# JACKO



# JACKO

*Based on the true story of a baby jackdaw rescued in Bushy Park, Teddington, circa 1957*

JEANNE WILLIS



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2023 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Jeanne Willis to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Jeanne Willis, 2023

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 322 0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

*To Bill Carman 1925–2007*
*who instilled a love of wildlife in his son, Mick,*
*who told me the story of Jacko.*

*J.W.*

# Chapter One



The white rabbit that Mick had just rescued from the butcher was a lot friskier than it looked. It had been fattened up for Easter and at first glance it reminded him of an overstuffed pyjama case. However, as he carried it down the alley, it was spooked by a yappy terrier and in a fit of terror it delivered a savage kick to his stomach which knocked the wind out of him.

Somehow, Mick didn't drop the rabbit. He clung onto it, doubled over, and having caught his breath, held it at arm's length and had a word with it.

'Pack it in, Thumper! I'm trying to help you. You clearly hate dogs and we've got two at home to guard our pub, so it's not safe for you to run free in the yard. That's why I'm taking you to live with the station master.'

The rabbit stared at him with pink eyes and swivelled its ears. Dangling by its armpits, it seemed to have grown to the size of a small child.

'Mr Sampson's got a massive lawn,' said Mick. 'And I only live down the road, so I can visit you any time – you'll still be my rabbit.'

With some difficulty, he settled the enormous buck in the crook of his elbow, held its feet to prevent its lethal claws from disembowelling him and set off again. But by the time he'd travelled the short distance to the station master's house, it felt as if he'd been carrying a bag of wet sand. His right arm had gone numb. Reluctant to release his grip on the rabbit with his free hand, he rang the doorbell with his nose.

Mr Sampson appeared and looked the rabbit up and down.

'Good Lord, he's a whopper . . . Is that the Easter Bunny?'

'He's a New Zealand rabbit,' replied Mick. 'He's called Thumper. The butcher was going to put him in a pie.'

'He'd need rather a lot of pastry,' remarked Mr Sampson. 'Where are you going to keep him? Your dogs will eat him for breakfast – quite a big breakfast.'

'Well, I thought he could live in your shed,' said Mick, hopefully. 'I noticed you had a bag of straw in there the last time I came, but I'll pay for his hay and stuff.'

'Will you now?'

There was a long pause while Mr Sampson thought about it, struggling to keep a straight face as the rabbit's enormous rump began to slip through Mick's grasp until it was almost sitting on the doorstep.

'Please hurry up and say yes,' said Mick. 'I can't hold him much longer.'

Mr Sampson threw up his hands in mock exasperation.

'Oh, bring him through for goodness' sake. You've twisted my arm yet again.'

~

Having spent the morning settling Thumper in the shed, Mick wandered back home to the Railway Hotel clutching a tin of small red worms that he'd dug out of Mr Sampson's compost heap. He needed them to feed his pet newts, which lived in a vivarium his dad had made from panes of glass taken from an old cucumber frame. It was attached to the yard wall with metal brackets and positioned near a window, so the newts could be viewed from inside the pub as well as out.

Once the wriggling worms were dropped into the water in front of the newts' snouts, Mick wiped his hands down his shorts and went to knock for his best mate, Ken, who lived a few doors down. He wanted to tell him about the rabbit but unfortunately it was Holy Week and Ken had been dragged along to another church service by his devoutly Catholic mother. So having nothing better to do, Mick helped himself to a bag of crisps from the public bar and climbed onto the roof of the gents' toilets – the perfect spot to keep a lookout for Ken when he returned.

He'd just finished his crisps when Brian Bond sauntered out of the bar and stopped in the street below to light a cigarette. If it had been Ken, Mick would have blown up the crisp bag and burst it to make him jump, but you didn't mess with Brian like that. Mick rolled onto his stomach and lay flat on the roof in an attempt to hide. Although Brian had a certain charm, he was unpredictable, like a dog with a dodgy past who'd lick your hand then tear your arm off.

He belonged to the Stanley Road Mob – notorious troublemakers barred from most pubs in Teddington, but who were all regulars at the Railway Hotel. They worshipped Mick's dad, Bill, who was the landlord, and were very protective towards his mum, Marie. She reckoned the mob prevented trouble and for reasons Mick couldn't really understand, she seemed to have a soft spot for Brian.

