

**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.”

THE TIMES, CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE WEEK

“A twist-laden, thriller-like tale.”

OBSERVER

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

SUNDAY TIMES

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DAILY MAIL

“A tale of friendship, of being yourself, of seeking solace in nature ... simply genius.”

BBC WILDLIFE

“[A] pacy mystery adventure.”

iNEWSPAPER

“A superb adventure of friendship, bravery and the wonderful world of birds.”

THE BOOKSELLER

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THE BOOKBAG

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“Glorious! Full of excitement and wonder!”

SOPHIE ANDERSON

“Brave and thrilling.”

JASBINDER BILAN

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

GILL LEWIS

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

PHIL EARLE

“A delight from start to finish.”

ABI ELPHINSTONE

“An absolute triumph.”

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

“*Twitch* is a compelling read... An adventure mystery with birds – what more could any reader want?!”

STEPHEN MOSS

“Adventure, friendship and the pure unassuming beauty of nature ... a book that could have been a collaboration between David Attenborough and Roald Dahl.”

DR JESS FRENCH

“Delightful and marvellous.”

LIZ HYDER

“WILDly good!”

MATT OLDFIELD



SPARK



M. G. LEONARD



WALKER
BOOKS



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For Arthur, with love.

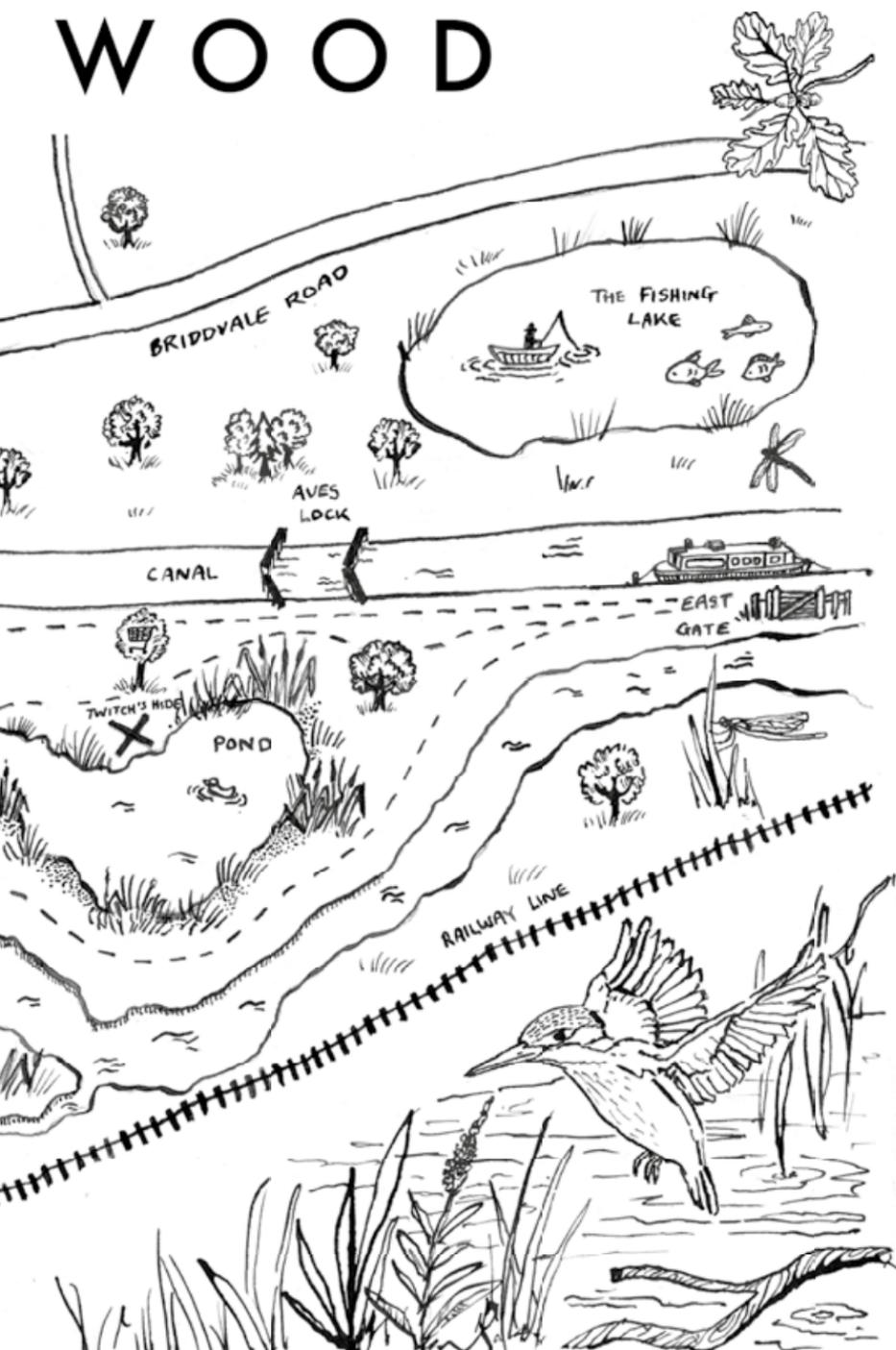
“Vultures are the most righteous
of birds: they do not attack even
the smallest living creature.”

