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Foxlowe

Written by Eleanor Wasserberg

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Foxlowe

ELEANOR WASSERBERG

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For my parents

Prologue

At Foxlowe everyone has two names. One is a secret, meant to be lost. For most, it worked like this: first they had the one they came to Foxlowe with peeled away like sunburnt skin. Then a new name, for a new life.

I used to get jealous of the Family with their secret outside names, while I only had the one, like half a person. Sometimes an old name would slip, strangled at a syllable with a blush. This was a sign to watch for, in case someone might wish to become a Leaver.

Now I am doubled that way, named twice, but for me, it's worked in reverse: my new name came later, on the outside, like putting on that crusty old skin that should be lying on the floor.

My one name was Green, but no one calls me that any more. I had no old name to peel away, because I was born at Foxlowe. Freya named me first, of course. She named all of us, except for one. There's a power in naming. Green was strange even for home — most of the women had flowers, or pretty ideas, like Liberty.

If I could speak to Freya, I'd tell her not to worry, because I hold my new name ever so lightly, ready to shrug it off, if ever Foxlowe could start up again.

Of course I wasn't Green all the time. With Toby, it was *the ungrown*; once Blue came, it was *the girls*, too.

Since this is a story for Blue, first here is the little bit I remember of the world before Blue was in it. I knew that it's not only names that double: time was split in two, between two Solstices. The winter one falls when the year is dying and you have to be careful then, because the Bad is strong in the dark. The summer one is when the sun sets twice at the Standing Stones, and the Bad is weakest. I don't remember when I learned these things, only that I knew them by the time Blue existed. I knew Freya and Richard and Libby were the Founders and that the others were the Family and I even remembered that there was a time when I was the only ungrown, before Toby came. I knew that when I was born, it brought the Time of the Crisis, and that everything Freya did, even the things that hurt, were to keep the Family together and safe ever afterwards.

I am meant to tell Blue's story, but it doesn't flow as it should: there are broken and jagged edges to it, and some pieces are too sharp for the tongue to tell. I could begin with Blue's naming, the first little thing I did to love and to hurt Blue all at once. Or I could tell the moment Foxlowe began crumbling all around us, with the front doorbell ringing. But wherever I begin, it all leads to the same place. To the sweet rotting smells, and the warm, slick blood.

PART ONE

Green

I

Tiny red beads came from the lines on my arm. Those soft scars give way like wet paper. There's a game that helps: footsteps in the dust, twisting to match the old strides without taking the skin away from the Spike Walk. Another: name steps all the way to the yellow room end of the Spike Walk. *Freya, Toby, Green, Egg, Pet, the Bad*. I made it to the final nail and squinted at the arm. Red tears and the lines swollen hot; a crying face. I turned to Freya, her long arms wrapped around herself at the ballroom end of the Walk. She nodded, so I breathed deeper and licked some of the salt and coins taste to make it clean.

Freya spoke. —And back again, Green.

Her voice was low, but even softened there was broken glass in it.

I lifted my other arm to the nails that had once hung pictures on these walls in Foxlowe's old life.

—No, same arm, Freya said, smothering a smile. —Until it bleeds, is the rule.

—It is bleeding.

I held up my arm for her to see. Freya gave a slow blink.

—And back again, Green.

I put the torn skin back to the first nail. By the time I stumbled into Freya's embrace there were flames under my skin, and I knew the Bad was burning away. I pleaded silently into the wood smoke scent of Freya's dress. She twined her fingers in my hair, tight at the roots, pulled to search my face. I tried to look pure and good, fixed on her dark eyes and sharp, veined cheeks. Freya nodded, uncurled to her full height, and led me out to the ballroom, where Libby knelt on the huge red rug.

Libby wrapped me in the cardigan with the daisy shaped buttons and left me for the kitchen. The curve of a broken button fitted snug around the tip of my little finger.

It wasn't Freya who returned but Libby with the poultice of lavender and honey.

