

To my husband Nick and our youngest cub Eartha.
For holding my hand through the forest.



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The Girl who Speaks Bear



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USBORNE



Prologue

I remember the bear who raised me. Nuzzling my face into her warm belly. Huge furry limbs shielding me from the biting snow. I remember the deep rumbles of her snores through the silent winter, and clouds of steamy breath smelling of berries and pine nuts.

My foster mother, Mamochka, says I was about two years old when she found me outside the bear cave. She says I was standing naked in the snow, but with warm pink cheeks and the biggest smile. I walked right up to her, lifted my arms into the air and made a soft barking sound. Mamochka picked me up and I laid my head on her shoulder, wrapped my legs around her waist, and fell straight to sleep. Mamochka says

she knew right there and then we were meant to be together. But if I don't know where I came from, how can I be sure where I belong?

Mamochka looked in the cave for clues about who I was or who my parents might be, but an old female bear was hibernating inside. Not wanting to disturb her, Mamochka crept away and carried me to her home at the edge of The Snow Forest.

I love living with Mamochka. She's the best mother I could have wished for, but I often wonder about the bear. I wonder if she remembers me. Maybe even misses me. I wonder about the bear almost as much as I wonder about my real parents. The ones who must have lost me – or left me – in the forest.

One day I'd like to find the story of my past, and I hope it's something more magical than being unwanted and abandoned as a baby. I hope it's a tale filled with wonder, that explains who I am and why I'm different, why I hear the trees whispering secrets, and why I always feel the forest, pulling me in.



Chapter One

Yanka the Bear

They call me Yanka the Bear. Not because of where I was found – only a few people know about that. They call me Yanka the Bear because I'm so big and strong.

I tower above all the other twelve-year-olds, and most of the grown-ups too. And I'm stronger than everyone. Even the ice-cutters and the wood-choppers and the few hunter-gatherers who are brave enough to dip into The Snow Forest.

About one hundred people live here, in the village on the southern edge of the forest. And right now they're all squashed into the square, preparing for the festival tomorrow.

Snow sparkles and excitement fizzes in the air.

For over six months, the village has been trapped by the fierce cold of winter. But tomorrow marks the start of The Big Melt. The Great Frozen River will thaw, and The Snow Forest will lose its blanket of white. I'll be able to wander beneath newly green trees. I won't wander far – Mamochka worries if I do. But just the thought of standing beneath swaying willows and chattering pines makes my cheeks tingle with happiness.

People call for my help as I cross the square. I stop to hold up wooden beams for the carpenters assembling the stage for the festival show. I help drive poles into the frozen earth for the climbing contest. And I haul creaking sledges up from the frozen river, loaded with blocks of ice for the ice fort. The fort is already as tall as the village hall, but children still clamber over its shining walls, building it even higher.

Finally, I reach the centre of the square, where my best friend Sasha is stacking wood for the festival bonfire.

"Hey, Sasha." I smile and wave.

"Hey, Yanka." Sasha smiles back from beneath his

huge furry hat. We've been best friends since I pulled him out of a nettle patch, when I was three and he was five. I rubbed his stings with dock leaves and asked him to climb a tree with me. Mamochka says that was the first time I ever spoke.

Sasha is long and leggy as a heron. Until this winter we stood eye to eye, but after my latest growth spurt I see right over the top of his head. I never imagined I'd grow this big, and I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it.

"Shall we carry this one together?" Sasha lifts one end of a long, cut tree.

"I can manage it." I swing the log up onto my shoulder and my feet sink deep into the snow. Sasha picks up another, smaller log, and we clump side by side to the bonfire stack.

Sasha's youngest cousin, Vanya, rushes over with his arms full of twigs. He beams up at me, wide-eyed. "You're as strong as a bear, Yanka."

I lower the log onto the bonfire stack and smile. I don't mind my strength being compared to a bear's. Not really. But it does remind me how different I am – and not only in my size and strength.

Everyone else in the village was born here, and so were their parents and grandparents. They wear fur coats passed down from great-grandfathers and sleep under blankets knitted by great-grandmothers. But I don't know where I was born, or who my real parents are, or how I ended up in the bear cave. The not-knowing feels like a hole inside me that gets a little wider every year.

