

## BOOK ONE - CHRISTMAS PAST

### CHAPTER ONE

*A storm is coming...*



Shadows skittered and scratched their way across the ceiling as the flame of the fat yellow candle shivered and bowed over in the draught. Flissy hunched down yet further under the duvet. It was freezing. Outside the wind howled in anger, and even the sleet and snow seemed desperate to try to escape its fury, scrabbling to get in through the window to take shelter inside. It was often windy at Windmill Farm - they'd built the old windmill here for a reason - but this was something different. The wind was bitter and violent, as though it wanted to get at her and punish her personally for all the sins of the human race. It tore at the outside of the house and battered at the window of Flissy's room like an vicious dog, ready to rip and shred anything it could reach. The power had been out for a couple of days now, and every part of the big old farmhouse other than the kitchen, where the old cast iron log burner was kept going 24/7, had gradually cooled to just a few degrees higher than the outside air. Flissy felt miserable. This was NOT how Christmas was supposed to be. Power cuts weren't unknown at Windmill Farm (Grandma always kept a good supply of logs and candles just in case), but for some reason they always seemed to coincide with the worst possible weather.

There was a loud bang and Flissy jumped as some piece of flying debris was picked up and hurled against the window, then swept away before she could even see what it was. She pulled the covers right over her head and buried her face in the pillow. She began to regret not taking Grandma up on her offer to sleep down in the kitchen. At the time she'd thought there was no way she was giving up her nice comfy bed to camp out on a sofa - but right now it felt like not just a cosier but a safer option. Going down now, though, meant not only admitting she'd been wrong

(not something she liked doing at all), but more importantly dragging herself out from under the relative protection of the covers and negotiating the long, dark and bitterly cold corridor and stairs back down to the kitchen. She decided to give it five more minutes - see if the storm abated a little or at least if she could manage to drop off to sleep for a while...

At first she couldn't tell what it was that had woken her. She must have nodded off but had no idea for how long. The storm was still raging outside, no quieter or noisier than it had been before. Something felt different though...not just different, wrong. Hardly daring to breathe, and keeping very still beneath the covers she listened as intently as she could. There it was. Breathing - in fact it was more like panting, fast and heavy as though someone had been running. Whoever, whatever it was, was also moving around her room. Grandma? Unlikely. Flissy knew from experience that once Grandma was asleep the sort of decibels needed to wake her before morning was not much short of a small explosion in the middle of a brass band rehearsal held in a metal foundry. Besides - if it had been Grandma she would have yanked the covers straight off her to check she wasn't still reading in bed. She listened again. No, whatever it was, it appeared to be prowling around her room, almost as though it were looking for something.

She swallowed. For a moment she considered screaming, then decided that wouldn't do much good - Grandma probably still wouldn't wake up and the only other possible source of help - the four Windmill Farm dogs - had obviously failed to keep outside the house whatever was now already in her room, so seemed unlikely to be much good to her. She thought about just keeping really, really still, in the hope that it might eventually get bored and just move away, but, whatever it was, just seemed to keep moving, back and forth, around the side of her bed. Although at first she'd just been scared, gradually she started to get angry. Whoever it was, how **dare** they come into **her** room uninvited? This was supposed to be her own private little world. First the storm had been battering away, trying to break in, and now someone (or something) else was here, prowling around her private space, whether deliberately trying to scare her, steal her things or just deliberately stop her getting a decent night's sleep. It was just not **ON!**

Plucking up her courage Flissy threw back the covers and sat bolt upright in bed.

The first thing she noticed was how bitterly cold the room had become - she thought she'd been cold under the covers but this was almost like jumping into an icy pond, and for a moment the shock almost took her breath away. As she recovered she looked anxiously around the room. The flame of the candle had burned deep down inside now and shed barely enough light to see past the covers on her bed. She stared into the deep, dark gloom at the other end of the bed. At first she could see nothing. She listened again. The prowling had stopped, but she could still hear something panting, there - just beyond the edge of the pool of light cast by the feeble, fluttering candle. She stared.

"Who are you? What do you want? You have no right to be here, you know. This is Private Property."

She thought she heard a footstep. Then, ever so faintly at first, from the depths of the blackness, she thought she saw something emerging. Two, tiny, faint reflections. Something, wet and shiny, just catching the faintest beams of light, and bouncing them back at her. Eyes! They blinked.

There were definitely two eyes, staring right at her from the far end of the room. There was a faint shuffling noise. The eyes moved closer.

"I've got a gun!"

This was, of course, a complete lie, and even if it hadn't been Flissy would not have known how to use a gun, nor wanted to - but she knew farmers often did keep guns and hoped whoever it was who had broken in knew that too...

The eyes moved closer. She thought she could vaguely make out a heavy fringe of spiky hair and what looked like a large, grey beard...The panting continued and suddenly a huge pink tongue loomed into view.

"Oh Rashty! For goodness sake! You scared the living daylights out of me..."

Rashty - Grandma's giant Irish Wolfhound - ambled across the room and with one giant lick covered most of Flissy's face with wet, sticky slobber.

"You dozy dog - what on earth are you doing up here? I thought you always stuck by the fire?"

Flissy reached out and put her arms around the huge dog's neck and pulled her in for a great (smelly) cuddle.

"We've to go."

"What?"

"The storm - it's getting worse. We have to go."

"No, what - who else is there?" She pushed Rashty to one side and peered back into the gloom.

*"There's no-one else. Just me. We have to go - now."*

Flissy peered across the room again, then turned back to the giant dog who was now sitting next to her bed, staring at her.

*"No seriously, come on - it's not funny any more. You can come out now."*

*"I told you. There's no-one else. Now would you find some clothes, quickly - we don't have much time."*

She stared into the wolfhound's two great orange eyes.

*"Dog's can't talk."*

Rashty blinked.

