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Opening extract from

There Will be Lies

Written by

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‘Well researched and nuanced, *Hostage Three* goes beyond the tropes of genre fiction, and does something rather more humane and interesting’
Guardian

‘Lake handles these difficult themes with great skill, making political points while never losing the balance between emotion and action. He captures Amy’s sense of abandonment with moving sensitivity and maintains the plot tension throughout’
Daily Mail

‘Nick Lake’s portrait of *Hostage Three* is so skilfully rendered’
Telegraph

‘An achievement to admire’
Five star review, Books For Keeps

‘Lake is adept at unusual tales inspired by real events’
The Times

‘This is a complex and thought-provoking thriller’
Marilyn Brocklehurst, The Bookseller

CHAPTER 1

WHEN I COME INTO the living room, Mom is not even slightly ready, which doesn't surprise me. She's got the TV on full blast; it's so loud, the ground is vibrating. At the same time she's got the closed captions on: Mom is a believer in total communication. She's on the couch, in her pyjama jeans, working on one of her cross-stitches. On the screen, it's news: something about a plane crashing somewhere cold looking; torn metal gleaming in snow. I glance at the closed captions.

> *. . . with all 336 passengers lost, the black rocks – black box is yet to be discovered . . .*

This is how they do it, see: there's an actual person typing this stuff, and when they make a mistake, like saying black rocks instead of black box, they do that line, I don't know what it's called, like a long hyphen, and then they correct it.

It's actually kind of hypnotic, because you start to picture this person, this totally ordinary person, not a presenter or anything, just sitting there and trying to write down what the anchor is saying and sometimes screwing up. It makes the TV feel human, I guess: I can see why Mom likes it.

Black rocks? says Mom, and I didn't even realise she was watching. *I mean, the context alone.*

Oh yeah: this is the other reason she keeps the closed captions on. She loves to see how other people do it. Mom's a stenographer at the courthouse. She spends her whole working life transcribing the words of lawyers and witnesses, so for her, the people who do it on the TV are like unseen competitors.

You coming? I ask.

Where?

I mime the swing, the slight pause when the bat strikes the ball, then the follow-through.

Mom checks her watch, ties off her thread, and wipes her hands on her pyjama jeans. *Sorry*, she says. *Got caught up. You finish your essay?*

Yes, I say. I have just been typing a three-thousand-word essay on decolonisation for her, with a special emphasis on French Indochina. That's when I haven't been talking to my online friends on the forums, anyway. I love it: I love how I can talk so quickly, I mean, I can talk at the speed I type, which is super fast. Mom doesn't know I even HAVE online friends, she wouldn't let me have Facebook, that's for sure, but she doesn't know that you can open a private browser window either, and then no one can see your history.

OK, clarification: friends might be a stretch. But, you know, I have people I can talk to about TV shows and books that I love. And they know who I am, they welcome me when I log on. I know they could be anyone, they could be fifty-year-old creeps in their underpants, but I like talking to them. So sue me.

And anyway, it's good for my typing skills, which helps when it comes to the tasks Mom sets me.

Mom is big on homework but she's also big on typing and writing in general – it's that total communication thing again, plus I guess she is a stenographer so it's 110 per cent obvious why typing would be important to her. So I don't just have to do the essays, I have to do them in a set time. This decolonisation essay she assigned me yesterday.

Good, she says, about the homework. *I'll read it tomorrow.*

She puts aside the picture she's been stitching. It's the same as all the others – a Scottish Highlands scene, purple mountains in the distance, a loch in the foreground. This time, a thistle growing up in the very front, just so you really know it's Scotland. Not that I believe Scotland really looks like that – I mean, there's no way any real place has colours like that.

Don't ask me why Scotland, either. It's just what she does. Always landscape, never with a person in the frame. She covers the walls, and then when she runs out of space, she starts to throw them out and begins all over again. She orders the patterns from the internet – for some reason, Scottish landscapes are popular enough that she pretty much never repeats herself.

