

Chapter ONE



Lara peered out of the train window, watching the dark wild hills pass by. The journey had been exciting to start with, but now she was sick of being cooped up and starting to feel a bit grumpy. She hadn't slept well either – the top bunk in the sleeper compartment had been nearly as big as her bed at home, but the train rattled and bumped and shook, and she'd kept waking up. Lara was sure her mum had struggled to sleep too. She looked even paler than usual, and there were huge purply shadows under her eyes.

“Are you OK?” Lara asked, turning back from the window, her voice gruff. She hated asking – what would she do if Mum said no? Lara's mum had been ill for a while, nearly a whole year, but she was getting a lot better. Sometimes Lara

found it hard to believe that she was really recovering.

Mum smiled at her, and then at Dad, who whipped round to stare at her, his face frightened. "I'm fine! Honestly."

She patted Dad's hand, and

then reached over the

table to hold Lara's

hand too. "The train

was a bit noisy,

wasn't it? But I still

think it was a good

idea of yours to take

the sleeper, Steve. It's

lovely to get the journey

done overnight, and not to

have to sit in the car for hours and hours.

We'll be at the station in about forty-five

minutes, I think. Enough time for you to



finish off that breakfast, Lara.”

Lara nodded, picking at her croissant. She was looking forward to seeing Gran and Grandad – it was ages since they’d last visited, and video calls just weren’t the same as the real thing. You couldn’t hug through a screen. Her grandparents lived in a cottage in the Highlands of Scotland, almost as far away as you could get and still be in Britain. It was at least a ten-hour journey in the car, and usually Mum and Dad and Lara drove there in the summer holidays. Mum hadn’t been up to it this summer, so they hadn’t been to visit for a year and a half. It seemed like forever.

“I’ll go and make sure everything’s packed away in our sleeping cabins,” Dad said. “Back in a minute.”

“I’m so excited we’re having Christmas at Fir Cottage,” Mum told Lara, as Dad headed off between the seats. “I loved Christmas there when I was growing up – with that huge fireplace to sit around, it’s a house that’s perfect for winter. It’s magical. Your gran told me they’ve had a bit of snow already, and there’s more forecast!”

Lara brightened up. A proper snowy Christmas would be brilliant, and she’d never been to Scotland in the winter before. There was even a ski resort not far from her grandparents’ cottage. Except ... the best bit about snow was getting to meet up with friends and have snowball fights, or make snow angels. She and her friend Anisha had made amazing balls of coloured ice when it was really cold

last winter – they'd filled balloons with water and food colouring, and left pink ice bubbles all over Anisha's front garden.

Anisha hadn't said much when Lara explained she was going to be away for most of the Christmas holidays, but she'd looked so disappointed. Lara hadn't had much time to spend with her friends over the last few months – it had been so tricky, fitting in everything round Mum's hospital appointments. Lara felt like she'd spent days in waiting rooms. And when they had been at home, Mum had been too tired to have people round. Now she was getting better, Lara had been hoping for a Christmassy sleepover...

Still ... Lara wanted so much for her mum to be happy. Happy and well. She could do stuff with Anisha when they got

back home, there would be a couple of days before school started again.

“Is that snow up there on those hills?” she asked, pressing her nose against the train window.

“Yes, oh, look!” Mum’s voice was high and squeaky with delight. “Oh, Lara, I’m so glad we’re here, it’s a real treat for me. And there are so many lovely things we can do. We can visit the reindeer again, do you remember doing that last time we were here? It’ll be even better in the snow! And Dad says he’ll take you to the ski slopes.”

Lara looked back at Mum, and saw how her eyes were sparkling. Suddenly, she didn’t mind being away from home at Christmas at all.



As they stepped down from the train with all the cases, Gran came hurrying across the platform to seize Mum in a hug, and Grandad scooped Lara up and swung her around. Lara couldn't stop laughing, swept away with all the happiness and excitement.



“Oh, we’ve got so much to tell you,” Gran said, as they began to pick everything up and head through the station to the car. “All the lovely things we’ve got planned. And you’ll never guess what your grandad saw yesterday, Lara. Something so special.”

For a tiny moment, Lara wondered if Gran meant something magical – little elves, perhaps, peering in between the trees that surrounded the cottage, or a snow spirit, dancing down out of the sky. Then she smiled at herself for being silly. It was Mum talking about how special the cottage was that had done it. And the sight of snow! Now they were stepping out of the station doors, she could see the sky properly – grey and heavy and snow-laden, with a few tiny, lazy snowflakes

fluttering down.

“Oh, it’s snowing!” she cried, gazing up at the thick clouds.