'Oi, what are you up to, Mick?' Brian called. He'd been seen.

'Nothing.'

'Can't have that, can we? Come here, I want to ask you something.'

Mick crawled to the edge of the roof and peered down, dreading the question – he had no idea what it could possibly be. Brian blew a smoke ring in his face and glanced over his shoulder.

'Fancy going poaching tomorrow?'

'Who, me?'

'Yeah, why not?'

Transfixed by Brian's stoat-like stare, Mick froze – he'd just saved Thumper's life, *that's* why not. He loved animals, *that's* why not. But if he gave excuses like that not to go, Brian would think he was soft and laugh at him. Brian often went hunting with ferrets, and Mick knew he thought nothing of sending them down a warren to flush out the screaming quarry. No, Brian wouldn't understand about Thumper. On the other hand, how understanding would he be if his invitation were turned down?

'So d'you want to come or not, Mick? Can't beat a bit of poaching.'

'For rabbits?'

'Ducks.' He pointed an invisible gun at Mick's head: 'Boom!'

'Ducks? Oh . . . all right, then. What time, Brian?' Damn. Why was he doing this?

'Crack of sparrow's. Keep it under your hat.'

Having accepted Brian's invitation, Mick felt queasy with dread and remorse but by late afternoon, those feelings were almost overtaken by the thrill of being asked to go on an illicit expedition with a member of the mob. It was a dubious honour, but he was flattered – he still couldn't quite believe that Brian had asked him and he couldn't imagine many other eleven-year-olds being invited out with the mob.

Satisfied that rabbits were not on the hit list, he'd even managed to convince himself that dispatching ducks was no worse than eating chicken and if it was, Brian would be the one with blood on his hands. All Mick had to do now was come up with an escape plan so he could leave before dawn without his parents noticing.

While they were busy serving in the bar, Mick opened the cupboard under the stairs and found his dad's tool box. As he lifted the lid, the box released a waft of linseed oil from a neatly folded rag. Mick held it to his nose and breathed in the fumes – it was an interesting smell, like the inside of a damp fishing bag.

The tools were arranged inside with military precision. Even the screws were lined up on parade, as if at any moment his dad was expecting a kit inspection. He'd been in the Royal Air Force – Bill Carman, flight sergeant 1237632, No. 83 Squadron RAF, serving with the Pathfinders. He'd made thirty-three raids in a Lancaster bomber, but he never mentioned a thirty-fourth.

None of the regulars talked about the war, apart from Gus Wilson. He had an artificial limb and when he was drunk, he'd roll his trouser leg up, stub his cigarette out on his wooden knee and ask Mick's mum to kiss it better.

'Please, Marie – it burns!'

'Oh, put it away, Gus.'

Usually she could handle him but sometimes he had a

major meltdown, and then PC Liddle took control if Dad wasn't around. Downing his pint, he'd steer Gus across the carpet and out into the street. Sometimes Gus burst back in again and startled the customers, then he'd dive under a table, quivering and gibbering, until PC Liddle convinced him that the war was over and coaxed him out.

'Mick, whatever you do, don't ask Gus how he lost his leg,' Mum had once told him.

'Why not?'

'Because he'll tell you and it doesn't do him any good to be reminded.'

Mick took a saw out of the tool box but it was too big for the job he had in mind. He picked up a file and tested it on the door handle – perfect! He wrapped it in the oily rag and went upstairs to the spare room. In his haste, he bumped into the model railway set on the table and derailed an engine – he ignored it and went over to the window.

Down below, the guard dogs dozed in the yard. Mick took the file and began to saw slowly through the window bars. The rasping woke the blond Alsatian and she looked up at him, thumped her tail and gave a low *'Bouf!'*

'No, no – don't bark, Sylva. Please don't bark.'

*'Bouf!'*

He waited for her to settle, then set to work again, but hearing the strange noise coming from above, the other Alsatian now opened one eye and sprang to his feet.

'Go back to sleep, Satan. It's only me . . . *shhh*.'

Mick looked at the clock – the 4:30 p.m. from Waterloo was due. The railway line was close by – if he sawed hard each time a train rattled into Teddington station, it would mask the sound. It was a good plan and it worked, but because his sawing was restricted by the train timetable, it took a lot longer than he'd hoped.

