WHEN THE WILD CALLS

To everyone who asked what happens next

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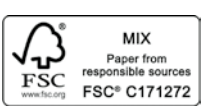
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LITTLE TIGER
LONDON



ONE
Juniper

The journey winds through me, twisted and turned, like a difficult second spine.

I dream of our glasshouse, impossibly beautiful, on the South Edge of the city, just before you reach the Buffer Zone. A dome of light and green in the dark cage that's Portia Steel's dominion. Our home for all those years, Bear's and mine.

There's a figure moving through the pots and shadows. Annie-Rose, our grandmother. She's older now. Only a few months have passed but she misses us so much it's stooped her shoulders and slowed her walk.

"We'll find a way back to you," I want to shout through the glass, but something stops me. I'm terrified of going back to that place.

There's a rapping on our door and I'm pulled from my

sleep. I glance at the empty bed opposite. Bear's already slipped away. He's still not over the joy of being here. Even on the coldest of mornings, when my breath billows out before me and my boots cut crisp shapes in the frost, Bear will be off somewhere. He can't get enough of this place.

The rapping sounds again, louder.

I stumble to the door, wiping sleep from my eyes. Morgan's outside. One of the Ennerdale women who seems least happy to have us. "I need a word with that brother of yours."

I step backwards. Why's Morgan rapping at our door so early in the morning? And why does she want Bear?

"Well, I'm waiting," she goes on, spitting out the words. She pushes into our hut and stands on the rush mat that Willow helped me weave from the reeds that grow round the edges of the lake. I don't like seeing Morgan's dirty boots on it, her laces done up in angry knots.

"Bear's not here," I tell her.

"I lost three chickens last night. Three!" Morgan exclaims.

I try to wake up my brain, to find the link between lost chickens and her standing here, shouting in my face.

"Do you want us to find them?" I ask, imagining Bear and me trailing chickens through the trees. He'd like that kind of chase.

Morgan's snarl stretches out of her face. "Do you find this funny?"

"No, but I don't understand," I say honestly, pushing my hair behind my ears. It's tangled in the night. I knew I should have plaited it.

"The fox got in, of course!" Morgan forces the words through her teeth so that each syllable comes with a globule of spit.

"I'm sorry," I say, my heart ramming faster inside my ribcage. "What's it got to do with my brother?"

"He let the fox in, didn't he? I've warned him about going inside the coop. He bothers them, and I've told him a million times about the latch. I don't know why he can't leave them alone."

"He just wants to see them. Your chickens. He loves them," I say. There's something about the coop that draws him in – the soft clucking birds, all beautiful and alive. He's got names for each of them. He takes them pink wriggling worms that he digs up from the Ennerdale compost heap.

"Bear'll be devastated when he finds out," I add, for good measure.

"I'm taking it to the council tonight," Morgan continues, the rage visible in her throat and a flare of it across her cheeks.

"But what can the council do? If he did let the fox in, it was an accident. He's only little."

Morgan looks at me with contempt. "Whatever age you

are, living here comes with responsibility. It's a privilege you earn every single day. We can't have recklessness."

"We know that."

"I said we shouldn't let in outsiders," Morgan hisses. A thick globule lands in the corner of my eye. "I'll be talking to your father."

I wipe away Morgan's spit and watch her storm through the emerald mossy-roofed cabins, back to the main hub of the village.

"Oh, Bear!" I groan, grabbing my coat from the hooks over our stove and stumbling into the early morning cold to find him.



TWO

Juniper

The February air's sharp and icy. I gulp it in, my mind alert now and my senses thrumming. The crunch of footsteps on the frozen ground. The tang of woodsmoke from Ennerdale's morning fires. A robin singing its heart out on a branch above our hut. The red-breasted bird jumps lower when he sees me.

"Not now, Red," I say apologetically. "I'll find some scraps for you later."

I circle the village. I'm too shy to knock on hut doors. Morgan's not entirely wrong about us being outsiders. People have been nice on the whole, we've made friends, yet some days it seems we're as out of place here as we were in the city. Like our hearts beat out of sync with everyone else's. Or we have a different way of seeing things – bug-eyed, thousands of tiny light detectors, checking for danger.

Though this place is safe really. Morgan would be an aberration anywhere.

