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Opening extract from

# The Great Fire Dogs

Written by

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Published by

**Penguin Books Ltd**

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First published 2016
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Set in 13/20 pt Baskerville MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–36526–8




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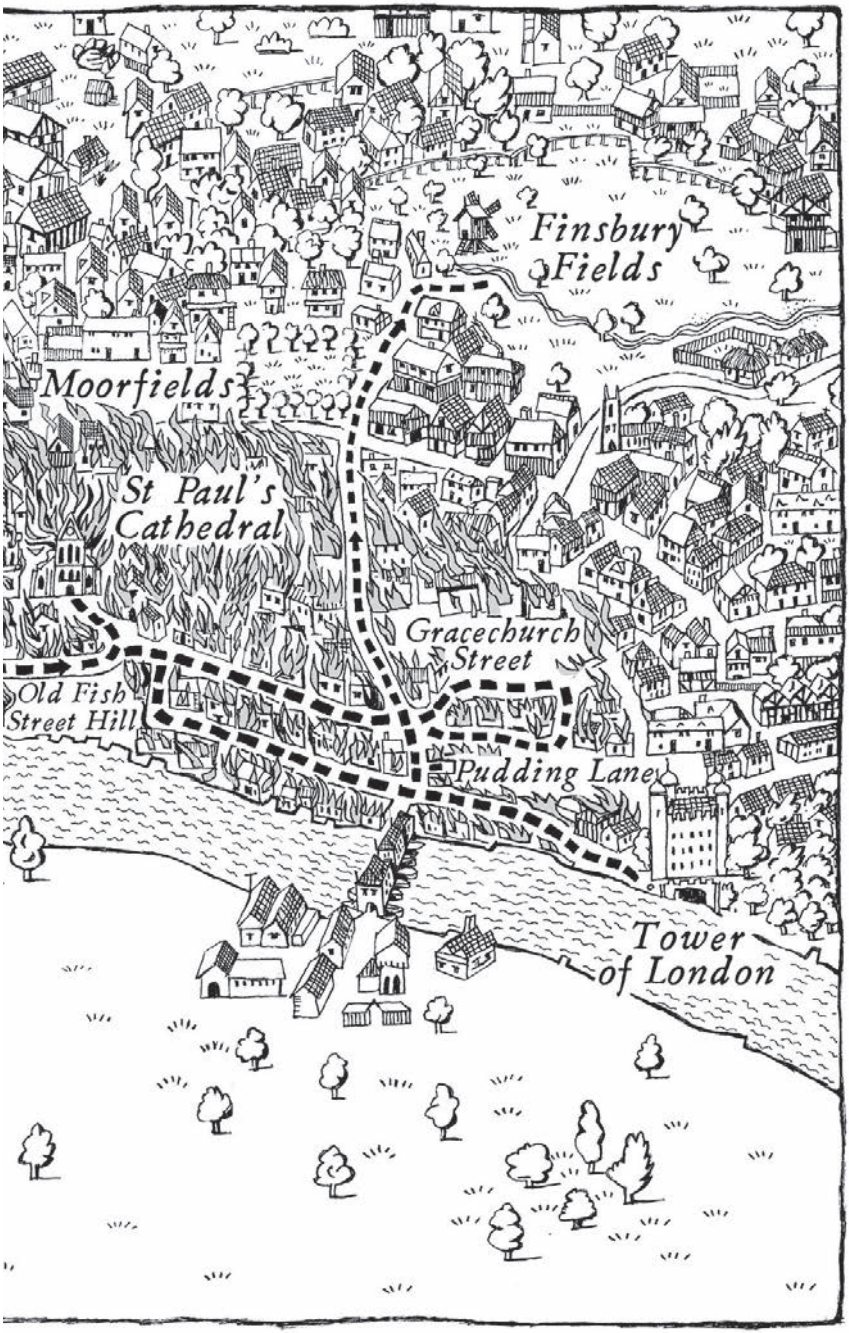
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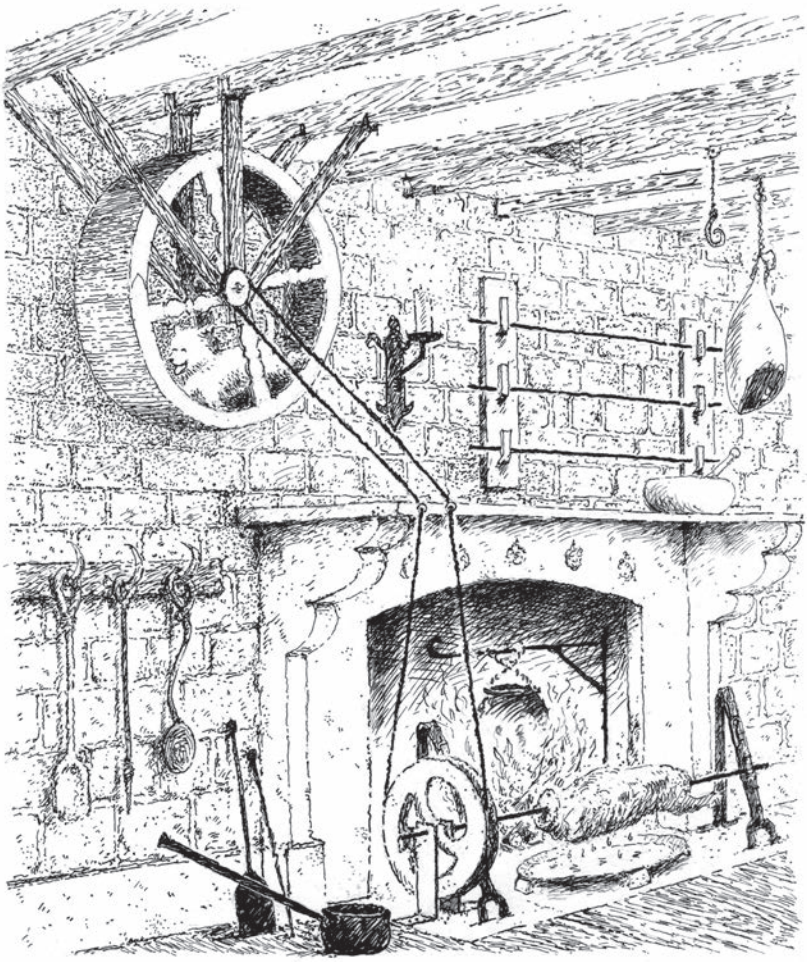