In between trains, he chewed through a packet of bubble gum and rolled it into luminous pink slobbery balls which he kept to one side. As the 6:30 p.m. from Waterloo departed, he sawed through the last window bar and, using the tacky gum as putty, he stuck them back in their original positions. His escape route was ready.

~

That evening, Mick put his pyjamas on to say good night to his mum and dad, then changed straight back into his day clothes. He wished he had a pair of jeans like Brian's instead of his stupid shorts and changed his outfit several times, but nothing in his wardrobe said 'mobster' when he looked in the mirror – he still looked like a kid. Hopefully Brian wouldn't notice in the dark.

At 11 p.m. the bell rang for last orders. 'Let's be having you. Everybody out!'

It took ages for the punters to leave and for Ernie Harvey the pot man to clear away the glasses. Finally, Mick heard

Muriel the barmaid saying goodbye, then the scraping of the bolt being drawn across the front door.

Mum came upstairs and he quickly pulled the blankets over his head. Sometimes, she popped in to make sure his light was out but thankfully not tonight, or she might have questioned why he was wearing his balaclava. He set his alarm clock for 3:30 a.m. and put it under his pillow to muffle the bell in case it woke her when it went off.

He woke up on the hour, every hour, to check that the clock hands were still moving. They were, but unbearably slowly, and he worried that being smothered by a pillow full of feathers might have affected the mechanism so he put it next to his ear. Exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep seconds before the alarm rang. Dazed and deafened, he juggled with the clock, fumbling frantically with the off button.

Mick held his breath, listening to make sure his parents hadn't woken up, then threw off the blanket, put his shoes on and crept into the spare room. He removed the window bars from the bubble gum putty, shinned down the drainpipe then climbed onto the roof of the gents' toilets and sat in the dark with his feet dangling, waiting for Brian Bond.

The air was cold and clammy and he fidgeted as his shorts sucked up the damp – surely half an hour had passed? Maybe Brian had changed his mind and didn't want a kid tagging along. There was already a glimmer of yellow on the horizon. It was no good going poaching if the sun was up.

That was it, then – Brian wasn't coming. Of course he wasn't. Mick felt foolish for thinking he ever would and was about to climb back up the drainpipe, when he heard a faint whistle in the alley next to the pub.

'Brian?'

'Keep it down, will you? Your old man will kill me if he catches us.'

They walked in silence down the alley, illuminated by Brian's glowing cigarette end, then up the sleeping streets towards Bushy Park. They entered the gates and marched past the deserted U.S. Air Force base.

'They used to have dances there on a Saturday,' said Brian. 'The dolly birds loved those GIs.'

Mick felt under pressure to reply and, not fully understanding what Brian was going on about, he said the first thing that came into his head: 'Yeah, well, they would, wouldn't they, Bri?'

There was a long pause.

'You don't get to call me Bri.'

'OK. Sorry.'

Mick followed a few paces behind him along the overgrown path, wading through chest-high bracken and trying to avoid his legs being thrashed by vicious brambles that sprang back in Brian's wake, until they arrived at Leg of Mutton Pond.

'Here we are, then, Mick. Keep an eye out for the gamekeeper for me.'

Brian pulled an air rifle out of his coat and let Mick feel the weight of the stock against his shoulder. Mick's finger trembled as he curled it round the trigger – he felt an overwhelming urge to squeeze it.

'Give it back now, Mick.'

'But can't I . . . ?'

'Maybe later.'

Reluctantly, he handed the rifle back to Brian and watched him load the pellets. They sank down and crawled along on their bellies until they were hidden among the reeds and waited . . . and waited . . . then Brian aimed the gun.

Mick's heart thumped against the cold earth as he heard the clumsy *slap, slap, slap* of webbed feet against the filmy surface of the pond. He watched as the duck rose into the air, its feathers dripping with silver, then without warning, it jerked and fell out of the sky.

There was no bang, just a soft splash as its body hit the water. Brian Bond was triumphant.

'How come there was no bang?' muttered Mick.

'Fitted a silencer in my lunch break at the tool factory. Good shot or what?'

Mick didn't reply. He watched miserably as Brian waded in, picked the duck up by the neck and dropped it on the bank.

'Should've brought the retriever,' laughed Brian. 'Got a hole in my boot.'

He swore, pulled it off and tipped the water out, nodding proudly at the dead duck.

