

Forever Blue

By Abby Wilder

The End

Lennon

I never thought it would end like this. I never thought it would end at all. But not all stories get a happy ending.

As I tore myself away and the car lunged forward, I ignored his pleading eyes and the terror that had settled within me. It only took a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. The tyres chewed the gravel and savagely spat it out behind us. The barrier did nothing to stop the car and we sailed over the edge. He reached over and took my hand in his, just as the force of hitting the water smashed my head into the steering wheel. I wound down my window, not daring to look at him.

His eyes stayed on me as water filled the car. And although he never voiced it, he knew. He knew this was the end. He knew there was no other choice. And he didn't fight. He smiled sadly as the water rushed in through the open window, and as we were sucked below, the cold lapped against our chins. It filled the car quickly, and as we sunk to the bottom of the lake, I closed my eyes, blocking him from my vision, my life, my memory.

I needed to move, to leave what would soon become a watery grave, but even though my lungs were bursting and panic sounded like a siren in my head, I turned to look at him one more time.

"Forever blue," he said, though the water muted the words. As the last breaths of air escaped, bubbles slipped from his mouth and became trapped under his eyelashes. His dark hair swayed with the movement of the water. But he did not move. He did not try to follow. He just smiled faintly as I pushed myself through the window and swam towards the surface. With one final glance back I watched as his eyes followed me from the watery depths. And even though I was desperate for air, the feeling no longer panicked me. It was too familiar.

I broke the surface and gulped in air, running my hands over my face to push the water away. A raindrop splattered on my cheek. He did not rise. Seven more raindrops in quick succession splattered against my skin. And still, he did not rise. The heavens opened and rain fell like a sheet, blanketing me, cutting me off from the rest of the world.

I thought it was the end of everything. But I was wrong.

Chapter One

Lennon

My ritual with Grams revolved around a cup of tea. I entered the nursing home, my nose following the scent of the freshly brewed leaves and cigarette smoke, and fell into the chair opposite Grams, ready to pour out the latest of my innermost thoughts. I'm not sure if it was something in the tea, or the straightforward way Grams looked at me—eyebrows slightly raised, rim of the cup poised at her lips, waiting for me to speak, smoke from the tip of her cigarette swirling into the air—but whatever it was, I was unable to lie to Grams. And that day I wanted to lie. I needed to lie. I couldn't tell her how much I wished I could skip over the day as though it didn't exist.

I had tried to avoid Grams and stay in my room, staring at the old maps pinned to the walls, the colours faded from the sun and place names in pirate-scrrawl, but the thought of her sitting patiently, waiting for me, was too much guilt to bear. And it wasn't really Grams I was avoiding; it was my mother. I didn't want to look into her eyes and see the memories that hovered. I didn't want to see the loss or the longing. It was selfish of me, I know. But I had enough memories of my own. I didn't want to face hers as well. Knowing I couldn't avoid the world forever, I pushed off the covers and padded down the hallway, still dressed in the same tracksuit pants and tee shirt from the day before, and drove the short distance to Lake Puruwai nursing home.

The nursing home was everything you'd imagine it to be; big comfy chairs placed in a semi-circle around the TV, ladies who greeted me with warm smiles as their knitting needles clacked together, and old men bent over tables, arguing over who had moved the last chess piece. But my Grams wasn't in the living area. She was where she always was, holed up in her room. I walked down the long hallway and pushed open the door. The scent hit me as soon as I entered, and even though I knew it to be pointless, even though I'd voiced it many times before, I still said something. "You know they'll take them away if they catch a whiff of that inside."

Grams, sitting at the small table, shrugged and leaned over to blow a stream of smoke out the open window. Her wrinkled lips puckered as she pursed them over yellow stained teeth. "They haven't yet." She tapped her cigarette on the windowsill, letting the ash fall into the bushes below. "You're late."

I placed a kiss on her cheek and slumped into the other chair, wondering if she had been waiting all morning. Probably. Grams didn't do a lot else other than drink tea, smoke and play cards with the 'ladies'— Grams' two best friends who moved here with her when the old home burnt down.

The liquid sloshed up the edges of the cup as I poured from the faded pot covered in miniature roses and edged in gold. The tea set had been given to Grams by her mother on her wedding day and she cherished it more than most of the people in her life. I added a sugar cube and a little milk and brought the cup to my lips.

Grams was a contradiction. She was super thin with spidery blue veins laced across her skin, and yet she ate more than any other person I knew. She drank tea from delicate hand-painted cups. She wore matching pastel-toned tracksuits. Her bedroom, decorated in soft pinks and blues, was a sweet old lady's room, and yet, the butt of a cigarette was never far from her lips, the words that came from her mouth could rival those of a sailor, though she tamed them around me. And at night, she replaced tea with gin until her eyes glazed over and her words slurred.

Grams' disapproving look deepened at my lack of apology or explanation. She snorted and took another sip, leaving the cigarette hanging out the window. "You never miss our Sunday morning cup of tea." She lifted one eyebrow and brought the cigarette to her lips again, watching me intently and drawing in a deep breath. The sound of shoes squeaking on the linoleum flooring outside her room spared me from answering her unasked question, and Grams quickly dropped the cigarette and waved frantically at the exhaled wisp of smoke hanging in the air. But the footsteps walked straight past Grams' room and she sighed at the half-finished cigarette lying in the dirt outside the window.

"How is she?" she asked finally.

I shrugged and took another sip of the lukewarm tea. I hadn't talked to Mum yet, not that she would have noticed. My morning was spent avoiding her, my nose buried in the pages of a book and my mind

distracted by the alternate reality. If it was up to me, we would skip this day altogether.

The door opened and a nurse popped her head through. Grams lifted her pencil-thin eyebrows, daring the nurse to say something about the lingering scent of smoke, but she merely sighed and closed the door again.

"She will be keeping herself distracted, I suppose." Grams blew on her tea, even though it wasn't hot, and took another sip. "So, he's coming?" Her voice was deep and rough from years of smoking.

I looked up at the clock ticking loudly in the corner and nodded. "Should be arriving soon."

Grams shook her head slowly, anger flashing in her eyes. Her fiery red hair almost looked magenta in the midday sun, but grey showed at the roots. "I would take pleasure in seeing that man—"

"I know, Grams." I didn't need to hear, yet again, what she would like to see happen to my father. I was angry at him too, but I had heard enough. He was still my father, even if he was a coward.

Grams reached across the lace tablecloth and patted my hand. Her skin felt soft and loose against mine, as though it wasn't connected to the flesh underneath. I stared down at the milky-brown liquid and watched my reflection quiver in the ripples as I blew over the surface. I knew Grams was looking at me, studying me, but I didn't want to meet her gaze. She sighed heavily. "Just promise me you won't let that man rile her up. She's got enough on her mind without him adding more stress."

I squeezed my eyes shut at the unvoiced memory. The way his little fingers felt so cold under my touch, and how perfect he seemed, even in death. I shuddered and pushed the thoughts away. "I won't, Grams. I promise."

