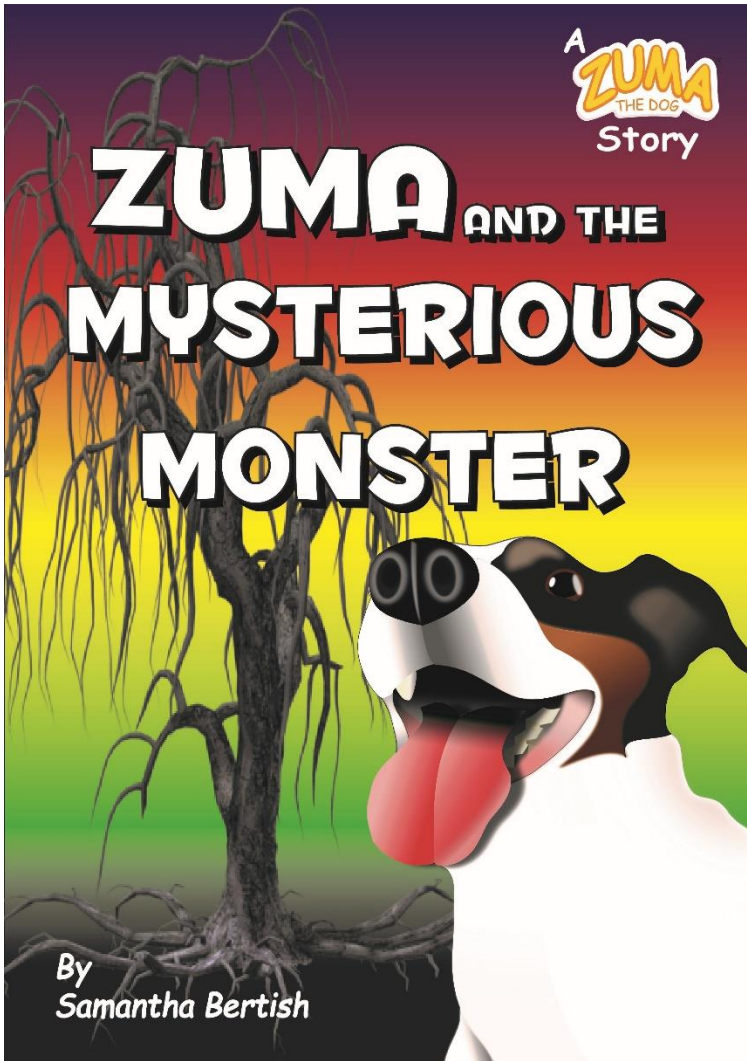


ZUMA AND THE MYSTERIOUS MONSTER



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About the Author

Following a career in fashion, Samantha Bertish, inspired by the family pet, created the fun character brand Zuma the Dog, designed to bring love and colour into every child's life. A survivor of domestic violence, Samantha's aim is to make a stand against bullying using her cute character to raise self-esteem in small people, to take a stand for fairness, equality, tolerance and nonviolence with her comical character, encapsulating all that is fun and lovable about her dog.

Samantha believes that by standing up to bullies and understanding why it is they bully; it empowers them to feel safe enough to not need power over someone.

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AND
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Samantha Bertish

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Dedication

Dedicated to my boys, without you this all seems pointless

and

Zuma, my inspirational emotional support mutt.

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*A story based on Zuma, the real-life dog
and inspiration for the children's character.*



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CHAPTER ONE

“Zuma! It’s bedtime. Do you guys want wee wees?”

The front door to their log cabin opened as it did every night, ready to let Zuma and his pack out for their evening wee before they snuggled together for the night in their giant family-sized blue corduroy beanbag. They had been living in their new home with their human for only a few months since moving from their beach paradise, and were slowly growing used to the dark night’s sky which comes with living on a mountain in the middle of nowhere. The pack liked these dark nights, with the only light pollution coming from the village below: a warm glow, lighting their area just enough to see the garden path leading towards the end of the garden, and a paw in front of one’s nose. The sky was so clear on this night even the elusive Seven Sisters constellation could be adored, showing off their shimmering beauty in the inky darkness. In the distance, across the valley the dark grey rugged mountain tops could

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just about be made out by remnants of the remaining winter snow glowing in the moonlight. Remnants of dirtier snow scraped up by a road-cleaning plough glistened like diamonds at the end of the garden on the opposite side of the gate. The thick black forest facing their home was quiet, like it was every night. Though, also this night, not a peep from the animals that usually appear: not a hoot from the owl, a squeal from a fox, or scampering of tiny nocturnal feet in the crisp leaves that fell from the beech trees the autumn just gone.

“Shush. Can you hear that?” Zuma’s human breathed gently as she stood motionless in the dark so as not to disturb anything.

Zuma’s senses kicked in, his stubby tail stood to attention, twitching in the dark as he stared out towards the forest, nose pointing forward. The darkness of the night didn’t feel the same as it had over the few months they had lived there. He couldn’t see anything as a thick blackness fell over them. His nose caught a pungent smell as his ears pricked up. A sharp stabbing feeling grasped the scar on his hind leg. It wasn’t often this pain bothered him, just on occasions when he felt something was about to change, but those occasions when it did hurt, it was jowl clenching. Grabbing at his leg, trying to soothe it, he turned his head from side to side to make sense of what he was, or in this case wasn’t, seeing. From the dark shadows just in front of

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him he could hear something. Something hidden behind the felled trees and piled up logs cut down by the local woodsman a few weeks earlier.

Zuma remembers back to the winter, when the heavy truck came with large metal arms that pulled the logs down from the forest. Humans struggling in the thick snow to get the trucks up the mountain, slip-sliding back and forth trying to grip the icy track and eventually jostling into position after hours of truck choreography. Humans in dayglo jackets and white hard hats milling around shouting instructions to other people operating the metal arms as one by one they strategically placed each log on top of the other, piling them carefully so they didn't and wouldn't fall. He remembers giving them a hard time, woofing the whole time as they disturbed his peaceful home, hoping they would go away and stop ruining his day. All the while his comedic friend, Pooper and fun-loving puppy Drool Jr. danced around in the background, paws flailing in the air singing "Mr Logger logger... Very bombastic, hat made of plastic... Mr Logger logger, yeeeeaaaah."

His eyes roll at the memory. He heard the noise again. Not a sound they had heard before and not ten metres from his secluded family home, close to the start of the track which leads up into the forest. A deep thump of slow heavy footsteps cracked sticks and logs as it prowled about in the

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heavy darkness. Something was out there. Something big. He had seen many deer come close to their new home before, and had heard of various stories, local legends of strange creatures living out in the shadows hiding from plain sight; but this, this was nothing he would believe in his wildest dreams. It was different – deep booming footsteps from something large, something heavy, something frightening. It was difficult to tell exactly where it was from the echo of the boom it made from each step. Twigs broke under foot, branches twisted and snapped further up the trunks of the forest pine trees. The whooshing sound of branches closer to the top of the smaller, younger pines as they were brushed passed, indicated that whatever this was, was big. Very big.

Zuma's human stood still, pale like a marble statue. Motionless, Zuma growled under his breath for a moment, cosyng up close to his human, hind leg scar aching, listening for more movement. The air stopped. Still. Stagnant, thick and difficult to breathe.

“Grrrrrr woof! Woof!” His warning to whatever was out there not to come any closer. “Who’s there?” Feeling brave from behind his human’s legs, Zuma dashed to the wooden fence that stretched the perimeter of his home, encasing him and his pack in a false sense of security. He woofed again, running to the far edge of his garden for a better view of what could possibly be out there, positioning his

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two front paws up against the gate in an attempt at making himself appear larger, leg wobbling from the strain of his stance, squinting his eyes, trying to improve his vision in the dark.

“Show yours...!” Cut off by his human mid-woof, telling him to be quiet, they listen again closely. They could hear another deep thump, then another as it drew closer to the edge of the forest, and to their home. A deep breath from the creature’s lungs followed by a snort, and Zuma could see the huff against the cool air behind the pile of felled trees. He held his breath, poised for a moment, and called out again, “Who are you?”

A light fog loomed over the tops of the trees and descended to form a low cloud over their heads, dropping the temperature by a few degrees, leaving them shivering in the blackness. No light was left to cast shadows that would allow Zuma to make out any kind of shape in the dark. In an instant a hopeless feeling fell over him, a desperate bleakness which consumed his whole body for a moment and reminded him of the moment he lost his best friend in the bush fire at K9 Cove eighteen months before. A darkness that reflected the scene crawled into his heart and images of bloodied violence and death consumed his mind, leaving him breathless and shocked. He shook his body from nose to tip, releasing the dreadful thoughts from within and from the corner of his eye he could see Sniffy,

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an adolescent Drool Jr and the remaining pack members peering around the front door curious to see what was going on. They too could sense the mysterious creature close by and peeped their heads further out for a better view. Zuma's human moved closer to the door and closed it slightly, gaining composure, and Zuma signalled to Sniffy to stay in and keep everyone with her.

The threat of this looming beast and the low-lying fog were still in the air. Zuma always stood his ground with everything he did, brave in character and this time was no different. Breath held tight until whatever was lurking and watching them from behind the tree pile was gone, trying to shake off the feelings within him and forget the disturbing images piercing his mind.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The ground boomed with a dull dreary tone. It paused for a second, and fell quiet. A few lengthy minutes of deathly silence passed as human and dog stood together, still, staring into nothing, holding their breath, hoping their booming hearts wouldn't give them away. They knew the creature knew they were there; they just hoped that if they remained like statues it would disappear without trouble.

Unexpectedly, as quickly as it had arrived, the mood disappeared. The air lightened and the fog lifted, allowing them some light to see slightly ahead of them. The thud of

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footsteps was now lighter as the deafening sound moved away and through the forest. Both Zuma and his human remained rooted to their spots, unable to move while they heard, far into the distant blackness, the beast stop for another moment, snort a deep breath in their direction before, once more, silence.

Both dog and human looked around, listening for any other strange noises lurking in the background. The intense darkness had lifted, giving them a small amount of sight within the strange night. The fog had crept its way down the hill towards the village creating a thin layer of mist below the house like a carpet of smoke, making their mountain appear to float in the night sky. Gradually, the usual nocturnal sounds returned to the forest.

“That was the weirdest thing I’ve ever experienced in my life!” woofed Zuma to himself from the corner of his mouth, still cemented to his spot, unsure whether to move, or make any loud noise. He exhaled the longest breath, as if gasping for air, as the darkened stench gave way to the usual fresh alpine smell he had grown accustomed to. He climbed down from his gate, hind leg ache disappearing, and trotted to his human for a pat on the head. Pleased with his family protection abilities, he swaggered back into his home.

CHAPTER TWO



It had been a couple of months since Zuma and his human heard the strange noise from a creature in the forest. They had all but forgotten about the incident. They had been

living in their home on the edge of a secluded forest close to the Swiss Alps for almost a year. The devastation and memories of their last home meant Zuma's human needed some long-term respite, and moving everyone to a new place, a quiet, peaceful spot, would aid her in her recovery. Zuma was happy to exchange his surfing-world-domination life for family life. They all deserved some security and this move gave them all the opportunity to recover from the trauma of the previous year's events. The scar on Zuma's hind leg left over from his accident and washing up on the beach at K9 Cove would give him problems, occasionally throbbing, stiffening up with pins

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and needles, which meant he wasn't quite the nimble dog he used to be.

The snowy winter had long since given way to warmer days and humid afternoons. The pack had enjoyed the cold white powdered rain that fell from the sky, which none of them had experienced before. Each morning they would take the opportunity to play in their garden, bouncing about and jumping in the deepest drifts, so only their heads were visible. For Drool Jr., being the smallest, only his ears could be seen. They would roll in the powdery snow, catching flakes in their paws, staring closely, squinting for a better view of each individual hexagonal shape, mesmerized by their unique fragile structures that softened and disappeared if held too long. They played games, holding their mouths open wide, lolling their tongues out far and snapping at the flakes as they fell. Some would land on their noses causing them to sneeze and snuffle, and they laughed and teased each other. They would play at who could plough the most snow in the quickest time. Piling it up where Drool Jr. could make snow dog sculptures with the help of his uncles.

With the changing season, now their mornings started with a quick sunbathe and admiring the giant sunflowers and fresh vegetables that popped up seemingly overnight out of the fresh smelling soil. Water from the top of the mountain trickled from an underground spring out over the

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edge of the garden and into a hollowed out old tree trunk that in turn splashed into a naturally forming pool. The pool was filled with tadpoles, small frogs, and fire salamanders. The gentle bubbling sound of the water made for a soothing background sound that could calm the most nervous of dispositions. As summer woke, so did the trees, animals and wildlife that lived nearby. Trees flourished in the garden. Flowers blossomed and provided early sustenance for humans and animals alike. Wild garlic grew in abundance close to the pond. Picked for garnishing human food, it always made the pups feel nauseous, so apart from using it as a good place to take a wee, the pack kept a wide berth from it. On the other hand, sweet-smelling elderflower blossom was great to add to their water bowls for a summer flavour. It was good for the pack to learn about the plant life that surrounded them. Like the Aloe from K9 Cove many had healing properties: dried stinging nettles were full of vitamin C; large juicy blades of grass were good for tummy aches and purging poisons from the gut. Some, however, such as the wild garlic in the spring and mushrooms in the autumn, were harmful. Where the field next door was once covered in snow and used as a snowboarding slope for Zuma's human and friends, now it was full of wild meadow flowers, yellow dandelions and buttercups, and tall grasses, and was a home for the local cows who would chew the grass all day, ready to make milk for the farmer. They pretty much kept themselves to themselves, eating as they moved together

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around the field, ding-donging their neck bells as they did so. Occasionally they would pop their heads over the garden fence to say hi, with their big brown shining eyes, long eyelashes, and short curly fringes that sat high upon their foreheads neatly between their ever-flapping ears. They liked to gossip about the farmer, and other animals in the community and this was good for the pack to know. They were pleasant enough, friendly and neighbourly, but the constant bell ringing day and night could be a little too much and the pack had to learn a zen technique to fade out the bonging.

