

## TROJAN POOCH

“How the hell did that dog get in here?” Adam asked incredulously. “You know I’m allergic to dogs.”

“It’s not like I let him in here,” I said with more than a touch of annoyance. I had been carrying in two weeks’ worth of groceries from the car after a 12-hour shift followed by a prolonged shopping trip, when the mutt of indeterminate breed came trotting in through the open garage and into the living room as though he helped pay the mortgage.

I continued, neatly stacking the produce into the crisper so that the drawer would close smoothly. “If you had come down to help me carry in the groceries, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. If you’d cleaned out the fridge before I got home, like I asked you to, I wouldn’t have had to take all this mess out to get the groceries. I *told* you I was almost home.”

“Well, can’t you shoo him back outside?” Adam asked, unbagging all the pantry items, but gathering them into a pile instead of turning around and going the extra two feet to the pantry door.

“I’m not a dog trainer. Obviously, the dog is hungry and smelled all the groceries, which is why he came in here. *You* try shooing him outside.”

Adam shot me a look but then decided against whatever he was going to say and turned his attention to the dirty dog.

“Go on, boy!” he said with a heavy dose of fake enthusiasm and a wave of his arm. The dog returned his enthusiasm with a vacant stare, not even following the arm wave with his gaze.

“Yes, I said,” shoving a plastic bag full of frozen meat at Adam. “I did try shooing him back outside. I had about as much luck as you did.”

“Maybe we can get him outside with a hot dog or something,” Adam said, rifling through the bag.

“I didn’t buy hot dogs. I think he has a collar. Maybe there’s a tag on it.”

“So?” Adam stared at her, somehow even more incredulous than before.

“So, maybe there’s a phone number on there that we can call.”

“And then what? The dog just hangs out in our house until someone can come pick him up? What if he pees on the new floor? Why can’t we just find a way to get him back outside and forget about it?”

It was side of Adam I knew existed, but I hated it. He was maybe the least charitable person I knew. He was a terrible recycler. And he couldn’t abide by house pets. When we’d first started dating, I’d had an old cat named Chicken. After the initial obsession with each other, he’d told me in no uncertain terms that we could only be a long-term thing if I never got another cat after Chicken died. I’d loved him enough then to agree. I still loved him, but he could be a real pain in the ass sometimes.

“You know what?” I said, my jaw jutting out with annoyance. “Just put that m-m-meat away and go upstairs. I’ll handle the dog and you won’t have to worry about it.” I stuttered when I got emotional or nervous.

“Fine,” he said, throwing up his hands, trying to disguise the relief I knew he felt. “I hope the dog doesn’t chew up all your nice shoes.”

“Fine.”

While Adam trudged up the stairs with exaggerated, angry tromps, the dog and I engaged in a staring contest that neither of us won. The dog was just beyond the line of neglect that made me worry for his safety. He was dirty, but not filthy. He was skinny, but not emaciated. He was forlorn, but not desperate-looking. If he wasn’t going to come to me, I was going to have to go to him.

I slowly made to advance toward the dog, but he immediately retreated with a slight whimper. I stopped, and dropped to all fours, glad Adam was safely out of view. If he saw me, he’d never let me live it down.

“It’s okay, boy,” I said in the same silly voice people use to talk to dogs and toddlers. “I’m not gonna hurtcha.”

The dog made a tentative step forward with one front paw, then another. He paused there. It became a tango of sorts; I’d crawl two steps, and then he’d crawl two steps, until finally we were close enough that I could reach out and touch him. But I didn’t, not at first. I gave him another “good boy” in the silly fake voice before sitting back on my heels.

I was now close enough to see that under a healthy amount of matted fur, the dog did in fact have a collar. Slowly, tentatively, I reached out with a closed fist like I’d been taught as a kid. When the dog didn’t flinch, I opened my fist and pet just behind his ear with one hand, then the other.

