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Opening extract from

The Secret Dog

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Chapter 1

The sea eagle circled lazily far overhead. Its three-metre wingspan made it easily visible. Josh kept an eye on it, as his long legs carried him swiftly up the rough dirt path. He knew the predator's eyes were sharper than his.

As usual, he'd headed straight for the commons after school. He had several hours to himself. Time to explore, and to try to find animals who were injured or ill. Josh loved to nurse them back to health. His uncle didn't mind him bringing them home – as long as it was temporary. But he had an iron rule – no pets.

Suddenly, the eagle changed direction. Had it spotted an animal in trouble? Josh watched as the bird started to circle over an area to his left. He knew this didn't *necessarily* mean it had seen potential prey – but the hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

The bird seemed to be concentrating its attention on a steep grass-covered gully that led down to one of the many rivers that crossed the commons. The gully was pitted with muddy holes and odd-shaped gashes where erosion had eaten away the land. Because the commons didn't belong to anybody, nobody took much care of it.

Two thousand sheep called it home. Two thousand sheep, lots of small wild animals, and Josh.

Josh had been exploring the commons for five years, since he'd come to live on the island. He loved it all, every neglected bit of it.

The sea eagle had adjusted its flight path again. It was flying lower, and circling an area near the river below. If there *was* an animal to save, Josh hoped it wasn't on the other side. He hadn't changed out of his school uniform.

To his left there was a wire fence. He put his hand on a solid-looking fence-post and used it to vault over. Then he started down the steep slope, keeping an eye on the huge bird. It was circling still lower. Maybe it sensed Josh was a threat to its dinner.

As Josh got closer to the river, he looked from side to side, his eyes rapidly scanning the area for any signs of life. His long, dirty-blond hair flopped over his eyes. He hadn't noticed any breaks in the fence . . . And surely he'd *see* a sheep in trouble. The sea eagle must be homing in on something smaller.

The river level wasn't at its highest point – the winter snow from the top of the hills had already melted and passed through, but it was still flowing pretty rapidly. He hastened along the bank. The eagle was still circling. *What was it looking at?*

Then Josh saw a slight movement, under a bush on the other side of the river where the bank was lowest. He couldn't see what was making the bush move. But if it was just the wind, a sea eagle wouldn't be so interested.

He glanced at his school shoes and trousers. *Why* did it have to be on the other side? But then, out of



the corner of his eye, he saw the sea eagle climb. Josh knew what that meant. It was getting ready to strike.

Without thinking, Josh charged into the river. The icy water made him catch his breath. It filled his shoes and soaked his trousers but he didn't hesitate. He knew he only had seconds to save the sea eagle's prey. His right foot slipped on one of the slick stones at the bottom of the river and he started to lose his balance. But he managed to plant his left on some gravel and kept going.

The sea eagle started to dive. Josh was out of time. He lunged forward. He tripped on the low bank but his momentum carried him into the bush. Thorns tore at his face. He was dimly aware of the sea eagle veering off, making a series of short, frustrated yaps. And then he saw what the bird was after.

It was a little bundle of soaking fur. A hedgehog? No. His eyes widened. It was a puppy! A black and white Border collie, shivering with cold.

'Did you fall in the river?' Josh wondered aloud. Then he understood: puppies this small didn't stray far from their mothers, who didn't go near rivers. He hadn't fallen. Someone must have thrown the dog into the river to get rid of it.

'I bet you were the runt of the litter,' he spoke softly, knowing his voice would calm the dog. He imagined the puppy pulling himself onto the bank with a huge effort for something so tiny. Josh's heart went out to him. 'You're a brave little soul,' he said.

Gently, he put his hand underneath the dog. He gasped.

'You're like a bag of frozen peas! You must have been in the water for ages! I'll have to get you warm. Right away.' Then Josh realised the puppy wasn't a "he". It was a "she"!

Carefully, he crawled backwards out of the bush, trying to limit the damage to his face and clothing. Holding the puppy in both hands, he crossed the river. Once he was safely on the other side, he cradled her in one hand, lifted his sweater and started to undo the middle buttons of his shirt.

She nuzzled up against his chest. Her nose was icy! He'd saved many animals, but never one that was this far gone. Surely he couldn't have found her too late!

His mind raced. If she was going to survive, he had to get her dry and then some warm food in her tummy. He glanced at his watch. His uncle, Calum, wouldn't be home yet, surely. He'd be out doing something on their small farm.

That would give him a chance to hide the puppy, and to get his trousers in the washing machine and his shoes in the airing cupboard.

Still holding the sodden collie against his skin, Josh buttoned up his shirt as far as he could. He turned and, squelching with every step, raced towards home.

Chapter 2

Josh put the pup on the dark kitchen counter as he stripped off his trousers and threw them in the dryer. He'd already put his shoes in the airing cupboard. He wasn't optimistic they'd be dry by the time he had to leave for school the next morning.

