



WILDLANDS

**BROGEN
MURPHY**



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For Claud, who lives on in all the wild places



WELCOME TO THE WILDLANDS



Imagine a Britain without the howl of the wolf, or the growl of a bear.

Way back in the 2020s, this was the sorry state of our overcrowded island. Intensive farming, climate change, pollution, urban expansion . . . animals simply had no place left to go.

While large predators had already been lost centuries before, now even common garden species were on the brink of extinction – the hedgehog, the badger, the humble bumble bee! A generation of children faced a future with silent skies, empty forests and dead rivers.

But just when we looked to be on the brink of disaster, a visionary plan was unveiled. What if we could bring back the lost animals and create a place where nature could not only survive, but thrive?

An idea this bold couldn't be kept to a quiet corner of the countryside, it had to be bigger than we'd ever dared dream before. And so, an enormous area of farmland, forestry and national parks – covering much of northern England and southern Scotland – was chosen.

First, the bison, beaver, boar, elk and eagles were released. Then, after all humans had safely left, followed the fiercest predators – wolves, bear and lynx. Free once again to choose its own destiny, the landscape slowly transformed into a vast wilderness of forests, meadows, scrubland, rivers, lakes, beaches and wild seas.

To allow people to enjoy this unique environment, a ten-mile-wide 'buffer zone' was established around the edge of the project. So why not come hike with pine martens through pristine forest, canoe with otters down crystal-clear rivers, and fall asleep under a thousand stars to the whoop of a long-eared owl?

But be warned – you must not cross the boundary-line into the heart of the Wildlands. Our intelligent alarm-system has ensured that no one has set foot in the core of the project for twenty years. Untamed, unmonitored and undisturbed, this is a place for nature to keep its secrets.

What happens there, we can only guess. However, you may catch a glimpse if you ride the train from London to Glasgow – for this high-speed rail line crosses right through the middle of the project.

Extract from **YOUR GUIDE TO THE WILDLANDS**

2050 edition

SCOTLAND



EDINBURGH

GLASGOW

THE WILDLANDS

HADRIAN'S WALL

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

SUNDERLAND

DURHAM

MIDDLESBOROUGH

ISLE OF MAN

YORK

BLACKPOOL

LEEDS

LIVERPOOL

MANCHESTER

STOKE-ON-TRENT

ENGLAND

ALT TUNNEL



KEY

FAMILY CAMPING SITE



BIRD WATCHING SITE



HIKING TRAILS



CYCLING TRAILS



RANGER STATION



BOAT TRIPS





An alert popped up on Astrid's screen:

Low battery, 10% remaining

She tried resting the phone on the in-seat charging block, but – as with the five previous times she'd tried this – nothing happened.

She tossed the phone with a clatter on to the tray-table in front of her. With her eyes off the screen, she became aware again of the train carriage around her. The other passengers were silently absorbed in their devices or talking quietly, their low voices mixing with the gentle hum of the electric engine.

Astrid glanced out of the window. The train was raised above the ground now, level with the tips of the

trees. They must be in the Wildlands. She had a vague memory of Mum explaining about the train being raised up to avoid catching animals on the track. Her mum would know, being one of the original founders of The Wildland Project – a fact Astrid wasn't allowed to forget with everyone going on about it, *all the time*.

'Can you see anything?'

Here was another fact Astrid wasn't allowed to forget – she was supposed to be looking after her little sister, Indie.

When their carriage had emptied out at Manchester, Astrid had made Indie move over to the double seat opposite. Now they were straight through to Glasgow without stopping, so Astrid had been *hoping* for some peace and quiet.

Indie scooted across the aisle to try and look out of Astrid's window.

'I think I saw a bear!' she yelled, her elbow digging into Astrid's thigh as she leant across her lap.

'No, you didn't,' said Astrid, shoving Indie back towards her own seat. 'We're going about two hundred miles an hour. You won't see anything out there.'

'I might see a bird of prey!' replied Indie, pressing her face against her own window. 'If it's hovering over the forest.'

Astrid watched Indie kneeling up on her seat to try and get a better look. Her dark, curly hair – which Ma had patiently pulled into bunches that morning – had already escaped, matting itself into a bird’s nest at the back of her head. She was wearing her Wildlands shirt.

Mum had given Astrid her old ranger shirt for her tenth birthday, with her surname – *their* surname – embroidered across the back. Indie had been so jealous that Astrid asked Mum if she had another so Indie could have one too. Indie was only five at the time, and the shirt Mum produced was so big on her that it trailed along the floor. Still, for the next year, the two of them wore their matching shirts everywhere together.

Till the day Astrid quietly stuffed hers right to the back of her wardrobe and vowed never to put it on again.

‘Isn’t it so cool,’ squeaked Indie, ‘that the train goes right through the middle of the Wildlands?’

‘No,’ muttered Astrid.