The pressure of her gaze lessened and I risked a peek. She was transfixed on a speck of dust dancing in the rays of the sun. Her eyes were glazed, separating me from wherever it was she went. Sometimes, it was as though a veil passed over her and she retreated into her own little world. Before Grams, all the women in our family died before the age of fifty. Grams was determined to live to a ripe old age and that's why she had lived in a home ever since she was forty-two. She was sick at the time, though no one will tell me what from. I'm not sure if it's because they don't want me to know, or if it's simply because they don't know.

Grams refused to talk about it, but sometimes, when I would call over on a Wednesday afternoon to drop off her bottle of gin, I would stand and listen at the door as she and her friends reminisced. They didn't say much, or what they said didn't always make sense, but occasionally I would hear them tell stories, and they would laugh and cackle until tears ran down their cheeks. But I'm not sure if it was the memories they were laughing about, or if it was the effect of the gin.

"Grams?" I reached out and pressed my fingers against her hand.

She jumped and snapped, "What?"

"You were gone," I said.

"Nonsense. I was right here the whole time." Grams lifted her fingers to her mouth, mimicking the motion of a cigarette, as though her body was so used to the movement it replicated it even when there was none between her fingers. "You should go," Grams said. "You don't want your father to arrive and Shelley have to deal with him all alone."

I leaned over to kiss her, but she swatted me away. "Be gone with you, girl. And next time, don't be late."

Mum wasn't home when I got back, but it wasn't long before the door swung open and she walked in, arms laden with grocery bags, and dumped them on the kitchen table. She looked at me, hands on hips, hair in disarray, and her eyes unsettled and distracted. "Are you ready? Your father will be arriving any minute."

She yanked open the fridge door and pulled out jars of olives, gherkins and sun-dried tomatoes, and dumped them on the table. With her red hair pulled back into an untidy bun, wisps trailing around her face and tickling the back of her neck, she looked so much like Grams. Both short and finely built, both with fire-red hair, though neither were natural redheads. They had so much more colour than I.

"Do you think your father would have had lunch yet?" She scanned the fridge absently. Behind her, the bright cupboards clashed with her floral dress. Mum loved bold things, hence the hair. The house was decorated in a rainbow of bright colours, only interrupted by the pale pastels and lace of Grams' furniture which wouldn't fit into her room at the nursing home.

I shrugged, picked up an apple, and sunk my teeth into its flesh. As soon as my parents separated, they stopped using names and only referred to each other as 'your father' and 'your mother'. "Probably," I

replied. "He learned that life lesson a while ago." I poked my tongue out through the mouthful of apple, and she gave me a wry smile. It was no secret that she didn't possess any culinary skills.

"If you look around," she waved her hand over the strange array of condiments on the table, "you will notice that I haven't cooked a single thing. I even picked up the chicken, already cooked, from the supermarket." She grabbed a loaf of bread and attacked it with a knife, the slices ending up unevenly thick.

Mum never cared for the appearance of food, or the taste. It was nothing more than a necessity. She'd been known to go days without eating when in the middle of one of her paintings, something I could have never managed. I was a nibbler, constantly looking for something to devour, but looking over what Mum had on offer, I wasn't hungry. Mum slapped butter onto two thickly-thin slabs of bread, shoved in some chicken, grated carrot and a couple of gherkins, sprinkled some raisins on top and handed it to me. I looked at her questioningly, but she just shoved the plate closer.

Before we moved back to Puruwai, we lived in an apartment close to the centre of the city and nearby Dad. Mum's excuse for moving was that Grams' health was failing, but I think seeing my father prance around with his new girlfriend was the true reason. Grams seemed fine, apart from her little spells where she went somewhere no one else could follow. She would be lost for a few seconds, or sometimes, even minutes, but she'd always come back, shaking her head a little to rid herself of whatever world she was lost in.

When we lived in the city, we only visited a few times a year, but we always came on this date to visit Harrison's grave. I never liked those trips. No one spoke in the car. Mum would rest her head against the window and stare out at the landscape as it rushed by in a blur, and Dad would grip his hands so tightly on the steering wheel I was afraid it would snap off. We would drive straight to the cemetery, a sense of dread descending over me as soon as we crossed the stone entrance. Mum's eyes would well with tears, and Dad would reach over and pat her hand awkwardly, only to have her jerk it away.

My little brother, Harrison, was born and died on the same day. Mum never spoke about it, and the things I had learned were gleaned from

overheard conversations and flashes of memories still embedded in my mind.

When Harrison finally made his way into the world, Mum and Dad were greeted by silence and the exchange of worried looks between the medical staff. The doctors and nurses rushed him away, but there was nothing they could do. Harrison never took his first breath.

I was with Grams back at our house, excited at the thought of having a new baby sister or brother, but when my parents came home with swollen eyes and pale faces, I knew something dreadful had happened, even if I was too young to comprehend it fully. I let Mum sob as she held onto me, without knowing why she cried. The feel of her tears soaking into my clothing and the great sobs that racked her body still haunt my dreams.

It was the beginning of the end for my parents. Dad threw himself into his work, and Mum into her art. They spoke only to relay necessary information, and the looks they shared were filled with resentment, each secretly blaming the other for his death, even though they both knew it was no one's fault.

That was why Dad was on his way, for the annual trip to Harrison's grave. Neither of us had seen him since we moved. He had called, and I had endured the brief and awkward conversations of him asking questions and me answering as quickly and bluntly as possible. I was angry at him. He should have stuck by Mum. He should have fought harder for us both.

I finished the apple, tossed the core into the bin and picked up the sandwich, examining it carefully before biting down. It didn't taste as bad as I expected. Mum kept looking out the window, checking for signs of Dad's arrival. Absently, she plucked olives from the jar and popped them into her mouth. Every now and again, I could see tears threaten, but she pushed them away by blinking rapidly.

"You should eat something decent," I said. Food was always the first thing to go when she was stressed.

She held up an olive, then shook her head, dismissing it as a sufficient food source before I could. "Not today."

The last anniversary of Harrison's death was the first one after Dad had moved out. That trip was even more painful than usual. Mum cried the whole way, her shoulders shaking and tears tripping down her cheeks,

but she never made a sound. Dad looked as though he would have rather been anywhere but with her, with us.

And that was why I wanted to skip the day, because it contained every memory I wanted to forget.

When we heard the purr of Dad's car pulling into the driveway, Mum's eyes darted to the window and she patted her cheeks. "He's here." She brushed her hands down her long skirt, pushed back her hair and plastered on a smile which gradually tightened to the point where it looked as though it would snap. Watching the door expectantly, she waited for Dad to come back into her life, once again.

Chapter Two

Lennon

I opened the door before Dad could ring the bell. He jumped up the few steps and wrapped his arms around me. "Lennon! It's good to see you, honey. How are you?" He was too happy, too bright, and his smile was a replica of Mum's, forced.

"Fine thanks, Dad."

He wasn't listening. I could have told him that I'd broken my leg, that I'd caught a deadly disease and was about to die within the next five minutes, and he still wouldn't have heard me. He responded the same way he always did. "Wow! Look at you!" He took a step back and held onto my shoulders, his fingers gripping into my flesh. "You've grown!"

I hadn't, not since I was fourteen. Around the age of twelve, I sprouted up and became all limbs and legs, and then, at the age of fourteen, I stopped. I was the same size as I was the last time he saw me. And the time before that.

I peered over Dad's shoulder at the metallic blue car which had the number plate 'HOME4U' and bold graphics of his real estate business blazoned across it. Melinda waved through the window and my heart sunk. "You brought her with you?"

