

NAOMI GIBSON

GAME

OVER

GIRL



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*For Me, Myself & I*  
**WE DID IT!**

Also by Naomi Gibson

*Every Line of You*

The room I enter is built to contain secrets. Bare walls, no windows. An orderly with a neck thicker than a tree trunk indicates to the chair at a table. I slide into it. Across from me, on the other side of the table, is a man who introduces himself as a therapist.

‘I’ve spoken to lots of therapists,’ I say.

He smiles. Crow’s feet line the corners of his bright blue eyes. ‘I’m different, I promise.’

‘What do you want?’ I fold my arms.

The orderly casts one last look over us, decides I’m not a threat and turns to leave. The door to the room shuts, taking the corridor’s noise with it.

‘We need to talk, Lola,’ the therapist says. ‘I need you to tell me how you got here.’

‘Why?’

‘It might help you. Your case. You want to get out of here, don’t you?’

I shift in my seat, run a hand through my greasy hair. ‘I’m not sure I deserve to get out of here.’

The therapist frowns. ‘Of course you do.’

He has no idea what he’s getting into. The doors and windows here, they’re locked. Some have bars or cages. Nothing gets in or out, not even the truth. It doesn’t matter if I tell him how I ended up here because it will never help me get out.

‘Please,’ he says. ‘I need you to tell me.’

The way he says *need* makes me realize he really does need it. He leans slightly forward, his whole body angled towards me like I might sneeze and it’ll come tumbling out and all he has to do is catch it and then he’ll know. He has to hear it for himself, what I did. And I have to retell it, otherwise I might forget again.

I’ve already started forgetting.

# ONE

Sometimes, I hallucinate. Small things. Objects or clothes I want that Mother wouldn't buy me. They appear in my room and my imagination welcomes them, accepting that they are mine. Other times, my hallucinations are bigger. I imagine I have a dad. I picture him so strongly – tall, red-haired like me, with aviator sunglasses and a chin cut from a movie – that he becomes real. When I was younger, he'd come to me at night. Kiss me on the forehead and pull my covers up to my chin, flick the light switch and wish me sweet dreams the way Mother never did.

When I got older his gestures became grander. He bought me ice cream from the van that circled our street, ignoring Mother when she said it had too much sugar. In fact, he bought my neighbours ice creams too, including the girl across the road I watched go to school every day. Then we all sat on the stone steps outside my house eating them together, licking it from our forearms when it dripped. Dad leant against the gate and chatted to the other parents. The sun was a halo behind his head.

I don't know if that was a *real* hallucination. More a

daydream that has gathered so much strength it's almost fact. It's carved into my mind in such a way, it might as well be a memory.

One thing I know for sure – something that isn't a hallucination and is a fact as sure as death and taxes – is that Mother is dead and my dad never existed.

A week after Mother died, I was sat in a solicitor's office with my twin sister, Alex. Mr Ratcliffe's office was the kind with a stained carpet and bookshelves crammed with battered textbooks. The early-morning sun entered the room through crooked blinds. Alex took one chair opposite Mr Ratcliffe's desk, and I took the other. The gap between us yawned wider the longer I looked at it, but Alex didn't seem to notice. She sat so perfectly, listening to the solicitor with a straight back and legs crossed at the ankles – exactly how Mother had taught us.

Her hair was shinier than mine.

Alex was Mother's favourite – another thing I definitely did not hallucinate. We were twins, but she'd come first when it really counted – a full minute and twenty seconds – and Alex had made sure she never let up the trend.

'Did you hear what I said, Dolores?' The solicitor peered at me over the top of the letter. He was old, all glasses, and too pragmatic to remember what sympathy is.

'It's Lola,' I said.

'You've got a full scholarship to Leighton Boarding

School.' He laughed, a smack of disbelief. 'Someone up there likes you, love.'

He went back to the letter.

Alex sat with a quiet smile on her face as we learnt Mother had left her her prized Stradivarius violin. And the car. And the house. And everything in it. I half expected her to turn to me and gloat, but it wasn't her style to do it in public.

She'd wait till we got home.

Till the front door was shut.

So like Mother.

A day after that, Alex made me take the train to Leighton, despite having been given the car. She left me on the platform without a goodbye. If Dad was there, he'd have scooped me up bear-hug style, claim our separation was too much to bear, and that he'd changed his mind and I didn't have to go.

