WHERE the RIVER TAKES US

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For Angharad



CHAPTER ONE

THE THREE OF US

It's surprising how many people in a small town will believe there's a wild cat on the loose. Up the valley, in Blaengarw, loads have seen it, but no one has real proof.

Funny that.

Jinx thinks it's true – but then, he would. He's over by the old brick shed on the other side of the waste ground with Tam, collecting stuff to build a bike

ramp. But I'd rather bomb around, spraying little stones into the air when I spin into skids.

This place, this scruffy, gravelly patch of land covered in rubble and pallets and anything else that can be dragged here, is where most of us Ponty kids hang around after school. I know everyone and everyone knows me. I never used to mind that, because I never really thought about it. But it's different now. Because everything's different now.

I try to perfect a wheelie, hit a stone, lose my balance and land on my side, wheels spinning. Just as Catrin comes over the top of the hill, hood up against the wind.

She runs over. 'Jason! You okay?'

'Yeah,' I say, rubbing my arm. Good job my parka's nice and thick.

'If you want to ride on one wheel, why don't you get a unicycle?' she asks, holding out a hand, but I get up without taking it.

'Choppers are cooler.' I grin, checking my bike for scratches.



All around us, kids shout and play. Some younger ones run past with their coats buttoned at the top like capes, yelling the *Batman* theme tune; on a tower of old car tyres, a girl's pretending to be a teacher, bossing her friends around; most of us older ones are on bikes. It's better than the park; that's got flower beds and benches and grown-ups.

This is just for us. This is ours.

'Why are you so late anyway?' I ask Catrin.

'Flipping bus broke down,' she says. 'Again. Wish I could walk to school like you.'

I look down the road, behind her. 'Where's Rhodri?'

'Left him outside Harwell's, drooling over the Airfix kits. Mam's going to tell me off, but I've got tons of homework.' She lifts her satchel, like she's trying to prove there are loads of books inside. 'Little brothers are a pain.'

'I bet that's what Richie says about me.'

'He's doing his best, you know.'

I shrug. 'Suppose.'

Catrin shuts up. That's the great thing about her.



She knows not to give me the look, the *I'm sorry your mam and dad died and your brother has to look after you* look. I get it from everyone else; teachers, Aunty Pearl, even Jinx and Tam sometimes. That's me; Jason North, the Ponty Orphan.

I hate it.

Jinx rides over and Catrin goes kind of stiff. They've never got on. Jinx has this thing about me, him and Tam being 'the three of us', so he doesn't give her a chance. And Tam's Tam – all for a quiet life – he never chooses sides. But Catrin's been my best friend since her family moved in next door when we were tiny. Everyone knows it.

'You're bleeding.' Jinx looks down at my knee. 'Give me a look.'

'No, you weirdo!'

'Hey, guess what?' He points to some kids chalking hopscotch on the pavement. 'We were just talking to them, and there's been another sighting of that wild cat. A man from Craigwern got a photo of its tail.'



I raise my eyebrows. 'Its tail?'

He waves Tam over. 'It's true, isn't it, about the cat in Blaengarw?'

Tam pulls up next to us, blocking out the low winter sun – he's massive, Tam is, gets it from his rugby coach dad. 'Yeah,' he says. 'People reckon it's too big to be a pet.'

'They all say that though.' I turn to Catrin. 'You agree with me, don't you?'

She screws up her face. 'To be honest, Jason, I'm not sure. I mean, why would all those people lie?'

Jinx claps his hands together, then holds them out in a *See what I mean?* sort of way. 'Exactly!'

Hang on … Did he just agree with Catrin?

He looks into the distance, eyeing the mountains above the houses. 'Imagine if it was here instead of Blaengarw. We'd find it. Easy.'

Catrin scuffs her shoe on the ground and smirks. Jinx's too busy scanning the fields to notice. 'It's a puma or a jaguar, I bet you.'

'I know what type of cat it is.' They look at me like

they're surprised. I lean forward, my eyes going from side to side like I'm watching for spies. 'Imaginary.'

Catrin laughs and walks off. 'See you after, Jason.'

Jinx watches her go. 'Why does she have to come here anyway? Everyone knows the waste ground is for Ponty kids.'

I shove him.

He glares at me. 'Leave off, Jase, mun!'

'She *is* a Ponty kid though,' Tam says. 'She just goes to the Welsh school, that's all.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'And you don't own the waste ground. If you did I'm pretty sure you'd ban those two.'

Another bike flies past us, the rider and person on the back screeching and shouting like maniacs – Gary Hall and Dean Bolan. They bomb out on to the road, not even stopping to check for traffic.

Tam turns his bike. 'Last one to the ramp has to marry Mrs Fletcher!'

I jump on my Chopper, no way I'm getting there behind Jinx.

They've built a really good ramp out of an old door

and some bricks. Tam has the idea of laying corrugated iron in front of it so when we ride over the top it just about shakes our brains out.

'We could come back tomorrow and make it a full assault course,' he says. 'I reckon my father will let us have some old training equipment we can make into jumps.'

'Brilliant!' Jinx checks his watch. 'Let's get it higher now, before it's too dark. I'll fetch more bricks.'

'Can't,' I say, turning my handlebars. 'Got to get home.'

'All right.'

They never argue any more, never try to persuade me to stay out longer. Because they know I have to make tea.

Standing on the pedals, working them hard, I ride up the hill to my house.