The dog whined again, but this time it was more of a whine of thanks for the affection he must have been missing since getting separated from his owner.

“Poor boy,” I cooed, getting more and more vigorous with my pets until the dog let me hook a hand under his collar and move it around the matted fur to where I could read the tag. There, in worn blocky letters, the tag read:

LUCY

+36 70 638 5041

“Poor *girl*,” I corrected myself, examining the tag more closely, a bit taken aback by its inscription. “Did you know that my name is Lucy, too? Did you?”

Of course, the dog didn’t, but she responded by licking her chops and panting softly. I reached for my phone and snapped a quick picture of the tag in case Lucy the dog decided to run off when Lucy the human rose from her aching knees to get Lucy the dog the bowl of water she obviously needed.

Google photos recognized the second line of the tag as a phone number before I did, and prompted me to run a search on the number, to which I happily obliged, filling a cereal bowl with water for Lucy. All Google could tell me was that the phone number was located in Tatabánya, Hungary – no

name, no address. Next, Google asked me whether I wanted to call, text, or save the Hungarian phone number.

I'd never once called or texted internationally from my three-year-old Android phone, and honestly didn't know if the process was any different than calling my mom's house. Adam had set up a Google voice number for me, but I didn't really know how to use it, and when I asked him to explain why it worked and why I needed it, he used language that went over my head and then belittled my lack of tech savvy, like he always did.

Before I could make any further decisions, I needed to get Lucy some water. I rose from the floor with a grunt that made Lucy stumble back in surprise, but she trotted into the kitchen behind me as soon as she heard the faucet running.

"You're a long way from Tatabánya, Lucy," I said as I watched the mutt lap up the water in big thirsty gulps, because she was still watching me as she did so. Not that I knew where Tatabánya was. Hell, I probably couldn't even point out Hungary on a map of Europe if you put one in front of me. Hungary was in Europe, right?

Lucy's thirst slaked, she gazed up at me with a happy, satisfied look on her hazel face. I took a deep breath and pressed the call button. Whoever the Hungarian man or woman responsible for Lucy was, they were probably worried sick about her and deserved to know that she'd safely wandered into the apartment of a stuttering, incompetent dog whisperer in Seattle.

*Please go to voicemail. Please go to voicemail.* I repeated in my head as I rehearsed what I would say after the beep. Like most people of my generation, I hated talking on the phone, but my nervous stutter made me hate it even more than most.

The line rang five times before I heard the welcome crackle of the recorded voicemail greeting's background noise. I let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding as the voice, sounding more Wichita than Tatabánya (not that I'd be able to pick a Hungarian accent out of a lineup), began.

*Hi, you've reached Steve Smith. I'm traveling at the moment so don't be surprised if it takes me a while to return your call, but please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.*

I swallowed hard as a different-sounding beep sounded in my ear.

"Hello, Steve. M-m-my name is L-Lucy Brooks." I shook my head and told myself not to be nervous. "I'm calling because I found your dog—" here I paused to make sure I could get it out in one syllable... "Lucy and wanted to see what I could do to get her back to you. My number is—"

It probably sounded on the voicemail that I trailed off having forgotten my own phone number, but in reality it was the mental blocker between my brain and my mouth trying to get out the "th" sound in "306." Thinking fast, I decided to use the Google Voice number Adam had set up for me.

"253-461-0097. Thank you."

I hung up hastily and got some water for myself, holding up the glass to Lucy, who still wouldn't take her chocolate eyes off me.

My phone vibrated three times in quick succession and chimed an unfamiliar alert noise. I picked up from the kitchen counter, where a few unshelved pantry items waited impatiently. I hated being interrupted in the middle of putting things away, and having clutter around me elicited a feeling of anxiety that could quickly spiral out of control. It was Google Voice.

You have a message from Steve Smith. [Click here](#) to download the message.

