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Opening extract from
Someone Else's Life

Written by
Katie Dale

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The author is donating a portion of the proceeds of this novel to charities involved with Huntington's disease, including the HDA and the HDSA, who offer such wonderful support to those affected by Huntington's disease, and their families, whilst tirelessly searching for a cure.

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Chapter One

Sunlight dances over the little girl's dark curls as she toddles clumsily through the dry grass. Her rosy cheeks dimple as she grins, her green eyes sparkling as she lunges sticky fingers towards the camera. Suddenly she trips.

The picture immediately jolts and twists into the grass, continuing at a skewed angle as a chestnut-haired woman rushes over to the child. But she is not crying. The screen fills with silent giggles as her mother scoops her up, her beautiful face filled with tenderness as she cuddles her daughter tightly, protectively, holding her so close it seems she'll never let go. The picture begins to blur . . .

I click the remote and the image flicks off, plunging the room into darkness. I stare at the blank screen. It's weird to watch your memories on screen, like watching a movie. It's like somewhere, in some wonderful world, those moments are trapped, bottled, to be enjoyed again. I wonder if heaven's like that – if you get to choose the best moments of your life and just relive them over and over. I hope so.

The world outside looks different already. A desert of white – the first white Christmas Eve in Sussex in years. The snow hides everything, glossing over the lumps and dips and tufts to leave a perfect, smooth surface. Like icing on a Christmas cake. It's all still there, though. The dirty

gravel that hisses and spits as you drive over it, the jagged rocks in the garden, the muddy patch where nothing grows – they're all still there, lurking, sleeping, beneath the mask of snow.

Like my mother.

Nothing on the *inside* changed, the doctors said. She could still understand what we were saying, she just couldn't respond like she used to. Couldn't hug me and tell me everything was going to be all right, like she always had. Like I needed her to. Because everything was not all right.

I pull the blanket tighter, but it makes no difference. I'm already wearing three sweaters. Ever since Mum got ill I'm always too hot or too cold – I can't explain it. Yesterday was one of the hot days, even though it snowed practically non-stop. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy, standing in the snowy graveyard in Mum's strappy stilettos and my red velvet dress among the whispering sea of black, disapproving sighs rising like smoke signals in the frosty air. But I didn't care – the biddies could tut all they liked – she was *my* mother and the dress was her favourite on me. She called me her Rose Red.

The shoes were her favourites too – I remember her dancing in them at my cousin Lucy's wedding. I was about four or five at the time, hiding beneath the buffet table in protest at the fuchsia meringue I'd been forced to wear as flower girl. But when Mum started dancing I forgot all about that. I crawled out and just stared at her, mesmerized. God, she was graceful. Everyone stopped to watch her whirling, swirling form as she glided around the room, those heels clacking like castanets.

When the song ended she stopped, breathless and

slightly dizzy, and looked around as if unsure where she was. Then someone started to clap. Embarrassment flushing her cheeks, she ran a hand through her hair and scooped me up into a tight hug, her eyes shining with tears. It was only later that I found out it was the first song she and Daddy had danced to at their wedding.

The stilettos were one of the first heartbreaks of the diagnosis. I remember hearing Mum crying in her room one day and padding up to find her sitting on her bed, placing them carefully into a silver box like a coffin, shrouded with beautiful rose-coloured tissue paper. The doctors said high heels were just an accident waiting to happen, and that, with everything else, was something she really didn't need. I watched as she kissed each shoe before pressing the lid down gently and tying the whole precious package together with a blue ribbon. The first of many sacrifices to Huntington's.

That was a long time ago, though. That Mum died long before her heart stopped beating last Tuesday. The real Mum. The way I'll always remember her, wearing those precious shoes and swirling and whirling away to her heart's content. Not lying alone, small and frail and empty, in a hospital bed.

The sharp ringing of the telephone makes me jump. I count the rings – one, two, three – and the machine kicks in.

'Hello!' Mum's voice sings, and my heart leaps. 'You have reached the Kenning residence. Trudie and Rosie are out at the mo, but if you'd like to leave a message – you know what to do!'

I swallow painfully. Aunt Sarah's been on at me to change it – and I know I should – but I just can't bring my-

self to erase her voice. She sounds so happy. So alive.

