



They were a gilded couple who seemed to have it all: wealth, beauty, brains and huge social clout. Zoe Appleyard, a city high-flier who raised millions for healthcare and technology start-ups in the late 1990s and early 2000s and filled gossip-column inches with her high-profile relationships with Boris Becker and Rory Bremner, met her match when she became engaged to Sven Ley, the dashing scion of the Escada fashion brand, after a whirlwind eight-week courtship. The couple wed 11 months later at Salzburg Cathedral in Austria on a cloudless May day in 2004.

The three-day extravaganza (which reportedly cost in excess of £1 million) included 650 guests from Europe's grandest families: the Fürstenbergs, the Bismarcks and the Bourbons rubbed shoulders with celebrities such as Elizabeth Hurley, whose son Damian was a pageboy. The party's grand finale was a black-tie ball at the Felsenreitschule, the location from *The Sound of Music* where the Von Trapps make their dramatic escape from the Nazis. Zoe and Sven's own adieu was equally epic, as they drove off in the wake of a dizzying firework display in ►

When a city high-flier and her fashion-heir husband abandoned their jet-set honeymoon to rescue a stray, it was the start of something special. ZOE APPLEYARD-LEY tells *Olivia Falcon* about the mutt that captured her heart

PHOTOGRAPHS *Rick Pushinsky*

The RESCUE DOG who rescued us



Zoe and Rockster at home. Opposite: 'He has the energy of a young dog,' says Zoe

◀ an Aston Martin DB6 (a wedding present from the bride to the groom). Their destination was Venice on the first leg of a globetrotting honeymoon. Little did they know, the most magical part of their modern fairy tale was just around the corner.

The honeymoon wasn't the romantic break Zoe had hoped for: 'Rather than it being just the two of us, everywhere we went – the Maldives, Venice, the Amalfi Coast – Sven seemed to run into yet another friend.' When the couple ventured out of the honeymoon suite at the five-star Grand Hotel Quisisana in Capri, Italy, and ran into Sven's old pal Count Rocky Agusta (who invited them on his yacht), Zoe was feeling frustrated and fed up. 'Sven managed to placate me when he begged Rocky to take us to La Conca del Sogno [which means home of dreams]. It is a simple, rustic pasta bar in a quiet bay just outside Naples, which has great sentimental value for us as it was the venue of one of our first dates.

'I was walking down the gangplank to the restaurant when I spied what I thought was a dead dog,' recalls Zoe. 'He was excruciatingly thin and the sun had bleached his unusual markings [a black patch over one eye, a speckled black and white coat and brown feet]. Sven rushed to get him some food and I put a drop of water on his nose and one little ear pricked up. He slowly started to drink the water and then opened an eye, and there, right before me, was real life. After the media circus of our very surreal wedding, I think we were both subconsciously looking for a dose of reality. Marriage is a life-changing event and to me family life means responsibility and nurturing each other, and here was this dog who desperately needed our help. He represented everything our wedding wasn't. He was so humble.

'Our courtship and wedding had been all about expensive things, but this experience reminded me that the most precious things in life don't cost money and invariably are more meaningful and more permanent than material gifts. The thought of leaving this poor dog had me in tears. I remember walking away with a heavy heart and then Sven calling, "Wait, you've forgotten something!" He came running down the steps holding the dog in his arms. "You wanted a wedding present money couldn't buy – well, here it is."

The Leys named their new charge The Rockster as a nod to Rocky, their captain,

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From top:
Zoe gives her
canine friend
a kiss, and
Rockster's
first meal after
the couple
found him

and Zoe's nickname for Sven, 'Monster' ('because sometimes I find Sven completely uncontrollable'). Integrating the newest member of their family into their gilded lifestyle proved tricky to start with. Back in Capri, they pleaded with the Quisisana's manager to let them smuggle Rockster; via the staff lift, into the hotel for one night. In the honeymoon suite, Zoe treated the dog to a *Pretty Woman*-style bath in a tub full of Fekkai shampoo. The next day, on a visit to the local vet, they discovered that the dog could be anywhere between one and four years old. The Rockster was issued with a microchip and pet passport, but his pedigree was anyone's guess – possibly part dalmatian, part terrier? No one could decide. The one thing the couple did agree on, though, was their inexplicable love for the mutt.

The new family found themselves wandering the streets of Capri with nowhere to stay, as none of the hotels accepted dogs. 'It was at this point we decided to cancel the rest of our honeymoon in Italy and head home,' says Zoe. 'Our plan was to drive back to London via the Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Cap d'Antibes – for one last romantic night – and Sven's family flat in Munich.' Unlike the honeymoon, the road trip home was filled with laughter. The Rockster not only had his human parents enthralled, but he melted the hearts of everyone along the way. Even the bellboy at the Eden-Roc couldn't resist treating him to a steak served on a silver platter:

The more the couple got to know Rockster, the more they fell in love with him, which in turn bonded the two of them. Like proud new parents, they talked for hours about Rockster's social nature, his hilarious cocky strut, his propensity for tracking them down at local restaurants, finding his way out of hotel rooms when they slipped off for a tête-à-tête, and the fact that he obviously thought he was human. 'The Rockster brought the wonderful qualities of loyalty, unconditional love and the warmth of Italian family life to us. It finally felt as though we were embarking on a proper family life together.'

