Clara stretched her arms over her head and her legs down towards the bottom of the bed, then rolled onto her side, smilng smugly. It was the first day of the summer holidays—no more school for six weeks! Clara sighed happily, threw the duvet off and sprang out of bed then opened her curtains to a bright, sunny day. *Perfect!* Clara thought.

Dressing in brown cords and a tank top, Clara left the house and strolled down the garden path and through the gate into the woodland her estate backed on to. Her step quickened as she saw her friends, Luke and Bob waiting for her.

“Morning!” she sang to them.

‘Morning,’ replied Luke, smiling.

Bob barked. He trotted up to Clara with his tail wagging and she bent down to fuss him, getting a lick on her face for her trouble.

“Yuck!” she exclaimed and wiping her face with the back of her hand. Bob was a mongrel who lived in the woods, and his breath stank.

Together they all wandered companionably around the woods and then up the trial to their hilltop clearing. From here they had a view back across Clara’s estate on one side of the hill and down towards the scrubland where Luke’s gypsy family camped.

“What shall we do today?” asked Clare.

Luke flushed. “Well, I had been looking forward to seeing you shapeshift.”

Clara grinned. She had been hoping he would stay that. He had discovered her ability to transform into animals a while ago but had kept his knowledge a secret from her until a couple of weeks earlier, when she had rescued him from being kidnapped. At the same time, she had broken a curse that had been placed on her family one hundred and sixty years before. Ever since, she had been dying to test her abilities, to see how they had changed now that the curse was broken.

Clara looked around. They were alone on the hilltop, as usual. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s see…” Suddenly Luke and Bob were looking at black collie dog, not at a thirteen-year-old girl. Bob turned away, unimpressed – he had seen that trick before. But Luke stared in surprise, his eyes widening.

Clara barks and wags her tail in delight at his reaction. She is happy, as this is the first time she has been able to transform in the daytime. Clara rose to her feet and, turning round, transformed into a sleek blue/grey shorthaired cat.

“Meow,” she said, and rubbed her head against Luke’s leg. He put his hand out automatically to stroke the beautiful cat but then hesitated as he suddenly remembered that it wasn’t a cat at all, it was Clara. He didn’t know what to do. Clara lifted her front paws from the the ground and brushed her head against Luke’s hand affectionately before trotting away and climbing a nearby tree. Checking to make sure that Luke was watching, she transformed into a Tawny owl. Luke laughed with delight. Clara tilted her head in acknowledgement, then spread her wings and took off.

She soared up over the trees and over her estate, her sharp eyes seeing children kicking a ball around in her street and her mum hanging out washing in the back garden. She banked over the woodland and flew over to the Gypsy camp—a cluster of eight caravans in a clearing. There she saw children playing football, while women hung washing out to dry.

*So similar*, Clara mused, *and yet a world apart.* She flew back towards the hilltop clearing, thinking she might land on Luke’s shoulder, but veered off at the last moment when she lost her nerve. She wasn’t that confident about her landing abilities, and didn’t want to hurt him. Clara landed on a tree branch, then hopping down transformed back into her dog form, picked up her pile of clothes in her mouth and disappeared behind a bush to transform back to her human self and get dressed.

Moments later she reappeared, a wide grin on her face. “What did you think?” she asked.

“You’re amazing,” breathed Luke. Clara blushed furiously. “It felt really natural,” she said as she sat beside him, her eyes slightly glazed as she thought about what she had just done. “It used to take a lot of effort and concentration to transform, but now it’s easy. I just think about the animal and then become it.”

“What does it feel like when you change?” asked Luke.

“It’s difficult to describe,” said Clara slowly. “There’s a tingling sensation that runs all through my body, and I can feel myself shrinking.”

“Does it hurt?” asked Luke.

“No, not at all” replied Clara. “It’s wonderful.” And she flushed again, this time with pleasure.

“What else can you do?” asked Luke.

Clara thought for a moment. Without warning, Bob stood up and pounced on Luke, madly licking his face and neck.

“I can do that,” spluttered Clara, laughing at the look on Luke’s face. Luke grinned sheepishly and wiped his face.

“Bob, your breath stinks,” said Luke, and then he chortled, to show that there were no hard feelings. “So, can you only communicate with Bob?” Luke asked, wanting to find out the extent of her talents.

