



Some old dogs can
learn new tricks.

BARK TWICE FOR MURDER

John Lekich



WAFFLES WITH A SIDE OF MURDER?

When Harry starts making food for unhoused people, he meets and befriends Stanley, an excellent cook with only two possessions: a precious recipe binder and a grumpy dog named Waffles. Then Stanley turns up dead and his treasured recipe book is gone. Harry is shocked—who would do such a thing?

That is exactly what Waffles wants to find out. Yes, Waffles, the dog that is now talking to Harry and only Harry. In his past life, Waffles was a detective and Stanley's friend before he too was murdered.

Waffles wants to follow the crumbs and piece together Stanley's murder, but he can't do it without Harry. Will this souped-up duo be able to take down a heaping serving of criminal characters, or will they be the next dish on the murderer's menu?

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Bark Twice for Murder

Author: John Lekich

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In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, fourteen-year-old Harry pairs up with a talking dog to solve the mystery of their friend Stanley's murder.

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KEY SELLING POINTS

- Fourteen-year-old Harry teams up with a jaded detective who has been reincarnated into a dog, in this entertaining food-filled mystery.
- The story has humor and hijinks as well as real jeopardy, suspense and a twisty plot that will challenge and captivate readers.
- The protagonist is an avid chef and food plays an important role in the story and the way the character processes grief.
- Includes an exploration of homelessness, grief and mental illness.
- John Lekich is an award-winning journalist and a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award.
- Enhanced features (dyslexia-friendly font, cream paper, larger trim size) to increase reading accessibility for dyslexic and other striving readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alex Whitehouse-Hayward

JOHN LEKICH is an award-winning journalist, essayist, film critic and author. He has written several critically acclaimed novels for young adult readers, including *The Prisoner of Snowflake Falls*, *Murder at the Hotel Hopeless* and *The Losers' Club*, which drew on John's personal experience with cerebral palsy, and was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award. His YA fiction has been recognized by organizations including The Young Adult Library Services Association and The Canadian Library Association. John lives in Vancouver.

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Summary: In this high-interest accessible novel for middle-grade readers, fourteen-year-old Harry pairs up with a talking dog to solve the mystery of their friend Stanley's murder.

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For my brother, Bill, as promised.

Chapter One

My name is Harry. I'm fourteen years old, and I love to cook. In fact, I love to cook a bit too much. I live with my grandmother, Elinor. She thinks I cook so much because I'm lonely. Elinor says the only friend I have close to my own age is her kitchen stove.

Sometimes I think my grandmother's right about me being lonely. This makes me worry. Which makes me cook even more. Before you know it, I've made

five whole trays of lasagna. Our basement freezer is so full, it's starting to groan in the dark.

My therapist's name is Dr. Sherman. Whenever we have an appointment, I always bring him the previous night's leftovers. Dr. Sherman is very pale and can use the nourishment. At first I couldn't figure out why he eats so fast. I thought maybe it was just to make me feel better. But then he started to keep a knife and fork in his desk drawer. Along with his own special napkin.

It is a pleasure to watch Dr. Sherman eat. He likes French food best. So for our last therapy session, I made him a dish called quiche Lorraine. It's a ham-and-cheese pie that is popular in France. When he took a bite, his cheeks got all rosy. "You made the crust from scratch, Harry?" he asked. Dr. Sherman is always noticing things like that.

When Dr. Sherman isn't eating, we do all sorts of therapeutic things. Dr. Sherman says I should learn to share my feelings about the death of my

parents. This is very hard for me to do, even with my grandmother. He once asked: “Have you considered getting a pet? A dog or a cat? Some people like to talk to their pets. They find it very comforting.”

I couldn’t imagine talking to a cat or a dog about anything important. For one thing, they can’t talk back. On the other hand, I know I should be more open with my feelings. Dr. Sherman says that’s a better choice than cooking three roast chickens at a time.

“Our goal is for you to cook *reasonably*, Harry. There is a pattern in your culinary behavior. When you are sad or depressed, you *overcook*. Overcooking helps you cope with your feelings of loss. But you must remember that your grandmother’s house is not a cafeteria.”

A couple of weeks ago, Elinor left a note on our fridge. It read *Dear Dr. Sherman: Help! My grandson is trying to drown me in spaghetti sauce!* She is always trying to make me laugh. I love my grandmother

very much. And she loves me, even though I'm not the easiest person to live with since my parents died.

Not long ago I baked forty-eight blueberry muffins for breakfast. That's when Elinor told me, "Harry, I am working on a solution to your overcooking problem." At least, that's what I think she said. It's always hard to tell when she's talking with a mouth full of blueberry muffin.

I should explain that my grandmother is a very healthy person. She does yoga and tries to stick to a sensible diet. But it is very hard for her to let all the food I cook go to waste. As for me, I like cooking more than eating. But you know what I like most of all? Seeing other people enjoy what I cook. It's about the only thing that makes me truly happy.

I know what you're thinking. Why does Harry's grandmother let him cook so much food? And why is Harry going to see a therapist?

My parents died in a plane crash a couple of years ago. My dad was a chef who ran a food truck

called the Pasta Express. And my mom always loved to bake. I was always interested in cooking. Even before I was tall enough to look over the stove. But a funny thing happened after they died.

I started to cook all the recipes that reminded me of my parents. Like my dad's special hot sauce for chicken wings. Or my mom's pineapple upside-down cake. The smell and taste of their favorite recipes bring back all sorts of memories. Sometimes it makes me feel happy. Sometimes it makes me feel sad. And sometimes it makes me feel happy and sad at the same time. But I discovered that there's another kind of feeling. It's the best feeling of all.

Sometimes, when I'm cooking, I close my eyes and imagine my parents are still here. You may think this is crazy. But it's surprisingly easy to do. Especially when I'm stirring one of my dad's classic pasta sauces. Or my mom's cinnamon rolls are rising in the oven. It's almost like they could walk into the kitchen at any moment.

I know my grandmother understands this feeling. Sometimes she'll sneak up behind me when I'm at the stove. And I can feel her arm around me as I'm cooking. "I miss them too," she'll say. And then we'll both stand there for a while. Just listening to the sounds of the kitchen. And thinking about when there were more than two plates set at the table.

I know my grandmother worries about me. Plus, she is very smart. She took over my dad's food-truck business and made it a big success. So when she tells me stuff, I try to take her advice. Like when she said, "Harry, it's okay to feel sorry for yourself. But in the end it won't help anyone, least of all you. And there are people out there who could use a helping hand."

That's how I ended up spending my summer vacation cooking for Vancouver's unhoused. Elinor set up the whole thing at Vancouver's New Day Shelter. One of our trucks parks outside the shelter and stays there overnight. We serve breakfast and lunch to anyone who is hungry. Later we pack a

bunch of takeout dinners and leave them at the shelter. There's never any food left over.

I must admit I was a bit nervous about serving a bunch of strangers. The truth is, I'm quite shy. Unless I'm holding a frying pan or something. But you know what? I actually look forward to greeting my customers every day. In fact, I have never met so many people who appreciate my cooking.

I don't know what it's like not to have a real home. And I hope I never find out. Some of the people I've gotten to know look a little rough at first. They spend a lot of time on the street. And Elinor says that can change a person in some very sad ways.

A few days ago I served a man named Andy. He took a bite out of one of my deluxe clubhouse sandwiches with extra bacon and turkey. Then he got this funny look. At first I thought there was something wrong with the sandwich. Because Andy started to cry. He just stood there, chewing and crying.

That's when Stanley stepped in. He put his arm around Andy, whispered to him and calmed him down. Then he looked at me and said, "It's okay, Harry. Andy says you make a great sandwich. It just reminds him of another time, you know?"

Stanley didn't have to tell me what that meant. For the people at the shelter, "another time" usually means a *better* time. And a better time is usually long ago. When life was good and everything tasted just right. To be honest, that's a feeling I know something about. So does Stanley.

Stanley is kind of a legend around the shelter. There's a rumor going around that he used to be a famous chef. There is even a rumor that he is secretly rich. Who knows? Stanley never talks about his past. And Stanley's two best friends? They don't talk at all.

Stanley's best human friend is a man they call Shaky Sam. I have never heard Shaky Sam say a single word. In fact, the only sound Sam makes is when he slurps his soup. The slurping sound is very

loud. Plus, Sam's hands shake while he's eating. So it takes him a while to get the spoon to his lips. By the time the soup arrives, he always makes the most of it.

Sam is not big on cleanliness and is very shy. He likes to cover most of his face with an old wool scarf. And he always wears a tattered wool hat pulled down below his eyebrows. The visible part of his face is always very dirty. But Stanley makes sure that Sam washes his hands before every meal.

Besides Sam, Stanley's best friend is his dog, Waffles. What breed of dog is Waffles? It's hard to tell. He looks like six different kinds of dog mixed together, all of them grumpy. I have never seen him wag his tail or heard him bark. Stanley says Waffles considers barking undignified and is very disappointed by life.

Stanley shares all his food with Waffles, who is always hungry. Waffles eats very fast and has the appetite of a much larger dog. I tried baking Waffles

his own dog biscuit. But when I held it in front of him, he refused to eat it.

Stanley could tell Waffles had hurt my feelings. “Waffles thinks you expect him to beg,” he said. “Waffles considers this humiliating. It’s not your fault, Harry. He just hates being a dog.”

“How can a dog hate being a dog?” I asked. “What choice does a dog have?”

“It’s a long story,” said Stanley. And then Stanley looked at Waffles. “Don’t talk that way about Harry,” he said. “He feeds us.”

Waffles didn’t say anything back. He just sat there. Looking like he didn’t want to be a dog at all.

Chapter Two

I have a few rules while serving my customers at the shelter. Number one? I always say hello and greet them by name. Number two? I always look my customers in the eye when I serve them. Number three? I always try to make a little conversation. Like, “How are you today?” Or, “Do you have any allergies I should know about?”

The hardest part is rule number two. Sometimes I will look into the eyes of a customer and see their sadness. In fact, for me it's kind of like looking into a mirror. Once in a while I'll be brushing my teeth and notice that same look in my eyes.

