

## **The Ultimate Reunion Contest**

### **Puppy Love by Kate Fellowes**

Mari Garcia cast an anxious glance up and down the street before closing the front door behind her.

“Okay, sweetie. Let’s go.”

The little old dog at her feet started down the steps of the brownstone slowly and deliberately, not minding the brisk autumn breeze.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon. All up and down the block, folks were taking advantage of the weather. The neighborhood, new to Mari, seemed peaceful and safe, but still she held her breath.

Sylvia, a ten-year-old white poodle, picked up her pace once they were on the sidewalk. Trotting happily over to investigate a tree brilliant with scarlet leaves, she didn’t notice Mari’s unease.

Maybe she was being silly, Mari thought as they walked on. Maybe it was just being single again, in a different city with a different job that had put her nerves on edge. She looked down at the dog leading the way at the end of a bright red leash and smiled, relaxing a bit.

Finding Sylvia had been unexpected good fortune. Back home, shopping malls didn’t contain animal shelters showcasing homeless pets. But here, they did. Mari had been looking for new clothes to go with her new job. Her list read: pants, skirts, shoes. Then, suddenly, it read: leash, dog food, dog bed.

Sylvia had caught her eye not by being cute and active like the other dogs in the shop window. No, she’d been asleep in the far corner. Alone, like Mari.

Leaning against the glass, Mari had watched the little dog sleep amidst the chaos and felt one of the knots inside her come loose. Just then, as if she could feel Mari’s attention, Sylvia had blinked and yawned. When their eyes met, Mari smiled, putting her hand to the glass in greeting.

The shelter worker said Sylvia was a Katrina dog, left behind in New Orleans after the hurricane. Unable to find her guardian, the local shelter had sent her north with several other dogs and cats, hoping to find new families for them all.

“Her name tag’s pretty worn, but we could make out an S at the front and an A at the back, so we’re calling her Sylvia,” the worker had said.

"I'll be your new family," Mari had whispered in Sylvia's ear. "Two girls together. What do you say?"

Sylvia's stubby tail had wagged and her tiny pink tongue took a few laps at Mari's fingers, sealing the deal.

With the aid of her new companion, life seemed to be better. Comfortable. Hopeful.

But then...

Arriving home from work the night before last, she'd seen a car parked out front. A man sat behind the wheel and seemed to be watching her. She and Sylvia used the rear entrance for their walk that night and by the time they got back from the park, the man and the car were gone.

Last night, the same dark green car sat outside her house, with the same man inside. He didn't look threatening. In fact, he was cute. Dark hair, straight nose, glasses. But why was he in front of her stoop when there were plenty of parking spaces on the block? It had to be deliberate, didn't it?

Mari bit her lip as she and Sylvia crossed the street, heading into the park. One lap around the perimeter was their usual pattern, with a rest on the park bench by the water fountain halfway through. The sun felt good on her face, the wind just cool enough to pinch her cheeks. Some kids on bikes pedaled around them when Sylvia stopped to sniff a shrub. Others were trying to get a kite in the air.

And the dark-haired man sat at their bench, hands in the pockets of his coat.

Mari's steps faltered. When he stood, she tightened her hold on the leash and moved backward a few paces. Sylvia, though, let out a yip as the man started running toward them.

"Stop!" Mari shouted, to both the man and Sylvia, but neither one listened.

"Savanna!" he cried, dropping to both knees and opening his arms.

Mari's canine senior citizen jumped into the stranger's arms with the energy of a puppy. Her tiny tail beat as rapidly as a hummingbird's wings, her tongue bathing his face with kisses.

"Oh, sweetie," he said in a voice cracking with emotion. "Oh, little girl, where have you been?"

He sat right down on the path, and wrapped both arms around the wiggly body, his cheek buried in her fur.

Mari, watching the reunion, felt another knot come loose. Crouching down to join them, she said, "It looks like you two know each other."

When he looked up, Mari could see tears in his eyes. A smile of such joy spread over his face that Mari smiled back.

"I was out of the country when the hurricane hit. By the time I could get back, she was gone," he said. "I've been trying to find her ever since." He rubbed behind Sylvia's ears and spoke so softly Mari strained to hear. "I'd almost given up."

"What led you here?" Mari stroked Sylvia's warm body.

"I sent her picture everywhere and some sharp-eyed volunteer made the connection. Bless her!"

Standing, he helped Mari to her feet even as he kept Sylvia tucked in the crook of his arm.

"Can I take you two to lunch? We've got a lot of catching up to do." He looked at little Sylvia, then turned to Mari. "And you and I have to get acquainted." He smiled again, dimples forming in both cheeks.

Mari tickled Sylvia under the chin. Was it possible the dog was smiling? Sylvia's tongue flicked out over Mari's fingers, then over the man's.

"Yes," Mari said. "We'll have to work out joint custody."

"She's a little dog, but Savanna... Sylvia... has enough love for us both," he promised.

Mari didn't doubt it.

***The End***