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A Novel

By William Bowles

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Installment 9

I was scared, really scared. I debated whether to tell Judy or not but finally realised that I had to, it was unfair not to, I was putting her at risk as well. She was working in the kitchen and as soon as I entered I could see she knew something was up. She got up and hugged me and I burst into tears, my body shaking uncontrollably. She held on to me for what seemed ages, rocking me back and forth until my sobs abated. Finally, too exhausted to stand, I sat down. She sat next to me, holding my hands in hers.

Finally, she said, 'Judy told me.'

'Oh. And?'

'She wanted me to persuade you to move to the hospital.'

'I will if you want.'

'Only if you want to.'

'But it puts you at risk, it's not fair on you.'

'Don't you worry about me. I told you, you can stay here as long as you want, I promised you and this doesn't change anything as far as I'm concerned. We'll just have to be extra careful that's all. I've already spoke to Clare and Matthew and made them swear not to say a word to anyone, under any circumstances. They know how dangerous it is for you and they both send their love.'

'Victoria wouldn't tell me how many have been murdered. Did she say anything to you?'

'No, she wouldn't give me any details. Oh Nova it's awful, barbaric. How can they murder pregnant women?'

'We threaten them I suppose. I wonder if they've caught anyone?'

'Apparently, but the government's not saying anything, they playing all the incidents down. They're afraid of a pogrom.'

'God, a pogrom. It sounds like it's already started.' I thought of my mother's family in Russia during the war, being wiped out by the Nazis, and the stories she told me about when she was a child in Leeds, Chapeltown and later in Salford. And my grandmother's stories about the Black Hundreds and the Cossacks in the Ukraine and Bylorus when she was a child. I felt cold and alone and utterly defenceless. What a deadly irony that it should come to this.

Over the next days, I resisted the temptation to listen to the news or go onto the Web, I was just too afraid of what I'd hear or read. I started to jump at every noise I heard outside. I took to staying in bed for most of the day and we stopped taking our daily walks. When the time came for my next checkup I refused to go into town. Victoria was very angry with me

but I was adamant. I asked her if she could find a local clinic I could visit. Then Judy came up with a brilliant idea.

‘We need to invent a fictitious identity for you. It shouldn’t be difficult for Victoria or at least the hospital to get all the necessary papers made up, a new National Insurance number, birth certificate and so on. Give me the phone let me speak to her.’

At first, they put up all kinds of obstacles, but eventually, they realised that it was the best way to protect me. Getting the various government agencies to comply wasn’t that difficult once the decision was made at a higher level. Victoria’s only concern was whether a local doctor would notice anything odd about my pregnancy.

A few days later, Judy drove into town and picked everything up. I was now Jane Bolton, born in Birmingham in 1975. I went to such and such a school, got five A-Levels, an Arts degree, blah-blah-blah. I was four months pregnant and I’d just moved to Bedfordshire. The following day, I phoned up a local surgery, registered and made an appointment to see the doctor. Judy drove me there and waited for me while I went through the process of registering and finally getting to see the doctor, who turned out to be an Asian woman, Doctor Amina Singh, a diminutive, pretty woman wearing glasses much too large for her face. Victoria had already sent her my suitably doctored records, which she was looking through as I entered her surgery. We shook hands and I sat down, feeling nervous and hoping it didn’t show.

‘Well Ms. Bolton. How are we then? From your records your pregnancy looks entirely normal so far but let’s take a look at you shall we.’

The moment of truth. I undressed and sat on the edge of the examination table, trembling a little.

‘Are you feeling cold?’

‘A little.’

She gave me a smock to wear. ‘This shouldn’t take long. Hop on to the table please.’

She asked me all the usual questions, prodded me, took my blood pressure, listened to my heart and lungs and then to the baby’s heartbeat, checking my records as she did so.

‘Well, you and you baby are in excellent health I must say, except for a slightly elevated blood pressure and your temperature seems a tad high. Do you feel well?’

God, I’d forgotten about my higher temperature! What if she asked me questions about it? The next time I came, she was sure to notice that it hadn’t changed. I remembered reading somewhere, that some pregnant mothers registered a slightly higher temperature. Would I pass?

‘Yes, I’m fine doctor.’ I took the plunge. ‘For some reason, my temperature has always been a slightly high since I was a little girl but nobody seems to know why. I mean I’m not ill or anything,’ I said, in a naïve, girly way, at least I hoped that’s how I sounded.

‘Hmmm, interesting. I have read accounts before. Very rare I must say. But nothing for you to worry about I’m sure my dear. The main thing is that it doesn’t seem to affect your pregnancy and that’s what counts. I take it you’re eating well, a balanced diet, you don’t smoke do you? Okay, I’d like you to visit me in a month’s time. Are you going to attend our pre-natal classes? I advise it, especially for a first time mother and it’s free and you’ll get to meet some people and make some friends, share experiences with other mothers to be.’

