

BLOOD'S
VEIL

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To those we call sisters,
by blood or by love.

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Blood's Veil

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BLOOD'S
VEIL

a Novel

SHONA CLINGHAM

Prologue

Every night she waited. Silent, still. The limbs of her twelve-year-old body ached with the effort. Her heart hammered in the quiet of the room—drumming, chanting; a cruel, betraying boom that gave her away. Every night she wished for morning, for the light. It always came too late. Sometimes, she wished instead for darkness, wished herself part of it—wisp and smoke and shadow, able to sink into the night and escape. When she held her breath and shut her eyes real tight, she could imagine that escape—imagine she was somewhere else entirely. If she kept still long enough she could pretend this night would be different; that maybe, this night, he wouldn't come for her—

But he always did.

Nineteen years later...

1

Ella was rooted to the spot. A scream carved an icy path inside her, from her head through every limb, with no release. Three seconds passed, three minutes—it could have been three hours—an immeasurable streak of sheer panic and hysteria. Then, it was suddenly still, as though a giant hand had reached out and smothered the world in shadow. Her breath caught in her throat, thick and heavy, like smoke. Her hand, foreign and white-knuckled with tension, kept a tight fist on the cordless black phone—the one thing that kept her tied to the centre of it all, to the cataclysmic news from the other side of the equator.

‘Ella?’ It broke Ella’s trance. ‘You still there? Hello?’

Aunt Mandy. Her mama’s sister... her *dead* mama’s sister.

Ella stared ahead, unseeing.

‘I have to go,’ she said, the words spluttering from her, coarse and splintered. She barely registered her own voice and

swallowed repeatedly to soothe the scratchy burn at the back of her throat. ‘I...’

She stopped.

She didn’t know how to end that sentence. It was like everything she was certain of up until this point had disintegrated into dust. She had never felt more unsure or alone than she did right now.

‘That’s okay, my darlin’, I understand. You take care. And let me know about the arrangements... Call me anytime, y’hear?’ Her aunt paused for a long moment, waiting. Eventually, she hung up.

Ella didn’t move.

The phone clicked dead then onto dial-tone as she stood there, unwilling, refusing, to process what she’d learnt. Her mind raced. Threads of thought chased themselves like dead leaves on the wind. Slowly, a single question began to form. It was both simple and complicated at once.

Why?

She slumped against the living room wall. It just couldn’t be true. She couldn’t believe it. She wouldn’t. There had to be some kind of a mistake—someone, somewhere, had gotten things horribly wrong.

The phone started to wail, and she hit the end-call button fiercely, returning to the suffocating silence.

Mama... she’s dead...

The three words jarred her. She seemed to fumble around them for a while, feeling her way, searching for a weakness, a gap, a hole in the truth. But there was none, and when her mind wrapped itself around the finality of fact, something inside her broke. Her head filled with pictures and memories, and the crushing torment of knowing it was all she had left.

She shoved the phone back on its cradle with such force it wobbled and fell off, and she stared at it, not daring to touch it; it was contaminated with truth. It had snatched the world from under her feet, and all that remained was a heavy, sickening ache, and yet she felt that somehow, it was the last tie to everything that came before it. Blinking back tears, she slowly picked it up, clutched it like a small child to her chest, and cried.

LYING MOTIONLESS IN THE CRAMPED bunk of her cabin, Ella dug deep for the motivation to move. The vessel's engine grumbled steadily somewhere beneath her, and morning was only just beginning to seep into the room. She eased herself off the top bunk, careful not to step on her sister, Brooke, snoring gently in the bed below.

She parted the heavy curtains. The dawn cast itself over the Atlantic, impossibly beautiful set against the recent tragedy of her

mother's passing; it seemed wrong somehow, that these two extremes could co-exist. She took a deep breath, forcing the raw grief back inside its box, trying not to lose her grip; losing herself instead to the pink-tinted sky tilting and realigning with each dip of the vessel. She'd forgotten how breathtaking it was to watch the day break over the ocean.

There was a lot she'd forgotten, and in just a few hours, stepping back on homeland, she was going to have to face the fact that her voluntary memory lapse was bringing her home just a little too late. She was determined never to forgive herself for that.

Travelling to an island which claimed to be one of the remotest places in the world took time, and there was only one way to reach Saint Helena—by sea, on an old Royal Mail ship. It had cost them two full weeks. Two weeks was a long time to have to sit around and grieve from afar, helpless and isolated. Still, a shorter time would have made no real difference. It was useless to blame an age-old journey plan for her own selfish mistake of not visiting when she'd had the chance. If she'd have kept her word, she would have seen her mama at least one more time. Instead, she'd put it off, time after time, always coming up with a feeble excuse; always accepting her mama's gentle understanding on the other end of the phone-line, accepting it as approval.

And now... it was too late.

The guilt had always tugged and niggled, although up until now it had been small enough to shrug off; now, it was a life-sized weight around her neck that she couldn't cast aside even if she'd wanted to.

She'd been on auto-pilot for the last fortnight, busying herself with anything she could, simply to avoid having to think; it was a little less painful to deal with in robot-mode, even if it was a coward's way forward. Unfortunately, three days on the ocean gave her plenty of time to correct that; boredom was no friend to grief, or guilt.

Brooke seemed to be coping. Then again, Brooke had never been in the habit of adorning anything with her heart, let alone her sleeve, so Ella's guess was as good as any. You never could be sure what was there under the surface with Brooke. She was more subdued than usual, and seemed to have agreed to the trip only so Ella wouldn't have to make it alone, but maybe she knew Ella needed this, and needed her, even if neither of them realised how much. This would be the closest thing to closure either of them could manage, if there was any such simple thing.

Ella jumped as Brooke shifted suddenly in her sleep.

Stuffing her head under one of the pillows, Brooke let out an overly loud groan, more agitated than a premenstrual dragon.

‘Why are you up so early?’ she grumbled, her voice muffled by the pillow. ‘Close the curtains, will you?’

Ella smiled in spite of herself. Her sister made it easier to function; easier to fake normality. If there was anyone in the world that could keep her anchored and sane in all of this, it would be Brooke. Whilst everyone else tiptoed around Ella, magnifying what had happened, treating her like a delicate crystal ornament—she could trust Brooke to be herself. And whether or not Brooke knew this, it was exactly what Ella needed.

BROOKE STOOD AT THE STERN of the vessel and studied the surf trail as the ship slowly cut its path. The ocean was a piercing mid-day-blue mirror to the cloudless sky above, the heat bouncing off the water in a rippled dance. The wooden rails separating her from the inviting depths below were sun-warm and comforting against her bare arms. If she craned her neck at just the right angle, she was able to catch her first glimpse of ‘home’.

At this distance the island was little more than jagged shadow and rock, jutting up out of the water—misshapen teeth in the mouth of a

sleeping dragon. Soon, she'd have no choice but to climb into that mouth. For now, it was still shrouded in haze, shimmering against the horizon like a mirage, and Brooke found herself wishing that were all it was; a mirage would have been easier than reality.

Too soon though, the ship pulled into the harbour, and the horn reverberated with finality. The short boat-ride to shore from the larger vessel was a whole lot more fun than Brooke remembered it to be, perhaps because an actual moment of joy had been so unexpected this close to landing. Sea spray and salty air aside, the uneasiness inside her grew. It had been stirring since leaving the airport in England.

She should have stayed. She should have kept herself away from all of this, not agree to come back; should have made her excuses and left it at that. But how could she have done?

She didn't see the point herself, in coming home this long after Addie's funeral, but she knew Ella wanted to, maybe needed to. She knew if there was ever a time she needed to step up and be there for someone else, it was now, for Ella.

Now though, as the boatman steered them all toward the harbour, her selfless act was looking really stupid. She wanted to leap overboard and swim all the way back to safety.

'This is it,' Ella said suddenly.

She looked smaller and more vulnerable than Brooke had ever seen her. Brooke aborted her wild ideas of escape, and reached for Ella's hand, squeezing it.

'We'll be alright, El.'

Ella nodded, and smiled a weak but obviously grateful smile, and Brooke hoped the simple lifelong mantra of all families everywhere would be enough to console Ella somehow.

We'll be alright.

It sure as hell didn't have Brooke convinced.

One of the boatmen at the pier offered a hand as she stepped out onto the wet landing step. She looked around her, waiting for Ella to follow. The wharf was teeming with men in yellow hard-hats and overalls, not hard at work but just as she'd left them—filling the position of laid-back onlookers. A few of them she recognised. Some of them smiled, some ogled, and some weren't bothered either way. They merely looked glad for a timeout and a smoke.

Ella reached her side and began unzipping the bulky life jacket, following the first boatload of twenty-odd passengers up the wide harbour steps in the direction of transportation to Customs. Brooke followed suit, her fingers fumbling and catching in the zip. They boarded the bus in silence, spoke

only when spoken to during the clearance procedure in Customs, and then ventured towards the exit of the building.

Brooke cast a side glance at Ella; she was pale. Facing the crowd at the seaside during passenger arrivals was never easy on the passengers. The other side of seven years, they had been a part of the waiting crowd. Brooke had been, at least. Ella never had time for ‘that sort of rubbish’—watching people return home just so you could scrutinise them; judging how much they’d changed during their time away, by the clothes they wore, or the way they greeted someone—that was not Ella’s idea of leisure. It was a bit of an island tradition though, and true to form, when they left the cool, safe darkness of the building, and the sunlight hit them once more, so did the gaping assembly of people.

There were so many of them. Some were caught up in their own reunions, oblivious to two more passengers arriving. The rest, they were all eyes.

Brooke’s gaze automatically swooped to the spot where she’d sat as a teenager: a ‘front-row’ spot near a large, out-of-use storage building. She half-expected the same group of people to be perched there, stuck in a time loop of some sort. Instead, there were nameless faces, all along the building front and the half-walls, all the way up toward a flight of stone

steps leading to one of the many hillside paths in the valley capital. To the right, yet more bystanders, spanning the width of the street. They had, as had always been the practice, formed a semi-circle around the gate of the Customs building, dotting themselves between parked vehicles, eagerly waiting like paparazzi for celebrities, or wild animals with barely-curbed appetites.

Ella grabbed the back of Brooke's sleeve as they walked on toward the masses. Uncomfortable didn't cover it; the watchful, hawkish eyes and intrigued half-smiles from faces that should have been familiar—it was just the tip of the iceberg. These people... and the uneasiness rising in Brooke's gut so fast she could almost taste it, had all been forgotten—until now. Time had made her forget to remember, or maybe she'd buried it deep enough to be able to dismiss it. Either way, it was as though she'd well and truly stepped back into the past, and it did not for a minute, feel anything like the nostalgia she'd heard other people speak about.

'Ella! Brooke! Over here!'

To Brooke, the voice could have belonged to anybody, coming from a million possible directions, but Ella immediately stepped forward and broke into a run, through the crowd, into the open arms of a grey-haired woman.

Aunt Mandy.

Ella had dismissed the staring and the whispering the minute she'd spotted her slightly-stooping maternal aunt. Brooke, following a little less steadily in Ella's footsteps, took in the wrinkled, smiling face and approached her nervously.

Her aunt reached out to her and pulled her into a warm, tight hug, then stepped back and took Brooke's face in both her hands.

'Brooke, sweetheart. You're more beautiful than when you left. How are you?' Aunt Mandy's face creased into a bittersweet, teary-eyed smile.

Brooke took her aunt's hand in her own.

'I'm okay,' she smiled, noticing Ella at her side, blinking back tears. 'How have you been?'

'Oh, you know, my darlin'. I'm getting by. This month hasn't been easy... Well, y'know... with the—' She broke off mid-sentence and squeezed Brooke's hand fiercely. 'Let's not talk of that just yet. You girls need to tell me 'bout your trip! Tell me all 'bout the big, bad world. You've been gone so long!'

'Aunt Mandy?' Ella interrupted her. 'Where's Dad? Is he working?'

The old woman looked stricken for a moment.

'No, my darlin'... He... couldn't make it here to see you.'

‘Is he alright? I’ve been worrying about him since you called me,’ Ella said. ‘I mean, he was all alone. I can’t imagine how he must be taking this.’

‘Oh, Ella, darlin’. Now I don’t want you to get upset, okay...’

‘Why? Is he okay? Where is he?’ Ella urged.

Brooke looked from one of them to the other, swallowing her private fear.

‘He’s... in prison.’

Brooke let out an audible gasp. Of all the possible scenarios she’d come up with in the last seven seconds, that had definitely not made the cut. Ella opened her mouth to say something and shut it again, no sound having passed her lips.

‘What did he do?’ Brooke blurted. She wanted to eat the words back up the moment she’d said them. ‘I mean—why? What happened?’

‘Girls, now don’t go upsetting yourselves...’

