**Andy's Choice**

Written By: Cherie Ferguson

The old terrier-cross with the greying muzzle looked up adoringly.

"Were going to move on again, old friend. They think that we're 'vulnerable'."

His master explained that he'd heard the authorities would soon be around trying to persuade him to accept treatment, accommodation and the like. He may have sensed, too, that there was something else about to happen which could change his life forever, and instinctively he knew he couldn't survive that.

Andy's voice was deep and cultured and it was said that he once had a budding law career. Some also said there was a daughter ... so long ago ... - another lifetime.

"They don't understand that the sky is our roof and that walls make us unhappy."

Nugget wiggled his stub of a tail in wholehearted agreement, but he was sad to be leaving Cotton Tree Park, it was their favourite place.

If there has not already been scientific study about how pets and their owners often grow to look alike, there should be. The resemblance between Andy and Nugget was uncanny: both were small, lean and brown; greying ginger beards; liquid brown eyes; white crinkles and tracks in a tanned face; white markings on fuzzy ginger fur; smiles which would have been dazzling with more teeth.

Andy carried an air of dignity. Not an easy thing to do if you cycled around on an ancient push-bike festooned with plastic bags full of your worldly possessions; carry basket at the front containing Nugget in a harness; another at the back for swag; bike helmet decorated with a single feather; thread-bare shorts and T-shirt, often worn with a tie (for more formal occasions); vintage sandals and bright blue football socks, if footwear was required.

Andy's constant dialogue was comforting and familiar: as much a part of the dog's life as the sound of the sea. Nugget didn't mind that their conversations often included folk that only Andy could see and hear. Sometimes it was like a party going on in their BBQ shelter, and passers-by often looked surprised to discover Andy and Nugget were the only ones there.

At other times, gentle cronies (flesh and blood ones) did join them: to share what they had, and shoot through the breeze. If those BBQ shelters could talk, what tales they could tell, for these were individuals who led marginal and eccentric lives.

Cotton Tree is a unique little community. The backdrop of Maroochy river mouth, park, beach, and pool promotes a relaxed atmosphere and a friendly, tolerant attitude amongst the eclectic population.

This evening was a corker: balmy and torpid, a sweet breeze now and then bringing cool, salty relief: people and traffic noises muffled by the hectic shush and boom of the ocean nearby, and the lapping of the river changing tides. The deepening navy sky wrapped itself, like a diamond studded velvet cloak, around the remaining fisherman and the few straggling families, packing up their evening picnics. Their kids were overtired and whinging after a day from which family memories are made, so no one noticed a small brown man and his small brown dog riding off into the gathering night.

Next morning when the Government Mental Health car pulled up not far from Andy and Nugget's BBQ shelter, all that was left were a few tufts of wiry ginger fur, and a feather. The Community worker knew she was obliged to come back, and would make half-hearted enquires in the next few days, but her smile was triumphant on behalf of Andy who had once again escaped the System's clutches.

Another visitor dropped by later that day, too: slight young woman with ginger hair and liquid brown eyes. Andy's daughter viewed the empty shelter pragmatically.

"Next time we might both be ready," she whispered, trying to ignore the familiar ache off loss, which was pulling at her heart.