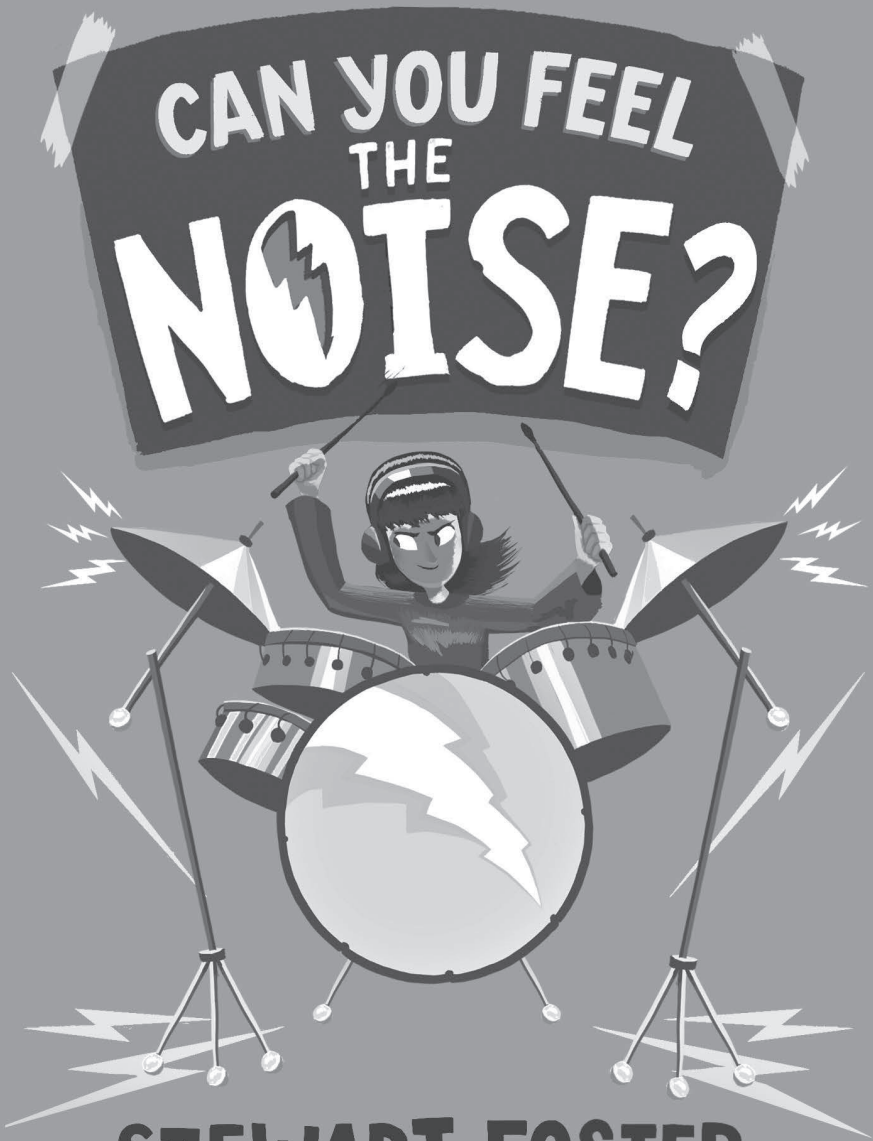
CAN YOU FEEL THE NOISE?



STEWART FOSTER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

Mum

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PROLOGUE

WHITE CORRIDORS AND BRIGHT LIGHTS

'Will it grow back . . . ? They said it would grow back . . .'

A nurse smiles, then she smooths my hair.

'Yes, it will grow back,' she says.

Smiley face. Her blurred, smiley face.

'My friend Rocco said I should have a Mohican.'

'What's that, Sophie?'

'My friend . . . Rocco . . . He said you should shave both sides of my head so I have a Mohican.'

Another sting in my hand. *Was I supposed to feel that?*

'It's okay, Sophie. You're going to feel a little drowsy now. We're just going to take you down to the operating theatre.'

