



The
**SNOW
GIRL**

ReadingZone



To Galina, Sasha and Eddie. Where you walk,
snowdrops grow.

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CHAPTER ONE THE SNOW FALLS

Tasha was untangling a baby goat from a bramble patch when the snow began to fall.

The flakes were tiny at first, drifting through the cold, still air like flecks of dust. Unsure if it really was snow, Tasha placed the baby goat, who was called Ferdinand, down on a patch of grass. She slipped off one of her warm mittens, which were embroidered with woodland animals round the cuffs. Then she held out her hand.

Glittering crystals landed on her skin so softly she barely felt them, then disappeared instantly, as if soaking into her.

“It’s snowing,” Tasha whispered, delight bubbling up inside her. Tasha had always dreamed of seeing snow. “It’s snowing!” she shouted louder, turning to the small stone farmhouse the other side of the goat paddock.

The living-room curtains were half drawn. Smoke curled sleepily from the chimney. Tasha put her hand over her mouth. She shouldn't have shouted. Grandpa was most likely dozing in front of the fire, and he needed his rest. And Mama and Papa would be busy, chopping wood or cutting hay or packing turnips into straw... Tasha and her parents had moved to Grandpa's farm three months ago because he was struggling to manage it alone, and there were a thousand jobs to do to get it ready for winter. So shouting that it was snowing would not be helpful.

Tasha turned away from the farmhouse and looked at the view all around. The mountains that cradled the patchwork valley were veiled by a cloud of falling snow, and the scattered handful of farmhouses that nestled among the fields were twinkling in the soft new light.

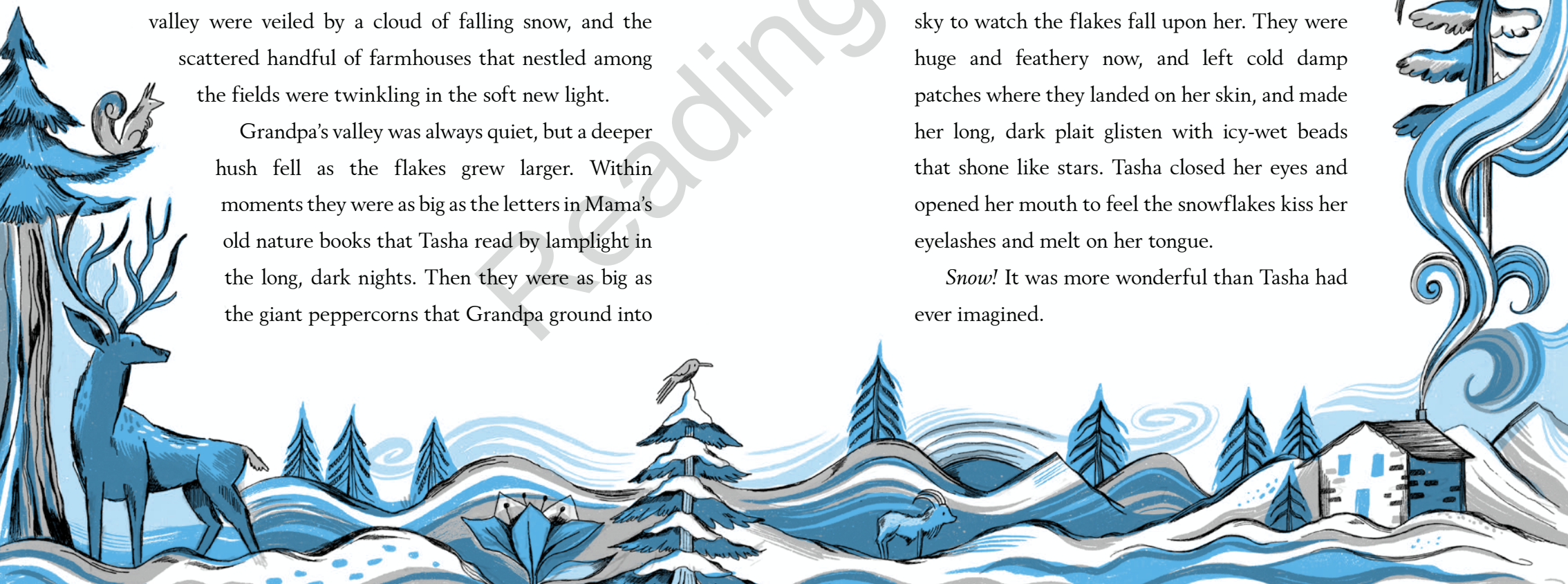
Grandpa's valley was always quiet, but a deeper hush fell as the flakes grew larger. Within moments they were as big as the letters in Mama's old nature books that Tasha read by lamplight in the long, dark nights. Then they were as big as the giant peppercorns that Grandpa ground into

