



CLUTCH

CAN THE TWITCHERS CATCH A THIEF?

M. G. LEONARD

"A lively, twisty crime drama." THE TIMES on Twitch

**WINNER OF THE
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BEST CRIME NOVEL
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“A lively, twisty crime drama as well as a persuasive story about friendship and protecting nature.”

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“An absolute triumph.”

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“WILDly good!”

MATT OLDFIELD



CLUTCH



M. G. LEONARD



WALKER
BOOKS



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First published 2023 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2023 MG Leonard Ltd.

Cover illustrations © 2023 Paddy Donnelly

Map illustrations © 2021, 2022 and 2023 Laurissa Jones

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This book has been typeset in Berkeley and Futura

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0610-5

www.walker.co.uk





For you, who love birds.

“An egg is always an adventure...”

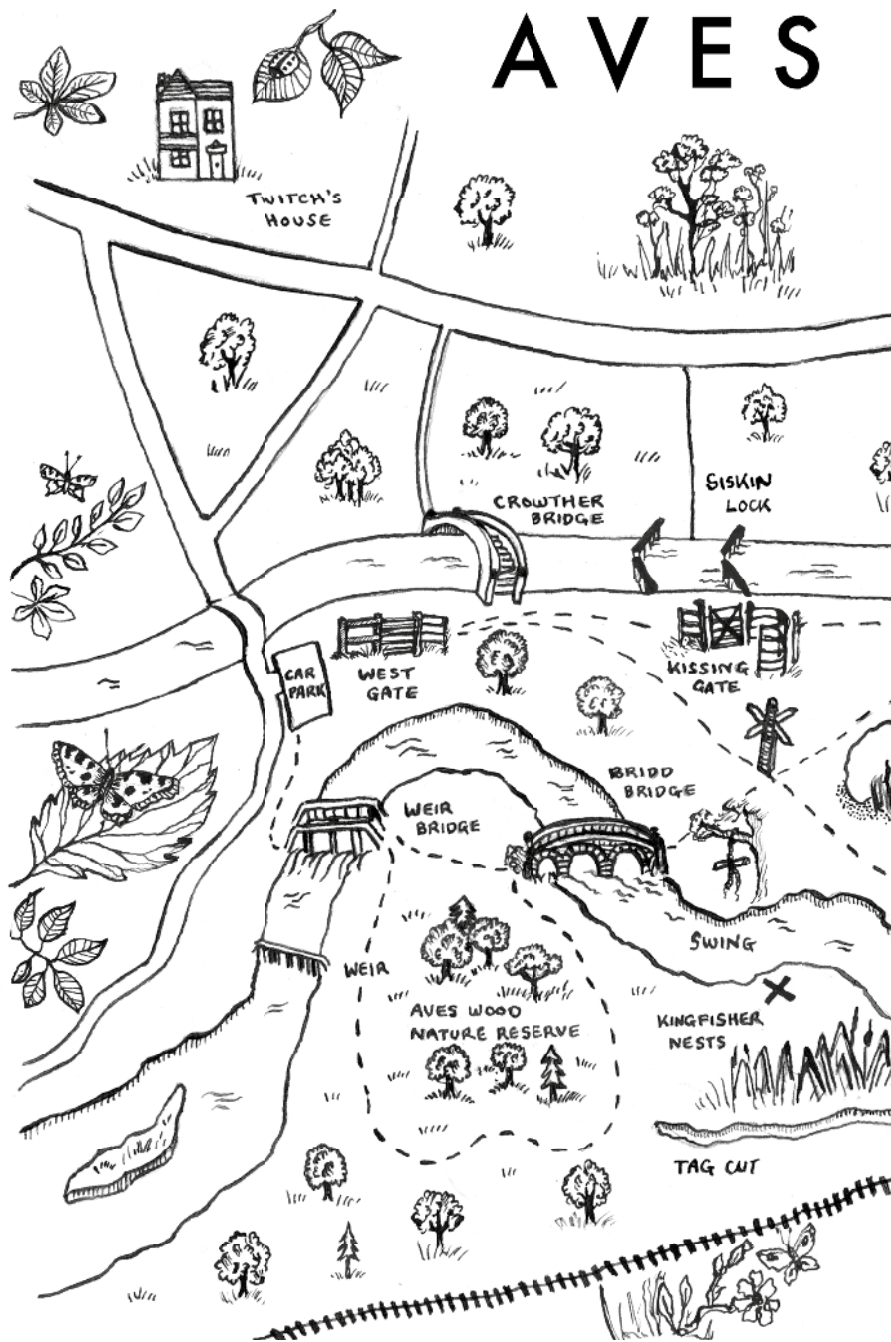
– **Oscar Wilde**

“I think that, if required on pain of death to name instantly the most perfect thing in the universe, I should risk my fate on a bird’s egg.”

