

1. I Freeze, You Freeze

One Christmas Eve, when the snow swirled and the wind howled, a crow swooped over the rooftops of Clonowen village. The bird was in a hurry for she carried a large piece of bread. She flew over the village square, where laughing children played, across the river and the white fields towards the woods on a hill in the distance. Then, after circling the trees, she came down on the branch of an old oak.

She was about to eat the bread when she saw a fox staring up at her. *Go on, drop it, please drop it,* the fox was thinking.

The crow was no fool. She had searched all day for this food and was not going to let even a crumb fall. But she could not eat with a fox staring at her like that.

So, with a noisy flap of her wings she flew away. The fox lowered his head and stepped back into his den, which was at the foot of the tree. His two cubs now stared at him.

"I'm hungry, Dad," said Misty.

"We haven't eaten in days two days," said Ash, her brother.

"Your father I know that," said Mother Fox, who was sitting next sitting next to her cubs. "We know."

"And it's Christmas Eve," added Misty, miserably.

Mother Fox and Father Fox looked at each other.

"Well, we can't just sit here and starve," said Father Fox. "Let's go out."

"Good ol' Dad," cheered the young foxes.

"But there's a snowstorm," protested Mother Fox.

"We've no choice," Father Fox replied.

A few moments later, Father Fox and Mother Fox and their two cubs stepped out into the woods. The little foxes were almost up to their noses in snow.

"It's fr-ee-ee-zing," said Misty.

Ash stared up at the sky in wonder. "Wow, look at those flakes flying everywhere!"

"Tricksters, pay attention," ordered Father Fox.

"Yes, line up behind your dad," said Mother Fox.

The cubs did as they were told.

"Good," said Father Fox. "I want you to stay like that. Me in front, your mother behind. All in one line. No wandering off anywhere. Understand?"

"Yes, Dad, we understand," answered both.

"And watch me, okay? If I freeze, you freeze!"

"But we're already freezing," said Ash.

"You know what I mean, Ash. If I stop dead-still, you do it. Is that clear?"

Both nodded.

"But if I say 'scatter', what do you do?"

"We scatter," said Misty, giggling.

"Yes," said their father. "We scatter like a... like a..."

"Like a bunch of scared rabbits," prompted Mother Fox.

"Yes, like rabbits," said Father Fox. "And we meet back here."

"But that's only if there's danger," Mother Fox told her cubs.

"Correct. There's no need to worry," added their father.

"Do you think we will catch a rabbit this time, Dad?" asked Ash.

"I hope so," said Father Fox.

"Yes!" shouted Misty. "Rabbit pie for dinner!"

"Sh-sh-sh, you'll give us away," said Mother Fox.

"Your mother is right," said Father Fox. "Now, let's get a move on." He turned and with one leap he set off through the snow.

"Wait for us, Dad," called Misty and Ash, bounding along behind as best they could.

Behind them, keeping a watchful eye, came Mother Fox.

The hungry foxes searched everywhere but there were no rabbits to be seen in the woods. There were no squirrels either. Or mice. Or birds. Not a single one. Not even a print left by one. Foxes, it seemed, were the only animals out in this snowstorm.

Father Fox came to a halt. It was dark by now, yet the snow gleamed in the moonlight. He stood there, unsure of what to do next.

"Do you see something Dad?" whispered Misty.

"Smell a rabbit?" whispered Ash.

"Your dad is thinking, that's all," said Mother Fox.

"Well, I'm hungry," complained Ash.

"My belly's rumbling," groaned Misty, "and I'm tired."

"Shush now, we'll think of something," said their mother. "Perhaps we should try digging for worms?" she suggested.

Misty and Ash usually turned their noses up at worms but now they seemed quite inviting.

"No," said Father fox. "The ground is frozen hard. It's a waste of time digging for the wriggly fellows No, there's only one place left to go."

"And where is that?" asked Mother Fox.

Father Fox stared at her.

"Surely you're not thinking of ...are you?" said she.

"Yes," he replied.