

## Chapter Twelve

Malcolm found the little girl and her tiny pet about as happy as a child and her faithful companion could possibly be. He watched them on the ice together. Becky practiced a series of figure eights, while the pup tried in earnest to keep pace, attempting concentric rings around her gliding feet. Malcolm believed that if he could capture and contain her laughter in a bottle, it would serve as a stark reminder of pure innocence. But the planet and its people were way beyond saving—past the point of no return. All corners of the globe considered. Powerful people such as the industrialist had ruined it for the rest. People of position simply failed the population. And those people had to pay. Dearly. Not with their lives, dear God, but with the lives of their loved ones. It was the only lesson from which the polluters of their fragile planet would ever learn, for they had not heeded the early warnings: signs from the scientific community as big as billboards; caveats and admonishments as clear as crystal. Instead, those of position and power turned their backs and stuck their collective heads in the proverbial sand. About to exercise *his* power anew, Malcolm smiled sadly but soberly at the child and her dog.

Becky stood in her sister's old skates, bundled from head to foot and wearing a different colored mitten on each hand: one, blood red; the other forest green.

“Hi there.”

Becky turned around abruptly and fell on her tiny padded tush. “Hey, you scared me!” the eight-year-old complained, climbing awkwardly to her feet on unsteady silvery blades.

“Better I should scare you than let you fall through the ice and drown.”

Becky's little dog seemingly yapped away in disagreement.

“I can’t fall through the ice, stu—silly, and drown.” She almost called the perfect stranger *stupid*, but caught herself in the nick of time. “Shush, Suzie. Be quiet.”

“How come you can’t fall through the ice and drown?” the happy-faced man wanted to know.

“Because it’s only a few inches deep. That’s how come. And that’s why I’m allowed to come back here and ice-skate,” she explained as if there might be a challenge that she was ready to defend.

“I see.”

“Who are you? I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“I’m not a stranger,” Malcolm replied. “You just don’t recognize me is all.” And with that the man contorted his face into a silly, sad frown.

Becky leaned back in laughter, then almost fell again, regaining her balance and skating over to a branch that extended outward over the ice like a friendly, long arm.

Suzie barked excitedly, and the little girl politely told her puppy to be quiet.

“You just don’t remember me, I guess. But I remember you. You picked out all those colored candies from the big glass jars in Kmart, while your mother was busy shopping for a few things.”

“And I dropped some of them. And *you’re* the one who helped me pick them up! Right?”

“That’s right. And your mother came over and told you to say . . .” Malcolm let the words hang somewhere beyond his frosty breath.

“Say thank you to the man, Becky.”

“And?”

“And you and mommy let me keep the candy that was wrapped but made me throw away the pieces that weren’t.”

“The Jujubes.”

“But I got more.”

“That you did, Becky.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So. I guess we’re really not strangers.”

“Guess not. What’s your name?”

“Malcolm.”

Becky thought it a funny name and smiled.

“Say, I got a great idea,” the man said.

“What?”

“I know a bigger skating place right behind this one.”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head. “That’s the deep one. That’s where you can fall in. My brother fell in last year. He was lucky. He only went up to his knees playing hockey. And that’s because the ice broke near the edge. It’s a pretty deep pool. Mommy takes me to a real ice-skating rink sometimes. Only she’s working now. But she’s going to take me to the rink on Saturday.”

“I know. I saw you at the rink with your mother. You wore a beautiful red outfit.”

“Skirt,” Becky clarified. “It’s my ice-skating skirt. Mommy says when I get real good, she’s going to buy me a brand-new one. These are my sister’s skates. They don’t fit her anymore. She’s married now and lives in a *big* house on Long Island. That’s in

New York. Not in the city. But way out there away from it,” she explained, waving an arm in illustration. “Have you ever been to New York? It’s real nice.”

“As a matter of fact, I just came from New York a little while ago. And it’s not so nice. I mean, the ice-skating. You see, everything started to melt. Then they got a cold spell again, and everything froze up. But not enough to ice-skate safely outdoors. That’s why I came up here. Here, it’s nice and cold and everything is frozen thick. Why, I’ll just bet that pool back there is frozen over at least a foot. Know how thick a foot is?”

