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Spin

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'Jon Adams?'

'Here.'

Oh, when the fog comes down . . .

'Julie Braeburn?'

'Here, sir.'

. . . the thick, the clinging fog, the fog that swirls and blackens thought . . .

'Peter Dalglish?'

'Yeah.'

. . . does it come to smother our faults, to hide our deeds from human eyes?

'Rory Fenton?'

'Present.'

Dan Curragh, sixty-four, decades a hill walker, never so seized with the cold mountains' dread.

'Jenny Haddow?'

'Here.'

Dan the teacher, Dan the leader.

'Evie Kilburnie?'

'Present, sir.'

Dan, whose voice was shaking.

'Sally Lawless?'

Sniggers.
'Yeah. Here.'
And now the fog and now the night beginning.
'Leanne Lockerbie?'
'Yeah.'
How can this be? How can this be?
'Philip McNab?'
'Here.'
To start with twelve and return with eleven?
'Paul Nisbett?'
No reply.
'Paul Nisbett?'
So is it him?
'Paul Nisbett?'
Paul the tough guy, Paul the swaggerer?
'Paul, are you here?'
Dan felt a shock of relief.
If it's him, he'll make it.
Of all of them, he's the one to beat the mountain.
'Paul Nisbett? Is it him who's missing?'
A quick infusion of hope after panic.
'Nah, sir. He's over there having a fag.'
Hope dashed.
Back to the nightmare.
'Cathy James?'
'I'm here sir, but it's Clare – Clare's not here.'
'What do you mean, Cathy?'
Don't panic, Dan.
'She's not here, sir. She's not here any more.'
Don't panic, Dan.
'Are you sure? Has anyone seen Clare?'

Silence.

'Cathy, you're her best friend—'

'Yes, sir. I don't know where she is.'

OK. OK, Dan Curragh. Think.

The fog's thick; she could be here.

'Clare! Clare O'Leary! Are you here?'

Clare the quiet. Clare the timid. Don't let it be her.

'Cathy! You two are always together. When did you last see her?'

'I don't know, sir. It's the fog. And Clare's gone. I'm scared, sir!'

Sit down, Dan.

Take stock.

One child down.

No way we can go back with one child down.

'Ian, we need to call Mountain Rescue. We need to get them out here right away. That's the first thing. Right? Then we need to decide who goes looking and who stays here. OK? . . . And where's Selwyn? What's he doing? . . . No, wait. Wait. We mustn't move from here till we talk to Mountain Rescue. They'll tell us what to do. Have you got the mobile? Come on, Ian! Ring them now!'

Ian Murray. Ten years younger than Dan. New Project, like Dan.

'Right, Dan. OK. What number do I ring?'

Why does my back hurt?

What am I doing here? What's down there?

I want to go home.

*

Home.

'What do you think, Frank? It's getting dark. Do you think they'll still be up in the mountains? I hope they're all right.'

'Of course they're all right, Eileen. It's organized by the council. It's the youth club. They know what they're doing. Stop worrying.'

'Hello, nine nine nine? What? . . . No, I don't want any of those. No . . . Yes, it is an emergency. I want Mountain Rescue . . . Yes, we're up in the mountains . . . What? It's Ian Murray. I'm a councillor. I'm one of the leaders of the trip.'

I'm scared.

It's too dark. It shouldn't be this dark.

I want to be at home.

Top of the Pops is starting.

Why can't I feel my legs?

'We'd better record *Top of the Pops* for Clare, Frank. They're not going to be back in time now, are they? Can you do it, please? Get up off your backside and do something, Frank!'

'You're asking me what my phone number is? I don't know. I'm ringing on a mobile, of course . . . Yes, it is my mobile . . . No, I don't know the number.'

I've got to look down. I can't.

It's the only way out. I can't climb back up there.

I must have fallen.

Why is it dark? The last I remember it was light.

*

'No, I don't know exactly where we are. It's completely fog-bound up here and we've been going round in circles. But we've got a child missing. Can you please hurry up and come and help us? . . . I think we're near the top of Ben Donnan.'