I heave another log up onto my shoulder and push away these wintery thoughts. Soon the bonfire stack is as tall as me, and I smile as I imagine the heat of it burning tomorrow.

Sasha is laughing with a group of children who have climbed down from the ice fort. His hat is in his hands and his feathery hair is sticking up at all angles. I recognize everyone in the group. There are only about twenty children in the village and we all go to the same school, and always have, so I shouldn't feel awkward around them. But I stumble as I walk over, then smile nervously. No one seems to notice. Maybe because they're busy making plans for tomorrow. Or maybe because my head is so much higher than all

of theirs. I try slouching and bending my knees, but still I don't fit into the group. I feel like a cuckoo chick in a nest of wrens.

The pale grey sky darkens and frost bites into the air. Winter might be ending, but the warmth of spring still feels far away. It's always like this. Snow that melts in the sun refreezes in the gloaming, so the nights are full of ice and glacier-sharp.

A bullfinch flutters past, so close that its feathers graze my cheek. It swoops up and away, towards the forest. I can only see a few spindly treetops from here, but they feel like thick ropes, tugging at my heart. I'm nearly at the top of the hill that rises from the village before I realize I've wandered away from the others.

Sasha catches me up and punches my arm as he falls into step beside me.

"What's that for?" I punch him back, as gently as I can, but still he wobbles away from me.

"Trying to get a head start." Sasha pulls out the blades that clip onto his boots to turn them into ice skates. "Race you to my house?"

"Yes!" My heart lifts, then sinks as I remember

why I'm not wearing skating boots. I've outgrown three pairs this winter and can't face having more made. It scares me, thinking how fast I've grown this year – so much faster than other years that I get pains in my legs at night. I fumble with my pockets and sigh. "I forgot my blades."

"Again?" Sasha groans.

"I don't mind if you skate without me." I stop at the top of the hill. A track of sheet ice covers the path here and stretches all the way to Sasha's house, and then on to my and Mamochka's front door. I know Sasha loves to glide along the ice, graceful as a swallow in flight. But he doesn't clip on his blades.

"Let's go through the forest instead." He bounces over to the gnarly old elm we used to climb when we were little. There's a trail behind it that winds between the trees and loops around to our gardens. I've always preferred walking back that way, and Sasha knows it. Warmth floods through me. Sasha makes the best friend.

Stepping into The Snow Forest is like stepping into another world. The tall, tall trees make me feel small. My mind tingles and my senses come alive.

Sometimes in the forest I feel so close to the story of my past I can almost hear it on the wind.

"Are you excited for the festival?" Sasha asks, his eyes shining.

I nod, thinking of all the things I enjoy about the festival: the games, the music and the shows, racing on the freshly iced sledging hill with Sasha, and running through the fire-maze to Mamochka.

The fire-maze doesn't involve real fire. Huge sheets of flowing silks, cut and painted to look like flames, are draped over the stage. Everyone runs through them at the end of the night, laughing when they get tangled or lost in the sheets, and emerging with faces glowing like embers.

The first time I went through the fire-maze, when I was three or four years old, I was scared, so Mamochka stood on the other side and beckoned me through. I'm not scared any more, but she still stands on the other side when I run.

"I can't wait for the siege game." Sasha beams. "Did you see how high the ice fort is this year?"

"Higher than the village hall," I murmur, distracted

by the sounds of the forest. I duck under a branch and snow shivers onto the back of my neck.

The forest has moods and at this moment it feels restless, with the snow dripping and the birds rustling, animals scurrying up trees and dashing along tunnels under the snow.

Sasha goes on about the games, but I can't concentrate. I feel on edge, like the forest is trying to tell me something.

"Yanka?"

"Sorry. What?"

"Were you listening to the trees again?" Sasha smiles. "Have they told you who you are yet?"

Blood rises into my cheeks. Me and Sasha have always told each other everything. Now, sometimes, I wish he didn't know quite so much about me; like how I hear things in the forest, and how much I wonder about my past.

"Shall I call for you tomorrow?" Sasha asks.

"I'm helping Mamochka carry her remedies to the square and set up her stall. We're leaving at first light."

"I'll come and help."

"You don't have to."

"I want to. My parents are sledging over to pick up my grandparents, so I'm on my own in the morning anyway." Sasha runs off into his back garden. "See you tomorrow."

