

CHAPTER 1

I saw her first, a pale skinny girl lying on a flat rock below the rapids. She was leaning out over the edge, reaching down into a deep pool of still water. Swirls of river foam clung to the bottom of her rolled-up sleeves and the floating ends of her long red hair. She was watching something in the dark river-shadows.

Rob and Euan pulled up beside me by the gap in the trees, their bike tyres skidding on the muddy track.

'What you looking at, Callum?' said Rob.

'Someone's down there,' I said, 'a girl.'

Euan pushed away a pine branch to get a better view down to the river. 'Who is it?'

'Dunno,' I said. 'She's nuts though. It must be freezing in there.' I looked up and down the river to see if she was with

CHAPTER 1

anyone, but there was no one. She was on her own.

The river was fast and swollen from the heavy rains. It came down from the loch in the high glen above us. Late March snow still clung to the mountain gullies. The loch and river were cold as ice.

'She's on our river,' scowled Rob.

The girl slipped her arm in deeper. Water crept over her sleeve and up to her shoulder.

'What's she doing?' I said.

Euan dropped his bike onto the ground. 'Fishing, that's what.'

The girl plunged forwards in a blur of spray. When she sat back up, she was clutching a massive brown trout. It flapped and thrashed in her wet hands. She flicked her hair back over her head, and for the first time we could clearly see her face.

'I know her,' said Rob.

I turned to look at him. His face was dark and grim.

'Who is she?' I said.

But Rob was already off his bike and marching down the riverbank towards her.

'Rob,' I called.

The girl looked up and saw us, and tried to hide the fish in her arms. Euan and I ran down to the water's edge

Sky Hawk

following Rob. A narrow channel of fast water ran between us and the girl.

Rob yelled across at her. 'Iona McNair!'

The girl scrambled to her feet.

Rob leapt across to the flat rock and grabbed her arm. 'You're a thief, Iona McNair, just like your ma.'

The girl struggled to hold the slippery fish. 'I'm not stealing,' she cried.

Rob pulled the fish off her and jumped back onto the riverbank. 'Then what d'you call this?' He held the fish up high. 'This is Callum's river and you're stealing.'

They all looked at me now.

'What about it, Callum?' said Rob. 'What's the punishment for fishing on your farm without a permit?'

I opened my mouth but no words came out.

'I don't need a permit,' spat Iona, 'I didn't use a rod.'

'You're a thief,' shouted Rob. 'And we don't want you here.'

I looked at Iona and she narrowed her eyes at me.

Rob dropped the thrashing fish on the ground and picked up a plastic bag next to Iona's coat on the riverbank.

'What else have you got in here?'

'Leave it, it's mine,' yelled Iona.

Rob tipped out a pair of old trainers and a tatty notebook.

Sky Hawk

Rob picked up the trout. It was dead. Its body had lost its bright sheen and its eyes were dull and glassy. He turned to me and shoved it in my deep coat pocket. 'It's your river, so it's your fish.'

'I don't want it,' I said.

But Rob just scowled at me and marched up to the bikes.

'She's left her coat and trainers,' I said to Euan.

'Best leave them,' he said, following Rob. 'She'll find them on her way back.'

Euan cycled off behind Rob, and I watched them skid and bump down the muddy track.

I pulled my hood up, clipped my cycle helmet over the top and stuffed my hands into my gloves. I looked up and down the far riverbank to see if I could catch a glimpse of the girl. I spotted her higher up the valley, a small figure in the distance heading up towards the loch. A cold wind was blowing through the trees. Rain was coming, I could feel it. I pushed off and followed Rob and Euan down the steep track alongside the river, but all the time I couldn't help thinking we should wait for her.

Euan and Rob were waiting for me by the old quarry.

Euan held open the gate to the mineral track that led down to the village in the valley below. 'You coming with us?' he said.

CHAPTER 2

I shook my head. 'I'll go home across the fields from here. It's quicker.'

I watched them disappear down the mineral track towards the dull orange glow of streetlights in the distance. Daylight was fading fast. It would be dark soon.

Rain started to fall, cold and sharp, like needles of ice. I looked back hoping to see Iona, but I couldn't see her anywhere. She had no coat or shoes, and her clothes were soaked from the river. She would freeze if she stayed up here. People died in these mountains every year, caught out by the weather, unprepared.

I turned my bike and headed back the way I'd come to look for her. Streams of water ran through the deep ruts. I picked up Iona's coat and trainers on the way and stopped at the top of the track to get my breath back. The steep wooded shores of the loch were hidden by the rain. Iona could be anywhere.

I followed the path around to the far side of the loch, calling her name. The clouds were low and heavy. Dark waves slapped against the rocks.

'Iona,' I shouted, but my voice was carried off by the wind.

Maybe I had passed her. Maybe she was already on her way back to the village. I couldn't stay up here all night.

I turned my bike round to head home but my tyre

Sky Hawk

side-slipped on a rock. I glanced down to see a bare footprint in the mud beside it. Rain had already puddled in the heel and toes.

Iona had come this way.

I jumped off my bike and followed the footprints. It wasn't far along the track before they disappeared. I guessed Iona had left the path and entered the woodland. Moss and pine needles covered the floor.

'Iona,' I called. 'I've got your coat.'

I walked further into the wood. It was dark under the cover of trees, almost too dark to see. I knew Mum and Dad would be wondering where I was.

'Iona,' I called again. But there was no answer.

I turned to go back to my bike, and jumped. Iona stood right in front of me. She had an oversize jumper on, jogging bottoms and a woolly hat that came down over her ears. But her feet were still bare and she shivered with cold.

'I've got your coat and trainers,' I said. I shoved them in her hands. 'Put them on and go home. It'll be dark soon.' I looked around but couldn't see where she'd got her dry clothes from.

Iona pulled her coat on, sat down on a rock and pushed her feet into her trainers. Her hands were shaking and her fingers were blue. She fumbled uselessly with the laces.

CHAPTER 4

I set off over the back of the hill to the loch in the next valley.

Iona was waiting for me.

'You came then,' she said.

We were standing at the spot where I'd followed her footprints into the wood.

I nodded. 'So what's the secret?'

'You'll find out,' said Iona.

'It'd better be good,' I said.

She turned and headed into the wood.

