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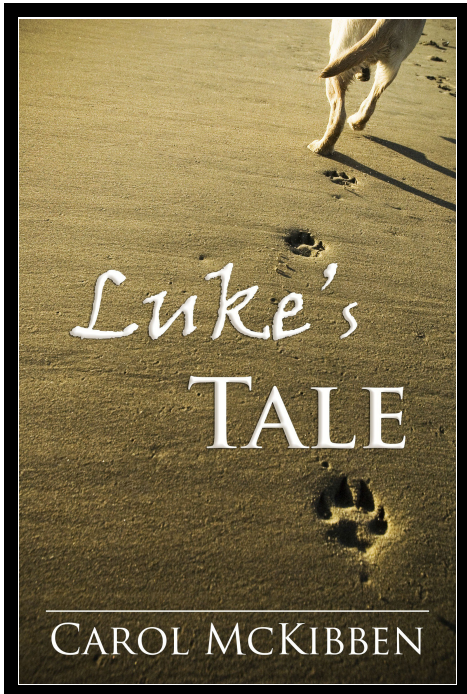
Luke's Tale by Carol McKibben

About the Author:

Carol writes from the heart of a dog's eyes. Often telling her stories to LabraDoodles, Basset Hounds and any stray that happens by, it wasn't long before people stopped to have a listen as well. Now Carol writes for people and speaks to large audiences, dogs included.

[Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Facebook](#)

Email: trollriverpub@gmail.com



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Book Description:

Luke, an intelligent, 89-pound yellow Labrador retriever, has an odd ability to understand human conversations and actions. When his owner's girlfriend, Sara Colson, discovers she has breast cancer Luke is the sole secret keeper of her disease. Not knowing if she'll survive, Sara leaves her boyfriend, Ashlundt Jaynes, to shield him from the pain. Luke, knowing how to give unconditional love, is the catalyst bringing the two lovers back together and helps them stay together while Sara and Ashlundt overcome a series of life-changing events.

At the heart of Luke's Tale is the story of two lovers and their struggle with unforeseen disillusionment to build a

lasting relationship -- and the loving, furry creature who is devoted to them beyond all reason.

Excerpts:

Prologue

September 15, 2015

The world is darker today. Not because I'm blind. My world is always black. But this day my heart is broken.

I sit for a very long time next to the door. I long for her smell of fresh cut flowers, her touch and her gentle voice. I visualize her face. I see the fullness of her lips and the deep compassion in her dark eyes. She is the most caring human I've ever known. I long for her comforting arms around me.

People come up and pet me. One nurse offers me a bowl of water. I remain aloof, not wanting to be distracted in case... in case there's some word. She couldn't possibly be capable of being with me now.

Bay leaf and ocean scent assault my nostrils as I feel Ashlundt pass by into the ER. I stretch my nose toward him, searching for some sort of hope. I feel his desperation as he hurries past me with two words, "Stay, Luke."

My stomach growls. I suppress the hunger. It doesn't matter now. In trying to push away the anguish, my mind wanders back to when Sara left us. I was younger and not blind. She wanted to protect Ashlundt from the pain of her cancer. She must have known that he wouldn't be able to cope with her being sick.

I'm not sure what makes him tick. It has to have something to do with his brother's surfing accident. He blames himself to this day. Maybe that's why he can't cope with illness or imperfection in those he's supposed to love. I once was his golden boy. We went everywhere together. Now, my blindness has pushed him further away from me.

I still feel Ashlundt's athletic strength every once and a while. He'll brush his large hands over me, and I can visualize his big frame and angular face bathed in his long, sun-lightened hair. I wish he knew how to cope with my blindness. It's hard not to take it personally.

I wish I could cope better with my loss of sight. I'd always been a watcher. It must be part of my Lab nature. What scares me the most is that I can't observe my humans, or help them now. Sara has always depended upon our unspoken bond. Ashlundt is another story. I've been through tough times with each of them, and I've had to be more like that human detective, Sherlock Holmes, than a dog for them. I am the product of a broken relationship.

It's long past my evening meal when I feel Sara's presence. I hear nothing but the despair in her voice. "Come, Luke." She takes me by the collar and leads me to the car.

I sit in the backseat and slowly lay down. I know what has happened but can't bare thinking of it. She is silent, but her pain is unbearable and palpable in the air. I think back to how Ashlundt pushed her away, even when he finally discovered she was sick. I fought so hard to help him try and win her back...

I'm jarred back to reality as the car stops. I hear the door open, then the backseat door. Sara whispers, "Let's go inside, Luke."

Slowly, I follow Sara into the house.

She says nothing as she fixes my kibble and leftover chicken, then leaves the room. My greatest fear has been realized.

