

Puppy Love on the Richter Scale

By Emily Conrad

Cold, thick rain washed Ben's face as he sprinted after his hulking mutt. Half great Dane and half bullmastiff, the dog could topple the petite blonde on the sidewalk with one swipe of his slobbering tongue, the animal's preferred method of introducing himself.

"Richter!" Ben would've stepped outside to meet this neighbor sooner had he known putting it off would result in such a terrible first impression. What if she broke a bone? "Richter!"

The woman's white pit bull saved her by snarling and lunging toward Ben's runaway. Taken aback, Richter halted at the edge of the sidewalk, his whipping tail sending a spray sideways through the downpour. Ben raced to get a hand around his collar but caught only rain as Richter dodged around to greet the other dog, a calmer black pit.

The woman's hair splayed from her shoulders as she twisted, supervising Richter and the black dog while keeping the crazy one away. Other days, she kept her hair straight as silk, but saturated with rain, the locks took on a wave that reminded him of Claire.

Focus, man.

“Sorry.” Skirting the crazy dog, he latched his fingers around Richter’s collar the dog dipped his head to sniff his new-found friend. “Nice day for a walk.” He flicked his free hand across his brow to stop the water from streaming into his eyes.

“It wasn’t raining when we started.” Effort sank the corners of her lips as she leaned against the wind and trudged toward her little house, pulling her dogs with her.

He’d noticed this woman before signing the lease for the duplex’s lower unit. Since moving in, a few facts had been easy to glean. She loved dogs and went to church on Sunday mornings, marks in her favor. And something about how small she was—five one?—made him want to protect her, though her energetic lifestyle and two pit bulls testified she needed no such thing. One conversation, and he’d be as loyal to her as one of her pets. That was why he hadn’t introduced himself sooner.

The howl of a tornado siren cut through the hiss of rain. The woman squinted at the graphite clouds, her mouth gaping. The white dog snapped against the leash, still bent on shredding Richter. The woman turned her wide eyes on Ben like he, and not her own dog, had been the one to yank her arm. “I don’t have a basement.”

The rain hit so hard that white mist shot three feet back up into the air, and the tornado sirens bayed on. Thunder cracked, and the woman jumped.

So she needed protection after all.

“If you’re worried, you can wait it out in mine.”

The woman’s mouth pulled taut. Why trust him, a stranger? No need to stand here in tornado weather and watch her shrink away. *I guess her safety’s up to you, God.* He tightened his grip on the collar. “Come on, Richter.”

The dog trotted next to him until three steps into the living room. There, Richter stopped, set his paws wide, and shook his coat. Ben held up an arm to shield himself, as if he wasn’t already soaked.

“Which way to the basement?”

Ben whipped around to find the drenched blonde in the entry. Her dogs mimicked Richter, sending water flying like a pair of sprinklers. Oblivious, the blonde's eyes, framed by wet lashes and smudged makeup, remained fixed on him.

He'd seen Claire disheveled a few times too. At the time, it seemed like a sign that their relationship had gone beyond the superficial to a place of security. Look where that had gotten him.

He lifted his hand toward the back of the house. "Through the door in the kitchen. It's nothing fancy. Cement, bricks, and cobwebs."

She and her dogs left tracks across the old, brown living room carpet. "It's better than mine."

Ben glanced at Richter as the woman disappeared from the kitchen. Moisture left the dog's short fur spiked, and he tilted his head, puzzled gaze latched on the door to the basement. As much as Ben would rather avoid her and the possibility that he'd suffer a repeat of what happened with Claire, if his basement was God's idea of keeping her safe, he'd better go make sure she settled in okay.

He waved Richter to follow him. "You got me into this."

Downstairs, the woman stood by a stack of boxes, peering into the one on top. Leave her alone for a moment and she'd nose through his stuff. Nice.

The white pit bull growled at Richter while the black one approached, tail wagging. Realizing she'd been caught, the woman withdrew her hand like the box had bitten her. "Sorry. I bumped it, and it rattled. I wanted to make sure I hadn't broken anything."