One day, she often says, *we'll go there. See the mountains for ourselves. The stags.*

No we won't, I always think. We might see mountains, but not these ones. Not these crazy fairy-tale peaks with their bright cotton colours. Still, I would like to go. I'd like to get out of this city in the desert, which is the only place I've ever known. To stand in the mountains, smelling the heather and the gorse. Seeing the mist rise off the ground, wreathing the horns of a stag. Hell, seeing mist. The closest we get is that heat shimmer off the roads; off the sand of the desert.

But of course we'll never go. We'll never leave the Phoenix area. I have asked a thousand times for a vacation; to go to some other place. Mom always says no when it comes right down to it. We've never even been to the Grand Canyon, and you can fly there in like an hour. There's a little air strip in Scottsdale – it costs a thousand dollars per person, they fly you up there and all around the canyon, looking at it from above. A day trip. There was a time, when I was younger and brattier, I used to talk about it all the time, ask to go, mention it when my birthday was coming up. Now I know better. Now I know we can't afford it – and even if we could, the scared look my mom gets on her face when it comes up, I think she's scared of the plane.

So, SCOTLAND? Scotland is just a silly dream – hers more than mine, but mine too, I have to admit. If only to see what it really looks like.

Mom hauls her ass out of the easy chair, goes to the hall and pulls on a light jacket over her T-shirt and PYJAMA JEANS, and I'm putting that in all caps now in case you didn't pick up on my subliminal referencing of her disgusting PYJAMA JEANS earlier. Also, in case it wasn't obvious when I talked about her hauling her ass, she is not the slimmest, whereas I am naturally athletic, and this makes the pyjama jeans look even worse. I mean, I love her anyway, she's got meat on her bones, whatever, but she doesn't have to wear that ridiculous garment.

Do you have to wear those? I say.

Yes, says Mom.

It's two in the afternoon, I say. *You can't go out in pyjamas.*

That's why they're made to look like jeans.

They do not look like –

But she's turned around, so she doesn't catch that. She just grabs her bag and motions for me to follow. I sigh and shake my head, giving up. I have told her about those horrible pants so many times now, and she just doesn't listen. It's almost like she WANTS to look like a loser, so you know, shrug.

No, I take back the shrug. It does bother me.

Because it's just . . . it's just, she looks like a loser RIGHT NEXT TO ME.

So anyway, I pick up my own bag and go out with her on to the warm street.

Keep up, says Mom. *And stay close. Sometimes cars come up on the kerb and hit people.*

I know, I say. *I know.*

I don't know – not then, not for sure; I just believe her, like I believe her on everything.

Later, though, I do know for real.

CHAPTER 2

We live in a three-storey apartment building in Scottsdale, Arizona, which is about as high as Scottsdale gets. We're on Via Linda. That means 'pretty road' in Spanish, inaccurately. On the plus side we have a shared pool, which gets cleaned, oh, ABOUT EVERY THREE YEARS, and if you continue walking on Via Linda you get to the desert in about a half-hour, which is awesome.

That last bit isn't meant to be sarcastic, by the way: I love the desert. Whenever I can, I go out there and just climb a hill or something. When I say 'when I can' what I mean is, when I can persuade Mom to come with me. From my description of her ass in the pyjama jeans you can guess that this is not a frequent occurrence. But sometimes, once every couple of months maybe, she'll give in and haul herself, sweating, up a hill with me, and then at the top through panting breaths she'll admit that, yes, it is beautiful.

Anyway, the mountains. There are loads of them. Then you can see to about infinity in every direction, all sandy flatness covered in scrub and cacti, and pale little hills sticking up under the endless wispy-clouded sky.

It's possible to imagine, then, that you're standing in five hundred years ago, before the settlers came, when the Apache and the

Navajo and the Yavapai wandered the desert. Now they don't wander so much – they stick to the Yavapai Nation reservation up in the hills near Flagstaff. Not that I've seen it – that would mean an actual honest-to-goodness trip, and Mom is never going to sign on for that. I don't think there's much there apart from a casino anyway.