'Beautiful bird, in't she?'

But she wasn't beautiful – not any more. She was a twisted, ugly mess. Mick stared in horror. Her ducklings were searching frantically for her in the bulrushes, calling with shrill, desperate cries. Mick put his hand over his ears. Only last week, he'd persuaded the superintendent to give him two permits so he and Ken could use the bird-watching lodges in Bushy Park. He liked birds that much, so why had he craved this killing trip? Why had he done this to those ducklings? He felt sick with shame.

'Bagged a good one, didn't we?' said Brian, stuffing the duck into his knapsack like an old pillow.

'*You* did,' said Mick. 'I just sat and watched.'

Something in Mick's tone seemed to annoy Brian. He was watching him out of the corner of his eye as he rolled a cigarette.

'Doesn't matter who pulled the trigger. You sat and acted as lookout, you're party to the deed, mate.'

'Am I?'

'Yep, you're as guilty as I am. Don't wet yourself, it was just a duck. It's not like I'm the Luftwaffin' Nazi who shot your dad's plane down.'

'What?' laughed Mick. 'He never got shot down.'

At first, he thought it was a spiteful joke, but Brian wasn't smiling – if anything, he looked a bit awkward.

'Oh, sorry, mate – he never told you? I thought you knew, or I'd never have said anything. Probably not something he'd want to boast about, is it? Being beaten by the Nazis.'

He took a long drag on his cigarette and flicked it into the pond. Mick sprang up and took a few steps backwards.

'It's not true, Brian. I've seen Dad's medals.'

'Medals? Ten a penny, Mick – where you off to? We haven't finished here yet.'

He held the gun out like a peace offering.

'I'll let you take the next shot. You know you want to.'

Mick glared at him, then turned and zigzagged away through the trees.

'Don't go crying to Daddy,' called Brian. 'And don't tell anyone what I told you. Keep your trap shut. I'm the one with the gun, remember.'

# Chapter Two



It was Easter Sunday and duck was on the menu. Whether or not Brian had shot it, Mick never knew, but either way, he found it impossible to swallow and fed it to Satan, who was sitting under the table with his tongue lolling out. Unfortunately, Mum noticed.

'Mick! Did you just give that to the dog?'

'It was gristly.'

'*Gristly?* Right, if you're not hungry for duck, you're not hungry for pudding.'

'But, Mum!'

'Nope.'

Later, when he went to bed that night, his dad sneaked him a buttered hot cross bun wrapped in a hanky.

'Don't tell Mum and don't leave crumbs.'

'Dad . . .'

'What?'

He was dying to ask him about being shot down by the

Nazis but decided against it – it probably wasn't a good topic for Easter Sunday, and how would he explain what he'd heard?

'Thanks for the bun.'

'I hope it wasn't too gristly.'

~

On Easter Monday, Ken called round to show off his new bike. Mick wasn't expecting him, he'd been trying to avoid Ken since the poaching incident. He wasn't sure how he'd react about the dead duck – with disbelief and anger, probably. The thought of the orphaned ducklings had given Mick a couple of sleepless nights.

'What's that face for?' asked Ken. 'Jealous of my bike? It's a Raleigh, it's got a bell, gears, the lot – want a lift to Bushy Park? Thought we could go bird-watching.'

'All right. Wait there . . .' said Mick.

He ran upstairs to his bedroom and returned carrying a small cotton bag tied at the neck with a drawstring.

'Are those sandwiches?' asked Ken. '*Pwhoarr!* They stink.'

'It's my grass snake,' said Mick, hanging the bag round his neck and tucking it down his jumper to keep the snake warm. 'I'll have to let him go. He keeps emptying his anal glands all over me – that's what the smell is.'

'Yeah, right. Blame it on the snake,' said Ken, standing up on the pedals as Mick straddled the bike and sat behind him. 'I bet your mum's glad he's going.'

'She had a fit when she found the baby mice I'd left in the freezer compartment, but I had to put them somewhere,' insisted Mick as they wobbled off down Victoria Road. 'Grass snakes eat mice and Mr Sampson's fridge hasn't got a frozen section. I asked him when I took Thumper round.'

He clung onto the saddle as Ken did a wheelie.

'Who's Thumper?'

By the time they got to Bushy Park, Mick had told him all about the rabbit and Ken was keen to go and see him.

