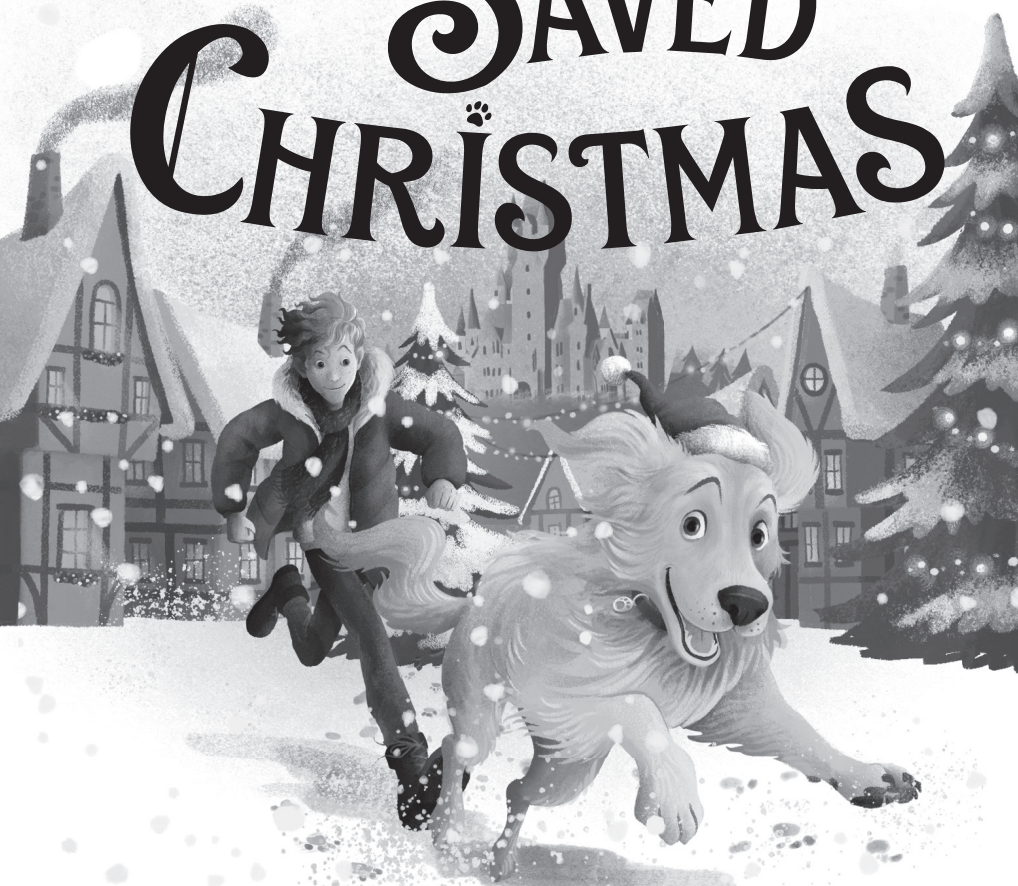


BEN MILLER

THE DOG WHO
SAVED
CHRISTMAS



Illustrations by **Elisa Paganelli**

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For Stevie







***R**ight, what's happening? Back home on the chuggy thing, is it? Brilliant. I love the chuggy thing. So many smells and snacks left under chairs and friendly people to stroke me.*

Okay! Up we go then — hop! Paws on the metal step — careful — and through the sliding doors! Everyone follow me! Down the wobbly tunnel with all the interesting knees to sniff and—

Ooooh, hang on a minute. What's that smell?

Back the way we came . . .

Mmmm, that's delicious! A yummy, meaty . . .

You guys go on — I'll be back in a—

Hello! What's that you've got there? Is that . . . for me??

Oh, yes please! I'd love—

Oh.

But . . . aren't you getting on? Wait, where are you going? Can't I eat it here?

Well, I should probably check with my person. He worries, you see . . .

Hmm.

