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Opening extract from

The Great Unexpected

Written by

Sharon Creech

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The Great Unexpected

Sharon Creech

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Prologue

My name is Naomi Deane and I grew up in Blackbird Tree, in the home of my guardians, Joe and Nula. Among the tales that Joe often told was that of a poor man who, while gambling, lost his house but won a donkey.

'A donkey?' the poor man wailed. 'What do I want with a donkey? I cannot even feed a donkey.'

'No matter,' replied the donkey. 'Reach into my left ear.'

The poor man, though shocked that the donkey could talk, nonetheless reached into the donkey's ear and pulled out a sack of feed.

'Well, now,' the poor man said. 'That's a mighty handy ear. I wish it had food for *me* as well.'

'Reach into my right ear,' the donkey said.

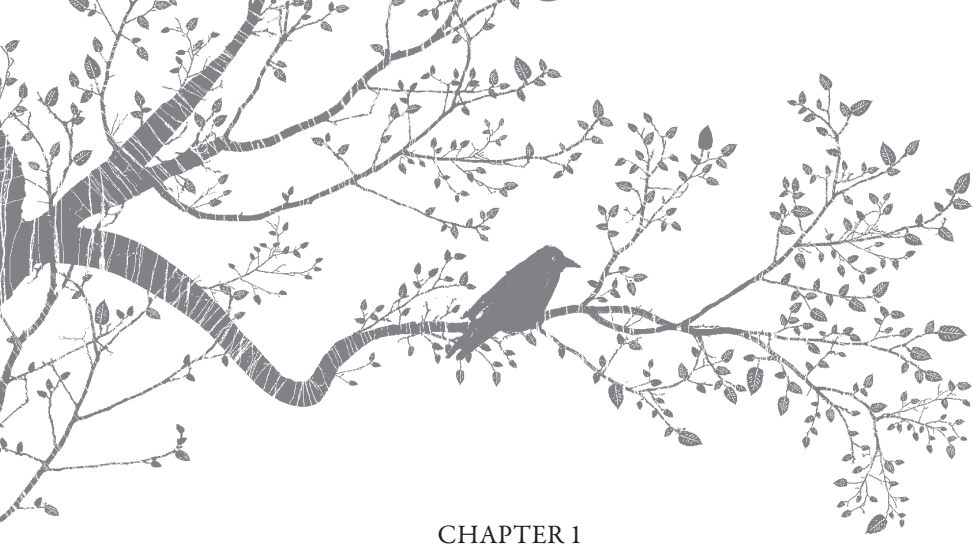
And so the poor man reached into the donkey's right ear and pulled out a loaf of bread, a pot of butter and a meat pie.

Joe went on like this, spinning out the tale, with the poor man pulling all sorts of things out of the donkey's ears: a stool, a pillow, a blanket and, finally, a sack of gold.

I loved this story, but I always listened uneasily, fearing that something bad would be pulled from the donkey's ears. Even after I'd heard the tale many times, always the same, I still worried that the poor man might reach in and pull out a snapping turtle or an alligator or something equally unpleasant and unexpected.

Sensing my fear, Joe would say, 'It's only a story, Naomi, only a story.' He suggested that I say to myself, '*I'm not in the story, I'm not in the story*' – a refrain I could repeat so that I would feel less anxious.

And so each time the poor man would reach into the donkey's ears, I would tell myself, I'm not in the story, I'm not in the story, but it didn't help because a story was only interesting if I *was* in the story.



CHAPTER 1

A Body Falls from a Tree

If you have never had a body fall out of a tree and knock you over, let me tell you what a surprising thing that is. I have had nuts fall out of a tree and conk my head. Leaves have fallen on me, and twigs, and a branch during a storm. Bird slop, of course, everyone gets that. But a body? That is not your usual thing dropping out of a tree.

It was a boy, close about my age, maybe twelve. Shaggy hair the colour of dry dirt. Brown trousers. Blue T-shirt. Bare feet. Dead.

