

**WINNER OF THE
CRIMEFEST AWARD FOR
BEST CRIME NOVEL
FOR CHILDREN 2021**



**WINNER OF THE
SAINSBURY'S
CHILDREN'S BOOK
AWARDS 2021**

PRAISE FOR *TWITCH*

“Leonard knows her audience and the jeopardy comes in flocks... Find your nest, curl up and enjoy.”

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“A twist-laden, thriller-like tale.”

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“A lively, twisty crime drama as well as a persuasive story about friendship and protecting nature.”

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“Glorious! Full of excitement and wonder!”

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“Brave and thrilling.”

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“Birds, mystery and fowl play! What more could you want?”

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“Cracking characters, beyond pacy plotting and an ending that is almost Buggy Malone-esque!”

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“A delight from start to finish.”

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“An absolute triumph.”

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DR JESS FRENCH



“Delightful and marvellous.”

LIZ HYDER

“WILDly good!”

MATT OLDFIELD



CLUTCH



M. G. LEONARD



WALKER
BOOKS



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For you, who love birds.

“An egg is always an adventure...”

– **Oscar Wilde**

“I think that, if required on pain of death to name instantly the most perfect thing in the universe, I should risk my fate on a bird’s egg.”

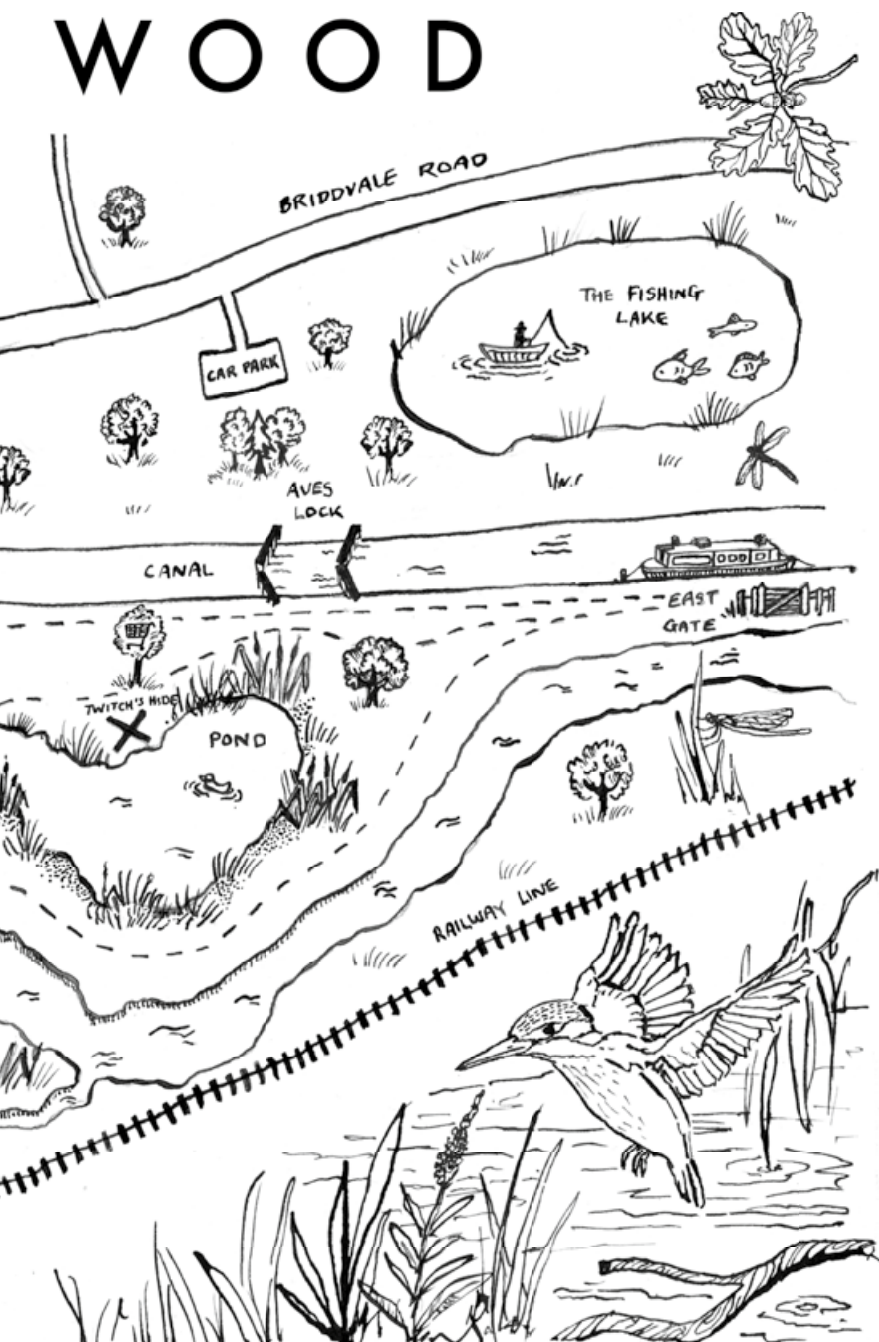
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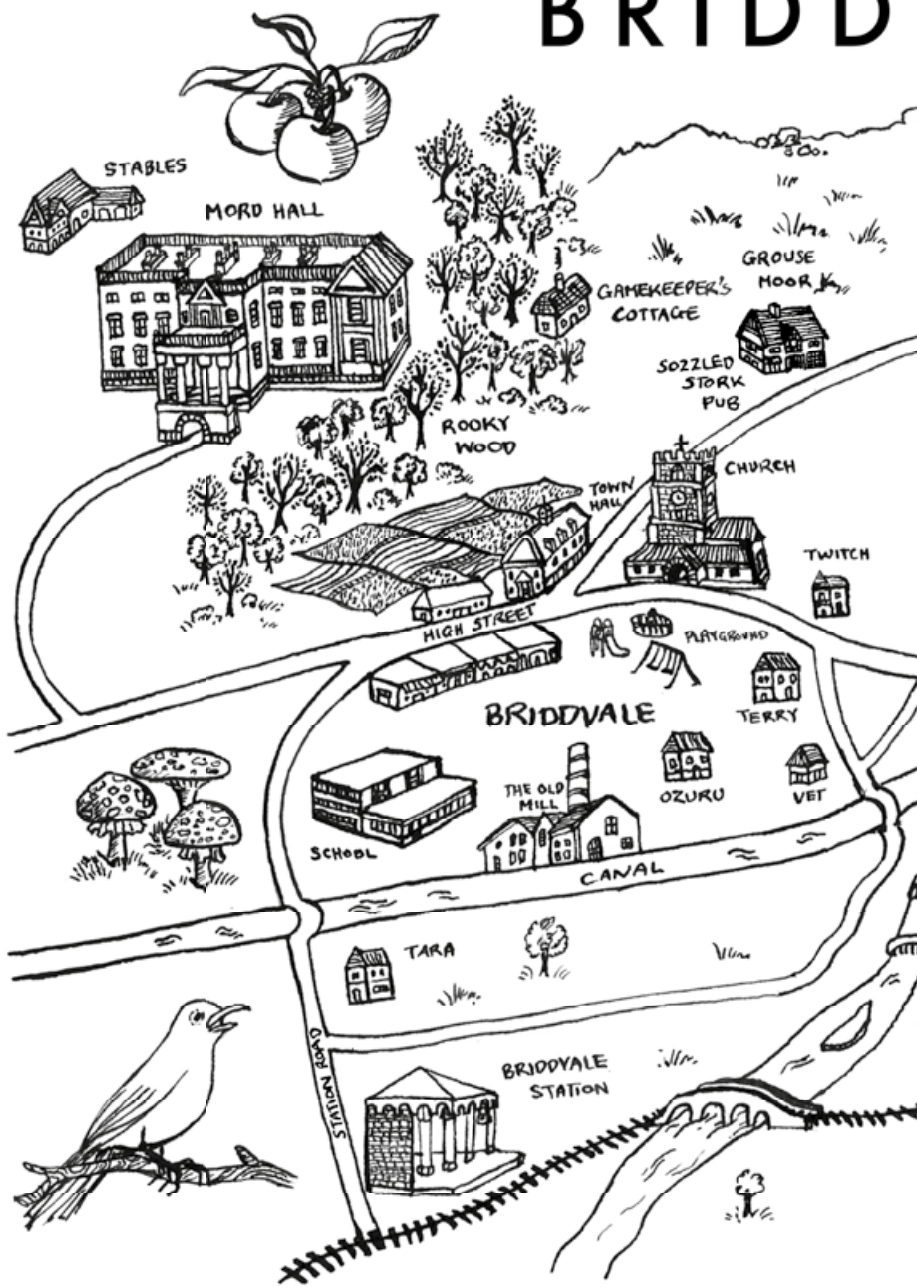
AVES