—Why're *you* doing it? I asked, as Libby wrapped the warm cloth below my elbow. Freya did this for me, while telling the story of the Crisis, then she'd bring her forehead to mine, and pour her thick, black hair around us, making a little world for us away from the rest of the Family. This was her way of forgiving me. A little ritual of our own, an always.

—What did you do for the Spike Walk? Libby asked.

She liked to answer questions with questions. Her full name was Liberty, but only Freya ever called her that. Her hair was greasy with egg yolk, ready to wash out when the water came on after sunset.

I shrugged. It was between Freya and me. That morning I'd tried to pierce my ears with a needle and ice snapped from the attic window frame. It wasn't for that I was punished, but because Freya, who could read all my secrets just by looking at my face or the way I moved my hands, knew it was because I wanted to look like Libby.

Libby's earrings were blue hoops with little gold birds perched on them. They were special. Richard had brought them for her from the outside, and they never went into Jumble. She let me play with them now that my arm was bandaged, pressing one against my ear, while she held up the back of a spoon for me to see the blurry image. My hair didn't move like her curls but like the knotted hair of a wet dog left out in the rain.

After a while the Family came in from the gardens, their arms full of holly, or branches of white and red berries. I looked for Toby, but only the grown had been outside collecting for the Solstice decorations. They were flushed from the cold and the carrying, but it was almost festival time, and they filled the huge room with whistles and snatches of song and bits of stories. I threw my head back to see if the sounds bouncing around the ceiling beams were visible. Richard dragged a crate of wine and raised his eyebrows at Libby as he passed. She gave him a wide smile and shifted her hips on the floor, touched her sticky yolked hair. His eyes slid to my arm, then away, and he left towards the kitchen. The Family

started to pull out vine and branch, strangling them into wreaths.

I was finding deeper breaths now, my heart settling.

—That’s it, breathe into it, Libby soothed. —Imagine the pain like a ball that’s moving to your hands.

I always tried but my pain ran in lines, so I made it into a track to be walked across the moor, leading to my fingers. Libby had me make a fist and release it. She told me I could watch the ball float up and away like a bubble. Instead, behind my eyelids were threads spooling out from the new cuts, unravelling, unpicked bad stitches.

—Have you heard the secret? Libby asked me.

—Secret? Is it new family? New clothes? I said. —Can I have a—

—No. It’s something really good, she said, giggling so her snaggle tooth showed.

—New ... animals? More dogs, are there going to be puppies?

Libby shook her head, plaiting the tassels at the edge of the ballroom rug.

—I know, I lied.

—You’ve guessed! And I’m not supposed to tell, Freya wants to!

—Why hasn’t Freya come? I said. —Is she to do with it, the secret?

Libby held out her earring. —Try it on your other ear.

But I didn’t care about the earrings any more. I tried to think of all the secrets there had ever been, but it wasn’t

new family or animals and I knew it couldn't be a Leaver, because Libby said something good. I begged Libby to tell me, hung from her shoulders, kissed her then kicked her, and eventually she said, —Green! Enough, go and find Toby and play, and she shoved me away.

He wasn't far, on the middle landing, eating berries from the new wreath that hung there. His woolly blond hair stuck out from his head in untidy curls; a layer of dirt crusted around his knees. I stole some berries and for a while we showed each other our red-stained tongues.

—D'you know there's a secret happening, something good? I asked Toby.

—Like what?

—Something to do with *me*.

He frowned. —You have to clean, is all. We all have to before Solstice.

—Stupid, that's not a good thing.

—Stupid, of course they aren't going to *tell* you it's a bad thing, stupid!

—Libby said something good. Are you calling Libby a liar?

My palm made red shapes on the skin of his back, where the safety pin left his t-shirt gaping. He kicked me away and twisted my arm, right where the fresh blood was. I spat in his face, foam on his cheeks. That settled it. Spit wins. Besides, Toby might be older, taller, but he

was still newer than me: I remembered the day he came, in Valentina's arms, and was dumped next to me on the ballroom rug. *Play*, they said. *You can't remember that*, he always said, *you were only a baby*. *I do*, I said: the strange plastic on his jacket, and the outside smell. He'd been named October; Freya said it was right. She told me that outside Foxlowe it was a name for the time when leaves turned to fire.

