

AH, THE TICK!

by

N.E. Nordstrom

CHAPTER 1

“What was – was; I cannot change it.”

Not all that long ago there lived a very diminutive gentleman who answered to many names, mostly unkind, with ease and readiness but always with eagerness when called by his actual given name “Thomas”. Thomas tended his rather wise and appreciative soul with a mix of a well-worn, if oft times somewhat skewed philosophical outlook and a distinctive style of well-mannered, though slightly intrusive curiosity. As such, he viewed the world around him with an open and willing heart. Wherever he went, he infused laughter and adventure and went willingly into each day anticipating its possibilities. He sought new landscapes, reveled in new friendships, and craved new opportunities with an insatiable and enviable appetite. All of which he found not necessarily due to where he found himself, but rather because he always *appreciated* where he found himself.

With such an approach to life, one would assume that Thomas was well-welcomed wherever he made his presence known. Alas, this would be a highly erroneous assumption. In truth, his gallant and enthused introductions were always greeted with sneers, jeers, and, in most cases, outright abject horror.

Such was Thomas’ life, and yet he still greeted each day with a smile and an anticipation of discovering that wonderful something somewhere along his journey.

At this particular time – no, not this time now as one reads this story, but the time then, when this particular adventure of Thomas’ begins – be it due to the peculiarity of the wind or the fickleness of fate, he found himself where he most fervently hoped to be, yet, was most ardently unwanted. Thomas was not a welcome visitor here, he well knew, having made numerous attempts in the past to spend time among its residents. Yet he was a persistent and determined fellow and believed strongly that if given the opportunity, he could encourage a more inviting attitude. He had a deep desire to learn more of these delicious dwellers, to burrow in and become

one with them and feed off their exquisite bounty. The smells, the textures, the taste of those he met enticed and intrigued and created an unfulfilled hunger within him. Unfortunately, however, every time he tried to settle in and better acquaint himself with these fantastic surroundings, he was scratched away; picked or plucked and tossed aside like the blood-sucking tick he was.

What was Thomas to do in the face of such antagonistic reactions to his presence? The truth was obvious: he could do little. Any effort he put forth to ingratiate himself to those around him, to plant his feet and insist on laying claim to his right to be there, could not occur without causing serious, if not fatal, injury. As a small, black, dog-tick his eight scrawny legs and tiny hard shell body were no match for those insistent on removing him be it by claw, tweezers, or the dreaded flame. No matter how discreet he tried to be, especially as miniscule as he was (ticks by their very constitution are very, very discreet) he was always discovered. The fact of the matter was simple: where most ticks went sullenly but quietly about their business, Thomas, being Thomas, tended to make a big impression wherever he went. Such was the obvious outcome of a tick who felt proper introductions should be made prior to partaking in a free meal.

It was truly unfortunate that Thomas could be so “Thomas” at times. He had such a buffet of dining choices, all shapes, sizes, and types but rarely ate his fill. Simply put, he would have fared better if he had just learned to keep his mouth shut. At the rate that he was going, his over-friendly nature was likely going to be the cause of him starving to death.

However, it wasn't the hunger pains brought on by skipped meals that dimmed the lightness of the day a bit for Thomas in this land of plenty. For such a personable individual, and with all the wonderful possibilities out there, his affability actually did little good and seriously hampered his social life. As soon as he began his introductions, he was immediately cut short, as was his dinner. Time after time he found that he had no more begun thanking his host for his upcoming repast when he'd suddenly find himself airborne. Giving a slight shimmy to free his shell from dust or dirt, depending on where he landed, he'd give a jolly wave and be on his way.

It must be acknowledged, however, that due to his characteristic chivalry, he never disturbed a potential host that was slumbering. How selfish would it be to intrude in such a manner, he would assert. Instead he'd settle in, relish a good meal, and then make himself presentable for proper introductions when his companion woke. At which point, once again, he'd find himself on the next flight out.

This made it difficult for Thomas to find a place to call his own, a situation that he acknowledged but did not lament. In his entire existence, at least up to this point – this point now, where our story begins – he had only been able to lay claim to one home. Even then, his residency had been relatively brief, even in tick time.

Since being evicted from that delicious, delicate poodle, Thomas had become a wanderer, looking for what he called “the glories”. The glories were the unexpected that he truly believed could be found in each day – if one was willing to look for them. Living the nomad life allowed him to search out that unexpected daily, leaving him in a constant state of happy amazement.

One may realize by now that Thomas was a rather peculiar arachnid. Even if one’s association with ticks has been limited or even non-existent up until this point, his distinctive attributes would still be remarkable. It was true, Thomas was noticeably unique and he credited much of his singularity to his family.

His wandering ways were ingrained in him by a rather rigid and cold elder he referred to as “Grandfather” for no particular reason except he liked being able to do so. He loved tagging along after the old gentleman. Every time he would scuttle too close, the elderly tick would cuff him with a hind leg and tell him to “shove off”. These caring – in Thomas’ opinion – words encouraged Thomas to be at peace with his nomadic life, learning to shove off whenever he had the opportunity.

His gentlemanly ways were a product of his domineering and determined siblings who had a habit of running right over Thomas when it came to the possibility of a meal. Thomas had learned that it was much easier for all if he simply stepped aside and let them have their fill. Since then, he had made it a habit of showing a more compassionate and considerate approach to those he met.

But the most important lesson he learned, the greatest gift, really, as he saw it, he received from his mother. It was from her that he contributed his bright and eager outlook. Although not all would agree that she had given him such a gift, Thomas had taken her parting words to heart, in his usual, positive, and uncensored way. She had no more than laid her eggs when hunger insisted she abandoned her young. Her words, as she scurried quickly away still echoed in his head:

“I don’t have time to name you all, so you’ll all be called Thomas, and that goes for you girls as well. It’s just the way of things or else my name wouldn’t be Bert! Now, I’m outta here

so you're on your own but I leave you with the same words my mother left me: take what you can when you can because you don't know when you can again." And that's what she went to do when she jumped on the passing beagle and left without a backward glance.

Thomas had rejoiced at his new name, uncaring that all his siblings would carry the same moniker, and he took her parting words as a life lesson. Where the others griped and groaned about being deserted by their parent in selfish pursuit of her own fulfillment, Thomas saw her words as an invitation to seek the best from each day and felt fortunate to have had a mother so caring and so wise. He was thankful that she had the foresight to depart such wisdom upon her offspring before going out into the world to gain from her own experiences there.

There were other obvious ways in which Thomas was different regardless of having the same type of upbringing, regardless of the very traits that commonly make up the simple dog-tick. There was his conscientious use of good manners and his oddly optimistic outlook, which in themselves were not even in the running as standard tick physiognomies. However, as annoying as these qualities were, they were at least bearable. There was another, a rubbed-the-faces-of-the-others-in-it kind of quality of Thomas' that they found intolerable. A quality that set him so far apart from all other ticks, something so out of place that the others could not even fathom its existence; something that for some reason came quite naturally for Thomas and absolutely did not exist for the other arachnids.