Well . . . I suppose if we're quick.

Oh yes! That is magnificent!

You're right! I am a good boy. My person says the same thing.

Wait, no — I definitely shouldn't get in the car. No, I really don't think I should—

Oh. Right. Okay then.

Well . . . is my person coming too, at least?

Hey! You nearly slammed my tail in the door! I need to tell him if we're going somewhere!

Wait, SERIOUSLY! I think I can hear him!

That's my name! He's calling me! He's on that chuggy thing over there — I can hear it making its leaving noise . . .

Just WAIT, won't you!

This is bad. This is wrong. He won't know where I am!

BARK

BARK

BARK!

FIVE MINUTES EARLIER . . .





CHAPTER ONE

‘**H**ere we are,’ said the taxi driver.
‘Invercraig Station.’

It was Christmas Eve in the Highlands. After a short visit, Alfie and his family were heading back to London. But his grandma wasn’t giving up without a fight.

In the front seat, she sighed heavily. ‘Ach, I DO wish you’d stay.’

Alfie felt a twist of guilt. After all, it was partly

his fault they were leaving . . .

He glanced back at Bear. As if he understood, Bear leaned forward and gently nudged his head beneath Alfie's hand, inviting a stroke.

'Good boy,' whispered Alfie.

For a moment, the twist loosened.

'Are you SURE I can't convince you?' said Grandma.

Mum gave a small, patient smile. 'Sorry, Ma . . .'

Grandma swivelled in her seat, her hopeful eyes sweeping around the people carrier.

In the back row, Alfie ducked behind his fringe as he unclipped his seat belt, then reached to free his little sister Frankie's. In the row in front of him, Mum was bending over one twin while Dad concentrated very hard on unbuckling the other from its baby seat.

No one wanted to meet Grandma's eyes when

she was dishing out one of her looks.

No one apart from Frankie.

‘WE’RE GOING HOME ON THE CHOO-CHOO!’ she shouted, a little insensitively, in Alfie’s opinion.

One of the twins began to stir. *Here we go*, thought Alfie. Sure enough, a wail erupted, and right on cue, the other twin joined in.

‘Oh don’t start that,’ Dad muttered over the rising chorus. ‘We’re already late.’

‘Are you quite sure you won’t change your minds?’ Grandma asked.

‘Ma, we’ve been over this . . .’ Mum said with a sigh, lifting the twin on to her shoulder.

But Grandma was ready to double down.

‘I know,’ she said, ‘but I’ve bought such a lot of food, and your brother’s bringing the boys this year. When was the last time we were all together

for Christmas? They were SO excited about seeing Alfie and Bear – especially after losing their own dog. It seems crazy to come all this way and then leave on Christmas Eve.’

For a second, Grandma’s eyes met Alfie’s.

His stomach tightened.

He reached an arm over the back seat towards Bear in the boot, threading his fingers into the dog’s thick, golden fur. Bear thumped his tail in reply.

Please don’t change your minds, Alfie thought.

Alfie loved his grandma – her bone-crunching hugs, her tastiest-in-the-Highlands shortbread and her ruthless card skills. But he did NOT want to spend Christmas with his uncle and his noisy Scottish cousins. The three boys were close in age, but different in every other way. Alfie was tall and quiet. His cousins were very small and VERY loud.

‘My two pocket rockets!’ his uncle always bragged, as if that were something to boast about.

Whenever Alfie was around them, he felt awkward and shy, even more so than usual. And besides, his own family was quite loud enough these days. Luckily, his parents seemed to feel the same way. A ‘quiet’ Christmas at home seemed to be all any of them had the energy for this year.

Movement caught Alfie’s eye. Through the back window, a dark green car glided in behind them – long, polished, old-fashioned. A Bentley, maybe?

‘And there’s a Christmas party in the village today too,’ Grandma went on, ‘with food stalls and games for the children . . . and *fireworks*!’

‘Ooooh FIWORKS!’ shouted Frankie, bouncing in her seat. ‘Like in the park for bonfires?’