'It's The Darkness on *Top of the Pops*, Frank. Have you put a tape in for Clare? What, have you just been sitting there? I can't believe it. Put the bloody tape in, Frank!'

'Yes, I told you: I'm Ian Murray . . . I'm a Project party councillor from Exxington District Council. It's our youth scheme . . . we've got eleven children here . . . we started with twelve.

'And we've got an adult missing too. We haven't seen either of them for about two hours now.

'The child's called Clare O'Leary. She's twelve. I'm worried about her . . . she's not very tough. Very timid . . . quite frail, you know.

'The adult's Selwyn Knox . . . he's a New Project councillor, too. He's the one who runs the youth scheme . . . It was his idea to bring this expedition up here . . .

'I wish we hadn't come on the bloody trip. It's too late now, but I wish we'd called it off when the weather warning came out. It's just, you know . . . Yes, OK . . . Sorry . . .

'Well, yes, *we're* all OK. No injuries, no . . . Yes, we're all warm and safe here. We've got food, but I want to find Clare and get this lot down as quick as possible.'

I can't look down.

I want my Mum.

Mummy, it's Clare! Can you see me, Mum?

*

'Frank, I'm really worried about Clare. Perhaps we should call the school.'

'It's got nothing to do with the school, Eileen. It's the council youth scheme or something. And, anyway, we haven't got their number. So just calm down, they'll be back in a bit.'

'Oh, Selwyn, there you are! Where the hell have you been? We've been going spare here.'

'Hi, Ian! Don't worry, Dan – I'm fine. I've been looking for Clare, but I don't think we'll find her in this fog.'

'What do you mean, you don't think we'll find her? We've got to find her. We can't go back without her! Ian's been on the phone to Mountain Rescue. They're going to send a helicopter. Then they're going to get the rest of the children down out of here.'

'Oh, right. So when's the helicopter coming, Dan?'

'I don't know, Selwyn, for Christ's sake! Ian's on the phone to them. They'll be coming as soon as they can.'

That's funny. I'm starting to feel warm again.

Why am I feeling warm?

It should be freezing here.

And I'm feeling warm.

'You know Clare O'Leary, don't you, Selwyn? You're in charge of the youth scheme. Do you think she'll be all right out on the mountain on her own?'

'I don't know, Ian. She's quite little and she's very nervy. I'm worried about her.'

'But she'll be all right won't she, Sel? She's not going to die out there or anything, is she? She's not, is she? Sel? Why did we come on this bloody trip, anyway?'

*

I'm getting warmer.

I feel OK now.

'This is BBC Radio Strathclyde. Some pretty atrocious weather conditions out there tonight. There's a weather watch in force for the whole of western Scotland, so if you're driving please do take extra care.

'Now, we're getting reports of a party of local school children stranded on a mountaineering expedition. The Mountain Rescue service has been alerted and a helicopter is reported to be on its way to pick up one child who's said to be injured. We have no further details on that breaking story, but we'll keep you informed as soon as we hear more.'

'That's the phone, Frank! Can you get it, please? I've got the dinner cooking here!'

Please, let me go home . . .

If you let me go home, I'll never argue with Lily again.

I'll never be cheeky to Mum and Dad.

I want to go home.

'Mountain Rescue here. Is that Ian Murray's phone? . . .

'Oh, OK. So who's that then? . . . Selwyn Knox did you say? All right. Hello, Mr Knox. The helicopter's on its way to you now.

'We'll be looking out for your party, so can you please make yourselves visible. That means spreading out as much brightly coloured material as possible on the ground where you are. Use tents or groundsheets – anything bright. And please light a fire so we can spot you as quickly as we can. I don't suppose you've got any flares with you, have you? . . . OK, not to worry. We'll be there soon.'

*

'Eileen, it's your sister. She says she's been listening to Radio Strathclyde and there's been something about a school party in trouble in the mountains. I told her not to worry because Clare's not on a school party, it's the council youth scheme.'

I'm getting warmer again.

And now I know how it's going to end.

