

Doofus, Dog of Doom



Emma Laybourn

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Doofus, Dog of Doom

Chapter One

“What a noise!” shrieked Mum, clapping her hands over her ears.

Holly did not cover her ears. She listened carefully to the painful din inside the dogs’ home. The rasping barks sounded like shovels hitting the concrete floor. They echoed over and over in sharp, frantic waves.

None of them sounded anything like the right bark. None of the dogs was Pancake.

“Let’s just go, Mum,” begged Holly; but Mum couldn’t hear her.

“Which one do you want?” she yelled over the barking. “Go on, Holly, take a closer look! This is your treat!”

A treat? thought Holly. How was this a treat, with Pancake only three weeks buried?

The assistant unlocked a metal gate and pointed out a bundle of spotty, yappy, long-eared puppies.

“How about one of those?” she suggested. “They’re nice, cheerful dogs, and just desperate for a home!” The puppies bounded up and down as if their legs were springs. They looked ridiculous and cute. Holly shook her head at them.

“Well, what about that golden labrador over there?” said Dad hopefully. “It looks like a friendly fellow.”

Holly followed his gaze. The labrador sprawled lazily on a blanket, tail slowly wagging, too comfortable to get up. That was Dad’s sort of dog.

She could see Mum’s sort of dog as well: a thin, wiry terrier with bright eyes and boundless energy, scurrying busily to and fro inside its pen. That would be the perfect dog to accompany Mum on her ten-mile runs.

There was even a dog for Matt, her teenage brother: a haughty boxer with a throaty bark, which tried to stroll nonchalantly across its enclosure and tripped over its own feet.

But nowhere was there a dog for Holly. Nowhere was there another Pancake. No little brown barrel with short, skittering legs, rocking like a lifeboat while she ran, carrying the newspaper all over the house and not letting anyone read it.

Holly’s throat began to ache. She wanted to feel the scrape of Pancake’s bristly coat, to hear her huffy growl, to smell her doggy smell of bins and biscuits. She did not want a new dog.

“Shall I fetch one of them out for you?” asked the assistant.

“Come on, Holly!” said Mum. “Which one do you want?” Mum was getting impatient. She wasn’t good at waiting around.

Holly sighed, thinking that maybe she should just choose a dog at random, so that they could go. It didn't matter which one she picked. After all, Mum would take it for runs up on the moors. Dad would feed it. Matt would try to train it. Holly wouldn't have to do anything at all.

Gazing gloomily at the bouncing puppies, she raised her arm to point. While she was still wondering which one to choose, she saw behind them a dog that she hadn't noticed earlier.

That was probably because it was completely black: as dark as a patch of shadow. It sat quite still, not barking, not bouncing, not wagging its tail. It didn't even look at her. It was staring into space.

She moved her arm, and pointed. "That one," she said. "The black one."

The assistant looked startled. "Are you sure? It's not very sociable, that one. Don't get me wrong, it's not troublesome. It's just...well..." Her voice tailed away uncertainly.

"That one," said Holly firmly.

With a shrug, the girl went through the gate and waded through the sea of yapping puppies to reach the black one. Scooping it up, she carried it to Holly. When Holly didn't hold out her arms for it, the assistant set the puppy carefully on the floor at her feet.

The puppy drooped on the concrete. Dad squatted down to offer it his fingers, but it didn't sniff them. On all sides, dogs were leaping up and yelping in eager desperation: *Me! Me! Me!* The black pup looked as if it would much rather just crawl back into its pen.

"Is it all right?" asked Dad doubtfully.

"Oh, yes. The vet's okayed it," the girl assured him. "It's had all the jabs. It's just a bit quiet... well, usually, anyway."

"It doesn't bark too much, then?" said Mum.

"Bark? Oh, no. It doesn't bark at all." She pulled a face. "Not exactly *bark*, as such."

"So where is it from?" Dad wanted to know.

"It was abandoned, like most of these dogs. They're generally pets that people can't cope with. This one was found by the roadside on the top of Whitten Moor, out in the middle of nowhere. He was probably a Christmas present that someone got fed up with and dumped."

"Poor little thing!" Dad began to stroke the dog, which showed no sign of even noticing him. "No wonder he doesn't look very happy. Poor old boy."

"Holly?" murmured Mum. "Are you quite sure this is the one you want? I mean, he's nothing like Pan—"

"This one," insisted Holly. There could never be another dog like Pancake. If she had to have another dog, she would choose one as different to Pancake as possible. This puppy's thick black coat was quite unlike Pancake's.

Its eyes were so dark they seemed expressionless after Pancake's enquiring, bright brown gaze.

"There's just one thing I ought to mention," said the girl. "He's a mixed breed. It's hard to tell what he's a mixture of, but I think there's some mastiff in there, and possibly ridgeback, and probably some wolf-hound too. They're big dogs. He could grow to quite a size."

Pancake had been small and noisy. "I don't mind that," said Holly, and she looked at Dad.

"Well, we've got enough room," said Dad. "We'll just have to make sure he gets plenty of exercise." He looked at Mum.

"That's no problem," said Mum, "as long as we don't have to drag him out for walks. He's not very lively, is he?"

"He's quiet," argued Holly, suddenly desperate to make Mum agree and just get out of there. "Some of those yapping puppies might have bothered Nan. She won't mind this one."

"Big dogs are often the most docile," added the assistant.

"Good point," said Dad. He picked up the silent black puppy, and Holly heard him whisper to Mum.

"Let's take this one, if it helps Holly to snap out of it!"

Holly stiffened with indignation. *Snap out of it?* As if her grief for Pancake was something she could just break out of?— like somebody falling through a window in a film, then standing up to shake the bits of glass off, quite uninjured.

They made those film-set windows out of sugar. They couldn't cut anybody. They didn't hurt. They weren't like real life.

She turned her back on Dad and her new dog, and marched out of the door.

Chapter Two

Nan stared down at the puppy, one eye almost closed in a pirate's leer. Her wheelchair rocked a little on the lawn of the back garden. Holly could not tell what Nan was thinking, because it was hard for anyone to tell what she thought. Nan wasn't saying.

Nan was old. She wasn't Holly's grandmother, but her great-grandmother. She was Mum's gran: she had looked after Mum when Mum was small and her own mother was ill.

Now, in turn, Mum was looking after Nan. It hadn't seemed like that, though, until recently. Nan hadn't needed looking after. She had trotted round the house in an apron and a smile, full of laughter and funny sayings. She had taught Holly how to bake and knit, and told her stories about her own childhood in the second world war, and how she had been evacuated with a gas mask and a label round her neck.

But Nan had never seemed old until last year, when she had a stroke. One day she was joking as usual: the next morning she was speechless and powerless, unable to withstand gravity. The stroke decided she should sit in a wheelchair and become a watcher, not a speaker or a doer.

Nan was not content. Bewildered by her new state, she would try to rise out of her wheelchair, stuttering her made-up words that nobody could understand.

Holly thought a stroke sounded too gentle for what had happened to Nan. A wallop on the head would have been more like it.

On the other hand, nobody told Nan to snap out of it.

Now Nan was trying to get out of her wheelchair, speaking in her own unique language which no-one else spoke except perhaps Lily the toddler next door. Nan's hand was shaking as she raised it to point at the doleful black puppy.

"Isn't he sweet?" said Mum. She picked up the puppy, which was limp and unriggling in her arms. "What shall we call him, Nan?"

Behind Holly, Matt groaned.

"Don't ask her," he muttered, looking pained and shuffling his too-big feet. Matt was embarrassed by Nan.

Annoyed with him, Holly jumped up to get Nan's notebook and pencil and put them on her lap. Nan had been known to draw things that she couldn't say. She would laboriously draw a flower, or a heart, or a kiss-cross to express her love.

"Can you think of a name for him, Nan?" asked Mum.

"Do," said Nan. "Doo."

"Doo?"

Nan grabbed the pencil and began to draw frantically, jerkily. She did not draw a tick or a heart. She drew a fish.

"Is it a dolphin?" asked Holly doubtfully. "I don't think we can call him Dolphin."

"It's a shark," said Matt. "Look at that fin."

Nan crossed out the fish with two vehement stabs of the pen and drew another one. "Do," she said. "Doo. Dooda."

Mum put the puppy down on the grass. "Whew! He's heavier than you'd think!" He sat immobile, as black as a dog-shaped hole in the ground.

Nan tore off the page with fumbling fingers and started again. A wobbly house, some stick figures, a bird flying above them, or perhaps a plane.

"That's a nice picture, Nan," said Mum. Nan flung up her hands and pushed the notebook off her knee on to the grass.

"Doobers," she said.

"Doofus," muttered Matt.

"Doofus?" said Mum. "You want the new dog to be called Doofus?" The old lady shook her head, then nodded vigorously.

"What's a Doofus?" said Holly.

Matt grinned at her. "It's an idiot. A numpty."

"Like you," said Holly. She looked at the dog. It obviously ought to be called Shadow, or Midnight. But it didn't really matter. It could be Tinkerbelle, for all she cared. Anything but Pancake.

"All right," she said. "I name this dog Doofus."

As she spoke, the limp and silent puppy stirred at last. He sat up, pointed his black nose at the sky, took a deep breath: and howled.

It was a long, long howl, as cold and desolate as winter. It swirled around the garden like a chilly, dreary wind.

"Good grief!" said Mum.

"Well, at least it's alive," said Matt. "I was beginning to wonder."

"I hope it's not going to do *that* too often," remarked Mum. "I thought the girl at the dogs' home said it never barked?"

"She didn't say it never howled."

Holly saw a thin, hopeful face appear over the top of the garden fence.

"Was that a dog I heard?" it asked.

"No, an elephant," said Matt.

"Come over, Clive," Holly told the face. "Meet our new puppy. He's called Doofus."

Mum wheeled Nan back into the house, while Clive ran down to the end of the garden and squeezed through the gap in the fence that they kept unmended on purpose. He was carrying a large bundle of bare twigs, like a bouquet of long-dead flowers.

“A dog!” he breathed in admiration. “A real dog!”

“The only one in the world,” said Matt. “You can pat him for a quid.”

“Don’t be daft, Matt,” said Holly sharply. To Clive she said, “Go on, give him a pat. He’s very tame.”

“Hold these,” said Clive. He handed the bouquet of twigs to Holly and squatted down to stroke Doofus lovingly.

Clive from next door was in Holly’s class at school. Despite being animal-mad, he had never had a dog, and never could have one. His mum had put her foot down.

Although he had dozens of pets, they were mostly of the small, many-legged or slimy sort that could be collected in the garden. Clive did have a hamster and two goldfish, but anything larger than that was out of the question. No animals were allowed in his house. Even the goldfish had their bowl inside the garden shed.

Clive was enraptured with Doofus. Doofus wasn’t enraptured at being patted and prodded and having his ears and paws inspected, but he put up with it resignedly.

“Can I help train him?” begged Clive.

“You’re welcome,” said Holly. She wasn’t looking forward to training the new puppy. She didn’t want him to sit and beg the way that Pancake used to.

The thought of Pancake clouded her head again like a ghost, so that she barely heard what Clive was saying.

“They have Puppy Parties in the village hall – I’ve seen a notice. *Help Your Puppy Make Friends And Learn to Socialise*. Could we take him to a Puppy Party, do you think?”

“Aaargh,” said Matt. He strangled himself and toppled over backwards on the grass. Doofus raised his head and gave him a look.

“All right,” said Holly. “We could go together.” She thought that with a bit of encouragement, Clive might take Doofus over completely. “Can I put these down now?” She held up the bundle of twigs she was still clutching.

“No! They’ll run away!”

“They’re sticks,” said Holly.

“Some of them are sticks,” said Clive. “Some of them are stick insects.”

“Which ones?”

“The ones with legs.”

Holly looked more closely. None of the twigs showed any sign of running away, but some of them did have legs.

“I bought them off Tom Boyle,” explained Clive, “only I think the shed’s a bit cold for them, that’s why they’re not moving much. I had to break the ice on the goldfish bowl this morning.”

Cautiously, Holly poked at a stick insect with her finger. It fell off its perch and lay on the path with its legs in the air.

“It’s dead, Clive.”

“*What?*”

“I didn’t kill it. It was dead already.”

“Bother!” Clive picked up the twiggy corpse and held it regretfully in his palm. “I knew it was too cold in there.”

“Shall we bury it?” suggested Holly. Pancake was buried under the peonies at the end of the garden. The sunny spot, Pancake’s favourite place to bask.

Clive shook his head. “No. I think I’ll save it and see how long it takes to rot.”

Doofus took a slow breath and raised his head. Closing his eyes, he pointed his nose at the sky and howled a second time.

It was even more chilling than the first. For a strange moment Holly felt she was adrift on a wide grey ocean, lost in the sea-fog, alone and freezing.

“You’ve gone and bought a flipping werewolf,” said Matt, as another stick insect tumbled from the bunch of twigs onto the path. He inspected it. “Died of shock,” he said.

Mum came hurrying out of the house carrying a bowl of water.

“That poor dog! We haven’t given it anything to eat or drink! No wonder it’s howling. Here’s some water, Doofus, and you can have some yummy meaty chunks as soon as I’ve opened the tin.” She put the bowl on the ground and hurried back inside.

Doofus studied the bowl, his dark eyes glistening. He padded over to the water and put his nose to it.

He did not drink. Instead, with a long, deep sigh, he lay down on top of the bowl.

“Hey,” said Holly. Doofus ignored her. His black eyes gazed at nothing.

“An incredibly brainless werewolf,” Matt declared.

Chapter Three

It did not take long for Holly to become quite sure that, whatever else Doofus might be, he was certainly not brainless.

On the contrary, he learnt very quickly, and without fuss. He only needed telling once about not weeing in the kitchen, for instance; and after the second time she had shown him how to sit and come to heel, he remembered without difficulty. She suspected that he knew what to do after the first time, but just wanted to be sure that *she* did.

What was more, Doofus never jumped up at people's legs with muddy paws or went mad barking or chased squirrels or stole sausages, or did any of the naughty and delightful things that Pancake had done.

Holly was glad. To have Doofus behaving in that way would have meant being constantly reminded of Pancake.

She tried to explain this to Clive when she went round to his shed one Saturday morning. Clive was very keen for them to take Doofus to a Puppy Party, as soon as he had finished cleaning out his hamster cage.

Clive frowned at her halting explanation. "But Doofus ought to jump up at you and bark and chase things. Puppies are supposed to be active and naughty," he pointed out. "It's not normal for them to be so listless." He tried to stroke Doofus's ears. Doofus didn't care for being stroked; he pulled away and stared intently at the door of Clive's shed.

"He's fine. He's eating plenty," Holly said defensively.

"But he's not interested in anything. Look at him!"

"He's interested in the door," said Holly.

"Does he want to go out?" Clive opened the door of the shed wide. Doofus stood in the doorway, neither in nor out.

"No, he just likes doors," said Holly. The only bad habit Doofus had acquired so far was to lie down in the middle of doorways, usually when somebody was just trying to get through them.

Clive shrugged and went on cleaning out the hamster cage. "Here," he said, "hold Mr Finney."

Holly took the curled ball of brown and white fur gingerly in her hands. She could feel the tiny, rapid beat of Mr Finney's heart.

"And you call Doofus listless," she remarked. "Aren't hamsters supposed to be more active?"

"He's a very nocturnal hamster. I have to get up in the middle of the night if I want to observe him."

"What do you observe?"

"Everything," said Clive. "What he eats, how he plays, where he puts his nose. I write it all down in my notebook." Holly couldn't even see Mr Finney's

nose. “The thing is,” Clive continued, “dogs aren’t nocturnal. Doofus should be livelier. He might be depressed. Is he sleeping all right?”

“Well, he doesn’t make any fuss at night,” said Holly, avoiding a direct answer. On the first night in his new home, Doofus had ignored the bean bag put in the kitchen for him and tried to sleep on top of his water bowl, before deciding he was more comfortable curled around it.

Since then, he’d nudged his water bowl over to the kitchen door every evening and spent the night draped round the one and in front of the other. It was, admittedly, an odd way to sleep.

What was equally odd, though, was that he didn’t seem to do much actual sleeping. When Holly crept down to the kitchen for a drink of milk, Doofus was awake. He was awake when Dad went late to bed. He was awake when Mum got up early for her morning run.

“He still howls. I’ve heard him,” said Clive, taking the little bundle of pulsing fur back from her and replacing him carefully in his clean cage. Mr Finney never uncurled himself during this process.

“Not very often.”

“I heard him howl twice yesterday. Do you think he’s pining for his mother? Or maybe he misses his old owners.”

“Of course he doesn’t.” Holly was exasperated. “Why would he miss them? They abandoned him on top of Whitten Moor.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t love them,” Clive pointed out. “Howling in dogs is usually a sign of distress.”

“He’s not distressed,” insisted Holly. This was all rubbish. She knew Doofus was fine. She didn’t want to have to start worrying about him. “Does he look distressed?”

“No,” said Clive. He took off his glasses and rubbed them on his jumper. She noticed for the first time that his eyes were a little pink. “I’m distressed, though.”

“Why?”

“Rover and Dobbin. The goldfish. They’re dead.”

“Both of them? Oh, no, Clive!” Holly saw that the goldfish tank was empty. “What happened? Was it too cold? Did they freeze?”

“Lily got them out yesterday to play with them and forgot to put them back.” Lily was Clive’s sister. She was two. “Still.” Clive took a deep breath, and replaced his glasses, looking more cheerful.

“At least I’ll have somewhere to put the frog-spawn now, when I find some,” he said. “I thought of making the tank into a wormery, but the worms seem happy enough where they are.”

“Where are they?”

Clive led her out of the shed to a yellow washing up bowl lying half-buried in the soil. He pulled out a worm that seemed to go on forever, like spaghetti.

“This is Renaldo,” he said proudly. “He’s the champion: 28 centimetres, and I think he’s still growing.” He looked over at Doofus, and frowned. “Doofus is growing.”

“Of course he’s growing. He’s a puppy.”

“No, but he’s growing *fast*. Have you measured him?”

“Stop going on about him,” Holly said. “Are we going to this Puppy Party or not? We don’t have to.”

“Yes, I want to! Just let me get my notebook.” Clive made a vague attempt to brush the sawdust off his jeans, and loped into the house.

Holly sighed, and clipped Doofus’s lead to his new red collar. She liked Clive in general. She certainly felt she knew him back to front, having lived next door to him since they were both five. In some ways she was closer to him than to her other friends at school; for Clive seldom sulked, or took umbrage and flounced off in a huff, unlike some people. But the notebook business could be a little wearing.

The village hall was at the other end of the long, thin road that snaked between the houses, following the line of the river. Their Derbyshire village was a large one – almost a small town – but bootlace-shaped, with odd knots and bows of houses clumped at intervals along it, while the bare, grim hills reared up on either side.

They could hear the Puppy Party from a distance. On entering the village hall, they found themselves inside an echo-chamber full of yelps and growls from over-excited puppies, and yelps and growls from over-excited owners who were trying to keep them under control. Clive opened his note-book, bright-eyed and happy.

“This is great! Did you see that poodle just try to pull off the beagle’s ear?” he murmured. “Whoa! Look at that terrier eating the chair-leg! Now why do you suppose it’s doing that?”

Holly shook her head and sidled round the edge of the room, hoping Clive wasn’t going to try and interview any of the owners. They looked harassed enough as it was. What was worse, they were all adults: she felt totally out of place.

“Come in, come in, and welcome to our party!” cried a lady with frizzy, oddly yellow hair. Holly knew her by sight. She had often seen her around the village, being dragged along the pavement by the straining leads of three fluffy white poodles.

“I’m Vera. Do take a seat! Down, Kiki darling! Leave poor Fifi alone. Naughty, naughty!” She wagged her finger at a poodle, which took no notice

but kept chasing two more identical poodles round and round a table, skidding and whirling, snapping at their tails as if they were a cartoon. The three of them had legs like pipe-cleaners.

Holly perched on a chair between Vera and an old man with a shy retriever puppy the colour of honey. He smiled at her kindly.

“Bill Barton,” he said, and offered her a gnarled hand to shake. “This is my Joey.”

She patted Joey, who gave her a tentative lick. Nobody else seemed very friendly, including the dogs. A poodle strutted over to sniff disdainfully at Doofus.

Doofus gave it one of his looks. Then he sat up by Holly like a sober uncle majestically ignoring his silly young nephews.

“What a very, um, remarkable dog,” said Vera doubtfully. “What breed is it?”

“We’re not quite sure yet,” mumbled Holly.

“Oh, a cross-breed... Well, never mind. Now, now, Lulu!” She admonished her poodle fondly as it dug its claws into the quivering Joey. “My darlings are pure pedigree, you know, and rather highly strung. Aren’t you, sweetie-pie?”

Lulu yipped petulantly in answer and pounced on Clive’s pencil. Wrestling it from his hand, she attacked it with vicious snarls. Clive tried to get it back and quickly retreated, sucking his finger.

“Yours might be a mongrel,” said Bill Barton, pointing at Doofus, “but he’s definitely a hound.”

“A hound?” Holly was puzzled. “Aren’t all dogs hounds?”

He shook his head. “Oh, my word, no. Hounds are trackers, chasers, runners. Hunting dogs. Look at the legs on him! You can tell he’s a hound.”

Holly studied Doofus. The old man was right. Doofus was growing muscles. He was becoming fast and powerful. As she watched, he let out a deep, doleful sigh and lay down with his nose on his paws.

Could Clive be right? she wondered. Could Doofus really be depressed? He got plenty of food, and pats and fuss from Dad, and runs with Mum, and occasional walks around the park with Holly and Nan’s wheelchair. What more could a dog possibly want?

“Is he always this quiet?” asked Bill.

“Oh, yes,” said Holly, but the old man had leapt up in sudden alarm to rescue his puppy from a poodle that was trying to tear off its tail.

“Bad dog!” he told the poodle sternly.

“Little Kiki’s only playing!” said Vera indulgently. Little Kiki growled ferociously, sprang at the cowering retriever and bit it on the nose. Bill flicked the poodle away with the back of his hand.

The poodle jumped away from him and spun round in a frantic circle, yelping. Then it streaked across the room and dashed out of the open door like a rocket-propelled cotton-wool ball.

“Kiki! Come back, Kiki!” shrieked Vera. She grabbed the collars of the other two poodles, who had immediately tried to follow Kiki. They began to yap shrilly in protest, and were followed by more and more dogs starting to bark until Holly felt as if she was back in the dogs’ home.

Doofus did not bark. Instead, in the midst of the raucous din, he raised his head. He pointed his nose at the ceiling, and he howled.

It was the longest, loudest, most mournful howl that Holly had yet heard come from his mouth. It made her want to cry.

All the yapping puppies were subdued into mere whimpers. Clive was staring at Doofus open-mouthed: and he wasn’t the only one.

Into the suddenly silent hall strode a young man. He wore a leather jacket, and carried a motor-cycle helmet in his hands. He stopped and gazed around, looking sombre and anxious.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he said. “It ran straight out in front of my motorbike. I didn’t have a chance to stop. I’m afraid it’s....”

He held out the helmet. Inside it, Holly could see a limp body made of cotton wool and pipe cleaners.

Vera clapped her hand to her mouth and let out a wail. “My Kiki! My little sweetie-pie!”

“Oh, Lord,” said Bill Barton.

Holly felt herself growing cold inside. She stared, not at the dead poodle, but at Doofus, who had closed his mouth, and now sat as black and immobile as if made of stone.

Chapter Four

“That’s the last time I take that dog out for a run!” declared Mum. Her hair was wild and her glowing face was rosily fierce. She threw her water-bottle at the sink and glared at Doofus, who had trotted in behind her, spattered with mud, and was now scratching himself absently. “You’re a bad dog, Doofus! No use looking so innocent!”

“What was the matter?” asked Matt. “Couldn’t he keep up?”

“Oh, he could keep up all right. Runs like a flipping greyhound!”

“Ah, that’s the trouble,” said Matt knowingly. “He was too fast for you.”

“It’s not that at all! He was supposed to be keeping me company – but no sooner had we got into the forest park than he galloped off into the trees and disappeared!”

“Maybe he saw a squirrel,” said Holly doubtfully, although Doofus had never tried to chase squirrels before.

“It wasn’t a squirrel!” said Mum heatedly. “It was a pack of dogs that he ran off to meet!”

Dad looked up. “What, a pack of dogs in Miller’s Clough?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure that’s what they were, though I couldn’t see them properly. They were slipping through the trees. I called and whistled for all I was worth, but Doofus wouldn’t come back!”

Dad frowned. “A pack of dogs running wild is the last thing the farmers need right now,” he said. “It’s too near lambing time. We’d better let Ailsa know.”

“But Doofus came back to you,” said Holly, as she watched him drinking noisily from his bowl.

“Yes – in the end he did! But not until I was nearly home. Heaven knows where he’d got to. He’s filthy. You’ll have to give him a bath, Holly.”

Doofus emptied his water bowl, pushed it over to the doorway and lay down next to it with a sigh. He looked satisfied, thought Holly. As if he was contented at a job well done... But what had he been up to, apart from running off to meet a few stray dogs?

“That’s me done,” said Mum emphatically. “I’m not taking him with me again until he learns to stay at heel!”

“He’s already learnt. He stays at heel for me,” said Holly.

“Does he indeed? Well, from now on, exercising him is *your* job. He’s your dog, after all.”

“But I can’t go for ten mile runs!” protested Holly.

“Why not?” said Mum.

“A good trot around the park’ll be enough for him most days,” said Dad. “You can take him for a proper run up on the moor at the weekends.”

“That’ll be fun for you,” Matt told Holly, smirking. “It’ll do you good.”

Mum rounded on him. “It’ll do *you* good as well, Matthew, instead of lounging around in front of that computer all day like a crisp-munching zombie. You can go with her.”

Matt shot himself with his fingers and fell sideways out of the door.

Holly was dismayed. Her occasional walks around the local park with Doofus had been very slow ones, because she was usually pushing Nan out in the wheelchair to get some fresh air. She knew her dog needed more exercise than that. She just didn’t want to be the one to take him.

But Mum insisted. She reminded Holly endlessly until Holly gave in and announced that she would take Doofus for a long walk up to Whitten Moor.

So she and Matt donned scarves and anoraks and trudged along the bootlace of the village to its last knot: a huddle of new, small, tidy houses. From there, the road wound steadily up the hill before threading its lonely way across the empty moor on the top.

It was a long uphill slog. This would be the first time Holly had been right up to the top since last November. In summer, she’d be cycling up and down here all the time, but in winter the bleak and treeless moor was not a welcoming place.

On the way up, though, there were plenty of trees: bare of leaves, they hunched in groups, leaning away from the wind. While the gardens down below were bright with bulbs, further up little was growing. The houses gave way to fields bleached with cold and patched with dull brown heather. When Holly listened for larks, she heard only the wind complaining.

However, this landscape suited Doofus. Since the road across the moor went nowhere in particular, meandering from farm to isolated farm, there was hardly any traffic; so Holly let Doofus off the lead. He set off as if shot from a catapult, looking almost eager as he loped effortlessly up the road ahead of them, his long tail flying in the wind.

