Foxlight

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The Space We're In
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The Light in Everything
Foxlight

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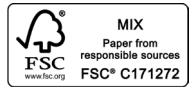
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Chapter 1

It is Sunday evening and Rey and I are hiding in the coat cupboard. It smells like feet and boot polish and coat wax and the weather.

I can hear Lissa calling and I sink back into the rails and let myself be swallowed by the scent of seasons. The wool scratches my skin like an army of tiny knitted ants but I don't wriggle away. I hold my finger up to my lips to make sure Rey keeps still but I don't need to worry because Rey hates Sundays just as much as I do.

Sunday evenings are bad for lots of reasons. One of them is that it's bath night, which takes about four years and the bathroom floor gets cleaner than most of us do.

Another reason Sunday is bad is that supper is leftover night, which means cabbage and potatoes

and something grey and gristly that might be mouse. We've never seen an actual mouse but Alice swears she got a tail in her bowl once. I always pick around the maybe-mouse with my spoon just in case and Lissa tuts because I'm wasting food. Rey always eats everything and says it's delicious.

Rey rolls in the pile of gloves and stares up at the dark ceiling. She's holding a book because Rey is always holding a book even when there's no light to see the pages. She holds them close to her chest like the words will seep into her bones. She knows a million things but she never really says them out loud because Rey doesn't like to talk that much. She can talk, even if sometimes Alex is mean and calls her a mute. She just doesn't feel the need very often and that's OK because I always know what she wants and needs and thinks anyway. Sometimes she'll burst open and she'll say something so brilliant and so true that it's like a firework or the sun appearing suddenly from the darkest sky. But that hardly ever happens. She's quiet and she's shy and funny and she's the best person in the whole world and even though I don't know many people I still know that's true.

I can hear the bath running and the mop squeaking outside. Or maybe it's Lissa catching mice for tea. Sunday sounds seep under the door and I try to pretend we're anywhere but a crumbling damp house filled with Found children and anywhere but on the edge of the misty wildlands and somewhere where we are wanted and somewhere where we belong. Rey turns the pages of her book.

I close my eyes tight and try to imagine. I dissolve my thoughts and I sink down and down into my mind and I am very nearly far away and somewhere else and somewhere better.

Imagine I whisper. *Imagine that we're on top of an icy cold mountain far away and it's just the two of us and …*

But then the shadows shift and the light comes rushing in.

Chapter 2

I peer up as Lissa opens the coat cupboard door. The smell of the house streams in. Old cabbage and wet floors and too many children. She puts her hands on her hips like a cross mother in a storybook but she's not actually cross and she's not our mother and this isn't a story.

Up and out please, Rey. I can see you under those gloves, you know she says and I think maybe there's a little tickle of laughter in her voice but she's swallowing it down.

Rey sticks her head out of the pile and there are at least three gloves caught in her wild tangle of hair. She grins at Lissa and clambers out of the pile but I stay still as a statue.

Fen, you're not invisible Lissa says. *Out please or there'll be no tea left for you before the gannets have it all.*

Oh no not Sunday tea that would be awful I mutter but I pull myself out of the coats and Rey and I leave the lovely quiet dark of the coat cupboard and trudge down the corridor into the kitchen for mouse soup and letters.

That's the other terrible thing about Sundays.

We're meant to write to our mothers.

And Rey and I don't have one.

Chapter 3

Rey and I were found at foxlight. That's what Lissa tells us. Right at that very moment when quiet twilight met the dawn and the sun and the moon and the stars wove their light together and the orange streaks of foxes could be seen brushing against the awakening sky. We've never seen foxes but I somehow wake up every morning just when the day and night are shaking hands and I stare into the wildlands and as the light grows and spreads I feel like I belong.

It was deep dark winter and the marshes were frozen and glassy and showed the splintered sky. We were nestled in the dip of a valley right at the very edge of the wildlands. We were curled up small and quiet like question marks in a swirl of snow and orange fur and white teeth. Lissa nearly didn't see us because she wasn't looking for babies out there right

at that wild untamed border. She nearly tramped right past but then she heard a mewl from a creature that almost definitely wasn't a fox. Lissa doesn't know which one of us it was and that makes me cross because things like that are important when your whole story is just a few seconds long.

