

Latasha
and the
little red TORNADO 

ALSO BY MICHAEL SCOTTO

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Latasha and the little red TORNADO



A novel by **Michael Scotto**

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To the fox and the hound

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DOG SWITCH

Momma told me that there is a time in a puppy's life—right around its second birthday—when it just starts to get it. The puppy starts to listen to you all the time and not just some of the time. She stops crying for food under the table and just patiently waits for a scrap. She realizes that yes, her tail actually is part of her body, and no, she'll probably never catch it. Basically, the puppy stops being a puppy and becomes a dog. Momma said it happens very quickly, like someone flipped a switch in the animal's brain.

I wish someone would hit that switch for Ella.

Ella is my puppy. She turned two a few months ago—five months, to be exact, back in April. We don't know the day she was born, just the month, because we got her last year from a rescue shelter for stray dogs. I like to think she was born on April first, because that makes her my April Fool.

That's what I tell people when they ask what kind of dog she is. "She's an April Fool," I say. That will just have to do. I don't know what breed of dog Ella really is. Momma calls her a little red mutt. She isn't mean about it; it's just the truth.

Dr. Vanderstam—that’s our vet—he said that Ella looks like dogs used to look six thousand years ago, way back before there were different breeds. I like that because it means that Ella’s not just one thing. She’s a mix of a whole lot of things. I guess that makes her sort of like me.

I named Ella for my favorite singer, Ella Fitzgerald. You might not have heard of her, but she was famous a long time ago. My puppy’s full name is Ella Fitzgerald Gandy, because she is a real part of my family, the Gandys. I only use her full name when she does something bad, though. I think I picked that up from Momma. She does the same thing with me.

When I leave my books all over the living room floor, or if I flush the toilet while Momma is in the shower, her voice gets deep and serious and she calls out, “Latasha Esther Gandy!”

I’ve really been trying to be good, though. Honest, I have. And not just because I hate hearing my middle name—which I do! I’m trying to be good because I’m not just some little kid anymore. I’m eight years old. That’s halfway to being a grown-up.

You know, there’s a more grown-up way to say “grown-up.” It is called being *mature*. I learned it from my pocket dictionary.

That’s what I want to be—mature. I want to be mature for Momma, because she is looking for a new job and she needs my help. And I want to be mature

for Ella. If I set a good example for her, maybe that dog switch will turn on and she'll finally settle down.

I'm doing a pretty good job at being mature. Momma hasn't had to call my full name in almost three weeks. I can't say the same about Ella. I use her full name a lot.



“Ella Fitzgerald Gandy!” I cried. It was the day after Labor Day, a sunny September Tuesday, and we were standing on the sidewalk in front of the house.

I had just gotten home from the after-school program at Cedarville Elementary. I just started third grade there last week. I was about to take Ella for a walk down the block. But Ella had another idea. She wanted to eat some of Mrs. Okocho's daisies.

Mrs. Okocho is our downstairs neighbor. She comes from a country called Nigeria. That's in Africa. She is quite elderly—which is a nice way of saying *old*. Momma says it's rude to call people old.

Ella was standing with three paws in the flowerbed and one on the pavement. “Get away from there!” I hissed, glancing nervously in the first floor window.

In most ways, Mrs. Okocho does not act old, or elderly, or even like a grown-up. She has a loud, high-pitched laugh that sounds like a kid being tickled, and a silly sense of humor to match. But there is one thing,