—Plutarch

AVES



WOOD



BRIDD



VALE





1

ZOMBIE

A soul-chilling howl paralysed Jack as he entered Aves Wood. The hairs on his body lifted as a scream reverberated through the trees. It was a horrible sound, writhing with tones of fear, pain and agony. It sent birds bolting skywards, seeking safety in the clouds.

Alarmed, Jack cautiously peered along the path, scouring the browning bracken beyond the east gate for any sign of a monstrous hell hound. Without taking his eyes from the path, he bent down and picked up a stick that was lying on the ground.

What had made that unearthly noise?

Jack felt like he was stepping into one of his own fantasies. In his most frequent daydream, a dangerous dishevelled army of the undead would hunt his friends across an apocalyptic landscape, desperate to dine on their flesh. Twitch, Ozuru, Ava, Tippi, Terry and Tara

would get trapped with their backs to a wall. They'd be about to have their limbs torn off and gnawed on, like barbecued chicken wings, when Jack, seeing his friends in danger, would vault over the wall, dropping down in front of them in a superhero pose. Armed only with a golf club, he would fight the flesh-eating zombies, defeating them in a gruesome battle, and saving his friends.

At least I'm wearing my boots, combats and camo coat, he thought. I can always run and hide. He raised the stick high above his head, wishing it was a metal golf club.

"Here, Zombie, Zombie," he called softly, creeping forward. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." He approached a clump of ferns beneath an old oak tree. Something was in there; he could sense it. "Let's make a deal, I won't decapitate you, if you don't bite me."

The reply was a vicious noise, like fat crackling in a wet frying pan, followed by another banshee scream.

Warily, Jack parted the fan of decaying ferns with his stick, jumping backwards as his ears were assaulted by a harrowing shriek. Just for a second, he had glimpsed the shocking sight of a ginger cat, eyes wide, ears flat against its head, blood all over its haunches.

"Not a zombie then," Jack said to himself, trying to calm his hammering heart. He sat down on the ground

in front of the cat's hiding place. The undergrowth vibrated with a low growl of warning. Zombie cat wasn't going to let anyone touch it.

What should he do? The cat needed help, he could see that. Should he go to the hide, where his friends were meeting to plan the half-term holiday? It would take at least twenty minutes to bring them back here. In that time Zombie cat might move, or whatever attacked it might come back to finish it off.

Jack wished Twitch were here. He was Jack's best friend and leader of the Twitchers, their birdwatching squad. He was brilliant at handling animals, even cats, which he didn't like because they killed birds.

What would Twitch do? Instinctively, Jack knew the answer. Twitch would get the hurt cat to a vet as quickly as he could, even if it meant he got bitten, scratched and missed the meeting with his friends.

