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Daughter

Written by Jane Shemilt

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daughter

JANE SHEMILT



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PART ONE

I

Dorset 2010

One year later

The days grow short. Apples litter the grass, their flesh pockmarked by crows. As I carry logs from the stack under the overhang today, I tread on a soft globe; it collapses into slime under my feet.

November.

I am cold all the time but she could be colder. Why should I be comfortable? How could I be?

By evening the dog is shivering. The room darkens; I light the fire and the flames pull me near as the regrets begin to flare, burning and hissing in my head.

If only. If only I'd been listening. If only I'd been watching. If I could only start again, exactly one year ago.

The leather-bound sketchbook Michael gave me is on the table and in the pocket of the dressing gown there is a bitten red stub of pencil; he told me it would help to draw the past. The pictures are in my head already: a scalpel balanced in trembling fingers, a plastic ballerina twirling round and round, a pile of notes neatly stacked on a bedside table in the dark.

I write my daughter's name on the first unmarked

page and underneath I sketch the outline of two black high-heeled shoes lying on their sides, long straps tangled together.

Naomi.

Bristol 2009

One day before

She was swaying to music on her iPod so she didn't notice me at first. Her orange scarf was looped round her throat, schoolbooks scattered everywhere. I closed the back door quietly behind me and slid my bag to the floor; it was heavy with notes, my stethoscope, syringes, vials and boxes. It had been a long day, two surgeries, home visits and paperwork. Leaning against the kitchen door, I watched my daughter but another girl was in my mind's eye. Jade, lying in a bed with bruises on her arms.

That was the chilli in my eye. They squirt chilli juice into an elephant's eye to distract him while they mend his wounded leg. Theo told me that once. At the time I didn't believe it could work, but I should have taken it as a warning. It's easier than you think to lose sight of what matters.

As I watched Naomi, I imagined painting the curve of her cheeks as she smiled to herself. I would outline them with a paler shade for the light trapped against her skin. With every step her blonde fringe jumped softly against her forehead. When it lifted, beads of sweat along the hairline glistened. She had pushed up the sleeves of her school jersey; the charm bracelet moved up and down, up

and down the smooth skin of her arm, almost slipping off. I was glad to see her wearing it; I thought she had lost it years ago.

‘Mum! I didn’t see you there. What do you think?’ She pulled out her earphones and looked at me.

‘Wish I could dance like that . . .’

I stepped forward and quickly kissed the velvety bloom along her cheek, breathing her in. Lemon soap and sweat.

She jerked her head away, and bent to pick up her books in a swerving movement that had her quick, glancing grace. Her voice was impatient: ‘No, I mean my shoes – look at them.’

They must have been new. Black, very high heels, with straps of leather binding her feet and wrapping tightly round her slim legs; they looked wrong on her. She usually wore pumps in coloured leather or converses.

‘The heels are incredibly high.’ Even I could hear the criticism in my voice, so I tried to laugh. ‘Not like your usual –’

‘They’re not, are they?’ Her voice was triumphant. ‘Totally different.’

‘They must have cost the earth. I thought you’d spent your allowance?’

‘They’re so comfortable. Exactly the right size.’ As if she couldn’t believe her luck.

‘You can’t wear them to go out, darling. They look far too tight on you.’

‘Admit you’re jealous. You want them.’ She smiled a little half smile that I hadn’t seen before.

‘Naomi –’

‘Well, you can’t have them. I’m in love with them. I love

them almost as much as I love Bertie.’ While she was speaking she stretched down to stroke the dog’s head. She turned then, and yawning widely went slowly upstairs, her shoes hitting each step with a harsh metallic noise, like little hammers.

She’d escaped. My question hung, unanswered, in the warm air of the kitchen.

I poured myself a glass of Ted’s wine. Naomi didn’t usually answer back or walk out while I was talking. I stashed the doctor’s bag and notes in the corner of the cloakroom, then, sipping my drink, started walking around the kitchen, straightening towels. She used to tell me everything. As I hung up her coat, the sharpness of the alcohol began to clear my mind; it was part of the bargain and I’d weighed it all up long ago. It was simple. I did the job I loved and earned good money but it meant I was home less than some mothers. The bonus was that it gave the children space. They were growing up independently, which was what we’d always wanted.

