PART 2 CHAPTERS 11-20

ROSIE LEWIS

A traumatised girl.

Her troubled brother.

Their shocking secret.

Broken

Rosie Lewis

Broken: Part 2 of 3: A traumatised girl. Her troubled brother. Their shocking secret.

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Lewis R.

Broken: Part 2 of 3: A traumatised girl. Her troubled brother. Their shocking secret. / R. Lewis — «HarperCollins»,

Nine-year-old Archie and his five-year-old sister, Bobbi, are taken into emergency police protective custody after an incident of domestic violence at their family home.Rosie collects the children from their out-of-hours foster carer on New Year's Day and instantly recognises Archie from a domestic violence workshop she helped with. Rosie remembers that when asked what he enjoyed most about the course, Archie said: 'the biscuits'.Social workers are concerned that Archie and Bobbi have been neglected. As Rosie gets to know the children, she begins to suspect that something far more disturbing lies in their past.Archie, jovial and polite, bats away Rosie's attempts to talk to him about anything serious with witty one-liners and sophisticated distractions. Bobbi reacts violently, lashing out and throwing herself around. Rosie has never seen a child as young a Bobbi behaving so viciously, but it is Archie she is most concerned about as the weeks go by.After a worrying incident at school, Archie tearfully discloses the truth – a shocking secret that has left him and his sister traumatised. Horrified at what she learns, Rosie is determined to help the young siblings find a forever-home that will provide them with the love and care they deserve.

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ROSIE

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Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates, have been changed to protect the family's privacy.

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Chapter Eleven

'It has to be up there with the worst ones yet,' I told Des as he followed me into the living area that evening, Mungo sniffing at his feet. It was just after seven thirty and with the girls tucked up in bed, the house was quiet but for the low buzz of the washing machine on a spin cycle in the kitchen. Emily was out for a meal with her grandmother and I wasn't expecting her back until late. Archie was in the shower and Jamie at band practice with his friends. Throughout the day my mind had returned to our row, my throat tightening with regret. Jamie was usually such a cheerful character. I hated falling out with him. We'd had a brief chat when he got back from school that afternoon, but things were still a bit cool between us.

Des was the perfect distraction. Loud and gregarious, he sat next to me on the sofa and chuckled as I relayed the entire mortifying fiasco. 'Par for the course in the Lewis household, I would have thought,' he joked, his loud voice booming despite his efforts not to disturb the children. Mungo sat at my feet, his feathery whiskers tickling my legs.

I groaned. 'It was awful. Then she came in and saw the fall-out from the weekend. Toys everywhere, smalls that had spent the entire weekend draped over the radiators stiff with rigor mortis. Honestly, it was bad.'

Des boomed a laugh and threw a hand to my shoulder. 'Ach, it cannae have been that bad,' he said in his soft Scottish lilt. It was a lyrical tone, one that never failed to cheer me. 'I expect she's seen worse. I once turned up to do an unannounced on a couple having the mother of all smash-ups. There were household objects flying across windows and everything. They didnae last long as foster carers after that.'

'Oh, heavens! I don't feel so bad now.'

'I'm sure t'was fine. She didnae express any concerns, did she?'

'She was very kind actually. She said she got the sense that ours is,' I paused, hooking the air, 'a "proper family home with plenty of evidence of children's play". Now there's a creative way of describing it.'

'Spot on, I'd say,' he said, leaning forward and opening the bottle of wine on the coffee table. Left over from Christmas, I had retrieved it from the cupboard when Des had texted to let me know he was popping in. He poured me a glass and lifted his own. 'Here's to your proper family home, warts an' all,' he said, holding his glass up in front of me.

'Cheers,' I said with a smile. We clinked. I took a sip, shuddered and passed it back to him. I liked the idea of sharing a bottle of wine but had never found one I liked the taste of and rarely managed more than half a glass. Des, a true Scot, took a much larger swill of his own, gulped down the rest of mine and banged the glasses back on the table.

'So how is everything? Any better?' Des had been training in Edinburgh since the children had arrived almost two weeks earlier. We had spoken on the phone during that time, but only briefly. Absorbed with the needs of my own family, his manically busy lifestyle suited me.

I tucked my legs up next to my hips. 'They're gorgeous children. Absolutely lovely.'

Des shifted around until his back was pressed against the arm of the sofa, so that we were facing each other. 'But –?'

