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DAVID ALMOND
THE
SHORT
KNIFE
ELEN CALDECOTT

Praise for ***The Short Knife***

'A distinctive and engrossing tale'
David Almond

'A gorgeously written tale with a sublime lyricism to it . . . the story resonates across the ages, holding a mirror up to contemporary Britain'
Catherine Bruton

'This is an important and inspiring novel. Here is some of the best contemporary UK YA that I've read for a very, very long time. Elen is an exceptional voice and talent in writing for young people'
Lucy Christopher

'I just loved *The Short Knife*. Beautifully written, lyrical and powerful – it's a fascinating insight into dark and desperate times which I found utterly absorbing. Grim and gritty but ultimately uplifting – it's a beautiful tribute to the courage and ingenuity of sisters'
Tanya Landman

'Elen Caldecott presents the sensory world of Late Antique Britain – clothes, artefacts and precarious lives – with compelling originality'
Caroline Lawrence

'As bright and real as the midsummer sunlight, and as powerfully drawn as a sharp, short knife'
Hilary McKay

THE SHORT KNIFE

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To Mum and Dad


Historical Note

For nearly 400 years, the Romans had ruled the people of Britain, making them part of the Empire that stretched from Syria to Scotland. But in 410AD, the army was recalled to defend Rome against the Visigoths. Without the army, civic life in Britain fell apart, towns were abandoned, trade was disrupted, coins lost their value. Saxons from northern Europe saw Britain in chaos, seized their opportunity, and sailed west.

1

SUMMER SOLSTICE, AD455,
WELL BEFORE DAWN.

I WALK BACK down the rabbit path alone. The stars and pale moon show the way. And there is bonfire light from the village. I don't think about what's burning. My feet are grey on the rocks. I might be the only person left in the whole world. It might belong to me. Foolish thoughts. Childish thoughts. The hills are full of hunters, even if I can't see them in the dark. My walk quickens.

The village at the bottom is nearing empty. Still, as I get closer to our barn, and hear moans, I wish my sister would suffer with less noise. She is too loud. I want to gag her mouth and push the sounds back down where they come from. Safer that way. Safe is all that matters.

As I pull open the flapping leather door, I stop and look back at the hill. The path is bone white in the black before dawn. I see no people, no movement. I stand on the threshold. It isn't too late to turn back. To follow the path, if that's what I choose.

'Close that, Mai!' Sara snaps. 'Where have you been? Get in here and help.'

I drop the leather as though it burns. Sara has the fire banked low, but still she's right, the light might be seen from the path.

She is busy looking through pots and jars and baskets, things that don't belong to us, looking for anything that might help my sister. I hear her moan again.

If the men hear the sounds of labour, they'll know we are in here, light or not. It's dangerous to be in the midst of their notice.

'How much longer?' I ask Sara, who has seen babies born before. I've only seen Rat-cat have kittens, and they slid into the world easy.

She tuts at me: *soup-stupid girl,* the sound says. 'We're not ready for it, no hot water, no swaddling. Don't wish it to come any sooner.'

But I do wish it. I do.

The faster the baby comes, the safer we will be.

And if it comes too early to live, then maybe all the better.

The Welsh barn is dark and I hope Sara hasn't seen the thought on my face. I ask Iesu Grist the baby, his Father and the Ghost for forgiveness. This baby can't help being wild-chick born. I feel my cheeks pink in the dark.

My sister cries out. I can't see her from the doorway. She labours behind the sack curtain that Sara has

hung to hide her shame in case any of our people come back. Sara and I wait on the other side in blackness that drips from the roof like something living. The shapes of the barn, so familiar in daytime, are clob-clumsy shadows.

I'm glad, for the moment, that my sister can't see me. She would have seen the hate-filled thought written clear on me. She knows me better than she knows our own hearth.

'What can I do?' I ask Sara. 'I want to help.'

'The baby comes in its own time.' Sara presses her palms into the base of her back. The night has been hard on her bones. 'Sit still, Mai, stay shushed. Wait.'

I come away from the door and drop onto one of the stump-stools that circle the fire. Even with the leather pulled across and the thin smoke of the embers, I can smell the village. The sweet smell of burning meat that makes my teeth draw water and sickness rise in my throat.

'Don't think about what's happening out there,' Sara tells me. 'Or what's happening in here, either, truth be told.'

I sit and stare as the red and gold flames lick hot-tongued over charcoal, imagining what lies beyond the barn.

How can I not think about what I've seen? I can feel my heart, bird-trapped in my chest. Its wings desperate

to escape. The longer I sit, the worse it gets. The wait blisters my skin. What if I lose my sister tonight? After all I've lost? If that happens then I will welcome my own death. I would open my arms to it.

