

Chapter 4

I sat down at breakfast the next morning with my thick fleece jacket and my rucksack by my side.

‘Where d’you think you’re going?’ said Mum.

‘Out,’ I said.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘I don’t think so. Not after last night.’

‘But Mum . . .’

‘We’re going to town this morning,’ said Mum pouring some tea. ‘Dad’s got sheep feed to pick up and I’ve got shopping to do.’

‘I’ll stay here,’ I said. ‘Graham’s here.’

‘He’s still in bed,’ said Mum. ‘You’ll come with us.’

I slammed my spoon in my bowl. ‘It’s not fair.’

Dad looked at me over the top of his paper and sighed.



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'I need someone to look after those two lambs. The foster ewe wasn't interested in them last night. We'll need to bottle feed them until we can find another ewe.'

'I'll do it,' I said. 'I don't want to go to town.'

Mum glared at Dad then turned to me. 'Ah, you'd only get under my feet. You can stay as long as you promise to stay near the farmhouse.'

'I promise,' I said. But underneath the table, my fingers were crossed.



I stood at the sink and stirred milk powder for the lambs into a jug of warm water and watched Mum and Dad drive away down the lane. I poured the milk into two clean bottles and tucked them under my jacket, grabbed my rucksack and headed out to the lambing shed. The two lambs were already bleating hungrily for milk when I went in, and it wasn't long before they finished the milk and started trying to suck on the tags of my coat. I heard the tractor rev into the yard outside. If Graham saw me, I'd have to help him all day. So I left the bottles in a bucket by the door and slipped out through some broken panels at the back of the shed.



The air was clear and sharp. It had rained heavily





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overnight and the puddles shone in the bright sunlight. I set off over the back of the hill to the loch in the next valley.

Iona was waiting for me.

'You came then,' she said.

We were standing at the spot where I'd followed her footprints into the wood.

I nodded. 'So what's the secret?'

'You'll find out,' said Iona.

'It'd better be good,' I said.

She turned and headed into the wood.

The pines gave way to oak and birch and wild cherry. I thought I knew every inch of this farm. I'd grown up here. I'd built dens with Rob and Euan all over it. But this path through the trees looked different.

Iona stopped at the edge of a clearing. A ring of large boulders lay in a wide circle in the sunlit space. I leaned against one and pulled some damp moss with my fingers. The pale stone underneath was bright in the spring sunshine. I could imagine this was once a meeting place for the ancient Scottish Warrior Kings.

Iona put her finger to her lips for me to be quiet. 'Fairy stones,' she whispered.





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'Fairy stones!' I said. 'You've brought me all this way just to see fairy stones?'

Iona giggled. 'Shh! Don't you believe in fairies, Callum?'

I scowled at her. 'I'm going home.'

Iona leaned against the trunk of a tree. It looked as if she was trying not to laugh. She tapped her fingers on the bark. 'Can you climb?' she asked.

I looked up into the tree. It was an old oak that had been struck by lightning some years before. The split trunk looked like a jagged scar against the sky. The nearest branches were beyond arms' reach and the bark was damp and fringed with moss.

'Climb that?' I snapped. 'Course I can.'

Iona kicked off her trainers and slid her fingers and toes into the tiny cracks in the bark. In no time, she had pulled herself up into the fork of branches above.

'Well, are you coming?'

I tried to grip the tree trunk, tried to wedge my feet onto the small ridges of bark, but each time my feet and hands slid. I looked up, but Iona had disappeared further up the tree.

'Iona!' I called. The end of a thick knotted rope fell by my feet. I hauled myself up into the tree and climbed higher to a natural platform of spreading branches. It was





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like a hidden fortress. You couldn't see it from the ground. Iona had made seats from old crates and there were tins and boxes and an old hurricane lamp balanced in the tree. From there, I could see across the narrow waters of the loch to the mountains and the wide blue sky beyond.

'It's brilliant,' I said, 'brilliant.'

'Shh, you've got to be quiet,' she said. She pulled a canvas bag out from the hollow trunk and spilled out a blanket, an old leather case, and a packet of biscuits.

'I promise I won't tell anyone about this,' I whispered.

She threw me a biscuit and stifled a laugh. 'This isn't the secret, dummy. It's better than this, a million times better.'

I stuffed the biscuit in my mouth. 'What is it then?'

She pointed to a cluster of Scots pine-trees on the island not far from the shore. The tall bare trunks were crowned by a spread of branches, dense with green pine needles. From our platform of crates, we were level with the flattened tree tops.

'What's so special?' I said.

'Open your eyes, Callum,' said Iona. 'Look!'

I still couldn't see what she was pointing at. A pile of sticks lay on the topmost branches, like driftwood stacked on a high tide.





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But something was moving inside. Something was pulling the sticks into place. It wasn't just a random heap of twigs and branches. Something was building it.

And then I saw it.

I saw the secret hidden in our valley. No one else knew about it. Not Mum or Dad, or Graham, or Rob and Euan.

Just me, and Iona.

'Amazing isn't it?' whispered Iona.

I just nodded.

I was lost for words.



