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To My Best Friends

Written by Sam Baker

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SAM BAKER

To My Best Friends

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To my *best friends*
Nancy, Clare, Catherine
Jude
Shelly
And, above all, Jon

PROLOGUE

> That navy Prada suit, the one with the nipped-in waist you wished you'd never bought? Trust me, get the skirt taken up two inches and wear it with my red Marc Jacobs mary-janes. The ones with the blue trim. They always fitted you better than they did me, anyway. You'll look a million dollars . . .

Slipping the lid back on the cartridge pen, Nicci dropped it on the duvet beside her and let her head fall back onto plumped pillows. She closed her eyes and felt the bedroom spin. It was a familiar sensation now, almost comforting, in a sick sort of way.

Three and a half lines of writing. Five sentences. Fifty-five words. How could fifty-five measly words be so exhausting? They weren't even the important words. Those were still to come. These were just the preamble, the housekeeping. Nicci risked opening her eyes and the room sped up.

Damn it, she thought, and let her lids drop, feeling the spinning recede. This wasn't her. Illness didn't suit her. Nicci Morrison didn't do sick, just as she didn't do sitting around at weekends, chilling or downtime. And she didn't do lying

in bed in the middle of the afternoon. At least not since she was twenty-one and had met David. Then they'd done nothing much other than lying in bed all afternoon when she should have been writing a ten-thousand-word dissertation on the way clothes reflect women's place in society in nineteenth-century literature. Well, not so much lying, but bed had figured prominently. Bed, the floor, the bath . . .

Nicci smiled at the memory. Half sad, half glad they'd had that then, and the rest.

Come on, she urged herself. *Get a grip. One down, three more letters to go*.

The trick was catching her morphine at the right stage: long enough after her injection for the pain to have eased, but not so soon the opiates dulled her capacity to think straight. Pulling herself up, Nicci rummaged around her for the pen while trying to find her train of thought. Light shimmered at the edge of her vision, brighter than she could stand.

Jo wouldn't refuse, Nicci was sure of that. Especially not when she opened the parcel containing the red mary-janes, which David would deliver with the letter. How could she – how could any of them – when Jo knew only too well what Nicci had been through in the past year? Biopsies, mastectomy, chemo and radio. None of which, ultimately, had worked. Wasn't wearing an old navy-blue suit the least a girl could do for her best friend?'

Looking at the sheet of thick cream paper resting on a magazine on her knee, Nicci smiled. She would have the last laugh. And her business partner would thank her for it. In the weeks to come, the last thing her friend would want to think about – the last thing any of Nicci's friends would want to think about – was what to wear.

Now, that's the outfit sorted. And don't argue, Jo. Remember, on the wardrobe front, Nicci knows best!!!

Just think of it as one less problem to worry about. After all, you're going to have enough on your plate with Capsule Wardrobe once I've gone.

But that's not the point of this letter. No, what I'm really writing about are my twin babies, my darling girls, my Charlie and Harrie, your goddaughters. And you've been such a good godmother, Jo, the very best. Which is why I want you to be more . . .

ONE

There were few things in life Nicci Morrison had not been able to control. But being buried on a dank, drizzly day in February was one of them.

It was not yet two o'clock, and the dirty grey cloud hung low over the church, obscuring the spire, making the hour seem closer to dusk.

'There you are!' Jo Clarke called out as a tall thin woman, hair frizzing from the bun at the nape of her neck, picked her way along the muddy path. She was clad head to toe in black – hardly unexpected at a funeral – but her spike-heeled ankle boots would have looked more at home in a bar.

'Let me guess,' Jo laughed, eyeing the Jimmy Choo boots. 'The person responsible for you buying those in the first place is to blame for you wearing them now?'

Mona Thomas raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at the red mary-janes on Jo's feet. 'Takes one to know one,' she said.

'Typical Nicci, huh?' Jo hugged Mona hard to distract herself from her tears. Nicci had known outfit-planning would be the last thing on anyone's mind, and so, unable to break the habit of a lifetime, she had done it for them.

‘Hello, Si.’ Mona reached over Jo’s shoulder to pat his cheek. ‘Am I the last?’

Shaking his head, Si moved aside to make way for a group of unfamiliar faces waiting impatiently in the mizzle behind his wife and her friend.

‘Lizzie and Gerry are inside. Well, Lizzie is. Gerry dropped her off at the gate and went to park the car. You on your own?’

