

TIM WILLOCKS



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Acknowledgments
About the Author

This book is dedicated to:
GRACE AMERLING for choosing FEARGAL
GRANT AMERLING for writing "FURGUL"
and
ESTHER COX for being the first to read it.

*The Doglands are everywhere and nowhere
Because dogs are everywhere and nowhere*

*They live in a world they do not rule
But sometimes
With the winds
A dog will run*

This is his tale ...

PART ONE
BRAVEDOG

CHAPTER ONE

THE CAMP

ONCE UPON A time in the Doglands, a blue greyhound gave birth to four pups in a prison camp that the dogs called Dedbone's Hole. The blue greyhound's name was Keeva and she named her firstborn Furgul, which in dog tongue means "the brave." Keeva loved Furgul from the moment she saw him, but as she licked his newborn body clean and gave him her milk to drink, her heart was filled with fear. Furgul had been born with a terrible secret. And she knew that when the masters discovered his secret, they would take him away.

Dedbone's Hole was a greyhound farm, where the masters made the rules and where no dog was free. Furgul was born in one of the whelping cages, whose floor was hard and cold and damp, but Furgul and his three sisters kept one another warm. Keeva gave them milk and love. And for the first few weeks of their lives, the pups were happy. Yet as Furgul learned how to walk and talk, and as his eyes, nose and ears grew keen, he realized that Dedbone's Hole was ruled by boots and teeth and chains.

Every dawn he heard the voices of the masters, harsh and angry and mean.

"Shout! Shout! Shout!" they roared. "In! Out! Here! There! Everywhere!"

Every day he heard the squeals as greyhounds were beaten down.

"This isn't fair!" cried the greyhounds. "We haven't done anything wrong!"

Every night he heard the murmurs of dogs who were hungry, frightened and sad.

“There is no justice here,” they whispered in the dark. “But what can we do?”

To keep her pups happy, Keeva crooned sweet songs and was always cheerful and kind, but every time he snuggled up against her body to go to sleep, Furgul could sense the hidden fear pounding inside her heart. He was too young to understand very much, but he knew that this fear was wrong. He wanted to make it go away. He wanted to make it right, but he didn’t know how.

When the pups no longer needed Keeva’s milk, they joined the other hounds in the exercise yard and Furgul got a better look at Dedbone’s Hole. A lot of greyhounds lived here, in a compound surrounded by a high wire fence. Outside the fence he saw a junkyard and some shacks. Inside the compound the greyhounds were locked in crates—one crate each, where each hound lived all alone—which were even smaller than the whelping cage that Furgul lived in. For just one hour a day the hounds were released from the crates to feed and exercise. The masters made sure that there was never enough food for all the hounds, and so the hounds had to fight one another, snarling and biting at the filthy troughs of grub to get enough to eat. The older dogs said the masters starved the hounds on purpose to make them compete, so they could find out who was weak and who was strong and who might make a good racer. They did it to teach them that it was stupid to make friends. They did it because they were bullies who thought it was fun to feel so powerful.

When the greyhounds were a year old, the masters trained them to chase mechanical rabbits round a track. If a hound didn’t chase the fake rabbit, he or she was punished. If a greyhound was a fast runner—and a clever racer—the masters made what they called money, which they put in their pockets. If a greyhound didn’t run fast

enough—if she was weak and puny, or if he wasn't clever enough, or when they got old and slow—then the masters got rid of them.

None of the dogs knew exactly how. At least not for sure. They just disappeared. And they never came back.

• • •

Keeva was the fastest greyhound—and the most successful racer—any dog at Dedbone's Hole could remember. Because her coat was blue, the masters called her Sapphire Breeze. With each day that passed, as her pups grew bigger and bigger, Furgul felt the fear inside Keeva grow too. One morning, while Keeva was watching his sisters at play, Furgul said, "Mam, why are you frightened?"

Keeva looked at him. Furgul's coat was white. He had a wet black nose and thin black rims beneath his deep brown eyes. "You're my firstborn," she said. This didn't seem important to Furgul, but it seemed to mean a lot to Keeva. Her eyes looked sad. She said, "I'm frightened because you won't be a pup for much longer."

"But I don't want to be a pup," said Furgul. "I want to be a dog."

Keeva said, "You'll be a big dog, but you won't be the biggest. You'll be strong, but you won't be the strongest. You'll be fast, but you won't be the fastest. That's why you'll have to be the bravest."

