

Oscar's  
Lonely  
Christmas

For Tom

STRIPES PUBLISHING  
An imprint of Magi Publications  
1 The Coda Centre, 189 Munster Road,  
London SW6 6AW

A paperback original  
First published in Great Britain in 2010

Text copyright © Holly Webb, 2010  
Cover illustration copyright © Sophy Williams, 2010  
Inside illustrations copyright © Katherine Kirkland, 2010

ISBN: 978-1-84715-138-4

The right of Holly Webb, Sophy Williams and Katherine Kirkland to be identified as the author and illustrators of this work respectively has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Chapter One



Hannah took off her gloves and stuffed them in her pockets. The cold wind was stinging her cheeks, and she looked up at the sky hopefully. Perhaps it would snow soon? It was only November, but it was so cold already! She reached into the tub of winter bird food and scooped out a big helping, scattering it over the bird table.

Then she smiled to herself. She was sure she could hear some sparrows and coal tits in the winter jasmine that was growing up the fence. They were scuffling about eagerly, waiting for her to go so that they could swoop in on the delicious mealworms that were their favourite part of the mixture.

She closed the tub and put on her gloves again – it was so cold her fingers had already started to hurt. Then she crept quietly back to the garden bench and curled up in the corner. If she was very, very quiet and still, the birds might come while she was there. It would be more sensible to go inside and watch from her bedroom window, but she loved seeing the birds up close. They were so funny, the way they

squabbled and shoved each other off the bird feeders. Hannah's family had five different bird feeders, and their garden was very popular with the local birds.

Hannah watched, snuggled inside her big scarf and furry hat, smiling to herself as a robin bossily sent all the other birds flapping off into the bushes. She wasn't going to be able to stay out here much longer; she could hardly feel her fingers. Hugging herself, she slipped into her favourite daydream – that she was cuddled up with a dog next to her, keeping her warm. Almost any dog would do, to be honest. She would really love a big dog that she could hug, but even a little dog would be wonderful.

Of course, as this was a daydream, she might as well have her all-time favourite. Daydream-Hannah sat there with her arms around a huge, black-and-white spotted Dalmatian. Just like Pongo from her favourite film, *101 Dalmatians*. Hannah had watched both versions over and over, and Dalmatians were her dream dogs.

Hannah's mum and dad had been thinking about getting a dog for ages – at least, they always *said*, “We’ll think about it,” whenever Hannah asked. Her dad was quite keen – he loved going on long walks, and he’d shown her pictures of the dog he’d had when he was a boy. But Hannah’s mum was a bit anxious about Zak, Hannah’s little brother. She was worried that a dog

wasn't a good idea with a toddler around. But Zak was coming up to three now, and Hannah had started dropping hints about dogs again. She didn't think a dog would be a problem for Zak at all – he loved animals as much as Hannah did, and whenever he met a dog he always wanted to hug it. It was more likely that the dog would need protecting from Zak than the other way around.

Just as she was thinking about her little brother, Hannah heard the kitchen door bang, and he stumbled out into the garden, calling her name.

Hannah gave a cross little sigh as Zak frightened all the birds away. She'd been enjoying the peaceful moment without him around.

But as he wobbled round the corner of the house she couldn't help smiling. Zak was wearing his big red snowsuit, and it was so stiff and padded that he could hardly move. He looked as though someone had inflated him like a balloon.



“Hannah! Hannah!” He came over and grabbed her hand. “Mummy wants you!”

Hannah's mum was coming out now too, a big scarf wrapped around her neck. “You must be frozen sitting out here for so long! Did you see any interesting birds?”

Hannah shook her head. “Only the normal ones. I was about to come in, it's getting dark.”

Mum was beaming. “We came out to tell you some news! I've just had a phone call – one I wasn't expecting.” She took a deep breath. “It was from the lady who runs Dashing Dalmatians.”

Hannah sat bolt upright, staring wide-eyed at her mum. “Is that – is that

a Dalmatian *breeder*?” she asked. “Why did she call you?”

Her mum smiled even more widely. “Because I rang her a few weeks ago, to ask if we could go on the list for one of the next litter of puppies.”

