



Abby Richmond's ancient two-toned station wagon shuddered to a stop in front of the dust-covered windows of the Temple Street Coffeehouse, and the Newfoundland beside her sat up and barked.

'Bowser, I think we're in trouble,' Abby said, peering through her windshield at the old building. 'It doesn't look like much of an inheritance.'

Bowser tried to lumber to his feet, but even in a full-sized station wagon there wasn't enough room for a full-sized Newfie, so he settled back down again, looking up at her with his dark, gentle eyes.

'Yeah, I know; you need a patch of grass and something to eat,' Abby said. 'The lawyer said there's a place to park in the alley around back. Let's reconnoiter.'

Bowser replied with the low raspy sound that meant agreement. Bowser tended to be a very agreeable dog. Abby pulled back out into the sparse traffic on Temple Street, managing to just miss clipping a Lexus, and drove around the corner in search of the elusive alleyway that belonged to the building. She pulled in and parked, then let Bowser out.

There was a small, brick-walled courtyard in back, and Bowser rushed toward the thick green grass with a muffled yelp of gratitude as Abby wandered over to the stone bench. The only piece of litter was a yellow flyer, and she picked it up and shoved it in her pocket before she sat

down. The smell of honeysuckle was in the air, and the June sun was bright overhead. She'd always thought of Ohio as flat and brown compared to the lush ripeness of landscaped Southern California, but this courtyard was an oasis of greenery.

She looked up at the back of the three-story building she'd inherited. It looked in decent enough shape, and her mother, the Real Estate Goddess of Escondido, would doubtless be able to sell it quickly and profitably. If Abby decided to let her.

'What do you think, Bowser?' she said. 'Do I hand this over to my mother . . . ?' Her cell phone rang, the booming strains of the 'Ride of the Valkyries.' 'Speak of the devil.' She flipped open her cell phone with a sigh of resignation. 'Yes, Mom.'

'Have you reached that godforsaken town yet?' Amanda Richmond demanded.

'I'm here.'

'I suppose it's as bleak and scrubby as it always was.'

'It's actually very pretty around here,' Abby said. 'How long has it been since you've been here?'

'Thirty years, and I'm never coming back. Does the building look like it's worth anything? I've got connections in the Ohio real estate market, and the sooner we move on it the better.'

Abby looked up at the building. The back was painted lavender, the bricked courtyard was lush and overgrown, and a wide set of stairs led up to the French doors. The roof looked solid, the windows a little dusty. All in all, it looked like home.

'I haven't decided yet. I may want to stay here for a while.'

'What?' her mother shrieked. 'Don't be ridiculous – you're a California girl. You don't belong in the flatlands.'

'It's actually quite hilly,' Abby pointed out. 'And I'm not sure where I belong.'

Her mother's silence was evocative of her disapproval but Amanda Richmond hadn't become the Real Estate Goddess of Escondido without learning how to play her clients. And her daughter. 'Someone's been trying to get in touch with you,' she said abruptly. 'Some moldy old professor. Apparently my mother promised him cookies, or something equally ridiculous. I didn't want to give him your cell phone number, but he was quite insistent. She was probably sleeping with him.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' Abby said. 'That's my grandmother you're talking about!'

'That's my mother I'm talking about,' Amanda said, her voice tart. 'And you hadn't seen her in more than fifteen years. Neither had I, for that matter, but I doubt she'd have changed her spots before she died. What are you going to do about the building?'

'Live here,' Abby said, defiant.

Another moment of angry silence. 'Very well. Professor Mackenzie will be looking for you. Be prepared to deal.'

Only her mother could slam down a cell phone, Abby thought, pushing up from the bench. Bowser ambled over to her, his plummy tail swishing back and forth, 'Amanda's flipped, Bowser,' she said.

Bowser, of course, said nothing.

'Let's go check out my inheritance.'

The first floor of the building was like a railroad flat – two long and narrow rooms. The French doors opened up into a kitchen, with a wide island in the middle, a series of commercial ovens and a storeroom on one side, semi-enclosed stairs on the other. The front room was dusty, chairs piled haphazardly around the room, the afternoon light filtering through the fly-specked storefront windows, but even with the musty, closed-up scent, she could still find the faint trace of cinnamon and coffee on the air.

