



L.T. Smith

Puppy Love



Foreword

Firstly, I would like to thank you for buying this book. As a lover of animals, and dogs especially, I have always dreamed of helping those less fortunate—in this case, those we all consider to be our “Best Friend.” When I first penned *Puppy Love*, I said that if it was ever published, all my royalties would go to help those pups in distress. So, when this dream became a reality, that is what happened. Money from the sales of this book went to Dogs Trust and, hopefully, made a difference. Then, when sales dwindled over time, as they tend to do, I kept on donating every month just because I was fortunate enough to be able to do this.

There are many reasons why an animal finds itself in difficulty. Presently, many people have lost jobs, homes, and hopes as Covid-19 ravages lives. Many are finding it hard to make ends meet, and just feeding the family is stretching incomes and, consequently, people have had to give up their pets, mostly with heavy and broken hearts. There are also instances where an owner is too ill to fully look after their pet, or that an owner dies and the pet is left without a home.

The aim of Dogs Trust is to give stray and abandoned dogs a second chance at a brighter future with responsible, caring new owners. They are totally reliant on voluntary donations to continue

the fantastic work they do. Without the help and support of people like you, it would be simply impossible to care for over 16,000 dogs every year. In addition, lockdown has severely impacted the Trust's ability to fundraise, something they really need to do in order to deliver the care and hope these dogs need at this time. Furthermore, the Trust predict as many as 40,000 stray or abandoned dogs could need help—our help—even after lockdown has come to an end. Staggering figures—and even more staggering when we realise this is only in the UK.

So, again, thank you, dear reader. With the purchase of this book you have helped to make a difference to our furry pals, and for that I will be forever thankful.

L.T. Smith—Linda to you

Supporting www.dogstrust.org.uk

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Acknowledgements

Thank you, Astrid and Ylva Publishing, for making this dream come true. Again. You have consistently supported my dream to help a cause that is very important to me. As well as my royalties, you are giving part of your profit to another animal charity based in Nepal. You are brilliant.

Day Petersen—you are wonderful. Thank you for polishing this novel to perfection. The pups thank you too. Lots of woofs and tail wagging for you.

Thank you to Streetlight Graphics for this brand-spanking-new cover. As well as being the cover for this edition, it will also front the German version. Go me! A book of mine in German! Sagenhaft? (As you can see, I am not the one translating my book into German. I struggle writing English.)

Finally, I hope you, the reader, enjoy this book and recommend it to another animal lover, then another, and then another. That would mean loads of money going to a very good cause.

Dedication

To all of our canine pals. You have shown us what unconditional love actually is, and we are forever grateful. To Jox and Mutz—I miss you every day. x

Prologue

I remember in vivid detail the very first time I fell in love. I wasn't looking for it, never planned on falling so completely under the spell of another. Despite that fact that I had spent thirty-three years without knowing how the sensation would feel, I accepted it without question, without a struggle. The moment I looked into the dark brown depths of my intended's eyes, I felt as if the part of me that craved a connection of some sort had suddenly come to life again.

Hmmmm. Love. Loveity loveity love. Strange to think I had hidden my longing away from all, including myself, but finally bit the bullet and opened my heart to the man I will love for the rest of my life. Considering I am a full-fledged lesbian, it seems weird writing that. Before you say anything, or even continue the train of thought that includes responses like "I don't understand. How can she call herself a lezza and fall in love with a man?" or "I don't give a fuck", please let me explain.

Men come in many shapes and sizes, and few of them will get my heart swelling like a bag of microwave popcorn. The male species is just that—a species. Males can be mice or men, birds or bees, or they can be, as I found out—or knew for quite some time—of the

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canine variety. Dogs, to be precise. Actually, “a” dog in particular. A loveable, brown-eyed boy called Charlie.

To put things in perspective, let me go back a little bit. I need to paint the picture for you of how I lost my heart to a wiggling ball of black and tan fur.

Chapter 1

January 2012. New Year's Day. Noon. Hangover. Every single one of my resolutions was already broken, and so was my cell phone. Seems that dropping it down the toilet, fishing it out, and then dropping it onto a tiled floor isn't the wisest course when it comes to technology. I would like to blame someone else for my stupidity, but it was all down to me trying to text my sister from the bathroom of Dixie's nightclub, to ask her to help me escape the blind date from hell. Seems I should've done it before I'd downed eight vodka and Cokes, but that would be hindsight, wouldn't it.

Rubbing my head and wincing, I stumbled from my bed and went to relieve my bladder. Sitting on the throne, I contemplated the mysteries of life. Do a person's fingers actually get fatter when one is inebriated? The previous evening, it had seemed as if each digit had spread over at least three keys on the keypad and ended up making a mish mosh of words—even if I had been in any shape to read them. Even though I was pissed and sporting the metaphorical beer goggles, I still couldn't muster up any attraction for Cherie.

Don't get me wrong—Cherie wasn't a mingler, as such, just... just...shallow. Lazy and shallow. Stupid, lazy, and shallow. A little like me, by the sounds of it. After all, here I am saying I stumbled

out of bed at noon, had bugged up my phone because I was pissed and wanted to get away from someone because I couldn't get pissed enough to shag her. Cherie could've been my double.

Shower time. Sigh. The feeling of griminess from the club began to wash away. It was replaced by more memories of the previous night: Cherie trying to cop a feel at every opportunity, and me dodging her tentacles at every one of those attempts like I was on a firing range on target practice day. This brought on more vigorous scrubbing and a pledge to never believe my sister when she told me the woman she worked with was a catch, and to not drink vodka and Coke ever, ever again.

Three o'clock saw me arriving at my sister's house feeling a little more alive and ready to seek retribution. But when my niece answered the door with her gap-toothed grin and eagerness to hug my legs, I decided the roasting over the coals could wait a while longer.

"Happy New Year, Aunty Wellie. Me needs a kiss now." Lily scrunched her eyes closed, puckered her lips, and waited for me to plant one on her.

Instead, I grabbed her underneath her armpits and hoisted her up. A yelp followed by excited screams shot from her mouth as I frantically slapped kisses all over her face. "Gerroff!"

