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Opening Extract from...

The Amber Fury

Written by Natalie Haynes

Published by Corvus

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THE AMBER FURY

NATALIE HAYNES

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For Dan

ὅδ᾽, ὡς ἔοικε, τῇ γυναικὶ συμμαχεῖ.

Sophocles *Antigone* 1 740

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PROLOGUE

L,

So this guy came today, and he says you sent him. Did you? I'll talk to him if you want, but he seems kind of annoying. He mostly talks in clichés. He's all, tell me what happened, in your own words, take your time, whenever you're ready.

He is pretty hot, though. So if you did send him, thanks for that. Let me know if it was you.

Love, D

ACT ONE

1

The first thing they'll ask me is how I met her. They already know how we met, of course. But that won't be why they're asking. It never is.

I remember when Luke was training, he told me that you only ever ask a question if you already know the answer. Lawyers don't like surprises, least of all when they're on the record. So they won't be asking because they want to know the date, the time, the address, all the little details. They will have done their homework, I'm sure. They've spoken to Robert, my old boss, already. So they know when I arrived in Edinburgh, and which day I started work. They probably have a copy of my timetable. If they wanted to, they could pinpoint our first meeting to the minute.

They won't be asking because they want to know what I'll say, they'll just want to know how I say it. Will my eyes go right or left? Am I remembering, or inventing? They'll be measuring my truth against the one they've built from other witnesses. Gauging whether I can be trusted, or whether I'm a liar.

So when they ask, I'm not going to roll my eyes and tell them they're wasting my time. I'm not going to tell them that I can hardly bear to go over this again, that every time someone asks me, I have to live through it all over again. I'm not going to ask if they know what it feels like, holding up the weight of everything that happened. I won't make a fuss. It wouldn't help.

I'm going to take a small breath, look straight ahead, and tell them the truth. I can't get nervous and start rattling on about how I didn't plan to be in Edinburgh. I won't ask them to remember what had happened to me, and why I'd had to run away from London, why I was in Scotland at all. I won't remind them that I could have had no inkling of how terribly things would turn out. Besides, even if I had, I wouldn't have cared. I didn't care about anything then.

I'm just going to answer as simply as I can: I met them on the 6th of January 2011, in the basement room at 58 Rankeillor Street. And I wouldn't have believed any of them could do something so monstrous.

That isn't quite true, of course. Even by the standards of the Unit, they were a difficult group. But Robert had warned me that they would be challenging, so my expectations were low.

I went to meet Robert the day before term began, at the pupil referral unit on Rankeillor Street. The building was empty except for the two of us, but I had to pick up forms and files and registration lists, most of which were covered in Post-it notes linking children's names to medical conditions. At first glance, at least half of them were allergic to something: nuts, pollen, air pollution, gluten, mould spores.

'They don't seem very sturdy,' I pointed out, skimming the top few pages Robert had just given me. His office was a huge, high-ceilinged room whose elegant proportions had been sliced in two by a partition wall. One half had been converted into his secretary's office. It was lined with filing cabinets from the door all the way to the far wall. In front of these stood her symmetrical desk: a computer in one corner was matched in the opposite one by three wire trays balanced on top of one another and marked 'In', 'Out' and 'Pending'; all of them were empty. Next to them was a picture of two young children, dark-haired and grinning in front of a loch in the pouring

rain. The frame was clearly handmade – in bright, misshapen purple clay – presumably by one of the children it contained.

Robert's office was the yin to Cynthia's yang. Bulging files were piled up on every flat surface, including the floor. Torn scraps of paper with names or initials were balanced on top of them. Where Cynthia's only light source was the greenish long-life bulb overhead, Robert's room had two huge sash windows which looked out onto Rankeillor Street. Look up to the left, and you could see Salisbury Crags, the dark cliffs which glower down over Edinburgh, reminding you that there will be no nonsense here. The windows were framed with thick, theatrical curtains, their dark crimson folds coated with a thin film of dust, through which narrow, wandering tracks of curtain showed. Someone had taken an erratic vacuum cleaner to them but had lost the will before victory could be claimed.

