

Chapter One

Judge me, hate me, find me unforgiven. You won't be the first. I have lived with it long enough. It changes nothing. Becky Burns was my best friend. My soul sister, my blood. I knew her better than anyone else – or I thought I did.

She didn't like heights. I heard once that if you dropped a stone off the Eiffel Tower, it hit the pavement at the speed of a bullet. Lord knows what the effect of two people jumping from that height would be. Most probably like a bomb going off – if they landed, that is.

I dream of Becky a lot. I'm still angry with her, angry with Icarus, angry with myself. Angry with all those who disregarded my story and accused me of being an unreliable witness.

I'm only human – fallible, full of mistakes.

Ruth wished the past to be washed away, wanted to bleach out my presence, my narrative. I have the right to my story. It was mine and Becky's, not Ruth's. She wasn't even there.

At the inquest I was left voiceless, my evidence mocked. In the end I kept schtum, especially when those lawyers went at me. I only said what they wanted to hear and no more. Still they

ate me up and spewed me out. There were calls for me to be sent to trial. Ruth would have loved to see me burn at the stake. She'd have been the first with a box of matches.

Which paper did you say you were from, Mr . . . er . . . Jones?

Oh, what kind of research? Is it for a UFO organisation?

It was so long ago, surely everything there is to say about it has been said or written.

Who else are you interviewing?

You know, I'm not the only one on your list who was laughed out of court. I see you're going to talk to Mari Scott. She knew Skye and Lazarus quite well. At the inquest the lawyer accused her of speaking ill of the dead, dismantling their good characters. I learned the hard way, that's what lawyers do – specialise in making you look stupid, cruel, careless.

The law is such a cold language. Who are they to judge others? Above and below my mistakes, I thought then that I did the right thing. Now I'm not so sure. Time has dragged up more questions than answers.

When it happened, this man from the *Daily Mail* sat outside our block of flats and followed me everywhere. He offered me money. I didn't tell Mum. I know what she would have said: take it, we need it. But I couldn't. I told him to get lost.

No, I never spoke about her, not to any of the newspapers, or any of the others that came afterwards. As I said, Becky Burns was my best friend.



Chapter Two

I met her at school when we were eleven. Her parents were socialists; they agreed with comprehensive education. They could afford to because they got tutors for anything that was lacking. Not that Becky needed tutoring. They lived in this really smart house in Camden Town, all scrubbed floors and Farrow & Ball colours. You know, like Elephant's Breath. Bloody stupid name. We just had mould in our flat. Now, that looked to me like Elephant's Breath – all black and blotchy.

I didn't take much notice of Becky Burns when we started at Morsefield Secondary School. We were both in Mr Hallow's class. She was thin, with dark, bobbed hair that hung down in sheets either side of her face. She never much pulled back the blinds to look out. We called her Moleskine. She didn't have any friends. There were roughly three gangs in our year: the nerds who were going to do very well and go to university; my gang, who were going particularly nowhere, and then there were the arty ones. We left them alone. But Becky didn't fall into any of those gangs. She sat outside them all, writing in her Moleskine book. Come on, who at eleven writes in a Moleskine book?

Anyway, she wrote in it all the time. Her mum would come and pick her up in a four-by-four. My mum never could be bothered to pick me up, ever.

Comprehensive, yeah. You get to see how the other half live, that's for shizzle.

Becky Burns irritated me rotten then, she and that little black book of hers. She wrote on those small squares in tiny letters, a traffic jam of words. One day in the playground, I found her sitting on a step, minding her own business, probably hoping I wouldn't see her. I went up to her and took her Moleskine book away.

'What are you going to do about it?' I said.

She said nothing, not a word, not even 'Give it back.'

She just stood up and went into the class. I thought she was about to report me to Mr Hallow but she didn't. I took the notebook home.

There was a row going on in my flat that evening. My older sister, Kylie, lived with us, with her baby, Sam. She was separated from his dad, who was only eighteen when he became a father. Kylie had been sixteen. He and his mates came round every now and again, shouted abuse at our window, threw stones, that kind of juvenile thing. Once Mum had to call the police.

I went to my room and had a tin of cold baked beans for dinner. I quite like baked beans, prefer them cold. Hate hot baked beans. I sat in the bedroom that I shared with Sam and started to read what Becky had written. I was blown away – I mean, it was really awesome. I just wanted more. Next day I handed the Moleskine notebook back to her.

She looked up at me through the curtain of hair and said, 'Thank you.'

Nothing more. After that, I think I rather fixated on her. I talked to her about her story. It was about a different world, with these strange creatures that were like us, but weren't us. They came from outer space. I said I thought it was fantastic. She said it had all been done before, she'd just nicked everything from the sci-fi stories she'd read and collaged bits together with superglue – all the crazy things that interested her. She said it was something to do in a plastic world.

