

*Sky
Dancer*
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CHAPTER 1

I'm a coward.

There, I've said it now.

I'm a coward.

It's true.

Dad never actually said it out loud, but it was always in his eyes.

He would've known that I wouldn't go to his funeral and that I'd sit in the car instead, slumped low so nobody could see me.

He would've known that I wouldn't want to be the one to scatter his ashes too.

I just don't want to do it.

I don't want to even think about it.

I want to stay here at home until it's all over, but Mum and Ryan say I have to scatter his ashes. I have to say goodbye. They say I'll regret it if I don't.

I even looked up cremation on the Internet to see what human ashes look like.

You find some weird stuff on the Internet.

In 1907 Dr Duncan MacDougall carried out an experiment to prove that the human soul has weight. He discovered that the average human soul weighs 21 grams. Turns out, it was a rubbish experiment and he only recorded the results he wanted to find. Still, it makes you think doesn't it? Dad's ashes weigh three kilograms, as much as three bags of sugar and that's a lot by human standards, at least that's what Mr Arkwright, the funeral director said. But it doesn't seem much, not compared to the size Dad was in life. Mr Arkwright said the ashes are just our bones, mainly. The rest, the soft bits, the muscle and fat and all our insides, burn and turn into steam and smoke. Just the bones left, burnt and crushed into ashes. Sometimes there are tooth fillings, bits of jewellery and artificial hips and stuff, but Dad didn't have any of those. Still, it makes you wonder doesn't it? What makes us, *us*? What is the soul anyway? Is it something flapping angels hand out when we enter this earth, or just electricity in our head that flicks out like a light bulb when we die?

I stare at the back of Ryan striding ahead of me, the stretched canvas of his gamekeeper's bag outlining the pine casket holding Dad's ashes.

Dad's bones.

Ryan's like a clone of Dad. He's only eighteen but he's six feet tall, and built like the massive gritstone slabs that shape this landscape. I reckon Ryan's ashes would weigh the same as Dad's. Mine would weigh less than half, I'm sure. I'm six years younger than Ryan, but I'll never be as big as him. I'm stick-thin and short. Like Mum.

I fall in behind Ryan, trying to follow his path. It's not quite dawn, and the moors lie dark and silent, stretched out before us. Above, heavy clouds slide across the sky, like the hulls of vast ships passing overhead. It's cold too. A skittish wind whips through the heather and stings the back of my neck. I pull my collar higher and wish I'd grabbed my thicker coat. It's nearly the end of June but it feels more like winter.

Ahead of Ryan, two birds explode from the cover of heather, their wings whirring away downwind. Even in this light I can see they are a pair of red grouse, their dark shapes streaking away, hugging the contours of the moor.

Ryan spins around. His face is hidden in shadow, but I don't have to see it, to know he's mad at me.

'Joe, keep your bloody dog under control.'

I can see Weasel bouncing after the birds, jumping up in the air, her long ears flapping as if she's trying to take off after them.

'Weasel!' I yell. She doesn't hear, or at least pretends

not to. 'WEASEL!' I yell again. I whistle several times and she gives up the chase, bounding back to me.

Ryan scowls, hunches his shoulders against the wind, and sets off again. His own dog, Teal, and Dad's old dog, Widgeon, trot by his side.

'Heel, Weasel,' I whisper. I click my fingers for her to walk beside me and she wags her long tail and licks my hand. I don't want to give Ryan any more excuses to get rid of her. She's a springer spaniel, but not working stock. She's chunkier than the working dogs and her tail's been left undocked. I got her free from a townie who couldn't keep her and wanted her put down. She had torn up his house and dug up the garden when she was left alone. All she needed was some exercise but Ryan's got no time for her. She's too soft, a lapdog, he says. She'll chase the birds if she's got half a chance. Worst of all she's gun-shy. She runs a mile at the sound of a single shot.

As we climb the moor, Black Rock rises up above us. The slabs of dark gritstone at its peak are silhouetted against the paling sky.

It's where we're heading.

Black Rock was Dad's favourite place. It sits high in the south Pennines, on the moorland roof of England. He used to say you could see the whole world from there. When I was little, I thought I'd be able to see China and Australia and America. But I think what Dad meant

was that he could see *his* whole world from there . . . across the whole Hartstone estate, down into its valleys and wooded cloughs, and to Hartstone Hall, the dark stone mansion with its walled gardens and cobblestone courtyard and stables. Hartstone is the home of Henry Knight, the owner of this moor.

Ryan scrambles up on to the top and stands facing the wind. On the eastern horizon, the sun breaks through a gap in the cloud, its golden light setting fire to the tips of the heather.

I breathe in the moor . . . the damp peat, the heather, and the smell of fresh rain on the earth.

I look at the place Dad always sat, a natural stone seat sheltered by the rock. Dad would settle himself in the shadow of Black Rock, take a swig of whisky from his hip flask, and survey the moor. Dad was the head gamekeeper for Hartstone Moor, like his father and grandfather before him.

Gamekeeping was in his blood.

In his soul.

Ryan's looking at the empty seat too. He places his shotgun and bag on the ground beside him and takes a swig from the hip flask in his pocket. Dad's shotgun, Dad's hip flask. Ryan claimed them as his right. All I have is Dad's old pair of binoculars. They're army issue and the weight of a brick.