‘Yep. I thought I’d spare Dan. I know he was fond of Nicci – and he adores David – but, y’know . . . kids and funerals . . .’ Mona’s voice trailed away, and Jo and Si nodded. They knew. Adults and funerals, too.

‘You guys go on in,’ Si said. ‘I’ll wait for Gerry. The, erm, the . . . hearse will . . . you know . . . be here soon.’

Jo nodded gratefully and took Mona’s arm. Si knew she wouldn’t want to see her best friend arrive that way.

‘So have you told Si yet?’

‘Told him what?’ Jo whispered, leaning across the pew so she could be heard by Lizzie and Mona, but not the random mixture of family members, customers and distant friends who had gathered to pay their respects.

‘About the letter, of course,’ Mona hissed.

Jo’s eyes bulged. ‘Of course I bl—’ she stopped herself, remembering where she was. Jo wasn’t religious, but even so. ‘Of course I haven’t! What was I supposed to say? “Hey, Si, after the last three years, all the money we’ve spent, all the . . .”’ she swallowed, focusing on her hands until Lizzie’s freckled arm reached over and squeezed one of them, “. . . all the disappointment, guess what. It doesn’t matter now if we can’t have kids because we’ve been left shares in someone else’s?” You can imagine how that would go down.’

Actually, now she thought of it, Jo didn’t have the first

clue how that news would go down with Si. It was months, longer, since they had even talked about it.

'You don't have to put it quite like that,' Lizzie whispered gently. 'After all, it's not as if it's that straightforward.'

'It's not remotely straightforward.'

Closing her eyes, Jo leant back in the pew. Centuries-old oak dug uncomfortably into her vertebrae and the organ music was giving her a headache. Whatever Nicci's instructions for the funeral, and, Nicci being Nicci, there would have been plenty – the flowers for a start; the church was awash with blue and yellow, not a lily in sight – Jo was sure they hadn't included a wheezing, clunking rendition of 'Dido's Lament', or anyone else's lament come to that.

'I've told Gerry,' Lizzie coloured as she rushed the words out. She couldn't help herself; never had been able to. If there was a crease Lizzie had to iron it out. A silence – awkward or not – she had to fill it.

Jo's eyes flicked open. 'About our bequests?' she asked, her voice tight. 'Didn't we agree to keep that between ourselves for now, just while we work out what to do? Whether we have to, you know, comply with Nicci's wishes.'

'Not yours and Mona's, just mine.'

'Oh,' snorted Mona. 'That's hardly the same, is it? At least Nicci left you some*thing*—'

'Just out of interest,' Jo interrupted, hearing Mona's voice rise and seeing Lizzie's lip quiver, 'what *did* Gerry say, about your bequest, I mean?'

Lizzie's mouth twisted. 'What d'you think he said?'

'Let me guess,' Mona said. 'I bet it had something to do with cheap labour.'

Lizzie's laugh burst out over the hush of voices and the wheeze of the organ. She clapped a hand over her mouth, but not before earning a scowl from an elderly woman sitting on the other side of the aisle. 'That's about the sum of it.

Gerry said . . .' she put on his voice. It was posh Yorkshire. He used being northern when it suited him and hid it when it didn't, '. . . "Don't you usually have to pay someone to do that?"'

Jo and Mona exchanged glances. They loved Lizzie but, despite years of trying, they still didn't get Gerry. If he hadn't married one of their dearest friends their paths would never have crossed. Nicci had barely tolerated him, declaring him smug and materialistic, and nowhere near good enough. But once Lizzie announced a date and flashed a rock that – as Nicci muttered later – cost a fortune and still looked as if it belonged in an Argos sale, she backed off. If Gerry was what Lizzie wanted then, like him or not, he was what they wanted for her too.

As 'Dido's Lament' segued clumsily into Albinoni's 'Adagio' Mona mimed sticking her fingers in her ears. 'Clearly there are some things even Nicci's ghost can't control. *Now That's What I Call Funerals*.'

'Still,' said Lizzie, 'what are the alternatives? Westlife? Celine Dion? Bette Midler?'

'That, and the self-invited guests,' said Jo. 'Guess it's what you get for being popular.'

'Yeah,' said Mona. 'Can you imagine having loads of people you hardly know turn up for your wedding?'

'I did,' Lizzie said. 'Remember? My mother insisted on inviting a bunch of aunties and cousins three times removed.'

'Nicci did too,' Jo said. 'But weren't they all distant relatives of David that he said he hadn't seen since his christening?'

