

Laurie

Chocolate

It all started with chocolate, well, the ever increasing cost of it to be precise.

Arabella Huntington had been searching for a while now, all through the house, the shambles still in the garage and out onto the quiet street but there was no sign of him anywhere. She had called and called but, he had never paid heed to his name being called anyway. She had to face it, Mr. Tibbet had disappeared. Not surprising really, she'd only just moved into the house, reluctantly driven back to her small hometown, the city is just too damn expensive these days, and her, an old meagre widow with no extra income. But Mr. Tibbet didn't care, he wasn't happy here and this was the third time in a week he'd run off. Mr. Tibbet was her cat, perhaps her favourite of all time but that was a big call. Arabella was a cat person, but just one or two at a time. Not like the nutty lady over the back fence, she seemed to have hundreds of them. Arabella shuddered, she hoped and prayed Mr. Tibbet hadn't got himself involved with that motley collection of delinquent felines. She was sure Mr. Tibbet had better taste, he seemed cultivated and debonair, but do cats have taste, she worried. She had already decided she was never going anywhere near her back fence. If he was over there, lost in that yard of strange weeds, he would just have to get himself home.

Reluctantly she walked in the direction of the back fence and at the last possible moment changed direction and stole through the garage door and started unpacking one of the many multitudes of boxes still to be unpacked from the move. Like all her other serious boxes, it was full of ceramics, but not just any ceramics, it had to be ceramic owls. She plucked the top one from inside the box. She felt the thrill run up her back as she carefully removed the newspaper wrapping. It never failed. After exposing the owl she stared at its glistening orb like eyes and wondered. "Now let me see. Where will I put you?" Wrapped in thought she left the shed.

The bent sticklike figure leaning over her back fence startled her. "Hello," it squawked while holding a scruffy cat out at arm's length. "This yours?"

"Mr. Tibbet?" Arabella inquired softly. "What have you been up to?"

Mr. Tibbet looked a little ragged, frayed around the edges, unkempt but just so slightly roguish.

"What hasn't he," laughed the figure devilishly. "I'm Bethyl Crank and you must be Annabella."

"Arabella"

"Sorry, Arabella." And after a moment's thought. "Not Arabella Huntington."

"The same."

Didn't you move years ago, pack up and move your whole studio into the city. It was in all the papers"

Arabella looked around wistfully. "Yes, that's me, didn't work out as well as I hoped. Too much competition from the big established studios and they really didn't want to help some small time independent studio from the country."

Bethyl smiled sympathetically but remained silent.

"Besides, I think I was spoiled with Candy, you remember Candy?"

"Oh yes," Bethyl replied enthusiastically. "Everybody knows Candy. What a great little dancer."

"Better than great," Arabella sighed. "She could have become the next Pavlova."

"By the way she's back in town you know, she works as a sales assistant at the swankiest jeweller's shop in town."

"Really does she now. It's a small world."

"Real exclusive clientele they even have a doorman"

"Now that is upmarket"

"She doesn't look a day older than the day she left but apparently she doesn't dance anymore."

"I'm not surprised."

"Why? What happened?"

"It was the night of her big debut," Arabella began sadly. "She looked gorgeous but the moment before she was to sweep majestically onto stage and amaze the audience she tripped over a stray cat and broke her leg."

"Really, the poor thing."

Bethyl and Arabella shared a silent moment for such a waste. Nobody likes to see talent so cruelly cut down.

"She was never the same after that, prissy thing. Even after all the rehabilitation and therapy she still couldn't get back on the horse. In fact it was such a traumatic experience that now, when she's completely stressed, she dons a tutu and starts dancing."

"Really," Bethyl blurted. "Now that's just odd."

"Yes well," Arabella replied guardedly looking over Bethyl's shoulder at Bethyl's carefully cultivated garden beds full of weeds and cats. "Every-one is a little odd. But I must admit I'm surprised she can hold down a job."

"Yes," Bethyl replied thinking. "Me too." She produced a handful of small squares of creamy chocolate from the pocket of her dreary dress.

"Want a piece?" she inquired offering her hand.

"Love one," Arabella replied licking her lips and delicately selecting a nice fat one. "You and I are going to get along fine."

"Hey, this is really really good chocolate," Arabella praised while savouring the delicious rich flavour.

