

The
MAP *of*
LEAVES
YARROW TOWNSEND



Chicken
House

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For Bridie Watts

A decorative illustration of various leaves falling from the top right towards the bottom left, scattered across the upper half of the page.

1

Comfrey *Symphytum officinale*

Leaves: for A poultice against inflammation and infection.

Also known as knitbone.

The village of Thorn Creek should have been abandoned long ago. It was a shivering, damp, dead end of a place, where wooden houses huddled together along a marshy river, as though afraid they would fall into the churning stream or else be swallowed up by the forest. It was not a place for children, out among the foggy woods and wild marshes. The winters were long and dark and impossibly grey; and no one in the little village looked forward to spending their days swamped by river mist, wrapped in two woolly jumpers, stacking firewood and collecting fallen pears. No one except Orla Carson.

Twelve-year-old Orla had dark-brown hair, bramble-scratched hands, and a determined frown. She wore a pair of boy's breeches that she never changed, an oilskin coat that smelt of beeswax, and a pair of thick leather boots. Her home was a small wooden shed, once used by a farmer to store his firewood. It stood at the edge of the village, in the shadow of the forest, in a tangle of black-thorn and apple trees, long forgotten by the farmer. Orla had lived in the woodshed with Ma, and now that Ma was dead, she lived there alone, with no help from anybody. She looked after the wild garden, and the wild garden looked after her. There was no need for anyone else.

That afternoon, in the goose-grey light, Orla found herself knee-deep in nettles, peering into the undergrowth. It was the first day of September, and the seasons were changing. The fog settled low on the river, and the bracken and comfrey at the end of the garden were draped with jewelled cobwebs. Around her, the plants whispered, their voices sparking through the tangle of leaves and stems.

Take it from the stem! called the dock.

You need more than two leaves, said the milfoil.

No – just a little from the tip! insisted the nettles.

'I know how to make the ointment,' said Orla, choosing which nettles to cut, and carefully pruning them with her knife. She caught the plants as they fell, plucked the leaves from the stems before they could sting her, and

stuffed them into her pockets. Her horse, Captain, was tied to the porch of the woodshed, looking forlorn. His hoof was half-rotten and she needed to draw out the infection before it got worse.

Goose-grass! called the purple toadflax.

Chickweed! chirruped the honesty, its seed pods like silver moons.

‘Hmm,’ said Orla. She pushed on through the scraggly patch of nettles and into the brambles, which snagged her oilskin coat and grabbed at her breeches. ‘Maybe. We’ll see about that, shall we? Excuse me, please,’ she said, peeling the thorny stems from her coat. ‘You know I’ve got an important job to do.’

She wound her way down through the patch of twisted old apple trees, towards the creek. ‘Nettles, comfrey, clay. That’s all I need.’

Comfrey always works, echoed the comfrey proudly.

By the water’s edge Orla wiped the mist from her nose with her sleeve and cut the comfrey leaves. She knew them well – broad and green, with a fine fur of prickly hairs. In summer the plants were adorned with a spray of pinkish bells, sometimes purple and sometimes white. But it was the thick leaves that she used for medicine – for burns, for bruises. Once, she had patched up a sparrow with a gammy leg by soaking a comfrey leaf in honey and wrapping it round the leg like a bandage, just like Ma had shown her, feeding the sparrow on porridge until it

flew away again.

Comfrey always worked.

Third time lucky, said the plant.

Orla bit her lip. ‘Let’s hope so,’ she said. Captain’s foot had gone bad three times this summer, and each time she’d made the old remedy, just as she’d been taught. It shouldn’t be coming back *again*. The first time, she’d mixed in a mountain of dock from the ditch by the hedge. And last month she’d stirred in a chunk of honey from the bees in the apple tree. That should have sorted it.

Not those – not good enough! More dock! said the blackthorn hedges.

More milfoil! cried the marigolds.

‘All right, all right,’ said Orla. ‘I *am* listening, you know.’

She pushed her damp hair away from her eyes and examined the comfrey leaves in the gloom. They were smaller than usual and flecked with black marks. Orla tried to rub the marks away with her finger, but they seemed to be part of the plant.

Bad leaves, said the moss beneath the apple trees.

They’ll still do! said the comfrey.

