THE GOOD BEAR

SARAH LEAN

illustrated by Fiona Woodcock

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CHAPTER ONE

Every year on Christmas Eve, Thea Whittington tells a story. It's about something that happened to her when she was a girl, more than thirty years ago.

Now, Thea is sitting on the sofa with a blanket peeled back while she waits for her daughter, Ursula, who is upstairs changing into her pyjamas.

It's dark outside and the sitting room smells of the sprigs of holly, twigs and pine cones tied with ribbons they collected that morning. There's a

blueberry pie in the oven, and there's a Christmas tree, decorated except for the star, which lies against the crêpe-paper-wrapped bucket of sand at the foot of the tree. Across the room Thea's world-worn boots lie on the doormat. She holds a photograph; its colours have dimmed and the edges of the paper are soft. There are two figures in the picture; one of them is a man wearing a blue coat who is Thea's father, and the other is a brown bear. The bear has one great paw raised. Thea smiles at them, as if they can see her. She sets the photo aside as Ursula comes bounding down the stairs and jumps on the sofa.

They snuggle under the blanket with their mugs of hot chocolate and marshmallows. They blow and sip and bathe in the warmth and the glow of the little golden lights on the tree.

Hot drinks finished, they gather the blanket closer around them, tucking it in at the sides. Thea takes a corner of the photograph and holds it

between them and they lean against each other for a full minute or two, taking in the image.

'I'm ready,' Ursula says.

'Where shall I start?' Thea asks, as she does every year on Christmas Eve.

'Start with the letter you wrote to Henry just before your twelfth birthday.'

'I'll start with the letter then.'

CHAPTER TWO

I didn't tell my mum about the letter at first. I didn't think she'd agree . . . but we'll come to that. About two weeks before my twelfth birthday, which was on the 11th December 1978, I wrote to my father, Henry, asking him if he would buy me a typewriter as a present. He and my mum had divorced when I was four and visits from him were irregular. Communication had all but stopped since he'd been living and working in Norway for the past few years. I had begun to think

of him as Henry, the man who used to be my dad. It armoured me against the fact he had drifted away from my life, but at that time also had the effect of making me feel the distance between us and want to pull him back. I was worried he was missing not only that I had grown but also hearing about what was growing inside my heart. I aspired to be a writer, more than anything else in the world, and I especially wanted him to know about that.

Around that time, Mum was occasionally bringing home a typewriter from her office to do some typing in the evenings to earn extra money. To me, there was something special about watching her sitting with her elbows tucked in, head slightly to one side, eyes on the notes she'd been given. It was magic the way she transferred those handwritten words, so quickly, from her eyes through her fingers and then to the typewriter keys to form beautifully organized sentences on paper. I wanted something of what I saw, and yet much

more, because I wanted it to be *my* words and *my* stories appearing like that. I told her I wanted to learn to type too.

Mum began to teach me to touch type. It meant resting my fingers on the middle line of keys, and then she would cover my hands with a tea towel so that I had to remember where the letters were. My fingers were learning to feel and know where to reach, as if my eyes were then free to turn inside me, and to somehow view, unhindered, the stories that would flow to the tips of my fingers. It was a wonderful feeling; a sense of knowing that I had something creative in me and it was my responsibility to find a way of letting it out.

With the urge in me so strong, I thought I must have a typewriter of my own. And to my mind, being a writer would also encourage Henry to want to be in my life so that he could share this part of me that I thought was worth sharing.

My handwriting was terribly time-consuming,

and a little flamboyant if anything, with lots of loopy tails and flourishes on the long and high letters. It had caused Mum and my teachers some concern as I took so long to finish things at school and often had to stay behind in break time to catch up. But I was much more interested in the words themselves and what they could do. I wrote the letter to Henry by hand because I thought it was also important that he should see how much of a hindrance my handwriting was to me. I crossed out the sentiments I felt were somehow weak. I screwed the paper up many times, started again and again, worrying over whether I had said enough or if Henry would be able to tell how much it all meant to me. Using the most dazzling descriptions, even though I barely understood them, and with the most compelling persuasion I could muster, the letter with my birthday present wish for a typewriter slowly got written, loopy tails and all. I copied Henry's address from a

scrappy piece of paper tucked inside our address book and searched the drawers of the sideboard for a loose stamp. I sneaked out while Mum was hand-washing delicates at the kitchen sink and ran to the corner of our road.

I turned the envelope over, checked the seal and pressed my thumb over the stamp again. Then I dropped it in the post box before doubt got the better of me.

My heart fluttered with anticipation every time I thought of that letter getting closer and closer to him. The desire that was winging its way to him in its envelope was out of my hands now, and hopefully safely in his.

For my birthday Mum bought me a satchel. It was brown leather with two buckles and a long strap, and expanded in the middle. I tried it out, wearing

it across my chest, deeming it my version of a writer's briefcase, in preparation and rehearsal for what I wanted to be.

No present had arrived from Henry though.

All he sent was a card.

On seeing me so miserable, I told Mum about the letter. She winced, and not just a little, when I admitted what I'd asked Henry for. She thought I shouldn't have handed over to Henry such a big wish as this one. I explained to her that my letter and request were my way of trying to draw us closer together. I was sure he'd understand from my words how important it was for me because of his own passion for working with wood.

Despite Mum's reservations, somewhere between my disappointing birthday and some phone calls she made, it was decided I should spend Christmas with Henry and his new family. It wasn't what I'd imagined would happen. I'd hoped for the gift, and perhaps a card with a letter inside, and meaningful words.

'But that means *we* won't spend Christmas together,' I told Mum. The thought of missing out on that precious time with traditions we had made our own was enough to make me refuse. It was only for this one Christmas, Mum assured me, a little more than one week away from each other. And although we would miss each other terribly, she thought I should go.

'Henry told me he does have a birthday present for you,' she said, wincing again.

'He does?' I took her reaction to mean that she knew what gift awaited me in Norway but didn't want to spoil the surprise.

I took myself off to my room and stretched out the pleated middle of my satchel. There was enough room for a small, portable typewriter, one that might have been too heavy or too big to post from Norway.

My father had long been gone and I had in many ways accepted his absence as I loved the life I shared

with Mum. Life had also added a new family to Henry over in Norway, and although I felt slightly envious over the fact they had him in their daily life, I gave them little other thought. As far as I was concerned, I was on my way to becoming a writer, which happened to involve an important journey to see my father first and collect the typewriter.