Then he stopped and waited patiently for the children, his eyes still fixed on the road further along. They ran to catch him up; but as soon as they reached him, he set off again.

“I’ll have to rest,” Matt panted. “I’ve got stitch.”

“You should be fitter than me,” said Holly, who enjoyed running, though not uphill. “Your legs are longer.”

“But they’re growing too fast.” Matt flexed one leg. “Hear it clicking? That’s because my joints don’t fit any more. So I have to take it easy.”

Holly had no patience with him. To prove what a feeble wimp he was, she raced on at full speed to where Doofus was waiting. Together they ran round the edge of the hill, and came to a halt by a Landrover backed up against a gate.

“Hi, Ailsa,” gasped Holly, glad of the excuse to stop and lean on the gate for a while. Ailsa did not turn to greet her. She was trying to shove a reluctant sheep into the back of the Landrover.

“Give us a hand!” she commanded, and Holly grasped two handfuls of tangled wool and helped her push until the protesting sheep was in the Landrover, its hooves clattering. Then she quickly took hold of Doofus’s collar in case he tried to get into the field to chase the other sheep. But Doofus wasn’t paying attention to them; he was still intently gazing up the road.

“So that’s your new dog, is it?” said Ailsa curiously. Under her old woolly hat, grey-speckled hair stuck out in startled tufts around the farmer’s weather-wrinkled face. She stood back to take a proper look at Doofus.

“That’s quite a dog,” she said. “Glad to see he’s not a sheep-worrier.”

“Mum says to watch out for your sheep, because there’s a pack of dogs running wild in the forest park,” said Matt, dragging himself up to the Landrover with heavy feet.

“Is there indeed? They’d better not come round here,” said Ailsa sternly.

“Would you shoot them?” Holly asked.

“Not me. I don’t have a shotgun licence. But there are a few farmers who would – that new man up the road being one of them. Jarvis Turnpike: he’s old Jim’s nephew. He took over the farm at the end of last year. Being doing a load of work since, clearing the fields and mending walls.”

“That’s good,” said Matt.

“I suppose,” said Ailsa doubtfully. “He’s a wee bit short-tempered. Not keen on dogs. He’s already shot one stray.” She nodded at Doofus. “If you’re going up to Barges Bridge, best keep him on a lead.”

“All right. But he’s very good,” said Holly. “He’s very well-behaved.” Except when he howled, she thought; which he did a few times a day. She knew that you could hardly blame a dog for howling, even if it seemed to freeze your heart and darken the skies.

But no matter how she scolded Doofus, he still howled. In fact, Holly sometimes wondered if he was only obedient in other respects because it suited him.

Ailsa gazed at Doofus. “Here, boy. Here!” she said, and whistled, until Doofus turned his head and looked straight at her.

Ailsa’s expression changed. She looked puzzled and wary. “Where did you get him?”

“The dogs’ home. They said he was abandoned up on Whitten moor.”

“Was he? I’ve seen one like him once before, up there,” murmured Ailsa. Then she shook her head. “But that was years ago. More years than I care to remember.”

Doofus turned away again, straining beneath Holly's hand. He wanted to run on, and she staggered under the force of his pull. "We'd better go," she said.

As soon as she released him, Doofus was away, sprinting up the road as if it was a race-track. Holly jogged slowly after him, over the last rise and onto the top of the moor.

The road was a thin grey ribbon weaving away from them through a bleak expanse of rough pasture and rusty heather. Reeds marked the boggy patches. The wind rampaged unchecked: a wild restless presence endlessly combing the land in search of something.

Just over one horizon, Holly knew, were the friendly streets of Sheffield, and beyond the opposite horizon was the busy sprawl of Manchester. But up here, those cities might as well have not existed. They were alone but for a pair of swooping lapwings that rode the wind as if they were stunt aircraft. Ahead, the moor dipped and rose like a stormy grey sea. There was only one lonely farm in sight, close to the bridge.

"It's a bit parky up here," panted Matt, "and I've got homework. How far are we going?"

"Just to Barges Bridge. We'll turn round there."

Matt groaned as Doofus streaked on ahead. Mum was right: he was as fast as a greyhound, thought Holly, though stronger, more muscled. Like a black panther.

Then she caught up with herself. What was she thinking? Doofus was just an ordinary dog.

The ordinary dog ran to the low stone hump of Barges Bridge, which was too narrow for two cars to pass each other. Doofus stopped in the middle of the bridge and lay down.

"What are you doing there?" gasped Holly, jogging wearily after him. "Come on, Doofus! Shift! What if a car comes?"

"They hardly ever do," said Matt.

From up here, the village was invisible. They could not see a single building apart from the hunched, grey bulk of Barges Farm and its ramshackle barns. There was no sound but the wind whistling in the reeds, and the chatter of the narrow, deep-cut stream, talking quietly to itself below the bridge.

Holly draped her arms over the parapet and gazed down at the water where it pooled.

"Frogspawn!" she exclaimed. "I'll get some of that for Clive." She scrambled down to the water's edge to fill her water bottle with a clump of frog-spawn, until it held about twenty cloudy, dotted blobs.

Meanwhile Matt was frowning at the track that led to the lonely farmhouse.

“I thought it was Barges Farm?” he said. “They’ve changed the name.”
Turnpike Farm, the new sign read, in spiky, narrow letters.

“The new farmer’s Jarvis Turnpike,” said Holly. “I suppose we ought to go and say hallo.”

“No need for that,” objected Matt.

“But Jim was nice. I think I will.” Holly had enjoyed a few free rides on old Jim’s tractor in the past. Jim had been a friendly, deaf, slow-moving man. It seemed only right to say hallo to his nephew, and maybe ensure future tractor rides.

“Come here, Doofus! Heel!” she called.

Doofus didn’t budge. Holly grasped his collar and pulled until he reluctantly got up and left the bridge with a longing, backwards look.

As they walked up the farm track, three border collies bounded out of a barn and stood guard, barking warnings. Holly felt like a footballer being jeered onto the pitch; but Doofus, with barely a glance at the sheepdogs, walked over to investigate a water trough.

A man emerged from the barn.

“Shut up, dogs,” he commanded. He was young and wiry, wearing red overalls that clashed with his orange hair, and had deep frown lines between his eyes. He carried a very small lamb awkwardly in the crook of one arm.

“Yes?” he said curtly.

“Mr Turnpike? We’re Holly and Matt. We used to know your Uncle Jim...” Holly’s voice tailed away under the man’s unchanging scowl.

“Great-uncle,” he said. “And he left this place in a right state and all. I’ll be lucky to make any money this year. What do you want?”

Holly opened and closed her mouth, not sure how to answer.

Matt came to her rescue. “Ailsa down the road sends her regards, and did you know there might be some stray dogs wandering around?” he said.

“Think you’re telling me anything I don’t know already?” He glowered at them, his pale eyes disappearing in a suspicious frown. “Found one of my ewes dead yesterday, and another two lost their lambs thanks to dogs worrying them – and now this one’s arrived too early!”

“Is it all right?”

“No, it is not! I’ve heard a pack of dogs a few times,” snapped Jarvis Turnpike, “but I haven’t seen them, and they’ve always scarpered by the time I’ve got my gun. If they come back, though, I’ll be ready.”

“We’d better go,” said Holly. She found Mr Turnpike a little scary. “Come on, Doofus. Here, boy!”

The farmer’s eyes widened as he noticed Doofus for the first time.

“Get that ruddy dog on a lead!” he yelled. “If I see it anywhere near my sheep, I’ll shoot it on the spot!”

“He wouldn’t chase sheep,” said Holly, looping her fingers tight around Doofus’s collar.

“Oh, wouldn’t he? He’s the very spit of a dog I found roaming round my land at Christmas! Ruddy great black devil.”

“A black dog?”

“I shot *that* one,” snarled Jarvis Turnpike. “Get yours out of here before I shoot him too!”

“Hey, we came to do you a favour,” said Matt indignantly.

“You’re doing me no favour, bringing that dog here! Get out!”

Holly began to drag Doofus back down the track. He did not like being dragged. The farmer grunted sourly and turned back towards the barn.

“Come on, Doofus,” hissed Holly. “Don’t be a nuisance!”

But Doofus resisted her pull. And then he did the thing she dreaded. He dug his feet in and lifted his nose to the sky.

“No, Doofus!” said Holly frantically. “Bad dog! You *mustn’t!*”

Doofus closed his eyes, opened his mouth wide – and howled. The mournful sound twined up to the grey clouds, and seemed to pull them down to settle coldly round her heart. The sheepdogs all stopped barking and began to whimper.

An instant later, Jarvis Turnpike came out of the barn again at a run. He was blazing mad.

“That’s done it! That’s the last straw. Another one dead – that early lamb just died. That ruddy dog probably gave it a heart attack. You get it out of here before I–”

So they did, before he did.

Chapter Five

After that, Holly was reluctant to take Doofus up on to the moors or anywhere near Turnpike Farm. Luckily the weather colluded with her. There was day after day of low, grey cloud that draped itself miserably over the hills like a soggy handkerchief, now and then sputtering out a bit of drizzle.

Easter passed in gloom. She spent much of the week lying on her bed with supplies of books and chocolate eggs: she was reading for school, she informed Mum. One of the books was for school, anyway.

Matt was glued to the computer. Next door, Clive was busy in his shed working on an armadilladarium, which was, disappointingly, a home not for armadillos but for woodlice.

Meanwhile Doofus slunk around the house, eating, growing – he filled the doorways now – and occasionally howling. Sometimes he howled quite quietly. Even so, every time he did it, Holly felt the world around her darken until she was lost on a lonely, gloomy inward sea.

She told herself that she was doing as much for him as any dog could reasonably expect. He was well cared for. But whenever she tried half-heartedly to play with him, he showed no interest, and she soon gave up with a mixture of resentment and relief.

Still, she took him daily to the park and playground, where he trotted dutifully round the rosebeds. Often she pushed Nan's wheelchair down there too. Nan was supposed to go out regularly, like Doofus, though minus the running around.

Nan seemed to enjoy being outside. However, pushing Nan's wheelchair to the park wasn't Holly's favourite activity. Whenever she took Nan out, she worried that something dreadful would happen. It was a stupid worry. What could happen, after all, unless she pushed Nan into the pond?

Wheeling her past the flowerbeds on one of these trips, she kept a wary eye on the group of teenagers who hogged the swings, talking over-loudly and smoking. Dad always said just ignore them, they're harmless. Holly wondered if Matt was like that when he was with his friends.

After parking Nan in front of the tulips, she threw a stick for Doofus, which he retrieved without enthusiasm. She threw it further, into the dried-up fountain.

Doofus glanced at it, gave a sort of shrug, picked up another stick exactly the same size and brought it over to her.

"You're not daft, are you?" said Holly thoughtfully. She tried to give him a pat, but he pulled away.

"Godda dod," said Nan. She held out a thin, quivering hand to Doofus. Doofus walked over to her, sniffed her fingers and let himself be stroked.

Holly felt a momentary, shocking pang of jealousy. Why Nan and not her? “Yes, good dog!” she said.

“Good doggie!” shouted one of the boys on the swings. “Heel, doggie! Heel!” The others sniggered.

“Catch the stick, doggie!” A stick was flung from the swings, narrowly missing Doofus.

Doofus picked it up in his teeth. He strolled over to the teenagers and dropped it. Then, standing perfectly still, he looked at them.

They went quiet. The swinging stopped.

“Heel,” she called, and Doofus swung his shoulders round and trotted over to her. The boys were silent. A minute later they slid off the swings and slunk away.

Holly did not throw any more sticks. She began to push Nan home, with Doofus following on the lead. She noticed that one or two people crossed the road to avoid meeting them. Of course, not everybody liked dogs; or maybe it was just because of the width of the wheelchair.

But Doofus seemed to fill the path with more than just his body. It was like being followed by a thundercloud. The park wasn’t big enough for him, Holly thought. She didn’t want to take him there again.

Next day, however, the sun reappeared, weak and listless, like a flu patient after a long sleep beneath grey quilts.

“What are you two layabouts doing in the house?” demanded Mum, as if they’d been hiding in a cupboard for a week and she’d only just noticed them. “Spring’s come bounding in, and you can go bounding out. Off you go, the pair of you! Get some fresh air! Take that dog out for a proper walk.”

Matt moaned.

“We’ll get Clive to come with us,” said Holly. She was thinking that she might encourage Clive to do the dog-walking for her.

When they wriggled through the gap in the back fence, they found Clive in his garden wheedling a baby crow. Matt held Doofus tightly by the collar, but Doofus wasn’t interested in the crow. The crow certainly wasn’t interested in Doofus. Maybe it didn’t recognise dogs.

Clive was holding out a saucer to it. “Come on, come on, then, Stupid!” he urged.

The crow flapped and hopped around the patio and wouldn’t come near.

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Matt.

“It’s Stupid,” said Clive. “It fell out of the fir tree. Its mother’s sitting up there cawing at it for all she’s worth as if she thinks it can fly back up. But it can’t fly. And she won’t come down to feed it.” He was tense and impatient. “I’ve given her two hours. Now it’s up to me. But it won’t take food off me either. Come on, Stupid! Lunchtime!”

He laid the saucer, full of red bits of something, on the patio near the crow. It flapped its useless wings anxiously and skulked behind the pot-plants.

“What are you trying to feed it?” Holly asked.

“Chopped worm.” Clive exhaled. “Renaldo died.”

“Oh, Clive, I’m sorry! What of?”

“Being chopped up and fed to crows,” said Matt.

“I think he ate a slug pellet,” said Clive.

Holly looked at chopped Renaldo in the saucer, and Stupid refusing to eat him. “Has Doofus’s howling bothered you at all lately?” she asked casually.

“No more than usual.”

“I don’t think he howls as much as he used to,” said Holly. She wished this was true. “Sometimes he doesn’t howl so loud,” she added, and this *was* true. Sometimes the howls were so quiet they were almost under his breath. But they were still howls, and they still made the blood seem to slow and chill in her body.

Quite apart from the blood-chilling effect, his howling worried her for another reason. It was a reason she had not yet tried to share with Matt or Clive. She wasn’t even sure about it herself. It just seemed too far-fetched...

“You’re right,” said Matt. “I hadn’t thought about it. He hasn’t howled as loudly as he did at Jarvis Turnpike.”

“Up by Barges Bridge?” asked Clive. “That frog-spawn you found for me there all hatched, you know. Twenty-one tadpoles. I named two of them after you, but the biggest one is called Tiger. Do you want to see them?”

“Later,” said Holly. “We’ve got to take Doofus for a proper walk. Mum won’t take him running any more. She keeps saying it’s my job.”

Clive’s eyes lit up. “I’ll come with you,” he offered, as she had hoped. “Just let me get my binoculars and my notebook. I can do some bird-watching.”

As he disappeared into the house, Matt said, “I’m not going if Clive brings his binoculars. He’ll have to stop this stuff before he goes to High School. Bird-watching! And worms and tadpoles! I’m serious, Holly! He’ll get slaughtered.”

Privately, Holly agreed with him. Although she liked Clive and his enthusiasms, it was a worry. But High School was still six months away.

“Have fun,” said Matt. He delivered Doofus’s lead into Holly’s hand and dived back through the fence before she could argue.

Clive reappeared with a pair of huge, ancient binoculars dangling from his neck. “Ready. Where are we going?”

“Miller’s Clough,” said Holly. This was the forest park where Mum had taken Doofus running. It was a steep wooded valley made by the stream – the same one that flowed under Barges Bridge – as it tumbled down from the

moor, gathering volume and force until it met the river. Miller's Clough had waterfalls and waymarked paths and was popular with tourists.

As they set off, she asked Clive, "Would you like to take Doofus for his walks? On your own, I mean?"

Clive looked with longing at Doofus, who was trotting obediently on his lead. "Would you pay me?"

"*Pay* you?"

"Dog-walking fees."

Holly gritted her teeth. "All right. A pound a walk."

Clive sighed. "I'm tempted. But he's your dog. You're the one he'll want to have taking him for walks."

"He won't mind!"

"He will. He'll think you don't care about him."

"Well, I *don't* care about him!" Holly bit her lip as soon as she had blurted the words out. She couldn't take them back. But they were true. Clive stopped walking to stare at her in surprise and reproach.

"You chose him," he pointed out.

"Only to shut Mum and Dad up and keep them happy."

"But you still chose Doofus over all the others! You could have said no. You had the choice of all those dogs. You're so lucky. I don't have any real pets, only worms!"

"You've got Mr Finney," Holly said.

"If only he wasn't so nocturnal," muttered Clive.

"Then why don't you borrow Doofus?"

"Because he's *your dog*."

They stopped speaking as they entered the Miller's Clough car park. She scuffed her feet, feeling conspicuous with her forbidding dog and Clive's huge binoculars.

But the walkers thronging the car park were too busy to take much notice. They looked bright and purposeful in sturdy boots and bulging rucksacks. They wrestled with huge rustling maps that fought back, trying to envelop them, and queued for the ice-cream van. Some of them had shorts on. Some of the shorts were rather strange. Holly and Clive looked at each other and grinned.

"Do you want an ice-cream?" she said. It was a peace offering.

The ice cream cheered Clive up. "Stupid might eat Renaldo while I'm away," he said hopefully.

Holly fed Doofus her empty cone, to prove to Clive that she did care. Doofus chewed it, spat it out and went back to inspecting a puddle.

"He still has this thing about water," she said.

“Maybe he’s a water-dog,” suggested Clive. “You know, like a spaniel is bred to fetch ducks.”

“He’s nothing like a spaniel!”

“He might be some sort of gun dog, though, or a hunting dog.”

It occurred to Holly that whatever Doofus hunted, she would not want to be it. She shook the thought away. “He’s just a mixture. I don’t know what he is.”

“He’s a shuck,” said a voice next to her. She turned and saw a thin old man in long green shorts, like a spindly gnome. “All right, old shuck?” he inquired.

Doofus raised the edge of one ear disdainfully.

“What’s a shuck?” asked Holly.

“It’s what we call a dog like that, back home in Norfolk. That’s a shuck if ever I saw one.” He had a strange, slow accent.

“A dog like what?” said Holly sharply.

“Like that. A black dog.” He smiled at her. “Only joking, m’duck. Don’t look so worried. That’s a fine dog. Have a good walk.”

“Only joking about what?” said Holly, but the man had hoisted his rucksack and was marching away.

“Have you heard of a shuck?” she asked Clive.

“Nope. Must be a dialect word for a black dog. Come on, let’s avoid the tourists and take the old path.”

Turning away from the walkers, they entered the forest by a narrow, overgrown track. Like Clive’s pets, this forest wasn’t quite the real thing. It was really just a plantation of fir trees, so close together that nothing much would grow in the narrow darkness between them. As they walked, the trees seemed to march past in tight military rows. In the distance, the huddled trunks appeared to form a solid wall of grey.

Nevertheless, despite its formal ranks of trees, the forest still had a pleasantly creepy feeling of age and hidden eyes. Holly liked its disinfectant tang and the softness of the pine needles underfoot. It seemed that Doofus liked it too, for his ears pricked up and he gazed keenly through the shadows.

“I’m going to let you off the lead,” Holly told him, “but you mustn’t run away.” As she released his collar Doofus went to sniff at the tree trunks and raised his leg.

“Cuckoo!” said Clive excitedly. “Can you hear it? Listen!”

Holly listened. It sounded as if the cuckoo was singing down a wooden tunnel. She wondered why bird-song echoed in the open air, and since it did, why didn’t it bounce off a thousand tree-trunks and surround her with cuckoos?

Clive put the oversized binoculars to his eyes and scanned the treetops. “Can’t see anything,” he muttered. “Hang on! There we go! I think it’s a siskin.”

“Clive? When you start High School, will you tell people you go birdwatching?”

“Sure,” said Clive. “Loads of people go birdwatching.”

“Not at High School.”

“So?”

“So they’ll think you’re a dork.”

“So?” said Clive. With his binoculars pressed against his eyes, she couldn’t see his face.

“Yes, but Clive—” Holly broke off. Doofus had sprung off the path into the forest as abruptly as if somebody had fired a starting pistol.

She thought he would smash into a tree-trunk, so recklessly headlong was he running; but he swerved, twisted, and disappeared into the grey wall of trees like a piece fitting into a puzzle. And was gone.

“Doofus!” yelled Holly in exasperation. “I should never have let him off the lead. *Doofus!*”

“Ssh! You’ll disturb the birds. I think the mother’s just left the nest.”

“Doofus! Here, boy! *Heel!*”

“No point shouting. He’ll come back,” said Clive, still glued to his binoculars.

“There he is,” muttered Holly in relief. She took a few steps into the forest, straining her eyes in the gloom. “I just saw him over there – no, hang on!” She glimpsed another movement further away: a grey flicker as something slipped between the trees. And there it was again, but on the other side...

Suddenly she felt as if the whole forest was moving around her, rippling with grey shadows. She broke into a sweat and felt the hair prickle on the back of her head.

“Give me the binoculars!” she said urgently.

“Just a minute.” Clive tipped his head back. “I think I can see the cuckoo.”

A howl came from the trees to their side, long and drawn out.

“Doofus!” Holly cried.

The only answer was another howl, more high-pitched this time. It didn’t sound like Doofus at all. Then a third howl came from away in the distance.

“Sounds like he’s met some friends,” said Clive.

“Come here, Doofus! *Heel! Bad dog!*”

“He’s not a bad dog,” Clive objected.

“He mustn’t howl like that!”

“But lots of dogs – oh, look, look! It did it! Yes!” Clive punched the air. Throwing down the binoculars, he ran over to the base of the tree. He squatted down and carefully picked up something small from the carpet of pine needles.

“What did what?”

“The cuckoo! It pushed the baby siskin out of the nest. I saw it!” Clive held out his hand triumphantly. On his palm lay a shred of fluff with a beak. It was obviously dead.

“I feel sick,” said Holly.

“It’s just nature,” said Clive. “We couldn’t have prevented it.”

Holly stared at him. Then she whirled round.

“Doofus! *Doofus!* DOOFUS!” she screamed. She began to run after him, through the forest, away from Clive and the dead bird.

Hurtling past the lines of shadowy grey trunks, she kept shouting for Doofus. Around her, beyond the thudding of her feet, she seemed to hear other swift footsteps pattering. She stopped: so did the feet. She started up again, and so did they. Again she saw the strange grey flicker of a body through the trees. Was that Doofus?

It was big enough, but it wasn’t black enough. The trees closed in around her like the bars of a cage. Suddenly, unreasonably, Holly was frightened. There was something about those shifting, hidden shapes that made her hair stand up on end. She felt that if she stopped again, she might be caught.

They were just dogs, she told herself. Just a few dogs having fun. So she ran on, trying to ignore the fear that surged through her and whispered to her that the trees would never end; which of course they did, abruptly.

Holly emerged into glaring sunlight that made her wince. She was back on the main path, near the waterfalls where the stream made its last long leap towards the river. There was nothing strange here. Everything looked normal. A few people were tramping along the bank or dibbling fingers in the water. No dogs. Where was Doofus?

She ran upstream, and then back down: no Doofus. There were no dogs at all. Where had they all gone? Holly spun round in a circle, furious with herself for being so scared, and with Doofus for being the cause of it. She found that she was trembling, and she did not like it.

Then she saw him. He was standing at the top of the main waterfall, high above her on the far bank with his head turned, looking away upstream, up towards the moor.

“Doofus! *Doofus!*” she yelled furiously above the noise of tumbling water. At last he heard: the black head swivelled round towards her.

Without hurry, he came scrambling down the rocks at the far side of the falls, sure-footed and careful. Then he shook himself and sat on his haunches, gazing at her across the stream with his unreadable black eyes.

“Why did you run away like that?” said Clive’s indignant voice. He puffed up behind her with his binoculars swinging from his neck.

Holly ignored him. “Come here!” she yelled harshly at Doofus, who stood up, stretched and stepped deliberately through the stream, which was fast and broad but not deep, to reach her.

“Bad dog!” Her voice was thick with fear and anger. “*Sit!* And don’t you dare move until I say!” Doofus sat down with a casual air.

“What are you so het up about?” asked Clive in surprise. “All he did was go off to meet some other dogs. That’s only human. I mean only canine.”

“I didn’t like those dogs. Anyway, it’s not just that!”

“What, then? Why are you so angry with him?”

“Because Doofus makes bad things happen.” Holly’s voice was shaking. “Like that baby bird you found. Because every time he howls – something dies!”

Chapter Six

“That is just the most ridiculous thing I ever heard,” said Clive indignantly, striding down the path towards the car park. “Things die all the time. Like I told you, that’s just nature. And Doofus howls a lot because that’s *his* nature. That’s all there is to it.”

“Then why does Doofus keep howling at exactly the same time as things keep dying? It’s been happening ever since your stick insects keeled off their twigs that first day he came home.”

“You’ve never heard of coincidence? Dogs howl; things die. The one doesn’t cause the other.” He marched swiftly across the car park as if he was trying to get away from her, and didn’t say another word until they were back on the road.

Then he burst out, “Doofus only howled today because he met some other dogs. Anyway, they were howling too.”

“That’s another thing! Whose were those dogs? Where did they come from? He shouldn’t be running round with a pack of strays!”

“He came back,” said Clive. “Which is more than you deserve.” Then he stopped, tight-lipped, because Ailsa was riding down the road towards them on her quad bike, pulling a trailer load of straw. On seeing them, she halted and switched off the engine.

“Hallo, Ailsa,” said Holly flatly.

“Long faces, hen?”

“We’ve just taken Doofus for a walk and he ran away.”

“Good thing you got him back,” said Ailsa severely. “I wanted to talk to you about him. I’ve seen him, you know, up on the moor.”

“You’ve seen Doofus? When?” Holly stared at Doofus. How could he get all the way up there without her knowing? “Are you sure it was him?”

Ailsa sucked her cheeks in. “It was him all right. I’d know him anywhere, even without that red collar. I’ve seen him twice in the last week – while you’ve been at school, I daresay. I think you need to keep him safe at home, hen.”

“I thought he *was* safe at home.”

“You don’t want him straying, now, and upsetting the farmers.”

“We saw some stray dogs today, in the forest back there,” said Holly.

“Did you?” said Ailsa sharply. “How many?”

“I don’t know. At least three. We didn’t get a proper look at them, but we heard them howling.”

“Holly has this theory,” began Clive, until Holly kicked his ankle.

“What theory?” asked Ailsa.

“A man in the car park said that Doofus is a shuck,” said Holly. “Have you heard of a shuck?”

“I’ve not.” Ailsa’s weather-beaten face was serious as she gazed at Doofus, standing patiently by the trailer with no sign of his former excitement. “I found him lying on Barges Bridge both times,” she said. “I had to push him hard to get him off, didn’t I, lad?”

Doofus responded with the merest flick of his tail.

“Barges Bridge? Was he lying down in the middle of it?”