He was happy.

Obviously "happy" is not a typical descriptor one would use to describe the dark, gloomy character, or world for that matter, of the dog-tick. Where most railed against their humble status and tended to suck the very life's blood from their surroundings, Thomas had decided, quite young, to accept who he was, what he was, and to make the most of where he was – his interpretation of his mother's last words. "Thank you, Mother!" he would declare whenever life tickled him. Although his mother played a very obvious role in this approach (for all the wrong reasons), there was really no defining moment that was the epicenter of his decision to make the most of what he had and where he was. There were no lightning bolts, ah-ha revelations, or sudden epiphanies. Thomas, the same product of both nature and nurture as his fellow peers, had realized that going with the wind and taking the best out of his day made him far happier than approaching life with the disgruntled pessimism of his fellow ticks. This lighthearted, wandering

existence he had chosen, so he perceived, allowed him to discover more about himself and the world around him, than most arachnids ever learned in their entire lifetime.

Oddly enough, and what many may not know, is that a tick's life is naturally a nomadic one due to their need to feed and exactly what they feed upon; but it is actually against the ingrained nature of a tick to be a wanderer. This creates an obvious conflict; a tick's preference is to remain steadfast in one place. They resent the fact that the option of remaining is constantly, and consistently, usurped by others. No more do they settle in and begin to take root when someone arbitrarily decides to uproot them, willy-nilly, and send them on a trip elsewhere.

This spotlights another significant difference between Thomas and his fellow ticks: Thomas believed that he had *chosen* a nomadic existence. Be he traveling, settling, or moving on, he always felt he was making a choice and choosing to make the most of it.

This acceptance of who he was, and approaching his life accordingly, instilled a deep contentment within Thomas. This very statement being said, however, is a statement that made his fellow parasites uneasy.

"You should be more perturbed about losing your home," they would insist in their most strident tones when he would find himself airborne.

"Once again!" they'd remind him as he left another potential residence.

"Life is too miserable for you to be so happy," they would whine incessantly.

With grumpy consternation they would witness the smile on Thomas' face, the bounce in his eight legs when he scurried, and the air of excitement as he looked forward to his next new possibility.

"Hmph!" they'd rejoin as a group when he'd laugh while doing somersaults in the air after being plunked with tweezers. They didn't understand that he was rejoicing in the fact that he had at least attempted to befriend another and, equally important, he was immensely pleased that his eight legs and hard shell body were still attached to his scrawny head. Both were reasons to be jubilant.

"Why do you think tomorrow will be any better than today?" they constantly questioned with contempt. "Even if you were to find another, you're likely going to lose it just as quickly tomorrow as you did just now, and each time after that, as well!"

Thomas would always look at his fellow peers with a curious mixture of wondrous bafflement. He simply could not fathom such a negative and unpleasant outlook on life. He could

not change, he knew, how they approached their lives; he could only share, in the hopes of motivating some sort of change, how he approached his.

“What was,” he would tell them time and time again, “– was; I cannot change it. What is – is. I can choose to make the best of it. What will be – well,” he’d continue with a secret smile, “that’s the wonder, and better yet, it is a wonder for me to create.”

The blank looks on those around him informed him quite clearly that they no more understood him, than he understood them. More, his optimistic attitude wasn’t endearing him to his peers.

In fact, as time went by they became more and more suspicious of what they considered Thomas’ eccentricities. It just wasn’t *normal* to be so cheerful. It was unhealthy to be so positive. It was dangerous to be so well-mannered. That was really the crux of the matter altogether: Thomas was just “so” everything.

With so much going on with Thomas, it was decided that he must have some sort of mental deficiency to live in such a state of constant hopefulness. With this conclusion seeming more sound than any explanation Thomas gave, it became the accepted truth. Thomas was a mental case. No matter where he found himself, it was the same: Thomas was just not right in the head. Soon they began to shun the unconventional tick, calling him an abnormal arachnid and making him an outcast. Eventually his family, his friends, his peers began to avoid him as equally as the canine’s he tried to join for a meal.

Their narrow outlook saddened Thomas. He was saddened, not because of their opinion of him; they were just opinions after all. He was saddened because he appreciated and enjoyed each day and because he did he knew he gained more from his life where they did not and he felt that loss for them. This empathy, of course, only confirmed their concerns as compassion for others was not a tick trait. Regardless, he felt no ill-will toward them. He believed that if he remained true to his nature, and others could see the contentment he derived by doing so, eventually they would learn by his example and possibly consider approaching their own lives differently, more meaningfully.

It was this purposeful and optimistic approach that enabled Thomas to live life fully, eagerly embracing each day and searching out that glorious unexpected.

The satisfied tick went about his day searching for his next meal, sleeping where he found warmth, and languishing among a variety of dry vegetation he found along the way. He wandered and drifted waiting to hitch a ride, looking for room and board with some generous host. Each day he would look for that unexpected glory: a sudden flurry of butterflies, a wildflower growing in the middle of a dried out stump, or the best but most elusive of all, the potential of meeting and making a new friend.

Thomas always looked forward to the possibility of forming friendships. The opportunity of sharing his ideals and philosophies with another inspired him to seek the most from each encounter. The wonder of it, he'd contemplate its possibility, to find a like-minded individual to discuss the intrigues of life while dining with a new friend, just filled him with anticipation. Or perhaps, he'd re-envision, he'd find one who might not be living authentically, one who was finding it difficult to find the glories in each day. This inspired him, as well. A teacher by choice, he looked forward to helping others recognize and live their potential – even though he had yet to be successful in doing so with those he'd met so far. This possibility more than any other, encouraged Thomas to face each new dawn, each uncertain destination, with eagerness. Who knew if this day would be the day that brought the prospect of a new friend?

Yes, Thomas believed a stranger was just a friend whose name he did not yet know. Unfortunately, “strangers” didn't take too kindly to making friends with a wandering tick. When rebuffed, the ever-hopeful Thomas would smile and then dust himself off, and, as manners dictated, offer appreciation for the opportunity to have had the chance meeting. He would then continue his travels, finding glory in life and pleasure with the creature he was.

CHAPTER 2

“You certainly are a gift...”

There came a day one winter – no, not this winter now but a winter a while ago (and this is where our story truly begins) – when Thomas found himself leaning against the warm, dirty mound at the base of a small hill. He was studiously picking at his teeth with one of his middle right legs in an effort to get his mind off the rumblings of his stomach – a reminder that he hadn’t eaten in quite a while. Picking at his teeth with this particular right leg had been a favorite past-time since the appendage had first formed. Thomas tended to be a left-legged arachnid, but was working on becoming more ambidextrous as he felt it could only serve him well to be so. He practiced using his right legs for various activities as often as he could as he felt that any opportunity to learn something new should be attempted with enthusiasm. He picked at his teeth carefully, as not normally being right-legged posed the possible risk of poking an eye out.