I can also see that same sad look in Stanley's eyes. Stanley is always busy taking care of others. But sometimes he just can't hide the way he feels. What does Stanley do when he feels depressed? He looks at his book of recipes. Stanley never lets the book out of his sight. And nobody is allowed to touch it without his permission. He even uses the book as a pillow whenever he takes a nap.

Sometimes Stanley will read one of his favorite recipes out loud. One day he recited his personal recipe for risotto, which is an Italian type of rice that is very tricky to get just right. You have to keep stirring the simmering rice until it is soft. But not soft enough to become mushy. This is very difficult to do without proper instruction. When I mentioned

this to Stanley, he smiled. “I can teach you how to make perfect risotto,” he said.

I asked him why he wanted to teach me. He said it was because of the way I treated people at the shelter. “You see us, Harry,” he explained. “You don’t treat us like we’re invisible, even when we want to be. I just want to give you something back.”

That’s how the cooking lessons started. After lunch service, Stanley and Waffles would come into the food truck. To be honest, I seriously considered kicking Waffles out. City health regulations don’t allow dogs in a working kitchen. But Stanley insisted it would be okay.

“Waffles and I had a little talk,” said Stanley. Then Stanley looked at his dog and added, “You’re not going to make any trouble, are you, Waffles? Otherwise, I’m feeding you nothing but *dog* food from now on.”

Threatening Waffles with a diet of nothing but dog food seemed to work. Waffles was always on his

best behavior in the food truck. Plus, Stanley made sure that his dog was extra clean. This did not seem to make Waffles very happy. But then, nothing much seems to please Waffles. Except for eating.

I had never seen a dog so in love with food that wasn't meant for pets. I once saw Waffles slurp down a bowl full of my pasta without even chewing. After that he looked at me like he was upset. I thought something was wrong with his digestion. But Stanley gave him a look and said, "He's fine. He just thinks your pasta sauce needs more seasoning."

"You can tell that just by looking at him?" I asked Stanley.

"Waffles and I are very close," explained Stanley. "Especially when it comes to food."

"Aren't you worried about your dog's stomach?"

"We have an arrangement," said Stanley. "I let him eat whatever he wants. And he stays away from drinking beer."

“You let him drink *beer*?” I asked, unable to hide my shock.

“Of course not,” said Stanley. “He *wants* to drink beer. Just like he wants to smoke cigars. But there’s no way I’ll let him. Right, Waffles?” Waffles looked down at the floor like he was ashamed.

Waffles seemed to have a very strong stomach for a dog. But Stanley and I worried about his digestion. We kept experimenting with baking different kinds of healthy dog biscuits. I stored them all in a big jar on top of the food truck’s fridge. I labeled the jar *DOG BISCUITS* and always kept it full.

The problem? Waffles did not consider my healthy dog biscuits a treat. In fact, he refused to touch them. Stanley even ate one of my biscuits in front of the dog. Trying his best to sound enthusiastic. “Hey, Waffles,” he said. “This isn’t so bad. It tastes a little like stale shortbread.” But Waffles wasn’t convinced.

The good news? Stanley was teaching me a lot about cooking. He never talked about his past. But I could tell right away that he'd been a professional chef. I couldn't believe how much great stuff I was learning.

Stanley wasn't just a great cook. He had a wonderful idea about how to improve service on the food truck. He would train his unhoused friends to volunteer as my helpers. All I had to do was feed them and pay them whatever I could afford.

I would have gladly paid Stanley for his cooking lessons. But, aside from taking a few dollars to train staff, Stanley wasn't interested in money. He kept telling me that he was going to be rich someday soon. He would even have enough money to open his own restaurant. "You know the first thing I'm going to do when that happens?" he asked. "I'm going to make you my assistant chef."

It was a lot of fun to imagine running a restaurant with Stanley. But I never took the idea seriously. Stanley was always saying stuff that was hard

to believe. Like Waffles wanting to smoke cigars and drink beer. There were even times when I thought Stanley should make an appointment with Dr. Sherman. I mean, who talks to their dog that way?

At other times, Stanley seemed extra anxious about something. Like someone was watching him. Finally I decided to ask Stanley if he was in trouble. "I have a big problem," he replied. "In fact, Waffles and I might have to leave town soon."

That's when Stanley asked for a favor in return for the cooking lessons. He wanted to sleep in the food truck overnight with Waffles.

I told Stanley this was against the rules. "I know," he answered. "I'm not asking for myself. It's just that Waffles needs his privacy. He's under a lot of emotional stress."

I glanced at Waffles, who looked the same as he always did. Hungry. "He seems okay to me."

"Believe me, he's not," said Stanley. "He doesn't feel safe."

I should explain that the food truck stayed parked outside the shelter overnight. At least, for most of the week. Luckily, some of my unhoused staff were happy to keep an eye on the truck at night. This worked out well, since I was too young to drive it. And it wasn't always convenient to move the truck back and forth.

After I locked up at the end of the day, nobody was allowed in. All my customers knew this and respected the rule. Nobody had ever tried to break in, even on rainy nights.

Anyway, I decided to let Stanley and Waffles sleep in the food truck overnight. For one thing, I wanted Stanley to continue with the cooking lessons. For another, I thought Stanley was frightened about something. Maybe he and Waffles would be safer sleeping in the truck at night. So I agreed to Stanley's request.

Stanley looked at Waffles. "See? I told you Harry was a good guy," he said. "I think we should tell him

our secret.” And then: “What do you mean, ‘Can we trust him?’”

The way Stanley talked to Waffles was starting to make me feel uncomfortable. When I confessed this to Stanley, he smiled. “There’s something you should know,” he said. “You’re going to think this is crazy. But Waffles and I can talk to each other. He can understand what I say. And I can hear his voice speaking to me in my head. We have conversations all the time.”

I didn’t know what to say. Finally I asked, “Can Waffles talk to me?”

Stanley answered, “Why don’t you ask him?” And so I did. But Waffles just looked at me like it was time for dinner.

Stanley sighed. “He only talks to people he likes,” he said. “And he only likes me.”

Chapter Three

To be honest, I was beginning to get concerned about Stanley's mental health. I was even thinking about asking Elinor or Dr. Sherman for advice. But then something else happened. Something that worried me even more than Stanley imagining his dog could talk.

A few months earlier the Pasta Express had expanded to include a small takeout restaurant. It

was our first place with a permanent street address. There were only a couple of chairs and tables, so it was pretty much just a kitchen with big takeout window. The type of place where people could drive up in their cars and order food.

I was spending a lot of time at the new place. Because even though it wasn't fancy or anything, I was very proud of it. Most times it was just me in the kitchen. That was how I met Rudy "the Worm" Carelli of Las Vegas, Nevada. Rudy the Worm was hard to miss.

Even though it was pretty warm outside, Rudy Carelli was wearing a big puffy jacket. The kind you wear to go skiing. The first thing I said to him was, "Aren't you hot in that coat?"

"Actually, I am practically freezing," said Rudy. "Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Rudolpho Carelli. But you can call me Rudy. I am from Las Vegas, Nevada. Is it always this cold in Vancouver?"

Later I found out that Rudy the Worm was only seventeen years old. He didn't look like a worm at all. When he took off his puffy coat, you could see that he was a very big guy in a lime-green jogging suit. The kind of guy who wore exercise clothes but never exercised. His feet were huge, and he was wearing gold sneakers.

But even if Rudy weren't so big, I would've noticed him. He was the only customer inside the restaurant. He pulled a big wad of cash out of the side pocket of his jogging pants. "I am hungry," he announced, slapping the cash on the counter. "Give me everything on the menu."

Rudy didn't rush his food like Waffles did. He ate very slowly and steadily. Like he was digging a ditch and wanted to get it exactly right. Before long I had to go off the menu. I started serving him stuff like I made at home. Everything from Jamaican meat pies to Asian dumplings. Rudy loved it all.

He was in the middle of a Mexican taco when he finally spoke. "My dad doesn't like me to eat anything but Italian food," he explained. "He says it's unpatriotic."

"You mean you've never had a taco?"

"Never," said Rudy. "You know something? It's really good. Come sit, Harry."

"How do you know my name?"

"I am the only son of Carmine Carelli," said Rudy. "The most powerful man in all of Las Vegas. My father makes it his business to know everything." Then he looked at one of the empty plates in front of him. Like he was sad all the food was gone. "You cook pasta like my mother," he told me. "I haven't eaten this good since she died."

"I'm sorry," I said. "My parents are gone too."

Rudy looked away from his pile of empty plates. Now he was looking right at me. "Then I guess we have something in common." His face was sad.

Then he suddenly grinned, showing a lot of white teeth. “Do you bake, Harry?”

“All the time. I just made a chocolate cheesecake. Want to try some?”

“I’ll take a slice to go,” said Rudy. “Right now I want to ask you some questions. It’s about your friend Stanley. He stole something from my dad.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise at the thought of Stanley being a thief. Finally I asked, “What did he steal?”

“A painting,” said Rudy. “A portrait of my dad’s mother. My grandmother, Violetta.”

“Why would Stanley steal a painting?” I asked. “He’s got nowhere to hang it.”

“It’s a very valuable piece of art,” replied Rudy. “The artist who painted it is famous. Also, my father likes the painting very much. It’s the only thing left that reminds him of Violetta.”

Then Rudy wiped a crumb of taco shell from his lip and leaned forward. Like he was going to share

a big secret. "My dad sent me all the way from Las Vegas to get the painting back," he confessed. "He says it's a matter of family honor." Rudy blinked like he was nervous. "I think it's some kind of a test, you know? To see if I'm smart enough to take over his business someday. My father doesn't like to be disappointed. You understand, Harry?"

Nobody wants to disappoint their parents. So I nodded that I understood.

"That's good," said Rudy. "I really need to find the painting. I thought maybe you could ask Stanley where it is. As a favor to me."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Rudy looked very serious. "I don't want to scare Stanley," he said.

There was something about Rudy's expression that made me nervous. "You wouldn't hurt him, would you?" I asked.

"Not me personally," said Rudy. "I'm not supposed to be the guy who hurts people. I'm supposed to be

the guy who talks people out of *getting* hurt. But if I can't get what my dad wants? He'll send someone else. Someone who specializes in hurting people."