'Don't believe a word of it,' he panted, as he hunted around the desk, the table and the mantelpiece over the long-dead fireplace, trying to make sure he had gathered everything with 'Alex' or 'A.M.' written on or near it. 'I mean, do believe it,' he corrected himself. 'Don't test them by throwing peanuts at them, or asking an asthmatic one to run up the stairs. But rest assured, Alex, these children will not be felled by a mere allergen. These details come up when they're assessed by doctors and social workers, of course, for their specific educational needs and challenges, and we have to keep full records of everything, even if it seems trivial. I doubt,' he glanced down at the file he was holding, 'if Jenny Stratton will meet a sticky end from her lychee allergy in your classroom. You'd have to go a long way to find a lychee anywhere in this city, come to that. It makes you wonder how they found out she was allergic at all. Most of them will be fine when they get to know you. Some of them might be less keen on doing drama or dramatherapy than others. Some of them are very confident, some are, you know, shyer.'

'How many kids do you have here?' I asked him, looking at the paper chaos. There couldn't possibly be room in the building – a vast converted terraced house spread over four floors, its yellow bricks blackened with dirt – for the number of children needed to generate this many forms.

'There are about thirty of them here at any one time, but they come and go, obviously. New children will be referred here from about the second week of term, I expect. And we'll lose some of these ones as we go along.'

'Lose them?'

'Rankeillor Street is a charity. Children come here when nowhere else will take them. Thanks to our benefactors, we can take a few children out of the system which is failing them. Most of them have been expelled from at least one school, though we do take some children before that point.' He began hunting around for something under the papers on his desk. 'Their parents or guardians apply to us, and if we think we can help, genuinely help, we try and make space for them. Our admissions procedure was enshrined in the original gift of the building and the fund: we don't take children who are simply struggling academically. There are plenty of other options available to them. Not all of them are good options, I know, but they do exist.'

He eventually found what he was looking for – a battered biro, which he used to scrawl a note on the file he held in his left hand. He didn't even pause while he was writing. 'We take the ones who don't function well elsewhere, for whatever reason: they've been bullied, or they are bullies, or they don't fit in, or whatever. The ones for whom we might actually be able to make a difference. But our aim is to get these children back into mainstream schools, if we possibly can. So really, we're trying to get rid of them as soon as they get here. And sometimes it works, but not always. We also lose some because

they can't function here any more successfully than they did at other schools. Even safety nets have holes in them, you know.'

I nodded, wondering what he meant. Robert had always been like this: he tended to assume you were more attuned to his thought processes than you actually were. Than I actually was, anyway.

'Not usually more than one or two each term,' he added. 'Unless it's a very bad term.'

He looked over his half-moon spectacles at the papers I was now trying to arrange into a coherent order. 'This class,' he reached over and prodded one of the pages with the wrong end of his pen, 'will probably be the most difficult for you.'

'Why?' The sheet listed only five names, a small class of fourth-years. I did the maths in my head: fifteen years old. He handed me three more files, which I slotted in to what seemed to be a sensible order. If I could control the paperwork, perhaps I could control a classroom. I now had one set of files for each class, and one class for each year-group, five in total. Looking at the lists of unfamiliar names, I wondered how long it would take to match them to children. Robert didn't answer the question.

'I think that's the last of them, Alex,' he said. 'I won't lie to you. They can be right little fuckers. But don't worry. You'll win them over in the end. I'm not giving you every sentence we have on every child: it'll just stress you out, thinking you need to read it all. You have everything you need here. If you feel like you're at sea with a particular student, come and ask for their full file; Cynthia will have a copy you can read. These children deserve to be more than their records, though, so please don't ask unless you really need to know something.'

I wanted to ask him what kind of information might be in the files which I didn't have, but he had already skipped on to talk about something else. Butterfly-brained, my mother would have called

him: always lighting upon one topic, then fluttering off to another one before you could catch up. It should have been infuriating, but his enthusiasm was always so complete that he made you want to race to catch up with him instead of sulking that he'd gone off without you. He had always been like that, even when I was a student and he was teaching drama over in the University buildings on George Square, less than a mile from where I now sat perched on the balding arm of his tweed-covered chair. He was the teacher you always hope for: passionate, exciting, funny. His chubby frame gave him a cuddly appearance that he only fulfilled if you handed work in on time, fully referenced and neatly printed out. Though his reddish hair had now faded to a sandy grey, and his face had creased into a few more lines, he still looked like the actor he had been in his youth. Even today, before the Unit was officially open, he was wearing a three-piece suit with a tartan waistcoat, as though he might be a wedding baritone, temporarily missing the rest of his choir. And this was him dressed down. I looked at my jeans, which were now covered with specks of white paper, shed from the papers I held, like tiny dirty confetti.