"OK, Zombie," Jack said softly. "You're going to have to trust me." He put the stick down, as a gentle wind rustled the golden leaves above him. Rising to his knees, he parted the ferns with his hands. The cat howled and spat, baring its teeth, hunkering down as if it were going to pounce.

Ignoring the noise, Jack peered at the cat's injury, grimacing at the sight of fur matted with congealed

blood. The cat's left hind leg was hanging at an odd angle. It couldn't have run away from him even if it wanted to. He studied the poor moggy. It didn't look like it had been in a fight. There were no claw marks or any other injuries. And it couldn't have been hit by a car: they were too far from the road. A trail of flattened plants showed the way the cat had dragged itself into this hiding place. It must've been hurt in Aves Wood, but by what ... or who?

If he left the cat here, Jack feared it would die.

There was a vet on the Briddvale Road, about a mile away, outside town. Could he get the cat there? Hoping to spot something or someone useful, Jack looked around. He saw glossy hawthorn berries dangling from lichen-covered branches, butterflies and buzzing beasties feeding on overripe crab apples, but he couldn't see anything that would help him carry a petrified injured cat.

Twitch had taught him that the key to dealing with frightened animals was to be calm, firm, gentle and swift. Wriggling out of his camo anorak, Jack pulled off his grey hoodie and put his coat back on, taking his gloves from his pockets. He tucked the hoodie into the neck of his coat, spreading the jumper across his chest, and pulled his gloves on. His heart was hopping about nervously.

Closing his eyes, he inhaled the calming earthy scent of autumn. He could do this.

“OK, Zombie, I’m going to pick you up now.” Jack flattened the ferns and Zombie shrank into a defensive posture, snarling at him. “Please don’t attack me, Zombie. I’m trying to help.” His words had no effect on the distressed cat. “Oh yikes,” he muttered to himself. “This is going to hurt.”

Before he could overthink, Jack leaned forwards, placing his hands around the cat’s middle, careful not to touch its injured hindquarters. He lifted it, swiftly, hugging its head and front half under his right armpit, keeping the injured end of the animal up.

The cat clawed at him, wildly. Jack’s coat and hoodie protected his ribs, but he sucked in air as one of Zombie’s razor-sharp talons caught him across the forearm, raking his skin.

A sickening waft of poop told him that the cat had soiled itself, and a wave of nausea turned Jack’s stomach, but he didn’t have time to worry because Zombie was wriggling and spitting, trying to escape.

“It’s all right, Zombie,” Jack said, struggling to keep hold of the cat. He manoeuvred his right arm so that it pinned the cat against him, and, using his teeth, he freed the hoodie from the neck of his coat, letting it

drop over the cat's head, so that it enveloped the feline and hid the world. He kept its injured backside lifted, touching nothing.

Jack stared at the cat's thigh, which was oozing blood. He could see a hole. Was it made by a bullet? Had someone shot Zombie? He was horrified. Who would do a thing like that?

Rising to his feet, Jack half walked, half jogged, with bent knees, moving as smoothly and swiftly as possible along the familiar paths of Aves Wood. He hurried across Crowther Bridge over the canal and came out on the Briddvale Road.

With a sickening jolt he suddenly realized the cat had stopped struggling. Terrified that Zombie might be dying in his arms, Jack raced up the road.

2

WHO SHOT COLONEL MUSTARD?



Jack burst through the door backwards. A woman in blue overalls saw that he was carrying an injured animal and sprang into action. Taking the cat from him, she disappeared through a door behind the counter.

Suddenly exhausted by his mad dash through the nature reserve, Jack slumped onto a blue plastic chair in the waiting area. Gingerly, he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. His arms were slashed with angry-looking scratches. Examining the raised red marks, Jack imagined his skin becoming purple and tinged with green, as he turned into a zombie.

“You did the right thing” – Jack jumped at the sound of the vet’s voice – “bringing the cat to me.”

The vet was smiling at him as she picked up the phone on the counter. Jack listened as she told someone – the owner he guessed – that his ginger tomcat, whose

real name turned out to be Colonel Mustard, had been brought in. She reassured the owner that the cat had not been run over. Jack noticed she didn't tell them that Colonel Mustard had been shot.

