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Three Cheers for Four-Legged Matchmakers



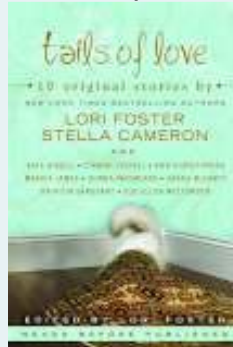
Three Cheers for Four-Legged Matchmakers... or Why My Books Feature Canine Cupids by Marcia James

February is all about romance, thanks to Valentine's Day, but it's also Responsible Pet Owner's Month. So what better time to discuss Canine Cupids? Don't you just love it when an animal character brings together the hero and heroine in a romance novel? I'm not talking about werewolves or other shape-shifters. Just every-day, garden-variety matchmaking cats and dogs. Of course, Smokey, my Chinese crested hairless dog mascot, would object to being called a garden-variety anything. He's very proud of the fact that, in my books, he and his cousins continue to work their magic when it comes to introducing or reuniting soul mates.



Every novel or novella I write includes a Chinese crested hairless dog (or "crestie"), along with other pets. I especially love pairing a big Alpha hero with a tiny crestie sidekick. *Sex & the Single Therapist* (S&ST), the first in my "Dr. Ally Skye, Sex Therapist" comic romantic mystery series, features a crestie, two mellow cats, and a mixed-breed canine shedding machine named Marty, who plays an important role in the mystery plot.

Fictional heroes and heroines show their softer sides around their pets — a humanizing characterization device Hollywood scriptwriters call "petting the dog." A fine example of this is the movie, *As Good As It Gets*, in which the curmudgeon (Jack Nicholson) falls for the little dog. In S&ST, the hero (Detective Zack Crawford) is gruff and all-business until we see him open his heart and his home to Marty. Like Marty, all of my fictional animal characters are homeless — rescued from the streets or adopted from shelters — and their owners spay or neuter them, as responsible pet owners should.



Animal adoption is such an important cause, especially when so many animals are homeless due to the economy and house foreclosures. In 2009, I contributed an animal-themed story, "Rescue Me," to author Lori Foster's benefit anthology, *Tails of Love*. So far, this book has raised over \$10,000 for Animal Adoption Foundation (AAF), a no-kill animal shelter in Ohio. This popular anthology, which Berkley reissued in December 2011, offers ten romantic tales featuring four-legged matchmakers. The author advances and royalties for Lori's as-yet-untitled, June 2012 benefit anthology will also support AAF.

In my *Tails of Love* story (and the majority of the others), the matchmaking four-legged characters don't have their own POV (point-of-view). Readers don't get to see what the animals are thinking; the POVs are saved for the two-legged characters. However, several of the stories do feature animals whose "internal dialogue" is on the page,

bringing the reader into the animal's POV. We can see why the dog or cat is doing what it's doing.

From the anthology's reviews and reader feedback, I learned that people either love or really dislike animal characters who have their own POVs. There doesn't seem to be a middle ground. It's an interesting phenomenon. Personally, I've always enjoyed mysteries and romances with thinking and sometimes talking animals. For example, quite a few cozy mysteries feature feline amateur sleuths, such as the "Midnight Louie" series by Carole Nelson Douglas. And I love Spencer Quinn's "Chet & Bernie" mysteries, which are told 100% from the point-of-view of Chet, a very amusing canine detective.

Speaking of talking animals, one of my favorite funny YouTube videos features a chatty dog being teased by his owner. Here's the link, if you'd like to check it out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGeKSiCQkPw>

So, do you enjoy books, movies, or television shows with animal POVs? Do you like hearing Fido's and Kitty's thoughts? If you do, what books, etc do you recommend featuring animals' internal dialogue?

I'll pick several people randomly from the comments on today's guest blog to receive a free e-book of my first comic romantic suspense, *At Her Command* -- featuring none other than Smokey himself!

By the way, below is the book blurb and an excerpt from *Sex & the Single Therapist*.

Happy Reading!
-- Marcia James

Sex & the Single Therapist blurb:

A crime of passion...

To clear an innocent friend, sex therapist Dr. Ally Skye investigates a patient's murder. Soon she's trading heated words and hot kisses with a sexy cop. Can this free-spirited amateur sleuth and her posse of Vegas insiders solve the crime before the killer targets her?

A sexy complication...

Cynical homicide detective Zack Crawford has the murder to solve. The last thing he needs is a red-hot sex therapist who haunts his dreams. Ally is trouble and, given her job and his luck, she'd probably grade his performance in bed.