The pines gave way to oak and birch and wild cherry. I thought I knew every inch of this farm. I'd grown up here. I'd built dens with Rob and Euan all over it. But this path through the trees looked different.

Iona stopped at the edge of a clearing. A ring of large boulders lay in a wide circle in the sunlit space. I leaned against one and pulled some damp moss with my fingers. The pale stone underneath was bright in the spring sunshine. I could imagine this was once a meeting place for the ancient Scottish Warrior Kings.

Iona put her finger to her lips for me to be quiet. 'Fairy stones,' she whispered.

'Fairy stones!' I said. 'You've brought me all this way just to see fairy stones?'

Sky Hawk

Iona giggled. 'Shh! Don't you believe in fairies, Callum?'
I scowled at her. 'I'm going home.'

Iona leaned against the trunk of a tree. It looked as if she was trying not to laugh. She tapped her fingers on the bark. 'Can you climb?' she asked.

I looked up into the tree. It was an old oak that had been struck by lightning some years before. The split trunk looked like a jagged scar against the sky. The nearest branches were beyond arms' reach and the bark was damp and fringed with moss.

'Climb that?' I snapped. 'Course I can.'

Iona kicked off her trainers and slid her fingers and toes into the tiny cracks in the bark. In no time, she had pulled herself up into the fork of branches above.

'Well, are you coming?'

I tried to grip the tree trunk, tried to wedge my feet onto the small ridges of bark, but each time my feet and hands slid. I looked up, but Iona had disappeared further up the tree.

'Iona!' I called. The end of a thick knotted rope fell by my feet. I hauled myself up into the tree and climbed higher to a natural platform of spreading branches. It was like a hidden fortress. You couldn't see it from the ground. Iona had made seats from old crates and there were tins and boxes and an old hurricane lamp balanced in the tree. From

there, I could see across the narrow waters of the loch to the mountains and the wide blue sky beyond.

'It's brilliant,' I said, 'brilliant.'

'Shh, you've got to be quiet,' she said. She pulled a canvas bag out from the hollow trunk and spilled out a blanket, an old leather case, and a packet of biscuits.

'I promise I won't tell anyone about this,' I whispered.

She threw me a biscuit and stifled a laugh. 'This isn't the secret, dummy. It's better than this, a million times better.'

I stuffed the biscuit in my mouth. 'What is it then?'

She pointed to a cluster of Scots pine-trees on the island not far from the shore. The tall bare trunks were crowned by a spread of branches, dense with green pine needles. From our platform of crates, we were level with the flattened tree tops.

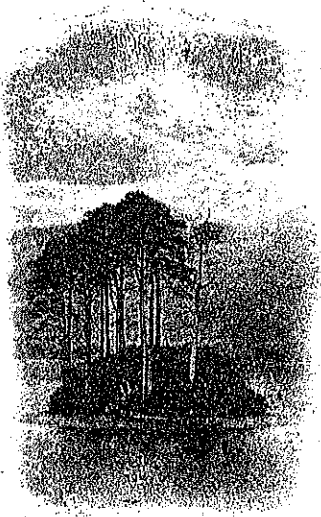
'What's so special?' I said.

'Open your eyes, Callum,' said Iona. 'Look!'

I still couldn't see what she was pointing at. A pile of sticks lay on the topmost branches, like driftwood stacked on a high tide.

But something was moving inside. Something was pulling the sticks into place. It wasn't just a random heap of twigs and branches. Something was building it.

And then I saw it.



CHAPTER 5

At first all I could see was the head of a bird above the pile of sticks, a creamy head with a brown stripe across the eye. Then the rest of the bird appeared. It was huge, with dark brown wings and a white belly. There was something prehistoric about it, like a beast of a lost world, too big for this landscape.

'Osprey,' I whispered. I could hardly believe it. 'We've got osprey here, on our farm.'

'You won't tell a soul?' said Iona.

'Course not,' I said. I'd seen photos of ospreys before, and I'd seen the nesting tree of two ospreys at the nearby nature reserve when I'd helped Dad put up fencing and bird hides. The nesting tree at the reserve had razor wire and surveillance cameras to stop people stealing the eggs.

Sky Hawk

'They're rare, they are,' I said. 'They're protected.'

'I knew I could trust you,' said Iona. She emptied out the biscuit packet. There was only one left. She broke it in two and gave me the bigger half.

'I've watched him build that nest from scratch,' said Iona.

'What makes you think it's a "he"?' I said.

Iona pulled out a bird book from the leather case and showed me the picture. 'Female ones have got more brown markings on the chest,' she said. 'And he keeps circling up high in the sky and calling. He's looking for a mate. I've been watching him all week.'

'Do you live up here then?' I said.

Iona laughed and shook her head. 'No, I'd like to, though. I'm staying with my grandad, for now.'

'What about your ma?' I said. 'Is she here too?'

Iona frowned. 'Ma's working.' She picked pine needles from her jumper and flicked them in the air. 'She's a dancer, you know,' said Iona. 'My ma, she's a dancer.' She pulled out a small gold locket on a chain from under her shirt and opened it. 'That's her.'

On one side was a picture of Iona and on the other, a picture of a young woman's face. She had flaming red hair and dark eyes like Iona's.

'She's in all the big shows in London,' said Iona. 'She's

CHAPTER 6

weightless, carried up, up, up into the bright blue sky. Up, above the mountains. Up, into the fast winds. Up, up, up into the splintered rays of sun.

'I can see her,' cried Iona.

I opened my eyes and squinted into the sunlight. There was a silhouette of a bird in the distance, like the shape small children draw seagulls. But it wasn't a seagull. It was bigger than that, much bigger.

The bird flew closer and banked in the air, showing the white of its belly and barred wing and tail feathers. I looked through the binoculars.

'It's definitely an osprey,' I said.

'Of course it is,' said Iona. 'Come on, let's get a closer look.'

We ran down the hillside towards the wooded shores of the loch.

Iona was already darting through the trees ahead of me. When I pulled myself up into the oak tree, Iona was sitting on the wooden crates, her eyes shining. 'Look, he's spotted her,' she said.

I looked across at the eyrie. The male was perched on the top, his wings held slightly open showing the white underneath. He suddenly lifted up into the sky carrying a fish. Up he flew, higher and higher. We could hear his high

Sky Hawk

pitched cry, 'Kee . . . kee . . . kee.' Then he swooped and dived, plummeting downwards, the fish held in his talons. He was a blur against the wooded hillside, faster and faster towards the water, until he pulled out of his dive and flew high in the air once more. The female soared in circles above, watching.