A sudden hush cut them short. The organ music had died and all around them people were getting to their feet as the pallbearers entered the church. Si slid in beside Jo, Gerry behind him.

'Here we go, love,' Si said, slipping his arm around Jo's shoulder . . .

'Ready or not,' she agreed, reaching for Lizzie's hand . . .
'Not,' Lizzie whispered, squeezing Mona's hand in turn . . .
'Never will be,' Mona replied, squeezing it back.

'Nicci had to be first at everything,' said Jo, trying to raise her quavering voice so it was audible at the back. The flowers seemed to muffle it, each petal, leaf and stamen cushioning the sound. Who knew flowers buggered up your acoustics? Not even Nicci could predict that.

Think of this as a business presentation Jo coached herself. Imagine those red eyes and puffy faces belong to financial backers, not fellow mourners at your best friend's funeral.

Her best friend's funeral.

How had she got landed with this? She hadn't known Nicci any longer than the others. Well, no longer than Lizzie. A day, maybe a week, certainly no more. Why did Jo always have to be the grown-up?

Gripping the lectern to steady herself, she took a deep breath. 'You name it,' Jo continued, 'Nicci beat the rest of us to it. She was the first to meet *The One* – her lovely David.' Jo ventured a smile at where Nicci's widower sat in the front pew, two tiny blonde girls in mini-me coats held close on either side of him, confusion on their small faces. David's parents sat either side of the three, creating a protective barrier around their son and granddaughters.

'The first to marry, the first to have children . . .' Jo swallowed. That last bit wasn't strictly true. Mona had had her son long before the others even started thinking about kids, but they'd discussed it the night before and agreed that simply didn't count. Mona had gone away, and when she came back there was Dan. It was different. They didn't really know why, it just was.

'. . . her adorable and much-loved Harriet and Charlotte.

Harrie and Charlie to their besotted godmothers – Mona, Lizzie and, of course, me . . .'

Did David know about the bequest, Jo wondered. Of course, he knew about the letters; he'd delivered them. But was he aware of their contents; that he was handing over grenades? He had to, didn't he? Nicci wouldn't have done that without telling him . . . would she?

Seeing a hundred faces gazing up at her, Jo forced herself on.

'She was the first of us to have it all. To juggle her new family, her beloved husband and our little business: her other baby, Capsule Wardrobe. And now . . .' Jo tried to concentrate on the neat capitals printed on the index cards in front of her. It wasn't as if she didn't know the words off by heart – poor Si had listened to this speech a dozen times in the last couple of days – but her eyes filled with tears, and the neat letters doubled and tripled until she couldn't even see her words, let alone recall them.

'And now, our beautiful Nicci . . .' she heard Lizzie prompt gently from the front row.

Jo blinked away her tears. 'And now, our beautiful Nicci,' she repeated, 'our best friend, the love – I know he won't mind me saying – of David's life, is the first of us to die.' Looking up, she pasted on a smile. 'Taking this number-one thing to extremes a bit, I think.'

A ripple of laughter echoed around the small church and Jo risked catching David's eye. Misery, exhaustion and disbelief at finding himself in this place, for this unthinkable, unimaginable, reason . . . all her own emotions were in his gaze but ripped raw. He squeezed his daughters tighter. Was it her imagination, or was he sending a signal?

Stop it, Jo told herself. *Concentrate*.

'I met Nicci,' she continued, 'on my first day at university. She took me under her vintage-store-clad wing and I never looked back. Soon after, she found Lizzie and, for want of a better word, adopted her too. Then, by sheer fluke, Mona found us. And together we found David. The poor thing didn't know what he was letting himself in for . . .' Another ripple of laughter.

'Nicci wheedled her way into David's life, and his wardrobe!' More laughter, louder now. 'As she did for so many of us here.'

Jo let her gaze roam the front pews where Nicci's influence bloomed. How had Nicci known they would all be so obedient? Or were they all just too exhausted, too heartbroken, to greet Nicci's instructions telling them what to wear to their best friend's funeral with anything other than gratitude?

Lizzie's taupe cardigan was loosely belted over a beautiful floral Paul Smith tea dress that Jo knew for a fact had cost as much as half a month's mortgage; the Burberry trench coat that had cost the other half lay over the back of the pew behind her. Mona wore a slick black Helmut Lang trouser suit, which just about made up for the four-inch heels Nicci had convinced her 'cost per wear' would be a bargain. At the last count, 'cost per wear' those boots still stood at six months' Council Tax. David's scuffed Church's brogues, identical to the ones Nicci had bought him their very first Christmas together, already showed signs of missing Nicci's care. And Jo's own navy suit was nowhere near as frumpy as she remembered now the skirt was taken up, as per Nicci's instructions.

