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For Isaac and Miles, in memory of your beloved Uncle Jack xx

C.B.





Chapter 1

The first thing Will noticed when he stepped off the train was the smell of the sea. Then the looming bulk of the mountains in the fading light. Then the man standing alone at the other end of the platform, a dark silhouette against the bruised sky.

The man looked different from when they had met in the hospital. But it was hard to remember clearly, hard for Will to trust his memories, hard to trust the man either – after everything that had happened.

The man gave a curt nod in Will's direction. He was wearing a rough fleece jacket, army trousers and big black boots that looked as though they had seen better days. His hair was cropped close to his head like a soldier too. And then there was the scar. That

was hard to ignore.

"Train's late," the man said gruffly. "I thought you were never coming, lad."

"So sorry – we missed the connection." The young social worker called Wendy apologised breathlessly. She had spent most of the train journey tapping messages on her phone while Will stared out of the window, watching the vast sprawling city he had grown up in disappear into higgledy-piggledy house-filled suburbs, as the track plunged through patchwork fields and hedges and hills, before finally making its way through wild bleak countryside to this tiny station in the middle of nowhere, where everything smelled and felt all wrong.

After months stuck inside the flat, it all seemed unreal to Will, as if he were watching it all in a dream.

"You remember your uncle, Ian Oakley," Wendy was saying. She spoke in the careful voice she'd used all day, as though she feared that if she spoke too loud Will might break. "You'll be staying with him – just for the time being."

Will said nothing.

"I'm so sorry but I need to get right back." Wendy had been looking anxiously at her watch for the past half an hour. "This is the last train. There won't be another one heading back to the city till the morning.

Will you … be OK from here?"

Will wasn't sure if she was asking him or the man, but he looked up at the stranger in front of him and they both nodded. An identical silent jerk of the head.

"Come on then, lad," said the man called Ian Oakley, with a gruff smile. "That all you got?"

He reached out to take Will's rucksack from him but Will instinctively flinched and held on.

"Like that, is it?" said Ian, stepping back. "Very well."

"I'll be in touch tomorrow," Wendy was saying. "And I'll pop over in a few days to check you're settling in – OK, Will?"

But Will just shrugged. He had run out of words hours ago.

Dark was falling fast and the little train was about to leave. This was the end of the line. It couldn't go any further or it would be in the sea. They were on the very edge of the world, Will thought, glancing beyond the station platform at the iron-grey rolling waves stretching off towards the dark horizon. A million miles from home. Where could you go from here? If you kept going, would you just fall off – into nothing? Or could you fly off into the distance, like the birds he could see hovering over the grey waves – fly off and leave all of

this behind? If only Will had wings…

"Call me if you have any problems?" Wendy said, as the train doors beeped and the guard waved her back on to the nearest carriage.

Will wanted to say that he didn't have her number. That he didn't want to go with this man who was apparently his uncle but whom he hardly knew. Whom Mum had never even talked about. Whom he'd met for the first time a week ago on the worst day of his life.

He wanted to say that none of this felt real. That he just wanted to go home. That being out of the flat for so long was making him feel dizzy, breathless. That he still had questions about Mum. About what had happened. About what was going to happen to him now.

But the guard was blowing his whistle and the last thing Will heard was Wendy saying with a cheery smile, "I'm sure you two will get on just fine."

Will wished he were one of the seagulls wheeling over the grey bands of sea. He wished he could take off – into the air, over the edge of the world, and forget that any of this had ever happened.

And pretend that Mum was still alive.



Chapter 2

Ian Oakley drove a battered old Land Rover. Will had never been in anything like it before, and the ancient vehicle rattled and squeaked as they turned out of the station car park, Will sitting bolt upright on the passenger seat as the suspension creaked on the rutted roads.

It was the sort of vehicle Will had only really seen on TV. On that programme Mum liked about the vets. The one they used to watch together, the two of them laughing about sheep poo and sticking their hands up cows' bottoms. That's why they'd started going to the city farm: every Saturday – until Mum got sick. They would buy grain to feed the chickens, and watch the cows being milked. In the spring lambing season Mum

and Will would stay all day, and sometimes the farmer would let Will bottle-feed the new baby lambs.

But that was before. Before Mum stopped laughing, before she stopped wanting to go outside. Before she got rid of the TV and switched off the Wi-Fi. Before everything changed.

"You'll be hungry, I expect," Ian said, indicating a Mars bar and a can of Coke on the dashboard.

Will was starving. He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten, but as he unpeeled the wrapper, the smell hit him – too sweet, too cloying. It brought back too many memories. A hot day in the park. A friend's birthday party. Melted chocolate all over his face, his hands, his top. Mum crying uncontrollably.

