

## *The Girl Who Saved Christmas*

**D**o you know how magic works?  
The kind of magic that gets reindeer to fly in the sky? The kind that helps Father Christmas travel around the world in a single night? The kind that can stop time and make dreams come true?

Hope.

That's how.

Without hope, there would be no magic.

It isn't Father Christmas or Blitzen or any of the other reindeer that make magic happen on the night before Christmas.

It's every child who wants and wishes for it to happen. If no one wished for magic to happen there would be no magic. And because we know Father Christmas comes every year we know now that magic – at least some kind of magic – is real.

But this wasn't always the case. There was once a time before stockings and Christmas mornings spent excitedly ripping off wrapping

paper. It was quite a miserable time, when very few human children had any reason to believe in magic at all.

And so, the very first night that Father Christmas ever decided to give human children a reason to be happy and to believe in magic, he had a lot of work to do.

The toys were in his sack, the sleigh and reindeer were ready, but as he flew out of Elfhelm he knew there wasn't enough magic in the air. He travelled through the Northern Lights but they were hardly glowing at all. And the reason for the low magic levels was that there wasn't much hoping going on. After all, how does a child hope for magic to happen if they have never seen it?

So that very first visit from Father Christmas nearly didn't happen. And that it did happen is thanks to one thing. A single human child. A girl, in London, who believed in magic totally. Who hoped and hoped for a miracle every single day. She was the child who believed in Father Christmas before anyone else. And she was the one who helped Father Christmas, just as his reindeer were starting to struggle, because the amount she hoped while lying in bed that Christmas Eve, added light to the sky.

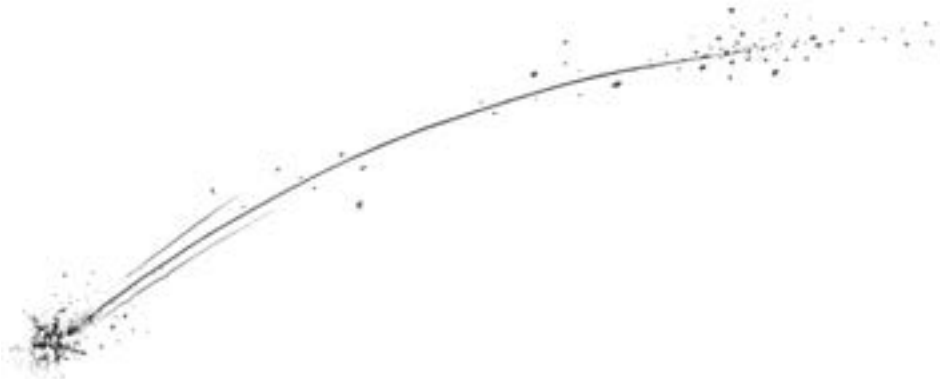
It gave Father Christmas purpose. A direction. And he followed a thin trace of light all the way to her home at 99 Haberdashery Road, London.

And once that was done, once he had placed a full stocking of toys at the foot of her bug-ridden bed, the hope grew. Magic was there, in the world, and it spread among the dreams of all children. But Father Christmas couldn't fool himself. Without that one child, that eight-year-old girl called Amelia Wishart, hoping so hard for magic to be real, Christmas would never have happened. Yes, it took elves and the reindeer and the workshop and all of that, but she was the one who saved it.

She was the first child.

The girl who saved Christmas.

And Father Christmas would never forget it . . .



## The Trembling Ground

**F**ather Christmas folded up Amelia's letter and put it in his pocket. He walked through the snow-covered Reindeer Field and past the frozen lake, looking around at all the quiet sights of Elfhelm. The wooden village hall. The clog shop and the Bank of Chocolate and the Figgy Pudding café on the Main Path, not open for another hour. The School of Sleighcraft and the University of Advanced Toymaking. The tall (by elf standards) offices of the *Daily Snow* on Vodol Street. Its walls of reinforced gingerbread, shining orange in the clear morning light.

Then, as he trod through the snow, turning west towards the Toy Workshop and the wooded pixie hills beyond, he saw an elf in a brown tunic and brown clogs walking towards him. The elf wore glasses and was a bit short-sighted so didn't see Father Christmas.

'Hello, Humdrum!' said Father Christmas. The elf jumped in shock.

‘Oh, h-hello, Father Christmas. I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there. I’ve just been on a nightshift.’

