

## The Bones

Meet me at The Bones, he says, and I go because I'm hoping maybe he'll kiss me this time. The last time we were alone together was when I fell asleep on the bus trip to the museum. I woke up and his face was right in mine, big swimming blue eyes like magic planets and I said boo because it was all I could think of and he jumped back and said you snore.

I guess that's why he didn't just press his lips to mine right then, so my eyelashes would part like thick gold tassel, and he could put one hand to my soft red cheek and there would be happily ever after.

So when Jeremy tells me meet me at The Bones I say sure and then I run away to find Jessie. She's my best friend.

I tell Jessie she should come with me to The Bones because I don't want to go alone, and not because I'm scared but I just don't want to. Also, Jessie's the first one I ever kissed because we dared ourselves and then when nothing bad like the ground

cracking open or God's finger zapping us with lightening happened, we did it a bunch more times. For practice.

After I beg her for, like, an hour she finally says fine, she'll come with, but she doesn't want to talk to Jeremy Fletcher, not ever, because she thinks he's a big jerk ever since he told her her haircut makes her look like a boy.

It is pretty short, I told her. And you are pretty flat still. Not like me. Maybe if you didn't wear those big jeans and all that black lipstick, you would look more sexy and it wouldn't be confusing. I can let you borrow something.

Yeah, she said, I should look more like you, and then she walked away because it was time for class to start.

Ever since this summer, when Jessie's parents sent her to some art camp down in the city and she met some older boy who was a photographer and kissed her with his tongue, she's been listening to a lot of weird, loud music and wearing black make-up all over her face and cutting her hair short to spike it up. I figure this is one of those phase things and it won't be long before she's back asking me to borrow my Candy Cotton gloss.

Right now, though, the most annoying thing is that she won't kiss me, not even knowing we're going to The Bones to meet Jeremy Fletcher and knowing she's been kissed with tongue and I've only ever kissed her.

Seriously, I say, what's your problem?

Instead of answering she points at my feet and says, those shoes? and I'm like, yeah, so what?

Beauty is pain, I say. You have to make sacrifices, you have to compromise for your man. That's what the magazines say.

She rolls her eyes at me. She's wearing purple Chucks with laces with little black skulls all down them. Weird, but at least I can lean on her arm.

The Bones isn't what you might think. It sounds all mysterious and glamorous and sinister, like some slick, dark, industrial bar. It could be in another town, but not ours.

The Bones is a place down by the river where it's rumored that some kids a few years older than us found some old bones – probably cow bones or maybe a dog, but they said human and that's always much more interesting to believe. One of the bones is still there. It looks a lot like a curved piece off a Styrofoam cup half buried in the shale.

The worst thing about The Bones though is that to get there you have to walk through this sort of old field that's got a lot of broken down farm equipment in it. It belongs to someone but no one will say who and everyone thinks its haunted, too. Jessie says she's seen the old stuff move – other people at school say so too. Like, that tractor without tires will be in one place one night and the next afternoon it'll be somewhere else, but I've never seen it. Or I'm sure there's a normal explanation.

I don't believe in ghosts. All I know is it's really hard to walk in heels.

Jessie and I hear voices before we can see through the trees, so clearly Jeremy's not there alone and my stomach drops a little, but then it also unclenches because I was worried about what to do with Jessie if he did kiss me, no matter what I'd told her about not having to make-out for an hour, and also I've never kissed a boy and she has and I

don't feel so great about her observing me the first time around. She says I shut my eyes too tight and it makes her laugh.

Then when we get through the last of the trees and can all see, there's Jeremy standing there and I say, where'd everybody go? and he asks, who? And I say, the people you were just talking to. And he says he wasn't talking to anybody and we must be hearing things.

That's how The Bone's are. You hear things here, he says, and I guess I'm supposed to be scared but I'm not, but I still kind of squeeze my arms in and look around like maybe I am, in case he feels like he wants to take care of me or hold my hand or something.

*Make your man feel important! That's what the magazines say. Give him little jobs to do, so he feels needed. You don't want him to feel like you'd be better off alone.*

So, what's up? I say, to get the conversation going, so we can move on to the kissing.

Nothing, he says. Have you been here before? he asks us and I answer, of course, although it's only been two times and not anywhere near as eventful as today already.

Have you seen the bones? he asks.

Oh, the bones, I say. Yeah, the bones.

Have you seen them? he asks again.

I mean, sure. I'm starting to get bored already, and cold from standing here.

No, I mean, the new bones, he says.

New bones? Jessie asks before she can help herself. It's not that she's scared, but more that she's been really in to things like bones and spikes and dead mice and stuff ever since the summer.