Two tiny babies! One so cross and one so quiet. One with eyes like a summer sky and one with eyes as dark as boot polish but both with the most beautiful red curls. You! The last thing I expected to see, even when my job is collecting babies. But no one had called me to come and find you. It was luck, I suppose. Lucky for me, lucky for you.

You were curled up so tightly with those foxes. That's why you weren't turned to ice babies and frozen blue Lissa told us and I know she means that's why we weren't dead but she doesn't want to say it like that because she wants to be kind and she doesn't think Rey and I want the truth and she doesn't think we could cope because we're just children but Lissa doesn't understand a lot of things about growing up.

Lissa unwound us from the foxes' tails even though they snapped with those bright white teeth and they bit at her soft wrists and now whenever I glance at her skinny wrists I can see she has a luminous half-moon of pinpricks where their fangs found flesh. She bundled us into her coat and she stamped across the frozen marsh under a snow-filled sky and she took us back to the house and defrosted us by the fire and when we were pink and furious she knew we would be all right and we'd keep all of our toes.

Everyone here was left by a mother who was alone and in trouble and who couldn't look after them. The house is called the Light House because it's the only flickering glow in a wild and empty land and everyone knows how to find it. Its light guides the mothers towards it so they can leave their babies safely. But the difference is our mother didn't do that. She left us with the foxes.

Lissa gives all the children here names to try and make us all equal and all the same. But all the other children came with their names so they just get middle names. Lissa gave us first names too. She says

they're fox names. Lissa says we all have names that link us to our beginning and our new life, to sew us all into the house and the folds of the family she makes and the family we had before. But everyone else got a name made in the mouths of their mother. Some of them were left actual treasures too. And every single one has a letter telling them their story printed in truth and words and ink.

Zaki's mother left him a locket filled with her face, and three pairs of handmade red socks. He won't let us read his letter. Zaki's middle name is Rain and the sky was pouring when he was left here.

Alex's mother carved his actual birthday on to a scrap of oak shaped like a heart. His letter is filled with how he came to be and how he came to be left and how his mother will come back for him when she can. Alex's middle name is February. The first yellow tips of daffodils were peering through the earth where he was found.

Jasmine's mother gave her a medal from a long-ago war and in her letter she told her all about her soldier father and his home far away across the blue-black

seas. Jasmine's middle name is Winter. There was a frost when she was found.

Alice's mother gave her a silver necklace hung with a single silver leaf and a drawing of a family tree with branches spread like arms opening wide. Her middle name is Dandelion because there were spiky yellow suns dotted across the heathland as Lissa welcomed her home.

Robin's mother gave him his name sewn tight on to his blanket so it would never get lost. His letter tells him about the birds that sang when he was born and why she couldn't stay and listen to their song with him. Robin's middle name is Blue because the sky was blazing the day Marl scooped him up from the doorstep and carried him through our front door.

Everyone has their name and their letter and their mother's story about who they are and what they can be.

But when the foxes had slipped off towards the frosted horizon and Lissa unwrapped our thin grey blankets no story fell from its scratchy folds. She thought for a moment that it was there, because a

torn scrap of paper fluttered to the ground like a feather. But when she picked it up she just saw a blur.

A charcoal swoop.

A black slink of a fox dusted across the page.

That's it.

Not a single word.

Just the scribbled shadow of a fox.

We don't have a mother. And we don't have a story.

Chapter 4

Some children at the Light House have found their mothers. They've sent letters full of bright words and they say things like *I can't believe we both like soup* and *She knew I'd find her one day*, and I want to shout that liking soup isn't special at all and why didn't *she* come back for *you*?

Rey likes the letters and she says things like *But wouldn't you want to know those things?* And I snort and say *No thank you*. Lissa puts the letters up on a board in the hall and I rage every time a new brass pin shines in the misty light curling through the windowpanes. Once I took the letters down and I wanted to burn them in the fire and watch the words glow bright and blackened until they curled into nothing but Rey grabbed my hand away and pinned them up again and they glowed pale against the wall and I hated them even more.