Humdrum was one of the hardest working elves at the Toy Workshop. He was quite a strange, nervous little elf, but Father Christmas liked him a lot. As the Assistant Deputy Chief Maker of Toys That Spin or Bounce, he was a very busy member of the workshop, and never complained about working overnight.

‘Everything all right at the workshop?’ asked Father Christmas.

‘Oh yes. All the toys that spin are spinning and all the toys that bounce are bouncing. There was a little bit of a problem with some of the tennis balls but we’ve fixed it now. They are bouncier than ever. The human children will love them.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Father Christmas. ‘Well, you go home and get some sleep. And wish Noosh and Little Mim a “Merry Christmas” from me.’

‘I will, Father Christmas. They will be very pleased. Especially Mim. His favourite new thing is a jigsaw with your face on it. Jiggle the jigsaw-maker made it especially for him.’

Father Christmas blushed. ‘Ho ho . . . Merry Christmas, Humdrum!’

‘Merry Christmas, Father Christmas!’

And just as they said goodbye they both felt something. A faint wobbling in their legs, as if the earth was shaking a little bit. Humdrum thought it was just because he was so tired. Father Christmas thought it was because he was so excited about the big day and night he had ahead of him. So neither said anything.



## *The Toy Workshop*

**T**he Toy Workshop was the largest building in Elfhelm, bigger even than the Village Hall and the *Daily Snow* offices. It had a vast tower and a main hall, all covered in snow.

Father Christmas stepped inside and saw the preparations were in full swing.

He saw happy, laughing, singing elves doing final toy tests: taking off dolls' heads; testing spinning tops; rocking on rocking horses; speed-reading books; plucking satsumas from satsuma trees; cuddling cuddly toys; bouncing balls . . . Music was provided by Elfhelm's favourite band, the Sleigh Belles, who were singing one of their favourites, 'It's Very Nearly Christmas (I'm So Excited I Have Wet My Tunic)'.

Father Christmas placed his sack down on the floor at the front of the room.

'Good morning, Father Christmas,' shouted one elf, called Dimple, with a cheery smile. Dimple's name was easy to remember because

she had dimples in her cheeks whenever she smiled, which was always. She was sitting next to Bella, the joke writer, who was working on her last joke of the year and chuckling to herself as she ate a mince pie.

Dimple offered Father Christmas a peppermint and when he opened the lid of the peppermint jar a toy snake popped out. ‘Aaagh!’ said Father Christmas.

Dimple was now on the floor in hysterics.

‘Ho ho ho,’ said Father Christmas, and tried to mean it. ‘How many of them do we have?’

‘Seventy-eight thousand six hundred and forty-seven.’

‘Very good.’

And then the Sleigh Belles saw him across the room and instantly changed their song to ‘Hero In The Red Coat’, which was a tribute to Father Christmas. It wasn’t the Sleigh Belles’ best song, but all the elves started singing.

‘There’s a man who’s dressed in red,  
With gifts for those asleep in bed.  
A tall man with a snow-white beard,  
Whose ears are round and rather weird.’



He showed us elves that there's a way,  
To make life as happy as Christmas Day.  
He and his reindeer travel the world,  
Giving presents to every boy and girl.  
As all their hopes and dreams take float,  
We all like to thank . . .

(Is it a goat?)

No!

It's THE HERO IN THE RED COAT!'

As the elves cheered, Father Christmas was a bit embarrassed and didn't know where to look, so he looked out of a window. He saw someone outside running across the snow towards the workhouse. No one else had noticed, as no one else was tall enough to see out of the window.

It wasn't an elf, Father Christmas knew that.

It was even smaller. Too light.  
Too graceful. Too stylish. Too  
yellow. Too *fast*.



And then, realising exactly who it was, he left the workshop.

‘Back in a moment, you wonderful folk,’ he told the elves, as the music lulled. ‘And the infinity sack is *there* so you can start dropping toys in it . . .’

By the time Father Christmas opened the door, she was there, hands on her little hips, bent double, breathless.

‘Truth Pixie!’ he said, happy to see her. After all, it wasn’t often a pixie entered Elfhelm. ‘Happy Christmas!’

The Truth Pixie’s eyes, which were always huge, were even wider than they were normally.

‘No,’ she said, staring up at Father Christmas, from the height of his knees.

‘What?’

‘No. It’s not a happy Christmas.’

The Truth Pixie stared inside the Toy Workshop and saw all the elves and felt a bit itchy, because she didn’t like elves very much, and they gave her a bit of a rash.

‘I’ve got a new suit,’ said Father Christmas. ‘It’s even redder than it was before. And look at this fur trim. Do you like it?’