Other creatures in the area also had their regular routines and the pack could set a clock by them. Bessy the sleek black cat would stroll each morning along the stony path that separated Zuma's cabin home from the forest opposite – making her way towards the cow field, where she would hang out all day, watching the cows, hunting small prey, but mostly bathing in the sunlight, moving from one position to another catching as many rays as possible. Eddy the kestrel would soar overhead, often perching in the trees on the other side of their garden fence facing towards the valley. In competition with Bessy, he too would watch the comings and goings of prey hoping for a tasty snack. Sniffy would often keep Drool Jr. inside with Eddy buzzing around, fearing he would mistake her pup for prey and had visions of him being taken off high into the sky and the pack chasing them across the field trying

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to rescue the little dog. Then there was Topsy, the white chested tubby tabby cat that was regularly seen walking down the stony track from the forest. Each day he would carry a gift in his mouth, presumably for his human. Sometimes it would be a mouse, or a frog. The biggest gift was a very large snake. Topsy had strolled out of the forest with it dangling from his mouth like large green spaghetti. Squiggling and squirming, the snake did not look too amused, though to be sure Topsy looked very pleased with himself.

Generally, all the locals got on very well. The fence surrounding Zuma's home was covered with hedges to give privacy for his human during the summer months, but there were plenty of gaps for everyone to see out and make contact with the animals outside. The pack had even found a small pipe under the road outside their home which they could crawl through to get out if they wanted to. Situated at the top end of the garden, disguised by water trickling into the pond and covered with chicken mesh and leaves, each dog could pull the mesh aside and crawl through the pipe leading out into the ditch which ran along the side of the track and up into the forest. It wasn't often that they did this, but sometimes it was nice to explore the area together as a pack and make friends with the locals. It was important for Zuma to do this. As pack leader he wanted to make their presence known, to see if others needed help,

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to gather for meetings and get involved with their new animal community.

Life was very different from what Zuma's pack had known before. No fending for themselves, no cages or fighting to survive through to the next day. No keeping out of sight of other animals and packs and constant recovering from injuries and abuse from others. Always full bellies and a warm place to sleep with a blanket. Snuggled together as a family, with love, belly rubs and long walks. It was exactly as he had promised. A forever home, where they could live out their lives safe and secure.

"Ahhhhhh, this is the life, Zuma." A relaxed Pantalot joined Zuma and Sniffy outside on the patio, watching Pooper and Drool Jr. frolic and play fight on the grass, rolling around while trying not to stain their fur green from the freshly cut lawn. "I could never have believed it would work out like this," he added.

"You must have more faith in me," Zuma jibed in return as he pulled his front paw over Sniffy and pulled her in for a hug.

"Yes," agreed Sniffy. "We have a lot to thank you for, Zuma. Our lives are so much easier, and we can all feel relaxed and secure living here. Drool Jr. will grow up never having to experience the life we once had. He will

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never have to go hungry or sleep rough or be scared for his life.” She paused, looking him directly in the eye. “Thank you.”

“Just such a shame we had to lose Drool and Silkskin before we got here,” said Pantalot. “They would have loved it here.”

They continued to watch the dogs play, agreeing they didn’t know who was the most childlike, Drool Jr. or his uncle Pooper.

Zuma’s human would be out all afternoon, so the pack took the opportunity to sneak out of their garden and go visit some of the local forest folk and wander around the woods. Grey coloured clouds had started to roll in over the mountain on the other side of the valley and a slight chill in the air told them their sunbathing time was up. After squeezing through their secret gap and crawling through the tunnel, they popped their heads out from the ditch, jumped onto the track and up the steep hill leading into the forest. Shiny green-coloured leaves adorned the branches of the trees. Most of the forest was made up of pine trees with beech trees dotted in between. The smell of pine hit the pack as they entered the deepest part of the forest and they took a deep breath, filling their lungs with the fresh scent. It’s a quiet place. Not many humans go there, so a lot of the local animals and wild folk are free to roam and

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be themselves most of the time. A cooling breeze whipped up small piles of leaf remnants left from the autumn. Now dried from the sun, they swirl around in mini whirlwinds which toss them onto the steep track snaking up through the forest. Little birds tweet sweet summer songs and woodpeckers drum on trunks, bashing out new homes while adding to the music. In places, the leaves pile high on the path, making it spongy under paw and some of it difficult to walk through with little legs without a jump or a skip. Moss-covered stumps of trees long gone gave the pack a chance to get off the ground as they hopped and jumped from stump to stump. Almost at the top of the hill now, they see where the sunlight gets brighter as the forest dissipates before building up again into thick layers of trees, as canopies cover the forest in shadow. Further forward into the darkest part of the forest, secluded from human hikers and the usual animal activity, they hear a chilling noise: one that none had heard in quite a while.

“Uhhh, did you hear what I thought I heard?” Pantalot, who was leading the expedition, turned around to look at the others, who also had stopped on hearing the noise. It now seemed to come from all directions – a chilling scream that filled the air with terror and sent shivers down their spines. They remained still. Pantalot slowly lifted a paw to his mouth indicating they should stay quiet and listen. Then, the sound again. The anguished squeal of an

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animal in pain, followed by a breathless caw and then an eerie silence.

“Oh gosh!” cried Sniffy in a panic. “Someone is hurt. We must help!”

The pack scattered to try and find the source of the cries: Zuma and Pantalot in one direction, Sniffy and Pooper with Drool Jr. dragging up the rear in another. Adrenaline pumping in all the dogs, they dash from left to right, listening for more cries, and sniffing out the source of the pain-filled screams.

“No one must stay on their own,” cried out Zuma instinctively as they scattered deeper into the forest.

Noses to the ground, they sniffed their way over rocks and under trees, through piles of leaves, and in holes created by old roots from dead trees. Everyone was so busy searching that no one noticed that Drool Jr. had wandered in a different direction and accidentally separated himself from the group. Then: “Aaaahhhhh!” The high-pitched scream from a terrified adolescent dog.

“Jr!” shouted Zuma, stopping dead in his tracks. Panicked, he turned and ran as fast as he could in the direction of his son, to find a traumatised pup on his knees staring at a sight no child should ever see. Zuma grabbed

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his boy, moving him to his side and averting the pup's eyes with his paw, as he himself looked closer at what lay in front of him. He tasted bile in his throat. The others arrived one by one. Sniffy, standing on her hind legs comforted her pup and took Drool Jr. into her arms and covered his eyes.

“Wow!” gasped Pantalot. “That’s something I thought we would never see again.” They all stared down at the bloodied remnants of what was once their kestrel neighbour, Eddy.

CHAPTER THREE

Somberly, the pack gathered around to pay their last respects to one of their newest friends. Shaking his head in disbelief. “What on earth happened here?” questioned Zuma, screwing up his nose. “Like, Eddy was perfectly OK this morning. I saw him proudly perched on top of the big pine tree as usual, searching for prey and keeping one eye on Jr.”

The humidity had risen through the afternoon and rain now started to drip through the trees as other forest animals appeared and gathered to pay their respects. Surrounding the corpse, they bowed their heads in sympathy. “Yep, for a prey bird, Eddy was one of the good ones,” piped up a bunny from the back of the crowd. “He had to survive like the rest of us and only ate out of necessity. Nothing more.”

“That’s right,” added a hedgehog. “Eddy had no real enemies. He was at the top of the food chain, yet no one disliked him. It’s very odd this has happened. Not at all usual. Especially here.”

The crowd silently retreated into the forest, spreading out in their various directions as Zuma and his pack stood there contemplating the situation for a while longer.

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“What sort of creature would do something like that?” questioned Pooper. “I mean, there’s killing something and then there’s tearing something apart.”

“I agree,” followed Pantalot. “Who or whatever did this seemed to enjoy it.”

“It’s savagery, that’s for sure,” said Zuma.

The snap of a twig some way off behind a group of trees caught their attention. “OK. Let’s head home,” said Sniffy. “This situation is starting to give me the creeps now and I’d like to get Jr home before it gets any darker.”

The grey clouds overhead were drawing the evening in early. The pack had been in the forest for hours and Zuma was sure his human would start to wonder where they were if she had already returned home. They gathered together for one last thought for Eddy before making their way back through the forest, down the beaten path, through the trees and back onto the stony track.

“Well. Look on the bright side Sniffy,” called out Pooper from the back of the group. “At least you don’t have to worry now about Drool Jr. being whisked off by Eddy.”

Sniffy turned to glare at him.

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“Poor taste Pooper,” advised Zuma. “Too early to make jokes I think, buddy.”

By the time they had reached the edge of the forest opposite their home the humidity of the summer evening had hit a high and heavy rain was falling. On the other side of the valley, flashes of lightening lit up the sky with a display of green, pink and blue, followed a few seconds later with a distant boom that could be felt from the inside of one’s heart. The dogs crawled into their garden through their secret tunnel and Zuma stayed back to make sure everyone was in safely. Before he climbed into the ditch himself, something in the forest caught his eye, hidden behind the felled trees. His mind flashing back to the strange evening with his human months before, a slight twinge in the scar on his leg, he turned quickly to see what was there. There was no sickening sense of impending doom with this watcher. It hid itself within the darkness before Zuma had time to focus. He saw nothing, but he couldn’t help feeling something was off; a familiar feeling, one of distrust and deceit. A chill shivered through the curious dog as he paused for a moment before he crawled through the tunnel into the safety of his garden, into his home and curled up in his beanbag, safe with his pack.

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“Papa, can you play ball with me?” begged an energetic Drool Jr. “Papa? Papa? Can you hear me?”

Zuma’s mind had wandered off as he pondered the details of the incident of Eddy a few days before. “What? Sorry Jr... yes, throw me the ball.”

Drool Jr. tossed the ball to Zuma who completely missed it, his mind still elsewhere. “What’s on your mind Papa?” questioned the inquisitive pup. “Mmmm... something’s not right,” Zuma replied. “Where’s your mum and uncles? We need to have a chat.”

The pack gathered together in the shady part of the garden, close to the stream where the trickling waterfall splashes into the pond. They stood closely, the bubbling water ensuring no one would hear them.

“Something is not right,” blurted Zuma, shaking his head. “I, I just can’t put my paw on it... but I can’t stop thinking about Eddy. What on earth could have possibly happened?”

“Do you think it may have something to do with that mysterious beastly thing we heard in the forest a few months back?” replied Pooper.

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“Well, I was thinking the same thing, and I think you might be onto something there.” Zuma turned to Pantalot, “What sort of animal would tear another to pieces like that?”

“Well, in my experience,” thinking back to his days in the dog fighting world, “it would be a pretty disturbed individual. Someone with a history of violence. Bullying maybe or someone who has seen a lot of hostility in their life. Suffered violence or bullying and unable to deal with any trauma they themselves have experienced. Maybe they are an isolated creature? Someone who spends much time on their own. With something to hide.”

“A creature that can cause that kind of cruelty certainly doesn’t have friends to put them on the right path, that’s for sure,” added Pooper.

They stayed sitting around the water pool for some time, trying to work out the reason for such an attack, brainstorming ideas of what sort of animal would be so cruel. Evening arrived, and they were called in for their dinner.

“I believe we need to get out tomorrow and talk with the locals,” said Zuma, between mouthfuls of food. “We need to find out more about this beast thing that lurks behind the trees. What is it? Where does it come from? Ask questions.

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Find out if this has happened before. Engage with the animals around us.” The rest of the pack agreed amid scoffing their own food.

A plan of action was made. Zuma and his pack were going to find out exactly what happened in the forest that day.

The pack awoke with buzzing energy. Today they were on a mission to find out the truth of what happened to Eddy. The morning reflected their mood as they stepped out of the back-door flap after breakfast. They could see the snow-capped mountain glistening and right across to the other side of the valley. The sky was cloud-free for the first time in days and the morning sun beat down. Lush green grass, damp from the morning dew gave sustenance to early birds pecking at the ground in search of an easy snack and pulling up juicy plump worms. Tall, rigid, fat-stemmed sunflowers stood to attention in the garden border beds, staring full faced into the sun. Happy smiles all round. Today the pack had purpose, to find a resolution, an answer.

Eager to get their day started the pack padded their way to the front of their garden and towards their secret tunnel. Out of the corner of his eye Zuma saw Bessy sprawled in her usual position in the cow field. The grass had been munched down quite low by the cows and Bessy was easy

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to spot. “That’s unusual...” Zuma queried to himself. “Bessy’s not usually here this early in the morning.” “Good morning, Bessy!” He enthusiastically waved as he passed by and scampered through the tunnel to the outside world. No reply from the sleeping cat. “Ahhh, she obviously didn’t hear me,” he thought and continued on his way catching up with the pack who were starting to make their way up the steep path into the forest.

The local animals and wildlife were used to seeing the pack visit the forest by now. Whereas before they would hide, worried about what this strange group of dogs were up to, now they were happy to interact with them and include them in conversations. The dogs strode deep into the forest, stopping to talk to the locals about daily life, ask questions about Eddy, and get a general feeling for the day-to-day events of the wild here in Switzerland. It certainly seemed very different to the world of K9 Cove. The wild world was less connected there. Yes, everyone lived together in a community of sorts, but it was different as each pack kept to themselves and no-one interacted outside their own packs and species. Here, everyone talked to each other, friendly, a different way of being. Tranquil, like the Cove, but different, a closer kind of community. It soon became obvious that the death of Eddy had hit the wild hard and to see him discarded the way he was left many of the animals devastated and worried for their own personal safety. No one had seen anything like it – not even the

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oldest and longest horned deer that had travelled over many parts of the forest in their time.

The pack continued deeper into the forest, passed the wide opening at the crest of the hill that opened onto a large field that homed the humans' communication antenna, then following a path into an area darker than they had been before. Animals gossip and news travels fast in the wild, so although the pack had not been here before, the locals knew who they were and were happy to welcome them, willing to answer any questions they had.