More squeals, followed by more kisses.

"You attacking my daughter?" Abbie's voice drifted down the hallway.

I stopped trying to eat my niece and glared over the blonde bunches on her head. "Go play, Lils. Aunty Ellie is going to kick Mummy's butt."

"But..."

"Yes. Mummy's butt. Go. Tell grumpy chops we leave in twenty minutes."

Whatever question Lily was going to ask next stayed unasked. What they were going to do was more important to her than being manhandled by her spinster aunt.

“DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAADDDDDDDDDDDDD
YYYY!” And she was gone, although the echo of her voice was still very much present.

“Want a cuppa?”

I glared at Abbie. I didn’t want a cuppa; I wanted an explanation. Why had she thought I wanted to be set up with a woman who had more hands than a poker game and more one-liners than a nineteen-seventies stand-up comic, without the actual humour.

“Before you start getting all righteous, Cherie would be good for you.”

“Fuck that.”

“Lily, Elles, Lily.” My sister was good at checking my bad language in front of my niece. Thankfully.

A voice from the living room demanded, “What?”

Both Abbie and I shouted, “Nothing, baby,” and I continued to glare at my sister.

Abbie sighed and moved closer. “You need company, Elles. You spend most of your time either at work or working at home. Don’t you want someone special in your life?”

Not like Cherie, I didn’t. My shoulders sagged. I knew Abbie was only thinking of me, but I was big enough to look out for myself. If I wanted a relationship, I would get one, right? I was happy in my own little solitary world. I had my family, didn’t I? My job? What else did I really need?

“It’s been, what, eighteen months since your last girlfriend. Time to move on, hon.”

Move on? I hadn’t even wanted to go out with Tina. That, once again, had been a result of Abbie’s interference. Tina was too needy,

too ready to have the moving truck outside my door after the second date. Talk about the caricature of a lesbian relationship. I'm surprised she didn't order a turkey baster and a sperm donor from eBay as an early birthday present for me.

A surge of anger welled up inside me. "Stop, okay? Just stop with this, Abs. I am not a charity case who needs fixing up." Why couldn't people just accept that I was happy being on my own? What was the big deal about being tagged to someone else?

Abbie opened her mouth, but I cut her off. "Not everyone needs someone else to feel whole, okay?" I watched a hurt expression flit across her face, and even then I couldn't stop myself. "I don't need this, and I don't need you. I'm going." With that, I spun around and left my sister looking stunned.

I hadn't even made it to the car before I felt a hand on my thigh, tugging at my jeans.

"Where ya goin, Aunty Wellie?"

I turned and looked down.

Big green eyes were looking pleadingly up at me. "Mummy said you were comin' wif us today."

I opened my mouth to say I couldn't make it, you know, make excuses to a kid who believed I would not lie to her, but I couldn't do it.

"Me's gitin' a puppy."

A puppy? A spark ignited inside me that felt foreign, almost like something people might classify as excitement.

"Mummy said you cud help pick her." Tears welled in the corners of her eyes, and I watched as one spilt over and trickled down her cheek. "If you dun't come, me won't get one."

Aw fuck.

Twenty minutes later, we were all bundled in my brother-in-law's car and heading to the local dog pound. Rob tried to get me

chatting by pulling faces in the mirror and cracking bad jokes, but I was too busy giving my sister the silent treatment to fall for his antics. Lily didn't notice the tension in the atmosphere; she was too excited about getting a dog. Every time Abbie tried to make eye contact, I did the immature teen thing and hunched my body closer to the door and stared out of the car window with a "fuck the world" facial expression. Sometimes I surprise myself with my ability to be a knob.

When we pulled up in the car park at the Dogs Trust, I felt my flicker of excitement turn into a full blown raging flame. Stuff the melodramatics of trying to pretend I was angry at my sister. It would have been difficult to say who got out of the car more quickly, Lily or me.

Abbie approached me cautiously, her face trying to gauge how I would respond to her after my giving her the silent treatment. "Look, Elles. I'm sorry, okay?" She tilted her head to one side, her lips pursing in consternation. Moving closer, she whispered, "I...I won't do it again."

I squinted at her, and my expression showed my disbelief. "What was that, sis?" I loved to watch Abbie squirm.

She tutted before starting to say it again.

"Stop."

She did.

"I need to actually hear you promise me you will keep your nose out of my business."

Another tut clicked off her tongue before she said, "I promise you, Ellie, I won't stick my nose into your life."

I grinned stupidly. "That'll do for me." I reached forward, grabbed hold of her and pulled her close. "Happy New Year, sis."

"And a Happy New Year to—"

“Come on! Me wants a puppy!” Lily was tugging on the door handle with all her might, trying to get inside the dog pound without us.

Laughing, I turned to look at Abbie and Rob, but was distracted by the arrival of a four-by-four entering the car park. The tyres scrunched over the gravel as the car spun to a stop. I don’t know why I found it necessary to stare. I just felt that I couldn’t pull my eyes away until I saw who was driving the car. Call it a totally fucked up moment.

The driver’s door opened slowly, as if this was a cinematic shot on slow speed. The next frames showed a long, jean clad leg cupped at the calf by a brown leather boot, then a second leg.

I watched as the legs stretched even longer and met the ground. All the moisture seemed to evaporate from my mouth.

“Close your gob, Ellie.” Abbie’s voice sounded as if it was a million miles away, floating to me on wisps of wind or as a distant memory.

The legs moved away from the car door and made their way over to where we were standing. Those glorious legs seemed to get bigger, and my focus moved from the thighs to the hips, from the hips to a flat jumper-clothed stomach, and onwards and upwards to the gentle sway of an obviously female chest.

I blinked, as my subconscious must’ve realised it was rude to stare at a woman’s chest, especially if you hadn’t been formally introduced. So, on came the view of a slender throat, a strong jaw, a crooked smile, and the tip of a straight nose. My heart rate was ramping up, thumping wildly inside my chest as the anticipation of the whole picture seeped from my imagination.

“Afternoon.”