Mom and I lived in Alaska till I was four – not that I remember it. South Alaska, not the full-on North Pole. Then we were in Albuquerque for like a year, I only vaguely remember it, and ever since then we've been in Scottsdale. Here. Once, I asked Mom why she came south to the desert, and she said, *Alaska has fingers of rain and its eyes are always half closed.*

It is maybe relevant that Mom had a cooler of wine on board at this point, but she does say strange things even when she's sober. For instance, she talks a lot about rain – she says I'm her daughter, and she loves me, and if she wants to keep the rain from falling on me, then what's wrong with that?

Uh, nothing, I say when she comes out with crap like that, because the important thing is to agree with her.

Although, I kind of know what she means. That is, I only remember Arizona and New Mexico, so I don't have anything to compare them to, but it's true that it never rains here and there are no shadows, and you couldn't call it sleepy or half awake. It's light all day, then the land closes its eyes and BOOM, it's night. It gets cold at night – it's because of the lack of moisture in the desert. Apart from that it's almost always warm. Right now it's spring and it's like mid-seventies all the time. That's another thing that Mom likes about it. She says, *The cold in Alaska gets into your skeleton, and you can never shake it.*

Right now, Mom is mainly trying to shake it by walking surprisingly fast down the street, her ass rippling in her, ahem, pyjama

jeans. That's not subliminal any more, by the way. It's just description. No one walks in this part of Arizona – no one besides us anyway, because we don't have a car. I mean, it's just houses and strip malls.

And even though she's overweight, she's twenty feet ahead of me now, passing the Apache Dreams restaurant, a low block of a building with floor-to-ceiling windows. As far as I know it serves mainly waffles, which is a weird thing for an Apache to dream about.

I hurry to catch up. I've got jeans on – NOT pyjama jeans – and there's sweat trickling down my back, but it's either that or show my scars, and I'm not doing that. My hair is pulled back in a ponytail, like always. I am wearing a T-shirt with a band name on it; it's kind of a joke between me and my mom.

I read a load of books – *Harry Potter, Twilight,* but also George Eliot, Dickens, Faulkner – whatever. My mom taught me to read when I was, like, four. She's pretty proud of it, and you know, I don't really blame her. I'm glad, anyway – reading is awesome. Just escaping into someone else's life, into another world. In books, everything is possible.

And . . . it seems that in girl books there's always some description of the girl so you know what she looks like, but here's the thing, I don't KNOW what I look like. I mean, I have seen myself in mirrors, obviously. But OK, you tell me what you look like.

Not so easy, is it?

But, fine, to get it out of the way: I have brown hair. I have eyes. I have a nose, and a mouth. My mom says I'm beautiful, the most beautiful girl in the world, but she would say that, wouldn't she? I guess it's possible I'm pretty. I'm five-five. One hundred and fifteen pounds. Athletic, you could say.

OK?

Moving on.

Ice cream for dinner after, honey? Mom asks when I'm walking beside her.

I nod. That's what we do every Friday, of course, but she likes to ask, and what does it hurt? Anyway I love Ice Cream for Dinner Night. I always have. Me, I'd happily have Ice Cream for Dinner Night every night, like forever. I think Mom would too, but even though she shops in the plus-size section herself, it's important to her that I stay healthy.

I like that – even more than I would like ice cream for dinner every night.

I step out into the street to cross over, and there's a Chevy station wagon I didn't see and –

– AND I TOLD YOU four hours, didn't I? That's only been, like, a half-hour, don't get ahead of yourself.

So Mom reaches out and gets a hold of my T-shirt and pulls me back on to the sidewalk, where I teeter for a moment.

No, Shelby, says Mom, shouts it, actually, which shows that she's had a shock because she hardly ever uses her voice with me. Shelby is my name – I said that already, I think. Mom named me after a Ford Mustang Shelby GT, because she says it's beautiful and powerful at the same time, and that's what she wants for me. Mom's weird like that – she doesn't even seem that interested in cars, but you never know what little thing she's going to turn out to randomly know a load about.

You can never quite get a handle on her, is what it means. And you can never cheat on a test. Or make something up in an essay.

Sorry, I say.

