

I know Laura is on a longer shift today because she has left the magical noise box on. Usually, she just leaves the other machine on – the one that makes the music but doesn't have any pictures. I don't understand how she sometimes stares at this bright, noisy box for so many hours; it hurts my eyes! Sometimes I pretend to watch it with her when she has all of her scary programmes on, but I'm really just there for the cuddle.

Just as I've had about enough of the box, I hear a door close across the hall and then the delicate footsteps of Ashleigh walking towards our door. The gentlest little bark escapes me, letting her know I'm excited. I gallop towards her as she enters, charging into her and licking her face as she ruffles my ears. After our exciting encounter, she tells me it's a good thing I'm cute because she is sick of being covered in my hairs. Compliment taken.

She does her usual routine of checking everything in the apartment is okay and then makes the pictures in the box disappear before grabbing my leash. I can feel it coming. She's about to say it...the magic word that takes control of my body and makes me dance. Here it comes...

“Come on Copper, want to go for a walk?!” She screams.

*I do! I do!* I scream as I jump and bark around her. She laughs at me and joins in with my silly behaviour. I love our walks; she throws the ball forever until I finally sit down next to her and nudge her leg, letting her know it's time to go home.

At home, I devour my dinner of chicken in gravy with veg. She doesn't mush it up the way Laura does but it hardly hits the sides anyways. I wash it down with some water and then stretch out ready to take my afternoon nap, knowing I'll be awoken with Laura's return. I listen for Ashleigh closing her door, making sure she makes it home safe and close my eyes.

I'm in a dream of the past, walking with Laura in the snow when I was just a pup. My little legs can hardly step over all of the snow, but I'm having so much fun. I feel the dream starting to slip away as I hear familiar footsteps rushing up the stairs outside and then the frantic jingle of keys in our door. I immediately rush to the door, admittedly not in a straight line in my disorientated state but she's home! I let out a high pitched howl which is specially reserved for my Laura and hear her giggle as she walks in. As usual, her aroma is a mixture of all different kinds of foods and drinks. Most of the smells excite my belly and make me hungry, but today she smells strongly of that stuff she drinks in the mornings. I don't mind the smell but I once licked up a bit that she had spilled on the floor and I couldn't sit still or sleep properly for days.

“Awww Copper, where's my best boy?”

*I'm here! Here I am!*

“You wouldn't believe the shit I've had to put up with today. Why do people take their coffee so bloody seriously?” She asked whilst dumping her bag and hanging up her jacket. I couldn't answer her but I love it when she tells me about work. It sounds like a horrible place and I wish she didn't have to go there but she says that's how she can afford to keep me and buy me treats. I do love my treats.

We've spent hours cuddling on the sofa. The mini box that she carries around with her keeps vibrating and waking me up from my snooze. I start to feel a bit jealous off all the attention she is giving to the mini box, but as soon as she realises I'm stirring she puts the Laura-Stealer down and strokes my head. This time, the little box makes a different noise and she starts speaking to it. I notice her body stiffen. She immediately springs into action, throwing my toys and all of her books

into a cupboard trying to make the place look neater. I can faintly hear a low, raspy voice coming from the box – one that I vaguely recognise.

“You don't usually come over today” she hisses irritably. “The place is a mess...if you need money I'll just send it now through my phone.” She keeps pacing the room, straightening the cushions and brushing hairs off the sofa. I sense I'm in the way so move over to my bed on the other side of the room, turning it to face the door.

I can sense my Laura becoming more and more upset. She is still pacing through our apartment, throwing dirty clothes into her bedroom and spraying air freshener when I hear her use her angry voice. I do not like this voice. The only time I have ever been on the receiving end of this voice was when we were out on one of our many glorious walks and I swam the whole width of the lake to get to some bread which was being thrown in. I thought it was for me but Laura sharply informed me that it was for the ducks. Easy mistake, really.

“How much have you had to drink? Just turn around and go home to Mam.” I hear her say through gritted teeth. *Yes!* That is most definitely her angry voice. Next thing I know she is back on the sofa, pulling on her shoes whilst telling me that she is taking me over to Ashleigh's. I'd heard Ashleigh leave for work about an hour ago. I usually only go to Ashleigh's every two Friday's when Laura gets paid and returns home with a bag full of goodies for me, and a bottle of liquid that seems to make Laura extremely jolly. I love those days. We both absolutely stuff our faces and usually fall asleep on the sofa together, but Laura's eyes are always red and puffy and I can tell she has been sad.

