

MONTY AND ME

Louisa Bennet

A V O N

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To Ann Young, Zina Daniel and Maureen Larkin.

Chapter One

I bound from the car and, nose to the ground, zig-zag around the front lawn of my new home. I Hoover up downy feathers that stick to my wet nose and I sneeze, sending the feathers flying. As a pup, I once tore a cushion to shreds searching for the duck inside. I found loads of feathers but never found the duck. I'm still searching. Can't be that many naked ducks about.

'So, what do you think?' Rose asks, smiling.

What do I think? I think those bitter white tablets the vet gave me were worth it after all. I can't feel my stitches and my paws seem to float above the grass as if I'm dreaming. I run over to Rose, tail wagging like a windscreen wiper in a downpour, and lick her hand. After being cooped up in a cage at the vet's, I need the wind in my fur, big time. So I charge up and down, leaning into each turn like a motorcycle at Brands Hatch, almost tripping over a faded wooden sign on the overgrown grass that once welcomed visitors to Duckdown Cottage. It even has a white duck painted on it.

Duck!

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I bolt down the side of the house to where the duck droppings are so potent it's like fireworks going off in my head.

'Monty!' she calls. 'Leave the ducks alone.'

She can't be serious! Duck and pheasant retrieval is what I'm bred for. It's a calling.

I go into selective hearing mode and charge for the pond, revelling in the glorious combination of mud, poultry poo and stagnant water. It's the canine equivalent of Chanel No. 5. Most of the quack-pack sit serenely in the shade of a willow. A matronly mallard leads them in meditation.

'Om shanti,' the mallard intones.

'Om shanti,' they reply.

The others snooze, plump bodies balanced on one of their twig-like legs, eyes closed. It's too much. I can't resist. Time for a bit of duck toppling!

I charge at them, plumed tail held high like the battle flag of an invading army, and bark with excitement. The ducks panic, running around in circles, then scatter. Some head for the water, others bolt across the lawn, wings back. Before Rose can grab my collar, I dive for the pond, water splashing over me, cool and exhilarating.

'Monty, stop! Your stitches!'

Mouth open, I pounce on a black and white tufted dowager and come up with her in my jaws.

'Get off me, you slobbering fur-ball!' she quacks and kicks me in the muzzle.

I can't tell this squirming mass of feathers and webbed feet that I'm not going to hurt her, because I'll drop her if I do. Sodden but proud, I trot out of the pond and deposit the ruffled bird, unhurt, at Rose's feet. A gift. I am expecting

praise, ears up, long pink tongue dangling, mouth turned up in what the big'uns – that's our term for people – often think of as a smile.

'Bad dog!' she scolds, trying to catch her breath.

The duck quacks out 'Tosser!' as she waddles off, a little wobbly.

I watch her go, my ears flat, head lowered, tail tucked in, confused by Rose's reaction. Not the duck's. They never take it well.

'This isn't going to work if you eat the ducks. You have to leave them alone, Monty,' she says, wagging her finger.

Even when she's cross she's softly spoken. It's like a gentle breeze whispering through tall grass.

I 'harrumph' and sit.

Detective Constable Rose Sidebottom is the alpha, the pack leader. My *new* pack. I can't quite wrap my brain around what a sidebottom is, since the ones I like to sniff are most definitely at the back. So I think of her as Rose. She's a trainee detective. I sympathise. I was a trainee guide dog once, and it's not easy having your every move watched and judged. On the way here I spotted her training harness in the back of the car. Who'd have thought detectives wear them too! Except she calls hers a stab jacket. Not sure why.

I peer up at her eyes, the colour of Blu Tack. How do I know? I tried eating some once. Very chewy, which was great fun. But not very tasty. Her mousy brown hair is pulled back in a long ponytail that reminds me of a bushy tail. I know she is not very tall because my head comes up to her waist, but she is strong, as I found out when I bolted from my cage and she grabbed my collar. She's not one for glinting, clinking jewellery and she dresses in monotones – today, it's a grey

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trouser suit. The only exception is an antique silver watch with narrow strap and diamonds around the tiny face that carries someone else's smell: a sickly person wrapped in blankets. Even this she keeps hidden under her shirt cuff. It's as if she doesn't want to be noticed.

Rose gnaws her lower lip. She looks worried. Is this because I chased the ducks? Oh no. I feel bad about that. I'll have to try not to. Will be hard though. Goes against my instincts. You know the Retriever thing.

I puff out my chest and sit tall, determined to ignore the little quackers.

I will be good, I will.

But I just can't resist a glance at the pond. The bird I've just released lifts her tail feathers and farts at me in defiance. Right, that's it! I'm not putting up with . . .

'Now we've got that clear I'll show you around, but take it easy, okay? You need time to heal.'

I focus back on Rose. Butter wouldn't melt in my mouth.

'Stand!' she commands.

I obey, quick-smart and walk to heel. I know how to do all this easy stuff. Sit! Heel! Drop! Stay! Fetch! All those commands – and many more – were drilled into me at guide dog school. Although I didn't know at the time, getting to guide dog school is like winning a scholarship to Oxford or Cambridge. And I got top marks there, too. I was destined for great things. It wasn't until my first posting that I disgraced myself and suffered the ultimate humiliation – but that's a story for another time.

