“YOU’RE SENDING ME where?” Loxie wailed.

Her parents exchanged a glance. “Fear Camp, sweetie,” her mother said. “To help you deal with the, er, aftermath of the Bear Incident.”

“You mean the bad dreams?” Loxie said. “Lots of kids have bad dreams.”

“Nightmares, dear. Yes, other kids have them, but you have them every night. And then, there’s your . . . phobia.”

“Lots of kids give up their teddy bears at my age!” Loxie said indignantly.
“But not because they’re afraid of them,” her father said. “Fear Camp is just what you need. It will help you work through what happened.”

“Work through it? I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Well, it’s either camp or spend the summer here,” her mother said firmly. “I hear the neighbors have invited friends to visit. A Mr. and Mrs. Bear, and their little Baby Bear.”

“When do I leave?”

ON REGISTRATION DAY, Fear Camp buzzed with boys and girls. All wore baby-blue T-shirts sporting the camp motto: Face Your Fears. After Loxie’s parents helped her find her cabin—named Serenity—and kissed her goodbye, she joined her cabin mates. They were sitting in a circle on the bunkroom floor.

“I’m Loretta, your counselor,” said a girl wearing a scarlet hoodie over her T-shirt. “But you can call me Retta. Or just Red.” She explained a few rules and then set her clipboard aside. “Now, to get to know each other, let’s share something we’re afraid of. I’ll start. I’m afraid of wolves and of visiting my grandmother.”

“What’s scary about your grandmother?” asked one of the campers.

“Is she a witch?”

“That’s a story for another day,” Red said. “Who’s next?”

One by one, they went around the circle. One camper was afraid of giant gingerbread boys, another of being lost in the forest, and another of amphibians (she’d once been turned into a frog by a mean-spirited fairy).
When it was Loxie’s turn, she said, “I’m Goldilocks—call me Loxie—and I’m afraid of bears.”

“Thanks for sharing, Loxie,” Red said. “Admitting your fear is the first step toward overcoming it.”

“What’s the second step?” asked the girl next to Loxie. She was afraid of spinning wheels.

Red smiled. “You’ll find out tomorrow. For the rest of today, we’re going to learn some relaxation exercises. Follow me to the yoga studio!”

FEAR CAMP WAS hard work. Each day, the campers rose early for physical training. “A healthy mind requires a healthy body!” Red often said. “And if you ever meet a big, bad wolf in a forest, being able to run a five-minute mile can’t hurt either!”

After training came breakfast, then journaling (they were expected to write about their feelings, although Loxie usually spent her time doodling), and after that came Fear Facing. Each day, it met in a different place:

The kitchen, where they made miniature gingerbread boys—“They don’t sing, and they can’t run. You can even bite their heads off, if you like!”

The forest, where they learned basic orienteering skills—“Use a compass to find your way. There’s no need to depend on breadcrumbs.”

And at the pond, where they caught, and released, frogs—“Go ahead, kiss it. Most frogs aren’t enchanted.”

I’M NOT AFRAID OF ANYTHING... EXCEPT UGLY BIRD, OF COURSE.

THAT’S NOT FEAR, THAT’S COMMON SENSE.
Loxie had little trouble with these activities. But on the day she was scheduled to face her own fear, she could hardly eat. Between tiny spoonfuls of breakfast porridge, she nervously repeated her truth statement. “Teddy bears are cute and fluffy. They cannot hurt me.”

From across the table, Gretel threw her a sympathetic look. “Your turn today?”

Loxie nodded. “I feel so silly. I mean, who’s afraid of teddy bears?”


Her brother Hansel chimed in. “Yeah, people can be afraid of anything. One of our friends at home gets all sweaty and anxious around peas.”

“Peas? You mean, like, the vegetable?” Loxie said.

Hansel nodded. “A couple of years ago, she got lost on a rainy night and ended up knocking on a castle door. The people who lived there had this crazy idea that she might be a princess. They made her sleep on a mattress filled with dried peas and in the morning, they wanted her to marry their son!”

“You’re kidding!” Loxie said, forgetting all about bears for a moment.

“Nope. It really freaked her out. Now, if she even sees a picture of a pea, she can’t sleep for a week.”

Clipboard in hand, Red walked up to the table. “Fear Facing starts in five minutes, everybody. We’re meeting in the bunkroom.”

As they cleared their dishes, Gretel smiled at Loxie. “Everyone’s got fears. The point is, you’re here doing something about it.”
During Fear Facing that day and the following days, Loxie progressed from petting her teddy bear, to holding it, to cuddling it. One night, she took it to bed and didn’t have a bad dream all night.

“I’m cured!” she told Red the next morning.

“Well, not quite. You still have a few more tasks to complete before you graduate from Fear Camp.”

“What are they? Do I have to go bungee jumping or something like that?”

Red looked intrigued. “Are you afraid of bungee jumping?”