It was while contemplating the possible dangers of putting his needle-thin foot so awkwardly to his face that he unexpectedly lost his footing. A great shaking had rumbled over his body and the air was suddenly filled with a high, piercing noise. With concern that the apparent earthquake would shake all sort of heavy debris upon his tiny body, he planted his eight feet firmly on the ground and considered his safest course of action. The trunk of the tree under which whose branches he had found shelter from the sweltering Arizona sun, a sun that didn’t seem to recognize such a season as winter, seemed to be his most viable and sturdy haven. Unfortunately, it was also quite the distance away, as a tick travels. Seeing no other option for more immediate cover, he took a deep breath and prepared to scurry as quickly as he could – ticks not being known for speed, his trepidation on successfully reaching his destination was very understandable. However, the continued high-pitch whine coming from behind him had him stalling his escape. He tilted his head slightly to better identify a sound that was not all that unfamiliar.

He chuckled as he realized his mistaken concern. This was no dirt hill shaking from a quake but a very dirty, dusty, and smelly dog scratching with high speed at a spot behind its ear. It was a somewhat comical sight, as Thomas observed it, and he watched in wonder at the rapid rate the clawed paw hit the same irritated spot. Sighing in relief that no pending doom was to occur as apparently his life hadn't been in danger from nature after all, he shook the tension out of each leg. Truth be told, it would have taken considerable time to make it to the trunk of the tree and in the case of an earthquake he would have unlikely made it safely to its protective cover. He considered the dog before him and with a grin found himself sending another "thank you" to mother for reminding him to look for the glories in each day.

One may wonder why a tick didn't know it was leaning against a dog, the obvious meal of choice for a dog-tick. Thomas was no longer a young arachnid, and was in what many considered his sunset years. Although this was true, the elderly tick was always pleased and proud to admit that he had reached the wise old age of two and half years with full appreciation of each day spent getting there. As such, he felt he had accomplished much, witnessed much, and most importantly gained much from his time in this world. This also meant, however, that his sense of smell had dulled somewhat. Although considering the beast before him, he felt that even if his age had not been so advanced, he might still have not caught the scent of dog immediately. Neither he, nor his advanced years could be blamed for his lack of recognition as the dog was covered in dried mud, and, if Thomas' now more aware senses were correct, dung, cow dung to be specific. Thomas wasn't even sure he could discern the true color of the animal's fur beneath the mud, dust, and manure.

However, realizing now what he had been leaning against, Thomas better understood as to why his stomach had been rumbling so loudly. *It* had apparently recognized, for quite some time, exactly where he was and with whom!

As the dog stopped scratching at that itch behind its ear – one could hazard a guess that it was possibly caused by a relative of Thomas – Thomas, himself, had begun the arduous task of working his way up from the dog's tail, through the mud-matted, course hair to the base of the dog's rump. He squirmed between strands of fur, looking for a clean place to picnic.

"Humph!"

Thomas looked up. The dog had twisted its head and was now balefully glaring at him.

"Good day!" greeted Thomas in his usually enthused way.

“Good day?” repeated the dog with gruff sarcasm. It twitched its coat in an effort to send Thomas in flight. Thomas, however, was an experienced tick and knew it was too early in the game to lose ground and held steadfast.

“Why yes,” he called out as he felt the skin beneath his feet shimmy in rejection to his being there. “The sun, though slowly making its departure, has given us a beautiful day, my good fellow,” he shouted, “there is no rain in sight, and the breeze is as soft as a butterfly.”

“Humph!” The dog stood and shook from head to tail and back to nose again. Then he shook harder, all four of its feet alternately lifting off the ground. Dirt and mud went flying yet a determined Thomas remained.

“Excuse me,” called Thomas. “EXCUSE ME!” he hollered as best and as politely as he could manage. The dog stopped shaking, sat with a thump, and turned with a disgruntled sigh.

“What?” he snapped.

“Since we are about to dine together, and as you are my most considerate host, I believe we should introduce ourselves,” the tick suggested in his proper tone. “My name is Thomas. I want to thank you for the opportunity to dine with you on such a fine afternoon.”

“Ya mean ‘dine *on* me,’ ya little vampire. Now off!” The dog growled, baring healthy, and sharp, canine teeth.

“You know,” Thomas mentioned, squinting slightly in inspection, “you... have... a bit... yes, yes, I am quite sure of it... you have a bit of fur right about there,” Thomas pointed to his own mouth with one of his left legs to identify the exact spot. “What is that exactly? I just cannot make out...” Thomas considered the gleaming teeth more closely, “Oh! Is that cow hide? Oh no, you have not been chasing the rancher’s cattle have you?” he asked with a slight scolding in his tone.

A paw, claws stretched and reaching, swiped near the spot where Thomas was eyeing him.

“‘You have not been chasin’ the rancher’s cattle’,” echoed the dog snidely. “Oh no, of course not, not me!” The dog pulled his paw up in a mock move of submission and then dropped it down with a slap in the dirt, “Duh! I’m a cattle dog, ya fool! Of course I’ve ben chasin’ the rancher’s cows.” With another attempt he swiped at the tiny black spot at the base of his tail. However, the dog had difficulty getting to Thomas and could not reach the spot with either claw or tooth. In his attempt he found himself scooting in a circle, creating a swirl of dust that caused

him to sneeze. Still lying down, he straightened slightly and circled his head this way and then that in an attempt to release some of the tension that was building there.

“You have not told me your name yet, kind host,” Thomas reminded him with easy and comfortable patience.

The dog snorted.

“Host! You’re readyin’ to feast on my blood, ya parasite. I’m not yer host ‘n I did *not* invite ya to ‘dine’ with me, let alone *on* me.” A growl sounded deep in the dog’s throat as he hunched his body even tighter in an effort to better reach the itchy annoyance.

Thomas shook his head slowly at the dogged attitude, a thought that made him chuckle slightly at the intended pun. He considered the beast, whose face, a bit too close for comfort, showed red-brown freckles on a cream colored nose above a mouth lined in black. He had patches over each eye the same color as the freckles, but it was the eyes that caught Thomas’ attention, not because they were such a clear, golden brown, or because they seemed to have been cosmetically outlined in black. They caught his attention because they were glaring at him in such determined annoyance that he couldn’t stop the slight shiver that ran under his shell. But as he considered those threatening eyes he saw something else, a deep weariness lurking within them, as well.

Thomas, as optimistic as he usually was, concluded that the dog seemed to be a bad-tempered sort of fellow. Seeing no point in being bad-tempered himself, he wondered why the dog would choose to be that way. Could it just be *who* he was? Maybe the dog’s attitude was like that of his fellow ticks: maybe he just had a persistently petulant personality. Or was there more to it than that? He noted again the weariness in the dog’s eyes. It may be that the dog had not had the best of days, he considered. This felt more likely. Thomas came to this conclusion because he believed that he could tell such things, that he had a natural understanding of the essence of others. Based on this instinct, he decided the mean-spirited behavior he was currently prey to, was just the dog’s way of projecting his bad day onto Thomas.