Becky let go of the branch and showed Malcolm how thick she thought a foot was. “As long as my skate. Daddy measures feet by putting one foot in front of the other. Like this.” Becky carefully placed the blade of one skate directly in front of the other. “See? That would be approx . . . uh . . . what’s that word?”

“Approximately?”

“That’s it. Approximately two feet.”

“That’s very good, Becky. I’ll bet you’re the smartest kid in your school.”

“Smartest of the girls,” Becky announced immodestly. “But Trevor Cassidy is the smartest in the class. In the whole school, I think. But that’s not fair because he’s a genius.”

“Genius,” Malcolm corrected.

“That’s what I said.”

Malcolm smiled. “Listen, Becky.”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t come all the way up here from New York to stand around in the cold and chitchat.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Talk.”

“Oh. So why *did* you come here?”

Malcolm smiled broadly. “I came up here, Miss Becky, to ice-skate,” he answered, pointing to an old battered black leather suitcase on the path behind him.

“And not on thin ice, either,” he assured her.

“Really?” she said with interest.

“Really. And if I could, I really would like to skate with you.”

“Truly?” she questioned with genuine enthusiasm.

“Really and truly. But there’s just one little problem, Becky.”

“What?”

“We can’t skate together on a little plate of ice like this. We need something bigger.”

Becky thought for a moment. “Are you sure it’s really safe back there?”

“Sure I’m sure. I was just back there.”

“I know how to tell if it’s really safe or not,” Becky swore.

“How?”

“Well, if you see white ice along the edges you stay away from there. You look for the gray. Not the mushy looking gray. But the dark kind. You can tell. And then if you really want to be sure, you know what you do?”

Malcolm shrugged, bent low, and petted Suzie, who was busy sniffing away at the pair of olive rubber boots.

“You throw a big rock out on the ice.”

“You certainly seem to know your way around the ice, Becky.”

“I do because my brother showed me. C’mon. I’ll show you.”

“Okay, but let me grab my skates first.”

Malcolm went to fetch his suitcase, and Becky started awkwardly down the path with Suzie running just ahead of her.

“C’mon,” she called again. “I bet I can beat you there with my ice skates on,” Becky declared, her arms held out at her sides for balance.

“Slow up there,” he called out. “Wait up.”

“Why? You sound just like my father.”

“Didn’t your father ever tell you you’ll dull your blades by walking on the ground like that?”

“No, but my brother did. I don’t walk on them until I get to the pond, which my brother calls a puddle. But it’s only a little ways to the big pond if you take this shortcut. See? You can see it right from here.”

“I see. But still you shouldn’t walk on them at all.” Malcolm put down his case. “Here, let me help you.” And before Becky could say another word, she was up in the air, then down upon his broad shoulders. “There. How’s that?”

Suzie made an about-face and started yapping in protest as the man stooped and swooped up his bag.

“Shush, Suzie,” Becky insisted in a sharp tone, commanding the dog to silence with a downward wave of her red mitten.

Suzie went running off again, zigzagging through the brush adjacent to the pathway.

“Hey, this is really neat up here.” Becky bent way forward from a narrow waist, craning her head until her eyes were inches from Malcolm’s. “You in there?” she questioned with a giggle.

Malcolm tugged at and pulled up the hood of his coat, then nudged his neck fore and aft. “What kind of animal am I, Becky?”

“Uh . . .?”

“Hint, hint. Reptile.”

“TURTLE!” Becky exclaimed with a shrill that sent Suzie into a frenzy.

“A deaf turtle,” Malcolm complained, crossing his arms and locking both of Becky’s spindly legs against his sides.

And with that, Becky fell backward in an entrusting descent that took the man completely by surprise. In an instant, she sprang back up and was happily taking in the wooded white world high above the ground as her new friend trudged and crunched along the frozen earth.

Suzie was circling the pair in a fit.

“I said, shush.”

The blade of Becky’s left skate chafed the corner of Malcolm’s suitcase before he changed hands while plodding down the path.

“Well, here we are, Malcolm. Put me down. Are you sure that’s really and truly your name?”

“Why? Don’t I look like a Malcolm to you?” he asked, setting his suitcase on the snowy ground.

