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opening extract from

Frozen Fire

written by

Tim Bowler

published by

Oxford University Press

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'I'm dying,' said the voice.

Dusty clutched the phone. She had no idea who this was. A boy about her age, by the sound of him—fifteen, sixteen, maybe a bit older.

'Is anyone there?' he muttered.

His voice was slurred and angry. She glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes to midnight. She'd answered the phone at once, thinking it would be Dad ringing to say he'd been held up by the snow but was on his way back. The last thing she needed was this boy.

'Is anyone there?' he said.

'Who are you?'

The only answer was a cough.

'And how did you get this number?' she said. 'We're ex-directory.'

Another cough but this time the boy answered.

'I just made up a number and dialled it.'

She frowned. This had to be a prank. Friday night, New Year's Day. Some boy messing around with his mates. If she listened hard enough, she'd probably catch the sound of them sniggering in the background. But all she heard was the laboured breathing of the boy at the other end of the line.

She thought of Dad out in Beckdale on his date. She'd been enjoying having the house to herself for the first time in weeks, especially after all the trouble it had taken her to get him to go, but now she wished he'd hurry back.

'Didn't you hear me?' mumbled the boy. 'I said I'm dying.'

She knew that wasn't true. If the boy was really in danger, he'd hardly make up a number and ring it. He'd dial 999.

'You need to ring the police,' she said.

'I don't want the police.'

'An ambulance, then.'

'I don't want an ambulance.'

'But you said you're dying.'

'I am dying.'

'Then you need to ring—'

'I don't need to ring anyone. I said I'm dying. I didn't say I wanted to live.'

There was a silence between them which she didn't like.

'I've taken an overdose,' he said.

She bit her lip, unsure what to believe and reluctant to be drawn any further into this boy's world. Maybe he was telling the truth, maybe he wasn't, but whatever his problem was, it was for other people to sort out.

'I can't help you,' she said.

'You can. I just want a friendly voice. Someone to talk to as I slip away.'

'You need the Samaritans, not me. I'll get you their number.'

'I don't need the Samaritans,' said the boy. 'I need you.'

This was getting a little creepy. All her instincts told her to put the phone down. But before she could do so, he spoke again.

'How old are you?'

'None of your business.'

'You sound about fifteen.'

She said nothing. His guess was spot on and probably a fluke but it was still disconcerting.

'What's your name?' he said.

'That's none of your business either.'

'Why won't you tell me?'

'Because it's none of your business.'

'My name's Josh.'

She squeezed the phone tight. Josh—of all the names to choose. The boy spoke again.

'I said my name's Josh.'

'No, it's not,' she said.

She prayed she was right. She didn't want this boy to be called Josh. She didn't want anyone to be called Josh. There was a silence, then the boy said, 'You're right. It's not. But you can call me Josh if you want to. I mean, just to give me a name.'

'I'm not interested in giving you a name.'

'Suit yourself.' The boy paused. 'What about you?'

'What about me?'

'Give me a name I can call you. Any name you like.'

Again her instincts screamed at her to put down the phone. This stuff about names made her feel vulnerable, especially all the talk about Josh. She started to wonder about this boy. He was a complete stranger to her, yet he had picked out the one name that mattered most to her. Maybe it was coincidence. Or maybe he knew who she was and where she lived and was watching the house right now.

She ran her eye over the lounge. It was the only room in the house with the light on at the moment and if he was watching from the lane, he'd almost

certainly be staring at this very window. She was glad that the curtains were drawn across.

But it didn't make her feel safer. Thorn Cottage was a lonely house all on its own. With the outskirts of Beckdale some miles to the right and nothing to the left save Stonewell Park and Kilbury Moor, and beyond that the lake and fells, there was little protection here.

'I'm not watching the window,' said the boy suddenly. 'I don't know who you are and I don't know where you live.'

She shivered. It didn't seem possible that he could speak the very fears that were running through her mind. But the next thing he said only deepened her unease.