Ella was close to tears.

‘I don’t know what to say...’ Aunt Mandy shook her head, reaching out and patting Ella’s shoulder. ‘They’ve... accused him of murdering your mama.’

ELLA’S BREATH CAUGHT IN HER throat as the man walked towards her, cuffed and led by one of the prison wardens. She’d expected the

unsightly orange she'd grown used to seeing on TV, but her father wore his own clothes. In any other scenario he would have looked just like the man she remembered, only he didn't seem as tall, and his hair had greyed a little. As he drew closer, she noticed his face had a lot more lines than before. The dark brown eyes were as warm as ever, but the new dark circles underneath them stubbed out their familiar sparkle.

Hank Roberts, the man she'd held high above any man she'd ever known, sat humbly in front of her. His gaze flitted between her and the surface of the table separating them. Within the first minute of awkwardness, he reached out to her, taking her smaller hand in his.

'Ella...'

Ella tried to smile, unsure how to act, not knowing quite what to do—or say. She didn't want to admit it, but her initial reaction was to snatch her hand out of his grasp.

'Look at you,' Hank said, smiling. His eyes glistened, and his voice was coarse, the words tumbling out onto the table. 'It's been so long.'

Ella's throat was dry. She tried swallowing a few times before she spoke.

'How have you been?' she managed at last.

Hank released her hand and sat back in his chair.

'Well, you know how it is...'

Ella was certain she didn't.

'It's been hard,' he said. 'Losing your mama. Now, *this*...' Hank's deep voice drifted off, leaving them in silence.

Ella nodded and diverted her gaze. She felt him watching her.

'El, I know this is difficult...'

Facing him made her feel just as she did at six years old; she studied his face, wanting to cry, wanting his comfort. She wanted to give in, and let him make it all better.

But how could he? Not now.

She said nothing. She didn't know what to say, and even if she did, she wouldn't know where to begin. It was hard enough to return home after so long, to a life where so much had changed—she was here to say goodbye to her mama, even though she could barely digest the fact that she was really gone... Even so, the guilt, the grief, she could just about handle it, but this—this was... crazy. How could she possibly know how to deal with this?

This man sitting before her, the same man who had taught her to tell time; kissed her knee better when she'd fallen off her bike the first time they took the stabilisers off; snuck out for burgers with her when her mama went on a year-long vegetarian craze; held her as she cried over the loss of her first boyfriend... That same man committed murder?

No! It was absurd. It was out of the question.

She wanted to scream at him.

Why? Why are you being accused of murder? What happened? How did it happen? What in hell could you have possibly done to make them think that you're the reason Mama's dead?

The questions bounced off each other, fighting to break free. But she couldn't let them. Thinking about it was one thing; getting them out, preparing herself for the answers... that was something else entirely.

She covered her face with her hands.

There was really only one big question she needed to ask. One that would answer everything she needed to know all at once. But what if she didn't get the answer she was searching for? The answer she was hoping for?

She still had to know.

How did Mama die?

Ella peeked at him to be sure she hadn't said it aloud, but his face was blank, and she sighed.

'I want to know that you still trust me, Ella.'

Ella's whole body jerked as he said it. She didn't answer.

Of all the things he could have asked of her...

For a long time she stared at the table, concentrating on it so hard she could have

counted the scratch marks there if she'd wanted to.

'I need you to,' he said. 'Please.'

The pleading was genuine; she could hear it in his voice. And it tugged on every fibre within her. But she had to keep her grip on things. She didn't have a clue what to do, what to trust, but... this was her family under the microscope. She grew up embedded in that family. There was no better judge of how solid they'd been.

No-one capable of as much love as her parents had provided her with could ever be a true part of this nightmare. It was impossible.

'I loved her, Ella,' Hank said. 'You know I did. I would never ever have hurt her. You know that.'

Ella nodded, the motion shaking tears loose.

Her own curiosity, her need for the truth—it plagued her, but she couldn't bring herself to question her own father. Asking him everything she wanted to know would be as good as throwing the prison key in the ocean.

She couldn't do that to him.

He had given her years of unconditional love. She would not alienate him, not now, when he was all alone in this. Not now, when he needed her.

'Do you believe me?' he asked. 'Can you?'

The question hung between them like a storm cloud.

Finally, she nodded, smiling feebly. She reached across the table and put her hand on his, and looked up at him, her face wet with tears.

‘I believe you.’

BROOKE LET HER SUITCASES FALL to the hall floor with a thud. ‘It’s smaller than I remember.’

‘Looks the same to me,’ Ella said from the kitchen, dropping the keys she’d picked up from her aunt on the nearest counter.

The house they’d grown up in was actually pretty large, at least in comparison with the small flat Ella had grown used to. It had been left for Ella’s mother by her mother before her, and it was one of the things that had been passed down to Ella now they both were gone. Traditional though it was, she had still been surprised to discover her dad had no part in any of it. It might have bothered her more, were it not for the fact that he currently occupied a jail cell. Who got what in the Will paled in comparison.

The house was quite new but had been built with several features from both the Victorian and Greek Revival eras. Ella had loved every minute she’d spent in it. From the

front gable and dark shuttered windows, to the tiny front porch and overgrown garden out back; the whole space reminded her of her mama—it had always smelt of freesias and fresh bread.

She slowly worked her way through the house to the living room, taking in the room through glassy eyes. On first glance the area was tidy and clean, the way her house-proud mother always kept it; up-close though, there were signs that there'd been no one around for the last few weeks to maintain that. The room was gloomy, and there was a thin film of dust on the furniture. Empty beer cans, a Vodka bottle, and a few ready-meal trays were strewn in front of the sofa, and the lower drawers of one of the cabinets spewed their contents onto the carpet.

Ella picked up a frame from the pile, leaving a bright thumb print in the middle of the dusty glass. It was Adelaide. Same dark hair, same smile, as her twenty-six-year-old daughter. She stood in the all too familiar garden, sunlight streaking her hair. It was an old picture, one either Ella or Brooke must have taken as children—the lopsided angle had always been a tell-tale sign.

Ella rubbed the glass against her jeans, smearing away the dust. She would never be able to see her mama's face ever again unless it was like this, in a photograph. This was all that

was left of her; this and the fading memories—and an unanswered question that lingered in the air like a bad smell. All she could do was smile nicely, and play ‘pretend’—pretend it was okay, that everything wasn’t falling apart.

Her fist tightened around the frame and heat flared inside her. She hurled the frame across the room, enjoying the satisfying crash it made as it collided with the wall.

‘Ella?’ Brooke burst from the hall, her eyes darting from Ella’s twisted face to the smashed remains of the photo frame on the floor. ‘Hey,’ Brooke soothed, drawing Ella into a hug.

Ella fought against her, her chest heaving, and her back tense and hurting with the urge to fight, or scream, or cry.

‘Ella, hey, listen—listen to me.’ Brooke shook her by the shoulders and forced eye contact. ‘It’s gonna be okay. You hear me? You will get through this.’ Brooke stared her down for a moment, then embraced her again.

Ella steeled herself against the hug, refusing to give in to comfort.

‘How, Brooke? How?’ She croaked the words between sobs. ‘Tell me, go on, tell me. How is it going to be okay? Mama’s dead, and—’ Ella paused, her breaths sharp and ragged. She tried to pull away, but Brooke refused to let her go, so they stood locked together as Ella tried again to find her voice. ‘Mama’s... gone. And Dad is in prison—

accused of killing her. Murder... Murder, Brooke! Can you imagine?’

Brooke didn’t answer. She squeezed Ella more tightly, and Ella was glad for it. The pain was more real now for having released it, and Brooke’s tight embrace seemed to be the only thing keeping her from falling completely to pieces.

‘It’s okay to be upset,’ Brooke whispered into her hair. ‘And it’s more than okay to be angry. Just give it time, okay?’

Ella didn’t answer.

‘Okay?’ Brooke repeated.

Ella pulled away, clumsily wiped her eyes on her sleeve, and nodded. It didn’t feel okay, but she willed herself to believe the lie, simply because there was nothing else she could do right now.

She shot a guilty, fleeting glance at the photo frame, sorry now for having broken it. That last little piece of her mama shattered into pieces with almost the same finality as her death; it could never be put back wholly, the way it once was. Everything that made it what it was, no longer existed—just like her mama.

‘We can fix that, don’t worry. Go. Shower, change. Then maybe we can go out, have something to eat... grab a few drinks. In fact, we could skip the meal altogether, and go straight to drinks,’ Brooke suggested. ‘I know I could use a couple, or five.’

‘Tonight? I don’t really—’

‘Yes, tonight. Unless you fancy sticking around here and trashing the place?’ Brooke inclined her chin toward the shards of broken glass.

‘Fine. You’re right. It may do us both some good to get out.’

They started up the stairs with their luggage, Brooke spouting unintelligible curse words the whole time. At the top, she crossed the landing, red-faced and breathless, heading straight on up to tackle the second flight of stairs to the converted loft, as Ella took a left toward the open door of her own room. For a while she simply stood in the doorway, taking it in; trying not to imagine how different this day would have been had her mama been here to greet her.

Even now though, Addie’s presence lingered: the double bed was fully made-up, as though she’d been expecting Ella to walk through the door any minute, and instead of the clutter of Ella’s youth, a single vase of wilted flowers sat atop the small Victorian dressing table. Five boxes were stacked in the corner of the room near the window, just as she’d left them—a cocktail collection of memories and junk.

A distinct thud came through the ceiling as Brooke set her luggage down in the room above Ella.

‘Man alive! How the hell did I live in this hole?’ Brooke exclaimed seconds later.

Ella smiled without answering.

She crossed the landing to the master bedroom, then hesitated. It would be much easier to wait, to walk away. Instead, she took a deep breath, reminded herself of the absence, and turned the doorknob. She nudged the door open with the toe of her shoe.

It was dark and still. She could make out the dressing table, the collection of bottles and jars, and small piles of books. The bed was unmade, as though someone had only just stepped out of it this morning.

A shiver ran through her, and goosebumps erupted on her bare arms. She automatically reached for the light switch just inside the door but nothing happened. Trying to shake off the feeling, she shut the door again just as Brooke came bounding down the stairs.

‘I have no idea how I got so tall living in that cupboard up there. I can just about stand upright. You okay?’ she added. ‘You been in there yet?’ She beckoned toward the master bedroom and Ella’s hand, which still clutched the doorknob.

‘Mm,’ Ella nodded. ‘It needs a new bulb.’

BROOKE WAITED UNTIL SHE HEARD the water running in the shower before she exhaled

heavily and collapsed onto the edge of the creaky bed. It was exhausting having to pretend for Ella's sake that she had her shit together. Or that everything would eventually be okay. Especially when she had no idea how any of this crap could amount to anything other than what it was: crap.

She pulled one of her cases toward her and began the search for an outfit, simply to have something else to focus on other than the suffocation of being back in her old room. She made a conscious effort not to really look at anything but it was useless. Bare walls, one window, a tatty-edged, blu-tacked poster of The Cranberries, naked wooden floor, single bed. No photos or frills; no charm—just memories... The pine wood flooring had been re-laid when she'd been officially adopted—the newly-orphaned girl, given a second-chance home with the family of her best friend. It had felt special at the time; a new room just for her. New bed, new paint, new floor. The smell of the pine wood had been intoxicating. Now, as an adult, the smell sickened her.

As she discarded one item of clothing after another, she forced herself to focus on the positives in returning home. She'd get to be the nurturing one for a change. Supportive, helpful. And she could try, really try, to bury things once and for all. Even if she couldn't manage that, and she sincerely doubted it, at

least she wouldn't have to worry about work—that had to be a plus; although, to be perfectly honest she didn't make a habit of worrying about work during work hours, much less otherwise. One genuine bonus was that she'd get to see a few old faces. The problem was she might not get to choose who those faces belonged to...

In a month, it'd all be over. Just one month. It was all she hoped to endure, despite Ella's reluctance to book return tickets. Going along with that seemed more of a sympathy offering than anything at the time; now Brooke wished she'd put her foot down. She wanted to be certain of her departure details, her 'get out of jail free' card. Seems like she wasn't the only one in the family in need of one of those right now.

She sighed, and tossed a red item of clothing over her shoulder, followed by another one, this time black. Black would have been appropriate, but Brooke was past mourning. Ella was her sister through and through, by love, if not blood; and Addie had been a wonderful mother figure in so many ways, but Brooke could never really connect with her. On some level, mourning her would feel like a lie. She was sad, naturally, but Ella was grieving in a way Brooke would never be able to. She just didn't feel that way. Or wouldn't allow herself to...

‘I’m done!’ Ella’s voice came up the stairs.

Brooke jumped guiltily, and brushed away the beginnings of a tear, as though it weren’t happening. The last thing Ella needed was an unstable co-pilot.