Throughout this contemplation, and without Thomas being aware, the dog had twisted even tighter and was trying to snip the little itch with his teeth. Those teeth were much, much closer than they had been. Yet, try as the dog might, he could not reach the spot where Thomas had settled.

“Now, now, I think you should just relax and let us move past this,” Thomas suggested with condescending authority.” The dog lunged once again, which rewarded him with nothing more than any other attempt he had made thus far. “What is it they say about the same behavior getting the same results; something about insanity? I just cannot remember,” Thomas mumbled more to himself than to the obvious oblivious dog. Ignoring its insistent attempts, Thomas asked for his name again and again and each time but was once again ignored.

Failing to reach the tick, the dog stood and put his whole body into a rigorous shake down that left his tail still trembling when he stopped.

“Oh really,” Thomas huffed in a stuffy tone of disapproval as he brushed at the dust that was floating down upon his shell. “We cannot have a civilized conversation if you do not settle yourself and most certainly we cannot if I do not know your name. No more procrastinating, please. Let us try this one more time. What does the rancher call you?”

“Why should I tell ya?” the dog questioned petulantly, as he held still in an attempt to regain his equilibrium. A fleeting confirmation that he was indeed similar to his fellow arachnids entered Thomas’s mind.

“Why should you tell me? Why, because it would make conversing with each other much easier as well as much more pleasant, I would think.” Thomas waited but the dog was silent. “The rancher – I am sure he has given you a proper name. What does he call you?” The dog let out a low, weary sigh.

“What a day, ‘n now this on top of it allt” The dog grumbled as he swiped a paw across his face. “The rancher? Usually he’s callin’ me somethin’ ’long the line of ‘dang-blasted dog’ or ‘old mangy mutt’,” he muttered, having forgotten to continue his attempts to dislocate the tick. “Me, a full-blooded Queensland Heeler, descendent of the great Dingo, can ya believe it? I ain’t no mutt.” The disgruntled hound finally planted his butt in the dirt and stared off toward the ranch house in the distance. Although his head was held high and his back straight, Thomas could feel the weariness of the day seeping through the dog’s body. As a single-minded tick, however, he was focused on a more important matter. He sighed deeply and loudly himself.

“Yes, yes, yes, I understand that he may have his pet names for you. Yet surely he has given you a *proper* name?” He asked with insistent patience.

“Duke,” was the grumbled reply.

“Duke,” Thomas whispered, as if tasting the name on his tongue. “Duke” he repeated with a smiling nod. “Yes, it fits you. It is an excellent name for such a strong, compact dog as you!” He wiggled his body and settled upon a clean spot of hide. “It is evident that you must work very hard for the rancher,” he declared, nodding his head toward the clods of dirt and mud that still clung to the dog’s fur which he could now confirm, especially after having that previous inspection of the dog’s face, was a mottled red, brown, and cream.

“Ya bet yer sweet, little tick b’hind I do,” confirmed Duke with heat. His eyes squinted slightly as he considered. “I gotta chase them stupid cows from mornin’ ‘till night, through thorny, brush ‘n muddy waterin’ holes, ‘n, AND,” he emphasized, “their babes as well. Their BABES!” he barked. “What kinda parents don’t keep eyes on their young’uns? Cow parents, that’s who!” he answered not waiting for a reply. “But I do. I keep ‘em all in line! ‘N does he appreciate me? NO!” he barked again, this time jumping to his feet and causing Thomas to jump as well in surprise. “‘N more, I do much more n’that. Like that slimey coyote with the family just over the hill? Everyone’s havin’ issues with him, but not us! Nope. ‘N who ya think keeps him from them chickens? Who’d you think? Or, OR! What about those, those mean-mother wild pigs...”

“Mother pigs?” questioned Thomas.

“Javelinas they are and mean suckers let me tell ya. Who’d ya think keeps ‘em off his property, away from them ignorant cows, out of his gardens? You got it, you got it. Me!” Duke was on a roll and began pacing back and forth with a stern look over at the ranch house on the other side of the pasture. “Oh, he throws me scraps from his table at times, ‘n occasionally gives me a hoof from a pig he’s butchered, one of his regular pigs don’t cha know. But he don’t appreciate the *real* me.” Duke sniffed and came to a stop. He shook his head in frustration, continuing to peruse the pasture in front of him, standing stiff and strong.

“I can see that you believe he does not,” Thomas agreed gently. He had crawled up the spine of the dog in an attempt to see the world from the dog’s point of view. “You protect his cattle from all sorts of unsavory threats. I am sure you patrol his home and property and keep it safe as well. You are certainly a gift to him and you feel that he just does not realize it.”

“Yay, well, sure you’ve got that right,” Duke agreed, somewhat confused as he had never thought of himself as a “gift” to anyone. Was this a joke? Was he being made fun of by a

parasite? As he considered what the tick just said, he looked for the sarcasm behind the words. “Seriously?” he asked with gruff uncertainty.

“Seriously,” confirmed Thomas who did, at times, take such questions literally.

Duke shrugged a shoulder in a show of careless interest.

“Why does a scrawny bug like ya care how the rancher treats me?”

“Arachnid,” Thomas said contemplatively, automatically making the correction. It was a habit of ticks to clarify that they were not bugs, not insects, but rather arachnids.

“Ya mean ya some kind of spider?” asked Duke with surprise.

“No, my dear host, just a member of the same family,” he clarified as he considered what he wanted to say next.

Duke pondered this clarification for a moment, not sure the difference.

“Back to what you asked earlier,” Thomas continued, bringing the conversation around to what interested him most. He gave the question of his caring about the dog’s situation another moment’s thought as was his way. Thomas tended to take such questions quite seriously. “I care,” he said simply with an imperceptible shrug. “I just do. It is in my nature to care.” A slow smile lightened his little black face. “It is my choice to be caring *and* insightful and I detect, from what you have said, that you do your best for the rancher and you feel you should be more appreciated for doing so.” He paused a moment then asked, “Is this correct?”

“Guess so.” Duke replied sullenly.

Duke turned his black-lined eyes toward Thomas and cocked his head to the side. His anger was subsiding quickly, both from being bone-worn tired and from being in the company of genuine sympathy for his troubles. “I’m a, well, I’m a pretty sensitive fellow, ya know,” he shared hesitantly.

“Yes, I can see that about you,” Thomas nodded with a kind smile.

“I’ve got feelin’s just like the next dog,” Duke stated defensively.

“Yes, sure you do.” Thomas agreed.

“I deserve to be pampered ‘n coddled just like them dang cats of his.”

“Cuddled and brushed and petted, too,” added Thomas.

Duke settled himself in the dirt and curled his body gently, resting his head on his side to better see Thomas who, after all this time had only made it to the base of the dog’s shoulders. They were both silent for a moment.

“Ok, maybe not cuddled,” Duke finally concluded after some thought. “That might be stretchin’ it a bit. ‘N I wouldn’t take too kindly to a brush if he were fool enough to think of it, damn scratchy, annoying things they are. But,” Duke considered a moment. “Petted? Yay, that’s somethin’ I might take a likin’ to.”

