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Opening extract from

The Snow Sister

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The Last Will and Testament of Silas Granger

Christmas Eve morning wasn't the best time for a telling-off, yet Pearl Granger was about to get one. She had been outside in the snow for all of two minutes, when above her head a window opened and her mother's voice rang out.

'What in heaven's name are you doing, you daft child?'

Pearl flinched. 'It isn't what it looks like, Ma.'

What it *did* look like was a girl in a patched-up frock putting the finishing touches to a person made out of snow. And that person, with two pilfered pieces of coal for eyes and a turnip for a nose, was now wearing Pearl's sister Agnes's best shawl.

'Bring that back inside this instant, do you hear?' Ma said, and Pearl knew it wasn't the coal or the turnip her mother meant, though both were in short supply. Ma shut the window again with a slam.

Pearl sniffed back her tears. She wasn't going to cry, not when it was very nearly Christmas and the snow lay so thick and beautiful on the ground. Ever since she could remember, she'd loved snow. So too had Agnes, and together

they'd rolled in it, fought in it, shut their eyes and tasted it. Even without Agnes the snow still made everything seem better, like a clean sheet over an old mattress.

And Pearl was proud of her finished snow sculpture. The size of a real-life girl, it had a sharp face, a certain tilt to the head. With Agnes's shawl now in place – and with a good deal of squinting – it might almost be her sister stood before her.

Almost. But not quite.

With a sigh, Pearl removed the shawl and, holding it to her face, breathed in. Agnes's smell was of violets – the sweets, not the flowers. After she died it had lingered in the house, as if she couldn't quite leave. Only when Ma packed Agnes's things in a tin trunk did the violet smell disappear. A year later, and though it was bad luck to keep them, all their mourning clothes were folded and stored

away inside the same trunk. Yet the blackness in their hearts proved more difficult to hide.

That tin trunk, Pearl knew, was kept in the cellar between the coal heap and the vegetables. Three winters it had been there. Three winters of her sister's clothes hidden away, so that instead of hand-me-downs Pearl made do with letting out skirt hems and patching up stockings worn thin at the toes.

Not that she minded. Each winter when it snowed, she crept down into the dark for two bits of coal, a turnip and something of Agnes's from the trunk to make a snow person.

Or more precisely, a snow sister.

It didn't bring her sister back. And the snow person always melted in the end. Yet for a little while she had a snow sister, which meant she missed Agnes just a tiny bit less.

Today, though, Agnes's best shawl didn't smell of violets. Pearl breathed deeper, willing



some scrap of her sister still to be there, but all she got was a nose full of dust that made her sneeze.

'Bless you!'

It was Mr Leonard, the postman.

'That hill on Heather Lane don't get any smaller,' he puffed. 'And now everyone's sending these new *Christmas* cards, I'm feeling like a pack mule!'

He stood red-faced on the path that led past six identical front doors, Pearl's being the first cottage in the row. The bag he wore strapped across his chest certainly looked fuller than usual. But Pearl's eyes went to the envelope in Mr Leonard's hand.

'Take it straight in to your pa,' the postman said, giving her the envelope. ''Tis an official letter. Postmark says it's from Bath!'

She frowned. *Bath?*

Bath was a day's walk away and full of

fine, tall houses, so Pa said. She didn't know anyone who lived in Bath, and yet she felt a dancing in the pit of her stomach and wasn't sure why.

With the letter in her hand she hesitated.

'*To Mr Barnaby Granger*,' it said.

The writing, squiggly and expensive-looking, was on an envelope so thick it might've had a whole pamphlet inside.

'Go on, hurry!' said Mr Leonard. Waving her inside, he carried on to the next cottage in the row.

Pearl took a deep breath. She felt that flutter in her stomach again. The letter was important, she was sure of it. What she didn't know was whether this was a good thing or a bad.

Inside, she found her father lacing up his work boots. Already he had his coat and hat on

because with the fire burning so feebly, it wasn't any warmer here than outside. He glared at the shawl in her hand. 'You been upsetting your mother?'