The Truth Pixie shook her head. She didn’t mean to be rude, but she had to tell the

truth. ‘No. I don’t like it at all. You look like a giant mouldy cloudberry. But that’s not the point.’

‘What is the point? You never come to Elfhelm.’

‘That is because it is full of elves.’

Some of the elves had seen the Truth Pixie now.

‘Merry Christmas, Truth Pixie!’ they giggled.

‘Idiots,’ mumbled the Truth Pixie.

Father Christmas sighed. He stepped outside onto the snow and closed the door behind him. ‘Listen, Truth Pixie, I would love to stay and chat, but it is Christmas Eve. I need to go and help get everything ready . . .’

The Truth Pixie was shaking her head.

‘You need to forget about the Toy Workshop. You need to forget about Christmas. You need to get out of Elfhelm. You need to run for the hills.’

‘What *are* you talking about, Truth Pixie?’

And it was then that he heard it. A kind of grumbling sound.

The Truth Pixie gulped.

‘I knew I should have had a bigger breakfast,’ Father Christmas said, patting his stomach.

‘That wasn’t coming from you,’ said the Truth

Pixie. 'It was coming from down there.' She pointed to the ground.

Father Christmas stared down at the fresh snow, as blank as a white page.

'It's happening even sooner than I thought,' she squealed, and began running. She looked back over her shoulder. 'Find a safe place! And hide! And I suppose you should tell the elves to hide too . . . And you better cancel Christmas before they do . . .'

'They? Who are *they*?' But the Truth Pixie had gone. Father Christmas chuckled, looking at the pixie's tiny footprints in the snow heading back to the wooded hills. It was Christmas. The Truth Pixie had obviously been up all night drinking cinnamon syrup and was probably a bit confused.

Even so, he heard the rumbling noise again.

'Oh, stomach, do be . . .'

But the noise was much louder and lower and suddenly not that stomachy. It was a very strange sound. He was sure it was nothing to worry about. But even so, he went back inside and quickly shut the door so he could hear nothing but the sounds of the Toy Workshop.

## Mr Creeper

**S**eventeen days after Amelia Wishart had sent her letter to Father Christmas, she was where she very often was – inside a chimney.

It was dark inside chimneys. That was the first thing she had had to get used to. The darkness. Another thing was the *size*. Chimneys were always a bit too *small*, even if you were still a child. But the worst thing about being a chimney sweep was the soot. The black dust got everywhere once you started sweeping. In your hair, on your clothes, on your skin, in your eyes and mouth. It made you cough a horrid unstoppable cough, and made your eyes water. It was a horrible job but it was a job she needed. A job that could help her earn enough money for food and to get medicine for her mother.

And anyway, the thing about sweeping chimneys was that it made you enjoy daylight more. In fact, it made you enjoy being anywhere that wasn't a chimney. It made you

hope. Being in the sooty darkness made you dream of all the exotic and light places in the world.

It was certainly no place to be on the morning of Christmas Eve. Stuck there, knees and elbows rammed against the chimney walls, choking on the clouds of soot as she brushed.

Then she heard something.

A tiny little crying sound.

Not a human sound. But something else.

A *miaow*.

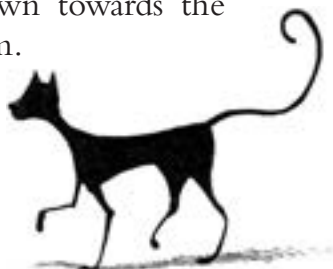
‘Oh no,’ she said, knowing exactly who it was.


She pressed her heels against the chimney wall and felt around with her free hand in the dark until she reached something soft and warm and furry, lying on a sloping shelf inside the crooked chimney.

‘Captain Soot! What have I told you? Never climb in chimneys! They are not for cats!’


Her cat began to purr as Amelia picked him up and carried him down towards the light of the living room.

Captain Soot was black all over except for the white tip on the end of his tail. But today even that was as black as, well, soot.







The cat wriggled out of Amelia's arms, did a twisting jump through the air, and started to walk across the room. Across the cream-coloured rug. The *expensive* cream-coloured rug. Amelia stared at the sooty paw prints in horror.




'Oh no. Captain Soot! Come back! What are you doing?!




Amelia went to get her cat but then of course *she* was getting the rug dirty too.




'Oh no,' she said. 'Oh no, oh no, oh no . . .'



She quickly got a wet cloth from the kitchen, where a knobbly handed kitchen maid was peeling carrots.



