

Opening extract from

SilverFin

Written by

Charlie Higson

Published by

Puffin Books

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your

Blood in the Water

The boy crept up to the fence and looked around. There was the familiar sign . . .

KEEP OUT!
PRIVATE PROPERTY.
TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT.

And hanging next to it, just to make sure that the message was clearly understood, were the bodies of several dead animals. Strung up like criminals, wire twisted round their broken necks.

He knew them so well; they were almost like old friends. There were rabbits with their eyes pecked out, tattered black crows with broken wings, a couple of foxes, a few rats, even a wildcat and a pine marten. In all the days he'd been coming here the boy had watched them slowly rotting away, until some of them were little more than flaps of dirty leather and yellow bones. But there were a couple of fresh ones since yesterday, a squirrel and another fox.

Which meant that someone had been back.

In his thick brown poacher's jacket and heavy green cotton trousers the boy was fairly well camouflaged, but he knew that he had to be on his guard. The signs and the fifteen-foot-high fence entwined with rusted barbed wire were enough to keep most people away, but there were the men as well. The estate workers. A couple of times he'd spotted a pair of them walking the perimeter, shotguns cradled in their elbows, and although it was a few days since he'd seen anyone up here, he knew that they were never far away.

At the moment, however, apart from the sad corpses of the animals, he was alone.

The afternoon light was fading into evening, taking all the detail from the land with it. Here, on this side of the fence, among the thick gorse and juniper and low rowan trees, he was well hidden, but soon . . . soon he was going under the wire, and on the other side the tree cover quickly fell away. He could just see the scrubby grassland, dotted with small rocks, which sloped down towards the peaty brown waters of the loch.

Soon he'd be fishing those waters for the first time.

The trek up here had taken nearly an hour. School had finished at four o'clock and he'd had nothing to eat since lunchtime. He knew that once he was inside the fence there would be no time to eat, so he slipped his knapsack from his shoulders and took out his ham sandwiches and a crisp apple. He ate them quickly, gazing up at the mountain that stood watch over the loch. It looked cold and barren and unfeeling. It had stood here for millions of years, and would stand for millions more. The boy felt

small and alone, and when the wind vibrated the wires in the fence, making them moan, he shivered.

Before the new laird had come there had been no fence. The land had been open for miles around. The loch had been a good fishing spot then, and the old laird hadn't been bothered by those few hardy folk who braved the long haul up from the village. What did he care if one or two of his trout went missing each year? There were always plenty more.

But that had all changed when the new fellow had taken over, five years ago. Everything had changed. The land was fenced off. The locals were kept away.

But not this evening.

The boy chucked his crusts and apple core into the bushes, then crawled over to the fence and pulled away the pieces of turf that covered the hole he'd dug.

The turfs rested on a grid of strong sticks, which he quickly removed. The ground up here was rock hard and full of stones, so it had taken the boy several days to hack this narrow tunnel under the fence, scrabbling in the dirt with his mother's gardening tools. Last night he'd finally finished the work, but it had been too late to do anything more so he'd reluctantly gone home.

Today he'd been too excited to concentrate at school, all he could think about was coming up here, ducking through the hole, going down to the loch and taking some fish from under the new laird's nose.

He smiled as he made his way into the hole and pushed aside the old piece of sacking that he'd used to cover the entrance at the other end. His tackle bag and knapsack

he easily pulled through the tunnel behind him, but his father's rod, even when broken down into three sections, was too long to fit through, so he went back, took it out of its case and slotted the pieces one by one through the fence.

Five minutes later, his rod in one hand, his tackle bag in the other, he was darting between the rocks down towards the water.

Before he'd died, his father had described Loch Silverfin to him many times. He'd often come up here as a lad to fish, and it was his stories that had inspired the boy. His father had loved fishing, but he had been wounded by a shell blast in the Great War of 1914 and the pieces of shrapnel buried in his flesh had slowly ruined his health, so that by the end he could barely walk, let alone hold a fishing rod.

The boy was excited; he was the man of the house now. He pictured the look on his mother's face when he brought home a fine fresh trout, but there was more to it than that. Fishing is a challenge – and this was the biggest challenge of all.

Loch Silverfin was shaped like a huge fish, long and narrow and fanning out into a rough tail at this end. It was named after a giant salmon from Scottish folklore – *It'Airgid*, which in Gaelic meant Silverfin. Silverfin was a fearsome salmon who was bigger and stronger than all the other salmon in Scotland. The giant Cachruadh had tried to catch him, and after an epic battle lasting twenty days the fish had at last swallowed the giant, and kept him in his belly for a year before spitting him out in Ireland.

Legend had it that Silverfin still lived in the loch, deep in its dark waters. The boy didn't quite believe that, but he did believe that there were some mighty fish here.

The loch looked wilder than he'd imagined it; steep, sheer rocks bordered most of the shore beneath the mountain, and a few stunted rushes were all that grew. Way down at the other end, partially shrouded in the mist rising off the water, he could just make out the square grey shape of the castle, sitting on the little island that formed the eye of the fish. But it was too far away, and the light was too bad, for anyone to see him from there.

