Kirsty Applebaum

nosy crow

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For my mum and dad

Part 1:
FARSTOKE

CHAPTER 1

Vvvvvmmmmm

The buzzing.

In the roots of my teeth.

Vvvvvmmmmmmmmmmmmm

In the thick of my tongue.

I search around on the shady forest floor.

Nothing.

I pull apart flat, feathered fern leaves.

Nothing.

Vvvvvvvvvvvmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

I push bracken aside with my size tens. *Clodhoppers*, Grandad calls them.

Nothing.

Where is it? I let the bracken bounce back.

Must be here somewhere. The buzzing's never wrong.

"Lonny – wait for me!" Midge stumbles through the trees, that ridiculous yellow baseball cap stuck backwards on his head. "What're you doing?" he says. "What happened?"

I look down. The basket's on its side, ink caps scattered over the ground. Must've dropped it.

Midge rights the basket and scoops the mushrooms back in. His sleeves are too long for his arms. He has to stop to roll them up.

Vvvvvvvvvvvvmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

My jaw vibrates.

"Lonny?" Midge frowns. "You've got the buzzing again, haven't you?"

Vvvvvvvvvvvvmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

"We should go back home," he says. "Dad said you have to walk away if you get the buzzing."

Walk away.

"C'mon." He yanks at my sleeve, but he's tiny, Midge is. No match for big brother Lonny. I push him off, hold him behind me with one arm, and keep on looking.

Ah.

There.

A rabbit. Breathing tight little dying-rabbit breaths. Twitching.

It's not got long. Must've been got by a fox, unlucky

beggar.

Or a stoat.

I kneel down – at the head end, mind. The rest's all blood-stuck and askew. I reach out a finger. Stroke its ear.

Feels soft. And warm. Like kisses and kind words from your mother. And I haven't had either of those in a very long time, so I keep on stroking.

"Lonny! Don't, Lonny!" Midge, all fretty. "Leave it alone. Walk away. It's just a rabbit. We shouldn't even have come out this far. Should've stopped at the oaks. Let's go home." Tug, tug, tug at my sleeve.

I shake him off.

Vvvvvvvvvvvvmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

The buzzing shifts. Shudders down my neck. Squeezes past my shoulder, my elbow, my hand. Pushes out through the ends of my fingers.

The rabbit stops twitching.

Its breathing slows.

Dead?

No.

Wait.

The breathing doesn't stop; it just slows to regular. Then the little rabbit legs twist themselves round and the dark rabbit blood dries itself up and everything slides nice 'n' smooth back into place. Like magic.

It gets up, gives itself a shake, and hops off.

And the buzzing's gone.

"You shouldn't have done that," says Midge.

"What's Dad going to say?"

"Who's going to tell him?"

He looks at the ground where the rabbit was.

I sit back on my heels.

Calm teeth.

Calm tongue.

Calm head.

OK, so I've aged again. Voice got a little bit deeper, arms grown a little bit longer. But it was only a rabbit. It'll shorten a few days from me, a week at the most. Talents like this don't come free, you know. There's always a price.

Give a bit of life, lose a bit of life.

That's how it goes.

Breathe, Lonny.

Breathe.

"Lonny?"

"Mmmm?"

Breathe.

"Did you hear that?" Midge. Fretting again.

"Mmmm?"

Breathe.

"Did you hear it?"

"Did I hear what?"

Yap!

"That," he says.

I open my eyes.

Yap-yap!

Yap! Yap!

A dog darts out from the trees.

What. On. Earth?

A dog, in the middle of the forest?

In the middle of *our* forest?

Yap!

It runs towards us.

Midge's hands clench up. "Told you we shouldn't have come out this far."

It's a little white quiver of a thing, with a luminous pink collar, twigs for legs and a whipped-under tail. Not much use for anything at all, I shouldn't imagine. Except trouble.

Yap! Yap-Yap!

It jumps up at Midge and – guess what – he falls over.

Unbelievable.

The dog slurps at his face.

"Lonny! Get it off me! Get it off!"

"Shush, Midge. Keep quiet."

Thing about dogs is, they don't wander around forests by themselves. Especially quivery little dogs like this. There'll be people following after, sooner or later.

I listen.

"*Suuuuuu-keeeeeey!*"

There you go.

Suki. That's her name, then.

The dog – *Suki* – stops still, two front feet on Midge's chest. She cocks an ear.

"*Suuuuuu-keeeeeey! Where are you?*"

"Get it off me, Lonny!"

"Keep quiet. We got to get ourselves away from this dog." I grab the skinny thing round her middle.

