

## **Yarn for Alma Rose**

**Amy McDonald**

‘Now, everyone, it’s that time of night.’ Marg smiled around the circle at her audience. ‘And, again, this will come as no surprise to most of you.’

Alma Rose shifted in her seat. She watched her hands. Anticipation was lovely, but best to keep it private.

Marg coughed to indicate a formality. ‘The Craft Shop Sales of the Month Award once again goes to—’

Alma Rose looked up.

‘Alma Rose.’ Marg patted her hands together softly. The rest of the meeting stayed quiet.

Alma Rose said a small ‘thank you’ without volume and took her prize: another jar of honey.

For the past five years she had won the Sales of the Month Award at the Craft Shop. Because she only selected the finest yarns from the haberdashery—and ordered them in from Melbourne or spun them herself when nothing else would suit—her woollies were an absolute smash.

It was strict policy that there be only one of each type of artisan at the Craft Shop at any time. This, of course, suited Alma Rose just fine. She now had a cupboard in her kitchen reserved exclusively for her honey.

Marg was coughing again. ‘Now, before we break for supper, I have one more item to discuss.’

The Award was always the final item.

‘I’d like to introduce our new member.’ Marg made a sweeping gesture. New members weren’t common.

Alma Rose wondered how she had missed the woman sitting two seats to Marg’s right. She was taller than Mag, and younger, although it may have just been the makeup. She wore tight pants, almost stockings. Leggings, or something, they were called. At her feet sat a bag with a picture of Marilyn Monroe on it, covered in diamantes.

‘Everyone,’ Marg smiled at the interloper. ‘This is Sheila. She’s new in town. She spins and knits. Please make her welcome.’

The group patted their hands together. Alma Rose watched Marg’s husband, who did the wood turning, give an encouraging nod. She looked back to the woman. The tightness of Sheilas leggings made the white elastic show across her crossed knees.

Marg was waving towards the kitchenette. ‘Now then, the urn’s hot,’ she said and shuffled towards the pikelets.

‘But what about the policy?’ Alma Rose called to her back.

Marg turned quickly, jerking her head to where the new woman was standing, and mouthed 'Not now!'

Alma Rose slept dreadfully that night. She dreamt thick pools of honey had run into her bed, sticking her to the sheets. And when she'd tried to roll over Marilyn Monroe had stuffed a ball of wool in her mouth.

While she waited for the kettle to boil she called her son. Tony only lived a few streets over but the telephone was preferable; her daughter-in-law never answered and the dog couldn't get into her knitting.

'Hello? Tony?'

'Mum? I was just going to call you. How's things?'

'Terrible, actually. It's the shop. There's been a bit of a rumpus.'

There was a pause on the line then a muffled noise. Tony said, 'Oh no,' in a voice that was not very startled.

'There's a new woman. *Sheila*.'

'Well, you oldies could do with some new blood.' Tony chuckled

'No, Tony. She *knits*.'

'Oh.'

'Yes. I'm feeling quite a bit sat on. We had a *policy*.'

Alma Rose heard the muffled noise, louder this time.

'Mum, that's terrible,' her son said. 'Maybe you need a distraction? You see,' Tony spoke fast and Alma Rose had to stay quiet to make sure she caught it all. 'We are going away for the weekend next weekend and we were wondering, well Sandra was wondering, if you would, well, mind the dog.' The last bit was very fast indeed. She was still thinking it through when he said 'I'll bring him over on Friday.'

Tony ended the call before she could protest.

Muttering, Alma Rose poured water over the tea leaves and refitted the green and yellow tea cosy she'd knitted the previous winter. She had an hour to knit before heading off to the Craft Shop. Today she was on with Marg, from nine until one.

Marg busied herself in the kitchenette while Alma Rose counted the float. She jotted down the amount, initialled it, and took her seat behind the counter. Then she noticed. 'What are those?' She didn't remember seeing them the previous night.

Marg appeared from behind the curtain to the back room. 'Scarves. Why?'

'Not *my* scarves.'

‘Sheila’s.’ Marg picked up one of the foreign scarves and rubbed it between her finger and thumb. ‘They’re so soft. Not like regular wool.’

Alma Rose rubbed the other end of the scarf. Marg was right. They were much softer than hers.