As ever, Nicci had been right. It might be her funeral, but her friends still looked a million dollars. In a subdued, funeral-appropriate, style.

‘I know this isn’t the done thing,’ Jo said, deviating from her script, ‘but I’d like to do a straw poll.’

A bemused murmur rippled through the congregation. Lizzie glanced at Mona, who shook her head. This wasn’t planned.

‘How many here today are wearing outfits, or at least items of clothing, that Nicci picked out for us?’ Jo raised her own arm. She felt like an idiot. And from the way half the congregation stared at her, she knew she looked like one too.

Widening her eyes at them, she willed Lizzie and Mona to join her.

Mona raised her arm, then Lizzie. A second later, David joined them. Harrie and Charlie’s arms were raised by their granny and grandpa. Then, as if in a Mexican wave, arms rose around the church, rippling right to the back where, Jo realised now, Capsule Wardrobe’s most loyal clients stood, the pews too full to hold them.

Laughter burst from her. Jo couldn’t help it; didn’t even try to suppress it. The sound of the first genuine laugh she’d managed in the two weeks since Nicci’s death pealed up into the apse.

‘How much would Nicci love this?’ Jo said. ‘She made clothes her life, she believed that what we wore spoke volumes more than anything words could say; that a T-shirt, or a dress, or a pair of shoes, really was a statement. That woman contributed in some way to the outfits of what must be over a hundred people here.

‘My friends . . . all of whom, like me, loved and trusted Nicci, there can be no better affirmation of her life. Because if there’s one thing I know Nicci would have wanted it’s this: no frumps at her funeral.

‘Nicci, we love you, we miss you, and we don’t yet know what we will do – how we will even begin to cope – without

you. But you are forever in our hearts . . .' Jo paused, locking wet eyes with Lizzie and Mona, strengthened by their tearful smiles.

'. . . And in our wardrobes.'

TWO

'Isn't David going to wonder where we've got to?' Lizzie asked, as she fumbled with the lock of the shed. In the fading light, she misjudged the distance and the key landed in the sludge at her feet. Bending, she noticed her high-heeled loafers were now crusted with mud. 'Anyone got a tissue?'

Mona shrugged, and Jo shook her head.

'Where is David, anyway?' Jo said. 'I haven't seen him for at least half an hour.'

'Hiding, probably,' Mona said. 'Who can blame him? House full of total strangers feeding their faces at his expense. Anyway,' she added, 'it's not as if it matters. It's Lizzie's shed now.'

Lizzie didn't look convinced. 'I know that, but does David? Does David know any of it?'

'Look,' Jo said, turning back to the house. Every window in the Victorian terrace was ablaze and the kitchen was crammed with people. 'It looks odd, doesn't it? Wrong, somehow?'

The others followed her gaze.

'It's not that the house is full – ' Lizzie said – 'it was always full – it's *those* people. Who are they? Does anyone know?'

'Someone must,' said Mona. 'David probably.'

'Come on,' Jo said, 'you must recognise some of them? The girls from Capsule Wardrobe, some suppliers, a few clients. David's mum and dad, his brother and his wife . . .'

'There was an awful lot of family at the church for someone who didn't have any,' Lizzie said.

Jo shrugged. 'David's, I suppose, like the wedding. And there are some old friends of Nicci's from the drama group at uni.'

'I can't believe none of Nicci's family bothered to show up,' Lizzie persisted. 'You'd think some would have wanted to pay their respects.'

'You don't know they didn't,' Jo said. 'There were plenty of strange faces in that church. Not inconceivable one or two of them belonged to Nicci.'

'You pair of romantics,' said Mona. 'Nicci didn't have family, you know that. She was always saying so: "You're my family. You, David and the girls. You're the only family I need."'

'That doesn't mean she didn't have one. No one comes from nowhere,' said Lizzie. 'Much as they might want to.'

'She fell out with her mum, we know that,' Jo went on as if Lizzie hadn't spoken. 'I remember her talking about it one night – when we were pissed, of course. You must remember?' Jo grinned. 'Whisky night.'

'Not sure I remember much from whisky night.' Lizzie grimaced.

