



DOGGIE'S LAST DAY



By Nigel Toeg

Doggie's Last Day was written and published by Nigel Toeg

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“Where’s Doggie?” said Chris, looking over at his wife Mara who was busy flicking through a magazine.

“Don’t know.” Mara turned her head, as though expecting Doggie to emerge from behind the sofa, or maybe appear in the doorway. “I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Me neither.” Chris stood up to get a better look through the window, peering left and right.

“Can’t see him,” he told her, shaking his head. “Better get his skates on, though. Not long now before we’re leaving.”

Some distance from his home, Doggie was walking along a lane. The lane led from his house to the village. Carefully crossing the road, he caught a glimpse of brown fur at the bottom of a hedge and a nose poking out of the green leaves. It was Francis.

“Hello Francis,” Doggie said to the fox. “How are you?”

“Not so bad.” Francis moved a bit further out from the hedge. “Have to keep my wits about me, though. Doesn’t pay to go daydreaming. Lots of people round here don’t like foxes.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Doggie. “Must be hard.”

Francis scratched at the ground with his paw. “You’re not wrong there, Doggie. More’s the pity!”

“Yes,” Doggie agreed. “Much harder being a fox than a dog.”

Francis nodded. “Anyway,” he continued. “Where are you going?”

“It’s my last day,” Doggie told him. “We’re moving house, so I thought I’d get out and about, have a last look round, say my goodbyes.”

“I see,” the fox said, turning his head to one side. “Left it a bit late, haven’t you?”

“I know,” said Doggie. “But I only found out we were leaving last night.”

“Poor thing,” said Francis. “Never nice to have a last day, I’d have thought. It sounds so final.”



“Yes, it does,” Doggie agreed.

“Oh well.” Francis gave a quick look up the lane. “Best be on my way.” And he retreated back into the shelter of the hedge. “Good luck to you, Doggie,” he called out as his bushy tail disappeared.

“Thanks,” Doggie said, a little sadly, wondering whether he’d ever see Francis again.

Giving a large sigh, he headed off once more towards the village.

As Doggie walked along, he found himself thinking back to the first day he'd arrived at the house they were now leaving. He tried to remember how long ago that had been but he wasn't very good with time. The one thing that came to mind, though, was Chris, his owner, saying he had a special present for him to mark the fact they had come to a new home. How excited Doggie had been, wondering what it could be.

"I've even wrapped it up," Chris went on to say.

Doggie could see how Chris was holding something behind his back and he jumped up and tried to get behind him to see what it was.

"No you don't," Chris called out, laughing and waving his free hand in the air. "All in good time Doggie, all in good time."

And then Chris played a little game of turning in a circle to stop Doggie seeing what he was holding. Doggie never liked it when his owner did this kind of thing but he was a loyal dog and went along with it to make Chris happy.

"Can't catch me," Chris shouted, continually whirling around and around, keeping Doggie in front of him and the surprise present behind his back.

That's what you think, Doggie thought. If I really tried, I could get behind you easy as anything, easy as putting one paw in front of the other.

After this had gone on a little longer, Chris suddenly stopped and held what he had in his hand towards Doggie. It was wrapped in newspaper and had the shape of a large bone.

"Bet you can't guess what this is?" Chris said.

Hmm, Doggie thought. Not for the first time wondering about the intelligence of his owner. It looks like a bone and smells like a bone, so my best guess would be that it's probably a bone. In fact, a bone would be my only suggestion.

“What a surprise you’re going to have,” Chris went on. “You’ll never guess!”

Not going to be a surprise unless it turns out to be a vase or a soup spoon or maybe a book, Doggie thought.

“Ta-da.” Chris put his clenched fist to his mouth and lifted his head, making noises through it like a pretend bugle blowing a fanfare.

And with this, he placed the wrapped present on the floor in front of Doggie.

Doggie dutifully wagged his tail and set to pulling the paper off.

Chris was hopping up and down, eager to see Doggie’s face when the present was revealed.

As the bone appeared from the wrapping, Doggie made sure he didn’t disappoint. After all, he was pleased to have a bone and took it in his teeth and turned his head from side to side, making a soft growling sound. Then he wagged his tail and jumped up at Chris while his owner ruffled the fur on his head and said, “What a surprise that must have been.”

Doggie continued along the lane, not stopping until he came to a place where a muddy road led towards two football pitches. Beyond the pitches were several acres of ploughed field bordered by woods on three sides.

In the summer, Chris and Mara would sometimes take a picnic and ramble through the woods, Doggie running on ahead, loving all the different smells and exploring parts he’d never been to before. Sometimes, in the warm weather, he’d take a dip in the stream. He remembered one time returning wet to where Chris and Mara were chatting on a mossy bank and shaking his fur, sending drops of water all over his owners.



A smile came to his face followed by a small bark-like chuckle as he remembered their shouts. “No Doggie, no,” Mara had cried out, looking at the muddy drops on her dress. “Bad dog,” Chris had joined in. “Bad dog, Doggie.”

On one of the football pitches, Doggie could see another dog running after a ball thrown for him. The dog’s name was Stanley and Stanley was a whippet.

As Doggie stopped and watched, he couldn’t believe how quickly Stanley could run. Mind you, he thought, that whippet doesn’t have an

ounce of fat on him. Pity the same can't be said about his owner.



Spotting Doggie watching, Stanley ran over to where he was sitting by the edge of the pitch.

“Hello Doggie,” Stanley greeted him. “What are you up to?”

“It’s my last day,” Doggie said. “We’re moving home. So I wanted to have a last look round and say goodbye.”

“Oh, that is a shame,” Stanley told him. “We’ll all miss you.”

“Thanks,” said Doggie, looking downcast.

“But then, I’m sure your new place will be great,” Stanley said brightly, trying to cheer him up.

“I hope so,” Doggie said. “I see you’re doing the ball thing.”

“Yes, I feel I have to. Pretty pointless, if you ask me. He throws the ball, I run after it and pick it up, then take it back to him, only for him to throw it again.” Stanley shook his head. “I’d much rather do what I want when we’re outdoors, take my time, nose around, but he’s just bought one of those plastic things for throwing the ball, so he doesn’t have to bend down, and this is the first chance he’s had to try it out.”

“I see what you mean,” Doggie replied. “Wouldn’t do if he threw the ball and you stayed put.”

“That’s right. He spent ages on the Internet trying to get a good deal on one. Although why he chose orange as a colour I’ll never know. Not stylish at all!”

“My two are the same,” said Doggie. “Chris spends hours browsing for electronics and Mara buys lots of her clothes on-line.”

Doggie heard a shout and looked up to see Andy, Stanley’s owner, making his way over, lolloping across the football pitch in a most ungainly fashion.

“Your Andy’s put on a lot of weight,” Doggie said, noticing how the buttons on his shirt were strained almost to breaking.