Furgul nodded. He didn't think this would be too hard. None of the puppies at the feeding troughs scared him. In fact, he had learned to scare them so that his three little sisters from the litter—Nessa and Eena and Brid—could get enough food. If he hadn't fought hard, the other pups would have gobbled up everything, and his sisters would have wasted away.

"Sure, Mam," he said. "Whatever you say."

“And if you’re going to escape,” said Keeva, “you’ll have to be very clever—and very lucky too.”

“Escape?” asked Furgul.

He looked at the high wire fence that surrounded the compound. Outside the fence was a junkyard full of trash and the house where the masters lived. Beyond the camp lay sweet green fields. In the distance a mountain rose toward the far blue sky. At the foot of the fence the masters had laid some very hard stuff called concrete so the dogs couldn’t dig underneath it. Worst of all, there were two bad dogs who guarded the fence for the masters. For a reward they got lots of meat—fresh, tasty red meat in their own private bowls—and they were never locked in a cage. By breed they were bullmastiffs, so the hounds called them the Bulls. The Bulls were huge and brutal and loved being mean. Even if a hound got over the fence—or so everyone said—the Bulls would tear him apart with their massive jaws.

Furgul had heard other dogs talk about escaping. It was one of their favorite fantasies. Some of them woofed about it in their sleep. But whenever escape was discussed they all agreed: It was impossible.

“But, Mam,” said Furgul, “no one’s ever escaped from Dedbone’s Hole.”

“Your father did,” said Keeva.

Furgul’s throat felt tight. Keeva and his sisters were the only family he had ever known. He’d never imagined there was someone else. He’d never even thought about it. He swallowed. “I have a father?”

Keeva nodded. “His name is Argal.”

The name hummed through Furgul’s bones and sent a chill down his spine.

“Argal,” he said.

The very sound of it made him feel brave, so he said it again.

“Argal.”

“Not only did Argal get in here,” continued Keeva, “he got out again.”

“How?” asked Furgul.

“He hid in the pickup truck that takes us to and from the racetrack in the city.”

“Why did he do that?” asked Furgul. “I mean, why did he come here?”

“Argal just appeared one day, like a legend, like a ghost, like a vision. He saw me win a race at the track and he fell in love. He risked his life to spend one night with me.” Keeva’s eyes grew misty. “He was the fiercest, handsomest, fightingest dog I ever saw. He was crazy and fearless and wild.”

Furgul liked the sound of this. “I wish I could play with Argal so that I could learn to be wild and fearless too.”

“So do I,” said Keeva.

“Where is he?” asked Furgul.

Keeva shrugged. “Your father is like the wind. He goes wherever he chooses and he does whatever he likes.”

“Wow,” said Furgul, “he must have a really great master.”

“Argal doesn’t have a master,” said Keeva. “He’s free.”

Furgul frowned. “What does ‘free’ mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Keeva. A troubled look came over her face. “Argal tried to explain it to me—something to do with what he called the Doglands.”

“The Doglands?” Furgul felt the fur on his back stand up on end. The word sang in his blood. “What did Argal say?”

“I wasn’t really listening. I was in love.”

“Where are the Doglands?” asked Furgul.

“I don’t know that either,” said Keeva. Confusion and pain clouded her eyes. She looked out between the bars of the cage in which all five of them had to lie day and night in their own pee. She gazed out beyond the high wire fence, past the rusting heaps of trash in the yard, to the mountain

on the far blue horizon. “Maybe the Doglands are somewhere out there.”

Furgul looked at the mountain. He felt as if his heart had just grown bigger.

“I’m going to be free,” he said. “Like Argal.”

Keeva panted and licked her lips, and Furgul could tell she was nervous. She looked about to make sure no other hounds were listening. She lowered her voice.

“Dedbone checked my feet and muscles this morning and gave me the special breakfast. That means the racing season has begun. I’m going to be racing tonight. For Dedbone.”

She looked at him. Suddenly Furgul didn’t feel quite so brave anymore. Dedbone was the master who did all the shouting and who starved the greyhounds and made them live alone in crates. All the dogs, even the biggest—even the Bulls—were scared of Dedbone. They talked about him all the time. They hated him. But what could they do?

Furgul remembered that the first sight he’d ever seen—when his eyes had just learned to see—was of Dedbone’s steel-toed boots. The boots had kicked sparks from the ground as they’d walked past the whelping cage. And they’d smelled of blood. Dog blood.

Furgul said, “You mean you want me to escape tonight?”