‘Sheila said she had the yarn imported especially from Tibet. Llama or some such,’ Marg said. ‘We’ve sold four of them already.’

Alma Rose swallowed hard. The itchy, woolly feeling from the night before was coming back.

Marg tipped her head forward to look over the top of her half-frames. ‘Never know, next month you might have to share the honey.’

‘Thanks again, Mum.’ Tony kissed Alma Rose’s cheek. The dog was already stowed in the rear compartment of their four wheel drive. Sandra was sitting up front. ‘Hope he didn’t make too much mess.’

‘We sorted it out.’ Alma Rose crossed her arms over her cardigan. It was mauve with cream on the cuffs. ‘You can bring him back next weekend if you like.’

Tony looked startled. ‘Really?’

‘Good company,’ Alma Rose lied.

Her son hugged her again, most unusual, then walked down the drive to the car. She watched the large vehicle pull out. Sandra smiled tightly but Tony was grinning. As the car turned into the main road Alma Rose heard the horn toot.

Because of the shedding she had bought a new fangled comb to brush the animal. The clumps of hair looked almost like wool.

After a few trials she had devised a way of holding the hands—just so—so that the hair would slip through her fingers and spin itself into a very fine yarn indeed. The colour was pleasant enough, not too showy, and the texture was much softer than ridiculous llama. Over the weekend Alma Rose had brushed three shopping bags full, enough for a couple of scarves and the trim of a beanie.

She still had a few hours to work with it before she was due at the Shop. As she knitted she practiced the face she’s use when receiving the next jar of honey.

Alma Rose watched Sheila take the seat next to Marg in the meeting circle. Unlike last time, the new woman’s hair was loose, her curls sitting fat on her shoulders. Three seats along, the wood turner was looking at Sheila with glittering eyes that made Alma Rose feel uneasy. Serve Sheila right, really, such tight trousers.

Alright, everyone. It's almost that time of night.' Marg said to the convened circle. 'But first, a special mention to Alma Rose's new mystery fibre.' The group patted their hands together. 'Quite incredible, and very popular.' It was true. Even the tourists, who browsed in the shop while they waited for their fish and chips too cook next door, had taken to Alma Rose's new scarves.

Since its initial visit the dog had been each weekend for four weeks and Alma Rose had collected thirteen and a half bags of fibre. She had perfected her method and incorporated the new yarn into each of her pieces.

Marg was coughing. 'Ladies, gentlemen, this month we do have some very exciting news.'

Alma Rose wiped her palms discreetly on her slacks. That morning she had emptied the linen press and transferred all of her jars. There was much more room now, and tonight's jar would be the beginning of a new shelf.

Marg continued. 'In somewhat of an unprecedented'—she said that word slowly—'turn of events, there are two winners of the Sales of the Month Award.'

Alma Rose's head jerked up. The woolly itch was back, deep in her throat.

'Congratulations to Alma Rose and to Sheila, joint winners of this month's prize.' Marg held out a single jar of honey. The women looked at it, then at each other.

Alma Rose had no choice but to let Sheila take the honey. She left before supper, drove straight home, made a cup of tea and headed to the linen press. The small reading lamp she had taken from the spare room gave the jars a soothing light. She pulled up a stool sipped her tea and watched the honey.

Alma Rose woke—still on the stool—to knocking.

Tony was smiling through the front door.

She unlocked the deadbolt.

'Morning, Mum,' he said, yanking at the dog leash. 'Looks like you've had a rough night.'

Alma Rose patted her hair at the back where it had flattened.

'Sorry we're late,' Tony was saying. 'Had a bit of trouble getting him in the car.' He used the side of his foot to push the dog through the door. The animal whimpered, then growled—showing too many teeth—as Alma Rose leant to pat it.

Tony unhooked the leash. He'll settle down.' He squatted and rubbed the dog's ears. 'you'll be right,' he said as he left.

But things weren't alright. Alma Rose coaxed the dog into the sitting room but when she came too close it cowered and made a most unacceptable puddle on the carpet. When she took out the brush the dog flashed its teeth again and made a deep growling noise. There was nothing to do but try to pacify the animal.