Grrrrrrrr.

She twists round and looks me all beady in the eye.

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

The growl comes from deep in her belly. I feel it through my fingers.

Midge scrambles to his feet, I stick Suki on the ground, and we run.

Crackle! Crunch! Snap! I dodge between ash and birch and hazel. The ground crumbles under my boots.

"Lonny! Wait for me!"

I stop for Midge to catch up. Suki gallops past him and skids to a halt in front of me.

She bares her teeth. *Grrrrrrrrrrrr.*

"Go!" I tell her. "Go on. Go away!"

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

It's a big sound for a tiny dog. Her legs tremble.

"Suuuuuuuu-keeeeey! Suuuuuuuu-keeeeeey!"

"Lonny, they're gonna find us." Midge looks at the forest behind him. He swishes a mayfly out of his face.

Grrrrrrrrrrrr.

"Suki – is that you?" Voices getting closer. "Erin! Over here. I can hear her. This way! You're a bad dog, Suki!" A flash of orange anorak between the trees.

"Lonny!" Midge swishes at another mayfly. "What

are we gonna do?"

Mayflies.

The air's full of them.

"Lonny!"

We must be near the stream. "C'mon." I grab Midge's arm and pull him through the trees.

There it is.

Cool and fresh and buzzing with life.

"Quick." I wade in. *Slooooosh.*

Midge stares at the water. "I can't go in there."

Oh, for heaven's sake. "It's hardly even going to be up to your knees." I yank him in after me.

It's not that deep but it's cold as anything and flowing fast, so it's enough to put the little dog off. We scramble out the other side, hide behind a yew tree and shiver.

Grrrrrrrrrrr. Suki growls on the far bank.

"Suki! You're a bad dog. A really bad dog!" It's a girl, not much bigger than Midge. "You mustn't keep running off like this. I found her, Erin. I found her!" She gathers up the trembly dog and kisses her all over. Clips a luminous pink lead on to the luminous pink collar. Suki licks her face. *Yap! Yap-Yap!*

Another girl comes out from the trees – older than the first. She strokes Suki's head. Suki licks at her hand. Seems Suki likes pretty much everyone, except for me.

"Well done, Katy," she says.

Katy.

Erin and Katy.

"And well done, Suki, *not.* You've got us proper lost now. How are we going to get back home? Dad'll be livid." She pulls something out of her pocket and peers at it. A mobile phone. I've seen them on Dad's TV.

"Course," she says, "it'd help if we lived somewhere you could actually get a signal. Like *anywhere else in the universe.*"

"Um…" Katy turns round on the spot, clutching Suki to her chest. She stops and points. "I think it's this way."

"All right, then," says Erin. "That way it is. You'd better be right."

"I am right – I'm sure I am. Farstoke, here we come." They march off eastwards.

I lean back against the yew tree. Safe.

"Farstoke," whispers Midge. "Did you hear that, Lonny? They're from Farstoke."

I heard it.

Midge sits on the ground. "Told you we'd come too far." He swishes another couple of mayflies away.

I look up. There's a whole cloud of them under the branches. Hundreds. Thousands. So many the air over our heads isn't even properly see-through any more. They dance and dive and swoop and zoom. Having the time of their lives.

Those girls are gonna be a long while getting back to Farstoke. Should be heading southwards, not

eastwards.

"Lonny?" Midge sniffs.

"Mmmm?"

"Can we go home now?"

We wade back through the stream, squeeze the water out from the bottom of our trousers, and set off for home.

CHAPTER 2

"That you, Lonny? Midge?" Dad comes out of the workshop, wiping his hands on a rag. He's not big like me, but he's strong. All muscles and knuckles and knots. "You all right?" he says. "Where've you been?" He's still got his working specs on, thick as your thumb.

"We went all the—"

I give Midge a shove. He's such a snitch.

"We went looking for mushrooms," I say. "Morels. Couldn't find any, though." I hold out the basket. "Only ink caps."

Dad sticks the rag in his back pocket. "You've been a long time. How far did you go? You missed lunch."

"We're not hungry. Are we, Midge?"

Midge looks at me.

Course we're hungry. But if we eat now, there won't be any food left for dinner.

Dad flips his lenses up and rubs his eyes. "How far did you go?"

"It's fine, Dad," I tell him. "Don't worry, we never go past the oaks."

Midge stares at the floor. Keep quiet, tattle-teller.

"Good. Make sure you don't." Dad takes the basket from me. "What happened to your boots? They're soaked."