Keeva nodded. “When Dedbone comes to the cage to put on my racing muzzle and leash, I’ll run away. He’ll get angry and chase after me. That’s when I want you to sneak past and run to the truck without letting anyone see you. Can you do that?”

Recently Furgul had started to play a game with the brutal, stupid Bulls. During the exercise hour he peed on top of their pee then ran and hid behind the cages, where he could watch them foam with rage when they sniffed his smell. They hunted for him, but he was always too fast and crafty to let them catch him. He was sure he could get to the truck.

He nodded. "I can do that."

Keeva asked, "Do you know what the truck looks like?"

Furgul said, "It's red and has a row of crates on the back."

"Very good. Dedbone always puts me in the last crate, nearest the back. It will have lots of old newspapers on the floor. I want you to jump in the crate, hide beneath the newspapers and wait for me. Can you jump that high?"

Furgul thought about it. The truck was very high indeed, at least for him.

He asked, "Could Argal jump that high when he was only my age?"

"I'm sure he could," said Keeva.

"Then so can I," said Furgul. "But what about the Bulls?"

"The Bulls never come to the races."

"Okay, Mam," said Furgul. "What happens when we get to the track?"

"When Dedbone opens my crate, I'll run away again. While Dedbone's trying to catch me, you must jump out and hide beneath the truck. After a while you'll smell that Dedbone and I have gone. You'll hear lots of roaring and cheering in the distance—"

"From masters like Dedbone?" asked Furgul.

"Yes, except these masters don't have dogs. They just like gambling on them at the track, especially dogs like me who make them lots of money. When you hear the roaring and cheering, you can come out from under the truck. You'll find yourself in a parking lot—you'll be surrounded by lots of empty trucks and cars. There's no fence around the parking lot, so if you run all the way to the edge, you can escape."

Furgul concentrated until he was sure he remembered every detail.

He asked, "What do I do when I'm free?"

"I don't know," replied Keeva. "I've never been free. That's when you'll need to be lucky and clever and brave."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"I've got a number tattooed in my ear. Dedbone would find me."

"Perhaps he wouldn't try," said Furgul.

"Yes, he would," said Keeva. "I'm the most valuable dog he's got. In any case I can't leave Eena and Nessa and Brid."

Furgul suddenly had a terrible feeling.

"Mam, if I go free, does that mean I'll never see you—ever again?"

Keeva turned away, but Furgul could still see the tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she said. "We'll never see each other again."

"Can't I wait a bit longer, then, before I escape?"

"No, Furgul, you have to go tonight."

"But why?"

"Because you were born with a secret," said Keeva. "A dangerous secret."

Furgul was confused. "What secret?"

"You're not a greyhound."

Furgul was stunned.

"What do you mean, I'm not a greyhound?" he said. "All the dogs at Dedbone's Hole are greyhounds, except for the Bulls."

Keeva said, "Your father wasn't a greyhound either."

This made Furgul feel a bit better. "If I'm not a greyhound, what am I?"

"Argal was a mixture of greyhound and wolfhound," said Keeva. "The masters call that a crossbreed—or a mongrel, or a mutt. The masters don't like mutts. I don't know why. They only like pure breeds, with pure bloodlines, which they call pedigrees. That's why they control who we breed with—or at least they try to. The masters love to control things. If they could, they'd control absolutely everything in

the world. They would never allow a crossbreed like Argal to come near a dog like me.”

“Because you are a pure breed.”

“Yes,” said Keeva. “But look at it this way. If I wasn’t pure, I wouldn’t have to live in a crate.”

“So I’m a mongrel or a mutt?” said Furgul.

“Argal said he was a lurcher, which means a thief.”

Furgul liked the sound of that much better. He cheered up. “A thief?”

“The masters won’t feed lurchers,” said Keeva, “so Argal became an outlaw. To survive he had to steal his food or kill other animals, like rabbits. That’s what you’ll have to do when you’re free. You see, you’re a lurcher too.”

This made Furgul remember that he wasn’t so sure that he wanted to be free anymore. He didn’t want to never see his mother again. He started to feel very sad. He heard a whimper in his throat, and his eyes began to water.

“Don’t cry,” said Keeva. “This isn’t the time. If you cry, you’ll be weak. And you won’t survive.”

“But why can’t I stay with you, just a little while longer?”

Keeva said, “When Dedbone finds out you’re not a greyhound, he’ll get rid of you. He’ll take you away and you’ll never come back.”

