



CHAPTER 2

ABANDONED

“COME! NOW!”

Papa spoke with a voice Natasha had never heard before. She had heard anger, as well as laughter, boredom, irritation. All the emotions, in fact, that a father might expose before his child. But this was different. This was a new voice, which crackled and snapped like burning wood.

The best day of her life would be followed by the worst.

The announcement on the radio, then the urgent voice of the loudhailer and finally the soldiers pounding at the door. Her parents' fear, the mad rush to pack. Being told that her puppy, the new love of her life, had to stay behind in the flat when they left for Kyiv.

“NO!” she had screamed, tears springing up in her eyes.

“It’s only for three days,” said Papa. Although, years later, when Natasha remembered that day, she thought that even then his voice betrayed his belief that they would never return.

“We’ll leave plenty of food out for Zoya,” said Mama. “And her toys. She’ll be fine.”

“But she’ll be lonely!”

“Not another word!” Papa commanded. “We’ve been told: no pets. It’s bad enough that there’ll be dog mess all over the floor.”

“Just three days,” Mama said, more softly. “Then they’ve promised we’ll be back. Either everything will be fine and we’ll all be here together . . . or, if the worst comes to the worst, we’ll pick Zoya up and all stay together with Aunty Valentina.”

“I hate her! She has a moustache and a wart and you can feel them both when she kisses you. I want my Zoya!”

But all her screams and her tears were for nothing. Papa would not be moved and even Mama lost patience in the end. Zoya was shut away in the bathroom, with newspapers spread over the floor, and three big bowls of dog food and a frying pan full of water. She scraped at the door as soon as it closed and barked with her little puppy voice. When Natasha tried to force her way back to the bathroom, Papa picked her up in his strong,

implacable arms. He carried her to the stairs, while Mama locked the door behind them.

“Please let me say one more goodbye!” Natasha begged.

“Enough!” Papa said.

But then her mama looked at her papa, and the look was so eloquent, so sad, so hopeless, that he put Natasha down. He remembered, perhaps, a puppy of his own. His own joy and hope and sadness.

Mama handed Natasha the key. “One minute!” she said. “Any longer and your father will kill us both.”

“I promise.”

Natasha rushed back. She did not see that Papa’s eyes were moist. Nor did she see the squeeze that Mama gave his hand.

Natasha was as good as her word, and soon the three of them were pushing through the frightened crowds on their way to the square where a fleet of green buses were waiting to take them to Kyiv. They carried just one bag each: Papa a big black suitcase, Mama a smaller blue one and Natasha her school backpack. Soldiers and police officers were everywhere, shouting and pointing.

“Natasha!” cried out a voice, and she turned to see her schoolfriend Olga, hoisted high on the shoulders of her father. But the crowd pulled them in different directions, and Natasha lost sight of Olga before she could shout back.

In the distance, a billowing black cloud from the burning nuclear plant hung in the air, and there was a

strange smell, metallic and sharp, that left a faint taste in her throat.

The square was in turmoil. There were so many buses, horns honking, so many people, so much shouting and pushing.

Natasha's family joined the back of what might have been a queue, although there was so much milling and jostling it felt more like a crowd at a football match. Buses pulled up and people pushed on, ushered by the soldiers. There was no panic, but nor was it calm. The feeling that ran through the crowd was a mix of fear and uncertainty. Rumours had begun to spread about the radiation from the plant. Talk was that many of the firefighters were becoming ill. Natasha looked with astonishment at one woman, her mama's age, who was weeping uncontrollably. She had never seen a grown-up cry before. The sound of the crowd was like the forest when the wind blows, individual voices lost in general noise.

"We should have come earlier," grumbled Papa. "I told you. We will be stuck here, with the poison, all because of that stupid . . ."

More buses came and went, each puffing out black exhaust smoke, to match that in the sky.

Despite Papa's fears, they were not left behind. The queue shrank, the last bus pulled up before them and its doors sighed open. Two soldiers stood on the pavement, guiding, goading, a firm hand on each shoulder that went up on to the bus.

“Hurry!” they said. “Quickly!”

The soldiers were young and looked nervous, despite their guns. One had a scarf pulled up over his face, to filter out the poisons in the air.

An old woman stumbled as she tried to climb the step. The soldier with the scarf caught her and gave her his arm, guiding her to a seat. The crowd murmured its approval.

Natasha and her parents were the very last to board the bus. Mama went first. As Natasha went to follow, the soldier said to her, “Don’t be frightened, young lady. All will be well.”

But then he looked at her backpack, slung over one shoulder, and Natasha knew that she was doomed.

“Give me your bag,” he said, the friendliness gone from his voice.

“What is it, comrade?” said Papa.

The soldier ignored him. He pulled the backpack from Natasha’s shoulder. It was alive. It squirmed and whimpered. The soldier loosened the cord securing the mouth of the bag, and a little black nose and a white muzzle poked out. He reached inside and pulled out Zoya by the scruff of her neck.

Natasha cried out and tried to grab the puppy back. But Papa came over, took his daughter gently in his arms and carried her, wailing, crying, screaming, up the steps and to the last seat right at the back of the bus.

Looking over Papa’s shoulder, Natasha saw the soldier put Zoya on the roadside. He wasn’t rough. He even

stroked her lovely face, his hand smoothing back her ears. But then he pushed her aside with his boot and the bus drove away.

Every eye on the bus followed each step of the tragedy. These were ordinary folk, with hard and weather-beaten faces. They had lived through difficult times, times of hunger and want, and danger. Many of them had been brought up on the farms around the town, and had the farmer's way with animals, seeing them as living tools. But even these people were moved by the scene, and came out of their own worries and fears to make low, soft sounds of sorrow for the little dog, and sympathy for the girl.