The caller clears his throat uncertainly. A familiar trait, no matter how much time's passed. My eyes flick to the phone.

'Um, hi – Rosie? It's Andy. It's uh, it's been a while, huh?' Awkward pause. 'Listen, I'm – I'm sorry about your mum, it must be . . .' Another pause. 'Shit. Look, I'd really like to see you – call me, okay? No pressure. Just as friends. Okay? You know I'm always here if . . . You know where I am. Bye.'

Wow. Andy. He's right, it has been a long time.

'You should call him, you know.'

I twist to see Aunt Sarah in the doorway. Is it that time already? Sarah works long hours at the local hospital, but that hasn't stopped her checking up on me whenever she can – to make sure I haven't slit my wrists or burned the house down or anything.

I shrug. 'Maybe.' *No*, I think. *No, no, no*.

'And why not?' She leans accusatorially on the door-frame.

'I didn't say *no*, I said *maybe*,' I protest.

'Same thing,' she replies. 'I know you.'

It's true, she does. She's known me my whole life – literally. I was my mother's last hope for a child, at the age of forty-two – the miracle baby – and Sarah was the midwife who delivered me that night. The night my father never came back.

She's not really my aunt, or even a relative at all, but she's Mum's best friend and our next-door neighbour, and she's been there at every major event of our lives. Our guardian angel – younger than Mum, but older and wiser than me – a fact I'm never allowed to forget.

‘Seriously, Rosie, you should go out, see people – enjoy the snow! God knows it won’t last long!’

‘I’m fine,’ I tell her.

‘I know you are, sweetie . . . but it would be good for you, you know?’

I hate it when people tell me what’s good for me – *Have a nice cup of tea, it’ll make you feel better. Go on, Rosie, have a good cry, it’s good for you.* Yeah, costhat’ll bring my mother back.

I get up and cross to the stereo.

‘Look, Rosie, this isn’t easy for any of us, you know?’ Sarah sighs, smoothing a hand over her frazzled ponytail. ‘But you shouldn’t hide away like this – it’s Christmas Eve. You should be with people – family. I know you’re going to your nana’s tomorrow, but she’d love to have you to stay with her, not just for the holidays—’

I flick through the noisy radio stations.

‘Rosie . . .’

I can see Sarah’s reflection in the glass cabinet. She looks tired, drained – and old. Sarah’s never been old. But I don’t care. How can she be like the rest of them? Patronising and clichéd and telling me what to do? I turn the volume up high, and a choir belts out “Joy to the World”.

‘Rosie!’ she battles with the racket. ‘Rosie, turn it down!’

‘I don’t like that one either!’ I yell back. ‘How’s this?’ *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* replaces the choir. I turn the volume higher. ‘*Have a happy ho-o-liday!*’

‘ROSIE! Turn it down!’

‘What?!’ I yell back, cupping my hand to my ear. Maybe now she’ll know how it feels.

‘ROSALIND KENNING, YOU LISTEN TO ME!’ Sarah yells, and I flick the radio off, her voice echoing in the sud-

den silence as I turn round. She is flushed and breathless, the light from the hallway behind her showing up every frizzed hair like a frenzied halo.

‘I’ve come to a decision,’ I say. Calmly, rationally. ‘I need to know.’ I take a deep breath. ‘I need to know if I’ve got Huntington’s.’

There it is. Out in the open.

The colour in Sarah’s cheeks melts away, leaving her pale and serious. ‘Rosie . . .’

‘I’ve made up my mind.’ I say, swallowing hard. ‘I can’t live like this, not knowing. I need to know if I’m going to get it too, if I’m going to . . .’ The words stick in my throat. ‘I need to know the truth.’

‘Rosie,’ Sarah swallows, steps closer. ‘You have to think about this, take some time . . .’

‘I have.’ I round on her. ‘Don’t you think I *have*?’

‘Look, I know that with your mum gone everything’s strange and scary—’

‘*You don’t know anything!*’ I scream at her, my legs trembling. I’ve never shouted at Sarah, never yelled, never . . . but suddenly all the feelings that have been bottled up for too long gush out in one big mess. ‘*You don’t know,*’ I shake my head. ‘*You don’t – you can’t . . .*’ I look away.