'Let me show you your classroom,' he said. 'Leave those.' He pointed at the files, then looked round his office, trying to find an empty spot. 'Perhaps put them on Cynthia's desk,' he said more quietly, as if she might appear and berate him. 'I'm sure she wouldn't mind. Just for now.'

I dusted them off with my sleeve before placing them on her desk, then followed him out of the room. He took me down the two flights of stairs to the ground floor, then down again to the basement, and what was now my room. The stairs grew darker as we reached the hallway at the bottom. Two scratchy yellow bulbs threw a thin light onto the final steps and the industrial-green classroom door. It was like climbing down into a cold swamp. Edinburgh in the winter is

dingy enough without going underground. It was barely warmer in the damp hallway than it was outside, in the sleeting rain.

'The kids like it down here,' he said, opening the door and stepping to one side so I could walk in. For a man who had once done a season at the RSC (one up from spear-carrying, darling, but it still counts), he was a terrible liar.

At least my predecessor had tried to make the place cosy. The back wall was a fiery orange, and the radiators were turned up to their highest setting, so the room itself was relatively dry. But the air smelled sourly of mildew, and as I scanned the warped doors of the cupboards which ran along the wall under the windows at the front of the building, I guessed that if I opened them, the smell would be stronger still.

The room was huge, easily bigger than the one-bedroom flat I was staying in down the road. It ran under the whole building, which had to compensate for standing on a hill. The windows at the back looked out over a yard which must have replaced the garden when the house had been converted into a pupil referral unit. Guessing from the litter, it was now mainly used for smoking. But at the front, where the ground had snuck up underneath it, the window looked out onto a whitewashed wall with a small door on one side. I noticed a large, dented keyhole and wondered if the door still opened. I had a brief vision of being locked in there by a class of jeering children who hated me, and shuddered. It had probably once been the coal-cellar, I supposed.

Way above head-height you could see the thick layer of pebbles in the space between the gate onto the street and the steps up to the front door of the building. I could just see the bottom of a few sorry shrubs in pots, which did nothing to change the Unit's unloved face. Like so many buildings in Edinburgh, it was grand but tired at the same time.

Robert flicked the light switch next to the door and three weary lamps flickered on overhead, two over the chairs and tables at the front end of the room and one more over the dingy, empty space towards the back. I blinked, wondering if bulbs came in a lower wattage than forty, and if they did, why someone would use them in a classroom.

'Carole – your predecessor – probably did most of her teaching here,' he said, pointing towards the chairs. I nodded. If she wanted to make out the kids through the gloom, she would have had to. Even in the summer, I would discover, the lights needed to be on in this room. How on earth had Carole taught art lessons in here? Why hadn't she asked for more lights to be fitted?

The chairs were old and mismatched. A battered brown leather chair stood behind the teacher's desk, my desk, and the rest were fabric-covered in grimy reds, purples and maroons. The walls were decorated with bright collages and paintings, made by the children last term, I supposed. But the corners were already peeling up from the bottom of each picture, as though the room were trying to rid itself of any signs of life.

The following afternoon I was sitting in the basement, waiting for them. I'd taught three classes that morning, which had gone relatively well, considering that it was three years since I'd finished my PGCE. I'd run quite a few theatre workshops for children in the meantime, but I hadn't taught, properly taught, a single lesson since I'd qualified. I knew perfectly well that if Robert hadn't been my friend, I would never have got a job at Rankeillor Street – on merit, or experience. How many people are given a job on the strength of a phone call? Robert had blustered something about an unexpected vacancy and short-term contracts being hard to fill, but he could easily have found someone better than me. I couldn't even bring myself to feel guilty about all the people he must have overlooked.

I'd met the rest of the Unit's staff over lunch upstairs, as they gossiped over sandwiches and microwaved pots of soup. One thing was clear: the class Robert had warned me about was indeed unpopular with almost every teacher. Eyes rolled when I asked why they were so much worse than the other kids. 'How long have you got?' snapped one irritable woman, settling herself against a cushion before she began her litany. But Robert, whose bat-like ears missed nothing, swooped in and told everyone to stop frightening me.

'If she leaves,' he hissed, 'someone's going to have to cover her classes.' He looked round at the rest of the staff. 'All her classes,' he emphasised.