Then the terrible thing happened. The convoy of buses crawled through the streets, with Natasha's bus at the back, and the puppy followed, hopefully, eagerly, as if this were a game. Natasha pressed her face to the rear window and looked on in horror.

The buses, slow to begin with, gathered speed as they left the town, so that Zoya had to run as fast as she could to keep up.

"We'll come back and find her," said Papa. "I promise. She will be OK. The soldiers will give her food. They're good boys, you saw. They will be gentle."

But Natasha knew that his words were empty.

And now the road was lined with trees: birch and ash and willow, shimmering with the new green leaves of spring. Still the little dog managed to follow, but gradually she fell further and further behind.

Tears streaked Natasha's face, but now they were the silent tears of infinite sorrow. Then she saw the trees and, sensing the darkness beyond, her grief found its voice again. She thought of the stories she had been told of the terrors in the deep woods.

"Papa, the forest. There are witches! There are wolves!"

"There are no witches," he replied softly. "And the wolves are all gone."

Natasha watched as Zoya disappeared into the distance. Before long, not even her sharp eyes, blurred with tears, could see the puppy. Then she knew that she would never be happy again and she buried her face in Papa's broad shoulder.



And little Zoya?

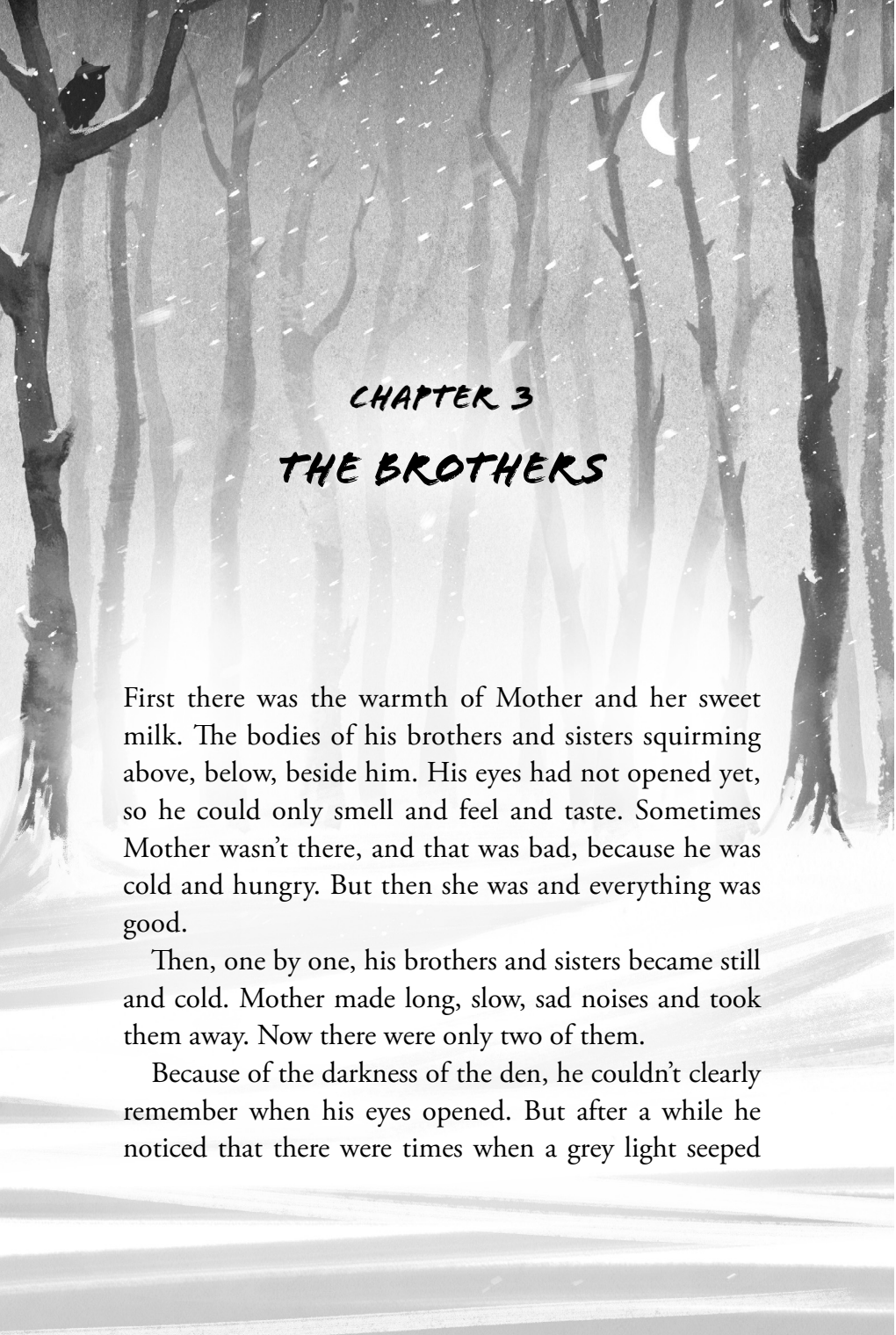
At first it was a game. It was fun to run along behind the big green thing. She could see the face of her special friend through the window. She knew that soon the thing would stop and they would be together.

As her legs grew tired, she wanted the game to stop. She wanted her friend to get out of that hateful thing and be with her again. But the thing with her friend inside did not stop, and it became smaller and smaller. Finally, Zoya could not run any more. The day had become hot and she was thirsty. She left the hard road and entered the shade of the trees, where she slumped down and closed her eyes.

