

Steppin' out

By Jerry Peterson

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“Let me tell you, friend, living inside a book is confining. I know, *The Maltese Falcon* is my home. Maybe you've heard of it.”

Spade tossed back a diet Sprite in the store's stockroom. He winced and stared at the can. “Tastes like horse pee. How I miss the days when a man could smoke a cigar and drink Scotch.

“Well, you asked me what I work on when I get out at night. Let me tell you I have to hustle. We got all these hot new detectives on the block, pansies compared to me and Philip Marlowe, but still they snatch the best cases. All I'm getting are kidnappings. Like this last one, I call it the Case of the Missing Bowser.

“The other night, I'm poking through this shelf of Dennis Lehane books looking for a good bedtime story, and this little red-haired girl comes up to me and asks, ‘Are you Sam Spade?’

“I'm sure not V.I. Warshawski, I say. And she asks, can I find her her dog, says her dog's been kidnapped, says his daddy can pay my retainer and expenses but can't go the ransom.

“How much is it, I ask. And she says five thousand dollars.

“I whistle in disbelief and ask what dog's worth that kind of dough? And she says, ‘Sandy. He's my best friend.’

“Did you take this to the police, I ask. And she says, ‘They laughed at me.’

“Now, friend, heartless cops, doesn't that make you wonder why you're paying your taxes? Anyway, I look at her and there's this flood of tears coming out of her eyes. How could I tell this sweet child I don't find dogs?

“She hands me the ransom note and it says, ‘Bring five thousand dollars to the new releases display by midnight or we whack your pooch.’

“So we make a plan. It's not the best, but it's worked for me before. We fill a suitcase with old paperbacks, and I tell her to drag it up to the display at the appointed hour and I'd take care of the rest.

“What's the rest, you say? I put my heater in my shoulder holster and a persuader – that's a blackjack, friend – in my coat pocket, and I get there early. I hide between an Evanovich book and that new one by McCall Smith and I wait.

“When the clock strikes midnight, I peek out and there comes the girl hauling the suitcase, and around this table steps this big guy, really huge – looked to be eight feet tall.

“The girl recognizes him, calls him Mister Mack and asks where's Sandy? And he says, ‘Leave the suitcase. The dog's tied behind the Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Anything funny,’ he says, ‘and I'll text Chuck the Chopper and he'll chainsaw your dog into smoky links before you can get there.’

“That's my cue. I leap out and pancake Mister Mack. Then I race to the Holmes section and ventilate The Chopper before he can fire up his chainsaw.

“The girl gets her dog, I get a payday, and, friend, it's the Case Missing Bowser closed.”