



# THE FORGOTTEN TUNNELS

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# Part One

## ~Chapter 1~

What's that rumbling noise? It's getting louder, surely? Or maybe, it's just my mind playing tricks on me, as now I hear nothing. And then, suddenly and without warning, there's a thunderous crash.

What's happening? Is the world ending? Perhaps; enormous chalk boulders are falling to the ground in front of me, completely blocking the cave's entrance. Panic-stricken, slowly I edge backwards into one of the cave's recesses, trembling uncontrollably, as more and more chunks of cliff fall and the cave grows darker and darker, until finally, all is silent.

After a while I begin to pace: round and round, moving slowly and cautiously, desperately seeking another way out. The first few times round reveal nothing. Next, moving even slower, I examine every crevice for hopeful signs of escape. Then finally, when I'm on the verge of giving up, success! At the very back of the cave there's an opening, just large enough to wriggle through on my belly. But is it safe? And what does this opening

lead to? Ideally, I want to go back – back to my carefree life by the sea. But that isn't an option: it's impossible. Going forward into the scary unknown is my *only* choice.



By now, you may be wondering how I became trapped like this? Mmm, thought so. It's because of my ball obsession. What do I mean? Well, my ball rolled into this cave from the beach and I chased it; it's as simple as that. You see, I'm a dog – a crossbreed – with a Collie mother and Retriever father, in my prime at four years old and living from second to second as most dogs do. You want to know my name and what I look like? Oh, okay. The two-legged giants (more commonly known by the dog community as “humans”) call me Millie and, as for looks, well, I'm medium build with a sleek, black fur coat with a white stripe on my chest and a distinctive white-tipped tail.

Am I alone? Oh no, my brother Jez is with me. And although inseparable, we're *so* different – opposites in fact. Whereas I'm

intelligent, inquisitive and running everywhere, Jez prefers to plod and likes a simple, straightforward life with few decisions. But, what Jez lacks in brains, he certainly makes up for in looks. Even I have to admit he's a handsome dog with his square, masculine head, deep amber eyes and floppy ears. Larger than me in stature, his coat's thick, black and fluffy, with a few white flecks on his chest and one white paw. The biggest difference between us, however, is that Jez is a follower, whereas I, on the other paw, am a leader: Jez's leader.

Looking back at our carefree life with our humans (Hannah and Jack), if I had to choose what I loved the most, it's got to be the two "Bs": "Beach" and "Ball". Why them? Mmm, let me see... Well, the beach is easy – soft sand on my paws

enabling me to run as fast as the wind. And sand's gentle on my bottom too, particularly when I'm doing my business, unlike hard concrete, jagged rocks or, worst of all, gravel (in fact, don't get me started on gravel – all those tiny stones getting stuck between my paw pads – what a nightmare!).

Do I remember the first time I stood on sand? Oh yes. You see, I'd never seen or felt anything like it before in my life, having always lived in the country. But, the minute my paws touched the sand my excitement exploded and I was springing into the air like a jack-in-the box. And soon, I was digging frantically, with my nose deep in the sand up to my eyes. Next, I was off, like a bullet from a gun, running far into the distance, free as a bird, until I saw the birds –seagulls they

were - and I was off again, my Collie instincts rising up inside me once more, like a rocket. And then, without meaning to, I ran straight into the sea. You see, in the thrill of the chase, I hadn't noticed where I was running, but when the seagulls had flown off and I was back in the real dog world, there I was - standing knee-deep in all this wet stuff. At first, this new sensation didn't please me at all - particularly when a large wave broke over my head, soaking me completely. But once I became accustomed to all the wetness on my fur, I decided it was a brilliant way to cool down after all that bird chasing.

And, later, when I trotted out of the sea, I discovered that with one of my top bum wiggles I could shake the wetness off me in a flash. Excellent: dry once more.

## ~Chapter 2~

But hang on a minute I'm forgetting the other "B" - the ball. What a wonderful invention it is: simple but effective. Dogs love to run and chase things; it's a natural instinct within us. And although I guess there are some "weirdo" dogs out there who don't like balls, I'm not one of them.



In fact, before a ball is thrown I use all my powers of concentration to work out which way it will go; my eyes never leave it for an instant, darting this way and that. Then, when I'm certain of its direction, I'm

off at full pelt. Next, I try to second-guess exactly when the ball will bounce, timing my jump to mid-air perfection. Once caught, I run back to Jack and Hannah with it clasped tightly between my teeth, eager for the ball to be thrown again and again... However, when it comes to dropping the ball exactly at Jack and Hannah's feet, I haven't quite mastered this skill (well, that's what *they* think anyway). You see, I believe it's better to drop the ball a little distance away from my humans so that they have to walk a short way to retrieve it, as very often humans stand still in one spot for minutes at a time (sometimes longer), either staring at the sunrise over the sea's horizon or talking to other humans who are similarly *walking* their dogs. And, quite honestly, why? They need just as much exercise as we do (if not more) and

all this standing about really isn't good for them. So, in the end, I'm only being kind...

In fact, my favourite ball trick of all is to bring it almost to Jack and Hannah's feet (lulling them into a false sense of security) then, at the very last moment, perform a fabulous pirouette and, with a final flourish, chuck the ball out of my mouth as far as I possibly can in the opposite direction to where they're standing.

Do I ever get tired of chasing the ball? No, never. In fact, I want to carry it around in my mouth all the time, even between throws. Doing my business doesn't stop me either – I just squat and do my number ones and twos with the ball clamped vice-like in my mouth. Even better, is squatting in the sea to relieve myself with the ball still in my mouth – a ready-made toilet and I get my bottom

washed at the same time – double bubble!  
The trouble is though I'm ball obsessed.  
And if I had my way, I'd play with it from  
dawn to dusk. But, like I told you before,  
unfortunately it's due to this ball  
obsession of mine that we're now trapped  
inside this cave and not at home curled up  
with our humans.

## ~Chapter 3~

Knowing that our only chance of escape is to go through the opening at the back of the cave is one thing, but being brave enough to take the plunge is quite another. Courage has never been my strong point, I'll admit that. But Jez needs a confident and fearless leader to follow and therefore, I must find the inner strength from somewhere. So, lying on my stomach, ready to ease myself through

the hole, I take a couple of deep breaths to steady my nerves, close my eyes and very slowly push myself through the hole, wriggling my body from side to side to propel myself forwards and digging occasionally with my front paws to loosen the sand around me. Jez follows. Then, on opening my eyes, I see we're in an underground tunnel sloping slightly uphill. After checking Jez is still following me, I walk down the tunnel, sniffing the walls as I go. There's no smell of other dogs' pee, but I can definitely smell other animals, most likely rats and mice and I can't hear anything except for a constant dripping sound coming from the tunnel ceiling. I've no idea where we're heading: are we going deeper into the cliff or out to sea? And is there just one long tunnel or will we be able to change direction?

On and on we walk. The tunnel, which initially sloped upwards, has now levelled off and is bending slightly to the right. I've no sense of time and the only indicator that time's moving on is my gurgling stomach, telling me it's empty. Jez stops to cock his leg up the tunnel wall every now and then, marking his scent. All around us is unnaturally still. There's no movement except for the constant flickering of the lights which cast shadowy, eerie shapes on the uneven chalk surface of the tunnel walls ahead. The effect's unnerving, causing my trembling to increase and my fur to stand on end.