“I know,” Stanley agreed. “It’s all those chips and snacks he eats and the fact he sits on the couch most of the day watching films, not to mention the bacon butties.”

“Stanley!” Andy called out, arriving out of breath. “What are you doing? You must come when I call.”

Stanley looked up at his owner and gave an apologetic bark, following this up with a brush of his back against Andy’s legs.

“And you,” Andy said to Doggie. “You should have a run with my Stanley. Bit of rough and tumble. Do you dogs good. Keep you fit.”

You can talk, Doggie thought. And catching the whippet's eye saw that Stanley was thinking the same.

“Come on then. I’ll throw the ball some more,” Andy said, gesturing at Stanley to get up from where he’d sprawled on the grass. Using the plastic thrower, he sent the ball skittering across the pitch. “Go on Stanley,” he encouraged. “Away you go. You’re a good dog really.”

“Woof, woof,” Stanley barked in agreement, as he ran off to collect it.

“And woof, woof to you,” Doggie called out to Stanley as he set off on his way.



After the lane had gone through a series of twisty turns, Doggie could see the village in the distance. He still had a way to go but on this sunny day he was enjoying the walk, happy to go slowly, as he took in the local sights for what would probably be the final time.



In the distance, he could see a red tractor making its way along a path between two fields. Doggie supposed it was one of Farmer Ben's fields but was having difficulty seeing properly, squinting through the hazy sunshine. Just as he was trying to work out where Farmer Ben's land began and ended, a figure jumped out onto the road right in front of him.

A large rabbit stood on his hind legs grinning. “How, how, how, how’s it going? It was Howard and this was his customary greeting. He turned his head to one side and pushed his pink nose into the air as he spoke.



“Howard!” Doggie said. “Where did you spring from? You gave me quite a start.”

“I was just over there,” Howard replied, pointing towards a ditch that ran along the side of the road. “You were so deep in thought, you didn’t notice me.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Doggie said to the rabbit. “It’s my last day, you see, before we move house and I was thinking about how much I like living here and how I’m going to miss everything and everyone.”

“That’s a shame,” said Howard. “After all, we’ve had some fun and games, you and I.”

“Yes,” Doggie agreed. “We certainly have.”

Howard thought for a moment, scratching his ear. “You remember the time Farmer Ben put out that lovely picnic spread in the garden at the back of the farmhouse and asked all the neighbours to come over.”

“Of course,” said Doggie. “Tons and tons of food.”

“And we went down there together.” He winked at Doggie. “After all, I’m a neighbour since I live in the field right by his farmhouse. And you live a little further away but you’re as good as a neighbour in my book.”

“That’s right,” Doggie agreed, smiling at the memory.

“And you took two sandwiches and a sausage from the table.”

Doggie chuckled and gave a soft bark. “And I didn’t realise Farmer Ben could see me from the kitchen window. I was just about to take another sausage when he appeared.”

Howard laughed. “I’ll never forget his face! All red and blotchy with anger, as he took off after you, shouting and waving his stick.”

“But he didn’t catch me and I have to say the food was delicious.” Doggie ran his tongue over his lips at the memory.

“And best of all,” Howard put in. “While he was distracted running after you, it allowed me to get in there and try some of the raspberries. Beautiful they were. Ripe as anything.”

“Yes,” Doggie said. “That was certainly a fun day.”

For the time being, the sun had gone behind a cloud and he could now see that it was Farmer Ben’s son Alec driving the tractor.

“And do you remember how later that horrible hare Roger turned up and tried to get himself some of the food?”

“Yes,” Doggie said. “I’ve never liked Roger. Too full of himself.”

“I agree,” said Howard. “And he keeps calling me Howie. I’ve told him I don’t like it, asked him to stop.” The rabbit scratched his head. “But he takes no notice, just carries on, thinks it’s funny.”

“Well, he got more than he bargained for that day,” Doggie said, smiling. “Farmer Ben turned the hosepipe on him.”

“Yes,” Howard agreed. “I was trying not to grin when he came past, all bedraggled.”

“So was I,” Doggie put in. “But I don’t think I succeeded.”

For a moment both animals seemed lost in thoughts of the past.

Then Howard asked, “Do you know where you’re moving to?”

“Not really,” Doggie replied. “But from what I can make out it’s quite a way away.”

“Well, you’ll just have to make new friends,” the rabbit said, giving several nods as he spoke.

“Yes, I know,” Doggie agreed, in a resigned voice.

And after these last few words, they said their goodbyes and parted company.

As Doggie came closer to the outskirts of the village, he thought about his meeting with the rabbit and knew he would miss Howard who was always cheerful and ready to go and do something together.

He remembered another time, a month back. He’d been dozing in the sun, head resting between his front paws when Howard appeared.

“How, how, how, how’s it going?” the rabbit had said in his usual fashion.

Doggie raised a sleepy eye. “All right,” he told him. “Just having a nap after lunch. Mara gave me the remains of a stew and it was very tasty.” He raised his head. “Mind you, she could have heated it up a little more for me but still, never mind, it was excellent, nonetheless.”

“Sometimes I wish I was a dog,” said Howard. “Lap of luxury, your life is. Food provided every day. Nice basket with a cushion for a bed. Everything laid on.”

“True,” Doggie agreed. “But I have to do what Chris and Mara say a lot of the time.” He stood up and stretched. “You know— Sit down Doggie, fetch this Doggie, get off the bed Doggie, come on Doggie we’re going out, don’t even think of jumping on the table, no you can’t stay at home, we’re leaving now. That sort of thing.” He raised his head and looked at the rabbit. “Whereas you can do as you like. Answer to no one. Come and go as you please.” He could see that Howard was about to make a remark and lifted a paw to stop him. “Yes, I know you have to find your own food but you have your freedom and that’s a very big thing.”

“I see what you mean,” Howard said, nodding his head, long ears flopping about. “When you put it that way, I suppose it is.”

Further down the lane, the wide gates of Oldthorpe Farm came into view with its tall chimneys and large front yard. Doggie was hoping to see his friend Maybelle, the old pony, who liked to stand with her head over the fence watching the goings on in the lane. Although getting on in years, Maybelle still gave rides to children from the local school. Michael, the farmer at Oldthorpe, had a young daughter there and one day her teacher had suggested trips to the farm to him, so the children could see how a farm was run and meet some of the animals. It turned out

to be a very enjoyable way of learning and, right at the end, Maybelle would always give each child a ride around the farmyard.



Just beyond the steel gates, Doggie gave a little bark and within no time Maybelle's head appeared above the fence.

"Hello Doggie," Maybelle said, giving a soft wuffling sound of pleasure at seeing her friend. "It's been a while since I last saw you."

"I know," said Doggie. "When I go for walks with Chris and Mara we don't often come down the lane this far. We usually turn off much earlier."

