A Puppy's First Christmas



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For everyone who has enjoyed this series through the years

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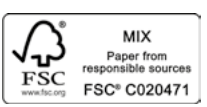
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Chapter One



Aria slid out of the classroom door and stood next to it, her back pressed against the wall, breathing hard. She had been looking forward to the end of term Christmas party – lots of games and fun and party food – but it had all been too much. The inside of her head seemed to be spinning round and round, and she felt dizzy.

Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to be back at home, curled up on the sofa, with Jackson's head resting in her lap – or all of Jackson in her lap would be even better. She'd be stroking her puppy's soft fur and everything would be peaceful…

"Are you all right, Aria? I saw you come out. Are you feeling sick?" Miss Lyons popped her head round the door, looking worried.



Aria shook her head and tried to smile.

"I'm OK. It's just … really noisy. And … bright…"

"It is a lot," Miss Lyons agreed, but she still looked concerned. "It's not long until the end of school, though. In fact, we should probably start tidying up. Would you be able to run a little errand for me? Could you go and ask Mr Fordham if I could have my cleaning spray? He borrowed it yesterday and I'm going to need it to wipe over all those sticky tables."

Aria was pretty sure Miss Lyons had invented the errand to give her some time away from the classroom, but she didn't mind. She nodded and walked slowly down the corridor to the Year

Four classroom to find Mr Fordham. If she was really slow, it would be practically time to go home when she got back.

What was it about the party that had been so hard to cope with? Aria wondered, as she headed back up the corridor with the bottle of spray. The noise? Everyone rushing about? Maybe it was just the excitement that seemed to be bubbling up out of everyone because it was the end of term. Aria could understand that. She loved Christmas and she'd been excited about it for ages. The last few weeks had been cold and damp and miserable, and her whole class was desperate for the holidays to come.

By the time she got back to the

classroom, the floor was covered in a thin layer of crushed-up crisps and broken biscuits. Everyone was helping to clear up, grumbling a bit, but mostly looking forward to the bell going and heading home for the Christmas break. Miss Lyons was already sending people off in twos and threes to get their coats.

"Thanks, Aria, I'll take that – you go and get your things."

Aria went to put her coat on, hoping that Dad would bring Jackson with him when he came to pick up her and her brother James. For some reason Aria had really missed Jackson today. They'd only had him for a couple of months, but now she couldn't imagine their house without a wriggling ball of chocolate Labrador puppy. Jackson was

gorgeous and whenever she was tired or upset he made her feel better. He wasn't always calm – he could be excited and bouncy and puppyish when they were out in the garden or at the park. But if Aria was feeling like things were too much, Jackson seemed to know. He'd come and lie on top of her – just when she needed the weight of him. Aria would hug him back and all the buzzy worry in her head would drain away.

Aria hurried out into the playground when the bell rang, waving goodbye and calling "Happy Christmas!" to her friends.

Yes! There was Dad, just outside the gate, and he had Jackson with him! The puppy was looking so smart in his new red collar and lead, and Aria

could see lots of her class giving him admiring glances. Jackson spotted her coming and Aria smiled to herself as he started to bounce up and down, whining with excitement. It felt good that he was so pleased to see her.

"Hello, love! Did you have a fun day? How was your party?" Dad asked.



Aria crouched down to rub Jackson's ears and shrugged. "It was OK… It was a bit loud." Mum and Dad knew that she couldn't deal with noise and big groups sometimes. Things like that could make her feel weird and shaky

and upset – Mum said she was more sensitive to them than other people were. Aria could tell that Dad was a bit worried about her now. "I went out into the corridor for some of it."

Dad nodded. "Sounds sensible. What are you going to do when you get home? How are you starting off the holidays?"

Aria smiled at Dad. She could tell he was trying to change the subject. "I'm going to wrap up – " she pressed her hands gently over Jackson's ears – "Jackson's present! I bought it with Mum when we went shopping at the weekend. It's a special dog toy, for Jackson's first Christmas."

"Nice!" Dad nodded and then waved. "Oh, hey, James!"

Jackson squirmed lovingly round James's knees and Aria's big brother picked him up, letting Jackson lick his cheek.

"Hello! Who's a good boy?"

"We'd better head home, we've got a lot of decorating to do," Dad said. "I picked up the Christmas tree this morning! Plus I'm getting chilly, and I bet Jackson is as well, we've been standing out here for ages."

"Mr Turner said he reckons it's going to snow soon," James said as they set off home.

"Really? Proper snow that sticks?" Aria asked excitedly. There'd been a little bit of snow back in February, but hardly enough to make a snowball, let alone a proper snowman.

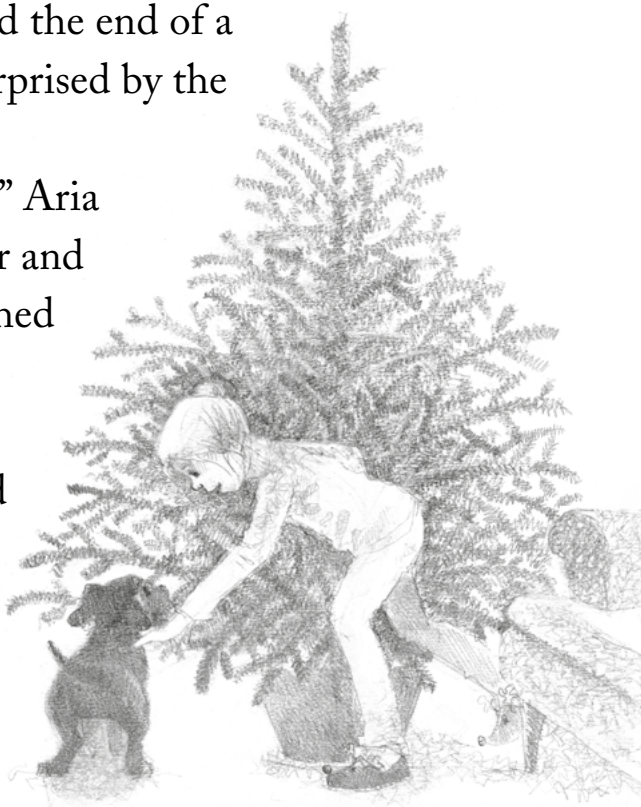
"Yeah, he said so. I hope it snows for when Matthew's here."

