

Middle reader fiction

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ROSA  
JORDAN

The Last Wild Place

# the last wild place

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**the last wild place** Chip Martin's biggest problem so far this year has been deciding whether he'll try out for soccer or baseball in seventh grade. But now things are getting more complicated. His brother Justin is away at college and his older sister Kate is busy with high-school activities. His single mom's lifelong friendship with Booker Wilson has suddenly taken a romantic turn, and now his best friend Luther, who may have to move away, won't speak to him. Even worse, Chip has to face the possibility of being uprooted himself.

Feeling friendless and alone, Chip explores the marshy woods behind the Old Place, an abandoned farm near his home. There he discovers something unbelievable—a family of Florida panthers that has been driven out of their home in the Everglades and dangerously close to human settlement.

Alarmed when he hears that the last few acres of the woods are to be cleared to make way for a meatpacking plant, Chip concocts a plan to protect the panthers. He eventually learns that he has more friends than he thought, and they all want the same thing—to find a safe home for the wild animals. And if they're lucky, a safe place for themselves, too.

ROSA JORDAN is an environmental activist, a member of Earthways Foundation's board of directors, and author of *LOST GOAT LANE*, *THE GOATNAPPERS*, *CYCLING CUBA*, and *DANGEROUS PLACES: TRAVELS ON THE EDGE*. She lives with her husband Derek in the Monashee Mountains of British Columbia.

ROSA  
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*Chip studied the prints, wondering if there was a big tomcat living around here... He felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck, giving him the feeling of being watched. He turned quickly, but there was nothing behind him but the grassy knoll and, beyond it, the woods.*

#### PRAISE FOR ROSA JORDAN

**LOST GOAT LANE,**  
a finalist for the 2005 Silver Birch Award (Canada)

"Jordan complements Kate's genuineness with an interesting locale, filled with threatening alligators and wily farm animals, intergenerational friendship, and a meaningful lesson in tolerance. A treat for middle readers."  
—*Kirkus Reviews*

**THE GOATNAPPERS,**  
a 2007 Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers

"...the well-defined characters will keep readers engaged, and Jordan skillfully handles the moral issue of whether breaking the law is ever the right thing to do."  
—*School Library Journal*

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BY **ROSA JORDAN**  
author of *Lost Goat Lane*

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ATLANTA



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the  
last  
**wild**  
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**ROSA JORDAN**



  
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Summary: With problems mounting at home and with his best friend, when sixth-grader Chip discovers a family of Florida panthers in the marshy woods behind an abandoned farm, he puts aside his own predicaments and concentrates on finding a safe home for the wild animals.

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For Vicky Holifield, my editor,  
whose magic touch always makes a good story better



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# 1

## Welcome Home

**C**hip awoke to a loud thump. Something big was moving around in his bedroom. He squinted into the dark, waiting for his eyes to adjust, then heard another thump and felt his bed shake.

“Junk all over the place!” the intruder muttered. “Coulda killed myself.”

Chip sat up. There, standing in the moonlight flooding in through the bedroom window, was his brother Justin—or else he was having a very vivid dream.

“Justin? What are you doing here?”

“Trying to find my bed. Which appears to be buried under your crap.” Clothes, comic books, a baseball glove, and video games went sailing through the air as Justin flung Chip’s stuff off his bed.

Chip switched on the bedside lamp. “I mean, what are you doing home? Did you get kicked out of college already?”

“Course not! Booker was coming down to visit his family, and he asked if I wanted to come along.”

Booker Wilson was one of Chip’s favorite people. Even though he lost his lower legs in the Gulf War, he was still just about the best pitcher Chip knew of. And Booker was everybody’s friend, even if they’d just known him for five minutes.

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He'd grown up at the other end of Lost Goat Lane, but now he coached baseball at the college Justin went to in Atlanta. If it hadn't been for Booker, Justin would have dropped out of baseball back in ninth grade. But he listened to Booker, and it was a good thing too, because he ended up with an athletic scholarship.

Chip was about to ask Justin more questions, but just then he heard voices coming from the kitchen. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Mom."

