Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Time to Say Goodbye

Written by S. D. Robertson

Published by AVON

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
The News Building
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2016

1

Copyright © S. D. Robertson 2016

S. D. Robertson asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-00-810067-4

Set in Sabon by Born Group using Atomik ePublisher from Easypress

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

Acknowledgements

Various people have played a role in bringing this book to life. It's been a long road to publication and I wouldn't have made it without their help.

Thank you first and foremost to my family for believing in me without question. Thanks for reading the earliest of drafts, being there for all my queries and anxieties, and allowing me the freedom to achieve my dream. Claudia, Kirsten, Mum, Dad and Lindsay, you're all amazing.

Next I must thank my literary agent, Pat Lomax. You've been brilliant at guiding me through this process from start to finish. You believed in the book right away. You saw what others didn't and have been fighting my corner ever since. All your hard work and support is greatly appreciated.

Thank you to the wonderful team at Avon/HarperCollins – particularly Lydia Vassar-Smith, Katy Loftus, Eleanor Dryden and Kate Ellis – who made the editing process a pleasure. I doubt there's a friendlier place to learn the ropes of being a published author.

Before I had an agent or publisher, a few friends were kind enough to read and give feedback on early drafts of this novel. I'm grateful Mervyn Kay, Tim Smith and Nick Coligan. You're all stars.

I must also mention Maurice Cohen, Rosie Kaye and Hillary Shaw. Your help was invaluable.

And lastly, thanks to you, the reader. You're the reason I write.

For Claudia and Kirsten

CHAPTER 1

2.36 P.M., THURSDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2016

Dying wasn't on the to-do list I'd drafted earlier that afternoon. No doubt the 4x4 driver hadn't planned on killing a cyclist either. But that's what happened. Her giant black car swerved into my path. It hit me head on. There was no time to react. Just an awful screeching sound, a brief sensation of flying and a sudden agonizing pain. Then I blacked out.

Next thing I knew, I was standing on the pavement watching two paramedics fight to revive my battered, bloody body. I desperately willed them to succeed, even moving closer in the hope I could jump back into my skin at the right moment, but it was futile. I was pronounced dead minutes later.

But I'm still here, I told myself. What does that make me? And then my thoughts turned to Ella. What would happen to her if I was dead? She'd be all alone, abandoned

by both of her parents: the very thing I'd sworn she'd never face.

'Wait! Don't give up,' I shouted at the paramedics. 'Don't stop! I'm still here. You've got to keep trying. You don't know what you're doing. Don't fucking give up on me! I'm not dead.'

I screamed my lungs out, begging and pleading with them to try to revive me again, but they couldn't hear me. I was invisible to them and, ironically, to the onlookers gathered at the police cordon – several waving camera phones – keen to catch a glimpse of the dead guy.

In desperation, I tried to grab one of the paramedics. But as my hand touched his right shoulder, I was hurled backwards by an invisible force. It left me sprawling on the tarmac. I was stunned but, oddly, not in any physical pain. I picked myself up and tried again with the man's colleague, only to find myself thrown to the floor again. What the hell was going on?

Then I saw the driver who'd killed me. She was chain-smoking menthol cigarettes under the watchful eye of a young bobby. 'It was an accident,' she told him in between drags. 'The sat nav. It fell on to the floor. By my feet. I was just trying to pick it up when – oh God, I can still see his face hitting my windscreen. What have I done? Is he going to be okay? Tell me he's going to make it.'

'Do I look okay?' I ask, standing in front of her, staring her in the face and willing her to see me. 'Does it seem like I'm going to make it? You've killed me. I'm dead. All because of a bloody sat nav. Look at me, for God's sake. I'm right here.'

She'd have looked glamorous without the vomit on her high-heeled shoes and in the ends of her straightened hair. She was deathly pale and shaking so much that I didn't have the heart to continue. She knew what she'd done.

'Why am I still here?' I yelled at the sky.

'Have you got the time?' one police officer asked another.

'Three o'clock.'

Shit. Home time. Ella's primary school was a good fifteen-minute walk away; instinct kicked in and I started to run.