‘Yes, I’d like to.’

‘Do you have a partner? Are you staying with someone?’

I’m staying with an old girlfriend of mine not far from here.’

‘Excellent, it’s no fun being a single mother without a family to support you. But I’m sure you must be looking forward to having your baby. It’s the most wonderful thing in the world being a mother.’

She positively radiated the beauty and sanctity of motherhood.

‘Yes, I can’t wait, I’m so excited. How many children do you have Doctor Singh?’

‘Two beautiful girls, three and five. Well it’s been a pleasure and I’ll see you in a month then Ms. Bolton, Jane isn’t it.’

She told me to talk to the receptionist who would give me all the relevant information I needed. She noted that I was unemployed and asked me if I needed any assistance, that there were various kinds of support for single mothers. I told her I’d only just moved here and I needed to register with the local Social Security office. Finally, I stood up, shook her hand and left. Had she noticed anything? I got the info from the receptionist and we left, with me breathing an audible sigh of relief as I got into the car.

‘No problems then?’

‘I don’t think so, except I forgot about my high temperature, so I made up a story about it being high since I was a little girl. She appeared to buy it, saying that it was extremely rare but not unknown. Told me that otherwise I was in excellent health and how wonderful it was to be a mother and that she had two beautiful girls. And I signed up for pre-natal classes. Told me I’d be able to share experiences with other mothers to be.’

I felt a lot better and Judy noticed the improvement.

‘Feel like taking our walks again?’

‘Yes, that would be nice. I really miss them.’

Five months and my tummy is getting bigger. I must have put on at least twenty-five pounds and my nipples have changed colour and gotten a lot bigger. The dreams always start up the same way. 'Mama? Mama?' Until I realise that's she's talking to me and I respond. 'Hello my darling.' Baby is snuggled up to me, warm and soft, a tiny hand holding on to my left breast. I can feel her heart beating. I stroke her and she opens her eyes and gazes adoringly at me, and then smiles that smile, which disarms me completely and I smile back. 'Mama warm. Mama soft. Mama safe.' To which I answer, 'Baby warm. Baby soft. Baby safe.' She wriggles around a bit, as if getting comfortable. Then she closes her eyes, snuggles down and the dream comes to an end. They're different from the earlier dreams in that I don't wake up right away. It's almost as if she's gone to sleep instead. Above all, the dream reassures me. When I wake, I feel peaceful and calm and I put my hands on my tummy and stroke it. I'm now absolutely sure that baby is in communication with me. Is she aware that she's different I wonder, and in part at least, that's the reason for the sense of reassurance she always communicates to me? Is it also because I'm different? When I wake, I wonder if she's moving around during the dream and I wish there were a way of checking for any correspondence. I think about asking Judy to check when I'm asleep but it seems a ridiculous thing to do, and in any case, how will she know I'm dreaming at the time?

To what degree it's me supplying the words to her or vice versa, is difficult to know, as each dream consists of a series of quite simple exchanges. I don't have any difficulty with the idea that she has a vocabulary. Although it occurs to me that she may be tapping directly into my mind and lifting the words that correspond to the feelings she wants to communicate, as I think it's feelings that she's communicating, not ideas as such. I start writing them down, as I have no difficulty remembering every tiny detail. I talk to Judy about the change in the dreams and I even bring up the idea of checking for movement, not in any serious way, and to my surprise, Judy doesn't mind trying, but we don't follow through.

I start attending the pre-natal classes. It's tough for me in the beginning. I can't shake the feeling that I'm here under some kind of false pretence, and I feel very self-conscious about it. During the exercises, I can feel baby moving around as if being surrounded by other pregnant women has reached her in some way. I'm immersed in the sounds and especially the smells of pregnant women. Am I the only one to sense it I wonder? She rarely kicked me but she moved quite a lot, especially when I was talking. It distracted me to the point where I would stop doing the exercises or listening to the instructor and focus on her instead.

The instructor, a woman called Jenny, sensing my distraction, approaches me after the class finished.

‘This is your first baby right?’ I want to tell her, and my last, but the thought occurs to me that it might be beyond my control.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, there’s nothing to be nervous about, it’s Jane isn’t it?’ I nod. ‘I got the feeling that you were distracted by something. Are you feeling okay?’

‘Yes, it’s just that baby was moving around quite a lot.’

Does that happen often?’

‘Normally only when I’m talking to someone.’