I read it in my book; I'm just not sure what sort of bird it is.

It looks like an eagle, but I know it's not an eagle.

'I can hear the helicopter, Ian. Can you hear it, Selwyn? I'm sure I can hear something. Listen carefully. This damn fog muffles the noise.'

'Oh, Frank, I'm worried. It doesn't matter what they call it. School, youth club, council – it's school children up in the mountains. And I'm sure it's Clare. I just know there's something wrong.'

'Ten o'clock. BBC Radio Strathclyde news. This is Nigel Tonbridge at the news desk.

'Our headlines tonight.

'A party of Strathclyde school children is reported missing on a hiking expedition in the Ben Donnan area. The party, organized by the Exxington District Council youth scheme, set out this morning before weather conditions started to worsen. It's thought the party of twelve children, reported to be aged between thirteen and sixteen and led by three council members, were caught in the dense fog that descended over the region in mid to late afternoon. Mountain Rescue helicopters are now scouring the area, but there are unconfirmed reports that one child may be missing.'

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It's an auk!

That's what it's called! An auk.

I remember it now from my book.

'Yes, it is the helicopter, Ian. I can see its lights now. Can you see it, Selwyn?

'I think it's going to try and land.

'Children! Everybody stand up and start waving.

'Here's the helicopter. It's coming to rescue us, so everyone stand together in a group and start waving so the pilot can see us.

'Move over to those rocks, children. The pilot wants us to move over there, so he can land on this flat bit of ground. Quickly, children! Go now!'

An auk.

A great auk! That's it.

He's coming to take me home.

When little children get lost, he always comes to carry them back to his nest, where it's warm and soft and safe.

'Hello, is that Mrs O'Leary?

'Hello, Mrs O'Leary. It's the duty officer at Exxington District Council here. I just wanted to let you know that there's been a bit of a problem with the youth scheme expedition. Now you don't need to worry. We're doing everything we can and we've got the Mountain Rescue people out, so everything's going to be all right.

'Mrs O'Leary . . . ?'

'Hello, I'm Captain Peters. Who's in charge here? Which of you is Mr Murray?'

'Hello, Captain. I'm Selwyn Knox and I'm in charge. Let's get

the children on board, shall we? And let's get everyone home as quickly as possible.'

'Yes, I'm here . . . I'm here. I'm sorry . . . it's just I can't take it in. Clare's only twelve, you know. She's so little. And she shouldn't really be going out hiking like that, only it's organized by the youth scheme, you know, and Mr Knox said it would be safe. But now we've got the newspapers ringing us and saying Clare's been injured or something. I just don't know what's going on and I'm so worried . . . but you did say she's all right, didn't you?'

'Yes, Captain, I know we've got a little girl missing, but we have to be logical about this. We need to get these children back to safety or we'll have more of them dying from cold or frostbite. We can't help Clare O'Leary at the moment, but we can help the others. So let's get them all back home while the other helicopter and the search parties carry on looking for Clare, all right?'

'Hello, Mrs O'Leary. It's the council duty officer again. Just to say that the Mountain Rescue people have been on. They've located the main party now and they expect to have them back here in an hour or so. Unfortunately, they haven't found Clare yet, but they say you shouldn't worry because they've got search teams and two helicopters out looking for her and they say they hope to find her as quickly as possible. So don't worry, Mrs O'Leary; the best thing you can do now is stay by the phone and wait until I ring you again, or the Mountain Rescue people or the police get in touch. Is that all right? . . . Mrs O'Leary—?'

'Is that Selwyn?

'Selwyn, it's Bob Travers here. Thank God you're back. And

thank God we've got most of the kids back. But what the hell's happening about Clare O'Leary?

'We're all very worried about this. It's not looking good for the council, you know . . .

'We were the ones who set this thing up; and we're the ones who're going to get blamed if anything's happened to the girl . . .

'I've already had the media ringing me, Selwyn, and it's pretty unpleasant, I can tell you. As council leader, I'm getting it right in the neck. They want to know why we let the trip go ahead in such bad weather and what safety measures we took.

