

# Christmas Among the Beasts

by Tom Edelson

December twenty-fourth. It was quiet at the offices of Animal Investigations. Heck, it wasn't just quiet, it was dead.

The boss told me to take the rest of the day off. I said I'd rather work.

He thought for a minute. "Kitty did pass me a message from the people out at the Mammoth Pets store. They said it was even more of a zoo than they'd planned for, and they were calling everyplace that might be able to send them some extra security help."

"I was ignoring it, because, you know, we do investigations, not retail security. But if you really want to work, go ahead."

A professional is a professional, no matter whether the job is a big deal or a yawner. Forty-five minutes later, I was at Mammoth Pets, blending into the background like a chameleon.

Yeah, it probably will be boring, I thought. But better this than sitting at home, with nothing but a bottle and my memories.

Then: maybe not all that boring. It seems like trouble really does know where to find me. I saw it walking up to one of the checkout stands. The kid at the register looked so wet behind the ears that it had to be his first holiday season on the job.

No immediate danger, I decided. No harm letting him learn something about what to look out for, before I step in. So I settled back, and watched the thoughts scroll across his face:

"This guy is a mess. His raincoat is way too big for him."

Then: "Oh, wait, I see why he needs a loose raincoat. The poor man has these great big lumps and bumps all over his body."

Then – his voice rising, in my imagination, to a panicky note – "Oh my God! This is like something out of a horror movie. The lumps are all ... *squirming* ..."

It was time for me to intervene. I strode up and showed my badge. "Excuse me, sir. AI agent. Would you mind opening your coat for me, please?"

You can probably pretty much figure out what I found. The guy had stitched twelve pockets to the inside of that coat. And he'd made good use of them: every pocket contained at least one hamster, guinea pig, or gerbil.

Five minutes later, he and I were in the back room, and I was getting down to the detail work. It's not exciting, but it can be tricky, and it has to be done right.

The perp broke my concentration: "Excuse me, but if you don't mind my asking, why are you trying to write on those animals?"

"They're no good as evidence," I muttered, "unless they're documented."

"Evidence? You're calling the police? You're going to have me arrested?"

"Nothing personal, sir. I'm a professional. It's what I do."

All at once, he started crying like a little kid. I pieced together his story between broken sobs. He knew it was wrong. He knew he might get caught. But he'd lost his job ... and they were threatening to turn off his utilities ....

“And there was no money to buy food for Cuddles. And today it hit me: I can’t just sit here and watch her starve to death in front of my eyes.”

I echoed: “‘Cuddles’?”

“My boa constrictor.”

At first, I’d taken it for the standard perp sympathy play. But now, I found myself believing him. And it was like the whole scene changed in front of my eyes. I couldn’t think about the law any more. I couldn’t think about Mammoth Pets’ bottom line. I couldn’t even think about being a professional. All I could think about was that this man had a hungry animal waiting for him, and he was willing to risk jail for her.

“Wait,” I said. “I just remembered. There’s been a change of procedure. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll get this straightened out.”

It didn’t take long to finish putting the rodents in the clear plastic evidence boxes, now that I wasn’t trying to write investigative notes on each of them. Then I stacked the boxes in the bottom of a shopping bag, and held it out to him. I felt something like a frog in my throat as I told him: “Here. Give Cuddles a squeeze for me. And ... merry Christmas.”