"Don't have much fragile stuff around."

"No?" Her head turned partially away from the box, but she kept her eyes locked on its contents a moment longer. Then, she aimed her attention at the growling dog. "Rudolph, knock it off."

Ben looked from the dog's brownish pink nose to the box. Worry over what she'd seen won out over the humor of the dog's name.

While she focused on controlling her pets, Ben pulled back the cardboard flap. Among the contents sat an open ring box. The diamond glinted like the droplets on the ends of this woman's hair. He released the flap as Rudolph finally let Richter approach.

She pointed at the black dog. "That's Belle. I'm Courtney." She eyed Ben's shirt. "And you're Bennet? Or is that your last name?"

"First." Friends called him Ben, but he hadn't changed out of his uniform, which displayed his full name in embroidered cursive. At least the dark colors and stiff fabric hid the effects of the water much better than her clinging tank top. He diverted his eyes to keep his mind on the straight and narrow. He wanted to be on good terms with his neighbors. Nothing more. She might as well call him by his full name.

"You want a fresh shirt?" He riffled through the laundry basket on the dryer and produced a t-shirt.

Courtney retreated with it behind a wall of boxes he had yet to unpack. Her dogs followed, but when Richter tried to join in, Ben grabbed his collar and held him back.

"So you've lived here about a month?"

Close enough. "Sorry about Richter running out. I don't know what got into him. He's usually pretty mellow."

"Right." Courtney's soft laugh rose over the row of boxes. "I've seen you try to walk him."

"What can I say? He's got places to go."

As if to contradict him, Richter sighed and lay down at Ben's waterlogged work boots.

By the time Courtney emerged from behind the shield of boxes, she had braided her hair, rolled the sleeves of his t-shirt and done something to it in back so it wasn't huge on her. She looked to nice.

God, why bring her here? I don't want to fall for anyone.

As if in answer, thunder rumbled through the house and into the basement. Right. This was just about safety during a thunderstorm.

She pinched and pulled at the top, making final adjustments. "I could walk him, if you want."

"He weighs more than you do."

"Next time the weather's nice, you'll see. I'm good with dogs. I can train him to walk nicely."

A know-it-all. Finally. Something about her to dislike. Besides, how good could she be with dogs if Rudolph was so ready to fight? "What makes you think I need help?"

Courtney's smile rounded her cheeks, bouncing his gruff demeanor right off. "I owe you for letting me weather the storm here."

"You don't owe me anything."

"I'd love to do it." She laid her fingers on his forearm.

He stepped back. This was going nowhere good—fast.

She diverted her eyes, getting the hint. "I've never seen a dog Richter's size before. He's awesome. You'd be doing me a favor—another favor—if you let me walk him."

"Okay, sure." Whatever it took to get out of here. "I'm going to go see what's going on outside. Richter, come on."

Richter's eyes focused on him, but the animal didn't move his head. Ben had seen the expression enough to know the dog wouldn't budge. *Traitor*. Ben turned and took the stairs two at a time. Tornado weather was safer than that blonde.

###

Richter trotted like a lamb beside Courtney, the payoff of a month's worth of walks. Now if only she could get through to his owner. She veered onto Bennet's front walk and grinned through her stomach's customary twist when he answered the door. His hair was, as always, a collection of curls she'd never thought she'd like on a guy.

“We’re ready for you to try.”

“Try what?”

Two simple words, but his voice, low with a hint of gravel, had her stomach reminding her how big this crush was and why she’d gone to all the trouble of training this dog. *Lord, am I doing the right thing, or am I trying to force your hand?*

In the course of the month, she hadn’t learned much about Bennet. He shared her faith in Jesus and her love of dogs. His job was “metal fab” in an auto body shop. She hadn’t gotten him talking enough to explain what that last one meant, but she suspected the work was the reason for the definition in his arms, which the occasional vein highlighted beautifully.

“Walk Richter with me. He’s a new dog.” As if to prove the point, Richter settled onto his haunches to wait out their conversation. She smiled triumphantly.