I must have looked shocked, because Rudy said, "Look, Harry. I'm talking to you because I *like* Stanley. I don't want him hurt. That's why I need your help."

I thought it over. Then I said, "I'll talk to him, Rudy."

Rudy looked happy. "On second thought, I'll have my cheesecake now. Thanks to you, I just got my appetite back."

The next day I told Stanley about my visit from Rudy. He turned pale right away. Stanley looked at Waffles. "I know," he said. "We're in big trouble."

"Stop talking to Waffles," I said. "Please, Stanley. Tell me what's going on."

That's when Stanley told me that he used to be Carmine Carelli's private chef.

“You know what the Mafia is, Harry? They’re made up of different criminal families. They’re into illegal gambling, loan-sharking and all sorts of bad stuff. Carmine Carelli is the biggest Mafia crime boss in Las Vegas.”

“I remember reading about him in a magazine while I was waiting at my doctor’s office,” I said. I got a lot of reading done at Dr. Sherman’s office. “Don’t they call him the Cobra?”

“That’s right,” said Stanley. “You know what they call his son? Rudy the Worm. He’s a nice enough kid. Loves my French toast. But his dad thinks he’s too weak to inherit the business. My guess? Carmine is trying to toughen the kid up. And I’m Rudy’s first assignment. If he finds that painting, I’m practically dead already.”

“How did you get yourself in such a mess, Stanley?”

Stanley sighed. “The only thing Carmine loves better than eating is bragging about how he can get

away with breaking every law there is. I heard about all his dirty secrets around the dinner table. Carmine said I could never leave the family. That I knew way too much about his business. He even hinted that he might kill me if I left.”

“Did you steal that painting from him?” I asked.

Stanley nodded. “I’m ashamed to say I did,” he confessed. “I wanted to use the money to open my own restaurant.”

“Why didn’t you, Stanley?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t think my plan through,” said Stanley. “Carmine has connections everywhere. It turns out it’s too dangerous to sell the painting to anyone else. I have to keep it to bargain with. It’s the only thing keeping me safe.”

Stanley sighed. “I’ve been on the run ever since. Too scared to work. Too scared to sell the painting. That’s how I ended up homeless, Harry.”

“So where did you hide the painting, Stanley?”

“The less you know about that, the better, Harry. I haven’t told anybody. Not even Waffles. I don’t want to put anybody else in danger.”

Stanley said he needed to think, so I left him. He told me he was going to be okay.

But Stanley was wrong. The next day I got up early to prepare for the breakfast shift. I found him in the food truck. He was lying on the floor. Dead. Someone had hit him on the head with my rolling pin. Hard enough to kill him. Waffles was on the floor. Lying a few inches from a pool of Stanley’s blood. It looked like somebody had drugged the dog with a piece of half-chewed bacon.

I guess I was in shock, because I could hear myself asking, “What happened?” out loud. Then Waffles was looking at me, like he was just waking up. That’s when I heard the voice in my head for the first time. “Somebody murdered my best friend,” it said. “That’s what happened.”

I looked at Waffles for a second or two. “If you’re talking to me, bark twice,” I said.

Waffles looked at me and barked once. Then he barked again. It was the saddest sound I’ve ever heard in my life. Both times.

Chapter Four

After the police showed up, I almost forgot Waffles could talk. A lot of different things were happening all at once. A homicide detective told me that somebody might have tried to rob the food truck. And that Stanley might have surprised them in the middle of the robbery.

The police were trying to ask everyone questions. But several people had fled the shelter when they

heard they were coming. And apparently Shaky Sam, Andy and a few others had just disappeared shortly before midnight. I wondered if I should tell the police about Rudy the Worm.

That's when I heard the voice of Waffles inside my head again. "Don't tell the police anything, Harry. We have no evidence. Besides, we can solve the murder faster by ourselves."

I should explain that Waffles has a voice that doesn't match his looks. Some might describe Waffles as cute. Maybe even adorable, if he is in a good mood. He's got these big sad eyes. And fur that sticks up in all directions after it rains. Even Shaky Sam, whose hands were always shaky, could never resist petting him.

But the voice of Waffles isn't cute at all. It sounds like a bunch of rusty nails rattling around the bottom of a deep barrel. It's even harder to ignore when he's yelling at me. "We have to find some evidence,

Harry!" shouted Waffles inside my head. "We can't go to the police without evidence!"

I could tell Waffles was very upset. But Stanley's murder was only the first shock of the morning. Aside from discovering that Waffles could talk, I was feeling bad for Elinor. I had never seen my grandmother so worried about me.

It was going to be one of those rainy Vancouver days when the sky stays dark. But I could see by the flashing lights on the police cars that Elinor had been crying. She asked me if I was all right. Then she grabbed me by the arms and looked me in the eye. "Harry," she said. "Do you realize that all we have is each other? If anything ever happened to you—"

She stopped talking and started to cry.

"I know," I told her. "If anything ever happened to you, I'd be all alone too." This was something I'd thought about a lot. But I'd never said it out loud before. That's when Elinor gave me a hug and

wouldn't let go. She just stood there. The flashing lights from the police cars turned her gray hair kind of pink.

Elinor let me take Waffles home. He had to sit there while my grandmother gave me a long lecture. She kept asking me questions. Like, why had I let Stanley and Waffles sleep in the food truck? Why hadn't I asked for her permission first?

"Because you would have said no," I explained.

That's when I heard Waffles say, "She's going to tell you that's no excuse."

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Elinor. "That's no excuse."

Then Elinor started to ask more questions. The kind she didn't really want me to answer. "Don't you trust me, Harry?" And "Have I given you too much responsibility?"

"Tell her about Rudy," said Waffles. "But don't tell her too much. Leave the painting out of it."

And so I told Elinor about Rudy the Worm. And how he was very curious about Stanley. "Do you

think this young man could have murdered your friend?" she asked.

"Tell her you're not sure," said Waffles.

"We're not—I mean, *I'm* not sure," I said.

"Maybe we should tell the police about him," Elinor suggested.

"We can handle Rudy ourselves," said Waffles. "Tell her we've already talked to the police about him."

I looked at Waffles. "But I haven't," I whispered. "I haven't told the police anything about Rudy." I thought maybe I could get away with whispering to Waffles, since my grandmother is a little hard of hearing. But this didn't work out.

"What are you muttering about, Harry?" she asked. "Please look me in the eye when you're talking to me. I know you've had an awful time, dear, but try to remember your manners."

I looked Elinor in the eye and spoke clearly. "I've already told the police about Rudy," I lied. "They're checking him out."

“That’s better, Harry,” said Elinor. “Always address the person you’re speaking to directly.” She looked at Waffles, who was scratching himself. “After all,” she added, reaching down to pat Waffles sympathetically, “courtesy is the only thing that separates us from our canine friend here.”

“Somebody wasn’t very courteous to Stanley last night,” I pointed out. “And it wasn’t Waffles.”

Elinor thought about this. “You’re absolutely right, Harry,” she said. “Perhaps we humans should be more like dogs.” She gave Waffles another pat on the head.

“Ask her if she wants to switch places with me,” said Waffles. “Let’s see how she likes eating with her nose stuck in a dog dish.”

Waffles sounded cranky. On the other hand, he needed a place to stay for the night. So he gave Elinor a pitiful look and rubbed against her hand. I asked my grandmother if Waffles could stay with us

for a while. "I suppose it would be all right for a few days," she said. "But we're going to have to get him a few things. A flea collar, a dog bowl and a leash."

"No!" begged Waffles. "No leash!"

But Elinor couldn't hear him. Plus, she was beginning to like the idea of adopting a pet.

"Maybe you better take Waffles to the vet tomorrow," she suggested. "Just to make sure he's had all his shots."

"No, Harry!" said Waffles. "I *hate* needles."

But by this time Elinor was talking about taking Waffles to the dog groomer. "He needs a haircut and a bath," she said. "Maybe then he won't look so sad. Have you noticed that he never wags his tail?"

By the time Elinor left us alone, Waffles was depressed. He didn't feel much like talking, but I had a lot of questions. So Waffles told me the story of his life. Or, to be more precise, his previous *human* life. As a cigar-smoking, beer-drinking detective

named Jake Palidino. I could hardly believe my ears. But there was something about the sorrowful way Waffles told his sad story. I knew it must all be true.

Before he turned into a dog, Waffles was a private detective in Las Vegas. In fact, he was Stanley's best friend. "We used to play poker together every Tuesday night," said Waffles. "He was the best friend I ever had on two legs. I kept telling him that working for a Mob boss was a big mistake. But he wouldn't listen.

"Then Stanley vanished. I looked all over Vegas for him," Waffles continued. "He was just gone. It began to haunt me, you know? How could my best friend just disappear? Was he dead? I had to find him, Harry. That's when I remembered Stanley telling me how much he'd always wanted to visit Vancouver again. He used to go on summer vacation here as a kid.

"I found him here living on the street." He paused. "This next part, I still have nightmares about. I'm talking to Stanley under this apartment building.

And a waffle maker comes sailing out of the sky from one of the open windows. It's just about to hit Stanley on the head, but I push him out of the way. And guess what? The waffle maker hits *me* on the head. Bang! Just like that, Jake Palidino is dead. Killed by a kitchen appliance."

Waffles looked at me with his big, sad eyes. "The next thing I knew, I was a dog! I don't know how or why it happened. And I don't think I ever will. But suddenly I was a dog, with four legs and a tail. Not even a big dog, like a Doberman or a Great Dane. You know, a breed that commands *respect*! I was just this little mutt sniffing people's shoes, trying to find Stanley.

"Well, I finally found him. Just by accident. I looked up from sniffing a beat-up pair of shoes, and there he was! Stanley! He almost fainted when I started to talk. But you know what he said? 'Don't worry, Jake. I'll take care of you, buddy. We're in this together.'"

Then Waffles told me something else. “I’m not much of a dog,” he admitted. “And before that, I wasn’t much of a person. But I was always a good detective. And I still am. I’m going to find out who murdered Stanley. But I need your help, kid.”

“Tell me what to do,” I said.

“No problem, Harry,” he answered. “Let’s talk.”