“Aye. Could have got run over, or worse,” said Ailsa. “Not a good place for him to hang around, so close to Turnpike’s farm. He’s lucky Jarvis Turnpike didn’t spot him. You keep him safe at home. Tell your Mam I’ll drop off her eggs tomorrow.” She started up her engine, making further conversation impossible.

Once she had gone, Holly said, bemused, “I didn’t know Doofus was going out during the day. Mum shuts him in the back garden when she goes to work and just leaves the porch open so he can shelter if it rains.”

“He comes through the gap in the fence,” said Clive, a touch guiltily. “My mum told me. If Doofus gets into our garden, she opens the back gate and lets him out.”

“Lets him out? Why?”

“She doesn’t like dogs.”

Holly exploded. “But she’s letting him loose in the street! He could get knocked over or anything! You heard Ailsa. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now,” said Clive. “Anyway, I thought you didn’t care about Doofus. If you won’t take him for walks, he has to take himself, doesn’t he?”

“You—” Holly snapped her mouth closed. She didn’t speak to Clive for the rest of the walk home, but marched a stiff and reproachful two metres ahead of him, while Doofus ran back and forth between them like a saw, cutting them apart. It didn’t help that Clive was partly right. It just made her feel worse.

Doofus needs more exercise, she thought dismally. He’s too big. Too strong: and he’s going to get bigger, and stronger. He’s the wrong dog. She watched him lollop up the garden path and lie down with a panting sigh of relief across the back door threshold.

Matt was in the garden mowing the lawn. “You look happy,” he said. “Not.”

Clive said, “Holly thinks Doofus can make animals die by howling at them.”

Matt rolled his eyes, raised his head and opened his mouth. Before he could start howling, Holly yelled, “No, I do not!”

“Yes, you do. Don’t deny it,” said Clive fiercely. “Animals die all the time, and it’s not fair to blame it on Doofus, just because you don’t want to look after him. It’s not Doofus’s fault. He’s just a dog. It’s not his fault that Pancake died either. Or do you want to blame him for *that*?” Clive stalked down to the gap in the fence with a haughtiness that was slightly spoilt when he caught his trousers on the wire.

“Doofus is not just any old dog!” Holly shouted after him. “He’s a shuck!”

“He’s a what?” demanded Matt.

“A shuck is just a black dog,” Clive’s voice yelled back over the fence. “That’s what the man said. That’s all it means!” A moment later he added, anguished, “And Stupid hasn’t eaten any of Renaldo.”

His face reappeared pinkly. “If Stupid dies, I suppose you’ll blame Doofus for that too. But it won’t be his fault, it’ll be Stupid’s and his stupid mother’s!” He disappeared and they heard the shed door bang.

“Dork,” shouted Holly, though not very loudly.

“Whoa there!” Matt exclaimed. “Take it easy. What’s going on? Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No,” said Holly.

The shed door opened. Clive’s voice shouted, “You think *I’m* weird? Well, just listen to yourself!” The door banged shut again.

Holly stepped over Doofus and stamped into the house. Nan was in the living room watching TV; she did not go to her day centre at the weekends.

“Nan,” said Holly. She knelt beside her chair and took Nan’s cool, thin hand, the skin as fine as tissue paper. For a moment she wished she was still small enough to climb into Nan’s lap; but of course she couldn’t do that any more, and certainly not since Nan had had the stroke. A stroke sounded so gentle, like a tender pat from God’s hand: a caress that had removed Nan’s speech and ability to walk.

“It’s not fair, Nan,” she whispered.

“Do doo,” said Nan, looking past her for Doofus. Holly placed Nan’s hand on her arm, and Nan stroked it, a little jerkily.

“Dood?” said Nan.

Doofus strolled in, walked over to Nan and sniffed her fingers, allowed her a quick pat, and then lay down in the living-room doorway. Holly wondered again why he liked Nan better than her.

Matt came in, climbing over Doofus, and switched on the computer in the corner.

“Nan’s watching telly,” Holly said reprovingly.

“It’s all right. I’m not playing games, I’m just googling,” answered Matt. Holly turned to watch the television with Nan. It was a soap opera; people were arguing, Holly couldn’t tell what about and didn’t care.

She had never argued with Clive before. Clive never got angry. He was always hopeful and cheerful, ready to share his ideas with her.

Well, all she'd done was to try and share an idea with him. There was no need for him to get so snotty. It was all Doofus's fault.

"Gotcha!" exclaimed Matt from the computer. "Come and see this, Hol!"

Holly stayed where she was. "See what?" she asked grumpily.

"I've found Shuck on the internet. Otherwise known as Old Shuck, a large black dog in Norfolk legend."

"Well, I knew that."

"Wait for the rest! Black dog legends appear throughout the British Isles," recited Matt. "In Lancashire the black dog is called the Guytrash or Shriker. In Yorkshire it's known as the Bargest. Apparently the Bargest of Troller's Gill was a great black dog with long hair and huge fiery eyes like saucers, that dragged a clanking chain behind it."

"Sounds like a fairy tale," muttered Holly.

"Elsewhere it's called the Padfoot or Gurt Dog, and on the Isle of Man there was a phantom dog called the Moddy Dhoo. Great name, that."

"We're not on the Isle of Man," said Holly. "And Doofus doesn't have eyes like saucers or a clanking chain."

"If he had a chain, it'd be bound to clank," said Matt. "Hang on, I'm looking up Derbyshire. Here we are. Hey, there's a mermaid pool on Kinder Scout!"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"And Hob Hurst is a giant who comes out at night to milk the cows."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And a phantom hunt was seen on Eyam Moor in 1931. That's not far away. It's a good website, this."

"It's a load of rubbish," said Holly. "So what does this black dog do, anyway? This shuck thing. Apart from clanking chains."

"Hey, I'm doing this for you!" protested Matt. "I thought you'd be interested!"

"Well, I'm not."

"Please yourself." Matt got up and went into the kitchen in a huff. Nan's bewildered eyes followed him.

"Neck a fen," she said plaintively.

"Don't worry, Nan," Holly told her. "He's just being Matt." She went to log off the computer.

But first she paused, pulled by the text on the screen, to read. A sentence flared out at her.

A large, black, demon dog, or hellhound, is one of the most pervasive and blood-chilling apparitions in British folklore... most often seen on roads,

bridges, gateways and graveyards, they seem to be linked to thresholds and boundaries, especially where these are formed by water...

The words were like a siren going off in her head.

Although such dogs can have a protective role, they are generally a harbinger of death.

Holly didn't know what a harbinger was, but she thought that she could guess.

She stared at Doofus filling the doorway, his head on his paws, his eyes wide open and gazing at nothing.

"Here, Doofus," she said. He didn't look up.

"Old Shuck." She glanced back at the screen. "Padfoot. Here, Guytrash."

An ear twitched, and relaxed again.

"Gurt Dog. Bargest. Moddy Dhoo."

Doofus yawned.

"Shriker," she whispered. "Hellhound."

He turned his head to gaze at her with those fathomless dark eyes. His tail thumped, once, hard against the floor.

Chapter Seven

That night Holly had a nightmare about a dog with eyes like saucers. She was crouching in a dark cave, and something big was in there with her, looking for her. She was trying to work up the courage to run, when suddenly a great black dog was standing over her. Its huge round eyes whirled weirdly and its lips curled in a growl: but no sound came out.

She woke with a start and lay still for a moment, her heart thumping, until she gradually remembered that she was not in a cave, but in her bed. Unable to get back to sleep, she crept downstairs to look for Doofus.

He wasn't in the kitchen. Then she remembered that he had refused to come inside the night before, and that Dad had shrugged and decided the weather was mild enough for him to sleep in the porch.

So after Dad had blocked the gap in the fence with a piece of board, it was in the porch that he put Doofus's beanbag bed.

Only Doofus wasn't lying on his bed. He wasn't in the porch. The kitchen clock told her it was half past three. Holly poked her head out into the chill dark air and listened. A solitary bird had woken and was calling plaintively for dawn. Other than that, she could hear nothing.

Cautiously, she padded out onto the lawn in her bare feet, feeling the dew cold upon her toes. The garden rested, motionless and shadowed.

No Doofus. She checked the fence: the board was still in place over the gap. The gate was shut.

"Doofus!" whispered Holly. But he was nowhere, and there was nothing she could do. So she went back inside and crawled into bed where she lay trying unsuccessfully to sleep, until three hours later she finally slipped back into unsettling dreams.

She was woken abruptly by the sound of Doofus howling quite close by. Groggily she fumbled for her alarm clock. She'd been asleep for a full thirty minutes, and it was nearly time to get up again for school.

Lurching out of bed, Holly stumbled down to breakfast feeling clumsy and stupid. Somebody had filled her head with clay. Doofus was in the kitchen blithely crunching up Doggibix. She wondered what he had killed with that latest howl, the one that had awoken her.

"Where was Doofus last night?" she asked.

"In the porch, of course," said Mum, scraping burnt bits off the toast. "Where else would he be? I've just let him in. There's a letter for you."

Holly tore open the envelope and tried to focus her tired eyes.

"I've been invited to a Pooch Party," she said dismally.

"A *what?*"

“A Pooch Party. By the lady who ran the Puppy Parties. It’s in the village hall tomorrow tea-time.”

“You’d like to go to a Pooch Party, wouldn’t you, boy?” Dad told Doofus, ruffling his ears. “You great big softie, you. See if you can balance a cornflake on your nose.”

“Dad!” groaned Holly. She wanted to tell him that hellhounds did not balance cornflakes on their noses. It was Dad who was the big softie, not Doofus. The cornflake fell off and Doofus crunched it up.

“You should go to that pooch party,” said Mum.

“I don’t think I want to,” said Holly.

“Don’t be a spoil-sport!” Dad tickled Doofus’s chin. “Doofie will enjoy it, won’t you, boy? He doesn’t get to meet any other dogs. It’ll be good for him.”

“Take Clive with you,” Mum suggested.

Holly thought Clive might not be speaking to her. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to speak to Clive. A ball of pride and hurt and anger seemed to swell in her throat. And Clive was angry too, which was awful, because it was so unknown.

So it was with some trepidation that she called for him on the way to school.

She stopped half way up his garden path. What looked like a bedraggled black mop-head was lying on the grass. It was the baby crow. When she touched the ragged bundle of feathers with her foot, it did not stir.

Clive opened the door.

“Your crow,” said Holly. “I think it’s dead, Clive.”

“Oh, Stupid,” said Clive, agonised. He fell to his knees by the body. “Why couldn’t you just *eat*?”

“Sorry,” said Holly.

“Why? It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but...” Holly paused. If she could only have stopped Doofus from howling earlier that morning, maybe Stupid would still be alive.

However, she didn’t say this. She didn’t need to. She knew that Clive had heard Doofus howl, because he avoided meeting her eyes as he stood up, dangling Stupid by the legs.

“You go on,” he said. “I’ll be a bit late.”

“Are you going to bury him?” said Holly, trying to be sympathetic.

Clive shook his head. “I’ll leave him in the back lane, where the foxes will find him.”

“Oh, yuck!” She couldn’t stop herself.

Clive stalked past her to the gate, his thin face set. “It’s called a natural cycle.” He still wasn’t looking at her.

She tried to push down the resentful lump that rose again in her throat. There was a turn of phrase about swallowing your pride. That was exactly how it felt.

“Clive? Do you want to come to a Pooch Party tomorrow?”

“No,” said Clive. The gate clanged behind him.

Holly walked on to school alone. After school, she walked home alone. Her two best other friends lived in a village miles away, and caught a bus. Clive was her only friend who lived nearby.

The next day, after walking home alone from school, she took Doofus to the Pooch Party alone. Dad was so keen for her to go that she didn’t know how to refuse.

“Holly! How nice to see you!” barked Vera enthusiastically, as she crept into the village hall. She’d hoped to slip in and out unnoticed; but Doofus was no longer a dog that anyone could ignore.

Vera was wearing a frilly yellow dress that clashed with her hair. “Welcome, Holly! And – er – your dog?” She blinked, less enthusiastic this time. In fact, she sounded a little alarmed. “My word. Hasn’t he grown!”

“A bit,” murmured Holly. Glancing around, she recognised many of the dogs and owners that she had met last time. She was glad to see Bill Barton with his shy retriever, which now looked small next to Doofus. All the other dogs did. Bill shuffled up to leave a chair for her.

“By heck, he’s a big lad!” he said, kindly. “What have you been feeding him?”

“Just dog food,” Holly said. But she realised again that Doofus had a presence. His muscles rippled as he walked: his black coat gleamed like moonlight on a wet pavement. The other owners looked at him askance.

Doofus gave Bill’s Joey a sniff which was not unfriendly; but paid no further attention to any of the dogs. And they kept their distance, all except the poodles.

There were three poodles again, leaping and squawking around the tea-table like over-excited toddlers at a party, while Vera looked on fondly.

“Careful, Lulu! No, Mimi darling, nose out. That nasty hot tea will burn you!”

Mimi darling looked exactly like Kiki, the poodle that had been run over. To Holly’s relief, nobody mentioned the dead poodle or the way Doofus had howled that day. Maybe they didn’t remember the howl, or it didn’t seem important to them; they hadn’t made the connection the way Holly had. They didn’t know Doofus’s terrible secret.

Holly sat silently with her hands gripping each other in her lap, praying Doofus would not howl again. He hadn’t howled since Stupid’s death.

At least, he hadn't howled loudly, just in a sort of husky whisper. Although he did this quite frequently, nothing had died that Holly could discover.

Trying not to think about it, she listened to the conversations going on around her.

"Bad business, this, on the farms," a motherly lady with a collie was saying.

"Terrible!" Bill Barton shook his head. "No knowing what will happen next!"

Vera leaned over curiously to ask, "Why, what is happening?"

"Sheep dying!" said the collie lady dramatically. "My brother farms up on Grindle Low. Last week he went out to find dead sheep all over the place. He said it looked like a massacre."

"I think I read that in the local paper," Vera said. "Didn't they blame it on a dog or something?"

Holly, who hadn't seen the paper, sat up straighter with a start and began to listen intently.

"Not just one dog," said Bill Barton. "A pack of them."

"My brother lost six lambs and three ewes. He reckoned some of them were scared to death," said the collie lady.

"Can a sheep be scared to death?" asked Vera in surprise. "I mean, they're stupid big lumps. They're not delicate things like my little fluffy fairies here." She put out a loving hand to caress Lulu, who tried to bite her finger. Holly wished Clive was there. She needed somebody to pull a puking face at.

Bill Barton's next words made her forget everything else.

"Oh, aye!" he exclaimed. "Sheep can be scared to death all right, if a pack of dogs start barking and howling and chasing them round until they drop dead of shock and exhaustion. When dogs get a taste for worrying sheep, then you're in trouble. They won't leave off."

Howling? thought Holly. She stared at him, wide-eyed and horrified.

He smiled at her reassuringly. "Don't worry, pet. These dogs are up on the moors, not down in the town."

"Some-one's seen them, then?" asked Holly, her voice croaking.

"Oh, aye! But not close enough to get a shot at them."

"Poor little doggies!" cried Vera indignantly.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but these are not poor little doggies," said Bill severely. "They're someone's pets turned bad and wild."

Beside Holly, Doofus stood up, stretched, and pointed his nose at the ceiling. Holly gasped. Don't howl! she thought at him. Please don't howl!

But Doofus merely made one of his strange, new, muted howls, halfway between a sigh and a groan, exposing his sharp white teeth before he settled down again.

“Listen to the lad yawning! He’s bored,” said Bill.

“Yes,” said Holly. “I’d better take him home soon.”

Yet Doofus did not look bored. He looked as if he was concentrating: listening. Now and then, his ears pricked ever so slightly, as if at a sound beyond her hearing.

As he stretched his neck and moaned again, she said quickly, “In fact, I think I’ll take him now.” She grabbed his collar and led him out before he could howl properly and cause anything dreadful to happen. There were too many dogs in there – it was just too dangerous. She should never have gone.

“What am I going to do?” muttered Holly to herself as she led Doofus home. She felt very anxious and alone. When she passed Clive’s house, she saw Clive sitting by his shed with his notebook on his knee.

Holly paused. Then she went through the gate and walked over to him, trying to think of something nice to say.

“How are the tadpoles?” she asked.

“Down to twelve now,” said Clive. “Ssh!” He was looking at his little sister, Lily, who was stirring a pink plastic bucket of water which had some grass floating in it. As Holly watched, Lily toddled over to the flower bed, pulled the heads off the pansies and dropped them in the bucket.

“What’s she doing?”

“She’s making soup. Or maybe perfume. I’m not quite sure.” He wrote in his notebook.

“What are *you* doing?”

“I’m observing her.”

“Why?”

“It’s practice for gorillas,” said Clive. Doofus wandered up to Lily and put his nose in the bucket.

“Bad Ad Dad!” shouted Lily, indignant. She whacked Doofus on the side and he sat down, looking surprised. “Fid fid!” scolded Lily.

“She sounds like Nan,” said Holly.

“Oh. That reminds me.” Clive closed his notebook. “A ambulance came for your Nan.”

“A *what*?”

“She was taken ill,” said Clive. “Your Mum and Dad went with her. They left a note on the door. You’re to stay here till they get back.”

Holly ran round to her own house and tore down the note taped to the letterbox. It didn’t tell her any more than Clive just had.

Holly. Nan poorly. Have taken her to hospital. Go round to Clive's till we come home. Mum.

Holly crumpled the paper in her hand, ran back round to Clive's house, and burst into the kitchen to find Clive's mum.

"My Nan – how is she?"

"Now then," said Clive's mother, "you're to be very sensible and not fret or panic. Your Nan wouldn't want you to be upset."

"How is she?" cried Holly, fretting and getting panicky.

"They think she's had another stroke, just a little one, but she had to go to hospital. Don't you worry, now."

Holly ran back outside. God had stroked Nan again. Why?

"Why didn't you tell me?" she shouted at Clive.

"I did tell you."

"Why didn't you tell me straight away?"

"You were asking about the tadpoles," said Clive. "They're fine, by the way, except that they keep eating each other."

"I don't care about your tadpoles!" Holly ran back inside.

"Sorry, dear," said Clive's mother, "but please don't let the dog in."

Holly saw that Doofus had padded in after her and was standing like a black shadow in the doorway. He stretched himself across the threshold.

"No!" said Holly. "Out, Doofus! Out!"

Doofus got up and looked at her enquiringly, as if curious to know why she was so upset. She pushed him out into the garden, where Clive was watching Lily pick up pebbles and drop them in her bucket.

"Un, two, tee, eight," chanted Lily.

Holly sat down on the grass with her back against the shed. Her legs felt very tired for no reason. She was shivering, although it wasn't cold.

Doofus ambled over and leaned his head down against her shoulder. He nuzzled his cold nose at her neck, almost as if he was trying to comfort her. He had never done that before.

"Go away, Doofus," whispered Holly. She gave him a shove.

Doofus straightened up and moved away with a shrug, strolling down the path. As he reached the end of it, he gathered his haunches, leapt effortlessly over the closed gate, and was gone.

"Hey," said Clive, staring, "did you see that? He can *jump*. Aren't you going after him?"

Holly shook her head and didn't answer. Doofus could jump. She should have thought of that: it was so obvious.

That was how he'd disappeared at night. Jumping was the least of his abilities.

And the least of her problems. She closed her eyes.

Chapter Eight

Nan was fine. At least, that was what Mum and Dad told her when they came back home.

Holly looked at their faces and didn't believe them. If Nan was fine, why had they left her behind in hospital?

"She's more comfortable there," said Mum, trying to be cheerful. "She'll be home soon."

"How soon?"

"Well, eventually," said Mum. "It all depends on what the doctors think."

Dad slumped in a chair, looking tired. His face seemed to have grown extra lines, as if Lily had been drawing on him with a pencil.

Neither of them noticed that Doofus was missing, so Holly did not bother mentioning how Doofus had leapt over the gate and run off and how Clive, after shouting at her that she wasn't fit to keep a dog, had jumped on his rattly old bike, pedalled off after Doofus and had not yet returned.

Holly went up to her bedroom to lie on her bed and wish for Pancake. Pancake had been named for her ears, which were brown and floppy like pancakes. She hadn't liked having her ears played with, but had loved having her tummy tickled; and had never tired of playing Grab the Tablecloth, until Mum had to resort to place-mats.

Pancake had never tired of being hugged and talked to either. She had licked and listened enthusiastically even when she was old and deaf. Like Nan, she had always been there.

Until she had been replaced by a strange, solemn black dog with inky eyes and no bark. A dog that wouldn't stop growing, that lay down in doorways, that was like an ominous storm-cloud roaming through the house; a dog that listened to unheard sounds – a dog that *howled*.

Holly got off her bed and leaned out of her bedroom window. She could see neither Doofus nor Clive. Next door, Lily was tugging at a pair of her mum's tights on the washing line. They stretched to twice their length before twanging off. Lily stuffed them in her bucket.

Clive's mum came out, shrieked, and carted Lily in. Holly did not much like Clive's mum. She did not make life particularly easy for Clive; yet he just got on with it regardless.

Holly admired that in Clive. When she let herself think about it properly, she knew it wasn't really Clive she was upset with. She was really upset with Pancake, for dying; and with Doofus, for being a strange unnerving dog instead of a busy, brown, familiar one; and with Nan, for being ill.

But there was no point in being upset with any of them. It didn't help. They didn't even know, or notice.

Clive knew, and noticed. It wasn't fair to take it out on Clive.

Holly crept downstairs past her family. Dad was cooking; Mum was on the phone, looking worried. Matt had come in, trailing bits of muddy football kit, and was slouched in front of the computer.

Plucking an empty jam-jar from the recycling box, Holly went outside and began to pick up plant pots to find the woodlice damply clustered underneath. She scooped up a dozen of the biggest and best, and put them in the jam-jar. Then she sat by the road to wait for Clive.

It was a long wait. In the middle of it Mum made her go inside and eat chicken curry. But at last Clive came cycling slowly down the road towards her, pulling Doofus on a length of string.

"I found you some woodlice for your armadilladium," said Holly.

Clive slid off his bike and glanced at the jar, unimpressed. "I found you Doofus," he said, untying the string. Doofus did not try to nuzzle against Holly. She did not try to stroke him.

Clive's mum came bursting out and began to scold Clive for disappearing when he was meant to be keeping an eye on Lily. She said Lily had ruined the washing and could have drowned in her bucket.

Clive thought about this. "Not unless she stood on her head in it."

His mum's voice raised by several pitches as she berated him for wasting his time chasing after ruddy animals instead of watching his sister. Only she didn't say ruddy, she used a different word that made Holly try to pretend she wasn't listening.

At last Clive's mum went back in. Clive was looking red and explosive like an over-blown balloon.

"Sorry," said Holly. "I saw Lily with the washing, but it was too late to stop her."

Clive let out a long, resigned breath. "Never mind," he said, deflating. "Mum's right, anyway. I'd rather chase ruddy animals, or the other sort."

"Where did you find Doofus?"

"Up on top of the moor, on the little bridge."

"Barges Bridge," said Holly. "You went all the way up there?"

"That's right. He didn't want to leave. I had to persuade him down to Ailsa's and then she lent me the string. She says you've got to keep him at home. Don't let him run loose."

Doofus was sniffing at the jar of woodlice. He threw up his head and gave one of his moaning sighs, like the ghost of a howl.

Quickly, Holly inspected the jar. The biggest woodlouse was lying on its back with its legs in the air.

"He's done it again! He's killed it!"

Clive peered at the jar. "It's a woodlouse," he said with patient exasperation. "It has a lifespan of about two and a half minutes. How did you pick it up?"

"Carefully."

He snorted. "I bet. You mangle it and then you blame it on Doofus!"

Holly caught him by the arm. "Clive. This is serious. You've got to come and look at this website that Matt found."

"If it's quick," he said. "I'm hungry. How's your Nan?"

"Everybody says Don't Worry," said Holly grimly.

He nodded understandingly. "How old is she?"

"Eighty-four. And don't say anything about natural life-spans."

"I wasn't going to," said Clive, as they arrived at the computer.

"We need that," said Holly.

"Hang on," muttered Matt, busy at the keyboard. "I've just got to make another six arrows and then I can swap them for a gold bar."

"And you think *I'm* a dork," said Clive.

"Everybody plays this," said Matt.

"It's escapism," said Clive. "You play it because you can't face real life."

"Matt," intervened Holly swiftly, "please can you find that black dog site for us again?"

"No," said Matt. Clive sighed.

"I take it back," he said. "It's a wonderful and fascinating game."

"That's better," said Matt. He minimised the game and hunted through recent websites.

"This one," he said. "Shucks, Padfoots and Moddy Dhoos."

Clive read it carefully, his lips moving. Reading was not Clive's strongest point. "But these are just fairy tales!"

"That's what I thought at first," said Holly. "But they're actually legends. That means they might have once been true."

Matt twisted round to stare at her incredulously. "You believe this? I only looked it up for a joke! Clive's right. It's not real."

"It is," said Holly stubbornly. "Doofus is a Black Dog, and whenever he howls, something dies."

"Rubbish."

"It's not rubbish! First it was the stick insects. Then there was the poodle at the puppy party, and the goldfish, and Renaldo, and the crow, and Jasper Turnpike's lamb – I'm telling you, every time he howls, something ends up dead!"

"You're exaggerating," said Matt. "That's only about six things. He howls loads more than that. He used to, anyway. He's gone a bit quiet lately."

“I’m *telling* you,” said Holly fiercely. “The other dead things were just worms and mice and animals that we don’t know about. But I bet you they’re dead too, if we could only find them!”

Matt shook his head. “No, no! Wait. You said the poodle got run over by a motorbike. So Doofus didn’t kill it.”

“He caused it!” Holly cried. “He made it run outside just as the motorbike went past!”

“Maybe he sensed something,” said Clive. “Let me go and get my woodlice.” He hurried out, returning a moment later with the jar.

“Okay,” he said. “This is an experiment. Make Doofus howl.”

They all looked at Doofus, who was sitting by the fire and scratching his ear.

“I’ll have a go,” said Holly. She did not want to hear Doofus howl; but on the other hand, she did want to be proved right.

So she poked Doofus in the ribs, pulled his tail and ears, called him a naughty dog, and in desperation, howled herself as an example. Throughout this, Doofus gazed at her with sad surprise and made no sound at all.

“Now let me try something.” Clive tipped a woodlouse out of the jar onto the desk, where he squashed it with the mouse mat.

“Oi!” said Matt, but the others were looking at Doofus, who stretched his neck and gave out, not a full-blown howl, but one of his pale, whispery sort.

“That’s a howl,” said Holly.

“That’s a yawn,” said Matt. “And *that’s* a mess.” He scraped woodlouse off the desk.

“Wait a minute,” said Clive. “You stay here and observe.” He took his jar out into the hall where they couldn’t see him.

Seconds later, Doofus quietly howled twice more in quick succession. Clive reappeared in triumph and showed them two squashed woodlice.

“You’re a murderer,” said Holly.

