**Twenty-four**

  ‘What is this place?’ I asked her as she opened the gate and we stepped into the long back garden. We ducked down and hurried to the DANGER door.

  ‘It was my grandfather’s,’ she said. ‘He died last year. He left it t0 me in his will. It’ll be mine when I’m eighteen.’ She turned the key in the lock. ‘We’re having it repaired soon. Then we’ll rent it out.’

  We stepped inside, carrying our parcels. Whisper slipped in at our heels.

  ‘Don’t worry, though,’ she whispered. ‘There’s weeks before the builders come.’

  I switched my torch on. We went into the room where we’d left him. He wasn’t there. The room was silent and empty, as if he’d never been there at all. Then we saw Mina’s cardigan behind the door, and dead bluebottles on the floor boards, and heard Whisper mewing from the stairs. We went into the hallway, saw the shape of Skellig lying halfway up the first flight.

  ‘Knackered,’ he squeaked as we crouched beside him.

  ‘Sick to death. Aspirin.’

  I fiddled in his pocket, took two of the tablets out, popped them in his mouth.

  ‘You moved,’ I said. ‘All on your own, you moved.’

  He winced with pain.

  ‘You want to go higher,’ said Mina.

  ‘Yes. Somewher

e higher,’ he whispered.

  We left our parcels there, lifted him together and carried him to the first landing.

  He groaned and twisted in agony.

  ‘Put me down,’ he squeaked.

  We took him into a bedroom with high white ceilings and pale wallpapered walls. We rested him against the wall. Thin beams of light pierced the cracks in the boards on the windows and shone on to his pale, dry face.

  I hurried back down for the parcels. We unrolled the blankets we had brought. We laid them out with a pillow on the floor. We put down a little plastic dish for his aspirins and cod liver oil. I put an opened bottle of beer beside it. There was a cheese sandwich and half a bar of chocolate.

  ‘All for you,’ Mina whispered.

  ‘Let us help you,’ I said.

  He shook his head. He turned over, on to all fours, started to crawl the short distance towards the blankets. We saw his tears dropping through the beams of light, splashing on to the floor. He knelt by the blankets, panting. Mina went to him, knelt facing him.

  ‘I’ll make you more comfortable,’ she whispered.

  She unfastened the buttons on his jacket. She began to pull his jacket down over his shoulders.

  ‘No,’ he squeaked.

  ‘Trust me,’ she whispered.

  He didn’t move. She slid the sleeves down over his arms, took the jacket right off him. We saw what both of us had dreamed we might see. Beneath his jacket were wings that grew out through rips in his shirt. When they were released, the wings began to unfurl from his shoulder blades. They were twisted and uneven, they were covered in cracked and crooked feathers. They clicked and trembled as they opened. They were wider than his shoulders, higher than his head. Skellig hung his head towards the floor. His tears continued to fall. He whimpered with pain. Mina reached out to him, stroked his brow. She reached further and touched the feathers with her fingertips.

  ‘You’re beautiful,’ she whispered.

  ‘Let me sleep,’ squeaked Skellig. ‘Let me go home.’

  He lay face down and his wings continued to quiver into shape above him. We drew the blankets up beneath them, felt his feathers against the skin on the backs of our hands. Soon Skellig’s breathing settled and he slept. Whisper rested against him, purring.

  We stared at each other. My hand trembled as I reached out towards Skellig’s wings. I touched them with my fingertips. I rested my palms on them. I felt the feathers, and beneath them the bones and sinews and muscles that supported them. I felt the crackle of Skellig’s breathing.

  I tiptoed to the shutters and stared out through the narrow chinks.

  ‘What you doing? she whispered.

  ‘Making sure the world’s still really there,’ I said.

  **Twenty-five**

  The wires and the tubes were in her again. The glass case was shut. She didn’t move. She was wrapped in white. Her hair was fluffy, dead straight and dark. I wanted to touch it, and to touch her skin, feel it soft against my fingertips. Her little hands were clenched tight on either side of her head. We said nothing. I listened to the drone of the city outside, to the clatter of the hospital. I heard my own breathing, the scared quick breathing of my parents at my side. I heard them sniffing back their tears. I went on listening. I listened through all these noises, until I heard the baby, the gentle squeaking of her breath, tiny and distant as if it came from a different world. I closed my eyes and went on listening and listening. I listened deeper, until I believed I heard her beating heart. I told myself that if I listened hard enough her breathing and the beating of her heart would never be able to stop.

  Dad held my hand as we walked through the corridors towards the car park. We passed a lift shaft and the woman with the zimmer frame from upstairs tottered out. She gasped and rested on her frame and grinned at me.

  ‘Three times round every landing and three times up and down in the lift,’ she said. ‘Knackered. Absolutely knackered.’

  Dad blinked, and nodded kindly at her.

  ‘Blinking getting there!’ she said. She bobbed about inside the frame. ‘Be dancing soon, you see!’

  She patted my arm with her crooked hand.

  ‘You’re so sad today. Been to see that friend of yours?’

  I nodded, and she smiled.

  ‘I’m going home soon. He will, too. Keep moving, that’s the thing. Stay cheerful.’

  She hobbled away, singing ‘Lord of the Dance’ to herself

  ‘Who did she mean, your friend?’ said Dad.

  ‘Nobody.’

  He was too distracted to ask again.

  In the car I saw the tears running down his face.

  I closed my eyes. I remembered the sound of the baby’s breathing, her beating heart. I held them in my mind, went on listening to them. I touched my heart and I felt the baby’s heart beating beside my own. Traffic roared past, Dad sniffed back his tears. I stayed dead silent, and concentrated on keeping the baby safe.