

Of His Bones

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Mariana Rivers, February 2009

YOU KNOW WHEN you wake up the day after some momentous event and you don't even remember it happened? This morning, my first thoughts were that my feet were cold and what the hell had happened to my quilt because it didn't snuggle around me like I'm used to – it felt thin and sort of stretched over the top of my shoulders, letting the air in. Too much light penetrated my eyelids. I didn't open them straight away. There were unfamiliar sounds going on; something clinking, and there was snoring and an unusual smell and – the atmosphere around me just felt *different*. I knew without even opening my eyes.

It felt sore between my legs as well, like that time me and Damon... No, I won't. It's too private. Also, my boobs felt heavier than normal, even with me being – and then it hit me like a blow to the head. *I've had the baby.*

I've had a baby. I'm in the postnatal ward. There are three other women and their babies in this side room with me, and loads of others out there in the other rooms off the main ward. The place is buzzing with us. Mothers, I mean, and babies. *Sweet Jesus*, can

you believe it? I gave birth to an actual, real-life baby: a wee boy. There he is, lying in the see-through plastic crib next to my bed.

The memories slowly came back as I lay, still waking up. My mam brought me to hospital yesterday when the pains got too bad to stay at home. Dad would've taken us here because Mam doesn't really like driving but he was too far away on a gardening job, so she had to do it. The next person to arrive was Damon, my baby's daddy – *ha-ha, his friends are going to take the piss out of him now* – and then, would you believe it? Bloody Aunty Geraldine turned up. *What the...?* You'd think she could've at least waited until I'd had the ruddy baby but no, she had to get herself in on the action. Wherever you look, she seems to be there. As if she thinks my mam can't cope or something; it's really getting on my rag. Just because she's had some daughters of her own and Mam 'only' adopted me.

I hated seeing Mam's face when one of the nurses let Geraldine into the room. It kind of fell, like she was thinking *not her again*. I've always called her Aunty but she's a cousin or something of Mam. Maybe once-removed. But I did hear Dad on the phone once to his work partner. "A close family friend would be more accurate." And then, *get this*, "I've had to bite my tongue on many an occasion, but we *are* stuck with her. It's in the contract."

In. The. Contract. What the bloody hell does that mean?

I'd forgotten all about it. Except now I'm mad at her for muscling in on the birth of Mam's first grandchild. Why doesn't she get some bloody grandkids of her own?

Ah, look, my new little baby has opened his eyes. *My baby*, I can't believe it.



I'M EIGHTEEN YEARS old and a mother. My son's birthday will always be exactly a week after mine. *Always*. I hold him in my arms

and look down into his searching, blue-green eyes and wonder why I can't stop crying. It's as if I can see the future, and my boy's already grown up and gone away. *You'd better take your time, my boy.* This baby is the first true relative I've ever had of my very own. Mam and Dad are wonderful – really, truly wonderful, but for the first time I can't help considering the woman who gave birth to me. Did she ever hold me in her arms like this?

I never realised how much having a baby would hurt and I don't mean inside my stomach and between my legs and my nipples from letting this little one suck on them (yeah, Damon read something about how good it is for the baby so he agreed it was the right thing to do.) It hurts in my heart though, and I wasn't expecting that. Nor had I expected the raging anger that comes flooding into me at my birth mother for giving me away.



DAMON SUGGESTS NAMES. “Donal?” Tapping his fingers on the arms of the orange-coloured bedside chair, frowning with what...? Disgust, awe, puzzlement? The sight of me and our child. The baby tugging at my nipple. A shock of lust powers through me as Damon catches my eye. It takes my breath away, but then it's gone again just as quickly. Possibly I imagined it. I'm woozy and alert all at the same time. I'm ecstatically happy but also mournfully sad. I'm all over the place, in other words.

“No, I don't like that.” Our son doesn't look like a Donal. The baby closes his eyes and loosens his grip, his head lolling on my arm. With my spare hand I pull my vest back over my boob.