“Yes! That’s the whole point!” Clive’s eyes were alight. “I killed them. Doofus didn’t. But he howled at exactly the moment when they died. I’m prepared to admit there’s a link.”

“You’re daft, the pair of you,” said Matt. “Doofus is just a dog. Dogs howl.”

“He’s not just a dog,” protested Holly. “Look at him! Look how fast he’s growing! And look at the way he lies down in doorways all the time. That website said that Black Dogs guard gates and boundaries and bridges.”

“Like Barges Bridge,” said Clive.

Holly drew her breath in swiftly with a gasp. “Where’s that website?” She scrutinised the screen. “I need to check something. *Guytrash*, *Shriker*, *Bargest*... What if Barges Bridge is really Bargest Bridge?”

“You’re bonkers,” said Matt. “Anyway, a black dog’s only called a Bargest in Yorkshire.”

“Yorkshire’s not that far away,” Clive pointed out.

“Matt? Can you pass me the phone? There’s something I need to know,” said Holly. She was frantically typing on the computer again; but this time she was looking for a different website – that of the dogs’ home.

She found the phone number on the screen and rang it.

“Hallo? Hallo, we got a black puppy from you a few months ago. The mixed-breed one that never barked, he only howled. Yes, that’s the one. No, he’s fine. But please could you tell me where he was found? I know it was up on Whitten Moor, but where exactly?”

Holly bit her lip while the girl checked at the other end. “Oh. I see. Thank you.” She closed the call and stared at Doofus.

“Well?” said Clive.

“That proves it. He’s a Bargest,” she said. “He was found sitting in the middle of Barges Bridge around New Year.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” objected Matt. “It just explains why he likes Barges Bridge. He’s looking for his owners, the ones who dumped him there. He was probably an unwanted Christmas present.”

“Jarvis Turnpike said he shot a big black dog round there at Christmas,” Holly said.

“I expect that was his mother,” said Matt.

“People wouldn’t dump a mother and a puppy!” she protested.

“Why not? Life is tough. You’ll learn that, little sister.”

She glared at him. But Clive said,

“It doesn’t matter. We can’t prove how Doofus got there. But we *can* test what he is. It seems that he does know when animals are dying. I’m thinking some sort of electromagnetic force.”

“What?” demanded Holly. “He’s not a magnet. He’s a harbinger of doom!”

“But what sort of doom?” said Clive. “That is the question. Little howls for little dooms, like woodlouse dooms. Big howls for big dooms, like... like...”

He gazed at Doofus. So did Holly. Doofus hadn’t howled properly for a while now.

So what would happen when he did? A trickle of fear, like a melting icicle, found its cold way down her spine.

Chapter Nine

Spring was sprouting from every tree and bush, bejewelling them with gold and purple blossom like lavish scatterings of treasure. Holly watched this decorative progress jealously from her classroom, where she was stuck doing exams. She did not really mind exams, since she was quick if not entirely accurate; but to Clive they were a form of torture.

However, the exams finished, and the cricket season started, in two senses of the word. Clive went off hunting for grasshoppers and crickets: while Holly's teacher told her that she had the makings of a good fast bowler, so she draped an old curtain over the washing line and spent every evening bowling into it until Dad protested that her run-up was ruining the lawn.

Doofus lay on the grass and watched her practise, occasionally yawning with his strange half-howl. He never tried to retrieve the cricket ball as Pancake used to do so avidly. On the other hand, he didn't try to bury it in the compost heap either.

At last the half-term holiday arrived, which meant two weeks off school. As well as bowling, Holly began to keep a diary. It was not a holiday diary, nor a bowling diary. It was a howling diary, with howls listed on a scale of one to ten.

One was barely a sigh; *ten* signified the full-blown, blood-curdling, nose-to-moon affair. She had yet to record a ten.

Her diary read:

Friday, 5.30pm. 3/10. Number 7's tortoise drowned in pond.

Saturday, 7.20 am. 2/10. ?? Unknown.

Saturday, 11.15am. 5/10. Mrs Wragg's cat put down by vet.

Sunday, 9.35 am. 3/10. Dead sparrow in Clive's garden.

Sunday. 1.40 pm. 1/10. ??

And so on. It was a gruesome diary, but she had to keep it. Only in this way could she confirm the truth: that whenever Doofus howled, something died.

The closer and the bigger the dying creature was, the louder his howls. Mrs Devlin's mousetrap three doors down caused several howls at level 2 or 3. But Jamie Garrow's guinea pig, half a mile away, had no effect. Nor did flies, unless they were swatted practically underneath his nose.

Clive was deeply interested in her diary, and had reported the cat and Jamie's guinea pig to her. He claimed to have made friends with the vet. Holly suspected that he just bombarded the poor woman with questions until she broke down and talked.

"I'd like to know how much Doofus howls at night," he said. "But he's too far away to tell."

“Too far away? What do you mean? You only live next door.”

“On Sunday I got up at two in the morning,” said Clive, “to observe Mr Finney. He keeps trying to eat his little wheel. Anyway, I heard a noise outside the shed and when I looked out, there was Doofus.”

“*Where* was Doofus?”

“Galloping off up the street, towards the hill.”

“To Barges Bridge,” said Holly, her heart sinking.

“I don’t know. I didn’t feel like following at two in the morning. But he did the same thing on Monday at the same time.”

“At two o’clock in the morning? Were you up every night?”

“I’m trying to be nocturnal over half-term,” explained Clive.

“So is Doofus,” she said glumly, looking down at her dog. He was sprawled hugely across the entrance to Clive’s shed, one ear pricked, one eye half open, as if watching and listening for something far away. “I’ve *told* Dad to tie him up at night. But Dad thinks Doofus is a big softie who’d never dream of jumping gates.”

“So what’s he doing on the moor?” asked Clive. “He won’t be going all the way up there for no reason. He’s a clever dog. Why don’t you take him up there and find out what it is? I’ll come with you.”

Holly surveyed the clever dog. As she watched, he stretched his long legs, opened his mouth wide, yawned and sort-of-howled.

“One and a half,” she said without thinking.

“Mr Finney!” Clive dashed inside the shed. He emerged a moment later cradling something in his hand.

“Not Mr Finney?” cried Holly anxiously.

“No. It’s Tiger. The last tadpole. He ate all the others.” Clive unfolded his hand to show her a small, brown, semi-froggy corpse. “Bother.”

“What a shame,” said Holly.

Clive sighed. “The trouble with Tiger was he wouldn’t eat anything but tadpole. It was Stupid all over again.” He slipped the remains of Tiger into a plastic bag. “I’ll put him back in the stream he came from.”

“How will that help?”

“Recycling,” said Clive. “Fish’ll eat him. Well, let’s go to Barges Bridge, shall we? We could take Doofus, and see if we can find out what’s so attractive to him up there.”

“What, now?”

“Before Tiger begins to smell,” said Clive. “It’s hot, and Mum won’t let me keep dead animals in the fridge. Not since the rat.”

It *was* hot. As they plodded up the road to Barges Bridge, the sky was a whitish haze: the fields were parched. Holly realised that it hadn’t rained properly for weeks; not since the gloomy Easter. Immediately she felt thirsty,

and drained her water-bottle. Clive hadn't brought one. He had his binoculars instead.

They passed a flock of newly-shorn sheep that looked thin and frail. Their flanks were pulsing in and out as they panted to keep cool. There was no shade in their field.

"It used to be forest, this, until five thousand years ago," puffed Clive.

"What?"

"The first farmers cleared it in the late Stone Age, the Neolithic. That was after the last Ice Age about ten thousand years ago, though the glaciers didn't actually get this far down the country. But there were people here way before *that*. They've found fossils in some of the caves."

"How do you know all this, Clive?"

"I read," said Clive. "Slowly."

Holly wondered how much had changed since those first farmers had chopped down the trees with stone axes. Not a lot, she thought: even the dry-stone walls looked ancient. It felt like another, timeless world up here, dry and still and silent under a pitiless sun. Doofus pulled at the lead, anxious to move on.

Suddenly, as Holly watched, the sheep jerked up their heads in unison. They began to move. Together they ran to and fro across the field, skittering to one side and then the other, unable to decide which way to go.

"What's upset them?" she said, and then she heard it: a thin, high, distant howling.

Doofus heard it too. He stopped tugging at the lead and stood alert, quivering with eagerness.

"That's more than one dog," said Clive.

"I don't like it," said Holly under her breath.

Neither did the sheep. They were panicking. Deciding on one direction, they all charged at the metal gate beside the road. They jammed up against the rails, bodies pressed together, their brown eyes staring out at Holly.

More howls wafted across the moor. This time they were closer. Clive got his over-sized binoculars out and climbed up on the wall to look.

"I can see them!" he exclaimed. "There are eight or ten of them. Big dogs, greyish. They all look pretty similar from here. They're coming this way. Hey. Wow." His voice changed.

Holly screwed up her eyes to stare across the land. A grey blur shifted on a distant slope, moving steadily through clumps of heather. Although she couldn't pick out individual dogs, she could hear the howls distinctly, carrying through the still, warm air. The sheep began to baa in panic.

As she gazed, the lead whipped through her hand.

“Doofus!” Holly tried to grab at it: too late. Doofus had got away. He raced a short way up the road and then leapt gracefully over the wall where it was lowest. He sprinted across the dry grass with his lead trailing behind him.

“Doofus!” cried Holly. “Oh, help! We’ll have to go after him!”

Clive, his binoculars pressed to his eyes, didn’t even stir. “No point. We’ll never catch him up.”

Holly climbed up on top of the wall to whistle loudly, but without much hope. If Doofus wanted to go, it would take more than a whistle to stop him. He was already little more than a black smudge hurtling away over the moor to meet the other dogs.

She watched, wondering what to do, as the smudge met the blur. They merged and circled before running off again.

“They must be his friends,” she said miserably. “We’ve got to go and get him!”

“They’re not coming this way any more,” said Clive, peering through his binoculars. “They’re going north. I can see Doofus: he’s at their head. Oh boy. Oh wow.”

“What? He’s their leader!” Holly was frantic. “I bet he’s been out with those dogs every night when they were worrying the sheep! You saw how terrified they were. We’ve *got* to catch him, Clive!”

“They’ve gone down in a dip now, out of sight,” said Clive. He lowered his binoculars.

“But we know which way they’re headed. Barges Bridge!” She jumped down off the wall.

Clive hung back. “Those were a lot of big dogs,” he said. “Something really weird about them.”

“I don’t care. We’ve got to get Doofus! Come on!”

Holly set off running up the road. She thought she might be able to catch up with the dogs where the road curved round towards Barges Bridge. Although Clive followed her, he was soon left behind. Her legs had outgrown his lately; and she found herself practically flying along the path. It was exhilarating being so much faster than Clive.

However, she had no time to feel exhilarated. Glancing to her left, for an instant she glimpsed a long grey figure running swiftly, before it was hidden again by the swell of the moor. The dogs were definitely closer.

She suddenly didn’t want to be that close to them. As Clive had said, they were big dogs. She stopped for a moment to pant and listen. More howls swirled through the air.

Next second, the howls were drowned out by a new, louder noise: a huge and throaty roar charging up behind her. She spun round, startled.

It was a tractor, and it was tomato red. On top of it perched Jarvis Turnpike in equally bright overalls. He looked like the jolly presenter of some kids' TV programme; except that his face was not jolly at all. Far from it.

As the tractor overtook her, he shouted furiously over the engine's racket: "That ruddy dog of yours is after my sheep! Him and a load of others! I *warned* you!"

He stopped the tractor at the next gate, wrenched it open and chugged the tractor through into the field.

"Close the gate!" he bellowed, before the tractor bounced and coughed across the grass towards the pack.

Holly went through the gate and pulled it closed, just as Clive came panting up and collapsed over its top rail.

"Wait," he gasped.

Holly could not afford to wait. She raced across the field after the tractor, leaping and bounding over tussocks.

A little further on, the tractor growled to a halt. Here the stream cut across the field. Although it was almost dry, its steep banks blocked the tractor's way.

Jasper Turnpike leapt down from his seat and jumped across the stream, a bright red flash of colour on the dull moorland. He was shouting and waving something. Holly caught another glimpse of a grey dog, heading upstream, before it disappeared from sight again.

Reaching the tractor, she clambered up on it to look out from its higher viewpoint. There was a big water-bottle tucked underneath the seat; Holly was just about to steal a swig when the farmer turned and saw her.

"Get down off my tractor!" he bellowed. "Leave my water alone! You ruddy children, you've got no respect. Letting that ruddy dog of yours run wild!" He jumped back over the stream towards them.

"My dog doesn't chase sheep," protested Holly, desperately hoping it was true.

Clive came staggering up. "Where are they?" he panted.

"They've gone up to the bridge, heading north," shouted Jarvis Turnpike. "But I've shot them!"

"You've *what*?"

"I've shot them!" The farmer held his hand aloft triumphantly. "I've filmed them with my phone! Would have been my ruddy shotgun if I had it with me." He strode back to the tractor.

"Let me see," said Clive. The farmer held out his phone and he squinted at it. "I can't see Doofus."

Jarvis magnified the screen with a flick of his fingers. "There! That's his back end! And those are all the others right behind him, clear as day! Your

dog's a menace. You can't keep it under control. I'll be sending these pictures to all the farmers in the area – and to the paper too. Then something might get done!"

"Yes," said Clive, still gazing at the phone. "I think it might."

"Where have the dogs gone now?" asked Holly, scanning the moor. "I can't see them at all."

Jarvis turned and scowled northward over the empty moorland. "Probably gone to ground somewhere. They'll have a den: maybe in some of the old mine-workings. But we'll hunt them, and we'll find them. I'll make sure I have my shotgun with me next time. And if I find that blasted dog of yours, I'll take great pleasure in shooting it – and not just with a phone!"

Holly bit her lip as she stared into the distance. The pack of dogs was nowhere to be seen, or heard. She could hear nothing but the whining of the wind; and a glug from Clive. He was just replacing the lid of the farmer's water-bottle.

Jarvis whirled round. "Get out of there!" he roared, and the two children fled. As she ran, Holly heard the tractor start up again behind them. It began to chug towards the farm.

"Lovely character, isn't he?" panted Clive as they tramped back across the field. "But I'll give him one thing: he's brave."

"*Brave?* What's so brave about shooting dogs?"

"He's brave to be hunting down that pack."

Holly wasn't paying attention. "Hurry up," she said. "We've got to find Doofus and get him out of here!"

"But we don't know where he's gone," objected Clive.

"Want to bet? Barges Bridge. Come on!"

She clambered over the wall, dropped back on to the road, and hurried towards the bridge.

"There he is! I told you! I knew it." Doofus was lying down, panting, in the middle of the old stone bridge. He was below its parapet, and therefore invisible from the farm.

She looked round for Jarvis Turnpike; but the tractor was hidden somewhere behind the buildings. Its faint growl was still audible, along with the frantic barking of the sheepdogs in the farmyard. Somehow they would have to sneak Doofus past the farm.

Clive had stopped. "What about the other dogs? Where are they?"

Holly peered up the road. "I can't see any of them. They've gone."

"Good," said Clive emphatically. "Because they're not dogs at all. They're wolves."

Holly's mouth dropped open as she stared at him.

"They're *what?*"

“They must have escaped from somewhere,” Clive said, his voice low but tense with excitement. “I know they’ve been talking about bringing wolves back to Scotland. Maybe somebody’s already done it here. Because those were definitely wolves.”

Holly whirled round. “Doofus!”

The black head lifted. Doofus stood up and began to stroll casually towards her.

“Where are they?” she demanded. “Where are all your friends, Doofus? Where are they hiding?”

Doofus’s only response was a faint twitch of his ears. He was breathing heavily and streaked with sweat and dust.

“We’re going home,” said Holly fiercely. “Heel!” She grabbed his trailing lead and he followed obediently as she headed back the way they had come.

But as they approached the farm, the tractor appeared around the side of the farmhouse with a roar like sudden thunder.

“Get down!” commanded Clive. Ducking behind the wall, they ran alongside it in a slow, awkward crouch, so that Jarvis Turnpike would not spot them.

They had to stop at the farm gate, listening to the tractor’s angry chug close by, just on the other side of the wall. There was no way to get across the drive unnoticed.

“We’re stuck,” breathed Holly. Through a gap in the wall’s loosely-fitting stones, she glimpsed a flash of red as Jarvis Turnpike jumped down from the tractor. As soon as they tried to run across his driveway, he would see them – and Doofus.

“Wait a bit, till he goes inside,” mouthed Clive.

But Jarvis was in no hurry to go inside. He paused to curse his noisy sheepdogs, and to swig his water.

And then, to Holly’s astonishment, he *howled*. He yowled as loud as any dog. He shrieked and yelled and swore.

“Now!” said Clive. While Jarvis Turnpike was dancing a strange jig on his drive, they scuttled across the gateway and then raced pell-mell down the road.

Not until they were round the bend did Holly pause. She felt a little safer now that she could see the village emerging down below her.

“What happened?” she said. “Is Jarvis Turnpike after us?”

Clive raised his head cautiously over the top of the wall. “No. He’s throwing his big water bottle around.”

“His water bottle? Why? He must be mad!”

“He certainly is,” said Clive with satisfaction. “Mad as a hopping hornet. Because I put Tiger the dead tadpole inside there.”

Chapter Ten

“Have you seen this?” said Matt. “It looks as if Clive wasn’t off his head after all.”

He held up that week’s local paper, so that Holly could read the headline:

WOLF PACK TERRORIZES MOORLAND FARM

Underneath the headline were two pictures. One showed Jarvis Turnpike looking smug and holding up his phone, while the other was a shot that he had taken of the dogs – except that it was obvious, seeing the picture blown up, that these weren’t just dogs.

Holly caught her breath. “So Clive was right.”

“This is so cool! Wolves on our moors! Listen to this.” Matt began to read aloud. “*The grey wolf became extinct in England hundreds of years ago. These animals have obviously escaped from a wildlife park or possibly a private zoo...*”

Holly leaned over him to read it herself. The local wildlife park was most indignant at the suggestion.

“*We have never kept wolves,*” said its Director. “*And none of our animals have ever escaped, apart from those wallabies. And the wild boar.*”

But the next sentence made her draw a sharp breath.

“*Some people have suggested that local dogs are running with the wolves. I am convinced of it,*’ said farmer Jarvis Turnpike.”

“Cool?” she cried. “You think having grey wolves on our doorstep is *cool*? And what about Doofus?”

“They’re not on our doorstep. And you can’t tell it’s Doofus in the picture,” Matt pointed out. “You can only see his back legs. The article doesn’t mention him, or us.”

“Good!”

Mum came to tidy the paper away and paused, peering closely at the front page.

“Good heavens,” she said, “just look at that! Water restrictions. I’ll have to stop hosing the garden.”

Matt and Holly glanced at each other.

“Mum,” said Holly, “there’s a pack of wolves up on the moor. You shouldn’t go running up there.”

“Too hot for running,” agreed Mum. “I’ll go swimming for a while instead. I’m not sure if I believe all that about wolves, though. Wolves? In a crowded country like ours? Somebody would have noticed.”

“They just did,” said Matt.

“But, Mum, if it’s true—” began Holly.

“If it’s true, they’ll find them soon enough,” said Mum. “It’s not a big place, after all. Now get your shoes on, the pair of you. We’re going to see Nan.”

“When’s she coming home?”

“Monday, I hope,” said Mum. “Luckily I’m off work next week, but we’ll get home visits from a nurse as well.”

Holly was not sure if she wanted Nan to come home yet. Nan was weak and fluttery. It was confusing; although she loved Nan, she thought she would be better off in hospital.

But Nan was not happy in hospital. She pined. It was a quandary.

Holly did not particularly care for the hospital, with all its rattling trolleys and clacking feet constantly passing the bed where Nan lay helpless. She did not like to see Nan this way. It reminded her too sharply of Pancake’s final week, when Pancake got so listless and exhausted and wanted to do nothing but sleep, until one morning she simply didn’t wake up any more.

So Holly fidgeted by Nan’s hospital bed, kicking at the chair legs until Mum told her off. But what else could she do? She couldn’t really talk to Nan because now Nan could talk back even less than before. When Holly gave her a pen and paper, the pen fell from Nan’s limp hand.

None the less, Mum kept up a steady stream of one-sided conversation about their expedition to buy Holly’s uniform for High School, and her curtain-bowling, and Matt’s latest exploits in a cricket match.

“The pitch is really dry,” said Matt. “Great for spin, but now it’s starting to crack.”

“There’s a pack of wolves up on the moor,” said Holly suddenly. The old face turned to look at her.

“I doubt it,” Mum said, frowning at her. “I think that photo in the paper was a fake. That Turnpike fellow doesn’t have too high a reputation, according to Ailsa. Anyway, Nan doesn’t want to hear rubbish about wolves.”

It seemed to Holly that Nan didn’t hear very much at all. She plucked at her sheet with trembling fingers, looked at Holly with appeal in her cloudy eyes and said,

“Do? Do?”

“Doofus is at home, Nan,” Holly said. “Clive’s looking after him. He’s fine.”

“He misses you,” Mum added. Holly didn’t think that this was true. Doofus showed no sign of missing Nan or anyone else. But Nan sighed, and plucked at the sheet some more.

“We’d bring him to see you,” said Matt, “but it’s not allowed. The nurses aren’t even too sure about *me*.”

“Well, you *are* barely human,” said Holly. Nan did not even try to smile.

“Uncle Ted’s coming on a visit for your birthday soon,” said Mum. “That’ll be nice, won’t it?”

Nan brightened a little; but only a little. When Holly kissed her goodbye, Nan’s cheek was as soft and silky as a rose petal just about to fall. Before they even left the room, her eyes were closed. Holly felt suddenly afraid.

“Nan will be all right, won’t she?” she asked on the way home.

“Of course she will,” said Mum.

“Why is Uncle Ted coming all the way from Cornwall to see her?” Uncle Ted was Nan’s younger brother.

“For her birthday, like I said. Nan’s going to be fine,” said Mum firmly.

But of course Mum would say that. Holly just worried more. Uncle Ted hadn’t been up this way for years. Why this birthday, now? Was it because they thought it would be the last one?

And what if Nan came home and Doofus howled? What if Holly’s first idea had been right, and his howl truly was deadly? What if it contained some dreadful note that made animals keel over? What might that do to Nan, so thin and frail? It was like a weight around her neck.

When they got home, Holly went next door to collect Doofus. He was lying across the entrance to the shed, like a shadow.

No, not just a shadow, she thought: he was like an absence of light, a body cutting off the sun. A black hole. Clive had tied his lead to the shed door.

“I didn’t need to tie him, though. He hasn’t budged,” said Clive, stepping over him.

He was carrying the tadpole tank. Instead of water, it held a mass of twigs and moss.

“Is that a new armadilladarium?”

“I saw a field mouse,” said Clive. “I think it’s living under the back fence.”

“You can’t keep it in a tank.”

“Why not, if it likes it? I’m luring it with mixed nuts and raisins.” He laid the tank carefully on its side by the fence, and threw a scattering of nuts into it.

“That won’t work.”

“You never know,” said Clive. He was cheerful, as always when planning animals. “And a boy on Egerton Street said he’ll sell me a snake.”

“You’re catching mice to feed to the snake?”

“No! Well, only if Doofus howls.”

“Shut up, Clive! It’s not a joke.”

“I wasn’t joking.” Clive settled the tank and straightened up. “Our town was on the telly,” he said. “They showed a picture of Whitten Moor. They’ve called in the Ministry of Something to check out the wolves.”

“What will *they* do?”

“They’ll hold meetings,” said Clive. “But they showed lots of angry farmers, too, shouting Action! and shooting crows.”

“Crows? Why?”

“Because nobody could find any wolves, and they wanted to film them shooting something. Apparently the moor is now crawling with film crews. But nobody’s seen any wolves at all,” said Clive.

“What, none?”

“It sounded like some people are doubting Jarvis Turnpike. Saying the photo’s a fake. Saying it’s a hoax to bring tourists to the area.”

“But we know the wolves are there!” she cried. “Where can they be hiding?”

“Ah.” Clive picked up his wormery and inspected it. “There was a separate newsflash about a barn collapsing a few miles away. There are old mine workings underneath it and the ground’s shifted with the drought.”

“Old mines?”

“I’m not saying the wolves are there... but the moors are riddled with tunnels from ancient lead mines, to say nothing of natural cave systems. I bet half of them have never been discovered. So what if Jarvis Turnpike was right, and the wolves are hiding somewhere underground?” He sighed wistfully. “I just wish I knew where.”

“Clive, you cannot catch a wolf to keep as a pet,” said Holly.

“I wasn’t thinking of that. I’d just like to observe them.”

“Wolves are dangerous! You were scared of them!”

“I know,” said Clive regretfully. “But I’ll have to get over being scared if I want to work with animals.”

“I don’t think you need to get over being afraid of wolves.”

He shrugged. “Well, anyway, you’ll have to keep Doofus in the house at night. Make sure he doesn’t get out.”

She agreed with him on that. But Doofus did not want to stay inside that night. When Holly tried to keep him in her bedroom, he whuffed and thumped his tail and rolled over and got up to pace around so much that she simply couldn’t sleep.

So she led him downstairs and shut him in the kitchen. An hour later, Matt woke her up by shaking her shoulder.

“Go and sort that dog out. He’s keeping me awake,” he mumbled. His bedroom was directly over the kitchen.

Matt’s eyes were almost closed. His hair stuck out in tufts. He smelt of sleepy, greasy teenager: of crisps and old deodorant and sweat.

“You sort him out,” said Holly.

“He’s *your* dog.”

She rolled out of bed with a groan and stumbled down to the kitchen. It was quarter past four in the morning, and getting light. Doofus was scratching at the kitchen door.

As she opened it he burst past her, ran to the front door and shoved his shoulder against it. He looked as if he wanted to whine, although Doofus never whined.

“You don’t want a wee,” Holly said severely. “You just want to go outside.”

Doofus began to lift his leg against the door.

“Oh, no,” said Holly. Mum would never forgive her. She grabbed his lead from its peg and attached it to his collar before opening the door.

“Do it quick, then back inside.”

Outside the day was pale and clean, just waiting for people to wake up and notice it. A multitude of small birds were shouting at cross-purposes to each other.

Doofus tugged at his lead.

“No way,” said Holly, wrapping it around her wrist.

He tugged harder, and pulled her over onto the grass. She had a vision of being dragged through the gate and down the footpath on her stomach.

“Stop it!” she said. She managed to wind the lead around a gnarled branch of the cotoneaster bush by the path. Doofus strained against it.

And then, away in the distance, Holly heard howling.

Doofus went frantic. He jumped up and down, trying to leap the gate, but getting nowhere. He opened his mouth as if he was barking, although no sound came out.

Holly wound the lead around the bush some more, and attempted to grab Doofus’s collar. He pulled away from her, rushing and bounding at the gate in a fever of excitement. She had never seen him so agitated.

Someone’s feet were pattering briskly down the road: the milkman, thought Holly without paying proper attention, and she called out, “Please can you help me with my dog?”

