

## Chapter 1

# Mum's new baby

I threw my school bag onto the floor in my room, changed into jeans and a T-shirt and then ran back down the hall.

Mum called me. 'Jenna, I need you for a minute.'

I looked at my watch. 'Mum, I'm late!'

'It's important,' she said.

I went over to the door of the small bedroom. Mum was standing on a ladder. She is quite short, and at the moment she was almost as round as a ball. She was wearing Dad's red T-shirt and black trousers. She had a tin of paint in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. She was painting one of the bedroom walls. They were pink, but she was painting one wall yellow. She'd painted another one white.

'Mum, you shouldn't be on that ladder. Dad will be cross. He said he'd paint the baby's room at the weekend.'

Mum smiled at me and climbed down off the ladder. She put the paint tin and paintbrush carefully on paper on the floor. 'Should the walls be yellow or white?'

It was hard to be cross with Mum. She was very happy about the baby she was going to have. Her eyes were shining and she couldn't stop smiling.

'Why don't you have three white walls and one yellow one?' I said. 'That will be better than all yellow or all white.'

'Good idea, Jenna,' said Mum.

'But wait for Dad to paint the other walls,' I said. 'It's taken a long time for you to become pregnant. Be careful!'

Mum's face was sad for a moment. For sixteen years I had been Mum and Dad's only child. This one was very special – for them.



‘I’ll be careful,’ she said.

‘I have to go,’ I said. ‘I’m really late. The dogs will be waiting.’

I knew Mum wanted me to kiss her goodbye but I didn’t want to. I began to walk out of the room.

Then Mum asked, ‘Can I come with you this afternoon? The doctor says I should walk more. I’ll just wash the paint off my hands.’

I didn’t want my friends to see me with her. I felt too old to have a pregnant mother. But I couldn’t say no, could I?

‘I won’t be able to walk very fast,’ she said when she came out of the bathroom. ‘Being pregnant isn’t easy!’

‘The dogs won’t be too happy,’ I said. ‘They don’t like slow walks.’

‘I’ll just walk with you a little way then,’ she said.

‘No, it’s okay,’ I said. ‘We’ll take the dogs to the park and they can run there. You can sit on a seat while I play with them.’

Mum smiled again. We walked slowly along the street to get the first dog, Pocket. She was black, white and brown. She was standing in the window of Mrs Grafton’s flat when we got there. Mrs Grafton was too old now to take Pocket for walks. Her son paid me to walk the dog for her.

Mrs Grafton was happy to see us. She asked Mum to sit and rest. She talked to her about the baby. I played a game with Pocket and her ball.

Mrs Grafton said to Mum, ‘I have something to ask you, Rosalie. My son and his wife want me to go and live with them soon. They say I’m getting too old to live by myself. They have three cats and don’t want me to bring Pocket. If I can’t find someone to take Pocket, I won’t go.’

I could feel the smile on my face. I looked at Mum but she was shaking her head.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'We can't take Pocket. We'll have the baby soon.'

'I understand,' said Mrs Grafton.

I didn't. I opened my mouth to tell Mum that I wanted a dog very much, but she shook her head and said, 'No, Jenna.'

I walked to the front door without saying anything at all.

Pocket was a good dog and didn't need a lead. She danced along on her little legs in front of us. We walked a few streets to get the next dogs from Carter Street.

'Why can't we have Pocket?' I asked. 'Look at her! She's very small and very good.'

Mum said, 'Who'll look after her while you're at school? I'll be too busy with the baby.'

