The DOG who saved the WORLD



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HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2019
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is:
www.harpercollins.co.uk
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ISBN 978–0–00–825697–5

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

Printed and bound in England by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Whitley Bay, Not Many Years From Now

I've got this framed poster on my bedroom wall that Dad got me for my birthday. I see it every morning and every night, so I know it off by heart.

THE WISDOM OF THE DOGS

Don't trust anyone who doesn't like dogs.

If what you want is buried, dig and dig until you find it.

Don't bite if a growl is enough.

Like people in spite of their faults.

Start each day with a wagging tail.

Whatever your size, be brave.

Whatever your age, learn new tricks.

If someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit near and nuzzle them, gently.

It's all true. Every single word. As I discovered last summer, when the world nearly ended.

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, allow me to introduce (drum roll . . .):

Mr Mash: The Dog Who Saved the World!

I love him more than anything. I know that sounds harsh on Dad and Clem, but I think they'll understand, especially after what happened over that summer.

We don't know exactly how old he is, how he became a stray, or even what sort of dog he might be. He's got shaggy fur – grey, brown and white – and ears that flop over at the ends. He's got a cute, inquisitive face like a schnauzer, big soft eyes and a strong, *very* waggy tail like a Labrador.

In other words, he's a mishmash. When we got him from the St Woof's shelter, the vicar said I could name him, and so I said 'Mishmash', which sounded like 'Miss Mash', but, because he's a boy dog, he became Mister Mash.

Mr Mash: my very best, very stupid friend. His tongue is far too big for his mouth, so it often just lolls out,

making him look even dafter. He's completely unable to tell if something is food or not, so he just eats it anyway. This, in turn, means he has what the vicar calls 'a wind problem'.

You can say that again. 'Silent and violent,' Dad says.

'Disgusting,' says Jessica, but she never liked him much anyway.

Without Mr Mash, the world might have ended.

Really.

Chapter One

It's six o'clock on a warm summer's evening and Ramzy Rahman and I are staring at the back entrance of the Spanish City entertainment centre, not daring to knock. Mr Mash has just scoffed a Magnum that someone dropped on the pavement and is licking his chops, ready for another. He even ate the wooden stick.

There's a massive double-height steel door in the white wall – one of those doors that's so big that there's a normal-sized door cut into it. In the middle of the normal door – looking totally out of place – is a knocker like you'd see on the door of a haunted mansion. The metal is green, and in the shape of a snarling wolf's head.

Mr Mash looks up at the wolf's head and curls his lip, though he doesn't actually growl.

Around the corner, on the seafront, men in shorts push babies in buggies; cars with dark windows hum along the coast road; and people pedal FreeBikes in the cycle lane. Ramzy nudges me to point out Saskia Hennessey's older sister, in just a bikini, flip-flops and goosebumps, shimmying towards the beach with some

friends. I keep my head down: I don't want to be recognised.

Above us, the sky is the intense blue of late afternoon and it's so hot that even the seagulls have retreated to the shade. Ramzy is doing his familiar shuffle-dance of excitement, and I feel I should calm him down.

'Ramzy,' I say, patiently. 'We're just visiting an old lady. She's probably lonely and wants to give us tea and scones, or something. Scroll through photos of her grandchildren. And we'll be polite and then we'll be off the hook. That's *not* an adventure, unless you're very odd.'

Ramzy gives me a look that says, *But I* am *very odd!*

Eventually, I lift up the wolf's head, which hinges at the jaws, and bring it down with a single sharp rap that echoes much louder than I expected, making Ramzy jump.

His eyes are shining with excitement and he whispers to me, 'Tea, scones, wolves and *adventure*!'

Dr Pretorius must have been waiting because no sooner have I knocked than we hear several bolts sliding back on the other side of the door, and it opens with a very satisfying creak. (I see Ramzy grin: he would have been disappointed if the door had *not* creaked.)

Now, to complete his delight, there *should* have been a clap of thunder, and a flash of lightning revealing Dr Pretorius in a long black cape, saying, 'Greetings, mortals,' or something.

Instead, it's still bright and sunny, not even slightly stormy, and Dr Pretorius – as long and as thin as a cat's tail – is wearing the same woollen beach robe as when we met her this morning.

She just says, 'Hi,' in her throaty American accent. Just that: 'Hi.'

Then she turns and walks back into what looks like a large dark storage area. With her bushy white hair on top of her thin dark body, she reminds me of a magic wand.

She has gone several steps before she stops and turns to Ramzy and me.

