

Lucky Bunny

ALSO BY JILL DAWSON

Trick of the Light

Magpie

Fred and Edie

Wild Boy

Watch Me Disappear

The Great Lover

JILL DAWSON

Lucky Bunny



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For the Dawson girls:
Maud, Debra, Beth, Lotte and Rose.

And for Meredith, with love, as ever.



Stolen sweets are always sweeter;
Stolen kisses much completer;
Stolen looks are nice in chapels;
Stolen, stolen be your apples.

James Leigh Hunt, 'Fairies' Song', 1830



Part One



Queenie's not my real name, of course. The name I was given at birth is plain enough, well known, and easily looked-up. Queenie's the name I took, chose for myself. Only the best for me, I remember thinking, at the time: the Queen of everything. A cracking name. I wanted it, I took it, I made it mine. As there might be some proper consequences attached to my real name, it wouldn't be right to set my given name down. I shouldn't even call that one my *real* name because, now I think of it, isn't that the point? Queenie's real, to me. For the purposes of this account, then, best you think of me as Queenie throughout: the name I've gone by for most of my life.

My best friend Stella knows my given name, but never calls me it. Yesterday she drove me up here, to my new home by the river, and as we picked up the keys from the estate agent's office and I signed 'Queenie Dove' on the contract, she was giggling and shoving me in the ribs and trying to hide her excitement, whispering in my ear, 'Can you believe your luck sometimes? Go on – can you?'

When I'd turned the key to my own front door, Stella went on: 'Don't you ever ask yourself, "Blimey, how did I end up here in one piece, and *get away with it all?*"'

You might find this strange but, honestly, I never *have* asked myself that. And it struck me hard, Stella saying it. As if, now that she's mentioned it, I'll have to pinch myself. My luck might fly off. I don't think I've breathed out yet. Am I safe? This old cottage has a back door and a garden that can't be

seen from the front, and a garden wall with a door in it that leads to the river: an escape route. I noticed it right away. And it's nothing flash, either, doesn't draw attention to itself. I'm not swanking – it's nothing like what I could actually afford. Bricks and mortar and my own garden shed, a wad of money all cosy in the silk lining of my red leather handbag, a child sleeping outside in the car: those things are real – those are things, not ideas. But luck, and getting away with it? How did I get here, after all?

So, after Stella's gone back to London, and it's late, midnight, and I'm lying for the first time in the brand-new, stiffly squeaking bed, snuggling in the fresh shop-scented linen, and geese are honking outside by the water, and there's the rest of the money, fat and solid, all piled up high in the otherwise empty white cupboard, I can't sleep for thinking about it, for wanting to answer Stella's question.

I'm so wide awake I have to get out of bed and wander into the front room, bumping into a crate. I put the light on and blink hard. My eyes fall on the open door to the kitchen, on the wooden table, to the cherries, bought from a roadside stall, that Stella's dumped in a blue china bowl – her contribution to the unpacking. Crumpled newspaper springs around the bowl, the purple-red cherries pretty against the blue china. I pop one in my mouth. I spread the newspaper out, glance at the headlines. Even now, years later, I expect to read about more arrests, see names I know, wonder if one day something will be said that could lead to me. But so far, so good. Stella's right then, surely? This is luck. I'm here, in one piece. Because don't we all believe that bad behaviour will be punished, that those who stick to the rules will get their reward eventually? If not in heaven, then in a beautiful cottage by the river, with a healthy child and a table with fresh cherries in a bowl.

Not me, though. I don't think I ever believed in fairness. Where would I have learned to expect that? No moaning and groaning and tearing at my clothes either. You won't catch me repenting. Puzzling, yes, but not repenting . . .

Mum once showed me a picture. Of her as a really young girl, with my dad, standing in Docklands at the edge of the water, men loading in the background and those huge cranes towering over her, like weird insects, and I remember saying, 'Where am I in that photo, then?' and her answer: 'Oh, you wasn't even a twinkle in your dad's eye then.' A shiver ran through me. Like I could see my own ghost there. How could that be? How could I be looking at a picture of a time when I didn't exist? But we can, can't we? It's what school-teachers praise us for, and then tell us we have too much of: it's called having an imagination. I'm good at that, I've learned. Making things up. Not telling tales, though; I'm not a tell-tale. I don't want to drop certain people in it, so I might change some names and the odd fact here and there, but not the relevant things, not the gist of it. I don't think I'm a confessional person. Bit of a story-teller, that's all.

Take what I say with a pinch of salt, if you like: luck always beggars belief. The more someone insists something's true, the more you've got to doubt it, wouldn't you say? It's important to me that you don't know the name my mother chose for me. I hope I've left that other-named little girl behind; I've worked bloody hard at it.

This magistrate, a woman, once said to me, 'I am rather tired of hearing time and again from those breaking the law that they had a terribly troubled childhood. Everyone who passes through this court claims to have had an appalling childhood. Surely some people can transcend their childhood, once in a while. Could we at least stop using it as an excuse for everything?'

She had this glossy black hair, like the oiled hair of a Doberman Pinscher, and she flashed a smile round the court as she said it – you know, like a dog baring its teeth. What did I think, listening to her, back then? I thought she had a point. I was all for not making excuses. But she annoyed me, too, I'll admit. I didn't examine things too much in those days, but dimly I might have wondered, does anyone 'transcend' their childhood? I mean, did she? Did she rise above it, to be someone different from the shape cut out for her? Did her family expect a tearaway, a hoister, a criminal or a madam, for instance, and instead they got her – a homework-producing head girl?

I wasn't allowed to answer back, of course. I knew she didn't want an answer. She was bright and hard, skin stretched tight over that smile. It was probably a throwaway remark; she was just fed up, hearing the same sob stories time and again. It's funny how that comment from years ago – *ten* years ago – sailed back just now.