Didn't recognize him. My first thought was, *Is this my fault? I bet this is my fault.* Nula once said I had a knack for being around when trouble happened. She had not been around other kids much, though, and maybe did not know that *most* kids had a knack for being around when trouble happened.

All I really wanted to do that hot day was go on down to

the creek and hunt for clay in the cool, cool water. I was wondering if maybe I could deal with the body later, when the body said, 'Am I dead?'

I looked at the body's head. Its eyes were closed.

'If you can talk, I guess you're not dead.'

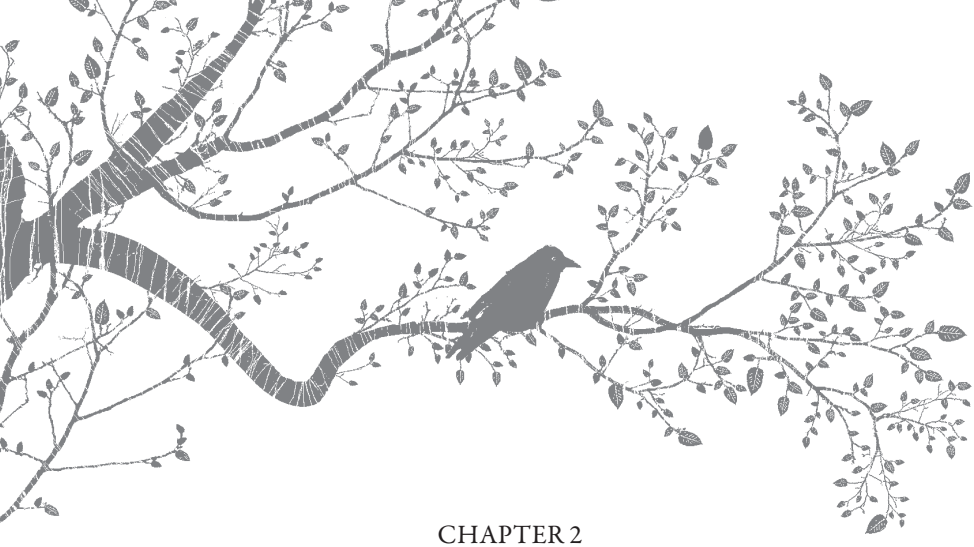
The body said, 'When I open my eyes, how will I know if I'm dead or alive?'

'Well, now, you'll see me, you'll see the meadow, you'll see the tree you fell out of, so I guess you'll know you're alive.'

'But how will I know if I'm here or if I'm at Rooks Orchard?'

'I don't know anything about any rook or any orchard, so I can pretty much guarantee that you are here and not there. Why don't you open your eyes and have a look around?'

And so the body opened his eyes and slowly sat up and looked all around – at the green meadow, at the cows in the distance, at the tree out of which he had fallen and at me, and then he yelled, 'Oh, *no*!' and fell back on the ground and his eyes closed and he was dead again.



CHAPTER 2

Lizzie

No sooner had the body lain back down than I heard the warbling voice of Lizzie Scatterding. Lizzie often felt it necessary to sing – in a high, trembly, warbly opera voice – when she was outdoors.

'Oh, lar-de-dar, the sky so blue' – definitely Lizzie – 'the fields so green, oh lar-de-dar—'

Lizzie was my friend, and usually I was glad to see her, but I was not sure how she was going to handle seeing the body at my feet. Sometimes Lizzie could be a little dramatic.

'Oh, lar-de-dar – Naomi! Is that you?' Lizzie stopped in the middle of the path and crossed her hands over her chest as if to keep her fragile heart steady. 'Naomi!' She ran towards me, her frizzy mane flopping here and there.

'Ack! Naomi, what is *that*? Is that a person?' She inched her way around to stand behind me so that I was her shield. 'Who

is it? Where'd it come from? Is it *dead*?' She clutched my shoulders. 'You didn't *kill* it, did you?'

