THE DOG THAT SAVED Christmas

NICOLA DAVIES

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Mike Byrne

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To the Family Bookworms
Kit, Nina, Noah, Mummy and Daddy Worm
With love and thanks

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CHAPTER 1

THE INFLATABLE SNOWMAN

Jake hated Christmas. Nothing was normal. There was no routine. It felt like anything could happen. Even the food was weird. And it went on for days. Sometimes, Jake would go back to bed on the days between Christmas and New Year, and get up all over again. He hoped that a second start to the day would iron out the bumps in it. It never worked, of course.

Even the run-up to Christmas was horrid. The decorations in the town centre had flashing lights that made Jake's eyes hurt. People did strange things, like standing outside his house in the dark and singing carols. And Jake's parents brought a tree *into the living room*! Fir trees were meant to be outside on mountains, not indoors covered in tinsel and poking Jake in the leg with their spiky needles.

And now Christmas was starting all over again, ruining a perfectly *normal* Sunday afternoon.

Jake was on the sofa with his big brother, Andy, who was almost a grown-up. They were watching Jake's favourite documentary

about leopards hunting. Well, Jake was watching. Andy was fiddling with his phone. Mum came staggering out of the cupboard under the stairs with a huge box. She plonked it down in front of the sofa and began pulling out a string of fairy lights.

"Plug these in for me, Andy," Mum said. "There's a love."

Andy reached one of his long arms to the plug in the wall without taking his eyes off his phone. The fairy lights snapped on.

"Ta da!" said Mum. "Hooray. They work! I think that's the official start of Crimbo!"

"You're just a big kid, Mum!" Andy laughed.

The lights were flashing now: on–off, on–off. Jake picked up a cushion and held it to the side of his head to block them out.



"Oops, sorry, Jake," Mum said.

Andy turned off the plug. "There you go, bro!" Andy said. "OK now?"

Jake kept the cushion next to his head and didn't reply. He stared hard at the TV.

This was his favourite bit of his favourite programme. Jake had watched it hundreds of times. The leopard caught the impala, but then the impala got away again. Jake could tell the leopard was cross – it must be very hard to have to catch your food. But the flashing fairy lights still filled Jake's head, burning out the lovely leopard. Christmas had broken in and spoiled everything, like it always did.

Jake threw the cushion on the floor and stomped upstairs without a word, even though he knew Andy and Mum were trying to be nice.

Everything in Jake's bedroom was normal. His model animals were lined up on the top of the chest of drawers – three elephants, two giraffes, a lion, a leopard and five zebras. The numbers on his digital clock glowed green. Best of all, the tree – *his* tree – stood strong and steady outside the window by his bed. Every night, the streetlight cast shadows of its branches on the wall. Jake knew the pattern of the shadows by heart. He sat down on his blue bedcover and let out a long breath. Christmas would never ever get into his room.

The comforting shadows vanished all of a sudden. Jake's bedroom wall glowed white then pink then white. Jake rushed to the window. A massive blow-up snowman stood in the front garden of Mr Elvy's house across the road. The snowman was lit up like a huge light bulb and flashed red, white, then red again. Jake could even hear a faint "ho ho ho" sound coming through the glass of his window.

A big hot wave of panic rushed up from the bottom of Jake's belly. But before it made him start to shriek, something darted out from the hedge beside the snowman. It was a black and white dog with a bushy tail. Its fur coat stood out in a spiky shape against the white of the snowman. The dog's body

was tense, and it crouched low. Jake could see that it was very afraid – afraid of the big weird *thing* that had lit up next to its hiding place.



The red and white flashing went on, and the "ho ho ho" began again. The dog jumped at the sound, then it turned round and bit the plastic! The snowman fell like a popped balloon and the lights went out. It was too dark for Jake to see what had happened to the dog, but the hot wave of panic inside him had gone.

The dog had given Jake an idea. This year, he wasn't going to let Christmas just *happen*, he was going to fight back!