I pulled the potatoes out of the cupboard. They were covered in little lumps of soil so I rinsed them quickly under the tap. Thinking about it, though, she hadn’t wanted to talk properly for months now. Ted would tell me not to worry. She’s a teenager, he would say, growing up. The cold water chilled my hands and I turned off the tap. Growing up or growing away? Preoccupied or withdrawn? The questions hummed in my mind as I hunted in the drawer for the potato peeler. Last summer in my surgery I had seen an anxious adolescent; she had carefully sliced the delicate skin of her wrists into multiple red

lines. I shook my head to drive the image away. Naomi wasn't depressed. There was that new smile to set against the impatience. Her involvement in the play against the silences at home. If she seemed preoccupied it was because she was older now, more thoughtful. Acting had given her maturity. Last summer she'd worked with Ted in his lab and she'd become interested in medicine. As I began peeling potatoes it occurred to me that her new-found confidence could be key to success in interviews. Perhaps I should celebrate. The starring role in the school play would also increase her chances of getting a place at medical school. Interviewers liked students with outside interests; it was known to offset the stress of becoming a doctor. Painting worked like that for me, dissolving the stress of general practice. With the tap back on, the brown mud swirled around and around in the sink and then disappeared. I'd almost finished Naomi's portrait and I could feel the pull of it now. Whenever I painted I was in a different world; worries melted away. My easel was just upstairs in the attic, and I wished I could escape more often. I dumped the potato peelings in the bin and took the sausages out of the fridge. Theo's favourite had been bangers and mash since he was a toddler. I could talk to Naomi tomorrow.

Later Ted phoned to say he was held up at the hospital. The twins came back home ravenously hungry. Ed lifted his hand in silent greeting as he took a heaped plate of toast upstairs. I could hear the bedroom door close behind him and pictured him turning on music, falling onto his bed, toast in hand, eyes closed. I remembered that about being seventeen: hoping no one would bang on your door

or, worse, walk in and talk to you. Theo, freckles blazing in his pale face, shouted out the day's triumphs as he crunched biscuits, one after another, emptying the tin. Naomi came back through the kitchen, her wet hair lying in thick points on her neck. I hurriedly pushed sandwiches into her rucksack as she was on her way out, then stood at the open door for a few minutes, listening to her footsteps going slowly down the road, gradually becoming fainter. The school theatre was a street away but she was always late. She'd stopped running everywhere now; the play was sapping her energy.

'Though just fifteen Naomi Malcolm's Maria is mature beyond her years.' 'Naomi mixes innocence and sexuality in a bewitching performance as Maria; a star is born.' Being tired and wound up was worth it for those reviews on the school website. Two more performances after this: Thursday then Friday. Soon we would all get back to normal.

Dorset 2010

One year later

I know it's Friday today because the fish lady comes to the cottage. I crouch down under the stairs as her van draws up outside, the white shape smudged by the old glass of the door. The woman rings the bell and waits, a squat, hopeful figure, head bobbing as she searches the windows. If she sees me I will have to open the door, compose words, smile. None of these are possible today. A small spider scrabbles over my hand. Bending my head further,

I breathe dust from the carpet and after a while the van rumbles away down the lane. It's a day for being on my own. I lie low and wait for the hours to pass. Fridays still hurt.

After a while, I get up and find the book I left on the hearth last night. I turn over the page with the picture of her shoes and, on the next one, draw the little overlapping circles of a silver ring.

Bristol 2009

The night of the disappearance

I knelt on the kitchen floor, opening up my medical bag to check the drugs against a list to see what I needed. This job was easier away from the surgery; there were fewer interruptions if I picked my time. I was groping into the depths of the leather pockets so I didn't notice her come silently into the kitchen. She walked past me and the bag she was carrying knocked against my shoulder. I looked up, keeping a finger on my list; I was running low on paracetamol and pethidine. Naomi glanced down at me, her blue eyes clouded with thought. Even through the thick make-up she'd already put on for the play there were dark lines under her eyes. She looked exhausted. This wasn't the moment to ask the questions I'd wanted to.

'You're almost done, sweetie. This is the second-last performance,' I said brightly.

Clothes were spilling from her carrier bag; the heels of her shoes had made little holes in the plastic.

‘Dad and I will be there tomorrow.’ I sat back on my heels and looked up, studying her face. The black eyeliner made her look much older than fifteen. ‘I’m longing to see if it’s changed since the first night.’

She looked at me blankly, and then gave me the new smile; only one side of her mouth lifted so it looked as if she was smiling to herself.

