



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

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asha 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

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.