'I'm sorry,' Amelia said. 'I've just made a bit of a mess.'



The maid tutted and scowled, like a cross cat herself. 'Mr Creeper won't be happy when he gets back from the workhouse!' Amelia went back to the living room and tried to clear up the soot, but all she did was make the black marks look even bigger.



'We have to do this before Mr Creeper

comes back,' she told the cat. 'Of all the houses to choose to do this in, Captain!'

The cat said sorry with its eyes.

'It's all right, you weren't to know, but I bet Mr Creeper has got a temper.'

And as she kept scrubbing she realised there was something strange about this living room. It was Christmas Eve, and yet there wasn't one single decoration. Not one Christmas card. No holly and ivy. No smell of mince pies. Now, in a rich house like this one, this was quite unusual.

Then Amelia heard loud footsteps in the hallway. She turned as the living-room door opened, and there stood Mr Creeper.





Amelia stared up at the man. He was a long man. He had a long body. And a long, narrow face. And a long, crooked nose. And a long black cane that, with his dark coat and dark top hat, made him look like a crow who had decided – one dreary Tuesday while eating a worm – to become a human.

Mr Creeper was staring at Amelia, the cat and the smudged sooty footprints all over the floor.

‘I’m sorry,’ Amelia said. ‘It’s just my cat had followed me and he sneaked up the chimney.’

‘Do you know how much that rug cost?’

‘No, sir. But I’m cleaning it. Look, it’s coming off.’

Captain Soot arched his back ready to pounce and hissed up at Mr Creeper. Captain Soot liked most people but he *really* didn’t like this long man.

‘Vile creature.’

‘He’s just trying to wish you Happy Christmas,’ Amelia said, trying to smile.

‘*Christmas*,’ said Mr Creeper, and his mouth twisted as if the word had a horrid taste. ‘Christmas is only happy if you are a fool. Or a child. And you are obviously both.’

Amelia knew who Mr Creeper was. He was

the man who ran Creeper's Workhouse, one of the largest workhouses in all of London. She also knew what a workhouse was. A workhouse was a horrible place. A workhouse was a place no one wanted to be but sometimes *ended up* if they became too poor or too ill or lost their home or their parents. It was a place where you had to work all day and eat disgusting food and hardly sleep and get punished all the time.

'What a pair of grubby little animals you are!' said Mr Creeper.

Captain Soot's hair stood on end, making him look like a fluffy ball of anger.

'He doesn't like being called names, sir.'

Mr Creeper clearly did not like being talked to in this way by a child. Especially a poor one, dressed in sooty rags, whose cat had made a mess of his floor. 'Stand up, girl.'

Amelia stood up.

'How old are you?'

'I'm ten, sir.'

Mr Creeper grabbed Amelia by the ear. 'You are a liar.'

He bent down and squinted at her as if inspecting some dirt on his shoe. Amelia saw his crooked nose and wondered how it had become broken. She silently wished she could

have been there to see it happen. ‘I spoke to your mother. You are nine. A liar and a thief.’

Her ear felt like it was going to be pulled off. ‘Please, sir, that hurts, sir.’

‘I could have gone for another sweep when your mother fell ill,’ said Mr Creeper, letting go of Amelia and rubbing away the dirt from his hands. ‘But no, I said I’ll give this girl a go. What an absolute mistake. My workhouse is where you should be. Now, the money . . .’

‘It’s three pennies, sir. But as I made a bit of a mess you can have it half price.’

‘No.’

‘No what, sir?’

‘You’ve got it the wrong way round. You are the one who has to pay me.’

‘Why, sir?’

‘For ruining my rug.’

Amelia looked at the rug. It probably cost more than a chimney sweep could earn in ten years. She felt sad and angry. She had needed the three pennies from Mr Creeper to buy a figgy pudding for her and her mother tomorrow. They couldn’t afford a goose or a turkey but they could afford a Christmas pudding. Well, they would have done.

‘What money have you got in your pocket?’

‘None, sir.’

‘Liar. I can see the shape of a coin. Give it to me.’

Amelia dug in her pocket to produce the only coin she had. She stared at the face of Queen Victoria on the brown halfpenny.



Mr Creeper shook his head. And looked at her, as if he really was a crow and she was a worm. He grasped her ear again and twisted it. ‘Your mother really has been soft with you, hasn’t she? I always thought she was a weak kind of woman. I mean, your father obviously thought so. He didn’t stick around for either of you, did he?’

