

and rested on her frame and grinned at me.

'Three times round every landing and three times up and down in the lift,' she said. 'Knackered. Absolutely knackered.'

Dad blinked, and nodded kindly at her.

'Blinking getting there!' she said. She bobbed about inside the frame. 'Be dancing soon, you see!'

She patted my arm with her crooked hand.

'You're so sad today. Been to see that friend of yours?'

I nodded, and she smiled.

'I'm going home soon. He will, too. Keep moving, that's the thing. Stay cheerful.'

She hobbled away, singing 'Lord of the Dance' to herself.

'Who did she mean, your friend?' said Dad.

'Nobody.'

He was too distracted to ask again.

In the car I saw the tears running down his face.

I closed my eyes. I remembered the sound of the baby's breathing, her beating heart. I held them in my mind, went on listening to them. I touched my heart and I felt the baby's heart beating beside my own. Traffic roared past, Dad sniffed back his tears. I stayed dead silent, and concentrated on keeping the baby safe.

Twenty-six

'There it is,' said Mina. 'Archaeopteryx. The dinosaur that flew.'

She laid the heavy encyclopedia on the grass beneath the tree. We looked down at the clumsy creature. It was perched on a thorny branch. Beyond it, volcanoes belched flames and smoke. The great land-bound creatures – diplodocus, stegosaurus – lurched across a stony plain.

'We believe that dinosaurs became extinct,' said Mina. 'But there's another theory, that their descendants are with us still. They nest in our trees and our attics. The air is filled with their songs. The little archaeopteryx survived, and began the line of evolution that led to birds.'

She touched the short, stunted wings.

'Wings and feathers, see? But the creature was a heavy, bony thing. Look at the clumsy, leaden tail. It was capable of nothing but short, sudden flights. From tree to tree, stone to stone. It couldn't rise and spiral and dance like birds can now. No pneumatisation.'

I looked at her.

'Do you remember nothing?' she said. 'Pneumatisation. The presence of air cavities in the bones of birds. It is this which allows them free flight.'

The blackbird flew from the tree above us and dashed into the sky.

'If you held the archaeopteryx,' she said, 'it would be almost as heavy as stone in your hand. It would be almost as heavy as the clay models I make.'

I looked into Mina's dark eyes. They were wide open, expectant, like she wanted me to see something or say something. I thought of the baby in my lap, of Skellig slung between Mina and me. I thought of his wings and of the baby's fluttering heart.

'There's no end to evolution,' said Mina.

She shuffled closer to me.

'We have to be ready to move forward,' she said. 'Maybe this is not how we are meant to be for ever.'

She took my hand.

'We are extraordinary,' she whispered.

She looked deep into me.

'Skellig!' she whispered. 'Skellig! Skellig!'

I stared back. I didn't blink. It was like she was calling Skellig out from somewhere deep inside me. It was like we were looking into the place where each other's dreams came from.

And then there was sniggering and giggling. We looked up, and there were Leakey and Coot, standing on the other side of the wall, looking down at us.

Twenty-seven

'What's wrong with you?' they kept asking. 'What's bloody wrong with you?'

I was hopeless. I couldn't tackle. I missed the ball by a mile when I jumped up to head it. When I had the ball at my feet I stumbled all over the place. I fell over it once and skinned my elbow on the kerb. I felt shaky and wobbly and I didn't want to be doing this, playing football in our front street with Leakey and Coot while Mina sat in the tree with a book in her lap and stared and stared.

'It's cos he's been ill,' said Leakey.

'Bollocks,' said Coot. 'He's not been ill. He's just been upset.'

He watched me trying to flick the ball up on to my head. It bounced off my knee and bobbed into the gutter.

'I'm just out of practice,' I said.

'Bollocks,' he said. 'It's just been a week since you could beat anybody in the school.'

'That's right,' said Leakey.

'It's her,' said Coot. 'Her in the tree. That lass he was with.'

Leakey grinned.

'That's right,' he said.

I shook my head.

'Bollocks,' I whispered.

My voice was as shaky as my feet had been.

They stood there sniggering.

'It's that lass,' said Leakey.

'That lass that climbs in a tree like a monkey,' said Coot.

'Her that sits in a tree like a crow.'

'Bollocks,' I said.

I looked Leakey in the eye. He'd been my best friend for years. I couldn't believe he'd go on with this if I looked him in the eye and wanted him to stop.

He grinned.

'He holds hands with her,' he said.

'She says he's extraordinary,' said Coot.

'Get stuffed,' I said.

I turned away from them, went past our house to the end of the street, turned down towards the back lane. I heard them coming after me. I sat down in the lane with my back against the boarded-up garage. I just wanted them to go away. I wanted them to stay. I wanted to be able to play like I used to. I wanted things to be just the way they used to be.

Leakey crouched beside me and I could feel he was sorry. — 'The baby's ill,' I said. 'Really ill. The doctor says I'm in distress.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah. I know. I'm sorry.'

Coot kicked the ball back and forward against the boards.

'Don't do that,' I said. 'You'll knock it down.'

He sniggered.

'Oh, aye?'

He went on doing it.

'Don't do it,' I said.

I got up and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

'Stop doing it,' I said.

He sniggered again.

'Doing what, Michael?' he said in a high girlish voice.

I shoved him back against the garage. I thumped my hand against the boards beside his head.

He winked at Leakey.

'See what I mean?' he said.

I thumped the boards beside his head again. There was a loud crack and the whole garage trembled. Coot jumped away. We stared at the boards.

'Bloody hell,' said Leakey.

There was another crack and another shudder and then silence.

I opened the gate into the wilderness and we tiptoed inside. We stared through the door into the gloomy garage. Dust was falling thicker than ever through the light.

There was another crack.

'Bloody hell,' said Coot.

'I'd better get my dad,' I said.