**Forty-one**

  I was wrong. She wasn’t dead. She was in a long, deep sleep that followed the anaesthetic. She was snoring gently beneath white blankets. Mum told us about the great wound in her tiny chest and the massive bandage that covered it. There were wires and tubes again and a machine that bleeped in rhythm with her tiny heart.

  ‘They said everything’ll be all right now, Michael,’ she said. ‘They’re sure everything’ll be all right.’

We sat there, the three of us, hand in hand, looking down at the delicate creature.

  ‘They said there was a moment when they thought they’d lost her,’ she said. She put her arm around me. ‘But she burst into life again.’

  A nurse came. She checked the wires and tubes and the machine. She patted my head.

  ‘Your sister’s got a heart of fire,’ she said. ‘She’s a little fighter. She won’t give in.’

  ‘You still say your prayers for her?’ asked Mum.

  ‘Yes,’ I said.

  ‘We’ve been wondering again what to call her,’ said Dad.

  ‘Persephone,’ I said.

  They laughed.

‘Too much of a mouthful,’ he said.

  ‘It has to be something very little and very strong,’ Mum said. ‘Just like she is.’

  ‘Gus,’ said Dad, and we giggled.

  ‘Butch,’ I said.

  ‘Garth,’ said Mum.

  ‘Buster,’ said Dad.

  ‘Look,’ said Mum. ‘She’s dreaming.’

  And she was. Her eyes were moving behind their lids.

  ‘Wonder what she sees,’ said Dad.

  ‘Only nice things, I hope,’ said Mum.

  ‘I’m sure that’s right,’ said Dad. ‘Look at her face. Sweet and still, nearly smiling. Little angel. I know. We could call her Angela. But no, too long.’

  ‘It was the strangest thing,’ said Mum.

  She stopped and shook her head.

  ‘What was?’ said Dad.

  She crinkled her face up, like she was embarrassed.

  ‘Well,’ she said. ‘I was lying here last night, tossing and turning. Kept getting up to look at her. Kept dropping off to sleep. And the strangest of dreams…’

  ‘And…?’ said Dad.

  ‘And I saw this man, that’s all. Another dream, though I was sure I was wide awake. He was standing over the baby. He was filthy. All in black, an ancient dusty suit. A great hunch on his back. Hair all matted and tangled. I was terrified. I wanted to reach out to him. I wanted to push him away. I wanted to scream, Get away from our baby! I wanted to shout for the nurses and the doctors. But I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, and I was sure he was going to take her away. But then he turned and looked at me. His face as white and dry as chalk. And there was such tenderness in his eyes. And for some reason I knew he hadn’t come to harm her. I knew it would be all right…’

  She stopped again and shook her head.

  ‘And…?’ said Dad.

  ‘And then he reached right down with both hands and lifted her up. She was wide awake. They stared and stared into each other’s eyes. He started slowly to turn around…’

  ‘Like they were dancing,’ I said.

  ‘That’s right, like they were dancing. And then the strangest thing of all…’

  She laughed at us, and shrugged.

  ‘And the strangest thing of all was, there were wings on the baby’s back. Not solid wings. Transparent, ghostly, hardly visible, but there they were. Little feathery things. It looked so funny. The strange tall man and the little baby and the wings. And that was it. He put her back down, he turned and looked at me again, and it was over. I slept like a log the rest of the night. When I woke up they were already getting her ready for the operation. But I wasn’t worried any more. I kissed her and whispered to her how much we all loved her and they took her away. I knew it was going to be all right.’

  ‘And it is,’ said Dad.

  ‘And it is.’

  She poked me in the ribs.

  ‘Must have been thinking about what you asked me. What are shoulder blades for? Eh?’

  I smiled and nodded.

  ‘Yes. Yes.’

  The baby’s eyes kept moving, seeing the things she imagined in her sleep.

  ‘Funny little chick,’ said Dad. ‘What can she be seeing?’

  ‘Skellig,’ I whispered to myself ‘Skellig.’

