

In Dog We Trust is the first Steve and Rochester golden retriever mystery. After a bad divorce and a brief prison term for computer hacking, 42-year-old Steve Levitan has returned to his home town of Stewart's Crossing and taken a part-time job as an adjunct professor of English at his alma mater, Eastern College. While walking around his gated community, he becomes friendly with his next-door neighbor, Caroline Kelly, and her golden retriever, Rochester.

When Caroline is shot and killed while walking Rochester, Steve becomes the dog's temporary guardian. Together, these two unlikely sleuths work to uncover the mystery behind Caroline's death.

Santiago Santos sat down at my kitchen table to examine the audit trail on my laptop. One of the conditions of my computer use while on parole was the installation of keystroke software, which tells Santos, my parole officer, which keys have been pressed, and which windows they were pressed in. It captures emails, usernames, passwords and chat conversations, and only he has the password to see what's been recorded.

While I made coffee for both of us, he looked at the log. "Computer looks fine," he said, pushing it away as I brought two mugs to the table. In the Pennsylvania state parole system, officers visit parolees at their homes. I'd been to his office in Bensalem, for my first visit and to fill out paperwork, and he'd been out to my townhouse in Stewart's Crossing once a month since then.

Like many computer hackers, I had little formal training. I had a bachelor's and master's degrees in English, but I'd never taken more than a couple of introductory courses in programming.

Yet I had a talent for it. I could sit down in front of a screen, hit a couple of keys, and find my way into even the most secure website. I never sent anyone a virus, and I never caused malicious mischief; all I ever wanted to do was find hidden data, explore protected directories, read confidential memos. It was knowledge I was after, not material gain.

Try convincing a judge of that.

My skills had brought me cash, an underground reputation—and a year's sentence in a minimum-security prison. The corrections system in the state of California was operating at maximum capacity, so as a non-violent offender I was released after six months, with two years on parole.

By the age of forty, I'd lost my career, my marriage, and both my parents. So I'd left Silicon Valley and come back home, to Bucks County, PA, to regroup and start over. Just before his death, my father had moved to a townhouse in River Bend, a development on the edge of Stewart's Crossing, and I took the place over when I was paroled.

One of the conditions of my parole was that I find a career that did not involve regular computer work. I was allowed to use the internet only to send and receive emails, to look for work, and other ordinary purposes—reading the *New York Times*, playing solitaire, and so on. Every time I turned on my computer, my fingers itched toward forbidden sites, but I held back, not least because of the tracking software.

Santiago Santos opened a file folder he'd brought with him and gave it a quick glance. He's Puerto Rican, with a bachelor's degree in sociology from Drexel, and looks like an amateur boxer, about 5-8, stocky, with muscular forearms. I wasn't sure which of those characteristics helped him most in dealing with his clients.

"How's the writing going?" he asked.

When I returned to Pennsylvania, I began trying to develop a freelance technical writing business. I had ten years' experience, but I knew the felony conviction I'd have to admit to on job applications would lead to a constant stream of rejection from potential employers. As a freelancer, I could avoid the kind of paperwork that would keep me from full-time employment.

"OK. I got a new project last week, modifying a manual for a blood pressure machine. If I do a good job with this, they'll have me update all their documentation."

"You know about that?" he asked. "Blood pressure machines?"

I sat down across from him. My own blood pressure was high; I worried about saying the wrong thing in front of him, about his power to violate my parole and send me back to prison in California. "I'm just cleaning up the grammar, making sure the steps are easy to follow," I said. "If I have any technical questions about how the product works, I email the project manager."

He nodded. "And how about your teaching?"

Shortly after returning to Bucks County, I'd seen an ad for adjunct faculty at Eastern College, my undergraduate alma mater. Because the department chair had been a favorite professor of mine, he took pity on me and gave me a safe, if temporary, job as an adjunct instructor in the English department, which enabled me to pay my bills. "OK. Lots of papers to grade. A lot of these kids don't understand basic grammar."

"Big problem these days," Santos said, taking a sip of his coffee and nodding in appreciation. Ten years in Silicon Valley had made me a coffee snob; I bought the best beans, ground them myself, used filtered water. "Most of my clients can't even write a resume or a decent letter applying for a job."

