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Megan Rix

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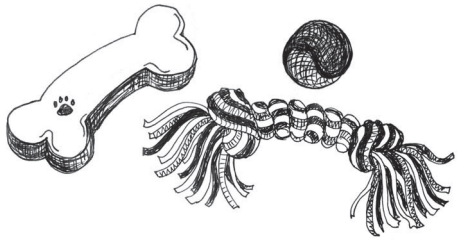
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Chapter 1

Marnie, a five-year-old yellow Labrador, stood at the front door and gave a single bark. When no one came she sat down and waited for a few seconds, then awkwardly stood up again and waddled her way down the hallway. She went into the kitchen, past the small table, over to the glass back door that led out to the garden, whined and looked behind her.

Grey-haired Mrs Hodges was seated at the kitchen table. She heard Marnie's whine, but didn't look up from reading the local newspaper

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while dunking a digestive biscuit into her mug of tea. 'Helper Dogs' she read at the top of the article that had a large photograph of some dogs below it. Mrs Hodges smiled. She was very fond of Helper Dogs – the charity that trained dogs to help people with special needs. Her friend Lenny ran the local centre not far away. They were looking for more volunteer puppy raisers and suitable puppies to be donated to the charity.

Marnie whined again and then gave a short sharp bark. Mrs Hodges finally looked up and found herself being stared at by her dog's soft brown eyes.

Mrs Hodges knew full well what that stare meant.

'You wouldn't think a dog in your condition would still want to be heading out for walks. Those puppies are going to come along very soon,' she said as she put the newspaper down and stood up.

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Marnie stepped from one front paw to the other to ease the weight in her belly, her claws making tapping sounds on the wooden floor,.

'Just a small one then.'

Marnie's thick tail wagged as she followed Mrs Hodges to the front door and waited for her to take down the lead from the hook she kept it on. Being pregnant didn't stop Marnie from wanting to go for a walk, but it did mean the walks had to be much shorter – and no free runs or trips in the car.

'Come on then,' Mrs Hodges said as she opened the front door.

Outside, the sun was shining. It was a bright summer's day with a clear blue sky. Marnie hurried out as fast as she could waddle. 'Slowly now,' Mrs Hodges warned her.

The old lady kept a careful eye on Marnie during their gentle walk round the block. She'd been through it all before and knew that Marnie's instinct was to find a place to give

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birth outdoors. Mrs Hodges' instinct, however, was to help choose Marnie's birthing spot for her – indoors, where she could keep a close eye on things.

But Marnie was surprisingly quick for a heavily pregnant dog.

'Come out of there!' Mrs Hodges cried as Marnie dived under a promising-looking hedge. She'd only just managed to coax the Labrador back out when a long black car drove slowly past them. They both turned to watch the hearse pass. In the back, resting on the coffin, was a wreath of white and purple flowers that spelt the word DAD.

'Oh dear,' muttered Mrs Hodges, bowing her head and giving Marnie a stroke.

Behind the hearse was a black limousine. As it passed them by, Mrs Hodges caught a glimpse of a sandy-haired boy in the back seat, staring determinedly straight ahead. Marnie barked and for a brief second the boy looked over at them.

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'Poor love,' Mrs Hodges said as she and Marnie continued on their walk.

After the funeral was over everyone, or it seemed like everyone, came back to eleven-year-old Joe Scott's house. Not that Joe wanted them there, but that's what his mum said people did.

He went into his room to get away from them, but people kept knocking on his door and poking their heads round it to ask if he was OK.

Of course I'm not, he wanted to scream at them. *Why would I be OK?* He'd never be OK.

There was a large cupboard with a lattice door on one side of the bedroom. Joe picked up his phone, opened the door, stepped inside the cupboard, closed the door behind him and sat down on the floor among his shoes.

Then someone else knocked on his bedroom door and walked in. 'Joe?'

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Joe didn't reply and soon he heard the footsteps retreating.