WOOD



BRIDD



VALE







1

POACHED!

Twitch winced as a needle-sharp spike raked the back of his hand. The pale graze turned red as his blood sought to knit his skin back together. He ignored it. He had to see what was going on. Why were there two police cars at the bottom of Passerine Pike?

“Please don’t let it be the peregrine falcons,” he whispered to himself, as a creeping dread drove him up the barbed hawthorn tree. “Please.” He felt a sob building in the base of his throat as he spotted torch beams bumbling about at the top of the hill. That was where the nest was. He swallowed the marble of emotion, forcing himself up the bunch-backed tree, his heart hopping anxiously.

Since he and his best friend, Jack, had witnessed the death-defying aerial display of the courting falcons in late February, they had regularly trekked up Passerine Pike

to watch the birds. Twitch remembered the male bird rocketing skywards, spiralling up until it was a speck, then plunging down at a speed that had stopped his breath. It had pulled out of its dive at the very last moment, rolling, climbing, looping the loop. The female falcon had swooped in, locking talons with the male. They seemed to tumble out of control: whirling, falling, spinning, rising.

Jack had thought the birds were fighting.

Laughing, Twitch had explained that they were kind of kissing.

The peregrine falcons had built a nest, an eyrie, on a high ledge of one of the ancient rocks protruding from the top of the hill like giant's teeth.

The highest bough of the hawthorn tree, which grew out of the hedgerow that marked the border between public land and the private Mord Estate, was the only place from which you could see into the nest without upsetting the birds. Through their binoculars, Twitch and Jack had spotted a clutch of perfect rust-brown speckled eggs and celebrated with a silent high five.

The fear that something might have happened to the falcons was making Twitch feel sick. Reaching up, leaning back, he lifted his bottom into the highest junction of hawthorn branches, wedging himself safely in the arms of the tree. Yanking out his binoculars, he ran

his finger over the focusing dial. The blur became a nest, but he saw no birds. He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach by Vernon, the biggest boy in his class. The nest was empty! He looked up, desperately searching the pewter sky for the falcons. Where could they be? Had they abandoned their nest? Had they been hurt?

Looking back through his binoculars, Twitch counted three police officers searching the ground around the rocks and one in a climbing harness up near the nest. He spied the familiar, clean-shaven face of Constable Greenwood, who was frowning, holding his chin as he listened to a female officer who Twitch had never seen before. Concentrating on her lips, Twitch tried to read what the officer was saying.