At regular intervals, my loud, booming bark - warning others of our presence - echoes up and down the tunnel, which fortunately goes unanswered. However,

despite this, my unease is steadily growing. At the back of my mind is a nagging doggie feeling that just won't go away: I'm convinced we're no longer alone and something's out there watching us; whether friend or foe, who knows. Then, at the exact moment that thought pops into my head, there's a piercing howl, chilling every bone of my body. This is it, we're done for. Our short lives are over. I'm shaking and Jez is whining. Closing my eyes, I fear the worst.

'OI, BLACKIE WAKE UP!' a voice shouts in my ear, seconds later.

That's a dog talking, is my first thought. Now, at this point, I should explain that dogs can talk – although I know some humans (those who don't possess the "sixth sense" or who aren't open-minded enough) can't hear us. But others can

(including Hannah and Jack). And certain other animals have the ability too. Of course we don't talk in the same way as humans do, but why does that make us inferior? We're just different. Anyway, enough explanations - where was I? Oh yes...

My eyes snap open. There, right in front of my nose, is a small, stocky, silver-grey, oblong-faced, fluffy-nosed what I can only describe as a dog, although unlike any dog I've ever seen before. Its body isn't solid - I can see the tunnel wall through it! But whatever it is (dog or freak dog) it's standing right there, glaring at me; escape is impossible. And although I'm guessing "Blackie" refers to me, Jez and I are both black, so really this dog-like creature could be addressing either one of us.

Taking a step backwards – wanting to put some space between me and it – I ask bravely ‘Are you talking to me?’ with as much confidence as I can muster, although my visibly shaking body is a definite giveaway.

‘Yes, of course I am, dimwit!’ the dog-like creature replies rather aggressively, ‘Who are you? And what are you doing here?’

Wishing to keep the conversation as friendly as possible at this stage, I reply, ‘I’m Millie. And this is my brother Jez. We got trapped in a cave on the beach, when part of the cliff collapsed and blocked the entrance ... I was chasing my ball, you see, and it rolled into this cave ... and the only way out was through a small opening at the back of the cave, which led into this tunnel...’ I’m rambling, I know, pressure always affects me this way,

‘...and so now we’re lost and trying to find our way home, but we don’t know the way...’ I continue, speaking very fast. ‘And anyway, who are you?’ I add finally, after a slight pause to catch my breath, deciding that it’s better to ask “Who are you?” rather than “What are you?” which seems rather rude.

‘I’m Meg – a dog – well, I was *once*,’ replies Meg with a big sigh, her whole transparent body visibly sagging to the ground.

Mmm, she really is a drama dog – I can tell. ‘What do you mean, you were *once*, aren’t you anymore?’ I reply, my interest caught, despite my fear.

‘No, of course not silly, haven’t you noticed you can see through me? That I’m not solid?’ Meg sneers, sarcastically.

‘Well, yes, I did notice, of course I did, but I felt it was a bit rude to mention it. I thought it might have something to do with being down here in the tunnel and the dim light,’ I answer, my confidence growing – she’s not going to hurt us – if that had been her game plan she would have attacked by now, she’s had ample time and opportunity.

‘No, it’s not the tunnel. I’m dead,’ Meg states bluntly. ‘I’m a dog ghost or a Vision to be more precise. But you can call me Meg.’



## ~Chapter 4~

At Meg's revelation, Jez whimpers loudly, his head peering out from behind my back legs where he's been trying to hide ever since we came across Meg (not very successfully I might add, as he's larger than me).

'What's a Vision? Are you friendly?' Jez asks timidly.

At this, Meg looks up at us with a twinkle in her eye. Then, without warning, she's gliding around us in a circle, barking wildly.

'You're so funny,' she barks at Jez, her circling moving ever closer to him. 'Do I really look sinister or scary to you? And if I was, wouldn't I have attacked you by now? I've been watching you for ages.'

Mmm, that's true – she could have attacked us at any time. And to be honest, she just doesn't seem the type: she's far too happy and bouncy, if not a bit feisty and mischievous, but there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, I know Jez likes those traits in a female dog: a dog with oomph and a sense of fun, and Meg definitely has both those qualities in abundance – even if she is dead.

Meg stops circling and hovers close to Jez, next to the tunnel wall. ‘A Vision is a dead dog, human or other creature that, sort of, comes back to life. But although they have the same outline of the body they had when they were alive, it’s no longer solid – it’s see-through,’ Meg adds, speaking only to Jez now; I must be out of favour or else she’s taken a fancy to him – it wouldn’t be the first time a female dog’s fallen for his doggish charms – he is very handsome after all.

Meg moves slowly towards Jez’s bum, sniffing – I guess she’s trying to show him that she means no harm in a way that every dog understands. ‘Yes Jez, I’m a friendly Vision. I won’t hurt you. It’s the *Skulkers* you’ve got to watch out for. They will.’

‘The S-k-kulkers...’ Jez stammers, his eyes huge and full of fear.

‘Who or what are the Skulkers?’ I ask nervously, ‘and why do we have to watch out for them?’

For the first time since meeting us, Meg turns to look directly at me, rather than Jez, and says darkly, ‘Skulkers are bad ghosts, Millie. They like hurting the living.’

## ~Chapter 5~

Discovering the existence of the Skulkers has been a terrible shock. Up until now we'd thought our biggest challenge ahead would be getting home. But clearly it's not - staying alive has to be our number one priority. So many thoughts race through my mind. How can we have *any* chance of fighting bad ghosts? It's impossible. Perhaps if we met a hostile *living* creature down here, in the tunnel,

we'd stand a chance, but trying to fight the dead who have the sole intention of hurting the living – it just doesn't bear thinking about. And how do we stay positive and carry on? Well, we're dogs after all – admired for our friendly dispositions and positive outlook on life – Jez and I mustn't give in to fear: it's probably what these Skulkers are counting on.

'So what are our chances of coming into contact with these Skulkers?' I ask Meg, trying not to sound too worried.

'Quite likely,' she replies matter of factly, 'but if you stick with me you'll be okay. I've got friends who can help us if the Skulkers turn up.'

'Other Visions you mean?' I move closer to Meg now, feeling slightly encouraged

by her positive reply and the prospect of other Visions protecting us.

‘Yes – mostly Visions and one human friend,’ she answers smugly, as if this is particularly important.

‘So, are you going to stay with us and help us get home?’ Jez asks suddenly and rather bravely for him – maybe he’s finally realised that Meg’s got a soft spot for him and is using this to our advantage – mmm, perhaps he’s not as stupid as I thought...

Meg looks up at Jez with a sappy, wide-eyed look. (If she was a human she’d be batting her eyelids or winking at him by now!)

‘Yes, Jez, of course I’ll stay. (Oh please – where’s the bucket?) ‘But helping you get

home might be tricky ... there are just so many tunnels down here, you see ... it's not always easy to know where to go. But Sophie should be able to help...'

'Who's Sophie - another Vision?' I ask, aware that Meg will probably ignore me as she's only got eyes for one dog and one dog alone - in fact, I may as well be invisible.

But instead, she surprises me and replies, 'No, not another Vision, Millie, they're all in Acumen. Sophie's the female human I'm friends with.'

'Acumen - what's that?' I ask.