“But you’re on your own today, by the look of it,” Maybelle said, lifting her head and peering beyond Doggie up the lane.

“That’s right,” Doggie nodded, and went on to tell her about it being his last day and how he wanted to see everything one more time.

“You sound a little sad,” the pony said. “But it’s only to be expected. After all, you’ve lived here for quite some while.”

“Yes, I am sad,” Doggie agreed, nodding his head. “And I only heard we were leaving last night so it’s come as a bit of a shock. All very sudden.”

“It can be hard to leave a place you like,” Maybelle told him. “But from what I know, if the place you go to is nice as well, then you’ll settle down easily and make plenty of new friends.”

“I hope you’re right,” Doggie said, a note of uncertainty in his tone.

“I am,” Maybelle continued in a calm voice. “What you will miss at first is the familiarity of your old home.”

“How do you mean?” Doggie asked.

“Well— knowing where everything is, what there is to do and see, who lives nearby. Little things like where to find a nice warm corner of the house so you can have a snooze in the sun.”

“I see,” said Doggie.

“But very soon, as time goes by,” Maybelle went on. “Your new home will become just as familiar as your old one was and you’ll feel settled and safe.”

“Do you really think so?”

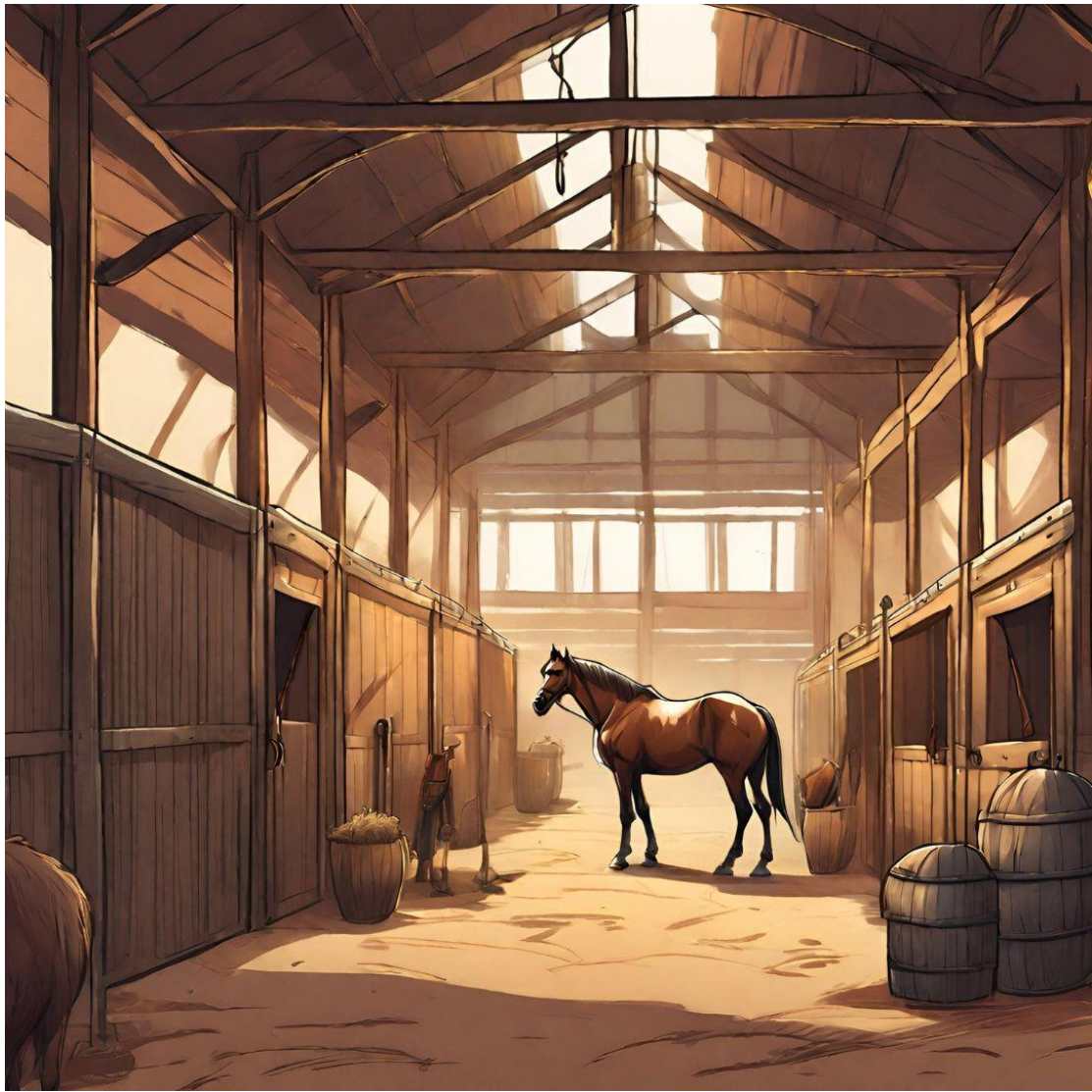
“Yes, I really do,” Maybelle said, reassuringly. “I’ll tell you something—before I came to live at Oldthorpe, I lived a long way away from here. And I didn’t belong to Farmer Michael but to his father who had stables. He trained racehorses which are by nature very nervous animals and he had one horse in particular who ended up a great

champion. He won all sorts of cups and prizes. But when he first arrived he was skittish, which means that he was nervous, excitable and jumped about all the time. Michael's father was having difficulty trying to train him. Even getting him to accept a saddle on his back was almost impossible at first. In fact, I heard Michael's father saying to the owner one day that, if things didn't improve, he would have to give up, even though it was obvious that the horse had a lot of promise.

"The day after I heard this, I went and had a talk with Fred, that was the name of the horse, told him the situation. He had a proper racehorse name but around the stables he was just known as Fred.

"But when he was taken out of his stable for exercise the following day he kicked out as usual and was difficult to handle. I was nearby and went over and reminded him of what I'd said – how he'd be sent away if he carried on like this - and he calmed down straightaway. Michael's father saw the effect I'd had on him and from that time onward I became his companion. We were inseparable and everyone could see the change in Fred was down to me. He just needed someone to talk to and keep him calm, direct him a little.

"Almost at once, he became easy to train and, by the end of his career, Fred was known across the land as a true champion.



“So I had a wonderful life at the stables. Always a full hay basket, fresh water, some light exercise. They looked after me really well and every day I was nicely brushed and turned out. I would travel to race meetings with Fred and it was really exciting when he won.

“My life couldn’t have been better. That is until one day I heard that Michael’s father was retiring and selling the stables. Fred was retired himself by that time from racing and I found out I would be going to live with his son Michael miles away in a place I’d never heard of. I was devastated.”

“I see,” Doggie said. “Nothing you could do, though.”