“Up until now, I’ve been more afraid of bears. But not anymore.”

“You’re not afraid of teddy bears anymore,” Red corrected. “That’s great, but your real fear is bears—live ones. We still have to work on that.”

Loxie thought back to that dreadful day. She’d become separated from her Forest Explorers troop while hiking. For hours, she tramped through thickets and splashed across streams until she felt like collapsing. And then the little house appeared. She knocked, but no one was home. Desperate for a drink of water, she went inside, and the porridge and fire-warmed chairs and comfy beds were too much to resist. But then she’d awoken to that face—that furry face with its glistening snout and tiny, sharp teeth—only inches from her own. She’d screamed and screamed—

“Loxie!”

“What? WHAT?”

“Sorry,” Red said gently. “You were having a flashback.”

Loxie sighed. “I guess I do still have some work to do.”
TWO WEEKS LATER, at twilight, Red gathered everyone around the fire pit for a sing-along.

“I’m proud of you,” she said. “Tomorrow you’ll graduate from Fear Camp.” She cleared her throat. “If you pass your final test.”

“What do we have to do?” Hansel asked.

Red stood. “Follow me into the forest.”

The campers stared at her, mouths open.

“Now?” Loxie cried. “But it’s dark. And wild animals live in there.”

“Remember our motto?” Red said. “This is the last step toward facing your fear.”

Single file, the campers followed her down a path that wound around gnarled oak and shadowy pine trees. An owl hooted, while further away, a wolf howled. Red shivered.

“That’s right, you’re afraid of wolves, aren’t you?” Loxie asked.

“I was. Well, I still am, a little,” Red said. She had never told the campers her fear story, but Loxie was too scared at the moment to ask.

They tramped on. The moon made creepy shadows on the path, and the wind moaned through the tree tops.

“How much longer?” A camper asked in a hushed voice.

“Almost there,” Red said.

“Do you think we’ll have to find our way back alone?” Gretel whispered to Loxie.

“Maybe,” Loxie answered. That would be scary, but not nearly as scary as facing a bear. She had a feeling that’s what she was going to have to do.
Clouds hid the moon; Loxie could hardly see Red’s outline in front of her. Finally, the counselor stopped.

“We wait here,” she said.

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

The campers huddled, shivering in the night breeze. Suddenly, Loxie heard a twig snap.

“What was that?”

In the dim starlight, she made out a tall figure. It was wearing a baby-blue cap and had a long, furry snout.

“A bear!” she screamed. “Run!”

Red grabbed Loxie’s arm. “Not a bear. A wolf.”

“Oh, that’s OK then,” Loxie sobbed hysterically. “We’ll be eaten by a wolf instead of a bear.”

“Hush.” Red threw the wolf an apologetic look. “This wolf is safe. I know him.”

“You do?”

Red turned her flashlight on. The wolf waved. Behind him stood a group of wide-eyed campers dressed in T-shirts and caps just like Loxie’s. Except these campers weren’t human—there was a pig, a young witch, a life-sized gingerbread boy, a fairy, and, at the end of the line, a small bear. He was staring straight at Loxie and trembling.

“I know him!” Loxie cried, too surprised to be afraid. “He’s the one that scared me at the bear’s cottage. What’s he doing here?”
“He’s a Fear Camper, too,” Red said.
“We have two campuses. Humans and nonhumans don’t mix well.”

Loxie glanced at the bear again. He seemed to be sucking his paws. And was he whimpering, too?
“What’s he afraid of?”
Red smiled. “You.”

After the astonished campers had asked all their questions, Red and Harold (who was surprisingly funny for a wolf) handed out maps and trail mix. Just as Gretel had predicted, they had to find their way back to camp. But not alone—each human camper was matched with a nonhuman camper.

“No breadcrumbs,” Red reminded Hansel, who was paired with the witch. “And if you see any candy houses, walk in the opposite direction.”

Loxie, of course, was paired with Baby Bear. After the first few, awkward minutes, during which Loxie apologized for breaking into his house, and Baby Bear said he was sorry for scaring her (“I’d never seen a real, live girl before. That’s why I got so close!”), they got acquainted. They discussed their families, their favorite music, and food. Both loved porridge, and both preferred it at medium temperature with lots of brown sugar and a touch of cream.
When they arrived back at camp, the sun was rising. Red presented each camper with a certificate of achievement and then everyone headed to the mess hall for a huge breakfast. (Bacon wasn’t served, of course, out of respect for the pig).

Afterwards, Loxie invited Baby Bear to see her cabin. They were heading out of the mess hall when Red stopped them.

“Be back here in fifteen minutes, you two,” she said. “Big day ahead.”

“But I thought we’d done everything we needed to graduate,” Loxie said.

“You have,” Red said, with a wicked glint in her eyes. “Now it’s time to celebrate. We’re going bungee jumping.”