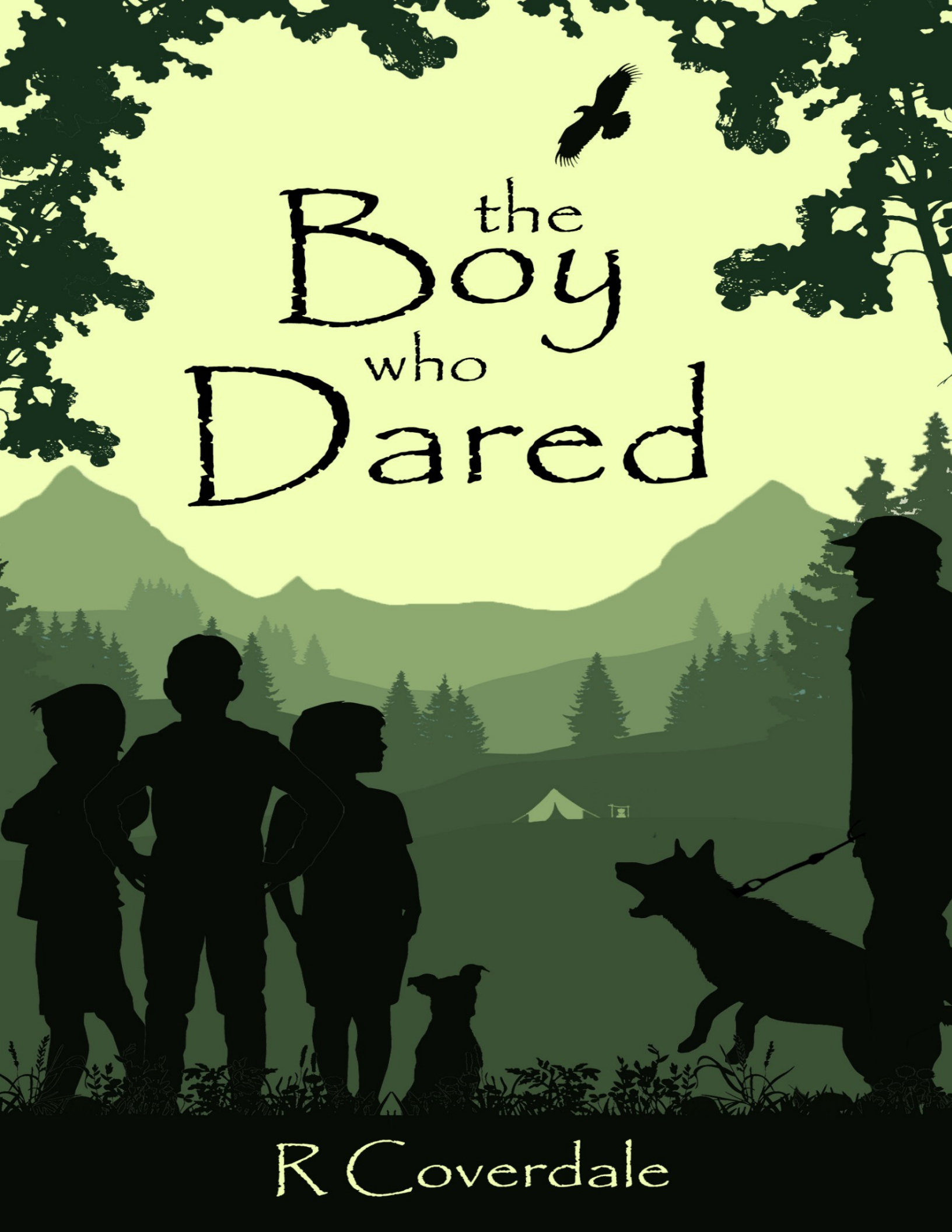

the Boy who Dared
R Coverdale

The Boy Who Dared

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the incredible people all around the world who work for charities and agencies rescuing abused animals and to all those wonderful people who take on those damaged pets to give them a safe, secure and loving forever-home.

IN LOVING MEMORY

In loving memory of my beautiful, crazy, loveable, funny GoldenDoodle, Montogomery, who nuzzled, encouraged and entertained me throughout the writing of this story. His premature passing was the worst shock of my life. He only had three years, but they were the best years. No regrets.

IN LOVING MEMORY

In loving memory of my fabulous, eccentric, bookish friend Judy, whose dogs were her fur-babies. She loved them beyond all reason. Thank you for our decades of friendship brought together initially through our love of literature.

PROLOGUE

* JAMES *

I looked at my watch. Two o'clock in the morning. A low, menacing growl travelled under the barn door, climbed up my trembling body, and forced its way into my unwilling ears.