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# Chapter 1

*February 1666*

On the snow-covered south side of the River Thames, a red-faced man wearing a patched, woollen green coat and a grubby, rust-coloured waistcoat stood next to a wicker basket. Squashed inside the basket were six dock-tailed Wicklow terrier puppies.

'Wheelers – wheeler pups for sale!' the man shouted into the icy-cold air. He blew on his fingers to try and warm them up. Next to him, a man was roasting chestnuts on a fire but the



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dog seller couldn't afford to buy any until he'd sold a puppy. He pulled the lid off the wicker basket beside him, reached into it and grabbed the first puppy he touched by the scruff of its neck. 'These little dogs were born to work in the kitchen,' he called out to the passing people as the cream-coated puppy tried to wriggle free. 'Born to turn the cooking wheel.'

In the wicker basket, one of the puppies, the one who had been getting squashed by the first puppy's bottom, popped his head out to look at the snowy winter scene. The snow had come down hard overnight and London had woken covered in a thick white coat. There were stalls positioned all along the white banks of the river, many of them selling food. Hot pies and roast meat as well as chestnuts and gingerbread. The puppy sniffed at the delicious smells in the air and gave a whine.

'My turnspit dog got out during the plague last year and that was the last I saw of him,' a



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woman with an apron over her long brown skirt told the puppy seller. 'Caught by one of those awful dog catchers, no doubt.'

The puppy seller nodded. There used to be lots of dogs and cats in London's streets, most of them strays, but not any more. They were thought to carry the plague and people had been paid good money to catch and kill them.

