

ON CAUTION

RUFF VS. FLUFF

A QUEENIE AND ARTHUR NOVEL

SPENCER QUINN



SCHOLASTIC PRESS • NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-09139-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 19 20 21 22 23

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, April 2019

Book design by Maeve Norton

ONE QUEENIE

I HAVE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL VOICE. I USE it to say just one thing: *Me-ow!* Have you ever heard anything so lovely? And it starts with *me!* How great is that? I love starting with me. In fact, I have no time for anything that doesn't start with me and keep on going with me right until it ends, with me. Me—or actually ME—is how I think of myself, but you can call me Queenie, like all the other humans. Call me Queenie—but don't expect me to come, or perform some stupid trick, or pay the slightest attention to you. You have my permission to look at me all you want. I don't blame you. I'm a thing of beauty.

This is probably a good moment to describe myself. Where to even start? With my tail? Kind of cool, starting at the end. And I'm cool, no doubt about that. Mom always says, "That Queenie is one cool cat." Not my mom, who I really don't remember, but the kids' mom, who has another name I can't be bothered to come up with at the moment, and anyway, she's just Mom around these parts.

These parts are what humans call snow country, although we didn't have any snow yet and it was getting close to Christmas. I knew it was close to Christmas because Elrod hauled a big tree into the Big Room and, after a lot of grunting and fumbling around plus muttered words that won't be repeated here, got it set up in front of the fireplace. I myself was watching this performance from one of my favorite spots, namely on the top shelf of the bookcase in the corner. Books can be quite comfortable. Were you aware of that already? What do humans actually know? I'm afraid the true answer might disappoint.

Elrod's the handyman. Why? Because he's a man with hands? I had no interest in exploring the question. Humans have their ways, usually noisy, and we in the cat world have ours, usually quiet. At the moment I was absolutely motionless and silent, yet still somehow the main character. Meanwhile Elrod was admiring the tree and rubbing his hands together, meaning job well done.

Mom came into the room, stopping short when she saw the tree.

“Elrod?”

He turned to her. Elrod—a very big guy with a thick beard and a ponytail, a look you see a lot up here in snow country—moves kind of slow. Mom—a small woman with

short, no-nonsense hair and real sharp eyes—moves kind of fast.

“Ma’am?” he said.

Mom blinked. Because she’d asked Elrod not to call her *ma’am* from the very first day he came here, and that was . . . who knew when? And here, so much later, he was still doing it? “It makes me feel old, Elrod,” she always said. Although she didn’t say it now. Instead she said, “The tree.”

“Ain’t she a beauty? Sixteen feet, six inches—measured it myself.”

“Yes, but—”

“Guess how?”

“How what?”

This, like a lot of human talk, was failing to hold my complete attention. I curled up next to a nice soft paperback.

“How I did the measure. With an app on my phone!” Elrod slapped his thigh. The sound—like a gunshot at close range—knocked me clear out of the nap I was just sliding into. I eyed the worn woolen cap on Elrod’s head, the one with the Bruins logo, and had an idea. I’m partial to wool.

“No flies on you,” Mom said, which maybe didn’t need saying at this time of year, when there were no flies anywhere, but I gave her a pass. I like Mom. She and I both have a thing for sardines. “The problem is the distance between the tree and the fireplace.”

“Gotcha!” said Elrod, and took out his phone. “You want me to measure it?”

Mom usually keeps her voice nice and even. You learn to look for other things, like the way her foot was starting to tap. “I’m just remembering last year, Elrod.”

“Last year? You mean when the, um . . .”

“Exactly. When the tree burst into flames.”

Then came the sound of a tinkling bell from the front desk. The tinkling bell could mean the arrival of guests, and guests were what we had to have more of, which Mom had been saying a lot lately. She hurried out of the room and Elrod got busy.

Maybe now is when to mention that we own the Blackberry Hill Inn—we being me, Mom, and the twins, Harmony and Bro, and me, in case I missed getting me at the top of this list. Elrod’s the handyman and Bertha’s the cook, but she’s just here in the mornings because breakfast is the only meal we serve. At one time there was also Dad, but then came a divorce for reasons I may have slept through, and now he was gone.

Mom came into the room, accompanied by a man trailing a suitcase on rollers.

“Elrod, this is Mr. LeMaire. He’s from Montreal, Canada.”

“Nice to meet you,” Elrod said.

“Uh-huh,” said Mr. LeMaire, a tall man, as tall as Elrod, but much thinner. In fact, kind of skinny, with a face that started narrow and got more so, the nose beak-like. Mom led him across the Big Room and up the broad stairs toward the guest rooms. They all have names, our guest rooms, possibly different kinds of berries or flowers, I forget which. It might even be . . . birds.

