

BONE BY BONE

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LAURA

It sounded as if someone was trying to open the front door. *Matt*, she thought; he must have forgotten his keys. She frowned. That was something she was likely to do, not him. And then she remembered. It couldn't be Matt, it wasn't his weekend to look after Autumn. She rolled over and looked at her bedside clock. It was 4 a.m. The door shook in its frame again.

She rose, wide awake now, and flung on her dressing gown. Although her room was at the top of the house, she always slept with her bedroom door open so that she could hear if Autumn needed her in the night. Who could it be at this time? The house was old – at least Edwardian – and the floorboards seemed to wince under her weight even though she tried to walk quietly down them so she wouldn't wake Autumn and Vanessa.

She hated how vulnerable she felt, a single woman in her early thirties with a young child and her mother asleep in the house. There was nothing secure about their front door – it opened straight from the hall onto the street; there was no spy hole and no chain on the inside. Like everything else in the house, it needed replacing. Now she'd reached the door, she could feel the draught stealing around the warped edges.

'Who's there?' she said, but quietly, so that she wouldn't disturb her family.

There was no answer. She looked through the narrow hall window but all she could see was her own reflection, sharp and

bright, in her white dressing gown. She rested her forehead against the glass and cupped her hands around her eyes but she couldn't make out anyone on the street and her view was obscured by the branches of the fig tree she'd planted in a pot and placed right in front of this sliver of a window. In any case, the angle was wrong to see who it was if he was standing right by the front door. She assumed it was a he. It always was, wasn't it? She moved away, in case he could see her reflection, and stood directly in front of the door, listening for breathing, for the scrape of shoes against the pavement. Nothing.

She turned the key in the lock and opened the door a fraction, and then pulled it wide open. A blast of damp, icy air hit her. There was no one there. She leant out to look further into Wolferton Place. The trees in the small park opposite tossed in the wind, the branches of the old pines creaking, and the rain came in hard gusts. Her hair was instantly whipped into a tangle. The short cul-de-sac they lived on was deserted.

She closed the door softly and locked it. For a moment she stood there. Had she imagined the noise? Or had it been the wind? Their house in London had been modern and she wasn't used to the sounds this one made, the way the wind moaned around the chimney and the odd groans and sighs and hisses as air sifted through the gap in the sash windows. Now that the adrenaline was starting to leave her, she became acutely aware of how cold her feet were. The thought of her bed, still vaguely warm, was appealing. She crept back up the stairs, hoping she hadn't woken Vanessa or Autumn. She assumed Vanessa would go for a run if she was already awake. Her mother had no patience with lying in. Laura, on the other hand, felt drained.

She pushed open the door to Autumn's bedroom and peered inside. After a moment her vision adjusted to the gloom. She was startled to see two large eyes staring at her, gleaming in the dark.

Autumn was sitting up in bed, pale and still. She was wearing her white pyjamas, the ones with the rose pattern, the flowers now faded.

‘Autumn? Are you awake?’

Laura went over and sat on her bed. She folded her arms around her daughter, feeling the child’s thin arms and ribs, the chill of her limbs. She must have woken ages ago.

She’d been worried about Autumn for weeks – almost since the start of term. Her daughter had been miserable and not like her usual sunny, quirky self at all. At first, Laura thought she was missing her dad and finding it difficult to settle into a new school – Autumn had never had to change schools until this summer – but her daughter’s mood had only worsened over the past few weeks.

‘What is it, love? Did I wake you?’

Autumn shook her head.

‘Is there something bothering you?’

Her daughter’s shoulders shook and she felt hot tears drop onto her collar bone. She stroked her hair and hugged her.

‘What’s happened? You can tell me, sweetheart.’ She tried to peel her away – Autumn’s face was pressed tightly against her neck – and wiped her tears with a crumpled tissue from her dressing gown pocket.

Autumn sniffed. ‘It’s a boy. He’s been saying mean things to me.’ She dissolved into tears.

‘A boy in your class?’

Autumn shook her head. ‘He’s in the year above. He calls me names.’

An older boy in the final year of primary school: it somehow made it worse, a child of that age preying on her daughter at a time when children were still supposed to behave like children.

‘Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry. How long has this been going on for?’

'A bit after I started school.'

