

ON CAUTION

PAWS vs. CLAWS

A QUEENIE AND ARTHUR NOVEL

SPENCER QUINN



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ONE

QUEENIE

BAD NEWS, PUSSYCAT,” SAID BERTHA.
“No cream today.”

No cream today? Had I heard right? Well, that’s not a real question. Of course I’d heard right. My hearing is as good as it gets. Everything about me is as good as it gets. My looks, for example, are off the charts. I’m a thing of beauty, from my gold-flecked button nose to the tip of my snowy tail. And my eyes! I’ll make this simple: When you gaze into them, you never want to stop. That’s happened to me so often—in fact, every time I come upon a mirror.

There are no mirrors in our kitchen here at the Blackberry Hill Inn. I prefer rooms with mirrors, but I make an exception for the kitchen. Every morning when I wake up I take an elegant little stretch—very different from the clumsy stretches of a certain other party who inhabits this place and whom you’ll probably meet later, nothing I can do about it—and I glide down off the top of

the grandfather clock in the front hall and make my way here, where Bertha, the cook, is standing by to serve me fresh cream in a pretty china saucer, white with a gold border. This saucer is known to everyone as Queenie's saucer. I'm Queenie, in case you haven't guessed. I hope I'm not going too fast, although if I am, don't expect me to do anything about it.

I stood motionless in the doorway, waiting for . . . what, exactly? For some explanation? For Bertha to come to her senses? No! I was waiting for my cream, period. This was basic: I, Queenie, start my day with fresh cream served in a special saucer named after me, Queenie. End of story.

Bertha looked at me. I looked at Bertha. Bertha's a big, strong woman with a roundish, not unpleasant face. She's quite presentable for a human, and we've always gotten along well, right up until now.

"What's with you?" she said.

Seriously? I didn't move a muscle. Perhaps a whisker or two quivered in the slight breeze drifting in from the hall. My whiskers are lovely, kind of a finishing touch to the whole stunning package, and quite intelligent in their own way. I wouldn't have minded watching them quiver for a bit, but . . . no mirror. My mood—so cheery on awakening, the memory of a brief nighttime trip down to the basement and a chance encounter with a mouse fresh in my mind—was darkening fast.

“Don’t blame me,” Bertha said. “It’s not my fault.”

So? What did that have to do with anything? Did I care about the whos or whys or—

At that moment Mom walked in, entering through the door that led to our family quarters upstairs.

“Morning, Bertha,” Mom said. She glanced around. “Were you talking to someone?”

Bertha pointed at me with her chin. Some humans have a cool move or two—I don’t mind admitting that—and the chin point is a personal favorite.

Mom laughed. “I do that all the time.”

If that was a joke, I didn’t get it. So Mom talks to me all the time? What’s funny about that? We’re very close. She tells me all sorts of things she tells nobody else. That’s how I know, for example, that the Blackberry Hill Inn, which belongs to us—us being me; Mom; and the twins, Harmony and Bro, now on some sort of school vacation—and I suppose that one other party mentioned earlier, although he’s the classic free-riding type, contributing nothing while eating us out of house and . . . but where was I? Right, the inn. The inn’s not doing so well, Mom told me the other night, when it was just the two of us sitting by the fire in the small parlor. A bunch of money coming our way is still tied up in court, with more knots added by the day, Mom says. “We need guests, Queenie, and lots of ’em. But you know the problem.”

I did. It was the end of winter, a time of year known as mud season in these parts. All the snow melts, somehow turning into mud. Through the kitchen window I could see the remains of the tall, shining snowman Harmony and Bro had built, now short and squat and marked with many yellow zigzags, thanks to certain bathroom habits of that other party. I myself don't go outside much at any time, but never in mud season. Mud spatters on my coat? What could be worse? Rain started up outside, pounding on the roof and slanting down the window.

"I think Queenie's mad at me," Bertha said.

"Oh?" said Mom.

"There's no cream today."

"How come?"

"No idea. I set the empties on the back step when I leave for the day, and Walter has always made the delivery by the time I get here in the morning—two gallons of whole milk and a pint of cream."

"Who's Walter?" Mom said.

"Mr. Doone's hired man," said Bertha. "More like a hired kid—he can't be more than seventeen or eighteen."

Mom opened the side door. One small glass bottle and two big ones, all empty, stood on the back step. Were we getting anywhere? If so, very very slowly. Mom closed the door.

“Maybe the cows are taking the day off,” she said.

Bertha laughed, so this must have been another joke. Mom laughed, too. Sometimes Mom laughs at her own jokes. She looks very pretty when she laughs; actually she looks pretty all the time. Her eyes are really quite beautiful, big and dark and full of thoughts. Not beautiful like mine—just throwing that in so you don’t form a wrong opinion. You’re welcome, but don’t count on me to keep looking out for you.

