

PATRICK GOSSAGE

# SLOW LOVE

## Chapter One

Charles K. James is a typical successful business guy. A 55 year old widower, he is a typical successful business guy. He lives in a two-story substantial house in the suburbs and has an unusual dog Mabel who he dotes on. While he is attached to his hobby of nature painting and enjoys his weekends and holidays at his cottage on a northern rocky lake, he has slowly realized that his life has lacked real romance and lively love. Of course, he loves his 32-year-old daughter Sammy, but his marriage with his late wife was fairly routine and he has started to yearn for a new and lively love interest. And he now has a focus on an attractive younger woman and her dog who he has seen in the park where he walks Mabel.

Charles believed as an absolute fact that dog people are more nurturing and caring than non-dog people. His mom Peggy used to say that “Dog is God spelt backwards and, like God, is the only source of unconditional love.” He believed that and now he had decided to try and get close to a real dog person, hopefully this attractive younger woman.

Such a fortuitous meeting was finally in the cards, and it began on a spring day in a woodlot in suburban Toronto. This nearby well-treed park where he now walks his dog becomes radiant with a blanket of trilliums in the early spring. The kind of pastoral beauty that melts hearts, particularly of dog walkers who wind up and down its myriad wide well-worn trails.

Charles is the owner of a successful PR firm. He is attractive, medium height and a bit overweight, with a strong nose, a thin face, lots of hair that’s now salt and pepper but turning white, friendly brown eyes and a ready crinkly smile.

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He was a relative newcomer to the woodlot with Mabel, his year-and-a-half old multi-coloured Australian sheepdog, who was bred to herd cattle. Her stubby tail, as he explained to all, was cropped to prevent the cattle from stepping on a bushy tail.

His wife had recently died of breast cancer very quickly after being diagnosed. During her short illness, Mabel was always a nearby caring and worried companion. Charles was trying manfully to keep the house and dog happy for his beloved daughter, Sammy. Luckily, Sammy worked for a small marketing and public relations company in the suburbs and could come home at noon and walk Mabel while Charles was running his company in the city. Both she and he were sociable, as was the dog, and the dog soon became known by the neighbourhood dog walkers.

However, Charles soon learnt that strangers, or newcomers like him, often did not get to know the actual names of the veteran regulars. Like the unspoken 'no names' rule on the commuter train, it is difficult to get beyond hellos in the woods. Casual hellos and talking about dogs was okay if you weren't part of the regular gang, but asking for formal introductions or details beyond "Trixie's mom" was a bigger challenge.

And this was his issue with the lovely Hollie. Another dog walker had revealed her name. "Oh yes, that's Hollie, Joe's mom." Seeing her through the winter or passing her on the trail, he had admired and decided she could be the one. She was almost his height, blonde, all fresh and bright-eyed with full lips curled at the edges in a constant grin. This he had made out even if she was bundled up in her red parka. He knew her dog, a big chocolate brown lab named Joe. But that's as far as it went. This spring day, he was determined to see if he

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could get to know Joe's mom better. Just maybe she could be the solution to his romance strategy.

Now that the weather was warmer, he could see more of her. Her hair was showing now, and was long and very blonde, with a slight curl. Hollie had a strong chin, perky nose, long neck and large blue eyes. Without the red parka covering her up, he could appreciate that she had an athletic body and an almost perfect figure. That day she was in a form -fitting ribbed light blue V-necked sweater, tight-fitting jeans, and white runners. White cuffs turned up over the sweater's sleeves added a touch of class.

Charles thought of the first female dog owner he had fantasized about when he used to walk Mabel around his block first thing in the morning, rather than bringing her to the woodlot. She was a small redhead with a big toothy smile, thin hips and full breasts. Her dog was named Chester and she took an instant liking to Mabel. He introduced himself to her after meeting several times. But then one day as Charles watched her walk up her driveway towards a red pickup truck, he witnessed a very large and good looking young man embrace her. For some reason Charles was turned off.

Pre-work and weekend walks were the time to meet the dog crew in the woodlot. This sunny Sunday was no exception and 11:00 a.m. was a popular time for the long circuit.

That May morning Charles was feeling lonely as he scanned the beauty of the scene—the carpet of white and pink trilliums in the sun-dappled hardwood forest of beech, maple, and oak. As he often did, he was feeling sorry for himself with nobody with which to share the splendor of nature that he would photograph and then paint in his basement studio.