The corners of Bennet’s lips hooked up in a rare smile. Maybe she had reason to hope.

Three blocks of perfect behavior from Richter followed.

“Remember how it used to be?” As the question left her lips, she heard a jingle from the fenced-in yard next to her.

The dog that lived there was rarely out, but before she could warn Bennet, the black lab reached the fence and launched into a ferocious string of barks. Richter startled, stepping toward Courtney. His paws tangled with her feet. In her struggle to stay upright, her toes smacked his leg.

Bennet pulled Richter into the empty street, and they struggled along until they’d passed the yard, Richter pulling, the lab assaulting the fence, and Courtney limping.

“You all right?” Bennet rejoined Courtney on the sidewalk. He lifted his hand toward her arm, but let it hover short of touching her.

“Yeah.” She huffed out a breath of pain. “No big deal. It hurts, but I never even get a bruise to show for it. If I’m going to go through the pain, it seems like I should at least get a bruise, you know?”

Bennet's eyebrows skewed. "I get banged up at work, and I'm not sure the bruises and burns are my better features."

"Sure. They make you mysterious and tough-looking." She tossed a smile at him as she willed herself to stop limping. And maybe tone down the flirting before she scared him off for good.

"Or just bad at my job."

"Not for a minute." The toe hadn't stopped hurting, but she wouldn't suggest they turn back when Bennet was finally talking. "Is the job the reason you moved here?"

"Had to live somewhere."

"Yeah, but you came from far away right? The only people I've seen stop by had Indiana plates. Why come here?"

His mouth pulled into a straight, tight line. "Wanted a fresh start."

So he'd moved all this way because of whatever happened with the girl the ring had been for.

"You do have a lot of scars, don't you?"

His jaw flexed in time with their footsteps. "Richter and I do just fine."

Courtney signaled, and they rounded the corner. Had Bennet given up on relationships with people in favor of the company of a dog? She loved Rudolph and Belle, but they didn't make great conversationalists.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're limping."

"I'll walk it off. It'll be fine by the time we get back."

Her bravado got her nowhere. Eventually, she had to request they slow the pace. She'd broken a toe back in high school. Though it'd been years, the sharp jolt in her foot stung with familiarity.

When they made it home, Bennet pointed at the telltale bruise. "Looks like you got your wish. That's broke, isn't it?"

If he didn't live right next door, she'd deny it. Since he'd see her hobbling around, she sighed and nodded.

"I'm really sorry." And he looked it, too. What woman in her right mind would've left this man when he was ready to put a ring on her finger?

Richter, as if he were sorry, too, nuzzled her hand. She rubbed the soft fur behind his ear.

"Hazard of the job. I should've known better than to wear flip flops."

"If it's a job, then I should pay you for all the time you put in."

"No, that's a figure of speech." She gave Richter a final pat. The foot throbbed. A session with an ice pack was about six blocks overdue. "See you around."

She limped away. This injury would bench her from her mission to catch Ben's eye. But the next evening, her doorbell chimed.

She did a toeless waddle to the door and glanced to make sure Rudy and Belle had obeyed her command to stay back. The two bundles of energy fidgeted ten feet away. She smiled at Bennet, ready to assure him her toe was just fine.

"I'll walk them since you can't."

"Oh." The abrupt favor rendered her speechless. And giddy.

As soon as her fingers touched the leashes, Belle and Rudy charged the door. She sidestepped the thundering paws and let Bennet hook them up. His fingers brushed the back of her hand as he took Belle's leash from her, the first time he'd touched her, though it was probably on account of the tugging dogs rather than any decision on his part.

She'd take what she could get. "Thanks for doing this, Bennet."

"Ben." He cleared his throat. "Call me Ben. We'll be back soon."

###

“Really, dog?” What Ben had meant to be a quick twenty-minute walk was stretching into thirty as Rudolph stopped at a third fire hydrant.

