



## REBECCA LANGTON

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Rebecca is a children's literary scout, freelance editor, book reviewer and professional plate spinner. After studying history, a PGCE and a master's in Children's Literature at Cambridge, Rebecca realised it was time to join the real world where the world of children's publishing provided a soft landing.

Rebecca's short story *The Circus* came second in *The Caterpillar Magazine's* short story competition, and was praised by author Mark Lowery in the *Irish Times* as a 'truly exceptional piece of story-telling' with an 'exquisite lightness of touch'. Beyond writing, Rebecca is a fan of long distance running, podcasts, ghost stories and true crime. *Featherweight* received an Honourable Mention in the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

### *About Featherweight*

Feather hates Fennloch. It won't stop raining, Mumma's boyfriend gives her the creeps and she and her little brother Fox are sleeping on a sofa bed that reeks of wet dog. Then Feather meets Skye. Weird, tempestuous, hot-headed Skye. For the first time ever Feather feels like she might have made a real friend. But Skye disappears and strange messages start appearing around Fennloch. Messages that Feather knows are meant for her.

Feather must fight. Fight to be seen. Fight to get justice in a town where boys will be boys and girls are asking for it. Fight to reveal Fennloch's dark secret.

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# FEATHERWEIGHT

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## *Chapter One*

Feather squinted out through the blur of rain. She could just make out a huddle of low square buildings, a mud-slicked football pitch. A sign welcoming them to Fennloch.

‘Where even are we?’ Feather snapped open her seatbelt, wound down the window a little to see, letting a smir of rain buzz across her face. ‘Apart from the middle of nowhere – obviously.’

‘Ach, you. Stop it.’ Mumma flapped her hand at Feather. ‘We’ll stop here, you can stretch your legs, I’ll get the car fixed. We’ll be on to Callan in no time.’

‘I’m not stretching my legs in that.’ Feather wiped the wet from her nose, wound the window up.

Mumma rolled her eyes at Feather, then turned in her seat, her arm wrapped around the headrest. ‘Fox, do you want to go for a wee walk?’

Fox curled his knees up to his chest, pushed Babbit’s velvet ear on to his lips, shook his head.

‘Fine. Just me then.’ Mumma reached around for her rain jacket, zipped it all the way up to her chin, flipped up the hood and opened the car door.

Feather watched Mumma walk, hunched up in the rain, around to the car bonnet, before she climbed over into the backseat and stretched out her legs so they rested on Fox’s lap. He had Babbit’s ear in one corner of his mouth, his thumb in the other. She reached over, tugged his hand away. ‘Stop that, Foxy, you’re five. You’re not a baby.’

Fox turned away, slipped his thumb back in, mumbled something Feather couldn’t hear.

‘We’re not staying here for long.’ Feather squeaked her finger across the window. ‘Still got fifty miles to go today. At least two hours. Three maybe, cos of the mountains and the rain and all that.’

The rain got louder, a thrumming beat that washed away the muddy football pitch and the dirty buildings into one big smudge of colour, Mumma’s red hood bobbing up and down as she fiddled with the engine. Something smelled burned through. Rubber or plastic. Chemical.

Five minutes later and Mumma climbed back into the front seat. She pulled down her hood and shook her head like a dog out from the bath, sprinkling them with second-hand rain. ‘Doesn’t look good.’

Feather’s stomach slid low. ‘But we’re going to Callan.’

‘Sorry, Birdy. Not tonight.’ Mumma rubbed her hands together, blew on them. They were white like bone, the tips red and hot looking. ‘You two OK to stay here? I’m going to go into town. See if there’s a garage, a mechanic, or something.’ She glanced at Feather, narrowed her eyes. ‘Anyone asks, play stupid.’

Feather nodded.

Mumma blew them a kiss, tossed her hood back up. ‘Be good.’

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The car started to get cold without the engine on. Feather’s fingers ached, her breath puffed out in clouds. She pulled out the blankets and sleeping bags from the boot and made them a nest, folded Fox into it beside her so they were like peas for shelling.

Feather drummed her fingers on the window, wiped a hole in the clouded glass. Outside, a group of kids, hoods up, shoulders hunched, tramped down the road towards a big, low, long building in the distance, a high school maybe. It made Feather’s stomach squeeze thinking about the hundreds of kids crammed together, ready to sprawl out on to the streets with her stuck there in the car. She grabbed a half-empty bag of starburst, unwrapped a green-flavoured one for Fox, a red-flavoured one for herself, then started folding. Neat edges. Clean sides. It was something Mumma had shown her. How to shape paper. Even as tiny as sweetie wrappers. Concertina it into sharp corners, pulled edges. Fold the buzzing, flickering thoughts, tame them

into birds and boats and cats with pointed ears. Feather thought she had probably made a hundred tiny paper boats, a thousand birds. She set the sweetie-wrapper boats sailing over the backseat and tried not to think about staying here in Fennloch. Another new town. Each one was smaller and smaller. Her life was like a Russian doll of tiny places. Callan was bigger though. Big enough to get lost in, Feather thought. Or get found.