"But who's she talking to?"

"Booker."

"Booker's here?" Chip yelped. "I gotta go say hi!"

"You stay put," Justin said. "We're only going to be here two days. This is probably the one chance they'll have to be alone."

Why would they want to be alone? Chip wondered as he headed down the hall. When he reached the darkened living room he could see the brightly lit kitchen and the back of Booker's wheelchair. But just as he was about to say hello, something stopped him in his tracks.

Mom was sitting on Booker's lap.

She was holding a bunch of red roses, and she was laughing. "Booker Wilson, you are too much!" Chip heard her say. "I can't believe you drove four hundred miles just to bring me flowers! At my age!"

"What age?" Booker said. "You keeping score or something?"

Just then a hand clamped on Chip's shoulder and dragged him backward. The hand belonged to his sixteen-year-old sister Kate. "Don't be spying on them!" she hissed. Then she moved in front of Chip so she could spy on them.

"Oh my gosh!" she gasped.

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"What?" Chip whispered. "Let me see." He pushed her to one side so he could look into the kitchen again. What he saw made his mouth drop open. Mom and Booker were kissing.

Kate grabbed him by the hand and dragged him down the hall to his room. Justin was sprawled on his bed. Kate flipped on the light and closed the bedroom door behind her. "Justin!" she whispered. "What is going on?"

Chip climbed back into bed and waited for Justin's explanation. All Justin said was, "You could say hello."

"Hel-lo," Kate said in an exaggerated voice and sat down on the edge of Chip's bed. "Now tell me what's going on!"

"I give up," Justin yawned. "What's going on?"

"Mom and Booker! I thought he had a girlfriend."

"Melody? Nah. She's history."

"You mean they broke up?" Kate demanded.

"Yeah. About a year ago. Booker said she got a job in D.C. after she finished law school. He heard she's engaged to a congressman."

"Oh." Kate sat there a minute, then asked, "So when did this thing with Mom and Booker come about?"

"What thing?"

"They're out there like...like they're on a date or something!" Kate stuck her fingers in her blonde hair and grabbed hold of her scalp like the idea was about to cause her head to explode.

"They're kissing!" Chip informed his brother.

"So? No law against that."

"Justin!" Kate leaned across Chip, half squishing him, and whacked Justin on the arm. "Stop acting so superior! This is serious."

"Serious how?" asked Justin. "They've been friends since before we were born."

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"I know that!" Kate snapped. "But since when did they get to be a couple?"

"I don't see why you're so upset," Justin said.

"I'm not upset." Kate took a deep breath. "I'm just saying that it would be...I don't know...hard for them to be a couple. I mean—"

"You mean because Booker's black?" Justin asked.

"Booker's not black," Chip interrupted. "He's very dark brown. Same as Luther and Ruby and the rest of the Wilsons."

"And Luther is Chip's best friend and Ruby's your best friend," Justin said to Kate. "You saying it's not okay for Mom and Booker to go out together?"

"No! I mean, yes! Of course it's okay. I'm just saying...some of my friends might not understand."

Chip could see why his sister was confused. They had barely known the Wilsons until four years ago, when Kate's nanny goat ran away to visit the Wilsons' billy goat. First it was the goats that got acquainted, but that same day Chip and Luther got to be buddies. Later, Kate and Ruby started making gourmet chocolates to sell, and then they started a home sewing business together called Denim Designs. Now Kate and Ruby were together practically every weekend, either at home making stuff or in town selling it. Kate did have a few friends her own age now, but back in junior high she'd gotten a lot of hassle about her unstylish clothes and farm-girl image. If word about Booker and Mom got around, Kate might start getting teased all over again.

They stopped talking when they heard the kitchen door open and close, then the thump of Booker's wheelchair being let down the steps to the ground. Voices coming from outside told them that Mom was walking Booker to his van.

## WELCOME HOME

"Besides," Kate said, no longer whispering, "Mom's a lot older than Booker. Four years older, at least."

