

# The Blight

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## PROLOGUE

The child was dead, and it was all his fault.

He hunched over the edge of the crib, staring down at the unmoving infant. The boy's usually rosy cheeks looked grey in the soft glow of the night light, his small lips tinged with blue. Less than an hour ago he had been crawling around on the living room carpet, giggling and squealing and making a nuisance of himself. But now, now he was still, and silent, and always would be.

The watcher cursed himself. He should have been faster. Why hadn't he been faster? A soft mewling sound escaped his lips, a sound full of a pain that had nothing to do with the gash that sliced across his ribcage on the right side. Blood flowed from the wound and he winced every time he drew breath.

If only he had been faster, and yet the truth was he had done everything in his power to save the child's life. It was not through lack of effort that he had failed, he had simply let himself grow fat and complacent, and when the time came, the time to prove his worth, he had been found wanting. He'd always known there was a chance something like this could happen. He'd heard the stories, most had, and yet he had never truly believed them, and years of soft living had made him weak. He'd made a fight of it though, throwing himself

into the fray with reckless abandon, and with no thought for his own safety, but it had been too little too late. The child had been dead before he could even reach his quarry, his best efforts cast aside with almost contemptuous ease.

He'd scored a hit, of that he was certain. He'd heard his foe scream, seen its red eyes go wide with pain, even as he himself was sent flying back to smash against the far wall of the small nursery. By the time he'd been able to pull himself back to his feet, and shake some sense back into his head, the killer was gone, disappearing back out through the half opened window and into the warm summer night.

He'd staggered over to the crib, pulling himself up with pained effort, hoping against hope that he wouldn't find what his every instinct knew to be true. Looking down his heart stopped beating, and for a moment he wondered if he too had died, even wishing that he had, that the two of them could trade places. But his wishes, like hope, failed him.

He let out another cry as something inside him broke. A flood of raw emotion beyond anything he would have thought himself capable burst from him and his cry became a wail that shook his entire body.

There was the sound of feet on the landing and then the door to the nursery being pushed open, but he couldn't bring himself to turn to face the new arrival.

"What's all that noise about?" said a soft female voice in a tone that was equal parts concern and amusement.

A heavy hand came to rest on the top of his head and he almost flinched away. The hand was strong, insistent, and full of the comfort he needed but knew he would never deserve again. And yet, despite everything, he found himself pressing his head against the hand, as he had done so many times before, and its warmth seemed to radiate into him, silencing the cries in his throat, but leaving him trembling beneath its touch.

"Hey," she said, filling the word with compassion. "What's wrong? If you carry on like that you'll wake..."

The words died on her lips and he didn't need to look to know she

had now joined him in staring into the crib. Now her hand was shaking as well.

“What?” she asked, her voice a whisper.

And then the hand was gone from his head and she was reaching into the crib and pulling the still child into her arms. And then she was screaming, a sound so devastating that it put his own cries to shame, a sound that only a mother could make for her lost child.

There was a thundering sound on the stairs and moments later the child’s father burst into the room. He made it one step over the threshold before slamming to a halt so abrupt it was as though he had run headlong into a wall. He took in the scene before him, the desperate, screaming woman, the grey child in her arms, and his legs gave way beneath him. He landed hard on his knees, though the pain didn’t register. His shoulders shook as tears flowed down his cheeks, his mouth opening in a wordless cry.

It was all too much, the watcher couldn’t take it anymore. He threw himself away from the crib, hissing as fresh pain erupted from his wounded ribs, and rushed from the room, squeezing past the child’s broken father. He ran from the sound of a world ending, dashing down the stairs, across the kitchen, and out through the back door of the small white house and into the garden beyond.

He reached the end of the garden in a heartbeat and scrambled up onto the top of the wall. There he paused, torn between two impossible choices. But he couldn’t bring himself to turn his head, to look back toward the house, towards the misery he had caused.

And in that moment he made himself a promise. He would never be too slow again.

Before he could rethink his decision he dropped down the far side of the wall and fled further into the night.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Three Years Later

I was almost four years old, and utterly convinced I knew everything there was to know about the world, when the sickness struck the children of Whilsden.