Jack could read lips because his older brother, David, was deaf. Jack had taught all his friends sign language, but Twitch had wanted to learn how to lip-read too. It was a useful way of silently communicating when watching birds or mouthing a secret message at school.

Focusing on the female officer's mouth, Twitch missed some words but then clearly made out two: *egg thief*.

It was as if his insides had been doused with icy water. Instantly he understood what had happened. Shoving his binoculars into his coat pocket, Twitch scrambled down the tree, barely noticing the thorns.

An egg thief! In Briddvale! This was disastrous for all birds. It was spring! Nesting season! He needed to get to Jack, immediately.

Landing clumsily, he staggered then ran, hurtling down the hill. His long brackish-blond fringe flew back from his face as the biting chill of the evening air caught at his throat. He sprinted into the car park, an empty disco of spinning blue lights, passing a silver VW Golf. He glimpsed a gaunt young man with a shaved head in the driver's seat, staring up at the drama on the hill. When he reached the end of the lane, he heard a girl call his name. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw nine-year-old Pippa Bettany, the granddaughter of the Briddvale newsagent, Twitch's boss. She waved. He raised a hand in reply but ran on.

Once on tarmac, Twitch regulated his stride, falling into a rhythm, pulling his knees up, throwing his fists forward, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. He flew past naked trees, knobbly with new buds. He barely noticed passing Patchem's farm. Slowing to cross Briddvale Road, he sped up again over the canal, turning onto the footpath, his feet thudding on the compact earth; finally, he entered the alley that wove along the back of the houses on Redshank Road. He stopped in front of a tall garden gate, gulping down

lungfuls of air. His head throbbed as if a woodpecker were hammering at his temples. He leaned on the fence post, closing his eyes as he caught his breath. His mind showed him the image of the empty nest. His eyelids sprang open. He turned the ring handle, lifting the latch, and let himself into a manicured garden.

It was dark now. Night had fallen whilst he'd been running.

Through the glass doors at the back of the house, he could see Jack's mum and dad, sitting at their kitchen table. They were chatting, smiling, holding glasses of red wine, surrounded by the scattered plates of a recently eaten dinner. Twitch suddenly felt like he was intruding. He was about to sneak over to the side gate and go round to the front door when the bathroom light flickered on upstairs. He instantly recognized Jack's silhouette. The window was ajar. Taking out his phone and turning up the volume, Twitch stood beneath the window. He hit play on a track he'd labelled "Spark Bird" and his phone emitted the eerie cry of a nightjar. It was a high gurgling sound, like a singing chorus of strangled frogs. The nightjar was the bird that had sparked Twitch's passion for birdwatching. Jack knew this.

The window opened wide. Jack's head popped out. "Twitch?"

“Jack!” Twitch hissed, waving his hands. “Down here.”

“What are you doing here?” Jack looked amazed to see him. “I thought we were meeting in the morning after your paper round?”

“Something terrible has happened...” Twitch felt his chest clench and he couldn’t go on. In his race to get here, he hadn’t let himself think about the falcons. Jack had been so excited to see their fluffy chicks hatch and fledge.

“Climb up the trellis,” Jack said, seeing Twitch was upset. “It’ll hold. I’ve done it loads.”

Focusing on the footholds and handholds needed to scale the wall, Twitch climbed until he felt Jack’s hands grabbing his shoulders and hauling him in through the bathroom window. The pair of them fell to the linoleum floor. Jack laughed as he sat up. Seeing Twitch’s face, he stopped.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Jack!” Twitch exclaimed. “They’re gone!”

“Who are?”

“The peregrine falcons.” Twitch stared at his best friend’s uncomprehending face. “Their nest is empty.”

“Empty?” Jack frowned. “But what about the eggs ... their babies?”

“They’ve been taken” – Twitch shook his head – “by an egg thief!”



2

BOYS OF A FEATHER

Twitch watched Jack take in the awful news. His friend pushed his fingers through his upright caramel fringe, repeating Twitch's words.

"Taken by an egg thief?" Jack paused. "Do you mean by another animal, a predator ... to eat or something?"

"No." Twitch's shoulders slumped. He suddenly felt exhausted. "Falcons know how to defend their nests against predators. That's why they build them high, on rocks, so they're difficult to reach." He shook his head. "A human took them. The police are up at Passerine Pike right now, investigating."

"What?" Jack rose to his knees, banging his head on the underside of the sink. "Ow!" He didn't take his eyes from Twitch as he rubbed his bump. "But why? What kind of a person steals birds' eggs?"

"Egg collectors do."

“Egg collectors!” Jack echoed. “People don’t really do that, do they? That’s like ... kidnapping baby birds from their families.”

“It’s worse.” Twitch’s voice was a rasp. “It’s murder.”

“Murder!”

“Egg collectors only care about the shell. They blow the eggs to get rid of the growing bird inside.”

Jack’s top lip curled in disgust.

“A peregrine falcon’s nest is its home.” Grief rose like a wave inside Twitch. “They return to it every spring. But, if they’re still alive, our falcons will never return to Passerine Pike.” He tried to blink back his tears, but several escaped down his cheeks. “And they won’t produce another clutch of eggs this year.”

“We need to find their eggs, quickly, and put them back.” Jack got to his feet.

“It’s too late. Unless the eggs are in an incubator, the chicks will already be dead.”

There was a horrible silence as the boys thought about the baby peregrine falcons that would never hatch. Jack’s eyes were glassy with tears.