I thought that was kind of weak or really smart, and as I wasn't sure which, I said, 'Yeah, you're right.'

Becky gave me another of her Moleskines to read. I was really gripped.

I said, 'This is sick, better than *Doctor Who*, and really scary.'

Then she said, 'Would you like to come back for tea?'

I'll never forget her mum picking us up in that four-by-four.

The Burnses' house was well old, a Victorian thing with very tall windows. Such a beautiful house. They even had a housekeeper to keep it beautiful. Becky's mum, Ruth – that's what Becky called her, that's what I called her: Ruth – she worked on a magazine, I think it was *Vogue*. Becky's dad, Simon, was an architect. They talked about politics and art, and they didn't argue, and they didn't have Heinz baked beans for tea, cold or hot.

Well. Fast forward.

I got thrown out by my mum when I was about fifteen. I didn't know what to do. Didn't want to sleep rough. Kylie and Sam had

left by then. I think Mum just wanted some space before she went stir crazy. It was a small flat. I asked a few of my mates if I could stay the night but it became awkward. Their parents would say, 'Hasn't she got a home to go to?'

I never asked Becky though. I told her what had happened but I never asked.

Then she said, 'Why don't you come and live with me?'

I was really nervous, thought her mum and dad would kick up a fuss. Turns out it went with their socialist principles that I should live with them. They gave me my own room. Like, why? My own room – I'd never had that, ever. Becky gave me some of her clothes to wear. We had wicked fun together, and we talked about her story a lot.

And just for a laugh, I said, 'Why don't you put it up on Facebook?' She wasn't keen, but I said, 'You've nothing to lose.'

So we did. The next day, after school, we discovered it had two thousand likes. I mean, that's stupid.

There were lots of comments too – like, 'We want more.'

Becky said, 'I don't want to do it again.' I asked her why not, and she shrugged. 'Not ready,' she said.

I feel bad about this part. I never really told anyone this but it's bugged me rotten. Becky's mum, Ruth, was one of the people who read it online.

She said, 'Becky, everyone is waiting for the next chapter.'

Becky said, 'That's so stupid, it's pathetic. It doesn't mean anything.'

Ruth was so nice to me for the whole week, asking if I was all right, if I needed pocket money, and on it went.

At the end of the week, she said, 'Jazmin, would you do something for me? Would you tell me where Becky keeps her Moleskine notebooks?'

And I did. Becky told me later that the next thing she knew all six chapters had been put on Whatwrite. You know, that website where you put up stories, poems, that kind of thing. People vote for the ones they would like to read more of. Yeah, you guessed it: Becky's story won outright.

By then it was the summer holidays. I've an aunt, Auntie Karen, who lives in Margate – she looked after Kylie and me when she could. She invited me down. Becky came to the seaside with me for a while. She liked my aunt. She told me I was lucky that I didn't have pushy parents. Then she had to go on holiday with her family. They were going to New York and then off to some swanky island that you can only get to in a little plane.

I stayed on with my Auntie Karen. I had nowhere else to go. Finally she called my mum down to Margate after Becky left. She said I was too young to be homeless and that my mum had responsibilities. They had a right bargy. You see, Auntie Karen never had children but she wanted them. Mum never wanted children but she had them. She said it was bad luck; I would say it was more to do with forgetting birth control. Auntie Karen told my mum what was what and Mum looked a bit sheepish. I think my aunt gave her some money so she could manage. Anyway, I went home with Mum to London and the flat.

All that summer, I never heard from Becky. Not a postcard, nothing. I was certain Ruth must have told her it was me who as

good as handed over the Moleskines, though she'd promised it would be our secret.

I checked it online – I couldn't believe the number of views those chapters had had. One million – that was phenomenal. I tried to contact Becky through Facebook because she never answered texts. Still nothing.

When school started in the autumn, Becky wasn't there. The first day, some people said she'd left and gone to a private school. I knew her parents wouldn't do that. They were strong on state education, even if they did drink champagne. Ruth said all people are the same, or something like that. But Becky Burns definitely wasn't the same when she came back to school three weeks late. She wouldn't tell me where she'd been. I asked her again and again and all she said was that she wished everything could be like it was before.

'Before what?' I asked.

She said it didn't matter. I thought maybe she didn't like me any more, maybe she'd gone off me. I just couldn't work out what was wrong. It made me feel like I was nothing.

No teacher made an example of her for being absent. Maria McCoy had nearly been expelled for starting back at school late without a proper sick note.

