

*Sam the
Stolen
Puppy*

For Emily Ruby,
and for Robin and William

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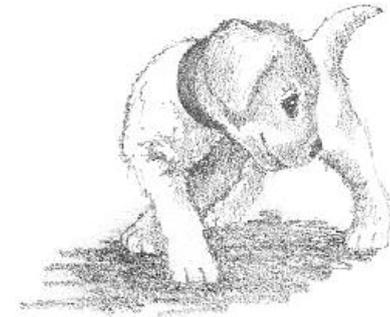
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Chapter One



The living room was covered in shreds of wrapping paper, and Emily's mum was desperately trying to keep track. "Emily, was that toy car Jack just opened from Auntie May or Auntie Sue? No, hang on, Auntie Sue sent you both book tokens, didn't she?" She stared at the list, anxiously. "But I'm sure she said something about a car."

Emily's dad rustled through the paper to try and find a gift tag. "No, sorry, I think Jack's eaten it."

"Is it breakfast?" Jack had caught on to the idea of food. "I want toast!" He abandoned the car in a pile of paper and ribbon, and started to head for the kitchen.

"Hey! Come back here!" Dad called, a little crossly.

Jack turned back, looking confused. "But I thought breakfast..." he said, in a hurt voice.

Dad picked him up, and tickled him. "Sorry, Jack, I didn't mean to sound cross. We just need to wait a bit. Emily hasn't opened all her presents yet. Come on, Emily – you're not usually so slow."



Emily was sitting quietly with a neat pile of opened presents next to her. They were nice. A pair of new trainers. A pink fluffy winter hat and scarf. New glitter pens and a sketchpad. She *should* be happy. But she couldn't help being a tiny bit disappointed. There had only been one thing on her Christmas list.

She and Jack had both written letters to Father Christmas – well, Emily had written Jack's for him, which took for ever, because he kept changing his mind, and he wanted most of the toy shop in his stocking. He'd drawn a big spiky thing he said was a reindeer, and a J at the bottom, which was all he could manage, because he was only just three. Dad had lit the fire in the grate,

even though it wasn't really that cold, and they'd sent the letters flying up the chimney in a rush of flickering ashes. Emily wasn't convinced about letters magically racing to the North Pole, but it was still fun to do. And you never knew, anyway...

Still, she hadn't really expected Father Christmas to leave a puppy at the end of her bed. It had been a big hint to Mum and Dad, and they seemed to have missed it. Emily had one present left, and it certainly didn't have a dog in it. It was far too small. Though it did have very cute wrapping paper – silver, with little black pawprints scattered all over it.

“Sorry, Jack, I've just got this one to open.” Trying not to look too

disappointed, Emily carefully tore the end of the parcel – she wanted to keep the pawprint paper. She couldn't work out what was inside as she peered in. She'd guessed from the shape that it might be clothes, even though it felt a bit hard. She shook the parcel, and out came something red, uncoiling itself as it came. A red dog collar, and a lead!

Emily's tummy turned over with hope and trying-not-to-get-too-excited-because-it-might-not-mean-what-she-thought-it-meant. She *did* have a very gorgeous toy Dalmatian dog called Georgie, who was almost life-size. Until a couple of years ago, one of her favourite games had been to pretend that he was real, and tie ribbons round his neck for a lead.

But she never did that now. Almost never, anyway. Mum and Dad wouldn't have bought her a real collar and lead just for Georgie, would they?

Slowly, she looked up at her parents, the collar lying in her hands, like it was something incredibly precious.



Her dad was grinning. “Can anyone hear something in the kitchen?” he asked thoughtfully. “I’m sure there’s a noise. Maybe in the utility room. Sort of a *barking* noise...”

