

ONE YEAR LATER

Also by Sanjida Kay

Bone by Bone

The Stolen Child

My Mother's Secret

ONE YEAR LATER

Sanjida Kay



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To my family

–Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear...

I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath.

The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri

PROLOGUE

He stands on the edge of the cliff and stares at the drop below. It's early, around 5 a.m., and he's only had two hours' sleep. He blinks, rubs his eyes. The wind, skimmed straight from the sea, is cold, and he can taste the salt on his tongue. There's a pale-blue line where the ocean meets the sky: the first sign of the approaching dawn. He has a torch in his pocket, but it's of little use, faced with the dark expanse of beach below him. He shifts slightly and feels the earth give way beneath one foot.

He doesn't have long.

The tide is almost fully in, and the man who'd phoned him had said she was at one end of the beach. The caller was drunk; he said he was on his way home from the festival, although that in itself was suspicious, because no one lives at this end of the island, save for the Donati family and the people staying in the holiday house below their farm. The man was slurring his words – fear, combined with the alcohol, making him barely comprehensible. He didn't say which end of the beach. Martelli had driven here as fast as he could, radioing for the ambulance from the car. He offers a silent prayer: that she is above the tideline, that he can find her in time, that she's still alive.

The clouds shift; the line of light over the water turns to buttermilk, and he thinks he can see her. *Could be rocks or flotsam. Or a body.* If it is the English girl, she's lying stretched out on the sand below the headland, where this spit of land joins *il cavalluccio marino*.

He clicks the torch on and starts down the cliff path. It's treacherous in daylight, never mind at night: narrow, twisting and steep, stones breaking through the soil. He slips, thinks he's going to lose his footing. He can't see how far it is to the bottom. He slides, collapses back against the side of the cliff, grabbing handfuls of vegetation to stop himself from falling the rest of the way. Loose grit and pebbles slide from beneath his boots, and he can smell the sweet, sharp scent of thyme and wild marjoram where he's crushed the plants in his fists. It's momentarily comforting: his grandma puts them in her *rigatoni campagnolo*. But then his torch hits a rock on the shore and the bulb smashes. He's in darkness, his breath ragged in his throat. He pushes himself half-upright and scrambles the rest of the way down. His ankle throbs where he's grazed it. The paramedics are not going to be able to carry her up here on a stretcher, he thinks, and the tide is approaching so fast, he's not sure if they'll make it round the headland, either.

If she's still alive.

He runs across the sand, through crisp, dried seaweed and a ragged line of plastic bottles, Coke cans scoured clean, baling twine and polystyrene chips. The tourists can't reach this beach, so no one clears away the rubbish. She's on her side, one arm flung out, her legs at a disjointed angle. Has she fallen from the cliff? The rocks surrounding her are sharp as needles, erupting through the sand like prehistoric teeth. The foam-tipped edge of a wave creeps across the toes of her right foot. She's missing one sandal. Her white summer dress is rucked up, exposing her thighs, revealing part of one breast. He throws himself onto his knees next to her. Her dark hair is wet and covers her face, so he can't see what she looks like – if she is the missing girl. But he can see the blood: an uneven pool staining the sand, spreading out from the back of her head.

Where the hell is the ambulance?

His radio crackles, but there's no word from the paramedics. He gently touches her with the tips of his fingers, and she's cold, so cold.

Mio Dio.

He's never seen a dead body before and his stomach clenches into a tight fist. Briefly he brushes the crucifix hidden under his shirt and then slides his hand beneath her hair, feeling for a pulse.

PART I

JULY, BRISTOL

1

AMY

It's as if the day has gone into reverse. Amy puts on lipstick and feels like she's getting ready for work instead of a night out with her husband. There's something hard and smooth in the pit of her stomach; it's the shape of an avocado stone, but larger, heavier. She can't remember the last time she and Matt went out. Before, probably. Most things happened *before*. She scrutinizes herself. She's thirty-six, but she looks ten years older; there are hollows beneath her cheeks, and her face has concertinaed into those folds that athletes get when their body fat drops. She's never been thin before. She always wanted to be slimmer, but now that she is, she hates it. Misery skinniness might look good in photos, but it's unattractive in real life. Matt winces sometimes when they try and make love, as if he might break her or she'll pierce him with a hipbone. She tries a smile. It's what the self-help books say: *Smile and then you'll really start feeling happy!* She covers the place where her dress gapes across her chest with a scarf and tucks the lipstick into the pocket of her handbag.