Anger, like slow-burning coals, glowed white-hot in the pit of Twitch’s stomach. “There are barely fifteen hundred nesting pairs of peregrine falcons in the whole country.” He clenched his fists. “They’re on the

brink of extinction. A clutch of baby peregrine falcons is precious.”

“Scumbag!” Jack exclaimed suddenly, throwing a punch at the shower curtain hanging over the bath. It swished aside. “We can’t let them get away with this.” He yanked open the door. “Come on. We’re going to find out who stole those eggs and stop them from ever doing it again.”

Twitch got up. This was why he’d come. Jack was an excellent detective who loved the challenge of a difficult case. He and Twitch were part of a crime-solving, birdwatching club called the Twitchers. They had already solved two dangerous crimes. Tomorrow was the start of the Easter holidays. At school, that afternoon, Ozuru, Terry, Jack and Twitch had all cheered when Tara had announced that Ava and Tippi were coming to visit, arriving in Briddvale by train the next morning. The Twitchers would be together again. It had been months since the seven of them had gathered at the hide in Aves Wood. Twitch had been planning to bring everyone to see the falcons’ nest, which is why he’d gone to Passerine Pike this evening, to check on the birds. Now, instead, the Twitchers would be solving the mystery of who had stolen their eggs.

“How are we going to stop the egg thief?” Twitch

asked, following Jack across the landing and into his bedroom.

“I don’t know yet, but the police won’t have the resources to stop someone committing crimes against birds. They’ll only be able to act if there’s a witness. Remember how stretched they were last year when those cats were being shot at? And they were pets!”

“It’s up to us.” Twitch felt a surge of determination.

“Exactly.” Jack grabbed a notebook and pen from the desk next to his bed.

Twitch perched on the stool for Jack’s drum kit. On the wall above him hung a photograph he’d taken last October of a bearded vulture, a lammergeier. He and Jack had seen the rare bird together. That moment had cemented their friendship for ever.

“The case of the egg thief,” Jack pronounced dramatically, dropping onto his bed. “Tara found this book for me in the library about solving crimes. I’ve been reading it. It’s so good. It mentions this thing called profiling. We should try it.”

“Profiling?”

“You gather all the facts you can about a crime. Then you deduce what kind of a person is likely to have committed it. When you’re considering suspects, you focus on the people that match your profile.”

“We don’t have any suspects.”

“Not yet,” Jack agreed, rolling onto his stomach. He took the lid off his pen. “Let’s start with the geography of the crime: where it took place.”

“The eggs were stolen from the nest at the top of the pike.”

“Which is outdoors, on public land. Anyone up there is visible from miles around. It’s the highest hill in Briddvale. People climb it all the time.”

“You’d have to be really lucky not to be spotted climbing up to the nest to steal the eggs in daylight.”

“Which is why the thief must’ve taken them at night,” Jack deduced.

“If I were the thief” – Twitch tried to imagine taking the eggs – “I’d scope out the nest in the daylight, then go back when it was dark, and no one was around.”

“Yes!” Jack scribbled something down. “Which means the eggs must have been stolen last night or very early this morning.”

“I was at the pike yesterday at about six-thirty. The eggs were fine. The female falcon was sitting on them.”

“You went last night?” Jack looked up, surprised. “But we checked on the birds before school.”

“I know.” Twitch felt himself flush. “They hunt at dusk. I wanted to watch.”

“Did you see anyone up there?”

Twitch thought back to the previous evening. “There was a man, a stranger. He wasn’t up near the peak though. He was walking along the path above the car park. I don’t think he’s local.”

“Suspect number one,” Jack said, scribbling in the notebook. “We need to find out who he is. He might have been waiting for you to leave, so he could pinch the eggs. What did he look like?”

“Tall, lanky. He was wearing one of those khaki waistcoats with lots of pockets on the front. He had on an olive-green cap, and a tatty rucksack with a fishing rod strapped to the side.”

“Those waistcoat pockets would be useful for storing stolen eggs.”

“He was behaving weirdly,” Twitch remembered. “Walking slowly, bent down, staring at the ground.”

“Perhaps he’d dropped something,” Jack suggested. “Or maybe he was trying to hide his face.”

Twitch shook his head. The man hadn’t looked like he was trying to hide.

“Did you see anyone else?” Jack asked. “Or anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not that I remember.”

“What about tonight? Tell me what you saw.”

“There are four police officers on the pike. One was using climbing gear to get up to the nest. Constable Greenwood was talking to a female officer. I read her lips. That’s how I know they think it’s an egg thief.”

“Nice work!” Jack looked impressed.

“Pippa called to me as I ran out of the car park,” Twitch remembered.

“Pippa Bettany?” Jack’s tone was scornful. “Is that little kid still following you around?”

“Yeah.” Twitch rolled his eyes. “Every time she sees me, she launches into a monologue about birds. I never know what to say. Luckily, this time, I was already running away.”

“I swear she was stalking you the other day.” Jack chuckled. “When we were walking by the canal.”

“Every time I look over my shoulder, she’s there.”

“Someone’s got a crush...” Jack said in a singsong voice.

“I have not!”

“I meant her, you idiot.”

“Oh! Right.”

“Let’s get back to our profile.” Jack looked down at his notebook. “What does the scene of the crime tell us about the criminal? The nest is on a high rock up a big hill, so it’s unlikely our thief is old. Or if they are,

they must be super fit. Anyone injured or frightened of heights couldn't climb up to the nest."

"If the thief climbed the pike at night," Twitch said, "it's unlikely they're a child. Most children would be at home, in bed."

