

TAYA BAYLISS
DOG SITTER

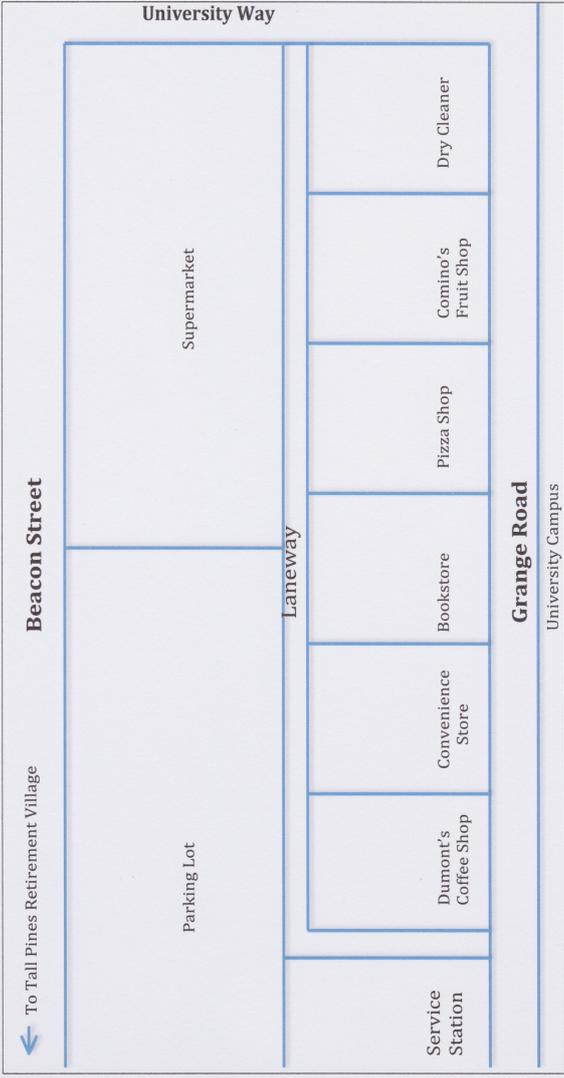


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Taya Bayliss – Treasure Hunter

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ISBN – 10: 0987370812
ISBN – 13: 978-0987370839





Chapter 1

The thief moved quietly around the room, from cabinet to cabinet, from table to table, picking things up, placing some items back in their positions and some into a black plastic bag.

This is so easy, the thief thought, walking along the corridor to enter the next room. The curtains were partially drawn, making this room shadowy and quite dark, even though the sun shone brightly outside.

The thief peeped through the gap in the curtains. *There's that wretched dog again*. It visited the retirement village often and was quite a favourite with the residents. Now it was wandering around the garden, going from one old person to the next, accepting an ear rub or a pat at each stop.

The thief watched as the dog took a ball of wool from the rocking chair on the sun terrace and trotted off toward the gate that led out into the car park.

As long as you don't get in my way, dog, the thief thought, smiling at the idea of two sneak thieves at work in Tall Pines Retirement Village.

From her perch on the railing that surrounded the tiny porch, Taya Bayliss observed Minette, Mr Dumont's almost fully-grown Golden Doodle, trotting briskly down the laneway. Her doggy lips curled back in what looked like a grin, she held a ball of purple wool carefully in her mouth.

Taya smiled at Minette, clicked her fingers, and held out a hand in greeting. Minette bounced up to the porch, dropped the wool, and kissed Taya's hand with her long tongue. She seemed to be waiting for praise- to be told what a clever dog she was for hunting down and retrieving such a wonderful thing as this purple ball.

The city in the summer was an interesting place for a curious dog. It was full of smells both lovely and disgusting, pieces of rubbish in which to roll, and many hidden treasures for a passing pup to discover.

Taya patted Minette's big head and tickled her floppy ears.

'What have you been up to, Minnie,' she asked. 'Where did you find this? Are you going to take up knitting?'