Without thinking, Joe studied his phone. He had lots of photos of Dad on his phone and he scrolled slowly through them. He didn't like looking at the ones of Dad in his army uniform the last time they'd said goodbye. He scrolled back to the ones of them together from before: Christmas last year, way before Dad told him he'd be going away; him and his dad both wearing Cat in the Hat hats; Christmas. Joe's stomach flipped over. He didn't want to have a Christmas without Dad.

Joe's favourite photo was of him and his dad laughing together on holiday at the beach in July, just over a year ago.

He carried on looking at the photos until finally the house became quiet.

Then suddenly the cupboard door opened and Joe jerked his head up. His mum stood

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there. She'd kicked off the high-heeled black shoes she'd worn for the funeral.

'It's not fair,' Joe said.

'I know it isn't.'

'Why did it have to be him?'

His mum had no answer. There *was* no answer. She held her hand out to pull Joe up, but he didn't take it immediately.

'I don't want to go back.'

'Back where?'

'To school after the holidays.' His voice caught in his throat. 'The other kids will ask me about Dad.'

He didn't want to talk about the funeral with anyone, and especially not with nosy-parker people. He loved his dad too much for that, and the ache he felt every time he thought about how much he missed him had left a hole so big it felt like he could crawl inside it and stay there forever.

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‘Come on, let’s have some food,’ his mum said, offering her hand again.

‘I’m not hungry,’ he told her as she pulled him up.

‘Then help me clear it all away.’

Mrs Hodges filled Marnie’s bowl with the special food for dogs who are expecting puppies, but Marnie wouldn’t touch it. She hadn’t been interested in food all day, which wasn’t at all like the usual Marnie.

‘Well, I suppose that’s normal. Shouldn’t think it will be long now,’ Mrs Hodges told the Labrador as she softly stroked Marnie’s bulging belly. The old lady had taken to feeding the dog near the nesting box where she tried to get Marnie to sleep too. Much better for the puppies to be born there than under some bush that took Marnie’s fancy.

Marnie liked the stroking and she fell asleep in the special box Mrs Hodges had made for

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her, snoring loudly. The snoring, loud as it was, was oddly soothing. Mrs Hodges hadn't slept properly over the last few nights. She'd had one ear open for any sound that might mean Marnie was about to give birth. Now she carried on stroking the snoring dog until they'd both nodded off.

Marnie hadn't been asleep for more than an hour when her eyes opened and she gave a yelp.

Mrs Hodges woke up too and rubbed her eyes. 'Goodness! Is it time?' she asked. Then she looked properly at Marnie and smiled as the first of the puppies was born. Five more followed over the next few hours.

'What a clever girl you are, Marnie. Six puppies!' Mrs Hodges said as she checked each of the newborns as they arrived.

There were four boys and two girls, and all of the pups were completely yellow except for

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one of the boys who had a patch of black on his right ear.

'There'll be no mistaking you, will there, little Patch,' Mrs Hodges said as she cleaned the black-eared puppy with a soft towel. Patch made a high mewling sound, almost as if he'd heard her. But he hadn't. Newborn puppies are all blind and deaf, but have a strong sense of smell. Patch's tiny pink nose pressed against Mrs Hodges' thumb and she put him with his mum so he could feed.

Mrs Hodges had given all the other puppies a dot on the top of the head, using different coloured marker pens to identify them. The puppy born straight after Patch was the last of the litter and smaller than the others.

'You'll soon catch up with the rest of them, Little Blue,' Mrs Hodges told her as she marked the top of the puppy's head with a blue dot.

Once she was sure that there were no more puppies to come, Mrs Hodges picked up the

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little dog with the black ear and smiled as he made the mewling sound again and tried to suck her finger. She'd heard of these sorts of markings occurring in pure-bred Labradors before – mosaic puppies they were called – but she'd never seen it for herself.

'Well you'll never win a dog show with that ear, Patch,' she told the puppy. 'I'm not even sure I'll be able to sell you. But I know somewhere that'll take you with open arms, somewhere that you'll become the most precious puppy in the world. I'll give my friend Lenny a call just as soon as I get a chance and see what he has to say.'

She put Patch back in the nesting box and he snuggled up to his mum with his brothers and sisters.

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