“Babe,” Damon whistles. “You make me so horny.” He wiggles his hand in a rude gesture.

“Shhhh, they'll hear you!”

I giggle and glance at the other mothers, all older than me. They have their husbands and children with them. None of their new babies looks as beautiful as mine. I know – new mothers always think their baby’s the most gorgeous, but it’s really true in the case of the little lad Damon’s reaching his arms out for now. Our kid has round cheeks and feathery blonde eyebrows, he has these intense greenish eyes. *Look*, I can’t really explain what makes him look bonnier than the others but he honestly does.

I pass him over with a feeling of actual reverence. Damon comes across proper confident, holding our boy upright against his chest. He kisses the top of the baby’s head.

“Are those tears?” I kind of hope the way his eyes are brimming is only a joke. He needs to stay the same because of this swelling feeling in my chest, I’m scared I’ll burst. He sniffs and wipes his eyes on his sweatshirt sleeve.

“Might be. What if they are? Look at what we made though, babe.”

Yeah.

“He’s like an angel.” With his hand under the baby’s head, Damon lowers him backwards until he’s resting him on his knees. Our boy curls his tiny hands into fists. Looking at him from a different angle like this my stomach caves in. *What if I lose him?* I want to reach out and grab him back. For a second my ears go muffled, then the sound returns and Damon’s saying, “...in the school play, you know, the Nativity?”

“Yeah.” I felt like the Virgin Mary with my huge belly when I went with Damon to see his little sister’s performance at Christmas. “What about it?”

“We should call him Gabriel. Gabe for short.”



AUNTY GERALDINE'S SHOWING me something in a newspaper – the posh one she always reads. Before opening it on my bed she insisted on taking Gabriel out of my arms and tucking him under the blanket in the plastic crib. “It doesn’t do to spoil them,” she said in her prim-and-proper voice. *Bog off*, is what I thought in my head, but I didn’t say. You have to pick your arguments with that woman and this one wasn’t worth it. He was fine, anyway – still fast asleep. Probably bored of hearing her harping voice.

It’s a review of some sort, I don’t know what she’s showing *me* for. A play in a theatre in London. “Yeah, and...?”

“Mariana. No need to be so rude. It’s about a mother who had to give up her baby and now wants to make contact with her lost daughter. I thought you might be interested in seeing it with me?”

“Why?” I span out my fingers, tip my hand towards the baby in the crib, like, *have you forgotten something?*

“You could bring the baby along. We could get a babysitter while we went to see the play.”

I glance at the writing on the page and it dawns on me what she’s saying. “You mean go to London?” *To. See. A. Play.* “Why would I?”

The woman’s in a world of her own. Seriously, I’ve just given birth and she wants me to go gallivanting off to London. Her lips disappear – it’s as if they’ve moved up to her forehead, the horizontal frown there’s so deep. Her skin, normally dead white, is now red.

“Don’t you see? It’s entirely appropriate. You’re eighteen now, the age when most adopted children begin searching for their birth parents. This play might help you understand what it was like for your mother. It’s important that you know, dear.”

I keep staring at her. Since I got pregnant she’s never stopped going on about me finding my birth mother. *What. The...?*

“You’re a mother yourself now, Mariana. Your own mother might be waiting for you to make contact with her...”

“I’m not being rude, Auntie Geraldine, but what business is it of... I mean, why do you even care? Surely you should be on Mam’s side – you know how sensitive she is about stuff like that.”

“I’m not on anybody’s *side*.” But it doesn’t ring true. Red earrings sway against her neck as she starts messing about with a handkerchief in her bag. Damon calls her a classy bird for her age but she looks like she’s struggling to hold it together at the moment. *What is up with her?* She dabs the end of her nose with the hanky then puts it away again. It looks odd, the way she smooths her hand over the page of newspaper, glancing at me again before beginning to fold it, slowly. Like something’s really bugging her. “I do think you should see this play, dear.”