Soon, they came across a place like nothing they had ever seen before. Turns out, the part of the forest they thought they knew well was nothing compared to this hive of activity. The pack gasped in awe at what they saw. Dug into the side of the mountain were holes upon holes upon holes. Small animals: badgers, hedgehogs, rabbits, pine martins, squirrels... hard at work... every animal looked like they were on a mission, deep in concentration. It looked as if each hole was an entrance to someone's home. Some animals were gathering pine nuts and piling them up in a central area for all to share. An effigy of a large bird hung between two central trees close to the pile of nuts. It became clear that Eddy was a respected member of the community. Despite being at the top of the food chain, as the hedgehog from the day of Eddy's death explained, he was a fair bird who only preyed on the sick and dying,

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often acting as help for those who knew their days were up. Being able to sit so high in the trees he would often act as look-out bird and tell others in the community about strangers and possible danger coming their way. That is how the wild community knew about Zuma and his pack moving to the area all those months ago.

“Then, if Eddy was so liked by the community, why did he fall foul to such awful circumstances?” was Zuma’s question to everyone he talked to.

Each animal replied in a different way. None had any clue as to who it could be, yet they all had one thing in common with their answers. All mentioned a mysterious beast that lived in the forest. They heard on the pipeline that Eddy had some news of this creature and was on his way to tell the community when he met his fate.

Not one animal said the same thing about this beast. Some would say it was living high in the trees, so it could watch everyone at all times. Some said it lived underground in a deep cave low in the forest, so it could not be seen. Some said it was tall. Others said it was giant. Hairy, possibly small and furry. So many conflicting descriptions it was hard for the pack to make any headway with their enquiries. No one had ever seen it for sure, though they knew it existed. A solitary creature, ugly, scary with a menacing presence that darkened the darkest

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of nights. It was older than the forest itself and none wanted to ever encounter it. All knowing, all seeing. There were rumours that it commanded the forest. The trees themselves, that without it the forest wouldn't exist.

Zuma and his pack pieced together what information they could make sense of: this beast, this creature, this something had lived in the forest for many, many years, yet gone unseen. It lived in shadows, hiding behind trees and bushes deep within the forest. Almost a ghost, a spirit in the wind perhaps, though there was evidence of a physical being. With the occasional unexplained footprint, the size of a hundred paw prints. Bigger than any human would make. It had no friends, no family, and they knew of no one who had ever encountered it or communicated with it. Yet, they knew it was there. They could feel its presence when it passed by. An ancient feeling with visions and a darkness that would well up from deep inside if one allowed it. Much like the feelings Zuma felt months ago in the dark. This legendary beast was obviously solitary, alone, a one of a kind, and yet, the hedgehog said a killing like Eddy's was unusual for the area. Nothing like that had happened before. "So, if this beast has been here for so long, why is this the first time a local has been killed?" questioned Zuma to the other pack while they paused to reflect on their findings.

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“I guess this is something we need to find out,” answered Sniffy.

They wandered deeper through the unknown (to them) part of the forest. Everything they had learnt suggested this beast was of course the culprit behind Eddy’s death. Its profile fitted the one which Pantalot talked about days before, though there was not a strong enough motive for a clear-cut decision for guilt.

Before the evening drew in, the pack slowly walked back down the stony path to their home. There was something living close by that could carry out a heinous act of cruelty and they needed to find this thing quickly and hold it accountable before anyone else got hurt.

It had been a beautiful day throughout, though the pack had seen very little of the sunshine, being under the closed canopy of the forest all day. Clouds above rolled in just as the pack approached their secret tunnel to home. The grey sky threatened rain, but with the odd clear blue gap allowing the sun to peep through, shooting down transparent yellow rays into the ground. Each pack member crawled through the gap. As Zuma bent down to take his turn he looked up for a moment and paused to see Bessy still over in the field. “Hold on a minute,” he called out to the pack. “Look at that!” He gestured over to the sprawled cat.

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“What?” answered Pooper, following the line of Zuma’s gaze. “It’s just Bessy, sleeping as usual.”

“Right, but she was in that same position this morning when we left. It looks like she hasn’t moved.”

“The cows are way at the bottom of the field, and they are not looking so happy,” called out Sniffy.

“OK,” said Zuma, “Sniffy, you stay here with Jr and Pantalot, and Pooper, you come with me.”

The dogs crawled slowly along the stony path towards the field that sat adjacent to their garden, carefully not to disturb the cows. Laying low in the grass they crept under the electric fence and slowly made their way towards the black ball of fur, trying not to creep up on the cat in case they startled her. It wasn’t until they got close that they were surrounded with flies and a sudden breeze enveloped them in a pungent smell.

“Oh gosh! What is that?” gasped Zuma, struggling for breath from the awful stench as he and the others stood on their hind legs to get their heads above the smell.

“That’s the smell of death, my friend,” replied Pantalot, as they got close to Bessy, to see a gutted bloodied body in front of them.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I think I’m going to be sick!” said Pooper, holding a paw over his snout, stepping back away from the mess.

“What is up with this place?” questioned Zuma.

“This is a real mess,” said Pantalot, following Pooper in stepping away from the corpse. “No wonder the cows are huddled up at the other end of the field. Who would want this anywhere near them?”

“Right!” agreed Zuma. “They must be petrified. I wonder if they saw anything?” He looked at Bessy. “I remember seeing her here this morning. Poor moggy must have been here since at least yesterday evening.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t see anything,” a confused Pantalot replied, bowing his head. “I’m supposed to oversee security, yet I managed to let this happen. Right here! Right under our noses!”

Dusk on the mountain was making it difficult to see, so the dogs agreed to head back home for some food and to figure out what was really going on.

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“Don’t beat yourself up about Bessy, Pantalot,” said Sniffy. “You can’t keep an eye on all the animals here on the mountain.”

“That’s right,” agreed Zuma, placing a soft reassuring paw on his buddy’s shoulder. “We are all safe and that is what counts right now.”

The pack lounged around all evening, snuggling in front of the TV and cosying up to their human. Quiet. Deep in thought. “There’s nothing we can do for her now,” piped up Sniffy after some time. “Let’s take a while to digest what’s happened. Give the community a moment to adjust and see if we can get to the bottom of this.”

It took some days before the cows were brave enough to graze closer to the top of their field again. Their big brown eyes had dulled and saddened, and they spent a lot of time staring into nothing, rocking back and forth, dipping their heads and extending their necks. They ceased to groom themselves, sometimes attempting to catch the attention of the pack, only to run off and huddle in a corner when they did.

“Have you noticed how strange the cows have been behaving since Bessy was killed?” asked Sniffy after a few days. “I see them occasionally pop their heads over the fence and then run off.”

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“Yeah, right,” agreed Pooper. “It’s like they want to tell us something, yet are too scared to.”

They watched the cows’ behaviour over a period of a few days from a secluded part of the garden, so as not to disturb or trouble them. They were sure the cows could give the dogs a clue as to who killed Bessy and if the killing was linked to Eddy.

The herd would always stay close together – never grazing apart and if one wandered in a different direction by itself, another would moo, calling it to return and it would come right back. Whereas before, they grazed separately, keeping distance between them, now they moved around the field as a group, sticking close together. Acting in pairs, one would take a turn to chew while another kept look-out. Around and around the field they continued this way for days.

“Safety in numbers,” Pantalot said to Zuma after a week of studying them. “If they stay together, they can’t be picked off by whatever killed Bessy and Eddy.”

“Something has definitely spooked them,” mused Zuma. “We need to speak with them.”

Signalling to the rest of the pack, they make a plan to crawl through the long grassy patch that lead over to the

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cows to try and talk to them. As the sun lay low in the sky, shadows hovered over the field obscuring anything that was hiding in the grass from view, making the perfect hide-out for the pack. They made sure not to disturb the grass too much and shuffled their way across the field towards the apple tree where the cows huddled together. The apple tree was often used as a scratching post and on happier days the cows would reach out with their long pink tongues to grab the juicy sweet treats the tree had to offer during these mid-summer months. Attempting not to spook them any more than they were already, Zuma tried to catch the eye of the look-out cow and stuck out a paw to signal to keep calm, so that nothing watching would notice they were there.

“Please,” Zuma whispered. “Don’t look at us. Carry on with your business. We are here to talk. We just need to ask you a few questions.”

Struggling not to show its surprise, the cow snorted a little moo. “You can’t be seen talking to us!” it said quietly but curtly, its long eyelashes flicking flies away from its eyes. “You’re putting us all in grave danger by being here.”

“So, something did kill Bessy and you do know what it was?” questioned Pantalot.

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The watcher cow bent its head to the ground as if to take a mouthful of grass allowing its neck bell to dong slightly to drown out any conversation and speaking from the side of its mouth. “We saw it all, but...” It paused and discreetly scanned the field with its eyes... “if we tell, the same will happen to us.”

Pushing for more information. “You must say something!” snapped Pantalot in a low, gruff tone. “Careful,” urged Zuma. “It’s not right to scare them any more than they are already.” Turning to address the watch cow. “Is there something, anything you can tell us that might help? We need to get to the bottom of this. We need to make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else,” he pleaded.

Watcher cow shook its head pretending to swat a fly from its face and dinging its bell another time. “No, there’s nothing we can say... except, it’s a monster. Not right in the head. It has some serious issues...” The cows start to slowly move away together, keeping close and tight as a herd. “... it’s always watching,” it added as they walked calmly away from the pack leaving them stunned by the fear they felt from the herd.

The dogs laid in the grass for a while contemplating the words of the watcher cow as the severity of the situation hit home. “Whatever this monster or beast or creature thing

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is, we really are up against it. We have to find it soon,” Pantalot said to Zuma.

“Come on, let’s head back to the garden before we’re spotted,” commanded Zuma. As they snook through the grass an inquisitive Pooper said, “This beastly monstery thing we’re supposed to be looking for is described as being big, right?” The other dogs nodded, wondering where Pooper was going with this. “So, tell me, if it’s so big, why is it preying on such small creatures?” The others stopped in their tracks, just before slipping through the fence leading into their garden where Sniffy and Jr were waiting for them.

“Right, why would a big animal only kill small creatures?” repeated Zuma. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, perhaps the legendary beast everyone talks about is only big by reputation,” adds Sniffy holding on to Jr, catching some of the conversation as the pack joined her.

“Oh my! Sniffy!” cried Zuma. “You may have hit the nail on the head there!” He hugged her. “We’re not looking for a big beast! We’re looking for something much smaller, something around the size of us!”

The pack sits closely together musing over this new thought and the evidence they had gathered so far. Jr

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dashes into the house just for a second and returns bringing with him a crumpled old piece of paper he's fetched from their human's bin. He unfolds the paper, rubbing it gently so as not to tear it too much, and using his claw and some mud from the flower beds starts to write a list of what they have learnt so far.

Victims

1. *Eddy - popular with the wild folk
Size of a small dog
Lived high in the trees and always watching
Saw most things that were going on.*
2. *Bessy - Always hung around close to the field.
Size of a small dog
Knew the comings and goings of house.*

Suspect

1. *Wild folk says something has been living in the forest since time began.*
2. *We had a strange encounter with something dark, big and smelly months ago.*
3. *Suspect must be small as only dog size creatures have been killed.*
4. *Probably a loner.*
5. *Must be violent judging by its kills.*

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“So, Papa!” – after some time scribbling intently Jr looked up. His tongue was hanging out in concentration. He wiped his muddy claw across the grass to get rid of the globule of mud that had congealed on the end of his paw. “So far, the only things in common are that Eddy and Bessy were of similar size and lived close to us and knew mostly what was going on in our lives.”

The pack looked at each other, confused. “Wuuuut?” questioned Sniffy, after a minute. “Judging by that, it seems these killings have been about us? That can’t be right?” She screwed up her face in disbelief.

“The profile on the suspect seems a little conflicting though, don’t you think?” asked Zuma. “What do you take from that?”

“Well, at this point, who can say...” replied the pragmatic Pantalot. “All we have to go on is what the wild folk say and so far, I believe we are looking for this ghost of the forest still, unless anyone has any other ideas?”

The pack fell silent again, deliberating over Jr’s list and as the sun lowered some more before disappearing behind the mountain, leaving just the glowing remnants of the day just gone, one by one the pack members wandered into their basement bedroom, found their bowls of dinner waiting which they made short work of before gulping

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down some water while thinking about what had happened. As the night bedded in, clouds covering the moon left the dogs' home in deathly darkness, much like the night from months ago. The pack gathered together as they did most nights, snuggling in front of the TV with a blanket over them, and their human close by munching on nut-filled chocolate, careful not to let the pack sneakily steal any of her sweet treats. Outside, the blackness was complete, with a stench so thick it would curl the ends of any nose hair. The sound of breaking branches crunched through the forest and twigs from high in the trees fell to the ground as they snapped. Deep footsteps thudded and a husky breath revealed itself from behind the felled trees near the cabin as it did before. Out of the shadows appeared the darkest old eyes, steeped in age, set in wrinkled, leathery ancient-looking skin, watching intently, but not the cabin. Today its attention was drawn to the rustling in the trees across the stony path from the pack's home. Rustling so loud, the noise from the dark watcher was unnoticed, drowned out. There was slurping and guzzling, and then a nasty little snigger could be heard as a small head revealed itself for a moment, occupied by its activity. Pointy, flopped-over ears, a thin weaselly body and a snout glistening with a thick, dripping dark substance. The creature then hid itself, but two green eyes could still be seen peeping out from the undergrowth as it rocked and muttered words under its breath.

CHAPTER FIVE

The summer morning sun glared brightly through the windows of their basement bedroom, waking the pack early to start their day. Jr groaned like any adolescent, as the yellow light bathed his muzzle in radiant warmth, as if it was gently prodding him, saying ‘get up lazy bones’.

“Why does the sun have to be up so early?” he moaned as he rolled over covering his head with his blankey which he’d kicked off during the night.