Such a sweet voice. Heavenly. Angelic, yet laced with something that most definitely didn’t denote harps and purity. With a snap, I

shut my mouth, my teeth clattering together like castanets. I honestly believe I answered with an “afternoon” of my own, but I couldn’t swear to it.

Then she was gone. Dark brown hair fluttered through the door and left me wanting. I hadn’t seen her eyes. For some reason, I felt that I needed to see her eyes. Looking into someone’s eyes allowed me to see so much. It wasn’t just attraction that made me do it; I was like that with everyone. Shaking my head, I grinned stupidly. I turned to speak to my sister, but realised I was on my own. What the...

“You coming?” Rob was standing in the doorway, waiting for me. “Looks like the other ladies wanted to see another kind of puppy dog eyes.”

Amazing to think he is just a builder and not a comedian, isn’t it.



Once inside, I saw the back of the mysterious woman’s head just in front of my sister. She was talking in low tones to one of the volunteers at the dog shelter, and I couldn’t hear what she was saying. Believe me when I tell you I was really trying—and also attempting to see what she looked like, especially the colour of her eyes. If the rest of her body was any indication, they would be perfect as well.

“What is the matter with you?” Abbie hissed. “How much did you drink last night?”

I grunted, and my incomprehensible noise seemed to pique the interest of the mysterious long-legged, four-by-four driver in front of us. She turned her head slightly, and I almost got to see her face, but the woman she was talking to asked her something and recaptured her attention.

Then, she was gone, and I was left feeling as if I had missed out on something totally life changing. I was typically not one for

being overly dramatic, although with my sister, I was not averse to melodrama. Nevertheless, I knew I had to see the woman in toto before I would be able to achieve some semblance of peace.

Ten minutes later, we were allowed through the doors and into the back where the dogs were housed. Seeing those adorable little faces nearly made me forget my quest, and I was acting exactly like Lily. Seeing her eyes wide, mouth open in wonder and inability to speak made me long for the days when the smell and excited licks of a dog were all it took to make the world seem right. For me, that had been a long, long time ago. After Toby died, I had promised myself that for as long as I had breath in my body, I would never allow myself to be absolutely smitten with a dog again. He was my first and last pet, my special boy, the lad who had taught me that getting covered in mud and other unmentionable things was one of the most special times a girl could have. My relationship with Toby was completely different from any friendships I'd ever had before him. Upon reflection, I guess I had been in love before, but hadn't allowed myself to remember loving Toby, because of the pain that came with it. It had taken me so long to get rid of the images of my loveable lad's last moments on this earth, that I couldn't open myself up to the possibility of losing someone that meant the world to me.

God. The trust, the absolute devotion he had shown, allowing me to slowly walk him into the room where the vet was waiting to end his pain. I still remember the way Toby looked at me, still remember the acceptance, the understanding. It hurts to think about the feel of his fur as I ran my fingers through it, loving the heat of his skin before the coldness would take over.

One injection. Toby had the time to look at me, lick my hand, and lie down as if he was just having a nap. I physically felt the crack

inside my chest, the pain spreading like a plague and destroying every memory of happiness I had ever had.

Leaving him there all by himself was even harder. In my mind, he wasn't dead; he was sleeping. If I left, I would be leaving him alone to wake in a strange place and look for his mum. Hard. So fucking hard.

It was Abbie who had taken my hand and pulled me to her. Abbie who had held me as I sobbed over my loss. Abbie who had taken me home and stayed with me until I had cried myself to sleep. She had still been there for me when I woke and remembered what I had done. I felt as if I had murdered Toby. The part of my brain that told me it was the right thing to do wasn't very convincing.

"Hey, sis." Abbie's soft voice brought me out of the memory of the sad times. A tear had escaped without me knowing, and she leant forward and brushed it away. "You okay?"

I nodded and sniffed.

"If you would rather we leave—"

"Mummy! Look! She likes me." Lily was face to face with a Jack Russell who was frantically trying to lick her through the bars of the kennel.

How could I do that to my niece? Or to the Jack Russell, for that matter. The little mite was trying to get to Lily every which way she could.

"Nah, I'm fine." I ruffled Lily's hair, then tugged gently at a strand. "I'll just have a look around for a bit."

Abbie nodded and gave me a sympathetic smile.

During the time I had been conjuring memories of my little lad, I had forgotten about the woman who for a brief time had absorbed my focus. It wasn't until I walked to the far side of the kennels that

the goal resurfaced. She was kneeling on the floor with her back to me. I could hear her talking to someone, her voice cooing and gentle.

I stepped to the side so I could see the object of her attention. A Border Terrier was bouncing in front of her, his tail wagging wildly, a ball stuck in his mouth. Something clicked inside my chest as I saw the life and joy in the little mass of black and tan, but it was nothing compared to how I felt when he turned his focus to me. Sparkling dark brown eyes absorbed me in one look, the tail stiffening before going crazy.

I didn't even realise I was kneeling until I felt the dog leap into my arms, the ball forgotten and a frantic tongue wiping away the remnants of my tears. I laughed, and the dog became even more intent on kissing me hello.

“Hey there, fella.” More licking and mewling noises. “Want to play ball?”

“Yap!”

Over he went and recovered the discarded ball, then brought it straight back to me. Plunk. It hit the ground, and he used his nose to bat it closer to where I was kneeling.

“Yap!”

I snatched the ball and bounced it, laughing as the little furball tried to catch it.

“Charlie! Here, boy!”

That voice again—the one I'd heard only twice before but seemed to know already, forced my attention from the scrambling dog. Looking over, I saw the woman's face for the first time. Fuck. Yes, fuck. She was everything I'd hoped and more besides. My breath caught in my throat, and my heart was pounding so loudly that I would have sworn everyone in the room could hear it.

Charlie stopped his chasing and turned his head to the speaker, then to me, then to the woman again.

“Come on, fella!”

Okay. She was attractive. Granted, she had the voice of an angel. And true...those eyes, God, those eyes. Dark brown. Deep. Soulful. I was finding it difficult to split my attention between her and Charlie... But let's slow things down a minute. She wanted Charlie away from me.