The king's official order had been that: '*No Swine, Dogs, Cats or tame Pigeons be permitted to pass up and down in Streets, or from house to house, in places Infected.*' But the lord mayor of London had taken things a step further and ordered all stray cats and dogs to be put down, just like the last time there'd been a plague and the time before that too.

'I heard forty thousand dogs and two hundred thousand cats lost their lives,' the dog seller told the woman.

While they were talking, the puppy that had been looking out of the top of the basket



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scrambled free and headed off on his short puppy legs towards the frozen water's edge.

On the other side of the river, across the long bridge full of houses and shops, twelve-year-old George, palace kitchen apprentice, looked over at the skaters on the wide expanse of frozen water. Their sharp, iron-bladed skates made swishing sounds as they cut through the ice like butter. He watched in admiration as they weaved in and out of the arches under London Bridge. The bridge acted like a weir, turning the water sluggish so it was more likely to freeze. In places the ice was more than five feet thick and perfect for skating. George wished he could skate.

Some winters, when the vast Thames froze even harder than this, they held Frost Fairs on the river. Stalls were set up on the ice and people walked about on the river as if it were a street, but it wasn't frozen enough for that yet.



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The small cream-coated puppy headed further out on to the ice. It was very cold beneath his tender paws and he whimpered every now and again but he didn't turn back.

'How old is it?' the woman asked, nodding at the puppy the dog seller was holding.

'Ten weeks,' the man told her.

The woman looked doubtful. 'Bit small for ten weeks old, isn't it?'

'But strong as an ox,' the man said quickly. He didn't want to lose his first potential customer of the day. 'There's more in the basket if you don't want this one. Just take a look.'

He glanced to the side of him and saw that the rest of the puppies had tipped the basket over and were making a speedy escape.

'Quick! Stop them!' the dog seller cried.

He gave the puppy he was holding to the woman wearing the apron as he ran after the escaping pups. People laughed and bumped into each other as they tried to help him scoop



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up the four little puppies and return them to the basket.

'Oh, look at that one,' a small girl said as a puppy ran past her. She was about to head over to him when her mother grabbed her arm.

'Don't touch it – dogs carry the plague!'

'But it's a puppy . . .' the girl said.

'The plague's over,' a man told the girl's mother. 'It must be if the king's come home.'

The bells had tolled throughout the city on the first of February for the return of the king.

'The streets are crowded with people returning to London now that he's back,' said another man.

But the woman still wouldn't let her daughter help catch the pups. She'd known too many people die from the plague to risk it. More than a hundred thousand people dead this time she'd been told and she wasn't taking any chances.



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'Come on,' she said as she took her daughter by the hand and dragged her away from the riverbank.

'There should be five of them!' the puppy seller said, looking about him frantically. 'I brought six here with me today.'

But only four could be found and put back in the basket.

The woman holding the first puppy decided to buy him and handed over a few coins to the dog seller.

'You won't be disappointed,' the man told her.

The little puppy tried to wriggle away from the woman but she had it in a firm hold.

'None of that now,' she told it as they headed back across London's only bridge to the north side of the river.

From the far-off snowy north riverbank George saw something moving about in the middle of the icy river but when he looked again it wasn't



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there. He shielded his eyes against the bright winter sun and squinted. No, there it was again. It looked like some sort of small animal . . . but it couldn't be, could it? Maybe it was a cat. But what would a cat be doing out there? Its coat was too light for a fox.

As the puppy came closer across the ice George realized what it was and gasped. The pup looked a lot like a turnspit – one of the kitchen dogs that George looked after at the palace.

The sound of skates swishing across the ice now filled George with dread.

The skaters, all men and boys, were heading towards the puppy, faster and faster with their sharp iron-bladed skates. The puppy didn't even seem to be aware of the danger he was in.

'Look out!' George shouted, running on to the slippery ice and waving his arms about.

The puppy looked up at him and wagged his tail stub as he tried to run towards George, putting himself in a direct line with the skaters.



