

## *About the Author*

Olivia Levez lives in Worcestershire, where she divides her time between teaching in a secondary school and writing. *The Island* is Olivia's debut novel and she is already at work on her second book, which Rock the Boat will publish in spring 2017. She writes mainly in her caravan in West Wales and was inspired by the coast to create the desert island in this book.

You can follow Olivia on Twitter **@livilev**.



The  
ISLAND

Olivia Levez



ROCK THE BOAT

A Rock the Boat Book

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*For my mother, Judith*



# Dog Breath

They all know what I've done. Of course they do. That's why they leave me well alone.

*Hi I'm Rufus!* is fascinated, like I'm some frickin sideshow. You can tell because his eyes are on me every time I look.

I stare boldly at him – *I won't use my freezing power, not yet* – till he flinches away.

So here we all are, on a plane the size of my shoe.

The plane is tracking along the runway at Ptang-Plang Airport, bracing itself for take-off.

Outside there's the shimmer of bluesky and brightlight and palm trees.

Inside is a dog, curled up in its travel bag, panting. Even across the aisle I can smell its breath, warm and stinking in the close air.

*Hi I'm Rufus!* has one of those posh voices that owns a room. It cuts through Ella Fitzgerald as she yearns through my earphones.

'Pilot's dog,' he's saying.

Lucky me that he's sitting right in front. He twists so that I see the nasty yellow of his TeamSkill shirt that does nothing for his complexion. He's wearing his TeamSkill name badge with its happy rainbow colours.

Rufus reaches a freckled arm over to stroke the dog's head.

'Hello, old boy,' he says.

Old boy?

I shoot bolts of ice at him before he flinches away but I've already seen what he's thinking: *It's the monster, the one in the files.* He doesn't give up though; he remembers his TeamSkill training and says, 'I like dogs', as the dog beside me pantpantpant.

I glance out of the window, then wish I hadn't. Looks like we're heading straight towards the sea.

I turn down Ella.

'Why d'you keep looking at me? You some kind of perv?'

I hurt almost without thinking these days.

*'Do you have any friends, Fran?'* Sally-the-Counsellor's voice, ever calm and ever concerned.

*'My name's Frances,'* I say. *'Only people I like call me Fran.'*

There were friends once, but they melted away. Things are different now I'm a monster.

## Medusa Girl

That's the first time I've spoken since yesterday.

I'm Medusa Girl. Cold as rock, hard as stone.

Medusa was a monster who turned flesh into stone. A useful skill. I think of all the people I would turn to stone, and whether it's the hate that does it, bleeding out of your head through your eyes and puddling towards people like poison, or whether you shoot out white-rage like a spear of lightning.

I think of Angela with her I-really-care eyes; imagine freezing her so all of her endless questions drop like pebbles

through the air.

Angela is my social worker.

She's got one of those voices that goes up at the end of each sentence. It irritates the frick out of me. If only I'd discovered my Medusa powers when we first met, maybe I could have stopped all of this from happening.

Maybe.

At Heathrow she had to have one last go at saving me.

*'You know this is such an opportunity? I mean, an island in the Indian Ocean? Everyone's rooting for you, Frances?'*

*I watch the other social workers fade away, but not Angela. She still hovers. Holds out her hand.*

*'Well, goodbye, Frances. Hope you enjoy the experience? Even though it'll be tough?'*

*When I shove my hands in my pockets she looks disappointed.*

*I stare at Angela, and she can't hold my gaze; she flinches away. Doesn't stop her talking though.*

*'Frances, remember what we discussed – before? When you come back, I really think you should visit her. She understands why you did it. She –'*

*My snakes hiss and spit.*

*'Shut up. Just shut up,' I say.*

*My gate is called, and I turn to follow the rest of TeamSkill.*

*'She's asking to see you?' calls Angela.*

*I don't look back.*

Just then our little plane gives a great lurch and bounces into the air.

Makes my memory snap shut like a book.

# *Are You Sitting Comfortably?*

I clench my fists as the plane curves over palm trees and parked cars and miniature buildings, then veers over the coast into the sea.