his honey tea, to help with his winter cough. Soon they were as big as the dried berries that Papa mixed into their porridge every morning, to remind them of the warmth and colour of spring. Right now, surrounded by the gently falling snow, Tasha wasn't thinking of spring, though.

Already, the snow had given everything a bright, sparkling sheen, like a cake dusted with icing sugar. Tasha laughed at the beauty of it and her voice sounded too loud in the silence. She slid off her other mitten and spun round, arms outstretched, fingertips spread wide.

Then she stopped and lifted her face to the sky to watch the flakes fall upon her. They were huge and feathery now, and left cold damp patches where they landed on her skin, and made her long, dark plait glisten with icy-wet beads that shone like stars. Tasha closed her eyes and opened her mouth to feel the snowflakes kiss her eyelashes and melt on her tongue.

Snow! It was more wonderful than Tasha had ever imagined.



Before she moved to Grandpa's farm, Tasha had spent all twelve years of her life living in Saltberry – a warm and sunny seaside town in the far south, where it never snowed. And although Tasha had visited Grandpa's many times, she had never visited in winter, so had only ever heard stories of the deep snows that fell here every year. But this was real! Snowflakes shivered all around her. They tasted of mountain air, pine needles and the tingle of excitement.

"Look, Ferdinand, it's snowing!" Tasha crouched beside Ferdinand and stroked the top of his head. Ferdinand was only a few months old, no taller than Tasha's knees and wore a small felt coat to keep him warm. Ferdinand looked up at the snow, bleated, then tried to chase some of the flakes into his mouth with his tongue. Tasha smiled, gave him another stroke, then rose back up.

Tasha's gaze was drawn to the nearest farmhouse. It was about half-an-hour's walk away, and quickly becoming difficult to see through the thickening snow, but there was movement at an upstairs window. Tasha guessed it would be Klara, a girl of about her age, who lived there with her parents and two-year-old twin brothers, Leo and Stefan.

Tasha had often seen Klara climb

out of her bedroom window into the thick branches of a nearby tree, but Tasha's heart still jumped with fright as Klara's distant figure dashed from the window now and a whoop of delight echoed across the fields. Tasha watched Klara climb safely down to the ground, then sighed with relief.

Klara was fearless. She spent her days riding Zinovy, her smoke-grey horse, around the valley, or scaling the mountains with ropes and metal spikes that she hammered into the rocks. Klara had asked Tasha several times if she would like to go riding or climbing with her, but the thought of doing something so dangerous made Tasha feel like she had sandhoppers jumping in her belly. Then again, just the thought of leaving Grandpa's farm made Tasha feel that way.

Tasha hadn't always been so scared of everything. She used to love exploring the beaches and coves around Saltberry, rock-pooling and swimming, and playing games with her many cousins and friends. But after what happened at Claw's Edge just over a year ago, her life had changed. She had changed. Tasha touched the fine scar above her left eyebrow with a snow-damp finger. She now knew how important it was to keep herself safe.

When Tasha and her parents had decided to move to Grandpa's farm, Tasha had thought the peace and quiet of the

valley would be perfect for her. She knew there were few children – so few that there was no school. But that hadn't worried her. Tasha's parents had said that they, and Grandpa, would help her learn at home. Tasha had plenty of books, pencils and sketchpads, and there were lots of jobs to keep her busy on the farm.

Tasha glanced at Ferdinand, who had tripped over his own hooves while spinning round trying to catch a snowflake. He sprang back up, bleated, then skipped after another. Tasha felt a warm rush of joy. Animals had always been her greatest passion. She loved taking care of the goats and the chickens on Grandpa's farm. And she loved watching for wild animals too.

Tasha had happy memories of walking around the valley with Grandpa – along the lakeshore, through the woods, and up the mountains – and seeing deer, foxes and hares, and birds of prey wheeling in the sky. Once, high up on the peaks, they had spotted the most beautiful animal Tasha had ever seen. It was a type of wildcat called a lynx, with long, graceful legs and big furry paws, bright eyes and tufted ears, and pale grey, black-spotted fur that looked so soft Tasha had longed to stroke it.