We had imagined our camping holiday very differently – being woken by bird song, feeling the hard earth under the inadequate sleeping-bags and smelling breakfast being fried over the campfire. Yet here we were, trapped in a stinking barn with snarling, frothing dogs. An old rickety wooden door, all that was separating us from a brutal mauling. I looked towards Ahmed slumped against the wall, gripping his injured arm. He had to have a plan. Of the three of us, he was always the one who could get us out of danger. The fear in his eyes reflected mine.

It would seem trouble follows Greg wherever he goes.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 1

* JAMES *

A few days earlier.

"Ahmed is here, James," Dad shouted up the stairs.

It was no surprise to see Ahmed arrive ahead of schedule. As I went out to meet him, it was all he could do to stop himself from skipping up our drive. He was grinning from ear to ear. "Dad's lent me his emergency survival kit. I've got a Swiss army knife, lighter, head torch, nylon rope, foil blanket, water filter and universal pen. I've put some of my own things in too…"

I shook my head and laughed as Ahmed emptied everything out to show me.

"And here's Greg too," said Dad. "Good time-keepers!"

"A'right," said Greg.

"All right," we said.



Greg used to be horrible to me at school, but since the crazy adventures of last summer, we've all learnt to get along. I was pretty sure Greg was excited about the camping trip too, but he was way too cool to show it. Really, he's too cool to hang around with Ahmed and me, so he keeps it quiet that he comes and visits and nobody knows he's going on holiday with us. He'd rather lie and say he'd been locked up by the police for a week.

Actually*, I'd* rather have been locked up for a week than go on holiday if I'd known what was going to happen, but we had no idea what lay ahead when we were setting off that bright, sunny morning.

We pushed our backpacks into the last square inches of the boot, forcing the car to sink

lower on its springs. Mum rushed down the drive. “Here love, take this extra duvet to place across your sleeping bags.”

“Mum, we can’t fit that in the car. You’re putting too much in. There’ll be no room left for us and Dad will have to go on his own.” Mum can be so embarrassing. She’d been keen for us all to go camping, but now the day was finally here. She was doing her usual fussing and trying to pack *everything except the kitchen sink*, as my grandma would say.

Dad stepped in. “Love, we’ve got a tent, sleeping bags, spare clothes, a camping stove, and food supplies, plus a medical kit. If we need anything else, I have my wallet. We’re going to Wales, not Mars, so stop worrying. We’ll see you in a few days when you and Rosie join us.”

“I bet you’ll find space for these though,” she laughed, producing four Easter eggs from behind her back. “Try to save them until Easter Sunday, if you can.”

“Thanks love, don’t forget to keep checking the CCTV on that osprey nest and adding to my notes.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “Rosie and I will keep watching. We might even see you! Won’t we?” she said turning to my baby sister and lifting her onto her hip.

Greg jumped in the front seat before I could get to it. “Dad…”

“You can all take turns in the front. We might as well start with eldest first, so Greg for the first part of the journey, then Ahmed, then you.”

I knew that was fair, but I was still annoyed. Dad was always letting Greg get away with bad manners. Ahmed and I climbed in the back and as soon as we set off, I could feel excitement bubbling inside me again.

CHAPTER 2
* GREG *

It was proper good of the Taylor family to invite me to go camping with 'em for the Easter holidays. They're one of those hippy-type families who only see the good in people. They call me a hero 'cos I helped rescue their James last year. But the mad thing is – I was saving 'im from me own dad. Anyways, me dad was sent down for it, so I don't have to put up with him no more. I got sent to live with me Uncle Kev and Aunty Anne. They've never had no kids of their own and Aunty Anne's always been a bit soft on me.

I sneaked out of me aunty and uncle's house real early to get to James', 'cos I didn't want Aunty Anne making a big fuss and embarrassing me. She'd helped me pack me things the night before and must've guessed I would sneak off, 'cos she left out a BLT sandwich for me to scran on me way round.

Even though I arrived before seven, Ahmed was already there. "Look at all my military equipment, Greg." He had tipped his army-type backpack out on the drive. Ahmed pretends he's in the army all the time, which is a bit daft, but he can be good fun too. He shaves his thick black hair to a number two all over to look like his dad who's high up in the army. Ahmed's dead clever like his dad. He looks a bit like him an' all. They're a bit skinny and not very tall or owt, but yer can tell they're strong. *Fit as a butcher's dog,* me granny would say. They remind me of greyhounds at the racetrack.