'He's sky-dancing,' said Iona with a grin. 'He's trying to impress her.'

The male did his spectacular high dive trick again, but this time pulled up from his dive and flew to the eyrie with the fish.

We watched the female circle lower and lower until she landed on a tree next to him. She clung on to a branch as it swayed beneath her, inspecting the eyrie. I held my breath.

But she suddenly flapped her wings and flew off over the trees behind us and was gone.

'She's not impressed,' I said.

I focused my binoculars on the male osprey. I almost laughed. If a bird could look totally let down, he did then. The feathers on his head were all ruffled and he kept looking at his fish as if it was all the fish's fault.

'Here she comes again,' whispered Iona.

The female swooped in, low and wide, and landed right on the eyrie. She paced around the edge and pulled a few

CHAPTER 6

sticks into place as though it wasn't quite to her liking. Then she pulled the fish away from the male and started tearing off chunks of flesh.

Iona leaned into me and nudged me. 'Look, she likes him.'

I nodded, and for some reason felt my face burn bright red.

CHAPTER 7

and tapped her watch as I sat down next to Rob and Euan.

'What happened to you on Friday?' whispered Euan. 'You didn't get home for hours after we left you. Mum made me tell her where we'd been.'

It seemed ages ago, although it was only three days.

'I was checking on sheep,' I lied.

'You'll never guess who's in our class,' said Rob. His face was dark, like thunder. He nodded to the tables at the front of the class. 'It's her.'

At that moment Iona turned round. It was as if she could feel us looking at her. She looked strangely out of place in the classroom, in her grey uniform and blue fleece. Her hair was tied in a ponytail, but thick clumps and tangles stuck out at the back. She smiled at me, but I looked away.

'Nutter,' said Rob.

Our teacher introduced Iona, but most of the class knew of her. At least they knew her grandad, and that was enough to set some of the girls off giggling.

At lunch-break I saw Iona alone. She sat on the far wall of the playground staring out over the fields. I joined a group from my class trading cards.

'She forgot her lunch,' said Ruth. 'She won't tell the teachers though.'

'Look at the state of her,' said Sarah. 'I don't see why *she*

Sky Hawk

should be allowed to wear trainers when no one else can.'

Ruth spread her cards out on the table. 'I heard her ma's locked up in a mental home.'

Sarah picked a card and swapped it for one of hers. 'Mum said to have nothing to do with her.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Cos she's a nutter,' said Rob. 'You've seen that yourself.'

I saved a sandwich for Iona, but didn't get a chance to give it to her until afternoon class. The teacher let Iona pick someone to work with in the library for our class project on recycling, and she picked me.

'Thanks,' said Iona. She wolfed the sandwich down and wiped the crumbs from her chin.

We sat in the corner of the library and spread out books in front of us.

No one else was in there. The sun poured through the big side windows.

'Look at this book,' said Iona.

She sat down next to me and opened a large book on Scottish wildlife and started flicking through the pages. 'You've got a pine-marten den on your farm, did you know?'

I leaned across to look at the picture of the creature sitting in the branch of a tree. Its long brown body looked part-cat, part-weasel. I'd only caught a glimpse of a pine-

CHAPTER 7

marten once before, just its face peering above an old fallen trunk. It had turned and disappeared into the undergrowth showing a last view of its bushy tail. I flicked over to another page. Iona seemed to know more about my farm than I did.

'I've seen golden eagles before,' I said.

'Really?' said Iona. 'I've never seen one of them.'

'Last year, I saw them. On the other side of the hill,' I said. 'We'll look for them.'

Iona smiled. 'I'd like that.'

I leaned across Iona to point to a photo of red deer, 'And we've got those . . .'

'Callum!'

I jumped. I hadn't heard the library door open. Rob was standing behind us, staring at me. I leapt to my feet.

'Time to pack up,' said Rob. He scowled at Iona.

Iona went back to flicking through her book.

I ignored her and started putting books away on the shelves.

'Come on,' said Rob, 'it's home time. Let her do the rest.'

I followed Rob out through the door and into the playground. We pulled our bikes from the rack and pushed them out past the mums and dads waiting at the school gates. Mad Old McNair was standing on the other side of the road, a stooped figure in a long brown coat. As we

Sky Hawk

cycled past, I noticed striped pyjamas flap against his bare legs.

'Race you,' said Rob.

I pedalled like mad behind Rob up the hill out of the village. When we got to the top of the hill, I glanced back down the road. The village lay sprawled out like a map beneath us, the bright green of the playing field dotted with a few sheep, the village hall and the shop and the stone cottages.

The school playground had emptied, and cars were winding their way along the narrow roads. A stooped figure shuffled slowly along the south road out of the village. A smaller figure behind him turned to look up and waved.

'Come on,' said Rob. 'What are you waiting for?'

I didn't wave back.

Instead, I turned my bike down the steep descent of Shepherd's Lane, my wheels following in Rob's tyre tracks all the way.

CHAPTER 8

Rob stuffed his homework in his bag and we hurried up the ramp to the classroom. I was at the door when Iona called me back.

'What does she want?' Rob frowned.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'I'll catch you up.' I turned to Iona. 'You coming to the loch after school?' she asked.

'I can't,' I said. 'It's Rob's birthday.'

'Doesn't matter.' She smiled and passed me a large envelope. 'I did this for you last night.'

I could see Rob watching us from the window.

'Thanks, Iona,' I mumbled. I stuffed it in my bag.

'Aren't you going to look inside?' she said.

'Later,' I said. 'Come on, we're late.'

I walked to the back of the room and slung my bag on the table with Rob and Euan. The teacher wasn't in the class yet, so I took my homework out of my bag and walked up through the aisle between the tables to place it on the teacher's desk.

When I got back to my chair, Euan and Rob were crowded over my bag. They'd pulled out the envelope and opened it and were looking at a painting on a piece of paper.

'Very romantic,' said Euan with a grin.

I looked at the paper. Iona had painted two ospreys. One was sitting in the nest and the other was flying, wings

Sky Hawk

outspread, bringing a fish. She had signed it: 'To Callum, from Iona. xxx.'