'But – I don't know. Bobbi's behaviour is familiar, although a little more extreme than I've experienced before. She's aggressive, impulsive, difficult to manage generally, the little cherub. But I think she's calming down. She's not talking ten to the dozen anymore. I think she'll settle with time. She has a hard time coping with school, but she's showing some attachment to me; clinging in the mornings and reaching out when she's upset.' Miss Granville had written another note in SHOUTY capitals in the home school diary again, Bobbi having antagonised her classmates all morning. Totally

overwhelmed, she had apparently spent most of the afternoon under one of the desks, refusing to come out even when the headmistress was called in.

'And Archie?'

'You'll meet him in a minute. He's a bit of an enigma. I don't quite know what to make of him. One minute he's civil and well mannered, effusive with compliments, the next brooding and sulky. He was very withdrawn after contact this afternoon.' When I'd picked the children up from the family centre earlier, the contact supervisor told me that there had been a lot of whispering in corners between Tanya and Archie during their ninety-minute contact session. The supervisor had intervened several times, but Tanya had taken little notice. 'He barely ate a thing when he got home. Well, nothing at the dinner table at least.' I gave him a rueful look.

'They're still hoarding?'

I nodded grimly. 'Rubbish mainly. Crisps, chocolate bars, cheese. I even found a fondue fork under a box of Junior Scrabble earlier.'

Des chuckled, though his expression quickly grew serious. 'The body craves sweet, salty, fatty food when in an alarmed state. Perhaps they're just taking what they need. You might havetae forget healthy eating for a wee while, or ride both horses for now.'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'Sometimes, sweetheart, you have to swim with the tide.'

I felt a spark of heat in my face and quickly looked away. The fact that we were becoming more than just friends still took me by surprise. He reached out and touched my sleeve. Mungo eyed him from my feet.

'It's not only food though, Des. One of them took a bracelet from my room. I found it under their bed.' Some foster carers were able to tolerate all sorts of abuse – kicking, spitting, biting and punching – but I knew quite a few who struggled to continue with a placement after a child had stolen from them.

'Don't take it personally,' Des said mildly, slipping into supervising social worker mode. 'They're communicating with you. Telling you their deepest fear; that they'll be left to die. Kids steal either to fill the unfillable hole inside them, or to hold onto something physical, because everything else around them is disintegrating. The fact that they chose something of yours says something – it tells me that they see you as their anchor at the minute, the person who's going to keep them afloat.'

'Oh, Des,' I said, feeling quite emotional, 'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'You said that Bobbi's scalp is flat at the back. We both know what that means. Who was it who said that children adopted today are the Baby Peters who dinnae die? Hoarding is the kids' way of securing their survival.'

'But they don't need my bracelet to survive,' I protested weakly, already entirely convinced by Des's argument.

He dipped his head. 'Aye, that I'll grant you. But it's likely they're both functioning at least two, possibly three years younger than their actual age, in terms of emotional development, like most looked-after children. What age is Bobbi? Five? So adjusted, she's two or three years old at most. And Archie, maybe six or seven?' I nodded. 'So if we're thinking toddler in terms of Bobbi, suddenly taking a bracelet isnae stealing, but natural inquisitiveness.'

I gave him a sceptical look. 'So I should have just ignored it?'

'I'm not saying that. I just mean do what you'd do with a toddler. Explain that they mustnae take things that don't belong to them and then forget it. The last thing you want to do is shame them.' I knew Des was talking sense. Shame was often the fuel that ignited difficult behaviour in fostered children. Responding with anger, though a natural response, was a sure fire way of fanning the flames and getting everyone caught up in a downward spiral. 'Anyways, at least –'

He stopped as Mungo jumped to his feet and gave a low yap. The sound of a key in the front door followed. 'Jamie,' I said, standing up and brushing myself down. Mungo belted into the hall.

'Hey!' Des said as Jamie walked in, Mungo weaving excitedly around his legs. 'It's the main man. How you been, fella?' He jumped up and pumped Jamie's hand heartily.

'Hiya, Des,' Jamie said with a grin, flicking a glance in my direction.

'Hungry? I can warm some lasagne up for you.'

He nodded and thanked me quietly, his reserve eliciting a look of puzzlement from Des. He glanced between us fleetingly then clapped a hand on Jamie's back. 'Course he's hungry. He's a growing lad, look at the size of him!' A natural with kids of all ages, Jamie and Emily had always liked Des and he doted on Megan. When he sat back on the sofa, Jamie took the opposite end and launched into an update on some booking or other he had arranged for the band. I could hear their easy conversation as I heated Jamie's dinner in the microwave, the odd raucous laugh.