'I guess I shouldn't have been so quick to annoy my mother,' Abby said, looking around her before heading

back into the kitchen. That part of the building was at least relatively dust free, and she tried to imagine her grandmother moving around the room, an apron tied around her waist. Maybe something like *Chocolat* with Johnny Depp lurking around the corner.

Except she could barely remember what Granny B looked like.

According to the lawyers, two of the three apartments upstairs were empty; she ought to grab her duffel bag and find out where she was sleeping. She turned to the stairs at the back, then let out a shriek.

Someone stood there, silhouetted against the bright sunlight, and as Bowser made an encouraging woof, she wondered whether it was the ghost of Granny B. Then he moved into the room, and he most definitely was a far cry from a little old lady. He was tall, lean, and much too good-looking to be showing up at her back door.

‘I assume you’re Abby Richmond?’ the man said in a cranky voice.

Damn, he was pretty. In a disagreeable, uptight sort of way. He was wearing a suit – Abby hated men in suits. He was in his late twenties, maybe early thirties, with dark blond hair pushed back from a too-clever face. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, and he was looking at her like she’d shot his dog. Except he wasn’t the type to have a dog.

‘Who’s asking?’ she replied, mildly enough.

‘Professor Christopher Mackenzie,’ he said. ‘I’ve been trying to track you down for days.’

‘You have? I just arrived here a few minutes ago.’

‘I know. Your mother told me I’d find you here.’

Abby managed a tight smile. ‘How helpful of her. What can I do for you, Professor?’

‘Your grandmother contracted to make cookies for a reception I’m holding tomorrow for the math department. I need to know whether you’re going to fulfill that contract or I need to make other arrangements.’

Abby glanced around her. 'I think you'll be making other arrangements,' she said. 'I just arrived, and I don't bake.'

'Fine. In which case you can return my deposit.'

'You didn't give me any money.'

'You're your grandmother's heir. Your mother assured me you'd either return the deposit or fulfill Bea's obligations.'

'My mother knows I don't have a red cent to my name.'

'Then you'd better learn to bake.'

*Why are the gorgeous ones always assholes?* Abby thought with a sigh. 'What do you need and when?'

He didn't look particularly pleased that he'd gotten his way. 'Six dozen cookies for tomorrow evening.'

She'd made Christmas cookies in the past, hadn't she? Burned half of them, but she could be more careful. 'Where should I deliver them?'

'I'll pick them up. And don't even think of skipping town.'

Abby made a derisive noise. 'I'm not going on the lam over a few cookies, Professor.'

'Your mother said you were unreliable.'

'My mother . . .' Abby began heatedly, and Bowser moved closer, leaning against her leg. 'My mother,' she said in a calmer voice, 'doesn't know anything about me. You'll get your cookies, Professor.'

She waited until he closed the French doors behind him and disappeared down the wide back steps. 'What an asshole,' she said under her breath. She followed him, determined to lock the back door before she had any more unwanted visitors, and her eye caught the yellow sheet of paper on the floor.

She picked it up.

**BE A GODDESS TO YOUR DOG!**  
*The Kammani Gula Dog Obedience Course*

This two-week immersion course will teach you  
to communicate with your dog  
while commanding complete obedience.  
Learn the ways of the goddess Kammani Gula,  
whose sacred animal was the dog,  
under the tutelage of Noah Wortham,  
anointed Kammani Gula instructor.

‘Well, one thing’s clear, Bowser,’ she said, crumpling up the paper. ‘We don’t need no stinkin’ classes.’

Bowser gave a small bark of assent, and Abby rubbed his massive head. ‘Let’s go shopping, baby. It’s Slim-Fast for me and ground round for you.’

She opened the back door, and a sheet of yellow paper came swirling in on a breeze in the otherwise still afternoon, smacking her in the face like flypaper. She pulled it away and stared at it. Another dog-training flyer.

‘Persistent, aren’t they?’ she said to Bowser. ‘What do you say, pal? You think we ought to go to this dog-training class so I can learn to be a goddess? Maybe see if anyone there happened to know Granny B? We can always go shopping afterward.’

Bowser arfed, agreeable as ever.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Dogs and goddesses it is.’

And they headed back out into the afternoon sun.

Daisy Harris watched as seventeen pounds of Jack Russell terror leapt into the air, snapped at either a hallucination or a wish, and landed with a circus performer’s *ta-da!* flourish on the manicured grass of the Summerville College campus.

‘That’s not normal,’ she said.