*"To be sure. In point of fact, though, it would have to be said, most creatures can communicate, in some form or other. I believe the issue has more to do with Human unwillingness to listen."*

*"But you're...you're...you're not moving your lips."* As soon as she'd said this Flissy realised what a lame comment it appeared to be, but she was struggling to make any sense of what was going on.

*"I'm not sure that would help - though if it makes you more comfortable I suppose I could open and close my mouth..."* At this the big dog started smacking her lips and rolling her tongue around. The overall effect was more like a ventriloquist's dummy with chewing gum stuck in its mouth though.

*"No, stop - please. That's really not helping."*

*"As you wish. You know, we've been trying to communicate with you for decades. It was necessary to find a different approach. It's a bit like me pushing my thoughts to you, but you have to pull a bit too. Now...we really should be getting on I think."* Rashty moved towards the window and lifted her giant head to sniff at the draught coming through then turned and looked back at Flissy over her shoulder.

*"It's coming. Quickly now, if you will. We have to go. You should probably put on more of those clothes things - you are not well fitted for what is to come..."*

Quickly and quietly Rashty moved across the room, picked up the pile of clothes from where Flissy had discarded them on the floor last night and lay them on top of the bed.

*"Wait, what? No, I don't understand. Go where? And why now for goodness' sake? It's like the end of the world out there."*

*"That is precisely why we have to go now. I'll explain more once we are under way. There really is no more time."*

Flissy looked at Rashty, then the pile of clothes on her bed.

*"Might as well get dressed I suppose - I'm freezing anyway. Am I dreaming this, by the way?"*

Rashty was back, staring out of the window again.

*"And how would you know if you were? Now please, hurry and come open this window."*

Flissy already had her jeans on and was just pushing her head through her pullover.

*"mmmfff - Are you crazy? We're not going that way? What's wrong with the front door? And by the way, you can talk but you can't open windows?"*

Rashty sighed. She definitely sighed. *"As I said before - I'm not talking, I'm communicating."*

*She held up a huge, hairy paw. "Do you see an opposable thumb here? And before you say any more, let's see how well **you** do without fur, claws, four legs and a half decent sense of smell where we are going..."*

*"I am dreaming this, aren't I? I must be dreaming it. Oh well, I suppose if it is a dream I might as well go along with it - what's the worst that can happen?"*

*"An excellent question. Just a shame, perhaps, that you weren't after asking it earlier. Now - are you finally ready?"*

*"As I'll ever be, I guess."*

Rashty looked pointedly at the window.

*"You really want me to open that?"*

There was no reply.

She sighed. *"Ok, then. Here goes."*

At first she struggled to push the window open against the storm force wind, but then, almost as though it sensed what she was doing, the wind suddenly turned and wrenching the handle out of her hand, tore the window open and banged it so loudly against the stop she thought it would smash. She gasped as rain, sleet and snow lashed across her face. The candle lasted just long enough to see half of her books torn from the bookshelves and hurled across the room, then there was only the faintest of glows from a full moon hidden behind the heavy storm clouds outside.

"*Get on.*"

"WHAT?" Flissy could barely hear herself, even when shouting as loudly as possible, though for some reason she could still hear Rashty's voice, almost as though it were *inside* her head.

"*Climb on me - NOW!*"

She reached out, and in the dark grabbed onto Rashty's thick, wiry fur, then pulled herself up and onto the huge dog's broad back, settling just behind her shoulders.

"*Put your arms round my neck.*" Rashty turned and started walking towards the door.

"Oh good - I see you've decided to take the stairs after all. But why did you want me to open the

..."

At the door, Rashty turned, took two giant bounds and leapt straight through the

"...winDOOOOOOOOOOW!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Night rider*

Flissy wrapped both her arms and legs around Rashty's huge body as tightly as she could and buried her face in the thick fur between her shoulder blades.

"WHAT THE..?"

*"Please - be quiet. We are already late, we have a long way to go and it's not easy navigating in this storm - I have to concentrate. And loosen your grip a bit, if you would - it would be very unfortunate for us both if I passed out at this stage through not being able to breathe properly."*

Flissy loosened her grip around Rashty's neck slightly, but if anything gripped even harder with her legs. She could feel the wolfhound's body and muscles flexing beneath her, taking giant bounds through the air. They seemed to be climbing, but how, or where they were heading to, she had no idea. Every now and then she risked raising her head enough to take a peek and occasionally she thought she might have seen lights or a road far away down below, but mostly it was so cold and she was so scared of falling, she just clung on and hoped that they would get wherever they were going soon. After a while she thought she sensed the storm easing a little, and eventually the moon came out from behind the clouds and she even thought the air got slightly less cold. She sensed Rashty starting to relax a little as she settled into a steady, lolling gait.

She risked relaxing her grip long enough to lift a great floppy ear that was flying around in the breeze next to her face. As loudly as she could, she bellowed: "ISN'T IT ABOUT TIME YOU TOLD ME WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?"

She felt Rashty buck slightly and twist her head away and quickly tightened her grip around the big dog's neck again.

"THERE'S NO NEED TO SHOUT!" Bellowed the voice inside her head. *"For now at least I can hear you just the same as you hear me."*

"Oh - sorry. So where are we going, exactly?"

*"I've been tasked with showing you."*

"Showing me what?"

*"Showing you what it is that you need to see."*

"That's helpful." She tried another tack. "So why you, then? And what do you mean, you've been tasked?"

*"Most think it's already too late. We (I and a few others) argued for you, we thought there might still be time. It was a long, and difficult discussion. Eventually I was given permission to try, but there is very little time left - we have to hurry..."*

"I don't understand. Whatever it is, why all the rush suddenly?"

*"It's only sudden to you. What we see has been coming for decades, centuries even."*

"So you have to take me out in the middle of the night?"

Rashty stole a quick glance over her shoulder.

*"For you, it's already nearly midnight. We have a lot to see. We will be descending soon - I'd suggest you concentrate on holding on for now and save any further questions for when we arrive."*

In the distance Flissy thought she could see the faint glow of dawn lightening the sky, which was odd, since Rashty claimed it was nearly midnight. Then again, dogs didn't have watches so how would she know anyway?