“That’s right,” Maybelle continued. “I was led into a horsebox and we set off. Throughout the journey I was worried and unhappy, wondering what was going to happen. After jolting around for what seemed like ages we finally stopped and I’d arrived at Oldthorpe. I remember my legs were trembling as I waited to be let out.

“When the back of the box opened, Michael was there with a smile on his face. He led me out himself and stroked my neck, saying some kind words. He knew what I meant to his father. Then he took me to a nice stable, warm and dry with plenty to eat. It all seemed very strange at first but in no time at all it felt like home.” She lowered her head, looking Doggie in the eye. “And I’m sure it will be the same for you at your new place.”

“Thanks Maybelle,” Doggie said. “You’ve made me feel a lot better.”

“You take care, Doggie,” Maybelle said. “And don’t forget. Remember what I’ve told you.”

Having said farewell to Maybelle, he set off again.

Doggie was now coming to the first few houses in the village. It was only a small hamlet really with just a row of shops, post box, pub and garage.

As he passed one of the front gardens he heard someone say, “Look Ryan, I think that’s Doggie.”

Doggie turned in the direction of the voice and saw John Bolden and his young son Ryan through a gap in the hedge in their front garden. He gave a little bark to say hello, and Ryan ran through the gate and knelt down on the pavement to stroke Doggie’s fur. He was clutching a bright red phone.

Doggie liked the Boldens very much. John Bolden's wife Ann always made a fuss of him as did Ryan. They owned the butcher's shop down the street and there was always a bowl of water outside for dogs to drink from. John would sometimes come outside when Doggie was waiting patiently for Chris and Mara to buy their meat and give him a treat. "Here's a titbit for Doggie," he would say, as he put a little something on the ground — a cube of meat, half a sausage, a trimming of fat from a steak. When this happened, Doggie always gave a crisp double-bark to show how much he appreciated it.

"I hear you'll be moving soon," John said, smiling down at Doggie. "Must be any day now, I'd have thought, from what Chris said. I can't remember the date exactly."

Doggie looked up and gave a short bark.

"Well, we can't have you leaving us without giving you a little something."

Mmm, Doggie thought, eyes lighting up. Just what I like to hear.

"Come along to the shop and I'll see what I can do. It's Ryan's birthday today and we need to collect his cake from the bakery next door."

"I'm ten," Ryan sang out, proudly.

"That's right," his father said. "Who'd have thought it! We've just given him his first phone as a present." He looked over at his son. "Mind you be careful with it, lad. Don't drop it."

"I won't," Ryan answered, tapping at the red phone as he spoke. "Thanks, Dad. It's the best present ever."

"Come on then birthday boy," he said, ruffling his son's hair.

Doggie walked along happily beside the pair and they shortly arrived outside the butchers. Ann was behind the counter and John stepped through the door.



Arnold Drake who ran the Red Lion pub stood inside buying some Cornish pasties and Doggie had often overheard people saying how good Bolden's pasties were.

Ryan was sitting on a low wall working his phone and Doggie settled down beside him.

It wasn't long before John reappeared with a plate covered in tin foil.

"Here's one for you," he said, lifting up the foil to reveal a sausage.

Doggie was on his feet but the sausage was offered to Ryan who reached out to take it in his hand.

I thought that would be for me, Doggie thought, feeling disappointed.

John replaced the foil and went to turn away and go back into the shop. At the last moment, he turned back. “Just kidding, Doggie. There’s one for you and some nice bacon scraps, as well.” He put the plate on the ground and Doggie gave his crisp double-bark before making short work of it.

“I’ll just go next door and see about collecting the cake,” John said to Ryan. “Back in a tick.”

“Okay, Dad.” Ryan gave a nod without looking up from his phone.

A few moments later, Doggie was licking up the last of the bacon fat when Ryan stood up, tilting the phone first one way and then another. The hazy sunshine shone brightly and Doggie could see he was finding it difficult viewing the screen. Still looking at his phone, Ryan set off for a patch of shade along the street to try and see better.

Doggie was about to settle down again by the wall when a glint of metal caught his eye. From a thin lane used for deliveries to the backdoors of the shops, a van was backing out onto the main road.

Ryan continued on, heading towards the patch of shade, eyes glued to his phone as he turned it this way and that still trying to see the screen properly.

It took Doggie only a split-second to realise what was about to happen.

With all his attention on the new phone, Ryan was about to step out into the path of the reversing van.

Jumping to his feet, Doggie barked loudly and started to run towards Ryan.

The van continued to reverse and was now only a short distance from hitting the boy.

Barking furiously, Doggie hurried forward,

Ryan was on the point of stepping into the road and Doggie knew that the driver would be unable to see him in his mirror, due to a high wall.

For just a second, Ryan paused and half-turned his head, wondering why Doggie was barking so much.

But then the boy walked on, returning his attention back to the phone.

The brief pause, though, had been enough and gave Doggie the chance to lunge forward, taking hold of Ryan's trouser leg in his teeth and pulling him backwards.

Seconds later the van went past, missing the boy by no more than a few inches.

As it went by, a woman's scream could be heard.

Ryan had toppled backwards onto the ground, still clutching his phone.

Ann rushed over and wrapped an arm around her son. Doggie realised that it must have been her who'd screamed. Then came John, a few steps behind, hurrying from the bakery with a cake box in his hands.

"Thank goodness you're safe," she told Ryan. "And all thanks to Doggie."

She put her other arm around Doggie and squeezed him to her.

"Thank you, Doggie. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"What happened?" John asked.

"I saw it all from the doorway," Ann told her husband. "Ryan wasn't paying attention—looking at his phone when he should have been

looking at the road. Doggie pulled him back just in time.” She gave Doggie another big squeeze. “If he hadn’t, Ryan would have been hit by the van.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said, in a small voice.

“And so you should be,” his father said, sternly. “We’ll need to have a talk about this later.”

The driver had now parked up and hurried over, looking worried. “Is he all right?” he said. “The boy. I didn’t hit him, did I?”

“No,” Ann replied. “And he should have been looking where he was going, not at his phone.”

“That’s a relief,” the driver said. “I’m sorry, it’s so difficult to reverse out of there as the high wall stops me seeing anyone coming along the street in my mirror until the last moment. I was going as slow as I could.”

John Bolden nodded, knowing this was true. “Well, no harm done, I suppose,” he said, letting out a breath. “And all thanks to Doggie.”

Back at the shop a few minutes later, John presented Doggie with a bowl of meat. “My finest steak,” the butcher said. “And no one deserves it more than you.”

Doggie settled down to eat and it was truly the best meal he’d ever had.

When he’d finished, Ann came and gave him a last cuddle while Ryan stroked his fur, whispering his thanks into Doggie’s ear.

After Doggie left the Boldens, he made his way along the street looking at the shops. He thought of all the times he’d come here with Chris and Mara and one occasion in particular stuck in his mind: The day he’d met a strange animal he didn’t know the name of.