THE BAR WAS ALREADY HEAVING with people when they arrived just after ten. Ella recognised a few faces on the way in; she slipped under the radar with ease as Brooke bobbed her head and threw enough half-smiles for the both of them.

One of the men on the open-air patio all but pounced on her sister.

‘Brooke? That you?’

Brooke smiled back casually at the overeager guy, her green satin top accentuating a lot more than just her eyes. She was never at risk of going unnoticed.

Ella hung about, feeling uneasy, wishing Brooke would stop dragging out the whole sorry charade and get to the point, so they could get moving. She remembered this particular victim, vaguely. Dylan... or Darren? Shit, if she couldn’t remember his name, she doubted Brooke could, even though Brooke was the one who used to date him—him and every other two-legged hopeful. Dylan, or Darren, had been crazy about Brooke, so she had messed around with him for about a week

and a half and then told him ‘it wasn’t working out’. Any man lucky enough to know Brooke was also unlucky enough to have heard those infamous last words from her.

Ella observed the two of them, caught up in conversation as though there hadn’t been a single awkward moment between them. To be honest, she felt surplus to requirements; she knew only too well how many more of Brooke’s ‘acquaintances’ would be waiting to get reacquainted, and quite frankly, unless Ella was prepared to issue tickets, she’d be invisible.

The idea of going back to the house beckoned. Instead, headed bravely for the bar, she began squeezing her way through the crowd. She ordered her drink and scanned the room. She recognised so many people—unmoving, unchanging, as though no time at all had passed. She spotted her cousin Sarah, but she’d been less than friendly towards Ella for the majority of their lives, mostly because of the company Sarah kept—Christy, Paige and Louisa—together: the fantastic-bloody-four. Between them, back then, they’d been the epitome of cool. Granted, Ella’s definition of ‘cool’ left a lot to be desired. Give yourself a few years, and a good, sharp smack in the face with reality and things certainly looked different.

As enviable as they’d been growing up, Christy and her crew provided Ella with just

enough remembered nerves to act as a distraction from the anguish swarming around her head, like flies around a corpse. She allowed a small, self-deprecating smirk: perhaps she should hire them to come home with her; it'd keep her mind off... her mind.

She paid for her drink, and then propped herself up at the bar for a while, still gazing around, hoping to see someone she actually knew or liked. There were several old classmates around but she didn't have the nerve to just walk right up and start talking. Keeping in touch would have paid off, had she had the sense and social skills to have done it.

Two of Christy's three groupies were being frivolous at the far end of the bar. Perpetual idiots... It was a small mercy Christy was absent. Morphing into a former teenaged shell of herself, Ella found herself hoping Christy would remain absent. Automatically, she began wondering whether Christy might still be with Matthew...

Matthew Hudson: heart-break
extraordinaire.

It would be pretty ironic if they were still together. Or married.

She sincerely hoped not, even after all this time.

After a last hopeless glance around the room, she gave up. She would check in on Brooke, but after that, she was quite prepared

to shoot her glass of wine in a single unladylike gulp, and run off home.

Rising, she grabbed her glass off the bar and collided—wine first—with the solid bulk of another body.

She cursed under her breath.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said, shouting over the racket from the DJ.

She twisted between several other patrons to rid herself of the empty glass. At least it hadn’t broken. She shook her hands in a pathetic effort to dry them, and then smoothed them across her wine-soaked dress, an attempt that was even more desperate.

‘Really, I’m so sorry,’ she said again, turning. ‘I wasn’t looking where—’

She became rapidly aware of the staccato thudding in her chest. She’d heard the saying ‘speak of the devil’. Apparently, thinking of the devil would suffice.

‘Hey,’ he said, smiling.

Matthew freaking Hudson... of all the people to run into.

‘Hi, what are you d—I mean—how are you? God, it’s been... how long?’

She ignored her flustered stammering, and observed the tall, burly man in front of her, as thoroughly bewildered by him now as she’d been when last she saw him. All these years later and he still rendered her a little breathless.

‘I’m so sorry about the—’ She gestured to her former beverage currently seeping through the front of his shirt.

‘It’s okay,’ he shrugged. ‘It’s my fault. I saw you and kind of... charged over. Let me get you another drink. Wine, right?’

‘Er, yes...’

‘White?’ he asked.

Wow, he paid attention. Although he had the damn stuff all over him, so it wasn’t much of a challenge.

He nudged his way through bodies, and she tagged along behind him, relishing the opportunity to examine him in profile as they drew level with the bar. This made for a much better distraction than her earlier idea. As unchanged as the feelings he stirred, so were his features—youthful as ever: playful eyes, wide mouth, chiselled jaw-line...

He put a freshly filled glass in front of her.

‘Thanks.’ She took a sip, then a large gulp.

‘You look great, El.’

She nearly choked on the wine. It was all she could do to keep from spitting it back into the glass.

‘Thanks,’ she muttered again.

‘You haven’t aged a day,’ he said, his eyes trained on her face, whilst she concentrated on emptying her glass at a steady pace.

‘Tell me you’ve got more than flattery up your sleeve these days.’

‘It’s true, though. You haven’t changed at all.’

She shrugged. What he didn’t know could go unmentioned.

‘You’ve aged dreadfully,’ she quipped.

He threw his head back, his laugh loud, even above the music in the room.

‘Thanks, I’m touched.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

‘So, I take it you didn’t know we were on the same voyage back here, either?’

She looked at him, puzzled; he must’ve figured that as ‘no’, and continued.

‘I only saw you after we’d dropped anchor. Saw you disembarking.’

‘No way? I have to admit I was a bit of a hermit the whole time.’

‘Shame,’ he said. ‘Could’ve had some fun.’

She let the comment slide, unwilling to speculate, irritated that after all this time he had the nerve to assume that she still thought he was the next best thing. Whether she did or not was entirely beside the point.

‘JASON!’ BROOKE SQUEALED AS SHE spotted the six-foot, dark-haired man, unable to contain herself. She weaved her way through the crowd toward him, and he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her without so much as a hello, as though he had rights.

‘A little birdy told me you were on your way home,’ he said, when he pulled away from her, his arm still around her shoulders. ‘Seems like you left just yesterday.’

‘Well! That’s charming!’ Brooke laughed. ‘It’s been a bloody decade, J, give or take.’

His laugh was deep. ‘So where’s my other girl?’

‘What? There’s someone else? Jason Richards! Another woman... I’m fucking heartbroken.’

‘You’re a lousy actress.’ Jason sniggered. ‘Where is she?’

Brooke craned her head above the throng, trying to spot Ella.

‘You know, I have no idea. She was here a minute ago.’ Brooke wondered then if it had only been a minute ago.

She shrugged. Ella always wandered off on nights out. She just... had a habit of disappearing. The worst part was that she was often a hard person to find again; she was so short she was the last to know when it rained; finding her amid drunken, arm-waving bump-n-grinders was virtually impossible.

‘I’ll keep an eye out for her,’ Jason said.

‘Sure, she’s probably just at the bar.’

Before either of them made a move, Ella showed up. She crept up behind Jason, and made a fair attempt to cover his eyes with her hands; she could barely reach the top of his

shoulders. She dug him in the ribs instead. He spun around, then realising who it was, scooped her up in a hug that momentarily lifted her off her feet.

‘Hey, you,’ he said.

‘Hey, yourself. How are you?’ Ella’s face lit up despite all the recent tragedy, and Brooke smiled, relieved to see her a little more at ease than earlier.

‘I’m wet,’ Jason chuckled, pulling away from her and glancing down at his shirt. ‘What the hell happened to you?’

Ella dismissed it with a wave of her hand.

‘Oh, it was nothing. Clumsy as ever, me.’

Jason shook his head.

‘Didn’t change a bit,’ he grinned, and draped his arm across her shoulders. ‘I can’t believe you’re back, both of you! Just like old times, huh?’ He smiled, then caught himself. ‘Well, not exactly like old times... I’m sorry about your mama, El.’

Ella’s smile slipped like watery cake icing, and Jason squeezed her a little tighter.

He had been their friend for a long time. To Ella, he was the big brother she’d never had. Brooke, on the other hand, had been linked to him in such a way that brotherhood would render the whole thing a sin.

‘So... what’s new with the two of you? Apart from... y’know...’ Jason wrapped an arm around each of them and sauntered towards

the bar. Neither of them answered. 'Okay, looks like we're saving the heart-to-heart for later, huh? Suits me. How 'bout we drink ourselves senseless instead?'

'I thought you'd never ask,' Brooke said.

2

Matthew ran a nervous hand over his head, rubbing back and forth as though he'd just discovered his own magic lamp.

Man! How did he keep getting himself into predicaments like this? Christy, of all people, was sound asleep in his bed. After getting home last night, she had 'dropped by', pissed out of her head. Considering their on/off relationship ended several months ago, Christy 'dropped by' more often than anyone he knew, and he was sure she just broke her own record—he'd been back at home for less than twenty-four hours, yet she'd already made an appearance. Last night, after she'd invited herself to make herself at home, she had followed up with a desperate attempt to seduce him.

He had to admit—it very nearly worked. He splashed his face with cold water, peering at the circles under his eyes, and cursing. Fine lot of use that holiday had been—he looked everything except refreshed. No thanks to late night visits from the devil incarnate.

How was he ever going to get her out of his house without starting a commotion? He toyed with the idea of dumping her sleeping body into her car and dead-bolting all the doors in the house. Save for that genius plan, he could come up with nothing. He began folding the bed linen. This was what it had come to, a grown man in his own house—well, his old man’s house—forced to sleep on the sofa. He grunted to himself, remembering his father’s last threat before he left: ‘Pull your damn self together, boy, or pack your shit and go’. He’d packed his shit alright, but pissed the old fella off ten-fold by swanning off to America during the busiest time of the work year. If he didn’t pull some trick out of his ass soon, his old man would see to it that Matthew didn’t so much as have a sofa to bunk on.

The last thing he wanted right now was to get involved with Christy again. She dragged drama around with her like a puppy in a handbag. She was self-centred, and kind of irritating, not to mention a complete control freak. Being with her was like being forced to bite off more than you could chew, and he’d done that once or twice already; luckily he’d been able to spit most of it back out. Still, if push came to shove, she might prove useful. If he ended up jobless and homeless, it would shine a new light on her. Lord knows he couldn’t depend on Ethan to bail him out;

these days his brother was almost as bad as their old man.

He left the blankets folded in a pile on the sofa.

Christ! He was so on edge he was doing housework. Something had to give. He switched on the TV, hoping it might wake her; the sooner she woke, the sooner she could leave. Rap music. Rap, hip-hop... who knew? Either way, it was too angry right now, too aggravating. That and the superb hangover he had was not the best cocktail. Not even the semi-naked gyrating girls on the screen could entice him to keep watching. He hit stand-by. The throbbing in his head continued drumming out a rhythm that might have been worse than the music. He needed to rehydrate. Sticking his head under the kitchen tap seemed perfectly reasonable, but instead, he grabbed a cold bottle from the fridge, and took a long swig of beer—it was a half-assed remedy at best. As he stood there, pressing the base of the beer bottle against his forehead, he caught sight of the unpacked suitcases sitting in the hall. He'd been far too eager to get out on the town to mess around with shit that could wait, and it had been worth it.

He smiled to himself, remembering the reunion with Ella last night. Before last night, he would never have bet on it, but now he was pretty certain he was in with a shot. Ella

seemed so different now. A few years ago she'd have fallen at his feet; the rush of having women go crazy over him now and again just never seemed to fade. But this new territory could prove interesting... Ella's new attitude, her strange, new confidence. It was enticing. She was... a challenge.

He reached for his cigarettes off the top of the fridge and put one of them in his mouth, then he groped about for his lighter. It wasn't there. He found it in the back pocket of his jeans along with a crumpled slip of paper with Ella's phone number. He lit his Marlboro, took a drag, and idly wondered where she would be living, now she was back. There was her parents' place in Half Tree Hollow... Or one of her aunts—they were all over the place. The first one was more appealing; she'd be pretty much alone; her mother gone, her old man inside. It wasn't a pretty picture, but from where Matthew stood it meant fewer complications for him—he was in no mood for meet-the-parents shenanigans.

He took another long hit on the cigarette.

Ella Roberts... after all this time. Their history wasn't exactly enchanting. It may have been a lifetime ago, but abandoning Ella to go back to Christy—on the same night Ella finally gave up the cherry—was the kind of thing that got you kicked off Christmas lists. He'd done some pretty mean shit in his time, but he was

still particularly proud of that one. He'd been sure Ella wouldn't have so much as spit in his direction, but apparently she didn't hold grudges, and that suited him just fine.

'Morning, handsome.'

