

T M Alexander

Labradoodle

On

the

Loose



Five friends have
fun and adventures

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Fifty's Kidnap



Biscuits For Breakfast

Fifty came round at half-past eight in the morning, which was odd because it was half-term and all normal eleven-year-olds were in bed. I got the door because Mum had left for work with Flo (who was going to her new best friend's house) and Amy was still asleep (and would be until lunchtime). I would have been asleep too but I forgot to draw my curtains so the sun lasered through my eyelids at six o'clock.

'What's up?' I asked.

He grunted. That was odd as well – Fifty likes to talk. I got the biscuit tin out – sugar's his favourite thing. He took a bourbon, ate it, took another.

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'So what's up?' I said again.

He ate the second bourbon. 'Nothing.'

There was no point trying to fool my I've-known-you-since-you-wore-Thomas-the-Tank-pyjamas lie detector. I gave him a look.

He sighed. 'Probably Rose has gone to nursery.' His little sister is actually just 'Rose' but they didn't decide on her name for weeks so everyone went around saying 'She's probably Rose' and it stuck.

'So?' I knew Fifty didn't want his mum to send his little sister to nursery but I wasn't sure why. I went to nursery. So did he. Copper Pie's mum *runs* a nursery. So what?

'She went yesterday for the morning and she *didn't* like it.' He stuck his bottom lip out.

'How d'you know?'

'She told me, of course.'

Yeah, right! Rose can say 'yes', 'no', 'yoghurt' and 'star' (which means lightbulb). That was it. I decided to change the subject. Fifty is far too obsessed with his sister. 'Mum's left us some stuff for a Tribe picnic. She said there's loads, enough for two Tribes.'

Fifty grinned. 'There's only one Tribe.'

'We could take it to the park. Meet everyone there,' I said.

'Same,' said Fifty.

I looked at my watch. 'At . . . ten o'clock?'

'OK.' He got out his phone. 'I'll text the Tribers.'

I got crisps, Marmite, bread and the packet of chocolate

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cakes out of the cupboard. And ham, cold sausages, pork pies and butter out of the fridge. While we made the sandwiches the texts came back: *yes* from Jonno, Bee and Copper Pie. The Tribe picnic was on. There were four days left of the holidays. It was sunny. *Ace*. I crammed the picnic and a rug in my rucksack.

‘What about drinks?’ said Fifty.

‘We can buy them from the ice-cream van.’

We were off. It’s not far to the park, but it seemed forever because Fifty stressed about his sister *all* the way. I adopted the usual strategy, which is to answer ‘Yes’ or ‘Umm’, or nod.

‘You know they just leave the babies in those bouncy seats.’

‘Yes.’

‘And don’t change their nappies.’

I nodded.

‘Kids get bitten at nursery.’

‘Umm.’

‘You got bitten by Annabel Ellis *every* day.’

That needed a proper response. ‘There *won’t* be an Annabel Ellis at her nursery,’ I said confidently.

‘Let’s hope not. Because if anyone upsets Probably Rose, they’ll have *me* to deal with,’ said Fifty. As he’s small (half the size of everyone else – ‘Fifty’ percent, get it?) and cute-looking, it didn’t seem much of a threat. I would have completely forgotten about it, except that he said it again later, but not to me this time . . . to the police.

Needed - One Dog

Bee was swinging on the gate to the play area, making it clang really loudly. 'Hi,' she said.

'Anyone else here?' I asked.

'Doodle,' she said.

'That wasn't what I meant.'

'You're anyone, aren't you, Doodle?' Bee stroked his head. She used to hate him because of the chewing (of shoes), dog hair (in her breakfast) and yelping (in the middle of the night). It was when Jonno went puppy training with her that it got better. Now they always carry dog treats in their pockets.

'Rose is at nursery today,' said Fifty. 'And not getting picked up till *two*.'

'Lucky Rose,' said Bee.

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As she spoke I heard a familiar noise. We knew to move, and sharpish – it was Marco on his mountainboard accelerating our way. We all leapt onto the gate. *Clang!* He turned at the last second – just before certain impact – flipped his board in the air and caught it. Unreal!

‘Hello, Marco,’ said Bee.

‘Hi. Can I lend the dog?’ It was an odd thing to say. Marco comes from Portugal but his English has got pretty good since he’s been at our school.

Bee used her favourite (and only) Portuguese word. ‘*Que?*’

‘The dog.’ Marco pointed.

‘Why do you want Doodle?’ said a voice. It was Jonno, glasses on the end of his nose as usual, with Copper Pie.

Marco tried to explain. We didn’t understand. He gave up, got a stone and drew a picture on the pavement of what he wanted. It was a boy on a board with a dog dragging it along, like a husky.

‘Why do you want to do that?’ said Jonno, pushing his frizzy hair back.

‘I see a boy, going fast with a dog.’ It sounded fun. We all looked at Bee to see if Doodle was going to be allowed to be a husky.

She moved her black fringe out of her eyes. ‘OK, but me first.’