'She's always watching you,' said Rob. 'I reckon she fancies you!'

'Does not,' I mumbled.

'Look at all these kisses,' said Rob.

I wished he'd just shut up. Iona was looking at us now.

'Her grandad came down to the shop in his night-shirt last week,' said Euan. 'Night-shirt and slippers, that's all he had on.'

Rob looked across my shoulder to where Iona was sitting.

'Right nutters, the pair of them,' he said. 'Should be banged up in a mental home.' He held up the picture in full view. The rest of the class was listening now. Some of the girls laughed. Rob's voice was crystal sharp, loud and clear. 'Right nutters. What d'you reckon, Callum?'

I could see Iona watching me from under her fringe of red hair. I could feel her eyes burning into me.

The whole class was watching.

I looked down at my shoes, where mud had hardened into a thick brown shell. 'Yeah, right pair of nutters,' I said.

Sky Hawk

'I heard that,' shouted Euan. 'I didn't get the junior fly fishing cup for nothing, you know!'

'Catch . . . ' yelled Rob and he threw Euan a chocolate bar. ' . . . it might be the only thing you do catch today.'

'Ta,' Euan muttered. 'You just wait, Rob,' he said. 'Fly fishing is pure skill, none of your computer techno stuff. You just wait.'

I sat down in the soft grass and rubbed my bruised legs. Rob passed me some chocolate and we watched the playback on the action-cam. I thought I'd been in control for some of the death drop, but all I could see was me tumbling over and over.

Rob laughed. 'It's mind over matter. You and the bike, you *are* the bike.'

I looked at my bike, at the deep scratches in the paintwork and bent wheel spokes. 'I know what you mean,' I groaned.

The sun was so hot, more like a summer's day than one in May. The rest of the half term holiday stretched ahead of us. I lay back, closed my eyes and let the chocolate slowly melt in my mouth.

It was over a month ago I'd sat with Iona on the heather hillside and seen the osprey return. I hadn't seen much of Iona since then. I think she was avoiding me. I wanted to say sorry about the mean things I'd said about her and her

CHAPTER 9

grandad, but there was never a good time. I often went to the loch to watch the ospreys. I'd even seen the male osprey catch a fish in his talons right out of the loch, but it just wasn't the same without Iona to share it with.

'I'VE GOT ONE,' shouted Euan.

Rob and I scrambled down the bank.

Euan was thigh deep in water, his rod arched downstream. 'Here it comes,' he said. The end of the rod bowed and bent against the fighting strain of the fish. A silvery underbelly flashed as the fish leapt from the water's surface, twisting in the air before plunging back under water.

'I've got you, I've got you!' Euan reeled the fish onto the stony bank. 'Rainbow trout,' said Euan with a grin. 'Not a bad size.'

We watched the fish gulp and thrash on the ground at our feet. Its smooth scales glittered a million colours in the bright sunshine. The scarlet gills desperately flapped the air. I wanted to pick it up and let it slide back into the cool river water. I wanted to watch it skim away under the bright surface. But Euan hit it over the head with a stick.

'CALLUMI'

We'd been so engrossed looking at the fish that we hadn't seen Iona on the bank above us. Her face was red from running.

Sky Hawk

mountain bikes. I pulled it up, moulding my hands round the handlebars.

'Oi, Callum!' Rob yelled. 'Leave my bike alone.'

I glanced at him over my shoulder.

'Not my bike,' Rob yelled. 'Not my bike.'

I pushed off, slipping smoothly through the gears. The frame absorbed the stones and ruts, and the tyres gripped the thick mud. I flew down the track after Iona.

'I'll kill you, Callum. I'll bloody kill you.' But Rob's voice was soon drowned in the rush of river under the bridge.

I caught up with Iona at the bottom of the mineral track. We cycled up past the old quarries following the riverbank. My legs ached and my lungs burned.

'Come on,' said Iona.

I pushed Rob's bike up to the top of the track.

'There,' Iona shouted, when we reached the edge of the loch.

I looked across the dark waters to the island.

My mouth went dry.

I felt sick.

Hanging below one of the branches of the nest tree was the osprey, slowly turning as if held by invisible thread. She spun in mid-air, upside-down, like a gruesome ballet dancer. Feet skyward, wings pointing to the ground.

CHAPTER 10

'Fishing line,' said Iona. 'I reckon she's tangled in fishing line.'

There was no movement from the osprey. Her body hung slack and limp. I clapped my hands, once, twice. It echoed across the loch.

The osprey jerked upwards. Her wings uselessly beat the air, and she swung like a pendulum beneath her eyrie, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

Her alarm cry rang out, 'Kee . . . kee . . . kee . . .'

'She'll die,' said Iona. 'She'll die like that.'

I looked at the tree. 'We can't climb that. It's way too high,' I said. 'It must be over a hundred feet tall.'

'You've got some ropes on the farm,' said Iona.

I looked at her. Her face was set.

'You need the proper tree climbing stuff,' I said. 'Harnesses and abseil ropes and things.'

Iona put her hands on her hips. 'We can't just let her die.'

'I know,' I said. I squinted into the sun. The osprey was still again. 'We'll have to get help.'

'And tell someone our secret?' said Iona. She was furious. 'Never.'

'We've got no choice,' I said.

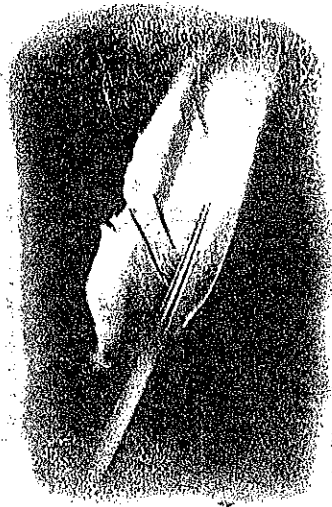
'You promised, Callum,' she said. 'If you don't go up there, I will.'

Sky Hawk

I kicked the ground. 'And what if we do get her down? She's bound to be injured. What then? You'll know what to do, will you?'

Iona pressed her palms into her eyes. 'We can't let her die,' she sobbed.

'Come on,' I said. I picked Rob's bike up and pushed off down the track. 'We can't do this on our own.'



CHAPTER 12

Nothing prepared me for seeing her right in front of me. It was as if the lochs and the mountains and the sky were folded deep inside her, as if she was a small piece of this vast landscape and none of it could exist without her.