But these days Grandpa was too weak for long walks, and her parents were too busy. Tasha hadn't left the farm in weeks,

as she was scared go alone. At least there was plenty she could see from the goat paddock, where she stood now.

When Tasha got up, at dawn, to feed the goats and the chickens, she often glimpsed rabbits, stoats and squirrels in the woods to the north. She listened to the birds, chattering in the trees, and watched them fly over the fields.

Sometimes, as the sun rose higher, Tasha's gaze would drift across the valley, and she would see Klara playing outside with her brothers. Or Mika, a boy about the same age as Klara and Tasha, walking to the lake where he liked to fish. At these times, Tasha would pull her gaze away – because Claw's Edge was never far from her thoughts. That's why she shook her head nervously at every invitation to spend time with Klara or Mika, and changed the subject whenever her parents or Grandpa suggested that she try to make friends. She was fine on her own. Except...

There was an emptiness inside Tasha. She had tried to ignore it at first, but it had been swelling since that day over a year ago. And since she had moved to Grandpa's farm, it had grown so large that it ached more and more each day.

Tasha felt the ache now, as she watched Klara spinning round in the field near her farmhouse. Klara was holding her hands out into the falling snow – like Tasha had. For a brief

moment, Tasha imagined standing beside Klara, both of them holding their hands into the snowfall together. But Tasha soon turned away. She looked at Ferdinand. He bleated loudly and the other six goats echoed his cry.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Tasha exclaimed. The goats were all staring at her reproachfully. Clusters of snowflakes were gathering in their long, grey-white curls. “You must be getting cold and wet.”

Tasha scooped Ferdinand into her arms and dusted the snow from his little felt coat. She began walking towards the goat shelter and the rest of the goats followed. It was almost dusk, when she would have tucked them in for the night anyway.

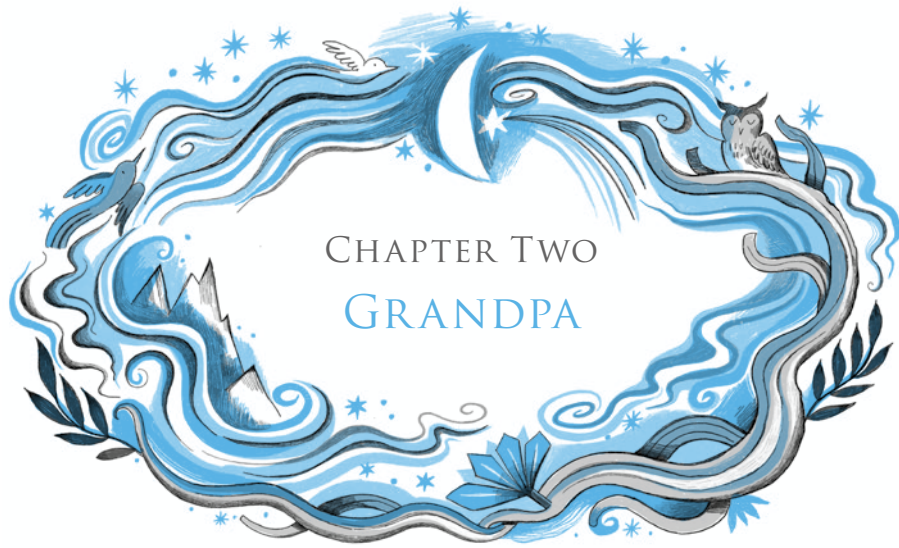
The snow was nearly an inch deep already and crunched beneath Tasha’s boots. Tasha smiled at the sound and the feel of it. She thought of all Grandpa’s winter stories, and all the things she had always longed to do in the snow, and sparks of excitement danced from her fingertips to her toes.

Tasha paused and looked up again, to the mountains all around. The peaks were mostly lost in a whirl of white, but the highest ones in the north now rose above the snow cloud. Beyond their steep cliffs lay a plateau that extended into the distance. At the very edge of it, Tasha glimpsed the faraway glacier glistening like sea glass.

The only sound was from the snow falling thick and fast. It sounded like a heartbeat, a whisper, distant wings in flight. It thrilled Tasha, and made her suddenly feel that she wanted to run off to explore the snowy landscape, like she had run off to explore beaches and coves when she was younger.

