Blood from Stone

Frances Fyfield

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Extract

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PART ONE

Chapter One

Scene 1

Following his acquittal, which happened without too much of a fanfare but with dramatic abruptness on the fourth day of the sixth week of his postponed and protracted trial, the Defendant waited outside Court Three in the Central Criminal Court long after everyone else had departed. He was admiring the older part of the building. He had been granted the accolade of the original, seventeenth-century courtroom that had once led, via a trapdoor in the floor, to the cells of Newgate Gaol beneath. Two centuries ago, prisoners would enter the court via this hole in the ground; it was said that the judge would hold a perfumed nosegay to his face to mask the smell of incarcerated humanity. *Ring a ring o' roses, a pocket full of posies, Atishoo, atishoo! We all fall down.* Or maybe, as Ms Shearer, QC, his learned Counsel for the Defence had said, this ditty referred to the plague years.

He was waiting specifically to say goodbye to her. He knew very well she detested him as thoroughly as anyone of her bloodless and ruthless temperament could entertain such

an emotion. He had his own, foul smell. She would be better at carefully concealed contempt than she would be at affection and as for sentiment, Jehovah forbid. She was fifty-one, walked like an aggressive ballerina, acted like a wheedling prima donna specialising in outrage on behalf of her clients, and had the ability to make herself believe in them absolutely for as long as it took. Her desire to win was lethal. He had charmed her at first, but that was a long time before. Ms Shearer had got what her ugly face deserved.

The trial had gone wrong on her, with the right result, certainly, one achieved through exploitation of weakness, legal argument, bullying, manipulation and luck. The suicide of the prime witness could only be called a misfortune. A thoroughly professional hatchet job on her part, in other words. It was for the prosecution to prove their case and for her to destroy it; she had done the latter but the result would not cover her with glory simply because it would be seen as an outrageous piece of cruel luck, rather than advocacy.

She would not want to say goodbye. She would never want to see him again, but he was fresh out of jail and for the first time he was leaving the court via the front door and not via the prison van. The prison van, he had told her, was an exquisitely uncomfortable mode of transport, like travelling on the inside of a human time bomb complete with moulded plastic seats and manacles.

Freedom could wait. He knew she had to come through that door over there in order to find her own way out and he knew she would be hoping he was long gone, never to be seen or heard of again, but he wanted a chance to stress to her how much they had in common, to *thank* her, of course and above all, to let her know exactly *what* they had achieved

between them. As if, after all those hours spent together, she did not know already.

She wore her high heels as if born in them, clicking over the tiled floor, hesitating when she saw him, alone apart from the security guard who waited to see them out. The space was suddenly vast. His small legal team had melted away as soon as the Judge left his seat. No one else wanted to say goodbye. The Prosecution's pathetic posse of lawyers and disgruntled police had exited stage left, shepherding away that bitch of a girl with a bag who would have spat at him in passing if not held back. They might all be elsewhere, rending their garments like biblical penitents. So, it might just be the two of them, then; after all those hours spent together saying goodbye.

Her hesitation, a slow little click-clack of the black shoes, as if pausing in a dance, turned into certainty. Ms Shearer would never give herself the option of running away.

'Still here, Richard?' she said. 'Doesn't the fresh air beckon or something? It's over.'

'I wanted to thank you.'

She was standing back, but he reached forward and touched her arm above the elbow. She was heavily laden with leather panniers of paper over each shoulder; her face was old and cold, paler than his prison pallor, a face devoid and exhausted and still ugly.

'No need to thank me. I was only doing my job.'

'So you were. Can I carry your bags, miss?'

'No. My luggage is my own.'

She began to steer her way round him, her distaste palpable. He was furious. *After all those hours*.

'I only wanted to walk out of here with you. My saviour. And you can't even bear to do that?'

She put down the document bags and rubbed her right shoulder, weariness overcoming her. Spoke loudly in her harsh voice.

'No, I don't want to walk out of here with you, even if it's the wrong time of day for the newspapers. You wanted to say goodbye, so goodbye, Rick Boyd. I've done the job and I've got another. Another innocence to prove.'

'Shake hands, then.'