The morning was crystal clear. The sun lit up the valley below causing solar panels on farmers’ sheds to dazzle like stars. The sun’s gaze on the mountain caused parts of the rock to glow pink, white and orange with the mountain tops appearing to be on fire – giving the older members of the pack flashbacks to the dreadful night at K9 Cove where Drool had lost his life. Avoiding each other’s eyes, they banished the thoughts from their minds. Sleeping in was now impossible, so everyone, except for Jr, got up to start their day.

“I have a feeling about today,” chirped Sniffy, rolling out of the beanbag and drowsily padding her way to the door

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to go out for a wee. “I can smell a change in the air. Today will be different. I’m sure of that.” She pushed her nose through the flap in the door to sniff the warm morning air and then jumped out.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” she screamed, followed by silence as the pack rushed to her assistance.

“Jeez, what’s up?” shouted Zuma, followed outside by Pantalot and Pooper. “Are you OK?”

“Look,” she stammered quietly, as she gestured in front of her. They all followed her gaze.

“Urrrrhhhhhh!” all three stared in horror at the sight in front of them before gazing in shocked bewilderment at each other.

“Keep Jr inside –” commanded Zuma, “he doesn’t need to see this.”

Towards the back of their garden was the watcher cow from yesterday. Its head and front hooves had been forced through the wired fence separating its field and the garden and was left to struggle and wriggle its way out... until the fence wire, and electric cable surrounding the perimeter of the field, had cut into the cow’s flesh, and the poor animal was left dangling while it bled to death. Its large eyes still

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open, glazed, extinguished of life, tongue removed so as unable to call for help as it passed away. Further off in the field stood the rest of the herd, huddled together, staring over at the pack, quietly mourning for their friend, and clearly frightened. Zuma gestured a sympathetic nod towards them as he ushered the pack back into their bedroom, away from the horror outside.

The dogs slumped back into their beds in disbelief. Jr still under his blankey and drowsy from his slumber was unaware of the sight the others had witnessed.

“Well, that blows our theory out of the water,” a disappointed Pooper blurted out.

“Shush,” said Sniffy. “Keep it down. We don’t want Jr to wake and see outside.”

“Ooops, sorry Sniffy,” replied Pooper submissively.

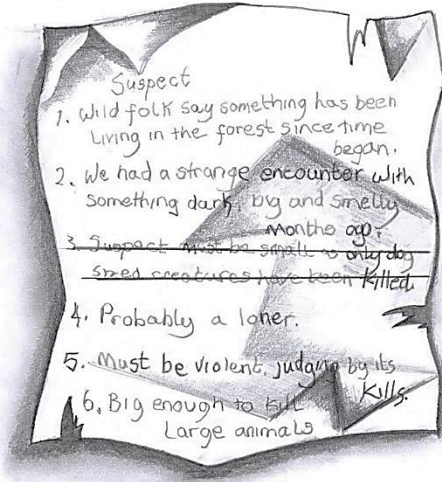
“What do you mean anyway?” she questioned.

“Well, on Jr’s list last night, we agreed the thing doing all of this must be small, something the size of us, perhaps,” Pooper went on. “You, Pantalot, have fought many a big beast in your time, but how would you fair against something the size of a cow?”

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“Mmmmm...” Pantalot looked thoughtful. “Cows are usually placid creatures, but I wouldn’t want to be up against one on my own on a dark night. They have their moments, that’s for sure. Especially when they’re spooked. Whoever did this had to be strong and cunning.”

“So, that puts a small animal out of the picture and the beasty the wild folk talk about back in the frame,”



concluded Zuma looking around at the others.

“Then we’re all in agreement,” said Pantalot. “We can cross number 3 ‘*Suspect must be small as only us-sized creatures have been killed.*’ off Jr’s suspect list?”

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“Yes,” agreed Sniffy. “And add in a point 6. So, this is how the list reads now:

Everyone nods in agreement.

To help take their minds off what they’d seen, the pack decide to take themselves for a walk. Zuma follows and jumps about at his human’s feet, generally making a pest of himself and begs her with big brown eyes to join them. It’s been a few days since she’s enjoyed a long walk with them, so she grabs the tennis ball and flinger and a handful of poo bags and off they wander, following the stony people path up through the forest to the top, where the clearing of thick green grass starts, and the communication antenna stands tall watching over all the forest and its wild folk. They play for hours. Zuma’s human is aware of the cow corpse and decides it’s best to stay away from the house until the farmer has come to remove it. Ball flinging is the pack’s most favourite game and Zuma’s human flings it for miles and clearly loves to watch them all chase it, to see who reaches it first. Back and forth, on and on the ball flinging goes, stopping only a few times for a drink of water as the summer morning warms up into a humid afternoon. The pack are enjoying themselves so much their worries melt away as they immerse themselves in the moment, running and chasing and fetching and woofing. Barking and rolling, laughing and joking.

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As the day heats up, the pack tires. Tongues lolling from their mouths as they try to cool down, they are called by Zuma's human to sit and chill out, so they don't overheat. Laying together on the thick grass, some snuggled into their human, their thoughts return to the recent events and the loss of their friends.

“Just one thing,” Zuma addressed the pack in a moment of reflection. “I didn't see the bell around the watcher cow's neck. Did you?”

Jr and Pooper roll about like the jokers they are, lightening the mood, rubbing their backs deep into the grass turning their fur multiple shades of green, with Zuma's human chuckling as she watches. The pack looks across the valley towards the mountain. Thoughts turn to their time at K9 Cove, remembering the good days when they were able to relax on their beach, fooling around playing games and collecting food. They were different times, tougher. Days where they needed to be vigilant, on guard and fight for survival. Incomparable to their lives today – with fond memories of their beloved Drool, those days were long gone.

The pack, along with their human, had dozed off and midday had long gone. Pantalot's security senses kicked in

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suddenly. His ears pricked up as he caught a familiar scent. Nose to the air, he stood to attention, stubby tail all atwitch. There had been no one in sight for hours, so this scent took him by surprise. “Noooo?” he questioned.

“What’s up?” asked Zuma, as he and the other pack members came round, standing as well, and stretching, stubby tails twitching.

“It can’t be,” he replied, confused. “Can you smell that?”

The light breeze changed direction for a moment and the pack briefly caught the distinct smell.

Sniffy sensed movement way off in the distance, from the deep forest. “Look!” she called, squinting in the direction of an ominous emerging shape, and pointing. “Yes! I do smell that... familiar... smell,” she added, inhaling long deep breaths and taking in the memorable scent.

All, including Zuma’s human, gazed in the direction Sniffy was pointing. “What is that?” Zuma asked, gathering them all closer together, with Jr in the middle and their human at the back, to protect them all. Tails and hackles up, noses in the air, they all sniffed, curious and growling under their breaths. Zuma’s scar twinged a little

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as he and Pantalot moved forward slowly, ready to defend if need be.

“I... I don’t believe my eyes,” said a confused Pantalot.

“It can’t be?” questioned a confused Sniffy, as she continued to sniff the air, and slowly moved forward.

Emerging from the forest opening, a small dog not unlike themselves. A little skinny, hunched back and short stubby tail. Triangular, flopped over ears, long snout with white and light brown markings covering one eye like a patch and also the ear on the same side. Clearly very tired, the dog limped its way towards them. The weaselly shape moved slowly, so dirty it was difficult to make out the scars on its body, though soon the pack could make out that familiar twitch, and recognise those big green eyes.

The pack edged forward slowly. “It can’t be!” Sniffy cried. “Silkskin?” she muttered under her breath.

The strange dog continued to limp towards them, one bloodied paw stretched out signalling for help as the pack looked at each other in disbelief.

“Silkskin!” Pantalot shouted and the strange dog groaned in reply. Pantalot glanced at Zuma, waiting to see what to do next.

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“He’s injured,” a compassionate Sniffy squealed and rushed forward to the wounded dog’s aid. “Silkskin?” She took the dog in her front paws and looked to the rest of the pack. Shaking her head in amazement and relief, “It’s him, it really is Silkskin!”

The rest of the pack rushed forward to greet their old pack member. Sniffing, tails twitching with excitement, they squeaked with amazement as they ran and bounced around licking him and nuzzling against him welcoming him back to the pack. Zuma’s human could see the dogs knew this bedraggled, injured and bloodied dog, and so rushed forward and scooped him into her arms.

“Don’t worry now old buddy,” Zuma whispered into Silkskin’s ear. “You are home now and will be well taken care of.”

The tired injured dog breathlessly whispered, “I’ve found you, at last, I’ve found you.” As he slipped into a deep sleep and was carried home to the cabin on the mountain.

CHAPTER SIX

For days Sniffy sat by Silkskin's side accompanied by Jr, who often stared at the strange-looking newcomer. Zuma's human had done a good job in cleaning up Silkskin's injuries. They actually looked worse than they were and with regular bathing and clean dressings the wounds were healing nicely. Silkskin had groaned, in and out of consciousness the whole time, occasionally waking for a little warm homemade food. Aside from his wounds, his body looked like it had seen better days. His rib cage pushing through his fur, his drawn-in face and claws worn down to the quick except for two on his right paw.

Silkskin twisted and contorted in his sleep, his exhausted body haunted by the early memories of his birth family held deep down inside. Born to a family of working dogs from a farm in the English Devonshire countryside, Silkskin was the smallest of a litter of five, made up of three girls and two boys. The small hunch on his back made it difficult for him to move like the others and his short stubby legs left him slow in learning to walk. Continuously being pushed out by his bigger, stronger siblings, his mother always tried to encourage and push him to get what he needed to survive, but this never stopped him from feeling rejected by his siblings for his differences. When he wasn't ignored by them, he'd be

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bullied for his size or the funny-looking little hump on his back. The only acceptance he felt was from his mother.

They lived in a barn on a very busy sheep farm. Lots of comings and goings of other animals, that would always come to take a look at the different-looking little dog, and the pointing and laughing soon became normal to him as he retreated within himself and his thoughts. A traditional family set up, his mother loved him, fed him and cared for him the best she could, unsuccessfully shielding him from the stares of strangers, while also looking after her other pups. His father worked hard for the farmer. Assisting him with tractor journeys and watching over sheep, this had been his job for many years until a nasty injury from heavy farm machinery left him disabled, shortly after the birth of Silkskin and his siblings. The farmer had no use for a three-legged ageing dog, so despite his best efforts to help out he was retired to more menial work closer to the farmhouse.

Mum tried to keep the family together, but as the pups grew, one by one, humans would come and take each pup to their new loving forever homes. All were taken, except for the rejected, unwanted runt.

His suppressed memories took him to a dark night. Only himself left in the family barn wrapped up in his cosy blanket. All his siblings had been rehomed and his mother

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and father were inside the farmhouse for a moment on a small farm related job. The night was cold and thick fog lingered low outside the door of his warm comfortable home. Still small for his age, Silkskin showed bravery as two humans open his barn door a crack, allowing white lights from a vehicle to dazzle him in his bed. He barked with all his might to warn off the strangers, but still they sneaked into the barn.

“Look, there he is,” one signalled to the other in a deep cockney accent.

Instantly a thick blanket was thrown over him to muffle his bark and muzzle his snapping jaw, and he was scooped up from his bed.

“E’s got some fight in ‘im for a little un,” the largest of the two humans croaked, struggling with the fighting blanket.

“Yeah, perfect for wot we got in mind,” laughed the other with cigarette smoke leaking from his open mouth, much like the fog of the cold night outside.

In seconds he remembered being thrown into the back of a cold van and taken far away from his mother. Deeper, his memory took him back to being a fearful pup. Cold, shivering, scared. Too young to understand what was

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happening to him. He found himself underground in a small cage. Hungry, alone and forced to fight for scraps of food. Told he was in training for something big, something great and he would be grateful for this training for what was to come. Traumatized by his treatment, Silkskin developed an anger within. Small coping mechanisms kicked in: rocking, twitching, jealousy, mistrust, all developed to enable his ability to cope. A broken pup, raised in a toxic environment, stolen to live a life in slavery.

He twitches in his sleep as he remembers meeting his pack for the first time. Thrown into a new cage after a long journey and a big fight. Scared and frozen in fear against the iron bars of the cage, he stared at the group of dogs in front of him. The kind face of Blaze as she tended to a nasty cut on the back of Pantalot's front paw. Torn ears and a scar down her face, he remembers the love in her eyes as she summons him close to comfort him. A strong Drool standing close by. On watch, waiting for his show call.

The Jack Pack's acceptance of him briefly stopped the fragile dog from falling completely over the edge. For a time, his psychotic blood lust from the fighting ring is suppressed as he's accepted into this family of misfits. His vulnerability exposed, and trauma released, as he begins to remember the love he felt from his mother and the

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newfound mother figure he had in Blaze. In time his relationship with her grew. He wanted to protect her, love her, obsess about her and while he respected Blaze's relationship with Drool, the affection he developed for Blaze soon became an unhealthy obsession. All the pack members knew it, but as Blaze was his mother figure, so Drool his father and Pantalot his brother, the family Silkskin needed was there to help and support him. His insanity underestimated by the others, his obsessive thoughts were passed off as trauma related.

After the pack's escape from the dog fighting compound, and the loss of Blaze, the pack pulled together for a better life. For the first time Silkskin was a free dog. Free to live his life without fear, free to walk where he wanted. His life at K9 Cove with the others was the best he'd ever known. And with Sniffy now a part of the pack along with her brother, he now had a new mother figure to obsess about, and Sniffy had the ability to keep him calm for a couple of years, while they all lived as a pack, recovering and learning from life, learning from the love of Blaze and the teachings from Drool.

Everything changed when Zuma was found washed up on the beach.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Strange,” thought Sniffy to herself gazing at Silkskin’s ground down claws as she stroked his head holding on to Jr with her other paw. “This is your uncle Silkskin, Jr.” She said softly turning to her pup. “Like your uncle Pantalot he was a strong defender of the pack, and saved your father’s life.” Purposely not mentioning the reason how they got to be on that cliff top in the first place and who caused the event that led up to it.