So Jeremy turns to her and grins real big and says, new ones! Then he tells a story about how his brother's friends were out here two nights ago and they kept hearing a funny noise in the trees and blah blah blah the skeleton of some poor, unloved girl down at the bottom of the river.

He brings his hands together SMACK! when he says river, and Jessie jumps but I don't. And then I do, in case that's what he wants. This is becoming a lot of work.

Then Jeremy hunches forward like he's afraid someone else might hear and I try not to roll my eyes again, but instead widen them all big and doe-y and lean closer so he can smell the new scent I got at the Target last weekend. You know, he says, if you look right, you can see her bones glowing down there. Even in the light.

I have to say I'm not all that excited about this, as I've never really believed in The Bones, and I'm not much for skeletons glowing, that's just dumb, but if we just poo-poo his whole elaborate story, that's going to make Jeremy feel pretty unspecial and like we weren't interested in him all along, and the magazines say to try to be interested in what the boy is interested in. So you have things to talk about when you can't be kissing.

Yeah, I say. Yeah, I'll look. What do I have to do?

You go over there, he says, pointing. You just have to go there and bend way over and don't blink and you'll see it at the bottom of the water.

Fine, I say, and troop over to the edge of the river and look in. Nothing but some brownish water with little fishy lights slipping along the surface and maybe a few drops

of rain fall, although I don't feel any, and then Jeremy says behind me, closer! You have to bend closer!

So, fine, I stick my legs farther apart and put my hands on my knees and bend way forward and peer into the water, thinking at least maybe he's looking at my butt because some boys are into that and mine's pretty nice, kind of round and puffy like hamburger buns, and there's nothing, there's nothing, and then all of a sudden the water's rising up at me and I stick my arms out but it's too late and there's cold for real and it's dark dark dark and just before I scramble around and realize the ground's right there and my head surfaces, I do see something like a shock after-image of a skeleton flash before my eyes. And I can still feel someone's bony, poking fingers on my back.

I stand up real fast, and the water only comes up to about my waist and I can hear laughing, not just Jeremy, but all those people we thought we heard him talking to, and then also Jessie's laugh for just one second, but I know it so well. I told her once she should try to turn it down because she sounds like a gargling crow. Not that crows gargle, but still.

Suddenly I feel really hot – not cold at all – and I don't want to turn around, but it's like, if I did I could throw all that burning right at them, yell boo! and scream and they would melt down into stupid little puddles right there. But I just stand there and wait while they laugh, because you can't laugh forever, and eventually they sort of taper off and I hear someone whisper, *what's she doing?*

I'm not doing anything, but the funny feeling hasn't gone away, and my fingers feel all itchy and my face feels really really hard.

Hey, Miranda, Jeremy's voice breaks on the 'r', and already I'm beginning to be glad he didn't kiss me. What're you doing in there? It's not bikini season any more. And there they go laughing again and this time I really don't know what's funny, because I have the nicest bikini you've ever seen with little sailboats all over it, and just because Jessie and half the other girls don't have any breasts yet and look like toothpicks stuck in erasures in their one pieces, what's funny about that?

Finally, I just turn around. I don't think I would kiss Jeremy if he paid me in Cover Girl Gift Certificates, but they're not going anywhere and neither am I if I stay there looking at the tree roots sticking out of the other bank. And I'm ready to go.

There are five of them standing there, Jeremy's best friend Leo-the-soccer-player and Jeremy and Jessie, of course, and also this other kid who rides a skateboard a lot and gets in trouble for skipping school.

And then Alexis is also there, which surprises me because I didn't think she was really friends with them, especially not Jessie. Jessie told me once that Alexis's mom gave Alexis cigarettes and she used to sell them before school in homeroom and at lunch. Jessie and Alexis were friends then, when I still lived down in South Carolina. Even though they were friends Alexis still charged Jessie a quarter for a cig a long time ago at the beginning of middle school, and then Alexis wanted to smoke it with her, back behind the trees at the end of the playing field, and Jessie wanted the whole thing, she had paid for it, so they got in a fight and Alexis broke the cigarette and Jessie wouldn't talk to her after that.

I moved here the next year and told Jessie right away that she could be my best friend.

The thing about Alexis is that half the time you wouldn't know something like her mother gave her cigarettes, or that she had six brothers and sisters, all younger, and that her father was almost never home because he drove a truck and people say even when he isn't driving a truck he doesn't come home because her mother has a tongue full of tacks and skin like old tobacco.