Sometime later, there came a quiet noise. Not quite of creeping or stealth, just that of a light foot in the forest.

“And who are you, little one?” said an ancient voice, the voice of Baba Yaga, the wood witch, who could kill or cure on a whim. Whose hut, lighted by lanterns made of human skulls, walked with the feet of a monstrous chicken.

Hands, lined and veined, the skin thin as rice paper, reached down and took up the little dog, who was in a sleep so deep that nothing could rouse her.



CHAPTER 3

THE BROTHERS

First there was the warmth of Mother and her sweet milk. The bodies of his brothers and sisters squirming above, below, beside him. His eyes had not opened yet, so he could only smell and feel and taste. Sometimes Mother wasn't there, and that was bad, because he was cold and hungry. But then she was and everything was good.

Then, one by one, his brothers and sisters became still and cold. Mother made long, slow, sad noises and took them away. Now there were only two of them.

Because of the darkness of the den, he couldn't clearly remember when his eyes opened. But after a while he noticed that there were times when a grey light seeped

into the world and he could see the shape of Mother, black against the grey.

Mother nudged the two of them together.

Misha, this is your brother, Bratan. You two must be one.

He licked his brother's face and it felt wrong. His eyes were not open. Not only that. One eye was not an eye. And there were other things. His front legs were good and strong enough to pin him when they had their play-fights, but his back legs were twisted and weak. Misha knew that he would always have to watch out for Bratan. And he always would.

The grey light and the dark alternated in the den. Mother came and fed them, and sometimes she had a smell that was strong and good, but also troubling. When Misha licked her face, it tasted strange, but the sort of strangeness that you wanted more of. And when Mother had the strange, exciting smell and taste, she was happy and she made good milk.

Misha began to explore every corner of the den, the blackness in the deep parts and the light, towards the entrance. But he was still a little afraid of the light and soon returned to the warmth of his brother, dreaming in the dark.

And one time when Mother was not there, a bad smell came, like their own smell but stronger. A soft voice was snuffling in the den.

Where are you, little ones? Come to me. Let me feel you. Let me taste you.

Bratan whimpered, his fear palpable, and Misha moved between him and the entrance. Without meaning to, he found that he was snarling. He felt the hair around his neck and on his back rise.

But his snarl was just an encouragement to the intruder. Misha saw the yellow light in her eyes, the white flash of her teeth, the red glow of her fur. And he felt within him something stir. He had been frightened but now the new feeling swamped the fear. What he felt was rage and a kind of joy. He knew that he was made for this. Rather than cowering back from the white teeth, he lunged forwards, his comical little snarl rising in intensity.

The vixen, anticipating a quick and easy kill, paused for a moment, puzzled. This was not what she had expected. But the insolent pup was only a quarter of her size and she tensed herself to spring on him. Her jaws would fasten round his neck and a quick shake would see the job done.

Misha's spurt of courage was beginning to fail. He wanted Mother. He backed away a little, till he felt Bratan behind him. He tried to growl, but this time not even a squeak emerged.

And then there was fury and noise. Bodies writhed and spun in the small space, and Misha and Bratan were crushed and thrown and bruised. Hissing, yelping, quick savage barks. A high-pitched sound, agonised and tragic, the last ever to emerge from that red throat. Then it was over. The den filled with the smell of dead fox.

Misha found Mother. She nuzzled him and he licked at her face. She was hurt, with deep bites on her shoulders, and one ear was torn. The blood showed red on her white fur. Bratan came up nervously from the depths. The three of them huddled together and the two pups fed.



