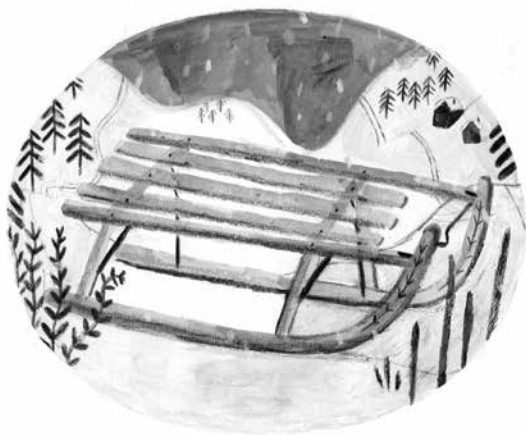


# THE LETTER



*As soon as you get off the ferry at the quayside, you'll feel the breeze blowing down from the glen. Even now, when it's winter and cold, you can still feel it. Close your eyes. You can smell the pine trees, and the spruce. Then just start walking.*

*Follow the road straight ahead, past the closed-down snack bar, the shop and Theo's hair salon, and then carry on along by the river. The road starts off quite flat, with the odd house along the way. There's a digger parked outside one of the last houses. That's where Peter and his mum live.*

*Then there's more and more snow and trees, and fewer and fewer houses. The road narrows to half the width and becomes twice as steep. If you haven't been here before, you*

*might hesitate, wondering if you've gone the wrong way. But you haven't. Because just as you start to wonder, you see a sign. "Glimmerdal", it says. Then you know you're heading in the right direction after all.*

*The first thing you come to after the sign is a holiday camp. Listen carefully: whatever you do, don't enter that holiday camp. If you do, then don't come out saying that you weren't warned. Klaus Hagen, the owner of Hagen's Wellness Retreat, is so sour he should be poured down the kitchen sink. He has no sense of humour, and he doesn't like children, especially if they make loud noises ... and especially if they once smashed one of his cabin windows with a catapult, even if it wasn't on purpose. He thinks those children are the worst. (The child who smashed that window isn't particularly fond of Mr Hagen either, if truth be told. Sometimes she lies awake at night wondering whether she should smash another one.) So, if you've any sense at all, you'll head straight past Hagen's Wellness Retreat.*

*After Hagen's Wellness Retreat, you'll find yourself in some woods, where the snow bends the branches almost all the way down to your head. Some call it an enchanted forest. Just beyond it is Sally's green house, but there's nothing much enchanted*

*about that. You'll spot Sally's purplish perm sticking up from behind a pot plant in her living-room window. Sally will spot you too; you can be sure of that. Sally spots everything. Even if you were to sneak past that green house like a little mouse in winter camouflage, making not so much as a peep, Sally would still spot you. She never takes afternoon naps either.*

*Once you're past Sally's house, you'll finally reach the bridge, the one that crosses the River Glimmerdal. If you go over the bridge and walk a short way up the hill to the right, you'll get to Gunnvald's farm. But if, instead of going right, you walk a short way up the hill to the left, then you'll reach Astrid and her family's farm. There are no other farms up the glen, beneath the mountains.*

*So now you've arrived. Welcome to Glimmerdal.*



## CHAPTER ONE

### **In which Astrid almost skis a somersault**

Old February afternoons are very peaceful at the top of Glimmerdal. The river is quiet, because it's all iced up on top. There are no birds tweeting, because they've flown south. You can't even hear the sheep, as they're inside, in the barns. There's just the white snow, the dark spruce trees and the tall, silent mountains.

But in the midst of this winter quiet, there was a black dot about to make some noise. The black dot was up at the foot of Cairn Peak, at the end of a long and quite uneven ski track. The dot was none other than Astrid Glimmerdal, with her lion's mane of curly red hair. Her father is a farmer here in Glimmerdal, and her mother is a marine

research scientist who goes on expeditions, working along the coast and at sea. Her family have been living in the glen for a long time, which is why they share their surname with the place, as do some other families in the area.

Astrid was about to turn ten at Easter, and she was planning to have such a big party that it would be heard echoing all the way up the mountains.