That day, the shopping almost done, and with just a loaf of bread still to get, Doggie was waiting outside while Mara went into the bakery. He was hoping that his owner might come out with a piece of carrot cake or maybe some ginger biscuits. He particularly liked carrot cake, as did Mara, and they would sometimes share a slice together before going home.

It was as he was thinking this, that he heard the sound of music. Not the sort of music his owners played at home but a rather more mysterious sound. And no sooner had he heard this, than a truck with an open back turned into the high street. It was brightly painted and Doggie stood up to see better.

On the truck were two jugglers throwing balls into the air and a clown waving and talking to the people in the street. The truck moved very slowly and the clown had a stack of leaflets in his hand, giving them out as they went along. A sign along the side of the truck read: HARRY STAR'S CIRCUS.

But the strangest thing of all was the animal being led alongside the truck.

It was a light brown colour with a long neck and a sort of hump on its back.

When the truck came nearer, the animal gave Doggie a long stare as it went by.

A little further down the road, the truck stopped and people gathered round. It was a Saturday, Doggie remembered, and many were out getting their shopping for the weekend.

Doggie decided he would go over and investigate.

As he approached the small crowd, he discovered that the strange large animal had been tied to the truck by its lead.

“Hello,” Doggie said, going nearer. “What sort of animal are you?”

Lowering its neck to be nearer Doggie's level, the animal looked at him for a long moment before saying, "You mean you don't know?"

Doggie shook his head.

"Are you sure you don't know? Are you being serious?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you," Doggie said, giving an impatient little bark.

"No need to be like that. I just find it surprising, that's all."

"Well, I DON'T know," Doggie said again, starting to get fed up with the conversation."

"All right, then," the animal said. "I'll tell you. . . I'm a camel." A slight pause. "Camel. . . does that mean anything to you?" And when Doggie continued to have a blank look. "Ship of the Desert? Can go for a long time without water? Ring any bells?" Doggie shook his head. "Can travel for days across the sandy wasteland, with not a tree in sight?" And when Doggie continued shaking his head, the camel gave what could only be described as a full-on exasperated sigh. "Have you been taught NOTHING?"



“Look,” Doggie said, getting annoyed. “How many more times do I have to tell you. I’ve never heard, seen, met or had anything to do with a camel in my entire life. And if talking to you is anything to go by, I’m not sure that I want to have anything to do with any camel.”

“Okay,” the camel said, “Calm down, now. Calm down. No need for all that.”

“Don’t you tell me to calm down you big . . .” Doggie stopped, trying to come up with a suitable word, “. . . Camel,” was all he could think of. “Big camel. That’s what you are. Nothing but a big camel.”

For a moment the two animals glared at one another, before the faintest hint of a smile appeared on the camel’s face. Seeing this, Doggie

couldn't help but smile himself and a second later they both burst out laughing.

"Gerald," the camel introduced himself, once they'd managed to stop laughing. "Pleased to meet you."

"Doggie," said Doggie. "And likewise."

"We're setting up a big tent for the circus in one of the fields just beyond the village," Gerald explained. "Doing a show tomorrow night."

"That sounds exciting," Doggie said. "I've never been to a circus. What happens?"

"Well, we have trapeze artists, clowns, a high wire act, jugglers and all sorts of other acts including a band."

"And what do you do?" Doggie asked.

"That's a good question," the camel said. "And the answer is that I dance."

"Oh," said Doggie, rather taken aback.

"The band play music and I dance. Without wishing to blow my own trumpet, I'm usually rather a hit with the audience."

Out of the corner of his eye, Doggie could see Mara outside the bakery, looking around for him.

"Perhaps you'll be able to come?" Gerald suggested. "Seven o'clock tomorrow night."

"I'll see what I can do," Doggie replied. "Must go now my owner's looking for me."

As he left, Doggie stopped and picked up one of the leaflets he noticed on the ground and took it with him in his mouth.

"Ah, there you are, Doggie," Mara said. "What's that you've got in your mouth?"

And this was how Doggie got to go to the circus.

Mara took the leaflet and showed it to Chris.

“What do you think?” Chris asked her.

“I think it looks good. Could be fun. And we’ve nothing else planned tomorrow evening.”

“Think we can take Doggie?”

“Don’t see why not,” his wife said. “It’s in a tent in a field.”

“Okay then. Let’s go.”



So the following evening they set off in the car and parked outside the field where a large tent had been put up. Doggie was worried that he

wouldn't be let in. But when they reached the gate, it was Max the owner of the field who was selling the tickets.

"Okay for Doggie to come in?" Chris asked.

Doggie looked up hopefully at Max and held his breath waiting for an answer. If he said no, Doggie knew he would have to spend the next hour or so in the car.

"Oh, yes," Max said. "Doggie's a well-behaved dog. No problem there. And what's more, he can come in for free."

The circus had attracted a lot of people from the local area and, as they went through the flap in the tent, they could see it was already over half-full. Doggie felt excited and looked around for Gerald but he was nowhere to be seen. There was a big open area with seats going all the way round and they quickly found somewhere to sit.

By the time ten minutes had gone by the place was full and the band started playing. Soon, a man in a red coat, white trousers, black boots and a top hat ran out into the centre and introduced himself as the Ringmaster. He had a large waxed moustache and Doggie wondered whether it was real.

"What's he going to do?" Chris asked Mara.

"He introduces the acts," she told him."

And introduce he did.

For Doggie it all passed in a bit of a blur: The sparkly costumes of the performers, the antics of the clowns and the skills of the different acts.

Doggie found himself looking up, along with everyone else, as a girl walked along the high wire — jumping, skipping, bouncing and all without falling off. Doggie was amazed. Then the trapeze team swinging out and letting go, catching one another as they flew through the air. Next it was the turn of the jugglers Doggie had seen on the truck and this was

followed by a troop of acrobats propelling themselves up into the air, tumbling and twisting.

And then suddenly Gerald appeared with a bright cloth covered in tiny little mirrors draped across his back. For a moment he stood quite still and the audience hushed. Then the band started up and he began to dance.

It was clear that the audience had never seen anything like it. Gerald followed the beat closely, moving his feet and lifting his legs this way and that without ever getting out of time. First his front legs and then his back legs, with even a swish of his tail to match the drummer's clash of cymbals.

By the time he'd finished, many in the audience were on their feet clapping and whistling their approval. Gerald, for his part, went to the centre of the ring and dipped his long neck in a deep bow.

Doggie, who'd been quiet up to this point, gave a whole series of barks to show his appreciation.

"Quiet," Mara said, looking down at him. "You'll have us thrown out! Whatever's got into you?"

But Doggie barked on and was pleased to see Gerald raise his head and look his way.

After Gerald's act the clowns ran out, tripping each other up and pretending to hit one another. This led to one clown falling over and losing his trousers, another having a bucket of water emptied over his head and a third getting a custard pie full in the face.