Whenever another baby is left on this ragged edge between the wild and the world everyone always wonders what their story will be and what they might have been left with and what they'll learn when they're big enough to know. It doesn't matter though. You're just as stuck here. It doesn't matter if someone has told you everything or nothing at all.

And I don't care that we don't have a mother. And I don't care that we don't know anything.

But Rey does.

Chapter 5

On Sundays Lissa tries to get us to write letters to our mothers. She doesn't post them or anything. She gets us to put them in special folders we decorated when we were small and stupid and didn't know any better. Rey's is beautiful, all swoops of colour and the careful edges of flowers and plants and animals she'd found in storybooks. Mine is mostly scribbles and spiky shapes that look like the fangs of some wild beast. But it doesn't matter. We haven't got anyone to write to so we don't bother. Rey sometimes tries to write a few lines but I laugh and I say I can tell her better stories and I try to grab the paper and she scrunches it up and I scrunch mine up and we have an indoor snowball fight instead.

Lissa is always trying to get us to write something and she says it's all about keeping connections and

making your own story and today Robin says he's writing to his mother about how he's learned all the parts of a bird skeleton and he thinks that will make his mother proud because she loves birds and so does he. So I say to Lissa *Right well we were found wild with the foxes so shall I write and tell them I'm aiming to dig my own den and scavenge for food and run free across the marshes then shall I?* And she looked sad but I don't care. But the more I think about that letter the more I think that I would like to live its words and I imagine just me and Rey and the sky and the wild and it's perfect.

So while the others draw and write their stupid letters, Rey and I spin pencils on the table and she draws strange scribbly patterns in her special little blue notebook that Lissa gave her for all her words and drawings and it's much better than any stupid Life Book. We play tic-tac-toe and hangman until the night sky eats up the daylight and we can go. Lissa looks at our pencil games and rolls her eyes and says we should try to share our ideas just like everyone else. I draw a sketch of the house and Lissa smiles but then I sweep the lines of a dragon across the page

and make it eat the roof and she rolls her eyes again. Robin finishes colouring in a starling and its feathers bristle and shine and it's ready to fly off the page and make its nest in the faraway trees.

As soon as we're allowed, Rey and I run upstairs to the girls' room as fast as we can without sliding back down the just-washed stairs. Lissa calls something after us but we don't turn round because if we do she'll make us clean the windows or read the little ones a bedtime story and both of these things are terrible.

The bedroom is in the tower, which sounds cool and actually is quite cool because we can see for miles and miles from our bright windows and the tower is how the house got its name. At its very top is a huge lamp that glows and spreads a soft still golden light out into the dark nights like a beam searching for ships and guiding them home and keeping them safe from the snarled teeth of jagged rocks.

Tonight the bedroom is cold but not cold enough to see my breath and there is no frost spangled on the windowpane so we'll be cosy in bed especially if we keep our socks on.

I sit on the lumpy mattress and look through the window glass to the wild world outside. I am always drawn to the wildlands. There is something in their foreverness and the way they stretch far away beyond where my eyes can find their end. I can see sweeps of trees and dark forests and I can see the sharp ridges of blue-skinned mountains and I can sometimes see the dirty brown of marshes that glimmer wetly in the gloom. Sometimes I think I see the snaking glitter of a river. The wildlands are everything. My favourite thing is to imagine what it would be like if Lissa had never found us and we hadn't frozen to death but instead we'd grown up wild and brilliant and alone. We would live the perfect story but it would be true and it would be ours. We'd live without bedtimes or letters or baths or mouse soup and we'd eat berries from a bush and sleep under the stars. We'd build campfires and nibble charred meat from bones and swim in the sparkling river and catch fish with our bare hands.

And so I tell Rey stories.

Chapter 6

Our light is the only light outside because we are too far away from anyone who would use one apart from Marl, and his cottage is tucked into a dip a mile away behind the house. There is endless blackness stretching and yawning as the night curls around the house. Even the stars are quiet tonight. For a moment I see through the dark into the world beyond and something flickers and flares. But when I blink it's gone and the night is swallowing the house whole.

OK says Rey and she's put her pyjamas on and I can see the moonbright strip of her ankles because they're too short now and Rey has always been smaller than me but maybe she's catching up. She is holding a book about stars and the night sky but she's marked her place and closed the cover so she's not going to read right away.