'It fell out of this here tree. I thought it was dead, but then it spoke, and now it's gone off again.'

I kneeled beside the body and put my hand on its chest.

'Is it breathing?' Lizzie asked. 'Take its pulse.'

I held the body's wrist. 'I can feel something gurgling in there.'

'Oh, my! Then it's alive. Have you ever seen it before? What did it say when it spoke – before it went off again?'

'Something about a rook's orchard, or maybe a crook's orchard.'

Lizzie's foot nudged the body's foot. 'Maybe it was in an orchard place and a crook tried to kill it and so he hid in this tree and then when you came along—'

'Maybe we should stop calling it an *it*.'

Lizzie studied the body's face. 'Never saw it before, did you?'

'Nope.'

'Look in its pockets, Naomi. See if it has something with its name on it.'

'I'm not looking in any boy's pockets, dead or alive. You look.'

Just then the body grunted. Lizzie skittered sideways like a crab.

'Good gracious! I swear to bats! It's alive!' Her hands were protecting her fragile heart again. 'Naomi, the poor *thing*. What if his internal organs are hurt? What if he is bleeding to death and we don't even know it? Naomi, you must get help.'

The body spoke. 'Am I here – ?'

Lizzie squealed. 'It has a voice!'

Its eyes were still closed. 'Am I here – or am I there?'

I touched his hand. 'You're here.'

'How will I know that?'

'Well, ding it, you are *here*. If you weren't here, you wouldn't be hearing me, would you? You'd be somewhere else. But you're not somewhere else, *you are here*!'

'Naomi, you don't have to be so harsh. It's a poor body lying there maybe bleeding to death and it just wants to know if it is here.'

'Fine. Then you take over, Doctor Lizzie.'

'I *will*.' Lizzie carefully placed herself beside the body, folding her legs daintily beneath her. 'Now,' she cooed in the softest of tones, 'everything will be just fine. We need to find out who you are and if you are injured in your internal organs.'

The body was silent.

Lizzie inched a little closer. 'Boy, can you tell me your name?'

Silence.

'Boy, do you have family around here?'

Silence.

'Naomi, do you have a cool cloth?'

'No, Lizzie, I do not happen to have a cool cloth on my person.'

'I feel we should put a cool cloth on this poor injured boy's forehead.'

'I don't have a cool cloth.'

Lizzie sighed a deep, meaningful sigh. 'Oh, dear, oh, dear.' She lightly touched her fingers to the boy's head. Then she leaned closer and blew on his forehead.

'Whatever are you doing, Lizzie?'

'I am cooling the poor boy, Naomi. I am bringing comfort until such time as he can rouse himself.'

'What if he can't ever rouse himself? What if he dies for good?'

Lizzie tapped the boy's shoulder. 'Please do try your best to rouse yourself and tell us your name.'

Silence.

'I am pleading with you, boy.'

Silence.

'Naomi, you will have to get help. I will stay here with the poor, injured boy. Please go. Please hurry.'

But before I could move, the boy spoke again. 'Don't take the gold.'

'Naomi, he spoke! He told us not to take the gold!'

'I've got ears, Lizzie. I heard him.' I tapped his arm. 'What gold?'

Silence.

I scanned the area. No gold in sight. I asked louder: 'WHAT GOLD?'

'Naomi, please don't shout at the poor, injured boy.'

The boy opened his eyes.

'Naomi, he opened his eyes.'

'For heaven's sake, Lizzie, I'm not blind.'

'My name is Finn.'

'Naomi, he said his name! He said his name! His name is Finn!'

'There isn't any gold,' he said.

'Naomi, he said—'

'I know, I know what he said. There isn't any gold. There isn't any silver, either. There aren't any emeralds or rubies or diamonds—'

'He didn't say any of that, Naomi. He only said about the gold.'

'No gold,' the boy repeated.

'See?' Lizzie said. 'No gold.'