“Uhhhh... he seems a little odd to me Mummy,” said Jr, staring at the patient some more, frowning slightly as he noticed the apparently sleeping patient slowly peel open an eye and then close it quickly, as if he was hoping to still appear asleep.

“Please try not to be judgmental Jr,” advised Zuma kindly from behind them. “Silkskin had a difficult life and your mum was the only dog in our pack able to pacify him. Her compassion kept him calm. They were very close.”

Jr leaned over Silkskin some more, staring closely. One eye slightly open, Silkskin could sense the closeness of the pup and slowly backed himself away up against the wall trying not to make it obvious he was awake.

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“He’s awake! He’s awake!” The excited pup barked and bounced around. “Look! He’s moving.”

The devious patient pretended to stir slowly as his cover was blown and opened one eye, then the other to see Jr right up in his face, head tilting to one side and then the other. Yawning very deliberately and faking a stretch, he could see his beautiful Sniffy gazing with loving eyes at her friend, and Zuma close behind. “Urrghh,” he thought to himself, as he ignored the pack leader and concentrated his efforts on his Sniffy.

“I’m so glad I found you,” he groaned, with weakness in his voice.

“We are too,” replied a relieved Sniffy, gently pushing Jr aside and holding out a paw to help Silkskin stand. He leant on her as she walked him to the centre of the room where everyone was waiting to welcome him home.

“Looks like you guys did well for yourselves?” he questioned gazing around the room with its doggy comforts. Water bowls, food bowls, a big soft blue beanbag that he remembered Zuma talked about in the days of K9 Cove was placed next to a comfortable looking square thing covered in blankets and cushions which the dogs jumped onto to sit and lie on. A white box-shaped thing stood in the corner of the room, and another square

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flat box-shaped thing stood on top of it, this one showing cartoon-styled moving images of other animals not familiar to him on its front. Stretching himself out, releasing the stiffness in his muscles from days of sleeping, he shook his body off, freeing some old, matted fur that was caught up in dirt from his journey. He caught the eyes of the others all there ready to greet their long-lost friend and eagerly listen to his story, as he awkwardly looked down at the floor.

“Zuma was right Silkskin!” assured Pantalot with excitement. “After our first conversations when meeting him on K9 Cove all that time ago. Remember? We were teasing Zuma because he was talking about how much he was loved, and we couldn’t believe a human was capable of such love and affection. Well, his human does love him. He is her world, and now, so are we.”

“Yes,” gushed Pooper. “We all live here together now. We’ve got our forever home with warm blankies, plenty of food, lots of walks, hugs, and best of all... ball flinging! Oh, the ball flinging...” His mind drifting to the thought of hundreds of tennis balls landing on him in a slow-motion rainy scene.

“But, tell us Silkskin,” a concerned Zuma asked, “what happened to you? We saw you fall over the cliff and plunge into the sea. How is it you are here with us today?”

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Sniffy, helping Silkskin to sit on a cushion close to the fireplace, signalled for the pack to gather around. Jr pushed a bowl of water closer so Silkskin could drink at will.

“Please,” begged Pooper. “Tell us what happened.”

The long-lost pack member took a deep breath. Not one for many coherent words he sat quiet for a moment, composed himself and disclosed his version of *his* story.

“I did indeed fall over the edge,” he started. “Though, I didn’t land in the sea.” He looked up, green eyes directed at Zuma, piercing him with blame. “You failed to see I landed on a ledge just below, almost hidden, but not enough: if you had bothered to look, you would have seen me,” he mocked.

The jaws of all the pack members dropped and heads tilted, confused.

“But...” a puzzled Pantalot defended, shaking his head, “we looked over the edge and called to you. We saw the splash in the water – you didn’t respond.”

“Oh Silkskin,” a sympathetic Sniffy said. “How were we to know?”

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“While you abandoned me, I lived on that ledge. Stranded, for what seemed like an eternity. I battled the elements, day after day, night after night. Relying on the kindness of those stupid sea gulls to drop food close by. Sometimes they dropped rocks and stones, which would hit and bruise me. Talk about knocking a dog when he’s down. Over time the stones built up and I was able to climb up the cliff and back onto the edge where I fell. I laid there for hours thinking, wondering, recovering. I knew you were following the cliff with the sea to your right to find your ‘forever home’—” using air quotes as he sarcastically continued – “so, I walked for days, maybe weeks, I dunno, I lost track of time, to find the beach you talked about. I did find it eventually and found an acquaintance of yours.” He turned to Zuma. “A tall, red wire-haired Visla?”

“Dylan!” Zuma whispered.

“Yes, well,” Silkskin continued rolling his eyes, “he informed me that you had been living close by, but after your human had recovered from her coma, she moved you all to the mountains of Switzerland to retreat from the world. The only thing I could do was find you. Find *my* pack.”

I could sense where you all had been. I could smell you all, well, most of you and followed your stinky track. Some of you are more fragrant than others, that’s the truth,”

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glaring at Zuma and then glancing fondly at Sniffy. “I followed and talked to locals. Turns out you are quite the celebrity pack across countries. I walked north into Spain, followed its northern coastline until I reached a small mountain range and crossed the Pyrenees into France. I followed the sea to my right until I reached the middle of northern Italy and then north over the Alps through winding tunnels, along busy roads, high into the mountain where summer and winter could both exist in one day. St Bernardino’s Pass links Italy and Switzerland and it’s funny I remember that, as it reminded me of an annoying dog pack from K9 Cove. You remember right?” gesturing to Pantalot and Pooper. “Those huge furry things that carried funny barrels around their necks and we always wondered what they were for.”

“As I got closer, I could smell you were not far away. Some of you reeked.” He pausing to look accusingly at Zuma again. “I rested only when I had to and ate only when I could find something. My pads are like stone and my claws almost down to the quick. If I needed to fight I did. But all I had in my mind was to be back together with my pack.” He stared at Sniffy. She blushed and uncomfortably rocked onto her toes for a moment. “I followed your scent to this forest. Here I came across the scariest creature I’ve ever met. In all my days I never thought such a beast existed. I thought I’d come across some evil beasts back in the compound, but this... this was off the scale. Huge in

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stature, I sensed its diseased mind, its smell, its darkness, that welled up depression inside me. Awful, just horrible it was. I saw it watching you and spying at night from behind the felled trees across from this cabin. After I saw it up high in the forest, I approached it and asked why it was here and the thing attacked me, unprovoked. It took everything I had to fight it off and I'm pretty sure I injured it, but this thing is bigger than me and will take all of us to defeat it. That's how I got these injuries." He gestured to his bandaged paw. "I don't know what it is, what it wants, where it comes from, but I have a feeling it's not good."

"Oh Silkskin," empathised Sniffy. "You have had quite the adventure."

Silkskin nodded, turning puppy eyes to Sniffy and offering his head down for a pat. "I had only just arrived on the day you found me. It was only the early hours of that morning I came across the mysterious monster." He fell silent and paused. Then, looking at Jr, "So, who is this new member?"

Zuma looked at his boy and reassuringly nodded for him to come forward. Nervously, Jr stepped out from behind Sniffy, letting go of her tail that he always gripped tightly in moments when unsure, and introduced himself. He gazed at both his parents who encouraged him on. "Mm...mm...my name is Drool," he stammered nervously.

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“My mama told me you fought hard and saved Papa’s life?”

“Mama? Papa?” questioned Silkskin looking at both Zuma and Sniffy, green eyes aglow.

“Yes, I’m Junior,” continued the pup feeling braver with every word. “They used to tell me stories every night of the adventures you had together, as they tucked me up in bed. Stories of how you, Uncle Pantalot and my name’s sake fought bravely for the sake of our pack. You’re kind of a legend,” he confessed blushing.

“Well yes, that’s right little one,” replied the patient. “We had many adventures and lived a good life on K9 Cove until...” He stopped, looked at Zuma and continued, changing the subject again. “Don’t you look very handsome, so much like your mummy. Big and strong. You’ve got big fighting paws there boy.”

Sniffy blushed again, trying to ignore Silkskin’s words. “Let’s eat and then get Silkskin acquainted with our home, with a tour of the house and garden –” pushing breakfast bowls in front of each pack member urging them to eat up.

Summers are short in Switzerland and this one was starting to draw to an end. Still with the occasional hot summery day, the last week had changed and today was

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the first dull, cool and overcast day in a while. Autumn was definitely in the air. The smell of ageing leaves lingered as they start to turn colour and fall. Pumpkins growing in the veg patch were getting larger, almost ready to hollow out as jack ‘o’ lanterns for Halloween. The sunflower heads dried and drooped, indicating their time was up and birds hovered in groups stealing what seeds they could before they were harvested as human food for the winter months. Berries grew fat and plump hanging ripe from their bushes, ready to be plucked and collected for jam. The occasional black squirrel would risk a visit into the garden and, one by one, scurry about with stolen fruit from the pear tree and scrumping apples from the cow field, cramming their mouths as much as possible to make each trip as efficient as they could. The pack enjoyed watching them scamper about. They seemed more spooked than usual now, not knowing if they would be safe in the garden of the Jack Pack. The mountain opposite was missing, hiding behind a blanket of low-lying grey cloud, setting off the rest of the valley with a dull tone. No shadows from sunlight and a quietness from the wild world, the mountain felt almost eerie.

“Welcome to your new forever home,” announced Zuma, as all the pack members bounced through the dog flap to their garden. Zuma was surprised about the ease in which Silkskin managed to get through the flap,

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considering his injuries and exhaustion from his recent long journey.

The pack stood together admiring their surroundings, joyous that their group was almost complete once again.

“We’ll fill you in on what’s been going on around here Silkskin,” Pantalot said. “But at least we now know for sure there is a forest monster and we have to track it down and hold it accountable for its horrendous acts,” he said to the others.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Silkskin sneaked up behind the pack to listen as they talked through the goings-on over the recent months. Zuma can see his reaction to some of the things they talked about. He winced when Eddy was mentioned, groaned about Bessy, sympathised about the cow, and looked shocked when they talked about the watcher, the mysterious animal that lurked in the forest.

“Kind of reminds me of someone back in the old dog days,” he remarked.

Silkskin only had negative puppyhood memories, of being abused. He remembered the separation anxiety he felt from being taken away from his biological family. He could never understand why he was taken in the way he was, while his siblings, one by one, visited by human families with small children who petted and loved them, before each was snuggled in a fluffy blanket and allowed to sniff goodbye to their parents, and then carried away. Jealousy raged within him. He remembered the cold wire cage where he was forced to live, placed on a damp floor with no bed or blanket for warmth. The relentless training that went on and on until it was instinct. The beatings. Those humans, who lassoed a thick rope over his head and dragged him, almost strangled, snarling and snapping from

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his cage night after night. He remembers being made to fight, though by this point it was all he knew. The blood lust he developed. The human cheers and the smell of money exchanging hands. He remembers the isolation when kept in a cage on his own, without food for days, when he lost a fight. He remembered the damp, dark, dank smell of the underground bunker light with just a single dangling dim lightbulb where the humans kept all the dogs. The blood, the vomit and the squalid conditions. The infections from wounds. He remembers withdrawing from the world – anxiety, scratching and twitching developed as the voices in his head gave him comfort as they talked to him in the dark. His face softened for a moment as he thought of Blaze. She licked his wounds and held him tight when he was frightened. The only other creature he could call a mother that he could remember. The only creature who showed compassion, who taught them all love at all cost. The pack member he respected, the pack member who loved, the pack leader who helped them to work through their trauma while she was suffering her own anguish. Who was so tragically taken from him. And then he remembered finally, the joy he felt when taking revenge on the one who took her away, the one who took Drool away. The treasured moments of K9 Cove. A place he could call home, where all of his pack could play and be dogs. Recover from trauma, being cared for by his beloved Sniffy. And after all he had been through, he was now

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back. He had his pack, he had Sniffy and the extra added bonus of Jr.

“If I’m not mistaken (and if I didn’t see his death myself), I would say this mysterious monster sounds a lot like that red-eyed Ridgeback to me,” pondered Silkskin, shaking away the haunting thoughts of days gone by.

Each pack member had their part to play in raising Jr. Sniffy, the loving mother, Zuma, the caring father figure and the uncles to play with, one for joking and pranking with, and the other to learn about bravery. “Where would I fit in?” he thought to himself.

Zuma and the pack had all agreed that Jr was to be raised with Drool and Blaze’s philosophy of love and tolerance for all. To teach him that bullying is not the way and that kind, uplifting words are best; love and forgiveness will conquer all, and every situation can be resolved through honesty and clear communication.

“But the kid needs to have skills, Sniffy,” protested Silkskin one morning, ignoring Zuma as they flopped through the flap into the garden on yet another dismal grey day. “He needs to be able to protect himself.”

“From what?” asked Zuma.

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“There’s no real danger here Silkskin,” advocated Sniffy.

“And once we have this mysterious beast under control, all will be perfectly safe on the mountain again,” added Zuma.

Defeated, Silkskin sloped off to find his young nephew and pretended to join in with the ball game Jr and Pooper are playing together.

“Huh!?” Zuma tilted his head to one side as he watched Silkskin. “Never took him for a game player,” he said passing Sniffy as he wanders off towards the front of the garden.

“Dogs can change!” she returned.

Zuma winked and half smiled as he carried on.

From the top end of the garden, Zuma had a good all-round view, where he could admire his pack. The low-lying cloud was lifting slightly, but not enough to make much difference to the dullness that spread across the valley.