My baby stirs in his crib, flinging his hands out from under the blankets. Gushing between my legs and I need to go to the bathroom. Hot prickling breaks out all over me. The hospital lights suddenly feel too bright and I want Auntie Geraldine to go away. She finally notices.

“Why are you crying, dear?”

“I’m not. I’m just... I can’t deal with this right now, Auntie Geraldine. I’m not going with you to see the play, ok? Just accept it. Please.”

She looks so disappointed. But it’s not my fault. Everything’s gone blurry through the water in my eyes and at the periphery of my vision I see those small pink hands flailing. *He needs me*. It’s a physical pull. But I need to get to the bathroom and back before he begins screaming the place down. It’s not my job to do what Auntie Geraldine wants – I’ve got my baby to think of now.

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Maria Child, January 2013

WIPED MY chin on the back of my hand, hoping Alice hadn't noticed me dribbling. Maybe I'd been snoring too. No-one, apart from occasional lovers, had ever seen me in the vulnerability of sleep. Except in hospital – and that was different. Impersonal. Then, I was so detached I barely existed. Now, in the car, I struggled to rise from the clinging cobwebs of my dark pit, the sweet unconsciousness that had threatened to cocoon me indefinitely so many times.

Blery eyed, I pulled myself into a more upright position, extracted a soft mint from a packet I found in my handbag and offered one to Alice. She refused with a sideways smile, taking her eyes only briefly from the road.

The mint freshened my mouth enough to speak and restored me, at least outwardly, to the realms of the awake.

“It's got dark since I dozed off. What time is it?”

“Almost five o'clock,” her eyes flickered to the dashboard clock and back to the unlit strip of road in front of us. “You've been asleep most of the trip.”

“I've no energy at the moment.”

That was an understatement. I didn't even know the name of the place we were heading, and I hadn't been interested enough to ask. Alice had taken me by surprise, turning up at my mother's house and demanding that I accompany her on a weekend break by the sea. And of course my mother encouraged it – she would try anything to get me well.

I trusted Alice, both as an actress and as a friend. She reminded me of my youngest sister and as such, I'd allowed myself to get closer to Alice than I had to most other people.

During the time I'd known her, Alice had probably chattered on about some idyll by the sea where she'd grown up, referring to it by various pet names, but I couldn't remember where she'd said it was. Lincolnshire? Anyway, within driving distance of Leeds, where my family lived.

"Mum'll be pleased to have some female company. She was good friends with our next door neighbour, but she died last year." We held a respectful silence for a few moments. "And Mum misses my brother. He only comes home for a couple of weeks at a time."

"What about your dad?"

"My step-dad. Well, he's ok but he has these dark moods." She lifted a hand from the wheel. "Maybe we women can arrange an evening out together."

Ha. She was nothing if not an eternal optimist. *Me, on a night out?* "I'm not much of a drinker, Alice."

I didn't like crowds either. *She knows that.* I peered ahead at the black road. With no streetlights, I could see nothing beyond the tarmac surface with its white lines.

"Where are we?"

"We're just coming up to Restingham."

Alice steered the car carefully around a bend. "If you look over there, you'll see the gas terminal, all lit up. I used to think it

magical when my father drove me back on Sunday nights after I stayed the weekend with him.”

I couldn't see anything at first. But the name rang a bell. *Restingham*. Where had I heard it before?

A door slamming shut inside me.

“What's your village called?” The air around my lips was cold – preposterous that I hadn't asked already, I could see that now.

“It's called Pottersea. Oh yeah, I once told you it was Weepot, didn't I? A joke me and my brother made up when Mum was toilet-training my sister – get it? We'd be in the car, little Sis with her legs crossed and my brother and me chanting, *hurry back home to Weepot*.” Typical Alice. She can't ever have told me the actual name. I would never have agreed... oh no...

My muscles were tingling. My jaw becoming numb. No.

