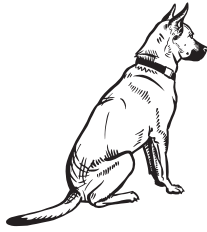




PREVIEW ONLY
Not for Sale

Siren
and the
Serenade

ANGELA CUMMINGS



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Paperback ISBN 978-1-954126-02-2 • \$8.99
February 2021 • 160 pages

The book's layout was adapted for this PDF preview.
The content may change before release.

A preview of upcoming book from Tulip & Hound,
an imprint of Tulip and Hound Productions, LLC,
4253 Echowood Ln, Langley, WA 98260

tulipandhound.com

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ONE

Flagler Raises the Flag

I WOKE UP ON THE FLOOR again this morning. Woke up to the noise of a garbage truck assaulting all the sound sleepers along Washington Street. Garbage day. An annoyance I pretended not to notice while I remained in my preferred sleep position: eyes closed; legs tucked under my belly; neck stretched with face buried in unvacuumed fibers of the burgundy shag rug.

I faked deep sleep for several more seconds. Finally, bored with my ruse, I stood up, performed a decent downward dog, and walked to the bathroom where I found My Patroness brushing her teeth. She turned around and smiled, trying to say something. I heard some noises, but as her mouth was full of a blueish white foam, I didn't understand a thing she said. Regardless, I looked at her lovingly and bowed.

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Then I smelled something. Some scent blowing in from the open window. I walked to the living room, stuck my nose out, and sniffed.

The musk was unmistakable. At first, I saw nothing, but a few minutes later I saw a tuft of reddish curly hair maneuvering down the street. The musk grew stronger as my gaze narrowed in on the reddish figure. Indeed, there was no mistaking that particular midwestern gait. Yes, that was him: my subordinate, Sergeant Samuel Ford Flagler. He trotted one block further, then stopped at the intersection of Quincy and Washington Street.

Meanwhile, My Patroness had finished brushing all her dull and totally inadequate teeth, after which she went to the closet and put on a coat. She looked at me and said she would not be gone for very long. I looked back at her, remaining silent. She then took one last look in the mirror, accepting the consequences of this act, and walked out of Apartment N° 3.

I stood next to the front door, listening. She walked down the first flight of stairs, then the second flight. The hulking front door of the Bishop Victorian Arms creaked as it opened and creaked again as it closed. Trotting back to the window, I tilted my head slightly to the left and watched My Patroness walk toward Hydrangea Way.

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Flagler was sitting on the corner, slouching. He waited for My Patroness to turn left on Hydrangea, then looked up toward my apartment's window. I pricked my ears, settling into alert position. Flagler barked once, lifted his delicate hind leg, and marked the lower $\frac{1}{17}$ of the stop sign pole.

The flag was raised. I must go meet him and find out what he had discovered.

TWO

Petal of Petunia

YESTERDAY, I had sent Flagler on a mission to find out who might know something about the murder of Siren, the Siamese show cat who had been found dead at the Port Townsend Marina five days earlier. His quick return and signal on the corner indicated his excursion had been fruitful.

I departed Apartment N° 3 and hurried to meet my subordinate. After a brief but obligatory greeting, Flagler got right to it.

“It seems that Petal has seen something suspicious, but she wouldn’t tell me exactly what. She insisted that she tell the two of us together, at her home.”

“You are certain that Petal has some useful information?” I asked him.

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He tilted his head as if he hadn't heard me. Finally, he replied, "I have no reason to doubt Petal."

It was common knowledge that Flagler was infatuated with Petal. Unfortunately for Sergeant Flagler, it was a very unlikely match. First, he was almost 26 centimeters shorter than her. Second, and more to the heart of the matter, she was a well-groomed purebred with papers who subsisted on an all-organic diet, while Flagler was a working-class hound from a spontaneously generated litter of questionable origin. There was even speculation – not unfounded – that his mother had some spaniel in her lineage.

"Do you have any reason to doubt Petal's motives?" Flagler asked me.

I pretended not to be irritated by his question and started the walk up the hill toward Uptown. Flagler said no more and joined me at the trot.

"Is she expecting us now?" I asked him to break the tension.

"Yes. She will signal us once Her Mistress has gone."

Petal lived on an elegant and well-paved street known as Petunia Avenue where the grandest, oldest houses of Port Townsend rested. Her house was a stately Victorian painted a rich lavender-blue color with ivory trim. It boasted a four-story turret and wide porch that wrapped completely around the expansive house.

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The locals referred to it as “Begonia” after the original owner’s young bride whom the house was built for.

As was agreed, Flagler and I waited in the alley for Petal’s signal. After a short wait we saw her large white head thrust through the cat door leading into the back yard. Petal’s large round eyes surveyed her back yard until she spotted us. It looked as if she winked, but I couldn’t be certain. Seeing that she had noticed us, Flagler wasted no time and crawled under the white fence, running toward the kitchen door where Petal’s head was still vented. I, myself, waited to make sure she successfully retracted her massive mug from the sparse opening of the cat door. Without a whimper, she did withdraw entirely from the cat door. I jumped over the fence and joined them at the back door.

Flagler and I followed Petal into the massive, blue tiled kitchen. Without pause, Petal continued into the living room while Flagler and I stopped at the threshold. The living room was a grand affair with three large floor-to-ceiling windows facing Petunia Avenue. The walls were adorned in a black satin wallpaper with a gold and mint green floral design. I had never seen a living room quite like this, and I was fairly certain that Flagler had not either. We waited at the threshold while Petal hoisted herself onto the purple velvet sofa.