As predicted, there is no answer at Ashleigh's. Laura returned even more distressed, desperately looking around our home for anything out of place.

“Fuck.” She stood still and closed her eyes, running both her hands through her hair. She let out a long, deep sigh and swore again. Her voice sounded shaky as she told me I had to be an extra good boy for the next hour. Before I even had time to prepare, I heard heavy, uneven footsteps trudging up the stairs. I like that the lift is broken, it gives me more time to guess who is outside. Laura sheepishly walked towards the door, awaiting our unforeseen guest. We both flinched at the sound of the pounding on the door. This was definitely a man, I had never heard a woman knock that hard. I fought all my natural instincts and didn't bark, I needed to be extra good according to Laura...but I was still on my guard.

As soon as she opened the door, a sickening smell whacked me across the snout. I recognised this scent; it clung to Laura's clothes every other Friday night. It was the man who they called Mike; Laura's Mam's special friend who had moved in to our old house and changed everything. I had never liked this man, and he had never liked me. My tail stood still, no wags for him.

He moved closer to Laura, placing his meaty hand on her arm. She winced but ignored her instinct to snatch it away. “Rent isn't due until Friday, Mike. You have no reason to be here. What do you want?” She didn't usually speak so directly; the playfulness in her voice had disappeared.

“If a recall correctly, this is my fuckin' hoose, is it not?” He slurred. I saw some of his saliva land on Laura's pale cheek, but she didn't dare wipe it away. I didn't care for his language. His already thick Geordie accent became almost inconceivable when he was drunk.

“It is, but you don't come over through the week...I usually like to know before you come over.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and kept looking down at the floor; she had barely given

him any eye contact since he arrived. He walked further into our house, slamming the door behind him so violently that the ornaments on the fireplace wobbled. My poor Laura wanted to keep her distance, but he was already upon her. He grabbed her face between his sweaty hands and squeezed her cheeks.

“It's not your money am after today darlin', ye havn't forgotten our other deal have ye?” His smile grew too wide and menacing, I couldn't help it...a loud, threatening bark escaped me and I instantly felt his gaze shift to me.

“You know a don't like it when that fuckin' dog is here!”

“Mike, don't be a dick. I would have got someone to watch him if I knew you were coming.” I could hear her breathing become more rapid. Oh god, I hope she's not mad at me.

“Av always hated this little shit” he bellowed, still glaring at me, spit still flying. “What's the matter son? You remember me don't ye?” He let out a raspy laugh which quickly turned into an uncontrollable coughing fit. I did remember him and I wasn't surprised he was coughing, the smell of smoke lingering on his clothes was enough to make any dog sick. He turned to look at Laura again, lifting her face so that she had no choice but to look at his greasy face.

For a few seconds, the silence and tension in the room was unbearable. Laura held her breath as he pulled her closer and forced his hand up her shirt. “Mike...” she was trying to protest but was choked with her own tears. His putrid mouth was all over her. Her whole body was heaving through her sobs. He pulled back suddenly and slapped her hard across her face.

“Stop cryin' you little bitch!” Then before I knew it, I was on him. I don't know how it had happened, because I hadn't meant to have moved but I felt my teeth ripping away the denim and sinking into the flesh on his calf. He made a sound I had only ever heard whilst watching Laura's scary programmes on the magic box – a deafening scream filled with pure rage. But then I heard Laura's High-pitched scream, filled with fear. He had knocked her to the ground in his outburst of anger. Without thinking, I released his leg and instinctively rushed to Laura's aide.

Before I had even reached her, his hand caved into my ribs.

As I plummeted to the ground, I let out an involuntary whimper. It hurts, but I don't think anything is broken. I think I can get back up. As I get to my Laura, blow number two knocks me back down. This time, my whimper is more of a scream. I'd never made this sound before. I prepared myself for blow number three. Nothing came. Instead, I heard his heavy, stinking body drop to the ground next to me. Above us, Laura stood with her mouth wide open, letting the object in her hand fall to the floor. I stood up, kind of wishing I hadn't. The pain shot through my side, but I had to be okay for Laura. The object on the floor was one of Laura's ornaments – the elephant one which Ashleigh had brought her back from Thailand, only now it was smashed. Laura dropped onto her knees, unable to take her eyes away from the dirty heap on our carpet. She began to sob hysterically, it was agonising to listen to. I went straight to her and nuzzled her face, letting her tears stream down into my fur.

