

*Tiny
White Lies*

ALSO BY FIONA PALMER

Secrets Between Friends

Sisters and Brothers

Matters of the Heart

Fiona
PALMER

*Tiny
White Lies*

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*To Dr Sam Cunneen and all the amazing doctors who are
changing and saving lives*

*Mackenzie and Blake. I love you
to infinity and beyond*

Ashley

'U SKANKY COW!!'

'Why do u bother coming to school, nobody likes you!!!'

'Stupid whore with a munted face like a dropped pie!! Go infect some other school.'

Ashley's fingers were white as they gripped her daughter's iPad. Waves of nausea hit her like rough seas slapping against the side of a boat as she read message after message on her fifteen-year-old daughter's Instagram account. The more she scrolled through the obscene comments the more her face burned hot with rage.

Emily had begged to have an Instagram account last year and Ashley had allowed it, eventually. It was hard to resist her only child's charms and persistent nagging, but it came with the caveat that the password never be changed so Ashley could keep tabs. Which she did and found it all to be innocent friend chatter. But after a while the checks grew further apart until they stopped altogether. That was until today.

If Ashley Grisham allowed herself to be brutally honest, she had known for a while that something wasn't right with Emily. But they were both coming to terms with overwhelming changes and she was trying to give her daughter time and space to grieve, to heal. She thought Emily would come around in time. But more and more, Emily returned home from school quieter and quieter, moving slowly through life, shoulders drooped, head heavy and her eyes so sad it was breaking her mother's heart. And the distance, as if Em were on a boat drifting out to sea, seemed to grow between them with each passing day.

Of course Ashley had tried to talk with her, to check in, but Emily's reply was always, 'I'm fine, Mum.' Emily would flash her one of those smiles with her naturally red lips and straight teeth, the sort that could make the world believe she was the happiest, luckiest kid ever. Ash had been falling for it for too many years, or maybe she knew but was too scared to see the truth behind that smile. Because that smile was one Ash herself had worn on many occasions.

But it was in Em's eyes that the truth lay. She had Ash's blue centres but her father's large, almost almond shape. They were stunning, lending a pixie look to her narrow face and pointed chin. It was when those eyes sparkled that Ash could believe that Emily was really smiling.

Ash dropped her head against the iPad, ignoring the mess of red waves that got caught up in her fingers. Emily was lucky not to inherit her hair colour and freckles, even though her husband had loved both.

Oh, Owen! Why did you have to leave us?

Maybe Ashley had been leaning on Emily too much? Too much pressure for a fifteen year old? Emily had always been

her rock, so much stronger and only still a teenager. Was it all just finally wearing her down?

Yesterday had been a turning point.

Em's brushed but still scraggly blonde hair had hung limp over her shoulders when she came home, but this time there was something stuck in it, smeared through it. Ashley had reached to pluck it out when the wet mess clung to her fingers.

'Oh, ew, Em, what *is* that?'

Emily had shrugged, making her oversized school polo shirt move like a flag in the wind. She hated clingy clothes and made Ash buy the next size up every time. If Ash even tried to buy something that would fit her nicely it would just end up kicked under her bed.

Ash had left her hand on Emily's shoulder until she finally spoke.

'It's banana.'

'How did banana end up in your hair?'

'Don't worry about it, Mum. It's nothing.'

Again she'd given that smile, the one that didn't reach her eyes.

'Emily?' Ash had taken her hand and held it between hers, eyes locked and waiting for the truth.

A huge sigh had escaped Emily's lips. 'It's nothing. Just some mean girls who like throwing food. I just got caught in the crossfire.'

That smile again.

'I'll go and have a shower.' Then Em had pulled away and headed off to her room in that slow, steady crawl.

Ashley knew she had only got a half-truth, just enough to 'Keep Mum Off My Back', and after stewing about it for

most of the night and most of this morning she had finally remembered the Instagram account. And suddenly it was all coming together.

Emily was being bullied. Her beautiful, amazing daughter. Abuse was being hurled at her for no reason and she had been hiding it, putting on a brave face for her mum.

