

## SNOWY

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IT WAS EMMA who heard the dog on the roof on Christmas morning, after dreaming of sleighbells jingling and reindeer's hoofbeats in the snow. She woke up in her room in the attic, and at first she couldn't believe her ears.

She sat up and listened. Then she heard it again and she knew she was right. She ran along the landing to her sister's room.

"Katie, wake up," she said, shaking her shoulder. "There's a dog on the roof."

Katie groaned and pulled her pillow over her head.

"Don't be stupid, Emma," she said. "How could there be?"

There was more barking and yelping from just above their heads, and Emma dashed back to her room.

She stood on the bed and unfastened the catch on the skylight window, banging upwards on the frame. A blast of air made her hair stand on end as the window flew open and let in the cold December morning.

Emma stuck her head outside. Snow was falling fast, and a thick covering lay on the roof and on the roofs of the houses all around.

Then Emma saw something strange. Here and there on the roof, quickly disappearing under fresh flakes, were footprints in the snow.

Emma stared, remembering her dream. The footprints looked as if they had been made by a large pair of boots, and there were others that could have been the prints of hooves. There were even some long, deep grooves that looked a bit like the skidmarks from the runners of a sleigh. Don't be stupid, Emma, said Emma to herself, and blinked the snow out of her eyes.

The barking began again, and it was then that Emma saw the small white shape beside the chimney pot.

"Katie, it is a dog," she called. "Come and see."

The dog pricked up his ears at the sound of Emma's voice. He stared at her hopefully, then threw back his head and howled at the sky.

"Good grief," said Katie, appearing in Emma's doorway. "How did it get up there?" She pushed Emma out of the way and stuck her head outside.

"Go and get Mum and Gran," she said, after staring for a moment. "We'll have to get him down."

It was the strangest Christmas morning Emma had ever had. What with Mum climbing out on the roof in her dressing-gown and almost falling off, and what with the excitement of getting the dog down at last by tempting him with a cold sausage, and what with all the arguments about how the dog had got there and who he belonged to and what they were going to do with him—Emma even forgot to open her presents.

"Go and look in the front room," said Gran, as Emma and Katie rubbed the dog with a towel and gave him some milk. "You haven't seen what Father Christmas has brought you."

Katie laughed. "There's no such person as Father Christmas," she said scornfully, but she ran with Emma to unwrap the pile of parcels under the Christmas tree all the same.

After breakfast Mum phoned the police. "Nobody has reported a dog missing," she said when she came back into the kitchen. "I said we'd keep him here until he's claimed. He seems a nice little dog now that he's dry. What shall we call him?"

Emma looked at the dog's fluffy coat. "He looks like an Eskimo dog," she said. "Let's call him Snowy, because we found him in the snow." And even Katie agreed that it was a good idea.

What nobody could agree about was how the dog came to be on the roof in the first place. There was no way he could have climbed up there by himself.

Katie said he must have fallen out of an aeroplane, but that didn't seem likely. Gran thought he must have come down by parachute, but as there was no parachute, that didn't seem possible either. Mum thought he must have been put there by somebody having a joke, but Emma didn't think it was a very funny joke. All day she kept thinking of her dream, and of the sleighbells, and of those strange footprints in the snow.

Nobody came forward to claim him, and Snowy became Emma's dog. He followed her everywhere, and he slept on her bed in the attic, although Mum didn't altogether approve. Emma took him for walks every day after school, she fed him and brushed him, and she saved up her pocket money to buy him a collar and lead.

When summer came Emma took Snowy for picnics by the river, and he even went with the family for a holiday by the sea, although he didn't seem to like hot weather, and spent most of his time looking for somewhere cool to lie down.

"He is a funny dog," said Gran one day. "He keeps trying to curl up in the fridge!"

"He likes cold places," said Emma. "Perhaps he comes from the North Pole."

"Don't be silly said, Emma," said Gran. "There aren't any dogs at the North Pole. Only polar bears."

Emma said nothing more, but she gave Snowy an ice-cube to lick whenever she got the chance.

Snowy was well looked after and had everything a dog could wish for, but he never completely settled down. Emma would watch him sometimes as he lay in the garden with his nose on his paws, gazing up at the sky, and she knew that he would never be happy in his new home. He seemed to be waiting for something, or for somebody. Emma would look at his sad brown eyes and wish that she could help.

Autumn came, and then winter. Snowy became more and more restless as Christmas came round once again. He spent more and more time in the attic, sitting on Emma's bed, watching the sky through the skylight window.

On Christmas Eve it began to snow.

"Whatever's the matter with that dog?" said Mum, shooing him off the bed for the hundredth time. "He keeps gazing into the sky. I can't imagine why."

"He wants to get out on the roof," said Emma.

"Don't be silly, Emma," said Mum. "What would he want to do that for?"

When Emma went to bed she lay in the dark for a long time, stroking the dog's ears and thinking. If she was right about Snowy, there was only one thing to do. And tonight was the only night she could do it.

Emma thought and thought, and at last she finally made up her mind. She propped herself up against the pillows, determined to stay awake all night.

It was Snowy's whining that woke her a few hours later, from a dream of sleighbells jingling and reindeer's hoofbeats in the snow.

Emma sat up and listened. She hadn't been dreaming.

Real sleighbells were jingling, real hooves were clip-clopping, and somebody in big boots was stamping about on the roof above Emma's head.

Snowy went wild. He jumped up at the skylight, yelping and wagging his tail.

Emma knew she had no time to waste. She stood up on the bed and flung the window open, letting in a gust of cold wind and a flurry of snow. She picked Snowy up in her arms and hugged him tightly to her for a moment.

"Goodbye, Snowy," she said into his fur, and bundled him out onto the roof. With a quick lick at her face the dog was gone.

Emma heard Snowy barking, and then she heard something else that made her shiver with excitement in her pyjamas.

"So that's where you are!" said a deep voice that made Emma think of plum pudding and mince pies. Did you fall off the sleigh? We'd better make sure that doesn't happen again, hadn't we?"

Hooves drummed on the roof, there was a sudden jingling of bells and then silence. Emma closed the window and went back to bed.

She knew she would miss Snowy, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he was on his way home.

There was a big fuss the next morning as everybody looked for Snowy. Mum, Gran and Katie searched the house from top to bottom, calling his name. Mum even reported it to the police.

"What can have happened to him?" she said. "Do you know anything, Emma? You don't seem very upset."

Emma only shook her head and said nothing. It wasn't worth telling anybody anything. She knew exactly what they would all say.