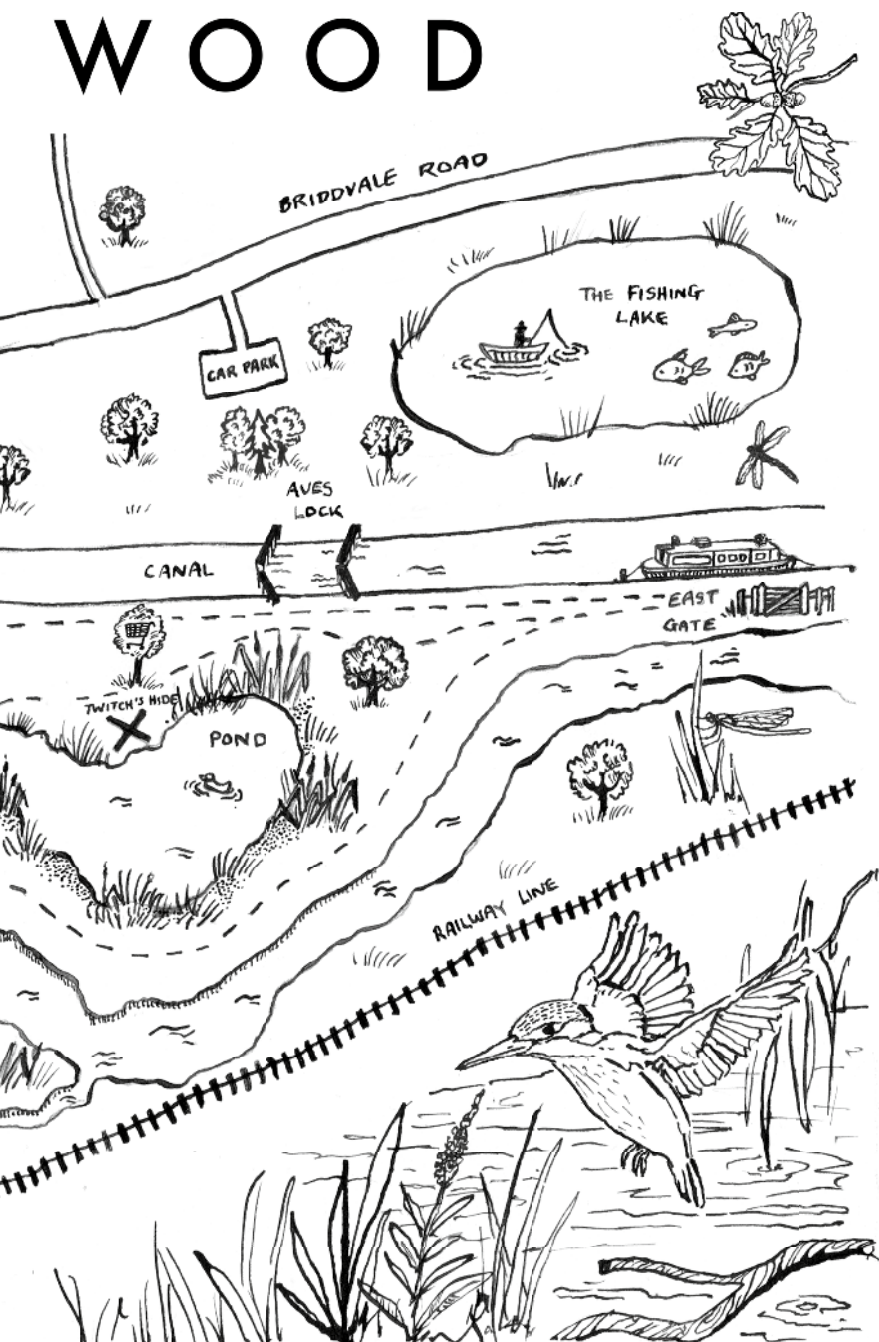
– **Thomas Wentworth Higginson**