Ash lifted her head and touched the iPad again. She scrolled through more of the hurtful messages. Each one worse than the previous.

'If you died, no one would care.'

'Do it, do it, do it!!'

'Just kill yourself already u know u want too just like your daddy!!!!'

Clang!

The iPad smacked against the floor at her feet. Ash felt as if she were teetering on the edge of the cliff again, huge waves licking up the rocks reaching for her, pulling at her feet. The prickling on her skin started; the waves of dizziness.

'Oh god,' she murmured before collapsing back against the chair in the lounge room. It had been hard enough having to tell Emily how her father had died let alone see Owen's suicide being used to taunt her.

Count to five! she tried telling herself. But every time she tried to say 'One', those words raced past her eyes as the room turned dark.

'Just like your daddy!'

'Do it, do it, do it!'

A small part of her brain was trying to clutch onto reality. Ground yourself, the tiny voice whispered.

Ground yourself.

Ash started to move her feet on the floor while her hands searched beside her in the blackness. She could feel the material of the chair and the soft tassels of the yellow throw pillow. Her stomach rolled as she fought off the queasiness.

Focus, Ash! Think of Emily as a baby, holding her in your arms, her sweet baby smell, her gentle coos.

Distracting herself with her favourite memories usually helped, but it was a hard battle to overcome when the panic persisted. It felt like hours that she sat there in her own private hell. To some she probably looked like she was meditating but she could feel the slick sweat coating her skin as on the inside the war raged on.

It was probably ten minutes or more before Ashley felt herself gain control; before the room came into clear view and she could breathe again. She felt as if she had just run a marathon: her breath in heavy pants, her limbs and chest aching, her body frazzled and her brain like mush.

Pulling the black band from her wrist, she tied her auburn hair on top of her head, needing to free her neck from the constricting thickness of her waves. Her eyes caught the black shape of the iPad and she felt the prickle again, but she quickly glanced away, searching for something else to hold her thoughts. Anything.

A light-cedar-coloured acoustic guitar resting against the wall made her feel warm. She went over and picked it up, holding it against her chest as if she were about to play it. Her fingertips pressed against the strings one by one. Owen had taught Emily how to play on this guitar. She was just five when he had first propped her up on his knee, the guitar cradled against her small body while he helped her make her first chord. Then he

got her to strum it, and the sound of it made her eyes shine so brightly. It was something they both loved and shared. Since her husband's death it had sat untouched. Hardly looked at. Avoided.

Eight months.

Ashley ran her fingers across the strings, the sound not quite right but still it filtered through her body like vines tethering her to the floor. It was the grounding she needed to bring her back to calm.

She strummed it absentmindedly while she sought out their family portrait that hung on the cream wall above the guitar. Owen with his blond scruffy hair at odd angles and his larger-than-life smile. His arms were around Ashley and Emily and they were all smiling as they watched the colourful butterflies around them. The sun had been out, shining through the butterfly enclosure, but ten-year-old Em had been watching her dad with delight. It had been a good day.

If only they'd had more like it.

With the instrument still clutched to her chest Ashley dared to think about Emily and the abuse she was getting online and at school. She doubted the banana incident had been an accident or a one-off. Kids could be so mean. Emily was a beautiful girl with a big, caring heart. Was that why she was a target? They were jealous of her stunning features? Or did it have more to do with her father's death?

It was common to hear Nirvana or Pearl Jam playing from Emily's room, or indeed her rendition of 'Thunderstruck' on the guitar, her fingertips having callused long ago. On weekends she lived in torn jeans and checked shirts. Anyone would think it was the early nineties and Kurt Cobain was still alive and

grunge the in thing. Ashley had wondered if Owen's music influence on Emily had flared more since his death, and if she was finding ways to be closer to him.

Now, a million thoughts rushed through her mind. Should she call the school and make a complaint? Reply to all the messages and scold each child? Talk to Emily about it? Ash felt as if she were on a spinning carousel and didn't know how to get off.