Leaving his head where it rested, his eyes swept the land, the mesquite tree they were under, and the bit of blue sky that could be seen between the spindly tree branches.

“They say that this is a dog’s life, ya know,” he said conversationally. “I was born a cattle dog. Chasin’ ‘n roundin’ up strays all day is my job, my life.” Duke looked over at the beasts of burden of which he was speaking. “That’s what I do; I keep them cows in line. It’s what I have t’do every freakin’, single day.”

C”HAPTER 3

“It is in the choosing that you will notice the difference.”

“‘*Have to*’ is a strong choice of words,” Thomas commented, “and if you feel you ‘have to’ do these things it might explain some of your discontent.”

“Huh?” replied Duke who instantly thought of a dozen or so stronger words he could have used to describe his day.

“‘Have to’ is a chore,” Thomas answered simply. Duke nodded.

“That’s right,” the Heeler agreed. “Chasin’ stupid cows is a chore, that’s what I said. ‘N I have t’do it every day.”

“Do you?”

“What do ya mean, ‘do I’?” Duke repeated, a snarky tone sneaking into his voice.

“Think about it,” Thomas insisted. “Do you ‘have to’?”

The dog narrowed his eyes in bafflement, or so Thomas hoped it was in bafflement for such a look made the dog appear somewhat intimidating, especially when his teeth were so close.

“It is like this,” Thomas explained a bit nervously, inching away from those teeth that suddenly seemed so near. “Whenever you say you ‘have to’ do something you make that something a chore. Think about it. You feel you have to play with your friends, you have to chase the cattle, you have to eat your dinner, go to bed, get up... These are things that are chores because you feel you ‘have to’ do them.”

“Ex—actly!” agreed Duke. “Ya nailed it.”

“Did I? So you consider eating a meal a chore or resting at night a chore? How about spending time with your friends, is that a chore as well?” Thomas asked smugly.

“Have you met Butch?” Duke smirked as he replied. “But I get cha on that, some things ain’t chores; just most things.”

“Only because you don’t feel you have a choice. However,” Thomas injected before Duke could feed more sarcasm to the conversation, “if you felt you were *choosing* to do them then they would not feel like chores. It is in the choosing that you will notice the difference. Right now, you do not feel that you are choosing to do the things you do, the things the rancher wants you to do. You feel that you have to do them. You feel your day is filled with ‘have-to’ chores.”

“Right, yay, that’s exactly right,” Duke nodded lifting his head slightly. “I *have to* do the cattle dog thing. If the rancher only knew...” he drifted off in thought a moment, and then leaned in a bit closer. “Ok, here’s the thing. The truth is, n’it’s not like I’ve ever mentioned this before, but I’ve always fancied bein’ a –” his eyes darted from side to side and he lowered his voice, “promise not to tell?” Thomas, filled with excitement at the tone of Duke’s voice, let the idea of whom he would share a secret with slide and promised immediately. “I’ve always dreamt ’bout bein’ a ...” he paused dramatically, closed his eyes and then with a rush said, “a Frisbee-jumper!”

“Ooh!” clapped Thomas in pleased wonder.

Duke looked away in embarrassment, apparently at the thought of a working dog participating in such a frivolous sport, but Thomas was thrilled.

“Oh how wonderful!” he declared excitedly. Being a tick of an enthusiastic nature, Thomas always enjoyed hearing tales of others pursuing their bliss. However, he rarely had the opportunity to hear such wondrous stories. “I believe you would make a wonderful Frisbee-jumper! You would be amazing!”

If a dog could blush, Duke did, both from embarrassment and from the praise. Then throwing caution to the wind he grinned knowingly, this time showing his strong teeth in a much kindlier fashion.

“Ya think so?” he asked with a hint of quiet sarcasm. The arrogant confidence, natural of the breed, shone in his eyes.

“Oh yes!” smiled Thomas with certainty. “I can just see you, those powerful hind legs of yours springing you up and into the air, that strong jaw grabbing the Frisbee as it glides along the breeze.” Thomas clasped his most recently grown front two hands together, his eyes closed as he

imagined the scene. "What a sight! You would be wonderful," he sighed. The dog chuckled and reconsidered the tick.

"Yer a bit odd fer a tick ain't ya?" scoffed Duke. "Tell me ya name agen?"

"My name is Thomas. It is truly a pleasure to meet you, Duke." Thomas gave an odd little bow of his head then laughed. "And yes, I believe I may very well be odd for a tick! Is that not marvelous? It is the gift I give myself, and when appreciated, the gift I give to others by finding pleasure in the life I live and the life around me. Like you will find when you become a Frisbee-jumper!"

The sigh from the dog almost lifted Thomas from the skin he had yet to settle back into.

"Not meant to be."

"What?" exclaimed Thomas. "Oh no! Oh no, that cannot be. Why not?" Thomas scanned the dog as best he could, worried that an injury was preventing Duke from living his dream.

Duke lifted his shoulders then let them fall.

"I'm a cattle dog," he stated matter-of-factly. He nodded toward the livestock grazing in the dry grass. "This is the life I'm meant to lead." Curled in a ball, Duke laid his head down in the dirt.

"Oh no, no, no," cried Thomas. He had begun to feel a kinship with this hound and disliked the idea that his new friend was living a life that made him less than happy. "Just because you are a cattle dog it does not mean you have to be *just* a cattle dog. It does not mean you cannot pursue your true happiness!" Duke snorted and a puff of dust erupted into the air at his nose.

"Well, heck, maybe that notion applies to ticks, but it don't apply to us dogs," he mumbled dismissively.

"Sure it does!"

Once again, silence fell between the two.

Thomas continued to be saddened by Duke's lack of faith in the possibility of living his dream. So much so that he had completely lost his appetite. Since Thomas had found contentment living his truth, the teacher in him wanted to help Duke do so as well. He looked over at the resigned head of his companion and tried to express what Thomas knew to be truth.

"Do you not understand?" he said as he stood tall, trying to rise above the stubby strands of Duke's coarse coat. "You may have been born a cattle dog, but it does not mean that you

should only chase cows all your life! That is just what the rancher wants you to do. But know this, a bird is born to fly, but the roadrunner is happiest when he strolls down the street. An elephant was born to the land but loves to swim. Duke, you need to be true to your nature, allow yourself to live your *authentic* life if you truly want to find happiness!"

Not lifting his head from the ground, Duke gave Thomas a lazy, lopsided smile.

"Ah, my little bug-buddy..."

"Arachnid," replied Thomas out of absent-minded habit.

Duke smiled indulgently, as he wiggled more comfortably in the dirt.

"Happiness is not fer workin' dogs like me," he said gently, as if he didn't want to hurt the tick's feelings. "We live to serve, to please our masters, to be loyal 'n trustworthy 'n hard workin'. That's why the rancher got me... to serve his purpose. I've responsibilities. Maybe I ain't happy 'bout them. Maybe I ain't livin' my 'au -then - tic life' as ya might say, but I'm a fine cattle dog, 'n cuz I am, the rancher provides me with a warm doghouse 'n a meal everyday, co-op food or not. 'N that's what I'll get, day in, day out, as long as I serve his purpose. That's the most this old dog can expect." Duke shrugged a lazy shoulder, "Ya are what ya born into. Guess I just gotta be satisfied with that." Duke curled back into a ball to look directly at Thomas.