“No.”

“Then what would you like to call me?”

“Charles.”

“Charles?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s your daddy’s name. Right?”

Becky kept her eyes frozen to the ground as he put her down.

“What’s the matter, Becky?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why the long face all of a sudden?”

“No reason.”

“Gotta be a reason.”

Becky said nothing.

“Gotta be a reason for everything we say and do. Right?”

“I guess.”

“So, then there’s a reason, but you just don’t want to share it with me because we’re not really friends yet. Am I right?”

Becky raised her eyes slowly from the ground, stretching her neck and staring up into the man’s kind face.

“Well, am I?”

Becky nodded.

“I usually am right,” he stated quite surely. “My parents would tell me that I take a very good read on people.”

Becky was staring quizzically. “Huh?”

“Reading people.”

“How can you read people?”

“Like you read a book, Becky. But instead of staring down at the words upon a page, you look into a person’s eyes. They speak volumes without saying a single word. Then, when you really get good, you take in the entire face and body. Observing the way a person moves their lips. Even how they stand. What they do with their hands when they *are* speaking. You can tell so much about a person by studying them as you would a book.”

Malcolm stooped and opened his suitcase.

Becky looked inside. “Wow!”

“Neat?”

“My brother would like them a lot. Racers. Right?”

“You’re a very bright little girl, Becky.”

“And so are you. Anyone who can read a person like they read a book has got to be smart.”

“Thank you, Becky. That’s a very nice thing to say.”

“Well, it’s true.”

Malcolm gave up a queer little smile.

“What’s in that paper bag,” she asked, pointing with her green mitten.

“That? That’s a little present I brought along especially for you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” He handed her the plain brown bag, its top sealed closed in a series of folds.

Becky took and felt the weight of the package.

“Go ahead. Open it. It’s a gift from me to you.”

Becky thought she heard something jingling inside the second she received her present. She jiggled the bundle and heard the sound again, carefully opening the bag and taking a peek inside. She shook her head in disbelief, staring from the contents to the man.

Malcolm smiled broadly.

“Figure skates!” the girl cried. “With tiny little bells.”

“And I believe they’re exactly your size; that is, with a pair of heavy woolen socks like you’re wearing.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“White as falling snow.”

“I know,” she said and giggled excitedly, removing the pair as Malcolm retrieved the paper bag and returned it to his suitcase.

“Why don’t you try them on?”

“Can I?”

“I don’t see why not. They’re yours. But I would like you to make me a promise.”

“Sure.” She would have promised just about anything.

“I want you to promise me that you won’t do anything to dull the blades.”

“Oh, I won’t. I promise. Look. I’ll even take a swear.” Becky ran the green mitten of her right hand down, and then across her chest as she cradled her precious gift. Quick as a crippled bunny, she made her way over to a fallen log. “See? I can put these

on right here. Then I'll only have . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five feet to go in the snow," she measured meticulously, placing one skate directly in front of the other until she reached the very edge of the frozen pond. "How's that, Malcolm?"

"Perfect, Becky."

Becky walked back and set her brand-new skates down alongside the log. Hurriedly, she pulled the pair of mittens off with her teeth, then sat and began undoing the laces of her sister's plain-Jane skates. When she finally freed herself from the well-worn hand-me-downs, she reached for the bell-tasseled beauties. All clean and shiny. Not a scuff or blemish anywhere.

It was as Becky finished lacing up and removing a protective rubber guard from one of the steel runners that she noticed something strange. The blade. It was different from anything she had seen before. Becky compared it the older pair. Examining them closely.

Malcolm was studying Becky. Reading her like a book.

"Hey, there's something funny here, Malcolm."

"What's that?" Malcolm was sitting on a rock, putting on his racers.

"The blade."

"What about it?" The man was racing with his laces.

"It's sharp."

"It's supposed to be sharp. Remember what I told you?"

"Yeah, but this is *really* sharp."

"Really and truly?" Malcolm inquired with a grin.

“It’s supposed to be flat on the bottom. Like this.” Becky held up one of her sister’s old skates. “See?”

Suzie was staring up at the elevated skate as though it were a large treat. “*Woof!*” the terrier sounded.

