



THE BEGINNING

Every year, Dad waits for them. He says it means the start of winter, when they arrive . . . the start of Christmas. The start of everything brilliant.

When he was a boy, he would sit with Nan and Granddad in a field near the lake behind their house . . . and wait. It was usually cold, and dark, and he says they even sat through a snowstorm once. Even then, Granddad knew when they'd arrive. Dad used to think Granddad was magical for knowing that. I can remember waiting beside that lake too, but the memory is more like a dream than something real.

The last time we all waited there together was six years ago: the winter before Nan died. The last winter the wild swans ever went to Granddad's lake.

All of us were huddled by the edge of the water, and the blankets wrapped around my shoulders smelt like dusty

drawers. Nan pushed a cheese sandwich into my hand and Granddad passed around mugs of hot chocolate. I was sleepy and still, but I kept my eyes open.

And then they came, appearing like something from a fairy tale. It was as if they'd sprung from the clouds themselves. The dawn light glinted on them . . . made them seem so white. Silver almost. Their wings set the air humming.

I still remember Dad's face as he watched them. His wide eyes. The way he bit the edge of his lip, as though he was anxious the birds might not make it. When they began to circle down to the lake, Dad leant forward a little as if he was imagining doing the landing himself.

I loved them, even then. Just like Dad. But they scared me too. The way they arrived out of nowhere, and so many of them. It was as if we'd dreamt them. As if they'd come from another world.

And this year it starts like that again. With Dad excited and rapping on my door. With the swans arriving . . . and everything changing.



CHAPTER 1

Early morning. It's too cold to get out of bed, but already Dad's at my door. His fingertips drumming like rain.

'Isla?' he whispers. 'Coming? They're here, up at the reserve. I'm sure of it.'

I force my eyes to focus on the shadows around my bed . . . desk, chair heaped with school clothes, jeans and jumper in a pile on the carpet. I hold my breath as I swing my legs out from under the duvet. Sit up. Rub my hands over my arms. Dad knocks again.

'Yes, OK, I'm up,' I hiss.

I pull on the jeans and jumper. Find the thickest socks in my drawer. Hold my breath until I'm warmer. The heating hasn't gone on yet. It's too early, still dark outside. Dad creaks open the door, just a crack, but it's enough to see the