**Twenty-six**
  ‘There it is,’ said Mina. ‘Archaeopteryx. The dinosaur that flew.’

  She laid the heavy encyclopedia on the grass beneath the tree. We looked down at the clumsy creature. It was perched on a thorny branch. Beyond it, volcanoes belched flames and smoke. The great land-bound creatures — diplodocus, stegosaurus — lurched across a stony plain.

  ‘We believe that dinosaurs became extinct,’ said Mina. ‘But there’s another theory, that their descendants are with us still. They nest in our trees and our attics. The air is filled with their songs. The little archaeopteryx survived, and began the line of evolution that led to birds.’

  She touched the short, stunted wings.

  ‘Wings and feathers, see? But the creature was a heavy, bony thing. Look at the clumsy, leaden tail. It was capable of nothing but short, sudden flights. From tree to tree, stone to stone. It couldn’t rise and spiral and dance like birds can now. No pneumatisation.’

  I looked at her.

  ‘Do you remember nothing?’ she said. ‘Pneumatisation. The presence of air cavities in the bones of birds. It is this which allows them free flight.’

  The blackbird flew from the tree above us and dashed into the sky.

  ‘If you held the archaeopteryx,’ she said, ‘it would be almost as heavy as stone in your hand. It would be almost as heavy as the clay models I make.’

  I looked into Mina’s dark eyes. They were wide open, expectant, like she wanted me to see something or say something. I thought of the baby in my lap, of Skellig slung between Mina and me. I thought of his wings and of the baby’s fluttering heart.

  ‘There’s no end to evolution,’ said Mina.

  She shuffled closer to me.

  ‘We have to be ready to move forward,’ she said. ‘Maybe this is not how we are meant to be for ever.’

  She took my hand.

  ‘We are extraordinary,’ she whispered.

  She looked deep into me.

  ‘Skellig!’ she whispered. ‘Skellig! Skellig!’

  I stared back. I didn’t blink. It was like she was calling Skellig out from somewhere deep inside me. It was like we were looking into the place where each other’s dreams came from.

  And then there was sniggering and giggling. We looked up, and there were Leakey and Coot, standing on the other side of the wall, looking down at us.

**Twenty-seven**

  ‘What’s wrong with you?’ they kept asking. ‘What’s bloody wrong with you?’

  I was hopeless. I couldn’t tackle. I missed the ball by a mile when I jumped up to head it. When I had the ball at my feet I stumbled all over the place. I fell over it once and skinned my elbow on the kerb. I felt shaky and wobbly and I didn’t want to be doing this, playing football in our front street with Leakey and Coot while Mina sat in the tree with a book in her lap and stared and stared.

  ‘It’s cos he’s been ill,’ said Leakey.

  ‘Bollocks,’ said Coot. ‘He’s not been ill. He’s just been upset.’

  He watched me trying to flick the b

all up on to my head.

  It bounced off my knee and bobbed into the gutter.

  ‘I’m just out of practice,’ I said.

  ‘Bollocks,’ he said. ‘It’s just been a week since you could beat anybody in the school.’

  ‘That’s right,’ said Leakey.

  ‘It’s her,’ said Coot. ‘Her in the tree. That lass he was with.’

  Leakey grinned.

  ‘That’s right,’ he said.

  I shook my head.

  ‘Bollocks,’ I whispered.

  My voice was as shaky as my feet had been.

  They stood there sniggering.

  ‘It’s that lass,’ said Leakey.

  ‘That lass that climbs in a tree like a monkey,’ said Coot. ‘Her that sits in a tree like a crow.’

  ‘Bollocks,’ I said.

  I looked Leakey in the eye. He’d been my best friend for years. I couldn’t believe he’d go on with this if I looked him in the eye and wanted him to stop.

  He grinned.

  ‘He holds hands with her,’ he said.

  ‘She says he’s extraordinary,’ said Coot.

  ‘Get stuffed,’ I said.

  I turned away from them, went past our house to the end of the street, turned down towards the back lane. I heard them coming after me. I sat down in the lane with my back against the boarded-up garage. I just wanted them to go away. I wanted them to stay. I wanted to be able to play like I used to. I wanted things to be just the way they used to be.

Leakey crouched beside me and I could feel he was sorry.