‘Oh really?’ She gives me a quizzical look but doesn’t pursue my observation. I want to ask her if it’s normal but I’m afraid it might be taken as abnormal, so instead I say, ‘It’s just that I’m very self-conscious about being pregnant, it’s taking a lot of getting used to.’

‘You’re not alone in feeling self-conscious talking about your body, especially our plumbing.’ I think she’s trying to make light of it, put my mind at ease, but it has the opposite effect on me. I start thinking about how different I am and whether it will show as I get nearer to term. I’m also very conscious of just how little I know about the internal workings of a woman’s body and I debate the idea of revealing my ignorance. But before I can she says,

‘We’re all in this together Jane and you’ll soon get used to the idea of sharing your feelings with the other women. Is there anything else in particular that’s bothering you?’

‘No, not really,’ I lie. ‘Well yes, I suppose so but it’s silly really.’

‘Jane, there’s nothing silly about being pregnant you know. It’s the most important event of your life.’

I’ve just been chastised by Jenny and I can feel myself blush. ‘Why don’t you tell me,’ and she puts a reassuring hand on mine. I’m trying desperately to think of something innocuous to say that doesn’t sound silly.

‘Well how can I put it? I suppose it’s how my body is changing. You know...’ I pause, searching for the words.

‘Oh you mean your breasts growing and the extra weight around your hips and tush and the strange feelings you get sometimes?’

‘Well yes, something like that.’

‘It’s something you’ll just have to get used to, dear. Your body is gearing up to give birth and all kinds of hormones and chemicals are being released to prepare you for it. Some

of them affect the way you think and your emotional state can swing wildly. It's all quite normal and nothing to worry about.'

'It's embarrassing for me to admit it but I know so little about my own body really.'

'Darling, you're not alone you know. Some women go through the entire process without a clue as to what is going on, that's why we have these classes. All they worry about is how they look and that they can't get into their clothes. Many complain about being clumsy and the fact that they sometimes have a problem concentrating on things.'

She takes me over to a table with pamphlets and books on it and sorts out a pile for me.

'Why don't you read these. I think you'll find the answers to most of the questions you have. And don't be shy in asking me anything, even if you do think it's silly, that's what I'm here for.'

She ushers me gently to the door as she talks.

'So, next week then and try not to worry. It's important that you relax. Look through this,' she sorts one of the pamphlets out, 'It has a number of relaxation exercises that you can do at home. They're not difficult and won't take up a lot of your time.'

'Well I do take a long walk every day.'

'That's excellent. It's important that you keep your body limber. And watch your weight dear. Sometimes we think that we have to stuff our faces for two, but it's more important that you eat the right kinds of food rather than the quantity.' She sorts out another pamphlet and taps on the cover. 'When the day comes, it'll make having baby that much easier, believe me.'

'Yes, well thank you. I'll see you next week then.'

Judy is waiting in the car for me.

'Well, how did it go?'

'Nerve-wracking. I felt so out of it. All those pregnant women nattering away about this and that.'

'It's important that you join in you know.'

'I'm afraid I'll give myself away. I felt such a fraud.'

Judy laughed.

'It's not funny. The instructor noticed how nervous and self-conscious I was and took me aside at the end of the class.'

'What did she say?'

‘Well I got chastised for being silly. This is the most important event of your life and don’t be shy about showing your feelings or asking obvious questions. She told me that I might not be able to think straight but not to worry about it.’

Laughing, ‘If only she knew.’

‘I think she might be right. Lately, I’ve been having a problem concentrating. Do you think I might be turning into a bimbo?’

Oh Nova really!’

‘Jane, remember.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry, Jane.’

‘In the class, surrounded by pregnant women I started to have the strangest feelings.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well it was the sounds but more than that, the smell.’

‘The smell?’

‘Yes, of women I suppose. Maybe pregnant women smell differently? Anyway, I felt I don’t know, immersed in it. And baby started moving around an awful lot and it kept distracting me. I kept drifting off and focusing on her moving.’

‘Are you saying that you think it affected her in some way?’

I sighed, ‘I don’t know Judy, I just don’t know. God I wish the nine months were up.’

‘But you love being pregnant.’

‘Do I?’

‘Jane, I’m not blind you know. You dote on your baby.’

‘So I’m just like all the other women in the class. That’s all they talked about, breasts and aching backs, and what colour the nursery would be and what was the best pram or nappy.’

‘Well you don’t talk about it so much as get lost in it. At least that’s how I perceive it. And anyway, there’s nothing wrong with it you know.’

‘I know, it’s just really difficult for me to adjust. Maybe it’ll get better.’