Sitting on the step, we picked at things. Toby peeled away a huge scab on his knee I'd given him a day or two before. I plucked at rotten wood, and we drew on the fresh wood underneath with the berry juice. I loved to sit on the middle landing. From there you had a view right down into the main house. You could see the front entrance hall, and the ballroom ceilings stretched out of sight. The hallway leading to the kitchen was below too, so you could watch as people rushed in and out, carrying tea or fruit back to the studios. If you looked up, you could follow the staircase right up to the attic, making your stomach ripple with the height. Best of all, the stained glass window had a panel of clear glass with a view over the back lawns and the moor beyond, so you could peer out, bathing your feet in the blue light. The middle landing was the heart of everything.

Toby looked up from his bleeding knee and tugged at my poultice.

—Spike Walk?

I nodded.

—Valentina won't let Freya take me any more, Toby said.

This was a lie. From Toby or Valentina, I couldn't tell which.

—Freya didn't properly forgive me after, I said. —I might have to do the Walk again.

—What did you do?

—A Libby thing.

Toby nodded. The tides between Freya and Libby were always.

—Where is she then? Toby said. After a pause he said, —Maybe she's a Leaver! and laughed.

I pulled my cardigan closer around my waist. Freya had made it for me. The daisy buttons were from a shop she told me about that had them in jars, like sweets, she said, and I didn't understand her, sweets are in rows from the oven or from chilling in the goat shed, ready to cut into brittle pieces and suck. Freya laughed, pulled me to her and nuzzled my neck, saying *Imagine it*, talking about the outside for a while. Then we'd played *All The Ways Home Is Better*.

There had been a Leaving that year, just as the Summer Solstice was coming, a strange time to go, when the house was aglow and everyone was happy. She'd been pretty, the Leaver had, and liked to sit on the back steps sewing patchwork quilts. We were already forgetting her. After a Leaving, there was always a slump, and careful watching of each other, lots of Meetings and the reshuf-

fle of chores, and if people were gone for longer than expected, on shop runs or disappearing over the moor, things went quiet until they came back.

I slipped the hard edge of a daisy petal under my thumbnail, and tried to think of Freya as a Leaver, outside, in one of the box-houses she told me about. Foxlowe without her, like a hungry stomach.

—Don't be stupid, I said.

We stared each other out, until my stomach complained, a guttering sound, and we went off to find food.

In the kitchen, bread smell swelled up the room. Toby tripped down the steps and leapt onto the table, upsetting the wine. The Family cheered and slow-clapped. Pooling around my fingers, the red stream was sticky and cool.

The Foxlowe kitchen was a cave, a stone mouth with a cold floor that made an easy game of trying to jump from slab to slab, just as we did out on the moor. There was a long gutter, where blood used to run, Freya said, when they killed animals down there in Foxlowe's old life. Windows along one wall looked out on the back lawns. A table stretched along the centre, sticky with fruit juice and oil. Everywhere paint and brushes, lumps of curdled milk, crusty teabags. Dogs huddled the huge aga stove. The Family had come from the ballroom, following the smell of fresh bread.

When the Family was together like that, grown and ungrown, we got loud, shouting over each other, calling names, throwing arms wide. Libby looped around the

table, kissing cheeks, her fresh-washed hair spilling over faces. I looked around for Freya, who liked to complain about the waste and vanity of Libby using the yolks, but she wasn't there. Once, she'd tricked Libby by leaving old eggs out, long after they floated in still water, and Libby's hair reeked for days, Freya laughing so hard I thought she would be sick. Now, Libby looped her arms around Richard's neck, and he breathed in her newly softened curls.

