

Wings

By,

Laura Messenger

Genre:

Psychological Literature

Des always saw things I didn't.

She was always the first to spot a mark. She'd pull me close to the side of a wall, so the bricks pressed into my back, keep us hidden in the shadows, and she'd point them out to me.

See there? A student, mobile phone in one hand, CD player hanging from a loop on his jeans. Designer backpack on one shoulder. Rich kids and new toys, she said. A good mark.

Five women, drunk, staggering into each other and out of a club. Strapped into tops too tight, flesh hanging over their belts in great, ugly lumps. Like whales. Bump into them, they don't see you, give you some slurred tongue back, but me and Des, we don't care, because we're hanging on tight to their gold bracelets.

Two businessmen, all suited, stinking of aftershave. Heads close together, talking big words, stuff I can't understand. Too busy to see me or Des behind them, to miss the wallets that we take from their pockets.

You had to take from those who wouldn't notice. Des kept telling me this; it was her number two rule. Take from those who won't run after you, who won't call for the Dibbles, who won't even see. Not from those who struggled, like us. Not the single mum, she'd tell me, not this teenage girl with a child gripping her hand, and screaming. Not the drunk lying asleep on the pavement, even though his bag calls to us. No good pickings, she says, and besides, it's like stealing from our own.

Des was always teaching me things like that. Take from those who won't notice, do it in a big crowd, make sure there are loads of exits, make sure you

keep away from the Dibbles, don't start talking to Friendlies.

Friendlies. That's what she called them, Des. Those women who'd come up to me in the street, and ask me where my parents were, or offer to take me to Maccy Ds, or give me chocolate. Some of them gave me money, but I couldn't take it because they were Friendlies.

Never talk to Friendlies. That was Des's number one rule.

I never got why, not for a long time. When I was little—I mean, smaller than I am now, not really little—she said these women, they weren't being kind. They wanted to steal me, me, a person! Not a thing, not money. She said they wanted to take me away from her, lock me away, with other kids they'd stolen. And then I'd never see Des again.

That scared me, alright. Not seeing Des? I couldn't think of that. Me and Des, we'd always been together, and weren't we always going to be together, just like she said?

Just me and her, she said. We didn't need no one else.

Des was my sister. I knew this, even before I really knew what a sister was. We looked the same, you know? We had the same eyes, same pointy ears; some people said we laughed the same. Not that Des laughed that much.

Not on the streets. That was serious, then, we meant business. We had to find a mark, had to make at least three, or else there'd be no food that night, and none for breakfast. She'd have this look, like she was concentrating really hard. I always knew when she was thinking like this because she'd stick the tip of her tongue out, just between her teeth. And when we got the bag, or the wallet, or

whatever – when the job was done, she'd sort of look hopeful, maybe. Me and her, hiding down a back street, behind some bins. If I'd caught the mark, she'd let me open it, and she'd watch me, that hopeful look on her face. If it was good day, then she'd smile, and we'd go to Greggs, and she'd buy me the biggest cream cake there. One of the chocolate ones, where the cream would ooze out of the end. If it was a bad day, she wouldn't look at me; she'd just look all concentrated again, and tell me to go back onto the streets.

Sometimes she laughed. When we got to watch telly.

That was the best. See, out the other end of Market Street, where all the rich kids hang out, they put this huge telly screen on the wall of a shop, so everyone can watch. Most times they show the news, which is really boring and I don't like to watch, but it doesn't matter, cause normally we're too busy trying to pick out marks in the crowd. But sometimes, if it was a really good day, we'd go and sit down in the square and watch, if they were showing a movie or some quiz show. And we'd eat our cakes, and she'd hold my hand, and laugh.

But it had been months since that last happened. Things were getting bad.

We hadn't had a decent mark in ages. Des said it was because no one wanted to come to Manchester, there'd been all those warnings, on the big telly, and now people were scared, and sat in their houses, and waited. Des said there were people who wanted to blow up Manchester, like they had before, and that meant no one was on the streets, or in the shops, not the students or the drunk women or the business people. And if there was anyone, they'd be all scared and

looking over their shoulder all the time, and we couldn't get anything.

Des said it was gonna be okay, because wasn't it always okay, and didn't she always take care of me? I just nodded, but I knew she was scared, and that made me scared. For a while things were alright because we had a stash, things we hadn't sold yet, but that started to run out.

There were no more cakes. I asked Des, I asked her if we could go in. I stood pressed up against the window because it was warm in there, and I could see them, the chocolate ones, all covered in cream. But Des said no, and she got angry.