Let's play Imagine I say because she's waiting for me to say that. She nods and she starts to wind up our lantern. Will gave it to us when he left because he was sixteen and too old to be here any more. He said he'd buy us a better one with his wages as a mechanic, but he hasn't yet. This one is fine though and no one else has one so it's extra special. You have to turn a handle for ages and ages to get the bulb to flicker and breathe out a tiny glow but it's better than batteries because we'd never get Lissa to buy those for us. They're too expensive and there are never enough to go round.

Rey puts the lantern under the bed covers and I pull on my pyjamas so quickly that the waistband gives a little shudder and tears. I roll it over because I can get Lissa to sew it up for me tomorrow with a needle and tiny neat stitches that look like she was never there at all. I turn towards bed and the lit-up lump that is Rey and I see the moon suspended like a secret in the misty dark outside. The silver light gleams through to the roll of the hills and the dips and peaks of valleys and mountains that shift and

change with the weather. This house is a lonely place sewn right on the edge of another lonely place. There is no one out there.

I scramble into bed. The sheets are slippery with cold but we make our own world under the covers and it's full of warmth and light and shadows.

Imagine whispers Rey and her face is a scrap of moonlight. She doesn't finish her sentence.

Imagine we were at the very top of a mountain in the heart of the wildlands I say but Rey shakes her head.

Imagine we were swimming in the river and the water was full of bright fish that moved around us like a swirling silver cloak I try but Rey shakes her head again. She doesn't want my wild stories. She wants our mother.

Imagine she was a gem collector I say and Rey nods so I carry on speaking in our warm world under the covers. I spin the story and I let it fill all the space between us and the darkening nooks and crannies as the lantern spits and sputters its dying light.

Imagine she was a gem collector and she was on a hunt for the famous Marsh Opal which could only be

found in the wet wildlands where the earth meets the sky. Everyone said it was a piece of the moon or maybe a fallen star and it was lost in the waters forever. It was worth more than any other gem in the whole world. It could cure the sick and turn stones into spills of rubies and diamonds. It was magic and it was real. But the marshes were dark and dangerous and they could suck you in and hold you tight. She was so brave and so daring.

I watch Rey as I tell her the story about our mother and how she found the Marsh Opal but other people wanted it so badly they'd do anything to get it. So she had to run and hide and she couldn't take us with her so she left us where she knew Lissa would find us. Rey glows as the words wrap around her.

Again she whispers and hugs her arms round her bony knees and leans into me. She's relaxed and wrapped in stories and lamplight. She loves to hear every scrap of story I can spin about our mother and she wants them all to be true even though they're all just magic and make believe. She never wants stories about our father and I don't have any to tell. Children

here wonder and talk about their mothers, I suppose. They grew us. They grew us and gave birth to us and they knew us. Then they left us.

Give me an idea I say and Rey frowns and spins a cinnamon curl around her finger. I cut mine short with Lissa's kitchen scissors and she shrieked when she saw me but she said that was only because I'd done such a bad job and then she tidied it up around my ears for me.

Imagine she lived in the village and sold books? Rey says and the words rise at the end like smoke because she's not sure about this story and I shake my head. I don't like stories like that. I like to tell ones that are wild and weird and nothing like those boring letters everyone else has. Rey loves the stories no matter what. She lets herself believe every single word.

Imagine she was an explorer I say.

I've told this one so many times that its edges are soft and worn and the words have become old and crumpled in my mouth. I don't really want to tell it again. I just want to imagine us alone in the wildlands because whenever I tell those stories it feels like I am

whole. Just for a bit. But Rey doesn't like those stories as much.

Imagine she was an explorer I say again and Rey folds herself around me. This one is good enough. We build a mother from words and in the half-light of the world under our covers she takes shape and she might be real. Rey loves it when I make our mother come back for us. It's like I can carve a puzzle piece she's been missing all her life and for a few moments she's happy. So I mould our mother's shadow and compose her voice like music in the air as she says *My babies, my babies.*

I keep telling the story of our mother until Rey's eyes close like petals in the moonlight and she slips into sleep. I turn off the lantern and we curl together like we always do and our breathing begins to match. I fall into the space between waking and dreaming and I imagine being tiny and just-born and the duvet above us is a snow-filled sky and that our beginning was different.