The Taylor's fat Labrador came bouncing up to me wagging his tail like mad. "Hello Lad," I said. I once found him in the woods and called him Andrew, but it turned out he belonged to them and they called him Sam, so now everyone calls him Samdrew. He gave me a big lick on me hand and sat on me foot. He always does that. I looked down at him and stroked his head. I was gutted he wasn't coming with us, but he'd be coming later when Mrs Taylor and Rosie joined us.

Mrs Taylor came out of the house and wrapped her arms round me, squeezing me tight. Sometimes I wish she was *my* mam. Me own mam doesn't bother with me no more. Ever since me dad got sent down. I know she blames me and so do I, but I couldn't help what happened.

"Now don't you be worrying your head about Samdrew," Mrs Taylor said to me. "He's going to love having Rosie and me to himself."

I nodded. I didn't wanna say nowt in case me voice cracked and gave away how I was feeling. She gave me another squeeze then went over to the others, fussing over 'em and trying to give 'em even more stuff to cram into their tiny car.

As soon as we got going, Mr Taylor started laughing. "I reckon we'll get a text before the first hour is up to check how we are. Lay your bets, lads."

"I'm guessing twenty minutes," said James.

Ahmed thought for a bit. "Two hours and six minutes. That would mean we were exactly

halfway through our journey and likely to be stopped for a break."

"How about you? What's your guess Greg?" asked Mr Taylor.

I thought about it. If it was *my* mam, she probably wouldn't bother ringing or texting at all. She couldn't care less. Maybe I'm being hard on her. Before she took to drink, she was always fussing over me, but gradually drink became more important to her than either of her boys. Nowadays she's much better, and she dotes on me kid brother, Kyle, but she still doesn't bother so much with me. I think me Aunty Anne cares, but I still don't think she'd try to ring or text 'cos she's only me aunty.

Everyone was staring at me and I realised I hadn't answered the question. "An hour and a half," I said. It was the first thing that jumped into me head.

"Right, set your stopwatch Ahmed," said Mr Taylor. Ahmed gave a massive grin and set his watch. "Now what song are we going to sing first, lads?"

I bunched me coat against the window and rested me head on it, pretending to sleep. There was no way I was gunna start singing 'Ten Green Bottles' or whatever. I couldn't sleep, though; I was too excited.

CHAPTER 3

* AHMED *

It was brilliant fun singing all the crazy car-journey songs. Mr Taylor and James and I were warbling along at the top of our voices. That's one of the reasons James and I get on so well. Neither of us mind being silly. He's a great laugh. It used to be just us two, but now Greg hangs out with us. Greg can be good fun too in his own way, but I sometimes get the sense that James is jealous if I spend too much time with him.

I don't know how Greg managed to sleep through all our noise – he must have been awake all last night excited about our trip. He didn't stir until we stopped singing.

It had been lovely weather when we set off, but as the road went up over the moors, it became cold and foggy. At the very top, there were hardly any cars about. Everyone stopped talking and we could hear the wind whispering anxiously around our car.

Mr Taylor interrupted the silence. "These moors always give me the chills."

I looked out the window. The landscape was bland, drained of colour, just rocks and moss and heather with fog creeping around. I tried to imagine myself out there, alone on the moors. I was glad I was safe inside a car. Even though it felt warm in the car, I felt a shiver go through me. It was the perfect atmosphere to tell a grisly story. "Anyone heard about the Welsh legend of Gelert?" I said.

"What's that then?" asked James, his eyes widening. He always loves my stories.

I'd been researching Wales from the day I discovered we were going and found a book on Welsh legends in the library. "It happened centuries ago. The ruler of Wales was called Llywelyn the Great. He was a strong and powerful ruler, but he had a soft spot. That soft spot was reserved for his wife, his son, and his dog. Especially his dog."

Greg turned round. I knew I'd catch his interest once he realised there was a dog in the story. He didn't ever seem to read books, but he always enjoyed listening to a story and he loves animals. That's the one thing we all have in common.

"What was the dog called?" asked Greg.

"Gelert."

"That's a weird name."

"Lots of the Welsh names sound weird to us."

"Yeah," he nodded. "They spell 'em funny too. Go on."

"Well, Llywelyn the Great was a respected and feared warrior and ruler. He fought in lots of battles. Nobody would ever mess with him. If they did, they'd regret it. When he got married, it was the perfect match. He married the King of England's daughter. They were in love and he was never happier. Then they had a baby boy. Just what they wanted. In those days, they always wanted boys, not girls."

“This sounds like a love story. Are you telling us a love story?” said Greg.

“No, no, I just want you to know he was happy.”

“Alright, so he was happy. What about the dog?”