Thomas wondered why anyone would settle for less than what he or she could be. There must be a way to help Duke realize his potential. During this conversation, he had gone for a walk down the dog's spine. Thinking hard, he now found himself pacing up and down the dog's tail, unknowingly creating an itch. Duke thumped the tail once, tipping the tick to the ground. Thomas quickly recovered and worked his way back up the tail to look directly into the coiled dog's eyes.

"My dear friend, there is so much more to life," Thomas began, taking a deep, steadying breath and settling himself comfortably within the fur. "Life is not mere existence. It's a celebration! You breathe! Everyday you breathe this precious air and it fills your lungs and it helps pump your blood and you move your muscles and you run!" Thomas laughed with joy at the thought. "You run!"

Duke shrugged again. "'kay?"

"You were born a cattle dog, but it does not mean you were born to just be or do one thing. That is up to you." Thomas grabbed onto an idea. "You run," he repeated simply.

“Of course I run,” Duke agreed growing bored with the topic of his day in, day out activity.

“No, Duke. You *run*! When you run, my friend, how does it make you feel?”

“What?” Duke looked at the tick as if he were nuts. Thomas simply stared back and Duke could swear an eyebrow was raised in question. He pondered a moment. “I – I don’t know,” he said irritably. “Never gave it much thought.” He lowered his head on his paws “Ran this mornin’, ran most of the day,” he said, more to himself. He considered that morning which seemed days away already. It had started out cool, slightly breezy, the freshness of a new day in the air. He thought of the dust, the dirt; the drumming hooves of the cattle. Then he considered the freedom, the breeze in his face, the quick turns and sudden altering of course – only done successfully by a truly talented Heeler as he, of course. “Ok,” he considered, “I’d have to say it felt,” he glanced at Thomas and smiled and said simply, “good.”

Duke chuckled as he remembered. “Felt like, like flyin’ would feel, I ‘magine,” he continued, apparently reflecting back on those mindless moments of chase. He straightened, his forearms lying warm in the dirt, stretching out his back so his stomach absorbed the warmth of the earth. “Sometimes when I run I barely feel the ground. ‘N the cows, dimwits that they are, think they can get away, but I cut left,” he ducked his head to the left, “I cut right,” he ducked it to the right, “I slide underneath ‘em ‘n come ‘round their backside!” He laughed as he ducked his head as if scooting under the belly of a cow. “That’s when I nip their heels to make sure they know they ain’t gettin’ away!” Without thinking he rolled over onto his back and wiggled with delight.

“Ah, ah, help!” Duke barely heard the squeak from beneath him. When he did, he instantly jumped onto all fours and glanced anxiously around, feet shuffling the dirt and sending dust everywhere. “Please! Hold still!” begged Thomas. Duke glanced back and saw the tick frantically holding on to the last hair of his tail. He promptly sat his butt down, curled his tail up, and set Thomas gently on the stubble fur of his upper back.

“Sorry,” mumbled Duke. Thomas dusted himself off, counted and ensured he still had all eight of his limbs, and then smiled up at Duke.

“You love to run,” the breathless tick concluded.

“Yay,” agreed Duke. “Felt good this mornin’.” Then he frowned, anger settling into his golden brown eyes, “That was ‘til that stupid calf ran into the wash. It was all muddy from the rains yesterday ‘n ‘bout sucked me in.” He nodded at his coat.

“Ah, that explains it,” said Thomas, scurrying over a patch of mud that still clung to the fur. After all of Duke’s earlier shaking, he was surprised there was even fur still left on the dog. He looked for a clean spot of skin. “I’m curious, Duke. Have you *ever* Frisbee jumped?”

Duke looked off into the distance, his eyes unfocused.

“Yay,” he answered simply.

Thomas waited but the dog remained silent. He let his friend ponder his thoughts while the tick pondered his own. The two were silent for a bit, enjoying the sun, enjoying the breeze, and oddly enough, enjoying each other’s company. Finally Thomas said quietly, “You need to live the life you are meant to live, Duke. Not the life you feel you *have to* live.”

Duke raised a brown dot of an eyebrow.

“Told ya, I am,” he said, bored now with the subject. “I’m a cattle dog. I chase cattle. I’m livin’ the life I’m *meant* to live.”

Thomas released a deep, slow sigh.

“I do not think you understand. You think that because you are a cattle dog, you are meant to chase cattle.” Duke lazily nodded his agreement. “I say you are a Frisbee-jumper and should be jumping for Frisbees.”

A whistle broke the silence that followed Thomas’ statement. Out of habit Duke stood instantly, prepared to obey his master’s call. He stopped and turned his head to look at Thomas, tucked between the coarse hairs of his spine, all settled in and readying for dinner. He found himself hesitant to end a conversation that he had to admit, albeit reluctantly, he found intriguing.

“Don’t think ya should settle in, little guy. The rancher checks for ticks at chow time,” Duke said.

No more needed to be said to encourage Thomas to abandon his dinner plans. He jumped and landed gently in the dirt below. The whistle came again. Duke tensed; ready to run.

“Go,” Thomas said smiling. “Give thought to our conversation and see if tomorrow does not look different to you. But promise me you will give thought to what we have discussed. Will you promise me that?”

Duke considered for a moment. He wasn't sure what there was to give thought to but to please the old tick he agreed.

“Excellent,” replied Thomas enthusiastically. “I hope we can continue this further at a later time.” He looked Duke in the eye, “I truly hope I will see you again, *friend*.”

Thomas' heart expanded as he said the word. The day had once again given him an unexpected – “thank you, mother!”, and the memory of this one he would cherish for a long time to come, he promised himself. He scurried over to the base of the spreading mesquite tree in hopes of settling below a promising root that was protruding from the ground.

Duke hesitated, but when the rancher whistled a third time habit won out over curiosity and he took off running. As he headed toward the house, he called over his shoulder: “I'll be back tomorrow!” and scampered off to see what chore he would have to do now.

CHAPTER 3

“It is always good to talk it out...”

The next morning as the sun considered the mesquite dappled landscape from high above the desert floor, Thomas woke from a good night’s sleep with a smile. He stretched his legs in eight different directions and considered each one of them in turn. He could definitely feel the old in all but the newer two, which he had grown not that long ago. He acknowledged that he didn’t move as quickly as he had in his youth and his sense of smell had dulled somewhat, evidenced by his slow recognition the night before of a potential meal, but he had two new legs and was still moving ... and wasn’t that a good thing.

He glanced out from under the root and noticed a bit of damp on the ground. A dog-tick’s worst fear was water. Maybe not his worst fear. Such would only be true if ignoring the obvious worries of teeth, claws, tweezers, fire, and tick powder. As Thomas found himself surrounded by the threatening morning dew he decided it was best to stay where he was until the Arizona weather dehydrated the ground as it tended to do each day regardless of the season.