He put a pan of milk on the Aga to heat, then rushed to the bathroom where he found a towel and tied it around his waist. Then, back to the stove, where the milk was just starting to boil around the edges. He poured it into a mug. Holding it in one hand and the puppy in the other, he headed for the ladder to his room in the loft. At the bottom of the ladder, he hesitated. He'd have to climb without hands . . .

Okay. He'd use the hand holding the mug to balance. As his head went through the opening into his room, a waft of warm air hit him. The loft baked in high summer and froze in the winter. In June, it could go either way. Normally, when it was this hot, the first thing he'd do was open the velux window. But today, hot was good. Hot was exactly what the vet ordered.

He laid the pup down on his blanket, and put the milk on the wooden crate that served as his bedside table. He untied the towel and started to touch-dry



the puppy's fur. Then he picked up the mug and put it up to the pup's black nose. She turned away and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. 'What's this about?' she seemed to be asking.

'Let me show you,' Josh said, a smile in his voice. He stuck his finger in the warm milk, and held it up to her mouth. After a moment, a tiny tongue came out and licked it. It felt lovely and rough against his skin. The puppy glanced at him again. Then her tongue started going in and out of the milk.

Josh didn't let her have too much. He'd learned the hard way that small animals never know when to stop eating – he'd once let a starving rabbit eat too much and it had been violently sick all over his school uniform. As soon as he removed the mug, the puppy curled up into a ball the size of a small grapefruit. In a moment she was fast asleep, exhausted by her ordeal. Tenderly, Josh wrapped her in his wool blanket.

He sat beside her, with his hand gently resting on her sleeping form. He had to think. Calum would be home in a few minutes. He needed a plan.

But here Josh ran into a brick wall. He already knew his uncle's position on pets. They were for people with more money than sense. Crofters like them could only afford to keep working animals.

Josh felt the puppy stir under his hand. Maybe she was having a dream? He imagined her struggling to keep her head above the freezing water, desperately searching for a place where the bank was low, seizing her chance and scrambling up onto it . . . And then

he came by, just as the sea eagle spotted her. It was fate. He was *meant* to have her!

If she lived . . . She had to live!

From his experience with other animals he'd rescued, Josh knew the next couple of days were critical. The puppy's heart might have been too stressed by the freezing water, or her body might have used up too much energy fighting the cold. An infection might get hold of her weakened immune system . . . But with his help, surely none of those things would happen. She'd recover fully.

He heard the back door close downstairs. He had to go to help with dinner. And to convince Calum to let him keep her.

Josh sat across from his uncle, at the small dark wooden table that served as their dining room. Dinner was a mutton stew, which had been cooking on the Aga all day. Mutton stew could be kept going for days with the addition of carrots, potatoes and whatever other vegetables came into season from their garden. It wasn't usual summer fare, but summer didn't guarantee warmth this far north. And Josh was used to it.

It was still light outside but the kitchen didn't have very big windows. The old cabinets, new when his uncle was a child, didn't lend much cheer. They ate in a kind of low-level gloom. The maroon Aga in the corner was the only thing that added some colour. It was one of Josh's jobs to keep it fed with wood, and to bank it down at night.

They ate in silence, as usual. Calum was a

middle-aged man, bald on top with dark brown hair around the sides. Very fit, like most crofters, he was roughly the same height as Josh, but thicker around the chest and waist. He was a man of few words. There were some topics he got animated about: the animals on the farm, subsidies for cattle and Josh's school reports. But none of these seemed to be on his mind that evening. He hadn't even noticed the cuts on Josh's face.

Usually Josh didn't mind the quiet. But today he had to bring something up. And the silence made it more difficult for him to make it seem casual. His mind dashed in one direction and then another. What could he say to persuade his uncle to let him keep the puppy?

Calum had almost finished his stew. In a moment, he'd push his chair away from the table and go into the living room to read the local paper. It was now or never.

'If someone gave me a dog,' Josh started. Then he realised his uncle, who was slightly deaf, hadn't heard him. He started again, speaking louder. 'If someone gave me a dog, could I keep it?'

Was that it? That was the best he could do? *If someone gave me a dog could I keep it?* Josh was furious with himself. 'I mean we could call it a birthday present. A birthday present and a Christmas present,' he added quickly.

It was a while before his uncle responded. Josh desperately cast around for something to make his request more compelling. Nothing came to him.

‘Animals cost money,’ Calum spoke softly. ‘And we’re already struggling. Maybe when we have a good year.’

That was no help! The list of things that would arrive when they had ‘a good year’ was already long. It included a skateboard, a mobile phone, a computer and a bigger window for the loft.

‘I’ll earn the money to feed it!’ Josh pleaded.

‘Your priority is improving your school grades,’ Calum said firmly. ‘And there’s little enough work around here for grown-ups, let alone twelve-year-old boys.’

‘You just don’t think I’d take good care of it,’ Josh said, sullenly.

His uncle frowned. ‘Don’t ever think that, lad. I’ve seen how you are with the animals on the farm. And the wee ones you bring home. It’s just that it’s hard enough for me to provide you with the necessaries. A pet would be a luxury for us.’