  ‘It isn’t over,’ said Mum. ‘You know that, don’t you? We’ll have to protect her always, especially at first.’

  ‘I know,’ I said. ‘We’ll love her and love her and love her.’

  We left soon afterwards. In the corridor I saw Doctor MacNabola coming out of the lift with a clutch of students in white coats around him. I told Dad just to wait a minute. I ran to Doctor MacNabola. He looked down at me.

  ‘Doctor,’ I said. ‘I told you about my friend. Remember? The one with arthritis.’

  He puffed his chest out and drew his shoulders up.

  ‘Aha,’ he said. ‘So is he ready for my needles and my saw?’

  ‘No,’ I said. ‘He seems to be getting better.’

  ‘Splendid,’ he said. ‘Cod liver oil and a dose of positive thinking, eh? Maybe he’ll escape me yet.’

  The students giggled.

  ‘Can love help a person to get better?’ I asked.

  He raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips, tapped his chin. One of the students took a notebook and pencil from her pocket.

  ‘Love,’ said the doctor. ‘Hmmm. What can we doctors know about love, eh?’ He winked at the student with the notebook and she blushed. ‘ “Love is the child that breathes our breath/Love is the child that scatters death.” ’

  ‘William Blake? I said.

  He laughed.

  ‘We have an educated man before us,’ he said.

  He smiled properly for the first time.

  ‘Tell your friend that I hope he and I never have to meet.’

  Then he winked at me, turned, and led the students away. ‘What was that about?’ said Dad when I hurried back to him.

  ‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Somebody I met soon after the baby came in.’

  He laughed.

  ‘Mystery man, that’s who you are.’

  In the car on the way home we wound the windows down and he sang ‘The Black Hills of Dakota’ at the top of his voice. I put my hands together and hooted and hooted like an owl.

  ‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘I like that. That’s really good. You’ll have to show me how to do that one. Not while I’m driving, though, eh?’

  We smiled as we drove through the busy city streets.

  ‘She’s not out of danger yet,’ he said. ‘You d

o understand that, don’t you?’

  ‘Yes. But she will be, won’t she?’

  ‘Yes!’ he yelled. ‘Yes, she blinking will!’

  And he sang again.

  ‘Have to get on with that blinking house now, eh?’ he said. ‘I know! We can have 27 and 53 tonight, eh?’

  ‘27 and 53,’ I said. ‘Sweetest of nectars!’

  ‘Sweetest of nectars! I like that. Sweetest of blinking nectars!’

  **Forty-two**

  It was long after dusk when Mina and I went out with the remnants of 27 and 53 and a bottle of brown ale in a paper bag. The lights were on in the streets, the air was cold, and the sky was glittering with stars. Our breath curled in long white plumes around us. I told Mina about Mum’s dream as we walked.

  ‘Extraordinary,’ she whispered.

  She smiled and said it showed that he’d always be there, whenever we might need him. But we knew we wanted to see him and touch him again.

  In the lane, we found Whisper at our heels.

  ‘Bad boy,’ she said, leaning down to stroke him.

  She laughed.

  ‘All day long the fledglings got stronger and braver. They fluttered up into the middle of the hedge where they couldn’t be caught. All day long they were getting worms, worms, worms, and when we let him out, this one just sat grumpy and frustrated on the step beside us.’

  She stroked him again.

  ‘Horrible little savage,’ she said, and he purred and pressed against her.

  We went through the DANGER door expecting nothing. The house was still and silent. The attic was empty. No owls. No Skellig. On the windowsill we found a dead mouse, a bit of bacon rind, a little mound of dead black beetles.

  We sat on the floor against the wall and stared out towards the endless stars.

  ‘I really think she’ll be all right now,’ I said.

  Mina smiled and Whisper purred.

  ‘Feel my heart,’ I said.

  She put her hand on my chest.

  ‘Can you feel it?’ I said. ‘Her heart beating right in there beside my own?’

  She concentrated.

  ‘I’m not sure, Michael,’ she said.