I call to some kids I pass. "You seen my brother?"

"He's hiding," one of them says. It's a boy of seven or so, Piper, who's one of Bear's little crew. "Morgan's on the warpath."

"Yeah, well, it's not fair," I mutter, as I carry on by. "Bear didn't do anything, did he?"

My eyes stray to the treeline, panic squashing up inside me. Bear wouldn't run away, would he? He wouldn't leave this place, because he's scared of Morgan's wrath, and sad at the loss of three chickens?

I pick up pace towards the lake, to the peninsula bit everyone calls the island.

"Bear!" I cry, my voice echoing over the water. There's a crust of ice with trapped frozen leaves inside like outstretched hands, and the reeds breaking out like swords.

Willow says this is where she'll teach me and Bear to swim when it's warm enough. In summer, the Ennerdale kids take trips to the sea and stay overnight on a beach called St Bees, camping out on the sand. We have to be able to swim by then, so we can go with them.

I loop between the trees. "Bear!" I scream, frustrated now. *Why did you have to disappear? Why did you have to go in with those chickens, when you know how much Morgan*

dislikes us? And why couldn't you put the latch back on, like she showed you?

It's pointless. I can feel the emptiness of this place. There's just the heron, still and silent, watching for fish.

I turn back to the village.

Fern's cry floats on the air from Gael and Willow's hut. Her voice has got that note to it that goes straight to your heart. I push through the door.

I stop in surprise at the sight of Gael and Bear together. Gael's on the big chair, rocking Fern in his arms in a panicked way. Bear's standing over her, making the faces that usually get her beaming. But not today – can't they see? – she's way beyond that. Her squashed-up face, scrunched fists flying all over the place.

"Bear! I've been looking everywhere for you!" I yell, turning to him first.

He frowns. "You didn't try here."

I frown back crossly, wondering why this didn't occur to me. Gael's our father. If there had been room in his and Willow's cabin, Bear and I would be living here instead.

"Where's Willow?" I ask Dad, my attention back on the baby.

"Out for a swim," he answers.

"I just came from the lake," I tell him, shivering at the thought of Willow in the icy water. But Willow's tough. She swam the whole way through winter. Even days after

giving birth, she swam.

"You must have missed her," Dad says, getting to his feet. "She'll have stopped at Rosie's place. Juniper, could you take young Fern while I run over? This baby's hungry."

"Of course," I say, happy to scoop Fern's flailing body from him, to wrap her in my arms and hush into her ears.

She's scratched her face, poor mite. No wonder she's bawling. There's a thin red line on her cheek where she's caught it with her fingernail.

I wrap her closer. She smells of lavender and milk.

Bear looks sheepish as Dad flies out of the door. I walk the space of the hut with Fern, intent on the shushing.

"I know about the chickens," I say after a couple of minutes, when Fern's sobs have quietened and her eyes start shutting, her body heavier in my arms.

"I didn't do anything, I promise!" Bear says, his eyes rushing to my face.

"You went to see them last night?" I ask, still hoping he'll deny it. It would be easier if Morgan's dead chickens were down to something else. The wind or a faulty latch or anything that isn't Bear.

He looks at the ground miserably.

"Bear!" I cry, collapsing into the rocking chair, letting that do the movement that helps Fern drift into her slumber.

"I thought I locked them up. I promise, Ju. But maybe I got distracted. I saw that lynx again, like I told you."

His cheeks are flushed. I stare at him, remembering last night. I was distracted too, deep in a book, when he came in.

I should have double-checked about the chicken-coop latch. Bear was so excited about the lynx he said he saw. Not our Ghost, the lynx who trailed us from pretty much outside our city. He swears he's seen a new one.

I sigh. "We can't make mistakes. It's important that people like us."

"They do!" he says, puffing out his chest. "They do, Ju. We ran races up the shore yesterday with Piper's dad, and everyone says I was the fastest, by rights."

"By rights?"

Bear tilts his head. "If the bigger kids hadn't joined in. Lee was there and you know how long her legs are! That's hardly fair, is it? And I was almost as fast."

"Bear!" I laugh gently, lying back against the chair cushion. Fern's eyelids flicker like moth wings. "It's not always got to be some big competition. You don't have to be proving yourself. You just got to be careful, like locking up the chickens so the fox doesn't get in."

