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Opening extract from

Spy Dog

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Published by

Puffin

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1. *A Brush with Death*

The man with the gun was prowling nearby. Lara couldn't see him but she could smell him. She still had the taste of his flesh in her mouth. She crouched, absolutely still, half hidden in the undergrowth.

A twig cracked underfoot. 'Where are you, dog?' he cursed. 'I have a little something for you.'

Yes, and that little something is a bullet, thought Lara as she adjusted her position in readiness to leap at the man.

He came into view, the gun held out in front of him, walking carefully, occasionally turning round full circle. His clothes were torn, his arms were scratched and his leg was bleeding badly, souvenirs of his encounter with the dog he was now determined to shoot.

Lara remained still, controlling her breathing and the urge to run. The man came closer. He must have seen her. It would only be a matter of time. *Wait for the right moment and I might live to fight another day.* Now, just a couple of metres away, she could see the barrel of the gun. She could smell that it had recently been used.

It's now or never. Go! Lara leapt from her



hiding place, surprising the man and sinking her teeth into his arm. He yelled in pain and dropped the weapon.

The dog sprinted away. *I must get out of this wood. Just run and don't look back.* She couldn't see the man, but obviously he had found his gun. She heard a shot, and a bullet thudded into a nearby tree. She ran faster, zigzagging out of the way as more shots were fired. An empty Coke can jumped high into the air as a stray bullet hit it. The noise was enough to wake her . . .

Lara leapt to her feet. At first she wasn't sure where she was. There was no wood, no undergrowth and no gun. Instead there was a concrete floor, a water bowl and some iron bars . . . She quickly recovered her senses.

Lara was in the safety of the RSPCA. She had been dreaming of her brush with death five days ago.



2. *The Waiting Game*

Lara had spent the last five days studying ordinary dogs. She had resisted the temptation to choose just any old owner, although the prospect of a quick escape from the RSPCA was almost overwhelming. She was following orders. *I must choose a family. Be patient. I will know when the right owners come along.*

Lara noticed that the pretty dogs with good manners tended to stay only a few hours, whereas the uglier ones with gruff barks stayed a lot longer. In fact, some she had spoken to had been in their cages for months. *A bit of a shame that humans choose according to looks*, she thought. *Maybe I can help one of the long-serving dogs get adopted?*

She decided to help Bruce in cell

thirty-four. He had been caged for nearly six months and Lara noticed that his size and his energy put off a lot of potential owners. Even worse, he got so excited when people came round that he jumped up at the bars and howled like a wolf. Yet when nobody was around Bruce was the nicest, softest dog on the row. At exercise time, Lara took him to one side. *Look here, Bruce*, she barked. *Have you ever considered why you've been here for six months?*

Bruce wasn't the brightest. He hadn't really considered very much at all, only that he was desperate to have a family and that the more he tried the worse it got.

Lara had coached him in basic relaxation and manners. The very next day she was delighted to see him taking deep breaths and composing himself as a lady approached his cage. *Good lad, Brucey*, she thought. *No barking or jumping up. Keep it cool.* Then, as per the plan, Bruce lay down and rolled over for a tummy tickle, and Lara watched as the lady stopped at cage thirty-four and patted his belly. Lara knew that Bruce was fighting his urge to bounce and howl. She was willing

him on. *Fight the urge, lad. Stay strong, she thought. Sad eyes, Bruce . . . do your sad eyes . . . like we practised.* Right on cue, Bruce got to his feet and sat before the lady, offering his paw through the bars. He did his sad eyes, just as they'd rehearsed, and Lara saw the lady's face break into a pitying smile. Lara punched the air in delight as the lady asked for cage thirty-four to be opened. *No bouncing.* Take some *deep breaths, Brucey*, she thought. *Don't blow your chance now. Remember the final move.* At exactly the right moment, Bruce planted a big wet lick across the lady's face and sealed his adoption. Lara



led the howls of delight as Bruce was led away, bouncing with excitement.

Thanks for the advice, Lara, he barked. *I owe you one. See you on the outside.*

Bruce's departure left fifty-three dogs at the RSPCA. Lara was staggered at the variety on offer: cute and cuddly, large and smelly, short-haired, long-eared, pedigrees, mongrels, sleek and beautiful, fat and ugly, puppies, fully grown dogs, some smiling, some sad – but all with one thing in common: they longed for a loving home.

The Cook family pulled up outside the



RSPCA, bright and early on a Saturday morning. The back doors of the car swung open and three children bolted up the steps and burst into the RSPCA office. Mum and Dad emerged more slowly. Dad stretched and Mum was still wiping the sleep from her eyes. The children had been so excited about choosing a dog that they'd been up half the night.

