

Twenty-eight

Very gently, using a little hammer and long thin nails, he nailed some boards across the door. The garage trembled as he worked. He told us to keep back. We stood in the wilderness staring, shaking our heads. He got some black gloss paint and wrote DANGER across the boards. He brought some Coke for us and some beer for himself and we all sat against the house wall and stared at the garage.

'Better get it made safe, eh?' said Dad.

'My uncle's a builder,' said Coot. 'Always doing garages and extensions and things.'

'Aye?' said Dad.

'He'd tell you knock the whole thing down and start again.'

'Aye?'

'Aye. Some folk fight to keep things that should've been smashed years back.'

I looked at the garage and imagined it gone, saw the big emptiness that would take its place.

'Aye,' said Coot again. 'He says the best jobs start with a

massive sledgehammer and a massive skip.'

He swigged his Coke. The blackbird flew on to the edge of the garage roof and perched there. I knew it would be watching the wilderness, looking for beetles and fat worms for its babies.

'He wants us gone,' I said.

Coot cocked his finger and thumb like a gun. He eyed the bird as if he was aiming.

'Gotcha,' he said, and his hand recoiled as if he'd fired.

Dad told Leakey and Coot it was good to see them again.

'Michael's been moping,' he said. 'A good kickabout with his mates'll be just what the doctor ordered.'

'Not against the garage, though,' said Leakey.

'Not against the blinking garage, no.'

We took the ball and went through the house into the front street again. Mina wasn't there. I played better now, but I couldn't help turning to the empty tree. I imagined her alone with Skellig in the dark house.

I caught them laughing at me.

'Missing her already?' said Coot.

I raised my eyes and tried to grin. I went to sit on our front garden wall.

'Who is she, anyway?' said Leakey.

I shrugged.

'She's called Mina.'

'What school's she at?'

'She doesn't go to school.'

They looked at me.

'How's that?' said Leakey.

'Plays the wag?' said Coot.

'Her mother teaches 'ner,' I said.

They looked again.

'Bloody hell,' said Leakey. 'I thought you had to go to school.'

'Imagine it,' said Coot.

They imagined it for a while.

'Lucky sod,' said Leakey.

'What'll she do for mates, though?' said Coot. 'And who'd like to be stuck at home all day?'

'They think schools stop you from learning,' I said. 'They think schools try to make everybody just the same.'

'That's bollocks,' said Coot.

'Aye,' said Leakey. 'You're relearning all day long in school.'

I shrugged.

'Maybe.'

'Is that why you've not been coming in?' said Leakey. 'Is it cos you're never coming back again. You're going to let that lass's mother teach you?'

'Course not,' I said. 'But they're going to teach me some things.'

'Like?'

'Like modelling with clay. And about William Blake.'

'Who's he?' said Coot. 'That bloke that's got the butcher's shop in town?'

'He said school drives all joy away,' I said. 'He was a painter and a poet.'

They looked at each other and grinned. Leakey couldn't look me in the eye. I could feel my face burning and burning.

'Look,' I said. 'I can't tell you anything. But the world's full of amazing things.'

Coot sighed and shook his head and bounced the ball between his knees.

'I've seen them,' I said.

Leakey stared at me.

I imagined taking him through the DANGER door, taking him to Skellig, showing him. For a moment I was dying to tell him what I'd seen and what I'd touched.

'There she is,' said Coot.

We turned together, and there was Mina climbing into the tree again.

'The monkey girl,' said Leakey.

Coot giggled.

'Hey!' he said. 'Maybe Rasputin's right about that evolution stuff. He could come and look at her and see there's monkeys all around us still.'

Twenty-nine

Her eyes were cold as she stared down at me from the tree. Her voice was sarcastic and singsong:

‘Thank God I was never sent to school,
To be flogd into following the style of a Fool.’

‘You know nothing about it,’ I said. ‘We don’t get flogged and my friends aren’t fools.’

‘Ha!’

‘That’s it,’ I said. ‘You know nothing about it. You think you’re special but you’re just as ignorant as anybody. You might know about William Blake but you know nothing about what ordinary people do.’

‘Ha!’

‘Yes. Ha!’

I stared at my feet. I picked my fingernails. I kicked the garden wall.

‘They hate me,’ she said. ‘I could see it in their eyes. They think I’m taking you away from them. They’re stupid.’

‘They’re not stupid!’

‘Stupid. Kicking balls and jumping at each other and screeching like hyenas. Stupid. Yes, hyenas. You as well.’

‘Hyenas? They think you’re a monkey, then.’

Her eyes glared and her face burned.

‘See? See what I mean? They know nothing about me but they hate me.’