The pattering footsteps increased their pace. They arrived at the gate and stopped. Behind the gate’s metal curlicues stood a large, lean, shaggy animal.

It was a little like a big grey dog, except that its head was wrong: it was too triangular, with a narrow jaw. Its half-bared teeth were long and yellow. This dog was not afraid of her. Black eyes stared through the gate, and she froze, staring back.

There were no reflections in its eyes. They were holes into nothingness.

She was gazing through the railings at a big, bad wolf.

Chapter Eleven

Doofus hurled himself towards the gate, his muscles bulging, his body quivering.

The lead went taut; and then went PTWANG.

The bush bounced back into Holly and sent her sprawling. By the time she recovered, Doofus had sprung like a racehorse over the gate.

Not just over the gate. He leapt right over the startled wolf and as soon as he hit the ground was speeding away up the road. Holly was left alone in the garden clutching the remains of his lead.

She sat on the grass with her mouth open, staring at the wolf. But the wolf ignored her. It whirled round and set off after Doofus. Holly staggered to the gate and gazed out at the street.

And then she saw shadow after waiting shadow raise itself from gates and hedges. Wolf after wolf took shape in the empty yellow dawn; and, swift and scuffling, followed Doofus down the road.

Holly was transfixed. This trail of wolves in the empty street was something wonderful to behold, like a scene from a Grimm's fairy tale. Then she reminded herself sternly that these wolves were real, and unlikely to follow fairy tale rules. She shrank back from the gate: but the wolves were only interested in Doofus.

A dozen of them were now loping after Doofus, as if they were playing Follow my Leader. She wondered if they had come looking for him, or were just exploring the village – but either way, they *knew* him. Rounding the corner of the houses, they disappeared from view.

Holly stood irresolute for about four seconds. Then she ran inside, flung on her jeans, T-shirt and trainers, and went to shake Matt.

“Wake up! Wolves are chasing Doofus. I'm going to follow them. Are you coming?”

Matt groaned and muttered something incomprehensible without opening his eyes.

“Tell Mum and Dad, then,” said Holly. She wasn't going to tell them herself, because they'd immediately stop her. And scared though she was, she needed to know where those wolves were going.

She ran downstairs, grabbed her mobile phone, and let herself out quietly. She took Matt's bike from behind the wheelie bins. It was too small for Matt now, but she had nearly grown into it: and it was fast.

Before she left, she threw a handful of gravel at Clive's window. He did not appear. So much for being nocturnal, thought Holly, as she started pedalling up the road the way the wolves had run.

When she reached the edge of the village, she could see the wolf pack heading up the hill, already maybe half a mile away. They'd got a big head start while she was getting dressed.

She almost sped up the slope past Ailsa's farm; the gears on Matt's bike were much better than her old one. She reckoned that on the flat, she would go faster than a wolf. It occurred to her that over the last few weeks her legs had grown to fully fit this bike.

It also occurred to her that this might be one of the stupidest things she had ever done in her life.

Well, she wasn't going to turn back now. She could see the pack crossing the field ahead, scattering sheep, though they didn't seem to be chasing them. Doofus was in the lead, and they were still following him up to the moor.

Was he the leader, or was he being hunted? Holly couldn't tell. She realised she would only know that if they caught him up. Despite her mixed feelings about Doofus, she really did not want to see him being torn to bits by hungry wolves.

However, they weren't catching him up yet. Doofus actually seemed to be gaining on them slightly. She wondered how long he would be able to keep up the pace.

Switching gears again, she stood on the pedals as the road steepened. She laboured up to the shoulder of the hill, where she caught another glimpse of running wolves before they disappeared from view. But she had a good idea of where Doofus was heading: Barges Bridge.

As the road levelled, she began to pick up speed. She startled a family of badgers snuffling in the earth bank by the roadside. They waddled away as she shot past, only to start snuffling and digging again behind her. She must tell Clive.

High overhead, a lark started up: its busy, hurtling song sounded as if it couldn't get the notes out fast enough. Somewhere away over the vast moor a curlew was pouring out a musical cascade of blue and silver through the clean, pale dawn. It seemed surreal to be chasing wolves to a soundtrack of birdsong.

Now she was on the long, winding stretch of road to Barges Farm. When she passed its gate, the noisy farm dogs set off barking somewhere inside. Holly winced. They would probably wake Jarvis Turnpike.

However, there was no time to worry about that. Holly hurtled on to Barges Bridge; and there at last she rested, halting on its stone hump that rose like a small whale's back above the sea of moorland. She surveyed the swell of land: dusty heather, straw-dry grass, no wolves. The lemon sky told her that the sun was just about to rise. Where were they?

All at once she caught sight of Doofus, running fast and low to the ground. Behind him came the pack, a rippling tide of grey. They swung round in a big, slow arc until they were heading towards her – towards the bridge.

Her muscles tensed with sudden fear. She had to get out of their way. What should she do?

The sensible thing would be to run back to Jarvis Turnpike's farm. She could bang on the door and shelter there. Jarvis might be angry, but she'd be safe.

Holly did not do the sensible thing. She was afraid of Jarvis Turnpike's temper; so she told herself there wasn't time to reach the farm. Instead, dropping the bike, she ran down from the bridge and jumped into the stream.

Except that there was no stream now, mid-drought. The tadpole pools had gone. The reeds were parched and yellow. There was no water here at all: just damp mud.

Holly pushed along the dry stream bed to hide beneath the bridge. It was like a small tunnel. Under there, the air was as cold as the stone at her back. It was so dim that she could see little apart from the two semi-circles of light framed by darkness, one on either side of her.

But she could hear. For the first time, she heard a howl, too close for comfort. She froze. That was not Doofus.

There was another strange howl, even closer than the first; and then, to her alarm, a jostling, shuffling rush of feet.

The pack of wolves was crossing the bridge right overhead. Holly stopped breathing. In another minute they'd have passed, and she'd be safe again... *Go, go*, she urged them silently.

Surely, by now, they must be running down the other side. Her heart lurched as a dark shape appeared, silhouetted in one of the pale semi-circles.

It was not a wolf. It was Doofus. He stopped and sniffed the air.

His head turned towards her, as if he scanned her, for the briefest instant. Then, before she could move or even think, he plunged away from her, away from the tunnel entrance, charging further up the stream bed. The grey horde came into view, but they did not look her way. They followed Doofus, body after body in a rustling, surging mass, until at last they disappeared.

Holly huddled motionless beneath the bridge, listening hard. It took a while for her to hear anything beyond the thumping of her own pulse. But once that quietened, she heard nothing: neither howl, nor rustle, nor any scuffle or scrape of claws on stone.

So after another moment she ventured out to peer along the deeply cut stream bed. She could see the bruised grass on the banks where the pack had pushed past. She could see the marks their feet had written on the mud.

But she could not see *them*. They had gone. Another carefree lark piped up above her: elsewhere, the silence was intense.

“Half way across the moor by now,” thought Holly; yet she was puzzled. How could they have disappeared so quickly?

Very cautiously she pushed along the dry stream bed a little further, following the clawprints. She went no more than a few metres from the bridge, around a bend—

—and suddenly she was tumbling, with nothing underneath her feet, being scraped and clouted round her head and legs and shoulders. She was sliding, rolling, falling, falling, and she could not help herself.

It seemed to go on for ever. After a final thump, it took her several seconds to realise she had stopped. Inside her head she was still falling.

Everything was dark. Holly lay dazed and immobile, trying to work out where she was and what had happened.

There was rough earth beneath her hand. She shifted, and heard the dry rattle of small stones. They seemed to echo, as if she was in a large space.

She was underground. The stream-bed had given way. She might be in one of the old mine-workings: or perhaps it was a natural cave.

Either way, it didn't make much difference. She was buried deep in the dark, alone, with no way out.

Chapter Twelve

Holly tested her limbs. She felt bruised and battered, but everything still seemed to work. Cautiously she stood up in the dark and felt around her.

To her back was rough stone. Beneath her feet, the ground was dry and slightly sloping. There was another faint rattle of pebbles underfoot as she turned: they were falling away downhill. Holly froze lest she should follow.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she realised that it was not as pitch black as she had at first thought. Above her head was a small, ragged patch of light. That must be where she had fallen through, although it did not do much to illuminate the cavernous dark around her. It was as if the earth had opened an unexpected giant mouth and gulped her in; but it had not yet completely swallowed her.

Holly fished in her pocket and pulled out her mobile phone. With relief, she saw that it was still working. Her relief turned to dismay when she realised that there was no signal. She was too far down.

But at least the phone provided a little more light. By its white gleam she saw that she was in a deep, steep-sided cavern, although she couldn't tell if it was natural or man made. Tunnels snaked away into the dark on either side. They might have been carved by ancient water or by ancient hands; in either case, she didn't feel inclined to follow them.

She looked up at the roof. There was no way she could see of climbing up those stony walls.

"Help!" she yelled. It immediately struck her as a foolish thing to do. The earth seemed to swallow up her voice; and anyway, who was going to hear her shout, down here?

But somebody – or something – had heard her. From the shadows there came a faint, muffled snarl.

Holly's head whipped round. The growl seemed to have come from the sloping tunnel to her right. A dreadful idea struck her like a blow: this was the wolves' hide-out.

This was where they'd been coming from, and where they'd run back to. It explained why the pack seemed to just disappear off the face of the moor.

Which would mean the wolves were down here with her...

She sidled over to the tunnels on her left, trying to move as quietly as possible, using her phone as a torch. There was a meeting of three tunnels here. One was blocked with fallen earth and rock. The next looked open, so she tried that one; but a little way in, the stone walls narrowed drastically. She could not wriggle through the tiny gap. There was no escape this way.

And now she heard the snarl again, distinctly.

It was not Doofus. Doofus never made a sound like that. It must be a wolf.

The phone went dark, and this time she did not try to wake it up again. Instead she pressed herself into the narrow tunnel as far as she could, huddling against the unyielding stone, trying to make herself small. She was trapped in utter darkness, and something was there with her.

She heard the faintest scuff of feet upon the ground. Her hair stood up on end. There was the soft brush of a body against the tunnel wall: higher than she would have thought.

A big wolf, then. Huge. Holly stared wide-eyed into the dark, trying not to stir, desperate to see and desperate not to. A rank, sour, thick smell filled her nostrils. It was the scent of blood. She felt the vibration of slow, silent feet. It must be heavy.

Yet it moved almost without noise. Now it was so near that she could hear it breathing. Now she could feel its breath, a movement of warm air on her face. It smelt. She closed her eyes against the darkness.

For the third time, she heard the snarl, right by her cheek.

And then, away beyond it, came a howl.

With a rush of air, the unseen creature turned. Fur grazed her face: for an instant, a heavy body pressed against her arm and shoulder as it swung round.

Then it was gone. She heard it move away, following the howl back into the main cavern. The pressure in the tunnel seemed to lessen.

There was another, louder howl, echoing through the tunnels, and hard on its heels came a deep and dreadful growl: almost a roar. Then there was a snap, a series of sharp, yelping cries, the sound of scurrying feet – and silence.

Holly stood silent too, but both her heart and mind were racing. What had she just encountered? What wolf could possibly be big enough to breathe into her face, and press its flank against her shoulder?

She seemed still to feel its weight; and that brush against her cheek. Its coat had not felt rough and hairy, as she would expect a wolf's to be. It had felt more like fur.

Where was it now? Carefully she eased herself out of her crevice and tiptoed back into the cavern.

The dim light through the roof showed her that the space was empty. She could not hear a sound. The animals must have gone down the third tunnel, directly opposite her; and in that case, that surely must be the way out. After all, the wolves were unlikely to have fallen in through the same hole that she had. They must have their own, less painful entrance.

The rank stench of the creature she had just met lingered in the still, cool air. She did not want to venture down the third tunnel.

But she would have to. There was no other way out. And if she hung around here, wasn't whatever-it-was just as likely to find her?

So, ignoring the thumping of her heart and the weakness in her limbs that said *stay here*, she made herself enter the third tunnel.

Within three metres, it was so dark that she needed to switch on her phone again. As soon as she did so, a shadow rushed at her out of the dark and leapt up at her, throwing her back against the wall. Holly cried out.

But teeth did not tear at her. Instead, something was licking her, nuzzling a dark head into her stomach. It did not smell of blood, but of Value Doggibix.

“Doofus!” breathed Holly. “Oh, Doofus. Am I glad to see you.”

And, falling to her knees, she wrapped her arms around his strong black neck. She had never wanted to hug Doofus before; now she didn’t want to let him go.

It was Doofus who at last pulled free of her and began to trot down the tunnel. Holly followed. She trusted him. And sure enough, there was a new glimmer of daylight just a little way ahead.

But Doofus stopped before they reached it. An opening ran off to their side, dark and deep. The air here stank. Doofus stood perfectly still, pressing against Holly’s legs to stop her moving, and she understood. Down there was where the wolves were; or the other thing that she could not name.

Eventually Doofus stirred. He nudged her forward. A dozen more steps, and she could see a thin slit of sky above her. She was in a steep trough – but not too steep to climb. She scrambled up uneven stones and hauled herself on roots and grass, until at last she stumbled out into welcome daylight. The newly risen sun shone in her face, so dazzling that she could barely see. She shut her eyes, in relief as much as anything.

So she did not expect the heavy hand that fell upon her shoulder, nor the angry shout right in her ear.

“Got yer! Yer young hooligan, what have you been doing to my sheep?”

Chapter Thirteen

Jarvis Turnpike's face was almost as red as his overalls. Flecks of spit flew from his mouth as he berated her.

"What the devil are you letting that dog of yours—"

"Please," said Holly desperately, "shush! Don't shout!"

"I'll shout if I—" He stopped as Holly, mouthing at him, pointed to the ground beneath their feet.

"It wasn't my dog worrying your sheep," she whispered. "It was the wolves. They were chasing him. They're down there, in the caves. That's where they've been hiding. My dog found them – he led me here."

She did not mention that he had also led the pack of wolves here. Doofus had scabbled out of the opening behind her and now stood patiently by her side, only his heaving flanks revealing the efforts he had made that morning.

Jarvis Turnpike stared at her, his mouth open. "Those wolves? They're there, down underground?"

"I think that's their entrance, where I just climbed out behind that clump of heather. But I fell in through a hole in the stream bed, on the other side of Barges Bridge. Be careful!"

This last was because Jarvis had just jumped over the heather to see the entrance. "Well! You'd never know there was a hole there, until you were right on it," he said, amazed.

Holly had begun to shiver, although it was much warmer up here in the sunshine than it had been underneath the earth.

"I don't want to stay here," she said, glancing around.

"Come on, then," said Jarvis decisively. "Back to the farmhouse, and my Missus will look after you while I look after this." He began to stride away towards the farm. Holly and Doofus followed, until they reached the gateway. There Doofus stopped and lay down.

Jarvis turned and stared at him. "What's that dog doing?"

"He's doing what he does," said Holly.

The farmer shook his head and yelled into the house. "Lexie?"

Holly had never thought there might be a Mrs Turnpike, let alone a baby Turnpike. But his wife, when she appeared, was young and thin and anxious-looking, with a red-haired, red-faced baby hiccupping on her shoulder.

"Stay in the house," commanded Jarvis as he marched inside. "Keep the doors and windows shut."

"Why? What's going on?"

"This lass found the wolves' den." Jarvis unlocked a cupboard and grabbed a shotgun. "I'm going to fill that hole in once and for all!"

He strode outside again and Holly heard the tractor roar into throaty life. Lexie ran upstairs, carrying the baby, to look out from the hall window.

Holly followed, trying to explain the situation and stuttering in the attempt. She didn't have the words to describe the presence in the tunnels; but Lexie listened without questions, while the baby clenched its podgy fists in her hair.

"I don't understand all this about wolves," said Lexie, staring through the window at the tractor chugging down the farm track. It wasn't the red tractor this time, but a slower, heavier, green one with an earth-moving shovel attached.

As it approached the gate, Doofus stood up and strolled out of its way. Then he lay down again as soon as it had passed.

"I don't understand either," said Holly. Her head was a jumble of tunnels and wolves. Why exactly had Doofus been there with them?

He wasn't with them now, thank goodness. Holly shuddered as she saw the tractor jolt over the uneven ground to Barges Bridge. Something was moving through the clumped grass beyond the bridge, making her heart stop momentarily; but it wasn't grey. More sandy-coloured, she thought, the same shade as the dry reeds; and anyway next moment it was gone.

The digger got to work, lifting and filling, for several minutes. Then she saw Jarvis throw the shotgun to his shoulder with a swift movement: a shot rang out above the tractor's thunder.

At the same instant, there was a long drawn out howl from the farmyard. It was Doofus, who had his noise pointed to the sky. There was a second shot: a second howl, which set off all the tethered farm dogs howling too. Holly's heart began to pound again amidst the din. She flinched away from the window.

But Lexie, staring out, said,

"Are those really wolves? He's got two of them. He's a good shot, my Jarvis."

Holly swallowed. She could barely speak. "Are there any more?"

"I can't see any. He's filling the hole in now. Don't you worry, pet. You're safe."

Holly did not know whether to be glad or sorry. What about the poor wolves, buried alive under all that soil? It was a horrible thought. Her imagination could all too easily conjure up the feel of falling earth, cold and damp and smothering.

"Come on," said Lexie. "I'll make you a hot drink."

Down in the kitchen, Holly held the baby while Lexie made coffee. She did not know what to do with the baby. Its head rolled and it waved its fat arms as if trying to conduct her. She was glad to hand it back over in exchange for a

mug of coffee, which was not as bad as she expected, being very milky and very sweet.

There were no more shots. Somewhere outside the tractor was still growling. Holly tried not to think about it, and looked around the kitchen instead. It was a dark, cosy room, with tiny, deep-set windows, their wide sills crammed with china knick-knacks and baby photographs.

One of the photos was propped against a stone with a hole in it. It was a little bigger than her hand, and a bluish colour, not like the local stone. The small, smooth hole looked drilled and polished. She bent down automatically to look through it.

A golden eye looked back.

Holly nearly dropped her coffee. She gulped, and made herself look through the hole again. No eye. Of course not. Just a cluttered windowsill. She was all on edge, imagining things.

“What’s this?”

“That’s his first haircut,” said Lexie fondly.

“No, the rock.”

“Oh, that... Jarvis dug that up nearby when he was clearing the pasture.”

The tractor roared up outside, and the baby squealed in delighted answer. A moment later Jarvis Turnpike came back in.

“That’s that done,” he said matter-of-factly, as if he’d just been squashing woodlice. “Was that your bike on the bridge? I brought it back for you.”

“Thank you,” said Holly faintly.

“Want a lift back down the road?”

She shook her head.

“Don’t forget to take that dog of yours,” he said. “It’s behaving itself now. I thought it was as bad as them wolves. But maybe not. Maybe they were just chasing after him, like you said.”

“He’s part wolf-hound,” Holly offered as an explanation, “so they probably thought he was their enemy.” She crossed her fingers behind her back.

“Is he? That would explain how he tracked them down,” said Lexie.

“Well, put him on a lead,” said Jarvis, and he handed Holly a length of yellow cable.

“Yes. I will. Are they really all gone? There’s – there’s nothing left?”

“There’s half a ton of earth in there,” he said with satisfaction. “There were two of them by the bridge, but I got them both.”

“Two wolves?”

“Well, they weren’t piglets,” he said. “I’ll have to tell the authorities. They can come and dig out the bodies of the rest. That’ll show a few people. Making it up, indeed! You’re a witness. I’ll need your name.”

Holly wrote it down for him, along with her address and phone number, and stood up shakily. "I'd better go."

"Do you think it's safe?" Lexie asked her husband.

"Safe enough," said Jarvis confidently. "I reckon I got them all. And if there were any that I didn't get, they'll have run a mile by this time at the sound of the shotgun."

Lexie turned to Holly. "You sure you're all right now, pet? You don't want a lift?"

"No, thanks, I'm all right."

But when Holly got on the bike, she wasn't all right. She wobbled so much that she ended up getting off it again and wheeling it down the track, with a last wave at Lexie and the baby in the window. Jarvis might be horrible, but his wife was nice enough. And at least he hadn't shot Doofus.

Doofus was waiting for her by the gate. He was imperturbable as Holly tied the yellow cable to his collar. She was reassured by his calmness: if there were still any wolves around, he would let her know. But when she wheeled the bike onto the road, he walked sedately alongside her, as if nothing had happened. They'd just been for a normal walk. The world was quiet and ordinary.

Holly checked her phone. She had a signal now, and wondered whether to ring home: but it was only half past six. No one in her house would be up yet. They wouldn't even know that she had gone, unless Matt had woken them to tell them.

After a while she worked up enough courage to climb back on her bike and freewheel down the road. Doofus ran beside her effortlessly. The air was bright and clear and full of twitterings: chaffinches this time, the fast bowlers of birdsong doing their cheerful run-up-and-hurl of notes. Sheep baaed tranquilly around her. Yet all that Holly seemed to hear were mournful howls that echoed through her memory.

And she remembered something else. The long, sandy-coloured shape, merging into the reeds and sun-bleached grass, a shape that had not been a wolf.

So what had it been? A cow, maybe, lying down? A cow, creeping?

She turned into her road. Her house was quiet and curtained: nobody was up. Her head was whirling, yet here everyone was still asleep and unaware.

Nearly everyone. Next door's shed was open. Clive stuck his head out. He was holding Mr Finney.

"Where've you been?"

"Nowhere," said Holly. She dropped the bike behind the bins. When she went to the door, Doofus was already lying across the threshold. She had to step over him to get inside.

She bent down and hugged him. “Thank you,” she whispered. Doofus did not respond with any nudge or lick; maybe she had only imagined that he did that earlier, deep underground.

No, she thought. I didn’t imagine anything. She stood up wearily, climbed the stairs and, fully clothed, lay down upon her bed.

Chapter Fourteen

“I wish you’d woken me up so I could have come too,” said Clive.

“So do I,” said Holly. “It was awful.” And she hadn’t even told Clive the full story. He thought her most awful moments had been hiding from the wolves and then hearing them get shot. Neither of those events had been the worst, however.

She had tried to describe the unnamed thing that came so close to her in the tunnels: but what was there to say? She had felt its breath and smelt its rank, sour odour; but she’d seen nothing, heard next to nothing – only sensed that heavy presence, and as with Lexie she could not find the words to fit. Anyway, Clive was more interested in wolves.

“I’m going to ask Lucinda about them,” he said.

“Lucinda?”

“You know, the vet. She worked in a zoo once, so I expect she knows a bit about wolves. Do you want to come with me?”

“I can’t,” said Holly. “Nan’s coming home.”

“Oh, good! That is good, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

Nan did not seem to know either. She looked as if she’d shrunk in hospital. She seemed restless and bewildered to be back home. Once Mum and Dad had lifted her into bed, she sat propped up by too many pillows and kneaded at the duvet as if she was trying futilely to shape it into something else.

It made Holly sad. Why was growing old so unstoppable? Why could time not just pause, and leave Nan as she had been before the stroke, brisk and bright and chatty? Or, better still, go back to when everyone was young and fit, including Pancake?

Time was cruel. It would not leave you alone. It pushed you towards High School and exams and monthly periods and growing up when none of these were things you particularly wanted.

And now it was pushing Nan. Although Holly read out bits of the newspaper to her, Nan wasn’t listening. She did not want the TV turned on either. She kept looking round for something.

“Do,” she said. “Doo.”

“He’s out by the back gate,” Holly said. “Shall I bring him in?”

“Do.”

When Holly went out to fetch Doofus, he was not sprawled across the gateway in his usual manner. He was standing, looking up the road towards the moor with intense concentration, and took no notice of her. The hair on the back of his strong neck was slightly raised.

“Doofus? Nan wants you.”

She did not expect him to move, but he immediately turned and trotted into the house and up the stairs.

Nan's face lit up when she saw him. There was no other term for it, thought Holly: like a flickering candle that grows strong again when it's sheltered from the draught.

Doofus seemed pleased too, although he was not a bouncy dog, and had never even licked Holly until that time in the tunnel. She steered her thoughts away quickly, watching Doofus wag his tail twice as Nan clumsily caressed him. That was effusive, for Doofus.

Nan looked much happier. Holly felt dreadful. She sat by the bed and leaned her head against Nan's shoulder, so that Nan would stroke her too.

"I'm sad, Nan," she said, although she did not tell Nan why. The trembling hand fluttered across her hair, and then reached for the notepad on the bedside table.

Holly put it front of Nan, and fastened the pencil between her stiff fingers. Nan drew a smiley, and a heart.

"Yes, Nan," said Holly. "I know. I love you too."

Nan looked at Doofus, and drew a dog's head, which was not unlike him. Then she drew a fish, perhaps a shark, above the dog.

"A flying shark," said Holly.

"Doo," said Nan. Doofus nuzzled at her fingers and then trotted off again, down the stairs.

"Yan danner," said Nan, gesturing at the window.

"You want to see out the window?"

"That's a good idea," said Mum, coming in with a cup of tea. "We'll move your bed so you can look out. It's such a lovely summer's day."

Nan seemed quite excited to be by the window. Mum found yet more pillows so that she could sit right up and enjoy the view of rooftops, trees and hills. From here Holly could see the far end of the garden, where Doofus was back on guard, standing by the gate.

"Dooo," repeated Nan. She seemed to be trying to lengthen the word, to finish it. "Dooo. Dooom."

It went through Holly like an electric shock. *Doom*. Was that what Nan was trying to say? *Doom*. It thudded through her brain.

The dog of doom stood like a statue, gazing out at nothing; or at everything.

Mum was plumping up Nan's pillows. "Isn't that nice? Now you can see everything that's going on," she said, although not much was, apart from Clive haring up the road towards them. "And Uncle Ted will be here next week. That'll be lovely, won't it?"

"Af," said Nan. That seemed to be agreement.

Clive was waving at them vigorously. Holly ran out into the garden to meet him.

"I've been talking to Lucinda," he said, patting Doofus, who ignored him.

"You mean you've been interrogating her?"

"I don't need to interrogate her!" protested Clive. "She likes me. She wouldn't tell me everything she knows, but she told me enough."

"Enough about what?"

"The wolves. Jarvis Turnpike called the police," said Clive, "and when the police went to his farm and saw the dead wolves, they called in the vet, because they thought they must have escaped from a wildlife park and they'd have electronic tags."

"And do they?"

"No. No tags. But that's not all!" Clive was bursting with his news. "Lucinda said these wolves weren't like the ones she used to work with."

"Well, I expect there are different species."

"But she doesn't know what this species is. They've taken the bodies off to Sheffield University and they're calling in an expert to identify them."

"They're wolves," said Holly, puzzled. "Does it matter what sort?"

"They need to know where they came from," said Clive. "And Lucinda said there was something strange about the third wolf, but she wouldn't tell me what."

"What third wolf?" Holly stared at him. "Only two got out before Jarvis Turnpike killed them." She could still hear those two sharp gunshots in her head. Two shots; two wolves. *Doom. Doom.*

Clive shrugged. "Well, there were three bodies. Another one must have got out too."

"So what did it die of? Did it get crushed when the hole was filled in?"