It's not . . . it's not an apology that I need, says Mom. *I need to know you're safe when I'm not there. You're just always dreaming. You KNOW, Shelby. You KNOW you look both ways before you –*

Yes. I know. Then I get pissed, suddenly, like when a house light goes off on a timer. *But you're ALWAYS there,* I say. *You never leave me alone.*

This is true – I mean, I'm homeschooled, so we spend a lot of time together. And no one could deny that Mom is über-protective and kind of scared of everything. When I was a kid she never let me out of her sight; she covered me in SPF-50 if we even stepped outside; she wouldn't let me ride a bike.

But it's cruel of me to say it that way, to tell her she never leaves me alone, because it's not like I mind it – I mean, she loves me and she doesn't want anything bad to happen to me; I get it. Right at that moment though I just want to hurt her.

Mom takes a deep breath . . . and says nothing. She just takes my hand and leads me across the road, as if I'm a little girl again. *It's Ice Cream for Dinner Night*, she says just to herself, like a calming mantra, but I see it. I see the fear on her face.

CHAPTER 3

AT THE BATTING CAGES we check in and book a lane. Well, Mom does. And even though it's the same zit-covered kid who greets us every Friday, she doesn't look him in the eye – the whole time she's talking to him, she's directing her words and her slight smile to the worn carpet on the ground, as if it could answer. The kid hands over a token with a grin.

Lane eight, he says. *Have a great time.* He's looking at Mom as he says it, but it's the counter she nods to as she walks away. The word 'shy' doesn't even begin to cover it with Mom. The way she acts, it's like everyone could have a knife hidden somewhere, ready to slice her up. I mean, yeah, she's pretty strict with me, she keeps me safe, but put her in front of any kind of stranger and she just snaps shut, like an oyster.

Me, I can feel energy crackling down my arms already, the excitement of being here. Because this is my treat, you see. My special day of the week. Every other day is the same: I get up, I watch TV, I chat online, I work with Mom when she finishes her shift. Then we eat in, trays on our laps: Mom's idea of a kitchen is a fridge and a microwave.

And at the end of it, I go to bed and while I'm sleeping the stage

hands of my life rebuild the set exactly the same, the layout of my room, the apartment, so that when I wake up everything is the same, repeating seamlessly.

Except for today, because today is baseball, ice cream and library day.

Every Friday, without fail.

I frown. So actually today is part of the sameness, because it's always baseball, ice cream and library on a Friday, always the same routine. But I don't really care. I like it. At least it's not homework.

Today, I head to lane eight while Mom goes to the cafe, then I unzip my bag and take out my bat. It's a DeMarini CF4 ST with a composite handle and barrel, and it's approximately 3,904 times more awesome than your average baseball bat, mostly because it flexes to reduce recoil and hand-shiver when you hit the ball.

Hand-shiver is not a technical term, BTW. I made it up. But you know what I mean.

If you are familiar with bats, then you know that the CF4 ST runs pretty expensive and so maybe you're thinking that we're rich, but let me tell you, court stenographers do not take home mad money, do not build up fat stacks. Here's how you buy a bat like that if you're me:

You get five dollars allowance a week.

You wait for a hundred weeks and you don't buy shit.

That's it.

There are a few kids waiting in the concessions area, because they know when I come, and they can see my lane from there – the eighty mph lane, which is the whole reason we come here, as it's a full ten mph faster than anything else in the state. I don't nod to them or anything; that would be weird. But they nod to me.

There's a guy in there, but I check the sheet and see he's only got another couple of minutes. He's showing off in front of his friends – gym-rat type, muscles stretching his sleeveless tee. But his strength doesn't give him speed, it seems like, because as I watch, the ball sails past his bat and smacks the back wire behind him. He curses.

Lame, says one of his friends from outside the cage.

Yeah? Watch –

BANG.

This time he swings just right, and the bat connects with the ball and it skitters along the ground past the throwing machine.

Sweet, says the friend.

The kids have walked over now. They're, like, ten but they're wearing low-slung jeans and chains, as if they're gangsters.

One of them says, *You think that was sweet? You have no idea.*

What's that, loser? says gym rat's friend. He's got a tattoo of a chilli on his bicep and a diamond in his front tooth.