'You mean, in September?'

Autumn nodded and blew her nose loudly.

'But that's ages ago, Autumn. Why didn't you say anything?'

'I didn't want you to worry. I thought he'd stop.'

She squeezed Autumn's shoulders. 'And has he done anything else to you? Apart from calling you names?'

Autumn dropped her head. She hiccupped as she tried to speak. 'Slugs,' she wailed and started to cry again.

It was hard to tell what she was saying, but Laura finally got it out of her. Autumn had opened her drawer in class and it had been full of the creatures, packed on top of a layer of rotten apples. Laura thought of those writhing, slimy bodies, the malice it would have taken to collect them all and press them onto her child's books.

'Try and get a little bit of sleep before we have to leave for school.'

Autumn reluctantly lay down and closed her eyes.

'I'm going to talk to your teacher this morning,' Laura said. Her feet were now really cold and she felt tired. She shunted Autumn over and slid into her narrow single bed alongside her. 'It's not acceptable, what that boy is doing. What's his name again? Lenny?'

'Levi,' muttered Autumn, as if the word left a bad taste in her mouth.

Autumn rolled onto her side, curling up and snuggling into the duvet. The child's face relaxed and her breathing slowed. Laura's feet started to tingle. The heating clicked and rumbled into life, the radiators gurgling as the water within them slowly warmed. It was still cold though. Laura knew she should get up but it was so rare to be able to watch her daughter fall asleep.

It felt as if hardly any time had passed since Autumn had been a baby and yet here she was, looking down at a nine year old whose long, thick, light-brown hair was spread across her pillow. When Autumn was born, it was as if she recognized her, as if she'd always

known that it would be her, this little person who had come to live with her and reside permanently in her heart. It was a love unlike any other: fierce and powerful. It was a shock to Laura, who had never felt anything so all-consuming in her life.

She couldn't bear the idea that Autumn was being teased.

'There is nothing I would not do for you,' she whispered to her daughter in the darkness as she stroked her hair one last time.

They'd moved from London to Bristol late that summer, once the divorce had been finalized and their house sold. Laura had chosen to live in Montpelier because the school was so good: Ashley Grove Junior had excellent Ofsted grades, the teachers seemed nice and they could walk there. Compared to Autumn's school in Hammersmith, it was calmer and quieter – there were only two classes in each year.

When Autumn had first started at Ashley Grove in September, Laura had been as nervous as her daughter. She'd been worried about Autumn – if she'd make new friends, if she'd fit in – as well as for herself – would the other mothers like her? It had felt, as she'd walked to school that morning, her mouth dry and her stomach churning, as if it were her first day too. Autumn had gone to one school all her life and Laura – probably because of her peripatetic childhood, being shuttled between Namibia and London when her parents were working overseas – hated change.

School started at 9 a.m., but the pupils were expected to arrive five minutes early, so there were normally a lot of children and their parents milling around in the playground beforehand. For the first couple of days, a few of the other mothers openly stared at her and Autumn but no one spoke to them. It wasn't until the third day that, to Laura's eternal gratitude, Rebecca came across to

talk to her. It didn't take long for Rebecca's friends – Amy, Lily and Rani – to follow. Rebecca was an alpha mother and being accepted by her had made Laura's life a lot easier. It didn't stop Laura feeling lonely and isolated though. Her own friends were in London but so far none of them – not even her best friend, Lucy – had had time to visit. She couldn't remember a period in her life when she hadn't been surrounded by a network of people: she'd stayed in touch with all the mothers and their children from her NCT group, and then there were the odd assortment of gardeners, whom she'd seen once a week at her allotment and often in the pub later, as well as the friends she'd made on her horticultural course. Still, she thought, it was just a matter of time. They hadn't been here for long and it was absolutely the right decision to move to Bristol and make a fresh start.

Today Laura looked around for Rebecca's black Range Rover and her two blonde, beautifully dressed little girls, Poppy and Tilly – Tilly was in Autumn's class – but there was no sign of them. They were still a couple of minutes early, though.

As they were crossing the yard, Autumn moved closer to Laura so that she was pressed against her side.

'He's there,' she said in a small voice. 'Look.'

She pointed to a group of boys who were lounging around the climbing frame. A couple of them were hanging from the bars.