"It can't have, I think, because Lucinda said there was something odd about the way it had been killed."

Holly turned to look at Doofus. Could he have...? But if he'd killed a wolf before he found her in the tunnel, surely he would have been spattered with its blood.

She remembered that Doofus had howled only twice from the farmyard: a howl for each of the wolves that Jarvis had shot. Once Doofus was far enough away, though, he wouldn't howl for a death. So maybe the third wolf had died – or, rather, had been killed – later on.

"I've asked Lucinda to keep me up to date," said Clive. "Did anybody come and see you yet to hear your side of the story?"

Holly shook her head. "Not yet." She was beginning to think that Jarvis Turnpike might not have given her name and address to the police after all. She hoped not: she dreaded being interviewed. And, of course, there was the

little matter of her cycling up to the moor on her own, which she had not mentioned to Mum or Dad. They had no knowledge of her expedition.

So when a policewoman did call round that afternoon, unannounced, to take a statement from her, Holly had to tell her parents for the first time too.

She kept her story as simple as she could. Sitting on the sofa with her hands demurely folded in her lap, she told the policewoman that she'd been for an early morning bike ride with her dog. She had fallen down a hole, and when she climbed out she met Mr Turnpike, who had helped her; and then she had a cup of coffee with Lexie and played with the baby.

Holly insisted that when she was down in the hole, she had seen nothing, which was after all quite true: and that she hadn't actually seen Mr Turnpike shoot any wolves, which was also practically true. She hadn't seen the wolves fall. She acted shy and ignorant, and the police officer, who didn't know her, was satisfied that she'd been there by sheer accident.

Her parents weren't. They were appalled.

"You went out in the middle of the *night*?" said Dad, aghast. "On your *own*?"

"It was already light," said Holly. "It wasn't the middle of the night, it was morning. I woke up early, so I just thought I'd go for a spin on Matt's old bike. I told Matt." However, Matt didn't even remember her waking him up.

"And why did you go to Barges Bridge, exactly?" demanded Mum. "Where those wolves just happened to be? What *really* happened, Holly?"

"Nothing. Like I said. Lexie was nice."

But the upshot was a ban from going out at night; and, in fact, from leaving the house at all for the rest of the holiday, unless she was with somebody, and Told People Where She Was Going Beforehand. On the whole, Holly felt that she had got off lightly.

Throughout all this, Doofus was barely mentioned. Her parents still had no idea that there was anything unusual about him, other than his size. She had left out nearly all his part in the night's events.

And Doofus did nothing to draw attention to himself. When the policewoman gave him a pat as she left, he barely seemed to notice, but continued standing by the gate, as impassively alert as a soldier in a sentry-box, gazing over to the hills like Nan from her window above.

As far as Holly could tell, however, there was nothing for them to gaze at apart from camera crews in fluorescent jackets. These had arrived like exotic migrant birds that now dotted the hillsides in bright flocks. They seemed to have no idea of camouflage.

Within two days, the TV crews had eaten every Bakewell pudding in the village. They spent the evenings huddled in the pub, grumbling about the lack of wolves. Nobody had managed to film any, or had even seen any wolves for

certain, despite an abundance of rumour. Holly's Dad learned all this when he got talking to a disgruntled cameraman over a pint.

"He said they all traipsed four miles across country to look at a dead deer," Dad reported with some glee, "and it turned out to be a wild goose chase."

"What? You mean the deer had turned into a goose?" said Matt.

"Oh, there was a dead deer all right, but no reason to blame wolves for it. It probably got knocked down by a car," said Dad. "And then the body had got mauled by foxes. But would you believe some nutcase reported seeing a cougar in the area?"

"But cougars live in America, don't they?" Holly said.

"More to the point, the wildlife park has never had a cougar or anything like one. People panic, that's the trouble, and start imagining all sorts of weird things. You wouldn't believe the other stuff that's being reported."

"Like what?"

Dad grinned at her. "Apparently in the last two days there have been sightings of a polar bear, a lion, and – get this – a walrus, all spotted within five miles of Whitten Moor."

"A *walrus*?"

"I know." Dad shook his head. "It's mass hysteria. They'll be seeing hippos next. Anyway, I don't think you need to worry about rampaging walruses."

So Holly tried not to worry. She still had a week of holiday to come, although she was not allowed leisure to enjoy it. Since she was grounded, she thought she would practise her bowling in the garden, but Mum roped her in to do the cleaning. With Uncle Ted due to arrive soon, Mum seemed intent on scrubbing and polishing the entire house as if for a royal visit.

Admittedly Matt's room, where Uncle Ted would sleep, was in dire need of cleaning. Mum said the crusty socks under the bed must have been there for years. Matt would be sleeping on an airbed in the dining room. He and Holly pumped at the airbed for an hour, trying to blow it up, before discovering it had a puncture.

Then there was Nan to read to, and food to buy for her coming birthday party (though there would be only a dozen people there), and a cake to make in the shape of a bluebell, Nan's favourite flower, which unfortunately did not lend itself to cakehood in either form or colour, so that although Holly had volunteered to bake it, she needed several attempts; and then there was Doofus to take for walks around and round the playground till it drove her mad. For this purpose she was allowed to go to the local park, but no further.

Meanwhile Clive was out and about in the sunshine on his rattly old bike, with his notebook and giant binoculars and his collecting jars in a backpack. Holly was jealous, even though he only came back with beetles.

"I've got a devil's coach-horse!" he told her proudly, waving something black and monstrous in a jar.

"Lovely. No, don't get it out," she said. "Will you be coming to Nan's birthday party?"

"Am I invited?" He looked surprised and pleased.

"She's eighty-four," said Holly. "There won't be any dancing. There'll be a blue cake."

"I'd like to come," said Clive. "What sort of present should I get her?"

"I don't know. Nothing expensive." Holly knew that Clive had very little money. She thought it wise to add, "She's not too keen on beetles."

"I'll have a think. I went to see Ailsa today about some bats."

"Cricket bats?"

He gave her a look. "Brown long-eared bats. Ailsa thinks she's got some in her barn. Anyway, while I was there, she told me there were workmen and diggers up by Barges Bridge for a full day. They dug out the bodies of two more wolves from Jarvis Turnpike's hole."

"There should have been more than that," said Holly, frowning. "There should have been about ten. It was a big pack."

Clive did not dispute this. "I suppose the other bodies were still buried. And if they weren't then, they are now. The hole's been filled in with tons of earth and rubble, Ailsa said, so that nothing else is ever going to come out of there alive. She reckons we can stop worrying."

"Dad said to stop worrying too." Holly looked over at Doofus, standing alertly by the gate. He was still on guard.

But what was he on guard against? Was he waiting for the dead wolves, she wondered, unaware that they would not return? Had they, after all, been his friends? When he led them away from the houses and their sleeping inhabitants, whom had he been protecting? Wolves or humans?

She still did not know. She only knew that whatever Doofus was – Shuck or Shriker, Gurt Dog or Guytrash – he was more than ever now. His shadow spread across her thoughts. Nobody else seemed to notice. They were used to him; and he was so quiet that they just took him for granted.

Stop worrying. But with Nan so ill and Doofus always watching by the gate, how could she stop worrying?

None the less, she tried. And Doofus did not howl. Even his sighs were softer and less frequent now. Her diary had not recorded anything higher than a 2 for days. As long as Doofus did not howl, she told herself, then everything would be all right.

For another day, it was. And then, that night, she heard the full, heart-stopping ten.

That was the night Bill Barton's shy retriever died.

Chapter Fifteen

The howl woke Holly.

“Doofus!” she said aloud in panic. He was supposed to be tied up in the porch: but the howl did not come from the porch. It came, she thought confusedly, from the other side of the village.

She jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. It wasn’t yet eleven o’clock, and Dad was still up. He had just opened the door to look outside for Doofus.

“Where’s that dratted dog gone?” he complained. “I thought I tied him quite securely to that bracket. Look, he’s actually broken it off the wall!” He turned round and saw Holly frantically trying to pull on her trainers without undoing the laces. “Oh, no!” he said firmly. “You’re not going out on your own.”

“But Doofus howled! I need to find him!”

“I’ll go and find him,” said Dad.

“Then I’m coming with you. That’s not *on my own*.” Holly finally squeezed her bare feet into her trainers, and flung her coat on over her pyjamas.

Dad hesitated, but only for a second. “Well, all right. But stay with me.”

Together they dived out into the dusk. Even this late, it was not completely dark: the year was edging towards midsummer. Above them, the sky was a luminous bowl of blue with a purple smoulder in the west, and the moon was rising.

They hurried across the main road in the direction the howl had come from. On this side of the village, old cottages huddled close together, linked by small twisting alleyways that led down to the river. As they came closer they could hear a man shouting.

“What’s he saying?” muttered Dad.

Holly couldn’t tell. She couldn’t see much either. There was no street lighting, and in the remnants of the dusk everything looked indistinct. Moonlight glimmered faintly on rooftops and gardens, and made great shadows slink between the walls, so that Holly got the jitters; but they saw nothing out of the ordinary until they ventured down one of the small alleyways, and came across a splintered fence.

It had been destroyed – knocked right over into the neighbouring garden, as if by an express train. And in the garden, amidst the bits of shattered fence, were two dogs. One, huge and black, stood over the smaller, paler dog, which lay twitching on the ground. A man was kneeling down beside it.

“Doofus,” said Holly, her voice no more than a croak.

“Oh no,” said Dad in horror. “Did our dog do this? Was it him?”

“He broke the fence down,” said the kneeling man. He did not look up from the stricken dog. Holly recognised Bill Barton’s voice, although there was a strange catch in it.

She hurried forward to grab Doofus’s collar, and her hands felt something wet and slightly sticky. Doofus did not resist her grasp, but stood motionless, looking into the darkness.

“What can we do?” asked Dad.

“There’s a torch in the kitchen,” said Bill hoarsely. “The door’s not locked.”

When Dad had found the torch and switched it on, she saw Bill Barton kneeling by his young retriever. Tears were trickling from his crinkled eyes.

“Poor old lad, poor old Joey, that’s a good boy,” he was saying. Dad shone the torch down at the dog, and then hastily away again.

In that instant, though, Holly could see that there was no hope. The dog took tiny, husky gasps of breath: its honey-coloured throat and chest were dark and sodden with what she knew must be blood, although in the torchlight it looked almost black.

Bill raised his head, tears glinting on his cheek. “Can you call the vet? The number’s inside, by the phone.”

Dad gave the torch to Holly and went inside. Holly shone the torch at Doofus, briefly. There was blood around his mouth: there was blood on her hands.

“What happened?” Her voice cracked. Surely Doofus could not be responsible for this?

“I don’t know,” said Bill, his voice cracking even worse than hers.

“Did Doofus – did he...?”

Bill did not answer, except to whisper, “Good boy, Joey. Such a good boy.”

The retriever’s panting grew thinner, fainter; and stopped. Then it started: and then stopped. And did not start.

Dad came out of the house again. “The vet’s on her way.”

“Aye. Too late now. But thank you,” said the old man quietly. He did not move.

After a moment, Dad asked what Holly had tried to. “I’m so sorry. Did our dog do this? Because if he did, we’ll see that he’s put down.”

“*Dad!*” breathed Holly, although she knew Dad had to say it.

Bill Barton said, “I don’t rightly know what happened.” He stood up stiffly and looked down at the body at his feet. “I was upstairs, just thinking about getting ready for bed, when I heard a great thump outside and Joey started barking like a mad thing. Well, I thought burglars or vandals, so I looked out of the window and next second I heard a terrible crash. Bits of wood flying all over the place, and your dog in the middle of it. I saw him quite clearly in the moonlight. But then...”

He cleared his throat and shook his head for a moment before going on.

“From my bedroom window I can’t see all the garden, only the far end. Your dog dashed towards the house, out of my sight, and I heard something snarling and yelping down below, and then a howl fit to freeze your blood: but I couldn’t see a thing. I ran downstairs and grabbed my stick. By the time I got the door unlocked, your dog had run off down the jitty.”

He pointed to the alley down the side of the house. “He came back here, though, a few minutes later. By then I’d found my Joey with his throat ripped out. I jumped up with my stick, wondering how I’d fight your dog off, but he just stood there, calm as you like. And then you arrived.”

Bill Barton did not sound angry. He sounded lost: bewildered.

“I’m so sorry,” said Dad again. “I don’t understand why our dog would attack yours. He’s normally docile for all he’s so big.”

“He liked Joey,” said Holly, her voice shaking. “They were friends.” They weren’t enemies, at least, she thought. Doofus had no friends; except, perhaps, wolves. “Could there have been a wolf in your garden?”

“You mean, one of them that was on the news? They said they were all dead, but perhaps one escaped. Perhaps so. That howl...”

“That was Doofus,” Dad said. “He howls.”

“I don’t know then,” said Bill sadly. “Like I say, I couldn’t see.”

“I’ll make a cup of tea,” said Dad, “while we wait for the vet.”

They all went inside except for Doofus. Holly tied him to a tree, although she thought that would probably not hold him if he wanted to leave. But he showed no sign of wanting to leave. He was standing sentry, smeared with blood.

Inside, the dead dog’s corpse looked even worse when it was laid out upon the kitchen table. Holly did not know what to say to Bill. She knew exactly how he felt, because she had felt it with Pancake: the stunned emptiness, the knowledge that the world had changed forever, for the worse, and would not change back no matter how she willed it. Dad made a cup of tea which nobody drank. Luckily the vet arrived soon after. It was Clive’s favourite vet, Lucinda, who was neat and calm and self-contained. But she lost some of her composure when she set eyes on Joey’s corpse.

“Dear God,” she said. “What did this?”

Bill Barton explained.

“Doofus?” said Lucinda, her gaze sharpening. “That big black dog? Where is he?”

“Tied up outside. He’s perfectly quiet,” said Holly miserably.

Lucinda raised her eyebrows. “He’s never struck me as the vicious type. He’s always been quite placid when I’ve given him his injections. But if he did this—”

“We don’t know that he did,” said Bill.

Lucinda bent over Joey, gently parting the blood-stained fur. “Extraordinary,” she muttered. “Twice in one week.”

“What is it?”

“Similar bite pattern to the one I found on a dead wolf the other day.” She straightened up. “Let me see Doofus.”

Holly led the vet outside, and held Doofus’s collar while Lucinda cautiously prised open his jaws. Shining the torch into his mouth, she examined his teeth and measured them with a pencil.

“Something there,” she said, and taking a pair of tweezers from her bag, she used them to extract an object from his teeth. Doofus waited stoically, without snapping, until she was done.

Holly followed Lucinda back into the kitchen, where the vet opened her hand to show what she had found in Doofus’s mouth.

It was a tuft of bloody, sandy-coloured fur.

Dad groaned. “That’s off your dog,” he said to Bill.

“Not necessarily,” Lucinda said. “The colour’s similar, but I’m not sure if it’s a match. I’d need a microscope to be sure.” She put the fur into a plastic bag and labelled it. “One thing that is definitely not a match, though,” she went on, “is Doofus’s bite. His mouth’s not the right size to have made that wound in your dog’s throat.”

“What was it, then? A wolf?” exclaimed Dad. “Does that mean there’s one still on the loose?”

A frown creased Lucinda’s brows. “Possibly,” she said. “I can’t think of any other reasonable explanation – though I admit I’d be surprised. It’d be a bold wolf that prowled around the village on its own. They’re braver in a pack.”

“Let’s hope it’s the only one, then!” said Dad.

“I’d like to close that ruddy wildlife park,” said Bill, with unexpected vehemence. It was the first sign he’d shown of being angry.

“Actually, the wolves weren’t theirs,” Lucinda said. “They were telling the truth about that.”

“How can you be sure? I know that’s what they said, but maybe they just weren’t owning up.”

“No. The DNA test results came back. According to the lab, those wolves weren’t any species currently known in Europe.”

“American?” said Dad.

But the vet shook her head. “The lab said it was such an archaic strain that it was hard to pinpoint its origin. Mitochondrial DNA showed a throwback species type more indicative of the Early Upper Paleolithic. Which makes no sense at all.” She seemed to be talking to herself. She looked at Dad and shrugged. “I’ve advised them to re-run the tests.”

Dad looked a bit blank. “So do you think a wolf did this or not?”

Lucinda sighed. “I really couldn’t say for sure. It could be another large and vicious dog, I suppose. I’d like to take Joey with me, if I may, Bill. Do you want to report this to the police? You’re within your rights to do so.”

Holly held her breath. She knew what that could mean: Doofus being labelled as a dangerous dog, and being put down.

But Bill slowly shook his head. “No. I know that black dog, and I don’t think he did this. I think that something else did, if what you say about the bite is true. I think that black dog tried to come to Joey’s rescue, and chased something else away.”

“Very well,” Lucinda said. She looked at Dad. “I’ll be in touch. Meanwhile, I would advise you to keep your dog at all times under your control, and in your sight.”

“Yes, of course,” said Dad meekly.

Holly went outside to untie Doofus. She needed the torch to do so. It shone past him to the flowerbed, where broken, mangled flowers drooped in its wan light.

There were some footprints there, against the wall. Holly squatted down to study them.

Although they were not clear to see, they were certainly animal prints; perhaps a dog’s or wolf’s. But there was one print in particular that she was sure did not belong to Doofus...

For it was far too big.

Chapter Sixteen

“I tried to tell them,” she said to Clive next morning. “But when Dad came back outside with me, Doofus had trampled all over the footprint. Dad thought I’d just imagined it. He said I was suffering from shock and getting over-wrought, and he made me come home.”

“Never mind,” said Clive. “Even if nobody else saw it, that proves the killer wasn’t Doofus. There must still be a wolf on the loose – a big one. I wish I could find it.”

“I don’t,” said Holly with a shudder, remembering Joey’s wounds. “And that bit of fur that Lucinda found wasn’t grey.”

“Wolves aren’t grey all over. They’re sometimes sandy, particularly underneath; and their bite can be quite different to a dog’s. Tell me again what Lucinda said about the DNA,” commanded Clive. “Try and remember the exact words.”

Holly tried. But she could not remember precisely what the vet had said about the wolves’ DNA, except that it was archaic.

“Early Upper Paley something,” she said.

Clive’s eyes gleamed. “Upper Paleolithic. Unbelievable! That means more than twelve thousand years ago. Possibly much longer.”

“Those wolves can’t have been hiding for twelve thousand years,” objected Holly.

“Possibly much longer,” repeated Clive, happily. “Could be fifty thousand years. The Paleolithic Age went on for a long time. So I agree, it’s impossible that they’ve just been hiding. Somebody must have bred them specially. Genetic engineering, I expect.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “To see if they could.”

“And then they let ancient wolves loose on the moors?”

“Maybe they escaped,” said Clive. “Or maybe it’s some crackpot millionaire genius trying to bring old species back into the countryside.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Well, it’s the obvious explanation.”

It wasn’t obvious to Holly. The obvious explanation was blaring like a beacon, setting off sirens and flashing lights inside her head.

If they were an ancient type, it was because they were ancient wolves. Doofus was an animal of ancient legend; why shouldn’t the wolves be, too? And now, somehow, they had re-emerged from the past.

She remembered that cleft where she had fallen underground, and had felt the presence of... whatever it was. The unknown beast for which she had no name, although the memory made her skin rise up in goose-pimples.

What if the cavern was a passage from somewhere else entirely? Not another place – but from another time? And the wolves had slipped through into the present; and then slipped back again. That would explain why only a couple of their bodies had been found.

Now the gap had been filled in. Nothing else could come through.

Holly tried to find comfort in this thought. But she decided not to tell her theory to Clive, because it all sounded far too weird, and he would mock; or worse, fall out with her again.

Clive had plunged into his shed. Now he emerged waving an antique tape recorder.

“Bird song!” he said.

“What about it?”

“For your Nan’s birthday present. A tape of the dawn chorus that she can listen to. Bird song is very soothing.”

“It’s a nice idea,” said Holly. “I think she’d like that. Is that what’s on the tape?”

“Not yet. I’ve still got to record it.”

Holly saw a drawback. “Dawn’s about five o’clock in the morning, Clive.”

“Four forty-nine. That’s all right,” he said. “I’m being nocturnal tomorrow night: I’m camping out in Ailsa’s barn, up in the loft, to look for bats. I’ll record the birdsong early in the morning.”

“Oh, you lucky thing! Your mum’s letting you go?”

“I told her I was going with you,” said Clive. “So you’d better ask *your* mum.”

Holly ran inside to ask. She had always wanted to camp in Ailsa’s barn, which had a high, airy loft: a platform reached only by a ladder. But Mum was reluctant, and not just because Holly was still supposed to be grounded.

“Camping? With a possible wolf on the loose, or at least a nasty dog?” she said.

“But it’s not really camping,” pleaded Holly. “We’ll be sleeping up on the loft in Ailsa’s barn. You know how high that is. It’s like being upstairs in a house. We’ll be quite safe.”

Mum looked sceptical. “As long as you don’t fall off,” she said.

“We won’t. We’ll be careful. And I can’t be grounded all holiday, that’s not fair.” Holly was desperate to get out of the house. She was stir-crazy from going no further than the park; and while she certainly wouldn’t want to go camping in a field just now, the barn was truly as safe as any house from wolves – unless wolves could sneak through barn doors and climb ladders.

So after a phone call to Ailsa, Mum allowed it, on condition that on no account were they to leave the farmyard overnight.

“Can we take Doofus?”

“No,” said Mum decidedly. “Not with all that livestock around. Doofus can stay here.”

Holly hurried off to plan her packing. By the time she had everything ready the next evening, it felt as if they were going on a major expedition. When they finally set off to Ailsa’s, they needed Matt to walk with them just to help them carry all their stuff.

Holly had two sleeping bags, because she thought Clive probably wouldn’t have one (she was right); two pillows, a torch and her Dad’s camera, and a rucksack full of spare clothes and food – a flask of tomato soup, cheese, bread rolls, blueberry muffins, bananas and apple juice. Clive, as well as his tape-recorder, had a tin of baked beans and two hard-boiled eggs, wrapped in a blanket.

The three of them trudged up the road to Ailsa’s farm like beasts of burden. Doofus went with them for the exercise, although Matt kept him on his lead.

“They’ve gone,” said Clive, looking up towards the hills.

“Who have?” asked Holly.

“All the camera crews.” He was right. At least, they weren’t visible. The moors looked wild and empty.

“They all drove off today,” said Matt. “They went to Manchester, because of that footballer who punched his manager and drove his Lamborghini through a fish and chip shop. Mad footballers make better TV than invisible wolves.”

He dropped his bundle with a puff at Ailsa’s gate.

“Don’t you wish you were staying with us?” Holly said.

“You can,” said Clive. “There’s a spare blanket. And two hard-boiled eggs.”

“No, thanks,” said Matt, with a mock shudder. Holly thought that just a year ago, he would have said yes. Matt was growing away from her: the fault of baleful Time again.

“You just want to slob around and play computer games,” she said sadly.

Matt rolled his eyes. “I just don’t want to sleep on a plank and look for bats,” he retorted.

At that moment Ailsa came out to meet them, which was probably just as well. While they began to sort out their things, Doofus slipped quietly away to explore the farmyard.

“Go get him, Matt,” said Holly. Then she sighed and went to get him herself. She held his lead and let him nose around.

First Doofus nosed around the barn, and then around the little clump of trees that Ailsa called her orchard: old, gnarled trees bearing baby apples the size of cherries. Seeming satisfied with that, he wandered through the farmyard, past the Landrover and trailers and the chicken run, and into the paddock.

There was nothing in the paddock except a lame sheep. But Doofus became suddenly alert. He began to trot across the grass, nose to ground, as if following a trail. The sheep looked alarmed and limped into a corner. Doofus loped to the opposite corner and started to scramble up the wall.

“No,” said Holly. “Stop it, Doofus. You can’t.”

Doofus stopped scrabbling and stared over the wall. Holly could not see anything unusual. Sheep grazed peacefully in a rough pasture lined with trees and dotted with rocks. The gorse bushes were still in yellow flower, and a rabbit lolloped carelessly amongst them. Behind them reared the bare back of the hill.

Doofus sniffed the air. She had to tug at his collar to make him turn around. But at least he did not try to pull away, or jump the wall, or run off. He trotted back to the barn and had another sniff around it. He did not seem to be concerned by anything there; so Holly relaxed.

In one way it would actually be quite nice, she thought, to have a night away from Doofus. She would be too far away to hear him howl. Not that he would howl. But she wouldn’t have to lie awake wondering if he would.

“See you tomorrow. Have fun,” said Matt, and he led Doofus away. Once Holly and Clive had arranged their things in the loft, they helped Ailsa shoo her chickens into their coops for the night, and then Ailsa cooked them tea: sausages and mash.

“No, honestly, we’ve got food,” Holly said, but she insisted.

“Any problems, you just come into the house,” she said. “It won’t be locked. You can use the bathroom any time, of course. I’ll be up at six in any case. Will bacon butties do you in the morning?”

“Yes, please,” said Clive, grinning. When they got back to the loft he ate most of the bread rolls and soup, and a banana. He was happy.

The loft in Ailsa’s barn was wider than Holly’s living-room. She thought it might be wider than her whole house. It was a platform built of wooden planks with gaps between them big enough to wedge a finger in, so that you could see through them down to the floor and the piles of sacks and tubs that Ailsa kept below.

It felt a very long way up, which pleased Holly. Even though much of the loft was stacked with straw bales, there was plenty of room to lay out the sleeping bags and what Clive had left of the food.

He produced a pack of cards and they played snap and rummy on a straw bale for a while. Then, as dusk began to slowly draw layer on layer of deeper blue across the windows, they climbed carefully down the steep ladder and prowled around the barn, bat-hunting.

“There’s one!” said Clive. There was a flutter of blackness, a flash of dark. The bats used the high, round windows of the barn to fly in and out. There were more dark flashes. Holly could not track their flight.

“Why do they squiggle around so much?”

“Insects,” said Clive. He took dozens of photos with Holly’s Dad’s camera, and Holly got caught up in his eagerness and tried to snap them with her phone, the white flashes vying with the darting blackness of the bats.

Afterwards, when it was fully dark and they climbed back up the ladder to the loft, they leant against the bales of straw and scrolled through the pictures. Bats flitted at the edges. Half a wing here, a squashed nose there.

“They’re a bit ugly,” Holly said.

“That’s definitely a Brown Long-eared,” said Clive with satisfaction. “And I’m sure some of those others are pipistrelles.”

Holly yawned. “What time do we have to get up for the birdsong?”

“About four.”

She set the alarm on her phone, and then crawled into her sleeping bag. An owl hooted in the distance. In the airy dark, she knew by the tiny, reappearing square of light that Clive was still looking through the pictures on the camera.

It was warm and peaceful. She felt wrapped around not just by her sleeping bag, but by the scent of straw, the high walls of the barn: the night itself.

She yawned contentedly, and closed her eyes.