Six months and I’m getting big. My waist has disappeared completely. I’ve had to get a new wardrobe. My breasts are two sizes bigger and unwieldy as if they’ve been glued on to my chest. I’m not waddling like a penguin yet, but getting up is starting to be an effort. Judy is absolutely wonderful, I don’t know what I would do without her. I get cranky and forgetful a lot of the time, which annoys me no end. She’s encouraging me to make friends with the

other women in the class but I'm nervous with the idea of them getting too close to me and asking me too many questions or me forgetting who I'm supposed to be.

The dreams continue and as I suspected they would, they are getting more complex although limited by what I can only interpret as her inability to relate to the world outside the womb. The focus is still on feelings of security and love and getting close to me. Does she know that she'll soon be born? Does she even have a concept of time?

'Mama? Mama wake.' 'Hello baby. Yes, I'm awake dear.' Now I turn her and lift her up to my face. Her eyes are more focused, communicating an intensity of feeling as if she knows that I know that this is no dream. Again the feeling of assurance, of not worrying, that this is quite normal, for her at least and that it's me that has to adjust. Don't ask me why I know this, but the beautiful, perfect face that I see before me just radiates an aura of confidence and certainty. She closes her eyes and I gently put her down. Now she floats before me, one tiny hand pressed to her lips, and a delicate, Mona Lisa smile, plays across her face. I think she's dreaming too.

I wake and stretch, and feeling completely contented, snuggle further under the duvet. I contemplate the dream as I do every time I have it. Is she dreaming my dream now, as I lay here thinking of her or does she have her own? Does she feel my love for her? I have this image of my love messages being transmitted through the umbilical cord like packets of data over the Internet, eventually arriving in her mind for her to unpack and digest.

Month seven and I've had no real contact with the world and events at all except at my weekly class. I have trouble sleeping and breathing becomes more of an effort but I'm advised that this is quite normal. The doctor told me to put a pillow under my tummy and one between my legs.

The issue of those who've been through the change is never raised in the class or with the women I talk to now and again, and I have no intention of bringing it up.

Doctor Singh is very pleased with my progress although she expresses some surprise at the state of my health. I ask her what she means.

'Well Jane, it's usually normal during pregnancy for minor glitches to occur as the body goes through the various stages of pregnancy, but aside from the temporary rise in your blood pressure some time back, you are disgustingly healthy, if I may put it that way. Although, there is one, well I'm not sure abnormality is the right word but your birth canal is slightly different.'

'Different? How different?' My pulse quickens. Am I about to be unmasked?

‘Well how can I put it? This may sound odd but yours is better, no that’s not the word I want. Okay, let me put this way. For whatever reason, perhaps an evolutionary one, the birthing mechanism, like many other aspects of our body’s design, is not perfect. Sometimes, when these imperfections combine with other factors mainly genetic in origin, a flaw for example expressed in some way, can lead to complications during pregnancy or the birth of the baby.’

‘And in my case?’

‘Well my dear I’d say you’ve been blessed with an improvement. I’d go so far as to say, that your baby is going to pop out without a problem.’

‘Is that a problem?’

She laughed at my joke.

‘No of course not but...’ she paused as if debating whether to continue her train of thought. Here we go, and I held my breath waiting for the bomb to drop.

In a low voice, almost a whisper, ‘Are you one of the people who’ve been through the change?’

‘Change?’ What change?’

‘Please forgive me if you think I’m prying, but as your physician, I’m responsible, legally and morally for your health and the health of your baby. If you’re keeping something back from me which could impact on or prejudice your pregnancy you owe it to your baby, if not to yourself, to tell me.’

I looked at her, trying to get a handle on her reaction if I told her the truth. I knew it was too good to be true of course, that I was deluding myself that I could keep it a secret for this long and especially from a doctor. The question is how will she react and what will she do?

‘Doctor Singh, do you know what’s been happening to some of the people who’ve gone through the, the change?’

‘Yes of course I do. I’m appalled by what’s being done to them. Murdered and mutilated. It’s absolutely hateful and barbaric. Is that why you’re afraid to tell me because if it is, please let me assure you, anything you tell me is in the strictest confidence. And moreover, not only as a doctor but also as a woman, I’ve seen first hand the kind of atrocities men inflict on us. And whatever else you are Ms. Bolton, you are a pregnant woman first and it’s my duty is to protect you and your baby from harm. Does this put your mind at rest?’

I nodded but said nothing. I sat there in her surgery thinking about the next move. Eventually I got up. ‘Doctor Singh, I think you should get in touch with Doctor Victoria

Grayson at St. George's Hospital. She'll tell you all you need to know, insofar as they know anything about my, condition.'

'Well frankly Ms Bolton, I've already been in touch with her after I noticed the, abnormalities, and it was only her evasiveness in answering my queries that alerted me to the possibility of your being a...what does one call your condition Ms. Bolton?'

