

# Black Dog - Chapter 5

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Olivia's first night alone at Lockwood House.

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Twilight had surrendered to the full dark of night before Olivia remembered to call her mum and let her know that the funeral had proceeded without incident (mostly) and that she was settling in.

"Don't forget it's only a couple of weeks before you start at the library," said her mum.

"I haven't forgotten."

"It's a good job for you, and I don't want you wearing yourself out over all this business with Auntie Imogen's house."

"I won't," Olivia promised.

"There'll come a point where you'll need to get men in to do some of the work on the house, you know. You can't do it all by yourself. I want you to talk to your dad when it gets to that stage."

"Of course." Since Olivia had left university, disgraced by her failures, she'd barely spoken to her father at all. He'd done little to disguise his disappointment in her for 'wasting her talent.'

"So did you see your gran at the funeral?"

"I don't think so." Olivia had only met her grandmother a handful of times but was dimly aware of the decades-old rift between Granny Lockwood and her sister-in-law Imogen.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised." A long pause followed. Olivia thought about airing out the stuffy rooms of the house, but it would have to wait until morning. Then, "You've remembered to lock all the doors and windows, haven't you?"

"Yes, mother." Olivia had been round the house turning on lights that evening, too: the living room,

kitchen, entrance hall, the bedroom she'd chosen for herself, and the bathroom. The darkened rooms had made her nervous, and she didn't want to go fumbling around in the pitch black for a lost light switch or tripping over a cat. "I'll keep an eye out for the Black Dog, too," she joked.

"Ah yes, the family curse." Her mum sighed. "Not quite what I'll be worrying about, with you all those miles away, in that big house all by yourself."

"Really, I'll be fine."

"Don't forget to keep in touch. Your dad sends his love, and we'll see you at Christmas."

Olivia fought a sudden urge to beg to go home. It was as bad as her ill-fated year at university: once again separated from her home and family by a long train journey. "Christmas," she repeated.

"You'll be so busy with the new job, and the house, I expect the time will just fly by. Well then, goodnight, love."

"Night, mum. Speak to you soon."

Olivia sat looking at the phone long after her mum had hung up. Only a sudden chill breeze, strong enough to lift her hair off the back of her neck, woke her from her trance. She padded out into the entrance hall, double-checking the front door, and headed for bed. But just as she set foot on the first step, there was a loud pink , and the landing above vanished into the darkness.

"Oh for goodness' sake!" The guest bedroom she'd chosen wasn't far from the top of the stairs. Only a few hurried steps in darkness, only a few moments blind, fumble for the door handle, the light switch, and she'd be safely back in the light - but her feet froze her in place at the bottom of the stairs, her body weight suddenly monumental and unmovable. She stared up into the dark: at shadows on the brink of movement, of taking on a life of their own. What had possessed her to speak of the Black Dog after nightfall? In the daylight hours, it piqued her curiosity, but in the dark house, alone amongst ancestral ghosts.

Nothing to be afraid of here, she told herself sternly, but she was afraid nonetheless. Then something brushed against her shins, and she screamed, in the instant before common sense caught up with her. Only a cat, only a cat, only a cat. It had darted away when she'd screamed, but at the far end of the hallway, she could see eyes in the darkness, shining bright and yellow as a demon's.

Still shaking, Olivia crouched down and called the black cat over to her. "I know you," she whispered, giving the friendly cat a scratch behind the ears. For some inexplicable reason now lost to the world,

Aunt Imogen had named him Banana. A cat called Banana, purring like a furry engine while he rubbed his nose up her arm, couldn't possibly be a bad omen, whether he was black or white or purple polka-dotted. "I fed you earlier," said Olivia, who knew a bit about cats and knew what this kind of affectionate behaviour usually meant. She'd fed all the cats as well as she could, with what remained in the pantry. But Banana liked her company, perhaps, and either way his presence gave her some comfort as she ventured up to the guest bedroom. She even let him sleep on the bed, rather than be alone. She curled up on her side, facing the door, and listened to the timbers of the old house creak as they breathed, every creak sounding like a voice, or a foot upon the stairs. Hours later she succumbed to the sleep of the exhausted, the warm, comfortable weight of the cat pressed against her shoulder blades.