Hanging up the phone, the vet took a first-aid kit from beneath the counter and came to sit beside him, introducing herself as Jess. She set about cleaning the scratches on his arms with antiseptic wipes. It stung and Jack tried hard not to wince.

"Where did you find Colonel Mustard?" she asked.

"In Aves Wood." Jack told her the story of how he'd found and rescued the cat.

"You were very brave to pick him up." She unscrewed a tube of cream. "He's really gone to town on your arms." She started dabbing the cream onto Jack's scratches.

"Will the cat be OK?" Jack swallowed, thinking of the moment the cat had stopped struggling in his arms. "He's not going to die, is he?"

"He's asleep now. Once we've fixed him up, he'll be OK." She smiled reassuringly. "He's lost a lot of blood and that back leg is a mess, but he'll live to eat a few more fish suppers, don't you worry."

"What happened to him? It looked like he'd been shot!"

“Yes.” The vet’s expression became sombre. “That is what it looks like, although there’s no bullet in his leg. It’s a bit odd.” She sighed wearily. “He isn’t the first cat that’s been hurt in this way recently.”

“There have been other shootings?” Jack sat up straight.

“Colonel Mustard is the third cat targeted in Briddvale this week. Sadly, the first one didn’t survive.”

“Do the police know?”

“Yes, and I’ll tell them about Colonel Mustard too.” The vet put the lid back on the tube of antiseptic cream. “There, that should take care of those scratches. Now, I’d like to call one of your grown-ups and let them know you’re here. Do you have a number for them?”

Jack was waiting for his mum to collect him when a taxi pulled up outside the vet’s. The driver hopped out and helped an elderly gentleman, dressed in a blue shirt and tweed suit, rise from the back seat. He set a walking-frame before him.

“Mr Reginald Frisby?” the vet asked, opening the door.

“At your service.” Reginald Frisby lifted an ancient hand of knuckles and wrinkled skin to his liver-spotted forehead. “But, please, call me Reggie.” He walked a step at a time, leaning on the frame. “How’s the old Colonel bearing up? Is he being a good patient?”

“He’s sleeping. Another vet is looking at the X-rays.” Jess stepped back from the doorway to give Reggie the space to get through. “My name’s Jess.” She helped him to a chair. “I’m the vet treating Colonel Mustard, and this is Jack. He found your cat and brought him to me. He saved the Colonel’s life.”

“Thank you, young man.” Reggie took Jack’s hand, closing his own around it. “I’m very much indebted to you.” His blue eyes were watery. “My daughter gave the Colonel to me when he was nothing more than a ball of ginger fluff. He and I have been together since my wife died.” He gave Jack an emotional smile. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost him.” He turned to Jess. “What trouble has he got himself into this time?”

“He has a serious injury to his back left leg, but the good news is that none of his major organs are damaged.”

“How did he hurt his leg?” Reggie asked. “Did he trap it in something?”

“No. It seems likely he was . . . shot.”

“Someone shot the Colonel!” Reggie was aghast. “What sort of callous hooligan does a thing like that to a poor old cat?”

“I don’t know.” Jess shook her head. “We’re hopeful we can save the leg, though he’ll probably limp for the rest of his life.”

“Well that makes two of us then,” Reggie said.

“Mr Frisby,” Jack said. “Colonel Mustard isn’t the only pet to be shot. There’s a shooter on the loose, targeting cats.”

“That’s dreadful. In my day, you only shot an animal if you were hungry enough to eat it, and no one ate anyone else’s pets.” He shook his head. “If I were a younger man, I’d hunt them down...”

“Would you?” The same thought had occurred to Jack.

“I would.” Reggie nodded. “Although, I’m not sure I could catch a snail with this thing.” He patted his walking frame.

“I could do it,” Jack suggested. “I’d make sure that whoever hurt Colonel Mustard is caught and sent to prison.”

