

This is not a fairy tale, though there are Fairies in it. And Kings and Queens, and Princesses and Princelings, and magic that comes from faraway places not found on any map…



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For Zander and Orlie

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MagicBorn

PETER BUNZL





FINAL BOOK TO INCLUDE:

*Author letter from Peter Bunzl on his inspirations behind the story

*Further notes on the historical context of MAGICBORN, the characters and the period

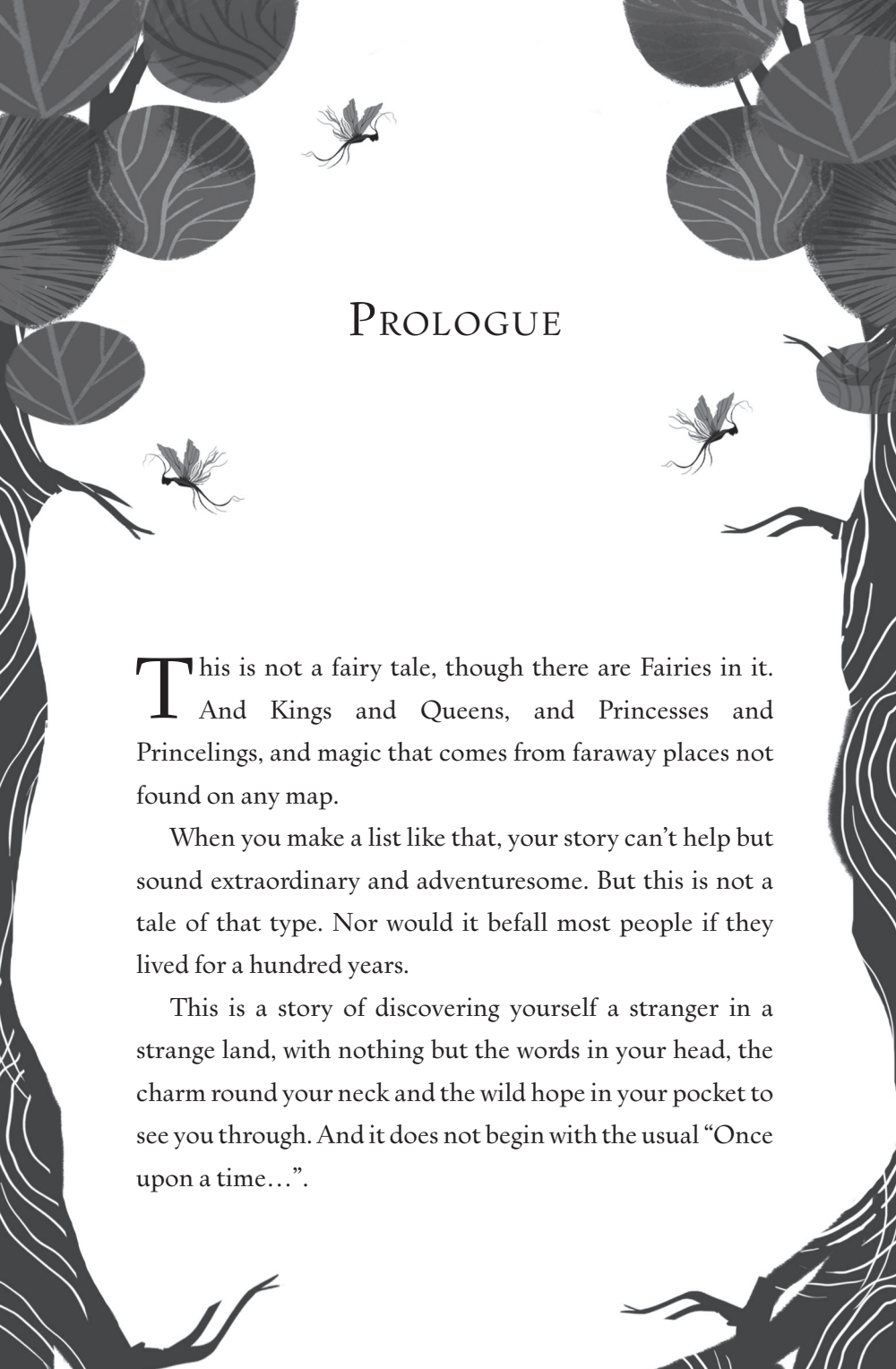
*Sumptuous map and portrait gallery by Maxine Lee-Mackie



"Remember, remember all that is lost.
The first days of spring, and the last winter's frost.
The trees that were saplings, the birds that were eggs.
The dream-lives of children tucked up in their beds.