“Strange for it to last so long,” he thought to himself, but they hadn’t been at the cabin for a full year yet, so he had no previous year to compare it to. The mountain was still

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lost under deep layers of grey. Only the spire at the top of the highest point of the mountain poked through, and then could only be seen with a squint. He looked at his surroundings, aging plants where flowers had drooped. Weeds were taking over in the beds where their human had no time to maintain the garden. The wild garlic patch looked emptier than usual. Most of the flowers were done for the year and the leaves were shrinking off, but the patch was certainly smaller than it had been in recent weeks. *“Perhaps our wee has killed it off.”* He speculated. He watched Jr play with his uncles and slowly each became tired and fell away from the game in favour of a nap, until it was just Jr and Silkskin huddled together talking. He continued to watch as they played. Pulling up earthworms from out of the ground and cutting them in two to watch their new bodies grow a tail, teaching Jr about regeneration. It seemed a bit cruel, but Zuma was prepared to let Silkskin continue for the sake of education, plus it didn’t actually hurt the worm, or so he believed. They caught bugs by clasping them in their paws and then letting them go. This continued for some time, until Silkskin purposely squashed a bug and wiped it off on his fur like it was nothing, encouraging Jr to do the same, sniggering all the while. He watched Sniffy step in, asking them not to continue. She was uncomfortable with what was happening, and they stopped for a moment. He observed some more as his pup and Silkskin played behind a bush. Jr with a tennis ball in his mouth, he appeared to be

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listening and taking instructions from Silkskin. The ball placed softly onto the grass and Jr gently licks and turns the ball until a piece of its bright green fluffy coating becomes detached. He sees Silkskin's paws as they push together indicating Jr's jaws need to press hard on the ball and continue to tear the coating to reveal the rubber underneath. This process continues for some time as the pup is encouraged to bite hard and roll the ball inside his jaws, squeezing and rolling, squeezing and rolling, until eventually the ball pops open and the two halves fall apart exposing its innards. Well, if there were innards. Jr continues to stay alert, focusing all attention on Silkskin as his paws flap about as he continues, as it seems, to instruct the pup.

Butterflies of gold and white flutter past and unfortunate ones are grabbed by Silkskin, who promptly pulls off their wings in a way that makes Jr wince. It seems clear to Zuma that he's being instructed in this also. Not sure if he should intervene. It is of course against their pack code, but should he?

“Should I say something?” he thinks to himself, wrestling with his conscience.

Calling out to Sniffy, he points in the direction of instructor and student hiding behind the bush. She sees what's going on and Zuma, unable to hear what is being

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said sees Sniffy pulling Jr from the situation, hold one paw up to Silkskin, suggesting staying away. Silkskin's ears sink as he's left alone to wander the garden, twitching, scratching and muttering to himself as Jr is told to stay by his mum for a while. He's watching the scenario play out, but what he doesn't realise until that moment is that he is also being watched. His fur stands to attention as he feels eyes staring at him from the other side of the path. Behind the felled trees in its usual position on the edge of the forest. A shiver creeps down Zuma's spine, and hackles high, he turns to face his watcher. The smell of death overcomes his body and the scar on his leg throbbed like it had before. Clouds loom low in the air, darkening the forest even more. He sees nothing. Pressing his paws up against the garden gate, he squints his eyes for a better look and moving his head from side to side, hoping each angle will reveal something new. Still, nothing. Visions of death appear in his mind as a depression sets over him, much like how he felt the first time they encountered this watcher. Then, on the ground, to the left of the felled trees, in the middle of a grassy path which led up to some fields lay Topsy.

Shrugging off the sickening feeling from the watcher, Zuma leapt over the garden fence and rushed over, calling for the rest of the pack. Rustling from the trees behind the log pile, Zuma heard a whoosh of branches and booming

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footsteps rush off into the distance. “I know you’re there!” he shouts.

In an instant the pack gather round close, as they stare down at the motionless kitty sprawled out on the muddy grass.

The dank air and darkness had lifted slightly, but the stench lingers a little. Low-lying clouds loomed over head, threatening a storm.

“Well, that’s another one down,” came an unpleasant shrill from Silkskin.

The pack glared at him in silence.

“Is he really dead? I don’t see any marks,” enquired Pantalot.

Everyone stared down at the cat. Zuma kneeled next to the silent ball of fur and prodded it with a stick picked up from a fallen branch. No twinge or groan or movement of any kind.

“OK,” shrugs Pantalot. “That answers my question.”

They all huddled together staring even closer at the body.

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“I felt the monster thingy here again,” confessed Zuma after some time.

“Where?”

“Here. Right here, just now,” he continued. “Just before I found Topsy like this.”

“Strange,” added Pooper.

“Yeah, it’s like it wanted me to find him, the cat. I mean, the thing wanted me to find Topsy,” said Zuma, stumbling his words. “And when I called you, I heard those booming footsteps disappear into the forest.”

With no visible signs of what caused the death of Topsy, the pack seemed more confused than ever.

“So, do you think our monster killed him?” questioned Pantalot with his logical head on.

“Well, yeah, I guess so. It was here and now it’s not.”

“It ran away as soon as it was busted!” barked Silkskin.

“Yes, but hang on,” piped up Sniffy, leaning in closer to get a better look at the stiffening cat. “What are those?”

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Close to the back end of the cat, hidden deep in his long soft fur, were two small puncture marks. Close together with congealed blood and clear liquid oozing from the holes. It was obvious Topsy had been there an hour or two.

“I think we may have our culprit,” nodded Pantalot, towards a long green snake slammed up against the fence close by, screwed up like spaghetti.

“So, that will suggest this was an accident. Am I right?” proposed Sniffy.

“It would certainly seem that way,” replied Zuma, but he was unsure. Something didn’t seem right. Topsy certainly had snake bite marks and it seems that those were what killed him. But the snake. “Why would a snake have died after biting something or someone?” He continued, “Is it normal for snakes to die after one bite, like a bumblebee sting? Topsy was known for stalking and catching snakes as prizes for his human, as we know, so a snake bite for him is not so much as a surprise, but why is the snake dead? Are there two suspicious deaths here? Or one accident and the other murder?”

“I’m pretty sure we can call this murder by proxy,” concluded Pantalot.

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“What on earth is murder by proxy?” questioned Zuma.
“And how would you know what that is anyway?”

Pantalot shrugs as Silkskin slides in behind him. “When you’ve had a life like ours, one picks up all sorts of useless information.”

CHAPTER NINE

A kind of normality returned to the mountain as the pack settled back into their routine with Silkskin. It wasn't long before old roles from K9 Cove resumed. Pooper and Jr playing and joking together. Zuma and Pantalot talking about how great their lives are now, philosophising about the world and the weird things going on recently. Sniffy keeping a close eye on Jr and Silkskin and Silkskin watching Sniffy's every move, hiding and listening in on conversations and occasionally disappearing from sight. No one seemed bothered by this behaviour, it was 'normal' for Silkskin. It's what he did. Twitching, rocking, mumbling, scratching. Exactly the same as he behaved at K9 Cove, his coping mechanism. His wounds seemed to take time to heal. For something quite superficial Silkskin nursed his paw, holding it up much like rocking a baby in his arms and winced a lot as he moved it. Unable to put pressure on it he developed a small limp that wouldn't go away. A three-legged tripod, Sniffy would have sympathy for.

The eerie sense that covered the mountain and forest days before with grey tones was still present, though the pack chose to ignore it in their happiness of their reunion. The mountain opposite was still concealed by the off-white clouds which lay low over the valley, obscuring any views

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they may have. The absence of shadows created a ghostly atmosphere with still, stagnant air. The cows continued to gather close together, choosing to remain at the bottom section of the field far away from the cabin as possible, unwilling to make eye contact with Zuma or any member of the pack. Black squirrels ceased to frequent the garden in search of tasty snacks. An absence of other animals that were usually drawn to the abundance of positivity surrounding their cabin seemed to go unnoticed by the pack too.

“I’m heading out for a wander,” said Zuma after some days. He said to Pantalot, “You stay here and continue to hang out with Silkskin and the others. I need some time alone to contemplate what’s going on around here.”

He took his usual route, through the secret tunnel out to the path and up through the forest. Darker than it had been in recent weeks, the forest was turning as the new season arrived. Pine trees with large cones ready to pop remained the same but leaves from the scattered beech trees started to change and wilt. The forest was quiet as Zuma padded his way, hearing only the sound of his pawsteps rustling through the fallen leaves, spongy under foot, and clipping sounds from disrupted stones as he passed by.

“So strange,” he thought to himself. Looking around he could not see a single soul from the wild world. Not a bird

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twittering, woodpecker pecking, squirrel scurrying. Not even a juicy fat red slug could be seen on the damp ground. He carried on walking. Up past the clearing where they had found Silkskin and further into the deep forest. Still nothing, no one. Not a bunny bouncing, or a deer dancing. Confused, Zuma cautiously carried on further, towards the wild village. “What’s going on here?” He gazed around trying to find any signs of life. Deeper he walked further and darker the forest got. With no sunlight through the forest canopy Zuma was having difficulty seeing. Eventually he saw a baby fox darting in and out of some bushes and further away its father signalling it to hurry into their burrow.

“Odd,” he whispered bewildered.

A short while after, a kite flew past, high up to the furthest tree point it could go. A family of hedgehogs curled into balls, so they couldn’t make eye contact with Zuma, and rolled themselves into a close-by hole. He stumbled and while gaining his balance, some mice were quivering under a rotten old tree covered with mushrooms and moss. “Shush!” he could hear them squeak. “He’ll see us.”

He stood for a while, slowly turning in circles, looking around, bewildered. Hoping someone, anyone would show themselves. Someone who could tell him what was going

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on. “Why is everyone so unwelcoming?” he called, dizzy from all the spinning.

He padded his way into the wild village. “Surely there will be someone here?” he thought, but the village entrance was quiet, except for various creatures scattering into their tiny homes and slamming doors. The food pile was left abandoned. Laundry hanging around the tiny entrances of all the homes, long since dry was left unkempt. The effigy of Eddy still hanging in prominent position. Small recently extinguished fires in the village centre smoulder indicated someone is there, but no one making themselves present to Zuma.

Alone and confused he fell to the ground, eyes screwed up and head tilted. “What’s going on?” Shaking his head, he lay down, paws out front and head down submissively, hoping someone would come forward and explain what’s going on. He felt rejected, an intruder, and he didn’t know why, and it saddened him. Rain started to drip through the tree canopies onto him. The humid air chills and Zuma feels it right to his bones as the rain trickles through his fur causing him to shiver.

“I haven’t felt this lonely since I found myself washed up on the beach at K9 Cove,” he thinks to himself and continues to lay there submissively, waiting for someone to come.

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“Leave us, dog!” booms a voice from behind a felled tree stump covered in rotten bark and moss. Startled, Zuma jumped to his paws staring in the direction of the voice. “You and your pack are not welcome anymore,” it continued.

“Wha... What have we done?” Confused.

“You have brought death upon the wild world. Upset the balance of our life. Go. Now!”

Rejected and unable to respond in his confusion, Zuma, shaking, lowered his head as far as he could and turned to leave, but was distracted by sobbing sounds in the distance past the other side of the village.

“I must find out what that is!” he shouts and charges through the village before anyone could stop him. Claws clattering on the ground, he sped through parts of the wild village he’d not seen before. It got darker before he popped out into a small clearing where it brightened. Zuma shaded his eyes against the glare until his eyes acclimatised. Brilliant green coloured grass adorned the ground and thick white mist rising from it looked like breath from a dragon. To his surprise on the grass lay the largest of stags with huge antlers, with his doe sobbing sorrowfully over him. Zuma edged forward to see what had happened.

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“C... Can I help?” he asked softly.

“I really don’t think so,” sobbed the doe prodding at the stag with her hoof hoping for a reaction.

“What happened?”

Shrugging her shoulders, staring down at her mate through her tears. “I really have no idea. He was grazing with me one minute. We were spooked by a shadow. He ran in one direction... me in another.” Prodding harder at her stag. “I heard what sounded like a rush of wind... a scream and then, I found Star here like this.”

Zuma moved closer. A strong looking buck, in the prime of his life, lay lifeless. Rain trickling from his corpse. There were no immediate visible signs of how he died, but Zuma could see two deep scratch marks across his left hind leg. His body laid limp, Zuma sensed he was not long dead from the warmth still radiating from his body.

“What am I to do now?” sobbed the doe. “He was my life mate. How can I carry on without him?”

“What can I do to help?” asked Zuma again.

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The doe turned to Zuma, for the first time properly looking at him, and realising who he was, scowled. “Nothing!” she snapped.

Zuma recoiled.

“It’s because of you and your pack that this has happened,” the doe accused. “Haven’t you noticed the wild folk distancing themselves from you? You have brought evil here, and the spirit of the forest is punishing us. Punishing us all!”

“Spirit of the forest?” asked Zuma. “We’ve never really heard of the wild folk talk of this before. Please,” he begged. “Tell me more.”

The doe studied Zuma for a moment, then caught her breath and continued softly, “Only the oldest and wisest folk know of the spirit of the forest. Stories are passed down generations to keep the wild world safe and in time they have become legend. Only a few have the honour of knowing the truth. Deer are amongst the honoured as we have the capability to wander the whole of this forest in only a day and we live the longest of all the forest folk.” She paused. “You heard the wild folk talk about a mysterious creature living amongst us. No one could really give you an answer, no one really knows, but it’s here. It lives amongst us, hidden in shadows, passing information

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to folk through dreams and visions. The whole eco system of the forest relies on it – relies on its mood, its energy, its life. It's older than the forest itself, it's our home."

"Has anyone actually met this mysterious creature?" asked Zuma.



"Yes!" defended the doe. "Many elders, not with us today, have described the creature. A solitary beast, as old looking as that tree bark," she said, nodding her head towards a solitary old oak tree in the clearing. "Not easy on the eye, it stands taller than man and smells as old as it looks."

"Do you know where it lives. Where I can find it?" asked Zuma softly.

"No," she replied. "It finds you. And judging by what has been going on around here lately, something has really

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upset it. Our situation here, the forest, the animals, the deaths, is unprecedented.”

Zuma exhaled a long breath and thanked the doe for her time during her moment of grief. “I am sorry for your loss. It truly is a terrible time.” Reaching high he places a sympathetic soft paw upon her shoulder, turns around and heads back into the forest, but not before the old oak tree catches his eye for one split second. Ears up, nose to the air, curiosity setting in as he sees a shadow pass by from behind.