It was an hour before Mumma came back. By then the sun had come out. Watery and grey. The boats were scattered limp and sticky across the floor of the car. Fox's lips were tinged lime green and Feather's belly was folded over with hunger.

## *Chapter Two*

Mumma said they couldn't sleep in the car again, that it would be too cold, that someone would notice. She was going to have to find a B&B. She pressed a tenner into Feather's hand, told her to go wait in the pub.

Fox splashed in every puddle in the carpark. He was wailing about his wet feet before they'd even got in the door. The pub was thick with swirled carpets and smelled of spilled beer. The barman gave them a funny look when Feather asked for a burger but then he shrugged and nodded at a little round table in the corner, told them he'd have to turn on the fryer special.

While they waited, Feather pulled Fox's shoes off and cupped his feet in her hands to get them warm again. The cool, damp of his skin reminded her of when he was a baby, soft as white bread.

When it arrived, the burger was limp looking, the bun curling at the edges, the chips pale and soft. Fox licked the ketchup off the underside of the bun and pushed wet rags of lettuce on to Feather's side of the plate. She made him eat slowly, pretending to be posh, nibbling each chip, their little fingers sticking out.

The barman came over eventually, took their plate. 'I'm no babysitter,' he said, whipping a dishtowel across the table, sweeping up the strands of lettuce, the smudge of mayonnaise. 'Where yous stayin?'

'Our mum is booking us into a B&B.'

The barman laughed, short and sharp. 'Ha! What, here in Fennloch?' He flipped the cloth over his shoulder. 'Yous here on yer holidays?'

‘No,’ Feather snapped. ‘We’re visiting my gran in Pitlochry.’ It was the same line she used most places they went. They were just passing through. A dead aunt in Glasgow. A sick dog in Inverness. ‘It’s just for one night.’

‘Well, there’ll no be many places open this time of the year. Not high season quite yet.’ He stopped talking, looked round as the door swung open and there was Mumma, jaw tight, eyes smudged charcoal black. She’d changed out of her trainers into her fancy boots, had ditched her rain jacket for a black sequinned top that swung round her middle in glittery waves. Her hair was swept up into a high pony, twisted in curls to hide her red roots.

Feather closed her eyes. Tipped her head back. She knew what Mumma’s good boots and big hair meant. That there weren’t any B&Bs. The barman had been right. She shut her eyes, leant her head back against the wall. She should be used to this by now. Sitting up in dingy pubs with a plate of cold chips while Mumma found them somewhere to stay, someone to pay the bill. She still didn’t like it though. It was better when it was just the three of them. Last night they’d been lying on the bonnet of the car watching the stars, a blanket wrapping them burrito-tight. Fox squeezed into the middle so he didn’t fall, Mumma’s hand curled tight into the tangles of Feather’s hair. It seemed a million miles away now.

Mumma flopped down on the seat next to Feather. She leant over, brushing the top of Fox’s head. He was yawning, rubbing his eyes. It was getting late. ‘What are you dreaming about, Feather?’

‘About not this place,’ Feather muttered, keeping the words all soft and mumbled.

Mumma planted a kiss just above Feather’s ear. ‘Grumble, grumble, Birdy. OK, it might not be Balmoral but it’s not the end of the world.’

‘Are you sure? Cos it definitely feels like it.’ Feather sighed, rolled her shoulders.

‘Aye, well there’s a Super-Save and a Freeze-Foods here!’ Mumma made her eyes big, then winked. ‘I know you want to get to Callan. Somewhere a bit bigger, hey? We’ll get there, chicky.’

‘Did you ask about the car?’ Feather didn’t want to give in to Mumma’s joking. Didn’t want to pretend like she wasn’t still annoyed at being abandoned in the car and then the pub all day.

‘They can get someone out on Monday.’ Mumma prodded at her hair, smoothed down the sequins on her top.

‘Monday!’ Feather shifted Fox who was leaning heavy against her ribs. He was a dead weight when he was sleeping. ‘That’s ages.’

