

DEAD AIR

by Greg Rhyno

CHAPTER 3

Eden Mills Writers' Festival

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When Jake finally nodded off that evening, Holly opened a bottle of Cabernet Franc and sat at the kitchen table. The walkie-talkie rested on the surface and she gave it a little spin. When it stopped, she picked it up and snapped it back on. The light on top swelled like a bead of blood, but as she tried the channels they had listened to that day, she found only dead air. When she clicked onto channel five, though, the speaker garbled into sudden conversation.

"Do you hear that?" a man asked.

Again, Holly was struck by the familiarity of the voice. Was it her neighbour across the street? Or the guy she paid to shovel the driveway?

"Probably just some animal."

The second voice belonged to a woman.

"How would you know what an animal sounds like?"

But that first voice—it was someone close to her. Someone she'd known forever. Holly snapped her fingers.

Of course. It was her brother. It was Simon. But who was he talking to?

"I'll show you what an animal sounds like."

Holly's thumb hovered over the talk button. She wanted to surprise her brother, let him know she was out there, but what if she was hearing something he didn't want to be heard? She thought about the grunting couple from channel three. Almost involuntarily, her fingers switched off the device.

Were you just using Sadie's walkie-talkie? she texted Simon.

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She stared at the plastic device. I think so.

Jake was already in the schoolyard when Holly came to pick him up that afternoon. As she crossed at the crosswalk, she recognized his bright blue jacket and Pokémon toque. He was sitting on a little girl's chest and washing her face with handfuls of snow.

"Jacob!"

Holly started running and immediately slipped and landed hard on the icy pavement. She pushed herself up into a standing position and hobbled toward her boy.

"Jacob!" she called again, her voice lost in the shrieks and noise of the playground.

The recess supervisor dropped her clipboard and broke into a run toward the brawling children.

At home, Holly opened a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon even before she took off her winter coat. She found the biggest wine glass in the cupboard and filled it full. She hadn't said anything to Jake yet. Her rage was at a rolling boil. She worried it might scald her child. Permanently disfigure him.

As Jake took off his coat and boots, she drank a third of the glass in one gulp. Her eyes watered, and threatened to coax real tears from a deeper reservoir. She knew if she started, she might not stop. Her son had already seen her cry like that. Hiccupping sobs. It frightened both of them.

"Why?" she finally asked him.

"She was saying things." Jake pulled the hat from his head and his hair crackled with static electricity.

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Holly swallowed another burning mouthful. “What things? What did that little girl say to you that made you think you could hurt her like that?”

“Things about Dad.”

Holly sighed. “Jake, I’m sorry. The world hasn’t been very fair to you lately, but you need to be better than this.”

“Why?” he collapsed into a chair at the kitchen table. He picked up the orange walkie-talkie. “Nobody else has to be better. Why is it just me?”

“Because people are watching us. People want to know if I’m a good mom.”

Jake turned the device over in his hands. “But sometimes you’re not a good mom.”

“What?” Holly put her glass down. “What do you mean by that?”

Jake clicked the walkie-talkie switch on and off. “You’re always getting mad or sad or sleepy.”

“Please don’t say that, Jake. I know—”

“But it’s true!” His voice was louder now, indignant. He kept clicking the walkie-talkie switch on and off, on and off.

“Sometimes you say bad words! And sometimes you fall asleep after supper and I have to wake you up.”

“Jake, please—”

“And once you broke that glass and you didn’t even clean it up and I cut my foot.”

In a fluid movement, Holly stepped to the boy and covered his mouth with her hand.

“Don’t. Don’t say those things. Someone might hear us.”

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Jake's eyes were wide circles, coloured with anger and surprise. Holly took her hand away, her face flushed with the shame of what she had done.

"Who could hear us?" Jake asked.

Holly didn't say anything. Her eyes glanced at the walkie-talkie. It lay on the table, its screen grey, its light black and lifeless.

"It's not even on."

"Do you know what would happen if people heard you talk like that?" She crouched down in front of him and the pain in her tailbone made her dizzy. "They'd take you away from me. You'd never see me again."

He was quiet for a moment. "Like Dad?"

"Yes"—she steadied herself against the boy's shoulder—"like Dad. Is that what you want?"

His mouth made a barely audible, "No."