I scrunch up my toes. "We just … fell into the stream. That's all."

"Both of you?"

"Both of us."

Midge nods.

"Well, you'd better take more care next time – new boots are the last thing we can afford. Lonny, there's some old newspapers in the back of the workshop – stuff them with those and they'll keep a bit of shape while they're drying. Midge, I need your help with these watches. We've got to get them finished."

Midge pulls off his boots and slips behind Dad into the workshop.

"I can help too," I say. "With the watches. If you're in a hurry with them."

Dad rubs the stubble on his chin. "No. S'all right, Lon."

Course he doesn't want your help, Lonny. Your ham-fisted, unhelpful help.

He holds up the basket. "Good job on these, though. They'll go lovely with some eggs for dinner. Who needs morels?" He puts it on the kitchen table. "You get on with stuffing those boots. Chickens need sorting too, don't forget."

Boot stuffing and chicken sorting. Great.

I follow him into the workshop. Midge is already perched at the bench. He's surrounded by shelves and shelves of watchmaking equipment: scales and monitors and gear-pullers and dust-blowers and balance wheels and pivot lathes. Backs of watches and fronts of watches. Winding stems for the sides of watches. Cogs and springs and screws so little that some of them are completely invisible if all you've got is your bare human eyes.

Midge is calm in here. Happy. His fretting's all gone. Ignore the cap and he looks like nothing more in the world than a smaller version of Dad. The same concentrated face; the same hunched shoulders; the same careful hands.

I turn over my own hands. Straighten my fingers. Big. Wide. Clumsy.

Boot-stuffing, chicken-sorting hands.

They're magic too, though, don't forget. *Life-giving.*

For the fat lot of good it does me.

I pull the box of newspapers down from the shelf.

Dad opens up the dark wooden case where he stores watches while they're half-made, or half-mended. He covers his hand with a cloth and lifts out a perfectly round, almost-finished, 44-millimetre lever-set pocket watch. His speciality.

He passes it to Midge.

The watch gleams. It's made the old-fashioned way, with seventeen jewels, just like the classic pocket watches made a hundred years ago. When it's finished it'll have a fine leather fob looped round the top and Just-the-Job Jess will pick it up and take it into the city. You'll be able to buy it from Everston's the Jeweller and it won't lose or gain more than two seconds per year guaranteed. And when it does finally gallop ahead or fall behind, you can send it back through Everston's, and Dad and Midge'll tweak it till it's perfect all over again.

Trouble is, there's not much demand for pocket watches nowadays.

That's why we have to make ours the best, says Dad.

I take the top newspaper out of the box. My hungry stomach growls.

Dad lifts out a second watch and flips his lenses down. He twists a flat palm over the watch and the back comes off neatly. He nods to Midge, who does the same.

He places the back piece into a plastic tray. Midge does the same.

Everything you take off has to go into the tray, so it

doesn't get lost.

BANG! BANG!

The ceiling shudders. Dad sighs.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

It's Grandad upstairs, banging his walking stick on the floor. Dad keeps threatening to take it away if he doesn't stop. Says he'll give him a little brass bell instead. But Grandad said *bells are for churches and angels and old-fangled doorways and they aren't much assistance when you're trying to get across the landing to spend a periwinkle, thank you very much.*

"S'GONE FOUR!" shouts Grandad. "WHAT'RE YOU ALL DOODLING AWAY AT DOWN THERE? WHERE'S MY CUPPA?"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"WHERE'S MY CUPPA?"

Dad squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath in through his nose. "Lonny," he says, "make your grandad a cup of tea, will you? We've got to get these watches finished. Jess is coming to collect them in the morning."

"Here you go, Grandad." I push his creaking bedroom door open. The cup of tea – made with our very last drop of milk – slooshes in the mug.

"Lonny! Marvellous." Grandad's sitting on the bed. The room smells of shelves that haven't been dusted enough and floors that haven't been hoovered enough. "Grand old duke of a job." He pats the bed

beside him. "Have a little sittle down, eh? Or would you prefer the chair? More comfy? I can move my stuff off if you like." He fumbles for his stick and begins to creak himself to upright.

"No, Grandad – don't get up. I've got to go and sort the chickens."

I can't stay here in this stuffy old-person room.

"But, Lon, I thought we could have a heave-ho on the old draughts board. Let you go first? Or d'you wanna look at Grandma Quicke's exercise book? S'been a while since you read any of her stories."

"I've gotta go, Grandad. I'll leave this here, all right?"

I put the tea down on the bedside table and dodge back out the door.