He opened Facebook on his phone to pass the time. The first picture in his news feed featured Claire, clad in a white dress and a blazing smile. Moving all the way here was supposed to keep him from having to see this. Too bad most everyone he knew had been at the wedding.

He huffed, shoved the phone into his pocket, and tugged the dogs along. He’d ignored the warning signs that Claire wasn’t as into the relationship as he was, but he didn’t need the lesson twice. In the Bible, back before God made women, it’d been a man and a bunch of animals. He and Richter had that kind of paradise going. Sure, God had said it wasn’t good for man to be alone, but then he’d made Adam a wife out of his own rib. Unless God did a custom fab job like that for Ben, he’d stay single.

Thirty-five minutes after he’d left, he rang Courtney’s doorbell again.

“Come on in,” she called.

Must be too much trouble to get to the door with that foot.

Inside, the dogs trotted out of sight. Odd that Courtney hadn’t shown her face, but that was for the best. If anyone tempted him to risk his heart again, it was her.

“I’ll stop by for them tomorrow. Give that foot a chance to heal.”

No response.

He stepped farther into the house. “You okay?” Around the corner, he found a small dining area, the table set for two. A steaming pot of marinara sat in the middle next to a bowl of noodles. Ben salivated. He needed to learn to cook one of these days. How had she whipped all this up in the space of one walk? Not a wisp of Italian spices had wafted out when he’d picked up the dogs.

Better question: Was she dating someone? If there was a guy around, why hadn’t he seen him pulling in and out of the driveway?

“You have to stay for dinner.” Courtney limped in, a plate of grated cheese in one hand and a loaf of garlic bread in the other. “I have way too much for one person.”

The elaborate meal, too much for *four* people, revealed what she wasn’t saying. Just when he’d let his guard down about calling him Ben, she wanted to upgrade their relationship. The jealousy he’d felt just a minute ago, when he’d thought she’d made all this for someone else, told him he didn’t mind the idea as thoroughly as he ought.

“Sorry, I haven’t walked Richter yet. Came over right after work. It was a long day...” How many more excuses would it take to change her look of hurt to one of understanding? The truth would do the trick, but he couldn’t say it out loud. His ex-girlfriend, the woman he’d hoped to marry, had married someone else last Saturday. “I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

“Oh. Okay.” Courtney smiled, but her eyes shouted disappointment.

He backed out of the room.

After work the next day, he walked Richter, but not Rudolph and Belle. As evening wore on, he watched Courtney limp by, first with one dog then the other. She must’ve had to split them up to handle them while injured. He shouldn’t have forced her to walk them, but he couldn’t risk it.

Two weeks later, Courtney walked much smoother, this time next to some clean-cut guy. The short hair, medium build, and clean hands—something Ben could never attain because of his job—told him she’d caught on and found someone who was Ben’s opposite.

###

“What if he sees another dog?” Eric passed Rudolph’s leash to his right hand, probably trying to make sure he used his strongest grip.

Courtney had been working on this guy for two weeks, but he still couldn’t see past pit bulls’ reputation for aggression. To think Bennet had walked off holding both leashes in one hand like balloons

floated on the ends and not dogs. Rudolph barked, and Eric gasped, eyes fixed on the one place Courtney had been trying not to look: Bennet's house. She turned toward the duplex.

Richter's long legs swallowed up the lawn as he raced toward them. Bennet really needed a fenced-in yard if he was this bad at containing his dog. She stomped toward the mastiff and shouted, "Go home!"

Richter froze, as if shocked to find she was no longer a friend. He trotted back around the duplex and out of sight. She led the way down the sidewalk. "See? Nothing to worry about."

After the walk, she and Eric sat down to eat. They'd prayed and picked up their silverware when the doorbell rang.

Courtney stood with a flinch. Her toe rarely hurt anymore, and the bruise had disappeared, but she must've tweaked it just right. Eric didn't seem to notice, so she continued toward the door without a word. She turned the handle and found herself face-to-face with Ben.

Bennet. She'd meant to start thinking of him by his full name again, since the nickname clearly wasn't something he wanted just anyone calling him.

