

THE SKY OVER REBECCA

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HACHETTE CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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*For my mother
and her namesake*

CHAPTER 1

Somebody had made a snow angel in a perfect white snow drift down by the lake.

There was something odd about it.

Something about it didn't look right.

I saw it from the window of a bus heading home from town. We were on a bridge, high above the frozen lake. I looked down, and there in the woods on the shore was the snow angel.

There had been something strange about it.

I walked home from the bus stop in the last light of the day. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, in early January, and the sun had already set. All around me the city lingered in a grey twilight. Nautical twilight, my Grandpa called it, meaning there was still enough light

left in the sky for ships to navigate by.

It grew darker.

Lights came on as I approached our building. The snow on the forecourt was pockmarked with three-pronged talons: crows' footprints. Someone had scattered seed here and the crows had eaten it, going back and forth, this way and that, until they'd left a web of tracks in the snow.

I remembered the snow angel.

I saw what was wrong with it.

There had been no footprints. No footprints leading to it, and no footprints leading away from it either.

It was as if someone had dropped out of the sky and lain down in the snow and then vanished.

I looked up at the windows of our apartment, on the seventh floor. They were dark. Lena, my mother, was still at work. She wouldn't be home for another hour or so.

I thought about the snow angel.

I decided to go back.

CHAPTER 2

I got off the bus at the bridge and walked a short way back. The lake was frozen a hundred metres below.

I went down a flight of wooden steps at the side of the road and into the woods. There were street lights here, glowing white, and paths for joggers and dog walkers, and the snow had been thinned out by other people's feet.

I came to a stretch where the street lights were out, broken, and I turned on the torch on my phone. The light fell blue on the snow. The path narrowed and a crow cawed somewhere. The trees looked black and wet. I could hear the sound of my own breathing close by.

Then I stopped.

I was in the clearing.

There was the drift. There was the snow angel.

I shone the torch on it.

I was right. There were no footprints leading to it or away from it. The snow was pristine; no one had set foot on it. It was too far from the path for someone to jump, and too far from the trees for someone to climb up and jump down from. And yet someone had lain there, somehow, and stretched out their arms and smoothed out the snow around them to make a pair of wings and a long flowing robe.

The snow angel was deep. The body of it went a foot or so down into the snow. It was as if someone had fallen from a great height and landed slap bang in the middle of the drift. It was as if someone had fallen from the sky.

I looked up. There was nothing up there; nothing you could fall from, anyway. There were just the treetops and the smudged orange glow of the city lights.

There were also crows in the trees, I noticed, all around, black and silent and still. There must have been a hundred of them, come home to roost for the night.

‘Hello, crows,’ I said.

Then I took a photograph of the snow angel on my phone.

There was a sound behind me: a boot crunch on snow. Someone had moved from where they’d been standing

watching me – that’s what it sounded like, anyway – and I whipped round and aimed the beam of my phone light on the trees behind me. I moved the torch, scanning the trees.

‘Who’s there?’ I said.

There was no answer. No one.

‘Who’s there?’ I said again.

This time – when there was no answer – I turned and went quickly back along the path, to home.

CHAPTER 3

There were lights on in the windows of our apartment when I got back. That made me glad. I rode the lift and let myself in.

Lena, my mother, was sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop open in front of her, her fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. I came up behind her and we hugged our hellos. I leaned into her and felt the warmth of her, and felt her relax into my embrace.

I could see the screen of the laptop. There was a long queue of emails waiting for her there.

‘I won’t be long,’ said Mum.

That was almost a lie. I knew it and she knew it too. She’d probably be working all evening and into the night, only getting up from the table to make herself a

cup of coffee or to go to the bathroom. But it wasn't a bad lie. She hadn't meant to mislead me. What she'd said was more of a *wish*. She wanted to spend the evening with me. She didn't want to have to work all the time. But the office was, as ever, hectic, and there were always deadlines.

So here she was, at home, with me, but also at work. There was nothing I could do about it.

Still it was good just to be around her. To be in the same room. There was her smell. There was her face. That was something.

I cooked. Vegan sausages and mashed potato. Carrots and parsnips in the mash, too. Lots of herbs (too many herbs; some of them ended up on the floor). Peas on the side, steam rising from them. A little half-bottle of red wine on the table for Mum and a single tall glass.

Tea lights which I lit from a single match.

Then it was ready.

'I sent you an email,' I said.

'All right,' Mum said. 'Let me see.'

She opened the email. Attached to it was the photo I'd taken of the snow angel.

'What am I looking at?'

'What do you see?'

‘A snow angel.’

‘Yes,’ I said, bringing the food to the table.

Then she saw what was odd about it. ‘No footprints,’ she said.

‘Yes.’ I sat down facing her.

‘Interesting.’