CHAPTER 4

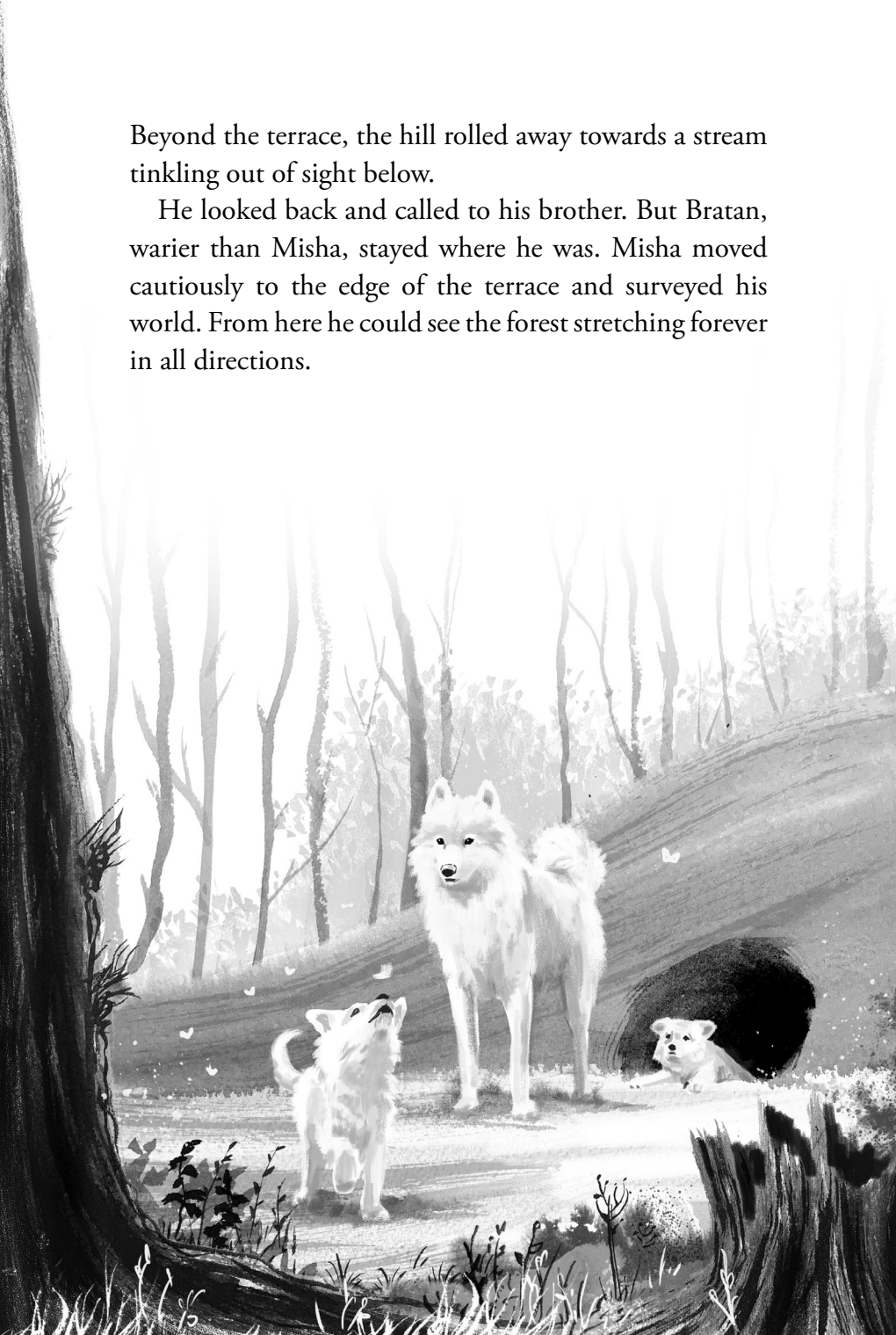
FIRST ADVENTURES

At last the time had come. Mother called him gently from outside and Misha, sniffing, pausing, sniffing, scampering, stumbling, made his way into the full light of day. The world was dazzling in the late spring sunshine. All he had seen before were shades of grey, but now there was blue and white above, and all around the wrinkled browns, mottled silvers and shimmering greens of the trees. The glittering brightness hurt his eyes but his soul swelled outwards to meet it.

The den had been scraped out from under an overhanging lip of rock on the side of a hill deep in the forest. There was a flat terrace in front of the overhang, just big enough for the family to lie and play together.

Beyond the terrace, the hill rolled away towards a stream tinkling out of sight below.

He looked back and called to his brother. But Bratan, warier than Misha, stayed where he was. Misha moved cautiously to the edge of the terrace and surveyed his world. From here he could see the forest stretching forever in all directions.



Not quite forever. Far away beyond the trees, something unnatural loomed, huge and ominous: towers and domes and great concrete blocks. Despite its mass, the structure was too far away to register with the pups or their mother. It was as distant and remote as the sky.

Mother nuzzled Misha and then went back into the den. She emerged, a few seconds later, with Bratan in her mouth. She dropped him, a little roughly, next to Misha. Bratan immediately crept up to Misha and tried to hide his face in his side.

It's OK, Brother. There's nothing to be frightened of. This is the world. The sun was warm and their mother lay down next to them. She rolled on to her back and they suckled happily.

Each day after that, the pups were allowed out on to the terrace. Soon even Bratan was enjoying the expeditions out of the den, which now felt airless and cramped.

As Misha exercised his growing limbs, he began to feel a new kind of hunger. It was still good to drink Mother's milk, to feel close to her and to have his brother feed next to him. But he wanted something else, something more.

One day, Mother came back from one of her trips to the forest and he sensed that the new thing was coming. It had been a successful outing. Padding quietly along by the side of the river at the bottom of the hill, she had disturbed an otter eating a big carp. The otter had already eaten half of the fish, and so, after a little hissing and chattering, a few half-hearted lunges, it slipped back into

the water. Mother greedily swallowed everything that remained: skin, bones, head and all.

Trotting back towards the den, her belly already round, she heard a rustle in a bramble patch. There she found a nest of field mice and she quickly crunched and swallowed the eight young. And finally, on the lower slopes of the hill, she saw a huge earthworm, drawn out by the overnight rain. One end was anchored in the soil and it put up a surprising fight before she pulled it loose.