'It's where all the Visions live, Millie. Some Visions stay in Acumen all the time, but others - like me - can use a Vortex to enter the living world.'

‘A Vortex – what’s that?’ Jez asks with his head cocked to one side and the usual question mark look on his face.

‘It’s an entrance from the living world into Acumen,’ Meg replies.

‘Do all dead dogs become ghosts then? And humans too?’

Meg moves slowly towards me, ‘No, not all dogs, humans or other creatures become ghosts, Millie, only those with “the gift”. And, in the case of the Skulkers, those animals and humans who’ve behaved badly during their lifetime. But the Skulkers don’t live in Acumen like we do, they live in Gast – a horrible, desolate place, full of misery and despair,’ Meg’s almost nose to nose with me now.

‘What’s “the gift”?’ I ask quickly, wanting to change the subject, as Gast sounds, well, “ghastly”...

‘It’s insight – you know, a sixth sense,’ Meg replies. ‘Some of us have it and some of us don’t. You definitely have it Millie, I can tell.’

Yes, I know I do. But does Jez? I think to myself sadly. Dead or alive I wouldn’t want to exist without him by my side.

Luckily, before I can dwell further on this terrible thought, Meg continues, ‘But there are hundreds, maybe thousands of ghosts in Acumen and Gast, Millie, although only a small number can use the Forgotten Tunnels Vortex of course. You see, there are many Vortexes all over the world and a ghost can only enter the living world by

using their assigned Vortex, usually the one closest to where they died.'

'So did you live and die near here?' Jez asks gently.

'Yes Jez. I was born in Ramsgate, lived here all my life and now, of course, I'm still here in death, and I use the Forgotten Tunnels Vortex as it's the closest one to where I died.'

'So what did you die of, old age?' Jez asks timidly - I think he's worried he may upset Meg by asking about her death.

'Yeah, old age,' Meg sighs deeply, 'but at least as a Vision I have the body I had when I was in my prime - well, the outline of it at least...' She's now staring straight ahead with a glazed look in her eyes, as if she's no longer with us.

‘So where’s this Vortex and why are these tunnels called “The Forgotten Tunnels”?’ I ask, trying to bring her back to the present.

Meg’s eyes slowly come back into focus and she says evasively, ‘It’s over there,’ flicking her head in the general direction she means. ‘And “The Ramsgate Tunnels” are known as “The Forgotten Tunnels” because ... well ... they’ve been forgotten! And although Sophie and her friends play in the tunnels closest to the Chatham House entrance, and there are a few mice and rats roaming about, mostly the tunnels are deserted.’

‘Have these tunnels been used by humans and other creatures in the past, then?’ Jez asks, curiously.

‘Yes – they were once a hive of activity, many years ago, but not now...’ Meg replies, looking sad again. And then, without warning, she barks loudly, ‘Well, it’s no good floating around here all day – are you hungry? You must be by now?’

Right on cue, Jez’s stomach rumbles loudly.

‘Thought so,’ Meg says, with that mischievous twinkle back in her eyes. ‘Okay ... I think we should try and find Sophie first ... she should be able to give you some food ... she often keeps a secret stash hidden in the tunnels somewhere. Come on! Let’s go and find her.’

## ~Chapter 6~

So, off we trot in search of Sophie, although Meg, of course, isn't trotting, she's floating and barking every now and then with excitement – she really is a happy little dead dog, nothing seems to get her down. But then again, I guess dying is the worst thing that can happen and it's all uphill from there. Anyway, Meg's upbeat mood is infectious; we feel

more optimistic about getting home safely now. Somehow, Meg's presence has given us the strength we need to get through this ordeal. And, once we've had some food, and perhaps a chance to sleep, we'll be fully refreshed and ready for the next stage of our unexpected adventure.

The tunnels lead us on and on. Mostly we go straight ahead, but every now and then we reach a criss-cross of tunnels where we have to make a choice. Well, I say we have to make a choice, but Meg's our pack leader now, so she makes the choice and we follow. Our fate is now in her paws. We trust her – whether that's foolish or not, only time will tell.

So far on our journey we've met no other living creatures – well, none that we can smell, hear or see. I thought I smelt a rat earlier, but I think I must have been

mistaken or perhaps it was an old smell. The only sounds we hear are our own paw steps and a slight swishing sound coming from Meg.

‘ARE WE THERE YET?’ I shout. I have to shout as Meg’s quite a way ahead now, gliding effortlessly. Perhaps she’s on the lookout for Skulkers – not a cheery thought, I know.

‘Not long now, Mille, we’re almost there. I usually find Sophie playing just around this bend ... ah Sophie, there you are...’

So, what are my first impressions of Sophie? Well, she’s very pretty, with long brown hair and blue eyes. She’s young – I’d say about twelve years old. Also, I sense she’s a kind-hearted, gentle soul who wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s reflective too and definitely has the insight Meg

mentioned. But what I notice about her the most is the extreme sadness and loneliness radiating from every pore of her pale skin. In fact, it's so intense I can almost taste it on my tongue. And she's sobbing, the tears cascading down her pretty face onto the tunnel floor. What possibly could have happened in her short life to cause such anguish and despair? And why do I immediately feel such a strong bond with her? Does her sadness somehow mirror my own?

## ~Chapter 7~

‘Sophie, what’s wrong?’ Meg asks at once, zooming towards the sobbing Sophie, her eyes full of concern. ‘What’s happened?’

‘She spoke to me again, Meg. She-e needs me-e,’ Sophie sobs. She sinks to the floor, sitting cross-legged, her back against the tunnel wall, head hanging down, eyes closed and tears still glistening on her face in the dim tunnel

light. 'Alice needs me. I've got to find her. Will you help me, Meg?'

'Of course, Sophie, of course, I'll do everything I can to help you. But I've looked for Alice everywhere in Acumen and I've asked every Vision I know if they've seen her, but none of them have. I won't give up though, I promise. I'm sure we'll find her Sophie ... we will ... please don't cry ... it'll all be okay in the end, you'll see...'

Meg's now hovering directly in front of Sophie, doing all she can to reassure her. Jez really has got himself a sweet little dog-friend, I think to myself proudly. Sophie stops crying, dries her eyes on the sleeve of her top and looks at Meg smiling. 'Thanks Meg, you're such a good friend.' She then spots us, standing a short distance behind Meg, and says

anxiously, ‘Oh, sorry, Meg, I didn’t realise you weren’t alone. Who are your friends?’

‘Sophie, this is Jez and Millie. I met them by the Vortex. They got trapped in one of the caves leading from the beach and found their way into the tunnels. They want to get home – to their human owners – but they’re lost; they need our help. Also, can you give them some food from your secret stash as they haven’t eaten today?’

‘Oh no you poor dogs,’ Sophie says sweetly, beckoning us closer. ‘Of course I can give you some food ... you wait here a minute and I’ll go and get some ... I’ll be right back...’ Sophie jumps to her feet and hurries off around the bend of the tunnel.

We all watch her intently for a few moments, then I look at Meg and ask, ‘Will

Sophie understand us if we talk to her in dog or is it just Visions she understands?’

‘Millie, Sophie has the gift. She’ll be able to understand you and Jez – she can talk dog.’

If I’m honest I’d known this already as I’d sensed that Sophie had the gift, but I just wanted to be sure; I didn’t want to make a fool of myself.