Fairy tales long forgotten, bring them to light,
as the sun in the morning makes daytime from night."

~ Traditional Fairy remembering spell



Prologue

This is not a fairy tale, though there are Fairies in it. And Kings and Queens, and Princesses and Princelings, and magic that comes from faraway places not found on any map.

When you make a list like that, your story can't help but sound extraordinary and adventuresome. But this is not a tale of that type. Nor would it befall most people if they lived for a hundred years.

This is a story of discovering yourself a stranger in a strange land, with nothing but the words in your head, the charm round your neck and the wild hope in your pocket to see you through. And it does not begin with the usual "Once upon a time…".

Instead, it starts far off, and rather like a dream: on a cold winter's night in 1726, at full moon, on the thirteenth stroke of midnight, in the Greenwood, on the Fair Isle, in the furthest reaches of England, where there was and there wasn't a Wild Boy running through the trees…



The woods were deep and the woods were dark, but the Wild Boy was not afraid. Not of the forest. As he weaved between its bare branches, over the deep snow lying on the ground, he smelled burrowing insects, hibernating mice, scurrying squirrels, barn owls scouring the sky and restless seedlings curled deep underground.

This Wild Boy was ragged in appearance. Black curly hair poked from beneath the fur hood of his coat. His darting eyes – one green, one blue – were set in a round face, white as paper. He pursed his lips in concentration as he stumbled forward, clutching at frosted tree stumps. A single wolf's tooth was sewn to his collar, and his torn coat-tails flew out behind him.

The first remarkable thing to observe about this Wild Boy was that he possessed the shadow of a wolf. It danced on the white drifts as he ran.

The second remarkable thing to observe about him was that he wore a stone that looked like an almond-shaped eye

with a hole through its centre, threaded onto a leather string around his neck.

The Wild Boy could not recall where he'd got this charm, nor who had given it to him. Truth be told, he couldn't even remember his own name. That's if he'd ever had one. He felt as if an enormous, confusing storm was rolling along behind him, and an unnameable fear was brewing in his belly. His cheeks stung with tears as he scrambled onwards, muttering a spell:

"Tail, snout, pelt, paws. Wings, fins, teeth, claws. Shake me, change me, magic art. Make me the creature of your heart."

Magic seeped from within the Wild Boy, making his limbs heavy and long. His hands and feet became furry footpads, and he fell to all fours, leaving paw prints in the snow. His fingernails clawed. His face lengthened. His nose sharpened and became a snout, and his tattered coat grew around his body like a pelt.

He had become a wolf.

The wolf swerved around trees and ruined buildings, and all at once came upon a magnificent great oak growing through a stone floor. The sight of its branches reaching up like fingers to grab the sky filled the wolf with fear. Why it was frightening, the wolf couldn't say. In his head, he had not the words to compose such thoughts. All he knew was that this tree was dangerous and he must not go near it.

He skittered nervously away and broke into a gallop, leaving the tree and its surroundings behind.

Somewhere, somehow, at some time or other in the not-too-distant past, he had gone hopelessly astray. Got terribly lost. But up above, the stars were sparkling, and the moon shone full and bright.

The wolf looked at the moon and the moon stared back at him, beaming like a proud pockmarked parent. Smiling its celestial smile.

The wolf opened his jaws wide to reveal a mouthful of yellow teeth and gave a joyful growl.

The growl became a bark, then a roar, and finally a howl as long and loud and fierce as the night itself.

AWHOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

1



Storm Girl

The river was wet and the river was wild, but the Storm Girl was not afraid. Not of the crashing waves, nor the clink of the ice that sat atop the freezing cold water like broken shards of glass.