'How come you didn't call for me that day and tell me?' he asked, steering off the main path and bumping across the grass. 'I was back from that stupid service by five-thirty. What else have you been up that I don't know about?'

Mick felt his face go red.

'Nothing – this and that. Helping Dad with stuff.'

Ken glanced over his shoulder and frowned at him.

Mick quickly changed the subject.

'Look out! You nearly hit that tree – listen, I've got some crusts in my pocket. Let's feed the ducklings at Leg of Mutton Pond before we go to the bird hide.'

Ken swerved round and took a shortcut through the bracken, startling a red deer stag which leaped up, bucked and pounded its hooves.

'Pedal faster!' yelled Mick. 'Before he attacks. They're more dangerous than you think. Dad said they can kill a man.'

'Agh, no! It better not batter my new bike.'

Repeating the same swear word like a mantra, Ken pumped his knees up and down frantically, throwing the Raleigh from side to side. Mick felt the cotton bag shifting about inside his jumper.

'Slow down, Ken! You're scaring the snake.'

'Has the stag gone yet, Mick?'

'Yeah, ages ago.'

'Oh, you sneaky piece of . . . You might have told me!'

As they reached the pond, Ken skidded to a halt and they dismounted.

'Give us a crust,' he said, trying to grab the bread bag. 'I'm starving.'

'Get off. They're for the ducklings.'

'Talking of ducks . . .' said Ken as Mick wandered over to the bank. 'My mum said your mum bought a duck off Brian Bond. Poached it, she reckoned.'

Mick really didn't want this conversation. Why would Ken mention Brian and poached duck in the same breath unless he knew what had happened?

'Roasted it, more like,' said Ken.

Mick shrugged. 'I have no idea what you're going on about.'

Ken looked offended.

'It's a *joke,*' he said. 'Mum reckoned the duck was poached, I said roasted . . .'

'Oh right . . . Ha-dee-ha,' said Mick. 'I never had any duck.'

It was a huge relief that Ken clearly didn't know about the shooting, but now he seemed irritated that his joke had fallen flat.

'I was only having a laugh, Mick. Bit moody, aren't you?'

Mick crumbled the stale bread and cast it over the water. A moorhen cruised towards the crumbs with a string of fluffy black chicks squeaking in her slipstream, but no ducklings came – not one. He went over to the reed bed to see if they were hiding among the rushes – maybe they'd survived without their mother? He doubted it, they were too young.

Suddenly his heart skipped a beat – there was something small and round tangled in the pondweed, fuzzy and half-submerged. He fetched a stick to lift it out; it was just an old tennis ball.

He stood on the bank and lobbed it back into the pond. It disturbed the moorhen and as she skittered away with her chicks, the ripples carried the ball back and it got caught in a deep boot print pressed into the sticky yellow clay at the water's edge. Mick recognised it at once – it was Brian's.

He sat down and stared up at the clouds, hugging his knees. Ken came over and sat next to him, chewing on a crust.

'What's up, mate? You've been acting weird all morning.'

'Nothing.'

Mick got up and hurried off towards the avenue of horse chestnut trees.

Ken grabbed the bike and ran after him.

'What's wrong, Mick? I know it's something – I won't tell a soul.'

Mick hoped he could trust him but it was a big secret to keep – he wasn't sure.

'Not even your sister? Only Mary can't keep her mouth shut.'

Ken crossed his heart. 'I promise. Spill the beans – you're not dying, are you?'

'I might if Brian finds out I told you. Oh, what the hell . . .'

Mick sat down on a tree stump, took a deep breath and told Ken everything. About sawing the window bars, about the duck, and about what Brian had said about his dad. Ken chewed on a match and listened without interruption but when Mick finished speaking, he still didn't say a word. He screwed up his nose, kicked up a pile of wet leaves and marched off in the opposite direction.

'Hey!' yelled Mick. 'I risked my life telling you . . .'

'You need to let it go!' shouted Ken.

Mick hurried after him and grabbed him by the sleeve.

'Let it *go*?'

'The grass snake,' said Ken. 'Let it go, it stinks.'

