

CHAPTER 1

“You’re not serious?” Ryan grabbed his friend’s arm so he could stop her walking and check her expression but there was no hint of fun in the clear blue of her eyes. “No one’s mother could be that stupid, especially yours.”

Jamie shook her head. “At first I thought she was doing it for a laugh, but she was on the phone for hours so I had a look at the bill. She keeps all that stuff so tidy in a drawer and Dad never goes there. And it was all there, sometimes she’s calling every day, and not just this month, neither.”

“So, what are we going to do about it?” Ryan’s whole face wrinkled up as he considered the problem and he missed the grateful look that came his way.

“I have this idea,” she admitted, “but I need help.”

“That’s enough gossip, you two – you’re late,” Mr Jones pointed out, tapping his watch as he ushered the tail end of a queue into the Science Lab.

“Why do they do that?” muttered Ryan, “as if we’re foreigners who need pictures to go with the words or something.”

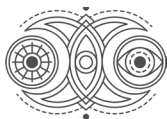
“It’s in their training,” replied Jamie under her breath, as Ryan flashed his teeth widely at Mr Jones.

“Sorry Sir,” he said, “we were checking the weather

station, and we got into discussion over whether there was any connection between climate change and the planet's magnetic fields."

The teacher's eyes lit up with the inner glow of too-rarely indulged obsession. "Funny you should say that," he began, waving vaguely at the rest of the class to sit down, and frowning at three restless characters doomed to the front bench for previous misbehaviours. "There is a very exciting documentary coming up on TV..."

Jamie let the teacher-speak wash over her. She was used to this situation from hanging around with Ryan, and the important thing was that she'd managed to talk to him, and that something was going to happen. That, too, was not unusual with Ryan.



For the tenth time, Ryan said, "I just can't believe it. Now if it was my mother—" he broke off and they listened to Mrs Anderson bashing away on a laptop, occasionally coming out with a, "Goddam" or, more obscurely, "bill of rights mean nothing to you guys?"

Ryan's mother was a journalist who still kept her American links although she lived in Wales now. She'd lived there long enough to stop calling it 'Wales, England', but she still

found ways to embarrass her son.

To give his mother her due, she would have been an embarrassment anywhere, as Ryan often said,. He could not understand that Jamie was a little in awe of Mrs Anderson's glamour, her southern States accent and the way she talked about her book on the federal states of Europe, as if writing such a thing was normal parent behaviour – as if writing anything was normal.

Knowing, as Jamie did, that Ryan's mother had “got him from a sperm bank”, as he had told his friend when they first shared confidences, did not make Mrs Anderson any less awesome.

Moreover, for all Ryan's complaints – that his mother's attention was the sort of brilliant light best suited to torturing people in war films, and that she was just “too much” – it was Jamie's Mum who was the problem.

“Tell me the facts again.” Ryan had rigged up his bedroom as Operation Headquarters. An old basketball poster (one of his Mom's doomed attempts to keep him in touch with his American roots) had been blu-tacked, face to the wall, for use as a memo-board, and Ryan was poised in front of it with a marker.

“She's phoning horoscopes for hours every week and it's costing hundreds of pounds.”

Ryan wrote ‘horoscopes’, ‘phone’, and ‘£££’, randomly

in capital letters on the poster. “Start at the beginning,” he prompted.

Jamie thought. “I suppose she used to check her horoscope in the paper, watch those people on daytime telly – you know, reading the stars and so on. When she wasn’t working, and Dad wasn’t around—”

Ryan wrote ‘TV’, and ‘paper’, beside ‘PHONE’, and drew a circle round them, then found another space for ‘DAD’.

Jamie had been lying on the carpet, but sat up when she saw his addition.

“Cross that out,” she said. “That’s got nothing to do with it. If he’s there, she can’t watch stuff like that on telly because he has his programmes on, that’s all. It’s not like she’s waiting to get rid of him so she can do stuff, more like—” Ryan raised an eyebrow “—more like, she does different stuff when he’s not there,” she tailed off.