‘Why’s Sophie so upset, Meg?’ I continue, ‘And who’s Alice? Is she a Vision?’

Before Meg can answer, however, Sophie reappears from around the bend, her arms laden with food. It’s a wonderful sight. We’re starving; it’s been so long since our last meal.

‘Here you go,’ Sophie says, as she puts the food on the floor. Jez’s stomach

rumbles loudly, right on cue. ‘It’s all yours, so tuck in. There are chicken sandwiches, beef sandwiches, fruit salad and I’ve got loads of bananas, which I’ll just peel for you. Oh and here’s some water, as I bet you’re thirsty too.’

Sophie places a bowl full of water next to the food and starts peeling bananas. It all tastes amazing – the best food I’ve ever eaten, in fact, although perhaps that’s not entirely true, all dogs think the food they’re currently eating is the best food ever – well, at least until their next meal anyway.

‘Thanks Sophie, we really needed that,’ I say gratefully, once all the food has been eaten which is, believe me, in record-breaking time.

‘Yeah thanks,’ Jez echoes. He’s now lying on the tunnel floor – paws crossed, eyes half-closed and looking very sleepy.

‘You’re welcome. Do you want to have a nap?’ Sophie enquires, looking directly at Jez – his eyes are now completely shut; he’ll be snoring soon. ‘Just around the bend I have a blanket and cushions you can lie on. I’m sure you’ll feel better after a bit of a rest,’ Sophie continues.

‘Thanks Sophie, that would be great,’ we reply at once in unison.

## ~Chapter 8~

Sophie leads us to a small cave set back slightly from the tunnel wall. True to her word, on the floor is a blanket covered with several squashy-looking cushions which Sophie points to and says, 'Here you go. And don't worry, I'll watch over you and make sure you're safe.'



And so we sleep and on waking, a short while later, we do feel refreshed and ready for the next stage of our tunnel adventure. Also, as promised, Sophie's sitting between us, her hands behind her back, legs outstretched – guarding us.

'Feeling better?' she whispers.

‘Much better thanks, Sophie,’ I reply.  
‘Where’s Meg?’ I add, peering up and down the tunnel, searching for her.

‘She’s gone back to Acumen for a rest too. Don’t worry, she’ll be back soon.’

‘Do Visions eat and sleep then?’

‘Well, they don’t need to eat or sleep as we do, but they recharge somehow, although I’ve never been to Acumen, so I don’t know exactly how they do it...’

Sophie moves her sitting position, bringing her arms to rest in front of her and briefly glances down at her hands. I look at them too. In them is clasped something, but even though I twist and turn my head to get a better look, I can’t quite see what it is.

‘What have you got in your hands, Sophie?’ Jez asks nosily.

‘It’s a map,’ Sophie replies. ‘I found it while you were sleeping. It was tucked into a narrow crevice above our heads. I’ve never noticed it before when I’ve sat here. Anyway, I’m going to ask Meg if she knows about it when she gets back from Acumen,’ she adds, standing up and stretching, putting the map on the blanket by her feet. However, once fully stretched, she sits between us once more.

‘Who’s Alice, Sophie? We heard you mention her name to Meg earlier,’ I ask without thinking, and instantly wish I hadn’t when I see Sophie’s face, which has turned pale and shocked-looking, as if the name causes her great physical pain. Oh no, what have I done? Sophie’s been very kind to us and upsetting her is the last

thing I wanted to do. She's our friend now, or at least she was. I sit up and move as close to Sophie as I possibly can without actually sitting on her. I rest my head on her shoulder gently, looking up with large, apologetic eyes and offering her my paw in forgiveness. Jez sits up too and starts licking her other hand, to show his feelings.

Sophie takes a deep breath and says softly, still holding my paw in one hand, with Jez continuously licking the other, 'Alice is, or rather was, my twin sister. She died a few months ago. She was hit by a car and died instantly...' her voice trembles, a solitary tear running down her face onto her nose. Then she sniffs loudly.

'I'm sorry, Sophie, I shouldn't have asked,' I say sadly.

‘It’s okay, Millie, I don’t mind you asking. It’s just very sad that’s all. Alice and I were inseparable, you see, just like you and Jez. Every day I miss her so much it hurts and that’s why I get upset when I talk about her or think about her...’ Sophie pulls a tissue from her jeans’ pocket and wipes the tear off her nose, before blowing into the tissue with loud, trumpeting noises. Then, she crumples it tightly into a ball and stuffs it in the rucksack lying at her feet.

‘What’s a car?’ Jez asks suddenly.

‘Oh, of course, you wouldn’t know what cars are, being dogs. Sorry. They’re...’

‘Are they the big metal monsters that humans use?’ I ask, staring at Sophie intently.

‘Yes, that’s right, Millie ... so you do know what they are...’ Sophie says, looking impressed. ‘They’re made of metal and people – I mean humans – control them, but sometimes things can go horribly wrong and living creatures are hurt or worse – killed...’ she continues, her voice trembling again.

‘I think it was a car that killed our brother and sister,’ I admit quietly.

At this Sophie gasps and Jez howls, their combined sounds of shock echoing up and down the tunnel, bouncing off its walls. Jez looks directly at me with a scared, question mark stare on his face (a very Jez look); I guess he’s surprised I’ve shared my metal monster suspicions with Sophie. You see, up until now no one else even knew we had a brother and sister, let alone that they were killed – killed by a

metal monster. We'd buried our memories of that terrible day deep inside us, trying to forget it ever happened. But meeting Sophie has changed things. Her pain of losing Alice radiates through me. So when Sophie asks me what happened on *that day*, I tell her. In fact, I tell her everything – right from the very beginning.

# Part Two

## ~Chapter 9~

Our lives began in the countryside. I was the second pup in a litter of four, Jez the fourth. Cleo (the first pup) was the spitting image of our mother Tess, a Border Collie, but Paddy, on the other paw, took after our father, Ben, a Golden Retriever. At first, we played happily together in the large, airy shed where we

were born, under the watchful eye of our mother. Then, as we got older, we ventured out into the great outdoors. Well, I say the great outdoors, but we had a large, wired pen to play in to keep us safe from wild animals and other dogs from nearby packs. Our field, you see, was home to a large community of travellers – humans and dogs.

In many ways it was a brilliant place to grow up. There was a large field to explore and we could run free all day long. But at the same time, it was a chaotic life with no rules or routine and little human interaction. Don't get me wrong, we weren't mistreated. We were always fed, watered and exercised, but special attention from humans was scarce – there were just too many dogs for that. And, on the very rare occasion one of us

was singled out, we'd all go into a wild frenzy; jumping up madly, hoping we'd be noticed.

Then *that day* arrived; the day after our first birthday. I remember there'd been increasing unrest in our field for a few days before *that day*. In fact, the humans had been talking about being "evicted" a lot, although I had no idea what that meant back then. Many dogs were barking; sensing something was about to happen, but not knowing what it was. It was a warm summer's day and our humans took us for a long, mid-morning walk. It was a great couple of hours. We explored fields we'd never set paw in before – the new smells tantalising our nostrils. It was exhilarating: chasing rabbits, jumping in amongst the wildflowers, trying to catch bees as they flew from flower to flower

and, of course, our favourite pastime – play-fighting. We were all so happy. Then, after about an hour or so, when we were longing to get out of the midday sun, lay down in the shade and sleep perhaps, our humans grabbed us, one by one and put ropes around our necks, tying the four of us to a rusty, old gate at the edge of an unknown field. And then they left – walking out of sight and into the distance, never to return.

