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opening extract from

Frozen in Time

written by

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published by

Oxford

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-272755-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Sabon LT Std by TnQ Books and Journals Pvt. Ltd.,
Chennai, India

Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

LONDON, 2007

The man in the dark grey trench coat walked briskly along the Embankment, cursing the cold and his lack of gloves. It had been years since he'd been called out to a secret rendezvous—he was past this kind of thing. But the name rang a bell. Made him curious. Astonished, in fact.

The old boy was waiting under Westminster Bridge, as promised, his thick coat cut like a Russian's. He didn't try to shake hands, but nodded slowly, several times, when he saw his old, old colleague.

'By God, it *is* you, Dick. I can't believe you have the nerve—even after fifty years!'

Dick smiled. A miserable smile. 'I came to give you information. About Henry. I have to clear my conscience. It wasn't him . . . it was me. I was your man—not Henry. He had no choice. That's all.'

The man in the dark grey trench coat shook his head. 'What do you want?'

'To be here again, in England, for the rest of my life . . . It won't be long.'

'And Henry? And his children? What about *them*?'

'His *children*?' The old man looked shocked.

'You didn't take them?'

' . . . Didn't you?'

Chapter 1

The satellite falling to earth changed life for ever for Ben and Rachel Corder. It was catastrophic.

One day their world was full of colour and light and sound—and the next, in just a few terrible seconds, it was grey and swarms of insects engulfed it.

'No! No! No! No!' wailed Rachel, panic rising through her, while Ben aimed the remote at the TV and pressed the buttons again and again, as if this could make a difference.

'We should never have let Uncle J put it up,' said Ben. 'Satellite dishes should be put up by the men from Sky, not by random uncles! Now we've only got the old aerial. Press the TV

button . . . see if there's anything coming through at all.'

Rachel crawled across the room and prodded the TV button below the screen, which switched the system to the old free terrestrial channels . . . if there were any left these days. It was a desperate measure. Only minutes ago they could have watched hundreds of different channels, from music to documentaries to cartoons . . . Pop divas wiggling their hips at the camera, ravening dinosaurs plunging through realistic CGI swamps, real people arguing spitefully with other real people in live reality shows, unreal Disney teenagers with perfect teeth, singing and dancing . . . and now . . . what?

The tall ancient oaks which surrounded the house made it barely possible to get even BBC1 through on the old aerial. BBC2 was slightly better and Channel 4 would come and go. Forget the rest.

By 11a.m. Ben and Rachel were slumped back in their usual position—the position they'd been in for almost all that wet, wet, wet summer, sprawled across the old parquet flooring in the

sitting room, propped up on their elbows, watching a repeat of a 1970s detective series.

'We'll have to ask Uncle J to phone up Sky,' sighed Ben. 'It'll take him for ever to get around to it though.'

He absent-mindedly scored the damp dark stain on the floor with one fingernail, while Rachel toggled a loose woodblock up and down, and they both squinted at the 1970s detective who was solving crimes through a relentless attack of bees. The bees were not part of the plot—it was just *really* bad reception. There was a hot, dusty smell coming from the overworked set, but they were both too dull and damped down that morning to do anything about it.

They would have liked to go outside, but the endless rain made playing in the huge and wild garden almost impossible. A deep valley of overgrown shrubs and trees, it had become a vast mud bath, especially on the lower lawn by the stream, where they usually liked to play. You'd go in up to your ankles there.

Sadly, playing inside, when Uncle Jerome was working, wasn't easy either. Ben and Rachel would tend to get noisy, and then he'd tend to

get angry, because he couldn't concentrate. Uncle Jerome wasn't bad really. He was just very brainy and intense and when he was caught up in his work upstairs he had no patience for anything else. It was easier when Mum and Dad were around, but this summer, like most summers, they were away again, on tour. They were a magic act. Truly. Ben and Rachel's dad could eat fire and sawed their mum in half on a regular basis. They were very good and much in demand—and their high season was always May to September, and Christmas, of course.

This meant that Uncle Jerome, who lived with them all in the large old house on the outskirts of town, became their guardian whenever high season came around. He was quite a good guardian, in the way that he didn't really care *what* his thirteen-year-old nephew and twelve-year-old niece did—as long as it didn't end in death or, worse, a lot of noise.

'Do you think he'd notice if we were dead?' Ben mumbled, resting his chin in his hands and staring at the Seventies TV detective, speeding along in his open topped car, through the swarm.

'Who—Uncle J?' said Rachel, rolling onto

her back and staring at the high, ornate ceiling with a lacklustre yawn. 'Not for a few days, probably. Unless we managed to be dead *and* very noisy at the same time.'

Ben grinned. 'Maybe if we fell on the telly with our last breath and sort of got snagged on the volume switch. If *Scooby Doo* was on and our corpses somehow pinned against the button, making it louder and louder and louder.'

