Also by Carlie Sorosiak

I, Cosmo

My Life as a Cat

Always, Clementine

Shadow Fox

Carlie Sorosiak



nosy crow

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To my grandmother, Pat, who showed me the magic of Grand Marais



"In all things of nature there is something of the marvellous."
Aristotle

"All good things are wild and free."
Henry David Thoreau

"YAAHHAGHHHGHHHHHH!"
The fox who lived outside my window



1

The Girl Without the Fish

How many foxes have you met? Probably not many. That's for the best. Most foxes don't want to speak with you. Not *you* in particular. I'm sure you're perfectly OK. But humans can be very hard to like.

Unless they give you fish. Or trout. Which is a kind of fish.

Now, you might be thinking that this story is *about* fish. Many good stories are. Generally speaking, though, foxes do not like stories unless they're about foxes. Luckily, this one is.

I am a fox, if you haven't already guessed.

My name is YAAAARRRRAAAWWWAAAARRR. You say it with a screech, when you're about to pounce on a rabbit in the snow. I also have another name, which is much easier for humans to pronounce, because it's a

human word. I can't tell you that name up front. It would ruin the story. Which is about foxes. So it's a good one.

Listen closely.

It starts with the night I met the girl.

You can picture that night if you try hard enough. Part of the sky is black, like fox paws, and the rest is stuffed with stars. Pebbly, blue stars, as round as eggs in a nest. This far north they're bright – the brightest. They can light the way through a storm.

I need those stars. I mean, look at me! Look at how little fur I have left, how thin I am.

I need all the help I can get.

Flattening my eyes to slits, I try to block out the snowflakes. Wet chunks *thwick* against my lashes and *thwack* against my back, leaving damp patches on my skin. Icicles cling to the tiniest fur tufts on my belly. I used to like this kind of weather, but now? *Bleh! Pssh!* Each gasp of wind through the birch trees is a sliver in my side.

Here, in this part of the world, the weather changes so quickly, and the cold is colder than cold. When you breathe out, smoke hangs in the air.

Still, I'm trotting along, light-footed. Each paw-step is like the forest itself: quiet, quiet, quiet. That's how foxes are supposed to move. We're not supposed to be seen, not

supposed to be heard. We're supposed to be in our own worlds. And *fast.* That's another thing. We're made to be swifter than swift, a streak of orange in the night.

I try to pick up the pace, towards the extra light flickering through the trees. *Oh, hah! Ga-hah!* I squeal to myself, almost chuckling, because I know that flicker! It's a good flicker! Warm, yellow light pulses over cold blue snow. That means Nan has the porch light on. She's waiting for me. Must be! Nan, the woman in the woolly sweater, always feeds me. With her soft humming and her gentle fingers that smell vaguely of birds, she is the only human I don't hate. She brings out trays of sliced trout: little chunks that I can shove into my mouth and nom-nom.

My hope rises along with my brush.

Because I'm hungry. So very hungry. It's been three days since I've had a big meal, and I feel every hour of it. A gnaw grows in the hollow of my belly. Nan will solve that! She'll feed me, and I'll eat the fish, and the gnaw will be no more.

A pep in my step, I weave past the spruce and the fir trees before the forest spits me out, directly in front of the motel. The white stack of lumber, with the darkened windows and the bright-blue doors, is a den for humans. And it has terrible bins! I mean *terrible.* Never enough

food in them. Sometimes, very rarely, there's fish at the bottom. Squished fish, with the juices run out – and you have to dive for a taste.

On the night I meet the girl, I skulk by the bins, chasing the yellow porch light like I chase beetles.

Almost there! Almost!