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At the very last moment George darted forward, skidding across the ice, ripping his waistcoat and grazing his leg, but managing to scoop the puppy up as the skating group split into two around them.

'It's all right. I've got you, you're safe now,' he said to the soft furry bundle in his arms. The little puppy's heart was beating very fast but he wasn't frightened, because he had found George. His dark brown eyes looked at George and then he licked his new friend's face as the boy laughed.

'Could've been killed!' one of the skaters said angrily as they glided onwards.

'Shouldn't be out on the ice.'

'Where did you come from?' George asked the puppy when the skaters had gone. He looked around him but no one seemed to be searching for a puppy along the icy riverbank.

George didn't get much time off from his job at the palace and he'd been on his way to see



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his gran. His mum and dad had died of smallpox when George was five and Gran was the only family he had left. She used to work in the palace kitchen too. Humphrey the cook had given George some chicken for Gran to put in her soup, or pottage as she called it, as well as a bottle of the nasty plague-prevention water he insisted they all drank even though the plague was supposed to be over.

The old lady wouldn't want to be kept waiting.

'Looks like you're coming with me,' George told the puppy, and it licked George's face some more as they came off the frozen river and headed down the narrow cobblestoned streets to his gran's house.

Although it wasn't far it took longer than usual because there were so many people coming back to the city now that the plague had gone. So many carts and wagons were trying to get down the narrow streets that they were causing traffic jams and gridlock.



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The blades of grass that had grown up around the cobblestones during the plague year, when the streets had been empty, didn't stand a chance.

George carried the puppy up Fish Street Hill where the oyster sellers were walking up and down with their baskets of shellfish.

'Cockles and mussels – who will buy?' a woman cried. 'Fresh from the sea.'

'Get your trout here,' a man called as George walked past.

The puppy sniffed at the fishy smells but he wasn't given any to try. He wriggled in the boy's arms until George set him down on the ground.

As he followed George he did his best to avoid the coarse leather boots and high-heeled, buckle-toed shoes that headed towards him, as well as the ornamental walking sticks that the men waved about as they strode forward. But more than once he gave a yelp as he was almost stepped on.



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The rakers were doing their best to sweep the mess from the now slush-filled streets so people could get past. Rats followed wherever the rakers went and gorged on the rubbish piles waiting to be carted out of the city or on to the dungboats on the river.

Some people sniffed nosegays to ward off the smell. The flowers were also supposed to stop the plague's bad air from being breathed in. Wearing a dead toad round your neck was supposed to help too.

The puppy was about to sniff at a rat but George quickly scooped him up.

'We don't want you getting fleas,' he told him. 'Or being bitten. Those rats can give a nasty bite.'

They stepped to the side as a horse clipped past with a carriage behind it.

'Look out below!' a woman shouted from above as she emptied a bowl of slops out of an upstairs window.



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Once Fish Street Hill had been full of cats and dogs looking for tasty morsels but not since the plague.

George didn't know how the cat that lived on his gran's roof had managed to survive without getting caught during the last year. But somehow it had.

'Raggedy Cat' as George's gran called it, on account of its ragged tail, arched its back and hissed from its spot on the roof as they turned into Black Raven Alley.

The puppy heard the hiss and looked up at the cat, his stub of a tail wagging as much as it could with George still holding him. The ragged-tailed tortoiseshell cat only hissed back.

George put the pup on the ground and he barked at the cat, then sat down in surprise as if he couldn't quite believe that such a deep, loud noise had come from him.



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'Well, that was a woof and a half for a little pup,' chuckled George's gran, coming out of her front door. 'Woke me up, it did.'

The puppy licked Gran's gnarled, outstretched fingers with his little pink tongue.

'I didn't know you were getting a puppy, George,' she said.

'I wasn't until today!' George grinned.

'Is he one of the kitchen dogs?' Gran asked him.

'Not yet,' said George, 'but he'll make a perfect turnspit dog once he's older.'

'What's his name?' Gran wanted to know.