'You know, they're saying we breached government safety guidelines. But I've checked: there *are* no bloody guidelines! So I don't know what they're on about, really.

'But that hasn't stopped London getting on the phone to give us a bollocking. The leadership are absolutely furious. They say we're a major New Project council and this could hurt the government's image. I've told them that's nonsense, but you know what control freaks this New Project lot can be.

'Anyway, they're sending somebody up here for a meeting first thing in the morning. What? . . . No . . . no, I don't know who it is yet. We'll find out in the morning. Anyway, they want the whole of the Project group here without fail. So make sure all three of you who were up on the mountain get in here by eight o'clock, OK? Tell Ian and Dan. All right?

'Yes, I know you've got to make a statement to the police. Go and do that now, then get some sleep. But you need to be here in the morning to tell this guy from London exactly what happened. They've really got it in for the council – and that means me and you. We're in trouble if we can't give a good account of ourselves.

'And another thing, Selwyn: the media are camped outside the

O'Learys' house. They know it's Clare who's missing. So keep away from there, OK?'

'This is BBC Radio Strathclyde with the seven o'clock news.

'Just one headline this morning and it is, of course, the continuing story of the little schoolgirl who's missing in bad weather following a hiking expedition that went disastrously wrong.

'Clare O'Leary, who's twelve and comes from the Exxington area, is still missing this morning, despite intensive rescue efforts, which have continued throughout the night.

'Search teams are combing the area near the last sighting of Clare, but the Mountain Rescue helicopters, which would normally lead an operation like this, have not been able to operate since fog and driving sleet forced them to return to base. Earlier one helicopter managed to bring back eleven other children and the three Project party members of Exxington District Council, who had taken the expedition into difficult mountainous territory despite weather warnings from the Met Office. No council spokesman was available for comment this morning, but on the line now is Captain John Peters from the Mountain Rescue service: Captain Peters, can you tell us what went wrong?'

'Gentlemen, can I call this meeting to order, please? I'd like to start by introducing Geoff Maddle. Geoff's here from party headquarters in London. The national Project party – or the government – which is it, Geoff? . . . OK, the national Project party it is – they're the same thing, of course, but Geoff's officially from the party, even though he's an adviser to the New Project government, is that right? . . . OK, Geoff. Thanks.

'So London have sent Geoff here to help us deal with the way we, er . . . deal with this very unpleasant incident.

'As council leader, I'd just like to say that it was most unfortunate that this expedition ended in the, er . . . unfortunate way it did.

'But I'd like to add that we mustn't give up hope. The missing girl is still missing. So she isn't dead and we can only hope that things turn out all right after all. I think we have to hope that—'

'Get real, Bob. The girl's dead. Even the Mountain Rescue people say she couldn't have survived a night out in weather like this. Didn't you hear them on the radio this morning?'

'Just wait a minute, Tommy. Wait! You weren't up there on the mountain. It's no good jumping the gun here. I think we have to have a policy to follow in case she's alive and a policy in case she's dead.'

'What do you mean a policy? This is a little girl we're talking about here, Bob. How can we have a policy? We've cocked things up and we have to say so. We can't play politics with a little girl's life.'

'No, of course we can't. We've all got children . . . or we've all got mothers and fathers at least.

'So we're people first and foremost, of course, but we're also the public face of the New Project party and Geoff is here to make that point to us all.

'So before we all get carried away . . . no, wait. We can't all talk at once!

'We'll all get the chance to have our say.

'Order! Gentlemen! Wait! Please—

'What we have to do first is introduce ourselves so Geoff knows who we are. And then I think we'll hear what Geoff has to say.

'And, don't forget, Geoff is speaking for the Prime Minister. Whatever Geoff says to you all this morning, it's the same as if

Andy Sheen was saying it himself. Is that clear, everyone? That's right, isn't it, Geoff?

'Right, let's tell Geoff who we are. First of all, I need the three of you who were leading the expedition to make themselves known to Geoff.