He wanders back through the village, trying to go unnoticed, not wanting to disturb the wild folk more than they were already. Zuma has always wanted the pack to be a positive addition to the forest. He doesn't want his neighbours to think ill of any member of his family. He was confused why they were being blamed, when it was obvious the spirit of the forest (as the doe called it) was the culprit. Cloud still thick and rain now pouring hard, Zuma scurried back to his cabin, deep in thought. “I must find this beast. Confront it. Find out why it's murdered so many of the wild folk, and why it's implicating my pack? It's obvious it's not my pack. They are not big enough to take on anything so large.” Shaking his head. “As traumatised as some of them are, no one has it in them to commit murder...” His thoughts are disturbed as he approached the tunnel to his garden.

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“Zuma! Zuma!” shouted Pantalot impatiently. “Where have you been?”

“Whooaahh!” startled Zuma. “I... I was...”

“No time for you to explain,” an anxious Pantalot interrupted, his voice shaking, “It’s Sniffy and Jr! They’re missing!”

CHAPTER TEN

“Wait!” Zuma barked. “What do you mean they are missing?” Shaking his head in disbelief.

The remaining pack members gathered around.

“Sniffy said she and Jr were feeling unwell and went off into the forest to find a remedy. We thought they went on to look for you. Followed you up to the forest. But now we see you’re alone, we know they are missing. They’ve been gone all afternoon.”

A sick feeling consumed Zuma as his mind drifted to the mysterious monster spirity thing the doe had just told him about. It was so unlike them to wander off without anyone knowing.

“Have you searched the house and garden?”

“Thoroughly!” was the reply.

Brow furrowed and ears pinned back with nerves, Zuma, standing still, felt the world spin around him as he tried to think where they could be.

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“OK, OK,” he panted, trying to think with some clarity. “We need to head back into the forest. We need to find them. Fast. You are all strong and capable of searching alone. We’ll have to split up... cover more ground that way.” He directed the dogs in which area they should search, and they hastily rushed off in their different directions in search of their missing family.

Trying to keep calm and think straight Zuma ran back up the stony track as fast as his little legs would take him. The rain had set in and night wasn’t far off. He passed through the first section of forest to where the trees cleared into the twilight of the evening. From the corner of his eye he noticed an old ramshackle disused-looking bird hide high in a tree. Something he’d not seen before; he proceeded to climb the rickety ladder. Sniffing the air there’s a familiar strong scent, confused with the smell of lavender. Someone has been here, but no sign of mother or pup. Screwing up his face and stalling to collect his thoughts, he’s reminded of the stag and the ancient-looking oak tree high up on the other side of the forest. The shadow that caught his eye and the feeling he had. “I must find that monster!” he shouted to himself, scurrying back down the ladder. Clouds loom darker and closer overhead and vision becomes harder in the lack of light. Taking a moment for his eyes to adjust he followed the path that took him further into the deep part of the forest, towards the wild village and its unwelcoming inhabitants. He wondered what will

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be there to greet him as he continued at full pace. Thunder now boomed above him. Blue and pink flashes of lightening follow, illuminating the path Zuma must follow. Paws tapping hard against the path, breath thudding through his lungs he continued through the wild village he'd entered earlier that day. It felt uninviting then, but now, creepy, eerie as darkness and thunder followed the dog through the empty wild community. A brief respite from the rain as he sheltered under canopies, scurrying quickly from tree to tree towards the clearing where he first saw the doe. Breathless as he quickens, huff appears with each pant. Occasionally he spots eyes that glisten from little amounts of light filtering in from gaps in the canopy. More and more eyes start to appear, and dizziness and fear grab Zuma around his heart.

“Sniffy!” he calls. “Jr!” even louder.

His heart aches, and nausea takes over. Thoughts run through his mind. Dreadful thoughts. Loss and hopelessness consume him as he pushes faster towards the opening, and stops. He stands alone. Motionless. Breath hard against the cold rain beating upon his small body. The remnants of the stag from earlier had been removed and there was no sign of what was there before. The absence of tree canopies overhead let in enough light for Zuma to make out shapes in the dark. The cloud still low, eased off enough to allow a little moonlight to peep through, which

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directed itself at the old oak tree standing in the middle of the clearing. Though bathed in moonlight, it still appeared shadowy, dark, and thick. Slowly, drawn towards the tree, Zuma crawled forward, closer, keeping low to the ground. Breath easing, but heart still drumming in the back of his throat, fearing the worst, he's guided in by the bright light beamed down by the moon. Mesmerised by the ancient mass of rough twists and knots, he edged his way towards the deep-rooted tree. Tiny in its shadow he raised both paws and set them against its ancient, knotted bark. The scar on his hind leg ached as he felt around the trunk feeling the patches of furrows and scales. Both rough and then smooth as the patchy texture transformed with each touch. The trunk was wide, as wide as one would expect from a tree of this age. Zuma tried to encircle it in his forelegs, as if in a hug, and leaned his head against it, quiet, listening. Hoping to hear his family yell out to him. Anguished he beat a paw against the tree.

“I know you are here!” he called out repeatedly, turning and sliding his back down the trunk of the tree. “I know you have them! Show yourself!” Eventually, defeated by loss and pain he found himself curled up amongst the tree roots, shivering and pining.

Several minutes passed as Zuma lay in the damp darkness of the oak tree roots, pained by his scar which was now stabbing. Fearing the worst, thinking all the while

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of a way to find the monster who'd kidnapped his loved ones. Shivering followed by a moment of bravery as a small yellow light appeared from underneath him. He stood and yapped. Staring down into the roots, digging as the light grew bigger, brighter, shooting blinding rays out high into the branches. He stood back and watched for a second, snout high, snuffling the air for recognisable smells. Nothing. No familiar scent of Sniffy or Jr, but something was happening. The roots that curled around the bottom of the trunk that hugged Zuma in his fear, moved, slowly at first and then speeding up, wriggling, snake like as its tendrils lifted revealing a gateway under the tree into the light. Eyes blinking, Zuma squints to see better as the tendrils beckons him forward and into the light. Hypnotised, he obeyed and soon finds himself surrounded by bright yellow light as the tendrils slam shut behind him leaving Zuma within a space he'd never thought would exist.

Fear melts away as curiosity takes over. This new place feels bright, light and safe. A contrast to the outside night. It's warm, fuzzy and kind. As the light changed, he can see this place is a mirror image to what is outside. Golden trees adorned with fruit. Closely cut grass, bright lime in colour. Brighter than the sunniest of summer days he's known in the other place. There is no sun in the sky, just light emitting from everything and anything, like everything is glowing from itself. Clouds white and fluffy, rainbows dart

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across the air like floating ribbons. Zuma wanders forward. Looking all around in wonder, shaking his head in awe of what he sees around him. Rubbing his eyes to adjust them to the new light. “Am I dead?”

“No,” replies a soft voice.

Surprised by the response, Zuma circles to find the source of the voice.

“I have been watching you for quite some time little Zuma,” it continued.

Startled, his ears prick up. “Now that’s not creepy,” he sarcastically whispers under his breath. “What have you done with my family?” he blurts. “You are the one who’s been watching and creeping us all out!” He barked, with a sudden burst of bravery. “You’re a murderer.”

“Not all is as it may seem, little doggy,” replied the mystery voice.

Calmness set in as a shape began to form out of the light. A tall shape, huge and hairy, majestically moving forward towards Zuma with its arms held out ready to embrace the dog. As the shape grew closer, Zuma could make out a face with wrinkles as deep as the bark from the tree trunk

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outside, and as rough. Not pleasing to the eye at all, yet nor scary. He gulped as he stared, the voice drew closer.

Tall and hairy, yes. Almost ape like. Something that resembled the description from the wild folk, but not quite. Zuma had to crook his neck to look into its eyes. Soft, with age behind them. Its fur, a soft, shaggy dark golden brown, matted in places, glowed golden in the light. He knew this creature was ancient. Jagged teeth: one bottom tooth popped out from under its top lip. An elongated head, a stubby nose and two upturned horns protruding from either side of its head above two semi-circular fluffy ears. Its arms, longer than they should be and almost hitting the ground, ended with large soft wrinkly hands with stubby sausage shaped fingers. Bowed legs, and large feet with thick toes carried its muscular body.

Zuma looked down. “*My. What big feet!*” he thought chuckling to himself.

“I am the spirit of the forest, Zuma,” she introduced herself softly. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you, in person.”

“Ummm, likewise?” responded the confused dog.

“I am the life, the death and the love,” she paused. “I am the seasons and the weather and the breath you see after a

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storm. Some know me as Sasquatch. Some as the Yeti. Here I'm known as Big Foot.

“But you are ugly, evil!” he protested. “You killed everyone and smeared our pack name!”

“It may seem that way, but by judging the way you believe I have behaved, and the way I look, will not bring back your family.”

The voice and the creature seemed to float, while Zuma sat down to listen some more. Behind the Big Foot, Zuma could see other creatures floating around, minding their own business. Horses dancing over rainbows, some with knobby horns protruding from the front of their heads, other with giant wings majestically flying like angels. Tiny little flickers of light buzzed around Zuma's nose. His attempts to swot them failed as the flickers of light darted here and there and once in focus, Zuma could see tiny little shapes that looked like people, with pointy ears and wings.

“You must trust your instincts and look deeper into your heart Zuma,” continued Big Foot. “Think back to the events of the last months. Think of the list that your boy wrote. Who is really responsible?”

Pictures rise in Zuma's mind as he thinks.

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“I have been watching your family since you arrived. I am the keeper of this forest and acquaint myself with all who live here. You will not see me, but I am there; you may not feel me unless I want you to know it. You’ve been feeling some pain in the scar on your leg just lately? I can feel it. And this you should learn is your intuition. Each time it hurts, you must stop and listen to what it is telling you. You have all lived through trauma, I suffer it too. I feel what you feel. You’ve experienced sadness and loss. Death and life. You have a good heart Zuma, you have love for everyone, you were taught well. But there is still judgement and discrimination within you. You must eliminate this, so you can find the true killer amongst the wild world. You have not seen me before now, but you have sensed me. You knew trouble was coming. I made you feel it. I made you see what was coming in the hope you could prevent it. Yet, you closed your mind to other possibilities and let prejudice get in the way of what is in front of you and that has brought you here.”

“If you knew what was happening, why didn’t you fix it yourself?” asked Zuma.

“My purpose is only to guide. You may feel me, see things move around me. As old as I am, I am a mere watcher, I’m only able to give knowledge through guidance, through messages, through smell and visions in hope the enlightened will follow. Zuma, you are an

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enlightened one, you are waking to the possibilities of an alternative life, but still have lessons to learn. Use your intuition. Listen to your heart, Zuma – listen.”

He sat for a while taking in his surroundings, contemplating the events. “Where am I? What is this place?” he questioned softly.

“This is my world,” replied Big Foot. “You have crossed into the mythical world of beasts, where others like me live. We live here, safe from persecution from those – humans mostly – unable to understand that some creatures are different,” she continues. “For thousands of years we have been hunted and enslaved, so this world was built for us to take refuge until the world of people are able to open their hearts and minds to the unusual. We have the ability to help some in your world, those who deserve it, and we cross over to your physical world in times of need.”

“Alrighty then,” said a sceptical Zuma. “So, if you are not the killer, who is?” He ran the list of suspects through in his mind, followed by each event.

“Think Zuma, the truth is there within you,” encouraged Big Foot.

Remembering the first night, when all was dark, the smell of death. Then finding Eddy’s body weeks later. The

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feeling of being watched. “Who else was watching if not just Big foot?” He thought of Bessy. The cows and how scared they were. “What kind of monster has the skill to kill a cow and leave it like that?” he questioned to himself. “Something smart, with skills, who knows how the pack thinks. Someone who knew how to throw us off the trail.” He continues thinking of the list. “Then Topsy, was he an accident? Maybe not. Murder by proxy was still a theory he was trying to understand. And the snake? Those are all easy kills for a small animal like me. Can be done quickly and quietly, in plain view perhaps? Definitely by something with experience, and the buck? It had two claw marks. Wait – claw marks. Two.” He rattles his brain to remember. Rubs his paws over his head. And then his stomach sinks, nausea takes over. He looks up. He screams in terror. “Silkskin!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As the realisation of his mistake sinks in, Zuma scrambles to his paws and finds himself pushed back through the yellow light in an instant. Panic stricken; the dark thundery night of the forest blinds him. Clashes of thunder and sparks of pink and green lights dance around the sky. The rain beats down hard on the little dog's body, he orientates his mind for a moment and sets to work thinking where Silkskin would hide his family.

Behind him, from inside the tree he hears the soft voice. "Remember to open your heart Zuma. I will be with you, by your side to guide. Remember to open your mind and look for my messages."

He composed himself for a moment and looked around in the dark. Nothing stood out that he could follow, just night, rain, and lightning.

With Big Foot as back up, Zuma felt brave. "Come on Zuma," he barked at himself. "Think! Where would he take them?"

He slowly made his way along the path he followed before. The only route the wild world would take. When they are not hiding from Zuma, this track would normally

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be filled with animals busying themselves during different times. Day or night.

“It wouldn’t make sense for Silkskin to take them to a place frequented by animals.” He pondered.

He carried on padding sloppily through the rain, his pace quickening, but ambling with no real direction to follow. Lightening periodically lit up the sky, momentarily illuminating the path enough for Zuma to see his next few steps ahead. Still no wild folk to be seen, desolate in his quest, his mind cast back to happier times at his precious Guincho Beach, playing ball with his pack, digging in the sand and showing a very young Jr how to wax up a surfboard. The warm all-round sun that kept everyone’s mood uplifted and the togetherness each evening. A deep contrast to his life this night, but he had been here before. Fighting for Drool, fighting for his pack and tonight he wasn’t about to let Silkskin win.

Electric charges continued to brighten the sky and Zuma followed. His mind flooded with memories, unable to shake them off. Loud claps of thunder as blue, green and pink charges hit the ground as spikes, leading Zuma along a path typically used by the humans.