Ryan reaches into his bag and pulls out the pine casket.

His knuckles are white as he grips its edges and I can see his hands shake. He pulls the lid and I stare at the powder of Dad's bones. There are dark, gritty, charcoal-like lumps amongst finer ash, which is a pale smoke-grey.

'Let's do it then,' says Ryan.

I nod my head but we both just stand there, neither of us knowing what to do next.

Ryan reaches in and scoops a handful of Dad's ashes. He stares at them, frowning as if he's trying to read words in the ash.

'Ashes to ashes,' he says.

His voice falters. The words feel out of place. Borrowed from a church. A formality. They're the kind of thing you're meant to say, but they don't sound right here. Maybe the wind hissing through the heather and the haunting dawn call of a curlew are words enough for Dad. Ryan throws the handful of ash into the air. The dark, gritty pieces fall to the ground, but the wind snatches the finer flecks of pale ash and carries them high across the heather.

I watch Dad returning to the moor to become the peat and the heather, and to flow in its streams and rivers. I watch the landscape that created him, taking him back.

Ryan holds out the casket to me. 'Your turn.'

I look at the gritty ash and shake my head. 'It's OK. You do it.'

Ryan spits on the ground. 'Don't be a wimp, Joe. Do it. Do it for Dad.'

I don't want to touch Dad's ashes. I shake my head and fold my arms, pressing my hands against my sides.

'Do it,' orders Ryan, shoving the casket against my chest.

I hesitate, then lift my hand, my fingers hovering over the casket.

'C'mon,' says Ryan. 'Do it now.'

I grab a handful and fling it up into the air, keen to let go. A gust of wind whips past and snatches Dad's ashes high into the sky. The gritty pieces fall to earth, but I watch the fine white ash drift slowly down towards the valley, a pale ghost of Dad riding the wind, skimming the heather.

Then I see another ghost rise up to meet him.

Pale smoke-grey, it glides across the moor on broad outstretched wings tipped with black. It's a bird of prey. A male hen harrier. A sky dancer.

It dips back down and quarters low over the heather, switching this way and that.

It's so strange that we should see it now, at this moment.

I hope Ryan hasn't seen, but Ryan's like Dad. He never misses anything.

‘Bloody bird.’ Ryan curses beneath his breath.

It’s not until I hear the click of barrels close on the stock of the shotgun, that I realize Ryan’s loaded up and taking aim.

I hold my breath, hoping the bird will glide out of sight, but he flies closer, moving back and forth, his attention directed to the heather.

‘Don’t, Ryan,’ I whisper. I can feel my heart thump against my chest. ‘Don’t! There’ll be Birders watching somewhere. You’ll get caught, like Dad.’

‘Bloody bird.’ He narrows his eye. ‘I owe Dad this.’

I sense him find the bird in his line of sight and track it across the moor. His finger slides towards the trigger. I can’t let him do this. I can’t.

I reach up and yank his sleeve.

Ryan spins around. ‘What the hell d’you do that for?’

‘Don’t,’ I say. ‘Adam Thorne might be out there with his camera again.’

Ryan glares at me. ‘D’you think I care? He as good as killed Dad.’

‘He’d love nothing better than to get you put in prison too.’

Ryan pulls his arm away. ‘Like I said. I don’t care.’

He puts the shotgun to his shoulder again, but the bird has disappeared into the soft folds of shadow. ‘You should’ve let me shoot it.’

‘Let it go, Ryan. Dad’s gone. It’s over.’

Ryan grabs my coat so fast that I can’t back away. He hauls me up, and I feel my heels come off the ground. His voice is cold and he almost spits the words in a harsh whisper. ‘It’s not over. Not for me. Not for you. Going to prison gave Dad his heart attack, that’s what the doctors said. Prison killed him.’

I try and push him off, but Ryan’s grip is like iron. ‘Dad broke the law,’ I say. ‘You know that. Adam Thorne filmed him shooting that hen harrier. He had proof.’

Ryan pulls me even closer so our faces are almost touching. ‘You just don’t get it do you? Dad said you were soft in the head like them Birders. He said you’d never make a gamekeeper. You don’t have it in you.’

My throat feels tight and it’s not just Ryan’s hand pressing against my neck that’s making it hard to breathe. His words are like a punch in the chest. I try and push him off. ‘Gerroff,’ I splutter.

Ryan lets go of me. ‘Dad loved this moor, Joe. Never forget that. He gave his life protecting it.’ He picks up the casket and walks away to stand with his back to me. He doesn’t include me this time. Instead he scoops handfuls of Dad’s ashes and casts them into the wind with fast, angry swipes. I watch the ash spiral away across the heather. When he’s done, Ryan spins around, picks up his gun and marches past without looking at me, his face hard, like rock.

I watch Ryan stride away. This isn't how it's meant to be. I try to force myself to cry; to feel something, anything. I try to think of a happy time, something Dad and I did together. But the truth is I don't feel anything at all. I don't think Dad loved me.

I was never good enough for him.

I'm too soft.

Too scared.

Too small.

I let Dad down.

And now I'll never be able to make it right with him, and it hangs like a heavy weight around my soul.