Though a couple of years ago, she’d have been just as excited as Indie. In fact, when she was younger, she’d begged Mum so often to take her into the Wildlands that the two of them had once ridden this same train

line up and back again, just so Astrid could look out of the window the whole time.

Astrid shook the memory away. Across the aisle, The Wildland Project logo on the back of Indie's shirt seemed to jeer at her. She had a horrible fear Indie would wear the shirt to Mum's conference, meaning Astrid would have to endure an endless parade of boring rewilding people exclaiming in delight that *you're Cara's daughters!*

Or maybe they wouldn't?

Maybe everyone else would see what she had never noticed – that, while Indie looked like both their mothers, Astrid clearly must not. Had everyone else always been able to see it?

Everyone but her . . .

Astrid returned to her own window. She leant her forehead on the glass, feeling the rumble of the train's movement vibrate through her skull. The high summer sun made her squint, even though the train windows had tinted automatically to compensate. She unfocused her eyes till the endless expanse of trees blurred into a blanket of green.

'Can I look it up on your phone?'

'No,' replied Astrid, reflexively grabbing her phone

off the table and clutching it to her chest. ‘Wait, look up what?’

‘What birds of prey there are!’ exclaimed Indie, as if this was obvious. ‘So I’m ready to recognize them.’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Why not?’ whined Indie.

‘Because . . .’ faltered Astrid, ‘I’m using it.’ And then, because Indie was still watching her, she swiped open her phone.

She’d promised Ma that she’d message Mum once they left Manchester, to let her know the train was running on time. Of course, Astrid had absolutely no intention of sending Mum a message. Mum could look it up herself. If she cared so much, she would have stayed at home instead of rushing off at the first opportunity to show off about how important she was.

Mum was always getting asked to speak at events and conferences about rewilding. This time, it was a last-minute call to replace a sick speaker at a conference in Glasgow – something boring about human–bear conflict in the Highland Wilds.

It was the last week of the summer holidays, and Ma – who was a big-deal environmental lawyer – couldn’t

take more time off work because she had an important case coming up. After a lot of intense *adult discussions*, an elaborate plan was made in which Ma would work from home for a few days, then put the girls on a train to Glasgow, where Mum would meet them.

So that's how Astrid had ended up stuck on a train, looking after an overexcited eight-year-old, hurtling through the absolute last place on earth she wanted to be right now.

She opened the message thread with her best friend, Neel. His parents had taken him and his sisters to India to visit their grandparents in Kerala, so he'd been gone practically all summer. He wasn't online much, but over the weeks he'd sent through a steady stream of photos, mostly of himself on the beach, his skin getting gradually darker and darker while he looked increasingly pleased with himself.

Lucky Neel. The most exotic place Astrid would go this summer was this trip to Glasgow. Mum's parents were from Scotland, but they'd moved to London after Astrid was born. Ma was from Sri Lanka, but her parents had moved to Australia when she was little. Ma kept talking about doing a big trip out there, but it hadn't happened yet.

Staring down at Neel's goofy face, smudged with salt and sand, Astrid had the sudden urge to tell him how much she was dreading spending three days in a hotel with Mum . . . How she couldn't bear the idea of all Mum's colleagues telling Astrid that she must be *so proud* to be her daughter . . . But she couldn't be honest with Neel, because then she'd have to explain what she'd found out.

A few times over the past couple of years, he'd asked Astrid what had changed. Why she'd gone from telling anyone who would stand still for long enough about how *her* mum had founded the Wildlands, to not wanting to be in the same room as Mum and pretending the Wildlands didn't exist. Astrid had managed to shrug off his questions, pretending it was just a normal part of becoming a teenager. She'd hit puberty first, so he tended to defer to her on all things hormone-related.

'Did you know, the Wildlands has the largest -?'

'I'm busy here,' muttered Astrid, holding up her phone to cut Indie off.

Why did no one understand how much she didn't want to talk about Mum's precious Wildlands? It was bad enough having to be in it for the next hour.

A hurt look passed across Indie's face, and Astrid felt

a pang of guilt. She was supposed to be looking out for her, after all.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. ‘Hey, Indie,’ she said in a falsely cheerful voice. ‘I think I saw a beaver.’

Indie looked confused for a moment, then she broke into a grin. ‘That’s *otter*-ly ridiculous!’

Astrid shrugged. ‘*Whale*, you’ve missed it now.’

‘Oh . . .’ giggled Indie, ‘*rats*!’

They’d had a whole repertoire of animal-based puns when they were younger. Whenever they were bored, the two of them would go for as long as they could till one of them couldn’t think of a reply. Their parents would laugh along, then tell them to stop, then add in stern tones ‘that *eel*-y is enough now’, making them all crack up again.

Astrid pictured the four of them, laughing along together in their shared world, and a sharp ache spread through her chest. She gripped her phone and began scrolling aimlessly, glaring down at the blurry screen.

She really wished this journey could be over already. But then, she also never wanted to arrive in Glasgow.

Maybe the whole train could just drive itself off the tracks?