'Oh no!' Ashley caught sight of the clock on the wall. 'Bloody hell, I'll be late for work.'

She returned the guitar to its usual place and ran to the kitchen to collect her large black handbag and keys, all the while silently cursing her panic attacks and their ability to suck chunks of her life away. If only she could get control of her emotions. The coping techniques her therapist had given her were now her mantra, as well as the natural oils and calming sprays that at least gave her a small sense of control.

Ashley glanced around the house, checking everything was where it should be. Out of habit she adjusted the tea towel hanging on the oven door so it was straight, pushed in the two chairs around the dining table.

The iPad was still on the floor where she'd dropped it but she didn't have the strength to go and move it. The little prickle along her skin warned her to keep moving and leave the house; she couldn't afford another panic attack when she was already late for work. She knew how ridiculous it sounded, a grown woman scared of a square piece of technology, but in her mind it was a snake with fangs. The words it carried were venom. Ashley just couldn't handle thinking about those messages again, not yet. Maybe she was weak, she felt weak and silly

most of the time; but Nikki, her best friend, always reassured her that she was none of those things.

Ashley pressed a hand down her navy skirt and checked for stains on her white shirt. When nothing else caught her eye she dashed from the house, locking it behind her, and then reached back to check it.

The morning traffic was in her favour and she arrived, not at work but at Emily's school.

She parked out the front, car running, and scanned the school. It was eerily quiet and empty, everyone inside, not even one kid loitering outside or taking a slow bathroom break. What had she hoped to get out of this visit? Spot the mean kids and go yell at them?

You're too weak for that, Ash.

Her little voice was right, she wasn't the confrontational type, but how she longed to be that strong mum who would stand up for their kid and give those horrible brats a good talking to.

'You're late for work, woman,' she chastised herself and set off for the shopping centre with no minutes to spare.

She parked quickly – at least the parking angel was on her side today – and with her handbag gripped tightly against her chest she walked like a kid wanting to run around the pool but knowing the watchful eyes of the lifeguard weren't far away. Inside the air-conditioned shopping centre music blared from the nearby hair salon, and in front of her four older women talked loudly as they shuffled slower than a wombat, forcing Ashley to weave around them and narrowly miss taking her hip out on the island Puffin Fresh Donut stand. Her eyes were drawn to the fashion boutique Designs on the right; two

female mannequins wore stunning evening dresses in blue and lemon, but she couldn't see Nikki, who was the manager. She so desperately wanted to see her friend's face, to hear her reassuring voice, get her thoughts on this cyberbullying. On her break she would send a text to see if they could catch up for lunch.

Ashley felt her bladder swell as she passed the corridor to the public toilets but she tried to suppress it; there was no time to spare, and her boss Margie would give her a weighted stare all day if she was even a minute late.

'I'm here,' she practically shouted as she entered the pharmacy, which, luckily, seemed empty of customers.

Margie, in her pressed white shirt and blue pencil skirt, glanced at her watch before turning back to her task near the counter. 'Did you do your hair this morning, Ashley?' she said without looking up.

Oh, damn! She remembered scraping it up into a mess to cool her neck. Quickly she headed into the small room at the back where they kept their belongings and had their breaks. It doubled as a storage room, but it did have a small mirror on the wall, and as she caught her reflection she cringed. It was like a rather large rat had nested on her head. Her chest started to flutter, not in a good way, so she immediately reached into her bag for her balance oil and smeared it onto her wrists before fixing her hair.

'You okay, Ash?' asked Tim, leaning against the doorframe.

'Yep, nearly done.'

Ashley, happy with how her auburn waves now sat, headed towards Tim. 'It's been a horrible morning.'

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh honey, you did look a bit dishevelled when you ran in. Careful, Margie’s on the war path, but on the upside she’s off in ten minutes for a meeting.’

‘Really?’