'I'm sure they've dreamed a medical term for it Doctor Singh, though I've no idea what it is. The point is, well how can I put this? Aside from wanting to keep my true identity a secret because I fear for my life and the life of my baby, I stopped being a patient of Victoria, that is Doctor Grayson, because I no longer wanted to be a, well a guinea pig at her hospital.'

'That's understandable and I've no intention of turning you into one here. As I said, you are my patient and as far as I'm concerned simply a pregnant woman, and that's the way I intend to keep it.'

'Thank you Doctor Singh and I believe you. However, I'm concerned that you may come under a lot of pressure from St. George's to communicate your findings to them. Do you know that I'm the first one to go through the change and live, and probably the first one to give birth?'

'No I didn't but thank you for telling me. As to the issue of sharing any information I get with them, I have no intention of volunteering anything and as far as I know, I'm under no compulsion to do so. Does that answer your question?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Now that we're out in the open, is there anything else you think you should or could tell me that will help me in making sure you give birth to a healthy baby girl?'

'Well there are certain peculiarities about my baby but I don't think they have any direct bearing on me giving birth.'

'Well perhaps you could let me be the judge?'

'It's complicated Doctor Singh and I'm not sure if it really is relevant but I'm sure she communicates with me through my dreams.'

'Communicates? In what way?'

'Well I know it sounds fanciful, but apparently all of us do it, so it's not just me, she talks to me. Not the kind of conversation you and I have, it consists more of feelings and emotions but she knows I'm her mother and she lets me know she loves me and that everything is going to be alright. When I tell her that I love her, she responds. Look it sounds crazy I know but I have these dreams every time I sleep, almost without fail. She wakes me up in my dream. She calls to me and says 'Mama wake' and I wake up in my dream and pick

her up and cradle her to me and she snuggles up to my breast. I can't begin to describe the well I suppose ineffable feeling she imparts to me. She looks me in the eye with a very cool and beautiful intelligence. In the beginning it was most disconcerting believe me. And as the pregnancy has progressed, so the conversation if that's what one can call it, has gotten more complex.'

'Well if it helps in the progress of your pregnancy and during the birth, it might be relevant but I can see why you're reluctant to share it with me, it is pretty fantastic, although no more so than what's happened to you already. Is there anything else I should know?'

I could see she didn't really believe me but who cares.

'No.'

I left her surgery feeling better because I was no longer lying to her but less secure nevertheless.

I'm in the eighth month and I'm now pretty enormous. I pee a lot and I've had my first contractions except they don't feel like contractions, more like I'm being tickled inside. As the projected birth date gets closer, I'm getting more anxious but baby, as always, does all she can to reassure me. I talk to her a lot when I'm awake now and I'm sure she's aware that it'll soon be time.

I told Judy about my conversation with Doctor Singh.

'It's probably for the best Jane. As she said, she needs as much information as possible to make sure that you have a safe birth. I understand your concern about keeping your identity a secret but Doctor Singh sounds like she's on your side.'

'I trust her, I really do but I'm not so sure about St. George's.'

'Have you spoken with Victoria?'

'No not since my last visit. Have you?'

'Yes. She phones me up to see how you're doing. You know she feels guilty about the way things developed. She told me she was thinking of leaving St. George's, she's had an offer from a private research organisation. I wish you two could get together again, I feel so bad about what happened, we've known each other for years and I know she thinks I've deserted her. It puts me in an unenviable position.'

'I know Judy, but it's not really Victoria I'm angry with, you know that don't you. And I'm sorry that I've gotten between you.' Now I felt guilty. 'Please ask her to visit us, I'd like to see her too.' I thought about the week I nearly died and incongruously, of Victoria's shopping for me that day at my flat. I'd forgotten all about my flat! The rates hadn't been paid

nor had my mortgage. Maybe I should sell it? I couldn't see myself living there ever again. God, what a mess I'd left behind me. But it seems an age ago and no longer me or a part of my life, which in a sense was true. Roy Simmons was dead, long live Roy Simmons!

'Really? You're not just saying that to please me?'

'No of course not silly. Please ask her to come if she wants to.'

Victoria arrived on Friday evening to spend the weekend with us. The atmosphere was pretty strained at first with Judy doing her best to act as the mediator. Victoria couldn't believe how I'd changed and she teased me about my enormous belly and how I wobbled about the house and complained all the time about my back and my swollen feet. At first, we avoided any reference to the other women but I knew that sooner or later the subject had to come up, it couldn't be put off indefinitely. They both fussed over me all weekend, not allowing me to do a thing.

We were sitting around the kitchen table the following morning when Victoria mentioned that she'd spoken with Doctor Singh.

