

**HOW I
BECAME
A DOG
CALLED
MIDNIGHT**



Other books by Ben Miller

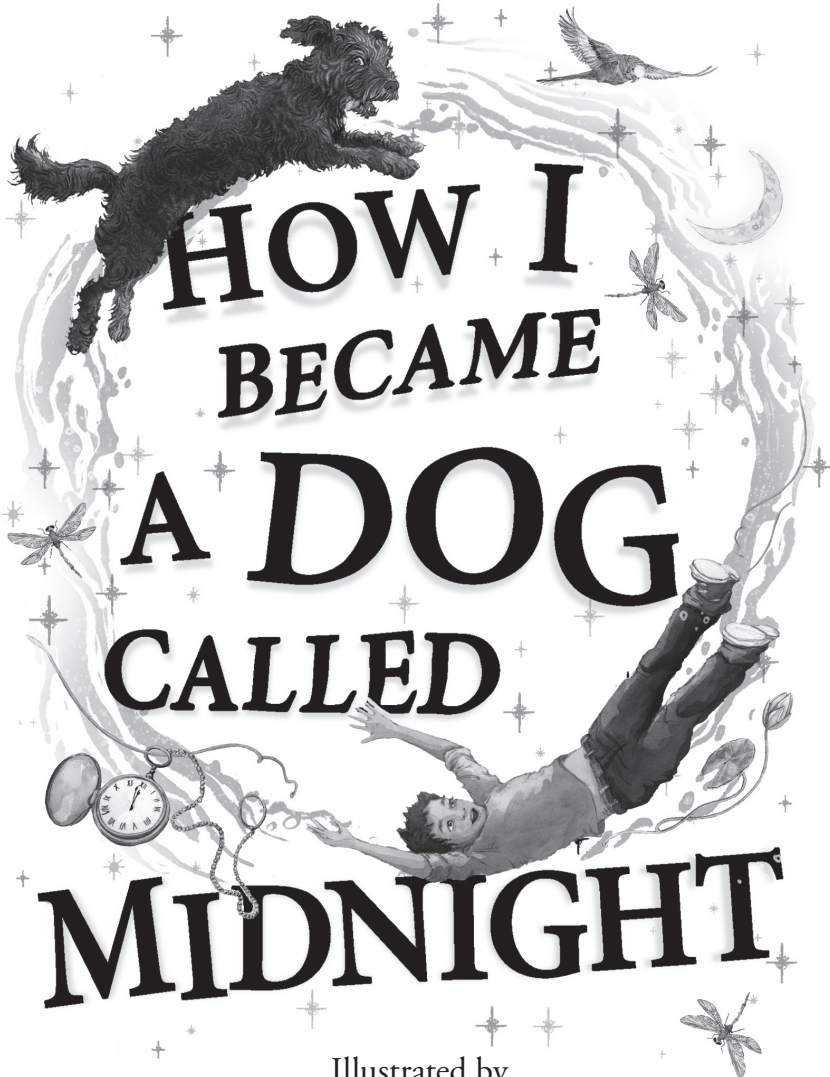
The Night I Met Father Christmas

The Boy Who Made the World Disappear

The Day I Fell Into a Fairytale

Diary of a Christmas Elf – *coming soon!*

BEN MILLER



Illustrated by
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SIMON & SCHUSTER



CHAPTER ONE

‘G eorge? I’ve got a surprise for you.’
It was his mum’s voice, soft and low. George looked up to see her and his dad, bathed in light.

‘Close your eyes and hold out your hands.’

Doing as he was told, he felt the prick of tiny paws and the heat of an animal’s body.

‘You can look now.’

A puppy! A miniature, pink-nosed puppy with

pink ears, white fur and huge blue eyes!

‘She’s an albino chihuahua’, said his dad.
‘Twelve weeks old and she’s looking for a new home.’

George blinked in disbelief. He’d wanted a puppy for ever! For a moment he was so excited he forgot to breathe.

‘Can we keep her?’ he asked.

‘She’s yours, George.’ His mum smiled. ‘What are you going to call her?’

‘Snowball,’ he said instantly.

Taking care not to drop her, George raised one thumb and stroked the back of the puppy’s tiny head. She seemed to like it. ‘Hello, Snowball,’ he whispered.

Snowball licked his thumbnail.

As the three of them watched, teeny-tiny Snowball sat up tall, closed her eyes, tipped back

her head and let out an ENORMOUS, quite definitely terrifying HOWL!

George woke with a start and sat upright in bed, heart thumping.

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CHAPTER TWO

George had dreamed about the puppy again; the one his mum had given him just before she died. It was a dream that started with him feeling happy and secure, and ended with him feeling sad and alone, because his mum wasn't here any more.

The fact that he and his dad had to give Snowball away soon afterwards made him even sadder.

The howl, though. That was a new twist.

George took a deep breath, plumped his pillow, and tried to settle back down. Which was when he heard it again.

A BONE-CHILLING, FULL-THROATED HOWL, echoing off into the night!

Something was out there, in the woods that surrounded the cottage. *But what was it?*

Eyes wide, George slid off the bed, crept to the window, and pulled back the curtain. A large moon hung beyond the whispering trees. He checked the time on his bedside clock. It was almost midnight!

It had *sounded* like a wolf. But there were no wolves in England, were there?

His dad would know what to do. George slipped on his dressing gown and opened his bedroom door.

The lights were on – his father was still up!
‘Dad?’

The long-legged figure by the wood burner didn't move. George tiptoed closer. His dad was fast asleep in his favourite armchair, an old book in his lap, head tipped back and snoring. He was still in his work clothes; his short dark hair was tousled and a half-eaten cheese toastie sat beside him.

Outside in the woods, the creature howled again!

Gabe snuffled but didn't wake. That made George's mind up: he would go and investigate himself. Sliding into his big coat, he twisted his bare feet into his wellies. With one last glance at his sleeping father, he was outside.

His eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the darkness as he made a few clumsy steps off the stony path into the trees. Then he froze. Somewhere up ahead, something was moving.

It was big and blundering, crashing through

shrubs and ripping brambles. A deer, maybe, or a badger? George felt his chest tighten. No wild animal moved like that, not normally. Not unless it was injured. And injured animals could be dangerous . . .

The noises stopped. The creature had sensed him. For a heart-stopping moment, their two spirits locked together in the stillness of the woods.

Then it burst out of the bushes, lurching towards him!

George took flight, racing for the lights of the cottage, but the creature was fast – much too fast. He took a few more steps before a heavy weight struck him between his shoulder blades, knocking him face down into the mud!

What was coming next? Teeth? Claws? George rolled into a ball, shielding his head with his hands. But all that came was a nose. A huge, wet

nose, sniffing his neck, his armpits, and under his jumper. Then a tongue. A colossal, slobbering tongue, wiping him down like a flannel.

‘Oi!’ yelled George, half delighted, half terrified. ‘Get off!’

It was a dog. A huge, black shaggy dog with hair on its forehead so long and curly, its eyes were almost invisible. It bowed down in front of George, tail wagging, flashing its giant teeth and enormous pink tongue.

George pushed himself up from the floor. The dog seemed to take this as a cue for a play-fight, whirling around in circles to show how fast he could pounce and strike. It was funny and scary and impressive all at the same time; a show of strength and power without ever being properly threatening.

Where had it come from? Lady Jane and Koko

weren't due back at Hill House until tomorrow, and there were no fishermen at the lake this weekend. The only people on the entire estate were him and his dad . . .

‘Midnight! Where are you?’

A man's voice rang out in the darkness.

The dog pricked up its ears, let out a rumbling bark, and bounded off!

Someone was up at Hill House!