She wasn't afraid of the mermaids her nearly pa, Prosper, the ferry keeper, told her swam in the river. Nor the giants her nearly da, Marino, told her stalked the mountains, smashing glaciers with their bare fists.

She wasn't even afraid of the Fair Folk, who, legend had it, danced in the ruins around the great old oak tree at the heart of the forest, once a year at winter's end, on the thirteenth stroke of midnight.

Nor was she afraid of the fact that the villagers were whispering that wolves had returned to the Greenwood, and that a wolfish creature – half-boy, half-cub – had been spotted howling at the moon by local charcoal-burners.

The Storm Girl wasn't scared of any of that…at least, that's what she told herself. And in the daytime those assurances held. Yet when she lay alone in her bed on these cold winter nights, thoughts of those strange and magical creatures brewed a squall of anxiety inside her.

Then she told herself they were only myths and legends, old wives' tales. Just stories… But stories can have a ring of truth to them, like the peal of a bell. Sometimes that truth is so deafening it can wake the dead. Other times it's barely loud enough to stir the hidden secrets inside you.

The first remarkable thing to observe about the Storm Girl was her name:

Tempest.

It was an odd name with a wild and stormy nature, and Tempest was as tempestuous as it suggested. Plus, she was rather unkempt in appearance. Her mousey hair fell like a stream over rocks and tangled on the shoulders of her red cloak, which she'd had for longer than she could remember. Her nose was as sharp as the craggiest rock in the river, and pointed boldly wherever she wanted to go. Her brow was as

high and rugged as a cliff, and was often furrowed in deep thought.

But there was a clean-cut truthfulness to her, fresh as broken stone. You could tell what she was thinking in each of her shining eyes – one green, one blue – and in every corner of her strong-willed face.

The second remarkable thing to observe about Tempest was that she could talk to the robin on her shoulder.

The robin's name was Coriel. Coriel's eyes were dark as coal and were constantly looking about for danger while she fluffed her grey-brown plumage and plumped the red feather pinny she wore across her chest.

Tempest sometimes had to mother Coriel, but most of the time Coriel mothered Tempest. That little bird was the most matronly creature in the young girl's life. Apart from Prosper and Marino.

Tempest kept the fact she and Coriel could speak together secret. Most people in the village where she lived were wary of magic abilities, even small ones like talking to a bird.

The third and most remarkable thing about Tempest was that she had lost her memory. She could remember nothing before Prosper and Marino had plucked her from the river, just over two years ago. Not who her real family was, nor where she'd lived, or who had cared for her before she met Prosper and Marino.

Coriel couldn't remember either. The little robin's sharp mind drew a blank when it came to the before times. "*I don't recall anything from our past, little gannet,*" she would whisper to Tempest. "*Not a dicky bird. I feel clueless as a chick straight out the egg when I try to think of it.*"

In the days following the Almost Drowning, Tempest and Coriel lived with Prosper and Marino in their home, Ferry Keeper's Cottage. Tempest would let her mind whirl back through half-forgotten memories, shaking them up like shards of broken mirror. Sadly, she could recall next to nothing.

There was one tiny physical clue to her past, however: a small piece of bone, carved into the shape of a cloud, that Tempest wore on a leather thong around her neck. The Bone Cloud had three words engraved on its back, written in the same secret language Tempest spoke with Coriel.

From your mother

That message was enough for Tempest to know her real family were somewhere and missed her.

Holding the Bone Cloud in her hand, she could sense small details about her mother. The smell of her, sweet as tree sap. Her ears poking through her long, straight, silver hair like leaves frozen in ice, and her dark eyes, deep as still water.

Her mother must have given her this beautiful necklace out of love…and maybe one day she'd come and find her.

It was sad to be left with these few faded memories, but Tempest blew on their embers in the hope that soon they'd blaze into a roaring fire of remembrance.

Those first weeks and months at the cottage drifted by slowly like the flotsam of the river. Prosper and Marino were kind and treated her as if she was their own daughter. Each day that Tempest was with the couple, she learned more about them.

Marino was very talkative. He was always full of song and chatter, which floated through the house and garden like birdsong.

