

Black Dog - Chapter 6

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A visitor interrupts Olivia's work on the house.

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Olivia woke to slippery blood on her thighs, her nightdress clinging. She got up, the cradle of leaden pain between her hips making her slow and clumsy as she stripped the sheets to see that she'd bled through to the mattress. This was not an auspicious start to her plans. Even before entering the house, she'd noticed the weathered and cracked paintwork, the slates missing from the roof, that broken window in one of the rooms on the second floor. She puttered around all morning, doing precisely nothing of what she'd planned.

Auntie Imogen had been in her grave for less than a day - it would be callous and mercenary to begin so soon with dismantling the sets and stages where the eight decades of her life had played out. Olivia gazed vacantly as a ruminating cow at the weeds beyond the smeared panes of the French windows. She could manage a little weeding, just a little tidying up in the garden. Auntie Imogen surely wouldn't have objected to that. Digging out a pair of dungarees and a warm jumper from her suitcases, Olivia ventured into the overgrown jungle of the garden.

Anything rare and delicate in the sprawling garden had long since been choked by a tangle of ivy, brambles, buddleia bushes and assorted other weeds. Auntie Imogen had never been an enthusiastic gardener, and in her old age and diminishing strength had conceded to the wilderness, so Olivia could trample through and stamp her own brand on the landscape almost completely free of guilt. She only felt a twinge of regret when she remembered that there had been an apple tree somewhere around, just a sapling last time Olivia had seen it, but Auntie Imogen had been so pleased with it. Olivia paused, her breath clouding, dirt smeared across her face. Guiltily, she glanced at the pile of weeds and branches she'd amassed for a bonfire later. She shook off the feeling as best she could. She'd have noticed, wouldn't she? Disengaging the hems of her muddy dungarees from a snare of brambles, she tramped across the garden to hack at a particularly large buddleia bush. That was safe enough to be getting on with. Probably couldn't kill a buddleia, even if she tried.

It was hard work: the branches towered over her, some as thick as her wrists. She fetched a hacksaw from the shed, but soon snapped the blade and had to do what she could with a big pair of

garden shears. Puffing and sweating despite the chill, she hacked her way closer and closer to the heart of the buddleia, until the jarring clang of metal on metal stopped her, the squeal of the blades on the unseen obstacle setting her teeth on edge. She dropped the shears, pulling the broken branches away by hand, to discover a small wrought iron gate, bent and rusted. It squealed and groaned in protest when Olivia opened it and pushed her way through the thick growth of vegetation, into the churchyard on the other side.

No more than a couple of feet from the gate, a track wound between the grave markers, under the big yew tree and out of sight. Olivia wondered if Auntie Imogen had known about the gate. Most likely she had at some point (having lived in the house all her life) but had forgotten about it once the bushes had overtaken it. Olivia had played in the garden as a child, too, when she'd visited with her parents. She thought fleetingly of *The Secret Garden*, which she'd read as a child. What a shame that she hadn't discovered the gate ten years ago; that she'd missed out on the secret when it would have been magical. She considered allowing the garden to grow over and reclaim its secret, perhaps for some other child to discover in the future, but from where she stood just outside the gate, she could see the vicarage looking warm and cozy on the other side of the churchyard. With everyone she knew and cared about so far away, it was comforting to think of the friendly vicar just a short walk away.

Since the last of the usable daylight was coming to an end, Olivia put her gardening tools back in the shed and went back to clear the broken branches from around the gateway. She oiled the gate and went to see exactly where the path led. It came out close to the great yew tree with the tombstone she recognised as 'Verity's place,' and meandered off among the graves. Olivia was just about to head back to the house when she noticed, standing by the lych gate, a slim young girl with curly dark hair. Verity. Olivia prickled with irritation at the memory of Verity's strange behaviour after the funeral, but then again, she remembered having doubts about some of her school friends, to begin with. Maybe Verity's sense of humour was little inappropriate; maybe she took some getting used to. Olivia was about to call over when she saw that Verity was already talking to someone. Olivia had missed him at first: a tall, thin man dressed in dark clothing, blending into the shadows of the lych gate. Olivia didn't think she knew him, but in the blurry twilight shadows, she couldn't tell for sure. She was too far away to hear their conversation, but when the wind changed, she could hear the excitement in Verity's voice as she chattered away at the tall stranger. Then he turned to stare in Olivia's direction, and Verity stared too. Olivia offered a small awkward wave, but at this, Verity turned away again, resuming her monologue.

Olivia slunk back to the house and locked the door behind her, secretly relieved that Verity hadn't invited her over to join the conversation. She might have had the nerve to face Verity alone, but not Verity's friend, who had looked a disagreeable sort. She went up to scrub her muddy hands and face, and convince herself that she really hadn't wanted to talk to Verity anyway.

A week's worth of hard work made no appreciable difference. Olivia needed to restore the house to its former glory, something Aunt Imogen would have been proud of - but reality kept dampening her enthusiasm. Why pick bright new colours for walls that remained unreachable behind a thousand or more dog-eared and yellow romance novels, three deep and piled on top of each other in places? Why bother with plans to pull up a cat-stained old carpet when it was weighted so thoroughly in place with decades of accumulated rubbish? All with Aunt Imogen forever looking over her shoulder.

Olivia made up her mind to tackle just one room. Just one room to make her own, to prove to herself that she could. She picked the guest bedroom where she'd been sleeping and promptly began to pull out everything but the most basic furniture. But before she'd finished, the doorbell rang, and she answered the door to find Verity standing there, smirking cattily, her parasol over her shoulder.