We went over to the other side of the park by the big hill where there are always kids doing tricks on bikes and

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skateboards. Bee put her feet in the strappy bits on the board, bent forwards and stuck her bottom out. That wasn't going to work. Marco tried to straighten her up but the wheels moved and she yelped and grabbed on to him. Doodle sat at the end of the lead having a good gnaw on Copper Pie's black trainers. I didn't bother telling him.

'Try without the dog,' said Fifty.

Bee handed the lead to Jonno. 'What now?' she said.

'Move the knees,' said Marco.

She did. The board moved, but Marco steadied it. She fell off anyway. *Learning to mountainboard might take a while*, I thought.

Bee kicked the board over to Marco. 'You show me.'

When you can already do something without thinking it's really hard to show anyone else. I'm like that with surfing. Because I can do it without trying, I have to kind of watch myself do it in my head to explain it to anyone else. Marco didn't even try. He just scooted off, perfectly balanced, did a jump to turn and sailed back. That was the only lesson Bee was getting.

'It looks easy,' said Jonno.

'Can I go with the dog?' said Marco.

Bee nodded. Jonno handed him over. Marco waved the lead, which I think meant 'Go'. Doodle stayed by Copper Pie's tasty trainer. Marco did it again. Same result.

'I think you'll have to move first,' said Jonno. 'Doodle can't read your mind.'

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Marco pushed off. Doodle got up and ran behind. That wasn't what Marco wanted. He came back over. 'How can I make the dog do the pull?'

'He needs something to chase,' said Fifty. 'Like a rabbit.'

'What about me?' said Bee.

Lots of nodding. Bee jogged off. Doodle watched her, but didn't follow. Bee stopped by the hedge.

'Doo-dle,' she shouted. He went off like a rocket. Marco shot forwards, lost the lead, fell backwards – splat. Doodle ran over to Bee and was rewarded with something from her pocket.

'Again,' said Marco. Bee rolled her eyes. It was never going to work.

'Once.' She held up one finger. 'Once more, that's all.'

He nodded and took back the lead. This time when Bee shouted for Doodle to come, Marco was ready. They went off at a good dog speed, following Bee. She ran in a big circle and stopped back by us, panting. Marco sailed round after her like he was the captain of a ship coming into port after a splendid victory. He patted his labradoodle-husky.

'Good dog,' he said. Bee fished about for more treats. Doodle gulped them down – I don't think dogs chew – and started barking.

'Shhhh,' said Bee.

Doodle nudged the board with his nose.

'He wants another go,' said Fifty.

'Me next,' said Copper Pie. He grabbed the lead. This

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time Bee didn't have to run ahead. Doodle shot straight off, with only one of Copper Pie's feet strapped in. He managed to stay on, wobbling a bit. Doodle headed for the slope. Oh no! Disaster. Copper Pie obviously thought the same. He bailed out and the board accelerated away followed by Doodle. Copper Pie ran after him. He's a really fast runner but Doodle was faster. Luckily he decided to stop and chew a bone-like branch or Copper Pie would never have got him.

'My turn,' said Bee. 'I get it now.' She got on, bent her knees, said 'Run, Doodle,' and amazingly she stayed on. She even managed to steer him away from the hill and ride all round the grassy area. It was cool. Dog-power.

'It must be me next,' said Jonno. Bee handed over the lead. Doodle started dragging Jonno without the board.

'Sit,' said Jonno. Doodle jumped up at him. Jonno did the whole turning away thing that you're meant to do if a dog's naughty.

'You may as well have your go,' said Bee. 'Doodle's over-excited.'

Jonno didn't seem to like speed so he kept leaning back and yanking on the lead to slow Doodle down. They were like a remote control car being operated by a two-year-old. Stop. Start. Stop. Start.

'I give up,' said Jonno. He looked at me. I shook my head. I figured I'd be OK on the board, but I didn't fancy a manic dog dragging me along the ground, taking all the

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skin off my knees. I think Fifty felt the same. So Marco had a go. He went all the way down the hill on his board, mega mega fast. The ball-bearing noise from the wheels was super-loud. At the bottom, Doodle leapt up at Marco, barking his head off and nearly knocking him over. It was top entertainment, but eventually Copper Pie demanded lunch, so we abandoned the very successful husky racing, and Marco, for nosh.

Nosh

I laid out the rug.

‘Who votes Keener be called Tribe Mother?’ said Bee, tying Doodle up.

‘Who votes Bee has no cake?’ I said back. It wasn’t witty but my brain doesn’t make up clever things quickly, or in fact slowly.

‘Only joking, Keener.’ She smiled. I threw the bag of cold sausages at her. She shoved them away.

‘Where are the chocolate cakes, Keener?’ asked Fifty.

‘Staying in the bag till we’ve eaten the rest,’ I said.

‘OK, Tribe Mother,’ said Fifty.

I ignored him. Copper Pie was already scoffing sausages. He doesn’t chew, just like Doodle.

‘Pass the sausages.’ I took two. Jonno picked up a roll,

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peeled open the bun to look inside and dropped it like he'd been bitten. Marmite does that to people. Copper Pie picked it up and demolished it in two mouthfuls. Animal.

TRIBERS' FOOD FACTS

BEE: Likes organic, home-made stuff.