I walk on to my and Mamochka's garden and linger under the pines at the edge of it, to be near the forest a few moments longer.

Our garden, like Sasha's, runs straight into the forest, with no fences or gates to separate the two. At the moment it's a flat patch of snow, but after The Big Melt we'll turn over the earth and plant seeds. By the time the long summer days arrive, it will be bursting with colour; fruits, flowers and hundreds of herbs, dancing with bees and butterflies.

The herbs are Mamochka's livelihood. She harvests them, dries them, grinds them up and makes all kinds of remedies. Whenever I'm unwell, she has a tonic or a tea to make me feel better. This winter she even made a special ointment, just for me, when I complained that my feet ached from growing too fast.

People say Mamochka can cure anything – that if she wanted to, she could cure the sky from bleeding at sunset – because she has the wisdom of The Snow Forest inside her. Mamochka feels like the forest too, fierce and gentle all at once. Her hands are smooth but tough, like new bark. Her hair is dark, like the shadows between pines. And she smells sweet as lime blossoms.

When Mamochka was younger, she'd walk deep into the forest, collecting wild herbs and berries for

her remedies. That's how she ended up finding me at the bear cave. But these days, she stays in the village and grows everything she needs in her garden.

Like all the other villagers, she says it's dangerous in the forest and that her most important job now is to keep me safe. I wish she'd let me explore just a little further, but she says I could get lost, frozen, or be attacked by one of the many predators that stalk between the trees.

A flash of pink on a snowy branch catches my eye. It's another fat, round bullfinch. I smile at him, slide my hand into my pocket and pull out a few of the sunflower seeds I always carry for the birds. Holding my hand out flat and still, with the seeds on my palm, I whistle low and mournful.

The bullfinch tilts his head and edges down the branch. Then he jumps and flutters onto my hand.

"Yanka!"

My breath catches in my throat. I'm sure the bullfinch said my name.

"Yanka!" the bird calls again. "Yanka the Bear! Come back to the forest!"

I stare at the bullfinch, mouth open. I heard his words as birdsong, but they made sense in my mind. I lean closer, willing the bullfinch to say something else.

But tiny paws scamper up the back of my reindeer-skin coat and Mousetrap, our house weasel, launches himself from my shoulder and dives straight at the little bird.

The bullfinch flaps away just in time and Mousetrap lands on my hand, sending the sunflower seeds raining into the snow. He coils around my wrist and looks up at me guiltlessly, licking his lips.

I frown at him and shake my head. "I wish you wouldn't hunt the birds I feed. Aren't there enough mice in the house for you?"

Mousetrap shakes himself, fluffing up his fur, then drops to the ground and sprints back across the garden, a streak of copper against the snow. Mousetrap's fur doesn't turn white in winter like other weasels', because he lives by our fire.

Mamochka knocks on the kitchen window. "*Sbiten?*" She mouths the word, holding up my

favourite yellow mug. I smile and nod, feeling warmer at the thought of the hot honey drink.

I glance back in the direction the bullfinch flew, but he's gone. I tell myself I imagined understanding him, but my heart knows different. The treetops whisper and the snow drips secrets. I feel the pull of the forest, stronger than ever before. Somewhere, deep in the dark between the trees, hides the truth of my past.

My heart races and my toes twitch. I stamp the snow from my boots and brush off my coat, but I can't shake the restless feeling from my legs. And as the front door swings shut behind me, I hear the bullfinch once more, far in the distance.

"Yanka the Bear! Come back to the forest! You belong here!"



Chapter Two

Anatoly

Anatoly arrives at night, with ice in his beard and moonlit eyes. Excitement bubbles inside me as I watch him through the frost-coated window. He unharnesses and feeds his sledge dogs, brushes each of them carefully, checks their paws and whispers their names: Nessa, Bayan, Pyotr and Zoya. Finally, he settles them into the shelter and comes inside.

He ducks through the doorway, huge as a bear in his deerskins and furs, but once he peels off his layers and sits by the fire in his threadbare *rubakha* tunic, he looks thinner and older than I remember. There are deeper wrinkles around his silvery eyes, and more white hairs in his lopsided beard, which doesn't grow evenly because of the burn scars on his cheeks. But his