I need to tell Alice something. Something very important.

I can't go back to this place.



“MARIA, MARIA...” ALICE'S voice filtered through to me. “We're here. Are you ok? I think you just had one of your...you know.”

I flexed my fingers. Alice leaned over me. “Don't worry, we're here now. Let's go inside and get you a drink. I'll carry your bag in for you. Can you move properly yet?”

No, I wanted to shout. *I can't go in there. I can't go into that house*. But my voice was no more than a croak. She handed me a bottle of water. I took a sip, not knowing how to ask her to take me straight home.

Perhaps his family had left a long time ago. Somebody else lived at Blackberry House now. But her name carried the answer. Alice. I had a fleeting mental image of a golden-haired child.

What have I done? How have I ended up back where I started?

All those years of careful work.

Alice came around to my side of the car, opened the passenger door and extended a hand. She obviously didn't remember we had met once before, decades ago. If she had, she wouldn't have worked in my theatre company. Would have avoided me like the plague.

"Alice, I..."

The neatly packaged boxes in my memory had been rattled, their contents shaken. I took a deep breath.

Get a grip, Maria.

"Out you get. You'll feel better once we're out of the car and inside. There'll be a fire in the kitchen. Cal will offer you a whiskey."

With one hand clutching the back of the seat I managed to swing my feet outwards, but the movement was too sudden; I vomited onto the gravel. With her previous knowledge of my illness, Alice had already stepped out of the way, anticipating what would happen. Then she moved forward again and grasped my arm.

"Come on. Step around it carefully." It was only mucus anyway. I'd barely eaten for two days. With deft movements, Alice reached into the back seat for my holdall and kicked both the front and back doors shut, still holding onto me with one hand.

A cold wind buffeted us as she propelled me to the front door of her home, a three storey white house with the windows of the top floor set back from the rest of the façade. Just as we stepped into the stone-flagged porch, a woman pulled open the heavy wooden door.

"Alice!" Her mother's greedy hands snatched the girl and enveloped her in a hug.

"Mum!" Alice reproved, pulling away at last. "We need to get Maria inside, she's not very well."

"Oh, I *am* sorry, hello!"

Lisa. She beckoned us through the hallway and into her huge kitchen. Lamps set into the walls cast a homely glow. The long table in the centre of the room sat on red floor tiles which looked as if they'd been polished. I saw that Lisa, always full-figured, had thickened around the waist. She'd be nearly fifty-seven, my stirred brain calculated. *I would have been, too, if...* I pressed a hand against my mouth at the sight of the quarry tiles. This kitchen had played such a significant part in my story.

"There's a cloakroom to your right, if you need to freshen up." Lisa had hardly looked at me. "Can I get you a drink?"

It used to be called the downstairs toilet. I took unsteady breaths. Lisa stared at me.

"Sorry, you look familiar." She took a few steps backwards, turning my name over in her mouth. Her icy distrust blew through my clothes. "Maria Child. Have we met before?"

If Alice hadn't been there I would have explained, but I didn't want to awaken bad memories. The colour drained from Lisa's face. Quite clearly she shared my concern for her daughter and hid her shock well.

"What can I get you?" Her voice was like water cracking ice.

Alice didn't notice, bending to stroke a tortoiseshell cat. "Get her a whisky, Mum. And one for me as well, please. Look, Maria, isn't this woodstove cosy? We had it installed after Christmas last year. Well, I mean the year before." She laughed. "I keep forgetting last week was technically last year. Anyway, come and sit down by the stove." She took my arm and pulled me with her to the other end of the kitchen to a sofa, strategically placed to catch the immediate warmth from the wood-burning stove.

Lisa had her back to us, but I could sense the trembling in her long cotton skirt. A girl with dyed black hair thumped down the open, antique-carpeted staircase behind us. The girl scanned me

with green eyes, causing my empty stomach to lurch. *His* daughter, his other daughter.

“Who’s that?” the girl muttered to her mother at the counter.