"I didn't want to leave her alone all day. Don't worry, she'll just wait in the car." He lowered his voice and grinned as though we shared a secret. "Your mother won't even know she's here."

"Yeah, sure." I rolled my eyes. He turned to blow Melinda a kiss, and I closed my eyes tight to stop them rolling again.

Dad started dating Melinda before the ink had dried on the separation paperwork, and as much as I wanted to hate her, I couldn't. She was just too sweet. She had honey-brown hair cut into a perfect bob that never strayed out of place, a round face, and a cute button nose with wide eyes that were spaced a little too far apart, giving her an innocent, if not gullible look. Innocent and dumb, Grams had said when I showed her a picture, and promptly nicknamed her Bambi. At twenty-seven, she was closer to my age than my father's.

"Shelley!" Dad walked into the kitchen with his too tight smile and stood uncomfortably before Mum, who leaned against the table, her own exaggerated grin stuck on her face. She held out her hand but he wrapped her in an awkward embrace instead. Mum pulled a face from behind his back, one that feigned disgust, and I gave her a reassuring smile, though she didn't look at me long enough to catch it.

"You look good." Dad stepped back and placed his arm over my shoulder. It felt heavy and warm and I wanted to shrug out from underneath its weight, but instead, I just stood there as he and Mum exchanged hesitant looks.

Mum nodded, her face once again plastered with a smile, and opened the fridge, turning her back on Dad and calling over her shoulder, "Ask your father if he would like some lunch, Lennon."

"Dad," I waved my hand theatrically over the table, "would you like some lunch?"

Dad's eyes wandered over the strange selection of food placed haphazardly between the grocery bags and shook his head. "Thanks, but we ate on the way up."

"We?" Mum's head jerked quickly towards the window, and I visualised kicking Dad for his stupidity.

Dad wouldn't meet my gaze but he swallowed uncomfortably. "I brought Melinda up. I hope you don't mind."

Mum's smile grew wide and her eyes even wider. "Mind? Why would I mind you inviting your girlfriend to the anniversary of our son's death? Really, you must invite her in." Her eyes flashed darkly and the tone of her voice heightened with each sentence. Like her smile, I thought it might snap at any moment.

With the hand that wasn't draped over my shoulder, Dad fidgeted with his tie. "No, that's all right. She's fine waiting in the car. She understands that this is a delicate time."

Pity he didn't understand the same thing.

"I insist." Mum's expression hadn't changed, it was glued on her face, stuck there like she was afraid that if she relaxed, her true feelings would escape. There was no point telling her they already had. "Invite her in," she repeated. "You can't leave her sitting in the car like some stray dog."

Dad's head cocked to the side, his mouth in a tight line. "No, it's fine, Shelley." He drew out her name painfully. "She's fine where she is."

"Nonsense." Mum moved from her leaning post and headed for the door. "If you're not going to invite her in, then I will."

Dad darted to the doorway to block her, and I felt light under the released weight of his arm. "Fine. I will go and get her, but I'm telling you, she is okay with staying in the car."

Mum folded her arms and waited for him to leave. I smiled apologetically on Dad's behalf and took a mouthful of the forgotten sandwich, as though enjoying the monstrosity would somehow comfort her.

Mum squared her shoulders and smoothed her hair. "I can't believe I was married to that man for nineteen years." She gave me a meagre smile. It was small, but it was there.

The car door opened and we heard Dad talking to Melinda in hushed tones. Melinda protested, but the front door creaked open and Mum and I exchanged a look to brace ourselves for Melinda's cheerful onslaught. As soon as she walked through the doorway, I understood why Dad was so adamant she stay in the car. The outline of her belly greeted us before anything else. My mouth fell open.

Melinda smiled sheepishly and looked over at Mum. "I don't mind staying in the car, Shelley, really, I don't." Melinda flashed me a quick smile before turning her gaze back to Mum, who had somehow managed to wipe the look of complete shock off her face, something I was yet to do.

"You're pregnant!" The words surprised me when they came out, I hadn't meant to say them out loud, but there they were, hovering in the room, more obvious than Melinda's stomach.

Melinda rested one hand on the stretched fabric covering her belly and smiled happily. "Eight months." Her eyes darted from my dad to my mum.

I didn't think it possible for Mum's smile to become more awkward, but with her lips stuck open and her teeth clenched together, I was wrong. "Congratulations." Mum's eyes were glued to Melinda's belly.

"I was going to tell you, I just didn't think it was the right time." Dad stood beside Melinda and placed his arm around her shoulders, much like he had done to me only minutes ago. Somehow, the memory of where it lay, burned cold.

"No kidding," I muttered.

Dad shot me a hard look, wincing through the tight skin around his eyes. Mum forced her gaze away from Melinda's stomach and turned around to fill the kettle. I tried to catch her eye, but she kept them trained on the kettle as if it would shatter the moment she looked away.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Melinda?" Mum's voice was strained and tight.

"No, no, it's fine." She shook her pretty head and looked over to me, her eyes pleading. It was obvious she felt uncomfortable. She didn't want to be here, and I wondered if Dad meant for this to happen to avoid having to tell Mum himself. Why else would he bring her? A rush of anger shuddered through me, but I offered Melinda a smile. As awkward as this was for Mum, Melinda didn't like it either.

"What about ginger and lemon infused water?" Mum opened the fridge door and pulled out a frosted jug. "I've got some in here, all chilled and ready to go."

"No. Honestly Shelley, I'm fine. I had a coffee on the way."

"Coffee?" Dad turned to her. "That was coffee? You know you shouldn't be drinking that."

"It was just a little cup." Melinda dipped her head.

Mum ignored Melinda's refusal, poured a glass of the cloudy water and placed it on the table. The little particles of ginger and slices of lemon settled on the bottom.

"Thanks." Melinda picked up the glass and a perfect ring of water marked the table. "This is really great. Refreshing even." She never took a sip.

The silence was heavy. And awkward. And strained. We stood around the table, waiting for someone to say something, say anything, but no one did. Melinda opened her mouth a few times, only to close it again. I thought about asking about the baby, but somehow, showing any interest felt like betrayal.

The floor of our kitchen was in no way interesting or attractive, but in that moment, it held the attention of us all. I wished Grams were here, even if it was to say something rude or crass. Anything would be better than silence.

Chapter Three

Lennon

Once my parents separated, they became strangers. They forgot how to talk to each other. They forgot the memories they shared, or, at least, the good ones, and things became tense.

So I was surprised when Mum agreed that we would all travel in Dad's car. She rested her head against the window in the back seat next to me. Melinda had offered her the front, but Mum declined. I was surprised how well Mum was holding up. There had always been a softness to her that I felt I had to protect. I just never thought it would be Dad who I needed to protect her from.

She had told me she wanted to try for more children after Harrison's death, but Dad had been against it. Never again, he had said. And now, we were on our way to visit the gravesite of my dead baby brother with Dad and his heavily pregnant girlfriend.

