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Opening extract from

Another Life

Written by

Keren David

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For Phoebe, absolutely my favourite daughter

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ANOTHER LIFE



Keren David

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

CHAPTER 1
Plan A

There's a matchbox of weed sitting on the headmaster's desk – good quality Dutch skunk. I can smell it, sweet and strong, from my uncomfortably low chair, which has been carefully positioned so I am looking up Father Roderick's flared nostrils.

He knows and I know that it came from my bedside locker drawer.

I'm not admitting it, though. I'm not the son of two top lawyers for nothing.

'Just tell me how you got the drugs into the school,' says Father Roderick in his smoothest, most sympathetic voice. 'I need to know the full facts, Archie, before we decide what action to take. You may need help; this may not even be your doing.'

I don't want him to think I'm innocent. That would

scupper my chance of getting expelled. But I'm certainly not admitting anything. I'm staying in the grey area of silence.

I shrug. He sighs.

'I have contacted your parents. It appears your mother is abroad, but your father is on his way.' He looks at his watch – a plain, brown leather strap, a simple black and white face. I'd so hate being a monk. I bet he wears really scratchy underwear.

'He said he'd be here by three. I suggest you sit here and have a good think about your options, while we wait for him.'

That's three hours – three hours of no lunch, nothing to drink, nothing to do. God, it's so boring just thinking. Father Roderick gets on with his work – loads of rustling papers and clicking at his keyboard. I wonder if he's looking at porn. I wonder if his computer's got a whole history of busty blondes and Asian babes. If he's dim enough to leave the room without logging out – he has to get some lunch, surely – maybe I could run round to the other side of the desk and infect his screen with some tasty pop-ups. I imagine Father Roderick's horrified face, his round, blue, innocent eyes widening in horror. I turn a laugh into a cough.

'I'm glad you find this amusing, because I don't,' he says. 'Ahh, thank you, Miss Johnson.'

Miss Johnson is his secretary and she's just brought him a massive sandwich – chicken on granary with mayo and lettuce. We never get food like that. We get watery mashed snotballs, chewy donkey-arse stew and fried incontinence pads. This place is like something on a boring TV documentary about the third world. Father Roderick tucks into his sandwich noisily. I ignore him.

I'm sure he's actually not allowed to starve me like this. It's virtually torture. I bet the European Court of Human Rights would have something to say about the way I'm being treated. When my dad arrives, I'll get him to look up the UN declaration on the rights of children on his iPhone.

My dad. He's not going to be very pleased with me. He really disapproves of drugs and rule-breaking and getting expelled. On the other hand, I don't think he was all that happy when Mum cooked up this idea of sending me to a super-strict Catholic boys' school ('We succeed with the boys that other schools fail').

'I should have been consulted, not presented with a fait accompli. You know my feelings about faith schools,' he said, when I was packing to go off

to Allingham Priory. And then he said a load more. I was really hopeful that they'd call the whole thing off, but Mum just rolled her eyes and said, 'Look, it wasn't so easy finding anywhere that would take him, after he got chucked out of Hadley House – and don't think we've forgotten how naughty that was, Archie, because we haven't – and you weren't exactly around to go looking at schools.'

'Well, nor were you,' Dad pointed out. 'We were both abroad. You got your secretary to ring around. What did you tell her? "Can you find somewhere traditional where monks will make sure Archie is steeped in his Catholic heritage?"'

'Not at all. I just asked Christina to find somewhere with high academic standards that could take on a challenge – a challenge who'd just been expelled for booking a strippergram for his housemaster's birthday. We were lucky to find him somewhere so quickly. I'm sure it's just what he needs. Discipline. High standards. It'll be fine, won't it, Archie?'

'No,' I said, 'it won't. I really, really don't want to go. Can't I stay at home and go to a day school? Please?'

Then Dad went all grumpy and said, 'I don't think we can trust you at home when we're away so

much,' and Mum said, 'Don't be silly. You'd be lonely all by yourself at home. You're much better off at school surrounded by friends and with loads of things to do.'

I tried again during the summer holidays, but they were both busy at work and they'd booked me into tennis camp and when I came home there was no one to whinge to except Veselina the cleaner, who only speaks Albanian or whatever.

So I went round to my friend Oscar, who lives virtually next door, and we started plotting my escape. Plan A, provided by Oscar's older brother Marcus (without his knowledge, obviously), is in a matchbox on Father Roderick's desk.

The bell rings for the end of lunch. Father Roderick stands up.

'Miss Johnson,' he calls, 'can you come and sit with Archie Stone, please? I have to go and teach.'