  ‘Try again. Concentrate. It’s like touching and listening and imagining all at the same time. It’s something far-off and tiny, like blackbird chicks cheeping in a nest.’

  She closed her eyes and felt again.

  She smiled.

  ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, there it is. There and there and there.’

  ‘The baby’s heart,’ I said. ‘It won’t stop now.’

  ‘It won’t stop now.’

  She started singing her William Blake song.

  ‘The sun descending in the west.

  The evening star does shine…’

  I joined in with her.

  ‘The birds are silent in their nest

  And I must seek for mine…’

  ‘See?’ she said. ‘I said we’d get you singing.’

  The night deepened and we knew we’d have to go home soon.

  ‘I could sleep here,’ she said. Just like this. And be happy for ever.’

  I sighed.

  ‘But we have to go.’

  We didn’t move.

  And then there was a sudden rustling in the air outside, the stars were blocked out, the window creaked, and there he was, climbing in through the arched frame. He didn’t see us. He crouched on the floor, gasping for breath. His wings slowly settled on his back.

  ‘Skellig,’ I hissed.

  He turned his moon-pale face towards us.

  ‘Michael. Mina,’ he said. His voice was shallow, thin, strained, but a smile was forming on his face.

  I held out the paper bag.

  ‘We brought you this, Skellig. 27 and 53.’

  ‘Ha!’

  I opened the bag and we took it to him. We knelt at his side. He hooked his long curved finger into the food, lifted out a string of sauce and pork and beansprouts. He licked it from his finger with his long pale tongue.

  ‘Sweetest of nectars,’ he whispered. ‘Food of the blinking gods.’

  ‘And this,’ I said.

  I snapped the top off the bottle and he let me trickle the beer into his open mouth.

  ‘Thought it was cold mice for supper and I come home to a banquet.’

  He ate again, sighed with contentment.

  ‘Pair of angels,’ he said. ‘That’s what you are.’

  We watched him eat and drink, saw him gathering his strength.

  ‘You went to my sister,’ I said.

  He laughed.

  ‘Hm! Pretty little thing.’

  ‘You made her strong.’

  ‘That one’s glittering with life. Heart like fire. It was her that gave the strength to me.’

  He sipped at the beer again.

  ‘But worn out now,’ he said. ‘Knackered.’

  Then he reached out and touched Mina’s face, then mine.

  ‘But I’m getting strong, thanks to the angels and the owls.’

  He put the food and drink aside and leaned against the wall.

  We sat in a tiny circle, the three of us, and for minutes we just watched each other and smiled.

  ‘You’re going away,’ I said at last.

  He closed his eyes and nodded.

  ‘Where will you go?’ I said.

  He shrugged, pointed out to the sky.

  ‘Somewhere,’ he said.

  I touched his dry, cold hand.

  ‘What are you?’ I whispered.

  He shrugged again.

  ‘Something,’ he said. ‘Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel.’ He laughed. ‘Something like that.’

  He smiled.

  ‘Let’s stand up,’ he said.

  We made our circle and we held each other tight. We looked deep into each other’s eyes. We began to turn. Our hearts and breath were together. We turned and turned until the ghostly wings rose from Mina’s back and mine, until we felt ourselves being raised, until we seemed to turn and dance in the empty air.

  And then it ended and we came to earth again.

  ‘We’ll remember for ever,’ said Mina.

  Skellig leaned forward and hugged us both.

  He licked a drop of red sauce from his lips.

  ‘Thank you for 27 and 53,’ he said. ‘Thank you for giving me my life again. Now you have to go home.’

  We watched him as we walked towards the door and as we pulled it open. We peered through as we slowly pulled it closed. He gazed back at us with his tender eyes. Then we went silently down through the house and we stepped out with Whisper into the astounding night.

**Forty-three**

  I was brilliant at school next day. Nobody could get the ball away from me. I did body swerves and dribbles and flicks. I skipped over tackles, back—heeled the ball to my team mates, scored with diving headers and with long shots curled into the corners of the net.