‘What time will you be back?’ I gave up and got to my feet reluctantly; I never managed to finish anything. ‘It’s Thursday. Dad usually picks you up on Thursdays.’

‘I told him not to bother ages ago. Walking with friends is easier.’ She sounded bored. ‘The meal will finish around midnight. Shan will give me a lift.’

‘Midnight?’ But she was tired already. Despite myself, my voice was rising. ‘You’ve got the play again tomorrow, the party straight after. It’s only a meal. Ten thirty.’

‘That’s not nearly long enough. Why do I always have to be different from everyone else?’ Her fingers started tapping the table; the little ring that some boy at school had given her was glinting in the light.

‘Eleven, then.’

She stared at me. ‘I’m not a baby.’ The anger in her tone was surprising.

We couldn’t argue all night. She would be onstage soon and needed to calm down; I had to finish sorting the medicines before cooking supper.

‘Half past eleven. Not a second later.’

She shrugged and turned, bending over Bertie where he lay at full stretch, sleeping against the stove. She kissed him, pulling his soft ears gently; though he hardly stirred, his tail thumped the floor.

I touched her arm. ‘He’s old, sweetheart. He needs his sleep.’

She jerked her arm from my hand, her face tense.

‘Relax, it’s okay. You’re a triumph, remember?’ I gave her a quick hug but she turned her face away. ‘Only one more day to go.’

Her mobile went off, and she stepped back, her hand resting on the draining board as she answered. Her fingers were long. She had freckles, tiny ones that went as far as the second knuckle, light gold, like grains of Demerara sugar. The nails were bitten like a child’s, at odds with the pretty ring. I folded her hand in both of mine and kissed it quickly. She was talking to Nikita; I don’t think she even noticed. She was still young enough for the knuckles to feel like little pits under my lips. The phone call finished and she turned to go, a little wave at the door, her way of making up for being irritable.

‘Bye, Mum,’ she said.

Later I fell asleep by mistake. I put the kettle on for her hot-water bottle at about eleven, and lay down on the sofa to wait; I must have drifted off almost immediately. When I woke up my neck ached and my mouth tasted stale. I got up and, pulling my jersey down, went to put the kettle on again.

The kettle was cold under my hand. I looked at the clock. Two in the morning. I hadn’t heard her come in. I felt sick. She’d never been as late as this. What had happened? The blood thumped painfully in my ears for a second until common sense took over. Of course, she had let herself in by the front door and gone straight up to bed. Asleep in the basement kitchen a flight below, I

wouldn't have heard the door shutting behind her. She must have dropped her shoes soundlessly in the front porch and then tiptoed upstairs, quietly, guiltily, past our room and up to hers, on the second floor. I stretched as I waited for the kettle to boil; she could still have her hot-water bottle. I would wrap it up and tuck it in beside her; she might sleepily register the warmth.

I went upstairs slowly past the boys' rooms. Ed snored suddenly as I passed, making me jump. Up another flight to Naomi's room. The door was open a crack and I went in quietly. It was pitch dark and stuffy, smelling of strawberry shampoo and something else, bitter with citrus at the back of it. I felt my way to her chest of drawers, and, pulling out a shirt, slipped the hot-water bottle inside. I stepped carefully over to the bed, half tripping on strewn clothes. My hands moved to turn the cover back around her, but it was smooth and flat.

The bed was empty.

I snapped on the light. Tights spilled from open drawers, there were towels and shoes on the floor. A thong lay on top of a red lacy bra on her bedside table, a black half-cup bra on the chair. I didn't recognize any of these things; had her friends changed here too? Naomi was usually so tidy. A bottle of foundation had tipped over on the dressing table; a stick of lipstick lay in the small beige puddle. Her grey school jersey had been left on the floor, with the white shirt still inside it.

The cover of the bed was slightly dented where she had sat on it but the pillow was quite smooth.

Fear curled in the pit of my stomach. I put my hand on the wall and its coldness seemed to travel up my arm to

the inside of my chest. And then I heard the front door shut two floors down.

Thank God. Thank you, God.

I put the hot-water bottle under the duvet, far enough down to make a warm place for her feet. They would be cold by now in those thin shoes. Then I ran downstairs, careless of the noise. I wouldn't be cross, not tonight. I would kiss her, take her coat and send her up. I could be cross tomorrow. My footsteps slowed as I rounded the corner of the stairs and Ted came into view. Ted, not Naomi. He stood looking up at me. He was wearing his coat and his briefcase was by his feet.