'First, Dan Curragh. This is Dan Curragh, Geoff.

'Dan's been a mountaineer for very many years. There isn't anyone more experienced at mountain walking than Dan in the whole of the region, is there? And Dan was in the SAS, weren't you, Dan, so he knows all about survival and rescue and things . . . What? The TA – OK. The TA Dan was in.

'And second, here's Ian Murray, Geoff. He's a master butcher and he's been a member of Exxington District Council for fifteen years – fifteen is it, Ian? So he's very experienced as well.

'And last of all is Selwyn Knox. He's the leader of the council's youth scheme, so he knows a lot about young people and to some extent it was his idea to take this expedition out there, wasn't it, Selwyn?

'Selwyn? . . . where's Selwyn?

'He was here earlier, wasn't he?

'I know I talked to him on the phone. I'm sure I did because I told everyone on the New Project group they had to be here. Does anyone know where Selwyn is?'

Selwyn Knox had not slept during the whole of that terrible night.

After two fraught hours at the Mountain Rescue HQ, talking to the search leaders on the radio link and trying to guide them to where Clare might be, then giving endless statements to one police officer after another, all the while churning over the events in his head, he could not sleep even when he got back to his flat at three a.m.

As mug of coffee followed mug of coffee and the night ticked away, Selwyn brooded on the images of sleet, fog and rock that were burned on his brain and gave him no peace: the thought of Clare; the blackness of the fog descending on the mountain; sight extinguished; sound deadened; no voices, no cries; then returning to the group; Dan's voice; the dread cold of fear in his heart; the mental rally as he attempted to take control; the celestial apparition of the helicopter; the surge of adrenalin; the return of lucidity in conversation with the pilot—

Now, Selwyn, now!

Stay focused – stay calm!

You're facing your biggest test yet so keep the ice in your heart – stay in control.

They're out to get you – they've always been against you – you've only yourself to rely on.

You're down now, they'll try to keep you down. But every setback is an opportunity. Don't just survive this: use it, use it to grow stronger, use it to advance. You're not one of them – you're different, stronger, better. You're marked for the future – don't forget the future – your future will change things – and today is make or break for you.

'OK, so it looks like Selwyn isn't here. Maybe he overslept or something. Can someone try his phone, please? Meanwhile, I'm going to hand over to Geoff from party headquarters. And I want you to listen carefully to what Geoff has to say because the way we handle this crisis could determine all our political futures. We've got local elections coming up soon, I don't need to tell you that. And Geoff's got his own concerns about the party's image at the national level too, haven't you, Geoff? I think we all need to remember what Andy Sheen has always said: "What we do is

important, but it won't count for anything if we don't present it right." So Geoff's going to tell us now how we need to go about presenting this crisis. Geoff—'

'Thanks. Morning, everyone. Sorry I've had to come at such a difficult time. I'm here 'cos the Prime Minister and Charlie McDonald are concerned about what's happened in Exxington. They're both very sad about the little girl and her family, of course, but most of all they're concerned because this was an expedition organized by the New Project party. I'm not saying anyone did anything wrong, I'm sure you all had the best intentions. But when things happen that have the New Project party's name attached to them, we can be sure our enemies will be delighted that things have gone wrong for us. The opposition will be meeting at this moment to figure out how to use this against us. And don't forget we've got Prime Minister's Questions coming up, so Andy Sheen is going to face a grilling in parliament. And that's really why I'm here now: what I need from you is a clear explanation of everything that happened up in those mountains. Then we need to agree a very clear story that we all stick to. We mustn't end up contradicting each other because it'll make us look guilty and that's exactly what our enemies want – we don't need it. We need to stick together. We need to agree a line to take and we need to get your other guy – what's his name, Selwyn Knox? – involved in this. We don't want any loose cannons on this story. OK? So why don't you go first, Ian Murray, and tell us exactly what you remember about yesterday, starting from when the expedition set off, and then talk us through exactly who did what and who went where? All right?'

