

WULFIE

★ STAGE FRIGHT ★



Lindsay J Sedgwick
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Little Island Books

WULFIE: STAGE FRIGHT

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An Chomhairle Ealaíon



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For my daughter, Libby. May her dreams come true.



Chapter 1

As Libby climbed up to her room, the shadows shifted. They came out of nooks and crannies and open cupboard doors. They stretched across the floor, slid down the stairs and lapped at her feet. It was an old, odd house, each staircase narrower and darker than the last, and right at the very top, so far up it was impossible to go any further without climbing onto the roof, was Libby's bedroom.

She had just snuggled into her bed underneath the skylight when Rex burst in.

'I'm going to tell you a bedtime story,' he said. 'And it's going to make you cry.'

Oh dear, thought Libby.



Her brother – step-brother, really – jumped up onto Libby’s bed and had a practice bounce. Rex was small and mean, but Libby was smaller and Rex was very good at telling stories that made her cry.

Being hidden in the eaves, full of corners and dark spaces, Libby’s room was the perfect place in which to scare little sisters. She pulled her legs to one side before he stood on them. Chilly air reached in and tickled her toes.

So now she was cold, as well as hungry and scared.

‘Ms Emily in drama class says I’ve to practise my storytelling skills,’ said Rex.

The bed rocked precariously. It only had three proper legs. The fourth was made from a pile of books. Sometimes Libby took one of the books to bed and slept at an angle.

The moonlight lit up Rex’s scruffy red hair, making him look more medium-sized monster than small boy.

‘I think Veronika just called you,’ Libby said in a tiny voice. Veronika was Rex’s mum.

‘Oh, she can wait.’ Rex grinned. He had a smudge of chocolate on his nose. ‘We went for chocolate sundaes

while you were cleaning the house.’ He bent down over her and scrunched up his face. ‘You can lick my nose if you like.’

A drop of snot landed exactly above where her mouth would have been if Libby hadn’t yanked a corner of her duvet up extra quickly.

‘Suit yourself.’ Rex licked his nose clean. ‘Remember the Big Bad Wolf?’

She remembered. Rex’s Big Bad Wolf was nothing like the one in the book of fairy tales in the school library. *His* Big Bad Wolf was enormously hairy and ate little girls. Slowly. Starting with their toes. Or sometimes he’d just have a finger or two in a sandwich with some mayonnaise.

And he never ate boys, according to Rex.

The moon slid silently behind a cloud that was as long and thin as a panini. Libby’s tummy rumbled. She wondered if chocolate sundaes tasted nice. She’d had a square of chocolate once. It had only lasted long enough for her to want more.

Rex cleared his throat and began. ‘Once upon a time there was this little girl ...’

Libby tuned out by staring through the skylight, imagining what it would be like on the moon. The moon moved out from behind the cloud-panini but stayed silent. She thought it might be cold, like her feet.

One day she would take all the books that held up her bed, learn the maps that were inside them and have adventures of her own, away from Rex. They were books with leather covers, emblazoned with the name that was also carved into the big trunk in the corner that smelled of the sea: *Zebediah F Flanagan*. Her great-great-grandfather.

Her father said the *F* stood for *Fearless* and she believed him.

Libby wanted to be fearless. She had curly blonde hair that never stayed in a plait but was just about okay in pigtails. She'd never heard of explorers with pigtails so she would have to be the first.

Rex's words seeped into her ears.

'... they yanked her into the graveyard, where the Big Bad Wolf, all scraggly nightfall ...' Rex paused. He liked the phrase. His mother had made him learn it off

by heart so he'd sound intelligent. '... was chasing the little girl. The ground slid under her feet. Full of holes and bones and dead bodies heaving and goo and gore and eyeballs popping out of the mud ...'

Libby closed her eyes.

'No matter how fast she ran, the little girl – who looks *exactly* like you, Libby – could never get away.'

Libby could hear their parents talking downstairs. A hum (Dad) interspersed with crackling (Veronika). *I might as well be on a different planet*, she thought, gazing through the skylight. *Or a star. A beautiful, warm and friendly star where big brothers don't exist.*

'The Big Bad Wolf's eyes bored into her head. He was sharpening his claws on the gravestones as he followed her. "I'm going to gobble you up," he said.'

'Why doesn't he eat boys?' said Libby.

The shadows in the room were getting too big. The trunk that smelled of the sea was casting a shadow she knew would creep up the wall, across the ceiling and down onto her bed. It was Rex's doing. His story would make it happen.

She made herself look at her step-brother. 'Is it because they're stinky like you?'

Rex jumped onto the floor with a thud. ‘Everyone knows the Big Bad Wolf only eats girls. They’re the pointless ones.’

‘We are *not!*’

If she could get him to talk about how much he hated girls, he might forget to finish his story. They never ended well.

But Rex smiled and wiped his runny nose on Libby’s duvet. ‘She couldn’t run fast enough,’ he went on. ‘She was small and stupid and only just ten so she ran the wrong way, down to the narrow end of the graveyard, until there was only one grave left. A grave that had the biggest and scariest tomb, shaped just like *that!*’ Rex pointed into the darkest corner of Libby’s room. At the trunk. ‘Full of skulls. Rats.’

Libby gulped and tried to count backwards in sevens from a hundred in her head.

‘Oh, he slowed down now, the Big Bad Wolf. He slowed down and licked his lips at the thought of the meal ahead.’

