

# Snow Under Toe

By C. Jade Wyton

*During a cold winter night when Maggie can't sleep, her best friend Edmund drags her out of her basement bedroom and, in his own strange way, tries to cheer her up.*

***Contains descriptions of bullying and mentions of abuse. Reader discretion advised.***

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It was a cold winter night, and Maggie had never hated her room being in the basement more than she did in this exact moment.

Fern had given her more blankets to try and keep her warm but they weren't helping. The cold cut through them, down to her bones, and she wished she had the courage to get up and tell Fern she was cold.... But she was still feeling too embarrassed, after being yelled at for spilling dinner and wasting food, to ask too much of the matron.

So she just lay in bed, her blankets wrapped around her small form, and shivered.

Then, a creak from her door, and Maggie peeked up at the light that shone in.

'Fern?' she asked.

'*Shh!*' a different voice shushed back. '*Be quieter!*'

'*Edmund!*' Maggie's heart leapt in joy, and she sat up.

'*Brr, it's icy down here!*' Edmund commented as he hurried down the stairs. '*Aren't you cold in that dress?!*'

'*Freezing!*' Maggie whispered back. '*But it's all I have because I've grown out of all my jumpers and I can't wear the spares.*'

'*Cos of your wings?*' Edmund asked.

'*Yeah, cos of my wings,*' Maggie confirmed, wrapping her blankets around herself again.

Edmund batted them off and grabbed her by the wrist. '*Come on! Get up,*' he ordered, yanking her out of bed and onto the ice-cold concrete floor.

'*But it's too cold!*' Maggie complained; though she didn't fight back as Edmund dragged her up the stairs and into the hall.

'*Shh!*' Edmund shushed. '*Stop complaining, you big baby.*'

'*I'm not a baby—*'

'*You still wet the bed,*' Edmund interrupted. '*That makes you a baby!*'

'*I only wet the bed when I have bad dreams!*' Maggie argued; digging in her heels but failing to find any traction on the smooth wooden floors to hold her as she was pulled along. '*If you don't stop being mean to me, I'll go back to bed!*'

'*Yeah, right!*' Edmund scoffed, tugging her forward. '*You can try, but I won't let you!*'

As if to make his point, he gave her a mighty yank that made her stumble forward, and smothered his laugh when she slipped and fell over.

Maggie pushed herself up, frowning deliberately at Edmund as she crossed her arms and stuck her nose in the air.

‘Fern says you’re a bad influence on me,’ Maggie said, not bothering to lower her voice anymore.

‘Yeah, *and?*’ Edmund huffed back, grabbing Maggie by the arm and pulling her along again. ‘*You’re* the one who *lets* me influence you!’

‘I do not—’

‘*Shh!*’

Maggie rolled her eyes as Edmund shushed her again, and then twitched an ear as he snuck her into the kitchen.

All of his friends were already crowded around the pantry, quietly helping themselves to the scraps that they knew Fern wouldn’t notice missing.

She didn’t mean to gasp but, when she did, all of Edmund’s friends rolled their eyes and cast her sideways glances, and she knew before they spoke exactly what they were going to say:

‘Ugh! Why’d you bring her, Edmund?’

‘Cos I wanted to, that’s why!’ Edmund snapped back.

A chorus of tuts and frustrations echoed the kitchen as the boys all argued and grumbled at each other before turning back to their looting of the shelves.

Several arguments were had:

*That she’d tell Fern.*

*Or she’d be too loud.*

*Or she’d tell them to stop.*

But Edmund insisted that she wouldn’t; he argued that she wouldn’t tell or be loud or stop them. That she would be cool about it, even if she didn’t eat anything, herself.

It made Maggie feel special; Edmund had brought her here, knowing his friends were going to resist it. And he was fighting for her to stay.... He really wanted to spend time with her, *that much?*

‘What are you purring for, weirdo?’ one of the boys (Maggie knew she’d been told his name many times; but it never stuck) gave a laugh and a ball of squeezed-up bread hit Maggie between the eyes. ‘I can hear you from here!’

Another ball of bread hit Maggie. And then another.

She didn’t think to protect herself. It all happened too fast, and she was pelted with a full loaf’s worth of bread directly in the face before she managed to react and lifted a wing to cover herself.

The pelting stopped and the boys went back to the cupboards.

‘Slow,’ one of Edmund’s friends commented.

‘Good sport about it, though,’ another chuckled back.

Maggie just brushed the crumbs from her fur and glanced to Edmund; who frowned at her and shook his head.

‘What kind of hero doesn’t fight back!’ he scoffed.