Miss Johnson bustles in. She's about fifty and the general consensus is that she's got the hots for Father Roderick and stays in her job in the hope that one day he will see the error of his monkish ways, renounce celibacy and take her ancient virginity on the hearthrug. Maybe he has already. It looks quite well-worn. She's always been really nice to me before,

but she's obviously been tipped off about the hidden stash of weed, because she's stony-faced as she takes Father Roderick's chair and sits down.

I wait until he's plodded off in the direction of the sixth form extension. Then I sigh and wipe my brow. No response. I try again, a little louder.

She can't resist my best victim face.

'What is it, Archie? Anything to tell me?'

'I'm hungry, miss. I'm starving. I get low blood sugar if I don't eat and I think I might faint.' I lift up my hand, let it tremble a little. 'Look, I'm shaking.'

Naturally, I've stolen all this from my Nana Bertha, who is eighty-five, borderline diabetic and a total drama queen. Whenever we see her – every Christmas – she pretends to be at death's door. It drives my dad crazy, because he has to play along.

Miss Johnson falls for it.

'Oh dear . . . I can't leave you. Do you feel bad? You'd better have a biscuit.' And she opens Father Roderick's special cupboard.

By the time my dad arrives at 3.35, I've eaten an entire packet of chocolate HobNobs, she's made me a cup of tea, I'm sitting on Father Roderick's sofa-for-prospective-parents and we're having a boring but friendly chat about her hobby, which

is breeding Abyssinian guinea pigs. One of my many skills is the ability to talk to anyone. It's an undervalued asset. I could marry into the royal family any time and fit right in.

One of the sixth-formers brings Dad to the study. I have a bit of a shock when he arrives. His eyes are a bit baggier than usual, and the way he's hunched his shoulders – well, I'm kind of used to my dad being older than everyone else's but I don't like to see him looking like an old man.

Then he snaps, 'Hello Archie, I thought you were in deep trouble, but it appears I was wrong,' and I remember that he's actually only fifty-five and last year the *Financial Times* called him 'Possibly the most energetic and aggressive corporate lawyer currently operating in the City of London. Definitely someone you want on your side.'

Miss Johnson jumps up guiltily, and tells the sixth-former to go and get Father Roderick.

'Archie, you'd better come and sit over here again,' she says.

I brush the biscuit crumbs onto the Rug of Desire, and think about whether I should hug my dad or not. But he's too busy handing his coat to Miss Johnson. She goes off to hang it up and he hisses at me, 'I hope

you haven't said anything to give them reason to call in the police.'

'I haven't said anything,' I say, and he nods, face set and unsmiling.

'Good.'

Father Roderick runs through the school's procedure when drugs are found on the premises – calling in the police, suspension and/or expulsion.

'Of course we greatly regret involving the police, but possession of drugs is a criminal offence.'

'I can see a small amount of drugs on your desk,' says my dad, cool and calm, 'but nothing at all to link my son with them. It would appear that you currently possess these drugs, and therefore you are the one who will need to speak to the police.'

Father Roderick turns purple.

'My son is only fourteen years old, and I would prefer him not to spend any more time in an educational institution where drugs are so readily available,' says my dad, looking at his Rolex. He only wears it when he's away from the office. At work he has a much plainer watch so his clients won't feel they're being ripped off.

'These drugs were found amongst Archie's things,' says Father Roderick.

'Then you should have called the police immediately and left the evidence in situ. I shall be taking Archie away with me today, and my assistant will be sending you an agreement to sign which makes it clear that we have removed him from school and you will not be giving him a bad report when we approach other schools, or accusing him of anything to do with drugs. Is that acceptable? Or shall we discuss the laws of libel?'

Woo! Go Dad! I'm hoping that he'll actually believe someone planted the drugs in my stuff, and then I won't get into any trouble at all.

And there's no way they can send me to another boarding school after this.

Dad turns to me. 'Archie,' he says, 'I want you packed and ready to leave in thirty minutes. I'll meet you in the front hall.'

'Err. . .' I say, wondering how I'm going to achieve that when I have absolutely no idea where they put our cases after we unpack on the first day of term. Miss Johnson will have to tell me.

And that's it. No need for goodbyes, no need for supper (chilli con concrete and apple puke), last glimpse of Father Roderick, spitting mad and

virtually foaming at the mouth. Ha! Even better than I'd hoped!

I heave my case (there's a storeroom, it turns out, by the sixth form studies) into the back of the Prius (bought to impress clients with Dad's caring attitude towards the environment – he says that as soon as he retires he's getting a BMW).

I do up my seat belt. I sigh with relief as the car glides through the school gates.

I'm ready for Dad's lecture, ready to be told off. Whatever he says, it was well worth it. I'm smug in the knowledge that any risks I took weren't just for me.

The thing is, I made a promise – a promise that I'd be somewhere at a certain time. The time is next Tuesday, and the place is a courtroom in north London.

I'm going to be there for my cousin Ty.