Seventy-nine. Seventy-two. Sixty-five. Fifty-eight.

‘She backed into the tomb and as the wolf stretched out a claw ...’

Thirty-seven. Thirty. Twenty-three.

Rex leant down over her head. ‘Slowly, the lid of the tomb opened.’

Libby tried not to open her eyes. She had a story to write for school about Granuaile, the pirate queen from Galway in the West of Ireland. They’d studied her in class. If Libby concentrated on working out what she’d write in her head, maybe it would stop Rex’s words getting in there. Granuaile would help her to be brave.

‘Creeeaaak,’ said Rex, wriggling his fingers in the air.

Libby’s eyes popped open, all of their own accord. In the corner, the trunk was rattling.

As if there was something inside.

Rex didn’t notice. ‘The stench of rotting flesh flooded out,’ he said, relishing every word.

The front door opened downstairs and Libby heard her father dragging the bins through the house to put them out front. *Granuaile. Pirates. Galway Bay. Rattling trunk.*

“‘I’m going to drag you into my tomb,” the wolf said. “I’m going to pluck off your toes and eat them one by

one.” Rex made a slurping sound. Libby ducked under the covers. “I’ll dip them in ketchup and have them for tea—”

‘Rexipoo!’ called Veronika’s voice.

At last, thought Libby.

‘You still upstairs?’

By the time Veronika stepped into the room, Rex was standing by the door with tears in his eyes. (He was practising tears-on-demand for Ms Emily’s drama class.)

‘What’s wrong, darling?’ asked Veronika.

Rex looked up at his mum with big wet eyes. ‘Libby said my story was rubbish!’

‘That’s hardly a nice thing to say, Libby!’

Libby’s head popped out from under the covers. ‘B-but—!’

‘Look at you, all warm and cosy in bed, and your brother making this huge effort to come up four flights of stairs to tell you a bedtime story!’

Rex stuck his tongue out at Libby, so she did it back. Trouble was, Veronika was facing her at the time.

‘Libby! Apologise to your brother and say thank you.’

‘Thank you, Rex,’ said Libby, keeping an eye on the now-silent trunk at the end of the room. Had it really rattled?

The thing was, everything Rex said, Veronika believed. Everything Libby said, Veronika disbelieved. It was that simple.

And Rex was a *lot* better at lying than Libby.

They were both ten years old, with only a few months between them, but Libby’s own mother had been mislaid when Libby was very young, while Rex’s mother had found Libby’s dad when Libby was nearly four and a half. Veronika had hoped he’d become a famous inventor someday and make them all rich but he hadn’t managed it yet.

To get Libby’s dad, Veronika had had to take on Libby too. But it seemed she only had enough love to spare for one child.

Rex.

‘My poor generous boy,’ Veronika said now. ‘What story were you telling her?’

‘The Big Bad Wolf in the graveyard.’

‘Oh, yes. Nice. Lots of *nibble nibble, crunch crunch?*’

‘I was just getting to that part,’ said Rex.

Rex’s mum clicked each of her fingers with their long purple fingernails and smiled at her son. ‘Always good to leave something to the imagination,’ she said.

As Veronika ushered Rex out, Libby asked in a little voice, ‘Could you leave the light on, please?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ said Veronika. ‘You have the moon to light up your room.’ Rex had three nightlights *and* two big windows facing the street in his room. ‘It’s not as if the Big Bad Wolf actually *lives* in our attic,’ Veronika went on. ‘Though, if he was to live somewhere, your room does have the right atmosphere, with that smelly old trunk. It’s probably full of skulls.’

‘That’s what I said!’ Rex beamed.

‘You know, Libby, fear is a smell the Big Bad Wolf particularly likes,’ said Veronika. ‘The more afraid you are, the more likely it is that he’ll appear and gobble you up while you’re sleeping.’

‘Mum!’ said Rex. ‘You’re a genius. I wish I’d thought of that.’

Then they left Libby there, in her little bed at the top of the house, and they chuckled all the way downstairs.

As Libby's bedroom door clicked shut, the moon slipped silently behind a large cloud shaped just like the face of a wolf, with teeth sharp as claws.



ABOUT LITTLE ISLAND

Little Island Books publishes good books for young minds, from toddlers to teens. In 2019 Little Island won a Small Press of the Year award at the British Book Awards. As well as publishing a lot of new Irish writers and illustrators, Little Island publishes books in translation from around the world.



www.littleisland.ie

ABOUT LINDSAY J SEDGWICK

Lindsay is an award-winning screenwriter and creator of Punky, the first mainstream animation series worldwide in which the central character has special needs (Down's syndrome). It is available in over a hundred countries. She has written for film and TV, games and apps, and the stage. Lindsay started writing about Wulfie in a shed with a pet snail called Percival (adopted from her daughter) and finished it in the company of a scruffilufagus dog called Roxy, who has the heart of a wulfen.

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ABOUT JOSEPHINE WOLFF

Josephine is an up-and-coming illustrator and communication designer from Berlin represented by Lemonade Illustration Agency. Josephine likes illustrating characters for animated films, creating fantastic worlds for children's books and finding the right story for everyone. She is currently working on her first graphic novel. When Josephine isn't drawing or holding workshops with children, she likes to relax with audiobooks and play with the cat that lives in her yard.

