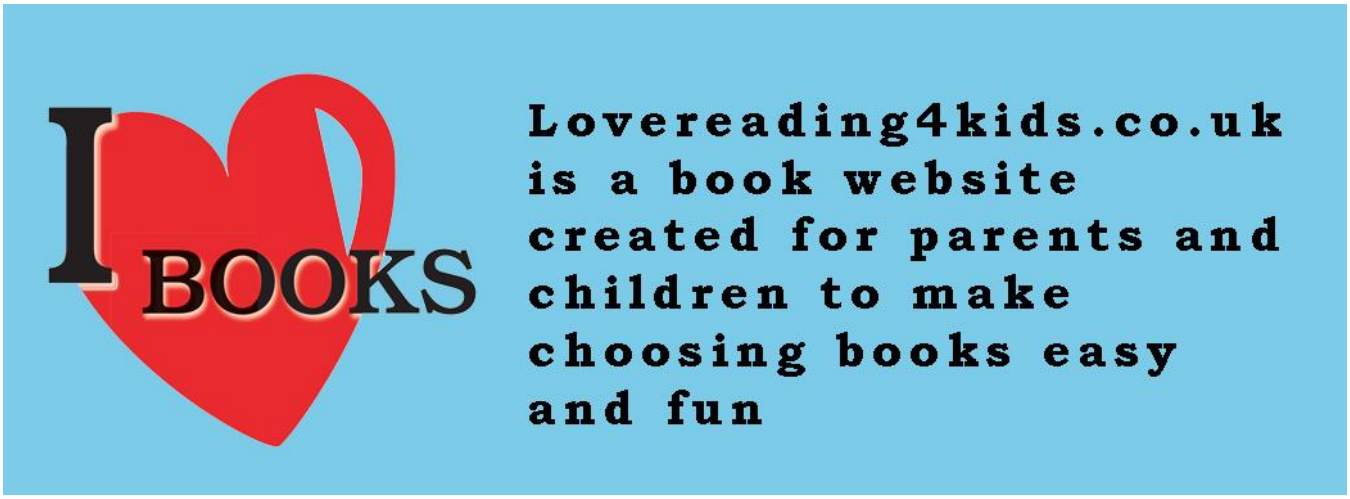


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Megan Rix

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Echo Come Home

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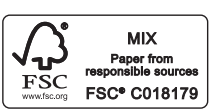
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Every dog has his day . . .

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Chapter 1

Jake watched the shaggy-coated little dog through the supermarket window as he waited for his mum and younger sister, Vicky, to fetch a trolley. The dog wagged its tail every time someone dropped a coin into the homeless man's cap. Jake smiled. It was almost like the little dog was saying thank you.

'Excuse me,' a voice behind Jake said, but Jake didn't move. 'Excuse me!' the voice repeated more loudly. Finally, the man shook his head and pushed his trolley round the boy.

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Eleven-year-old Jake didn't realize that he was standing in people's way by the door and he was oblivious to the black looks he was getting from shoppers trying to get past him with their trolleys.

He wished he had a dog. A dog that would spend all day with him and always be there for him, like the homeless man's dog was.

'Excuse me . . . you're in my way . . . Can you just move . . . for goodness' sake!'

Jake turned in surprise as a trolley bumped into the back of him. He stared at the shopper's angry face. Her lips opened and closed as she spoke.

'. . . rude boy . . .' he lip-read, before the woman bustled on into the supermarket.

Jake flinched and his face burned red as he turned back to look at the dog. Now it was sitting on the pavement next to the old homeless man. It held its paw out to Jake's mum and eight-year-old Vicky.

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‘Spare a few coins, lady?’ said the homeless man.

The little grizzle-coated terrier cross stood up and wagged his tail. His head tilted to one side as he looked up at them. Jake watched his mum drop some coins into the man’s cap.

‘Thank you kindly,’ Jake lip-read.

‘Jake!’ Vicky yelled, when she saw her brother through the glass.

‘Shh, Vicky,’ her mum said. ‘You know he can’t hear you.’

‘Why didn’t he wait for us to get the trolley? He’s always wandering off and then we have to chase after him,’ Vicky grumbled. ‘He can be a right pain sometimes.’

Once they’d gone, the homeless man took the coins out of his cap and put them in his pocket. He grinned at the little dog. ‘You bring old George luck, you do, Bones,’ he said.

The little dog’s tail wagged.

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'Afternoon, George,' a young man in a brown suit said, coming over to them. 'Lovely day.'

'Can't complain,' George said, as he tugged at the tattered red-and-white spotted bandana he liked to wear round his neck. It was very warm for March.

'How've you been keeping?'

'Not too bad, Mr C. Can't complain.'

He knew Charles Cooper from way back. The first time they'd met, Mr C, as everyone called him, had been a student running the food bank. George hadn't seen him for a while though, not since he'd dished up the roast potatoes at the Christmas lunch for the homeless they had every year at the town hall. George still thought about those potatoes. He'd even dreamt about them once.