Bailey looked up at her, panting, as if to say, *Want me to do it again?*

'No,' Daisy said.

He'd been a lot cuter when he was living with her mother.

Bailey darted forward, dragging her a good three feet and seriously aggravating her tiny person's complex. She dug in her heels and pulled back, but then he decided to run back to her, taking away the opposing force she was straining against. Daisy landed on the grass with a thunk just as Bailey charged her, licking her face over and over again with sloppy, stinky dog tongue.

'Stop . . . just— *agh!*' she sputtered, pushing at him. "'no" means "no," Bailey!

Bailey hopped back, panting, then jumped up in the air again, did a half twirl, and landed at Daisy's feet.

'Peg taught you that, didn't she?' Daisy asked, then heard a crackle under her and looked to see a piece of bright yellow paper, some kind of flyer—

'Daisy!

Her mother's voice trilled from behind her, and Bailey barked and strained against the leash, a little bundle of excitement and mayhem. Daisy pushed up off the grass just as her mother approached, a tiny, platinum-blond Jackie O, right down to the scoop neckline and the pillbox hat.

'Oh, no,' Peg said, reaching her hands out toward the rear of Daisy's khaki capris. 'Your pants.'

'Hands off my ass, Peg,' Daisy said, shooing her mother away.

'Hi, Bailey!' Peg knelt over Bailey, and Daisy felt a flood of relief run through her. It was over. Two days of incessant barking and chewed-up shoes and her things knocked out of place and picking up poop with little plastic Baggies . . . over. It was almost too good to be true.

'Okay, then. See ya,' Daisy said, then turned to walk away.

‘Wait; wait.’ Peg straightened and grabbed Daisy’s arm. Daisy sighed; she should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. Christians in ancient Rome had escaped lions with less trouble than Daisy had escaping her mother.

‘This is just a test visitation to see if the allergies are gone,’ Peg said. ‘It’s going to take me a few minutes to . . .’ She eyed Daisy. ‘To know for sure.’

‘No, I’ve handed over custody. I’m done. I don’t know how you suddenly get allergies to a dog you’ve had for three years and I don’t care, but—’

‘Are you implying that I lied to get free dogsitting out of you?’ Peg’s eyes went wide with innocence and just a touch of indignation.

‘Are you implying there isn’t precedent for that suspicion?’ Daisy said.

Peg’s eyes went back to normal and she shrugged. ‘I guess not.’

*How did I come from this woman?* ‘Look, you said two days. You said the doctor had some kind of shots for you and . . .’

‘Well, the doctor—’

‘*You said two days.*’ Daisy tried to control her breathing as the panic sharpened. ‘It’s not that Bailey isn’t . . .’ She stared down at the tiny dog that had torn up her life for the past forty-eight hours. ‘. . . kinda cute, kinda, but I don’t have room in my life for your dog. I have a CD rack to re-alphabetize thanks to him, and some couch pillows that will never be the same, and—’

‘I thought you two would have fun,’ Peg said. ‘I thought you’d enjoy having a roommate for a while.’

‘He’s not a roommate,’ Daisy said. ‘He’s a dog. Roommates don’t shed or, ideally, poop in your bathtub. Which reminds me; have you ever thought about obedience—’

‘Let’s discuss it some more.’ Peg grabbed Daisy’s elbow. ‘We can sit down . . .’ Peg scanned the campus, then pointed to the huge, stone step temple where Summerville

College housed the history department. ‘There.’

She pulled on Daisy’s arm, but Daisy resisted. A lifetime in Summerville, four years attending college there, and another ten working in the humanities department, and Daisy had managed to never set foot in that temple. It was about half the size of a city block at the base, and clicked upward in diminishing squares for three formidable stories, looking like a tremendous, ugly stone wedding cake. It was a notable claim to fame for Summerville College to have a genuine Mesopotamian ziggurat in the center of campus, sure, but the thing wasn’t exactly welcoming.

‘Let’s just sit down on the grass,’ Daisy said. ‘I’m already stained.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Peg said, pulling on Daisy with a force that belied her miniature stature.

Bailey barked and danced at their heels as they walked. Peg didn’t seem to mind her leash arm being yanked around from side to side; just watching it drove Daisy crazy.

‘You know,’ Daisy said, ‘you really should think about training—’

‘Tell me,’ Peg said, looping her arm through Daisy’s. ‘What’s new? Anything?’