As the light started to build she looked down to see what she could make out below. At first the answer was 'not much'. Slowly, though, shadows started to build, showing more detail in the landscape and simultaneously she felt Rashty descending. The air began to grow warmer, much warmer, in fact almost hot. When she looked again at the ground it began to make sense why - it was barren, sandy in fact.

"You're taking me to a desert? Where on earth are we?"

*"It doesn't matter so much **where** we are - there are any number of places like this. What's important right now is **when** we are. This is somewhere in what you would call the Past."*

"And what would you call it?"

*"Most creatures have a different view of time than you humans - simpler, more...integrated. We might think of this as a different present. Ah - I believe we are nearly here - hold on."*

Suddenly Rashty tilted sharply forwards and Flissy very nearly fell. Just in time she managed to hook her fingers under the thick leather collar around Rashty's neck and push herself back up the

long dog's back. At the same time she felt her shorten her stride but increase her pace. Looking forward and down she saw they were fast approaching a small group of houses. *Too fast...*

"Rash! Don't you think you should..."

*"Hold tight."*

Flissy screamed and leaned back as far as she could. At the last moment it seemed like Rashty realised they were coming in too fast and tried to pull back - but it was way too late by then.

There was a tremendous thump as they hit the ground. Rashty scrambled to try and keep running but their downward momentum was too much, their forward speed too fast and the ground too slippery - her long legs splayed out sideways, her chest hit the ground and before Flissy knew what was happening the two of them were rolling through the dirt in a huge cloud of dust.

When she finally came to a halt Flissy slowly and painfully sat up. Her elbow hurt where she had hit the ground, she was covered in dust from head to foot and she had a large tear in her jeans.

As the dust slowly settled she looked around. Rashty was lying on the ground a short way off, completely prone and not moving.

"Rashty? RASH! - Are you ok?"

She jumped up and ran over.

Rashty lifted her head and shook her long, floppy ears.

*"What? Ah, sure - I'm fine."*

"WHAT ON EARTH WERE YOU THINKING? HAVE YOU NEVER DONE THAT BEFORE?"

*"Of course I've not done it before. How many flying Wolfhounds do you think there are? All in all I'd say it went pretty well - we're here, aren't we?"*

"We are NOT doing that again. I will do the landing on the way back, ok?"

Rashty shrugged.

*"There is still a way to go before we return, but as you wish...Now - follow me."*

The big dog struggled to her feet, shook some of the dust out of her coat and trotted off towards one of the larger of the nearby buildings.

Flissy looked around. It didn't exactly look like there was a lot of choice, so, grudgingly she dusted herself off a little and set off to follow.

"I still don't understand why we're here. And why the past? How long ago is this supposed to be?"

"Long enough to be relevant. You have to see what has already been lost, if you are to understand just how much you stand to lose in the future...Come, this is the place, I think."

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Fast in the past*

Rashty made her way directly towards a small, neat-looking house near the end of the group of buildings Flissy had seen from the air. As she followed Flissy peeled off a couple of pullovers she had thrown on in her room earlier - it really was quite warm here, wherever it was.

As they approached a cacophony of noise erupted from around the corner and a massive black dog suddenly appeared. Without any warning it hurled itself towards them. All Flissy could see was teeth, drool and the whites of its eyes. The rest of its face seemed to be pulled back by a tidal wave of fear, anger and hatred. Flissy was well used to dogs, of all sizes and all their moods, but this was different. It wasn't warning them off. This dog had only one, insane, desire left in its body - the desire to destroy and to kill. Flissy screamed and tried to step behind Rashty. Even though Rashty was bigger (few dogs could match the Wolfhound for sheer size) Flissy was terrified for both of them. She didn't see how anything could stand in the face of that level of ferocity. Rashty, though, calmly stood her ground, turning only her large head towards the threatened attack and leaning her body gently up against Flissy as she did at home when she was expressing affection or reassurance. Flissy desperately wanted to run, but for some reason none of the messages her brain was frantically sending out seemed to actually be reaching her feet. It would be on them any second now, a snarling whirlwind of hate, but still Rashty didn't move. At the last moment the great black dog took a giant leap into the air. Flissy cringed and tried to duck behind Rashty's back, but as she looked up in horror their would-be attacker let out a sudden yelp. Its head jerked back and its hind legs swept underneath it as it crashed to the ground, flat on its back.

"It's chained!"

*"For now...come on, we shouldn't taunt him".* Rashty turned back towards the house and started walking towards it again.

By now the black dog was back on his feet, still snarling and slaving, pulling a long rusty chain taught behind him.

"Taunt him? You must be joking - what on earth is wrong with him?" Flissy followed behind Rashty but was careful to keep her between herself and the other dog while keeping a close eye on the chain as it vibrated up and down.

*"Wrong? Nothing is wrong with him. Mars is like that because humans made him that way."*

"Mars? You **know** him?"

*"I know **of** him. It's no accident he is the way he is. It has taken years of abuse and neglect by many people to make him that way. If it wasn't their intention then I can only assume they are even more shortsighted than we thought."*

"But what about the chain?"

*"What about it?"*

"What if it gives way?"

Rashty looked back, but with an expression more like pity than fear.

*"The chain is part of the problem. Sadly it is both partly the cause for his anger, but at the same time now necessary to keep him at bay. We are safe for the moment; though, as is the nature of these things, it is bound to give way eventually."*

"And what then?"

*"Then? All hell is let loose...Come on. We're here."*

Rashty had stopped outside a light blue door. It was a beautiful shade of what Flissy would call 'baby blue' and looked as though it had been recently, and lovingly painted.

Rashty looked pointedly at the handle.

"Oh, so you need my help - again. Shouldn't we knock first? Who lives here anyway?"