'Grab some more gloves, Callum,' Hamish said. 'I'll need a hand here.'

I pulled the thick leather gloves up to my sleeves and wrapped my hands around the osprey's folded wings. I thought she'd be really heavy, but she was light, much lighter than I expected, as if she was made out of air itself. My hands were shaking. I didn't want to hurt her and I didn't want to be on the sharp end of her talons.

'She's got three eggs up there,' said Hamish. 'Take a look while I set this stuff up.'

CHAPTER 12

Iona showed me the picture on Hamish's phone. There were three creamy white eggs with chocolatey brown smudges in a bed of soft grass.

'She's been off the nest a while now,' said Hamish. 'We'd better work fast or the chicks inside might die.'

Hamish weighed the osprey in another sling with weighing scales. 'Good weight,' Hamish nodded. 'Let's check her over.'

He gently spread out each wing. The feathers weren't just plain brown, but all the colours from dark furrowed fields to pale golden wheat. When Hamish stretched them out, her wingspan was as long as me.

'Look at those talons,' said Dad. 'They could do some damage.'

'She's a fish-killing machine all right,' said Hamish. 'See here, her foot has ridges and spiky scales to hold on to slippery fish.'

I had to touch her talons. I took my gloves off and felt the smooth perfect curve of each talon and the needle-sharp tip.

'Careful,' said Hamish. 'Once she's got you, she won't let go.'

'She's beautiful, isn't she?' said Iona.

I nodded. But it was the osprey's eyes that fascinated me.

Sky Hawk

They were sunflower yellow, bright and intense. When she fixed me with her eyes it was as if she was looking right into me, as if I couldn't hide anything from her.

'I reckon we got to her just in time,' said Hamish. 'She's got Iona to thank for that. That fishing line has cut right into her foot.'

I helped to cut the long strands of fishing line. The osprey flinched as Hamish gently pulled them from her foot. The line had cut through the skin and deep into the flesh and we could see shiny whiteness inside.

'She's lucky,' said Hamish. 'That's her tendon in there. If the line had cut the tendon, she wouldn't be able to grasp with her foot. She'd never be able to fish again.'

'Will we need to keep her in for a few days,' asked Dad, 'till it heals?'

Hamish shook his head. 'I'll spray it with some antiseptic. It should heal OK,' he said. 'These birds don't do so well in captivity, and anyway, her mate will feed her while she sits on her eggs.'

'So can we let her go now?' asked Iona.

'Soon,' said Hamish. 'Open that little black case will you, Iona.'

Iona undid the plastic catches and opened the lid. Inside was a small rectangular black box, a long thin

CHAPTER 12

wire, and small harness that looked as if it would fit a toy bear.

'It's a satellite transmitter,' Hamish said. 'Latest technology. We strap it to her back, a bit like a mini rucksack. It tells us her position. You know, where she is in the world. We can tell how high she's flying and how fast. We can follow her journey all the way to Africa and back.'

'Brilliant,' I said.

'Isn't it a bit heavy?' frowned Iona.

'No. Here, feel it.'

Hamish handed it to Iona. She held it in her palm and curled her fingers around it.

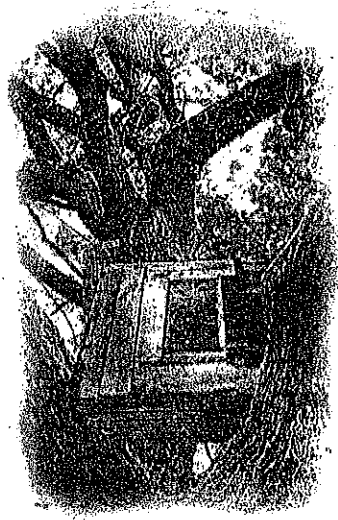
'But how can we find out where she's been,' I asked.

'I'll give you a special code,' he said. 'You put it into your computer and it plots her journey on Google Earth. You might even be able to see which tree she roosts in.'

'So we can actually see her fly?' asked Iona.

'No,' said Hamish. 'Google Earth has satellite pictures of the Earth that were taken before now, but you can see the sort of places she flies over.'

The osprey jabbed at the leather gloves with her beak while Hamish tied the straps of the transmitter. 'No-one must find out about this nest,' said Hamish. 'Not a soul. News like this has the nasty habit of finding the wrong ears.'



CHAPTER 13

I returned Rob's bike the next morning.
'I've cleaned your bike,' I said.

Rob was down in the village with Euan and some boys from school. They were kicking a ball about on the rough stony ground below the play park.

Rob glanced down at his bike. 'It's not just some cheap bike, that. Dad nearly killed me when I didn't come home with it last night.'

'I know,' I said. 'I'm sorry.'

'What did *she* want, anyway?' said Rob.

'Who, Iona?' I said. I shrugged my shoulders. 'It was nothing.'

'We waited for ages but you never came back,' said Rob. 'Where d'you go? What were you doing?'

Sky Hawk

'It wasn't anything,' I said irritably. 'Just drop it OK?'

'Hey, Callum,' shouted Euan, 'we need a goalie, are you playing?'

Euan kicked the ball to me but I let it roll past and into a ditch.

'Or maybe you want to get back to your girlfriend?' said Rob.

I grabbed him by his coat. 'Shut up, Rob,' I yelled.

Our faces were inches apart.

'She's a nutter,' said Rob. 'You said so yourself.'

Something inside me snapped.

I punched him, right in the face.

Rob scrambled up and launched at me. We sprawled over his bike, punching and kicking. I felt the crack of his bike computer splitting open beneath my back. Then Euan was there, pulling Rob away before the other boys could crowd around us.

'Go, Callum,' Euan said. He held Rob by the arm. 'Just go.'

Rob and I glared at each other. I couldn't tell if it was hurt or hate in his eyes, but I didn't care. I turned and walked up the road out of the village and didn't look back.

* * *

Sky Hawk

'Mrs Wicklow was cleaning out the art room and dropped them round for my birthday,' she said.

'I didn't know it was your birthday,' I said.

'Well, it's next week,' said Iona. 'But I couldn't wait to use the paints.'

Iona found a new sheet of paper and started sketching.

I glanced at the picture. I thought she'd do one of the chick's first flight, but instead she was drawing Iris on a tree on the other side of the loch.