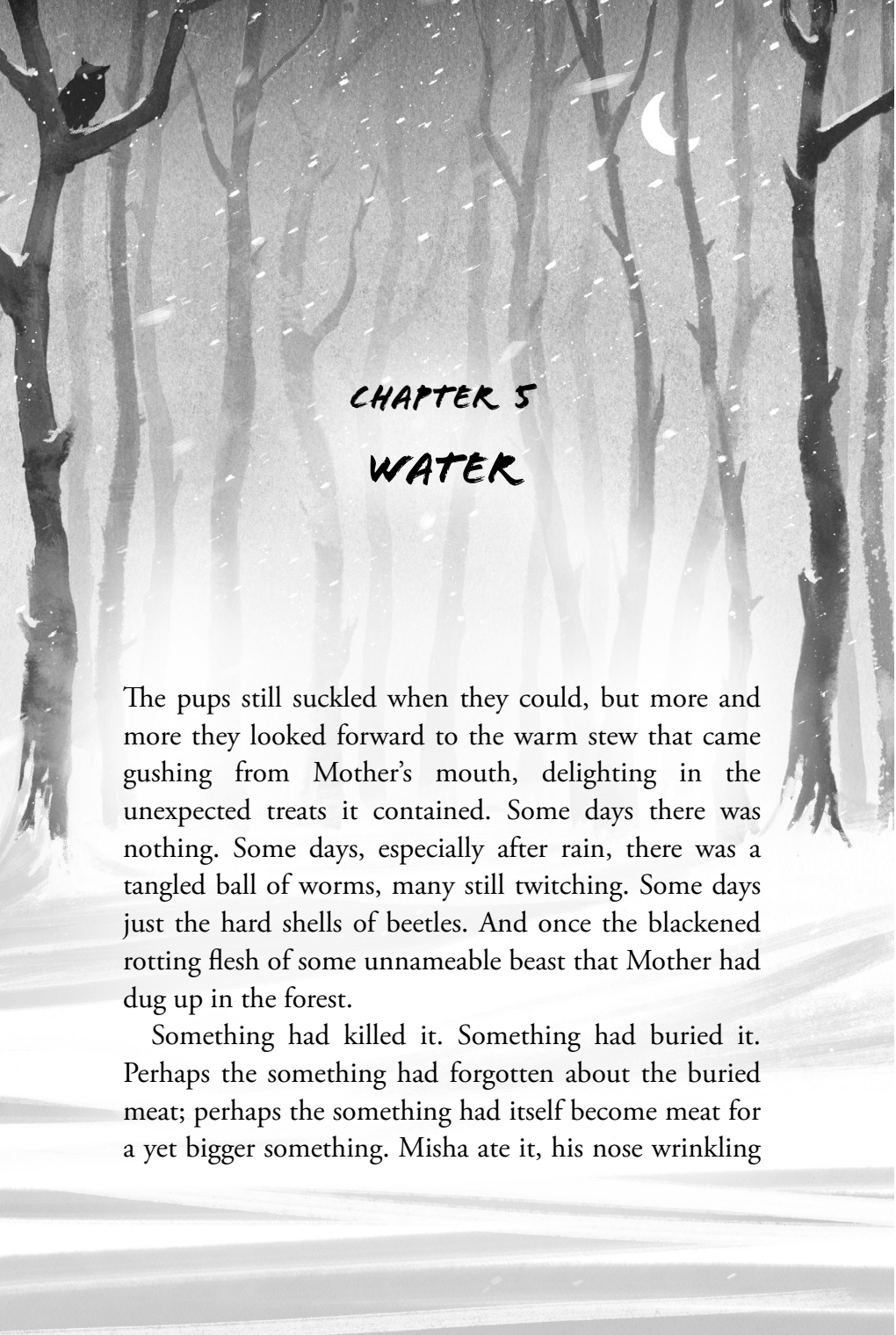
This was her best hunt in weeks. She loved the feeling of fullness in her belly, even as she knew that it would not last.

She called to her pups from the mouth of the den and out they came. Misha first, of course, but even Bratan now emerged without much coaxing.

Misha instinctively knew what to do. He reached up and began to lick Mother's lips. Whenever she turned away, he followed her. And then she shuddered, and up came a savoury soup of fish and mouse and worm. Misha needed no invitation or encouragement but buried his face in the warm mess, sucking and chomping. Bratan sniffed his way over. Then, for the first time ever, Misha growled at him, a low menacing growl, not unlike the one he had aimed at the marauding vixen. Bratan recoiled, and Misha felt a surge of sorrow and shame.

Come, Brother. It's good.

Bratan came shyly forwards again and began to eat the half-digested feast.



CHAPTER 5

WATER

The pups still suckled when they could, but more and more they looked forward to the warm stew that came gushing from Mother's mouth, delighting in the unexpected treats it contained. Some days there was nothing. Some days, especially after rain, there was a tangled ball of worms, many still twitching. Some days just the hard shells of beetles. And once the blackened rotting flesh of some unnameable beast that Mother had dug up in the forest.

Something had killed it. Something had buried it. Perhaps the something had forgotten about the buried meat; perhaps the something had itself become meat for a yet bigger something. Misha ate it, his nose wrinkling

in disgust even as he swallowed. But Bratan took one sniff and retreated back to the den.

Then, one morning, Mother left the den, surveyed the green world and called to them.

Come.

Misha knew from the urgency of her bark that his life was about to change.

Come, he barked in turn to Bratan. But Bratan would not come, even when Misha and Mother called together.

Mother started trotting purposefully down the hill towards the stream at the bottom. Misha looked back, still hoping his brother would follow. But then the urge to run took control of him and he was bounding after Mother, truly stretching his legs for the first time.

Bounding too quickly.

He had only ever scampered around the little flat terrace outside the den, but now he was running wildly down the slope. After a few strides, he was completely out of control. His back legs somersaulted over his front, then he was tumbling head over heels through the silver birch and willow saplings. Finally, he crashed into Mother, who spun round and gave him a sharp nip on the shoulder. When he yelped at the pain, she nipped him on the other one.

The message was clear: *Quiet! This is not play.*

They reached the stream at the bottom of the slope. Mother drank, lapping the water with her tongue, and Misha copied her. Or tried to. It was trickier than it looked.

Drinking was a skill you had to learn. But the cool water was delicious.

Misha heard Bratan crying feebly back at the den, and together he and Mother headed home. Bratan had never been left on his own before, and even though they had only been gone for a few minutes, he jumped and capered with excitement on their return. Mother nipped him sharply on the nose.

Again, the message was plain: *Be silent when I am not here.*

From this point on, Mother grew ever harsher in her punishments. They had to learn new things. Things to do, and things not to do. There were fewer gentle caresses, and more cuffs and nips.