'Which one?' asked Laura.

'By the swing,' Autumn said, and half turned towards her mother so that she could no longer see the gang.

Laura didn't know what she'd expected: a small podgy boy with mean eyes, if she'd been pushed to describe the image in her mind; a kid on free school meals and benefits with a tattooed father and his shirt tails hanging out. But not this boy.

'He's in the year above you?' She couldn't stop herself from saying it.

‘Don’t stare!’ said Autumn, her cheeks colouring.

‘Sorry.’

She started walking again and Autumn continued leaning against her, keeping time with her steps, her face resolutely turned away.

So that was Levi. She could hardly believe it. The most obvious thing about him was that he was beautiful. Stunningly good-looking, in fact. He was tall, at least as tall as Laura. He appeared older than ten, although she guessed he could be eleven already. And then there was the fact that he was black. Not dark or blue-black though, but a warm, golden-brown. His hair was in corn rows, ending just below his collar and his large, dark eyes were fringed with thick eyelashes. He had an aquiline nose and bow-shaped lips. He looked neat in his white shirt, blazer and black trousers. The uniform was quite relaxed at Ashley Grove but he’d chosen to wear the most formal clothes he could and they were spotless. Propped casually against the metal post of the swing, coolly regarding the antics of the other boys, he seemed older, wiser, superior. Laura found it hard to believe he’d even noticed Autumn. Levi looked like a teenager; you could see in his face the young man he would become. In comparison, Autumn looked like a child with her round cheeks and bony knees, her gap-toothed smile and her plaits.

‘Where are his parents?’ asked Laura, looking around the yard.

‘I don’t know. I’ve only seen him walking to school by himself,’ mumbled Autumn, stepping away from her.

Laura felt the sudden chill where Autumn’s warm body had been. Unable to help herself, she glanced over at Levi again. To her surprise he was staring directly at her, as if he were calmly appraising her. She ducked her head and hurried after Autumn.

She took a deep breath, walked into the school and knocked on the open door of the Year 4 classroom. Autumn trailed unhappily behind her.

Autumn's class teacher, Mrs Ellen Sibson, was tall, in her late fifties, with an angry rash across her chin and severely parted hair streaked with grey and dotted with a few flakes of dandruff. She wore an ankle-length pale-blue cord skirt and a long-sleeved top and cardigan in a matching colour. A necklace made of round green plastic beads hung across her bosom and rested on her stomach. Laura thought she was intimidating, not like the jovial George Wu, who'd taken Autumn's class last year in London.

Laura found any kind of confrontation difficult and had been rehearsing what to say to Mrs Sibson all the way to school, so that their walk had been in near silence. She realized, with a fretful pang, that she hadn't even tried to reassure Autumn.

'Could I just have a quick word?' she asked Mrs Sibson, who frowned and then attempted a smile.

Laura immediately felt at a disadvantage. Mrs Sibson was readying herself for her class and would hardly want to have an extended chat right now. But it was for Autumn's sake; she had to do it. She pushed the door shut and clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms.

'What can I do for you?' Mrs Sibson asked.

'It's about Autumn. I'm not sure she's settling in that well.' She gave Mrs Sibson a small smile, trying to look friendly.

'I think she's doing remarkably well, considering how difficult it must have been for her, moving here and transferring to a new school.'

'Well, it's more than that. More than simply starting at a new school.'

'She is quiet,' said Mrs Sibson, glancing at Autumn, 'but she's been working hard, and she's very gifted artistically. Our PE teacher is particularly impressed with her gymnastic ability.'

'I'm not worried about her school work,' said Laura.

'We all think Autumn has been doing better than we'd anticipated

by this stage in the term. But if you have any concerns, by all means come in when we have more time and we can discuss it further.'

'I am concerned, Mrs Sibson, that's why I'm here. Autumn is being bullied.'

'Bullied?'

'A boy – his name is Levi – is bullying Autumn. I'd like you to speak to him and make sure it stops. Yesterday—'

'The slugs,' interrupted Mrs Sibson. 'I'm sorry Autumn found it distressing but it was just a prank.'

A prank? Laura looked at her in disbelief.