‘New?’ Daisy sighed. ‘Let’s see. Scratches in my wood floors, those are new. My inability to sleep through the night because Bailey barks at the door, that’s new. Oh, and let me tell you about the newly violated ficus plant at the office—’

Peg stopped walking, shooting a horrified look at Daisy. ‘Barking at the door? Why didn’t you let him sleep on the bed with you?’

Daisy stopped walking about fifteen feet from the temple steps and turned on her mother. ‘Sleep with me? Are you insane?’

Peg shook her head. ‘No. It’s nice. He crawls down under the sheets and keeps your toes warm.’

*Ugh*, Daisy thought. ‘Look, I’m not a dog person, okay? I mean, Bailey’s . . .’ She shot a look at him as he panted happily up at her, and felt an odd sense of guilt. ‘. . . fine, for a dog, but I don’t like animals. I like a clean apartment and clothes without dog hair on them and—’

Just then, something flew at her, smacking her gently in the side of the face. She grabbed at it and pulled it back – another yellow flyer. She glanced around, looking for a student with an armful who needed a serious talking to, but there was no one. Daisy glanced at the paper and started reading:

### **BE A GODDESS TO YOUR DOG!**

#### *The Kammani Gula Dog Obedience Course*

‘“Be a Goddess to Your Dog!”?’ she said. ‘Now I’ve seen everything. Although it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you and—’

‘Be a what?’ Peg snatched the flyer away from Daisy and read it, her eyes widening, and then . . .

. . . she sneezed.

‘Oh, no,’ Daisy said, backing away. ‘You go train that dog and be a goddess; I have CDs to alphabetize.’

‘Ah-*chooo!*’ This one hit so loudly that Daisy could hear it echoing off the stone of the temple.

‘Ah, crap,’ Daisy said.

Peg reached into her tiny purse, withdrew one of her classic monogrammed handkerchiefs, and blew her nose so loudly that Bailey barked twice and hopped up in the air, ostensibly to check on her.

‘Oh, no,’ Peg held out her leash hand to Daisy.

‘“Oh, no,” is right,’ Daisy said. ‘As in “no.” No way, no how, no—’

‘The doctor said that if my allergies didn’t go away from the shots, he knew a great specialist in . . .’ Peg hesitated, tapping her foot and glancing around; then she smiled and

snapped her fingers. ‘New York! That’s right. Manhattan. The Garment District, actually. Isn’t that funny?’ Peg grabbed Daisy’s hand and shoved the leash and the flyer into it. ‘I’ll be back in a week or so.’

‘A *week*?’ Daisy tried to shove the leash back into her mother’s hand, but Peg moved freakishly fast.

‘Or so!’ Peg called back, scurrying across the campus. Daisy tried to run after her, but Bailey was pulling toward the step temple.

‘But . . . no . . . I can’t . . .’ Daisy said, and then felt a crunch of paper under her feet. She looked down: another yellow flyer. She bent over to pick it up and Bailey yanked on the leash, but she yanked back.

‘Knock it off,’ she said, then pulled up the flyer, uncrinkling them both, her eyes trailing over the text, catching on *teach you to communicate with your dog while commanding complete obedience . . .*

‘Complete obedience.’ Daisy showed him the flyer. ‘See that?’

Bailey barked, hopped up in the air, and landed with an ungracious splat that didn’t seem to bother him in the least. Daisy glanced at the details on the paper. The class was starting in half an hour. She could do that. She scanned for the location . . .

‘Crap.’

*The history department.*

Daisy looked up at the step temple while Bailey darted around her, barking, yanking her arm almost out of its socket. She wasn’t going to make it through the next week – *or so* – of dogsitting if something didn’t change. Maybe going into the creepy building and learning to be a goddess would help.

She looked at Bailey, who hopped in the air again, landed, turned around twice, lifted his leg to a patch of grass even though he’d long ago run out of urine, and barked twice at nothing.

‘Certainly can’t make things any worse,’ she said, put the flyer in her back pocket, and started for the building.

In her office on the ground floor of the step temple converted into a history building, Professor Shar Summer looked at the pink metallic appliance on the desk in front of her and thought, *My life has hit bottom*. She was forty-eight years old, her grandmother was running her life from beyond the grave, and her lover of two years had just given her a Taser instead of a commitment.

A cold nose pressed against her leg under her desk, and she reached down and patted her best friend, her black and gray long-haired dachshund, Wolfie.