"I'm not surprised. If college kids can't write..."

"More of my clients are like you these days," he said. "Professional guys, guys with careers and college." He looked up at me. "Any chance of getting a full-time job at Eastern?"

I shook my head. "Not with a felony on my record. And even if I didn't have that little problem, you need a PhD to get a full-time job at Eastern, and right now, they're only hiring minorities."

Oops. Was I supposed to say something like that in front of a Hispanic person? Santos didn't say anything, but it was probably just another black mark in my file.

"Your contract goes until when—May?"

"Yup. It doesn't look like they'll have any work for me this summer; their enrollment goes way down, and preference goes to the full-time faculty. But I'm hoping I can go back in the fall."

He made some notes in the folder, then looked up at me. "The last time we talked, you said that this teaching job was temporary, just a stopgap until you got your business going. I don't want you to put too much emphasis on it, if it can't lead to something full time. You've got to focus on developing your client base. You've got what, three actual clients?"

I nodded.

"Any one of those decides to cut back, you could end up in financial trouble. And guys in financial trouble are vulnerable to getting into legal trouble."

I swallowed hard and shifted in the stiff wooden chair.

"By the time I see you next month," he said, "I want you to have a plan together for developing your business. How you're going to exploit your contacts, build your client base. Financial projections for the next six months."

I had avoided most people I knew before my conviction out of embarrassment, but the need to pay bills—and stay out of jail—is a powerful motivator. "I can do that."

"Good. I'm not trying to be a hard-ass, Steve. I want you to succeed. But if you don't have a plan in place, you're going to fail. And you know what failure means, right?"

I knew. If I didn't provide the means to support myself, the State of California would take over, returning me to that drafty cell at a state prison and three lousy meals a day.

Santos stood up. "Let's say four weeks from today, same time, same station," he said.

As soon as he left, I grabbed my parka and went out for a walk. The March weather had been cold, windy and damp for a week or more, and it was a struggle to motivate myself to keep up my regimen of morning and evening walks, part of my program to keep from sitting around the house brooding. That evening, though, I wanted to get outdoors and shake off the tension his visits always bring.

I often like to walk alongside the nature preserve that backs up against River Bend in the evening. There's a long stretch between River Road and the guardhouse, and when I'm there I can imagine I'm in the midst of a wilderness instead of the middle of suburbia.

I waved at the old guy manning the gate, and then side-stepped a big pile of poop, left behind by a dog belonging to one of my neighbors. Probably one of those who ostentatiously carried plastic bags but never stooped to using one.

Many of my dog-owning neighbors liked to walk along the preserve, including my

next-door neighbor, Caroline Kelly, who owned a golden retriever named Rochester. I guess the smells out there are more interesting than the ones on our street, even though it's lined with maples and oaks and nearly every house has a dogwood or lilac tree or a flowerbed filled with the first daffodils and tulips of spring.

I was brooding about the ever-present possibility that I'd be sent back to prison when I heard three short bangs that sounded like someone was shooting off firecrackers, but without the whistle and the whine. The sounds stood out because the rest of the night was so silent—not even a distant siren or the roar of a motorcycle.

A fast-moving black SUV roared past me a moment later, skidding gravel. Rochester came galloping up toward me as soon as it had gone, the handle of his extension leash bouncing behind him the way a convict in a cartoon might drag his ball and chain.

I knew it was Rochester because of the madras bandana that Caroline kept slung around his neck. "Hey, boy, hey," I said, reaching out to grab him. "Where's your mom? How'd you get away from her?"

As soon as I had hold of his leash, Rochester executed a sharp 180-degree turn and started running back the way he'd come, this time dragging me along with him. "Rochester! Stop!" I called. "Sit, boy, sit!"

I'd never cared for Rochester. I guess it was clear to him that I didn't like dogs, and he made it his personal mission to reinforce that opinion. He did a good job of it, too. He was too big, too enthusiastic, too shaggy. Whenever I stopped to talk to Caroline, Rochester tried to jump on me, and Caroline couldn't keep him in line. She took him for obedience lessons every Saturday, but his exuberance still overwhelmed his manners.

