

Chapter ONE



“Do you really think it will snow?” Anna whispered as soon as Mr Ford’s back was turned. They were supposed to be reading, but most of the class had at least one eye on the window and the patch of yellowish-grey sky they could see over the wall of the playground.

“Definitely,” Ruby hissed back. “It’s so cold. And it just looks like snow, doesn’t it?”

Anna nodded. There was something about that scrap of sky. It looked heavy, as if the clouds were filled with snow. Just in time for the end of term tomorrow. It would be perfect. She peered over her page at the clock – surely it was home time by now? Usually she loved ending the day with reading, but the thought of snow made it too hard to concentrate.

When the bell rang at last, there was a second of complete silence and then everyone leaped up, cramming books and pencil cases into their trays and racing for the cloakroom.

“If it snows like it’s supposed to, maybe we won’t even have to come to school tomorrow,” Ruby said hopefully.

“The last day’s always fun, though!” Anna said, wrapping a scarf round her neck. “Mr Ford said we can watch a DVD after lunch. But that’s not as much fun as playing in the snow,” she admitted.

“Exactly! Come on, let’s go and see if it’s started yet!”

Anna and Ruby hurried out into the playground to look at the sky. It was a dark, dark grey now, but there were still no snowflakes.

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“Do you think the forecast has got it wrong?” Ruby said, peering at the clouds.

Anna sighed. “I hope not.”

“It will snow, *zvezda moya*, don’t worry.”

“Baba!” Anna turned to hug her grandma. “I forgot you were picking me up today. Mum’s going to her office Christmas party and Dad’s working,” she explained to Ruby. “I’m staying over at Baba’s house tonight.”

Ruby nodded. “What does *zvez* – whatever your baba said mean?” she whispered.

“It’s Russian for ‘my star’,” Anna explained. “It’s just a nice thing to call somebody. Baba, do you really think it’s going to snow?”

“Definitely. Those are snow clouds.

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If it doesn't start before you go to bed tonight, you will wake up to a white world tomorrow, I'm certain. Now –" she looked thoughtfully at Anna's bag – "do you have everything? Your mama dropped a bag off with me this morning, but she said to make sure you had brought everything home. Homework? PE kit?"

"No homework and I've got my PE kit." Anna waved it in front of her.

"See you tomorrow, Anna! My mum's calling me." Ruby dashed away and Anna slipped her hand into Baba's.

"Can we watch a film together tonight?"

"Mmm, I should think so. You can find me a nice Christmas film. I made those honey cookies you like. We can have some when we get home."

They walked back to Baba's house,

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admiring all the Christmas lights and decorations on the way. Anna liked the sparkling reindeer standing on her neighbour's lawn.



“We’re going to put up our tree this weekend. Have you got a tree yet, Baba?”

“My little tinsel tree is in the loft, but I haven’t got it down yet. Perhaps you can help me put it up later. But it feels early to me, to be putting up a tree. Christmas is weeks away,” Baba grumbled, and Anna laughed.

The church in Russia worked on a different calendar, so Christmas Day wasn’t until January 7th. There would be all the New Year celebrations first. Anna loved the party that Baba always had for all her Russian friends on New Year’s Eve.

“You could always have Christmas twice!” Anna suggested.

“Two Christmases! Certainly not.” Baba shook her head, pretending to be cross. “What an idea. You know, your

cousins in Russia won't be on their school holiday until the day before New Year's Eve."

Anna sighed. "I bet Tatiana and Peter and Annushka have got masses of snow."

"Oh yes." Baba smiled. "But nothing like a year or so ago, when they had that huge snowfall. Do you remember? Two months' worth of snow fell in one night and Uncle Michael had to dig out their front door."

"I wish we could go and visit them again," Anna said enviously. "But in the winter, this time. We could go to Russia for New Year! I'd love to see really deep snow. Here it's just cold." She shivered. It was definitely a lot colder than it had been the day before.

They hurried into Baba's little flat, and

Baba made a cup of tea for herself and hot chocolate for Anna. Dipping the spiced honey cookies into the hot chocolate, Anna started to feel her frozen toes again. “This is nice, Baba,” she murmured. But she couldn’t resist looking round to check out of the window for snow.

“It will come, Anna! I promise. Let’s go and watch our film, hey?”

It was lovely, snuggled up on the sofa. Anna almost forgot about the snow. She was starting to feel really Christmassy now.

What should she get Baba for Christmas, she wondered as the film ended and Baba went into the kitchen to heat up the soup she’d made for dinner. Baba loved little ornaments. She had lots of them on the shelves in her living room

– animals and dancing girls and baskets of flowers. Perhaps she could buy her grandma a special new one?

“Anna, switch it over to the news, please,” Baba called from the kitchen. “I like to know what’s going on. I can hear it from here.”

Anna changed channels and went on looking at Baba’s ornaments, wondering whether she had enough pocket money to buy something really nice. Then something the newsreader said caught her attention, and she yelped with excitement.

“What is it?” Baba asked, popping her head round the door.

“Look! It’s Vladivostok! That’s near where Tatiana and Peter and Annushka live, isn’t it? It’s on the news!”

“I’ll turn the soup down.” Baba hurried

back into the kitchen and then came to sit with Anna. “What’s happening? Is it the snow again?”

“No! They’re saying there’s a tiger in the city!”

“Oh my... I don’t believe it.” Baba peered at the screen, gasping at the blurry footage of a tiger – a real tiger! – racing across a busy road.



“They’re trying to catch him,” Anna explained. “And they’ve given him a name – Vladik, like the city. Did you ever see a tiger when you lived near Vladivostok, Baba?”

“Never,” her baba murmured. “Tigers are so wild, they never usually come near people. Even in our tiny village close to the forest we never saw one. Right into the city? It’s hard to believe.”

