

Lost Dogs and Lonely Hearts

Lucy Dillon

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Extract

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About the author

Lucy Dillon was born in Cumbria. She now divides her time between London and the Wye Valley, where she enjoys walking in the Malvern Hills with her Basset hounds, Violet and Bonham.

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For the volunteers who work so hard to make second chances happen for lost
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When February started, Rachel Fielding had a middling-to-glamorous career doing PR for internet companies, a boyfriend who regularly bought her flowers and dressed better than she did, a cleaner, and a skin-age three years younger than her actual age, which was thirty-nine.

By the second week, however, she had, in one simple manoeuvre, managed to lose the love of her life, her Chiswick flat and her job. Rachel also discovered, that same morning, her first grey streak, which stood out a mile in her thick dark hair, and got a text from her sister Amelia, accusing her of forgetting her niece's fifth birthday 'because not having children doesn't mean you can be so bloody selfish'.

The sacking, or the dumping, or the grey hair was depressing enough on its own. But all three together was more punishment than even someone skilled in spinning bad news could take. Rachel longed – *yearned* – to be lying face down in a puddle of Bailey's ice cream, listening to Joy Division, but instead she was sitting on a plastic chair in a solicitor's office in Longhampton, a country town where the arrival of Waitrose was still something of a talking point, listening to a lecture on inheritance tax from a middle-aged man who kept referring to her as 'Ms Fielding', and to himself as 'myself'.

Rachel had just inherited what Gerald Flint was 'pleased to call a substantial holding', but all she could really focus on right now was the fact that she, like her late Auntie Dot before her, was headed for a dwindling twilight of dog hair and ready meals for one. Every time she tried to concentrate on her new capacity as executor and pretty much sole beneficiary of Dot's estate, comprising family house, kennels, dogs, more dogs, and some dogs, Oliver's dark-eyed wickedness slid across her mind like a masochistic screensaver: his face caught in the moment she confronted him with the receipts – shock, then fear, then, horribly, a flicker of something she now realised was smugness.

'Have we lost you there, Ms Fielding?'

Rachel shuddered hard, and snapped her attention back to the meeting. *Get a grip*, she told herself. *He's gone. You're here. This is important.*

'I'm with you, Mr Flint,' she said and tapped her pen against her notebook. 'Well, actually, no. Can you just run through what exactly I'm supposed to do, as executor?'

Gerald was sitting at his desk underneath a large photo-to-canvas portrait of his four owlish grandchildren. On his right was a blonde woman in her twenties, who was apparently the manager of Dot's kennels. Next to her was

a miserable black and white Border collie.

Rachel couldn't remember what the dog was doing there. But then Dot had been legendary in the family for her bonkers attitude to dogs ('bonkers' being Rachel's mother's terse diagnosis; Rachel herself thought it wasn't so weird, compared with Val's own passion for hygienic storage). It was entirely possible that the dog was actually a co-executor.

Gerald mistook her Oliver-induced vacancy for bereavement distress. 'It's a lot to take in but we're here to handle most of it for yourself. I'll recap, shall I?'

Rachel turned to a fresh page in her notebook. It fell open at the angry to-do list she'd made the previous day – *pack stuff, phone storage company, change locks, book holiday* – and she hastily turned to a new page.

As Gerald spoke, she jotted down notes. Before she could inherit Dot's house, and the boarding kennels, and the rescue centre that was part of it, she'd have to arrange a valuation for probate, then the solicitors would send off the various forms, the Revenue would calculate the inheritance tax to pay, nothing would be hers until some of that was paid, blah blah blah – but, even as her pen moved dutifully across the page, Rachel's entire chest ached from intensive regret.

Ten years of her life, gone just like that. The best, ripest, decade of her life. She was never, ever going to touch Oliver's black hair again, pushed back off his forehead in a style that shouldn't work, but somehow did. The smell of him after work, that musty, masculine odour around his white shirt as he threw his jacket with the gold lining over her chair . . .