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He had to admit his late wife did not share this love, which he had been dedicated to capturing in his unappreciated oil paintings. Luckily, his daughter shared his reverence, but then she was his daughter. She hung several of his works in her small apartment. At the moment, Sammy was the only woman in his life, but that was not the same as having a life partner, which he was almost ready to contemplate again.

He was hoping he would run into Joe—he and Mabel were already pals and maybe he'd actually meet his delicious owner and could at least work up a girlfriend situation of some sort.

Curiously enough, Hollie was having the same thoughts as she wound towards him on the wooded narrow lower path beside the stream. She had had a long-term live-in relationship with Bob, a big bruiser of a man who had been a turn on in bed but not much else. Recently, she had finally given him his walking papers after admitting to herself how little else they shared. She would explain the breakup to her friends with, "Joe never liked him, and showed it!"

With no children, she made an okay living doing illustrations for children's books—mostly cuddly animals of all sorts. Bunnies were her specialty. She did still like men, and she liked sex. But for now, she was unready to contemplate a new relationship that might exact too great a cost to her self-worth. She was a very self-aware 35-year-old.

Her dog Joe was a dark brown, large Labrador with a long full tail. He was a typical loving, easygoing and lolling about lab. "My only true boyfriend," she would say. She knew Mabel and had taken a good look at her manly owner over the winter and she too wondered if they'd actually meet that sunny day.

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Just past the fallen log that had been sawn in two for the path, there they were, face to face, the dogs greeting each other with obscene sniffs and wagging. They were immediately jumping on each other in a doggie boxing match. After hellos, Charles and Hollie each waited for the other to start a conversation.

"They sure like each other," Charles offered first.

"They really do..." Hollie didn't know where to take this. Charles did. He'd been thinking about it for several weeks. That was a characteristic of this man—to be captivated by the image of a person he hadn't even really met. His good friend and number two at his firm, Ashleigh, teased him about this. "You always have to be in love with someone," she would say. And she was right. Even happily married, more or less, Charles would go to sleep dreaming of one of the "yummy mummies" he had barely met at the gym. As he would remind himself with the line from a song, that it is hard to be happy with your heart is on the run. Lately, his heart was fixated on Joe's owner.

"You know," he started hesitantly. Hollie moved closer, all ears. "It's ridiculous we don't even know each other's names and we've crossed paths a dozen or more times in the last months. I'm Charles and you are...?"

"Hollie. Pleased to put a name to a face."

"So am I. Aren't the woods spectacular today? I'm really inspired by the display of trilliums."

"They are amazing. I actually dug a few up and planted them in my tiny garden a few years ago. I know you're not supposed to..."

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but a couple finally came up just now.” She made a sweet girlish guilty-looking face.

“We’ll forgive you,” Charles said. “Do I detect a slight accent?”

“Yes, my parents are Dutch and came here when I was ten. So, English is my second language—but it never held me back. I did manage to graduate from the Ontario College of Art.”

“So how old is Joe?” When in doubt, default to dog questions.

“He’s two and a handful...takes a lot of care. But since I work at home, I can walk him several times a day.”

“Wish I could walk Mabel as often. Luckily, my daughter Sammy takes her out most lunchtimes. We got her before my wife was sick and she was very much her dog, particularly when she was ill and Mabel kept extremely close to her. She knew what was happening. A very caring animal. Sammy loves her, she’s a remaining connection with her late mom.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—your wife passed away, then?”

“Yes, of cancer, a year ago.” He felt perhaps he wasn’t showing enough regret. He’d admitted to himself he was bad at death, even his own wife’s.

She sensed that. “But you’ve survived?” Asked kindly.

“Yes, thanks. And Mabel has too. But she moped for a good month, looking for her, after my wife passed.” By this time the dogs were jumping around the underbrush beside the path. He had an idea that would see the continuation of what seemed to have started that day. “I have a big yard and perhaps you’d like to bring Joe around for a play date some day?”

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She responded—almost too warmly, she thought to herself. “I have a postage stamp yard in an apartment building. I’d love to—maybe next Saturday.”

“Sure, let’s meet here at the south woodlot entrance at eleven, we’ll go for the long walk then to my house for a beer and doggie play. Sound good?”

“Okay. Until then.” And with a wide grin on her face, she passed him and went off down the path in the other direction, Joe watching with interest. His dad had told him that a good way to judge a woman was to watch her walk away and judge her bearing. He watched Hollie walk away with a bit of a swing of her small round hips, straight, erect and proud. She passed the dad test.