

THE DOG, RAY

L I N D A C O G G I N

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ALSO BY LINDA COGGIN

The Boy with the Tiger's Heart

Chapter 1

When my death came it was swift. Swift as a racing horse. It wasted no time. Like a conjuring trick. One moment I was in the car, the next on the road, and then I wasn't anywhere. When I awoke I was slouched in a chair in a room with yellow paint peeling off the walls and a table at the far end. Yes. My death was as fleet as the wind. Meteoric, you might say. Mercurial, like quick silver. No floating above the body looking down on the grieving relatives. It was snappy, prompt. It was *smart*.

It's funny, now I come to think of it. The man

who was driving the car always had a fear of horses. He was so afraid of them he would never get on one, nor pat one on the neck, nor let their lovely soft muzzles blow in his face. I know all this because the man driving the car was my dad, and my mum had told me how scared of horses he was.

‘It’s unreasonable, really,’ she’d say. ‘He’s never had anything to do with them. It’s not like he was kicked by one when he was small.’

And that is what’s funny. Because the reason I ended up on the road was because a horse jumped over a hedge onto my dad’s car as we were driving to the supermarket. So it had been a premonition. His fear of horses.

‘You’d better hurry up, dear,’ said someone at the table at the far end, ‘or all the best jobs will be taken. We had a multiple coach crash just before you came in and most of the *qualified* jobs have gone.’

‘Jobs?’ I asked. ‘Why do I need a job? I’m only twelve.’

‘*Were* only twelve, dear,’ the voice corrected.

‘I’ve got you down as Daisy Fellows. Distinguishing features one blue eye and one green eye. Is that right?’

I nodded. I had always longed to have one of those old-fashioned passports that Mum had told me about. I’d never seen one, but Mum said they used to have a section for distinguishing marks. I thought whoever read it would have to look long into my eyes to make sure it was true and I would learn to perfect a blank stare so that they wouldn’t be able to see into my soul. But they don’t do that any more. The passport I got last year just had a little microchip in it that probably said everything there is to know about me, including my bad marks in the maths exam.

A woman was sorting out a pile of papers on the desk and she glanced at me every now and then.

‘Really, my dear, you don’t want to get *cold*. You must go while you can. A new baby is about to be born in Spitalfields. It’s the only *qualified* job left. I think we’ve got about two minutes, so come and sign the form and then you must be off.’

‘Off? I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘I’ve only just arrived. And I don’t even know where I am. Is this Heaven or something?’

‘Heaven? Goodness, my dear. What an old-fashioned concept of death. You are in one of our Government-run Job Centres. You are a *soul*, are you not? Everyone who is born needs a soul. It’s just a question of whose body you take up. Look upon it as rehousing.’

She was just about to hand me a form to sign when a telephone rang at her side. She picked it up.

‘Oh dear. Really? What a shame. Thank you for letting me know.’ The woman looked at me. ‘The baby was stillborn. No need for you to go *there*.’

‘Why is no one else here?’ I asked. ‘Six thousand three hundred and ninety people die per hour. I learnt that at school. Where are they all?’

‘That’s an old figure, my dear. Far more people die than that. But that’s not the point. The point is we like to treat people as *individuals*. There are lots of rooms in the building, you know, and queues of people waiting to come in here.’

‘What about my dad? He’ll be here, won’t he?’

‘I don’t know, dear – what’s his name?’

‘Dennis Fellows.’

The woman opened a drawer marked *F* and rifled through it. ‘Fanshawe. Featherstone. Fielding. Can’t see a *Dennis* Fellows; there’s a Freddie Fellows – any relation?’

I shook my head.

‘He can’t be dead, then,’ she said.

Good, I thought. Mum’ll be pleased. Just me, then. No joint funeral. Thank goodness. I wouldn’t want to be buried to something by the Beatles. I thought about it for a moment. It would’ve been fun to see who’d come to it – most of Year Eight, I guessed. I hoped Owen Taylor turned up and wept buckets for me. Of course, technically I wouldn’t have had my funeral yet. I was probably still lying on the road, covered in a sheet. I expected there was a crowd of people. They always stop and stare at accidents. I wondered what had happened to the horse. Perhaps it was in the queue outside, waiting to come back as a hedgehog.

‘So Mum was right about her theory of coming

back again as something else when you die?’ I said. ‘She was into Buddhism.’

‘It’s not about *religion*,’ the woman said scornfully. ‘It’s about practicalities. Now you’re getting cold, aren’t you? I can see you shivering. We must hurry. Ah yes. You needn’t sign any forms for this one – it’s not a qualified job. Off you go, dear – through that door on the right.’

‘But what’s my – er . . . who, er – *what’s my job? Who am I to become?*’

‘There’s a litter being born right now in a charming house. I’m sure you’ll like it. They’re nearly all out but I’ll arrange for one to be stuck in the birth canal. That’ll give you about three minutes to get there. Remember – *the door on the right!*’

I just had the handle in my hand when the door flew open. It definitely seemed like sky out there, and when I looked down, a jagged vent opened up and it felt as if something had grabbed hold of my legs. Too late, I realised – I had gone through the door on the left. Out of the corner of my eye I’d seen a notice – *Absolutely No Exit*.

I was meant to have gone through *the door on the right*. I found myself falling, falling. And it was as quick as the wind. It was snappy, prompt. It was *smart*.

As I fell I remember shouting out, ‘What sort of litter? Am I going to be a pig? A cat? *A rat?*’ But no one heard me and it wasn’t until I could open my eyes twelve days later that I could see, perfectly well, that I had come back to Earth as a dog.