“Please,” she said, nodding.

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Taking this liberty, we entered the room, each of us settling into two armchairs across from her.

“Apologies,” Flagler began, “my colleague might be shedding a bit.”

Annoyed, I quickly changed the subject. “Flagler tells me you have information that might be of interest to us,” I said.

“Perhaps,” she said.

She paused an uncomfortably long time, looking straight at me. She made me a bit nervous, I must admit. She was reputed to be a gentle giant, but I could only imagine what that jaw could do under the right (or wrong) circumstances.

“Petal, perhaps you’re not ready to talk about it? We can come back another time,” said Flagler.

My annoyance continued. I had not walked five blocks for nothing.

“Flagler, you indulge me,” she said. “And that’s saying a lot as I am nothing, if not overly indulged.”

“You know you can trust us, Petal,” I offered, hoping this would help her finally spit it out.

“It’s getting harder to trust people in this town,” she started. “My family used to know everyone, and certainly all the residents on Petunia Avenue where we have lived for over six generations. Now there are transplants and re-locaters and short-term rental pro-

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spectors. They come here with their undocumented dogs and uncollared cats, and sometimes even other animals, like rabbits and chickens. Chickens! Can you imagine anything more fowl?”

I certainly was not interested in Petal’s thoughts on the subject of immigration, so I decided that I must cut to the chase. “Petal, do you know anything that could help us uncover who was involved in Siren’s murder?” I asked.

She paused and again stared at me for an uncomfortable minute. “What I know is that Siren’s benefactor— What is his name?”

“Mr. Gregory,” I answered.

“Yes, Mr. Gregory never let Siren outside alone. Of course, she was a celebrity. A show cat, if you can imagine anything more absurd. What could a cat have to show anyone?”

Her disdain could not have been more palpable. “Still,” she said, collecting herself, “I am sure Siren did not deserve such an end—”

“Of course not” – Flagler interrupted – “and your sympathy and kindness are admirable.”

Petal continued. “I was thinking about the day it happened – just a week ago, was it?” She looked down for a moment, as if to bring up a memory. “There was a man. Someone I did not recognize. Perhaps a tourist. Who can tell? They all look alike to me. But anyway, he

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smelled different. Not bad, just a new smell.”

“Where did you smell this man?” I asked.

“My Mistress decided to take me downtown one day – something that almost never happens. You see, I like it here on my sofa. I like it very much.”

I sighed, waiting for Petal to say something useful to the case.

“Anyway, she and I were walking on Water Street, just strolling along. It was a very warm day with just enough of a breeze. Suddenly, My Mistress decided she needed a beverage. She isn’t one to be patient, so she promptly fastened me to a tree near The Bistro and told me to ‘Stay’ which made me laugh. I mean, what choice did I have? Anyway, while sitting there I caught the scent of slightly charred bacon, light brown sugar, vanilla shortbread, and a tiny hint of thinly sliced Genoa salami. I turned my head toward this marvelous draft, and that’s when I saw the stranger walking out of Swain’s Hardware. Generally, I wouldn’t have thought anything, it being a Saturday, but the scent of this unfamiliar person was so strong.”

“Besides the smell, was there anything else unusual about this man?”

“Well, yes, he was carrying a box of rat poison.”

“Aha!” Flagler exclaimed, his nubby little tail shaking vigorously.

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I was not so easily excited. “That would not be unusual. We do have rats in this town.”

“No, I suppose not.” Petal said. She hesitated for a moment and then opened her mouth a little, looking right at me.

“Where did he go after leaving the store?” I asked.

“He got into his car and drove off.”

“And his car, what did it look like?”

“It was silver.”

“Anything else you can tell me about the car?”

“No, I didn’t have a chance to notice, as just then I was greeted by an exuberant Golden Retriever tourist.”

“Well, this is some development, yes?” Flagler looked at me with eyes bulging.

“It is *information*, Flagler. I will process and consider it along with all the other information we have gathered.”

I sensed that Petal had no more details to share, so I gestured to Flagler that we should leave. It was good timing, as Petal’s roommate, a gigantic orange tabby named Fremont, entered the room.

“Ah, the recluse,” Petal said with a sneer.

I had only a small number of encounters with Fremont. He was known to be quite exclusive, even by feline standards.

“You remember Detective Wellington?” Petal said.

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“Indeed,” the cat said. He blinked slowly and then sauntered on toward the dining room.

Flagler and I excused ourselves.

As we walked out the kitchen door, Petal hollered after us, “Come back some day for a less serious conversation, won’t you, Detective?”

When we entered the alley, Flagler could not contain his excitement. He was almost yipping. “So! That is certainly something now, isn’t it, Wellington?”

“We have some information, Flagler. That is all,” I repeated. “The known facts are that Siren, the Siamese Show Cat, was found dead on August 3 on the steps of the Point Hudson Marina. Her body was intact. She, being an indoor-only cat, had not been known to ever frequent the marina. The cause of death appears to be suffocation and severe indigestion brought on by chemicals. When found, it was noted that her diamond collar was missing from her neck.

“Write this down, Flagler: silver car – style, make, model, year, license plate – unknown; scent – vanilla shortbread.”

Flagler began writing. “What about the bacon, brown sugar and salami?” he asked.

“Everyone smells like that here.”

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