Tasha shook the thought away. She wasn’t that person any more. Adventures and exploring were dangerous, and she was safe here on the farm. Tasha turned to walk on, and an unexpected sight made her eyes light up. She pulled Ferdinand closer and ran towards Grandpa as fast as she could, through the twinkling web of falling snow.





CHAPTER TWO GRANDPA

“Grandpa!” Tasha sprinted towards Grandpa, Ferdinand in her arms, the other six goats galloping around her. Their curly fur swayed around their legs and the curved horns on their heads bobbed up and down with their movement.

“Tashenka!” Grandpa called back, using his affectionate name for Tasha.

Tasha beamed. Grandpa hadn’t left the farmhouse in almost a week, but here he was, rosy-cheeked and smiling as he pushed a wheelbarrow full of hay towards the goat shelter. This was a good sign that he was feeling stronger.

Grandpa had lost a lot of weight over the last year, but he was still a big man and in his quilted, padded coat he looked even bigger. His white hair puffed out from beneath his blue woollen hat and his long white beard tumbled into the blue

woollen scarf he always wore, even indoors. His hat and scarf had been knitted by Grandma, who had died when Tasha was so young she could barely remember her.

“Does Mama know you’re outside?” Tasha asked. “She said you should stay in the warm until your cough is better.”

“I always bring the goats extra hay when the first snow falls.” Grandpa glanced up at the flakes tumbling down, then turned to Tasha with a twinkle in his eyes. “And I wanted to see what you thought of your first snow, Tashenka,” he added.

“It’s beautiful!” Tasha felt a fresh rush of excitement to be seeing the snow with Grandpa. “Let me push the wheelbarrow. Can you carry Ferdinand?” Tasha held out Ferdinand and Grandpa’s smile widened. He lowered the wheelbarrow, took Ferdinand into his arms and whispered into one of the little goat’s silk-soft ears. Ferdinand licked Grandpa’s cheeks and nuzzled his beard.

The other goats ran into their shelter, which was a long, low building made from mossy stones, now draped with snow. Grandpa ducked through the doorway and ushered the goats out of Tasha’s way, so she could push the wheelbarrow inside. The wooden roof was raised slightly above the walls, to let in light and fresh air. But it was still shadowy, and smelled a little musky – although not in an unpleasant way. It was a

goaty smell – warm and slightly sweet.

Tasha had cleaned all the stalls that morning and put fresh hay on all the beds. Each goat had their own bed, raised from the floor to keep them warm. Tasha scooped the extra hay out, while the goats sniffed around and Grandpa leaned against a wall, with Ferdinand still nuzzling his beard.

“Will he be warm enough tonight?” Tasha asked, looking at Ferdinand.

“With the extra hay, and Agnes, he’ll be fine.” Grandpa nodded.

Agnes was Ferdinand’s mother, and although in the daytime Ferdinand was independent and adventurous, he still liked to cuddle her at night.

“The snow is early this year though,” Grandpa continued, “and it’s falling fast. We must keep a close eye on the goats and the chickens, and make sure they stay warm and well fed. And we’ll need to watch out for foxes. They get bolder in the snow. Last winter I lost three chickens,” Grandpa said sadly.

“I’ll do my best to keep them safe.” Tasha scooped the last of the hay into Agnes and Ferdinand’s stall, then checked the water buckets and feeders were full.

Grandpa tried lowering Ferdinand into his stall with Agnes, but Ferdinand clambered back into Grandpa’s beard. “It’s time

to sleep now, Ferdinand.” Grandpa laughed as he untangled Ferdinand’s legs. His laugh turned into a deep chesty cough and his whole body began shaking.

Tasha took one of the cough sweets she always carried for Grandpa out of the tin in her pocket and offered it to him. Nona, an elderly lady in the valley, had made the sweets for Grandpa, from honey, moss and birch sap. They smelled sweet and earthy – much nicer than the bitter “*fortifying tea*” Nona had made for Tasha, to “*strengthen her because she is too timid*”.


Nona called Tasha “Myshka”, which means little mouse. This annoyed Tasha, but she hadn’t complained because she didn’t want to talk about how or why she might be timid.

Once the sweet was in Grandpa’s mouth, his cough subsided and he began breathing more calmly. Tasha felt herself relax too. Nona might annoy her sometimes, but she was grateful for those cough sweets. “Are you all right?” Tasha asked.

