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Almost True

Written by
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almost
true

Keren David

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FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

For my parents, Shirley and Joseph David

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CHAPTER 1

Blood

They come to kill me early in the morning. At 6 am when the sky is pink and misty grey, the seagulls are crying overhead and the beach is empty.

I'm not at home when they arrive. I'm the only person on the beach, loving my early morning run – the sound of the waves and the smell of seaweed. It all reminds me that my new name is Jake and Jake lives by the seaside.

Jake's normally a bit of a sad person – no friends, poor sod – but here, right now, working on my speed and strength, I'm happy that wherever we are and whatever my name is, I can always run, my body is my own.

For a bit I even forget that I'm supposed to be Jake and I run myself back into my last identity, which was Joe, cool popular Joe. I miss Joe. It's good that I can be him when I run. I never want to be Ty again,

my real name, the basic me, but I still dream of being Joe.

Joe never feels lonely, running on his own. It's Jake who's miserable at school, where no one talks to him.

Jake never thinks about Claire – *my* Claire, my lovely Claire – because her name throws him into a dark pit of despair, but when I'm Joe I pretend I'm running to see her and I let myself feel just a little bit of joy . . . excitement . . . hope.

So it's a good morning, and even when I get near home and have to readjust to being Jake again, there's still a kind of afterglow that clings to me. A Joe glow for Jake the fake. I'm hot and sweaty and that's as good as Jake's life ever gets, but then, when I turn our corner, there are police cars everywhere, and ambulances, and a small crowd of people staring, and they're putting up tape to stop anyone getting through.

'Get back! Get back!' a policeman is shouting, but I push on forward through the crowd to the edge of the tape.

And then I see it. A dark pool of blood at our front door. For a moment the world stops, and my heart isn't even beating. I'm swaying, and everything is going whiter and smaller and I'm like one of the seagulls flying overhead, looking down on the crowd and screaming to the sky.

I don't know what to do. I think about just running away, so I never need to find out what happened. Then arms hug me tight and it's Gran, oh God, it's Gran, and she's pulling me over to a police car. My mum's hunched up in the back. She's making a weird noise – a kind of gasping, howling, hooting noise. It reminds me of when Jamie Robins had an asthma attack in Year Three – it was scary then and it's hideous now.

Nicki's whole face is white, even her lips, and she's staring right through me – and then Gran slaps her face hard and Mum stops the terrible noise and falls into her arms. They're both still in their dressing gowns. There's blood on Gran's fluffy pink slippers.

Gran sits with her arms around my mum, rocking her back and forth and saying, 'You'll be OK, my darling, stay strong, Nicki, you'll be OK.'

'What . . . who?' I ask, but I know. I'm already beginning to piece together what must have happened.

They must have rung our doorbell. Most days, it would have been my mum stumbling down the stairs to the front door. If she had, then I think they would have grabbed her, dragged her upstairs and searched the place for me. When they found no one, what then? Kept her gagged and silent until I came back, then shot us both, I should think.

But Mum didn't open the door. She's sitting here

in the car, retching and sobbing, doubled over like she's in pain. It must have been Alistair who went downstairs. Alistair, the guy she had just started seeing before we had to move here.

Alistair, who spent the night in her bed.

Alistair, who turned up last night, out of the blue. No one bothered to tell me why or how.

Alistair, with his gelled hair and muscled arms. He looks like a prat from a boy band, but he's OK really. He's a good cook. My mum really likes him.

Alistair, who works in a gym and trained Ellie so well that she's going to the Paralympics next year. She was the first person to realise that I'd got potential as a runner. Ellie's sister is Claire. I'm probably never going to see either of them again.

Anyway. Alistair would have opened the door. Mum must've told him I'd gone out running and he probably thought I'd forgotten my key.

He's half-asleep, hair all over the place. And they shout at him, 'Ty? Ty Lewis?' He stares, yawning and bewildered – he doesn't even know I have a real name, let alone what it is – and they must take that as a yes because then they shoot him. His hands are trying to keep his brains from spilling out. Then he drops to his knees on the doorstep and blood leaks from his broken body and he dies right there on the path. And they don't

hang around because they think they've done their job. They've killed me.

This isn't the first time that someone's tried to silence me forever. It's just the first time that someone else has died instead.

My mum's woken up by the noise of the shots. She's standing at the top of the stairs, screaming and screaming, and then my gran, who's lived downstairs for the last few weeks, wakes up too. Gran spots Alistair's body, the blood – she screams and rushes to my mum. And then she calls the police.

Then the cars arrive, sirens shouting and the tape goes up and I get home from my run.

* * *

At the police station, they put us into a room on our own and say they'll send someone to take our statements. Gran pulls her mobile out of her pocket and starts ringing: first my aunties then Doug. Our witness protection officer. The policeman who's meant to keep us safe from the people who want to stop me testifying in court.

It seems like hours, but then they all start to arrive. Gran's trying to explain to the local cops that we're in witness protection, and my auntie Louise just says, 'Take us to whoever's in charge.'

Then Gran and Louise disappear into a room with the police guys and when Doug arrives, he goes in there too. Doug looks incredibly rough. He doesn't even say hello to us. Mum and my auntie Emma and I sit side by side in the corridor outside and I'm straining to hear what's going on. All I can hear is Lou's raised voice. She's good at shouting. She has to be – she's a teacher.