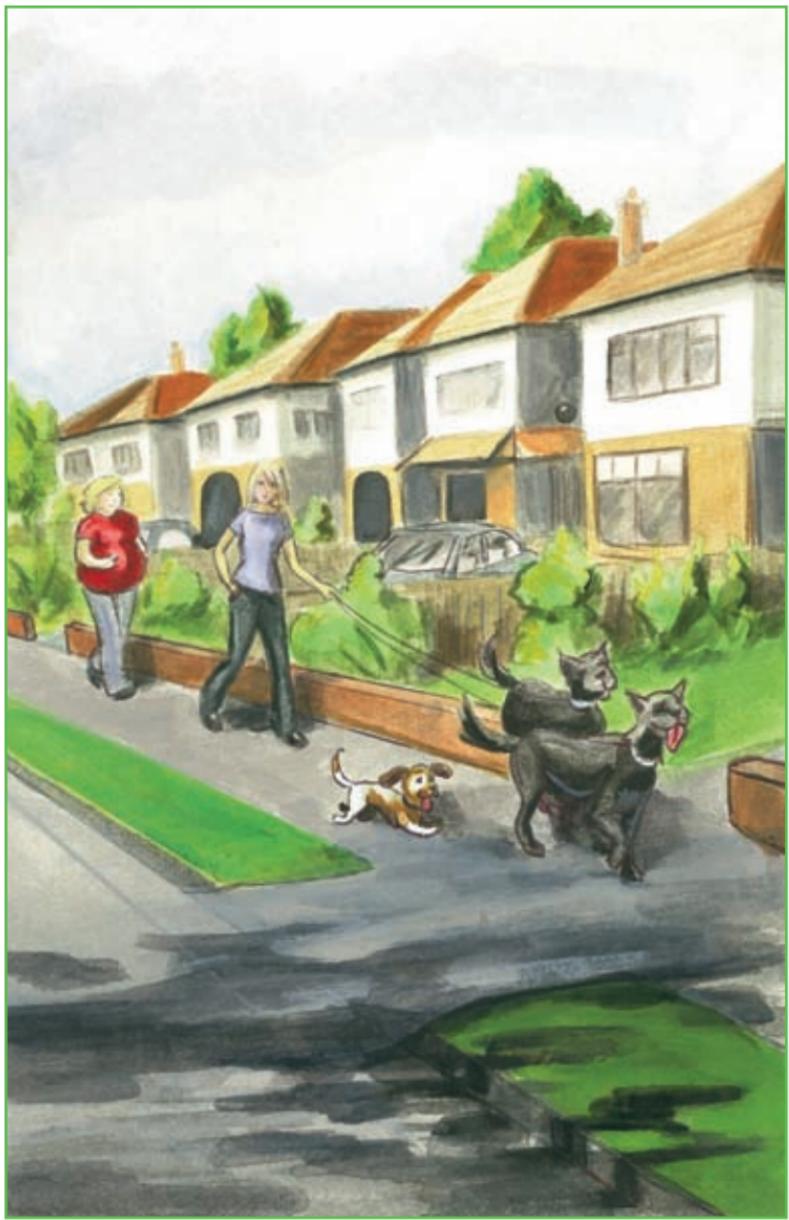
*The baby again, I thought. Always the baby.*

Pocket ran in the gate of the house in Carter Street. Mum sat on a seat outside the front door. When Buster and Bounce heard Pocket they began to bark. Pocket ran down the side of the house and into the back garden. I followed her past two old cars and a bike. I had a key to the back door. The dogs inside nearly knocked me over when I opened the door. Buster and Bounce were big black dogs – brothers. Pocket ran between their legs and it was hard for me to put on the two big dogs' leads.

'Let's go!' I said. The three dogs each tried to be the first out of the door. When we were in the street Buster and Bounce pulled me along quickly. Pocket had to run to stay beside the bigger dogs.

Mum said, 'Can we go slower, please?'

I liked my walks with the dogs. Winter was over and we



walked a long way every day. We always went to Pinewood Park. Buster and Bounce could run off their leads there.

Our part of the city was called Pinewood. The dogs and I knew many people who lived there. We saw them going to work or school in the mornings; we saw them coming home in the afternoons. At the weekends we saw different people. There were people who liked dogs and people who didn't. Pocket, Buster and Bounce were nice dogs. It was hard to like people who didn't see that.

Mum and I walked through the streets of Pinewood. Children came to pat the dogs. Old ladies patted them and gave them food. We saw a couple of pregnant women on our walk. Mum smiled at them and they smiled back at her.

We came to Northwood Road. It led to the park. A blue car drove along the road and turned into a driveway a little way in front of us. Bounce loved cars. He pulled me forwards to the driveway of Number 164. A woman got out of the blue car. I'd seen her before when she drove off to work in the mornings. She was wearing a blue dress and was carrying some bags. Bounce pulled his lead out of my hand and tried to jump into the car. The woman dropped her bags and shouted, 'Go away, dog!'

Bounce stopped. He was really a very good dog.

'Sorry,' I said. 'He likes cars!'

The woman gave me a small smile. She picked up her bags. Mum said, 'The dogs won't hurt your baby,' but the woman hurried to her front door. Another pregnant woman! She wasn't as big as Mum. She unlocked her door and a black cat came out. Buster began to bark and the cat ran inside again. The woman closed her door quickly and we continued our walk. The dogs knew the park was close. I didn't give the woman another thought. Not then.