Minette ignored this silly human suggestion and rolled over on to her back, cradling her ball of wool in her front paws. She began unraveling it. Taya giggled as she watched her. *She is such a lovely dog.* Taya had known Minette since Mr Dumont's son, Pascal, had brought home the tiny, woolly puppy, which had now grown into a thirty-kilogram dog. Mr Dumont had told Taya then that Minette was a poodle crossed with a golden retriever. She was a big, gentle, playful dog with a coat of golden, curly wool. She liked to greet people with a hug, standing up on her back legs and cuddling them. This could be quite startling if the person wasn't expecting to be hugged by such a big dog. Now Pascal was working overseas, and Minette's energetic and adventurous nature was becoming a problem for the Dumonts.

Glad of something to do, Taya jumped down from the rail. These school holidays were turning out to be long, hot, and dull.

‘Come on, Minnie. We have to get you home before anyone knows you’ve been out adventuring. You don’t want to be in trouble again, do you?’ she said and led the way along the laneway. Minette followed, wool in mouth, trailing a long line of purple behind her.

On one side of the lane was a parking lot that led to a supermarket. On the other side was an assortment of fences that closed off the small yards behind the shops that opened on to Grange Road. Mr Dumont’s yard had a rock wall with an iron gate. Taya checked it.

‘Minnie, the gate is still locked. How did you get out?’ she asked.

Minette turned her woolly head to look at Taya and made a huffing sound. With the wool still in her mouth, she turned, walked back to the neighbor’s gate and gave it a push with her head. It opened. She walked across the small yard to the side fence, crouched down on her belly and shimmied under the rickety pickets into the Dumont’s backyard. Taya watched in amazement.

‘Min, you are unbelievable! If Mr D. knows you can do that, he’ll chain you up.’

Minette huffed again and trotted to the back verandah where Mr Dumont liked to sit and smoke his cigars while he read the newspaper. Taya opened the gate, walked down the gravel path and sat down on the veranda beside Minette. Minette looked at her and made a *wuff, wuff, wuff* sound that sounded as though she was laughing. Taya laughed too.

‘Yeah, well, you might think this is funny, Min, but remember what happened last time you went out on one of your adventures? You took that policeman’s hat off the back of the chair while he was having coffee. Mr D. really freaked out that day. He was going to send you to the animal shelter. Think about that! What are we going to do with you?’

Minette *wuff, wuff, wuffed* again. She didn’t seem to be concerned about the situation. People puzzled her sometimes. They were very useful for filling up a dinner bowl or a water dish and for ear scratches and belly rubs, but they didn’t understand fun like dogs did.

She lowered her big head and nudged Taya. Taya giggled. Minette nudged her again and then performed a deep bowing stretch. She walked over to the edge of the verandah, jumped down and disappeared into the bushes.

‘Right then,’ Taya said. ‘Looks like we’re playing Hide and Seek. Coming, ready or not, Minnie!’

Counting to ten as she went, Taya followed Minette to the bushes. She could hear Minnie’s *wuff, wuff, wuff* coming from under the foliage. Kneeling down, Taya stuck her head into the middle of the bush.

‘Okay. Come out, come out, wherever you are,’ she called softly, looking around for a large woolly paw or tail. What she saw caused her to gasp in complete amazement.

‘Oh my goodness, Min. What have you done?’



Chapter 2

In the middle of a clump of bushes in the corner of Mr Dumont's garden, Taya sat back on her heels and gave a low whistle as Minette's woolly head pushed in beside her.

'Oh my goodness,' she repeated. 'Minnie, what have you been doing?'

Before her startled eyes lay an amazing array of bits and pieces: four unmatched socks, two fast food containers, a motorcycle glove (slightly chewed), a key chain, three face washers, a magazine or two, a box of matches, a shopping bag (also slightly chewed), a pair of large underpants, crumpled sweet wrappers, a cushion, several artificial flowers, a tennis ball, a broken leash and the recently added ball of purple wool.

Minette woofed, obviously very proud of her collection. She slurped Taya's neck and began touching each item with her nose as if counting them.

See how much I have, she seemed to be saying. Aren't I clever?

'Oh boy,' Taya sighed. 'Min, you're a criminal. We have to get this stuff back to wherever it came from before you end up in the dog shelter. At least I think I know where you found this,' she said, picking up the glove.

