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Opening extract from

No Use Crying

Written by

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For Andy,
and for Philip and Bridget

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No Use Crying

Zannah Kearns

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS



ONE

'So, what did Mrs K want?' Akiko asked, rhythmically kicking her school bag as she waited for Niki outside the school gates.

'Oh,' Niki sighed and fell into step as they headed towards the bus stop. 'She just wanted to check that when she said our stories should be *interesting*, I understood that she meant the right sort of interesting.'

'Ah.'

'The wrong sort of interesting gets you seen by psychologists who make you share your feelings with the use of puppets. As if I'd forget *that*.'

'Sounds kinda fun. . . So, no more window cleaners cutting off your mother's head then?'

''Fraid not.'

'Shame.'

'I can't believe she's still *fussing* about it,' Niki said. 'It was in Year *Six* – before I was even in the senior

part of the school! Do you think I'm *still* the talk of the staffroom after all this time? The weird freak girl with her free place and psycho personality – wouldn't want me poisoning the minds of all the precious posh kids at perfect St Magda's.'

'Maybe she's scared that in your next story you'll be chopping *her* to pieces.'

'Now there's a thought.'

'And, hey! I'm one of those precious posh kids, thank you very much,' Akiko added, feigning hurt.

'Well, be warned – you don't want to get sucked into *my* imagination. It's darker than a witch's armpit.'

'What a delightful thought. Come on, we're going to miss the bus.'

♦♦♦

'Am I in trouble?' Niki had asked when everyone else got their stories back and she didn't. Her first week in a new school – a private all-girls school at that, where she felt totally out of place – and already she was in trouble. 'Please don't tell my mum.'

'It's OK, dear, don't panic,' Mrs Hughes had said, already standing up to address the class. 'But I do

need a little chat with your mother, nothing to worry about. Now sit down, it's time for our weather project.'

Niki didn't care about the weather, she just wanted to get her story back and to have never written it.

At the time she had been compelled to write it – it had filled her head, like so many dreams that had haunted her long into the following day. There he'd been, the man on the patio, cleaning the windows. She was watching TV while he stood outside the patio doors, soaping them in great arcs with his big windscreen wiper thing. She'd found herself looking up to watch the soap dribble down the window, sliding in ever-changing shapes. He took hold of another wiper and in a few deft sweeps the window was clear again, mopped and dazzling. So clear, it seemed as if there were no glass at all, only air.

She'd glanced up, and found herself looking straight into his eyes, the eyes of this man with his wipers and rags and buckets, and he'd smiled at her. It felt as though there was nothing between them, no window at all, nothing to stop him stepping into the room and smothering her mouth with that grey rag – shoving it right down her throat so that she couldn't even whimper. Chopping her up and hiding her

in his bucket then taking her home and eating her.

Niki had run from the room, along the hall and into the bedroom where she'd propped a chair underneath the door handle. She'd seen someone do that on TV once and was surprised at how it really locked the door. Sitting with her back against the wardrobe so that she could see both the door and the window, she wrote her story. As she wrote, her imagination pulled her into darker images. She pictured him killing her mother first so that there was no one to protect her; cutting off her head, his smile never leaving his face.

She wrote about hiding in an attic, about it being as dark as bats' wings, about hearing his feet on the stairs, about darkness and noises getting closer.

She'd written it because she didn't want it inside her head. It felt as though if she got it all out on paper, every horrible detail, then it would be gone, purged, like when they shoved old junk into plastic sacks for the bin men, hurling them far from the house. It had never occurred to her that it would cause so much trouble.

♦♦♦

'So, what's it going to be?' Akiko asked, just before it was time for Niki to get off at her stop. 'Skinning puppies? Boiling bunnies?'

'You're sicker than I am, reject.'

'Just checking, just checking.'

'Just because I'm the daughter of a heinous criminal, doesn't mean I'm a psycho myself, you know.'

Niki didn't know when it had first started – making jokes about her father – but each time she felt a prickling sensation inside her. It simply wasn't funny, however much she pretended not to care.

'That's what they all say,' said Akiko narrowing her eyes in mock suspicion. 'See you on Monday, freak.'

'Yeah, have a good weekend, loser.'