We were only playing ball, only having a good time. I felt challenged, and I repeatedly slapped my hands against my thighs. “Charlie Farley! Gissit! Gis ya ball-y!”

Poor boy. He continued to look from me to her, his ball wedged firmly in his mouth. A flick of his tail showed me he was deciding who to go to—maybe because he was a sensitive soul who didn't want to hurt the feelings of the other, or, more than likely, he was contemplating who would keep throwing his ball for him. Delicately placing his prized toy on the ground, he nudged it so it rolled between us.

I was up for the challenge; I lurched to the side. Unfortunately, so did the 4X4 woman. Hands scrabbled to grab the red plastic ball, and it seemed more like a scrum at a rugby match than playtime with a canine pal. My hand secured the orb, only to be held fast in a strong grip. Sparks charged up my arm at the contact. Usually I would have dropped what I was holding, but no. My ball. Mine.

Tug. Heavy breathing. Another tug, a grinding of teeth. More heavy, laboured breathing, followed by an impatient woof from behind us.

With a surge of strength, I yanked the ball towards me, totally believing I would secure it. However, all I managed to do was tug

the woman with it and be knocked flat by the complete weight of her body on top of mine, smacking my head on the ground in the process.

I opened my eyes and was momentarily struck dumb by the look of the woman now sprawled on top of me. Brown eyes were widened in shock, her mouth moving in apology. Seeing her so close up was totally breath taking, not to mention that the weight of her pressing on my chest made it ache.

“Yapp!”

Charlie was next to us, trying to poke his head between our stunned faces and get anyone’s attention. We were each absorbed in trying to read the other’s expression, and he was getting antsy.

“Ellie! What the fuck are you doing?” Abbie’s voice came from the doorway.

I tried to squirm free, but I still didn’t let go of the ball and neither would my rival.

“You fighting?” Abbie asked.

Dark hair whipped over my face as the woman turned to face my sister. I watched in rapt fascination as the stoic expression changed into a wonderful smile.

“Good afternoon. You two related?”

Nice start to the conversation, considering it came from an assailant who was pinning me to the floor. It was not the typical greeting someone would give in the middle of a wrestling match. And why wasn’t Abbie kicking the woman’s ass into 2013?

“She’s my sister.”

For fuck sake, Abbie! Get her off me! I felt the woman’s laughter bubble up before it burst out into the air at my sister’s comment.

“You’ve met Ellie, then?”

“Seems like we are getting to know each other.”

I squirmed as if to remind her I was still pinned beneath her. Brown eyes turned my way, and she flashed me the most beautiful smile.

“Hi there, Ellie. Good to meet you.”

Were her eyes twinkling? I gritted my teeth and was just about to give her a mouthful of unladylike epithets.

“Can I have my ball back?” the woman asked.

What was this? Some fucked up childhood re-enactment? Was I the evil old woman who lived next door, who wouldn’t give a kid her ball back after it had crashed through my petunias?

“Your ball back?” Abbie moved into the room and stood next to us. “Hello there, little fella.”

Charlie licked her hand and then turned his attention back to the scrappers.

“I think she means your ball back, don’t you?” She ruffled the fur behind Charlie’s ears before directing her attention to us again. “Would either of you like to tell me what is going on?”

I relaxed momentarily, and in doing so I released my vice-like grip on the ball.

My captor didn’t waste any time. She manoeuvred the spherical object away in one fluid movement, then she was off me as if she had bounced off my body like it was a trampoline.

“Ooof!”

“Woof!”

Shaking her body, the woman turned to Abbie and stuck out her ball-free hand—the one that wasn’t a thief—and announced, “Emily Carson. Carson Property Developments.”

So, she had a name and a business. Who cared?

“Abigail Culligan.” Looked as if my sister cared. “And this one trying to get up is my sister, Ellie McSmelly.”

Emily Carson's face scrunched in thought as she processed the nickname my sister thought highly hilarious.

"Ellie Anderson, actually."

Did I always sound so fucked off and distant? Maybe I sounded like that because I had lost the ball and, along with it, the attention of the little brown-eyed boy. I felt a scratching sensation on my calf and noticed that Charlie was trying to get my attention. I ruffled the fur on the top of his head.

"Lovely to meet you, Abigail and...Ellie."

Did she deliberately hesitate over my name to annoy me even more?

"This is Charlie, the dog I am hoping to adopt."

"So, it's not final then?" Why was I being such a bitch? A totally hot woman was standing in front of me, the woman I had felt the need to see up close and personal, and I was being a total twat just because she was hoping to adopt the dog I had met moments ago. I needed to get a grip.

"Huh?"

"I said..." Maybe the grip I had been hoping to get wasn't quite ready to be gripped. "You haven't adopted Charlie yet? It's not final?"

"What do you mean by that? It's not final? I came here today to meet with him, and then you came and intruded on our time."

Anger flared up inside me. "Sorry. I didn't see the notice on the door." I marched over to the doorway, swung the door back and pretended to examine it. "Nope. Nothing there."

"Ellie!"

The concern in Abbie's voice should have served as a warning. I wasn't acting like myself. Maybe it was the effects of the vodka and Cokes from the previous night. As a matter of fact, I didn't feel well. My stomach was kicking off and doing a line dance to my throat. I

knew it was a matter of moments before the remnants of anything I had eaten or drunk in the last few hours were on display to one and all.

“Ex-cuse...me.” And I was gone, flying down the corridor in search of the nearest toilet. Thankfully my stomach waited until my mouth was situated within target range before it gave the big heave ho and treated me to a rendition of Psychedelic Pizza artwork with a backing track of gagging noises.



By the time I had thrown up, cried about throwing up, washed my face and rinsed out my mouth, I felt a little better. Embarrassed, but better. Why had I wrestled with Emily Carson? Why had I all but challenged her for the ownership of Charlie? Charlie was a dog in need of a good home, lots of love and attention, not two women fighting over his ball on the floor of his kennel. I should go and apologise for my actions, blame my stupidity on not feeling well before shaking Emily’s hand and wishing her well with her life with the gorgeous Charlie. That’s what people do when they are grown up.