I couldn't understand why she was upset. The smelly man was no longer touching her. In fact, he didn't seem to be able to do anything; he hadn't moved since he hit the floor. I could no longer hear his harsh breathing, and thankfully couldn't smell it. But now I was met with a different smell, and it seemed to be coming from the thick liquid draining from his skull. I believed this was blood. I had come into contact with it a few times when Laura used to get 'nose bleeds' but it never smelled this bad. It was a horrible smell, an unforgettable one. Whenever Laura bled, there were

copious amounts of paper towels and proper procedures to stop the bleeding. But this time, we just watched it ooze out of the horrible man's bald head.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit” Laura murmured.

She began to crawl across the floor and put her fingers against his neck. Why is she touching him? I nudged her arm to show that I was inquisitive but she told me to 'shh.' After a few painfully silent seconds, Laura pulled away and just stared at him. She was shivering. She turned her attention to me and cupped my head in her unsteady hands.

“Everything is going to be okay, Copper. I won't let anything happen to you” she promised whilst kissing my forehead. I wagged my tail and put my paw on her knee; I hated it when she was sad.

Without warning, she burst into life and started rolling his body so that he was on his back, his vacant eyes staring up at the ceiling. The smell coming from him was eye-watering, despite Laura's effort to mask it by wrapping up his body with bags and towels. It was like a game. I had to drag all the towels out of the cupboard as fast as I possibly could and deliver them to Laura to hide the man. I'm glad he's still quiet, he would probably be furious to wake up and find all of this stuff piled on top of him.

Once smelly Mike was completely covered in all of our towels, Laura sat on the sofa and began swapping her shoes to the boots she only wears when taking me out for a walk. She didn't say the magic 'w' word like she usually does but I knew where we were going. She grabbed my leash but didn't put it on me until she had shoved the man in the back of her car. I couldn't contain my excitement! This walk was completely unexpected; it's dark and we never go to the lake when it's dark, but I'm not complaining. Well actually, I have one complaint - why did she have to bring Mike? Luckily she keeps dropping the window so I can stick my head out and escape his musty stench. I would have just left him at home, he doesn't deserve to be part of our walks.

During the day, this place is usually packed with other Laura's and their dogs. Right now, it's deserted and it is amazing! The whole place to ourselves! I didn't know walks could get any better but Laura started another new game. Now I had to help her drag Mike into the trees. He was heavy. For a game, this was a lot of hard work. Honestly, I believed he was probably just being lazy and could have made his own way here but never mind.

Finally, the game seemed to be drawing to a close! I hadn't realised with all the excitement, but Laura had brought the plastic spade I'd found at the beach last year and attached it to her belt. That was odd. We had gotten as far as the overgrown wooded area that I wasn't usually allowed in when we stopped and she unclipped the spade. She looked around frantically before thumbing in her pocket and putting on a pair of gloves.

“Come on Copper, let's make this quick” she whispered as she plunged her flimsy spade into the soil. I wasn't sure what we were doing but I could see she would definitely need my help here; that spade is useless and if I do say so myself, I'm a pretty good digger. I dug my claws into the soil and continued to dig and dig and dig until she seemed happy.

Oh god, more pulling of the Smelly Man. We dragged his body towards the hole until we heard the hefty thud hit the damp soil. Without any hesitation, Laura started piling the soil back into the hole. What a good idea! He is going to be so mad when he wakes up! It will take him ages to get out of here!

Once all the soil had been replaced, Laura started patting it down and smoothing it out; it didn't even look like we'd been here! She gathered all of our towels and stuffed them into a rubbish bag along with her gloves and spade. Without even saying a word, we started walking rather briskly back to the car.

At home, I had another dinner – mushed exactly the way I like it. Laura had a very long bath with that strange smelling happy juice. We never did anything like that night again, we never got a chance to. Laura didn't come home a few nights later. I waited and waited for her, but nothing. Now I live with Ashleigh and I like Ashleigh, but she's not my Laura. I still listen for her running up the stairs, but it never happens. I loved my Laura.

I thought I was her good boy. Her Copper.