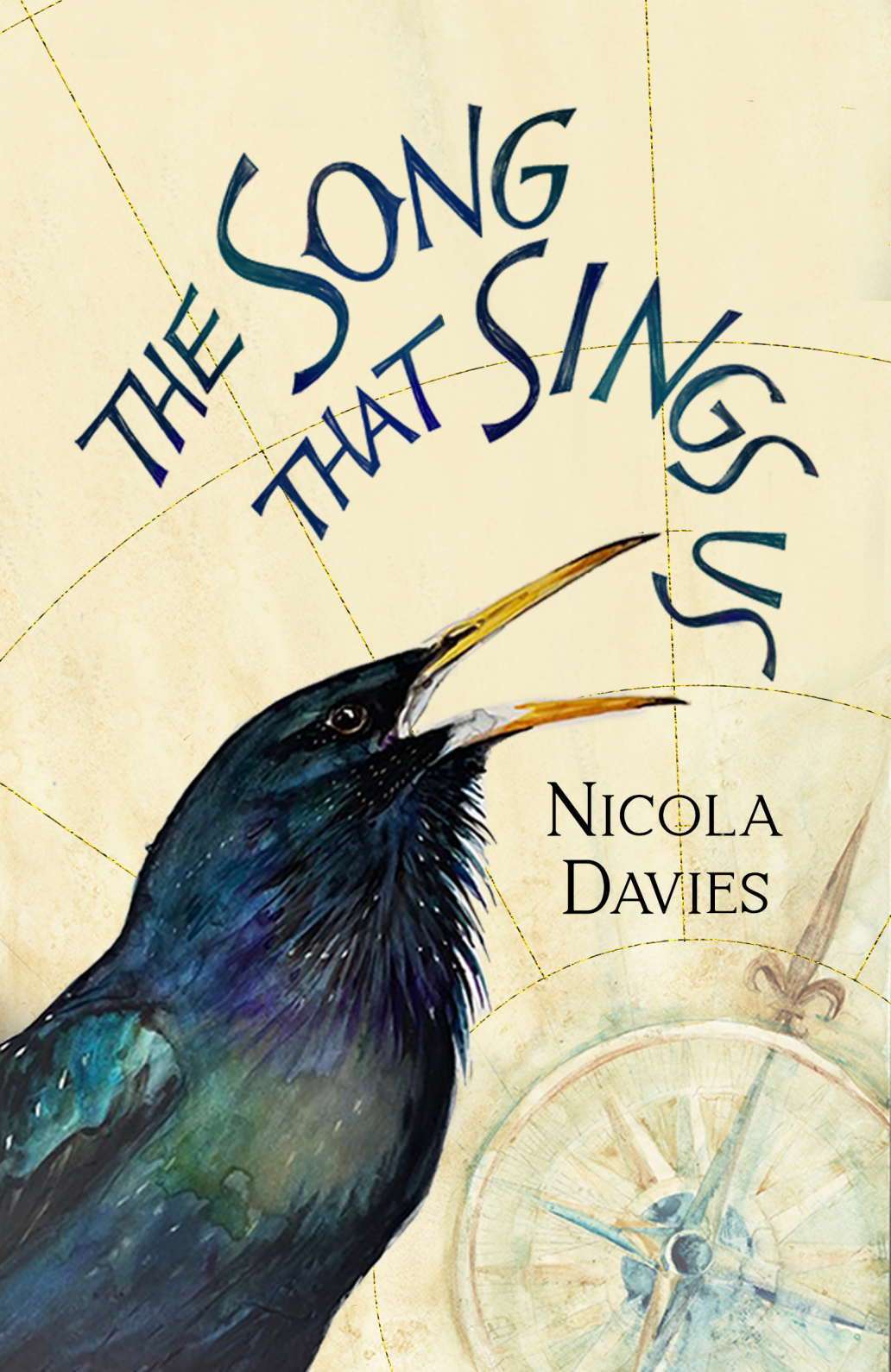
The Song That Sings Us



Nicola Davies

Firefly Press

with thanks to
Molly Howell
Cathy Fisher
Jackie Morris
the midwives of this book

and to my husband
Daniel Jones
for unfailing love and support

Firefly Press

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Nicola Davies

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First published in 2021
by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ
www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from
the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-913102-77-7
Ebook ISBN 978-1-913102-50-0

This book has been published with the support of
the Books Counci of Wales.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples
Printed by 4Edge Ltd

Firefly Press

When animals speak, it's time humans listened.

