



Once Upon a Time

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Wake up! Wake up!' Bluebird twittered in Bear's ear.

Bear stopped snoring and opened one eye. 'Is it spring yet?'

'Spring started a week ago!' Bluebird chirped. 'Now get up! I have news.'

Bear lumbered out of his cave and down to the river. After a long drink of water, he asked, 'What kind of news?'

'It's about the Forest Fling,' Bluebird said, soaring in circles above Bear's head. 'This year, there's a writing contest. The winner's story will be read aloud on opening night. And guess who's—'

'A story contest?' Bear interrupted. 'Maybe I'll enter. I've always wanted to be a writer.'

'So has Owl!' Bluebird said. 'She's entering too, and you know how smart she is.'

Bear frowned. If Owl entered the contest, she'd be sure to win. He might as well give up now.

But then he pictured all the forest animals circled around the campfire, listening to his story. His winning story.

'I think I'll give it a try,' he said.

The next morning, Bear sat in his cave, surrounded by crumpled papers.

‘Writing a story is hard,’ he said.

Just then, Bluebird fluttered in. ‘Guess what? I stopped by Owl’s tree, and she’s already written fifty-two pages. Her story’s amazing! At least ... I *think* it is.’

‘What do you mean?’ Bear asked.

‘She uses a lot of long words,’ Bluebird said.

‘Harrumph,’ Bear said. ‘I like stories I can understand.’

He remembered being a cub. He had loved to sit in his little chair while Papa Bear read to him in a deep, growly voice. None of Papa Bear’s stories were confusing.

Bluebird looked doubtful. ‘Owl’s story sounds really smart. She just might win.’

Bear sighed and picked up his pencil. ‘You’re probably right.’

The next day, Bear went outside to write. But the sunshine made him sleepy, so he took a nap instead. He dreamed about fish soup and acorns and the porridge Mama Bear used to make for breakfast. She’d covered it with brown sugar and thick, yellow cream.

Bear woke up hungry. While he was catching himself a fish for supper, Bluebird came by.

‘How many pages have you finished?’ she asked.

Bear flipped a fish out of the water. ‘One—well, *almost* one.’

‘Bear! The deadline is tomorrow night,’ Bluebird scolded. ‘You need to get busy!’

‘How’s Owl doing?’ Bear asked, although he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

‘She’s written eighty-eight pages!’ Bluebird said. ‘She has a chapter about the history of shoelaces, and another about giant pickles, and another about Polish-speaking ostriches.’

‘I’ve never heard of Polish-speaking ostriches,’ Bear said.

Bluebird looked wise. ‘Owl says a story’s supposed to teach you something.’

‘Harrumph,’ Bear said. ‘I like stories about everyday things. Like friends, and families, and forests. And maybe porridge.’

Bluebird patted him on the head. ‘Try not to feel too bad. It’s not your fault you don’t have Owl’s brain.’

The next day, Bear woke up early. After breakfast, he sat at the table with his notebook and pencil.

'Now where was I?' he said aloud. He looked down at the paper. All he had so far was *Once upon a time*.

Moments later, Bluebird sailed in. 'I just came from Owl's tree. She's finished!'

'Really,' Bear said glumly.

'She wrote 203 pages,' Bluebird said, hopping up and down on Bear's shoulder. 'Her description of the sunrise takes up 100 pages alone!'

'Harrumph,' Bear said. 'I can describe the sunrise in two words: *It's pink.*'

'I'm sorry, Bear, but she's going to win for sure!' Bluebird flew around the room in a feathery frenzy. As she zoomed over the coffee table, her wing brushed a framed photo to the ground. *Crash!*

'Bluebird!' Bear said. 'Watch where you're flying, please.'

He picked up the photo. It showed him as a cub, standing next to his childhood friend, a little girl with long, golden hair. He hadn't thought about Goldilocks in a long time.

'I like stories with interesting characters,' he said softly, remembering the day they had met. Suddenly his paw itched for a pencil.

'Sorry about the broken glass,' Bluebird said. 'And I'm sorry about the contest. Maybe next year, huh?'

'Maybe,' Bear said, sitting down again. 'Or maybe not.'

The next night, the Forest Fling opened with its traditional campfire. All the animals gathered around as Mouse, the head of the judging committee, cleared his throat and began the winning story:

Once upon a time, there were three bears: Papa Bear, Mama Bear and Baby Bear. They lived in a cottage in the forest. One day, while waiting for their porridge to cool ...