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THE WOLF TWINS

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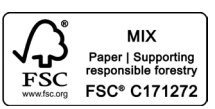
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1



Watchful Lucy

I see her in the clearing outside our house the day after the snowstorm. Weather-beaten, with matted hair, like a well-worn, bobbly jumper. Her white beard of frozen fur has a smattering of frost, and her beady eyes are wild. She turns her head, as if searching for something. My hand hesitates at the window latch. Right now, this single pane of glass is the only thing separating our worlds.

I've never seen a wolf this close before. I stare at her, and she looks back questioningly. Time hangs between us. I'm trying so hard not to blink that my eyes sting.

'Who are you?' I whisper, because even without asking Mum I sense she's not one of hers.

The she-wolf opens her jaws and lets loose a growl. I tense, though I know it's not a sound of anger, but perhaps of hunger, or pain.

She startles, and I watch as her back arches and she flees into the forest so fast it's as though she was never here at all.

Then our front door creaks and I hear pounding feet, and before she comes into my line of vision, I know it's Alpha. She hasn't noticed the wolf that she's scared off. She flings her bag over her shoulder and jogs down the path, slipping slightly in the snow.

I watch her feet rise from the ground in their dirty trainers (she wouldn't be seen dead in clean ones) and come crashing down, droplets of slushy snow spraying our front step. Her feet are constantly in motion, as if she's always dribbling on the basketball court, gearing up for a super slam dunk. Alpha is so confident, I'm certain she can do anything. She's technically my mirror image. We have the same wavy ginger hair (except hers is always smoothed back into a messy bun, so it doesn't get in her way), the same round face with a smattering of freckles

across the nose and cheeks, and the same long, thin legs. But inside we couldn't be more different.

I try to imagine what it must feel like, not being scared of what people think or what they might say. Even leaving the house on my own seems impossible. If I close my eyes, I can just about see it – waltzing up the steps of the bus or along the street to school… or maybe… No, I wouldn't waste it on school.

If I could walk out of the house without a care in the world, I would go somewhere extra special. I'd hop on the train to London and visit the observatory in Greenwich. I'd find the right bus by myself and use the map on my phone to navigate the way up the hill. Then I'd gaze down at the park, the Queen's House, the winding river, and the city in the distance, and I'd stay until it got dark. And then Alpha and I — because she'd be there with me — we'd go and look through the 28-inch refractor telescope and see the moon. And we'd think about how it must have felt to be the first human to walk on its surface…

2

Racing Alpha

I run from Gra's house to the bus stop, like a jungle explorer running from a leopard or a tiger. I'm probably not far off. Who knows what animals lurk here? All these tall trees give me the creeps, like the stupid rickety bus that comes only once an hour and looks about a hundred years old.

Who would want to live in a place like this?



When I told Hector we were moving to the forest, he thought I was having him on.

'What, like Tarzan? Maybe you could try out a fresh move – swinging from a vine in the treetops to drop the ball in the net?'

His eyes creased up and he laughed so hard his glasses almost fell off. That sparked another wave of rage inside me about the ridiculous unfairness of it all.

'I wish I was joking,' I told him. 'But Mum's got a new job and we're going next month. Apparently there's no discussion.'

'What? But you've always lived next door to us, Allie,' he wailed. 'She can't just decide you're leaving without asking you.'

'Of course she can. My parents are great at making selfish decisions. First Dad, now her.'

I'd stopped speaking to Dad when he moved out and it became clear we weren't good enough for him any more. Now I felt like walking out on Mum, but it's tricky as she's the parent we agreed to live with.

'What am I going to do without you?' Hector asked miserably.

'Probably get into less trouble,' I said, hoping that would make him laugh, but it didn't.

He kicked the garden wall we were sitting on with the back of his foot. A fleck of white paint floated to the ground like a giant snowflake.

'Where is this forest? And what is your mum going to do?'

'She's going to be… wait for it – a rewilder.'

'A what?'

'I know – I can't believe it's even a job. Sometimes I think she's made it up. She'll be helping to bring back wolves into Whitecastle Forest.'

'What… like *real* wolves?'

I nodded grimly.

'But isn't that super dangerous? Why is that a good idea?'

'You'd have to ask her.'

I climbed down the ladder that straddled our gardens. Luce and I would climb it to play with Hector, pretty much since we could walk. By the end of February, it would have to be removed, along with the collection of special stones we'd gathered on our adventures and which we'd proudly displayed along the wall.

'What about school, Allie?' Hector asked, panicking.

'I'll be there. Don't you worry,' I said firmly. Mum was trying to make us both move to Whitecastle

School, especially after Luce's Incident, but that's something I wouldn't budge on. Jefferson Secondary is where Hector and Vern and all my other friends are – not to mention Mr Ray, the best basketball coach ever. This year we're in with a decent chance of winning the inter-school mixed basketball championships.

Mum had protested that it was almost a forty-minute journey on the bus each way, but I said I'd do it.



So here I am, on the bus with 'the usuals'. There's the woman in the colourful shirts and pristine suits, sitting at the back with her laptop open. She clearly works in town, but I have no idea why she chose to live out here. There's the old man with his equally old black Labrador, who always travel on Tuesdays and Fridays, and there are the two boys in red uniform. They look like brothers. One of them is always reading and the other looks like he's playing games on his phone. I've said hi to them a couple of times, but they didn't seem keen on talking.

The roads are slippery because of the ice and snow – mad weather for the start of April. The bus trundles along slowly out of the forest. It hasn't been repaired in years, and the potholes make us bounce in our seats, which I can tell is particularly annoying for the colourful-shirt-laptop-lady who's trying to type.

It's only when we reach the turn onto the main road that takes us into town that I finally breathe a sigh of relief, because I feel as though I'm coming home.