‘And of course you know everything about them.’

‘I know enough. There’s nothing to know. Kicking, screeching, being stupid.’

‘Ha!’

‘Yes, ha! And that little ginger one...’

‘Blake was little and ginger.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘See? You think nobody but you can know anything!’

‘No, I don’t!’

‘Ha!’

Her lips were pressed tight together. She pressed her head back against the trunk of the tree.

‘Go home,’ she said. ‘Go and play stupid football or something. Leave me alone.’

I gave the wall a last kick, then I left her. I went into my front garden. I went through the open front door. Dad shouted hello from somewhere upstairs. I went straight through into the wilderness and squatted there and squeezed my eyes tight to try and stop the tears.

Thirty

The owls woke me. Or a call that was like that of the owls. I looked out into the night. The moon hung over the city, a great orange ball with the silhouettes of steeples and chimney stacks upon it. The sky was blue around it, deepening to blackness high above, where only the most brilliant stars shone. Down below, the wilderness was filled with the pitch black shadow of the garage and a wedge of cold silvery light.

I watched for the birds and saw nothing.

'Skellig,' I whispered. 'Skellig. Skellig.'

I cursed myself, because in order to go to him now I had to rely on Mina.

I lay in bed again. I moved between sleeping and waking. I dreamt that Skellig entered the hospital ward, that he lifted the baby from her glass case. He pulled the tubes and wires from her. She reached up and touched his pale, dry skin with her little fingers and she giggled. He took her away, flew with her in his arms through the darkest part of the sky. He landed with her in the wilderness and stood there calling to me.

'Michael! Michael!'

They stood there laughing. She bounced in his arms. They had lost all of their weaknesses and they were strong again.

'Michael!' he called, and his eyes were shining with joy. 'Michael! Michael! Michael!'

I woke up. I heard the owls again. I pulled on some jeans and a pullover and tiptoed downstairs and out into the wilderness. Nothing there, of course, just the image of them burning in my mind. I stood listening to the city all around, its low, deep, endless roar. I went out through the shadows into the back lane. Though I knew it was useless, I began to walk towards Mina's boarded house. Something brushed against me as I walked.

'Whisper!' I whispered.

The cat went with me, slinking at my side.

The door into the garden was ajar. The moon had climbed. It hung directly over us. Behind the wall, the garden was flooded with its light. Mina was waiting. She sat on the step before the DANGER door, elbows resting on her knees, pale face resting on her hands. I hesitated and we watched each other.

'What took so long?' she said.

I looked at her.

'Thought I'd have to do this all alone,' she said.

'Thought that was what you wanted.'

The cat prowled to her side, brushed itself against her legs.

'Oh, Michael,' she said.

I didn't know what to do. I sat on the steps below her.

'We said stupid things,' she said. 'I said stupid things.'

I said nothing. An owl silently flew down into the garden and perched on the back wall.

Hoot, it went. Hoot hoot hoot.

'Don't be angry. Be my friend,' she whispered.

'I am your friend.'

'It's possible to hate your friend. You hated me today.'

'You hated me.'

The other owl descended and perched in silence beside its partner.

'I love the night,' said Mina. 'Anything seems possible at night when the rest of the world has gone to sleep.'

I looked up at her silvery face, her ink-black eyes. I knew that in a dream I would see her as the moon with Skellig flying silently across her.

I moved up to her side.

'I'll be your friend,' I whispered.

She smiled, and we sat there looking out at the moonlight. Soon the owls rose, and headed for the centre of the city. We lay back together against the DANGER door. I felt myself falling into sleep.

'Skellig!' I hissed. 'Skellig!'

We rubbed the sleep from our eyes.

Mina pushed the key into the lock.

Thirty-one

We had no torch. The light that came through the chinks in the boards was pale and weak. We blundered through the dark. We held hands and stretched our free hands out in front of us. We walked into the wall. We caught our toes on loose floorboards. We stumbled as we climbed the stairs. We shuffled across the first landing. We felt for the handle of the door to the room where we thought we'd left Skellig. We inched the door open. We whispered, 'Skellig! Skellig!' No answer. We moved forward carefully, arms outstretched, feeling forward with our feet before we took each step. Our breath was fast, shallow, trembly. My heart was thundering. I opened my eyes wide, glared into the dark, seeking the shape of his body on the floor. Nothing there, just the blankets, the pillow, the plastic dish, the beer bottle rolling away from my stumbling feet.

'Where is he?' whispered Mina.

'Skellig,' we whispered. 'Skellig! Skellig!'

We turned back to the landing again, we stumbled up the next flight of stairs, we opened many doors, we stared past