Wait till she gets in there, says the kid. *Then you'll see.*

That right? says diamond tooth, turning to me. *You good?*

I shrug. My DeMarini is light in my hand. Mom looks over at me from the cafeteria, where she's drinking some kind of coffee or something from a paper cup. Her whole body is a question, but I shake my head a little.

She don't speak, says the kid.

What, never?

Never has, says another kid.

In the cage, gym rat misses another ball, then he steps out. His time is up. I go past him and shut the wire door behind me.

The cage is long, like seventy feet. At the opposite end to me is the throwing machine, a squat thing the size of a clothes dryer with the end of a pipe at the top of it, a circular hole: O.

A light goes from green to red above it, and I settle into the stance.

The trick is:

You don't swing when the ball comes out of the cannon. Reaction time from your brain to your hand is, what, one-sixteenth of a second? You wait to see the ball and you're swinging at empty air, while the ball barrels into the chain-link fence behind you.

What you do:

You swing before you see anything, and half the skill of it is knowing when to start. It's also the beauty of it, for me. The thing that made me save for two fricking years to buy this bat. Mom gave me this book once, about Zen archers – how monks would train by firing an empty bow at a target for years, before being allowed to use an actual arrow. Because the point isn't to fire the arrow into the target, it's to imagine that the arrow is already in the target. To make the act of shooting more like meditation than action.

Yeah – my education is kind of eclectic. Two days a week, Mom goes to her job, and I do homework, mostly. Cook myself lunch – Mom is big on Learning Self-Sufficiency. Sometimes I cook dinner for Mom too when she gets back, if she texts me to remind me. The weekend I have off, and the other three days, Mom teaches me. She gets books from the library, on all kinds of topics, and we go through them together. She gives me math problems, essays to write – you name it. You'd think it would be boring, but it isn't. I don't have friends to hang out with, but I get to learn about Zen archery.

Anyway, the eighty lane is like that. Like a kind of Zen thing. You're swinging at NOTHING. Your bat describes this curve in the air, swatting at emptiness . . .

. . . the ball gets from the cannon to you in, literally, half a second . . .

. . . and your bat connects . . .

. . . and something magic happens.

The ball, which has been moving at eighty mph towards you, that's about one hundred and twenty feet a second, contracts in on itself:

( )

( )

( )

And then it pretty much explodes off the bat, as you continue your arc, and it flies like a bullet to the other end of the batting cage.

Except that all this happens like:

that.

As I shift my head, getting in the stance again, I catch gym rat's eyes. He mouths, *holy crap*. He has this look that I recognise: it means he's going to ask me out when I leave the cage. He'll say something like, *you feel like hooking up?* This is how guys are: half of them hate it when I hit the ball. The other half want to do me.

I ignore him and concentrate on sending the next ball straight down the cage. I mean straight: like a beautiful flat line. Whoosh. I can feel gym rat's gaze on me. I don't think anyone knows whether they're hot or not, I mean, not really. Not unless you're some kind of model. But guys do look at me sometimes, I guess, so I'm not repulsive evidently.

Of course, the guys who check me out, they don't see my scars to begin with, because of the jeans. They don't see my scars ever, actually, because I've never gone out with any of them. My mom would freak out. And anyway I'd be too scared.

Another ball flies back; this one hits the machine and *pock*, it flicks up into the top of the cage, ricochets.

I get them all: I never miss. A couple of times, scouts have been at the batting cages, and they've asked me to play for teams. One guy talked to Mom and offered me a full scholarship to Arizona State, as long as I passed my SATs. Mom said no. She says I wouldn't be safe at college, that people would take advantage of me. I don't mind, too much, that she says no. I mean, I would like to go to college. To study and make friends. But I know my mom is looking out for me – she always has.

Anyway: I'm not interested in playing baseball. I'm just interested in the fast batting cage, the feeling of connecting the motion of the bat with the motion of the ball, of reversing something fast and inevitable. This is the lesson of the baseball cage: everything can be vanquished; everything can be beaten; everything can be turned around.

The ball's going like that, quick as snapped fingers:

And I make it go like that:

It's like, in that cage, I can beat anything.

Even time.

Even death.

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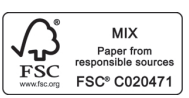

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