Becky was distant. She didn't eat, just played with her food. I was worried about her. She wasn't like me – I blurt everything out, can't keep it in. It was nearly half-term before she invited me for tea at her house. I was so relieved. Pathetic, I know.

We were listening to 'Walk on the Wild Side'. She liked that song.

I said, 'Why aren't you writing in your Moleskine notebooks?'

'That was then,' she said. 'This is now.'

I asked her if we were still friends.

She said, 'Of course. You're my best friend – my only friend – in all the world.'

Still she never told me. I only found out at the end of the autumn term. It was all in the papers. Even the head of our school said he felt very proud that there was such a fine young writer among us.

The only person who didn't seem to be too thrilled was Becky. Her book, *The Martian Winter*, was to be published in February. There was already a film deal.

'Why didn't you say?' I said. 'That's fantastic.'

'Because I knew you would say that. And you would've agreed with Ruth that I shouldn't waste such an opportunity, and all that shit.'

That was the only thing she ever said about it. I think she knew what I'd done. In a way, I'm part of the reason Becky Burns jumped.



Chapter Three

The Martian Winter became a bestseller. At first it was a bit of a laugh, sort of unbelievable. Becky went from having one best friend – me – to her entire class claiming that each one of them knew her better than anyone else. That's what fame does – everyone wants a slice of that cake. The press sat outside the school gates with long-lens cameras. It was too much in every way. Way too much.

The book went to the top of the charts here and in America – it sold five million copies. Becky said, if books were bricks, how many cheap, unsound houses could she have built by now? I hadn't a clue. She said that it was a theoretical question.

Becky became thinner and more locked inside herself. She hated all the fuss. Because she was a minor, Crossbow Books, her publishers, appointed this young woman called Laura to assist her and she spent her time making sure that Becky was 'in the zone', as she called it. She meant interviews and that kind of stuff. But no matter what the interviewers asked her, Becky stayed schtum. You have to talk in interviews; silence isn't what anyone wants to hear. So they stopped trying to interview her. I

suppose that just added to her mystery. It certainly didn't stop people writing a load of crap, all that psychobabble about the tortured young writer. What was wrong with everyone? She hadn't even taken her GCSEs.

I sort of lost touch with her. She wasn't at school that much and then she left. Ruth had her tutored at home. I suppose it was to appease her guilt about betraying her socialist principles that she wrote an article in the *Guardian* about her genius daughter being bullied. Like, yeah, a brain-breaking stupid thing to do, if you ask me.

I did my GCSEs and was trying to get a part-time job while waiting for my results when Becky texted me, asking if I'd like to spend the summer with her in somewhere called Orford. She added, 'Please say yes, otherwise Mum will insist on coming with me.'

I knew it must be bad – she never called Ruth 'Mum'.

I texted her back, saying I had to find work.

She said, 'Ruth will pay better than any summer job.' That was weird and I said I didn't need paying to come and see her.

'Just come then,' she texted back. 'I baked you a cake.'

I didn't know where Orford was and had to look it up. You know England's got this huge, round bottom that sticks out into the North Sea? That's Suffolk, an open invitation to a UFO. It couldn't miss a bum as big as that.

I was picked up that evening and driven there in the four-by-four. Not by Ruth but by a driver called Alan who now worked for the Burnses full time. They could afford that and more.

I hadn't seen Becky in a while and I was shocked. She was

stick-bone thin. It put you off eating to look at her. The cake was waiting for me. It had a small cement mixer's load of icing on top.

'It's only for you,' said Becky.

I knew she wasn't well, it was obvious. She sat at the end of the scrubbed wooden table in the huge kitchen and watched me eat the cake.

'What does it taste like?' she asked, staring at the cake.

'Crap,' I said. 'It tastes like crap. And I'm not playing this game.'

'What game?' she said.

'The game where I eat for you. If you want to know what the cake tastes like, you eat it.'

I pushed the plate towards her.

She laughed. 'You haven't changed.'

'No,' I said. 'Unlike you.'

I stormed out of the kitchen through the French windows, past the spot where the lights come on automatically, into the darkness. Bloody hell, it was proper night out there. No hum, no orange glow, just a sky with a sneeze-full of stars. I had taken three packets of my mum's fags, the ones she bought when she went to Gibraltar. I struck a match. Even a flicker of light was comforting in that abyss.

Becky came out and stood beside me with a torch in one hand and a plate with a slice of cake on it in the other.

'It makes you feel so small when you look up,' she said. 'Small and amounting to nothing.'

'I'm not your nanny,' I said. 'If you don't eat, you'll be ill, and

I'm not spending my summer messing about with all that.'

'All what?' said Becky, wide-eyed and far from innocent.