"Have you seen Richter?" His forehead furrowed the same way it had the day he found her looking at the ring in his basement. "The back door must not've latched when I came home. He's gone."

Her appetite vanished as guilt filled her stomach. "Around five?"

"You saw him?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you were in the back yard. He went running straight there when I told him to go home."

"That monstrous dog is yours?"

Courtney pivoted toward Eric's voice. When had he walked over, and what had Richter done to deserve the title "monstrous?"

Ben's jaw tightened, his Adam's apple marked a swallow, and he nodded once. "I'd better keep looking."

Courtney and Eric returned to their meal, but she couldn't carry a conversation. Finding a dog—even one as big as Richter—must feel like searching for a lost tennis ball in a field of corn. There were so many nooks and crannies to check. And Ben depended on that dog. *Bennet*.

Oh, what was the use? As soon as the meal ended, she sent Eric away and went to check on Ben. He didn't answer the door, so he was probably out looking for Richter. She'd take Rudy and Belle out for a walk. If Richter saw them, he'd come running. That was, if she hadn't scared him away too badly when she shouted at him earlier.

###

Ben sat in the darkness on the back step of the duplex. Two hours of cruising the neighborhood had resulted in no leads. He supported his head with his hands, fingers pushed into his hair.

Man's best friend. Right. The dumb animal had bolted out the back door, as bent on leaving him as Claire had been. He ought to call his brother back in Indiana and ask if Richter had washed up there.

"I take it he hasn't shown up." Courtney's voice was soft with sympathy.

Ben paused to blink three times before lifting his head, clearing his eyes enough to pass for dry in this darkness. "No, not yet."

He'd picked the rear door specifically so Courtney wouldn't see him sitting here. He hadn't counted on her coming up the driveway and around the back.

"He wears tags. Someone will find him and call."

"Maybe not until after he runs out in front of a car. That or they'll keep him." He turned his face away as if to scan the yards around them, though he could only see blurred shadows through the moisture that had returned to his eyes. When had he turned into such a cry baby?

“He’s pretty big.” The step creaked as Courtney sat next to him. “Hopefully, people would see him before there could be an accident. And if anyone tried to keep him, he’d eat them out of house and home. I’ve seen the size of his food dish.” She nudged his arm with her elbow.

Ben managed something that ought to resemble a smile and continued to stare at the shadows. If he ignored her long enough, she’d leave. Claire and Richter had.

After half an hour, she stretched her legs, feet reaching toward the landing at the bottom of the steps. He focused through the darkness toward the smudge of blue that was her right shoe. She’d broken her toe because he hadn’t held onto Richter tightly enough on that walk. Then he’d freaked out when she asked him to stay for dinner and had left her to take care of two rambunctious dogs on her own with an injured foot. Richter and Claire had left him over much less.

“Why are you still here?” he asked.

“You won’t like my answer.”

He sighed. Probably not, but it would get his mind off Richter. “Go for it.”

“I’m here because I like you, and I hate to see you sad. Which is funny because I’m not sure I’ve ever seen you anything but sad.”

“That’s what happens when you propose to your girlfriend only for her to tell you she fell for your brother.”

“That’s what happened?”

“Then they got married, and the dog I adopted in the aftermath of the breakup goes and runs off. Turns out, he doesn’t want to be stuck with me either.”

“He’ll come back.”

Ben didn’t try to reply. He’d choke up. Besides, why was he talking to a woman he had to push away? Her liking someone else offered him some level of protection. The new guy who thought his dog

was a monster. But wait. She'd said she liked Ben. She needed a reminder about where the boundaries were. "Tell me about this hot date of yours."

"No hot date. I told him tonight that things aren't working out. He doesn't like dogs."

"Well, someone else will come along, if that's what you're into."

"And you want me to buy that you're not looking for happily ever after like I am?"

"Doesn't exist. Even dogs leave. If he hadn't run away, big breeds don't have great life spans. I'll be lucky if he sees ten years. Most marriages would be lucky to last that long too."