I remember initially thinking it was all just a game, one where I had to work out a way to free myself from the rope and then find a way back to the field where we lived – leading the way for the others to follow. But deep down, I felt uneasy. Something was wrong. We'd never played this game before, so why now? Getting free from the rope only took me a few

attempts. Cleo, too, was quick to escape from her ties. Paddy and Jez took longer, but soon, with some help from Cleo and me, we were all rope-free and dashing back towards our field – the only home we'd ever known.

We didn't know the way back from sight alone, we had to use our noses, but as we'd left many scent markings on our morning run, it was easy to work out where we'd been. We raced across the first field at full pelt, Cleo and I neck and neck, followed closely by Paddy and Jez, side by side. Next we reached a shallow stream. Here, we all stopped to drink, lapping the water greedily, making loud slurping noises – thirsty after all our running. Then our next stop was a small wood. Here Jez and I were distracted by a squirrel sitting between two trees, its

focus solely on the nut it was nibbling. Cleo and Paddy didn't see the squirrel – they were too busy winding their way through the thicket of trees ahead to notice it.

Jez and I both crouched low, in stalking mode (we didn't want to hurt the squirrel; it's the chase we love). However, just before we made our move, the squirrel saw us. Instantly, it was off – the nut clasped tightly in its mouth – running for its life up the nearest tree, leaving Jez and I defeated at the bottom, totally unaware of what had happened only moments ago at the other side of the wood.

I was the first dog to find them – Cleo and Paddy. I was alone, as Jez had stopped to cock his leg up a tree in the wood. I stood at the roadside numb with shock. I couldn't move a muscle. How could this

be? Why were my brother and sister lying in the middle of the road covered in blood? Did I run to them and try to save them, I hear you ask? No, I didn't. I knew it was too late, that they were dead. Was I sad? Yes, of course. Perhaps Cleo and I weren't the closest of sisters, but she was still my sister after all. Paddy had been a great brother and we'd had a close bond (perhaps even more so than Jez and me) and now I'd never be able to play-fight or snuggle up to him ever again. Did I cry? Yes, I'm not ashamed to say that I did. That, of course, is another thing humans think we can't do – crying. We can, just not in the same sobbing, hysterical way some humans do. Did I know why they were dead at that point? No, I had no idea. I didn't know about roads back then and the dangers they pose to all animals. I also didn't know about the metal

monsters called cars or that they could kill innocent animals and humans. I only found that out later when Sophie told me how Alice died.

Then suddenly, there was a heart-wrenching howl behind me – Jez had arrived at the scene and was staring horror-struck and wide-eyed at Cleo and Paddy’s lifeless bodies. I’m not sure if he realised at first that they were dead, that it was out of our paws now and that we were left completely on our own, just the two of us. We stood stock-still at the roadside for the longest time, but eventually I motioned to Jez that we must go – sadly, we must leave our brother and sister’s bodies; there was nothing we could do for them now. We must return to the only home we’d known – our field. We needed familiarity. But, when we

arrived back a short while later, our field was completely deserted. Surely our humans wouldn't leave us here alone to fend for ourselves? They'd be coming back for us, wouldn't they? But they never did. They'd left us tied to that gate not knowing or caring what would happen of us, whether we'd live (or in Paddy and Cleo's case die). In short: they'd abandoned us.

## ~Chapter 10~

Our future looked bleak. How could we survive on our own? We were emotionally and physically exhausted. We didn't know which way to turn. So, we sought comfort in the only familiarity left to us – the shed where we were born. The door was open; we trotted in and lay down, desperate for shade from the hottest part of the day. Then, as we were getting comfy, ready

for a long sleep, I heard human voices outside the shed, two females. At once I jumped up, running to the open door to investigate – my need to be loved and accepted by humans overcoming every other sense and emotion. Jez followed my lead and in no time we were both jumping up at the two new humans, trying to lick their faces, wanting them to love us, protect us; our excitement overcoming any fear, sadness or exhaustion we felt. They responded by uttering soothing words of comfort, stroking our bodies, wanting to calm us. We sensed no harm, no malice. We trusted them – mmm – was that our next big mistake?

Within seconds, we both had ropes around our necks once more, but this time instead of being tied up and left alone, we were led out of the shed (well, I say “led”, but it

was more a case of us dragging the humans behind us) and into the field. After a few minutes' walk we arrived in a clearing, where a big white monster stood. Much later, I found out this monster is in fact made of metal (not flesh and blood as I'd initially thought), is called a van and is used to carry belongings and humans (or in this case us) around in. Next thing we knew we were lifted off our feet by the two humans and put inside the metal monster; one of the humans jumping up to sit beside us, to keep us calm – yeah right, as if that was possible the state we were in!

Now let me ask you a question – in such unnerving and upsetting circumstances like these was it really my fault I was “as sick as a dog” (a human saying that was *very* appropriate in this situation) while

inside the metal monster? I was utterly terrified of what was going to happen to us, so understandably I'd worked myself up into a frenzy through fear and uncertainty. And then, to add to my humiliation even further (how much worse could it be, I know?), I lost control of my bladder and a large pool of wee appeared next to the pile of sick – yes, okay – I admit it was *very* unfortunate I happened to wee over the human's feet. And, I also agree that Jez didn't disgrace himself as I had with sick and wee, but his whining did get increasingly louder and louder the longer the journey went on. Despite our behaviour, however, the human wasn't angry with us. In fact, she kept muttering words of comfort, stroking us calmly, lulling us into a false sense of security. At last the metal monster stopped and we jumped out and were back on firm ground.

Where had these humans taken us? Had they taken us to our traveller humans' new home? No, they'd not taken us there. Instead, we'd been taken to dog prison.

Do I have any positive memories of my time in prison? No, not really. Don't get me wrong, we weren't mistreated. We were fed and watered. And although the food wasn't great (horrid, strong-smelling pellets) it filled a hole. Plus Jez and I were kept together in the same concrete cell. In fact, as we'd spent our puppyhood in a shed, a concrete cell wasn't too much of a step down to be honest. Even the individual caged pen where we could exercise daily and do our business wasn't very different from the pen we'd had in our field, although admittedly that one had been considerably larger.

The main difference between dog prison and our travellers' field was our close proximity to so many other *stressed* dogs. Yes, in the field we'd been surrounded by other dog packs, but they'd been mostly happy dogs, not wound up like these ones were – barking or whining continuously – desperate to escape their life behind bars. Perhaps many of the dogs in prison had experienced a more comfortable life in their past than we had; living with loving humans who'd spoilt them rotten. Maybe it was more of a shock to their systems than ours. We hadn't been pampered or showered with love and affection. We were tougher perhaps. But, nonetheless, their stress affected us. It was infectious. We couldn't help but be swept up in their anguish and distress; a catalyst of barking and whining: one dog starting, the rest

following, from dawn to dusk ... every day ... endless ... exhausting...