“The fact is, there’s only one cow,” Bertha said. “And she never takes a day off.”

“Mr. Doone has only one cow?” said Mom.

“But she’s an Emsworth.”

“Emsworth?” Mom said. “Is that a breed of cow? I’ve never heard of it.”

Bertha shook her head. “Not a breed. This cow is the great-great—I don’t know how many greats—granddaughter of Lady Emsworth, the most prizewinning cow that ever lived in the Green Mountains. She’s called Sweet Lady Em, on account of the sweetness of her milk.” Bertha glanced my way. “And her cream,” she added.

Yes, my cream. That was the issue. Thanks for remembering. Where was my cream? Had this Sweet Lady Em character—evidently a cow having something to do with the delivery of my cream—messed up? I had very little

experience with cows—in fact, only one, and that experience was not good. This was back in the days when I used to do much more outdoor roaming. That ended when we had a visit from an unpleasant old lady from a group with a strange name—the Society for the Protection of Birds, or something of that nature. The protection of birds? That made no sense to me. Birds are very capable of protecting themselves—by quickly taking off and soaring into the sky, for example. You’ve got to be even quicker to have the slightest chance of actually catching one, which I’m happy to say I’ve done on many many . . .

But back to my one and only experience with a cow. At the time, I happened to be following a mousy scent trail that led through a tiny hole in the wall of a barn not far from Blackberry Creek, which I’ve never crossed, creeks being wet. Tiny holes are no problem for me. I just sort of flowed through it and came softly down inside the barn, where I got my first look at this mouse of mine, a fattish little fellow burrowing into some straw on the floor. We seemed to be in a stall, sharing the space with a yellowish-colored cow busy chewing on something that smelled atrocious, chewing and chewing but never swallowing. Not my problem. I had no problems. Fattish mice are never much of a challenge. You don’t even need to be the best pouncer in the world, although it just so happens that I am.

I pounced. What fun! Very quiet fun—a look of terror in micey eyes is completely silent—and at the same time good-natured, one of us batting the other around from paw to paw, and the other getting batted, no harm, no foul. No telling how it would end—which makes it even more fun! My mouse buddy and I were so busy having fun that we lost track of the cow, who must have changed position slightly because all of a sudden I felt an extremely heavy hoof settle down on my tail. I tried to scramble away and got nowhere. This was a nightmare. Meanwhile the mouse shot me one brief glance, then scurried up the wall and disappeared somewhere above, as though it got to decide when our little game was over. How maddening! Also maddening was this heavy hoof. I curled around and bit into it in decisive fashion. My teeth are needle-sharp, by the way, maybe should have gotten that fact in earlier. The cow lowered her head slightly and gazed down at me, still chewing in that annoying way but otherwise showing nothing—like pain, for example, from my needle-sharp teeth.

I tried hissing. I have a loud, harsh hiss that even scares me sometimes. She went on chewing. Her cud? Is that what it's called? I believe so. And then came the very worst moment of the whole episode. The cow slobbered some of that cud directly down on me! On my sublime and glowing

coat! I know how terrible you're feeling for me right now, and I appreciate it. I'm sure nothing remotely so awful has ever happened to you.

But back to me. For no reason I could see, the cow slowly raised her hoof and shifted toward the other side of the stall. I bolted out of that barn and made my way home to the inn, where I mounted the grandfather clock, remaining there until the cuddly smell had vanished completely—several days, if I remember right.

And now cows were out to get me again. Where was my cream? I wanted my cream! Cream! Cream! Cream!

"Is her hair standing on end?" Mom said.

"Looks that way," said Bertha.

"I wonder if something's wrong with her."

"Something's wrong with her, all right. She wants her cream."

"You think?"

"I know."

Mom gazed down at me. "What a funny little character!"

"That's one way of putting it," Bertha said.

"Come on, Bertha. I know you love her."

"Hrrmmph," said Bertha. That's a sound she makes to show she loves me, just in case you were wondering. Mom's always right about the big things.

Meanwhile she'd opened the door to our quarters and was calling up the stairs.

"Bro? Are you awake?"

"No."

"I want you to walk over to the Doones' place, see if they're on the way with the milk."

"And cream," Bertha said.

Yes, she loves me, loves me very much. Very nice, although not surprising.

"What about Harmony?" Bro yelled down. Bro and Harmony are twins, but not the identical kind. I've heard that explained to so many humans so many times that it makes me crazy. When I'm crazy my fur stands on end. Like now. I was having a very bad day and it had hardly begun.

"I picked you," Mom said.

"Why?"

"Luck of the draw. And take Arthur. He could use the exercise."