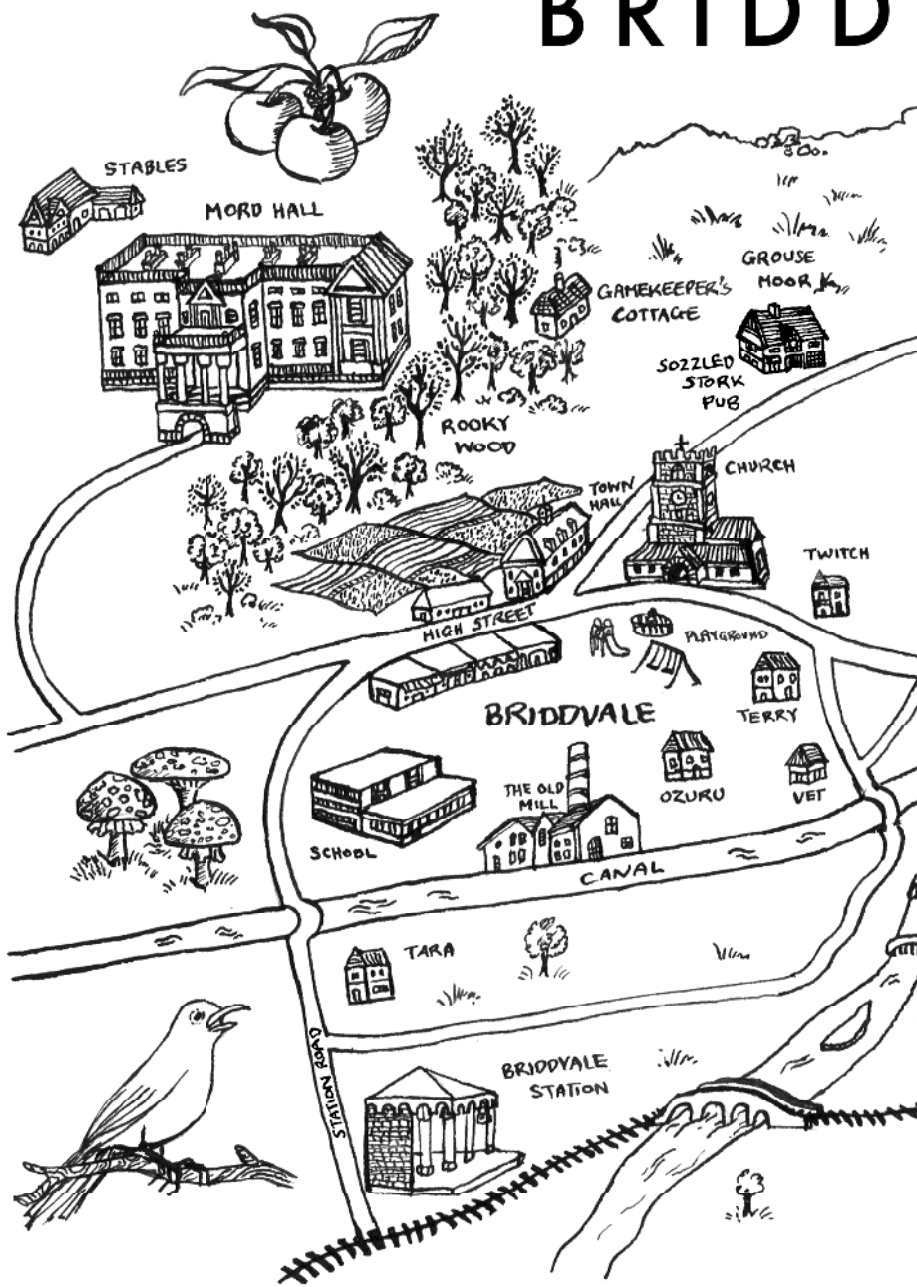
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