"Yeah, and she's divorced and has three kids. On top of that, Booker's in a wheelchair, and his skin's darker than ours," Justin said. "Booker and me had a long talk about it on the drive down from Atlanta. Looks to me like none of that stuff's a problem for him. If Mom gave him a welcome-home kiss, I guess it's not a problem for her either. If it's a problem for you, Kate, well, that's your problem." Justin rolled over to face the wall. "Turn off the light, Chip, so I can get some sleep."

Kate stood up to leave. "It's not a problem for you because you're off in college now and don't have to live in this little town, where nobody ever saw a mixed-race couple except on TV!"

"So," Justin yawned, "tell 'em Booker's a TV star and Mom's gonna be his leading lady."

Chip turned off the light. Kate stalked out and slammed the door so hard Chip wondered if Mom might have heard it out in the yard. Booker's van drove away, but Chip could tell Mom was still on the front porch. He could hear the squeak of the swing as it moved back and forth. She was singing softly. She had a good voice. She probably really could have been on TV if she'd wanted to be a singer.

He reckoned his friends wouldn't give him any flack about Mom and Booker. They'd each just wish Booker was stuck on their mom so he'd hang around their house and play baseball with them.

"Justin," he said to his brother's back. "I think this might be a win-win-win situation."

"That's the way I look at it," his brother murmured, half asleep.

## 2

# Bad Day for Luther

**J**ustin and Kate were still asleep when Chip got up the next morning, and Mom had already gone to work at Mr. Hashimoto's plant nursery just across the highway.

Chip poured himself a bowl of cereal and read the note Mom had left on the table.

Chip, be sure to change into clean clothes before going to town. Kate, when you and Ruby finish your candy making, please put the roast in the oven. Justin, will you replace the overhead light on the back porch? If you go off with your friends, don't forget to leave a phone number where you'll be.

Mom

Ever since Dad had left, which was almost before Chip could remember, Mom had worked full time, so she had to do a lot of parenting-by-note. In a way it wasn't bad, because it meant she wasn't around to nag them about little stuff. But if she got home and you hadn't finished all the jobs on the list, look out!

After breakfast Chip did his regular chores—milking the goats and feeding the ducks. He strained the milk and put it in the fridge, then headed down Lost Goat Lane toward the

## BAD DAY FOR LUTHER

Wilson house. He looked for turtles in the drainage ditch that ran alongside the unpaved road, but all he saw was one snapping turtle. He didn't try to catch it, as he once would have, but he watched it awhile. This year he had learned in Mr. O'Dell's biology class that if you just observe things without disturbing them, you can see critters do whatever they would be doing if they weren't being watched. When the turtle disappeared under the water, Chip walked on.

Up ahead was the Wilson farm, which was pretty much the same as Chip's family's, with a shade tree in the front yard and a goat pen and pasture out back. Booker's van was parked in front of the house. Chip hadn't exactly forgotten about Mom and Booker, but right now he had other things to think about. He and Luther had a big day ahead of them.

Chip was about to knock on the front door when he heard yelling. He was so surprised that his hand stopped in midair and just hung there, fingers still curled to make knuckles for knocking. Old Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, usually soft-spoken, only yelled when they were calling to somebody outside. Booker had a booming voice, but Chip had never seen him mad enough to yell like this. He'd heard Ruby raise her voice plenty of times, but what he heard coming from the kitchen weren't her high-pitched yells. It was definitely Luther, normally the quietest person in the whole family, who was making most of the noise.

"No!" Luther shouted. "I'm staying here!"

Then several voices spoke all at once. Chip couldn't make out what they were saying, only that they seemed to be trying to calm Luther down. Then Luther yelled again, "You can't make me! If you try, I'll run away from home!" With that, the back door slammed so hard that Chip could feel the vibration all the way to the front porch.



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Chip was turning to go after him and find out why he was so mad when a voice behind him said, "Oh, hi, Chip." Luther's mother Ruby opened the screen door and came out onto the porch.