Rachel giggled. She was too floppy and bored to stop herself. 'Or if I got caught up on the ceiling fan in the dining room,' she improvised. 'If it was strong enough to hold a dead body, that is. And if it was switched on—I could just go round and round, with my dead feet kicking the biscuit tin every time.' She laughed, limply. 'You'd have to switch the fan on for me before you fell dead onto the telly.' They both started giggling helplessly.

Then the telly blew up. There was a blue flash and a loud bang, and the sharp smell of singed dust hit them both on a sudden draugh of air. They both sat up and stared at the dead screen for a moment, before Ben jumped up and ran to the socket and pulled the plug out.

'Ow!' he said. 'It's hot!'

Fearfully they looked around the back of the TV. The hot and dusty smell was strongest under its rear outcrop of dark grey plastic moulding and wires. Luckily, nothing seemed to be on fire.

They sat back down again and looked at each other. True, they had probably experienced more excitement around the TV in the last twenty seconds than they had for the past five weeks—but now even Seventies TV detectives were denied to them. The final week of school holiday stretched ahead bleakly. More rain. No telly.

'Oh no,' murmured Ben, weakly. 'I think we'll start playing Monopoly soon.'

'It hasn't come to that yet,' said Rachel. 'Maybe it'll stop raining.'

They both looked forlornly out at the deep, dark green, slithery, slippery garden. Under the beaded curtain of endless drops of water, it fell away down steep slopes towards the lower lawn and the stream. Their parents were hopeless gardeners, but that didn't matter. In a normal summer the garden was perfect for playing in. It had many tall trees: old oak, rowan, ash and

elder; several good apple trees, and hazels, which were a larder for a dozen or more squirrels.

Through its overgrown grass and thickly spreading bushes, foxes would flit. Jays would clack noisily in the trees. It was a wildlife garden. That's what their mum called it. It was the way she justified never mowing the lawn. Once or twice a year they would get in 'contractors' to hack it back a bit—so they could actually get out of the house.

But for most of the time it was left to do its own thing—as was the tangled wood beyond the stream, also part of the grounds which went with the house. The garden was great, thought Rachel, resting her forehead against the old, wobbly glass of the sash window and steaming it up with her sigh, but when it was this wet—*this* wet—you just couldn't *do* the garden. You couldn't even get down the bank, unless you were happy about going head first.

'Bum,' said Ben. He sat heavily on the old leather pouffe next to Rachel and also rested his forehead against the window.

Then it stopped raining. Just like that. Then the sun came out.

‘What’s that weird light?’ said Ben and Rachel wasn’t sure that he was joking. For the first time in more than three weeks, the summer sun finally smiled.

They whooped. They cheered. They jumped up and down and then ran for the hallway.

Uncle Jerome emerged at the top of the stairs, blinking. ‘What’s all the racket about?’ he demanded fiercely.

‘The sun! The sun!’ Rachel was bouncing up and down, while Ben was flinging their wellingtons out from under the stairs. ‘Look!’

Uncle Jerome squinted down at the large front door, with its stained-glass windows. The green, red, and yellow in the leaded panes were actually reflecting in the unpolished tiles on the hallway floor. Even Uncle Jerome smiled.

‘Good news!’ he said. ‘Now you can get outside for a bit and we can stop driving each other batty.’

Ben was hit in the face by a soggy honeysuckle bloom as soon as the door was open. He didn’t care. He and his sister scrambled past the porch and stood on the narrow gravel path above the bank, raising their pale faces to the sky and

feeling the warm sun pat across their noses and cheeks with her soft, fond, long-lost fingers.

'Oh! Oh! At last!' beamed Rachel, feeling as if she might possibly cry with delight. Even the sight of the fallen satellite dish, dangling next to the porch on its flex, didn't bother her now.

They pelted past the ornamental well and across to the giant acer which grew at the top of the bank in a wriggling tangle of pale trunk and branches. It was the perfect hand-hold for lowering yourself carefully down the first few feet of slippery greenery. Then there was a leap down to the rhododendrons, which would hopefully break your fall before you scrambled through some knee-high shrubs and lilies and out onto the lower lawn.

The lower lawn looked like a huge chocolate blancmange. Its grass was drowned in four or five inches of muddy water. The stream had overflowed. On the opposite bank the land began to rise again, held firm by the gnarly roots of trees which had been there for hundreds of years.

Ben and Rachel waded across the lawn in their wellingtons and splashed more deeply across

the stony bed of the stream. Grabbing the roots, they hauled themselves up on the far bank.

'Den?' said Ben.

'If it hasn't been washed away!' said Rachel and they made their way to a collection of planks and old doors which they had made into a den last summer, leaning them up against the almost horizontal bough of a beech tree, like a sort of tent. Inside, their plastic crates were soaked and a wooden tea chest they'd used as a table was growing mould.

'We should have covered it with plastic sheeting,' sighed Rachel.