He stopped. Still for a moment as he realised. “Yes, of course. No point in being in a wild world place. It’s not

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secluded enough – animals everywhere. They will see.” He tells himself. “Go to a place, a human place when it’s dark and wet. No human will be there late at night. No wild folk would be there, it’s a human place. We need to find a human place.”

His pace quickens as he sniffs the air and thinks of all the human places and paths in the forest. “All paths lead to the same place.” And with nose down and tail up his paws quicken into a trot and then a canter as he dashed to the one place, he knows no human will visit on a night like this. The most obvious, secluded spot on the mountain.

“The communications antenna!”

Thunder roared through the forest. Tentatively, Zuma approached the communication antenna. Immobile in the blackness, a glistening solid metal trunk spears the sky from its grounded roots. So tall its great metal, squared-off branches reach higher than the oldest pine tree close by. It loomed out of the ground like a menacing impenetrable beast, protecting what hid inside. He advanced as bolts of lightning led him towards the metal tree, brightening the path towards a large wooden clad shed to the right of the antenna. Its door cracked open, just enough to allow a small dog to pass. Zuma shudders at the thought of what he may find inside, but remembers he has Big Foot watching over him.

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Fearless, he burst open the door, pushing with all his might. “Jr! Sniffy!” he shouts, as he enters a room so dark nothing was visible to the naked eye.

“Papa?” a shrill whimper from Jr.

“Don’t come any closer,” followed the weasley rasp of Silkskin.

Zuma’s eyes adjust to the blackness, and far off to the back end of the room stands his very frightened pup held tightly by Silkskin, eyes glowing green from the flashing light inching through the crack of the door.

“It’s going to be OK Jr,” Zuma ensures his boy. He spots Jr’s head lolling around almost unconscious, a cow bell dangles heavy around his neck. “Where’s Sniffy?”

“You tell me,” retorts Silkskin, as he rocks into a chant. “You hurt me; I’ll get you back. You took my family, I’ll take yours.”

“What are you talking about? Where’s Sniffy?” he repeats, holding out his paw trying to calm the situation.

“Dunno.” A snapped response.

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“And is that the watcher cow’s bell?” Zuma added confused. “Where did you find that?”

Silkskin holds Jr tight with his two unworn claws close to the pup’s throat, giggling under his breath, ignoring Zuma’s last questions. “I’m glad you’re here, you found us just in time,” he giggles. “Now you can feel the pain I felt as you took my pack away from me!” he roared. “When you let our leader die in that fire. You wanted to lead my pack yourself. You can feel the pain I felt when you left me to die on that ledge. Not to mention how you wooed my Sniffy away from me. She was mine and you turned up out of the blue and took her away,” he snapped. “I had a good mind to leave you on the beach to perish. To not mention you to Sniffy and the others, but I knew if I didn’t say something another pack would, and I couldn’t have Sniffy think bad of me, could I?” His voice softens as the word Sniffy expels from his jowls. “She fell for your charm when you left me to die on that ledge.” He slithered around to the other side of the whimpering pup for a better grip on his throat, dinging the neck bell as he moves.

Zuma listened in horror. “No Silkskin. You have it all wrong.”

“I know exactly what you’re doing. You took my family, now I take yours,” shrieked Silkskin, grasping Jr’s throat even tighter, stopping the pup from breathing.

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“You’re hurting him!” shouted Zuma. “Please, let him go. Can’t you see he’s sick. You’re going to kill him!”

“Well... that is the idea,” Silkskin retorted. “You took away everything I love, and now I get to take it back.” Jr whimpers as Silkskin grasps even tighter. “You think you’re so special. Sweeping in, taking over, like this pack is all yours,” he sniped. “It was so easy to turn your new wild friends against you. To take it away like you took it away from me.” Rocking from side to side as he continued. “Eddy was easy. He saw me arrive all those months ago,” sniggered the deranged dog. “Such easy prey for someone like me. I had to silence him before he told anyone about my arrival. Didn’t want to ruin the surprise, if you know what I mean,” he laughed aloud. “Now Bessy. Cute kitty. Very trusting. She thought I was already living at the cabin with you, she saw me so much... so stupid and naïve, but she had to go before she said something that made you think I was around. And the cows... Just like slaying one of those ridgeback dogs back at the compound... I had to silence the herd as they saw what happened to Bessy and then they talked to you. Couldn’t have them give me away, could I?” He continued sarcastically. “Topsy was just for fun, murder by proxy Pantalot called, right? The snake owed me a favour for not eating him while I was in hiding here. Got him to bite the stupid moggy to see how long it would take to die. Then I realised the snake was so slippery he would say something too, so he had to go. Plus, I

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thought it would put you off the trail for a bit – give me some time. You’re too predictable Zuma, I knew you’d want to figure this out quickly and I was counting on you to head up into the forest for answers. I gained the trust of your little protégé here,” holding Jr out in front. “Didn’t take long for this naïve pup’s curiosity to get him in trouble. It was easy to feed him left over toast from breakfast laced in wild garlic. While he fell unconscious, I took my opportunity to hide him and fulfil my plan. Now the stag was my favourite. Quite the challenge. Big and fast. Your Big Foot friend who was supposed to take the wrap for all of this, stupidly told the Stag what was going on, so then... oopsie... he had to go too.

“I, I don’t understand Silkskin.” Zuma’s voice changed as a calmness came over him, hoping to reassure Jr everything would be OK. “What plan, why are you taking it out on my boy? I loved Drool and all I ever wanted was to give you all a loving home like I had, to share my life and love with you all, as I promised Drool the night we lost him.”

“Your arrogance gets the better of you Zuma,” the unhinged dog squealed. “What makes you so sure we wanted your life? It was better without you.”

“Perhaps, but you changed all that, it was you who burnt our home. You created the fire that killed Drool. You must

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take responsibility for something Silkskin,” he said softly, careful not to worsen the situation.

“You took my Sniffy!”

“She was never yours to own,” Zuma reasoned. “She loves you as a brother and it was her choice who she coupled with. You have to accept that and respect her choice.”

“You took Drool away too!”

“Jealousy? Is that what this is all about?”

Silence fell on the darkened shed as Silkskin contemplates Zuma’s words.

“I know you love Sniffy and you respected Drool. Yes, by hurting Jr you will ruin me, that’s true, but you will also destroy Sniffy and you will lose the respect from the rest of the pack. Is that what you want?” Zuma continued. “Is this how you want to be remembered?”

Silkskin’s paw loosens for a moment as he considers what Zuma’s saying. Jr collapses and Silkskin grip tightens again, remembering his commitment to the moment and his plan. The night outside still blew a storm. Wind howling and battering against the wooden shack,

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shaking it like matchsticks. The door flapping and banging against its hinges allowing multi-coloured lightning flashes to enter the darkness and illuminate Silkskin cornered and still grasping Jr hard by the throat. He takes the pup hard with his other paw gripping him tightly around his shoulders and Jr whimpers.

“Silkskin, please.” Zuma begged.

The two-clawed paw of Silkskin is raised high and the claws are caught by a sudden flash of lightening making them glisten in the darkness for a second. A loud clash disorients Zuma. “No!” he shouts as he’s knocked to the ground by two warm bodies flying through the flapping door of the shed behind him, followed by a soft voice. “Silkskin? Now, that’s not nice, leave your nephew alone. Blaze would not be happy about you hurting another pack member, would she?”

Pantalot and Pooper rush Silkskin taking one side each, shoving him hard up against the wooden wall. In his surprise he released Jr from his grasp, who slammed hard to the ground. Vomit and foam around his jowls.

“Jr!” cried Zuma, rushing over to his pup and cradling him in his paws.

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“Take this Zuma,” shouted Sniffy, throwing him a leaf wrapped around lots of juicy blades of grass. “Quickly, give it to Jr. Let me deal with Silkskin.” She stands tall glaring at the pinned down dog struggling against the strength of his guards. “Well, Silkskin,” she spoke harshly, in a tone unknown to the rest of the pack. “You drugged us with wild garlic, you left me for dead and took my boy. Luckily for you, I know the antidote.” She continued. “I’ve been all over this mountain searching. Never, ever separate a mama from her child.” She warns. “You have no idea the bond we share. You have no idea what you will unleash.” She glares deep into Silkskin’s eyes for long enough to make him flinch in fear at this unknown version of Sniffy standing her ground. “What are we to do with you?” She’s mad at the thought of her boy being hurt and furious that Silkskin was prepared to cause her pain in such a sickening way. Her voice wavers as she’s caught between anger and knowing that showing violence in this situation will not solve a thing. She knows it will make her just as bad as Silkskin. Her eyes soften as a lightning flash illuminates her face.

“Silkskin,” she begins after taking a long drawn-out breath – “this is no way to make friends. You have always been trouble, but you have always been a valued member of this pack.” Silkskin continues to fight against Pantalot and Pooper, snapping and snarling as they hold him fast. “We were devastated when we lost you on the cliff that

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day. We stayed in the hope we would see you bob up out the sea. We sobbed and mourned you just like we did for Drool. It's not fair for you to assume we left without a care and it's not right to cause pain to us, your pack, your family, without hearing the facts."

Holding on tightly to his boy as the pup purges the poison from his body, Zuma listens and watches as Sniffy calms the situation and talks down the maddened mutt as the flashing and clashing continues outside the shed. "We have all suffered trauma, we have all experienced pain. We understand what you have been through, we understand your pain too." She glides softly towards her troubled friend. "We are family Silkskin and family takes care of each other through both the good and the bad times. Taking it out on your family will not help you. We will strive, as we've always done, to understand and to council you through your pain. Let go of the hurt. It only serves to torture you. Let go of the jealousy."

Pantalot and Pooper could feel Silkskin relax with every word from Sniffy. The softness of her verbal touch turned him to jelly and the situation was finally calming. The storm outside, in sync with the moment also calmed as Silkskin fell limp in his pack pals' grasp. Head bowed in shame and with a deep breath, he cried. "I'm so sorry." Pantalot and Pooper loosened their grip and he fell to the ground in exhaustion.

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“You need help Silkskin,” advised Zuma, still hugging his now conscious pup. “We all want the best for you, and we know exactly how to help. Please let us.”

Too exhausted to respond, Silkskin nods his head in agreement.

Sniffy gently cups her paws around her unbalanced friend’s snout and whispers softly. “Trauma is not your fault. It’s how we support your recovery that matters.” And she gently nuzzles his snout.

EPILOGUE

“Papa. Can I lick the inside of the pumpkin?” asked an excited Jr.

“I think it’s better to scoop out the flesh and seeds from inside first,” smiled Zuma, handing a medium-sized bright orange pumpkin to his enthusiastic boy.

“Yeah, you might get it stuck on your head otherwise.” Joked Pooper flicking off enormous white seeds from the inside of his giant fruit. “Mind you, that would make a great costume to scare the trick or treaters,” he giggles.

“Once you’ve done that,” Zuma adds. “We can cut out a scary face before we add in the light.”

“Can we make it look like Uncle Silkskin Papa?”

Several weeks had passed since the incident at the antenna and all the pack members were gelling together once again. Silkskin was benefitting from some therapy that their human had insisted on. Once a week she would scoop him up in a blanket and drive him to a doggy spa where he would receive some trauma training followed by a relaxation massage and some ‘one on one’ time with his new guardian. Silkskin revelled in the attention. His fight

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instinct remained inside – that gave him his strength – but with all the love, security and encouragement now surrounding him he felt he could finally put his horrors behind him and strive for a better version of himself. Of course, he had a lot of work to do with the wild world and he hoped in time he could build some bridges and become a defender of the forest and wild village.

After the last of the 'Trick-or-Treaters had left and the jack 'o' lantern lights had started to fade, the pack gathered together in the garden to see out the remaining daylight. Autumn was fully settled in on their mountain home with the crisp crunch of fallen multi-coloured leaves under paw and the cool fresh air breezing softly through their fur. The end trails of the sun dipping down behind the mountain edge left stunning deep orange and purple lights reflecting from a few fluffy clouds. Higher up the stars flickered in the clear dark sky and then it started. First the stillness, followed by a deep darkness and a stench. Not of death this time, but of lavender. A sweet smell of calmness. The pack stood strong together at the front of the garden opposite the felled tree. And there she stood, tall, ancient and furry.

“You are a testament to us all,” Big Foot said with fondness. “We all shall learn from your love, tolerance and understanding and I will be keeping a close eye on you in the future,” she continued. “Keep a watch for my signs, Zuma. You and your pack have bigger things coming and

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I have every faith you can overcome them. Stay connected to the light my little enlightened friends. Stay connected.”

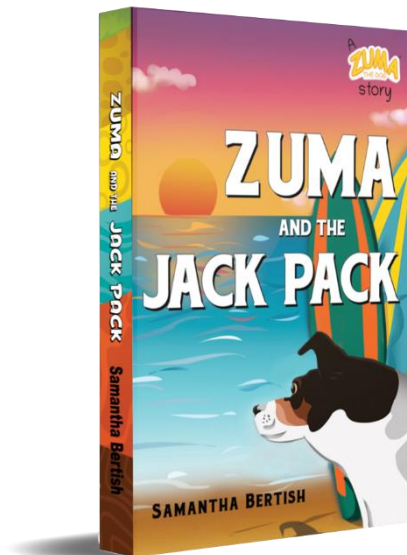
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A series of inexplicable deaths of local wildlife at Zuma's new forest home in Switzerland causes suspicion amongst the animals of the wild world and blame is placed on the pack of newcomers. After a close encounter with a strange, ancient creature living in the forest, Zuma and his pack are quick to try and prove their innocence and assume the ugly looking monster is the culprit.

Trying to solve the murders and implicate the mysterious monster that roams the forest, Zuma and his pack embrace the arrival of an old friend whose struggles and good intentions may not be as genuine as they thought. Can Zuma and his pack figure out who the real monster is before it's too late?

This fictional story is based in the mountains of Switzerland, where the real Zuma lived for several years of his life. He played with the real wildlife in his forest location of Gaiserwald

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