Mrs Sibson glanced down at Autumn as she leant against one of the desks and scuffed the linoleum with her toe, staring intently at the floor. Her cheeks flushed scarlet and she closed her eyes, an old childhood trait she'd developed when she was a year old if anyone apart from Laura or Matt spoke to her. Mrs Sibson looked rather pointedly at the clock on the wall.

'I wouldn't call stuffing a child's drawer full of slugs a prank,' said Laura.

'I think it was a one-off,' said Mrs Sibson. 'I haven't noticed any of the children in this class teasing Autumn or playing tricks on her before this occurred. And I cancelled the children's Halloween treat because no one owned up.'

So as well as being bullied, her whole class would be annoyed with her, thought Laura.

'Autumn says Levi was responsible,' said Laura. 'He's been bullying her virtually since the start of term. She's only just told me now or I would have come to see you earlier.'

Ignoring the charge of bullying, Mrs Sibson said, 'Levi is in the year above.' She turned to Autumn for the first time and asked, 'How could he have done it?'

Autumn screwed her eyes closed even tighter and said nothing. Laura wanted to shout at Mrs Sibson to stop this child, this Levi,

whoever he was, from speaking to Autumn ever again.

‘It’s not up to Autumn to work out how Levi could have got into the classroom!’

Both she and Autumn still had on their winter coats and the room was hot. She felt uncomfortable, a minor tremor running through her torso because of the heat, the awkwardness of the situation.

Mrs Sibson said, ‘I appreciate you coming to me about this matter. We don’t tolerate bullying in this school. Every child here is taught a respectful attitude to others.’ She added, ‘We adhere to our stringent, anti-bullying policy, Mrs Baron-Cohen, so we do take your concerns seriously. I can’t say I’ve noticed Levi speaking to her. But I will take it up with Mr Bradley, Levi’s class teacher. The teachers are generally not outside during the lunch break, so I will also talk to the dinner staff who monitor the playground. I do wish I had more time to discuss this with you, but I have a class to teach. I’ll let you know what Mr Bradley says and we’ll keep an eye on Levi, particularly at break-times. Perhaps you could make an appointment for next week,’ she said, looking at the clock again.

She’s saying she doesn’t believe Autumn, Laura thought.

Autumn opened her eyes and looked over at her, her face set in a hurt expression. She moved towards her daughter but, at that moment, the bell rang and Autumn’s classmates, who’d been pressed against the door, flooded noisily into the room. Autumn moved away so that Laura couldn’t kiss her goodbye in public and shrugged off her coat with her back to her. Laura forced herself not to help her. She stood in the doorway, jostled by the incoming children, and then made her way slowly out of the school.

As she walked across the playground, she saw Rebecca standing near the gate with a small group of parents. Rebecca, as usual, looked like a mother in a catalogue. She had long, wavy chestnut hair and was wearing white jeans and knee-length dark-brown

boots, a grey cashmere coat and had an elegant scarf wrapped around her neck.

How can she wear white jeans in winter? Laura wondered.

She was talking to Amy, a petite woman who was half Vietnamese and was also always immaculate. She wore retro-chic dresses with cinched-in waists, emphasizing her tiny frame and her flat stomach, in spite of having had three children. Laura didn't recognize the other two mothers or the man they were with.

Rebecca waved her over. 'Now here's someone you really must meet. He's an absolute genius at sorting out computers – he does the IT at Ashley Grove and doesn't charge us a penny.' She flapped her hand between the two of them. 'Aaron Jablonski. Laura Baron-Cohen.'

If Laura had been asked, she might have come up with some nebulous image of what a man who worked in IT might look like: pot-bellied, pale, sandy-haired with poor dress sense, perhaps. Nothing like this man. He was tall, handsome, with a straight jaw and chiselled features. He exuded masculinity in an understated kind of way, like a woodsman, a log-cutter, someone from the forests of North America. Beneath his coat he was wearing a white shirt and black waistcoat with jeans. A messenger bag was slung over his chest and the hand that held the strap had a silver charm on a woven leather strap around the wrist; no wedding ring.

'Aaron,' he said and held out his hand. His voice was deep.

Laura felt as if she was reaching out to grasp his hand in slow motion. He squeezed her hand firmly. She realized she'd been staring and blushed and stepped back.

'Are you new to the area?'