After sating my hunger, I go to find Sara in her bedroom. She is lying across her bed in silence, tortured and bereft. Even though I'm not usually allowed on the bed, she says nothing as I crawl up next to her and place my head on her hip. I give out a whimpered cry of sorrow.

We lie together in silence for a long, long time. I have to go outside so badly that my bladder hurts, but I don't dare leave Sara. She is so cold. I move closer to her, wanting her to feel my warmth, the warmth that Ashlundt should have offered. Time passes. My stomach begins to growl and adds to my discomfort, but it doesn't matter. I will not leave her.

Sometime later the phone starts to ring. It must be morning. All those distraught voices leaving messages of sorrow on the answering machine. I crawl up to her face, pressing my nose on her cheek to see if she is asleep. Her hand softly touches the top of my head. "It's okay, Lukey. Thank you for staying with me." A ragged sigh escapes from her and is joined by my own.

Still we remain motionless. I think back to the chain of events until I started going blind. But, I've gotten way ahead of myself. I need to go back to the beginning so that you understand how we arrived at our darkest moment in time.

Excerpt Two:

On the flip side, there seemed to be no movement on his part to try and locate Sara. In counting my filled dinner bowls, I was able to make it to 120 since Ashlundt and Dr. Hines had met at Starbucks. What Ashlundt called Christmas had come and gone quietly. His family tried to get us to come to San Diego for the holidays, but he refused saying he had to work. I couldn't even begin to count how long it had been since Sara had left us. I know she left us in warm weather in the summertime. Then, the cool weather passed us by, and it was warm again. The flowers were in full bloom. It had been way too long. I missed her and decided to start reapplying the reminders.

One thing about Ashlundt: he hated it when things were moved away from places where he'd left them. He'd get crazy when he couldn't find his socks, his wristwatch or his pens. So you can only imagine his reaction when I went back into the bedroom, grabbed Sara's charm bracelet and the once-buried framed photo and dragged them back to his office... just after one of his newest clients had completed a session.

The photograph of them laughing together was the last straw. He was reading his notes when I laid it on his lap. He exploded. "What are you doing to me?" Ashlundt reached for a big Yellow Pages phonebook, picked it up and hoisted it onto the floor. Thwack! It landed about a German Shepherd's length from where I was standing. Now, I was mad. I began barking at the top of my lungs. This was behavior I rarely exhibited, but surely necessary in that moment of desperation.

Ashlundt grew angrier. He stamped his foot in my general direction and began to shout. "Luke. Knock it off! Now! I'm warning you, no supper tonight if you don't calm the hell down!"

I wouldn't calm down. If one bowl of K-Dog was my sacrifice for getting Sara back, I was willing to starve for at least one night. Only my barking seemed to have the opposite

effect on Ashlundt. Instead of motivating him to action, he seemed to just get madder at me.

The more I barked, the more things he threw on the floor. A paper weight. His appointment book. A computer speaker. Finally, I was starting to feel threatened. I leaped onto his chest, catching him off balance in his anger, and brought him to the floor. We hit the carpet together alongside his desk with a muffled thud.

My master flashed me a puzzled look. He was still breathing heavily; his heart was pounding like a jackhammer. So was mine. It took both of us a moment to gather our senses. And then something amazing happened. Ashlundt's anger subsided into sighs of frustration, then tears. He began to wail; a sadness I had never witnessed before in my life. Tears were flowing steadily down his cheeks. I did what any loyal canine would do. I licked his face and hands as he curled with his arms around his legs on the floor. Then, I sat directly in front of him and waited.

Eventually, Ashlundt sat up. He wiped his eyes with the bottom of his shirt. And then he looked at me. I nudged the picture of the two of them with my nose until it rested next to his feet.

"I know, Luke, I know. I'm such a bastard. But I can't stand to see her suffering and sick!" He ran his fingers through his long shaggy hair, then stared at the ground.

I was flabbergasted. *How did this once charming man become such a coward? I recalled how gentle and understanding he was with one young housewife who was trying to cope with her own cancer. She had been deeply depressed, and he helped her realize how much her family loved her. "You need to not give up; fight the cancer for the sake of those who love you so much," he had told her. How could he take such good care of his patients and not be there for his greatest love? Perhaps it had something to do with what he had mentioned to Tim. Something about being so emotionally involved with Sara but detached from his patients? Well, anyway, it sounded good.*

I barked once and pushed the photo up against his leg with my nose. He said nothing; just stared at it in silence. I couldn't tell you precisely how long it was that we just sat there, but I know it was until long after the sun went down. Eventually, I pushed the photo frame between his legs, put my paw on his knee, then looked at the phone. He followed my gaze and let out a deep sigh. "Okay. You win. I know what I need to do, boy. Enough."