I awoke from a pleasant dream, forgotten in an instant, and opened my mouth in a wide yawn that flowed through my whole body. I clambered to my feet, stretched, arching my back as high as I could to ease the slight ache in my limbs, before relaxing and looking around my cosy bedroom. Though the curtains were still drawn I could tell the sun had risen, and yet Dad was still asleep, bundled up under the covers, his breathing heavy. I closed my eyes, reigning in my irritation. Usually Dad could be trusted to have my breakfast prepared before I woke up, but now, as was routinely the case, after several days of reliable meals he had yet again reverted back to sleeping in. I sighed. If the past was any indicator it would take me a couple of days to remind him of his duties before normal service resumed once more.

I approached the head of the bed and, with one paw, poked Dad gently in the eye. He flinched away from my touch, but I had

accomplished my goal. His eyes opened and met my own. After a small lifetime, realisation entered his gaze and an arm slid out from under the covers, his warm hand rubbing against the side of my neck.

“Morning, buddy,” he said in a thick voice.

I angled my head so that he could scratch at the patch of white fur under my chin, deciding to allow him this small indulgence before sending him off to prepare my meal. After a moment though his hand slipped down onto the bed and, most annoyingly, he drifted back to sleep. It was time to remind him who was in charge around here. Taking a step forward I headbutted him in the same eye I’d poked earlier.

“All right, all right, Marmalade. I’m awake,” he said, jerking his head back and wiping at the wet spot I’d left on his face with the back of his hand.

Content that he wouldn’t be falling back to sleep again I let out a rumble of approval. As Dad started to move I was tempted to head over to where Mum was still sleeping for a quick cuddle, but decided that could wait until after breakfast. Turning, I hopped off the bed to the floor and walked to the open bedroom door. I paused for a moment to check that Dad was following me, which he was, in his own slow, lumbering way, before setting off once more at an increased pace. My eyes were drawn to the cracked open door to Ralph’s bedroom and I was tempted to pop in to check on the small boy, but the pull of my stomach was too much for even this and I kept moving, jogging down the stairs to the living room and heading for the kitchen. There was a barrier set up across the entrance to the kitchen, and though such things might hinder lesser creatures it gave me no trouble. I stopped in front of it, dropping into a sitting position for a moment, before leaping gracefully to the top of the barrier and dropping effortlessly down the far side. It was really rather impressive, if I do say so myself.

Before me now lay a large shaggy creature, golden haired, foul smelling, and with a vacant, gormless expression on its fur-covered face. Its foolishly big head lifted at the sight of me, its large pink tongue lolling in a decidedly undignified fashion and its bushy tail began to wag.

“Oh hey, Marmalade, you’re awake now. That is good news,” said Toby.

I shook my head.

“Good morning, dog,” I replied. “Yes I am awake, that is most observant of you.”

Toby smiled at me and his tail proceeded to wag with increased vigour, once more demonstrating his profound ability to elevate even the smallest of praise into something of note. That and his complete lack of understanding when it came to sarcasm made me sure that, even by dog standards, he was not the sharpest claw in the paw. Yet, he was my dog and the sight of him warmed my heart, not that I was about to admit it to him. I sauntered over, knocked my nose against his great muzzle, and then rubbed my body against his flank as I moved past and towards the real purpose of my visit to the kitchen - the food bowls.

I started by checking the bowl I shared with the dog. It appeared empty but I licked it a few times to make sure before heading over to the bowl reserved for yours truly. Here I found a couple of bites of food left over from the night before and snapped them up. There was a crazed, almost demented, scrambling sound behind me as Toby rushed across the kitchen to greet Dad, who had finally made it downstairs to sort out my breakfast.

“Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad!” said the dog with an overabundance of excitement.

He jumped up to rest his front legs on the top of the barrier, all but trying to clamber over the thing, and Dad rubbed his head with enthusiasm. In turn, Toby attempted to lick every part of Dad he could reach and, given the number of times he licked at thin air, several parts he couldn’t.

“You know,” I said, “when you block him like that he can’t get in to make my breakfast.”