Jo never forgot anything. It amazed Lizzie, and annoyed her slightly. Jo and Nicci always could riff off events, jokes and incidents she barely remembered at all. Most of her time at university was a blur. A blur then, and a blur now.

'Think that was the only time she mentioned it. And you know how she always spent every holiday at uni, working in Sainsbury's, when the rest of us went home. Said someone

had to look after our house. Like we were going to fall for that.'

'We did, though, didn't we?' Lizzie said.

'Her dad left when she was a baby, didn't he?' Mona said, tucking her hands under her arms in a bid to keep warm. The fine wool suit looked good but it wasn't much use against the damp chill that hung in the air.

'So Nicci said that night. You know how she was: all ears where our problems were concerned, but always playing her own cards close to her chest.'

Having wiped the muddy key on her hem, Lizzie pushed it into the lock, turned it but found the door wouldn't open.

'Come on,' said Mona. 'My toes are going to drop off if you don't let us in soon.'

Lizzie looked puzzled. Turning the key back the other way, she felt it click and reached for the shed's door handle. The shed had been unlocked all along.

'Here we go,' she said, pushing open the door, and stopped . . .

Lizzie could hear breathing. There was someone in there. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, the toes of a scuffed pair of shoes came into view. Church's brogues.

'D-David,' she asked, 'is that you?' Her mind raced through their conversation. Had they said anything he shouldn't have overheard?

'Yes,' said a familiar voice, and she felt her shoulders sag. 'It's me. Sorry. I didn't mean to make you jump, I just had to . . . you know . . . get away for a bit. I couldn't think where else to go. Every room in the house is . . . and Nicci always . . .' David stopped, unable to go on. After a careful breath, he said, 'She came down here when she wanted peace, you know. Said it was the only place she could think. Away from the house, with the sounds of the garden.'

'And the A3 in the distance,' Mona said wryly.

David flipped a switch and Nicci's shed came into focus. It was larger than Lizzie expected. The light came from two small lamps. They were the kind of lights her gran might have had: dark wood sculpted base, lampshades of faded chintz. Lizzie wouldn't have given them houseroom. Typically, here they looked somehow stylish. The one nearest David sat on an old sideboard, which doubled as a worktop, a kettle, glazed brown teapot and assorted mugs, plus a couple of boxes of herbal tea, piled haphazardly on its surface. In the far corner was an old-school Victorian sink. It appeared to be plumbed in.

One of the mugs Lizzie recognised: she'd bought them all 'I ♥ NY' mugs back from her honeymoon. The chair David sat in was from his and Nicci's first flat. A battered old thing that had been more holes than leather when they'd bought it for a tenner in a junk shop. Nicci had restored it.

'I always wondered what happened to that chair,' Lizzie said. 'And those cushions . . .'

'What did she need a kettle for?' Mona said. 'I know it's a big garden, but it's not *that* big.'

'Mona,' Jo said crossly.

'What?'

'Think about it.'

An awkward silence fell. Lizzie and Jo were thinking the same thing: a couple of hundred feet is a long way when you've had chemo.

'Like I said,' David got to his feet, 'Nicci used to spend time down here thinking. Until the last few weeks. Then the state of the garden made her feel too guilty. She hadn't been well enough to put it to bed for winter, and she felt bad about that. Said it wore its neglect like unloved clothes.'

Yes, Lizzie thought, that sounded like Nicci.

David looked wrung out. Anyone who hadn't known him

with a purple Mohican would have thought the same hairdresser had cut his short brown hair in the same style since he was a toddler. His brown eyes were bloodshot, his face puffy. His mouth, usually ready with a quiet smile, was set in a tense line, as if one wobble would bring his composure crashing down.

'I'm sorry,' Lizzie said. 'We didn't realise . . . I mean, if we'd known you were here we wouldn't have intruded.'

'OK,' he said, brushing off his trousers, even though there was nothing on them. 'I should get back anyway. After all, it's my party . . .'

'And I'll cry if I want to,' the women finished for him.

'David,' Lizzie said, 'I'm so sorry.'

'I know,' he said, his voice almost inaudible. 'But not as sorry as I am.'

'He knows,' Mona said, when David had shut the shed door firmly behind him. 'About the letters. He knows.'

'What makes you say that?' Lizzie asked. 'He'd say something, wouldn't he? If he did.'

'We know,' Jo pointed out. 'And we haven't.'

