

FINALLY HOME



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The wind whirled around me as I struggled to plow through it in a straight line. I had snatched Darter up in my arms when I saw he had almost blown away. I couldn't bear to lose him.

"This storm is awfully bad!" I cried to him, my voice barely louder than a whistle in the roaring wind. He lifted his head to gaze into my eyes as if he understood me. Bursts of snow blinded me, and I staggered helplessly into a snowbank, hard and crusted. The cold bit me terribly, and I looked to see where I was, but nothing but white was visible. *Oh no.* The little sheepdog shivered and whined in my arms, and I only squeezed him tighter, hoping it provided some warmth for him-and me. *I have to get home. I have to get back to my family.* With great effort, I stood up and turned my back against the howling wind. My hands, numb with cold, grasped Darter's fur, and I started back again. Though I had no idea where anything was anymore. I had been heading back home from the library when the storm hit, and for all I knew, I could be miles away from the roads. I imagined my family's faces. William, my younger brother, Nina, my mother, and Sanders, my father, were all there.

"I'll make it home to you," I swore under my breath. "I just got to." I started out at a steady pace, Darter snug in my arms. Patches up slippery ice, which were concealed under the snow, tripped me, and the cold was unbearable. I fought through drifts of heavy snow, heading no particular direction. The snow was blowing so hard, I could barely see my hands in front of me. I crashed into something hard and rubbed my head with my hands. Darter barked, but to me it sounded like a squeal. Feeling the object I had hit, I tried to determine what it was. It was hard, and its texture was rough. I squinted and leaned nearer to it. It was also very dark and very tall. *A tree.* I stroked Darter's fur with my hands, and kept on walking. Wherever I was now, the snow was not so cruel, and I could see things better, which I was thankful for. My muscles were tense and sore, and I squeezed Darter again. I looked straight forwards and then I saw it. It was the lake where William and I would fish in the summertime.

"Maybe," I whispered to my puppy, a determined look in my eyes. "This isn't impossible after all." Continuing tiredly beside the lake, miles of whiteness lay before me and after what seemed like five hours of walking endlessly, I collapsed behind a snowdrift. *Why couldn't I have waited till tomorrow to return the books?* I asked myself. I slapped my forehead. *Because I didn't know there would be a blizzard.* I answered. I couldn't feel my hands at all, and I felt horrible. My head throbbed and white specks danced before my eyes. Darter looked sick, and I let out a small yelp that woke him from a cat-nap.

"Wake up, boy. Come on," I chanted, nudging him with my hand. He looked so bad. The dry wind nipped at my face, seeming not even to consider stopping for a moment. My lips were cracked and bleeding and my knuckles were too. Tucking the

little bundle of fur under my coat, I pressed against him and kissed his little black nose, which was colder than ice. My whole body trembled as I started out again, wandering blindly. Some sections, I would notice, the wind would grow quite calm, but other areas were even worse to pass through. I went unsteadily over an icy part that seemed to continue forever, until I collapsed. Darter whined. I gasped for breath, my entire body shivering. He inched closer to me and licked my face gently. I could barely feel him-I was numb all over. My eyes drooped, but I forced them open. I resorted to talking to myself. *Where am I? I don't know. How long have I been walking? How far have I gone from the road? Will I make it back?* There was a pause. *I don't know.* I shook my head. What was I doing? I was talking to no one, but didn't quite care. I needed someone to talk to, even if it was just me. *I'll just talk to Darter. At least he's real.* My legs stung, and my head hurt. I eyed my hands.

"I'm gonna die," I whispered to Darter, who was sitting erect beside me. "Come, boy," I commanded, barely managing to stand up. At the very least, I had to make it to a road. He howled as I started to walk. I left him to go on his own. The snowfall had ended, and only the winds remained, just as freezing and wild as ever. *Just let me make it home.* Slipping into a quiet daze, I kept on walking, steering around piled up snow banks or icy patches without realizing. Darter was managing all right, I saw through the corner of my eyes, and I was relieved. He didn't weigh all that much, but my arms stung too much to carry him. I stopped to sneeze, but Darter hadn't waited for me. I looked around for him, too astonished by his disappearance that I didn't know what else to do.

"Here, boy!" I shouted, my eyes wide with fear. I heard a loud crack and a distressed yelp. *Darter!* I scurried in the direction I thought the noise was coming from and froze. My puppy had apparently broken through what appeared to be a frozen river while attempting to cross over to the other side.

"No!" I screeched, my hands flying to my head. Without another thought, I waded into it, drenching my body from the waist down. A pain seized me and took my breath as I stretched out my hands to sweep him up. He howled when I lifted him out of the water. As soon as I assured myself that I had a firm grip on my dog, I practically flew backwards. I shivered violently and cried out. Tears dripped down my cheeks, only to freeze moments later, and I lay in a heap by the river bank. With a wild glance, I saw the water near my feet and scrambled farther away from it. Then my eyes widened.

"I think-" I said, pausing a moment because my jaw started chattering. "I think I know where we are." I looked around again at my surroundings, my breath coming out in puffs. I was colder with each passing second. If I was going to move, it had to be *now*. With a silent prayer, my journey started-and ended.

With my whole body aching, I limped away from the river at a pace as slow as a turtle's. Though I had only gone a little ways, limping only for five minutes, I fell,

looking up at the cloudy white sky. I was near my house, I knew, but I also knew that I could only make it home if someone found me. Otherwise, any attempts I made would be futile. My eyes closed and my muscles loosened. My mind was blank. I fell asleep and did not dream.

When I woke up, I was dazed. Everything I saw was in slow motion, it seemed like I was in a dream. Two men and a woman, all in white lab coats, hurried me down a wide hall. I looked down and saw that I was in a sort of cart. I rushed by faces, familiar faces. There, William, Nina, and Sanders stood, all tense in their posture. It was then I knew where I was. I knew my situation, and I was grateful. I spotted Darter sitting behind Nina's legs. I smiled. *Everything will be all right now.* I had finally made it home.