  ‘The baby’s ill,’ I said. ‘Really ill. The doctor says I’m in distress.’

  ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Yeah. I know. I’m sorry.’

  Coot kicked the ball back and forward against the boards.

  ‘Don’t do that,’ I said. ‘You’ll knock it down.’

  He sniggered.

  ‘Oh, aye?’

  He went on doing it.

  ‘Don’t do it,’ I said.

  I got up and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

  ‘Stop doing it,’ I said.

  He sniggered again.

‘Doing what, Michael? he said in a high girlish voice.

  I shoved him back against the garage. I thumped my hand against the boards beside his head.

  He winked at Leakey.

  ‘See what I mean?’ he said.

  I thumped the boards beside his head again. There was a loud crack and the whole garage trembled. Coot jumped away. We stared at the boards.

  ‘Bloody hell,’ said Leakey.

  There was another crack and another shudder and then silence. I opened the gate into the wilderness and we tiptoed inside. We stared through the door into the gloomy garage. Dust was falling thicker than ever through the light.

  There was another crack.

  ‘Bloody hell,’ said Coot.

‘I’d better get my dad,’ I said.

  **Twenty-eight**

  Very gently, using a little hammer and long thin nails, he nailed some boards across the door. The garage trembled as he worked. He told us to keep back. We stood in the wilderness staring, shaking our heads. He got some black gloss paint and wrote DANGER across the boards. He brought some Coke for us and some beer for himself and we all sat against the house wall and stared at the garage.

  ‘Better get it made safe, eh?’ said Dad.

  ‘My uncle’s a builder,’ said Coot. ‘Always doing garages and extensions and things.’

  ‘Aye?’ said Dad.

  ‘He’d tell you knock the whole thing down and start again.’

  ‘Aye?’

  ‘Aye. Some folk fight to keep things that should’ve been smashed years back.’

I looked at the garage and imagined it gone, saw the big emptiness that would take its place.

  ‘Aye,’ said Coot again. ‘He says the best jobs start with a massive sledgehammer and a massive skip.’

  He swigged his Coke. The blackbird flew on to the edge of the garage roof and perched there. I knew it would be watching the wilderness, looking for beetles and fat worms for its babies.

  ‘He wants us gone,’ I said.

  Coot cocked his finger and thumb like a gun. He eyed the bird as if he was aiming.

  ‘Gotcha,’ he said, and his hand recoiled as if he’d fired.

  Dad told Leakey and Coot it was good to see them again.

  ‘Michael’s been moping,’ he said. ‘A good kickabout with his mates’ll be just what the doctor ordered.’

  ‘Not against the garage, though,’ said Leakey.

  ‘Not against the blinking garage, no.’

  We took the ball and went through the house into the front street again. Mina wasn’t there. I played better now, but I couldn’t help turning to the empty tree. I imagined her alone with Skellig in the dark house.

  I caught them laughing at me.

  ‘Missing her already?’ said Coot.

  I raised my eyes and tried to grin. I went to sit on our front garden wall.

  ‘Who is she, anyway?’ said Leakey.

  I shrugged.

  ‘She’s called Mina.’

  ‘What school’s she at?’

  ‘She doesn’t go to school.’

  They looked at me.

  ‘How’s that?’ said Leakey.

  ‘Plays the wag?’ said Coot.

  ‘Her mother teaches her,’ I said.

  They looked again.

  ‘Bloody hell,’ said Leakey. ‘I thought you had to go to school.’

  ‘Imagine it,’ said Coot.

  They imagined it for a while.

  ‘Lucky sod,’ said Leakey.

  ‘What’ll she do for mates, though? said Coot. ‘And who’d like to be stuck at home all day?’

  ‘They think schools stop you from learning,’ I said. ‘They think schools try to make everybody just the same.’

  ‘That’s bollocks,’ said Coot.

  ‘Aye,’ said Leakey. ‘You’re learning all day long in school.’

  I shrugged.

  ‘Maybe.’

  ‘Is that why you’ve not been coming in?’ said Leakey. ‘Is it cos you’re never coming back again. You’re going to let that lass’s mother teach you?’

  ‘Course not,’ I said. ‘But they’re going to teach me some things.’

  ‘Like?’

  ‘Like modelling with clay. And about William Blake.’