Ella Fitzgerald tries to calm me with her caramel voice but it's not working. I grip the armrest because that's going to help. Then I try to focus on the other passengers.

There's Tiny, real name Paul. Fourteen, but looks three years younger. Only clue to his age is the bumfluff that pokes through his zitty chin: those head-phone's he's wearing are bigger than him.

There's Coral, screech-laughing to the boy beside her. When she shifts position, I can see the silver stretch marks on her belly. On her arm is a badly-drawn tattoo of a baby's face.

Next to her is Joker. Sixteen-ish, cap yanked high on the back of his head. He's jiggling his knee, all pent-up fury behind the gags. Like he'd slam your head down on the point of your pencil, Heath Ledger style, if you provoked him. He mutters something to Coral and she screams with laughter, showing her tongue piercing.

Our survival kit is in the hold. It's all been packed for us. They think we can't be trusted to pack for ourselves because: we'll fill our backpacks with knives and vodka and smack we're city kids so haven't seen a frickin tree before, let alone a coconut.

'Are you really nervous?'

*Hi I'm Rufus!* is still trying hard. Has he forgiven me yet for spoiling his stupid team game back at the Centre? Probably wants to write a report on me or something. Fran Stanton: Special Case Study.

He has pale skin, the sort that looks surprised to be outside. Eyes blue as a Tory boy. Everything about him is soft: soft skin, soft fringe, soft life.

‘Here, have a sweet to take your mind off it.’

He hands me a wrapped boiled sweet which I shove into my pocket just as the plane gives an alarming shake. Everyone cheers except me.

‘I flew one of these once, a Cessna two-seater. My father gave me lessons for my eighteenth birthday. Fantastic things. Really robust, you know –’

‘You don’t have to practise on me,’ I say.

‘What? I mean, pardon?’

‘All your TeamSkill training. You don’t have to practise on me. It won’t work. I’m not listening.’

I watch his flush deepen.

I take a swig from my bottle and try to ignore the stink-pant of the dog. Outside, the world is all wrong: everything is edges and angles.

The co-pilot turns round to us and smiles. ‘OK, you guys. Hope you are all comfortable back there.’

But I’m staring at the plastic-coated escape plan which is stuck to the seat in front. Cheerful passengers bobbing about in the sea and blowing whistles.

And now we are rising, high over the ocean, away from the land.

The plane lifts and my stomach drops.

# Indictable Offence

‘Frances Stanton. You understand why you are here in the Children’s Court today?’

Shrug.

‘It is my duty to pass sentence on the following crimes. You have been found guilty of, amongst other things, inflicting criminal damage to a public building, causing damage in excess of two hundred thousand pounds. We believe that there are many circumstances that make this case an indictable offence...’

Shrug.

‘...aggravating factors...’

*Don’t think. Don’t think about it. Watch her mouth work and twist but don’t listen to the words coming out.*

‘However, in view of your age...and other mitigating circumstances...’

*I am panting with rage, running, running. Running down the stairs, past the caretaker. Left down the corridor, up the passage. Outside, the sound of the loudspeaker. Inside, the clink of bottles in my bag.*

I start to shake. Try to shove the memory back where it came from. Freeze it out. Freeze it out.

‘...more focused approach...’

What is she saying? I fix on her purple glasses as her mouth works, blah blah blah. They are interesting glasses, for someone who must be at least fifty. They’ve got glittery bits in them. I imagine her choosing them, maybe with her daughter. ‘Get those, Mum,’ her girl would say. ‘They’re well cool...’ I read the designer label on the side: Paul Smith. So she’s got money then. Plenty of it, from sorting out crims like me.

‘Frances Stanton?’

*Stone stare.*

‘This scheme works by offering an intense three-month course that gives offenders the opportunity to focus on team-building skills...’

‘What?’ I say.

Sigh. ‘Since this is your future we are discussing, Frances, it would be nice if you would pay attention. We’ve decided that we’d like to avoid a custodial sentence in a juvenile detention centre if at all possible.’

