

THE DOG

by

Steven Fisher

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The dog weighed no more than a breath, and Moresby hated it the moment it pity-patted into the Laura Ashley-decorated room.

After inviting him into her house, Carlene Krugal had asked Moresby to wait in the living room while she finished getting ready for their date.

The tiny canine had shown up a few seconds later, immediately sitting and facing him with the expectant gaze that the visitor would take the frou-frou chew toy out of its mouth. The toy was shaped like a rose.

Single women and their animals, Moresby grumbled. *They always have to treat them as if they were human.*

Moresby ignored the animal's offer of its toy. Small dogs annoyed him. It irritated him even more that the toy breed somehow seemed a perfect fit with the fussy plum wallpaper decorated with a repeating motif of an embracing 18th century couple surrounded by cupids, butterflies, birds, and, of course, pathetic-looking dogs. Carlene was well-known for her love of little dogs.

Which is appropriate, as far as I'm concerned, Moresby thought, *since she's a dog, too.*

Carlene's pet was a Yorkshire terrier, all black and tan and gray hair, and it had a red bow on its head. The glossy coat said the mutt was young and insufferably cute. The wallpaper and furnishings were also insufferably cute, and Moresby hated insufferably cute.

Besides, small dogs – this one could weigh no more than five pounds – yapped more than his ex, and he and his depleted bank account were not tolerant of anything that reminded him of his former wife.

He considered drop-kicking the animal out of the double-hung window before Carlene returned and decided reluctantly that it wouldn't be the best way to begin their date.

Date! Moresby snorted at the thought and cursed his bad luck. *Some date!*

Carlene Krugal was the Director of R&D for PharmBest Corporation and a running joke in the sales department. Every year, the bachelor loser in annual sales had to be her escort to the company year-end party. This year, Moresby had earned the loser's label by coming in a full 50% under quota.

Moresby had escaped the mortification of a date with Carlene up until now because he'd been married. No more. Lisa had divorced him this year, and not because of the affairs, but just because he'd left Jimmy at home alone for one lousy afternoon.

Hell, even though the kid was only six years old, everybody knew kids were more mature these days, and nothing had happened, except that Jimmy had called him a couple of times whining that he was scared and didn't have anybody to play with.

Moresby had reassured his boy that everything was all right and gone back to dialing for dollars, trying to move his numbers up. It was his bad luck that Lisa had come home early that day because of a cold. Otherwise, she wouldn't have known the difference. Everything would be all right, and he wouldn't be stuck on a date with Carlene Krugal.

The galling part was that, right from the start, Moresby knew he'd had no chance of getting out of the obligation. Every year, Carlene accepted the date. The bitch was either stupid or desperate not to look like the total dog she was. Moresby knew it was desperation for two reasons.

One, she held a senior managerial position in a billion-dollar pharmaceutical corporation, and PharmBest wasn't in the habit of hiring dummies.

And, second, her husband had walked out on her three years ago. Left without saying a word.

Moresby knew why the man had disappeared.

Framed by a bowl of straw-blond hair, Carlene's face was a vanilla pudding with a pendulous nose sticking out of it. The pudding had sagged down into a double chin. The chins said the woman had to have at least 250 pounds on a five foot four frame, but that was the oddity about the director.

In spite of the chins, she was the thinnest, fittest woman Moresby had ever seen. She ran triathlons, for God's sake. All in the company's name, of course, but nevertheless she competed in them. And not just in one or two.

No, she ran in six or more every year. Moresby was always seeing her picture in the company newsletter, her muscular arms and raisin-brown eyes raised toward the heavens. The captions invariably read "Division Winner!"

Moresby snickered. *Definitely not a division winner in looks. The woman put the 'Ugh' in ugly.*

The Yorkie whined and shifted its body into pleading posture.

"Shut up!" Moresby ordered.

The dog rose and pattered a few steps closer. It sat and whined again.

Moresby opened his mouth to snap at the dog, but closed it when he saw that the animal wasn't holding a chew toy in its jaws, as he'd first assumed.