'Of course he knows,' Mona said. 'When has it ever been that awkward with David? He's known us as long as he's known Nicci. It's never been awkward. If you'd asked me a couple of weeks ago I'd have said I was closer to him than my brothers, by a mile. Dan certainly is. I've seen a lot more of David in the last fifteen years than I have of them.' She grinned. 'Hell, when we lived in that dive in Hove he probably saw us naked almost as often as Nicci.'

A memory of David walking in on her in the bathroom came to Mona and her grin slipped as fast as it had arrived. His appraising glance, before embarrassment hit them both. Nicci's forty-eight hours of coolness, David's mumbled apology in Nicci's presence, and the wariness with which

she watched David and Mona for a few weeks after that. It was unnecessary. Even if Mona would have, David wouldn't.

'Damn it,' she said. 'He knows.'

'The awkwardness could be coming from us,' Lizzie said. 'I know I've never felt uncomfortable around him before, but look at what we just did. We barged in on him in his own shed – a shed to which I now have the key – like we owned the place.'

'Which you do,' Mona said. 'If those letters mean anything. Which is a whole other conversation.'

'Look,' Jo interrupted, 'suppose Mona's right?' She'd been standing at the small window watching David's back recede in the darkness. His drooping shoulders and scuffing walk radiated anguish. 'And given that we just let ourselves into his shed – with his wife's key – and he didn't bat an eyelid, I think she is, then he's waiting for us to make the first move.'

It took a while to sink in.

'What did he say?' Lizzie turned to Mona. 'When he delivered your letter, I mean. How did he look?'

Mona shrugged. 'Rough as hell. Like he hadn't slept in days. Which he probably hadn't. And he didn't say anything much. Certainly wasn't up for a cup of tea and a chat. He just handed me the envelope and said something like, "Nicci wanted me to give you this." We hugged, just barely, now I think about it. He definitely wanted to get away as quickly as possible. Said he had the girls in the car.'

'Which he did,' Jo pointed out.

'I found this,' she said, pulling a crumpled piece of paper from her coat pocket. 'After I'd read the letter – about a hundred times – I went up in the attic and dug out the copy of *The Bell Jar* Nicci gave me for my birthday.'

Mona and Lizzie groaned.

'She was obsessed with that damn book for a while,' Lizzie said.

'Bloody depressing,' Mona added. 'I'm pretty sure I binned mine years ago, before I went to Australia.'

'Anyway,' Jo interrupted them, 'this fell out. I must have been using it as a bookmark and forgot all about it.'

Smoothing the square of paper flat with her hand, Jo held it up. The picture was faded where the flare of the flash had turned pink. Blu-Tack stains still speckled its back.

'I remember that night!' Mona exclaimed. 'It wasn't long after I moved in with you.'

Jo glanced at her friend anxiously. She knew the fact that Mona had joined their little group a year after the others still smarted, but if Mona was thinking that it didn't show.

The photograph was of the four of them, just before a party. Snarls and pouts and grins for a camera on self-timer and balanced on a bookshelf. All with that early nineties hair, which was still really late eighties. Except for Nicci, of course. She had a bleached crop, the kind that looked like she'd cut it herself, which she had.

'Look at you!' Lizzie laughed, and Jo was embarrassed to see she was hoisting her boobs for the camera. As if they weren't big enough already in those days. She wore a towel and nothing else. Lizzie was all wild red hair, in an over-large man's shirt and Levi's 501s, a look she adopted in their first term at university, under Nicci's tuition, and wore for years. As ever, her hair hid her face.

Mona was in the hippy phase that presaged her wanderlust. A long Indian skirt and a mirror-beaded waistcoat over a puffy shirt. On anyone else it would have looked like a sack, but she looked as lean as always. Only Mona would hide the slim-hipped, long-legged figure of a model under that outfit.

And Nicci? She was channelling Courtney Love.

Doc Martens, with her original sixties biker jacket, over a peach satin slip, her hair spiky. A bottle of vodka in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Jo was pouting, Mona was inscrutable and Lizzie was grinning, more or less. As for Nicci, she had a rock star snarl and that wildness in her eyes. The wildness that had only started to fade when she met David.

Lizzie's sniff broke the silence. 'Still no tissues, I suppose?' she asked, glancing around the shed. Her gaze fell on the remains of a kitchen roll. She tore off a square and passed the roll to the others.

'Nicci lived in that leather jacket,' Lizzie said. 'She was wearing it the very first time I met her.'