*"Questions are good, but you should know the quality of answers you get, often depends on the quality of the questions you ask...now, open the door if you please..."*

"Seems a bit rude to me, just barging in, but if you say so..." Flissy reached out and pushed the door open. Inside was a short corridor, dark and cool by comparison with the growing light outside. At the end she could see more light though, another doorway and heard voices.

*"Go ahead."*

Slowly Flissy felt her way down the corridor. The first thing she noticed was a wonderful, warm tidal wave of smells. Someone was obviously cooking, but this wasn't like cooking at home. This



was like a rainbow of scents and spices, aromas and herbs - she'd never smelled anything like it before. She looked down at Rashty, padding along softly beside her.'

*"Finally - I wondered when you would eventually pick up the scent..."*

"It smells amazing! What are they cooking exactly?"

*"Why don't you go and see?"*

Cautiously Flissy moved forwards towards the opening. "Hello. Hello? May I come in?"

At the end of the corridor she turned and stepped into a large, brightly lit kitchen. The room was a hive of activity. In one corner was a stove. Two teenage girls were tending four or five pans which were bubbling or sizzling on the top. Occasionally one of them would bend down to peer into the oven below. In the centre of the room was a long wooden table, strewn with various bowls, plates, broken eggshells and vegetable peelings. At the far end a small boy was struggling with a large knife, trying to chop carrots into strips. The carrots, being round, kept rolling to one side under the knife and he poked his tongue out of the side of his mouth with concentration as he tried to hold them still and slice then without removing one or more of his fingers in the process.

Standing next to the table was a young woman. Out of the corner of her eye she was watching the boy while at the same time rolling out some sort of dough on the table.

She paused for a moment and turned to the two girls by the stove to give some sort of instruction, before turning back to the boy to show him how to hold the carrot and slice down the middle first to give himself a flat surface. One of the girls asked something and the woman pointed to a cupboard near the door. The girl turned and stepped towards Flissy.

"Hello - I'm Flissy..." Flissy stepped forward and held out her hand. To her surprise the girl walked straight past her.

"Well there's no need to be rude..."

*"They can neither see you, nor hear you," said Rashty. "Any more than you could see or hear them from your comfortable room in England."*

Just as the young girl reached the cupboard the woman said something and all four suddenly burst out laughing.

"What did she say? What language is that? I don't understand." Flissy liked a good joke and hated to feel that she was missing something.

Rashty shook her large head and flapped her ears.

*"Language is too often used to emphasise the divide between us. Focus on who they are, what they're doing - the things you share..."*

"They look like they're having fun. Is it some sort of party? That must be their mum."

*"They are indeed preparing a celebration - a feast. They have been fasting for a while now. Tonight the whole family will gather together to share food and enjoy their good fortune."*

"Oh - how exciting! Have they won something?"

Rashty looked up at Flissy and stared for a moment.

*"Their good fortune in being together..."*

"Right - of course."

The girl took something from the cupboard and went back to add it to one of the pans on top of the stove. As she did so the younger girl reached for it and knocked her hand, tipping a great lump of some sort of powdered spice into the pan. Both girls jumped back, horrified, then looked around towards their mother who was too preoccupied with the combination of her own work and supervising the small boy to have noticed anything.

The elder girl conspiratorially put her finger on her lips, placed the lid back on the container she was holding and quietly put it back in the cupboard.

Flissy looked around. "Where's their dad?"

*"Away. Like most of the people here - he has to travel to a far part of the country to work, taking things from the earth wherever they are found. He will be home soon to join them."*

"They seem nice - happy. But..."

*"But?"*

"I still don't get it. Why are we here? I mean what's special about them?"

*"Special? Nothing. Absolutely nothing special about these people whatsoever. They are so ordinary they might as well be made of brown paper. In fact they are of no interest to anyone, other than each other of course..."*

Seeing their mother pre-occupied the two girls started flicking bits of food at their little brother who looked up just in time to receive a well-aimed pea in his left eye, and immediately started to wail. Both girls turned back to their pans as though nothing had happened.

"Oh good shot!"



*"You're not concerned for the little one?"*

"Him? No. If he's anything like my little cousin he'll get his own back when they're not looking..." The elder girl, obviously feeling guilty, went over to her brother, wiped his eyes and set to helping him with the carrots.

*"O.K. Time to go..."*

"We only just got here. Can't we at least stay and see what they're making? It smells incredible. I don't suppose..?"

*"No you may **not** eat any of it. Now hurry - we have more visitations to make."* Rashty turned and made her way towards the front door.

As Flissy followed her outside she stretched her arms high and wide in the air.

"I quite like it here - at least it's warm."

*"It is not warm - it is **hot** - and also exceedingly dry. Very few things grow here without additional water which must be pumped from the ground. Now climb back on. We have more stops to make and I don't want to be late for Corvin."*

"Who's Corvin?"

*"You'll meet him soon enough - he will be your next guide."*

Flissy stopped.

"Wait - look this is all well and good. Well, it's not exactly good, but - whatever - the thing is, we **will** be back in time for Christmas won't we? Only the smell of all that food has made me hungry. Grandma does cook a pretty good roast and I am due some mega presents this year..."

*"You will go home...whether it is in time or not largely depends upon you. Now, on - and try not to choke me this time."*

Flissy climbed back on to the giant dog's back.

"I'll do you a deal - I'll try not to choke you if you try for a three-point landing next time."

*"Deal,"* and in two bounds they were once more climbing through the air.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Cold hearted killer*

As they rose through the air a second time Flissy started to relax a little more. If this was a dream at least it wasn't a nightmare - yet, anyway. She leaned back a little and took the time to look around. They had left the storm far behind now and the sky was crystal clear - so clear in fact she couldn't remember ever having seen so many stars before. Her eyes slowly adjusted and the more she looked, the more she saw. Certainly more than she would ever be able to count she realised. She remembered something Grandpat had once told her: the light they were seeing from the stars was old - even the very nearest star took more than four years for its light to reach earth. For many, in fact most of them, what she was seeing was what they *had* looked like *millions* of years ago. Their past was her present, and, she supposed, if there were anybody out there looking back at her, her present was their future. She shivered. Some thoughts were just too big - it made her feel uncomfortable. She shivered again, then realised it wasn't just her thoughts that were shaking here, it was getting cold. *Very cold.*

"Rash....RASH! Where are we going? I'm getting cold. Can't we go home now?"