He scouted along the shingle for a good place to cast, but it wasn't very encouraging. The shoreline was too exposed. If any of the estate workers came anywhere near, they'd be bound to spot him.

The thought of the estate workers made him glance around uneasily and he realized how scared he was. They weren't local men and they didn't mix with the folk in the village. They lived up here in a group of low, ugly, concrete sheds the laird had built near the gatehouse. He'd turned his castle into a fortress and these men were his private army. The boy had no desire to bump into any of them this evening.

He was just thinking that he might have to chuck it in and go home when he saw the perfect spot. At the tip of the fish's tail there was a fold in the edge of the loch where a stream entered. The water here was almost completely hidden from view by the high cliffs all round. He knew that the trout would wait here for food to wash down the stream.

Twenty feet or so out in the lake there stood a single, huge granite rock. If he could get there and shelter behind it, he could easily cast towards the stream without being seen by either man or fish.

He sat in the grass to pull his waterproof waders on. It had been a real slog, lugging them up here, but he needed them now. They slipped over his clothes like a huge pair of trousers attached to a pair of boots, coming right up to his chest, where they were supported by shoulder straps. They smelt of damp and old rubber.

He fastened his reel to his cane rod and quickly threaded the line through the loops. He'd already tied on his fly line, so he took out his favourite fly, a silver doctor, and knotted it to the end.

He skirted round the water's edge until he was level with the big rock, and then waded out into the water towards it. It took him a few minutes to pick his way across, feeling with his feet for safe places to step. The bottom of the loch was slippery and uneven and at one point he had to make a long detour round a particularly deep area, but once he neared the rock it became shallower again and he grew more confident.

He found a good solid place to stand and from here he had a clear cast over towards the stream. He checked his fly, played out his line, then, with a quick backwards jerk of his arm, he whipped it up into a big loop behind him, before flicking it forward, where it snaked out across the water and landed expertly at the edge of the loch.

That part had gone very well, but it turned out to be the only part that did. He didn't get a single touch. Try as

he might, he couldn't attract any fish on to his hook. He cast and recast, he changed his fly, he tried nearer and further – nothing.

It was getting darker by the minute and he would have to head for home soon, so, in desperation, he decided to try a worm. He'd brought a box of them with him just in case. He dug it out of his pocket, chose a nice fat lobworm and speared it on a hook, where it wriggled enticingly. What fish could resist that?

He had to be more careful casting the worm and he flicked it gently, underarm, away from him. Then he got his first bite so quickly it took him completely by surprise; the worm had scarcely landed in the water before he felt a strong tug. He tugged back to get a good hold in the fish's mouth, then prepared for a fight.

Whatever it was on the end of his line, it was tough. It pulled this way and that, furiously, and he watched his rod bow and dip towards the water. He let the fish run for a few moments to tire it, then slowly reeled it in. Still it zigzagged about in the water in a frantic attempt to get free. The boy grinned from ear to ear – it was a big one and wasn't going to give up easily.

Maybe he'd caught the awesome Silverfin himself!

For some time he played it, gradually reeling in as much line as he dared, praying that the hook wouldn't slip or the line snap . . . This was a very delicate business, he had to feel the fish, had to try and predict its wild movements. Then, at last, he had it near, he could see something moving in the water on the end of his line; he took a deep breath, hauled it up and his heart sank . . .

It wasn't Silverfin, it was an eel, and, even as he realized it, something brushed against his legs, nearly knocking him off balance. He looked down and saw a second eel darting away through the water.

Well, there was nothing else to do: he had to land the thing to retrieve his hook and line. He hoisted it out of the water and tried to grab hold of it, but it was thrashing about in the air, twisting itself into knots, snarling itself round the line, and, as he reached for it, it tangled round his arm. It was a monstrous thing; it must have been at least two feet long, streaked with slime, cold and sleek and brownish grey.

He hated eels.

He tried to pull it off his arm, but it was tremendously powerful and single-minded, like one big, writhing muscle, and it simply twisted itself round his other arm. He swore and shook it, nearly losing his footing. He told himself to keep calm and he carefully moved closer to the rock, which he managed to slap the eel against and pin it down. Still it squirmed and writhed like a mad thing, even though its face showed nothing. It was a cold, dead mask, flattened and wide, with small, dark eyes.

Finally he was able to hold its head still enough to get a grip on the deeply embedded hook, and he began to twist and wrench it free. It was hard work. He'd used a big hook and the end of it was barbed to stop it from slipping out once it had stuck into a fish's mouth.

'Come on,' he muttered, grunting with the effort, and then – he wasn't sure how it happened, it went too fast – all at the same time, the hook came loose, the eel gave a

frantic jerk and, the next thing he knew, the hook was in his thumb.

The pain was awful, like a freezing bolt shooting all the way up his arm. He gasped and clamped his teeth together and managed not to shout – it was a still evening and any sound up here would travel for miles, bouncing off the high rocks and water.