Bear sits cross-legged by my feet and wraps his arms around himself. "I wonder which ones it was. I hope it wasn't Pepper, or Fluffy."

I reach down to squeeze his shoulder. "It will have been quick for them. You've seen fox teeth."

"I don't think it was a fox," Bear goes on. "I think it was that lynx. I told you, Juniper. It's bigger than Ghost even."

I stare out of the window, still painted with its frost patterns from the night. Could there be another lynx in this valley? Has it scented Ghost? I get a tight feeling in my chest. What if she follows it away from us?

The door swings open and Willow rushes in, Dad pushing her forward. Willow stops when she sees Fern asleep in my arms. "Ah, Juniper, you're so good with her." She jostles Dad. "Anyone would have thought she was dying the way this one was going on!"

Willow's face falls and she puts her fingers to her lips, as though to yank the words right back. "Sorry, I didn't mean…"

I shake my head. "Don't be silly. It doesn't matter. I don't…"

I stop, not knowing what I mean to say. Will I always think about Mum when someone mentions dying? Will I always think about Mum anyway, when I see Willow next to Dad like that, joined together as if they're two separate parts of the same whole. Willow, when in another world, it might have been Mum. A world with no disease, where people hadn't been locked up in cities and died. If Mum and Dad had stayed in their hometown and lived an ordinary life.

But that's rolling back too many things. Too many ifs and maybes.

It's rolling back humankind to a time before people's greed got so out of control that someone would think releasing a deadly disease was the only way to save the world.

If we went back that far, I don't suppose there'd still be Bear and me, and there definitely wouldn't be this brand-new person, warm and soft against me.

"Let me take Fern anyway," Willow says in a whisper. "She'll be wanting feeding."

I let Willow take my place on the rocking chair. It has a view up between the huts to the lake. The water shimmers silvery like fish.

"I'll make pancakes," Dad says, heading into the other half of their hut, where there's a wood-burning stove throwing out heat, and shelves to store the crockery they've plundered from surrounding valleys. "Then we'll discuss how to make it up to Morgan for her lost chickens!"

Bear buries his face in the rag rug.

"Oh, Gael!" Willow tuts, giving Dad a stern look. "It was an easy mistake, wasn't it, Bear? It could even have been Morgan herself forgetting to put the latch on."

Dad rolls his eyes at Willow but I smile, grateful for her excuses. "Morgan's not an easy person to cross," Dad says. "She's well respected on the council."

"By who?" Willow scoffs.

"Gill, Ben, Annie, Ade," Dad replies. "We must respect

the Ennerdale elders. They've lived through things we can only imagine."

"We've lived through enough too, Gael," Willow says quietly, stroking the hair on the back of Fern's head. There's just a sprinkling of it, like moss. "Juniper and Bear, Gael. They've lived through enough already. They don't deserve Morgan."

The pan's sizzling now and I can smell the first pancake. Real eggs, milk and flour. Nothing like our old city food.

I'll never forget the first time we tasted Dad's pancakes. December 21st, the shortest day of the year. Willow was fretting because more snow was coming and Dad and Gill, his travelling companion, were due back to Ennerdale. When we arrived, they'd been away in a city north of here called Carlisle, talking about the disease and vaccines. Those conversations could be tense, Willow told us.

Despite thick snow and the falling night, Dad made it back for the winter solstice. His mouth hung open in disbelief when he saw Bear and me. He was happy, but he was sad too. Seeing us so much bigger than when we'd been sent away, and realizing how much he'd missed.

Anyway, even though he was tired after his journey and must have had a million emotions swirling round his head, he insisted he cook us his speciality.

The day after that, Willow went into labour. And the day after *that*, Fern was born. So in three days, Dad went from

having no kids, to having three.

"You'll have to write a note of apology to Morgan. Peace is important," he says, dishing up the first pancake.

"You could draw her one of your pictures, Bear," I say quickly, watching my brother's face contort at the thought of writing letters.

Bear nods reluctantly. We can all agree on peace as a good thing to strive for.

"Now, who wants honey?" Willow says. I don't know why she asks – as if either of us would say no to honey.