It was a leather motorcycle glove, black with a red lightning bolt design. The seam on the little finger section was split and looked as if Minette had been chewing or pulling on it.

Taya checked the inside of the glove just in case there was a name on it, but there was just a size label. Putting the tennis ball in her pocket, she reversed out of the bushes and stood up.

‘You stay here, Min,’ she said, sternly, wagging a finger at the dog the way she had seen Mr Dumont do it. ‘I’ll be back in a minute and we can play ball.’ Minette sat, snorted, and watched as Taya left the garden, closing the gate firmly behind her.

Six shops fronted Grange Road; Dumont’s coffee shop, a convenience store, a bookstore, a pizza shop, a fruit shop and a dry cleaner. Taya lived with her parents in the apartment above the bookstore. Mr Bayliss was a science professor at the university and Mrs Bayliss was an artist who illustrated children’s books. The university campus was just on the other side of Grange Road. Taya loved living so close to the university. She loved the historic buildings, watching the students hurrying to their classes, the smell of coffee and pastries from Mr Dumont’s shop and the trails through the parkland around the university that led down to the river where the ducks raised their babies amongst the reeds. It was a very convenient place to live. Even the retirement village where her grandmother lived was only a couple of blocks away, which meant that Taya could visit her almost every day. It was a busy yet safe neighbourhood or, at least, it had been until the robberies had started.

As she walked down the laneway, Taya felt a twinge of discomfort. She was heading for the garden down at the University Way end of the lane, the one behind the dry cleaning store. She didn’t know who lived in the upstairs apartment but she did know that they had a motorcycle. There it was, standing next to the fence with a chain attaching it to a metal post. It was shiny and black with HOT DOG written in red along the side. Behind the seat, on top of the back mudguard, a storage case was attached. It was open. Peeping inside, Taya saw a glove just like the one she held in her hand.

I don't want to get caught returning this, Taya thought. She didn't want anyone to think that she had taken the glove and she was quite sure that nobody would believe that a dog was the actual thief.

Taking the tennis ball from her pocket, she casually dropped it. It rolled under the back wheel. *Perfect!* As she bent down to retrieve the ball, she slipped the glove into the storage case and was just about to congratulate herself on her cleverness, when an angry voice had her looking around in alarm.

'You! Kid! Get away from that bike!'

Whirling around, Taya faced the apartment above the dry cleaning store. She couldn't see anyone but the door was ajar.

'I...I...I was just getting my ball,' she called, holding up the tennis ball.

'You just keep away from that bike! Do you hear me? Keep away!'

'Okay. Sorry!' Taya shouted over her shoulder as she turned and headed back up the laneway.

Phew, she thought, as she passed the yard behind Comino's fruit shop. *Some people are so grumpy.*

She heaved a sigh of relief and was about to bounce the tennis ball on the bitumen when a head popped up behind the fence. Taya jumped back in shock.

'Hi, Taya!' It was Chris, youngest child and only son of the Comino family. 'Been upsetting old "Hotdog", have you?'

'Chris! Don't do that! I nearly had a heart attack,' Taya replied, one hand pressed to her chest. Chris smiled. At twelve, he was only a year older than Taya but he was much taller. His black hair was usually cut short for school but now, during the holidays, it was curling round his ears and flopping over his forehead.

'Ha! Sorry. I heard him shouting at you. What did you do? Get too close to his precious bike?' Chris gestured with his thumb toward the motorcycle and walked to the garden gate.

Taya smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

'I tried to make it look like I was just getting my ball but I was really putting back a glove that Minette had pinched.'

She shivered, remembering the anger in the motorcycle owner's voice. Chris opened the gate and joined Taya in the laneway.

'Ah, yes, Minette, the sneak thief,' he said with a chuckle. 'So you're the new dog sitter, are you?'

'No, what...?' Taya began.

'Mr D. asked me to do it but I told him I couldn't because I was already going to be working in the shop for Dad these holidays,' Chris continued. 'Did he ask you to watch her then?'

'No. He didn't, but I think I am going to suggest it to him. Minnie certainly needs a minder. She's always getting out of the yard and Mr D. has been saying he is going to send her to the shelter because she is too adventurous. I wouldn't want that to happen. She's such a nice dog.'