Chapter Five

At first I had a bit of trouble concentrating on the murder investigation. I kept wondering why Jake Palidino had come back to life as a dog. And why he could talk. And why he'd chosen to talk to *me*. Then Waffles gave me some good advice. "Don't try and figure it out," he said. "Trust me, Harry, it will only give you the biggest headache of your life."

I asked Waffles if he missed being human. “I miss it more than anything,” he confessed. “I miss going to the horse races. I miss brushing my teeth. I even miss my old bathrobe.”

“Would it help if I called you Jake instead of Waffles?” I asked.

Waffles said that calling him Jake would only make things worse. “You know why Stanley gave me the name Waffles? Because he didn’t want me to forget how I was killed. By a waffle maker thrown from a window! He figured it would give me motivation to find my killer.”

“I guess the way you were killed *is* kind of unusual,” I said.

Waffles looked embarrassed. “When you’re a private detective, you expect danger,” he said. “So I always thought I’d die from a bullet or a dagger. Maybe a poisoned dart. But getting killed by a waffle maker? It’s humiliating.”

“You saved Stanley’s life,” I pointed out. “If you hadn’t pushed him out of the way, the waffle maker would have hit him instead.”

“It was the only unselfish thing I did in my entire human life,” Waffles said. “And what was it all for? Stanley’s dead, and your grandmother is measuring me for my very own dog sweater. She’s bought the wool and is going to begin knitting any day now. Wool makes me itch, Harry.”

“Start thinking like a detective again,” I said. “Is Jake’s death connected to Stanley’s murder?”

“Absolutely,” answered Waffles. “I think the same person who accidentally killed Jake, me, I mean, also murdered Stanley. My money’s on the Carelli crime family for both murders.”

“You think Rudy the Worm had something to do with Stanley’s death?” I asked.

“He’s a Carelli, isn’t he?” said Waffles. “The Worm doesn’t look like a murderer. But he could have done

something stupid by accident. Or the killer could be someone we don't know. Like one of Carmine's professional hit men."

"Maybe we should go to the police."

"And tell them what?" Waffles asked. "We can't prove anything yet. And the Carelli family can afford the best lawyers money can buy. I still have some connections on the Las Vegas task force for organized crime. They specialize in investigating the Mafia. But we need proof before we can go to them."

"I think we should tell my grandmother about all this."

"That's exactly what you don't want to do," said Waffles. "We have to keep Elinor out of this investigation as much as possible. Otherwise we'll be putting her life in danger. That's why we have to convince Rudy that we don't know where the painting is."

Waffles looked like he was thinking something over. "There's something we don't know about that

painting,” he said. “Some sort of secret. Why is the painting so important, Harry? Why did someone kill Stanley to try to get it?”

“The painting is worth a lot of money,” I said.

“That’s true,” said Waffles. “The only thing these Mafia types care about more than revenge is money. But this is about more than a valuable portrait.”

“I’ve been reading as many books on the Mafia as I can,” I said. “Last night I listened to a podcast on organized crime. It turns out the Mafia isn’t really that organized. In fact, it’s pretty disorganized. Maybe Stanley knew something dangerous. Some secret that had to do with the painting. A secret that got him killed. We have to find the painting before anyone else does. But where do we start?”

“We’ve already started,” said Waffles. “I got a pretty good look at the crime scene before they kicked me out. There was something missing. Stanley’s book of recipes.”

“He never let that book out of his sight,” I said.
“Stanley even *slept* with it.”

“You know what I think?” asked Waffles. “There might be something hidden in the book that could lead us to the painting. Like a code or a map. Stanley loved puzzles and games.”

“So he wouldn’t want to tell us where the painting is,” I suggested, “but he’d leave us clues.”

“That would be just like Stanley,” Waffles said.

Later that day I took Waffles to the vet to get his shots. I also took him to the dog groomer. They told me that Waffles would look beautiful and smell like a rose. “I don’t want to smell like a rose,” said Waffles. “I want to smell like cigar smoke and spaghetti sauce.”

Waffles complained about the shots, his bath and his haircut. He told me his new flea collar was too tight. “You’re wasting our time trying to turn me into a regular dog, Harry,” he argued. “We should be looking for Stanley’s recipe book.”

I told Waffles to keep quiet for a while. To tell the truth, there were times when his constant chatter made me nervous. Waffles started to say something else. But I whispered, “You want me to put you on a leash?”

“When I was human, I never even wore a necktie,” said Waffles. “Now you want me on a leash. A leash is nothing more than the world’s longest necktie. Is that fair, Harry? Why are you so grouchy?”

“I’m upset,” I confessed. “Stanley is dead. And Elinor won’t let me serve lunch at the shelter until they find his killer.”

“Maybe you’re just hungry,” said Waffles. “How about we split a meatball sandwich?”

“I suppose that means you want *me* to make the sandwich, right?”

“Well, I’d make *you* one, Harry,” said Waffles, looking down at his front paws, “but I don’t seem to have any hands.”

I was finally getting used to hearing the voice of Waffles inside my head. And usually it sounded grumpy. Now I realized that Waffles was actually making a joke. That's when I did something I hadn't done for a few days. I laughed out loud.

I had to leave for my shift at the drive-through restaurant. So I took Waffles with me. I made him half a meatball sandwich and put it on a plate. He was about to start eating when Rudy walked in. He was wearing a powder-blue jogging suit this time. I told him we were closed.

"I'm sorry," said Rudy. He looked at my half of the meatball sandwich. "Am I interrupting your lunch, Harry?"

"That's okay," I replied. "There's a question I've been meaning to ask you."

Rudy ignored me and looked at Waffles. "I didn't know you had a dog," he said. "What's his name?"

"Waffles," I answered. "He's not really mine. He was Stanley's dog."

“That’s very interesting,” said Rudy. “Does he do any tricks?”

Waffles was playing it cool. Not saying anything. Just eating his sandwich. Rudy smiled. “Look at the way that dog is eating his sandwich,” he said. “He’s not picking it apart. He’s trying to eat it in one piece. Like a person. I wonder where he learned to do that.”

I took a deep breath. Then I looked Rudy in the eye and asked the big question. “Did you kill Stanley, Rudy?”

But Rudy didn’t answer. He just looked at my sandwich. Like it was his only friend in the world. “Are you going to eat that?” he asked.

Chapter Six

Rudy Carelli was a careful eater. He chewed each mouthful of my sandwich at least ten times. I know because I counted. Finally he looked at Waffles and said, “I don’t think that dog likes me. Does he bite?”

“No,” I said. “Waffles isn’t mean. He’s just disappointed by life.”

Rudy nodded like he understood. “You know what I wanted to be when I was a little kid, Harry? A baker.

I went to my dad and told him that. You know what he said? ‘Tough guys don’t bake.’ He wants me to be a tough guy so bad. And my dad always gets what he wants.”

“You don’t have to be what your dad wants,” I told Rudy. “You can be anything you want.”

“You don’t know my dad, Harry.” Then he looked at me kindly and said, “You know something? You did me a big favor. Your cooking has opened up a whole new world to me. Before I met you? I never knew there were so many different kinds of food to enjoy. My life was spaghetti and lasagna and that’s it.”

“I’m glad you appreciate my cooking, Rudy.”

“The thing is,” said Rudy, “my life isn’t like the menu at a buffet. I don’t get to choose who I am. I might want to be a bowl of Hungarian goulash or a dish of beef stroganoff. But I’m just a plate of leftover pasta. That’s all I was ever meant to be.”

I didn’t want to interrupt Rudy in the middle of his sad story. But Waffles didn’t care about being

polite. He *looked* like he was still working on the crust of his sandwich. But I could hear him talking to me. “Ask him again, Harry,” said Waffles. “Ask Rudy if he killed Stanley.”

It was hard for me to ask the question again. Because, believe it or not, I was getting to like Rudy the Worm. But I had to know the answer. “So *did* you kill Stanley, Rudy?” I asked.

“Would you believe me if I said no, Harry?”

I said nothing. And neither did Waffles. He just looked at Rudy like he was waiting for an answer.

“See?” said Rudy. “You’re not sure, are you, Harry? Maybe I killed Stanley. And maybe I didn’t. After all, I *am* a Carelli. That’s what you’re thinking, right? Well, I don’t blame you. You know why? Because I’d do just about anything to please my father. Even *lie* about killing Stanley. I guess the only thing I wouldn’t do is actually *kill* Stanley.”

Then Rudy looked at me and added, “Stanley taught me how to make French toast when I was

a kid. You can't kill somebody who taught you to how to make French toast!"

Waffles told me: "I've got to admit he sounds pretty convincing. Especially that part about the French toast."

"I don't believe you killed Stanley, Rudy," I said. "And for what it's worth, I don't think you're a worm either."

"That's not what my family thinks," Rudy told me. "I'm always going to be Rudy the Worm. Until I find that painting. The painting will get me my dad's respect."

"I don't know where the painting is," I said.

"What about the recipe book?" asked Rudy.

Waffles pricked up his ears. I could hear the surprise in his voice. "How does he know about the recipe book, Harry?"

I asked Rudy the same question. He was quiet for a few seconds. "Suppose there was this guy," said Rudy. "You might even suppose this guy could be me."

Anyway, this guy goes to visit Stanley in your food truck. What does he see? Stanley lying on the floor. Next to a pool of something that looks like someone spilled tomato sauce. Only it isn't tomato sauce at all.

"This guy sees that Stanley is not long for this world. So he asks, 'Where's the painting, Stanley?' You know what Stanley said?"

Rudy leaned forward and whispered. "Stanley said, 'You want the painting? You have to find my recipe book first. It's going to show you where the painting is hidden.'"

I heard Waffles say: "I knew it, Harry!"

"By now it's getting harder for Stanley to talk," said Rudy. "So this guy—well, okay, me—asks him where his recipe book is. That's when Stanley gives me a little smile. Like he's going to tell me the funniest joke ever. Then he says, 'Ask Waffles, Rudy.' Those were his last words. 'Ask Waffles, Rudy.' How can I ask Waffles? He's a *freakin' dog!*"

“Who ever heard of a talking dog?” I offered, trying my best to sound convincing.