'Sit still,' Sara chides me.

I'm listening to her for now. But my obedience won't last.

My sister dog-pants in the dark.

Sara goes back beyond the sack curtain. I'm alone. Heart beat-beat-beating so there's no room for breath in my chest. No place in my bones not pulled bandage-tight. I press my fingers to my eyelids until I see green and red flashes.

In the smoking dark, I feel rage course through me suddenly. Anger at the panting and moaning and the awful, awful way this baby has come to be. Anger at the people free to flee into the hills. Anger at all the world and everyone in it. I want to open my mouth and let the fire out, burn it all into blackness.

But I'm not the child I was. I can't sit and wail in the dark. My anger is gone as quick as it came, burned to nothing, leaving me clean tired.

My sister needs me.

While she is as tethered as cows to their posts, so I'm tethered too.

I hear Sara making soothing noises. As if the baby were already here and loo-loo-listening to her song.

‘Hush, child,’ she whispers. ‘Hush. There’s work coming and you need your strength.’

It would be easy to run. I know that. I’ve done it before. But this time, I have chosen to stay. The baby will be here before the sun arcs the morning sky. If it lives, it will be my kin.

I’ve duty here.

I have to stay. I owe that to my sister, and all the mothers and sisters and aunts who came before me and made sure I was kept breathing. I’ll try to keep it breathing. I will tell it the tales my tad told me. As much as I remember, anyway.

I wrap my arms about my knees in the darkness. And I plan the tale I will tell the infant, if it lives. If any of us live.



2

THE PREVIOUS AUTUMN, AD454

TROUBLE CAME WITH the frosts of dying autumn. Our farm lay too close to the road, Haf said, it brought nought but worry. Our father was different, Tad had been born in better times, when this land was ruled by far-off emperors. He remembered the tramping march of men, the Roman army plumed under eagles. He was full of stories of adventure and glory and great men, and gods born in stables.

Tad was up in the top field when the danger arrived. Three men. Only me and Rat-cat were there to watch them walk. I don't know where Haf had got to that day. Outside the hall, in the farmyard, me and the cat stood and I saw.

'Who's that, cat?' I whispered. The men made raucous calls as they strolled ling-di-long farmwards, swinging their walking sticks. 'Are they friend or foe?' I asked cat.

As they got close, I saw there was no real need of the question. No travellers who walked with such rolling ease could be friendly.

The beat of my blood quickened as they came closer.

Should I leave the farm empty while I ran up the hill to fetch Tad? Or stay, but let Tad delay untold? I was caught between the devil and his sty.

They were near our yard now. They wore flapping layers of brown, like corpse-bird feathers. Brown hair knotted and tangled atop nut-tanned skin. Mud men, I thought. Spawned in road ditches.

'*Boré da, bach!*' The man who led them spoke the correct greeting, but accented strangely; the sound that should have rolled was flat as floodplains. He had clearly learned the phrase in thick-tongued adulthood. Saxon.

I said nothing. The cat stalked away. I never saw her again.

'Have you food for strangers passing? Somewhere we will rest until the morning break?' He was bird-speckled with freckles. His smile too eager, his accent hard to grasp.

I've the wisdom of tomorrow now, and know that I shouldn't have said another word. I should have put my feet to the earth and run.

But in that moment, I did nothing.

They crossed the yard, coming closer. I had my back to the hall door. Behind the hall was the storage barn. To my right, the old byre, long since empty of cows, though still standing, built as it was with sweat and good Roman nails reused. I stood alone to guard it all, with only the useless short knife at my waist; it was meant for eating, cutting cheese and bread, no more.

Then, I heard my sister speak. '*Bore da, syr,*' Haf said.

The 'syr' wholly ill, in my own opinion.

She'd come from the byre. I scowled at her. She hid sometimes, up there in the rafters, to get away from me, she said. But I knew it was to get away from the wife-work of the farm. She smiled as though she were five years older than me, not two, and was the woman of the house. Haf eased me aside as if I were planked wood. 'Don't mind Mai,' she said. 'The little mouse has no manners.'

Haf opened the door to the hall and let them, all three, step inside. Then, she poked me keenly. 'Check the barn is sealed. Then go fetch Tad.' Her voice was hare soft, 'I'll feed them what I can from what there is in the hall.'