Dark shadow. A doorway, then a white corridor, with bright lights passing over my head.

My eyes start to flicker.

'My friend Rocco . . .'

Smiling face. Warm, smiling face – lips moving, but too blurry to read.

I feel sleepy. I feel so sleepy. Warm hand on mine.

'Your mum said you like to play guitar?'

I smile.

'Yeah.' My eyes flicker again. 'My friend . . . Rocco said I should have a Mohican.' The nurse's face fades away. So sleepy. So sleepy. 'My friend Rocco . . . He said . . . He said . . . I should have . . . a . . . Mo . . . a . . . Mo . . . hi . . . can.'

CHAPTER 1

SIX WEEKS EARLIER

THE NOISE

It started as a distant hum. A low drilling noise, like roadworks had begun on my street one Sunday morning. It was so real I kept checking out of my bedroom window for white vans and workers digging in reflective clothing. But there was no one there, except for a boy from the house four doors down, kicking his football against a wall.

The hum was still there in the afternoon.

'Perhaps it's the fridge,' my mum suggested. 'It's on its way out.'

'Or maybe it's the electricity pylon down the road,' said my dad.

'No,' I said. 'The fridge is more of a drone, and the pylon is a buzz – this is as irritating as both but is neither.'

They shrugged because they couldn't hear a noise anything like the one I was describing, but they could tell how annoyed I was, because Dad was still trying to help identify what it was during tea.

'Are you sure it's not the pylon?' he said. 'Only, you know I'm fairly sure it causes my psoriasis.'

‘Dad,’ I snapped, and put my knife and fork down. ‘It’s not the pylon. You blame everything on it – your psoriasis, your bald patch, the grass not growing.’

‘Only trying to help, Soph,’ he said, like I’d upset him.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry – it’s just the noise has been there all day, like a million midges, midging away at my brain.’

‘Midging?’ Mum chuckled.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘whatever it is that midges do.’

We all laughed, then Mum put her hand on mine.

‘Perhaps it’s wax, Soph,’ she said gently. ‘I’ll put some olive oil in your ears before you go to bed.’

That night I went to bed, ears so greasy I felt like my head was slipping off the pillow. But the noise was still there. For a while, I thought it was my stepbrother, Liam, outside with his friends revving their motorbikes, even though I was sure I’d heard him come in at eleven. I was doubly sure it was him when I sniffed the smell of burnt toast wafting under my door.

But that didn’t stop me getting up and checking three more times during the night. My alarm clock said 2.05 a.m. the next time I got up.

2.26 a.m. the next.

3.09 a.m. the time after that.

It had to be something, somewhere – a truck, or a bus idling – but each time I looked, all I saw was the neighbourhood cats stalking each other under the village street lights.

That day in May was the first time I had the noise, but it wasn’t the first problem I’d had with my ears.

I'd noticed it first in the final term at my primary school, six months ago, whenever Mrs Santo turned her back and wrote a sum on the whiteboard. As she spoke, all I could hear was the mumble of her voice, just loud enough that I could make out how many syllables she was saying. Most times I could see what she'd written, and would be able to answer, but if she asked another question after that, I wouldn't be able to work out what she'd said. I'd sit still, feeling dumb, while other kids in the class were waving their hands in the air.

The first person I told was Mum, and it turned out she wasn't surprised. She'd noticed how every day it felt like she was having to shout louder up the stairs to tell me when tea was ready. She'd thought that I'd been ignoring her, or maybe I had been too immersed in playing my songs on my guitar.

She took me to see a hearing consultant, Dr Cowans. He gave me a test and said my hearing wasn't as good as it could be, and that we should monitor it for a while. A month later, I didn't need another test to know my hearing was getting worse. I could still hear, but I was now sometimes missing questions, even when Mrs Santo was facing the class, and I'd have to ask my friend Mia what she'd said. And over the summer holidays, Mum and Dad had noticed that I'd started turning the TV up louder.