*"Home? Everywhere is home to someone...or something."*

"Maybe. But it's not MY home, and I don't have a thick fur coat like you."

*"And yet you humans insist on treating every corner of the planet as though it was your property, to do with as you see fit."*

"Look - I didn't ASK to come here, ok? I still don't understand what's going on or why we need to be here. And I am COLD!"

*"There are things you need to see, and perhaps more importantly, to **feel**. Look down. Not far now."*

As she looked down Flissy took a sharp intake of breath. White! The ground was completely white.

"Is that snow?" For a moment she forgot how cold she was. "Wow - a white Christmas at last!" Everybody always talked about a white Christmas as though it was the normal thing, and it seemed like every single Christmas card showed a snowy scene. But she had never known it snow at Christmas. In fact, she had hardly ever seen snow, not real snow anyway. A couple of days a year a few flakes came down, mixed with the rain, but it melted as soon as it touched the ground.

*"Mostly ice, to be precise, but yes, there will be some snow. Now hold on - we should land somewhere over there I think."*

Flissy was not convinced that Rashty's landing technique would have improved much since the last time. She slid back, tucked her legs under the big dog's slim waist, wrapped her arms around her long neck and buried her face in the thick fur between Rashty's shoulder blades.

"This time I am hanging on to you," She thought. "You can be a big fat cushion between me and the ground.."

*"I can hear your thoughts, you know..."*

"Never mind that, why don't you just concentrate on landing properly this time?"

She raised her head long enough for a quick glance at the ground.

"It looks smooth enough, at least. Maybe the snow will cushion us a bit."

Without further warning they suddenly dropped and she felt Rashty's feet pattering across the surface of the ground. Then something changed. Instead of pattering across the surface, they started sinking. The big dog tried to keep running, but her long legs sank below the surface and quickly collapsed beneath her. Before Flissy knew what was happening her face wash pushed deep into a mounting wave of snow which crashed over her head and shot down the back of her neck, taking her breath away with the cold.

*"Well. Looks like you were right after all. Seems like there IS quite a lot of snow..."*

"UGH! No kidding? I thought you were going to try to stay upright this time?"

*"I **am** upright. Unfortunately my feet still seem to be some way below the surface. Still, all things considered, I'd say that was a significant improvement, wouldn't you?"*

Flissy was too busy reaching behind herself to drag large lumps of snow and ice out from under her collar to be bothered to answer. Instead, having retrieved as much as she could reach, she rolled off Rashty's back and tried to stand.

"Where **are** we anyway? There's nothing here!"

*"On the contrary - everything is here. Everything that is **supposed** to be here."*

"Well all I can see is snow and ice."

*"Precisely. We are inside the Arctic circle, in the middle of winter. It is meant to be icy."*

"Ok then, **why** are we here."

*"I told you - for you to see and to feel."*

"Well I feel cold and I see nothing - so can we go now - please?"

*"Look again - over there."*

Rashty motioned with her large head, out across the frozen landscape. Flissy looked up. She saw for the first time that they had landed on top of a small rise in the landscape. Out in the direction Rashty had indicated at first she saw nothing, just a blank expanse of white.

"All I see is white. What am I supposed to be looking for?"

*"Look again. Look for what is **not** there."*

"Hmmpfh." She stared once again in the direction indicated by Rashty's long nose.

"Wait - hold on a second. Is that a hole? In the ice? That little dark patch."

*"It is. And what else do you see?"*

"Nothing. There's a sort of lump in the ground just next to it. How long do we have to be here exactly? In case you hadn't noticed I am **freezing!**"

*"That lump, as you call it, has been there for six or seven hours. You are lucky I am shortcutting the process to allow for your human impatience. Now watch."*

Flissy shivered, then stared back across the blank waste towards the small, slightly darker ellipse that marked the hole in the ice. She was just about to start complaining again to Rashty when she thought she noticed something like a small ripple across the surface.

"What's that?"

*"Shhh...just watch."*

As she watched a small black nose appeared, covered in spiky whiskers, followed by two small round eyes which quickly blinked away the seawater running off them.

"Oh it's a seal! How lovely!"

Just as she realised what it was she was looking at, the lump in the ground suddenly rose up and lunged towards the seal's head as it poked above the surface.

"No, no, no, no NO!"

Flissy stared anxiously as her view was obscured for the next few seconds, then watched in horror as a huge Polar Bear rose up on its hind legs, a young seal clamped firmly by the neck between its jaws.

She turned away.

"That's horrible! Why did you bring me here to see that?"

*"Why is it so horrible?"*

"That poor seal..."

*"Yes, it's terrible for the seal, it's true. But what of the bear?"*

"I don't care about the bear - it's horrid."

*"Tell me - when we get back, what will you be eating, for your Christmas dinner?"*

"Well not seal, that's for sure."

*"Turkey, then?"*

"I suppose so..."

*"And do you think that Turkey will have willingly given itself up to the butcher's knife?"*

"No, of course not - but that's different..."

*"Of course it's different. But the key difference is, the bear and the seal both know they are alive. They know that one may die so that the other lives. This time it was the seal. Another time the seal may escape and the bear may starve. The bear must respect the seal's right to live - or it could not wait so patiently to endeavour to kill it. You have no respect for the Turkey, because it's death has no relevance to you."*

Flissy shivered again and turned away to wipe a tear from her eye.

"That's just horrid. And not fair. Can we please just go home now? I don't want to see any more..."

Rashty sighed and nuzzled Flissy from behind.

*"I told you at the beginning, this is not about what you want to see, but what you need to see. We have one more stop then I will take you back."*

"I don't care. I don't want to see any more killing."