The only short reprieve from this depressing existence was our once a week treat of a walk with varying humans depending on who turned up for prison duty. And, if we didn't get a walk that week, we had a run in what us dogs called the "big pen", but which also doubled up as what I can only describe as a dog's amusement park. Looking back, those times in the big pen made dog prison just about bearable for me; I loved it in there. At one end there were several fun amusements: a long tunnel made of fabric to run through, a few small jumps which were of course to jump over, a platform to stand on to survey your surroundings (and perhaps plan a possible escape route) and my favourite – a circular piece of thick

black rubber with a hole in the middle that was bigger than me and suspended from a rope tied around a branch of a tree which you had to run up to at great speed and jump through – such fun!

Some dogs (Jez included) didn't make the most of their time in the big pen, in my opinion. They would stand about looking bored or otherwise sniffing; some of the more lively dogs running about barking or digging frantically, trying to escape under the wire cage – but never succeeding – the humans would either stop them at the crucial point, or instead, their digging skills weren't up to much. Jez usually just trotted around sniffing and peeing – what a waste of time quite honestly. I, on the other paw, became my true dog-self again: running straight over to the amusements and doing at least one circuit,

sometimes more depending on the time we had inside. I often heard the humans saying to each other that I was “a natural at agility” whatever that meant!

So, how long were we actually behind bars? Well, it was four weeks, five hours and twenty minutes – not that I was counting of course! But I knew a week before the actual day of release that our fortunes were about to change dramatically, as that was the day we met Hannah and Jack.

## ~Chapter 11~

I remember that wonderful day vividly. Jez and I were fast asleep - our usual pastime - there being little else to do in dog prison. However, I was wide awake in an instant (it's a knack all dogs have: we can be in a deep sleep one second, alert and eager the next) when the Big Chief of the prison entered our cell. I sensed something important was about to

happen as it wasn't the usual day for a walk or play in the big pen. And why was the Big Chief here? That hadn't happened before. Jez, as usual, took longer to stir from his slumber, but got there in the end. Trembling instinctively with anticipation, I knew this was the day that would change our lives forever.

We were led past many frantically barking dogs (perhaps they too sensed the chance of escape from their pitiful lives) into the main office, a place we'd only seen on our way into prison. And there they were, standing at one end of the office, our saviours, Hannah and Jack. I remember we went berserk – crazy with excitement. We'd been at the dog prison long enough; we knew how the system worked. Some dogs had been chosen; they'd been released from their prison sentence:

they'd come and gone. Unfortunately, however, far too many of us still remained. But this time it was our turn – our chance of a new and better life.

The Big Chief put both our leads into the hands of two other female humans, both of whom we'd seen before on our dog walks or during playtime in the big pen. Then they *led* us (yeah right that old chestnut again!) from the office towards the big pen. Hannah and Jack trailed slightly behind, walking as quickly as possible to try to keep up with my rocket-like pace; Jez trying to keep pace with me also, but failing miserably. We approached the gate to the field where the big pen was. Why was this human taking so long to get there? I was impatient, desperate to run free again, anxious to be released from this human's grip; she just didn't

understand my need for the great outdoors – to be as free as a bird. In my heightened state of excitement, I forgot she was holding me on a lead; I jumped the gate while still attached. Total confusion followed. I’d shocked the human. She hadn’t expected me to jump the gate. In fact, I’d surprised myself. But the smell of grass, the fresh air, the call of the wild had overwhelmed any rational thoughts I’d had. Eventually, once the human had regained her composure and covered any embarrassment she felt about my jumping the gate while she was supposedly “in control” of me, we entered the big pen. And there, at last, we were set free to meet Hannah and Jack properly for the first time.

I remember so clearly running straight over to Jack and jumping up at him full

stretch, trying to reach his face – I wanted to lick all of it, explore every interesting scent oozing from his skin. Dogs can tell a lot from a human’s skin: first and foremost what they’ve eaten in the last few days, but more importantly, how they’re feeling at any given time. That’s why humans often say dogs have an unexplained “sixth sense”. What they really mean is a dog can sense another animal’s aura, in other words, their mood and feelings. Humans have this ability too, but few have developed the skill enough to be able to use it successfully. It’s the same with dogs, some have the knack and some don’t. But I knew from that very first meeting in the big pen that Hannah and Jack had the knack, as did I.

## ~Chapter 12~

It would be a lie to say that our new life with Hannah and Jack was perfect from day one – it wasn't. In fact, it started off very badly indeed, as we were made to travel in another one of those hideous metal monsters. And then, once we'd

arrived at our new home, there was the house problem. Our shed had been small and intimate, not large and frightening. Easygoing Jez was fine with it, but for me, the prospect of living in a house was utterly overwhelming. However, after lots of coaxing with tasty treats, combined with a gentle nudge on my bottom from Jack's hand, I did make it inside – eventually. Then, after another half an hour or so of total panic on the kitchen doormat, I stopped panting for a second to see Jez curled up, fast asleep in a squashy and very comfortable-looking dog bed. Mmm, okay, perhaps Jez isn't the stupid one after all.

The first night in our new home was the worst. We were left in the kitchen with two very comfy dog beds to lie on, but still we felt unsettled. You see, back in

dog prison we'd been used to constant noise from other dogs barking and whining, but in our new home it was deathly quiet, except for the occasional hooting owl or screeching fox. So, to feel more at home and to replicate what we'd been used to in dog prison, we barked all night. But after that first traumatic day and night were over, our lives improved dramatically. We tasted dog treats for the very first time and, although at first we were somewhat wary, it didn't take us long to get the idea and scoff them greedily. Dog toys were yet another novelty. When Jez was given a toy all he wanted to do was lie down and chew it; he chewed anything and everything back then: books, clothes, shoes, dog beds, computer leads – anything he could lay his paws on – he wasn't fussy. Hannah and Jack thought he was just being naughty,

but it wasn't that at all - he was stressed and that was his way of coping. However, by contrast, I was always a natural with dog toys; somehow I instinctively knew what to do. At first, the blue hoop was my favourite - Hannah would throw it and I would catch it - I never got bored of the game; I wanted to play it all day long. Then, after about a week, I had the best day of my life so far: Hannah gave me my first ever ball. I couldn't believe it, this was even better than the hoop; it was easier to catch and, of course, it bounced. And from that moment on there was no turning back, I was completely hooked and my ball obsession began...

So, were we happy living with Hannah and Jack? Oh yes, we had a wonderful life. We had two or three long walks every day in the nearby park and at other times we

could run free or play with our toys in the garden (you know, a small field with fenced borders) to our heart's content. And the food – well, it was delicious, much better than that awful prison food. Oh – and I almost forgot – there were the cuddles too. At first it felt strange when Hannah and Jack invaded our personal space and put their long, dangling arms around us, hugging us tightly. But it didn't take us long to start enjoying the experience. In fact, pretty soon I found myself craving these cuddles – they made me feel safe and loved. Life was brilliant and we thought we'd found our forever home, there in the countryside. But it was not to be. After a few years of domestic bliss our lives changed once more. Oh no, I hear you shout! Yes, but hang on, our lives changed for the better. You see, after two years, Hannah and Jack decided

to move to another house, within walking distance of the sea, and this time we weren't left behind.