'Hamish thinks she'll set off to Africa soon,' said Iona.

I looked out across the loch where Iris sat in a tall dead tree. She was bright against the dark woodland.

'Iris always sits on that far tree now, doesn't she?' I said.

'I think she looks sad,' said Iona.

'She's a bird,' I said. 'How can she look sad?'

Iona shrugged her shoulders and kept working at her picture. 'She does to me,' said Iona. 'She knows she can't stay however much she wants to. She can't help it. She'll leave her chick and go.'

I laughed. 'She won't even think about it.'

Iona crumpled up her picture and flung it across the floor. She stormed down the hatch and away from the tree-house.

'Iona,' I called, but she had already disappeared into the trees.

CHAPTER 15

I caught up with her by the river. She was sitting on a stone, hunched over, digging her penknife into something in her hand.

'She'll be back, Iona,' I said.

Iona turned round. Tears streaked down her cheeks. 'Will she?'

The gold locket lay open in her palm. Deep scratches were cut into the photo of her mother's face.

I sat down close beside her. 'Your ma will come back for you, Iona,' I said.

Iona snapped the locket shut and wiped the tears from her face. 'No,' she said. She shook her head. 'She's never coming back, for me.'

Sky Hawk

Graham shoved the cake in his mouth and winked at Iona.

Mum poured cups of tea and put some more cakes on the table. 'It's a shame your grandad couldn't come round as well.'

Iona nodded, prodding at the sticky crumbs on her plate with a finger. 'He had things to do.'

I knew she didn't want Mum asking questions. 'Why don't you try out your new boots?' I said.

'Can I?' said Iona.

'Go on,' smiled Dad. 'Why don't you and Callum go on up the hill?'

I went to get my boots and followed Iona out into the yard. She was bouncing up and down on the spot, waiting for me.

'You don't really like them do you?' I said. 'They're pink!'

Iona walked on, balancing on hardened ridges of mud. 'Pink's my favourite colour.'

I frowned at her. 'You never said.'

She laughed. 'You never asked.'

I gave her a shove into a sticky mud puddle and ran ahead.

'Hey, watch it,' she shouted. 'I don't want them getting dirty.'

We ran up the steepest part of the hill to the stone wall

CHAPTER 16

running along the top edge of the field. The sun was hot on our backs and we were out of breath when we reached the wall. Sheep were scattered across the ridge dividing our farm from the valley beyond with the loch and the ospreys.

Iona licked her finger and tried to rub mud off the front of one boot. 'I wish it wasn't school next week,' she said.

'Me too,' I said. It would feel different back at school, I knew it would.

'It's only the middle of August,' said Iona. 'When I was in London, the schools didn't go back until September.'

I picked up small stones and tried flinging them as far as I could down the hill. 'That's Scotland for you,' I said.

'You know what we should do before we go back to school?' said Iona.

'What?' I turned to look at her. She had a huge grin on her face.

'Stay a night in the tree-house.'

'Mum would never let me,' I said.

'Don't tell her,' said Iona. 'Grandad won't notice me gone. We'll both sneak out and meet there.'

I thought of sleeping in the tree-house, in the darkness with all the noises of the night around us, waking up and seeing the dawn. We'd talked about it before, but never seriously. Now it seemed like the best idea.

Sky Hawk

'All right,' I said. 'This Saturday, you're on.'

Iona smiled. 'Don't come up till then,' she said, 'I have to get something ready for then; a surprise.'

'What?' I said.

She laughed. 'You'll just have to wait and see.'

I turned to head down the hill, but Iona called me back.

'Callum,' she said.

I looked at her.

'Today,' she said. 'All of it. It's been the best.'

I grinned at her. 'Come on,' I yelled. 'Race you.'

them on the table, and rolled the sleeping bags out across the floor.

'Iona?' I lifted up the bench store to see if she was hiding, but she wasn't anywhere. I leaned out of the window to look back along the footpath. There was no sign of her.

The clouds had turned purple and grey, like a dark bruise spreading across the sky. To the south, thunder rumbled over the mountains. If Iona didn't get here soon, she'd be soaked. Maybe she'd forgotten, but it wasn't like her.

I scrambled down the rope ladder and set off along the path hoping to meet Iona on the way. I followed the track by the river to join the old mineral tracks going down to the village. In the crook of a dried-up puddle lay a long feather caked in dirt. I crouched down to pick it up and clean it on my sleeve. It was creamy white with thick stripes of dark brown, an osprey feather.

I tucked it in the combat pocket of my shorts. Large, single drops of rain hit the ground by my feet sending little puffs of dust into the air. I glanced up at the sky. A great cloud was looming up over the ridge, its shadow dark against the hillside. The thunder sounded again, closer this time. I began to run. The sky was darkening, and as I reached the road into the village even the streetlights lit up.

I could see Iona's house on the edge of the village. It was



CHAPTER 18

I woke to rain pattering on my bedroom window. I glanced at my clock; it was nine already. I'd slept late. I pulled on my clothes and peered out of the window. It had rained in the night, hard and heavy. Deep puddles pooled across the yard. Kip and Elsie were barking in their kennel. I looked at the clock again and thought it was strange because Dad usually let them out by now.

I went down to the kitchen and Mum turned to me as I opened the door. Dad, Graham, and Hamish were there too. Graham slammed his cup down and stormed out. Dad and Hamish wouldn't look at me. Were they cross? Did they know about the plan to sleep in the tree-house?

'Sit down, Callum,' said Mum.

'What have I done?'

CHAPTER 18

Mum put her arms round me. 'It's Iona,' she said. Mum held me so tight. 'She died . . . last night.'

I pushed Mum away. 'No. But I saw her. I saw her last night.'

Dad came over to me. 'I'm sorry . . .'

'It's not true,' I yelled. 'She was OK. She's got summer flu, that's all, just flu.' I looked at Hamish. He looked pale, deathly white.

'I've just come from her house,' he said. 'The ambulance was there.'

I backed away from them to the door, shoved my boots on and started running. Running and running. My lungs burned and my chest ached but I didn't stop until I reached the tree-house.

I pulled up on the 'rope' ladder. My hands stung with cold and my feet slipped on the wet wooden rungs. I flung open the trapdoor above me and hauled myself in. Rain had seeped into every part of the tree-house. Water dripped from the sleeping bags and the cake on the table was soggy and turned to mush. The colours in Iona's osprey painting had bled onto the floor. All the tiny details were lost. It was a ghost osprey now.