‘Exactly!’ said Grandma, a triumphant glint in her

eye. 'Except these ones will be EVEN BIGGER.'

Another good reason to go home, thought Alfie.

Bear hated fireworks. Every Bonfire Night, he squeezed himself under Alfie's bed, trembling so hard the frame rattled. Which, of course, gave Alfie the perfect excuse to stay inside too. While everyone else was outside, laughing and shouting and lighting sparklers, he could keep himself to himself.

His parents were always saying he should try harder to make friends.

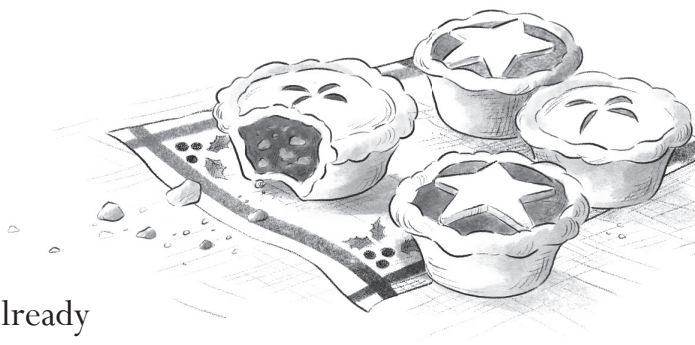
They didn't get it.

He didn't *need* friends. He had Bear.

As if reading his thoughts, Bear pushed his nose into Alfie's palm and gave it a warm, trusting lick.

'And there'll be mulled wine,' Grandma was saying, 'and mince pies, and it's all free apparently.'

'Free?' said Mum distractedly as she opened the car door.



Dad was already
strapping one of the twins to his chest.

The danger had almost passed. Alfie felt himself relaxing. He bent to pick up his rucksack. A few minutes more, and they'd be on the train. He pictured himself back at home, door shut, beanbag, books, computer games. Bear at his feet.

'I mean . . .'

 Grandma paused, drawing herself up. 'I'm not getting any younger, you know.'

For a moment, the car went quiet. Mum paused, one foot out the car door.

The low hoot of a train horn broke the silence, followed by a distant clattering along the tracks.

'I think that's the train,' said Dad, reaching for the door handle.

Mum sighed. 'We talked about this, Ma,' she

said, taking Grandma's hand. 'It's just easier for everyone if we head home today.'

'FIWORKS! FIWORKS! FIWORKS!' chanted Frankie.

Not to be outdone, the twins took their bawling up a notch.

Alfie winced. Before they were born, he hadn't thought anything could be louder than Frankie. He had been wrong.

'Sorry, Flora,' said Dad, climbing out. 'We need to get these two terrors home.'

Dad shoved the seat forward, and Alfie unfolded himself from the back, then helped Frankie down. Immediately, she ran round the car screaming, 'FIWORKS! FIWORKS! FIWORKS!'

'*Three* terrors, you mean . . .' muttered Mum.

'Frankie, *please* . . .' pleaded Dad.

These days, Alfie didn't even make the list. In

fact, if anything, he'd faded even more into the background.

Mum and Grandma got out too, and they all congregated on the pavement.

'Next year, Ma. Properly,' Mum said.

'Yes, but your brother won't have the boys next year.' Grandma sighed.

Both of the twins were now screeching at full volume.

'FIWORKS! FIWORKS! FIRWORKS!' screamed Frankie.

'Frankie, will you please be quiet!' Mum snapped.

The rumble of the approaching train grew louder.

'Great to see you, Flora,' said Dad, giving Mum a *hurry up* look.

Mum held Grandma's shoulders and looked her

in the eye, then hugged her tightly.

Were they going to start crying as well now? thought Alfie.

He popped the boot and Bear leaped out, tail wagging excitedly.

‘Go on then,’ said Grandma at last, brushing at her eyes. ‘Before I change my mind again.’