Mum closed her laptop and we ate.

‘So what do you think?’ I said.

‘The angel?’

‘Yes. How they did it without leaving any footprints.’

Mum frowned over her wine glass. ‘It would take some doing,’ she said. ‘It would take some thought.’

‘You don’t know,’ I said.

‘I don’t. But I have some ideas.’

She couldn’t explain it straight off. But she liked a puzzle. While we ate we bounced around ideas about how it could be done. Mum’s best suggestion was to tie a strong rope between two trees and climb out along it until you could drop right into the middle of the snow drift. Then you make the Angel, get back on the rope, climb back to the path, untie the rope and walk away . . .

My best suggestion was being lowered from a helicopter which picked you up again after you’d made the snow angel, but that was really just a joke.

‘You’ll figure it out,’ said Mum when we’d run out of ideas.

Somehow we knew we hadn’t solved it.

‘You’ll work it out,’ Mum said. ‘I know you will.’

It has always been just the two of us. Mum and me. We’ve always been together.

I’ve read about children in books going off on adventures looking for their real parents but I don’t need to go anywhere. My real parent is right here, sitting across from me now while we eat, and she’s pretty good at this parenting thing, despite the laptop open on the kitchen table.

There is no other parent. No one is missing. There’s no one to go looking for and I don’t even have an interesting story to tell about why there’s no one to go looking for.

What happened was my father met someone else shortly after I was born. Someone he wanted to be with more than he wanted to be with us. He moved away to another country, where he married again, and Mum and I changed our names.

We went back to my mother’s family name, Lukas. I’m glad about that. Lukas is a very old name from the Latin word *Lux*, meaning Light. It’s a good name to have if you

live in the dark, which we do most of the time in winter.

We live in Stockholm, in Sweden. It's on the same latitude as Alaska, which is pretty far north as far as this planet goes. In summer the days are long, so long they never seem to want to end. It's light long before you get up in the morning and it's still light long after you go to bed. But in winter the world turns dark, and it's the nights that grow long, and longer, and the days kind of curl up into themselves, as if even they don't want to brave the cold and the dark.

Meanwhile, the snow falls.

And falls.

And falls.

And everything freezes, even the lake I can see from my bedroom window, the great lake, Lake Mälaren. When a lake like that freezes it stays frozen for months. It's like it's been turned to stone. You can walk on it. Jump up and down on it. Skate on it. And I do. Except—

Except I don't trust it.

I don't trust Mälaren.

Something about it spooks me.

Mum says it's because I nearly drowned there when I was little. Maybe. I don't know, I don't remember. I was three years old. I walked out on the ice by myself. Mum

was there, on the shore, with my grandpa, David Lukas. But they were distracted. The ice cracked and I slipped straight in. I screamed, and my mouth filled with lake water and I disappeared.

Grandpa, who was old then, and who is now even older, walked out on to the lake to get me. He let the ice break under his feet until he was wading through the sludge towards me. It came all the way up to his shoulders.

I was under water the whole time.

Grandpa reached down into the dark water and pulled me up by the scruff of my neck.

I coughed up lake water.

Grandpa carried me back to shore.

I vomited. I was in hospital for two nights.

I don't remember any of it.

The landline rang while we were having dinner. That could only be one person: Grandpa. He still didn't own a cell phone, and he was the only person I knew who actually *took out a pen and wrote down* people's telephone numbers in a little black book he carried around with him.

I got up from the table and answered the phone.

'Grandpa?'

'How did you know it was me?' he said, although he

was laughing as he said it – I could hear it in his voice – and then he said, ‘Seriously now, Kara. You may be able to see the Quadrantids tonight. Even in Stockholm. There have been sightings.’

Meteors. The Quadrantids were a meteor shower. They fall in late December and early January.

‘Have you seen them?’ I said.

‘They’re not here yet,’ he said, ‘but I’ve spoken to a friend of mine at the Observatory. They’re on their way.’

‘I hope you get to see them.’

‘You too.’

‘I’ll look for them,’ I said.

‘Good. Put your mother on, would you?’

‘Goodnight Grandpa,’ I said.

‘Goodnight, Kara.’

I handed Mum the phone and went back to my food. She and Grandpa spoke for a long while. I couldn’t hear what Grandpa was saying, only Mum’s side of it, which was mostly ‘Yes, I see,’ and ‘Yes, I understand . . .’

I wondered what they were talking about. Grandpa hadn’t been too well recently. He’d been in hospital with an infection and recovered, but while he was there they’d found some strange rhythms in his heart. The timings were wrong. It was something he could live with the

doctors said, but it was also something that might simply spirit him away one night.

I made coffee for Mum and loaded the dishwasher and set it running quietly.

Mum opened her laptop and went back to work. She would work on into the night.

I had falling stars to see.