Prosper kept his cards close to his chest. He could be quite grumpy, especially on land, but he loved the river.

Under their tutelage, Tempest became a natural sailor. Soon she could row and steer their little ferry boat, *Nixie*, like an expert. Tempest could swim already – she must have learned sometime in the past – but Prosper and Marino taught her stronger strokes that she could use in dangerous currents.

* * *

A year passed, then two. On the second anniversary of their meeting, on the winter solstice, the couple threw Tempest an Almost-Thirteenth birthday party. There was smoked fish, and all the food and jollity they could muster on their meagre earnings. Almost-Thirteen was how old Tempest thought herself to be, if she counted up the vague number of real birthdays she sensed she'd had. Though, for some reason, she felt her actual birthday was in spring.

For a present, the couple gave Tempest a tiny wooden rowing boat with three painted figures in it. Prosper had whittled the piece himself with his knife, and Marino had painted it with tiny horsehair brushes. The figures looked exactly like each of them. Tempest even wore her red cloak. The boat was just small enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

"This is our gift to you," Prosper said.

"If, one day, your parents do return…" Marino said.

"Or if you have to go away for any other reason…" Prosper added.

"Then," they both chimed in, "you'll have it to remember us by."

"Thank you," Tempest said. "I'll treasure it always."

She knew she would, for it had been given with love, like her mother's necklace.

"There's something else we've been meaning to talk with

you about," Marino said, as Tempest turned the little boat around in her hand.

"You've been here for two years now," Prosper said in his straightforward way. "And we're still not sure where your parents are. Perhaps they want to come back, but aren't able to. So until they do, or if they don't return, we thought…"

"We thought you could stay with us on a permanent basis," Marino added soothingly. "As our honorary daughter."

"But only if you want to," Prosper continued. "Coriel too," he said, stroking the little robin, who was sat on the table's edge. "What do you think?"

Tempest didn't know what to say, both of her worlds were unexpectedly colliding like a sudden breeze on a calm day. She'd always thought her parents *would* return, so she hadn't really considered what she'd do if they didn't. Now she knew she must face that possibility, but something was still stopping her.

"Can I have some time to think about it?" she asked.

"Of course," Marino said.

That night Tempest dreamed of a stormy curse that cut the land in two. She was on one side of the river, in the daytime. Her real mother and family were on the other, at night.

Tempest couldn't see their faces. They were too far away.

She waded into the river and tried to swim across to them, but suddenly the black waters of the Tambling clenched like a fist around her, its strong current dragging her down to the Dead Lands below on the riverbed.

Half-remembered garbled words floated in her mind as water gushed endlessly down her gullet, until she felt as if she would drown.

She woke scared, thrashing and drenched in sweat. Coriel was circling around her head, squawking in alarm, until Prosper and Marino arrived.

"I had a nightmare," Tempest explained tearfully, as Marino dried her face with the corner of the blanket.

"What was it about?" Prosper asked.

"The Almost Drowning." Tempest settled nervously back into her bed. "I was searching for my family in a terrible storm. I saw them on the far bank, and waded into the river to swim across to them. But then I started to sink deeper and deeper, just like I did in real life, and I couldn't get out or escape my fate."

"But you did get out," Marino reminded her, stroking her hand. "We saved you, remember."

"I know," Tempest said.

"My dear Storm Girl," Prosper said. "Some difficulties can feel immeasurable on the surface, but in your depths you carry something stronger."

"What's that?" Tempest asked.

"Stillness." Prosper smiled reassuringly. "Own that stillness," he advised. "Let it fill you with power. Then you'll know the truth of who you are."

"Whatever you're missing, my love," Marino added, "whatever you've lost, remember your troubles are passing. Even in the raging of life's biggest storms, there is always a tranquil, calm space available to you if you look hard enough. Right here." He touched his chest. "Beneath your worries, in the depths of your heart. Underneath."

Tempest considered their words over the next few weeks, and their offer for her to stay on as their daughter. She had always imagined going home to her real family at some point. But, after all this time, she could see that Prosper and Marino were probably right. Her real family might not return for her.