Richard wore different clothes to the rest of us. There were paintings that looked like him in the upper rooms, the same fox faces with narrow noses and narrow eyes, and some of the clothes were the same: waistcoats and long black coats, white shirts full of moth holes. He never hugged us or swept us into a dance or pulled us onto his knee, so I didn't know the smell and feel of him like the other grown, but he was all bone, strong in Freya's way. His beard grew patchy and he was always scratching around his jaw. Sometimes the Family called him *boy* as a joke, but he was, Freya said, not *that* much younger than she was, if you were counting, and anyway older than Libby, who had airs of a grown but could have only just bled to look at her. Richard was one of the Founders, so there was little chance of him being a Leaver. Sometimes I secretly wished he would, didn't like his eyes following me around the house or the way they would flick away from me if I tried to catch them. He eyed the blood on Toby's knee.

—Still fighting, October, he said.

His voice faded at the end of words, like he got bored of them.

—This is supposed to be a place of peace, he said, circling his hands, his roll up making a smoky trail. —But you two ... always bring ... a kind of endless nasty fight, into our midst.

Toby licked the wine from his hands and pointed to the centre of the table.

—Butter, is that the secret thing? That's shit, he said.

—What secret? Libby said, smiling.

—Is it just cleaning? I said. —Where's Freya?

Richard frowned, and Libby looked away, and the Family chewed and swallowed.

I crawled under the table. Libby lifted Toby down. He nudged me with a fist and I hit him away.

—Try again, Toby said. —Say her name and see what they do.

—She can't be a Leaver, I whispered.

—Ask again, he said.

But I was too afraid to name her to the Family and have them look away. Thing was sometimes Leavers slipped away like that, quick and silent.

Libby passed some cake dipped in honey to us. —An undertable picnic! she said. I glared at her.

The shuffle of feet and laughter faded as the Family moved to the ballroom. The mulled wine steamed on the stove.

—Thought Freya would have taken you, Toby said. — You must have done something really bad. What did you do to make her a *Leaver*?

I lay down on the icy stone.

—What was her name, that last Leaver? I whispered.

Toby scowled at me. Getting each other into trouble was our favourite game.

—Really, I said. —I forgot. I won't tell.

—Brida, he said.

Her Foxlowe name. When she came, it was something long, an E name, I tried to remember.

Toby dug a bogey out of his nose and wiped it on the stone. —Valentina didn't like her, he added.

—Freya neither.

—Maybe Freya went to tell her off.

—Yes, I said.

—Let's get some clothes and food and stuff and go after her! he said.

—Shut up! She'll come back!

Toby pinched me hard. It was to say *Sorry* and *There, because you shouted at me and I was trying to be nice to you, and It might be true what I said, so get ready*, all in one red nip of the skin, his favourite place on my wrist, all my scars there not from Freya but from him. We talked that way, when it was something important. I didn't squeal or fight, just watched the blood flow into the skin, grateful for the sharpness of it, then Toby went back to the gown, leaving me lying under the table.

Candles on the table made a ring of light around the wooden curled feet. Freya would say, *Here's a fairy ring*, safe or dangerous, depending on the story.

Freya's fingers, greasy and rough on my cheek, her bitten skin coated in vaseline. Her hair around her shoulders like black straw. Dark eyes narrowed, squinting back at me. In the weak light Freya's crooked teeth were hidden, and she looked pale, almost pretty like Libby. She hunched her tall figure further under the table.

—What have we here? A fairy crawled under my table looking for milk.

She made *look* sound like *lute*.

—And still asleep, she doesn't want to talk.

I shot under her arm, and she held my head against her wool coat. She smelled of the outside: leather and plastic, and petrol from the old car we used for the shop runs.

—You came back, I said.

I tried to burrow further into her but she held her side away from me. In the crook of her elbow was a bundle of clothes. She'd brought new things! I grasped for it, but Freya sucked air through her teeth and cuffed my arm away. The bundle made wet sounds.

Freya knelt next to me and shifted it high onto her chest.

—This is our new baby, she said.