'She's not back.' I was out of breath; the words were difficult to push out. 'I thought you were her coming in.'

'What?' He looked exhausted. His shoulders were hunched; there were deep circles under his eyes.

'Naomi hasn't come home yet.' I went close to him. A faint smell of burning clung about him; it must have been from the diathermy spluttering heat, sealing cut blood vessels. He'd come straight from the operating theatre.

His eyes, the same sea-blue as Naomi's, looked puzzled. 'Her play ended at nine thirty, didn't it?' An expression of panic crossed his face. 'Jesus, it's Thursday.'

He'd forgotten that she had cancelled Thursday pickups, but he never knew what was happening in the children's lives anyway. He never asked. I felt the slow swell of anger.

'She walks back with friends now. She told you.'

'Of course she did. I'd forgotten. Oh well.' He looked relieved.

'But tonight was different.' How could he be so relaxed

when my heart was pounding with anxiety? ‘She went out for a meal with the cast.’

‘I can’t keep up.’ He shrugged. ‘So, she’s out with her mates. Perhaps they’re having such a good time they stayed on.’

‘Ted, it’s after two . . .’ My face flushed hot with panic and fury. Surely he realized this was different, that it felt wrong.

‘That late? Gosh, I’m sorry. The operation went on and on and on. I hoped you’d be asleep by now.’ He spread his hands in apology.

‘Where the hell is she?’ I stared at him, my voice rising. ‘She never does this, she lets me know even if she’s five minutes late.’ As I said it, it occurred to me that she hadn’t for a long time now, but then she had never been as late as this. ‘There’s a rapist in Bristol, it said on the news —’

‘Calm down, Jen. Who is she with, exactly?’ He looked down at me and I could sense reluctance. He didn’t want this to be happening; he wanted to go to bed.

‘Her friends from the play. Nikita, everyone. It was just a meal, not a party.’

‘Perhaps they went to a club after.’

‘She’d never get in.’ Her cheeks were still rounded; she had a fifteen-year-old face, younger sometimes, especially when she was tired. ‘She’s not old enough.’

‘It’s what they all do.’ Ted’s voice was slow with tiredness. He leant his tall frame against the wall in the hall. ‘They have false IDs. Remember when Theo —’

‘Not Naomi.’ Then I remembered the shoes, the smile. Was it possible? A club?

‘Let’s give it a bit longer.’ Ted’s voice was calm. ‘I mean,

it's kind of normal, still early if you're having fun. Let's wait until two thirty.'

'Then what?'

'She'll probably be back.' He pushed himself away from the wall, and rubbing his face with his hands he began to walk towards the steps at the end of the hall that led down to the kitchen. 'If not, we'll phone Shan. You've phoned Naomi, obviously?'

I hadn't. God knows why. I hadn't even checked for a text. I felt for my mobile phone but it wasn't in my pocket. 'Where the bloody hell's my bloody phone?'

I pushed past Ted and ran downstairs. It must have fallen out and was half hidden under a squashed cushion on the sofa. I snatched it up. No text. I punched her number.

'Hiya, this is Naomi. Sorry, I'm busy doing something incredibly important right now. But – um – leave me a number and I'll get back to you. That's a promise. Bye.'

I shook my head, unable to speak.

'I need a drink.' Ted went slowly to the drinks cupboard. He poured two whiskies and held one out to me. I felt the alcohol burn my throat then travel down the length of my gullet.

Two fifteen. Fifteen minutes to go before we would ring Shan.

I didn't want to wait. I wanted to leave the house. I wanted to go down the road to the school theatre, wrench open the doors and shout her name into the dusty air. If she wasn't there then I would run down the main street, past the university, storm into all the clubs, pushing past the bouncers, and yell into the crowds of dancers . . .

‘Is there any food?’

‘What?’

‘Jenny, I’ve been operating all night. I missed supper in the canteen. Is there any food?’

I opened the fridge and looked in. I couldn’t recognize anything. Squares and oblongs. My hands found cheese and butter. The cold lumps of butter tore the bread. Ted silently took it from me. He made a perfect sandwich and cut off the crusts.