Then, just to be sure, Rudy bent down to look Waffles in the eye. He spoke to the dog like Waffles was hard of hearing. “Hey, dog!” he shouted. “Tell me where the recipe book is and I’ll buy you a nice chew toy!”

Waffles just sat there, doing his best to appear puzzled. Finally Rudy straightened up and turned to me. “I thought it was worth a shot, you know?” he explained. “Like, maybe he was one of those dogs you see on TV. The ones who can turn a doorknob with their teeth. Or lead the fire department to some baby who fell in a ditch.”

“I guess Waffles is just an ordinary dog,” I told him.

“That’s too bad,” said Rudy. “My dad is getting impatient, Harry. If I don’t find what he wants soon? He’s going to send somebody who’s not so nice.”

“What does that mean, Rudy?”

“There’s a rumor that my dad has sent one of his more experienced guys to find the painting. I don’t know who the guy is. I’m trying to find out. But nobody tells me anything.”

“You can’t even guess who it might be?” I asked.

Rudy shrugged. “My father likes to use different guys for different jobs,” he said. “I think he’s losing faith in me, Harry. He gave me my big chance. And now he thinks I messed up. If I don’t make things right, I could get kicked out of my own family.”

Rudy looked at Waffles. “I wish you *could* talk,” he said. “It would save us all a lot of trouble.” Then Rudy got a sour look on his face.

“Was something wrong with your sandwich?” I asked him. “You don’t look so great.”

“It’s not the sandwich, Harry,” Rudy replied. “I’m afraid of what’s going to happen next. It’s upsetting my stomach.”

Waffles wasn’t talking. Maybe it was just my imagination, but it almost looked like he felt sorry

for Rudy the Worm. Rudy noticed it too. "It must be nice having a dog," he said. "You've always got a friend, no matter what."

Then Rudy left. Without even asking for a slice of pie. Waffles said he was going to go to the unhoused shelter and see if he could pick up any gossip about Stanley's murder. I told him to watch out for the dogcatcher. "Don't worry, Harry," he said. "I'll try not to bite anybody." I stayed to do my shift at the restaurant.

When Waffles got back, he told me that the local police had made no progress on the case. You know what else? Andy, Shaky Sam and a few other regulars still hadn't shown up. "They're scared they're going to end up like Stanley," explained Waffles. "I don't blame them for going into hiding."

Then he scratched himself and said, "Can we go home now, Harry? I'm starving."

When Waffles and I got home, nobody was there. I thought Elinor was out shopping. Or maybe at her

yoga class. But then we saw the note on the coffee table. I didn't recognize the handwriting on the front of the envelope. Just two words. *Sorry, Harry.*

Waffles said, "Sorry, Harry." At first I thought he was just reading the front of the envelope. But his voice sounded different. Like he really *was* sorry. Then I asked him if he wanted something to eat. "No, thanks," he answered. "I'm not hungry."

That's when I knew my grandmother wasn't coming home for dinner.

Chapter Seven

I opened the envelope. There was a letter inside, which I read to Waffles.

Dear Harry:

My sincere apologies for temporarily borrowing your grandmother. She seems like a very nice lady. (Even though she kicked me in the shins. Twice.) Please know that I am only following my father's orders. I promise you that I will keep her safe. I hope

I don't have to borrow Elinor for very long. Please do not call the police. I will stop by the restaurant tomorrow afternoon for a little talk.

Please think, Harry! I need to go back to my dad with some new information. It would really help a lot if you could find Stanley's recipe book. Maybe it will tell us where to find the painting. See you tomorrow.

Rudy

PS. I'm really sorry. I just didn't know what else to do.

Waffles was upset. Although he was too grumpy to admit it, he liked my grandmother very much. He hadn't been living with us for more than a few days. But I figured he was getting used to having a real home.

Waffles enjoyed sitting on the couch with Elinor and watching TV. They both enjoyed old black-and-white movies. He even let Elinor scratch him behind the ears like he was a puppy. Now she was gone.

As for me, Elinor's kidnapping was pretty close to my worst nightmare come true. "Maybe Rudy isn't so

harmless after all,” said Waffles. “What if he’s more dangerous than we think? What if turning into a dog has made me too soft, Harry? I could be letting Stanley’s killer off the hook.”

But, unlike Waffles, I wasn’t so sure Rudy the Worm was responsible for Stanley’s murder. Or for killing Jake. “Rudy couldn’t kill a fly unless it landed on his dinner,” I said to Waffles. “I think our murder suspect is somebody else.”

“But the Worm is our most obvious suspect,” said Waffles. “What more proof do you need? He just kidnapped your grandmother!”

“You know what I think?” I said. “I think you need someone handy to blame for all your problems. And Rudy is an easy target. You hate living like a dog, and you hate the Carellis. So you single out Rudy when somebody else is to blame.”

“Okay, so I hate being a dog,” Waffles admitted. “Do I like getting the sudden urge to rummage through garbage cans? To roll around in the wet

grass? No, I don't! But in my *mind*, I'm still a professional investigator. I can still be objective when it comes to murder."

"Really?" I asked. "I thought a good detective was supposed to consider all possibilities. Do you really think Rudy is capable of murder?"

I waited. But Waffles stayed silent. Then he said, "Maybe you're right, Harry. Stanley used to say I let my emotions interfere with my judgment sometimes. It's even worse since I became a dog. I keep wanting to bite first and ask questions later."

Waffles got quiet again. Then he asked, "Harry? What's the most frustrating thing that can happen to a detective?" Before I could speak, Waffles answered his own question. "It's having a clue right in front of you. And not being able to figure out what it means."

"Like Stanley's last words to Rudy?" I said. "Ask Waffles. Why would Stanley hint that you know

where his recipe book is? He never told you where it is.”

“Because he thinks I can guess where it is,” said Waffles. “So even though he didn’t tell me, I must know where it is. I just have to figure it out.”

“What did Stanley like to do?” I asked. “Where did he like to go? Did he have a favorite place?”

“Besides cooking with you in the food truck?” said Waffles. “He liked working in the community garden. Planting flowers and vegetables. There’s this maple tree he liked to sit beside. He’d take me there. And when I got bored, I would dig a hole under the tree. Just for something to do.”

“Maybe Stanley’s recipe book is buried there.”

“Get a flashlight, Harry,” said Waffles. “We’ve got work to do.”

We went to the community garden after dark. There was nobody around. I brought a flashlight, which we needed, and a shovel, which we didn’t.

Waffles went to a certain spot near Stanley's favorite maple tree. Then he began to dig as fast as he could. Like a much bigger dog. Like the Doberman or the Great Dane he wished he could be.

His paws were a blur as he dug, and dirt was flying everywhere. After a while I was afraid he might fall into the hole he'd dug. But then I heard him yell, "I found something, Harry!"

It was Stanley's recipe book, inside a burlap sack.

Waffles was so happy, I thought he might wag his tail. He didn't. But I could hear how pleased he was by the tone of his voice. "You know what, Harry?" he said. "I'm starting to feel like a real detective again. Maybe we'll actually solve this case before my ninety-day flea collar expires!"

I filled in the hole Waffles had made as quickly as I could. Then we went home to take a closer look at the recipe book.

Reading the recipe book was difficult because Stanley had liked to scribble all sorts of notes in

the margins. Sometimes they were just things he'd decided to write beside the recipes. Like a poem about Waffles beside our latest recipe for dog biscuits. It was underlined in red ink.

"A Portrait of Waffles"

Who refuses to nibble

On pellets or kibble?

Who'll never let go of his past?

Who thinks dog food is gross

Demands garlic toast

And pasta he slurps way too fast?

Give him a dog biscuit

And he thinks, Why risk it?

If only he'd let himself be.

He'd aid his digestion

And answer the question,

How can I set myself free?

*For life is a puzzle
You cannot unmuzzle
By wishing on some distant star.*

*Find the secret you seek
When you use your teeth
And finally accept who you are.*

“What do you think the poem means?” I asked.

“Stanley was always giving me the same advice,” said Waffles. “He kept saying I should accept my fate. You know, try to enjoy being a dog. Forget about cigars, poker and spaghetti sauce. Learn to love begging for scraps and sleeping on the floor.”

“Stanley was your friend,” I said. “He was just trying to help.”

“Stanley was probably right,” Waffles said. “I should just accept my new life. But I miss my *old* life, Harry. And you know the only thing I have left from

my old life? The way food used to taste! I can't give that up."

I told Waffles that I understood. We kept looking through the book. Then an old photo fell out from between the pages. It was a picture of Stanley and Jake laughing around a poker table. They both looked young, strong and happy. Like nothing could ever go wrong as long as they stayed friends.

Waffles looked at the picture and asked, "Whatever happened to those two guys, Harry? Where did they go?"

I didn't know what to say. So I didn't say anything.

I was grateful that we had the recipe book to show Rudy. But we were still no closer to finding the painting. I couldn't stop worrying about my grandmother. And I couldn't sleep.

Waffles knew that I was worried. Usually he spent the night on the sofa in front of the TV. Elinor liked to leave the TV on for him until he fell asleep. She said

it would make him feel more at home. There was a dog bed in my room. But Waffles never slept there. Sometimes I could hear him wandering around the house. Alone with his thoughts.

I tried to get him to sleep in my room on the dog bed. But Waffles told me he'd rather not. "I don't want to get too attached to anyone, Harry," he said. "I think it's better that way."

But on this night Waffles went straight to the dog bed in my room and stayed there. "You okay, Harry?" he asked. I told him no. And Waffles said, "Me either. I can't sleep."

For the first time, I told Waffles how much I missed my parents. And how worried I was about Elinor. How everyone you love can be gone. Just like that. Without even a chance to say goodbye. Harry told me all about his life as Jake. How he wished he'd been a less selfish person. "I should have been a better friend to Stanley," said Waffles.

“You miss Stanley, don’t you?” I asked.

“All the time,” said Waffles. “But you know who I miss most of all?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Me, Harry,” said Waffles. “I miss *me*.”

Chapter Eight

We didn't sleep much that night. The next morning, we didn't eat much either. Which, for Waffles, was unusual. In the afternoon we went to the restaurant to meet Rudy. I put up the *WE ARE CLOSED* sign and waited.

