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**Opening Extract from...**

# 13 Minutes

Written by Sarah Pinborough

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# 13 MINUTES

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*For Baria,*
*Gonzo to my Duke*
*and Pats/Eds to my Eds/Pats,*
*with much love.*

# Part One

# One

*Ophelia.*

She was young. No more than eighteen. Probably less. Her hair could be blonde or brown, it was hard to tell, soaked wet in the gloom. She was wearing white, bright against the dark river, almost an accent to the fresh snow that lay heavy on the ground. Her pale face, blue lips slightly parted, was turned up to the inky sky. She was snagged on twigs as if the bent branches, bare of leaves and broken by winter, had grasped to save her, to keep her afloat.

His breath steamed a harsh mist.

He could hear his chest wheezing loud, although Biscuit's frantic barking, the alarm that had brought him from the path to the bank, seemed to be coming from somewhere far away. He couldn't move. It was five forty-five in the morning and there was a dead girl in the river.

*I am a cliché*, was his next coherent thought. *I am the early-morning dog-walker who finds a body.*

Biscuit ran in small darts up and down the dirty snow at the water's edge; furious, eager, disturbed by this change to their daily routine. By this *wrong*. The dog turned and whined at his owner, but still the man couldn't stop staring, fingers gripping the phone tucked deep in the pocket of his thick coat.

And then he saw it. Just the slightest twitch of her hand. Then, moments after, another.

He walked Biscuit early not out of necessity but because of the quiet. Because time moved more slowly in the hours before the world woke up. It was perfectly peaceful and sleep had never been his friend, anyway.

The later walk was for polite chats with other owners as the dogs raced through the woods and parkland. The mornings were his own. It was his routine, clockwork, never broken for the weather, only rarely for illness. Rise at five, even if he hadn't finished recording until two a.m. One coffee. Leave at five-twenty on the dot. This morning, however, they had been a rare five minutes late. Biscuit had hidden his collar, finally found under the sofa. Then across the meadow and past the meandering river, an hour or so in the woods, and after that he'd fetch the papers on the way home to read over breakfast. If they were ready, he'd have a warm croissant from the bakery, too. This time was sacred and belonged to only him and Biscuit; extra hours of precious life. Sometimes he called his little sister in New York – catching her before she went to sleep and checking that her world was still turning in the right direction – and they would have a bitter-sweet moment before the river of her own life reclaimed her and swept her away from him. Some mornings she surprised him by being the one to call, and those were the best.

The marbling hand twitched again and suddenly he felt the cold on his skin and his heart beating and could hear Biscuit's bark loud and clear and then the phone was at his ear and his voice added to the clamour. When he was done, he threw the phone down and pulled off his coat. The river would not claim this girl before her time.

*

The rest was a blur. The cold water on his legs that knocked the air from his lungs with the shock of it. Slipping. Almost submerged. Gasping. Numb fingers pulling her to the bank. The heaviness of her soaked clothes, the unexpected heaviness of his. Wrapping his coat around her limp body. The crispness of her soaked hair. No warm breath from her mouth. Talking to her through chattering teeth. Biscuit licking her frozen face. The sirens. The blanket wrapped round him. *Come with me, please, Mr McMahon, that's right, I'll help you. It's okay, we'll take it from here.* Pulled up onto legs that wouldn't quite work and led to the ambulance. But not before he saw the grim faces. The shake of a head. The defibrillator.

*Clear!*

The dreadful quiet as they worked. Him, the world, nature: all frozen. But not time. Time had ticked on. How many minutes? How long had they sat on the bank with her not breathing? How long before the ambulance arrived? Ten minutes? More? Less?

*I've got a pulse! I've got a pulse!*

And then his tears, hot and sudden, bursting up from deep inside.

Biscuit, beside him, pushed his stinking damp fur closer, paws scratching at his face, tongue on his cheeks, licking, snuffling and whining. He wrapped his arm around the dog, pulled him under the blanket and then looked up at the winter sky which was neither truly night nor morning and thought he'd never loved it more.

# Two

Saturday, 09.03

**Jenny**

ur not picking up. Pick Up! OMFG.

09.08

**Jenny**

ur fone on silent? WAKE UP!

09.13

**Jenny**

I'm freaking out. My mum is crying.
Think she's still drunk. Wants to go
to the hospital. WTF??

09.15

**Jenny**

FUCKING PICK UP!!!!!
WTF is going on?