*"You won't, I promise - anyway, not in the sense that you mean it. Climb back on. At least our next stop will be warm again..."*

## CHAPTER 5

### *Insectnificant*

As they rose into the air for the third time Flissy thought a little about what she had just seen, and Rashty's comments. Half her family were vegetarian, but the truth was she *liked* meat. It just seemed like a normal part of a meal to her. She'd never stopped before to consider too much where it came from. The only meat she didn't eat was lamb, because, well, it made her think of fluffy little lambs. It crossed her mind that maybe we deliberately used other words to disguise the implications of what we were eating; 'meat' instead of 'animal', 'pork' instead of 'pig' and 'beef' rather than saying 'a big piece of cow, please.' These were not comfortable thoughts and she pushed them to the back of her mind for now to concentrate on what was happening below. As she looked down the white landscape of the Arctic had given way to a uniform blue-black with faint traces of white and she realised they were crossing an ocean.

"SO where are we now?"

*"Somewhere above the South Atlantic Ocean. You will see more of it later, but for now our destination is a little way ahead."*

"At least it's getting a bit warmer again."

*"Ye-es, there is that I suppose."*

"What is it Rash? You sound a bit nervous. You weren't bothered by that mad dog Mars or the Polar Bear - what is it about this place we're going to now?"

*"It's not the place so much...but in truth, yes, I am a little uncomfortable. The residents can be, shall we say, a little aggressive."*

"The why are we going there for goodness' sake?"

*"Because they are also so very important."*

Flissy was about to ask more when she was distracted by a dark smudge which had just appeared on the horizon. The sky was also lighter again now and she was confused by the apparent flexibility of time on this weird journey.

"Is that land up ahead? And what time is it now? I hope I'm not missing Christmas morning at home?"

*"It is the coast, yes, though we will be travelling some way inland, following the path of the great river. And it is still Christmas Eve, though not the one you are thinking of. The world we are about to visit already disappeared many years before your view of the present."*

"I don't get it. If it's not there any more, what's the point in showing me? It's not my fault if it's gone. Why drag me half way round the world to show me something that has nothing to do with me?"

Rashty sighed. *"Perhaps they were right. Perhaps it is too late. Still we are nearly there now so we will just have to try anyway."*

"Perhaps WHO was right?"

*"Never mind - you will meet some of them later (if we decide to continue). You are due two more visitations, the shadows of the Present and the Yet to Come. For now, just hold on - I can see the River below, and the path will be quite twisty to reach where we need to be."*

Flissy looked down again to see a simply enormous brown river spread out below her. It was so wide she could barely see the banks on either side, and she wondered why Rashty would describe this as 'twisty'. It looked more like a giant lake than a river. They were moving so fast though that it wasn't long before the sides started to close in and she saw more detail - giant trees with greenery growing all the way down to the very edge of the river. They passed a few settlements, somehow squeezed into a small space on the bank, but mostly the land was completely dominated by one thing - vegetation.

"There don't seem to be many people around."

*"No, we have had to travel some way in time as well as distance to show you the scale of what once was."*

"I'm still not following you - all I can see is green..."

*"Precisely. Now hold on - it gets a little trickier from here."*

Suddenly the trees closed in - not just from the sides, but reaching out high above them too. She felt Rashty's long body buck and turn beneath her as they twisted right and left following the winding, ever-narrowing path of the river beneath them.

At first it was quite fun - a bit like a crazy funfair ride, but before long she started to feel quite queasy. If it weren't for the fact that she hadn't eaten in a while she was sure she would have

been sick by this point. She was just about to ask Rashty to stop for a bit, maybe let her stretch her legs when they started to slow.

"Nearly there. I suggest you hold on tight - this landing may be a little trickier than the others."

"Wait - hold on - what do you mean 'trickier'?"

Rashty turned sharply, almost throwing Flissy off into the water in the process, and angled directly towards the riverbank."

All Flissy could see was a solid wall of greenery - there literally was not a gap in it.

"Wait. Whoa! You can't go in there! There isn't any space - we're going to crash..."

Despite having slowed a little, the great green wall was rushing towards them at an alarming pace. Even as they got closer Flissy could not make out any possible gaps that might allow them to land. At the last minute she tightened her arms around the big dog's neck, pressed her face hard down into the fur on Rashty's neck and hoped that they wouldn't both just bounce off the trunk of some huge tree and collapse in a heap of broken bones into the river.

Instead, there was an incredible crashing noise - almost like a series of small fireworks going off - that continued for longer than she could have imagined. They were thrown right, left, up and down and she felt her hair and her back torn and scratched as leaves, branches and thorns grabbed at her, trying to rip her from Rashty's back. Eventually the mini explosions slowed and finally came to a halt.

There was something odd, though. They had stopped moving forward, but they were still moving somehow. Swaying, actually, rather gently from side to side.

"Rash? Are you ok? What's going on?"

*"Mmm yes - Ok I think, thank you. Though I would like to have ended up a little nearer to the ground..."*

Flissy lifted her head up and got ready to slide off Rashty's back so she could stand up and check herself over.

"What do you mean, nearer...OH MY GOD!"

She hastily scrambled back up and tightened her grip around Rashty's neck before carefully peering past her right ear. They were somehow resting on the fork of a large branch. Below her all she could see was more branches from the same tree, intersecting branches from other trees and what could be the tops of some bushes below - or just as easily could be the tops of still smaller trees.

"Just how far off the ground ARE we?"