' . . . and Gem, of course?' added the blonde girl, breaking Rachel's train of thought. She was Australian, so it sounded more like a question than a statement. The huge sunny grin she was directing at Rachel suggested she thought it was the best bequest of the lot.

Rachel squinted at the gold necklace hanging above her t-shirt. Megan.

'Sorry, I don't remember anything about a dog in the will,' she said, glancing over at Gerald for confirmation. 'Was it mentioned? Sorry, the last week or so's been a bit of a nightmare for me . . .'

'Dot left me instructions to tell you about Gem once you got here.' Megan pointed at the dog who'd been sitting at her feet since the meeting started, obedient but somehow morose, his tail and ears drooping sadly.

It looks more grief-stricken than me, thought Rachel, with a flash of guilt.

'Gem's seven, and he's a Border collie. Dot wanted you to have him. She was very specific about that, wasn't she, Gem? Only a special new home for you.' She gave the dog's feathery black ears an affectionate caress and it leaned into her side.

'But I'm not a dog person,' Rachel protested, and as she spoke the dog looked up and she recoiled at the spooky ice-blue eyes that searched her face as if it was trying to recognise her. Were dogs meant to have eyes like that, she wondered? It seemed to be looking into her head and seeing a woman who couldn't even be trusted with house plants.

'Dot wouldn't have left you Gem if she didn't think you were the right person for him. She had this knack for matching up people with the right dog,' Megan explained, very seriously. 'She could tell, soon as they walked into the room. Wouldn't let one of her rescues go home with the wrong person, not even if they begged and begged.'

Rachel glanced at the solicitor, expecting a faint shake of the head at this sub-Disney madness, but Gerald only smiled indulgently. 'She certainly matched me up with two little smashers. The dog matchmaker, we used to call her.'

Oh God, thought Rachel. This *must* be a dream.

'Does it run in the family?' Megan enquired. 'Dog whispering?'

'Not as far as I know,' said Rachel politely, then changed her mind. 'Actually, no. No, it definitely doesn't. We weren't even allowed goldfish, growing up. I don't know where Dot's dog thing came from.'

But then Dot wasn't a typical Mossop in all sorts of ways. She hadn't got married at twenty-four, never had kids, and refused to turn up with clockwork regularity to the fruit-cake-and-sherry gatherings thrown by Rachel's mother, Valerie. Though neither did Rachel. It was a good job Val had made Dot Rachel's godmother before her mysterious midlife relocation to Longhampton; as it was, Rachel was starting to get the impression Val thought Dot had passed on spinsterdom to her niece like some kind of hereditary affliction.

'Pardon me for saying but you're very alike, you and Dorothy,' said Gerald, in a tone that made it clear he meant it as a compliment. 'In looks, I mean. Something about the . . .'

Rachel knew what he was going to say; it was what everyone said. That they both looked like eccentric Edwardian suffragette-gardeners. Or pre-Raphaelite avenging angels, with their long noses and dark, round eyes, so unlike Val and her other daughter Amelia's English rose bloneness. Rachel had longed to be pretty like Amelia for years; it was only Oliver who'd convinced her that 'striking' would see her through to her eighties.

'The nose?' she suggested.

' . . . something about the nose,' Gerald finished, more nervously than he'd begun. Rachel knew her resting expression was fiercer than she meant it to be. He tried to rescue the situation. 'Dorothy was a fine figure of a woman, striding around the common with her dogs. We always wondered if she'd been in the secret service or some other . . .' He floundered. 'Something about her confidence, perhaps.'

'I know,' said Rachel, unhappily.

Oliver had always loved Rachel's confidence too. Her breezy, polished manner in client meetings, that she'd almost convinced herself was natural and not a side-effect of a liver-clenching coffee habit or her burning need to impress him.

'Well, we have *some* things in common,' Rachel conceded, because her heart had given another lurch. 'But not dogs, sorry. I'm serious, Megan,' she

added, spotting an indulgent smile from the other side of the desk. 'I don't have anywhere to put a dog. I travel a lot, I work full time.' She raised her hands.