'Heard you'd been promoted,' George said.

Mr Cooper nodded. 'I'm going to be running the Fresh Start Hostel over by the park. You

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should come and see how the building work's progressing, George. The place is going to be fit for a king once it's done.'

But George wasn't even sure he wanted to live at the hostel yet. He didn't like the thought of all those walls closing in around him. Or of the doors trapping him in at night. He wanted to be free to come and go as he pleased, especially when the weather was warm like today. Although in the winter, when the nights grew bitter and his bones ached from the cold, maybe a hostel wouldn't be such a bad place to live. It'd be warm and Mr C would make sure there was always plenty to eat. Maybe even dish up some of those roast potatoes.

'That your dog, George?' Mr Cooper asked him.

George shook his head. 'He's not anyone's dog but his own. I call him Bones because I get him one from the butcher's when I can. Bones loves his bones.'

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Mr Cooper reached over to stroke the dog, but Bones backed away.

'Doesn't like to be stroked,' George said, as the young man tried to coax the dog to him. 'At least not until he gets to know you, and sometimes not even then.'

'Why not?' Mr Cooper asked. But George didn't know the answer to that.

From a safe distance the little dog looked up at him with his big brown eyes and wagged his tail.

'Having him around reminds me of what it used to be like,' George said softly, almost to himself.

'What used to be like?'

'Having a home and someone who cares about you.'

'You could have that again once the new hostel opens in the summer. All it takes is that first step. There's going to be a festival in the park to celebrate its opening and raise funds

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to keep it running. I'm on my way to help design the posters for it now.'

George's watery, tired blue eyes looked up at Mr Cooper. He'd had enough of hearing about the hostel.

'Spare a bit of change, guv? For the dog,' he said.

Mr Cooper sighed and dropped some coins into George's cap.

Bones came back to George once Mr C had gone.

'I wish I could give you a proper home,' the old man said. 'You deserve somewhere warm and safe with lots of good food.' He didn't know if the Fresh Start Hostel would allow pets or not, but most places didn't.

The little dog whined and put out his paw.

'Well, at least we'll both have something nice to eat today and some for the others, too,' George said. He groaned as he stood up and

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headed off down the street with Bones trotting along beside him.

First they went to the butcher's to get a bone and then they visited the fish and chip shop.

'As many chips as this'll buy,' George said, as he emptied his pockets of all the coins they'd collected.

Mandy looked over at the little dog waiting for George outside the door. It reminded her of the dog she'd had when she was a little girl. As a special treat, she gave George far more chips than his money would normally have bought.

'There you go,' she said. 'I put a bit of leftover fish in there too. And this is for your dog.' She held out a saveloy.

'Thank you.'

George took the saveloy from her, scooped up the hot bags of chips and fish from the counter and headed out of the shop.

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Mandy watched through the window as the little dog wolfed down the saveloy in a few big gulps. George gave her a thumbs up and she waved back.

'Come on, Bones,' George said.

He didn't hear the swish of the skateboard's wheels as it headed along the pavement, but Bones did and he gave a bark. George looked round just in time and was able to step back before the skateboard and its rider ran into him.

'Thank you,' George said to Bones. It wasn't the first time the little dog had alerted him to something that he hadn't heard coming.

The two of them walked down to the river on the outskirts of town. Under the bridge other homeless people gathered at night for shelter and company.

The chips weren't hot by the time George and Bones arrived, but they weren't cold either, and everyone was grateful as George handed

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round the delicious salty fried potatoes and leftover fish.

'There you go, Mike . . . This is for you, Jen . . . Here you are, Harvey . . . Cole, Blue . . . Jay, Kel . . .'

The little dog lay down on the muddy ground beneath the bridge and started gnawing on his bone.

'Always get more money when he's with me,' George said, as the rest of them ate.

'Got more in one day than I usually get in a week when he spent the day with me,' Jen agreed.

'Missed him when he took himself off,' said Harvey, as he ate his chips with one hand and sketched the dog on the paper the chips had been wrapped in with the other. Bones had been gone for weeks and none of them knew where he'd disappeared to, just like they didn't know where he'd come from when he first turned up. A little dog without a collar

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and a fear of being stroked, at least until he got to know you, and sometimes not even then.

They were all glad when he'd come back home to the bridge and not just because of the increase in the money they could collect. Everyone felt happier when Bones was around, but they knew he could take off at any moment. He didn't belong to anyone.

'Never known a dog to dislike being stroked before,' Mike said.

'Something bad must have happened,' said George, and the others nodded.

As it grew darker, the people who lived under the bridge settled down for the night. For the moment it served as a windbreak and an umbrella from the rain, but the bridge was condemned and none of them knew how long it would be before it was taken down meaning they would lose the only home they had.

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As the sun came up, Bones yawned, blinked and stretched out his legs all the way to the ends of his paws. He rolled over on to his back with his legs in the air, then rolled on to his other side, stood up and gave himself a shake.