But Ben wasn't listening. He was peering hard through the triangular entrance at something through the trees. His brow was furrowing and he was narrowing his eyes.

'What is it?' asked Rachel, trying to follow his gaze.

'Dunno,' said Ben. 'Something—something shiny. Down there. There's something shiny stuck in the ground.'

Rachel pushed her shoulder next to Ben's and stared in the direction he was pointing. He was right. There *was* something, smooth and

glinting in the pale sunshine, deep between the roots and the ivy and the rich brown earth.

'Probably an old hub cap off a car or something,' she said. 'Probably someone's been dumping stuff again. Hey! Wait for me!'

Ben was already running and slithering across the knotty woodland floor to examine the thing. Rachel scrambled after him. It was probably rubbish, but she didn't want to be left out. By the time she caught him up, Ben was hunkered down, wiping away the dead leaves and peat from the thing. It looked a bit like a car steering wheel. An old style, large metal one, like you might see in classic cars, lying at a slight angle in the earth. The remains of a very decomposed old log lay over part of it. It looked as if the log had slid down the bank slightly in all the rain.

'What is it?'

'I don't know,' said Ben, grunting with effort as he tried to prise the wheel thing out of the soil. He had managed to hook his fingers around the curve of metal tubing on each side of its circumference, but although he was tugging hard, it wouldn't give. Rachel crouched down beside him and dug her fingers into the cold

earth around it too. They both, instinctively, took a breath and then pulled hard, together.

Grunts of effort rang through the small copse and startled the wood pigeons, which flapped clumsily among the higher branches, bumbling and cooing in an offended tone.

The wheel wouldn't give.

'I reckon it's attached to something in the ground,' said Ben, poking his fingers deeper into the dark earth around it. 'Help me dig.'

Rachel didn't know why he was getting so excited. It was a just a wheel. Still, she shrugged and knelt down, oblivious to the water squeezing out of the wet sponge of earth into the denim knees of her jeans, and made her fingers into spade shape, like her brother.

Utterly soaked by nearly a month of unstoppable rain, the soil gave up its hold quite readily, and soon they had cleared a sort of crater around the wheel, down to a thick metal post at its centre.

'What metal is it?' asked Rachel, flicking a squirming, annoyed worm off her fingers.

'Steel, I think,' said Ben, although he didn't

know. ‘Really hard and solid, whatever it is. Keep digging.’

They were getting filthy, but did not worry. Uncle Jerome wouldn’t notice, and as they did their own washing, there was nobody to give a sharp exhalation and fold their arms in annoyance when they traipsed back to the house later.

Soon the crater was a few inches deep and the soil was damp rather than saturated. Ben was getting fed up. He grasped the wheel and tried to shake it but it absolutely wouldn’t budge. He sat back on his muddy heels and wiped his dark blond fringe out of his eyes, leaving a wide trail of woodland ink across his brow. ‘It should be budging by now!’ he said, crossly. ‘We should be able to get it out! We can make a go-kart or something with it.’

Rachel sat back too and sighed heavily from the spent effort. ‘Maybe it’s not a steering wheel,’ she pondered. Ben creased his muddied brow and thought. He stood up and looked up at the trees around them. Then he made vague measuring shapes with his soil-caked hands, turning them vertically and examining the sky

through the chinks in the gently dripping leaves, and then peering back at the wheel.

'It's dead horizontal!' he said, thoughtfully.

'Is it?'

'Yes. You can't tell at first, because the ground's at an angle here—it's a bank.' He sank down again, kneeling on the edge of the crater and resting his elbows and forearms on the obstinate wheel. He chewed on his lower lip, as he always did when an idea was coming to him. 'I think it's joined to something big and heavy under the soil. It must have been here for years—but that log was on top of it. Come on!' With renewed enthusiasm he ducked down into the crater and dug harder.

Rachel joined him, raking her fingers deep down into the soil, tearing through its network of fine roots, dragging up clumps of matter and hurling them off away from the excavation. They were both feeling excited. It beat watching Seventies TV detectives. After another five minutes Ben gave a shout. His fingers had met with more metal—the thick column under the wheel was joined to a flat surface under the soil. They both tried to make it tilt in its dark

brown bed, but it was as unmovable as the wheel.

Intrigued, they knelt back and stared at it. Then Ben gave an exclamation and rubbed quickly at the metal surface two inches from the column. Under his fingers Rachel could see the earth catching. The metal was raised here, in relief. A curve around the base of the column tapered to a triangular point.

'It's an arrow!' gasped Ben. 'An arrow!'

'What does that mean?'

Ben was looking at her with gleaming eyes and an excited grin. 'It's an arrow! Like you get on taps or bottle lids. It's telling us which way to turn the wheel!'

Rachel stared at the wheel and the arrow.

'Don't you get it?' demanded Ben, in a voice squeakier than usual. 'It *opens*! There's something down there—and it *opens*!'