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Flyaway



THE BEGINNING

Every year, Dad waits for them. He says it means the start of winter, when they arrive . . . the start of Christmas. The start of everything brilliant.

When he was a boy, he would sit with Nan and Granddad in a field near the lake behind their house . . . and wait. It was usually cold, and dark, and he says they even sat through a snowstorm once. Even then, Granddad knew when they'd arrive. Dad used to think Granddad was magical for knowing that. I can remember waiting beside that lake too, but the memory is more like a dream than something real.

The last time we all waited there together was six years ago: the winter before Nan died. The last winter the wild swans ever went to Granddad's lake.

All of us were huddled by the edge of the water, and the blankets wrapped around my shoulders smelt like dusty

drawers. Nan pushed a cheese sandwich into my hand and Granddad passed around mugs of hot chocolate. I was sleepy and still, but I kept my eyes open.

And then they came, appearing like something from a fairy tale. It was as if they'd sprung from the clouds themselves. The dawn light glinted on them . . . made them seem so white. Silver almost. Their wings made the air hum.

I still remember Dad's face as he watched them. His wide eyes. The way he bit the edge of his lip, as though he was anxious the birds might not make it. When they began to circle down to the lake, Dad leant forward a little as if he was imagining doing the landing himself.

I loved them, even then. Just like Dad. But they scared me too. The way they arrived out of nowhere, and so many of them. It was as if we'd dreamt them. As if they'd come from another world.

And this year it starts like that again. With Dad excited and rapping on my door. With the swans arriving . . . and everything changing.



CHAPTER 1

Early morning. It's too cold to get out of bed, but already Dad's at my door. His fingertips drumming like rain.

'Isla?' he whispers. 'Coming? They're here, up at the reserve. I'm sure of it.'

I force my eyes to focus on the shadows around my bed . . . desk, chair heaped with school clothes, jeans and jumper in a pile on the carpet. I hold my breath as I swing my legs out from under the duvet. Sit up. Rub my hands over my arms. Dad knocks again.

'Yes, OK, I'm up,' I hiss.

I pull on the jeans and jumper. Find the thickest socks in my drawer. Hold my breath until I'm warmer. The heating hasn't gone on yet. It's too early, still dark outside. Dad creaks open the door, just a crack, but it's enough to see the

wide grin on his face.

'What you doing in here? Anyone would think you're still half asleep.'

'I am.'

I step towards him, touching my hair to see that it's not too tangled.

'Don't worry, you're beautiful,' he whispers, already turning to go. 'The birds won't care.'

I go back to grab a hair band, then follow Dad down the stairs, still rubbing sleep from my eyes. We both avoid the middle step that creaks. Neither of us wants to wake up Mum or Jack. This is our time: mine and Dad's. Jack comes sometimes, when he's not playing football, but mostly it's just me and Dad watching them. Since that winter six years ago, the whooper swans have been arriving at a new lake on the wetlands reserve. Sometimes I hope they'll come back to Granddad's lake, but Dad says they never will. He says it's too built up and overgrown there now.

We pass the bathroom, and I think about stopping to brush my teeth but I can feel Dad's excitement, almost as if he is fizzing beside me. He's always like this. As soon as he's up, he just wants to move. The only thing he'll ever stay still for is the birds. He grabs the flask of coffee that's on the kitchen counter. I take a slice of bread from the bread bag, then go back and grab the whole bag in case Dad's hungry too.

As Dad locks the house, I stamp my feet and breathe warmth onto my hands. Our front garden has turned white

overnight. Frost makes the grass shimmer and turns our concrete path slick as an ice-cube. I cling onto Dad's arm to get to the car. No one in our street is up yet. The place feels heavy and sleepy. Even the pub on the corner is quiet. We're the only ones awake in the whole world. Us and the birds.

I turn the car heating up full. Half grin at Dad to show I'm waking up. And we're on our way.

'It's not normally this cold when they arrive,' I say.

'Coldest snap for twenty years. Some people said they wouldn't come at all. But they have. They've been up north for days now.'

'How do you know they'll arrive here today?'

Dad shrugs. 'It just feels right.'

He watches the road. I shut my eyes and try to grasp another quick moment of sleep, but I can hear Dad's fingers tapping on the steering wheel. I open my eyes again. Dad's chewing on his lip, as usual. However sure he seems, he's still nervous every year that they won't turn up. There are dark circles under his eyes today, making him look more tired than usual. Mum says Dad's not well at the moment: she was worried when he got sent home from work early last week. But I don't know. He just looks tired to me.

He pulls onto the ring road. We pass a long Tesco delivery truck with its fog lights on, then that's it. No other vehicles. The sky's getting lighter, though; already it's shifted from black to purple to grey. The hedgerows are coming into focus. I take a piece of bread from the bag at my feet and chew on it. Pass a piece to Dad. He switches off his

headlights. Neither of us turns on the radio. It would ruin something, somehow. It never feels like winter until Dad and I have done this, until we've driven down these roads on this cold early morning. The car ride to the reserve always means the beginning.