Mick felt the cotton bag inside his jumper – a damp patch had gone through to his vest. He sniffed his fingers, hung the bag up on a branch and, having stripped to the waist, he threw his reeking vest into a bush. Luckily, his jumper wasn't too badly stained and he put it back on. Ken watched him

with mild amusement – he still hadn't said a thing about Mick being party to killing a duck.

'Did you hear that wind last night?' he said. 'Our dustbin lid blew away.'

'Yeah, our milk bottles got smashed. Look, are you mad at me for going poaching, Ken?'

Ken folded his arms. 'I'm a bit cheesed off you didn't tell me when Brian first asked you. I could have talked you out of it, maybe.'

'I don't even know why I went,' mumbled Mick.

'He had a gun,' said Ken. 'You can't argue with a gun.'

Mick was relieved that Ken understood. He wished he'd told him earlier now – it felt good to get it off his chest. He'd been worrying about it a lot. But that wasn't the only thing he'd been worrying about. He unhooked the cotton bag from the branch and looked for a good place to release the snake.

'Do you think Brian was lying about my dad getting shot down, Ken?' he said eventually.

'I dunno, but I wouldn't ask him, if I were you. Brian told you not to say anything. If he finds out you did, he'll shoot you in the knackers. Hurry up and release that snake, or we won't have time to go bird-watching.'

Mick walked off the main path towards an ancient horse chestnut tree growing among a thicket of ferns. Its gnarled roots looped and twisted into low, arched doorways which led to a maze of tunnels – the perfect sanctuary for a snake.

Mick knelt down, opened the cotton bag, and the snake shot out with a disgruntled hiss. He watched as it slithered towards the labyrinth of tree roots and disappeared, sad to see it go but not entirely sorry.

He was about to get up off his hands and knees and join Ken when he heard a muffled shriek. At first, he thought the snake must have caught a shrew or a frog but the noise wasn't coming from under the tree roots – there was something hiding in a clump of long grass nearby, surrounded by a pile of fallen leaves.

Mick parted the grass blades carefully with his fingers and peered in – there was a tiny bundle of dark, soggy feathers, huddled up and quivering.

'Ohhh . . . Don't be scared,' he whispered. 'I won't hurt you.'

It blinked at him with anxious opal eyes.

'Ken? . . . Ken! Over here – you'll never guess what I've just found.'

It was a baby jackdaw.

~

'Yep . . . *Corvus monedula*,' said Ken, consulting his *Pocket Book of British Birds* as he gazed at the fledgling. 'A corvid, a member of the crow family – also known as the chimney bird.'

Shielding his eyes, he peered up at the tree top and pointed

to a jagged hole bristling with twigs and rags bound together with mud.

'There's its nest, Mick! It must have blown out in the storm last night.'

'Can you see the mother?'

'No.'

The fledgling tried to scuttle away, dragging its droopy wing through a puddle. It made a feeble attempt to fly then tipped onto its back, its pipe-cleaner legs bent awkwardly against its scrawny neck. It was breathing rapidly and began to gape, the rubbery hinges of its beak stretching as if they might snap.

'It's damaged a wing,' said Mick.

He lay down on his front, coaxed it onto its feet and circled his arms around it.

'It's only just fledged. Even if wasn't injured, it's too young to fly.'

'Still no sign of the mother,' said Ken. 'Oh, hang on – is that her up there?'

Mick twisted his neck to look up at the heavy bird that had just landed in the tree.

'Not sure – looks too big. Has it got a grey patch on its shoulders like a shawl?'

'Can't see one,' said Ken. 'Probably a rook.'

The fledgling's eyes were half-closed. Its beak was clamped shut. Mick was worried it was dying.

'If it fell in the night, it must be starving. The parents feed them every two hours. Look for a worm, Ken.'

'Why do I have to look?'

'I'm looking after the jackdaw.'

Something in his conscience was telling him if he saved its life, it might redeem him for being party to killing the duck.

Ken tutted and began poking about half-heartedly in the mud.

'Try lifting that log,' said Mick.

The log was rotten and covered in puffballs. When Ken rolled it over, a worm tried to disappear back down its hole as if the earth were sucking it in like a strand of spaghetti. He grabbed it by the tail. 'Got one.'

'Good. Chew it to soften it up a bit.'

Ken swore and threw it at him.

'I'm not chewing it! *You* chew it. He's your baby.'

Mick removed the worm from his forehead.

'It's all right, it's still juicy – I'll give it to him as it is.'