In an automatic gesture of politeness – she was good with gestures – she extended her right hand towards him. He glimpsed the long, ringless fingers with the talon nails he had seen so often turning the pages of paper in his presence, looking for the weaknesses in the words and always finding them. In the last second, her hand trembled and he imagined what she would want to do after she had shaken his. She would want to wipe away all traces, stroke her damp palm on the cloth of her skirt to get rid of the slime of him and maybe she would not even wait until he was out of sight. He seized the proffered hand in both of his own and bent back the first finger until he could hear the crick of bone.

'Beautiful hands,' he murmured. 'I got the dear Angel to display hers on the kitchen table. I do so love a woman's hand. She'd varnished her fingernails for me. She was admiring herself, hands splayed on the wood, when I took off the first digit. The blood went in the soup and salt went in the wound. She slept very well, I assure you. I'm sure she doesn't miss it. Anyway, I really did want to thank you for springing me. Magnificently done. Every single trick in the book.'

He struggled with pride, straightened his shoulders.

'I suppose we killed her, really,' he murmured. 'But I didn't mean it. I'll find that other bitch. Anyway, thanks.'

The hand he relinquished fell to her side. She flexed nerveless fingers, took a deep breath, hoisted her bags of robes and papers and clicked her way across the floor. From a safe distance, she half turned, checked the mobile phone in her breast pocket, spoke over her shoulder, 'I'll put it all in my memoirs, Mr Boyd,' and then she went out. The guard followed her, leaving the Defendant alone.

He did a little dance on the central design of the tiled floor.

Free.

Conscience was something which belonged to other people. The hot summer sunshine outside on the street was as sweet as she had promised, not that he noticed the seasons. Truth never hurt anyone except his victims, and victims lied, did they not? Lied, while only one of them had died. Who cared? They were cut from the same cloth, Ms Shearer and he. They didn't *do* suffering.

Rejoice.

Only, out in the daylight, he knew she had not done it right. She had not proved he was INNOCENT. What memoirs? What book of revelation of all those long hours? She never loved him and she still had his life.

Scene 2.

It was early in the morning of a cold January day when Paul Bain was crossing through from one busy road towards another, admiring the contrast between this street and the one he had left and wishing he was at home in bed. The tree-lined street was quiet, containing ambassadorial-style residences and a discreetly expensive hotel with six floors and a façade of Edwardian splendour. He was wondering what it would be like to be a rich London tourist and stay in

a place like that, reflecting that an overnight stay would cost him a month's wages and this was not the career he had in mind for himself. Artist reduced to dogsbody. It was a day for feeling bitter. He had his camera ready for the morning's unglamorous task, which was photographing road works in an evidence-gathering exercise for Westminster City Council. He hoped he did not look the part and he did not want to reach his destination, so he stopped and looked up for a spot of dreaming, and that was when he saw her.

The woman was sitting on the balustrade of the sixth-floor balcony of the hotel, framed by a couple of box trees behind her with her booted feet dangling in front, supporting herself on her hands. She was fully dressed with a flash of colour and looked small and odd, perched up there. A window opened in the room next to hers; someone stepped out on to their balcony and spoke to her. It all seemed very relaxed, if eccentric, as if it was a normal, early morning chat between chambermaids, all under control. The camera was in his hands. He trained it on her, the better to see. She had shiny hair, which caught the light as she shook her head. He thought he saw the suggestion of a reassuring smile through the lens, as if she had seen him or someone she knew and liked, and then she jumped.

She leapt. In one split second she was safe, if precarious, on the broad stone balustrade, a person teasing danger rather than in it, and then she pushed herself off with her hands, spread her arms wide and floated down like a bird shot from the skies. He recorded her agonisingly slow progress through the lens: he knew the meaning of time standing still as her disfigured shape fell and became a blur as it hit the road with a deafening sound. The noise was like a distant car crash causing vibrations through his feet and skull, a muted

explosion sending the birds in the trees flying away in screaming protest. He simply stood there with his camera frozen to his hand until his knees began to tremble and the buildings around him seem to shake, shrug and become still. He had forgotten his own name.

