

Not just a dog... he's my hero

When debilitating illnesses shattered Sally Whitney's dreams, the cure to her pain came with a waggy tail...

As I made my way down the aisle, I smiled at the oohs and ahs coming from my friends and family. I knew they weren't just admiring my dress. You see, beside me was a four-legged fluff ball – my dog, Ethan.

I know, you're probably thinking what a sweet idea – having your dog walk you down the aisle – but it was much more than that. I owe Ethan my life.

When I was at school, I was the girl who did everything. I sang in the choir, and danced at after-school clubs. 'You never sit still!' my mum Jo would joke.

'I was having up to four seizures each day'

But then everything changed when I fell ill with a virus in 2005, aged 17. My glands were swollen, I had terrible headaches and

felt exhausted.

I was diagnosed with thyroiditis and told to get plenty of rest. Meanwhile, I studied hard, got As in my A levels and secured a place at Edinburgh University to study medicine.

But I was still so ill.

Some mornings I struggled to pull myself out of bed. And after 18 months, I began

having seizures. Terrified, I was in and out of hospital, but my condition baffled doctors. By January 2007, I was having up to four seizures a day.

I was unable to sit up and eat since the movement triggered a seizure, and I lost 3st 7lb, dropping to 5st. Bed-bound, weak and exhausted, I felt I was losing everything. 'I want my old life back,' I sobbed to my parents.

Finally, after eight months in hospital, I was diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease that inflames organs, joints and muscles. I was told there was no cure, but medication would

Sally credits her dog, Ethan, with giving her the confidence to find love with husband Ed



ease my symptoms. Of course, I was upset, but I was also relieved to finally have answers. Prescribed steroids, I gradually started learning to sit up and walk again. But it wasn't to last.

Another setback

In 2009, I planned to finally start medical school, and hoped that everything was falling into place. But my seizures returned and I had no choice but to give up my dream.

In February 2012, I was diagnosed with another rare genetic condition – Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. It affects the body's connective tissues, making joints hypermobile. Again, there was no cure.

I refused to mope and tried to get on with things. But then I had a seizure that made me stop breathing. My joints dislocated all over my body and I was admitted to intensive care. Thankfully, with doctors' help and therapy, I made progress.

In April 2013, I was discharged in a wheelchair. Every time I tried to stand up, I would pass out or have a seizure. I moved into a disabled-access flat in Brighton with a permanent carer. Though my parents were supportive, I'd never felt more alone.

I couldn't work, and felt sure I'd never meet anybody to spend my life with – after all, the only thing people seemed to see was my wheelchair, not me.

'There's a charity called Canine Partners that pairs disabled people with dogs,' my cousin Jessica said one day. 'You should sign up.'

It was a great idea. So, that year, I applied and was put on the waiting list for an assistance dog.

In February 2015, I was matched with Ethan, a gorgeous black Labrador golden retriever-cross. Meeting him for

'I'm lucky to have two special men in my life'

I had a seizure, he could sense something was wrong and would alert my carer – meaning I got help as quickly as possible.

And, with Ethan, for the first time ever, instead of avoiding me, people started to talk to me. 'He's gorgeous,' strangers would say, stopping me on the street.

With Ethan by my side, I didn't feel scared or embarrassed, I felt like my old self again. In fact, it was thanks to him (and my friends!) that I found the confidence to sign up to an online dating site. I put up pictures of myself in my wheelchair, too. 'I've got nothing to hide,' I told Mum.

In February 2016, there was a message from a man called Ed. From his profile I could see he was 31, a teacher, and that he lived in a village near Chichester. I remember how nervous I felt writing



Helping to take out cash



Passing Sally's purse to a shop assistant

back. But a week on, Ethan and I met him at a restaurant in Brighton.

Being with him felt so natural and despite Ed admitting he wasn't really a dog person, Ethan quickly won him round!

From then on, our relationship blossomed. Given my condition, there were lots of serious talks about our future. But Ed didn't mind. 'I want to be with you,' he vowed. 'No matter what.'

Happy ever after

Nine months on, Ed proposed. Asking Dad if he could wheel me down the aisle was a special moment. But there was no way I'd leave Ethan out. So, on 4 August 2017, they were both by my side. It was perfect.

Now, almost a year on, I'm the happiest I've ever been. 'Sometimes I forget you're in a wheelchair,' Ed says. I love that he doesn't see the wheels – he just sees me. And Ethan, now four, is as wonderful as ever – not a day goes by without someone telling me how handsome he is.

While I don't know what my future holds, I'm living in the moment and enjoying every second. And I know how lucky I am to have two special men in my life. I'd be lost without them.



It's puppy love for assistance dog Ethan

Sally and Ethan are inseparable