That didn't mean they didn't love her. There could be umpteen other reasons that they hadn't come. Perhaps they couldn't afford to take her back, or maybe they just weren't able to because she had drifted so far away from them downriver.

A small seed of sorrow grew in her belly as she considered these thoughts, but another part of her wondered how she

could possibly miss what she couldn't remember. Still, she could never quite close the door on the idea that her mother might one day reappear to claim her.

The last evening she thought about all this was in the final week of winter. It had been snowing heavily along the river. Unseasonably late for such weather. The snowstorm lasted through the night. It didn't even stop the next morning when Prosper and Marino were due to go to the nearby town of Miles Cross.

Even so, the two ferry keepers didn't think of cancelling their trip. This was the day they had to renew their Ferryman Licences for the coming year, and their appointment in the town hall had been booked for months. Tempest and Coriel were to stay behind to look after the cottage. Tempest decided that when Prosper and Marino returned that evening, she would tell them about her decision to accept their proposal, and become their honorary daughter. She couldn't wait to see their faces when she told them.

"Promise me you won't take the boat out alone on the river today," Marino said to Tempest, when he and Prosper were finally ready to depart.

"I won't," Tempest replied. "I promise."

"Good girl." Marino gave Tempest a hug and kissed the top of her head.

"Not even if you hear the naiads calling," Prosper said,

as he took down his coat from the hook on the back door. "*Nixie*'s a strong boat, but even she couldn't save you from being dragged down by river sprites on a stormy, snowy day like this."

"And if that happened," Marino said, buttoning up his winter jacket, "we might never see you again."

Tempest hugged Prosper and Marino goodbye.

"We'll be back this evening," Marino said.

"If anyone comes to be ferried across to the Greenwood," Prosper added, "tell them they'll have to wait for the storm to pass. In the meantime, you'd best secure the boat."

With that, he and Marino left to fight their way through the snow to Tambling village and catch the stagecoach to Miles Cross.

Tempest had set herself plenty to do that day, so she wouldn't be sitting around nervously awaiting their return. But they didn't need to worry about her going out on the river, she thought as she washed the breakfast things in a big stone trough. The truth was she never took the boat out solo. The Tambling River stretched like a scar in her mind between the Greenwood and Ferry Keeper's Cottage, and being on its treacherous waters reminded Tempest of the Almost Drowning.

She spent the rest of the morning after Prosper and

Marino left tidying the cottage. Then she got ready to go outside. She put on her boots, lined with wild rabbit fur, and her red woollen cloak, and placed the three painted figures in their little wooden ferry boat in her pocket. Coriel flapped to Tempest's shoulder and jumped into the hood of her cloak. She curled up in a ball to keep her feathers dry as Tempest opened the front door and, with her cloak billowing out behind her, Tempest set off into the snow.

Out in the bluster by the riverbank, she set to swabbing *Nixie*'s deck. Tempest loved *Nixie*. The way she sat primly and confidently in the river no matter what it threw at her. Tempest trusted the little ferry boat with her life, just as she did Prosper and Marino. Some days the three of them, along with Coriel, rowed *Nixie* to the mouth of the Tambling River, where its crystal waters met the clouded salty ocean. There they would see storms far out at sea – thunder and lightning that roiled in the distance – while all around them the waters were calm and clear, as if they made their own weather.

By lunchtime, the wind was whisking a constant stream of fresh flakes giddily through the air. Tempest had cleared all the ropes and boxes from the pier and secured *Nixie* in preparation for the growing storm. She was about to head indoors when Coriel flapped from her hood and gave her a warning nip on the ear.

Tempest turned to see a carriage drawn by a pair of brindle mares approaching through the stream of spiralling snow.

It was driven by a coachman in green livery and a tricorn hat. Smart strangers like him rarely called at Ferry Keeper's Cottage, especially not in winter. Strapped to the carriage's roof, among the bags and boxes, was a large, ominous-looking cage, whose iron bars glinted oddly in the afternoon light.

Coriel fidgeted on Tempest's shoulder. "*Have a care, my little Stonechat,*" she whispered softly in Tempest's ear. "*Something wicked this way comes!*"

And Tempest shivered in agreement.