‘Now you don’t have to be afraid anymore,’ Ray said as he checked his watch. ‘Problem solved.’

*I didn’t say I was afraid; I said I didn’t like living alone.* ‘Thank you.’

‘I got the pink one,’ Ray said, evidently sensing his gift had missed on a few points.

‘Perfect.’ Shar put the lid on the Taser box, trying to be fair. Maybe if she were more passionate about Ray, he’d be more passionate about her. She tried to imagine Ray passionate about anything – finding the Ark of the Covenant, rescuing a kidnapped bride, defeating a mummy – but it didn’t work. Too much tweed. Of course she couldn’t picture herself doing any of those things, either.

She shoved the box to one side of her desk with the rest of the stuff she didn’t want; the green department newsletter; a yellow flyer for some dog-training class, miscellaneous notes from her students explaining why they couldn’t turn their work in on time, the list of places she’d tried to find citations for her damn grandmother’s damn book—

‘Are you okay?’ Ray said.

*No. I can’t find anything on this stinking Mesopotamian*

*goddess my grandmother wrote about, I'm sleeping with a man who gives me a Taser instead of moving in with me, and I can't remember when I really cared about anything except my dog.* Shar rubbed her forehead. 'I'm fine. I just have to find some sources for this goddess and then the book will be done, and once that's out of the way . . .'

'I don't see why you're bothering with it at all.' Ray checked his watch again.

'I told you, my mother promised her mother she'd finish her book, and I promised my mother I'd finish the citations. It's like a family curse. Most of sources were easy to find but this Kammani—'

'Your grandmother and your mother are dead,' Ray said, shooting his shirt cuff over his watch. 'Listen—'

'I don't think that relieves me of the promise,' Shar said. 'You don't go back on your word just because somebody dies.'

'You do if they don't have a publisher,' Ray said. '*Carpe diem*, Shar.'

*You couldn't carpe your diem with both hands*, Shar thought, and tilted her chair back to stare at the ceiling. If this were a movie, she'd stand up and say, *It's over between us, Ray*, and then she'd meet somebody fabulous; he'd walk right through her office door and say, *I've been looking for an intelligent, mature woman with an advanced degree in Assyriology. Let me take you away from all—*

'Professor Summer?'

Shar let her chair fall forward, back into reality. One of her grad students – pretty, procrastinating Leesa – stood in the doorway with a hi-I'm-here-to-ask-for-something smile and then came in and put some papers on the already-buried desk. 'Here's the outline you asked for, but I don't have the chapters. I was wondering—'

'No, you can't have an extension,' Shar said, annoyed with her for screwing up her movie hero fantasy. 'I told you

your topic was too broad. Narrow it down to what you've already done—'

'What's your topic?' Ray asked, leaning against the wall, all professorial.

'Passion and Joy in Mesopotamian Culture,' Leesa said.

'Maybe narrow it down to one Mesopotamian culture and one idea?' Ray said. 'The concept of joy in Sumerian poetry?'

'That's what Professor Summer said,' Leesa said. 'But I didn't want to restrain myself.'

'Restrict,' Shar said, and then realized that Leesa probably didn't want to restrain herself, either, but before she could say, *Never mind*, a beefy brown-haired undergraduate stopped in the doorway and scowled at her.

'Professor Summer, you screwed up my test. I put Hera for Mesopotamian mother goddess and you marked it wrong.'

Doug Essen. Wonderful. Shar said, 'Hera is not Mesopotamian. She's Greek.'

'Well, Greece is right there, isn't it?' Doug said belligerently. 'She coulda gone next door, had a little nookie with some hot Mesopotamian god, been a mother goddess that way, right?'

*This is my life*, Shar thought. *This is what I've spent forty-eight years to achieve*. She looked at Doug and suddenly he looked a lot like Ray. And Leesa. Like one more damn pothole in her dusty road of life.

'Yes, Doug,' she said through her teeth. 'She could have walked seven hundred miles north, hung a right at the Euphrates, and had a gang bang with the entire pantheon of ancient Middle Eastern deities. *But she still would have been Greek.*'

'That's not fair,' Doug said, sounding about three. 'You have to give me another chance.'

