

PADRAIG KENNY

Chicken House

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www.chickenhousebooks.com

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PROLOGUE

It was night when Pog heard weeping in the forest.

He'd been patrolling for an hour, and the only sounds had been the occasional cries of foxes, or the low hooting of owls.

Pog sniffed the air. There was a scent.

Human scent.

Pog followed the smell. He skipped over tree roots, his eyes finely attuned to the night, his furry ears twitching as he got closer to the sound. It was coming from the trees encircling the dark forbidden heart of the forest. Pog's hackles immediately stood on end. He paced back and forth fretfully, listening to the weeping before plunging into the undergrowth.

Pog peeked out from behind a bush and into the circular clearing which was dotted with stunted tree trunks. There was a human child sitting on one of the old stumps. A girl with dark curly hair. She was sobbing inconsolably into her hands. Pog knew her instantly and nodded in understanding. He'd already seen tall ones that very morning. They'd arrived at the house in their metal box on wheels.

This was something entirely new for Pog. He was used to protecting and patrolling, not coming across the children of tall ones crying in the forest. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to reveal himself, but the girl was clearly lost. *What to do? What to do?* he thought, chewing on his thumb.

The decision was made for him as he saw the girl suddenly look up towards the ancient twisted tree that lay at the centre of the clearing. It was as if she'd heard something. She stood up, frowning curiously at the tree, and then started to walk carefully towards it.

'Pssst! No!' Pog hissed, drawing his sword and staff without thinking.

The girl wheeled round. 'Who's that? Who's there?'

Pog hid behind the bush, his chest tight, muscles tensed.

'A friend,' he said. 'Is you lost?'

The girl wiped her eyes and nodded. 'Yes,' she whimpered.

'Come then, and Pog will show you the way home.'

The girl hunched her shoulders and didn't move. Behind her, a sliver of moonlight shone on the tree, and the black bark rippled for a moment, as if a

serpent were twisting beneath it. Pog smelt something fetid and rotten. He licked his lips. He needed to get the girl away from the tree, but he couldn't reveal himself. It was forbidden.

'Come now,' he said, trying to keep his tone light and friendly.

The girl clutched her hands to her chest and retreated a couple of steps closer to the tree. Pog saw that supple insidious movement again beneath the skin of the tree, and he fancied he heard a hissing whisper. The girl was frightened, and hiding from her was only making things worse. There was only one thing for it.

Pog stepped into the clearing.

The girl blinked in disbelief. 'Who are you?' she asked, her lower lip trembling.

'Pog Lumpkin. A friend.' Pog smiled at the girl to show her he meant no harm. The warmth he felt when she smiled in response was a surprise to him.

'You're all furry,' said the girl.

'Pog is of the First Folk. We's all furry. Not like you tall folk.' He beckoned the girl forward, smiling at her while keeping one eye on the tree. 'Pog will show you the way home. Come, follow Pog.'

As the girl came towards him, Pog sighed inwardly with relief. He cast one eye over his shoul-

der as they left the clearing behind. Pog thought he heard that whisper again, but perhaps it was his imagination. The tree was still, but its bark had a reptilian sheen.

Clouds cleared and the moon came out and lit their way. Pog bounded through the forest, the girl keeping pace with him. Pog started to speed up and the girl laughed as she chased after him. Pog laughed too, but he took care not to go too fast in case he lost her.

It didn't take them long to reach the large house that lay at the edge of the forest. Pog and the girl went up the driveway and stopped outside the door. There was a light on in one of the windows.

'There now,' he said.

The girl smiled up at him. 'Thank you, Pog.'

Pog felt strange. There was a fluttering in his chest. No one had spoken his name in years.

'Pog must go now.'

'Will I see you again?' asked the girl.

'Maybe,' said Pog.

'Are you alone?'

The question took Pog by surprise. He felt an ache in his throat. He shook his head. 'Not now,' he smiled.

The girl waved goodbye and Pog slipped around

the corner of the house, and watched as she knocked on the door. A tall man with grey hair opened the door. He and the girl embraced, and the sight of it made Pog feel sad and happy at the same time.