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The sender number wasn't the Hungarian phone number on Lucy's tag; it was the same kind of simple five-digit number I texted to donate to the Red Cross or vote for someone on American Idol. I hovered over the link, then withdrew my finger, looking over at Lucy. Her eyes were still on me, with the same forlorn look that said *If you don't help me, who will?*

I couldn't think with all this kitchen clutter around me. I shoved the phone into the front pocket of my scrubs and set to work filing the groceries away on their proper pantry shelves, my Crocs squeaking against the clean tile floor as I paced to and fro between the counters and the pantry. I tried to think back to the security training they'd made us sit through at work. It had all been about emails and the electronic health records programs, nothing about phones. How would compromising a phone work, anyway?

I could go upstairs and ask Adam, but he'd just be annoyed at me for interrupting him and want to know if the dog was still hanging around. Plus, I was still ticked off at him for not helping with the groceries and wanting to relegate Lucy to the streets. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing he was, once again, more technologically inclined than I was. He'd probably just tell me it was a message stored in the Cloud and I could only see it if I downloaded it.

The phone chimed and buzzed three more times. I pulled it from the pocket and saw that the three messages were now nine. I wondered if it was nine different messages, or nine of the same message over and over. Whoever Steve was, he must be really worried and relieved about Lucy. I tapped the "click here" link in the first message.

The screen blurred except for a spinner in focus, like a dog chasing its tail around and around. I watched as the spinner slowed and a download icon appeared in the status bar, then another, and then another. *The file size on these messages must be huge*, I thought. Then just as the spinner disappeared and the screen darkened, I felt the phone grow hot in the palm of my hand. I dropped it onto the kitchen counter where the pantry groceries had just been, just as it began to vibrate and the screen lit up – once, twice, three times, then followed by almost-constant vibration.

A message that purported to be from the Federal Bureau of Investigation kept popping up over and over, sparkling white text against a menacing dark red background.

Your device has been locked due to the violation of federal laws of the United States of America. To decrypt your files, send voucher code and \$500 USD via MoneyPak.

I held my index finger against the blazing hot power button until the restart icon appeared on the screen. I tapped it, letting out a sigh of relief, and waited for the phone to complete its power cycle

so everything could get back to normal. Through the floor and ceiling above me, I heard Adam let out a hacking cough and I swallowed hard.

The screen had no sooner lit up with the happy selfie Adam had reluctantly taken with me from the top of the Ferris wheel at the state fair than the phone started vibrating again and the sinister message reappeared. I swiped the status bar down to view the long list of notifications that had populated in the last 60 seconds. The first five were from my bank.

Did you just make two purchases of \$80 to SVC SHOP CHILLZ?

There's a new inquiry on your credit report. Have a look now.

Your debit card purchase of \$151.24 at Chili's was approved.

A wire transfer of \$1215.16 has been scheduled for April 2.

Your purchase for \$86.61 KOHL'S was approved.

I tried to tap into all of them, but each time I tried, the same candy cane message from the "FBI" reappeared. I half-sprinted across the living room to grab my wallet from my purse, where each of my debit cards and credit cards slept securely in their own pockets like a giant bunk bed in a cartoon. I hastily ripped one from its pocket and turned the card over to view the 1-800 number on the back, then I tapped the phone icon in the tray. Lucy the dog peered at me apologetically between laps of water. *Don't shoot the messenger*, her sad eyes seemed to say.

The number pad appeared for a second before disappearing behind the FBI message. I tried entering the number anyway, but couldn't see whether I'd entered it correctly and couldn't tap the call button because it was covered up. I noticed with a lightheaded gasp that my hands were shaking and I had locked my knees – the first things I always did before a panic attack.

My heart sank with the realization that I'd have to use Adam's phone to call my bank. I slipped the hot phone back into my scrubs pocket and started pedaling my knees to get the blood flowing and give myself enough physical courage to venture upstairs to Adam's office. Lucy began to trot next to me, but when I reached the bottom of the stairs, she quickly changed her mind and lowered her body to lie down on the cold, hard, newly-installed bamboo floor.