Walking back into the room where I had last seen Abbie, Emily, and Charlie, I was greeted by silence. Where had everybody gone? I made my way back to where I had last seen Lily and Rob. No one was there, either. It suddenly struck me that it was actually rather quiet for a dog pound—no whimpers, no staff around. It was like a canine Marie Celeste.

Then I heard a squeal followed shortly by excited yaps. I followed the sounds down the corridor and exited through a doorway marked “Yard.”

Not surprisingly, there stood Abbie, Rob, and Emily chatting away whilst Lily played with two dogs off the lead. One was the Jack

Russell I had seen her trying to kiss through the bars, and the other was the main man himself, Charlie. Lily was throwing the red ball for the dogs to chase. Funny how Emily didn't have a problem with other people touching her balls... That hadn't sounded right.

Watching Charlie playing with the other dog and my niece, I felt that special glow again. Why was I so smitten with the little chap? There were plenty of dogs in need of a loving home, so why him? And why now? I hadn't intended to adopt a pooch when I had slipped into the back of the car earlier, so why was I contemplating fighting Emily Carson for Charlie?

At that precise moment, deep brown eyes spotted me. An excited yelp issued from his mouth, and he sprinted over to where I was standing, the ball forgotten.

I knelt down and cupped his head, then scratched behind his ears, which made him grin and pant. "You like that, buddy? Yeah...it's good, isn't it?"

As soon as I spoke, Charlie moved away, as if to go back to Emily, but then came back to me, before moving towards Emily again. It was totally a Skippy moment, and I wanted to say "Is Billy down the well, Skip?" Instead, I took the hint and followed him to where the adults were congregated. It was time to make nice.

Conjuring a friendly smile from the depths, I stuck out my hand. "Hello. My name is Ellie Anderson. Nice to meet you."

Emily hesitated, as if she was contemplating what might be a hidden agenda beneath the gesture.

Did she think I would pull her over and pin her to the ground? Actually, was I considering doing that?

"Seems like we got off on the wrong foot. Sorry about that. I have no idea why I behaved as I did." Part of that statement was true. I wasn't exactly sure why I had wrestled with the woman standing in

front of me, except that I wanted to get the ball, thus keeping Charlie with me.

I watched in fascination as her sombre expression changed into something truly breath taking. Emily Carson had to be the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in all of my thirty- three years. Her hand slipped into mine, and I felt the shock again, the same shock I had experienced when her hand had covered mine in the fight for the ball. Instead of releasing our handshake, we held on a little bit longer than was customary.

“Erm...no worries. Nice to finally get to meet you.”

Brown eyes met mine, and there was a question in their depths. Maybe she was also wondering about the spark that had passed between us, or even why I was still holding on to her hand.

At that thought, I pulled my hand away sharply and shoved it into my pocket. I willed myself to stop staring at Emily, but I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away. It wasn't just because she was beautiful, it was something else, but I couldn't put my finger on what that “something else” was.

A small cough from beside me snapped me out of my fascinated fixation on the stunning Emily. I turned my attention towards Abbie. “Something in your throat?”

She bit her lip and swallowed back a swear word before she shot a forced grin in my direction. “We were just telling Emily about your landscaping business.”

I wanted to say “And?” but held it back. After all, I was trying to make an effort to be nice.

“She has just bought Miller's Farm House and wants to sort out the gardens.”

Instead of being happy that my sister was trying to pimp my business, I felt a deep urge to throttle her. She was doing it again—

trying to fix me up with any available woman she could find, even if the woman was straight.

“Yes. I need to make it safe for Charlie.”

Talk about a double slap—my sister trying to fix me up with Emily, and Emily rubbing it in about her being Charlie’s new mummy. Where did that leave me? Hankering after two things that would never be mine, that’s where.

“Here’s my card.” As if by magic, a neat little business card with “Carson Property Developers” stamped across the centre was between the tips of my fingers.

“Oh...erm...right.” I started to give her my card, but she held up her hand.

“No need. Your sister has already given me one.”

Yes. I bet she has. And a rundown of my life to date, if I knew Abbie.

“I’ve heard of your business. All good.”

I smiled and nodded, as I didn’t trust myself to speak at that moment.

“I’d love it if you could come to my place and have a look at my grounds.”

Was she bragging? Just because I had only one acre didn’t mean it wasn’t prime land, plenty enough land to keep one pup very happy. “Sure.” Another smile to seal the deal. “Let me know when.”

“Tomorrow too soon?” Emily asked.

Shit. Yes. “Great. I’ll see you there about one,” I answered. *I’ll call in the morning and cancel. Yep. My wonderful plan.*

“Could we make it a little later? Say three? I’m coming to see Charlie at twelve.”

Go on. Rub it in. I nodded and turned to look at the chap in question.

PUPPY LOVE

He was seated next to Lily, lapping up all the attention she could give to two dogs at once. It was as if he knew I was looking at him, as he turned and wagged his tail before yapping just the once as if to say “What?” Bless his furry paws.

“Looks like he wants a walk.” Emily stepped in front of me, blocking my view of Charlie. “Nice to meet you, Ellie. See you tomorrow.” And she was gone, taking the lad I had fallen for with her.

Chapter 2

The car ride back to Abbie's was filled with Lily's excited chatter. They were adopting Poppy, the Jack Russell, although Lily wanted to call her Jessie J, something that would NOT be happening.

With the Dogs Trust it wasn't just a case of saying, "Yep. I want that one." You had to show you were capable of looking after a pet, and one of the main requirements was having a suitable home and garden.

I grinned. A safe garden. A garden the dog could have freedom in, but also not be able to escape from. Another grin. Emily Carson was looking to me to make her garden safe enough for a home visit, so she could give Charlie her home and not mine. For a fleeting moment, I felt a little more powerful.

