August 23rd:

Iain sniffed at the air. It didn't smell like summer. He expected the kitchen-diner to be filled with the scent of freshly cut grass. But with the double doors closed he couldn't even see his neatly manicured lawns. Burnt toast. That's what he could smell. And just as that realisation struck him so too did a stinging plume of smoke from the toaster.

"Good thing the doors are closed this morning." No one at the table responded. "It's a bit early to have the builders in to replace a perfectly good fence. What a racket."
"Good thing they're closed or we'd be eating cereal in our coats again. I don't know why you insist on having them open, it's never warm enough in Edinburgh." Iain's eldest, 17 year old Claire, made her feelings known as usual. Jeremy, 3 years her junior, simply scrunched up his face to signal his agreement.

Iain moved briskly from the counter to the table and gently presented a cup of steaming hot tea to Katherine. "There you go dear, just how you like it. Strong but with lots of milk."
"Did you remember the sugar this time?"
Now it was Iain's turn to scrunch up his face, not in agreement but in mild frustration with himself. "23 years of marriage and you still don't know how I like my tea." Iain wouldn't have been that bothered had he not been such a people pleaser. He'd always tried to please others ever since his own parents had shown such little pleasure in him. Unfortunately there was nothing he could prescribe for his own forgetfulness.

On this occasion he decided to blame 'Chips'. A majestic Red Chow Chow, Chips was the family’s dearest friend. On those finer days when the doors were swung wide open Chips would bound confidently through the garden. Today however...

"Blame Chips! I can't move for him wriggling around my ankles."

"Blame those rotten builders. They've taken down half the fence. Do they want my precious Chips to run away?" Once again Claire was anything but shy to speak her mind.

Iain was feeling flustered by all this. Smoke in his eyes, dog charging round his feet and a decidedly aggressive tone from both wife and daughter. He moved towards the doors. By simply stepping outside all three issues could be remedied at once. He reached for the handle and opened the door.
"CHIPS!!?!!" The family exclaimed in unison as their show pet made his break. "The fence!" Iain thought silently to himself, "They won't be pleased by this at all."

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Enrique walked briskly along the street, partly battling the stiff breeze, partly battling the cold that was setting into his bones. "Summer?!" He muttered to himself. "Ma skins not made for this kind of weather." Enrique was a 3rd generation Scot. His grandparents had swapped the poverty brought on by Spain's civil war for the relative prosperity of Scotland's capital.

As he strode the familiar backstreets of East Millbank the icy sun began to fade behind the rooftops. He got the distinct feeling that he was no longer walking alone. Gently tilting his head to one side he caught a glimpse of his unwanted companion and was stopped dead in his tracks. A Red Chow Chow. He was sure of it. As a child Enrique had encountered this magnificent beast on the pages of a magazine he so often found on the shelves of his parents pet shop.

Enrique stood motionless, thinking for a moment, his pensive expression mimicked by the Chow Chow.
"What are you doing out here on your own?" He wasn't expecting a response. "You're far too special to be wandering around alone. I bet who ever cares for you would be willing to pay handsomely to get you back in one piece." With that he clutched the dog by the collar and searched for a tag. It simply read:

Chips

"That's not much use is it!? Well, if I can't find them we better wait till they come looking for you."
Together the two made their way home.

August 26th:
Shouts, screams and muffled arguments. This was a typical soundtrack to life in Enrique’s flat. Neighbours he barely knew 'working through' their numerous and varied disagreements. Perhaps that soundtrack was playing today but Enrique wouldn't have heard it. Since the arrival of his new house guest he supposed it was everyone else listening in on him. "Alright Chips, stop that racket." His pleading falling on deaf ears.

Enrique wasn't worried about Chips tearing up the furniture. He didn't have any. "Truth be told, this place makes a better kennel than it does a flat."
He thought out loud. It was time for action. Three
days his life had been turned upside down while he ‘dog sat’ for absolute strangers. It was obvious that they wouldn't be coming to find him, how would they know where to look? "Perhaps they could follow this incessant BARKING!" Enrique’s thoughts turned to words and reached a crescendo as he tried in vain to compete with Chips’ impressive volume. For the briefest of moments Chips stood silent and cast a puzzled glance at his new master. The barking immediately returned.

Enrique checked his wallet. Nothing but loose change. "You're eating me out of house and home wee doggy. I better cash in on you soon or it won't have been worth my bother." He pulled on his heaviest coat, a coat he'd not worn since his January visit to South Wales to see a friend, and headed for the door. "I'm off out to find your face on a lamppost. You stay here and keep the neighbours entertained."

**August 27th:**

“Don’t play me for a fool pal, I know a Red Chow Chow when I see one. You can take what you're offering and double it.” This uncharacteristic outburst over the phone had led Enrique to choose a spot nearly 5 miles away from his flat to make the exchange. A public basketball court he’d once attended a coaching
session on in his youth.

He’d found the poster easily enough. In fact between his flat and the phone box he’d used to make the call he’d found 12 posters all proudly displaying a much younger Chips. When he dialed the number he was a little taken aback to be connected to a G.P’s surgery.

“Hello, West Millbank Surgery, how can I help you today?”

“Oh, excuse me, I thought I was phoning a Mr. Ian McNeir.” He could hear the confusion in his own voice.

“Dr. McNeir, yes. What may I ask is the nature of your call?”

“I’m phoning about the dog.” Enrique spoke through a broad grin. Confusion gave way to excitement as he realised that Iain McNeir definitely had the means to improve on the meager reward offered on the posters.

So he sat, hands buried deep inside the pockets of his heaviest coat, on a bench adjacent to a basketball court from his youth, with a very valuable dog tied to a nearby railing by a tatty bit of string, awaiting the arrival of a man he was somewhat worried he’d upset.