Then he let the camera drop and looked back up to the balcony with his naked eye. The person who had been speaking to the woman had moved back from the edge and covered her face. The silence was unspeakable. He did not move; nothing moved. He stood there for some time, like a child waiting for someone to collect him. He had the perverse feeling that someone ought to ask him how he was, because he was cold on the shady side of the street and he felt weak and sick and lonely. In the midst of all of this, after an ambulance arrived and people fussed over the dead thing in the road and no one came near him, he found himself obscurely angry with her for subjecting him to this, and at the same time it occurred to him that all disasters created opportunities and if he wanted to be a member of the paparazzi, he should learn to think like one. With those colours, she looked as if she might have been a celebrity. It might have been a film stunt gone wrong. As soon as he had seen her, he had remembered a startlingly similar happening only a week before, when another woman had leapt from a building in the cold light of day. It made all this seem like an unreal sham, simply a harmless death rehearsal and a perfect photo opportunity.

So he sold her. Her, pictures of her. Ms Marianne Shearer hit the news with more force than she had ever done even in the most infamous of her trials as a champion of justice.

'Celebrity' and 'well known in certain circles' amounted to the same thing. It was a dull week too soon after New Year.

Throwing oneself from a window was enough to secure temporary celebrity status, especially when the suicide was rich, well qualified, successful and without any apparent problems, thus providing more of a sensation than the last self-inflicted demise. Bain's excellent-quality mementos were published the next day following an auction for the rights. There was intense interest and considerable outrage since the selected newspapers were the first to bear the bad tidings to most of her friends, family, colleagues, etc. They all learned of her ending by watching her in free fall, captured in newsprint on a morning when there was no other news. The insensitivity of sensationalised death on camera and the cold voyeurism of the opportunistic photographer gave the deceased an added dimension of tragedy. She floated to earth in a brown blur of glory, famous at last, as she might have wanted, or not. *A woman at the top of her professional tree/a fearless practitioner of the law/protector of human rights/the innocent/owner of three-bedroomed Kensington apmt worth one mill, loved by friends and surviving brother. British citizen, born in NZ.*

Strangers who never knew her at all shed tears. Poor, wretched woman, for whom money bought nothing but the price of a lofty hotel room hired for the express purpose of throwing herself out of it. A failed love affair? Seasonal blues? Whatever. Poor, lonely rich woman, a lesson to us all. Tributes from friends.

One person looked at the first edition of the *Daily Mail*, having been drawn to buy it like thousands of others purely by the front page photograph of a blurred silhouette plunging down the side of a building, with promises of more on page three. She looked closely and was also moved to tears

until she found the details and name. Then she threw it across the room. Why didn't she kill herself sooner, before she did so much damage? And then she cried herself angrily into sleep, because this wasn't justice, it never was.

The photographer came to consider it the worst thing he had ever done, to be in that street, at that time and to sell what he had seen. It paid his debts and more, but she owned him after that. He could no longer hold his camera to his eye without his hand shaking; he could not believe what he saw on the screen and the images blurred along with the observations which haunted him, such as how careful she had been about the choice of a place to jump, so that she avoided the hotel portico where she might have fallen against the flagpole, or the room to the right, where she might have become entangled with the tree which reached the fourth floor, from whose bare branches the birds had flown with their anxious screams. He was trying to find something which indicated she had not meant it; that it was accident or homicide rather than self-destruct. He was also looking all the time for the third figure beyond the box-tree ornaments on the balcony and into the room beyond, searching for the shadow he wished he had seen, someone who would explain. There were no pictures of anything before the moment when she had jumped, nothing until she pushed herself away and that full skirt had slightly checked her fall, but there were the pictures he wished into his mind of the same figure, flying back.

A third person saw the photographs and simply laughed. Serve you right. You wouldn't walk out of there with me. I knew I scared you rigid, I saw it in your face. I passed on the baton of conscience, all right? You fell with your hands outstretched

and it looked as if you had no thumbs at all. You thought you were immune. Who'll write the memoirs now?

He remembered how the last time he had seen her, she had fingered the mobile phone in her pocket as if checking. She recorded everything. He also remembered how it was with her, how nothing she did in public, not even the smallest gesture, was without a purpose.

She might have lost her grasp, but she still had *his life, his soul.* On record, on paper, she still possessed all that knowledge of *him*.

An old man sat with the evening paper, which he examined closely. He smoothed the fine mohair fabric of his jacket and picked off a small lump of fluff. It was the only time she had ever intruded into his home. From the far end of the house, he could hear his grandchildren.

Then his plump wife came in with his tea.