Maggie’s ears pressed back, and she looked to her feet. ‘One who hasn’t been sleeping good?’ she tried.

‘Oh, gods, yeah,’ one of the boys said from inside the pantry. ‘The basement’s gotta be *really* cold, huh?’

‘Yeah,’ Maggie agreed. ‘So cold that it’s— Sometimes it’s hard to feel my toes!’

‘There’s a spare bed in our room,’ said a boy, nudging Edmund. ‘Maybe Fern’ll let you use that until it gets warmer.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Maggie sighed. ‘She’s really strict about me staying in my own room....’

The boy simply shrugged, giving an almost sympathetic look, and returned to the pantry.

Maggie twitched an ear as she watched the boys snack.

‘I...’ she started, the word catching in her throat as she realised what she was about to suggest.

*It would be breaking the rules....*

But it might make the boys like her.

*Fern would be mad.*

But Edmund would be happy.

She *really* wanted Edmund’s friends to like her.

‘What?’ Edmund grumbled, breaking her thoughts. ‘You *what?*’

‘I know how to make coconut balls,’ Maggie blurted; much to the interest of the room. ‘Uh... one of the older girls taught me. I could... make some for everyone?’

A quiet, agreeable sound echoed the kitchen as the boys nodded and hummed their interest.

So, Maggie got to work; retrieving all of the ingredients, a large bowl, and a pair of thick gloves from the cupboards.

‘I gotta wear gloves when I cook, cos of the fur,’ she said. ‘But you break them up like this....’

She wasn’t sure if anyone was actually listening, as they seemed more busy talking amongst themselves.

But she kept explaining, anyway; it felt nice to talk out loud, and to feel a little like she might be included in something....

Then she heard Edmund mimicking her and, though his tone was clearly mocking, she was relieved to know that he, at least, had been listening.

She made one large ball for each of them; small enough to fit in one hand, but large enough that it would take at least six bites to finish.

Then she finished coating them in loose coconut and shared the sweet treats around, appreciating that the boys at least all thanked her as they took their food.

Then, when they were all about halfway done, Edmund snatched Maggie’s food from her hand and held it too high for her to reach.

‘*Edmund!*’ she exclaimed in a hushed tone. ‘Give it back! You have your own!’

‘Come outside with us!’ he demanded. ‘It snowed today— There should still be enough to make a snowman with!’

‘Snow?’ Maggie’s whiskers twitched, and she stopped grabbing for her snack. ‘I’ve never been outside after it’s snowed, before. Fern says it’s too cold, and I have no outside shoes. And— And I don’t have a jumper!’

Almost immediately after she said it, one of Edmund’s friends yanked off their own jacket and, demanding Maggie fold her wings in around herself, pulled it on her.

‘There you go!’ he said. ‘You almost look like a normal tabaxi, now!’

‘Yeah, maybe if we got some shoes on you, we could take you to town and

nobody would notice what a freak you are!

Maggie twitched her tail at the comment, almost feeling bad about it, until Edmund shoved his friend aside and scoffed:

'You're just jealous cos she can fly!'

'Hah! *Barely*, you mean!'

'Yeah? Still cooler than anything you can do!'

'I'm cool?' Maggie squeaked in surprise. 'Really?'

'I didn't say *that*,' Edmund huffed, giving her back her coconut ball. Then, before she could take a bite, he had grabbed her by the wrist and was dragging her out of the kitchen. 'Just that you're cooler than any of the *losers* here.'

A chorus of playful *boos* echoed behind them; though they quieted down as the boys all followed Edmund into the front yard.

Maggie paused at the top of the steps, digging in her heels as the rest of the group passed her and Edmund and ran into the snowy yard to kick up the white powdery ice that blanketed the ground.

'Maggie!' Edmund huffed. 'Come on!'

Maggie shook her head. 'I don't want to get in trouble!'

'You're a little past *that*!' scoffed the last of the boys as he passed. 'You forgot to clean the bowls in the kitchen; Fern's gonna know what you did.'

Maggie's ears pressed back and she gave a whimper, before she was immediately tugged into the yard.

'Yeah, see?' Edmund urged. 'If you're going to get in trouble you might as well make it *worth* it!'

Maggie felt the crunch of the ice-cold snow under her toes and hopped in surprise; only stopping her silly little dance-like movements when the boys all laughed at her.

A snowball missed her head, thrown by one of the boys, and another boy gave an annoyed huff as he threw one back; telling his friend to give Maggie a moment before pelting her in the face.

The others just laughed and made for the front gate; though Maggie dug her heels in again, refusing to budge as Edmund yanked on her arm.

'No!' she said, firmly. 'I already have done *so much* for you tonight! Don't make me leave the yard, too!'