Grandpa nodded and patted Ferdinand goodnight. When he rose up, his gaze drifted to the empty stalls further into the shelter and his eyes shone damp in the dim light.

Last spring there had been fifty goats sleeping in the shelter. “You must miss them,” Tasha whispered.

“I do.” Grandpa scratched his beard and sighed. “But it’s important to know when to let go. I was struggling to manage



them and, at that time, I hadn't thought to ask for help from you and your parents. Then Vasily, on the other side of the lake, offered me a good price. He'll take care of them and there's fine grazing in his fields. And perhaps..." Grandpa turned back to Tasha and raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps now you and your parents have moved here, you might decide to grow the herd again in spring."

"I'd like that." Tasha smiled at the thought of more baby goats around the farm, and crouched down to rub the soft fur around Ferdinand's neck. Usually, baby goats were born in spring – when the weather was warmer and there were more plants to graze. But Ferdinand had been born in winter. Grandpa said he was an unexpected gift.

Ferdinand bleated and pushed his warm snout into Tasha's palm. "Goodnight, Ferdinand." Tasha stroked each goat as she wished them goodnight and closed the gates on their stalls, then she held out her arm to support Grandpa.

Grandpa linked his arm into Tasha's and they ducked back outside, closing and bolting the shelter door behind them. The snow was falling so thickly now that it was difficult to see anything but the fluffy flakes.

"This is incredible!" Tasha's boots sank deep into the softness. "I can't believe how much has fallen while we've

been settling the goats."

"Almost a hand's breadth in the last hour." Grandpa looked across the paddock, which was now covered in a thick, bright blanket. "That is rare, even for here."

"I can't believe I'm finally seeing snow!" Tasha tried to blink away some of the sparkling flakes that kept sticking to her eyelashes. Her face tingled with cold. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes as she tried to make out the nearest farmhouse again. She couldn't help but wonder if Klara was still outside. But if she was, Tasha had no chance of seeing her now. Klara was too far away, and there was too much snow in the air.

Grandpa followed Tasha's gaze. "Do you know what is as important as knowing when to let go?" he asked.

Tasha tilted her head with curiosity.

"Knowing when to reach out," Grandpa said.

Tasha felt herself tense and draw inwards. It was a familiar feeling. Since that day at Claw's Edge, Tasha had withdrawn from the world like a hermit crab into a shell. And she had been doing it for so long now, she didn't know how to stop.

Tasha knew it worried her parents, and now Grandpa too. She had seen Grandpa watching her with concern on the few occasions people had visited the farmhouse. She knew how she must look at those times – how her nervousness was woven into

her body and showed itself in her stiff posture, her trembling fingers and tense frown. When anyone came close to Tasha, she would stand still and silent as a mountain and imagine sea urchin spines all around her, protecting her. Tasha didn't like to admit it, but all this worried her too. She felt trapped by the way she had become, but unable to step out of it.

Grandpa moved his arm over Tasha's shoulders. "I know it can be difficult," he said gently. "It took me almost a year to write that letter to your parents – to say what was on my mind, and ask for help."

Tasha thought back to the letter that had landed on the sandy doormat of her old home at the end of summer. She had smiled to see Grandpa's careful, curving handwriting on the envelope. Grandpa didn't often send letters and when he did, they were better described as gifts from the valley. They might contain a tiny pressed flower with a note saying, *The first blossom of spring*. Or a soft curl of goat's wool with a note saying, *Kira had a kid. I named her Inna*. Once, he sent a tiny skull and delicate white bones wrapped in pale-green moss with a note saying, *Shrew skeleton from inside a barn-owl pellet*.

This envelope had no gift from the valley though. It contained a single folded piece of paper, and Grandpa's usually neat script had a few wobbles.

*Dearest Svetlana, Konstantin and Tasha,
Midsummer has passed. The days are getting shorter. I go to the woods to gather firewood, but I am tired. Sometimes I think I see my old dog, Yarik. Yesterday I followed him for an hour through a pine thicket before I remembered he was gone. I picked some evening beauty on the way home, but it had lost its freshness by the time I reached Yarik's grave, the white flowers yellowed and wrinkled.*

When the sun sets below the western peaks, its fire burning bright orange, charring the mountaintops black, I see a house right on top of the world and I feel it calling me. But no one else in the valley sees it. They say it must be a trick of the light, or that I am imagining things.