Chapter Two

Shearer—Marianne Jane, on 4th January, aged 51, at Kensington, London. Private cremation to be arranged. No flowers, please. Inquiries to T.Noble@NobleandCo.com.

It was a beautiful flat, if you liked that kind of thing, which Thomas did. It was an estate agent's dream for the client worth a million, requiring nothing more than space without a single piece of evidence indicating a previous occupant of any kind. Cream walls, cream carpet, a kitchen full of stainless steel, a single, neutral sofa, marooned in the centre of a large living room, alongside a small perspex table so transparent it melded with the rest. A blank canvas, to be written upon, with no writing as yet.

The newspaper, left open on the floor, provided the only contrast. Black, against the white, looked almost shocking. One longed for the odd wine stain, even for blood. Any sign of life would do.

The taller of the two men, Thomas Noble, picked up the

newspaper, which was offensive to him for several reasons. His shorter companion stood a good way off, leaning against the window with his arms crossed and admiring the view outside with a proprietorial air. The irritation which percolated between them was in control. Thomas had rarely disliked anyone with such intensity, and marvelled at the fact he could so loathe on sight a person who was the brother of someone he had counted as a close friend, but then, that same great friend had obviously been a bit of a mystery in her own right. Her failure to confide despair rankled like an itch. After all, she seemed to have confided so much. Marianne could be shockingly frank. Not so her brother. Thomas shuddered, imperceptibly, and in order to say something, picked up and read from the newspaper article she had ringed with the red felt pen. It provided the only colour in the room.

'I have the feeling that this is the only evidence of why she chose to do it the way she did. It makes me sad.'

Frank Shearer continued to look at the view outside the window, enjoying it, listening without caring.

'Pardon?'

'She was reading an article in the *Daily Mail*,' Thomas explained. 'Page three.'

'I thought she never got further than the law pages in *The Times*.'

'She did this time,' Thomas insisted. 'She was reading an article about an unemployed woman who died in a bedsit in North London and was only found two years later. Almost a record. Two years! Doesn't say much for her neighbours, who reported a foul smell, and then nothing after a couple of months, which according to this,' he handled the newspaper carefully, it was evidence of a kind, after all, 'is hardly

surprising. She died with the heating full on, and it never went off. TV still murmuring away in the corner, central heating going full blast after two winters and a summer. Place infested, of course, but even the bugs had perished.'

'Are you making a point?'

'Yes. The point I'm making is that Marianne read this article which is dated two days before she died. It gives a clue to what she was thinking. She was thinking that if she stayed in her own flat, no one would notice she was dead. She didn't want that.'

'Your point is?'

'The woman in the newspaper. Marianne definitely didn't want to be undiscovered for two years. Or two weeks.'

'So she jumped instead? And if she *had* died here, how long would it have been before the body was found? How long before a friend like you would have worried enough to break the door down?'

Thomas shrugged. He and Marianne Shearer met for civilised evenings as often as twice a month. That was his version of close friendship.

'Knowing my sister,' Frank Shearer said, 'she might just as well have been reading the article to try and discover what type of boiler and TV that dead woman had. The sort that works for two years without servicing. She'd be looking for the same make and model. Or maybe it was just envy of someone who didn't have to pay any bills. She was cute with money, my sis.'

He shook his head. 'No, I don't think it was that, even if she did leave this newspaper. There was that other woman who jumped out of a hotel window the other week, wasn't there? Wasn't she some kind of lawyer, too? Photos of her in the paper, but not nearly as good as Marianne's. Marianne

would have seen that and thought she could show people how such things ought to be done for maximum impact. Make herself the definitive hotel suicide. She did like having the last word in everything.'

Thomas knew that Frank Shearer and his late sister had not been close because she had told him. *Bloody ne'er-do-well, sponger, with a touch of the vicious about him, you know? Work-shy, that one, spoiled rotten. No time for him*. Frank Shearer had absolutely no interest in her life, only her death. The physical resemblance was there. Frank had her eyes and her hair, without any of her backbone; he was soft where she was slim and muscular. He was handsome: she was not, although she could be striking. *That's why I had to succeed, Thomas, I didn't have the option of hanging around and being pretty*. Thomas Noble, solicitor; friend of the deceased whom he had accompanied to many a football match in pursuit of a shared passion which surprised them both. If she wasn't winning herself, she was certainly wanting someone else to win. She might have evolved into a hired assassin in another life, and if he had been a heterosexual man himself, he would have run a mile from her. As he was, he was free to appreciate a frightful friend and consider himself a mentor, although how much he had succeeded in that was sadly in doubt. Marianne had said nothing about what ailed her – that was insulting – and it seemed that she had never followed his advice to make a will. All the same, he had to admit there was something in what Frank had just said. There had been a similar suicide soon after Christmas, and Marianne could never resist upstaging another woman. This was surely an unfair thought, although it lingered because of the similarities. Marianne's was definitely different. All she had done, on the same day she had read the newspaper article about the