‘Three months?’ I say. ‘I can’t be gone for three months – my brother needs me!’ I am shouting now. My Medusa thing isn’t working. Sometimes it doesn’t; sometimes I can’t seem to turn it on.

Purple Glasses leans forward then.

‘We are aware that you do have a close relationship with your half-brother, Johnny Bailey.’

A hand is restraining me as I struggle. My breath’s coming quick and fast in my throat.

*Remember you are rock. Remember you are stone.*

‘What of it?’ I say.

‘If you take up this opportunity we are offering, you avoid a custodial sentence, which means you will be able to have regular access visits.’

Then a man with white hair, who’s been quiet all this time, shifts round to speak to me.

‘Basically, Frances, if you get yourself locked up, you may not get to see your little brother for up to two years.’

# Yogurt

Derek-the-co-pilot is tanned and relaxed. He winks at us all and dips in a spoon, slowly. He's eating blueberry yogurt. I watch that yogurt like hell because as long as he's eating it, everything's just fine.

'Our journey to the island will take around two hours. We hope you enjoy the flight, kids.'

The heat shimmers and the little dog grins and pants beside me. Coral nudges Joker and giggles. Tiny looks out of the window; hardly moves as he takes it all in.

'Carob-coated Brazils, everyone,' sings *Hi I'm Trish!* She starts to throw bags of nuts and bottles of ice-cold water to us all.

Joker catches some nuts and chucks them at Coral, who shrieks. My water rolls under my seat but I ignore it. Twist the lid of my own bottle instead.

'Tiny, not for you because of your nut allergy,' *Hi I'm Trish!* says.

Nice Trish. Wonderful Trish. Thinks of everything.

The other TeamSkill kids have quietened down now. They're swigging water and opening packets.

Coral has her head on Joker's shoulder; his hand, I notice, is under her top, stroking her back. Tiny's still staring out at the sea. As Coral yawns and stretches, her sleeve falls back, showing her tattoo. Too late, she sees me looking.

'My kid,' she says, and smiles.

She rolls her sleeve higher to show me.

'Tia. She's eighteen months. Just started walking.' She sighs. 'Got anyone you'll miss?'

So I stare at her tattoo, at this baby that crawls along her

arm, one hand after the other, little fingers grasping the plumpness of her flesh, and I'm thinking...

I'm thinking

of another baby,

smiling

as it makes its way trustingly towards me.

The little inked face wobbles closer, closer.

Stare. Blink.

*Turn away now.*

## Starfish

He's all scrunched up and angry-looking.

But I don't mind.

I am nine and I like babies.

'Can I hold him, Mum?'

Cassie's all woozy with wires. She's talking sort of bendy because she's had a difficult labour. That means there was trouble getting the baby out. I know because my best friend Priya's mum's just had a baby too.

Cassie nods, smiling through her blurriness. She watches me place my arm under the baby's head so he doesn't loll, and lift him, as carefully as I can, in my arms.

I sit on the chair and we both look at him.

He's all sleepy-warm and his hair's kind of yucky with my mum's blood and stuff but that doesn't matter.

What matters is that he's mine.

He gives a sort of snuffle and stretches one hand out like a starfish.

'Look, Mum,' I say.

He's smiling in his sleep; his eyes roll back and forth under their lids as his little mouth laughs silently.

'He likes you,' Cassie says.

I am enchanted. I trace my finger over his cheek, and it's firm and new. He's a conker just come out of its shell.

His eyes open then, and they gaze into mine, wise as an owl, thoughtful as time.

'Hello, Monkey,' I say.

## Tarmac

I wonder when *Hi I'm Trish!* will notice that half her vodka's gone from the bottle in her duty-free bag. I refilled the last bottle of water she gave me with vodka, after pouring the water out over the hot, hot tarmac. Stood there for ages watching its steam shimmer and vanish.

The plane gives a jolt and I tighten my grip on the arm-rest. Take another swig and stuff the bottle into my hoodie pocket.

I take a quick look at the co-pilot. It's OK – he's licking his spoon and chatting to Trish, who is up at the front.

Poor cow. She doesn't know that she's only got twenty minutes left to live.