So, as the classroom door opened, I was remembering the conversations that I used to have with my housemates when we were all teacher-training: one in maths, one in history, and me in drama and dramatherapy. Children are like animals, we agreed. They can sense fear. Like pack animals. Like hyenas. They know when you're afraid and they use it against you, taking advantage of their superior numbers to destroy you. We really did see our charges as interchangeable with wild dogs. No wonder I'd given up as soon as I'd qualified: no audience was ever as frightening as a classroom, and besides, the director doesn't have to face the audience. We – I should say, they – can hide behind the actors.

I could smell them before I saw them; fresh smoke clung to their clothes as they came in. Whatever else they were allergic to, it wasn't cigarettes. As the five of them slunk into the room – they were late, of course – it was a small, scrappy, red-haired boy who voiced what they were all thinking. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'Come in, sit down,' I replied, gesturing at the chairs in the middle of the room. I was leaning against the front of my desk, trying to look casual. It was the first of many things I got wrong. I didn't need to

befriend them, I needed to look like an authority figure. That's why they give teachers the biggest desks.

'You know who she is,' one of the girls hissed at the red-headed boy. 'She's Robert's friend. Miss Allen's gone on maternity leave early, hasn't she?'

He shrugged and nodded. The five of them took their seats – three girls, two boys.

'I'm Alex Morris,' I said, 'and I'm very glad to meet you.' I read from the sheet Robert had given me: 'You must be Annika, Mel, Carly, Ricky and Jono.'

They stared at me. The two boys were sitting together. The one who had asked who I was looked much younger than the other four. He had to be at least fourteen, but he looked no older than the twelve-year-olds I'd taught in the morning. He was skinny, with short, almost shaved ginger hair. His pale scalp shone through in patches, as if the hair had been hacked off against his will. He wore a huge hoody over his shirt and tie; he must have borrowed it from the boy he sat next to, who was several inches taller and much bulkier.

The larger boy had greasy dark hair hanging down in front of his face. The buttons of his school shirt strained when he sat down and his shoulders were slightly hunched, either because he spent a lot of time leaning over a computer, or because the shoulders of his shirt were as tight as the chest and it was the only way he could fit into it. His cheeks were pink and freckled. The notes I'd cribbed over lunch told me they were the same age, though it didn't seem possible.

'Are you Ricky?' I asked the dark-haired one. He rolled his eyes and pointed at the scrawny redhead.

'You must be Jono, then,' I continued. He shrugged. I added them to my mental list, as I had been doing with all the other children that day. Ricky – red hair. That was easy. I couldn't think of an alliteration for Jono. I'd have to rely on his dead-eyed stare to jog my memory.

Two of the girls were also sitting together. The one who had spoken to Ricky was also a redhead, but her hair was a beautiful pale orange colour, like a pedigree cat's. I couldn't tell if it was dyed or natural, but it framed her face, curling under her jaw in neat wings. I had worked with actresses who didn't have such a perfect blow-dry. Her eyes were lined in a bright emerald green, and she had added some green eyelashes in among her own. I looked the question at her.

'I'm Carly,' she said. A small, neat voice to match her small, neat frame. 'And this is Mel.' She put her arm round the slender blonde girl next to her and squeezed her shoulders, smiling. The blonde girl said nothing, just tilted her feathery head a little and looked at me. Clear blue eyes shone out from under her fringe. I tried to remember what I'd read about Mel or Carly, but I came up blank. I had memorised as many children as I could that day, and the details were starting to get fuzzy. This was already the busiest day I'd had in weeks: meeting all the staff and students and learning all their names was beginning to overwhelm me.

'Hello,' I said to them both.

Mel waved the fingers of one hand at me. I guessed she was trying to convey that she was not hostile, but not interested either. I wished I could do the same. So the girl sitting alone was Annika, long-limbed, golden-haired and dark-eyed. She wore big glasses with thick black frames. Only a girl who knew she was beautiful would wear something so deliberately ugly. They made her look like a seventies spy. Without them, she would be only one fur hat away from a Russian novel. Annika Karenina, I thought. Another easy one to remember.

'So you must be Annika?' I asked her, smiling.

'Yes, well done. Five out of five.' She flicked her blonde mane as she turned away, like an ill-tempered racehorse. I felt the smile freeze on my face. This was what one teacher had told me earlier. Annika is a right cow, she had said, succinctly. Whatever you say or do, she will

punish you for it. Don't take it personally. None of the rest of us do.

I took a breath and began. 'I know you usually do art therapy in here. But this term, I'd like us to do some dramatherapy instead, if that's OK with you.'