'Well? Whatcha waitin' for? The last train to Clarksville? Come on in. Bring the mutt if you have to.'

On the other side of the cluttered storage area is a narrow flight of metal stairs leading up to a platform with a handrail. She doesn't wait to see if we are following and so I peer round the high, dusty space. It's piled with boxes, bricks, bags of cement, ladders, planks, a small cement mixer, a leather sofa propped up on its end and a builder's skip filled with rubble. There's other stuff too: a horse's saddle, a car seat, bar stools, an exercise bike, a huge machine for making espresso, and something the size of an old-fashioned cartwheel on its side, half covered by a dusty blue tarpaulin.

Ramzy pokes me in the back and points to it. '*Psst*. Check out the copter-drone!'

I have heard of copter-drones, obviously, and I've seen

people demonstrating them on YouTube and stuff, but I've never seen one for real. I'm thinking that Clem would be dead jealous that I've seen one before he has. Then I remember that I'm not supposed to tell anyone that I'm here.

Dr Pretorius is saying: '. . . my green wolf knocker – d'you like it? It's called verdigris. From the old French, green of Greece. It's copper carbonate caused by the brass tarnishing in the salty air. Same as the Statue of Liberty. But you knew that, didn't you?'

We say nothing, following her up the stairs, both of us casting curious glances back at the storage area and what might – or more probably might not – have been a copter-drone.

She stops at the top and turns. '*Didn't you?*'

'Oh aye. Definitely,' says Ramzy, nodding enthusiastically.

'Liar!' she snarls and points her long brown chin at him. I notice that her white halo of Afro hair quivers when she talks, then goes still when she stops. 'What's the chemical formula for copper carbonate?'

Ramzy's poor face! His mouth droops. Ramzy is clever but not *that* clever. 'Erm . . . erm . . .'

Dr Pretorius turns again and marches along the metal landing, her beach robe billowing behind her. 'It's $CuCO_3$,' she calls over her shoulder. 'What do they teach you at that school of yours, huh? Is it still self-esteem and climate change? Ha! Come on, keep up!'

We trot after her, Mr Mash's claws click-clacking on the metal walkway.

She halts by a pair of double doors in the centre of a long, curved wall and faces us. She takes a deep breath and then starts a coughing fit that goes on for ages. At one point, she is almost bent double as she hacks and coughs. It kind of spoils the dramatic moment, but then, as suddenly as she started, she stops and straightens up. Her face softens a little. 'Ah! Don't look so scared, fella. I'm just gettin' old is all. What's your name?'

'R-Ramzy. Ramzy Rahman. Ma'am.'

The side of her mouth goes up and she chuckles. '*Ma'am?* Ha! Well, you got better manners than I have, buddy. Invitin' you into my place without even a proper introduction. So we've got Ramzy Rahman and . . .?'

'Georgina Santos. Georgie for short.' I don't do the *ma'am* bit. I can't carry it off like Ramzy.

'OK, Georgie-for-short and Ramzy-ma'am. That was my little test, see? But from now on no more lies, huh? From here on in, I'm trusting you. Did you tell anyone you were here?'

Ramzy and I shake our heads, and both say, 'No.'

'*Noooo*,' she drawls and takes off her thick glasses, bending down to peer at us with her strange pale eyes. 'So is it a deal?'

We both nod, although I'm not at all sure what the deal is exactly.

'Deal,' we say together.

Seemingly satisfied, she turns round and flings open both doors, growling, 'Well, ain't that dandy? We've got ourselves a deal! Welcome, my little chickadees, to the future! Ha ha ha *haaa*!' Her laugh is like an arpeggio, each bark higher than the one before, ending on a loud screech.

Ramzy catches my eye and smirks. If Dr Pretorius is pretending to be a crazy person then she's overdoing it. Only . . . I think it's real.

Mr Mash gives a little whine. He doesn't want to go through the doors, and I know exactly how he feels.

Chapter Two

I've tried really hard to work out where the whole thing started. By 'the whole thing', I mean Dr Pretorius's 'FutureDome' stuff, the campervan explosion, the Dog Plague, the million-pound jackpot . . . everything. And I think it started with Mr Mash:

Don't trust anyone who doesn't like dogs.

That's number one on my Wisdom of the Dogs poster. I know it sounds a bit final so I've come up with some exceptions:

1. People (Ramzy's Aunty Nush, for example) who have grown up in countries and cultures where dogs are not pets. So it's not *really* their fault.
2. Postmen and delivery people who have been attacked by dogs, though it's really the owner's fault for not training the dog properly.
3. People who are allergic. I have to say that because of Jessica. More on *her* coming up soon.