'Daisy?'

She stiffened.

'What did you say?'

'Daisy. I'm trying to guess your name. It's something like Daisy.'

She swallowed hard and again found herself glancing towards the curtains.

'I told you,' said the boy. 'I'm not watching the window.'

She was scared now, really scared. This boy seemed to know everything she was doing and thinking. She tried to be rational. Maybe it wasn't so difficult for him. He must know a young girl would be frightened in a situation like this, must realize she'd be wondering where he was and probably glancing at the window. But the name Josh, and then . . . Daisy. It wasn't right but it was close.

'I'm not called Daisy,' she said slowly.

'I didn't think you were,' said the boy. 'But it's something like that, isn't it?'

She didn't answer.

'What about . . . Tomboy?' he said. 'Can I call you that? I know it's kind of weird but you sound like a bit of a tomboy.'

She gasped. Now it was serious. Only one person in the world had ever called her Tomboy. It was his own pet name for her, and too unusual to guess. This boy knew who she was—and much more.

'Where's Josh?' she said coldly.

'I don't know anyone called Josh.'

'Where is he? Tell me.'

'I don't know anyone called Josh.'

'You said the name Josh a moment ago.'

'I made it up. Like I made up your phone number. And the name Daisy.'

'And Tomboy.'

'Yes. Why? Has someone else called you that?'

She didn't answer, didn't want to answer. Suspicions were now racing through her. This boy knew far more than he was admitting. She had to find out what she could. A face drifted into her mind: a face she hadn't seen for two years but which haunted her every day, sometimes every hour, sometimes—it seemed—every moment of her life.

'Where's Josh?' she said again.

'I told you. I don't know anyone called Josh.'

'You do.'

'I don't.'

'But you just said—'

'I don't care what I just said.' The boy sounded tetchy now. 'I don't have any control over that, OK? I just say what I say. I don't know where it comes from.'

She tried to calm herself. She knew she had to be careful. She had to probe this boy but if she pushed him too hard, he'd hang up.

'Tell me why you chose those names,' she said.

But the boy didn't answer. Instead she heard him retching at the other end of the line. She listened, her mind riddled with confusion. If this was acting, it was pretty convincing. The retching went on for what seemed a long time, then suddenly stopped.

'Are you all right?' she said.

No response, just another sound, which she recognized at once.

'You're drinking something,' she said. 'What is it?'

'Cheap plonk,' came the answer. 'Tastes like shit.'

She heard a rattling noise.

'What's that?' she said.

'What what?'

'That sound.'

'This?'

And she heard the rattling sound again.

'Yeah.'

'Bottle of pills,' said the boy. 'Think I might have gobbed up the last lot. So I'm taking some more. If I can get the top off the bloody thing.'

'Listen—' she started.

But the boy wasn't listening. He seemed to have put the phone down and was struggling to open the bottle of pills. She could hear him swearing to himself as he wrenched at the top. Then she heard a grunt of satisfaction, followed by more silence.

'Are you there?' she said.

No answer.

She tried to think. She was convinced now that

the boy had taken an overdose and was even at this moment swallowing more pills. But she was also convinced that he knew something about Josh. She had to glean what she could from him. But first she had to save his life, and that meant finding out where he was. With any luck he'd tell her. It was just possible this wasn't a genuine suicide attempt but a cry for help.

'Are you there?' she said again.

Still no answer. She took the phone over to the window and peeped round the side of the curtain. Everything glistened with snow. The latest fall had deepened the previous layer by several inches and it was now a thick blanket, still virgin by the look of it.

She glanced to the right. No sign of Dad coming back from Beckdale, just the deserted lane stretching away into the night. She looked to the left and followed the same lane past the broad turning area outside the house and on to where it narrowed again and finally ended at the gate into Stonewell Park. No one there either, just whiteness, stillness, emptiness. Suddenly she heard the boy's voice again.