Furgul could see that she was serious. He had heard the stories that some greyhounds—the weak, the slow, the old—went away with Dedbone and never came back. He had heard the rumors that greyhounds were drowned in sacks, and shot with guns, and hanged by the neck from ropes, and even buried alive in pits. He had heard that lots and lots of greyhounds, more than any dog here had ever even seen, were “put to sleep”—which really means “killed”—with “injections.” But a lot of hounds in the camp didn’t believe these rumors. They said the stories were made up just to frighten them and to make them run even faster.

Looking into Keeva's eyes, Furgul could tell that all the stories were true.

"When you're a little pup," said Keeva, "a greyhound and a lurcher look just the same to the masters. But you're growing up fast. Your chest and shoulders are getting too big for a greyhound. I can see it. Soon Dedbone will see it too. And lurchers aren't allowed to race at the track, so you're worthless, at least to him."

Furgul had a horrible thought.

He asked, "Does that mean you'll get in trouble for being in love with Argal?"

Keeva gave him a dog smile and licked his face. The lick felt good.

"Your brain is bigger than a greyhound's too," she said. "But don't worry about me. As long as I'm the fastest, Dedbone won't do me any harm. And I aim to be the fastest for a long time."

Furgul had another thought, even more horrible than the last.

"But what about Nessa and Eena and Brid? They must be lurchers like me. Does that mean Dedbone will think they're worthless too?"

Keeva's eyes darkened. "That's why I want you to escape tonight. You can show them how it's done. If you can do it tonight, maybe they can do it tomorrow."

Furgul loved Nessa and Eena and Brid. He looked at them snoozing together in a heap at the back of the whelping cage. They were beautiful and good. How could they be worthless, just because they weren't pure? Furgul's throat trembled with a growl.

"Will you do this for me and for your sisters?" asked Keeva. "Will you be brave and make me proud?"

"Yes," said Furgul. He swallowed his rage. "I'll make you proud."

The sun began to sink in the gold and crimson sky beyond the mountain. Furgul knew that soon it would be time to make his escape. Keeva had told him not to tell his sisters, in case they became too excited and gave away the plan. That meant Furgul could not say goodbye to them, and this was hard. But he was strong and he obeyed his mother.

He practiced the plan in his mind until it felt perfect. He knew he could get to the truck and jump into the crate and hide beneath the newspapers. At least he would be with Keeva on the journey to the track. He would snuggle right up to her belly all the way. He knew he could hide until he heard the cheers of the gamblers. He knew he could escape from the parking lot. After that—when he was free—he had no plan at all.

Furgul was scared. But he thought of the father he had never seen, the mysterious outlaw—the legend, the ghost, the vision—named Argal. And he thought of his mother, Keeva, the fastest and the most beautiful. And he thought of his sisters, Nessa and Eena and Brid. And even if he did not know what he would do when he was free, he knew that he would make them all proud. Or he would die.

“Furgul,” said Keeva. “Get ready.”

Through the bars of their cage Furgul saw Dedbone walking toward them.

All masters were bigger than the greyhounds, but Dedbone was a monster. He had a big head with greasy black hair and a neck as thick as a tree trunk. He had strong arms and meaty hands with knuckles like big red walnuts for punching the dogs. His belly spilled from his pants as he swaggered across the yard, kicking up sparks from the soles of his steel-toed boots. His mouth was scarred and twisted. His eyes were small and dead, like pellets of sheep dung. He devoured a leg of fried chicken as he came, and the hungry dogs watched him from their crates and licked their lips.

Behind Dedbone came the two bullmastiffs, slavering from their big fat mouths and flashing their big sharp teeth. Walking next to Dedbone was another master, whom Furgul had never seen before. He had eyes like sheep dung too, but he wasn't half as big as Dedbone. Furgul had the feeling he was one of the masters who gambled on the dogs to make money. They stopped at the cage, and Dedbone pointed at Keeva and puffed out his chest.

"Boast, boast, boast!" droned Dedbone.

Dogs learned a few words of the master tongue, the ones that they heard all the time like "No!" and "Sit!" and "Go!" and "Cage!" and "Bad boy!" But the rest was mainly gibberish. The masters thought they were clever, but the fact was that dogs could learn at least a little of the human tongue, whereas masters were too stupid, or too lazy, to learn any of the dog tongue at all.

Not a single word.