The last few stragglers were leaving the school gates by the time I arrived. The knock-on effect of my accident was already evident in the snake of cars – squashed noses and curious eyes at their rear windows – that filled one side of the suburban street. I rushed to the back of the building, where Ella would be waiting, and saw her standing there alone, a forlorn look on her face. 'Over here, darling!' I shouted, waving as I ran across the empty yard. 'It's okay. I'm here now.'

I don't know what I was thinking. Why would she see me when no one else had? Watching my six-year-old daughter stare straight through me was quite the reality check.

'Ella, Daddy's here,' I said for the umpteenth time, kneeling in front of her so we were face to face, but not daring to touch her after what had happened with the paramedics. Her lips were chapped and her right hand, which was clenching her Hello Kitty lunchbox, was covered in red felt-tip ink. I gasped as I realized I wouldn't be able

to remind her to use her lip balm or to help her 'scrub those mucky paws'. Oblivious to my presence, she stared expectantly towards the far end of the playground.

Mrs Afzal emerged from the open door behind Ella. 'Is he still not here, love? You'd better get inside now.'

'He'll be here in a minute,' Ella told her teacher. 'His watch might need a new battery again.'

'Come on. We'll get the office to give him a call.'

Panic knifed through me as I pictured my mobile ringing in the back of the ambulance while they drove away my dead body. I imagined one of the paramedics, my blood still splattered across his green shirt, rooting through my pockets to find it. How long before Ella discovered what had happened?

I was about to follow them inside when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Startled, I spun around.

'Hello, William. Sorry to sneak up on you like that. I, um, I'm Lizzie.'

A stumpy woman in a dowdy grey skirt suit and beige mac was standing before me, one arm outstretched for a handshake. Gingerly, fearing another run-in with the tarmac, I reached out towards her podgy hand. It felt cool despite the unseasonal late September sunshine.

'How do you know my name?' I asked. 'And how come I can touch you?'

'I was sent to meet you when you died. You've probably got a few questions.'

'What are you: some kind of angel? Pull the other one.'

Lizzie, who appeared to be in her late twenties, ran a hand through her wavy black hair, which was tied in a

loose ponytail. Her nose twitched in a way that reminded me of a rabbit.

'Um, no. I'm not an angel. We're on the same team, but they're higher up the pecking order. Think of me as a guide. This can be a confusing time. I'm here to make your transition from life to death as smooth as possible. How are you doing so far?'

'Well, I'm dead. Apart from you, no one can see me. Not even my little girl, who's about to learn she's an orphan. How do you think I'm doing?'

'Right. Sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?'

'How about bringing me back to life and taking that bloody lunatic driver instead? It's her fault I'm here.'

She shook her head. 'That's not possible, I'm afraid. Anything else?'

'What about helping me to communicate with Ella? If I'm really a ghost, doesn't that mean people can see me in certain circumstances? I need her to know that I'm still here; that I haven't abandoned her.'

'We don't tend to use the G-word. It has too many negative connotations. We prefer the term "spirit".'

'Whatever. You're splitting hairs. Can I talk to Ella or not?'

'She can't see you. You said so yourself. That's not the way this works. The reason I'm here is to guide you across to the other side and show you the ropes.'

'What if I don't want to come?'

'There's nothing left for you here.'

'What about my little girl? She needs me.'

'She's not your responsibility any more, William. It's out of your control. You're a spirit now; what's waiting

for you on the other side is incredible beyond words.'

'You didn't answer my question. What if I don't want to come? Will you drag me kicking and screaming?'

'I won't take you anywhere you don't want to go.'

'So I can stay?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'It's your choice.'

'And if I do go with you? Can I change my mind and come back?'

'No. It's a one-way ticket.'

'How about the other way round? If I don't come with you now, can I come later?'

Lizzie hesitated for a moment before nodding her head. 'There's a grace period.'

'Now we're getting somewhere. How long?'

'That depends.' She looked up to the sky. 'It's a top-level decision. I'd have to get back to you.'

'Right. I'll get back to you too, then. How do I get hold of you?'

As the words left my mouth, I was distracted by the sound of two chattering teachers walking towards us. I turned for the briefest of moments to look at them and when I turned back Lizzie had vanished.

I looked from left to right in confusion. 'Hello? Are you there? Can you still hear me? You didn't answer my question. And why can't I touch anyone – except you?'