09.17

**Hayley**

Soz dad was in here!!! Woke me up.
I'm fucking shaking. WTFWTFWTF??

Will call from shower. Delete txts.
Yesterdays 2. FUCK??

09.18

**Jenny**

K.

09.19

**Hayley**

DON'T SAY ANYTHING.

# Three

'Rebecca!'

Her mum's voice, loud and demanding, was a thorn in the meat of Becca's brain, and she pulled the duvet over her head to block it out and sink back into her half-sleep. It was Saturday. It was too early. *Whatever* time it was, it was too early. It was also cold. Her toes felt like ice and a draught was creeping through the gaps between the covers. She hooked them closer with her foot, cocooning herself.

'Rebecca! Come down! It's important!'

She didn't move. Whatever it was, it could wait. Five more minutes at least. She breathed shallow, not wanting to come up for air. Her hair stank of smoke and her head ached slightly, a parting gift from last night's weed and tobacco. If it was before midday she was going to kill her mum. Saturdays were hers. That was their deal.

'Now! I mean it!'

She pushed the covers off and sat up, angry. What the hell was so pressing? She scanned her bleary memory. No late-night snacking so no pizza boxes or Coke cans abandoned in the kitchen. No TV left on. She'd double-bolted the door. All she'd done was come home, go quietly to her room and smoke one last joint through the window before passing out in front

of some shit comedy on Netflix. She wasn't even home *late*. She glanced at the open window and sighed. *Good work, Bex. No wonder it's like Antarctica in here.* At least there was no trace of stale smoke in the air.

'Becca!' A pause. 'Please, darling!'

'Coming!' she shouted back, voice like gravel, head pounding with the effort. No more straight cigarettes, she thought, tugging on her joggers and pulling last night's sweatshirt over her head. Her chest felt like shit. Her room was ice-box cold and goosebumps shivered across her skin. Juice. She needed juice. And a cup of tea. And a bacon sandwich. Maybe going downstairs wasn't such a bad idea. At least it would be warm. But still, conversation with her mother first thing in the morning was not what she needed *ever*. She preferred to get up when they were all out. Have some quiet time that didn't require locking herself away in her room. Two more years and then she could escape to university. Out of this house, out of this suffocating town, and onward to freedom. London, maybe. A big city, definitely. Somewhere Aiden could come with her and work on his music career.

They would live like bohemians and eventually, one day, magazines would write stories about the successful couple who once lived on Ramen noodles in a run-down (but still cool) grimy flat somewhere while they followed their dreams. That's how it would be. But there were still two *long* years to get through before that would be anything more than a stoned fantasy.

She scraped her hair back into a semblance of a ponytail, sprayed it with deodorant and shuffled out of her sanctuary, grabbing her phone from the side of her bed. She pressed the home button for the time. Ten thirty-four.

Fourteen iMessages, six WhatsApps and two missed calls. She frowned, confused by the list of names appearing. She wasn't that popular. She never woke up to fourteen texts, unless they were from Aiden when he was high and horny. She scrolled through as she headed downstairs. Mainly group texts. That figured. She was a social add-on. She didn't let the tiny needles sting. Like she gave a shit.

U heard the news?

Seen about Tasha Howland?

Crazy shit on the news!
U gotta see!

By the time she'd read them all and reached the kitchen she was wide awake. Her mouth was dry.

Her mother was standing at the kitchen island watching the small TV in the corner – the one her dad had fought so hard to stop them getting – *too many TVs, too many computers, too many phones, everything's technology*, *nobody talks any more* – but had lost the battle, two to one. There was toast on a plate in front of her but she wasn't eating it. She didn't even look around, just stared, pale-faced, at the screen.

Becca's skin tingled, part apprehension, part strange thrill.

'What's happened to Tasha?' she asked. 'My phone's gone mad.'

Her mum turned then, wrapping herself around Becca's stiff frame, bathing her in the warm scent of foundation and citrus perfume. Even on a Saturday Julia Crisp made an effort. Her thin arms were all sinew and muscle beneath her cashmere

sweater, and Becca instantly felt like the fat kid she'd once been all over again. *Like mother, like daughter* was not an adage that fitted them.

'It's terrible. She's in a coma. It's all over the news.' Her mother's hand stroked her back but Becca pulled away, pretending to get a better view of the TV. Her mum made her feel uncomfortable. The teenage years had drawn lines between them that neither knew how to cross.