He had huge paws and a big head. His fur was fine and attached itself to me if I even passed within five feet of him, giving my lint brush lots of use. He had big jowls, too, and there was usually a line of drool hanging from them he was happy to wipe off on me. His paws were often muddy, and somehow the tip of his tail was always wet, and when he whipped it against my leg it stung like the touch of a wasp.

Galloping down the street, he ignored my commands to stop, but quickly I saw why he was in such a hurry.

A narrow, grassed-over path from the access road into River Bend led off to an old Revolutionary War cemetery at the edge of the preserve. Caroline had told me she often took Rochester up that path, and cars used it to turn around when they realized they were approaching the entry to a gated community.

As I neared where the grassy path met the roadway, I saw Caroline Kelly lying on the ground. All the activity of the past few minutes formed into a pattern in my head—the shots fired, the speeding car, the loose dog. I looked around as adrenaline raced through my veins. Was the shooter still there? No, he or she must have left in the car that passed me.

I walked up to Caroline, and leaned down next to her. Blood seeped out of her jacket, and there was a growing pool next to her leg. I remembered learning in

college biology that if the femoral artery, running through the thigh, was severed, you could bleed out in a matter of minutes.

"Caroline?" I asked. "Caroline, can you hear me?" I had no idea how to do CPR and I was worried I'd do the wrong thing, somehow hurt her further.

I watched for a minute but could not see any rise and fall in her chest. I flipped open my cell phone, my hands shaking, and found my friend Rick Stemper's cell number. Rick was a police detective in Stewart's Crossing, and I knew he'd tell me what I should do.

Rick and I hadn't been great friends at Pennsbury High; I think we'd shared a couple of classes together. But when I'd been back in town for a few weeks, I was standing in line at The Chocolate Ear, a new café in the center of town, when I thought the guy behind me looked familiar. By the time I had my extra-hot tall coffee, his name had come to me.

"Rick?" I asked. I stuck my hand out. "Steve Levitan."

He'd put on a few pounds since high school—but hadn't we all. Otherwise he looked the same; unruly mop of brown hair, broad shoulders, athletic build. There were bags below his eyes and a couple of laugh lines around his mouth, but in general, he looked pretty good. "Hey, long time no see," he'd said, and we'd started to fill each other in on the intervening years.

He had joined the Stewart's Crossing police department after graduating from Penn State with a degree in criminal justice. His ex-wife liked worrying if her hubby would come home at night, and once Rick moved from beat cop to plainclothes, she couldn't muster up the enthusiasm any more. Six months after he'd made detective, she had dumped him for a fire fighter

We'd bonded over mutual bitterness. I remember him asking that day, "If a tree falls in the forest and kills your ex-wife, what do you do with the lumber?"

I laughed. "Are you still in contact with her?"

"As far as I'm concerned, she's moved to Whoragon," he said. "And I don't mean Portland."

"Somebody's shot Caroline Kelly," I said, when Rick answered his phone. "My next-door neighbor. I think she's dead." My voice was higher than normal, and I was panting for breath after that quick run with Rochester.

"Whoa, Steve, hold on!" Rick said. "Where are you?"

I described the spot, between River Road and the entrance to River Bend. "I'm on my way," he said. "Did you call 911?"

"Not yet."

"Do it." He disconnected, and I called the emergency number.

The dispatcher was calm and professional. She led me through what had happened

and where I was, and promised to send police and an ambulance.

All the while, Rochester paced around me, alternating between barking and whimpering. He'd strain to go over to Caroline's body, then when I pulled him back he'd jump up on me, as if he was trying to convince me to do something more than just wait for the police to arrive.

I shivered in the cold, damp breeze, starting at every noise, worried that whoever had shot Caroline hadn't been in that car, that he was still lurking in the wooded preserve. But the one-two punch of a visit from Santiago Santos, and the discovery of Caroline's body, had knocked all the initiative out of me. All I could do was sit on the ground with the big golden dog next to me, and wait for whatever fate had in store.

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