"Oh yes," Bethyl thoroughly agreed. "Very good chocolate but unfortunately, hideously expensive."

There was a tinkle of her door bell. "Who can that be?" Bethyl wondered aloud clearly perplexed. "I never get visitors." "Well, gotta go," she added for Arabella's sake. "Nice meeting you."

It all starts with chocolate and the ever increasing price of it.

Fred was serious, really deadly serious. "I don't like thieves Busker," he spat. It was only when the top of the busker's little finger went sailing through the air and he felt the onrush of pain did he realise how serious Fred was. "One down, three to go," Fred said humourlessly as he applied his pliers to the next finger. Naturally, the busker screamed. Naturally Fred grinned. Naturally the pliers tightened. "That ought to teach you to keep your slippery fingers out of my business." Snip, snip, snip.

"Now get out of my sight," Fred warned with a menacing wave of the bloody pliers. "You got six months. In six months' time if you don't have my money friend I'll come looking and." He squeezed the pliers for emphasis and spat, "You got four more on the other hand and that will make life pretty difficult for a petty thief who relies on sleight of hand for his earnings."

Fred roughly wrapped the busker's bloody hand in a dirty rag and steered him to the door. With a sharp shove in the back the busker soon found himself outside.

"And don't try to run friend, cos I'll find you and when I do. Fred's reptile eyes were calculating and soulless. "I've got eyes and ears everywhere. I know it all and I will find you." The door slammed and Fred, the blunt instrument, was gone.

That was four months ago and still the tips of his fingers tingled. He massaged them gently and reluctantly pressed the doorbell again. He could hear her slowly threading her way through the house, chatting to herself or some-one else. Maybe she was talking to him, the dead husband she never had. The whole family knew she was nuts but she didn't cause problems so no-one really cared, except for him. This crazy old lady had always been his favourite aunt and she had loved him like a son. But that was twenty-five years and a lifetime of reckless lawless desperation ago. He needed her now, she was his last hope and he had nowhere else to run. He was as nervous now as when he last saw her as a cocky nineteen year old.

"Who's there?" trilled her nervous voice as she peered through the spyhole.

"It's me Auntie Bethyl," he replied placing himself in front of her view. "You remember me?"

The silence waiting for recognition was long but he waited. He had little choice.

"Oh my lord," finally filtered through the door. "After all these years."

He heard the jangle of chains and locks being turned. It was music, coming home music.

Inside it was solid, cats and cat's stuff everywhere. Clearly she was still as much off her rocker as she always was. He smiled inside. This was good. He doubted even Fred would look for him here, crazy cat loving aunt hiding him, unlikely.

"How's it been?" he asked stirring up conversation.

"What? The last twenty odd years," she replied a little miffed. "Fine since you asked."

"Sorry," he got the message. "I should have dropped in more often."

"Too damn right," she chastised. "Mind you, you'd be the only one. It's been just me and Charlie out here for years."

"Charlie?" he inquired then remembered. "Oh that Charlie."

Charlie was her imaginary dead husband she never had.

"Well, I'm here now," he offered helpfully. "It can be just you and me, oh, and Charlie of course."

"Want a cuppa?" Bethyl asked as she moved into the house.

"Love one," he replied as he found himself a seat in the lounge.

Through a window he could see into the backyard. All the garden beds were full of weeds, one particular weed.

"Oh my God," he thought. "As a joke I gave her a plant year's ago. I wonder if she knows what it is. I spose the cops wouldn't ever to think to look here." He laughed to himself. "I might have to help her pull these up. Too bad I'm not into that anymore."

Bethyl returned with two tea cups on a tray with a handful of chocolate squares scattered around to keep them company. He took his cup and a couple of the tasty looking squares.

"Now young man," Bethyl ordered. "What have you been up to?"

Slowly he chewed on of the squares, savouring the flavour swirling his tongue. "MMMM. These are delicious."

"Oh yes," Bethyl thoroughly agreed. "Very good chocolate but unfortunately, hideous expensive."

He could feel the bald accusation of twenty years of stupid mistakes and terrible judgements weighing on his chest and he decided now was the time to lift them. To her ever widening eyes he told her all, finishing with Fred and how he lost his fingers, and she listened and listened.

It all starts with chocolate or the ever increasing cost of it.