“Don’t be rude, Angel,” Alice jumped up and pulled her unwilling sister into a hug. “Maria,” she said. “This is my delightfully named sister.”

Alice seemed pleased to be home. *It would have been so much better for her to have arrived without me.* Angel barely glanced my way. “How’s your boyfriend?” she asked her sister.

A smile warmed my protégé’s face. She’d spent Christmas in Spain. Angel rolled her eyes, went over to a different counter and opened a wooden bread bin. She cut herself a hunk of bread which, once she’d spread it with butter she carried in two hands back up the stairs. There was something animal-like about her. Above us a door slammed and the footsteps continued upwards. *The attic*, I thought. *She has her room in the attic.*

Lisa handed Alice and me our whiskies. She stood uncertainly for a moment, and then perched on the arm of a chair. She met my eyes briefly. The antique sofa I sat on had once nestled under the stairs, the new woodstove had replaced the old Aga and in place of the Aga a black metal cooker sat to one side of the alcove. Lisa saw me looking.

“What do you think?”

There was no warmth in her tone. She looked as sick as I felt. We were two restless animals trapped in a cage.

“It’s lovely.” I pushed my trembling hands between my knees, wishing I could make myself disappear. Alice shifted uncomfortably.

“Do you two know each other?”

“From a long time ago; it doesn’t matter now.” Lisa made an effort to smile. “Can I get you another whisky?”

I'd downed the first one too quickly. I declined with a shake of my head. Lisa swallowed hard. "So *you* wrote the play that gave Alice her big break."

A flat statement. But she followed it with a loaded question. "Is it autobiographical?"

Alice rested her hand on my shoulder before I could answer. She had been in the office with me at work when I learned that my daughter had, for the second time, rejected my request for contact. Her empathy in that circumstance was what had led to her become one of my few friends.

"Leave it, Mum," she prompted softly. "Maria's had a rough time. And she's not been well."

"Your stepfather will be home shortly."

Lisa pricked out each word, hung lights around it so I couldn't fail to notice what she was saying. It was me she looked at with her piercing blue eyes. Neither of us knew what to do. I couldn't be there when Cal Wilde arrived home. I started to rise shakily from my seat, feeling sick.

"Is there a B&B I could stay at near here?"

Alice's mouth dropped open. She looked at me, and then at Lisa with confusion in her eyes. Grabbing my wrist, none too gently, she pulled me back down into the embroidered sofa cushions.

"You're not going to a B&B, Maria, of course you're not. What are you thinking of? You're here as our guest. Oh my God, why would you suggest such a thing?" Tears gathered in her big blue eyes, so like her mother's.

"Perhaps you could do with an early night, though," Lisa butted in. "Alice, why don't you show Maria to her room? She looks exhausted." She turned to me. "Alice could bring you up some food on a tray."

Yes. Let me go. I stood up again and felt my way around the back of the sofa, longing to escape up the stairs. Lisa defended herself against her daughter's cold stare. "You said Maria wasn't feeling well."

I gripped the polished dome on the banister post. It seemed the only solution. Keep me hidden away from Cal. Perhaps I'd be able to sneak out of there in the morning. I wondered if the bus I'd caught to the village so long ago still ran or whether recent public service cuts had rendered it extinct. I'd just have to hope for the best, stay out of Cal's way at any cost. My long-term illness threatened me with every shaking breath; every tingle and ache in my muscles. Alice raised her hands in a helpless gesture, glancing from one of us to the other as if we'd both gone mad.

"Well if you insist... But I thought we could have a lovely evening together. Mum, I thought Maria might be company. But you obviously..."

She looked about to cry, shoulders slumping as if all the air had gone out of her. Giving up the fight, she followed me to the staircase.

"It's the room at the far end of the landing."