The eel slithered away and plopped back into the water. A wave of sickness passed over the boy and he swayed, nearly fainting. For a long while he couldn't bring himself to look at his hand, but at last he forced his eyes down. The hook had gone in by his palm and right through the fleshy base of his thumb, where it stuck out on the other side. There was a horrible gash and flap of skin where the barb had broken through on its way out. Blood was already oozing from the wound and dripping into the icy water.

He was lucky that the point had come out and not stayed sunk deep inside his flesh, but he knew that he couldn't just pull the hook free; it had the curved barb on one end and a ring on the other where the line was attached.

There was only one thing to do.

He rested his rod against the rock and with his other hand he reached into his tackle bag and got out his cutters.

He took a deep breath, clamped the cutters on the end of the hook where the line was knotted, pressed them together and – *SNAK* – the end broke off. Then, quickly, so that he didn't have time to think about it, he pulled the

hook out by the barb. A fresh pain hit him and he leant against the rock to stop his knees from giving way.

He knew he wouldn't do any more fishing today. He started to cry. All that effort for this: a lousy eel and a wounded thumb. It just wasn't fair. Then he pulled himself together. He had to do something about his situation. Blood was flowing freely from the wound. He washed his hand in the loch, the blood turning black and oily in the cold water, then he took a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wrapped it tightly round his thumb. He was shaking badly now and felt very light-headed. As carefully as he could, he secured all his gear and set off back to the shore, wading through the dark slick in the water that his blood had made.

And then he felt it.

A jolt against his legs.

And then another.

More eels. But what were they doing? Eels never attacked people. They ate scraps and frogs and small fish . . .

He pressed on; maybe he'd imagined it.

No. There it came again. A definite bump.

He peered down into the water and in the dim light he saw them . . . hundreds of them, a seething mass in the water, balled up and tangled together like the writhing hair of some underwater Medusa. Eels. All round him. Eels of all sizes, from tiny black slivers to huge brutes twice the length of the one he'd caught. The water was alive with them, wriggling, twisting, turning over and over . . . They surged against his legs and he stumbled. His

wounded hand splashed down into the water and he felt hungry mouths tug the bloodied handkerchief from his hand and drag it away into the murky depths.

He panicked, tried to run for the shore, but slipped and, as his feet scrabbled to get a hold, he stumbled into the deep part of the loch. For a moment his head went under and he was aware of eels brushing against his face. One wrapped itself round his neck and he pulled it away with his good hand. Then his feet touched the bottom and he pushed himself up to the surface. He gulped in a mouthful of air, but his waders were filled with water now . . . water and eels, he could feel them down his legs, trapped by the rubber.

He knew that if he could get his feet up he might float, but in his terror and panic his body wasn't doing what he wanted it to do.

'Help,' he screamed, 'help me!' Then he was under again, and this time the water seemed even thicker with eels. The head of one probed his mouth and clamped its jaws on to his lip. He tore it away, and his anger gave him fresh strength. He forced his feet downwards, found a solid piece of ground, and then he was up out of the water again. All about him the surface of the lake was seething with frenzied eels.

'Help, help . . . Please, somebody, help me . . .' His mouth hurt and blood was dripping from where the eel had bitten his lip. He thrashed at the water, but nothing would scare the beasts away.

And then out of the corner of his eye he saw someone . . . a man running along the far shore. He waved

crazily and yelled for help again. He didn't care any more if it was an estate worker . . . anything was better than being trapped here with these terrible fish.

The man ran closer and dived into the loch.

No, the boy wanted to shout. Not in the water. Not in with the eels. But then he saw a head bob to the surface. It was all right. He was going to be rescued.

The man swam towards him with strong, crude strokes. Thank God. Thank God. He was going to be saved. For a while he almost forgot about the eels and just concentrated on the man's steady progress towards him, but then a fresh surge knocked him off balance and he was once more in the snaking embrace of a hundred frenzied coils of cold flesh.

No. No, he would not let them beat him. He whirled his arms, kicked his legs and he was out again, gasping and spluttering for breath.

But where was the man? He had disappeared.

The boy looked round desperately. Had the eels got him?

It was quiet; the movement in the water seemed to have stopped, almost as if none of this had ever happened . . .

And then he saw him, under the water, a big, dark shape among the fish, and suddenly, with a great splash, he rose out of the loch and the boy screamed.

The last thing he saw before he sank back into the black depths of the water was the man's face; only it wasn't a man's face . . . It was an eel's face, a nightmare face; chinless, with smooth, grey, utterly hairless skin

pulled tight across it, and fat, blubbery lips that stretched almost all the way back to where the ears should be. The front of the face was deformed, pushed forward, so that the nose was hideously flattened, with splayed nostrils, and the bulging eyes were forced so wide apart that they didn't look in any way human.

The ghastly thick lips parted and a wet belching hiss erupted.

Then the waters closed over the boy and he knew nothing more.