At this very moment, the Twitchers were in Aves Wood planning what to do over the half-term holiday. Twitch wanted to build a skywatch hide on Passerine Pike, to chart the birds departing on their autumn migrations, but Jack was certain they’d all much rather be solving the mystery of the evil cat killer.

“That’s very good of you, Jack” – Reggie patted his knee – “but you’ve done enough for me and the old Colonel already.”

“The police are investigating,” Jess chimed in.

“But, I’m one of the Twitchers; the birdwatching detectives. We’re the ones who caught that bank robber and found the missing money.”

“I read about that in the *Bridgdvale Record*.” Reggie looked impressed.

“That was us.” Jack’s chest lifted with pride. “We were in all the newspapers. We use our birding skills to solve crimes.”

“Well, isn’t that something.”

“We’ll find out who’s guilty of shooting the cats quicker than the police can,” Jack bragged. “If I interview you about Colonel Mustard’s routine, we can work out where and when he was hurt.”

“Now?” Reggie looked intrigued.

A familiar red car pulled up and parked outside the vet’s. Jack watched his mum pull her handbag from the passenger seat onto her lap. “Um, it’d be better if I had the others with me.”

“Well, I don’t go out much. You’re welcome to pop round my house and ask me questions, anytime.” Reggie paused and then asked, “Do you think you could come before the big storm?”

“What storm?”

“Haven’t you heard? There’s a storm warning for Monday. It’s been on the radio.”

“But the weather’s been nice this week.”

“It can turn on a sixpence at this time of year. If it’s a really big storm, there’ll be flooding, mark my words.”

“We could come tomorrow?” Jack said. “In the afternoon?”

“Lovely.” Reggie nodded and wrote down his address on the back of a leaflet about looking after dogs.

“You live on the same road as me!” Jack exclaimed. “I live at number eight.”

“Jack!” His mother hurried through the door, her shoulder length wavy hair held back from her immaculately made-up face with combs. Her eyes scanned him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mum. You didn’t need to come.”

“Your son is a hero,” Reggie told her. “He saved Colonel Mustard’s life.”

Jack’s mum looked blankly back at him, smiling politely.

“Colonel Mustard is a cat, Mum. I saved Mr Frisby’s cat.”

“Look at your arm, Jack! It’s bleeding!” she exclaimed in horror. “Did the beastly cat do that to you?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Jack lied, pulling down his sleeves to cover the scratches.

Jess handed Jack’s mum a carrier bag. “It’s got Jack’s jumper in it. I’m afraid it’ll need a wash.”

Jack’s mum made the mistake of opening the bag and recoiled at the smell.

“The cat soiled itself,” Jess explained, apologetically.

“Come on.” Jack’s mum headed for the door, holding the bag at arm’s length. “Let’s get you home.”

“But, I need to go to Aves Wood. I’m meeting the others in the hide.” Jack followed his mum as she opened the boot of her car and dropped the plastic bag into it. “It’s important.”

“And I was supposed to be shopping for a costume to wear to the Halloween Ball next Friday.”

“But I *have* to go to the hide,” Jack pleaded. “They’ll be wondering where I am.”

“Send them a message. Tell them you got mauled by a vicious cat.” Her eyes flickered to his arm. “I’ll need to keep an eye on those scratches; they could become infected.”

“But ... *Mum!*”

“No ifs, no buts,” she replied, marching past him, dropping into the driving seat and turning the key in the ignition to end the conversation. “Get in.”

Jack stared out of the car window as they drove past Aves Wood. There was no phone signal in the woods. He couldn't send a message. And he didn't want to. He wanted to see the excitement on his friends' faces when he told them he'd found a crime for them to solve.



3

LADY BARBARA GOREMORE

Jack rose early and got dressed. Twitch had messaged him last night, asking why he hadn't come to the meeting. Jack had sent a cryptic reply, saying he would explain everything when they met. Nothing was going to stop him from going to the hide this morning. He'd already laid out everything he needed for a day of detecting. On his drum kit were: a fresh notebook and pen, his binoculars, a fully charged phone and his camouflage clothes.