She gave him the letter, tucking Agnes's shawl under her arm as she did so. 'This came. Postmark says it's from Bath.'

He sat up straight.

'Oh,' Pa said, turning the envelope over. 'Oh.'

Pearl swallowed nervously. That moment Ma stormed down the stairs.

'Pearl, you can't just go taking that shawl . . .' Seeing Pa's face, she stopped. 'Whatever is it, Barnaby?'

'We have a letter,' he said. 'From Bath.'

Ma moved closer.

Pearl wished he'd just hurry up and open it. Then everyone might forget about Agnes's shawl and she could sneak it back into the

trunk without another word. But she knew Pa wouldn't be able to read the letter, not with his spectacles broken and no money for a new pair.

'Want me to read?' she offered.

Pa nodded and gave the envelope to her. Inside was just one sheet of very thick paper. The words on it were written in that same fancy, squiggly hand.

Pearl cleared her throat.

'*Dearest Sir*,' she read. '*You are requested to attend the reading of the last will and testament of Mr Silas Granger . . .*'

She glanced up.

'Silas *Granger*? Is he a relative, then?'

From the look on her parents' faces she knew he was, though she'd never heard the name before. So the letter was bad news. A will meant that someone had died; *a Granger*, she thought, and felt her tears well

up again even though this person wasn't close like a sister. They hadn't died of fever, here in this very house, whilst holding tight on to her hand.

Yet Pa soon recovered himself. 'Well, well. All that money couldn't save the old devil in the end.' Then he nodded. 'Read on, Pearl.'

She took a nervous breath.

'. . . *on Thursday 24th December at Whitstone and Whitstable Solicitors, Argyle Street, Bath. Proceedings will begin at two p.m. As the main beneficiary in the document you are strongly advised to be prompt . . .*'

Looking up, she saw her parents' faces had changed. Pa was almost smiling. Ma's hand covered her mouth like she was fighting back a laugh.

'What's a beneficiary?' Pearl asked.

'It means he's left us something in his will,' said Pa.

Ma shook her head. 'Only *something*? Barnaby, you're the *main* beneficiary! Looks like he's left you the lot!'

Taking the letter from Pearl and pocketing it, Pa got to his feet. 'Bath? Today at two p.m.?' He glanced at the mantel clock. 'If I get a shift on I might make it in time.'

'But you'll lose a day's work,' said Pearl, growing confused. Though Pa was a wheelwright by trade, the work had become unreliable. People travelled more and more by train these days. There was less call for carriage wheels. And even fine, handcrafted ones like Pa made would never run as smooth as those on train tracks. So a day's work, when it came, was important.

'This is *vital*. He has to go,' said Ma. And her parents shared a look that to Pearl seemed almost feverish.

'Who exactly is *Silas Granger*?' she asked,

even more confused.

'He is . . . sorry, *was* . . . your uncle, your father's only brother,' said Ma, 'though they moved in very different worlds.'

'Why haven't I heard of him before, then?'

Her father paused. 'We never got on, not even as boys. He always wanted bigger and better. Didn't care how he got it, neither. 'Tis no surprise he got rich. We lost touch over the years.'

Ma interrupted. 'Now, Pearl, let your father get going else he'll never make it to Bath.'

'But why's he left us something if you didn't get on?' Pearl said. She couldn't imagine not caring for your own flesh and blood. Not speaking for all those years. It felt such a terribly sad waste.

'Don't you fret, girl. Chances are we're about to become rich!' said Ma.

Pearl stared at her ma, then her pa. '*Rich?*

Us?' This was getting madder by the minute!

'Perhaps our luck's changing, Pearlie-Pearl,' Pa said, chucking her under the chin. 'Now stop worrying.'

Yet still Pearl didn't know what to make of it. From the doorstep, she waved Pa off until he was nothing but a trail of dark footprints in the snow. She hoped he was right, that life was about to get better. In the meantime Ma, at least, was smiling again, and seemed to have forgotten about telling her off.