  After the bell went, and we were trailing back to the school across the field, Leakey ran after me.

  ‘Lucky sod,’ he said. ‘You’ll never play like that again.’

  I laughed.

  ‘Luck? What about this, then?’

  I dropped the ball and dribbled it round him. I flicked it between his legs and ran on with it. Then he got me with a thumping tackle into the back of my legs that sent us both sprawling.

  ‘Foul!’ I shouted. ‘Foul!’

  We started wrestling, rolling over and over on the grass. He was bigger than me and he pinned me down, sat over me, pressed my shoulders into the ground.

  He was grinning.

  ‘Say it again,’ he said.

  ‘Foul! Bloody foul!’

  He lifted his fist like he was going to smash me in the face but then he just laughed and flopped down and lay beside me.

  ‘Bloody hell,’ he said. ‘You were brilliant.’

  We lay there laughing, then Mrs Dando started yelling.

  ‘Get in

, you two! You’re going to be late!’

  We walked together towards school.

  ‘It’s like you’ve been miles and miles away,’ he said.

  ‘I know,’ I said.

  ‘Would you tell me about it?’ he said.

  We paused and I looked at him and I knew he really wanted to know.

  ‘Some day I’ll tell you everything,’ I said.

  We saw Coot in the school doorway waiting for us.

  ‘Might even tell that daft sod,’ I said. ‘If I think he might believe it.’

  Then Mrs Dando was yelling again.

  ‘Come on, you two! Come on! Get in!’

  **Forty-four**

  That evening and the evenings that followed, I helped Dad in the house. I mixed wallpaper paste for him and carefully painted door frames and window frames with him. We went to see Mum and the baby in the hospital. The baby soon came out of her long sleep and she got stronger and stronger. They took the wires and tubes out of her and they switched off the machine. The bandages on her chest were smaller and smaller. Every evening she sat in my lap, twisting and turning and gurgling. She learned how to stick out her tongue at us, and her mouth and eyes started to smile.

  ‘Look at her,’ we’d say. ‘Little devil.’

  And Mum would laugh and say, ‘Watch out. We’re coming home soon.’

  I used to look for Dr MacNabola, but I never saw him again.

  We had lots of Chinese takeaways. Dad winked and said we had to keep it quiet or Mum would have us on salad for a month. I poked his stomach.

  ‘Mightn’t be a bad idea, Fatso.’

  ‘You don’t want them, then?’ he said. ‘No more 27 and 53, then?’

  ‘That’s right, Fatso,’ I said. ‘I’ll have… 19 and 42 instead.’

  ‘Ha! A bit of imagination, eh?’

  After we’d eaten, I’d go to Mina’s. We drew and painted on her kitchen table. We read William Blake and we wrote stories about adventures in old houses and joumeys to far-off imaginary places.

  Each evening, Mina used to ask, ‘When’s she coming home, Michael? I can hardly wait. I haven’t even seen her yet.’

  We went one more time to the attic before the baby came home. The sun was still shining. It hung low and red and huge over the city.

The attic was empty and silent. She pointed to the heap of owl pellets beneath the nest.

  ‘Don’t go near,’ she said. ‘They’ll defend their chicks to the death.’

  We stood at the centre, remembering Skellig.

  ‘Someone else might find him now,’ said Mina.

  ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I hope they do.’

  Then we saw the outline of a heart scratched into the floorboards beneath the arched window. Just outside the heart was scratched, Thank you. S., and inside were three small white feathers.

  We picked up the feathers and smiled.

  ‘Three,’ said Mina.

  ‘One for the baby as well,’ I said.

  As we crouched there, the owls flew out into the room and perched on the frame above us. Then two fledglings appeared, tottering in the shadows by the far wall. They were round and almost naked. Little cheeps came from their wide open beaks. We gasped at how beautiful they were, how delicate. Then the owls went out hunting. We stayed for a while. We watched the owls flying back in with the meat from tiny animals they’d killed. We watched the fledglings gorge themselves.

‘Little savages,’ I said.