Matthew started, dropping his cigarette on the kitchen tiles.

'Damn it!'

She was clad in nothing but one of his old T-shirts, which rode up a bit too far on her long legs. Not that he was complaining; his mind changed tracks at the sight of her. He dumped the cigarette, and took a swig of beer, trying to avert his eyes, or at least, not be seen staring.

Fuck it. She was in his house.

He stared as much as he figured he could get away with. She didn't seem to mind. In fact, he was sure she appreciated it.

'Sleep well?' Christy enquired, stepping closer to him.

'Yeah, fine.' He wondered whether or not she realised they'd slept in different rooms. The expression on her face suggested otherwise.

'Last night was great,' she said, inches from him.

'Mm-hmm, it's good to be back... I guess...'

If she got any closer, he'd have to break his rule.

Christy reached forward with a slender hand and lifted his chin.

‘I mean *good*,’ she said, lifting a perfect eyebrow. ‘You know... you... me...’ She flashed a smile and tried to embrace him.

Matthew ducked and slipped out of her way. He knew what she meant. But she apparently didn’t remember any of last night’s hints.

‘Don’t play shy, Matty. We both want it.’

Yeah, that much was true. He wanted it. He just didn’t want the follow-up shit. As fine as that ass was, it still wasn’t worth it. Not yet, at least.

‘My head,’ he said. ‘It’s killing me.’

‘How ’bout some coffee, babe?’

‘No. Thanks,’ he muttered, lifting his beer.

He couldn’t let her stay. He couldn’t.

‘Christy, I...’ he paused. Jesus. ‘Okay, look. I don’t know what it is that you think happened last night, but I just want to...’

‘I know, Matt,’ Christy cut him short with a patronising tone. ‘It’s okay with me if you want to take things slow for a while.’

Shit. She’d really put her own spin on his rejection. He had to get rid of her.

‘No, what I meant was...’

Christy bent to open one of the cupboards, presumably searching for mugs, and Matthew nearly lost his train of thought as the shirt slid up over her bare ass.

‘I think you should go,’ he blurted.

She pulled herself upright to look at him, and he tried to read her face for signs. Her almond eyes narrowed as he spoke.

‘I like you, I do,’ he said, trying not to cringe as he spoke. ‘But as a friend, okay? That’s all it’ll ever be this time.’

He finished off the dregs of his beer. It felt like he’d just given a long speech. And the hardest part was probably coming—her reaction.

Christy seemed to scrutinise him, folding her arms across her chest.

‘Okay. I totally understand,’ she said finally, in a perfectly rational tone of voice. ‘You need more time. I get it. I’ll call you, okay?’ She ambled out of the kitchen.

Matthew clenched his jaw, staring at the empty corridor. She was unbelievable. Persistent to a fault. Somehow, though, he’d have to get his message through to her because he was fairly certain that wasn’t her acceptance of rejection.

THE ROADS WERE NARROW AND vehicles were coming from all directions, almost out of nowhere. Traffic lights and pedestrian crossings were apparently an off-island luxury. The ‘Island code’ was a phenomenon in itself: drivers just gave way to others out of courtesy, flashed their lights to one another in a devil-

may-care greeting, and parking arrangements consisted primarily of two wheels atop the kerb. As a pedestrian, with no crossings to speak of, jaywalking and hightailing was the best anyone could hope for. The town square was small; brightly-painted buildings lining either side of the mile-long valley. Backroads and alleyways snaked between, curving around the base of each steep cliff side—the bare-rock backdrop to the island capital from nearly every angle.

Brooke was in the lower half of town, nearing Main Street. Each building in this area was as individual as the islanders themselves; although most were tall and narrow two-stories, each was a mismatch of colour and style, wedged in alongside one another like books on a shelf. Brooke stopped next to one, peering in the long, violet-framed double windows. They were stacked with a weird and wide range of eccentric items—jewellery, pottery, musical instruments, figurines—all laid out on display upon pastel satin. They were a strange mix and yet, they did mesh well together; it was exquisite, and certainly unique. The shop had been there for years, she was sure, but as a teenager, second-hand antiques and old-fashioned ornaments had been the last thing she'd been interested in; she had better taste now, she liked to think, and that old room could do with a makeover.

She examined the shop display for a while, caught in the moment, absentmindedly picking out pricey items to take up their own spot in her old room; the place was bare... as bare as a—

Realisation hit her. What the hell was she doing? Redecorating? Given a choice, she'd rather play traffic warden on Main Street. Trying to patch up her old room was off-the-charts stupid! All that sea air had gone to her head.

As she stood there debating whether to go inside the shop or not, a sharp tug on her shoulder propelled her body sideways. She turned just in time to see the tail-end of her bag in the clutches of a small boy as he tore off down the street. She didn't hesitate—she raced after him, yelling obscenities as she ran, but even though he took the time to turn back and throw a brazen grin in her direction, he still managed to widen the gap between them. She ran until she lost sight of him, then begrudgingly admitted defeat. She came to a clumsy halt, misjudged her footing, and stumbled, landing ass-first on the gritty pavement. A single treacherous red flip-flop sat twisted on her foot; the other in the shallow ditch between the kerb and the road.

'Bastard!' She mumbled into the sparse crowd, fully aware of the stares and whispers

coming at her from all sides, but too incensed to give a damn.

A kind old man asked her if she was okay; she nodded at him and grumbled her thanks. Everyone else seemed more amused than concerned. She got up slowly, snatching her shoe from the ditch.

Stupid shoes.

She adjusted her dress.

‘Oh, shit!’

There was a patch of dirt, like a photocopied ass, imprinted on the back of her dress. She cursed again, muttering to no-one in particular. How was she going to shop now? How in hell would she even get home? No bag, no money—

The freaking little...

She clenched her fists at her sides, furious with herself for letting her guard down. Served her right for assuming the streets of home was safer than anywhere else. Getting a hold of her temper, she resigned herself to her dilemma. There was little choice—she was going to have to call Ella, or she could go to the police.

If those were her only options, frankly, she’d prefer the police. Ella’s level-headed judgement and lecture could be passed up just this once. Being robbed in broad daylight by a pint-sized criminal was ludicrous—she definitely didn’t need a second opinion to confirm it.

With a determined first step forward she tried to recall the direction of the station. Her foot throbbed as she walked, forcing a limp as she passed the local Spar, the Bank, the Post Office, feeling like a complete freak, sensing her audience before she ever saw them. But it was this or Ella. Either way, her pride was out of the window.

It was stupid, really, going to the police; pointless. He was just a kid. The chances of tracking him down were slim, and even if they eventually did, chances were she'd have to call Ella anyway to come and pick her up. It was all a serious waste of time and effort. If she'd have listened to her gut instinct, and stayed in bed this morning it—

His face suddenly appeared amidst the crowd.

'Hey! Hey, you!' She yelled without thinking. She was sure it was him, but she had to wait until the bodies parted again to be sure it wasn't wishful thinking. She limped toward him. If he made a run for it, she'd have no choice but to let him go. But funnily enough, the little beast was coming toward her. She didn't know why he'd changed his mind, but his sudden development in morality did not change the fact that she'd be taking him, by the collar, straight to his parents.

Only as she drew closer, she realised someone had beaten her to it, and that

particular someone had him by the ears. If the pained expression on the rogue's face was anything to go by, it was not all for show either.

'It's her, it's her! That's her, I swear, lemme go! Come on, Quinn, lemme go.' The boy had lost his brazen grin, squirming in the grip of the older, taller man.

'Hey. This yours?' Quinn asked, his rugged face serious but friendly; he beckoned to Brooke's green bag in the boy's hand.

'It's mine, yeah... he didn't seem to realise that ten minutes ago.'

The boy handed it over.

'Zach, whaddya say to the lady?' Quinn pulled on the boy's ears a bit harder.

Brooke felt a rush of pity for him, now her bag was back in her possession.

'Sorry.'

'Wha'? I didn't quite catch it, Zachary...'

'I said: I'm sorry!' The boy all but shouted.

Before Brooke could even respond Quinn had released the boy's reddened ears and pushed him in front of himself, placing his big, brown, oil-stained hands on the boy's shoulders.

'This 'ere is Zach. He has a bit of a... problem... with this sorta thing. Don't worry, he'll be dealt with.' Quinn's voice was firm and steady, and his eye contact didn't waver. There was no doubt he meant what he said, and

Brooke hoped now he wasn't too hard on the boy.

'It's okay,' Brooke managed, all her previous fury forgotten.

'Name's Quinn.' He stuck out his hand and Brooke shook it nervously, not the least bit bothered by the oil imprinting from his hand onto hers. 'And you are?' he prompted.

'Oh, right. Sorry. I'm Brooke.'

'Nice to—'

'Arrr, come on, Quinn. I don't wanna stand 'ere all day,' Zach cut in.

'Okay, okay. Go on, then. You go straight home, Zach, I mean it. I'll deal with you after work. And any more trouble from you, y'hear me...'

It was obvious the threat had been made before since Quinn didn't need to finish it. Zach nodded so fiercely Brooke thought his head might drop off. Then he turned on his heel and scooted off down the street.

'Sorry 'bout that. He's having a tough time at home—doctor says he's acting out, but it doesn't excuse what he's doing. I'm so sorry.' Quinn looked at her, open, unarmed, like they were old friends. He squinted, lifted an arm to shield some of the sunlight, and offered a warm smile.

She could accept his apology all day long.

'It's okay,' she said, standing there with her free arm hanging awkwardly at her side like it

belonged to someone else. She fiddled with the strap of her bag. ‘I hope he’ll be okay. How old is your son?’

‘Son? Christ, no. He’s my kid brother. He’s nine. More like nineteen though for all the trouble he’s wreaked.’

‘I guess I should just be thankful thievery doesn’t run in the family.’ Brooke strained a little laugh, immediately wondering why she’d felt the need to make such a ridiculous noise.

Quinn’s mouth curled into a beautifully wicked grin.

‘Well,’ Brooke said. ‘I guess I’ll get back to...’

‘Getting mugged?’

‘Once is good,’ she grinned. ‘Thanks a lot for the... retrieval.’

‘Sure, no problem. It’s kinda the least I could do—y’know... to keep you from pressing charges.’

QUINN EASED THE BACK DOOR open and stepped into the dim stillness of the kitchen. He had two minds to holler for Zach, just to put the breeze up the boy, but with any luck, his ma was getting some much-needed shut-eye, and verbally abusing his hooligan of a brother was not exactly conducive to sleep. Instead, he wormed his feet out of his work boots and advanced through the chaos and jumble of the

house. Last night's dishes piled high in the sink, and magazines and comic books lay open in haphazard piles on the table, doing a grand job of covering a fraction of Zach's overdue homework. A mini temple of shoes half-blocked the entry to the lounge, and Quinn shoved them further offside to seek out Zach. The lounge, flickering with harsh blue TV light, was otherwise dreary, and Zach sat elbow-deep amongst the unfolded laundry Quinn had dropped on the sofa two days ago. Zach didn't even look up as Quinn entered the room, too engrossed in whatever show he was watching.

'Hey,' Quinn said.

The boy grunted in Quinn's direction.

'What's the matter with your mouth?'

Zach shrugged.

'Would you at least fold the laundry?'

'I'll do it later,' Zach said, unconvincingly.

'Did you check on Ma?'

'Mm.'

Quinn gave up, knowing that was the best he'd get from Zach for now, and without having quite decided what action to take after this morning's stunt, there wasn't much point in aggravating Zach, particularly since the TV was about the only thing that kept Zach out of trouble, and by the same token, kept Quinn sane.

He crept softly into the hall and nudged his way through the door of the master bedroom.

The curtains were drawn shut, a tiny sliver of white light casting an almost ethereal glow at the head of the bed where his ma lay. He started as she met his gaze, thinking she had been asleep.

‘Hey, Ma. Sorry, did I wake you?’

His pale mother shook her drooping head with careful, slow precision, then offered Quinn a weak, lopsided smile.

‘How you feeling today?’ He asked her this question every day, always hoping for a different answer, always a little unprepared when he got the same answer as the day before.

‘No change,’ she said. Such acceptance.

It was torturous. Every day Quinn felt himself being ripped through his middle—one half wanted to shake life and strength back into her, willing her to fight, to try harder; the other half wanted to hug her and savour every precious hour in case this hour was the last.

‘You need anything?’ Quinn fussed with the pillows, straightened the covers, just to make himself useful, make himself feel as if he was helping. Deep down though, he knew it was pointless.

‘No, darlin’,’ she said, her voice raspy. ‘Zach gave me soup.’

‘Did he, now?’ Quinn’s broad smile lit his whole face. ‘He’s just full of surprises today.’

His ma nodded, smiling, as though she fully understood what Quinn referred to. If she

knew her youngest boy was fast becoming a terror and thief to boot, it'd finish her.