'My sister Kylie had bulimia and that was bad enough. I don't want the job of nurse. So I'm going home tomorrow.'

Becky picked up the slice of cake and took a bite.

'Too sweet,' she said.

'Yeah. As I said, it tastes like crap.'

We both started to laugh. We found a bottle of wine – yes, you guessed it, the Burnses had a wine cellar. The combination lock was dead simple to crack: Becky's birthday. Did her parents really think we were that stupid? We got drunk and I made popcorn. We sat outside. It was a warm night and Becky told me she did want to be a writer, just not now, but after she'd lived a bit. Ruth expected her to go to Oxford but Becky wanted to go to the University of East Anglia like her half-brother.

Wait. Rewind. I should have mentioned Alex. It's just that he wasn't around much when I lived at the Burnses' house. Becky's dad was his father. Ruth and Mari, Alex's mum, had been best friends back in the days when they were at art school. How Ruth qualified as a best friend I'm not sure. She nicked Mari's husband so I would call that a prize enemy. Alex was two and a half years older than Becky. He stayed away from Ruth and his dad as much as possible. You couldn't blame him. Ruth would always introduce him as her stepson. You'd think 'stepson' was his name, it was used that often. I'd met Alex for the first time around the Christmas before Becky's book was published. He and Ruth were like two cats in an alley full of fish arguing over one salmon. Becky.

I remember him shouting, 'You will send her over the edge if you don't stop pushing.'

I was a bit scared of Alex. He was dead fit, he said what he thought and he didn't care about the consequences.

At supper one evening, Ruth and Simon were talking about politics. I zoned out when those two started up. Not Alex. He pounced on them.

'Your crappy 1970s socialism. I hate any "ism" that's related to religion, and politics is a cancer as far as I am concerned, an evil that's infecting this world. We will be nullified by dullerism if we're not careful.'

Ruth told him to go to his room. He laughed, left the table and caught a train home. I didn't see him again until that summer I was in Orford.

Fast forward. As I said, we found a bottle of wine and I listened to all Becky had to say. We fell asleep on the sofa and were woken the next morning by Becky's mobile. Then mine rang. We ignored them. Then the house phone rang and finally Becky answered it. It was Ruth calling to remind us that Mark, the chimney sweep, was due at ten. Were we up, had Becky eaten, was she all right, had Jazmin arrived? I heard all this because Becky put her on speaker.

We were having breakfast and being a bit silly when the doorbell rang. I had boiled eggs and I'd cut the toast into soldiers. I was doing aeroplane noises, flying the soldiers at Becky to make her eat the egg. We'd forgotten all about the chimney sweep until I opened the door. If it hadn't been for the bag of brushes and the toolbox he carried, I'd have thought he

was a salesman. He wasn't young. He had short grey hair and glasses. A neat freak, didn't look like a sweep, but I suppose I had this Victorian image of a man covered in soot. He was an advert for washing powder.

Becky was pleased to have an excuse not to eat her egg and toast.

'I mean it,' I whispered. 'You'll be all on your ownsome if you don't eat.'

She took the toast to the sofa and nibbled it. She asked Mark if he'd always been a chimney sweep. He said it was a new venture for him. He said it was good to be out and meeting people.

'What did you do before?'

He seemed reluctant to answer and told us he was known for being one of the cleanest chimney sweeps in the Woodbridge area.

Becky pulled her knees up and asked him again, but he still he didn't say much.

I offered him coffee and while I was in the kitchen I could hear Becky asking question after question. He was old school. I could tell that he didn't like talking about himself. At last, Mark said he'd worked for the prison service.

Now, if it had been me, I would have left it at that, but not Becky. She wanted to know more, and being smart, she knew how to get the answers. She reminded me of a tin-opener. With each question she cut a bit more round his lid until all the beans spilled out.

He told her he'd been looking after a prisoner who'd been in solitary confinement for years. I thought, what a boring job.

Recently this prisoner had been moved into an open prison nearby. Becky asked what he'd done.

Mark hesitated for a long time and then said, 'Do you remember the story of the two teenagers from round here – Skye and Lazarus?'

OK – that interested me. I mean, who hadn't heard of those two? The lovebirds who jumped or fell or were pushed off the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. If you put it in Google, hundreds of sites pop up. Some say that they never jumped, others that they're being held prisoner somewhere far away. Then there are those who are certain that they were taken by a UFO. Yeah, a lot of hocus-pocus.

Becky pretended to look as gormless as a crab in a bucket.

I said, 'You mean those two kids who jumped off St Paul's?'

'They didn't jump,' said Mark, unpacking his brush and rods. 'They were pushed.'