"Unless they're working with an adult..." Jack tapped his pen against his teeth, then shrugged. "But, yeah, probably not a kid." He paused. "The thief would need equipment ... torches, rock-climbing gear, that sort of thing."

"That's what I was thinking."

"OK, so if I'm an egg thief" – Jack closed his eyes – "what kind of person am I?"

"Secretive," Twitch replied instantly.

Jack's eyes sprang open. "Why?"

"Collecting eggs is illegal. That's why the police were up at Passerine Pike. If you are caught with a collection of wild birds' eggs, you can be sent to prison."

Jack looked astonished. "But I've seen egg collections in museums."

"Some of the eggs you see in museums aren't real. My grandad knew this artist over in Thrushcombe who makes replica eggs for museums and galleries out of plaster and resin. What was his name...? Peter something..." Twitch screwed up his face as he tried

to remember. “Peter Landrow. That’s it. He paints fake eggs to make them look real. We’ve got one on our living-room mantelpiece. The guillemot’s egg. He gave it to me at Grandad’s funeral.”

“You’ve shown it to me.” Jack nodded.

“My grandad and Mr Landrow grew up together. When they were kids, they collected birds’ eggs.”

“What!” Jack was aghast. “Your grandad!”

“It wasn’t illegal back then because there were lots of birds. Only when people realized bird populations were shrinking did they make egg collecting a crime. Grandad told me that eggers – that’s what egg collectors call themselves, or, if they’re being posh, oologists—”

“Oologists!”

“Yeah! Anyway, Grandad said that eggers who loved their collections couldn’t stop. Obsessed collectors kept doing it. They’re addicted.”

“Weird thing to be addicted to.”

“That’s why the authorities had to make owning an egg collection a crime. Places like museums are allowed to have old collections, but that’s it.”

“So, if I were an egger, I’d have to hide my collection?”

Twitch nodded. “You couldn’t tell your friends or family in case someone dobbed you in to the police.

They would take your collection away and you'd go to prison."

"An egger must collect all kinds of eggs, which means I'm probably good at climbing trees." He wrote this down. "I must be fit and outdoorsy, probably between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five-ish. I'm a loner, with secrets, and addicted to collecting." Jack thought for a moment. "Unless ... can you sell rare eggs? I mean, are they worth money? Could someone be stealing the eggs to sell to rich oologists?"

"I don't know." Twitch frowned. "I mean, it's possible, but you'd have to be paid a lot of money to risk going to prison for an egg. I think the thief is probably stealing for their own collection." He considered the picture of the person Jack was creating. "And they must know a lot about birds. Nests can be hard to find. You'd need to know about habitats, times of year for laying, the number of eggs in a clutch, their size, what they look like. The thief has to be a birdwatcher!"

"Imagine watching birds so you can kidnap their babies!" Jack looked disgusted. "That's dark!" He shook his head. "My first thought was that this might be the kind of thing that Richard Peak or Tom Madden would do for money..."

"No." Twitch had already ruled out the two teenagers

who'd mercilessly bullied Jack last year. "They don't know enough about birds, and they haven't been back to Briddvale since Christmas. This is someone new."

"It's good that Ava and Tippi are coming tomorrow," Jack said. "When the seven of us put our heads together, no criminal is safe."

There was a knock and Jack's bedroom door opened. "Jack, I— Oh! Twitch!" Jack's dad was startled to see him. "I didn't know you were here."

"Hello, Mr Cappleman." Twitch stood up. "I came to talk to Jack about the Easter holidays, but I should be going."

"You can stay the night if you want," Jack said. "He can, can't he, Dad? It's the holidays."

"I have to go home," Twitch told him. "I've got my paper round in the morning, but I'll see you at the station, to meet Ava and Tippi's train."

"I'll drive you, Twitch," Mr Cappleman offered. "It's too dark for you to walk. I'll just go get my keys."

As the door closed, Twitch turned to his friend. "Jack, egg thieves target the rarest birds. They do terrible damage to vulnerable populations. We have to catch this thief quickly. It's spring. Nesting season. The birds in Briddvale are in danger!"



3

EARLY BIRDS

Jack's alarm screamed at him from under his pillow. He turned it off and threw the covers back without opening his eyes. It was dark, but it didn't matter because he was already dressed. Sitting up, he turned on his bedside lamp, blinking against the brightness as he shoved his feet into his trainers. His rucksack was packed beside his bedroom door. He pulled on his coat, slipped the bag over his shoulder and crept downstairs. He left a pre-written note on the kitchen table, went to the fridge and took out a freezer bag containing the chocolate spread sandwiches he'd made last night. Wheeling his bike from the garage, Jack set off.

By the time Jack reached Twitch's house, the sky was the greenish shade of dark blue that heralds the rising sun. Taking out his phone, he typed: *You up yet? I'm outside your front door.*

Two minutes later, Twitch opened the door in his pyjamas.

“Surprise!” Jack whispered, enjoying the baffled look on his friend’s face.

“What are you doing here? It’s five-thirty in the morning!”

“I’ve got something to show you. I would’ve shown you last night, only I forgot because of the egg thief. Can I come in? It’s freezing out here.”

“I’ve got about thirty minutes before I have to get ready to do my paper round,” Twitch said in a hushed voice, ushering Jack down the hall and into the kitchen.

“I’m doing it with you. I’ve got my bike. We’ll get it done quicker together and then we can work on the case.” Jack noticed there were shadows under Twitch’s eyes. “You all right?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Twitch replied. “Then I had bad dreams.”

“About the peregrine falcons?”

Twitch’s lips pressed together in a narrow line as he nodded. “Sometimes I think human beings are horrible. I wish I wasn’t one.”