It was a rose, an actual long-stemmed red rose. An American Beauty, he guessed since that was the only name he knew when it came to roses.

Over the rose, two beady eyes had fixed themselves upon Moresby as if the terrier expected the human to issue a command.

Curiosity as to what the dog would do overcame his hatred of small canines, and he snapped "Come!" just to see what would happen.

The Yorkie rose from its sitting position, trotted across the room like a hairy centipede missing all but four of its legs, and dropped the rose at his feet.

Moresby was impressed by its training and picked up the rose. A thorn pricked his index finger, and he dropped the flower back onto the carpet.

"Damn!" he swore as the dog nudged the rose back toward his Johnston & Murphys. "How the hell do you carry that thing in your mouth, you furry little shit?"

The Yorkie poked the rose again.

"What am I supposed to do with the flower?" Moresby asked and felt instantly foolish about talking to a dog.

Another nudge and the pleading look dogs were so expert at.

"Oh, hell," Moresby said and picked the rose up again, this time being careful to avoid the thorns.

The Yorkie made a distinct sniffing sound.

Moresby stared down at the animal. He could swear that the dog, as best a dog could do, was telling him to smell the rose.

He chuckled and said, "The damned dog wants me to sniff the flower."

The Yorkie's mouth broke into a pleased panting at his remark. A little pink tongue pistoned in and out.

Moresby started at this reaction. Narrowing his eyes, he looked around the room to check to see if Carlene had concealed herself behind the furniture and was cuing the dog as a practical joke.

There was no one.

Moresby shrugged and obeyed the command of the little canine. He brought the flower up to his nose and inhaled its sweet scent. At the party, the new employees and the clueless would find the rose a sweet, romantic touch from Carlene's escort. Those in the know would snicker into their wine glasses.

The rose was the mark of a loser.

Moresby sighed.

He slipped the stem of the flower through the button hole in his lapel, taking care not to rip the fine wool fabric of his Austin Reed suit with one of the thorns.

The company insisted its salespeople wear clothing that reflected its upscale image. It was the only good suit he had left. And he couldn't afford any new suits after Lisa had picked up a chef's knife and slashed her way through his closet.

Moresby sighed and hoped the evening would be mercifully short. He'd had enough trouble with women lately.

The Yorkie yipped as if it approved of his placement of the flower. "Fuck off," he told the dog.

It rose and pattered across the room, leapt up into a chair with a red, heart-shaped cushion, and settled down with a pleased sigh.

Startled by the animal's response, Moresby stared at the dog. He knew it couldn't have a brain any bigger than a walnut, but it seemed to understand everything he said.

Moresby shook his head to get rid of the thought. *The smell of the damned rose is getting to me. Sweet and sickening.*

An ache in his finger caused Moresby to look down. Around the area where the thorn had pricked him, the skin had grown inflamed. He swore. An infection was the last thing he needed.

He squeezed at the wound to see if the tip of the thorn had broken off inside. The action rewarded him not with rich red blood, but a brown ooze.

Moresby cursed again. *What the hell? Nothing can cause an infection that quickly.*

He squeezed the wound again to make sure he was seeing things correctly.

The ooze flowed across his skin.

Moresby frowned and glared down at the wound as if his stare would cause it to heal itself.

"Problem?" Carlene's voice asked.

Moresby started and looked up to see his date stride toward him with a concerned expression on her bland custard of a face.

Oh, if only that body had a decent head atop it, Moresby thought involuntarily. Carlene had a body that wouldn't quit. High, firm breasts, a narrow waist, and wide hips that tapered into long slim athletic legs. All these assets were accentuated by an artfully draped black ankle-length dress with a scooped neck line and spaghetti straps to provide the illusion that the dress was going to fall off at any moment.

"Problem?" Moresby blurted out, trying to recover from the distraction of her body.

"With your finger," Marlene said. "What happened?"