I worry about the farm. I am old and struggling to manage it alone, and the few people left in the valley are so busy with their own farms I do not wish to trouble them. I do not wish to trouble you either, and if you are too busy, I understand, but I wondered if perhaps you would all like to come and visit for a while? Your company and help over autumn and winter would be wonderful, and perhaps, if you like, you could stay even longer.

This farm is your home too, always.

With love, Grandpa

At first, the letter made Tasha worry about Grandpa. But then she talked to her parents and they agreed they would move to Grandpa's farm as soon as possible, and stay as long as they were needed – maybe even make a new home there. Tasha felt in her heart that Grandpa would feel better as soon as they did this, so her worry quickly dissolved.

Mama was Grandpa's only child. And Tasha and her parents were the only family he had. They always had a brilliant time when they visited Grandpa, and all loved each other dearly, so it felt right that they move in together.

As they made plans, Tasha became excited about the fresh start away from the rolling waves of Saltberry, which were a constant reminder of the awful day she didn't want to think about.

There were things that Tasha knew she would miss of course. Their cosy family home, and the forget-me-nots that grew around it. The secret cave Mama took her to, where the wind always swirled into a song. Fossil hunting with Papa around the old slate quarry, so overgrown with gigantic ferns that Tasha always felt like she had stepped back in time. And the blackberries, salted with sea air, that gave Saltberry its name. Tasha and her parents would pick them from along the coastal path when they walked to the Blue Shell Gallery,

where Mama and Papa sold their art.

Tasha's parents were artists. They said they would carry on painting – in between farming – and send their art to the gallery instead. Or, if they stayed on the farm, they could bring their art to Saltberry in the summer and visit Papa's side of the family too. Tasha liked this idea, because even though she didn't feel as close to her cousins, aunts and uncles since Claw's Edge, she knew she would miss them. Especially Aunt Katya, who worked in Tasha's favourite second-hand bookshop, and always kept the best wildlife books under the counter for her. And Uncle Gennady, who made mouth-wateringly delicious Saltberry ice cream for Tasha and her cousins – whose laughter and squabbles had always been a part of Tasha's life.

But now all Tasha's happy memories of Saltberry had been overshadowed by thick storm clouds of feelings about what had happened there. So Tasha put her seashell collection back on the beach, along with the pebbles and driftwood she had gathered over the years. She even left her old sketchbooks behind, which had drawings of rock pools and waves, and most of her books too, because they were about coastal and marine wildlife.

Tasha did pack Auntie Katya's leaving gift though – a book called *Animals in Winter* and another called *Wildlife of the*

North. And she packed the gifts from her cousins – new sketchbooks and pencils – and promised to send them drawings of her new life on Grandpa’s farm.

“I wish I’d written the letter sooner now,” Grandpa said, pulling Tasha from her thoughts. “It’s wonderful having you all here. And knowing that, when the time comes, you’ll take over the farm and care for the animals.”

Tasha felt suddenly cold and dizzy, like one of the snowflakes tumbling down. She knew Grandpa was old and hadn’t been feeling well, but he was strong. He shouldn’t be thinking about *when the time comes*.

“We’re not taking over the farm,” Tasha said firmly. “We came here to help while you get better, then we can all take care of it together.”

Grandpa hugged Tasha tighter. “Well, whatever the near and far future holds, I’d feel happier if you made a friend or two here, Tashenka.” He winked at her. “And I think you’d feel happier too. The goats and the chickens are fine company, but nothing compares to a human friend.”

Tasha looked down at the snow at her feet, wanting to change the conversation. She nudged it gently with the toe of her boots and it bunched into a little glistening mound. Tasha’s eyes lit up as an idea sparked inside her. “Let’s build a snow girl,

Grandpa! Like in the story you tell. I’ve always wanted to.”

Grandpa looked around at the quilt of fresh snow and smiled. “I would love to, Tashenka. What a gift to build your first snowman with you.”

“Snow girl,” Tasha corrected. “Like in the story. Let’s build her close to the farmhouse, then we’ll be able to see her through the windows when we go inside.”

Tasha leaned close to Grandpa as they walked on. Feathery flakes whirled around Tasha’s face and clung to her eyelashes, making the world glitter with possibility. “Grandpa, this snow is so beautiful. The snow girl we build will be the most magical thing in the world!”