Mum is still shaking and crying and no one is doing anything to help her except Emma, who's hugging her and saying, 'It'll be OK, it'll be OK,' in a really unconvinced voice. Deep, deep inside me there's a tiny muffled scream – *he's dead . . . he was shot . . . that should have been me* – but shock has sucked all the feeling out of me and I'm getting that distant feeling again. It's like I've been laminated.

'I'm fed up with this,' I say. 'I'm going in there.'

Emma says, 'Ty, you can't just interrupt,' but I say, 'Watch me,' and I push the door open. They all go quiet as I barge into the room. It's almost funny to see Gran sitting there in her pink dressing gown in a room full of cops.

'Look,' I say, 'we've been sitting here for hours. My mum's just seen her boyfriend shot. We all know they wanted to shoot me. What's going on?' I top it up with a lot of words that I don't usually say in front of my gran.

Louise shakes her head and says, 'Just because there's been a murder, there is no need for you to be foul-mouthed.'

'Oh for Christ's sake, Lou, you're not in the classroom now,' I say, and I can see the police officers smiling. I sit down at the table with them. She frowns at me, but I'm going nowhere.

'Right,' she says, 'I think we've finished here anyway. Ty, you're coming with me. We've lost confidence in witness protection for you. We'll co-ordinate with the police when it's time for you to give evidence. But only if we're satisfied with their security arrangements.'

'Your gran's going to stay here with Nicki so that they can make their statements, and maybe someone'll be thoughtful enough to get them some clothes and then they'll have a discussion with Doug about where to go next.'

What does she mean? How is she going to look after me? What's going to happen to my mum? And Gran? Will the police even let me go?

Doug says, 'We'll give Ty twenty-four-hour protection now this has happened. I don't think you should be too hasty.'

Louise is very near completely losing her temper. I can tell by the way the end of her nose has gone pink.

'As far as I can see, Ty is pretty safe right now.'

The bastards who are out to get him think they've succeeded. Until you release the victim's name, that'll be the case. I'm assuming you won't do that right away. So I've got time to get Ty to a place where no one will know where he is. And that includes the Metropolitan Police, and every other bloody police force in the country.'

'Are you suggesting *we* had something to do with this?' says Doug, who sounds pretty upset himself.

'I'm suggesting you launch an inquiry right away to find out how they got Nicki and Ty's address. I'll bet you'll find there was a leak somewhere close to home. And just in case you don't do that, I'm going to get on the phone to the Police Complaints Commission just as soon as I've sorted my nephew out.'

She's not finished with Doug. 'I want you to go to the flat and pack all Ty's things, so I can leave here with him in half an hour. And then you can concentrate on making sure that Nicki and my mum and Emma – oh, and me as well – have somewhere reasonably safe to go. You can keep your twenty-four-hour protection for us.'

She leads Gran and me out of the room. Doug follows, and when he sees my mum, he says, 'Nicki, I don't know what to say,'

Louise snaps, 'An apology would be nice, but

that's not allowed, is it Doug? That would be admitting liability.'

Then she asks for some privacy to make phone calls and a policeman takes her away down the corridor.

Emma's rocking Mum back and forth, and Gran holds me tight.

'Ty, my love,' she says, 'this isn't going to be easy, but Louise knows what's she's about. She's rock-solid that girl, always made the right choices. She'll know what's best for you.'

'I want to stay with you,' I say. 'I only just got you back.'

Gran's always been more like a mother to me than my own mum. I nearly fell apart without her these last few months. I can't believe I'm going to be taken away from her again. I cling on to her like I'm a baby monkey, not someone who's going to be fifteen in just over a month.

She kisses my forehead and says, 'I'm always with you darling, I always love you. But Nicki needs me more than you do right now.'

And that's it. Doug comes back with my bag, and puts it into Lou's car. I have a final hug with Gran and Emma. My mum is throwing up in the Ladies, so we wait for her, and I give her a hug too, even though she smells of vomit. She can't stop crying and I'm not even sure

she understands that I might not see her for . . . for weeks?
For months? For ever?

‘Take care,’ she says, ‘Take care. Lou, take care of him.’

Louise says, ‘Don’t worry, Nicki, I’ll do what’s best.’

My mum stops crying, mid-sob. She does an enormous sniff, which doesn’t even begin to retrieve the snot on her face, looks Louise straight in the eye and says, ‘He’s *my* son, Louise, don’t you forget that.’

And my auntie says, ‘No one’s ever in danger of forgetting that, Nicki. I’ll be seeing you soon. Take care of yourselves.’

Then she puts her arm on my back and leads me away underground, where her car is waiting.

CHAPTER 2

Buckingham Palace

I’m lying on the back seat of Louise’s car wondering where on earth she’s going to take me. Louise is driving like a maniac and I’m incredibly sick and drowsy. I’m going to fall asleep or throw up, it’s just a question of which one first.

I asked her where we were going and she said, ‘Shut up, Ty, I’m thinking,’ so fiercely that I didn’t bother asking again. I’ve been running through all her friends in my mind and deciding which one I’d least hate to stay with. Most of them are teachers and they’re all a bit serious – the boring brigade, my mum calls them. But they all live in London. She can’t be taking me there.

We stopped for about ten minutes, and I thought she’d buy me some food as I haven’t even had breakfast, but she just whizzed me into a Snappy Snaps and got my