  ‘That’s right,’ said Mina. ‘Beautiful tender savages.’

  We smiled, and prepared to tiptoe away. Then the owls flew back in and came to us. They laid something on the floor in front of us. A dead mouse, a tiny dead baby bird. Blood was still trickling through the ripped fur, through the young feathers. The owls flew quickly away again, and we heard them hooting in the thickening night.

  ‘Savages,’ I whispered.

  ‘Killers,’ said Mina. ‘Extraordinary presents, eh.’

  ‘They think we’re something like them,’ I said.

  ‘Perhaps we are,’ said Mina.

  We lifted the creatures and tiptoed out.

 ‘Goodnight, little chicks,’ we whispered.

  Outside, we buried the mouse and the fledgling in a border in the garden. We stared up towards the attic and saw the owls, lit by moonlight now, flying in with more meat for their young.

  ‘The builders’ll be coming soon,’ said Mina. ‘I’ll make sure they do nothing until the chicks have flown.’
 **Forty-five**

  That Saturday the builders came to sort the garage out. There were three of them, an old man in a cap, Mr Batley, and his two sons, Nick and Gus. They thumped the walls and watched them sway and tremble. They heard the roof creaking and sagging. They scratched the bricks and watched them flake easily away. They yanked Dad’s planks off and peered inside.

  Mr Batley took his cap off and scratched his bald head. ‘Wouldn’t get me in there for danger money,’ he said. He pondered. He shrugged and twisted his mouth and looked at Dad.

  ‘Know what I’m going to say, don’t you?’ he said.

‘Suppose so,’ said Dad.

  ‘Nowt else for it. Knock it down and start again.’

  Dad looked at me.

  ‘What d’you think?’ he said.

  ‘Don’t know,’ I said.

  ‘Easy choice,’ said Mr Batley. ‘Knock it down or sit and watch it fall down.’

  Dad laughed.

  ‘Go on, then,’ he said. ‘Get the stuff out from inside and knock it down.’

  They put steel props up to keep the roof from falling in while they worked inside. They brought the junk out and laid it around Ernie’s toilet in the wilderness: all the ancient chests of drawers, the broken washbasins, the bags of cement, the broken doors, the tattered deckchairs, rotted carpets, the ropes, the pipes, the newspapers and magazines, the coils of cable, the bags of nails. Dad and I went through it all as they brought it out. We kept saying, ‘This’ll come in useful,’ then saying, ‘No, it won’t, it’s just a piece of junk.’ A truck came and left a huge steel skip in the back lane. We chucked in everything. We were all covered in dead bluebottles, dead spiders, brick and mortar dust. When it was empty, we stood around drinking tea and laughing at the mess.

  I went to the door alone and stared in.

  ‘Michael!’ said Dad.

  ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I know. I won’t go in.’

  He told the builders about how desperate I’d been to get in there after we’d moved in.

  Just like these two used to be,’ said Mr Batley. ‘Show them something dark and dangerous and it was the devil’s own work to keep them out.’

  I kept on staring. Just rubble and dust and broken pottery, and in the far corner a couple of takeaway trays, some brown ale bottles, a scattered handful of feathers, the pellets. I sighed and whispered, ‘Goodbye, Skellig.’

  Then the builders and Dad were at my back.

  ‘See,’ said Mr Batley, pointing past me. ‘Looks like you’ve had a dosser spending a night or two in there. Lucky the whole lot didn’t come down on his head.’

  Then we finished the tea. Mr Batley rubbed his hands.

  ‘Right, then, lads,’ he said. ‘Time for a bit of knocky down.’

  It only took an hour or two. We stood in the kitchen and watched them work with crowbars and sledgehammers and saws. We bit our lips and shook our heads each time a bit of roof or a bit of wall fell with a massive thump. Soon the garage was just a great pile of bricks and timber and dust.

  ‘Bloody hell,’ said Dad.

  ‘Least we’ll have a nice long garden for the baby to play in,’ I said.