'But they never landed,' said Becky.

'They must have landed,' I said. 'If they were pushed off St Paul's, they'd have landed.'

Mark said nothing.

Becky had that Moleskine look on her, the one she had when she was writing.

'What's the name of the prisoner?' she asked.

Mark said, 'Go outside and see if the brush pops out the top of the chimney. That'll show there's no obstruction.'

We trooped out in our jim-jams and slippers. Sure enough, chim-chimney and all that, there it was. Mary Poppins, eat your heart out.

We went back inside. Mark was putting away his kit.

‘The prisoner, the man who pushed them off the roof – what was he called?’ Becky asked.

I knew the answer. I mean, you’d have to have lived in a bubble not to know it.

His name was Icarus.



Chapter Four

It rained a lot in Orford. That's English summers for you. Becky lit fires and sat, writing in her Moleskine, not eating, not speaking.

I found Simon's computer in his study. The password was the same as the wine cellar's. Pathetic. After looking at sites with all the clothes that I couldn't afford, I checked the gossip columns. And then I put into Google 'Icarus Old Bailey'. Do people really have nothing better to do with their time? There were conspiracy theories and non-conspiracy theories and they all centred on what happened when Lazarus and Skye were pushed off the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. They'd never been to London before, having lived all their lives around Woodbridge, and the first thing they did, according to the *Daily Mail*, was get a taxi to St Paul's, where Icarus was waiting for them. When I thought about it, it gave me the creeps because it made no sense. Look, call me old fashioned but if you were sixteen and you found yourself in London for the first time, no way would you want to see some old cathedral. And if you were going to jump from a high building into oblivion, wouldn't you

choose one where you had less chance of getting caught? It was the day before the Lord Mayor's Show, there were cameras everywhere, set up to record the parade. The video shot that day is still on YouTube. You can see Lazarus and Skye standing on the edge of the dome, holding hands, and behind them is a man later identified as Icarus. In the clip it shows him quite clearly pushing Skye and Lazarus off the dome. OK so far – two and two are making four and not yet adding up to weird. Still hand-in-hand, Skye and Lazarus begin to fall. Someone had the bright idea of freeze-framing the shot. It shows them suspended in the air, then what appears to be a flash of light – then nothing. Now, if you believe that two and two make four you have to accept that if two people jump from the dome of St Paul's, they would be bound to land. They'd be dead but they would land. This is where it gets really freaky and the physics doesn't work. Two people jumped from the dome of St Paul's, witnessed by many. No one lands. Icarus was arrested and charged with murder, though what happened to Skye and Lazarus was never properly explained. The conspiracy theorists went into meltdown.

So here we go, the top-ten loony tunes of what happened to those two flightless love birds:

One: they were kidnapped by aliens.

Two: it was a magic trick and they're both alive and well.

Three: they're being held in a secret prison.

Four: they were a couple of holograms and an innocent man was sent to prison.

Five: they were angels.

Six: it was a forewarning of the end of the world.
Seven: it was a cover-up by MI5 and the CIA.
Eight: it's all to do with the Bermuda Triangle.
Nine: they were fairies and fairies are really aliens.
Ten: the answer lies in the writings of Icarus, which so far have proved impossible to decode.

A load of rubbish, that's what I thought back then in the rain-soaked days in Orford. The day I lost my rag with Becky was the day the sun came out for a minute.

Becky wasn't eating and I couldn't keep threatening to leave and still stay put. I had it out with her a week later, after an evening of watching her chop up all her food as small as she could, then, as if I wouldn't notice, hide it under a lettuce leaf. The next morning, I went at her. All brass and bugles blaring, that's me. But it was no use, she just curled into herself, didn't say a word. Absent while present, if you get my drift. I was so angry I had to leave the house. Slammed the front door shut, felt like a right turnip. Mum always slammed the door when she was losing an argument. And, hello, here I was doing the same thing. I regretted it the second I started to walk away from the cottage. I shouldn't have called her a spoilt bitch. Never should have said that. I thought when I returned she'd most probably suggest that me and my big mouth catch a train to London.

I went for a long walk to calm down. I considered all my options and none of them looked that rosy. If I stayed and Becky didn't eat, I would be blamed. If I left and Becky didn't eat, I would be blamed. I definitely wasn't holding the Willy Wonka

golden ticket, that's for shizzle. I was munching on all this in my head when I noticed Mark driving past in his van. I remember thinking, how boring, he just has 'Mark Keele Chimney Sweep' written on the side. I reckoned it should have said 'Mark Keele, the Cleanest Chimney Sweep in Suffolk'. He waved at me and I didn't wave back. This nursery-rhyme village was beginning to give me the willies.