'I'm sure she'll be fine, darling. I'm sure she will.'

'Was it a car accident?' *Natasha in a coma?* It couldn't be real. Shit like that didn't happen to girls like Natasha. It happened to girls like Becca.

She pulled up a stool and sat and watched, ignoring the buzz of her phone and her mother's bird-flutterings of care around her. Up onscreen Hayley and Jenny, red-eyed and yet still so perfect, hurried into the hospital, their parents clinging to them like dry autumn leaves to wool. The other two Barbies. Of course they were there. Rushing to their beloved leader's side.

'I know you two used to be close, darling, do you want to—'

'Shh.' She silenced her mother without even a glance as the reporter, nose red in the blistering cold, pushed back the hair blowing into her face and spoke into the microphone with that insincere sincerity only TV journalists had.

*

An hour later, Becca was standing on the small balcony at Aiden's flat, shivering alongside him as he sparked up a Marlboro Light. He held out the packet and she took one, her resolve of first thing gone. Fuck it. Anyway, it was too early for a joint,

and even in the relaxed sloppy atmosphere of Aiden's mum's place, obvious drugs were a no-go. She might suspect he toked – she must be able to smell it coming out of his bedroom – but she was a long way from condoning it.

'They said she was dead for thirteen minutes.' Becca shuffled from foot to foot to ward off the icy air while they smoked. 'They're calling it a miracle that they revived her.'

'She's lucky it got so cold.' Aiden stared out over the snow that had fallen heavy since dawn. Becca thought he looked almost angelic against the white and grey that coated the world. Maybe not an angel as others thought of them, but her angel all the same. Pale face, sharp features, thick dark hair and those clear eyes that shone bright blue from under his long fringe. An angel or a vampire. Either way, she still sometimes had to pinch herself to believe he was hers.

'That's probably what saved her,' he said. 'The water would have been freezing – dropped her temperature so fast it put her heartbeat into some kind of survival mode.'

'How do you know this stuff?' Becca asked.

He grinned, sheepish. 'Saw it on some old underwater alien film.'

'It's weird, though, huh? To be dead and then not dead,' Becca said. 'Thirteen minutes is a long time.'

'Wonder if she saw anything. You know – bright lights, that sort of shit.'

'Knowing Natasha, even if she didn't she'll say she did when she wakes up.' It was a sharp comment but she couldn't help it. Her feelings about Natasha were a ball of wire she couldn't untangle. She missed her old childhood friend, but she didn't know the new *Barbie* Natasha. Her Natasha had braces and liked Chess Club. Her Natasha had been her Best

Friend Forever. Becca hadn't realised at the time that *forever* would only last until Natasha's tits grew and her braces came off and suddenly she was hot and Becca was a dumpy geek who got swiftly discarded.

'*If* she wakes up,' Aiden said, exhaling a long cloud of smoke. 'The news said she was unconscious. She might have brain damage or something.'

Becca tried to imagine that. She'd seen images of brain-damaged people on TV and they never looked quite the same as they did before. Natasha dying would at least be beautifully tragic. Natasha brain-damaged and hooked up to machines that let her shit and piss while she dribbled into soup for the rest of her life was horrifying.

'What was she doing out there, anyway?' Aiden asked. 'In the woods at night? You reckon someone took her?'

'Fucked if I know.' Becca shrugged. 'No one else seems to, either. Everyone's too busy being hysterical over it to say anything useful.' The hive, as she thought of their school sometimes, had been buzzing since the news broke. Texts, WhatsApp, Instagram pictures of Natasha's beautiful smiling face, tweets of everyone's shock and upset, the whole school proclaiming how much they loved her, as if somehow a part of what had happened to her could be theirs, too. #TashaForeva was probably trending by now. The hum from it was electric. It fizzed under her skin.

Becca had not uploaded any old photos to her Instagram account, or to her Facebook or Twitter. Partly, she'd not had time. More honestly, she didn't have that many followers, and, finally, because of the round of *Did you see what Becca Crisp posted? Clinging to the glory days!* texts behind her back that would no doubt follow.

And although she'd hated Tasha for a while, when she'd so unceremoniously dumped Becca and replaced her with Jenny, the new trio all Barbie-doll perfect, that shit had been a long time ago and there was nothing Tasha would hate more than for the world to be reminded of her bad hair and bad teeth of childhood. Even now, Becca wouldn't do that to her.

'There was that girl went missing over in Maypoole a couple of months ago,' Aiden said. 'Maybe it's the same guy.'