COPPER PIE: Likes unhealthy stuff – crisps, pies and sausage rolls.

JONNO: Eats grown-up food no one else has heard of.

KEENER: Hates runny food.

FIFTY: Gets fed brown rice cakes but wants golden syrup on everything.

I was thirsty, so I offered to get the drinks. Fifty came too. While I stood in the queue for the ice-cream van he swung on the play area gate, clanging it just like Bee had. He was probably watching all the toddlers fall off the end of the slide in the play area. They don't have brakes.

I heard the mountainboard wheels buzzing again and Marco zoomed past the queue. 'Thank you for dog.'

It's funny when he doesn't put all the words he needs in, or puts in too many. I watched him do a jump. It looked fun. I wondered why I'd never had a skateboard. Because no

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one had ever bought me one was the obvious answer.

I had to call Fifty *twice* to get him to come and help me with the cans. There was obviously something going on in the play area. Maybe there was a toddler having a lie-on-the-floor-and-kick tantrum or, even better, wrestling babies.

After we had a can each there was a burping contest, thanks to Bee who can never drink a fizzy drink without her stomach immediately expelling all the bubbles. There was a thought hovering in my head – *I can surf so I should be able to mountainboard*. It was followed by a second thought – *Dog-powered boarding would be cool*. And that one turned into action. I got up.

‘Bee, can I borrow Doodle?’

‘He’s not a library book,’ she said.

Lots of laughing, which I ignored. ‘I’m going to have a go on Marco’s board.’

‘I suppose so,’ she said, with a can-you-believe-Keener’s-actually-going-near-my-dog face.

I untied the lead, which was attached to a bike rack, said ‘See you,’ and went in search of Marco.

Tricks

As we walked along, Doodle kept turning round and looking back at Bee. It was as though he knew I wasn't a proper dog handler. I tried not to catch his eye. I'm not exactly scared of dogs, I just don't like their teeth.

I could see Marco up ahead, trying out tricks on the path.

'Marco,' I shouted. He looked up and smiled. 'Can I have a go on your board with the dog?'

'Sure,' he said. 'You're a good surfer, makes good boarder.' Marco's been surfing with me. He's amazing.

'I hope so,' I said, but I wasn't sure. Surfing on water is a bit different from four wheels on bumpy ground. And falling in water, or a wipe-out as we surfers call it, is most definitely better than a tumble on the concrete.

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He pushed the board with his foot, I stopped it with mine. So far so good. Marco waited for me to get on, but I didn't. It's embarrassing when you have a go at something you can't do, or don't know if you can do. I wanted him to go away, or at least turn round, but I couldn't say that to him, could I?

'You want help?' he said.

I nodded and handed over the lead. Marco hooked the loop over his foot. *Funny way to keep hold of a dog.*

'OK,' he said. Marco wasn't a bad teacher. Or maybe I was a good pupil. He showed me which foot to put at the front (your leading leg), how to get on without the board slipping away (make sure it's on the flat) and how to use your knees, heels and toes to move and steer. I messed about a bit at the top of the hill. It was easy.

'Down the hill,' said Marco.

I looked down. I've walked down the hill loads of times. I've run down it, cycled down it. But I've never gone down it on four wheels, without brakes.

'Go . . .' Marco couldn't find the word he wanted. He used his hands instead. They pointed diagonally. That made sense. I was going to slip my front foot out of the binding to turn the board to face the direction of Marco's hand but he shook his head and did a little jump. I got it. I was meant to jump to turn the board round. *Here goes,* I thought.

Jumping with a board attached to both your feet was

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weird. But it worked. I was ready. I bent my knees, the board set off with me on it. I headed across the slope, and only remembered when I needed to turn and head the other way that Marco hadn't explained how to turn. *Great!* Or how to brake. *Even more great!* Luckily, it turned out to be just like surfing. I'm goofy (that means right foot forward – left foot forward is 'natural') so I just leant back on my heels and round I went. I did a few turns on the way down and to stop I turned back up the hill. Marco started clapping. I bowed. Time to try it with the dog!

But Where Is The Dog?

While I pushed the board back up the hill with my foot, I decided *I* was getting a mountainboard. My birthday's in November but there was a chance I could afford one before then if a lot of people forgot to pick up their pound coins from the swimming lockers. (I have lessons on Saturday mornings. I check the lockers, before and after. It's easy money.)

What is a mountainboard?

It's like a skateboard but it's bigger and the wheels aren't hidden underneath, they stick out the side. And there are bindings, like on a snowboard, to slip your feet in. That helps you do jumps.

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What is a mountainboarder?

A lunatic that loves speed and danger.

'Great stuff,' said Marco.

'Wait till you see me with the dog,' I said.

'Dog,' he said, as though he'd never heard the word before. And certainly never used one as a husky. Or had the lead of one looped round his foot less than five minutes before.

'Dog,' I repeated.

A few very bad thoughts smacked me in the face, one after the other: *I'd left Doodle with Marco, Marco was standing in front of me, Doodle wasn't, Marco had lost Doodle, but I'd taken Doodle from Bee, so I was in charge, so I'd lost Doodle.*