

Bella watched over Roman



Together



They were inseparable



Roman's resting place

One boy and his dog

Scarlet's dog Bella wouldn't leave her little boy's side, and she was heartbroken when she found out why...

As we opened the front door, a bundle of fur bounded towards us. 'This is Roman,' I said gently, as Bella, our four-year-old collie Labrador cross, approached us. My partner Ben and I had just brought our two-day-old son home, and we couldn't wait for them to meet. We watched as Bella cautiously sniffed his carry cot. 'Aww, she's welcoming him,' I smiled. As the days went by, Bella became Roman's furry shadow, even sleeping next to his bouncer. We'd had Bella since she was eight weeks old. Roman was our first child, but we'd never seen Bella act like this around other kids before. We thought she'd eventually get used to having a baby around. But no. Bella always slept under Roman's cot, and if any visitors came over, she'd stand guard. When Roman started walking, she let him hold her lead. She never ran off, always going

at his pace. 'Ba ba,' Roman said one day, pointing at Bella. 'He's trying to say Bella, but he can't even say "Da Da" yet!' Ben laughed. They were inseparable. A year later, I fell pregnant again. But Bella showed no interest in my bump — all she cared about was Roman. One morning, I lifted Roman out of his cot and placed him on the floor. Only, his legs collapsed beneath him. I stood him up again, and the same thing happened. Bella barked, seeming to echo my concern. Worried, Ben and I took Roman to hospital. Doctors originally thought it might be an infection. But when he couldn't walk after a few days, Roman underwent tests. I stayed with Roman, while Ben looked after Bella. But we FaceTimed so the best pals could see each other. 'Look, Roman, Bella's saying

hello,' I said. Then Bella licked the screen, and we all laughed. Eventually, doctors had some answers for us. 'Roman has Niemann-Pick disease type C,' one said. We'd never heard of it. 'It's a rare metabolic disorder that causes the body to shut down bit by bit,' another doctor explained. 'Roman would have been born with it.' 'Is there anything we can do?' I asked. 'I'm afraid there's no cure,' he replied. 'Roman's symptoms will get progressively worse, and he's unlikely to see his 10th birthday.' I felt my whole world crumble. Doctors explained that Roman would spend months in hospital. They said that as his body and organs shut down, he would eventually need tube feeding, and be unable to talk, or even sit up. It didn't seem real. Eventually, when Roman was stable enough to come home, Bella gently licked everywhere

he'd had an injection. Then it hit me. 'I think Bella knew Roman was poorly all along,' I said to Ben. 'It's like she's been trying to look after him,' Ben said. When Roman was diagnosed, I was eight months pregnant — with a boy we'd decided to name Gabriel — and it was too far into the pregnancy to get him tested in the womb. But as soon as he was born, they took his cord blood and tested it. We had an agonising month-long wait for the results. But when we took Gabriel home, Bella didn't show any interest in him. I hoped that meant he was OK. And on Christmas Eve, Gabriel tested negative for the disease. He was only a carrier. As Roman's health declined, Bella spent hours lying beside

him, calming him. But he deteriorated quickly. His hands cramped up and he could no longer stroke Bella, so she nuzzled her head under his arm. He was in and out of hospital with countless infections and eventually needed a feeding tube as he couldn't swallow. Soon, Roman lost the ability to speak. But he could still say one word — 'Ba ba'. Unable to care for Roman and a newborn alone, Ben gave up work. By the time he was three, Roman had lost all of his abilities. Against all the odds, he made it to his fifth birthday. But he was so poorly. We knew

we didn't have long left. All we could do was keep him comfortable. The doctors advised us to make memories while we could. Ben and I decided to get married that April, so Roman could be there. He did so well on the big day. Afterwards, we set up a special hospital bed in the front room so that Bella could lie underneath it. But one day later that month, Bella started barking constantly. 'That's not like her,' Ben said. We put her out in the garden, but she scrambled to come back inside. We let her in, and she ran into the front room where Roman was lying on the sofa. She put her head on his chest, whimpering. 'I think Bella knows that Roman doesn't have long left and she's saying goodbye to him,' I stammered. I wept in Ben's arms. Gabriel, two, came in too. 'Goodbye, Ro Ro,' he said to his big brother. Ben and I cuddled Roman on the sofa. 'You can rest now, Roman,' I told him. And that night, he passed away in our arms. We were inconsolable. I couldn't believe our boy was gone. Bella frantically ran round the house, looking for Roman. She

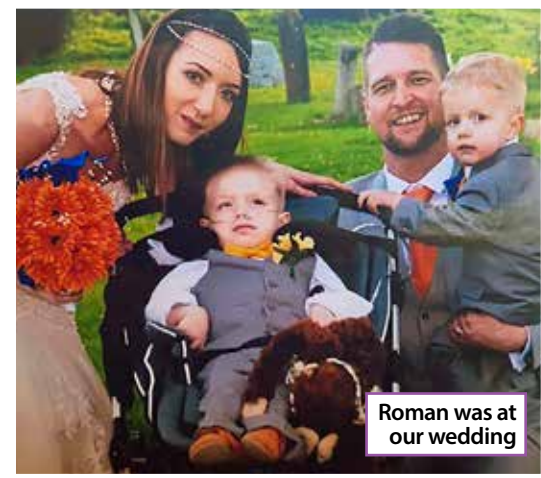
'You miss him too, don't you?'

scratched his bedroom door and ran up to his bed. I broke down sobbing and she put her head on my lap. 'You miss him too, don't you?' I sobbed. Bella wasn't the same after we lost Roman. None of us were. She hardly ate and spent her days outside Roman's bedroom. 'She's got doggy depression,' the vet confirmed, and suggested that we get a puppy to give her something to focus on. So, a few months later, we got Luna, a Rottweiler bulldog cross. She helped mend Bella's broken heart a little. But when Luna was no longer a pup and became more independent, Bella seemed listless again. It was hard to explain to Gabriel what had happened to his brother. 'Roman went up into the sky and he's on the moon,' I gently explained to him. Every night, Gabriel would say goodnight to the moon. Two years later, I fell pregnant with my third child. At 11 weeks, they took a sample of my placenta to test for the disease. Deep down, I'd convinced myself that this baby also had Niemann-Pick disease. But 10 days later, the results came back negative — and the doctors confirmed I was having a girl. Just like with Gabriel, when Rose was born, Bella didn't show much interest in her. Bella's broken heart couldn't be healed. And two years later, when she was 12, the vet confirmed that she was largely blind and deaf. She also had some tumours. We knew she wouldn't get better, and to stop her suffering, we took the difficult decision to

have her put to sleep. The day she died, it felt like we were losing Roman all over again. 'Look after my boy up there,' I whispered to Bella as she passed. 'Let's scatter Bella's ashes on Roman's grave so they can be together forever,' Ben said. That helped ease our pain. I knew my baby wasn't alone. *He's got Bella, his fierce protector, beside him,* I thought. To keep his memory alive, we visit Roman's grave often. And over the years, we've raised thousands of pounds for his hospice and towards research into the disease. Rose, now four, has started to ask who the other little boy is in our photos. 'That's our big brother, Roman,' Gabriel tells her. 'He lives in the sky. He's up there with our old dog, Bella. They've got each other.' It brings us comfort to believe that Roman's doggy-guard will never leave his side.

Scarlet James, 31, Corby, Northamptonshire

Me, Ben, Rose and Gabriel



Roman was at our wedding

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