Creeping down to the kitchen, Jack smiled at Winnie, the family dog, who was jerking and snuffling as she snoozed in her basket, dreaming of chasing rabbits. He poured himself a bowl of cereal, spooned it down and placed a note on the kitchen table, telling his parents he'd gone birdwatching in Aves Wood for the day.

After pulling on his boots and coat, Jack slipped out the back door, tramping over the dew-laden grass to the tall gate in the fence at the bottom of his garden. Beyond it was an overgrown footpath that ran along the back of the neighbouring houses. He paused, seeing a small brown bird with a blue-grey head, rust-coloured face and white feathers in its wings. It was perching on the drooping stem of a desiccated thistle.

Slowly and calmly, he slid his hand into his trouser pocket and took out his bird book. "You're a tree sparrow," he whispered, as the bird pecked at the shrivelled thistle head, searching for seeds. Scanning the index, he found the page for tree sparrow and immediately realized he was wrong. Flicking through the pages of the little book, he searched randomly for the bird, but when he looked up, it had gone.

Shoving the field guide back into his pocket, Jack stomped along the path feeling frustrated. He'd been a bird-spotter for two months now and was beginning to worry that he was no good at it. Every bird seemed to be a different shade of brown, and they were so jumpy, and moved so fast, it was impossible to know what you were looking at. Twitch told him to look at size, the shape of a bird's beak and the habitat it was spotted in, and Jack really did try, but he couldn't seem to get the hang of it.

Having moved from a big city to Briddvale only nine months ago, Jack felt he was way behind the others. Twitch, Ozuru, Terry and Tara had lived in the countryside town of Briddvale their entire lives. They knew the names of the plants and the trees like they knew the names of the roads and local landmarks. They didn't need a field guide to identify birds. Even Tippi and Ava, the two members of the Twitchers not from Briddvale, knew lots about nature. They'd learned it from their nan who was an artist and lover of birds.

The thought that he might not be a good birdwatcher made Jack feel sick in his stomach; it was the main interest of his entire friendship circle: birds and solving crime.

At the end of the footpath, he turned away from the cul-de-sac of modern houses, striking out across scrubland, to take the shortcut to the canal and the east gate into Aves Wood. From behind him came the rhythmic thunder of a galloping horse. He spun around to see a woman in a fitted scarlet jacket over a high-necked white blouse, black jodhpurs and riding boots come flying over the hedgerow on the back of a white stallion. She was riding straight towards him.

"Hey!" Jack yelled, waving his arms as she bore down on him, showing no signs of trying to slow her horse. He threw himself sideways, hitting the ground

hard and crying out in pain as his scratched arms collided with the earth. He rolled out of harm's way to avoid being trampled.

Already in detective mode, Jack reached into his pocket and whipped out his phone, taking a series of photographs as the woman in red galloped away. Her mouth was set in a determined snarl, twisting her features. She didn't look back, instead screeching "YAH! YAH!" as she beat her riding crop against the flank of the sweating stallion, driving it forward.

The rider hunkered down as the horse jumped. It kicked clods of mud into the air as it cleared the hedge at the far end of the field.

Jack sat up, shocked by his close encounter with the horse. Hadn't the rider seen him? She hadn't even tried to slow down. He scrolled through the sequence of photographs he'd taken with his phone. Who was she? He took out his notebook and pen, wrote the date at the top of a clean page, then a short description of the rider and what had happened.

Beyond the east gate cobwebs, suspended between burgundy stalks of curly dock, glittered in the early morning light. All was quiet. The nature reserve, with its weaving pathways and glades of burnished foliage, was a wild place that Jack had come to love. When he'd

first met Twitch, his friend had been fiercely protective of Aves Wood, reluctant to share its secrets. Now, Jack understood why. It felt meaningful to be a part of the wildlife world within the woods.

Travelling down the main path to a familiar bend, Jack glanced up, searching the russet canopy above him for the rusty old shopping trolley that marked the secret trail to the Twitchers' hide. The tree had held the trolley in its embrace for so long that its branches wound through it, lifting the trolley higher and higher as it grew. The pair were inseparable now.

