

**SWANFALL**

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*Books by Sophie Kirtley*

The Wild Way Home  
The Way to Impossible Island  
The Haunting of Fortune Farm  
Swanfall

# SWANFALL

SOPHIE KIRTLEY

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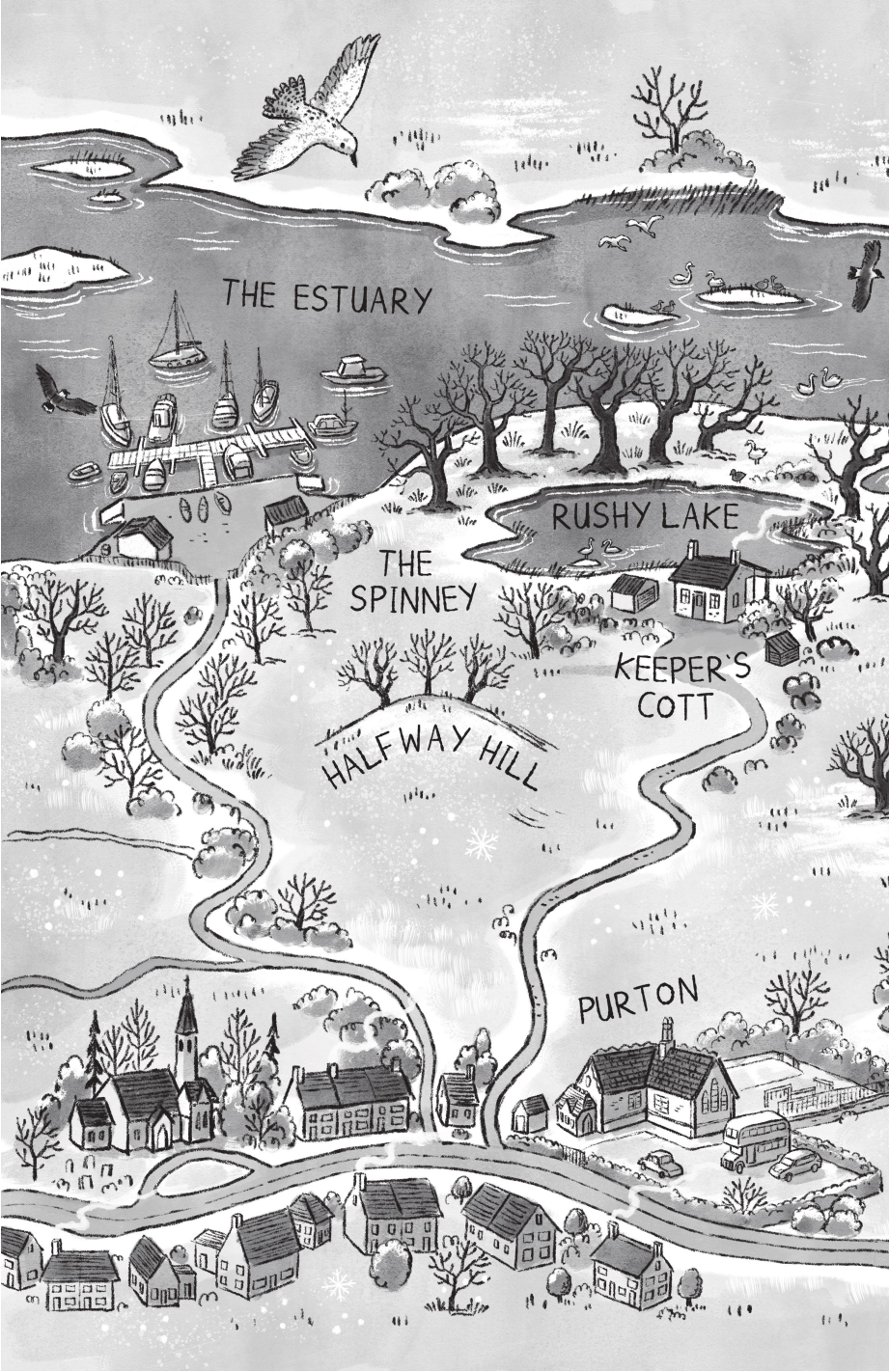
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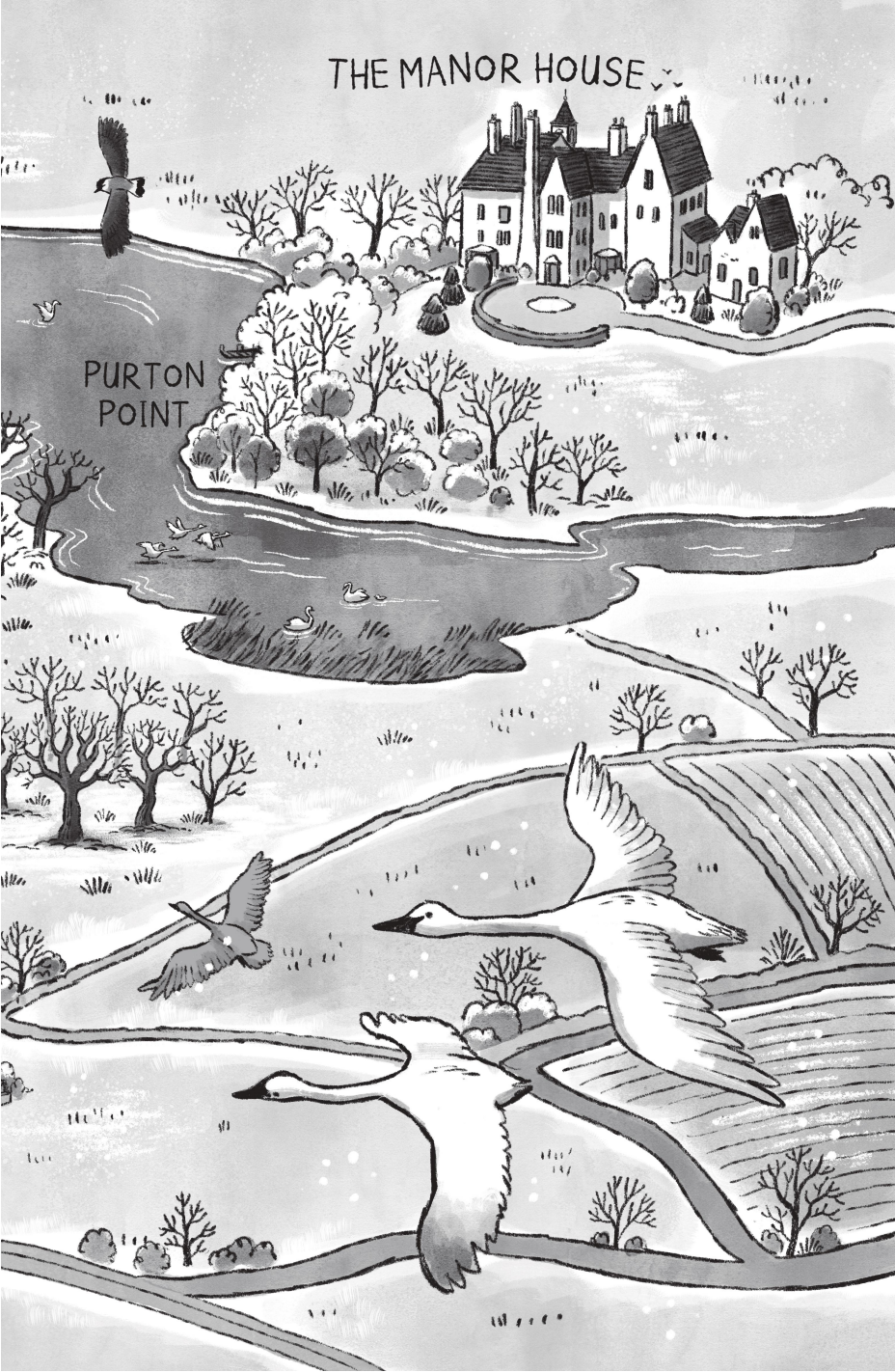
*For Amy, Alice and Niall,  
My sisters and my brother,  
My flock*