The bird's beak sprang open. Mick dropped the worm into the cavernous pink lining of its mouth but it slithered out.

'You should have chewed it,' said Ken. 'You're a rubbish dad.'

Mick tried to feed the fledgling again but it turned its head away. What was the phrase his mum used to say when she was trying to spoon-feed his baby cousin?

Something about a train. He drew up some phlegm, put the worm in his palm and spat on it.

'What's that, gravy?' asked Ken.

'It's drying out,' explained Mick. 'I don't want him to choke.'

He tapped the worm against the bird's nostrils.

'Open wide . . . here comes the train.'

The fledgling snatched it and with bulging eyes, gulped it down and opened its beak again.

'It's still begging. Find some more worms, Ken.'

'*More?* We'll be here all night at this rate if he needs feeding every two hours. Even if his mother comes back, she'll abandon him now you've touched him.'

Mick had already thought about that.

'We can build a camp and stay over.'

'Yeah, but what about the next night and the next? What about school?'

'Bunk off.'

Ken threw his hands in the air.

'Have you met my dad? If I get caught, he'll go ballistic.'

The fledgling began to scream.

'Hey – you'll be all right,' said Mick, stroking its bony little head.

It wouldn't be all right though. If he left it in the grass, it would die of cold and hunger or be eaten by a fox or a heron.

'I'm taking him home,' he said, tucking the fledgling inside his jacket.

Ken tutted.

'How's that fair? You've already got two dogs, thousands of newts and a rabbit. I've only got a cat.'

'Finders, keepers,' said Mick.

'Only if your mum lets you,' tutted Ken. 'He'll crap everywhere.'

Mick shrugged. 'She might moan at first, but it's all a front and Dad loves animals. I'm sure they won't mind feeding him when I'm at school, then when he's older, I'll teach him how to fly.'

'Your dad could teach him better than you, being in the RAF,' said Ken as they walked back towards the park gates. 'Mind you, he got shot down, so maybe not.'

Mick gave him a hard stare.

'Thanks for that. He might *not* have – Brian's lying, I bet. Don't tell anyone though, I don't think Dad wants anyone knowing and nor do I. It's not something you boast about, is it?'

'I won't tell as long as you let me share the fledgling,' said Ken. 'Let's call him Champion, after the Wonder Horse on telly.'

'He's a bird, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'How about Fury?'

'That's another horse, Ken – you're not naming him, I found him.'

'But I found the worm.'

The fledgling fluttered against Mick's heart. He opened the top button of his jacket and blew on it gently to give it some air.

'Let me have a blow,' said Ken.

'No, you can help out and play with him sometimes – but he's mine.'

'So I'll be like his uncle and have no responsibility but all the fun? All right!'

When they arrived at Ken's, he asked to hold the baby jackdaw but Mick put a protective hand over the warm little lump and wouldn't let him near it.

'Not now, he's asleep. See you tomorrow.'

'What are you like?' grinned Ken.

Mick watched Ken go inside, then went and sat on the gate to the pub, smiling to himself. Moments later his smile faded – the fledgling had stopped moving. Was it dead? Please no! He couldn't bear to look. He held his breath – nothing, just his own anxious heartbeat pipping away . . . or was it? He stroked the fledgling lightly with his thumb and with a sigh of relief, he felt its whisker-thin ribs rising and falling.

His dad came into the yard eating a tub of winkles that Ernie Harvey the pot man had given him.

'Want one, Mick? Ernie's allergic to shellfish, apparently.'

'No, thanks.'

He'd tried one before – it was like eating a rubber washer sprinkled with vinegar.

'Dad . . . Guess who I found today.'

'I dunno . . . Glenn Miller?'

Mick looked at him blankly.

'You must know who Glenn Miller is, Mick. The greatest band leader ever? He went missing?'

Mick shook his head.

'They think his plane went down over the English Channel on his way to play for the U.S. troops, but they never found it – or him.'

'Was he shot down?' asked Mick. 'That must be awful, mustn't it?'

To his disappointment, Dad didn't take it as a cue to recount the story of his own plane's disaster – he just said that Glenn Miller's carburettor must have frozen.

'Well, I didn't find Glenn Miller,' said Mick.

'Who did you find, son?'

Mick undid the top button of his jacket and showed him.

'Jacko,' he said.