Glancing over his shoulder to check no one would see him, Jack waded through a wall of yellowing bracken that swung back behind him like a door. A rabbit trail took him through a tangle of spiky plants that snagged on his clothes, scattering raindrops as they pinged free. He realized there must've been a shower of rain in the night, though it couldn't have been heavy. It hadn't reached the compacted forest floor, which had been baked hard over the summer.

The hide was hidden deep within a thicket of plants that would sting, spike or tear at your flesh if you approached it from the wrong direction. It was a point of pride for all the Twitchers that their den was so well camouflaged, it was impossible for the untrained eye

to see. Built around an ancient oak that grew within a circle of coppiced hazel trees, the hide was a stone's throw from the marshy banks of the Aves Wood pond, which, despite its name, was the size of a lake. The hide had three rooms. The entrance was a tepee built from tall branches. The back room was triangular, the size and shape of a two-man tent, and the main room was a square cabin with a window looking out over the water. A ladder climbed up through a hole in the tepee roof to a walkway that encircled the oak's thick trunk. Above the walkway was a pigeon loft – an adapted dog crate strapped into the intersection of the oak's upper branches and protected from the rain by strategically hung, olive green, tarpaulin triangles.

Ozuru's dad had helped them get permission from the Aves Wood Nature Reserve committee to add the cabin (his old garden shed) and walkway to the tree. In exchange, the Twitchers had volunteered to litter-pick and act as rangers, looking after the wood.

Jack made his way round to the entrance of the hide, unhooked a wooden coat hanger from a stubby branch on an adjacent tree and pulled on it, winching the door open.

“Jack! Up here!” Twitch, a short boy with shoulder-length brackish-blond hair and a shy smile, hailed him

from the viewing platform. Like Jack, he was dressed in combat trousers and a sandy hoodie. “I’m feeding the pigeons.”

Jack clambered up the ladder, joining Twitch on the walkway. Sitting down with his back against the old oak, Jack let his legs dangle over the edge as he looked out over the water.

“So where were you yesterday?” Twitch asked as he withdrew a handful of birdseed from a pocket in his trousers and emptied it into a bowl. “Why all the mystery?” He slid the bowl into the pigeon loft where two pigeons – one goggle-eyed and scruffy, the other a paler and neater bird – immediately began pecking at it.

Twitch had trained his two homing birds, Frazzle and Squeaker, to carry messages between the hide and his home, and Jack envied him his pets. He wanted to get pigeons too, but his mother wasn’t keen. She changed the subject every time he asked her about it.

Jack waited until Twitch had shut the loft door and he had his full attention. “Because at long last there is a mystery and a really good one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yesterday, I was on my way here when I found an injured cat.”

“Where?”

“Near the east gate. It was making an awful noise. I thought it was the beginning of the zombie apocalypse.”

Twitch laughed.

“It was hiding in the ferns and get this” – Jack paused for dramatic effect – “it had been shot!”

“Shot!” Twitch’s shock was exactly the reaction Jack had been hoping for.

“Yeah. Its back left leg was hanging all wrong and there was blood everywhere.”

Twitch dusted off his hands, wiping them on his trousers, as he and sat down beside Jack. “What did you do?”

“I saved its life,” Jack said nonchalantly. “I picked it up and carried it all the way to the vet on Briddvale Road.”

“Was it unconscious?”

“No.”

“Injured cats are vicious.” Twitch looked sceptical. “I wouldn’t pick one up.”

“You wouldn’t?” Jack was surprised.

“Didn’t it go for you?”

Jack pushed up the sleeves of his coat and showed Twitch the scabs on his scratched arms.

“Whoa! That’s nasty. Did it hurt?”

“It did afterwards. I didn’t really feel the scratches when I was running to the vet. I was worried about the

cat dying.” He shook his head. “I wanted to come and tell you and the others about it, but Mum wouldn’t let me. She was worried I’d get an infection or tetanus or something.” Jack let his sleeves fall back down. “But get this, Colonel Mustard isn’t the only cat that’s been shot.”