We didn't have to wait long. I could tell Rudy was nervous. Because all he wanted was a glass of water. "Where's my grandmother, Rudy?" I asked.

“Elinor is safe and sound at a secret location,” answered Rudy. “Fortunately, she had her knitting in her purse when we left your house. So she’s keeping busy. Did you know she’s knitting you a sweater, Harry?”

Waffles looked at Rudy. I heard him say: “She’s knitting the sweater for me, you idiot.”

He sounded upset, so I said, “She’s knitting the sweater for Waffles, Rudy.”

“No kidding?” said Rudy. “Imagine that. A sweater for a dog! I guess a small dog like that must get cold. Maybe she should knit him a little hat too.”

“Tell the Worm to eat my fleas,” said Waffles.

I ignored Waffles. “You better be taking good care of my grandmother.”

“I am letting her follow her daily routine as much as possible,” Rudy assured me. “I said I wouldn’t tie her up if she stopped talking. Also, I made her promise not to poke me with a knitting needle. When I left, she was doing yoga. You know, that

thing where you sit with your legs crossed and stay quiet?”

“I know,” I said. “She does it every day. She says it helps her stay calm.”

“Maybe I should try yoga,” said Rudy. “No offense, Harry, but I find being with Elinor very stressful. She’s kind of bossy.”

“She didn’t ask to be kidnapped,” I pointed out. “That was your idea.”

“I was desperate,” Rudy admitted. “If I’d known she was going to talk so much, I would have kidnapped your dog instead. At least he doesn’t talk back.”

I heard Waffles say, “That’s what you think, genius.”

“So my grandmother’s okay?” I asked. “You didn’t get mean or anything, did you?”

“She didn’t want to go with me at first,” Rudy said. “I pulled out a gun. But there weren’t any bullets in it.

I mean, she's an old lady, right? Who needs bullets? She even *asked* if there were bullets in the gun. And I had to lie. I guess she could tell I was lying. Because she kicked me in the shins a couple of times."

"You shouldn't have scared her like that."

"That's what's so funny," said Rudy. "She was more curious than scared. I thought I was going to have to pick her up and carry her out. But you know what she said? 'Let us try and preserve our mutual dignity, shall we?' Then she walked out of the house with that big purse of hers. Like she was going shopping or something."

"She carries everything in that purse," I said.

"Yeah," said Rudy. "I told her I was getting a headache from all her talking. By this time, she knows my name and everything. She says, 'I have aspirin in my purse, Rudy. Are you taking me to a place that has running water?' You know, so we could get a glass of water for the aspirin."

Then Rudy looked at me like he was embarrassed. “You know something, Harry? I think Elinor just went along with the kidnapping because she was worried about me. Like maybe I was too irresponsible to be on my own. Waving around a gun with no bullets.”

“That sounds like my grandmother,” I said. “She worries about me a lot.”

“You’re her favorite subject, Harry,” said Rudy. “She told me to tell you not to worry. Me, I’m worried enough for everybody.”

“Now that you mention it? You don’t look so good, Rudy.”

Rudy took a sip of his water. “I didn’t get much sleep last night,” he replied. “Elinor kept wanting to have a conversation. Only it was kind of one-sided. She kept telling me, ‘It’s never too late to do the right thing, Rudy.’ Or ‘Rudy, I can tell that deep down you want to be a good person.’ No wonder I have a headache.”

“You should never have kidnapped Elinor in the first place,” I said. “I’m not going to cook for you until you give her back.”

I heard Waffles say, “Way to go, Harry. Get the Worm where it hurts. In his stomach.”

Rudy looked hurt. “I’m going to miss your fried rice, Harry,” he said. “If only we could find that recipe book.”

“We found it, Rudy,” I told him. “Last night.”

Rudy looked pleased. Then confused. “We?”

“The book was buried under some dirt,” I explained. “Waffles dug it up.”

Rudy looked at Waffles like he didn’t know what to say. Then he decided to go with, “Good dog.”

Rudy reached out to pet Waffles. Then he changed his mind. “Show me the book, Harry,” he said.

Rudy read through the recipe book very carefully. Finally he said, “There’s no map, no directions, nothing!” He even ripped the binding of the book

apart, checking for a hidden compartment or something. “The recipe book was supposed to show us where the painting is,” he said. “But the book is worthless! Just recipes and poems!”

Nobody talked for a while. Not even Waffles. Then, I looked at Rudy and said, “I guess we’re about to find out something very important.”

“We have no idea where the painting is,” said Rudy. “What could be more important than that?”

“We’re going to find out if you really want to be a good person, Rudy. Like my grandmother said. I got you the book. Now you give me back Elinor. That was the deal, remember?”

Waffles said, “If Rudy the Worm says no, I get to bite him, right, Harry?”

Rudy asked, “Why does your dog always look like he wants to bite me?”

“He won’t bite you,” I told him. I looked at Waffles. “Because if he does, I’ll never make him another meatball sandwich.”

But Rudy wasn't taking any chances. "Okay, Harry," he said. "A deal's a deal. I'll take you to Elinor."

"Thank you for keeping your promise," I said.

"Don't thank *me*," Rudy said. "Thank your grandmother. If I spend any more time with her, I'll never get rid of this headache."

Rudy took us to a nice-looking apartment building on the other side of town. "I rented a place here," he explained. "Because I wanted Elinor to be kidnapped to someplace comfortable."

As we entered the apartment, I thought the worst was over. Except my grandmother wasn't there. Nobody was. There was just a note on the fridge. It read: *I have the old lady. I will exchange her for the painting. If you ever want to see her alive again, get me what I want. NO COPS or Grandma has knitted her last sweater!*

It was signed *Jimmy the Fork*.

"Oh no," Rudy said.

"Who's Jimmy the Fork?" I asked.

“He works for my dad,” said Rudy. “He’s a very bad guy.”

“How bad?”

“Let’s put it this way,” said Rudy. “His gun always has bullets in it.”

I heard Waffles say: “We have to get Elinor back, Harry! Jimmy the Fork doesn’t like to leave any witnesses. You know what I mean?”

I must have turned very pale, because Rudy said, “Don’t worry, Harry. I have the right connections. I can get Jimmy the Fork to come here. I have a plan.”

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

“Well, there’s good news and bad news,” said Rudy. “The bad news? You have to poison Jimmy the Fork’s dinner.”

“What’s the good news?”

“You get to plan the menu,” said Rudy.

Chapter Nine

Rudy told me he had a new kind of tasteless poison. All I had to do was put it in Jimmy the Fork's food. "My dad uses it all the time," he explained.

"I can't poison anyone," I said to Rudy. "No chef would do that. It's murder on a plate!"

"Who said anything about murder?" asked Rudy. "All we want to do is make Jimmy the Fork really sick. You know, make him *think* he's going

to die. That's when I show him the antidote to the poison."

"The antidote?" I said.

"The stuff that's going to make him all better again," Rudy explained. "Like he never took the poison in the first place. We give him the antidote. But only if he gives us Elinor."

"How much of the poison do I have to use?"

"Two or three drops," said Rudy. "Maybe four. I don't know the exact amount. To be honest, I haven't actually used it yet."

"What happens if I use too much?" I asked.

"Jimmy the Fork drops dead before we can give him the cure," said Rudy.

"You mean I could kill him by accident?" I asked.

"It's possible," Rudy admitted. "Not that Jimmy's death would be any great loss to humanity." Then he shrugged and added, "On the plus side, Jimmy's got a pretty strong stomach. In fact, he might

survive long enough to strangle one of us with his bare hands.”

“There’s got to be another way.”

Rudy looked at Waffles. “Well, we could have your dog dig up the whole town, looking for the painting. But that might take more time than we’ve got.”

“Let’s listen to Rudy, Harry,” said Waffles. “Make him tell us the whole plan.”

I asked to hear the whole plan. I noticed that Waffles was paying close attention, his ears standing straight up. “Jimmy the Fork has one weakness,” Rudy explained. “He loves to eat. More than anybody I know.”

“More than you?” I asked.

“Way more,” said Rudy. “I know that’s hard to believe. But Jimmy the Fork makes me look like a picky eater. The one thing Jimmy can’t resist? A fancy dinner cooked by a great chef. In case you’re wondering, that’s you, Harry.”

“So we invite him to dinner,” I said. “Then what?”

“We tell Jimmy we have the painting,” said Rudy. “Then we offer to exchange the painting for your grandmother.”

“There’s only one thing wrong with your plan,” I told Rudy. “We don’t have the painting.”

“That’s the beauty of my plan,” said Rudy. “We use a fake painting as bait. By the time Jimmy knows the difference, the poison will have kicked in.”

“Won’t that make Jimmy the Fork angry?” I asked.

Waffles answered me first. “Let’s put it this way, Harry: don’t put any sharp cutlery beside Jimmy’s dinner plate.”

“Jimmy’s going to be really mad,” said Rudy. “Somebody tried to poison him once—he almost died. But that’s what’s great about using poison. When it kicks in, he’ll be more scared than angry. The stuff I’m going to give you is supposed to work really fast.”

Rudy took out a vial of clear liquid. He held it up to the light. "This is the poison," he said. "Trust me, Harry. This stuff is what's going to get Elinor back."

"What about the antidote?" I asked.

"I'll keep the antidote, you keep the poison," said Rudy. "That's fair, isn't it?"

"What if I end up killing Jimmy the Fork?" I asked.

"There's enough poison here to experiment with," said Rudy. "You know, see the exact amount you can use without using too much." He looked at Waffles. "Maybe you could try the poison out on the dog first. See how much poison is *too* much, you know? That way Jimmy the Fork won't drop dead by accident. We wouldn't want to kill a real person if we don't have to."

Waffles was *very* offended by this remark. "I am a real person!" he shouted at me. And then he thought about it and said, "At least, I used to be."

"You want me to use poison on Waffles?" I said. "You can't be serious!"

“I’ve been watching this mutt,” said Rudy. “He’s the sorriest excuse for a dog I’ve ever seen. He can’t even do any tricks.”

“You just don’t know Waffles like I do. To me, he’s almost human.”

“How so?” asked Rudy.

“Well, he snores in his sleep,” I pointed out.

“I do?” asked Waffles. “You should have said something, Harry. I would have moved back to the living room couch.”

