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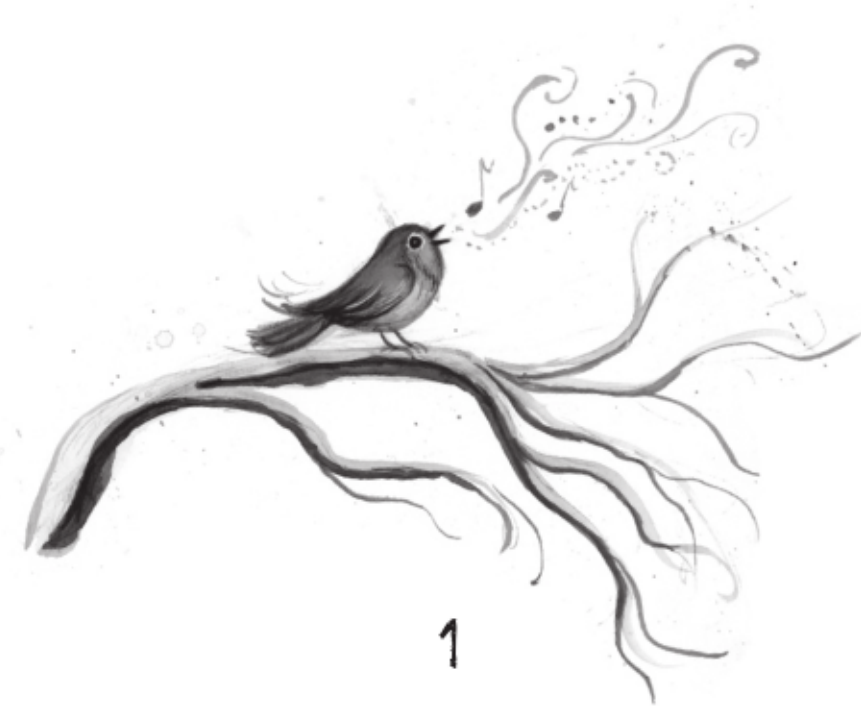
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For Annie and Charlotte



1

The forest has frozen silent since the last time I was here. Back then, the tops of the trees were bursting with birds, and the ground was as soft as a muddy sponge. It was like walking through an orchestra of squelching, and whistling, and the buzzing of bees.

It's winter now, and the only sounds are the bones of fallen leaves under our boots. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

I look up at Uncle John walking next to me. His hair is floppy like a dog's ears and it bounces as he

walks. It's bright red, just like mine, but he doesn't have as many freckles on his face as I do. He hasn't said much at all this whole walk, which is probably the thing I like the most about him. He listens, just like me.

'Roooaarr!'

I jump as a girl appears out of nowhere – running down the path from the opposite direction and shouting at the top of her lungs. She's probably about nine years old, which is the same age as my little sister, Scarlet. But this girl is upright and free, rather than stuck in hospital like my sister will be in just a few days. And the girl must not be looking properly, as she runs into me like she doesn't even see me.

'Ooof!' I say, barely a whisper.

'Annie! Look where you're going!' a lady calls from behind her, pushing a pram and looking hot, even though it's so cold today that I can't feel the tips of my fingers – even in my mittens.

The girl doesn't say sorry or anything though.

She just keeps roaring her way down the path like a wild animal.

Uncle John frowns, checking me over with his wood-brown eyes. 'She almost ran straight through you. Are you okay, Eddie?'

My stomach hurts a bit from the girl's sharp elbow. And my toe is sore from where she trod on it. But I smile up at him and nod and then put my eyes back down on the frosty ground again, so we can keep walking.

Sometimes, I feel like I'm made of ice-puddles. I'm solid around the edges, but in the middle there's nothing there that people can see. My arms are like drops of rain that have frozen on their way down to the ground, and my mouth is just a scratch-cut line from someone's ice skate.

Uncle John clears his throat. 'Your dad said you'll be staying with me for a couple of weeks this time.'

I push my chin into the top of my coat and keep my eyes on the ground. The frost has blown glitter

onto everything, like it's all been caught in a magic spell. In winter, you can see all these things you probably never would before, such as spider webs and leaf skeletons.

I'm good at seeing things like that. I saw the doctor's letters on the kitchen table about Scarlet's big operation before Mum and Dad told me about it. And I saw that I'd probably be staying with Uncle John again before Mum and Dad had even thought about it themselves. I don't mind staying here. There's a lot going on with Scarlet and it's easier for Mum and Dad if I get out of the way when the big stuff is happening.

'You and Scarlet used to come here all the time when you were little, do you remember?'

I nod before I've even thought back that far, but I think I remember. Back when Scarlet's breaths weren't as wheezy. Back then, she was all story and games and noise.

It's not like that now. The forest is crisp-quiet, just like it is at home. It's lovely though, isn't it?

Being able to hear your soft-tread footsteps and your heart in your ears, reminding you that it works and that you're the lucky one.

Uncle John clears his throat again, putting one of his heavy hands on my shoulder and squeezing it. 'I want you to feel that you can talk to me whilst you're here, Eddie.'

I stumble over a tree root and my stomach flips. I look up at him and he's wearing an awkward smile and I'm not sure what to say or do, but it suddenly feels like Uncle John can see through my ice-edges like the winter has frosted me with glitter too.

'I'm okay, thanks,' I say quickly.

He squeezes my shoulder again and I can tell he wants to say something else, so I hold my breath.

He doesn't though. He just gives me an awkward pat and we carry on walking in silence. We step out through the canopy of branches and walk across the open grassy field on the other side, before following the path along the edge of the Visitor Centre with the cafe and shop. We cross the road

to his little cottage overlooking the forest. And then we brush the frost from our boots and sigh as the heat from the house hits us and still, we don't say anything else.

And I'm glad. Because if Uncle John could see the words hiding in the bottom of that ice-puddle, he'd never want me to stay in his house ever again.