“No, I can communicate with any animal,” replied Clara. “That is very cool,” Luke said slowly. “I can also affect their behaviors and moods,” Clara added.

“So, you can make animals do what you want them to do?” asked Luke.

“Yes, but I try not to unless I have to.” Clara said. “After all, what right do I have to interfere with them that way?”

Luke nodded in understanding. “Have you done it before, though?”

“Yes,” said Clara quietly. “Once, before I broke the curse, I was trying to transform into a mouse. I’d been having problems transforming, as it’s such a small animal, but I finally succeeded – but then I was captured by an owl.” Clara shook her head remembering the event. “It took off with me in its talons. I had to force it to come back down to land so I could escape.”

“How did you get away?” asked Luke.

“As we came towards the ground, I transformed into a dog,” said Clara, grinning. “I wish I could have seen the owl’s expression. It let go of me and flew away like its tail was on fire.”

Luke laughed. Clara didn’t tell him that the episode had left her stunned and injured, and it had taken several weeks for her bruises and cuts to heal. She hadn’t transformed into a mouse since. She shuddered at the memory of the panic and helplessness she had felt when she had realised what was happening. Then Bob crawled over and rested his head on her leg, comforting her. She put her arm around him and forced herself back to the present.

“There is one thing, though,” she said. Luke raised his eyebrows in query.

“Shapeshifting doesn’t half make you hungry.” Clara grinned.

“Let’s go down to the camp and get some grub,” Luke said and stood, pulling Clara up beside him. They strolled companionably down the hill.

When they arrived at the camp a few minutes later, it was almost dark. Clara sensed a tension in the air. A few weeks ago, Luke had almost been kidnapped by a rival gang of Gypsies. Although they had previously been quite friendly towards Clara, the gypsies had withdrawn since then, seeing Clara as an outsider – and therefore a threat. Clara sighed, but smiled when she saw Grams waving to her out of a caravan window.

Changing direction, Luke and Clara walked over to Gram’s caravan. As they arrived another gypsy left the caravan, acknowledging Clara with a nod. Clara and Luke climbed into the caravan.

“Good morning, Clara,” said Grams. “How lovely to see you. What are you kids up to on such a fine day?

“Hi Grams,” said Clara. “It’s the first day of the summer holidays so I’m enjoying my freedom.”

Grams chuckled. “Very nice,” she said. “And do you have any plans for the summer?” Grams and Des, Luke’s dad, were the only people outside Clara’s family who knew about her gifts. Grams was the wise women of Luke’s clan. She had healing powers, and Clara was convinced she could do magic spells, although the Gypsies called them blessings.

“Well, now that the curse is broken I can practice shape-shifting whenever I like,” Clara smiled.

Grams smiled back. “So long as you’re careful not to get caught. If I recall, that was how your great-great-great-great aunt came to be cursed in the first place.”

Clara grinned. “I’ll be careful,” she said. “Things here don’t seem to have settled down much?”

Grams frowned and shook her head sadly. “It affects the whole group when a person is expelled. They might as well have died. People are grieving.” She sighed. “It’ll take time for things to get back to normal.”

Luke hung his head.

“Oh, don’t look so miserable, Luke, it wasn’t your fault,” said Grams, just as Clara’s stomach rumbled loudly. “Why don’t we have some tea?”

The three of them moved to the kitchen, getting in each other’s way in the small space as they prepared cheese sandwiches.

In bed that night, Clara thought about her visit to the camp. *She knew Grams and Des were worried that there might be another attempt to kidnap Luke*. The people who had tried to kidnap him were Luke’s relatives on his mum’s side of the family. They had not approved of Luke’s mum and Des becoming a couple, and were grief-stricken when she died of cancer when Luke was a baby. Clara had always found Luke’s dad to be a serious man, but since the kidnap attempt he often seemed to be constantly angry, often keeping Luke close to him, afraid of letting him out of his sight. Des and Grams only allowed Luke to go out of the camp alone to spend time with Clara, because they knew she could look after herself – and Luke, if she needed to.

Clara sighed and finally dropped into a troubled sleep. Her dreams were filled with threatening films lurking in bushes and behind trees, whispering and plotting in the shadows.