"Oh, it's you," said Olivia. "What are you doing here?"

Verity's smile didn't falter. "Just dropping by to see how you were settling in, and if you were in need of any assistance. You know: neighbourly..." she gestured airily with her parasol. " things ." She was dressed prettily as before, in shocking contrast to the dungarees and ratty old jumper Olivia had designated her cleaning clothes. Nevertheless, Olivia recognised the dress as the exact same one Verity had worn to the funeral, and quite possibly the exact same jewellery, too. Certainly, the lovely antique cameo choker was the same.

"Oh! I almost forgot:" Verity started digging in her handbag. "I brought you a house-warming present. It has some local folklore and ghost stories," she explained, handing Olivia a small and yellow-leaved book, and then added, "of course, they're not all true."

"You would know, I suppose."

A look of anger flashed across Verity's pretty white face. "Let's not talk about the other day, shall we?" she said, although she then fell silent, leaving limited alternatives.

"Thank you for the book," said Olivia politely. "I'm sure I'll find it very interesting." And the worst thing was that she probably would enjoy the gift, regardless of her mixed feelings about the giver. Having accepted the book, it seemed intolerably rude to leave Verity waiting on the doorstep as it began to drizzle. "Well, don't just stand there: come in and have a cup of tea. Sorry about the mess, it's not mine."

Having made drinks, Olivia flumped down on the sofa, glad of a rest, but Verity stood there looking uncomfortable. She was slight and flat-chested, with thin legs sticking out from the voluminous black ruffles of her skirt. A waif, a stray. Olivia was struck by jealousy again at the thought of how Auntie Imogen would have loved this dainty visitor. Auntie Imogen had always had an interest in fashion and despaired at the difficulty in finding pretty clothes to fit Olivia. Olivia had long legs and had won several prizes running for her school's athletics team, but no amount of carefully watching her weight could ever give her that waifish look that came so effortlessly to some girls.

"You can sit down, you know," said Olivia.

Verity glanced from the sofa to the chair next to it, then the big armchair in the corner, and back again. "I'm happier standing, thank you," she said, with an enigmatic smile. Then she squeaked in surprise, her large eyes going even larger as she stared at the threshold of the door to the hallway. A thin white kitten stared back at her, its blue eyes looking just as huge. It stood frozen, with one paw raised and trembling, and a moment later its nerve broke, and it vanished like a ghost. Verity, treading delicately and with no sound but the faintest tinkling of silver jewellery, moved to peer out into the hallway. On the stairs sat a tableau of several cats, stone still as they stared at the stranger. "Ohh," Verity breathed, "I like your cats."

"Thank you, but they're not really mine. I don't know what I'm going to do with them all, to be honest."

Verity grimaced. "Well, you'd better be kind to them," she said. She weaved curiously around the room, peering at shelves high and low. "I'm only looking," she said. "Don't worry; I won't touch anything." She drifted to a halt at the mantelpiece. "Is this you?"

Reluctantly, Olivia nodded. Age eleven, Olivia had been the tallest in her class, painfully self-conscious, and the school photograph hadn't exactly captured her best side. "Yes, that really needs to go, doesn't it?" she said, getting up to turn it face down on the dusty shelf.

Verity smirked. "Why? Imogen thinks it's a nice picture which ought to be on display." She moved along the row. "And this one's Imogen?" Three elegantly austere young women gazed dispassionately out from a brown and cream photograph, and Olivia recognised at once the dark hooded eyes and almost-smile of the one on the left. The young Imogen was beautiful in a way that her sisters were not, and that beauty hadn't been passed down through the lineage to Olivia, either.

"I said 'who's this?' " Verity brought Olivia swiftly back to the present. "He's rather handsome, isn't he?"

Olivia looked at the photograph, and her heart sank. "That's my Uncle George." In that one image, he

smiled as if everything in the world was right.

Verity grinned. "You may have to introduce me to your Uncle George. I've always had the ambition to snare myself a good-looking man from a wealthy family." She studied the photograph carefully. "How old is he now: forty? Does he still have all his hair? People make age differences work, don't they?" she asked, looking horribly serious.

"Don't," said Olivia. "Just don't, please."

"Oh, don't look at me like that, I'm only joking. And I know he must be married: such a good-looking man simply must be married."

"No, I mean... You shouldn't talk that way about the dead."

"He's dead? You didn't say. Hmm. Well, I didn't mean to upset you, so you shouldn't take it personally." She paused only a moment before another picture caught her attention. "Ooh! That's such a pretty dress!"

Verity's 'neighbourly' offer of assistance appeared to count for nothing, in the end. She hung around for a while longer, asking odd questions about who and what and when and why - and then she vanished, leaving her cup of tea untouched.

Alone, Olivia took up her notebook.

Dear Uncle George, It seems you have an admirer, and she's the prettiest little thing you've ever seen. She's about my age, if that, but then what's another scandal to our family?

Olivia paused. She'd never met her Uncle George - he'd died the year she'd been born - but for years she'd been writing down her stories and thoughts in the form of letters to him, even going so far as to seal them up in envelopes and keep them in shoe boxes under her bed. The eccentric Uncle George of her parents' family stories would have charmed Verity easily enough, Olivia imagined. The house would have fallen to him if he'd been alive. He'd always been Auntie Imogen's favourite nephew. Olivia sighed and put away her notebook.

