

## **The First Two Pages: “Pet”**

By Shari Randall

From *Chesapeake Crimes: Fur, Feathers, and Felonies* (Wildside Press)

Art, thank you for inviting me to talk about my First Two Pages. I’m a fan of your work and Bonnie’s, so it’s an honor to be here.

With my story, “Pet,” there are three elements at work in the first two pages that I wanted to discuss: One thing I had to accomplish, one I wanted to accomplish, and one thing, a thematic thread, that I became aware of as the story progressed and decided to amplify in the first few pages of the story.

The task that I had to accomplish was the easiest. The anthology, *Fur, Feathers, and Felonies*, had to have an animal. In a blazingly original move, I chose a dog. So sue me. I had a character who wouldn’t leave me alone and she wanted a dog, and not just any dog but a pampered pooch that enjoys spa visits.

The thing I wanted to accomplish? I wanted to go dark. More than that, I wanted to go *noir*. I write cozy mysteries and I wanted to explore a grittier, darker world—less Cabot Cove and more *Chinatown*. I mention *Chinatown* because my character not only wanted a dog, she wanted to live in California, so I also had to ground that setting in the first two pages.

The third element? I discovered as I wrote that I was writing a fairy tale. Isn’t California a fairy tale? This almost unconscious choice turned out to be

perfect for the characters and the story. I went back into the first pages to underscore this theme.

Before you click over to another blog, I don't mean the sanitized Disney fairy tales with talking animals. The earliest fairy tales were dark, violent and always the orphaned child had to go into the forest alone.

Perfect. And so noir.

Originally, my first two pages were pages 5 and 6 of the story, which my wise editor told me to axe. Those first pages were a prologue in which I showed why my protagonist, a young illegal Russian immigrant named Katya, is so attached to dogs. How she understands them so intuitively, what they've meant to her.

I hesitate to call my main character a protagonist because as the story progressed I learned that she was prey. I had to make that clear in the first two pages.

As "Pet" opens, Katya walks to a pet salon where she enjoys looking at the dogs in the window—a nod to the iconic Hollywood movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. As Katya walks, she encounters cat-calling men on the street—wolves.

Katya left her Redondo Beach apartment, hurrying along the cracked pavement past nail salons, empty storefronts, and a crowd of cat-calling men outside a car wash.

Katya had to be isolated, as alone, as possible. I further isolated her by culture, language, and legal status. When she first meets Rosie, the owner of the pet salon, Katya's command of English is poor. Her word choice is simple, her sentences short, stilted. She wonders what Rosie's slang means.

“You like dogs.” It wasn't a question.

Katya nodded slightly, unsure if watching the dogs was allowed.

“I'm looking for someone to give baths. One of my shampoo girls took off with some asshat surfer.”

“Asshat surfer?” Katya said.

Rosie laughed, a short bark. “Sounds better with a Russian accent. You looking for work? A job?”

Katya thought of the boys who shared her apartment, the way they looked at her when they thought Lev didn't notice. Of Anya, the other girl she lived with, how she only left the apartment to buy cigarettes, how her eyes looked dead.

“Yes. A job. Please.”

“You're what, eighteen?”

Katya nodded. That's what the papers Lev had bought said.

Katya's English is limited but she's not stupid and she already has survival skills. She lies when she has to (“that's what the papers say”) and she knows she has to escape her apartment or she'll end up like Anya.

Is Katya's boyfriend her protector or another wolf? In the first two pages, we're not sure. He tells her to lie but he did help her get to the US.

As the story progresses, Katya meets a Hollywood heiress named Carol Ashburn who will change her life.

Mrs. Ashburn the ‘richer than God’ lady who owned [the pampered pooch Katya cares for] had a deep voice, smooth as honey.

Katya was dazzled. The woman's wide white smile and silver-blond hair reminded Katya of a woman she'd seen in a movie once, a woman in a pink dress draped with diamonds, dancing with dozens of sleek men in tuxedos....Diamonds glittered like fairy dust on every finger....

When Katya meets Carol she hangs back but Lev pushes her forward. Is this gesture a helpful nudge toward opportunity or is he pushing her toward danger?

Katya's pet shop is called Rosie's—again a nod to fairy tales—a rose, of course. I have a rather obvious (to me, a fan of classic movie musicals) nod to Marilyn Monroe in *Carol Ashburn*, reaching out with her fingers dripping in diamonds. Is Carol a good witch or bad? I used these images to underscore Katya's naïve view of her new home and her yearning for a life that, like castles in fairy tales, may not exist.

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Shari Randall is the author of *Curses, Boiled Again!* the first in the new Lobster Shack Mystery series from St. Martin's Press. She earned her BA in English from Connecticut College and her MLIS from the University of South Carolina. A longtime literacy advocate, Shari spreads the library love as Sisters in Crime's Library Liaison. In addition to "Pet," she's had two additional short stories published in the Chesapeake Crimes anthology series: "Disco Donna" in *Chesapeake Crimes: Homicidal Holidays* and "Keep It Simple" in *Chesapeake Crimes: This Job Is Murder*. You can see what's new with her at <https://us.macmillan.com/author/sharirandall> and check out her mermaid obsession on Instagram @sharirandallauthor.