"I—" Moresby began and hesitated at another distraction. Carlene's voice was different. At work, it had a shrill "how stupid could you possibly be" tone to it. But right now, it had taken on a soft and pleasing quality.

A voice that I very much want to hear, hear all the time, he realized after a second, and the realization gave him another start.

"That's silly!" he blurted out.

"Pardon me?" Carlene asked. "What's silly?"

"What? Oh—me, that's who's silly," Moresby said in an effort to recover his mental balance. "I pricked my finger on the rose your dog brought me. I thought it was some sort of chew toy, not a real rose."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry," Carlene apologized. "Would you like a bandage for it?"

"No, I should be okay. Did you train the dog to do that? Carry a rose around, I mean?"

"Yes. Silly, isn't it? But that's Gwendolyn's full name, you know—Gwendolyn Rose. So, it only seemed appropriate to train her to offer that flower to my dates....Are you feeling quite all right, Paul?"

"Yeah, sure. Why do you ask?"

"Well, your face is flushed, and you seem to be sweating quite a bit."

Moresby wiped a sleeve across his forehead. It came away wet.

"It's a bit warm in here, that's all.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, damn—yeah, I'm fine. Are you ready to go?"

The pudding face's lips pursed as Carlene's brown eyes studied him intently.

"I don't think you should go to the party," she said. "You look sick to me."

"I told you, I'm just fine."

"Stand up for me then, Paul."

"What?"

"Stand up. If we're going to go to the party, you do have to stand up, don't you? I want to make sure you're not sick."

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

Moresby rose from the chair quickly so he could dispel Carlene's silly notion that he wasn't feeling well. He sat back down even more rapidly, expelling a sudden "Whoa!" in surprise at the dizziness that spun the room like a merry-go-round.

"See?" Carlene admonished. "I told you that you weren't feeling good. You need to lie down."

"I guess you're right," Moresby said. His dismay at being sick was lessened when he realized he had a great opportunity to avoid humiliation at the party. "I should go home and do just that – lie down. I apologize for—"

"Nonsense," Carlene interrupted. "You're in no shape to go anywhere. Look at you. One minute you've got a fever; the next you're shaking with cold. I have a bed for you."

Oh, God, I don't want that! Moresby almost blurted out. *A few hours with that face is bad enough. I don't want it hovering over me overnight.*

"I can drive home," he insisted. "I can drive. I really can."

To prove his point, he rose again, this time slowly. The effort did no good. Moresby dropped hard to his knees and vomited all over the carpet.

"I'll get you a cold compress," he heard Carlene say as footsteps faded from the room.

Moresby stared down at the puddle of vomit.

Where did that come from? he thought stupidly. *I don't feel all that si—"*

A light thump on the floor, and the patter of tiny feet interrupted the thought. The Yorkie sniffed at the puke, glanced up at Moresby, then lapped at the ejected stomach contents.

"Oh, crap!" Moresby groaned as he felt the sight of the dog prompt another eruption. He fell onto all fours and spewed vomit between his hands. The smell nauseated him into a series of dry heaves.

It's not the sight of the stuff, he realized. It's the intensity of the smell. God, I've never smelled anything so powerful in my life. It's the flu. I've got the damned Asian bird flu or SARS or something. I can't handle it. I've got to get out of here!

He tried moving his limbs. They moved as if in thick mud. An anesthetic sensation crept up from the wound in his finger along with march of the brown ooze along his skin.

Moresby strained to move his arms and legs until he was panting with the effort. His face remained stuck above the vomit. Its odor mingled with the scent from the rose in his lapel.

"I've got the compress," Carlene announced as she re-entered the room. Moresby swung his eyes up to plead for help.

"My, you *are* sick!" the woman said as she kneeled down and pressed a wet washcloth across his forehead. "This should make you feel better. I wrapped ice in the cloth."

Moresby sighed at the relief the coldness brought to his head. "Thank you," he croaked and wondered how his voice had gotten so raspy so quickly. "That feels wonderful."

"It usually does," she said.

"I'm sure it will—wait a minute. What do you mean 'it usually does'?"