I kicked a box of biscuits out through the trapdoor and watched it clatter against the tree roots. I wanted to scream

Sky Hawk

and shout. I wanted to cry. But the tears just couldn't come.

I flung open the shutters and the north wind slammed them against the wooden sides. I leaned out of the window.

'Iona's dead,' I shouted, 'dead.'

Iris turned to look in my direction. She was hunkered down on the sheltered side of her nesting tree. The mottled brown of her wings merged into the peeling bark of the branch. Her mate was in the eyrie. I couldn't see the fledgling chick, but knew it must be huddled in there somewhere trying to keep dry.

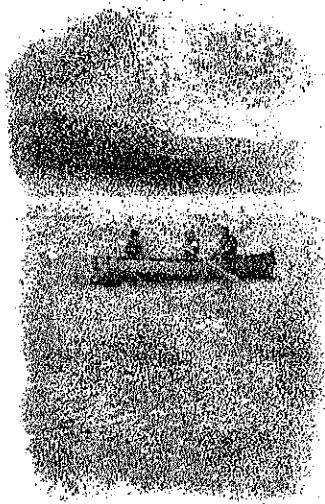
I leaned right out of the window so half of me was over the drop below. 'She's dead,' I shouted, 'dead! But what do you know? You're only a stupid bird.'

Iris ruffled her feathers, her bright eyes watching me. Her alarm call rang out through the driving rain. 'Kee, kee, kee.'

I clapped my hands together and Iris launched into the air. 'You're only a stupid, dumb bird.'

I slammed the shutter against the wooden sides of the tree-house and the noise echoed across the loch. Iris wheeled away over the wooded hillside behind me, the underside of her body pale against the iron sky.

I sat there staring out over the loch, just staring. Broken sunlight filtered through the clouds. Iris didn't return to



CHAPTER 21

'Osprey!' said Euan, flopping down in the boat. He watched the osprey carry the trout back to the eyrie where the young osprey pulled it from him. 'You've got osprey nesting on your farm. Why didn't you tell us?'

I stared at the ripples of the boat's wake. 'They're rare,' I mumbled, 'protected.'

'And you thought we'd go and blab to everyone,' said Euan. He looked hurt now, angry. 'You didn't think you could trust us?'

I grabbed the oars and pulled hard on them. 'It wasn't like that,' I said.

'Did *she* know?' asked Rob.

I nodded. 'Iona found them. She saved them . . . well, Iris that is.'

Sky Hawk

'Iris?' said Rob with a laugh.

'Yes, Iris,' I snapped. 'Why d'you have to make a stupid bloody joke out of everything?' I rowed the boat across the loch, the oars slapping in the water. The boat crunched on the gritty shore and I jumped out and looped the rope over a tree stump. 'I promised Iona I'd look after Iris. And I will. I'll do it.'

I stormed off along the path. Rob and Euan had to run to catch up with me.

Rob grabbed me by the arm. 'I'm sorry, all right?'

I turned on him angrily. 'You said I was a complete loser, remember?'

'I was mad at you. You couldn't be bothered with us any more.'

'It was the ospreys,' I said. 'I . . . ' My voice trailed off and I sank onto a damp mossy stone.

Euan leaned against a tree. 'So where's she now? Where's Iris?'

'Gone,' I said. 'She's heading south for the winter.'

'So that's it, is it?' said Euan. 'You'll have to wait till next year?'

I sat there picking the bits of moss and rolling them between my fingers.

'No,' I said.

CHAPTER 21

Neither Rob nor Euan said a word.

I flicked the moss to the ground. 'I can follow her. She's got a radio transmitter on her back. I'll see her journey all the way to Africa and back.'

'You're kidding me?' said Rob. He was wide-eyed.

'No,' I said. 'Iona and me, we helped fit the transmitter.'

'Now *that* is cool,' whistled Rob. 'How do you track her?'

'On my computer,' I said.

'Can you show us?' said Rob.

I shrugged my shoulders.

Euan gave me a hard stare. 'For God's sake, Callum, we're your mates. Can't you trust us?'

I looked across at them. Dad was right. They were my friends, and right now, I needed them.

'Of course I trust you,' I said.

'Come on, then,' said Rob picking up my rucksack. 'I can't wait to see this.'

Back in my bedroom, Euan and Rob leaned over my shoulder as I switched on the computer.

'Iris is in southern France,' I said. 'She'll have to fly over the Pyrenees soon.'

'The what?' said Rob.

11th September
5.30 GMT
Sahara Desert
31°30'08.84" N 0°41'37.21" E
Speed: 0 km/h
Total distance: 3812.02 km

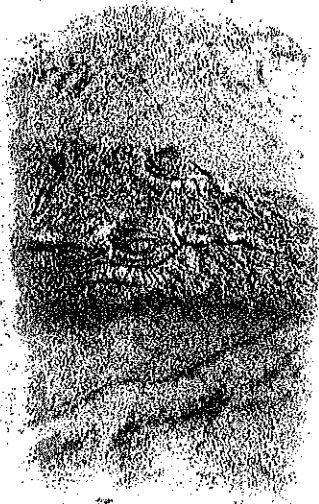
Iris opened her eyes and ruffled her feathers. A pale orange dawn was spreading across the horizon. There were no landmarks to be seen, no green-lined oasis or bright strip of river. There were only the pale golden dunes rolling endlessly into the distance.

The sandstorm had raged all day and all night. It had blown far into the desert where she found shelter beneath an outcrop of rock. Gritty sand had worked its way into her mouth and nostrils and rubbed on the soft skin beneath the downy feathers. One foot was swollen and ached where the old cut lay open, and her long flight feathers were dry and brittle from the heat. She started preening them, oiling them so the barbs on each were smooth and sealed again.

As the sun flared into the sky, Iris launched herself up into the rising spirals of air. All day she drifted southwards and westwards. The desert sun burned into her back and the midday sand glared bright in her eyes. As the sun curved down towards the horizon, Iris sank down with it through the cooling layers of air.