"I'm not used to company," Ian was saying, eyes on the slowly darkening strip of road ahead. "And I'm not sure I'm any good with kids. You should probably know that, lad."

Will held the Mars bar in his lap, feeling the chocolate warm beneath his fingers, remembering Mum's tears and how she had gone to bed and cried herself to sleep. His finger began to tap nervously on the plastic wrapper.

One, two, three…

"Been on my own a while so I'm a bit set in my

ways," Ian went on, not seeming to notice. "No doubt it'll take a little while for us to get used to one another. But I'm sure we'll muddle along. Not like we have much choice, eh?"

Will's finger tapped a little faster.

Four, five, six, seven…

He glanced at the man by his side, his face briefly illuminated by the headlights of an oncoming car. He searched the stranger's features to find something – anything – that reminded him of Mum.

"Go on, take a good look," Ian said, eyes flicking to meet Will's wary gaze. His face was burned down the whole of one side so that the skin looked like molten lava. "I expect it's not every day you meet a man who looks like a James Bond villain."

"S-sorry," stammered Will. He dropped his eyes quickly to his hands. "I didn't mean to –"

"Don't be," said Ian. "We've all got our scars. It's just mine are a bit more visible than others. But you know what they say – scar tissue is stronger than skin."

Will didn't know how to respond. It had been the same on the train with Wendy, and in the hospital with the nurses. Even with the policeman who'd tried to talk to him about what had happened. Will had so many questions, but every time he tried to ask them, his

throat clammed up and no words came out.

So all he could do was count.

One, two, three, four…

They had turned off the main road now and the Land Rover was plunging into a series of narrow-looking country roads that climbed steadily up into the looming mountains that Will had caught glimpses of on the train journey. They bumped over tiny lanes that ran alongside little streams and rock-strewn hillsides on which ragged sheep grazed like pale smudges in the twilight. At one point, Will caught sight of a waterfall, high up on the hills. He'd never seen a waterfall in his whole life, and it added to the feeling that this was just a dream and soon he'd wake up and find himself in the flat with the doors and windows closed, and Mum would be alive and everything would go back to normal.

Five, six, seven, eight…

And then he spotted it – a bird with giant wings, which seemed to float on the air beneath the purpling sky. Will stared at the floating creature in awe. He couldn't make out what it was from here – a goshawk maybe, or a red kite? No, it was neither of those. The wings were the wrong shape.

He wished he had his bird book. The one Mum had given him that helped to distinguish the different types

of gulls that flew across the estate, and so he could tell the tree sparrows from the house sparrows and name starlings and crows and pigeons. But the book was back in the flat.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve…

As he stared at the giant bird hovering over the fells, Will remembered the thing Mum had said once: "*We all come back as birds, Will! Isn't that a lovely thought? All the lost souls of our loved ones come back with wings.*"

Could it … be her?

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Stop.

His heart lurched, and the feelings he'd been working so hard to keep inside tried to push their way up through his chest. Will tapped his finger quicker on the frayed canvas seating – *one, two, three, four* – counting the thoughts back down, where they couldn't hurt him. Mum was gone. *Five, six, seven, eight.* She was dead. *Nine, ten, eleven, twelve.* And she wasn't coming back as a bird or anything else. *Thirteen, fourteen.* Why would she? After all, it was Will's fault she was no longer alive. *Fifteen. Stop.*

"I'm sorry about your mum," Ian said suddenly.

Will swallowed. Clenched his fist.

"What happened to her…" Ian hesitated. "It must have been tough on you."

Will wished the man would stop talking. Because it was Ian's fault too.

"And I'm sorry you're stuck with me for now," Ian went on. "But it won't be for long. Just till your grandparents can have you."

Will had spoken to his grandparents on video call that morning. They couldn't wait for him to join them, they said. Just as soon as the paperwork was completed, his grandma explained. There was a lot of red tape, his grandfather added. They loved him very much and always had, his grandma insisted. Then she sighed and said, "We've missed you, William."

Will said he missed them too, but the truth was he hardly knew them. They were his dad's parents, but Dad had walked out when Will was only a baby and died a few years later. And his grandparents lived on the other side of the world – Melbourne, Australia – but it might as well have been on Mars, as far as Will knew.

"Obviously, there's visas and things to sort out," Ian was saying. "And a passport too. But then you can go over there and begin to – you know – make a new start."

But Will didn't want to start again. He didn't want a new home. He just wanted to go back to how things were. Even though he'd hated it for so long.

The light was dipping and the giant bird up on the hillside was no longer visible.

We all come back as birds, Will.

He started the count again.

One, two, three…

"You're not a great one for talking, are you?" Ian went on.

Four, five, six, seven, eight.

Will said nothing.

"Well, this is certainly going to be interesting, kid."