  ‘Who’s he?’ said Coot. ‘That bloke that’s got the butcher’s shop in town?’

  ‘He said school drives all joy away,’ I said. ‘He was a painter and a poet.’

  They looked at each other and grinned. Leakey couldn’t look me in the eye. I could feel my face burning and burning.

  ‘Look,’ I said. ‘I can’t tell you anything. But the world’s full of amazing things.’

  Coot sighed and shook his head and bounced the ball between his knees.

  ‘I’ve seen them,’ I said.

  Leakey stared at me.

  I imagined taking him through the DANGER door, taking him to Skellig, showing him. For a moment I was dying to tell him what I’d seen and what I’d touched.

  ‘There she is,’ said Coot.

  We turned together, and there was Mina climbing into the tree again.

  ‘The monkey girl,’ said Leakey.

  Coot giggled.

  ‘Hey!’ he said. ‘Maybe Rasputin’s right about that evolution stuff. He could come and look at her and see there’s monkeys all around us still.’

  **Twenty-nine**

  Her eyes were cold as she stared down at me from the tree. Her voice was sarcastic and singsong:

  ‘Thank God I was never sent to school,

  To be flogd into following the style of a Fool.’

  ‘You know nothing about it,’ I said. ‘We don’t get flogged and my friends aren’t fools.’

  ‘Ha!’

  ‘That’s it,’ I said. ‘You know nothing about it. You think you’re special but you’re just as ignorant as anybody. You might know about William Blake but you know nothing about what ordinary people do.’

  ‘Ha!’

  ‘Yes. Ha!’

  I stared at my feet. I picked my fingernails. I kicked the garden wall.

  ‘They hate me,’ she said. ‘I could see it in their eyes. They think I’m taking you away from them. They’re stupid.’

  ‘They’re not stupid!’

  ‘Stupid. Kicking balls and jumping at each other and screeching like hyenas. Stupid. Yes, hyenas. You as well.’

  ‘Hyenas? They think you’re a monkey, then.’

  Her eyes glared and her face burned.

  ‘See? See what I mean? They know nothing about me but they hate me.’

  ‘And of course you know everything about them.’

  ‘I know enough. There’s nothing to know. Kicking, screeching, being stupid.’

  ‘Ha!’

  ‘Yes, ha! And that little ginger one…’

  ‘Blake was little and ginger.’

  ‘How do you know that?’

  ‘See? You think nobody but you can know anything!’

  ‘No, I don’t!’

  ‘Ha!’

  Her lips were pressed tight together. She pressed her head back against the trunk of the tree.

  ‘Go home,’ she said. ‘Go and play stupid football or something. Leave me alone.’

  I gave the wall a last kick, then I left her. I went into my front garden. I went through the open front door. Dad shouted hello from somewhere upstairs. I went

straight through into the wilderness and squatted there and squeezed my eyes tight to try and stop the tears.

  **Thirty**

  The owls woke me. Or a call that was like that of the owls. I looked out into the night. The moon hung over the city, a great orange ball with the silhouettes of steeples and chimney stacks upon it. The sky was blue around it, deepening to blackness high above, where only the most brilliant stars shone. Down below, the wilderness was filled with the pitch black shadow of the garage and a wedge of cold silvery light.

  I watched for the birds and saw nothing.

  ‘Skellig,’ I whispered. ‘Skellig. Skellig.’

  I cursed myself; because in order to go to him now I had to rely on Mina.

  I lay in bed again. I moved between sleeping and waking. I dreamt that Skellig entered the hospital ward, that he lifted the baby from her glass case. He pulled the tubes and wires from her. She reached up and touched his pale, dry skin with her little fingers and she giggled. He took her away, flew with her in his arms through the darkest part of the sky. He landed with her in the wilderness and stood there calling to me.

  ‘Michael! Michael!’

  They stood there laughing. She bounced in his arms. They had lost all of their weaknesses and they were strong again.

  ‘Michael!’ he called, and his eyes were shining with joy. ‘Michael! Michael! Michael!’

  I woke up. I heard the owls again. I pulled on some jeans and a pullover and tiptoed downstairs and out into the wilderness. Nothing there, of course, just the image of them burning in my mind. I stood listening to the city all around, its low, deep, endless roar. I went out through the shadows into the back lane. Though I knew it was useless, I began to walk towards Mina’s boarded house. Something brushed against me as I walked.