“Some of us are nice.” Jack gave Twitch’s arm a gentle shove.

“I know.” Twitch sighed. “But, when I see a rare bird,

I have sad thoughts, like ... this might be the only time I ever see this bird because they'll be gone one day." His expression was haunted. "Maybe soon."

"Don't think like that," Jack said softly. "Concentrate on the good things people are doing to make a difference, like us, like the Twitchers." He gave him a reassuring smile. "I've got something that will cheer you up." From his rucksack he carefully lifted a white plastic dish with a black microphone in its centre. Pulling headphones over his head, he plugged them into a chunky rectangular recorder strapped onto his belt and waggled it at Twitch. "It arrived yesterday when we were at school."

"Is that a parabolic microphone?" Twitch looked impressed. "Have you tried it?"

"I thought we could test it together."

Twitch glanced up at the kitchen clock. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Brought it with me." Jack whipped the bag of sandwiches out of his pocket.

"Give me a second to get dressed." Twitch hared away and Jack sat down at the table to eat his sandwiches. He thought about how down Twitch was and decided that, until they could meet the others, he would distract and cheer up his friend.

Twitch returned, dressed in combats and a hoodie,

and hurriedly poured milk onto a bowl of cereal. Unlocking his back door, he grabbed his bowl and waved Jack through. "I'll eat in the garden. You can try the microphone."

"According to the instructions, this parabolic microphone can capture sounds from fifty or sixty metres away. I just need some birds to record."

"You came to the right place." Twitch strolled past Jack, stopping beneath the old wild lilac tree from which dangled an assortment of brightly coloured chipped and broken teapots. Twitch had made the tree to cheer up his mum after his grandparents had died. The broken crockery had been turned into bird feeders, baths and nesting boxes. Jack watched as his friend closed his eyes and listened.

Lifting his left hand, Twitch pointed towards a neighbouring garden. "Blackbirds. Two of them."

Pulling his headphones on, Jack directed the white dish to where Twitch had indicated. With a thrill of excitement, he heard two birds trilling their penny whistle duet loud and clear. He pressed record on the box strapped to his belt. "Got them!"

Between mouthfuls of cereal, Twitch waved his spoon. "Wren. Over there."

Jack moved the dish, tuned in to the bird's song,

and hit record. Twitch's ability to instantly recognize a bird by its call seemed miraculous to Jack, like a superpower. "Come and listen," he said. "It's captured it brilliantly!"

The boys huddled together as they took turns putting the headphones on and playing back the blackbirds and the wren.

"That's so cool!" Twitch smiled and Jack was relieved to see the shadow of his earlier mood retreating.

A squawking came through the headphones. Beyond the chicken-wire fence at the bottom of the garden was an old outhouse that had been converted into a chicken coop. Twitch's three hens were inside clucking excitedly. Jack pointed the white dish in their direction. "Eggbum, Dodo and Fandango say they're hungry."

Twitch rolled his eyes. "Those hens are always hungry."

"I've been learning more about the Dracula parrot," Jack said, following Twitch into the chicken run.

"You're not still trying to build a Horror Lifer List?" Twitch chuckled. Jack's approach to birdwatching was different to Twitch's. Whereas Twitch was interested in all birds, Jack was drawn to birds of prey. Since he'd discovered his spark bird, a bearded vulture, he'd been making a new kind of list, containing birds that he

thought were deadly cool. He kept a list of all the birds he'd spotted, like every other birder, but Jack's particular passion was for birds that could star in horror movies.

"The Dracula parrot is forty-five centimetres tall," Jack said, as Twitch filled the chicken's food trough, "with a normal parrot body but a head like a vulture's! Its plumage is black and scarlet, like Dracula's cloak."

"Does it suck blood?" Twitch chuckled and Jack's heart lifted at the sound.

"Sadly, no. It eats fruit. Figs mostly." Jack pretended to be sad about this.

"Are you sure you haven't confused it with a gracula?"

"What? Wait! There's a bird called Gracula! How did I not know that?" Jack took out his notebook and pen. "That's going on the Horror Lifer List for sure."

"What birds do you have so far?" Twitch asked, dusting off his hands.

"Dracula parrots, ravens, crows, vultures, falcons..." Jack kicked himself silently as Twitch's expression clouded over at the mention of the bird who'd fallen foul of the egg thief. "Er, eagles, *graculas*" – he made a show of adding the new bird to the list – "oh, and seagulls."

"No such thing," Twitch said flatly, as he came out of the chicken coop.

"There is," Jack insisted.

“Nope. There are different types of gull, like a herring gull or the black-headed gull. They all get called seagulls, but there’s no such bird.”

“Well, I say there is,” Jack argued, “and they’re terrifying. When I was little, we went on holiday to the seaside. Brighton. We went on the pier. My mum bought me a bag of hot mini doughnuts coated in sugar—”

“They’re nice.”

“I love them. Anyway, I was walking along, eating one, and a massive seagull swooped down and snatched it out of my hand! Then, the evil bird swooped around, came back and grabbed the whole bag! I thought it was going to carry me off next. I was so scared I cried! My mum had to take me back to the hotel.”

“Bet it was a herring gull.” Twitch laughed. “Hey, maybe that’s why it took you a while to get into birdwatching? Too scared of them!”

“I’m not the only person to find birds scary. There’s a horror movie called *The Birds*, you know. It’s really old. We should watch it. Loads of birds attack a bunch of people trapped in an old house.”

“All right.” Twitch grinned. “So long as you don’t mind if I’m on the side of the birds.”