Indeed, family life became even busier with the arrival of the couple's children, Balthazar in 2007 and Clementine in 2009, and Zoe decided to give up her work in finance and concentrate on being a mother: 'When the children came into our lives, I was focused on them, and Sven found that hard. We started to grow apart and even ➤



Above: Zoe and Sven tied the knot in a three-day extravaganza in Austria, 2004. Below, from left: Rockster with Zoe and baby Balthazar at Lake Como, xxxx; celebrating Christmas with Sven in Switzerland, xxxx, and with Zoe and Clementine in the mountains of St Moritz, xxxx





◀ separated on a few occasions (the longest split was two years), but the Rockster and our children proved to be the glue that held us together. The Rockster was always an omnipresent reminder of the early days of our marriage when we were very much in love.'

The dog also proved to be Zoe's rock when she found herself in the spotlight after Emma Currie, whom Zoe had hired via Gumtree as a mother's help, was arrested for stealing from the family. The case took two years to come to court and was widely reported in the newspapers last summer; with devastating consequences for Zoe as Emma proceeded to smear her reputation and abilities as a mother in court. After a traumatic investigation by social services, the allegations against Zoe were found to be completely untrue.

'You have to put it behind you for the sake of your children, but clearly I now have trust issues,' reflects Zoe. 'The way Emma sought to evade justice by making me out to be a monster was far more sinister than the crime itself. As a witness I had no legal representation or say in what was presented to the jury about me. I couldn't defend myself. The British justice system should afford victims greater protection when bringing criminals to justice.

'I was gagged from speaking about the case while it was ongoing. I felt I had no one to talk to. Sven was incredibly supportive, but I was not allowed to discuss it with anyone – including him – and I felt very isolated and under attack. The Rockster became my rock and confidant.' Behind closed doors, he never left his mistress's side and was a soft shoulder to cry on who didn't judge.

'In the aftermath of the case, it was a pretty hard summer. One of my oldest friends died

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From opposite, far left: last year the family's former mother's help Emma Currie was jailed for nine months for theft; Zoe and Sven with xxxxxxxxx; Zoe with Rory Bremner in 1998, and with Boris Becker in 2002

suddenly from a brain tumour. Sometimes there are moments in one's life when you reflect about what you really want to do. Now that the children were older, I felt I needed to get back to work and had always dreamt of creating a brand with the Rockster name. The “nannygate” experience made me even more determined to do it.'

For a couple of years, Zoe had noticed that The Rockster was growing older: he had lost his joie de vivre and was becoming picky with his food, rejecting premium dog-food brands. 'I began to research what went into dog food and learned how to read the labels. The more I learned, the more shocked I became about the lack of quality and transparency in the pet-food industry.' Reports of road kill and diseased livestock, unfit for human consumption, mixed with cheap grain-based fillers that irritate a dog's digestive system, set alarm bells ringing. 'I became convinced there was a gap in the market to create the first superfood for dogs that was nutritious and most importantly could potentially extend their lives.'

Combining Sven's blue-chip manufacturing connections with Zoe's business experience, the couple engaged Germany's leading pet nutritionist, Hans-Jochen Bungener, to create six recipes inspired by places on The Rockster's journey from Naples to London. Flavours include Boeuf du Cap (Cap d'Antibes) and The Sound of Game (Salzburg). 'Every recipe is a single-protein formula, which

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means it is far more easily digestible than standard dog food and can be fed to allergic dogs (and help prevent dogs developing allergies). We use beef, rabbit, chicken and turkey from bio-organic farmers in Bavaria and Austria,' explains Zoe, who visits all the facilities to check quality. The recipes are also charged with the kind of superfoods you might expect to find in your own morning smoothie: immune-boosting spirulina and omega-rich sea buckthorn, and jerusalem artichoke extract, which works as a prebiotic to help dogs absorb vital nutrients and reduce flatulence.

The recipes are all grain- and additive-free and ingredients are poached to preserve nutrients, mirroring the *sous-vide* cooking method of Michelin-starred chefs. When challenged, Sven himself will happily tuck into a can. 'He once said it is better than my cooking,' laughs Zoe.

'We knew we were on to a winning formula when we lined up 50 bowls of the world's best-loved dog-food brands alongside our recipes and The Rockster, who is without question one of the canine world's fussiest eaters, instantly homed in on our brand, each time licking the bowl clean.' At £4.95 a can, it's a hefty addition to the weekly shop, but Zoe explains: 'The price reflects the quality of the ingredients. If someone tried to charge you 50p for an organic fillet steak, you'd know something was wrong.'

The Rockster is the obvious name for the brand, but has only been allowed after a lengthy legal battle with Porsche, who claimed it would cheapen the trademark of their Boxster car.

After a year on his new diet, The Rockster has regained the spring in his step. 'His coat is shiny, his eyesight seems sharper; he's gone from having stiff back legs to jumping up into the boot of an SUV. We estimate he must be 13 to 15 years old now, but he has the energy of a young dog.' Indeed, some of Europe's leading breeders and vets, and Rockster's celebrity chums such as fashion designer Bruce Oldfield's terriers Baz and Boo, are lining up to endorse the brand.

'People might see our story as a rags-to-riches tale of a rescue dog,' says Zoe, 'but the truth is that, in so many ways, the Rockster has rescued us right back.' 🐾

■ The Rockster range is available now from therockster.com and Waggin Tails, London SW10, and from selected Goddard veterinary surgeries from goddardsvets.co.uk Thursday;