She pulled Alfie in for one of her classic hugs.

‘You’re still my favourite tall grandson,’ she whispered.

Alfie swallowed. He loved her, which was exactly what made leaving difficult.

And then suddenly the train was pulling into the platform and they were waving goodbye and hurrying across the concourse, arms full of babies and bags and prams and presents, Bear bounding along beside them, glancing up at Alfie for instructions.

‘Heel,’ said Alfie, and Bear instantly dropped back to his side.

At the carriage door, Alfie called, ‘Up!’ and Bear leaped neatly on ahead of them.

Bear always liked to lead the way.

He was so well trained that Alfie hardly needed the lead. One word – ‘heel’, ‘sit’, ‘stay’ or ‘come’ – and Bear obeyed. And he knew other commands too. He would ‘fetch’ anything you asked him to, if you taught him the word for that thing. He knew ‘ball’ and ‘bone’, and recently Alfie had been teaching him ‘keys’. If Alfie said ‘keys’, Bear would tear off down the hall, grab them from their hook by the door and race right back with them, tail thumping like mad. Bear loved ‘keys’ because he knew it meant they were going for a walk. And going for a walk with Alfie was Bear’s favourite thing in the whole world.

Once Bear was aboard, the rush began. Stepping up on to the train, Alfie could hardly see over the top of the pile of presents he was carrying.



Ahead of him, Dad cursed as an overfull plastic bag split, spilling its contents across the carriage floor. Satsumas rolled under seats. A tub of Grandma's shortbread skidded beneath a crowded table.



The twins, who'd been briefly soothed by the walk to the train, both started screaming again.

'Can you come and take this one from me?' shouted Mum from further down the carriage.

Dad squeezed the bridge of his nose. He looked like he was about to cry.

'I'll get this stuff,' said Alfie quickly, dropping his presents and shrugging off his rucksack. 'I can fit it in here.'

He crouched, scooping up satsumas, stuffing biscuits and wrapping paper into his bag.

By the time he'd crammed everything inside and fought his way down the carriage, Frankie had begun screaming. His mum and dad were manically rummaging through bags.

'Where are the dummies?' his mum asked, a note of panic in her voice.

'They must be here somewhere . . .' said Dad.

‘Frankie, please be quiet!’

Alfie dumped the presents on the table and slung his rucksack on to a seat.

He frowned.

‘Where’s Bear?’ he said.

‘Did you put them in the pram?’ asked Mum.

No one was listening to Alfie. He moved further down the carriage, scanning beneath the seats. Bear was probably snuffling around after something to eat, as usual . . . a dropped crisp or a stray sandwich crust. That was the one time Bear was utterly disobedient. His stomach came first.

‘Has anyone seen Bear?’ Alfie tried again. Then, when they still didn’t answer, he raised his voice. ‘DAD!’

‘I NEED A POO-POO!’ shouted Frankie.

‘What? Yes, he got on first,’ Dad said distractedly, adding to Mum, ‘I’ll take her . . .’

‘No, it’s fine – I will . . .’

I may as well be invisible, Alfie thought.

He felt his chest tighten. He forced himself to breathe. Bear was on the train. He had to be.

Maybe he’d wandered back the other way . . .

Alfie turned and pushed back through the carriage.

‘Bear?’ he called. ‘Bear, come!’

A panicky feeling was fluttering inside him now as he ran back past the train door they’d originally come through and . . .

BARK! BARK! BARK!

Alfie stopped abruptly in the doorway.

The sound wasn’t from inside the carriage. It was coming from outside.

Alfie leaned out the train door.

Beyond the platform edge ran a low metal fence. Beyond that, down a short flight of steps, lay the station car park.

The dark green car was still there, parked just outside the gate.

A short, thick-set man in a flat cap had just slammed the back door. Alfie could see something through the back window – something big and fluffy and golden and . . .

His stomach plummeted like a runaway lift.

‘Bear!’ he yelled.