"I just got here," Chip blurted out, hoping she wouldn't think he'd been on the porch for half an hour listening to their family fight. He glanced at her, then looked away quickly. Chip had never seen her this upset. She wasn't actually crying, but her eyes were wet. Even all teared up like that she was about the prettiest woman Chip knew. "Um...I..." he stammered. "I was looking for—"

"Luther's out back," Ruby said before he could finish.

"He probably went to get Old Billy," Chip said, trying to sound cheerful. "We're going to give him a bath before we take him to town."

"Oh, that's right." Ruby took a deep breath and added, "Tell Luther I'll be at your house, helping Kate make candy. You boys want to stop by on your way to town, I'll save you a piece."

"Thanks!" Chip never missed a chance for a sample of the hand-dipped chocolates Ruby and Kate made. He took off around the corner of the house. Luther was coming from the pasture, leading Old Billy.

Old Billy was not your average goat. He was pure white with long, beautiful horns that curved out toward the ends. Over the years, he'd won tons of prizes at county and state fairs. People brought their nannies from all over to breed with him in hopes of getting baby goats of the same good quality. Two of the Martins' milk goats, Honey and Go-Girl, were Old Billy's offspring, but they weren't snowy white like him. Little Billy, the third of the triplets and the one who looked most like Old Billy, was now a mascot for the marching band at Justin's college.

## BAD DAY FOR LUTHER

Chip watched as Luther led Old Billy across the pasture. He had to admit that the old goat still had style. Old Billy practically pranced when he walked.

Luther, though, was not prancing. He was scuffing his feet through the grass, looking miserable.

Chip opened the gate so Luther could lead Billy into the yard. "Hey, man. What's happening?"

"Crap's happening, that's what," Luther grumbled. "Get the hose, will you?"

Chip went to the spigot and turned it on. Then he uncoiled the garden hose and carried it to where Luther was holding Billy.

"Good morning, Chip," Mrs. Wilson called from the porch. "Here's some herbal shampoo you can use. I reckon the children will appreciate Old Billy more if he smells nice."

Luther turned his back and didn't answer, so Chip went to get the shampoo. When Mrs. Wilson handed him the bottle, she looked past him, out to where Luther was starting to hose down Old Billy. She watched Luther with worried eyes for a minute, then went back into the house.

One thing about being a person's best friend for four years, you know when to keep quiet. Chip could tell Luther was not in the mood to talk, so he didn't ask him what was wrong. Old Billy smelled pretty rank, so Chip poured a thick line of green shampoo along his backbone, from between his horns all the way to his tail. He started working it into a lather all over one side of Billy's body. Luther dropped the hose and started lathering the other side. Pretty soon Billy looked like one giant mound of soapsuds.

Luther flicked some suds off Billy's spine onto Chip. Naturally Chip flicked some back at him. In a minute they were throwing handfuls of suds at each other. By the time Mr. Wilson

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came out to see how they were getting along, they were as covered in suds as Old Billy, and laughing like fools.

"You boys line up with Billy and I'll hose all of you off together," Mr. Wilson said with a chuckle.

"I'll do it," Luther said, picking up the hose. He doused himself, then turned the spray on Chip.

"Hey, that's enough!" Chip protested. "Old Billy's the one who needs the bath!"

Mr. Wilson handed Chip a small container. "Here's the polish for his horns and hooves, but make sure he's good and dry before you apply it."

"Yes sir," Chip said. When he looked up, Booker was coming across the yard in his wheelchair.

"Hey, men," Booker boomed. "I thought Old Billy only got the royal treatment for Fall Fair. What's the occasion? He got a lady friend coming to visit?"

"Not today," Mr. Wilson answered as he fed Billy a biscuit left over from breakfast. "Him and these boys are heading to town to be good citizens, helping out some folks that fell on hard times."

"What folks are we talking about?" Booker wanted to know.

"Them people along the Gulf Coast that got blown this way by that last hurricane," Mr. Wilson explained. "There's a fair number still living in the community center, families whose homes were completely wiped out."

"I see how the boys might be some help, but where does Old Billy fit in?" Booker asked. "Goats aren't especially known as good citizens."