What you need is some pine, said the wormwood.

Pine sap and resin and tar. Pine tar! echoed the garden.

‘Pine tar, indeed,’ replied Orla, her mind still on the comfrey. She pocketed the leaves and trudged back up to the woodshed. Captain was peering up at the hedge that

separated the garden from the lane, sniffing the air. His mane was tangled with burdock spines and his patchwork coat was dappled with mud.

‘Stop thinking about blackberries,’ she said to him, scratching behind his ears, just where he liked it. Then she picked up his feathered leg to examine the gammy hoof. Captain struggled a little, but Orla shushed him and patted his bony side gently, before peering at the hoof. It smelt terrible and there was something oozing from the heel. Gently lowering Captain’s foot, she pulled the bundle of leaves from her pocket and tried to pick out the ones that didn’t have black splodges on them, while Captain sniffed enthusiastically.

Pine would be better, muttered the wormwood.

‘Let’s try my idea first,’ said Orla, pulling a stone mortar from beneath the little bench in the porch. She tossed the leaves into the mortar and hammered them to a pulp. ‘There,’ she said, adding the greyish clay and watching it turn green, just like it was supposed to. ‘That’ll do it. There’s nothing wrong with the leaves, they’re just a little past their best, that’s all.’

Hmm, said the dock leaves by her feet.

Are they? said the wormwood.

Orla chewed her lip. ‘It’ll be OK,’ she said, giving the mixture a final stir. Lifting Captain’s hoof, she pasted on the green ointment and held it in place with a piece of clean linen. It was true, the ointment was already

starting to look a little darker than usual.

Orla let down Captain's foot and wiped her hands on her breeches. 'Next time you escape, stay away from the village,' she told him. 'Too much glass and nails and trouble up there. Can't have you getting lost.'

Captain lowered his head to sniff his foot, and snorted.

Orla raised an eyebrow. 'The ointment looks fine to me. You'll feel better in no time.'

The plants whispered behind her, like a shiver in the wind.

'I *can* hear you, you know,' she said.

Pine tar, said the plants in chorus.

Pine and ash, cook it till it sticks! said the ivy.

Orla shot them a scornful look. 'I said *no*,' she repeated, wiping the mist from her nose and putting her knife back in her pocket. 'Captain's going to be fine,' she said. 'Coffee's half-burnt already, then I gotta pick carrots for dinner. I'm not going hunting for pine. I know what I'm doing.'

But in the back of her mind, she knew the ivy was right. It had watched over her garden for many years; its roots twisted thick and secure into the foundations of the woodshed.

Comfrey's not enough, said the ivy. *Pine, or he'll die of infection. Pine, out beyond the village. Pine, from the Borderwoods.*

Orla squinted in the direction of Thorn Creek. A twisting path ran up from the river to a cluster of dark houses, wooden and rain-soaked, along cobbled streets. Lamps were already lit, and shadows gathered around the tavern and the chapel, drifting in the fog. Beyond, a line of dark pine trees watched over the village. The hairs on the back of Orla's arms prickled and her legs felt heavy.

You're scared, said the bitter wormwood.

'I'm not *scared*,' mumbled Orla, but her stomach was twisting like ropes. Nothing good ever happened when she went up to the village.

Orla stomped inside the woodshed and bolted the door behind her. Then she poured herself a cup of acorn coffee and sat on her home-made chair to warm her feet by the fire. Her boots let off curls of steam into the damp air. Now and again, she peered outside. Captain stood with his foot held pitifully in the air. The ointment was slowly dripping through the linen. Orla thought of the speckled comfrey leaves and groaned. Her eyes darted to the wooden box beside the fire – the box that held Ma's book. But the time had long passed for checking recipes. She could do this by herself.

Dusk's falling, whispered the grass outside. *Birds are roosting.*

Can't wait another day – can't wait, called the dog rose.

Time to go, said the sage. *Time to go.*

Orla was fond of Captain, fond of his dark eyes and snuffling breath, though she would never tell anyone that. To other people, he was just a horse – good for keeping the grass short by the apple trees and for fertilizing the vegetable patches. But for Orla, he was a friend. Her only friend, apart from the plants. And she couldn't afford to lose him.

'Fine,' she said, eying the trees. 'Pine tar it is.'