Josh was sure that if he’d been cleverer, he could have come up with an argument that would have persuaded his uncle. But now it was too late. Once his uncle had decided something, he’d stubbornly refuse to change his mind.

‘All right,’ Josh said. He stood to clear the table.

‘All right’ just meant that he wasn’t going to argue further. Not that he wasn’t going to keep the puppy. He was determined to do that, whatever it took.

Chapter 3

Josh had been looking forward to seeing the puppy all day. By the time school finished, he'd decided he couldn't wait another moment. Running the two miles home wasn't a problem. But it did mean he'd have to pass Yvonne and Kearney, two classmates who followed the same path as him, at least most of the way home. He was a bit scared of them, but for different reasons. He was frightened of Yvonne, a brown-haired, intense girl, because she was so smart, and of Kearney because he was big and mean and the school bully.

'If it isn't our "blow-in"! What's the hurry, city boy?' Kearney shouted as he approached them. 'Catching a bus back to town?'

As usual, Josh was stuck for something to say in reply. Why hadn't he thought of anything in advance? He'd known he'd run into them. He searched his mind. Nothing. He just wasn't sharp like that. As he stepped off the path to pass them, he consoled himself. Perhaps it was for the best. If he said something silly, Kearney would repeat it to everyone in the class. And if he said something clever, Kearney would probably hit him.

The encounter dented his good spirits, though, reminding him that, even after five years on the



island, people regarded him as a 'blow-in'. And that *he* didn't have anyone to walk home with . . .

Uncle Calum's small bungalow was halfway up a hill, about twenty metres south of the main road. Most of the houses around here were north of the road, higher up on the hill. They might be able to see further, but the view from his uncle's house was still pretty special. Below the house were a couple of fields, dotted with his uncle's Highland cattle and sheep. Beyond them was the old river bed, lined with trees. And beyond that, the beach to the loch, a large, dark body of water that ran all the way out to the Atlantic. Sometimes, they could see dolphins from their front window. Josh loved spotting them playing together.

* * *

Josh warmed a pan of milk. His puppy would be hungry. But as soon as he got to the top of the ladder, Josh knew something was wrong. He could hear the puppy's breathing. It was fast and irregular. He raced over to her. She was stretched out awkwardly on his pillow. Her nose was hot to the touch and her temperature was way too high. He couldn't wake her to take any of the warm milk he'd brought.

From his experience with other rescued animals, he knew she'd caught an infection. And that her small, weakened body would find it difficult to fight it. It was as if a heavy stone had rolled on top of his heart. His knees felt like buckling.

He fought to stay upright. 'I've been here before.'

He said it aloud, as if to remind himself that he would survive. But then hot anger surged through him. Why didn't anything go right for him? But there was no time to think about that now.

He had to act. He almost slid down the ladder in his haste to get to the kitchen. He returned immediately with a bag of frozen chips, tenderly lifted the unconscious puppy, and settled her onto his lap. Then he sat there, as the afternoon lengthened, cooling her down every few minutes with the slowly defrosting chips. But mostly, he talked to her.

He told her how he'd saved loads of animals, but that she was special. He was going to keep her forever.

'I've come up with a plan,' Josh told her softly. 'I'm going to train you to work with sheep! Once you're a *working* dog, everything will be different. Calum will accept you. And we'll roam the commons having adventures and searching for other animals to rescue. That's why you've *got* to get better!'

Then Josh started to tell her about himself. How when he was a toddler, his mother had always pointed to a photograph of a handsome soldier when he'd asked about his father . . . and that it was only when he was four that he'd come to understand that his dad had been killed in a far-away war before he'd been born. And that he would never meet or know him. All he had were his mother's stories about him and an album of pictures of his parents' wedding and honeymoon.

He checked the puppy's temperature. Still way too hot. He tucked the bag of frozen chips in next to her.

Then he told the puppy about his mother. How they had lived together in a tiny flat and how she was small and funny and warm and how she'd raised him all by herself and how they were just fine, the two of them . . . until she'd decided to be a good Samaritan and drive a neighbour who was having a baby to the hospital. She must have been going way too fast – they were both killed instantly.

He was just seven at the time, and though he still had some photos of her, he just didn't seem to be able to remember her properly. Not *feel* inside him what she was like. Not since he'd come to the island . . .

That had happened two days after the crash. His mother's brother, who he'd only met once when he was so small he couldn't remember it, had taken him in. But Calum wasn't at all like his mother. Not warm, not funny. He wasn't cruel or anything like that, he assured the sleeping puppy. It was just that he wasn't . . . her.

Still – Josh remembered to check the puppy's temperature and remove the bag of chips – the one good thing about living here was that he'd discovered the commons, the wild and varied land near his uncle's croft. And it was there he'd discovered his passion: saving animals, like her.

It wasn't until the early evening that the puppy opened one of her eyes and with a huge effort, turned her little head to look up at him. She just gazed at

him and Josh felt a huge joy well up inside him. He *knew* then that she'd pull through.

And a name for her popped into his head – almost as if *she'd* put it there. Reggae. The music his mum had loved.