“Yes, and there’s going to be a whole lot more of it, I promise you that,” Grandad said, as he pulled out the car keys. “But you still haven’t guessed, Lara. What do you think I saw?”

“A pine marten?” Lara asked hopefully. Grandad had emailed her a video of a pine marten on their garden bird table a few weeks before, a gorgeous dark-furred little creature, and she really wanted to see one for herself.

“Oh...” Grandad waved the keys around as though pine martens were nothing. “He’s back every other day, Lara, he’d probably steal your breakfast toast out of your hand if you let him. No,

something much more exciting than that.”

“I give up,” Lara said, smiling at him. She could see he was desperate to tell her.

Grandad drew himself up very straight and said, in a deep, impressive voice. “A ... snowy ... owl!”

“Oh...” Lara nodded politely. She wasn’t really as interested in birds as she was in other animals. And she couldn’t help feeling that owls were a bit spooky.

“They’re incredibly rare!” Grandad told her, looking slightly disappointed. “You only see them – oh, once every few years. They usually live in the Arctic, you see.”



“What, like polar bears?” Lara asked, surprised. That was a bit more special.

“Exactly! They used to nest in Scotland sometimes, but there hasn’t been a breeding pair here for nearly fifty years, and that was on Fetlar, one of the Shetland Isles. They’re very occasional winter visitors here in the Cairngorms these days. I’ve only ever seen one once before, and that was years ago.”

“Ian, we need to get in the car,” Gran said, in a very patient voice. “It’s cold. And Marie needs to stay warm, remember.”

“Oh! Yes.” Grandad unlocked the car. “I’ll tell you more about snowy owls once we’re home, Lara. You’ll be very excited.”

Dad grinned at Lara and nudged her with his elbow. “I don’t think you’ve got any choice.”



Back at the cottage, Gran led Lara up to a tiny little room right up under the roof, the one she always slept in. There was a steep, narrow staircase just for her, and it opened straight out into the bedroom. The ceiling sloped right down to the floor and there was a tiny window that looked out on to the garden – which was already flecked with patches of snow.

“Unpack your things in here,” Gran said, showing Lara a chest of drawers. “And then come and have some hot chocolate. I got some of those little marshmallows you like. And that squirty cream.”

Lara hurriedly shoved her clothes into the drawers, pulled on her fleecy slippers, and raced back down the staircase.

She could smell the chocolate, and a faint scent of woodsmoke – Grandad was lighting the fire.

Down in the living room, Grandad patted the sofa next to him and held up his phone. “Your mum and dad are still unpacking. Look, I’ve got a photo of the snowy owl to show you. It’s a bit blurry, though – I was so surprised to see her. I think my hands were shaking!”

Lara snuggled up beside him and smiled gratefully as Gran passed her a mug of hot chocolate. She sniffed the sweet steam rising from it, and looked at Grandad’s phone. Gazing back at her from a snow-topped rock was a huge white bird, its feathers striped and barred with black. The owl’s yellow eyes were narrowed and it seemed to be glaring at Lara out of the phone.



“Oh!” Lara felt her fingers tighten around the mug. “It’s so big! It looks – sort of angry, Grandad.”

Grandad chuckled. “I know what you mean. I don’t think she was angry. She was just keeping an eye on me, making sure I wasn’t dangerous. They can be very fierce birds, though, if someone threatens their nests. Look at the size of her claws.”

“Where did you see her?” Lara asked, frowning at the rock in the photo. It looked

familiar. She was sure she'd climbed on it. Her grandparents' cottage nestled against a hill, and was surrounded by heather and rocky crags and patches of fir trees. Lara loved to go scrambling around the rocks when she came to stay.

“Practically in the garden!” Grandad said delightedly. “I was going up to the Big House to have a chat with Geoff – my friend who’s one of the gardeners there. You met him last time you were here, Lara, but you probably don’t remember. I was just wandering along the path, not paying all that much attention. I almost walked past her! But I had a feeling someone was watching me. I looked round and there she was! Perched on the rock and eyeing me up.” He shook his head. “She must have come from so far away. Maybe even

all the way from the Arctic, imagine that! We're so lucky."

"You keep saying she, but how do you know?"

"Well, I had to do some research," Grandad explained. "I'm not absolutely sure, but apparently male snowy owls have whiter feathers than females, and you can see this one has quite a lot of black stripes. A male owl would be white all over." He put his arm round Lara's shoulders. "I know you're probably tired from the journey, but perhaps we could go out this afternoon and try to find her?"

Grandad was looking at Lara so hopefully that she couldn't let him down, even though she still thought the owl was a bit scary-looking.

"Definitely. This afternoon."