Alexis has skin like a marshmallow when you've toasted it just right, and her hair is a weird silvery black and thick like a billow of smoke and her eyes are only brown, but they're so brown and deep I want to say mean things to her just like dropping stones in a well, to see how far they fall before they splash.

Now she's standing there with one arm linked through Jessie's and the other through Leo's and Leo has his other arm linked through Jeremy's and they're smiling but their eyes aren't smiling. Their eyes all look as full and sharp as Alexis's.

Well, the skeleton didn't get me, I say and Alexis snorts. I wade out of the water toward them, and realize I'm missing a shoe, so I lift my foot to take the other one in my hand, because maybe I'll find a use for it – waste not want not – and also there's no way I'd make it across that field in only one of those big shoes.

Jessie, let's go, I say, giving her my disapproving look. She takes a step forward but snags on Alexis's arm. She's not going with you, Alexis says, pulling Jessie next to her and giving her a big red lipstick kiss on her cheek.

Oh, yeah? I say and I turn on Alexis and it all comes boiling up, the cold and the stringy hair in my face and Jeremy's dumb story and the lost sandal and Alexis with her dirty sneakers and perfect wavy ponytail and her chipped purple nail polish and bright red lipstick and I yell, Alexis Martino, you stupid jerk, I wouldn't kiss you if you were the



last stupid jerk on earth, right in her face. And then I realize what I just said, which is all wrong, somehow I must have gotten my thought about Jeremy mixed up with being mad at Alexis so sudden, and I can't just leave it at that so I throw the shoe and it hits her in the chest, since I'm standing right there, and THWACK it falls to the ground leaving a wet spot on her T-shirt right over where her heart would be.

She looks down at the shoe and then up at me and everyone's looking at me like they're completely frozen, and I feel really light and hard and I have this crazy thought like maybe I am the skeleton, maybe that's what happened in the water when I saw that flash and felt my face get stiff and now they're scared of me, but then Alexis laughs and says *kiss you? KISS you?* and shoots her foot out and sort of kicks at the shoe and then Jeremy jumps forward and kicks and it lands in front of Jessie and she looks at me and then looks at the shoe and then she looks at Alexis and she says, she does like to kiss girls, she told me so, and then she really kicks and it goes flying back and SPLOOSH into the water and now I have no shoes and I look at Jessie one last time and she looks away and I say, fine. You always bike into me anyways.

I turn on my heel as best as I can barefoot and head back over the rutted field. It's actually easier this time without the shoes, although I'm afraid there might be sharp things so I'm really careful about each step. It's toward the end of dusk by now and all the big equipment looms up out of the shadows with no warning, and I almost walk into stuff like a hundred times because I'm trying to watch my feet and my eyes are all stinging and blurry.

I walk and I walk and it feels like forever and I haven't stepped on anything, not one little thing, so I look up and go faster and I swerve around that tractor, the one with

the big looped bar up on top, and I still can't see the parking lot through the trees and there's a big wagon thing and a pile of tires and a metal frame with a lot of teeth and then that tractor again. The same tractor, I swear, and I think I hear screaming from The Bones, which could be anything, could be the boys playing tricks or someone's splashing someone or it's for fun or just some rusty piece of metal in the wind and I turn right and stop looking, all I see is Alexis's perfect skin and her big red lip-print on Jessie's cheek and I'm running.

By the time I burst out from between the trees into the parking lot I'm kind of out of breath and it's really dark and I can't find my bike for a minute until I realize I'm much farther down than when we got there and I walk along the edge of the trees and there's my bike and Jessie's, too, and I see them huddled together by the parking sign and remember something bad. My lock isn't there. I forgot it at home because I was so excited, and so we locked our bikes together with Jessie's lock and I don't know the combination. I could walk, I even start to walk, but I can't walk. It's too far and it's dark and I can't walk that whole way alone. There is a pay phone at the gas station across the street, but then I think of explaining to my parents the water and the missing shoes and my bike and what if Jessie comes later and takes her lock away? And how not to tell my parents about Jessie and Alexis and how to look all Cotton Candy gloss so they don't guess, and I can't. I just can't.

So I step back between the trees where I can see the bikes but they can't see me and I sit on a flat-ish stone and wait. It's cold, but not too cold under the trees, and I sit there looking over at the blue gas station sign, waiting, thinking dry thoughts, dry, dry thoughts where my whole body is dry, my legs and my feet and hair and my cheeks,

inside and out, and eyes and lips and I'm all alone but I'm dry and comfortable and I raise my hand and press the back of it to my mouth and kiss and kiss until I feel like I've gotten it just right.