“So he snores,” said Rudy. “It’s a perfect match for his bad table manners. You notice the way he gulps down your food without tasting it? He doesn’t appreciate your cooking, Harry. That dog would eat a moldy sardine right out of the garbage can.”

“Don’t listen to him, Harry,” Waffles said to me. “I appreciate your cooking very much. Your Korean spare ribs are better than anything I’ve come across in a garbage can. And I’ve dug through the green bins of some very exclusive restaurants.”

Rudy looked at Waffles and said, “Just try a drop of the poison on him. Maybe it will cure his snoring.”

Waffles shouted, “Can you believe this guy, Harry? He wants to poison me because I snore!”

“Think of it as a science experiment,” Rudy added. “He’s only a dog, Harry.”

“Not to me, he isn’t,” I said. “Besides, dogs have feelings too, Rudy. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Rudy shrugged. “Believe me, I am,” he said. “But we are talking about Jimmy the Fork here! He will not hesitate to hurt Elinor. Or worse. Do I have to explain what that means?”

The next thing Waffles said surprised me. “Take the poison from Rudy, Harry. We may need it.” The way he said it made me take the vial of poison. Even though I didn’t want to.

Rudy smiled sympathetically. “You know what my dad says? The first time you poison a guy is always the hardest.” Then he sighed. “I’ve been under

a lot of stress. I'm sorry for those things I said about your dog."

Then Rudy bent down to Waffles and gave him a pat on the head. "Hey, dog," said Rudy. "Just in case I don't see you again? I hope they have meatball sandwiches wherever you're going."

That's when I realized that Rudy thought I was going to try the poison on Waffles.

"Make his next meal really good, Harry," Rudy said. "It could be his last one."

That night when I went to bed, Waffles settled in on the bedroom floor. "I would never hurt you, Waffles," I said. "You know that, right?"

"You couldn't hurt anybody, Harry," said Waffles. "You know too much about what it's like to feel hurt. You know what Stanley used to say? 'Look into Harry's eyes, Waffles. He's one of us.'"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You ever wonder why I talk to you? And *only* you?" said Waffles. "It's because you're like me. You're

lonely, Harry. Stanley always said, 'If two people are lonely, it's better to be lonely together.'

Waffles looked up at me from his dog bed. "You know what else Stanley said? He said, 'Every kid should have a dog to talk to.' Maybe he was right, huh, Harry?"

I knew I was lucky to have a dog to talk to. I was even luckier to have a dog who talked back. Then Waffles said, "You can always talk to me, Harry."

And so I did. I told him how I liked to bake my mother's favorite cake. That it always brought back the sound of her voice. Saying things like, "Did you remember the vanilla extract, honey?" I told him how scared I was that Elinor would die one day and I'd be left all alone.

Then Waffles fell asleep and started to snore. I couldn't sleep. So I got up to plan Jimmy the Fork's dinner menu. Unfortunately, I didn't get very far.

I just couldn't figure out which recipes went best with poison.

Chapter Ten

Waffles slept through until morning. This was unusual—he generally woke up in the middle of the night. Sometimes he was just hungry and wanted a midnight snack. So I always remembered to leave some leftovers in his bowl.

Usually, though, he woke up because of a bad dream. He said it was always the same one. In the dream, he was still Jake Palidino. He would be walking

along the street and see a waffle maker falling from the sky. It would keep getting bigger and bigger, aimed straight for his head. The problem? He couldn't move. He just stood there, waiting for the waffle maker to hit him. And turn him into a homeless dog.

"You know what I hate most about the dream, Harry?" Waffles said to me once. "It's like I can almost see the face of the guy dropping the waffle maker. Like I know who it is. But then the dream ends, and I wake up."

Waffles still complained about how much he missed being Jake. He said things like, "I wish I could still shuffle cards." Or, "I miss wearing pants." One day I gave him an old slipper to play with. And he looked at me disgustedly. "You expect me to chew on this?" he said. "I solved a diamond robbery once. Do you think I celebrated by chewing on a slipper?"

"You probably drank a beer or smoked a cigar," I said. "Or played poker all night long."

“I had some bad habits, Harry,” he admitted. “I always knew I should quit smoking, drinking and gambling. But I never thought I’d have to turn into a dog to do it.”

Of course, some habits were hard to break, even for a dog. For example, Waffles really missed his morning coffee. “Give me a cup of coffee and I could solve a case in my bathrobe,” he would say. “Did I tell you how much I miss my bathrobe?”

Sometimes a nice pancake would lift his spirits. Waffles loved a good pancake for breakfast. He told me he used to love waffles as well. But now they brought back too many bad memories.

Anyway, I was so worried about Elinor that I was back to stress cooking. This was lucky for Waffles. I had made three dozen pancakes by the time he woke up. I thought this would make him happy. But he walked into the kitchen and ignored breakfast.

I thought maybe he was still sleepy. So I asked, “Would you like a pancake, Waffles?”

“No thanks, Harry.”

At first I thought all the talk of poison had affected his appetite. But then I noticed something different about him. He was alert and almost cheerful. Like he had just drunk a whole cup of coffee in his long-lost bathrobe. “I had a dream last night, Harry,” he said.

“Was it about getting hit by the waffle maker again?” I asked.

“No,” said Waffles. “It was about the poem in Stanley’s recipe book.”

“A Portrait of Waffles’?” I said.

“That’s right,” said Waffles. “I dreamt about it last night. Why is the poem underlined in red ink, Harry? Nothing else in the book is. Stanley wanted us to pay special attention to it! It isn’t really a poem. It’s more like a riddle. A riddle that’s going to help us find the painting.”

We read the poem again. And then Waffles got very quiet. I asked him what he was doing. “I’m

thinking like a detective,” he answered. “A detective who’s also a dog.”

Waffles told me to read the last three lines of the riddle. *Find the secret you seek/When you use your teeth/And finally accept who you are.*

“But what does it mean?” I asked.

“It has to do with something I remembered last night,” said Waffles. “It was about one of Stanley’s favorite memories as a kid. His mother used to hide special surprises in his birthday cakes. Coins wrapped in wax paper, or little toys. So when you cut into the cake, you discovered them. Like a secret prize.”

Waffles was getting excited. “Back when I was still Jake, Stanley made me a birthday cake. It had ten-dollar poker chips baked right into the cake.”

“You think he might have baked something with a secret inside?” I asked. “Something that will lead us to the painting?”

“You know Stanley,” said Waffles. “He was always trying to get me to eat like a normal dog. And what do normal dogs eat?”

I thought for a moment. And we both said “Dog biscuits!” at the same time. “That’s right, Harry!” said Waffles. “Stanley’s baked a clue into my dog biscuits. Something that’s going to lead us straight to the painting.”

“But you hate Stanley’s dog biscuits,” I pointed out. “You even hate how they’re in the shape of a bone.”

“I’ll eat a thousand dog biscuits if it means we get Elinor back,” said Waffles.

That’s how Waffles ended up eating most of Stanley’s biscuits in the *DOG BISCUITS* jar. “These taste awful, Harry,” he said. “I wouldn’t feed them to a *dog*.”

I offered to break up some biscuits for him, so he wouldn’t have to eat them. But Waffles was a dog on

a mission. He just kept eating the biscuits, one by one—very carefully.

It took a long time. For a while I thought Waffles wouldn't find anything. Then he spit out one of the dog biscuits as delicately as he could. There was something inside the biscuit, wrapped in wax paper.

It was a key. Nothing else. Just a key with a number engraved on it.

"There has to be something more. In another biscuit," said Waffles. "Directions or a map."

Waffles kept eating. After a while he found it. A small plastic tube with a message inside. "Open it, Harry," said Waffles. I could hear the excitement in his voice.

I unraveled a single sheet of tightly wound paper from inside the tube and started to read.

Dear Waffles:

You may be a dog, but you're still the best detective I ever knew. You've solved the mystery of

the missing painting. I knew you and Harry would make a great team. Follow the directions below and they will lead you to a storage locker. The painting is inside the locker. Good luck! And be careful!

Stanley

There was a map below the letter. It showed the way to a large locker at the bus station. The key unlocked a numbered locker. The painting was inside the locker. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. It was a big painting, and it took us a while to get it home. Once we had, I put it down on the kitchen table and unwrapped it.

It was a portrait of Carmine Carelli's mother, Violetta. She looked like the kind of person who was always angry about something. "Turn over the painting, Harry," said Waffles.

I did as I was told.

"Now take off the backing," Waffles said.

"Why?" I asked. "We have the painting. Let's just give it to Jimmy the Fork in exchange for Elinor."

“I’ve been thinking, Harry. There has to be more to this painting than meets the eye. Why did someone want it badly enough to kill Stanley?”

“You think there’s something hidden inside?” I asked.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Waffles said.

I got a screwdriver and some other tools. Then we carefully removed the cardboard backing on the painting. There was a large piece of paper taped to it. To me it looked like a whole bunch of numbers typed in columns. I had no idea what it meant. But Waffles did.

“You remember what I told you? What these Mafia guys care about most?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Money.”

“Well, I’ve seen these kinds of numbers before,” said Waffles. “They’re bank-account numbers. This is all the money that Carmine Carelli has stored away in secret accounts. But you see these numbers here?” He pointed with one paw. “The money is in

bonds. That means anybody who has access to these account numbers has access to the money. They can withdraw it at any time. That's millions of dollars."

"But why wouldn't Carelli store the information on a computer?" I asked.

"Carmin is old-school," answered Waffles. "He hates computers and is always worried about getting hacked. What better place to hide the list than behind the portrait?"

"That's why Stanley was murdered," I said. "Somebody wanted the account numbers. We have to call the police."

"Soon, Harry," said Waffles. "But first we throw a dinner party. Then we invite the police in for dessert."

Chapter Eleven

Waffles explained that we had to be careful. “We have to watch Rudy to make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid. Our killer could be Jimmy the Fork. If it’s Jimmy, he’s very slippery. They say he’s a master of disguise. And that he can disappear faster than a magician. If that happens, we’ll never find Elinor.”

“So we have to lure him out into the open,” I said.

“With dinner and a painting,” said Waffles. “If Jimmy murdered Stanley, there’s only two ways to put him in jail. Hard evidence or a confession.”

