For Mum, with all my love

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Chapter One

We'd been living in our new house in Oakbridge for just over a week and I hated everything about it. When Mum said we were moving to the country, I'd imagined a pretty, old-fashioned cottage with roses round the door – I got the *old* bit right, but it was dark and gloomy with massive spiders, and cobwebs so thick it was impossible to see light through them. We'd spent every spare minute trying to get it sorted, but it still gave me the creeps.

"New house, new job, new beginning," Mum kept saying, doing her best to sound cheery. But the "new beginning" bit was hard – at least, it was for me.

It was alright for Mum – she'd lived in Oakbridge before I was born so it wasn't really a *new beginning* for her anyway. But I'd barely had time to finish Year Seven before I was packing my old life up in a stack of brown cardboard boxes and leaving everything I knew behind me.

"I still don't get why we had to move here in the first place," I grumbled, sitting down to lunch that first week – pizza *again*, served on an upturned crate. We'd had pizza every day since we arrived. Hot pizza for lunch, and cold leftover pizza for tea. I never thought I could get sick of pizza – but seriously!

Mum looked across at me, frowning. "What do you mean, you don't understand? How many times do I have to keep explaining?"

"I know, I know, 'it's a great job, too good to pass up', but you were happy at your old job, weren't you? And what about me? What am I supposed to do without Laura? And what about my wildlife photography course? You know how much I loved going..."

"Look I'm really sorry, Becky." Mum pressed her fingers to the side of her head as if she was in pain. "I know it's difficult for you, but I'm sure Laura will come and visit later on in the summer, and there'll be loads more opportunities for you to take wildlife photos around here." She started to clear away the pizza. "Jobs like this

don't come along very often, you know, not when you get to my age. I'll be *running my own department*. It's a huge step up."

We were so busy those first few days I didn't have much time to think about what I was going to do once Mum actually started her *great new job*. It was the summer holidays – the hottest July on record, the weatherman kept saying – and six empty weeks stretched out in front of me. We weren't connected to the internet yet, and I could barely get a phone signal for long enough to call anyone. Talk about being stuck in the middle of nowhere.

We worked our way through all the big boxes the first weekend we arrived. We'd been unpacking for over three hours solid and I was just about ready to collapse from heat exhaustion when Mum's old friend, Stella, popped by to help us.

"Tracy Miller, I can't believe you're back!" she cried, bursting in and throwing her arms round Mum. "It is *so* good to see you. And you must be the beautiful Becky!" She turned round to face me, grabbing hold of my hands and squeezing them tight.

I shook my head, blushing. No one had ever called me beautiful before. Neat brown hair, a turned-up nose and freckles don't exactly add up to beautiful. Cute maybe – but not beautiful.

"We go back years, your mum and me," Stella went on, her eyes full of mischief. "I've known her since primary school, can you believe...?"

I couldn't imagine my mum at primary school. She was always so sensible and grown up. More like a head teacher than anything else. "Was she naughty?" I asked, knowing what the answer would be. "*Naughty?*" Stella roared. "Scared of her own shadow, your mum. Wouldn't say boo to a goose."

I liked Stella straight away. She was the same age as Mum but she seemed years younger. She had wavy brown hair with white-blonde streaks and she never stopped smiling. She swept into our dark, empty house, filling it with noise and laughter. When she got fed up with unwrapping cups and saucers, and cleaning out cupboards, she put on an old disco CD and danced around the room – grabbing me and Mum in turn and swinging us round until we were dripping with sweat and out of breath.

"It's too hot, Stella," Mum groaned, pushing her away, but I could tell she didn't mind.

"We used to dance all night," cried Stella. "And I don't remember you complaining back then!"

"It was you who used to dance all night," said Mum, laughing. "I was the one trying to drag you home! But I have missed you," she added. "It's been far too long."

"I've missed you too, Trace," said Stella, serious for a moment.

It was great to meet someone from Mum's past. She'd never really talked much about why she left Oakbridge. She split with my dad and moved away before I was born, and any mention of him – or "that time" as she called it – was guaranteed to bring on one of her headaches. I know it sounds weird, but meeting Stella was like getting a tiny step closer to finding out what really happened back then.