'C'mon, don't be a—'

'*Please*, Edmund!' Maggie begged. 'I don't want to. I really, really, *really* don't want to!'

Edmund's furrowed brow softened, and he cast a glance to his friends who waited at the gate before... waving them on. Though, he still didn't let Maggie go.

She almost thanked him. But, before she could, he changed the direction he tugged her; taking her instead to the slumbering garden and shoving her face-first into an undisturbed pile of snow.

Maggie gave an upset squeak as Edmund pushed her deeper into the snow. And then she struggled against him as he yanked her back out and dropped her heavily on the ground.

'Stop it, Edmund!'

'Make me!'

Maggie just frowned, her tail slipping between her legs as Edmund stepped

over her to the hole her head had left in the snow.

The boy began to scoop it up and round it out, and before Maggie knew what was going on, he'd demanded her help in making a snowman.

It was a lot of fun, Maggie thought. Even with Edmund bossing her around and constantly tripping her over. She'd never been allowed to make a snowman before.

So even though it came out wonky, with a head too small and arms that didn't match, Maggie felt proud enough of their work to purr as they stood back and examined it.

'It needs a nose,' Edmund said, simply.

'Really? How do you make a nose?'

'You stick something in its face,' Edmund said. 'Most people use carrots or sticks, but I think *this* will do!'

Maggie opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but instead of her question a shout escaped her as he plucked a long primary feather from her wing as it stuck out from her jacket.

As he jammed it into their snowman's face, Maggie lifted her jacket to examine the gap left in her wing.

'Edmund that *hurt!*'

'So? Lots of things hurt,' Edmund scoffed a laugh. 'Don't be such a baby!'

'It's not funny!' Maggie pressed, touching the droplet of blood that had formed on her wing. 'That *really* hurt, Edmund! Look! You made me *bleed!*'

For a moment Edmund watched her, and then he glanced away, a guilty look in his eyes as he kicked at the snow. 'Hm.... Do you want to hit me back?'

'What?'

'You can hit me back,' Edmund repeated, stepping closer. 'I hurt you. It's only fair you get to hurt me back.'

'I don't *want* to hurt you back,' Maggie sighed, her ears pressing down. 'Hurting people for revenge isn't heroic.'

'Whatever,' Edmund rolled his eyes and shoved past her; making for the orphanage porch so he could sit down and mope.

Maggie shifted from foot-to-foot, feeling the cold snow between her numbing talons, before joining the boy on the stair.

She rubbed at her arms, the cold air still biting her through the jacket she'd been given, before leaning closer to Edmund for warmth.

Edmund sulked a moment longer, before she felt his arms around her.

'You're such a baby,' he mumbled, rubbing her up and down roughly in an effort to warm her up. 'You have all this fur and you *still* feel cold?'

'I can't help it,' Maggie whined back. 'I just get cold!'

'And in summer you're too hot!' Edmund rolled his eyes; though, he didn't stop trying to warm her up.

Maggie couldn't help but smile as he unbuttoned his own jacket and wrapped it around her, doing it up tightly so they were squished together.

'There, is *that* better?' he asked.

'Mhm!' Maggie acknowledged. 'You're warm.'

'Whatever.'

The pair fell into silence as they sat on the stair, looking up at the night sky.

The stars above shone down at them in beautiful-but-faint colours and, after a moment of watching the galaxies twinkle in the distance, Maggie felt Edmund relaxing.

She glanced to him, then, watching as the misty clouds of breath spun out of his nose.

Then she wiggled closer, ignoring his annoyed scowl.

'You're my best friend, Edmund,' Maggie said.

Edmund looked awkward. Then, after a pause, he gave a haughty sniff that was clearly an attempt to play off the compliment like it hadn't made him feel good. 'Yeah, well. You're... pretty cool to hang around, too. Y'know. For a girl—'

'Edmund! Maggie!' Fern's voice cut through the air as the front door opened and harsh yellow light bathed over the children. Two firm claps followed their names, and they both flinched as Fern barked, 'Inside! Now!'

They attempted to stand, forgetting they were bound together, and immediately fell into the snowy yard.

A noise escaped Fern as she watched them fumble to free themselves from their own tangled limbs, and Maggie realised, as she slipped from inside Edmund's jacket and hurriedly stood up, that the matron had smothered a laugh.

'Inside,' Fern ordered again; still firm, but with a hint of humour at the edges of her tone. 'And go sit by the fire in the main room.'

They did as they were told; taking their places on the old, worn-out rug and warming themselves in the heat of the flames.