After a moment Toby clearly saw the sense of my words and dropped down to the floor long enough to allow Dad to climb over the barrier. Dad headed over to the cupboard in which my food was kept and Toby, finally seeming to understand what was going on, rushed over to where I was, patiently and politely, waiting by the



food bowls. The entire back half of his body was moving back and forth with such manic enthusiasm that I was a little concerned it might come detached.

“He’s going to feed us, Marmalade. Dad is going to feed us.”

I inclined my head.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “I told him to.”

“Aww really? You’re the best Marmalade. Dad is the best. You are both the best together.”

I took in Toby’s shaggy, ridiculous face for a moment and then lent forward and rubbed my nose against it. Toby had all the sense of a ball of twine, but it was hard not to like him. Dad came over then, carrying two pouches of food. He placed them on the worktop, picked up the food bowls and proceeded to fill them with wonderful smelling meats and jellies. He put the bowls back down, placing the shared bowl far enough from mine that the dog would not knock me over with his wild, overly excited gyrating, and we both dug in with equal zeal, though with far more decorum on my part.

Once I had eaten my fill I took a moment to clean myself, presentation is everything as you know, before heading towards the far side of the kitchen and my private doorway to the world beyond. I bent my head to push against the flap and paused. An odd, repellent, smell rose up from the flap and I pulled back in disgust. Looking at the flap I noticed traces of a black, sticky-looking substance around the edges of my door, as if something large and filthy had tried to squeeze its way through. For a moment I wondered if Toby, who was still eating, had tried to stick his massive head through my door again. Leaning close I gave the flap a cautious sniff. The black slime lacked the big dog’s pervasive stink. However, while it wasn’t a smell I recognised, it did carry familiar tones. It reminded me in part of the black bags that the people of the neighbourhood would pile up outside their houses every few days, though it lacked any of the more enticing notes those bags often carried. It also made me think of those disgusting, slimy, crawling things that often showed up at night when it was wet outside. Only this was far more intense than any crawler I had encountered before. If the mess came from one of those then it had been a big one.

Doing my best not to touch the edges and thus stain my immaculately groomed ginger fur, I pushed through the flap and out into the garden beyond. Outside an abundance of far more pleasant smells invaded my senses, though not enough to fully block out the stink of the black slime, traces of which ran in a patchwork line from the flap, down the path and to the gate at the far end of the garden. Despite this there was no sign of anything that might have been responsible for the trail and so I pushed it from my mind and got about my morning business. I made use of the flower bed, stared at a pigeon on the wall until it fled in terror, and then rolled on the grass for a bit. Satisfied I headed back to the house and had pretty much forgotten about the black slime until the smell hit me anew as I reached the flap.

There was a higher concentration of black slime on this side of the flap, suggesting that whatever had caused the mess had pushed against the flap from the outside. The hairs on my neck twitched and my stomach clenched despite having recently been filled. I was missing something, but what? My pulse quickened as I tried to focus on whatever it was I wasn't getting, but before I could reach a conclusion something strange happened, derailing my train of thought. As I'd been examining the flap, the sun had continued to rise steadily behind me and was now high enough that its rays could fall directly onto the back door for the first time. As soon as the light hit the flap the black slime started to fizz and hiss before my eyes and thin wisps of purplish smoke rose up from it. I took a step back and saw that the other splotches of black slime along the path were also starting to smoke in the sunlight, some already having disappeared completely. The whole process took less time than it would take me to run to one end of the garden and back, which is to say very little time indeed as I am very fast, and then the black slime was gone. I moved back to the flap and sniffed where it had been. At first I could still detect a trace of the foul odour but even this faded within a few heartbeats.

Unsure what to make of this I pushed my way back through the flap, again making sure not to touch the edges in case any trace of the black slime remained, and re-entered the kitchen. Toby had

finally stopped eating and was slumped back down on the mattress I let him sleep on when I wasn't using it. He raised his head again at my entrance and demonstrated one of his rare moments of actual perception.

"Are you all right, Marmalade? You look troubled."