“So, his favourite hunting dog was Gelert. He had lots of hunting dogs, that’s how they lived back then, but this dog was special to him. When it had been born, the mother and the rest of the pups had been killed by wolves, but this one puppy had survived. Being only a young lad himself, Llywelyn raised it by hand, so it was a lot tamer than the rest of his dogs and it slept in his bedroom with him. It was a very loyal dog and never left his side unless it was instructed to stay at home to guard the castle.

“One day during a fierce battle, Llywelyn was knocked onto his back. His attacker was standing over him, about to stick the sword in. The faithful dog was supposed to be at home when suddenly this great black shadow appeared from nowhere, all frothing mouth and snarling teeth and clamped its jaws on the sword-arm of the attacker. As the attacker tried to shake Gelert off, Llywelyn took the opportunity to jump up and stab the attacker through his heart.

“That night he gave a feast in honour of his great dog and the dog was given the freedom of Wales, but still it only ever wanted to be by his side and was loyal and faithful for all days.”

“Nice story,” said James.

“But that’s not all. Something unexpected and terrible happened. Something that changed Llywelyn the Great’s life forever…” I paused for dramatic effect.

Everyone in the car was silent, waiting for me to go on. I held the silence for a while, enjoying their frustration, then I continued.

“Like I said, Llywelyn got married and had a little boy. One day, Llywelyn was out hunting. His baby boy was in the nursery with the great dog lying faithfully by its side. Suddenly, a wolf appeared at the nursery doorway. Gelert was a big dog, but he was old now, and anyway, he wasn’t as big as a wolf. There was no way he was going to let the wolf harm his master’s baby, though. He knew he was weaker than the wolf, so he had to outsmart him. Using all his skill and experience against the young, powerful wolf, he sneaked up quietly, then at the very last moment, launched at its throat. The nimble wolf jumped easily to the side. Gelert only managed a glancing slice at the throat. It drew blood, but only enough to anger the wolf, not to disable it. The wolf was already twisting round as it landed and immediately turned its savage jaws towards Gelert.

“Knowing he couldn’t beat him, the only option Gelert had was to try to lead the wolf away from the nursery and hope that the commotion would cause enough noise for someone to realise what was happening and grab the baby to safety. The wolf had a strong hold on Gelert, his teeth sunk deeply into the skin on his side. Gelert rolled over, causing his skin to be ripped by the wolf, but also causing them to swap positions – now the wolf was closest to the doorway. Gelert shrugged backwards the way he did when his master played with him with a tug rope. Except his opponent was a wolf and the tug toy was his own hide. Despite the wolf’s superior strength and body power, he didn’t know how to play this game and soon Gelert had tricked him into dragging them both out of the nursery and into the corridor.

“Once they were far enough away from the baby, Gelert collapsed to the floor, confident that he’d saved the child and waited for the wolf to kill him.

“But the wolf jumped over him. It ran straight back into the nursery and directly for that fat, juicy baby. With his remaining strength, Gelert dragged himself up and gave a final lurch at the wolf. Not expecting him to come back, the wolf was taken by surprise. This time, Gelert hit the mark. As he pounced, he sank his teeth into the wolf’s throat and the weight of him landing

pulled the wolf's windpipe right out of his neck. The wolf died there in the nursery and Gelert lay down next to it, exhausted and seriously injured, but happy that he'd saved his master's baby.

James leaned forward in his seat. "That's exactly what Samdrew would do if a wolf attacked Rosie, wouldn't he, Dad? He'd fight to his death to protect us. He loves us."

"Yeah, yer right like," Greg said, "Remember when I first met you lot? Samdrew always used to come and check on me in the woods. Good dog that. Mind, I reckon all dogs are like that."

James nodded, "I couldn't agree more, Greg. If you treat any dog right, it will always do right by you. The vicious ones are the ones that have been brought up to be vicious."

"Yer mean like me Dad's?"

"Oh. No… I wasn't meaning…"

"The story's not finished yet." I told them. "Gelert heard his master returning. With his last drop of energy, the loyal old dog dragged himself up and went out to meet his friend.

"Llywelyn saw his dog crawling towards him. It was covered in blood and he could see the trail led from his baby's nursery. He immediately assumed that old, faithful Gelert had attacked and killed his baby boy. He raised his sword and with one raging swipe he chopped off his dog's head."

I paused. Nobody said anything, but I noticed Greg was no longer facing me. The back of his neck was going red and his shoulders were rigid. I quickly continued. "At that moment, he heard his baby cry. He ran to the nursery and saw his baby safe and the bloodied body of a huge wolf laid at the foot of the cradle.

"Llywelyn let out a howl of anguish, realising in that moment, the mistake he'd made.

"He gave Gelert a full ceremonial burial and had a statue raised in honour of him, which can still be seen today. But the guilt ate away at him. He never smiled again."