'She probably just ran away.' Becca threw the cigarette stub into the mug on the table to join the others rotting in the inch of thick brown water at the bottom. Her mouth was dry and her feet freezing. She sniffed.

'Shall we go inside? Watch a movie?'

Aiden looked at her, thoughtful, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled slightly under his scrutiny. 'Don't you want to go to the hospital?' he said.

'Why?' She smarted suddenly. 'Do you? Feeling the need to check on the damsel in distress?'

He laughed at that, and then pulled her close. 'God, you're a dick. I asked her out *once*. Nearly two years ago. Before I had better taste.'

She breathed in the leather smell of his jacket. He was hers. She knew it. There was nothing worse than sounding needy; there was nothing worse than *being* needy. Why hadn't she kept her mouth shut?

'I know.' She exhaled hot air onto her own trapped face. He stepped away from her.

'*And* she was a complete bitch about it. I don't give a shit about Natasha Howland. But she was your best friend for years. You should go. For her parents if nothing else.'

It was almost exactly what her mother had said before Becca

had grabbed her coat and said she was going out. Somehow it sounded more reasonable coming from Aiden.

'Okay,' she said, eventually. Reluctantly. 'Okay, maybe we should go.' She looked up at him and kissed his cigarette-stale mouth with her own. 'But can we stop at McDonald's on the way? I'm starving.'

He grinned. 'That's why you're my girl. All class.' His phone buzzed and he checked it, frowning as he read the text. 'Man, that's weird.'

'What?'

'I've got to go to the hospital, too. But have to stop and pick up some stuff first. It's Jamie. He's there too.'

# Four

It was odd seeing Natasha's mother, Alison Howland, so fragile and weepy, and somehow Becca found herself crying too, hot, wet sobs that sprang out of nowhere and hurt her chest. Gary Howland stood between them, one hand awkwardly on their backs, unsure of his place in this sea of feminine emotion. His jaw was tight and his eyes slightly too wide, but other than that and the stiffness in his spine, it was hard to tell if he was feeling anything at all. But then Becca had never really known him. He'd come in and out and gone to his office or the tennis club and smiled at them as they played while his mind was clearly elsewhere. Becca guessed that was how you became rich and successful. He wasn't one of those dads who got involved. Natasha was no doubt endlessly grateful for that.

'It's so kind of you to come, Rebecca,' Alison said, wiping away snotty tears. Always Rebecca with Mrs Howland, never Becca or Bex, just like Tasha was always Natasha. 'You're a good girl. You were a good friend to Natasha.' *Were*. Becca said nothing to that, just gave a vague nod. Alison was as aware as anyone that Becca was no longer part of the inner circle. The inner circle were standing to one side, their carefully made-up eyes delicately bleary, both checking their phones. Hayley and Jenny. Almost identical and yet so different.

Where Jenny was sensual soft and estate chic, Hayley was middle-class athletic. A hard body. She didn't climb trees any more, but when she abandoned her tomboy ways she hadn't given up sport. She was the fastest runner in the school. Never caught without lip gloss. And always with the shortest shorts no matter how many times she was told to change them. The two girls didn't look at Becca and she turned her attention back to Alison Howland.

'I just . . . I just wanted to show my support,' Becca said eventually. 'My mum sends her love, too.' That was middle-ground enough. 'I'm sure Tasha'll be fine. I'm sure of it.'

'I don't understand what she was doing there.' Alison's gaze had drifted somewhere past Becca, into her own personal nightmare, but her hands gripped Becca's like she was an anchor, the only thing stopping Alison from being dragged away completely. Her palms were dry and rough, as if all the moisture in her body had been cried out. 'I mean, why was she even there at that time? In this weather?' There was something in her tone, and the lack of response from Hayley, Jenny or Gary, that made Becca think these were questions Natasha's mother had asked aloud over and over during the past few hours.

Becca started to feel claustrophobic in the tight atmosphere of the small hospital relatives' room. The lights were suddenly too bright and the air too hot and thin. Her skin prickled with sweat under her heavy quilted coat. She didn't belong here.

Just when she thought she might have to break away from Alison Howland's grip and sit down for a moment, the door opened. Alison's head swivelled fast and then her shoulders drooped. It wasn't a doctor.

