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**Opening Extract from...**

# Perfect Daughter

Written by Amanda Prowse

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I am so lucky to have the Perfect Niece! Amelie Beth Smith, you are beautiful inside and out. We are all so very, very proud of you. You are kind, patient, smart and funny and I can't wait to watch your journey unfold. Never forget how much you are loved.

# Prologue

When the last of the guests had left and Jacks had wrapped the leftover sausage rolls in clingfilm, the newlyweds kicked off their shoes and lay on their donated double bed, looking up at the ceiling.

‘That all went well, didn’t it?’

It had been a small, low-key wedding at the Register Office on the Boulevard. The registrar had mumbled and Pete’s mum had cried. And then everyone had piled back to their new home in Sunnyside Road, bought with the help of both sets of parents. Pete scooted round putting coasters under cans of beer, Jacks passed around plates of sandwiches and cakes, and her best friend Gina teased her for acting like a grown-up married woman. Jacks had looked around the small, square kitchen of their little Weston-super-Mare terrace, trying to stop her mind flying to the vast kitchen in the seafront villa where she had not so long ago lain on a daybed and succumbed to the charms of a boy who had told her about the big wide world beyond her doorstep and had made her believe that one day, she might see it.

Then she had spied her dad, Don, with his arm around

Pete's shoulder, and felt a strange sort of contentment. She sidled up between them.

'I was just saying to young Pete here, the best advice I can give you is never go to bed on a cross word. And if you can smile through the bad times, just imagine how much you will laugh in the good.'

'And the best advice I can give is don't take advice from him!' Jacks' mum jerked her thumb in her husband's direction. She spoke a little louder than she would normally – but normally she wouldn't have polished off three glasses of Asti and four Martini-and-lemonades.

'Thank you, Don.' Pete had beamed at his new wife. 'I'll look after her, I promise,' he'd said, as if she wasn't present.

Pete stroked Jacks' shoulder and brought her back to the present. 'Feels weird having all these rooms to wander around in and only us to live in them. Three bedrooms, the bathroom and two rooms downstairs – I'm still used to being in my little bedroom at my mum's!'

'I know, me too. It'll be great, Pete, all this space.'

She scratched the itching skin, stretched taut across her stomach. 'There'll be one more occupant before we know it!'

'Yep. Can't wait. Shall we decorate the littlest room, make it cosy?'

'What with? Don't think we've got any spare cash for decorating right now.' She hated having to point out the practicalities and quash his enthusiasm.

'I know, and I don't mean anything flash, but we can manage a lick of paint. And Gina's arty, couldn't we get her to draw something on the walls?'

‘Blimey, I’ve seen her artwork. No thanks! Poor baby would be waking up to the Take That logo every morning.’

They both laughed. Pete reached for her hand. ‘I’ve got a wife.’

‘Yes, you have.’ She smiled.

‘Do you feel like a wife?’ he asked.

‘I suppose I do. What are wives supposed to feel like?’

She felt him shrug. ‘Don’t know. I guess like they are part of a pair, and no longer having to face the world on their own.’

‘Oh, Pete, you old softie! That’s lovely, and yes, in that case I do feel like a wife.’ She leant across and kissed him.

‘I wonder how long we’ll live here.’ Jacks let her words float out into the darkness.

‘I reckon a couple of years, just till we are on our feet. We should get this place shipshape, replace the windows, get the garden nice, put a new kitchen in and then move up.’

She smiled into the darkness, loving the idea of a new kitchen and a lovely garden. ‘Poor house, we’ve only been in it for three weeks and already we are planning on moving!’

‘It’s good to plan, Jacks, set our path and find a way. That’s how you get on in life, isn’t it. You work hard and you fight for better.’

‘I like that, Pete. Work hard and fight for better – it sounds like a plan.’ She squeezed his hand. ‘I wouldn’t want much more than this, mind. Maybe an en-suite bathroom and room in the kitchen for one of them big fridges.’

‘I’d love a garage. I could have a workbench and a place to store all my tools and I could make things.’

She could tell he was smiling. ‘What would you make?’

‘Dunno. Things from wood and I could do repairs, fix things. I’d love to be out there tinkering.’

Jacks chuckled. ‘You sound like my dad!

‘I’ll take that as a compliment.’

‘I tell you what I would love, a conservatory, with wicker furniture in it. I’d sit in it and read a magazine and have a coffee, somewhere to put my feet up.’

‘That sounds like a plan.’

She nestled up to him and laid her head on his chest.

‘Funny how things work out, isn’t it, Mrs Davies?’

Jacks smiled at the unfamiliar title. ‘It sure is.’

# One

She supposed it was a talent of sorts, her ability to wake a couple of minutes before her alarm roused her every single morning. It didn't seem like a big deal – who worried about a measly two minutes here or there? But when she multiplied them over a year, it amounted to an extra seven hundred and thirty minutes of sleep that she was missing out on. And when you were as tired as she was, those extra twelve hours over the course of a year would have been most welcome. She wished she could take them all at once, literally just lie in bed, in silence and drift off without fear of disturbance. Bliss.