'You don't have any children, do you, Mr Knox? It's not easy bringing them up. You spend your whole life building them up,

creating them, then they start to leave you. Or that's how it feels. The whole time you feel them growing away from you. But if you're lucky you can know they're still yours. They're still with you. When you wake your daughter in the morning she looks like a grown up twelve-year-old, but in that minute when she's coming round from sleep, waking from a dream, you know . . . she's suddenly back to the little one she used to be. It's hard to explain. She's all soft with sleep and when she opens her eyes she looks at you just the way she used to do when she was small. And then you can see that inside she's still the same; still the lovely child she was when she was little; you can see that she's full of goodness and simplicity and love. Oh, Mr Knox, how can this have happened?'

As he walked out to seize his destiny, Selwyn Knox glanced in the hall mirror of the O'Learys' terraced house. He looked stern. He looked determined. He smoothed his beard with the palm of his right hand.

There are moments in a person's life when the future is decided. You need to recognize them, you need to seize them. Only the strongest can seize their destiny. Only the strongest can act with mental clarity and decision – and I have been given that gift – I have been given the talents and the power. I am strong – I won't be looking back in twenty years and regretting opportunities I missed—

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

'You've been here most of the night. Thank you for doing your job with such devotion.

'I know you are all concerned about Clare.

'I know you want to talk to Mr and Mrs O'Leary.

'And I know you want to hear from the council, who organized this expedition.

'Well, I'm here. My name is Councillor Selwyn Knox. Mrs O'Leary is here too, and we'll do our best to answer all your questions.

'But first let me say how terribly stricken I feel this morning. Stricken by the weight of last night's events; stricken by the anxiety and fear of a mother waiting for news of her child; stricken by the force of a mother's love.

'We all know the burden Mr and Mrs O'Leary are carrying as we wait to hear about Clare, as we hope for her safe return from the mountain but fear for her safety.

'So let our first thoughts be with Clare and with Clare's parents. As human beings, we owe that to ourselves.

'But let me say, also, that I am here to answer any questions you may have about the council's role in these events. As a two-term New Project party councillor myself, I can say that I at least have absolutely nothing to hide. This has been a tragic accident. If anyone has acted incorrectly, then I'm as determined as you are to find out the truth and take any action that is necessary. I can say quite categorically—'

'Mr Knox! We want to talk to Mrs O'Leary—'

'Mrs O'Leary, how do you feel about what has happened to Clare?'

'Mrs O'Leary, are you angry at the way the council has handled this?'

'Mrs O'Leary—'

'Wait! All of you! One at a time. Don't shout! Don't you know Mrs O'Leary has been through a terrible ordeal? Now Mrs O'Leary has a short statement to make and then I'll take any further questions. Eileen, are you all right? Are you going to be able to talk? OK, be quiet everyone and listen to what Mrs O'Leary has to say because this is all she'll be saying today.'

'Thank you, Selwyn – Mr Knox, I mean. I just want to say

that I love Clare very much. She is my youngest daughter and she is a lovely girl. I know she is in danger, but we are praying to Our Lady to keep her safe. We're praying . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . that's . . . I'm sorry . . .'

'It's all right, Eileen. Don't worry. Just the last bit, remember? The bit about the youth scheme. OK?'

'Yes . . . yes . . . I just want to say that Clare has been a member of the council youth scheme for the last two years and she has always been safe on it. And she has always enjoyed the activities Mr Knox has organized. And we have never had any problems at all. Is that all right?'

'Thank you, Eileen. Now I want to say—'

'Mrs O'Leary, have you been told exactly how Clare went missing?'

'Mrs O'Leary, how did the supervisors all manage to lose sight of Clare?'

'Mrs O'Leary—'

'Now stop that! Stop shouting! Can't you see Mrs O'Leary is upset? She's been very brave coming out to talk to you. You can't expect her to answer all those questions—'

'It's all right, Selwyn . . . it's all right . . . Can I just say to all of you that Mr Knox has been a good friend to Clare ever since she was ten and she joined the council youth scheme. In fact, he's been a friend to our whole family. So I want Mr Knox to answer your questions. He can speak on behalf of me . . . if you'll excuse me, I just can't say anything else just now . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm really very sorry—'

'Right, everyone! Leave Mrs O'Leary alone. You've had your statement. Leave her in peace. Thank you. Now, I just have a couple more things to say on behalf of Exxington District Council.