'I was thinking that if you agree, we should meet with Doctor Singh this weekend. Would you mind? I've already asked her. She doesn't mind coming here, maybe this afternoon? She'll have to bring her children though. Would that be a problem?'

My initial reaction was to ask why, then I thought it over and it made a lot of sense. Victoria probably knew more about my condition than anyone else alive.

'I'd love to meet her children actually. She talks about them every time I see her. I think she's trying to convince me that I'll have nothing but fun when the baby arrives. Yes, okay, invite her over. Judy?'

'Of course, I'd love to meet her. She sounds so sweet from everything you've said about her.'

I half expected Victoria to ask if she could examine me but she didn't. I suppose I wouldn't have minded if she had, I was more than a little proud of my heavily pregnant body. Baby moved around a lot that morning and I had the feeling that she recognised Victoria's voice.

'What are you going to call her?' Victoria asked.

'Call her? Well I haven't really thought about it. I just call her Baby but I suppose I'll have to come up with a name at some point. Got any ideas? Judy?'

'Well you don't want to lumber her with some name loaded with meaning like Nova.'

'No I suppose not.' Then it came to me in a flash. 'How about Valentina?'

'Valentina? Where did you get that from?'

‘That was the name of the first woman in space and well Valentina will be the first one on earth...’

‘And you didn’t want to pick a name loaded with meaning?’

‘But it’s a pretty name and as I’m half Russian, I think it’s very appropriate.’

Victoria rolled the name over on her tongue.

‘Valentina. Hmm...not bad I suppose. Could be worse. What do you think Judy?’

‘Actually I quite like it. Valentina. Yes.’

‘Okay, it’s decided.’ I rubbed my tummy and said, ‘Hello Valentina, you’ll be landing soon.’

‘She talks to her all the time and when she thinks I can’t hear, she sings to her as well.’

‘She likes my singing, which reminds me, I’d like to get my music from my flat, assuming it’s all still there of course. I need to make sure Valentina gets a good musical education from the get go.’

‘They can hear quite well and they can even recognise individual voices .’

‘I think she knows you’re here Victoria.’

‘Really? How d’you know that?’

‘She been moving around a lot since you got here.’

‘If you want, I’ll check by your apartment and collect your CDs. Would you like me to get your sound system as well?’

‘Would you? I’d really appreciate that. Judy, would you mind?’

‘Of course not my dear. From what you’ve told me, you’ve got a lot of good music and you know what kind of sound system I’ve got.’

We carried on like this for the rest of morning, nattering around the kitchen table and generally avoided talk about anything connected to my condition. The girls put some lunch together and then I fell asleep in front of the fire, as usual.

‘Mama. Wake up.’ ‘Hello Valentina. That’s your name now you know.’ I repeated her name to her. She smiled at me and to my amazement said, ‘Me Valentina. You Mama.’ I was so shocked I woke up with a start.

Victoria was standing in the doorway. ‘What happened? I heard you talking. Were you talking to Valentina in your sleep?’

I was still trying to gather my thoughts. But why should I be so surprised? Maybe it was the directness of it and the fact that I’d only just named her that amazed me.

‘I was dreaming as usual and she woke me up, in my dream of course, and said, ‘Me Valentina. You Mama,’ just like that. I was so amazed it woke me up.’

‘You’re not alone you know.’

‘So I’ve heard.’

‘It’s still being debated. Most scientists don’t believe it’s happening, at least that it’s real communication rather than just a dream.’

‘And you?’

‘Me? As a scientist I find it hard to accept, after all, it’s almost impossible to prove that it’s happening until...’

‘Until what?’

‘Well, we can ask her when she’s born can’t we.’

‘I have a feeling Victoria, that she’ll tell us.’

‘Yes, I’m inclined to agree with you.’

‘Oh why’s that?’

‘We’ve developed new, non-invasive techniques over the past few months for measuring the baby’s brain activity and there are clear differences between your baby’s and that of a normal one. We’ve compared the two and there’s no doubt. The question is of course, whether this accounts for what you’ve been experiencing. Personally, I believe you’re right but I can’t tell my colleagues that.’

‘What kind of differences are you talking about?’

‘Well, there are particular areas that are more developed, for example, the area normally associated with speech and the cognitive areas. There are also differences in the physical development of her body.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if she comes out running. Well not exactly but you know what I mean. That’s why it’s important that Doctor Singh has as much information as possible, you realise that don’t you? She needs to be as prepared for any surprises in store for us.’

‘Yes.’

‘Have kept up with the news at all?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want to know?’

‘Not really but I get the feeling you’re going to tell me anyway.’

‘No, not if you insist. The thing is, the entire world is waiting you know.’

‘Waiting?’