'I just stopped by to check on you. Uncle Dan will be by later to tend to Zach. I have a late shift at the garage,' Quinn said, collecting empty glasses from the nightstand.

'You're so good to us, Quinn,' she said.

He smiled at her, suddenly eager to leave as he noticed her eyes growing teary. He planted a kiss on her forehead and retreated.

'I'll be back tonight, okay,' he said. 'Try to get some sleep.'

She nodded again, her smile wobbling at the edges, before settling back into the world-weary expression Quinn would never grow accustomed to.

ELLA SHOVED HER FOOT INSIDE her shoe and checked her watch. Six forty. She had about twenty minutes, well, ten in fact, since it would take her ten minutes to get to the restaurant. Matthew had suggested it—Hudson Hotel. She'd snickered and made a snide remark on hearing it, because it bore his surname, wondering aloud whether he'd grown rich and successful over the years. Matthew hadn't shared her amusement; turned out it was his brother who was the rich and successful one. She was certain she'd touched a nerve and quite likely blown the date already.

She gave her reflection the once over, fluffing her dark, flat hair. She stared at herself. After all the time she'd spent trying to get over that first taste of heartache, here she was, voluntarily crawling along the same path, when she had so many other things she could have been doing—*should* have been doing. She'd tried to convince herself that she was using Matthew as a distraction, a convenient sideline for the crap she wanted to avoid, but the truth was, she couldn't help herself. She was forced to admit that she wanted to see where it would lead, even if it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that Matthew was all wrong for her. Matthew was like a magnet; she—and every other female this side of the world—was drawn to him.

Maybe it was the sentiment of it more than anything, the fantasy of falling for someone all over again after so many years. Either way, she'd given him her number, never really expecting to hear from him; when she did, she couldn't bring herself to refuse. The most she'd gotten the first time around was a speedy drive to a secluded spot, an even speedier retreat to the backseat, and a speed-of-light dismissal. It all happened so fast it was a small wonder she could even remember it.

She sat on the edge of the bed, catching her breath.

What the hell was she doing?

She'd been here for exactly a day and wasn't any closer to closure than if she'd stayed in England, but finding the courage to say goodbye was harder to do with a heart and head full of unanswered questions, and right now, she couldn't bear to dig for the answers. She didn't have the strength to so much as scratch the surface, let alone dig, and being stuck in the big, empty house was nothing but a constant reminder of her own cowardice.

To hell with it.

If she had a way to avoid being stuck there all night, she'd take it. Besides, even if it spelt disaster, what could Matthew, or anyone, possibly do to make the situation any worse than it already was?

MATTHEW CRACKED HIS KNUCKLES AND paced the length of the kitchen floor, waiting on time. He got yet another beer from the fridge and cracked it open—at this rate, he would be drunk by the time he got there. He checked his watch. It'd be a ten-minute drive at the most. He usually liked to keep his women waiting but tonight he would make an exception. Ella wasn't exactly his usual easy target.

Grabbing his jacket from the sofa and his keys off the centre table, he headed for the

front door, casting one last look in the hall mirror as he passed.

Christy's smiling face loomed up in front of him just as he opened the door.

Christ, of all the times and places.

'Hey, handsome,' she said. 'Oh,' she added, eyeing his jacket. 'On your way out? Want some company?' She beamed at him, like a kid who'd just spotted Santa.

'Look, bad timin', okay. I'm in a hurry,' Matthew said, his flat tone barely concealing his annoyance.

Christy held her hands up as if in surrender.

'Well, don't mind me. Where you headed? Maybe I can give you a ride?' She shot him an affected smile.

He shook his head, ignoring the ambiguity of what she just said. 'No, I'm just goin' into town.' He pulled the front door shut, stepping around her. The perfume she'd clearly marinated in wafted enticingly under his nose. 'I'm takin' the Jeep,' he said firmly, more to discipline himself than anything else. If he got pulled over on account of that second beer, it would be too damn bad.

He'd take his chances.

'Oh, come on, Matt.' Christy skipped to catch up with his widening strides. 'I'm going that way anyway—and it's just a ride. I won't

bite.’ She smiled at him. ‘Unless you want me to.’

Matthew considered her offer—both of them—trying hard to ignore the images that the more appealing of the two conjured up. Getting a lift had benefits, at least that way he could drink without worrying about his limit. Not that he planned to get hammered. Ella probably wouldn’t approve of that. Although Ella probably wouldn’t approve of this either.

‘Fine,’ he agreed. ‘But I swear, Christy, if I’m late...’

‘You won’t be. Jeez, you got a hot date, or what?’

He didn’t answer; it wasn’t worth getting into. Besides, it was none of her business anymore, anyway. He got in the Porsche in silence—he’d had some good times in that car. But that didn’t bear thinking about now.

Christy started the car and took off achingly slow.

‘Where in town you gotta go, babe?’

‘Ethan’s place.’

Christy nodded and started the car. ‘How is Ethan these days?’

‘I dunno, do I? I only got back yesterday.’

‘Boy! Touchy tonight, huh, babe?’ She reached over and put her hand on his thigh.

‘Quit calling me that.’ It was irritating the way she behaved like they still had something, yet he couldn’t deny the physical reaction she

triggered. The impulse to guide her hand a little higher was strong, but he resisted and shoved it away instead.

‘Damn! What the hell is up with you? You piss off for three months in the States, and you come back like you spent the whole time in a freaking monastery.’

Matthew laughed. ‘What’s the matter? Not used to getting rejected?’

‘Not by you. Usually.’ Christy grinned.

He sniggered in response.

‘How was it anyway—your holiday?’

‘All expenses paid... Can’t complain,’ he said.

‘And your ma?’

‘She’s good. Barely freakin’ recognised her, though. Fake tan, bottle-blond hair, new rack... *Christ.*’ Matthew cringed at the memory of his cosmetically ‘enhanced’ mother. ‘New husband too...’ Matthew trailed off, his mind back in America with his ‘new’ mother, and this year’s new contender—Larry.

‘Don’t like him?’

Matthew snorted.

‘I don’t know what she sees in him. Total sap. He’s rolling in it though, so could well be that—’ He broke off suddenly as Christy took a right turn instead of a left, heading in the opposite direction of town. ‘Hey! What the hell are you doing?’

‘Oh, come on, you’ve got plenty of time. Who’s got your panties in a twist? Who is it? Who’s your hot little date?’

‘None of your damn business—and you didn’t answer me. Why the hell are we going this way?’

When she failed to answer yet again, he checked his watch. His plan, to get there before Ella, was definitely down the drain. He could still make it on time if Christy turned the car around now.

‘Christy, quit playing. Just drive me to the freakin’ restaurant, or let me out.’ Matthew couldn’t believe the amount of nerve she had. On second thought though, he was the stupid one. He should never have gotten in the car in the first place.

‘Oh, come on, Matt,’ she said, again. ‘It takes half an hour to drive round the whole of the island. How much time outta your precious date night is it gonna take to cruise around the neighbourhood?’

‘I don’t *want* to cruise around the neighbourhood, woman! Let me out.’

Christy ignored him, her face smooth and calm. Under different circumstances he may have let her have her way without protest, simply to save himself the trouble. Protest or not though, she drove on, further and further from where he needed to be.

‘Hey, you remember this road?’ she said after a while. She threw a quick glance in Matthew’s direction.

Before he could respond, she hit the left indicator and turned onto a steep, winding road at the bottom of Red Hill.

Matthew muttered under his breath.

‘Jesus...’

‘Remember the night your car broke down up here, Matt? How we ended up staying here til near daylight?’

‘Yeah, the ride home in the back of the police car? You remember that?’ Matthew asked her, dryly. He was losing patience.

She laughed, unfazed, seemingly unaware that Matthew wasn’t particularly enjoying their trip down memory lane. She brought the car to a halt at the top of the hill and cut the engine, dropping them into pitch dark.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Matthew asked.

‘I missed you, Matt.’

Oh, fuck.

He didn’t answer. In the darkness, it was pretty easy to shut his eyes and pretend he wasn’t there.

‘Matt?’ Christy reached over and placed her hand on his leg again. ‘I missed you a lot. I know it’s been a long time since we were... anything.’

Could have fooled him. She certainly didn't act like it.

'But not having you here for the last few months,' Christy continued, 'it made me realise... it made me see how much I want this.'

Matthew swallowed hard.

'Matt?'

Son of a... There was no ignoring this.

She shuffled in her seat, presumably to face him, and he could feel her staring him down, even in the dark.

Here was his moment. His opportunity. His chance to tell her to get a grip, back the hell up. They were done with the relationship, and he was done with the drama.

He drew a long, slow breath. 'Now is not the time for us to be doing this,' he said instead.

The sigh that followed was loud. He looked toward the window into the black nothing, and mentally kicked himself.

What a chicken-shit he was!

But how in hell could he tell her to back off—out loud? And what else was there to say apart from that? I don't like you? I don't want you? None of that was true. The truth was he both liked her and wanted her—he just didn't want her *all of the time*. He was fairly certain that response wouldn't fly.

'I gotta go,' he said, and opened the passenger door, and pushed her hand off his

leg, more firmly this time. 'I'll see you around, okay.'

He got out of the car. He was a good thirty-minute walk away from home but it would be worth the effort. After this, he was getting himself one of those peepholes for his front-door, and he'd be damn sure he'd use it.

'No, Matthew, wait!' Christy's door opened. 'Please, just wait a second.' She rushed to the other side toward him.

Matthew sighed. He shut the car door and leaned against it.

'Just wait, okay?' Christy drew closer to him.

'I'm waiting. What?'

She took hold of his hand and brought it up to her cheek.

That was unexpected. Apparently, she was into the 'show, don't tell' approach.

Matthew tried pulling his hand out of her grasp, but instead of letting go, she tightened her grip on him, and kissed the centre of his palm, and stepped towards him. She pressed herself against his body, which was suddenly rigid and alert. She tilted toward him, her face barely visible in the dark, but her breath was hot and sweet against his face. When she kissed his lips, his mouth already partly open in feeble protest, he put up no resistance. Her lips were hard against his; with determination, he realised a second later. He wrapped his free

arm around her, pulled her closer still, and only then, realised what he was doing.

‘I can’t,’ he mumbled.

The hell you can’t, his body screamed back at him.

Christy ran her hands along his torso, snatching at the fabric of his shirt to find her way to his bare skin.

‘Don’t sell yourself short, Matt... You can. I know you can.’

It took him exactly three seconds to weigh the pros and cons, and at the fourth second, he grabbed her hips and pulled her more tightly against him. He took her mouth with his own, and as the taste of her exploded once more over his tongue, he scooped her body off the ground and set her down on the bonnet of the car.

She pulled away briefly to speak.

‘Change of heart?’ She smiled against his mouth.

‘Heart... yeah,’ he grinned. Then he kissed her again, quick and ruthless, whilst his hands dove under her clothes, seeking out the smooth, toned lines of her body.

‘Not here,’ she said, kissing his neck.

‘Why the hell not?’

‘You want another trip in a police vehicle?’

‘Fuck ’em,’ he said, squeezing one hand under the waistband of her jeans.

‘Matt... I’m serious.’ Christy took hold of his wrist, tugging his hand away from the warmth.

‘Since when do you care?’

Christy didn’t answer.

Instead, she grabbed at the bulge at the front of his jeans and squeezed him firmly enough to make him groan.

‘Get in the car,’ she said. ‘We’re going back to yours.’

‘CHRIST, MATTHEW! I’M NOT HAPPY about this.’

‘You don’t have to be, bro.’

Bro...

Convenient. This was about the only time Matthew acknowledged the pair of them as brothers—when he wanted something.

‘I don’t see her,’ Ethan said, surveying the room anyway. ‘And why the hell are you whispering?’

‘You sure you don’t see her?’

‘She’s not here, okay. Probably for the best, don’t you think?’

‘I guess. Looks like you’re off the hook, then.’

‘Goodbye, Matt.’ Ethan shook his head.

He replaced the receiver back in its cradle behind the bar, without waiting for Matthew’s reply. Small doses were the key when dealing

with him. It didn't take much to set things off when it came down to it. One too many insensitive remarks from Matthew would have them at each other's throats.

When it came to pure nerve, Matthew had it in spades. Ethan shook his head again, his incredulity covering his annoyance, hands down. Matthew had actually called him up after months away from home, not to say hello or to tell him how his holiday had been, or to, God forbid, actually ask how Ethan was doing—*no*. Matthew had called him up solely for a favour, and dirty work at that.

Well, it was just too bad, wasn't it? Because like he'd told Matthew, the woman he intended to stand up wasn't there—she had either left already, or, with any luck, hadn't shown up in the first place. As far as Ethan could tell she'd had a lucky escape.

