



# Flyaway

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Summary: While her father is in the hospital, thirteen-  
year-old Isla befriends Harry, the first boy to understand  
her love of the outdoors, and as Harry's health fails, Isla  
tries to help both him and the lone swan they see, struggling  
to fly, on the lake outside Harry's window.

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## *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.



Early morning. It's too cold to get out of bed, but already Dad's at my door. His fingertips drumming like rain.

"Isla?" he whispers. "Coming? They're here, up at the preserve. I'm sure of it."

I force my eyes to focus on the shadows around my bed . . . desk, chair heaped with school clothes, jeans and sweater in a pile on the carpet. I hold my breath as I swing my legs out from under the blankets. Sit up. Rub my hands over my arms.

Dad knocks again.

"Yes, OK, I'm up," I hiss.

I pull on the jeans and sweater. Find the thickest socks in my drawer. Hold my breath until I'm warmer. The heat hasn't come on yet. It's too early, still dark outside. Dad creaks open the door, just a crack, but it's enough to see the wide grin on his face.

“What are you doing in there? Anyone would think you’re still half asleep.”

“I am.”

I step toward him, touching my hair to check that it’s not too tangled.

“Don’t worry, you’re beautiful,” he whispers, already turning to go. “The birds won’t care.”

I go back to grab a hair band, then follow Dad down the stairs, still rubbing sleep from my eyes. We both avoid the middle step that creaks. Neither of us wants to wake up Mum or Jack. This is our time: mine and Dad’s. Jack comes sometimes, when he’s not playing soccer, but mostly it’s just me and Dad watching them. The whoopers arrive at a new lake now, at the wetlands preserve. They have ever since that winter six years ago. No one knows why they changed.

Sometimes I hope they’ll come back to Granddad’s lake, but Dad says they never will. He says it’s too built up and overgrown there now.

We pass the bathroom, and I think about stopping to brush my teeth, but I can feel Dad’s excitement, almost as if he’s fizzing beside me. He’s always like this. As soon as he’s up, he just wants to move. The only thing he’ll ever stay still for is the birds. He grabs the thermos of coffee that’s on the kitchen counter. I take a slice of bread from the bread bag, then go back and grab the whole bag in case Dad’s hungry, too.

As Dad locks the house, I stamp my feet and breathe warmth onto my hands. Our front yard has turned white overnight. Frost makes the grass shimmer and turns our concrete path slick as an ice cube. I cling on to Dad's arm to get to the car. No one on our street is up yet. The place feels heavy and sleepy. Even the café on the corner is quiet. We're the only ones awake in the whole world. Us and the birds.

I turn the heat in the car all the way up. Half grin at Dad to show I'm waking up. And we're on our way.

"It's not normally this cold when they arrive," I say.

"Coldest snap in twenty years. Some people said they wouldn't come at all. But they have. They've been up north for days now."

"How do you know they'll arrive here today?"

Dad shrugs. "It just feels right."

He watches the road. I shut my eyes and try to grasp another quick moment of sleep, but I can hear Dad's fingers tapping on the steering wheel. I open my eyes again. Dad's chewing on his lip, as usual. However sure he seems, he's still nervous every year that the swans won't turn up. There are dark circles under his eyes today, making him look more tired than usual. Mum says Dad hasn't been feeling well lately: She was worried when he got sent home from work last week. But I don't know. He just looks tired to me.

He pulls onto the highway. We pass a long supermarket delivery truck with its fog lights on, then that's it. No other

vehicles. The sky's getting lighter, though; already it's shifted from black to purple to gray. The hedgerows are coming into focus. I take a piece of bread from the bag at my feet and chew on it. Pass a piece to Dad. He switches off his headlights. Neither of us turns on the radio. It would ruin something, somehow. It never feels like winter until Dad and I have done this, until we've driven down these roads on this cold early morning. The car ride to the preserve is always the start of it.





Dad drives past the pylons and buildings of the steelworks, past the entrance to the new power station. He turns left into the preserve parking lot, through puddles of muddy water. We're the only ones. It's too cold and early for even the hard-core bird-watchers. No one's even been around yet to unlock the Porta-Potty. If Dad wasn't with me, it would be so creepy being here. I get out of the car and listen. There's not one single sound . . . not even the trundle of the steelworks or the distant hum of the motorway. The sky is as heavy and gray as a blanket. It feels like snow's coming.

Dad grabs the binoculars from the trunk and we get going. It doesn't take long to walk to the lakes. Down the small dirt lane beside the stream, up the short ramp where the wind hits you at full force and then between the reed beds. Dad walks fast, barely waiting for me to keep up. I'm

breathing hard, and the cold air makes my throat hurt. Dad stops to pick up a crumpled candy wrapper at the side of the path, his breath hanging in the air as he bends. We listen. I can't hear the usual honks and hisses. It's silent, too silent for them. Perhaps they've decided to stay up north after all. Dad would be so disappointed. He glances up at the sky, checking. But nothing.

"You sure it's today?"

Dad nods, absently. "Has to be."

It's Dad, not Granddad, who's always right about when they'll arrive now. Always. It's weird, but if there's one thing he's never wrong about, it's this. Sometimes I think it's the only thing he's actually inherited from Granddad . . . the only thing that makes me convinced they're related. We turn the last corner before the main lake, their favorite lake. Walk the final few yards. But there are no birds at all, not even any mallards or coots. The lake is as still as stone, ripple-less. For that moment it feels like all the birds in the world have disappeared.

"I don't get it," Dad mumbles.

He shakes his head, frowns. He spins around to check the sky from all angles. I look up, too.

"Maybe we're too early?" I suggest.

Dad starts walking, away from the lake. I think about the wild whooper swans, how clever they are to cover the hundreds, maybe thousands, of miles between Iceland

and here. Perhaps this year they're too tired to fly the final bit. Maybe they've given up on this wintering ground, just like they gave up on Granddad's lake. Perhaps we'll just have to watch the mute swans instead, the swans that stay here all year round. I almost laugh when I think of Dad being excited to watch mutes. We both know they have none of the noise and the mystery that the whoopers have. None of their magic.

Dad walks down the main path, toward the river. He's looking for a better view. He holds the binoculars to his eyes, scanning. Then his body goes still as he sees something. He takes the binoculars away, squints at the sky, then looks again.

"What is it?" I ask.

"No, can't be . . ." He lets the binoculars drop and they bounce against his chest. He starts forward into a run. I'm so shocked by the expression on his face that I don't even move for a second or two, I just watch him run down the path away from me. It's not the direction where the swans normally arrive from. But he's seen something.

"What?" I shout again.

He's already too far away to answer. I run after him. I'm glancing at the sky as I go, desperately trying to find out what he's seen. I don't have time to stop and use my own binoculars. He's running toward the far end of the preserve, near the corner where the new power station is. My eyes

flick over it, the concrete building with its long waste chutes. The towering electricity pylons, only put up a few months ago. Suddenly, I realize what Dad must have seen, what he might be imagining. My stomach clenches into a tight fist. And I pick up my pace and pelt after him.