CHAPTER 2

Dad drives past the pylons and buildings of the steel works, past the entrance to the new power station. He turns left into the reserve car park, through puddles of muddy water. We're the only ones. It's too cold and early for even the hard-core birdwatchers. No one's even been round yet to unlock the portaloo. If Dad wasn't with me, it would be so creepy being here. I get out of the car and listen. There's not one single sound . . . not even the trundle of the steel works or the distant hum of the motorway. The sky is as heavy and grey as a blanket. It feels like snow's coming.

Dad fetches the binoculars from the boot and we get going. It doesn't take long to walk to the lakes. Down the small dirt lane beside the stream, up the short ramp where the wind hits you at full force and then between the reed beds. Dad walks fast, barely waiting for me to keep up. I'm

breathing hard, and the cold air makes my throat hurt. Dad stops to pick up a scrunched crisp packet at the side of the path, his breath hanging in the air as he bends. We listen. I can't hear the usual honks and hisses. It's silent, too silent for them. Perhaps they've decided to stay up north after all. Dad would be so disappointed. He glances up at the sky, checking. But nothing.

'You sure it's today?'

Dad nods, absently. 'Has to be.'

It's Dad who's always right about when they'll arrive now. Always. It's weird, but if there's one thing he's never wrong about, it's this. Sometimes I think it's the only thing he's actually inherited from Granddad . . . the only thing that makes me convinced they're related. We turn the last corner before the main lake, their favourite lake. Walk the final few metres. But there's no birds at all. Not even any mallards or coots. The lake is as still as stone, ripple-less. For that moment it feels like all the birds in the world have disappeared.

'I don't get it,' Dad mumbles.

He shakes his head, frowns. He spins around to check the sky from all angles. I look up too.

'Maybe we're too early?' I suggest.

Dad starts walking, away from the lake. I think about the wild whooper swans, how clever they are to cover the hundreds, maybe thousands, of miles between Iceland and here. Perhaps this year they're too tired to fly the final bit. Maybe they've given up on this wintering ground, just like they gave up on Granddad's lake. Perhaps we'll just have to watch the

mute swans instead. I almost laugh when I think of Dad being excited to watch mutes. We both know they have none of the noise and the mystery that the whoopers have. None of their magic.

Dad walks down the main path, towards the river. He's looking for a better view. He holds the binoculars to his eyes, scanning. Then his body goes still as he sees something. He takes the binoculars away, squints at the sky, then looks again.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Oh no.' He lets the binoculars drop and they bounce against his chest. He starts forward into a run. I'm so shocked by the expression on his face that I don't even move for a second or two, I just watch him run down the path away from me. It's not the direction where the swans normally arrive from. But he's seen something.

'What?' I shout again.

He's already too far away to answer. I run after him. I'm glancing at the sky as I go, desperately trying to work out what Dad's seen. I don't have time to stop and use my own binoculars. He's running towards the far end of the reserve, near the corner where the new power station is. My eyes flick over it, the concrete building with its long waste chutes. The towering electricity pylons, only put up a few months ago. Suddenly I realise what Dad must have seen, what he might be imagining. My stomach clenches into a tight fist. And I pick up my pace and pelt after him.

I've nearly caught up with Dad when I see the swans. There are about twenty of them, fewer than usual, but they're

big and definitely whoopers. They are stretched across the sky, flying swiftly in that huge V shape, their wings beating in time. They must be aiming for the main lake, whooping and trumpeting as they fly. I stop and watch them. It's something I've seen so many times, but it still gets me. The dawn light on their feathers. The soft whir of wings. The way they are so huge and gangly and yet look so graceful . . . so impossibly elegant. In that moment I always understand why Dad likes them so much.

Then Dad starts waving and screaming at them and jolts me back to the freezing cold morning.

'We have to stop them,' he yells.

I peel off my coat and fling it about above my head. I jump up and down. It's no good. They're only focused on getting to the lake. They don't notice us.

'They're going to hit it,' Dad says.

And I feel sick then, really truly sick, because I know he's right. In the pale light, the swans can't see the wires linking the new pylons; can't see the electricity fizzing in front of them. There are no red marker balls on the wires like the council promised, nothing to show the birds what's there. I start screaming at them.

'Go away! Get back!'

But they don't see us. Even if they did, we can't stop them.

'Isla, don't,' Dad whispers. 'Don't watch.'

But I have to. My mouth goes dry. I let my arms drop. The swan at the front looks so determined, its head bobbing in time with the beat of its wings. It looks confident about

where it's going, vaguely hopeful. The rest of the flock trust it. Dad makes a tight, strangled noise as the swans falter. They slow down, change direction a little, and I think for a second that they've seen the wires. I let out a kind of breathless laugh as their wings beat furiously to take them higher. Maybe they'll make it.