From what Dr. McNeir had disclosed on the phone Enrique understood that Chips was a family pet. He
sympathised with the McNeirs as he recalled the inevitable grief that followed when an animal he’d grown too attached to in his parents shop was sold and promptly whisked away by new owners. “They’re not your pets.” His father would remind him, “They’re someone else’s just waiting to be found.” He knew his father was trying to help but it never made it any easier to see an animal he loved leave the shop. Now he didn’t just feel sympathy, he also felt a twinge of remorse as he realised he was essentially holding Chips, beloved by Iain and his family, to ransom.

He plunged his hands further into his pockets in an attempt to regain some feeling in his finger tips and felt the sharp edge of some folded paper. Removing the offending article he carefully unfurled it to reveal a flyer he’d been handed some months previously and paid little to no attention to:

“World’s Weirdest Record Breakers.”

He mouthed the words as he read the bold white lettering. “Acts include Gerrard Von Hoffmeir, record breaking Siamese twin.” “How can he be a Siamese twin if there’s only one of him?” “One week only, every night 7-9pm, Porthcawl Promenade.”
“What a load of nonsense. It’s a wonder I didn’t bin it.” Enrique was speaking to Chips. He’d gotten used to doing this over the last few days and Chips had gotten used to staring vacantly in return.

“Chips!” Iain, who had been pensively walking towards the basketball court through this undesirable area, now broke into a slow run before embracing his runaway friend. “You look great boy. And you must be?” Enrique had neglected to give a name over the phone.

“Gerrard.” He lied.

Why had he lied? Why were they here on this odd little basketball court?!

“Well Gerrard, thank you ever so much for taking such wonderful care of Chips and getting in touch when you saw my poster. Where exactly did you find him?”

“He found me!” Enrique protested. “I never stole him.”

“I know you didn’t, he got out of the fence. I wasn’t accusing...”

“Anyway, he’s been a right pain in the backside. Eating more than I could afford, damaging my furniture, barking all night and causing me aggro with the neighbours. I’ve earned that reward.”

Enrique wasn’t sure why he’d adopted such a defensive posture. Perhaps it was because he knew what he was
about to do. “You have indeed. We’re just thrilled he’s safe. £400 was it?” Iain was trying to defuse the tension and get out of the awkward situation as swiftly as possible. “£600.” “I beg your pardon?” “£600. Like I said, he’s been more bother than I thought when I rescued him.” Enrique ‘the hero’ was the picture he was trying to paint as he silently prayed he hadn’t pushed Iain too far.

“Quite right...quite right.” Iain hesitated as he thought about the developing situation. He just wanted Chips and to be on his way. “Luckily I have my chequebook. Gerrard?” Iain began to fill in the blank cheque. Panic spread throughout Enrique's body.

Why had he given a false name? He’d never be able to cash the cheque if it was made out to Gerrard. If he owned up he risked the doctor giving him nothing or worse still calling the police.

“I’m not accepting a cheque. How do I know it won’t bounce?” No impartial observer would have validated Enrique's concern but it was a cunning attempt at defusing the situation. “Well I only have the cash we agreed on.” Iain's patience was beginning to be tested. Until this point he’d been trying to keep a stranger happy but
Enrique’s eccentricities were pushing even him to the limit. “Aye, go on then. £400 as agreed. In cash.”

Iain counted out eight crisp £50 notes. “Well, there you are, your reward. And I’ll take Chips and, well, thank you.” Having handed over the money, Iain began to loosen the knot which fastened the old string to Chips’ collar. Enrique hid the notes in his coat pocket, once again grazing the sharp edge of Gerrard VonHoffmeir’s folded flyer. The reality of the situation struck him. He realised that this dog he’d grown attached to was not going home with him. It was someone else’s pet waiting to be found. And in spite of the relentless barking Enrique had grown fond of Chips’ dreamy stare and lamb like bounce. If he felt like this having spent a meager four days with the mutt, how must the McNeir children have felt when they thought they’d lost him forever?

And he’d lied about his identity. He’d demanded far too much money. He’d brought poor old Dr. McNeir all the way out here. “Wait. Here, take your money back.” Iain’s face froze. “I lied, my names not Gerrard its Enrique. He’s not been a bother I’ve loved having him. He’s your dog and you shouldn’t have to pay to get him back.”

Now Iain was really confused. The very same man who’d boldly attempted to triple the reward was
inexplicably offering to return all the money? “So your names not Gerrard?”
“No.”
“It’s Enrique?”
“Yes.”
“And Chips didn’t eat your furniture or disturb your neighbours?”
“I’ve got no furniture and it was quite nice to have them disturbed by me for a change.”

Iain simply stood there, staring at the ground, deep in thought. “Here’s how I see it Enrique. A member of my family went missing for four whole days. We didn’t know what at happened and we feared the worst. But you took him in, you cared for him, you loved him and have given him back safely. Keep the £400. £100 a day isn’t much to know a loved one is safe.”

Enrique smiled, that made more sense to him than anything that had happened up to this point. It made him feel better knowing that Chips was going home to a family that cared so much for him. “Besides, you need it for new furniture right?” The two shared a chuckle.

Brought together by a runaway dog, having barely spent 15 minutes in each others company, they felt comfortable enough and sure enough in the others love for Chips to at last lower their guards and smile. Neither thought that anymore words needed to be
exchanged and with little more than a nod each went their separate ways.

Chips immediately wove between Iain’s legs, nearly tripping him as he led the dog away from the basketball court. “He’ll be pleased with that.” Iain thought to himself, “And the kids will be very pleased when I bring this one back home. All in all a very pleasing outcome.”

***THE END***