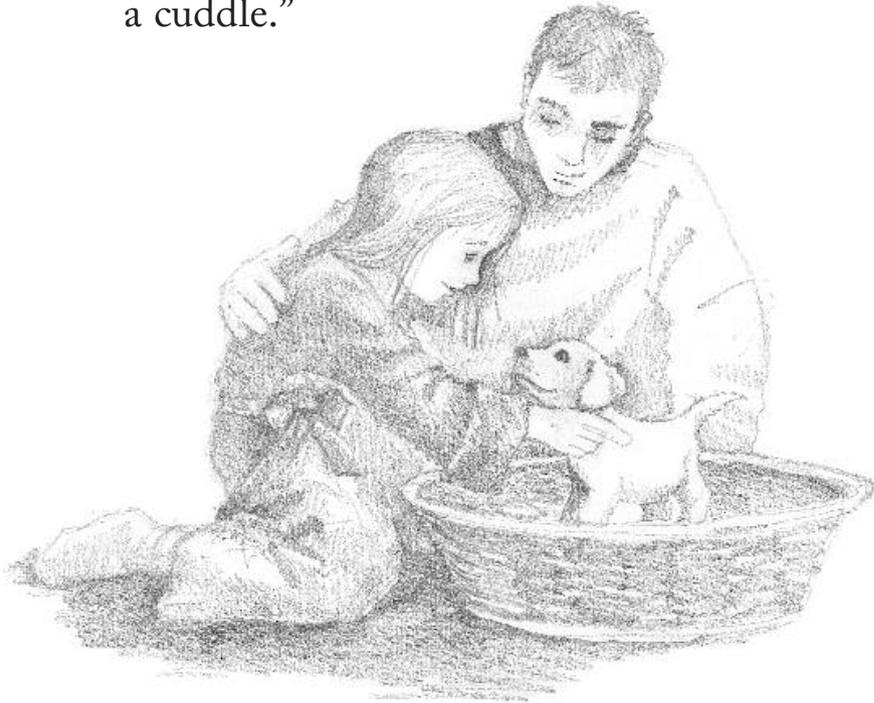
Emily leaped up in excitement and rushed to the kitchen door, and then through to the little room at the end where they kept the washing machine. In the corner of the room was a beautiful new basket. Emily knelt down beside it, hardly breathing, she was so excited. The basket was padded with a soft fleecy blanket, and snuggled into one corner of it was a ball of golden fur. As Emily watched, the puppy heaved a great sigh that seemed to go from one end of its body to the other, and then opened one eye to peer

up at her. Obviously she looked interesting, because the other eye opened too, and then the tiny dog turned round and stood up. He gave a massive yawn, showing a lot of pink tongue and some very sharp little white teeth, then padded across the basket to reach Emily. They were almost nose to nose. The puppy gave a shy little wag of his tail, and licked Emily’s cheek, looking at her hopefully. This looked like someone who might be good at cuddling. It had been a little bit boring tucked away in this basket.

“Oh, wow...” Very gently, Emily put out her hand for the puppy to sniff. She was desperate to pick him up, but she wasn’t sure if it was OK. Maybe the puppy would be scared? She looked

round to see Dad leaning against the door, looking pleased.

“That’s really good, Emily. Taking it slow. That’s just what you need to do.” He crouched down by the basket too. “Pet him a little. Stroke his ears. Then when he’s used to that you can give him a cuddle.”



“He’s really for me?” Emily whispered, hardly able to take her eyes off the puppy.

“All yours.” Dad was grinning as he watched Emily’s amazed face.

“He’s so beautiful, thank you so much, Dad! I didn’t think you’d noticed I wanted a dog.”

“It would have been hard *not* to notice,” Dad said, laughing. “You certainly gave us some hints! Dogs just seemed to keep being mentioned...”

“He’s a golden Labrador, isn’t he? He’s so lovely. You are the most beautiful dog I’ve ever seen,” Emily murmured, as she tickled the puppy behind his ears with one finger. His ears felt like velvet, so soft. The puppy closed his eyes in delight. Just the right

place. One of his back legs kicked without him meaning it to, as Emily tickled a really itchy bit.

Emily looked worriedly up at Dad. “Did I do something wrong? Why did he do that with his leg?”

“No, it’s OK. Some dogs do that. My dog Scruff used to do it whenever you scratched him behind the ears. It just means they like it, and they want more scratching. Don’t you, hmmm? And you’re right, he is a golden Labrador,” he added, reaching out to stroke the puppy too. “He’s eight weeks old.” He grinned down at Emily, who was still gazing in wonder at the puppy, stroking him with one finger. “So you like him then?”

“I love him!” Emily wanted to leap up

and hug him, but she didn’t want to frighten the puppy with any sudden movements.

“Good,” said Dad. “Why don’t you try picking him up? That’s it, scoop him up gently. Make sure you’re supporting his bottom so he feels comfortable.”

Emily carefully snuggled the puppy into her dressing gown, and the little dog immediately tried to climb up her front, eager to explore.

“Take him into the kitchen,” Dad suggested. “Let him have a little look around. I went and picked him up late last night, and we’ve kept him in here since then. He needs to settle in to the house gradually. Just a room at a time. We’ll keep him in here and the kitchen for now.”