While he was eating, I found Nikita’s number on a pink Post-it note stuck to the cork board on the cupboard. She didn’t pick up either. The phone was in her bag. She had pushed it under the table, so she could dance in the club they’d managed to get into. Everyone else wanted to go home, all their friends were leaning against the wall, yawning, but Naomi and Nikita were dancing together, having fun. No one would be able hear Nikita’s phone ringing in the bag under the table. Shan must be awake too, waiting. It was only a year since her divorce from Neil; this would feel worse on her own.

Half past two.

I phoned Shan and, as I waited, I remembered her telling me a week ago how Nikita still shared everything with her and the stabbing moment of jealousy that I’d felt. Naomi didn’t do that any more. Now I was glad Nikita still confided in her mother. Shan would know exactly where we could pick them up.

A sleepy voice mumbled an answer. She must have fallen asleep, like me.

‘Hello, Shan.’ I tried to make my voice sound normal. ‘I’m so sorry to wake you. Do you have any idea where

they are? We'll pick them up, but the trouble is . . .' I paused, and attempted to laugh. 'Naomi forgot to tell me where they would be.'

'Wait a moment.' I could see her sitting up, running her hand through her hair, blinking at the alarm clock on her bedside table. 'Say all that again?'

I took a breath and tried to speak slowly.

'Naomi's not back yet. They must have gone on somewhere after the meal. Did Nikita say where?'

'The meal's tomorrow, Jen.'

'No, that's the party.'

'Both tomorrow. Nikita's here. She's exhausted; she's been asleep since I picked her up hours ago.'

I repeated stupidly: 'Hours ago?'

'I collected her straight after the play.' There was a little pause and then she said quietly, 'There was no meal.'

'But Naomi said.' My mouth was dry. 'She took her new shoes. She said . . .'

I sounded like children do when they want something they can't have. She had taken the shoes and the bag of clothes. How could there not have been a meal? Shan must be mistaken; perhaps Nikita hadn't been invited. There was a longer pause.

'I'll check with Nikita,' she said. 'Phone you back in a moment.'

I was outside a gate that had just shut with a little click. Behind it was a place where children slept safely, their limbs trustingly spread across the sheets; a place where you didn't phone a friend at two thirty in the morning.

The kitchen chairs were cold and hard. Ted's face was

white. He kept bending his knuckles till they cracked. I wanted to stop him but I couldn't open my mouth in case I started screaming. I picked the phone up quickly when it rang and at first I didn't say anything.

'There was no meal, Jenny.' Shan's voice was slightly breathless. 'Everyone went home. I'm sorry.'

A faint buzzing noise started in my head, filling in the silence that stretched after her words. I felt giddy as if I was tipping forwards, or the world was tipping back. I held tightly to the edge of the table.

'Can I speak to Nikita?'

By the tiny space that followed my question, I could measure how far away I had travelled from the gate that had clicked behind me. Shan sounded hesitant.

'She's gone back to sleep.'

Asleep? How could that matter? Nikita was there, safe. We had no idea where our daughter was. A wave of anger was breaking on top of my fear.

'If Nikita knows anything, anything at all that we don't, and Naomi might be in danger –' My throat constricted. Ted took the phone from me.

'Hi there, Shania.' There was a pause. 'I appreciate how difficult this will be for Nikita . . .' His voice was calm but with an edge of authority. It was exactly how he talked to the junior doctors on his team if they rang him for advice about a neurosurgical problem. 'If Naomi doesn't come home soon, we may need to call the police. The more information you give us . . .' Another pause. 'Thanks. Yes. See you in a few minutes, then.'

The boys were sleeping in their rooms. I leant into the warm, breathing space around their heads. Theo had

burrowed under the duvet; his hair, sticking up in a ruff above its edge, was stiff under my lips. Ed's black fringe was damp; even in sleep his eyebrows swooped down like the wings of a blackbird. As I straightened, I caught my reflection in his mirror. My face, lit by the street lamp shining through the window, looked as if it belonged to someone much older. My hair was dark and shapeless. I dragged Ed's brush through it.

As we drove past the school theatre, Ted stopped the car and we got out.

I don't know why. I still don't know why we had to check. Did we really think you would be there, curled up and sleeping on the stage? That we could wake you and that you would smile and stretch, sleepy and stiff, with some explanation about taking too long to change? That we would put our arms round you, and take you home?

The glass doors were locked. They rocked slightly as I pulled at the handles. There was a night-light in the foyer and the bottles in the bar were shining in neat rows. A torn red and yellow programme lay on the floor just inside the door; I could make out red letters spelling 'West' and 'Story' on different lines and part of a picture of a girl with a blue swirling skirt.