She lay back and stared at the ceiling with its fringed blue paisley lampshade housing a single dull bulb hanging from the centre. They had meant to change the shade for something yellow to match the wallpaper, that had been the plan, they might even have had a look at a few in British Home Stores, she couldn't remember, but fifteen years later it still hadn't happened. Like everything else in the house that was defunct, mismatched or ageing, they had got used to it, lived with it, until it was just how things were. This



even applied to the cardboard boxes full of clothes and bits and bobs that had been packaged up and stacked in the front hallway. They were intended for the loft. What had he said? ‘Pop ’em there, love, and I’ll shove them up in the loft next time I bring the ladder in.’ But three years later, they had taken root in the hallway, become furniture. She hoovered around them and stacked clean laundry on the top, and the kids threw their school bags on to them rather than take them upstairs. In fact she wasn’t even sure what was in a couple of them.

Opening her eyes wide, she tried to force herself into a greater state of wakefulness. Her nightie was twisted in an uncomfortable ring around her midriff; she lifted her bottom and in her crab-like pose pulled the fabric until it lay flat beneath her. She had got into the habit of wearing both a nightie and pyjama bottoms, whether for warmth, comfort or an added obstacle for Pete to navigate should the mood take him, she wasn’t sure. Although she had to admit the mood hadn’t taken him for quite some time and, if she was being honest, that was something of a relief.

She glanced across at her husband, who slept without a pillow, his head tipped back, mouth open, his dark stubble poking like little sticks through skin that could do with a good dollop of moisturiser. Chance would be a fine thing – he considered owning hair gel a statement of questionable sexuality. Unaware of her scrutiny, he raised his arm and scratched his nose. Then he turned and breathed open mouthed in her direction. She looked away; anything his body emitted at that time of the morning was less than fragrant. He was still a young man, still good-looking when

he was spruced up, but there was something about him in the early-morning light, with the sweat of a warm night clinging to his skin and his breath laced with spices, that made her shrink from him.

She smiled at the irony as she flexed her toes inside his old sports socks that she slept in. Hardly sexy. He still on occasion had the ability to elicit a longing deep inside her, especially when he smelt good and was confident, reminding her of the self-assured banter of their youth. She remembered when they left school, eighteen years ago. She had been a beauty then, with her long, slim legs, blonde hair and a tan that seemed to last year round. Her nose was freckled and her long eyelashes framed her green eyes without the need for mascara. Whenever she stumbled across photographs from that era, it always shocked her how lovely she had been and how unaware of it she was. She recalled her many insecurities and how she had worried about the slight cleft to her chin, her gangly limbs.

They had married soon after they had started dating and in those days slept skin to skin, her face pressed into his chest, arms and legs entwined. Any time separated was considered a waste. They would wake in the early hours to make love before falling asleep again. Not that she had needed much sleep, not then. Neither sleep nor food sustained her, all she needed was him, him and her new baby. The sight of him, the thought of him, the feel of him against her, he was everything.

Jacks crept from their bed and looked back at him as he screwed his eyes shut, wrinkled his nose and farted. She rolled her eyes. 'Those were the days,' she whispered as she

collected her towel from the back of the old dining chair in the corner of the room and headed for the shower.

‘Mum?’

‘What?’ Jacks answered without lifting her head from the newspaper. It was 7.15. She had shoved on some clothes, run a brush through her hair, turned on the lights, flicked on the heating, placed the breakfast cereal on the table and made a hot drink. She now sat at the kitchen table. This was her one small window of opportunity at the beginning of every day when she was able to read the local news. A brief moment before the world came rushing up to meet her and she had to run to keep up, like a lady she’d once seen balancing on a glittery ball in the circus. Her smile had been fixed, but under her elaborate false eyelashes Jacks had seen the terror in her eyes. One wrong step and she would fall off. Jacks knew exactly how she felt.

‘Mum?’ The shout was louder this time.

She closed her eyes. ‘For God’s sake, Martha, you know I hate this shouting up and down the stairs.’ She tapped her palm on the kitchen table, liking the sound of her wedding band on the wooden surface. ‘How many times have I told you, if you want to ask me something, come down here!’ She shook her head and returned to the article in the *Weston Mercury*, interested in how to get a smear-free shine on your conservatory windows with nothing more than warm water and a squirt of vinegar.

Her daughter’s footsteps thundered down the uncarpeted stairs. Jacks drew breath: how many times *had* she told her? Too many to count, but Martha, aged seventeen, who had

lived in this house since she was born, still hadn't mastered conversing face to face, preferring to holler from room to room. Neither, it would seem, had she learnt how to walk down the stairs without shaking the rafters.

'Have I got a shirt for school?' She practically bounced on the spot, her tone was urgent. It amazed Jacks that despite the fact that they left the house at 7.45 every morning and had done so for the last six years, time always seemed to sneak up on Martha like it was a shock or a deviation from the norm, each and every morning.

Jacks looked at her daughter in her tight black school skirt, thick woolly tights and pyjama top, reeking of perfume and trying to tease her roots with her fingers as she loitered in the doorway. She decided not to comment on the dark ring of black kohl that masked her daughter's pretty blue eyes and made her heart-shaped face look top-heavy. There were only so many times she could have that conversation. Besides, when she was a lawyer, rushing up the court steps in a crisp white shirt with her briefcase full of important notes, she would surely rethink her knotty hair and over-the-top eye make-up. She would want to emulate her colleagues. Jacks smiled at the thought. Her brilliant girl, soon to take her A levels, which would put her on the path to a university education and then a dazzling career. Jacks would never forget Mrs Fentiman, the woman who had come into Martha's school and given a talk, extolling the virtues of doing law and painting a picture so vivid, Jacks could taste the champagne with which they toasted their wins and could smell the leather-topped desk at which she sat and enjoyed a perfect view of St Paul's Cathedral.