Birds. Why did I have to think of birds? Because of Mr. LeMaire’s nose? That was probably it. I licked my paws for a while, trying to drive the thought of birds from my mind. Birds were the reason I didn’t go outside much anymore. Where’s the justice in that? When I catch a mouse behind the fridge, for example, all I hear is “Good job, Queenie! Way to go!” But when I catch a bird—much harder than catching a mouse, by the way, and lots more fun, especially if you nab them at the moment of takeoff!—why, then it’s all about “Bad Queenie!” and “How could you do such a thing?” Sometimes I just don’t get the credit I deserve. I licked my paws some more, even gnawed a bit, trying to gnaw birds right out of my mind. I ended up thinking about birds, birds, birds. What were those red ones? Cardinals? Couldn’t be easier to spot, so what do they expect? Once, I was out in the yard, the backyard that slopes all the way past the woodpile and the apple orchard down to Blackberry Creek, only I was

much closer to the house, actually hanging out near the bird feeder, when—

I heard a squeak coming from the front hall, the squeak of a rubber boot heel on the hardwood floor. I'm an expert at hearing squeaks you probably miss, and not only that but I can identify certain specific squeaks, the higher and squeakier the better. This particular squeak came from the heel of a green boot with red laces that belonged to Harmony. Have I mentioned her yet? She and Bro are the twins. They're my favorite humans in the world. I like them almost as much as I like me. Well, let's not get crazy. Bro's name actually may not be Bro, but that's what Harmony calls him and it caught on. I tried to remember the name he had before Bro and gave up, instead uncurling myself and enjoying a nice lazy stretch. What a lovely sight that must have been, but there was no one around to see it. Not even Elrod, now on his knees and peering under the lowest branches of the tree.

The next moment, Harmony came into the room, carrying a load of firewood and, yes, wearing her Christmas boots, the green ones with the red laces. You may think that being right all the time would get boring, but take it from me: It doesn't.

"Hey, Elrod," she said. "What a nice tree!"

Elrod, now lying facedown and way under the tree, just the lower part of his legs showing, squirmed around and

said something muffled that sounded like, “Sixteen feet, six inches, Harmony! And you’ll never guess how I—”

That was when the tree started getting tippy. I was down on the floor myself, headed toward Harmony with the idea of rubbing myself against her leg for a bit, just reminding her of me, but I’m not the type to stick around when catastrophe is in the air. Before you knew it—almost before I knew it—I’d leaped up to the top of the piano, a fine spot although not as cozy as the bookcase. How pleasant to be so quick!

Meanwhile, Harmony—who’s pretty quick herself, in human terms—had somehow put down her load of split logs and grabbed on to a big branch of the tree, getting it back to almost steady.

“Uh, thanks, Harmony,” Elrod said, backing out from underneath, butt first. I actually had one paw raised, all set to slink my way down to Harmony and get on with the leg-rubbing ritual, when familiar crashing and banging started up from the direction of the front door. In walked Bro, also with an armful of wood, but although far from quiet in his movements, Bro wasn’t the chief noisemaker. That would be the final member of our household, whom I suppose I’ll have to mention.

There he was, real as real could be, and just so excited to be in the mix, careening around in his undignified way,

carrying one measly split log, and a small one at that, wedged crookedly in that drooling mouth of his. He was real proud to be helping out. That weird stubby tail wagging at blur speed was the giveaway. Here's a tip—all you ever need to know about Arthur you can tell from what that tail is up to. Forget about subtlety when it comes to Arthur. That's true of all dogs, although many of them are much more presentable than Arthur. Maybe all of them. For example, what's the deal with that gnarly coat of his, kind of like the old tweed jacket Elrod wears when he has to dress up? And do his ears really need to be that floppy, practically dragging on the floor? Plus don't get me started on his nose, which takes up about half his—

“Arthur! No! Stop!”

That was Harmony. But too late. Anything the slightest bit unusual—like the sight of Elrod crawling out from under the tree—is enough to get Arthur going. It was all so, so predictable: Arthur's sudden change of direction, ripping tufts of wool off Mom's favorite rug with his clumsy claws; then his all-paws-off-the-ground-at-once sprint toward Elrod, the split log dangling out one side of his mouth; followed by a series of Arthur-type decisions, all customarily demented; and ending with the tree toppling down on Elrod, Harmony, Bro, and a pretty crystal flower vase, Mom's favorite. But not on Arthur, who stood just outside

the circle of destruction, his tail still wagging, although slower now, as though beginning to have doubts. I made a mental note concerning those tufts of rug wool, now readily available, then closed my eyes and settled into that nap, which was what I should have done from the start.