Past the glaring heat of summer, we were not quite into the full harshness of winter, but it was coming. The town of Puruwai was a summer town, a lakeside refuge that tourists flocked to, but in the winter it shut down, leaving only a core of locals. The holiday homes were boarded over, the little carnival down by the lake closed its iron gates. The cafes and shops that lined the narrow main road closed their doors, and Puruwai became a ghost town, sullen and depressing. You could be forgiven for thinking that with its crystal blue lake and snow-capped mountains, Puruwai would be picturesque in the winter, but it wasn't. The low-lying cloud that clung to the ground each morning and each evening created a dreary effect that was hard to shake. And that day, as I looked out the window at the grey and listless sky, overcast, with just a hint of storm clouds rumbling over the mountains, I felt as though the town could sense my mood and was reaching out in solidarity.

We passed the little white church with its single spire jutting into the sky, and I looked to see if I could catch a glimpse of Sienna among the crowd gathered outside. I waved when I saw her pink dress fluttering in the breeze, but she just stared at the car, wondering who was waving at her from the back seat of a tackily sign written vehicle. It wasn't until we

were nearly out of sight that it dawned on her and she waved enthusiastically.

I shuddered as soon as we passed the stone walls with the white letters 'cemetery' engraved on them. I never liked cemeteries. Where some people found comfort, I found chills that crept up my spine and tingled at the base of my neck.

We must have made a strange group huddled at the gravesite; a frail lady holding back the tears as the wind danced with the hem of her skirt, another, young and soft, gently caressing her swollen belly, a man torn between the two, and me. I doubt I would have stood out to anyone watching. I tended to melt into the background of any landscape. I had none of the bold colours of my mum, and none of the garish self-promotion of my father. I was muted, smudged.

Mum clutched a bouquet of flowers: gypsophila, baby's breath. She leaned down and placed the bouquet tenderly on the manicured grass. Her fingers trailed along the stone, tracing the etching of his name.

Harrison Robert Donnelly.

Dad brushed a tear away and drew Melinda close, his hand hovering protectively near her belly. Melinda reached up and placed a kiss at his temple where his hair was flecked with grey. She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "I'm going to give you a little time." She gave Mum an apologetic smile and headed towards the car.

Dad came close to Mum and placed a hand on her shoulder, hesitant and unsure. Instead of pulling away like I expected her to, she leaned in and let the tears fall. It was strange to see my parents embracing again, joined by the grief they shared for a life so brief.

I drifted away from them. An overwhelming dread settled in my stomach and I needed space to breathe. Often, I wondered what it would have been like if Harrison had survived. Would he have saved our family?

The wet ground squelched under my feet and left flattened prints in the grass. I walked down the row of perfectly lined gravestones and wondered at the lives they represented. Lives summed up with a name, a date, and sometimes a few words of comfort. I thought of the bodies lying decayed and decrepit under the soil, but I never pictured Harrison that way. I always pictured him as I had last seen him, lying perfect and untouched in his miniature coffin.

Mum and Dad took me to the funeral home with them, never knowing that while they argued, I snuck over and peeked inside the coffin. He was so perfect. Little button nose, perfectly developed hands and small, wrinkled feet. He seemed to smile as he lay there. Until he didn't. As I reached out to touch him, his eyes opened and terror flooded me. He looked at me intently, as though he could see into my soul, and I saw the shadow of his memory. It never left me. I didn't tell Mum or Dad. They never knew I looked into that little blue box. They never knew what tricks my mind played on my young eyes.

Tall, broken trees fragmented the symmetry of the cemetery, and through them I spotted a boy sitting on a gravestone. He sat still, staring at nothing, the only movement was his hair blowing in the breeze. As I got closer, I recognised him from school. Judah Mitchell, the boy who walked around with an ever-present scowl, hunched shoulders and hands stuffed in his pockets. I didn't know much about him. He wasn't liked. He never smiled. And he hardly ever spoke. Well, not really. Sometimes he grunted, and sometimes he swore, but not often. But out here he just looked alone, a boy with dark hair, colourless eyes and an even darker expression.

The only other thing I knew about him was gleaned from overheard schoolyard gossip. Rumours that he had killed someone. Some people said it was his brother, but I didn't believe that. If he had, then surely he would be rotting in a juvenile detention centre, not casually sitting on his brother's gravestone.

He didn't look my way as I approached. His eyes were vacant of everything except sadness, and it was that sadness that I recognised. It had touched me before, and it drew me to him.

A chill wafted through the air and I wrapped my cardigan closer, hugging myself and looking down at the gravestone. Ruben Douglas Mitchell and the date of his birth and death. He was only sixteen when he died, a year younger than me. It scared me that a life could be summed up in so few words.

"Hi," I said quietly.

He seemed startled when I spoke, as though I had broken him out of a daze. He looked up but didn't say anything. Even though I knew who he was, it didn't surprise me he had no idea who I was. To be fair, despite

going to Puruwai High School for five months, no one noticed me, and if they did, they only knew me as Sienna's cousin.

"Hi," I said again when he did nothing but stare.

He straightened himself on the gravestone, cleared his throat and peered at me intently. "Blue." His voice was husky.

"Blue?" I repeated.

He laughed nervously and tilted his head to the side, so his hair fell into his eyes. "Sorry, I was off in my own world." He stood and held his hand out. "I'm—"

"Judah Mitchell," I finished for him. "I know."

"We've met?"

"We go to the same school."

"But we've never spoken."

I'm not sure if he meant it as a question or a statement, but I shook my head. "I have. You haven't."

Colour flooded up his cheeks and he licked his lips. "Sorry, guess I'm just not used to people listening."

There was nothing special about him in that moment. He had burnt brown hair swept off his face and a curious smile. But it was his eyes, so lonely they made my chest hurt, that stood out the most. And the fact that they were stuck on me. I just didn't know why. Not then.

"He drowned." Judah nodded to the gravestone.

"Oh." I wasn't sure what to say in reply. I wanted to ask what happened. I wanted to ask if the rumours had any truth to them, but it seemed rude just to blurt it out. "Sorry."

Judah shrugged, squinted from the sun that had managed to peek through the clouds for a second, and tilted his head to the side. "It happens to us all at some stage." He paused, studying me, and I found myself staring at the gravestone, unsettled by his unwavering stare. It wasn't something I was used to. "You?"

I hesitated a moment before answering. It seemed wrong to talk about the dead. Wrong to talk about Harrison. "Same."

He lifted his brows questioningly.

"Brother, I mean, not the drowning part." I stumbled on my words, unsure of the etiquette in discussing the dead. It wasn't done in my house. For every other day of the year, it was like Harrison never existed, apart from when he was reflected in the tears of my mother. "He was just a

baby, never made it into this world, not properly." I wanted to tell him that the sadness I saw in Harrison's eyes as he lay in the coffin was the same sadness I saw in his, but I didn't.

"I'm sorry." His gaze moved to where Mum and Dad's dark figures huddled over the gravestone. "Your parents?" he asked. I nodded. "And the pregnant one? Your sister?"

I laughed, knowing that to others it would seem the most likely conclusion, but it sounded hollow and empty, and nothing like me. "She's my dad's girlfriend."

"I see." His eyes dipped to his wet shoes before returning to lock on mine.

