

## Chapter 7

'Yes...yes...','Oh, I know...''Really...?''He did what?''Oh I know...''And what did you do?''Really?','Oh I know...''And you won it, really, well, well done babes, I'm really proud of you...yes...I am...''Oh I know...''\*\*\*\*\*Freddy listened to this nonsense for at least ten minutes before getting up to shut the door and block it out. Although they had never met, he felt like he knew Clara's friend Chantelle himself. But their conversations were always like that, with Chantelle blabbering on the other end of the phone, and Clara occasionally contributing to the conversation with a brief 'Oh I know...' or something similar. Freddy simply could not understand the attraction of this kind of conversation. To be fair to his favourite half-sister, Clara did not normally talk like that, and it was only when talking to certain of her friends that she seemed to be reduced to this daft state. Apart from Chantelle, Clara's dotty schoolmate Paris also brought out the worst in her. Their conversations were even less logical to Freddy, as usually they were the opposite, with Clara being the chatty one, and Paris apparently contributing nothing at all to the call. Freddy had once challenged Clara on this and had been told in no uncertain terms that there was more to Paris than most people realised, and that although she behaved a little empty-headed, she was actually a surprisingly deep person, who cared passionately about animals and wanted to work with children. On this particular January morning, Freddy had allowed the conversation with Chantelle to run on a bit longer before shutting the door, in case he could work out anything interesting from what he was overhearing. Inevitably, he had not been able to, but he remembered that just after Christmas, Chantelle had been treated to a surprise three-week holiday, which had just come to an end, and he thought that there might be something interesting to report. He made a mental note to ask Clara about the holiday later in the day. But he never remembered to ask.\*\*\*\*\*

He rubbed his eyes. He had spent the weekend staring into his microscope, working out the differences between water that had come straight from the tap, or from the pond at the bottom of their garden, and water that had been filtered. He had tried a variety of different ways of filtering, including sand, salt, and the peat they had picked up on their amazing journey to Bruinlarroch.\*\*\*\*\* Wilis had had a more active weekend, and was now sitting at the table in the kitchen, also running his wet hands delicately over his eyes, trying to coax some action out of them. He would go down to the big house later in the day, he thought, but he first had to record what he had seen over the weekend. He had spent most of it sitting under a blanket in the garden. Early on Saturday, he had draped a dark grey blanket over the three lowest branches of the big oak which stood in one corner of their garden, its main boughs overhanging the lawn, and extending back into the wooded area behind him. He had settled down underneath the blanket, with a mug of hot cocoa and a packet of Jammy Dodgers for company. And he had waited. And waited. And carried on waiting, staring at the empty patch of lawn in front of him. He had tried to persuade the others that counting birds might be interesting, but apart from Clara, he could get no response from them. Clara, who had always been close to Wil, had seemed keen, but she had explained that she was expecting a phone call, and that unless she could bring her mobile with her, she was not going to come. Wil had refused, knowing that a single note of Clara's Arctic Monkeys ringtone would deter any self-respecting bird from coming anywhere close, even though he had really wanted a companion. Privately, he thought the others might be right in finding other things to do that weekend, but he was determined to do what he had promised, with or without them. Actually he had really wanted Clara to join him. They had always been close, he respecting her energy and enthusiasm, and she looking up to his calm independence. He had been sitting for the best part of an hour, when two sparrows had descended towards the bird feeder he had hung from a smaller oak which grew from the middle of the lawn. They had toyed with the feeder for a while, before flying off, apparently not

impressed with the food on offer. But he marked '2 sparrows' on his sheet. A little later, he had been surprised when in the sky above the house he had seen what appeared to be a sheet of white paper fluttering down towards him. He trained his binoculars on it, and realised that it was actually an envelope, which then landed just in front of his hide. In order not to disturb any other birds that may come to the garden that day, he reached gingerly out towards the envelope with his right hand. As he was within touching distance, he heard a tremendous squawking sound, a flapping of wings, and saw a pair of sharp talons grab the envelope and take off over the hide, disappearing from view

behind him. All he had seen of the bird (which must have had a wingspan of at least sixty centimetres) was its flat face and prominent ears as it departed. He guessed it was some kind of owl, and noted down 'some kind of post-owl' in his notepad. The rest of the day had passed smoothly until dusk. He had lit a fire just outside the hide to keep himself warm. With the fire burning strongly as the last light of day disappeared, he rubbed his hands together and soaked up the heat from the flames, staring into them as you do. As he watched the yellow and orange colours dancing around the sticks and paper he had fuelled it with, a shape appeared before him in the fire, formed itself into a striking, metre-high bird with bright red plumage, and shot up into the air, spitting sparks and flashes of light onto the trees below. 'I've had enough of this,' thought Wil, and, pulling the hide with him, marched back into the house. \*\*\*\*\* He rubbed his eyes again as he sat at the kitchen table, and just remembered to write 'Phoenix' on his pad to complete his record keeping from the weekend. He went to fetch an envelope so that he could send his observations off. \*\*\*\*\* Both Freddy and Clara were staring out of windows. Clara was doing what she normally did at this time of day, which was to look out for the bus. Even if they had nowhere to go to, she was fascinated by its distant rumbling, which drew her to the window. As the vehicle made its way up the road, a bit faster than most buses, the rumble turned into a kind of a roar, developing into a definite whoosh by the time it passed the bus stop and raced past the front of their house on its way. Freddy was looking out of a different window, and was trying to connect a distant tapping sound with the empty vista in front of him. He opened the window, jumping back slightly as the cold wind hit him. He stuck his head out and looked down the road towards the village in the distance, but saw nothing. Turning the other way, he could see the bus departing smoothly up the road, but there was not a human or a trace of life in either direction. The tapping grew louder, and was becoming more uniform. 'tap, tappety tap, tap tappety tap tap... tap tappety tap, tap tappety tap tap...' Whilst Freddy was used to all sorts of strange sounds in that old house, he was sure that it had to be generated by a human being, because it started to become more regular still, 'tappety tappety tap te tap... tappety tappety tap te tap...' It was more regular, but also more worrying. He looked left and right again, then up. From where he was he could see across several gardens to the big oak tree in Wil's house. Above the tree high in the sky were two distant aircraft leaving their sky-writing vapour trails. But no sign at all of the tapping sound.

But there it was again, even louder now. He realised that he had been looking in the wrong place. The sound was coming from beneath the window. He climbed up on the sill so that he would have the possibility to lean over and see what was making the noise. He put his hand on the window-sill, and started to pull himself up. Kneeling now beside the window, he peered over and adjusted his eyes to the half-light of the dusk. The tapping started again, and this time he could see what was making the sound. Two sticks were tapping together. They appeared to be coming from under a large pile of black hair...