I paused, expecting her to reappear, but she didn't. 'Great,' I said. 'I guess I'm on my own.'

I'd abandoned my only daughter. I'd broken the promise I'd made to her countless times, usually as she was lying

in bed at night, asking about her mother, eyes intense and probing.

'Daddy, you'll never leave me, will you?'

'No, of course not, darling. I'm not going anywhere. I'll never leave you.'

'Promise?'

'Promise. From the bottom of my heart.'

Back inside the school it was obvious that they'd found something out. Ella was moved from the corridor outside the office back to her classroom, where Mrs Afzal kept her occupied doing some drawing. Her teacher was smiling the whole time, but I could see pity in her eyes. She told Ella there was a slight problem and she'd have to wait at school a little longer.

'When will my daddy get here?'

'I'm not sure how long you'll have to wait, Ella. But I'll stay with you until someone comes to pick you up.'

'He's never been this late before. Last time his watch battery broke he was only a bit late. I wasn't even the last one waiting.'

Mrs Afzal knelt down next to Ella. 'What's that you're drawing?'

'An ice cream. Look, that's the chocolate stick and I'm going to add some red sauce. Daddy said I could have one after tea today because it's summer in India.'

It was my mother who eventually arrived to pick Ella up. She put on a show of normality for her granddaughter's sake, but I could see the anguish in her eyes. She knew. Usually she'd have had a chinwag with Mrs Afzal

about her own days as a primary school teacher. Not today.

'Nana!' Ella said, running over to give her a big hug. 'I didn't know you were coming to pick me up. Daddy's really late.'

I saw Mum's face crumple as she held Ella tightly against her own short, slender frame. But she fought to hide her pain again when they parted.

'Hi, Mum,' I whispered, from as close as I could get to her without touching. 'I messed up. I'm so sorry. I'm going to need you to look after her for me.'

Mum drove Ella home and sat her down in the lounge. I couldn't believe what was about to happen. I watched as tears started to fall down her cheeks. It terrified me, but it was the only thing to do. Ella needed to know the truth.

'What's the matter, Nana? Why are you crying? What's happened? Is Daddy okay?'

'No, darling. I have to tell you some terrible news.'

'What is it? What's wrong? Has he hurt himself? Is he in hospital?'

Tears were flooding down Mum's face. I could hardly bear to watch. 'There was a terrible accident, my love. Daddy was really badly hurt and … I'm so sorry … he died.'

Ella was silent for a moment before asking: 'What do you mean? What kind of accident?'

'Daddy was riding his bicycle. He was, um. He was in a crash.'

'A crash? How? What hurted him?'

'It was a car.'

'Where is he now? Has he gone to the hospital?'

'No, darling. He died. He's not here any more. He's in Heaven. He's with your mummy.'

Ella stood up. 'He can't be. He's taking me to get an ice cream later. He's just a bit late. It's naughty to tell lies, Nana. Do you want to see my new hairband? I'll go and get it. It's in my bedroom.'

She ran out of the room and up the stairs, leaving Mum distraught.

'Go after her!' I cried.

But at that moment Mum's mobile phone started ringing. 'Hello? Oh, Tom, it's you. Thank goodness. Are you still with the police?'

I left Mum talking to Dad and went upstairs to Ella's bedroom, which she'd persuaded me to paint bright pink about a year ago. I couldn't see where she was at first; then I heard a rustling sound coming from inside the princess castle I'd given her the birthday before last. We had talked about taking the pink play tent down, as she hadn't used it for a while, but when I peered through the mesh window, there she was. She was hugging Kitten, her favourite soft toy, and staring at the floor.

I knelt down right by the window. 'I wish you could hear me, Ella. You're my world, my everything. I'm here for you and I'm not going anywhere.'

'I know you're not dead, Daddy,' she said, startling me.

'Ella?' I replied, reaching my arm into the tent to touch her – to make contact – only to find myself flying backwards through the air and slamming against the wall on the far side of the room. No pain again, but it was clear I wasn't able to touch anyone.

‘Please come home soon, so Nana can see that she’s wrong,’ she continued, oblivious to what had just happened. ‘You promised you’d never leave me and I know you meant it. Please come home, Daddy. I miss you.’