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The Bones of You

Written by Debbie Howells

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DEBBIE HOWELLS

*The Bones
of you*

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‘Stars are the souls of dead poets,
but to become a star, you have to die.’

Van Gogh

ROSIE

August

It's true, what they say about when you die. In the final, terrible seconds of my life, eighteen years flash before my eyes.

It's when I understand the difference between life and death. It's time. Did you know it takes 0.0045 seconds for an input to reach the brain and a further 0.002 for a reaction to happen? How long it takes to gasp with shock? How long, from when the knife first rips into me before the agony starts? That seconds can stretch into eternity?

I feel myself leave my body, breaking free of the invisible threads that join me to it, until I'm floating, looking down at the blood, a thick, dark pool seeping under the leaves into the earth. And though my brain is starved of oxygen, flooded with endorphins, I'm hanging on, waiting, for an unknown something.

And then it starts, in freeze frames, moments of time caught like small plastic snow globes without the snow. I see my parents – too young to be my parents, but I know my mother's fair hair and the smile that doesn't reach her eyes, my father's firm hand pressed on her shoulder. They're holding a baby, in front of a small, red-brick house I don't recognize.

It fades and blurs into another, then another. Then when I'm five

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years old, my pictures become motion pictures, and I'm in them. Living, hoping, dreaming, all over again – only this time, it's different.

The wonderful childhood I had, the toys, far-flung holidays, the TV in my bedroom I was so proud of, all still there, only shattered into a million pieces, blood-stained, dust-covered, shrouded in inky blackness.

Then the voices start. The secrets no one must ever know, that aren't secrets any more because I can hear them. The face that was always watching me, that knows the truth.

I'm looking at the movie of my life.

1

August

I put down the phone and just stand there, completely still.

‘Mum? What is it?’

Everything in this house is Grace’s business. At eighteen, she’s allowed secrets, but no one else. When I don’t reply instantly, it’s not good enough.

‘*Mother*, who were you talking to?’

‘Sorry.’ You know those moments when your head is bursting with too many thoughts to form the words? My eyes fix blankly on something – a spot on the wall, an empty mug, not seeing them. ‘That was Jo. Something really odd’s happened. Rosie’s gone missing.’

Living at opposite ends of a small village, with daughters at the same school, Jo and I belong to a group of mothers who meet now and then. I know that she’s married to Neal, a renowned journalist, whose handsome face I’ve seen looking out of our TV screen more times than I’ve actually met him, reporting from the middle of war zones. That they have two daughters, drive new cars – her black Range Rover and Neal’s BMW X5 – and live in this big, architect-designed house that

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I've only been inside once or twice. It's a friendship that extends to the occasional coffee or gossipy lunch, but it's Rosie to whom I've found myself drawn. They're the same age, Grace and Rosie, A levels behind them, the start of hard-won uni places a few short weeks away, but the similarities end there. Quieter than Grace's crowd, I know Rosie as the shy girl who shares my love of horses.

Grace rolls her eyes. 'She's probably just hanging out with Poppy and hasn't told Jo because she wouldn't let her. Poppy's a slut.'

She says it good-naturedly, like 'idiot' or 'moron', but it's an ugly word on my daughter's lips. The reprimand's out before I can stop it.

'Gracie . . .'

And then my mind's wandering, as I try to imagine what's happened to her, seeing the clear eyes she hides behind the fair hair that falls across her face.

'Seriously, Mum. You haven't met Poppy. Her skirt's so short you can see her knickers. And she snogs anything – even Ryan Francis.'

Ryan Francis is the worst male specimen on the planet – according to Grace, who's yet to explain exactly why.

'But Rosie's not like that, surely?' I struggle to imagine the Rosie I know snogging an indiscriminate anyone. She has a gentleness I've seen with my horses, which comes from her own instincts. They mooch peacefully around her through the long grass, like she's one of them.

'Duh. I'm talking about Poppy, Mother. But you know, peer pressure and all that . . . I wouldn't be surprised . . .'

Alarm bells start ringing. What if she's right and Rosie's got in with a bad crowd or, worse, been persuaded to run off

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with some less-than-desirable boy? Should I say something to Jo? Then I see Grace's face. She's winding me up.

'Well, whatever,' I say, annoyed, because this isn't something to joke about. 'If you hear anything, let me know. Jo's really worried. She hasn't seen Rosie since yesterday, and her mobile goes straight to voicemail. If it was you, Grace, I'd be out of my mind.'

Grace hesitates. 'I can get Poppy's number, if you like.' Flicking her long red hair over her shoulder as she busies herself texting.

Thanks to the interconnectedness of today's teenagers, in a few seconds she has it. 'I'll send it to your phone.'

Half an hour later, I get through to Jo. She's jittery, not surprisingly, only half listening, her mind jumping all over the place.

'Not Poppy Elwood?' I can hear from her voice she's shocked. 'Oh, Kate, Rosanna wouldn't be friends with *her* . . .'

'Well, according to Grace, she is.'

'*Oh my God* . . .' I can hear her imagining her worst nightmare, that her daughter's run off or eloped. Jo's inclined to fuss over her daughters, even though Rosie's eighteen and about to leave home. 'The police will find her, won't they? You hear about this kind of thing happening . . . but they always do find them, don't they?'

'Try not to worry, Jo.' Sounding far more confident than I feel. 'I'm sure they will – if it comes to that. She'll probably walk in any moment with a perfectly reasonable explanation. But why don't you call Poppy?' I remind her. 'You never know, she might be able to tell you something.'

'Yes, I suppose I should.' She's quiet. 'I still can't believe she's friends with that girl.'

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I know how she feels. All mothers have them. The friends that threaten everything we've ever wanted for our daughters with another way to live, another set of standards that we're terrified they'll prefer to ours.

'She can't be all bad or Rosie wouldn't be friends with her,' I point out. 'And at the end of the day, she's *your daughter*. She knows what's right. She's not stupid.'

Jo's silence echoes my own hesitation, because it's not something Rosie's even hinted at, but I'm curious.

'I was thinking . . . does she have a boyfriend, Jo? Only if she does, he might know something.'

'No. She doesn't. She's put all her time into studying. Not like . . .'

 She leaves the sentence open-ended.

'I'll get off the phone,' I say hastily, ignoring her jibe at the students who work hard but play hard, too. Like Grace. 'She might be trying to call you. Will you let me know when she comes home?'

Rosie will turn up, I'm sure of it. I have a gardener's inherent belief in the natural order of things. Soft-petalled flowers that go to seed. The resolute passage of the seasons. Swallows that fly thousands of miles to follow the eternal summer.

Children who don't die before their parents.