Mumma shrugged. ‘Just the weekend, Feather.’ She took Feather’s Coke, finished it off, shaking the half-melted ice cubes round in the bottom of the glass, then looked around. The pub was starting to get busy. A football match was flashing on a TV mounted on the wall. Men mostly, with pints balanced on too-small tables, arms folded across bulging bellies.

Mumma rummaged in her bag, pulled out her makeup bag. She smeared berry-red gloss across her lips and pouted into a mirror. ‘Anyway. Fennloch. It’s a bit small, but it’s nice, cosy, right? We could, you know, let things blow over. A weekend, maybe a couple more days.’ She smacked her berry lips. ‘You want another Coke?’

Feather shook her head. She couldn’t reach it anyhow with Fox all heavy and in the way, leaning against her arm.

‘OK,’ Mumma turned to Feather: ‘Hey listen, Birdy. Listen – Feather – I know it’s not what we planned, but I got a good feeling about Fennloch.’

‘Sure.’ Feather shifted again, wiggled her toes. She was starting to lose circulation in her legs. She was bored and hot and she’d sat in a million pubs like this one, and she already hated how she knew it was going to end.

‘See that bloke over there? The one in the red shirt?’

Feather looked over to where Mumma was pointing. A man slouched on a barstool. A scratchy blue tattoo, wound its way up the back of his neck on to his lumpy shaven head. A snake, a tentacle, she couldn’t quite make it out.

‘He’s a nice guy. Met him in town. Owns the garage.’

‘Mumma.’ Feather’s stomach tightened.

‘Don’t Mumma me.’ Mumma stood up, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. ‘Let me take care of things, Birdy. That’s my job.’

The man watched Mumma walk towards him then snaked a thick arm round her waist, pulled her close.

Fox stirred next to Feather, yawning.

‘Hey, Fox cub.’ Feather brushed hair from his eyes. ‘It’s OK, you can sleep.’

‘Where’s Mumma?’

‘Mumma’s busy.’

‘What about us?’

Feather thought for a moment. She watched Mumma across the pub, leaning into the tentacle man, sipping on a glass of something heavy looking. ‘Mumma said to wait for her in the car.’

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The night was cold and Feather shivered as they walked through the sandy carpark. She carried Fox, his bare feet dangling by her knees.

‘Ugh you are so heavy, Fox.’ Feather hoisted him higher, was out of breath by the time they got to the car. She dropped him on to the backseat, stretched out the ache in her back.

There was a group of kids, maybe her age, a bit older, sitting in a huddle on the bench across the way. They were laughing, yelling, pulling at each other. Their legs tangled up in knots, the girls sprawled across the boys, looping their arms around their waists. Feather felt their eyes on her, watching as she hurried Fox into his pyjamas, the trousers three inches too short for him, the cuffs tight around his calves.

He pushed her hands away. ‘I can do it.’

Feather sighed. Let him wriggle into his pyjama top, watched as he got it twisted across his shoulders, the wrong way around. He peered cross-eyed at the label tickling his nose.

‘You need to stop growing, Foxy.’ Feather helped him pull it the right way around, tugged it down over the wide strip of stomach showing at the bottom.

Fox reached his arms up so his fingers grazed the roof of the car. He raised his eyebrows like that might make him even taller still and that made Feather laugh. Too loud. She heard the kids across the street fall quiet, listening as well as watching and her lungs tightened, her cheeks burning hot. She held her breath, waited for them to start shouting, wanting to know who she was, what she was doing, but there was just a beat of silence, then a shriek, one of the girls yelling that there’d been a hand up her shirt, laughing *You animal! You prick!* And Feather felt their attention fall away. She made Fox brush his teeth before he got in the car, poured water into his mouth from the flask and he swilled and spit, splattering the dust with mint-fresh foam.

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Feather pulled her headphones down around her neck, tugged the blanket further over her lap. The pink glow of the pub's neon sign made Fox's pale skin shine almost purple. She could hear the rat-a-tat of the music spill out every time the door swung open. The kids across the road had drifted away. She watched men stumble out, each one catching their balance as they hit the cold night air. A few were followed by women, swaying on high platform shoes. Feather waited for Mumma. It was getting late. Her eyes felt heavy, it had been a long day. She yawned. Felt herself start to drift, thoughts seeping into sleep, the flamingo pink fading.

Someone rapped on the window of the car.

'Birdy. Fox. Hey. Wake up now. Come on, hurry.' Mumma opened the car door. She started pulling at Fox, dragging him out from under the blanket.

'Leave him, Mumma.' Feather leant across, pushed her hands away. 'What are you doing?'

'Feather, stop whining.' Mumma's breath smelt of lemonade and peach schnapps. 'We're going home with Lizard. He's a real nice guy. He's got a pool.'