The next day, Mother again led Misha on a trip down to the stream. This time, when Misha called, his brother followed. Bratan's back legs still had not developed properly. The right one was twisted awkwardly under his body while the left splayed outwards, as if to compensate. He did his best to keep up, scooting along in his limping, dragging way. His front legs and his chest and head were growing strong, which helped. Indeed, in tussles in the den he would always triumph over Misha, as long as he could wedge himself in a corner and did not have to move.

But this was a new challenge and the effort exhausted him. Twice Mother stopped and went back, encouraging with nudges and nips and growls. Whenever he rested,

she licked his back legs and haunches, as if her pup had the sort of injury you could cure with love.

At last, they reached the stream and Bratan took his first drink. He looked up at Misha, his eyes wide with delight.

Why didn't you tell me about this stuff? I love it!

The two pups splashed about in the stream, which now, in early summer, was not much more than a trickle. All too soon, Mother pushed them out with her nose and chased them back home.

That then became the pattern: daily trips down to drink at the stream. The days were getting hotter, so the cool stream was a good place to be. Bratan became a little less stiff in his movements, but still could not go for long without getting tangled in his own limbs. He looked as if his strong shoulders were dragging the rest of him along behind, like a sledge.

Mother still went out twice a day on hunting and foraging trips, setting out on her first just before dawn and on her last just as darkness fell. Misha felt the excitement rise whenever she set off, and would plead to be allowed to come.

Not yet, she would always say.

Until, at long last, on one grey and misty morning, she said, *Yes*.

Misha looked towards Bratan, dozing against the back wall of the den.

No.

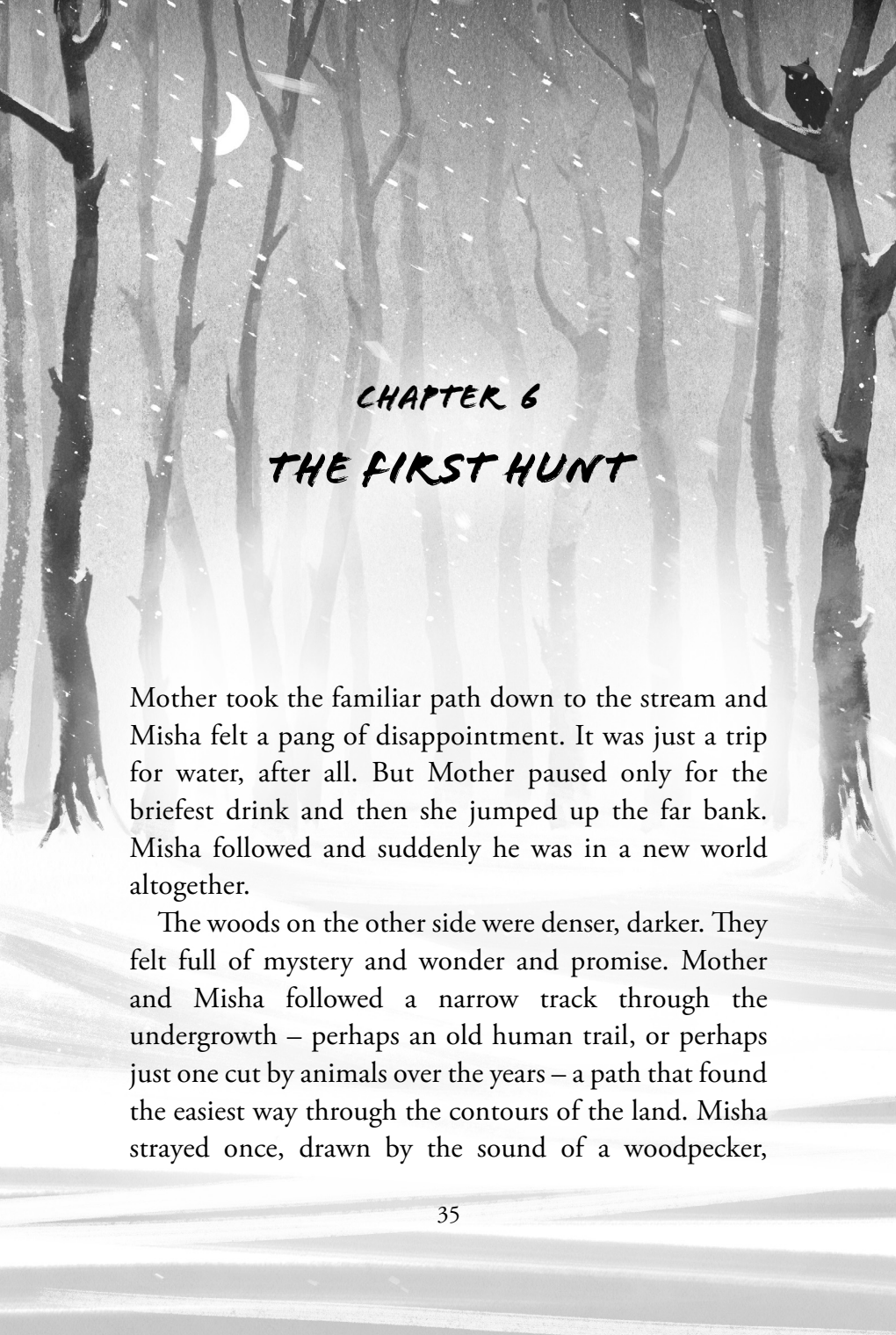
Misha looked from Bratan to Mother, and back again.

Please.

No.