I began to notice it more when I started at Cromwell High. It might have been because the classes were bigger and the students noisier, but I had to sit near the front to hear the teachers. Luckily at my last appointment with Dr Cowans a few months ago, he said my hearing seemed to have stabilized; while it wasn't getting better, it

didn't seem to be getting any worse. Which made me feel great – it finally felt like things were starting to look up.

But the morning the noise started, it didn't feel like things were looking up; it felt like they were getting worse.

It was still with me when I got on the bus to school with Mia the next morning. My noise was irritating me so much that I didn't want to talk about it; I thought Mia might think it was weird. Besides, she seemed more preoccupied with how I smelt.

'What is it?' she said, sniffing the air as she looked at me.

'Maybe it's my deodorant,' I said.

'No.' Mia leaned close. 'It's not that.'

'Maybe Mum's changed our fabric conditioner.' I held out my arm for her to smell.

'No.' She screwed up her face.

'What is it, then?' I asked. 'Because you're making me feel gross.'

Mia didn't answer, and we hardly talked as the bus drove out of our village. I just stared out of the window because I'd gone to bed with the noise, woken up with the noise, eaten breakfast with the noise, and now it was still there, whining away above the rumble of the bus wheels. I closed my eyes, took deep breaths to try to calm down, but it was still there like an alarm clock, ringing in my head. I just wished I could reach up with my hand, slam the button and turn it off.

Mia didn't say much in registration either, but then sometimes we're like that. Being friends for five years, we don't have to talk to know how the other is feeling. She knew I was irritable in the same way I knew she was upset when Lotto, her dog, died. We just don't

have to spend all day reminding each other what's on our minds. She's in the band with me. In fact, we were the ones who started it in the second week after winter break.

We were sat together at lunch, playing our guitars, when two boys from our year came and joined us – Ty and Rocco. They often came to the music room, but we'd never spoken to them before. They said they'd heard us playing songs that they liked, like 'Fade Away' and 'Dying Sun', and Ty showed us his rucksack where he'd painted the band name BURNOUT in big yellow letters on to the back of it.

That's the moment I knew we'd get along, and we decided to form a band, with Ty on keyboard and Rocco as our lead singer. We played for fun more than anything else and hadn't even come up with a name when our music teacher, Mrs Hopkirk, said we should enter the Battle of the Bands competition to find the best school band in our area. We've already got through the first round with HiFi Dad from Year Nine and a group of sixth-formers called the Longshots, and we're all playing in the semi-finals in three weeks' time. The final is at Rock City, the biggest music venue in town, two weeks after that. We spend most of our lunchtimes practising in the music room, and today was like any other. Except this time, I had my noise, and all anyone could talk about was the weird smell.

'Chips!' Rocco said. 'That's what it is! You smell of chips.'

'What?' I sniffed my arms again.

'Chips!' He seemed almost happy about it. 'But don't worry, sometimes I know I stink of my dad's homemade beer. It's not your clothes; it's your hair.'

'No, it's not,' I said. 'Is it?' I pulled a band out of my hair. 'Oh no,

it is,' I said, lifting my hair up to my nose. 'It's everywhere.'

'What is?' asked Mia.

'Olive oil,' I said.

'Olive oil?' they all said at the same time.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I've got this noise in my head. A high-pitched whine. My mum thought it might be trapped wax, so she put olive oil in my ear to loosen it.'

'Gross,' said Rocco, scrunching up his nose.

'Thanks, Rocco,' I said. 'I know it makes it look like I haven't washed it for week.'

'True.'

'You're not supposed to agree with me,' I said irritably.

'Just saying.' Rocco smirked.

I turned to Ty, who had cranked his amp up so loud it hummed. 'And can you at least keep that down until we're ready to play?'

'Haven't touched it,' said Ty.

'You have,' I snapped at him like I had at Dad the night before. 'I can hear it.'

'Soph, it's not.' Ty lifted up his keyboard lead. 'It's not even plugged in.'

'Then what is it? That hum.'