'Detective Inspector Bennett, is there anything—' Gary

started but the inspector shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I'd just like to have a word with the girls.' DI Bennett had no make-up on and her hair was scraped back in a no-nonsense ponytail. She looked tired as she gave Alison a soft smile. 'See if we can piece together Natasha's movements. The doctors say you can go in and sit with her for a while if you'd like.'

'Thank you,' Gary said, one hand on his wife's elbow.

The DI held the door open and Natasha's parents hurried out, Alison in tears again. It was horrible, Becca concluded. Bright and clinical and real and yet not-real. Natasha was here somewhere fighting for her life. Natasha. Unbreakable, perfect Natasha.

'Shall I wait outside?' Becca asked.

'Are you a friend of Natasha's?'

Becca wasn't sure how to answer that honestly. 'Kind of. I used to be, anyway. We go to the same school but we haven't been close for a few years.' She glanced at the two blondes. 'Hayley and Jenny are her best friends.' Hayley dropped her eyes. Hayley who used to throw herself from tree branch to tree branch until Tasha and Becca were shrieking with fear and giggles that she might fall. Hayley who had faltered slightly when Natasha closed ranks against Becca. Sneaking round for tea once or twice, but then choosing her side and sticking to it. The winning side. The cool side. *Natasha's* side. Yeah, Hayley could go fuck herself.

The policewoman looked from the two Barbies to Becca and back again, mentally piecing the story together. It wasn't exactly unusual. Dull friend gets dumped for more popular, prettier friends. Given Inspector Bennett's scruffy appearance – *how old was she? Thirties? Less? Old, anyway* – maybe

she'd been on the receiving end of similar treatment when she was at school.

'You may as well stay,' the woman said. 'This isn't a formal interview. And you might have a different perspective.'

*Oh, yeah*, Becca thought. *I bet I do.*

'What do you think happened?' Jenny asked.

'We're not sure. It might have just been an accident. A prank gone wrong.'

'Did someone hurt her?' Hayley's eyes were wide. 'Gary said you'd told them that she wasn't . . . no one had . . .'

'She wasn't raped, no.' Inspector Bennett's direct answer startled Becca away from her inner sneer at the way Hayley had said *Gary*. So faux-adult. She hadn't even thought about rape until now. Which was crazy because often it was all anyone *did* talk about, even if it was only an undercurrent. Don't drink too much because something could happen. Don't wear that, you'll send the wrong signals. Always walk home with a friend or get a taxi. Don't lead anyone on. Blah blah blah. At least since she'd been with Aiden her mother had stopped with those kind of comments. As if now that Becca had a boyfriend she had someone to protect her. She wondered if her mum realised how shitty that was.

'We need to figure out what Natasha was doing last night and during the early hours of this morning.' The policewoman sat down and, like sheep, the three girls followed suit. 'There's no blame here, no one's going to get in any trouble, but if she was attacked, then it's vital we have as much information as possible.'

'Is she hurt, then?' Becca asked. 'I mean, other than . . .' She trailed off. *Other than having been dead for thirteen minutes.*

'A few cuts and bruises, but they could have come from

being in the river. As I said, we really don't know if this was an accident or intentional, or an incident involving someone else.'

Intentional. The word, one that didn't quite fit, clunked around in Becca's brain trying to make sense of itself. Jenny, surprisingly, got there first, barking out a harsh laugh at odds with the solemnity of the room.

'You think Tash might have tried to kill herself?'

'We're exploring all avenues.'

'No,' Jenny said, shaking her head, adamant. Her hair wasn't quite as long or perfectly straight as Hayley's, and she tucked a stray curl behind one delicate pierced ear. The stud was cheap glass, not diamond. The Cinderella Barbie from the wrong side of town.

'No, Natasha wouldn't do that. And not *that* way. Not by throwing herself into a freezing river.'

'No,' Hayley added, as if the two nos weren't emphatic enough.

DI Bennett turned to Becca. She shrugged, hesitant. There was more going on for her here than just the police investigation. Becca had to choose her words carefully. She didn't want to piss the Barbies off or look as if she was sucking up to them. Especially not to Hayley. Hayley had been her friend – she knew how to get under Becca's skin in a way Jenny couldn't. Jenny was nothing. But whatever Becca said now might come back on her in bitchy subtweets and status updates and knowing looks. Words ran like strung barbed wire around the teenage community of this small town, ready to scratch and tear and snag you.

'I don't think so.' It was the truth. If Tasha was going to kill herself she would choose something far more romantic. And Natasha was not the killing-herself type. 'People bloat when