THE BIRDS AND THE TREES

Jack raced Twitch to Mr Bettany's newsagent's, which stood at the point where Briddvale Road became the high street, not far from their school. The morning was fresh and frosty, the sky was an icy blue and the pair were neck and neck all the way to the shop. Twitch pulled on his brakes, turned into the skid, and neatly slotted his BMX into the bike rack at the same time as jumping off.

"Unfair advantage!" Jack cried as Twitch did a victory dance. "You've had practice."

The bell tinkled as Twitch pushed the door open. Jack saw Mr Bettany kneeling on the floor, counting newspapers from a stack. He raised a forefinger to his flat cap in greeting, his lips monitoring his counting. He pointed a pencil at two hessian bags heavy with the Saturday papers. Twitch picked them up, passing one to Jack, and said, "I've got a helper today."

Mr Bettany scribbled something in the margin of a newspaper before smiling up at them. “Me too.” He nodded to the counter. Behind it, standing in front of jars of boiled sweets, was Pippa. “You know my granddaughter Pippa, don’t you, Twitch?”

Pippa’s face turned pink as she waved.

“Yes.” Twitch glanced at Jack. “Hi, Pippa.”

“Are you going to Aves Wood today?” Pippa asked.

“Er...” Twitch spoke hurriedly. “Not sure yet. Are we, Jack? We’re meeting our friends at the station in a bit. We’d better go. Lots of papers to deliver. Bye.”

“Bye!” Jack echoed, suppressing a giggle as they piled out the door and jumped back on their bikes before Pippa could ask another question.

“Where do you think we should begin our investigation?” Twitch asked Jack, as they pedalled back towards the crossroads, slower now that they were loaded down with heavy bags. Jack noticed the intense expression on Twitch’s face, and it occurred to him that if he didn’t catch the egg thief, his best friend might not ever forgive him.

“Once we’ve met Ava and Tippi’s train, I think we should go straight up to Passerine Pike,” Jack replied, pushing his fears aside. “The police will have finished their search of the crime scene. Now it’s our turn.”

Conversation became tougher as the gradient of the north road grew steep.

“The fastest way ... to get the paper round done,” Twitch said, between gasps, “is to go to the furthest house ... and work back ... then it’s downhill all the way.”

Within the hour, the boys were racing back to the newsagent’s to exchange their empty bags for a small brown envelope containing Twitch’s wages.

“It’s a bit after seven-thirty,” Twitch said, as they climbed back onto their bikes. “We’ve two hours before Ava and Tippi arrive. Should we do some investigating now?”

“I think we should wait for the others before we go to the pike,” Jack said. “But how about we go to Aves Wood and scout about. We may see someone hunting for nests, or acting suspicious. The egg thief is hardly going to return to the scene of the crime. Most likely they’ll be where birds are nesting. We can test my microphone at the same time.”

Twitch didn’t look impressed with this plan. He was obviously keen to get back to the falcons’ nest and hunt for clues, but he reluctantly agreed.

As they crossed Crowther Bridge, Jack spotted something that sent his heartbeat into a canter. He

yanked on his brakes, stopping suddenly. “Look!” he whispered, nodding down at a grey-haired man in wading trousers, navy shirt and a beige, pocketed waistcoat who was setting up for a day of fishing. Several rods were laid out on the grass beside him. He was arranging his tackle box and two camping chairs.

“He’s got the waistcoat and the fishing rods! Is he the man you saw on Passerine Pike, the night the eggs went missing?”

Twitch shook his head. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Oh.” Jack’s shoulders dropped with disappointment.

“The man on the pike was younger and skinnier,” Twitch said, keeping his voice low, as they watched the fisherman pick up a rod in his gloved hands. “I wonder who he is. I know most of the people who fish the canal and the river.”

“He could be a suspect,” Jack whispered, clinging to the excitement he’d felt when he’d first spotted the waistcoat.

The man settled down in one of his chairs and peered into his tackle box.

“Maybe,” Twitch said, sounding doubtful.

“Let’s go talk to him.” Jack got off his bike, wheeling it towards the towpath. “Morning,” he called cheerily

as he approached the stranger. “Lovely day for a spot of fishing.”

“Let’s hope so.” The man looked up at the sky as if he feared it was going to cloud over.

Jack wondered what question he could ask that would reveal whether this man was an egger. “Er ... are you on holiday?”

“I suppose I am.” The man looked amused by this idea.

“It’s just, we come to the woods all the time,” Jack said. “We know all the people who fish here.” Realizing his statement sounded like an accusation, he gave the man a friendly smile. “My name’s Jack, and this is Twitch.”

“Twitch! That’s an unusual name.”

“His *real* name is Corvus,” Jack explained, delighted to have found a way to turn the conversation to birds, “but everyone calls him Twitch on account of him being a mega birdwatcher.”

The fisherman stretched out a gloved hand and shook each of theirs. “You like birds do you, Twitch? A fine hobby. I’m Merle Drake, more of a fisher than a birder, I’m afraid. And you’re right. I’m not from these parts. I live in Cornwall.”

“Merle! Merle,” came a woman’s voice. “There’s a cafe in the nature reserve visitor centre. It’s not open

yet, but the woman inside made me two teas and said I could pay her later.” A rosy-cheeked woman in walking boots, wearing a brown wax jacket and burgundy fedora hat, waddled onto the towpath carrying two steaming cups. “Oh!” She smiled warmly at Twitch and Jack. “Hello.”

“Evelyn dear, this is Jack and Twitch. They’re local boys.” He turned to them. “And this is Mrs Drake. Now, you must tell me something.” He narrowed his eyes. “Either of your dads fish?” He grunted in satisfaction when they both shook their heads. “You’re not here to check out the competition then?”

