Pond Road, and the Tibbies followed the footpath I’d worn through the woods around the pond. We descended the slope to the trail at pond’s edge.

I use the term “slope” advisedly. Shortly after moving home to the Nest, I was given directions to a get-together at someone’s house. Told to follow a certain road up a hill and turn into the driveway at the top of the hill, I traveled the entire length of the road, back and forth, half a dozen times, passing several driveways but no “hill” of any description. I then saw another car filled with people I recognized as fellow guests, select and turn into a driveway. I have since learned to refine my eyesight to identify any elevation, even as little as one foot, as a “hill.”

Even ponds are shallow in such flat country. Though a pretty pond, Swann’s depth is only six or seven feet with a nine-foot trench at its center. On this breezeless morning, the pond’s glassy surface was relatively deserted. I spotted one Tracker deep in a cove, its angler standing at the bow trolling the shoreline for bass. While the dogs sniffed a rotting log, I paused to watch the fisherman cast into the lily pads.

He's hunting a lunker, a female fat with eggs, fanning her nest, I thought. The dogs concluded their investigation and we left the cove.

A green canoe passed in the opposite direction, only the dip of the paddles marking its passage. Songbirds were calling high up in the pines. I clutched at my chest but was irritated to discover I'd left my binoculars hanging by the back door instead of around my neck. When we came to the bridge over the creek where it enters the pond, I told the dogs to "sit," which they did, panting happily. I leaned against the railing with my eyes closed, face lifted to the sun. A walker startled me out of my daydream with a "cute dogs" remark. I murmured thanks and we continued on our circuit.

Teke seemed to be walking more comfortably by the time we returned to the Nest. He'd even pricked his ears and grown still when he spotted some Canada geese, year-round residents of the pond site, foraging near the picnic tables. I was pleased that his spirits seemed to have brightened.

Back home, a cup of tea at my hand, I settled down in the dining room where some pieces that I'd kept in storage were arrayed on dining table, still in their boxes. I was looking forward to spending the morning unpacking and studying them.

Dawa and Senge took up positions in the deep window seat gazing out over the yard. In Tibet, Tibbies were watch dogs. Patrolling the walls of monasteries and rooftops of the homes of the well-off, they alerted the human inhabitants and giant Tibetan Mastiffs below to the approach of strangers. To this day, all Tibbies love to climb to the highest possible point and watch for intruders. Bred for an altogether different purpose, Teke was content to leave the watch-dogging to the Tibbies. He circled and settled on the hearth.

Dawa trilled and Senge growled at something they saw outside. I pushed back my chair and joined them at the window, peering through the old, wavy glass.

"That's just our geese," I said to the Tibs, scratching their ears. The pair of Canada geese stops by every morning to see what the songbirds have left behind on the ground under the feeder. They hang around all year, apparently feeling no need to migrate with other Canadas, in the relative comfort of the vicinity of Swann's. I assume they are a bonded pair, a married couple so to speak, since I have never seen them apart,

and they produce a quantity of goslings every year. Senge grunted in reply, sighed and dropped his chin onto the window stool. Dawa, less tolerant of other creatures on her turf, whether furred or feathered, continued to peer fiercely at the geese.

I returned to the dining table where I powered up my laptop and dislodged an object from its foam peanuts. "Ah." I exhaled the word, not even realizing I'd been holding my breath, as a lovely bamboo okimono emerged from a covering of thick brown paper. The reclining puppy with its drop ears and chubby cheeks just fit my cupped palm. I remembered vaguely hearing another dealer of orientalia say that these puppies were guardians placed beside the beds of Japanese children to keep away whatever evil lurked in the night.

This was the first puppy okimono I had ever acquired. I observed it closely as is my habit by training and inclination. It seemed in excellent condition with only one or two mild imperfections in the caramel-colored polish of its surface. When I turned it over, I saw the signature cartouche on a forepaw but did not recognize it. Mentally recording the ideogram, I consulted a couple reference books from the floor-to-ceiling bookcases at either side of the fireplace but could not find the artist's name.