She nodded. 'We've just moved here. My daughter started school this term.'

'I've just dropped my son off. I hardly ever have the chance. It's my one small pleasure in life. But he's at that age where he's

embarrassed to be seen with his dad so when we get within a few hundred metres of the school, he hares off so I won't – God forbid – try and hug him in front of his mates.' He smiled and Laura could see the other mothers leaning in, imperceptibly drawing nearer, hanging on his every word.

'Oh, my daughter's the same. She's already told me I'm not allowed to hold her hand or kiss her in front of any of her school friends.'

'A bit different from when we were growing up,' he said, looking at her as if the two of them existed in some private universe that no one else had access to. 'Our parents never bothered walking us and to and from school. Am I right?'

Laura nodded, feeling her cheeks begin to glow again.

He straightened and looked around at the small group breathlessly waiting for his attention. There were so few fathers at the school gates it was no wonder Aaron was attracting so much attention, she thought, and then, of course, he was ridiculously handsome...

'Ladies, I must dash. Laura, if I may...?' He took a small leather wallet from his pocket. 'My card. Just in case. I do home visits.'

'Oh, he's a godsend,' said Rebecca, 'the amount of times Aaron has come over at a moment's notice to fix my Mac.'

Laura took the card, still faintly warm from where it had been pressed against his thigh. The mothers watched Aaron stride away, his long, dark coat flaring behind him.

'Is everything okay?' asked Rebecca, turning to her. 'I saw you talking to Mrs Sibson.'

Laura hesitated. She was still angry at being dismissed so summarily by the teacher, but she forced herself not to rant about it. She didn't want to upset the fragile balance of her relationship with Rebecca.

'Autumn is finding it a little difficult to settle in,' she said.

Rebecca pursed her lips sympathetically and said, 'That's such a

shame. The girls in her class are so sweet, though, I'm sure it won't take long for her to make friends. Why don't you come over for afternoon tea tomorrow? Poppy and Tilly would love a play date with Autumn, and we can have a gossip.'

Laura nodded gratefully and felt a surge of pleasure in spite of the circumstances. She'd gone for coffee with Rebecca and her coteries of mothers, but she'd never been to her house. She knew that Rebecca and the other women sometimes met for drinks, or for an afternoon in the park at the weekend, the one with a café that apparently sold amazing coffee, hand-roasted in Bristol, and gluten- and sugar-free cakes and cookies. Laura had not been invited so far and was not certain enough of Rebecca to ask if she could join them. Tilly had invited several girls, including Autumn, for a sleepover, but it wasn't for another week and she knew Autumn would love the chance to have Tilly to herself for a short while.

'That would be wonderful, thank you.'

She glanced down at herself. Next to Rebecca and Amy she looked dowdy and badly dressed. She was wearing her work clothes: mud-stained army trousers, cracked hiking boots, an ill-fitting fleece and a flannel shirt. Her hair was scraped back from her unmade-up face.

Rebecca smiled and kissed her on the cheek. 'Three? At my house? I'm sure I'll see you both before then.' She gave a little wave as if dismissing her, and then bent to speak to Amy.

Laura crossed the road and headed down Briar Lane. That had gone badly, she thought. Autumn was upset and embarrassed, Mrs Sibson hadn't taken her seriously and she hadn't managed to put a stop to the bullying. She didn't even know who Levi's parents were – perhaps if Mrs Sibson did nothing about it, she could speak to them? She shivered at the thought of confronting them; she knew they'd be horribly defensive and angry. And, on top of that, she was going to be late for work. She half jogged, annoyed with herself for becoming so unfit.

The lane, which ran directly opposite the school behind the terrace of houses that lined the main road, led to a miniature nature reserve created between the intersection of three railway tracks. You reached Narrowways nature reserve by crossing a thin bridge suspended over the lines. It had high corrugated metal barriers on either side that were scrawled with neon-bright graffiti, and it was encased by wire bars, so that the whole bridge was like a cage, preventing anyone from accidentally falling onto the train line.