Abbie, Rob, and Lily had to make a commitment to Poppy. They had to go to the Trust every day to bond with Poppy and to allow her to get to know them. Fortunately, their garden was safe, and their house was dog-proof. They were also very keen to adopt Poppy—another plus. I liked the way the Trust operated. They didn't allow just anyone to take a dog; the person had to be right, and the dog had to be happy. This rule applied to everyone. Everyone.

I grinned again.

“Do you like Poppy, Auntie Wellie?”

“She’s an angel, Lil.”

“No she ain’t. She’s a dog.”

Kids. Gotta love ’em.



After dinner, Rob had a football game was calling his name, and he scuttled off to the living room, taking a sleepy Lily with him. She loved to curl up next to him on the sofa when he was watching TV, though I doubted she would get much sleep with all his shouting “Are you blind?” at the ref.

I helped Abbie clear away the pots and was the drier to her washing up. I knew she wanted to talk about something, and I knew what that “something” was going to be.

“Emily’s nice, isn’t she?”

I continued to dry.

“She has a good reputation as a developer.”

I slipped another dry plate onto the stack.

“And she’s gay.”

Smash.

“Watch my plates, sis.”

I knelt down and started to collect the pieces of what had so recently been one of Abbie’s dinner plates. Without looking up, I asked, “And I suppose that just came up in conversation, did it?”

Abbie joined me on the floor, dustpan and brush in hand. “Not really, no. I observed many things that told me her preference leaned to the Sapphic side.” She paused whilst she chased a stubborn sliver of china around on the tile. “Her key ring for one—Stonewall. The sticker in the back window of her car—Stonewall. The ring on her pinkie finger—”

“Was that Stonewall too?”

Abbie stood and smacked me on the back of the head. “Git. No.”

I rubbed the spot as I stood too, but she moved to throw the pieces away.

“And the way she stared at you constantly when she thought you weren’t looking.”

My heart banged dramatically inside my chest, as if it was auditioning for a new play called Hope. “That means nothing, Abbie. People look at each other all the time.”

Abbie laughed. “True. But not in the panting ‘I want you’ kind of way.”

“Pfffft!”

“You can ‘pfffft’ all you want. It was totally obvious. Emily Carson wants you badly.”

Green eyes met green, and I knew that Abbie wasn’t pulling my leg. She might be indulging in a bout of wishful thinking, but at that precise moment, she believed every word that she was saying.

“I have to go. See you soon, okay?”

Abbie tilted her head and looked at me.

“Before you start matchmaking, remember that you promised me.”

Abbie sighed and nodded.

“And I really have to go. It seems as if I have to go take a look at Miller’s Farm tomorrow.”

Before I left, I wished Rob a quiet goodbye, as Lily was snoring on the sofa next to him.

I had just opened the door to my pickup when Abbie came up behind me. Her hands slipped around my waist and turned me around to give me a hug. Her soft voice whispered in my ear, “I know how much it hurt today. And how much you still miss Toby. We all do, sis.”

A pressure swelled inside my chest, and I nodded against her shoulder.

”One day, eh?”

A sniff, another nod, and a croaked, “Yes. One day.”



When I arrived home, I went straight to the walk-in closet in my bedroom. On the shelf above the clothes rods were boxes full of memories—memories I wanted to forget, yet memories I wanted close to me. Boxes marked “Mum and Dad,” boxes marked “Family,” and a box marked “Toby.”

I pulled the last box down and took it to the front room, where I settled myself on the beanbag and balanced the box on my thigh. When I lifted the lid, I was greeted by big brown eyes and a toothy grin, and my tears welled up. I lifted the picture closer and looked into my lad’s eyes. If I tried hard enough, I could just make out my reflection in his pupils. I’d been younger, happier, and smitten right back. I carefully laid the picture to one side and selected another. This time Toby was nine months old, racing around the garden chasing a cat that had decided my back garden was the perfect place to sunbathe. Not on Toby’s watch, it wasn’t. A thick snorting laugh shot out of my mouth, followed by a sob.

Each picture was like the pleasure/pain theory. It hurt so much to see him, yet it soothed my soul to know that I had had someone so special to share my world with. Glossy prints of the best thirteen years of my life—every stage a reminder of what I’d had and what I had lost.

It had been five years since I had said my farewell to him, and five years since I had last looked at his picture. I felt guilty, almost like I

had abandoned his memory, but it had hurt so much to look, hurt so much to remember.

Two hours later, I slipped all the photographs back into the box and closed the lid. Instead of putting it back on the shelf, I set it on the coffee table. It was time to move on...time to bring Toby out of the dark and me along with him. I would buy a photo album, buy some frames. I wanted to see him again. Time, as they say, was a great healer, and although the pain never truly goes away, it does get easier to deal with. My dad always said that pets were here to show us how to love, and although it seems cruel that they are taken from us too soon, their love carries on. Love is something we should treasure, not hide from. It was a pity that when it came to loving me, my dad couldn't measure up to his own words.

I had decided that I wasn't going to hide anymore. Tomorrow I would go and see Charlie again. I knew Emily wanted to be his mum, but I thought, maybe, I could be that too.



I guess it might have been a little underhanded for me to go to the Dogs Trust at nine o'clock the next morning when I knew Emily was going at twelve. Who cared? Not me. As I had looked into Charlie's eyes, I'd felt something click into place, something I thought I would never feel again. If it turned out that the Trust decided Emily was the better parent, then so be it. I would take the rejection well. Maybe.

A woman greeted me at the door, and then her face showed confusion as I asked to see Charlie.

"Charlie has someone interested in adopting him." Her voice quavered. "Just let me..." She toddled off to the reception desk and tapped a password into the computer which brought the screen to life.

"Are you Emily Carson?"

She knew I wasn't Emily, but was politely informing me that the adoption of Charlie was underway. Why else have it all on the system?

Turning, she gave me the traditional "I'm sorry" face before attempting to actually say the words.

It was time to turn on what little charm I possessed, and that wasn't a lot. "I just want to see him. He is so adorable, isn't he?"

The woman smiled and nodded. "That's the problem. They all are."

I surreptitiously glanced at her name badge before smiling widely. "People like you, Ann, amaze me."