'Daisy?'

'Don't call me Daisy,' she said. 'It's not my name, OK? Now listen—'

'No, you listen.' The boy's voice had changed again. It was more drowsy yet somehow more forceful too. 'Listen . . . I haven't got much time . . . and there's something I want to say. I . . . I'm sorry if I scared you.'

'You didn't scare me.'

'I did.' The boy's breathing sounded heavier. 'I did scare you. I know I did. And I know I'm . . . I'm still scaring you.'

She said nothing, but she knew he was right.

'So I'm sorry,' he said. 'That's all I wanted to say. I'm really sorry . . . whoever you are . . . '

'My name's Dusty.'

She hated telling him. It made her feel more vulnerable than ever. But she knew she had to take the risk. She had to bond with this boy somehow if she was to find out where he was.

'It's a nice name,' he said.

'What's yours?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'You must have a name.'

'I've got lots of names.'

'So give me one of them. I've given you mine.'

'Too late for names now.'

There was a finality in the boy's voice that chilled her.

'Dusty?' he said.

'Yes?'

'Thanks for not putting the phone down.'

'Tell me where Josh is.'

'I don't know anyone called Josh.'

'You do. I know you do.'

The boy didn't answer.

'Where is he?' she said.

The boy spoke, but not to answer her question.

'These trees,' he murmured. 'They're so beautiful.'

'Tell me about Josh. Please tell me about Josh.'

'So beautiful.' The boy's voice was fading. 'I'm glad I'm dying near trees.'

'Where are you?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Why won't you tell me?'

'Because you'll send an ambulance and they might save my life.'

She shuddered. This was no cry for help. This was a farewell.

'Tell me where you are,' she urged him.

'Don't want to.'

'Please.'

'Don't want to.'

'But you'll die.'

'Want to die. Must die.'

'But why?'

'Too much pain. Just want it to go away.'

Dusty's mind was racing. There had to be some way of working out where the boy was. He'd talked about trees, but that didn't help much. There were loads of places with trees round here, and there was no guarantee the boy was even phoning from the Beckdale area. He hadn't said he was. He could be anywhere in the country, even abroad. Suddenly she caught a new sound at the other end of the phone.

Something metallic, a kind of groan, like some heavy object moving on a hinge, maybe a pub sign swinging in the wind or an iron gate opening. She listened. There was something familiar about it. It was a sound she'd heard recently. She was sure of it.

The sound ceased. She listened for it again, her thoughts running fast. The boy was somewhere near. She sensed it. If she could just hear the sound again, she might be able to place it. But instead she heard the boy's voice—distant, detached, as though speaking to himself. Yet his words were for her and they shook her to the core.

'I'm sorry, little Dusty. Goodbye, little Dusty.'

She trembled. It wasn't possible. Not those very words. She remembered the last time she had

heard them. She remembered gripping the phone with all her might, just as she was doing now. She remembered standing by her bedroom window watching the sun setting over Kilbury Moor. She remembered the feeling of a day dissolving and a life dissolving with it. She remembered the small words in her ear, the last her brother had ever spoken to her.

'Goodbye, little Dusty,' said the boy.

'Josh!' she screamed.

No answer came back. All she heard before the line went dead was the strange metallic groan again. But this time recollection came flooding with it. Stonewell Park . . . the trees . . . the children's playground . . . the swing! She'd sat on it only yesterday when she went walking in the park with Dad. She'd even swung on it—and heard that very noise. If she was right, the boy was barely two hundred yards away.

She threw down the phone, rushed into the hall and pulled on her coat and boots. Then she picked up her mobile, switched it on and scribbled a note to Dad on the pad.

Gone out. Mobile on. Back soon. Dusty x

She prayed she'd be back before he read it. He'd be apoplectic if he saw this. But there was nothing she could do about it now. She had to find this boy, and quickly. She stepped out of the house, slammed the front door behind her, and raced off into the night.