“Or both,” I said.

That’s how I ended up planning a five-course meal for a Mafia hit man. I already knew what Rudy liked to eat. But I had never made dinner for Jimmy the Fork. I looked at Waffles. “Do you think he has any allergies?”

“I don’t know,” said Waffles. “You better start with something simple. What are you making for the first course?”

“I was thinking minestrone soup,” I said.

“Nice choice, Harry,” said Waffles.

“For the main course, I was thinking pasta.”

“Don’t worry about the main course,” said Waffles.

“Why not?”

“Because Jimmy the Fork will never get to the pasta,” said Waffles. “We’re going to poison his soup.”

“I told you, I can’t do that, Waffles. It’s too risky to use the poison. Besides, it goes against my whole honor code as a chef.”

Then Waffles explained to me what he had in mind. “You really think it’ll work?” I asked.

“You just do the cooking, Harry,” said Waffles. “Leave the rest up to me.”

And so I did.

We had the dinner at the Pasta Express restaurant. I tried to make everything look especially nice. I put out tablecloths and candles. There was even a handwritten menu with all the different courses listed in order.

Every course had a different name. The soup was called Harry’s Extra-Special Minestrone. I didn’t write anything about what made the soup special. But if our plan worked, Jimmy the Fork would never forget my first course.

Rudy and Jimmy arrived at the restaurant together. Jimmy the Fork looked nothing like Rudy.

He was thin, neat and well-groomed. He was also very polite. "It's nice to meet you, Harry. Rudy tells me you're an excellent chef." Then he bent down to pat Waffles.

I could hear Waffles ask me: "Have you seen Jimmy before? He looks kind of familiar."

I whispered, "I don't think so. But he *does* look sort of familiar."

"Harry's a great chef, Jimmy," said Rudy. "Wait until you taste his food."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Jimmy. "But first I need to see the painting. You do have the painting, don't you, Harry?"

"Of course I do, Mr. Fork," I said.

"Listen to this kid," said Jimmy. "So polite. Here's what I think we should do, Harry. You give me the painting. And then we'll eat."

"Not until I get my grandmother back," I said. I started to serve the soup. "We can't let the first course get cold, can we, Jimmy?"

“No ‘Mr. Fork’ this time, huh?” Jimmy didn’t sound pleased.

“What’s your hurry, Jimmy?” said Rudy. “Have something to eat. I hear this first course is unforgettable.”

Waffles was squinting at Jimmy. Then he asked me: “Are you sure we’ve never seen Jimmy before?”

I took a closer look at Jimmy’s face. Jimmy the Fork did not look happy. Then he started to smell my soup. And he gave a little smile. “Minestrone?” he said. “It’s like I’m back in my mother’s kitchen.”

“Believe me, your mother never made soup like this,” said Rudy. “Try it.”

“I guess a bowl of soup wouldn’t hurt,” said Jimmy.

We sat down in our chairs to eat. Except for Waffles, who sat next to Jimmy on a small stool.

“You sure we should have a dog sitting next to our guest of honor?” Rudy asked. He sounded a little nervous. And he kept staring at Jimmy’s soup.

“That’s okay,” said Jimmy. “I like dogs better than people.”

“Go ahead and start,” said Rudy. “Before the soup gets cold.”

Jimmy the Fork started slurping his soup in a familiar way. On Jimmy’s third spoonful, Waffles said, “Harry! I know where we’ve seen this guy before. Imagine him with dirt all over his face and a wool hat pulled over his forehead.”

And a wool scarf hiding everything but his cold blue eyes, I thought. “It’s Shaky Sam,” I whispered. I didn’t say it very loud. But Rudy asked, “Shaky who?”

“Shaky Sam,” said Jimmy. “My best performance ever. Right, Harry?”

“You killed Stanley, didn’t you?” I said. “Why? Everyone thought you were his friend.”

Jimmy the Fork looked almost sorry. “You know what’s funny about this, Harry? I liked Stanley. I worked hard to gain his trust. When I found the painting’s secret, I thought we could split the

money from the hidden bank accounts and disappear.”

Rudy nodded. “But it didn’t work, did it, Jimmy?”

“Stanley wanted to give the painting back!” said Jimmy. “He said he was tired of running. And that there was nowhere on earth we could hide from Carmine Carelli. All he wanted to do was live a quiet life with his dog. Can you imagine turning down all that money for a dirty little mutt?”

Waffles stayed calm. And Jimmy the Fork told us what happened next. “That night in the food truck? I lost my temper. I grabbed the rolling pin and hit Stanley a little too hard. I wasn’t trying to kill him. Not like that first time.”

I could see Waffles squinting at Jimmy the Fork. Then I heard him say: “It’s him, Harry. The guy in my dream. Jimmy the Fork is the waffle-maker killer!”

“You tried to kill Stanley with a waffle maker, didn’t you, Jimmy?” I said.

Jimmy looked surprised. "I saw a chance. And I grabbed the first heavy thing I could reach. It was the stupidest thing I ever did. I ended up killing some friend of his by accident. A cheap private detective nobody would ever miss."

Jimmy got up from the table and pulled out a gun from under his jacket. "Enough of this," he said.

Then Rudy stood up. He pulled out his own gun and aimed it at Jimmy.

Jimmy asked, "Is that gun loaded?"

I knew Rudy's gun was empty. But Rudy did his best to act like the tough guy his dad had always wanted him to be. "Maybe yes, maybe no," he said. "You want to take a chance, Jimmy?" They just stood there, guns pointed at each other.

Then Jimmy said, "Carmine knew you'd mess things up, Rudy. That's why he had me come to Vancouver before you arrived. He wanted to make sure the job got done properly."

Rudy looked like he was going to cry. I heard Waffles say, "I feel a sudden urge for soup, Harry." He leapt onto the table and started lapping from Jimmy the Fork's bowl. "No, Waffles!" I shouted. "Don't drink from Jimmy's bowl!"

Jimmy lowered his gun a little. "Why not?" he asked.

"I poisoned your soup," I said.

Rudy smiled. "I have the antidote, Jimmy. I can give it to you. But I get my dad's painting. And Harry gets Elinor back."

"You're bluffing," said Jimmy.

"Really?" said Rudy. "You don't look so good."

Jimmy started to turn pale. He felt his stomach with his free hand. Just then Waffles started foaming at the mouth. He jumped off the table and keeled over on the floor. Then he twitched a few times and went still as a rug.

Rudy said, "I think your dog is dead, Harry."

“So fast?” I said. “I guess that’s because he’s so little.”

“The poison will take a bit longer to work on a big guy like Jimmy,” said Rudy. “But it should kick in shortly.”

Now Jimmy was panicking. He pointed his gun at me. “Give me the antidote, Rudy, or Harry gets it.”

I didn’t have much time to be scared. Waffles leapt up from playing dead and bit Jimmy, the bath soap he’d tucked in his cheek still foaming around his mouth. Jimmy yelped and dropped his gun. I jumped forward and kicked the gun away. Waffles tugged on Jimmy’s ankle until he lost his balance and fell flat on his back. Rudy sat on him, holding him in place. I ran to the kitchen for a frying pan. When I returned, Jimmy the Fork was trying to wriggle loose. “Don’t move, Jimmy,” I said, holding the pan over his head. “This pan is cast iron.”

“Okay, kid,” said Jimmy. “You win.”

A few seconds later the police rushed through the door.

Jimmy the Fork looked at me with a bitter little smile. “Congratulations, Harry. They never would have caught me except for one thing. I just couldn’t resist your cooking.”

Chapter Twelve

Jimmy the Fork told the police where he'd hidden Elinor, even though he knew by then that we hadn't really poisoned him. The police arrested Jimmy for Stanley's murder. I was glad the local police got the credit. They took a big chance, listening to my story. I didn't have the heart to tell them the whole truth, that their case was solved by a talking dog who talks only to me.

The Las Vegas police made a lot of other arrests after we turned in the painting.

I told the police how Rudy had helped capture Jimmy the Fork. They sent Rudy to a special jail for young offenders. Rudy was allowed to write a farewell letter to me. He wrote that he was very happy working in the prison bakery. And that he often dreamed about my cooking.

Rudy even thanked me. *Someday you will be a great international chef, he wrote. But I am not thanking you for all the great food you made me. I am thanking you for being my friend. And for showing me that I don't have to be a leftover bowl of pasta. I can be anything I want on the menu.*

Unfortunately, I am not allowed to write Rudy back. The Las Vegas police have put my grandmother and me in a witness protection program, so we're in another city. We have new last names and everything. Even Waffles. He's now called Pal—short for Palidino, but also because after everything we've

been through, he really is my pal. “I like my new name,” he says. “Maybe I’ll even start eating waffles again.”

Pal hates wearing the itchy sweater my grandmother knitted for him. But he wears it anyway. “It makes her happy,” he told me. “It’s no big deal.” Yesterday we caught him wagging his tail at lunch.

My grandmother says Pal has given her a great idea for a new business—dog food that tastes like Italian cuisine. We’re working on a dog-food version of spaghetti and meatballs. And Pal is our official taster. I don’t stress-cook so much anymore, which has really cut down on our grocery bill. It helps me a lot to talk to Pal.

Sometimes I wish I could write Dr. Sherman and tell him about my dog. Just to let him know I have someone else to talk to besides Elinor. Of course, he wouldn’t believe the part about Pal talking back.

There are times I still can’t believe it myself. And then I’ll hear the clicking of four feet on the kitchen

floor. And Pal's voice saying, "You want to split a meatball sandwich?" Last night I heard him talking in his sleep. "I like this, Harry," he said. I waited for him to mention what he was eating. But he didn't say. Then he woke up again.

"You don't mind being a dog so much anymore, do you?" I asked.

"Well, I don't mind being *your* dog, Harry," he replied. "I don't mind it at all."

Pal didn't say anything for a minute, and I thought he'd gone back to sleep. Then I heard him say something else. "I think maybe I know why I became a dog," he said. "I think maybe being a dog has made me a better person. Does that sound strange, Harry?"

I told Pal that it didn't sound strange at all. I waited for him to say something else. But all I could hear was snoring.

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