*"Mmm. Not sure exactly. I closed my eyes as we were coming in - there was a certain amount of... interference."*

*"Interference! Is that what you call it? My back feels like it was shredded and I have no idea what my hair must look like. More to the point though - how do you propose to get us down?"*

*"Getting down will be easy - gravity will see to that. We just need to be careful not to damage the environment."*

*"'Environment' - Yes, I see that, don't want to break any twigs, do we? What about NOT BREAKING US!"*

*"We are important too, of course. But just because a life is smaller or apparently more plentiful does not decrease its value - in fact, almost the opposite."*

*"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you barrelled into the trees at 60 mph?"*

*"Hmm...you have a point. As I may have mentioned, however, I am still rather new to this whole flying business. Perhaps I should have asked Corvin for some hints and tips...Be that as it may. Our task now is to reach the ground causing the minimum amount of damage..."*

*"Ahem..."*

*"Yes, yes. To reach the ground **safely**, and causing minimal damage."*

Just at that point there was a loud crack, followed by an even louder scream from Flissy as the branch they were on suddenly dropped a few centimeters and started swaying ominously.

She tightened her grip around Rashty's neck.

*"Oh dear. I hope that was nothing permanent."*

"I have a feeling the next one will be something permanent for us if you don't get a move on. DO something Rashty. NOW!"

Rashty turned her huge head from side to side scanning the forest.

*"Hmm, yes...perhaps there is a way. Hold on."*

"Wait! Hold on. What are we...WHOA!"

Standing quickly, and with remarkable grace on the narrow branch Rashty suddenly leapt into the green maze below them. Faster than Flissy could follow she bounded, rebounded and skittered from branch to branch. It was all Flissy could do to hang on.

*"Please...try not to...upset my balance..."* panted Rashty.

Flissy didn't bother to reply, just clung on even tighter in the hope that the big dog's body would at least cushion her to some extent when they eventually, surely did tumble to the ground.

Finally, with a heavy thud, they came to a halt.

Still clinging on tight Flissy looked up and tilted her head to the right to try to see past Rashty's Mohican fur peak.

"We're down! How did you do that?"

*"You're never too old to learn some new skills. You may have noticed I have spent a lot of time observing squirrels in the trees around the farm. You have to understand trees and plan your route to work with them, not against them."*

"Observing squirrels, or chasing them?"

Rashty shrugged.

*"Instinct is hard to ignore..."*

"Well we're down now anyway - thank goodness for that. I really need to stretch my legs."

Flissy leaned over ready to jump off the big dog's back.

*"No, no! Wait!"*

"Wait? What for? I ache all over. And now that we're finally down I would really like to put my feet back on the ground for a while."

*"Not yet. Our landing was still a little hard. I fear we may have disturbed them."*

"Them who?"

*"The many."*

Flissy peered into the dense green vegetation all around them.

"Well, I don't see ANYone - let alone 'many'."

*"Look closer."*

Flissy peered into the jungle.

"Nope. Unless you mean leaves..."

*"Them too. But I didn't mean look **harder**. I mean **closer** - look down."*

Flissy shifted slightly to peer down at the ground behind Rashty's shoulder.

"Still not seeing anything - unless you mean ants of course - loads of them."

*"Of course I mean the ants. Tell me, what are they doing? You can see better than me and I don't want to move unless I have too."*

"Doing? Just being ants I suppose. I don't know - scurrying around randomly?"

"Nothing is random in their world. Look again."

Flissy sighed, then turned again and stared down at the ants moving across the forest floor.

"Hmm...now you mention it, they DO look kinda busy. They're tracking backwards and forwards, in a line. Some of them are carrying bits of leaves and stuff. Actually, they don't look busy so much as angry? Is that even possible?"

*"Oh dear. I was afraid of that. We may have landed too close to their nest. I think we must have disturbed one of their communication lines."*

"Well, Ok. But I mean really, what's the big deal? I mean they're only ants, after all."

*"**Only** ants. There we have it. That is one of the reasons why we are here."*

"I still don't get it."

*"Then let me put it in your terms. If all of life on earth were a pyramid, where would humans be in that pyramid?"*

"At the top, of course."

*"Of course...and dogs like me?"*

"Well, Grandpat would probably say above humans, but most people would say near the top, maybe part way down."

*"And the ants and other insects?"*

"Somewhere around the base I suppose. Where is this going anyway?"

*"So tell me, what would happen to the top of the pyramid if the base were to crumble away?"*

Flissy frowned.

"What do you mean, 'crumble away'?"

*"Collapse, stop functioning, not be there any more, no longer support all that weight above it..."*

"It would fall over I suppose."

*"So does that make the base of the pyramid more or less significant than the top?"*

"Okay, I get it. But the world's not going to collapse if we accidentally squish a couple of ants..."

*"And if YOU were accidentally squished? After all, there are more than 8 Billion of you on the planet. Would it make much difference if there was one small girl less?"*

"It would to me."

*"Think on that, then."*

At this point Rashty leaned backwards and started to squat just above the ground. Flissy could hear the sound of liquid splashing behind her.

"Yew! What are you DOING?"

*"I am asking them a question."*

"By PEEING on them?"

*"Ants don't use words. They communicate using chemical signals and vibrations. I am speaking to them in their language just as I have been speaking to you in yours. And it is not pee, by the way, or at least not just pee. we dogs have a special scent gland back there. It's part of our own communication system."*

"Well I still think it's pretty gross. What did you ask them, anyway?"

*"Where we can find the angry ones."*

"The angry whats? And why do we want to find them anyway, if they're so angry?"

*"You will see. And why are you humans so obsessed with what you want all the time. Animals are much better at understanding the balance of our needs. Focusing on wants is like mistaking the scent of an expensive perfume for the real luxury of just breathing pure, fresh air. Now speaking of scents, be quiet for a moment - I want to see what they have to say."*

Rashty bent down and sniffed carefully at the long line of ants as they wove their way around her large furry feet. She flinched suddenly and sneezed.

"What? What did they say?"

*"Well really. There's no need to be rude!"*

"What?"

*"I think perhaps they are a little cross that we disrupted their highway. Difficult to translate into words, but a distinctly pungent response - it would definitely include the word 'off'..."*

"Oh well - perhaps we should just go home now then. I really don't want to miss presents..."

*"Not quite yet. When they told me to, ahem, head off, they did at least indicate a direction - this way..."*

Slowly and ever so carefully Rashty lifted her huge paws and stepped away from the line of ants then padded across the forest floor.