# Part Three

## ~Chapter 13~

Sophie had listened intently to our life story, often with tears in her eyes, and now is telling us all about her own childhood and the exciting adventures she'd shared with Alice, many of them

here, in The Forgotten Tunnels. Sophie then describes Alice. Of course, being an identical twin, she was in appearance – well – identical. But in personality, Sophie explains, they were so different. Alice was mischievous, confident and a true leader, Sophie – reflective, dependable and happy to follow. However – together – those contrasting personality traits made their adventures all the more exciting; they were the perfect fit, like two peas in a pod. But since Alice’s death, Sophie’s felt empty and broken – as if she’s been physically torn in two, with one part lost forever.

Sophie jumps to her feet and starts pacing from one wall of the tunnel to the other. ‘And since she died, Alice has been trying to contact me...’ Sophie continues in a very shaky voice ‘... in my dreams. She’s

been trying to tell me something important. But, however hard I listen, I can't hear the words clearly enough to understand what she's saying...' Sophie adds, her voice finally breaking as pent up emotions overflow and racking sobs contort her body.

The tunnel descends into an eerie silence while Sophie regains her composure. Then, after a few minutes, she takes a few deep breaths, stops pacing and carries on, in a much steadier voice now, 'But one thing I do know for sure, just from the tone of her voice, is that Alice needs me.'

'Have you ever seen her ghost in The Forgotten Tunnels, Sophie? Or do you only see and hear Alice in your dreams?' I ask gently, nudging one of her hands with my nose affectionately.

‘No, I’ve never seen or heard her in these tunnels. I’ve often called her name, but she’s never answered or shown herself to me, although Meg says some Visions can’t enter this world so it may be that she’s stuck in Acumen and cannot get through the Vortex. And when Meg’s in Acumen, she’s searches everywhere for Alice and asks the other Visions if anyone’s seen her. As yet, no one has, but apparently Acumen’s huge so Alice could still be there somewhere – there’s still hope...’

*Hope.* That’s what keeps Sophie going. She needs that chance of hope, however slim it may be.

‘Sophie, do you think Paddy and Cleo could also be in Acumen?’ Jez asks unexpectedly, breaking my chain of thought.

‘Yes, Jez – they could be. You should ask Meg – she may know.’

And then, as if on cue, Meg comes zooming up the tunnel to greet us.

‘Hello you three – have I missed anything?’ Meg asks eagerly, peering at each of us in turn, her gaze lingering on Jez, of course.

‘Hello Meg,’ we reply in unison.

‘No, you haven’t missed anything. Millie and Jez caught up on some sleep ... oh, and I found this...’ Sophie says nonchalantly, picking the map up from the floor by her feet and waving it in front of Meg’s transparent nose. ‘Do you know what it’s for? Is it a treasure map? I found it up here.’ Sophie points to a narrow crevice above her head.

Meg stares at the map. Am I imagining that look of surprise on her face? It was only there for a fraction of a second, to quickly be replaced with her usual doggie grin, so perhaps I was mistaken, although I can't help feeling she has seen that map before and knows exactly what it shows.

'It's a map of The Forgotten Tunnels,' Meg replies dully, now staring intently at the tunnel floor to avoid eye contact.

Mmm - talk about stating the obvious - even I'd worked that much out!

'Yeah, I'd already guessed that much,' Sophie says, echoing my thoughts exactly, 'but what are these marks? Can you see them, Meg, these two red triangles marked here and here?' she persists, pointing to the relevant places on the map.

‘Does it mark where there’s hidden treasure?’

There’s no disguising it this time – Meg looks extremely uncomfortable and shifty. But why doesn’t she want to tell Sophie the truth about this map? Is she just embarrassed that she can’t read it? You see, that’s one thing dogs can’t do – read. But, then again, Meg’s no longer a dog, she’s a Vision.

However, my question is answered almost immediately when Meg replies hesitantly, ‘No it’s not a treasure map, Sophie, it shows the two Vortex entrances into Acumen.’

‘So you have seen this map before?’ Sophie says sharply. ‘But why was it up here?’ she adds, pointing to the place where she found the map again.

‘No, I’ve never seen the Vortex Map before...’ Meg replies honestly, looking up at Sophie once more, ‘... it has been lost for years and years ... well, until now. But I’ve heard about it, of course. The legend of the Vortex Map is very well-known in Acumen. And I don’t know why it was hidden up there,’ Meg flicks her head in the direction of the cave wall above Sophie’s head, ‘or why you found it, when so many others have failed before you, unless it was placed there on purpose, you know, as a trap.’

‘A trap,’ Sophie repeats, shrilly, ‘why would it be a trap? And hang on – I thought there was only one Vortex into Acumen – the one you use?’

‘Yes, Sophie, there is only one *Vision* Vortex into Acumen,’ Meg answers

confidently. ‘But the other Vortex isn’t  
for ghosts, it’s for the *living...*’

## ~Chapter 14~

Meg lets that bombshell hang in the air, while we all stare at her open-mouthed.

‘Do you mean ... are you telling me ... that I can get into Acumen?’ Sophie mutters, looking utterly bewildered. ‘That the *living* can get into Acumen?’ she continues sternly. ‘But why haven’t you told me this before, Meg?’ she snaps angrily.

‘Well, yes, it’s true; in theory, the living *can* pass into Acumen using that Vortex...’ Meg replies apologetically, ‘... but no one – alive or dead – knew where the Living Vortex was located up until now, as – like I said before – the map had been lost. And anyway, even now that we do know where to find the Living Vortex, passing through it is bound to be extremely dangerous and may, in fact, be impossible,’ Meg adds defensively. ‘And, I didn’t tell you about the existence of map or the Living Vortex, Sophie, because I didn’t want to get your hopes up unnecessarily...’ she concludes, emotionally.

‘But now that we do have the map, and know exactly where the Living Vortex is, will you help me? You know – to find the Living Vortex, to get into Acumen safely

and then to search for Alice?’ Sophie asks Meg expectantly. ‘As I’m sure I wouldn’t stand *any* chance of finding Alice without *your* help...’ Sophie continues in a flattering voice, now smiling at Meg warmly.

Meg, however, looks in two minds – as if she’s suffering a very painful, internal dilemma. She wants to help Sophie, of course she does, that goes without saying, but at the same time she doesn’t want to let her down either and also, wants to protect her as best she can. Ah, bless – it really is a huge burden for her little doggie shoulders to bear.

But after only a few minutes, Meg sighs deeply, looks resigned, and says very fast, ‘Well, of course I’ll help you in every way I can, Sophie – always. But it might not be that easy. I don’t want you getting

your hopes up too much, okay? It may be impossible for you to enter into Acumen. Firstly, we've got to find the Living Vortex using the map and then you've got to go through it alone; I won't be able to go with you - Visions can't use that Vortex - so, you see, I can't guarantee your safety and it could be incredibly dangerous. And then, when you're actually in the Vortex itself, you could meet the Skulkers - they may lie in wait for you there - and I don't think I could ever forgive myself if you got hurt or ... well, worse...'

After Meg's monologue there's total silence. But then suddenly - taking us all by surprise - Jez cries loudly, 'Don't worry, Sophie, you won't be alone. We'll come with you, won't we, Millie?'

Oh – I had thought our biggest challenge would be getting home alive! How wrong could I be? Because now it seems, we’re about to embark on a very dangerous and potentially life-threatening quest with Sophie and Meg – as, of course there’s no question of us not tagging along; we’re involved now and could never abandon them.

‘Yes, you can count on us, Sophie. Of course we’re coming with you,’ I exclaim loudly.