The puppy's loud bark and Gran's comment had shown George exactly what he should be called. 'I'm going to call him Woofer,' he said, running his fingers down the puppy's soft fur.

The little pup barked again and then once more, before sneezing with excitement, jumping



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up and moving closer to George for a reassuring cuddle.

'He is a dear little puppy,' Gran smiled. 'And I'm looking forward to hearing all about him.' She pushed open the front door.

As Woofer and George followed her, the raggedy cat hissed again.

'Has the cat let you stroke it yet?' George asked his gran.

'No,' she told him. 'Came to the door once to swallow a bit of fish, though.'

Inside Gran's rented room it was always dark because the roofs of the houses in Black Raven Alley almost touched each other and blocked out the light but George's gran didn't mind. She knew where everything was and could've found her way round with her eyes closed.

'Humphrey the cook gave me this to give to you,' George said, handing over the bottle of plague water.



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Gran pulled out the cork and sniffed at it.

'What's in it?' she asked him and George did his best to remember as he ticked off the ingredients on his fingers.

'Rosemary, borage, angelica, celandine, dragonwort, feverfew, wormwood, pennyroyal, mugwort, sage and sorrel.'

'That's a lot of ingredients,' his gran said. 'But none of them should do any harm and may do some good, although I have my doubts that any of the plague waters really work.'

'Humphrey makes us drink some every day,' George said. 'Even though the plague's supposed to be over now.'

'At least he isn't making you drink anything too bad-tasting or hard to find. Do you know I heard of one plague water that has dried unicorn horn in it?'

George's mouth fell open. Where on earth was anyone going to find unicorn horn?

'I know,' Gran said. 'Ridiculous!'



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Then George gave her the chicken wrapped in cheesecloth.

Gran grinned her toothless grin as she took it from him and headed over to the fire and the pottage that was gently simmering on it.

She stirred the chicken into the soup and while they waited for it to heat through George told her all about how he and Woofer had met.

'Shouldn't have gone out on the ice,' his gran scolded him. 'Too dangerous.'

'My waistcoat got torn,' George told her and showed her the tear.

Servants' clothes were provided by the palace. Different colours and types for different roles and duties. Kitchen apprentices like George had a black waistcoat, brown britches and a cream shirt.

'I'll soon have that fixed,' Gran said. 'You'll have to thread the needle for me, mind. My eyes aren't what they used to be.'



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George threaded the needle and Gran set to work while Woofer sniffed at the delicious smell coming from the pot of soup on the fire.

It didn't take long for Gran to finish mending the waistcoat.

'Good as new,' she said as she handed it back to George.

'Thanks, Gran.'

'Time for some soup,' the old lady said, and she groaned as she stood up and headed to the fire.

Woofer watched as Gran ladled out a bowl of the vegetable, chicken and oat soup mixture for George and then one for herself. She put a smaller bowl of soup to cool on the side.

'Good soup, Gran,' George said as he drank his.

'Can't beat a bowl of pottage, whether it's fine weather or foul outside,' Gran agreed as she slurped hers.

Woofer whined.



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'Not yet,' George told him. 'We don't want you burning your mouth.'

Once they'd eaten theirs Gran gave Woofer his bowl. George and Gran both watched, smiling, as the puppy lapped it up.

'He's very hungry,' George said.

'Starving,' she agreed.

Woofer licked the bowl clean, then sat down and gave a small whine – but no more soup came.

It was time for George to be heading back to the palace.

Gran gave him a hug.

'Thank Humphrey for me!' she called after George as she waved him and Woofer off.

The raggedy cat hissed again as they headed out of Black Raven Alley on to Fish Street Hill and along Thames Street. Woofer's sensitive nose sniffed the air. It had changed from smelling of fish to the aroma of meat now.

'This way, Woofer,' George said, and the puppy trotted after him as they turned into a



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street with a double row of tumbledown Tudor buildings that was too narrow for a carriage to get down. Several of the houses had a red cross painted on the door and the words LORD HAVE MERCY UPON US written on them. These were the houses where plague victims had been shut in during the last year.