“Colonel Mustard?”

“That’s the cat’s name. He’s the *third* cat to be shot around here. The first one died!”

“That’s horrible!” Twitch looked out over the pond. “I mean, I don’t really like cats, but I wouldn’t go around killing them!”

“I know. It’s bad.”

“You sound ... excited?” Twitch narrowed his eyes as he studied Jack.

“Colonel Mustard’s owner, Mr Frisby, said that he’d like the Twitchers to look into who might have shot his cat. He read about us in the paper.”

“What about the police?”

“The vet said they are investigating, but I reckon they’ll be too busy arresting people who commit crimes against people to worry about hurt animals.”

“Probably.” Twitch nodded.

“Mr Frisby wants us to find out who shot Colonel Mustard, and the other cats, and bring them to justice before they can hurt any more.” Jack beamed. “It’s

our first proper case as detectives.” He bounced as he said this.

“Our second, don’t you mean?”

“Robber Ryan was our origin story. That case brought us together, but this one we can solve as a group.” Lifting his hand to his mouth to make a megaphone, Jack put on an action-movie-trailer voice, “Can the Twitchers solve the impossible case of the evil cat killer?”

“I bet we can.” Twitch laughed.

“I can’t wait to tell the others. This is going to be the best half-term holiday ever. And it’s Halloween next Friday, the best day of the year, and then it’s your birthday!”

“Mum’s so excited about throwing me a party, it’s making me nervous,” Twitch admitted. “I’ve not had a party before.”

“You’ve never had a birthday party?”

Twitch shook his head. “I’ve done nice things, like seeing a movie with Mum, or going out for dinner.”

“Yeah, but this is your thirteenth birthday. You’re going to be a teenager. You’ve got to have a party.”

Twitch shrugged and changed the subject. “Yesterday, we went to Passerine Pike and made a start on the skywatch hide. The swifts and swallows may have gone, but we saw starlings arriving from eastern Europe.”

Jack suspected he'd be as good at charting migrations as he was at identifying tree sparrows. "Twitch, do you think, that maybe, some people aren't good birdwatchers?"

"You're so impatient, Jack." Twitch gave him an affectionate shove, followed by a reassuring grin. "You've only been looking at birds for a couple of months. It gets easier as they become more familiar. Each season brings different birds. You need to be watching for at least a year to see them all. Wait till you find your spark bird. You'll see things differently then."

"What's a spark bird?"

"It's the bird that makes you a birdwatcher. Every birder has one."

"I don't have one," Jack admitted. "I tried to identify a bird on the way here. I'm pretty sure it was common, but I got it wrong."

"What did it look like?"

"It had a blue-grey head, and a rust-brown face with white feathers in its wings."

"Was its beak the same blue-grey as its head?"

"Yeah."

"It was a chaffinch."

Jack was always impressed by Twitch's knowledge, but it made him feel like they were very different people.

He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to spot birds with the confidence and joy that Twitch did.

"You'll never guess what happened to me on the way here," Jack said, pulling his phone from his pocket. "A woman on a big white horse came galloping across the field and almost ran me over. I had to jump and roll out of her way." He showed Twitch a picture. "She was really whipping the horse. It was horrible."

"That's Lady Barbara Goremore of Mord Hall," Twitch said with a stony voice, and Jack could tell he didn't like her.

"Do you think I should report it to the police?"

Twitch shook his head. "She doesn't think laws apply to her."

"Perhaps she tried to mow me down because she'd heard that I'd accepted the cat killer case and she's worried I might solve it. Do you think she looks like a cat killer?"

"Ha! She wouldn't shoot a cat unless it grew wings and flew," Twitch replied bitterly. "The Goremores hunt grouse. She is a bird murderer."

"You can't hunt grouse without a gun!" Jack declared triumphantly, flipping open his notebook and taking out his pen. "She owns a gun, looks evil, and tried to kill a detective on the case! That officially makes Lady Goremore our first suspect."