I didn't answer straight away, instead turning my attention to the black marks on this side of the flap. Even these, while not in direct sunlight like those outside, seemed to have reduced in size since I had last seen them. Some of the smaller patches smoked away entirely, right before my eyes. With a shiver I turned away.

"Toby," I said, using his name to make sure I had his full attention, "did something come into the house last night?"

He sat up at this, his stupid floppy ears lifting as his gaze tracked back and forth between me and the flap. After a few moments he dropped his head and looked at me with an expression he usually reserved for when he had been caught eating something he shouldn't have.

"I didn't see anything," he admitted. "Do you think something was in here while I was sleeping?"

I almost acknowledged that this was exactly what I was thinking, but seeing how dejected the scruffy furball looked already I decided to keep my concerns to myself for the moment.

"I'm sure it's nothing," I said as I walked over to him. "If something did try to get in I'm sure whatever it was took one look at you and ran for the hills."

At this Toby's mouth fell open in a witless smile so intense that I swear it made me dumber.

"Well that's good. Good to hear. I have to keep the family safe. It is my job you know."

I let out a rumble and knocked the side of my head against his ridiculous face.

"And you do it the best you can." I said.

Once again failing to catch even the smallest hint of sarcasm, Toby dropped back down onto the mattress and continued to smile his doggy smile, though I was pleased to see that his eyes kept darting to the flap every few seconds. Walking to the barrier I hopped over with

even more grace and poise than I had managed earlier, and stopped. Standing in the living room my mind at last arrived at the conclusion it had been struggling to reach in the garden.

My concern wasn't that something had come through the flap in the middle of the night, something that left a trail of foul-smelling black slime in its wake. No. What had me worried had nothing to do with the thing's entrance into my house, and everything to do with the fact that I wasn't convinced it had left.

## CHAPTER TWO

I dropped low, my belly almost touching the floor, ears forward, whiskers twitching, green eyes wide and ready to detect the smallest of movements. If there was something in the room with me, something that shouldn't be, I would find it. With deliberate, cautious steps I stalked forward, checking the limited hiding places the room offered.

I looked under the big soft chair that I allowed the rest of the family to share with me. I found one of the button boxes Dad was so obsessed with, and one of my toys that I made a note to retrieve later, but nothing that didn't belong in the house. I moved on to check behind the curtains, and then down the side of the unit on which sat the big picture box that my family spent so much time staring at; I also checked behind it. Nothing.

I sat down, licked a paw and cleaned my ears. The room was clear and I hadn't found even a trace of the black slime anywhere. I was sure that something had tried to enter the house through my flap, but now I was thinking I had also been right about it seeing Toby and having a change of heart. It was the most likely explanation for why someone with my sublime predatory instincts had failed to find any trace of the intruder and so I let myself relax. I decided to head back

to my bedroom for that cuddle with Mum, and of course made it up no more than a pawful of steps before I found something.

I had missed it earlier as I'd been in a hurry to get down for breakfast, but now that I was heading back up at a more sedate pace, and closer to the wall side of the stairs, I picked up a faint trace of the sickening smell of the black slime. It took me a moment to hone in on the source, but sure enough there it was; a tiny mark on the wall, no bigger than one of my toes, already fading as the room filled with morning light. I froze as my mind raced with the implications. This single, rapidly decreasing mark meant that my earlier assumptions had been right. Something had come into the house during the night, and had then made it at least this far up the stairs. And it had done so in a way that both Toby and I had failed to detect. If I had decided to start the day with that cuddle from Mum then there was every chance the morning sun would have removed all trace of the intruder and I would have been none the wiser. I looked up the stairs and my hackles rose along my back. Could it, whatever it was, still be up there?

My body was in motion before my mind realised it was moving. I raced up the stairs, leaping two at a time. My feet dug into the carpet at the top, swinging me into a tight turn, and I ran back to my bedroom, rushing into the room without slowing and jumping up onto the bed.

"Oh god, Marmalade," said Mum, clutching a hand to her chest. "You scared the life out of me."