"Why don't I ask my son Mack to show you around?" she said to me as she was leaving. "He'll only drive me mad getting under my feet all summer if he stops at home!"

I nodded, smiling, although inside my tummy clenched up. I couldn't imagine going off around the village with some boy I'd never met before.

There were quite a few visitors after that. Stella must've passed the word round that Mum was back. That's the thing with small villages – it doesn't take long for news to spread. At the end of the week, someone called Mrs. Wilson came by from the church. She was small and bony and all buttoned up, even though it was easily the hottest day so far.

"Are the two of you planning to come to church?" she

asked primly, while Mum poured us all a cup of tea. I noticed she'd used the best cups *and* a proper teapot. "There's a very nice service next Sunday if you'd like to attend."

Mum half-nodded. "We'll certainly do our best, although I'm due to start my new job tomorrow and what with all the unpacking and everything..." She trailed off and we sat in silence for a moment.

Mrs. Wilson gave me the creeps big time. There was something sour about her – like she'd eaten too many lemons. She kept staring at me in this really intense way, and when Mum offered her a cookie she muttered something random about gluttony and sin. I could just imagine Laura saying, *What* is *that lady's problem?* and I had to stop myself from snorting into my cup.

"How do you think you'll like Oakbridge, Becky?" she asked after a bit. "It's not the most exciting place for a girl of your age."

"She'll be fine," said Mum quickly. "It's just the two of us, so Becky's used to her own company, and she'll soon make friends when school starts. I've enrolled her at Farnsbury High; it's supposed to be very good."

Mrs. Wilson sniffed. "There's no discipline these days, not like when I was at school."

When was that then? I felt like saying. *In the Ice Age?*

Mrs. Wilson ended up staying for another cup of tea, prattling on about the house and how old it was and other boring stuff like that. Mum kept looking at her watch and clearing her throat in a really obvious way, but it didn't seem to make the slightest difference.

"I'm pretty sure I've still got some unpacking to do," I said, first chance I got, and escaped upstairs.

I couldn't stand my new room. It was small and dark and airless, even with the window open. But it wasn't the size, or the lack of light that bothered me so much, it was the way it felt. Leaving my old room behind was one of the hardest things about moving; like losing a part of who I was. I tried to explain to Mum but she didn't get it. She said that by the end of the summer I'd be so settled, I wouldn't even remember what my old room looked like.

The night before we moved had been the worst. I'd started to think about all the people who would live in my room after I'd gone, and how it wouldn't be mine any more, and how no one would know I'd spent the first twelve years of my life there. At some point I got up and scratched *Becky Miller* into the window sill. I used an old nail from the back of my door, where my dressing gown used to hang. I spent ages scraping away at the wood until the letters were really deep. I just wanted to make sure

a tiny part of me was left behind, even if it was only my name.

I didn't really have any more unpacking to do; it was just an excuse to get away from Mrs. Wilson. I lay on my bed listening to her and Mum talking. They were standing by the front door, and Mrs. Wilson was asking Mum about church again. I couldn't make out what Mum was saying back – her voice was too quiet – but I knew she'd be trying to get rid of her. She'd been really funny about visitors dropping by, apart from Stella. She said it was one of the things she hated most about village life: the way people just assumed they could turn up, without calling first to make sure it was okay.

I found the box that night, much later, after Mrs. Wilson had gone home. It was wedged under Mum's bed with a load of other stuff – it probably got shoved under there when we were unpacking. I was looking for a magazine to read and the only way I could reach the one I wanted was by pulling the box right out.

It looked like one of those old-fashioned jewellery boxes, the kind with music and ballet dancers twirling around inside. It was made of very dark, shiny wood, with the prettiest gold pattern engraved on the lid and a tiny

padlock. I ran my hands over the surface. It didn't look new but I was sure I'd never seen it before.

I could hear Mum in the living room. She was ironing her shirt for the morning. She was going to be in charge of a brand-new department at Hartons, this big firm of accountants, so she had to look as smart as possible. I thought about taking the box down, to ask her if I could have it – but I opened it first, just to see if there was anything interesting inside.