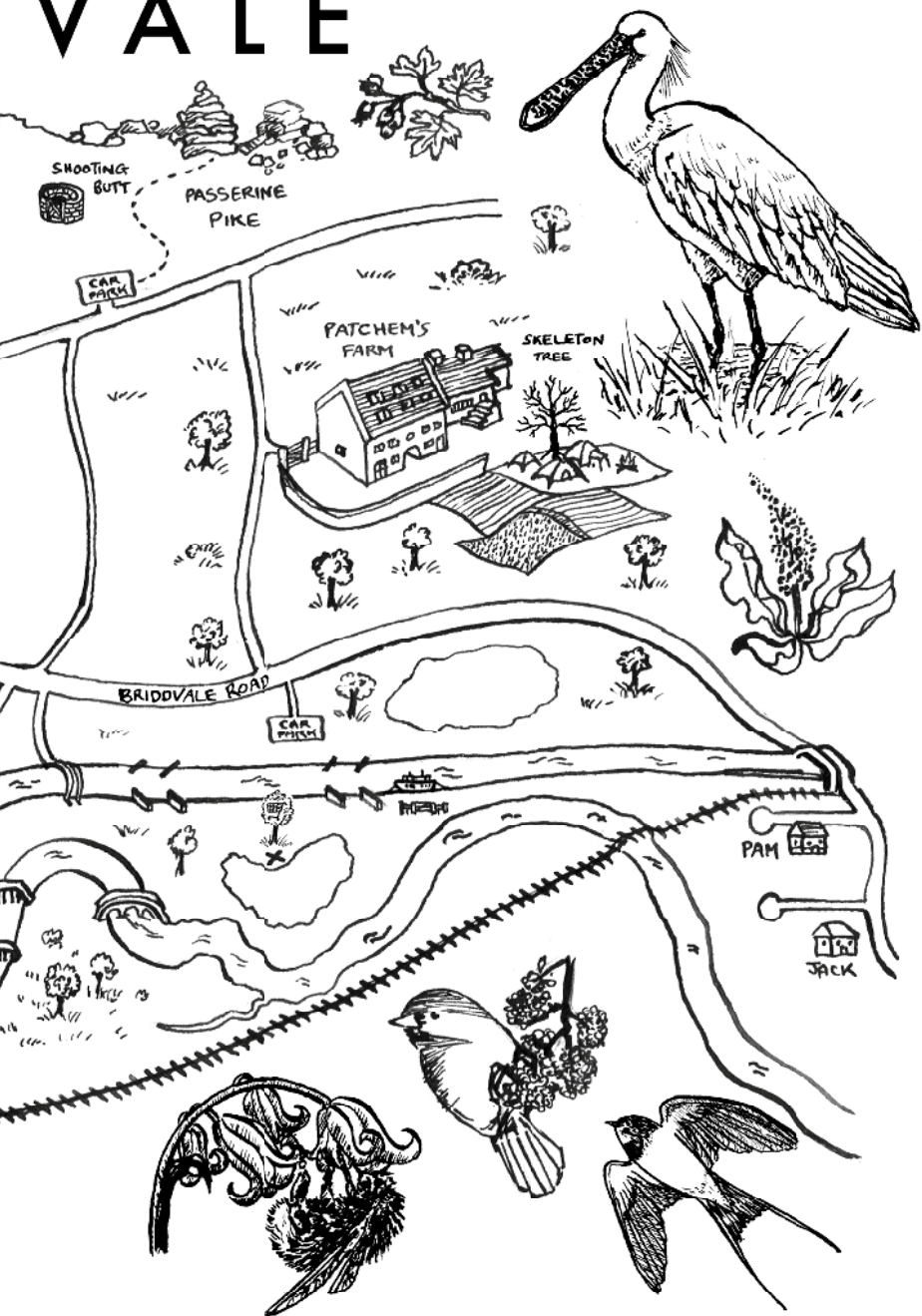
WOOD