Dad explained to the lady behind the counter that they would like to choose a family pet. The lady smiled and pointed to the wooden gate. 'Go through that gate into the yard,' she told them. 'We have a wonderful selection of dogs for you to choose from.'

Mum, Dad, Ben, Sophie and Ollie went through the gate to choose their dog. Little did they suspect that actually it was Lara who would choose them.



3. *The Incredible Whistling Dog*

The Cooks were a perfect family for any of the dogs but, unfortunately for the abandoned animals, they could only choose one. Mum and Dad worked full-time, so they were relying on Gran, who lived across the road, to look after the new pet during the day.

Ben, Sophie and Ollie ran up and down past the cages. Dogs of all shapes and sizes tried to win their affections, rolling over for tummy tickles, barking wildly, lying forlornly, shaking paws – each dog had its own tactic for being chosen. Each tried to outdo the others.

Sophie rushed between the cages, shrieking with glee at the different animals. 'Look at this one, Dad,' she squealed. 'It's got

brown, floppy ears and sad eyes. If we took it home, we could cheer it up. And this one's jumping up at me. I think he loves me.'

'He's a she,' noted Dad, reading from the notice above the cage. 'Her name's Lizzy and she's already been reserved. See what others you can find.'

'Here are some tiny puppies,' cooed Sophie's younger brother. 'Look at them, they're all cute and cuddly. We could take all four and then they'd never be lonely.'

Dad calmed him. 'Just the one, Ollie. If we can find a mutt we think we can all love, we'll take it. If not, we'll have to try again another day.'

As far as Sophie's older brother was concerned, there would be no other day. Ben had permission to choose a dog, so choose a dog he would – today. He had nagged his parents for the last two years and they'd always said, 'Not until you're old enough to look after a dog properly.'

'When will that be?' he'd pleaded.

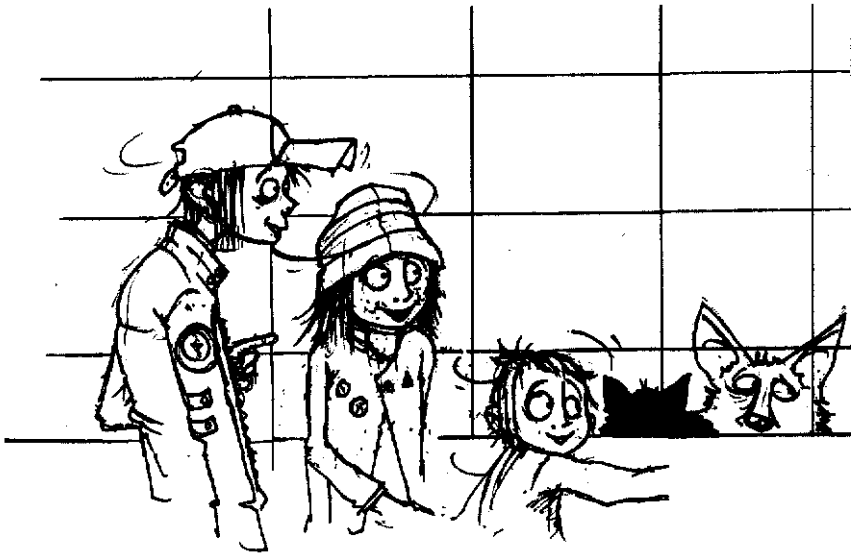
'Probably when you reach double figures,' Dad had said, and the children had been counting down to today, Ben's tenth

birthday. Mum and Dad smiled as their three children galloped to and fro, as excitable as the dogs themselves.

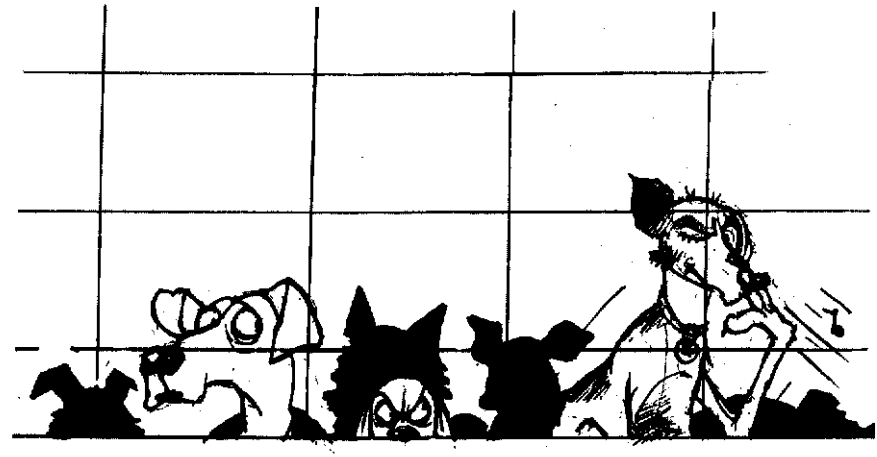
Lara was no ordinary dog. She listened, taking it all in and playing it cool. She had calculated that the older children, Ben and Sophie, would be the ones who would sway any decision. If she could win them over, then she would be going home with the Cooks tonight.