Bratan woke up and realised that something was happening, something that didn't include him. He stood and tottered towards the entrance. Mother darted forwards and pinned him to the ground. This was the ultimate show of who was boss and she had never before used it with her pups. Bratan instantly and instinctively submitted, rolling to present his belly to Mother.

Satisfied, she turned and scrambled out of the den. With one last backward glance, Misha followed.



CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST HUNT

Mother took the familiar path down to the stream and Misha felt a pang of disappointment. It was just a trip for water, after all. But Mother paused only for the briefest drink and then she jumped up the far bank. Misha followed and suddenly he was in a new world altogether.

The woods on the other side were denser, darker. They felt full of mystery and wonder and promise. Mother and Misha followed a narrow track through the undergrowth – perhaps an old human trail, or perhaps just one cut by animals over the years – a path that found the easiest way through the contours of the land. Misha strayed once, drawn by the sound of a woodpecker,

hammering invisibly somewhere to the side. Mother stopped, turned and growled, and Misha focused again. A little later, he fell clumsily over his own feet. This time, Mother came back along the path and bared her teeth at him.

No noise. There is danger here.

She followed it up with a quick, hard nip on the rump. Misha swallowed the yelp. After that, he did his best to follow stealthily in Mother's footsteps. Each time he stepped too heavily on a twig, or stumbled over a tussock, she spun round and nipped him again.

This was not fun.

He looked back through the trees, thinking he might find his way home. But he could not see the den, could not hear the stream, could not even see the hill where he was born. The sky had disappeared: there was only the dark green canopy above and the grey-shadowed trunks of the trees all around.

So he carried on and in time learned how to ape Mother's easy, silent lope. Slowly, he began to enjoy the adventure. His nose was assaulted by new smells: faint traces of the living things that had walked this way in the night. Some tantalising: smells he wanted to follow. Some frightening: smells he wanted to run away from. Some perplexing: dark musty smells that attracted and repelled him equally.

As his own movements became less clumsy, he began to hear the sounds of the woods. The sighing of the wind

in the leaves, the alarm calls of birds, the rustlings and tremblings of creatures in the undergrowth. Each time Mother heard the sounds of furtive movements, she would stop dead and gaze in the direction from which the sounds came. Her ears would rotate till they faced the same way and her body would tense with controlled energy.

Twice Mother leaped into the undergrowth, trying to pounce on whichever small creature had betrayed itself: wood mouse or vole. Both times she returned with nothing.

Although happy to attempt these occasional side-hunts, all the while she appeared to be heading towards a particular destination. Misha was hot and tired by the time they got there, but his eyes opened wide with delight when he saw it.

It was a clearing in the forest, formed when a storm had blown down a towering but rotten old ash tree, which had in turn demolished the smaller silver birch, elder and willows. Deer, elk and bison had come and browsed the new growth, keeping the glade open. Without the trees, sunlight and colour filled the space. The floor of the glade was coated with grasses and wildflowers.

Misha rolled and danced in the sunshine, but they weren't here to play. Misha saw once again Mother's intense gaze and crouching posture, the sharply focused eyes and ears. He felt the excitement of the hunt and

wondered what great prey it was that she pursued. And then she leaped and her jaws closed around . . . what?

Nothing.

Something.

Misha hurried over and saw her bite, once, twice, on air it seemed. Then he saw movement in her mouth. It was a bright green grasshopper, like a clockwork toy made from emeralds. And now that he saw this first one, he looked around and realised that the glade was alive with them, hopping and crawling over the grass.

Mother leaped again and another grasshopper was in her mouth.

Misha copied Mother's technique as best he could: the prowl, the crouch, the leap. He smashed into the ground, nose first.

He tried again.

And again.

And again.



Mother had made it seem so easy but all he could catch was air and grass. In despair, he lay down, resting his chin on a patch of dandelions.

Then a grasshopper landed so close that he could almost reach it with his tongue. The grasshopper crawled to the end of a dandelion leaf and Misha sensed that it was about to make another of its haphazard jumps. Without thinking, his paw went up and out and down, trapping the insect. He felt it wriggle, felt it fight, and the sensation thrilled him. Keeping his paw on the grasshopper, he stood, gave a small bark and bit. The wings and legs and the hard skin crunched, but the body inside was sweet and juicy.