She reached out towards me but I kept my distance, looking around for the monster I felt certain must be lurking somewhere close by. I could hear the sound of running water coming from behind the door on the opposite side of the room and knew that Dad must be in the rain box. I knew from experience that there was nowhere to hide in there, and unless Dad was even more unobservant than he seemed, an admitted possibility, then it was unlikely the intruder was in there with him. I moved across the bed, hopping over Mum's legs, and leant over the edge, trying to see underneath without making myself visible to anything that might be lurking there.

“What on earth are you doing, mister?” asked Mum in her soft singsong voice.

I continued to ignore her and, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, pounced off the bed and threw myself into the dark space beneath, claws extended, teeth bared. I thrashed around for a few rapid heartbeats before realising that the woollen jumper I was tearing into wasn't going to fight back. I froze, my eyes darting around, but aside from a few boxes there was nothing else under the bed.

“Have you quite finished destroying my jumper?” said Mum, making me flinch.

I span round to see her head, upside down, staring at me. I hissed.

“Oh, it's like that is it?” she said, the humour disappearing from her voice.

I dropped my head; the hiss had been uncalled for. I slinked over to her and nuzzled her upside-down head.

“That's better,” she said and then all at once a hand snaked under my belly and she lifted me onto the bed and into a cuddle.

I was still on edge and so struggled to free myself at first, but after a moment I gave up and melted into the warmth of her embrace. Mum really was the best when it came to cuddles and it would have been easy to stay there and enjoy it, but I couldn't shake the sensation that something was wrong in the house, and so, after a few moments of pure indulgence, I struggled again and this time broke free.

“Goodness,” Mum said, “what's with you this morning?”

I didn't have time to explain and anyway, as good as she was at understanding my basic needs, I wasn't sure she had the capacity for something of this magnitude. I jumped down from the bed and jogged back into the hall. I checked the next room where I liked to sit in the big black chair on wheels that Dad seemed to think belonged to him, but there was nothing of interest in there. Next up was the room with the big water bowl, currently empty, but again there was no sign of anything that could have been responsible for the black slime. That only left one place the intruder could have gone and I found myself breaking into a run again as I headed to my second

bedroom.

The door was only open a crack, but that was more than enough for me to squeeze through without opening it further. It was still dark inside, with only a soft glow coming from the numerous tiny lights that covered the ceiling above my head. Ralph was fascinated by the stars and when he woke up in the night he used to climb out of bed to go look at them. In an attempt to both encourage his interest and stop him from getting up, Mum and Dad had recreated the night sky on the ceiling of his bedroom. Right now the second part was working, as the sound of the boy's rhythmic breathing drifted to me from the bed. Unlike the rest of the house this room was a mess. There were things all over the floor, despite the fact that Mum was constantly picking them up, and I was pretty sure that if I looked hard enough I would be able to find something interesting to eat. But that wasn't why I was here. I was here to check for intruders.

Of all the members of my household Ralph was my favourite. He was almost as good at cuddles as Mum, always felt warm, enjoyed playing as much as I did, and, as I mentioned, was a reliable source of tasty treats. He was also a much more sensible size than either Mum or Dad, and was generous enough to fill my second bed with all manner of soft things to snuggle up to. All in all he was most tolerable and showed every sign that he could be trained.

There were plenty of places to hide in here so I kept low as I approached the bed and hopped up onto it in complete silence. Ralph didn't move and so, after scanning the bed for any threats, I walked over and pressed myself up against his back. He felt hot and damp. I pulled back. Something was wrong. I leant forward and sniffed. My heckles shot up. Ralph always had a strong, though not unpleasant, smell to him, but now there was something about it that disturbed me. And on top of that I could smell the black slime.

I made to clamber over his body, as I had done many times in the past, but he let out a small whimper of pain as I placed my feet on him and I drew back, instead moving around the top of his head. The moment I saw his face I arched my back and recoiled away from him. He was still asleep, though his eyes fluttered and he occasionally made a sharp squeaking sound. This alone was enough to warrant



concern, as the kid was usually up long before me. His face was red and blotchy, and covered in a thin film of moisture. But none of that was what had so alarmed me. No, that honour belonged to the black slime that coated his mouth and nose in a quantity far greater than anything I had seen so far.