  ‘Whisper!’ I whispered.

  The cat went with me, slinking at my side.

  The door into the garden was ajar. The moon had climbed. It hung directly over us. Behind the wall, the garden was flooded with its light. Mina was waiting. She sat on the step before the DANGER door, elbows resting on her knees, pale face resting on her hands. I hesitated and we watched each other.

  ‘What took so long?’ she said.

  I looked at her.

  ‘Thought I’d have to do this all alone,’ she said.

  ‘Thought that was what you wanted.’

  The cat prowled to her side, brushed itself against her legs.

  ‘Oh, Michael,’ she said.

  I didn’t know what to do. I sat on the steps below her.

  ‘We said stupid things,’ she said. ‘I said stupid things.’

  I said nothing. An owl silently flew down into the garden and perched on the back wall.

  Hoot, it went. Hoot hoot hoot.

  ‘Don’t be angry. Be my friend,’ she whispered.

  ‘I am your friend.’

  ‘It’s possible to hate your friend. You hated me today.’

  ‘You hated me.’

  The other owl descended and perched in silence beside its partner.

  ‘I love the night,’ said Mina. ‘Anything seems possible at night when the rest of the world has gone to sleep.’

  I looked up at her silvery face, her ink-black eyes. I knew that in a dream I would see her as the moon with Skellig flying silently across her.

  I moved up to her side.

  ‘I’ll be your friend,’ I whispered.

  She smiled, and we sat there looking out at the moonlight. Soon the owls rose, and headed for the centre of the city. We lay back together against the DANGER door. I felt myself falling into sleep.

  ‘Skellig!’ I hissed. ‘Skellig!’

  We rubbed the sleep from our eyes.

  Mina pushed the key into the lock.

**Thirty-one**

  We had no torch. The light that came through the chinks in the boards was pale and weak. We blundered through the dark. We held hands and stretched our free hands out in front of us. We walked into the wall. We caught our toes on loose floorboards. We stumbled as we climbed the stairs. We shuffled across the first landing. We felt for the handle of the door to the room where we thought we’d left Skellig. We inched the door open. We whispered, ‘Skellig! Skellig!’ No answer. We moved forward carefully, arms outstretched, feeling forward with our feet before we took each step. Our breath was fast, shallow, trembly. My heart was thundering. I opened my eyes wide, glared into the dark, seeking the shape of his body on the floor. Nothing there, just the blankets, the pillow, the plastic dish, the beer bottle rolling away from my stumbling feet.

  ‘Where is he?’ whispered Mina.

  ‘Skellig,’ we whispered. ‘Skellig! Skellig!’

  We turned back to the landing again, we stumbled up the next flight of stairs, we opened many doors, we stared past them into pitch black rooms, we whispered his name, we heard nothing but our own breath, our own uncertain feet, his name echoing back to us from bare floorboards and bare walls, we turned back to the landing again, we stumbled up the next flight of stairs.

  We halted. We gripped each other’s hand. We felt each other shuddering. Our heads were filled with the darkness of the house. Beside me was nothing but Mina’s face, its silvery bloom.

  ‘We must be more calm,’ she whispered. ‘We must listen, like we listened to the squeaking of the blackbird chicks.’

  ‘Yes,’ I said.

  ‘Stand still. Do nothing. Listen to the deepest deepest places of the dark.’

  We held hands and listened to the night. We heard the endless din of the city all around us, the creaking and cracking of the house, our own breath. As I listened deeper, I heard the breathing of the baby deep inside myself. I heard the far off beating of her heart. I sighed, knowing that she was safe.

  ‘You hear?’ said Mina.

  I listened, and it was as if she guided me to hear what she heard. It was like hearing the blackbird chicks cheeping in the nest. It came from above us, a far-off squeaking, whistling sound. Skellig’s breathing.

  ‘I hear it,’ I whispered.

  We climbed the final flight of stairs towards the final doorway. Gently, fearfully, we turned the handle and slowly pushed open the door.