My thoughts flew to the barn. It was the end of autumn and Tad had worked arm-and-shoulder to fill it for winter. There were dry roots in baskets and barley grains wrapped tight in their chaff to keep the damp out. There was smoked meat from whatever animals Tad had hunted. We'd eaten the purple patches of fresh leaves and there would be no more of that until late spring. Everything was packed tight to carry us through winter. It was ours. Our food. And Haf had smiled at these men and welcomed them in like Bathsheba did King David in the tall tales Tad told. But these men were no kings of the east. They were drain-ditch dunmen.

We should have run at them with swords.

There were no swords.

So I went to the barn. The bar was lowered and bolted. I shook it hard to check. If their eyes went prying, they could open it quick enough. But it wasn't flung open in invitation at least.

I galloped on wild hooves to the top field, my breath coming in white clouds. Tad was digging the earth over, ready for seeding. The thin copse of trees and the hill would hide the tall stalks, when the time came. But, for now, the black earth was bare. I was out of wind by the time I reached his side. 'Men,' I said, through gasps. 'Three men. At the hall.'

'What men?' Tad raised his eyes from the spade beneath his foot, his forehead as furrowed as the land.

'Saxons.' What else was there to say? Men where they shouldn't be.

I willed him hard to stop work and come. We needed him. Haf couldn't be left in charge.

He let go the spade. He was coming. He saw the threat was real.

We walked back, me behind. I could see sweat beading wetly at the base of his trimmed hair, turning the grey black. Did his own heart beat fast like mine?

'Mai,' Tad said, 'guests are always honoured, be they Saxon or Briton, or even wild scare-bods from the heath.'

'Be kind like the Samaritan,' I whispered.

‘That’s right. But it’s more than that. Guests in your home should be protected and cared for, wherever they come from.’

I thought about the thick sticks I’d seen. ‘What if they aren’t guests, Tad?’

‘Do you think they might be wise men disguised as travellers? Elias or Job or one of the old prophets from the desert kingdoms come to test us. Hmm? Is that what you’re thinking?’ I could hear the smile in his voice.

That was not what I was thinking. ‘They aren’t prophets, sure certain.’

‘Well, we won’t know what they are until they tell us. Come on.’

As we dropped down from the hill, the stone footings of the hall looked cave-damp and cold. The wooden slats that rose from the low walls were shadowed under the eaves. The byre and barn were silent. Only smoke curling from the thatch-hole in the hall roof showed that there was anyone inside alive.

Tad didn’t speak, so neither did I.

Soon, we heard them from the hall, voices crackling like fire. They spoke their own tongue together. Saxon. To my ears it sounded like half-swallowed song, with nothing to mark the edges of words.

‘*Dasmädchen – ja – istschön.*’

‘*Ja!*’

‘*Derhof – ja – iswunderschön.*’

I tried out the sounds: *Wunderschoen. Wun derschoen. Wunders choen.*

I wondered what it meant.

The sounds were spells, making me see scented

Woods, dew-wet, where Woden walked.

Thick-pelted boar, blind hunted,

By men like these.

Tad held me back. 'It might be best if you stay out of sight. Just for now. While I go and find out if they really are prophets.' He winked, and squeezed my shoulder.

They had already seen me, with Haf, but I was grateful for his wish to keep me safe. He paused at the threshold, his hand on the wooden latch. Then, he pulled it open and headed into our hall alone.

I stood staring at the door, stupid as brushwood.

Moments later, it opened again and Haf came out. When it closed, she leaned to listen, ear close to the knots in the wood.

'What's happening?' I asked. 'Is Tad making them leave?'

'*Isht*, Mai.' She stepped away from the door, grabbed my wrist and dragged me. I was going to yell at her, for the pain and the cheek of it. She wasn't my mam and shouldn't tell me what to do, though she did all the time. But there was something about the tilt of her head, the whiteness of her knuckles, that kept me quiet. She stopped

under the window. It being autumn, the wooden shutters were closed. But part of the wood was cracked and sound escaped the hall as much as the heat.

Haf crouched beneath it, with me at her side.

I wanted to ask her what had been said, where were the men from, what were their names. I wanted the whole tale. But I crouched too, copying my big sister.

Listening, I heard the leader thank Tad, in British, for the feast.

The man said something to Tad about his daughters.

Haf gripped my shoulder, forcing me down lower.

But there was no danger of being seen, the window was shut tight. I nudged her, harder than was kind.

The man inside switched back to Saxon. His words were again like the Wild Woods and the Midnight Hunt, myths of old. The sound was of the dark places of the earth that Tad told us about, the cracks in the rocks where devils lived.

'Haf.' I heard him say *Haf*.

Was he talking about my sister? I looked leftwise at her.