I broke my gaze away and looked over to where Melinda leaned against the car, glued to her cell, fingers tapping furiously. "She's alright, I guess. Kind of hard on Mum, especially when she lost a child and Dad didn't want to try for another." Bitterness stained my voice. I didn't know why I was telling him so much. Maybe it was because I felt like I could never really talk about my family to my family. Maybe it was because I didn't know him, not really, not then, and it was like writing on an empty page. Maybe it was because he looked at me so openly, as though he already knew me, or wanted to know me, and I felt I owed him the truth.

Judah stepped closer, and the cold breeze picked up and blew my hair over my face. I picked away the strands and stared at the gravestone, wrapping my arms even closer around my body.

His brother's gravestone was more elaborate than the others around it. The words, 'Beloved son and brother, taken too soon', were carved into the stone below the date.

"Have you always lived here?" His voice wavered and he cleared his throat again. "I haven't seen you around."

"I was born here but moved to the city when I was young. We moved back about five months ago."

"And how are you finding life in Puruwai?" He smiled, but his eyes remained marred with sorrow.

"I like it, actually. It's—"

"Lennon!" My mother's voice, carried by the breeze, drifted across the rows of gravestones.

"I've got to go," I said, but I hesitated before walking away. Something held me back and my eyes flicked to him again.

He grinned, and it transformed him. Dimples sunk into his cheeks and his dark eyes sparkled. "Lennon? Your name is Lennon, as in *John Lennon*?"

I shrugged. "The one and only. Let's just say Mum used to be a little obsessed."

He laughed, and it made me want to stay there and watch him laugh again. But Mum was waving for me to come back to the car.

"I've got to go."

"Might catch you around?" His voice was hopeful.

"Sure." I smiled, just a little.

I felt his eyes following me as I walked back to the car. I wanted to turn around, catch his gaze again, but I didn't. He was nothing like I expected him to be. Maybe his hard exterior was only at school.

"Ready to go?" Dad was waiting by the car, Mum and Melinda already inside. I watched Judah as he wandered backwards across the cemetery, eyes still fixed on me, his shoulders slumped, and hands pushed deep into the pockets of his jeans, and then clambered into the back seat. Mum's eyes were puffy and red.

"You okay?" I placed my hand on her knee.

She hiccupped a few times but nodded. "I'm fine." I could see the pain and hurt that had been locked deep inside trying to break free and rise to the surface like a freshly torn wound. Sometimes I wondered if it would be easier not to remember at all.

Once we were on our way, I dug into my bag and pulled out my cell. Three texts, all from Sienna, wondering how things were going with my dad, and updating me on her relationship/non-relationship with Ross. I filled her in on the latest news of Melinda's pregnancy then turned to Mum. "Is it all right if I go over to Sienna's tonight?"

"Actually," Dad cleared his throat, "I was hoping to take you out for dinner tonight, spend a bit of time with my girl."

I rolled my eyes and pulled a face behind his back. Mum smiled and shrugged her shoulders, not offering any help for me to weasel my way out.

Chapter Four

Lennon

I don't know why Mum agreed to us all going out for dinner that night, maybe she wanted to be near Dad, or maybe she liked putting herself through the torture of seeing her ex-husband dote over another woman and the promise of a new family, but I found myself at the table with the three of them.

The Fat Stag Tavern was a mix of country pub and Scottish hunting trophy room. The walls were covered with animal skins, mounted animal heads and tartan. Over in one corner, there was a pool table and a dartboard. A few locals leaned against the bar, cackling over an inside joke, and the barmaid was stocking the fridge with bottles of pre-mixed drinks. Faulkner, the barman, looked up and gave me a wink and a smile when we walked in. Melinda noticed and looked at me questioningly.

Dad chose a table with the best view of the TV. Rugby was on. Great. Dad would be glued to it for the rest of the night while Mum, Melinda and I struggled through awkward conversations, each too polite to do otherwise. But I didn't mind too much. My thoughts were on Judah. Only it wasn't about the way he looked. It was about the way he looked at me.

"So, Lennon," Melinda said as the waitress set down our drinks. "How's school going?"

I took a sip of my lemonade and raspberry and little pink bubbles floated to the surface and pricked my nose. It had been my favourite drink since the age of five when I loved everything pink, I just never really grew out of it. "Not bad, I guess."

"I hope you're getting good grades." Dad took his eyes off the TV screen for an instant to look at me.

Melinda scowled at him and I ignored the question.

"Have you met any cute guys yet?" Melinda sat forward and placed her elbows on the table, ready for me to spill the latest on my love life. Now it was Dad's turn to scowl, but he still turned, interested in my answer, for once.

"Of course not." I smiled innocently. "Too busy with school work to bother with boys." It was mostly true. I was invisible at school, hidden

by Sienna's shadow, so it wasn't really a choice of me not bothering with people, it was more a case of people not bothering with me. Not that I cared. I enjoyed my own company.

Dad smiled, and Melinda winked as though we shared a secret.

The conversation was as awkward as everything else about the day. The chirpy waitress came over and took our orders. Dad ordered the oysters. Melinda wanted them too, but Dad wouldn't let her. Instead, she went for the crumbed, deep-fried camembert starter.

Dad shook his head. "No soft cheeses, babe, not good for the baby."

"Actually, Robert," Mum glared at him, "the cheeses are fine. All of them are pasteurised."

Dad raised his eyebrows at Mum's clear challenge of his orders. "Still better to be safe than sorry, right, babe?" He patted Melinda's hand.

Mum looked to Melinda, and I could feel the tension slice through the table. Melinda looked down at the table, letting her hair cover her face before telling the waitress she wanted the cheese. Mum smiled triumphantly and Dad scowled.

"So, Melinda." Mum was confident in her newfound alliance with the younger woman. "Do you know if it's a boy or girl?"

Melinda smiled brilliantly, letting joy radiate out of her, and I wished she would tone it back, just a little. "A boy."

It was only for an instant, but Mum let her shield drop and I saw the pain well up again. I pressed my hand on her knee under the table. She didn't look at me. "How wonderful." Mum took a sip of her wine, keeping her eyes glued to the ring of liquid left behind.

"I thought we were going to keep that to ourselves?" Dad sounded like a whiny child.

"They're family," Melinda said firmly. "Besides, don't you think Lennon would want to know if she is going to have a little brother or sister?"

I snorted and sent a fine spray of pink lemonade over the table. This baby would be my brother or sister... half brother or sister. Strange as it was, I hadn't registered to that fact. It was Dad's baby, Melinda's baby, not my sibling.

"When are you due?" I didn't really care. I just wanted to keep the conversation going and take the attention away from the fact that I was wiping pink droplets from the table.

"November seventeenth."

"Not long then. You'll be getting excited," I replied, saying all the things I thought I were expected of me.

"And nervous!" Melinda laughed and her nose wrinkled delightfully. I found myself momentarily wishing I had her dainty nose instead of my straight and boring one which snorted instead of wrinkling delightfully.

"Any names?" I asked.

"We've narrowed it down to one or two, but your father won't let me tell anyone." She pulled her lips into a pout before playfully grinning at Dad and reaching across to rub his knee.

"Oh, come on, Dad," I pleaded dryly. "Surely you can let us in on the choices."