Sliding the strap of my holdall more firmly onto her shoulder, she guided me in a U-turn around the top banister. She flicked a switch, bathing the landing in a soft glow. I noticed straight away the carpet up here was new, well: new to me. I experienced a flash of the compulsion I once had for this home, exploring it as a girl of seventeen.

"It used to be Angel's room," Alice said. "But she's moved into my old room, that's the attic. I still sleep up there when I'm home. It's divided into two."

Oh, I know the attic, alright.

She opened the bedroom door at the end of the corridor.

“Sorry, it’s still got one black wall, Angel was supposed to repaint it fully before she moved upstairs but she never got round to finishing it. It does have its own tiny bathroom, though.”

Three of the walls were painted a rich butterscotch, with darker patches where the black showed through. We both sat on the edge of the bed. It had a dark blue quilt cover, decorated with gold stars. Alice searched my eyes.

“That was pretty weird, you know, you and my mum. Where have you met before?”

I was silent, picking at the edges of my fingernails.

“Tell me.” She held my gaze steadily.

“It doesn’t matter, really,” I said, the same as her mother. Standing up I pushed at the curtain, nudging the top pane of the window open. Darkness glared in. I could smell the sea and hear the wind blowing through the trees at the side of the house. My stomach hurt. “It was a lifetime ago, but we’ll talk about it another time, ok? Please. I can’t face it now.” I sat down again, rubbed my eyes.

“You’re really not very well, are you? I’m sorry for pushing you. Hopefully you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Alice gave me an anxious glance and drew the curtains against the black night, but I tugged a narrow gap open again. I wanted to tilt my face and sniff the air like a dog. A long-ago memory came back to me of Jude, the collie that once lived in this house.

“I’ll bring you a sandwich and a cup of tea. Promise me you’ll try and eat something?”

Alice peered into my eyes again and I had a brief recollection of the child she was, probing me with questions. What if she discovered me?

“You’re very kind.”

“Are you sure you want to be up here on your own? It’s still early. You could come down and eat with us, if you change your mind.”

“No, honestly, I’d rather stay up here. I’m not very good at coping with new situations. I shouldn’t have come...”

I rubbed the side of my face with one hand, pinched a corner of quilt with the other.

Let me go. “It’s so thoughtful of you to offer... but I’m really very tired.”

She stared a moment longer. Then she switched on a little bedside lamp, and moved to turn off the overhead light.

“There should be a clean towel in the bathroom if you want to have a shower or anything. Oh, and there’s a bookshelf over there if you’re looking for something to read, but not much variety, I’m afraid.”

She gave a small grin and I followed her glance. A row of Callum Wilde’s novels filled one whole shelf, his name writ large on each book spine. Nausea charged me again. Why had she never mentioned him? I wouldn’t have come here. She saw my face.

“Callum Wilde’s my step-dad. I guess you must have heard of him? He’s been on telly and stuff.” Now she looked down at her fingernails.

“You never said...”

“I hardly ever tell people. All the girls at school and University used to plague me for his autograph, you know he was on the English curriculum? I happen to have a father of my own and I felt defensive for him. When I went to London it was a new start. I decided to be known just for myself.”

Twenty years of defences crumbled like chalk. *Maybe this was all meant to happen.* Alice didn’t seem to notice me shivering.

“We’ll go for a bracing walk on the beach in the morning. It’ll do you the world of good. I’m sure Mum will be friendlier towards

you tomorrow. I think she had a shock, seeing someone from her past. She's a bit isolated out here, you see."

The headlights of a car swung slices of light around the walls of the room and outside, tires crunched on gravel. A car horn tooted, the engine went dead. Cold washed through the inside of my body. I wanted to hide under the covers.

"That'll be Cal." Alice brightened. "I'd better go down and say hello. You can meet him in the morning. If you're in the shower when I get back up, I'll just leave your sandwich on the desk over there. Try and get a good night's sleep."

I gazed wistfully at the closed door. Unless I avoided Cal in the morning, it was possible that this moment signified the end of my four-and-a-half year friendship with Alice.