He scuttled around and over the bit of root he had called shelter the night before. He found a bit of sun and sighed contentedly as he relaxed in its warmth. He straddled the tiny piece of bark on which he had parked himself so that all his legs could take full advantage of the heat. Sighing again, he folded his two front legs under his tiny head and glanced toward the pasture, curious to see if his old friend was out among the cows. “Old friend” may seem to be an odd and early choice of adjectives considering the two had just met the prior evening. But an hour’s conversation in tick-time was a very long time indeed. This is why Thomas now considered Duke one of his oldest and dearest friends – if not his only friend at the moment.

He lazily scanned the pastures that spilled between the rough ground where the mesquite grew off-kilter from the side of the road and the ranch house in the distance. He could barely see the tile roof of the rancher’s home as it was quite a distance away. As for Duke, he searched the

fields in anticipation. The dog's fur was a delightful mixture of colors all smudged together as if there had been a spill and someone had tried to mop it up but instead just smeared the white, cream, red, and brown that marked the dog a Red Heeler. He didn't see such colors among the tall khaki colored grass. He didn't hear any excited yapping or warning barks. Neither did he see the rancher who would most likely be with Duke if they were out working today. Thomas decided that the Heeler was off taking care of other chores this fine morning and was just a bit disappointed that it would be some time before he saw him again.

He considered their conversation from the previous evening. Frisbee-jumper, imagine that! Turning his head to watch the leaves bob lightly in the morning breeze, Thomas chuckled at the thought. Duke would be such a wonderful Frisbee-jumper; he just knew it, for Thomas was a tick of exceptional insight and could always tell such things.

As he considered it, however, he began to get the suspicion that there was more to the story. Duke had withheld some part of this dream of his and was not telling him everything. The more he considered that possibility, the more Thomas became certain of it. He began to wonder if the dog had actually jumped in the past at some point and couldn't remember with certainty if Duke had said one way or the other.

Questions filled Thomas' head. *If Duke had Frisbee jumped before, was he still doing it now? If so, then who might his partner be, who was it that threw the Frisbee for him to catch? The rancher? That seemed unlikely from what Duke had said about the rancher, but it was certainly a possibility. Duke had not mentioned anyone else living at the ranch so, if not the rancher, who? And if he was still jumping, when did he do it? Before he rounded up strays, at the end of a long day? Were there rare occasions when there were no chores to do, and he jumped then? If so, Thomas pondered with anticipation, would Duke consider exhibiting this most wonderful ability before me?* Thomas was most curious about that last question as it would be very exciting to have the opportunity to witness such a thing.

All these questions made Thomas curious and a curious Thomas became obsessed with finding answers. He decided that there was more to the Frisbee situation than what he had learned so far and was determined to learn more. In fact, upon further contemplation, he became quite certain that Duke was hiding a secret of some sort; most likely a deep, dark secret which might explain the taciturn attitude of the dog. All of this was a bit of a stretch based on the limited knowledge Thomas had, or the amount of time spent with Duke yet such was the way of

thinking for most ticks. Thomas, like all ticks who lived in the shadowed world of tree bark, grass roots, and dog skins, loved secrets and was determined to discover what this one was.

When someone assumes another has a secret, it does not matter whether a skeleton exists in the closet or not. The one looking for that secret is likely to uncover something unexpected anyway.

The small arachnid sheltered his eyes against the rising sun and surveyed his surroundings. It was nice to be in one spot for a bit – he rarely ever had that opportunity. The last place he had stayed he had only been able to call home for about five hours. He smiled on the memory. She was a pretty white poodle who lived in a pretty white house. He had landed on her after a rather horrendous journey consisting of wind, rain, and a rather scruffy stray mutt on whom he had to fend off fleas on top of everything else. The sedate and pampered poodle had been a welcome change. Thomas had no more than settled in to take a nice little nap after lunch, when a sudden piercing scream brought him to his feet. Or at least it would have if he hadn't over indulged during the meal – his legs had actually stuck out like sticks from the sides of his over indulged body.

If he hadn't been so tired and hungry when he had first arrived he would have realized instantly that the poodle had been a poor choice anyway. The tick's hard black body had been highly visible among the thin, white curls. Oddly enough, however, by the time he had been discovered, his body had no longer been a solid black speck but a plumb black-spotted cream color, bloated and over-fed, large enough that the petting hand that had ran over the favored pet had felt him immediately.

Thomas didn't harbor any bad feeling about being pinched and tossed out into the yard; it could have been far worse, he knew. As the wind would have it, his luck had stuck and he had landed on a cartwheeling tumbleweed. Upon taking him on it had not even hesitated and had continued its journey across the yard, instantly carting him off on a dizzying and bumpy ride. Even with his head spinning and feeling a bit nauseous from the unexpected trip, he appreciated that at least the woman hadn't flushed him down the toilet, which was always a strong possibility. Looking at the up side of things was a talent of Thomas' which is why he just held on as tight as he could to the nearest twig and wondered where he'd land next.

The plus to the tumbleweed was that it had offered Thomas both an exhilarating ride as well as free travel. What better way to get from one place to another, he had thought. In fact,

Thomas had quickly realized, being thrown out the window had given him an opportunity to travel in an unknown direction – as the tumbleweed tended to change course quite often – to an unknown destination. He spent his tumbling time considering this future destination that he was about to reach – a destination he only imagined existed when he was on the back of the poodle.

This is how Thomas arrived at Duke's place: on a twig of tumbleweed that had simply exploded against the very trunk of the aged mesquite tree in which Thomas was now relaxing. Upon explosion, Thomas had been carelessly tossed aside. After a moments recovery, and taking a bit of time to dust himself off he had leaned against the dusty mound, now with hindsight known as Duke, and given himself a breather.

Getting caught on the poodle had not been planned and the ride on the tumbleweed unexpected, he thought now, but the end result? Well, was not that just working out swell?

An optimistic nature was one of Thomas gifts, or so he thought. Every day presented him with new opportunities, unexpected glories he was always searching to uncover. All of which presented him with opportunities to be the best Thomas possible. Although what those opportunities had in store for him he didn't always know and sometimes, like being thrown out windows, they were a bit frightening. But then, according to Thomas, it was the unknown that made life such an adventure. Not always being certain of what lay ahead was stimulating. The routine, the normal, the ordinary may be what filled the day, but it was those sudden unexpected gifts that he sought out that were what made the day worth experiencing.

As Thomas kindly reminisced on the shaking poodle and its distraught and overly-shrill owner, he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Very large brown eyes, soft and round, seemed to be peering right at him. He tilted his head as he considered the cow reaching through the fence to a grassy stand just on the other side. Though it was a fair tick-distance away, its immense size was most astonishing. He considered its size in relation to all that surrounded it. It, in turn, continued to chew, casually grinding its food over and over until it dripped yellow drool from its mouth.