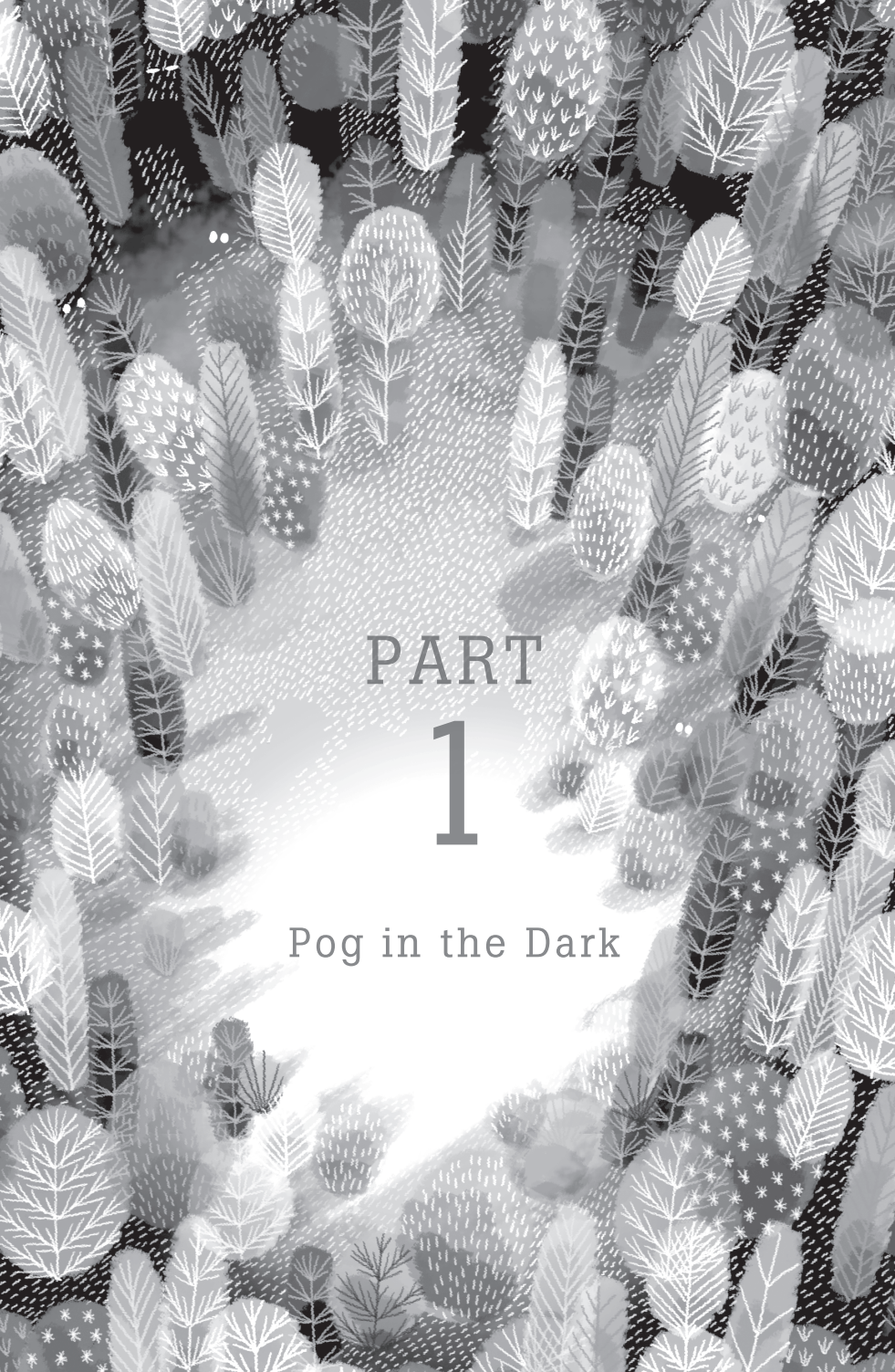
They both went inside and Pog felt almost disappointed as the door closed.

He shimmied up the drainpipe and squeezed in through the hole that led into the attic. Pog landed deftly on the attic floor and started to remove his sword and staff.

Are you alone? Pog thought about the question. Yes, he had been. He had been alone in the dark for a very long time, but he wasn't alone now.

But what Pog didn't know was that in two weeks' time the girl would be gone. Her grandparents would soon follow, and the house would be empty. And there Pog would stay in the attic, patrolling at night, keeping to a long-held promise. And spring would come, summers would pass, many autumns, many winters. It would just be Pog then, alone in the dark, for what seemed like for ever.

