



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 there, too, but the memory is more like a dream than something real.

The last time we all waited 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 smelled 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 leaned forward a little as if he was imagining doing the landing himself.

I loved them, even then. Just like Dad did. 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 begins like that again. With Dad excited and rapping on my door. With the swans arriving . . . and with everything changing.