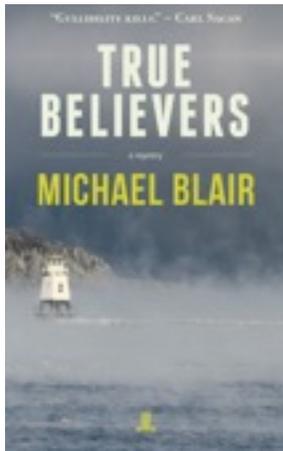


True Believers

a mystery
by
Michael Blair



At 7:15 on a blustery Tuesday morning in December, Myrtle Sanders, a retired school teacher and part-time “Grim & Bare It” greeting card writer, was walking her five-year-old rescued greyhound Spider along the bricked footpath on the edge of Burlington Bay, between the ECHO Lake science centre and the Coast Guard station. A bitter northwest wind boomed in off Lake Champlain, an early Christmas present from Canada, whipping spume from the tops of the white caps beyond the breakwater. Overnight, the temperature had dropped to below freezing and in the calm water inside the breakwater, a scum of ice had formed along the rocky shoreline. The little automated lighthouses at the north and south ends of the breakwater were still on, bright white lights surrounded by frosty nimbuses of morning mist. All in all, Myrtle thought, it was a typical Vermont December morning.

She wouldn't think so for long.

Spider, natty in his red tartan vest and booties, strained at his leash, breath steaming, dim memories of mechanical rabbits urging him to run. Although the adoption agency frowned on letting greyhounds run free, Myrtle released Spider from his leash. With a doggish leap of joy, Spider galloped across the frost-rimed grass alongside the path, but after twenty yards or so he faltered and slowed, then stopped and looked about. Myrtle sighed and shook her head. Poor creature, she thought, and whistled. Spider bounded back to her, skidding to a halt and bumping his narrow head against her thighs.

“Stupid thing,” she said fondly, rubbing his small silky ears with her bare hand.

She started to reattach his leash when Spider decided it would be fun to play on the ice and bounded down the rocky embankment to the edge of the bay.

“You fall through, you damned fool,” Myrtle called, “don't expect me to come rescue you.”

She clambered down after him. Spider ran out onto the ice, slipped, sprawled, tried to stand, and sprawled again. Finally, finding his ice legs, he walked gingerly across the slick surface, but stayed near the shore, where the ice was thicker. Then, spying something embedded in the ice, he angled toward the thinner ice farther from shore.

“Come back here, you idiot,” Myrtle called. He ignored her. “Spidey. Come. Hot dog. Hot dog.”

She took a frozen frankfurter out of her coat pocket and waved it at him, but as much as Spider liked franks, he’d found something much more interesting. He began pawing at an object partially embedded in the ice about fifteen feet from shore. Oh, god, Myrtle thought, peering nearsightedly at the shape in the ice. He’s found a dead dog or something; it was too big to be a fish or a seagull. She edged out for a closer look, but eased back toward shore when she felt the ice crack beneath her boots.

“Spider, get back here.”

Spider whined and scabbled at the object in the ice.

“Goddamnit,” she shouted. “Get back here this minute.”

The ice gave way, and Spider plunged into the icy water. Fortunately, it was not deep, barely halfway up Spider’s deep chest. The thing Spider had been pawing at also broke free of the ice. Spider clamped his jaws onto a piece of it and began dragging it toward the shore, walking backward on his long, powerful legs, pulling desperately. It was quite a bit bigger than he was.

“Oh, shit,” Myrtle said, when she saw what it was that Spider had brought ashore.

It was the body of a woman.

Myrtle dug into her pocket for her phone as Spider released the dead woman’s arm and waited eagerly for his reward. He’d lost one of his red tartan booties.

When the police arrived later that morning at Hack Loomis’s office on the fourth floor of the Bank Street Professional Building, he’d just hung up from a frustrating half-hour on the phone with his mother in Toronto. His ninety-two-year-old paternal grandfather Walter had had another small stroke, Helen Loomis had told him, and while his doctors said he would likely make a full recovery, they insisted that Walter stop going into the office. “All well and good,” she’d said, “but I can’t run the business by myself.”

“You’ve been running it yourself for years,” Loomis said. Ever since Loomis’s father Christopher and older brother Denny had died in a road accident. Nearly twenty years. Had it really been that long?

“Nevertheless,” she said, “it’s long past time you accepted your responsibilities, came home, and took over the business.”

Loomis Brewers was the third largest craft brewery in the Province of Ontario and while Loomis didn’t mind a beer or two now and again, he had no interest in making the stuff. And besides, he’d reminded her, he’d built a life for himself in Burlington and nothing had changed since the last time she’d raised the subject. (Well, that wasn’t entirely true: his relationship with Connie Noble had moved to a different level the night before last, when they’d slept together for the first time in the two years since she’d come to work for him.) So what was it that made him feel so guilty about not wanting to return home, make beer, and probably a vat-load of money to boot? Damned if he knew.

On the other hand, he grumbled to himself after saying goodbye and hanging up the phone, why not go home and make a vat-load of money? What would he really be giving up? Business was lousy, his ex-wife was driving him crazy, and Phil Jefferson, his former father-in-law and erstwhile employer, was constantly on his case about coming back to work for his security company. Maybe, Loomis thought, what he was feeling wasn’t guilt at all. Maybe it was stupidity.

As for Connie, maybe she’d be willing to come with him. There wasn’t much keeping her in Burlington, not since her husband Sam had died three years before of heart failure while running a marathon, leaving her with a mountain of debt and two kids. Her parents had retired to Florida the year before and her sister lived in New York City. It was early days yet in their relationship, but —

He sat up with a start when someone banged on the outer door of the office.