Dogs didn't need to understand all human words because they could read what humans were feeling. Most humans couldn't read dogs at all. In fact, they couldn't even read each other. Furgul couldn't translate what Dedbone was saying, but he knew the sound of boasting when he heard it.

"Brag, brag, brag!" bragged Dedbone.

After being angry and nasty, which he was more often than not, Dedbone liked to brag and boast more than anything in the world. Keeva said he liked to gloat and wave a big fat wad of cash, especially when he beat his friends at the races. Most of all he liked to boast about Keeva. To hear Dedbone talk you'd think that he was the one who ran the races.

Dedbone threw away the chicken leg. The hungry greyhounds watched as the Bulls squabbled for it. Dedbone bent closer to Keeva's cage. His face was blotchy and red. His hairy nostrils flared at the stink from the unwashed

concrete floor. Yet his own breath stank of something so vile it made Furgul feel dizzy just to sniff it.

“Gloat, gloat, gloat!” Dedbone went on.

But then the other man—the Gambler—pointed at Furgul.

“Sneer, sneer, sneer!” sneered the Gambler.

Suddenly Furgul felt very bad, though he wasn’t sure why.

The Gambler stabbed his crooked finger at Nessa and Eena and Brid.

Though he still didn’t know why, Furgul felt even worse.

The Gambler scoffed and laughed. “Scoff, scoff, scoff! Jeer, jeer, jeer!”

Dedbone’s face turned even redder than usual. He scratched his head, and greasy white dust tumbled over his shoulders. His eyebrows squirmed and his mouth went all pouty with rage. He bent over and stared at Furgul through the bars of the cage. He stared for a long, long time.

Furgul stared back at Dedbone. He’d never seen a human face at such close range before. Dedbone was ugly, but the pocked skin, the bad teeth, the red nose and the pale dog-bite scars didn’t bother Furgul at all. What bothered him was Dedbone’s stare. Furgul felt as if the stare were sucking the life from his marrow.

Keeva let out a whimper of alarm.

Furgul had never heard Keeva whimper before.

Dedbone and the Gambler turned around and walked away. The Gambler was still laughing. He seemed to be laughing at Dedbone. Dedbone was so angry he couldn’t even shout. The Bulls lingered behind and grinned and slavered at Keeva through the bars. The Bulls didn’t have dog names. They answered only to the names that the masters gave them—Tic for the male, and Tac for the female.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” said Tic.

“Who’s been a naughty girl, then?” said Tac.

Tic and Tac barked together—"Rowf, rowf, rowf!"—which was their way of laughing. Then they turned and followed Dedbone across the yard.

Keeva paced around the cage in a state of panic. The girls woke up.

"Mama, what's wrong?" asked Brid.

"You're scared, Mama," said Nessa.

"Yes," said Eena. "What's wrong?"

Keeva stopped pacing so the sisters wouldn't be frightened. "Nothing, my loves," she said. "I'm just nervous about the race."

Furgul didn't believe that this was the reason. A race could never make her nervous. He tried to catch her eye, but Keeva avoided him. Suddenly Furgul realized what had just happened. And he knew that he wouldn't be escaping after all.

"They know, don't they?" asked Furgul.

Keeva still could not look at him. She didn't answer.

"The Gambler could see what we are," said Furgul. "He told Dedbone that we're not real greyhounds—we're not pure—we're just lurchers—"

"Enough!" said Keeva.

She looked at Furgul. Her brown eyes were filled with a sadness so deep that Furgul wanted to cry. He wanted to lick her face to make her feel better. But Keeva turned away again. Nessa and Eena and Brid huddled together at the back of the cage and said nothing. Keeva hurried over and crooned a song to comfort them. The sisters crowded beneath her legs and licked the teats on her belly to show that they loved her. Furgul wanted to join them. Instead he stood tall and waited by the door of the cage.

"What do you want me to do, Mam?" he asked.

Keeva stopped crooning. For a moment she couldn't speak. She blinked away the tears in her eyes. Then she turned to look at him.

“Stay close to your sisters,” said Keeva. “Remember your father, Argal—the fiercest, fightingest dog that ever I saw—and be brave.”

Furgul smelled something foul—something evil—and turned his head.

Dedbone and the Gambler were coming back across the yard. Between them they carried a brown cardboard box that was almost as big as a cage. In the crook of Dedbone’s arm was a double-barreled shotgun. Furgul had seen him use it to kill crows.

Furgul turned back to his mother.

“Sure, Mam.” He swallowed the fear in his throat. “Whatever you say.”