OK, so she wasn't working full time or living in a flat in Chiswick right now, but she definitely didn't want a Border collie. She worked in PR, not on *Blue Peter*.

'Ah, Gem's not a *dog*. Gem's like, an old pal? Aren't you? And if Dot thought you and Gem were meant to be together, then you're definitely a match made in heaven.' Megan's cheerful smile faltered, and a look of horror flashed across her open face. 'Oh, jeez, I'm sorry, that was really tactless of me.'

'Let me give you the keys to the door, as it were,' said Gerald, seizing the chance to divert the conversation by reaching into his drawer for the keys. 'I'm sure you're keen to get over to Four Oaks and look around,' he added, with a nod towards Megan. 'Megan is more than capable of bringing you up to speed with the kennel operations.'

Suddenly the mental exertions of the past week caught up with Rachel, crashing over her weary head as they did every day, at three o'clock sharp. She felt overwhelmed with a need to be alone with a bottle of wine, under a duvet, and in a pair of pyjamas, instead of this Marc Jacobs skirt that was digging into her waist because it had been on sale and she was too in love with the label to size up, and professional single women in their thirties needed to be well-dressed, because they didn't have the excuse of puking kids to relax their wardrobes.

Gerald grimaced with perfectly judged sympathy as he handed her a large bunch of keys, with neat labels attached in Dot's meticulous print.

'And there's a letter, which Dorothy left to be handed to the executor with the keys, but I'll leave that for yourself to go through in private.' He passed her a thin envelope, which she tucked into the back of her notebook. 'As I say, we can arrange for the estate agents to pop round and do the valuations, send off the forms and so forth. If you could have a look through the property for any significant valuables – or we could just approach a house clearance firm to make the assessment?'

'No, I'll do that. But thank you.' Rachel looked between the two of them, wondering what she was supposed to say now. Val, for all her faults, was excellent at this sort of thing. She always knew the right tone of murmur to make. Funerals, weddings, will readings – her mother bustled into action at the drop of an elderly relative. She'd organised the whole funeral from a different county, and had Dot interred next to their parents, back home in Lancashire. It was, apparently, typical of Dot that she'd insisted that the will be handled in Longhampton, by the executor – Rachel.

Val was the only person Rachel knew who could be hurt that she *hadn't* been landed with a mess of administration.

The dog was gazing at her with its sad, icy eyes. It was sitting perfectly still,

but at the same time it looked so forlorn that Rachel got the impression that, like her it would rather be alone in a basket with a bone, or whatever the dog equivalent of a bottle of wine was, instead of going through this charade.

Megan squirmed in her seat. 'Can I ask a favour, um . . . Ms Fielding?'

'Rachel, please. And sure,' said Rachel, more than ready to give her Gem to remember Dot by. But unfortunately, that wasn't what Megan wanted.

'Can I get a lift back to Four Oaks? If you're heading up there?'

'Of course. I'm not sure I know the way anyway,' said Rachel. She added a smile, because there was something about Megan that made it hard not to smile. Her face was eager and good-natured, still tanned despite the February gloom already darkening the sky outside. Megan clearly *was* a dog person.

Megan kept up a cheerful monologue out of the offices and into the car park and, when she saw Rachel's car, it bubbled right over into amazement.

'Oh, wow, this is yours?' she gasped, as Rachel bleeped the central locking on her black Range Rover. 'This is just perfect for Gem! Gem, just look at the gorgeous truck your new mum's got!'

Rachel winced again at the 'new mum' bit. 'He's a dog and I'm not his mother, OK?'

She rubbed a hand over her face and squeezed her sore eyes shut. She didn't add that now she'd walked out of her job, the Range Rover would probably be going back to London just as soon as the finance company she leased it from got wind of her newly unemployed status.

You'll just have to get another job, she reminded herself. Plenty of them about, with your CV. Even in a recession, people need positive PR. *Especially* in a recession.

Megan and Gem were looking at her expectantly, and Rachel wasn't sure who seemed more eager to please, Megan or Gem. She felt equally bad about letting them both down.