The little diamond earring in his ear sparkled as his smile lit up his pale face. ‘Gone for the rest of the day.’ He did his signature ‘spirit fingers’ celebration. ‘Oh, but she wants to see you before she goes,’ he added with a grimace. ‘Don’t shoot the messenger,’ he whispered as he left.

Ashley sighed heavily, then plastered on her biggest smile and went to find Margie.

Margie was in the corner at her desk next to the head pharmacist. Ash thought she resembled a stern old headmistress and that underneath her long pencil skirt she hid a cane, one she was dying to use. Margie would get a glint in her eye when she was about to deliver bad news or pain – and today, as she turned towards Ashley, that evil glimmer was there.

Oh, great.

‘Ashley, I’m glad you could join us at work today. Please take a seat.’

Ash grinned like an idiot, trying to appease the woman when all she wanted to do was strangle that triumphant look from her face. The ‘seat’ Margie offered was the tiny stool she used to reach the higher shelves, but Ash sat on it with as much dignity as she could muster.

‘I’ll cut straight to the point, Ashley. I have been asked to tighten the budget and look at our staffing. I’m sorry to say that we no longer have a position for you here.’

Ash blinked, trying to understand Margie’s words. ‘Pardon?’

‘Consider this your notice.’

Ash's mouth opened but no words came.

'Do you understand?' Margie continued, clearly preventing her lips from curling as if she took great delight in her power. 'We can't justify the extra staff and have made your position redundant, mainly because others have been here longer. Phil will go over your final pay and entitlements this afternoon.'

'I don't have a job?' Ash suddenly realised what this meant. 'I need a job.' Without Owen, there was no one else to pay the bills. Since his death, the cost of his funeral and dropping to one income meant that Ash was hardly making ends meet. She'd sold his ute, but that was only a quick fix. Ash gaped at Margie, then firmly closed her mouth. She would not play the recent-widow card.

'I'm sorry, I know it has been a hard year for you. We thank you for your service with us at the pharmacy. I'm sure someone will organise something for you on your last day.'

Then Margie fluttered her hand impatiently as if Ash were an annoying fly.

'Oh. Yes, okay,' muttered Ash as she tried to get up off the stool gracefully and failed. As she stood she felt a huge weight press against her chest, and in her muddled state of mind she did an awkward bow to Margie, as if she were the Queen of England, and left.

You idiot. She swore internally as she searched for Tim. She found him sorting the condom selection, his favourite task, and rushed almost into him.

'Hey, sweets. What did Hitler's mother want?'

'To fire me,' she huffed.

Tim's mouth and eyes flew open in his usual over-the-top flair but his shock made her feel a little better.

‘Shut the front door!’

‘I kid you not. Oh, Tim, what am I going to do now?’

Tim pulled her into a hug as a nearby customer watched them. Ashley didn’t cry, she couldn’t cry, she was in too much shock to muster up any tears.

Instead she felt the heaviness of her mind, like a throbbing volcano waiting to erupt. Visions of Emily and the constant worry of how she was going at school today were hard to ignore, and now the fact that she was jobless had just added to the weight on her shoulders. What *was* she going to do now?

2

Nikki

NIKKI SUMMERSON GENTLY PULLED THE GREEN SILK DRESS over the hard cream mannequin. She paused at the breasts, the material pulling tight, and gently eased it over them. Her hand moved back to the breast, feeling its shape and its odd hardness. Even hard they were still better than hers.

Stop it, Nikki! she scolded herself and yet her gaze lingered on the breasts. At thirty-eight she was ogling breasts on a mannequin like a horny fifteen year old. It was ridiculous, she knew that, and yet here she was unable to stop admiring how perfect they looked and the way the dress moulded around them to show off the designer styling. Nikki would kill to be able to wear this dress.

‘That dress is stunning, Nikki. Did it just come in?’

Heat burned up her throat and she took a moment before turning to reply to her assistant, Alice.

‘Yes, six came in but I think this is my favourite.’ Nikki smiled at twenty-two-year-old Alice, who had the spark of the

young and a curvaceous body to match. Alice was a lovely size twelve, and knew how to wear her make-up to highlight her features, but it was her bubbly personality that had won her this position.