Alex didn't even bother to say she'd see me at the weekend. It was a promise we both knew she'd break, so it made sense not to make it.

I sat with a rigid spine the entire journey. My ticket curled in my hot sweaty palm. My stomach lurched every time the train carriage rocked. The man opposite me fell asleep, his flabby neck vibrating with each jostle of the carriage. The idea of sleeping on a train was impossible.

I wondered if Mother had been asleep when it happened to her. Maybe that was why Alex made me take the train. To see if it got me the same way it got her.

‘This is all your fault, Lola,’ Alex had hissed at me. ‘This never would have happened if you’d—’

‘Last stop, all change. All change, please.’ The train conductor passed through the carriage.

The man opposite me had gone. When?

It had turned dark outside. I looked at the window, to try to peer into the darkness, but all I could see was my reflection.

I was half lost in the dark, half caught in the yellow lights above my head. Eyes as empty as the countryside beyond.

‘Dolores Whitmore?’ a voice barked.

It belonged to a woman with an expression caught between a scowl and uncertainty.

‘Yes?’

The scowl took over. ‘Come on, girl. I’ve been waiting on the platform for ten minutes.’ She prised me from my seat with long fingers, grabbed my suitcase from the rack and barged her way back through the doors that tried to close on us as we went through them. ‘You’re lucky the train wasn’t due to leave for forty-five minutes or you could have been on your way back to Grenville.’

She led me to a car and opened the rear passenger door for me.

‘I’m the matron at Leighton,’ she said. ‘All the children call me Matron.’

Matron drove hunched over the wheel, both her hands at twelve o’clock, squinting into a darkness her car lights barely penetrated. She made the engine over-rev. The

gearbox scratched when she changed gear. She muttered under her breath until both she and the car relaxed into a more regular rhythm.

Her gaze flicked to me in the rear-view mirror. 'It's very unusual to have someone join us for Upper Sixth. Normally we get an influx of students for Lower Sixth, but never Upper. And certainly not after term has already started.'

I wouldn't be at Leighton at all unless it was strictly necessary. Mr Ratcliffe had made it quite clear there was no one else to take care of me. Alex was in her second year at the Grenville Music Academy and had found someone willing to be her legal guardian.

I had no one.

Matron was still talking. 'But then I saw your file . . . How . . . odd.'

I didn't know I had a file. Mother had home-schooled Alex and me, so it's not like there was one tucked away in a school office somewhere.

Maybe she meant the police file.

I wondered if there were any pictures in it.

Train crash.

Landslide.

'What happened with your mother was in there, of course,' Matron said in confirmation. She squinted at me. 'Odd. Very odd.'

I closed my palms over my kneecaps.

'But a full scholarship to Leighton. What a lucky girl. What subjects have you chosen?'

I didn't choose any of my subjects. The solicitor had handled all the communications with the headmaster, who sent me a quiz to fill out. It had questions like:

I regularly compare myself to others

Yes/No

and

I react well to sudden change

Yes/No

'Dolores?' Matron prompted.

'Lola,' I said. 'I prefer Lola.'

'Very well, Lola. What subjects have you chosen for A-Level?'

I'd seen in the prospectus that Leighton's selling point was their small classes. Mr Ratcliffe said he'd put me where they still had space. I recounted to Matron what he'd told me: English Language, English Literature and History, and I'd been enrolled on a Computer Science course for my extracurricular activity, all because I'd scored so highly on the quiz.

'An arts student,' Matron said with a nod that seemed like approval. 'Except for that Computer Science nonsense.'

Matron would have got on well with Mother. A year ago, I'd tried to enrol at a local college for A-Levels. I'd chosen my classes and presented them to her on a card.

She'd looked over the top of it, finger hooked in her pearls and said, 'Computer Science? IT? I think not, Dolores,' and she'd scratched it off with a pen the way she scratched off days from the calendar, counting down to an event known only to her. 'We'll continue with home-schooling.'

'Lola?' Matron said. 'I asked if you had any family left?'

Mother and Alex were best friends. She was given everything. New clothes, pocket money, haircuts at an actual salon. I was given whatever she got bored of, whatever she declared crap and whatever felt cheaply made.