I froze. What should I do? I had no idea what this black slime was or where it came from, but I knew for sure that it was bad and that it did not belong on Ralph's face. I reached out and poked at his chest with one paw, but this failed to wake him and only succeeded in making him moan once more. The panic was building and with no idea what else to do I darted forward and furiously licked at the black slime around his nose.

I gagged and pulled back spitting. The black slime was foul and burnt my tongue. I went in again but only managed a couple of licks before I felt my whole body heave and I had to stop. This wasn't working, I needed to try something else. I looked at the door and thought about going to get Mum, but I was worried she wouldn't understand quickly enough and I didn't want to leave Ralph like this, even for the short time it would take to bring help. No, I had to do something. Racking my brains I ran through what I knew about the black slime, which wasn't much. It smelt bad, tasted far worse, was unpleasantly hot on the tongue, and...

I span round to face the window. The curtains in this room were thick and allowed in very little light even in the middle of the day. I ran to the end of the bed and leapt, landing on a large white box below the window. Scrambling and twisting I managed to get myself under the curtains and up onto the windowsill. The world beyond the curtain was bright and glorious and I had to close my eyes for a moment against the glare of the sun. This was exactly what I needed. I grabbed at one side of the curtain in my teeth and started to pull. It was far heavier than I'd expected and it took me a moment to work out the best way to move it, but I was determined and so, straining against the weight, I slowly, way too slowly, started to pull the curtains open. I managed to open up a gap almost as big as I was long, but when I let go of the curtain it fell back into place, casting the bedroom back into darkness.

My heart hammering in my chest, I bit into the material again and pulled, moving backwards a single step at a time across the windowsill. There was a clacking sound above my head and the curtain jumped towards me. I took another step and the clacking sound repeated itself and the curtain gave way again. I kept this up for a few more clacks before letting go. This time the curtain only fell back a short distance, but otherwise stayed open. Knowing what to do this time, I rushed to the other curtain and repeated the process. Light was now streaming into the room and so I left the curtains and rushed back to the bed.

The black slime was already smoking and fading away when I reached Ralph's face, but as it did so he started to twist and writhe about and his whimpering grew louder. The black slime was hurting him as it burnt away.

Before I could talk myself out of it I jumped onto his chest in a vain attempt to hold him still and started licking at the remaining black slime with all my might. My body convulsed every time my tongue touched the foul substance, but I kept at it. The smoke stung my eyes and went up my nose and I started coughing, but I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and didn't stop. I had to get the black slime off Ralph's face as fast as possible. It was a nightmare and my breakfast started to rise up in my throat, but then Ralph stopped struggling and I was able to force my eyes open once more. The black slime was gone. As I watched, the unnatural redness in his face started to fade and his usual colour began to return.

Relief flooded me and I licked at his face in joy rather than panic. But the moment was short-lived. The room whirled around me and I found myself slipping sideways. I tried to steady myself but my legs gave way and, before I could do anything to stop it, I was falling from Ralph's chest and rolling off the side of the bed.

I hit the floor with none of my usual grace and the air burst from my lungs. With it came my breakfast and I barely managed to get myself the right way up before I started hacking and gagging and the food, mixed with great globules of the black slime, erupted from my mouth. This first explosion was only the beginning, as no sooner was my mouth clear than I was retching again. This was far worse than

the occasional hairball I had to deal with, and my insides cramped up painfully as my body tried to expel every last drop of the black toxin.

I lost count of how many times I threw up, decidedly too many, but then, in a flash, it was over and I dropped down to the floor, my face inches from the putrid mess that had flown out of me. I watched as the black slime mixed in with my food started to smoke in the sunlight and disappear. I was drained and my body trembled all over. My insides hurt and my mouth was still burning and I fully intended to stay right where I was until someone came to rescue me.

Then something moved under the bed.

The full version of *The Blight* will be available in both paperback and Kindle format from Amazon in early 2023.

To be kept posted regarding this book and my other work please follow me on Instagram at [@rabbitpirate](https://www.instagram.com/rabbitpirate)

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