“What competition?” Jack asked.

“Don’t listen to him,” Evelyn Drake said, bustling through to sit in the vacant camping chair. “Merle’s here for the big Canal Masters fishing competition,” she explained. “I’m surprised you don’t know about it!”

“We’re birdwatchers,” Twitch told her.

“Oh, how lovely! I’m a big fan of our feathered friends.” She beamed. “I’m no birder, mind, but I do love to watch them in my garden.”

“Twitch knows more about birds than anyone in Briddvale,” Jack said proudly. “We’ve got a club, called the Twitchers. We watch birds and solve crimes.”

“Well, isn’t that something!” She chuckled and took

a sip of her tea. “Just like the Famous Five, I’ll bet.”

“Except we’re real,” Jack told her, annoyed that she wasn’t taking him seriously. “We solved the case of Robber Ryan last summer...”

“...and uncovered an illegal plot to hunt raptors,” Twitch added.

“We were in all the papers,” Jack said.

“Gosh.” Mrs Drake looked impressed. “Well, I know who to come to if I have a mystery that needs solving!”

“We’re working on a case right now, actually,” Jack boasted. “We’d better get going.”

They said goodbye to the Drakes and pushed their bikes onto the footpath into Aves Wood.

“Twitch,” Jack said, as an idea struck him. “What if the egg thief is someone from out of town, come for this fishing competition?”

“That would make sense!” Twitch’s features lit up. “I was thinking, last night, that if someone local was stealing eggs from birds’ nests, for their secret collection, I’d know about it. I mean, I spend so much of my time watching the local birds, I think I’d notice if eggs were disappearing, and big thefts would be reported in the papers.”

“Are these the first eggs you’ve known to be stolen?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm ... interesting.” Jack took out the notebook he was using for the case and scribbled something down as Twitch locked their bikes to a fence post in the car park. “I think we need to find out who’s entering this fishing competition.”

With his mind churning, Jack led the way through the west gate and into the nature reserve. There was something special about Aves Wood. Jack felt it every time he was amongst the trees. The noise and bustle of everyday life melted away. A distant electricity pylon, standing like a mini Eiffel Tower on a bit of scrubland beyond the River Bridd, was the only reminder that an outside world even existed. Inside the woods, he could hear the river gurgling like a happy baby. Above him, beyond the latticework of scantily clad branches, was a powder-blue sky with clouds as white and puffy as a child’s drawing. Emerging bluebells lent a cobalt tinge to the intensely green forest floor. A solitary bee with copper hairs on its back – a mining bee, Twitch told him – flew past, hunting for willow catkins and dandelions. Jack’s spirits rose. He felt alive.

It’s spring! It’s spring! Brrrrr-upppp! Brrrrr-upppp! Brrrrr-upppp! the birds sang.

Twitch stopped abruptly, signalling that Jack should get out his microphone.

“Chiffchaff?” Jack asked, as he pointed the microphone dish at the loud tweeter.

Twitch smiled and nodded.

Jack inhaled the scent of damp earth, tree sap and dewy moss. “It really feels like spring is here!”

“For me, spring starts when the swallows have returned,” Twitch said, his eyes turning upwards. “Which should be any day now.”

Jack thought back to last summer and the piping squeaks of the swallow chicks that had emanated from the nest their parents had built beside Twitch’s open bedroom window. It had seemed peculiar and marvellous to him that they came back every year. But after what had happened to the peregrine falcon nest, Jack thought the swallows were clever. There was no safer place in the whole of Briddvale to raise a clutch of chicks than Twitch’s bedroom.

“The swallows will be on their migration flight from Africa,” Twitch said. “It’s such a long way. I’m always nervous until they arrive safely.”

He stiffened, pricking up his ears, a look of alert amazement on his face.

“What is it?” Jack whispered. Twitch grabbed his right hand and steered the microphone, pointing it up at the canopy. Through his headphones Jack heard

a strange call, like the whistle of a World War II bomb being dropped from a plane. Then came the racket of high-pitched machine-gun fire. He could see from the expression on Twitch's face, this was a special bird. He pressed record.

"Nightingale!" Twitch exhaled the word like a sigh and reached into his trouser pockets. Confused, he patted his other pockets, then checked his rucksack. Horror dawned on his face. "Oh, no! Jack! My binoculars!" He was pale. "I had them last night. I must've dropped them when I ran to yours."

"Then we'll find them." Jack knew the binoculars were precious. They had once belonged to Twitch's grandad, who'd inspired his love of birds. "Once we've met Ava and Tippi's train, all seven of us will search the whole of Passerine Pike. They won't be lost for very long."

Twitch nodded, but his haunted expression had returned.

"What do nightingales look like?" Jack asked, hoping to distract him.

"Small, brown..."

"Why so many birds gotta be small and brown!" Jack exclaimed. "How am I supposed to identify them?"

Twitch gave a half-hearted snort.

“How come nightingales are thought to be special if they look like other songbirds and sound like they’re playing war games?”

“The song of the nightingale can be strange but it’s changeable. The birds mimic sounds and adapt their song. It’s the unpredictable and sometimes bonkers nature of the nightingale’s music that makes it wonderful.” Twitch paused to listen to the bird in the canopy. “This one is calling to attract a mate. If it doesn’t find one here, it’ll move on.”

“How cool would it be to have a nesting pair of nightingales in Aves Wood?” Jack said. “Imagine the singing from a clutch of baby nightingales!”

“There’ll only be baby nightingales if no one steals their eggs,” Twitch said grimly. “We’ve got to catch that thief, Jack.”