Klaus Hagen, the one down at the holiday camp who doesn't like children, should really have been pleased with his lot in life. After all, there was only one child in the whole glen, and even Mr Hagen should have been able to put up with just one. But he couldn't. Astrid Glimmerdal was precisely the type of child that Mr Hagen couldn't stand. As soon as they met her, all his holiday guests realized that even if they were staying at Hagen's Wellness Retreat, it was really Astrid's glen they were visiting. Luckily the little empress of Glimmerdal was particularly fond of visitors.

"You should have 'welcome' printed on your forehead, Astrid," Auntie Idun had once told her.

In the winter, Astrid's ski tracks and footprints traced

lines and squiggles all across Glimmerdal.

“I let her out every morning and hope she’ll come back in the evening,” her dad, Sigurd, would say when visitors asked him where his daughter was off to now, as people in Glimmerdal always asked.

The little thunderbolt of Glimmerdal, that was what everyone called her.

Below Cairn Peak, Astrid shifted her weight a little, pointing the ends of her skis down towards the crag known as the Little Hammer. School had finished early, as it was the last Friday before half-term, so it was still the middle of the day.

“Ah, what a wonderful thing February half-term is,” Astrid said to herself. “February half-term and downhill slopes.”

The run down to the Little Hammer was steep. So steep that Astrid really had to steel herself. But this was what Auntie Eira and Auntie Idun did when they were home for Easter. They’d start from the same place, and would set off at a furious speed, kicking up a flurry of snow behind them like a bride’s veil. They’d leap off the edge of the Little

Hammer, flying sky-high. Auntie Eira even did somersaults.

“You need two things in life,” Auntie Eira would say.

“Speed and self-confidence.”

Astrid thought those were wise words. While her aunts were away studying in Oslo, Astrid tried to keep in practice, doing lots of things that required speed and self-confidence.

One thing was for certain, though – Astrid Glimmerdal would never even do so much as a tiny, sneaky little ski jump unless Gunnvald was sitting at his kitchen window, watching her. For a start, it’s no fun jumping unless somebody’s watching; and besides, it’s a good idea to have somebody who can call the mountain rescue service if you don’t get up again after landing.

Gunnvald lived quite a long way from the foot of Cairn Peak, but he had some fantastic binoculars. Now Astrid waved her arms to signal that she was ready.

And then the silence in Glimmerdal was broken.

“*Old MacDonald had a farm!*” Astrid sang, bellowing out the words and launching herself forward.

It is important to sing when you’re skiing. Every time she jumped off the Little Hammer, Astrid sang so loudly



that she started mini-avalanches in the hollow near the top of the Glimmerhorn.

*“E–I–E–I–OOOO!”*

She curled up with her hands in front of her and her head down to reduce the drag.

*“And on that farm he had a coooooow!”*

The edge of the Little Hammer was growing larger. Astrid began to sing extra loudly to stop herself from suddenly changing her mind, which might not end well.

*“E–I–E–I–OOOO!”* she sang so loudly that the words echoed off the mountains of Glimmerdal.

Holy muskrat, she was going fast! The Little Hammer was looming closer and closer. Good grief, why did she never learn? Why did she never, ever, *ever* learn? She was almost there. Soon she’d be going up...

Astrid closed her eyes. There was the edge. She had butterflies in her stomach and her legs were tingling.

*“With a moo-moo here and a moo-moooooooooooo...!”*

Astrid was flying. She had never sung so much of “Old MacDonald” in mid-air. Blinking badgers, it was almost the whole chorus. If she’d known how to do somersaults, like

Auntie Eira, then she would've had time to do three in a row.

But I don't know how to do somersaults yet, Astrid thought to herself while in mid-air. Or maybe I do, she thought next, when she noticed that her head was where her legs were supposed to be, and her legs were where her head was supposed to be.

Then, after flying quite an impressive trajectory, Astrid crash-landed like an upside-down jelly baby in a cream cake with far too much cream. It was white and cold, and she didn't know whether she was alive or dead as she lay there. Gunnvald was probably wondering the same thing, down at his kitchen window. Astrid lay still until she could feel her heart beating. Then she shook her head a little, as if to put everything inside it back in place.

"Does that count as a somersault?" she wondered aloud.