

A NEW HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

BY EDDIE CALLAWAY

It was the night before Christmas. Emma Lee could barely contain her excitement. Her parents were reading her stories by the fireplace but her mind and eyes kept wandering.

Her mind was on the presents she anticipated under the tree; thoughts of when Santa would show up and how he would make it down the chimney with so many gifts.

Her eyes were fixated out the large picture window, partially blocked by the splendidly decorated tree. It was snowing. Hard.

The night was going to be a cold one, perhaps a record low temperature and even a record for snowfall. That didn't matter to Emma. She was wrapped tightly in a blanket on her mother's lap, warmed by her and the fire.

Her father's deep and relaxing voice read aloud but the words didn't matter to Emma. Her mother's rhythmic breathing and the overall warmth and calm was quickly putting Emma into a state of near sleep.

And then she fell asleep.

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Outside it was cold. The wind blew harshly in what felt like every direction. The snow was cold and heavy. Anyone with any sense would be inside, with their family. In their home.

But not everyone had a home. In the alley behind Emma's home lived a young dog. She had no name, no family, and no home. She was all black save a white patch on her chest and one white paw.

Every day she huddled away from people but where she could watch them. She longed for a family, for warmth, for love.

She had not always been a stray. She had a family but they turned her away for selfish reasons. She found safety in the alley. She could hide from the dogcatcher

and find enough scraps of food to survive.

The alley stray had no knowledge of Christmas but had watched with interest over the last few weeks. The hustle and bustle; the lights and decorations; the insanity of Emma's father dragging a once-living tree into their house. A tree!

But as the wind blew more violently and the snow fell harder, the stray tucked her muzzle deep into her fur and just wished for it all to stop.

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Emma must have fallen asleep but now she was wide awake. She was in her bed so must have been carried up there in her father's strong arms.

She had been startled out of her slumber from some sort of noise. She heard it again, this time louder, but could not pinpoint what it was. Although it sounded like it came from the backyard and it sounded interesting.

"Santa," Emma mouthed the words and in one quick motion was scurrying out the back door in her puppy-eared slippers.

She had somehow remembered to grab her coat but neglected to zip it or add any other typical winter garb. She was in a hurry to catch a glimpse of Santa and maybe his reindeer and sleigh.

She shuffled through the snow and ignored the cold. She had made it to the back gate, which was swung wide open, and before she could make a sound, someone grabbed her and everything went dark.

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The stray dog was only half-asleep. Suddenly she was completely alert. She heard an odd sound followed by an odder sound. A dark van was sitting in the alley, engine running but lights off. Her ears turned towards the sounds and she could make out a man's groan and a short squeak of a little girl.

Without another thought, the stray was on her feet and trotting softly through the snowdrifts. She peered around the side of the van and saw a grotesque figure with a garbage-bag wrapped child. The child's legs were flailing but to no affect.

The man stumbled about and struggled to slide the van's side door open.

The stray could not believe what was happening. She thought of barking but used her dark fur and silent approach to catch the man off-guard.

In a spectacular leap she was on top of the man. He lurched backward but managed his balance. The child squirmed free and fell into the snow, still entrapped by the garbage bag.

The man smelled of whiskey and evil. His eyes were blank and emotionless.

The stray bit hard into his shoulder and then twice into his arm. She had aimed for his throat but he pushed away with the arm that once held the child.

Somehow he managed to wrangle the stray dog off his arm and reached into his pocket. He quickly found a knife he had stored there and lashed out at the dog.

She whimpered but knew she was the only hope the child had. With her quickly vanishing strength she leaped forward onto the man. He toppled and smashed his skull against the side of the van.

He slumped quietly to the ground.

The stray howled as loud as she could until her breath faded into the cold night air.

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Emma's father woke with a start. He heard a deep howling sound. Something told him this wasn't just a neighbor's dog. Something was wrong.

When he reached the scene everything turned into a blur. He could hardly remember calling the police until there was yellow tape lining the alley and four officers and a detective were standing around the van.

Everyone was talking at once. Emma's mom held her little girl tightly as her father answered questions. The evil man had regained consciousness, was cuffed and roughly placed in a squad car.

Emma was shaking and pointing but could not speak. Finally, her mother looked

in the direction of her quivering finger.

There the stray lay quietly. Her black fur was matted where the blood had finally dried. Emma's mother gasped and got the attention of the detective.

He quickly discovered a bloody knife next to the dog. Suddenly everything made sense and Emma could speak.

She recounted everything she heard as her vision was blocked by the garbage bag. The dog had saved Emma's life. But now her own life was fading.

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The vet examined the stray dog in his home. He lived down the street, was a family friend, and the news of the night's events was spreading across the town. He looked the stray over and kept shaking his head.

"We'll need to perform emergency surgery. Tonight," he sighed. "It doesn't look good at all."

Emma's father was about to ask something when the vet stole the question from his lips.

"There's only a small chance she'll survive," the vet spoke softly. "And it will be really expensive."

Emma began to cry uncontrollably. She had been staring deeply into the stray's big brown eyes.

"You have to save her!" she screamed. "Sell all my presents. I don't want any of them. Just please save this puppy's life!"

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The surgery was costly. Emma's parents could barely afford it but did as Emma requested. They sold all her gifts plus all the toys Emma owned.

News of the wild Christmas night had reached the surrounding towns. It soon became national news. Donations came pouring in from all over the country.

“We’ll have to wait to see how she recovers,” the vet said but was a bit more optimistic than the night before.

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A week passed. The tree, once decorated and covered in lights, now sat naked by the garbage cans in the alley.

Inside Emma played quietly. She was having a tea party with invisible teacups, invisible tea, and invisible cookies.

But she had a guest at her tea party. Sitting beautifully with a large smile on her face was the stray. Her black fur was shiny and clean.

There was no sign of the attack but a small fur-less patch on her side and a healing scar. Around her neck the stray sported a bright pink collar and a shiny heart-shaped tag.

On the tag was one simple word in block letters. “CHRISTMAS”.

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The tea party was interrupted by a reporter from the local news station. She had been interviewing Emma’s parents and wanted to ask Emma a question.

“Do you feel sad that you don’t have any toys?”

Emma looked up after giving Christmas a drink of “tea”.

“All the toys in the world matter nothing to me so long as I have Christmas.”

~ The End ~