Dad shook his head. "You will just have to wait like everyone else." He took a big gulp of beer, and since the rugby match was at half time, tilted his chair back to face the table. "Your mother had some rather strange names picked out for you. She wanted ones along the lines of what the Deacons used. She actually liked the name they chose for the boy, Phoenix." He shook his head slowly. "The stupidity of some parents. Children need strong, clear names, not pathetic ones that belong in the garden. She wanted to call you Blossom or Petal, or some such rubbish before we settled on Lennon, which I must add was strange enough in itself, but, at least it's strong."

"It was Aster." Mum frowned and studied her wine glass.

"Oh, I love that!" Melinda crooned, and clasped her hands together. Dad gave her such a look of disgust I wanted to laugh. Mum caught it as well, and we shared a smile.

"I've always wanted to call a baby an exotic name like the celebrity babies, something like Kyd or Ocean," Melinda continued.

"Over my dead body," Dad muttered, then looked at Mum apologetically.

Thankfully, our meals came in record time. We had depleted our conversation topics. Mum had already asked Dad how the real estate business was going. Melinda had told a couple of funny stories from the beauty therapist business, well, at least she thought them funny. And Mum had talked about her latest art piece, much to Dad's annoyance. He didn't consider it a real job. A real job brings in money. A real job involves

a workplace, a time you need to be somewhere, not simply showing bits of rubbish on a board with some paint splattered on it.

"You know, I was thinking, Lennon—" Dad popped an oyster into his mouth while Melinda's eyes followed it all the way from his plate to his lips. He swallowed and took another gulp of beer. "You don't mind driving, do you, babe?" He turned to Melinda, who shook her head, lifted a hunk of deep-fried, gooey cheese goodness and dipped it into the plum sauce. Dad wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and turned to me. "You should come and spend some time with us before the baby arrives."

I sighed. I knew what would happen if I went to spend time with Dad, the same thing that had happened all my life. Dad would work, and I'd be left to fend for myself, or, myself and Melinda. Mum wasn't much better, but, at least she didn't have a boyfriend closer to my age than hers. And I had Grams. "It's kind of hard with school, and all that." I wasn't sure what 'all that' was, since school was the only thing I had on my calendar, but school in itself didn't seem like enough of an excuse.

"Well, I could drive up and get you on a Friday night, and drop you back off on a Sunday. What do you say?" He drained the last gulp of beer.

"Or I could drive myself?" I turned to Mum, hopeful. The thought of spending the weekend with Dad wasn't appealing, but getting to drive myself down to the city sounded fun. I was finally on my restricted license and allowed to drive alone.

"You would let her drive the car?" Dad raised his eyebrows at Mum and his glasses tilted lopsidedly.

"She's got her own now." Mum didn't look at him and loaded more chicken into her mouth so her words were mumbled. "I traded mine and got a couple of little bombs for us to run around in. Seemed more practical than keeping that gas-guzzling monster."

Dad's eyes widened. "You sold the Commodore?"

Mum nodded.

"And you got her a car without consulting me?"

"I'm sorry, did you want to buy her a car yourself?" Mum knew that would get to him. He was a tightwad, always had been. It's not that he didn't have money, it's that he preferred to spend it on himself.

"Well, no. I just assumed you would talk to me about things like this."

"Why?" Mum looked as though she was enjoying watching him squirm as she lifted another piece of chicken to her mouth.

"Well, just because." He picked up his glass but sat it back down again once he realised it was empty.

He looked older. His hair, once dark and thick, was greying at the temples and thinning on top. He had recently started wearing glasses that accented the pouches beneath his eyes, and his tummy showed signs of too many happy hours at the bar.

"So, you'll come?" he asked.

I played with the carrots left on my plate. I didn't like orange things, another absurdity left over from when I was five. "Well, it's just, I would love to drive my car down, but with petrol prices what they are at the moment—" I let the sentence hang.

"Bobby will give you some petrol money, won't you?" Melinda cut in. I had never heard anyone call Dad, Bobby, before, and I had to hold in my laughter. I didn't dare look at Mum.

Dad dug out his wallet and handed me sixty dollars. Melinda might be good for him, after all. "Enough?"

"Thanks, Dad, that's great." I folded the notes and stuffed them into my jeans. I was sure Dad thought I was playing him, but in reality, I really did need the cash to get down. I didn't have a part-time job, yet, but I was looking, sort of. I flicked through the situation vacant adverts in the local paper. I just hadn't done anything more than that.

"So, when will you come down?" Dad took a sip of his drink that the waitress sat down in front of him, and looked over the edge of his glasses.

"Early November? Maybe just for one night, though."

Dad took out his phone and punched at it with one finger. "First weekend?"

I nodded. There was no point in checking my calendar. I already knew I was free.

"I'll cancel my open homes for that weekend. Suzie can cover them for me." He looked at his phone for a moment longer. "You'll be down for the baby shower."

"Yay." I put zero enthusiasm into my reply.

"It will be such fun!" Melinda clapped her hands together excitedly, completely ignorant, or oblivious to my tone. "You can help me set up

all the games and decorate. I've got lots of baby blue balloons and little diapers we can shape into a cake."

I groaned inwardly but attempted a smile for Melinda's sake.

"Don't you think you should use neutral coloured balloons?" Dad glared at her.

"I didn't realise that colours had a gender," I said.

Melinda shook her head. "Everyone pretty much knows, anyway." She grinned. "I told you I was bad at keeping secrets."

"Obviously." Dad cleared his throat and pushed back his plate, staring at his watch. Melinda picked up the dessert menu but Dad shook his head. "We better hit the road."

Mum pushed back her chair and stood.

"I'll get this, Shelley." Dad scraped his chair against the floor and stood, arching his back and patting his belly.

"No need. I can cover my own." Mum was firm.

Melinda stood beside Dad and wrapped her arms around his waist. "But I virtually forced you into coming tonight." Melinda smiled. "Please, let us get this one."

Mum flinched when Melinda said, 'us', but then she straightened her shoulders and looked at the younger woman. "I can look after myself, but thanks for the offer."

When we got home, I holed myself up on the couch with a blanket and a block of chocolate for company while Mum retreated to her room. A music video raced across the TV screen, one with broken mirrors, swirling smoke and longing looks, and I found myself thinking of the boy at the cemetery. He had such sad eyes. I would ask Sienna about him tomorrow and see if I could find out anything more. If anyone knew the truth behind the rumours, it was Sienna.

Chapter Five

Ruben - The previous year

We were named after brothers in the Bible. Ruben and Judah. I'm not sure why our parents chose those names. Two siblings who hated their younger brother so much they plotted to kill him was hardly the most inspiring of stories. But our story, the story of Ruben and Judah, was more like another biblical tale. In the realm of our small town, our story would come to rival that of Cain and Abel. One dead and the other left branded by the aftermath.

By the time we were fifteen, rugby was the only thing Judah and I had in common, other than being twins, that is. We were identical, but it only extended to our looks. Everyone assumed that we had a secret connection, that I had the ability to look into the mind of my brother and know what he was thinking because we looked alike. But his mind was just as much a mystery to me as it was to everyone else, our father included. In his eyes, he gave us the same opportunities. Judah just squandered his.