Des had been lead guitarist in a rock band in his youth and often regaled Jamie with tales of touring and after-gig parties. Their shared passion for music meant they were never short of something to say to each other. I pulled some wet clothes from the machine and hung them on an airer then went back into the living room, listening in bemused silence as they argued the merits of Gibson Les Paul guitars against Fender Stratocasters, Jamie tucking into his dinner on a tray on his lap.

'You shouldn't encourage him,' I said later, when Jamie was in the shower.

'Huh?'

I dipped my head towards the door. 'You know. All that talk about the band. I'd rather he concentrated on his exams at the moment.'

Des scratched his wavy hair. 'I thought he was doing okay at school.'

'At the moment he is. But he won't if he spends all his time trying to revive The Bad Natives.'

He fixed me with an appraising, half-amused look. 'There are worse ways to make a living, you know. The Natives never went hungry. And we were never short of groupies either.'

I raised my eyebrows. 'Hmmph!'

'Oh, come on, sweetheart,' he said, laughing. 'You can't let go of your sense of humour or you'll never stay the course.'

I pulled a face. He was right, again, but I wasn't quite ready to admit it yet. He reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine. I gave him a reluctant smile.

At that moment Mungo's ears flapped back. When the door opened, expecting to see Jamie, I snatched my hand away. Jamie and Emily's amused glances whenever I mentioned Des weren't lost on me. However much they liked him, I was quite certain that the merest whiff of any canoodling between us would have been a bit disturbing for them. Instead of Jamie though, Archie stood in the doorway, his expression grim. 'What is it, Archie?' I said, springing to my feet. I was surprised to find that my pulse was racing, though I wasn't sure why.

Archie glared at Des, his jaw tightened as if his teeth were grinding together. His arms hung poker straight at his sides, his thin hands clenched into tight fists. I cleared my throat. 'Archie, this is Des.' I paused. 'A friend of mine.'

'Hi, mate,' Des said softly, a cheery though slightly puzzled smile on his face. Archie blinked and stared. There was a look of fear in his eyes, as if Des's presence was somehow a threat.

I cleared my throat. 'Archie's a whizz at Rummy, Des. Do you fancy joining us for a game?'

'Fantastic,' Des said with a smile. Archie continued to stare at him wordlessly, his eyes finally straying to the bottle of wine and glasses on the coffee table. Something about the angle of his shoulders made the hairs on the back of my forearms stand on end. Mungo began to bark.

'What's wrong, Arch,' I said gently. 'Has something upset you?'

He turned his eyes on me, his lips twisted in disgust. 'You slag,' he said slowly. His words were cool and measured but his cheeks were crimson. 'You horrible, dirty slag.' Taken aback, all I could do was stare at him. Wisely, Des stayed where he was, his face angled away.

'Archie,' I said, at a loss as to where all this had sprung from. I glanced at Des. He raised one eyebrow and then looked away again. 'What's this about, honey?'

Archie's chest began to heave. Without warning he kicked out at Mungo, catching his soft underbelly. Mungo yelped in pain and hid behind my leg. 'Archie!' I shouted, crouching down and wrapping my arms around the trembling pup. Archie glared at me then turned on his heel and disappeared.

'You sure you donnae want me to stay?' Des said quietly in the hall a minute or so later. 'Just as back-up if you need it.'

'I'll be fine, really,' I whispered. 'Outbursts are my bread and butter. It's the phoniness I find hard to cope with.'

'If you're sure.' He touched the pad of his thumb to my cheek. 'Text me if you need a wee hand and I'll come straight back.'

I rested my forehead against his, patted his hand. 'Thanks, Des.'

When he left I leaned back against the front door and glanced up at the banisters, my legs trembling. There was no sound coming from upstairs but, despite the confidence I had expressed to Des, for a second I regretted asking him to leave. I took a breath, trying to compose myself. I knew that any sign of stress on my part would only escalate Archie's own.

Sometimes being a foster carer is a bit like being a detective. Archie was suffering, but the reasons for his distress were, for now, closed off from me. I had sensed that something was wrong when I first met him, and now it was becoming clearer that Archie's inner world was broken. I pushed myself away from the door and rolled my shoulders back. No matter how distressing a place it might be, I had a feeling that if I wanted to understand him, I was going to have to join him there.

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