‘Your baby is the first one Nova. You’ve no idea to what lengths I’ve had to go to protect you. I had to use someone else’s car to come here, just in case.’

‘I’m not having Valentina living in a goldfish bowl. I’ll do everything in my power to keep her from that.’

‘I understand that. The point is it’s going to be very difficult at first.’

I had that sinking feeling. Is she listening? Does she understand already? She may be better prepared for it than I am, for all I know.

‘Nova?’

‘What?’

‘I’m sorry, I was thinking. It occurs to me that she might be listening to everything we say. Have you considered that?’

‘Yes I have. And it gives me confidence that she’ll be better equipped to deal with life than we think.’

‘I wonder. Her world is full of love and security Victoria. She trusts me implicitly. She constantly reassures me do you know that?’

‘Yes. That’s what all the others say too.’

‘I’ll die to protect her. I’ll kill to protect her too.’ The thought shocked me. Would I really do that? Yes, I would. There was something so fundamental to the feeling. A feeling of being driven by some built in compulsion that Valentina had to survive at any cost and the finality of the thought frightened me. I also knew that there was no way I could tell Victoria or anybody else for that matter and I already regretted the little I’d said.

‘Yes.’

Judging by the expression on her face, was it already too late? I thought about all the sci-fi stories I’d read as a kid about mutants. Kill or be killed, I thought and I realised that it might not be so far-fetched. The memory of pogroms resurfaced and I shivered.

‘I’m sorry Nova, I’ve upset you haven’t I.’

‘No, not you,’ I sighed. ‘The world.’ I stroked my tummy and murmured quiet words of reassurance to her. Oh Valentina, what’s in store for you I wonder?

‘Doctor Singh’s here,’ Judy called out.

Just as she’d said the girls were adorable and absolutely fascinated by my enormous tummy. They fired questions at me, some of which revealed that they’d listened to their mother talk, obviously without understanding much. They asked me if they could touch my tummy and did she kick and did it hurt and when was she coming out?

‘Stop it girls! Leave Jane alone now.’

‘Sorry mummy,’ they reply in unison but before long, they’re at it again.

‘What did I tell you?’

‘That’s okay, I don’t mind.’

‘Don’t encourage them, they’re much too nosy. It’s not like you haven’t seen pregnant ladies before, so stop pestering Jane. That’s the last time I’m going to tell you.’

I winked at them and they giggled and hid behind their mother’s sari, peeking out at me. Their freshness and innocence was delightful, and it lifted my spirits, making me forget the dark thoughts of just a few minutes ago. Judy offered to take them into the kitchen for awhile, tempting them with chocolate chip cookies, leaving the three us alone.

Victoria started the conversation by bringing Amina up to date and I tried to listen but I found my mind wandering back to Valentina. Occasionally, my ears pricked up when I heard my name mentioned but for the most part I must have day dreamed, the warmth of the fire encouraging me to sleep. ‘Mama? Wake up. Valentina. Wake up Mama.’ ‘Hello darling.’ I picked her up and hugged her to me her skin like the softest caramel coloured silk and I cooed a simple melody in her perfect tiny ear. Her laugh was like crystal bells, tinkling lightly. Then she closed her eyes and I was awake.

They were looking at me. Amina had a look of disbelief on her face.

‘Sorry, I nodded off. The fire...’

Eventually Amina said, ‘So that’s what it’s like then.’

‘I was talking to Valentina.’

‘And singing, a pretty melody too. So you’ve decided on a name then.’

‘Yes, this morning. Victoria and Judy said I couldn’t keep calling her Baby. I think that’s the first time I’ve sung to her. She loved it. She laughed, cooed and then went to sleep. She’s such an angel. I hope she’s like this when she joins us.’

‘You’ll be very lucky if she is. I think she’s going to be a very demanding young lady if this what she’s like before she’s even born.’

‘Yes you’re probably right. I’m sorry I nodded off, very rude of me. Anyway did I miss anything important?’

‘I’ve just been bringing Amina up-to-date on the latest findings and what we think she should watch for, when the day comes. I think Amina’s observation on the differences, are quite important but we’ll see in the final month. I think we should do a scan next week. Your pelvis should already be softening so it can stretch during birth but we need to make sure.’

‘What else should I know?’

‘Well as you know, in the final week, Valentina will move down to into your uterus. You’ll feel it and she should be kicking at least once an hour. But you’ve got to remember all this is based on the birth of a normal baby, so it may be that these are not much of a guide for us, but there’s no reason to assume that things should be that different for you than for a normal birth. I think what concerns us more is the health of Valentina.’

‘Yes, what do you intend to do after the birth Jane?’

‘Do? I’m not sure I follow you Amina.’

‘Will you continue to live here?’