BRIDD



VALE







1

POACHED!

Twitch winced as a needle-sharp spike raked the back of his hand. The pale graze turned red as his blood sought to knit his skin back together. He ignored it. He had to see what was going on. Why were there two police cars at the bottom of Passerine Pike?

“Please don’t let it be the peregrine falcons,” he whispered to himself, as a creeping dread drove him up the barbed hawthorn tree. “Please.” He felt a sob building in the base of his throat as he spotted torch beams bumbling about at the top of the hill. That was where the nest was. He swallowed the marble of emotion, forcing himself up the bunch-backed tree, his heart hopping anxiously.

Since he and his best friend, Jack, had witnessed the death-defying aerial display of the courting falcons in late February, they had regularly trekked up Passerine Pike

to watch the birds. Twitch remembered the male bird rocketing skywards, spiralling up until it was a speck, then plunging down at a speed that had stopped his breath. It had pulled out of its dive at the very last moment, rolling, climbing, looping the loop. The female falcon had swooped in, locking talons with the male. They seemed to tumble out of control: whirling, falling, spinning, rising.

Jack had thought the birds were fighting.

Laughing, Twitch had explained that they were kind of kissing.

The peregrine falcons had built a nest, an eyrie, on a high ledge of one of the ancient rocks protruding from the top of the hill like giant's teeth.

The highest bough of the hawthorn tree, which grew out of the hedgerow that marked the border between public land and the private Mord Estate, was the only place from which you could see into the nest without upsetting the birds. Through their binoculars, Twitch and Jack had spotted a clutch of perfect rust-brown speckled eggs and celebrated with a silent high five.

The fear that something might have happened to the falcons was making Twitch feel sick. Reaching up, leaning back, he lifted his bottom into the highest junction of hawthorn branches, wedging himself safely in the arms of the tree. Yanking out his binoculars, he ran

his finger over the focusing dial. The blur became a nest, but he saw no birds. He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach by Vernon, the biggest boy in his class. The nest was empty! He looked up, desperately searching the pewter sky for the falcons. Where could they be? Had they abandoned their nest? Had they been hurt?

Looking back through his binoculars, Twitch counted three police officers searching the ground around the rocks and one in a climbing harness up near the nest. He spied the familiar, clean-shaven face of Constable Greenwood, who was frowning, holding his chin as he listened to a female officer who Twitch had never seen before. Concentrating on her lips, Twitch tried to read what the officer was saying.

Jack could read lips because his older brother, David, was deaf. Jack had taught all his friends sign language, but Twitch had wanted to learn how to lip-read too. It was a useful way of silently communicating when watching birds or mouthing a secret message at school.

Focusing on the female officer's mouth, Twitch missed some words but then clearly made out two: *egg thief*.

It was as if his insides had been doused with icy water. Instantly he understood what had happened. Shoving his binoculars into his coat pocket, Twitch scrambled down the tree, barely noticing the thorns.

An egg thief! In Briddvale! This was disastrous for all birds. It was spring! Nesting season! He needed to get to Jack, immediately.

Landing clumsily, he staggered then ran, hurtling down the hill. His long brackish-blond fringe flew back from his face as the biting chill of the evening air caught at his throat. He sprinted into the car park, an empty disco of spinning blue lights, passing a silver VW Golf. He glimpsed a gaunt young man with a shaved head in the driver's seat, staring up at the drama on the hill. When he reached the end of the lane, he heard a girl call his name. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw nine-year-old Pippa Bettany, the granddaughter of the Briddvale newsagent, Twitch's boss. She waved. He raised a hand in reply but ran on.

Once on tarmac, Twitch regulated his stride, falling into a rhythm, pulling his knees up, throwing his fists forward, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. He flew past naked trees, knobbly with new buds. He barely noticed passing Patchem's farm. Slowing to cross Briddvale Road, he sped up again over the canal, turning onto the footpath, his feet thudding on the compact earth; finally, he entered the alley that wove along the back of the houses on Redshank Road. He stopped in front of a tall garden gate, gulping down

lungfuls of air. His head throbbed as if a woodpecker were hammering at his temples. He leaned on the fence post, closing his eyes as he caught his breath. His mind showed him the image of the empty nest. His eyelids sprang open. He turned the ring handle, lifting the latch, and let himself into a manicured garden.

It was dark now. Night had fallen whilst he'd been running.

Through the glass doors at the back of the house, he could see Jack's mum and dad, sitting at their kitchen table. They were chatting, smiling, holding glasses of red wine, surrounded by the scattered plates of a recently eaten dinner. Twitch suddenly felt like he was intruding. He was about to sneak over to the side gate and go round to the front door when the bathroom light flickered on upstairs. He instantly recognized Jack's silhouette. The window was ajar. Taking out his phone and turning up the volume, Twitch stood beneath the window. He hit play on a track he'd labelled "Spark Bird" and his phone emitted the eerie cry of a nightjar. It was a high gurgling sound, like a singing chorus of strangled frogs. The nightjar was the bird that had sparked Twitch's passion for birdwatching. Jack knew this.