But, exceptions aside, I think it's a pretty good rule. Dogs just want to be with us. Did you know that dogs have lived alongside humans for pretty much as long as we've been on earth? That's why we have the expression 'man's best friend'. (And woman's, and children's as well, obviously.)

I was born wanting a dog. That's what Dad says, anyway. He says my first words were, 'Can we get a dog?' I think he's joking but I like to pretend it's true.

Next to the poster on my bedroom wall I've got a collection of pictures of famous people with their dogs. My favourites are:

- Robby Els and his poodle.
- G-Topp and his (very cute) chihuahua.
- The American president and her Great Dane.
- Our king with his Jack Russell (I met the king once, when I was a baby, before he was the king. He didn't have his dog with him, though.)
- The old queen with her corgis.

Anyway, eventually we got a dog. It was March last year, not long after Dad's girlfriend, Jessica, moved in. (Coincidence? I don't think so.)

I knew *something* was up. Dad had taken a couple of calls from his friend Maurice, who used to be a vicar and now runs St Woof's Dog Shelter on Eastbourne Gardens.

Nothing odd about that, but when he answered he would say, 'Ah, Maurice! Hold on,' and then leave the room, and once when he came back in he was smirking so much his face was nearly bursting. Of course, I didn't even dare to hope.

I asked Clem, but he'd already started his retreat to his bedroom, otherwise known as the Teen Cave (a retreat that is now more or less complete). He shrugged and – to be fair – getting a dog was always my thing, not my brother's. If it doesn't have a smelly petrol engine, Clem's not all that bothered.

Not daring to hope is really, really hard when you're hoping like mad. I'd look at the calendar on my wall – *12 Months of Paw-some Puppies!* – and wonder if we'd get one, ranking my preferences in a list that I kept in my bedside drawer.

1. Golden retriever (*excellent with children*).
2. Cockapoo.
3. Chocolate Labrador.
4. Great Dane (*I know, they're massive. 'You may as well buy a horse,' says Dad*).
5. Border collie (*v. smart, need lots of training*).

I even tried to work out what was going on in Dad's head. It was like, *Jessica's moving in, Clem's growing up, Georgie's not happy about any of that, so let's get her a dog.*

Which suited me fine. And then . . . I came back from school one Friday, walked into the kitchen and Dad was there. He said, 'Close your eyes!' but I had already heard a dog whining behind the door.

I have never, ever been happier than when Dad opened the door to the living room, and I first saw this bundle of fur, wagging his tail so much that his entire backside was in motion. I sank to my knees and, when he licked me, I fell instantly, totally in love.

Dad had got him from St Woof's, and we didn't know his age. The vicar (who knows about this sort of thing) estimated him to be about five years old. Nor did he fit anywhere on my list of favourite dog breeds.

So I made a new list, where 'mongrels' was at the top.

It lasted a month. Twenty-seven days, actually. Twenty-seven days of pure happiness, and then it was over. Trashed by Jessica, who I try *so hard* to like – without success.

Chapter Three

It wasn't Mr Mash's 'wind problem' that was the issue.

I for one would have put up with that. Although sometimes the smell could make your eyes water, it was never for long. No: it was Jessica, one hundred per cent.

It started with a cough, then wheezing, then a rash on her hands. Jessica, it turned out, was completely allergic.

'Didn't you *know*?' I wailed, and she shook her head. Believe it or not, she had simply never been in close enough contact with dogs for long enough to discover that she was hypersensitive to their fur, or their saliva, or something. Or maybe it developed when she was an adult. I don't think she was making it up: she's not that bad.

OK, I *did* – occasionally – think that. But after Jessica had an asthma attack that left her exhausted, and her hair all sweaty, we knew that Mr Mash would have to go back.

It's probably unusual to have the best day and the worst day of your life within a month, especially since I was still only ten at the time.

I cried for a week, and Jessica kept saying she was

sorry and trying to hug me with her bony arms, but I was furious. I still am, sometimes.

Mr Mash went back to St Woof's. And the only good thing is that he is still there. The vicar says I can see him whenever I like.

I became a St Woof's volunteer. I'm way too young officially, but Dad says he persuaded the vicar to 'bend the rules'.

Actually, it wasn't the *only* good thing. The other good thing was that there were loads of dogs at St Woof's, and I liked them all.

But I loved Mr Mash the best, and it was because of him that – fifteen months later – Ramzy and I ended up meeting Dr Pretorius.