"Shhh...just relax," Carlene soothed as she stroked his head.

"Answer my question!" Moresby managed to gasp under the impact of the pleasure of Carlene's petting. He wanted more. He wanted all the stroking he could get.

"Just be a good boy and I'll take care of you."

"I said...answer my question...you ugly bitch!" He spat the words out in bunches because that's all the constricted muscles in his jaw would allow.

"Shhhh....the fever's making you say nasty things, Paul."

"You've slipped me some sort of hallucinogenic drug, haven't you? You planned this whole thing, using that stupid Yorkie. Get away from me. Get the dog away from me. The furry little vermin."

Moresby wanted to smash in Carlene's pudding face, but he found he could move nothing now. Not even twitch a finger. The only part of his body that he could move was his eyes and even they felt as if they swam in setting concrete.

Carlene continued to pet and stroke his hair while she spoke in a calming voice. "It'll be okay, Paul. It'll be just fine. Soon, you'll be able to put events in the proper perspective. Very soon, I promise you."

Moresby loathed her touch and craved it. It was driving him mad. He despised the woman and yet, at the moment, he desired her touch more than anything in the world.

His mind raged in its search for answers. *What did you do to me, Carlene? Why do you want to kill me?*

Carlene laughed. It had the brittle sound of shattering glass.

"Kill you, Paul? I don't kill people. Far from it."

You can hear me? You can read my mind?

"Of course, I can. Mind reading is a wonderful skill, isn't it? Very handy for the advancement of one's career, Paul. How else do you think a woman who is, as you put it, a 'dog', advance so high in the corporate world?"

You heard me say that in my mind? Wait a minute, this isn't possible. You've stolen drugs from your own department. What is it? Peyote? LSD?

Carlene laughed again. "No peyote, Paul. No LSD. Let's just say that it's my special blend. A dash of curare, a pinch of botox, a sprinkle of...well, I never do give out my recipes. I'm sure you'll understand. After all, I've put more new drugs onto the market in the last few years than any other researcher in the field."

But that still doesn't explain the telepathy!

"No, it doesn't, does it? Well, Paul, when a person is treated like a witch all her life because of her ugliness, she's bound to become a witch, isn't she? And what's a witch's stock in trade? Black magic, of course. Mind reading is part of the mix, that's all. My fellow scientists would be so envious if they knew."

Moresby shook his head, trying to free his mind of the insanity that had gripped it. He talked to himself, *This is crazy, absolutely crazy. Paul, you're hallucinating. Maybe you're feeling guilty or something about the way you've treated her. Apologize to her, even if it's not real. Maybe that will clear the lunacy out of your head....I'm sorry, Carlene...I...I didn't mean it. Not really...I...*

"Of course you meant it," Carlene said as she shifted her petting to his back.

Moresby thrilled at the touch as she continued, "There's no need to grovel. You'll have plenty of time for that later. You know, Paul, I always enjoy this part of the conversation... the explanation, I mean. It's no fun keeping your feelings all bottled up inside, is there? Now, I kind of understand the anger that boils up inside serial killers and makes them do the horrible things they do."

Moresby's mind flinched at the mention of the word "serial killer".

Carlene laughed again. She grabbed his chin and swung his head so that her raisin-brown eyes were no more than two inches away. "Relax, Mr. Moresby, I already told you I don't kill people. I'm not insane, you know. But I am, in fact, a believer in that old corporate adage, 'Don't get mad. Get even.' You agree with that venerable principle, don't you?"

Her strong hand wagged his chin up and down in a parody of agreement.

"I know you do, and thank you for being honest about it. I respect you for that. But getting even implies retribution, doesn't it? And retribution requires an explanation for its cause. But you already know the reason for getting even, don't you, Paul?"

I called you a dog.