Courtney laughed. "What does luck have to do with it? I thought we were both Christians."

"Being a Christian doesn't make my dog live longer." Or come home, for that matter.

"But you do still believe in a loving, faithful God, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then that loving God will bring the right relationships into your life. He'll help you when and if they end. I'd like to think his leading is how you ended up right next door to me, and I'm glad you're here. Not that I'm happy it took such hard circumstances to make you move, but I'm glad God orchestrated our meeting each other. While you're right that we don't get our true happily-ever-afters this side of heaven, I don't believe we have to live lives of heartbreak."

Ben caught his fingers in his hair again as he lowered his head. If she was right, why did he keep ending up alone?

"Something good will come from all this trouble." She stood. "I'm sorry you haven't found whatever that is yet."

A metallic tick sounded from somewhere in the darkness, followed by rustling, thudding and more jingling. Ben lifted his face just in time for a tongue the size of a hand to swipe from his jaw to his eyebrow.

He laughed, but even as he did, he locked his fingers around Richter's collar. He held tight when the dog tried to dart toward Courtney. He led Richter up the steps and shut the dog in the house. When he turned back to wrap things up with Courtney, she'd already gone.

###

Courtney paused outside her front door and inhaled the clean night air. She'd given it her best shot with Bennet, but maybe all it amounted to was trying to create feelings in him where there were none. *Okay, God, I give up. Your will be done. Thanks for bringing his dog back.*

"Courtney." Bennet jogged across her front yard and stopped at the base of her front steps. "That other guy was nothing like me."

"True." She crossed her arms. When he'd come running over, she'd hoped for something better than this. A kiss, maybe?

"You really believe God's been working in this whole thing? That he used my experience with Claire to bring me here where I could meet you so we could fall in love and get married and live happily ever after."

"I didn't say all *that*." She'd dreamt about it, but she hadn't said it.

He lifted his hand. Until then, she hadn't realized he'd held anything, but now there was no mistaking the size and shape of the small box that fit so easily in his grasp.

"Bennet." Even if she'd hoped for a future with him, she couldn't accept a spontaneous proposal with no relationship to back it up.

"Oh, don't get the wrong idea." His fingers fisted around the ring box. "I brought it over to tell you that you make a good case. I'm getting rid of it. Returning it, selling it. Whatever. I'm moving on. We can't let life be all heartbreak." He opened his car and tossed the ring box inside. As he returned, he held up his empty hands as if he'd laid down a weapon and was now surrendering.

To her.

Her heart thumped a cadence like an excited puppy's tail might have.

Instead of stopping at the bottom of the stairs, Ben climbed up. She managed a tentative smile.

He stood *close*. "Could I take you on a date this weekend?"

"Yes." The word came out too quiet. He may have felt the answer brush by his face, but he wouldn't have heard it.

His hands, warm and strong, circled hers. "Six on Saturday?"

"That's a long way away."

He leaned in, and she held her breath and closed her eyes, thinking she might get that kiss after all. His lips brushed her cheek, then he stepped back. "We can walk the dogs together tomorrow." He dropped her hands and started for his house.

This was goodnight already? "Good thing someone trained that dog of yours," she called after him.

"Careful." Ben chuckled, and her attempt to get him to turn around succeeded. "If your theory's right that God is controlling and using everything, then you can't deny he used Richter's bad behavior to get us talking."

"Good point. We'll never train him to do anything again."

The streetlight highlighted his smile. "Let's not take it that far. At this rate, if he doesn't start behaving, we'll end up"

She longed to hear the end of the sentence, what he might think would come of their relationship. Whatever it was, that smile said he expected something positive. She'd have to let it go at that.

"Anyway." He waved goodnight. "Good thing God's in control and not Richter."

As if in protest, Richter's deep-throated bark echoed from Ben's place. Belle and Rudolph answered back. Courtney pulled open her door to go inside before they disturbed the whole neighborhood, but she couldn't help feeling that maybe Richter knew something they didn't.

THE END

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