'Sorry. Look, I don't know where he should go. Will he be safe in the boot?'

'He'll be fine in a boot this size, lucky guy,' said Megan, opening the tail gate. 'Ooh, you're travelling light,' she observed, seeing Rachel's two small bags and her box of random junk that she'd thrown together when she'd left the flat. That was another depressing thing: how little she really had to show for ten years. 'How long are you staying?'

'I don't know.' Rachel raked her hands through her hair, remembered the white streaks, and sighed. 'I can honestly say I don't have any plans right now.'

'See how it goes, eh? Best way.' Megan patted the edge of the car. 'Up you get, Gem boy!'

Gem leaped obediently into Rachel's boot and curled up between her two leather Mulberry overnight bags. Already, Rachel could see long dog hairs settling on the black upholstery, but she was too tired to think about that now. Instead, she shut the boot and opened the driver's door.

'I appreciate the lift – the buses here are pretty unreliable, but that's the countryside for you, eh? I'll give you directions if you take the road out of Longhampton towards Hartley,' Megan was saying, climbing into the passenger seat. She had to jump a bit, being almost a foot shorter than Rachel. Megan wore practical boots over her old jeans and as she settled herself in, Rachel could smell dogs and Body Shop White Musk. 'It's not too far, out of the main town, but then you know that, don't you?' She paused, and listened. 'Is that your phone?'

Rachel knew it was her phone. The ringtone was 'Ride of the Valkyries' which let her know it was her mother on the other end. It was tempting to ignore it, and pretend she was driving, but Val knew she'd been to see the solicitor today and she would only keep calling. And calling. And calling. Better to get it over with.

'Yes,' she said, reaching into her bag, 'it is. Sorry, I'll have to pick this up. I'll just be a moment.' She slid out of the car, and put her mobile to her ear. 'Hello, Mum?'

'Are you out of the solicitors'? Was there a mistake in the will?' Val didn't mince her words. 'Your father and I have been discussing it, and he thought there might have been a letter from Dot, explaining how you were meant to divide everything up. When you got to the solicitors', I mean. He thought it might have been cheaper, for her to leave everything to you, and then have you share it with your sister, instead of involving someone official.'

Rachel breathed through her nose. This conversation had started four days ago. Val always picked up exactly where she'd left off last time. 'Mum, there is a letter but I haven't opened it yet. And can you stop making out that it's my fault? It's not like I expected this, you know. I'm sure I can find some things Amelia would like. I don't think Dot meant it as a *criticism*.'

'Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming Dot,' her mother insisted, struggling to be fair. Val was always fair, and gave everyone the benefit of the doubt, even when she didn't actually believe them. Particularly when she didn't believe them. 'That's just the way Dot was – she was used to living on her own, with no ties or anyone else to bother about – but it's not just Amelia. Grace and Jack ought to have some keepsake from their great-aunt.'

Rachel resisted the temptation to point out that looking after a pack of assorted dogs didn't exactly leave you footloose and fancy-free. It riled her, this family assumption that not having children meant you led a life of nightclubs and riotous self-indulgence. 'Would they like a dog?' she suggested, only half-joking. 'Plenty left.'

She could hear the drawn-in breath of outrage, two hundred miles away. 'What? No! That would be totally irresponsible! What about allergies? You'd have to talk to Amelia first, Rachel. No, there'll be a nice silver brush set that would be appropriate for Grace, used to be our mother's, and as for Jack, I seem to remember Dot did a bit of fishing, I dare say there's an expensive rod somewhere.' There was a pause. 'And don't say I

told you this, Rachel, but Amelia could do with a hand with nursery fees right now. It costs a fortune, childcare. I'm sure Dot left a nest egg that you could . . . '

'Mum, stop,' interrupted Rachel. 'I can put your mind at rest on that front. There's no money.'

'What?' Val sounded disbelieving.

'There's no money. There's the house, and the kennels business, but once the staff have been paid, and the solicitor, there'll be no cash at all.'