The earth beneath the condemned bridge was hard, cold and often damp. But he'd nestled close to George and shared his body warmth. With the rough blanket, cardboard-box mattress and a full belly, they'd both been able to sleep pretty well.

'Don't go, Bones,' George said sleepily. But Bones was already heading off.

The scaffolding supporting the crumbling bridge stopped people from using it as a shortcut into town, but it was no obstacle for the little dog. His claws made tapping noises as he nimbly crossed the steel structure before jumping on to the soft, overgrown grass on the other side.

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His short tail was held confidently high as he trotted along beside the river, past the quacking ducks and gliding swans.

'Morning, dog,' one of the night fishermen called to him, as he tossed Bones a crust from the remains of his ham sandwich. It was gulped down in a second and Bones wagged his tail as he looked cheekily over at the bag the sandwich had come from and then back at the man.

'That's all there is left,' the night fisherman told the dog, as he packed up his fishing tackle. 'Time I was heading home.' But when he looked round the little dog had already gone.

Bones didn't follow the route into the town centre that everyone else took. His was a lot quicker. Under the broken gate of number 23, into the back garden of number 9 with the sheets hanging on the line, across the churchyard, avoiding the gardener who'd once thrown a bit of broken brick at him, and

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through the car park, keeping a careful lookout for cars.

A cat jumped up on to a wall as he ran into the park. But Bones never chased cats, or squirrels, like a pet dog might do.

He crossed the park and stopped at the pelican crossing of a busy main road and sat down. He didn't have long to wait.

'Hello there,' a woman, heading off to work, said. She reached out a hand to stroke him, but he took a few steps back so she couldn't reach him.

The woman pressed the crossing button and as soon as the beeps started Bones ran across the road. Ahead of him lay the town centre.

The early-morning roadsweeper stopped pushing his handcart.

'Here you go, Muttley,' he said, throwing a half-eaten burger he'd just picked up to the dog.

Bones swallowed it down and then looked up at the roadsweeper and gave a wag of his

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tail. The man pushed his cart further up the street as Bones trotted on too.

The hamburger was good, but best of all was the street where the takeaway food restaurants were. Bones's pace quickened as he got closer. Most days there was a little food lying on the ground at whatever time he got there. But on one day every week, one special day, the restaurants put out all their bins filled with tempting delicacies for the people in big trucks to take away. And today was that day.

'Here, dog . . .' Boris from Freddy's Fried Chicken said, throwing Bones some leftovers.

Boris didn't know what the dog's real name was or even if he had one, but he felt sorry for the stray and had started to leave a small plastic tub of fresh water out for him. He'd tried to stroke the dog, but it wouldn't let him get close enough to do so. Boris missed his own dog who was still living at his parents' home while Boris studied at university.

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Bones gulped down the chicken before heading past The Golden Elephant, Pizza Perfect and The Curry Stop.

As soon as he'd gone, Boris pressed the dog warden's number into his mobile phone.

'That little dog's here again,' he said. 'It's definitely a stray.'

'I'm in the van and on my way,' the dog warden told him.

She'd had more than one phone call reporting this particular stray in the last few weeks. But so far she hadn't been able to catch him. The little dog was just too quick and as soon as he heard her coming he was off. She was determined that he wasn't going to escape again today.

Bones stopped at The Blue Lotus on the corner. As usual, seventeen-year-old Li had a paper carton of leftover fried noodles waiting for him. The little dog wagged his tail as Li put the carton down on the ground. But he waited

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until Li stepped back before putting his head into the carton and starting to eat.

'You are one noodle-loving dog,' Li said as he watched him slurping down the noodles.

Li pulled his phone from his pocket and took a photo of Bones eating.

'I'm going to put this on the internet,' he said, grinning at the photo he'd taken. The little dog had noodles hanging from his mouth and a look of pure pleasure in his eyes.

'It's not like he's being a nuisance or anything, but that dog shouldn't be living on the streets,' Jay from Pizza Perfect told the dog warden when she arrived. He pointed towards The Blue Lotus.

'What if he got run over?' the chef from The Golden Elephant said, as he watched the dog warden take the dog-catching net from the back of her van. 'And a dog shouldn't live on

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takeaway food, should it? It can't be good for him.'

The dog warden nodded: that little dog wasn't going to get away today. Her mouth was set firm as she grasped the net and crept down the street.

Bones's head was down as he licked up the very last bite of the noodles. He didn't see the dog warden advancing silently down the street towards him, but he did hear her when her foot stepped on an empty box. He looked round and saw the dog-catching net raised high to swoop down on him. The net hit the ground empty as Bones scampered off down the street.

'Quick, stop him!' the dog warden shouted at Li.

But it was too late. The little dog was racing past The Curry Stop, Perfect Pizza and The Golden Elephant.

The dog warden might never have caught him had Boris not got in the way.

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‘Stop that dog!’ the dog warden yelled.

Boris tried to grab him and, as the little dog dodged away from his hands, the dog-catching net landed on top of him.

‘Gotcha!’

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