The band looked at each other.

'Can't you hear it?' I said, panicking. 'Please tell me you can hear it.'

'There's no noise, Soph,' said Mia. 'You know we've not turned the amps up loud since your doctor said not to.'

I suddenly felt hot and like I was trapped in a box. The noise was

in my head, and it had followed me from home to school. But it was changing: one minute it was a rumbling truck engine, the next it was like I was being followed by a screeching alien. Now it was like a thousand bees stuck in a jar. At first it was annoying, but now I'd started to freak out.

I put my guitar down beside me and sat on a desk. I wanted to leave, but we'd just got through the first round of Battle of the Bands and needed to practise as much as we could. We had the semi-finals coming up, then if we got through, the finals were at Rock City, in the centre of town.

Rocco came over to me like he could tell I was worried.

'It's okay, Soph,' he said. 'Maybe just sit here quietly and write some lyrics instead.' Then he went off, bouncing around while pretending he was singing into a microphone. He could be an idiot sometimes, but he could almost always make me smile. I couldn't smile then, though, and I definitely couldn't think of any lyrics, not with the noise *buzz*, *buzz*, *buzzing* in my head.

When I got home from school, I went straight to my room. Mum came in and asked if I was okay. I told her the noise was still there. She told me she'd call Dr Cowans in the morning to make an appointment. I knew I had to go. I'd been six times in the last year, but still I hated having the cold metal probe in my ear, like a tiny telescope with a light shining through. And I hated having my ears tested, which might have been why Mum let me eat my tea in my bedroom . . . or maybe she knew I didn't want to hear Dad going on about the pylons.

That evening, I tried to do my history homework, but the harder

I concentrated, the worse the noise got. I turned on the TV to try to cover it, but it was still there, like a pack of hyenas, screaming in the middle of my head. I tried playing music, I tried putting my hands over my ears, I tried wrapping my head in my pillow, but there was no escape.

After two hours, my phone buzzed beside me.

A message from Rocco.

Rocco: Hey, Soph are you okay?
Still got the 🐝?

Sophie: Yes. Still there.

Rocco: Hope it goes. I got a song for next round of Battle of the Bands.

I smiled even though my noise had made me so tired.

Sophie: How does it go? It better not be about a 🐝

Rocco: It's not 🙂 Hang on . . .

I looked at my phone, imagined Rocco in his garage recording his song idea. He couldn't play drums, but when we were together, he'd play me simple beats he'd find on the internet and then we'd sit side by side and he'd sing the tune and I'd add the melody and the lyrics.

My screen lit up as a file from Rocco arrived.

I opened it up.

A simple drumbeat played, then Rocco began to sing '*la-la-la*' over the top of it. I smiled. Rocco had a good voice, but it was weird without lyrics.

Rocco: What do you think?

Sophie: It's a good tune.

Rocco: Cool. We could work on it tomorrow?

Sophie: Could do, but I might have to go to hospital as Mum's calling them in the morning.

Rocco: About the 🐝?
Just swat it 🏏

Sophie: I'll try.

Rocco: Maybe that's what we should call the band. The Bees 🙂 Or the Swats 🙂

My phone kept vibrating as Rocco sent more names, but my noise was wearing me out.

I put the phone down on my bedside table and switched off the light. For a moment I thought about Battle of the Bands, imagining us all at Rock City, with me and Mia playing guitars and Ty standing behind the keyboard, while Rocco jumped around onstage like Tigger from *Winnie the Pooh*. I smiled, but that soon disappeared as the noise came back again – the hyenas had gone, but the bees

were back. Like they were stuck in the corner of a window trying to get out.

It didn't matter which way I tried to sleep – it was always there. So bad, I felt like swatting it with one of my music books, just like Rocco had said. The next minute it didn't sound like a bee at all. It was like I was watching a monster in a scary film, creeping and crawling. If it *had* been a film, I would've jumped up and turned it off before it got to the scary bit, but this noise didn't have a switch – it was in the middle of my head.