  Moonlight came through the arched window. Skellig sat before its frame, bowed forward. We saw the black silhouette of his pale face, of his bowed shoulders, of his wings folded upon his shoulders. At the base of his wings was the silhouette of his shredded shirt. He must have heard us as we stepped through the door, as we crouched together against the wall, but he didn’t turn. We didn’t speak. We didn’t dare approach him. As we watched, an owl appeared, dropping on silent wings from the moonlit sky to the moonlit window. It perched on the frame. It bowed forward, opened its beak, laid something on the windowsill and flew out again. Skellig bent his head to where the bird had been. He pressed his lips to the windowsill. Then the owl, or the other owl, came again to the window, perched, opened its beak, flew off again. Skellig bent forward again. He chewed.

  ‘They’re feeding him,’ whispered Mina.

  And it was true. Each time the owls left, Skellig lifted what they had left him, he chewed and swallowed.

  At last he turned to us. We saw nothing of his eyes, his pale cheeks; just his black silhouette against the glistening night. Mina and I held hands. Still we didn’t dare go to him.

  ‘Come to me,’ he whispered.

  We didn’t move.

  ‘Come to me.’

  Mina tugged me, led me to him.

  We met him in the middle of the room. He stood erect.

  He seemed stronger than he’d ever been. He took my hand and Mina’s hand, and we stood there, the three of us, linked in the moonlight on the old bare floorboards. He squeezed my hand as if to reassure me. When he smiled at me I caught the stench of his breath, the stench of the things the owls had given him to eat. I gagged. His breath was the breath of an animal that lives on the meat of other living things: a dog, a fox, a blackbird, an owl. He squeezed me again and smiled again. He stepped sideways and we

turned together, kept slowly turning, as if we were carefully, nervously beginning to dance. The moonlight shone on our faces in turn. Each face spun from shadow to light, from shadow to light, from shadow to light, and each time the faces of Mina and Skellig came into the light they were more silvery, more expressionless. Their eyes were darker, more empty, more penetrating. For a moment I wanted to pull away from them, to break the circle, but Skellig’s hand tightened on mine.

  ‘Don’t stop, Michael,’ he whispered.

  His eyes and Mina’s eyes stared far into me.

  ‘No, Michael,’ said Mina. ‘Don’t stop.’

  I didn’t stop. I found that I was smiling, that Skellig and Mina were smiling too. My heart raced and thundered and then it settled to a steady rolling rhythm. I felt Skellig’s and Mina’s hearts beating along with my own. I felt their breath in rhythm with mine. It was like we had moved into each other, as if we had become one thing. Our heads were dark, then were as huge and moonlit as the night. I couldn’t feel the bare floorboards against my feet. All I knew were the hands in mine, the faces turning through the light and the dark, and for a moment I saw ghostly wings at Mina’s back, I felt the feathers and delicate bones rising from my own shoulders, and I was lifted from the floor with Skellig and Mina. We turned circles together through the empty air of that empty room high in an old house in Crow Road.

  Then it was over. I found myself crumpled on the floorboards alongside Mina. Skellig crouched beside us. He touched our heads.

  ‘Go home now,’ he squeaked.

  ‘But how are you like this now?’ I asked.

  He pressed his finger to his lips.

  ‘The owls and the angels,’ he whispered.

  He raised his finger when we began to speak again.

  ‘Remember this night,’ he whispered.

  We tottered from the room. We descended the stairs. We went out through the DANGER door into the night. We hesitated for a moment.

  ‘Did it happen to you as well?’ I whispered.

  ‘Yes. It happened to all of us.’

  We laughed. I closed my eyes. I tried to feel again the feathers and bones of wings on my shoulders. I opened my eyes, tried to recall the ghostly wings rising at Mina’s back.

‘It will happen again,’ said Mina. ‘Won’t it?’

  ‘Yes.’

  We hurried homeward. At the entrance to the back lane, we paused again to catch our breath. It was then that we heard Dad’s voice, calling.

  ‘Michael! Michael!’

  As we stood there, we saw him come out from the wilderness into the lane. His voice was filled with fear.

  ‘Michael! Oh, Michael!’

  Then he saw us standing there, hand in hand.

  ‘Michael! Oh, Michael!’

  He ran and grabbed me in his arms.

  ‘We were sleepwalking,’ said Mina.

 ‘Yes,’ I said, as he held me tight to keep me safe. ‘I didn’t know what I was doing. I was dreaming. I was sleepwalking.’