Sophie’s overcome with gratitude and has a big grin on her face – just the effect I’d hoped for; it’s great to see her smiling again. Looking down at us both, Sophie says sweetly, ‘Oh, thank you so much. You really are very special dogs – you know that, don’t you? I’ll never forget your kindness or your bravery. And I

promise that when we get back from Acumen, I'll take you home personally – back to Hannah and Jack.'

'Excellent, excellent...' barks Meg excitedly, swishing wildly at Jez's side. 'Well come on then ... let's get going ... there's no time like the present.'

## ~Chapter 15~

Our journey to the Living Vortex is pretty uneventful. Before we leave, Sophie studies the map carefully, so we know where we're going and then packs as much food and bottles of water as she can possibly fit into her rucksack, together with a couple of blankets (in case it's cold) and a torch (in case it's dark). Meg

leads the way through the tunnels, with Sophie close behind and Jez and I at the back, walking side by side. None of us speak: the enormity of the challenge ahead is now beginning to sink in.

As we walk on and on, I'm amazed at how Meg can tell all the different tunnels apart, like the back of her paw. To me, they all look the same; well, perhaps some are wider than others, but that's it. And they definitely all smell the same – you know – that horrid, damp, musty smell, plus they're all dimly lit, with only one row of lights along the tunnel roof, with some of them broken or flickering feebly.

'We've found it!' Meg suddenly shouts over her shoulder, taking Jez and me completely by surprise – so much so, in fact, that we both jump high into the air

and land with a resounding thud moments later.

In the distance I can see Meg and Sophie standing at the right-hand side of the tunnel. Next, Sophie's lifting the Vortex Map and pressing it hard against the wall. Then all of a sudden, the rough surface of the wall disappears and Sophie screams, chilling every bone in my body, my fur standing to attention. Immediately, I speed towards her - ready to fight, Jez lagging behind me. But Sophie isn't under attack. It's the Living Vortex that's frightened her. And now I'm standing next to her, I can see why: it truly is a terrifying sight to behold. I'll be honest, I'm not entirely sure what I'd expected to see, but not what I'm looking at, that's for sure. Where, only moments ago, there'd been a solid tunnel wall, now there's a

writhing, twisting, swirling mass of blue. But of what, I have no idea. All I know is that whatever it's made of, this is the Vortex Sophie, Jez and I have to pass through to get into Acumen. No way! Meg must be out of her tiny little mind if she thinks we can get through this alive!

Looking behind me, I see that Jez has fainted. Immediately, I check to see if he's okay. He is. And he's no longer alone. You see, the moment he collapsed, Meg zoomed towards him at top speed, her round, see-through eyes full of concern. Stifling a giggle, I quickly look away. Meg is funny – kind – but funny. Then, sneaking a quick peek over my left shoulder, I see she's now trying to revive him by licking his face – rather unsuccessfully of course – as she seems

to have forgotten she's dead and doesn't have a solid tongue anymore!

On Jez's collapse, Sophie, too, ran to his side and knelt beside him. Satisfied he's fine, however, she then says to Meg, 'So, I'm guessing this is the Living Vortex?'

Meg gives a cursory nod.

'But exactly *how* do we pass through this?' Sophie adds sceptically – her eyes darting from Meg to the Vortex and back again.

Good question – although I would have asked: 'But exactly *how* do we pass through this *alive*?'



‘Well, I imagine this Vortex works the same way the other one does,’ Meg replies calmly, as if she’s talking about something commonplace, not this writhing, blue monster in front of us. ‘So all you have to do is walk straight into the Vortex and shout the Code Number.’

‘What do you mean? What Code Number?’ Sophie asks nervously.

‘Well, I’m guessing it’s the same number I use – 444,’ Meg replies.

‘You’re guessing? You’re not sure?’ Sophie cries shrilly. ‘But what will happen to us if we enter the wrong code number?’

‘Nothing ... I hope...’

## ~Chapter 16~

Sophie looks worried. I'm not surprised. So am I. This journey's getting worse by the second. But there's no going back now. We have to take the risk.

Sophie turns to me and asks, 'Are you two absolutely sure that you want to come with me? It could be extremely dangerous.'

Hesitating only for a moment, I reply, with as much confidence as I can muster, ‘Yes, of course we do, Sophie. We know what the risks are – we’re coming with you, no matter what. There’s no way we’d let you enter this ... this ... Vortex alone.’

‘I can’t guarantee your safety – you know that, don’t you?’

We both nod solemnly.

‘Well, if you’re sure ...’ Sophie says apprehensively. ‘And Meg, we’ll see you in Acumen. Although how will we find you if it’s so big?’ Sophie adds, as an afterthought.

‘I’ll find you, don’t worry. And once you’re in Acumen you’ll be safe; the Visions will take care of you. Plus, if anything does go wrong in the Vortex, and

I'm sure it won't,' Meg adds quickly, 'just shout "HELP" into the Vortex Map and one of the Visions will hear you. Right, I have to zoom back to the Vision Vortex now. Please be careful – all of you,' Meg says, looking longingly at Jez (she'll be blowing him kisses next) 'and I'll see you all very soon.'

'Bye Meg,' Jez says sadly. 'See you in Acumen.'

Meg zooms off. After watching her outline disappear from view, Sophie turns to face us, looking focused. She's our leader now. And wherever she leads we will follow.

'Right, I think it's best if you two shut your eyes and keep them tightly closed when we enter the Vortex,' Sophie whispers, giving us both an encouraging

pat on our heads. ‘Ready? Here we go ... on the count of three...’

I close my eyes, ready to step through the Vortex.

‘One – two – three –’

Together, we step into the Vortex.

Seconds later, there’s a piercing scream; Sophie’s in trouble.

‘ARGH – GET OFF ME!’ Sophie shouts angrily into the darkness.

My eyes snap open at once. But it’s pitch-black and however hard I try to focus on what’s around me, I can’t see a thing: not Sophie, not Jez, nor indeed my captor. So instead, I thrash wildly, trying to bite whoever or whatever is holding me down – wanting to break free to help

Sophie. But it's no use, I can't move a muscle. Somewhere in the darkness Jez growls loudly, his teeth snapping together ferociously in an attempt to get loose. Relief flows through me; at least we've all survived the Vortex. But now we're trapped, although trapped by what, I don't know.

So what happened when we entered the Vortex? Well, it's all a bit of a blur, really. I remember going in there, side by side. We were all shaking uncontrollably; terrified of the scary-looking blue mass of energy we had to walk into. The Vortex, however, didn't harm us, it wasn't our enemy. In fact, it was cool and refreshing and a wonderful feeling of calmness washed over me the minute my paws touched the swirling mass of blue; positivity surging up and down my body,

right from my panting tongue to the white tip of my fluffy tail. At some point, I was vaguely aware of Sophie's muffled shout of the Code Number, but she sounded so far away – I was still in a blissful, trance-like state and all that mattered to me was that I was in this different world – a wonderful world. Then, as quickly as the amazing feelings had arrived – they left – reality hitting me once more. There was chaos all around me. Sophie was screaming, Jez howling and, from out of nowhere, thin rope-like strands started to wrap themselves around me tightly.

‘Sophie, Jez are you okay?’ I bark loudly.

‘It’s the Skulkers,’ Sophie cries. ‘They’ve caught us.’