“That, Becky dear, is supposed to be very sharp.” The bearer of the gift got to his feet. “See? Like these.” He lifted up his right leg and showed her his skate. And then the other.

“Like a knife?” she asked, her face all scrunched up in confusion.

“Like a razor,” he replied, slashing his right leg out at nothing—holding it perfectly steady in the cold, still air.

Becky said nothing, Malcolm noted satisfactorily, setting his foot on the ground again.

Neither of them said a word for what seemed an eternity.

Finally, Malcolm spoke. “I think you’re reading me perfectly, Becky. And I want you to know that I’m really and truly very proud of you,” he said behind a smirk.

Becky began to cry.

“Now, get up! Take that other guard off.” There was a sharp edge to his voice.

Becky immediately did as she was told.

“Good girl.” Malcolm looked up at the gray-flannel sky. “Kind of dreary today. No?”

Becky uttered not a single word.

“Put your mittens back on, pet. The temperature is starting to drop.”

Without taking her eyes off the man who she had thought was her friend, Becky reached down, picked up her mittens and put them back on. She dabbed the tears running down her angelic face.

“I’m cold, and I want to go home,” Becky insisted.

“Not until we have our little skate first,” Malcolm said flatly. “It’ll get your blood flowing, and then you won’t be so cold anymore,” he promised. “Now, let me see you out there on the ice. And don’t walk on those blades that I worked so hard to sharpen to perfection. All right? Use the toes of the blade. Those saw-toothed notches. That’s what they’re for. Go on now.”

Becky moved forward clumsily on the toes of the blades, taking several steps toward the pond. Like a cockeyed inebriated ballerina, she swayed. As she reached the edge of the ice, the toes of the steel depressions dug cleanly into its surface.

Malcolm nodded approvingly. “Out to the center, Becky Lynn Dawson.”

Becky suddenly wondered how he knew her full name. Was this some sort of punishment from God because she had lied by telling her mother that she finished all her homework so that she could go with Daddy when he came to pick her up on Sunday mornings? She promised God on the spot that she would never lie like that again . . . that she would have *all* her homework finished by Saturday afternoon. Even the math homework that she hated and would copy from Patty Mason on the Monday morning bus. Even if it meant *not* going to the skating rink with her mom. *Maybe that’s it*, she somehow managed to sort out in her frightened mind. *Maybe the cheating* had finally caught up with her. But it really was not cheating. Patty was teaching her as well. Tutoring her. Sort of. *Yes. That has to be it.* God was really and truly mad.

Malcolm was racing toward her now.

Suzie was sliding on the ice, unable to get a firm hold beneath her clawing, pawing pads.

Malcolm stood before Becky, looking down at her unhappily. The man had gone from nice to mean in a matter of moments. She could see it plainly in his face. Becky dropped her eyes back to his skates—eyeing the sharp blades that protruded well beyond its heels and toes. They formed a point. A very sharp point. Like a butcher’s knife minus its handle—the single blades pointing in both deadly directions.

“Let me see you skate,” the mean man ordered.

Becky tried to push off . . . not so much to obey his instructions, but to instinctively move away. Her blades sliced into the ice and held fast.

“These are not right,” Becky insisted. “They don’t . . . glide.”

Malcolm nodded. “These skates are not supposed to glide. They’re meant for cutting and slicing. Mine have an added edge,” he threw out with double meaning. “They’re meant for piercing.”

Becky tried to push off again. But the blades held fast. Her body shivered violently. “I can’t skate with these.”

Suzie was just coming up to Becky’s unsteady ankles when Malcolm shot the point of a blade upward and into the dog’s right side. The animal yelped in mid air, then fell forward in a ball of white fur that turned as red as a checker before Becky’s disbelieving eyes.

Becky went clamoring for her pet.

“Oh, my God!” she wailed, knowing now that God had nothing to do with her homework or lack of it, or the cheating, or punishment of any kind. God was good and would not let a thing like this happen because she slipped a little every now and then. God would not punish an otherwise good little girl and her dog like this. *This* was about the bad men in the world who her mommy and daddy had warned her of time and time again.

Becky was on her knees, holding onto her little dog for dear life. She was trying to make Suzie’s bleeding stop.

