

# 1

Last day of primary school. When I got home, Jet was at the door like always. He jumped into my arms and panted and squirmed and yapped against my chest and I couldn't stop laughing.

'Yes,' I said. 'Yes, we'll go out, Jet. We will!'

I hushed him and put him down.

Dad was lying on the sofa. His book was on the floor. His water glass was empty. I leaned close and listened hard. He was breathing. Of course he was. I laid a woollen rug over him. Sometimes he felt so cold, even though it was mad hot outside.

I dumped my bag of folders and artwork from school on the floor.

'Big day for you, son,' he murmured.

'Aye, Dad.'

‘It went OK?’

‘Aye, Dad. Was it OK for you?’

‘Same as ever, son.’

He wasn’t properly awake and he didn’t want to talk. I filled his glass and put it back on the coffee table close by and told him to drink. I asked if there was anything else I could do and he murmured no.

‘I’ll take Jet out,’ I said. ‘Is that OK?’

‘He needs it, son. Not a dog to be cooped up inside. Stay safe.’

‘I won’t be long. I won’t go far.’

‘Nowhere’s far in this town, son. Take some water. You got sun cream on?’

‘Aye.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Look after him, Jet.’

Then he shut his eyes.

I tucked the rug around his shoulders. I watched him for a while and he looked fine.

I put a caramel wafer and water bottle into my backpack, got the lead, and left the house.

I let Jet lead me. The sun blazed down like it had for weeks. We walked up steep Cuthbert’s Lane, went beyond the houses, then along the narrow twisting path beneath the trees towards the Chapel of Doom.

We came to the ancient metal fence. Most of it had

fallen long ago and was tangled up in the brambles and weeds.

There were battered faded signs.

*KEEP OUT. NO ENTRY.*

*BEWARE. DANGER OF DEATH.*

One had the silhouette of a falling boy on it.

They'd been there forever, ever since my dad had been a boy, ever since his dad had been a boy.

There was another newer one today, Day-Glo yellow.

*PRIVATE. NO TRESPASSING.*

Beyond it was the wasteland – shrubs and scrawny trees and brambles and rubble and dusty ground. And old tombstones, lopsided, broken, lots of them toppled to the earth. Then the chapel itself. Ancient, crumbling. The roof was shattered and the spire was nearly gone. Most of the windows were bricked up, the huge front door had bars and boards across it.

A couple of crows flapped out through the shattered roof. Some other dark bird, I don't know what, was up there on the ruined steeple.

I listened, but there was no noise from inside that day.

Jet growled softly.

'It's OK,' I said. 'We'll not go in this time.'

We kept on staring. We were nervous here, but we couldn't stay away.

‘There’s no falling boy,’ I said. ‘It’s just a tale. Let’s go.’

We went back along the path and turned downhill and passed the school, St Giles. The gates were shut. Just a couple of teachers’ cars were left. Everything was empty and silent and still, but I saw Mrs Stubbs in reception class. In termtime, her walls were always covered in kids’ artwork, but they were empty now, waiting for next year. She didn’t see me. Mrs Stubbs. I loved her so much, ever since the very first day, when she stood at the school door with a smile on her face to welcome us all. Mam and Dad were at the gate, smiling as well with tears in their eyes as I walked away from them.

I’d probably never go in there again.

Mr Griffiths, the caretaker, came out with a load of bin bags in his arms.

He laughed.

‘Back so soon? We thought you’d gone forever, lad!’

‘I’m going now!’ I yelled.

We walked the busy High Street. Lots of folk nodded and smiled at us. A couple of them asked about my dad. We got to Basil Malone’s Butcher’s at the far end. We paused, and Jet gazed longingly at the sausages hanging in the window.

There was a massive butcher model just outside. He wore a red and white apron and a white straw hat and a curly

black moustache and he had a cleaver in his hand. His belly was huge, his arms were thick.

Years back, Dad showed me how to rap his belly and make him go *Dong!* When I was little, I had to stretch and reach right up to do it. I could just about make him go *Ding!* I still felt really small beside him. I pressed my palm against him and he was already hot from the blazing sun.

I rapped him with my fist.

*Dang!*

Jet yapped at him, and, like always, he seemed amazed the butcher didn't move.

I rapped him harder.

*Dang!*

A girl stepped out from the doorway next to the door of the shop. She had a little rucksack on her back, a red sun hat on her head, a notebook in her hand.

'Oh, hello!' she said. 'What a lovely dog! We live up there.'

She pointed upwards and I held my arm across the sun and looked up to the sky.

'Not all the way up!' she said. 'Just the flat upstairs. That's where we're staying. Me and my mum. We're from the distant hills. What's your name?'

'Joff.'

'Joff. I'll tell her. I'm out collecting information today. My name is Dawn. But today I'm Marco Polo.'

‘Marco Polo?’

‘Yes. Which way should I go? I’m gathering information about the town to take back to her. Which is the most interesting way?’

I looked back along the High Street to where I’d come from, and forward along City Road to where I was headed.

I shrugged.

‘There’s nowhere that’s *that* interesting,’ I said.

‘What a strange thing to say. Anyway, my first information will be about a boy called Joff and his dog called . . .’

‘Jet.’

‘Jet. Good name.’ She stroked Jet’s head. ‘There are lots of lovely dogs like you where I come from.’

He wagged his tail. I could see he liked her.

‘My name’s Dawn, Jet,’ she said. ‘It’s very good to meet you.’

*Yap!*

She opened her notebook and wrote something down.

‘An interesting boy named Joff,’ she said, ‘and his interesting border collie named Jet. You’re the very first entry in my book. Are you from these parts?’

I pointed over the rooftops at the other side of the street.

‘I live over that way,’ I told her.

She wrote again.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘It’s time to roam. Goodbye, Joff. Goodbye,

Jet. Thanks for the help. I'm sure our paths will cross again.  
I'll go . . . this way.'

And she headed out the way that Jet and I had come. She stopped for a moment to look closely at a hedge in somebody's front garden. She wrote something down and set off again.

She kept turning her head as she walked away, like she was talking to somebody there at her side.