'The whole of the New Project group are devastated by what has happened to Clare. The decision to take the expedition into

the mountains yesterday was made by the council as a whole. It was a collective decision. The trip was led by very professional, very experienced guides. And the decision to set off yesterday morning was made before the bad weather started. There was never any suggestion that the weather was going to turn, and anyone who says the bad weather was predicted by the Met Office is just kidding themselves.

'It is true that I was one of the leaders of the expedition. I can't go into details of what happened up in the mountains because the relevant authorities are still investigating what happened and I cannot be seen to pre-empt their conclusions. But I can tell you that I was not the man who organized this outing. I have no axe to grind and I certainly have nothing to hide. What I can tell you is that I didn't support the idea of the trip. In fact, I had severe reservations about it and I think bad decisions were taken by some of those in charge of the expedition, although I don't want to point the finger of blame and they will have to speak for themselves . . . when the time comes, that is.

'I will just say that when things went wrong up on the mountain there was a lot of panic among those who should have known better. When the weather turned bad – and conditions were atrocious, I can tell you – it was me who took charge, while the others were dithering around at base camp. I went looking for Clare, I did all I could, so my conscience at least is clear.

'As Mrs O'Leary told you, I have known Clare and her family for a long time. It is no exaggeration to say that in some respects Clare knew and respected me as a father to her. So what happened yesterday was absolutely heartbreaking for me . . . excuse me a moment . . . I'm sorry, I just need a moment . . . I can tell you, in all honesty, I loved Clare like a father . . . I'm sorry . . . what was I saying? Yes . . . so, as a result of what I suffered yesterday, I have decided I could not live with myself if I didn't now do everything

possible to ensure a tragedy like this never happens again. It's scandalous that despite many promises there are no legal guidelines to ensure that such trips are carried out with the maximum safety for the children involved. So I hereby pledge to all of you that I will not rest until this question has been tackled properly. From today onwards I shall be devoting myself to leading a campaign for new government guidelines to increase safety regulations for trips like this one, whether they be school trips, youth club outings or any other expedition.

'And I can tell you that this campaign will be waged at national level, not just here in Exxington but at Westminster! Because there can be no higher cause than the safety of our children, our children who are the future of our whole society. And I can tell you that I, Selwyn Knox, will be at the heart of that great campaign.

'Thank you very much, everybody. I would like to end by asking us all just to take a couple of moments of silence to turn our thoughts to Clare O'Leary, who is missing in the mountains, for believers among us to pray for her salvation, and for all of us to express the hope that Clare will be found safe and well and that she'll be back here soon with her loving parents.'

But what Selwyn Knox could not hear at that moment was the voice of Clare herself, poor Clare, lying in the mountains—

'I know he's coming. I know the great auk is coming,' said Clare, her eyes now burning from the pain and fever, but burning too with hope and looking to the happiness that lay ahead.

'The great auk is coming.'

And Clare was right, because what happened next was exactly as she had foreseen it.

With the utmost gentleness, the great auk swooped down to the ledge where Clare was lying.

Even though a tear was running through the feathers round his noble eyes, he smiled his great auk smile at her and Clare felt comforted.

And then, just as she had known he would, the great auk cradled her in his powerful claws – taking infinite care not to crush or hurt her.

With a mighty beating of his powerful wings, he rose from the sluggish pull of the earth and hovered briefly over the mountain ledge.

Clare felt the relief and thrill of weightlessness.

Then the great auk soared into the sky, carrying his precious cargo to the safety and warmth of his noble nest.

In Exxington, outside a terraced house on a council estate, a mobile phone rang moments later and a member of the media listened to a message from his newsroom.

'Mr Knox . . . Mrs O'Leary. I'm sorry to interrupt. We've just heard. Clare's been found.'