Ray and Leesa had stopped talking to watch; definitely time to get rid of Doug. 'Okay. You write me a paper with

footnotes that show research proving that Hera was a Mesopotamian Mother Goddess and I'll give you credit for that essay question.' *And good luck with that, since Hera was Greek.*

'A paper,' Doug said, looking suspicious. 'Where am I gonna find out that stuff?'

'I'd start with the library,' Shar said. 'Books, not DVDs, so Disney's *Hercules* is out. If it's colorful and it's moving and it has catchy songs, you may not footnote it.'

Doug looked at her with suspicion, but she kept her face blank, so he scowled at her and went off to pay somebody to write a research paper for him.

'Jeez.' Leesa said, watching him go. 'So about my extension—'

'No,' Shar said.

Leesa stopped. 'Uh, okay, look, I'll talk to you later. I'll, uh, call.' She backed out of the door, clutching her sliding books, and as she waved good-bye to Ray and disappeared, a yellow flyer fluttered down to the floor.

Ray picked it up and put it on Shar's desk. 'That wasn't like you.'

'That was exactly like me.' Shar shoved herself back from her overflowing desk. 'The real me, not the good sport. I'm tired of the book; I'm tired of this job – *I'm tired of you . . .*

'What are you talking about?' Ray said. 'Do you feel all right?'

'I'm great.' Shar put her head on her desk.

'You're not tired of your job; you love it. Don't do anything dumb like quitting. You've only got five years to go to retirement. And they'll go fast. The first twenty-five years went fast, right?'

She lifted her head and stared at him, appalled, but he wasn't the problem. She was. She straightened in her chair and faced the truth: she had to change. It wasn't too late, she could still set herself free – okay, her hair had gone

gray and she was pushing fifty, but she could find joy and passion; she was *not* trapped. She could do anything she wanted; she could even decide to not look for Kammani Gula anymore. That thought gave her a sudden, giddy sense of freedom. *The hell with my grandmother and the hell with Kammani Gula. Nobody has ever heard of her; Grandma probably made her up. I'm going to just delete her—*

'Don't get perimenopausal on me,' Ray said.

Shar glared at him and then realized that if she could delete Kammani Gula, she could delete Ray, too. 'I think we should see other people.'

Ray stared at her. 'I just got you a Taser.'

'You can have it back.'

'It's pink.'

'I—'

A yellow paper blew through the window and splatted on her desk. 'What the hell?' She picked the flyer up and read it for the first time. "'Be a Goddess to Your Dog! The Kammani Gula Dog Obedience Course" . . . oh, *hell*.'

'Shar, are you listening to me?'

Kammani Gula. Right there. She looked up at Ray with her heart sinking. 'Somebody else besides my grandmother knew about Kammani Gula.'

'Who cares?' Ray said, looking mad. 'Are you serious about breaking up with me? Because I have to tell you, it'll be a lot easier for me to find somebody else than it will be for you.'

'Damn it,' Shar said, staring at the flyer, feeling the weight settle over her again.

'Exactly,' Ray said. 'I know you're feeling down, but don't—'

'I was going to delete her, but now here's somebody else using her name. She must have been real.' She looked at the flyer again. The dog class was in the auditorium, right across the hall, and it started in five minutes. She had

no excuse for not checking it out. 'I have to go to this damn class so I can find out where Kammani Gula came from. *Damn it.*'

'I was talking about you ending our relationship,' Ray said stiffly. 'But since you've made a foolish decision based on a spur-of-the-moment hormonal surge, I'm going to my six o'clock class. We'll talk about this tomorrow.'

'Oh, good,' Shar said miserably, but he was already out the door.

Wolfie pressed his nose against her leg again.

'We're going to a dog obedience class,' Shar told him, pushing back her chair so she could look into his soft brown eyes. 'We'll find out who this Kammani Gula was, I'll make some notes, and then we'll go home and eat popcorn and watch a movie. That's our evening. Can you stand it?'

Wolfie barked once and it sounded like approval, so Shar let it ride.

She stacked the papers on her desk, put the box with the Taser in her purse, and found Wolfie's leash to take him across the hall to the auditorium, trying not to feel defeated. It was a *good* thing that she was keeping her promise to her grandmother. And as for Ray . . .

'We can change our lives slowly,' she told Wolfie as she hooked his leash on his collar. 'Forget popcorn; we'll have *pretzels* tonight.'

Wolfie barked again, and she was pretty sure this time she heard contempt in his voice.

*That's fair*, she thought, and dragged him across the hall.