Amelia’s face reddened. She had never known her father except as a charcoal sketch her mother had drawn. He was dressed in a soldier’s uniform and was smiling. William Wishart looked like a hero and that was enough

for her. He had been a soldier in the British Army and had gone to war in a very hot country called Burma. He had died there the year Amelia was born. She had imagined him being strong and noble and heroic and the exact opposite of Mr Creeper.

‘Your mother has not been a good one,’ continued Mr Creeper. ‘Look at you. In your ragged trousers. You would hardly know you weren’t a boy. Your mother hasn’t taught you to be a girl, has she? At least she probably won’t be around for long . . .’

Even Captain Soot seemed cross about this and he pounced across the room and swiped at Mr Creeper, digging his claws into his black trousers and ripping the material. Mr Creeper pushed the cat away with his cane, and Amelia felt a red flash of rage. She jabbed the sooty bristles of her brush into Mr Creeper’s horrid face and kicked him in the shins. Then she kicked him again. And once more.

Mr Creeper coughed on soot. ‘YOU!’

Amelia wasn’t scared any more. She thought of her mother lying ill in bed. ‘Don’t. Talk. About. My. Ma!’

She threw the coin on the ground and stormed out of the room.

‘I’ll be seeing you.’

*No, you won’t*, Amelia thought, and hoped like mad that it was true, as Captain Soot trotted by her side, leaving sooty footprints all the way.

Outside, Amelia walked eastwards, through the dark and dirty streets towards her home on Haberdashery Road. The houses got smaller and shabbier and closer together. A small church hummed with the sound of ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’. As she walked she passed people setting up stalls for a Christmas market, girls in the street playing hopscotch, servants with geese from the butcher’s, a woman carrying a Christmas pudding, and a man waking up on a bench.

A chestnut seller called out, ‘Merry Christmas, love!’

Amelia smiled and tried to feel merry and Christmasy but it was hard. Far harder than it had been last year.

‘It’s Christmas Eve, love,’ said the chestnut seller. ‘Father Christmas will be coming tonight.’

Amelia smiled at the thought of Father Christmas. She raised her chimney brush and shouted, ‘Happy Christmas!’

## *Little Mim*

**L**ittle Mim was an elf.  
As you could guess from his name Little Mim was, well, *little*, even by elf standards. And young. He was younger than you. A lot younger. Three years old, to be exact. He had dark black hair that shone like lakes in moonlight and he smelled faintly of gingerbread. He went to the



little kindergarten that was now part of the School of Sleighcraft, and lived in a small cottage just off the Street of Seven Curves in the middle of Elfhelm.

But today wasn't a school day.

It was Christmas Eve. The most exciting day of the year. And this year it was the most exciting Christmas Eve there had ever been. At least for Little Mim. Because today he was going to see the Toy Workshop along with all the other elf children. You see, once Father Christmas's sack had been filled with all the presents for the human children, the elf children were allowed to pick whichever toys they wanted. And Little Mim had never been to the Toy Workshop.

'It's Christmas Eve!' he yelped as he jumped onto his parents' bed. His parents' bed, like most elf beds, was as bouncy as a trampoline, so the moment he jumped on it he bounced so high he hit his head on the ceiling and tore through a red and green paper chain that had been put up as part of the bedroom's many Christmas decorations.

'Little Mim, it's too early,' moaned his mother, Noosh, from beneath a tangled mess of dark hair. She pulled the pillow over her head.



‘Your mummy’s right,’ said his father, Humdrum. He put on his glasses and nervously looked at his watch. ‘It’s a quarter past Very Early Indeed.’

Very Early Indeed was Humdrum’s least favourite hour of the day, especially today, because he had been working all night. He felt like he had only just got into bed. Which he had. He loved being the Assistant Deputy Chief Maker of Toys That Spin or Bounce, which paid a reasonable one hundred and fifty chocolate coins a week and was a nice kind of job to have. But he also loved sleep. And now it was his son who was spinning and bouncing, such was his excitement.

‘I love Christmas! It makes me feel sparkly!’ Little Mim was saying.

‘We all love Christmas, Little Mim. Just try and get back to sleep,’ said Noosh, from under the pillow. The pillow was embroidered with the words ‘It’s Always Christmas In Your Dreams’. Noosh was tired as well, as this was an equally busy time of year for her too. She had been up late talking to reindeer.

‘But, Mummy! Come on. It’s nearly Christmas. We shouldn’t do any sleeping near Christmas. So we can make it last longer . . . Come on. Let’s build a snow elf.’