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At first all I could see was the head of a bird above the pile of sticks, a creamy head with a brown stripe across the eye. Then the rest of the bird appeared. It was huge, with dark brown wings and a white belly. There was something prehistoric about it, like a beast of a lost world, too big for this landscape.

‘Osprey,’ I whispered. I could hardly believe it. ‘We’ve got osprey, here, on our farm.’

‘You won’t tell a soul?’ said Iona.

‘Course not,’ I said. I’d seen photos of ospreys before, and I’d seen the nesting tree of two ospreys at the nearby nature reserve when I’d helped Dad put up fencing and bird hides. The nesting tree at the reserve had razor wire and surveillance cameras to stop people stealing the eggs.



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'They're rare, they are,' I said. 'They're protected.'

'I knew I could trust you,' said Iona. She emptied out the biscuit packet. There was only one left. She broke it in two and gave me the bigger half.

'I've watched him build that nest from scratch,' said Iona. 'What makes you think it's a "he"?' I said.

Iona pulled out a bird book from the leather case and showed me the picture. 'Female ones have got more brown markings on the chest,' she said. 'And he keeps circling up high in the sky and calling. He's looking for a mate. I've been watching him all week.'

'Do you live up here then?' I said.

Iona laughed and shook her head. 'No, I'd like to, though. I'm staying with my grandad, for now.'

'What about your ma?' I said. 'Is she here too?'

Iona frowned. 'Ma's working.' She picked pine needles from her jumper and flicked them in the air. 'She's a dancer, you know,' said Iona. 'My ma, she's a dancer.' She pulled out a small gold locket on a chain from under her shirt and opened it. 'That's her.'

On one side was a picture of Iona and on the other, a picture of a young woman's face. She had flaming red hair and dark eyes like Iona's.





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'She's in all the big shows in London,' said Iona. 'She's too busy to come up here. She's really famous, my ma.'

'I've never heard of her,' I said.

Iona scowled and stuffed the locket back under her shirt. 'As if you'd know!'

I looked across at the osprey again. He was standing on the nest staring up at the sky. His high-pitched cry called out, 'Kee . . . kee . . . kee . . .'

'Has he finished his nest?' I said.

'Don't think so,' said Iona. 'It keeps getting bigger and bigger. Anyway, it's called an *eyrie*, not a nest. Ospreys go to Africa in the winter.'

'I know that,' I said. 'You're not the only one who knows this stuff.'

The osprey marched around his eyrie and called out one more time. Then he spread his huge wings and lifted off into the air. He banked away over the trees behind us, showing the brown striped underside of his wings and his white belly.

'He's probably gone fishing,' said Iona. 'Might be ages before he's back.'

'I've got to go,' I said. I remembered the orphan lambs. They'd need another feed soon.



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'I'm going back too,' said Iona.

I helped her stuff the bag into the hollow of the tree and dropped down to the ground beside her. We walked along the track by the river. The air was warm now, and wisps of steam rose up from the damp earth.

'How was the fish?' I asked.

Iona gave me a wicked grin. 'Delicious.'

'How d'you do it?' I said. 'How d'you catch it with your bare hands?'

Iona grinned. 'Come on, I'll show you.'

I followed her to the river's edge where eddies of fast-water swirled into a still pool. 'What do you see?' she said.

I lay down on the soft grass and looked at the river water. Cloud and sunlight reflected back. 'Nothing,' I said.

'You're not doing it right,' said Iona. 'Look further in.'

I stared at the water. Cloud patterns floated across it. I tried to look beyond the bright surface to the dark shadows below. The rocks merged into the brownish river bed. It was all moving and shifting. Reed, mud, and silt-stirred leaves. And two fish. Two trout, facing the current, their green-speckled bodies perfectly still except for the ripple of their tails.

'D'you see them?' whispered Iona.





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I nodded.

'Now run your hand slowly into the water behind them.'

I slid my hand into the river. Closer and closer until my fingers were inches from their tails.

'Run your fingers underneath and try to stroke behind their gills,' said Iona.

I reached forward, and for a moment felt the slippery body of one fish against my hand before both fish shot into the deep water and were gone.

Iona laughed. 'It took me ages at first,' she said. 'Grandad showed me one summer when I was little.'

I stared deep into the water, hoping to see the fish return.

'People are like rivers,' said Iona. 'That's what I think.'

I sat up and squeezed the water from my sleeve. 'What d'you mean?'

Iona rocked back on her heels and looked right at me. 'You've got to learn to look beneath the surface, to see what lies deeper in.'

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. They were freezing from the icy water. 'I've got to go now.'

'So can I come back?' said Iona. 'On your farm?'

I nodded. 'We made a deal, didn't we?'

Iona stood up and smiled. 'A female osprey will come



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tomorrow afternoon,' she said. 'There's good weather coming. She'll be here, I'm sure of it.'

I laughed. 'Oh, right. You just know, do you?'

Iona turned her back on me. 'Meet me up on the hill tomorrow if you don't believe me. I'm going to wait for her.'

I looked up at the heather-covered hill above us. I could see the silhouette of the cairn on top, the highest point of the farm. It would be perfect. I wanted to see an osprey coming back to Scotland. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. It would be amazing to have ospreys nesting here, on our farm.

'All right, Iona,' I said. 'You're on.'

