



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.

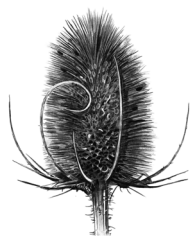
That's it.

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 *I knew you'd find me 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.

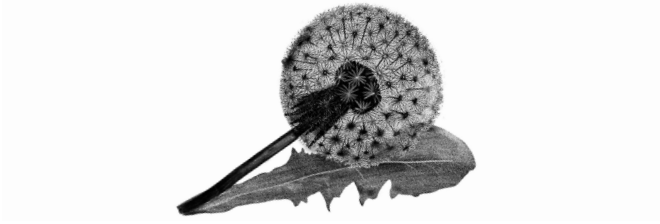


Whenever another baby is left on this ragged edge between the wild and the world everyone always wonders what their story will be and what they might have been left with and what they'll learn when they're big enough to know. It doesn't matter though. You're just as stuck here. It doesn't matter if someone 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.