He looked around the room again, double-checking the restaurant area, and the far end of the bar, knowing he'd recognise Ella if she'd been there, if only because she'd be 'new' in a room full of regulars. Even so, Ethan knew her, more or less—quiet, short, pretty—he remembered when she and Matthew had had something going. With the run-around Matthew had given her, Ethan had spoken to her on the phone more than Matthew ever had; nine and a half times out of ten, she had to be told that Matthew was out, when Matthew was

actually in the garage, fooling around with his latest female casualty.

The fact that Ella wanted Matthew back then was mind-boggling; she had seemed more than sensible enough to know what kind of a deal she would have been getting, and that was back then. But now? He wondered what she could possibly have been thinking to have agreed to go out on a date with his two-timing brother this time around; maybe she wasn't as smart as he'd pegged her to be.

Matthew was capable of a kind of trickery that made other people overlook his drawbacks, repress certain memories, erase common sense. Paige, for instance, was a prime example; she had seen only what she'd wanted to.

What Ella saw was anyone's guess.

'... just tell her something came up...'
Matthew had said.

Yeah, sure. He knew his brother well enough to know what that something was.

If that was how he wanted to play things, fine; Ethan was nowhere near qualified enough to preach to Matthew about his extra-curricular activities, but if he wanted to play dirty, he should have to clean up his own mess. If he thought for a minute that Ethan would be his Boy Scout messenger, he could think again.

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, SHE'D actually believed the bastard had changed. She pressed her teeth together and stared hard at herself in the mirror. There was only herself to blame—she should have told him no, just like her gut instinct had told her. That way she would not have gone to the trouble to shave her legs for the second time this week; she would not have squeezed herself into the sexiest but most uncomfortable pair of jeans she owned; and she would not have been left sitting alone in a strange restaurant, with a 'stood up' neon sign flashing over her head.

She could kick herself for believing he'd turn up in the first place, but God, how she despised herself for having sat there waiting, trying to concoct excuses for him. When her senses finally emerged, there had been two choices she could think of. The first was to calmly remove her neon sign whilst perhaps ordering another drink and pretending to enjoy her own company; the second was to go home, defeated, and pretend to enjoy her own company there instead. Option one gave her alcohol on the spot so she had ordered three shots of tequila, and when they arrived, she downed them one after the other, like the whole deal was routine, before skulking off to—had she been a lady—powder her nose.

Between coaxing her jeans back up over her legs and spattering water from the automatic tap on her top, the tequila had taken hold. Going home might have been the better option. She would have been able to fumble around without an audience. A little time to think and a half-decent night's sleep would have put things in perspective. Without either, an involuntary bout of overreaction was on its way.

This wasn't what she'd foreseen in her mind's eye at all. It was all wrong, completely lopsided. In her head, everything had been goose-bump, heart-thunder special. This didn't even come close—Matthew could've at least shown up. The night was meant to have been a good thing, a happy thing, a most welcome sedative. It wasn't supposed to make her worse.

When she choked on a sob it startled her back to realisation—she was being absurd. He was just a man. She had to try to be sensible about this; next to everything that had happened, Matthew was small potatoes.

An insanely attractive small potato...

She continued to stare at herself in the mirror, willing herself to get a grip. The mirror gave it to her straight. The eyeliner and mascara had smudged miserably down her face like a rain-soaked ink drawing. She washed her face, splashing more water on her

outfit at the same time. Her head spun a little, and she leaned against the sink for support.

Right—all she had to do was make it from the bathroom to a stool at the bar; plenty of single people sat at the bar. She could make up the rest as she went along. She straightened up. The heels of her shoes had surely grown in the time she'd been in the bathroom; she didn't remember feeling quite so dangerous in them. The swift motion as she opened the door made her stumble, but she kept her eyes straight ahead and bee-lined toward the bar, not daring to check on her potential audience.

The bar seemed much farther now that she was staggering in its direction, rather than when she'd been sitting soberly at the other end of the room. When she reached it she grabbed the counter for support and exhaled. Her head continued to spin, more rapidly now. She made a blind reach for a barstool, then perched on the end of it, her elbows resting on the bar.

'Can I buy you a drink, maybe a cup of coffee?'

Ella glanced up into an amused face. 'Matthew?' Her voice came out in shrill disbelief.

'No, Ethan—Matthew's my brother.' He looked annoyed for just a second, then resumed his smile. 'You're Ella, right?'

She nodded. ‘Yup, that’s me,’ she said, wishing she were anyone but herself right now. She straightened, and promptly lost her balance. Ethan caught her by her arm and she laughed. ‘Nearly went there, huh?’ she said. The slur in her voice was obvious, even to her. She laughed again, and cleared her throat, then assessed the brother of the asshole she’d gotten herself into this state over. ‘Wow, you look so much like him.’

It was the face. And the hair; Matthew had long, dark hair once, too.

Ethan propped her up on the stool again and let go of her. She continued to peer at him—it must have been the tequila buzz; she knew she was staring, but she didn’t care. Ethan’s face was chiselled like his brother’s but older, softer; and his eyes—they were vividly green.

‘So, how about that coffee?’ Ethan asked.

‘No... Thanks,’ she added. ‘I should go.’ Ella stood, and he reached out to steady her again. ‘Good to meet you...’

‘Ethan,’ he offered.

‘Yes... Ethan.’ She stumbled, struggling to find a way around the bar stool, reluctant to let go of the counter.

‘Do you need a lift home?’ he asked.

‘Who, me? No... I’m fine. I live just over there.’ She indicated, her arm outstretched in what could have been the opposite direction.

Ethan laughed, and Ella fixed him with narrowed eyes, unsure whether he was laughing with her or at her.

He stood and took her by the arm.

‘It’s fine. I can get a taxi.’ She shrugged out of Ethan’s hold, and tottered away from him, instantly wishing she hadn’t when her head whirled.

She tried to take deep breaths but it only triggered queasiness, and she groaned, wishing she could blame the bright idea of double shots on someone else—someone who wasn’t aware of the bad effects of a lightweight twenty-something woman knocking back 80-proof tequila.

Ethan was still standing and watching her when she turned back.

‘Fine, it couldn’t hurt for you to give me a lift.’

He smiled and walked towards her, grasping her gently by the elbow for support.

‘You’re not a psycho, are you?’ she asked, deadly serious.

He laughed and led her out of the bar.

ELLA FELL INTO THE CAR and sat there like an untidy mess in Ethan’s otherwise immaculate BMW. She pushed the neat black button on the car door, and the glass purred down. The warm night air blew back against her face. Instead of

having the desired effect of carrying her back into a state of sobriety, an irresistible wave of sleepiness washed over her. She snapped her head upward and prised open her eyelids as far as she could manage.

She let out a small cough, which erupted into a hiccup.

‘Bad night, eh?’ Ethan’s voice cut through the silence.

She started to nod, but her head wobbled dangerously, so she merely let out a grunt in reply.

‘Which way?’ he asked.

They’d reached the top of Ladder Hill Road, now out of town.

‘Oh, um...’ She took in their surroundings, the stretch of road ahead, climbing steadily toward the three old water tanks at the top of the junction, aptly named Three Tanks. ‘Keep going,’ she mumbled, running a conscious hand through her hair, thankful for the dark.

She could feel Ethan’s gaze on her. She glanced over at him, but her eyes travelled beyond his sculpted profile, as though they knew what they were searching for before she did—there were lights on in Matthew’s house just across the way. It was crazy to presume he still lived there after all this time, but she presumed anyway.

The tell-tale black Porsche parked proudly out front confirmed it, and added a heaping dose of salt to the wound.

She let out a sound, a cross between a gasp and a groan. Her head spun, and her stomach lurched—whether it was the alcohol or the déjà vu experience, she didn't know.

'You okay?' Ethan asked.

She couldn't reply. She smacked him swiftly on the arm and flung the car door open. They shuddered to a halt, and Ella threw herself from the car to be sick. She heard Ethan cuss under his breath, and she hoped he'd just give up on her and drive off, to save her the embarrassment. Instead, she registered the sound of him getting out of the car to come to her, and she retched again. She held up her palm to him, wishing she could run and vomit at the same time.

'It's okay. I'm okay,' she said between breaths. Her wretched tone betrayed her but she pulled herself upright and tried to wipe her mouth without him seeing.

'You sure?' he asked.

'I'm fine. I just need to get home.'

'Yeah, okay. Get in the car.' Ethan waited, then shut the door behind her.

Ella propped her left elbow up on the door frame and stared blindly out of the window.

'Christ, how much did you drink?' Ethan asked as he got in.

She shrugged, her eyes fixed on the slow-passing scenery.

‘Here,’ she said moments later. ‘Take this turning here,’ she indicated with a feeble wave of her hand.

Ethan turned the silver car into the narrow driveway. The gravel crunched under the tyres as he made his way up the path to the dark house; only the uppermost window was lit. He seemed to debate whether or not to say anything, then to Ella’s dismay, he shut off the engine.

‘Are you gonna be okay?’

Ella nodded and forced herself to look at him. It wasn’t his fault that he was so generous, and that she was such a train-wreck.

‘Brooke’s home anyway, so I’ll be fine.’

‘Brooke?’

‘My sister.’

‘Oh right, yeah, course so. Well... take care, okay?’

She opened the door. Ethan moved to open his side but she stopped him.

‘I’m okay from here. Thanks. I’m sorry about...’ She covered her face with her hand, wishing she could fully disappear behind it.

Ethan smiled, tucking a stray strand of hair behind his ear. ‘It’s no problem,’ he said. The man was a saint.

‘G’night, then.’ She got out and started up the steps to the porch, casting a last grateful

look over her shoulder before succumbing to the urge to run inside and hide under the bed covers.

‘I’M SORRY, I HAVE TO get this.’ Matthew gestured toward the phone, the sudden *ring-ring* much more irritating than usual because of what it interrupted.

Christy tilted her head from side to side as if to convey ‘yeah, whatever’, before taking one of Matthew’s cigarettes from his pack on the coffee table.

‘Yeah, hello?’ Matthew propped himself against the wall.

‘What in God’s name did you go and do that for tonight, Matt?’

‘What?’ Jeez, the thought of jumping into bed with Christy had only just crossed his mind twenty minutes ago, and he was getting aggro for it already? Ethan sounded on the verge of red on the other end.

‘Oh, like you don’t know what I’m on about, Matt. Smooth move. How you got her to go out with you in the first place, I’ll never know. But then, you go and get me to bail on her for you! You’re a real piece of work, honestly.’

Oh...

Matthew’s face burned as he realised what his brother was talking about, and he turned to

face the wall, hoping to hide the shame threatening to register on his face.

He was a piece of work. He knew it. But he sure as hell wasn't about to admit as much to Ethan.

'Oh, give it a rest, man. I'm sure she handled it okay. I'll call her tomorrow,' he said, then hung up before Ethan could give him any more shit about it.

'Her who?'

Christy intervened before Matthew had the chance to capture the full satisfaction of hanging up on his brother.

He meandered across the room, stalling.

'Paige.' It was the first appropriate female name he could think of.

'Paige?' Christy may as well have had a question mark hanging over her head. Her expression was comical, and not entirely convinced.

'Yeah. Paige.'

'If there's a problem with Paige why does Ethan need *you* to sort it out?'

Okay, it was pretty ridiculous. He really needed to work on his cover-ups.

'It's some business stuff or something...'

He sat next to her on the couch, watching her extinguish a half-burned cigarette. She blew the last of the smoke into the air, her lips pursing together, pout-like, sensual.

‘But, I thought Ethan was still pissed at you for...’

And she ruined it.

‘Can we not talk about my damn brother?’

Christy smiled and ran a hand through her blonde mane. ‘Yeah, you’re right.’ She reached for him. ‘Where were we?’

Matthew grinned. Like she didn’t know.

Had the phone not suspended the activity, they’d have been halfway to the bedroom by now. The only reason he’d taken the call was because he’d been hoping it was Ella. The chances of that were pretty low considering he’d just left her high and dry.

He hadn’t meant to. But he was a sucker for... well, most things, really—more so, if it wore a skirt. If he’d had his way, he’d have taken Christy all the way down memory lane and back again on the bonnet of her car, but as it was, she was insisting on being coy about it.

Her eyes sparkled as she assessed him, and she trailed her fingertips along his neck, across his collarbone, all the way down into the folds of his shirt.

‘Another drink?’ she asked.

He shook his head. He wasn’t thirsty. At least, not for that...

3

Awareness of the night before struck before she'd even opened her eyes. Ella peered out of one eye, not wanting to get out of bed—today or any other day. The half-lit room was a mess. Having dragged herself up the staircase last night, in a state that could only be reached with alcohol, drugs, or utter insanity, she'd ransacked her luggage to find her precious photo album. The fact that the photo album had been in one of the neatly stacked boxes in the corner for the last seven years, only occurred to her after she'd upended the contents of her suitcase in a heap on the floor.