The snow has almost stopped, too. The wind has died down to a hush. And I can hear the lake lapping nearby: water crashing against the smooth rocks. To me, the lake always sounds like fox urine, splooshing into a puddle, mixed with the distant call of birds. The noise pricks my ears as I round the first step of the deck, paws poised, my mouth already watering at the thought of Nan's treats, and—

What? What's this? Scuttling backward, my hind legs skitter on the snow. A bark climbs into my throat as I glare up at the human on the porch. *You're not Nan! You're not the white-haired woman with the sweaters and the fish!*

In front of me is a girl. A *girl*! A girl with dark-red hair, her mouth falling open. She's staring in my direction, her eyes wide, golden-brown, and flicking. She looks around twelve winters old, and, oh, I couldn't care less about her! I don't care one *lick* about her! Except she's standing where Nan once stood. By the glass door to the human den. Under the yellow light. Snow glob-falling on

to her coat.

Where is *Nan*?

Body stiff, I face off against the girl. My ears tilt back against my head. You know what these ears mean, don't you? *Annoyed fox! Angry fox!* My whiskers scream the same thing. They're slicked to my muzzle – long, black strands shivering in the arctic breeze. I might not have much fur left, but the remaining tufts stand at attention, pumpkin-coloured in the moonlight. This is serious business! The pit in my belly aches for fish.

"Yuuuu musss huuuu greeeee," the girl whispers at me. Annoyingly. Who cares what she says! I never understand what humans say! Nevertheless, her head cocks, her face sharp and intelligent. It's a foxlike face. A face almost like mine. Slowly, slow as a creek flows, she bends down to one knee.

Why … why is she bending down like that? Why is she extending a gloved hand towards me? Why isn't *Nan* here?

I cough, snorting, because Nan wasn't here yesterday. Or the day before. Or the day before that. And she isn't here now! Again! A familiar sensation worms into my gut. The feeling of being left by someone who never should've gone. It's the opposite of a gut full of fish.

Well … *ga-rah! Ha-cha-cha!* Squinching my amber eyes,

I bark at the girl, who startles. Her shoulders jump up and down, like a fox springing. But she keeps her hand flat, extended, reaching towards me. Doesn't she know I'm wild? Doesn't she know I could reach out and nip her fingers? I really could! I could do that!

"Plssssss," she says, making an unintelligible noise again, and isn't it just like humans? To think that *we* should understand *them*?

The pads of my paws dig into the snow, and I don't know what I'm waiting for. Why I'm not running. Why I haven't turned around yet. Maybe it's … the girl's sweater. Head tilted, I notice something odd about her sweater. It's *Nan's*. Puffy, grey, big. The one that smells of winter and fish and sometimes birds. Nan would stretch out her arms towards me, wearing that sweater, humming, feeding me.

That is not your sweater, I snap at the girl. *Do you hear me? It isn't yours!* My voice charges, sharp, into the night air.

The girl sniffles. *Sniffles!*

Pshh! Why is she sniffling? Her amber eyes cloud with water, like fog on the lake, and her face scrunches, as a fox's might before a sneeze. For a second, I go quiet. The black edges of my ears twitch with a thought.

Does *the girl* have fish? Will she feed me?

No, no. I'm disappointed with myself for even *thinking* about that. Never trust food from a stranger! It could

be rotten. Or poisoned! The fish could have tapeworms bloating in the belly.

As a parting shot, I stamp the ground with my paw, a loud cry rising from my throat: *AAAAAA-AAAAAH!* Normally, this gets a reaction. Normally, humans clamp their hands over their ears, blocking out the noise. Which offends me. My noises are beautiful! Serene!

But the girl doesn't clamp her ears shut.

She listens. Under the sky, night flooded with stars, she listens.

I push away from the porch, the remains of my brush in an angry puff. Fine. That's just fine. If Nan doesn't want to feed me, *fine*! I don't need her anyway! I'll make do with scavenging or digging up one of my holes. Foxes are meant to be alone. It should be easy, hunting only for myself. No mother. No sister waiting for me in the den. No paws pouncing against my back. My feet sink into the snow as I trot away.

But the girl is shouting something. Something sharp and insistent. A muscle pulses in my neck, urging me to turn and scream back at her. *WAPOW!* Or *YAARAAAWAAAAR!* I have all these noises stored in my belly. That's what happens when you have no one else to speak to.

At the very last moment, at the edge of the birch forest,