Noosh couldn't help but smile at her son.

'We build a snow elf *every* morning.'

Humdrum had fallen back asleep and was snoring. Noosh sighed because she knew this meant she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep now. So she took the pillow off her face and got up to make Little Mim breakfast.

'What were the reindeer saying?' asked Little Mim, as he ate his jam and gingerbread on a wooden stool in the small kitchen. He was staring at a portrait of Father Christmas that had been painted by local elf artist Mother Miro. It was one of seven portraits they had of him, and even though they knew Father Christmas was very embarrassed whenever he went to an elf's house and saw his own picture, they found it comforting having his strange bearded human face around.

'The reindeer didn't say much. They were very quiet. Comet seemed worried, which was unusual. And Blitzen was doing something strange.'

Mother Noosh was the *Daily Snow's* Chief Reindeer Correspondent. Her job was to write articles about reindeer. The trouble was reindeer were really bad at interviews. The most you could get out of them was a

grunt or a sigh. There was rarely a scandal unless you counted Blitzen doing a poo on Father Vodol's front lawn. (Father Vodol was Noosh's boss. And he had forbidden her from writing about that.) And a reindeer-related story never got near the front page, although there had been a little bit of interest in the fact that Cupid and Dancer kept falling in and out of love. And the annual School of Sleighcraft Reindeer and Sleigh Race had once made it to page four, but that was about it. Everyone knew that whichever elf had chosen Dasher would win, as he was the fastest reindeer by quite a way. It was officially the most boring job at the whole of the *Daily Snow* and Noosh wanted a more exciting role. Like Gingerbread Correspondent, or Toy Correspondent. But the thing she wanted to be more than anything was Troll Correspondent. She desperately wanted to be *Troll* Correspondent. It was the most dangerous of all jobs, because trolls were big and scary and had a long history of eating elves. But it was also the most important job, and by far the most exciting. And she wished every day that her boss would give her that job, but he never did. Father Vodol was a very

grumpy boss. In fact he was the grumpiest elf in Elfhelm. And he hated Christmas.

‘What do you mean?’ wondered Little Mim, as his mother added ten spoonfuls of sugar to his cloudberry juice. ‘Why was Blitzen acting strange?’

‘He kept his head down. He kept looking at the ground. And he wasn’t looking for food. He seemed quite worried. They all did. And last year they had all been excited. And anyway he looked at me and made a sound.’

Little Mim laughed because he found this funny. But Little Mim found everything funny.

‘A bottom sound?’

‘No. A mouth sound. It was like this . . .’

Noosh did the sound. She put her lips together and made a truffling kind of worried-reindeer sound. Little Mim stopped laughing at this because it was quite a troubling kind of noise.

Little Mim finished eating his gingerbread so, while his mother went to stand under the watering can in the bathroom, he played with a jigsaw. The jigsaw was another picture of Father Christmas. It had five thousand pieces and usually took Little Mim half an hour, which was quite slow for an elf. But then, just as he



was working on piecing Father Christmas's red coat together, something happened. Parts of the jigsaw were disappearing, dropping into blackness. There was now a hole where Father Christmas's mouth should be. And the hole kept getting bigger as jigsaw pieces kept falling through the floor.



'Mummy! The floor is eating Father Christmas!' shouted Little Mim.



But Noosh couldn't hear. She was in the shower, singing her favourite song by the Sleigh Belles. The song was called 'Reindeer Over The Mountain'.



Little Mim pushed his jigsaw aside and saw a dark crack in the tiles that was getting wider. Just then his mother appeared in her green day tunic, drying her hair with a towel that had a picture of Blitzen, Father Christmas's favourite reindeer, on it.

'What's that?' Little Mim asked her.

Noosh was confused. 'What are you talking about?'

‘In the floor. It ate my jigsaw.’

Noosh looked. It was a crack. Right there in the shining green and white tiles near the wall. And not just any old crack. This crack was getting bigger and bigger until it stretched all the way across the small kitchen.

‘What’s that?’ Little Mim asked again.

‘What?’

‘That sound.’

(Elves are very good at hearing, due to the clever curving of their ears, and child elves have slightly better hearing than fully grown elves. Which is why elf parents never talk nastily about their children.)

‘It might be your papa snoring . . .’

But no. Now Noosh heard it. It too was a very deep low sound, coming from somewhere below. Noosh knew in an instant what the sound was, and her whole body froze in shock.

‘Mummy?’

She looked at Little Mim and said one little word, ‘Trolls.’