The window opened wide. Jack's head popped out. "Twitch?"

“Jack!” Twitch hissed, waving his hands. “Down here.”

“What are you doing here?” Jack looked amazed to see him. “I thought we were meeting in the morning after your paper round?”

“Something terrible has happened...” Twitch felt his chest clench and he couldn’t go on. In his race to get here, he hadn’t let himself think about the falcons. Jack had been so excited to see their fluffy chicks hatch and fledge.

“Climb up the trellis,” Jack said, seeing Twitch was upset. “It’ll hold. I’ve done it loads.”

Focusing on the footholds and handholds needed to scale the wall, Twitch climbed until he felt Jack’s hands grabbing his shoulders and hauling him in through the bathroom window. The pair of them fell to the linoleum floor. Jack laughed as he sat up. Seeing Twitch’s face, he stopped.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Jack!” Twitch exclaimed. “They’re gone!”

“Who are?”

“The peregrine falcons.” Twitch stared at his best friend’s uncomprehending face. “Their nest is empty.”

“Empty?” Jack frowned. “But what about the eggs ... their babies?”

“They’ve been taken” – Twitch shook his head – “by an egg thief!”



2

BOYS OF A FEATHER

Twitch watched Jack take in the awful news. His friend pushed his fingers through his upright caramel fringe, repeating Twitch's words.

"Taken by an egg thief?" Jack paused. "Do you mean by another animal, a predator ... to eat or something?"

"No." Twitch's shoulders slumped. He suddenly felt exhausted. "Falcons know how to defend their nests against predators. That's why they build them high, on rocks, so they're difficult to reach." He shook his head. "A human took them. The police are up at Passerine Pike right now, investigating."

"What?" Jack rose to his knees, banging his head on the underside of the sink. "Ow!" He didn't take his eyes from Twitch as he rubbed his bump. "But why? What kind of a person steals birds' eggs?"

"Egg collectors do."

“Egg collectors!” Jack echoed. “People don’t really do that, do they? That’s like ... kidnapping baby birds from their families.”

“It’s worse.” Twitch’s voice was a rasp. “It’s murder.”

“Murder!”

“Egg collectors only care about the shell. They blow the eggs to get rid of the growing bird inside.”

Jack’s top lip curled in disgust.

“A peregrine falcon’s nest is its home.” Grief rose like a wave inside Twitch. “They return to it every spring. But, if they’re still alive, our falcons will never return to Passerine Pike.” He tried to blink back his tears, but several escaped down his cheeks. “And they won’t produce another clutch of eggs this year.”

“We need to find their eggs, quickly, and put them back.” Jack got to his feet.

“It’s too late. Unless the eggs are in an incubator, the chicks will already be dead.”

There was a horrible silence as the boys thought about the baby peregrine falcons that would never hatch. Jack’s eyes were glassy with tears.

Anger, like slow-burning coals, glowed white-hot in the pit of Twitch’s stomach. “There are barely fifteen hundred nesting pairs of peregrine falcons in the whole country.” He clenched his fists. “They’re on the

brink of extinction. A clutch of baby peregrine falcons is precious.”

“Scumbag!” Jack exclaimed suddenly, throwing a punch at the shower curtain hanging over the bath. It swished aside. “We can’t let them get away with this.” He yanked open the door. “Come on. We’re going to find out who stole those eggs and stop them from ever doing it again.”

Twitch got up. This was why he’d come. Jack was an excellent detective who loved the challenge of a difficult case. He and Twitch were part of a crime-solving, birdwatching club called the Twitchers. They had already solved two dangerous crimes. Tomorrow was the start of the Easter holidays. At school, that afternoon, Ozuru, Terry, Jack and Twitch had all cheered when Tara had announced that Ava and Tippi were coming to visit, arriving in Briddvale by train the next morning. The Twitchers would be together again. It had been months since the seven of them had gathered at the hide in Aves Wood. Twitch had been planning to bring everyone to see the falcons’ nest, which is why he’d gone to Passerine Pike this evening, to check on the birds. Now, instead, the Twitchers would be solving the mystery of who had stolen their eggs.