She said I should be grateful to her for everything she did. She said if I wanted, I could go away with the Friendlies, was that what I wanted? And I felt bad because I was grateful, Des does everything for me, so I never needed no parents.

So I said sorry, and I held her hand, and she cried on my shoulder and made my coat wet. She gave me this big hug, and said sorry, sorry that there were no cakes, sorry that she was angry. That night she let me sleep next to her, and she told me stories of mum, stuff she hadn't said for years.

Cause I don't really remember our parents. Des says that mum was never sure who our dad was. I used to make up things about him, when I was little, like maybe he was a clown at a circus, or maybe he was a businessman in one of those big offices. But I don't care, anymore. Mum, I remember a bit of. I remember she had hair like ours, black and thick, and like Des's, tied back with an elastic band, but still escaping, like this wild animal. Des told me she used to

sing a lot, that she used to make up stories about dragons and wizards and she'd get us to sleep with them, but now maybe I think Des was lying.

Now I think Des couldn't remember anything either, not really.

But that night, that bad night, I didn't say any of this to her. I let Des tell me all those stories again, and I fell asleep next to her, and I think I dreamt of her and mum and me, all together again. Like mum had never left us.

The next night, I slept on my own.

Des said I wasn't to be scared, but that she had a job to do. I asked if it was a mark, and she said yeah, a big mark, but she looked all sad when she said it, and she wouldn't look at me, not properly. Just like when we open a wallet, and there's nothing there but coins.

We were sleeping in this old hardware shop. It must have closed years ago, and the owner must have left in a hurry, because there were still boxes of screws hidden in places and some tins of paint. I couldn't sleep, not on my own, so I tried to build things with the screws and with the pieces of wood I found, until Des came back. I heard her climb through the broken wood at the window, so I crept down tight under my blanket, so she'd think I'd been asleep all the time. But I had my eyes open, just a bit, so I could see her.

She was crying.

I suppose things got better then. We moved out of the shop, and into a proper flat, with a bed and a toilet and everything. It was above this kebab shop, too, and the minute we got in the room I ran to the window and pulled it open to smell. When I asked her, Des wouldn't say how she'd got the place, but then she

pulled out this box, this cardboard box with Greggs on this side, and there were three cakes in there. And she let me eat all of them, all at once.

I slept alone that night, too. That time I did go to sleep, I guess tired from all those nights before, so I didn't see Des come back. But when I woke up, she was sitting by the window, and she wouldn't look at me for the longest time. And when she did, I saw that her right eye was all puffy and red, and it hurt her when I tried to put a wet cloth on it. She wouldn't tell me who had done it; she said she'd walked into a lamppost when she was running away from a mark. I made like I believed her, but I knew she was making it up.

I think it must have been that night she started taking the pills.

Des said we didn't do drugs. I knew what they were. I'd seen guys with these shoelaces tied round their arms and needles in them, and Des said we should always stay away from them. She told me about drugs, about pills and needles and booze, and how we didn't need any of those things because we had each other.

And she didn't take anything like that, not when we were on the street doing jobs.

I guess she must have started then, though, because the next night, the next night she didn't come back at all. I got really scared then, thinking that maybe she'd been caught by the Dibbles, or worse, maybe a Friendly. I sat by the window for hours, trying to see her. Guess I fell asleep, because when I woke up, a man I'd never met was carrying Des through the door and putting her onto the bed. He said she was tired, that I shouldn't wake her. And he gave me

money, notes, lots of them, more than I'd ever seen, and he said she'd done good; it was a big job.

And then he left me with Des.

She was lying on the bed, and her eyes were open, and she was staring up at the ceiling – but not saying anything. I don't think she saw me, I don't think she could see anything. Not in the room, anyways. But like I said, Des could always see things I couldn't.

I didn't know what else to do, so I got up on the bed and lay down next to her. I thought she felt cold, so I pulled a blanket up, over the two of us. And that's when she spoke.

“The stairs.”

That's all. Weird, huh? I asked her what stairs, what did she mean, but she didn't say anything back. And then, it was weird, it was like she gave up; she closed her eyes and went to sleep. But her face was wet; she was crying.

When Des woke up, she was angry. She took the money from me, and I never saw what she did with it. I guess she bought the pills with it because there weren't any cakes, not that day or the day after. I asked her about the night before, about the stairs, but she wouldn't tell me, said she hadn't said anything.

She'd been tired, she said. Dreaming.