Below, a trail of camels and people trudged over the high

dune ridges, their long dark shadows pressed against the golden sand. A child riding high on one of the camels pointed to her as she passed. Deep within Iris, the memories of the distant coldlands flowed through her, memories of a child watching, of rich fishing grounds and deep waters. They lifted her and carried her higher. And in the fading light a green smudge of trees and scrubland appeared, and beyond that, at last a strip of sunset reflected in the curves of a wide flowing river.



CHAPTER 30

'Amazing,' said Euan. 'To think they've actually found her.' He sat down at my computer after school the next day to look at the photograph of Iris.

'You've got another email,' said Rob, 'and another picture.'

From: Jeneba Kah
Sent: 11th October 15.30 GMT

Subject: Iris

Hello Callum,
I hope you got the photo yesterday. Max took it with his camera. It made the computer crash when I tried to send it and Dr Jawara was not very happy. But Max has fixed the computer and I am allowed to use it again.

CHAPTER 30

Yesterday was an exciting day. All the villagers went out on boats with my father and the marabout. I wish I could have been there too. Max showed me the photos. He said it was like a big party. The marabout told them to look in dense forest and rotting trees. He said she was not far from the place my father and Max were looking yesterday.

Everyone was looking for Iris all afternoon. My brother found her in a hollow rotten tree.

The fishermen caught a lot of fish yesterday. Iris has brought them good luck.

Max is looking after Iris in a shed next to his apartment. She is very weak. He has been feeding her mashed fish through a tube into her stomach because she is too sick to feed herself. There is an old cut on her foot which has become infected so Max is giving her antibiotics.

Max wanted to bring Iris into the ward to show me, but Mama Binta got real cross at him. She said she didn't want no 'fishing chicken' in her ward. All birds are chickens to Mama Binta. Last week three goats got into the hospital and chewed up some blankets. Mama Binta got so mad with those old goats I think she almost put them in the stew pot.

Mama Binta is the head nurse here. She sees everything. If things aren't clean and spotless, she is like a crocodile with a sore tooth. Even the doctors are afraid of her.

She says I make a nuisance of myself asking all my questions and keeping the other children in the ward awake. That's why she carries me to Doctor Jawa's office to write to you.

I can hear Mama Binta coming to fetch me, so I must go now. I have attached another photo that Max has taken.

I will write you when I can about Iris.

Your friend, Jeneba.

Sky Hawk

across the river from Jeneba's village on Monday morning, and spent the day along a small creek. The next day she'd flown north up the coast near the border of Senegal.

'They did it,' said Euan. 'They set her free then.'

'But we haven't heard from Jeneba,' I said.

Euan peered over my shoulder. 'We can only wait.'

We had to wait another week before we got an email.

From: Jeneba Kah
Sent: 3rd November 16.00 GMT

Subject: Iris

Hello Callum,

I am sorry I have not written, but I have not been well. I had the casts removed from my legs but the breaks in one leg are too bad, and my bones have not healed. I have a bad infection in it and this has been giving me a fever. Dr Jawara thinks he will have to amputate my leg.

My father visited the marabout last night. The marabout had another vision. This time, he saw me walking high above the world across an ocean of white cloud. My father thinks this means I am going to die. The marabout is never wrong. What scares me most is knowing I will never walk again.

I have sent a photo of Iris the day we set her free. Max let me do it. I was so happy to see her fly away on her

CHAPTER 32

big strong wings. I wanted to follow her up into the sky. All the villagers were there and they cheered and clapped. Even Mama Binta's eyes were red and watery. She said she had some dust in her eye, but Max and I didn't believe her.

I will write when I can. I think of you and Iris every day.

Your friend, Jeneba.

I opened the attachment. It was a good photo, an action shot of Iris bursting from Jeneba's hands, huge wings outspread, and intense yellow eyes fixed on the sky above. It was almost an exact copy of the same moment when Iona and I had released Iris all those months ago. I should have felt the same thrill seeing the photo of Iris being released, but I didn't.

Instead, all I felt was a dull ache deep in my chest. Jeneba was thousands of miles away. She was very sick. And suddenly I felt completely and utterly helpless.

The tops of the mountains pushed above the mist-filled valleys. They rose like islands above a sea of white cloud.

'Please help me down,' said Jeneba.

She was quiet, a slight frown on her face.

'I want to walk,' she said.

Hamish helped her down from the Land Rover. I passed her the crutches, but she shook her head. 'I must do this on my own.'

She spread her arms to steady herself. And, slowly, she took her first steps, one foot in front of the other.

'You're walking,' I shouted, 'you're really walking.'

She stopped and turned to me and smiled the biggest smile. 'Look, Callum,' she said. 'The marabout, he was right.'

Jeneba stepped towards me through the mist-covered heather. The mist furled around her feet like waves.

She was walking above the world, across an ocean of bright cloud.

'I can see for miles and miles,' she said. 'The mountains, they never end.'

'Try these,' I said. I tipped my binoculars out of their case. A small gold locket slithered out into my hand. It was

Sky Hawk

Iona's locket. It lay open in my palm, Iona's face smiling out at me.

And suddenly, it was as if Iona was with us there on the mountain. It was as if she had always been there. I curled my fingers around the locket and held it in my hand. My eyes burned hot with tears that wanted to come.

'Here,' I said. I put the locket into Jeneba's palm. 'My friend would have wanted you to have this.'

I turned away and closed my eyes tight, but the tears came anyway.

I'd promised Iona that I would look after Iris. I'd tried my best. A lifetime ago, Iona and I had sat on this hillside watching Iris fly over the loch and valley. And now I'd lost them both.

I jumped when Jeneba put her hand on my shoulder. 'Kulanjango . . .' she said.

I turned to look at her.

'Kulanjango,' said Jeneba again. 'Look, Callum. She is coming.'

I wiped my eyes and stared through blurred tears. And there, above the sea of white cloud, flew a bird, its broad wings outstretched. It soared above us, its high call piercing the blue sky.

An answering call came from the mist in the valley below.

CHAPTER 44

'Osprey,' I whispered.

It banked around and flew close, above our heads. I could hear the rush of air through feather tips. I knew it was Iris, I just knew it.

'She's back,' I yelled. 'She's back.'

I ran along the ground beneath her, my feet flying over the grass.

I spread my arms wide like birds' wings, and raced behind her, in her shadow.

She turned in flight and called again, 'Kee . . . kee . . . kee.'

And in that one brief amazing moment, her bright sunflower-yellow eyes looked right into mine.