Ahead is a tumbledown shed covered in ivy. As wide as a garage, its lopsided wooden doors hang open on broken hinges. The ancient black paint peels and curls. I sniff a door

post and pick up an old wee-mail – that’s the doggie equivalent of an email. It’s a message from a slightly deluded Dachshund called Legless who believes she is named after the elf in *Lord of the Rings* because of her exceptional speed. On those little legs? Somehow, I don’t think so. Wee-mails, though brief, go one step further than emails: they convey our mood. Hers is elation. She boasts she’s finally bitten the postman’s ankles after three years of trying. That I can believe: her head’s at the perfect height.

‘Aunt Kay used to love gardening. It helped her unwind,’ Rose says, staring at a dented green wheelbarrow just inside the door. ‘She could grow anything. She’d sing to the flowers, you know.’

I look up and see tears in her eyes. I lean against her leg and feel her sadness. It reminds me of my own. I don’t understand why big’uns’ eyes fill with water but I do understand the pain of loss and Rose clearly misses this Aunt Kay very much, just like I pine for Paddy, my old master. It feels like I’ve lost a limb and although it will never come back, the memory is agonisingly real. I howled each night at the vet’s, calling Paddy’s name, but in my heart I knew he wouldn’t come.

I miss Paddy’s hand stroking my head. I miss our fishing trips together and how he’d never scold me when I scared away the fish. I miss our evenings; he’d sit in his armchair tapping away at his laptop as I lay at his feet, head resting on his leather slippers. And I miss his smell: musty books, Listerine, woollen cardigan, and liver treats, which he always kept in his cardigan pocket, just in case.

‘Should mow the lawn one day,’ Rose mumbles, as she walks away.

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It takes me a while to focus on what she's said. Mow? Why? I prefer meadow. Love the way the dandelions tickle my belly and the bees scatter as I charge through the tall grass.

I place a wee-mail above Legless's ancient message. No need to sign it because every dog has a unique aroma. It's the same wee-mail I've left whenever I've had the chance to pee. It conveys my shame. I ask one question: who killed Professor Patrick Salt? I hang my head and tuck in my tail as I plod after Rose. She's investigating his murder, but little does she know, so am I. I failed Paddy in life and I have vowed I will not fail him in his death.

Rose waits for me.

'Poor boy,' she says, giving me a pat. 'I shouldn't get cross with you. It's not your fault I've messed up at work.'

It's early evening in September and summer came late this year so the air is still warm and the light has only just begun to fade. We stroll by a greenhouse with panes of glass missing and tomato plants laden with over-ripe fruit. I can smell their sweetness. I also detect a ratty scent. I clock it for investigation later, and follow Rose to the very end of the garden where a tall oak tree tickles the sky and a thick yew hedge marks the boundary. My heart races. This must be where the river is. Oh boy! Just like home. Then I remember *this* is now my home.

In the distance, there's a low rumble that becomes a clackety-clack. It gets louder as it draws closer. I feel vibrations through the ground. My nose is stung by a gush of air, ripe with hot metal, engine oil and rubber. I step back and bark a warning, then there's a fearful scream from the other side of the hedge. It tears by so fast it's gone in seconds, its

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bright eyes glaring at me through gaps in the foliage. My tail is up and curled over my back like a question mark, my legs wide set, then I charge forward and growl at the creature. I must defend us. I bark at Rose to move away, but she stands there laughing, her ponytail bobbing.

‘It’s all right, Monty, just a train. You’re going to have to get used to it. The line’s on the other side of the hedge.’

She strokes my head and I relax. Not sure about this train thing. Never met one before and until I’ve thoroughly sniffed it, I’ll be on my guard.

Rose kneels down and looks me in the eye.

‘The fence is pretty rotten and I can’t afford to fix it. So I need you to promise me you won’t run away.’ She scratches behind my ear.

Oh yeah! Up a bit, that’s it. A bit more. Ah yes, bliss!

‘Okay?’

For you, anything! I promise.

Unless . . .

Truth be told, I have an Achilles Heel. My nose might be my greatest asset but it’s also the chink in my furry armour. I’m a food addict. There. I’ve said it. An addict. Food’s the reason I’m no longer a guide dog. The most embarrassing moment of my life. But then, that’s how I met the Professor. Life’s confusing, isn’t it?

‘Hungry?’ Rose asks.

Something tells me we’re going to get along just fine.

I walk back to the house, so close to Rose she almost trips over me. She unlocks the stable-style kitchen door. It scrapes the worn yellow and brown, diamond-patterned lino floor. I am hit by a smorgasbord of smells: some very old indeed. What better place to inhale the house’s history than the

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kitchen? Rose's scent is the newest: vanilla and honey, peppermint and the sea. She must've spent her childhood near the ocean because the sea is part of her make-up now. But her clothes carry the odours of her work: bitter coffee, stale cigarettes, plastic chairs in over-heated rooms and someone else's sweat that's tinged with the vinegary smell of fear. Ever wondered why your dog sniffs you when you come home? He wants to know where you've been and who you've met.

There's a loud ringing coming from Rose's pocket. I feel her body tense. She answers.

'Sir?' Her hand trembles.

I look around, searching for the threat, ready to defend her.

A man yells down the phone. 'Sidebottom, get in here now!'