"Some of the families staying at the center have kids," Mr. Wilson explained. "And not all that much for them to do. Chip and Luther came up with the idea of going over and giving them free rides in the goat cart."

## BAD DAY FOR LUTHER

“What an amazingly good idea!” Booker gave Chip and Luther one of his superwide grins, the kind that make you feel warm from the inside out. “I mean, brilliant! One of you guys decide to be president when you grow up, you got my vote!”

“Thanks,” Chip said, pleased to be doing something Booker thought was a good idea. He cut a sidelong look at Luther. Luther hadn’t said anything, but he was wearing a little smile. Chip could tell that his anger was wearing off.

When the grown-ups went back in the house, Chip and Luther rubbed Billy down, then flopped down in the grass to wait for him to get dry. It was a perfect spring day, the kind where the sun is warm enough to make you feel lazy, but not so hot that it turns you into a puddle of sweat.

“Bet you’re glad Booker’s home,” Chip said. He was considering whether or not to tell Luther about Mom and Booker. He and Luther didn’t keep secrets from each other—ever. Chip just wasn’t sure about the kissing part. What if Luther laughed and started cracking jokes about it, the way Chip knew his other friends would do if they found out?

Luther didn’t answer, so Chip decided to wait a while before bringing up the subject. Instead he said, “This is going to be a fun day.”

“This is not a fun day,” Luther snapped. “It’s the second-worst day of my life.”

Chip sat up and stared at him. “Why?”

“Because my mother is getting married, that’s why.” Luther picked up a pebble and threw it as hard as he could at the side of the house. Fortunately it struck below the window. Chip wasn’t sure whether Luther had been aiming at the window or not.

“To Mr. Jackson?” Richard Jackson was a math teacher at the local high school. Ruby had been going out with him for

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more than three years, so the fact that they'd finally decided to get married wasn't any big surprise. And as far as Chip knew, Luther liked him okay. "You reckon that's going to be a problem?"

"The problem," Luther snarled, "is that when they get married, my mom plans to move in with him. Which means I'll have to move."

"Oh." That, Chip had to admit, would be a problem, not just for Luther, but for him too. A lot of the things they did together wouldn't be so easy if Luther lived in town. On the other hand, it wouldn't be all that bad to have a place in town to hang out.

"Well, his apartment's close to the junior high," Chip reminded him. "If you go out for the baseball team next year, it would be easier if you didn't have to take the bus. And," he added cheerfully, "Mr. Jackson can help you with your math. If we get Terrible Thackery for seventh-grade math, we're going to need all the help we can get."

"You think I want to spend all day in school, then go home to an apartment that's right next to the school to live with a teacher and do more schoolwork? I'd rather flunk math!" Luther picked up another, bigger rock and flung it. Chip winced when it thwacked against the side of the house. Right now Luther probably wouldn't have cared if the rock had hit the glass and shattered it all over the floor of his mother's bedroom.

"You got a point," Chip said. "But breaking a window probably won't help the situation."

Luther took off his soapsuds-spattered glasses and started polishing them on the tail of his T-shirt. "Nothing's going to help the situation," he muttered.

## BAD DAY FOR LUTHER

The cheerfulness Chip had felt when he was walking down Lost Goat Lane on the way to the Wilson farm, looking forward to their trip to town, had worn off. Luther's situation, he was just figuring out, might actually be their situation.

Luther was worried about having to move into town if his mom got married. Well, what if Chip's mom decided to marry Booker? Would she want to move to Atlanta? That wouldn't matter to Justin, since he was already living there. And it wouldn't affect Kate so much. In one more year she'd graduate and go off to college. But what about Chip? And what about their goats? Suddenly Chip felt sick. Luther looked like he didn't feel so hot either. Neither of them said anything for a long time.

Then a question crossed Chip's mind. "You said this was the second-worst day of your life, Luther. What's the worst?"

"The worst," Luther said darkly, "will be the day they get married and Mama tries to make me move to town with her and Mr. Jackson. Because I won't do it. I already told her, I'll run away first."