Aria nodded, but she looked thoughtful. Matthew was their cousin, and he had two younger sisters, Lucy and Hannah. All three of them were coming to stay the day before Christmas Eve, with Auntie Anna, Mum's sister, and Uncle Josh. *And* Gran and Grandad. Aria was really looking forward to it, especially since she didn't get to see her cousins very often – they'd never even met Jackson! – but it was going to be a busy, noisy houseful. She loved the thought of a big family Christmas, but she couldn't help feeling just a little bit nervous too.



Jackson sniffed at the huge tree that had appeared in the corner of the living room. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he loved the sharp, piney smell that it had. He reached up a little and nibbled the end of a branch, surprised by the spiky feel.

"Uh-uh!" Aria leaned over and gently pushed him away. "Jackson, no! It's bad for you. You'll get needles in your tummy!"



Jackson leaned against her happily, distracted by the fuss he was getting instead. His back paw drummed against the carpet as Aria scratched just the right spot behind his ear.

Aria giggled. “I love it when you do that.”

“Was he eating the tree?” Mum asked, carrying in a box of decorations. Jackson got up to nose that as well. He worked his way around it, sniffing at the cardboard. What could it be?

“Just a little bit.”

“Silly boy.” Mum looked at the tree with a frown and called back into the hallway. “Dave, I got the decorations out of the garage, but maybe we should leave putting them on till tomorrow? It’ll give the branches time to open

out properly. And there's a bit in that puppy book about Christmas trees – it says it's good to give the dog a little while to get used to the tree before you start decorating it. That way at least, if Jackson jumps up at it, he's not going to get tangled in tinsel."

Dad came in from the kitchen and put down a tray on the coffee table. "Mmmm. He's definitely been a bit bouncy today, he must be starting to feel Christmassy too. We're going to have to keep an eye on him when all the family arrives. It'll be different for him with so many people in the house."

Aria looked at Jackson, who was still sniffing at the box of decorations as though it was the most interesting

thing he'd ever seen. She felt a bit guilty. She'd been half excited and half worried about everyone coming for Christmas, but she hadn't even thought about how Jackson was going to feel.

Jackson left the box and headed for the tray – whatever was in the mugs smelled even better. He prowled hopefully round the edge of the table, knowing he wasn't supposed to jump up.

"Hot chocolate!" Aria hurried over and Jackson looked at her hopefully, wondering if she would share whatever the delicious-smelling stuff could be. Aria was always good at slipping him little treats…

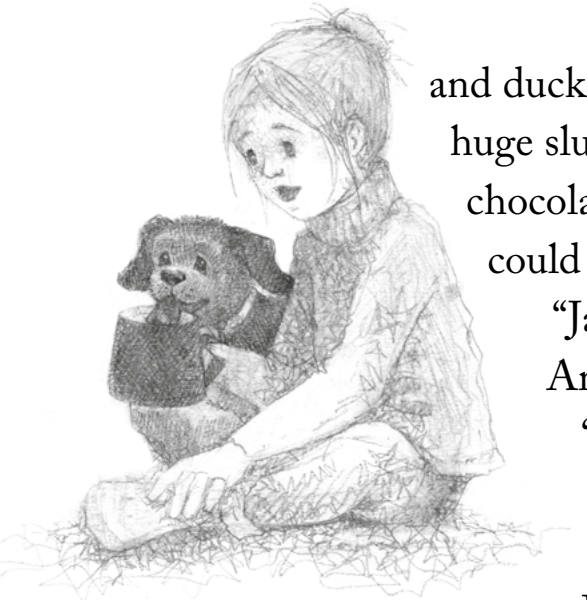
"With marshmallows, as an end of term treat." Dad handed a mug to

Aria. “Be careful, it’s hot.” Then he looked round at the tree. “I hadn’t thought about Jackson jumping up at the tree – isn’t it cats that do that?”

“He was definitely interested in it,” James said, and Jackson watched him pick up a steaming mug. Whatever it was smelled too good to miss… “Does that mean we can’t decorate the tree till tomorrow?”

“I think it’s probably best, but we can do the rest of the house,” Mum said. “Wrap tinsel round the banisters and put the wreath on the front door.”

Jackson sidled closer to Aria. She had one of those good-smelling mugs now and she was sitting on the floor. He wandered round behind her, and then came up close on her other side



and ducked in for a huge slurp of hot chocolate before she could stop him.

"Jackson!" Aria squeaked. "You're so naughty!"

But Jackson could tell she wasn't cross. She was laughing. He licked chocolate off his damp whiskers happily and eyed the mug. He could try again in a minute, he reckoned.

"We definitely need to give him time to get used to the tree," Mum sighed.