After a couple more acts, the show closed with two horses running round the ring, their riders standing up on their backs and jumping from one horse to the other as they passed.

Later, as they made their way back to the car, Doggie knew that his night at the circus would be one he would always remember.

By this time, Doggie had almost reached the other end of the village. He headed for the garage, which took up most of one corner of the High Street with a large open area at the front and a workshop inside.



As he'd hoped, his friend Jebb was there, stretched out on the forecourt and taking advantage of the shade from an overhanging tree.

Jebb was a dog with a pointy face and long white fur. This gave him a rather comical expression, as though he found everything somewhat amusing. Many people in the village called him The Garage Dog as he seemed to have been there forever. Indeed, when the garage changed

hands a few years ago Jebb stayed on, adopting the new people as his owners.

“Ah, Doggie,” Jebb called out. “Wondered when you’d turn up. I hear you’re moving house.”

“How’d you hear that?” Doggie asked. “I only found out myself last night.”

“I don’t know really,” Jebb replied. “I was sitting here and then. . . suddenly the thought that you were leaving popped into my head out of nowhere.”

“That’s amazing,” Doggie said. “I can’t believe how that can happen!”

“Don’t be silly! ‘Course it can’t happen. Stanley told me. Came in with Andy in the car to have a new battery put in.”

“Oh, I see,” Doggie said, feeling a little foolish to have fallen for one of Jebb’s lines.

“So, when d’you go?” Jebb asked.

“Don’t really know. Later today, I think.”

“And have you said goodbye to everyone?”

“Mostly, yes. It’s a bit rushed. I only heard we were leaving last night.”

“How about that French poodle, Babette,” Jebb said with a wink. “Said goodbye to her have you?” Jebb winked again.

“Got something in your eye?” Doggie said.

“Just saying,” Jebb went on.

“Just saying what,”

“Just saying that I think she’s taken a bit of a shine to you. I can tell.”

“No,” Doggie said, wondering whether he was blushing. “Babette’s a fancy dog. Lived with her owner in Paris before she came over here.”

“So, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well,” Doggie continued. “Fancy dog like her wouldn’t be interested in the likes of me.”

Jebb turned his head slowly side to side. “Don’t you be so sure. She might seem like she has airs and graces—”

“Hairs and what?” Doggie said, looking confused.

“It means that she seems a bit conceited, full of herself and how wonderful she looks. But you’ve got to remember that Babette’s a pedigree dog and all pedigree dogs are a bit like that.”

“Exactly,” Doggie said. “Not like us common or garden dogs.”

“Maybe. But that doesn’t mean she won’t like you. Don’t do yourself down. And anyway,” here Jebb gave a bark-like chuckle, “you don’t look as bad as all that, ‘specially if your owners give you a brush.” He got to his feet and stretched. “Anyway, doesn’t matter now, I suppose, water under the bridge seeing as you’re leaving.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Doggie said, thinking over what his friend had told him. “Too late now.” He gave a sigh. “Much too late now.”

“So anyway, Doggie. Best of luck to you and come and see me if you’re ever back in the area.”

“Will do,” Doggie told him, as he set off to return through the village.

“Oh, and by the way,” Jebb called out, after he’d gone a few steps. “She’ll be out for her walk soon.”

“Who will?” Doggie answered, stopping and looking back at his friend.

“Babette, who else?” Jebb said. “Owner takes her regular as clockwork, long as the weather’s fine. Up the lane a little way and then back through the village.” He gave a chuckle. “Shame to miss her!”

As he returned along the High Street, Doggie made a detour through the narrow passage at the side of the Red Lion pub.



This led through into a garden at the back and he put his front paws up on the low brick wall and peered among the chairs and tables. A family-of-four were finishing their meal at one table—fish and chips by the look of it—and a young couple shared sandwiches at another. Near the end of the garden where the land started to drop away sat a medium sized brown dog.

Doggie made his way over.

“Hello Esme,” he began, sitting down alongside the brown dog. “I see the view’s as good as ever.”

“Doggie! How nice of you to come and visit,” Esme said.

Doggie looked back at the view, moving his eyes from one part to another. It really was wonderful with broken ground bordered by yellow gorse bushes at first and then merging into fields of hay. Further back, a bright blue lake shimmered in the sunshine along the banks of which stood tall dark trees, their trunks straight and true as though guarding the water. And beyond all this, a ruined castle on a hill threw up turrets and towers against the horizon, warm brown where the sun caught the stone on one side and dark shadows on the other.



“Have I ever told you why I sit here so often?” Esme asked, turning to face Doggie.

“No.” Doggie shook his head. “I just know you like doing so.”

“When I first turned up in the village, Arnold, who’d just become the landlord here, found me outside looking rather bewildered and took me in. I had no collar and he took me to the vet to see if I’d been chipped with an address as all dogs have to be now. But there was nothing. The vet said that I appeared to be in good health apart from a small bump on the side of the head, although he didn’t think this was serious. What of course they didn’t know was that I’d lost my memory. A likely explanation is that I’d been hit by a car but I’ll never be able to find out for certain.

“Anyway, I remembered nothing about my life before I arrived in the village and still don’t to this day. Not even my name.”

“That must have been awful,” Doggie put in.

“It was certainly very strange. When we returned from the vet, Arnold brought me out here, to this very spot, and put down a bowl of food. He looked at me for a moment and said he would call me Esme, after a character in a film he liked. I found I was starving and ate quickly. When I’d finished, we sat looking out at the view and I remember thinking that this is where my new life begins. I may not remember my past life but my new life starts right here now with Arnold.” She smiled at Doggie. “That’s why it’s so special and why I come here often.”

“I understand,” said Doggie, and then went on to tell Esme about moving home and leaving the area.

“I’ll be sorry to see you go,” Esme told him. “We’ve had some good conversations together.”

“I’ll be sorry to leave,” Doggie said with a sigh. “If it was up to me I’d stay.”

“I know,” said Esme. “But we can’t always do what we want.”

After saying goodbye, Doggie thought he should probably get back to the house. He’d been out for a long time and Chris and Mara would be wondering what had happened to him.

Returning along the High Street he noticed a woman sitting on a bench. She had her back to him, talking on a phone, but when he approached he recognized Babette’s owner. The French poodle, however, was nowhere to be seen and Doggie felt a surge of disappointment, especially after what Jebb had said, although he still didn’t know whether to believe him. There was a path not far from the bench and Doggie could hear someone singing. Soon he could make out the top half of a little girl skipping smartly along. Reaching the end of the path she stepped out and Doggie could now see Babette on a lead by her side. As usual, the French poodle had been groomed beautifully with not a hair out of place.

“Look another dog,” the girl said, spotting Doggie. “Let’s go and say hello.”