woman dead for two years, was transfer money into his bank account, with the cryptic email saying, *Look after stuff, and have fun with this will you? Use Peter Friel for the business, he's dull but dogged. Mx*

He coughed. It followed from this that he was appointed in the role of her legal representative in the absence of anyone else. There was no one better qualified to sort the mess. It also followed that this foul, definitely homophobic man needed him, since Frank did not know where else to start and Thomas held all the cards. Frank was a car salesman with a history of debt and he needed a lawyer, since, as things stood, under the rules of intestacy, he the undeserving was going to reap the fruits of what she had sown. Ms Shearer's brother was practically salivating. Worth nothing last week and now worth enough to strut like a cockerel.

'Great apartment. The newspaper said it was worth a cool mill. And recent life insurance, you said?'

Thomas shook his head.

'I doubt if the flat's worth that much. And there's a mortgage. She was a barrister for twenty-five years, but a Life of Crime doesn't make you a millionaire. If we,' he stressed the 'we' in the interests of companionship because it was important they did not fall out . . . yet, 'don't find a last will and testament, or other known relatives apart from yourself, then this,' he nodded at the white walls, 'falls to you. Subject to tax et cetera. The verdict at the inquest will have an impact on the amount, of course.'

'How's that? What do you mean?'

Oh Lord, signs of animation at last. If not grief, at least anxiety. Thomas was a conscientious lawyer, but he still liked alarming the client and enjoyed it when people gave themselves away. It always amazed him how mere information

had the knack of creating anger, which was something he preferred to witness rather than experience first hand. Hence the love of football. Ritualised disharmony. Also Wagner. Anything with a tempest included, watched from a safe seat.

'She insured her life, of course. She would have had to have done that, to get the mortgage. I did the legal work, I have those papers. A verdict of suicide, as such, can invalidate life policies. Most coroners are careful these days. A verdict of accidental death would be better. You aren't really supposed to take out insurance and then kill yourself, any more than you're allowed to insure your wife and then kill her. Simply not sporting. But yours, all yours, old son, pending evidence of other instructions, of course.'

'So we want the Coroner to say something like accidental death while balance of mind disturbed?'

'Yes. Especially if the insurance policy she took out on the mortgage has a suicide clause. It would diminish the estate quite a bit. Coroners rarely give a verdict of suicide. Even murder would be more convenient.'

Frank barked with horribly satisfied laughter.

'How do you pay the bloke to get the words right? Get him to say she didn't really mean it when she's thrown herself out of a window in front of witnesses? For fuck's sake, there can't be much doubt about that, even if she was copying someone else.'

'We all need doubts, Frank, no doubt about that.'

Thomas turned the old newspaper over in his hands and slipped it under the sofa. It was offensive. Let someone else take it away. He supposed that the money Marianne had left in his care was for practical things, like paying for cleaning and a funeral. Three days after her last occupation, and the place was already dusty. She had been the owner for less

than a week. There was a bed, sofa, the rudiments of furniture. The rest she was going to buy new. There must be things stored with other friends.

'You don't pay coroners,' he said. 'You pray for their discretion.'

'Surely Marianne would have known that suicide could invalidate insurance policies? She was a lawyer after all.'

'One of the few female Queen's Counsel, and the even fewer who made crime pay,' Thomas answered. 'But speaking as one who acts as a humble, domestic lawyer to many other lawyers, I'm beyond being surprised about how little they know about law outside their chosen field. And how little they take the legal advice they either dispense or receive. Such as making a will, minimising tax, that kind of thing. I doubt if she read her policies. Don't worry, there'll be plenty left. She was clever with property. She invested wisely.'