Intoxicated as she was, she'd stepped over the mountain of clothes and shoes, and pulled down box after box of old possessions. At 3am, she had conquered box three. Getting caught up in the findings, she'd settled herself in the midst of it all, examining all the little pieces she'd thought worth keeping. From a handmade jewellery box from Brooke to old poetry and drawings, it was all there—dusty, and with the stench of things that had been

starved of air, but priceless as ever. There were letters from her great grandma, magazine clippings of places she'd forgotten she wanted to visit, and picture frames—stacks and stacks of picture frames. Ella at age twelve, clad in a too-big Girl Guide uniform; a snapshot of Brooke dressed as an elf for a Christmas street parade; a family camping trip at Horse Pasture—the Easter Weekend tradition—and heaps more. She'd put them to one side and kept searching, trying to blink back the tears. At the very bottom of the box, she had found it—her photo album. She'd flipped to the back section at once, fulfilling the stupidity that had driven her to it in the first place—and there it was: New Year's Eve 2001. Brooke, nineteen, dazzling; in a silvery gown that swept the floor, side by side with Denny... Darren... What's-His-Face. He appeared on the verge of losing his last meal. The next photo was also of Brooke, this time with Ella. Ella, barely sixteen, looked a little like Brooke's date—petrified, awkward, moments away from hurling. The only difference was the strapless dress; one that Ella had been forced to wear for her first 'big night out on the town'. The third photo, the last one, was the one she'd been searching for: the one with Matthew. Matthew had longer hair back then, dark and long and wavy like his brother's. He wore his trademark winning—bordering-on-cocky—smile, his arm

around Ella in a casual, confident way. Ella, next to him, was stiff and awkward, about as comfortable as a constipated rat.

Ella rolled over in bed now, squinting against both the light and the throbbing at her temples. She had spent the remainder of the early hours staring hopelessly at a photograph that screamed ‘not meant to be’. And as for their most recent attempt—last night—well, that was only proof, wasn’t it? It was absurd. With all that was happening in her life at the moment, she found it incredible that Matthew was her current cause for concern. Was she really so crazy about him? And was she really going to continue on down that dead-end road, knowing only too well that the only thing waiting for her was a second round of disappointment? She would be stupid to do it. And yet, stupid seemed well within reach.

The soft knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

Soft knocking was not something Brooke usually did. She had a habit of barging in whenever and wherever she wanted, regardless. It was obvious she was up to something.

‘Ella? Honey? Are you awake?’

Honey? She definitely wanted something.

Brooke peered round the crack in the door, and Ella waved her in.

‘Morning,’ she croaked at Brooke, who stood there with a mug in her hand. ‘Oh, please tell me that’s coffee, and that it’s for me.’

‘Yeah, I figured you’d need it after last night’s activities.’ Brooke waited whilst Ella sat up in bed, then handed her the steaming mug. ‘So, how are you feeling?’ Brooke asked.

‘Like someone dropped an anvil on my head.’

Brooke snorted, then glanced around the room. ‘What happened in here? Did a fight break out or something?’

‘I was looking through some... stuff.’

Brooke nodded, unconvinced, as Ella took increasingly large mouthfuls of coffee. It was barely five minutes before Brooke’s resolve cracked.

‘So?’ she prompted.

Ella had sensed it coming. ‘What?’

‘Are you going to fill me in? Or do I have to torture you?’

‘The second one.’

‘Oh, come on!’ Brooke settled herself on the edge of the bed. ‘Spill!’

‘What? I went on a date. No big deal.’

‘Yes, big deal! You went on a date with Matthew, whom you were in *love* with.’ Brooke mimed speech marks with her fingers. ‘But not only that, you came home with someone else. In a flash car. Several hours after your usual curfew.’

‘I don’t have a curfew.’

‘Oh, come on, you know as well as I do that a man has to struggle to fit an average length movie into the time you give him on a first date!’

‘How do you even know all this? Were you spying on me?’

‘I was awake. I was bored. Count yourself lucky that I didn’t come down to question you the second you got in.’

‘You’d have been out of luck. I was beyond knowing my name.’

‘Well!’ Brooke laughed. ‘Drunk on a first date, too! And I thought the sea air was getting to me!’

‘Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter. I have nothing to tell. I got stood up.’

‘What? By Matthew?’ Brooke changed tracks. ‘Ella, I knew it all along. I told you, didn’t I? I told you he was a lying son of a bitch. He’s not changed. He probably can’t change. I should wring his arrogant neck! Did he call you to say why?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I bet he didn’t. He doesn’t have a decent freaking bone in his body!’

‘Finished?’ Ella asked.

Brooke could go for ages once she got going. She became a little scary when she was truly pissed off, which was actually quite often, and usually for all the wrong reasons. This

time though, as much as it pained her, Ella had to admit Brooke was right.

‘Why are you so calm? I thought you’d be upset.’

‘I was,’ Ella said. ‘I went the whole nine yards. Fuming, crying—I got drunk, for crying out loud. And then Ethan gave me a lift home.’

‘Who’s Ethan? What was he doing there? You think it was a set up?’

‘Don’t be so dramatic, of course not. He’s Matthew’s brother. He owns the place, according to Matthew. It’s a restaurant—used to be the Blue Fin club.’

‘Since when?’

‘Dunno, for some time now though, I think. He owns both of the restaurants on Main Street. Well, one of them is actually a hotel.’

‘Well, that’s settled then. Forget Matthew, Ethan’s your guy.’

‘That’s not funny. You know I’m not into that.’

‘Kidding. Keep your PJs on.’

Brooke sauntered to the window. Judging by the racket outside, the neighbours’ kids were already playing in the street. It was nice and all, but it didn’t do much to help Ella’s head.

‘So, are you planning on seeing either one of them again?’ Brooke asked.

‘No.’ Ella put the empty mug on the nightstand. ‘Well, actually, maybe I should call

Ethan or something, to thank him for bringing me home last night. I think I actually considered walking home at one point—I'd have been road-kill.'

'Yes, you should call him, and I could call Matthew for you if you like—a little verbal abuse won't take up much of my day.'

'Thanks, but no thanks. It doesn't matter. It was a bad idea to begin with.'

'So, *did* he actually call? To explain why he didn't show?'

'No, I haven't spoken to him.' Ella would rather carve out her left kidney with a butter knife before admitting to Brooke that she'd seen the infamous Porsche outside Matthew's place on the way home.

Brooke ruffled Ella's hair, no doubt an attempt to comfort her. Whilst the ruffle didn't offer much, Brooke's current lighter mood was certainly something Ella could handle in large doses, particularly since Ella's own mood was, in a word, crappy.

'He's not worth it,' Brooke said. 'Come on, get dressed and we'll head into town—have lunch, go shopping. Then I'm supposed to meet Jason for dinner. You could come too if you want?'

Ella hesitated. She had to go and visit her mama's grave. She'd put it off once already. It was hard work avoiding it, but harder still to try and face it.

She nodded, grateful for Brooke and her distractions.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘It sounds better than having to mope around here for the rest of the day.’

JASON GREETED THEM BOTH WITH suffocating hugs. Brooke kissed him, brushing her lips against the corner of his mouth; Ella touched his cheek with hers.

‘So, who needs what?’ Jason asked as they all were seated. ‘I got water here, I just ordered a bottle of house wine, which ain’t all bad by the way, and I got a decent recipe that’ll cure the world’s worse hangover if anyone’s interested. Or I can get you something else from the bar?’

‘I’ll go with the wine, please. And Ella here will have a double dose of that hangover remedy. Should have seen the state of her when she got home last night, J.’

Ella groaned.

‘Yeah thanks, Mouth. Spy rule number one is knowing when to shut up.’

‘Really?’ Jason grinned. ‘Misbehaving? I never knew you had it in you.’

‘God, you guys, I misbehave all the time. When I want to. I just won’t be doing it again in a hurry.’ Ella rested her elbows on the table

and leaned into her hands. ‘I’ll just stick to water. My head is a mess.’

‘Probably something to do with the rich guy who rescued her last night. Should have seen that Bimmer she came home in!’ Brooke said to Jason, nudging and giggling like kids, as though Ella wasn’t there.

‘Who?’ Jason straightened up as if someone had stuck a pin in him.

‘Matthew Hudson’s brother.’

‘No way! Ethan? He owns this restaurant. Maybe we’ll see the sequel right here if we’re lucky.’

‘You’re both so embarrassing. Just pack it in, will you?’ Ella’s cheeks flushed pink, and she buried her face further into her palms.

The waiter brought the wine and poured it for Jason to taste. He nodded, then motioned towards Brooke, who held out her glass as though she was dying of thirst.

‘So, what’s the deal?’ Jason nudged Ella.

‘Huh?’

‘The deal? With Ethan?’

‘There is no ‘deal’, okay.’ She picked up the jug of water on the table and poured it into her glass, an attempt to split their focus. She wasn’t sure what was worse: their insatiable curiosity, or her hangover. ‘He just gave me a lift home. I was meant to be meeting his brother, alright.’ She took a sip.

‘Who didn’t show,’ Brooke interjected.

‘Ah, Christ, honey. Matt’s a douche.’

‘Yeah, tell her, J. You’d have thought she learnt her lesson first time round, eh!’

‘Dammit, what is this? Judgement day?’ Ella pressed the cool glass against her cheek.

Jason laughed. ‘Brooke’s right, though.’ His expression was earnest. ‘Matthew just got back, but before he left, he was stirring up a hell of a lot of rumours. Although as you’ll remember that’s never news with him. That was like, three, maybe four months ago, but somehow I don’t think he’s changed much in that short time. He’s a womaniser. Always has been.’

‘I guess. I just thought it’d be... nice, to catch up.’ Ella picked up the menu.

‘And he *is* hot. I’ll give you that,’ Brooke added as if this validated Ella’s mistake.

‘Yes, okay, thanks for your input.’ Ella swatted Brooke with her napkin. ‘Can we order or what? What’s good here?’ she asked, eager to get out of the spotlight.

‘I hear the owner might be,’ Jason said, snickering with Brooke behind his menu.

‘HUDSON.’ ETHAN ANSWERED THE PHONE more abruptly than he’d intended to; the calls had been coming in non-stop all day, and he was reaching the end of his rope.

‘Ethan? That you?’

Who else would it be? It was his office.

He recognised Paige's voice in an instant. The woman suddenly couldn't get enough of him.

'Ethan? You there?'

'Yeah, I'm here, Paige. What is it?' He stared out of the office window, tapping the tip of his pen against the edge of the desk.

'Well, I was wondering how you've been doing? Is that so bad?' Her voice was shrill and irritating.

It was too late to wonder how he was doing. He let out a long sigh.

'Same as yesterday, Paige, and same as the day before. I've told you, I'm fine.'

'I just wanted to talk. I'm here if you need anything, you know.'

He didn't bother answering. He knew all too well the offer was not exclusive.

Paige didn't give up.

'I wish we kept in touch more.'

'So you've said.'

'No, really, I mean it.'

'I know.'

'Ethan, you're not listening to me. I've been thinking... maybe we should—'

'We've been over this,' he said, cutting her off.

'I know we have. Maybe we should go over it again.'

Ethan laughed. He hadn't meant to but it just kind of came out.

'Paige...' He sighed again. 'Why won't you just leave me alone?'

'I can't.'

'Try harder.'

'You're being mean. Unreasonable.'

Ethan let out a snort.

Unreasonable was screwing your husband's brother, then screwing your husband over with the divorce. Unreasonable was running out of settlement money, and hoping to pick up with said husband two years down the line, as though none of it ever happened.

'You have that back to front, huh, Paige? I've told you, I don't want anything more to do with you.'

'I'm sor—'

'Dammit, no! No more apologies. It's done. It's over. You made your choice—so for fuck's sake, just stick with it, okay?'

He hung up.

Then he was instantly sorry he did.

He wasn't used to being so harsh—he'd never been so cold to anyone in his life before Paige. But he'd never been married to a manipulative woman before Paige, either. Their divorce had earned her a nice profit purely because he'd been too deliriously in love to sign a prenup. Most people worked for their

living; all Paige had to do was sleep with Matthew and—*bam!*—she was rich, and off the hook, just like that, because Ethan hadn't had the heart to cut her off even after she cheated on him. Sometimes he caught himself wondering if it was all a big scam to begin with. Maybe Matthew had some part in it—nothing could be put past him.

He felt like such a fool. The nastiest bit of it all was he'd actually been happy before it all blew apart, genuinely happy. He thought Paige had been happy, too. When all was said and done, he didn't even care about the money—he'd cared about her.