They were cuffed around the ears as Fern joined them, though it was only a brief punishment as she began checking their fingers and toes.

'Maggie, you shouldn't be out in snow with bare feet!' she scolded.

'But I don't have outside shoes—'

'Then you shouldn't be outside at all, should you?'

Maggie cut off, looking miserable as Fern took her ice-cold talons and began to rub the warmth back into them.

There was a moment of quiet, where neither orphan dared speak up to the matron.

Then, Fern gave a curt hum.

'I saw you were cooking,' she said.

Maggie nodded. 'I couldn't sleep,' she admitted. 'My room is too cold. It's so cold my ears hurt.'

Fern gave a sympathetic sigh. 'I'm sorry, Maggie. I know it's not a very comfortable room.'

'There's a spare bed in my room, I wish you could use that,' Edmund said. Then he looked to Fern, and asked earnestly, 'Why can't she sleep in one of the regular rooms?'

'She's safest downstairs,' Fern answered, focusing on Maggie's toes.

'Safe? She's going to *freeze* to death!' Edmund argued; flinching when Fern's annoyed gaze turned to him. 'It's just...' Edmund's voice became meek, now; something that surprised both Maggie and Fern. 'It's so dark down there. All the time. That's no fun.'

Maggie felt a purr rumbling in her chest at her friend's understanding; it *was* dark. And it *was* no fun.

‘It’s complicated,’ Fern said, in a voice so firm it was clear she didn’t want either of them talking back. ‘Sometimes we have to be uncomfortable to be safe. And it’s *not* fun. But it *is* necessary.’

Maggie just sighed.

‘Are you both warm, now?’

‘Yes,’ Edmund answered.

‘No,’ Maggie complained.

‘Hm,’ Fern gave a hum, then motioned to the door. ‘Well, Edmund, to bed with you.’

‘Can’t I stay up until Maggie’s—’

‘No. Bed.’

‘Ugh!’ Edmund stormed out, stomping heavily as he went.

Fern simply rolled her eyes, and shifted Maggie closer to the fire. ‘That boy is a bad influence on you,’ she said.

‘He’s my friend,’ was all Maggie could think to respond. ‘Nobody else likes spending time with me. They only do it when you say they have to, but Edmund *wants* to spend time with me. Even before I saved him, he *wanted* to be my friend!’

Fern just sighed, sounding very tired, and shook her head. ‘What are we going to do with the pair of you, hm?’

‘I...’ Maggie shifted, unsure how to answer. ‘I think I’m warm now, Matron Fern.’

‘Alright,’ Fern sat back, letting Maggie go. ‘To bed with you, then.’

‘You’re not going to punish me?’ Maggie asked. ‘I thought you’d be a lot madder at me.’

‘I’m furious, Maggie,’ Fern said, simply. ‘But I’m too tired, tonight. We’ll talk about how much trouble you’re in after breakfast.’

‘Oh... okay,’ Maggie heaved another sigh, heavy and exaggerated, before rising to her feet and heading towards her room. ‘Goodnight, Matron.’

‘Goodnight, Maggie. I don’t want to hear you out of bed until morning, understood?’

‘Yes, Matron,’ Maggie promised.

Then, she made the long walk to her room; trudging down the cold, creaky stairs to her bed—

Her eyes widened as she looked up and saw, sitting on her bed and wrapped in blankets from his own room:

‘Edmund!’

‘*I thought it’d be warmer if there was two of us,*’ he whispered, lifting the blanket in invitation.

Maggie immediately climbed in with him, curling up beside him.

‘*Don’t you dare wet the bed,*’ Edmund warned. ‘*I’ll punch you if you do.*’

‘*I’ll try not to,*’ Maggie answered.

‘*You better not!*’

‘*I won’t! I won’t,*’ Maggie promised, snuggling tight against Edmund’s back. ‘*I promise I won’t.*’

‘*Good!*’

They went quiet, shifting only a little bit to get comfortable in the cold room.

Then, just as Maggie was finally starting to drift off, Edmund rolled over.

*'Am I really your best friend?' he asked into Maggie's ear. 'I thought Ben was your best friend.'*

*'He was, but he's a bug, so he won't mind being my second-best friend,' she answered softly. 'Because I like being best friends with you, more.'*

*'Yeah?'*

*'Yeah. You're my favourite person out of everyone in the entire orphanage. Even Fern. But it's a secret, so don't tell anyone!'*

*'Even more than Fern?' Edmund echoed; clearly beaming with pride as he rolled back over to face the wall.... Then, after another long moment, he rolled back over and whispered again, 'Can I tell you a secret?'*

*'Yeah?'*

*'You're my favourite, too.'*

—END—

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