Chris chuckled again.

'She has a few bad habits though apparently. I saw her near the bus stop on Beacon Street last week, wandering along with a pair of underpants in her mouth. She probably got them over at the old people's home. That dog is seriously weird.'

'Ew! I just found those under a bush,' Taya exclaimed, laughing.

'Gross! What did you do with them?' Chris asked.

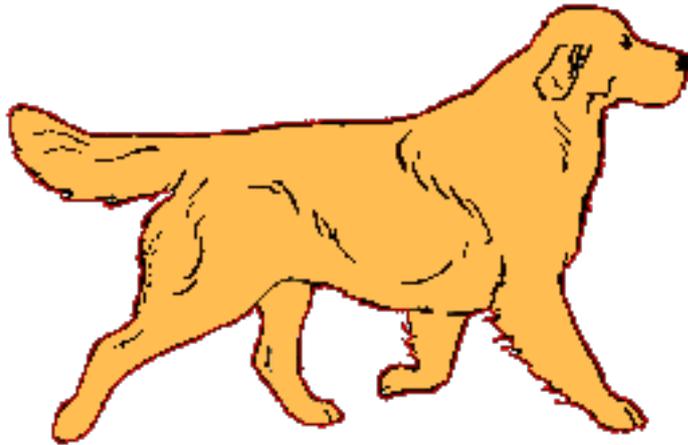
'Nothing. I wasn't going to touch them. Yuk! I'll get rid of them later when I have some rubber gloves...or tongs, or something.' Taya looked disgusted.

'Well, underpants and motorcycle gloves aren't as serious as what's been happening over at Tall Pines,' Chris replied as they reached the Dumont's gate and were welcomed rapturously by Minette.

Taya turned to face Chris.

'Tall Pines Retirement Village? That's where my grandma lives. What are you talking about?'

They went to sit on the verandah with Minette between them happily accepting ear rubs and belly scratches.



‘My sister, Sophie, has been volunteering over there recently and she says things have been going missing. Not stuff like underpants but expensive stuff - watches, pieces of jewelry, that sort of thing.’

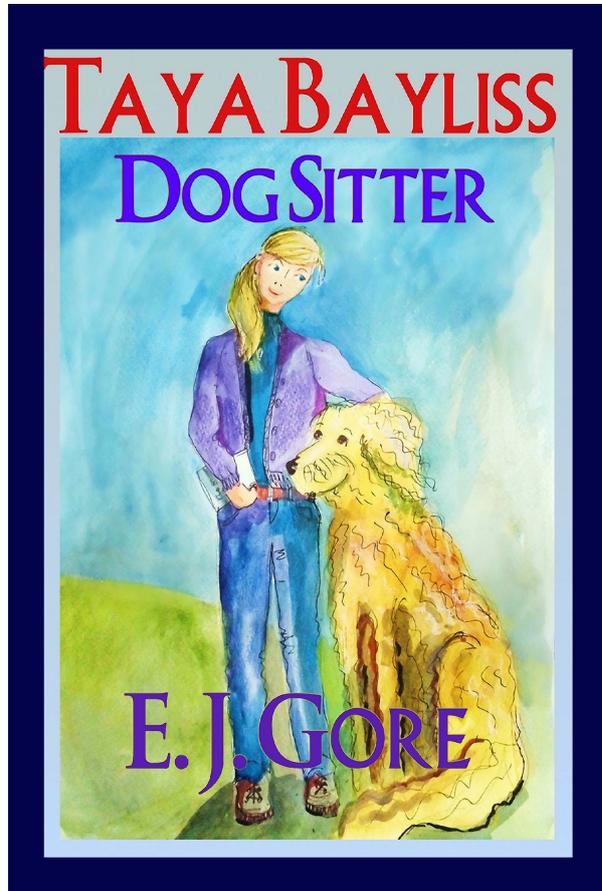
Taya whistled softly.

‘Wow! Min, is there anything you’d like to tell us?’

Minette rolled on to her back and made her wuffing laugh.

‘Seriously weird,’ Chris repeated.

Taya laughed. ‘Crazy dog! I think we had better have another look at your stash.’



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