Until they came.



PART 1

Pog in the Dark



30 YEARS LATER

'Your mum's in Ipswich.'

Penny looked up from unpacking a box of books to see her dad waggling his phone at her.

'Ipswich,' he said again, and he shook his head and gave a sheepish smile.

Penny felt her cheeks get hot and she looked across the hallway towards David who was unpacking another box only a metre or so away from her. She wanted him to look up at her, so that she could have someone to share her irritation with, but David's head was bent low. It was obvious that he didn't want to have anything to do with the situation.

Penny turned back towards her dad. He seemed

to be waiting for her to say something. She rubbed her forehead vigorously and just said, 'Right.'

Her dad smiled apologetically. Penny hated that smile.

'Bit of confusion about directions.' He shrugged. 'She should be here after lunch.'

Penny cleared her throat. She didn't know what he expected her to say. He grinned and waggled his phone again and put it in his pocket. Penny fought the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she remembered herself and she did what she'd been doing for the past three months. She flashed one of her best brilliant smiles. 'That's good, Dad,' she said.

Her dad seemed encouraged by this, and for a moment he seemed to stand that little bit taller, like a child who'd just been complimented by a parent. Penny felt a pang of guilt for feeling so irritated in the first place. After all, he was only trying his best. They were all trying their best.

'Did you hear that, David? Mum will be here after lunch.'

David said nothing and just kept unpacking.

Penny looked at the boxes that were scattered around the hall. Their whole lives were squeezed in them, waiting to be unpacked in their new home. For a moment Penny wondered if they could just

leave the boxes as they were and not unpack anything. That way they could just stay as they were, not moving forward, not moving back, stuck in time where things might be safer. Stuck between the awful past and an equally awful future.

'Maybe you could both go outside and explore for a bit,' said Dad.

'Whatever,' David said, shrugging his shoulders.

Sometimes Penny wondered if he was the one who had just become a teenager and not her. When Penny looked into his eyes he seemed to be the oldest-looking eleven-year-old in the world.

'Look at it. The state of it. I wouldn't let a dog live in it,' David growled.

He was kicking gravel on the driveway, his hands deep in his pockets. He jerked his head towards the house.

Penny looked at the rickety house looming above them. He had a point. No one had lived here for decades. It had belonged to their mum's grandparents, and they'd passed it on to Mum. It was coming apart at the seams, and their mum had never had the time to do anything about it. But even though the house was sloppy and angular, Penny liked it. Her dad's plan was to apply his

architectural skills and do it up. Penny and David thought he was mad. It would have been easier to stay in London, but looking at the house now, Penny was beginning to understand in some small way what their father was about. It would take a lot of work, but maybe it would be good for him, good for them all.

'Bet there's rats up there. Rats and all sorts of things.' David was looking at the roof. 'Look how many holes are up there. That's how they get in. Rats can climb anything.'

Penny looked up and squinted her eyes.

'And loose slates for the rain. Bet it's like a swamp up there. Pools of water for the rats to drink, and maggots, and . . . and . . .' David kicked a stone and it went skidding into a bush.

There was silence for a few moments. Penny felt the breeze on her face and it rippled through her brown curls. She could smell wood and leaves on the air.

'Let's go for a walk in the forest,' she said.

She was surprised when David didn't complain about her suggestion. They walked down the driveway together, their shoes crunching on the gravel. David insisted on dragging his feet. Penny fought the urge to tell him to stop. That would only risk

more sulks from him, and she was determined to lighten the mood. She decided that a walk through trees and sunlight would do them both the power of good.

They crossed the dirt road – a quiet, narrow track at the end of the drive. It was a bright warm summer's day, and the shade looked particularly inviting. The house was bounded on all sides by forest, although the trees were thicker and deeper on the side across the road. The nearest village was eight miles away. Penny liked the way it all felt, isolated, away from anyone who could remind them of the bustle of the outside world.

They entered the forest and the hush settled around them. They picked their way through trees and rocks without saying a word, following a well-worn track to avoid getting lost. After about twenty minutes, they found themselves in a part of the forest where the trees seemed even more densely packed. They both stood still and just looked at the trees and listened to the wind hiss through the leaves.

Penny saw David frown. 'What is it?' she asked.

'Do you hear that?' said David.

Penny listened hard, but there was no sound at all apart from the wind in the trees.

David pointed at the clump of trees. 'It came from in there.'