But it's just a dream and it's just words and it's just a story I tell to keep Rey bright and happy.

Chapter 7

I wake up in the empty foxlight just like I always do and I look out of the smeared glass pane by our bed. The sky is low and brushed with steel and the wildlands are hidden but I try to trace their familiar edges with my finger. I run the lines of the trees and the mountains and then I stop because there's something different. There is something moving. I am sure of it. A shape that moved and shifted away from my finger as I drew the tumble of grass that snakes into the beyond. A sloping twist of shadow. I grip the window sill and I press my nose flat against the burning cold of the glass but the mist rushes in and the light changes to morning and there is nothing there.

I roll over and I curl into Rey and I try to go back to sleep but the shape moves darkly behind my eyelids.

Chapter 8

In the wild light of morning Rey is outside feeding bones to her garden. I am outside watching even though it's freezing cold and the mists are grey and low and starting to whisper inside my skin. There's nothing else to do today unless you count playing cars with Zaki or playing cards with Alice or listening to Robin plink through a song on the piano or stomping up and down the endless corridors to try and keep warm because there's not quite enough wood to light the fires all day long and Lissa only puts the big metal radiators on when it's a special occasion. I am going to be cold inside or outside so I might as well keep Rey company. It's always better to be near Rey, and it's always better not to be playing cars with Zaki.

Rey throws handfuls of ground bone powder on to the wet soil and it glows like stars in a blue-black sky.

The air is damp and heavy and Rey's clothes are sticking to her skinny body. I can see the thread of her spine like a row of cotton reels and the bones of her wrists as she scoops more bone meal from her bucket. She kneels down right in the mud and sprinkles carefully. Her fingers are glowing white and blue. Rey will never put on gardening gloves and she says she needs to feel the earth with her fingertips and that the cold doesn't bother her one bit. She always wears her favourite yellow hat but that's because Lissa knitted it and she loves it and not because it keeps her toasty warm. I wonder if not feeling the cold is something to do with being found iceblasted and snowsoaked but I can't stand the cold so it can't really be that. I sometimes think the ice never melted from my bones and all the sharp shards are still trapped inside me.

Rey pokes at the dark earth with a purpling finger. Nothing ever grows in this soil. It swallows everything Rey puts in and spits out nothing in return. She writes down the seeds she's planted and the weather that day and some other little things in her blue book as if that will make a difference and somehow the flowers

will bloom because of her diligent notetaking. But she really doesn't seem to mind either way. She's not bothered when things aren't perfect. If we lived in the wildlands I'm sure her flowers would grow. I would tangle them through our hair and wear them like crowns and we'd be queens of all the wild.

I wander through the icy garden. The rabbits shift and hop in their hutches and a few sit in the wire run and sniff the air. It's probably too cold for them to be outside now and so soon Lissa will make us carry their heavy wooden homes into the boot room. Robin loves the rabbits. They were his idea and he begged and begged until one day Marl turned up with a cage slung in the back of his truck and six pairs of bright eyes glowing in the morning sun. He wouldn't tell us where he'd got them from but I don't think it was easy. Quite soon after we had a lot more than six pairs of eyes and so Marl built another rabbit run. One for boys and one for girls. Just like in the house.

Rabbits in the wildlands would run free.

The Light House is built on the very edge of the wildlands and the world. No one lives out beyond us.

They are snug and safe in the tiny town and scattered in the villages that are dipped in valleys below and we can never see their lights or their people. Marl is the closest person to us and we hardly ever see him unless Lissa needs something fixing and she can't do it herself. This house is a full stop and nothing comes after. Except it has to. It's where we were found and so there must have been someone there. There must have been something. I spend a lot of time looking out to the flat horizon and a lot of time seeing nothing.

But something catches the corner of my eye. Over by the wire and wood of the rabbit hutches. A burst of orange flame. A flicker. A tiny moment of colour and movement. I see its shadow rise and fall and a paintbrush streak of colour spread itself through the grey. The same sloping movement I saw early this morning, I'm sure of it. I whirl round and try to follow but there's nothing anywhere except endless sky reflected in the wildland waters.

Same as always.