Frank Shearer moved from his view over the gardens at the back and sprawled on the sofa, testing the springs with his weight, as if already deciding whether he would keep it or not. Or maybe regretting that she had depleted what was going to be his inheritance by purchasing such a thing. He pulled a cream cushion on to his lap and picked at the braid around the edge, actions designed to irritate. The last buttocks to occupy that sofa were those of his dead sister. The indentation of her behind was still present, next to him. Thomas would have scalded himself rather than sit on it. Oh why, oh why, had she not made herself clear? There were too many whys buzzing around here, like angry wasps trapped in a room, such as why she had done it at all. There were all those possessions of hers, no doubt hidden with some *other* friend, maybe the will was there, too. Hope sprang in his mind and he kept his face bland. You're like an old cat,

Marianne had said. No one knows what you're thinking, even when you purr.

'I'm sure she didn't make a will,' Frank said. 'Because, if she had, she would have told me what to expect. There was no love lost, if you see what I mean, but I'm still her only brother. Perhaps she jumped because she'd invested her all in the dream flat, and then found she was still fifty-one, past her sell-by date, still ugly and as lonely as ever.'

'She wasn't lonely,' Thomas protested, guilty for leaving out the fact that beautiful she was not.

'Don't tell me she was popular.'

'No . . . I mean yes. She never needed to spend an evening alone unless she wanted. She was a workaholic, not lonely. Have we finished here?'

He could not bear the sight of Frank Shearer unpicking a cushion as if he might find money inside it. Frank grinned at him.

'Shame you don't like me, old boy,' he said. ''Cos we're stuck with each other for a bit, aren't we? That's what she would have wanted. Everything sorted out fair and square in strict accordance with the law, and you in charge, looking after me.'

'I don't know what she wanted,' Thomas said. 'But I'll act for you in the matter of her estate if you pay me. I'll need to advertise and hire a probate researcher, just to ensure there's no other beneficiaries. I've got Peter Friel on hand to do that.'

'Look out those insurance policies, old boy. Smile at the taxman, cosy up to the Coroner, throw a few hissy fits, kiss arse and sleep with the enemy. That's what she would have done, that's what she did all the time. Anything for a result.'

The phone rang, eerily loud in the empty space. Thomas

looked around for the source of the sound, coming from the small room stage left of where they were. He hovered, for once uncertain about a bizarre piece of etiquette such as who should be the one to answer a dead person's phone. There was no precedent for that one. He moved towards it but Frank moved faster.

'Hello, what d'ya want?'

'Marianne? Is she there?'

'Don't you read the newspapers? She's dead.'

Thomas stepped forward, seething with anger and grabbed the receiver from Frank's hand.

'Hello, who is this please?'

There was the sound of tumultuous breathing, like someone struggling for air.

'I'm so sorry for that response,' Thomas said. 'You got Ms Shearer's brother. He's upset. Can I help you?'

More breathing. He waited.

'I don't read any newspapers, I make things for her, I have this dress, ready for her, and . . . I so sorry. Why she die?'

Why, oh why? Not enough to say I don't know.

'It seems she was very depressed,' Thomas said, gently. 'So depressed, she took her own life.'

The breathing became sharper.

'Tha's a lie. She not *depressed*. How can she be depressed? She had this *dress*, beautiful dress, she wanted it so bad. I don' believe you. Someone gotta pay. She love it. Oh, nooooo . . .'

He paused. Another challenge to the good manners that dictated his life.

'Can you give me your name?' he asked quietly. 'And send details of any outstanding bills to me? I assure you, they'll be paid.'

He recited his address as he listened to the sound of noisy weeping.

'I send what I want. I keep the dress, maybe. Now I'm the one depressed. Someone kill her, you hear?'

The phone was slammed down and the sound rang in his ears. He went back to the living room, shaken. Frank was on his feet, chucking the keys to the place from one hand to another, itching to move all of a sudden. The cold of the place got to them. With her usual efficiency, Marianne had turned off the heat before she left from her new home here, to go to a room in a hotel a hundred yards away in order to kill herself. She had been sure she would not need warmth when she came back.

He took the keys from Frank and Frank took one last look around. Thomas remembered as he closed the door on the empty space what it was that had impressed him about Marianne Shearer when they had first met, a decade before. Not beauty, for sure. Style. He wondered for the first time what exactly she had been wearing when she jumped.

It was warmer outside.