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1
Skull Gully

Harlon

Harlon sees the lantern beams slicing up the mountainside towards her home. They've come at last, the people called the Automators. The red symbol on their black uniforms is a fist closing round the Earth and now it's closing around her family too: they've come to take her brother and her sister, Ash and Xeno. But she and Ma won't let them.

'Kill the lights,' Ma says. 'Get ready.'

They all know what to do. They've practised this routine so many times, but Harlon never thought it would be for real. Together the three children bar the front door and lock the shutters. They don't speak.

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Ma pulls two rifles out from underneath the bed. She loads both then lines up more ammunition on the windowsill and pokes the barrel of the first between the shutters. She's not Ma – Breen Avvon, alpaca farmer – now but someone else, the person she was *before*; the person no one is allowed to talk about, who knows how to shoot straight, and knock a man to the ground in perfect silence.

'Dammit,' Ma says. 'How did they find us?' Her eyes narrow, focused on the dark silhouettes darting between the rocks and trees, getting closer. She bites her lip and Harlon sees that Ma's afraid. That scares Harlon more than anything, but she mustn't show it. It's Harlon's job now to be strong for her little brother and sister. So she listens, looking calm, while Ma tells them what to do, speaking in snatches over her shoulder as she aims.

'You'll have to snowboard down Skull Gully,' Ma says.

What? Harlon wants to answer. *What?*

Skull Gully is six thousand feet, six thousand ways to die is what Ma's always said before. But, as if she's read her eldest daughter's thoughts, Ma says.

'I've done it myself, Harlon. I *know* you three can do it too. Nothing will follow you down there.'

Of course nothing will follow them because it's like jumping off a cliff!

Ash and Xeno look at Harlon; she stays steady and she gives their shoulders each a squeeze to tell them that if Ma thinks they can do it, then they can. Really, she's not sure.

A bullet slams into the kitchen wall, striking sparks from the stone. Ash and Xeno cry out and Harlon pulls them further from the window. Ma pumps a volley of returning fire.

'That'll keep them back for a minute,' Ma says and turns from the window to look at her children. A dark stain is spreading through her shirt; she tries to pull her jacket over it but it can't be hidden.

'Ma!' Ash cries out. Xeno whimpers and moves towards her.

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'No! Keep back from the window,' Ma says. 'Just listen.' She grits her teeth.

'No time to explain. Get to the bottom of the gully. Don't let them catch you. Head to the coast.'

Ma gasps, takes a few deep breaths against the pain and closes her eyes.

'You have to get to a place that's not on a map. An island lost in the deepest part of the ocean. No one will find you there. You'll be safe. *Promise* me you'll stay together; promise me you'll get there.'

Her eyes open, blazing, her voice with an edge like a sword. *'Promise.'*

Blood loss, Harlon thinks. It's made her crazy, but there's no choice but to make the promise.

'We promise, Ma,' they say together, like a small chorus.

Xeno starts to cry.

'Hey, little bird,' Ma says, more gently. 'You have to take our song there, alright?'

Ma takes a breath and hums the first notes of the lullaby she's sung them all their lives. 'The song that sings us' is what Xeno calls it. Xeno answers with the first three notes sung in her bird-like trill.

'Good. Now hand me that other rifle, Harlon. Quick.'

Harlon does as she is told, creeping low under the window to pass the rifle to her mother's hands.

'I'll be alright, Harlon,' Ma whispers. 'I *will* survive this. I'll be fine and so will you. You trained for this.'

For a moment Harlon feels about to crumble, then something flips inside her. Ma is right, she did train for this, all her life. Ma trained her.