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*While the world is asleep  
we fly by the stars  
it is safer this way  
under cover of dark*

*We fly over snow  
and frozen seas  
dreaming of how  
things used to be ...*

*... when once  
we were loved*

*... when once  
we were free ...*



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# PROMISES IN THE SKY



Pip waited by his open bedroom window, wide-eyed and breathless. The winter air smelled of snow and the sky was heavy, full of promise – as if at any second it would open, releasing something white and marvellous on to the world. But it wasn't snow that Pip was waiting for. He was waiting for his swans to come home.

The Arctic swans returned to Rushy Lake every winter, regular and expected as short days and frost and Christmas. *Swanfall*. That's what they called it when the swans came back, having flown all the way from Siberia – more than three thousand kilometres – so many wingbeats from this small lake by the edge of the river estuary. Pip was eleven, and even though he'd lived on the wetlands for years, every winter the swanfall still cast a spell over him. To Pip the swanfall had a kind of magic he could never quite explain – it made him feel



like everything was right in the world, as if, just like the Arctic swans, he too had somehow *landed*, settled and safe for the winter.

Pip peered again through his binoculars all the way to Purton Point and the river beyond. The low sky was still pink with sunrise and although the usual geese and ducks paced the frozen foreshore of the lake, there was no sign yet of the swanfall. It was easy to tell the difference between the migrating swans and the swans who lived here all year long: the Arctic swans were smaller, their necks shorter, their bills yellow with black markings. Their calls were different too, softer, like music almost. Pip blinked in surprise. For a tiny second, he thought he could hear that soft call in the still morning air. His heartbeat quickened. He listened harder.

But no. Not yet. Must've just been his imagination, just the wind whistling in the reeds.

'Pip!' Mum's voice from downstairs snapped him out of his daydream. 'Get a move on, love! School starts in fifteen minutes!'

Pip's heart felt suddenly heavy, like it was made of lead. *School.*

School was one hundred per cent impossible – it was all about sitting still and trying to make his mind focus on one thing at a time instead of the seven billion things at a time that usually danced through Pip's fast-whirling





helter-skelter of a brain. School made Pip feel like a wild thing in a small cage.

‘Pip! Hurry up!’ Mum called again.

‘Coming!’ With a heavy sigh, Pip slung his schoolbag on to his shoulder and trudged downstairs into the kitchen.

As he gobbled his breakfast, he gazed at the three small pictures on the wall by the table. His sister, Edie, had painted them years ago and they were the perfect likeness of his favourite Arctic swans – Midnight, Silver and Moonshadow.

Pip smiled. He knew he wasn’t supposed to have favourites but it was hard not to when it came to those three. There was just something special about them; maybe it was because they reminded him of his very first swanfall. Pip blinked slowly, remembering when he, Mum and Edie came to live in Keeper’s Cott, back when Pip was only seven; Midnight, Silver and Moonshadow had been the first Arctic swans to arrive at Rushy Lake that winter. They were young, only cygnets really, their feathers still mottled-grey, not white like full-grown swans. Mum had marvelled at how they’d managed to fly here alone, all the way from the Arctic tundra – usually cygnets arrived with their parents for their first few winters at least.

Pip, Edie and Mum had given them their names – Edie named Midnight because his bill was almost all

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black; Mum named Silver because his was white at the tip; and Pip named Moonshadow because on her yellow bill she had a black marking in the shape of a crescent moon. Each year since then those same three swans had come back to Rushy Lake, and always together too.

‘Pip! For goodness’ sake! Get a move on!’

He tugged on his shoes, called bye to Mum and opened the back door. A gust of wind whooshed in, teasing him with its wild freshness. Pip eyed the pale sky – Moonshadow, Midnight and Silver would be on their way here right now! His heart lifted.

Pip cycled down the frost-sparkled lane to the village. On each side stretched the wetlands, wide and flat, bright with ice – riding fast through the dazzle of it, Pip’s tyres hissed and the frozen air stung his cheeks. There was a magic to the wetlands in winter, when the low hedgerows were feathered with frost and the air tasted so clear and cold it tingled. He paused at the bend to watch a flock of lapwings flicker across the huge apricot sky in their appearing-and-vanishing-and-appearing-and-vanishing kind of way. And again Pip thought he heard it – the call of the Arctic swans – barely there, soft, so soft, like a whisper, like a wish. He held his breath.

From the Manor House across the estuary a distant bell chimed. With a gasp Pip realised the time; he



pedalled frantically to the gates, skidding to a stop at the bike rack where Tommo was parking his bike too.

Tommo was the one good thing about school. In some ways they were total opposites – Tommo was tall and broad, while Pip was small and slight; Tommo's hair was fair and straight while Pip's was curly and dark; Tommo was loud and excitable while Pip was quiet and day-dreamy. None of that mattered though; they'd been best friends for almost as long as Pip could remember.

'Late again,' said Tommo, with his lopsided grin.

'You're one to talk,' laughed Pip. And they hurried in, late together, just like most mornings.

As the school door closed behind him, Pip gazed back at the endless skies and the wetlands, so vast and glimmering. There was a strange new tingle in the sparkling air today and it gave him a fluttery excited nervous feeling. The kind of feeling you get before your birthday or Christmas; the feeling that something extraordinary is out there, on the horizon, just waiting to happen ...



# BASIL'S BOOK BUS



*Maths. Why did every day have to start with maths?*

Pip sighed as he looked back over his work. The numbers on his page jiggled and hopped and didn't add up. As usual. Pip chewed the end of his pencil. He'd only managed one question, but Mariama, next to him, was on number five already. Biting his lip, he stared out of the window into the frost-sharp morning. The pale skies were huge, and somewhere out there, far, far away, his swans were flying ever closer.

'Right, everyone,' called Mr Fisher. Pip was so lost in his own thoughts he actually jumped. 'Close your books, please!'