"Yes, of course, that's the reason, isn't it? If it makes you feel any better, you're not the only man who thinks I'm ugly. All men think that. And who am I to disagree? I could work my body into fantastic shape, but not even *Extreme Makeover* could do anything with...this." Carlene touched a hand to her face as if to regretfully confirm the truth of her statement. "As you thought earlier, I have a face like a pudding. It sags and has no real shape and my nose...my nose! Well, let's just say that Cyrano would have envied it. Even my husband could no longer stand the sight of it after less than a year of marriage."

Carlene sighed. "So, what's a girl to do? Why, make the best of a bad situation! Life handed me a lemon, so I made lemonade. The going got tough, so I got tough and got going...Well, I could go on with as many clichés as you like, but you're not really interested in clichés at this point, are you, Paul? You want to know what's going to happen to you. Well, relax. I have gotten even with you and all the other lying, cheating, irresponsible bastards out there—yes, I know you're one because Lisa confided in me—but you'll find that it won't be so bad."

Carlene stopped stroking Moresby's back and stood. "I'll be back in a few minutes with something you'll really, really like. I promise."

Moresby felt his eyes plead for more petting, but it only got him a smile from a woman who seemed have grown taller in the short time Moresby had been in the room. He watched Carlene leave and hoped, hoped she would return. Soon. He didn't want to be away from her for a minute.

A series of sharp yips diverted his attention away from the frustration. Gwendolyn still stood by the pool of vomit. Moresby wanted to snarl at the little terrier again so it would shut up, but the problem was that it was no longer little. It was eye-level with him now. Like Carlene, it had grown bigger.

And somehow alluring.

After a moment, Moresby realized it was the smell of Gwendolyn. The smell of sex. The dog was in heat.

The musky odor shocked him into the realization, *Oh, my God, Carlene's concoction is affecting my brain and making me feel like I'm turning into a dog.*

Moresby glanced down at his hands just to reassure himself that they were still there.

And discovered paws.

Tiny, furry, black and tan and silver paws.

Moresby screamed.

It came out as a high-pitched yip.

Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh my God! Carlene wasn't lying! She did turn me into a dog. She—

The intensifying musky odor from Gwendolyn cut the thought short. Moresby struggled against the power of the odor, but it wrapped its tendrils around his brain and urged him forward.

He lost all control when Gwendolyn presented her rear to him. Moresby raced around the puddle of vomit and mounted the terrier, thinking, Maybe being a dog won't be so bad, after all!

Carlene's harsh voice cut through his ecstasy. She stood in the doorway with a collar and a leash and a disapproving expression. She shook a finger at Moresby.

"Bad dog, Paul! Get off Gwendolyn! Sit! Sit!"

Despite his powerful desire, Moresby dropped off the female terrier and sat.

"Gwendolyn is not spayed, you know, Paul, and I don't have room for puppies. You know what that means, don't you?... I said, sit!...A good dog is an obedient dog. You'll just have to

learn some manners, that's all. I'll just have to separate you from Gwen, won't I? But don't worry it won't be for long. Only until tomorrow."

Lust continued to rip at Moresby's mind, but he pushed it down by reassuring himself, *I can wait that long. I can. I really can. I know I can!*

"Come," Carlene commanded, and Moresby padded across the room to his mistress.

"Sit," she ordered, and Moresby sat while Carlene kneeled and buckled the collar around his neck, then snapped the leash on to the ring.

Moresby tried to sit still but couldn't keep his head from turning back to Gwen. She was so....sexy.

I've got to have her. I've got to have her. I've got to have her now!

It was the only thought running through Moresby's head, and he couldn't get rid of it.

Finished with the buckling, Carlene patted Moresby on the head and stood.

"Can't keep your eyes off her, Paul? I don't blame you. She is a temptation, isn't she? Gives a male a one-track mind. Can't think of anything else and ends up chewing on furniture and slippers to get rid of the frustration."

"Well, I'll help you get rid of that awful feeling, Paul," Carlene said as she tugged on the leash and led Moresby out of the room and out of sight of Gwendolyn. "I told you I had a bed for you. You need to rest. The change is always hard on the body. Plus, you've got a big day in store for you."

"Tomorrow, I take you to the vet."