The path from the bridge skirted a scrubby meadow that had been carpeted with wild flowers when she'd put the offer in on the new house in May; the sight had lifted her spirits, but it was now pock-marked with the burnt embers of fires and scattered with beer cans and crisp packets. It led to a peak, the highest point in the area with a startling view over the red-brick terraces of Easton and St Werburghs, and beyond to green fields and hedgerows in the distance. In spite of the upheaval coming here, Laura loved the fact that from her neighbourhood you could see the edge of the city. It was unfeasible to be near the centre of London and see where that vast metropolis neatly, clearly and sharply, ended. It was one of the reasons why, after she and Matt had split up, she'd wanted to move to Bristol. Now Autumn could grow up somewhere with fresh air and countryside nearby, but still have all the benefits a city could offer.

On one side of the meadow was a cliff of exposed red earth and gritty stone with stunted ash trees clinging to it that led down to a railway track. The path divided and you could either walk up and over the peak or around it and then down through a small wood. Laura, because she was in a hurry, chose the shorter route.

Her mobile rang. She looked at the screen and saw it was Matt.

'Hello,' she said, in the new, chirpy voice she'd taken to using when he called.

'Laura. Just checking you haven't forgotten about Nepal.'

Nepal? For a moment she was confused and then she remembered.

‘No, no, of course not, it’s today, isn’t it?’

There was a pause. She could tell he knew she’d forgotten and was weighing up whether to use it as an opportunity to have another dig at her.

‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘I’m at the airport now. I still want to speak to Autumn tomorrow night. I’ll Skype at the usual time, okay?’

‘Yes, that’s fine,’ she said.

‘I’ve emailed you a copy of my schedule. I’ll try and Skype the following Saturday as normal too – we should be back in a village that has Internet access by then. The satellite number is on the schedule if there’s an emergency. With Autumn,’ he added, in case she was not absolutely clear that any emergencies concerning her were no longer his responsibility.

Like her parents, Matt had trained as an anthropologist and originally specialized in making films about tribal peoples for the BBC and *National Geographic*. As audiences had grown accustomed to more light-weight entertainment, he’d turned his skills towards the reality-TV market. He was currently making a series featuring athletes competing against tribes in a traditional rite, such as a wrestling match or canoe race. This was his first trip for the series and he was heading to the flanks of the Himalayas to film an endurance race between a Buddhist tribe and a team of five female athletes.

Typical of Matt, she thought, to surround himself with toned, beautiful and sporty women in the guise of work. She wondered what Leah, his new girlfriend, felt about the trip and then realized that, since Leah was his researcher, she’d probably be with him.

Nothing to do with me, she reminded herself, taking a deep breath to steady herself. That was the trouble with being divorced and having a child – you could never truly get away from it all. Moving to Bristol had been her way of putting as much distance

as possible between her, Matt and Leah. And even though Bristol wasn't that far from London, Matt was still annoyed with her, as if she had done it deliberately so that he couldn't see Autumn as much as he'd like to.

She wondered whether to tell Matt about Autumn being bullied and then decided not to. She could handle it by herself.

'Talk to you on Saturday,' she said breezily and hung up.

The wood was really an orchard that had gone wild, and Laura had been delighted to find apple, pear and plum trees. The plums had all been picked, but there were a few apples left, tight and shiny in the ragged branches. From the wood there was a path that led into the allotments, which bordered the lane at the bottom of their house. It meant that their day started off with an almost rural feel.

Fortunately, Bronze Beech, the landscaping company Laura was working for, was currently redesigning a garden in Montpelier, on the other side of the nature reserve, so Laura could walk to it after dropping Autumn off without being too late for work. Her boss, Barney McLoughlin, was a rugged, burly man with wind-burnt cheeks and an Oxbridge accent. He wore a singular combination of tweed jackets with elbow patches and combat trousers for work.

As well as Laura, Barney employed Ted, who had dreadlocks so bleached they were white – he even bleached his eyebrows. Throughout the early weeks of autumn Ted had taken his T-shirt off most days, exposing badly drawn Maori tattoos from an old trip to New Zealand, and beer-blurred muscles. Laura thought he was a particularly toxic combination of misogyny and sycophancy. Her agreed hours were 9.30 a.m. to 3 p.m. but Barney and, more often, Ted, frequently made comments about her arriving late and leaving early; today Barney would be furious because she actually was going to be late. She sighed. She was going to have to put Autumn in an after-school club so she could work for longer.