“Let that dog go now, Becky. I want to see you skate, I said.”

Becky did not hear the man, only the sporadic whimpering of her little companion. She removed her woolen cap, pressing the material against the dog’s wound like she had seen actors do to wounded people in action movies. Violent videos that she was not supposed to watch.

Maybe it *was* all the lies and deceptions piled up on one another that had brought her and Suzie to this point, Becky thought again. Maybe *that* was the simple truth.

She felt a gentle tug on the collar of her coat, and Malcolm felt the sudden pull of defiance.

The next thing Becky saw—then felt—was a flash followed by the *whoosh* of a steel blade passing a fraction of an inch before her face. Another silvery streak grazed the outer fabric of her coat. A second later, she felt herself being dragged across the pond where the ice was milky-white and thin. She no longer had Suzie in her arms. Becky was screaming hysterically. All that could hear her were the squirrels that had stopped their scurrying just moments before . . . sitting motionless on their haunches upon naked

limbs . . . others that suddenly buried themselves safely into their leafy nests in naked trees high above the ground. Too, the bevy of birds that had immediately taken wing, then disappeared when piercing screams sent them darting in all directions. The deer, also, hightailing it out from the edges of a dense woodland, which the herd pretty much sensed they had back to themselves after the last of the hunters abruptly ended the season many a moon ago. Suzie certainly heard Becky, too. Not more than fifty feet away. But neither of them could do anything for the other.

“Now shut up and get up, Beck, before I slice your fucking head off.”

Becky clambered about, not quite able to make it to her feet. Suddenly, a blade tore through her insulated poly/cotton jacket, exposing a wisp of insulation. The girl scrambled in all directions upon the ice . . . sobbing bitterly, yet with hardly a sound.

“Okay, daughter of the Dawsons. Lie there on your lazy back and chop.”

Malcolm got down on his back next to Becky and showed her how, slashing the backs of his tubular blades in a vicious semicircle all around them—the crisp sound of ice cracking as he moved clockwise in a furious arc. Icy water was spurting up onto the surface and soaking into the material at their backs.

Becky wept uncontrollably and made a halfhearted effort purely out of fear.

Malcolm removed a thin leather belt from his pants, then looped the end back through its buckle and around Becky’s tiny pair of trembling hands hidden in their mittens, tying off the prayerful package with a secure knot—right before her terrified eyes.

“See?” he asked excitedly. “Now, all you have to do to free yourself is cut through the leather strap with your new skates. That is, before the cold water chills you

to the bone and covers you up like a blanket. It's about four feet deep right here, give or take an inch. But you must be very careful not to cut your wrists. Those blades are terribly, terribly sharp. I want you to have a fighting chance, Becky Dawson. That's more than your mother ever gave the public. And your dear father, *Charles*, who even fought *against* having the stream that feeds this very pond posted for pollution. *They're* not very nice people, Becky. I have zero tolerance for folks like that."

"Where's my Suzie?" Becky groaned.

"Where's Suzie? I'll show you where Suzie is."

On his back, Malcolm made his way along the dangerously thin gray-white ice until he reached the thicker, safer part of the frozen pond. Getting to his feet, then lifting one skate level with his knee, Malcolm brought the edge of the blade down like a guillotine upon the terrier's blood-splattered, wispy white body before calling out to its master.

"We'll be there in a minute, Beck. Don't you fret."

Down came another cut. And then another.

Becky was crawling around blindly on all fours, screaming mercilessly.

In less than thirty seconds, Malcolm knifed his way back to Becky. Between two gloved fingers, he held the dog's bloody head by one of its ears.

Becky was still screaming as the ice beneath her little body suddenly gave.

"Use your *blades*, Becky, to cut away the strap. Hold your breath when you go under, kid. Then stand when you need to catch your breath."

Becky was thrashing around in the chest-high water when the madman suddenly slid the head of her damaged dead dog into the dark watery hole alongside her as though he had successfully maneuvered a hockey puck across the goal line.

Becky bellowed bloody murder.

Malcolm walked to a safe corner of the pond and watched with fascination as Becky fought furiously between trying to cut away the strap and trying to stand erect. On her fourth or fifth attempt, beneath the frigid water, Becky never found the surface