The door rang its elegant chime. Candy looked up fearfully from under the counter. She hoped it wasn't the busker who for some strange reason had taken up residence outside the shop entrance. He had a nice voice but seemed to be pretending to play the ukulele as from here it appeared to be stringless. She hoped he would move along soon or she might ask Richard the doorman to assist him move. The busker looked scruffy and there was something not quite right about him. Once upon a time that would have been enough, the tutu would have come out and she would have embarrassed herself once more, but she was more resilient now, tougher,

and she as mighty proud of it. "It would take more than one oddball busker to set her off," she assured herself. However, the tutu was still in her handbag, right there within hands reach, just in case. She hadn't had to use it for a long time but it was there, her safety net.

In through the door straggled two grey old ladies. One seemed immersed in cats, an animal Candy disliked intensely, and the other seemed oddly familiar. The cats bothered Candy and her fingers started to flex. She deliberately calmed herself with several deep long breaths. One after the other, inhale, pause, exhale, pause. Inhale, pause, exhale, pause. It was working to some degree it was working

The cat lady busied herself with scurrying about the displays, fingering this, fingering that, all the while chatting to herself. "Crazy, just crazy," Candy thought, her fingers flexing and breathing, breathing. The other lady, prim and proper, looked around obviously displeased. "Why doesn't Richard throw them out." She flicked a glance over to where he stood, arched her eyebrows and inclined her head. He shrugged his shoulders and played it down.

Cat lady kept patrolling the display cases as prim lady approached the counter. "Candy," she exclaimed loudly. "It can't be, Candy"

"My god. It is you."

Do I know you?" Candy inquired defensively.

"You must remember me," demanded the prim lady. "It's me Arabella Huntington. your ballet teacher. Surely you remember me."

Candy had desperately hoped not but slowly and surely she did. All her therapy was eroding. Her fingers twitched madly. "First the odd busker, then crazy cat woman, now this. Breath, breath, breath." It wasn't working. She could feel herself slipping.

Arabella's mouth was moving but Candy couldn't hear the words. She was drifting. She did notice the busker slip into the shop and start to argue with Richard. Suddenly cat woman spied Candy and just as quickly she and Arabella were at each other, yelling, screaming. The busker was barging about with Richard, neither was winning so both must be losing. Arabella and the cat woman raised old shaking fists and swore. They flung their frail frames at each other. Richard disentangled from the busker to aid the two old women. Every-one was yelling, flinging accusations. "Ballet, my pupil, not yours mine, don't chuck me out, I've got rights, Sir, please leave the premises, you'll force me to call the police, don't you threaten me." The noise was deafening.

In the midst of the chaos Candy suddenly found herself dancing. She'd slipped into her tutu and was off, pirouetting across the floor, oblivious to her surroundings. Richard immediately dropped what he was doing and went to her aid. Cat woman, Arabella and the busker sorted themselves out best they could and as a small untidy rowdy group left the shop. The busker had his hands in his pockets and a tight grin curled his lip.

“Would you like a piece of chocolate?” Bethyl asked her friends as she pulled a couple of pieces from her pocket. The cats were still purring and crawling all around her.

“Yes please,” they replied. “This chocolate is wonderful.”

“Oh yes,” Bethyl thoroughly agreed. “Very good chocolate but unfortunately, hideously expensive.”

Fred was happy with the busker’s haul, happy enough to let him keep his fingers at least.

The busker retained his fingers and like all thieves skimmed some off the top of his haul so he had some capital to continue on with. The dope plants entered an enterprising mind but that plan had its own set of problems.

Candy recovered, just.

One day, a very very large parcel arrived for Bethyl Crank. She wondered what it was as she tore off the wrapping.

“Wow,” she thought.

She took the parcel out the back yard, past her weeds to the back fence.

“Arabella,” she yelled. Arabella was in the garage, sorting owls. Owl in hand, she sauntered out to the back fence.

“Want some chocolate?” Bethyl asked showing Arabella the parcel contents.

“Wow,” she breathed her hand deep in the contents of the parcel.

“MMM,” she slurped as the delicious chocolate coated her mouth. “This is great chocolate.

“Oh yes,” Bethyl thoroughly agreed. “Very good chocolate but unfortunately, hideously expensive.”

It all ends with chocolate or the rising cost of it.