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'Travel like ghosts,' Ma says. 'Don't trust anyone. Take our song. Remember, lost in the deepest ocean. Now, GO!'

Ma's voice is laced tight against the pain, her sparse words only just managing to escape her lips, but still she turns to aim into the centre of the flickering torches. She has always seemed to Harlon like a dagger forced to be a spoon, but tonight she's more like herself than Harlon's ever seen her, that secret person that Harlon feels she'll never get to know now. That person whose skill and fierce love will buy her children as much time as she can, whatever it costs.

They have to use it.

Harlon steps back from the window and rubs her tears dry. She barks at Ash and Xeno.

'Ma's fine. Let's go. *Right now*!' and they start to run.

The three of them race down the long stone corridor and grab their outdoor gear from the pegs that line it. Their boards lean up against the wall, cleaned and waxed by Ma's long, beautiful fingers. Harlon pushes down the questions formed by Ma's words: *an island not on any map? Lost in the deepest ocean?*

She must not think right now. Their survival depends on focus: one step, and then the next. Harlon reaches for her jacket but her hand falls on Ma's old one instead. It's a man's coat, too big for Ma, but she used to wear it all the time when they were small. Harlon pulls it from the peg and puts it on. It's old, with stitching crisscrossed over its layers of lining, but it smells of Ma; that's all that matters.

Their backpacks, ready packed with camping gear, dried food and water bottles, are in size order. Ash takes his middle-sized one and catches Harlon's eye.

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'The three bears,' he says. That's what Ma used to call them when they were little: *my three bears*. Harlon, as the biggest, was the daddy bear, Ash never seemed to mind that he was Mamma, and little Xeno, although his twin, could never be anything but the baby.

Ash smiles at her, even though he's scared, so she smiles quickly back.

'Get your back pack on, Mamma Bear,' Harlon says. 'No time to waste!' Xeno smiles too and for a moment they're those three kids again, giggling insanely because Ma called them bears. Then Xeno frowns and lifts her board above her head to show how ready she is.

'Sky will hatch!' she says and Harlon nods, even though nothing Xeno says ever makes much sense. Then there's another shot, from inside the house, and the sound of a ricochet hitting the walls.

'Go!' says Harlon, and hustles her siblings out into the pre-dawn dark.

Outside, the cold has fangs and the stars fizz with frost. Ragged clouds are shoaling round the moon like fish. It may snow, Harlon thinks, hopefully. It would be good if their tracks were covered. Their eyes are used to the blue twilight of winter nights, so they don't need a torch to find the way. Frozen snow is piled head high either side of the path that leads away from the house, hiding them from the Automators whose shouts and lights stab up into the sky. The alpacas call in alarm like a herd of rusty hinges, as the noise reaches their stall.

Ash stops moving.

'They're scared,' he whispers. 'So scared!'

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It's not just the calls that tell him. Ash can feel their thoughts, Xeno a little too, but the alpacas are Ash's special friends. Alba, the white cria who he reared when her mother died, cries out like a human baby.

There's a burst of gun shots, the alpacas scream and Ash's legs collapse under him. Xeno turns from the path and throws up into the snow. There is a horrible silence. Harlon doesn't need to ask what's happened. Why would anyone do such a thing? Shoot defenceless beings trapped in their stable?

'Alba!' Ash whispers. *'Alba!'*

Harlon feels she could throw up too. She knows every one of the alpacas by name and character, even if she can't eavesdrop on their thoughts the way Ash can. But there's no time for grief now, no time for anger even. She pulls her brother to his feet.

'We have to go,' she says and pulls at his jacket.

But Ash doesn't move. Xeno lays a hand on her brother's arm. Her mouth is a straight, determined line and her eyes shine hard as ice. She's tougher than Ash. Like a bird, small and tough, armoured with feathers. Xeno makes a sound like the first notes of a robin's song, but lower.

'Ash!' she says. *'Fly!'*

'Right,' Ash says. 'A'right.'

