

# WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

## by Bobbie Candas

### EXCERPT

The Gladiator  
Turner Cooper

The landline was ringing again but I didn't bother to pick up. Letting it go to voicemail, I listened to my wife's warm Texas accent roll softly through the office over the speaker of an antiquated answering machine.

Hi, there. It's Allie. Turner and I aren't here. You know what to do; bye now.

Sighing, I ruffled the soft shiny fur of our Irish Setter, Blaze. Leaning back on my leather sectional, I stretched my legs out over the ottoman, closed my eyes, and wondered how many more hours it would be before I could go back to bed without seeming too pitiful. Perhaps a half-tumbler of Dewar's Scotch and a movie would help pass the time. I silenced my cell and closed the office door so there would be no interruptions. Amazing how many solicitations there were after you signed up for the no-solicitation list. I never realized before... because I rarely was home to hear them. I smiled, recalling a recent conversation with Allie.

'I swear, Turner, we need to get rid of that phone. Unless you're in the market for a time share or extended car warranty, it's useless. No one we know has a landline anymore.'

'But Allie, what about missing out on the all-expense-paid cruise of our dreams, or lending my social security number to a Nigerian prince?'

'Uh, those guys don't call much anymore.'

'I promise, babe... I'll get around to it.' But there it was, still ringing.

Petting Blaze's head again, I said, "Yeah bud, you get what they say about old dogs and new tricks, don't you Blaze?"

Hearing his name, my dog looked over at me expectantly, and then laid his head down on the thick rug. Back to a movie choice. I could punch up something on Netflix, but lately, most of those movies were lame. Either stupid rom-coms or crazy fantasy. How about an old favorite instead?

I got up and perused our shelves of old DVDs on either side of the six-foot screen. "Here's a good one, Blaze. Haven't watched this in years. You'll love it." I popped in Gladiator, starring Russell Crowe, sat back down, put my feet up and took a deep sip of Scotch. It was a long film; maybe it would require a full tumbler. Or two.

Three hours later, I'd surprised myself, managing to remain awake through the entire film, and on this viewing I saw the story so differently. That happens sometimes when rewatching a film. My previous memory of it was all about warring strategies, power struggles, and grisly

scenes of bodies being torn apart. But this afternoon, I realized the gladiator's greatest desire was to leave all power and politics behind him and return home to his wife and farm. Somehow before I'd totally missed that aspect.

I got up and stretched, checking my watch. "Well, boy...time for that walk now, right? Let's go." Blaze was ready. Hearing the word walk, he began looking anxiously about. "Come on, downstairs. She's not here today." I walked through the utility room, switched from bare feet to slip-on tennis shoes, attached his leash, and left through the garage.

The sun was still thirty minutes away from sizzling into the lake, with the air feeling less humid than usual. Even in September, Dallas weather could be brutal. "So, what are you up for? Long one or short one?" I looked at the dog's inquisitive golden-brown eyes. "That's what I thought too."

We headed down our street, turned at the corner and walked down to the bike trail. Under the shade of trees, wearing a loose tee-shirt and shorts, it actually felt good to be out. We walked the half-mile to the large dog park by the lake. I unleashed Blaze, sat down on a bench, and watched him run, dodge, and scamper with joy among the wide range of large breeds released for play by their work-a-day parents.

Eventually, another guy came and sat down next to me and, like a proud papa, pointed. "Mine's the Goldendoodle. Which one's yours?"

"The Irish Setter with all the pent-up energy. He's used to getting out more."

"Oh, yeah. He's a beauty. Wait...is that Blaze? Man, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize...your Allie's husband, right? She was up here with Blaze all the time. Great lady. I'm so sorry, dude. I'm Kevin. Kevin Wells. My wife and I live nearby."

I nodded, smiled stiffly, and stood up. "Good to meet you, Kevin. Thanks. I'm heading out now."

I walked toward my dog, knowing he'd hate being pulled out so soon, but it was time for us to leave. Kevin got up and called out after me, "Hey, if you ever need to talk or anything, I'm here most evenings. Allie, she was awesome. Really gonna miss her around here."

I nodded, putting the leash back on the setter. "Sure, thanks man." We weren't ready for those conversations yet. Blaze and I were damaged goods.