Pip didn't need to be asked twice. He glanced over at Tommo, who mouthed the words '*Basil's Book Bus*'. Craning his neck, Pip saw the familiar sunshine-yellow double-decker bus already parked at the far end of the



playground. Pip gave Tommo a thumbs up and smiled. Basil's Book Bus came to the school most Thursday mornings – it was a library on wheels that visited all the villages along the river estuary, so that people who couldn't get to the big library in town could still borrow books.

As they lined up to board the Book Bus, Tommo nudged Pip and whispered, 'I wonder what goodies Basil has for us this week?'

Basil, who drove the bus, was also an expert librarian; he had some kind of superpower to help anyone find exactly the right book for them. Basil knew that Pip loved books about animals, especially ones that included bats or birds. Often he surprised Pip with a perfectly matched book, tucked behind the counter.

They all piled on to the Book Bus and just behind them came Basil.

He was wearing his usual spotty bow tie and carrying a big leather trunk. 'Coming through! Coming through! Make way, Year Six!' he puffed, smiling through his twirly moustache as the children parted to let him pass. Basil put down the trunk with a thud. 'Oooof! Heavy!'

'*L.P.F.*,' said Tommo, reading the silver letters printed on to the leather.

Before Pip could get a closer look, Erin McNamee squeezed in next to Tommo and leaned forward eagerly,

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her two auburn plaits swinging. Erin McNamee was head of School Council and she was always sticking her nose into other people's business and searching for problems to solve. 'What's *L.P.F.*?' she asked Basil, her blue eyes bright with curiosity.

'It's not *what*, it's *who*, my dear Erin,' smiled Basil. 'You see, L.P.F. stands for Lady Penelope Feder. And before you ask, Lady Feder was a wealthy woman who kept a fine collection of interesting things related to the Purton area; she passed away over one hundred years ago but her great-great-niece kindly donated this trunk to our little Book Bus.'

'What's in the trunk?' asked Erin, craning her head to have a look. Pip rolled his eyes.

Basil didn't seem to mind Erin's curiosity. 'Books, of course!' he grinned, his moustache lifting up at the ends. He clicked the silver clasps on the trunk and opened it with a creak. A strange musty scent wafted out and Pip wrinkled his nose. It smelled like the mothballs Pip's grandma, Lolly, kept in her wardrobe to preserve her clothes, but also sort of perfumey too. 'A generous donation of beautiful books,' continued Basil. 'But I'll need to file them all properly before you lovely lot can borrow any.'

'Now, Erin – I think you're going to be rather pleased because just look what was delivered only yesterday.'





Follow me –’ Basil darted off behind the counter with Erin at his heels while the rest of the class scattered around the Book Bus, finding books or claiming beanbag space. Pip and Tommo peered into the leather trunk at the dusty pile of books inside.

‘They don’t look like *beautiful books* to me!’ said Tommo.

‘I know,’ said Pip, puffing out his cheeks. ‘More like books nobody else wanted.’ The books in the trunk were ancient looking – hardbacks, with dull pictureless covers in shades of brown and sludgy green. They smelled like old wardrobes and forgotten things. Then something amongst them caught Pip’s eye, something brightly white and out of place: a feather. A softly curled white swan feather.

‘Look,’ he murmured, picking up a book with a deep red cover. ‘This one’s got a feather as a bookmark.’

The book still felt cold from being outside as Pip opened it to where the swan feather poked out. A chill wind whistled in through the open bus window, ruffling the pages of the book, so much so that the white feather lifted and twirled and danced in the air. Reaching up, Pip caught the feather and slipped it back between the pages of the deep red book. And as he did so something else slid from between the pages and on to the floor next to Tommo’s feet.



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‘What is it?’ asked Pip.

‘It’s an envelope,’ said Tommo, picking it up. ‘Do you think it’s a long-lost love letter?’ he laughed, before continuing in a posh voice, ‘My dearest darling Ermintrude ...’ He made kissy noises.

Pip giggled too. ‘Whatever it is, it’s definitely really old,’ he said, taking the faded yellowish envelope from Tommo for closer inspection. ‘Look.’ Pip pointed to a red wax seal on the back of the envelope. It was embossed with a tiny symbol – a circle with a feather through it. Pip ran his fingernail along its edge and the seal lifted easily, almost like the envelope wanted to be opened.

Biting his lip, he glanced up at Tommo, and as they locked eyes Pip knew that they were each thinking the same thought. ‘Shall we?’ he whispered.

Tommo grinned his wonky grin. ‘Of course!’

They both giggled nervously, and then with a quick glance over his shoulder, Pip lifted the seal. Opening the envelope, he drew out a thin bundle of papers and began to unfold them.