'But . . . how? She had half the money from Dad's house and no one to spend it on but herself!'

Rachel could hear the hurt bubbling up through the gaps between the words. It wasn't about the money, she knew that. Val was generous to a fault; in her own way, as much of a rescuer as Dot, but of people, not animals. She was always helping, resolutely putting other people first, carting old folk to the hospital in her red Fiesta, or doing laundry for bewildered widowed neighbours.

'She must have spent a lot of it on the dogs, Mum,' Rachel said, walking around her car. 'But that was her choice.'

Val went silent on the other end of the phone, and Rachel knew she was counting up to ten, rather than say whatever she was thinking. She heard someone in the background, shouting something.

'What's that, Ken? Oh, your father says can you have a look for Dorothy's . . . Dorothy's what? Speak up! Dorothy's Acker Bilk albums.'

Rachel spun on her heel, and looked over to where Megan was still waiting in the car. 'This isn't a car boot sale,' she protested. 'Look, when probate's granted you can come and see what you want for yourself. How about that?'

'We wouldn't like to impose, and anyway, I've got commitments here, my hospice ladies relying on me and your dad – I can't just drop everything,' huffed Val.

But I can, Rachel added in her head.

'So. What are your plans?' Val went on. 'Are you going to sell it? A big house like that takes a lot of upkeep when it's just you. I always said to your father, it's a family house, far too big for Dot there on her own.'

Rachel stared at the other cars in the solicitors' car park, noting a silver Jaguar like Oliver's, and felt the band around her head tighten.

'Rachel? Are you still there?'

'Yes, Mum,' she said, squeezing her nose and closing her eyes tight.

'Are you staying there now? I tried you at the flat last night but there was no answer. You don't tell me anything any more,' Val continued, more gently. 'Some girls like to share with their mothers. Amelia's always dropping in with the kiddies, but I never even know if you're in the country or not.'

'I'm run off my feet with work, Mum,' said Rachel, determined to finish the conversation before it got back into the old, unproductive rut. She'd have to tell her about resigning at some point; at least she didn't have to tell her about

splitting with Oliver.

Rachel had weighed it up some years back, and decided that it was easier to pretend to be single and deal with Val's nagging about 'finding a man to settle down with' than it would be to explain her complicated relationship with a man as unsuitable as Oliver Wrigley. Ironically, the only one of her family who knew anything at all about Oliver had been Dot, and even then Rachel had only told her the bare minimum.

'Work isn't everything in life,' Val reminded her, unhelpfully, Rachel thought, coming from a woman who'd been a full-time housewife since 1969, thanks to her dad's devotion to dentistry. 'You're not getting any younger.'

'Is anyone?' Rachel snapped and turned back to the car.

As she spun round, she came face to face with a pair of bright eyes. Gem was staring at her through the back window, and Rachel staggered backwards in surprise.

He sat like a sentry with one paw on her box of stuff, and tilted his head, as if he could hear the other side of the phone conversation. One black ear flopped down, while the other stayed pricked up, revealing tender pink skin, flecked with white hairs. He looked proud to be guarding her worldly goods, eager to be useful, unaware that his new owner had no room for him in her messy life.

An irrational surge of pity swelled in Rachel's chest and, to her surprise, she felt tears prickle along her lashes.

Maybe this was an early menopausal symptom, she thought glumly. Getting emotional about animals. Maybe this was what happened, your body telling you the final whistle was about to go and that you should stock up on cats.

'Rachel! Say something!' Val was still on the line, hoping for an Amelia-style outpouring.

'Mum, I'll call you later,' she said.

'There are things we need to talk about,' said Val.

'And don't forget the Acker Bilk albums!' shouted a muffled voice.

'And don't forget . . .' Val began to repeat.

'I know,' said Rachel. 'I heard him the first time.'

She hung up, and behind the glass Gem began to pant, his mouth drawn back into a smile, his pink tongue sticking out.

'Don't get too comfortable,' Rachel warned him.