I started to get bored, then. Des wasn't really speaking to me, and anyway, she was out all night, and came back and just slept on the bed, fully clothed and everything. So I used to go out on my own, being careful of course, no Dibbles or Friendlies. I did a few jobs, little ones; I thought I'd make Des

proud. But when I showed her what I'd got, she didn't say anything; she just pushed the stuff back at me and said, "They're yours, that's your job."

I tried to take the pills away from her. I made it look like I was out on a job, but then I snuck back early, when I knew Des was out. I dug around in her bag until I found them, this little silver strip of pink pills. I looked through the plastic, and I could see they had wings on them, little angel wings.

They looked like sweets, like sugar. I thought about tasting one, but then I remembered what Des looked like after, how she was all angry, and I ran to the loo before I could change my mind. Pushed each one out, so there were all these little pink angel wings floating around in the toilet.

Des caught me just before I flushed.

I know she didn't mean to hit me. She was all upset and scared, I think, scared of losing all those little pink angel wings. She yanked on my arm, pushed me away from the loo so she could scrabble about inside. She scooped them all up, every last one, and put them into her bag, deep back into her bag. And then she started yelling at me, really yelling.

It didn't really hurt, anyway. Just her hand, the flat bit, slapping my cheek. Des was so upset afterwards, she just looked terrible, how could I be angry? She started crying, and fell onto the bed, so I curled up around her and tried to make it alright again.

Funny. That was the first time I was the one who had to look after her.

Des told me she wouldn't take any more pills. I knew she was lying. She never threw them away, did she? Kept them hidden in her bag, all the time she

was telling me she'd quit. She said we'd leave the flat, go back out onto the streets, make it like it was before. We'd just stop one more night, just one more night, and she had to see someone, make it okay.

The next morning, she said she'd fallen over in the street, bruised her face and arms.

Des hardly spoke to me, after that. She'd come in late, sometimes with food, chips from downstairs, still warm in the paper. Sometimes she'd not come back with anything, she'd just crash out on the bed. I tried looking for the pills again, but I couldn't find them.

Some nights she didn't come back at all. That happened more and more, which I guess explains why I wasn't worried, not at first. I had my job still, didn't I, and I was older too, didn't need Des so much, not in the same way. But that night, I dunno, it felt weird. I was out late, longer than usual. Some Dibbles had caught me on Oldham Street, and I'd had to run, I'd run all the way in the wrong direction hadn't I, all the way to Piccadilly before I realized. And I'd dropped the stuff. It took me ages to walk back to the flat, making sure no Dibbles saw me.

The kebab shop was closed. The fear was high, by then. Everyone was afraid. I knew that. Everyone knew it. A lot of times the shops were closed, and the streets were empty. So I didn't think anything of the shop being closed.

But the door was open. The door to the flat. Des always closed it, she said it was safer, keep us safe from Friendlies and Dibbles. She said, keeping the door closed, that made the flat really ours. But it was open, and the flat was empty.

I knew she was on the roof. I don't know how. Maybe it was what she had said, that first night I'd known properly she was taking those pills.

The stairs.

Our flat, the kebab shop, it was on Oxford Road, in the middle of Rusholme. Loads of houses nearby, but they were quite small, only a couple of stories. Our building had three – the kebab shop, our apartment, and above us, just an empty space, where the Pakis who owned the place kept dusty old boxes, and plastic furniture. And then the roof.

I climbed up the stairs. The door to the roof was open, like I knew it would be.

You could see for miles from that roof. All down Oxford Road, both ways, up to the university, and the Palace Hotel just beyond it. And back the other way, you could see the whole Curry Mile, and it looked pretty at night. Like Las Vegas, I bet, if you took out all the curry houses and turned them into casinos.

Des looked beautiful, stood on the edge of the roof, with Manchester below her. And she looked happy.

Maybe that's what got me so scared. Her looking happy, it made me sick with fear, this horrible feeling.

What are you doing, Des, I asked her. Are you gonna come back downstairs? I told her about the job, how it had gone sour, and couldn't she come inside and tell me it'd be okay, like she used to?

Des didn't say anything, not for ages. And then, all of a sudden, she turned, just her head, and she looks at me with this smile on her face.

“They’re going to take me home.”

I didn’t know what she meant, and I told her, too. Who, I asked, but she wouldn’t say. Where, I asked. Wasn’t this our home?

“Up. Up and beyond all of this, Gabe. Everything is so beautiful.” She looked like an angel, Des did, her dark hair all undone. Like an angel.

“I can see the stairs.”

