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Chapter One

“You can’t force some things, Rob”, Mum said. She was standing in front of the ironing board in the living room. The television was on, and she put the iron down now and then to watch particularly interesting bits. The metal holder rattled and steam hissed when she picked up the iron again and pressed the button on it.

Rob stood on the sofa next to the window and pressed his nose to the glass. When he had steamed up a patch of window with his breath so that he could no longer see out, he moved a little to the side and stared out onto the street again. It was getting dark – the streetlamps weren’t on yet, but some cars had their headlights on already.

Rob had climbed up onto the sofa at least ten times that day. The window in the living room was the ideal lookout point. He could rest his elbows on the windowsill and cup his chin in his hands. He had waited a few minutes each time before turning away in disappointment and returning to his room.

“Look,” Mum said. “Hawaii!” On the screen, turquoise waves lapped a sandy white beach. “It’s summer all the time there,” she said. “All that’s warm here now is this iron!”

Rob went over to the coffee table and picked up a biscuit from the shallow bowl on it. It didn’t taste of anything. The Advent wreath next to it looked real, but smelt of plastic and soap. Three of the four thick candles set in it had already been lit.

“I’ll turn the heating up,” Mum said.

“Mmmphhh,” said Rob, spluttering biscuit crumbs. He brushed them off the table quickly. “It’s much too warm in here already,” he said, but Mum was already in the next room adjusting the thermostat.

“Not everyone is an Eskimo like you,” she said when she came back. She pointed at the big book on the coffee table. “Have a look at the penguins.”

“Penguins!” snorted Rob. “That book’s about the North Pole. Penguins live in the South Pole.”

He flung himself onto the sofa and opened the book, which he needed both hands to hold aloft. He never tired of the photographs in it, and found them more beautiful every time he looked at them. Gigantic icebergs floated in inky black waters – palaces of crystal with sunlight glinting off them. Eskimos stood next to their neat little sealskin boats, sucking seagull feathers or chewing on strips of dried whale fat. Rob’s favourite photograph was the one of a polar bear crouching with splayed paws on pack ice that was just beginning to crack under it. The picture made Rob laugh every time he saw it.

The best story in the book was about an Eskimo girl who brought up a husky puppy that her father had given her. The husky was to lead an entire team of sledge dogs when it grew up. The girl and her husky get caught in a storm that sweeps inland over the ice plains and whirls the seagulls round like feathers. They get separated and meet with many difficulties before they find each other again.

“Will you read me something? The story about the dog?”

“Rob, you can see that I’m ironing,” Mum sighed.

Rob shut the book with a thump and started plaiting the fringe of a sofa cushion. It was quite dark outside now. The living room was reflected back on itself in the window. Drop after drop of rain ran down the glass and the cars swished by on the streets outside. It was a sad sound.

“Do you think it’s going to snow?” he asked

Mum shrugged.

“Last year it started snowing the week before Christmas.” Rob said.

He remembered it very well. The snow had lain thick on the streets on the third Sunday of Advent. The cars had moved slowly, leaving thick, soft tracks as their tyres crunched through the snow. In the afternoon, he and Ferdi had gone to the park with the sledge. Ferdi’s dog Purzel had been with them. Rob had wanted to harness Purzel to the sledge, but Ferdi had not let him. They had argued for ages about whether Purzel could be a sledge dog or not. The dogs in Rob’s book were large and grey and looked like wolves. Purzel was small and black.

“Ferdie doesn’t like getting into snowball fights,” Rob announced. “It’s because he’s from Italy and he’s always cold.” He did not mention that Ferdi also now had a girlfriend. He sniffed dismissively. “I could spend a whole night in the snow,” he said. “It would be like lying in great big white bed.”

Chapter Two

Rob got into trouble at school a few days later for constantly looking out of the window. It was no longer raining, but there was no sun either. The weather was completely featureless. The teacher had to call his name three times before he heard her, and she threatened to ring his mother.

At home, there was a soup on the stove, but Rob did not feel like having anything to eat. He tried to do his homework, but could not concentrate. He tossed his books onto the floor in a rage and swept the Advent wreath off the table. He picked

everything up again, sobered. One of the candles was broken and the other three candles suddenly did not fit the holders any longer.

Mum sent him to his room until supper. Rob sat down on his bed, clutched his soft toy Nellie the dog to his chest and told her about Greenland in a quiet voice. “The Eskimos call it ‘The Land of the People’,” he said. “We’ll move there when we’re grown up. You’ll have lots of friends, and you’ll be able to pull a sledge. Only if you want, of course.”

Rob fell asleep eventually, lying with his back to the wall and with Nellie in his arms. He dreamt of a girl crying, and immediately recognised her as the girl from his book, the one who had lost her dog.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s a disaster,” she whispered. “You must help me.”

“What can I do?”

But she had disappeared. All that remained in the spot where she had stood were a couple of snowflakes, which melted immediately.

That evening, Rob had a large bowl of soup and Mum was pleased with him.

“There’s a good boy,” she said. “What a fuss to make over the weather!”

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