Her smile wavered. "People like me?" She paused momentarily before continuing. "Why would someone like me amaze anyone?"

"Because if it wasn't for people like you, where would our canine friends be? Who would look out for them?"

Ann laughed. Loudly. "Nice try."

I scrunched up my face showing her I knew I'd been caught, which made her laugh again, and this time I joined her. After a moment, we fell silent, Ann's eyes looking at me expectantly.

"I know someone else wants to adopt him, but when I saw him yesterday, I didn't get the chance to speak to anyone about adopting him myself."

Ann looked deeply into my eyes as if exacting a promise of sorts from me, then she sighed and nodded. "Come on then. Let's make Charlie's day."

As she moved past me, I wanted to pump the air with my fist and hiss "yes!" but decided that, for the moment, I should at least give the appearance of being mature enough to adopt a dog.

As we walked through to the back, the mischievous side of me wanted to drop hints about seeing Emily yesterday and how she

didn't seem to connect with the pooch. But, nah...that wasn't my style. Everything had to be fair and square.

Who was I kidding? It had nothing to do with being fair and square. I couldn't do that to Emily. God help me, I liked her. Was attracted to her. I mean, how many women had I known that had made me react the way I had reacted to her? I'd never felt an actual spark when touching someone. Never before needed to look at the colour of someone's eyes so badly. And seeing her with Charlie... I sighed. I felt guilty about being at the kennel, but I also wanted to see the little man again. Just the once. Just to see if the connection I had with him was the same today as yesterday.

Approaching his kennel, the same excitement welled up in me. I'd brought my own ball for him to chase, bought first thing that morning from the pet store. To say Charlie was happy to see me would have been an understatement. He was dozing in his basket when I arrived, his back to the bars, but he lifted his head and sniffed the air inquisitively. He turned, got up, and came to me, all in one fluid movement.

"Hey, baby."

"Yap!" He was on his hind legs, his tail flapping wildly.

"Want to play?"

Charlie tilted his head back and made a mini howling noise, his paws scrabbling at the cage.

Ann laughed. "It seems as if it will be okay to leave you two on your own. You can play in the yard."

Playing ball is such a simple thing. All you need is a ball and willing participants. It can last for as little or as long as you want—your call. Some people might think that throwing a ball, having it brought back, and then throwing it again is a waste of time. Those same people think that half an hour could be better spent, even if

it is used for sorting out the niggling things that life can throw at you. Not me. Half an hour throwing the ball for Charlie was the best possible use of my time. Watching him chase it, pin it, growl at it as he pretended it was his prisoner, then trot back grinning for me to throw it again—that, to me, was fulfilling. Seeing him nudge it with his nose when I pretended I didn't see it; hearing his impatient yap; being jumped on and thoroughly licked with happiness—definitely not a waste of time. And in this short thirty minutes, I knew, without the shadow of a doubt, I was in love.

Saying goodbye to him was hard, but I had to go, as Emily would be arriving in just over an hour and a half. I wanted to speak to the volunteers about his adoption, wanted to find out why his owners had given up on such a gem as Charlie. I left him with a squeaky toy and a promise to visit him the next day.

After speaking to Sharon, Charlie's key worker, about why he was at the Trust, I realised that some people should be shot. I couldn't help the tears that came when I found out about the neglect, the beatings, the abandonment Charlie had suffered at the hands of someone who probably classed him or herself as being superior to a dog.

Charlie had been found at the beginning of October the previous year, scavenging through bins. He was painfully underweight, had injuries to his hind leg, and open wounds around his neck, probably caused by being tethered. Injuries of that extent should have made him wary of humans, should have made him fearful of trusting another person, but no. When the call came through from a concerned party about a dog looking like it needed help, members of the Trust had gone to save him. Instead of running or cowering, Charlie had wagged his tail and limped over to them, curling himself into a ball around Sharon's feet. It was if he knew they were there to help him.

He had needed immediate medical attention. Surgery on his hind leg treated a fracture and a ruptured cruciate; eighteen stitches were needed near his right ear, twenty-eight around his neck. They also found a wound at the back of his neck that suggested the owner had cut out the microchip that identified him with his owner. At that juncture, I wanted to use a very bad word that started with a C.

Charlie's adoption had been on hold until he was healed and feeling more secure about the world around him. Even though people could meet him now, it would be another month before he would be ready to go home with his new mummy because of all he had been through.

Sharon gave me a form to fill out, once again making sure I knew that someone else was interested in Charlie.

The image of Emily's smiling face flitted into my mind, and I felt guilty all over again. It didn't stop me from filling in the form, didn't stop me from taking one of their small photographs of Charlie and slipping it inside my purse.

All day, I thought of Charlie. Thought of the way he trusted, the way his tail wagged, the way he loved humans. How could that be? How could a dog who had so obviously been mistreated open himself up for anything? Countless times I slipped his photograph from my purse and stared at his sparkling eyes, his grinning mouth, and read the text at the side that introduced Charlie to the world as "Loveable, friendly, playful."

At three o'clock, I pulled into the driveway of Miller's Farm. Seeing Emily dressed in cargo pants and a sweatshirt made my heart flip flop inside my chest. She was halfway up a ladder, sanding the window sill of one of the upstairs windows with an electric sander, her ears covered with sound reducing muffs. As she stretched, her sweatshirt lifted and exposed a very muscled back. I could tell she

was strong by the way she manoeuvred herself, making the sander do her bidding.

She was so beautiful, so captivating, so positively breath taking. Yet she was going to take Charlie away from me. Or I was going to take him from her. Guilt flooded through me. Here I was, her potential employee, stabbing her in the back when she wasn't looking. Why was I doing that? Why was I contemplating sneaking something away from her when she, in fact, had seen Charlie first?

I reached for my purse and then pulled out the picture again. God. That face. Those eyes. My grin spread like butter, and I nodded at the picture.

BANG BANG BANG! Fuck!

“When were you going to tell me you were planning on trying to steal *my* dog?”

What the fuck? The surprise of seeing Emily standing next to the car window nearly made me pee my pants.