Harlon calculates as they run up the steep rocky track: a ten-minute climb to the top; thirty for anyone not used to climbing mountain paths at speed. More for someone who doesn't know the path, which is half hidden between the boulders and stumps of trees. Will their headstart be enough to let them get

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away? Harlon is not sure. She picks up her pace and pushes Ash and Xeno to do the same. The sounds of hard breathing and the scrunch of footfalls enclose them as they run. There are shouts behind, voices yelling orders, more shots. Harlon gives Xeno and Ash a stream of small orders and encouragements to stop them thinking.

In Harlon's head, her ma's voice speaks.

When you are in danger, the most dangerous thing is to wish you weren't. Accept the reality of danger, then you can survive it.

Climb, she tells herself. *Get away.*

Xeno is first to the top. She's waiting when Ash and Harlon reach the rocks that stand like sentinels guarding the gully, one almost overlapping the other, so the narrow entrance is hard to see. Beyond them, sheer drops hide under lips of snow. Even the most skillful skier could not go down Skull Gully; skis are just too long to make turns tight enough for the narrowest sections. But snowboards make this dangerous descent a possibility and Breen Avvon and her three bears are expert snowboarders. No one will have the slightest chance of following them.

Behind them there is a sudden boom, and the house that has been the only home they have known, becomes a cloud of red flame and smoke against the snow. The children look at each other without a word, numbed by shock. That's it. There is no going back. From this moment their past life is gone, and any future they imagined utterly changed. Harlon can't lie and tell them Ma is fine and will follow when she can. All she can say is the obvious.

'Time to go!'

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Harlon bites down on fear and sorrow and cuts off their past life. A kind of reckless joy rises in her like a shiver as the three of them drop over the lip of the gully.

The light of the setting moon makes the snow glow almost blue. Thin shadows of their three bodies follow them down the slope. This first section is just steep, really steep, and narrow. There's not much room to turn, the only choice is to go straight down, a sort of controlled fall. Which means gathering more and more speed, reacting more and more quickly. But they are very good at this, they have ridden the mountain snow every day of the long winters since Ash and Xeno could walk. That means climbing every slope before boarding down it. So they're fit and strong as well as skilled.

I know you can do this.

Harlon looks round. She needs to know at all times where Ash and Xeno are. They must be close enough to keep in contact but not too close to risk collision, a fall that could be fatal at this speed. Ash is in front. He reads the snow intuitively, and he's at his boldest when he's on the slopes. To the right and a little behind, Xeno is careful and precise, naturally graceful.

A voice of doubt whispers like a mutiny inside Harlon's mind: *And you, Harlon? What would you say about your skills and strengths?*

It seeds panic in her heart. She doesn't really know what she can do.

Stay calm, Harlon, Ma's voice tells her. *Think. Always, think!*

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Every tiny undulation, every minute change in texture in the snow is vibrating through the soles of Harlon's feet, into the joints of her knees and hips. Her whole body is reading the snow, the way Ash says bats read the night air. New information from nerves and muscles piles into her brain, more and more with every passing second as her speed increases and increases. The slightest error, a misjudgment of balance, a turn when the edge of the board isn't perfectly positioned, will send her into a cartwheeling fall. She feels she's already at the very limit of what she can do.

There's a sudden quiver in the snow. Its surface feels unstable. A glances to the side tells her Ash and Xeno have felt it too. They all know what it means. They must float over the snow without attacking it. Slopes as steep as this one this rarely slip, but now this feels as if it wants to stop being a surface and start being a wave. It is an avalanche wanting to happen.

There's no headspace for thoughts about what lies behind, or what lies ahead. There is just *this* moment of intense effort and concentration. And then the next, the next, the next. Each second so packed with what every muscle must do, every sense attend to, that time slows down and stretches.

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The gully widens a little, flattens out before a second plunge into a slope that's spiked with rocks. But the flat brings another kind of risk: slow down here, Harlon knows, and they could all sink into powder over their heads. For several moments this takes every ounce of concentration, and then Harlon realises that she can't see Xeno. She's so small that if she sank here they'd never find her. When did she see her last? A second ago? Ten? Where *is* she?

'*Chirrup.*' Her voice is right at Harlon's shoulder, answering her thought.