Ted drove carefully though I knew he was tired. He had pressed the button on the dashboard that made the back of my seat warm up. It made me sweat and nausea seemed to rise from the deep leather upholstery. I glanced at him. He was good at this. Good at looking serious not desperate. When Naomi was in difficulty during her birth, his calmness had stopped me panicking. He had organized the epidural for the Caesarean section and he was there

when they lifted out her small, bloodied body. I wouldn't think about that now. I looked out of the window quickly. The streets were shining and empty. A fine rain had started to mist the windows. What had she been wearing? I couldn't remember. Her mac? What about her scarf? I looked up into the roadside trees as if the orange cloth might be there, tangled in the wet black branches.

At Shania's house Ted knocked firmly. The night was silent and still around us, but if anyone had been passing in a car, they would have seen a couple like any other. We were wearing warm coats and clean shoes as we waited quietly, heads bowed in the rain. We probably looked normal.

Shania's face was prepared. She looked calm and serious as she hugged us. It was hot in her house, the gas fire flaming in her tidy sitting room. Nikita was hunched on the sofa, a cushion held tightly to her, her long legs in rabbit-patterned pyjamas tucked beneath her. I smiled at her, but my mouth felt stiff and trembled at the corners. Shan sat close to her on the sofa, we sat opposite and Ted took my hand.

'Ted and Jenny want to ask you about Naomi now, babe.' Shania put her arm round Nikita, who looked down as she twisted a thick lock of her dark hair in her fingers.

I moved to sit by her on the other side, but she shifted slightly away from me. I tried to make my voice gentle.

'Where is she, Nik?'

'I don't know.' She bent and pushed her head into the cushion; her voice was muffled. 'I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.'

Shania's eyes met mine over her head.

‘I’ll start, then,’ Shan said. ‘I’ll tell Jenny what you told me.’ Nikita nodded. Her mother continued: ‘Naomi told Nikita that she was going to meet someone, a bloke, after the play.’

‘A bloke?’ Ted’s voice cut across my intake of breath. ‘What bloke?’ The word in his mouth sounded dangerous. Not a boy. Older. My heart started banging so loudly I was afraid Nikita would hear and refuse to tell us anything.

‘She said . . .’ Nikita hesitatingly began. ‘She said she had met someone. He was hot.’

I uncrossed my legs and turned round to face her properly. ‘Hot? Naomi said that?’

‘That’s all right, isn’t it? You asked me.’ Nikita’s forehead puckered, her eyes filled with tears.

‘Of course,’ I told her.

But it wasn’t all right. I’d never heard her use that word. We had talked about sex but as I desperately scanned my memory for clues, I couldn’t remember when. Relationships, sex and contraception – Naomi didn’t seem interested. Had she been? What had I missed?

‘Was he . . . did she . . .’ I groped in a forest of possibilities. ‘Was he from school?’

Nikita shook her head. Ted spoke then. Lightly, casually, as though it wasn’t important.

‘This guy. She must have met him before?’

Nikita’s shoulders dropped fractionally, she stopped twisting her hair. Ted’s calmness was working but I felt a stab of anger that he could manage it so easily. I could hardly keep my voice from trembling.

‘Yeah. I think he was around in the theatre sometimes.’ She glanced down. ‘You know, at the back.’

‘At the back?’ Again, barely inquisitive.

‘Yeah. Where people waited. Maybe.’ She looked up and there was reluctance in her dark eyes. ‘I didn’t really see.’

‘What did he look like?’ I asked quickly.

‘Don’t know.’ Nikita didn’t look at me. There was a pause. ‘Maybe dark hair?’

She moved nearer Shan on the sofa and closed her eyes. I didn’t think she would tell us anything else, but Ted was asking another question.

‘And tonight? What did she say to you about tonight?’

There was silence. Nikita was completely still. Then Shan stood up. ‘She’s tired now.’ Her voice was firm. ‘She needs to go back to bed.’

‘Tell us, Nikita, please.’ I touched her on the arm lightly, carefully. ‘Please, please tell us what she said.’

She looked back at me then, her brown eyes wide with surprise. Her best friend’s mother was a busy figure in the distance: cheerful, running in and running out. In charge of her life and her family. She didn’t plead.

‘She said’ – Nikita paused for a fraction – ‘she said, “Wish me luck.”’