“How are we going to stop the egg thief?” Twitch

asked, following Jack across the landing and into his bedroom.

“I don’t know yet, but the police won’t have the resources to stop someone committing crimes against birds. They’ll only be able to act if there’s a witness. Remember how stretched they were last year when those cats were being shot at? And they were pets!”

“It’s up to us.” Twitch felt a surge of determination.

“Exactly.” Jack grabbed a notebook and pen from the desk next to his bed.

Twitch perched on the stool for Jack’s drum kit. On the wall above him hung a photograph he’d taken last October of a bearded vulture, a lammergeier. He and Jack had seen the rare bird together. That moment had cemented their friendship for ever.

“The case of the egg thief,” Jack pronounced dramatically, dropping onto his bed. “Tara found this book for me in the library about solving crimes. I’ve been reading it. It’s so good. It mentions this thing called profiling. We should try it.”

“Profiling?”

“You gather all the facts you can about a crime. Then you deduce what kind of a person is likely to have committed it. When you’re considering suspects, you focus on the people that match your profile.”

“We don’t have any suspects.”

“Not yet,” Jack agreed, rolling onto his stomach. He took the lid off his pen. “Let’s start with the geography of the crime: where it took place.”

“The eggs were stolen from the nest at the top of the pike.”

“Which is outdoors, on public land. Anyone up there is visible from miles around. It’s the highest hill in Briddvale. People climb it all the time.”

“You’d have to be really lucky not to be spotted climbing up to the nest to steal the eggs in daylight.”

“Which is why the thief must’ve taken them at night,” Jack deduced.

“If I were the thief” – Twitch tried to imagine taking the eggs – “I’d scope out the nest in the daylight, then go back when it was dark, and no one was around.”

“Yes!” Jack scribbled something down. “Which means the eggs must have been stolen last night or very early this morning.”

“I was at the pike yesterday at about six-thirty. The eggs were fine. The female falcon was sitting on them.”

“You went last night?” Jack looked up, surprised. “But we checked on the birds before school.”

“I know.” Twitch felt himself flush. “They hunt at dusk. I wanted to watch.”

“Did you see anyone up there?”

Twitch thought back to the previous evening. “There was a man, a stranger. He wasn’t up near the peak though. He was walking along the path above the car park. I don’t think he’s local.”

“Suspect number one,” Jack said, scribbling in the notebook. “We need to find out who he is. He might have been waiting for you to leave, so he could pinch the eggs. What did he look like?”

“Tall, lanky. He was wearing one of those khaki waistcoats with lots of pockets on the front. He had on an olive-green cap, and a tatty rucksack with a fishing rod strapped to the side.”

“Those waistcoat pockets would be useful for storing stolen eggs.”

“He was behaving weirdly,” Twitch remembered. “Walking slowly, bent down, staring at the ground.”

“Perhaps he’d dropped something,” Jack suggested. “Or maybe he was trying to hide his face.”

Twitch shook his head. The man hadn’t looked like he was trying to hide.

“Did you see anyone else?” Jack asked. “Or anything out of the ordinary?”

“Not that I remember.”

“What about tonight? Tell me what you saw.”

“There are four police officers on the pike. One was using climbing gear to get up to the nest. Constable Greenwood was talking to a female officer. I read her lips. That’s how I know they think it’s an egg thief.”

“Nice work!” Jack looked impressed.

“Pippa called to me as I ran out of the car park,” Twitch remembered.

“Pippa Bettany?” Jack’s tone was scornful. “Is that little kid still following you around?”

“Yeah.” Twitch rolled his eyes. “Every time she sees me, she launches into a monologue about birds. I never know what to say. Luckily, this time, I was already running away.”

“I swear she was stalking you the other day.” Jack chuckled. “When we were walking by the canal.”

“Every time I look over my shoulder, she’s there.”

“Someone’s got a crush...” Jack said in a singsong voice.

“I have not!”

“I meant her, you idiot.”

“Oh! Right.”

“Let’s get back to our profile.” Jack looked down at his notebook. “What does the scene of the crime tell us about the criminal? The nest is on a high rock up a big hill, so it’s unlikely our thief is old. Or if they are,

they must be super fit. Anyone injured or frightened of heights couldn't climb up to the nest."

