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Opening Extract from...

Rattle

Written by Fiona Cummins

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For JJ, who believed

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Stone Man Syndrome (Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva): A rare, debilitating disease that causes sufferers to grow a second skeleton which literally traps them in a prison of bone. The eyes, tongue, diaphragm and heart are characteristically spared. At present, there is no cure.

Tommy Rawhead: 'A bogeyman, typically imagined as having a head in the form of a skull, or one whose flesh has been stripped of its skin, invoked to frighten children. Freq. used in conjunction with Bloody-Bones.' – *Oxford English Dictionary*

PROLOGUE

On still nights, when the curve of a winter moon is smudged in the flow of the River Quaggy, the dead clamour for him.

He cocks his head and, through the whispering darkness, picks out the loosely formed sobs of the child.

The boy's mumbled distress pulls at him across the sweep of the city, and he fights the urge to leave at once. Even the passing of the years cannot quiet the shiver that swells through him as he contemplates a lifetime's work.

From every generation, a collection of its own. His father, his father's father, and the men who walked before them.

But now it is *his* time, his privilege and his duty.

He savours the way the moon seeps through the slats in the blinds at his father's house, and the wash of light on the bones.

Ribbons and sheets of ossified matter. Stalagmites and bridges. Twisted plates and bony nubs. A plaque engraved with the letter C.

The shadows in the house deepen. He stands alone in the hallway, and drinks in the glory of the skeleton in its glass case, mesmerized by its distortions, the incursion of

bone into thoracic cavity, the calcified trimmings decorating his spine.

A young boy trapped in a prison of stone.

For years he has been seeking this rarest of specimens, searching amongst the dead and the living. Always looking, always hoping.

And now, after all this time, he has found another one.

FRIDAY

1

3.21 p.m.

If Erdman Frith had chosen pizza instead of roast beef, his son might have been spared.

If Jakey Frith had been a little more ordinary, the bogeyman who stalked the shadows of his life would have been nothing more than a childhood memory, to be dusted off and laughed at on family occasions.

If Clara Foyle's parents had been a little less self-absorbed and a little more focused on their five-year-old daughter, her disappearance might never have happened at all.

As for Detective Sergeant Etta Fitzroy, if she hadn't been haunted by thoughts of what might have been, of what *she* might have been, both children would have tumbled from the blaze of newspaper headlines into the darkest reaches of infamy.

But none of them suspected anything of this on that wet November afternoon, just hours before their lives collided and cracked open to reveal the truth of them all.

Especially not Erdman Frith, who was dithering in the

chiller section; aisle three for pepperoni and a pension; aisle five and he might as well be as dead as the lump of sirloin he was lifting into his trolley.

No, Erdman Frith wasn't thinking about death at all. He was more concerned with what Lilith would say when she saw . . . dum . . . dum . . . dummmmm . . . Red Meat.

Erdman pictured her, lips pursed tighter than a gnat's arse.

'What about the saturated fat content, Erdman?'

'Doesn't red meat contribute to bowel cancer, Erdman?'

The gnat's arse would pucker.

'Or mad cow disease, Erdman. They claim they've eradicated it, but who's to say they're telling the truth?'

Did she honestly expect him to answer that?

Once upon a time he'd have teased the worry lines from her face, firing silly jokes at her until they were both laughing, and she would lean into him, fingers tangling his hair, breathing him in, her fears forgotten.

'Why do they call it PMS, Lilith?'

'I don't know, Erdman, why do they call it PMS?'

'Because mad cow disease is already taken.'

Bada bing.

But these days he couldn't even raise a smile.

These days, her eyes followed Jakey's every move, her fears not forgotten, but amplified a thousandfold by a cruel enemy that was reducing their son – and now their marriage – into paper butterflies, fragile and easily broken.

They told their boy, Lilith and Erdman, that he had a little problem with his bones. That was something of an understatement. Jakey's 'little problem' would end up killing him.

The medical team who delivered him had suspected it immediately, thanks to the telltale malformation of his big toes. Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva. Thirty-five letters. A letter, give or take, for each year Jakey was expected to live. The average life expectancy. Any more would be a bonus.

By chance, a nurse in the maternity unit had spent the previous six months working in an Australian hospital where a teenager had reported with strange bony growths and loss of movement. They'd injected painkilling drugs into her muscles, she'd explained, surgically removed the extra ribbons of bone, and all they had done was make it a million times worse. By the time she was diagnosed, she was practically a statue, barely able to move at all, except to speak. She could still speak. The nurse had told them that as if it was some kind of blessing.

Six years on, even the specialists were shocked at the speed of the progression of his illness. That Jakey's flare-ups were unusually severe for one so young. That his body was following the characteristic path of the disease, but already it had reached his arms much earlier than they'd anticipated. That a fall or bump could trigger a life-threatening episode.

To enjoy their time with their son.

Erdman's fingers grazed the cool, damp packaging in his trolley. He should put it back. Lilith would kill him and he didn't want to upset her, not really. He longed for the joyous freedom of their love, before it was tangled up in hospital appointments and medication. But he was weary of always doing what she told him to.

Anyhow, *he* hadn't got BSE or CJD, or whatever the hell it was, and he was pushing forty. If that metaphorical cowpat was heading his way it would have dumped on his life by

now, which, let's be honest, was already shitty enough. Even if the worst did happen he wouldn't notice the transition from middle-aged man to vegetable. A potato had more fun than he did.

Fuck it. Jakey loved roast dinners and he needed building up.

Had Erdman known that he was sealing his son's fate in that most glamorous of locations, Tesco on Lewisham Road, the whole family would have become vegetarian. But he didn't, and so he headed home, smug in the knowledge that as he had done the shopping, it was his prerogative to decide what they had for tea.

2

3.23 p.m.

'Ip dip doo. The cat's got the flu, the monkey's got the chicken pox so out go you.'

Poppy Smith was pointing straight at her, giggling through the gap in the top row of her teeth, but Clara Foyle wasn't smiling.

'Not playing,' said Clara, and turned her back on the small knot of children and their game of tag.

She marched off in the direction of the gates at the far end of the infant playground, her hands buried deep into her pockets. It was almost empty, just a few stragglers waiting for the older boys to finish an impromptu game of football. Poppy called after her, making lobster claws with her fingers, and everybody laughed, but Clara pretended not to hear. Poppy's mother was supposed to be looking after Clara, but she was gossiping with another mother, her back to the little girl, and didn't notice her wandering off while Poppy was too busy whispering with the others to see.

That was his first stroke of luck.