'Fuck off,' said Ricky, without malice. 'Art's the only thing I like.' He picked up his bag, lifted it onto his spindly shoulder, then stood up and slouched out of the room. The remaining four stared at me. I had no idea what to say.

'Does anyone else feel that strongly about art?'

'I don't think so,' said Carly, smiling again. She and Mel made eye contact, and they both started laughing. I tried not to redden, wondering if it was a joke at my expense.

'Good,' I said, too loudly. Any fragment of authority I might have possessed had walked straight out of the room with that boy.

'Will we be putting on plays?' Carly asked, still giggling. I caught another glint of green from the outer corner of her eyes, as her false lashes caught the light.

'We can do, of course.' I looked round the vast room. We were only using about a third of it, so there was plenty of room for performing if they wanted to. Though I would have to find some way of lighting the rest of the space. 'Is that something you'd like to do?'

More shrugs.

'Maybe we should try to get to know each other a bit better?' I suggested, trying not to sound desperate. I thought of the years that had passed since my teacher-training year, and knew that I was now paying the price for never having taken it seriously enough. Teacher-training was something I'd chosen to endure so I could keep on directing student plays. I must have sat through hours of discussion about difficult students and conflict resolution, but I could remember none of it. Maybe the directing could help me instead. I cast around for a game or something to break the ice.

'Let's try this. I want each of you to tell the rest of us two truths and one lie. We'll try and work out what the lie is, and by the end of it, I hope I'll know a bit more about you all.'

They looked sceptical.

'I'll start,' I said. 'I'm from London, I have a degree in English and Drama, and this is my first time in Edinburgh.'

'You're definitely from London,' said Carly, her pale red hair tipping to and fro as she nodded. 'You sound it. What do you think's the lie?' She looked at Mel, who frowned, then shook her head.

'Why are you in our unit, then?' asked Annika. She shook loose a few hairs that had caught the edge of her pink lip-gloss. 'Are you even qualified?'

'Yes, thank you. I'm a trained teacher and I have a postgraduate qualification in dramatherapy,' I explained.

'Oooh,' she said, with contempt. She reached into her pockets and pulled out a pair of white headphones, fitting them carefully into her ears. I heard a faint, tinny sound and wondered what to do. Challenge her and risk losing another student in the first five minutes of the lesson, or ignore her and risk looking like I was scared of her? Which I was, as the whole room must have realised. I was more embarrassed than upset at this point. I looked at Carly, hoping she'd continue to play the game.

'Then it's not your first time here. That's the lie,' she guessed. 'And that's how you know Robert.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'You got me. I did my degree here. Robert was one of my tutors. Now your turn.'

'I'm Carly Jones,' she said. 'Can that be one of my three things?'

I shook my head.

She thought for a moment and tried again. 'I'm fifteen. My favourite colour is blue. And…' She paused. People always pause before the lie. 'I like cats.'

'She hates cats,' said Jono, instantly. 'She's allergic to them.'

'Now you,' I said to Jono.

'This is fucking pathetic,' he replied. I waited, hoping he couldn't smell my desperation over the sweaty odour which was coming from his bag. Did he have a gym kit? I didn't think they did PE at the Unit.

'Fine. I'm fourteen, I wanted a PS3 for Christmas, but my parents got me an Xbox, because they're too stupid to know the difference. And I hated art therapy. If I never see another fucking collage as long as I live, that'll be fine.'

'Is an Xbox so bad?' I asked.

'It's OK,' he said. 'I suppose. But the PS3 is obviously better. They just don't listen.'

We had already passed the limits of my knowledge of games consoles. I was relieved when Carly spoke again.

'He's not fourteen, he's fifteen,' she said. 'Miss Allen brought in a cake.'

I felt a grudging respect for my predecessor. Perhaps that was how to win them over.

'So you really hated making collages?' I asked Jono.

'It's the glue,' he said. 'It stinks. I can still smell it now.' Once he said it, I realised that he had identified the chemical tang beneath the stench of damp that filled the basement, which I hadn't been able to place. 'You can't even sniff it,' he added, 'because it's safety glue.'

'Not that you would sniff glue, since it's dangerous and illegal.' I was trying to smile, but my face felt tight.

'Of course not, miss.' He didn't smile back.

'You don't have to call me miss,' I said, quickly. 'Alex is fine.'

'Alright, "Alex",' he said, as if I might be lying about my name.

I turned to Annika and raised my eyebrows. 'Perhaps you could take your headphones out and switch your music off,' I said.