  He nodded, and started talking about the lawn he’d lay, and the pond he’d dig, and the shrubs he’d plant for the birds to build their nests in.

  ‘Ha!’ he said. ‘A little paradise for us all.’

  When it was over, Gus and Nick stood proud and happy with their hands on their hips. Mr Batley, white as death with dust, gave us the thumbs up and we went out with more tea.

  ‘Bloody lovely, that was,’ he said.

  ‘Aye,’ said Gus. ‘You cannot beat a bit of knocky down.’

  **Forty-six**

  She came home on a Sunday. A beautiful bright warm day. It was really spring at last. Dad went off in the car and I stayed behind to finish cleaning the kitchen up. I wrapped last night’s takeaway tins in newspaper and threw them in the bin. I put the kettle on for Mum. I got a can of beer and a glass ready for Dad.

  I went upstairs and slipped the baby’s feather under her mattress. I smiled, because I knew she’d have the best of dreams.

  I waited, looking out into the empty space left by Mr Batley and his sons. Even the cracked concrete floor was gone now. There was a wooden fence instead of the back wall. I imagined the garden, filled it with all the shrubs and flowers and the grass that would soon be growing where the wilderness had been.

  I trembled when I heard the car. I couldn’t move. Then I took deep breaths, and thought of Skellig and went to open the front door. Dad had the baby in his arms. Mum stood there beaming.

  ‘Welcome home, Mum,’ I whispered, using the words I’d practised.

  She smiled at how nervous I was. She took my hand and led me back into the house, into the kitchen. She sat me on a chair and put the baby in my arms.

  ‘Look how beautiful your sister is,’ she said. ‘Look how strong she is.’

  I lifted the baby higher. She arched her back as if she was about to dance or fly. She reached out, and scratched with her tiny nails at the skin on my face. She tugged at my lips and touched my tongue. She tasted of milk and salt and of something mysterious, sweet and sour all at once. She whimpered and gurgled. I held her closer and her dark eyes looked right into me, right into the place where all my dreams were, and she smiled.

  ‘She’ll have to keep going for check-ups,’ Mum said. ‘But they’re sure the danger’s gone, Michael. Your sister is really going to be all right.’

  We laid the baby on the table and sat around her. We didn’t know what to say. Mum drank her tea. Dad let me have swigs of his beer. We just sat there looking at each other and touching each other and we laughed and laughed and we cried and cried.

  Soon, there was a gentle knock at the door. I went and Foun

d Mina standing there. She was shy and quiet, like I’d never seen her before. She started to say something, but it was a mumble and she ended up just looking into my eyes.

  'Come and see,’ I said.

  I took her hand and led her into the kitchen. She said good evening politely to my parents. She said she hoped they didn’t mind. Dad shifted aside to let her in beside the table. She looked down at the baby.

  ‘She’s beautiful,’ she gasped. ‘She’s extraordinary!’

  And she looked around and laughed with us all.

  She was really shy again when she said, ‘I brought a present. I hope you don’t mind.’

  She unrolled a picture of Skellig, with his wings rising from his back and a tender smile on his white face.

  Mum caught her breath.

  She stared at me and she stared at Mina. For a moment, I thought she was going to ask us something. Then she simply smiled at both of us.

  ‘Just something I made up,’ said Mina. ‘I thought the baby might like it on her wall.’

  ‘It’s really lovely, Mina,’ Mum said, and she took it gently from Mina’s hands.

  ‘Thank you,’ said Mina. She stood there awkwardly. ‘I’ll leave you alone now.’

  I led her back to the door.

  We smiled at each other.

  ‘See you tomorrow, Mina,’

  ‘See you tomorrow, Michael.’

  I watched her walk away in the late light. From across the street, Whisper came to join her. When Mina stooped down to stroke the cat, I was sure I saw for a second the ghostly image of her wings.

  Back in the kitchen, they were talking again about giving the baby a proper name.

  ‘Persephone,’ I said.

  ‘Not that mouthful again,’ said Dad.

  We thought a little longer, and in the end we simply called her Joy.