‘You should try that one on, it’s your colour, Nikki. Make those gorgeous emerald eyes of yours pop,’ said Alice as she ran her fingers over the silky material.

Nikki would normally have jumped at the chance, but not now. All she felt now was a sense of loss and longing. Like a model past her prime, never to grace the catwalk again.

Lately it had been hard to come to work, to be surrounded by such beauty and still wear a smile when inside she felt like she was slowly rotting like one of her son’s half-eaten apples left behind the couch.

‘I might take it home one night,’ she said, hoping that was enough to stop Alice before she began to insist Nikki try it on.

‘Yes, you should. Once Chris sees you in that, look out.’ Alice gave a little growl and wiggled her perfect brows.

Nikki’s stomach jolted at the thought.

‘Hey, were you going to take your lunch break now? Or did you want me to?’ asked Alice.

Finally the escape Nikki needed. ‘Oh yes, I’ll go. Ashley wants to meet up for lunch today. Would you mind finishing up here and then we can start rearranging the front window.’

‘Sounds great. I’ll get things cleared away.’

While Alice fussed over the dress, Nikki darted to the back room for her bag and then set off into the shopping centre. She tucked her straight blonde hair behind her ear and twitched a bit as her bra rubbed against her skin. She was thankful for

her chunky designer jumper, but soon it would be summer. Nikki shuddered at the thought.

The shops weren't especially busy today, so the short walk to the other end was painless. No dodging phone-consumed teens who didn't move or groups of mums with prams employed as battering rams, four abreast and hard to pass. Everything seemed to irritate Nikki these days, even Chris being extra helpful at home. She had a hot husband she couldn't bear to look at lately. And instead of getting better it was getting worse, because she knew he was waiting and wanting. The more he did nice things to try to win her over the more she felt like screaming and running the other way. Which was horrible, because she did love him. Was this what having a mid-life crisis felt like?

'Hi Nikki.'

She looked up as she entered the modern Espresso Bar. 'Hi James,' she said, waving to the owner, who wore a white-and-blue striped apron over his black clothes. His grey hair was always cropped short and tidy.

'Ashley's just arrived. I'll bring you both a coffee and take your orders.'

'Thanks, James.'

Ashley was sitting in the corner booth, staring at the opposite wall. Her shoulders were hunched over as if her gorgeous flaming locks were too heavy. She looked how Nikki felt.

'Hey Ash, you okay?' Nikki slid into the small booth opposite her. The black leather seat was worn but comfy.

Ash sighed heavily. Her face seemed paler than normal, making her freckles stand out. She was so down-to-earth gorgeous against Nikki's higher-maintenance, designer,

always-look-amazing self and yet they had been fast friends these past four years since meeting when their girls started high school together.

‘No, I don’t think I am,’ Ash finally replied.

Nikki’s concern for her friend drowned out her own issues and she felt a little relieved to have a moment of breathing space; something she didn’t seem to get much of these days.

‘Is this why you wanted to meet up? What’s wrong?’

Ashley’s blue eyes, framed by ruby lashes, shone with tears as she looked up. ‘It’s ah . . . um . . . Sorry, it’s been a bad day so far.’

Nikki waited as Ash seemed to sort through her emotions and thoughts, all the while wondering what could possibly be wrong. She’d not long ago buried her husband – surely the universe could give her friend a break?

Taking a gulp of air, Ash exhaled her words in a rush. ‘It’s Emily. She’s being bullied and abused.’

‘What?’ Nikki wasn’t sure she’d heard right.

‘Oh Nikki, I don’t know what to do.’

Ash flung her hands to her wet face while Nikki dug through her bag for her little tissue packet and passed her one. ‘Here,’ she said, nudging the tissue into her fingers and waiting, letting Ash take the lead.

She pulled her hands from her face and dabbed herself dry. ‘I’m sorry. I’m such a mess. But it’s so awful. Has Chloe said anything?’

