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Snow!

Carl Speedy woke up shivering. His room was freezing. The weather forecast had been for snow during the night. With a rush of excitement, he leaped out of bed, ran to the window and threw open the curtains. He gave a great gasp, as if his own breath had frozen in his throat.

Everything was white! A deep blanket of soft, fresh snow covered the whole garden. The trees, the bushes, the fence, the fish pond, even the wheelie bins all looked like they had been coated in icing sugar.

“It’s snowed!” Carl cried happily.

For Carl, the most exciting day of the whole year was when it snowed for the first time. That was when all the children took their toboggans to Sheerside Peak.

From the top of Sheerside Peak all the way down to the bottom it was a quarter of a mile of hard, fast snow.

A straight run.

No bends.

Not even a curve.

Plenty of bumps.

The ‘Quarter-Mile Run’.

Nobody had ever made it all the way to the bottom. Last year Samantha Nichols came close. She only had a hundred metres to go when she went airborne. She broke her leg and spent the rest of the winter on crutches.

Carl pulled on his clothes and hurried downstairs. His mother and father were eating breakfast in the kitchen. His mother placed a steaming bowl on the table.

“Porridge today, Carl.”

Carl sat down and began shovelling spoonfuls of the hot, creamy porridge into his mouth. He didn’t even like porridge. But he knew his mother would not let him go outside if he didn’t eat every last mouthful.

“Can I go to Sheerside Peak with Toby?” he asked excitedly.

Toby Jackson was Carl’s best friend. They were always daring each other to do dangerous stunts and getting into trouble together. The last time was when Toby had dared Carl to climb to the top of Old Oak, the enormous oak tree that stood at the bottom of Farmer Brodie’s field. Carl got stuck three quarters of the way up. A fire engine had to come to get him down.

“So, can I go?” he asked again, slurping up mouthfuls of porridge.

“Don’t bolt your breakfast, Carl,” said his mother.

“If we don’t hurry the other kids will get all the good snow,” he said.

“Of course you can go,” said his father. “Just stay below Cedar Copse, okay? You know the rules.”

Cedar Copse was two thirds of the way to the bottom of the Quarter-Mile Run. It was the spot where the slope suddenly became less steep and much wider.

Carl raised his head out of the bowl. Porridge dribbled down his chin. “Why can’t we go to the top?” he protested, scowling.

“Carl, we go through this every time,” Mr Speedy began with an impatient sigh. “It’s far too steep for you at the top of Sheerside Peak. Every year somebody gets hurt. I don’t want you going up there, do you understand? And only the other day I saw that clown Jessop up on the summit trying out his latest invention,

another crazy flying machine it looked like. I don't want you tobogganing anywhere near him when he's testing those silly machines of his."

Mr Jessop was an inventor who lived in the woods on Sheerside Peak. All the grown-ups thought he had a screw loose, but to the children he was a fascinating mystery and they all thought his machines were wonderful. The inventor built all sorts of machines, but it was his flying machines that captured Carl's imagination. Some of the machines looked like flying sailing ships, with tall masts and huge billowing sails. Others were great bird-like contraptions with flapping mechanical wings. There were machines that resembled hot-air balloons, or furious flying windmills, or enormous colourful Chinese dragons that breathed flames and smoke across the sky. How many times had Carl dreamed of flying those wonderful machines? He often wondered what happened to the inventor if the machines didn't fly.

"Is it true Mr Jessop has been to prison?" asked Carl.

His mother looked startled. Even his father sat up in his chair.

"Who told you that?" asked Mrs Speedy.

"Everybody at school says he's an ex-con."

Mrs Speedy laughed. "And I suppose you believed them. Honestly, Carl, you do let your imagination run away with you sometimes! I don't know where you get these ideas, I really don't! What will you dream up next?"

"So it's not true?" asked Carl.

Mr Speedy said, "Children have been making up stories about what goes on in the woods on Sheerside Peak for centuries. They always have and they always will."

Just then there were two loud sharp knocks at the front door.

"That's Toby!" said Carl, jumping down from the table.

"Have you eaten all your porridge?" his mother called after him.

“Yes!” he called back, leaving half a bowlful.

He opened the door and there stood Toby, wrapped up against the cold in a heavy coat, a woolly hat, a long scarf, a pair of thick gloves and a pair of Wellington boots. His chubby cheeks were flushed from the cold air and his eyes were shining with excitement.

“Coming to Sheerside Peak?” he asked, grinning. He was dragging his toboggan behind him.

“You bet!” said Carl, pulling on his boots.

“Wrap up warm, won’t you?” Mrs Speedy called from the kitchen. “Wear your scarf and gloves.”

“Yes, Mum,” said Carl, rolling his eyes at Toby.

“Remember, Carl, stay below Cedar Copse,” called Mr Speedy.

Carl was already out of the house and racing to the garage to fetch his toboggan.