'Hello.'

I looked up to see this woman, a woman I had never met before, smiling at me as if she'd known me all her life.

'You're staying at the Burns house,' she said.

'Yes,' I said, slightly aggressively because it was no one's business where I was staying.

But Mrs Sunshine with her straw shopping basket bobbing with vegetables took no notice. She had a smile glued to her face, the one the Jehovah's Witnesses wear when they knock on our front door. A sort of martyred expression, as if to say, whatever the world throws at me, I will smile.

'I'm so glad that Becky isn't there alone,' said Mrs Sunshine. 'She needs a friend. If there's anything you want, just call on me – everyone knows where I live.'

Mrs Sunshine said her name and it went in one ear and drained out before reaching the other.

I walked away and tried to figure out how she knew that I was staying at the Burnses'. But then, when I looked at all the cottages around me, I could see their windows listening, their loose-tongued curtains flapping. It gave me the heebie-jeebies, made me long for the silver-foil lights of the high-rises in London.

It started to rain – that thin summer rain that is more of a mist. I went back to face Becky, certain I'd see my rucksack packed and waiting in the hall. Instead, I saw Becky sitting cross-legged on the window seat in the kitchen, writing in her Moleskine. She closed it when she saw me. I thought, here it comes: 'Pack your jim-jams and bugger off.'

She said, 'Tomorrow, will you come with me to the open prison?'

That was the thing about Becky. You never knew what she was going to say. She hopscotched over conversations you were having and returned to them when you'd forgotten what you'd been talking about. It kept you on your toes.

'Why?'

'Because there is someone there I want to interview.'

I was pretty sure it had to be Icarus. I couldn't think who else Becky would be interested in.

I said, 'Is it him?'

Becky nodded and went back to the Moleskine.

I didn't get it and said so.

She looked at me with a sad sort of expression as if to say, I doubt if you'll ever get it, Jazmin. But she didn't say that. I thought it, but she didn't say it.

What she did say was, 'I have an idea for my next book.'

'Becky,' I said, 'you can't just walk into an open prison and say, "Hi, I would like to see this man called Icarus." They won't let you in. For open, read shut.'

Becky had that lazy smile on her face, the one that told you she'd already managed the impossible.

'I phoned Tess Renshaw.'

'Who?' I said, though I knew the answer. I just needed time to figure out my reply.

Tess Renshaw was Becky's editor. It turned out that she was all friendly with a man who worked with the Home Secretary. Job done. Permission granted. Tomorrow at eleven o'clock.

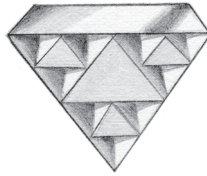
I sat down, defeated. Talk about being wrong-footed.

I just said, 'Will you eat something if I make it?'

Becky shrugged. 'I'll try.'

But when I leapt up to go to the kitchen, she said, 'Tomorrow.'

I had no wish to climb onto the same merry-go-round that I'd just managed to climb off. Look, if she wanted to starve, that wasn't my problem, was it?



Chapter Five

I don't know how helpful all this is to you. Perhaps it's a bit too much information. Are you recording what I'm saying? Because you haven't taken any notes.

You must have a good memory – that's a rarity these days. Go on, show me how good your memory is.

You remembered every word. That's ruddy phenomenal.

It's strange. I haven't spoken about this to anyone before – well, no one who wasn't involved in it – because no one has ever understood what really happened. After the inquest someone suggested that I see a psychiatrist. I couldn't face looking at another person who believed that I was telling fairy stories. You're not like that, Mr Jones. You listen. Two rare qualities, listening and memory. Back then, no one was silent long enough to hear their own breath, let alone what I had to say.

I suppose you want to know what happened when we went to the open prison to meet Icarus. All right. If I tell you, would you answer one of my questions?



Chapter Six

Tess Renshaw. She drove an Audi, one that made me think of a cockroach on wheels and only had two seats. Two seats. Just hold that image because if you take me, Becky and, of course, Tess, that makes three. Me being the 'does she have to come?' girl, I sat scrunched up in the back while Tess drove us to the prison and did all the talking. I lay there and watched the sunlight play on the trees – you know, that golden summer light when the days are long and carefree? The carefree bit is a joke. Becky drew with her finger on the window and I don't think she listened to a word.

Tess has a motormouth. Tess said she had the most exciting piece of news: this really hot actor was to play the lead in the film of *The Martian Winter*. Becky didn't stop drawing.

'I don't know who he is,' she said.

Tess laughed. She laughed not because something was funny, but because she wasn't sure if she was dealing with a mad girl.

Still Becky said nothing. Tess changed the subject. Her voice was a tad more serious, talking about the open prison and about Icarus.