Hannah sprang off the bench and threw her arms around her mum. “Really? You didn’t tell me! We’re going to get a Dalmatian puppy? You mean it?”

Mum nodded. “Let’s go and talk about this inside, I’m freezing!”

Hannah raced into the house, tugging off her coat and scarf, and unzipping Zak from his suit. She ran to put her things away, then skidded back into the kitchen. “Please tell me!”

Her mum laughed. “I should agree to

getting a puppy more often... Yes, your dad and I decided that maybe you and Zak were old enough now for us to have a dog. Your dad wanted a big dog and you were desperate for a Dalmatian, so we found this lady – Lisa, she’s called – on the internet. She lives about twenty miles away, close to Mill Green.”

Hannah nodded. Mill Green was a little village she’d visited on a school trip to see the working watermill.

“She breeds Dalmatians – only two or three litters a year, so we thought we might have to wait quite a while for a puppy. But it turns out that someone who’d put her name down for one of the latest litter has changed her mind.” Her mum frowned. “Something about

not quite the right markings. Lisa said she'd explain it all properly when we went to see the puppy. She said it shouldn't matter at all, as we'd told her we weren't looking for a show dog."

"When can we go and see the puppy?" Hannah gasped. She hardly knew what to say, she felt so excited.

"How about tomorrow?"

Oooh, Hannah, don't squash me!" Her mum laughed as Hannah flung her arms around her waist. "So, you're pleased, then? You haven't changed your mind about Dalmatians?"



"Of course not!" Hannah cried. "They're the best dogs ever! We're really going to see some tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. It had to be a Saturday, so your dad can come too." Mum smiled. "He's going to get a big surprise when he gets home!"



Hannah's dad was just as excited as she was about the puppy. Mum told him all about the phone call over dinner.

"That's just such good news," he murmured. "I thought we'd have to wait ages. We wanted to make sure we got a puppy from a proper breeder, you see, Hannah. Dalmatians can be a bit nervous and excitable, and you have to

be careful to meet the parent dogs, that kind of thing. Mum said the lady from Dashing Dalmatians was very nice when she phoned her. She gave her all sorts of test results and told her lots about the breed.” Then he frowned and glanced over at Hannah’s mum. “I’ve just thought. We did say we were going to try and avoid getting a puppy around Christmas though, didn’t we?”

Hannah’s mum nodded slowly. “Oh, goodness, I’d forgotten that. I just didn’t think.” She paused for a moment. “Lisa said that the puppies were six weeks old now, and we could take our puppy home at about eight weeks. So that would be the first week of December, I suppose. Oh, that *is* a bit close to Christmas.”

“Why can’t we get the puppy before Christmas?” Hannah asked, her voice starting to squeak with panic – they couldn’t change their minds now!

Her dad rubbed her shoulder. “It’s just that Mum and I said that we wouldn’t ever get a dog as a Christmas present – so many puppies end up at shelters after Christmas. And it’s quite a stressful time for a dog, with loads of people around, and the house all turned upside down.”

“But you aren’t getting us a dog for Christmas!” Hannah pointed out quickly, her heart thudding with hope. “The puppy just happens to be coming close to Christmas, that’s all. It doesn’t really make the puppy a Christmas present!” She dug her fingers into her

hands, looking anxiously from Mum to Dad. Then she added, in case that had sounded greedy, “But I don’t want anything else for Christmas, it’s OK. Just maybe a dog lead?”

Dad laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m not saying we can’t get a puppy. I was just wondering if now was the best time. But to be honest, I’m sure getting a puppy is a big upheaval whenever you do it.”

“So ... can we still go tomorrow?” Hannah whispered.

Her mum and dad exchanged a look, and smiled.

“Yes,” Mum told her. “We’ll go.”

“Please-may-I-leave-the-table?” Hannah rattled off. “I don’t want any pudding, thanks. I’m going to go and look up Dalmatians on the computer!”

## Chapter Two



Hannah sat in the back of the car next to Zak, biting her lip. Mum had got sick of her asking if they were nearly there, and she’d told Hannah she’d turn the car round if she said it again. It was just that she was desperate to know!

“Look, there’s a sign for Mill Green,” Dad said, taking pity on her. “Not far now.”