We returned home from the game covered in mud. Mum frowned when I walked into the kitchen, though I'm not sure why. It's not as though she did the laundry. We had a cleaning service for that. But still, she frowned and placed her hand on her hip, muttering under her breath as she sipped on a glass of wine. I couldn't wait to jump in the shower. Don't get me wrong, I loved rugby, I just didn't love being covered in mud. But as my foot touched the first step of the stairs, Mum called out, "Your father is home." She said it as though it was something to be excited about. It wasn't. Dad was often away on business. He owned a hotel chain, but I would hardly call drinking and playing golf, working, whether you referred to them as business meetings or not.

As if he had been waiting for Mum's announcement, Dad sauntered into the kitchen and clapped me on the back. He was dressed in his usual navy pinstripe suit which meant he hadn't finished for the day. If he had been, he and Mum would have been shuffling around in their matching satin dressing gowns and slippers, a sight which made me shudder.

"How was the game?" he asked, leaning over the table and grasping the newspaper. He dragged it towards him and smoothed the pages, his eyes scanning the headlines. That was the thing about Dad. He was there, he was present, but at the same time, he wasn't. Even though he acknowledged me, even though he asked about practice, he didn't really care. It was just a chance for him to relive his glory days and remind Judah and me that we would never live up to them.

I grabbed an apple from the bench and took a bite, causing my words to come out mumbled between pieces of fruit. "We won."

Dad looked up from the paper and smiled briefly. "Good to hear. Maybe you boys will take the title this year, become champions like your old man."

I didn't bother telling him that it was just a friendly game between our high school and the one from the next town over. There was no title involved. Dad wore the black jersey once, and only once. But by the way he spoke, he was one of the greatest rugby players to grace the earth.

His eyes slid over to where Judah leaned against the kitchen counter, downing a bottle of water. "How about you, Judah? Ready to become the next Mitchell to storm the rugby world, or are you going to leave that up to your brother, too?"

Judah grunted and took another gulp of water. His face was smeared with dirt and he hid beneath the dark hair that hung over his eyes, trying not to show the bruising that was under it, something Dad would see as either a badge of honour, or weakness. But because it was Judah, the latter was the more likely.

Dad sighed and turned back to me. "Friday night," he said, as though his announcement made it so. "You boys got anything planned?"

I swallowed the last bite of apple. "There's a party at the old hall that I might check out."

"And what about you, Judah? Do you think you'll actually leave your room tonight and interact with the world?" Dad asked coldly.

Judah shrugged and grabbed another bottle of water from the fridge. The light from the open door illuminated his face, and Mum's features wrinkled with concern.

"What happened?" She walked over and traced the faint bruising already starting to blush under his left eye.

"Nothing," he muttered, pulling away from her touch and trying not to wince at the sudden movement.

"It doesn't look like nothing," she said, replacing her look of concern with a frown and crossing her arms.

Dad rolled his eyes. "Shouldn't have let them get that close to you, boy. Back in my day—"

Mum smiled and walked over to pat Dad's cheek. "But it's not your day, is it?"

Dad chuckled. "Not anymore, my love. Those days are long gone. But not for these boys. They have their whole lives ahead of them, to make something of themselves, just like their old man, not to sit around and cry over a little scuff."

Dad didn't see the tackle. He didn't see the way Judah was slammed into the ground, or the deliberate head butt that occurred just before it. But Judah didn't bother answering. He didn't bother pointing out that he hadn't shed a single tear. He simply twisted the cap off the bottle and emptied the contents in one gulp before leaving the room, slamming the door behind him.

"What's his problem this time?" Dad asked.

He couldn't, or wouldn't, see the way he treated Judah, the way he assumed the worst of him. Admittedly, Judah did very little to help himself. He spent most of his time tinkering with his car in the garage, or locked away in his room playing video games. He wasn't like me. He didn't care what other people thought of him, Dad included. He would rather talk to people halfway around the world about which clan to raid next, than talk to his own family, his own brother. As I said, rugby was the only thing we had in common, and even then, he barely spoke to me. We played on opposite sides of the field. We rarely had the need to communicate, just the way Judah preferred it.

Dad picked up the paper and jostled it firmly. "Take him to that party with you tonight," he ordered, turning his attention back to the headlines.

Judah hated parties, or as he called them 'group alcohol consumption gatherings.' I laughed. "Unless there's going to be a car show or some sort of gaming exhibition, I don't see that happening."

"Well, find some way to convince him," Dad said gruffly. He looked over the top of the paper. "I'm not having a son of mine waste his life away playing pretend games and fiddling with cars."

Mum walked out of the room, refilled wine glass in hand. She hated the way Dad talked about Judah, but she never did anything to stop it. Neither did I.

Whenever Dad was home, his input in our lives was in the form of lectures and comparisons to what he was doing at our age. In Dad's eyes, I stacked up not badly. Judah didn't. Judah wasn't enough. He would never be enough.

"No worse than drowning it in wine." I meant to say it quietly, mutter the words under my breath, but Dad caught every one of them and sent me a sharp look. He didn't address them, though. He merely turned his attention back to the subject of my socially backwards brother. "It's not a good look. I want him out of the house tonight. You hear me? I've got a meeting."

And with that comment, the truth came out. Best to hide him away rather than face the embarrassment of a son not living up to his potential.

"I'll do my best," I said as I walked out.

I bounded up the stairs and stopped at Judah's door. Machine gun fire blasted through the open crack. Our rooms were either side of the staircase and took up the entire level. Left for mine, right for Judah's. They were exact replicas. Same layout, same wallpaper, same furniture, same everything. But, unlike Judah's, in my room everything had a place. I had a few of my most treasured sketches pinned over the gold and black wallpaper, but other than those, it was clean and clear. My books were arranged neatly on my desk, my TV flickered with music videos, but the volume was down, and the big mirror above my duchess was clear from dust. It was only my guitar that sat out of place, leaning against the wall. It was there to impress people who might happen to come in, but I could only play one song.

Judah's room was the opposite. I squeezed through the door, as it wouldn't open properly due to the clothing scattered across the floor, and waved my way through the haze of smoke until I was standing in front of Judah, blocking his vision of the screen. The game was loud. Gunfire and explosions sounded in my ears, but Judah barely registered I was there. He simply tilted his head so he could still see the screen and continued forcefully tapping his thumbs on the controller.

"Judah!" I yelled at him. He looked up but didn't answer. He didn't even take off his headphones. "Judah!" I yelled again.

He paused the game and removed the headphones, placing them carefully on the coffee table. "What?" he asked impatiently. Only it wasn't really a word. It was a grunt. He picked up a cigarette packet from the ground and tapped the bottom so one popped out. I flopped down on the beanbag beside him and kicked away an empty chip packet. "You're coming to the party with me tonight."

Judah rolled his eyes, placed the cigarette in his mouth and put the headphones back over his head. I wasn't sure whether he was using them to communicate with the other gamers across the world, or whether they were just a way to block me out. I got up and ripped them from his head. Anger flared in his expression, but he merely snatched them back and placed them over his ears again, making a deliberate effort to look around me at the screen. The unlit cigarette clung to his bottom lip, stuck by some magical force, or spit, probably spit. Although he had wiped the mud from his face, he hadn't bothered to get out of his rugby clothes.

"Hurt much?" I nodded to the marks across his nose and under his eye.

Judah moved his eyes towards me and wiped his wrist under his nose. His hand came away with a line of dry blood. "Right as rain." The cigarette bobbed up and down as he spoke.