“I hope the tiger’s OK,” Anna murmured. “I bet he was scared of those cars.”

Baba nodded, and then sighed as the news programme showed footage of police tracking the tiger. “And now he has all these people chasing him...”

“They won’t hurt him, will they?” Anna asked worriedly. “He’s so beautiful

– but I suppose it would be really scary if he got into a supermarket or something.”

“Oh!” Baba took her phone out of her pocket. “It’s your mama. She probably wants to say goodnight to you before she goes to this party. Hello, Maria!”

“Can I tell her about the tiger, Baba, please?” Anna asked excitedly.

“Maria, you’ll not believe what we just saw on the news. Here, Anna will tell you.” Baba passed over the phone and Anna grabbed it eagerly.

“Mum! There’s a tiger loose in Vladivostok! A wild tiger!”

“Wow! What’s it doing there?”

“No one knows – they said on the news that maybe it was looking for food. They’re trying to catch him to take him back to the forest.”

“Tigers are really rare,” her mum said. “But I suppose with towns getting bigger they will end up coming closer to people. I expect they’re doing everything they can to catch him safely, Anna, don’t worry. Are you having fun with Baba? Did she make honey cookies for you?”

“Yes. And we watched a film.”

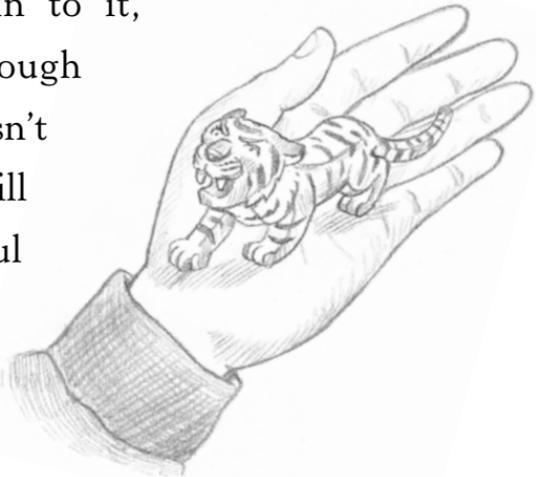
“Lucky you. Sleep well, OK? Last day of school tomorrow.”

“Have fun at the party, Mum!” Anna handed back the phone and heard Baba and Mum switch to Russian. Anna knew some Russian, but not enough to understand Baba when she was talking fast. She went back to looking at Baba’s ornaments. Most of them were animals, she realized. Anna had played with some of them before – there was a whole

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family of gorgeous bears, the littlest one not much bigger than the end of Anna's thumb. She loved arranging them and she'd given them all names long ago. But behind the bears, looking a little bit dusty, was another creature, long and low with a beautiful heavy curl of tail.

Anna picked up the wooden figure, wondering how she'd never noticed it before. It was a tiger, but it looked plumper than the one on the news, small and a bit fluffy, as if it was a cub. The woodcarver had used some sort of special wood with a clear grain to it, so even though the tiger wasn't painted, it still had beautiful stripes.



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“Ah, you found my little tiger!” Baba came over to see what Anna was holding. “He’s lovely, isn’t he?”

“Where did he come from, Baba?”

Baba smiled. “Your uncle Michael made him for me – he’s very good at carving animals, he made the little bears too. Your cousin Annushka has a tiger just like this one and when I said how beautiful it was, Michael made one for me.”

Anna smiled. She had only met Annushka once, but they spoke on the phone sometimes. They were almost exactly the same age and they had the same name – Annushka was a pet name for Anna. She wondered what Annushka was doing right now – had she seen the news about the

tiger in Vladivostok too?

Anna put the tiger in the middle of the kitchen table while they were eating their soup, and when it was time for bed she looked pleadingly at Baba. “Could I take him with me? He reminds me of Vladik, the tiger on the news. I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Of course you can.” Baba hugged her. “And don’t worry, Anna. I am sure the tiger will be all right.”

Anna had just put on her pyjamas when Baba called from the living room. “Anna! Look out of the window, *zvezda moya!*”

Anna hurried across the room, and drew back the curtains. “It’s snowing!” she whispered delightedly. A few fat heavy flakes were floating down, glowing in the light of the street lamp.



“Do you think there’ll be more?” she said, as Baba came to stand behind her. “Will it stick?”

“I’m sure it will. Go to bed, you’ll catch cold standing there staring at it!”

“Will you come and talk to me for a bit?” Anna pleaded. “You could tell me about my cousins and their village.” She loved it when Baba told her stories about life in Russia.

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“It’s getting late,” Baba grumbled, but she came and sat on the end of Anna’s bed anyway. “Do you want to hear about the snow again, *zvezda moyya?*”

“Yes, please,” Anna said sleepily.

“OK, well... Did you know, Annushka once went outside in the snow without her warm hood on, and it was so cold that her eyelashes froze?”

“That’s silly, Baba. You’re making it up...”

“Not at all. You have to be careful, when it’s that cold. And now with tigers out there too. I shall call your auntie, tell her to make sure they all stay close to the house. Are you asleep, Anna?”

“Mmmm...”

“Goodnight then, Annushka!” Baba leaned over to give her a kiss and then

padded away, her footsteps tiger-soft.

Anna smiled to herself. She loved it when Baba called her that. Yawning, she rolled over and looked at the wooden tiger standing guard on the little chest of drawers beside the bed. He was carved with a snarl and he looked fierce, but Anna thought perhaps he was scared. She snuggled under the duvet, wishing she'd brought her really warm pyjamas. Sleepily, she reached out to hold the little wooden tiger, tucking him next to her cheek.

Not really fierce, she thought, as her eyes drifted shut again and the tiger cub slunk away down the street outside Baba's flat, shaking the snowflakes from his whiskers.