‘He was nineteen when he was convicted so he would now be about forty or forty-one,’ she said.

‘Too old to be of interest to you, Becks,’ I piped up.

Becky giggled.

Tess let out an exasperated sigh.

‘I hope, Jazmin, that we’re going to be grown-up about this. It took quite some arranging.’ Tess answered her hands-free. ‘No, darling,’ she said to who knew who. ‘That’s my final offer.’ Click. Gone is the speaker. Through gritted lipstick she muttered, ‘Agents.’

I felt Becky’s hand find mine and give it a squeeze.

How much wire fencing does an open prison need? Open? No. Though the word ‘prison’ describes the dump very well. We went through one clanking door after another until we reached a waiting room. The place smelled of disinfectant and sweat. I sat on a green plastic bench while Tess and Becky went to see Icarus. Two minutes later – maybe three – all right, five – out comes Tess on the war path, deploying her weapon of mass destruction.

‘Is this some kind of joke, Henry?’ she said into her mobile. ‘Becky Burns wanted to see Icarus, not some nineteen-year-old drug dealer.’

I couldn’t hear what was being said by Henry but before he was nuked into tomorrow Tess marginally calmed down. Her voice pivoted on the see-saw of believing and not believing. She came down on the side of not believing. From the bass note of Henry’s voice I got the impression that jokes weren’t his thing. Tess glanced at me, an irritated ‘I could do without you, cow’

kind of look, and walked into the corner of the waiting room near a water cooler. The rest of the conversation was inaudible.

Finally, she knocked on the door that she had stormed out of and the guard opened it – not to let her in but to let Becky out.

‘Becky, darling,’ said Tess, ‘there’s been some terrible mistake but I can put it right.’

‘There’s been no mistake,’ said Becky. ‘I want to leave now.’

Tess looked at her watch. She was calculating exactly how many minutes the visit had lasted, weighed up against how many things she had to promise Henry, on top of how many hours she had driven. Before she could announce the solution to the equation, her phone rang.

‘Yes. Um – yes, all right. Tell her I can make the meeting.’

Tess turned to us.

‘Let’s be going,’ she said, artificially bright. ‘I’ll take you home.’

‘No,’ said Becky. ‘I want to go into Woodbridge, I’m starving.’

‘Good,’ said Tess, the LED bulb of her expression waning.

Once in the safety of her Audi, she said, ‘Look, I really need to be back in London. Would you girls be all right if I dropped you off? This has all been a bit of a fiasco. I will see what I can do about you meeting the actual Icarus. Henry must take me for a fool.’

I couldn’t imagine anyone thinking such a lightweight thought about her.

‘I want to go to Woodbridge,’ Becky said again. ‘To The Crown.’

‘I’m so sorry, darling – I can’t stay for lunch,’ said Tess.

‘That’s OK,’ said Becky.

Too true it was OK.

‘We need money for lunch,’ I said, ‘and for the minicab to take us home afterwards.’

Becky might be away with the fairies but someone has to have their feet on the ground.

‘No probs,’ said Tess.

I could see what she was thinking. A strategic withdrawal. Fall back and regroup. We whizzed along far too fast and Tess had to brake really hard near the airbase as three deer crossed our path.

‘Damn,’ she said, genuinely shocked. ‘I didn’t see them. Are you all right, darling?’ she asked Becky.

Perhaps she should have thought of that before putting her foot on the accelerator. Or did she think all those ‘beware of deer’ signs were there to decorate the road?

Three more deer made a bolt for it and I wondered if they had just waited to see whether we or their mates would be dead meat.

I felt like a bent plastic doll by the time I climbed out of the car and glad that I wouldn’t have to go back to Orford in it.

Tess gave me a fifty-pound note. I did my not-impressed look and she handed me another.

‘I want the receipts,’ she said.

Then, enjoying the admiring looks her car was getting, she stepped on the gas, as they say in films, and disappeared in a haze of speed in a twenty-miles-per-hour zone.

I wasn’t for one minute expecting to actually have lunch in

The Crown, but Becky walked in and asked for a table for three.

'Who's the third?' I asked.

'Alex. I texted him.'

We sat at a table with white linen napkins and a lot of cutlery. And I felt a right prat. I had never in all my life eaten at a restaurant. McD's, yes. This, never.

'Tess said you hadn't seen Icarus, that it was some drug dealer who looked like him. That you'd been conned.'

Becky had her head down, staring at the menu.

'I wasn't conned,' she said. 'It was Icarus.'

'You sure, Becky?'

'Yes. Double, treble sure. He saw the knots in me.'

'Knots?' I repeated. 'What does that mean?'