"I know, girl," I said before turning my back on her to face my fate upstairs, the tears coming as I tried not to think about what kind of person would use an innocent stray dog for something so sinister.

I slipped my Crocs off at the top of the stairs and wiped my tears before knocking on the door Adam had slammed behind him in his tantrum minutes earlier.

"What, Lucy?" an annoyed voice called from behind the closed door.

"I n-n-need to use your phone," I stammered.

"Did you forget to charge yours again?"

"No, it's not that. C-can I just c-c-come in, please?"

I heard the creak of Adam's expensive desk chair and the soft thud of his footfalls before he opened the door.

"What's wrong with your phone? Is that dog still here? You didn't leave it alone, did you?"

"I called the number on the tag," I said, head down, eyes not wanting to meet his gaze.

"Did anyone answer?"

"No. It was an international n-n-number. It sent back a m-message to download so I did, and—" I trailed off, the next words I wanted to say already sticking in my throat behind a nervous mental block. I withdrew my phone from my pocket and decided to let it speak for itself.

"What the hell?" Adam said, snatching the phone from my shaking hand.

"It just started freaking out," I said. "And I tried to restart it but then there were all these m-m-MESSAGES—" I nearly shouted the last word as it shook loose from its stutter. "...from my bank. I need to call the bank."

"Jesus Christ, Lucy, this is ransomware! You got all this from the dog tag?"

I nodded.

"That's kind of genius, actually," Adam said, more to himself than to me. "I wonder how they pulled all that off from a voice mail. You did leave a voice mail, didn't you? Even though you hate talking to voice mail?"

*Not as much as I hate talking to people.* "Yes. Can you fix it?"

"Is that dog still here, then?" he asked, the anger in his voice rising.

"Yes, but is that really important right now? I need to call my bank before this guy cleans out all of our accounts."

"Our accounts? There are no *our* accounts. We're not married and we don't have any joint assets. This condo is in my name, which means it's mine, now GET THAT DOG OUT OF MY HOUSE!" Adam got a weird nostril flare thing whenever he got annoyed or angry that I used to find kind of cute and endearing. I didn't find it cute anymore.

"I'm not taking the dog anywhere until you l-l-let me call my bank!"

The phone buzzed again. Adam's face shot down to the screen.

"The guy just downloaded all the pictures from your phone," he said in a quiet, faraway voice.

"So?" Now I was the one getting angry and annoyed.

"You deleted the picture, right?" he asked in a panicky voice.

"What picture?"

"The one I took of you—" he trailed off and looked down at his feet and back up, then back at me. I shot him a look of frustrated confusion.

“On my birthday?” he said, as though that would ring a bell. It didn’t. I gave him the same look.

“When you were blowing me, Lucy,” he almost shouted. “Tell me you deleted the picture?!”

I stepped back, my jaw on the pristine bamboo floor. “You took a picture of me giving you a... a...” I was bad at words that started with B.

“A buh-buh-buh-blowjob, you dumb bitch.”

I felt my face flush. He’d made fun of my stutter before to get a rise out of me, and I’d made it clear at the time that he’d gone an inch too far. This was a mile.

“Are you going to let me use your phone or not?”

“We have to destroy this and get you a new phone. Jesus Christ, Lucy. How could you be so suh-suh-suh-stupid?”

I could hear Lucy the dog’s faint whimper echo off the walls of the stairwell and Adam’s precious new floor. She didn’t care that I wasn’t very good with technology, that I had a stutter, or that I suffered from sometimes debilitating anxiety attacks. She was just happy someone showed her a little kindness. I hoped the thief had left me enough money for a hotel for the night, somewhere where they accepted scrawny, pitiful pets.

“I think I need a new phone and a new boyfriend. At least now I have a new dog. We’re done.”