Chapter Seventeen

The phone's beep woke her from a dream of Doofus chasing tiny apples round and round the orchard. A dim grey light was just beginning to scrub the darkness from the barn. She could see Clive curled up in the other sleeping bag, an empty banana skin beside him. Without his glasses he did not look like Clive.

"Hey," she said, giving him a nudge. "Wake up, Clive. Dawn chorus time." For someone nocturnal, he took a long time to wake.

"Ergh," he said, reaching for his glasses. Then he ate a muffin, washed it down with apple juice, and turned into cheerful Clive again.

"We'll try recording in the orchard," he decided. "Bound to be birds there."

There was one, at least, a single blackbird belting out a song to the silent trees. A net of light, damp mist hung limply over everything.

While Clive was recording, Holly ran over to the farmhouse through the dewy grass and crept inside to use Ailsa's toilet. Creeping out again, she looked around the yard. All quiet. She walked across to the paddock and looked into it over the wall. All quiet there too, although she could not see the lame sheep. The veil of mist lay heavy on the fields and hillside.

She walked back to Clive, who pressed a finger to his lips. More distant birds were starting up now, in answer to the blackbird in the orchard: they seemed to echo in from miles around. Something quick and piercing as a sewing-machine needle rang out sharply from a nearby tree and made her jump.

"Wren," mouthed Clive.

Holly listened. Nan would love this. It was a rippling, sparkling river of birdsong – there was perhaps a tractor engine faintly purring, far away, but otherwise nothing but birds, all vying in song with each other.

It was a shame about that engine. She heard it again. Like a deep, distant growl.

And again. Perhaps it wasn't as distant as she thought. What was it? She didn't think it was a tractor, after all.

She listened. And again.

Holly put out a hand and touched Clive's arm.

"Clive? Can we go back into the barn now?"

"Ssh."

"Clive?"

He pressed *pause* on the tape recorder. "What? We've only got about twenty minutes' worth."

"That's enough," said Holly. "I'm hungry. Let's go back and have some breakfast in the barn."

“Okay.” Clive began to stroll towards the barn, pausing to tilt an ear. “Greenfinch,” he said, nodding.

“Come on,” said Holly, who was listening too, but for something else. In the orchard, the blackbird’s stream of song turned to a strident *chuck chuck chuck*. “Clive? Please.”

At last Clive began to move again. It seemed to take him forever to get back into the barn.

Meanwhile Holly, still straining her ears, heard nothing else out of the ordinary. Maybe she’d been mistaken. By the time they’d climbed the ladder and were up in the loft amongst the straw, she’d convinced herself that she had been wrong.

“I suppose we ought to listen to the tape,” said Clive, unpeeling a boiled egg, “while there’s still time to go back and record some more if it hasn’t come out properly.”

He pressed the play button and turned the volume up. A blackbird filled the barn like an over-eager choirboy in a cathedral. A huge blackbird, thought Holly, about the size of a turkey.

“That’s not bad,” said Clive, after a few minutes; and then she heard it, magnified: the growl.

Clive frowned. “Shame about that engine. I don’t remember hearing that.”

“Is it an engine?” Holly said.

“Well, what else would it be?”

The recorder growled again. The sound echoed round the barn.

“You know, that’s like,” said Clive, and stopped.

It growled again.

And this time, from outside the barn, there came an answering growl.

No, not a growl, thought Holly in growing alarm. It was more like a roar, deep and long and rasping; and it was far too close for comfort.

“Switch it off,” she said quickly, and reached over to the recorder. It growled again just before she could press the stop button.

And in the sudden dusky silence, there came the replying roar outside.

Clive’s mouth was open.

“I didn’t bolt the door,” he said quietly. “The barn door.”

They stared at each other. The door was underneath and behind them, and therefore invisible from where they were. In the silence that followed there was a stealthy shifting.

“It might be a cat,” breathed Clive uncertainly.

“We can’t bolt the door now,” whispered Holly. “Can we pull the ladder up?”

They both reached for the ladder. It was hooked over the edge of the platform, but when they unhooked it they could not pull it up. It was too long and heavy.

There was a creak. It did not come from the ladder. It came from the door. Something was opening the door wider, and coming in.

“Let go,” said Clive. He stopped trying to pull the ladder up and gave it a sharp push instead. The ladder teetered and then keeled over slowly the other way, like a tall, thin man fainting. It clattered against the far wall.

For a moment there was dead silence. The children crouched on the platform, motionless and rigid, listening.

Maybe the noise has frightened it away, thought Holly, whatever it is; but before the thought had time to reassure her, she glimpsed a movement.

Between the slats of the platform, down below her, something was creeping, creeping. She could see only narrow slices of it at a time. It was something with sandy-coloured fur. Something that looked as broad as a cow, though it was not a cow, nor anything like one.

Now she could smell it: a rank, dark, cloying smell that she recognised. It was the scent of the creature that had met her underground, in the dark, stone tunnel.

And it was right beneath the platform. She watched slice after slice of it pass by below, trying to fit the slices together in her mind; but she could not, she could only guess that it was big, until it moved across the floor into full sight.

Clive gasped. Holly could not make a sound. Her brain seemed frozen, half in terror, half in trying to fix a label on this creature. She tried to concentrate on the label. It was preferable to terror, but the terror kept breaking through.

The animal was nosing at the fallen ladder. Clive had been right, in one way: it was indeed a cat.

It was a big cat – an impossibly big cat. It was long and heavily built, with thick sandy fur, and a gently swaying tail. It was like a lioness, but bigger than the lions she had seen once in the zoo. More muscular, more stocky: far, far too big.

It turned its head, and Clive’s hand gripped her shoulder. Two huge fangs curved down from its upper jaw. Lions had fangs; but not like these.

The creature saw them. Its slanting golden eyes, unblinking, seemed to drink them in. Then it drew back its head and snarled at them, showing off not just the enormous fangs but many other over-sized and vicious teeth. Padding round in a semi-circle, it stopped and crouched below the platform, gazing up at them.

She saw the massive haunches bunch. She shrieked and pulled Clive backward as it leapt.

Claws scraped at the edge of the platform. Then the cat fell back to the ground, everything vibrating as it landed. It disappeared below them, and she saw it through the slats, prowling round again beneath: she glimpsed a narrow slice of golden eye.

Clive was scrabbling for the camera.

“No, Clive!” she said, but too late. He was already hanging his head over the edge of the platform to take a picture. The camera whirred and flashed, and then there was a roar. Clive pulled himself back up in a hurry and threw himself against the straw bales as the creature leapt again.

This time it was attacking from the wrong angle, and did not even come close: but the camera went tumbling from the platform to the ground.

The creature ignored the fallen camera. Prowling back into their sight, it turned its deliberate gaze upwards, studying the children.

“Oh my God,” said Holly. “Oh my God. What is it?”

Clive looked both sick and excited. “Sabre-tooth.”

“What? As in prehistoric? A sabre-tooth tiger?”

“Cat, not tiger. But yes. I’m pretty sure of it. Where’s your phone?”

Grabbing it, he fumbled at the screen. As the cat padded round the barn again, he began to take more pictures with the phone.

“Stop it,” Holly said. “Oh, stop it, stop it, Clive.”

“I’ve got to,” said Clive, snapping repeatedly. White flashes filled the barn like multiple lightning.

The creature did not like the flash. It drew back, glaring up at them; and then its mouth yawned open in a harsh, rasping roar that shredded what little composure Holly had left. She flinched back at the sight of those exposed, curved fangs, each longer than her hand.

The cat crouched low: she knew what it meant to do, and she could not prevent it. Every muscle in her body tensed as she watched it launch itself into the air a third time.

This was its best attempt yet. The unsheathed claws clutched at the edge of the platform. The massive head came partly into view: the eyes fixed on her. Its impossible fangs looked even bigger this close up.

But its hind feet had nothing to grip. They were dangling. A small domestic cat might have pulled itself up from that position by its front claws alone: this giant cat could not.

“Get off!” shouted Clive. Holly picked up the thermos flask and threw it at the staring head. The flask bounced off one ear. The cat snarled: and dropped.

For the third time, it fell back to the floor with a thud that shook through Holly like a drumbeat.

She waited fearfully to it to try again; but abruptly it seemed to lose interest in them.

Lowering its head, it sniffed its way around the tubs lining the barn, pushed one over and investigated the contents. Then it disappeared from sight. There was a creak at the door – and silence.

After a while Clive hung himself upside down over the edge of the platform.

“It’s gone out,” he said. He did not sound relieved.

Holly began to shiver. She pulled the sleeping bag around her, but it didn’t help.

“What do we do? Give me my phone,” she whispered. Who could she ring, though? It wasn’t even five o’clock in the morning.

But she needed to warn people. She needed to warn her family. So she stabbed at the phone with fumbling, clumsy fingers. First she would ring home, and then she would dial 999 and ask for the police.

At home, nobody answered. They were all asleep. After six rings the answerphone invited her to leave her message after the tone.

“Hi it’s me,” said Holly breathlessly. “We’re okay we’re still in Ailsa’s barn don’t worry but–” And then her phone went dead.

She shook it. It had been at least half charged last night. But the camera flash ate up battery power.

“We can’t ring anyone,” she said blankly. “What can we do?”

“We’ll wait for Ailsa to come and find us in the morning,” said Clive. He had a look of dreamy ecstasy on his face. Holly wanted to shake him.

“But what if that thing eats Ailsa?” she wailed. “What if it lies in wait and pounces on her?” She could feel tears welling up, but she knew she mustn’t cry. She had to stay calm in order to think.

“It’ll have found something else to eat by then,” said Clive.

Holly was not comforted by this theory. She peered down from the platform. It really was very high; and there was no way to climb down the barn’s stone walls, which was fortunate, because otherwise the sabre-tooth might have climbed up. But if she let herself over the edge of the platform until she was hanging by her fingers, then the drop would not be so great. She could tip some straw bales down beforehand, to land on.

And while she was dangling there, like helpless bait on a fishing line, the sabre-tooth might prowl back through the door. No. There was nothing to do but wait.

So she huddled, shivering anxiously, in her sleeping bag. Clive stretched out luxuriously in his.

“I can’t believe it,” he murmured after a while, as if he had seen Paradise.

“We have to believe it,” she said grimly.

“A sabre-tooth. Imagine. They haven’t been alive for maybe thirty thousand years. Whoever bred the wolves must have bred this as well.

Maybe they managed to get DNA from fossils and clone it. Wow. Just unbelievable.” He was in bliss.

Holly did not answer. But, scrunched up in her sleeping bag, hugging her knees, she began to think.

It seemed unlikely to her that Clive’s scientific explanation was the right one. Cloning prehistoric beasts would be a very difficult and expensive business, surely? She didn’t see how you could breed all those wolves and a giant cat in total secrecy. It would be a big operation, not easy to hide. Somebody would have found out. It would be all over the internet.

And while an eccentric millionaire might want to reintroduce wolves into the wild – who on earth would want to introduce a sabre-tooth? On the other hand, if they had escaped from some research lab, why had nobody turned up to claim them?

The animals had appeared from nowhere, all at once: not long after Doofus had arrived. Holly was sure the sabre-tooth had come, like the wolves, from the gap in the ground at Barges Bridge. She recalled her glimpse of a long, lithe, sandy body...

They had all emerged from the past at Barges Bridge, through a gap, not just in soil and rock, but in time. That was the only explanation.

But why now? Why *there*? Streams had dried up before. Caves had fallen in. There were holes in the ground all over the moors, but they didn’t have prehistoric creatures creeping out of them.

There must be something else about that place, she thought, something special about Barges Bridge, where Doofus was found, where Jarvis shot and killed a black dog, perhaps Doofus’s mother. Perhaps there have always been black dogs there.

She felt the cogs of her brain spin and whirl as they swiftly slotted ideas together, impelled by adrenalin and fear.

If it was called Barges Bridge after the black dogs – the Bargests – maybe that was proof that black dogs had hung around there for ages. Hadn’t Ailsa seen one, years ago? Maybe people had been seeing Bargests there for centuries, or longer. Romans had marched across the moors two thousand years ago, but they hadn’t been the first inhabitants by a long way. She thought of rugged people dressed in furs, wielding their stone axes on the trees – building the first bridge across the stream.

Maybe the Bargests were there for a good reason: because that was where the past leaked through. But she had never heard of anybody seeing wolves up on the moor before. And certainly there had been nothing like *this*...

She seemed to feel the cat’s long body, huge and heavy, slinking silently below her, and had to roll round in her sleeping bag and look down to check it wasn’t really there.

The barn was empty. She rolled on to her back, and thought about a golden eye, watching her between the slats of wood.

A golden eye, looking out at her – or in at her – through a pierced blue stone.

That bluish stone on the Turnpikes' windowsill. The stone that Jarvis had dug up on his land. The golden eye that she had seen through it had not been her imagination. It had been real. It matched the eyes that had glowered hungrily at her from the edge of the platform, before the sabre-tooth lost its precarious grip and fell. That stone had something to do with it all.

There was an argument of birds outside; a distant car revved its engine; a cow moored mournfully. The world was waking up. And somewhere in that everyday world a sabre-tooth cat stalked. She looked across at Clive, who was gently snoring.

What was the stone? And even if she knew – how would it help?

Chapter Eighteen

At last Holly heard the unmistakable sounds of Ailsa in the farmyard, clattering a bucket and scolding a sheepdog.

“Ailsa!” she called; but her voice was swallowed up in the dusty spaces of the loft.

She had to warn Ailsa, in case the sabre-tooth was still around. So she did what she had worked out earlier, first shoving three straw bales over the edge of the platform. They landed with soft thuds. Clive did not even stir in his sleep.

Next Holly lowered herself feet first over the edge of the platform until she was dangling by her arms, and then only by her hands; and then she had no choice but to drop. If a whole pride of big cats had been lurking below, she wouldn't have been able to pull herself back up.

She dropped onto a bale and promptly fell off it, rolled over and sat up. No cats were lurking. And her ankles were only slightly jarred. She ran out of the open door and over to the farmyard, calling, “Ailsa! Ailsa!”

“Good morning to you! Are you wanting your bacon butties?” said the farmer kindly. “I wasn't planning on doing them for a bit.”

“No! Ailsa, there's danger, you've got to watch out! There was a big cat early this morning, it came into the barn—” Holly kept glancing around apprehensively as she poured out the night's events, which Ailsa made her go back and repeat in several places. She seemed calmer than Holly had expected.

“You don't believe me, do you?” Holly said at last.

“I'm old enough to believe anything, hen,” said Ailsa gravely. “But whatever's been here, it's not here now. My dogs would have told me.”

Holly wasn't so sure. The dogs had stayed quiet all night: maybe because the sabre-tooth's smell was utterly alien to them, or maybe out of sheer terror. If she was a sheepdog she would have run away to hide.

“Ailsa, we have to warn people!” she urged, her voice trembling as she thought of Nan and her family.

“Let's get the pair of you inside,” said Ailsa. They went into the barn together and put the ladder up for Clive, who climbed sleepily down it. He picked up the camera, which Holly had forgotten, from the corner of the barn.

He tried to switch it on and pulled a disappointed face. “Not working,” he said regretfully, handing it to Holly. “The case has split. Sorry.”

“But you got some pictures of the big cat on my phone,” she reminded him.

“Did you? Can I see?” asked Ailsa sharply.

“Not at the moment. The battery's dead. I haven't brought my charger.”

“Well, never mind, hen,” said Ailsa. She led them over to the farmhouse. Once they were inside its snug, cluttered kitchen, she made Clive tell her the events all over again, more slowly.

“A sabre-tooth?” she said, her eyebrows disappearing under her grey hair.

“Honestly,” said Clive.

“All right, hen.” Ailsa put them in charge of the frying pan while she went out into the hall, saying she would ring the police.

Holly crept to the kitchen door to overhear. She knew she oughtn’t to, but this was important. She needed to know what Ailsa would say. Ailsa did ring the police, although not 999.

“Hallo there, Paddy,” said Ailsa’s voice. Paddy was the local policeman. “I’ve got a strange story to tell you.”

And tell it she did, quite fairly, though suggesting that there might be a big cat like a puma on the loose rather than a sabre-tooth. That was probably wise, thought Holly.

“After all this business with the wolves,” said Ailsa to the phone, “nothing would surprise me. And the lass is too frightened to be making it all up. What? Well, the wildlife park *would* say that, wouldn’t they? But *something’s* out there.”

There was a pause, before she went on. “No, I didn’t see it myself. No, I didn’t hear anything in the night. No, Paddy, I’m afraid I haven’t seen any signs, though I haven’t looked round the place thoroughly as yet. But I thought you ought to – yes, of course. I know you will. Thank you, Paddy.”

As she put the phone down, Holly darted back into the sizzle and smoke of the kitchen, where Clive was burning the bacon.

“They’ll send somebody up here to have a look around in a little while,” Ailsa said when she came back in. “It’s a wee bit early yet. The police don’t keep farmers’ hours.” Her eyes twinkled.

“But what about warning people?” cried Holly.

“They’ll do that,” Ailsa said. “I’ll ring your parents in a bit. And what I will do after breakfast is take you back home in the Landrover.”

“Ailsa? Can we – can we go somewhere else first? Can we go to Jarvis Turnpike’s? I – I think we ought to let them know,” she stuttered as Ailsa looked surprised. “I think the sabre-tooth may have come from near there, like the wolves. It might go back. We need to warn them – there’s the baby, after all! And there’s something there I want to look at. It might be important.”

“What sort of something?” said Clive.

“It’s in his house.”

“Very well, hen,” was all Ailsa’s comment.

After the bacon butties – of which Clive ate four – they went back to the barn to fetch their gear. Holly had a good look around for footprints, droppings, anything to show in evidence.

Apart from the overturned tub, there was nothing. No prints. No tufts of sandy fur conveniently caught on anything. No evidence at all.

As she hauled her sleeping bag into the Landrover, she gazed round with a frown. The mist had almost gone. Sheep grazed peacefully on the slopes. Everything seemed tranquil as Ailsa came out of the house.

“I’ve just rung your Dad, hen, and told him I’ll drop you down there in a bit. I warned him there might be a big cat around, but I didn’t quite tell him your full story. Thought I’d leave that for you. No point worrying him too much, eh?”

“No,” said Holly. “Ailsa, what happened to the lame sheep in that field?”

“What?” Ailsa turned and scanned the field. She went to the gate, then went through it and tramped around for a while. She stood still for a moment, looking at the gorse bushes and the trees up on the hillside.

Then she tramped back to Holly. “Well now,” she said. “Well, let’s get you going.”

They piled into the rusty Landrover. Ailsa rattled and banged up to the top of the hill and into the yard of Turnpike Farm.

“Nothing strange here,” she said, looking across the moor as she climbed out of the car.

“How do you know?” said Holly.

“Those rooks would be making a fuss if there was a big cat around.”

Holly hoped she was right. When Jarvis Turnpike came out to meet them, she listened to Ailsa tell the tale about the possible puma once again. Although Jarvis wore his usual scowl, he was not as curt to her as he had been on their first meeting, and he listened to Ailsa with a serious face.

Clive opened his mouth, and Holly, guessing he was about to correct “puma” to “sabre-tooth,” glared at him so sternly that he shut it again. If they started talking about a sabre-tooth, nobody would believe them.

Even Clive didn’t understand what this big cat really was: he thought it was just a scientific experiment, rather than an escapee from the deep past. Nobody else would understand.

Nobody except Doofus. *He* knew. Suddenly, Holly desperately wanted Doofus’s black, silent presence. She wanted to put her arms around his shoulders, to feel his comforting strength; although Doofus would not want her arms around him.

“So best keep a sharp lookout,” said Ailsa to Jarvis, finishing her warning.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be going anywhere today without my shotgun,” he replied. “And Lexie won’t be going out at all.”

“Can I say hallo to Lexie, and the baby?” Holly asked.

Jarvis led them inside. The baby was having breakfast, quite a lot of which was in its hair. It waved its spoon imperiously.

“Hallo baby, hallo Lexie,” Holly said. “Please could I borrow that rock with a hole that’s on your windowsill? I’ll bring it back.”

She could not have told them why it seemed important, although she thought they were bound to ask what she wanted it for. But Jarvis shrugged, and Lexie just said, “Sure,” without paying much attention, because the baby was trying to push a rusk in its ear.

So Holly picked up the stone and slid it into the front pocket of her jeans, where it just fitted.

“What’s that stone got to do with anything?” said Clive, back in Ailsa’s Landrover.

Holly got it out again. “Look through it,” she told him.

He looked. “I don’t see anything,” he said. “Oh, wow. That is really weird.” He raised his head with a bemused expression, and then bent it to peer through the stone again. “Now I can see Ailsa! That’s freaky.”

“What is?”

“Not seeing anything. I mean, literally, *nothing*, the first time I looked through it: only blackness. But the second time it’s just what you’d expect.” Clive turned the stone in his hands. “Just the windscreen, and Ailsa driving.”

“What’s that you’re saying about my driving?” said Ailsa over her shoulder. She couldn’t hear them properly. “I’ll not come in when I drop you off. I need to be back home before that nice young policeman comes to pay a visit.”

She pulled up outside Holly’s house and they unloaded their gear. There was no Doofus standing guard. Matt was the only one at home.

“Dad’s gone to work,” he said, helping to carry their things inside as Ailsa drove away. “Mum’s taken Nan out for a walk, or rather for a wheel around, seeing as it’s so nice. She said she’d take her early, before it gets too hot.”

“*What?* Didn’t Dad tell her about the big cat being on the loose?”

Matt scratched his head and grinned. “So what was all that about? Dad said you’d heard strange noises in the night and got scared. Ailsa said you thought it was a big cat. He reckoned you’d heard a farm cat in the dark. Is that why you rang up and left a message to tell us you were okay?”

“A farm cat? It was a big cat,” said Holly.

“It was a sabre-tooth,” said Clive with relish.

“*What?*” said Matt in his turn, incredulous. “Clive, are you having me on?”

“He’s not joking,” Holly said. She spun round frantically to look for Doofus. “Doofus, where’s Doofus?”

“Mum took him with her. A *sabre-tooth*? As in sabre-tooth tigers from the stone age?”

“Technically it’s not a tiger,” Clive informed him.

“It wasn’t stripey,” Holly said. “Where did Mum go, Matt?”

“A sabre-tooth whatever. Really? What was it like?”

“Brilliant,” said Clive, and “Horrible,” said Holly, both at the same time.

“Matt?” she persisted. “Where did Mum *go*?”

“Down to Miller’s Clough, to see the waterfall.”

“Right. Come on, Clive,” she said decisively. “We’re going after them. Get your bike, it’s faster.” She ran out of the door with the stone weighing down her pocket, and grabbed Matt’s bike from behind the garage.

“Hey!” said Matt, following her. “That’s mine!”

“Not any more. It doesn’t fit you. Borrow Mum’s.”

But Matt hung back. “You’re cycling down to Miller’s Clough, to warn Mum about a sabre-tooth tiger on the loose,” he said carefully.

“Yes!” she cried. “Why don’t you believe me? You heard about the wolves – this is all part of the same thing!”

“Oh, I believe you,” Matt replied. “That’s the trouble.”

“The cat won’t come into the village,” Clive declared. “I don’t think so, anyway. Not unless it’s really hungry. And there are sheep all over the place, so it doesn’t need to hunt people. In fact, it’s probably asleep right now. Lions spend three quarters of their time asleep.”

“Somehow I don’t find that very reassuring,” said Matt. “It’s the other quarter of the time I’m worried about. Hang on, I’m going to ring Mum.” He pulled out his mobile and swiped it.

A phone rang in the hall, inside a handbag.

“Ah,” said Matt. “Good old Mum. Always take your phone, she says. What a fine example.”

“I’m going to find her,” Holly said. “Come if you like. I don’t care.” She seemed to hear a plaintive howl that echoed round her head, bone-chilling as a midnight ghost. She swung the bike across the drive and set off fast to Miller’s Clough.

Chapter Nineteen

Although it was only five minutes' ride to Miller's Clough, by the time Holly got there Clive's bike had disappeared far behind her.

Along the way, she kept telling herself that Clive was probably right about the cat being fast asleep somewhere. He usually was right where animals were concerned: though who was to say that a Stone Age sabre-tooth would act the same way as a modern lion or tiger? Nobody had observed a sabre-tooth.

Until now. She thought of that predatory golden eye, observing *her*. The stone pressed against her leg. She was sure it was important, but she had no idea why, or what she could do with it.

At the moment, all she could think of was to warn Mum. Even if the cat was miles away, or snoring somewhere with a stomach full of lamb, she had to know that Mum and Nan were safe. Again, a mournful, gut-wrenching howl from Doofus seemed to echo through her head.

She gritted her teeth and pedalled even faster. Typical Mum, going out this early. It was barely nine o'clock when Holly's bike swerved into the car-park: too soon for the ice-cream van. There were no more than half a dozen cars there.

Holly couldn't see Mum or Nan, but she knew which path they must have taken: the wheelchair-friendly one, a gentle loop that twined through trees to the bottom of the waterfall and back again.

If it was wheelchair friendly, it was bike-friendly. As soon as she saw Clive wobbling into the far end of the car park, she set off down the path, pedalling furiously past indignant pairs of walkers who had to leap out of the way.

"No bikes!" one shouted. She ignored him and flew on between the trees.

Then she heard the howl.

Doofus... This time the howl was not inside her head: it was real, piteous and compelling. A surge of dread and panic flooded through her. Thrown off balance, she skidded sideways and nearly crashed into a tree.

As she dragged the bike upright, a second howl came to her ears: it was both a warning and an imperious summons. And then there was a third howl, and a fourth – layer on strident layer of alarm. Five, six, seven: howl after howl. She knew they were all Doofus. He must be going crazy.

She abandoned the bike by the side of the path and ran round the last bend to the waterfall. There was Mum, bending over Doofus, trying to quieten him, with apologetic smiles at the walkers who were frowning at this interruption to their peaceful morning. Doofus would not be quieted. Another howl echoed round the leafy banks like a baleful siren.

How many howls was that now? Holly asked herself in dismay. How many deaths did that mean? Nine, ten? Whose deaths was he howling for?

Doofus stood rigid, head pointing at the waterfall, and howled yet again, the harrowing sound rising over the steady rush of water.

“Stop it, Doofus, for goodness sake!” snapped Mum, tugging at his lead in vain. Nan, in her wheelchair, looked anxious. Mum glanced up and saw Holly.

“Oh, Holly, thank heavens you’ve arrived! Can you get him to calm down? Because I can’t. I don’t know what’s got into him. Do you think he’s hurt?”

Holly ran to Doofus. She did not fling her arms around him as she had wanted to do earlier. Instead she squatted next to him and said softly,

“What is it, Doofus? Where is it?” She followed the line of his gaze with her own eyes.

Trees clustered round the falls, which were a series of several torrents tumbling down the narrow cleft. High up on each overgrown bank were thick tangles of bushes and brambles.

She couldn’t see anything unusual: but she thought she detected the faint waft of a dark, pungent smell. The skin prickled on the back of her neck and down her spine. Doofus howled again, his whole body tense and stiff as steel, as if it pained him. That must be twelve howls by now, at least.