She was pretty as morning. Even I, her little sister, who'd seen her wipe snot on her sleeve when she thought no one was looking, knew that. Her hair was long and wild as wolves. It spun out, dark from her head. That wasn't sudden-strange – we all had dark hair. But her eyes were blue, striking as the summer sky. Her skin promised health

and honeyed life. Even when her lips were snow-burned in winter, she looked well. And she could be quick-witted too, when she tried hard.

We heard the door slam open, it shook the front wall. 'Haf!' the man shouted.

He knew her name, sure certain.

She must have told him. She was stupid as soup.

'Haf!' He stepped away from the hall, spun around in the yard. We shrank back, but he saw us. He spread his arms and smiled. 'You are here. You quickly left.' He looked all at Haf, as if I wasn't taking breaths. 'Come sit. Eat. We're not bad men. And you are Freya herself.'

At the name of one of their heathen gods, I felt my spine stiffen. My sister was no pagan. Though it was sure she was no angel either.

Haf dropped her knee towards the ground in curtsy. 'Syr, my tad sent me to do the work he's been called away from. I can't disobey my father.'

The man stepped closer, his hands in fists, his kindness hanging by the thinnest thread. He looked goat-eyed at Haf. 'Why not? You want not to sit with Saxons?'

I was shocked to see her blush to her crown.

'No, syr,' she said, 'of course not! But when there's guests, there's work. My sister and I must see to the farm and the fields.'

She gave another curtsy for good measure. She was being too sweet. Like glutting honey that sticks teeth

shut. I kept my eyes to the ground and sensed that Haf was doing the same. The man was close enough to smell now. Mostly sweat and days spent walking, but also lakes and rivers, otter-scented. He smelled of free things, wild creatures. With his strange British, he was like no man we'd seen before.

I felt my blood beat again, my heart in my throat. This is how deer must feel, I thought, when they know there are arrows flying. I willed him to step back, to leave us be.

But Haf lifted her head and smiled like the lollin that she was. 'Syr, we can't come inside,' Haf said, 'but when our chores are done, we eat together in the evening. You will still be with us?'

The Saxon smiled, idle-mawed. 'It's certain,' he said. 'Keep your word. Yes? Yes.'

I looked up from under my scowl at Haf as the man turned and re-entered the hall.

'Why did you say that?' I muttered. 'I don't want to eat with them.'

She shrugged. 'Neither do I.'

'Then why did you say we would?'

'To keep the dish steady. He went in happy, didn't he? And we're out here safe.'

'But you said we'd go inside.'

'I said we'd go inside late or later. Those men will sleep and scratch the day away and will have long forgotten

about us by the time the next meal rolls around. You'll see.'

I hoped she was right. It was Haf who had all the ideas for our games, who thought of things to cheer Tad. She seemed to know, often, what was for the best. So, I let her pull me away from the hall to the byre.

Haf could remember the last beast that lived here. I had only flashes of memory, brown, coarse hair, her black nose bigger than my head. She had got too old for milking and Tad had hoped to make Mam better with strong stew, Haf said. But it hadn't worked. I was three when we lost the cow and Mam.

Haf climbed to the top of the low wooden wall that marked the stall, then pulled herself into the roof rafters. It was her favourite spot to hide from chores. She'd fold herself, igam-ogam into the space and stay quiet, unnoticed. I followed her up, grasping the rough wood beneath my fingertips.

'Don't fret, Mai,' she told me. 'They won't be taking everything. See?' Haf reached for the pouch that hung at her belt next to her eating knife, and pulled out something small. Something the colour of water droplets or moonlight. I recognised it. The silver cross that Mam had worn, when she was with us. It was meant to be pinned to draped tunics, to hold them in place. It had belonged to her mam before her, Haf said.

I had no memory of Mam wearing it. My few memories

of her were fleeting. But I did have memories of Haf, curled up close in the bed we shared as infants, holding it up to the light and telling me about Moses on the mountain and Iesu in his crib and all the power he had to make the sick well. Magic tales she'd heard from Tad, when he had time, in the late sun of summer.

She'd taken the cross from her wooden cist in the hall, without the men seeing.

Haf reached up into the thatch of the roof and pressed the cross into the hollow she kept there for her secrets.

It made me feel better to know that they couldn't take that little bit of Mam away, even if they took everything else.

Slow as ivy grows, the spine of the day bent into evening, with no sign of Tad or the men. We brought the three hens into the byre. Then we just waited.

'You told them we'd go in when it got late,' I said.

'I know.'

'It's late now.'

'I know, Mai.'

I crossed my arms tight as though I were holding Rat-cat. 'We shouldn't go in. Tad wouldn't want us to.'

'It's up to me,' she said, almost to the wind. 'It's up to me what I do.'