Sarah sighs. ‘All I’m saying is that it’s too soon to be making choices like this, to take the test—’

‘*Too soon?* When do you *want* me to find out? When I’ve got kids too? I’m not a child anymore, Sarah – I’m nearly eighteen!’

‘I know, Rosie, but this is a life-changing decision we’re talking about here. There’s no cure, and once you know, you can’t go back . . .’

‘I can’t go back anyway!’ I choke on the words. ‘And no, actually. It’s not a life-changing decision because nothing *actually* changes, does it? It’s already decided whether I live or die – I’d just quite like to know which it’s going to be, okay?’

Sarah looks beaten, hopeless.

‘What kind of a life can I have otherwise?’ I ask quietly. ‘Not knowing? Not knowing if one day *I’ll* end up like—’

‘You won’t.’

‘Sarah, it’s hereditary,’ I sigh. ‘It hangs on the toss of a coin.’

‘No,’ She takes my shoulders gently, her eyes so sad. ‘Rosie, sweetheart, you don’t have Huntington’s. You don’t need the test.’

‘I’m not asking your permission, Sarah.’ I tell her quietly. ‘I’ve got an appointment at the clinic on Wednesday, and –’

‘No,’ she says. ‘You don’t understand.’ She takes a deep breath. ‘Rosie, you don’t have the disease.’

‘Sarah,’ I say gently, as if to a child. ‘There’s a fifty per cent chance that I do – it’s a genetic fact.’

‘That’s what I mean.’ Sarah says slowly, not looking at me. ‘There is no chance.’

‘I—’ I blink. ‘I don’t understand . . .’

‘Rosie . . .’ She sighs, rubs her hand over her brow. ‘Oh, God!’

I don’t move. Don’t dare breathe.

‘Rosie, you don’t have the disease – you can’t possibly, because—’ Desperate pause. Swallow. Breath. ‘Because Trudie wasn’t your mother.’

Her eyes meet mine at last and I flick mine away.

There’s a red stain on the carpet by the door, where Mum spilled red wine as she was handing it round one New

Year's Eve. She'd said she was just a bit tipsy, but I knew she hadn't had a drop to drink all night.

Now it looks like blood.

'Rosie, I've wanted to tell you for such a long time, especially with Trudie getting worse and worse – to put your mind at rest, give you one less thing to worry about, and because you deserved – *deserve* – to know. But I couldn't while she was alive, don't you see? You were everything to her.'

I start tugging at my sweater. It's hot again. Insufferably hot.

'God, this is awful! I'm so sorry, sweetie – this isn't how I wanted to tell you at all. But if you take the test they might compare your DNA, and I just . . . I didn't want you to find out from someone else. I had to tell you – to explain . . .'

She trails off. 'Rosie?'

I blink hard, trying to concentrate, focus.

She sighs. 'Rosie, you had to know – you *have* to know – because it's the only way you can move on with your life – your own long and healthy life!'

The room whirls faster and faster.

'I don't understand.'

Another sigh. The same gentle voice. 'Rosie, you haven't inherited the disease. She wasn't your mother—'

'NO!' I scream, the loudness of my voice startling me. 'She was – she is!'

'Rosie—' Sarah reaches for me.

'No! You were there!' I accuse her, wrenching away. 'You were there when I was born, you *delivered* me – how can you . . . ?' I gasp for breath.

She nods. That weak smile again.

'Yes, yes, I was, which is why I know that Trudie

wasn't—'

'Stop it! Stop *lying* to me!' I yell. 'This is sick! This is just some sick way to stop me taking the test – admit it!' My eyes search hers, desperate for some sign that it's not true, that she's made it all up, but she just looks sad, tired.

I feel faint, giddy. *She was! She was my mother. Wasn't she?* I close my eyes. *She would have told me – she would have told me if I was adopted. Wouldn't she . . . ?*

'Rosie, sit down, you're swaying. Let's talk about this – please, let me explain . . . ' Sarah reaches out, guiding, helpful.

I swipe her away and run, just run. Out of the back door, through the gate, the woods, hurtling down the hill towards the fields, yanking off the sweaters and sprinting blindly through the snow. I can't breathe. The flakes swirl faster and faster, dancing and whirling and twirling with my lost mother in my mind.

I've lost her, and she wasn't even mine.

The words tumble clumsily into the dance, cold and hard and heavy.

She wasn't even my mother to lose.