"It shouldn't be too far, but please be quiet. I need to concentrate. It would not do to surprise them."

"Why not? And if they're that touchy why not just leave them alone?"

*"You do understand the concept of quiet, right? And that is the whole problem - they just want to be left alone. It's you humans who are provoking them."*

"Me? I haven't done anything!"

*"Shhh. Please. I am serious. We could take our chances with the Polar bear but we must be very careful indeed with the angry ones - they are far more dangerous."*

Flissy was just about to ask again why, in that case they were actively looking for these 'angry ones' but she decided it might be better to keep quiet for now. She didn't much like the idea of meeting them, whoever they were, but the sooner they got it over with the sooner she could get back home and get on with Christmas. Anyway, Rash could always just fly away if they got into trouble...

Rashty continued making her way through the forest - treading very carefully and frequently lifting her nose high in the air and sniffing repeatedly as if trying to find a trail in the air. After a while she started to slow, moving ever more cautiously. Eventually she came to a halt, then slid her front paws out, very gently, till she was lying flat on the ground.

Flissy stared all around her but could see nothing unusual. There was a very faint, slightly sweet smell in the air and she noticed a change too in the sound of the forest. The general hubbub of insect noises had died down and been replaced, instead, by a strange sort of low background hum. She was just about to ask Rashty, quietly, why they had stopped when the dog looked back over her shoulder and motioned softly with her head, forwards across the forest floor.

Flissy looked up.



At first it was very difficult so see anything. The contrast between the intense light bursting through any gaps in the foliage and the dark shade created by the dense leaves and branches made it very difficult to make out anything other than a patchwork of shadows.

Gradually though she started to focus on one patch of shade, a small bump among the trees, twenty metres or so in front of them. It was moving, but not in the normal way an animal moves. It was more like a pulsating, throbbing movement, sort of blurry around the edges.

Flissy stared. As she watched she thought she saw small dots, parts of the shape break off and move away, while others came back and rejoined it. Then she noticed one of the breakaway dots was zig-zagging but gradually moving towards them.

*"Stay very still..."* Rashty was barely breathing by this point.

*"Oh it's a bee! I like bees! I really like honey!"*

*"Shhhhhh!"*

*"Look! It's coming towards us."*

*"PLEASE be quiet. Make no sudden moves."*

As Flissy watched the bee came closer towards them then hovered a metre or so directly ahead.

Flissy held out her hand. *"Hello mr Bee."*

*"It is not a bee - it is a wasp."*

The bee buzzed backwards a few centimeters, paused, then flew straight at Flissy's head.

*"What? Hey! No - shoo, SHOO!"*

She waved her hands frantically around her head trying to shoo the wasp away.

She thought she might have managed to hit it and the bee flew back again, hovering angrily just out of reach.

*"What's wrong with them?"*

*"They are looking for a new home. They live deep in the forest but they have already been moved on several times and they are NOT happy about it. I don't think you have made them any happier."*

*"Well he attacked me first."*

While they watched the wasp started zig-zagging back to the hive.

*"She was not attacking you. She was sent to tell you to move on. Instead you attacked her. Now she is taking your message back to the nest. I think perhaps we should leave."*

*"Well I never asked to come here in the first place."*

*"Perhaps you are right. Maybe this was a mistake after all. It seems humans only know one way to respond to other creatures who have the temerity to suggest they may have their own rights..."*

*Come, Let's go."*

Rashty rose slowly to her feet.

*"Why are you showing them to me anyway?"*

*"Because they signify. You are very fond of bees because you can domesticate them and use them for your own benefit, but wasps are older, far older and play a vital role in the environment. As well as being pollinators (like bees) they are key predators, controlling the numbers of caterpillars and other insects. You would destroy them without remorse because you believe they are insignificant and because they have at least a limited ability to strike back, to hurt you if they feel threatened. All life (including humans) will fight to survive. The difference is that humans do not stop at survival - they fight to dominate: the earth, other life forms, even each other, and they do not seem to know how to stop. While the wasps are numerous now, they are fragile. If you take away their home they may not survive. If they do not survive, you start to undermine the pyramid."*

Flissy looked back across at the nest. The shape was changing now, pulsating more, growing, getting fuzzier at the edges. While she watched a large chunk broke away and suddenly started streaming directly at them.

*"Er, Rash!"*

*"I see it. Hold tight!"*

In one leap Rashty had turned and started bounding back through the trees. After only two or three strides Flissy felt them leave the ground and start climbing, Rashty again leaping from bough to bough like a mad giant squirrel. As they wove their way between branches she ducked low and tried to make herself as small as possible. Once again the twigs and branches snagged at her, trying to claw her off and knock her back down to the ground below. She clung on even more tightly till, with a great flutter of leaves they burst through the canopy and out into the clear sky beyond.

*"Thanks goodness you can fly."*

*"Except of course, wasps fly too..."*

Carefully Flissy lifted her head and looked back over her shoulder. At first all looked clear, then she noticed - just where they had emerged from the canopy, a small black cloud was forming. "Rash..."

*"I know. I am going as fast as I can, believe me..."*

Higher they climbed, Rashty's breath coming faster and more ragged as her legs thrashed through the air. Behind them the cloud was getting bigger.

"I think they're getting closer."

"I know... They really...must be...angry...this time..."

Rashty did not bother following the river this time, but instead climbed higher and higher in an attempt to outfly the angry wasps. By the time the first wasp reached them the river was already a small sliver in the landscape far below. Flissy swatted it away. But another came, and another. She was flailing at them with both hands but soon there were just too many. They swarmed around her head, noisy and fierce. Then the first sting struck.

"Ow!"

Then another, and another. She felt the sharp pains on her face, her arms then over her body. She was suffocating in a swirling black mass of buzzing anger. She felt Rashty spasm beneath her and suddenly they were falling, falling, falling - an angry whirling mass plummeting towards the earth below...