"You're coming to the party with me. We leave in fifteen minutes," I said. But Judah was already fixed back on the game, the sound of gunfire filling the room with deafening clarity. Absently, he brought a lighter to the tip of the cigarette, flicking his eyes between it and the screen, and inhaled deeply, the end of the cigarette burning red.

I walked across the hall, into my room, and breathed deeply. I liked clean, clear spaces. Clean, clear air, too. It helped keep my thoughts ordered and my mind focussed. My room was so tidy that if I knew anyone would be entering, I messed it up a little in order not to show how much of a neat freak I was. Well, anyone apart from Judah. Even though we barely spoke, we never felt the need to hide from each other like we did others. It was because of this that sometimes I wished we were closer, that we connected in ways they say twins do. The way we used to. It wasn't always this way. We used to do everything together. But that was before Cara Armistead moved in next door. A few years after that, he hated me. At first, I thought it was because of Dad's attention. Being the favoured son came with its own brand of torture. Only, Judah

couldn't see that. All he saw was the attention I received, the gifts I was adorned with, and the praise that fell so easily from our father's lips. But he didn't realise the pressure that came with those expectations. He didn't realise that every time I came home with a high grade only compounded the pressure to achieve a better result next time. He didn't know that Dad's praise meant a completely different thing to my ears than it did to his. But I don't think that's why he hated me. He hated me because Cara didn't.

It didn't take long to jump through the shower, pull on a clean shirt and jeans, and slick my hair back, but it was obviously not long enough for Judah. When I went back into his room, he was sitting in the same place as before, eyes glued to the screen, gunfire blasting through the air. I walked over, grabbed a beer out of his mini fridge and flicked off the power switch to the gaming consol, silencing the bloodshed and explosions.

"It's one party." I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a swig. Judah just stared. He had this way of looking at me that made me feel guilty, even when I hadn't done anything wrong. He didn't answer, just stared at me with eyes that were a replica of my own, unblinking, unwavering and cold, as if he were holding all his emotions inside until I left. So I said the one thing that I knew would work. "Cara's coming."

Sure enough, Judah's eyes widened, despite his best effort to appear uninterested. "She's home?"

"Last week."

"And you know this, how?" His eyes narrowed.

"She called. She wanted a ride to the party tonight. She asked if you were coming." She hadn't, but he didn't need to know that. Judah had been in love with Cara Armistead since they met. They became inseparable and stayed that way until Cara left for boarding school at the beginning of the year. But Cara had been called home when her Mum started to get sick.

Judah jerked off his headphones and stubbed out the cigarette in the overflowing ashtray.

"Did you hear me?" I said. "Cara's coming."

He stared without blinking, until he reached up and grabbed the bottle out of my hands, downing it in one gulp. "Well, I'm hardly going to attend the freak show sober, am I?"

"I guess that means I'm driving." I grabbed his keys off the bedside cabinet and jangled them in front of him. "We're taking your car."

Judah shrugged. "Whatever." He stood and looked around the room, pulling off his rugby uniform and dumping it on the floor, until he found some crumpled jeans, a tee shirt and his leather jacket discarded in a pile, and pulled them on. He didn't bother to clean the mud from his arms, or smooth back the hair that was dangling in his eyes. It wasn't Judah's style.

Cara's house was set in the middle of a paddock and surrounded by broken cars, thanks to her dad's auto shop which was situated in the large shed off to the side of the house. Her family moved to town when she was eleven, and my father hated it, claiming that their presence brought down the value of all the properties in the area. He had been petitioning for the house to be demolished before the Armistead's bought it.

Cara hated growing up in our small town. She hated that everyone knew her name, and that she couldn't take a step without someone having an opinion on which direction she was walking. But I liked it. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. In a city, I would be one among thousands. Here, everybody knew my name, and unlike Cara, I loved that. So Cara was excited when she left for boarding school. She was finally getting away from this town, this life that had her trapped. But when her mother's illness grew worse, she had to come back to the place she wanted to forget existed.

I guess that's why I kissed her when I did. She didn't give a damn. She lived the way she wanted and to hell with the consequences. She didn't care about grades or making some sports team. She wasn't consumed with how she looked, or what others thought of her. She was nothing like me.

We were at a party one weekend when it happened. Parties were common in my town. It was the last weekend before Cara left. She would be back each school holidays, but I guess I wasn't thinking about that. All I thought about was the way she offered her soft lips. The way she looked at me with complete adoration when she never looked at anyone like that. Judah knew she liked me. It had been the cause of many fights over the years. I never wanted to kiss her. I never wanted to take her away from him. It was a stupid thing I did.

I never told Judah about it. I knew it would break his heart.

Judah almost smiled when Cara bounded out of the house. Dressed simply in ripped jeans, a striped black and white singlet and a faded red jacket, she looked nothing like the girls I normally dated. My last girlfriend before her had been the type my parents approved of, pretty, and from a well-off family. Cara was neither of those things. But there was something about Cara that seemed to attract boys. Well, the Mitchell boys, anyway. I wound down the window and thumped the side of the car in greeting.

"Careful," Judah said. Even though the doors were rusted and the paint was patched across the body, the 1973 Ford Fairlane was his pride and joy. I suspected the only reason he let me drive was because we were picking Cara up and she loved his car almost as much as he did. I stepped on the accelerator and revved the engine, waving at her to hurry. Cara's little sister followed her out of the house and leaned against the post that held up the sagging porch, scowling so hard her face was barely recognisable.

"Hey Lana," I called out and waved. She didn't reply. She was too busy throwing dagged looks at her sister. They looked alike, both skinny with long hair, thick eyebrows and small faces which had the ability to clearly display what they were thinking. And in this case, Lana Armistead was pissed.

"Stay," Cara flung over her shoulder, much like she was talking to a dog. She turned and gave me a slow smile, a smile I hoped Judah didn't notice.

"So you come home to party and leave me to look after Mum?" Lana yelled after her. "I thought you came back to help."

"Yes, that's right," Cara said, yanking the door open and standing with her hand resting on the roof of the car. "I've come home from boarding school, which I loved, by the way, just to go to a lame party. It's one night Lana. Get over it."

"One night?" Lana replied, her voice rising in pitch. "It's been all fucking year!"

Cara groaned and plonked herself down on the back seat. "Language!" she scolded her sister out the open window, before leaning over and pecking us both on the cheek. Judah did his best to appear calm, though the colour flooded up his cheeks, and his eyes flicked to her reflection in the mirror. But Cara was searching for mine. A knot of guilt twisted in

my gut as Judah reached forward and fiddled with the radio. I liked Cara, I really did. But I didn't love her like Judah did. She was just there.

Lana placed her hands on her hips and glared at her sister. "You swear," she retorted.

"I'm not fourteen," Cara replied and poked out her tongue which belied the comment.

Lana crossed her arms and glared at Cara with an expression that left nothing to the imagination. "What time will you be home?"

Cara leaned forward and groaned in my ear. "Just get me out of here. I forgot what an annoying little bitch she is."

I gave Lana a weak, apologetic smile and pulled out onto the driveway, flinging Cara back in her seat as she let out a whoop of laughter.

She stuck her head out the window, the rush of wind whipping her hair around her face, and yelled back down the driveway. "I'll be home whatever fucking time I want!"