She came up and patted Doggie who wagged his tail. “Why don’t you two dogs have a play and I’ll go and sit with Auntie Anna.” And saying this, she unclipped Babette’s lead and turned towards the bench.



For a moment they looked at each other and then Babette said, “Hello Doggie, it’s always nice to see you. What brings you down to the village?”

Doggie, encouraged by her friendly words, said, “Well, it’s just. . .it’s my last day, you see.”

“Last day.” Babette frowned. “Last day for what?”

“Yes, sorry. I’m not being very clear.” And he went on to explain about moving home.

“That’s a shame,” Babette told him. “We’ve never had a chance to get to know one another. I’d have liked that.”

“Me too,” Doggie said. “I’d have liked that very much.”

“But you always used to rush by with just a quick greeting. I never thought you wanted to stop and chat, get to know me.”

Doggie gave a nod of agreement. “You’re right. But I wish now that I had.”

Babette put her head to one side and looked Doggie in the eye. “Is it because of the rumours about me? Don’t think I don’t know about them. What some of the other dogs have been saying. How I’m snooty and think I’m superior and all the other words they use like haughty and conceited.”

“Well. . .” Doggie started to say.

“It is that, isn’t it?” Babette continued. “Oh! It makes me so mad.”

“I suppose it had something to do with it. . . well a lot to do with it, really.” Doggie told her. “I didn’t think you’d be interested in knowing me.”

“But Doggie, you’re a lovely dog and you have such kind eyes. Of course I’d want you to be my friend.”

Doggie gave a sigh. “I wish I’d known. And now I’m leaving and it’s all too late.”

“Yes, it is too late,” Babette said, as the little girl raised a hand and waved Babette’s lead to show that she wanted to go. “All I can do is wish you bon voyage.” And when Doggie looked mystified. “It’s French. It means I hope you have a good journey to your new home.”

“Thank you,” was all Doggie could find to say.

On the way back along the lane, Doggie couldn’t help feeling sad. He’d missed his chance to be friends with Babette and now had to face leaving the place he was happy in. He thought of Maybelle’s words of encouragement but try as he might they did little to stop him feeling

miserable. Once again, it crossed his mind how long he'd been out and hoped his owners wouldn't be angry.

The earlier hazy sunshine had now all but disappeared with only a glint of brightness left in one tiny corner of the sky. In its place, a number of dark clouds had moved in overhead, giving a gloomy feel to the surroundings, matching Doggie's mood.

Up ahead, two people waited at the bus stop and Doggie soon recognized Amy who worked part time for Arnold at the Red Lion. Standing with Amy was her daughter Shirley, who'd grown up in the village but moved away after she married.

"Look who's here," Amy said, as Doggie approached the bus stop. "You remember Doggie, Shirl. He belongs to the people we were just talking about, Chris and Mara."

Doggie's ears pricked up at the mention of his owners' names and wondered what they'd been saying about them.

"Yes, it's a real shame," Shirley said, crouching down and stroking Doggie's back. "I wonder what's going to happen?"

"No idea," said her mother, shaking her head. "It's a bad situation."

Doggie gave a little bark at this. What bad situation, he thought, feeling the first signs of worry.

"We don't know what's going to happen to you, do we," Amy said, talking to Doggie. "Where you're going to go, or anything." She bent forward to stroke his head. "Poor thing," she continued. "But I suppose something will be sorted out."

"It'll depend on how bad things are for Chris and Mara," Shirley put in. "Whether there's anything they can do."

"Yes, that's true," Amy agreed and added, "Who'd have thought it could happen!"

Doggie was now thoroughly confused and becoming very worried. One thing was clear, something had happened to his owners and it was not good news. The best thing he could do now was hurry home. As he set off along the lane, a flurry of rain came down. Doggie glanced up and saw that the clouds were much darker now.

By the time he arrived back at the house his fur had become soaked through, the rain falling heavily. The first thing he noticed was how the house looked all shut up, which was strange. No sign of the removal van and also no sign of the car, usually parked on the driveway. Perhaps they've put it in the garage, Doggie thought.

Standing by the front door, Doggie gave a couple of barks to let them know he was there. And then a couple more when the door didn't open.

Time went by and still no one came, the door remaining firmly shut.

Doggie made his way along the side passage to the back garden and looked into the sitting room through the French windows. The room was empty—no furniture anymore and just patterns of dust on the bare boards to show where it had been. Even his dog-basket had been removed.

Doggie didn't know what to think. He felt sad to see the house he loved stripped of everything that made it home, and with each moment that went by was becoming more and more worried about his owners. What had Amy and Shirley heard?

The rain came down harder still, lashing against the house as lightning fractured the sky. Doggie hurried away to find shelter in the garden shed. The door didn't shut properly and he was able to get inside. He felt wet, worried and thoroughly miserable.



Once under cover he shook the raindrops from his fur and tried to think.

No furniture in the house meant that the removal van had been and gone and it seemed like his owners had also left. They would have been driving from here to the new house so perhaps they'd had a car accident, he thought, his worry increasing.

And with this thought, the feeling of uncertainty made his mind go off in all sorts of directions. What had Amy meant by saying that she didn't know what would happen to him or where he would go? If something had happened to Chris and Mara, he could end up on his own or worse, put in a kennel somewhere. The thought of it sent a shiver

down his spine. He remembered his conversation with Howard about freedom and how the rabbit could do as he pleased with no one to answer to. But Doggie knew this was not for him. He enjoyed the companionship of his owners and there was no way he could forage for food like Howard.

After waiting in the shed a little longer, he went back out into the garden and barked. The rain had now eased to a drizzle with grey clouds hanging in the sky. Doggie didn't expect his owners to suddenly appear but didn't know what else to do and it was better than doing nothing. So he barked and barked and barked. First in the back garden and then round by the front door again.

Finally, his barking produced a result in the form of Jim their next-door neighbour.

"Ah, there you are, Doggie," Jim said. "Back at last." He beckoned Doggie over. "I'm to look after you for the time being. Come along."

So, Doggie followed Jim next door just as Jim's wife Angela returned home from the bus stop with a red umbrella. Must be later than I imagined, Doggie thought. Angela's back from work already.

"Hello love," Jim said. "Good day?"

"Best not to ask," his wife replied. And then, "Oh, hello Doggie, what are you doing here?"

"He's been missing all day." Jim explained. The removal van's been and gone and Chris and Mara had to go too. They'll be at the new place they're renting by now. I said we'd keep an eye out and look after Doggie 'til they're able to come back and fetch him."

Doggie looked up, expecting him to continue, expecting him to say more. When he didn't, Doggie realised that Jim couldn't have heard the bad news about his owners.

“Here,” Jim said to Doggie. “Come into the kitchen.” Doggie followed and Jim pointed at a bowl of water by the back door. “There’ll be food for you later.”