'Oh, have you started to say something interesting?' she said, all mock-surprise. 'Because if you're still bleating on about getting to

know us, I'm not going to waste my time.' She was flipping through screens on her phone.

'I'll do three things for her,' said Mel, the quiet blonde girl. It was the first thing she'd said since she walked through the door. Her voice was unexpected, but I couldn't work out why. Was the emphasis on the wrong word? Her accent was impossible to place. She continued. 'Her name's Annika, she's Swedish, and she's a total bitch. Wait, did you say one of them should be a lie?'

'Fuck you,' said Annika as she switched from one song to another.

'You now,' I said to Mel.

'I'm Mel Pearce,' she said. 'I'm in the Unit because I got chucked out of my old school. I'm deaf, and I wish I wasn't.'

There was another awkward silence. They were all watching, waiting to see what I might say.

'The last one's the lie? You like being deaf?' I asked her.

She nodded. 'It's everyone else who doesn't like me being deaf,' she said.

'OK, maybe that's something we could talk about later in the session.'

'Yeah, because that sounds interesting,' said Annika.

'Don't be such a fucking bitch,' said Carly, her soft Edinburgh accent blunting the force of the words only a touch.

'Shut up, you stupid cunt,' snapped Annika. She jumped out of her seat.

'Don't start on her, Carly,' said Jono, delighted to see the lesson collapsing around him. 'She might go for you with a knife.'

'Christ, I didn't go for anyone with a knife. I was slicing bread and he started pissing me off. It was the school's stupid knife.' Annika grabbed her bag and stalked towards the door. She opened it, and turned back to me. 'And next time, "Alex", maybe we could talk about something that isn't how someone feels. I am so fucking bored

of talking and hearing about everyone's feelings. This is the only education we're going to get, you know.'

'It's the only education you're going to get because you got kicked out of your school for threatening someone at knife-point,' Jono muttered, but quietly.

'I mean it,' she said. 'I don't want to be… twenty, and not know more than I know now.' Twenty, it seemed, was the greatest age she could consider being. 'If you're so qualified, teach us something. Otherwise it's all just,' she looked back at Jono, 'fucking collages.'

'OK. Do you all feel that way?' I asked.

They nodded.

'We're not stupid,' Carly said. 'We can do anything they do in normal schools.'

'Alright then. We'll do that. There will have to be some feelings involved though.' I turned back to Annika, who still stood with one hand on the door handle. 'That's part of what plays are for. They should change the way you feel about things, otherwise they're not good plays.'

'Fine,' she said. 'So long as it's about something that isn't these fucking losers.' She jerked her head back at her classmates as she walked out. The door banged shut behind her.

'OK, well, this is a dramatherapy session,' I said to the remaining three. 'So, for homework, I'd like you all to start keeping a diary, if you don't do that already.' They stared at me. 'You don't have to bring it in to the Unit, you don't have to tell anyone what's in it, I just want you to write something every day, that you learned, or noticed or thought or felt. Then you can try and write scenes based on your diary entries later in the term, if we feel like it?'

'Yeah, we'll think about it, miss.' Jono was up out of his seat already. 'I'll definitely tell Annika you want her to note down her feelings in a book.' He sniggered as he lumbered past.

The two girls collected their things too. They'd simply decided the lesson was over, and I'd barely kept them in the room for twenty minutes, half of the session time.

'Don't worry,' Carly said, kindly. 'You might do better next time. What shall we tell Ricky?'

The whole thing had gone as badly as it could possibly have done, and I knew it was because I was incapable of coping with the kind of children I was supposed to be teaching here. These weren't the middle-class London children I was used to, coming to a theatre workshop on a Saturday morning because their mothers thought it sounded fun and it gave them a couple of hours to spend drinking lattes in peace.

I thought for a moment. 'Ricky said he liked art, didn't he? Tell him to draw me a picture.'

As Carly and Mel came past my chair, Mel looked at me. 'You told two lies,' she said.

'What?' I thought I'd misheard her. She spoke so softly, and when I first met her, I thought that was odd. I suppose I must have thought deaf people would be more likely to shout, because they couldn't judge their own volume. I'd never given it much thought.

'You said we had to tell two truths and one lie. But you told two. You lied about not having been in Edinburgh before, and before that, you lied about being glad to meet us.'

I wanted to correct her, but I could see it would be no use. There was no point lying to her again.

'You don't want to be here with us,' she said. 'So why would we want to be here with you?'