Penny looked at the trees. They were gnarled and twisted together. They looked almost as if they were whispering to each other.

David took a step forward.

'David!'

David scowled at her. 'What?'

'Don't go in there.'

'Why? Are you afraid there might be monsters?'

He was sneering, but Penny could see the flicker of doubt in his eyes. There was something in there. He felt it too.

'Come on,' said Penny, 'we should get back.'

She was glad to walk away from that place. She noticed David kept looking over his shoulder as they headed back.

'We're in the middle of nowhere,' David said, still looking back to where they'd just come from.

'This is a forest,' said Penny. 'It's not nowhere.'

David curled his lip in disdain. 'It's not anywhere, Pen.'

Penny breathed in the warm clean air. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe they were better off out of London. Peace was probably what they needed. Penny had been anxious and a little frightened by

the idea of coming up here to Allbridge, but now she didn't feel so scared. It's for the best, she kept telling herself. It's for the best.

She said the words without even thinking. It was only afterwards, when they were back at the house, that she would realize that she had sounded just like Dad.

'Mum will like it here,' she said brightly.

David shook his head and said something without turning around. Penny pretended she hadn't heard him. They walked back in silence.

The silence remained all through the afternoon as they continued to unpack boxes.

Penny was putting some books in a bookcase in the sitting room when noise from outside caught her attention.

She looked out the window to see a van pull into the driveway. The driver got out. He was dressed in grey overalls with the removal company's logo over his left pocket. He went to the back of the van, opened the door, and took out a box which he cradled under his right arm. He closed the van doors and headed for the house.

Penny bolted out of the sitting room, kicking a box on her way, sending it skidding across the hall-

way. David gave her a reproachful look, but she was too busy trying to get to the door to notice it. The delivery man knocked on the door, and Penny shouted, 'I'll get it.'

She opened the door. The delivery man grinned at her, and looked at his clipboard. 'Cresswells, yeah?'

Penny didn't like his tone – he was too casual, too friendly. It seemed inappropriate. She nodded.

'Sorry about the delay; it was just that there was a bit of confusion and it got put in the van. I know you'd marked it as a personal item, but we had a new lad and he doesn't know procedure.'

The man in the overalls shrugged and smiled. Penny clenched her jaw.

'Didn't even bother himself to check our labelling system, so he packed it. The gaffer has had a few words with him already.' The man chuckled. 'He won't be doing that again in a hurry.' He started clucking with his tongue while reading the note on his clipboard. 'Says here it was headed for storage. Just as well you rang—'

Penny reached out her hands. 'Right, yeah, can you just give me my mum, please?'

The delivery man looked surprised and he grinned at what he thought was a joke. Then he saw

the look in Penny's eyes, and his grin started to crumple. He took half a step back.

'What?'

'Can you just give her to me, please?'

Penny's tone was brisk, edging just a little bit towards anger. The man's smile vanished completely, and he eyed her warily as he handed over the box. Penny snatched it away from him.

'You'll have to sign,' he said, almost leaning away from her as he handed her the clipboard.

Penny signed the form and slammed the door without even waiting for the delivery man to say his goodbyes. She turned round to find both David and Dad looking at her. She raised the box up slightly.

'She came,' she said.

No one said anything for a moment, then Dad stepped forward. Penny handed him the box.

Dad jerked his head in the direction of the sitting room. Penny nodded, and she and David followed him in. Dad put the box on the floor and opened it. He gently pushed aside the packing straw and tenderly took out the bronze urn it contained. Dad stood up and walked towards the fireplace. He put the urn on the mantelpiece and took a few steps back.

'What do you think?' he said.

Penny and David weren't sure what to say.

'Do you think she'll be happy here?' asked Dad.

No one said anything, until finally Penny couldn't take it any more and she just said, 'Yes.'

'I do too,' said Dad. 'I do too.'

For a minute or two he gave a little agitated shuffle as if he wasn't sure how to stand. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. He scratched the hair on his chin and rubbed his lower lip with his thumb. During all of this he kept his eyes on the urn. Eventually he turned and left the room without looking at them, as if he'd forgotten they were there at all.

After a while Penny turned around to see that David was gone too. She stepped towards the fireplace and held her hand out towards the urn. She touched the cool surface and remembered the words David had spoken in the forest. The words she'd chosen to ignore:

Mum's dead.