‘Well assuming that Judy is happy with the idea, then the answer is yes. Why do you ask?’

She looks at Victoria before answering.

‘You’re quite isolated here. What if there’s an emergency?’

‘I’ll call you or an ambulance. Look, what are you getting at?’

‘Frankly, I’m not sure that I’m equipped to deal with it.’

‘Is that the real reason Amina?’

‘We’re both concerned about your safety out here.’

‘Nobody knows I’m here do they. Why should this be an issue?’

‘It’s going to be very difficult to keep the birth quiet.’

‘Not if I have it here.’

‘Here? I’m not sure that’s...’

‘Victoria, I told you before. I have no intention of having the baby in a hospital.’

‘Aside from anything else Jane, it may be impossible for you to have the baby here.

What I mean is, they can force you.’

‘Force me? They can’t make me go into hospital!’

I felt sick.

‘So this is what this is all about.’

‘There are laws Jane. Laws that can be used if they think that the health of the baby is threatened by a home birth.’

‘But my baby is healthy. There’s no indication that there’s any threat to Valentina’s health.’

‘I know that Jane but it may be out of mine, or Amina’s hands.’

‘So I take it that they know where I am.’

‘There was no way I could hide it Jane. I had to register your pregnancy with the local health board it’s the law. It doesn’t take much for them to link your identity to your location

by doing a search through the databases. I'm sorry, I really am. Look I'm going to do everything I can to make sure you give birth here if that's what you really want but if they intervene directly, there's nothing I can do to stop them.'

'You mean they'll arrest me? Send in the pregnancy police!'

'We're hoping that it won't come to that. In theory they have to be advised by the patient's doctor as to the potential threat to health posed by a birth at home before doing anything.'

'And what are you planning to say?'

'Right now I don't see any threat to your health or that of your baby but that could change, you know that.'

What could I do? Resist? Barricade the house? Go underground perhaps. I knew it was futile if it came to that, there's nothing a pregnant woman can do to stop them. I couldn't really blame Amina or Victoria for that matter if the government decides to act, there is nothing they can do to stop them either.

'And is that what you're telling them?'

'Yes and I'm going to do all I can to make sure your wishes are respected.'

'So am I Nova. I'm hoping they'll listen to me. After all, my word does carry some weight. The critical point will be during the last week.'

Amina, looking absolutely stricken, 'Jane, Nova, if it looks at all like there may be complications of any kind, I'll have no choice but to recommend a hospital birth. But I've already been in touch with a midwife, one I really respect who has years of experience of home births and she's is utterly trustworthy, believe me.'

'What can I do. I suppose I'll have to trust your judgement although it seems that you have as much control over the situation as I do.'

'I know this sounds trite but try not to worry. Let's keep our fingers crossed and hope everything goes well. I have told them that you want to have a home birth and that any pressure on you to have your baby in hospital is likely to put you under extreme stress, which by itself could have negative consequences for your health. Luckily, there are no indications such as high blood pressure or other potential threats to your health that they can use as an excuse. In fact I've told them that your health and that of the baby is extremely good and that there's no reason at all to suspect complications.'

'Are these bureaucrats, who I assume are all men, likely to be persuaded by the truth?'

'We can only hope Nova.'

‘Look mummy, Judy helped us make some cookies! Chocolate ones.’ Amina’s girls came charging in followed by a harassed looking Judy carrying a plate of misshapen cookies. The youngest of Amina’s daughters was splattered with flour and had chocolate all over her face, hands and dress.

‘Oh look at you, your dress!’ Amina threw up her hands in despair. ‘I’m sorry Judy, did they make a real mess in your kitchen?’

‘No, it’s fine. We had fun didn’t we girls.’

‘Yesss!’

‘Well say thank you to Judy.’

‘Thank you Judy.’

‘Do they always say everything in unison?’

‘They’re inseparable, like twins. They always have been. Well aren’t you going to offer everyone a cookie then?’

Judy gave the eldest girl the plate and she went around the room accompanied by her sister insisting that we all take one.

The timing of their entrance couldn’t have been better planned. The look of relief on Amina and Victoria’s faces was palpable. The rest of the afternoon was spent in pleasant domestic chaos.

After they’d left, I helped Judy clean up the kitchen and while we were tidying up I told her about my conversation.

‘Oh Nova, how awful. What are you going to do?’

‘What can I do except hope that everything goes well. I thought briefly about disappearing but it’s an unrealistic and frankly stupid idea. After all, when all’s said and done, it’s Valentina that comes first. Frankly, I’m not so much concerned about going into hospital as such but the safety of Valentina. I just think we’ll be safer here.’

Poor Judy, she was so worried about me and I felt guilty about disrupting her life and possibly risking her safety as well. What a pair we were.