"If the thief climbed the pike at night," Twitch said, "it's unlikely they're a child. Most children would be at home, in bed."

"Unless they're working with an adult..." Jack tapped his pen against his teeth, then shrugged. "But, yeah, probably not a kid." He paused. "The thief would need equipment ... torches, rock-climbing gear, that sort of thing."

"That's what I was thinking."

"OK, so if I'm an egg thief" – Jack closed his eyes – "what kind of person am I?"

"Secretive," Twitch replied instantly.

Jack's eyes sprang open. "Why?"

"Collecting eggs is illegal. That's why the police were up at Passerine Pike. If you are caught with a collection of wild birds' eggs, you can be sent to prison."

Jack looked astonished. "But I've seen egg collections in museums."

"Some of the eggs you see in museums aren't real. My grandad knew this artist over in Thrushcombe who makes replica eggs for museums and galleries out of plaster and resin. What was his name...? Peter something..." Twitch screwed up his face as he tried

to remember. “Peter Landrow. That’s it. He paints fake eggs to make them look real. We’ve got one on our living-room mantelpiece. The guillemot’s egg. He gave it to me at Grandad’s funeral.”

“You’ve shown it to me.” Jack nodded.

“My grandad and Mr Landrow grew up together. When they were kids, they collected birds’ eggs.”

“What!” Jack was aghast. “Your grandad!”

“It wasn’t illegal back then because there were lots of birds. Only when people realized bird populations were shrinking did they make egg collecting a crime. Grandad told me that eggers – that’s what egg collectors call themselves, or, if they’re being posh, oologists—”

“Oologists!”

“Yeah! Anyway, Grandad said that eggers who loved their collections couldn’t stop. Obsessed collectors kept doing it. They’re addicted.”

“Weird thing to be addicted to.”

“That’s why the authorities had to make owning an egg collection a crime. Places like museums are allowed to have old collections, but that’s it.”

“So, if I were an egger, I’d have to hide my collection?”

Twitch nodded. “You couldn’t tell your friends or family in case someone dobbed you in to the police.

They would take your collection away and you'd go to prison."

"An egger must collect all kinds of eggs, which means I'm probably good at climbing trees." He wrote this down. "I must be fit and outdoorsy, probably between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five-ish. I'm a loner, with secrets, and addicted to collecting." Jack thought for a moment. "Unless ... can you sell rare eggs? I mean, are they worth money? Could someone be stealing the eggs to sell to rich oologists?"

"I don't know." Twitch frowned. "I mean, it's possible, but you'd have to be paid a lot of money to risk going to prison for an egg. I think the thief is probably stealing for their own collection." He considered the picture of the person Jack was creating. "And they must know a lot about birds. Nests can be hard to find. You'd need to know about habitats, times of year for laying, the number of eggs in a clutch, their size, what they look like. The thief has to be a birdwatcher!"

"Imagine watching birds so you can kidnap their babies!" Jack looked disgusted. "That's dark!" He shook his head. "My first thought was that this might be the kind of thing that Richard Peak or Tom Madden would do for money..."

"No." Twitch had already ruled out the two teenagers

who'd mercilessly bullied Jack last year. "They don't know enough about birds, and they haven't been back to Briddvale since Christmas. This is someone new."

"It's good that Ava and Tippi are coming tomorrow," Jack said. "When the seven of us put our heads together, no criminal is safe."

There was a knock and Jack's bedroom door opened. "Jack, I— Oh! Twitch!" Jack's dad was startled to see him. "I didn't know you were here."

"Hello, Mr Cappleman." Twitch stood up. "I came to talk to Jack about the Easter holidays, but I should be going."

"You can stay the night if you want," Jack said. "He can, can't he, Dad? It's the holidays."

"I have to go home," Twitch told him. "I've got my paper round in the morning, but I'll see you at the station, to meet Ava and Tippi's train."

"I'll drive you, Twitch," Mr Cappleman offered. "It's too dark for you to walk. I'll just go get my keys."

As the door closed, Twitch turned to his friend. "Jack, egg thieves target the rarest birds. They do terrible damage to vulnerable populations. We have to catch this thief quickly. It's spring. Nesting season. The birds in Briddvale are in danger!"