A dynamic duo...

Zack and Ally form an uneasy and sexually charged alliance. Murderers, extortionists and psychos are no match for these reluctant partners. Crime-solving was never this sexy or this fun!

Sex & the Single Therapist excerpt:

The front entrance of Dr. Ally Skye's office cracked open, and Gladys poked her head in. Her perfect French twist sprouted wisps of hair, her silk scarf was askew, and she'd nibbled off her lipstick. In the five years since Ally had established the practice, her unflappable office manager had never been shaken.

"There's a cop out here." Gladys hissed the words in a stage whisper before Ally could speak. "There's been a—"

The woman squeaked as a wide, tanned hand grasped the edge of the door above her head and shoved it fully open. A long-limbed, broad-shouldered man stepped around Gladys and closed the door in her face.

The grim man strode forward, impatience shimmering off him in waves. Holy guacamole, as her mother used to say. Beneath her clamoring fight-or-flight instinct, Ally recognized a thoroughly female reaction to his overt maleness...a sexual awareness that buzzed like a low-voltage current.

Lean but muscular, he wore a short-sleeved shirt revealing powerful, sun-darkened arms. His untucked, orange-and-turquoise Hawaiian shirt hung over dusty jeans that molded to his thighs. And there was a bump under his shirt tail. A belt holster?

A desert tan gave the cop the look of an Old West lawman despite his vibrant shirt. His hair, unruly and the color of espresso, brushed his collar. The room's diffused lighting glinted off gold highlights probably threaded through his dark mane by Nevada's relentless sunshine.

Fine lines emphasized the man's vibrant cobalt eyes and full, sensual mouth. Laugh lines? Only if he occasionally offered the world something besides this scowl. The cop's serious demeanor, though, fit the sharp planes of his handsome face. He halted in front of her, and Ally fought the knee-jerk urge to retreat.

"Detective Zack Crawford, Las Vegas Metro Police Department." His gruff introduction wasn't accompanied by an offer to shake hands. The man's gaze drifted over her, insolently assessing, before his eyes returned to her face. "I need to ask you some questions."

Ally met his cool stare, tilting her head to adjust to the good half-foot differential in their heights. Hmmm. One tall drink of water. Too bad his manners sucked. He was deliberately crowding her personal space, probably attempting to make her nervous. Well, she didn't intimidate easily. "Could I see some identification?" This was her office, and she was in control here.

He rolled his eyes before producing his shield. Ally didn't need her grad school body language courses to spot the exasperation in his posture and expression.

Unable to resist needling him, she plucked the shield from his fingers and studied it for several long seconds. Then, returning it to him, she extended her hand and completed their introductions. "I'm Dr. Ally Skye."

Crawford took her hand, gave it a single shake and dropped it. During the brief contact, she felt the warm, rough texture of his calloused fingers and awarded him points for giving her a firm but not vise-like squeeze. He might be impatient and aggressive, but he'd taken care not to crunch her knuckles.

Ally motioned to her client chairs. Crawford slid a hip onto the arm of the nearest one, ensuring he would hover over her if she settled onto the seat of her chair.

So that's your game. She almost grinned, enjoying their non-verbal jockeying for dominance. It was easy to spot a control freak when you had a few of those tendencies yourself. Unwilling to sit submissively below his level, she perched on the arm of her therapist chair, glad she'd chosen to wear the linen pants suit and not a dress that morning.

His lips tightened. Oh, he'd noticed the power play but didn't comment. Instead, he took a notebook out of his shirt pocket and flipped it open. "I'm here about a patient."

The disdain he'd layered on the last word was crystal clear, and Ally sighed. As a sex therapist, she was accustomed to unenlightened people denigrating her work. "I can't discuss my clients."

His eyes narrowed in a look that probably made criminals cower. "Don't pull that confidentiality bullshit, Doctor Skye. I know what services a surrogate performs."

Ally ground her teeth. He assumed she was a sex surrogate, which many considered synonymous with "call girl." No wonder he thought he could push her into discussing her clients. The "Doctor" before her name wasn't an honorary title or a correspondence school degree.

"Detective Crawford," she mimicked his derisive tone while chiding herself for letting him push her buttons. "I'm a licensed therapist, not a sex surrogate. And my clients are entitled to the same confidentiality as those of any doctor."

He leaned toward her, his musky scent sending an olfactory jolt to her brain's lust center. Ally shallowed her breathing in self-defense.

"This is a homicide investigation," he announced. "Tug Shaffer's been murdered, and we're questioning his wife."

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