It wasn't true. We both knew it. Tad was in charge. Then Haf. And she only had me and Rat-cat at her feet.

'Tad hasn't given me orders,' she said. 'He didn't say I

wasn't to go in, did he? You just think that's what he wants.'

'He'd want us to stay away.'

But she had found narrow council for herself, thin enough for doubt to slip through at any rate. I could see it in the way she pulled her spine straight. She wasn't going against his wishes, because she hadn't heard those wishes. The tale was untidy, but she could ignore that in the telling.

'What will you do?' I asked. I walked to her side, both of us jammed into the open doorway. She was only two summers older, but she was taller than I was and I had to look up to see her face. Now shadows swaddled the roundness of her cheeks, making her look much older still.

She pressed her nails into the wood of the doorframe, picking splinters free. 'Tad needs us.'

'You can't know that.'

'We haven't seen him come in or out. They might have—' Whatever it was she was going to say she bit back behind her teeth.

'What?' I asked. 'What might they have done?'

'Nothing. They're just guests. Just boring old men. But Tad might be tired of looking after them alone.'

I thought of the walking sticks the men carried.

'Right,' she said. 'I'll go inside, with cider. I'll pour the bottle until stupor takes them.'

This was nonsense that passed for planning. Three men full of drink was worse than three men without. It was obvious.

'The plan is lollin,' I said with scorn.

'Noah drank after the flood and fell straight to sleep,' she said.

'They aren't prophets, we already decided that. We should fight them with crosses painted on our shields and fire in our hearts, like the Emperor Constantine.'

Her only answer was to stare at me.

She was right. If we ran in, would we two fight three grown men? With what, the knives we used for eating and stones found on the farmyard floor?

My plan was as weak as hers. 'But you can't go in there, you can't.' I hated the whine that found its way into my voice.

'We have to do something. It's been too long since we've seen Tad,' Haf said.

'You think they've hurt him,' I accused.

'No! But I want to see him, just in case.'

'But they're more dangerous drunk,' I whispered.

She stepped so close we were sharing the same breath. 'Don't fret, Mai, please. I've seen drunk men at the market. The Noah story is right. They sing, then they sleep. We can slip out as soon as their eyes close, with Tad too.'

Was she right?

She stepped past me and back into the yard. Headed to the shut barn.

I followed. She was the cow to my wet calf as I bleated behind.

'Go back, Mai,' she said. 'Go and sing somewhere else! It's best I do this by myself.'

'If they aren't dangerous, then there's nothing to stop me coming too.'

She tutted. I had her cornered. 'Fine.'

Her skirt trailed in the dust behind her. Her arms swung with her stride as she crossed the farmyard. She reached the barn and lifted the heavy wooden bar. We both went inside. It was cool as lake water and the smell of old onions and turnips made soup of the air. Wooden tubs lined one wall. Most full; not all. Beside them were old sacks. Haf clambered around them, sending apples drumming to the ground in her impatience. Then she sighed grimly as she found what she was looking for – the cider.

It was kept in one of the few clay jars we had left. It was black earthenware with faces pinched into it by the ancient potter. Tad said it had once been used for wine, back when the Roman army had tramped the road and merchants and traders had followed behind. In those days, Tad said, every fine table would have had one. I'd never tasted wine, though I imagined it was sweet like hedge brambles. The cider was not. That I had tried, once, when

I fell into the swampy waters by the river, and had to be pulled out gasping. Tad had poured it down my throat and I coughed up the murky weeds as it burned its way down.

Now wine was gone, Tad bought the strong cider from the dunmen of the woods. It never sat on our table, but he drank it alone sometimes, late at night when the embers glowed. He never sang.

Haf tucked the jar under her arm, then grabbed the bruised apples from the floor. Armed with weapons that seemed worse than useless to me, she left the barn. I followed and lifted the heavy bar back into its sockets.

We marched, me still the calf, back to the farmyard. She stopped beside the shuttered window. She pressed her eye against the crack and watched.

'What can you see?'

'Nothing,' she said.

'True as true?'

She stepped back and blocked me from looking too. 'Go to the byre.'

I shook my head. 'If you're going in, so am I.'

'No, you're not. Go, now.'

I didn't move.

Haf leaned forward, her eyes so close to mine I could see my own shape reflected, despite the dark. 'You have nothing between your two ears. Don't you know I'm doing

this to keep you and Tad safe?' she hissed, cat-angry. 'You need to stay out of the way.'

I folded my arms across my chest, but didn't reply.

Haf held my glare with her own. Then, seeing that she was ploughing sand, she gave up. Huffing, she headed to the door and went inside.