Thomas laughed. How delightful. He had never been this close to an animal of such immense proportions before. As he considered her he considered just how big she was compared to a dog such as Duke. This made him appreciate even more the work that Duke did on the ranch, to be able to command the attention and obedience of such a huge beast. Suddenly he smiled and the smile soon turned into a chuckle as he realized that, considering her coloring,

she was a bovine version of Duke! With the thought of Duke's reaction to the comparison, Thomas laughed aloud.

The tick studied the cow and the cow thoughtfully chewed her cud, each contemplating their own perception of the complexities of life. Meanwhile, Duke was contemplating something of another sort entirely.

It had once been new, he remembered somewhat sadly. It had once been bright and shiny and such a neon orange that it almost hurt the eyes when the sun kissed it. When it flew, it had flown across the blue of the sky with an exuberance that had caught and held his breath. When it flew, he recalled, it was the most exhilarating part of his day. He could feel his back hunches twitch in memory and his heart kicked into a faster beat in remembered anticipation. When it flew...

Today it had taken Duke sometime to find, having gone so far as to creep through the crawl space under the front porch – the very place that the house cats used to warn him about when he was a pup. They had cautioned in their scratchy mewling voices that it was haunted by the dead dogs of seasons past. Those who entered, they would say slyly as their round eyes narrowed to emerald slits, did not always make it back out and if they did, they warned, they rarely made it out without being marked in some way by the departed. The occasional moaning, which he learned with age was simply the echo of the dishwasher when it was on in the house, and the eerie whistling wind through the warping plywood that surrounded the porch had convinced him for years their stories were true. Although he knew better now, it was from habit that his eyes nervously scanned the darkness for unexplainable movements and he soon found himself scurrying out as quickly as possible when he realized the Frisbee wasn't hiding within its dusty and dank shadows.

Eventually he had made his way to the tack room and even then almost missed it as it was tucked away back in the corner, dirty and torn and neglected. He sat silently, staring at it as if by sheer will he could make it revert to its former glory; willing it to fly across the room and sail on the non-existent wind in the stuffy room. But the Frisbee refused to budge and remained in desolate silence, pouting in the dark.

Carefully, with gentleness uncommon to his nature, he stretched a paw and laid it lightly on the disc, unable to prevent the heavy sigh upon doing so. Somewhere, from deep within, Duke felt a sense of letting go, as if he was finally saying goodbye to an old friend he had held onto for far too long. His paw brushed lightly, tenderly, against the worn, rough raised lettering. With another sigh he stood and walked from the room. At the door, he turned and gave one last, hopeful glance back at what had once been his most prized possession. Suddenly he paused and cocked his head to the side, ears alert with each one turning at different angles to catch the sound. Although the disc was still motionless, Duke thought he heard childish laughter coming from the fields of the distant past. But the laughter died away and he was left in the silence of the now. His head dropping slightly, he left the darkened shadows of the tack room and out into the overly bright sunshine.

It was long past midday when Duke took his daily stroll to the old mesquite on the far side of the pasture. He sniffed around for any fresh scents – acknowledging those that had come and gone, all familiar, most he called friend. He marked the tree for the 5,942nd time, declaring it for the 4,928th time as his property. He then took a patronizing lunge at a heckling grackle just to have it fly off and land in the road on the other side of the tree to continue its heckling from a safer distance. Ignoring the insults, he stretched in anticipation of settling for a much deserved nap in the sun.

Duke made stretching and napping an almost ceremonial experience. First he'd find just the right spot in which he would snooze, and would ensure it was the best spot by circling around it a time or two. He would then slide his front legs out to lie on his belly and stretch those front legs, extending them as far as possible in front of him. Then he'd wiggle a slow shiver from his neck down to the base of his tail as if to burrow slightly into the dirt. It was then that he'd stretch out his back legs as far as possible behind him. His head and tail he always lowered last, laying them gently between the two sets of paws.

For good measure, he'd give a snort to clear the dirt in front of his nose. With his eyes closed, he'd allow the tension of the day to ease from his body.

He considered this resting pose of his a spot-on imitation of the animal skin rug the rancher had hanging on the outside wall of the front porch.

“Good day, neighbor!”

Duke sighed, peering blurrily at a black speck of something in front of him.

“Humph.”

Thomas waited for Duke to expand but nothing else was forthcoming.

“And how are you this fine day?” he encouraged.

“Humph,” repeated the dog. This was followed by a long, rumbling sigh and a thump, as the dog tipped his body over onto his side, and taking advantage of the position, stiffen and stretched his four legs in front of him before plopping them into the dirt.

“Oh my,” sympathized Thomas instantly. “It seems you may not have had a good day, my friend. I am so sorry to learn this. Well,” he continued matter-of-factly, “let us talk it out. It is always good to talk it out and then you can just let it go and move on from here.”

Thomas settled himself much as a therapist sinks comfortably into a chair, and prepared himself to listen and be understanding. However, Duke remained silent and continued to remain silent. Eventually, enough time passed that Thomas had begun to wonder if his friend had fallen asleep until he noticed the black-lined eyes were slightly open, just showing a hint of their golden brown color.

“Would you like to talk about your day?”

“No.”

“Oh!”

Thomas had to admit he was somewhat disappointed. He had been looking forward to seeing Duke again, discussing possibilities, learning more about his desire to be a Frisbee jumper. More importantly, he wanted to investigate the secret that Duke was keeping, for he had grown more and more curious throughout the day. He considered their initial meeting the day before. Their talk had been so pleasant, even with their awkward start. Feeling as if they had made a connection, it was a trifle disappointing to be so easily dismissed.

Being the empathetic creature that the tick was, he quickly realized that the dog was an unhappy sort of fellow, for, as one may recall, Thomas could tell such things. The dog had admitted to as much the day prior, confirming the tick’s suspicions that the dog was apparently not much different than his tick counterparts. For this reason, Thomas quickly surmised that this disinterested behavior he was witnessing was just Duke’s way of trying to bring Thomas down to his own level of discontent.

In such situations, he decided, it was best to ignore the negative.

“Well, I must say that I had a spectacular day!” proclaimed the peppy parasite. If Duke was determined to bring Thomas down, Thomas was just as determined to bring Duke up. “It was a glorious morning. The birds were all chirping away, thankfully at a safe distance I must say. There was a light breeze that kept the smell of cow from me, and the bit of Schnauzer I had for breakfast was just excellent!”

Duke groaned and scraped a paw over his face. This can't be happening, he thought. He can't be here, lying in the dirt, listening to the ramblings of a senile old tick! Tilting his head, he peered between the pads of his paw and, yes, the black speck was still there, chatting away.

“...then I said, ‘you know, you really should take it easy on Duke because he should not have to chase you all over the pasture. You have your responsibilities and he has his.’ It will be interesting to see if you do not notice ...”

“What?” demanded Duke, suddenly paying attention and quickly rolling back onto his belly, his ears turned forward to hear exactly what Thomas had to say. “What are you talking about?”

“Excuse me? Have you not been listening?”