And then she stepped out over Manchester.

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After that, it wasn’t long ‘til a Friendly got me. But you know what, they weren’t that bad, not like what Des said at all.

This one, Max, she found me on Booth Street one day. I was trying to grab her purse, but she caught me, and instead of dragging me off to the Dibbles or locking me up, you know what she did? She let me keep it. All I had to do was promise to ring her, if I was in trouble or needed someone. Can you believe it?

Yeah, so I phoned her. I didn’t really know where I was going, not without Des. I thought, what the hell, so I called her up. And now I’m not on the streets anymore. I live in this big house in the south of Manchester, with a whole other bunch of kids. Some are street, like me, and others come from families who didn’t want them. However we got here though, we’re all the same. We’re all on our own.

I like it here. I have my own bed, and I share this room with three other

kids, and we can decorate the room with our own stuff. I've got a cupboard to myself, and stuff to fill it, clothes and things. And a few books. There's a telly I can watch whenever I want, least when other people are, though I never mind what we watch, so I never have to fight for it. There's always food, and cakes, though not the same as what Des used to buy me. I'm going to school, too.

The Friendlies, they think I'm happy here. And I am, too, I'm not lying when they ask me. But really, I'm just wasting time.

Waiting for today.

It's evening, just like it was when I last saw Des, and summer. The sky is dark blue, and it's still warm, even though it's getting late. Everyone else is in the back garden, cooking a barbeque. Celebrating, I suppose, because they told me that they don't have to be so afraid anymore. The fear has gone. I don't really understand it, don't really want to.

There's only one thing I want.

This house is a bit bigger than the kebab shop. Five floors, not three, although the bottom floor is a cellar, and the top is just this tiny attic room. But that's where I'm heading. None of the doors are ever locked in this house, which I always thought was a bit weird. Max said it was because they didn't allow secrets here, but I thought that was funny because I think everyone is hiding something, deep down.

I can feel my secret in my pocket. I made sure I crammed it down tight, under a tissue and a couple of coins, so no one would find it, not even if they searched me. But now I'm alone, in this attic room; I pull it out, and rest it on my

palm, and hold it up to the light.

I can see angel wings.

That's my secret, you see. I took it from Des' bag, after she was gone. There weren't many left, and I lost some, over the months. But I made sure I had at least one left, hidden in a place where no one could find it.

The other kids are calling out to each other. Tag, I think. Or maybe a water fight.

I take a gulp of water. Snuck a glass out of my bedroom, which was doubly good, because then, if anyone had caught me, I could have said I was just going to fill it up, get another drink.

The pill tastes like sugar on my tongue.

I let it sit there for just a second, and then I down the rest of the water, all in one go, and wash the pill down with it.

It's hard to explain what changed. Nothing happens, not for a few minutes. I start to get scared that it hadn't worked, that maybe it was a fake pill, full of aspirin or some other crap because I knew that happened a lot. Or maybe I'd been found out by Max, or one of the kids, maybe they'd stolen it, kept it for themselves and swapped it for this fake, so I wouldn't find out!

And then, I realize – this is it. The fear—that was part of the drug. I take a deep breath, and count to ten, and bury the fear back down again.

The room has changed. It's all pink and blurry, and everything seems to glow with this wonderful light. It's pretty.

The attic has this big, double hinged window at one end that looks out

over the street, over Manchester. Didsbury, and Withington, and a glimpse of Oxford Road. Maybe I can even see the old curry house, if I look hard enough.

I pull myself over to the window, and I have to really drag myself because it's hard to stop my legs from shaking. The window is locked, the one thing in the house that is, but it's only a bolt and I pull it back and open the glass wide.

And then I see it.

The stairs.

They arc up, out from the attic window and up, up into the dark blue sky and into the stars. I think they're made from glass, but then it changes, and I think maybe steel, then crystal, then snow, then light. They have no ending, a first step, but no last. They reach out over Manchester, and touch every rooftop, and every cloud, and then bury themselves into the blue.

My legs stop shaking. I know what I'm doing now. I know where I'm going. Des knew. She saw the stairs before I ever knew of them. An escape from this world, a second chance. Live it all over. Be with her again, better than before.

See, I've learnt, Des. I was paying attention to everything you taught me.

I stand up and climb up on a box so I can step out onto the window ledge.

I think Des is on one of the steps, waiting for me. Her hair is thick and black and escaping, just like it always did. She looks the same as the last time I saw her. Like an angel.

She stretches out her hand.

And I step out over Manchester.