More fool him.

He still had the pen in his hand; the tapping finally registered and he threw it across the room, turning to face the window instead. At least the view was great from here; the open space, setting it apart from the man-made town... the way the cliff tops dipped, just enough in the middle to allow him to catch the last of the sun in the evenings. When he and Paige first got together, they'd go up to the roof of the hotel to watch the sunset.

That was then, before the excitement ran out for her... before she lost interest in him... before she realised that all those expensive dates and fantastic vacations came from his hard work and that the hard work often took up most of his day; giving her time enough to

develop ‘extra-marital’ hobbies with her new brother-in-law.

Ethan sighed again, folding his arms across his broad chest, his solemn profile reflecting in the window as he stood watching the sun. It sank below the Atlantic with a final green glimmer.

Then the phone went off again. Ethan went over to check caller ID, and groaned, raking his fingers through his hair.

Unbelievable!

He grabbed his keys from his cluttered desk, and stormed out, ignoring the phone, and slamming the door behind him. He headed downstairs to the dining area. The restaurant was busy, and he was in no mood to be friendly, so he decided he would grab a drink from the bar at the far end, and call it a day. Fine ‘day off’ this turned out to be—the suppliers had messed up several deliveries, and the head chef was new, so he’d had no choice but to show his face.

‘Hey, Mitch, hows it goin’?’ Ethan plonked his weight onto one of the barstools, wishing he’d had the sense and foresight to put couches in the room.

‘Hey, boss. Things are cool. What can I get you?’

‘Something strong. No, wait, just a beer...’
Now was not the time to be off his head.

‘Thanks,’ he said, as Mitch set a bottle of lager in front of him.

Alright, he told himself. Just one beer, and he’d go home—where he would likely dwell on the same shit he was so eager to forget. He wished just once, he could let himself off the hook... forget about everything... live a little. Maybe he needed to take a leaf out of Matt’s book.

Loud laughter pierced the air over the hum of conversation in the room. He scanned the room, looking for the source. At least someone was enjoying themselves, if not him. When he realised who it was his indifference vanished. It was Brooke. He hadn’t seen her in years, but no one could mistake her. That had to mean... Ella...

Yes.

Ella sat at the same table, smiling, flush-faced, almost shy... unlike Brooke, who in fits of giggles, threw her head back, and slapped her palm against the tabletop repeatedly—untroubled, and quite obviously, unconcerned by anyone’s opinion of her.

Ethan threw subtle glances in their general direction for a while, trying not to make his interest so obvious. It wasn’t as if he knew any of them very well. To be honest he’d probably never said a word to Brooke in his life. And Ella—it was only thanks to Matthew that they’d ever crossed paths in the past. Last night was

no different. The third person sitting with them was broad-shouldered, presumably male, but he sat with his back to the bar.

At least it wasn't Matthew, Ethan told himself.

Though why it was any of his concern was beyond him. He shook it off, running his hands through his hair. He shifted himself, turning away from their table. He was still paying his dues for the last woman he fell for; he could do without the implications of another one. He drained the remains of his beer.

'Mitch,' he called out and motioned for another one.

The soft voice behind him made him jump.

'Rough day?'

He turned and found himself face to face with Ella, and without any conscious input, since all the blood immediately left his brain, his first thought was that he'd willed her there to him, simply for having been thinking about her. A second later, as his brain re-engaged, he gave himself a mental kick up the ass, and smiled at her, perhaps a little too keenly.

'Ella, hey. How'd you guess?'

'I'm something of an expert on the topic,' she said.

Ethan figured rough wouldn't cover her, given how hammered she'd been.

'How's the head?' he asked.

Ella groaned, then smiled, her eyes meeting his for a mere second. ‘Yeah, that... I thought the damage would be a lot worse. But it’s still pretty bad.’

Ethan chuckled, and her cheeks coloured, and she glanced back toward her table.

‘I just wanted to thank you—for seeing me home last night. It was really good of you.’

‘Sure. It was the least I could do, seeing how my brother was the one who stood you up.’

Great, now she was thinking of his idiot brother.

Ethan gave himself another solid mental kick, and when Ella retreated to her table a short while later, his head filled, *after* the nick of time, with all the smooth and impressive things he should have said to her.

‘WOW. THAT WAS BRAVE. YOU must still be drunk, huh?’ Brooke said to Ella as she sat back down.

‘I had to thank him,’ Ella said, hoping a matter-of-fact stance would bury the whole thing, and telling herself at the same time that the fluttering in her belly was embarrassment, nothing more.

Half an hour later they finished up, paid the bill, and headed outside. Ella was in a world of her own; she’d barely heard one word

since halfway through the main course. Thinking of Ethan made her think of Matthew and thinking of Matthew only made her think she was wasting her time. This wasn't what she was meant to be doing. She didn't come home for additional drama. She didn't want to spend her time getting drunk, and deliberating over men. This was supposed to be a selfless trip. She was here for her mama, to support her father.

Scratch that. What use could she be to him now?

'I'll see you both in a couple hours,' Jason called, as he headed for his car.

Ella and Brooke waved goodbye to him and got in the car they'd rented out that morning. Ella sighed as she closed the passenger door, waiting for Brooke.

'I'm so happy to see Jason again,' Brooke said, as she got in. 'To be honest, all of it is starting to feel okay.'

'All what?'

'This. Being back. I'm starting to think maybe it isn't such a bad thing,' she said. 'What I'm trying to say I suppose, is that it isn't all bad: you persuading me to come with you.'

'Persuading, huh?' Ella mumbled. 'And here I was thinking you were offering moral support or something.' She smiled, half-heartedly. Brooke's idea of support was like a

non-wired bra. It did the job okay but it wasn't reliable in tricky situations.

'Well, yeah, that, too.' Brooke turned to Ella. 'Even so, I was dreading it. I've been stewing in self-pity since I got off that plane. It's not so bad now though, just me and you... Anyway, if I hadn't come with you, I'd have been stuck back there at the hotel, working my ass off.'

She started the engine.

'Working? You? You were head receptionist,' Ella said. 'All you did was smile and delegate.'

'Hey, don't knock it,' Brooke said. 'So, how are you finding it, y'know, all things considered?'

Ella shrugged, which Brooke missed, as she looked up and down the street before exiting the restaurant car park.

'Well?' she asked again.

'Well what?'

'How is it? Being back?'

'I don't know. It's not the way I would have wanted it to happen, but it's... good to see familiar faces again, I guess.'

'I'm not convinced.' Brooke looked sideways at her.

'I just need time to adapt that's all. I mean, the last time we were here, Mama was alive, Dad was around. Everything was different.'

‘Yeah, I know.’ Brooke reached over and touched Ella’s knee. ‘It’ll get better.’

Ella shrugged again. ‘You’re right,’ she said, keen to end the conversation.

‘Of course I am. We just have to take your mind off it. J says he’ll pick us up at eight tonight. Hopefully, that club he was talking about will be half-decent. You never know, it may be a nice tonic.’

Ella switched off and gazed out the window. When Brooke rambled it was usually because she was excited or nervous. It was hard to believe her sister ever got nervous or insecure—no mutual friend of theirs would ever believe it. Whatever was bugging Brooke right now though would have to wait; Brooke wasn’t one to part with her demons so easily, and right now, Ella didn’t have the time or the energy to try. And if it was excitement, even better... it meant she had nothing to worry about.

As they neared Three Tanks she glanced towards Matthew’s house, trying hard not to draw attention to herself. The Porsche was gone. It would have made her feel better to pass by without giving it a thought, without looking or wondering, but this was a close second.

‘I think I’m gonna give tonight a miss.’

Brooke paused, mid-ramble.

‘What? No, come on, you can’t!’ she said. ‘You’ve told Jason you’re coming. You’ve told me that you’re coming!’ Brooke shot Ella a beseeching look.

Their junction was coming up. Brooke turned onto their street before continuing her rant of discontent.

‘It’ll be good for us, El. Why don’t you want to come? You have to have a reason.’

‘I just don’t feel up to it.’

Brooke steered the car off the main road, then into their driveway.

‘Ella,’ she said, just as the car jerked to a halt.

Ella snatched her bag off the floor of the car and fumbled inside it for her keys, eager to jump out of the car before Brooke could lay down the law.

‘Ella, you can’t be serious.’

‘I’m sorry.’

That was a lie. She wasn’t sorry at all. She just needed some time on her own. She needed to get her head around her fears, find a way to face them. More nights out meant more alcohol, and more alcohol meant stupid decisions. She’d made a couple of those stone-cold sober; she didn’t need more encouragement.

Brooke slammed the car door, following Ella to the front of the house.

‘That’s fine, just fine. I’ll go on my own with Jason. You know best, I guess.’ She stormed on past, prising the keys from Ella’s fingers.

Ella gave in, refusing to take a stand, or take the bait.

Inside the house, the phone was ringing.

Brooke jammed the key in the lock, thrust the door open, and snatched the phone up mid-ring.

‘Huh-LO.’ It was more grunt than greeting. ‘No, it’s not,’ she said down the line. ‘It’s for you,’ she said, turning to Ella, just as Ella stepped into the hall.

Brooke passed the phone to her and headed for the stairs.

‘Hello?’

‘Is this Ella?’ The voice was deep, and the accent was island.

‘Yes, who’s this?’

‘Oh, right. It’s Quinn, Brooke’s... friend. I got your number from the book... Don’t s’pose you know how I can reach her?’

‘You found her—my receptionist... Polite, isn’t she?’ Ella sighed. ‘Quinn, you said, right? Hold on a sec.’

Ella called upstairs.

‘Brooke, it’s for you.’

Brooke came down the stairs from the attic and peered over the landing.

‘No, it’s not, they asked for you.’

‘He says it’s Quinn.’

‘Quinn? How did he get this number?’ Her brow crinkled comically.

‘The phone book, Watson.’

Brooke raced down the second flight of stairs.

‘Hello?’ she said, in her 0900-premium-rate voice. ‘Sorry about before... caught me at a bad time.’

‘Yes, dragon-mode,’ Ella muttered. She pulled the keys from the open front door, catching the mutters, pauses and tail-end of Brooke’s conversation.

‘I can’t tonight. I’m kind of meeting up with a... friend.’ Brooke paused again, longer this time. ‘Hey!’

Ella jumped.

‘I wasn’t eavesdropping.’

‘Not you, dummy. *Him*.’ She looked over at Ella who stared back blankly. ‘He hung up.’

ELLA MADE HER WAY UP the stone steps to the graveyard entrance. The air itself hummed with an eerie silence, and she felt heavier with every step.

The cathedral at the top was as she’d always remembered it, but the large graveyard was packed, overcrowded even, and she was saddened by the mere thought of the number of deaths since she’d left. She looked around, not bothering to stand in awe of the looming

cathedral as she'd once done, but quickly scanning the cemetery to find the area her aunt had given instruction for.

She spotted it.

All at once, she wanted to turn on her heels and flee, but she had put it off long enough. Postponing the visit wouldn't bring her mama back, and as she tried to reason with herself, she became aware of the tears on her cheeks.

Brooke had offered, rather reluctantly, to come with her, but Ella refused. Now, standing alone in the cemetery, the only living, breathing occupant for what felt like miles, she wished she'd taken her sister up on her offer. She could really use a hand to hold now.

She moved forward, brushing her hair and the fresh tears off her face. There she was. Her mama. Now nothing but a memory and a raised patch of earth. Flowers covered the grave almost entirely, in beautiful patches of colour. A handwritten note, half unfolded in the breeze, protruded from the red-brown dirt. A simple wooden cross stood at the head. Ella took it all in, wanting to reach down and lift her mama out, as deluded as it was. She wanted to hug her and hold her—simply see her again.

She knelt and placed her hand where, underneath, her mama's body lay; tentative at first and then, losing herself in the moment, stroking the clumps of earth and mud as

though there was no barrier between them. No flowers, or earth, or wooden box—and certainly no death.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I should have been here.’

She spluttered through tears, choking on her own sobs.

‘I’m so, so sorry,’ she said, her voice breaking, willing her mama to hear her, and forgive her, and make the pain go away.

For the longest time, she knelt there, as though waiting for a response; the only change that came was the unsettling of leaves and grass in the wind, and the creeping darkness enveloping both her and the cemetery with a slow and silent stillness.

Ella sat amongst the floral tribute, oblivious to everything else around her. This was as close to her mama as she was ever going to be—ever again—and the crushing ache in her chest was so relentless, so brutal, her cries became exhausted sobs, and her breaths grew shallow and ragged. She curled herself against the grave, crumpling petals and ribbons with her knees, and it didn’t matter—none of it mattered, because her mama was gone and wasn’t coming back, and it felt to Ella, in this moment, like she was losing her all over again.