Nikki shook her head. She never got much out of Chloe unless she wanted money for new clothes or a beauty treatment; the rest of the time she was in her room and on her phone. Chloe was convinced she was going to be the next big Instagram

sensation or YouTube star giving make-up tips. ‘No, she’s not mentioned anything about Emily. But I’ll ask her tonight, just feel her out. What’s been happening?’

Ashley sighed again just as James arrived with their coffees. ‘Here you go, lovely ladies. What would you like for lunch?’

Nikki glanced at Ash, who was staring at the wall again. ‘Um, can you decide for us today, please, James? Something comforting? One of our usuals.’

He squinted slightly, assessing them. ‘I’ll sort it, and some hot apple pie for dessert, I think.’

Nikki smiled. Now that did sound good. When James left she touched Ash’s hand. ‘Tell me everything.’

Ash pulled one of her tiny brown bottles from her bag and rubbed some oil on her wrist before she started from the beginning. She whispered the words she’d read from Emily’s Instagram account but she couldn’t bring herself to repeat the last one.

‘*What?* They were telling her to take her own life?’ Nikki sat back, appalled. ‘That is disgusting, Ash, what kind of kid would say those things!’ Nikki closed her eyes and hoped Chloe wouldn’t ever get messages like that. Or even worse, that she wouldn’t ever say horrible things like that. ‘Were any from Chloe?’ she suddenly asked, her heart in her throat.

‘Oh no,’ Ash said quickly. ‘Chloe would never. They don’t run in the same circles, but even so, I know Chloe’s heart and she wouldn’t be capable of that, Nikki, not to Emily. I’m positive.’

Ash smiled weakly and Nikki felt the pressure around her neck release. ‘I hope you don’t mind but I’ll still be having a chat with Chloe regardless. It’s just not on. She could be friends

with these people for all I know. What are you going to do? Have you spoken to Emily?’

Ash shrugged as she picked up the coffee she’d just spotted in front of her. ‘I honestly don’t know what to do. I had a panic attack over it and have been in La La Land ever since. Should I go to the school? Are these people even in her school? Kids today have friends from all over the bloody country. How are we supposed to protect them?’ She took a sip of her coffee. ‘But I’ll talk to her tonight. I feel so sick that she’s been dealing with this on her own. Why didn’t she come to me?’

Ash’s blue eyes, rimmed red and glossy, skittered sideways, and Nikki felt like there was more to this story. Or maybe something else on her mind that she wasn’t ready to share. ‘I wish I knew, Ash. Maybe they don’t want to worry us? I didn’t tell my parents much either when I was that age. Remember what it was like as a teenager? I thought I was *so* grown up . . . But you don’t realise until you really are an adult just how wrong you had it.’ Nikki sighed. ‘Sometimes I wish I could go back to those days and really enjoy them. They’re supposed to be so carefree, but . . . This whole online world, and these phones concern me so much. I mean, Josh is a thirteen-year-old boy who has never climbed a tree. He sits on his phone or his PlayStation playing with other people online and I feel like I’m losing him. He’s like a boarder, this boy who eats and sleeps with us, but there’s no conversation, no interaction. And don’t get me started on Chloe. She thinks she has to have a “presence” on social media to be popular. She wants to be famous. An influencer. I have a full-time job trying to stop her from going to school all made up like she’s

off to a ball. Sometimes the fights and battles just wear me down until I give in a little. And I hate that.'

'I know. What are we supposed to do? How am I supposed to help Emily? Take all her devices away so they can't touch her?'

They both leaned back as one of James's staff brought over their lunch. A Caesar salad and a creamy pasta dish. Nikki reached for the salad at the same time Ash took the pasta.

'Thank James for us please, Syd. He knows us too well.'

The young man nodded and replied that the dessert would be out in ten.

'I think putting her devices away would be good,' Nikki said. 'So she can't keep reading the messages and letting them consume her. But what about the banana in her hair? Go in and speak to the principal, just make him aware of it at least?'

