

Daphne, rescue dog.

'Hello, you are a very beautiful doggie.'

The sixty-something man was short, wiry, round faced and balding, with a neat moustache and goatee beard, brimming with energy.

'Yes, Professor Simpson, she is cute and, so far as we can tell, perfectly healthy. She has been with us before, three times now. Her name is Daphne, we think. Like many strays, she is aggressive to other dogs. If you decide to take her on and she does not work out, I'm afraid we will have to put her down. This is her last chance.'

'Ah, her last chance saloon. Yes. I'm familiar with that situation. I'm sure we will suit each other fine. Let me just check with my partner. May I take a photograph, please?

An hour later, paperwork completed, further vaccinations given and all fees paid, Magnus Simpson rounded the amount up to £300 and the smallish pale brown greyhound cross was his, for better or worse.

Twenty minutes later he arrived home.

'Coo-ee Lottie, we're home! Are all the other external doors closed?'

The bungalow was only nine months old, carefully designed to accommodate Lottie's special needs, all doors operated remotely from her control pad or by voice commands, the extra costs funded by the money from the NHS payout after years of legal struggles for due compensation.

Lottie, (Charlotte) replied from her desk where she created animated adventure stories for primary aged children presented in video books which sold online in their hundreds every month.

'Yes, of course, honey,' she replied, before saving and closing the latest version of her current story, another about her principal character called *Harry the Hedgehog*, a Robin Hood type hero with superpowers, always on hand to help people and animals in trouble.

The small, bald, legless remnant of a woman appeared through the door of her study at the end of the wide corridor, riding a motorised wheelchair. She was in steady decline as she had been for several years as her spine slowly disintegrated. This condition had been brought on by a failed operation five years earlier following a car accident. The surgeon had used unsterilised surgical implements, this caused by an undetected fault in the autoclave equipment.

'Her name is Daphne. Call her, why don't you, Lottie dear?'

Daphne, rescue dog.

'Daphne. What a lovely name for such a beautiful dog. Come here Daphne, and let me tickle those lovely ears of yours.'

Two months later.

The short funeral service was well attended. Angela, the thirty-something girl sent by the Humanist Society, read an extract from a poem which Lottie had written featuring Harry and Daphne.

Magnus stood with Daphne at the exit, shaking hands with as the mourners said their final goodbyes, The bungalow and adapted disability van had been sold and the remaining legal paperwork was well-advanced. Final details could be arranged by telephone, email and fax.

He collected his cases from the waiting room. The man and his dog stood in the brisk November wind, waiting. At long last he was free of the nightmare of caring for his lovely Lottie while living his double life.

Ten minutes later, the Honda Jazz arrived precisely on time, as they had agreed on *WhatsApp*. It was driven by Sandra Whitley, the woman who had been Magnus's personal assistant and soul mate for over twenty years.

At nearly six feet tall, she towered above him.

'Hello you two. Are we set?'

The drive from Cambridge to Rosemarkie on The Black Isle beyond Inverness took over ten hours, with many stops for widdle walks. They arrived at just after midnight. It was fully dark with a spit of rain on the strong breeze. Sandra's refurbished bungalow was comfortable and cosy. Switching on the electric over blanket, she leaned forward and pecked his cheek.

'Right, Magnus, why not take Daphne for a last walk and I'll put the kettle on for a cuppa, shall I?'

'Yes, dear one. Come on Daphne, off we go.'