After drinking some water, Doggie returned to the sitting room to find Jim and Angela watching TV. He gave a heavy worried sigh and lay down quietly on the floor beside them.

Some while later the phone rang and Jim went to answer.

“Hello,” he said. “Oh, hello, Chris.”

At the mention of his owner’s name Doggie jumped to his feet with a feeling of relief. At least Chris was all right enough to use a phone.

And then. “What’s that? Say that again. No, you can’t be serious!” He listened for a while without speaking, a frown on his face. Doggie gave a whimper. “What bad luck. And it was all happening when you got there, you say.” Still holding the phone, he mouthed something to Angela but she shook her head to show she hadn’t understood. “And sorry, what was that, Chris? Angie was talking to me.” He listened for a moment. “Yes, he’s here,” he looked down at Doggie. “Yes, he’s fine. Nothing the matter. Yes, no problem. We can look after him. Yes, all right we’ll talk in the morning. Okay.” Replacing the phone, Jim shook his head several times.

“What?” Angela asked. “What do you mean by bad luck? What’s happened?”

“You won’t believe it,” Jim said.

“If you don’t get on and tell me, I won’t know whether I’ll believe it or not,” his wife said.

Jim sat back down and began to explain, “Chris and Mara followed the removal van to the new place but when they arrived there they found two fire engines and smoke going up into the sky. A builder had done some last-minute electrical work for their new landlord and it seems

likely that it wasn't done properly and caused the fire. The whole kitchen's been burnt out and part of the living room. Chris said the place is a wreck and they won't be able to move there now."



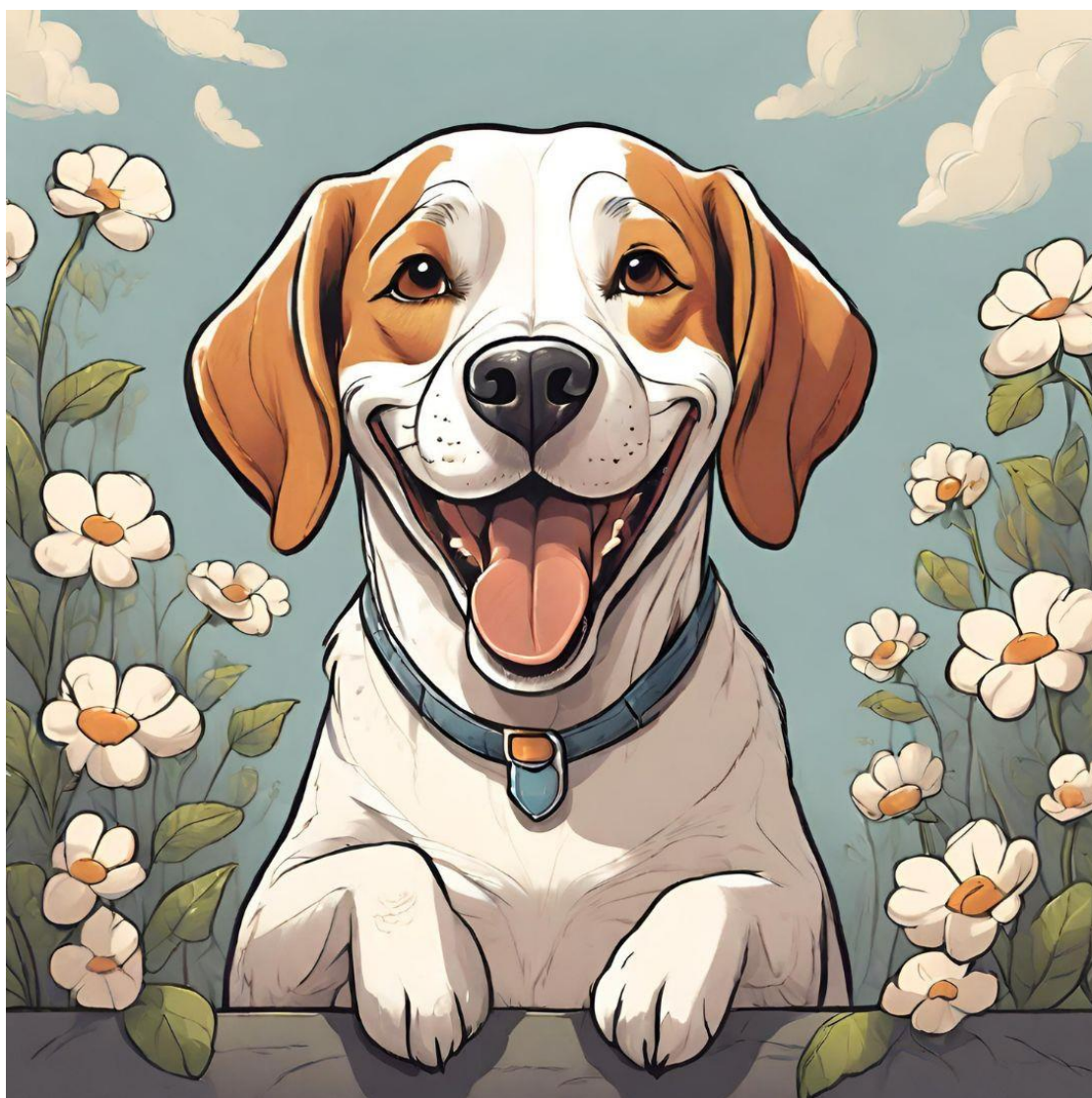
"Lucky it happened before they were settled in, if you ask me," Angela said. "But what about tonight, where are they staying? I heard you say they'd be in touch tomorrow."

"That's right. Chris has just managed to get hold of Arthur Burrows who owns next door and asked if they could come back, sign a new rental contract. Arthur hadn't put the house on the market yet as he'd wanted to paint the outside first. He's always liked Chris and Mara and was happy

to agree. All their stuff will stay in the removal van overnight and they've booked into a bed and breakfast. The van will return with everything tomorrow to put it all back. Should be here about ten. So they won't be moving after all."

Doggie had been listening carefully as Jim spoke and felt a surge of relief now that he knew his owners were well and hadn't come to any harm. With those few words of explanation, his world had changed from worry and despair to happiness. There had been no car accident. The bad thing Amy and Shirley had heard about was the fire and not being able to move. Doggie gave a large sigh of relief and then spent a moment thinking about Chris and Mara and how disappointed they must be.

But after the moment was up, he gave a little bark, the type of bark he only gave when he was really really happy. The thought of losing his friends had made him realise just how important they were to him. And this was also true of the area in which he lived. Now that he was able to stay, Doggie felt he'd been given a second chance and meant to enjoy every moment to the full. In his mind, he was already thinking of all his favourite walks along the lanes and in the woods, and the friends he would still be able to see: Howard and Francis, Maybelle, Esme, Jebb, Stanley and, of course, Babette.



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