Ash nodded. 'I think I need to. Surely a teacher has noticed something. Or if not I need to see that they're keeping an eye out.' Ash stabbed at her pasta. 'I feel so awful that I didn't find this out sooner. I'm her mum, I'm supposed to be able to protect her.'

'I don't think we can fully protect them from everything, Ash. Poor Emily. Don't they know she just lost her dad?'

Nikki watched as Ash moved her pasta around her plate, her face still so pale. The poor woman had been through hell, losing Owen the way she had and then trying to sort through the funeral and keep herself and Emily going. Nikki wasn't sure how she'd cope without Chris.

'One of them . . .' She took a breath. 'One of them mentioned Owen, and it implied they knew how he died.'

‘Have you spoken with her?’ said Nikki gently. ‘It was bound to get out and go around the school. Kids love any sort of gossip.’

‘No, not yet. She was already at school. We haven’t spoken much about Owen’s . . . death, except after it happened. Since then it’s like neither of us wants to bring it up and open old wounds.’

‘I understand. But Emily’s a strong girl, Ash, don’t forget that.’ Nikki had seen firsthand the way Emily watched her mother, looking for signs of her panic attacks and knowing how to divert them or help her through them. Chris had once told her that he thought Emily had the eyes of a wise person who had been here before, mature beyond her age. And Nikki knew what he meant; she had seen Em pick up on emotions in a room, seemingly aware of things going on in the background while other kids were oblivious. Chloe seemed years younger at times in comparison and yet she had been born only four months after Emily.

‘I know she is. Though I think that’s mainly because I’m *not* strong.’

Nikki reached for her hand and squeezed it. After the funeral Ash had confided her despair at not realising Owen was suicidal and her pain at thinking she could have saved him. Nikki had heard the guilt in her friend’s voice and held her while she’d cried and cried. She stayed the first few nights with Ash so she didn’t have to be alone. She held her hand while she organised the funeral arrangements, hugged her when she fell to pieces and reassured her every day that she was not responsible.

‘You are *not* to blame, Ash. For any of this. I’ll keep reminding you of that for as long as I have to.’ Nikki straightened up

and put on a determined air. ‘Now, let’s work on how you’ll approach Emily. We both know how difficult teenagers are to talk to,’ she said, rolling her eyes.

Ash gave her a small smile, and took a bite of her lunch.

‘We need to find a way for you to discuss the abuse without putting Emily offside or on the defensive. Especially when it’s hard to guess which way she’ll go,’ said Nikki while filling her fork with salad.

‘She’ll probably deny the whole lot just so I won’t worry. I don’t want her to blow this off as nothing.’

‘Agreed. It’s a serious matter. I hate bullying.’

The apple pie with a side of ice-cream eventually arrived and both women pounced on it while the waiter took their half-eaten lunches away.

Ash brushed her hair back and fanned her face. ‘Wow, it’s so hot in here. How are you not boiling in that jumper, Nik?’

Nikki shrugged and hoped her red face and clammy skin weren’t too noticeable. The truth was, she *was* hot. But they were nearly done and she would soon be back in the air-conditioned bliss.

‘I wish I could be more help, Ash,’ said Nikki, avoiding the jumper question; it was easier than lying. ‘But I don’t really know the best way either. This mothering gig is mostly guesswork and fear of getting it wrong. I wish I had the best answers.’ She could see the despair written all over Ash’s face, her neck tense and shoulders rolled forward, and wished there was some way to ease it.

‘Me too. Thank you, Nik; just talking with you has made me feel better.’

‘I’ll help any way I can, you know that.’

‘I know. I wouldn’t have made it through Owen’s funeral without you by my side and the days after,’ Ash said softly. ‘It works both ways too, you know.’

Nikki focused on cleaning up the last of the pie on her plate to avoid Ashley’s words but it didn’t stop them cutting through her. She felt as if she were betraying her closest friend, but she just couldn’t confide in her, not yet. Maybe later when she’d got a grip on it herself. She just needed time to wrap her own head around it before she could talk to anyone. It was still too raw.