A wind is getting up, siphoning up the gully from the valley floor, slithering over the powder and whipping it into a low icy mist, obscuring boards for moments on end. Easily enough time to hit a rock. But they can't slow down. They must keep the impact on the snow light and quick or risk starting that avalanche. Then the gully turns to the left, out of the wind but into deep shadow. Harlon's eyes struggle for a moment in the lower light and she loses sight of Xeno and Ash. When she spots them again they are fifty feet behind her and above them, almost on them, two dark shapes.

Falcons?

The birds of prey are huge and very fast. Harlon's never seen falcons so big, or willing to fly in moonlight. They are strange and menacing and very clearly chasing Ash and Xeno. But what that makes Harlon's blood suddenly run ice cold is that Xeno clearly doesn't know they're there. Xeno's power of tuning into bird minds is exceptional; she can sense the presence of a bird that she can neither hear nor see, tune into a passing goldfinch a hundred feet up in the air. Yet she hasn't sensed these creatures and they're almost on her shoulder.

Just as the wrongness of this hits Harlon in the belly, the birds stoop, full of malevolent intent. Their dark bodies dive like missiles, wings part-folded, like the fletches of giant arrows. The air is fractured by their speed. There's a flash of yellow eyes and outstretched talons more like steel daggers.

Harlon screams a warning and now, at last, Xeno and Ash

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see the birds too. Xeno lets out a high-pitched cry of shock. She ducks and one falcon skims her head and wheels round for another pass. Ash hasn't been so lucky. The other bird has raked him with a claw and there's a dark line of blood across his cheek.

'Trees,' Harlon yells. 'Into the trees!'

Ash and Xeno understand at once. Close-packed trees clothe this section of the slope to the left of the gully. To board between them at this speed, in moonlight, is insane but it's the only way to lose the birds. Falcons are built for high speed in open country, not for fast changes of direction in the enclosed space of dense woodland.

Moonlight, deep shadow, tree trunks, come at the speeding boarders in a high-velocity tangle. Every microsecond could smash any of them into a tree. Harlon hears the gasps of effort, the scrape and swish of boards turning at the last possible moment, as her brother and sister make split-second decisions about which way to turn. She sees them appear and disappear between the trees. In shadow, in light, in shadow again. Close, then far, close again, as if time was being cut into unconnected chunks.

Everything seems to get faster and faster. More disjointed. Senses, muscles, joints are close to overload and still the birds pursue them.

'Look out!' Ash yells a warning. One falcon is coming straight for the side of Harlon's face. But the bird is so focused on its target that it looks only where its feet will strike. Harlon jinks sideways, scrapes the tree trunk with the edge of her board, and the falcon's left wing smashes into the trunk.

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There's a snap, loud as a rifle, as the bird shatters into a floundering mess of feathers.

Ash and Xeno crow with delight, then Xeno screams. Harlon sees her shoot past, flashing between the trees with the other falcon's foot tangled in her hood. Xeno swats at it in panic, trying to keep her balance on the slope, trying to avoid the trees. She rips the hood away and swirls it. Too late, the falcon realises its mistake. Xeno smashes it into a passing tree and its head explodes.

By then the children are a hundred feet further on, speeding ever faster through the trees and, like the birds, too focused on what's just in front of them to see the bigger picture. By the time Harlon registers the end of the trees, they are all in the air. They've shot out over the lip where the slope of trees becomes sheer rock face, and are now falling.

Harlon is aware of the quiet as they fall. She has time to see the moon setting behind the mountains, the stars, the shapes of her brother and sister against the indigo sky, against the dull pearl of the snow.

'Oh,' she thinks, 'we're going to die.'

And then they drop into snow on the slope below the rock face. Harlon thinks of Ma dropping berries into whipped cream one summer day, counting as they made a satisfying plop.

One, two, three.

They are blackberries dropped in cream. Side by side, alive, unbroken, up to their waists in the fluffiest powder they've ever seen! It seems impossible, insane, wonderful.

Harlon is the first to free her legs and board from the drift.

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