Niki walked from the bus stop up to the Munroes' massive house, where she and her mum were living. All her life, Niki and her mum, Angela, had travelled from house to house, her mum working as a private carer for the elderly. They had rarely stayed anywhere for longer than a couple of school terms – before too long people found out that Niki's dad was an 'unsavoury character' and Angela would move them on. The fact they had no contact with him made no difference. As soon as the whispering began, *murder, drugs, prison* – perhaps Niki's teacher letting slip to a

mum at a Pilates class one Saturday morning – Angela would start to look for work elsewhere. 'It's just easier this way,' she'd say to Niki.

This was the longest that Niki had lived in one place. Two years. Professor Munroe was dying slowly of a disease that took away all his physical abilities – he couldn't walk or use his arms, and could hardly speak. His wife, Beatrice, had once been Headmistress of St Magdalena's, and she had made it possible for Niki to be given a free place at the school.

Popper, the Munroes' Jack Russell, tore down the driveway and leapt into Niki's arms, twisting and struggling in an attempt to lick her face.

'All right, calm *down*, Pops! You'd think this wasn't something we went through every single day!' Niki laughed.

She went in through the back door and shrugged off her coat, then scooped Popper up, stroking her cheek against his smooth coat while he shook all over in a frenzy of tail wagging.

'We'll worry about homework in a bit, Pops. I just want to collapse for a while.' She wandered towards the kitchen in search of her mum and a snack.

'It's not like I have a choice!' she heard her mother saying. 'My hands are tied.'

Angie's angry tone caused Niki to pause in the hallway just outside the kitchen's open door.

'Oh, don't talk rot – "your hands are tied". Honestly!' Beatrice Munroe clattered mugs into a sink of soapy water that was so hot it flushed her skin. She fussed the water to get more bubbles, then turned to look at Angela.

'You could always leave Niki here, you know. *You* go. She could visit in the holidays, and you could come here whenever you needed a break.'

'I couldn't do that!' said Angela. 'It wouldn't be good for her. And I love her too much.'

'You think this is love, do you – taking away the best opportunity she's ever had? She's on a *full* scholarship at one of the best private schools around! She's thriving, Angela. You can see how much she's settled. She's spent her whole life moving from place to place – you yourself have been worrying about her never having had a proper home. What will it do to her to be uprooted yet again?

'And anyway, how long has he got? I don't mean to be macabre, but if it's only a matter of weeks or months then it seems ridiculous to take Niki away when maybe you won't even have to be gone that long.'

Angie gripped her mug of now cold coffee and pressed her lips together.

'Children go to boarding school all the time,' continued Beatrice. 'She could visit you some – probably *most* – weekends. The trains are very good.'

'She needs her mother.'

'She'll still *have* her mother! Terms are short – she'd be with you at half-term and for all the long holidays. She can stay here in term times, so it wouldn't even be like proper boarding. She *loves* it here.'

'Now who's speaking out of mixed motives?'

Niki hugged Popper tighter. Through the crack on the hinge side of the door, she could make out a line of Beatrice's body as she stood by the kitchen window.

'I'm sorry, Bea,' said Angie after a moment, 'but my mind's made up.'

'You honestly think this is the best thing for her? Taking her back to the root of all your upsets? That's good mothering, is it?'

'Hey, I've always done my best for my daughter. I might not have a degree or a *wing* of a *school* named after me—'

'Oh, come on, Angela, I'm not putting you down. Don't make this about something it isn't. You're the

best home help we've ever had, and that's not patronising, that's not degrading. Degrading is having your arse wiped by a stranger, and not being able to bloody well swallow without spitting food all down your front.'

'Bea.'

'I just thought you'd be with us until the end,' Beatrice said quietly. 'Peter loves you. You've been so *good* for him – for both of us. You've looked after him so well. The thought of another nurse. . .'

'You'll need another nurse soon, anyway, a proper one. I won't be able to look after him when things get . . . well, you know.'

'But I thought you might stay on anyway, that you'd be here till Niki finished secondary school, did her A-levels, got into university. You could find another job and lodge with us – go in for nursing or whatever you wanted, you're still young. That way Niki can stay where she's happy. It's not good to move her again.'

Niki heard the scrape of her mum's chair as she stood up. Along the hall she could see the outside light shining fuzzily through the small square of frosted glass in the front door. It was October and already getting dark noticeably earlier.