I don't know what I expected to find – Mum's old wedding ring maybe, or some earrings I could borrow – but there was nothing in there, not even music and dancers, just a tatty piece of fabric and an old photo. The fabric was soft; bits of thread fraying from the edges. There was a message stitched across the middle: neat little hand-sewn crosses spelling *I LOVE YOU* in faded red cotton. The kind of thing you make when you're at primary school.

I placed it back in the box and picked up the photo. It was small and slightly old-fashioned, and I knew there was something strange about it straight away. It was a picture of Mum lying in a hospital bed with a baby in her arms. A baby girl wrapped in a pink blanket. Mum was smiling at the camera, her eyes shining with excitement. I couldn't believe how young she looked. I didn't think

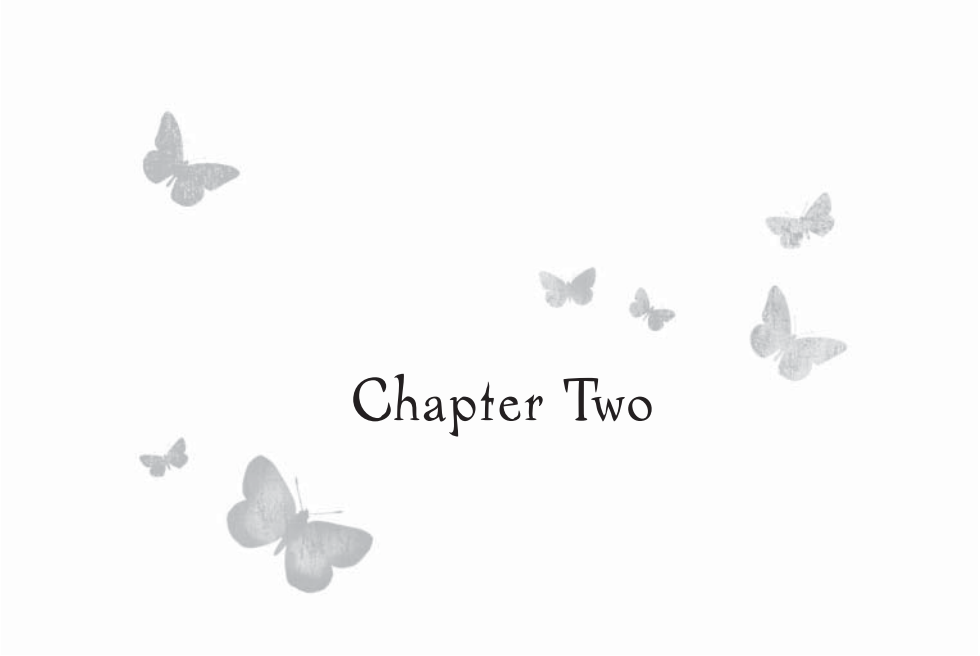
I'd ever seen her look that young or that happy.

I sat there clutching the photo, a million questions piling up in my head. Because I know about my own birth. Not much, but enough to realize that something was wrong. I know that I came too quickly; that there was no time to get to the hospital. It was the end of June, boiling hot, just like this summer. I was born at home and I stayed at home – the midwife said she'd never seen a baby in so much of a hurry to come out. Just me and Mum, *at home*. No hospital. No pink blanket. Not unless they *made* Mum go to the hospital, after the birth, just to make sure we were both okay? Not unless they made her go and she somehow forgot to tell me?

I turned the photo over, my hand trembling suddenly. There was a date in the top right-hand corner. A date written in Mum's small, neat handwriting. The words and numbers jumped about in front of my eyes and I had to blink a few times to refocus.

April 23rd 1986

Twelve years before I was born.



Chapter Two

I don't know how long I sat there trying to make sense of it all, but at some point I heard Mum come out of the lounge and the light went off downstairs. I dropped the photo back in the box, shoved it under her bed and ran down the hall to my room. I couldn't face Mum right then, not without bursting into tears, or blurting out something stupid.

It was impossible to get to sleep. I lay on top of my covers, thinking about the box, stuffed under Mum's bed, waiting to go off like a bomb. I tried to dream my best falling-asleep dream, but it didn't work. It's the one where there's a knock at the door and I open it to find my dad