“Sneaking over to the Trust. I know. They fucking told me.”

I was glad my doors were locked. Judging by the look on her face, I could have been the next victim of her electric sander.

“Charlie is not YOUR dog.”

She gritted her teeth, tipped her head to the side, and clutched the sander more firmly, as if she wanted to batter me about the head with it.

“By the way, your mobile doesn't work.”

Huh? Why bring that up now?

“So I'll tell you to your face—get the fuck off my land and stay away from my dog.”

And there's the answer.

As an aside, I couldn't help noticing that Emily Carson looked magnificent when she was angry. My smile sneaked up from

nowhere. I didn't do it to piss her off; it just reflected how I was feeling. Even when Emily was threatening me, hating me, it felt good being with her.

“Go on. Look fucking smug. But I'm telling you now, Charlie is my dog.”

“But I—”

“But you nothing. Go!”

Instead of me going, she did. She spun on her heel and marched inside her house, leaving me staring after her.

I had two choices. One, go. Two, go after her. I chose the latter.

I didn't knock, didn't announce I was there; I just went inside and looked for her. She was easy to find, as she was in what was going to be her living room, her hands resting on the mantelpiece, her head bowed. Even before I reached her, I knew she was crying. Those strong shoulders were shaking, and soft noises were escaping from the shroud of her hair.

I gently laid my hand on her back and braced myself for a bollocking, but it didn't come.

Emily turned and wrapped her arms around me, her sobs settling onto my shoulder.

I felt so protective of her, like I could stop her crying and somehow make her feel better. The only thing I could think of to accomplish that was to promise I wouldn't see Charlie again. I wanted to—God, I wanted to promise her that—but I couldn't. So, I continued to hold her, stroking my hand up and down her back, comforting her with shushing sounds and small kisses sporadically placed on the top of her head. Her fingers dug into my back, holding me until her crying eased.

“I'm sorry. I...don't usually get angry.” A loud hiccough made her chest heave. “Or cry like this.”

I remained silent. When Emily pulled away, I saw the utter anguish in her face. Her eyes were puffy and her cheeks were streaked, as the tears had made tracks through what I imagined was paint dust on her skin.

“Why, Ellie?” Brown eyes searched my own, seeking an answer. “Why did you do it?”

I shrugged and pulled away from her. I felt embarrassed, and not just about my actions. If Emily and I were ever going to salvage anything—be it friendship, a working relationship, or something more special—I had to explain.

With my face turned away from her, I found the strength to start my story. “His name was Toby. A Border Terrier. He was my best friend at a time when I really needed one.” I walked over to the other side of the room and pretended to be interested in an old table, running my fingers over the distressed wood. “When I first got him, I was fifteen years old. I’d wanted a dog for years, but my parents had always said no.”

I spilled each and every detail about my connection to Toby—why he was so damned important to me, so bloody special. “He stood by me when others didn’t, showed me that no matter who I chose to love, he still loved me exactly the same.” I turned my head so I could see her.

Emily was still in the same spot I had left her, her expression unreadable.

I let out a huge breath. “When I was twenty, I came out. I told my parents I was gay, and I expected we would move on from there. Abbie didn’t care; I was still Ellie. My parents...” I clicked my tongue, “...weren’t so understanding.”

“Oh, Ellie, I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. The time for ruing the lack of parental acceptance was well past its “sell by” date. “I haven’t spoken to them in nearly thirteen years.” This wasn’t about them, though. This was about the “why,” although maybe they were at least a part of the reason. I didn’t know for sure.

I no longer cared as much about the rejection from my parents. Too much had happened in my life since then for me to fret over their insensitivity and inability to love me no matter what. Unlike Toby.

“Abbie and Rob took me in. Gave Toby and me a home. Got me on my feet again. I lost Toby to cancer five years ago. I had to have him euthanised. It was the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make.”

I was finding it difficult to talk. My throat seemed to have swollen, and words were becoming trapped. I begged myself not to start crying, not in front of Emily. It seemed, of late, the waterworks turned on easily, and I couldn’t seem to completely shut off the flow. 2012 was turning into the year of crying. It seemed as if that was all I had done since yesterday.

Emily moved closer to me, her face full of concern. Her hand reached towards mine, but stopped.

It didn’t take a genius to work out why I had fallen so hard for Charlie, although I knew he was not Toby, and he would never replace my lad. Charlie would always be Charlie, and even if he did look his predecessor, there were many differences between them. For a start, Toby never liked red balls. At that thought, I snorted, a laugh that immediately turned into a sob. It was so hard to hold in the emotion. At that moment, undoubtedly people who had never had a pet would have been wondering what all the fuss was about.

Emily’s arms slipped around me, and it was her turn to be the comforter.

Being held by Emily was something I knew I would never tire of. It seemed as if I slotted right into the circle of her protection and, as long as I was there, nothing and no one could hurt me.

She let me cry. When the tears finally turned into gasping, she led me to the kitchen and plonked me down on one of the dining chairs. When Emily moved away from me, I immediately felt the loss of our contact. The sound of a kettle being filled, the click of the switch, and she was back, pulling a chair close to me.

I lifted my head and looked deeply into her eyes. It wasn't pity I saw there, but understanding.

Her hand stretched out and she caught my fingers with hers, her thumb stroking the back of my thumb. She was thinking something over. I could tell by the way she nibbled her bottom lip, the way her eyebrows dipped.

"Look." She straightened, but didn't release her hold on my hand. "We can both see Charlie."

I didn't understand.

"They always say that it isn't a person who chooses a dog, but the other way around."

I still didn't get it. Call me thick—I do on a regular basis.

"After the month is up, we will see who Charlie has bonded with most closely, okay?"

What? "I don't understand."

A delightful giggle came from her mouth. "We will let Charlie decide who he wants to live with. But," she leaned closer, "we will see him together. No sneaking off to get extra time with him, okay?"

I nodded. At least it was a start. It might turn out that after a month, I was still no better off, but at least I would be friends with the person that loved the same dog I did. It seemed like a plan.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

PUPPY LOVE

BY L.T. SMITH

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