“What do we do, Doofus?” she whispered; and then it hit her.

Maybe there was nothing to be done. If the sabre-tooth was up there, watching, waiting, what could they do? They were just prey. A dozen slow, unarmed, unwary humans, most of them looking disapprovingly at the noisy dog.

They would be powerless if the sabre-tooth attacked. Maybe the fitter ones could run, but not very far. How could you defend yourself against a cat that was heavier than a tiger and had fangs half as long as your arm?

Even Doofus, strong as he was, would be powerless against an animal like that. That was why he was howling: to warn them that there was a killer up there, because warning them was all that he could do.

And then she saw it. It was the merest sandy slither in the bushes: the smallest flicker of a sliding golden eye. But she knew it was there. It was high up on the far side of the stream, and watching them.

Holly sprang up in alarm and ran over to the wheelchair. Nan was the most helpless of all the people present.

“Mum! Get Nan away from here!” she cried, trying to turn Nan’s wheelchair round. It wouldn’t budge.

“You’ve got the brake on,” said Mum. “Why? What’s the rush?”

“There’s something dangerous in the bushes,” she said breathlessly, releasing the brake lever and heaving at the wheelchair. It still wouldn’t move. Its wheels dug into the gravel. Clive appeared, falling off his bike and staggering over to them.

“What sort of something dangerous?” Mum demanded.

“A sabre-tooth,” said Holly, and she turned to address Clive. “It’s there, Clive, in the bushes up above the falls, where Doofus is staring. We’ve got to get everyone away!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Mum.

Clive took a deep breath. “*That,*” he said.

They turned and saw it walking out into full view. Emerging from its cover, it stood above the steep bank on the far side of the falls, and looked down at them. They could see the enormous size of its powerful, thickset body, and the full, horrific length of those scimitar-like fangs as its mouth gaped in a snarl.

The falls were no barrier: it could leap them easily, thought Holly, or just wade through the water. The stream was not deep enough to even slow it down.

The cat was watching them watch it, with an intentness of gaze that seemed to pin her to the ground. Yet many of the sight-seers didn’t even notice it at first. It wasn’t until Clive shouted, “Everybody group together!” and pointed, that all the other people realised it was there.

And then, of course, nobody grouped together. One screamed; several ran, and a woman said, “Is that a model?” until it moved again, at which she both screamed and ran.

But Holly could not run with the wheelchair. She could barely push it: it crawled across the gravel. Meanwhile Doofus stood as rigid as a statue, facing the beast which was now prowling along the far bank, starting to scramble down.

“We’re safer in a group!” yelled Clive. “Everybody stare at it! Get stones ready to throw!” He picked up a stone in one hand and a stick in the other. Holly stooped automatically to take a stone in either hand, at the same time wondering just how effective sticks and stones would be against a sabre-tooth.

“Tigers like to surprise their prey,” Clive panted, as if he guessed her thoughts. “They don’t like to be stared at, or having things thrown at them. And they don’t like groups, they’d rather pick one person on their own.”

As if to prove his point, the sabre-tooth turned and prowled back half-way to the bushes before swinging round again. It stalked to and fro along the bank, first left, then right, with sinuous, heavy grace. Always its golden stare was fixed on them, seeming to weigh them up. Doofus stood stock still on the near bank, his black eyes watching it across the water.

“If the rest of us run away it’ll just charge,” said Clive. “Better to face it.” He strode up to stand next to Doofus at the stream’s edge, and hurled his rock towards the sabre-tooth. It fell short and landed in the water, its splash lost in the clamour of the falls. The big cat took no more notice of it than of a raindrop.

Holly was dreadfully afraid. All her instincts shouted at her to run, no matter what Clive said. But she could not abandon Nan, nor leave Clive standing there alone.

Three of them – two children and Doofus – would make more of a barrier than just two. It was a sort of group, at least. And Nan had to be protected at all costs, because she could not protect herself.

So, despite her thumping heart and the voice inside her head that was insistently telling her that this was really, *really* not a good idea, Holly marched up and stood beside Clive, a futile stone gripped in each clammy hand.

The big cat paused in its stalking to and fro. For several seconds it did not move at all: and then it seemed to go into slow motion. Gradually, very gradually, one hind leg stepped back, and then the other: slowly the muscular haunches lowered themselves into a crouch.

And then, with startling suddenness, it leapt. It sprang down agilely from its bank, landing heavily on a stone platform in the middle of the falls. There it halted amidst the fountain of white spray, still watching them, poised to spring again.

Clive yelled and threw his stick. And Doofus threw himself.

Doofus charged, splashing through the water, and launched himself at the sabre-tooth's back, away from those huge fangs. It twisted round to snarl and lunge at him, swiping with a mighty claw.

Holly's heart was in her mouth. Big though he was, Doofus was no match for a beast that size. It must be four or five times his weight. It would only be a matter of time before it killed him.

The cat's first lunge tore at Doofus's hind leg, ripping through his flesh. As Doofus whipped around to attack it from another angle, it wheeled to follow him. With a rasping, menacing roar, it lunged again.

Clive was yelling at the top of his voice. He picked up handfuls of gravel and threw them uselessly towards the cat. Holly hurled both her stones, shouting incoherently, she wasn't sure what – maybe *get away*, or maybe *Doofus, Doofus!* Blood began to stain the water red. She forgot about feeling frightened for herself. Instead she just felt desperately afraid for Doofus.

Her two stones hit the big cat's sandy hide, and bounced off without effect. There were no other large rocks lying within reach: nothing except gravel.

But there was a stone weighing down her pocket. She pulled it out and flung it at the sabre-tooth.

At the instant it left her hand, she thought bitterly, why did I go to all the trouble of fetching that blue rock, just to throw it away? How stupid am I? A little stone like that won't stop it.

Then she stopped thinking, because she could see through the hole in the stone as it arced in the air. A tiny point of fierce white light blazed through it momentarily. Yet the sun was nowhere near it.

The stone seemed to halt in mid-air: then, turning while it fell, it hit the sabre-tooth in the middle of the back.

The cat reared up, snarling in annoyance. Its eyes latched on to Holly as it bared its fangs in fury and roared again, showing her all the anatomy of its fearsome mouth. Doofus charged: the cat swatted him aside with a giant paw. And then it made a leap towards her.

In the same second, the pattern of the falls began to change.

It was as if they took a new course, or an extra ton of water was suddenly thrown down from the moors to surge past with a deafening, forceful roar, much louder than the sabre-tooth's. A huge cloud of white spray wrapped itself around both sabre-tooth and dog. They were completely hidden.

"What's happening?" Holly cried. She could not hear her own voice. Clive dragged her backwards as the spray flew out at them. Immediately they were both soaked through.

For a moment, Holly was blinded by the flying water and had to turn her face away. When she looked back, the surge was subsiding. The cloud of spray began to dissipate. She could see the black shape of Doofus standing in the middle of the water, his head drooping – but no sabre-tooth.

"It's gone," she said. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," said Clive. He sounded faint and stunned. Both dripping wet, they looked up and down the stream. No sabre-tooth: yet there was nowhere that it could have bolted to without being seen.

"Help me push Nan," begged Mum behind them. "That animal must have slipped away somehow, thank goodness. We need to move this wheelchair before it comes back!"

Clive ran back to Mum, who was in the middle of a small huddle of onlookers: the other walkers had, after all, followed Clive's advice about staying in a group. Now they began to help push Nan's chair off the gravel onto the smooth path.

But Holly went the other way and splashed into the falls, wading through the rushing water to reach Doofus.

He stood with his head down, panting heavily. Trickle of blood ran down his flanks and swirled away in the hurrying stream.

"What happened, Doofus?" she asked him as she tried to wipe the blood away with her hand. More blood took its place. "Where did the cat go?"

Doofus took a shuddering, gasping breath, and leaned against her legs. He wasn't looking for an enemy any longer. He wasn't looking anywhere. His eyes kept closing and opening again.

“Come on then,” said Holly, suddenly much more anxious about Doofus than about the vanished sabre-tooth. “Come on, let’s get out of the water.” She took hold of his collar and persuaded him to move, walking slowly alongside him, feeling his weight lurch against her as they stepped onto dry land.

The wheelchair was being swiftly pushed away by now: Holly saw Nan look back at them from amongst her helpers. Her hand fluttered in concern.

“He’s fine,” called Holly, and then she said encouragingly to Doofus, “Okay, let’s follow Nan.”

But Doofus wasn’t fine. That was increasingly obvious: his blood-drenched flanks were heaving. He stumbled, and righted himself with an effort. Holly wondered what to do. Everyone else was way ahead of them by now. If he were to collapse here, she could never carry him.

At last Doofus began to move again. Somehow he kept walking, although every few steps he halted, his breathing laboured, his head down. She rested her hand on his broad back and whispered gentle nothings to him until he shuffled his feet on again.

In this manner they crept towards the car park, where there was a noisy crowd of people all talking at once to the flummoxed warden. Doofus closed his eyes; and with a sigh, slumped slowly to the ground.

Chapter Twenty

Holly was watching the tea-time news. She sat on her hands next to Clive on the sofa, tight with fear and worry.

“And now with these latest reports of a big cat running wild, what are we to think?” the TV reporter said. He had a safari suit on and was posing like a big-game hunter in front of the falls at Miller’s Clough. “Given that no big cat has been found, despite extensive searches over the last twenty-four hours, is this simply a case of mass hysteria?”

The camera zoomed in to his face as his eyes narrowed. “Or is there something more suspicious going on? This area has gained a huge amount of publicity over the last few weeks, which can only have helped its hotels and tourist trade...”

Here they cut to an interview with a woman from the tourist board, who denied all knowledge of big cats or anything else.

“They didn’t even mention DNA and cloning,” said Clive, disappointed.

“They think it’s all a fraud, a fake or something, made up to get people to come here. But who on earth would expect a sabre-tooth cat to attract tourists?” asked Holly.

“It would attract me,” said Clive wistfully. “I wonder how it can have just disappeared?”

It went back through time, Holly said inside her head; with the help of the stone with a hole. She did not say this thought aloud. “Something electro-magnetic,” she suggested instead.

“Possibly.” Clive heaved a sigh of regret.

The phone rang, and Holly’s heart jumped in fear. This, not the TV news, was what she had been waiting for. As she leapt off the sofa to answer it, she felt so sick that she could barely speak.

“Hallo? Yes. Really? *Really?* Thank you.” She put the phone down and looked at Clive. “That was Lucinda. We can go and pick up Doofus.”

“He’s okay?”

Holly nodded and looked away again. It was ridiculous that tears should start to fill her eyes now, when there was good news. She hadn’t really believed that Doofus would be all right, despite Lucinda trying to reassure her the previous day; for it had seemed to her that Doofus must be dying.

When the warden at Miller’s Clough had seen the dog lying unconscious in a pool of blood, he had rung Lucinda. She’d come out straight away, and together they had loaded Doofus, barely breathing, into her van. There had been so much blood that Holly was terrified.

She wasn’t allowed to go with Doofus. She had to go home with the others. But she had barely eaten, barely slept since then. It was nearly as bad as

Pancake. Maybe it was worse, because she thought they might all owe their lives to Doofus. If he hadn't held the sabre-tooth at bay, how many of them now might just be shredded cat-meat?

So now the relief of Lucinda's call had not quite sunk in.

"Are you going to collect him? I'll come with you." Clive bounced up and switched off the TV.

Dad drove them to the vet's, because Doofus would not be walking home. He would not be walking anywhere for a few days, according to Lucinda.

The vet led them to a small room where Doofus lay prone upon a mat. He had a wodge of dressing round his neck and shoulder, and another one on his hind-quarters. Sixty-four stitches in all, Lucinda had told them. As they came in, he struggled to sit up.

"No, lie down, Doofus," Holly said. She put a hand upon his back. She didn't really know how to stroke him, because he did not care for being stroked. But he didn't seem to mind her hand just being there.

"Well, poor old Doofie," said Dad, kneeling down to make a fuss of him, and doing plenty of patting and stroking, which he bore patiently.

But Clive was following Lucinda around the surgery. While she was getting antibiotics for Doofus out of a cupboard, he trapped her in the corner and asked,

"Did they find out anything else yet about those wolves?"

"They're still trying to work out where they came from," said Lucinda, attempting to edge round him. Clive stood firm.

"What about that bit of fur you took from Doofus's teeth?" he asked eagerly. "What did that come from?"

"Cat," said Lucinda briefly, not meeting his gaze.

"Cat? So where is it now, that bit of fur?"

"It's gone to the Natural History Museum."

Clive beamed. "Cat is right," he said. "I saw it. It was amazing."

"Let's get this dog on the road," said Dad. The mat where Doofus lay had handles, and turned into a sort of cradle arrangement; but it took all four of them to lift it, with Doofus stretched out on it, into the back of Dad's estate car. Doofus was stoical.

"It's mostly blood loss that's the problem," said Lucinda. "Make sure he has plenty to eat and drink, and keep him quiet."

Thanking her, they set off for home, with Dad doing his smoothest chauffeur-style driving.

"Dad?" said Holly as they approached Miller's Clough. "Can we go in there, just for five minutes?"

"What for, sweetheart?"

"I just want to have a look."

The car park was cordoned off with orange tape. *Closed until further notice*, said a sign. Dad parked up next to it.

“If you’re walking down to the waterfall, I’ll come with you,” he said.

Holly looked at Doofus. He lay quiet and relaxed. Seeing him so unconcerned made her realise how much tension had been building up in him for the last week.

“I think it’ll be all right,” she said. “I don’t think there’s any danger now.”

She climbed over the tape and ran down the path with Dad puffing some way behind. Clive stayed in the car with Doofus.

When she reached the waterfall there was nobody there but the water, although that seemed like a person in itself, busily talking away to her in a liquid language that she felt she ought to know. Maybe Nan would understand it, or Lily.

She jumped over to the rocky platform where the sabre-tooth had stood, ignoring the drenching of her shoes, and looked down into the water. There was nothing to show that a big cat had ever been here, thirty thousand years after its true time. A blackbird sang melodiously from the tangled bushes. She gazed up at them: no golden eye gazed back.

She looked down again and saw what she had come for – the stone eye in the water. Reaching in, she picked it up and pocketed it, all wet, just as Dad came panting up to her.

“There’s nothing here now,” she said, turning round.

“What did you expect to find?”

“Footprints, or something,” she said vaguely. “I suppose the wardens and police and so on have tramped all over everything.”

Dad had a peer around for footprints anyway, while the stone lay heavy in Holly’s pocket.

But it’s not just a stone, she thought: it’s a window. A keyhole. A keystone. It’s a way through to the past: a way that can be locked to keep the past out.

It might have lain safely buried up on Whitten Moor for centuries, or thousands of years, until Jarvis dug it up and let the creatures of the past come through. But now the stone had sent them back.

Could it send them back in time, though? Time was one way only. She had read that you could slow time down by travelling fast enough through space, but you could never turn time around and go backwards. You could *look* back, if you looked far enough away across the galaxies; but you could not *go* back. The future was the only place to go.

So perhaps the sabre-tooth and wolves had been sent into the future; to reappear a hundred, or a thousand years from now.

Or next week.

She decided not to mention the stone in her pocket to Clive. He would only want to start experimenting on it, and there was no way she was going to let prehistoric wolves and big cats turn up in the shed. Although she didn't know how it worked, she knew she had better keep the stone eye somewhere safe: somewhere it would not be interfered with. If the trouble had all started when Jarvis dug it up, maybe she should bury it deep again.

"Hard to believe," said Dad, trying unsuccessfully to skim a pebble on the tumbling water. "It's all so peaceful here."

He had already decided that Holly and her Mum and Nan had seen a puma. He blamed the wildlife park, with their dodgy record on wild boars and wallabies. Mum had admitted that the cat might well have seemed bigger than it actually was; and Nan, of course, was not able to describe it at all.

Holly knew that Nan was worried about Doofus, though. All day Nan had been restless, her eyes searching. They were expecting Uncle Ted to arrive, but Holly thought Nan's longing was for Doofus. Nan would not be happy till he was back home.

So she said, "Come on, Dad. Party day tomorrow. I've got a cake to ice. Balloons to blow up. There's still a lot to do." And she led him back to the car, where Doofus waited, and left the stream behind her babbling out its endless unintelligible secrets.

Chapter Twenty-One

The blue cake was iced: balloons were blown: presents were given, mostly of the soap and lacy handkerchief variety. Holly gave Nan a box of cream chocolates. She had picked out all the caramels to eat herself, because Nan could not cope with them.

Clive did not give Nan his tape of birdsong after all.

“The growling in the background might scare her,” he explained. Holly doubted that, but she didn’t blame him for keeping the tape. He had the only sound recording in existence of a sabre-tooth cat.

And she had the only photographs of one, although her Dad’s camera had lost all its images, and when she charged up her phone the pictures Clive had taken with it were disappointing. The flash had given the cat weirdly green eyes and greyish fur; and, worse, there was no sense of scale. Nothing to show how big it was. They could have been pictures of a rather strange domestic cat, with fangs photo-shopped in.

All the same, Matt photo-shopped the green eyes back to gold, and printed off the clearest photograph for Clive to pin on his shed wall. He also helped Clive to rip a CD of birdsong off the internet, so that he would have something to give Nan at the party.

It was a very sedate party. It became even more sedate when Dad took the Frank Sinatra off the CD player and put the birdsong on, and they all had to sit in silence to listen to the tweets and trillings. Since most of the guests were friends of Nan and therefore over eighty, that didn’t seem to matter. Bill Barton and Ailsa brought the average age down by a little, but not much.

Nan smiled at the birdsong. She had a balloon tied to her wheelchair. Holly could tell that she was very happy, much happier than she’d been for months. Much of that was down to Uncle Ted, who had arrived the previous evening, rolling in like a hearty veteran pirate with red-veined cheeks above his white beard, and a strong, deep, burring voice.

Uncle Ted had immediately taken to Doofus. “Fine dog,” he said. Doofus was on his feet already, despite Lucinda saying it would be days; though he was moving very slowly. He walked stiffly over to Bill Barton and stood by him while Bill gave him a pat. Bill’s face went as stiff and painful as Doofus seemed to be.

“My daughter’s been on at me to get another dog,” he said.

“I think it’s too soon,” said Holly. “It takes a while.”

Bill nodded. “There’ll never be another one like Joey.”

“I know,” said Holly, but Mum put in brightly,

“Why don’t you try the dogs’ home? That’s where we got ours. He’s turned out rather big, it’s true, but he’s a treasure. Nan loves him, don’t you, Nan?”

“Doo,” said Nan. “Doo.”

“Yes, I know you do,” said Mum.

“He was abandoned on the moor,” said Dad. “Some people.”

“You told us that you saw one like him once,” Holly reminded Ailsa. “When was that?”

“Over thirty years ago, on top of Whitten Moor. It was a dog very similar to Doofus. Could have been his great-great-grandfather, I suppose,” said Ailsa. “But with a few more greats than that. It was when the heather fires along the tops were really bad.”

“I remember that,” said Dad. “We weren’t allowed anywhere near. What happened?”

“Well, I was foolish. Went up there trying to find a sheep and thinking I’d be fine,” she said, “and then I got myself trapped in the middle of the fires and didn’t know which way to go. The smoke was something dreadful. I couldn’t see a thing.”

“Scary.”

Ailsa pulled a wry face. “I don’t think I’d have burnt to death, it wasn’t like a bush fire, but I could have suffocated. I was starting to choke and cough when I saw a shadow in the smoke, and out came a big black dog. It seemed to know where it was going, so I followed it down off the moor. When I found myself back on the road I looked round for it, but it had gone. It was the double of Doofus, though.”

“He’s like that dog we saw in London that time, isn’t he, Meg?” said Uncle Ted in his jolly, rather booming voice.

“Af,” agreed Nan.

“What time do you mean?” asked Holly.

“It was in the war,” said Uncle Ted. “Second World, a long long time ago.” He winked at her. “Us kids had been evacuated, but after a few months we came back home again to London. When the bombing started we’d run down to the shelters or the Underground. We didn’t have an Anderson of our own. But we didn’t get any warning the night our house got hit.”

“A bomb?” asked Clive, wide eyed.

“It was a doodlebug,” said Ted solemnly. “A buzz bomb. A flying bomb, like a torpedo with wings. Horrible things. You’d hear them buzzing through the sky and then they’d go quiet, and you’d know you were in trouble. But we were asleep when it hit.”

“Nan never told us about that,” said Matt.

“No? Well, it was all a bit traumatic.”

“What happened?” said Clive eagerly.

“The doodlebug came down right through our roof. It smashed half a wall and demolished the stairs, but it didn’t blow up. Everything was dust and rubble. Our Mam was safe downstairs, but she couldn’t reach us. Me and Meg and Doris and our baby Wilf, we were stuck upstairs and couldn’t get down. There were broken rafters and piles of bricks everywhere and a fog of dust, and the whole lot was shifting and creaking with bits rattling away on all sides, as if it was ready to collapse. And in the middle of that lot was the doodlebug, like a great stranded shark.”

“Eh,” said Nan, in a tone of pain.

“We were all terrified,” said Ted. “We were crying with shock and didn’t know what to do. I thought we were going to die. Even if the doodlebug didn’t go off, the house would collapse. And if the house collapsed, the doodlebug would go off. It was just a toss-up which would happen first.”

“Doo,” said Nan.

“And then we saw this dog appear through a cloud of dust. A big black dog like yours. It must have found its way up through the house next door. As soon as we saw it, we knew there must be another way out. So we followed it, and it led us over the rubble through a hole smashed in the wall to next door’s house, and we got down that way.”

“And did the doodlebug go off?” asked Clive, agog.

“The house collapsed twenty minutes later, and yes, it went off then, and blew up half the street. But luckily they’d got everyone evacuated by that time. Nobody got hurt. Funny enough, nobody knew whose dog it was.”

“Doo,” said Nan, stretching out a trembling hand to Doofus. “Doo.” He strolled stiffly over to nuzzle at her fingers.

“We called him Rex,” said Ted, “and we wanted to keep him, but we had no house and no money to feed him. We kept him for a day at Auntie Edie’s place and then he disappeared. We were bereft. Never forgot him. This dog’s just like Rex, isn’t he, Meg?”

“Doo,” said Nan. She lay back in her chair, looking drained and relieved. Of course, thought Holly, she can’t say Rex. But that’s the tale she wanted to tell us all along.

Doo wasn’t for Doofus. Doo wasn’t for doom; or not exactly. Doo was for Doodlebug. Nan *knew*.

And then it was time for blue cake. Frank Sinatra replaced the birdsong, and the solemnity disappeared into laughs and jokes and many toasts: to Nan, to Uncle Ted, to Rex, to Doofus, to the memory of Joey. Holly and Clive drank their toasts in Vimto.

“And here’s to Clive and Holly,” said Dad unexpectedly, “for outstanding courage in the face of danger.”

The two of them had to stand in the middle of the room while everybody raised their glasses. Clive looked pleased and embarrassed.

"I wasn't really brave," he carefully explained, "because I wasn't really scared. Not as scared as Holly. So she was much braver."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Clive," she said.

But afterwards, when everyone else was talking, she felt she should boost Clive up a bit.

"Dad was right, Clive. You *were* really brave. How many people in High School will have faced a sabre-tooth and not been frightened?"

He gave her a sideways look. "Don't be patronising. I know what High School will be like. I'm prepared."

"Sorry," she said. "But it is true. You weren't afraid of a sabre-tooth. Why not?"

"I just wanted to see it close up," said Clive, finishing off his third piece of cake.

"What *are* you afraid of, Clive?"

"Something happening to Mr Finney," he said at once, with his mouth full.

"Is that all?"

Clive considered it. "Oh, well. Something happening to Lily, I suppose," he said. "Or Mum. Never seeing my dad again. Falling off harbour walls. Black mambas. Global warming. Breaking my glasses on top of a cliff. Not being good enough to do what I want to do."

"What do you want to do? Be a vet?"

"No," said Clive. "I can't, obviously, because of the exam thing, so I've already decided I don't want to. But I'm afraid that when I do know what I want to do I won't be able to do that either."

"I haven't even thought about it," Holly said. She wanted to point out that Clive's fear for Mr Finney was bound to be justified within a year, or less: Mr Finney was already two. But Clive must know that.

"I think I'm afraid of time," she said. "I wish we could stop it. It just keeps on going. It takes everything away. Not just Nan and Mr Finney, everything."

"It brings everything first," Clive pointed out. He took off his glasses to clean them on his T-shirt, putting a thin smear of blue icing across them. "Time is change. No getting round it. Everything has to change. If nothing ever changed there would be no time."

"But time controls everything. Except Doofus."

They both looked at Doofus.

"The harbinger of doom," said Holly, thinking, maybe Doofus knows when things will die, because all time is as one to him. He exists in time and

outside it, on the boundaries, in the places where time leaks from the world. Not just on Whitten Moor, but in other places too: like London, seventy-odd years ago.

That morning she had shown Doofus the stone-with-a-hole, at which he sniffed keenly; and then she had carried it around the house and garden with him painfully following her, while she tried to work out where to put it.

Although she had thought of burying it deep in the garden, Doofus would not let her. Despite his wounds, he had firmly barged her away from the flowerbeds.

So she'd taken it inside; but that was no better. Doofus had not approved of anywhere in the house. When she attempted to put the stone eye in the airing cupboard, he got his head in there and pushed her arm away. Then he walked very slowly downstairs to the back door, and stuck his nose in the tub with the rosemary bush which stood just outside the threshold, next to the drainpipe.

So that was where the stone was now: buried in the tub under the rosemary bush. Once it was done, Doofus had stretched and lain down with a yawn. Not a half-howl, but a true yawn.

"He doesn't bring doom. He just sees it coming," she said to Clive now, thinking aloud. "But he's a rescuer too, like Rex, and Ailsa's dog. He tried to rescue us at Miller's Clough. All that howling was to warn us. No-one died."

"We didn't let them," said Clive.

"But that was down to Doofus," Holly said.

At the sound of his name, his ears pricked up. He turned to look at her, with that unfathomable, deep, black gaze, like wells of night.

"Good boy," said Holly. "Sausage, Doofus?"

The dog of doom limped over to her and gulped down the sausage that she held out. Then he stuck his nose into her armpit before briefly reaching up to lick her chin.

"Look," said Clive in wonder, "he's wagging his tail."

"Why wouldn't he?" said Holly, as she caressed the strong black head. Doofus seemed to like it, or at least, not to mind; so she stroked his ears. They were nothing like Pancake's big, brown, floppy ears, but that didn't really matter. This was Doofus.

She was proud of him. *Her* dog.

The End

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If you have enjoyed reading *Doofus, Dog of Doom*, look for the second book about Doofus:

Doofus on the Edge

Holly and Clive go for a holiday to Great-Uncle Ted's house near the Cornish cliffs; and take Doofus with them. But they haven't been there long before strange things start to happen...

Doofus on the Edge is free to download from Emma Laybourn's website, Megamouse Books, at

<https://megamousebooks.com/doofusontheedge.html>

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