In the dull depths of my mind, a thought crystallized. Matron wasn't asking me questions out of genuine curiosity or because she was trying to make me feel comfortable. She didn't give a shit about any of that. She wanted gossip. To be the first in the staffroom with the info on the new kid with the weird family history. Matron paid more attention to me than the road.

'Family, Lola?'

'A sister,' I said after a moment. She didn't need to know about the dad who lived in my head.

Matron stared at me in the mirror. I turned away from the questions in her eyes.

After a while, the car headlights swept over two bricked gateposts with stone rampant lions adorning the top. They pointed inward, teeth bared as we drove between them. Beyond, a hundred sash windows glittered from a silhouetted mountain of a building. Gravel crunched under our tyres until we stopped outside the entrance.

I got out of the car and took a lungful of countryside air.

‘The school was built in 1896,’ Matron said, as though she were an estate agent and me a prospective buyer. ‘Grade II listed, you know. Mr Leighton has overseen most of the renovations, after the school passed to him from his father, of course. The Leighton dynasty, they call it. Come along, Lola. Gather your suitcase and I’ll show you to your room.’

I followed Matron through an entrance hall with panelled walls. Dark oil paintings hung from them: portraits of past headmasters, bowls of half-decayed fruit and women in uncomfortable dresses. Dust gathered in the baroque curls of their frames.

We went up a double-width staircase. Despite Matron’s renovation claims, I saw how the floors were scuffed from a thousand pairs of shoes, scratches sealed between layers of wax. Most walls were off-white and stained.

The wheels of my suitcase clacked over the floors as I followed her deeper into Leighton. I was to be roomed in Ashford wing with the other girls. The boys were in Hastings.

My room-mate was already assigned: a girl called Mercedes, but Matron told me nothing else about her. Anxiety clawed at me. What if Mercedes hated me? What if she knew what had happened?

Train crash.

Landslide.

Matron stopped so abruptly I almost barrelled into her. She pushed on a door to our left and a rectangle of light spilt into the room. There was a bay window, two beds either side of it. The furthest one was occupied by a sleeping figure.

Matron took me firmly by the elbow and deposited me on the other side of the door. She closed it between us with a curt, 'Goodnight.'

I blinked, adjusting to the dark. Each side of the room had a desk but only one was personalized. A laptop, some pens and books were spread across it. A noticeboard was taken up with pictures of people I'd never met. Their grins were half-moons in the limited light. A pink feather boa was draped over a mirror on a chest of drawers.

I slinked across the carpet to that feather boa, felt its silky glamour between my fingers. Whoever Mercedes was, she clearly loved make-up. Rows and rows of lipsticks were organized by brand: Mac, Charlotte Tilbury, Jeffree Star. The Charlotte Tilbury lipsticks came in shiny rose-gold tubes and there were more of those than the others. A small maroon box was on the side of the dresser, a business card with a handwritten scrawl on top of another rose-gold lipstick. The note read:

*This one is just your colour, darling. Much love XXX*

The author had held their pen so heavily they'd indented the card. I stroked a thumb over the words.

Darling. Much love.

X

X

X

A soft snore from the occupied bed made me pause. I waited, my body half turned towards the lipsticks and equally organized range of foundations, but there was no further movement from the bed.

I pocketed the note and wheeled my suitcase quietly over to the empty bed – my bed. Unzipping the case felt overly loud and I couldn't see the contents because it was darker over here. Alex had packed it. Folded everything tightly to save on suitcase real estate, packed my entire life into it so there was no excuse to go back.

It suddenly hit me that I wouldn't be going home ever again. It belonged to Alex now and she'd never let me visit or stay over.

I squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them, Dad was on the end of my bed. He took off his aviators and gave me a quiet smile. 'This is all a bit new, isn't it?'

I nodded and tried to swallow the rock that had wedged itself into my throat.

If he could touch me, Dad would have wrapped his arm around me and kissed my temple. Instead we sat next to each other on the bed.

'You'll be fine here, Lola. A good night's sleep will set you right,' he said.

I tugged the handwritten card from my pocket and put it against my chest, over my heart. His fingers went to

curl around mine, but they passed straight through.

He was gone.

I was alone, accompanied only by the soft snores of a stranger in the bed behind me.

I gave up trying to find a pair of pyjamas. I lay back on the bed, cocooning myself in the covers without getting under them. Sleep took me while I was fully clothed, shoes on, with *Much love XXX* pressed against my heart.

Train crash.

Landslide.