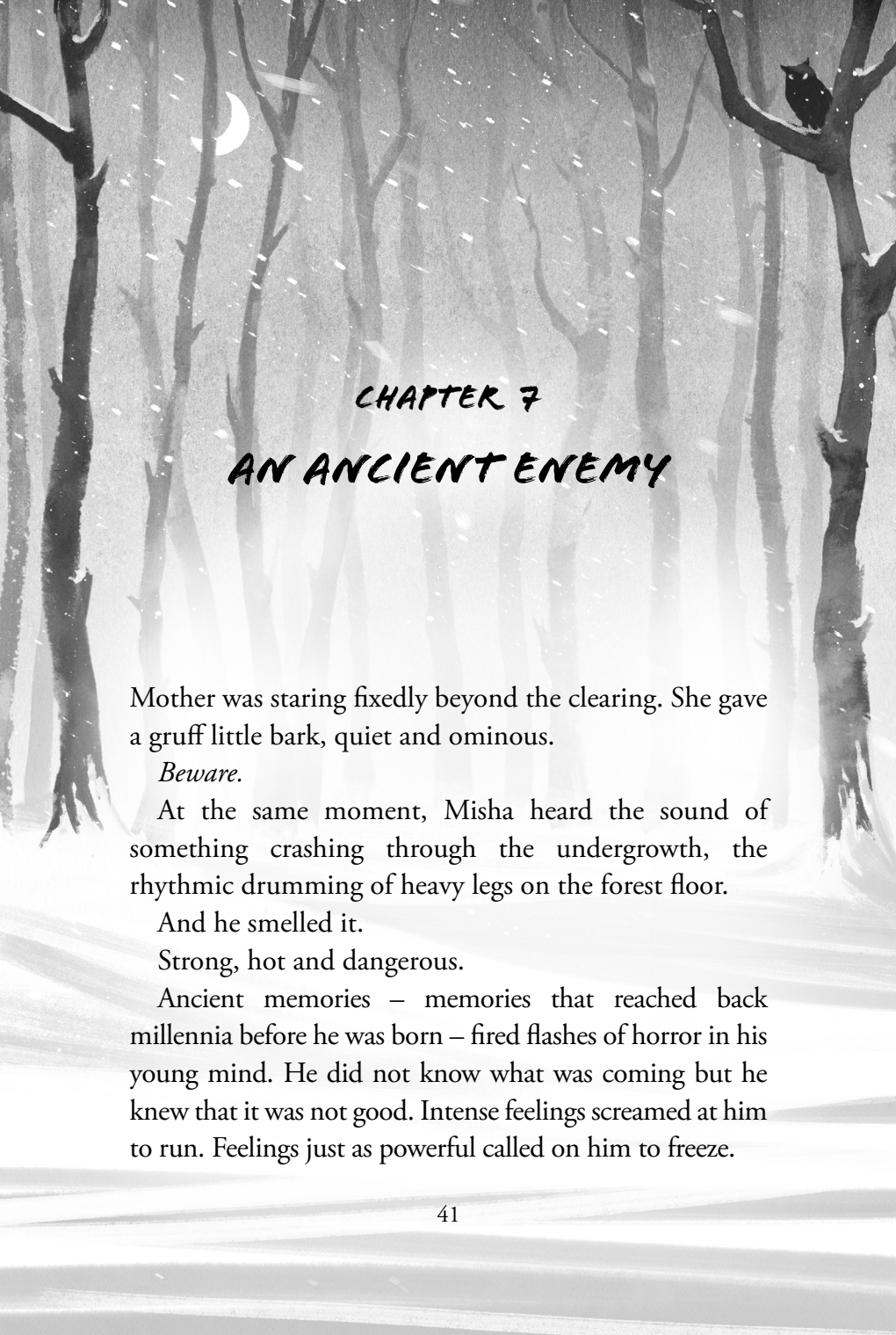
Misha had made his first kill and he felt the triumphant blood-thrill of the mighty hunter.

Now he really had a taste for grasshoppers. He began to look himself like a huge grey and white grasshopper, leaping randomly in all directions. He even managed to catch a few: some by slapping down with his paw, the way he'd caught the first, and others by snapping them up in his jaws, just like Mother.

As well as the jumping grasshoppers, there were other crawling things in the grass. Whatever came within Misha's reach he tried: a black beetle (sour and foul); a brown cricket (all crunch and no juice); a line of ants that squirted bitter acid on his tongue when he lapped them up. A butterfly caught on a daisy, barely worth the effort. And last a ladybird, which was the only thing he spat out,

so disgusting did it taste. From then on, he was wary of orange and black . . .

Despite the ladybird, it was the most fun Misha had ever had. So much fun, in fact, that he did not notice when Mother tensed again, this time in a new and very different way.



CHAPTER 7

AN ANCIENT ENEMY

Mother was staring fixedly beyond the clearing. She gave a gruff little bark, quiet and ominous.

Beware.

At the same moment, Misha heard the sound of something crashing through the undergrowth, the rhythmic drumming of heavy legs on the forest floor.

And he smelled it.

Strong, hot and dangerous.

Ancient memories – memories that reached back millennia before he was born – fired flashes of horror in his young mind. He did not know what was coming but he knew that it was not good. Intense feelings screamed at him to run. Feelings just as powerful called on him to freeze.

And then it was here, bursting into the glade with an explosion of leaves and twigs: a ferocious, bouncing, bounding ball of energy. A juvenile brown bear, a year old, far bigger than Mother, already equipped with long, curving claws and teeth that could mince flesh and carve bone.

The bear, however, exuded not predatory menace but heedless joy. He galloped and cavorted around the clearing, tripped over his flapping paws, rolled happily, skipped to his feet again, and then stopped and stared in fascination at the two dogs.

Without thinking, Misha went into play mode. His front legs flat on the floor, back end raised, tail high, his ears cocked, mouth open and tongue lolling. Everything about the bear screamed FUN and Misha wanted in.

Mother had other ideas. She roughly grabbed Misha by the scruff, and carried him away, yelping and twisting in frustration. The instant they left the clearing, something huge, monstrous almost, lumbered in from the same direction as the young bear. This new arrival had none of the playfulness of the cub. It meant business. And business meant danger.

It was the mother bear.

Her eyes, tiny and fretful in her massive head, surveyed the space. She sniffed suspiciously, angrily. She located the whiff of dog and turned towards the pair, inadequately concealed in the bushes at the edge of the clearing. Misha had stopped struggling and hung limp and terrified in Mother's mouth. If the young bear signified fun, the

parent signified death. Even Mother, so sure, so clever, so resourceful, seemed frozen, either hoping to remain silent and unseen, or simply too frightened to move.

The young bear, peeved at losing his new playmate, came gambolling towards them, followed by his lumbering guardian. That was enough to jolt Mother out of her reverie. She dropped Misha roughly on the ground.

Run.