'The knots in my head,' she said, looking up at me. 'You know, when he smiled at me it was as if I'd got off a train and he was there waiting for me.'

'Come on, explain.'

'You'll laugh.'

I didn't think I would. I wasn't finding any of this funny, far from it. If I was honest, it was beginning to spook me a bit.

'Go on,' I said.

'He untangled me.'

'Wait. Hold on. You saw this nineteen-year-old guy who can't be Icarus because time doesn't stop and no one remains young for ever, apart from Peter Pan – you saw him for ten minutes and he messed with your brain? Becks, you were conned.'

'You're right, no human stays nineteen. And no, and no again, I wasn't conned. I'm not stupid.'

I could see me going off on one and it all turning ugly, so I said, 'No, you're not. So what is this Icarus, an alien?'

'I don't know. Maybe, yes. All I know is that he is probably the most perceptive person I've ever met.' She changed the subject. 'What do you want to eat? I feel empty, as if I haven't eaten for weeks.'

'Surprise, surprise: you haven't.'

Becky ordered the fish and chips and non-alcoholic cocktails for both of us. She ordered as if she was as hungry as me.

'What about your friend?' said the waitress, nodding at the empty place.

'Oh, yes,' said Becky. 'Make that three fish and chips – and three prawn cocktails to start.'

I was speechless. This was a girl who ate air and was full. I didn't believe she would eat any of it. But never mind – I was bloody famished.

The waitress put bread and a saucer of olive oil on the table. Becky dipped the bread in the oil and ate it.

I was waiting – for what, I didn't know – when I heard Alex's voice.

'Hi, Jazmin – good to see you.'

'I ordered,' said Becky, olive oil running down her chin.

'You're eating,' said Alex.

'Yes.'

The first course came and I was surprised that Becky ate every prawn and every shred of lettuce.

'So what was Icarus like?' asked Alex. 'Wizened and out of touch?'

‘No – not in the least.’

She stood up and went to the loo. I thought I knew what she was about to do.

Alex said, ‘Jaz, what happened this morning in that prison?’

‘I don’t really know. Becky said that Icarus untangled her.’

‘Untangled her? Is she totally losing it?’

I wasn’t really concentrating on what Alex was saying as I was thinking about Becky, that now she would be chucking up in the toilet. I could see Alex was thinking the same and was just talking for the sake of it because it was better than thinking about Becky and vomit. But only two minutes later Becky was back, all smiles. OK. How long does food need to be in your stomach before your body starts to use it? Maybe she’ll wait until after she’s had her fish and chips.

But she was still sitting there, eating, talking, and I was gobsmacked when she ordered pudding. I couldn’t eat another thing. Becky appeared to be on a mission to eat every pudding on the menu.

She’d got through cheesecake, sticky toffee pudding and tiramisu, and was asking about ice cream when Alex said, ‘Becky, you’ll be sick if you keep eating – or is that the plan?’

‘I’m just hungry,’ she said.

‘OK,’ said Alex, less and less convinced. ‘What happened to make you decide to eat?’

‘Icarus,’ said Becky. ‘He took the pain away.’

‘Becky, come on, he’s a fantasist. He’s playing with you.’

‘He’s not. Anyway,’ said Becky, ‘I think you will like him. You’ll meet him tonight.’

'Is that a joke?' said Alex.

Becky looked at him through her curtain of hair.

I felt ill. I could tell she was deadly serious.

'No,' she said.

'How?' said Alex.

Becky didn't bother with 'how'.

'In The Jolly Sailor at eight.'

'Yeah.' Alex looked exasperated. 'Whatever ...'

I said, 'Becky, Icarus is in prison and ...'

Becky licked her spoon.

Alex rang for a minicab to take us to Orford, but Becky wanted to go to Saxmundham first and stop at the supermarket because there was nothing to eat at home.

I stayed in the cab while Alex went to help his sister with the shopping.

The minicab driver had a big, hairy head and the rest of him seemed welded into his plastic car-seat cover.

'You know who I had in my cab last week?' he piped up. 'Only that Rex Muller.'

'I don't know who Rex Muller is,' I said.

'Yeah, you do – the famous artist. The one who did the portrait of that Icarus. Y'know, it was shown a few years back, up in London. They say it caused people to have hallucinations. Had to be taken down. Rex Muller,' he said again, as if repeating the name would make it clearer. 'It was his brother and his girlfriend who that Icarus pushed off St Paul's.'

I suddenly had an urge to leave Suffolk, to walk away from all

this weird shit and catch a train back to London. I'd got out of the car and was heading towards the car park exit when I heard Alex call me.

'Jaz! Jazmin, where're you going?'