But it's too late.

I hear the sizzle of the front bird hitting the wire, even from here. It tumbles towards the ground, its head twisting in surprise. Its wings limp, feathers spinning down. I feel a pain inside me, an ache beneath my ribs. I gasp. And Dad puts his arm out and gathers me towards him. He's breathing fast, too. His whole body feels tense against me, shaking. I bury my head into his bonfire-smelling coat but still I hear the smack and sizzle as another bird hits. And then another. I hold my breath. The ache inside gets worse. Then there's screeching, loud and hoarse, as the birds warn each other away. There are other birds, joining in. A constant throb of panic and wings.

'I should have realised this would happen,' Dad murmurs, his voice as shaky as I feel. 'Those idiots building the pylons there, and no markers . . .'

He pulls me further towards him, so close that I think for a second I hear his heart. I concentrate everything I have on listening for it. Anything to drown out the sound of the birds all around. *Thud-thud.* Dad's own wingbeat. A gust of wind whips across my ears and under my collar, pushing my hair across my face. Dad picks up my coat from the path where

I've flung it and wraps it around my shoulders.

'Put it on,' he says. 'It's cold.'

I look up and see that his eyes are wet.

'Has it finished?'

He nods. I pull back to look up. There are no birds there now, only a few feathers clinging to the wires.

'Did they . . . how many got hit?'

Dad's holding out the coat, trying to get me to put my arms through it. 'The birds at the back had enough time to fly over, it's not so bad.'

I turn to look behind me. 'Are they on the main lake?'

Dad shakes his head, glances at the sky. 'Still up there. Doubt they'll winter here now.'

I shield my eyes. Far above, the black specks of swans are flying fast towards the city, following the river. Dad's watching a single swan flying much closer to us, circling slowly around the reserve. It's a youngster, greyish and small . . . maybe a female. She's all by herself. Left behind. I can tell by the way she keeps coming closer to the ground and then circling up again that she's confused, unsure if she should land. For one crazy minute I wish that I could be up there with her, helping her fly . . . showing her where to go. Does she even realise that her flock is getting further away with each circle she makes? Again there's that ache behind my ribs. I don't want to stop looking at her. It feels like if I do, she'll fall.

Dad starts walking towards the small lake in front of us. He's heading for the reeds below the wires, the place where the swans fell. I run forwards to grab his arm.

'We have to see, Isla,' he says firmly. 'We might be able to save them.'

I keep hold of him, even though he tries to shake me off to get to them. My eyes shift to the flattened reeds where the birds lie. I don't want to see the swans like this, broken and deformed. I want to remember them before they hit the wires flying straight and perfectly, with the light glinting off their feathers. But I also know Dad's right. We have to save what we can.

As Dad drags me closer, I see that there are three of them.

'Only three,' I say quietly. 'It could have been worse.'

Their white, limp bodies are floating, caught in the reeds between the path and deep water, their feathers becoming waterlogged.

Dad takes off his binoculars and gives them to me. He wades in.

'But it's freezing . . .' I start to say, before Dad's sharp glance stops my words.

He breathes in quickly as the water reaches his knees. There are patches of ice floating on the surface. I hear the squelch of his boots in the mud. He reaches the first swan, drags it towards him and turns it over.

'Dead,' he says.

I watch his jaw clench. Dad hates dead things. He likes things that jump with life and energy, things like him. He wades further in to the next bird and I move towards the bank.

'Let me help.'

'No. It's really cold.'

The first swan Dad touched drifts towards me. I bend down, reach out and grab its wing. I tow it to me. There is a deep, red gash running across the bottom of the bird's neck, wire-sized. The feathers are singed black around it and smell strangely like burnt plastic. I touch my fingers to the bird's chest. It's still warm, but there's no heartbeat. I turn away from the bird's still, glazed eyes.

Dad is feeling the next swan. 'Dead,' he mutters again.

He watches my face, checking to see if I'm upset, before moving onto the last bird. This one's smaller than the rest and its feathers are greyish-brown. A young one, on its first migration probably. Perhaps it's the brother of the other young one we saw flying around the reserve. It's not fair that it's travelled so far only to crash like this at the end. Dad has to wade in almost to his hips to reach it. The wind gets stronger then, making the reeds hiss and the breath catch in my throat.

'Come out of there, Dad,' I say, pulling my hair back from where it's whipping over my eyes. 'It's freezing. You'll die or something.'

But already he's moving back towards me, dragging the swan through the water. 'Here, help me,' he says.

He sticks his arms under the water's surface and lifts the bird. He steps towards the bank and I reach out. Limp, wet wings brush against me. A small hiss comes from the bird's throat. I try not to look at the burnt gash on this bird's shoulder as I shift my hands to get a better grip.

'It's alive, Isla,' Dad whispers. 'This one's alive.'