On Sophie's first pass, Lara tried the sympathy vote, lying in her classic doggie pose with her head on her front paws, looking slightly sad, putting on her long face with droopy eyes. *It worked for Bruce*, she thought as Sophie sprinted straight past without so much as a second glance. Panic set in. *The sad eyes haven't worked.* Lara was worried that if Sophie made it to the end cage, she would fall in love with a twelve-week-old puppy called Toby. She couldn't allow that to happen. A new tactic was needed, and quick.

Lara sprang to her feet and sniffed beyond the bars of her cage. She could smell Ollie



close by, but she couldn't see him. She suspected he was scratching the tummy of a basset hound, four doors down. She could hear him murmuring about how he would take care of this cute animal when it came to his house. Horror upon horror, her chance was slipping away. *I can't stand another day here. This is my chosen family*. Ben was scratching the head of Jasmine in cage one. Lara had to act, and act now. Fortunately she had been highly trained for just such a moment – now was the time to put her superior talents to good use. Without hesitation, Lara stood on her hind legs, put her left forepaw in her doggy mouth and, clear as day, whistled to



Ollie. The other dogs fell momentarily silent. *What was that?* barked Rex, an Alsatian of three weeks' residence.

Came from that new dog in cage eight, replied Sabre, his Labrador pal from three cages down. *But dogs can't whistle.*

How wrong they were. Lara had whistled perfectly, so it came out as a shrill, football-referee type of whistle, making everyone turn round and look, scratching their heads, wondering where the sound came from.

Ollie came running up to cage eight. 'Was that you, doggie?' he enquired innocently.

Lara barked excitedly. *Yes, yes, of course it was. Now go and get your brother and sister,*

thought Lara, frustrated that she could understand words but couldn't speak them. Standing on her hind legs, she pointed towards Ben, stabbing her paw wildly in his direction.

'Doggies aren't supposed to be able to whistle,' said Ollie matter-of-factly. 'They bark and bite and chase cats, but they can't whistle . . . or point.'

This one can, thought Lara, still upright on her hind legs. She jabbed her paw more wildly, this time towards Sophie, knowing that she was getting closer to the cute puppy at the end of the row. *For goodness sake, go and fetch your sister. Can't you see I've chosen you?*

'Sophie, can dogs whistle?' shouted Ollie to his older sister.

'Ollie, you pea brain, of course they can't. Don't they teach you anything at nursery? They woof and whine and fetch sticks and things, but they can't whistle,' chirped his sister as she scampered towards the end of the row. 'Hey, Mummy, come and look at these cute brown puppies,' she called, chancing on the final cage.

Lara was now on red alert. If her plan were

to work, if she were to go home with her chosen family tonight, she would have to take drastic action. While Ollie watched, she stood on her hind legs, put her paw in her mouth and let out another shrill whistle, not quite as loud as the previous one, but pretty ear-splitting all the same. Ollie watched, open-mouthed. 'Ben . . . Sophie . . .' he gasped, 'come and look at this whistling dog.'

That was how Lara caught Ollie's attention, who in turn caught Sophie's attention, who chatted it through with Ben, who worked on Mum and Dad, who finally told the lady from the RSPCA that they would like to take Lara home as their new family pet.

'Ollie says she can whistle,' joked Dad to the lady behind the RSPCA counter.

'Oh, good,' replied the lady, going along with the joke. 'Perhaps he will teach her to sing too!' The adults thought this was very funny.

Lara listened intently to the banter. *Stupid woman*, she thought. *I may be able to whistle tunes, read music and play the piano, but even spy dogs can't sing.*



4. *Following Orders*

In fact 'Lara' wasn't Lara's name at all. She didn't have a name, just a reference number, GM451, given to her by the British government. The silver disc round her neck said 'LARA' in bold letters, but this actually stood for 'Licensed Assault and Rescue Animal'. Lara was an experiment. This outwardly cuddly mongrel was, in fact, a highly trained special agent, bred by the British Secret Service for use on dangerous missions throughout the world. On her last mission Lara had escaped from a dangerous criminal who, she was sure, would be hunting her down. Her orders were clear: if separated from her handlers, she had to pretend to be a normal dog, allow herself to be captured by the RSPCA and secure