'Hello there!' a voice shouted, and when George and the puppy looked up they saw thirteen-year-old Annie hanging out of an upstairs window, doing her best to clean the baker's sign. 'Be down in a minute.'

George gave Woofer a stroke while they waited.

'Hannah wanted her father's sign nice and clean, especially the bit where it says he's the king's baker,' Annie told George when she came down. Hannah was twenty-three and a baker too. She was very proud of her father.

'The sign looks good,' George said.



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'Wouldn't want to go out there again, though!' Annie laughed as they went into the bakery where she worked. 'Teagh, Mr Farriner's servant, will have to do it instead.' She bent down to stroke the puppy who was looking up at her with his big brown eyes. 'Who's this little chap?'

'His name's Woofer,' George grinned and Woofer wagged his docked tail stub.

Farriner's Bakery made the hard biscuits that fed the king's navy when the sailors were at sea. It was a very important job because England was at war with the Dutch and the sailors defending the country needed feeding. Mr Farriner was always complaining to Annie that he wasn't paid quickly enough and that meant sometimes Annie didn't get paid at all. Not that she got paid much because she was only an assistant.

Annie loved baking so much she said she didn't care about getting paid. But George knew she must do really. At least she got to



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sleep at the baker's and was given her food there too.

Woofer sneezed at the smell of ginger coming from the shop.

'What've you been making?' George asked.

Annie's eyes lit up. 'Something new!' she told him.

'Gingerbread?' George said as he smelt the distinctive spicy aroma.

But Annie shook her head. 'Not exactly. Proper gingerbread is expensive to make and doesn't even always have ginger in it. But ginger dust is cheap and I've added a little to the sailors' hard tack. Ginger's supposed to stop you from getting seasick.'

Woofer sniffed at the biscuits cooling on the table and Annie gave two of the smaller broken pieces to George. There were lots of broken bite-sized pieces on the metal tray.

'I don't know why they cracked,' Annie said sadly.



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Mr Farriner and Hannah wouldn't be pleased when they got back from the flour mill. She wasn't even supposed to be cooking. She'd been told to clean the sign and the clay oven but instead she'd been baking ginger biscuits most of the day until they were rock-hard because they might have to last for weeks or even months at sea without going stale. The broken biscuit was too solid for George but Woofer crunched his bit up and then he ate George's piece too.

'Be good for his little puppy teeth,' Annie said as they watched him gnawing away.

'I bet Teeth and Claws and Scraps would like them too,' George said.

Annie smiled as she scooped up a double handful of broken pieces for the rest of the turnspit dogs at the palace. 'Here, take a few more with you, then. I made lots.'

She hoped Mr Farriner wasn't going to be too angry with her for using the flour without asking him.



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'Thanks,' said George as he put the biscuits in his pocket.

Woofer looked up at him meaningfully but George shook his head.

'You can't *still* be hungry,' he told the little dog.

Woofer gave a puppy yap to say that he was still very hungry – but George could see his little tummy was round and full.

'You can have some more later,' he said, and they headed onwards down the snowy cobblestoned streets to the river.

Woofer sniffed the air again. There were so many strange and interesting smells: farm animals that had passed by on the way to market, as well as other cats and dogs and hundreds and thousands of rats. There was also the smell of rotting food – and all of it mingled with the sour stink from the river, which was used as a sewer and a rubbish tip. The icy coldness had made the stench a little



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less strong today but it never completely went away. A screeching gull swooped overhead and Woofer raced to catch up with George, who was a few steps ahead.

Forty minutes later they arrived at the palace.

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# Chapter 2

The little white and tan spaniel puppy lay on the Persian rug in the king's apartment, panting. She'd been sick on the boat coming over from France and even more sick in the coach on the way to the palace.

'She wouldn't eat or drink on the trip, Your Majesty, and when I forced her to do so . . .'

'Yes?'

'It came straight back up.'

King Charles the Second shook his head. He'd had dogs as pets his whole life and he was



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