I tapped some notes about the object into my laptop while I contemplated what price to ask for it. A few minutes later, I was still studying it, forming a theory about its age, when Dawa patted my calf.

"What do you think of this, Dawa?" I asked, placing the okimono on the carpet. She crouched in front of the puppy. Gently placing a forepaw on either side of it, she curled her slippers, the long hair that grows from a Tibbie's toes, around it. She held it tightly while she sniffed. I had no fear she'd cause any damage. She looked up and smiled by stretching her lip away from her lower teeth, the way Tibbies do. I nodded.

"I think you're right, little Moon," I said to her, my eyes resting lovingly on her for a moment. Sometimes I called her Moon, which is what Dawa means in Tibetan. I'd named her that because of her creamy white coat with caramel-colored patches, like a late summer man-in-the-moon. Senge, ever jealous, ran over to sniff the okimono, too. I'd called him Senge, which means Lion, because I'd read that Tibetans bred their small dogs in the image of Buddha's spirit-lion. In Buddhist imagery,

the lion following in the Buddha's footsteps symbolizes the triumph of peace over violence. When Senge was a puppy, he'd been at my heels every moment. But Senge was not the least bit leonine in his personality. On the contrary, he was a huggy bear.

"Yes, definitely late Edo period, 19th century." Rescuing the okimono from Senge's curious less-gentle nose, I placed it on the fireplace mantel next to a pillow vase bearing the hand-painted image of a Tibbie. Since Dawa and Senge had come into my life, I became increasingly unwilling to part with objects that look like Tibbies or, for that matter, most any dog. When I run across them in my work, they inevitably end up on a mantel or library table or bookcase somewhere in Swann's Nest. The Nest has become a temple to dogs.

"It's probably supposed to be an Akita or some other Japanese breed but it sure looks like a Tibbie puppy, doesn't it? I think it's a keeper." It would be fun to just deal caniniana, I mused as I returned to my work, assuming I could ever find any doggy objects that weren't "keepers."

Doubtless thinking that I don't have enough sporting dog prints on the walls, Teke hoisted himself to a stand and sauntered to my side where he plopped beside my feet. I scratched his head until he seemed asleep and then went back to work.

Around three o'clock, Peg stopped by to pick up Teke. The Three Guys people wanted him back at St. Michaels in the morning to shoot the delayed retrieving scenes. To make sure Teke was up to the repetitive swims on the river as well as the rest of the shooting schedule, she had made an appointment with Doc Twilley to check him over. She rattled off the remainder of the shoots: Friday--on the Boardwalk in Rehoboth Beach Delaware. Monday--an amusement park in Ocean City Maryland. Tuesday--dolphin-watching at Cape Henlopen State Park. Wednesday--wild ponies at Assateague National Seashore in Virginia. Thursday--NASCAR™ at Dover International Speedway and a C-5 Galaxy at Dover Air Force Base, both in Dover Delaware.

As I planned to deliver some stock to my new "shop" in the antiques mall in Rehoboth Beach on Friday, we agreed to meet on the Boardwalk and, afterwards, make a short run to Lewes for the annual Ladies Shrimp Feast at the fire hall. As the limited number of tickets to the popular get-

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together sold out a year in advance, we'd been planning this outing for over a year.

I stood in the yard until Peg and Teke disappeared around the curve in the lane, headed for Doc Twilley's, on the other side of Swann's Pond about three miles away. Turning back to the house, I paused with my hand on handle of the old pump by the kitchen door. I pulled it up. It emitted a hollow sucking wheeze. I pushed down hard, and the spout coughed air. Was what had happened to Teke just a stupid prank or had someone deliberately tried to hurt him? Did Evelyn Hitchens do it to get back at Peg because Teke won over her dog? Would she do it again?

Dognapping and murder solved by clever dogs with mystical touch.

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