“We put it all up, then we decide what’s relevant,” Ryan decreed, “not before.”

“But you make it look like she’s having an affair or something.”

“Is she?” Ryan asked, with interest.

“No!”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

Ryan turned towards his poster, marker hovering and

Jamie said, “Don’t you dare.”

He sighed and left it, or at least wrote nothing. “So, your Dad knows your Mum spends hours – and loads of money – on fortune tellers.”

“No,” Jamie admitted. “I’m sure he doesn’t know, because I’d have heard the roof flying off the house if he found out. He’d go nuclear.”

“So how come he doesn’t know?” Ryan didn’t let Jamie to answer. “Either he’s really thick, and notices nothing, or she’s being clever at hiding things.” Ryan suddenly registered Jamie’s reaction. “Sorry, Jamie, I’m just being objective, I don’t mean—”

“That my Dad’s a moron and my Mum’s a liar?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You might as well have. I don’t know why I bothered telling you.” Jamie pulled herself up and headed for the door, shaking off Ryan’s attempt to hold her back.

“Wait. I’ve got an idea. Look at this.”

Jamie hesitated, her cheeks still flaming with angry colour, while Ryan turned back to the poster and drew an arrow from ‘paper’ to ‘telly’ to ‘phone’.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” he stabbed the poster. “She’s checking it more often, and she wants direct contact with the fortune teller now – and it’s costing more, isn’t it? The phone bills are getting more expensive. Am I right?”

Jamie slowly closed the door handle, nodding reluctantly. “Yes. It’s getting to be every day sometimes, if she thinks no one will notice. And I know we haven’t got the money, Ry, so I don’t know how she’s paying.”

“So, she’s hiding things – not by lying,” he added hastily, “just by doing things so as other people won’t know.”

Jamie shrugged. “She does all the money stuff so Dad wouldn’t know about that. And I sometimes hear bits of the phone calls, but with her and Dad on shifts, they’re never home together, or Dad’s down the pub, so he wouldn’t hear, and Gareth’s always out or in the coal shed, practising with the band.”

“So, what have you heard on the phone.”

“Not a lot. It’s mostly her listening for ages, then she asks a question like, “What should I do about this problem in work?” and she’ll say what the problem is – it’s always really boring, like a security guard trying to get extra discount or something like that.

Or she’ll say she’s thinking of making some changes round the house, is this a good time? I thought she was talking to a friend at first, but then I heard her saying, “Thank you, Madam Sosotris,” or some name like that, and then I kept hearing odd words like ‘Capricorn’, and I suddenly knew what was going on.

And I knew people would just laugh about it if I said

anything, because it's just normal, isn't it, reading your horoscopes and that."

"Not if you start believing in them."

"So why do you read them?"

"I don't. But you *have* been known to read them aloud to me."

There was a silence. "Do you think there's anything in it, Ry?"

"No way." Less certainly, "No, no way."

"But there's loads of people check on their stars before they do things, even world leaders."

"Like who?"

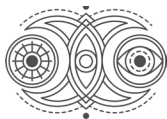
"I don't know off the top my head, do I!"

Ryan grinned. "So, we find out. Step 1, know your enemy. And Mr Travis is looking for stuff for the school newsletter, so we write it up and publish it."

"Oh no," Jamie groaned. "Mr Travis is *always* looking for stuff for the school newsletter."

"So, we help ourselves *and* we help him. We prove that horoscopes are rubbish, that fortune tellers are con-artists, and we help your Mum. And I didn't laugh at you," he pointed out.

He turned again to his poster and stabbed at the progression from 'paper' to 'phone'. "And it's going to get worse again. What do you think will be the next step up after all these phone calls?"



Alone again later, Jamie reminded herself, “Horoscopes are rubbish and fortune tellers are con-artists.” She looked at the search on her computer screen and started work, ignoring the nagging voice in her head, “And what if they’re not?”