Alma Rose swung open the mirrored cupboard above the bathroom sink. She looked for something she couldn't quite remember the name of. 'This one will help you sleep,' the doctor had said with a sympathetic smile. Of course she'd never taken one, but she'd had the prescription filled just in case. She located the jar and carried it to the kitchen.

She wasn't sure about the dosage. The animal had a good deal more energy than she did, so she doubled the recommended dose. She crushed them with the flat of a knife and dusted the powder over some dog food. The dog didn't seem to notice when Alma Rose sets its dish on the lino.

The next morning, the dog's frothing and foaming was somewhat alarming. But because Alma Rose had grown up in the country she knew how to deal with animals in strife. After, she spent half an hour cleaning up, removing a little extra fibre and dusting a discrete patch of stain-removing powder on one corner of the sitting room carpet. Then she made the call.

'Hello? Tony?'

'Mum? What's wrong?'

'It's the dog.' Alma Rose sniffed into the receiver. 'I think it's taken a bait. You'd better come over.'

She knew she didn't have enough to ensure sales for the month. She would have to raise the issue of the policy again next time she saw Marg.

'Is this working?' Marg blew into the microphone and feedback squealed through the hall. 'If you could all take your seats.'

People bumbled into the circle of plastic moulded chairs as Marg unfolded her speech. 'Since the beginning, the Craft Shop has allowed only one type of craftsman to exhibit at any one time. The Committee believes that this creates *diversity*.' Marg looked up from her shaking notes when she said that word. 'But there has been an issue with the knitting.' She coughed. 'So today each of the knitters will be asked to put forward their cases and then the group will vote.'

Marg stepped away from the microphone. She gestured for Sheila to come and speak.

Sheila had cut her hair. It made her curls spring out, bushy and full. Alma Rose fidgeted with her own hair. Perhaps she should have stretched for a new set for the night.

'I love being a part of the Craft Shop.' Sheila's voice was soft. 'But, being new, the last thing I want to do is step on anyone's toes. So, I will withdraw my artwork from the Shop.'

Alma Rose smiled and thought about the linen press of golden jars, gleaming like waxy cells in the hive.

But then, from the back of the hall, someone said, ‘Oh, don’t be like that, Sheila.’ It was the wood turner, Marg’s husband. ‘We love having *you* at the Shop.’

Alma Rose felt the itchiness grow in her throat. She spluttered. As the wool twined and curled into her lungs she squeaked ‘Water!’ She pushed back her seat and trotted to the kitchenette. She found a glass, turned on the cold tap and then heard a snicker from the hall. Someone else was giggling. Marg said, ‘Shh,’ in a way that wasn’t very forceful.

Alma Rose put down the glass and took the emergency exit to the car park.

Alma Rose wasn’t expecting anyone when she heard the knock at the door. She put down her knitting and strained to look out the front window. Sheila’s car was in the driveway.

‘Hello, Alma dear.’ Sheila was holding a sponge on a paper plate, the whole thing wrapped in a freezer bag. She had the Marilyn Monroe bag slung over one shoulder. ‘Modern’ Marg had called it. The cake, then Sheila, entered the house. ‘I thought I’d come by and see how you’re getting along.’

‘you’ve dyed your hair again.’ Alma Rose followed the now purple-headed woman back into her own sitting room. ‘Quite a contrast to your glasses.’

‘Yes.’ Sheila sat in Alma Rose’s chair. She looked around. Alma Rose watched the sponge sweat in its bag.

‘Marg has resigned,’ Sheila said. ‘Some of the float went missing.’

Alma Rose snorted. ‘Probably her husband.’

‘Oh, no. Poor, poor Marg. After twenty-five years as President. And being nominated for the Australia Day award.’

‘Don’t like her chances now,’ Alma Rose said.

Sheila fiddled with an earring, making her purple curls bounce. ‘Alma, you’ve got so much to offer, and I feel terrible about what’s happened.’ Sheila shook her head furiously. The curls bumped from side to side. She had such a terrible lot of hair. ‘Look, is there any way I can convince you to come back?’ She leaned forward in Alma Rose’s chair. On a yarn chart that colour would be called magenta.

Alma Rose made a breakthrough. ‘Look now, the sponge has sweated off all the icing sugar,’ she said. ‘I’ll re-dust it, shall I?’ She smiled and got out of the chair. ‘And while I’m up I’ll get a knife to slice it.’