Nick should be here soon, she thinks. He's late, but then he always is. She goes to check on the children. Theo is sitting up in bed, reading.

'How fast can light travel?' he asks, without looking up. Although he's only eight years old, it feels as if he's been obsessed with space his entire life.

'Oh, I know this one! Seven times round the Earth in one second.'

The upbeat voice she tries to use with the children sounds fake and brittle, even to her.

‘How many stars are there in space?’

‘As many as the grains of sand in the sea.’

He rolls his eyes. ‘Wrong.’

‘Okay then. Seventy thousand million million million.’

‘Seventy sextillion, you mean,’ he says, but there’s a grudging note in his voice.

‘I’ve been revising.’ She gives him a kiss. ‘Night, love. You remember Uncle Nick will be looking after you?’ He nods. ‘Fifteen more minutes and then put your light out.’

She peeks into Lotte’s room. There are pink-and-purple unicorns spiralling across the ceiling from a night-light. Lotte, two years younger than Theo, has been in bed for longer and is already snoring softly. Amy touches her forehead with the back of her hand. She feels hot, so she pushes the bedcovers down a little and worries whether it was sensible to let her wear a long nightie. She switches the night-light off, remembering, as she always does, that it isn’t Lotte’s.

Ruby-May’s bedroom is opposite. Amy stands in the doorway. The room isn’t quite dark: the curtains are open slightly and a street light shines through. She can see the curve of Ruby-May’s new bed. Her youngest daughter was delighted that she didn’t have to sleep in a cot any more and she was now officially a big girl. Amy resists the urge to draw the curtains fully closed, but she can’t help going in and sitting at the end of the bed. It’s so low down, her knees are almost level with her chin. She picks up Ruby-May’s doll, Pearl, and sets it on her lap. Its hard, plastic hands poke into her ribs. On the shelf opposite is Ruby-May’s Beatrix Potter collection; it was Amy’s, when she was little. Lined up in front of the books is a set of Beanie Boos, with large eyes that glitter in the muted light. There’s a thin bottle of gin tucked behind *The Tale of Peter*

Rabbit, but she resists that urge too. She listens for her daughter's breathing, as she does every night, and then stretches her hand across the Peppa Pig duvet cover.

Ruby-May slept tucked in a tight curl, like a fern frond before it unrolls.

She touches the spot where Ruby-May's toes would have been.

She can't imagine anything more soulless than a child's empty bed at night.

Matt used to make her leave their daughter's room, but he's given up. On her or on himself, she's not sure. Sometimes she still spends the night here, but every trace of Ruby-May's smell has gone. She glances at her watch and tells herself that she needs to make an effort. *We're going out, for the first time in over a year.* She forces herself to get up, to put the doll down, to hold back her tears. But instead of going to her husband, she slides *Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* forward and, with one finger, hooks out the bottle. It's a cheap one from Aldi and, over the artificial juniper, she can smell the sharpness of neat alcohol. She takes a sip and then another, and feels the warmth bloom across the back of her throat: a line, like a burn, running down her chest. One more and then she replaces the bottle and smooths the pillow. Her skin is so dry, her knuckles catch on the cotton.

In one month, it'll be a year. A year since their youngest daughter died. Ruby-May, the brightest jewel, her gorgeous girl. She'd always wanted Ruby-May to have her surname and not her husband's – Ruby-May Flowers sounds so much more romantic than Ruby Jenkins. She can't even bring herself to imagine the anniversary. It falls on the day before what would have been Ruby-May's fourth birthday.

I can't be here. I can't do this any more.

The books all say that time heals. But nothing can cauterize her pain.